

Russia bashing is making the West blind

By Tim Black, Spiked Online, 29 October 2016

In its quest for Cold War-era certainty, the West is inflaming world affairs

If you're looking for examples of just how acceptable anti-Russian prejudice now is, check out the cover of *Time* magazine from a couple of weeks ago. Against a Commie-evoking red background, a smiling Putin looks out like a Bond villain, while the headline tells readers that Russia is trying to undermine the US election. Or take a look at the most recent issue of *The Economist*. There, against a similarly Commie-red background, Putin once more looks out, but this time he is hollow-cheeked, monochrome and deathlike, his eyes replaced by red, fighter-jet shaped pupils. The headline may be simply 'Putinism', but the visual message is bleak and fearful.

You don't have to be in love with the bear-riding, shirt-off machismo of Vladimir Putin, let alone the Russian state's blissful intolerance of its own citizens' freedoms, to think that there's something deeply troubling about the incessant Russia-bashing and blaming that now falls too easily from the lips of Western politicians and pundits. Not only does it cloud issues, preventing problems and crises from being seen for what they are, it also inflames tensions, and creates a dynamic in world affairs that is irrational, unpredictable, dangerous even.

What's more, too many seem perfectly comfortable with this animus towards Russia. It has made politicians and commentators almost absurdly one-eyed, which makes sense given the plank in their other eye.

Think of the debates and arguments now swirling around Syria, and the unfolding horror of Aleppo. Many Western politicians seem perfectly happy to heap all the blame on Russia, likening its actions to the Nazi bombing of Guernica, and blithely accusing it of barbarism, of unspeakable atrocities. And all the while they do this, posing as the humanitarian solution, the bringers of peace, they ignore their own complicity in the destruction of Syria, their clueless undermining of Bashar al-Assad's regime, their backing of rebels, jihadist, terrorist or otherwise, and their own years-long aerial bombardment of not just Syria, but Iraq, too.

Or think of the Western outcry over Russia's 'state-sponsored' doping-in-sports programme, and the calls for *all* Russian athletes to be banned from this summer's Rio Olympics. Again, Russia, with Putin as demon-in-chief, was conjured up as the demiurge of sport's corruption, a nation so committed to restoring the pride of the Russian empire, or some other equally Tolkien-ish tale, that it was systematically creating an army of pharmaceutically enhanced athletes. That the biggest drugs-in-sports scandals of recent years, from [BALCO](#) to Lance Armstrong, have involved the private enterprise of Western sports stars did not seem to register among those determined to see the worst in a whole nation – a nation, it's worth remembering, that despite its alleged commitment to doping, has been unable to keep up with Britain's valiant column of asthmatic cyclists.

And now, of course, there is the outrage over Russia's putative attempts to interfere in the US election. This charge rests, in the main, on the cyberhacking of Putin nemesis Hillary Clinton's emails, many of which show Clinton to be a massive friend of Wall Street, a cynical purveyor

of identity politics, and a little uncertain about what to say on all but the most black-and-white issues. The emails are less revelations than confirmations of the bleeding obvious. But the suggestion that Russia is behind the hacks, carried out by a group called Fancy Bears, has been enough for some of the more belligerent American politicians to call it an [act of war](#). Even those of a more cautious bent talked darkly of the [‘Moscow menace’](#), while Clinton herself called her Republican rival Donald Trump ‘a puppet of Putin’.

You don’t have to be a student of international relations to know that outrage over Russia’s alleged interference in the US election is more than a little rich coming from a nation that has meddled in the democratic affairs of other nations for decades, from its undermining of the Italian Communist Party in the 1948 national elections and its role in the Belgian-led assassination of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba in 1961, to its near constant meddling, opposition funding and military interference in the Americas, especially its century-long (mis)management of [Haiti](#), which resulted most recently in the funding and sanctioning of elections in 2009 in which major opposition parties had been excluded. And that’s before we mention Iran in 1953, where it staged a *coup d’état* against a democratically elected leader, or Afghanistan, where post-intervention elections have been a constant battleground. In fact, according to one [study](#) in *International Studies Quarterly*, Washington and Moscow intervened in a third country’s elections 117 times between 1946 and 2000.

And yet it’s Russia that is being portrayed as the singular bad guy here, Russia that is being turned into the existential threat to the civilised world. As *The Economist* put it, ‘four years ago Mitt Romney, then a Republican candidate, said that Russia was America’s “number-one geopolitical foe”... With Russia hacking the American election, presiding over mass slaughter in Syria, annexing Crimea and talking casually about using nuclear weapons, Romney’s view has become conventional wisdom.’ Indeed. As the *Guardian* concluded, the big ‘strategic, security and diplomatic problem’ of our age is: ‘what to do about Russia?’

Russia is being conjured up in the Western political imagination as the enemy, the threat that must be dealt with, the military power that must be shot down, as Tory MP Andrew Mitchell sees it. But this creation of Russia as the West’s ultimate enemy doesn’t add up. For one thing, it is not especially territorially aggressive. Reactive and self-defensive, yes, as shown by both its brutal attempt to shore up what remains of state structures in Syria, and its military attempt to maintain at least a part of Ukraine as a buffer state. But Russia is not the protagonist – it is not proactively seeking to expand itself; it is seeking to preserve itself. The idea that Putin dreams of expanding some sort of Russian empire is just that – a dream, not on the part of Putin, but on the part of those Western politicians and commentators yearning for the certainties of the Cold War.

The problem here is not Russia, it’s the image of ‘Russia’ now haunting the Western mind. Because the constant demonisation of Putin, the determined construction of Russia as our mortal enemy, has a real effect. It inflames existing tensions, potentially turns negotiable disputes into full-blown conflicts, and further destabilises those nations and regions in which West-Russia relations are now being forcefully and brutally negotiated, be it the Middle East

or Ukraine. Russia might not really be the West's mortal enemy, but, such is the acceptability of Western anti-Russia sentiment, there seems to be an effort to turn it into just that.

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