

Metaphorical Maps Redux & Cold War Politics: the view from Portugal, 1953

Mapa humorístico da Europa em 1953

This is an astonishing map, in some ways about forty years out of its proper time. Light-hearted metaphorical* maps of Europe, so popular in the period 1854-1915, had all but ceased when the joke wore thin, in the early part of the Great War. I have seen one other Cold War map by a British cartoonist which pays homage to those earlier generations of map-makers, making this Portuguese satirical map one of only two I currently know of which depicts the iron curtain.

Dated September 1953, a month after Soviet Prime Minister Georgi Malenkov announced that the Soviet Union had a hydrogen bomb, it was published in Portugal by J.R. Silva. The artist signs himself 'Star'. As both 'Star' and (in context) 'Silva' are pretty close to google-proof, I would be thrilled to hear from anyone familiar with Portuguese cartoonists and publishers of the 1950s. Not such a long-shot, based on the past performance of this blog.

The Portuguese Second Republic of the cartoonist 'Star' and its Prime Minister, Salazar, was an authoritarian regime, often considered fascist. It was profoundly anti-Communist, and had a complex recent history with the west. Salazar had no truck with Hitler, and had provided a certain level of useful wartime support for the Allies while remaining neutral. Portugal was a founding member of NATO, and was on the cusp of joining the UN. Hints of these sympathies and allegiances show through on the map.

'Star's' Soviet circus is contained behind the iron curtain which has descended across the continent, severing limbs and dividing east from west. Western Europe basks in bright sunshine; east of the iron curtain all is in shadow. The Russian animal tamer, wielding pistol and whip, forces the trained animals of the Soviet satellite states to perform to a European and American audience. The Baltic states juggle bottles, balls and hoops, but further south the emphasis switches to factories, munitions, coal, oil and wheat – all feeding Soviet power in a far from harmless display. Putting on a show is what it's all about. Eight years after the end of the Second World War, as the physical fortifications of the iron curtain took shape and east-west migration all but ground to a halt, a certain degree of fluidity in east-west relations remained. Within a few months of this map being published, an approach by the USSR for NATO membership was rejected but West Germany was accepted into the club, and the Warsaw Pact was formed soon afterwards. 'Star's' map captures a key moment in Cold War politics.

The use of packed theatre boxes is an ingenious device to bring the Americas into the picture. The US lion (with powerful binoculars at the ready), the Canadian walrus and Mexican horse are the dominant figures, sharing the largest box. One must remember, however, that this is a Portuguese map: the South American states are individually defined with considerable care and imagination, as birds. A Cuban peacock, a duck representing San Salvador and a Nicaraguan vulture sit in the middle tier of seats, above a Columbian dove; Ecuadorian macaw; Peruvian parrot; Venezuelan marabou stork; Bolivian rooster; a stork from Paraguay; a Brazilian parrot; a blackbird from Uruguay, a Chilean condor and an Argentinean pelican.

Some of the European states have specific roles within or adjacent to the circus. Albania, a clown bear linked by a thread to the Russian ringmaster, stands on a little plinth of his own advertising the circus. We have one instance of animal transformation: the Yugoslavian bear has become a 'smart gorilla', having sawn through the chain which bound him to the Soviet circus (a fairly bizarre reference to the Yugoslavia-Soviet split of 1948). And at this point it is perhaps worth noting that the ability of the artist to convey animal characteristics with precision is occasionally wanting – the explanatory text in the legend, bottom right, is indispensable.

A Danish guard dog and the 'always correct' Turkish sheep are the uniformed doormen guarding opposite ends of the iron curtain. A Norwegian police-giraffe and a peaceful Swedish fire-elephant provide further security. Refreshments are served by a 'graceful' Italian doe selling ice-cream, and a 'proud, brave' Finnish penguin offering the finest sandwiches and pastries.

It is tempting to try and read something into these various roles, though one wants to avoid over-thinking the detail. For example, Turkey had initially been fairly friendly towards the fledgling USSR, but had joined NATO in 1952. So did Greece. Turkey is on guard duty, Greece is simply part of the audience, leaning on a stick.

The reactions of the audience vary. Most are alert or watchful (the famous British bulldog, the Irish pig, the old Greek donkey, the smart Belgian rabbit...) The Dutch cow (a Friesian?) is delighted. The elegant French cat is bored, 'to the point of falling asleep'. Special praise is reserved for Portugal's neighbour: 'the Spanish bull, with great understanding of international affairs, looks on thoughtfully as events unfold'.

And how are the Portuguese to see themselves? 'Appreciated by many, the sympathetic cod winks across the Atlantic, as if to say: "I am a faithful friend"'. Excuse the rough translation, but hopefully the idea is clear enough. Based on centuries of shared history, Portugal could carve out a Cold War role as a trusted broker between the old world and the new.

Again and again, though, one's eye is drawn to the blood on the iron curtain. The Austrian weasel conducts a waltz, willing and able to provide a musical accompaniment even though its tail has been severed (Austria regained full independence in 1955). For the German tiger, however, it's a different story; he is making efforts to rise, but his leg is broken and bloody.

* **editor's note:** the further we get into this subject, the less satisfying are the terms 'cartoon', 'pictorial', 'satirical' and 'caricature' when applied to this sort of map. Having to tag them as such creates a distinction without a difference; and so from now on we're going to use our own umbrella term, 'metaphorical maps'.