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The Makings of a New Cold War

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Introduction

> Love, friendship and respect do not unite people as much as a common hatred for something
>
> (*Notebook of Anton Chekov*, 1987)[1]

What do we in 'the West' know about Russia? Do we know that it is the largest country in the world, with a surface area of over 17.1 million square kilometres, with 11 time zones, west to east, and with a diverse population, in terms of ethnicity and language, of 144 million? Do we know of its vast natural resources on which we are dependent? Do we know of its rich, artistic heritage – its literature, its music, its art and its cinema? Do we know of its long, turbulent history from the first century AD through to the ascendancy of the Tsars in the early seventeenth century and the emergence of the Russian Empire a century later? Do we know much about the Russian revolutions that brought radical change to the country in 1917 and, in the words of the American journalist, John Reid, 'shook the world' into a new way of thinking about Russia's political axis? No longer isolationist but internationalist and, arguably, more confrontational?

Gradually, the great divide in the world became less about different empires and alliances than between Russia, with its revolutionary ideas of Marxism and Communism, and the West and its twin ideologies of capitalism and liberal democracy. How much do we know about the history of mutual suspicion, mistrust and even hatred that marked the relationship between Russia and what developed into the greater Soviet Union (East) and us (West)? Do we know about the horrors of forced migrations and the collectivisation of farmland in the Soviet Union of the 1930s? Or the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War, once it became an ally of the West, in winning the war against Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime in Germany? Do

we know that the Soviet death toll in that war, of over 20 million people, civilians and military, far exceeded that of the rest of the Western allies, combined? Do we know about the nuclear bombing by the USA of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with a combined death toll of anything between 120,000 to 220,000 human souls, depending how one counts? Do we know about the nuclear arms race between the West and the Soviet Union? About the hardening of the divide between us? The Iron Curtain? The Berlin Wall? The Cuban Missile crisis? And the various other misunderstandings, accidents and near misses that could have ended it all, for all of us? Do we remember those television documentaries about what would happen in the event of a nuclear strike, or the public information advertisements advising people that, in the event of an incoming nuclear missile strike, we should hide behind a sandbag, close one's eyes and hope (in our dying seconds) that everything would work out fine?

Then again, do we know about the days of hope? The 1980s and the arrival of a new leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev ('Gorby') and his visits to the West? How he transformed the ways in which Western publics saw the Soviet Union, or the 'Evil Empire' as US President Ronald Reagan called it? Do we know about the revolutions that spread throughout Eastern Europe in 1989? The symbolic 'Fall of the Berlin Wall' in November of that year? And do we know or remember that on 25 December 1991, the red flag of the Soviet Union with its hammer and sickle, the symbol of the union of workers and peasants, was lowered on the Kremlin, Moscow, for the very last time? The Soviet Union was no more. The Cold War was over; the West was triumphant. But there was still a Russia and it entered into a decade of immense social, political and economic chaos. This was illuminated in many ways by the personality and style of the first president of the new Russian republic, Boris Yeltsin. In the space of two four-year terms, beginning in June 1991, he oversaw the transformation of Russia from a Stalinist command and control state to being a free market republic along Western lines. Yet he also oversaw the catastrophic transfer of wealth from the state into private hands – most worryingly in the oil, mineral, industrial and financial sectors – and the impoverishment of a large section of the population. However, Yeltsin did not see out the whole of his

second term as president. Increasingly unable to function in office due to ill health and alcoholism, he resigned on 31 December 1999, and was replaced on an interim basis by his prime minister, Vladimir S. Putin. Within three months, Putin prevailed against a divided and chaotic bloc of opposition parties – nationalists, communists and Western-facing liberals – to get elected as president of Russia on a majority of 52 per cent of the electorate. He was re-elected in 2004 but gave way constitutionally, in 2008, to a new candidate, Dmitry Medvedev, on the understanding that the new president would not run against him in the next contest, scheduled for 2012. In the interim period, the new administration approved an extension of the presidential term from four to six years, starting from 2012, allowing Putin to run for and win that new term and another renewed mandate in 2018. By the time that comes to a close, in 2024, Vladimir Putin will have been the effective ruler of Russia for 25 years. Whether he formally gives up power for good at that point is uncertain. He will be 72 years old and perhaps looking forward at that point to a long and happy retirement in the holiday resort of Sochi? Or perhaps he will find a way to extend his rule for another term?

In the 20 years he has been in power, Putin has emerged as a relatively powerful politician at home and abroad. He has used the chaos of domestic politics to establish himself as the only sensible choice for a people wanting sustainability in the economy and credibility in foreign affairs. He has presented himself as a strong man, a new Tsar Peter the Great, not afraid to face down the out-of-control oligarchs, who are widely blamed for the country's economic degradation. And he has not been afraid to face down the West and call their bluff, with their seeming determination to surround Russia and keep it locked down. This book will focus on the Western media image of Putin and Russia that emerged very quickly from the start of his first term as president in 2000.

STRUCTURE, METHOD AND MEDIA SAMPLES

At the heart of this book is a thematic analysis of how our media has responded to the rise of Putin to power, with reference to key

moments in his relationship with the West: from the start of the Second Chechen War, in 1999, to early 2019. The book begins, in Chapter 2, by setting the analysis in historical context, reviewing the role the Western media have played in our understanding of the Soviet Union, from the Russian Revolution of October 1917 to its dissolution in 1991. It will set out two related but distinct elements in the media's Cold War, interpretive framework: the 'enemy image' of the Soviet Union and how it was used in the West to make sense of its relationship with the Soviet Union. With that established, it then presents four chapters (Chapters 3 to 6) which examine different aspects of how the media have responded to the emergence from chaos in the 1990s of a new Russia determined to reassert its power and confidence under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin. Stretching across 20 years, the book focuses mainly on the daily press in the UK, with reference also to the *New York Times*. This delivered a total sample of 3,177 newspaper items, using the Nexis database of British daily newspapers and the *New York Times* online archive.

Chapter 3 analyses coverage of all five presidential elections in Russia since Putin came to power in 2000, including that in 2008 when he stood down according to constitutional obligation but became prime minister under the new president, Dmitry Medvedev. Its focus is primarily on the way in which Putin's image was constructed from the start in very negative Cold War terms (total number of items: 485).

Chapter 4 examines the reporting of Putin's relationship with his political opposition at home and abroad. The analysis includes four case studies, looking at coverage of the assassination in Moscow of two opposition figures: the journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, in 2006; and the politician, Boris Nemtsov, in 2015; and the fate of two former Russian intelligence officers based in Britain: the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London, 2006; and the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, in 2018 (total number of items: 656).

The next two chapters turn attention to Putin's relationship with the West. The analysis in Chapter 5 focuses on the reporting of the Russian leader in conflict and how the West responded to this. It

includes five case studies, looking at coverage of the opening phase of the Second Chechen War, 1999–2000; the Russo–Georgian War, 2008; Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and the downing of Malaysia Airways Flight MH17, in 2014; and Russia's support for President Bashar Assad, in 2012 (total number of items: 1,649).

Chapter 6 includes analyses of six case studies, looking at coverage of Putin's meetings with successive US presidents from Bill Clinton in 2000 to Donald Trump in 2018. It will highlight the way in which coverage of the Russian leader's summit meetings with Donald Trump marked something of a paradigm break, with even the conservative press taking a critical position towards the US President against the background of growing tensions between Europe and the USA over national security and defence spending (total number of items: 387).

The final chapter – 'The Makings of a New Cold War?' – draws on material from the samples stated above to assess the extent to which the press in Britain have established a new Cold War framework of interpretation for understanding the relationship between the West and Russia. The focus will be on the voices in the editorial pages – editorials, columns and guest columns – and how they compete to offer an analysis and explanation of this relationship. Is it merely specific to the disposition of Vladimir Putin as the Russian leader, locking him into a Cold War position as a threat to the West; in other words, is it a transient phase of relationship that will change again after President Putin finally stands down in 2024? Or does most of this editorial content offer an alternative analysis that looks beyond conceptions of Cold War to something more akin to the imperial struggles of the nineteenth century, in other words a 'Great Powers' game? Of course, the ultimate question is this: is there any alternative to these explanations, one that switches the focus from Russia to the West and challenges its actions and policies to offer a more critical and nuanced perspective on this long-running, problematic relationship?

2

The Cold War, the Media and the Enemy Image

> Having an enemy is important, not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one. … And so we are concerned here not so much with the almost natural phenomenon of identifying an enemy who is threatening us, but with the process of creating and demonizing the enemy.
>
> (Umberto Eco, 2013: 2)

The certainty for journalism throughout the Cold War was the bipolar world of East and West, Communism and capitalism, because it provided a framework of interpretation – a way of seeing the world and of reporting international relations – that conformed to predictable patterns and narrative outcomes. Pierre Bourdieu's idea of 'master patterns' is useful here, by which he means 'an infinite number of individual patterns directly applicable to specific situations' (1972: 192). The problem, Bourdieu argues, is that while such master patterns help us to sustain thought, they may also take the place of thought. While they should help us to master reality with minimum effort, 'they may also encourage those who rely on them not to bother to refer to reality' at all (Bourdieu, 1972: 192). This is a crucial point when we come to consider the role of the Western media during the Cold War. They constructed their Cold War imagery both through *and* within one such 'master pattern' or interpretative framework. If we accept this, we have to make a distinction between the actual framework, the 'deep structures' of thought and action, and the instrumental 'enemy image', which served to rationalise it. It

would be wrong to argue that they are one and the same. The Cold War was characterised by alternating periods of hostility and détente and these determined the functional utility of the enemy image. But periods of détente did not signify crisis in the fundamental ideological framework; that remained constant throughout the conflict.

THE ENEMY IMAGE AND ITS ORIGINS

As George Gerbner argues, in the context of the Cold War, the enemy image 'has deep institutional sources and broad social consequences. It projects the fears of a system by dramatising and exaggerating the dangers that seem to lurk around every corner. It works to unify its subjects and mobilises them for action' (1991: 31) and, as Edward Thompson argues, helped dehumanise the 'other side' (1982). The enemy image has been projected across a range of literary and media forms: in popular fiction, press and broadcasting, television drama and cinema. They have projected images of the superpowers in simplistic binary opposition of good and evil: Uncle Sam versus Ivan the Terrible, the Eagle versus the Bear (an image used in a Pentagon video on the arms race), the Promised Land versus the Evil Empire. In the Soviet Union, the images were reversed. The West represented the kind of economic and social inequalities that the Russian Revolution sought to overthrow. Its shortcomings were minimised with persistent reference to capitalist exploitation and Western imperialism.

The sources of the Cold War enemy image are rooted in the West's response to the October Revolution in 1917. Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz (1920) carried out a content analysis of the *New York Times*' coverage of the revolution and its aftermath, over a three-year period from March 1917 to March 1920. They found that it shifted in tone and disposition in the sample period, from naïve excitement and optimism as the newspaper tried to work out if these momentous events, two revolutions in a matter of months, would see Russia stay on the allied side in the last phase of the First World War. But the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution and the failed Allied intervention in 1918, signalled a critical fracture in relations between

East and West. The authors found that the newspaper appeared perpetually convinced that the new regime would collapse – an assumption founded in nothing more than wishful thinking. Thus, it reported 30 times that Soviet power was on the wane; 20 times that counter-revolution was imminent; 14 times that regime collapse was underway; four times that Lenin and Trotsky were ready to flee Russia; three times that they had actually fled; three times that Lenin had been imprisoned; once that he was about to retire; and once that Lenin had been assassinated (Lippmann and Merz, 1920: 10–11). Reports of 'the Bolshevik menace' and 'the Red Peril' had mounted to such an extent that in the last year of the sample period, the *New York Times* was suggesting something approaching an invasion of the world. Lenin was apparently planning invasions of India, Poland and Persia, while also preparing for war with Britain (Lippmann and Merz, 1920: 40). Lippmann and Merz attributed this kind of reporting to organisational factors in the practice of professional journalism, the key theoretical impulse of their study. But what is interesting for the purposes of this study is the way in which the *New York Times* dramatised so much of its coverage in terms of the actions of individuals rather than international or geopolitical competition. In other words, the Russian Revolution was staged and promoted by the individual whims or the ideological obsessions of Lenin and Trotsky rather than something made possible by deeper, historical processes, for example, the upheaval of world war and the collapse of the old empires including the Tsarist empire itself.

But the reporting of the *New York Times*, as shown by Lippmann and Merz, was not exceptional. As Philip Knightley (2004) shows, most Western journalists and their newspapers appeared to ignore the causes and circumstances of the revolution and revolutionary politics and failed to report developments with any depth of analysis or insight; and many were compromised by their involvement in the subversive activities of Western intelligence agencies. They were reporting, mostly from outside Russia, that the Bolsheviks were doomed to fail and were without popular support. The Revolution's first great test was the allied intervention of 1918, known in mainstream, Western historiography as the Russian Civil War. Western

reporting of the intervention was heavily censored and only reports sympathetic to its aims were allowed. Most dispatches, whether about Bolshevik thinking and strategy, or the course of the intervention, relied on sources close to Western governments or exiled Russian groups hostile to the revolution. With few exceptions, coverage relied on anti-Bolshevik hysteria based on rumours and black propaganda. Reporting fell into the same pattern of falsehood and exaggeration that emerged in coverage of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Defeats of the Western alliance were reported as victories, while low morale and poor discipline in the allied armies were not reported at all. The Red Army on the other hand was reported to be near collapse and defeat even as it was in fact rolling back the allied intervention (Knightley, 2004: 142).

It was rare to find voices of dissent in the coverage. Arthur Ransome of the *London Daily News* eventually disowned self-interested sources, especially the British secret services, to report on a much more objective level. He wrote that: 'It is folly to deny the actual fact that the Bolsheviks do hold a majority of the politically active population' (Knightley, 2004: 133). He argued that the allied attitude to the revolution was wrong and that it only bred Bolshevik suspicions about the real intention of the allies (Knightley, 2004: 135).

The radical American reporter, John Reed, and Morgan Philips Price of the *Manchester Guardian* distinguished themselves with comprehensive and intelligent coverage. Philips Price reported events at the centre of Bolshevik power, providing insights into how the Russian Revolution was faring in face of the Western intervention. His reports were structured not around rumour and propaganda but were based on first-hand observations and interviews with the leadership. Both journalists served their readers with first-hand, immediate and non-judgemental accounts of a revolution in the making (see Philips Price, 1997; Reed, 1926).

Ever since the revolution, the most negative and virulent images prevailed over relatively short periods of crisis in US–Russian/Soviet relations. A longer, historical perspective on how each side defined the other points to a more dynamic process of political and cultural conflict and struggle on all fronts of the Cold War. While the Cold

War saw the picture at its blackest extreme, other periods of détente witnessed mixed images and shifting perceptions. The propaganda was successful in concealing a history of more 'normalised' relations between the USA and Russia as competing 'great powers', periods when they engaged in much more open economic, political and cultural exchange. Everette Dennis *et al.* (1991) work within a broad historical and comparative framework to examine changes in how the USA and Russia/Soviet Union saw each other from the nineteenth century. For example, while condemning the inequalities of American capitalism, Leninist journalism would also praise its productive forces, its technological advances and its great engineering feats (Zassoursky, 1991; Mickiewicz, 1991). Conversely, in the US media, images of stupid and violent Russians would mix with stories of Soviet–American cooperation and friendship, especially during the Second World War when the alliance with the Soviet Union was so crucial (Gerbner, 1991; Lukosiunas, 1991; Richter, 1991; Zassoursky, 1991). Such periods of Cold War thaw, or détente, brought with them a certain transformation of mutual image and perception and even significant political progress, the most notable and interesting being the ascendency in 1985 of Mikhail Gorbachev as a new type of Soviet leader, one who in the words of British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the West 'could do business with'. Gorbachev understood that the Soviet Union could no longer survive the extreme demands of its Cold War competition with the West and that it needed to radically reform its economy and society by way of what he described as *perestroika* and *glasnost*. In both personality and intent, Gorbachev projected a positive image and intent to the West, but few predicted the far-reaching consequences this was to have in just a matter of six years.

Perestroika, or 'reconstruction', referred to the idea that the problems with the Soviet economy, the gap, for example, between supply and demand, could only be solved by a radical rethink of economic policy. *Glasnost*, or 'openness', referred to a new period of liberalism in Soviet life and culture in which criticism and debate were allowed as long as they were constructive, and as long as people suggested better alternatives for making the revolution work for the

betterment of all the people. *Glasnost* was the means by which the public could be mobilised into supporting the programme of reforms proposed under *perestroika* and projecting a more positive image to the world was a vital part of the task. Not least among these changes was the transformation of the Soviet leader from Evil Emperor to Nice Guy. In the image-conscious West, Mikhail Gorbachev achieved 'superstar' status. Compared to his predecessors, he was young, photogenic and charismatic. But, as he toured the capitals of the West to popular acclaim, he became a propaganda liability for the West. Take, for example, his performance vis-à-vis Ronald Reagan during the Moscow Superpower Summit in May 1988. One of the highlights of the summit in this respect was his joint walkabout with Ronald Reagan around the Red Square. Here is how BBC News and ITN compared the two men:

> *Newscaster:* 'Mr Gorbachev saw the chance to win a few hearts and grabbed it with both hands (TAKES A CHILD IN HIS ARMS). All Mr Reagan managed was a handshake. Like before, and more so here in Moscow, Mr Gorbachev is tending to out-stage Mr Reagan. He's a lot quicker with the repartee although Mr Reagan still scores the odd point' (REAGAN PUTS AN ARM ROUND GORBACHEV'S SHOULDER).
>
> (BBC, *Newsnight*, 31 May 1988)

> *Reporter*: 'For all the world it looked like the two superpower leaders were campaigning together on a joint ticket, Mr Gorbachev producing a small boy from the crowd and bearing him aloft for a handshake with the President in true American election style. Mr Reagan appeared so taken with the moment that he threw his arm around the Soviet leader's shoulders.'
>
> (ITN, 31 May 1988, 17.45)

On the last day of the Moscow Summit, Gorbachev held a long news conference, speaking to the Western media on all issues, sometimes without notes; and even stopping to reorganise the seating arrangements in order to surmount problems with the simultane-

ous-translation facility. The event contrasted with Ronald Reagan's poorly attended news conference at the US Embassy, where the president appeared to struggle with the issues and was criticised for selecting favoured US journalists for questions. The comparison was highlighted in some sections of the British news media. ITN described Gorbachev's performance as 'an extraordinary tour de force without a note' (1 June 1988, 13.00). The BBC observed 'a man in control: quick-witted, dynamic, formidable' (*Newsnight*, 1 June 1988, 22.30). The newspapers on 2 June also compared performances. The *Guardian* reported that 'Gorbachev was masterful and … Reagan was genially feeble, even by his own modest standards'. The *Independent* judged Reagan's conference as 'deeply embarrassing' and 'a flop'; although a more sympathetic account in *The Times* concluded that his 'rambling answers, inconclusive sentences, hesitations, and apparent difficulty in grasping the point of many questions' were 'due to fatigue'. Gorbachev's popularity and credibility rating in Europe was rising as Reagan's was flagging: the US leadership role was under symbolic assault. This was especially significant at a time when NATO planners were arguing for 'modernisation' of the alliance's nuclear forces in Western Europe to defend against the Soviet threat.

The Soviets also showed they had learned some useful lessons in Western-style news management. When in Moscow for the superpower summit, President Reagan was scheduled to meet dissidents at the US Embassy. But the Kremlin announced a major news conference with the famous dissident, Andrei Sakharov, to take place a few days later, on 3 June 1988. At the same time, they set up an interview for the Western news media with controversial Soviet politician, Boris Yeltsin. That evening, the main news bulletins were dominated by the dramatic attack Yeltsin made on conservative members of the Politburo. It was reported as an exciting, sensational departure from the normal conduct of Soviet politics, and as a story in its own right. Yeltsin, unknown to Western publics at the time, came across as a colourful personality with an interesting story to tell. His 'struggle for the people against the system' engrossed journalists and 'experts' on the Soviet Union alike. In marked contrast,