

A Gun to Our Head?

American Imagination of the Russian Character Since 1946

By
Jason Denaburg

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors requirements for
the Department of American Studies

Dr. Cotten Seiler, Supervisor
Dr. Jerry Philogene, Reader
Dr. Sharon O'Brien, Reader
Dr. Eric Vazquez, Reader

May 10, 2016

On September 14, 2013, Fox News personality Bill O'Reilly asked Michael Waller, author of *Secret Empire: The KGB in Russia Today*, if he believed that Russian president Vladimir Putin was “actively trying to embarrass the USA to get favor at home.” The question sparked the following exchange:

O'Reilly: So the more...he spits in the face of America, the more popular he gets at home?

Waller: ...Yes, he's getting a lot of popularity by standing up to the United States because Russians as a whole have an inferiority complex now that they're not a superpower, and they have this great power pretension that Putin plays into.

O'Reilly: But do the Russians know enough to say well, you know...we're backing the bad guys?

Waller: Well, first, Russians are accustomed to backing the bad guys. We like to...remind ourselves that they were our allies in World War II. You've got to remember, Putin's buddy Stalin started World War II as an ally of Hitler. So, one thing we don't do is we don't teach history back to the Russians and we certainly don't call Russia out on its misbehavior.

O'Reilly: Do you feel that Russia is an enemy of the United States or is it just playing a game?

Waller: Well, if someone had a gun to your head, would he be your enemy or playing a game?"¹

This exchange exemplifies the enduring cultural construction of Russia and Russians in the United States (US) by popular culture, social science, and the state. As Waller's grim question indicates, many Americans have historically considered Russia *the* – not merely *an* – enemy of the US, one that threatens its very existence.

Knowledge production about the “Russian national character,” a trans-historical construct that has evolved in constant opposition to its American counterpart since the late 19th century, informs popular perceptions of Russia as the enemy. The Russian character, according to

¹ You Tube, September 14, 2013, “Bill O'Reilly: Is Putin Dominating Obama?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI85WhgDTRA>

popular and academic sources, is malleable, but nevertheless coheres around two essential characteristics: threatening and inferior. While Waller's understanding of the Russian character shapes his belief that Russia holds a gun to the nation's head, it also convinces him that Putin might pull the trigger.

Through its representations of the Russian character, popular culture generates knowledge about Russia in the US. Most Americans² have never been to Russia or met Russians, meaning that their understandings of Russia come from informative apparatuses such as mass media and educational institutions. However, ideas engendered by popular culture permeate each of those fields and significantly influence the knowledge they produce. This is especially true in the case of knowledge about Russia. From the moment of its inception in 1881, "imagination"³ of Russia in the US has developed in unison with popular culture, becoming more predominant in US society as technologies for disseminating information have advanced. For this reason knowledge of Russia has always been popular, even when articulated by ostensibly autonomous sources such as social scientists, journalists, economists and military experts.

In this paper I examine popular representations of the Russian character to prove its durability. By explicating Russia's historical ebb and flow between being imagined as an omnipresent threat to the US and on the cusp of becoming American, I argue the primacy of two Russian characteristics in the American imagination: threatening and inferior. These seemingly inherent Russian traits have always been juxtaposed against American characteristics, making them essential to the construction of the American character. Through frequent comparison,

² I use the term "Americans" in this paper solely for convenience. By "Americans," I mean United States citizens and others living in the United States who participate in the imagination of Russia and Russians.

³ In this paper, I refer to cultural representation of Russia as "imagination," borrowing the term from Kimberly Williams' book *Imagining Russia: A Feminist Perspective of U.S.-Russian Relations*. I often use the verbs "imagine" and "represent" interchangeably.

Russia's inferior and threatening attributes have created a superior and benevolent⁴ American character. In this sense, the cultural work the Russian character does makes it an indispensable foil for the US. It constructs American national identity and informs (and is informed by) US foreign policy, creating problems that foreign policy attempts to (but never quite does) solve. When American imagination functions most effectively, it represents Russia as an impending threat and Russians as indisputably inferior. Although an imaginary character cannot point a gun, it can persuade those imagining that Russians are willing to harm the US, in turn requiring a vigorous national defense. Imagining Russians as inferior constructs a corresponding superior American character, and implies that Americans not only can but should counter Russia. For over a century, this characterization of Russia and Russians has justified a steady expansion of US power across the globe.

To explain how imagining an enemy affects a nation, I consult Carl Schmitt's theory of the political enemy and Corey Robin's writing on Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime. Schmitt posits, "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."⁵ The "friend-enemy distinction" describes the relationship between two "fighting collectivities," what we call nation-states today. Much like the theory of a cultural "Other" states, having a political enemy is essential for the generation of meaning and mission on the national level. According to Schmitt, a political enemy "is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of

⁴ I borrow "benevolent" from Melani McAlister, who uses the term in her book *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* to describe the way in which the US represented its "super" power during the cold war. While benevolent signified a positive exercise of power, it implied that the US had an instinctive understanding of how to wield its power more capably than the Soviet Union, or any other nation. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (London: University of California Press, Ltd, 2005), 43-83.

⁵ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.

men...becomes public by virtue of such a relationship.”⁶ In democracies, which intersperse state and social affairs, the enemy can “exist theoretically and practically” without societal influences.⁷

However, the friend-enemy distinction does draw upon social affairs (religious, cultural, economic, legal, and scientific) for support, and when it does, Schmitt believes that the state becomes “total.” In this sense, total means all-encompassing or universal, not totalitarian, because various social (moral, religious, etc.) causes can become political if they categorize people “according to friend and enemy.”⁸ A total state is characterized by,

“The most vigorous penetration of all societal spheres by the state for the general purpose of winning for the entirety of the state all vital energies of the people”⁹...In actuality it is the total state which no longer knows anything absolutely nonpolitical, the state which must do away with the depoliticalizations of the nineteenth century and which in particular puts an end to the principle that the apolitical economy is independent of the state and that the state is apart from the economy.”¹⁰

A nation becomes a total state when it channels its citizens’ “vital energies” in support of a political agenda. Once a society fully embraces this agenda, it necessarily accepts and reproduces dominant perceptions of the enemy.

According to Schmitt, “Each participant¹¹ is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence.”¹² Here Schmitt’s theory of the total state intersects with

⁶ Schmitt also explains, “The enemy in the political sense need not be hated personally, and in the private sphere only does it make sense to love one’s enemy, i.e., one’s adversary. The Bible quotation...certainly does not mean that one should love and support the enemies of one’s own people.” Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 29.

⁷ Schmitt states, “The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible.” Ibid., 27.

⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁹ Rudolf Smend, *Verfassung und Verfassungsrecht* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1928), 97, note 2, quoted in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 25.

¹⁰ Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 25.

¹¹ Participant in society, which we can take to mean a citizen.

¹² Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27.

Burke's concept of the sublime, which reasons "that if the self is to survive and flourish it must be aroused by an experience more vital and bracing than pleasure or enjoyment."¹³ Corey Robin explains, "Paradoxically...in the face of the sublime, the self is annihilated, occupied, crushed, overwhelmed; in the face of the sublime, the self is heightened, aggrandized, magnified...it is this contradiction, the oscillation between wild extremes, that generates a strong and strenuous sense of self."¹⁴ During the cold war and in the present day (as O'Reilly and Waller's conversation indicates), the Russian threat has supplied this experience to many Americans. Burke's theory of what the sublime induces resembles Schmitt's vision of an enemy spurring a nation's "vital energies" into full swing. The sublime facilitates the enemy's incursion into all social affairs and by doing so, makes any and all resources available for the total state. Most importantly, "Burke understood that if violence were to retain its sublimity, it had to remain a possibility...real, as opposed to imagined violence...made its antagonists familiar to each other...making things drab and dreary."¹⁵ This nuance clarifies how and why Waller equated Russia's nuclear arsenal to a gun pointed at the US' head: because the mutually assured destruction of nuclear war has restricted violence between the US and Russia to the realm of imagination, rendering it a sublime experience.

To explain how various cultural sources create and maintain an image of Russia as inferior and threatening to the US, I employ Antonio Gramsci's theories of hegemony and hegemonic apparatuses. Hegemony describes a system of ideologies legitimated by structures and institutions (hegemonic apparatuses) that "organize and articulate popular consent for practices in education, politics, culture, and other social spheres." Television shows,

¹³ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 223.

¹⁴ Ibid., 224.

¹⁵ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 244.

universities, churches, magazines, local news networks and publishing groups all count as participants in hegemonic knowledge production, because they establish “accepted practices through sheer repetition.” Gramsci understood that popular culture has a primacy amongst hegemonic apparatuses, because in a modern capitalist state civil society and government are intertwined, and accepted or “dominant” practices and ideas directly influence or “lead” government.¹⁶ In this paper I assert that popular knowledge of the Russian character works within hegemonic apparatuses to collectively establish concepts and beliefs about Russia that inform how Americans understand themselves and guide how the US acts abroad.

To outline the historical formula for culturally constructing Russia as threatening and inferior to the US, my project engages with a broad range of American popular texts, including literature, TV shows, photographs, major films, magazine articles, speeches, editorial cartoons and Internet memes. I analyze how these sources have generated knowledge in the US about the Russian character since 1881 and pay close attention to the parallel construction of the American character. I start by briefly discussing the roots of American imaginings in the late 19th century before examining representations of the Russian character in three key eras: 1946-1990, 1990-2001, and 2007-present. In each era, I examine popular representations of the Russian character in the context of a contemporary political doctrine, which I draw from government related texts. The doctrines (and documents) for 1946-1990, 1990-2001, and 2007-present are the containment of communism (National Security Council document 68), the democratization and liberalization of Russia (Freedom and Support Act), and “the new world order” (George H.W. Bush’s 1991 State of the Union Address), respectively.

¹⁶ Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2001), 39-43.

My project draws from the work of four scholars: Victoria I. Zhuravleva, David S. Foglesong, Melani McAlister and Kimberly A. Williams. Foglesong and Zhuravleva unveil the origins of American imagination of the Russian character at the turn of the 20th century, revealing how representations of Russia have historically distinguished between the Russian people and their government, romanticizing the former and vilifying the latter.¹⁷ Zhuravleva also discloses that in the early 1900s, Americans imagined Russia as a simultaneously “evil empire” and a nation on the verge of democratization.¹⁸ This original flexibility in the American imagination representations of Russia testifies to the historical durability of the Russian character, as it has evidently always been capable of adapting to fit contemporary US interests. Throughout this paper, I borrow their methodology of examining the “Othering” of Russia in American popular culture in order to isolate and define the American character.

In this paper I emulate McAlister’s book *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* and its model for examining the relationship between cultural representations of the Middle East and US foreign policy towards the region. However, my focus on the Russian character and Russia’s historical fluctuation between being the foremost enemy and a junior partner of the US differentiates our studies. I am indebted to McAlister for her explication of benevolent supremacy, which factors heavily into my discussion of the American character and US foreign policy during the cold war.

My discussion of imagination of Russia from 1990-2001 relies heavily upon Williams’ book *Imagining Russia: A Feminist Perspective of U.S.-Russian Relations*, specifically her

¹⁷ Representations exclusively placed blame for Russian “backwardness” on the Russian government, a point that I return to in the final section of this paper, titled “The ‘Supreme Leader.’” David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”: The Crusade for a “Free Russia” Since 1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 112.

¹⁸ Victoria Ivanovna Zhuravleva, “Anti-Jewish violence in Russia and the American “mission for freedom” at the turn of the twentieth century,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 40, no. 1 (2010), 43.

assertion of five “gendered Russian imaginaries” upon which the narrative of post-cold war American triumphalism was predicated. I also reaffirm her claim that US policymakers construed Russia as threatening during one of the weakest periods in its history in my discussion of two widely popular films.

In this paper, I trace the historical evolution of the Russian character in the American imagination, revealing the various inferior traits Russians have embodied and “guns” Russia has aimed at the US. I begin with the initial vilification and romanticization of Russia from 1881-1905, when Russia endangered US interests in the far-east. Passing over the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and World War II,¹⁹ I examine how starting in 1946, imagination of the Russian character as *the* sublime enemy that threatened the American “way of life” transformed the US into a total state. In the second half of my discussion of the cold war, I analyze how popular culture colonized modernization theory, deploying its terminology to represent Russians under Soviet rule as especially inferior to Americans. From there, I review how representations of Russia and Russians as inferior and threatening to Americans and the “new world order” immediately before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to a popular narrative of American triumphalism, which has continued ever since. Lastly, I investigate the return of Russia as an enemy of the US in 2008 and how current representations of Russia’s threat to the US economy continue to progress toward reimagining Russia as the sublime.

The “United States of Russia”²⁰

¹⁹ I skip over this time period because imagination deployed several contradictory narratives, including opposite portrayals of the Bolsheviks and extremely friendly representations of the USSR during World War II. The standard set by popular culture during the early years of the cold war is most germane to my study, as it was then that Russia enable the US to fully capitalize on the nation’s energies and resources to expand. For more on imagination of Russia from 1917-1946, see Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 34-107.

²⁰ Referenced by Zhuravleva, “Anti-Jewish violence in Russia,” 46, used by Foglesong as a title for one of his chapters in *The American Mission*. Coined by William Walling: Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 41.

According to David Foglesong, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 marks a shift in American attitudes towards Russia from considering it “a distant, friendly power and an agent...of the Christian civilizing mission” to an evil “imaginary twin’ for the United States.”²¹ By violently disposing Alexander II, who “was reportedly on the verge of allowing a parliament,” assassins sparked a dialogue in the US over Russia’s potential for “civilization.”²² The national debate pitted those who viewed the assassination as the Russian people expressing their desire for liberty and democracy against those who believed that Russia’s hopes for reaching modernity had perished with the Tsar. Regardless of which position Americans assumed, they universally desired liberty and “civilization” for Russia over chaos and barbarism, reflecting a yearning for what Victoria Zhuravleva calls, “The United States of Russia.”²³ In other words, American interest in Russia confined itself to the question of whether Russia could adopt American values, principles and practices.

Books, pamphlets, editorial cartoons in a variety of newspapers and magazines, letters, and speeches delivered by missionaries and activists in support of reform in Russia at the turn of the 20th century all depicted Russia as an “Other” or they “othered” Russia and Russians by representing them in binary opposition to the US and Americans. Binary oppositions perform a crucial task in the construction of meaning, as they enable us to identify what we *are* based on what we *are not*. The construction of identity is closely linked to representations of difference,²⁴ and for this reason, both Zhuravleva and Foglesong study how imagination of Russia and Russians in American popular culture revitalized American nationalism. Zhuravleva notes several binary oppositions between Russia and the US, including “light and darkness, civilization

²¹ Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 7-11.

²² *Ibid.*, 12-4.

²³ Zhuravleva, “Anti-Jewish violence in Russia,” 46.

²⁴ Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon, eds., *Representation* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2013), 215-69.

and barbarity, modernity and medievalism, democracy and authoritarianism, freedom and slavery, and the West and the Orient.” She also explains, “The Russian Other [helped define] the American Self,”²⁵ pointing out that ideas of the US as civilized and “modern” accompanied visions of Russia as “barbaric” and “medieval.” These binaries convinced Americans of their superiority and their “special role in a changing world.”²⁶

Simultaneous perceptions of Russia as “demonic” and “romantic” in the late 19th century reveal the historical versatility of American imagination. The recursive “sharp distinction between the Russian people and their government” undoubtedly signified ordinary Russians as backward (and therefore inferior), however, it also placed blame for their supposed backwardness squarely on the Russian government.²⁷ Many of the villainous traits that American imaginings assigned to the tsars and later to the Soviets were contingent upon a romantic characterization of the Russian peasantry, whose suffering enhanced descriptions of Russian leaders as evil. Romantic visions of the Russian people captured their potential to transgress their sorry, backward state and become like the US, and as a result, they encouraged American entrepreneurs to reconsider the significance of US-Russian relations.

Foglesong clarifies, “Underlying such rethinking was a rising sense that backward Russia, rich in resources but hampered by inefficient agriculture, inept government, oppressive police, and medieval religion, badly needed American help.”²⁸ While conceptualizing ordinary Russians as innocent and helpless construed Russian leaders as evil, it also implied that American democratic and capitalist practices could somehow improve them. Romanticizing Russians therefore both intimated the superiority of the American character and provided an

²⁵ Zhuravleva, “Anti-Jewish violence in Russia,” 44.

²⁶ Ibid., 45.

²⁷ Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 112.

²⁸ Ibid., 11.

opportunity to demonstrate its superiority through the expansion of American markets and beliefs. For example,

“South Carolina businessman Alexander Hume Ford dreamed about the ‘regeneration’ of Russian agriculture by American machines, missionary Ludwig Conradi declared that Russia was an ‘immense field’ for evangelism, historian Henry Adams envisioned the Americanization of Siberia as a project worthy of American’s great energies, and novelist Mark Twain imagined buying Siberia in order to ‘start a republic.’”²⁹

From the very beginning then, American imagination has cohered around Russia’s potential to become like the US. This required both the formulation of what the US stood for and the condemnation of the Russian government for treating its people barbarically. This practice epitomizes an inherent contradiction of American popular culture, because emphasizing tsarist violence against Russian Jews ignored the litany of lynchings and other barbarous violence against racial minorities in the US.³⁰

American imagination of Russia at the turn of the 20th century also exacerbated the first political conflict in US-Russian relations. Russia had opposed the US’ proposition for an “Open Door” trade policy in Asia, concerning US diplomats and entrepreneurs seeking to expand American markets and influence. Foglesong notes that not long afterwards, perceptions of Russia as a political menace emerged: “Key US officials and intellectual advisers feared that Russia was becoming a formidable industrial rival and a powerful threat to American commercial interests.”³¹ Popular culture reacted by blaming the Russian national character for Russia’s political agenda. Zhuravleva explains, “American cartoonists began a competition in ingenuity with the goal of underlining the two-faced nature of the Russian imperial government

²⁹ Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 10.

³⁰ Zhuravleva, “Anti-Jewish violence in Russia,” 47.

³¹ Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 10.

and outlining the ‘Russian threat’ to US interests in the Far East.”³² Editorial cartoonists consistently sketched the Russian bear (a not so subtle signifier of Russia’s primitivism) and tsar obstructing or foiling Uncle Sam and his European counterparts in their “civilized” pursuit of free trade. Representations of primitive Russia and its barbaric tsar antagonized American observers and bolstered their support for US expansionist policies. George Kennan, an American explorer of Russia (and the cold warrior’s uncle), “repeatedly juxtaposed American trading opportunity and tsarist inhumanity,” showing how, “Humanitarianism and self-interest could mingle in a drive to liberate and develop Russia.”³³ Regardless of whether popular representations romanticized or demonized the Russian people, they constructed a parallel (and superior) American character and informed Americans about global US interests.

Zhuravleva’s and Foglesong’s work reveals how American imagination coalesced at the turn of the twentieth century to impress the Russian character’s threatening and inferior qualities upon American observers. The simultaneous demonization of Russian leadership and romanticization of Russian peasants facilitated impassioned notions of liberating Russians and modernizing Russia, conversely constructing an international identity and purpose for the US. Foglesong encapsulates the cultural work imagination of Russia accomplished, writing, “The vilification of the tsarist empire went hand in hand with the extension of the American mission...Russia had come to be an important foil for the definition of American identity.”³⁴

The “Perfect Vehicle”: Soviet Communism and the Total State

In 1946, George F. Kennan, the deputy head of mission in the US embassy in Moscow, wired an 8,000 word telegram to US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. To justify the record

³² Victoria Ivanovna Zhuravleva, *Understanding Russia in the United States: Images and Myths 1881-1914* (Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2012), 465.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

length of his message, Kennan implied a sense of dire significance, claiming that a shorter telegram “would be a dangerous degree of oversimplification,” and that the “questions involved are of...urgent importance.”³⁵ In it, he wrote of the Soviet Union,

“We have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure.”³⁶

Kennan’s “long telegram” relayed a grim reality to the Department of State: the US now faced the greatest threat in its history, one that endangered the existence of both the nation and the American “way of life.” His entirely unambiguous message left no room for appeasing the Soviets. The US would need to resist this maniacal force in every way that it could, or else it would cease to exist. Four years later, Kennan’s claims about the Soviet threat and recommendations for how to handle it manifested themselves in official US policy, appearing in a top-secret document titled National Security Council document 68 (NSC-68).

NSC-68, also known as “the most famous unread paper of its era,”³⁷ became “a blueprint for articulating [cold war] policies to the lower level bureaucracy and the public.”³⁸ By 1950, popular culture had colonized nearly all other forms of knowledge production in the US, decidedly imbuing government officials, filmmakers, journalists and editors of popular magazines with impelling notions of an inferior and extremely threatening Russian character.³⁹ This meant that preexisting ideologies about the Russian character had informed Kennan and Paul Nitze, the author of NSC-68,⁴⁰ however, their respective texts also rearticulated the essential

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall* (Moscow, Russia, 1946), 1.

³⁶ U.S. DOS *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall*, 14.

³⁷ Gaddis Smith, *Dean Acheson*, quoted in Melani McAlister, 50.

³⁸ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 51.

³⁹ Ron Robin, *The Making of a Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4.

⁴⁰ Jerry W. Sanders, *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 9.

threatening and inferior Russian traits to fit the ideological climate of the cold war. In addressing the nature of the Soviet threat, NSC-68 sampled Kennan's logic, utilizing the Russian character to reconstruct its American counterpart to thrive during the forty-four year ideological struggle ahead. It reasoned, "The implacable purpose of the slave state to eliminate the challenge of freedom has placed the two great powers at opposite poles. It is this fact which gives the present polarization of power the quality of crisis."⁴¹ By placing the two nations in a familiar binary opposition between freedom and slavery and attributing to Russians an insatiable desire to "eliminate freedom," NSC-68 continued the practice of representing Russians as inferior (due to their enslavement) and threatening (due to their insatiable desires). At the turn of the 20th century, the threatening and inferior Russian character merely irritated American observers. In 1950s, cold warriors began imagining Russia as a monstrous global menace. In the early years of the cold war, the Russian character no longer offended American sensibilities, it endangered American existence.

In this section I argue that the cold war marks a climactic moment in the historical representation of Russia, the moment when Americans fervidly imagined Russia as the sublime. In this climate of conflict from 1946-1990, representations of the Russian character permeated the long telegram, NSC-68, popular films, magazine articles and travel literature. Cold warriors vigorously vilified the Russian character for its inherent insecurity, primitivism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, in turn glorifying the American character for its rationalism, intelligence, morality and freedom. Adhering to this formula, cultural texts collectively redefined US interests as global, US power as benevolent and supreme, and Americans as intrinsically

⁴¹ U.S. National Security Council, *A Report to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*, NSC-68 (Washington, DC, 1950), 7, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf.

superior. This last achievement cultivated support amongst the public for the construction and maintenance of the US as a total state and a global superpower.

In her book *Epic Encounters*, Melani McAlister asserts, “Foreign policy becomes a site for defining the nations and its interests.” Echoing Benedict Anderson, she continues to explain that “nations are ‘imagined communities’ rather than natural entities, and as such they depend on cultural articulation and construction.”⁴² As my close reading of the long telegram and NSC-68 will show, imagination of Russia as *the* enemy framed global US power as a “benevolent supremacy.” Sensing the potential for international hegemony, the US imagined itself as ideologically between European colonialists and what it considered Soviet imperialists. It endorsed “a political construct of U.S.-dominated liberty”, conceiving itself at the head of “a well-ordered international family.”⁴³ Benevolent supremacy explains the US’ strategy of “spreading freedom” across the world, which in practical terms meant entering into alliances and economic partnerships abroad in which the US would always comprise the dominant party. While McAlister examines the role of biblical epics in cultivating support for this ideology, cold war representations of Russia equally contributed to its success.

The long telegram and NSC-68 both address the nature of the Soviet threat with absolute certainty. The final sentence of section III of NSC-68, titled “Fundamental Design of the Kremlin,” read, “The United States...is the principal enemy whose integrity and vitality must be subverted or destroyed by one means or another if the Kremlin is to achieve its fundamental design.” Two pages later it restated, “...the peace the Soviet Union seeks is the peace of total conformity to Soviet policy.”⁴⁴ These statements framed conflict between the US and USSR as an inevitable apocalyptic struggle. They also constructed US participation in the cold war as

⁴² Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 43-83.

⁴⁴ NSC-68, 6-8.

reluctant, purporting that general Russian hatred of American ideologies, specifically of capitalism and freedom, forced the US to engage the USSR. In spite of this logic, NSC-68 had an extremely narrow description of exactly why the Soviet Union posed a previously unimaginable threat to the US. “The Soviet world can do more with less – it has a lower standard of living, its economy requires less to keep it functioning and its military machine operates effectively with less elaborate equipment and organization.”⁴⁵ This vision of spartan Soviets determined to destroy the American way of life and break international US authority “made clear that the stakes [of the cold war] were the allegiances and values of the rest of the world...the overall goal of the argument was to marshal support...for increasing the U.S. military budget threefold.”⁴⁶ By representing Russians as hell-bent on destroying the US no matter the cost, NSC-68 imagined the USSR as a threat to the US’ global interests and influence, manufacturing a need for the “development of [US] military and economic strength.”⁴⁷

Although NSC-68 and Kennan’s telegram identified the Soviet Union as the tangible threat to the US, both expressed a belief that its Russian essence made the USSR a real danger. Describing Russian aggression as “inescapable,” NSC-68 named Soviet government, “The inheritor of Russian imperialism,” continuing to explain, “Persistent crisis, conflict and expansion are the essence of the Kremlin’s militancy.”⁴⁸ NSC-68 drew directly from Kennan’s telegram, specifically from his claim that Russian leaders “seek security only in...total destruction of a rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it.”⁴⁹ In fact, Kennan singled out “an instinctive Russian sense of insecurity,” not Marxist ideology, as the driving

⁴⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁶ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 51.

⁴⁷ NSC-68, 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ U.S. DOS, *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall*, 6.

force behind the USSR's global ambitions. In his mind, timeless "basic inner-Russian necessities" caused the Soviet threat, and Marxism merely served as "a perfect vehicle" for,

"That increase of military and police power of Russian state, that isolation of Russian population from [the] outside world, and that fluid and constant pressure to extend limits of Russian police power which are together the natural and instinctive urges of Russian rulers. Basically this is only the steady advance of uneasy Russian nationalism, a centuries old movement in which conceptions of offense and defense are inextricably confused."⁵⁰

Attributing Soviet policy to "natural and instinctive urges," the telegram and NSC-68 revived 19th century representations of Russia as barbaric and primitive, illustrating the trans-historical nature of the Russian character. According to these analyses, the "Russianness" of the USSR, not its atomic arsenal, massive territory nor its communist ideology classified it as lethal threat.

Kennan's telegram and NSC-68 manipulated the Russian threat to thrust the US into an entirely new international political position. The two documents stipulated that in order to effectively combat the USSR, the US needed to defend freedom worldwide as a global superpower. NSC-68 expressed this view in the clearest terms possible: "It is only by practical affirmation, abroad as well as at home, of our essential values, that we can preserve our own integrity, in which lies the real frustration of the Kremlin...this fact imposes on us, in our own interests, the responsibility of world leadership."⁵¹ Through imaginings of Russia, there emerged in this moment "a new standard of broadly defined and global American 'interests' under the rubric of supporting the independence of 'free peoples' fighting subjugation."⁵² The logic communicated in these documents elicited a strong reaction from the US government, which was the authors' exact intention. "The document was designed, in the words of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, to 'bludgeon the mass mind of 'top government' so that not only could the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵¹ NSC-68, 9.

⁵² McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 50.

President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out.”⁵³ President Truman and other “top government” officials indeed adhered to these recommendations for decades to come, maintaining the economic and military capabilities of a global superpower.

In addition to a commitment from top government, the success of cold war containment policy and economic expansion depended upon a nationwide consensus of Russia as threatening to the American “way of life.” A variety of cultural texts reinforced such conceptions during the early years of the cold war. An article in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, a series of publications in *LIFE Magazine*, plus Hollywood and short government films communicated the tenets of the long telegram and NSC-68 to the public, regurgitating their representations of Russia as the enemy. Together, these texts accomplished the cultural work of positioning Americans as essential participants in the nation’s cold war struggle. Readers’ ability to participate hinged upon their identity as Americans and as members of the west, a newer component of the American character that placed them in league with Europe and in historical opposition to Russia. By reproducing an inferior and threatening Russian character, popular culture constructed new conceptions of the nation and of American identity specific to the cold war, cultivating broad support for contemporary US policies.

The construction of Russians and the Soviet Union as the sublime exacerbated the larger discourse of postwar American exceptionalism. Historian John Jeffries writes,

“In 1945 the United States had been the colossus of the globe, its confidence buoyed not only by its enormous military, technological, and economic strength but also by the felt success of the double wartime triumph over the Axis and the Great Depression. The onset of the Cold War added to that a clear, to many Americans an ennobling, sense of mission.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁴ John W. Jeffries, “The ‘Quest for National Purpose’ of 1960,” *American Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1978), 452.

This “sense of mission” immediately manifested itself in postwar foreign policy, most recognizably in the Marshall plan. Through its efforts to rebuild Europe, the US vindicated its benevolence and superpower status, as well as demonstrated a reason for expanding its economy and military. McAlister clarifies the effect of the Marshall plan, explaining that “foreign policy itself is a meaning-making activity, and one that has helped to frame our ideas of nationhood and national interest.”⁵⁵ However, while foreign policy frames national interests, the specific cold war sense of mission still depended upon cultural sources for survival.

After a brief streak of films depicting Russians as friendly people and worthy allies,⁵⁶ Hollywood initiated a “demonization of the Soviet military and of the Soviet/Communist way of life.”⁵⁷ Movies greatly dramatized the Russian threat during the cold war and made it visible to millions of Americans. Films such as *Invasion U.S.A.* (1952) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) depicted the nightmare scenarios of NSC-68 and Kennan’s telegram, and achieved popularity precisely because they sensationalized the perceived Russian threat. The trailer for *Invasion U.S.A.* transposed the words, “SEE NEW YORK DISAPPEAR! SEE SEATTLE BLASTED! SEE SAN FRANCISCO IN FLAMES! SEE PARATROOPS TAKE OVER THE CAPITAL!” over clips of all these catastrophes occurring.⁵⁸ The trailer and the film communicated the Russian threat to the American public in extremely plain terms. Russia had the capability and the gumption to invade and destroy the biggest cities in the US. *The Manchurian Candidate* imagined a similarly catastrophic scenario in which an American politician controlled by his Communist spy of a wife nearly becomes president. A mistake by an

⁵⁵ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 5.

⁵⁶ This took place during World War II. See Harlow Robinson, *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood’s Russians: Biography of an Image* (Hanover, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2007), 115-46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁸ YouTube, February 17, 2007, “Invasion USA – Trailer (1952)”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNZaMm5q_BA

American veteran previously brainwashed by the Russians to serve as their assassin prevents the plan from succeeding, but nonetheless, audiences across the US received a clear image of how the Russians were deviously plotting to destroy their way of life using overt and covert methods.⁵⁹

Through film, Americans extensively visualized the threat posed by the USSR and individual Russians. Perhaps no series better represents this process than the James Bond franchise, which originated and ascended to legendary popularity in the US during the cold war. As Katerina Lawless explains, Bond films contributed to the construction of the Russian character in a number of ways.

“Classic’ Bond films implicitly [identify] Russia with military or nuclear power, and, consequently, with the danger posed to the rest of the world. Repeated references to USSR and the Soviet Union maintain clear boundaries between the West and the East, notifying the audience that Russia belongs to the ‘other’ side. The extensive mention of *KGB* depicts Russia as a severely controlled state with totalitarian regime, which *nobody leaves*. The sense of brutal control and poor standards of living is retained through the desire of Russian characters to *defect* to the West (sic).”⁶⁰

The signification of Russia as a global threat and an Other in cold war Bond films underscored the stakes of the ongoing struggle for the allegiances of third world nations, making Bond a key contributor to the ideology of benevolent supremacy. The series’ imagination justified manpower and infrastructure needed to enable the US to act like Bond, who literally countered the Russians in every corner of the globe. Furthermore, Bond’s reinforcement of Russia as inherently authoritarian conversely assigned value to democracy, free-markets, and other institutions that characterized the American way of life. Bond films therefore repeated the dual threat Russia posed to the US as a nation and to American values and practices. As Harlow

⁵⁹ *The Manchurian Candidate*, DVD, directed by John Frankenheimer (Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 1962).

⁶⁰ Katerina Lawless, “Constructing the ‘Other’: Construction of Russian Identity in the Discourse of James Bond films,” *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 9, no. 2: 92-3.

Robinson recounts, “For the first time in American history, Russia came to be seen as our primary military, economic, and ideological adversary, Enemy Number One. In the American popular consciousness, Russians ‘became inseparable from the Soviet system.’”⁶¹ In this sense, the Bond series exemplifies how popular film reimagined Russia as the sublime during the cold war, facilitating the establishment of a total state.

Films produced outside of Hollywood accentuated the Russian threat by making it a factor in every waking moment of American life. A famous short film remembered by many who lived through the 1950s and ‘60s is “Duck and Cover,” an “official civil defense film released in 1951.”⁶² “Duck and Cover” instructed viewers on how to stay safe in the event of a nuclear attack no matter where they were, therefore succeeding in establishing the Russian threat as omnipresent. “Sometimes,” the narrator intones, “And this is very, very important...sometimes, the bomb might explode without any warning.” It shows children curling under their desks at school and leaping off bicycles to use a roadside curb as cover. In another scene, an atomic explosion disrupts a family picnic, and in another, a farm worker dives under his tractor for shelter, driving home the point that the bomb threatens everyone, everywhere, at every moment. The short never explicitly mentions Russians or the USSR, and it never needed to. As the only other nuclear armed nation at the time, blame for an endangered American society rested squarely on Russian shoulders. “Duck and Cover” calls attention to connections between popular knowledge, “official” apparatuses, and the construction of a total state. Although the government produced it, the film dramatically impacted the daily lives of many Americans. Visions of mundane and pleasant activities jeopardized by the bomb and

⁶¹ Robinson, *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood’s Russians*, 149; Michael J. Strada and Harold R. Troper, *Friend or Foe: Russians in American Film and Foreign Policy, 1933-1991* quoted in Robinson, *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood’s Russians*, 149.

⁶² Youtube, July 11, 2009, “Duck And Cover (1951) Bert The Turtle,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKqXu-5jw60>.

Russia's apparent willingness to use it fundamentally altered their worldviews, forcing them to think about the incessant threat facing the US, which could reasonably be called the sublime.

An article published in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* in 1947 titled, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" further detailed the connections between popular culture and seemingly authoritative sources of knowledge. Authored by Kennan himself,⁶³ the article reiterates the Russian character traits originally articulated in his telegram. His admission of "psychological analysis" in the first paragraph highlights the constructed nature of his argument and the role popular knowledge played in forming that argument. Kennan had no expertise in psychology; he actually deployed his own interpretation of how Russian history affected the Soviets. Nonetheless, *Foreign Affairs* lent his argument credibility as he constructed Russia as a decidedly inferior sublime.

Similar to his telegram, Kennan discussed Russian history in relation to the "West," insisting upon Russia's historical distance from western societies. This maintained the characterization of Russians as lesser than westerners. "Their particular brand of fanaticism," Kennan explained, was a product of "the Russian-Asiatic world...unmodified by any of the Anglo-Saxon traditions of compromise."⁶⁴ The supposedly inherent insecurity of Russian leaders thus amounted to an inescapable consequence of Russian history, one that "must be understood and effectively countered."⁶⁵ Having already stated that the USSR intended to destroy capitalism worldwide, Kennan's narrative delegitimized any and all communist critiques of capitalist systems. It detached Soviet purpose from any sense of rationality, instead ascribing it to a historical Russian inability to compromise. This basic (and irrational) ideological appeal

⁶³ He used the pseudonym "X", which hints at the importance the government attached to public perceptions of foreign policy both because he wrote it and because he did so surreptitiously.

⁶⁴ George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947, 568. <https://shafr.org/sites/default/files/XArt.pdf>.

⁶⁵ George F. Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 566.

tacitly established readers of *Foreign Affairs* as inheritors of a superior historical trajectory and framed capitalism and “Anglo-Saxon traditions” as key components of that trajectory. Kennan therefore utilized the Russian character to entrench and expand American capitalism during the cold war.

In 1941, editor in chief of *LIFE Magazine* Henry Luce announced the arrival of a new “American century,” anticipating “American hegemony in a postwar global political economy.”⁶⁶ In 1960, he published a series of ten issues of *LIFE* featuring essays on the “National Purpose of the U.S.A.,” which he intended to serve “as a summons, of some urgency, to a national debate.”⁶⁷ Following the model set by NSC-68 and the long telegram, the *LIFE* series urged readers to consider the US’ purpose in the world through the lens of the Russian threat. James Jessup bemoaned nations that had “succumbed to ancient tyranny in its newest and most insidious guise, Communism,” and businessman David Sarnoff named Communism’s threat to freedom, “The paramount challenge of this epoch.”⁶⁸ By associating communism with tyranny, Jessup aligned Russia with one of the most evil concepts in the American national consciousness. The large majority of those familiar with American history understood tyranny as fundamentally contrary to American ideals. Paired with Sarnoff’s declaration, Soviet communism – here disparaged as a distinctly Russian phenomenon – represented the sublime on a political and ideological level. In this case, *LIFE* used the Russian character to define the national purpose as a dedication to the American capitalist way of life.

While the *LIFE* series directed readers to commit themselves to the US, the X article pointed to Russian inferiority as the reason the US would triumph over the USSR in the cold war. Kennan

⁶⁶ Wendy Kozol, *LIFE’ America: Family and Nation in Postwar Journalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 67.

⁶⁷ John K. Jessup et al., *The National Purpose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), v.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 14; 49.

professed that the US “must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena,” and should enact “a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians.” Containment would succeed precisely because of the characteristic insecurity of Russian leaders. Kennan suggested that the Communist party depended entirely upon coercion to achieve its goals, rendering its population “physically and spiritually tired.” Additionally, the “uncertainty” of the political climate and “precariously spotty” economy indicated that “the shadow of fear and compulsion” would eventually ruin the USSR.⁶⁹ The X article created a perception that the key to US victory lay in the weakness of Soviet will, a weakness caused by the characteristic brutality of Russian leaders.

No such weakness applied to the American character. On the contrary, the X article suggested that Americans possessed a superior capacity for intelligence, evident in Kennan’s claim that “only by intelligent long-range policies on the part of Russia’s adversaries” could the USSR be countered.⁷⁰ Russian diplomats’ “keen judge[ment] of human psychology” and their dangerous ability “to exploit...weakness” framed diplomacy with the USSR as a task for master negotiators.⁷¹ Although readers did not know “X’s” identity, they assumed this person had expansive knowledge of foreign policy and of Russia. However, Kennan actually showcased expansive knowledge of the Russian character, and dressed it up as his own diplomatic expertise. This lent US containment policy extra credibility as a brilliant answer to the weak yet menacing Russians, solidifying support for international US leadership. Even more importantly, the article implied that an inherent American superiority would ensure US victory. Kennan instructed

⁶⁹ Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 577-80.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 575.

⁷¹ Ibid., 575.

Americans to simply, “Measure up to [their] own best traditions and prove [themselves] worthy of preservation,” framing their participation as a “test of national quality.”⁷²

By the mid-1960s, the two superpowers had demarcated their respective spheres of influence abroad. The US had solidified its benevolent supremacy, and now focused on maintenance rather than expansion. Additionally, the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis encouraged the US and USSR to foster a less hostile relationship. Americans wanted reassurance that nuclear apocalypse would never happen, and found it in *détente*, which changed perceptions of the cold war from a mounting, inevitable conflict to a war of economic attrition. With new foreign policy objectives came updated representations of the enemy, yet the essential characterization of Russians as threatening and inferior continued. In the 1960s, a dominant discourse emerged that bolstered Kennan’s classification of Americans as more intelligent and capable than Russians: the discourse of modernity.

Modernization theory addressed the question of how “undeveloped” or “third world” societies progressed to “modernity.” It gain great currency in the US during the 1960s, as the US government tasked economists and sociologists with “advancing” the junior members of the US’ benevolent supremacy. In spite of the “failure” to modernize many third world countries (a fact made even clearer from our contemporary vantage point), Americans increasingly viewed economic and social vitality as advanced or “modern” qualities. Accordingly, modernity became a key facet of the American national character.

Modernization theory has roots in 19th century colonialism and has always been linked to theories of social evolution. An early strand of modernization theory was Social Darwinism, which replaced the paradigm of the Great Chain of Being with pseudoscientific explanations for the inherent superiority of European peoples, serving to justify western imperialism. Social

⁷² George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” 582.

Darwinists purported technology as evidence of the racial supremacy of western nations:

“Western industrial societies...were regarded by most writers (themselves of Western origin) as the highest known forms of civilization.”⁷³ Armed with this ex post facto “proof” of their supremacy, imperial powers undertook projects to “civilize” indigenous peoples, for example, the US in the Philippines. The racial/technological paradigm encouraged imperialists to view themselves as enlightened civilizers who could eliminate the “blockages in evolution” and remake the world in the image of western civilization.⁷⁴

Unlike their 19th century counterparts, 20th century theorists of modernization (or “modernizers”) emphasized the centrality of history and culture in modernism instead of race. After World War II, modernizers refuted racial explanations for underdevelopment, assuming “that all peoples not only could but would develop along the scientific industrial lines pioneered by the West.” They also “envisioned Africans and Asians – not westerners – as the main agents of the transformation of backward societies,”⁷⁵ prioritizing the acceptance of values and practices rather than race. Though technology remained essential to progress, cold war modernizers emphasized the ability of people to use it. Sociologist Marion Levy considered “rationality, universalism and functional specificity...necessary conditions for the efficient use of modern technology.”⁷⁶ In other words, the proper use technology required a modern (read: western) disposition, or as David Harrison puts it, “They’ would [need to] become more like ‘us.’”⁷⁷

⁷³ David Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization & Development* (London: Routledge, 1988), 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁵ Michael Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival of the Scientific and Technological Standards of Social Achievement and Human Worth,” in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Cold War*, ed. David C. Engerman et. al. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 35-6.

⁷⁶ Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization & Development*, 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

Whereas 19th century theorists preached a patient faith in “the naturalness and inevitability”⁷⁸ of undeveloped societies adopting western practices, early cold war modernizers displayed far less patience. NSC-68 mandated swift action, and modernization theory supplied a method to bring third world nations under the political and economic umbrella of the west while ideologically solidifying the US as the premier western modernizer. Michael E. Latham elaborates,

“How, [American theorists and policymakers] asked, could the United States defeat communism and create a global environment in which America’s liberal, capitalist, pluralist values would be most likely to survive and prosper? Modernization’s claim to accelerate the passage of decolonizing societies through a dangerous and destabilizing transition provided an appealing answer. Scientifically derived, modernization theory promised to be eminently useful: it would define the conditions for ‘take-off’ to begin, find the relevant lessons embedded in the American past, identify the essential levers of progress, and help policymakers manipulate them. For those who promoted and refined it, modernization itself became an ideology, a firmly held set of mutually reinforcing ideas about the ‘passing’ of traditional society, the integration of social, economic, and political change, and the opportunity for the United States to channel a ‘revolution of rising expectations.’”⁷⁹

Development projects comprised the “benevolent” aspect of benevolent supremacy, promising “progress” and prosperity under US supervision. While development enticed many third world nations, it also justified the massive international expenditure of US wealth to the American public. Development, as Latham argues above, fostered a safe environment for American values and promised to thwart communism before it reached the US. Of course, the ideology of modernization also convinced Americans of their intrinsic superiority, and positioned support for international development as an endorsement of their own supremacy.

Pointing to modernity as evidence of American superiority meant that modernizers defined “modern” traits as American traits. Indeed, they insisted that the US help third world

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁹ Michael E. Latham, “Introduction: Modernization, International History, and the Cold War World,” in *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Cold War*, ed. David C. Engerman et. al. (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 2.

nations implement American social and political ideologies, viewing “social mobility, expanding political participation, and the democratization of political institutions as measures of...modernity.”⁸⁰ In turn, these efforts caused the “modern v. traditional” binary to replace “civilized v. savage,” essentially rephrasing global supremacy in contemporary – and American – terms. Modernization became a discourse in itself during the cold war, as “The first, second third...worlds; postmodern, modern, traditional, primitive; mature, developing, underdeveloped – replaced the civilized/barbarian/savage scale that had long served as the standard.”⁸¹ It provided a prism through which Americans could discern their own superior traits and an international strategy. Thus, “Modernization theory...became a framework through which Americans defined their purposes.”⁸²

While they looked to Russia for an international strategy, Americans often measured foreign peoples to define themselves. Of course, defining others is an essential element of defining oneself. Postwar US power, stemming from its economy and military but especially from the global reach of its development projects, “structured the process of defining a rich variety of American – and ‘un-American’ – identities.”⁸³ Though theorists debated exactly how to modernize, they agreed that “traditional or ‘feudal’ beliefs, customs, and institutions were...impediments to the inevitable transformation of backward non-Western economies and societies.”⁸⁴ Adas writes, “Modernity is associated with rationality, empiricism, efficiency, and progressive change, tradition connotes fatalism, veneration for custom and the sacred, indiscipline, and stagnation.”⁸⁵ As Adas testifies, modernizers constructed third world

⁸⁰ Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival,” 36.

⁸¹ Ibid., 35.

⁸² Latham, “Introduction: Modernization, International History, and the Cold War World,” 8.

⁸³ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 4.

⁸⁴ Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival,” 39.

⁸⁵ Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival,” 38.

inhabitants as passive, backward, and primitive, but only in comparison to rational and efficient modern peoples, of whom Americans were the standard bearers. Thus, the “modern” component of the American character depended upon distinguishing itself from other traditional characters.

Though most traditional peoples represented in American popular culture lived in the third world, during the 1970s Russians entered the picture. *The Russians*, a book written by Hedrick Smith in 1976, exemplifies the evaluation of the Russian character through a lens of modernization. It highlights the “backwardness” permeating Soviet society through a subjective analysis of Russian behavior and characteristics, mirroring modernization theory’s focus on social impediments to progress. Smith wrote in the introduction, “Behind the mask of modernism, of missiles, jets and industrial technology, is concealed the imprint of centuries of Russian history of the structure of Soviet society and the habits and character of the Russian people.”⁸⁶ He measured the Russian character – implicitly and explicitly – against American ideals and practices, which he constructed as modern in opposition to traditional Russians. *The Russians* reinforced the notion that the driving force behind Soviet power was a historical Russian character, and thoroughly constructed that character as inferior. It reads as an inside story of the “real” Russians, made possible only by Smith’s subversion of Soviet attempts to prevent him from witnessing the real Russia.⁸⁷

From the many “truths” about Russians that Smith introduced, three – extreme nationalism, primitivism and instinctive subservience – stand out. He found none of them impressive or admirable, and viewed Russian nationalism as particularly disturbing. He

⁸⁶ Hedrick Smith, *The Russians* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Time Book Co., 1976), 8.

⁸⁷ Smith professes in his introduction, “It was very hard – though not impossible – to find out what they (Russians) thought about life and to get to know them personally. Mine was a unique experience.” The closing line of the introduction reads, “I had similar experiences – precisely the kind of contacts the KGB wanted to prevent.” This preface constructs Smith’s book not only as a rare (and authoritative) account of Russia and Russians, but also as information that the KGB (and therefore Soviet leadership) did not want Americans to read. Thus, from the very beginning of *The Russians*, Smith implies that Russians are conscious of the inferiority he observes and very much wish to hide it from Americans. Smith, *The Russians*, 14-22.

observed, “In almost any situation, [Russians] can take their patriotism straight and thrive on it.” In his mind, “The Russian sense of national moral superiority...seem[ed] a compensation for a deep-set national sense of inferiority toward the West.”⁸⁸ Whether expressed through pride in Russian victory in World War II or in the opinion that Russian women were the most beautiful in the world, to Smith, Russian nationalism embodied “blind patriotism.”⁸⁹ He classified this blind patriotism as “an instinctive, tribal-like, loyalty reflex,” and attributed it to the atavistic Russian character by explaining that Russians distinguish between “clan” and nation.⁹⁰ Smith connected the Russian term for blind patriotism (*Kvas patriotizm*, named after a popular drink) to primitivism, writing that the phrase perfectly represented “the earthy, peasantry, intensely Russian brand of patriotism.”⁹¹

In the 1970s, Smith and Americans in general likely did not consider Russia a candidate for modernization; they viewed it as the sublime enemy and the leader of the second world. However, *The Russians* unmistakably utilized modernization’s lexicon to construct Russians as a lesser people:

“If sentimentality is the counterpoint to Russian stoicism, then the folksy, traditional, peasant ways of Russians are the antithesis to the inflated rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism about the New Soviet Man. Not only are Russians easy-going, indolent, and disorganized rather than scientific, rational and efficient, but...they are lusty hedonists, devoted to such sensual pleasures as feasting, drinking and bathing.”⁹²

Smith’s use of “traditional” and “peasant” as adjectives for the “ways of Russians” epitomizes his characterization of Russians as primitive. In the US, “hedonism” and “indolence” had and still have stark, negative connotations about character that contradict American capitalist virtues. Smith implied here that traditional Russians were unable to handle the excess of modern society,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 312.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 309

⁹⁰ Ibid., 310.

⁹¹ Ibid., 309.

⁹² Smith, *The Russians*, 112-3.

as they “devoted” themselves to “sensual pleasures” instead of productive activities. In this regard, inferiority translates to an inability among Russians to handle the responsibilities of independent life under a free system of governance.⁹³ The fact that Smith found the folksy, traditional, peasant ways of Russians so remarkable attests to the prevalence of the “modern v. traditional” binary and its ability to construct American and un-American identities.

In Smith’s eyes, historically primitive and traditional Russian behavior instilled a tendency to obediently submit to power.⁹⁴ Russians’ “unquestioned acceptance of the yawning gulf between the Ruler and the Ruled” convinced Smith that Russia would likely never “undergo fundamental change.”⁹⁵ Russians simply lacked the desire to take control of their own destinies, an instinct that modernizers viewed as exclusive to “modern men.”⁹⁶ The final line of the 509-page book, incidentally a quote from Smith’s wife, captured the gist of *The Russians*: “So you see,” said Ann, “it’s nothing new. It was the same under the czars. They’re the same people.”⁹⁷ As Anne’s remark suggests, *The Russians* exemplifies a shift in the American imagination during the 1970s, when modernization theory influenced representations of Russia and Russians as inferior in a contemporary context. The Smiths also previewed American imagination during the 1990s by constructing Russians as politically passive and obedient. Similarly to the 1890s, this implied that Russians would need American help in order to “improve” themselves.

“The Nuclear Nightmare”: Imagining Russia After The Cold War

⁹³ Here Smith echoes a statement in NSC-68, which described democracy and freedom as the more difficult path.

⁹⁴ Smith, *The Russians*, 105

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 506-7.

⁹⁶ Adas, “Modernization Theory and the American Revival,” 38. He writes, “Two of the key criteria by which Alex Inkeles distinguished ‘Modern Men’ in six ‘developing’ countries in the mid-1960s were their belief in the efficacy of science and medicine (and a corresponding rejection of fatalism and passivity) and their insistence that people be ‘on time’ and ‘plan their affairs in advance.’ In an earlier essay, Inkeles also stressed the ‘modern man’s’ ability to ‘dominate his environment in order to advance his own purposes and goals,’ a quality ostensibly missing in the Russian character.

⁹⁷ Smith, *The Russians*, 509.

In the late 1980s, the chairman of the Communist party Mikhail Gorbachev enacted two policies, glasnost and perestroika, that would fundamentally change the USSR before they ended it. Glasnost relaxed political censorship and perestroika loosened economic controls, amounting to a half-hearted attempt at instituting a free market system. The US welcomed these changes and the eastern European revolutions they incited. President Reagan visited the USSR in 1988, touring Moscow and trading jokes with Gorbachev during a press conference. The Soviet leader's reforms seemed to vindicate American superiority, and American politicians and media harped on this point as often as they could. Meanwhile, Americans began to imagine what a unipolar, US dominated world might look like, and in order to do so, they imagined the lesser role of Russia and Russians in it.

This section explores how Americans imagined the Russian character from 1990-2001. The abrupt disappearance of the US' sublime enemy provided the nation an opportunity to represent itself as the lone global superpower, inducing a shift in the production of knowledge about Russia. However, over the course of this tumultuous decade, American imagination preserved the essential characterizations of Russia and Russians as threatening and inferior. Romantic representations returned, as optimistic as ever about Russia's potential to become like the US. Similar to the late 19th century, Americans imagined the ways they could improve Russia and Russians, further vindicating the superiority of American democratic and capitalist ideologies. The 1990s also saw the rise of American triumphalism, a popular narrative predicated on the imaginary feminine weakness of Russia. Triumphalism imagined a "new world order" led by the US and embodied by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). While the US government officially recognized Russia as part of the new world order, it (along with popular culture) actually imagined Russians as the order's most menacing threat.

Hedrick Smith returned to Russia in 1988 to conduct interviews for another book that he published in 1990, this one creatively titled *The New Russians*. Expressing his excitement about economic and political upheaval in the USSR, he zeroed in on the meaning making capacity this moment of perestroika and glasnost held in the American imagination.

“Even from afar, the transformation now underway in the Soviet Union holds a special fascination for all of us, and not only because its success or failure affects our destiny, our survival...[but because] it is a modern enactment of one of the archetypal stories of human existence, that of the struggle from darkness to light, from poverty toward prosperity, from dictatorship toward democracy...this book...is about what this change means for the New Russians, and for the rest of the world, in the 1990s and beyond.”⁹⁸

Smith explained glasnost and perestroika to his readers as a rebirth of the Russian people, who had finally awoken from their long slumber and now moved towards joining the rest of the world in modernity. Interestingly, he wrote of the transformation not as a matter of fact observation, but as an intriguing phenomenon. Smith romanticized Russia’s “struggle” for prosperity, democracy and “light,” which his readers could infer to mean the American way of life. By framing the American system as the story of humanity and Russia as the most recent chapter, Smith vindicated American superiority over Russia.

The New Russians also regurgitated the 19th century implication that Russians needed American help to reach modernity. *The New Russians* also repeats claims from *The Russians*, such as, “Industriousness, discipline, efficiency do not rank high with most Soviets, whether they be blue-collar workers, peasants, or white collar bureaucrats.” He attributed Russian deficiencies to their psyches, writing, “America is dominated by workaholic Type-A personalities [and] the Soviet Union is mired in hard-to-motivate Type-B’s.”⁹⁹ While this statement and a multitude of

⁹⁸ Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1990), xxxi.

⁹⁹ Smith also references Ivan Goncharov’s 19th century novel *Oblomov*, in which the main character (also named Oblomov) “is an anti-hero who hates work and is incapable of discipline and effort. It takes him an entire chapter to get out of bed...even today, a century later, Russians recognize in Oblomov the embodiment of an important facet of their national character.” Smith, *The New Russians*, 184.

others reinforced conceptions of Russians as lazy, passive, and backwards, it also raised awareness of the Soviet government's failure to motivate its people. Gorbachev could not reverse the "legendary pattern of sloth and shirking" in Russia: "By declaring it as his goal, [Gorbachev] launched his own search for perestroika."¹⁰⁰

A multitude of media outlets in the US showed how the Soviet economy had failed to match the pace set by capitalist economies, yet Smith urged his readers to see how the Russian character contributed to Soviet shortcomings. The unwillingness of Russians to work and Gorbachev's struggle to keep the ship afloat revealed Russia's cluelessness in navigating modern economic currents and betrayed Smith's underlying message: Russians were more to blame for the USSR's failure than Soviet ideology. *The New Russians* encapsulated an image of Russians as incapable of modern leadership, conversely describing Americans as capable. Though Smith failed to predict the 1991 collapse of the USSR, he set the stage for the US government's response to it.

A year after Smith published *The New Russians*, President George H.W. Bush delivered his State of the Union address, in which he articulated the concept of "the new world order." When Gorbachev announced his resignation on December 25, 1991, he effectively ended the Soviet Union, the cold war, and the "old" world order. Although Bush avowed a "community of nations," from the moment of its inception, the new world order has actually meant global US supremacy over a community of nations. When Bush addressed the nation in January of '91, Russia's decline created a void for the US – as the lone superpower in all but name – to fill. Bush declared as much in his speech: Among the nations of the world, only the [USA] has both the moral standing and the means to back it (the new world order) up." His assertion of the US' "moral standing" and "means" meant that the new world order would depend upon the US

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 178.

continuously affirming its superior morality and strength: “Let future generations understand...that, together, we affirmed American and the world as a community of conscience.”¹⁰¹

Bush’s speech manifested American triumphalism in the national consciousness, the ideology that led the US to assert itself as the lone world superpower. However, despite the US’ triumphalist projections, the demise of Soviet communism caused a legitimate crisis of identity in the US. For the previous forty-four years, the US took its cue from the Russian enemy, actively containing communism through diplomacy and knowledge production. By naming itself victor, the US acknowledged that the cold war had ended, forcing it to look elsewhere to sustain the total state. David S. Mason imparts that Ronald Reagan and Bush heralded terrorism and drug trafficking as threatening “to fill the conceptual vacuum left by the waning threat of communism,” but to no avail. One congressman encapsulated the confusion resulting from the loss of communism: “The old world was good guys and bad guys. The new world is gray guys.”¹⁰² This comment evokes Burke’s idea that boredom accompanies the loss of the sublime. Indeed, Russia no longer dictated US foreign policy, evidenced by Reagan and Bush’s rhetoric on terrorism and drug trafficking and Clinton’s interventions in Yugoslavia and Somalia.

However, a closer look at Kimberly Williams’ scholarship and Hollywood films reveals that in the ‘90s, the Russian threat persisted, albeit on the backburner. Williams informs us of:

“A disturbing discursive trend...in which post-soviet Russia was explicitly sexualized and gendered in U.S. popular and political culture. Conceptualized as politically and ideologically backward, the Russian Federation was frequently depicted as a feminized and/or emasculated entity that was potentially duplicitous, antagonistic, sexually voracious, a threat to U.S. national security, and/or an innocent victim of circumstances beyond its control and, consequently, in need of salvation and resurrection. These

¹⁰¹ George H.W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” *The American Presidency Project*, University of California Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19253>

¹⁰² David S. Mason, *The Cold War* (Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2003), 189.

gendered Russian imaginaries, as discursive systems of cultural representation and nationalist mythmaking, bolstered a triumphalist American nationalism whose narrative worked to ‘make belief’ about a strong, masculinist U.S. national identity in opposition to that which was Russian/Soviet.”¹⁰³

Of the five “gendered Russian imaginaries” that Williams goes on to explain, two in particular, “Russia as Child/US as Great White Father and Russia as Retrogressive *Baba*/US as Responsible Superpower,”¹⁰⁴ are pertinent to my argument that between 1990 and 2001, popular culture and the state ideologically cemented global US supremacy by rearticulating Russia’s inferior and threatening characteristics. “Russia as Child/US as Great, White Father operated of the premise, “While the US had reached the pinnacle of normalcy and civilization, Russia was both abnormal and uncivilized.”¹⁰⁵ This idea appeared in US foreign policy in the form of economic aid for Russia, provided by the Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Support Act of 1992, otherwise known as the Freedom Support Act (FSA). As a bill designed to help Russia “mature into a normal, modern, civilized society,” the FSA constitutes the manifestation of imagination of Russians as primitive and inferior in official policy.¹⁰⁶ The FSA became the cornerstone of postwar US foreign policy, and the policymakers who crafted it echoed Smith’s narrative of confused and incapable Russians and imagined a Russia that “called out to its parent, the US, for help as it struggled to find its way in the confusing and cutthroat capitalist world.”¹⁰⁷ This imaginary worked to define the US as normal and civilized, in turn constructing Americans as superior to their former cold war allies.

¹⁰³ Kimberly A. Williams, *Imagining Russia: Making Feminist Sense of American Nationalism in U.S.-Russian Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 36-7.

¹⁰⁴ The other three are Russia as Student/US as Tutor, Russia as Frontier/US as Entrepreneurial Pioneer, Russia as Pathologically Ill Patient/US as Doctor. Williams, *Imagining Russia*, 56-65. “Baba” means ‘old woman’ or ‘grandmother’ in most Slavic languages and usually has pejorative connotations having to do with what feminist theorists have critiqued as the generalized devaluation of older women as confused and socially irrelevant.” Ibid., 232n126.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, *Imagining Russia*, 56.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 55.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 57.

The “Russia as Retrogressive *Baba*/US as Responsible Superpower” imaginary preserved Russia’s threat to US national security and a need for global US power in the post-cold war era. Williams argues that the other four imaginaries and indeed the perceived need for the FSA painted Russia “as simultaneously weak and in need of assistance *as well as* chaotic, duplicitous, and irrational.”¹⁰⁸ Paranoia about the security of the Soviet nuclear arsenal especially contributed to imaginings of Russia as a threat to US national security. Popular ideas about intrinsic Russian traits, particularly “nationalist xenophobia, political conservatism, and apparent historical penchant for totalitarianism,”¹⁰⁹ exacerbated concerns over the threat of Russian nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands. Despite President Boris Yeltsin’s many assurances, Americans made a habit out of imagining a nuclear threat from Russian separatists, sometimes referred to as, “The nuclear nightmare.”¹¹⁰ Doing so gave the new world order the functional purpose of defending the world, or as Bush’s 1991 speech indicated, gave the US purpose as the responsible superpower.

Two popular films during the 1990s attest to prevalent national fear of rouge nuclear terrorists: *Goldeneye* (1995) and *Air Force One* (1997). *Air Force One* imagines a scenario in which Russian terrorists hijack the president’s plane as retaliation for a US-Russian joint mission that reclaimed Soviet nuclear missiles stolen by the terror group. The film not only affirms the possibility of such a theft, but it reinforces the idea that nationalism might lead the Russians to actually do it. In one scene, the president’s daughter Alice asks the lead hijacker why he killed a secret service agent. He replies, “Because I believe...in that instant I knew how deep was my belief (sic), that I would turn my back on God for Mother Russia. My doubts, my fears, my own

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹¹⁰ Michael Winess "ACCORD AT SUMMIT," *New York Times*, June 17, 1992, sec. A.

private morality, it dissolved in this moment.”¹¹¹ His love for Mother Russia was so strong that it not only led him to terrorism but also consumed all of his other thoughts, mirroring Smith’s description of “blind” Russian patriots.

Goldeneye, another film in the Bond series, portrays post-Soviet Russia as a chaotic and criminal country. Bond travels to Russia to track down an ambiguous crime syndicate that had just stolen the controls to a devastating Soviet weapon. The group’s target? The world.¹¹²

Goldeneye contributes in a variety of ways to Russia’s feminized and weakened character during the 1990s,¹¹³ but the metaphor of a world-threatening former Soviet weapon that the Russian government fails to secure explicitly visualizes the foremost security question of the era.¹¹⁴

Though the villain in this movie turned out to be a former British agent, Bond’s violent masquerade across Russia and the Russian military’s pathetic efforts to stop both him *and* the bad guys underscores Russia’s simultaneously weak and dangerous character during the 90s. The imagined Russian danger in these two films is precisely what policymakers had in mind when they deliberated over the FSA. Williams argues that these perceptions of Russia’s susceptibility to terrorism and extreme nationalism led lawmakers to conclude “that the Soviet Union/Russia was as much a threat in its feminized weakness as it had been when it waged cold war as a strong masculinist state.”¹¹⁵

Williams likely overstates this last point, as loosely controlled nuclear weapons did not grip the American imagination with the same force as during the cold war, when Russia sought

¹¹¹ *Air Force One*, DVD, directed by Wolfgang Petersen (1997; Santa Monica, CA: Beacon Pictures, 1998).

¹¹² *Goldeneye*, DVD, directed by Martin Campbell (1995; Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment Inc., 1999).

¹¹³ Particularly through its character Xenia Onatopp, who embodies the trope of the Russian femme fatale. For more on the Russian femme fatale, see Williams, *Imagining Russia*.

¹¹⁴ Patrick E. Tyler, "Pentagon Imagines New Enemies to Fight in Post-Cold-War Era," *New York Times* February 17, 1992, sec. A; Thomas L. Friedman, "FEARS ON WEAPONS," *New York Times* February 08, 1992, sec. A.

¹¹⁵ Williams, *Imagining Russia*, 65.

“total conformity with Soviet policy.”¹¹⁶ The resurgent romanticism of Russians at the start of the 1990s as well as engagement with Russia through the FSA also markedly contrasts this era with the cold war. However, American imagination kept the Russian threat alive in 1990s despite US “victory” over the USSR. The Russian character of the ‘90s continued the cultural work of the cold war character, in that it justified the US’ global supremacy as the “responsible superpower.” However, the Russian nuclear nightmare would only preoccupy the American imagination until September 11, 2001, when terrorism became the foremost threat to the US. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia would cooperate with the US in the war on terror until the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Russia, France and Germany collectively opposed. However, as the Russian economy expanded at a consistent rate over the next five years and Putin grew increasingly disillusioned with the unapologetic unilateralism of the Bush administration and the continuing expansion of NATO, the threatening Russian character slowly crept back into the American imagination.

For example, a day after Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Putin and Bush sat next to each other at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. “Bush told Putin: ‘I’ve been warning you Saakashvili¹¹⁷ is hot-blooded.’ ‘I’m hot blooded too,’ Putin retorted. Bush stared back at him. “No Vladimir,’ he said. ‘You’re cold-blooded.’”¹¹⁸

The “Supreme Leader”: Vladimir Putin and the New Russian Threat

In 2007, *TIME Magazine* selected Vladimir Putin as the Person of the Year, titling one of its feature pieces on the Russian president “A Tsar Is Born.” *TIME* undoubtedly meant the honor as a backhanded compliment, evidenced by author Adi Ignatius’ combination of grudging

¹¹⁶ NSC-68, 8.

¹¹⁷ Mikheil Saakashvili was President of Georgia from 2004-2013.

¹¹⁸ George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 434, quoted in Anglea Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 172.

respect for “Russia’s revival” with scorn for its “dark side” and a particularly fraught title for the Russian leader.

“In fact, having nominated his loyal former chief of staff (and current Deputy Prime Minister) Dmitri Medvedev to succeed him as President, Putin will surely remain the supreme leader, master of Russia's destiny, which will allow him to complete the job he started...If he succeeds, Russia will become a political competitor to the U.S. and to rising nations like China and India. It will be one of the great powers of the new world.”¹¹⁹

In this article, Ignatius unwittingly wrote the playbook for representing Putin and Russia to the American public for years to come. He boiled down all the complexities of Russian politics to one insatiable ambition – to rival the US as a great power – and attributed it to the character and intentions of Russia’s “supreme leader.” While this vision verifies US superpower, it also endangers the post-cold war international dominance of the US. While Ignatius refrained from explicitly describing Russia as an enemy, he left no doubt about Putin’s capability to make it one.

Putin’s face fills *TIME*’s cover page, staring coldly and without expression into the camera. Another photograph inside the magazine shows Putin looking down into the camera, lounging in a leather chair that, in the context of this article’s title, seems to represent a throne. Again, Putin’s facial expression is harsh and slightly intimidating, evoking Colin Powell’s remark, “I looked into his eyes and I saw KGB.”¹²⁰ As these images demonstrate, in many ways, Putin’s past and his personality – as well as the way many Americans perceive it – feeds imagination of the Russian character as threatening and inferior. Along with Ignatius’ argument, *TIME*’s images of Putin lend credence to the oft used phrase “Putin’s Russia,” and mirror a

¹¹⁹ Adi Ignatius, “A Tsar Is Born,” *TIME Magazine* December, 2007
http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1690757_1690766-6,00.html. This was one of nine articles on Putin, plus a transcript of a question and answer session with the Russian president.

¹²⁰ *Putin, Russia and the West*. TV film. Directed by Paul Mitchell and David Alter. BBC, 2011, quoted in Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership*, 62. Powell was commenting on George W. Bush’s statement, “I looked the man (Putin) in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy...I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country.”

tendency in popular and political culture since 2007 to refer to Putin and Russia synonymously, as two sides of the same coin.

Starting in 2007, popular culture again began to demonstrate its ability to define, circulate and justify US interests and identity through representations of Russia. A plethora of popular images – both still and moving – reflect the return of Russia as an enemy of the US, however, contemporary imagination lacks the consensus on Russia as *the* enemy it featured during the cold war. Terrorism still has a powerful hold on the American consciousness, and as I argue in this section, 21st century images portray Russia as threatening to the new world order, and therefore to global US supremacy, not to the mainland nation itself. The American character comprises the greatest stake in the 21st century imagination of Russia, as the disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, revelations of extensive US torture programs, and a deepening political divide have shaken dominant beliefs in what the US stands for. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in recent years disapproval of Putin and Russia have skyrocketed.¹²¹ Imaginings of the Russian president and his people as primitive, morally backward, psychologically insecure, and economically threatening provide the vision of an inferior enemy necessary for the construction of a superior American national identity. By imagining Putin as threatening to American interests abroad, representations of Russia also suggest that global US supremacy needs defending. In turn, this cultivates support for the preservation of US economic and military alliances and with them, the global economic, military and moral supremacy of the US.

The Netflix original series *House of Cards* constitutes a site of the ongoing cultural construction of Putin – and by extension, Russia – as an inferior and threatening. In the third season, the show introduces an imaginary president of the Russian Federation Victor Petrov, who

¹²¹ “Europeans, American More Negative toward Russia,” *Global Attitudes and Trends*, Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/pg-2014-07-09-russia-favorability-02/>

resembles Vladimir Putin in more ways than their shared initials and mannerisms. The first time we hear Petrov speak, the protagonist president Frank Underwood asks him, “This is your first visit to the White House?” Petrov replies, “Yes, yes, but my third president,” positioning him in the same historical moment that Putin now occupies. Another reference to Putin and Petrov’s shared past cements the comparison. Frank vents to his wife Claire over the phone, “Oh he might just be playing mind games, trying to throw me off balance, but this is a guy who was brought up through the KGB, after all.”¹²² In a show that emphasizes the importance of strong personalities in politics, the resemblance between Putin and Petrov cements the ties between the Kremlin, Russia, and the Russian character. Petrov’s Russian mindset constantly puts him at odds with Frank, who struggles throughout the show to overcome Petrov’s antagonism. Similar to representations of Putin in mass media and by politicians, *House of Cards* confronts the question of “how to handle”¹²³ the Russian character.

When Frank and Claire visit Moscow in season three, Frank soon learns his deal with Petrov to resolve an armed conflict between Israel and Palestine hinges upon an imprisoned American gay rights activist publicly apologizing for his protest against the Russian government. The activist, named Michael Corrigan, refuses to read the statement written for him by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US State Department, choosing to honor rather than abandon his morals. Petrov, afraid of being publicly humiliated, shocks Frank by making their deal contingent upon Corrigan’s apology. It soon becomes the main conflict of the episode, as Claire and Frank try to persuade Corrigan and Petrov respectively to not let their deal die.¹²⁴

¹²² “Chapter 29,” *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.

¹²³ “Bill O’Reilly: How to handle Putin,” *Fox News*, March 03, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2014/03/04/bill-oreilly-how-handle-putin/>

¹²⁴ “Chapter 29,” *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.

Corrigan's activism situates the show in the current historical context, as many in the US have criticized Russia for discriminating against LGBTQ people, particularly during the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Media outlets framed Sochi as Russia's opportunity to show off its progress to the world, yet it seemed that more negative information about Russia surfaced during the Olympics than at any time since 2008. In December 2013, *US News and World Report* featured a cartoon titled "SOCHI" that depicted five corpses lying inside the five rings of the Olympic logo (Figure 1). Chris Britt, the cartoonist, labeled them "Gay bashing, hatred, bigotry, human rights, homophobia." A bloodied rainbow flag lay just outside the reach of one body.¹²⁵ As this cartoon suggests, the topic of homophobia in Russia pervaded Olympic coverage, something likely triggered by the passage of an anti-gay "propaganda" law in Russia. However, when the Duma passed the law in June 2013, it received far less attention than it did during the Olympics in February 2014. In addition to the numerous cartoons and countless news reports on violent Russian homophobia, Google featured a rainbow logo throughout the games, and Jon Stewart ran a segment on *The Daily Show* titled "The 2014 Sochi Homophobic Olympics."¹²⁶ Interestingly, the outrage in the US over homophobia in Russia lacked a critical focus, as it failed to vilify the nine US states with similar anti-gay legislation.¹²⁷ Nonetheless, Russia's moral backwardness comprised a main story of the Sochi Olympics.

Much like the editorial cartoons, news reports, and *Daily Show* segment, *House of Cards* represented Russian homophobia to portray Russians as immoral. When Frank implores Petrov

¹²⁵ Christopher Britt, "SOCHI," *Creators Syndicate*, December 23, 2014, *US News and World Report*, Editorial Cartoons on the 2014 Sochi Olympics, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-the-2014-sochi-olympics>.

¹²⁶ Brandon Mercer, "Google Goes Rainbow For 2014 Winter Olympics in Homophobic Sochi," *CBS SF Bay Area*, February 6, 2014, <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/02/06/google-goes-rainbow-for-2014-winter-olympics-in-homophobic-sochi/>; Jon Stewart, "The 2014 Sochi Homophobic Olympics," *The Daily Show*, January 21, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/zdwkbb/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-2014-sochi-homophobic-olympics>.

¹²⁷ Zack Ford, "9 States With Anti-Gay Laws That Aren't That Different From Russia's," *Think Progress*, February 3, 2014, <http://thinkprogress.org/lgbt/2014/02/03/3241421/9-state-gay-propaganda-laws/>

to let Corrigan's apology go in order to save their deal and "make real progress," he receives surprising pushback.

Petrov: Look. I don't want our deal to fall apart any more than you do, your wife was right on the phone. But there is more than just a deal for me to consider. I need to show strength.

Frank: No-one is going to see this as weakness. On the contrary, you'll be applauded for letting him go.

Petrov: By who? The West? You don't understand Russia, Mr. President. If people don't like the job you're doing, they vote you out of office. If they don't like the job I'm doing, they topple statues; blood is spilt, chaos takes over. Is the gay propaganda law barbaric? Yes, of course it is. But religion, tradition, for most of my people, is in their bones. This law was passed for them. I have to represent my people the same way you do. And if there's no cost to Corrigan's actions, many of my people will feel betrayed.

Frank: There won't be a revolution because you freed one man.

Petrov: Revolution sneaks up on you, one small step at a time. I don't take chances. Even with the smallest of steps.¹²⁸

The terms "barbaric" and "tradition" revive stereotypes of Russian inferiority from the late 19th century as well as the 1990s, illustrating how *House of Cards* represents merely the latest instance of the historical construction of Russia as morally backward in the American imagination. Victoria Zhuravleva points out that in the early 1900s, American obsession with Russian pogroms against Jews became "a blot so huge and hideous that it eclipsed the race riots and lynchings in the US."¹²⁹ Just as it did then, the thorough characterization of Russians as primitive and backward people demonstrates how imagining immorality as a Russian national characteristic makes Americans seem moral in comparison.

Of course, Petrov's concerns about showing strength and not betraying his homophobic populations only to prevent chaos from taking over resuscitate George F. Kennan's claims about the inherent insecurity of Russian leaders. Kennan believed a "traditional and instinctive

¹²⁸ "Chapter 32," *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.

¹²⁹ Zhuravleva, "Anti-Jewish violence in Russia," 47.

Russian sense of insecurity” caused Russian leaders to see “that their rule was relatively archaic in form, fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation.”¹³⁰ Indeed, Petrov’s paranoia over “the smallest of steps” portrays him as insecure about his own power, and his reference to the toppling of statues and chaos reinforces conceptions of Putin as a modern day dictator.

However, *House of Cards* also characterizes Putin as personally insecure in the previously mentioned episode when Petrov visits the White House. At the state dinner celebrating Petrov’s visit, the guest of honor converses with Claire while Frank talks to the Senate Majority leader. After a bit of jaded banter, Petrov glances over at Frank before turning to Claire and saying, “So, this is what he does? He leaves the seduction to you. Isn’t there a word for that in English? Um...pimping! Yes? He’s pimping you out.” Claire nods grimly, forces a smile and responds, “How charming you are.” Petrov then adds insult to injury. “Thank you. And you make a far better first lady than [United Nations] ambassador, from what my people tell me. Only teasing. More wine for the ambassador!” Though they clearly irritate her, Claire ignores Petrov’s petty jabs and avoids provoking him. She cleverly retaliates a few minutes later when the party is chasing shots of vodka with pickles. In a sly toast, she attributes this Russian’s disrespectful and petty behavior to his inferior masculinity: “To President Petrov, and his little pickle.”¹³¹

In this instance, *House of Cards* continues the practice from the ‘90s of representing the Russian character as weak and feminine to construct a corresponding strong American character. Another scene in the same episode bolsters the cultural work that Claire’s emasculation of Petrov accomplishes. Following the state dinner, the party proceeds to dancing and singing, and after a brief waltz with Claire, Petrov kisses her fully on the lips. Though clearly unsettled, Claire and Frank say nothing, tolerating Petrov’s antics in order to preserve the possibility of striking a deal.

¹³⁰ U.S. DOS *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall*, 5.

¹³¹ “Chapter 29,” *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.

Frank soon ends the night and leads Petrov to a dimly lit stairwell to smoke cigars and negotiate. When Frank asks, “Do you kiss the wife of every president you meet?” Petrov replies, “Not every president’s wife looks like yours.” Frank then breaks the fourth wall, looking directly at the camera to furiously tell viewers, “I’d push him down the stairs and light his broken body on fire just to watch it burn, if it wouldn’t start a world war.”¹³² While Frank’s anger may be understandable on a personal level, his comment has larger symbolic meaning. It implies that in a one-on-one matchup without political repercussions, he could crush Petrov, similarly to how in a world without the threat of nuclear world war, the US could destroy Russia. This scene perfectly encapsulates the cultural work images of inferior Russians do in the US, as Petrov’s petty insecurity provides Frank and the viewers of *House of Cards* an opportunity to imagine a strong and masculine national identity.

Several editorial cartoons depicting Putin reinforce the characterization of him as weak and insecure, revealing the breadth of American imagination of Russia and highlighting the superior American character it constructs. In March 2014, *The Sacramento Bee* ran an editorial cartoon with two panels, one headlined “Old Cold War: Kennedy & Khrushchev” and the other “New Cold War: Putin and Putin” (Figure 2). In the old cold war panel, Kennedy and Khrushchev sit and talk, and in the new, Putin stands shirtless in front of a mirror, flexing and exclaiming, “You’re SO strong!”¹³³ The cartoon not only criticizes Putin’s irrationality in comparison to the old cold warriors, it also envisions him as insecure about his own strength. Cartoonists often sketch Putin without a shirt, a trend that began with Putin’s own staged photos but has since evolved into a signifier for his primitivism and for how he compensates for his

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Jack Ohman, “Old Cold War, New Cold War,” *The Sacramento Bee*, March 9, 2014, *US News and World*, Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.

stereotypical Russian insecurity. Another cartoon published in *The Chicago Tribune* depicts Putin as shirtless and about two feet tall, standing behind a dotted line separating Russia from the EU and yelling “Rowr!” Five much taller Europeans stare back at him, and one quips, “I miss the bear...” (Figure 3)¹³⁴ Putin’s bare-chested appearance seems primitive in comparison to the more civilized looking Europeans, who are wearing tuxedos and drinking wine. The cartoon also uses size to represent him as inferior to the west, as the Europeans tower over him and “miss the bear” instead of fearing this disgruntled, overcompensating, and child-like world leader.

Cartoons also convey Russian inferiority by conflating Putin’s primitivism with his extreme nationalism. One cartoonist sketched Putin in a ramshackle house sitting across the table from a poorly dressed man labeled “Crimea.” This time Putin wears overalls without a shirt, allowing viewers to see a tattoo on his arm of “Mother Russia” inked inside a heart with an arrow shot through it. Putin exclaims, “It’s great to have you back home!” and with a frightened expression on his face, the man marked Crimea answers, “It’s...so...great...to be here...”¹³⁵ This image attributes Putin’s invasion of Crimea to his fanatical love of Russia, while his bare chest and overalls accentuate the primitive roots of his nationalism. The emphasis on Putin’s personality not only makes him the latest manifestation of the inferior Russian character, it continues that character’s purpose: reducing Russia’s interests and actions to the atavistic nationalism of its supreme leader.

Attributing Putin’s actions to his Russianness explains complex international affairs by simplifying them. In addition to popular images, a common lexicon for describing Putin as threatening and inferior – one shared by popular culture, politicians and news media – has

¹³⁴ Scott Stantis, *The Chicago Tribune*, 2013, *US News and World*, Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.

¹³⁵ Dan Wasserman, *Tribune Content Agency*, *US News and World*, March, 2014, Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.

simplified knowledge of Russia in the US since 2007. Just as Marco Rubio decries Putin as a “gangster and a thug,” Claire Underwood advises Frank about Petrov, “Francis. He’s a thug. Smart but he’s still a thug. Don’t cower to him.”¹³⁶ While journalists and experts from across the political spectrum claim Putin is “flexing his muscles” in Crimea and Syria, a cartoon printed in the Miami newspaper *El Nuevo Herald* in March 2014 visualizes him doing just that – shirtless of course – while standing on a small platform marked Crimea.¹³⁷ The uniformity of images and phrases about Putin and Russia speaks to the potent effect imaginings of Russia have on US political culture, and suggests that maintaining perceptions of Putin as inferior goes hand in hand with representing Russia as dangerous. While these perceptions convey that the US can and should stand up to its weaker Russian enemy, they depend upon other cultural texts to articulate exactly how Russia threatens the US in order to effectively guide US policy.

Two cartoons published in 2008 immediately after the Russian invasion of Georgia reveal the stakes of “the new cold war” and show how the US has imagined Russia as simultaneously threatening and inferior since then. The first depicts the “Russian Bear” enclosure at the “New World Order Petting Zoo,” from which the Russian bear has escaped, destroying its cage and eating a zookeeper in the process.¹³⁸ Imagining Russia as a bear implicitly defines it as a primitive beast, and placing it in a cage called “The New World Order” suggests that it can only participate in the global community if properly contained. Russia’s escape from its containment undoubtedly serves as a metaphor for its invasion of Georgia, but it also denotes a sense of danger to the rest of the world. The bear’s escape threatens the existence of the new world order

¹³⁶ Colin Campbell, “Marco Rubio: Putin is a ‘gangster’ and a ‘thug’ – and here’s how I’d take him on,” *Business Insider*, October 02, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/marco-rubio-vladimir-putin-syria-russia-thug-gangster>. “Chapter 29,” *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.

¹³⁷ Gustavo Rodriguez, *El Nuevo Herald*, March 20, 2014, <http://editorialcartoonists.com/cartoon/display.cfm/130905/>; Ben Brumfield, “Vladimir Putin’s week of muscle-flexing,” CNN, May 29, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/europe/putin-week-muscle-flexing/>.

¹³⁸ Jim Day, “Russian bear escapes the petting zoo,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, August 21, 2008, <http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/c9acf3af-6001-447e-814a-0b220c7fa8fd.html>.

zoo, and implies a need to construct a new cage, i.e. a need to rethink policy towards Russia. The second cartoon, titled “Georgia On My Mind,” shows President George W. Bush reading a newspaper in “The NATO club.” Above the fireplace, a bear’s head is fastened on the wall as a trophy of “Soviet Expansionism,” yet this trophy is alive and noisily eating roses from a vase marked “Georgia: The Rose Revolution.”¹³⁹ While the cartoon plainly compares Russia under Putin to the Soviet Union, it also has connotations about American and Russian identities. The cartoonist drew Russia as a bear and Bush as a human, denoting Bush as civilized and Russia primitive. While the image critiques Bush for not controlling the bear, the bear’s threat to the NATO club is limited to the destruction of a floral arrangement.

This last cartoon explains work that American imagination of Russia does in the 21st century. The bear leaves Bush untouched, instead the NATO club’s décor – marked by the cartoonist himself as “Georgia” – suffers from Russian aggression, indicating that Putin jeopardizes US supremacy over the new world order but not the US (Bush) itself. In his 1991 speech, the first president Bush stated a need to habitually affirm “America and the world as a community of conscience”¹⁴⁰ in order to maintain the new world order. However, in the wake of the Iraq war it became clear that Europe lacked the will to fight the war on terror alongside the US. Without a common enemy to rally around, the community of nations (and US domination over it) seemed in peril. However, as the issue of *TIME* discussed earlier shows, a resurgent Russia returned to fill the void. A strong and assertive Russia inevitably threatens the new world order, because the community of nations was predicated on unipolar US power, made possible

¹³⁹ The Rose Revolution was a peaceful protest movement in Georgia in 2003, after which Mikheil Saakashvili became the first democratically elected president of Georgia. John Trever, “Georgia on my Mind,” *The Albuquerque Journal*, August 21, 2008, <http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/cb5b04ab-8d48-46d0-b704-5debf734aa77.html>.

¹⁴⁰ George H.W. Bush, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19253>

only by Russia's weakness. The return of Russia, visualized in the cartoon as the trophy on the wall of the NATO club, signifies the resurgence of Russia from its weakened state and the return of the Russian threat.

In contrast to the '90s then, the 21st century Russian threat does not concern the US' responsibility as a superpower, but the US' *status* as a superpower. Representations of Russia imagine Putin challenging that status in order to rally a defense of it. One cartoon encapsulates this message. President Obama frowns and crosses his arms as Putin stands on a ladder and draws a red line through the words "U.S. Influence" (Figure 4)¹⁴¹ The cartoon primarily critiques Obama for allowing Putin to cross out US influence, but its message about the danger Putin poses to the US comes across more strongly to the author. In the 21st century, Russia endangers US influence, not the world nor the American way of life.

Understanding Russia's role in maintaining US influence over the new world order clarifies the uproar in the US over Russia's 2016 bombing campaign in Syria. Two days before the campaign began on September 30, 2015, Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly hosted strategic analyst Ralph Peters to discuss President Obama's meeting with Putin at the UN.¹⁴² When asked by O'Reilly, "What does [Putin] want?" Peters outlined the new Russian threat:

Peters: The big things he wants is to restore Russia's greatness. He's a great Russian nationalist, restore Russia's greatness to, basically, the height of the tsarist empire before the first world war. In the Middle East, what concerns us directly, is just as the tsars pushed into central Asia, he wants to push into the Middle East. He – working with Iran – with his diabolical but effective alliance, that's now gathering in Iraq as well as including Assad (sic), he wants to construct a wall of Iranian dominated Russia friendly anti-US states from western Afghanistan through Iran through Iraq and Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea. That wall will overshadow Israel...it will overshadow our Arab-Sunni clients...

¹⁴¹ Michael Ramirez, "Drawing A Red Line," *The Weekly Standard* 2015, *US News and World Report*, Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.

¹⁴² O'Reilly said about their meeting, "We really have no idea what happened there, I have to be honest, haha, we don't know."

O'Reilly: Alright so he wants a Russian presence in the Middle East to basically call the shots, and then freeze the USA out.

Peters: He wants Russia in and us out.¹⁴³

According to Peters, the stakes in the Middle East include the US' "Arab-Sunni clients" and the nation's presence in the region. His reference to Putin's nationalism confirms the historical importance of the Russian character in legitimating the Russian threat, and his insight on Russia's intentions in the Middle East reinforces that Russia really only threatens international US supremacy. An article in *TIME* published the day Russia's bombing of Syria began illustrates how damage to US supremacy would also harm the new world order. Timothy Snyder writes, "If Europe fragments into nation-states, Russia becomes a much stronger player...European leaders might consider the possibility that Russian policy in Syria is aimed toward the transformation of the country into a refugee factory."¹⁴⁴ The notion that Russia is "weaponizing"¹⁴⁵ Syrian refugees to disrupt European unity epitomizes the lengths to which imagination goes to maintain perceptions of Russia as an enemy.

In addition to an indirect geopolitical threat, American popular culture imagines a direct threat to the US economy posed by Russia's oil and gas reserves. In the film *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014), CIA agent Jack Ryan discovers a Russian plot to devalue the dollar and initiate a second Great Depression. The CIA recruited Ryan (a patriot who joined the Marines after 9/11) during his recovery from a helicopter crash and put him on the elite unit dedicated to preventing another 9/11 type attack. After ten years of hibernation, in 2013 Ryan steps out of the shadows

¹⁴³ You Tube, September 28, 2015, "Ralph Peters: Vladimir Putin Is Ugly, Ruthless, Vicious, But Brilliant," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5E8nliMuz0>

¹⁴⁴ Timothy Snyder, "The Real Reason Russia Is 'Helping' Syria," *TIME Magazine*, September 30, 2015, <http://time.com/4054941/putin-russia-syria/>.

¹⁴⁵ I borrow this term from Russell Bova, Professor of Political Science at Dickinson College. Russell Bova, "Russian Actions and Objectives in Syria, European Responses, and the Implications for the U.S.," (Lecture, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA, February 18, 2016).

and into US-Russian relations. In New York, the UN gets set to vote on a new Turkish oil pipeline that, according to news reports, could “shatter Russian dominance of oil exports.” A brief exchange between the US and Russian ambassadors confirms:

US: The only thing that the Turks and the Georgians would undermine with their pipeline is Russia’s monopoly on the eastern European natural gas market, we both know that.

Russia: If you block our proposal and the pipeline is approved, oil falls below \$79 a barrel and the Russian government goes bankrupt.

US: In our judgement, your assessment is extreme.

Russia: Our request comes from my country’s highest level.

US: And it is respectfully denied by mine.

Russia: Then we will regard this as an act of economic war.¹⁴⁶

The film eerily represents the actual events of the subsequent year. While Russia’s energy dominance over eastern Europe does mirror actual energy politics, the film imagines Russia’s declaration of economic war,¹⁴⁷ and represents the Russian government – “the Kremlin” – as antagonistic, devious, and willing to use terrorism to achieve its goals.¹⁴⁸ In a later scene, the Russian Interior Minister known only as Sorokin meets in the woods with the film’s antagonist Victor Cherevin, telling Cherevin he hoped the assets had been moved before stating, “You understand the Kremlin must remain entirely distanced.” Collusion between the Russian government and Cherevin – both of whom are represented as extreme nationalists¹⁴⁹ – to wreck

¹⁴⁶ *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*, DVD, directed by Kenneth Branagh (2014; Santa Monica, CA: Skydance Media, 2014).

¹⁴⁷ After the annexation of Crimea, the US used economic sanctions as a weapon against Russia, citing its energy dominance as a justification and a target: “Remarks of Secretary Lew at CSIS,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, June 2, 2014, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2414.aspx>.

¹⁴⁸ The villain (Victor Cherevin) plans to sell his bonds in the US treasury in concert with a terrorist bombing of Wall St. The majority of scenes in Moscow show the Kremlin, underscoring that the Russian threat emanates from “the highest levels” of Russian government, i.e. the supreme leader.

¹⁴⁹ After Ryan thwarts the terrorist plot, Cherevin and Sorokin meet again in the woods. As Sorokin drives by Cherevin says, “It was always for Russia.” Sorokin replies, “So is this,” and then his bodyguard shoots Cherevin.

the US economy reconstructs the menacing aspect of the Russian character and solidifies Russia as an enemy.

One editorial cartoon printed by *The Chicago Tribune* in 2014 reproduces *Shadow Recruit*'s depiction of oil and gas as the weapons Russia will use to destroy US supremacy over the new world order. In it, President Obama and a shirtless, dwarfed Putin sit across from each other playing chess. Obama sullenly stares at the board as his pieces burn and Putin snarls, "Your move." A canister marked "GAS" stands next to Putin; he presumably used it to torch Obama's side of the chessboard, which represents the new world order (Figure 5).¹⁵⁰ While this image reinforces Putin's inferiority, it also spells out the danger facing the US to Americans that likely already consider Russia an enemy. Although the cartoonist probably intended to critique Obama's failure to control the weaker Putin, the cartoon nonetheless envisions an economic threat to the US posed by Russia's energy reserves.

In its fourth season, *House of Cards* imagines a 21st century gas crisis in the US. Insecure as ever, Petrov has reduced Russia's oil production in retaliation to a mysterious plot to oust him as president – a plot he believes Frank orchestrated. The sharp rise in the price of gasoline (to around \$6 per gallon) also helps the Russian economy, which badly needs a bailout. Feeling a need "to respond to strength with strength," Frank devises a plan to exploit Petrov's insecurity by extraditing a dissident Russian businessman to "a border country" and unfreezing his assets, providing him the means to undermine Petrov. However, in the next episode Frank is shot and goes into a coma, leaving his incapable vice-president and Claire to deal with Russia.

¹⁵⁰ Scott Stantis, *Chicago Tribune*, 2014, *US News and World Report*, Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>. For examples of chess as a metaphor for politics, see John Arquilla, How Chess Explains the World, *Foreign Affairs*, July 8, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/08/how-chess-explains-the-world/>.

Claire soon concocts her own plan to solve the crisis, in which China, the IMF, and “a consortium of American and Chinese energy companies” will bail out Russia’s sinking economy. In exchange, the energy companies will receive the rights to drill in Russia.¹⁵¹ Just as it did in the third season, the plot deliberately mirrors real world events. Russia’s severely weakened economy in *House of Cards* envisions the desired impact of the real financial sanctions the US and Europe have imposed on Russia for the past two years. Additionally, to convince Petrov to sign Claire’s deal the US invites Russia to the G7 summit in Brandenburg. The G7 was known as the G8 as recently as two years ago, before the group barred Russia from membership following its annexation of Crimea. Similar to *Shadow Recruit*, the show’s decision to replicate actual global affairs makes it a point of reference for Americans to understand Russia and US-Russian relations.

While the commonalities between real and imagined economic circumstances help to explain the broader geopolitical struggle between the two countries, Claire’s meeting with Petrov provides a vision of the US dominating its weaker enemy. Petrov’s stubborn resistance to the terms throws the whole plan into doubt. With the Chinese “getting skittish,” Claire knows that she needs to close the deal soon, but Petrov proves difficult to persuade. Finally, Claire decides to let everything go and tell Petrov how it is:

“Your people are hurting. Six months at most they’re going to be marching on Red Square. I’m done letting you have your dignity. The truth is, you’re a beggar on your knees, and you will take whatever we shove down your throat. *Petrov steps towards Claire, growls, and then steps away, turning his back to Claire and looking down.* Victor. Take the deal. Get your dignity back.”¹⁵²

Claire’s words and assertive tone make her dominance over Petrov and Russia crystal clear.

Although her gender adjusts the narrative of masculine American identity, it nonetheless

¹⁵¹ “Chapter 45” *House of Cards*, Netflix, March 4, 2016.
“Chapter 45” *House of Cards*, Netflix, March 4, 2016.

represents Americans and the US as strong while emasculating the Russian enemy. This scene in particular substantiates the ability of popular culture to construct an inferior Russian character, construe it as threatening, and then imagine scenarios in which an American character demonstrates its superiority over its Russian counterpart. Representing the US as stronger than Russia legitimates the incessant calls for the US to stand up to Russia, or as Claire puts it, to shove our agenda down Russia's throat. However, it also construes Russia as ignoble to construct the US (embodied by Claire) as the arbiter of international dignity. Thus, at its core, the imaginary reassertion of US influence over Russia includes the reassertion of a noble and superior American national identity.

Conclusion: You Get Out What You Putin

When scrolling through social media websites in 2016, one can find a number of internet memes¹⁵³ imagining Putin acting in an absurd manner. A two-panel meme shows a man cleaning a TV screen that is broadcasting Putin's press conference in the first panel, and in the second Putin crashes through the TV and grips the man in a chokehold (Figure 6). Another image shows a shirtless Putin straddling a grizzly bear (Figure 7), and in yet another he rides a giant Ritz cracker. Some imagine Putin's darker side, such as the picture of him smiling with the words, "You funny guy, I'll kill you last" transposed over it, or another that pictures him in an eye patch and a fur hat with the words, "I will take care of BOND" just beneath his face. One more shows Putin grinning and holding a koala, and it reads, "Please KILL ME," presumably spoken by the koala (Figure 8).¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ A meme is an (often edited) image shared over the internet, sometimes featuring text transposed onto it. Anyone with access to the internet can create a meme using a variety of websites dedicated to generating them.

¹⁵⁴ "Vladimir Putin Images," *Know Your Meme*®, 2016, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/vladimir-putin/photos>.

The Internet has democratized imagination of Russia in the US, making the technology needed to create popular images of Putin and the spaces to view them in available to all with internet access. Memes in particular highlight a historical trend, as knowledge production about Russia and Russians has become more popular and accessible over time as technologies for representing Russia and Russians have improved, from cartoons in the late 19th century to films and books during the cold war and 1990s to TV shows on Netflix and memes in the 21st century. As a result, representations work more effectively in US society, exhibited by the phenomenon of Putin, whom nearly everybody recognizes and whom singlehandedly represents Russia (hence “Putin’s Russia”) and the Russian character.¹⁵⁵

The abundance of memes depicting Putin and the ludicrous acts they imagine him doing suggest that many Americans find Putin amusing, corroborating his confusing popularity in the US. Memes seem to merge the threatening and inferior Russian characteristics into Putin’s persona, however, images of Putin convey Russian inferiority more than the Russian threat, especially because most aim to make fun of him. In many ways, Putin’s persona perfectly captures the pitiful inferiority of Russians and the negligible threat they pose to the US in the 21st century. His own staged photo ops have given rise to an Instagram account that uses them to humorously convey inspirational messages,¹⁵⁶ underscoring the fact that while some Americans view him as threatening, many more simply cannot take him (or Russia) seriously.

This last point highlights a recurring issue in US-Russian relations, one greatly exacerbated by American imagination of the Russian character. Putin especially embodies the cultural work that Russia does, because he both entertains and repulses American observers.

¹⁵⁵ When I presented on this project at Dickinson College, I asked the audience members if they recognized Putin, the Prime Minister of England David Cameron, and the President of China Xi Jinping. About a third of the room knew Cameron and only four individuals were familiar with Jinping, but everybody recognized Putin.

¹⁵⁶ Vova, “@Putinspiration,” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/putinspiration/?hl=en>.

Many Americans uncritically decry Putin's more reprehensible actions, such as the violence against his critics that he enables and his invasions of Georgia, Chechnya, and Ukraine. I do not mean that all accusations of wrongdoing leveled against Putin have no basis in reality. Many do. But any scholar of US history knows that the US has repeatedly worked with dictators and corrupt governments when it has suited the nation's interests, making it clear that the US prefers to treat Russia as an enemy rather than a partner.

Imagination of Russia feeds the American public what it needs to see: an Other that affirms our own superiority and legitimates the pursuit of US interests abroad. Popular culture, news media, social scientists and politicians collectively produce knowledge of Russia as threatening to the US economy and the new world order to generate a need to maintain international US political, economic, and military supremacy. Furthermore, American imagination of Putin's Russia buoys the American character. Putin's characteristically Russian insecurity, atavism, nationalism, immorality, and implied weakness enable the construction of a modern, rational, benevolent, moral, and strong American character.

While popular imaginings of the Russian character originated in the late 19th century, imagining Russia as the sublime enemy only began in 1946, when the US needed to motivate its citizens in order to preserve the political and economic gains it had made during World War II. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, imagination of the Russian character shifted to accommodate post-cold war American triumphalism. Formerly insecure over their own power and zealous about destroying the American way of life, it now seemed that Russians wanted to emulate it. However, American imagination never entirely extinguished the bonfire of anti-Russian sentiments, allowing perceptions of Russia as an enemy to smolder throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. This proved useful in 2008, when the war on terror had exhausted many

Americans and caused them to doubt the direction in which the country was headed. Russia's gradual shift away from partnership with the US throughout the 2000s intensified in 2008 with the invasion of Georgia and may have climaxed in 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea. Cartoonists, filmmakers, journalists and television producers have since rushed to fan the flames and revive imagination of Russia as threatening, inferior, and the sublime enemy of the US.

However, imagination of Russia as the sublime in the 21st century has fallen short. Although cold war holdouts such as Michael Waller regard Russia as the foremost threat to the US, other sources, such as the "Georgia On My Mind" cartoon,¹⁵⁷ represent the Russian threat as simply too indirect and far removed to affect Americans as it did during the cold war. Nonetheless, imagination of a threatening and inferior Russian character maintains popular perceptions of Russia's *capability* to endanger the US in the future, and it facilitates the incessant construction of a benevolent and superior American character. Russia remains an indispensable foil to the US in the 21st century. Our shared understanding of American benevolence, superiority, and power emerges from our collective imagination of Russia. While popular imagination of the Russian character has historically structured our national identity, purposes, and interests, it continues to unfailingly affirm and threaten US power.

¹⁵⁷ Trever, "Georgia On My Mind," *The Albuquerque Journal*.

Appendix

Figure 1



Figure 2

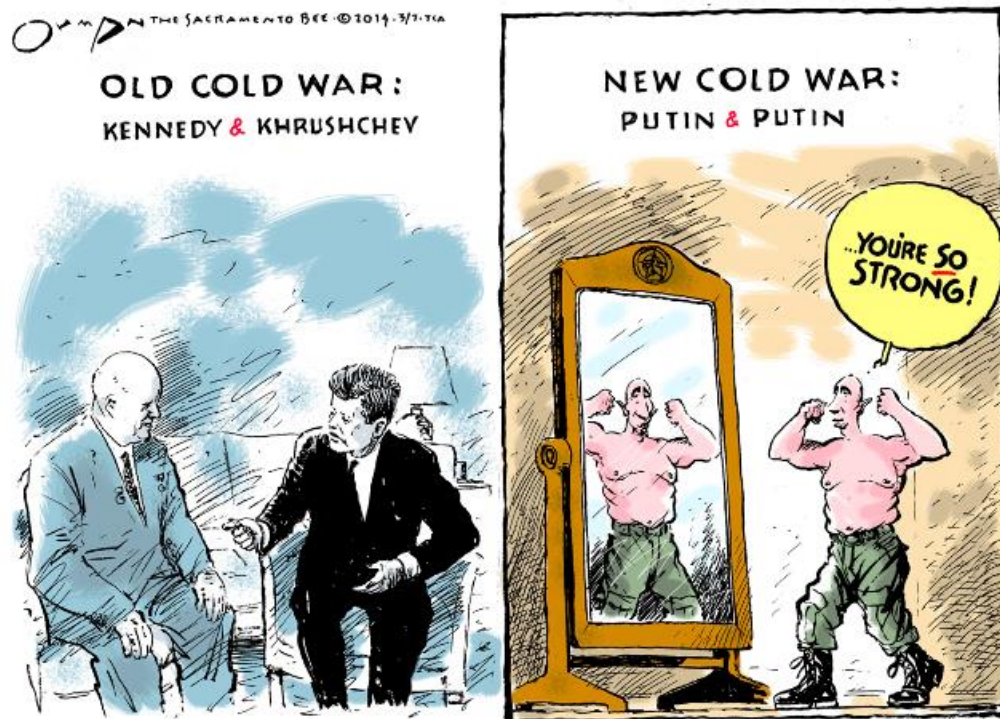


Figure 3

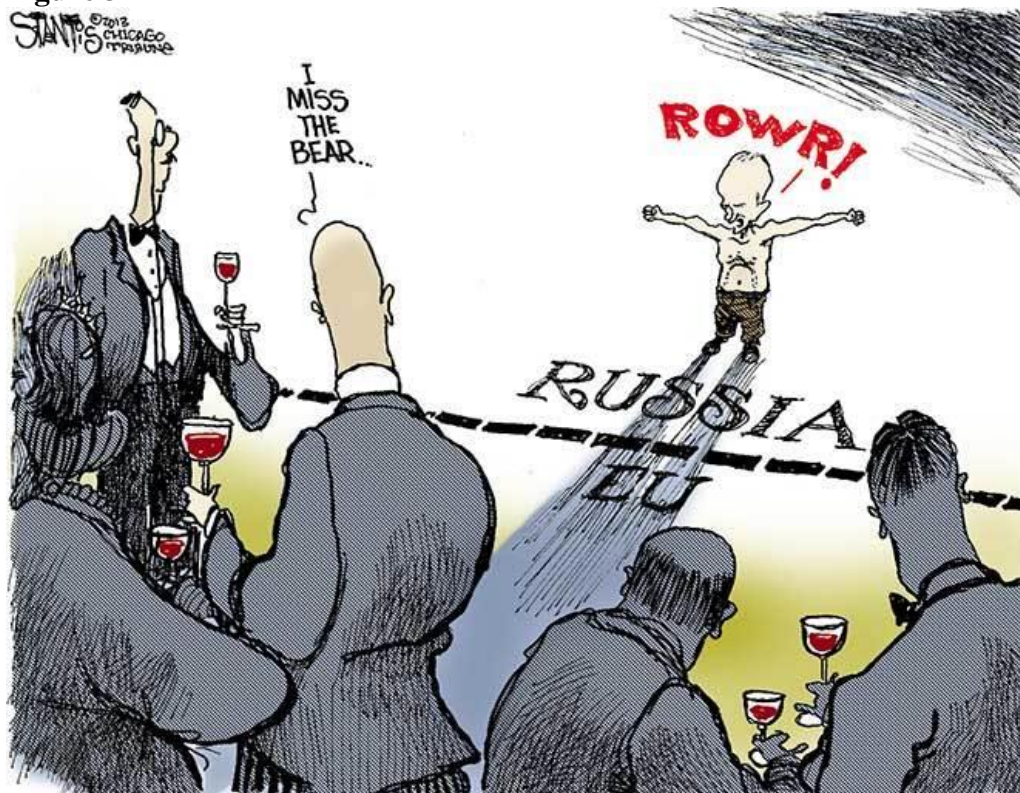


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Bibliography

- Adas, Michael. "Modernization Theory and the American Revival of the Scientific and Technological Standards of Social Achievement and Human Worth." In *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Cold War*. Edited by David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.
- Air Force One*. DVD. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. 1997; Santa Monica, CA: Beacon Pictures, 1998.
- Artz, Lee and Murphy, Bren Ortega. *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2001.
- Arquilla, John. How Chess Explains the World. *Foreign Affairs*. July 8, 2013. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/07/08/how-chess-explains-the-world/>.
- "Bill O'Reilly: How to handle Putin," *Fox News*, March 03, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2014/03/04/bill-oreilly-how-handle-putin/>
- Bova, Russell. "Russian Actions and Objectives in Syria, European Responses, and the Implications for the U.S." Lecture, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. February 18, 2016.
- Britt, Christopher. "SOCHI," *Creators Syndicate*, December 23, 2014, *US News and World Report*, Editorial Cartoons on the 2014 Sochi Olympics, <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-the-2014-sochi-olympics>.
- Brumfield, Ben. "Vladimir Putin's week of muscle-flexing." CNN. May 29, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/europe/putin-week-muscle-flexing/>.
- Bush, George H.W. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union." *The American Presidency Project*. University of California Santa Barbara. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19253>.
- Bush, George W. *Decision Points*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2011.
- Campbell, Colin. "Marco Rubio: Putin is a 'gangster' and a 'thug' – and here's how I'd take him on." *Business Insider*. October 02, 2015. <http://www.businessinsider.com/marco-rubio-vladimir-putin-syria-russia-thug-gangster>.
- "Chapter 29," *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.
- "Chapter 32," *House of Cards*, Netflix, February 27, 2015.
- "Chapter 45" *House of Cards*, Netflix, March 4, 2016.

Day, Jim. "Russian bear escapes the petting zoo." *Las Vegas Review Journal*. August 21, 2008. <http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/c9acf3af-6001-447e-814a-0b220c7fa8fd.html>.

"Europeans, American More Negative toward Russia." *Global Attitudes and Trends*. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/pg-2014-07-09-russia-favorability-02/>

Foglesong, David S. *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" Since 1881*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Ford, Zack. "9 States With Anti-Gay Laws That Aren't That Different From Russia's." *Think Progress*. February 3, 2014. <http://thinkprogress.org/lgbt/2014/02/03/3241421/9-state-gay-propaganda-laws/>.

Friedman, Thomas L. "FEARS ON WEAPONS," *New York Times*. February 08, 1992. Section A.

Goldeneye. DVD. Directed by Martin Campbell. 1995; Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment Inc., 1999.

Hall, Stuart, Evans, Jessica and Nixon, Sean eds. *Representation*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2013.

Harrison, David. *The Sociology of Modernization & Development*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Ignatius, Adi. "A Tsar Is Born." *TIME Magazine*. December, 2007. <http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/>

Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit. DVD. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. 2014; Santa Monica, CA: Skydance Media, 2014.

Jeffries, John W. "The 'Quest for National Purpose' of 1960." *American Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1978): 451-470.

Jessup, John K., Stevenson, Adlai, MacLeish, Archibald, Sarnoff, David, Graham, Billy, Gardener, John W., Rossiter, Clinton, Wohlstetter, Albert, Reston, James, and Lippman, Walter. *The National Purpose*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.

Katerina Lawless, "Constructing the 'Other': Construction of Russian Identity in the Discourse of James Bond films," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 9, no. 2 (2014): 79-97.

Kennan, George F. "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs*. Vol. 25, no. 4. July 1947, 566-582. <https://shafr.org/sites/default/files/XArt.pdf>.

Kozol, Wendy. *LIFE' America: Family and Nation in Postwar Journalism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

- Latham, Michael E. "Introduction: Modernization, International History, and the Cold War World." In *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Cold War*. Edited by David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, and Michael E. Latham. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003.
- Mason, David S. *The Cold War*. Farmington Hills, MI: Greenhaven Press, 2003.
- Mercer, Brandon. "Google Goes Rainbow For 2014 Winter Olympics in Homophobic Sochi." *CBS SF Bay Area*. February 6, 2014, <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/02/06/google-goes-rainbow-for-2014-winter-olympics-in-homophobic-sochi/>.
- McAlister, Melani. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, & U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*. London: University of California Press, Ltd, 2005.
- Ohman, Jack. "Old Cold War, New Cold War." *The Sacramento Bee*. March 9, 2014. *US News and World*. Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia. <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.
- Ramirez, Michael. "Drawing A Red Line." *The Weekly Standard* 2015. *US News and World Report*. Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia. <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.
- "Remarks of Secretary Lew at CSIS." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*. June 2, 2014. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2414.aspx>.
- Robin, Corey. *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Robin, Ron. *The Making of a Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Robinson, Harlow. *Russians in Hollywood, Hollywood's Russians: Biography of an Image*. Hanover, NH: Northeastern University Press, 2007.
- Gustavo Rodriguez. *El Nuevo Herald*. March 20, 2014. <http://editorialcartoonists.com/cartoon/display.cfm/130905/>
- Sanders, Jerry W. *Peddlers of Crisis: The Committee on the Present Danger and the Politics of Containment*. Boston: South End Press, 1983.
- Schmitt, Carl. *The Concept of the Political*. Translated by George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

- Smith, Hedrick. *The New Russians*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1990.
- Smith, Hedrick. *The Russians*. New York: Quadrangle/The New York Time Book Co., 1976.
- Snyder, Timothy. "The Real Reason Russia Is 'Helping' Syria." *TIME Magazine*. September 30, 2015. <http://time.com/4054941/putin-russia-syria/>.
- Stantis, Scott. *The Chicago Tribune*, 2013. *US News and World*. Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia. <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.
- Stent, Angela. *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Stewart, Jon. "The 2014 Sochi Homophobic Olympics." *The Daily Show*. January 21, 2014. <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/zdwkbb/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-2014-sochi-homophobic-olympics>.
- The Manchurian Candidate*. DVD. Directed by John Frankenheimer. Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 1962.
- Trever, John. "Georgia on my Mind." *The Albuquerque Journal*. August 21, 2008. <http://www.politicalcartoons.com/cartoon/cb5b04ab-8d48-46d0-b704-5debf734aa77.html>.
- Tyler, Patrick E. "Pentagon Imagines New Enemies to Fight in Post-Cold-War Era." *New York Times*. February 17, 1992. Section. A.
- U.S. Department of State. *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall*. Moscow, Russia, 1946.
- U.S. National Security Council. *A Report to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security*, NSC-68. Washington, DC, 1950. https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf.
- "Vladimir Putin Images." *Know Your Meme®*. 2016. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/people/vladimir-putin/photos>.
- Vova, "@Putinspiration," *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/putinspiration/?hl=en>.
- Wasserman, Dan. *Tribune Content Agency*. *US News and World*. March, 2014. Editorial Cartoons on Vladimir Putin and Russia. <http://www.usnews.com/cartoons/editorial-cartoons-on-vladimir-putin-and-russia>.
- Williams, Kimberly A. *Imagining Russia: Making Feminist Sense of American Nationalism in*

U.S. Russian Relations. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012.

Winess, Michael. "ACCORD AT SUMMIT," *New York Times*. June 17, 1992. Section A.

You Tube. February 17, 2007, "Invasion USA – Trailer (1952)."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNZaMm5q_BA

Youtube. July 11, 2009, "Duck And Cover (1951) Bert The Turtle,"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKqXu-5jw60>.

You Tube. September 14, 2013, "Bill O'Reilly: Is Putin Dominating Obama?"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sl85WhgDTRA>

You Tube. September 28, 2015. "Ralph Peters: Vladimir Putin Is Ugly, Ruthless, Vicious, But Brilliant."
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5E8nliMuz0>

Zhuravleva, Victoria Ivanovna. "Anti-Jewish violence in Russia and the American "mission for freedom" at the turn of the twentieth century." *East European Jewish Affairs* 40, no. 1 (2010): 43-60.

Zhuravleva, Victoria Ivanovna. *Understanding Russia in the United States: Images and Myths 1881-1914*. Moscow: Russian State University for the Humanities, 2012.