

Paul S. Hirsch. *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 344.

How does one define what is a weapon? One way of doing so is by how it is used. And while some weapons are easily recognisable because they can only be used as weapons, others only become so when they are used in order to defeat an enemy or advocate for a cause. Comic books are among those that fall in the latter category. Under certain circumstances, what might be viewed as a child's entertainment by some and art by others can be harnessed as a weapon. No country demonstrated this better than the United States, which used comic books in the 1940s and 1950s to demonise its enemies and advance its values both at home and abroad. Paul Hirsch describes these efforts in an extraordinary book that reveals just how heavily the federal government relied upon comic books to disseminate ideological messages, even as many politicians targeted them as a threat to morals at home.

The relationship between the federal government and comic book creators began with the Second World War, when the industry found itself mobilised along with everyone else into the fight against the Axis powers. As Hirsch argues, their employment was inevitable given the appeal of comic books at that time. Though comic books had emerged as a medium less than a decade before, they had already attracted a large and diverse audience, with over two out of every five men in the United States Army identifying themselves as readers. While the army produced comics to teach concepts such as preventative maintenance, others saw them as a valuable propaganda tool. The key agency involved was the War Writers' Board (WWB), a quasi-official group that, despite being privately organised and staffed by volunteers, exerted control through its ability to direct federal funds to useful efforts. This gave it considerable influence on the content of comics, which they used to shape the depiction of Japanese and Germans along racially stereotypical lines. Nazis became rapacious criminals or buffoonish oafs, while the Japanese were portrayed as little more than animals, simultaneously subhuman and superhuman – and thus in need of total extermination. Nor was racial stereotyping limited to the enemy, as comic books offered dehumanised portrayals even of America's Chinese allies. Though the idea of racial tolerance was promoted in comics, this was done primarily with a White audience in mind with little regard for doing

so through positive imagery, as even sympathetic Black characters were depicted in a highly racist manner.

Though the WWB's cultural warfare ended with Japan's surrender in 1945, comic books remained highly popular. In the postwar market, new comics were created featuring crime, horror and romance stories. Free from wartime constraints, these titles played to tastes coarsened by the war, with covers and stories that depicted America "as a violent, sexualized society" (p. 111). This became problematic with the burgeoning Cold War with the Soviet Union, as such representations fed Soviet arguments that American society was decadent and corrupt. A few of these titles even had stories in which the atomic bomb and the fears it spawned were dealt with in a more realistic manner than in other media, making it, in Hirsch's view, "the ideal medium for depicting and debating atomic power" (p. 118). These stories, he notes, never ended on an optimistic note, underscoring the apocalyptic consequences of atomic warfare.

The comics' frank, even lurid, depictions of the seamier sides of American life and the horrors of war prompted a backlash. Army officers fretted that the humanised depictions of North Korean and Chinese soldiers in war comics produced during the Korean War might cause soldiers to balk from shooting the enemy. A New York psychiatrist, Dr. Fredric Wertham, became internationally famous for his arguments—subsequently found to be based on suspect evidence—that violent comics turned young readers into sadists. This fed a widespread anti-comics campaign from activists across the political spectrum, as Black individuals and organisations objected to the absence of positive Black characters while conservatives fretted that comics were contributing to a decline in morals. Hirsch shows that while comics publishers responded to many of these criticisms by accepting a form of self-censorship, they were less successful in addressing the backlash abroad where criticism of comics in western Europe took on a nationalist dimension. For those wary of America's newly-established dominance, attacking comics was "a means of protesting against American hegemony without unduly antagonizing the wealthiest and most powerful member of the Western alliance" (p. 210).

This was just one complication to the renewed use of comic books as a propaganda tool, however. Another was the continuing use of racist language and images in comics. What was acceptable during the Second World War was increasingly less so during the Cold War as the target audience overseas was now that of the newly decolonised

states of the Third World. This, combined with wariness over collaborating with commercial publishers still reeling from the public backlash against comics in America, led the State Department and the United States Information Agency to produce their own propaganda comic books rather than rely upon commercial content. These were distributed well into the 1960s, offering staunchly anti-Communist and pro-American stories to millions of readers across the globe. By the middle of the decade though, these comics faced competition from television broadcasts of the growing war in Vietnam, which provided images that belied the pro-American Manichean narratives in the state-produced comic books. Increasingly they were supplanted in appeal by a new type of commercial comic book coming from the United States. Published by Marvel Comics, these comics featured stories in which costumed heroes such as the Fantastic Four, Iron Man and Thor supported the foreign policy goals of a technologically-advanced, forward-looking America, thus straddling “the cultural space between overt propaganda comic books and commercial titles,” much as their predecessors had twenty years before (p. 246).

Hirsch’s book convincingly demonstrates that “lowbrow” comic books were regarded by the U.S. government as an important weapon in America’s cultural arsenal in the mid-twentieth century. This he shows through a combination of extensive archival research and textual analysis of key issues and titles published during this period. The book’s physical appearance is no less impressive, as the high-quality colour reproduction of several of the comic book covers he describes testifies to the quality of his assessments. Yet for all of Hirsch’s commendable attention to the history of the production and distribution of these comic books, his study falls short in its assessment of their reception abroad. There is little evidence as to what the intended audience thought of these comics and no effort to gauge whether or not they succeeded, either on their own or in conjunction with other propaganda, in persuading that audience of the superiority of American values over those of Soviet Communism. While this is undoubtedly a reflection of the challenges in collecting such data—presuming that the data is even available to collect—it is nevertheless an unfortunate omission to what is otherwise a superb book about American cultural propaganda, one that deserves a wide audience and hopefully will spur additional research on this under-addressed aspect of American cultural diplomacy during the Cold War.