

Russia and USA: Rhetoric and Reality

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Moralization is an essential part of any geo-political game, and that is especially the case with countries such as the United States and Russia. Presently, Washington has become especially prone to playing the morality card. At least, that is the case with Hillary Clinton supporters who stated that the ugliness of Donald Trump is clearly manifested by his desire to overlook the noble principles on which American foreign policy has rested since the founding fathers designed it. Consequently, Trump's desire to befriend Vladimir Putin, the authoritarian Russian President, is a clear departure from his basic principles. Moscow also likes to assure that Russia always follows high moral principles in its foreign policy design. Still, Kremlin residents mostly limited moralizing to an internal audience, whereas people in Washington made the moralization publicly known to an international audience, *urbis* and *orbis*, so to speak. A closer look at the Soviet/Russia and the U.S. relationship could reveal that it is not high principles, whatever they might be in the context of the prevailing ideological shibboleth, but rather it is pragmatism that defines their relationship. The image of both countries has followed the pragmatic model. This implies that the U.S. and Russia could well cooperate in the future despite hostile rhetoric that dominated discourse in Moscow and Washington – a rhetoric that might not disappear completely in the future.

THE EARLY ENCOUNTERS: THE ORIGINS OF THE IMAGES

Let us start with the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution. Most Americans and, in some ways, the entire Western elite regarded the Bolsheviks in the same way most regarded present-day ISIS. They were the embodiment of evil, and their collapse was expected in the near future. On their side, the Bolsheviks had the similar optimistic vision of the future. Galvanized by the upheaval in post-WWI Europe and their victory, they expected worldwide “proletariat revolution,” which looks quite similar to the global jihad of their 21st Century ideological descendants. Consequently, neither side talked with each other. As time progressed, Moscow discovered that the expected revolution did not come. Soviet ideologists admitted that the capitalist world had entered the period of “temporal stabilization” and needed to be dealt with. Westerners also understood that the Soviets would not disappear in the near future and started to recognize the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), both the defacto and de jure. Western politicians who approached the Soviet regime from these perspectives implied that the Soviets were in the process of delayed

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“Thermidor,” the event of the French Revolution when radical Jacobins, often compared with Bolesheviks, was replaced by a more moderate faction. In the Soviet’s case, it implied the end of the regime. These explanations of the regime’s evolution were quite popular in the West and among those who had issues with people in the Kremlin, such as Mensheviks and Trotsky supporters.

It was decided that the USSR/Russia had become almost a “normal country” and could be admitted in the concert of the global powers. The reason was, of course, more pragmatic than moral. The USSR could not be ignored and, in addition, it was a place of lucrative economic deals and prospects. The U.S. had also followed the general trend and established diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1933. By that time, the country was fully under Joseph Stalin’s control and engaged in “collectivization,” which had starved millions and sent millions to Gulag. This had no implications for Washington’s decisions. It was not just geo-politics that mattered. There were business interests involved. The U.S. was in the grip of the Great Depression, and the USSR was a great market for machines and equipment. These factors cannot be ignored. Indeed, the USSR was the only major country which bought equipment and machinery from the U.S., whereas other European nations, also in the grip of the Depression, tried to protect their markets.

There were other perks also taken into consideration. Stalin engaged in crush industrialization and had been keen to get hard currency by all means. Selling of the country’s cultural treasures was one of the ways he achieved this. Many Westerners, including Americans, were among those who took advantage of the opportunities. All of these factors provided the incentive to configure the image and, more importantly, the behavior toward the Kremlin. While the members of the ruling elite made an occasional ideological barrage against the “godless” Soviets, they were broadly engaged in a variety of deals with the Kremlin. One could assume that in private conversations, they stated that Bolsheviks were not so bad and one could engage in business with them. Moreover, on the commencement of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, Washington’s and the general public’s views toward the Kremlin softened even more due to the fact that Roosevelt’s actions – the direct engagement in the economy on the level unthinkable before – recast Soviets experience in an absolutely different light. This was especially the case with the Left. The very fact that Stalin had engaged in the famous, or to be precise infamous, Purges bothered them very little. Walter Duranty, Moscow correspondent of the influential *New York Times*, published articles which presented the USSR as almost the ideal society. He was hardly the exception. Lion Feuchtwanger, Jewish German author, who visited Moscow during the height of the Purges, had published the book *Moscow: 1937* that presented the USSR as almost the ideal society and found full justification for terror.¹ As is the case with the American Left, by praising Stalin’s USSR, Feuchtwanger had followed European Leftists who pursued their own agenda. Fascism, and especially Nazism with strong anti-Semitic overtones, distraught the European Left, especially the Jewish Left, and they were looking at alternative political arrangements. They turned to the USSR and saw no problem here. The Jews were not a special target for the terror. Quite the contrary, Stalin’s

secret police were full of Jews. As a matter of fact, Gennrikh Yagoda, the secret police chief and one of those who initiated the Purges, was Jewish. His Jewishness, of course, did not prevent him to be consumed by terror in the future. While the West, the U.S. included, slowly found many reasons why Western capitals should work with Moscow regardless of their differences, Moscow also discovered that it could deal with the “capitalist predators.”

AMERICANS AND NAZI GERMANS AS GOOD FELLOWS

After the end of the Civil War, the Soviet regime had emerged and became slowly integrated in the global order. The ideology responded to these changes. Marxist-Leninism continued to be the official creed. However, beneath official sloganeering, a new ideology emerged, and it was called “National Bolshevism.” The gist of the creed was the assumption that Bolshevism was legitimized not by the prospect of the worldwide proletariat revolution, as according to Marxist design, but by the creation of the mighty Soviet Union, which was a modified Russian empire as it has existed for centuries. It implied a pragmatic foreign policy. Within this new ideological context, the U.S. hardly emerged as the major problem. Moreover, it was seen as a useful, friendly state even before the formal establishment of a diplomatic relationship. It was the U.S. that sent the USSR important machinery; hundreds, if not thousands, of Americans worked in the USSR providing essential skills and expertise. This conditioned the Kremlin’s approach to America. It is true that Soviet propaganda was anxious to demonstrate the horror of capitalism and the plight of American workers during the Great Depression. As a matter of fact, the excerpts from John Steinbeck’s work, *The Grapes of Wrath*, a book focused on the plight of the unemployed, was included in Soviet high school textbooks.

Still, the Kremlin did not brandish Washington as was the case with many other Western capitals. As a matter of fact, Stalin even made a positive remark about the U.S. by stating that the Soviets needed to imitate the U.S.’ technological achievements and what he noted as American “business-type behavior,” which is good organization and productivity. It was not surprising that by the late 1930s, both Washington and Moscow moved toward mutually profitable cooperation. At the same time, any cooperation, let alone alliances, with Nazi Germany looked unthinkable. Indeed, Hitler promulgated the destruction of Bolshevism as one of the major goals of his foreign policy and joined Japan in an “Anti-Comintern Pact,” aimed explicitly against the USSR. Moreover, Soviet and Japanese troops engaged in bloody clashes in the Far East.

Yet, suddenly, Moscow and Berlin became not just friendly but military allies. Any reference to an Anti-Comintern Pact had disappeared. The USSR and Nazi Germany divided Poland, starting World War II, and planned for other adventures together. The group of popular Soviet cartoonists, known as *Kukryniksy*, created pictures where they predicted how the planes of “brotherly people” (i.e., Soviet and Nazi Germans) would engage in bombing London. The abrupt changes in the Soviet-Nazi relationship led to equally dramatic changes in the image of

the USSR among the Western elite, in general, and America in particular. It was immediately discovered that Stalin was not a “progressive” leader, the spearhead of the movement against Nazi/Fascist threat, but a blood-thirsty dictator equal to Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. Even the Western Left changed their view of the Soviet regime. Some were truly disappointed, and others apparently adjusted their approach to fit well in the changing mood of the general public. These ideological opportunisms have been hardly unique and would be repeated in the future.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, marked by all forms of violence, some Western Leftist intellectuals saw the Cultural Revolution as a manifestation of the true drive against the corrupt bureaucracy and therefore the creation of “true socialism.” There was the case, for example, with two Bulgarians – Tsvetan Todorov and Julia Kristeva – who became influential French intellectuals. They visited China during the Cultural Revolution and posited that socialism was the “end of history.” When the ideological climate changed, they quickly discovered that socialism was a dead-end of history. The author of this article had met Todorov and later wrote him a letter asking to explain his extraordinary intellectual evolution. Todorov chose not to respond. The same intellectual chameleonism could be well-founded among Western intellectuals in the past who, upon a Soviet/Nazi pact, quickly admitted that they were wrong in their vision of Stalin and his regime.

STALIN AS “UNCLE JOE”

The ink barely dried on the Soviet/Nazi agreement when the Nazi Army invaded the USSR. Consequently, both Washington and Moscow immediately changed their view of each other. President Roosevelt transformed Stalin into the benign “Uncle Joe,” and Stalin’s actions were implicitly justified. In these narratives, Stalin did what any other leader should do, eliminating the “fifth column.” Indeed, as the Red Army regained momentum and Britain’s decline became more evident, Washington apparently mused about sharing the global predominance with Moscow after the war. The ideological backdrop for such an alliance was apparently in the making and could be seen in Nicholas Timasheff’s book *The Great Retreat*, published soon after the war. The major point of the book was that the USSR had finally entered the “Thermidorian” stage and restoration of pre-revolution order was in the making. If Washington was in a good relationship with Tsarist Russia, why could it not be on good terms with Stalin and share with him the global predominance?² One might note that a similar idea had circulated, at least for a while, in the minds of some American strategists in regards to Red China. Quite recently Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s National Security Adviser, for example, envisioned a geopolitical strategy where the US would share the global predominance with Red China. The plan did not work, neither with Beijing nor Moscow, and in 1946 the Cold War commenced. At that point, Stalin’s old image of the bloody tyrant emerged once again. Thus not only had the relationship between Moscow and Washington been conditioned by the pragmatic interests of power brokers involved in the deals, but it could be changed quickly and radically. The pragmatic approach could well explain

the nature of post-Soviet Russian-American relations and their possible evolution in the future.

RUSSIA AS EMPTY SPACE: GORBACHEV, YELTSIN, AND EARLY PUTIN AS “UNCLE JOE”

Post-Soviet relations with America depended not on the popularity of Russian leaders at home, or their behavior, but on the needs of the elite of both countries. Conventional morality, which Washington, especially the members of the Hillary Clinton clan, like to present as the major drive of American foreign policy, has no place in these arrangements. Late Soviet/Post-Soviet leaders could be hated by the majority of Russians. They could commit horrible crimes by the standards of any Western democratic society and still be accepted by Washington if their overall actions promoted American interests. Gorbachev lost the sympathy of most Russians soon enough and for legitimate reasons: they saw their living standards plummeting and the country disintegrating.

Yeltsin shelled the Parliament building, killing hundreds, if not thousands, in Moscow, impoverishing millions, and destroying Russian industry. He was deeply hated by millions. At the time, both Gorbachev and Yeltsin had emerged and still existed in the American narrative as great leaders and beneficiaries of the Russian people. They were the peculiar “Uncle Joes” and the reason was simple: all of them destroyed the USSR, the U.S.’s major geo-political rival. Putin also could have been put on “Uncle Joe’s” pedestal. Remember President George H. W. Bush’s statement when he looked Putin in the eyes and discovered that he was actually a good, sincere chap with whom one could work. The reason for such praise was not, of course, Bush’s naivety but the American elite’s assessment of Russia and their own abilities and actions. Throughout the 1990s, Russia was looked at as not just being weak but in irreversible freefall. The very fact that Putin did not object to the appearance of American bases in Central Asia, the Russia geo-political backyard, was a clear sign of Russia’s impotence.

At the same time, Washington was so confident in its absolute predominance that ruling “neo-con” did not bother even to keep the usual moralizing “big leaf.” Robert Kagan, one of their leading ideologists, published the scandalous article later expanded to be a short book titled, *Of Paradise and Power*. Within its pages, he presented Europe as weak and effeminate, in some ways a naive Venus who believed in such outdated trifles as a rule of international law.³ Whereas the U.S. represented Mars, the tough Social-Darwinian pragmatist who understood that foreign policy problems are solved not through meaningless negotiations but, if one would use the Bismarckian notion, by application of the “*Blut und Eisen*” view. In 2006, *Foreign Affairs*, the influential foreign policy journal, published an article with even more scandalous content.⁴ The point of the piece was that Russia and China are now so weak that the U.S.’ preventive nuclear strike could clearly knock them down before they could even think about retaliation. The collapse of both the remaining American competitors would not just ensure the U.S.’ complete global predominance but also help to promote democracy.

PUTIN'S FUTURE: FROM TYRANT TO "UNCLE JOE"

Still Putin's actions in Georgia in 2008 and later in Ukraine in 2014 had led to the reemergence of Putin as the dangerous Machiavellian tyrant who needed to be stopped. These images of Putin have dominated American mass media for the last few years, and they are the battle cry of Hillary Clinton. At the same time, her opponent, Donald Trump, proclaimed the "America First" policy and promised to befriend Putin. Some American commentators immediately described their disagreements as conflicts between the cynical business tycoon and the noble American politician willing to support American values. These explanations are rather naïve, and the deeper, underlying current of their conflict and its potential implications for a Russian-American relationship should be examined. The analysis will show that Putin has a chance to re-emerge as "Uncle Joe," albeit in peculiar and convoluted ways.

It is worth remembering that Stalin's transformation into "Uncle Joe" and Putin into the Machiavellian dictator was not just related to Soviet/Russian leaders' usefulness for Washington, but also to Washington's assessment of the U.S.' strength. From these perspectives, let us evaluate Donald Trump's slogan, "America First." While Trump and his supporters alleged that it was something new and American allies are just parasites on American goodwill and naivety, this is hardly the case. The U.S. always professed the "America First" foreign policy. It is called "national interest," and the U.S. followed their national interests, as they were perceived by the elite, since the beginning of its history.

Here in the U.S., of course, it is no different than other countries. While addressing its interests, the U.S. elite hardly pays any attention to their European allies interests or intentions. This was the case during the Cold War and even more so in its immediate aftermath of the Cold War. The present day "America First" doctrine, with its isolationist overtones, is plainly the understanding, at least by part of the American elite, that the U.S. has neither economic nor social recourses for keeping its imperial heirloom. As such, global retreat became inevitable. As a matter of fact, an American observer noted in the influential *Washington Quarterly* that the U.S. could well experience the geo-political default, i.e. the dramatic change of geo-political fortune when it simply would not be able to fulfill their global obligations.⁵ These assumptions lead to Trump's appeal to Putin whose help he might need in the future. In this case, Putin would become "not such a bad chap," or even a full-fledged "Uncle Joe."

In the case of Hillary Clinton's victory, the arrangement would be the same from an important aspect. She would face the same lack of resources as Trump. They would be similar in that respect regardless of their slogans. While characterizing Putin as the tyrant and imperialist, Clinton would be compelled to deal with Moscow in a pragmatic way. The Kremlin would most likely cooperate regardless of disagreements. It would not be due to Moscow's inborn peacefulness, as the Kremlin asserted for internal consumption, but because it also has limited resources. The fall of oil prices will lead to severe economic problems and the decline

of living standards. The Kremlin hardly excluded the possibility of mass protests, and this is the major reason why Putin has decided to create a large National Guard, mostly to maintain the public order. The creation of the Guard shall be ended by 2017, the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution, the memory of which is hardly pleasing for the Russian elite.

The Kremlin military adventure in the Middle East was also not too successful and Putin is anxious to disentangle Russia from a quagmire without completely losing face. Therefore, both Washington and Moscow would well present their counterpart's image to each other's populations in a more complicated way. In the Washington narrative, Putin would emerge as either an "Uncle Joe," a "dictator," or just plainly ignored. In the case of Moscow, the residents of the White House would be either "our American partners," a symbol of primordial Western aggressiveness, or also ignored. All of these contradictory images would have their own life without being connected with each other. They would still most likely be accepted by the majority of Americans and Russians, indicating how easily the public can, and has been, influenced by spin doctors. This is especially true in the case when *hoi polloi* has no personal experience in dealing with the discussed subjects.

NOTES

¹ Lion Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937: My Visit Described for My Friends*, (London: Viking Press, 1937).

² Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1946).

³ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

⁴ Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2006, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2006-03-01/rise-us-nuclear-primacy>.

⁵ Michael J. Mazarr, "The Risks of Ignoring Strategic Insolvency" *The Washington Quarterly*, 35. no. 4, (2012): 7-22.