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How the Kremlin Created a Collective Sharikov

By Alexei Bayer

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As is well-known, great novels remain relevant long after they are written. Even in the highly mobile U.S., "The Scarlet Letter" and "Moby Dick" give a valid picture of the contemporary American character. In Russia, where momentous upheavals tend to leave a surprisingly small mark on the mentality of its citizens, the works of such writers as Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and Nikolai Gogol seem to have been written yesterday.

And then there is Mikhail Bulgakov. His novel "Heart of a Dog" is the story of Professor Preobrazhensky, who implants vital human organs into a dog as part of a medical experiment. He transforms a sweet stray into a nasty, pushy oaf, someone known in Russian as a kham, or boor. Named Sharikov, the ex-canine promptly begins to harass and lecture Preobrazhensky.

Written in 1925, this caustic satire responded to the issues of the day, when thousands of half-educated Sharikovs were scaling the rungs of the new Soviet bureaucracy and wielded power over engineers, doctors, artists and other professionals. Regrettably, the leitmotif

of "Heart of a Dog" is equally relevant to the new brand of anti-Americanism that the Kremlin has spread over the past decade.

Until the collapse of communism, the U.S. maintained that its opponent in the Cold War was not the people but the Soviet government, which oppressed its citizens behind the Iron Curtain. Washington's most effective weapon against Moscow was not its huge arsenal of nuclear-tipped missiles but the information it beamed into the Soviet Union through Radio Liberty and Voice of America as well as a handful of publications that debunked the myths of Soviet propaganda.

The hope was that when the people realized that their government deprived them of elementary human rights and kept them in poverty with constant shortages and long lines, communism would collapse. This is exactly what happened, and as predicted, free enterprise and integration into the world economy allowed Russia to achieve the kind of material well-being and availability of goods it had not seen since around 1913.

But almost immediately after the official Soviet anti-U.S. propaganda ended in 1991, a new anti-Americanism started to develop at the grass-roots level. At first, Washington was accused of undermining Russia's sovereignty and stealing its natural resources. Yet as oil prices climbed and petrodollars poured into Russia in the 2000s, this argument could no longer hold water, even though there are still nuts in Russia claiming that perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union were part of a CIA plot to enslave the Russian people.

More interesting — and consonant with the mood of the day — is the new anti-Americanism taking shape today. It sees the conflict between Russia and the West in moral terms. According to this view, Russia is the last great hope of Christian morality in a corrupt, decadent and sexually perverted world led by the U.S. This is the theme of the resurgent official Orthodox Christianity and, by some weird logic, the basis for the recent law banning the adoption of Russian orphans by U.S. parents. A surprising number of Russians believe that Americans use Russian children to get welfare, force them to become homosexual or even — harking back to Bulgakov's novel — cut them up for organs.

This narrative is straight out of "Heart of a Dog." Over the four postwar decades, Washington strove to make Russians free and prosperous. Once the goal was achieved, a collective Sharikov emerged from deep within the Kremlin laboratories, one that began to spout crazy tales of U.S. evil plots worthy of medieval blood libel.

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