

TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION PRIVATE HIGH SCHOOL

INTERNATIONAL BACCHALAUREATE PROGRAMME

HISTORY EXTENDED ESSAY

“American Propaganda on Comics during the Cold War”

Supervisor: Tümay Timuçin

Candidate’s Name: Berfin

Candidate’s Surname: Yıldız

Candidate’s Number: D 001129 – 0129

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Abstract:

This essay investigates the question "How did American propaganda against Communism during the Cold War influenced comic books in between 1947-1991?"

This investigation uses a variety of primary and secondary sources. Using Fredrik Strömberg's "*Comic Art Propaganda*"¹ as guidance, which contains thorough analyses of the comics "*Is This Tomorrow*"² and "*This Godless Communism*"³, published by the Catechetical Guild and George A. Pflaum respectively to demonstrate the main ideas of propaganda in comics. Furthermore, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' "*Watchmen*"⁴ series were used to display a more grounded and less unilateral towards the nuclear war aspect of the Cold War.

¹ Strömberg, Fredrik. *Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010. Print.

² *Is This Tomorrow: America under Communism!* St. Paul, MN: Catechetical Guild Educational Society, 1947. Print.

³ Pflaum, George A. *This Godless Communism*. N.p.: George A. Pflaum, 1961. Print. Treasure Chest of Fun & Fact.

⁴ Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics, 1987. Print.

Following with a specific analyses of the Marvel Comics characters Iron Man ⁵, Black Widow ⁶ and the Winter Soldier ⁷, this essay uses their first appearances in the series as sources, along with quotations from Paul Fellman's essay titled "*Iron Man: America's Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace*". ⁸

The Extended Essay is broken down into five main sections, the abstract, introduction, investigation, conclusion and bibliography (followed by the Appendices if necessary). The investigation is the main body of the essay. The investigation begins by briefly outlining its own structure to then present and evaluate the source material.

The main conclusion reached in the investigation is that American propaganda was definitely featured throughout the comics that were published in the time period of 1947-1991, using comics as a visual and intriguing art form to distribute anti-Communist ideas.

⁵ Lee, Stan, Larry Lieber, and Jack Kirby. *Tales of Suspense*. N.p.: Marvel Comics, 1959-1968. Print.

⁶ Lee, Stan, Larry Lieber, and Jack Kirby. *Tales of Suspense*. N.p.: Marvel Comics, 1959-1968. Print.

⁷ Lee, Stan, Joe Simon, and Jack Kirby. *Captain America Comics*. N.p.: Timely/Marvel Comics, 1941. Print.

⁸ Fellman, Paul. "Iron Man: America's Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace." *Iron Man: America's Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace* (2009): 1-5. Web.

Introduction:

Comics, after they have been recognised as not a children's past-time activity but an actual art form, have evolved into a medium more mature, influenced by the adult world very often, sometimes merging the superheroes' universe with the cold reality. They are also used as a means of propaganda, especially during the Cold War era of 1947-1991, when ideologies' clashed more than actual military forces. Comics have been used to bend these ideals, specifically either Communism or Capitalism, and have been aimed at every sort of audiences.

As a visually intriguing art form, comics would attract and keep more attention than a newsletter or a radio transmission. They fascinate the reader, and this power has been used to express ideas, convince or provoke the reader of various doctrines — in other words, for propaganda. The intimate combination of words and pictures, with eye-catching speech bubbles, the color scheme, interesting plots, add to the magic of comics, and thus, the magic and attractiveness of the propaganda.

The usage of comics for propaganda date back to World War I, but its usage has flourished in World War II, and evidently, during the Cold War. Looking from the American and Capitalist point of view to propagandas in the Cold War, studies show that comics have been used abundantly for this purpose. Tackling ideas like America under Communism, sometimes depicting an ironically distorted (and humanised) version of Communism, these comics affect Americans' ideologies, making every country in America's radar their target.

Subject of study only focuses on the American perspective of the usage of comic books as propaganda, because comics of Anglo-Saxon origin are more accessible than comics of Soviet or Communist origin. Besides, the Soviet Union, China, North Korea or Cuba didn't have a

booming and developed comic book industry like America did⁹, and the few comics that were produced and published with intent of propaganda are hard to come by. The content of this study is to analyse the use of comics as a means of propaganda by America during the Cold War era of 1947 and 1991. For that, primary sources of actual comics published in this era are used, with Frederik Strömberg's study "*Comic Art Propaganda*" used as guidance.

⁹ Strömberg, Fredrik. *Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010. Print.

⁹ Note: Anti-Capitalist comics published by mentioned countries are less available to public sources than American comics.

Investigation:

Structure of the Investigation:

This investigation will firstly consider if American and Capitalist propaganda was abundant in the comic book industry during the Cold War era, defining it from the year 1947 to 1991. Then, it will move on to the ideas used for anti-Communist propaganda, starting with “America under Communism” and “Communism: What it really is”, with specific focus to Marvel Comics. Following this, all of the ideas will be considered and compared to the comic series *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons.

Source Materials:

The primary sources used in this essay are parts from Fredrik Strömberg’s “*Comic Art Propaganda*”, and “*Watchmen*” by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. While Strömberg’s “*Comic Art Propaganda*” will be used to give examples about comics that were published for the intention of anti-Communist propaganda, specifically "Is This Tomorrow" and "This Godless Communism", and they will also be analyzed in this essay, along with Alan Moore’s “*Watchmen*”, which will be used to deliver a more grounded and less Capitalist point of view towards America’s political abuse of comics.

The secondary sources used in this essay are quotations from Paul Fellman’s essay titled “*Iron Man: America’s Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace*” which provides analyses about Marvel Comics character Iron Man’s origins and its significance in anti-Communist propaganda, along with analyses about various other Marvel Comics character such

as Black Widow and Winter Soldier, using the “*Marvel Encyclopaedia (Updated Version)*”¹⁰ by Dorling Kindersley. Finally, some internet references were used, such as <http://marvel.com> .

1. America Under Communism

1.0 - Introduction:

Comics, as a visual and interactive form of art, compared to radio and television, usually come with their fair share of imagination, required from writers and artists who put their time and effort into these comics. During the Cold War era of 1947-1991, it can be said that imagination understandably merged with their political view, giving the reader new plots and stories that maybe could have been true. One of these ideas, and one of the strong ones visible from the comics is “America under Communism”, basically tangling the idea that what would happen if Communist countries won the Cold War and took control over America.

1.1– *Is This Tomorrow:*

Is This Tomorrow, published in 1947 by the Catechetical Guild, was one of the leading comics supporting the idea of America under Communism, featuring a dystopia where "at the end of the Second World War; Communist forces in America seized their chance."¹¹

¹⁰ *The Marvel Encyclopedia (Updated Version)*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2009. Print.

¹¹ See Appendix 1.

The Catechetical Guild was noticeably known for their distribution of teachings of the Catholic Church, so it was kind of expected of this publishing house to start distributing anti-Communist propaganda.

Is This Tomorrow's headline is "To make you THINK!" followed by the text "Today there are approximately 85.000 official members of the Communist Party in the United States. [...] These people are working day and night – laying the groundwork to overthrow YOUR GOVERNMENT!" , which is enough to demonstrate what kind of comic the publishers aimed *Is This Tomorrow* to be. It features the Communist Party's slow, steady and hostile takeover of the United States government and military, with the Communist Party finally seizing control over every aspect of America and finally declaring dictatorship. Communists, in this comic, create riots and strikes all over the U.S., making sure the Speaker of the House is on their side, assassinate the President and the Vice President for gaining political power. After the siege of the Congress is finished, they move over to control the military, the media and Congress with executions made common, the Catholic Church in shambles and every aspect of American society under their control.

With *Is This Tomorrow* being distributed as an "educational" comic series and its rise against the popular superhero sub-genre of comics, it can be easily said that this comic influenced millions of readers across the United States. It even increases its audience by including panels of a white man, a black man and a priest being attacked by Communists outside the White House, breaking the boundaries of racism.

1.2 – This Godless Communism:

This Godless Communism, published by George A. Pflaum in 1961, was a part of the biweekly released comic book series *Treasure Chest*, known for being distributed to parochial schools from 1946 to 1972, and its religious content. This comic book series, unlike *Is This Tomorrow*, starts in a Communist America, skipping the story of how Communists seized the country.

Featuring the normal family life in the U.S.S.A., which stands for “The Union of Soviet States of America”¹², *This Godless Communism* demonstrates how the teachings in schools change to fit the narrative of the new rule. In the very first issue, a teacher, sporting a red armband with the hammer and sickle symbol on it, sets the tone for this comic’s idea of Communism: “[...] is the answer to all the world’s problems. It will bring you a heaven on Earth in which everyone will be happy.”¹³

After this, the series present the reader with historical context about Communism, Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx and Josef Stalin and ending with the current Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, manipulated enough to make the reader create antagonistic conclusions for them, ending with critical remarks to show the two faces of Communism, as was seen in the very last issue of the series, with literally giving Khrushchev two heads, showing both his “good” and “bad” sides.¹⁴

¹² *This new abbreviation to the United States is a play on the U.S.S.R. abbreviation.*

^{13, 14} *See Appendix 2 and 3 respectively.*

2. Communism: What It Really Is

2.0 – Introduction:

Comics, again thanks to their visual appeal, have been used for educational purposes as well, for their ability to intrigue and appeal to masses. Since they have levelled up to be "not for children" anymore, their educational value have been also altered to a more mature and political standard.

2.1 – *Is This Tomorrow:*

The Catechetical Guild's *Is This Tomorrow* may simply seem like the common story of America under Communism, which gained popularity throughout the Red Scare, a social outcome of the Cold War, but its publisher makes it otherwise. The Guild, and their distribution of the teachings of the Catholic Church, make this comic also present their depiction of what Communism really is.

The amplification of the Red Scare¹⁵ throughout the years of the Cold War boost *Is This Tomorrow's* view of Communism as well. The ruling Communist Party is presented as the ultimate villain, making its branches spread everywhere, from politics to media, to social structure.

¹⁵ "Red Scare." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.

"Everyone was a suspect and anyone could at any given moment be called in for questioning by The House Committee on Un-American Activities"¹⁶, which simply demonstrates that Communism is everywhere.

The Guild, most known for their Catholicism, also used this series to spread their message of what a true Catholic should be: anti-Communist, anti-left, anti-union and anti-Hollywood, attributing Communism and the definition of evil to these points of view and aspects of life as well.

2.2 – This Godless Communism:

Being one of few anti-Communist comics to get the seal of approval from the Comics Code Authority, the *Treasure Chest* series, which contained *This Godless Communism*, sold with their tagline "of Fun & Fact". The publishers' main purpose was to combine comics with facts, and when the Cold War started brewing, the series had to inform their audience — children, mostly -- of the incoming Communist Menace.

Containing anecdotes about what Communism is, who Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, and Nikita Khrushchev is, this comic series presents their stories by manipulating them, choosing the facts a common American citizen would understand and render negative opinions about the Communist leaders.

¹⁶ "House Un-American Activities Committee." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.

In one panel, Khrushchev even says "[...] But our most important battle must be fought for people's minds — we must convince the world that Communism is its saviour! If we can do that, we can win the war without firing another shot!"¹⁷ , which is, at that time, the one line Capitalist Americans feared the most.

In another panel, a red octopus with the hammer and sickle sign on its forehead is depicted to be covering up the globe with its tentacles, with the caption reading "All over the Earth, a network of Communist parties were developed under Moscow's direction. Members were trained to overthrow the governments of the countries in which they lived by any means, including murder."¹⁸ , which is enough to demonstrate what *This Godless Communism* was trying to achieve by demonstrating Communism as an octopus. This series, like *Is This Tomorrow*, exhibit Communism as the ultimate villain, the one true enemy of mankind and America, with its branches spread everywhere.

3 – Watchmen & Cold War:

Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* is a twelve-issue graphic novel which first started publishing in 1986 and ended in 1987. The Hugo Award¹⁹ winning series featured a group of self-made superheroes during both in the Vietnam War of 1955-1975 and in 1985, telling the story of a world with actual crime-fighters which fit in with the reality.

¹⁷ See Appendix 4.

¹⁸ Pflaum, George A. *This Godless Communism*. N.p.: George A. Pflaum, 1961. Print. Treasure Chest of Fun & Fact.

¹⁹ "Hugo Award." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2016.

The existence of superheroes during this era — in this group of six superheroes, only one of them has super powers — alter the course of history in this novel, affecting the events of the Vietnam War and the presidency of Richard Nixon. In the novel, Dr. Manhattan²⁰, the only super powered hero in the team is forced to go to the Vietnam War, stopping the forces in two days, having the Viet Cong surrender in a week, end the war with U.S. victory in 1971 and thus extending the time period of Nixon's presidency for 24 more years, postponing the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan by 6 years.

While the war against Communism is a secondary plot in the novel, it still gives a more grounded approach towards the comics industry's relationship with Communism. In the story, the imminent nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States is a force to be reckoned with, extending to the point of having a symbolic "doomsday clock" ²¹ for determining how close humanity is towards nuclear destruction, moving the arms of the clock closer to midnight with each news of Communist threats approaching the United States. Over the course of twelve issues, the clock moves from ten o'clock to midnight, with Armageddon finally happening, but not caused by either of the major forces in the Cold War.

²⁰ See Appendix 5.

²¹ See Appendix 6.

Doctor Manhattan, a super powered being with God-like abilities is seen to be the only force between the nuclear weaponry of the Soviet Union and America, and thus the only force for the Doomsday Clock to slow its movement. At one point in the novel, he grows less attached to the Earth, the people living on it and the humanity he's used to have, so he leaves to Mars to create a colony on his own. With America's number one nuke repellent gone, the Soviet Union starts moving towards America, invading Afghanistan in the process, forcing America to enter DEFCON 1²².

In a plotline parallel to Dr. Manhattan's, another one of the superheroes, Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt²³, who's revealed his secret identity to the public and created an economic empire selling merchandise of his adventures, later using his money for humanitarian work and technological improvement in genetics. Over the course of the novel, he's revealed to be the mastermind behind the murder of The Comedian, which propels the plot and making the acquaintances and close friends of Dr. Manhattan get ill with cancer, severing his ties to the Earth and sending him to Mars. It is also revealed that in order to stop nuclear war, he's planted alien monsters under populated cities like New York, Moscow, London and Paris, in hopes of making the governments unite against a common threat. His plan works, but he's "sacrificed millions to save billions" ²⁴.

²² DEFCON, stands for "defense readiness condition", with DEFCON 1 meaning "nuclear war is imminent/maximum readiness."

²³ See Appendix 7.

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbnGA8uu8T0>

The imminent nuclear war between the major forces of the Eastern Bloc and the Western Bloc is a recurring theme in the novel, questioning what would happen if nuclear war actually happened. With Ozymandias's final cheer after the detonation of the alien monsters to the deaths of millions sacrificed for world peace taken for granted, the novel demonstrates a more philosophical aspect of the Cold War, making reader question whether it is humane to murder millions for obsolete world peace.

4 -- Marvel Comics & Cold War:

4.0 -- Introduction:

Since the days of having Captain America punch Adolf Hitler in the face with his sidekick Bucky, Marvel Comics presented itself filled with propaganda against whatever America politically was opposing since World War Two. Usually bypassing and after 2001, completely abandoning the Comics Code Authority's seal of approval²⁵, Marvel Comics delivered stories that were not just for children anymore, targeted for a mature audience and up-to-date with their current time period, and its political ideologies. This situation stayed the same during the Cold War as well, fighting the ideological war through characters like Iron Man — abandoning WW2 hero Captain America in the process — Black Widow and the Winter Soldier.

²⁵ Nyberg, Amy Kiste, Dr. "Comics Code History: The Seal of Approval." *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund*. N.p., n.d. Web.

4.1 – Iron Man:

After World War 2, Marvel Comics' own Captain America was deemed not fit for adventures, and with the incoming Cold War, creators of Anthony Stark, also known as Iron Man, decided a more technological, more charming hero was needed to fight the war against the Communist menace. Making his first appearance in "*Tales of Suspense*" issue #39 in 1963, Iron Man made such an impact against Communism in comics that in his seventh appearance, Nikita Khrushchev personally ordered his destruction²⁶

With a suit of armour he's made from the material of the "curtain" Stalin had spread across Eastern Europe, Iron Man's very first appearances included villains from across the Communist countries, starting with Wong-Chu²⁷ from China, Red Barbarian from the Soviet Union and the list goes on. Wong-Chu, a complete Asian stereotype, with slanted eyes, a fu-Manchu and beginner level English was Stark's first enemy, and with him easily defeated, American comics put their stance against the incoming lines of Communist enemies Iron Man would face.

²⁶ Fellman, Paul. "Iron Man: America's Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace." *Iron Man: America's Cold War Champion and Charm against the Communist Menace* (2009): 1-5. Web.

²⁷ See Appendix 8.

From Iron Man's encounter with Wong-Chu, it can be said that Americans didn't really give importance to Asian Communists compared to Soviet Communists, with Iron Man facing more villainous and menacing enemies such as Red Barbarian, The Actor, Crimson Dynamo, countless others and even Nikita Khrushchev himself. Either way, his war against all "dirty rotten commie bastards"²⁸ would rage on, with him setting a precedent of having no mercy for Communists, Reds and despots of any kind.

4.2 – Black Widow:

Natalia "Natasha" Alianova Romanova, also known as Black Widow²⁸ first made her way in the Marvel Comics' *"Tales of Suspense"* issue #52, published in 1964, as a KGB super spy, simultaneously trained by both the Bolshoi and the Black Widow programme in the Red Room for creating the perfect spy and killer to infiltrate the forces in the West. She was first introduced as an antagonist to Iron Man, without any super suit, sent to sneak information from him to her superiors at Moscow, preparing for the intelligence and idea war.

²⁷ Strömberg, Fredrik. *Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010. Print.

²⁸ See Appendix 9

In the Red Room facility, she was put in the Black Widow Ops programme, where she was brainwashed into completely obey her superiors, trained in armed and unarmed combat alongside the Winter Soldier, espionage and covert operations.

Being introduced as a female enemy to Iron Man, the Golden Avenger was enough for her to attract attention, but also being the perfect KGB agent made her the epitome of the idea "Communists are everywhere".

If it weren't for her unexpected relationship with American criminal-turned-superhero Hawkeye, she wouldn't have strayed away from Red Room's strict rule, joined the American superhero team The Avengers, and atoned for her past, thus eradicating her status as the obedient Soviet agent, while also destroying the idea of her being a symbol for the Red Scare. Until she defected to the United States, she was the embodiment of what people should be afraid about Communism: the fact that it could be anywhere.

4.2 – The Winter Soldier:

Before he was captured by the same Red Room facility that made a perfect spy out of Natasha Romanova, James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes²⁹ was the sidekick of Captain America, making his first appearance in "*Captain America*" issue #11 in 1942, punching Nazis and especially Adolf Hitler in the face, having the time of his life.

²⁸ See Appendices 10 and 11.

On their final mission to capture Baron Zemo, a nefarious Nazi scientist, they used an experimental drone to disarm a bomb, which detonated and dropped Captain America to the Atlantic Ocean to freeze for 70 years. Bucky's body was never found, and was presumed dead.

However, he was found by the Red Room facility officials, with no memory and a missing arm, they brainwashed him into the perfect soldier as well, giving him a bionic arm and reprogramming him to be the Winter Soldier, the assassin and soldier version of the Black Widow. He was sent on missions, committing massively political assassinations to change the course of history in favour of the Soviet Union and was put to cryo-sleep in between missions. He trained Romanova in hand-to-hand combat, genuinely believed he was the Winter Soldier, the perfect Russian experiment/soldier and not Bucky Barnes, Captain America's faithful sidekick, until regaining his memory through various encounters with Captain America himself.

Bucky, or the Winter Soldier, symbolised what the Communist rule of the Soviets had planned for the innocent American Capitalists. If they could turn the sidekick of the embodiment of American Patriotism into a deadly Communist weapon, what could they do for a common American with no real military training? Bucky and Winter Soldier's purpose was to make the reader question this, which amplified the Red Scare even more.

5 – Conclusion:

This investigation has sought to answer the question " How did American propaganda against Communism during the Cold War influence comic books in between 1947-1991? "

With regard to comics as a visual and interactive art form and its new and mature definition and target audience, the evidence and arguments considered in this essay demonstrate that since Cold War is an ideological and not a physical war, America's anti-Capitalist propaganda highly influenced comic books of all kind, from the superhero genre, demonstrated by Marvel Comics' "Iron Man", "Black Widow" and "The Winter Soldier" to simple educative comic strips.

Using The Catechetical Guild's *"Is This Tomorrow"* and Treasure Chest's *"This Godless Communism"* series, it is demonstrated that the ideas of "America under Communism" and "Communism: what it really is" have been tackled in terms of propaganda. America under Communism has been depicted as a social, political and economic dystopia with the Communists obtaining obsolete control over every aspect of society, branching from Moscow to every Capitalist country, while being depicted as the most villainous ideology to ever exist. The Red Scare, and the idea of Communists being everywhere is depicted as well, and it can be said that the main reason for these comics is to amplify the fear against Communism even more.

However, in Alan Moore's *"Watchmen"*, a more grounded and philosophical approach to Communism is demonstrated, focusing more on the imminent nuclear war compared to the other two comic series. "Watchmen" questions what would happen if nuclear war actually happened, or would it matter to sacrifice millions of humans to save the entire human population, and if there even were a chance for America to join forces with the Soviet Union for complete peace.

The idea of "what constitutes entertainment at a specific time may capture elusive aspects of a culture" is enough a reason for comics published during any era to be used as source materials to investigate that time period's cultural, social and even political points of view, and this is no less for the Cold War era of 1947-1991 as well. As not a physical war but a mental war, its usage of propaganda could be considered as the main weaponry instead of actual guns, and comics and their intriguing aspect as its bullets to the people's minds.

6 – Bibliography:

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Ozymandias' encounter with Nite Owl and Rorschach, reveal of his final plan, from the movie adaptation of *Watchmen*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbnGA8uu8T0>

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7 – Appendices:

- Appendix 1:



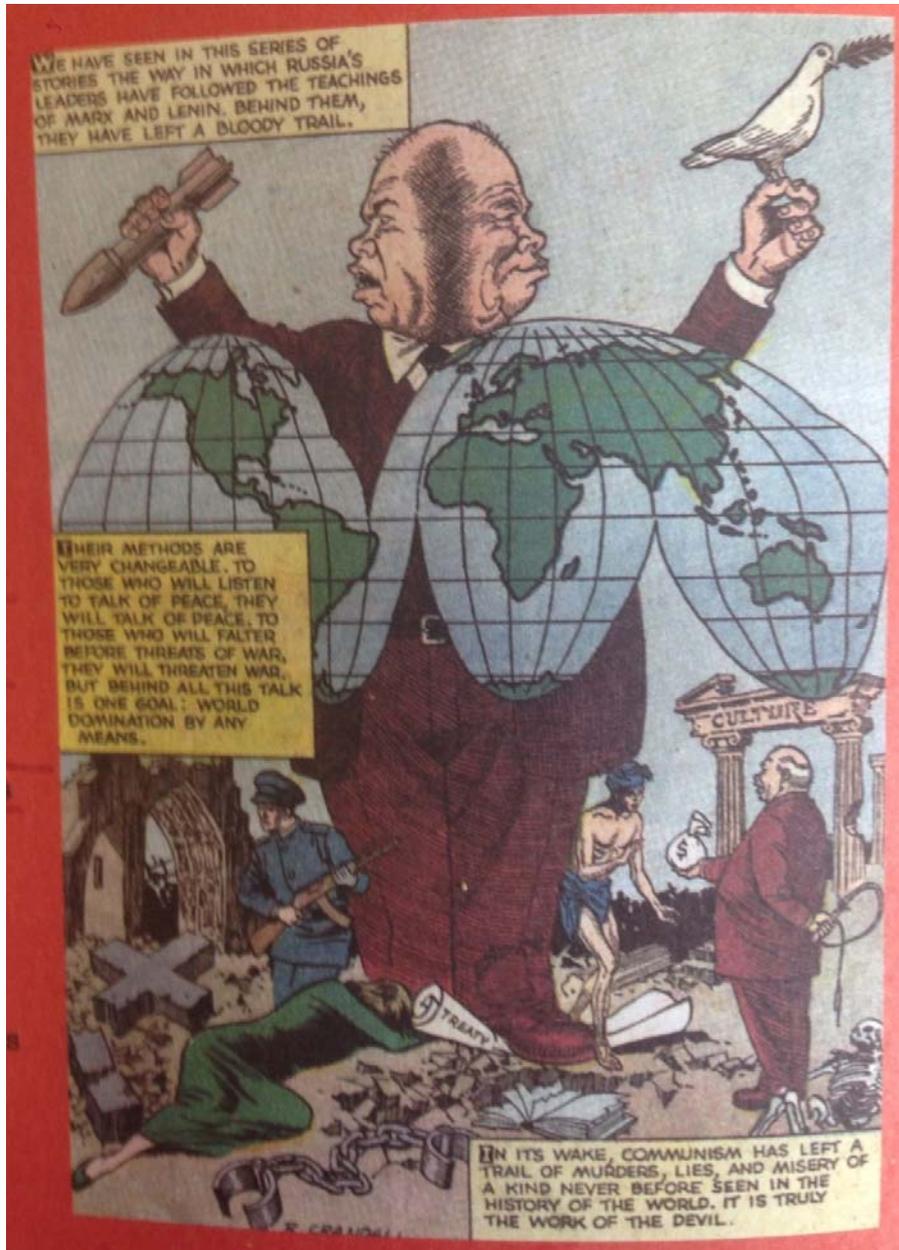
A panel from "Is This Tomorrow", where a black man, a white man and a priest are being beaten by the Communists for holding the American flag.

- Appendix 2:



The flag of the U.S.S.A, replacing its blue color with red and its stars with the hammer and sickle sign with one single star.

- Appendix 3:



A panel from the very last issue of "This Godless Communism", which demonstrates the hypocrisy of Khrushchev.

- Appendix 4:



A panel from *Is This Tomorrow*, where Khrushchev sums up the mentality of the Cold War itself.

- Appendix 5:



- Appendix 6:



Featured on the final chapter of Watchmen.

- Appendix 7:



Ozymandias, also known as Adrien Veidt, cheering for the obsolete peace in the world which he caused.

- Appendix 8:



Wong-Chu, a stereotypical Asian overlord, Iron Man's first nemesis.

- Appendix 9:



Natasha Alianova Romanova, in her first appearance in Tales of Suspense.

- Appendix 10 & 11:



James Buchanan Barnes, also known as Bucky/Winter Soldier, before and after the Red Room treatment.