

“People don’t like to be conquered, and so they will not be”: The Enduring Appeal of *The Moon Is Down*

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Abstract

The essay deals with the novel *The Moon Is Down* (1942) by American Nobel Prize winning writer John Steinbeck. Withing a year after its publication, the novel evolved into a play and movie. The appearance of this slim volume came as a shock to readers eagerly waiting another book on the same epic scale as its monumental predecessor, *The Grapes of Wrath*. During World War II, *The Moon Is Down* successfully served as a work of propaganda, as Steinbeck intended, raising morale in the European resistance movement. However, the work is not contingent upon time or place and deserves more critical attention. Reflecting delusions, traumas, and fears of a historical period, and the collective effort for survival, *The Moon Is Down* is also a study of today’s world in a state of conflict. By creating new awareness and conveying the idea about the unconquerable spirit of those reacting to the assault on freedom and democracy, it offers the assurance the people of Ukraine and Gaza, among others, want to hear.

Keywords: John Steinbeck, *The Moon Is Down*, art and propaganda, public and critical response, resistance movement

INTRODUCTION

John Steinbeck is known as a writer of great versatility and range. He himself observed that he had “not written two books alike” (1950, 20). Released at the wrong time for the Americans but at just the right moment for the European resistance movement, *The Moon Is Down* is his only full-length work of fiction that deals entirely with the subject of war. Focused on psychological rather than physical warfare, it explores how people resist and fight the terrors of invasion. On its publication in early March 1942, *The Moon Is Down* generated attacks and defences as passionate as those which greeted Steinbeck’s previous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939); however, whereas the latter is a generally recognised masterpiece, the former is not. The most frequently exposed and criticised flaws include simplistic and sentimental dialogue and flat or unconvincing characterisation. Viewing the book as a reductive propagandistic work, American reviewers were more interested in predicting its effects as propaganda than in evaluating its literary merits.

If the past saw little consensus about the exact nature of the work, today scholars and critics are inclined to treat the book as a legitimate work of fiction that needs to be approached from various angles of contemporary critical engagement. Looking at the work from the viewpoint of another culture, Japanese scholars Tetsumaro Hayashi, Kioko Ariki and Eiko Shiraga are among those whose change of tune for *The Moon Is Down* can be regarded a trope for the current trend towards re-evaluating the novel in terms of what Steinbeck accomplished, rather than what he failed to do. For example, Ariki (2003) re-examines the work in terms of the techniques Steinbeck employed for the presentation of the main themes, whereas Shiraga (1995), analysing the role of female characters, highlights their significant dramatic functions and heroic deeds in confronting the enemy. Several other critical readers tend to concur with Donald V. Coers, who reads *The Moon Is Down* mainly as highly effective propaganda on behalf of the war effort:

Few books have demonstrated more triumphantly the power of ideas against brute military strength, and few books in recent times have spoken with such reassurance to so many people of different countries and cultures. [...] *The Moon Is Down* was an inspiring statement of faith that despite the darkness of their hour, freedom and decency would return. That power to inspire [...] remains today its signal distinction. (Coers 1991, 138)

Coers describes the work as inspiring and comforting not only anti-Nazi resistance fighters during World War II, but as having an ongoing uplifting impact on all who defy enemy oppression and dictatorship. In addition to giving evidence of the book’s wide approval and enthusiasm it caused among the underground groups resisting Nazi oppression in Europe, the essay will demonstrate

that *The Moon Is Down* is not only emotional in its effect, arousing imaginative activity and promoting identification and empathy, but it is also relevant for its epistemological effect, conveying as it does important knowledge about wars and human nature.

ART FOR PROPAGANDA

Although propaganda does not usually accord well with art, given that we admire art but view propaganda with scepticism or even condescension, it is often found in literary works and popular cultural media. Its function is not only to summon powerful emotions; this opinion was contradicted as early as 1928, when Edward L. Bernays argued that emotions disconnected from ideas were worthless (101). Bernays saw propaganda as an organised effort to disseminate a particular belief or doctrine with the aim of getting large numbers of people to think in the same way (20). Propaganda is thus both emotional and epistemological in its effects, exploiting the power of storytelling to construct knowledge and influence behaviour. As Michel Foucault (1988) noted, knowledge is not simply the reflection of objective truth but is produced through discursive practices shaped by power dynamics.

Hollywood film production between December 1941 and September 1945 provides a good example of how efficient pop-cultural media could be in constructing cinemagoers’ knowledge about the war. During that time, Hollywood studios released a number of films that developed narratives, conflicts, character types and rhetoric to explain what American soldiers were fighting and dying for, what each citizen’s role should be and why enemy should be defeated. These issues were of particular relevance to the film adaptation of *The Moon Is Down*.¹ As Robert L. McLaughlin has described in great detail, by purchasing the film rights, Twentieth Century-Fox “thrust Steinbeck’s narrative into the machinery of the already well-established film conventions for movies about occupied countries” (214). Scholars, including McLaughlin and Roy Simmonds, have compared the three versions of the story and commented on how the “Hollywood treatment” corrected some narrative weaknesses in the novel and play, occasionally disrupted the writer’s narrative or thematic logic and enhanced ideas that were merely hinted at, in order to accentuate the work’s effectiveness as propaganda during the war (McLaughlin 214). The attempts to make the story of the successive versions more acceptable to the public produced increasingly less successful results.

1 The novel was published on 8 March 1942, the first production on Broadway was on 7 April 1942, and the world premiere of the movie was on 14 March 1943. Unlike the play version, written by Steinbeck, the film script was the work of Nunnally Johnson and Steinbeck had no final control over it.

According to Simmonds, at the time it first appeared, *The Moon Is Down* was never “widely accepted in America for what it was” (1995, 92); what most American readers, playgoers and movie viewers wanted was precisely what James Agee, among some others, passionately criticised as “reassuring, patriotic melodrama,” in which “superhuman acts of courage are enacted and in which the issues of good and evil are presented in clear-cut, psychologically simplified terms”(643).

The Moon Is Down is not the only work Steinbeck wrote for propaganda purposes, understanding literature as a medium that is not defined merely by the author’s quest for personal fulfilment and the meaning of human existence, but also as an expression of collective efforts to eliminate conflicts and tensions or ensure the existence of a community. As he observed in his 28 June 1951 entry in *The Journal of the Novel*:

It is the duty of the writer to lift up, to extend, to encourage. If the written word has contributed anything at all to our developing species and our half-developed culture, it is this: Great writing has been a staff to lean on, a mother to consult, a wisdom to pick up stumbling folly, a strength in weakness and courage to support sick cowardice. (115-116)

In line with his views concerning the duty of an artist, Steinbeck always came forward when help was needed. First, after witnessing the deplorable living conditions of migrant workers in California during the Great Depression, he exposed the unconscionable capitalist dynamics of corporate farming in a series of sharp newspaper articles “The Harvest Gypsies.” Published in October 1936, these articles attracted the attention of the Roosevelts and the nation, starting Steinbeck’s intriguing relationship with the White House. The sources as yet available do not reveal the entire extent of this relationship, but it is no secret that within a year after Steinbeck began asking President Roosevelt for various favours that would stop and correct the consequences of the tyranny of California’s agricultural system and its flagrant violations of migrants’ civil and human rights, he became an esteemed advisor to the President’s electoral committee and speech writer to the President himself (Lewis 1995). However, serving the government did not always serve Steinbeck’s artistic development well. This is particularly true of the works Steinbeck wrote during World War II. Composed hurriedly and under orders, they lack qualities that distinguish his earlier works. According to Warren French, what Steinbeck “unintentionally learned” from his political involvements was that he could only produce “superficial accounts” about matters he was not intimately involved with, a lesson that probably contributed to the despair and depression he felt in his later years (6).

STEINBECK’S WORLD WAR II ASSIGNMENTS

Following the 1939 German invasion of Poland, a number of American writers realised that the role of detached observer was no longer morally tenable and therefore undertook various tasks in government war projects. Steinbeck, who by the summer of 1940, when much of Europe had been conquered by the Nazis had become a world-renowned author, was one such writer (Lewis 23). He was alarmed by the aggressive propaganda Axis nations disseminated in Latin America, while the United States did nothing. Anticipating the inevitability of American involvement in the war and being willing to contribute to the Allies’ cause, he served voluntarily in several intelligence and information agencies established by the government between 1940 and 1942 (Coers 1995, vii).² Unlike some other major American writers, including Hemingway and Faulkner, who refused such assignments, Steinbeck agreed to write two books for the government, *The Moon Is Down* and *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team* (1942). The former promotes guerrilla resistance, while the latter aimed at boosting the enlistment of citizens into the American Air Force. Several scholars have noted that Steinbeck’s submission to the pressures of political expediency had disastrous consequences for his art. Indeed, neither of the two books solidified the artistic reputation he had established with *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was written with what French describes “the almost mystical sense of the author’s personal driving involvement” (6). Despite the important role of *The Moon Is Down* in heartening the European resistance movement, the stature of Steinbeck’s works connected with the subject of war remains controversial. In Steinbeck’s own words, the two books that followed government guidelines were not meant to be of artistic merit; writing them was a job he was doing for Foreign Information Service and as a contribution to the war effort: “I thought I was doing a good and patriotic thing” (qtd. in Benson 498).

As a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* in England, North Africa and Italy, another activity that testifies to the writer’s engagement with the events of his time, Steinbeck wrote a series of reports in which he expressed his views on war and politics. Dismissed by several critics, the reports were collected and published under the title *Once There Was a War* as late as 1958. Other attempts Steinbeck made to translate the theme of war into a literary work that would achieve the artistic greatness of his previous works also failed. Such were the film scripts for *Lifeboat* (1944) and *A Medal for Benny* (1945) by Alfred Hitchcock and Frank Butler respectively, both of which were huge disappointments for the

2 Two of the agencies Steinbeck worked for, COI (Office of Coordinator of Information) and OSS (Office of Strategic Services), both headed by Colonel William J. Donovan, were precursors of the CIA.

readers eagerly expecting another book with the sweeping reach and social consciousness of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The sense of disappointment these works generated because they “signalled a shift in the writer’s social commitment,” as Stanley Edgar Hyman wrote in the 10 December 1962 issue of *The New Leader* (10), was the beginning of what became known as Steinbeck’s “decline,” with some critics declaring that “nothing Steinbeck wrote after 1939 bears rereading” (Simmonds 1995, 77).

I would counter such denigrating critical views but concur with the scholars who argue that Steinbeck could never repeat the success he obtained during his “years of greatness,” as Hayashi³ refers to the period from 1936–1939, when Steinbeck produced works that have generally been accepted as classics. My contention is that, despite Steinbeck’s main preoccupation with propaganda in writing *The Moon Is Down*, and the widespread disappointment it caused on its publication in the United States, the book is an enduring if not altogether a great work of art and deserves more critical attention. Exploring how human beings should cope with the effects of war, shown as pernicious for the conquered and the conquerors alike, and conveying ideas about humans’ ability to confront and overcome the inhumanity of man to man, the work is particularly relevant in today’s turbulent times.⁴

FROM CONCEPTION TO PUBLICATION

The Moon Is Down is Steinbeck’s first novel far removed from his accustomed settings and the proletarian bent of his late 1930s fiction. The timing of the book’s appearance was most unfortunate—it was published in March 1942, three months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Involved as he was with the Roosevelt administration, Steinbeck’s aim in writing the book was primarily propagandistic. The first draft was written when America, unlike several European countries, had yet to join the war against Germany and the other Axis powers. Detesting the complacent attitude of many Americans in the manner of “it can’t happen here,” as Sinclair Lewis titled his 1935 dystopian political novel, Steinbeck intended to write about an enemy invasion of a small American city. As he explained later, he

3 In 1993, Tetsumaro Hayashi edited the book *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936–1939*.

4 One indicator of how this story about “the power of ideas in the face of cold steel and brute force,” as the blurb on the back of the book reads, continues to engage us in the 2020s is the effort of Dr Eric Rasmussen, the CEO of Infinitum Humanitarian Systems, to provide the residents of Crimea and Donbas with the electronic version of *The Moon Is Down*. Probably because of my 2017 study *John Steinbeck in East European Translation: A Bibliographical and Descriptive Overview*, he sent me an email on 24 November 2022, wondering whether *The Moon Is Down* was available in Ukrainian translation.

thought that the book would “wake America up and at the same time build a sympathy for what many people were going through abroad” (Benson 491). Clearly, Harriet Rafter points out, propaganda was on Steinbeck’s mind long before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour (240).

As Simmonds (1995), among others, describes in detail, Steinbeck’s initial idea was rejected by the authorities, who considered a story about the defeat and occupation of the United States as potentially destructive to national morale. Intrigued by the stories of refugees from recently occupied European countries with whom he came into contact in the course of his intelligence duties, Steinbeck then placed the action in an unidentified European country occupied by the enemy. The opening sentences read: “By ten-forty-five it was all over. The town was occupied, the defenders defeated, and the war finished” (Steinbeck 1995, 1). Demoralised by the invasion, the town gradually recovers from the shock of occupation and begins to resist. As an account of unfamiliar people in an unparticularised setting, the book could serve as a warning to Americans to remain alert and at the same time boost resistance movements abroad. In order to ensure the book’s broader implications, Steinbeck also neutralised his initial choice title from *The New Order*, which alluded to the political and social system that Hitler intended to impose on occupied territories, to *The Moon Is Down* (Simmonds 1995, 79). The new title—a phrase taken from the second act of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*—is more subtle, alluding to the descent of evil and spiritual darkness that the Nazis’ obsession with power had brought to Europe.

By the time the novel was published, America had entered the war. Due to this turn of events, the book was much more highly appreciated abroad than by Americans, who felt that Steinbeck was far too soft in his portrayals of the Nazis. Angered at Steinbeck’s apparent complacency towards Nazism, James Thurber referred to the novel as a “gentle fable of War in Wonderland,” denouncing Steinbeck for not having told the “true story of hell, horror and hopelessness” (370). Similarly, British war historian John Keegan described the work as “romantic” and “naïve” (Benson 490). Richard Astro also delivered a harsh verdict, arguing that the work was neither a war story nor an anti-war story, but a “quasi fictional philosophical debate, cut off by definition from World War II or any other war” (150). Several other reviewers and historians expressed contempt for Steinbeck’s humanisation of the invading soldiers, reprimanding him for his failure to show how desperate life was under Nazi rule, and drawing attention to such atrocities as the 1941 Babi Yar massacre in Kiev in September 1941.⁵ The anonymous reviewer of the 5 April 1943 issue of *Time* claimed that “the whole premise of the work was based upon questionable psychology and presented an extraordinary naïve view of Nazi life” (54). Clifton Fadiman accused Steinbeck of “melodramatic

5 Over three days, the Nazis shot about thirty-three thousand Jews (Rafter 241).

simplification of the issues involved,” basing the work on the “comforting fallacy that good will always overcome evil simply because it is, by definition, good” (59). A few others defended the novelist, noting that, while he “may have been too easy on the Nazis, he portrayed the heroic resistance of a basically peace-loving people with great understanding” (Astro 150). For Jackson Benson, Steinbeck’s main biographer, the book is “compelling in its currency, yet timeless” (488). Clearly, *The Moon Is Down* provoked nearly as much controversy as *The Grapes of Wrath*.

“THE FLIES HAVE CONQUERED THE FLYPAPER”

The story unfolds in a historically familiar environment, though with neither the location nor the time directly specified. As Steinbeck explains in his 1963 article “Reflections on a Lunar Eclipse,” the occupied country is described as “cold and stern like Norway, cunning and implacable like Denmark, reasonable like France. The names of people in the book I made as international as I could. I did not even call the Germans Germans but simply invaders” (3). Steinbeck’s aim seems to have been to illustrate what can happen when any nation invades another. Thus, although the narrative is illustrated with a chronological panorama of social and historical events, *The Moon Is Down* is not a documentary or a factual text but a fictional account that follows the events as arranged by the author. As Vanesa Matajc has observed, upon engaging the artist’s creativity, one realises that the past is “a priori intertwined with the artist’s present-day reality or it is a matter of his subjectivity; it exists through artistic construction rather than through historiographical reconstruction” (202).

At the forefront of the novel and as the most important driving force of the narrative is resistance warfare. The account of occupation, which is used as a means of exploring the issues of heroism, freedom, power and individuality, is complemented with several almost impressionistic depictions of a cold, half-dark and ice-covered landscape to achieve “certain effects in thematic development,” as discussed by Ariki (225). Sometimes, the description of depressing winter landscape creates the mood of monotony and inactivity—“The days and the weeks dragged on, and the months dragged on. The snow fell and melted and fell and melted and finally fell and stuck” (Steinbeck 1995, 57)—but most often, the landscape mirrors and underscores the occupied people’s collective emotional state, serving as a metaphor for the townspeople’s psychological transformation, for their growing wrath and hostility towards the invaders (Ariki 226-7):

By eleven o’clock the snow was falling heavily in big, soft puffs and the sky was not visible at all. People were scurrying through the falling snow, and snow piled up in the doorways and it piled up on the statue in the public square and

on the rails from the mine to the harbor. Snow piled up and the little cartwheels skidded as they were pushed along. And over the town there hung a blackness that was deeper than the cloud, and over the town there hung a sullenness and a dry, growing hatred. The people did not stand in the streets long, but they entered the doors and the doors closed and there seemed to be eyes looking from behind the curtains, and when the military went through the street or when the patrol walked down the main street, the eyes were on the patrol, cold and sullen. (Steinbeck 1995, 51)

And there was death in the air, hovering and waiting. [...] The cold hatred grew with winter, the silent, sullen hatred, the waiting hatred. [...] And the hatred was deep in the eyes of the people, beneath the surface. (Steinbeck 1995, 57–58)

The book also provides insight into the intimate emotional experiences of invaders, giving evidence that Steinbeck avoided the “facile flaw of propaganda in black and white” (Coers 1991, 107). With the exception of Captain Loft, a true professional, a man with “no unmilitary moments” (Steinbeck 1995, 21), the invading soldiers are presented as ordinary men who would rather be at home performing their everyday tasks than serving as military officers. Naive in their loneliness and homesickness, the enemy soldiers are seeking warm human relationships, longing for the affection and understanding of the town girls. As Lieutenant Tonder confides to the local girl Molly:

I only want to talk, that's all. I want to hear you talk. That's all I want. [...]. Can you understand this—can you believe this? Just for a little while, can't we forget this war? Just for a little while. Just for a little while, can't we talk together like people—together? [...] I'm lonely to the point of illness. I'm lonely in the quiet silence and the hatred.” (Steinbeck 2011, 77)

Often, they are plagued by doubts, fear, and uncertainty, realising that the citizens will not welcome but fight them. As individuals, they might reject the military mind and the “inability to see beyond the killing which is [their] job” (Steinbeck 1995, 49), but their inescapable role as soldiers in an aggressive army leaves them prey to violent idealism and desensitises their human spirit. Colonel Lanser, in particular, is depicted as war-weary, sceptical and distasteful of the job he has been given. He knows that war requires treachery and hatred, the torture and killing of innocent people. And yet, he fights off his individual sensitivity, repeatedly reminding himself that he is a soldier, not “expected to question or to think, but only to carry out orders” (Steinbeck 1995, 23). Cognisant of what happened in the previous war and foreseeing a repetition of the same pattern in the current one, he tries to convince himself “fifty times a day: this [war] will be different” (Ibid.). Steinbeck seems to have possessed the perception which was unusual for

that time; namely that the invader was equally vulnerable as the population they had overrun. In his view, wider recognition of this fact could contribute to a resistance victory. Indeed, although the situation for the occupied population appears hopeless, given that every act of rebellion is followed by brutal reprisals, the novel leaves no doubt about the final outcome:

“The people don’t like to be conquered, sir, and so they will not be. Free men cannot start a war, but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars. You will find that is so, sir.” (Steinbeck 1995, 111).

The invading army has taken on “the one impossible job in the world, the one thing that can’t be done [...] to break man’s spirit permanently” (Steinbeck 1995, 50). The inevitable defeat of invaders, the impossibility of subduing people with strong and free will without destroying themselves in the process, is also mirrored in the phrase “The flies have conquered the flypaper” (Steinbeck 1995, 111), which functions as an elaborate trope for what Steinbeck wanted to achieve with this novel. The propagandistic thrust of the work was intended to be twofold: to raise the spirit of the conquered and to shatter the morale of the invaders. This is particularly powerfully expressed in the closing chapter, with its startling dramatization of a passage from Plato’s *The Apology of Socrates*. Just before Mayor Orden and his confidant, Doctor Winter, are led away to be shot, they recite Socrates’ final speech to the Athenian court. His prophesy regarding his executors—“punishment far heavier than you have inflicted on me will surely await you”—is easily recognisable as the writer’s direct humanistic idea he wanted to convey: the conqueror will not remain unpunished, and by sending people to their deaths, he will not silence the voices of his victims.

Alongside its fundamental idea about the unconquerable spirit of people struggling for freedom and survival, and the vulnerability of the soldiers in the occupying forces, *The Moon Is Down* provides fictional reflection on several related issues: from its observation of the absurdity of military conflict and critique of military training that, for instance, prepares soldiers for victories but not for defeats, to its condemnation of unquestioning obedience to authority and lamentation of the loss of personal judgement and responsibility. Clearly, although it was conceived and written as propaganda and served its purpose most efficiently, *The Moon Is Down* contains the seeds for many new areas of investigation and continues to show and lobby for rethinking of the world we live in. This fact alone is a compelling rationale for the book’s new readings and circulation. Another is a convincing aesthetic use of landscape, the feature that is typical of Steinbeck’s central works, and is mentioned here only in passing.

THE NOVEL'S SUCCESS AS PROPAGANDA

As mentioned above, in the writer's homeland, the publication of *The Moon Is Down* was accompanied by mixed feelings, but the book nevertheless sold well, benefitting from selection by the Book of the Month Club. "The 'craziness' did not end there," reports Simmonds; soon after publication, the movie rights to the book were sold to Twentieth Century-Fox for the then record sum of \$300,000, four times more than the same studio had paid three years earlier to obtain the rights to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1995, 77). The controversy the work caused raged for months in major American newspapers and magazines. The book had some defenders, but the majority of critical readers expressed outrage and accused Steinbeck of naivety because of his lenient depiction of the Nazis. According to Coers, some critics even prophesied the novel's failure as propaganda, claiming that this "soft and dreamy stuff" would demoralise rather than inspire the victims of aggression (1995, xi). Praised until then for his artistic technique and socially enlightened views, Steinbeck suddenly fell from grace for what he considered a well-meaning contribution to the war effort. Three years earlier, following his bold exposure of the contemporary agricultural labour situation in his major work, many had accused him of sympathising with communism; now similar voices charged him with supporting Nazism and questioned his patriotism. The injustice of such criticism rankled with Steinbeck long after. In his 1957 essay "My Short Novels," he wrote:

The war came on, and I wrote *The Moon Is Down* as a kind of celebration of the durability of democracy. I couldn't conceive that it would be denounced. I had written of Germans as men, not supermen, and this was considered a very weak attitude to take. I couldn't make much sense out of this, and it seems absurd now that we know the Germans were men, and thus fallible, even defeatable. (Steinbeck 1957, 38)

In occupied Western Europe and Scandinavia, on the other hand, *The Moon Is Down* was met with an extraordinarily affirmative, even euphoric response, which demonstrates that Steinbeck was right about what would work as effective propaganda. The idea that there was no possibility for the invader to defeat peoples who shared common commitments was assurance of the sort that the people in occupied countries and those who had escaped German occupation wanted to hear. In Benson's terms, history proved that the critics were wrong on nearly every count, except that the book was artistically not among Steinbeck's best achievements (499). Despite the Nazis' attempts to prevent the book from being translated and disseminated, it was "smuggled into the occupied countries, copied, mimeographed, printed on hand presses in cellars" and sometimes "hand-written on

scrap paper and tied together with twine,” a member of Danish resistance revealed in 1942 (Benson 499). They did not feel the novel treated them favourably: mere possession of the book led to an automatic death sentence (Ibid.). As Coers relates with great thoroughness, in France, Belgium, Holland and Denmark, the book was so popular that sales of illegal editions provided funds for these countries’ respective resistance movements. The French clandestine edition of 1944 ran to fifteen hundred copies, which was the largest single edition to leave the Parisian underground press during the war. In Norway and Sweden, it was published in remarkable quantities even after the war (1995, xiii).

The Moon Is Down also enjoyed popularity in neutral Switzerland, but there the officials omitted all passages indirectly identifying Germany and the German army to “avoid displeasing their powerful neighbour” (Coers 1995, xiv). During the war, it was the most commonly acclaimed work of American literature in the former Soviet Union, although Russian critics denounced it as “mediocre and unrealistic” (Coers 1995, xx). During his visit to Florence in the 1950s, Steinbeck learned that the novel was also secretly translated and disseminated by members of the resistance in some Axis countries. Between 1943 and 1946, the book was published four times in Chinese translation; the Chinese immediately recognised its potential value as propaganda in their fight against the Japanese, who had claimed large tracts of China. Perhaps the greatest single proof of the novel’s significance and popularity was the gesture of King Haakon VII of Norway, who in 1946 awarded Steinbeck with the Liberty Cross for his significant contribution to the country’s liberation movement.

Several critics have attempted to explain divergent responses to the novel in wartime Europe and Asia, on the one hand, and in the United States, on the other. Referring to Jean-Paul Sartre’s claim that “readers can have no true understanding of a literary work unless they know who the author is writing for” (115), Coers draws attention to a similar controversy that surrounded the novel *The Silence of the Sea* by Jean Bruller, a member of the French resistance. The book succeeded as propaganda in France but found a hostile readership in French people living abroad (Coers 1995, xxii). Like Steinbeck, Bruller avoided the crude oversimplification typical of most wartime propaganda; for his compatriots, who were in daily contact with the invader, to “stereotype all Germans as ogres” would have been unrealistic (Ibid.). Roland Barthes has similarly overthrown criticism that disregards the reader, claiming that a “text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (257).

Steinbeck may have been right in his perception of the general character of invading soldiers, not portraying them as despotic and brutal oppressors, observes Benson, but since he had not yet experienced the atrocities of war at first hand, he had only an indirect notion of it. When more than twenty years later, he reported

from South Vietnam, witnessing the horrifying reality of the conflict in progress, such “biological distancing failed him” (1003). Be that as it may, *The Moon Is Down* had a huge impact as Allied propaganda in Nazi-occupied Europe and continues to speak with reassurance to the masses worldwide who defend independence and democracy in the face of dark adversity.

CONCLUSION

On several occasions, Steinbeck expressed his view that too much praise he had received for some of his work might lead to an “automatic rejection of whatever else he would produce of a different kind (Benson 497). *The Moon Is Down*, published after *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was already recognised as one of the most accomplished novels of the decade, if not of the half-century, proved his fears. The new novel, for which readers had great expectations, signalled a shift in Steinbeck’s thematic orientation, and seemed to have nothing in common with its powerful predecessor. Written in haste and “partly by dictation,” it is admittedly not a masterpiece (Benson 498). However, and despite numerous attacks launched by critics particularly on the account of what they saw as its unrealistic presentation of war, the book significantly raised the morale of readers in occupied Europe and Asia and thus accomplished what its creator had intended. In Simmonds’ terms, “it had never been Steinbeck’s purpose to people the novel with the sort of stock Nazis most readers regarded as the norm.” The writer’s approach was “more subtle and wiser,” emphasising the importance of knowing the enemy, his strengths and weaknesses (1995, 80).

Several early reviewers predicted that *The Moon Is Down* would not survive the crisis that created it. Despite its huge success as propaganda, the novel transcends the time and space it describes and creates visions of broader significance. Uncovering as it does profound and often unsettling truths about war and human nature, and exploring how an individual should face and survive political and moral crises, it remains a source of inspiration and knowledge well worth exploring. Given that such crises continue to unfold, it seems unlikely that the book will soon lose its ability to capture new audiences.

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“Ljudje nočejo biti okupirani, zato ne bodo”: trajna privlačnost romana *The Moon Is Down*

Prispevek se ukvarja z romanom *The Moon Is Down* (1942) ameriškega Nobelovega nagrajenca Johna Steinbecka, ki mu je že v letu prvega izida sledila priredba za gledališče, leto kasneje pa še filmska upodobitev. V pisateljevi domovini je roman sprožil val nezadovoljstva, še posebej pri tistih bralcih, ki so z nestrpnostjo pričakovali delo v maniri pisateljeve največje uspešnice, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Steinbeck je roman zasnoval in napisal kot propagandno delo; kot takšno je med drugo svetovno vojno učinkovito služilo svojemu namenu. V prispevku zagovarjam stališče, da pisateljevi pogledi niso niti časovno niti geografsko zamejeni, zato je delu potrebno nameniti več kritiške pozornosti. Čeprav roman odseva zablode, travme in strahove nekega zgodovinskega obdobja, bralca kar sili v razmislek o današnjem svetu v stanju konfliktov ter spodbuja nova spoznanja, še posebej idejo o nepremagljivi moči človekovega duha v boju za svobodo, demokracijo in obstoj. To pa je tisto, kar danes bodri prebivalce v Ukrajini, Gazi in drugje.

Ključne besede: John Steinbeck, *The Moon Is Down*, umetnost in propaganda, odmevnost romana, odporniško gibanje