The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Paradox of American Russophobia

By Sean Guillory

July 03, 2019

Given that Russophobia suggests an irrational fear of Russia's "Otherness," how much of this is really about Russia?

Pixabay / MT

Tackling something as conceptually vague as Russophobia requires a measure of intellectual dexterity. Its use and meaning has become totally subsumed into today's information war.

A glaring example is the recent report from the Russian Foreign Ministry. It's a sloppily compiled laundry list of slights in American reporting on Russiagate, and frankly, doesn't deserve serious engagement. But thanks to Moscow's reflexive cry of Russophobia, some critics merely reduce it to a "weapon" that is "whitewashing destructive Kremlin behavior."

Russophobia as deflection has been countered with a blanket denial of its existence.

The term, however, deserves engagement when scraped of its infowar muck. Its efficacy is in the ways it speaks to national identity, the construction of civilizational borders, how the

"West" imagines Russia and how vis-à-vis Russia, the "West" imagines itself.

The Russian government's current use of Russophobia is nothing new.

The Russian charge of Russophobia has been in use since 1867, when Fyodor Tyutchev coined it, ironically in French, to chastize Russian liberals who demonized the autocracy and "cherish[ed] Europe." Ivan Ilyin argued that Russophobia underpinned European desires to dismember and exploit Russia.

Today's Kremlin echoes much of Tyutchev and Ilyin in its use of Russophobia to discredit its domestic and foreign critics and discursively discipline Russian identity.

Related article: What's the Deal With Russophobia Anyway

Yet, at the same time, this doesn't mean Russophobia doesn't exist. It has a historical genealogy outside of Russia that can't be ignored. It's origins in the English language trace to the early 19th century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of its initial usages was by John Stuart Mill in 1836. Mill wrote "the real cause" for increasing British military budgets was that "Ministers are smitten with the epidemic disease of Russo-phobia."

One of the founding documents of Western Russophobia, the spurious "Testament of Peter the Great," continued to have resonance in the mid-20th century, and was even referenced by President Harry Truman in 1948 to explain Soviet foreign policy.

What is Russophobia? This is the crucial question.

Not all anti-Russian sentiment classifies as Russophobia. Emphasis should be placed on the *phobia* part of the word. According to one definition, a phobia is an "irrational fear" and "may result from displacing an internal conflict to an external object symbolically related to the conflict." The history of anti-Russian sentiment we see in states subject to Russian/Soviet domination are not always irrational given their tumultuous history.

Taking phobia as a means of displacement as a core tenet, I prefer to narrowly define Russophobia as when Russia, its government or its people are positioned as civilizational threats.

Taking Russiagate as an example, it is not Russophobic to say that the Russian government interfered in the 2016 U.S. election. It is Russophobic to claim that Russia "has penetrated the very foundations of our democracy."

When Russia is posited as antithetical to "Western values," considered a dangerous infection on the American body politic, individual Russians are inherently seen as a collective hive mind doing Putin's bidding, or when Russia serves as a symbolic repository to explain domestic crisis, these, in my opinion, are forms of Russophobia.

Given that Russophobia suggests an irrational fear of Russia's "Otherness," how much of this is really about Russia?

Discourses of otherness are always expressions of identity and power. The tendency to paint

Russia as eternally backward, barbarous, despotic and even evil, is fundamental to the "West's" construction of itself. Just note how the imagined borders of "Europe" or the "West" have shifted over the last century based on membership in and aspirations to join NATO/EU vis-a-via Russia.

Russia, in the words of one historian, serves as a "dark double" through which the "West" tempers its own darkness while simultaneously blackening the Russian Other. Russophobia serves as one of many discursive mechanisms in which the "West" consolidates itself, sublimates internal difference and reaffirms its universality.

One of the most controversial aspects of Russophobia is whether it's a form of racism. Russians are not a race. However, Russophobia utilizes racist language and concepts. I'm increasingly inclined to see it as racism.

Not so much because of its discriminatory and derogatory views toward Russians, but more because Russophobic rhetoric casts Russias as a race — an undifferentiated, historically immutable group in culture, biology, values and interests.

Related article: Russia to Re-Educate 'Brainwashed' Youth in Patriotic Camps

The racist moment is best seen in former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper's comment that "the historical practices of the Russians, who typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique" and that it's in Russian "genes to be opposed, diametrically opposed, to the United States and Western democracies."

Such notions of biologically determined, collective behavior *elevate* Russians to a racial category. This too is part of an older history of 19th and early 20th century notions of Slavic people as a distinct racial group inhabiting the grey zone of American "whiteness."

There is a paradox at the heart of American Russophobia. It is far more narcissistic than its European variants. Like most objects of narcissism, Russia serves as both an object of American desire and a subject of disgust. Desire in that the United States craves similitude from Russia to reconfirm the universality of American values.

At the same time, the United States is repulsed by Russia's halfhearted pantomimes or its outright rejection of American universalism.

Russia exists in a permanent liminal state within the American imagination. It is always in a state of becoming — becoming more democratic (the 1860s, 1905, 1917, or 1990s) or more authoritarian (the 1880s, 1920s, 2000s).

It is this anticipation which elicits so much American yearning and distaste. American discourse posits both a synchronic Russia — a historically inert Russia — and a diachronic Russia — a Russia that must progress.

It is this slippage between historical stasis and progress that makes Russia so easily slide from an object of American mania to a subject of American menace.

Interestingly, the denial of Russophobia plays a similar role in American discourse as claims of its ubiquitousness does in Russia: disciplining politics.

As British Minister to Washington Sir John Balfour said in 1947 in reference to U.S. congressional reluctance to approve the Marshall Plan, "The high pitch of Russophobia should go a long way towards keeping the unintelligent and emotional in line."

This high pitch rings in our ears again. Detractors often rebuke Russophobia as Russian propaganda, justifying the Russian narrative or behavior, or accuse slanders of being "agents" or "useful idiots" of Putin.

These are typical and banal claims on the surface. But scratch beneath them and the notion that there is a Russian narrative, Russian behavior or unwitting agents of Putin are some of the core tropes of the Russophobic mind.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/07/03/the-paradox-of-american-russophobia-a66241