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Neues Deutschland: “American Cultural Barbarism Threatens our Youth” (1950)

In the GDR, American popular culture was repeatedly rejected. In the spring of 1950, *Neues Deutschland*, the central organ of the SED, described “crime romanticism” in American movies and novels as a deliberate strategy to coarsen young people and make them insensitive to violence in order to lay the ideological groundwork for nuclear war.

American Cultural Barbarism Threatens our Youth

The corrupting influence of the gangster pulp fiction and crime movies imported from the USA can be demonstrated directly and concretely in the trial of the nineteen year-old robber-murderer Gladow and his gang.

With a vain smile, Gladow explained that his “great idol” was the American king of gangsters, Al Capone. His textbooks were hundreds of crime stories. From them, he learned many “tricks.” He “studied” the mistakes in the “construction of the crimes” in these cheap novels and “avoided” everything that had led to the discovery of the perpetrator. This gave him a sense of “safety and self-confidence.” And there was another interesting statement: the young gangster stated, among other things, that his “favorite” paper was the West Berlin *Abend*, “because it had the best murder stories.”

A glance at Gladow’s favorite paper justifies this “compliment.” Here are a few headlines from a single edition: “Passer-by thwarts kidnapping” – “Night of rumors” – “Bigamy with five women” – “Rudi behind bars” – “Killed with a garden hoe” – “A cowering woman on the steps” – “From the history of robber gangs,” and “first-hand reports” on the activities of a “famous” drug gangster and on America’s charming and versatile policewomen, who “are as skilled with lipstick, powder, and mascara as they are with their small-caliber pistols.” The *Abend* has nothing on other Western papers when it comes to crime romanticism.

The thirteen year-old who recently beat an elderly woman to death to get money for a bike and for more trips to the movie theater that shows murder films like “*Der Bagno-Sträfling*,” “*Der Herr der sieben Meere*,” and so on, and a whole host of similar cases of youthful murderers and criminals in recent times are part of the same phenomenon. They are fruits of the flood of

gangster pulp fiction and crime movies, which a Republican Senator in the American Senate was recently forced to describe as an education for “perfect murderers.”

There was no way around this conclusion, because youth crime in the U.S. had risen by a third as a result of the mass production of these gangster films and crime novels. In 1949 alone, 22 murders were committed in the U.S. by children between 9 and 16! With that, the country that already has the highest crime rate also has the infamy of being a place where child murderers are no longer an exceptional phenomenon.

And who can be surprised to find out that that, in a single week, broadcast stations in California showed, among other things, – 91 murders, 7 assaults, 3 child abductions, 10 thefts, 4 break-ins, 2 arsons, 2 suicides, and one catastrophic explosion with twenty fatalities, all in great detail. In addition, so-called “psychological thrillers” showed scenes in which Negroes were lynched, vampires sucked the blood from sleeping victims, and a doctor for the insane conducted experiments on his patients.

Millions of children are growing up under the influence of such scenes and such reading material. In the U.S. alone, about 300 to 400 crime magazines and crime serials appear every month, with a total circulation of 80 million, or one third of the entire American magazine circulation. This means that the poison of the “prime examples” – how Bill Jenkins, Al Capone, or Tim Jefferson punched out their rivals, slaughtered them, or extracted confessions with the most ingenious modern methods of torture, stage assaults, or how they exacted “revenge” – was drummed into the minds of well over 80 million children and adolescents. For this rubbish is read and traded far beyond the circle of buyers.

This means further that these 80 million youthful readers are getting accustomed, through this reading material, to regarding large-scale crimes, train derailments, bombings, arson, and so forth, which claim hundreds of human lives, as nothing unusual, and they equate an accomplished crime with a successful “heroic act.” In many cases, these gruesome murders are additionally laced with erotic enticements. In the “Superman series,” for example, the muscle-bound hero is always accompanied by a “girl detective,” a pin-up girl in net stockings and long black gloves.

It can therefore come as no surprise to anyone that, in keeping with these object lessons, two boys of eleven and thirteen in Springfield (U.S.A.), masked with handkerchiefs and armed with a revolver taken from the father’s desk, stopped a car on a country road and shot the driver to death. In juvenile court, the youthful murderers explained that they had gotten the idea for this holdup from reading “crime comics.” They had read thirty of these illustrated crime stories every week.

In another case, also in the U.S., a girl suffered such serious burns that both of her legs had to be amputated: a gang of adolescent playmates had tied her, as a “girl detective,” onto a pyre in the manner of one of these gangster stories.

But why and to what end this unparalleled glorification of acts of violence and crimes? Why and to what end this education of “perfect murderers?” This is not a random “manifestation of the times,” whose explanation lies in the “public’s taste,” but rather a conscious and systematic education to brutality, to disregard for human life, to indifference toward injustice and despotism, a systematic education to inhumanity, in short, the ideological preparation for a new madness of war.

Because resistance to a new genocide, the horror of which would surpass everything that has come before, is growing stronger in all peoples, even in the country of the American warmongers themselves, the most clever means are used for the purpose of an ideological education to war. New “heroic figures” are rapidly placed front and center wherever one looks: people who shy from nothing, adventurous criminals, gangsters; behind their “heroic deeds,” their acts of violence and crimes, the new war-mongering of America’s military interests, camouflaged as cosmopolitanism, conceals its bloody face.

But how can and must one counteract the poison of this murderous education?

The task is to wage the fight against American war-mongering and cultural barbarism in all areas. We must put better books into the hands of young people. It is one of the most urgent tasks to create good and suspenseful books for our young people’s thirst to read, and to make those that already exist truly available and accessible to them.

Our youth need books that teach them respect for life and humanity. This is not a new demand, but it is one that cannot be raised often enough – especially to our writers.

Source: Alice Stettiner, “American Cultural Barbarism Threatens our Youth”
[“Amerikanische Kulturbarbarei bedroht unsere Jugend”], *Neues Deutschland*, April 4, 1950.

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