

The Face of the Enemy

DAVID S. FOGLESONG

FOR MANY YEARS one man has been the enemy Americans have hated most. Not Osama bin Laden, whose time in the spotlight was relatively brief. Not Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State who has inspired and applauded terrorist attacks in the United States as well as Europe. Not Kim Jong-un, who has boasted about being able to hit the United States with intercontinental ballistic missiles, but who provokes more ridicule than fear.

Increasingly over the last two decades, the loathed archenemy has been Vladimir Putin. As early as February 2000, less than six weeks after Putin became president of Russia, a cartoonist for the *New York Review of Books* depicted him as a maniacal monarch with menacing claws, clutching a missile (fig. 1). While there was real cause for concern then about Russian forces' indiscriminate use of force as they crushed a radical Islamist insurgency in Chechnya, the cartoon's vilification of Putin sharply contrasted with the views of US officials who met him that year and found him to be an intelligent, pragmatic leader—one who would go on to provide extensive assistance to the US war in Afghanistan after the Islamist terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Putin's keen interest in a strategic and economic partnership with the George W. Bush administration did not win him many friends among American intellectuals, journalists, and cartoonists. In June 2007, a few months after Putin had criticized the "almost uncontained hyper-use of force" by the United States in Iraq and elsewhere, the *Boulder Camera* published a cartoon depicting him as a murderous thug and the negation of American liberty and democracy. Cartoonist John Sherffius drew Putin in the stance of the Statue of Liberty, holding a hammer and sickle in place of the torch in one hand, clutching a hit list of victims of assassination in the other, and wearing a crown of missiles. In August 2008, after Georgian forces attacked South



Fig. 1. *Vladimir Putin* by David Levine.
From the *New York Review of Books*, 10 February 2000.
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Ossetia, killing Russian peacekeepers, and Russia drove the Georgian troops back toward Tbilisi, a syndicated cartoonist in Arkansas portrayed Putin celebrating the Russian victory with a toast to a portrait of Stalin—as if Putin, who dedicated a memorial to the victims of Stalin’s terror in 2017, was a devotee of Stalin.

In the following years, the vilification of Putin became even more widespread. Especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, American magazine covers have repeatedly featured his face in the role of archvillain. *Newsweek* labeled him “The Pariah,” called

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him “The West’s Public Enemy Number One,” and warned that he “is preparing for World War III.” *National Review* depicted him as a gigantic spider with hairy legs sprawling across the globe and stressed the need to check his expansionist designs. *Time* was even more persistent, placing menacing images of Putin on numerous covers. One showed Putin looming over other “strongman” rulers (fig. 2), suggesting that he spawned Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Another promoted the theory that Putin controlled President Donald Trump by cleverly combining features of the two men in one photoshopped image so it appeared that Putin actually inhabited Trump’s body (fig. 3).

Unfortunately, the extreme animus against Putin has not been limited to publishers seeking to sell magazines with sensational covers. In January 2018 Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) and his staff on the Foreign Relations Committee published a report that inveighed against Putin’s “paranoid pathology” and compared his “relentless assault” on America to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. Other Democratic politicians launching presidential campaigns have made Putin a special target of their anger and a symbol of all the “demagogues,” “kleptocrats,” and “oligarchs” around the world—the locus of evil.

One might have thought that the long-awaited release of the report of special counsel Robert Mueller, who could not find evidence of a conspiracy between Putin and the Trump campaign, would have tempered the vilification. But in April 2019, after Mueller submitted his report, *Time* simply shifted its focus to “Russia’s *Other Plot*.” (fig. 4). Its bloodred cover depicted Putin standing behind a globe, staring intently at his “growing empire of rogue states,” from Iran and Syria to southern Africa, Venezuela, Peru, Cuba, and Nicaragua—a diverse array of states where Russian influence ranges from substantial to negligible.

Although the vilification of Putin has not reached the level of ferocity of the “Two Minutes Hate” in George Orwell’s 1984, the demonization has been extraordinarily intense and enduring. True,



Fig. 4. *Time*, Copyright © 15 April 2019.
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American journalists and politicians have impugned the leaders of many other foreign nations—from Kaiser Wilhelm II and Emperor Hirohito to Saddam Hussein—yet the incitement of hatred has typically been limited to prewar and wartime periods. So, what accounts for the unusually persistent vilification of Putin, and how should it be set in historical perspective?

As social scientists such as Sam Keen and Michael Rogin have explained, political demonology and the psychology of enmity have hinged on the projection onto an enemy of a “disowned darkness”—ambitions, lusts, and misdeeds that conflict with the desired image of the self. Thus, the enemy is used as a scapegoat to deflect attention from actions or problems that cannot be reconciled with an individual or national identity. As David Finlay observes in *Enemies in Politics* (1967), “In the images we maintain, our virtues—or the nation’s—are

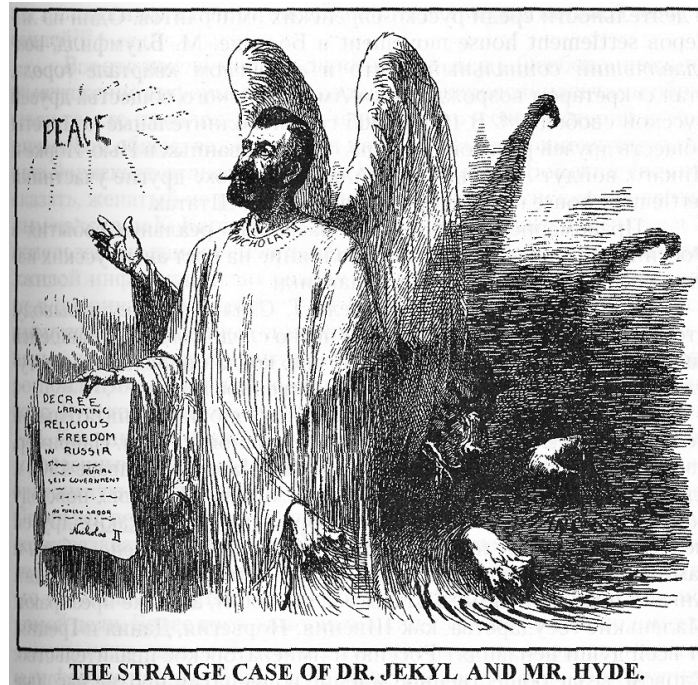


Fig. 5. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 17 May 1903.

magnified, while our sins tend to be blocked out. Conversely, the evils of the enemy are exaggerated, while any virtues he may possess are ignored.”

When American magazines fix public attention on Russian global aggression and American presidential contenders highlight how they will confront Putin’s malevolent meddling, then, we must ask what is being obscured, including the facts that the \$700 billion US military budget is ten times larger than Russia’s, that US military forces are involved in many more countries than are Russia’s soldiers, that the United States has killed far more innocent civilians in foreign nations than Russia has in the twenty-first century, and that US policy toward post-Soviet Russia has hinged for decades on a presumed right to influence the country’s political development and choices of leaders. That does not mean that Russian actions must be excused or that Putin is a saint. It does mean that we should reflect on the motives and consequences of the fomenting of enmity.



Fig. 6. *Chicago News*, reprinted in *Public Opinion*, 28 May 1903.

The contemporary castigation of Putin and Russia has deep historical roots. Understanding the present-day dynamics requires awareness of a long tradition of making Russian rulers out to be monsters. Consider the following examples.

In reaction to the massacre of forty-nine Jews at Kishinev in 1903, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* portrayed Czar Nicholas II as personally culpable, showing him as having Satan's wings and unmasking his false pretense of an angelic devotion to religious freedom and peace (fig. 5). In reality, as Steven Zipperstein has shown in *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (2018), neither Nicholas II nor other top Russian leaders instigated the slaughter, which was incited by local Bessarabian activists. Yet, at the time, the mobilization of indignant outrage at Russian misrule and revolting cruelty served a useful purpose, namely, to deflect attention from racial violence in America. As the *Chicago News* commented with another cartoon in 1903, the butchering of innocent Jews could be held up as much more shocking

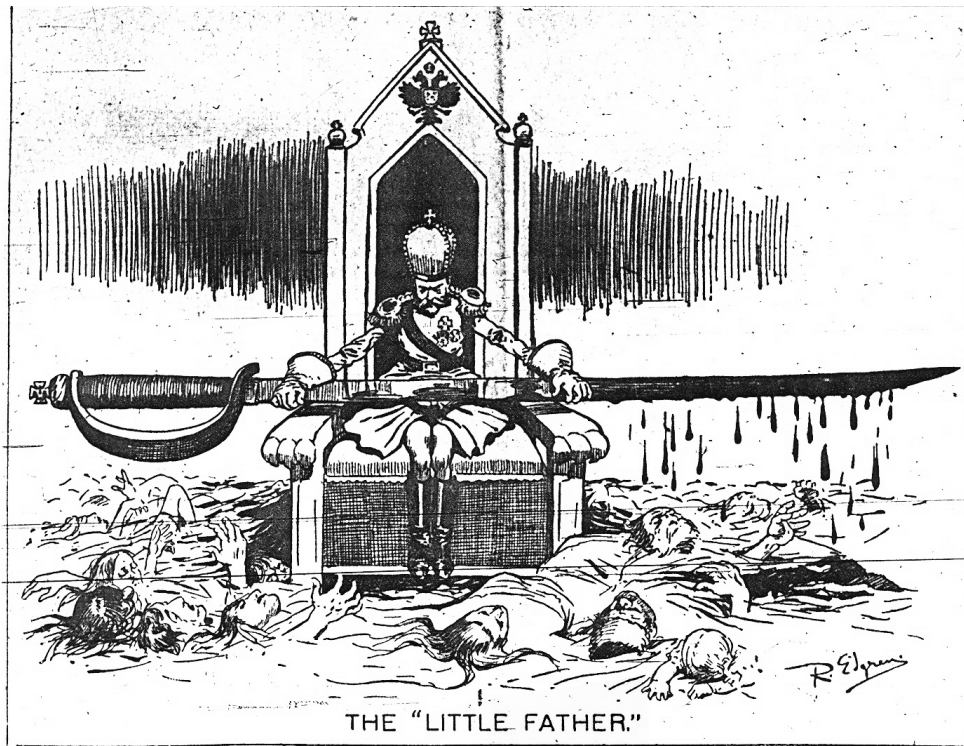


Fig. 7. *New York World*, 25 January 1905.

than the lynching of a Negro in America, which drew criticism from Europe (fig. 6). A cartoon for the *Brooklyn Eagle* made the same point in a different way, satirizing Nicholas II for shedding tears over a lynching in Delaware while rejecting an American petition about the Kishinev pogrom. Together such cartoons demonstrated how it had become habitual to divert concerns about racism in America by focusing antipathy on anti-Semitism in Russia—a diversion that prompted repeated complaints from African American leaders in an era when a hundred black people were lynched each year and race riots killed many others from Atlanta, Georgia, to Springfield, Illinois.

In January 1905, after Russian soldiers shot hundreds of peaceful protesters in St. Petersburg on Bloody Sunday, many Americans again blamed Nicholas II personally. The *New York World* published the most searing indictment, a depiction of the diminutive czar on his



Fig. 8. *New York World*, 13 September 1924.

throne, holding an enormous sword dripping blood onto the bodies of his victims (fig. 7). In reality, Nicholas II had left the capital for his country residence before the protest march, after having been assured by police officials that the situation was under control. The czar did not order the soldiers, untrained in crowd control, to fire on the demonstrators as they approached their lines.

The Russian Revolutions of 1917 changed the targets of American loathing but not the tendency to view leaders of Russia as depraved villains and the opposites of American values. In 1921, as the United States maintained a policy of refusing to recognize the pariah Soviet government, the *New York World* published a cartoon by Rollin Kirby of Uncle Sam looking scornfully at Leon Trotsky, a deceptive demagogue with a bomb under his arm and the torch of the Third

International (or Comintern) in his hand. While Trotsky was indeed an ardent promoter of world revolution, what was most striking about the depiction was the typically misleading association of Bolsheviks with bomb-throwing anarchists and the sarcastic use of the halo (an allusion to the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement of 1921 approved by the British prime minister David Lloyd George). In contrast to the more pragmatic European states that expanded commerce and established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, the United States persevered with its moral condemnation of the atheist regime, whose darkness was repeatedly contrasted to American light.

Ironically, the same Pulitzer prize-winning cartoonist who caricatured Trotsky for the Democratic-leaning *New York World* three years later attacked the way the Republican nominee for vice president, Charles Dawes, tried to link the Democratic and Progressive candidates with the scarecrow of Red Revolution (fig. 8). Less than a decade after the Bolshevik Revolution, the polemical pattern was in place. The demonization of Russia—which many scholars have associated with the post-1945 Cold War—had become deeply engrained in American political culture. For nearly a century, down to the present, domestic political opponents have been linked to actual or imagined foreign foes, especially Russian ones.

Of course, some Soviet leaders—particularly Joseph Stalin—fully deserved condemnation for monstrous violence. Yet what is most striking about American representations of Stalin is how abruptly they could change when it suited American interests. In the most glaring illustration of that dynamic, *Time* made Stalin “man of the year” twice in three years—as a villain in 1940 for having signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler and as a hero in 1943 for having withstood the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union (figs. 9 and 10).

There is nothing surprising about cartoonists exaggerating or distorting the features of figures they draw; that is their craft. Yet precisely because of the extreme nature of the distortion the cartoons discussed here make blatantly obvious tendencies that have been somewhat more subtly expressed in newspaper editorials or political rhetoric—especially tendencies to make stark moral judgments about

Fig. 9. *Time*,
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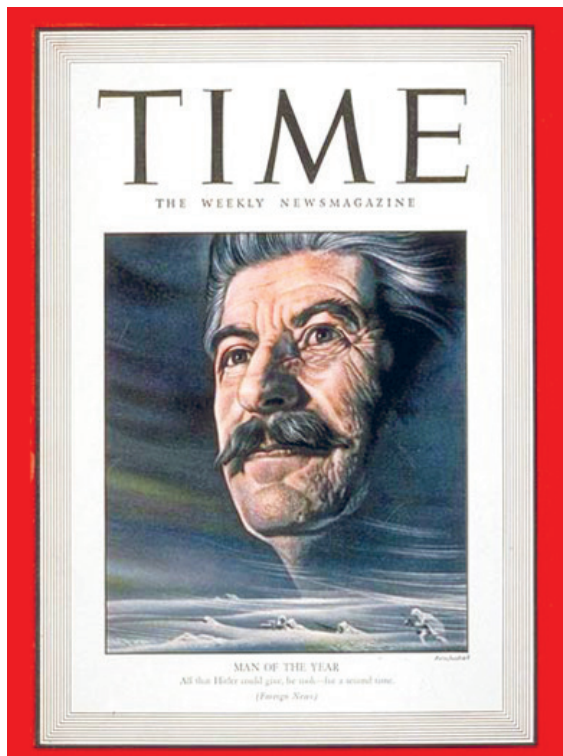
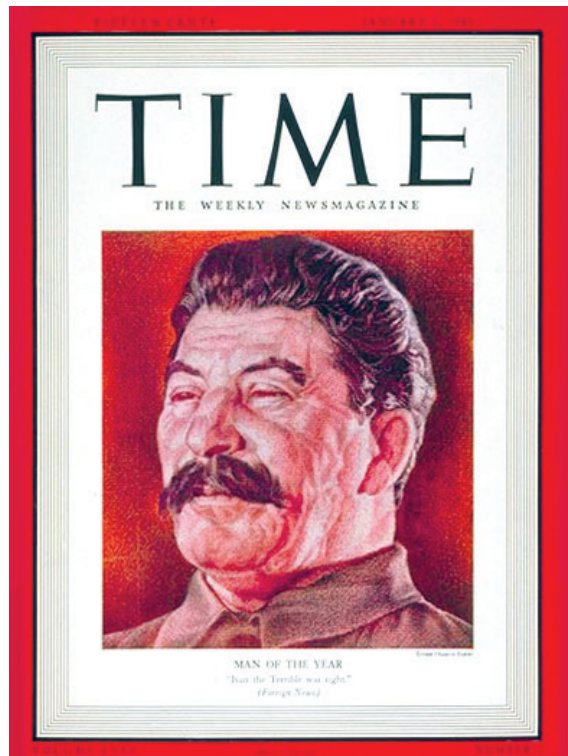


Fig. 10. *Time*,
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complex foreign countries and to invest Russian-American relations with Manichaen meaning.

Why does the vilification of Putin matter for present and future US policies toward Russia? Those who have been at the forefront of the condemnation of Putin, such as the former ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul, have insisted that constructive dialogue and cooperative relations with Russia are inherently impossible as long as Putin remains in power. Since Putin won reelection to another six-year term as Russia's president in March 2018, that means no improvement in relations can be envisioned before 2024. In the meantime, the costly modernization of the two nations' nuclear arsenals will proceed, spurring a destabilizing arms race even as the countries' ships and planes nearly collide in incidents that could lead to dangerous escalation. A clear-eyed, unsentimental, realistic engagement in dialogue with Russia is therefore needed.

Implicit in much of the castigation of Putin has been an assumption that his replacement by a different Russian leader would resolve the problems that have plagued American-Russian relations. Yet, as Tony Wood has pointed out in *Russia Without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War* (2018), Putin's departure is unlikely to alter the basic character of an authoritarian system established in the 1990s under his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. Although American politicians and journalists lionized Yeltsin as a heroic democrat and free-market reformer, when, in 1999, NATO expanded into Eastern Europe and bombed Russia's historic ally Serbia, Yeltsin became furious with President Bill Clinton. He named Putin as his successor in great part because he felt Russia needed a leader with a steel backbone. Far from being a rabid chauvinist, as he is often caricatured, Putin has objected to US policies that almost any Russian leader would have opposed—especially the continued eastward expansion of NATO. And he has been bitterly criticized by ultranationalists for being too moderate and restrained.

Will Xi Jinping and China take the place of Putin and Russia in the American demonological imagination in the coming years? There were many indications in the summer of 2019 that that might

happen. Mitt Romney, who called Russia America's "number one geopolitical foe" as he campaigned for president in 2012, declared in his first speech as a US senator this June that now "China is poised to assume that distinction." FBI Director Christopher Wray warned Congress in July that China poses "a more severe counterintelligence threat" than any other country. In *China's Vision of Victory (And Why America Must Win)* (2019), Jonathan Ward, a defense consultant in Washington, claims that China is now reverting to its original communist ideology, is pursuing a "position of superiority among all nations," and has no intention of "sharing Asia or the world with the United States." Ward's alarmist book, which is endorsed and introduced by a former commander of the US Pacific Fleet, emphasizes that "America stands in striking contrast to the things for which [Beijing] stands." Shifting his focus from Russia, Michael McFaul proclaimed in July that "the United States is losing the ideological battle with China" and must "regain the upper hand" in that struggle. Even more dramatically, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that China's detention and re-education of Muslims in camps in Xinjiang (not the American imprisonment, torture, and killing of Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere) "is truly the stain of the century."

By August 2019, when a Pew survey found that equal percentages of Americans (24 percent) name China and Russia as the greatest threat to the United States, Xi Jinping began to be a prominent target of American vilification. A cover of *Foreign Affairs*, the most prestigious journal of the US foreign policy establishment, put Xi at the front and center of a clutch of autocrats (including Putin) who "practice a brutal, smashmouth politics, a personalized authoritarianism."

However, the demonization of China may be limited by the extensive economic connections between the two countries (which dwarf American-Russian trade) and by the lack of a tradition of seeing Chinese as akin to Americans. It was the supposed similarities of Russia to America—white, Christian empires with histories of frontier expansion and near-simultaneous emancipation of slaves or serfs—that created a foundation for treating Russia as an imaginary twin in the nineteenth century and then a "dark double" in the twentieth.

China's racial and cultural distance from the United States may make it more difficult for Sinophobes to mobilize and sustain the special kind of antipathy that has been directed toward Russia for so long.

Instead of debating which country is the greatest threat to the United States, Americans should focus above all on major problems that require international cooperation, including the high costs of an arms race, the dangers from nuclear proliferation, and climate change. That will require humility, restraint, and patient dialogue rather than the arrogant, self-justifying vilification of foreign leaders that has marked the first decades of the twenty-first century.

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