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Long Reads

Red Scares, Then and Now

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MOSCOW/LONDON – The United States experienced its first “Red Scare” immediately after World War I. For three years, Russians were said to be inciting worker revolts and strikes as part of an orchestrated campaign to undermine American capitalism. Then, on April 29, 1920, US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer warned that two days hence, on May Day, American workers would rise up to topple the US government by force. It didn’t happen, and the Red Scare vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared.

The US suffered another Red Scare following World War II. The Soviet Union’s development of its own atomic bomb, together with the “loss” of China to Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists, fueled a febrile terror within the US that, in retrospect, hardly seems believable. American companies, particularly Hollywood film studios, created blacklists of suspected leftists, ruining countless lives.

In Washington, DC, proceedings in the US Congress indiscriminately labeled renowned figures from General George C. Marshall to Secretary of State Dean Acheson as communist stooges. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin – whose henchman, Roy Cohn, would later mentor Donald Trump – established such a lasting legacy of calumny that his methods still bear his name: McCarthyism. And yet, soon enough, congressional hearings and a television documentary exposed McCarthy as a liar and a demagogue. As in 1920, the Red Scare of the early 1950s faded almost as quickly as it had begun.

The Paranoid Style in American Kremlinology

Just when we are marking the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, another Red Scare seems to be underway, owing to revelations that Russia interfered in the 2016 US presidential election. With Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller having begun to unearth substantive links between members of the Trump presidential

campaign and official Russian circles, a sense of Russia-centered paranoia is setting in.

New revelations that hundreds of malignant Russian social media trolls were active during the US election, as well as the Brexit referendum campaign, has helped to elevate this fear even more. But, while those trolls certainly aimed to mock Western democracy, suggesting that they meaningfully subverted either of those votes is to give them far too much credit.

The danger now is that valid concerns about Russian interference in the US political system will give way to conspiracy theories, as in past Red Scares. At a congressional hearing in September, Representative Gwen Moore of Wisconsin complained that, during the 2016 presidential election, she received a robocall from a speaker with “clearly a Slavic voice” urging her to vote against Hillary Clinton. Other commentators have pointed to links between the National Rifle Association and Russia, as if Russian President Vladimir Putin is somehow responsible for America’s many mass shootings. And still others suggest that Russia has sought to destabilize the US through the mobile game *Pokémon Go*.

All of these claims are focused strictly on US politics, rather than on larger geopolitical considerations. But, given that Soviet communism collapsed more than a quarter-century ago, it is worth asking what threat the Kremlin really poses to the US. From what we know, the Kremlin’s main objective in the 2016 election was merely to embarrass a rival politician – Clinton – and buttress Trump, with whom it hoped to forge a working relationship.

The fact is that modern Russia does not pose a great threat to the US, the European Union, or the West generally. China is a far wealthier authoritarian power than Russia. And now that he has consolidated his power, Chinese President Xi Jinping enjoys a level of global influence that Putin can only dream of.

Beyond China, Saudi Arabia is crueler and more erratic than Russia; and Pakistan is more volatile. Even Turkey, a member of NATO, is a more flagrant abuser of human rights than Russia. Since the failed coup there in July 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government has imprisoned thousands of journalists, civil servants, and opposition figures. Moreover, Turkey has a unique capacity to destabilize Europe by creating a thoroughfare for undocumented migrants and refugees from Syria and other parts of the region.

The Western Id

But Russia poses a different kind of challenge, rooted in Putin’s claims to represent an alternative vision for the West. As Europeans, Russians are supposed to be *like us*, but following a different script. Like the Bolsheviks a century ago, Putin has been openly challenging European and American notions of what the future is supposed to look like.

In 1917, Western Europeans and Americans were shocked by the Bolsheviks' abolition of private property and proclamation of universal equality. During the first Red Scare, Western leaders feared that reports from the newly formed Soviet Union would spark a chain reaction of workers' revolts across Europe and America. For a few years, Germany, at least, seemed to be on the brink of following in the Bolsheviks' footsteps, with Lenin himself anticipating that it would happen any day. Compared to Lenin's project, Putin's has been reactive and intellectually incoherent. Rather than issuing a clarion call for forward-looking social progress, and offering a blueprint for how to achieve it, Putin would pull Europe backwards, into the same sort of moral and economic *cul-de-sac* in which Russia now finds itself. In Putin's Russia, the goal is a return to a putative Golden Age based on the "traditional family," Christianity, and heavy industry.

According to Putin and leading Russian politicians, the West, with its focus on individual autonomy, including gay rights, has forgotten the terms father and mother, husband and wife. "We see how many Euro-Atlantic countries have basically set off on a path of rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that comprise the foundation of Western civilization," Putin told Western delegates at the 2013 Valdai Forum. "This is a policy in which a family with many children and a single-sex marriage, belief in God and belief in the Devil, are put on the same level."

Though Putin's ideological project is radically different from that of the Soviet Union, it does share Bolshevism's proselytizing fervor. In fact, just last month, Russia revived the Soviet-era World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi, and invited young people from across Europe to join in the "struggle against imperialism."

With messages like these, Russia plays the role of Europe's id. It is a militarist, populist, patriotic, dynamic, politically incorrect response to the ego of European elites. Intellectually, Putin's project is a sloppy bricolage of old leftist ideas and conservative dogmas. But it still manages to expose European and American insecurities about the "Western project" – and appeal to Western populists of both the left and the right. In fact, Russian officials have been amazed, and sometimes delighted, by the moral panic that they have sown in the West. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told CNN in October 2016, "It's flattering, of course, to get this kind of attention – for a regional power, as President [Barack] Obama called us some time ago."

Getting Russia Right

So how should the West, and particularly the US, respond? For starters, we should remember that Russia is dangerous only so far as Western societies allow it to sow confusion in their midst. Politically and economically, its power is quite limited. Consider the big story of the day: Russia's intervention in the 2016 election, which was effective, but hardly decisive. The story has persisted largely for two reasons. First, the Democrats are desperate to explain how they lost an election they had

expected to win. And, second, reports continue to emerge about members of the Trump campaign showing a brazen willingness to accept assistance from a foreign power.

But this story tells us much more about the sad state of US politics than it does about the capabilities of the Kremlin. Russia's smaller neighbors, not least Georgia and Ukraine, have real reasons to regard Russia as a threat to their sovereignty. Britain, the US, and Germany do not. Russia's GDP is half that of California. Its defense budget is one-tenth that of the US. And the channels through which it exports its propaganda, RT and Sputnik, are marginal media outlets that few in the West watch.

Moreover, Putin's Russia, like Xi's China, has a paucity of strategic allies. At the United Nations General Assembly in March 2014, only 11 small countries – including Armenia, North Korea, and Zimbabwe – opposed a resolution condemning Russia's seizure of Crimea. That is a far cry from the influence the Soviet Union once enjoyed.

The Putin government's unpredictable and provocative behavior may appear threatening, but it really amounts to an effort to compensate for the Kremlin's inability to project real power. The fact that Russia has scored any geopolitical successes at all in recent years is largely due to its adversaries' weaknesses. A power vacuum in Ukraine allowed it to capture Crimea with troops it already had on the ground at Sebastopol. And a cyber-illiterate Democratic National Committee gave Russian hackers easy access to its email server.

In both cases, tactical success elided strategic failure. Yes, Russia now controls Crimea; but it has forever lost Ukraine as a friendly neighbor on its border. Similarly, the election meddling has united America's two major political parties against Russia, perhaps for a generation. Congressional Republicans and Democrats can agree on little else, but they came together to impose further sanctions on Russia, against the wishes of the Trump administration.

The Way Ahead

As it happens, the best way for Western countries to respond to Russian posturing is to boost their own resilience – morally and practically. For starters, Western countries need to fix easily exploitable flaws in their political systems. A prime example is the Electoral College in the US, which dates back to 1787, and in 2016 produced precisely the type of perverse result that it was intended to prevent.

More broadly, Western countries must do more than merely assert their moral superiority in response to Russian deception and aggression in Syria, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and elsewhere. American and European claims of representing a “values-and rules-based system” ring hollow in the Kremlin, and not without reason. Lest we forget, the US invaded Iraq unilaterally in 2003, has refused to join international rules-based institutions such as the International Criminal Court, and is now the only country not participating in the Paris climate agreement.

The EU is even more committed to multilateralism and the rules-based order than the US is; but it, too, behaves in ways that contradict its professed values. In 2013, after getting into a geopolitical bidding war with Russia over Ukraine, the EU offered an Association Agreement to then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich – a man now reviled as a kleptocratic tyrant. Russian leaders are happy to hold up a mirror to the West and say, “Take a good look. You are just like us.”

Westerners should acknowledge their own moral failings and maintain a sense of humility when calling out Russian transgressions. Only in that spirit are they entitled to recall that the Kremlin’s record of double standards is far worse. After all, Russia killed tens of thousands of its own citizens in Chechnya, all in the name of preserving its “territorial integrity,” and then blithely changed international borders by force in both Georgia and Ukraine.

Moreover, as Western leaders develop a Russia strategy, they should keep in mind the country’s internal dynamics. Russia is no longer as clearly divided between workers, peasants, and aristocrats as it was in 1917. Since Putin came to power in 2000, an urban middle class has emerged, and its values are more conventionally European than those of any other social group in Russian history.

Metropolitan centers such as Moscow and St. Petersburg now have bicycle lanes, yoga classes, and latte-serving cafes. These amenities reflect much more than lifestyle choices. They show that when Russians have the money, they will travel to Europe or the US, learn European languages, and adopt Western culture. On occasion, they will even make political demands, as they did in the street protests of 2011-2012, and in Moscow’s recent municipal elections. Unlike the Bolsheviks, the Putin regime has not cracked down on this class of Russians. It merely regards them as “internal exiles” who should be kept out of political life.

Tear Down That Wall

If the US and European governments really want to demonstrate that their version of Western culture is the better one, they need to devise policies for reaching out to Russia’s urban middle class. The message should be that the West’s problem is with Putin’s regime, not Russia itself.

This is not the message that Russians have been getting. It is worth remembering that for the first eight years of Putin’s rule, he held out the prospect of visa-free travel to the EU. But now the Kremlin wants the opposite: to restrict Russian citizens’ interactions with the West. If the EU had made a greater effort to meet the Kremlin halfway during that earlier period, it is hard to imagine that the diplomatic wall between Russia and Western Europe would be as high as it is today.

Similarly, the US has closed consulates and curtailed visa services outside of Moscow, forcing Russians in Siberia and other remote regions to travel thousands of miles to obtain permission to travel to America. As a result, exchange programs and

cooperative arrangements between Russian and other Western universities have been wound down.

The West's failure to engage with the Russian people has been a godsend for Putin and his regime, especially given the poor state of the Russian economy. As long as the neo-Bolshevik bogeyman in the Kremlin can claim to represent the "other Europe," he will likely maintain his hold on power, and the red-less Red Scares will continue.



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