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The Utter Stupidity of the New Cold War

By Gary Leupp
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It seems so strange, twenty-seven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to be living through a new Cold War with (as it happens, *capitalist*) Russia.

The Russian president is attacked by the U.S. political class and media as they never attacked Soviet leaders; he is personally vilified as a corrupt, venal dictator, who arrests or assassinates political opponents and dissident journalists, and is hell-bent on the restoration of the USSR.

(The latter claim rests largely on Vladimir Putin’s comment that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a “catastrophe” and “tragedy”—which in many respects it was. The press chooses to ignore his comment that “Anyone who does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart, while anyone who wants to restore it has no brain.” It conflicts with the simple talking-point that Putin misses the imperial Russia of the tsars if not the commissars and, burning with resentment over

the west's triumph in the Cold War, plans to exact revenge through wars of aggression and territorial expansion.)

The U.S. media following its State Department script depicts Russia as an expansionist power. That it can do so, so successfully, such that even rather progressive people—such as those appalled by Trump's victory who feel inclined to blame it on an external force—believe it, is testimony to the lingering power and utility of the Cold War mindset.

The military brass keep reminding us: We are up against an *existential* threat! One wants to say that this—*obviously*—makes no sense! Russia is twice the size of the U.S. with half its population. Its foreign bases can be counted on two hands. The U.S. has 800 or so bases abroad.

Russia's military budget is 14% of the U.S. figure. It does not claim to be the *exceptional* nation appointed by God to preserve “security” on its terms anywhere on the globe. Since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the U.S. has waged war (sometimes creating new client-states) in Bosnia (1994-5), Serbia (1999), Afghanistan (2001-), Iraq (2003-), Libya (2011), and Syria (2014-), while raining down drone strikes from Pakistan to Yemen to North Africa. These wars-based-on-lies have produced hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, millions of refugees, and general ongoing catastrophe throughout the “Greater Middle East.” There is no understating their evil.

The U.S. heads an expanding military alliance formed in 1949 to confront the Soviet Union and global communism in general. Its *raison d'être* has been dead for many years. Yet it has expanded from 16 to 28 members since 1999, and new members Estonia and Latvia share borders with Russia.

(Imagine the Warsaw Pact expanding to include Mexico. But no, the Warsaw Pact of the USSR and six European allies was dissolved 26 years ago in the idealistic expectation that NATO would follow in a new era of cooperation and peace.)

And this NATO alliance, in theory designed to defend the North Atlantic, was only first deployed *after* the long (and peaceful) first Cold War, in what had been neutral Yugoslavia (never a member of either the Warsaw Pact nor NATO), Afghanistan (over 3000 miles from the North Atlantic), and the North African country of Libya. Last summer NATO held its most massive military drills since the collapse of the Soviet Union, involving 31,000 troops in Poland, rehearsing war with Russia. (The German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier actually criticized this exercise as “warmongering.”)

Alliance officials expressed outrage when Russia responded to the warmongering by placing a new S-400 surface-to-air missiles and nuclear-capable Iskander systems on its territory of Kaliningrad between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic coast. But Russia has in fact been comparatively passive in a military sense during this period.

In 1999, as NATO was about to occupy the Serbian province of Kosovo (soon to be proclaimed an independent country, in violation of international law), nearby Russian peacekeepers raced to the airport in Pristina, Kosovo, to secure it and ensure a Russian role in the Serbian province's

future. It was a bold move that could have provoked a NATO-Russian clash. But the British officer on the ground wisely refused an order from Gen. Wesley Clark to block the Russian move, declaring he would not start World War III for Gen. Clark.

This, recall, was after Bill Clinton's secretary of state, Madeleine Albright (remember, the Hillary shill who said there's a special place in hell reserved for women who don't vote for women) presented to the Russian and Serbian negotiators at Rambouillet a plan for NATO occupation of not just Kosovo but all Serbia. It was a ridiculous demand, rejected by the Serbs and Russians, but depicted by unofficial State Department spokesperson and warmonger Christiane Amanpour as the "will of the international community." As though Russia was not a member of the international community!

This Pristina airport operation was largely a symbolic challenge to U.S. hegemony over the former Yugoslavia, a statement of protest that should have been taken seriously at the time.

In any case, the new Russian leader Putin was gracious after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, even offering NATO a military transport corridor through Russia to Afghanistan (closed in 2015). He was thanked by George W. Bush with the expansion of NATO by seven more members in 2004. (The U.S. press made light of this extraordinary geopolitical development; it saw and continues to see the expansion of NATO as no more problematic than the expansion of the UN or the European Union.) Then in April 2008 NATO announced that Georgia would be among the next members accepted into the alliance.

Soon the crazy Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili, emboldened by the promise of near-term membership, provoked a war with the breakaway republic of South Ossetia, which had never accepted inclusion of the new Georgian state established upon the dissolution of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1991. The Ossetians, fearing resurgent Georgian nationalism, had sought union with the Russian Federation. So had the people of Abkhazia.

The two "frozen conflicts," between the Georgian state and these peoples, had been frozen due to the deployment of Russian and Georgian peacekeepers. Russia had not recognized these regions as independent states nor agreed to their inclusion in the Russian Federation. But when Russian soldiers died in the Georgian attack in August, Russia responded with a brief punishing invasion. It then recognized the two new states (six months after the U.S. recognized Kosovo).

(Saakashvili, in case you're interested, was voted out of power, disgraced, accused of economic crimes, and deprived of his Georgian citizenship. After a brief stint at the Fletcher School of International Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University—of which I as a Tufts faculty member feel deeply ashamed—he was appointed as governor of Odessa in Ukraine by the pro-NATO regime empowered by the U.S.-backed coup of February 22, 2014.)

Sen. John McCain proclaimed in 2008: "We are all Georgians now," and advocated U.S. military aid to the Georgian regime. An advocate of war as a rule, McCain then became a big proponent of regime change in Ukraine to allow for that country's entry into NATO. Neocons in the State Department including most importantly McCain buddy Victoria Nuland, boasted of spending \$ 5 billion in support of "the Ukrainian people's European aspirations" (meaning: the desire of many

Ukrainians in the western part of the country to join the European Union—risking, although they perhaps do not realize it, a reduction in their standard of living under a Greek-style austerity program—to be followed by NATO membership, tightening the military noose around Russia).

The Ukrainian president opted out in favor of a generous Russian aid package. That decision—to deny these “European aspirations”—was used to justify the coup.

But look at it from a Russian point of view. Just look at this map, of the expanding NATO alliance, and imagine it spreading to include that vast country (the largest in Europe, actually) between Russia to the east and Poland to the west, bordering the Black Sea to the south. The NATO countries at present are shown in dark blue, Ukraine and Georgia in green. Imagine those countries’ inclusion.

And imagine NATO demanding that Russia vacate its Sevastopol naval facilities, which have been Russian since 1783, turning them over to the (to repeat: *anti-Russian*) alliance. How can anyone understand the situation in Ukraine without grasping this basic history?

The Russians denounced the coup against President Viktor Yanukovich (democratically elected—if it matters—in 2010), which was abetted by neo-fascists and marked from the outset by an ugly Russophobic character encouraged by the U.S. State Department. The majority population in the east of the country, inhabited by Russian-speaking ethnic Russians and not even part of Ukraine until 1917, also denounced the coup and refused to accept the unconstitutional regime that assumed power after Feb. 22.

When such people rejected the new government, and declared their autonomy, the Ukrainian army was sent in to repress them but failed, embarrassingly, when the troops confronted by angry *babushkas* turned back. The regime since has relied on the neo-fascist Azov Battalion to harass secessionists in what has become a new “frozen conflict.”

Russia has no doubt assisted the secessionists while refusing to annex Ukrainian territory, urging a federal system for the country to be negotiated by the parties. Russian families straddle the Russian-Ukrainian border. There are many Afghan War veterans in both countries. The Soviet munitions industry integrated Russian and Ukrainian elements. One must assume there are more than enough Russians angry about such atrocities as the May 2014 killing of 42 ethnic Russian government opponents in Odessa to bolster the Donbas volunteers.

But there is little evidence (apart from a handful of reports about convoys of dozens of “unmarked military vehicles” from Russia in late 2014) for a Russian “invasion” of Ukraine. And the annexation of Crimea (meaning, its restoration to its 1954 status as Russian territory) following a credible referendum did not require any “invasion” since there were already 38,000 Russian troops stationed there. All they had to do was to secure government buildings, and give Ukrainian soldiers the option of leaving or joining the Russian military. (A lot of Ukrainian soldiers opted to stay and accept Russian citizenship.)

Still, these two incidents—the brief 2008 war in Georgia, and Moscow’s (measured) response to the Ukrainian coup since 2014—have been presented as evidence of a general project to disrupt

the world order by military expansion, requiring a firm U.S. response. The entirety of the cable news anchor class embraces this narrative.

But they are blind fools. Who has in this young century disrupted world order more than the U.S., wrecking whole countries, slaughtering hundreds of thousands of innocents, provoking more outrage through grotesquely documented torture, generating new terror groups, and flooding Europe with refugees who include some determined to sow chaos and terror in European cities? How can any rational person with any awareness of history since 1991 conclude that *Russia* is the aggressive party?

And yet, this is the conventional wisdom. I doubt you can get a TV anchor job if you question it. The teleprompter will refer routinely to Putin's aggression and Russian expansion and the need for any mature presidential candidate to respect the time-honored tradition of supporting NATO no matter what. And now the anchor is expected to repeat that all 17 U.S. intelligence services have concluded that *Vladimir Putin interfered in the U.S. presidential election*.

Since there is zero evidence for this, one must conclude that the Democratic losers dipped into the reliable grab bag of scapegoats and posited that Russia and Putin in particular must have hacked the DNC in order to—through the revelation of primary sources of unquestionable validity, revealing the DNC's determination to make Clinton president, while sabotaging Sanders and promoting (through their media surrogates) Donald Trump as the Republican candidate—undermine Clinton's legitimacy.

All kinds of liberals, including Sanders' best surrogates like Nina Turner, are totally on board the Putin vilification campaign. It is sad and disturbing that so many progressive people are so willing to jump on the new Cold War bandwagon. It is as though they have learned nothing from history but are positively eager, in their fear and rage, to relive the McCarthy era.

But the bottom line is: U.S. Russophobia does not rest on reason, judgment, knowledge of recent history and the ability to make rational comparisons. It rests on religious-like assumptions of "American exceptionalism" and in particular the right of the U.S. to expand militarily at Russia's expense—as an obvious good in itself, rather than a distinct, obvious evil threatening World War III.

The hawks in Congress—bipartisan, amoral, ignorant, knee-jerk Israel apologists, opportunist scum—are determined to dissuade the president-elect (bile rises in my throat as I use that term, but it's true that he's that, technically) from any significant rapprochement with Russia. (Heavens, they must be horrified at the possibility that Trump follows Kissinger's reported advice and recognizes the Russian annexation of Crimea!) They want to so embarrass him with the charge of being (as Hillary accused him of being during the campaign) Putin's "puppet" that he backs off from his vague promise to "get along" with Russia.

They don't want to get along with Russia. They want more NATO expansion, more confrontation. They are furious with Russian-Syrian victories over U.S.-backed, al-Qaeda-led forces in Syria, especially the liberation of Aleppo that the U.S. media (1) does not cover having no reporters on the ground, and little interest since events in Syria so powerfully challenge the

State Department's talking points that shape U.S. reporting, (2) misreports systematically, as the tragic triumph of the evil, Assad's victory over an imaginary heroic opposition, and (3) sees the strengthening of the position of the Syrian state as an indication of Russia's reemergence as a superpower. (This they they cannot accept, as virtually a matter of religious conviction; the U.S. in official doctrine must maintain "full spectrum dominance" over the world and prohibit the emergence of any possible competitor, forever.)

The first Cold War was based on the western capitalists' fear of socialist expansion. It was based on the understanding that the USSR had defeated the Nazis, had extraordinary prestige in the world, and was the center for a time of the expanding global communist movement. It was based on the fear that more and more countries would achieve independence from western imperialism, denying investors their rights to dominate world markets. It had an ideological content. This one does not. Russia and the U.S. are equally committed to capitalism and neoliberal ideology. Their conflict is of the same nature as the U.S. conflict with Germany in the early 20th century. The Kaiser's Germany was at least as "democratic" as the U.S.; the system was not the issue. It was just jockeying for power, and as it happened, the U.S. intervening in World War I belatedly, after everybody else was exhausted, cleaned up. In World War II in Europe, the U.S. having hesitated to invade the continent despite repeated Soviet appeals to do so, responded to the fall of Berlin to Soviet forces by rushing token forces to the city to claim joint credit.

And then it wound up, after the war, establishing its hegemony over most of Europe—much, much more of Europe than became the Soviet-dominated zone, which has since with the Warsaw Pact evaporated. Russia is a truncated, weakened version of its former self. It is not threatening the U.S. in any of the ways the U.S. is threatening itself. It is not expanding a military alliance. It is not holding huge military exercises on the U.S. border. It is not destroying the Middle East through regime-change efforts justified to the American people by sheer misinformation. In September 2015 Putin asked the U.S., at the United Nations: "Do you realize what you've done?"

Unfortunately the people of this country are not educated, by their schools, press or even their favorite websites to realize what has been done, how truly horrible it is, and how based it all is on lies. Fake news is the order of the day.

Up is down, black is white, Russia is the aggressor, the U.S. is the victim. The new president *must* be a team-player, and for God's sake, understand that Putin is today's *Hitler*, and if Trump wants to get along with him, he will have to become a team-player embracing this most basic of political truths in this particular imperialist country: Russia (with its nukes, which are equally matched with the U.S. stockpile) is the enemy, whose every action must be skewed to inflame anti-Russian feeling, as the normative default sentiment towards this NATO-encircled, sanction-ridden, non-threatening nation, under what seems by comparison a cautious, rational leadership?

CNN's horrible "chief national correspondent" John King (former husband of equally horrid Dana Bash, CNN's "chief political correspondent") just posed the question, with an air of aggressive irritation: "Who does Donald Trump respect more, the U.S. intelligence agencies, or the guy who started Wikileaks [Assange]?"

It's a demand for the Trump camp to buy the Russian blame game, or get smeared as a fellow-traveler with international whistle-blowers keen on exposing the multiple crimes of U.S. imperialism.

So the real question is: Will Trump play ball, and credit the "intelligence community" that generates "intelligence products" on demand, or brush aside the war hawks' drive for a showdown with Putin's Russia? Will the second Cold War peter out coolly, or culminate in the conflagration that "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD) was supposed to render impossible?

The latter would be utterly stupid. But stupid people—or wise people, cynically exploiting others' stupidity—are shaping opinion every day, and have been since the first Cold War, based like this one on innumerable lies.