Beyond the Cold War

Soviet and American Media Images

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Contents

3
The Image of Russians in American Media and The "New Epoch"

GEORGE GERBNER

"The world leaves one epoch of Cold War," said President Gorbachev at his joint press conference with President Bush in December 1989, "and enters another epoch." What will that epoch be? More specifically, how will the "new epoch" deal with the legacy of some 40 years of hostility and distortion that poisoned the international atmosphere and provided the justification for repression at home and hot wars abroad?

A long-standing "enemy image" has deep institutional sources and broad social consequences. It projects the fears of a system by dramatizing and exaggerating the dangers that seem to lurk around every corner. It works to unify its subjects and mobilizes them for action. Behind the shifts from "red menace" through wartime alliance to "evil empire" and back to "Gorbymania" are pictures, attitudes, and suspicions deeply embedded in the minds of many generations. Before considering how U.S. Cold War imagery may color or constrain the new epoch, it may be useful to examine that legacy and its lingering shadow.

* * *

The media are prime suppliers of the pervasive images "that depict the Soviets as inhumane, vicious torturers who enjoy inflicting pain and murdering children," writes Brett Silverstein in his article "Enemy Images: The Psychology of U.S. Attitudes and Cognitions Regarding the Soviet Union" in the June 1989 issue of *American Psychologist*. His survey of studies shows that American children's information about Soviets comes mostly from the media, with parents and school trailing far behind as information sources. Frameworks of knowledge are established early in life, and they are self-reinforcing as well as difficult to change. Silverstein cites polls showing that one out of four college students consistently underestimates the number of Soviet

casualties in World War II and thinks that the Soviets first invented the atomic bomb. Press imbalances feed cognitive distortions. For example, *The New York Times* was five times as likely to mention martial law in a Soviet ally, or write about Soviet dissidents, than to carry news of the same things in a country friendly to the United States.

Exposed to what Cable News Network's Ted Turner called "hate films" in the May 17-23, 1989 issue of *Variety*—films such as *Rambo* (in which Soviet soldiers torture Stallone) and *Invasion U.S.A.* (in which two agents with rocket launchers cheerfully destroy a suburban neighborhood at Christmas-time), the miniseries "Amerika" and the film *Red Dawn* (chronicling other Soviet invasions), and the film *Hunt for Red October* (a tale of a Soviet submarine commander's defection to the U.S.), it is perhaps not too surprising that 28 percent of those responding to a *New York Times* survey in November 1985 believed that in World War II the Soviet Union fought *against* the United States.

Things may be changing with movies such as *Delta Force II* and *Red Heat* showing Soviet and American cops and commandos, respectively, teaming up against terror in Chicago and the Third World. But the change is not always for the better. A "post-Cold War" episode of the CBS series "The Equalizer" showed Soviet scientists infiltrating the Pentagon and using U.S. research funding (maybe that's why there is so little left for *our* research!) to develop a torture technique that turns Americans into murdering maniacs.

Escalation of the body count seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on global mayhem. The "Rambo" character played by Sylvester Stallone in *First Blood*, released in 1985, rambled through Southeast Asia, leaving 62 "commie" corpses. In the 1988 release of *Rambo III*, Stallone visits Afghanistan, killing at least 106 communists—just about one dead "red" a minute.

* * *

The wholesaler of enemy images, as of all images, is television. Prime time dramatic entertainment provides by far the most pervasive, frequent, and vivid images of all foreign nationals. Most Americans have never met a Soviet citizen, but they have encountered a Russian (always called a Russian, not a Soviet), in often intimate detail, an average of at least once in every three weeks of prime time network dramatic television. Only British and German nationals appear more frequently as major characters. Most of the "Russians" are stock characters typecast in the type of formula dramas that have fed the imagination of many generations of Americans.

Our analysis of these images is based on the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School Cultural Indicators data bank of annual network samples and a script archive consisting of all television plays since 1976. These sources yielded a sample of 44 programs with 103 Russian characters.

* * *

A fairly stable cast of about 150 major characters a week dominates the world of network television drama. Nine out of 10 are Americans. Russians are a visible presence in U.S. television's view of the world. In some ways, they are similar to the rest of the world presented on U.S. television. Russian men outnumber women about three to one, and their game is a game of power. There are no children or old people among the Russians. On the whole, they commit a little more violence than Americans (if that is possible, as about half of all television characters commit some violence). The aggregate personality profile of the Russians is more violent, strong, and efficient but, predictably, less successful than the Americans.

Taking a closer look makes all this come into sharper focus. Nine out of 10 Russian male and all female characters fall into just five categories. The largest is that of KGB and other secret agents, security personnel, and spies. Forty-five percent of the men and 17 percent of the women are in that category. The second largest group for men (23 percent), and the largest group for women (42 percent), is that of defectors.

So about two-thirds of Russian men and nearly as many Russian women seen on American television play out the roles of hunter and hunted. This being American television, most of the hunters fail, and their prey escape to "freedom."

The remaining one-third of the Russian character sample is divided among diplomats (9 percent of the men, none of the women), ballet dancers (6 percent of the men and 12 percent of the women), sports figures (6 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women), and scientists (12 percent of the women, but, curiously, only 1 man).

* * *

The image of Russians throughout the 1970s and 1980s is largely frozen into a frigid Cold War formula that does double duty on the sex role front. Men are the masterful, though ultimately vanquished, agents of a police state. Women are more likely to be fleeing from it. Meeting attractive Americans of the opposite sex always leads to a love interest that agents of the state must try to thwart.

These agents of the Soviet state, 9 out of 10 whom are men, are depicted as cold, ruthless, and machine-efficient. "They know everything," whispers a victim. They do not trust anybody, especially women. "She is too soft," says one of them, speaking of a female agent. "Full of humanitarianism. It's ridiculous!"

Most of the men try to head off or reclaim defectors and watch over ballet dancers and diplomats. Their cover is often that of social secretary, interpreter, or journalist. They also steal U.S. secrets, kidnap U.S. scientists, and hoodwink U.S. "dupes." Nothing can stop their deception, murder, and terror except bullets and the CIA.

The defectors comprise nearly half of the women and one out of every four men. They are mostly dancers, sports figures, and spouses or family members of other defectors. They live in dread of the KGB. Their pathetic but ultimately successful struggle provides most of the human interest in the formula-driven plot configurations.

Comic or any other relief is rare in the world of Russian characters. Most of the humor revolves around their fractured English, like "Take the loaf off your feet." The otherwise relentlessly stark ritual is relieved occasionally by an attempt at genuine fraternization, as among Soviet and U.S. athletes (until the KGB puts an end to that), a medical rescue, a Soviet diplomat befriending an American boy, and a debate over the merits of hamburgers versus "Leninburgers." Probably unintended humor comes from sporadic attempts to "humanize" the attractions of a free society, such as the virtues of hamburgers, Tootsie Rolls, and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

One episode shows fighting among Russians, Chinese, and U.S. geologists on an expedition that ultimately ends in cooperation. Another, perhaps prophetic, depicts Russians and Americans getting together to fight Third World "terrorists." But none reflects the wartime alliance, the period of détente, or perhaps as yet, the "new epoch" in U.S.-Soviet relations. Most of the depictions delve into the most repellent aspects and fantasies of Soviet society and our most frightening and self-serving relationships with it.

* * *

With the projection of massive American military power into the Middle East, the geopolitical structure of the new epoch is only dimly emergent. Its cultural underpinnings are equally murky. The reservoir filled with suspicion and malice for half a century can be replenished at will. More than likely it can be turned, with appropriate adaptations, to new uses.

If the Cold War turns into a new "holy alliance," as some of those who declare themselves its winners seem to hope, the superpowers can concen-

trate on securing their ever more precarious hold on the remaining privileges and shrinking resources of a world liberated from some bankrupt forms of domination but increasingly free and open to symbolic invasion. The floodgates are opening for the penetration of Russophobic (and all other) media violence "made in the USA." Even (or perhaps especially) the Soviets are not immune. *Rambo* was reported to be the hottest video on the Moscow black market. After the "liberation" of the film industry, *First Blood* was "cleaning up at the box office," reported *Variety* (October 15, 1990, p. 66). No doubt it will go on to "free" Soviet television, to be followed by the even bloodier remakes. "To hear the Russians tell it," *Variety* noted, "the Soviet film industry liberated itself into a state of total chaos. . . . Many of the Soviet films are modeled after Yank B-pics. . . . As many as 70% of the new crop are "commercial, cheap and bad."

Few countries are still willing or able to invest in a cultural policy that does not surrender the socialization of their children and the future of their language, culture, and society to "market forces." That drift is more likely to contribute to the resurgence of neofascism than to that of an open, humane, democratic "new epoch."

The issue is cultural policy, not just goodwill or wishful thinking. The Cold War has contaminated the cultural environment at least as much as its physical counterpart, the deadly strontium 90, damaged the atmosphere. As with atomic testing, an active international constituency is needed to press for a new policy. A cultural environmental movement dedicated to democratic and humanistic media reform must build such a constituency if we are to repair and replace the dark legacy of the Cold War with something deserving of the name "new epoch."