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More Anti-Russian Hysteria From the New York Times



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A little while back, I challenged a group of graduate students to find one article in the *New York Times* written in the last five years that had anything favorable to say about Russia. Their extensive research turned up one article published in 2021 that described the beneficial effects of global warming on cold countries. The piece was entitled, “How Russia Cashes In On Climate Change.” Other than that, the newspaper’s sizeable cadre of Russia specialists reported virtually nothing about Europe’s most populous nation other than stories picturing Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation as scheming plotters, corrupt and incompetent rulers, meddlers in other nations’ elections, brutal oppressors of

their own people, and aggressive expansionists threatening everyone else's independence and freedom.

One does not have to be an admirer of Mr. Putin or his right-wing regime to consider this coverage so unbalanced and Russophobic as to amount to a form of warmongering. Consider a recent article by David Sanger and Steven Erlanger headlined "Gravity of Putin Threats is Dawning on Europe." It is worth examining how this sort of journalism operates.

The story begins (and in many ways ends) by stating an assumption about Russia's evil motives as a fact. According to the reporters, Putin "had a message" for the Western leaders gathered for a conference in Munich. The message: "Nothing they've done so far – sanctions, condemnation, attempted containment – would alter his intentions to disrupt the current world order."

There is no evidence cited for this "message" because it doesn't exist, except as a metaphor. The authors' assumption is that since Putin is a congenital aggressor, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and attempt to assert control over the Russian-speaking provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk are very likely a prelude to further aggression against other European states. The source cited for this conclusion is NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg, who "referred repeatedly to recent intelligence conclusions that in three to five years Mr. Putin might attempt to test NATO's credibility by attacking one of the countries on Russia's borders, most probably a small Baltic nation."

If this sentence does not leave you scratching your head, you're not paying attention. What sort of "intelligence conclusions" project a possible attack by a great power in "three to five years"? How reliable is this sort of prediction? Why would Russia mount such an attack on a NATO member – simply to "test NATO's credibility"? Wouldn't they understand that to attack a "small Baltic nation" would activate the entire alliance? And why, oh why, would the *Times* reporters accept and quote this fanciful speculation without asking Jens Stoltenberg, a well-known hawk and advocate of NATO expansion, to prove his case?

In fact, there is no evidence that the Russians are planning any such action, nor is there any reason for them to do so. Putin moved against Ukraine only after its elected pro-Russian government was overthrown in 2014 in a Western-backed revolt, the U.S. and NATO announced their intention to incorporate the nation into NATO, a civil war erupted in the Russian-speaking eastern provinces, and the United States declared Russia's proposal to negotiate over perceived threats to its vital security interests a "non-starter."

Having lost more than 45,000 troops in the Ukraine war, the idea that Russian leaders would think of attacking an existing NATO member like Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland, thereby declaring war on all its other members including the U.S., is senseless.

But assumptions, however senseless, require their authors to produce some sort of evidence if they want to be considered minimally credible. Messrs. Sanger and Erlander therefore offer three pieces of information purporting to be evidentiary. First, they note that “Russia made its first major gain in Ukraine in nearly a year, taking the ruined city of Avdiivka, at huge human cost to both sides.” Next, they remark that “Aleksei A. Navalny’s suspicious death in a remote Arctic prison made ever clearer that Mr. Putin will tolerate no dissent as elections approach.” Finally, they refer to the U.S. discovery that “Mr. Putin may be planning to place a nuclear weapon in space” – an anti-satellite weapon that could “wipe out the connective tissues of global communications.”

Whew! Are these Russians bad guys, or what? But notice how the allegations, even if true, fail to produce even a hint of aggressive intentions toward Europe.

The Russians are winning the war in Ukraine. Yes, this has been the case ever since the much-ballyhooed Ukrainian “counter-offensive” of summer 2023 failed to achieve its objectives. But do Russia’s gains in the Donbass region imply that they will attack Kyiv itself or invade some other nation? Clearly not. The last thing that Putin and his colleagues want is another major war. While the Biden regime blames Congress and an alleged shortage of ammunition for the fall of Avdiivka – an exercise in historical fiction – *Times* reporters continue to promote the paranoid notion that Putin is an incurable megalomaniac who simply can’t stop aggressing. All this noise is intended to distract attention from the need for a negotiated settlement that recognizes Ukraine’s independence and right to join the EU, and the eastern provinces’ independence and right to join the Russian Federation.

Putin is responsible for Alex Navalny’s death. Again, this is true but irrelevant to the subject at hand. Whether or not Russian agents had anything to do with Navalny’s poisoning in 2020, the regime did try him on trumped up charges and did imprison him in a colony on the Arctic Circle, where he died at the age of 47. This was a tragedy but not a great surprise. With the brief exception of the Gorbachev regime (1985-1991), Russian rulers from the czars onward have often persecuted domestic dissenters, and Putin’s government is no exception. But this does not constitute a threat to Europe unless one is a neo-con ideologue trying to construct a neo-Cold War struggle between “democratic” and “authoritarian” blocs.

Please spare us a return to the political theology of Whitaker Chambers and the Dulles brothers! The idea that Putin is some sort of Hitlerian or Napoleonic adventurer with a messiah complex may seem convincing to some U.S. and NATO neo-cons, but most sensible people understand that it is a bias-ridden fantasy.

Russia is planning to put a nuclear anti-satellite weapon into space. Could be . . . but reporters from the *Times* and other journals manage to broadcast this charge by U.S. National Security chief John Kirby without either asking for proof or inquiring why Russian leaders would consider doing such a thing. As to proof, the alleged evidence for the alleged plan is, of course, “classified.” As to motive, could it be that the U.S. is using some of its more than 300 military satellites to convey intelligence on Russian troop movements to the Ukrainian military, which then uses it to kill Russian combatants? But no discussion of possible motives is to be found in these accounts. Nor is such discussion needed if one accepts the idea that Putin aggresses because he is an aggressor. After all, it makes little sense to inquire into the Devil’s motives for being devilish.

To summarize: the “evidence” for bad intentions toward Europe on the Russians’ part boils down to an assumption of their leader’s evil nature. Particularly notable is the absence of any other connective tissue binding together the three items that are said to create the Russian threat. The victory at Avdiivika, the death of Navalny, and the alleged anti-satellite weapon plan are unrelated pieces of information or speculation, but rattling them off in sequence (in a tone of grave concern) is intended to send the message that “the Russkies are coming! Circle the wagons!”

All of which makes one wonder what the *New York Times* considers “responsible journalism.” The accumulation of unrelated bits of information presented as evidence of an unprovable motivation is one of the oldest propaganda tricks on the books. Isn’t it time that journalists learned to be independent reporters and news interpreters rather than slavish mouthpieces for pro-war politicians and corporations? I have focused here on reporters for the *Times*, but television and radio journalists are, if anything, less inclined to think critically about such allegations than their print colleagues. Whether the topic is Putin’s Russia, China, or Iran, the unchallenged, unproved assumption is always that some demonically aggressive adversary is out to eat our lunch.

The problem with this approach, it should be clear, is not just that it creates an exaggerated sense of threat, but also that this produces an exaggerated pseudo-defensive response. Having failed to absorb Ukraine, as NATO threatened to do as early as 2008, that organization’s members are now arming to the teeth to “deter” a nonexistent Russian

threat to Europe. Could this rearmament, combined with a refusal to negotiate security issues, be considered a serious threat by Russia? Certainly! And so, the initial exaggeration of threat can end by producing a real threat and, quite possibly, a real war.

At times like this, one can only hope that a few sane leaders supported by a public tired of inflammatory rhetoric and needless killing will call a halt to jingoist assumptions of our own side's essential innocence and the other side's essential aggressivity. That these assumptions generate billions of dollars in profits for military-industrial corporations does not make them easy to extirpate. Even so, we can demand that journalists who ought to know better stop peddling these lies and exaggerations – and a growing number of clear-eyed citizens will say, “Amen!”

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