Languages of Freedom in a Coca-Cola* Communist Country

CARLA KONTA

INTRODUCTION

After Tito’s anti-western and anti-American speech at the first Non-Aligned Conference—held in Belgrade at the beginning of September 1961—American ambassador George Kennan sent a sternly worded telegram to the Department of State declaring that “we must reflect carefully on its implications for our treatment of conference and, in more long-term, our attitude toward role of Yugoslavs at this juncture” (Kennan). Foy D. Kohler, who at the time was the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, responded in no uncertain terms to Kennan’s proposals arguing that, beside assisting Yugoslavia “to build a firm secure base of national independence” and to “bring the US maximum benefit from [its] significant role . . . as an independent socialist state outside the Soviet bloc,” it would be imperative for United States interests “to exert an influence upon Yugoslavia’s present and future leadership for the evolution of Yugoslav political, economic, and social institutions along more democratically representative

* I borrowed this term from the title of Vučetić’s book *Koka-kola socijalizam* [Coca-Cola Socialism] in which she explores the Americanization of the Yugoslav “way to socialism” after its *revolution* versus the West in the first half of the fifties.

1 The translations from Serbo-Croatian are mine.
and humanistic lines with increasing ties to the West.” By attaining the goal of “a more definite shift to liberal and humanistic socialism” (Kohler), American public and cultural diplomacy would take on the specific role of enticing the Yugoslav ‘grey zone’ to the West. From the early fifties onwards, the Department of State and the United States Information Agency (USIA) began to contemplate a long-term policy which aimed at exerting cultural and political influence on Tito and Yugoslav public opinion by means of new communication channels in public diplomacy. Some of these measures were highly successful in reaching large audiences and ensuring maximum impact. Particularly successful in this regard was a periodical entitled *Pregled* [Horizons]—published in Serbo-Croatian and distributed by the United States Information Center of Belgrade—that between 1965 and 1966 was distributed monthly to some thirty-two thousand Yugoslav citizens (*Operations Memorandum*); and the broadcasts of the *Voice of America* which, according to a 1961 survey, was followed weekly by sixty-nine percent of all Yugoslav radio listeners (*Yugoslav Reactions*). Therefore, when the time came to justify and explain to the Yugoslav public why the African American Civil Rights struggle was taking place in the ‘freest country’ of the world, those communication channels became of crucial importance.

**American Visible and Invisible Networks in Yugoslavia during the Cold War**

After the Tito-Stalin split of 1948, doors were opened for the creation of a Yugosl-American partnership (Jakovina) and Yugoslavia came to the fore in the international arena by reason of its form of leadership in the Non-Aligned movement and its socialist self-management. Although it remained one of the “socialist powers” in the world, Yugoslavia started to mirror many western cultural and social models: jazz, rock music and films, the use of household appliances and the culinary arts, urban architecture, advertising and American supermarkets, to name just a few. However, as Sabina Mihelj has shown, “this did not mean that Yugoslav culture became thoroughly ‘Westernized’ [because] Yugoslav cultural producers and policymakers were trying to establish a ‘third way’ between state-controlled models of cultural production followed in the East, and the market-led approach favored in the West” (7).

In the historical climate of the time, United States public and cultural diplomatic activities assumed the role of creating American ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ networks among Yugoslav citizens and leaders. From 1945 and especially in the fifties, the USIA initiated the United States Information Services (USIS) in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Novi Sad (then in Ljubljana, Skopje and Sarajevo in the seventies). These American information centers housed a public library and reading-room that provided American journals and specialized periodicals, lectures, exhibits, concerts and English lessons. Together with the State Department, USIA also organized a Cultural Presentation Program which provided the arrival
in Yugoslavia of American artists, choirs, jazz, blues and classical music performers, vanguard theater groups, and painters, sportsmen, and academic lecturers. By broadcasting the *Voice of America* (VOA) the United States government reached thousands of Yugoslav citizens. Furthermore, the American pavilions at the Zagreb and Belgrade International Trade Fairs further enhanced the idea of American wealth, knowledge and technological know-how. What is more, the Cultural Exchange Program, provided by public funding such as the Fulbright and Leader’s Exchange Program or by private American foundations, generated intense interest and impact on the part of Yugoslav politicians, academics and university students by introducing an alternative and insidious *forma mentis*.

**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ISSUE AS REPORTED BY THE YUGOSLAV *VOICE OF AMERICA***

Since the early fifties the advancement of African Americans was proposed by the USIA as a top priority issue described in terms of freedom and emancipation “as an effective means of combatting Communist propaganda and demonstrating the progress of the American Negro in a democratic society” (Morton). In Yugoslavia these USIA bulletins were intended to deconstruct the anti-American stories that had become so popular in the Yugoslav mainstream press in the late forties (Savić; “Dobici”) by taking their cue from Soviet anti-Americanism; nonetheless because of the Yugo-American partnership in the early fifties these anti-American narrations partly vanished from Yugoslavia’s public discourse. When, in the wake of the *Brown vs. Board of Education*
2 verdict, the African American desegregation movement exploded, it spilled over, almost immediately, from United States national boundaries. For example, the Yugoslav press was actively interested in this matter and expressed sympathy for segregated African Americans: indeed the most important newspaper of Yugoslavia, “Borba” [The Struggle], defined it as an “anachronistic and painful phenomenon” (“Kukluksklanovski apostol” 4).

As far as the American side was concerned, the VOA program had paid a lot of attention to the issues of African American people even before 1954. One of the transmissions broadcast in May 1950 entitled “Outstanding Negroes of the United States” paid a heartfelt tribute to their contribution to United States society: “Of the hundreds of national and racial groups which compose the people of the United States, few have contributed more to the enrichment of the country than the Negro. Almost every field of endeavor is represented among the Negro men and women of achievement and their names . . . have become household words throughout the land” (1). In the same transmission the VOA outlined the huge contribution of African Americans to American education, science, sports, music and social welfare. Personalities such as Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, scientist George Washington Carver, New York State Representative

---

2 The United States Supreme Court decision ended the system of segregation in schools in 1954.
Clayton Powell Jr., Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in literature, then jazz and blues artists, were named as worthy symbols of the American nation (1-10). The VOA broadcasts gave voice to the Negro theater in Harlem and Brooklyn, New York City (Reports on the Arts n. 46) while Jazz Notes figured regularly as one of the features of the VOA broadcast “Arts in the U.S.A.” (Reports on the Arts n. 66). Each month, Negroes in the News reported on African American achievements in United States society. This radio program provided information on topics such as “William Gordon wins Nieman Fellowship for study at Harvard University” (Negroes in the News n. 10), or “Negroes in training awarded over $330,000 by National Medical Fellowship” (Negroes in the News n. 10), or “Blind honors student wins Root-Tilden scholarship for law study at N.Y.U.” (Negroes in the News n. 11). It also reported on a regular basis the success of African American artists in the motion picture industry, such as “Dorothy Dandridge—popular night club singer selected for starring role in . . . See How They Run” (Negroes in the News n. 15).

These and similar articles aimed specifically at convincing the Yugoslav public that the African American community had begun to be integrated into society, in the fields of education, banking and the business sector, as well as in public and civil services, and the arts. In January 1953 the VOA started to endorse the American initiative of the “Negro History Week,” held from February 8th till February 15th throughout the United States. “During this week—the VOA communicated—programs sponsored by churches, schools, colleges, community agencies and study groups, will emphasize the theme ‘Negro History and Human Relations.’ . . . An objective study [that] reveals not only the progress of the Negro in the United States, but reflects the spirit of American democratic ideals in action” (Negroes in the News n. 23) the broadcast concluded. To reinforce the ideals of American democracy and equality, the VOA provided stories about courageous African American men and women. As regards women, “The National Council of Negro Women—stated its director Dorothy Ferebee—is proud to add its influence and resources to those of other women striving to achieve that equality of status which will permit women the world over to exercise their true influence in the quest for universal peace” (Negroes in the News n. 28).

Besides providing information about American cultural trends, the broadcasts on “Negro” culture were intended to fight the assertions of communist propaganda that Americans were “cultural barbarians,” and that materialistic capitalism could only produce commodities instead of highbrow culture. These initiatives helped the United States government in its global propaganda campaign against the Soviet Union and its communist allies, who widely reported and successfully exploited the racial tension and violence that accompanied the rise of the Civil Rights movements in the United States—especially after the Brown vs. Board of Education verdict and the Little Rock events—as a blatant example of hypocrisy on the part of a nation that claimed to be a leader in the free world (Von Eschen 92-95).
As Mary Dudziak pointed out in her *Cold War Civil Rights*, “from 1946 throughout the mid-1960s, the federal government engaged in a sustained effort to tell a particular story about race and American democracy: a story of the triumph of good over evil, a story of U.S. moral superiority” (13). As the most significant channel of the American propaganda program in Yugoslavia, *Pregled* (a Yugoslav variant of the Soviet *Amerika*) began publication in 1959 with a circulation of twelve thousand copies. By 1961 circulation rose to thirty thousand copies (*Inspection Report* 23) and became the most popular source of information on the American way of life in politics, economics, welfare, technology, science and education. Its role in forming Yugoslav public opinion on the African American struggle was invaluable: it attested to the fact that democracy in America was leading to social justice even though the struggle was hard, and it confirmed the fact that democratic change, however slow and painful, was superior to the Soviet’s dictatorial approach. The key figure that African American emancipation pointed to was Abraham Lincoln. He was “The Emancipator” par excellence (Wish, “Linkoln i prava” 14), the man who had the courage to perpetuate the American Revolution and give freedom to the slaves. Speeches on the African-American struggle were often introduced by citing Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg speech of 1863: “our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” (Wish, “Linkoln—Emancipator” 8). While explaining the African American battle for liberty and equality in America, *Pregled* articles usually highlighted the idea that the American Revolution was still going on, as demonstrated by this speech by President Johnson:

> We are the children of the Revolution . . . The history of America is a history of a revolution still going on today. This revolution has conquered this continent and expanded democracy . . . Our achievements have raised hopes and aspirations of people all over the world for a better life. Our political ideas have helped ‘freedom’ to become a shared symbol of people gathering in every part of the world (“Lindon Bejns Džonson” 23).

Another aim of those articles was to explain the historical reasons for African American inequality: usually such stories started with the arrival of the first Dutch ship in Jamestown (Virginia) in 1619 that led to the “happy ending” of the Proclamation of Emancipation in 1863 (Sutherland 22). The fourteenth and fifteenth amendments were portrayed as the continuation of this story, but in the late nineteenth century the Supreme Court reversed the Proclamation with the verdict of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case (1896) which established the rule “separate but equal.” Nonetheless, the *Pregled* articles related a better turn of events in the twentieth century with the foundation of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the National Urban League Supreme Court victories, with the New Deal and Roosevelt’s Black Cabinet, during the
World War II, and, finally, with the Supreme Court verdict in the Brown vs. Board of Education case in 1954 (“Stalna bora” 32-36).

From time to time Pregled provided evidence of how the advancement of African Americans was becoming a reality in American contemporary society, of how they were entering government services and of how desegregation was being implemented in airports, schools, public restrooms, restaurants, hotels, and around public fountains. There were quotations by Roy Wilkins, the secretary of NAACP, affirming that “in the field of civil rights, the black position is evolving so completely, that he can only make progress toward full equality” (“Gradanska prava” 34). The segregationist community of the United States was — according to the articles of Pregled — made up of a small and gradually declining minority. The integrationists included the younger generation and educated people, even in the Deep South. In the civil rights struggle, good news was coming from the United States: the protests, the sit-ins, and the occupation of public, segregated places, the victories in the courts of the NAACP were becoming widespread all over the country (“Položaj crnaca” 48-52; “Predlog zakona” 26).

In this Cold War narrative two other figures played a key role in affirming the truth and faithfulness of the American fight for democracy and equality: Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy (Schlesinger 37). Both of them were seen as symbols of the fight for freedom, and strong and determined enemies of racial inequality. The events of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963 which culminated in Martin Luther King’s famous “I have a dream” speech, were covered by Pregled. Stories about the efforts of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Women’s Committee on Civil Rights (NWCCCR) were eagerly followed in order to show that racial equality would soon be achieved (Smith 39).

**Final Considerations**

As scholarly research shows, from the early fifties on, the United States State Department became increasingly concerned that domestic racial relations could have a negative impact “on the dozens of countries on the verge of independence from Western colonial powers”; the new nations’ view of racism in the United States would be a strong reason for them to ally themselves with the Soviet Union rather than with America (Monson 107-08; Borstelmann; Krenn). On the other hand, as Plummer demonstrated, the worldwide demands for decolonization put new pressures for change in race relations in America and African American involvement in international affairs (5-20), while the NAACP and its leaders exerted their power in order to take their human rights agenda before the United Nations (Anderson). Undoing the negative impact of domestic racial relations became part of Washington’s foreign policy agenda; by sending ambassadors for jazz (Heywood et al., ch. 7) and African American sportsmen abroad (Damion),
American policy makers intended to overcome hostile international responses to the violent repression of the national civil rights struggle.

An examination of *Pregled* and an analysis of VOA broadcasting in Yugoslavia brings to light evidence of this agenda. Even though the Yugoslav regime never took advantage officially of the problem of United States racial relations (at least not after 1950), for the USIS centers in Yugoslavia this issue was seen as a major blot on United States society and a litmus test for the sincerity of America’s intention to establish civil rights for all its citizens.

As Radina Vučetić has pointed out, the “Coca-Cola” communist country of Yugoslavia took advantage of western cultural infiltration and of foreign information services to show its form of “liberal socialism” to the world, but only in the case they weren’t pushing for explicit political change (291-304; 397-412). Nonetheless, throughout the fifties and the sixties the Yugoslav Central Committee continued to complain about the American information services (“Inostrane informativne ustanove” 33-335), while other prominent Yugoslav organizations defined these services as “antisocialist” (*Stenografske beleške* 10/2). Nonetheless, because of its Non-Aligned position, the Yugoslav policy makers deemed that it was impossible to restrict the dissemination of “foreign propaganda” without Yugoslavia losing international prestige as an “open community” (*Informacija*).

It is very difficult to assess to what extent the United States presentation of the African American desegregation struggle was successful in convincing its public, due to the absence of any United States or Yugoslav contemporary surveys on the issue. However, one survey report might be helpful in decoding the impact of these messages: in 1961 thirty Yugoslav refugees in Germany were asked to name the negative aspects of American life; the most common answers were “gangsterism” and “absence of social welfare provisions,” but no mention was made of the racial question (*Yugoslav Refugee Attitudes*).


