

Caught in a Bad Romance: What America Means to Russia

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As pundits in the West comment on the rise of “antiAmericanism” in Russia, Americans wonder about the origins of this anti- US sentiment. In this essay, Eliot Borenstein explains that, against all odds, the hostility towards America comes from a place of love.

Russia fares poorly in the headlines, and not just because the news is so often bad. With the Anglo-American world’s limited knowledge about its culture and history, Russia is saddled with painfully obvious clichés, often involving the words “red” and “revolution.” But the banality prize must go to the inevitable “From Russia, with Love.” (The Australian Daily Mail, June 16, 2015: “From Russia with Love: Miranda Kerr reveals a hint of her super toned tummy as she does a star jump outside the Saint Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow”) It has been almost sixty years since Ian Fleming published a James Bond novel by that name (and more than fifty since the movie was released), yet the phrase, like Bond himself, does not seem to be headed to retirement any time soon.

But it is time for our complacency about the nature of the ties between the two countries to be shaken, if not stirred. Fleming’s story features two Russian women trying to make contact with Britain’s top super spy; one wants to kill him, the other takes him to bed. With just a few small adjustments (such as swapping out Bond for an American), the two extremes could be applied to many Russians’ feelings about the United States, feelings that, as is often the case in cross-cultural relationships, are mutually misunderstood.

Pundits in the West anxiously wring their hands over the rise of Russian “anti-Americanism,” a notoriously vague term whose main effect is to make Americans feel besieged. Russia has become the latest focus for the naive question we never get tired of asking: “Why do they hate us so much?” In this case, though, the hostility towards America comes from a place of love. Angry, spurned love.

Enemies: A Love Story

Russia’s love of America is an old story, one that is worth recalling precisely when relations have gone so sour. Like Humbert’s Lolita, America had a precursor (she did, indeed she did): an older, and still simmering, affair with Western Europe in general and France in particular. But in the twentieth century, Russia was preoccupied with modernity and with the future. An infatuation with America was inevitable.

To those who lived through World War II, America was the Lend-Lease program. To the generation who came of age in the 1960s, America was the enchanted kingdom that gave birth to Jazz (broadcast on Voice of America for years), Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut, and bluejeans. For most people, this love was political only to the extent that turning one's attention to the "enemy" was a politicized gesture. The appeal was not the United States' economic system or democratic institutions; U.S. boosterism to the contrary, Russians were not seeking "freedom" or the "American Dream." They were simply charmed.

We liked to think of Soviet citizens as virtually isolated from the rest of the world, imagining their naive delight when they're finally confronted with the wonders of Western culture and technology. But the naiveté was really ours. Reports of shortages and long lines led many to assume that the USSR, rather than being an industrialized, modern country with a capacious social welfare system, was more like a godforsaken island whose inhabitants couldn't wait to start a cargo cult. The novelist Vasily Aksyonov, stripped of his citizenship in 1980, recalls how excited his new American landlord was when he heard that the Aksyonovs were from the USSR: he took them to a magic room that went up and down from floor to floor, depending on the buttons pressed. Aksyonov was too polite (and too amused) to tell him that the Soviets had long since mastered the secrets of the elevator.

Still, there was one gap in their knowledge about America that would prove disastrous: the Soviets did not know that their love for America was unrequited. And, really, how could they? The conflict between the two superpowers defined the entire era, and the limited contacts between them nearly always involved American scholars, diplomats, or activists who were emotionally or intellectually invested in Russia (otherwise, they wouldn't bother). This is not to say that Russia and the Soviet Union played no role in the American psyche: the Soviets made great movie villains. The ideological divide allowed for a reductive, functionalist approach to Russia and its culture, turning the Soviet Union into something of a totalitarian Disneyland for the American media/entertainment complex. What else could Russia have to offer?

Russia has a long history of preoccupation with its image on the world stage. America, on the other hand, is notoriously self-absorbed, indeed, self-satisfied, with little interest in other nations. We do, of course, get involved in foreign wars on a regular basis, but, really, our relationship with the rest of the world is one of benign neglect punctuated by the occasional recollections that other countries do exist; then, like a guilty, but dutiful child picking up a Hallmark card on Mother's Day, we remember to drop a bomb or send a drone to show that we care.

America was briefly infatuated with Russia and the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's perestroika, a period that proved as anomalous for the U.S. as it did for its home country. The damage, however, was done: for at least five years (late perestroika through 1993), citizens of the (former) Soviet Union could justifiably convince themselves that we were actually concerned about their well-being. We sent them McDonalds and Pizza Hut, and eventually humanitarian aid in the form of chicken ("Bush legs," as Russians called them) and leftover Desert Storm MREs. More ominously, we sent our "experts" to reform/ruin the national economy, and acted as indefatigable cheerleaders for the country's new democratic institutions (even when Russia's president disbanded and then shelled the country's parliament in 1993).

And, by the end of the Nineties, we more or less forgot about them. If we accept that US-Russian relations are at least in part about love, then America is the ultimate bad boyfriend.

Love Will Tear Us Apart

In retrospect, the turn against America should have been predictable. When we put our stamp of approval on a neoliberal, “democratic” regime that saw incomes plummet and crime run rampant, we became complicit in its failures. Even this could have been remedied, but we added insult to injury through neglect and lack of respect. Rather than seeing Russia as a partner (or even an antagonist—at least enemies get attention), we moved in the international arena as if Russia didn’t matter at all.

The 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia was a well-known turning point for Russia, when the media and popular opinion portrayed the Serbian people as victims of an overreaching predator. Russia’s then Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov was flying over the Atlantic on an official visit to the USA when he heard that NATO had commenced its bombing; Primakov briefly achieved cult hero status by ordering the plane to turn around immediately. This move was quickly dubbed “Primakov’s Loop,” an ironically appropriate term for a decision made because of the information loop from which Primakov had been excluded.

Russia’s anger over the bombings was cast, both internally and for export, in terms of the longstanding brotherly ties between two Orthodox Slavic nations. But these ties were only (re)discovered in the 1990s; in other words, the Russian media and political elites emotionally reinvested in Serbia precisely when Yugoslavia was collapsing. The implicit homology between Serbia and Yugoslavia on one side and Russia and the Soviet Union on the other meant that Serbia’s struggles were seen as a proxy for Russia’s. What the American media cast as a human rights and European security problem was, in Russia, presented as a test case for America’s plans for Russia itself.

It was after the bombings that anti-Western conspiracy theories started to move from the margin to the center. First came the revival of Russian emigre Grigory Klimov’s warnings about the sinister “Harvard Project,” an American/Jewish plot to use mind control and genetic manipulation to transform Russia into a nation of debased, predatory homosexuals. Long a fixture of the Russian far right, it spawned a dystopian trilogy about Russia’s near future, when the Harvard Project is challenged by a new Orthodox inquisition and a strong president who brings order to the land.

The Harvard Project would soon be eclipsed by the “Dulles Plan,” repackaged from a villain’s monologue in a 1970s Soviet spy thriller and attributed to Eisenhower’s secretary of state. What in the 1970s was, at best, a future threat to be avoided now looked like a plan that had already come to fruition: America will use its pop culture to turn people into idiots, and “switch out their values for false ones and make them believe in these false values.” Who knew that dubbed-over reruns of *Santa Barbara* could be so destructive?

One need not be a die-hard Freudian to see that loving and hating America are two versions of the same libidinal investment: either way, America retains an outsized importance that haunts the current proclamations of Russian spiritual superiority, while perpetuating the basic imbalance of attention. And in a time of increased state control

over media outlets, a hostile presentation of the United States hits the sweet spot between preexisting public sentiment and state propaganda. As in most of the cases in which Russia's well-curated state media carefully drive a particular message home, it is not simply a matter of an authoritarian government telling its compliant population what to believe; rather, it is a sophisticated media operation that confirms and extends beliefs that already hold a fair amount of currency.

Since 2006, the Russian media and blogosphere have been claiming that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright lamented the injustice of Russia's share of the world's oil and mineral wealth (Siberia should therefore be under international control). Albright herself has denied saying any such thing, while Putin has managed to have it both ways ("I'm not familiar with this quote by Madame Albright, but I know that such thoughts wander through the minds of certain politicians").¹ This fake quote is part of a perfect feedback loop, reinforcing both the rapaciousness of Americans (and particularly the Clinton administration, responsible for the bombings in Serbia) and the greatness of Russia itself. It is the familiar politics of *ressentiment*, harnessing public pride and humiliation in the service of the elite's agenda.

Given how much of contemporary Russian paranoid political discourse revolves around homosexuality, perhaps psychoanalysis does provide some useful insights. Klimov's fantasy of an American gay Jewish cabal trying to lure Russia onto the path to debauchery looks almost prescient: the current anti-gay hysteria posits homosexuality as not simply an internal danger to the body politic, but as a disease deliberately exported by America and Europe (or as Russian homophobes prefer, "Gayrope"). A recent episode of the reliably rabid documentary/talk show hybrid "Special Correspondent" (which airs on prime time on Russian state television) followed a short film called "Sodom" about the excesses of tolerance in the US and Europe with a discussion of "what this is all *really* about." America and Europe are using accusations of homophobia as the pretext for their next round of "humanitarian" bombings, while the State Department is relentlessly pursuing the gay agenda at the expense of all else. Even the Supreme Court's marriage equality decision (like the US prosecution of FIFA officials) gets spun as an anti-Russian act.

The rabid homophobia in Russia's contemporary public sphere is clearly about more than simple disdain for same-sex love. To hear Russian defenders of "traditional values" tell it, there is nothing so fragile as heterosexual desire. The assumption seems to be that, as soon as a young boy or girl hears about homosexuality, of course they're going to want to be gay (because, apparently, heterosexual sex must be a terrible drag). Homosexuality has come to stand in for the whole spectrum of "Western" (and particularly American) values that could seduce Russia's youth.

Freud, in one of his more dated moments, argued that paranoia is rooted in a denial of homoerotic feelings: "I'm attracted to him" transforms into the more acceptable "He is persecuting me." Meanwhile, the Russian legislature has rediscovered the joys of repression; it is a rare week without some news story about a bill to ban something. Most famous, of course, is the "gay propaganda" law, subjecting virtually any positive statement about homosexuality to possible prosecution (to save the children from mythical predators who want to "convert" them). Again, America is inevitably brought

¹ "Putting Words in Albright's Mouth," *The Moscow Times*, Nov. 7 2007.
<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/putting-words-in-albrights-mouth/193094.html>

into this particular discussion.

But perhaps the anti-American homophobes protest too much. The latent homosexuality of the homophobe is something of a cliché, but it suggests something about the geopolitical preoccupations of the guardians of Russia's morality. They are, I would argue, trying to forget the sins of their youth, when they experimented with Americanism. That is the new love that dare not speak its name.

Some citations about Americans writing about Russian anti-Americanism:

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