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# Ambivalent Americanizations

Popular and Consumer Culture  
in Central and Eastern Europe

Edited by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEBASTIAN M. HERRMANN, LEONARD SCHMIEDING Ambivalent Americanizations	7
--	---

### music

REINHOLD WAGNLEITNER Jazz – The Classical Music of Globalization	25
---	----

THOMAS KOLITSCH The Monotony of the Yeah, Yeah, Yeah – Official Ways of Dealing with Western Popular Music in the GDR	51
--	----

LEONARD SCHMIEDING Of Windmills, Headspins, and Powermoves: Hiphop in the GDR 1983-1989	65
---	----

### popular genres

KATJA KANZLER Kansas, Oz, and the Magic Land: A Wizard's Travels Through the Iron Curtain	89
---	----

NEVENA DAKOVIC City Foxes / East-West Soap (Belgrade / New York)	105
--	-----

### shopping

NADINE SWIBENKO “Because I'm an ‘Ossi’ ...” Asserting Identity by Consuming East German Goods	121
---	-----

EWA GRZESZCZYK American Models of Consumption and their Presence in Poland	139
---	-----

### material culture

SEBASTIAN M. HERRMANN A Plastic Modernity?	167
---	-----

ANNE KOENEN Superior Taste – Mail Order in the GDR	187
---	-----

### confrontations

MAGDALENA ZIÓLEK American Smiles on Polish Faces: American Culture in the Discourse of Globalization from the Perspective of the Polish Young Generation	211
---	-----

MALGORZATA GAJDA-ŁASZEWSKA Why We Loved What They Told Us to Hate: Miscalculations of the Anti-American Propaganda in the Polish Posters of the Stalinist Period.	233
--	-----

ZOË A. KUSMIERZ “The glitter of your kitchen pans”: The Kitchen, Home Appliances, and Politics at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959	253
---	-----

Contributors	273
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Index	277
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## Kansas, Oz, and the Magic Land: A Wizard's Travels Through the Iron Curtain

### Abstract

The following essay addresses Alexandr Volkov's adaptation and appropriation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*. Exceedingly popular throughout the Eastern bloc, Volkov's novels have endeared a magical setting and cast of characters to readers who rarely knew of their American origins. I discuss the *Wizard's* 'travels' through the Iron Curtain as an incidence of cultural exchange at once motivated by and subverting Cold War cultural politics. I suggest that it is not so much the changes to which Baum's narrative universe has been subjected on its way from West to East that makes this case study remarkable but the ways in which the two *Wizards* have been interpreted to fit contestable notions of 'American' and 'Soviet' culture.

### Introduction

When seeking to uncover the 'Americanization' of Eastern Europe during the Cold War, the classic methods of scholarship on Americanization often prove of little help. Shaped in the context of researching the politics of reeducation in post-World-War-II Western Europe, the scholarship targets the strategic transfer of U.S. goods and practices as means of cultural diplomacy. The Americanization of Eastern Europe, quite apparently, proceeded along different lines. In ways that remind of the pop-cultural socialization Kaspar Maase so perceptively studied in West Germany, it operated underneath or in opposition to cultural doctrine. Yet in contrast to the cultural exchanges Maase explored in West German youth culture, U.S. cultural artifacts in Eastern Europe were inevitably framed by normative cultural politics that assigned things American specific political meaning. In all instances, however, the narratives of Americanization hosted at the other side of the Iron Curtain resist the neat routes and boundaries classic concepts of Americanization provide for.<sup>1</sup>

In the following, I want to explore a case study that perfectly illustrates the messiness of a cultural exchange that not only involved a crossing of the Atlantic but also of the Iron Curtain. Far from serving as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, the cultural artifact I want to study – L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* – traveled across the Atlantic wholly

<sup>1</sup> A 2002 special issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies* on "Culture, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War" identifies cultural exchanges between East and West as a promising field for future scholarship on the Cold War (Glants/Kachurin).

unknown to its U.S. author and other American authorities. Also, an analysis of the transformations to which the American text was subjected on European soil fails to excavate easily intelligible cultural differences; it rather seems to uncover a repertoire of shared cultural traditions. Finally, reconstructing the contexts of the artifact's production and reception exposes the notion of neatly defined 'American' and 'Soviet' cultures as a political intervention, an active effort to bring order into a 'disorderly' cultural exchange.

More specifically, I want to discuss the *Wizard's* travels through the Iron Curtain as an incidence of cultural exchange at once affirming and subverting Cold War cultural politics. I suggest that it is not so much the changes to which Baum's narrative universe has been subjected on its way from West to East that makes this case study remarkable but the ways in which the two *Wizards* have been interpreted to fit ostensibly national concepts of culture. Readers on both sides of the Iron Curtain have made the effort to correlate (what I find to be) strikingly similar texts to, respectively, distinctly American and distinctly Soviet values and histories. The attributes 'American' and 'Soviet' prove particularly elusive here. On the one hand, they reference a cultural difference defined in national terms. Approaching the *Wizard's* transatlantic travels from the perspective of 'Americanization' both highlights this national frame of reference, and invites us to question the solidity of its boundaries.<sup>2</sup> In Cold War discourse, on the other hand, 'American' and 'Soviet' chiefly served as ideological signifiers, as shorthands for the different political systems in East and West. While Cold War propaganda sought to conflate the national and the ideological, I seek out moments in my case study where these two dimensions of things American and things Soviet are disjoined. I thereby hope to complicate the Cold War notion of a cultural antagonism supposedly reflecting the political antagonism of the Iron Curtain.

Accordingly, I want to begin this essay by tracing some of the ways in which the two 'versions' of the *Wizard* have been framed as, respectively, American and Soviet texts, and, in the case of Volkov's *Wizard*, how this 'Sovietization' unfolded in the context of Cold War politics. In the following, I want to suggest several aspects of the novels' inception, adaptation, reception, and textuality that destabilize the neat national/ideological boundaries erected around their two versions.<sup>3</sup> What I

2 Especially scholars working in the context of the cultural studies paradigm have (re-) figured 'Americanization' as a praxis of cultural mixing, hybridization, and 'indigenization' (cf. Paul/Kanzler 7).

3 It should be noted that Volkov has not been the only author who appropriated and expanded Baum's fictional universe. Fans of *Oz* have attempted to keep track of the various spin-offs and parallel storylines inspired by Baum (cf. <<http://www.timelineuniverse.net/Oz.htm>> 10 March 2006.). As far as I could ascertain, Volkov's fictional universe has not (yet) generated fan-writing in proportions comparable to Baum's.

wish to suggest in this essay is that neither of the two 'master narratives' of American culture's role in Eastern Europe during the Cold War – that of the demonized culture of the Capitalist enemy, and that of the worshiped culture of escape from and resistance against Communist dictatorship – tells the whole story. Ultimately, I am interested in the impact such 'messy' (hi)stories may, or should, have on our scholarship.

### The Wizard of the Emerald City

According to cultural historian Anne Nesbet, "[o]ne of the under-appreciated ironies of the Cold War is that the imaginations of Soviet children were nourished by the same fairy tale loved in the United States under the title *The Wizard of Oz*" (80). In 1939 – the year which saw the release of the novel's phenomenally successful film version –, Soviet scientist and novelist Alexandr Volkov published his adaptation of Baum's book under the title *The Wizard of the Emerald City*.<sup>4</sup> After considerably revising the novel in 1959, Volkov added five sequels in the 1960s and 70s: *Urfin Jus and His Wooden Soldiers*, *The Seven Underground Kings*, *The Fiery God of the Marrans*, *The Yellow Fog*, and, published posthumously in the 1980s, *The Mystery of the Deserted Castle*. While Volkov's first *Wizard* novel quite closely copies Baum's first novel, his sequels develop the characters and setting introduced there in ways largely independent of Baum's sequels.<sup>5</sup>

Volkov's books enjoyed tremendous popularity throughout the Eastern bloc and beyond, leaving their traces as far as to some Arab-speaking countries.<sup>6</sup> By 1981, more than 2.5 million copies of Volkov's first novel had been printed in Russian. This figure disregards not only the 13 languages into which Volkov's books have been translated but also his tremendously successful sequels (cf. Nesbet 80). Rumor has it that Soviet children copied the books by hand because the demand by far exceeded the supply (cf. Mitrokhina 187). All the while, Frank Baum's 'original' *Wizard* was virtually unknown in these parts of the world. Baum's and Volkov's books thus effectively map the world in ways largely, though not completely, congruent with the geo-political mappings of the Cold War.

4 I use the titles other scholars, writing about Volkov in English, have suggested as translations of the original titles. Although all of his novels are now available in English, they have been published under a variety of titles. Cf. the Works Cited list for their publication history in the U.S.

5 The extent to which Volkov read and incorporated any of Baum's later novels cannot be fully reconstructed, although both Mitrokhina and Nesbet speculate about Volkov's continued 'cannibalization' of Baum's work (Mitrokhina 188 n2; Nesbet 83).

6 Cf. <<http://www.answers.com/topic/alexander-m-volkov>> 12 September 2005.

## National Wizards

As suggested above, there is a strong tradition of reading both Baum's and Volkov's *Wizard* in the light of their respective national cultures. In the American context, this nationalizing approach seems chiefly owed to the fact that, to U.S. readers, the *Wizard* has quite simply presented itself as an American text. All sources indicate that not only Baum was unaware of Volkov's plagiarism, also the American reading public remained oblivious to the existence of a Soviet *Wizard* at least until the end of the Cold War.<sup>7</sup> The cultural boundary represented by the Iron Curtain, together with the American tendency so aptly diagnosed and bemoaned by Shelley Fisher Fishkin to narrowly locate American culture only within U.S. national territory, has effectively Americanized Baum's *Wizard*.

The scholarly readings this nationalizing approach has generated are abundant. Broadly, two branches may be discerned there. On the one hand, critics like Michael O. Riley have framed Baum's book as the "quintessential American fairy tale" (3), as a particularly successful transplantation of the genre conventions of the fairy tale to American soil. Other scholars have embedded the *Wizard* in the socio-cultural context of its production. Henry M. Littlefield, for example, frames the novel as a regional text, placing it alongside Hamlin Garland's grimly realistic portrayals of Midwestern farmers. From this point of view, Littlefield reads the novel as a parable on the political discourses of populism circulating in the U.S. at the time of the book's inception. For him, the Wicked Witch of the East represents "evil Eastern influences on honest labor" (52) both in Baum's Kansas and in the fantastic land of Oz. Whatever their conceptual angle, then, scholars like Riley and Littlefield 'naturally' interrogate the *Wizard of Oz* as an American text.

The 'Sovietization' of Volkov's *Wizard* displays a different dynamic. Most importantly, Volkov's adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* was not the result of one individual's autonomous artistic choices; it was rather deeply anchored in early Soviet cultural politics. In the 1920s, the young Soviet nation began to face a challenge that, it seems, cultural politicians in all Eastern bloc states had to confront at some point: On the one hand, they found virtually all genres of popular culture (including children's literature) to be shaped by conventions that enlisted them in the service of Capitalism. A culture that sought to cultivate a Communist identity would need to excise such forms of 'mass culture.'<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, people loved these popular genres; it would thus not only prove difficult to enforce any ban on

7 A Library of Congress exhibition now acknowledges Volkov's adaptation (cf. <<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/oz/ozsect2.html>> 12 September 2005).

8 This line of reasoning extends on Marxist interpretations of 'mass culture' which, at the time, circulated throughout Europe.

them, the genres – once 'rewritten' – also offered an opportunity to educate the people in the Communist spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Among a variety of efforts and programs, Soviet cultural politicians in the 1920s and 30s commissioned rewritings of several Western children's novels – including, for instance, Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio* (Alexey Tolstoy, *Adventures of Buratino*, 1936), Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Dolittle* (Kornei Chukovsky, *Dr. Aybolit*, 1925), and *The Wizard of Oz* (cf. Mitrokhina 183, 187 n1). In the case of each rewritten children's book, the 'Western' origins of these novels were minimized. The books were largely staged as products of their Soviet authors' imagination, their roots in other, 'Western,' texts either not mentioned at all or painted as merely some vague 'inspiration.' At the same time, none of the original novels were available in the countries of the Eastern bloc.<sup>10</sup>

The express purpose of this politics of plagiarism was to provide the Socialist public with a literature 'cleansed' of supposedly Capitalist traces and instead invested with (just as supposedly) Communist meanings and values.<sup>11</sup> While realism figured as the favored literary mode even for children's literature (cf. Ludwig 10-33), stories written in the fantastic mode also became candidates for Communist appropriation. After more radical Communist organizations had lobbied against fairy tales in the 1920s, indicting them as bourgeois and conservative, the 1930s saw the official approval of folk tales by the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers (cf. Brooke). Cultural politicians began to appreciate the opportunity to educate generations of young readers by using popular literary formulas, and the fairy tale's origins in folk culture offered a welcome strategy for legitimizing the genre. Its fantastic elements, however, remained a source of some anxiety: Normative discourses of Socialist culture too clearly condemned the fantastic as 'unhealthy' and diametrically opposed to the scientific materialism they sought to propagate. On another note, as Caroline Brooke's discussion of the controversial interpretation of several children's stories and poems outlines, the metaphoricity of the fantastic encodes a degree of uncertainty that collided with the didactic functionalization of literature in the Soviet Union. This anxiety about the fantastic remains unresolved in the Soviet program of 'reinterpreting' both traditional Russian tales and Western texts.

In accordance with this notion of 'reinterpretation,' many readers – during and after the Cold War, inside and outside of the academic

9 Cf. Ludwig.

10 East Germany may have figured as a bit of an exception here because German translations of these Western books at least existed; as far as I have found out, the original books were not translated into Russian and other East European languages before the late 1980s.

11 Financial considerations probably also played a role: By refusing to properly acknowledge the sources of these Soviet books, royalties could be avoided.

establishment – have read Volkov's books as Soviet texts. In a quite recent essay, literary historian Xenia Mitrokhina undertakes to focus on “the discrepancies between the two versions [Soviet and American] in order to suggest what kind of ideological messages the Soviet system sought to promote within children's literature” (183). Her interest in the differences between Volkov's and Baum's texts – however minute they may be – and her contextualization of the novels within Soviet propaganda colors Mitrokhina's reading. For example, she highlights the fact that, in the Soviet novel, Elli (a.k.a. Dorothy in Baum's novel) acts on the basis of a magic prediction made by the Fairy of the North, who announces that the girl would be able to return home if she helped three beings fulfill their dearest wishes. The certainty of such a prediction is missing from the American novel. Whereas Dorothy acts spontaneously and out of heartfelt sympathy for the creatures she meets along the Yellow Brick Road, Mitrokhina argues, Elli “has little control over her own fate” (184); she rather exemplifies a “subordinate, passive, and conformist personality” (185) – a model Soviet citizen.

While Mitrokhina uses her reading of Volkov to harshly criticize the politics of Soviet children's literature (she indicts the novels as “destructive, depressing, and passive-aggressive,” 187), she actually perpetuates pre-Perestroika Soviet ways of reading Volkov's novels that held great investments in picturing the Soviet and the American texts as fundamentally different.<sup>12</sup> Volkov himself produced the most prominent guidelines for reading his books by emphasizing the differences between his and Baum's novel. Most notably, Volkov made an effort to distinguish his from Baum's text by way of simply renaming characters and settings: Oz becomes the Magic Land, the Tin Woodman advances to the Iron Woodman, and unnamed characters receive names (the wizard in the Emerald City is named Goodwin, for example). Volkov even uses different Russian expressions for ‘wizard’ – волшебник and мудрец<sup>13</sup> – when talking about his own and Baum's book (cf. Nesbet 83).

Volkov's more fundamental claim to having significantly changed the material of the American book has been unmasked as a retroactive creation myth by Anne Nesbet's research into the novel's publication history. The few differences there are between *The Wizard of the Emerald City* and *The Wizard of Oz* – amounting to no more than some 15 pages in the whole novel (cf. Nesbet 82) – were largely introduced by Volkov in the novel's revised second edition, not having been part of its first, 1939 edition.

12 It should be noted, however, that the Magic Land novels were rarely discussed by the cultural establishment: If their fantastic elements were at odds with cultural doctrine, they needed not receive unnecessary attention.

13 The former word more immediately means ‘wizard’ whereas the latter is appropriately translated as ‘sage.’

Nesbet judges the novel's first version more accurately a translation rather than an adaptation of Baum's book.

If Soviet commentators at all addressed Volkov's American ‘inspiration,’ they could make sense of it only by having it provide the Soviet author with a *negative* point of reference, a stepping stone that allowed him to properly develop his ‘Soviet’ voice. Soviet critic I.P. Lupanova, writing about Volkov's books in the late 1960s, is a case in point:

In accordance with the social revision of the fairytale theme, the moral conflict of good and evil, which lies at the root of magic-fairytale plots, turns into the conflict between socially hostile forces. [...] In his accentuation of this aspect [of the story] one finds the fundamental creative operation worked by the Soviet storyteller on the foreign book. (qtd. in and transl. by Nesbet 83)

In Lupanova's argument, Volkov's adaptation becomes a work of *revision*, his text characterized by the *absence* of things American (as they have been singled out and ‘reworked’ by the Soviet author). What may appear problematic to some observers – to draw the line between Soviet and American *Wizard* – even affords Lupanova an opportunity to elaborate the distinctiveness of Soviet creativity: The implied closeness between Volkov's adaptation and its source – which Lupanova attributes to a democratically shared ‘fairy-tale theme’ rather than to plagiarized American authorship – provides a foil for Volkov's intervention which makes his ‘accentuation’ even more readily legible.

#### Ambivalent Wizards

For quite different reasons, then, readers on both sides of the Iron Curtain have imposed national/ideological frameworks on ‘their’ version of the *Wizard*. The ‘Soviet’ framing to which Volkov's novels have been subjected, however, cannot fully erase the ‘American’ resonances of their original. Most immediately, clear distinctions between American and Soviet signifiers are complicated by the inherent contingency of the antagonism Cold War discourses elaborate. Signifiers of Capitalism and Communism, of West and East, of things American and things Soviet are notoriously elusive – especially, one might assume, in a genre that largely relies on the fantastic mode. In the context of a cultural politics that is above all interested in generating a cohesive and certain cultural identity (as throughout the Eastern bloc), and in fueling an antagonistic image of Communist self and Capitalist other, such ‘messiness’ of national and political referents gains particular significance.

This messiness even predates the Cold War and its ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. Krystyna

Pomorska goes back as far as to the reign of Peter the Great to excavate a vibrant cultural exchange between Russia and America that resulted in a set of shared cultural narratives and values. Since the late 17<sup>th</sup>, and with particular urgency throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pomorska argues, Russian culture has drawn critical momentum from contact with, and opposition against, Western culture (389). A lively conflict between ‘Slavophiles’ and ‘Westernizers’ accompanied much of the development of Russian culture. Whereas the former insisted that “Russia differs essentially from the Western world in her very national and cultural principles” (390), chiefly referring to Russia’s distinct religious and folk traditions, the latter aimed for the nation’s integration in international networks of economic, political, and cultural exchange. The founding of the United States, along with the ‘success story’ of the nation’s early history – and the utopian projections this invited – greatly supported the cause of Russian Westernization throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, effectively elevating the U.S. to metonymic signifier of ‘the West.’ The very ambivalent perceptions of, and engagement with, American culture resulting from this history thus evolved independent of, yet echoed the dialectic of Americanism and anti-Americanism characterizing most of Western Europe’s cultural exchanges with the U.S. in the wake of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Next to this pre-Soviet dimension of Russian engagement with America – a history the discourses of a Soviet beginning strive to conceal – another genealogical horizon needs to be considered to appreciate the *Wizard’s* travels through the Iron Curtain. Baum’s novel, as well as Volkov’s adaptation and spin-off, draw from a repertoire of characters and plots indebted to the folk imagination of the fairy tale: fairies and wizards, animals and scarecrows that talk like human beings, magic objects – they all clearly make reference to the genre conventions of the fairy tale. As Propp’s and Campbell’s archetypal inquiries into such conventions suggest, the fairy tale can be approached as a genre in which cultural idiosyncrasies overlap to such an extent that more fundamental, ‘universal’ structures emerge. Fairy tales, from this point of view, are rooted in ‘archaic’ cultures and thus reflect ‘archaic’ thought.<sup>14</sup> If the two *Wizards* were conceived out of a shared, or at least overlapping, fairy-tale imagination, they may gesture toward a cultural dialog that undermines the antagonistic cultural politics of the Cold War.

Approaching Volkov’s novels with these considerations in mind prepares us to explore their ‘un-Soviet’ moments. In fact, I want to suggest, the national allegiance of Volkov’s narratives remains elusive to such an

14 Cf. Hudlin and Nikolajeva. Hudlin contrasts a Campbellian reading of Baum’s first novel as following the structure of heroic myth with Proppian approaches that see the novel reproduce patterns of the fairy tale; Hudlin finds the former approach more compelling.

extent that, at times, they appear even more ‘American’ than Baum’s original. Not only do Volkov’s books retain the original’s American setting, and not only does their protagonist keep an Anglophone name.<sup>15</sup> In an interesting twist of the notion of the Frontier, even Volkov’s Magic Land is located in the state of Kansas, hidden and protected by a belt of insurmountable mountains and a deadly desert. When, in Volkov’s subsequent novels, the protagonists intentionally seek out and journey to the Magic Land, they devise ways to cross a deadly landscape – by designing a sort of sailing ship the fierce winds drive across the desert (*Urfin Jus and His Wooden Soldiers*), or by constructing solar-powered electric mules in *The Fiery God of the Marrans*. In any case, by carefully planning and eventually undertaking a perilous journey Westward to get to a Magic/Promised Land, Volkov’s protagonists seem to re-stage America’s pioneer history.

These American echoes do not find their roots in Baum’s source text. In the American novels, Oz is located outside the territory of the United States, thereby creating a contrast between the ordinary, familiar Kansas setting and the fantastic setting of Oz (cf. Littlefield 51). This contrast is collapsed in Volkov’s novels, where the Magic Land is part of the United States, its magic seeping into and suffusing the American setting. For readers throughout the Eastern bloc, the Magic Land presented itself as metaphor and metonym of America – both equally far away and beyond reach, places whose magic promises and nightmarish perils are most appropriately figured in the fantastic mode.<sup>16</sup>

This ‘spectacularized’ American setting, along with the prominent and heroic role Elli and other members of her family play, creates a strong, and very positive, American presence in the novels. This presence is offset by a conspicuous Soviet absence: On Volkov’s fictional map, the Eastern bloc does not exist. This absence not only unfolds in geographic terms – the novels never look beyond the American continent – it also penetrates their imagination: The various cultures of Volkov’s Magic Land may well be taken to illustrate different shades and forms of class society. Role models of Communist social organization, however, are missing. Neither of the Magic Land’s communities convincingly represents Communist virtues, with the full utopian grandeur one may expect of a ‘magic’ land: Its inhabitants are weak and timid (and therefore prone to subjugation by various villains), and they require a strong government, executed by likable yet flawed rulers.<sup>17</sup>

15 Volkov changes the protagonist’s name from Dorothy to Elli

16 I speak from my own experience here for I vividly remember, when I first read the books as a child, I thought Kansas the most desirable and spectacular place in the world.

17 The principal of whom are introduced in the novel both Eastern and Western readers know: the scarecrow, the iron woodman, and the cowardly lion.

The novels' plots further complicate their placement within national/ideological frames of reference. Each book narrates the adventures of a little girl (first Elli, later her younger sister Ann) struggling against and eventually defeating some villain who has subjugated the people of the Magic Land: in *The Wizard of the Emerald City*, it is of course the Wicked Witch of the East (named Gingema in Volkov's version); in the first sequel (*Urfin Jus and His Wooden Soldiers*), it is carpenter Urfin who has created an army of wooden soldiers; Urfin returns in the series' fourth book (*The Fiery God of the Marrans*) where he subjugates a backward people of the Magic Land by pretending to be a God; the book in between (*The Seven Underground Kings*) focuses on an underground kingdom in which a large royal family exploits its subjects; in *The Yellow Fog*, a formerly dormant giant witch conquers the Magic Land; and in the final book (*The Mystery of the Deserted Castle*), a ship of aliens from outer space invades the land. Each book thus tells a story of the seemingly weak winning out against the seemingly strong, celebrating the power of a little girl and her little friends, and highlighting the significance of their friendship.

This plot invites a multiplicity of interpretations, within and without national/ideological frames of reference. It may well be read as an allegory of the Bolshevik revolution, the 'common people' rebelling against and ultimately overthrowing the despots who exploit them. Some novels strongly encourage such an interpretation, e.g. by characterizing the ruling aristocratic family in *The Seven Underground Kings* as a useless class that colonizes the country's resources, and by accentuating the dawning 'class consciousness' of the country's working people – interestingly, inspired by the American girl Ann. But this, and other, plots may just as well be read as tapping into American national narratives, their democratic and anti-aristocratic mythology. In terms of their imaginary usability for a fantastic children's novel, the American and the Bolshevik revolutions present themselves as not so different, after all. Finally, the plot may motivate readings that focus on the novels' genre rather than the geo-politics of their production and consumption. The quest narratives that provide the basis for each novel's plot, and the mythic battle between good and evil, innocent and corrupt they all narrate, may gesture toward the archetypal roots of Baum's as well as Volkov's imagination (cf. Hudlin).

In fact, several elements of Volkov's novels seem to draw on the rich tradition of Russian fairy tales, with its memorable witches and wizards and its heroes recruited from the 'common people.' Inspiration from these traditions provides the most compelling explanation for the curious dynamics of villainy in Volkov's novels. From an archetypal perspective, fairy tales thrive on the conflict between essential good and essential evil. In Volkov, only very few villains retain their evilness throughout the plot. Most conspicuous among these enduring antagonists are the witches – the two witches Volkov borrowed from Baum in his first novel and, even more

spectacularly, the giant witch Arachna starring in *The Yellow Fog*. Arachna's quite outstanding and horrific characterization – the novel meticulously fleshes out the enormous dimensions of her body as well as her exquisitely ruthless plans for taking control of the Magic Land – seems to be inspired by the prominent role witches play in Russian fairy tales: Baba Yaga – with her piercing eyes and steel teeth, residing in a hut built on chicken legs and fenced in by skulls of her victims – arguably figures as the most spectacular character of the Russian folk imagination (cf. Pilinovsky). She serves as a projection space for archetypal evil, which requires her annihilation by the end of the plot. Accordingly, Arachna, along with the two witches in the first novel, is the only major character who dies in Volkov's novels.

Volkov's other villains perform different cultural work, which contrasts them with the archetypal echoes of the novels' witches. All of the other villains are eventually reformed: Urfin is humbled by the forgiveness of the people he had manipulated and exploited, and chooses the life of a farmer and carpenter over subsequent temptations of power. His wooden soldiers are simply given new, cheerful faces to turn them into mild and useful creatures (Urfin's former general, for instance, finds a new purpose as dance instructor). The Underground Kingdom's royal family is put to sleep with the help of water from a magic spring that erases all memories and, upon their awakening, they are reeducated to become useful and productive members of society – weavers, miners, riveters, and cooks. Most immediately, these prominent conversion narratives enlist Volkov's novels in the didactic project Communist cultural politics prescribe for literature. Urfin and his fellows display the corrupting effects a feudal social system can have on the individual. After their 'false consciousness' has been reformed, they join society as members of the working class. At the same time, however, Volkov's conversion plots gesture toward his novels' multiple cultural allegiances. As both a stock plot device in narrative fiction and a fundamental cultural narrative (with religious as well as secular dimensions), these conversion plots yet more firmly embed Volkov's books in cultural traditions that transcend national as well as ideological boundaries.

Another interesting complication of the novels' ideological work emerges in their negotiation of magic. As suggested above, the fairy tale's fantastic elements continue to disturb the genre's functionalization in Communist cultural politics. Volkov seems to address this 'weakness' of the genre by generously drawing on signifiers of science. In this, he may have found his model in Baum's original novel where the wizard's balloon provides a blueprint for the representation of science vis-à-vis magic: The balloon's science serves as signifier of the 'real world.' More precisely, when the inhabitants of Oz mistake the 'wizard's' capacity to fly for magic, the novel establishes (the real world's) science as the conceptual



counterpart to (Oz's) magic. Baum's *Wizard* thus elaborates a fundamental contrast between science and magic that figures magic as the inversion, the fantastic transfiguration of science.

Volkov introduces more, and more sophisticated, scientific solutions into his Magic Land's fantastic setting. In several instances, he uses the juxtaposition of magic and science pioneered by Baum to elaborate the superiority of science. When the protagonists' carefully engineered desert-ship, or their high-tech electric mules overpower the Magic Land's magic border, science clearly emerges as more effective than magic. Such a narrative presents itself as the perfect solution to the dilemma fairy tales pose for Communist doctrine: It allows Volkov to exploit the imaginary potential of magic while covering his position by bracketing it as less powerful than science.

However, other moments in Volkov's novels bear witness to more ambivalent juxtapositions of magic and science, and more complex dynamics between the two than mere contrast and rivalry. In *The Fiery God of the Marrans*, for example, the scarecrow (now ruler of the Emerald City) receives as a gift from the Fairy of the South an apparatus that works and looks like a television set (allowing the protagonists to spy out the actions of their enemies), but whose operations are clearly figured as magic: its user needs to say a magic spell to activate it. This magic television-set, which reappears in later novels, collapses the neat distinction between science and magic in which Soviet cultural doctrine invests considerable significance. In *The Yellow Fog*, Volkov goes even one step further: To battle against the giant witch Arachna, Ann's uncle, Charlie, engineers and builds an Iron Knight of equally enormous proportions. His construction includes an intricate web of springs and levers by the help of which the Knight can be mechanically operated. As soon as the Knight's construction is completed, however, he turns alive, thanks to the same magic principle that animates other non-human characters like the scarecrow or the iron woodman. In the ensuing battles with Arachna, the Knight runs on the basis of his magic anima. Yet when he slips his feet in one scene, threatening to drown in a roaring river, his 'driver' instantly sets his mechanics in gear to stabilize and save him. The Iron Knight thus embodies magic and science as complementary. By promoting their integration rather than their antagonistic figuration, the text destabilizes an opposition that was quite foundational for Soviet cultural doctrine.

Even if one expressly resolves to read Volkov's novels as distinctly Soviet, ambivalences remain. They become apparent when one asks, for example, just what the villains in Volkov's books, and their evil deeds, symbolize: Do they represent the inherent repressiveness of class society (thus operating within hegemonic Soviet narratives), or do they rather allude to practices of Stalinist repression (thus subverting and critiquing dominant narratives)? On the surface, Volkov's villains do seem to figure

as text-book examples of the evils of Feudalism and Capitalism (e.g., when Urfin exploits the Marrans' religious sensibilities to manipulate them; or when *The Seven Underground Kings* details the effects an unproductive aristocratic class has on a national economy). At the same time, however, they also invite anti-Stalinist readings. I find it quite striking that the novels have several villains create some form of secret police, which always plays a significant role in underlining the villains' villainy. Urfin Jus, for example, immediately after having produced enough regiments of his wooden soldiers to usurp power, creates an army of wooden spies in order to stay in power. Also, the little story Volkov's novels have in store to explain the Magic Land's isolation from the world resonates with grievances against the Stalinist state<sup>18</sup>: The isolation is owed to one of Wicked Witch Gingema's evil spells that put in place a very effective form of border control – she created a chain of huge magnetic rocks that prevented any movement in and out of the Magic Land by forever capturing (and thereby killing) anybody getting near them. Baum's Oz also features a magic form of border control – the 'barrier of invisibility'; however, Baum has this barrier created by a fairy rather than a wicked witch, framing its creation as an act of protection rather than repression.

In many ways, then, the Soviet and the American *Wizard* seem to be more alike than different, and the differences that do emerge resist easy harmonization with national and ideological signifiers. In some cases, Volkov's more apparent interventions in Baum's material produces effects that contradict the agenda of Soviet cultural politics – for instance, when his relocation of the Magic Land within the territory of the United States infuses the American setting with some of the fantastic setting's magic. Even if Volkov's adaptation of the American children's novel originates from Soviet propaganda, the books' cultural work resists full control by the state apparatus.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I seem to have been making a case against 'Americanization' as a useful paradigm for unraveling transatlantic cultural exchanges in the context of the Cold War. In the present case study, these exchanges seemed to be so messy and so much entangled in cultural politics and histories that the concept of cultural transfer helped little to elucidate the matter. The original *Wizard* and its Soviet adaptation present themselves as so similar despite their differences that concepts of a national culture appear wholly unfitted for making sense of them. Doesn't this

<sup>18</sup>I am aware that my reading here may reflect my socialization in Eastern Germany, where the Wall separating the two German states came to be perceived as *the* symbol of Stalinist repression. Most probably, Volkov's novels have generated readings that mirror the diversity of experiences of living in the Eastern bloc.

disqualify 'Americanization' as an appropriate and productive critical matrix?

Quite to the contrary, I maintain. My case study (re-)appraises U.S. popular culture as a prime agent of cultural exchange, whose influence has predated and reached beyond the routes provided for by post-World-War-II cultural diplomacy. Discussing exchanges such as the *Wizard's* travels through the Iron Curtain from the perspective of 'Americanization' integrates new cultural settings into the very fruitful discussion of the dynamics of a transatlantic cultural space established by scholarship on the Americanization of Western Europe. On a second, and equally important, note, the present case study encourages us to interrogate the concept of 'Americanization' in ways that can only reinvigorate our study of its more traditional settings. It calls on us to appreciate the contingencies of national signifiers, and to find ways to integrate discussions of intercultural exchanges with those of intra-cultural dynamics.

Finally, as I approach this case study from the perspective of American studies, I want to see it make a contribution to the transnationalization of the field. American studies in Germany has always benefited from its transatlantic 'access' to American culture, from its ability to see the U.S. from a cultural position that is at once distanced and deeply involved in adopting and adapting American products.<sup>19</sup> American Americanists, in their effort to move beyond the exceptionalist formulation of their scholarship, are beginning to see the value of such a perspective (cf. Fishkin). Extending this type of inquiry to new cultural settings and, more specifically, to ask for the role the Iron Curtain has played in moderating, perhaps distorting, but certainly not preventing transatlantic cultural exchanges should be a valuable field of studies.

<sup>19</sup> Christoph Ribbat, in an essay that discusses the history of German scholarship on U.S. popular culture, acknowledges the study of 'Americanization' as one of the most dynamic fields of scholarship (172-74).

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