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The Russians Are Coming, Again

JEREMY KUZMAROV AND JOHN MARCIANO

The 1966 Academy Award-winning film *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming*, directed by Norman Jewison, parodies the Cold War paranoia then pervading the United States, depicting the chaos that seizes a small coastal New England town after a Soviet submarine runs aground. Half a century later, Americans are again being warned daily of the Russian menace, with persistent accusations of Russian aggression, lies, violations of international law, and cyberattacks on U.S. elections, as reported in leading liberal outlets like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

The charges are many and relentless: the Russians invaded Georgia; the Russians tried to subvert and overthrow the Ukrainian government; the Russians shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in July 2014 over eastern Ukraine, or supported rebels that did so; the Russians annexed Crimea in 2014 in an aggressive move reminiscent of the Soviet Union's postwar actions in Eastern Europe; the Russians have threatened smaller NATO nations in the region; and most recently, the Russians engaged in cyberwarfare by blatantly interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and then tried to manipulate the president through connections to key figures in his inner circle.

A prime example of the new Russia hysteria comes from a 2016 report in the *New York Times* by national security correspondents David Sanger, Eric Schmitt, and Michael R. Gordon:

> For his part, Mr. Putin is counting the days until Mr. Trump is in the Oval Office. Despite a failing economy, the Russian president has been pursuing for the past four years what most Western analysts see as a plan to reassert Russian power throughout the region. First came the annexation of Crimea and the shadow war in eastern Ukraine. Then came the deployment of nuclear-capable forces to the border of NATO countries, as Moscow, working to fracture the power structures in Germany and France and promote right-wing parties, sent a reinvigorated military force on patrol off the coasts of the Baltics and Western European nations.[1]

Based on unproven assertions masquerading as fact (such as that Putin was working to fracture power structures and promote right-wing parties

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in France and Germany), the article fails to acknowledge that a verbal agreement was made in late 1990 between Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker. According to the Russians—whose version is corroborated by hundreds of memos and transcripts at the George H. W. Bush presidential library—Baker pledged to Gorbachev that NATO would not expand east toward their border, in return for Russian support for German reunification.[2] Since then, of course, the United States has armed and funded NATO's eastward advance to include states that share borders with Russia. The United States also provocatively increased its naval presence in the Black Sea, and in 2014, the State Department fanned protests that led to the violent overthrow of Ukraine's autocratic but elected pro-Russian government, prompting the Russian annexation of Crimea, and then supplied more than a billion dollars in security assistance to a new, Western-friendly right-wing regime.[3]

In summer 2016, the Obama administration announced the construction of a future U.S. missile defense site in Poland and the activation of a missile defense system in Romania.[4] This came on top of a previously announced trillion-dollar nuclear modernization program, prompted in part by the lobbying efforts of the defense contractor Bechtel, that includes the development of new nuclear-tipped weapons, whose size and "smart" technology, according to a leading general, ensure that the use of nuclear arms is "no longer unthinkable."[5]

Russia, not surprisingly, has watched these policies with alarm, itself putting five new strategic nuclear missile regiments into service in 2016, and backing the Assad government in the Syrian civil war. Former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry is among those who believe that the danger of nuclear catastrophe arising from the renewed arms race is "greater today than during the Cold War."[6]

As in the original Cold War, U.S. arms manufacturers have fueled the escalation by lobbying Washington and NATO to maintain high levels of military spending, aided by hired-gun think tanks and professional "experts." As retired Army General Richard Cody, a vice president at L-3 Communications, the seventh-largest U.S. defense contractor, explained to shareholders in December 2015, the industry faces a historic opportunity: following the end of the Cold War, peace had "pretty much broken out all over the world," with Russia in decline and NATO nations celebrating. "The Wall came down," he said, and "all defense budgets went south."[7] Reversing this slide toward peace required the creation of new foreign enemies, including the perception of a revived Russian imperialism—even though the U.S. military budget, totaling $609 billion in 2016, dwarfs that of Russia, which spent $65 billion.

To understand the New Cold War emerging today, it is necessary to reexamine the original conflict between the United States and the USSR. The present Russia panic follows an entire century of fearmongering and "threat inflation," dating to the Russian Revolution, that has long served the interests of the U.S. military-industrial complex and security state. It has had little to do with either Russian or American realities, which have been consistently distorted.

From Midnight War to Cold War

It is a history that begins with U.S. aggression: after the triumph of the Bolsheviks in October 1917, the United States and other Western nations invaded Russia, fueling a legacy of mistrust that continues today. Popular memory in the West depicts Soviet Communism as a totalitarian ideology equivalent to slavery, and Stalin as a murderous despot equivalent to Hitler, whose aggressive drives made coexistence impossible. In fact, the United States encircled the Soviet Union with military bases, and Stalin, despite his unquestionable brutality, was cautious and defensive in foreign policy. The Soviet Union emerged under his rule as a superpower and military juggernaut that played a decisive role in defeating Nazism.[8]

After the demise of the Soviet Union, liberal intellectuals extolled the farsightedness of the "wise men" of the Truman administration, whose commitment to "containing" the Soviet threat led ultimately to U.S. victory.[9] In a 2015 article headlined "Cold War without the Fun," *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman lamented that the new confrontation between the United States and Russia lacked some of the drama of the original, such as "Nikita Khrushchev's shoe-banging, a race to the moon or a debate between American and Soviet leaders over whose country has the best kitchen appliances." According to Friedman, the new "post-post-Cold War has more of a W.W.E. — World Wrestling Entertainment — feel to it, and I don't just mean President Vladimir Putin of Russia's riding horses bare-chested, although that is an apt metaphor. It's just a raw jostling for power for power's sake — not a clash of influential ideas but rather of spheres of influence."[10]

Whatever their intended humor, Friedman's remarks blithely ignore the Cold War's horrific human costs, which led Mikhail Gorbachev to conclude that the conflict had "made losers of us all." These costs include the millions of deaths in Korea and Vietnam, the destabilization of third world countries, the militarization of U.S. political economy, the threat of nuclear war, and abuses of civil liberties. As Carl Marzani, an Office of Strategic Services and State Department employee convicted of lying about his involvement with the Communist Party, described in his

book *We Can be Friends* (1952), the Cold War threw the United States into "semi-hysteria" and a manufactured "war psychosis," with "dog tags on children, airplane spotters on twenty-four hour duty…roads marked for quick evacuations, buildings designated as air raid shelters, air raid drills everywhere in streets, stores and schools."[11] The Cold War also devastated whole communities of leftists, organizers, and union members, from the McCarthyite witch hunts to the mass persecution of political radicals by U.S. client states in Latin America and Asia.

Few Americans today realize that it was the United States that first ignited these hostilities, by invading Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution. The Wilson administration sent ten thousand U.S. troops from the European theater of the First World War, alongside the British, French, Canadians, and Japanese, to aid the White generals, who were later implicated in wide-scale atrocities, including pogroms against the country's Jews. This "Midnight War" was carried out illegally, without the consent of Congress, and was opposed by the U.S. Army commander in Siberia, General William S. Graves, who expressed "doubt if history will record in the past century a more flagrant case of flouting the well-known and approved practice in states in their international relations, and using instead of the accepted principles of international law, the principle of Might makes right."[12]

As it turned out, in the United States, history hardly recorded these events at all. Historian D. F. Fleming wrote that

> For the American people, the cosmic tragedy of the intervention in Russia does not exist, or it was an unimportant incident, long forgotten. But for the Soviet people and their leaders the period was a time of endless killing, of looting and raping, of plague and famine, of measureless suffering for scores of millions – an experience burned into the very soul of the nation, not to be forgotten for many generations if ever. Also, for many years, the harsh Soviet regimentation could all be justified by fear that the Capitalist power would be back to finish the job. It is not strange that in an address in New York, September 17, 1959, Premier Khrushchev should remind us of the interventions, "the time you sent the troops to quell the revolution," as he put it.[13]

The Bolshevik drive to nationalize industry and seize foreign assets was ideological and economic anathema to the United States, which in 1917 held investments of over $658.9 million in the country.[14] Wilson had long believed in a strong executive, which he considered the only bulwark against the "clumsy misrule of Congress."[15] Wilson was also a vigorous proponent of U.S. interventionism, having previously sent forces to help suppress revolution in Mexico. At one point, he acknowledged

that the October Revolution was a "desperate attempt on the part of the dispossessed to share in the bounty of industrial civilization," and that the Russian people had grown impatient with the slow pace of reform. Nevertheless, their revolutionary efforts could not be allowed to "make the ignorant and incapable mass dominant in the world." The only remedy for "class despotism in Petrograd," as Wilson and Secretary of State Robert Lansing saw it, was for a "strong commanding personality to arise…and gather a disciplined military force [capable of] restoring order and maintaining a new government."[16]

Initially, the Tsar's two top chiefs of staff were considered the most promising saviors, though the banner later fell to the Admiral Aleksandr Vasilevich Kolchak, a famed Arctic explorer and commander of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, known for a rash temper that often led him "beyond the limits of the law." James Landfield of the State Department was among those "greatly heartened" by the British-backed coup Kolchak launched in November 1918 in Omsk, Siberia, believing that at last a real military power might emerge in Russia that could "restore orderly existence."[17]

Receiving 600,000 rifles, 6,831 machine guns, and hand grenades and explosives from the Allied stock, Kolchak's cause was championed by, among others, Winston Churchill, the *New York Times*, the U.S. Consul General in Irkutsk, and J. P. Morgan.[18] But however strong their foreign support, the Omsk group represented only the "minority and ancient imperialists who were obstinately impervious to the new Russia flaming in revolution against age long abuses and tyrannies," as a lieutenant in the 339th Infantry put it.[19]

The U.S. ambassador to Japan, Rowland Morris, reported that all over Siberia under Kolchak's rule, there was an "orgy of arrests without charges; of executions without even the pretense of a trial; and of confiscations without the color of authority. Panic and fear has seized everyone. Men support each other and live in constant terror that some spy or enemy will cry Bolshevik and condemn them to instant death." Among those killed were former members of the constituent assembly and railroad workers who had struck for higher wages. In Ekaterinburg, Kolchak allowed Cossacks to massacre at least two thousand Jews, part of a larger wave of pogroms.[20]

Untroubled, Wilson set up a "little war board" to expedite arms shipments to Kolchak and provide further military support, without congressional sanction, through Kerensky's former ambassador to the United States, Boris Bakhmetev, who controlled over $200 million in assets. Historian Robert Maddox wrote that "by conserving and augmenting the embassy's resources, the Wilson administration established what

amounted to an independent treasury for use in Russia…[that was] immune from prying Congressmen. The ambassador of the Russian people had now become the quartermaster for the Kolchak regime."[21] In short, the "Midnight War" was waged by executive power, setting an early precedent for today's imperial presidency.

Referring to them as "John bolo" or "bolos," U.S. soldiers let loose their firepower upon the "massed Bolsheviks, felling them like cattle in a slaughter pen," according to Lieutenant John Cuhady. The village of Toulgas on the Northern Dvina River, where Leon Trotsky led the Bolshevik defense, was turned into a "smoking, dirty smudge upon the plain," as Captain Joel Moore, Lieutenant Harry Meade, and Lieutenant Lewis H. Jahns described it in an eyewitness account.

They go on to describe a "pitiful sight" in which the inhabitants of Toulgas, given three hours to vacate, turned "out of the dwellings where most had spent their whole simple, not unhappy lives, their meager possessions scattered awry on the grounds." With their houses in ruins, "the women sat upon hand-fashioned crates wherein were all their most prized household goods, and abandoned themselves to a paroxysm of weeping despair, while the children shrieked stridently, victim of all the realistic horrors that only childhood can conjure." Sad as the scene was, the authors wrote, when "we thought of the brave chaps whose lives had been taken from those flaming homes, for our casualties had been very heavy, nearly one hundred men killed and wounded, we stifled our compassion and looked on the blazing scene as a jubilant bonfire."[22]

Such dehumanization in war and desire for revenge would go on to spawn the "atrocity-producing environment" that characterized the war in Vietnam and other Cold War conflicts. During the Russian invasion, the British pioneered the use of dive bombing and tear gas bombs including in Tsaritsin (later Stalingrad), which was defended by a Soviet committee led by future dictator Joseph Stalin and later Red Army Marshal Georgy Zhukov, whose mistrust of the West was shaped by their experience in this forgotten war.[23]

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic" sung by U.S. troops made a melancholy joke of the quagmire:

> We came from Vladivostok, to catch the Bolshevik
> We chased them o'er the mountains,
> And we chased them through the creek
> We chased them every Sunday
> And we chased them through the week,
> But we couldn't catch a gosh darn one.

The bullets, may whistle, the cannons may roar,
I don't want to go to the trenches no more.
Take me over the sea, where the Bolsheviks can't get me.
Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home."[24]

Another anonymous poem, "In Russia's Fields," modeled after the famous First World War poem "In Flanders Fields," read:

In Russia's fields, no poppies grow,
There are no crosses row on row,
To mark the places where we lie,
No larks so grayly singing fly,
As in the fields of Flanders…

We are the dead. Not long ago
We fought beside you in the snow,
And gave our lives, and here we lie,
Though scarcely knowing reason why,
Like those who died in Flanders.[25]

It is ironic that we in the United States have always been led to fear a Russian invasion, when Americans were in fact the original invaders—the Russians have never forgotten. In May 1972, on a visit to the USSR to promote the new détente, President Richard Nixon boasted to his hosts about having never fought one another in a war, a line repeated by Ronald Reagan in his 1984 State of the Union address. A *New York Times* poll the next year found that only 14 percent of Americans were aware that in 1918 the U.S. had landed troops in northern and eastern Russia, a figure likely even lower today.[26] Deeper public awareness of history in the United States might force us to rethink the direction and the current slide towards renewed confrontation with Russia, and could enable us to see the world from Russia's perspective, potentially opening possibilities for engagement.

Learning from Woody

A final historical lesson could be taken from the legacy of Cold War dissenters like folk singer Woody Guthrie (1912–1967), a vocal critic of U.S. foreign policy who wanted peace with the Soviet Union. If he were alive today, Guthrie would no doubt be alarmed by the fearmongering rhetoric emanating from Washington, and might still be singing his song "Talkin' Atom Bomb," in which he proclaimed that "the only way to save your skin from this big bomb blast is ta outlaw the big bomb and I mean fast."[27]

Guthrie thought little of President Truman, whom Guthrie said "don't like my trade unions; don't like organized labor, don't like the communist party, don't like the human race." In Guthrie's view, the Republicans and

Democrats are "all out for one thing, which is to rake in big stacks of profits for the gambler that owns the House and the Senate Chamber too."[28]

In 1948, Guthrie championed the third party progressive candidate Henry Wallace, Vice President from 1940–44, who had advocated that the United Nations assume control of the strategically located air bases with which "the United States and Britain [had] encircled the world." According to Wallace, "nations not only should be prohibited from manufacturing atom bombs, guided missiles and military aircraft for bombing purposes, but also prohibited from spending on its military more than 15 percent of its budget." The United States, he said, could easily ensure cooperation with the Russians if they made clear they "are not planning for war against her," and had "no more business in the political affairs of Eastern Europe than Russia has in Latin America." Wallace ended the speech by calling on Americans "who look on this war-with-Russia talk as criminal foolishness…[to] carry our message direct to the people—even though we may be called communists because we dare to speak out."[29] Wallace was indeed fired as Commerce Secretary after giving the speech, and smeared as a Communist when he ran for President.

As part of the People's Songwriter collective that included Pete Seeger, Guthrie wrote a song called "I've Got to Know," in which he asked:

> Why do these war ships ride on my water?
> Why do these bombs fall down from the skies?
> Where is my food, my soap, and my warm clothes?
> I've got to know, friend, I've got to know.
>
> Why can't my two hands get a good paying job?
> Why did your cop kill that trade union worker!
> I'd like to know, folks, I'd like to know.[30]

Guthrie considered this composition a "Henry Wallace song": "Henry walked around the world asking folks the same questions," he sang, and that was what was "needed he said to save our union and the human race" from war and nuclear Armageddon. In "Henry Wallace Man," Guthrie lamented that he had

> felt bad when Truman drove Henry from his seat,
> The Senate bunch and the Congress gang, they call you silly names,
> Because you worked your fields of peace, and not in their gambling games
>
> You wanted peace with the Russians, and you wanted all colors free.[31]

As we enter another era of confrontation, we should remember the humane, peace-loving spirits of Guthrie and Wallace. If they were around

today, they would no doubt be alarmed by the obsession with Russia, the poisonous rhetoric in Washington, and the renewed threat of nuclear war. And Guthrie would also likely remind us that the main beneficiaries of the New Cold War will be the arms merchants and Wall Street bankers. The Cold War was a global disaster for all involved; we should do everything in our power to avoid repeating that history today.

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20. Richard Goldhurst, *The Midnight War* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1978), 153; Graves, *America's Siberian Adventure*, 227, 236, 265–66; Stewart, *The White Armies of Russia*, 180.

21. Goldhurst, *The Midnight War*, 192–95; Robert J. Maddox, *The Unknown War with Russia* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1977), 83. The "little" war board was headed by Bernard Baruch of the War Industries Board, Vance C. McCormack, head of the War Trade Board, and Edward N. Hurley, chairman of the U.S. Shipping Board.

22. Capt. Joel H. Moore, Lieut. Harry H. Mead, and Lieut. Lewis E. Jahns, *The History of the American Expedition Fighting the Bolsheviki*, (Nashville: Battery, 2003 [1920]), 109; Cuhady, *Archangel*, 142, 153.

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30. Woody Guthrie, "I've Got to Know," Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

31. Woody Guthrie, "Henry Wallace Man," Woody Guthrie Archive, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Guthrie would go on to write songs critical of the Korean War that foreshadowed the New Left critique of the U.S. war in Vietnam.