

Latverian Incursions: Dr Doom and Cold War Politics

Doctor Doom is a character defined by the Cold War whose development over the next twenty years would be dictated by the American public's attitudes towards their government's changing foreign policy.

He first appeared was in *Fantastic Four #5* (Lee, et al., 1962), which was on newsstands in April 1962, halfway between two of the most iconic moments of the Cold War - the Checkpoint Charlie standoff of October 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. His origin story, however, would not be told for another two years, in *Fantastic Four Annual #2* (Lee, et al., 1964). Stan Lee has said that this delay was deliberate, as 'it wasn't until 1964 that we really had time to do the kind of origin tale I felt Doc Doom deserved ... one that would make the reader really understand what motivated him, what had turned him into a villain, what made him the tragic, tortured tyrant he was.' (Lee, 1976)



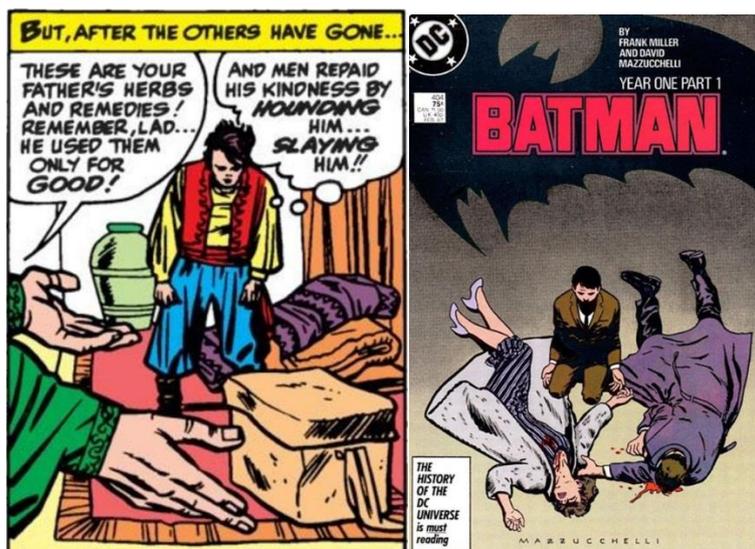
Here we are first introduced to Doom's homeland Latveria, a small East European country 'nestling in the heart of the Bavarian alps.' (Lee, et al., 1964) Right from the start Latveria is presented as a very strange place, like a fairy tale village transplanted into the real world, with Jack Kirby's illustrations showing an almost medieval world of peasant cottages and gypsy caravans. However, these gypsies are not the carefree wanderers of folk tales but rather a persecuted minority, forced to obey their rulers on pain of death. When the wife of Latveria's hereditary ruler - the Baron - falls fatally ill the police kidnap young Victor von

Doom's doctor father and force him to attempt to cure her. When Victor asks the village elders why this injustice is happening they tell him that 'he is a gypsy, boy... as we all are. It is the price we must pay!' (Lee, et al., 1964)

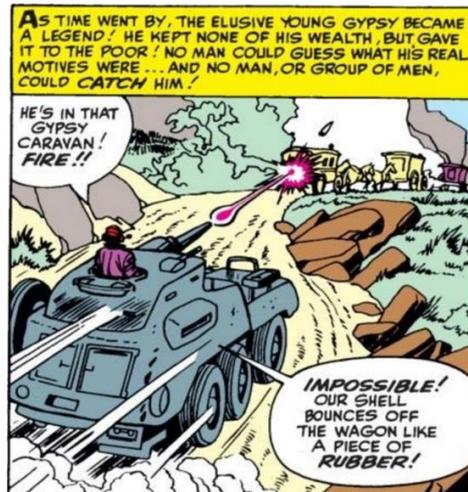
We can estimate that this flashback is occurring around 1936-38, a time of intense persecution for Roma people in Europe, with internment camps set up specifically for them and from which, after 1938, prisoners were transferred to concentration camps. (The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2008)

This depiction of Latveria is in line with much of Stan Lee's work at Marvel, where he attempted to 'combine reality with fantasy'(Service, 2016), mixing true history with ideas from fantasy and science fiction. There was also a personal link with this period and place in history, as both of his parents were immigrants from Romania (Lee, 2002). It's not impossible that some of his ideas about Eastern Europe could have been based on stories of Romania told by his parents when he was a child.

Victor's father is eventually killed while fleeing from the evil Baron, dying of exposure while try to lead his son to safety. Victor barely survives and vows to take vengeance on those who caused his parent's demise. Here his origin strongly resembles a superhero origin, notably that of Batman, another intelligent young lad who swears vengeance when his parents are murdered (Finger, et al., 1939). A key difference is that Victor's enemy is not a mugger, but the state itself.



Whilst sorting through his father's effects Victor discovers some items which had belonged to his mother, who had died giving birth to him. He realises that she was a witch, in possession of 'magic potions and strange scientific secrets' - another mix of the modern world and fairy tales. He decides to use these devices to steal from Latveria's rich and corrupt upper classes and 'As time went by, the elusive young gypsy became a legend! He kept none of his wealth but gave it to the poor'. He becomes a modern day Robin Hood, or superhero.



Eventually Doom comes to the attention of the Dean Of Science at State University in America, who travels to Latveria to invite Victor to attend his college. This act of cultural imperialism is the point at which Victor's journey changes. Removed from his pro-social activities at home he finds himself unable to fit in with the all-American students at State University, including an eager Reed Richards, future leader of the Fantastic Four. Doom isolates himself, conducting terrible experiments which ultimately - literally - blow up in his face.

As a result he is expelled from the University and goes in search of higher knowledge, an odyssey which eventually leads him to a cult of mountain-dwelling monks. He quickly masters the community, forcing the monks to build him a high-tech suit of armour and facemask, proclaiming 'From this moment on I shall be known as ... Doctor Doom!'



In *The Myth Of The American Superhero* Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence describe superheroes as the end product of the American Monomyth, a story where a mysterious stranger arrives in town, sees oppression, intervenes to stop it, and then fades away (Jewett & Lawrence, 2002). This is an apt description of superhero comics of the early 1960s, when each month characters such as Superman or Batman would spot an injustice, solve it (often with their fists) and then fly away without hope of reward.

Doctor Doom does not do this. Instead he goes home and conquers Latveria for himself, a decision much more in line with Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, a universal myth where a young man is called away to adventure, endures trials and eventually returns home changed (Campbell, 2012). The story of how Doom overthrew the previous ruler would not be shown for several years, in the *The Books Of Doom* mini-series (Brubaker, et al., 2007), but it is clear right from the start that his rule is approved of by the citizenry. At the end of his origin story he is seen marching through the centre of Latveria with grateful subjects happily bowing before him.



The ending to the story takes place in 1964, and yet the clothes of the Latverians look distinctly old-fashioned. Rather than wearing the modern clothes of contemporary Eastern Europeans they are dressed in lederhosen and dirndl, looking more like background characters from Hollywood movies set in 'ye olde Europe' such as *Hans Christian Andersen* (Hans Christian Andersen, 1952).

In the same way that a nationalist superhero like Captain America acts as 'an avatar of American ideology' (Costello, 2009) Doctor Doom can be seen as nationalist hero who stands for an American's idea of Europe based on newspaper stories, Hollywood movies and tales told by immigrant parents. Jason Dittmer says that 'the way in which a superhero's power is gained is a key part of the narration of the national purpose and power' (Dittmer, 2012) and thus Doctor Doom, and by extension Latveria, can be seen as a reflection of America's understanding of European history, full of tragedy, warfare, betrayal and revenge. This understanding would change over the course of the Cold War and would be reflected in changes to the portrayal of Doctor Doom and Latveria.

This beginnings of these changes can be seen in the series *Astonishing Tales*, published in 1970. This was a time of political change and suspicion in American public life, when ongoing disquiet over Watergate and Vietnam meant that the 'moral certainty of the consensus of the 1960s became the existential ambiguity of the 1970s' (Costello, 2009).

Astonishing Tales is a series marked by moral uncertainty and ambiguity. It was a 'double header', with two characters in separate stories sharing lead billing on the cover. Usually such series would feature two superheroes, such as Iron Man and Captain America in *Tales Of Suspense*, but *Astonishing Tales* was unique in featuring a supervillain, Doctor Doom, alongside a more traditional superhero like Ka-Zar, Marvel's Tarzan copy.

The first issue introduces Prince Rudolfo, the rightful ruler of Latveria, who is portrayed as a very unsympathetic character. He is an aristocrat who sneers openly at the revolutionaries who are trying to help him remove Doom and is only really interested in taking power for himself (Thomas & Wood, 1970). He is happy to be 'hailed' in a way that recalls Nazi salutes.



Rudolfo's revolutionaries rise up, and are swiftly defeated by Doctor Doom, who pulls down his entire castle on top of the rebels in order to deny them victory. As they flee the scene a vision of his masked face appears in the sky to taunt them. 'None may defy me with impunity,' he declares.



Doom can no longer be considered a superhero. As Richard Reynolds says in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, superheroes are inherently conservative characters who 'almost by definition ... are battling on behalf of the status quo.' (Reynolds, 1994) Doom is not a conservative, he is a leader in the mould of Stalin, happy to destroy entire cities to further his own ideological aims.

This is further demonstrated in the following issue, when he orders the people of Latveria to set to work rebuilding the castle for him. Where previously Doom was seen as a good leader, loved by his people, here we see him becoming more of a feared dictator, crushing a revolution and re-installing totalitarianism in much the same way that the Soviet Union did during the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Rather than celebrating his strength and achievements the Latverians now seem resigned to their own powerlessness. 'We are no better than sheep!' says one worker as he trudges to his task.

In order to engage the readers' sympathy with their lead character the various writers of this series were forced to pit him against characters even more villainous than he is, such as the Red Skull, Nazi super-soldier and long-time enemy of Captain America

Jason Dittmer argues that American culture in the late twentieth century would constantly look back to the Second World War as the last time it was abundantly clear who was good and who was evil (Dittmer, 2012). Since his re-introduction into the modern Marvel Universe in 1966 (Lee, et al., 1966) the Red Skull has been shown to support communism, reckless individualism, racism, and extreme corporate capitalism. As Dittmar points out, 'By

changing the meaning of Captain America's nemesis, the creative staff effectively change the meaning of the hero as well.' (Dittmer, 2012)

Having said all that, in this story the Red Skull is primarily presented as a straightforward Nazi, teaming up with various other old Axis warriors for the purpose of invading Latveria and, very quickly, converting the entire populace to Nazism.



This seizure of control takes place while Doctor Doom has flown off on a trip to the French Riviera, where he plans to relax while the subjects rebuild his castle. Apart from presenting the astonishing image of Doctor Doom sauntering around the beach amongst bikini-clad holidaymakers, this can be read as a suspicion by the United States that Europe, as represented by Latveria, could very easily return to Fascist rule should its leaders ever be distracted by the glamorous trappings of power.



The depiction of Doom and Latveria continues to mutate in a story which would go on to span several years and later be collected as *The Overthrow of Doom* (Wein, et al., 2011).

It begins in *The Fantastic Four* in 1978 when Reed Richards decides to take unilateral action to depose Doctor Doom. He flies to Latveria, where he uses his powers to covertly enter the sovereign nation (Wolfman & Pollard, 1978). Here he sees Doctor Doom laughing at his subjects, who he has forced to parade beneath his balcony. 'Look at those mindless cretins, prancing like headless chickens,' he crows. This is a marked difference from the harsh yet noble revolutionary who overthrew the previous regime in order to protect the common people.



This change in attitude may be the reason for a renewed call for revolution, this time led by Rudolfo's younger brother Zorba. At some point Doom had imprisoned Zorba and used him for terrible experiments, drawing parallels with human rights abuses going on in the Soviet Union at the time, perhaps even echoing Nazi human experiments, all of which point to Doom now as a creature of evil rather than nobility.

When his first attempt to dethrone Doom is easily defeated Zorba bursts into tears and tells Reed Richards that the revolution cannot succeed. Luckily for this emotional, weak European there's a strong, certain, noble American there to shore him up, and Richards literally shakes some sense into the prince.'



This moral fortification is an analogy for the America's role as a 'beacon of hope' to the rest of the world (USACIECA, 1963). As Matthew Costello describes it, 'America's global role and the expansive, interventionist national security state created to play it were justified by continued reference to the moral superiority of the United States.' (Costello, 2009)

With his confidence restored Zorba rouses the populace, who rise up against Doom armed with 'weapons smuggled into our tyrant's country!' Doom's reaction to this is very different from previous rebellions. Rather than fight back he feigns sadness and repentance, asking for forgiveness and saying that he will step down as leader when a new ruler is crowned, after which he himself 'shall wield power no longer.'



Doom is now recast as a mockery of a wheedling, self-pitying communist leader, rather than the proud totalitarian of previous stories. His promise is, of course, hollow - his real plan is to crown a clone of himself as the new ruler, creating the kind of ruling dynasty which the American constitution was written to prevent. The founding fathers probably didn't have cloning in mind, but still this demonstrates that Doctor Doom has moved from an unlikely ally to a clear enemy of American ideals.

When the ceremony begins Zorba is with the people, very much in the American style of freedom fighter, while Doom stands atop a marble staircase wearing a crown, his revolutionary roots forgotten much like the ideals of the Russian Revolution were under Stalin.



The ceremony is part of a cunning scheme which involves sculptress Alicia Masters creating a statue of Doom to be presented to the United Nations to commemorate the handover of power. Embedded inside it is a hypnotic device which will force the delegates to hand supreme power over the entire world to Doctor Doom.

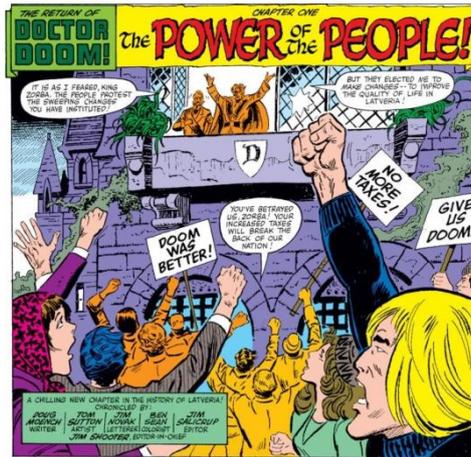
The plan very nearly succeeds, with the weak, multinational, diplomatic United Nations falling easily under the statue's hypnotic spell. Only strong unilateral action taken by the USA - represented again by Mr Fantastic - can save the day, foiling the scheme with some American cunning and determination.

Back in Latveria Doom's rule is ended when the honest working people of the nation rise up against him, guided of course by The Fantastic Four, and the story ends with Reed Richards congratulating Zorba as he is installed as temporary leader.



The image clearly demonstrates the power hierarchy in American foreign interventions. Reed Richards stands the highest, on top of a small mound, with the rest of The Fantastic Four backing him up, representing America's power. He places a hand on the shoulder of a slightly lower Zorba, giving assent to his leadership. Below and around them stands a crowd of approving Latverians, whilst nearby what seems to be a UN Soldier looks on, playing no part in the transfer of power. Zorba, we are told, will be leader only for a short time, until the elections 'next month'.

Two years later, in *Fantastic Four Annual 15* (Moench & Sutton, 1980) it is revealed that Zorba is still leader, Latveria is collapsing, and the population is up in arms again. From the same balcony where Doctor Doom once crowed at his people's obedience Zorba now watches a demonstration against his rule. The banners that the crowd hold, with slogans like 'No more taxes' and 'Doom Was Better', demonstrate that weak, feckless Europeans don't want freedom if there are any hardships involved, lacking as they do the pioneer spirit of Americans.



At this time America was seen as weak in international affairs, after events such as Jimmy Carter's failure to secure the release of hostages from the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was demonstrating its strength with the crackdown on Solidarity in Poland and the invasion of Afghanistan.

Without a strong America to back them up other nations were perceived to be at risk of Soviet invasion. Later on in the 1980s this fear would lead the US government pursuing covert methods to prop up states which they felt were in danger of falling under Soviet influence, such as the Iran-Contra affair (Online Highways LLC, n.d.). In the Marvel Universe these fears manifest by showing a sincere, well-meaning leader like Zorba unable to operate effectively in the murky waters of international politics.

While the protests are going on Zorba is informed that Doctor Doom has escaped from the dungeon in which his unconscious body has been kept since the previous story two years ago. Government advisors suggest using some of Doom's own technology to spy on the citizens in order to find out who is harbouring him, but Zorba refuses. 'Latveria is free now!' he declares.

That night he is tormented by dreams of Doom, reliving the terrible tortures he was forced to endure. The experience serves to change his opinion, and the next morning he informs his advisors that 'it is time to let idealism die... time to play the game of power according to Doom's rules.' He has accepted the new rules of international politics, a decision which seems sensible and 'realistic' at the time but will have serious implications when readers next return to Latveria in 1982, for John Byrne's classic *This Land Is Mine* (Byrne, 1982).

In this story the Fantastic Four discover a Latveria which has been destroyed by Zorba's rule. This was a time of revolutions and civil wars in Iran, El Salvador and Afghanistan, alongside continuing support by the US of dictators like Ferdinand Marcos who were seen as taking a strong stand against communism (Bennion, 2007). It's also a time when these actions were beginning to be questioned at home (Costello, 2009). As Sue Storm says, 'What if this is our fault?'



Throughout this story we are shown that Doom is loved, not feared, by his people. We learn this first from a young mother who is delighted to see he has returned. She narrates a brief version of their history which features a recreation of an image from *Fantastic Four Annual #2* showing Doom's popularity with his people, demonstrating that we have now returned to the original conception of Doom as a noble revolutionary.



Without his strong hand Latveria has rapidly declined. The implication is that Latverians – like other peoples around the world – are not as strong as Americans, and cannot be trusted to govern themselves. As Doom himself states 'When I seized control of my native land she was a pitiful joke of a country, with a feudal monarchy that was slowly destroying her. Within months Latveria would have been swallowed by the communist lands which surround our hills.' (Byrne, 1982)

This is a declaration of contemporary American foreign policy, which was to support dictators like General Pinochet in an effort to prevent their nations falling to Communism. Lee and Kirby's original portrayal of Doom has returned as an expression of US foreign policy in the 1980s.

Zorba, meanwhile, has become a reflection of the version of Doctor Doom seen in the 1970s. He sneers at and tortures his people, and becomes so angry with their failure to love him that he decides to unleashes weapons of mass destruction on them, although this being superhero comics means that he uses Killer Robots, rather than chemical weapons or bombs.

Doom and the Fantastic Four fly into action and the wisdom of US foreign policy is demonstrated as the strong head of state accepts American assistance to safeguard the ordinary people. They fight their way through the robotic hordes until they discover Zorba in his castle, where his transformation into 1970s Doctor Doom is completed when he unwittingly echoes his enemy's statement 'This Land Is Mine' as justification for his rule.



Doom murders Zorba and Reed Richards is forced to accept that in this new era there is no room for moral purity. Actions which would be unthinkable on American soil must be accepted when committed by new allies so long as they work towards the protection of America itself against the Communist menace.

In *Secret Identity Crisis* Matthew Costello says 'Changes to origins—the addition or subtraction of variables—signal new visions of the meaning of a character, and thus reveal changes in the culture which these characters reflect.' (Costello, 2009) This talk has demonstrated that the characterisation of Doctor Doom was heavily influenced by the US experience of the Cold War and that it would continue to develop as government policies, and public attitudes towards them, changed.

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