Opposite: Félix Beltrán, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, *machine gun*, assisted by a woman who photographic image of a soldier with a flag, Beltran has overlaid a black and white the dramatic primary colours of the NFL the lower third of the poster, in front of the North of their country, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) the Vietcong – who sought unification with Vietnam (NLF) – better known derisively as the American and Caribbean Students, OCLAE) (the Continental Organization of Latin America y Caribeña de Estudiantes Havana-based, Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes Mederos’ poster was produced for the Tricontinental Conference, a meeting of delegates from the Congo, South Africa, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Chile and the Dominican Republic. It was at this time that the significance of design in a directly political sense, as opposed to being limited to the promotion of cultural activity, was taken on board fully by the Cuban government. Its Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria (Commission for Revolutionary Guidance, COR) recognized that graphic design was to play a vital role in communicating ideas to both Cuban and international audiences: both OSPAAAL and the OCLAE embraced this remit. The work of OSPAAAL was structured alongside an ongoing calendar of solidarity with its members around the world, and the populations they represented struggling for decolonization. As Dugald Stermer described it in 1970, ‘The organization sponsored more days and weeks of solidarity with various groups and countries around the world than the Catholic Church has saint’s days.’ The production of posters to promote these events was simply one element of a broad coordinating and campaigning strategy, within which the war in Vietnam had a particularly prominent presence. It was the necessity to communicate beyond text – though as we will see not to its absolute exclusion – to audiences of different languages, levels of literacy and cultural contexts, that distinguishes the work of Cuban designers in these years. For while the legacy of the political appropriation of photography includes the defining images of Joseph Renau in Republican Spain, John Heartfield in Nazi Germany, and Gustav Klutsis in the Soviet Union, the designers working for OSPAAAL and OCLAE in the late 60s and 70s were also deeply interested in the visual languages employed by their contemporaries both in capitalist environments and in other socialist countries: embracing on the one hand, Pop art and commercial advertising techniques, and on the other, the work of East European designers, particularly in Poland. The socialist realism of posters produced in the Soviet Union and China is decidedly absent: Cuban designers wanted to be contemporary, distinctive and provocative.

Cuban graphic designers played an important role in campaigns condemning US intervention in Vietnam and photography occupied a significant place in the posters and publications they produced. Cuba had rapidly identified the war in South East Asia as emblematic of the struggles against imperialist aggression worldwide: as Che Guevara famously described in 1967, we could look into a bright future should two or three or many Vietnams flourish throughout the world. The internationalist perspective at the heart of the Cuban political agenda was a key determinant in the designs produced to encourage solidarity. So too, was the endorsement of armed struggle as a mechanism for defending the rights of decolonized nations to self-determination. It is this militancy that makes the posters produced in Cuba so confrontational and that distinguishes them from those produced by anti-war campaigners elsewhere who called for peace, rather than victory. Since their own overthrow of the puppet dictator Batista in 1958, the Cubans were eager to represent the Vietnamese as determined successors, and as spirited defenders in the face of US aggression. In 1971, Félix Beltrán designed a poster for the Havana-based, Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes (the Continental Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Students, OCLAE) to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF). It was at this time that the role of direct Soviet support to the DRV and the conflict as an enactment of Cold War allegiances did not tend to appeal as an approach, though the wider view was not entirely avoided. The designer René Mederos was sent to North Vietnam as official cultural representative of the Cuban government in February 1976, and his poster of Nixon ‘ripping the heart out of South East Asia’ expresses a rage breathtaking in its force. This poster, with its theme of political culpability and stratospheric point of view, presents a startling contrast to the main body of work that Mederos produced as a response to his visit – intimate, colourful, carefully composed screen prints narrating the daily endurance of the Vietnamese, often in domestic space or in the fields. Mederos’ poster was produced for the Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, Africa y América Latina (the Organisation for Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, OSPAAAL), established in Havana in January 1966 after the Tricontinental Conference, a meeting of delegates from the Congo, South Africa, Angola, Guinea, Vietnam, North Korea, Syria, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Chile and the Dominican Republic. It was at this time that the significance of design in a directly political sense, as opposed to being limited to the promotion of cultural activity, was taken on board fully by the Cuban government. Its Comisión de Orientación Revolucionaria (Commission for Revolutionary Guidance, COR) recognized that graphic design was to play a vital role in communicating ideas to both Cuban and international audiences: both OSPAAAL and the OCLAE embraced this remit. The work of OSPAAAL was structured alongside an ongoing calendar of solidarity with its members around the world, and the populations they represented struggling for decolonization. As Dugald Stermer described it in 1970, ‘The organization sponsored more days and weeks of solidarity with various groups and countries around the world than the Catholic Church has saint’s days.’ The production of posters to promote these events was simply one element of a broad coordinating and campaigning strategy, within which the war in Vietnam had a particularly prominent presence. It was the necessity to communicate beyond text – though as we will see not to its absolute exclusion – to audiences of different languages, levels of literacy and cultural contexts, that distinguishes the work of Cuban designers in these years. For while the legacy of the political appropriation of photography includes the defining images of Joseph Renau in Republican Spain, John Heartfield in Nazi Germany, and Gustav Klutsis in the Soviet Union, the designers working for OSPAAAL and OCLAE in the late 60s and 70s were also deeply interested in the visual languages employed by their contemporaries both in capitalist environments and in other socialist countries: embracing on the one hand, Pop art and commercial advertising techniques, and on the other, the work of East European designers, particularly in Poland. The socialist realism of posters produced in the Soviet Union and China is decidedly absent: Cuban designers wanted to be contemporary, distinctive and provocative.

By Catherine Moriarty ‘Political propaganda has never been understood by the masses … if it does not begin by disclosing the ethical dimension of the activity it invites them to oppose’.

Designs for Solidarity: Photography and the Cuban Political Poster 1965–1975

Cuban graphic designers played an important role in campaigns condemning US intervention in Vietnam and photography occupied a significant place in the posters and publications they produced. Cuba had rapidly identified the war in South East Asia as emblematic of the struggles against imperialist aggression worldwide: as Che Guevara famously described in 1967, we could look into a bright future should two or three or many Vietnams flourish throughout the world. The internationalist perspective at the heart of the Cuban political agenda was a key determinant in the designs produced to encourage solidarity. So too, was the endorsement of armed struggle as a mechanism for defending the rights of decolonized nations to self-determination. It is this militancy that makes the posters produced in Cuba so confrontational and that distinguishes them from those produced by anti-war campaigners elsewhere who called for peace, rather than victory. Since their own overthrow of the puppet dictator Batista in 1958, the Cubans were eager to represent the Vietnamese as determined successors, and as spirited defenders in the face of US aggression. In 1971, Félix Beltrán designed a poster for the Havana-based, Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes (the Continental Organization of Latin American and Caribbean Students, OCLAE) to celebrate the 11th anniversary of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF). It was at this time that the role of direct Soviet support to the DRV and the conflict as an enactment of Cold War allegiances did not tend to appeal as an approach, though the wider view was not entirely avoided. The designer René Mederos was sent to North Vietnam as official cultural representative of the Cuban government in February 1976, and his poster of Nixon ‘ripping the heart out of South East Asia’ expresses a rage breathtaking in its force. This poster, with its theme of political culpability and stratospheric point of view, presents a startling contrast to the main body of work that Mederos produced as a response to his visit – intimate, colourful, carefully composed screen prints narrating the daily endurance of the Vietnamese, often in domestic space or in the fields. Mederos’ poster was produced for the Organización de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, Africa y América Latina (the Organisation for Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, OSPAAAL), established in Havana in January 1966 after the Tricontinental Conference, a meeting of delegates from the Congo, South Africa, Angola, Guinea, Vietnam, North Korea, Syria, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Chile and the Dominican Republic. It was at this time that the significance of design in a directly political sense, as opposed to being limited to the promotion of cultural activity, was taken on board fully by the Cuban government.
Above left: Eduardo Bosch Jones (also attributed to Alfredo Roostgaard), Cut off the Hands of Imperialism in Vietnam, 1967. OSPAAAL
Above right: Nainen Tien Hung and Audrey Bokkini, 1973. OSPAAAL

The publication conjured photography and texts in a series of articles that reported news from OSPAAAL's member states around the world, committee reports, and the deaths and disappearances of its most prominent champions, among them Ben Barka, Tucios Lima, and eventually in 1967, Che Guevara. The headlines of the May 1966 issue are indicative: Solidarity with the Dominican Republic; The Revolutionary Struggle in Guinea; Rhodesia - Concentration Camp; The Struggle for the Reunification of Korea; and finally, Massacre of Injured Civilians. The covers were more ambitious, they were printed with at least one additional colour, and incorporated photography in striking graphic arrangements below the title of the publication and the OSPAAAL symbol that comprised an outstretched arm holding a gun set against a globe.

As well as its anonymous publication Tricontinental established a Committee of Support to Vietnam that produced another serial, For Vietnam. This slim trakt, first produced in 1966, celebrated the military achievements and the political programme of the NLF. It introduced the ‘Yankee aggressors and their puppet administration’, and described solidarity protests and meetings taking place around the world. Issue number six published in 1967, features a striking cover depicting Vietnamese troops atop a captured US Army assault vehicle. Inside were listed enemy casualties and the number of US aircraft shot down, as a previous issue described, ‘figures that will give Mr Johnson a headache.’ Photographs of dead and captured enemy troops, were placed alongside those of injured civilians. One photograph of a dead figure lying face down bears comparison with a poster by Eduardo Bosch Jones comprising an otherworldly depiction of evil evoking the faces of helmeted South Vietnamese (ARNV) troops. Evoking malice, victimization and the perpetration of suffering, it is roused. The masses have a simple policy in Vietnam, are of course the posters denouncing United States executive President of the International War Crimes Tribunal convened by Bertrand Russell and held in Stockholm earlier that year. The Tribunal, comprising delegates from around the world including several Nobel Prize winners, arrived at a unanimous condemnation of the actions of the US in Vietnam. In his article, Sartre sought to counter criticism of the legality of the tribunal and he also explained at length the processes by which delegates, in the face of the evidence presented to them, came to set aside their various individual, social and national divisions.

The photograph we can see on the posters denouncing United States policy in Vietnam, are of course the facts presented to us. But these facts are the ones most apt to provoke in us a moral condemnation: a mother holding her dead child in her arms . . . It is at this elementary and deep level, at the same time, that public opinion is roused. The masses have a simple and revolutionary moral, which before any political education, demands that the relations between the human, condemning exploitation and oppression as radically bad actions even before the organs of repression are roused. The masses themselves often determine the parameters of broader Cold Politics – the relationship between the International Union of Students and the Medical Committee Netherlands-Vietnam to name two examples.18 In the CDR, designer Klaus Wittkugel’s 1968 poster ‘In the name of humanity’ locates both injured Vietnamese children and a US soldier as victims of imperialistic directives so removed from the impact of their actions that carpet bombing, napalm, and Agent Orange seemed tangible. The November/December 1969 issue of Tricontinental included an article by Jean-Paul Sartre. It recounted his experiences as Executive President of the International War Crimes Tribunal convened by Bertrand Russell and held in Stockholm earlier that year. The Tribunal, comprising delegates from around the world including several Nobel Prize winners, arrived at a unanimous condemnation of the actions of the US in Vietnam.

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José Cómez Fresquet’s design La modelo y el viernesmita of the same year might be seen as the visual parallel to Purdy’s words. For Cuban designers occupied the moral high ground in various ways: they had the visual perspicacity to deploy a wide vocabulary of images and idioms – photography playing a significant role among them – in order to insist on the validity of their cause which, they wanted all to see, was also the cause of others.10

Catherine Morality is Curator of the University of Brighton Design Archives and Principal Research Fellow in the Faculty of Arts & Architecture. She is the Curator of Designs for Solidarity, on show at the Design Archives, University of Brighton from 23 September – 24 November as part of Brighton Photo Biennial 2018.

All images courtesy of International Council of Graphic Design Associations Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives.

Additional sources


International Council of Graphic Design Associations icograda.org

International Institute of Social History iiog.nl/index.php

University of Brighton Design Archives brighton.ac.uk/designarchives/icogradaarchive/index.html


2 DavidKendal, ‘Cuba’s art of solidarity’ in Centre for Political Graphics, Denial of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba 1945-1975, (Santa Monica, Smart Art Press, 1992), pp 17-27.


8 Tricontinental Committee of Support to Vietnam, For Vietnam, July/August 1966.

9 Reproduced as Fig. 1 in Lincoln Cushing, Red All Over: The Visual Language of Dissent http://www.agsa.org/content/rtcmedia/rd-all-over

10 The visual outputs of these organisations, and others, can be accessed at the International Institute of Social History. Amsterdam. Iiog.nl/iic.php

See also, Andreas Dau and others in, America, the Vietnam War and the World: Comparative and International Perspectives, (Cambridge University Press, 2013).


12 Susan Sontag, Memory as freeze-frame: extracts from From Nuremberg to Stockholm, 22 September – 24 November as part of Istanbul Photo Biennial 2018.


14 The Art of graphic design, (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2000).


Opposite: Alfredo Rostgaard, Create a, y mi pais... Viet-nam. That is the Watchword, 1967, OSPAAAL.