American Dreams and Red Nightmares:
Popular Media and the Framing of a Cold War Enemy, 1949-1962

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

Meredith K. Hohe
November 2010
© 2010 Meredith K. Hohe. All rights reserved.
This thesis titled
American Dreams and Red Nightmares:
Popular Media and the Framing of a Cold War Enemy, 1949-1962

by

MEREDITH K. HOHE

has been approved for
the Department of History
and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Katherine Jellison
Professor of History

Benjamin M. Ogles
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
Abstract

HOHE, MEREDITH K., M.A., November 2010, History

American Dreams and Red Nightmares: Popular Media and the Framing of a Cold War Enemy, 1949-1962 (131 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Katherine Jellison

The visual image of the Soviet Union during the early Cold War period played a significant role in contributing to average Americans’ understanding of their new national nemesis. However, while films, television, and popular magazines all helped to frame understanding of the Soviet threat, the portrait of the enemy they displayed was not a simplistic narrative of enemy demonization. Popular media both warned against and mocked the Soviet communist leadership. They portrayed the Soviet military and forces of scientific and technological production as both a leviathan of epic proportions and a lie built upon thievery and espionage. In focusing on the threat posed by Soviet agents working undercover within the United States, visual media outlined the danger posed but also mitigated the threat with images of the covert agents rounded up time after time by a triumphant F.B.I. The Soviet people themselves received a sympathetic treatment by popular media, which cast them as the exploited victims of the regime. The portrait of the Soviet enemy painted for American consumers of popular media in this era was far from simplistic.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2

List of Figures ............................................................................................................................... 4

Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 5

Chapter One Villains and Ideologues: American Visual Media Deal with the Soviet Leadership
....................................................................................................................................................... 16

Chapter Two Confronting the Leviathan: The Machinery of the Soviet State in American Popular Media .......................................................................................................................... 50

Chapter Three Those “Exploited Toilers”: American Views of Soviet Citizens ...................... 73

Chapter Four The Enemy at Home: Soviet Spies and Communist Agents in America ........ 101

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 125

Bibliography .................................................................................................................................... 128
List of Figures

Figure 1.1: “The Soviets invented everything, they say…” ................................. 24
Figure 1.2: “Treachery to his friends, cruelty to their children…” ......................... 39
Figures 1.3a & 1.3b: Nikita Khrushchev plays with his grandson and his dog ......... 47
Figure 2.1: “Red Military Advantage Grows” comparison chart ......................... 54
Figure 2.2: Battle map for an imaginary war ....................................................... 55
Figures 2.3a & b: Educational comparison between U.S. and U.S.S.R ............... 65
Figures 3.1a & b: The people of Russia, actual and idealized ............................. 75
Figures 3.2a & b: “Soviet equality” in Russian housing ....................................... 83
Figure 3.3: Evdokia Petrov strong-armed by Soviet officials ............................ 94
Introduction

In 1952, when Oliver Vickery read in his newspaper that the Soviet Union had
issued invitations for its International Economics Conference to American capitalists
Charles Wilson of General Motors, Marshall Field and banker James Warburg, he did not
hesitate to correct the Soviets’ error in omitting his name from their list of invitations.
The president of the Ferro-Bet rust prevention company of San Francisco, Vickery
drafted a quick letter to the Russian Embassy stating that he might be available, if invited,
and asking whether he should bring his dinner clothes along with him to Moscow. A
quick reply from the embassy invited Vickery to the conference, but assured him that the
dinner clothes would be quite unnecessary, being an “Anglo-Saxon custom.” Thus began
this California Republican and American Legionnaire’s journey into the heartland of
America’s Cold War enemy.

While free-loading on Soviet hospitality that included a palatial hotel suite, four
meals a day, and nightly entertainment at the Bolshoi Theater, Oliver Vickery
nonetheless worked to promote free-market capitalism at the International Economic
Conference. In a speech to the conference, Vickery declared his belief in the system of
free enterprise to the assembly, adding that this system “inspires and promotes individual
initiative, produces and distributes consumer goods more equitably than any other
economic system.” To Vickery’s surprise, his speech was met with a round of applause,
and he was elected to a high presidium with eighteen other delegates. Following
Vickery’s promotion, the Soviet cultural society VOKS began to court his favor with
boxes of cigars and cigarettes. When Vickery accepted an invitation to meet with the
vice president of VOKS, he became more of a representative of U.S. foreign policy than
he had bargained for. After a brief introduction, the VOKS vice president dispensed with the usual pleasant inquiries as to whether Vickery was enjoying his stay in the Soviet capital and fired off series of questions about U.S. foreign policy. As Vickery later reported, a breathless interpreter conveyed the following queries to him in quick succession.

One, Mister Vice President wants to know why the U.S. declared a trick peace with Japan without consulting Russia? …Two, Mister Vice President wants to know why are Americans interfering in the Korean civil war, which is like the U.S. civil war? Three, Mister Vice President wants to know why the U.S. is interfering in China? Four, Mister Vice President wants to know why U.S. is stirring up trouble in Iran? Five, Mister Vice President wants to know why is U.S. building an airport ring around Russia? Six, Mister Vice President wants to know why is U.S. interfering in Germany? Seven, Mister Vice President wants to know, do Americans think they can bribe European countries with financial aid? Eight, Mister Vice President wants to know what U.S. is doing in Europe anyway. Nine, Mister Vice President wants to know when this American interference all over the world is going to stop? Ten, Mister Vice President wants to drink to your health.

Though taken by surprise, Vickery managed to cobble together a response that highlighted his pride in America and disdain for the Soviet Union without actually answering any of the vice president’s numerous queries.

One, you tell Mister Vice President Americans are a very proud people. Two, you tell Mister Vice President America is a free country of 48 states where you can come and go as you please and it is not a police state. Three, you tell Mister Vice President that someone once said the earth was a lunatic asylum for the solar system and he must have meant Soviet Russia… Then, you tell Mister Vice President I’d like to drink to his health.¹

Following Vickery’s reply, the American company president and the Soviet vice president of VOKS tossed back a vodka toast and went to dinner with no further discussion of politics. Oliver Vickery’s experience in Moscow is a remarkable example of the way that even average Americans with no governmental affiliations could become entangled in foreign relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the early Cold War. Vickery’s story, however, was doubly significant. Not only did he become an impromptu representative of the United States to the Soviets he met while

abroad, he also played a role in the popular media’s image of the Soviet Union. After his journey, Vickery published an account of his doings in Moscow in *LIFE*, a magazine that enjoyed its heyday of popularity in the early Cold War period. Vickery’s fellow Americans who were unable to travel to the Soviet Union could get information from Vickery’s observations and account of his exploits. Through this article in *LIFE*, Americans could have seen a Soviet Union eager to impress American visitors, as officials fell over themselves to ask Oliver Vickery whether or not he was happy with his accommodation in Moscow. The Russian people on the pages of Vickery’s article were all hard-working and the workforce was predominately female. The people uttered a phrase like a well-known refrain whenever the American businessman spoke with them: “*My khotim mira,*” they told Vickery. “We want peace.” Yet despite the hospitable and peace-loving image Vickery encountered, he was reminded that the Soviet Union was still a police state. One morning, Vickery found a paper mustache in his coat pocket, left behind from a Gay Nineties party he had attended a few weeks prior. He put it on to answer the door to his suite, confused a hotel steward and minutes later found himself in a discussion with a Soviet official about why he had decided to mock Joseph Stalin with the mustache. Oliver Vickery’s month-long foray into the capital of Soviet communism became more than a simple opportunity for tourism in a largely closed-off country. His visit demonstrated the potential for average Americans to become participants in the Cold War, and his article in *LIFE* revealed the significance of the American popular media as an avenue for other Americans to participate in foreign relations as well.

The standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union that became the decades-long Cold War affected not only diplomatic relations and military preparation,
but shaped American society itself. Foreign relations may formally consist of the interactions between official representatives from national governments, but the term is broad enough to comprise all manner of international relationships, including those that average American citizens developed with their conception of the Soviet adversary. Historians such as Walter Hixson have demonstrated the significance of American culture to the prolonged U.S. standoff with the Soviet Union. “American mass culture has become one of the country’s greatest foreign policy assets,” Hixson argues, a reality that has persisted since the early years of the Cold War. Perception of America abroad was, and is still, shaped in large part by American cultural exports. Yet American culture played a dual role in this era. Not only did it influence the image of the United States in foreign countries, it framed an image of the Soviet Union that was accessible to average Americans. The Cold War pervaded almost every aspect of American life during the early Cold War period of 1949 to 1962. From the first Soviet nuclear detonation to the Cuban missile crisis, Americans were constantly bombarded with images of the enemy they faced. Although the realities of the Cold War and the threat posed by the Soviet Union were ever present in American culture during this era, there has been some debate about the extent to which these realities shaped daily life in America. Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert have argued that “although the Cold War distorted virtually every aspect of American life, broadly speaking there is very little fundamentally new about American culture in the Cold War.” The created concept of “Cold War culture,” they argue, is only to be found at the confluence of uniquely Cold War elements (nuclear threat, surrogate/covert warfare, opposition to socialism, and the military-industrial complex)

---

and existing trends in American society such as the drastic increase in the birth rate or the communications revolution of the 1950s, both of which would have occurred independently of the Cold War.\(^3\) Such an argument challenges the view popularized by historians such as Elaine Tyler May, who in her book *Homeward Bound* argues that the containment strategies of the early Cold War era were mirrored by a similar form of containment on the American home front. In the face of nuclear annihilation, American families turned inward and reinforced the structure of the “nuclear family,” a term notably derived from this era of nuclear panic.\(^4\) Richard Fried has described how this Cold War mentality worked its way into all areas of American society. Elements of Cold War pageantry brought the conflict to American doorsteps through holiday celebrations, the pledge of allegiance, the singing of the national anthem, and displays of American heritage such as the Freedom Train exhibit, which carried documents from American history across the country and acquired almost religious connotations.\(^5\)

Yet while the debate over the actual impact of this Cold War culture on the shape of American society is a significant one, this thesis is primarily concerned with how this culture shaped an image of the enemy that affected average Americans’ interpretations of their world. Even while doubting the effect of Cold War culture on larger trends in American society, Kuznick and Gilbert acknowledged the psychological effect it had. Cold War culture “persuaded millions of Americans to interpret their world in terms of insidious enemies at home and abroad who threatened them with nuclear and other forms


of annihilation.”\textsuperscript{6} The hostility of the Soviet Union toward the U.S. government was real, but for average Americans, their perception of this enemy was mediated through the information they received from television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and other media sources.

The treatment of the Soviet enemy by American film, television, and popular magazines of the early Cold War era was as complex and multidimensional as the conflict itself. These media offered a readily accessible source of knowledge about America’s adversary that informed average citizens’ understanding of the conflict. Articles in magazines such as \textit{LIFE} and \textit{The Saturday Evening Post} picked up news stories and framed them with splashy headlines and a hefty amount of appealing visual material. Television, which first began to emerge during this period as an influential medium for both news and entertainment, broadcast portrayals of Soviets directly into American homes. Films had long been a popular and powerful medium for influencing public perception of events, and Hollywood participated in the Cold War through a desire both to defend the industry from mounting accusations of communist infiltration, and to profit from the thrilling story lines made relevant and believable by the conflict with the Soviet Union. In combination, these media played a critical role in Americans’ perception of the “war” they were fighting. In reporting on news and current events, magazines and television programs selected stories that would hold interest. In imagining fictional storylines, films and television chose and created recognizable archetypes of Soviet characters and told tales that were identifiably drawn from current events. Yet, while there was a good deal of talk about the Soviet Union in American popular media, this discussion never followed a consistently paranoid and alarmist

\textsuperscript{6} Kuznick and Gilbert, p. 11.
narrative about the enemy. The American media did not vilify Soviets across the board. Rather, a more complex situation developed. While Soviet leadership and undercover spies were repeatedly cast as Cold War villains, the media were careful never to tar the Soviet people with the same brush. Indeed, average citizens of the Soviet regime were portrayed as subjects of American pity, enslaved by the monster of Soviet communism.

Many people today look back upon the early Cold War era as a time when both the media and America’s leaders colluded to foster a climate in which the abject fear of destruction drove the American population into paranoia, right-wing extremism and a collective loss of sanity. Certainly this was a decade marked by anxiety over the bleak situation of world affairs. William Tuttle, Jr. has described how the concerns and fears of the Cold War were particularly acute amongst America’s children, many of whom had already lived through the trauma of World War II. During the war years, the “specter of death and destruction haunted millions of American girls and boys, and the way in which the war ended only exacerbated children’s fears and insured that the specter would persist into peacetime.”

The lives of adults had similarly been programmed for the threat of the postwar years by the trauma of both World War II and the Great Depression. Now facing the uncertainty of a world in which total nuclear annihilation had become a ghastly prospect, the government inaugurated civil defense programs to assure Americans that survival in the face of atomic war was possible, and that they should be willing to band together and make preparations to protect their communities.

---


American civil defense efforts in this era were primarily an effort to mitigate the psychological threat the enemy posed to American society rather than ensure Americans’ physical safety. The climate of fear that is frequently identified as a significant force in American Cold War society was not as pervasive as is often believed. Civil Defense measures and other Cold war realities became routinized parts of everyday life as Americans continued to live their lives and prosper alongside the variously alarming, distasteful, pitiable, and even comforting images of the Soviet enemy that filtered in through the media.

In viewing American television programs, films, and popular magazines of the early Cold War period, four distinct aspects of the Soviet adversary emerge. The first comprised the Soviet communist leadership, both the Soviet heads of state and the true believers of the Soviet Communist Party. While these certainly appeared as the most villainous representations of the enemy, media portrayals of the Soviet leadership often mitigated the threat this group posed. Apparatchiks abandoned their strict adherence to communist mores in defiance of their professed ideology and “bumbling” Soviet officials blundered into disastrous decisions. There was plenty negative to be said about Joseph Stalin, but much of it appeared after his death in 1953 had eliminated him as a threat. Nikita Khrushchev, in contrast, initially emerged as a hopeful figure after he took the reins in the Soviet Union, with magazines portraying him as a jovial family man rather than a shrewd opportunist who had been complicit in many of the horrific crimes that the media was then attributing to the deceased Stalin.

To an American exposed to media representations of the Soviet enemy during the early days of the Cold War, the Soviet state itself became a character, its monstrous
proportions described as a leviathan, a machine of war and production with the ability to consume weaker nations whole. Magazine features lined up the capabilities of the United States and those of the Soviet Union side by side and created alarming visuals to show that the non-individualistic authoritarian government had enabled the Soviet Union to produce a massive military machine. At the same time these sources helped frame the threat in American minds, they also worked to tear it down. Magazines broke the Soviet military leviathan into its constituent parts of bored officers and reluctant conscripts. They attributed the technological and scientific advances of the Soviet Union to espionage and theft. Although films often went with the predictably more profitable stories of Soviet invasion, they also demonstrated how Soviet deceit, rather than superior ability, was responsible for many of their more powerful advances.

The Soviet people would have appeared to members of American society during this era as victims, rather than villains. Magazines dwelt on stories of oppression and exploitation that further indicted the regime and the state while exonerating its citizens. In the popular media’s depiction of the Cold War, those living under the heel of communism were most often treated as non-combatants. Americans viewed images of a hard-working people who dwelt in crumbling state-provided apartment blocks while making do without the consumer goods enjoyed by families in the United States. Through the media, Americans witnessed religious persecution, and saw the resilience of faith even behind the Iron Curtain. American women were able to open a magazine and see their Soviet sisters performing heavy industrial work while simultaneously raising families on the limited resources available to them, stripped of traditional femininity and given a double burden to bear by the very state that had promised them equality. Yet
while American media propagated this image of Soviets as the communist state’s exploited toilers, it also acknowledged the potential created by popular dissatisfaction with the regime and celebrated the defectors who dealt a blow to the Soviet Union while scoring a propaganda victory for the United States.

The most potentially threatening face of the Soviet Union, and one with which American society was highly preoccupied during the early 1950s, was that of the Soviet infiltrators who operated undercover in America. The high-profile espionage cases of the early part of the decade were examined and re-examined in glossy magazine spreads while espionage-centered films infiltrated Hollywood. Soviet spy characters became a staple of both film and television. Yet the flurry of anxiety over this threat was short-lived; by the mid-1950s the media had become more preoccupied with echoing a popular fear that Red Scare panic had endangered civil liberties at home and tarnished Americans’ concept of freedom.

Although this study hopes to convey accurately the perception of the Soviet enemy that average Americans saw and recognized from the media, it is, unfortunately, impossible to be comprehensive in its treatment of all sources of knowledge. In exploring the contours of the Soviet enemy that were conveyed to the American public during the early Cold War period, this project uses sources that were accessible and comprehensible to the widest possible audiences. Popular magazines experienced their heyday in terms of readership during the early 1950s. Television was a very new medium at this time, but one that grew rapidly throughout this period as its programming improved. In 1950, while over four million American households reported ownership of a radio, only 503,000 households owned a television. By 1960, that figure had swelled to
4,575,000 American households with a television. Movies remained a popular mode of entertainment, despite anxieties over a mounting war between the film and television industries for American viewers. While these media covered a large area of the American experience during the early Cold War, several useful sources are obviously neglected. By focusing on visual media, I have omitted radio despite its popularity during the time period concerned. Newspapers certainly played a critical role in framing the Cold War for their readers, but are less likely to have been as significant a factor as more visually oriented outlets of information. Visual media cut across boundaries of literacy, age, gender, race, and class. More people were likely to have acquired enduring images of Rosenberg espionage trial or the growing technology gap by leafing through a magazine (or even just seeing the cover at a newsstand) and encountering a photo of the ill-fated couple or a mock-up of the Sputnik I satellite. Visual sources spoke in a language common to all Americans. While reactions to such images certainly varied, these visual media resulted in a population whose knowledge of the Soviets stemmed in large part from reactions to images of atomic bomb tests, strategic maps of the Siberian wilderness, impoverished workers in crumbling housing blocks, a stern Stalin in military dress, and a jovial Khrushchev sipping a Pepsi-Cola.

---

Chapter One
Villains and Ideologues: American Visual Media Deal with the Soviet Leadership

One of the most difficult aspects of the Soviet Union that confronted Americans during the early years of the Cold War was the ideology of communism, and the leaders who enforced it. Of all representatives of the Soviet Union that appeared in American popular media during this era, Soviet leaders and the indoctrinated leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union took on the brunt of America’s negative portrayals of its enemies. As the United States moved out of World War II and away from its uneasy alliance with the U.S.S.R., Americans once again confronted communism as their principal ideological adversary, and Joseph Stalin as its demonic chief enforcer. However, American culture did not confine itself to simplistically negative portrayals of the commissars and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union’s General Secretary. Films, magazines and television programs of the day betrayed a desire on the part of Americans to come to terms with communist ideology by outright mocking of the system itself. A litany of films in the vein of the pre-war classic Ninotchka attest to this, and magazines occasionally broke from enumerating details of the Red menace for some more light-hearted mocking of the Soviet system. The bulk of enemy-making in American popular culture was reserved for this first face of the Soviet enemy, that of the regime’s leadership.

Ideology in Human Form: Soviet Apparatchiks and the American Media

The Cold War was a new experience for the American people. Unlike previous wars, the enemy was a much vaguer concept. It was a far simpler matter to know America’s enemy when a rival army was gunning down American GIs in the battlefields
of Europe or the South Pacific. However, as much energy as the United States expended being wary of Soviet aggression and expansionism, great pains were taken to avoid a direct military conflict with the Soviet Union. Although Americans encountered Soviet-backed and influenced communist troops in the Korean War, for the most part the Soviets were a shadow-enemy with whom American minds were constantly waging a hypothetical war.

The media of a society at war typically aids in defining and negatively depicting the national enemy. It had been fairly easy work to create a negative image of Nazi Germany. American society and culture played a significant role in framing the enemies of World War II. Emily Rosenberg has noted how a narrative of “infamy” was established in response to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. America’s enemies, the media showed, were dishonorable insects that swarmed down upon a peaceful America in a devastating “sneak attack.”\(^1\) The true enemy of American society during the early Cold War, however, was not a group of people so much as an ideology that sought to dominate the world. If communist ideology was the ultimate source of the evil that was perceived to be flowing from the Soviet Union, then the most likely targets of vilification by American society and culture were those who most strongly identified with the despised ideals.

The Soviet apparatchik was essentially communism presented in human form. American media and culture often focused upon such Communist Party ideologues to demonstrate the cold, inhuman aspects of the enemy. Images of the apparatchik in American culture were not new developments of the 1950s. The idea of a stern,

---

disciplined and unsmiling Party official dated back to before World War II, when Americans were first confronted with the alien ideology. The 1939 film *Ninotchka* drew comedy from this type of character, poking fun at the communist system of the Soviet Union by showing the title character’s transition from a cheerless Soviet official sent to Paris to crack the whip over errant comrades, to a smiling romantic enamored with Western capitalism (its fashionable clothes and abundant champagne in particular).

*Ninotchka*, billed in its advertising as “the film that kids the commissars,” set a trend in identifying and dealing with American society’s Cold War enemies. A storyline that would be the subject of much borrowing and reworking after World War II, *Ninotchka* both identified the problem of apparatchiks and presented the solution – they were cold, callous, and totally subservient to the ideology with which they had been indoctrinated, but it was a comfortingly simple matter to draw them away from communist mores once they encountered the prosperity of Western society.

The American popular media established the framework for knowledge about the Soviet Union for the average American citizen. Through films, magazines, and television (among other sources) Americans came to terms with the enemy they could not attempt to destroy in open war. Historian Stephen Whitfield describes the impulse to “fight the Cold War at home” as a kind of psychological reaction to being unable to get at the Russians abroad.² Reckoning with the ideology of communism, the media identified the unsavory qualities of indoctrinated Party ideologues. Media also dealt with these characters on a public stage – mocking the apparatchik as *Ninotchka* had done over a decade earlier. A war was taking place, but much of the fighting occurred in the arena of

---

popular media and culture rather than on a battlefield (or rather, in the skies over Moscow and Washington, D.C.).

“We underestimate the zeal and fervor of missionaries from Moscow,” wrote columnist Eric Johnston in a 1949 issue of Look. The Iron Curtain was drawing tighter around the Soviet bloc. Within months, the Soviet Union would confirm the successful explosion of a nuclear device in the wilds of Central Asia, but for the time being, communist ideology was at the forefront of American thoughts on the threat posed by the Soviet enemy. The “fervor” of the apparatchiks had all the dangerous markers of a religious revival that intended to break down Western capitalism. International communism, Johnson informed his readers, was winning the Cold War by playing to the weaknesses of capitalism, and Americans must be educated about communism in order to fight it effectively. The Ninotchkas of the Soviet bloc were tough, disciplined, and fanatical in their beliefs, and Americans must be on guard against this threat.

Those who read the major magazines of the late 1940s and early 1950s received a regular education in the nature of a communist. Lt. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith returned from three years as U.S. ambassador in the Soviet capital and set down to pen an eight-part series for The Saturday Evening Post, outlining the dangers of the Soviet enemy. The challenge of combating the unstoppable force of communist ideology was particularly daunting. “From the cradle to the grave the Soviet citizen is taught to believe that he is the luckiest man alive. And for the skeptics, there are the secret police - who already have some 15,000,000 Russians doing ‘involuntary labor.’” People in the Soviet Union, he argued, were guided into this sort of rigid acceptance of communist principles.

---

4 Walter Bedell Smith, “My Three Years in Moscow, Part 3 - Why the Russian People Don't Rebel,” The Saturday Evening Post, 26 Nov. 1949, pp. 24-25, 105-108.
The end result of such an education was the legion of close-minded and dogmatic Party functionaries that greased the wheels of the Soviet machine at home and provided a base to expand the system abroad.

The ideological discipline and harsh personal manner of Soviet apparatchiks was the subject of morbid curiosity for Americans during the early Cold War. Independence of mind was a characteristic that Americans prized greatly. In 1946, *Look*’s perspective on the sources of “that American Look” in young women was that it was a result not only of diet, sleep, cleanliness, and exercise, but also ingenuity, courage, independence, and practicality. The popular media identified the opposite characteristics in the enemy, placing Americans and Soviet communists on opposite ends of the ideological battlefield. *LIFE* published a short feature on “Soviet realism” in painting that gave a grim picture of the world for the joyless functionaries of the Party. “Soviet painting shows a misguided housewife railing against her patriotic husband for letting their delicate daughter be sent to a far-off camp,” read one caption. Such indoctrinated automaton-like figures were even capable of subsuming their love of family beneath this “patriotism.” Another painting elaborated on the consequences for those who failed to do so: “Criticized by other committee members, an official broods over his shortcomings at the end of a meeting.” Much of the information accessible to Americans during the early Cold War emphasized the conformist nature of communist ideology, contrasting it with the accepted doctrine of American independence to define rhetorically the enemy “other.”

Through the lens of popular media, Americans received glimpses of the ideology that confronted their own way of life. The relationship between the media and average

---

American citizens, however, went both ways. When Americans travelled to the Soviet Union and met actual communists, they wrote about their experience with a similar vocabulary and spoke of the close-minded inflexibility of Soviet beliefs. In 1950, American Gisela Kahn Gresser obtained a Soviet visa and travelled to Moscow to participate in a chess tournament against the protests of friends and family. Her subsequent article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* documented the difficulty of dealing with the Russians. “They seemed to me simple, child-like people,” wrote Gresser, “in spite of their amazing capacity for intricate calculation over the chessboard.” Her account particularly focused on the character of a woman named Luba, her assigned interpreter. Luba, Gresser wrote, “seemed to concentrate in her personality my own impression of the Soviet character.” Gresser reported that at her first meeting with Luba, she came upon her drinking vodka and discussing dialectical materialism. When offered American cigarettes, Luba retorted, “But why should I try yours when ours are so good? We have everything we need.” Gresser and Luba became entangled in arguments over America’s capitalist crimes that Luba settled by declaring that Gresser was simply a naïve bourgeois. As an official interpreter assigned by the Soviet Sports Committee, Luba had likely been selected as much for her unshakable political convictions as for her linguistic proficiency.

A similar occurrence was observed by American college students Gay Humphrey and Ted Curran. In an interview published in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, the pair said they experienced relative freedom compared to diplomats and were able to move about and speak with Russians. The students they met, however, were all “communist die-hards”

---

8 ibid., pp. 147-148.
who asked prepared questions and gave scripted answers. The apparatchiks of the Soviet Union were firmly in control of enforcing communist morality and controlling relations with Americans.

One of the more bizarre intrusions of the Soviet apparatchik into the lives of American citizens occurred in Mossinee, Wisconsin on a spring day in 1950. The small town decided to stage its own communist takeover in a dramatic bit of street theater designed to bring a taste of the Soviet Union to Middle America. At dawn, the town mayor was rounded up by men masquerading as conquering Soviets. The police chief was “tortured” and “shot” (which afterward left him free to perform his duty maintaining order on the Mossinee streets lest the pageantry get out of control). LIFE reported on the spectacle, displaying to the rest of the country an American version of an ideological takeover. A “stubble of whiskers helps Joseph Zach Kornfeder, a reformed Red, to play a commissar for a day,” read one caption. Commissars were apparently not only harsh and joyless but also unkempt. The “Soviet” interlopers in Mossinee renamed the local movie house the “People’s Theatre,” and abruptly cut off its scheduled showings and began to screen nothing but Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky*. A picture near the bottom of the page in LIFE showed a young American boy in uniform, raising his fist in a “Red salute.” Even the free-thinking and independent youth of America could be transformed by the dogmatic, brutal and unfeeling apparatchiks of the Soviet Union. The event in Mossinee was indeed a grand bit of Cold War pageantry, but it revealed an underlying

---


fear that no place, even free-thinking America, was safe from conquest by the motivated communists for whom the ends always justified the means.

Popular media also highlighted these functionaries of the Soviet Communist Party as essentially dishonest, responsible for the propagation of “communist truth” – an Orwellian conceptualization of fact that was based on the necessities of communism, rather than reality. Time and time again, American popular media addressed the propaganda of the Soviet ideologues, giving the public a sense of the depths of their enemy’s ability to dissemble shamelessly.

The Soviet justification given for one of the most unsettling incidents of the early Cold War was enough to give any American considerable pause. “They say they set off the bomb to reverse rivers and make desert bloom,” declared LIFE in the autumn of 1949. The idea that Russia’s nuclear weapon was no more than a massive Siberian gardening project “must have made even hardened Moscow propagandists blink.”

Walter Bedell Smith titled the fourth part of his series in The Saturday Evening Post “Falsehood: Russia's Sharpest Weapon,” describing the ways that high level ministers such as Vyacheslav Molotov employed outright lies to gain propaganda victories over the United States. Magazines reinforced the idea that Americans faced an enemy to whom truth was relative, and usually irrelevant. LIFE ran a full-page photo of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vishinsky giving a “great big cynical laugh” at the idea that the United States sought disarmament while trying to paint the West as warmongers and seize the

initiative for “peace propaganda.” A few months earlier, *LIFE* had commented on an ironic turn of events when Sioux Chief American Horse had shouted at a GOP supper “We red men have had too much New Deal red tape. We hope White Father will kick out Joe Stalin’s Red men who have sneaked into our tepee.” Later, the good Republican Chief turned up as a hero in the *Daily Worker* for some offhand comments made about getting the United States forces out of Korea. Soviet propagandists possessed the ability to manipulate words in order to involuntarily enlist even the most ardent anti-communists for their purposes.

A 1951 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* featured a page of tongue-in-cheek cartoons mocking the Soviet propagandists’ penchant for claiming major advances in technology as their own original inventions. Cartoonist William O’Brien imagined the Soviets labeling the Venus de Milo as the “Wenus from Minsk” - the statue is shown completed, wearing a kerchief and holding a hammer and sickle. In another frame, the “Leftovitch brothers” are shown testing an ineffective flying machine at “Kitty Hawkgrad.” Yet another commentary on apparatchiks’ enforcement of the communist party line appears in a cartoon describing how Russians led the world in the field of “mental hygiene” – demonstrated by a man force-marched with a bayonet by a Soviet guard who will treat him for his “incorrect thinking.” O’Brien’s cartoons presented a negative aspect of Soviet communism in a format amusing to readers.

---

Fig. 1.1. “The Soviets invented everything, they say...” William O’Brien took a more light-hearted approach in this 1951 jab at the Soviets for the readers of The Saturday Evening Post. Reprinted from The Saturday Evening Post, 17 May 1951, p. 45.
“Kidding the Commissars”: Deflating the Soviet Threat

The idea of a vast sea of Communist Party functionaries, each dishonest, devoid of natural human emotion, and instilled with a messianic vision to spread their belief system throughout the world quite naturally caused a fair amount of trepidation in American society. However, as often as American citizens were reminded of the formidable nature of the indoctrinated communists who opposed them, the media tried in equal measure to mitigate the threat that these figures posed, usually by outright mocking them and their adherence to their professed communist beliefs. Images of bumbling Soviet officials, immoral communist functionaries who benefitted personally from the corrupt system, and even several Ninotchka-like heroines who were “saved” from the harsh ways of the communist – all of these helped not only to negatively depict the Soviet system, but also to make the enemy seem slightly less influential and menacing.

Writing for The Saturday Evening Post, James O’Donnell cast Sergei Tulpanov, the political boss of Communist East Germany, as the epitome of bumbling, useless Soviet officials. Characterizing Tulpanov as “The Stupidest Russian in Europe,” a “sad sack” and “stooge,” O’Donnell could not help but wonder why this man had not been liquidated by Moscow for his countless “bonehead plays.” Readers of the article viewed not an effective cog in the Soviet machine but a monkey-wrench in the works of Soviet communism, shown in a photo walking along in a clueless manner as German strikers jeered at him.16 Portraying the enemy as completely ineffective, however, may have allayed some fears that the world would be taken over by the ideological party officials.

Another method that was frequently used as a means to discredit the pure ideological claims of apparatchiks was to challenge their own adherence to the principles they vociferously professed. After the U.S. Department of State charged Fred Warner Neal with escorting famous Soviet writers Ilya Ehrenberg, Konstantin Simonov, and the Soviet Maj. Gen. Mikhail Galaktionov on a tour through the United States, he wrote about the affair for The Saturday Evening Post in 1951. The trip had taken place four years prior to the article, when, as Neal wrote, “we were still trying hard to be friends with the Soviet.” Neal detailed the trio’s actions while in America, noting that for communist figures, they spent a good deal of time and money buying expensive items, even cars, to take home with them. While they were enjoying the hospitality and benefits of capitalist society, of course, they complained loudly about America.¹⁷ Edmund Stevens explored the same theme of overindulgence by the Soviet Union’s supposedly austere communist officials for Look in 1957. Phil Harrington photographed “Russia’s Privileged Few” as they were enjoying themselves at the theater and the beach. This new aristocracy, Stevens noted, had “the most to fear from an anti-Communist revolt.”¹⁸ The idealist claims of total equality that were used by the Soviet Union’s party officials to stake out the moral high ground for communism rang false when Americans saw these same functionaries reveling in the benefits of their elevated status while the bulk of Russian people remained impoverished.

These officials did not even appear to adhere completely to their own economic policy, as LIFE demonstrated to its readers in 1955 by reporting on an Eastern Bloc

¹⁸ Edmund Stevens, “Russia’s Privileged Few: They Have the Most to Fear from an Anti-Communist Revolt,” photographed by Phil Harrington, Look, 19 Feb 1957, pp. 32-35.
fashion show run by communists. Noting how the “Reds get capitalist-style show in Leipzig,” *LIFE* characterized the show as decadent and stocked with merchandise only for the benefit of Western visitors. Photos showed many East Germans attending to buy what they could while it was available and expressing their hatred of communism.\(^{19}\)

After the Hungarian revolt against communist control in 1956, Leslie Banogh Bain wrote in *Look* how communist immorality in Hungary turned Red sympathizers into freedom fighters. Communist ideology was riddled with “dry rot.”\(^{20}\) As intimidating as the enforcers of communist ideology may have seemed to the American public, the media also reassured them that many communists were not nearly as governed by their ideology as they claimed.

While American popular magazines frequently strove to discredit the commissars, the film industry took a page (or, rather, several pages) from the pre-war MGM classic *Ninotchka*. Films offered a more effective means of alleviating American’s distress over their enemy by making apparatchiks the butt of the joke, rather than a force to be discredited. Ten years after Greta Garbo’s stern Nina Yakushova first turned up her nose at the extravagant fashions of the West, Hollywood continued to “kid the commissars,” to the amusement of the American public.

So great was the popularity (and renewed relevance) of *Ninotchka* that MGM re-released the film in 1948 as the Soviet Union shifted again from wartime ally to peacetime adversary. The House Un-American Activities Committee launched investigations into alleged Communist infiltration of the Hollywood film industry, setting off a Red Scare that left its mark on films of this era. Plagued by criticism over their


wartime release of the pro-Soviet film *Song of Russia*, MGM executives hoped that the re-release of the anti-Soviet classic *Ninotchka* would simultaneously cash in on the Red Scare and throw HUAC off the studio’s scent.\(^{21}\) A light-hearted comedy that mocks the humorless, uncompromising attitude of the Soviet communists, *Ninotchka* features three Soviet agents, Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski who are sent to Paris to arrange for the sale of jewels confiscated during the Revolution from the now-exiled Grand Duchess Swana. Upon arriving in Paris, the three are entertained by Count d’Algout (Melvyn Douglas), a faithful representative of the Grand Duchess charged with recovering her jewels. After the good Count manages to corrupt the trio’s strict Soviet morals by means of extravagant meals, a steady stream of alcohol and a trio of Parisian cigarette-girls, Moscow sends an envoy to discipline the wayward comrades. Enter Comrade Nina Ivanovna Yakushova (Greta Garbo). Cold and severe, she arrives on the train platform dressed in plain, masculine-style clothing that stands out starkly against the backdrop of stylish, cosmopolitan Paris. When a porter tries to help with her luggage, she declares it “social injustice.” Upon meeting her comrades Nina is all business, conveying the news from Moscow – “The last mass trials were a great success. There are going to be fewer but better Russians.” She shows disdain for the fashions of Parisian women, in particular an oddly-shaped hat she sees in a shop window. After a few weeks in Paris, however, Ninotchka herself falls in love with the Count, casts off her plain Russian clothing and puts on Parisian fashions, including the hat she had previously scorned as frivolous.\(^{22}\)

*Ninotchka*’s jibes at the commissars were reprised soon after its release by another MGM film entitled *Comrade X*. The plot of *Comrade X* (which was also reissued in


\(^{22}\) *Ninotchka*, Ernst Lubitsch, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939.
1948 with *Ninotchka* to affirm MGM’s anti-communist credentials) followed a similar story arc. Clark Gable and Hedy Lamarr star as American reporter Mac Thompson and a beautiful Soviet streetcar conductor who goes by the name of Theodore. When Thompson is blackmailed into marrying the communist ideologue Theodore to get her out of the country where she can spread her ideas, a love story ensues that rings of *Ninotchka*, down to such apparatchik quirks as Theodore’s donning of a revealing nightgown at the request of Thompson, only to call it “a little reactionary.” The fearsome apparatchiks are made comical in these stories, abandoning their unnatural ways for the frills of capitalism in what became an oft-repeated theme in American cinema.

One notable imitator was MGM’s *The Iron Petticoat*, a 1957 comedy starring Katharine Hepburn and Bob Hope as the apparatchik and the charming capitalist. While the film’s plot bears a great resemblance to that of *Ninotchka* and *Comrade X*, the film fell flat with critics and audiences. "Through some not too subtle inspiration, it shamelessly has to do with a woman captain in the Soviet air force whose communistic enthusiasms collapse under the charm of an American Air Force officer assigned to give her a whirl in London," wrote *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther. “Three or four times around the circuit, even inside its own iron frame, and the jokes about the unfeminine Russian bursting out of her uniform become quite stale.” A week later, while deploiring the state of comedy in Hollywood, Crowther added to his criticism of

---

24 *Comrade X*, King Vidor, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1940.
The Iron Petticoat. “This one is so crude and witless it is downright embarrassing.”

While the film may not have been a resounding financial success, the stereotypical image of the apparatchik persisted in Hollywood.

A more successful instance of this type of film was released later in the same year. The popularity of Ninotchka had been sustained by its re-imagining as a Cole Porter Broadway musical titled Silk Stockings. In 1957, Hollywood (or rather, MGM yet again) turned the musical back into a film, and the result was a smashing success. The film was a perfect imitation of Ninotchka, though this time the plot revolves around Americans negotiating a film using the music of Soviet composer Boroff instead of a jewel sale. It has the same portrayals of communists as the original. The three commissars go starry-eyed at the mere suggestion of making propaganda. Ninotchka Yoschenko (Cyd Charisse) initially declares that love is “just a chemical reaction,” and the composer Boroff, who is best known for his work “Ode to a Tractor,” emphasize the unromantic utilitarian nature of communist ways. By the end of the film, all that has reversed – the three commissars have been wooed by capitalism decadence, Nina has cast off her stiff uniform and fallen head over heels for film producer Steve Canfield (Fred Astaire), and Boroff has developed a fascination with jazz, composing the piece “Red Blues,” his “latest and most decadent composition.”

The film was a hit with both critics and viewers. Critic Bosley Crowther, who had months before lambasted the witless unoriginality of The Iron Petticoat, recommended that Americans be given a week's holiday to see and enjoy Silk Stockings. “It would sweeten the national disposition, embolden those hesitant towards romance and

---

possibly make us feel easier about Soviet Russia, the butt of most of the kidding in this film.”

Crowther advised viewers not to discard *Silk Stockings* because it was not *Ninotchka*. “As such, it is a thoroughly light-hearted and even farcical rather than satiric spoof of the notion of Russian communism and a stubbornly solemn and sexless ideology,” he wrote, adding that “this is a perfectly valid concept in the present state of affairs.”

At the box office, *Silk Stockings* was “a promising contender,” rising to third place within its first week.

There did appear to be a shelf life on these tales of capitalist/communist romance, a reality demonstrated by Universal’s 1957 release of *Jet Pilot*. Filmed in 1950 by RKO, the film was not released until 1957 due to studio chief Howard Hughes’ excessive changes. By 1957 Hughes had sold RKO and Universal ended up distributing *Jet Pilot*.

The story begins when a Soviet fighter jet lands at a U.S. Air Force base and the “defector” turns out to be Lt. Anna Marladowna (Janet Leigh), an attractive Russian pilot who refuses to give any information that might hurt her country, even though she claims to be fleeing from a death sentence there. The U.S. Air Force charges Col. Jim Shannon (John Wayne) with the task of getting close to the lovely defector to make her talk, and to this end he escorts Anna around, introducing her to her new capitalist home. Anna initially declares that both religion and love are “dangerous narcotics” that “make individuals forget their duty to the state.” On an excursion to Palm Springs, however, she stops beside a display of women’s lingerie and announces that “Capitalism has certain dangerous advantages.” “That’s one thing we have in common with the Soviets,” retorts Shannon. “We both believe in uplifting the, uh, *masses*.” Anna buys feminine American

---

clothes, appearing to embrace the standards of capitalist society. “This hat is perfectly silly,” she says, admiring herself in the mirror. “And I love it.” Falling in love with her, Shannon takes her out for dinner and dancing, where she effuses over the availability of steak, sighing, “How can Russia compete with such propaganda?” When Shannon gets news that Anna is to be deported, he breaks the rules and marries her.

Upon returning to the airfield, Col. Shannon is informed that his new wife is, in fact, a Soviet spy by the name of Olga Orlief. The Air Force decides to form a covert operation of its own, and allows Jim Shannon to “escape” with Anna/Olga to Siberia. In Russia, Anna/Olga puts on her Soviet uniform once again and is dressed down by her superior for failing to kill Shannon. Anna/Olga states that she believes that his military intelligence would be valuable, and the Soviet agents begin to interrogate him about American tactics. While questioned, Shannon gives only outdated information while gleaning intelligence about Soviet weaknesses. Anna/Olga collaborates in pulling information out of Col. Shannon up until her commander informs her that they are planning to wipe his memory with drugs before exchanging him for Soviet spies. Ultimately valuing her loyalty to her husband over loyalty to communism, Anna engineers a daring escape for the pair, shooting down Soviet jets tailing Shannon’s plane after radioing to tell him that she would like to go have a steak again in the same place they had gone before. Col. Shannon and Anna escape back to the United States and ostensibly live happily ever after.31

*Jet Pilot* was received poorly by critics who saw it as somewhat dated from the several years the film had spent in its can collecting dust. “World tensions - indeed, a cold war - render difficult immediate acceptance of a story which has a pretty, young girl

---

as a Russian jet pilot who, on a spy mission, wings into a love match with an American airman in the United States,” wrote the reviewer for Variety. Unlike the comedies that had come before it, the reviewer noted that much of the film was played straight. “And there's nothing funny about the Russian gal dropping her colleagues out of the sky or strafing soldiers on the ground.”

The film “Barely Gets Off the Ground,” observed Bosley Crowther in the headline to his review of Jet Pilot in The New York Times. “It is a silly and sorry film.” The American public, however, begged to differ, and Jet Pilot took over the first-place rating at the box office by a healthy margin.

Each film, from Ninotchka to Jet Pilot, demonstrates an attempt to cope with the ideology of communism. In these films, the behavioral quirks of those under the influence of communist ideology – opposition to religion, disregard for the individual or the idea of romantic love, affinity for propaganda and regimented actions – are all viewed as either laughable, easily done away with, or both. Americans who saw these films no doubt felt more at ease with the ideology-driven apparatchik who appeared in contemporary popular magazines. If Americans could not aim their missiles at their enemy without risking their own obliteration, American popular culture could at least find other ways to make the enemy appear less threatening.

**Enemy No. 1: Joseph Stalin as America’s Quintessential Villain**

A horde of communist functionaries who spread propaganda and behaved in a manner counter to American ideals of independence, however, was only one face of America’s Cold War enemy during the 1950s. The single most recognizable villain of

---

34 “National Box Office Survey,” Variety, 2 Oct. 1957, p. 3.
the Soviet regime was the man with whom America had once fought alongside in World War II. After the war, Joseph Stalin stepped into the shoes of Adolph Hitler to become the ultimate embodiment of evil to Americans. Magazines helped make Stalin into a name and face to be feared and despised. After the dissolution of the uneasy alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union, reports of Stalinist atrocities committed against his own people and the world surfaced in the popular magazines. Often the accounts documented crimes committed over a decade earlier, but through media’s description of these atrocities, the name of Joseph Stalin became synonymous with treachery, brutality, and oppression.

For a 1949 article in *LIFE* entitled “Russia through Russian Eyes,” journalist John Scott interviewed several Russians who had managed to escape from the oppressive confines of the Soviet state. One of those interviewed, a former reservist captain in the Red Army, described how Stalin decided to allow the people of Ukraine to be butchered by sadistic German commanders as punishment for their collaboration.  

Stalin, as magazines would demonstrate time and time again, was not only a threat to the security of outsiders, but a murderous tyrant with no regard for the lives of his own citizens. Stalin himself was shown to be at the center of all affairs in the Soviet Union. Walter Bedell Smith described him as no “prisoner of the Politburo,” adding that his image was everywhere and his word was decisive. The leaders of the various communist nations were “Stalin’s Assassins,” according to a 1952 article in *Look*. Stalin himself controlled his “Red Gestapo Bosses,” a loaded phrase that would have certainly called up

---

comparisons between the Soviet leader and the nefarious deeds of Adolph Hitler. Stalin’s visage lurked behind the unimaginable atrocities that eventually came to the attention of the American public. His name became virtually synonymous with communist oppression. Defector General Alexei Markoff divulged “Stalin’s Secret War Plans,” which included Soviet plans to conquer Eurasia, isolate America and plunge it into depression, then “use fifth-columns to paint the White House red.”

Phil Gustafson wrote of Norway as “Stalin’s Backyard” and mused over whether the old dictator would make a play to conquer it. Yet another article showed “How to Heckle Stalin,” as Americans with foreign connections “bombard the Iron Curtain” with letters about the superiority of life in America in hopes of destabilizing the Kremlin regime. Despite communist ideology that stressed the dictatorship of the proletariat, it was clear in American magazines that the Soviet Union was a dictatorship of a single man.

Popular media’s image of Stalin’s personality kept pace with the stories of his crimes. Harold E. Stassen underlined Stalin’s callousness and inhumanity by contrasting him with philosopher and theologian Albert Schweitzer. “I have met the kindest man in the world,” he wrote in 1951 for Ladies’ Home Journal, “and I have met the most ruthless man in the world.”

“Stalin’s face mirrors a personality that combines hardness, cynicism, deception, strength of will and utter ruthlessness.” While Dr. Schweitzer was well-known for a philosophy that revered life, Stassen declared that “if one phrase could be used to characterize Stalin’s philosophy, it would be ‘disdain for life.’” Even the work environments of the two men were shown to be reflective of their natures. While

---

Schweitzer worked from a simple room open to nature that exuded “friendship and human sympathy,” the office of Stalin was “really his prison, deep in the heart of the Kremlin fortress, austere and unadorned… The accent is on death and war and ruthless power.”

Stalin’s lieutenants were, as portrayed in magazines, nearly as evil. Edgar Snow theorized in *The Saturday Evening Post* that Stalin’s successor would be the man who could “get there fastest with the mostest men.” In a government where leaders devoured each other like wolves, Georgi Malenkov, the heir apparent, had seemingly dropped in from nowhere. Russia under Malenkov, Snow stated, would be “the same thing we are getting, only more so.” Malenkov was here portrayed as even less human than Stalin. Snow recalled an occasion when he saw tears come to the eyes of the old dictator while listening to a sentimental ballad, but theorized that Malenkov would have sat “dry-eyed” through the whole song.

The portrayal of Joseph Stalin as the Soviet Union’s ultimate villain actually picked up considerably after his demise in 1953. A number of factors could account for this. For one, the death of Stalin caused many who once feared his retribution to speak out openly. A public airing of the crimes of such a fallen tyrant was inevitable. However horrible the stories of show trials, gulag atrocities, and brutal purges may have been to the Americans who read them, it is possible that there was some comfort to be found in the fact that the perpetrator of such acts was dead and gone. In ascribing such crimes to one man, Americans could retain some hope of a peaceful future, even in the face of the nuclear era.

---

42 ibid. p. 37.
In a series of articles for *LIFE* published barely a month after Stalin’s death, the Soviet defector Alexander Orlov exposed the American public to his sensational account of the deceased villain’s crimes in both word and image. Orlov, a former NKVD spy who defected to the United States in 1938, claimed to have kept the secrets of Soviet crimes in his back pocket for years to ensure the safety of his family. After the death of Stalin, however, Orlov began to release some of what he remembered from his life in the NKVD. In the series of articles, he described how Stalin murdered both friends and foes in his quest to hold power. One article was accompanied by cartoonish illustrations of defendants at the Moscow Trials, showing how Stalin initiated a bloodbath of purges on his own party members and former allies.\(^{44}\) Another illustration depicted a young girl, orphaned by the state that purged her disgraced parents, seeking shelter at the home of an old family friend. The family shuts the orphan girl out rather than put themselves at the mercy of Stalin’s rapacious purges by showing kindness to the daughter of a liquidated enemy of communism. As the husband closes the door on the girl, his wife holds back her anxious daughter from helping her old friend.\(^{45}\)

Alexander Orlov painted Stalin himself as the ultimate monster, sharing rumors of the dictator murdering his wife or driving her to suicide. An illustration caricatured an incident in which Stalin demanded that his lackeys stage a burlesque of his former comrade Grigori Zinoviev being dragged to his execution for his own personal amusement.\(^{46}\) Orlov did not stop there. By 1956, he declared that he finally felt safe enough to tell all to *LIFE*. “All” turned out to be that Stalin was, in fact, a tsarist agent. A picture showed a letter in Russian, offered as documentation of this covered-up fact.


Fig. 1.2. “Treachery to his friends, cruelty to their children...” Alexander Orlov’s dramatic account of Stalinist crimes was not without memorable illustrations. Here, a young girl orphaned by Stalin’s purge is turned away from the door of a family friend, who refuses to help lest he become the next comrade marked for death. Reprinted from *LIFE*, 13 April 1953, p. 142.
According to Orlov, NKVD agents plotted to kill Stalin after discovering this, and the result was the purge of officers and Marshall Mikhail Nikolayevich Tuhkachevsky.\textsuperscript{47} From Orlov, Americans received a portrait of a world-class villain.

While the truth of Alexander Orlov’s stories has certainly been debated in some instances, the significance of his revelations contributed to the post-mortem vilification of Stalin. And he was not the only author to publish his revelations in the American popular press. Horst Zimmermann’s account of Soviet “concentration camps” appeared in The Saturday Evening Post scarcely three weeks after Stalin’s demise.\textsuperscript{48} Henryk Zaborski told his story of imprisonment in a Stalinist work camp to Look later in 1953. Captured along the Russo-Polish border while fighting with partisans against the Red Army, Zaborski was imprisoned in Siberia until he managed to escape. The account was accompanied by melancholy sketches of life in the camps which included drawings of a friend Zaborski left behind, imprisoned women hauling heavy loads to waiting railway cars, and the camp layout.\textsuperscript{49} American John Hvasta told a similar tale of oppression in Stalin’s system of rigged trials and mass imprisonment, giving a detailed report of his harrowing escape from a communist prison after torture and imprisonment on trumped-up charges.\textsuperscript{50} By 1956, Harrison Salisbury, writing for Look, asked a question that was likely occurring in the minds of many Americans: “Was Stalin murdered?” After such horrific crimes, it would not have been such a difficult tale for Americans to swallow.

“There is evidence to suggest that his associates had to kill him in order to save their own

\textsuperscript{48} Horst Zimmermann, as told to Joan S. Crane, “My Years in Soviet Germany’s Concentration Camps,” \textit{The Saturday Evening Post}, 28 Mar. 1953, pp. 31, 183-186.
\textsuperscript{49} Henryk Zaborski, as told to Seymour Freidin and William Richardson, “I Was a Slave in Siberia,” \textit{Look}, 8 Sep. 1953, pp. 32-35.
lives,” Salisbury continued.51 After Alexander Orlov’s story of the purges, it would have been only too easy to imagine that such a villain had sown the seeds of his own destruction.

Given the extent of the “evil dictator” narrative in American popular magazines, it is unsurprising that the image of Stalin as arch-villain made the transition to the silver screen in at least one instance. Universal Studios’ 1957 exploitation film The Girl in the Kremlin revived the old tyrant four years after his death to be a B-movie villain with unsavory and sadistic tastes. “Anyone laboring under the impression that Joseph Stalin is entombed in the Kremlin is hereby apprised that this is a colossal canard,” commented a film critic in The New York Times.52 The plot hinges on the idea that Stalin merely faked his death in 1953, escaping with his nurse (Zsa Zsa Gabor) to a hideout in Greece after undergoing plastic surgery to alter his appearance. The film is best remembered, however, for its bizarre opening scene. From four young female prisoners brought to Stalin’s office, he selects Dasha (Natalia Darryl), the smallest of the four. After briefly interviewing the terrified girl, he orders the guards to “proceed.” As Stalin smokes his pipe and looks on, Dasha’s lovely black hair is hacked off. Stalin’s lackeys shave her head to a bare scalp for the entertainment of their sadistic leader.53 The film was promoted almost exclusively from this short but shocking scene. “Stalin’s weird fetishism revealed!” read the film posters, which featured the image of Stalin leering at the shorn Dasha. Stalin managed to take on a new life as a sadistic and devious villain in this film. The Girl in the Kremlin was never slated for critical or popular success. It was a “wildly

improbable fast-buck exploitation-slanted release” destined for double bills. Paired with *Deadly Mantis*, another Universal B-movie, *The Girl in the Kremlin* had only mediocre box office returns. While American curiosity may have been somewhat piqued by the concept of Stalin alive and moonlighting as a Hollywood villain, that novelty alone could not propel the film forward. The film is most significant in that it dramatizes on screen the consensus that had formed about Stalin. A real-life super villain who operated concentration camps, murdered his friends and rigged trials, Joseph Stalin was, even in death, the quintessential enemy of America.

**The Soviet Smile – Khrushchev’s (Quasi) Charm Offensive**

The death of Stalin in March 1953 instantly made waves in the American media. *LIFE* pulled its cover image of a lovely Irish model and substituted a more newsworthy image of Stalin’s successor, Georgi Malenkov. “False God Dies,” *LIFE* wrote of Stalin – “Crisis is Born.” The article ran images of the hated dictator lying in state with mourners lined up to pay their final respects. Stalin's death was wholly unexpected, and uncertainty loomed.

Yet while the struggle over power continued in Moscow, the American media seemed to focus on encouraging developments that had taken place. Television journalist Edward R. Murrow and several of his correspondents reviewed the developments of 1953 in their “yearly global report to the American people” known as *Years of Crisis*. The comments of the panel conveyed a general sense that times were changing. The death of Stalin may have precipitated some friendly “gestures” from the Soviet Union, but no

55 “National Box Office Survey”, *Variety*, 8 May 1957, p. 3.
substantive changes had occurred. One correspondent believed that something of a turning point had been reached and that Russians might have a new policy of “live and let live.” They had started “acting like human beings,” he added. Another correspondent believed that there was a “breathing space” but that the threat was not gone. Only one, Richard C. Hottelet, disagreed, stating that the police state remained intact and no change had occurred.58 Who would win “Moscow's battle royal” for power, wondered Ellsworth Raymond in The Saturday Evening Post. He described Malenkov's successors in power, Bulganin and Khrushchev, as "a worse threat to the free world than he ever was."59

The disagreement of Murrow’s correspondents was indicative of the general air of uncertainty Americans felt in regards to the future of America’s Cold War enemy. From magazines and television, however, there emerged a trend of looking towards more hopeful signs of the new era. CBS’s “Man of the Week” one month after Stalin’s death was a defector who hid his identity under the name “Col. X.” While previously he had only permitted a silhouette of himself to be shown on air, he now felt safe enough to show his face, if not reveal his name. In the interview, he stated his belief that a world war had been averted by Stalin’s death.60

In magazines, the idea of a change in the attitude of the Soviet Union was a popular theme in the years following Stalin’s demise. “A U.S. Housewife Is Able to Say ‘I Photographed Russia,’” boasted a headline in LIFE after 10 Americans, including publisher James Wick and his wife Dodee, were granted Russian visas and allowed to tour the country – giving the impression that the Soviet Union was opening up during the

58 “Years of Crisis” (No. 5) [Death of Stalin, Russia’s H-Bomb], CBS, 30 Jan. 1954.
60 “Man of the Week” (Defector from the Soviet Union), CBS, 5 Apr. 1953.
power struggle in the wake of Stalin’s death.⁶¹ Edmund Stevens wrote for Look about how “The Russian People Are Taking Sides Again.” The Soviet people were happier and, Stevens concluded, “it will be hard, if not impossible, to bring back the bad old days of Stalin.” Accompanying the article were several photographs of smiling Russians. Stevens reported that “People are beginning to think again,”⁶² Another encouraging feature noted that “American photographers, for the first time since the war, are working with some freedom.” Americans were able to take pictures of important events in Moscow such as the funeral of the Soviet transport minister, the visit of the Shah of Iran and Queen Soraya, and the landing of an American Cessna in Moscow.⁶³ The Iron Curtain seemed to be rusting a bit around the edges. When reporter James Shepley documented his first visit to Moscow for LIFE, he noted that “there is still a bit of looking over the shoulder when a Russian talks to an American, but I have the impression it is a vestigial reflex.”⁶⁴ The old days of the Stalin-era terror, it seemed, were beginning to fade.

Despite Ellsworth Raymond’s earlier criticism of Nikita Khrushchev as a threat to the free world, for the most part the rise of Khrushchev was reflected in the American popular media as a positive movement towards a more open Soviet Union. After the death of Stalin and the conclusion of the power struggle that characterized the intervening years, Khrushchev emerged as a new kind of Soviet leader – one clever enough to avoid the stamp of villainy that the American media had so firmly affixed to Stalin. Portrayals of the Soviet leadership become more humanizing during this period, and a frequent

theme was the new “Soviet Smile.” The “Kremlin Beams Smiles to U.S.,” proclaimed LIFE in 1955. Photographs of a “jolly” Zhukov, “grinning” Khrushchev, and Bulganin chatting “impishly” underlined the theme that this regime was something different from the cold and ruthless years of Stalin.⁶⁵ A portrait of the new Soviet ambassador, “Smiling Mike” Menshikov, described him and his wife as friendly, cheerful and “smartly dressed.”⁶⁶ The pair epitomized Moscow’s new approach to the West. “The Soviet Smiles Surprised Me,” wrote Adlai Stevenson for Look in 1958 after a trip to the Soviet Union and a meeting with Khrushchev. “This is how Nikita Khrushchev greeted me when I stepped into his office in the Kremlin,” Stevenson wrote beneath a photograph of a smiling Khrushchev, his arms spread in welcome. The Khrushchev he spoke with was plain-spoken and easy to talk to, but was not without his sensitivities. “He stopped smiling when I mentioned Hungary.”⁶⁷ Those who dealt with the new leader as Adlai Stevenson did reported back an image of a man who, despite his communist convictions, wanted peace and improved relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Articles appeared about Nikita Khrushchev’s family and home life, in dramatic contrast to the Stalin years, when the only article to mention his family speculated on whether or not he had driven his wife to suicide. “Khrushchev gave the comfortable appearance of a man on holiday at the beach,” wrote Eric Johnston for Look in 1959. Wearing a blue and white seersucker suit, in an accompanying photo, Khrushchev’s wardrobe could not possibly have contrasted more with Stalin's self-imposed military costume. The author contrasted this encounter to an earlier one with Stalin, who ignored

his questions and confessed to being “a rude old man.” An article in *LIFE* later that year highlighted Khrushchev’s role as a family man, showing a photograph of the Soviet leader smiling with his large family. The article showed him playing with his grandson, training his dog Arbat, and being doted upon by his wife Nina, displaying Khrushchev as a far more approachable personality than his predecessors. Gwen Robyns profiled the Soviet First Lady Nina Khrushchev for *Look*, showing Americans a woman who stayed “in her proper place” for Russian society while exercising background power over the leader of world communism.

Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to the United States in 1959 occasioned further speculation about whether the Soviet leader was friend or foe to Americans. Readers of *LIFE* in September 1959 were confronted with the image of Khrushchev’s recognizable bald head set against the backdrop of the Lincoln Memorial. “Khrushchev Confronts the Republic,” read the headline. Although the language of the title might have been somewhat adversarial, Khrushchev’s tour of America was anything but. The article detailed the Soviet leader’s travels across the United States as he visited farms and even went to a filming of the movie *Can Can* where he met Shirley MacLaine. His visit to the film set was covered on the Los Angeles broadcasting affiliate KTLA, which preempted its programming to cover the sight of Khrushchev watching a musical number from *Can Can* and taking in the thoroughly-bourgeois sight of dancing girls flipping up their skirts. Although Khrushchev would later express his disapproval of this “freedom

---

71 “Khrushchev Confronts the Republic.” *LIFE*, 28 Sep. 1959, pp. 29-30
72 “Nikita Khrushchev Visits the Set of the Film Can-Can,” KTLA, September 1959.
Figures 1.3a & 1.3b. “Grandpop” Nikita Khrushchev received a more humanizing look from popular magazines than his predecessor Stalin. He appeared in this 1959 feature for LIFE magazine playing with his grandson Alyosha and his dog Arbat. Reprinted from LIFE magazine, 17 February 1959, pp. 40-41.
for the girls to show their backsides,” the fact that the Soviet leader would endure the spectacle at all was something new in U.S.-Soviet foreign relations.  

While the American media’s image of Soviet leadership took a noticeable turn after the death of Stalin and the accession of Khrushchev, it was not without skepticism. “Beware of the New Soviet Smile,” wrote Seymour Freidin for Look. “For all their smiles, Soviet rulers have not given up their basic objective - domination of Europe and Asia.” Photographs of a smiling Malenkov and Mikoyan indicated that “genial cocktail-party manner is a basic requirement for Politburo members these days.” Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Averell Harriman remarked in Look that although Khrushchev was “affable,” America needed to clear up his misconceptions about the strength and intentions of the United States. No matter how likeable the new leader was, Harriman hoped to remind Americans that he was still a slave to his dogmatic Marxist principles.  

Even if the Soviet Union was no closer to abandoning its communist principles than it had been in the days of Stalin, the signs were nonetheless encouraging. In 1959, LIFE’s report on May Day celebrations in Moscow had something more pleasant than the usual display of Soviet military force to show Americans readers. “This year the fist opened into the friendliest looking hand imaginable. All it seemed to want to do was shake hands.” Americans saw images of flowery floats and calisthenics acts in the place of tanks and missiles. Although LIFE acknowledged that peace was just “the new

---

76 “An Unmilitary May Day in Moscow,” LIFE, 18 May 1959, pp. 53-56.
Soviet posture,” it surely had a positive psychological impact for Americans to see the threat of war symbolically replaced with the hope of peace.

The image of the Soviet communist leadership in American popular media was more complex than a simple campaign of demonization aimed at the Politburo and communist officials. While magazines, films and television gave average Americans a source of information about these enemies, the media did not simply whip the citizenry into a frenzied, panicked fear of these Soviets. It also dealt with them in ways that would mitigate their threat to the United States. Apparatchiks were exposed as hypocrites, Hollywood poked fun at the bumbling commissars, and the unimaginable crimes of the ruthless villain Joseph Stalin were replaced with the friendly openness of Khrushchev (despite the fact that Khrushchev was every bit as complicit in the brutal excesses of Soviet communism as was Stalin). Popular culture in the early Cold War era may have at times fueled paranoia, but it also provided Americans with a way to deal with the enemy they could not directly fight.
Chapter Two
|The Machinery of the Soviet State in American Popular Media

Although Soviet communists themselves constituted a key part of the threat against America during the early Cold War, a large portion of the American media’s response to their Cold War enemy dealt with the Soviet Union not as a collection of individuals but as a faceless leviathan of missiles, rockets, submarines, and war planes. Maps and charts showing the placements of troops and airpower carried over the wartime mindset of World War II into the conflict with the Soviet Union. The popular media frequently cast the Soviet Union as a monolithic war machine, a terrifying engine of production and technological advancement that developed the capability not only to send a human into the void of space, but also to alter the very minds of their opponents through sinister “brain-washing” techniques. As with the media’s treatment of Soviet leadership, however, films, magazines and television served not just to drum up fear and panic in their audiences, but provided a means to deal with the threat. The faceless Soviet military may have provided an impetus for continued vigilance and support for extended military mobilization, but showing Soviet soldiers as individuals rather than cogs in the war machine lessened the perception of the threat they posed. Soviet advances in science and technology were fast outstripping the United States as Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth, a development that the media frequently used to decry the shortcomings of American education in math and science. On the other side of the coin, however, some magazine articles pursued a line of taking the credit for such advances away from the Soviet state by citing espionage and theft. Finally, the idea of Soviet “brain-washing” that had acquired a strong grasp on the American imagination (most memorably though
its dramatization in films such as *The Manchurian Candidate*) posed a shocking threat to American independence of mind. The media demystified brain-washing by exposing its mundane methods and attempting to clear the air of any belief in the supernatural abilities of Soviet persuaders.

**The War Machine: The Red Army and Soviet Aggression**

The media’s depiction of the military threat facing Americans made a deft transition from its focus on the strength of the Axis powers to the military advantages and weaknesses of the Soviet Union. With scarce room for peacetime to settle in after VJ-Day in 1945, the media began to mobilize its charts and maps to outline the next threat to America’s freedom. “I Saw Russia Preparing for War,” wrote the former Finance Minister of Hungary for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1949. No time for peace, the article stressed, highlighting the Soviet Union’s violation of treaties to arm its satellite countries in Eastern Europe and coordinate with their militaries.¹ Although World War II had come to an end, a new conflict was on the rise. American popular media did much to frame this new conflict in the same vocabulary of war that it had employed in prior years.

The visual aspect of framing the conflict as a war can be found in countless magazines of the early Cold War era. In dealing with the Soviet military leviathan, articles often took the form of a side-by-side comparison of military forces, complete with maps detailing enemy strongholds and possible routes of attack. Charts and maps used a particular vocabulary of signs and symbols to describe the Soviet war machine in a way comprehensible to the American public. The “Red military advantage grows,” declared *LIFE* in early 1950. The accompanying chart estimated the growing menace of

---

the Red monster. Although the United States’ national income was nearly four times that of the Soviet Union (represented by a very large moneybag next to a very small one), the enemy’s striking power dwarfed that of the United States in all respects but navy surface vessels. The United States’ column was a series of diminutive combat and transport planes, infantrymen, airmen, tanks and submarines. They were overwhelmed by the much larger icons in the U.S.S.R.’s column. Accompanying maps detailed how the Soviet attack might come, with the familiar arrows of troop movements now plotting out hypothetical scenarios of a Soviet invasion of Europe, the Middle East, and Alaska. Another map showed routes drawn over the North Pole, illustrating how the American heartland was “within range of Murmansk-based bombers.” The remainder of the LIFE feature focused on the necessities of America’s new mobilization. The United States needed better radar, more “muscular” armed forces, a modern navy, and even more planes. On the heels of World War II, American popular media described to its already war-weary citizens the new threat that cast its shadow across the North American continent and set the sights of its war machine upon the United States.

The article in LIFE was no isolated occurrence. The major popular magazines all published similar analyses of the Soviet forces, mobilizing the minds of Americans to meet the challenge of the new war. A reliance on charts and maps to drive home the significance of the threat was a common theme. Look noted in December 1950 that “something big and dangerous” was growing in the wilderness of Siberia. The central feature of the article was a detailed map of the Soviet hinterland showing a formidable network of Russian infantry divisions and airborne units, factories, and bases. The Red

---
menace looked even more intimidating next to another map showing a few paltry air bases in the western United States. As with the earlier article in *LIFE*, this article showed the threat as a mass of icons – planes, infantrymen, factories, parachutes, oil wells and miners. This time the icons of the Soviet Union bested those of the United States not in size, but in number.\(^3\) Later that same month, *LIFE* printed an updated version of the chart it had used earlier in 1950, showing that no great improvement had been made in American mobilization – the American airplanes and soldiers still looked puny and impotent next to the Soviet airplanes and soldiers. To the question of the military preparedness of “the great U.S. industrial machine,” the answer was that “the U.S. wasn’t ready at all.”\(^4\) Richard Wilson’s vision of “Russia Today” in a 1950 issue of *Look* was another mess of menacing icons laid out across the Eurasian plains. The map of Soviet armored divisions and airfields was supplemented byicons for forced-labor camps in Magadan, Archangel, and other forbidding locales, underlining the dark nature of the enemy’s strength. Another icon depicted a blindfolded man awaiting his death at the end of a gun, placed on the map to indicate “disorders” in Ukraine and the Baltic States. This map, however, showed a set of arrows that were somewhat more encouraging – U.S. fighter planes striking at the Soviet industrial city of Magnitogorsk from bases in Northern Africa.\(^5\) The war was on, even if it was only being fought via hypothetical diagrams.

The American popular media waged this type of shadow war against the Soviet threat throughout the early Cold War period. *Look* created a fictional account of an


Fig. 2.1. Military comparison charts such as this one from a 1950 feature in LIFE represented the Soviet enemy as the sum of its military components and garnered support for greater military preparedness. Reprinted from LIFE, 27 February 1950, p. 20.
Fig. 2.2. Battle plans for an imaginary war. Popular magazines of the early Cold War carried over features from the World War II years, such as maps like this displaying enemy strengths and placement of resources. Reprinted from Look, 15 Aug. 1950, p. 28.
attack on America's coast by Soviet submarines. Noting that “Look does not believe that war is inevitable,” the magazine nevertheless warned that Americans must never lose sight of the worst-case scenario. In 1951, LIFE reminded its readers that “an enemy air force has the power to hit us in three ways,” and gave a familiar diagram of attack possibilities over the Pole, eastward to Alaska and across the Pacific towards California. Illustrations and photographs showed that the U.S. radar net was finally being built, but also called for a network of civilian plane spotters to fill in the radar gaps. Although the Air Force had begun recruiting for this task a year prior with the goal of 500,000 volunteers, “so far it has only recruited 50,000 and is frankly alarmed at the slow turnout.” “How Does Our Air Force Stack Up Against Stalin’s?” asked Wesley Price in a 1952 issue of The Saturday Evening Post. “Let's not kid ourselves,” he warned. The United States only had half the planes that the Soviets had. “Will Our Cities Survive?” asked Stephen White, writing for Look in 1953. The nuclear capabilities of the Soviet military leviathan were on the rise. “Second Best in the Air is Not Good Enough,” declared LIFE in 1956. In 1959, Look demonstrated how Soviet submarine attacks could draw the United States into “The War We Are Not Ready to Fight.” Once again, maps broke down the potential attack, depicting mushroom-cloud icons over heavily-populated American cities such as Dallas, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington and Los Angeles. Again and again, popular magazines drove home the idea that even if America’s guns were silent against the Soviet Union, the country was still at war with its...

---

10 “Second Best in the Air is Not Good Enough,” LIFE, 14 May 1956, pp. 52-56.
new nemesis. The portrayal of the Soviet enemy was, in this version, solely derived from its capability as a military force. A familiar set of icons and arrows outlined this dimension of the Soviet Union as a military leviathan against which Americans must mobilize, or face the devastating consequences. “Their plan worked in Seoul,” stated John W. Riley, Jr. and William Schramm, writing for *Look* in 1952. “It could work in New York or Chicago.”

One film that perhaps best summed up the climate of virtual war represented in popular magazines was Columbia’s 1952 release *Invasion U.S.A.* Emerging as a product of the Korean War period, the film was described by a reviewer for *Variety* as “conducive to a scare promotional campaign.” *Invasion U.S.A.* strove to play on American fears of Soviet invasion that had been circulating in the popular media for years. The ultimate message of the film was one of constant vigilance and military preparedness against the Soviet war machine that was poised to strike at a moment’s notice.

The film’s cast of characters included people from various walks of life. Vince Potter, a news commentator, Ed Mulfory, an Arizona cattle rancher, George Sylvester, a San Francisco tractor manufacturer, Carla Sanford, a New York debutante, and Illinois congressman Arthur Harroway are all seated in a bar at the beginning of the film. The characters do not care about the news playing on a nearby television and call loudly for the bartender to turn it off. Vince Potter decides to interview his fellow patrons about their opinions of the government’s mobilization measures, and each character gives him a flatly negative response. George Sylvester boasts how he will not let his factory be used to produce tanks, Ed Mulfory complains loudly about the high income tax he is forced to

---

pay, Carla Sanford refuses to work in a factory for the war effort because it “ruined her hands” during the last war, and the congressman is doing his best to get the defense budget cut in half. Across the bar, the mysterious Mr. Ohman sits, swirling the brandy in his snifter and listening disapprovingly to the conversation. As the mysterious stranger departs, the television flashes with the news: the communists are invading Alaska! Footage of the invasion shows an invading paratrooper shooting a female radio operator dead. The sneak attackers are even clad in American military uniforms.

The President declares it to be another “day of infamy,” and disorder ensues across the country. When George Sylvester returns to his factory to start belatedly producing tanks for America’s defense, a secret communist is revealed to have been working undercover at the factory. He protests his “capitalist pig” of a boss and allows invaders in to take over the factory. His comrades kill Sylvester and take over the factory to produce tanks for use by the invasion force. Carla Sanford responds to the invasion by volunteering at a Red Cross blood bank. Her new beau, Vince Potter, tries to join each branch of the armed services but is turned down by all. Ed Mulfory returns to his ranch in Arizona just in time to put his family in the car as an enemy air squadron targets a nearby dam. After the dam is taken out by a nuclear weapon, the floodwaters dramatically carry away the entire Mulfory family. In Washington, the invaders put on U.S. military uniforms in order to infiltrate the U.S. Capitol. The unit attacks the Capitol and shoots up Congress, killing Harroway in the process. New York gets atom-bombed, and the communist invaders try to force Potter to be a broadcaster for their propaganda, and then
shoot him upon his refusal. After his demise, the invader turns to Carla Sanford, who leaps to her death to avoid the man’s advances.\(^{14}\)

Bizarrely enough, the whole dramatic event turns out to have been just as much a shadow war as the Cold War itself. The characters had been hypnotized by the mysterious Mr. Ohman and shown the invasion that would occur if they refused to mend their errant ways. *Invasion U.S.A.* mirrored the hypothetical wars played out upon the pages of American magazines. A massive Soviet strike force travelled from Siberia and over the North Pole to attack an unprepared America. The Soviets are a nameless mass of parachutes descending over American skies, they are the destructive atomic bombs dropped on American cities, and a war machine devoid of basic humanity.

**Deconstructing Russia’s Military Might**

However compelling this image of the Soviet leviathan may have been (especially for U.S. defense budgets), it was not an uncontested image. There were several instances in popular media of a more moderate tone that sought to bring down the high level of Cold War hysteria. Speaking on the television program *Chronoscope* in June 1951, U.S. Admiral William H.P. Blandy informed the audience that in his opinion, the chances of Russia beginning World War III were “very remote.”\(^{15}\) Writing for *Look* in 1955, experienced diplomat Charles W. Thayer noted that the threat of war “has been postponed.” Russia, he claimed, was in no position to go to war immediately.\(^{16}\) Although such voices of moderation may have been in the minority, they demonstrate that American popular media did not simply rally around the flag of war mobilization.


\(^{15}\) *Chronoscope*, 11 Jun. 1951.

In other instances, a few magazine articles tried to negate the image of an enormous and disciplined Soviet military force by showing its individual soldiers as normal men rather than cogs in the machine of war. “The enemy buck private… is not a terrifying superman but a fairly average sort of guy,” claimed an article in a 1951 issue of LIFE. “It is even possible that he does not particularly care for army life and would rather be back in Omsk or Tientsin at the corner bar. He probably cusses noncoms when they are not around and thinks that he alone gets all the dirty details. His superiors undoubtedly worry a good deal about whether he knows just what he is fighting for.”

The telescopic lens of a German photographer captured images of a “bored Russian standing guard duty in Germany and scared Chinese captured in Korea.” The Soviet war machine, broken down into its constituent parts, looked very average here. Charles W. Thayer touched on an even more pronounced weakness of Soviet military power in a 1954 article for The Saturday Evening Post. “Can Russia Trust Her ‘Slave Armies’?” asked Thayer, noting that a large portion of the Soviet force was composed of conscripts from Soviet satellite nations, who might or might not fight for the Kremlin. The Soviet Union’s massive infantry forces might have proven little more than a paper tiger in actual combat. The Soviet enemy was often characterized in popular media as a war machine with a massive military force to enable its aims at world domination. Yet evidence exists that this was not the only view, and that more moderate points of view were heard as well.

The Technological Übermensch

It was not only in the realm of military might that American popular media portrayed the Soviet Union as a substantial threat. Magazines frequently reflected the technological advances of the Soviet Union as occurring faster than expected by the Western world, rendering an image of the average Soviet as a sort of technological übermensch. The Soviet state itself appeared as a machine of technological and industrial progress, a powerhouse that produced, against the odds, everything from atomic bombs to medal-winning athletes to satellites. The image of the Soviet state as a machine driving this sort of progress caused Americans to experience a natural fear of falling behind. As the aftermath of the Sputnik launch demonstrated, Americans were panicked about the quality of their nation’s educational system as compared to that of the Soviet Union.

“The U.S.S.R. has a topflight scientific team,” noted a LIFE article shortly after the Soviet Union’s 1949 test of a nuclear device. “Russian science and industry are considerably more advanced than had been supposed.” No more were Americans to underestimate the capabilities of their new nemesis. “It is even remotely possible that the Russians have developed a superior bomb.”19 The concept of Soviet super-scientists rapidly developing new weapons was captured in the 1951 spy thriller The Whip Hand, in which “Nazis now turned Commies are experimenting with germ warfare.” The film takes place in a quiet lake area in Wisconsin where an escaped Nazi scientist is perfecting a deadly virus to put in the Chicago water supply.20 Strangely enough, the Nazis and

communists in this film are almost interchangeable, though the devious scientist does take his orders from Moscow.21

The Soviet state was also portrayed as being a particularly strong producer of world-class athletes, capable of out-competing many American athletes in the Olympics (yet another means of fighting the Cold War without weapons). The Saturday Evening Post initially wondered whether Soviet athletes had really set the records they claimed, or if this was nothing more than “the usual communist malarkey.” There was considerable evidence, the article noted, that the Soviets really were strong athletes, owing to the Soviet state training programs that put American efforts to shame: “Soviet sports are conducted in an atmosphere which makes athletic overemphasis in this country seem tame.”22 The Soviet “Brawn Brigade” was a product of the same forces of production that had brought about the Soviet A-bomb. “Russia is building the greatest mass army of athletes that the world has ever known,” wrote Avery Brundage, then-president of the International Olympic Committee in a 1955 article in The Saturday Evening Post. Brundage framed his analysis of Soviet athletics in many of the war terms used in the articles that alerted Americans to the Soviet military advantage: “Unless there is a sudden awakening in this country, Soviet sportsmen are almost certain to dominate the 1956 Olympic Games at Melbourne, Australia.”23 Not only was the machinery of the Soviet state capable of amassing a formidable military and quickly developing devastating weapons, it also created a regimented band of super-athletes, capable of putting the West to shame in Olympic competitions.

The incident of Soviet technological supremacy that resonated most through American popular media, and American society in general, was no doubt the successful launch of a Soviet satellite into outer space in October 1957. Sputnik I took Americans by surprise, and much energy was expended in the following weeks and months to determine how the U.S. space program had fallen so far behind. In a CBS Special Report two days after the successful launch of Sputnik I, American anxiety over the Soviet Union’s technological coup was evident. People had gone through the satellite’s beeping signal looking for secret codes. The coverage included CBS correspondent Richard C. Hottelet speaking with astronomer Dr. Kenneth Franklin of the Hayden Planetarium. Edwards commented on the lack of scientific exchange between Russia and the United States and noted that the successful launch proved that the Soviets “have licked the problem of rocket propulsion.”\(^{24}\) Although the report also included an update on the United States’ own space program, it was quite apparent that the Soviet state had proven itself capable of outperforming American technology. “Soviet Satellite Sends U.S. into a Tizzy,” declared \textit{LIFE} a week later. The article featured photographs of the “smug Russians toasting their moon.”\(^{25}\) Post-Sputnik shock had set in on a large scale. Although \textit{LIFE} published an article touting America’s own space efforts three weeks after the Soviet launch, Sputnik remained “The Feat That Shook the Earth,” and indeed shook up American concepts of themselves as first in space exploration.\(^{26}\)

The following month, \textit{LIFE} followed as the Soviet Union celebrated their newfound technological supremacy. At the Soviet Union’s 40\textsuperscript{th} anniversary celebrations, \textit{LIFE} captured the massive show of force in Red Square, describing it as “A Birthday

Flexing of Red Biceps.”27 Against this triumphant image of the Soviet state, Americans began to reassess themselves in comparison to the Soviets, particularly in regards to education. Popular media revealed the discourse that evolved as Americans attempted to identify the processes by which the Soviet state educational system produced superior scientists and mathematicians.

A March 1958 article in *LIFE* examined the lives of a Soviet and American schoolboy side-by-side in order to expose the deficiencies in America’s educational system. The article described the strenuous and disciplined life of Alexei Kutkov in Moscow. Photographs showed Kutkov standing stiffly to answer difficult questions, reading aloud from *Sister Carrie*, and studying long hours with little leisure time. By contrast, the article showed Stephen Lapecas of Chicago walking to school with his girlfriend, sitting in a disorderly classroom, and dancing with classmates. Studies in America, *LIFE* pointed out, were more relaxed than in the Soviet Union, but perhaps they were too relaxed if the United States was losing so much ground to the Soviets in science and technology.28 *LIFE* portrayed the Soviet student as studious, serious, and regimented – very much a cog in the machine of the Soviet state. The difference between this East/West comparison and those in earlier articles is that here Americans questioned whether or not a Soviet trait was a characteristic to emulate. Russia’s schools posed a “frightening challenge,” wrote the U.S. Commissioner of Education for *Look* in 1958.29 Russian schools were more disciplined, better equipped and staffed. In order to compete with the

---

increasingly powerful Soviet leviathan, Americans might need to co-opt the Soviet image of discipline and dedication shown in the media.

A few films attempted to capitalize on the post-Sputnik hysteria. By the following summer, Allied Artists Studios had released two hastily-made pictures on the subject. *War of the Satellites* was released in May 1958, followed by *Spy in the Sky* in July. The plot of *War of the Satellites* did not focus on the space race between the United States and the Soviet Union, but instead upon a satellite project of the United Nations and the efforts of aliens to thwart it. Rushed into production only weeks after the launch of Sputnik, the message of the film stressed the necessity for mankind to move forward in space exploration.\(^{30}\) *Spy in the Sky* confronted the space race more directly, with a spy-thriller plot that hinged on the discovery of secret codes in the beeping signal of Sputnik.\(^{31}\) Both films failed to yield the profits Allied Artists had hoped for in exploiting American anxiety over the nation’s space race defeat and were relegated to B-movie fare for double bills. *Variety* pegged *War of the Satellites* as “a lesser entry for the exploitation market, where it will be packaged with *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman.*”\(^{32}\) In much the same vein, the *Variety* reviewer described *Spy in the Sky* as “poorly and cheaply made espionage intrigue” that “attempts to cash in on the satellite interest through its title and exploitation. Actually, however, it is a routine spy story of poor quality that will be adequate in the U.S. only for lower case double-bill bookings.”\(^{33}\) Although the problems posed by the Sputnik launch resonated in American minds at this time, it was not enough to make a financial success of two poorly-made exploitation films.

---

\(^{30}\) *War of the Satellites*, Roger Corman, Allied Artists, 8 May 1958.


Taking Credit from the Soviets

In all the anxiety that surrounded the idea of the Soviet Union’s technological superiority to the United States, one method emerged to make the image of the Soviet technological übermensch seem less competent and not as threatening to the narrative of American world supremacy. Taking credit away from Soviet advances by claiming espionage and the theft of Western secrets became a fairly common theme in many articles published in response to news of Soviet technological advances. While it has been shown that certainly some information regarding scientific and industrial secrets was obtained this way by the Soviets, the extent to which this fact was played up in the popular media demonstrated a need to underline the aspects of technology that were gained through illicit means in order to diminish the impact of actual Soviet innovations.

“I Saw the Russians Snooping,” wrote Jack Roberts for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1949. Roberts had served as an interpreter and guide for a group of Russians conducting “friendly inspections” of U.S. industry that “verged on espionage, not to mention fraud.”34 Even the Soviet Union’s storied powers of production could be traced back to the West. “The Western World trusted Peter Kapitza with its atomic research, but he betrayed it,” wrote J. Alvin Kugelmass and Jack Goulden of “The Double Cross that Gave the Reds the H-Bomb” in a 1954 issue of *Look*. The article focused on the one Soviet scientist who had done work at Cambridge before returning in the 1930s to his native Russia, which banned his return to the West.35 Magazines showed that not only nuclear weapons but space exploration itself had been tainted by Soviet theft. “We Gave

the Russians the Key to Sputnik,” noted the headline of a *Look* article in February 1958. The author, Vladimir Shabinsky, went on to elaborate upon how America had captured secrets from the Nazis, and then allowed them to get away to the Soviets. The essence of the article was that the only reason the Soviet Union was able to beat the United States in space was through its usual mix of trickery and deceit.

Soviet technological progress through theft and trickery became a common theme in American popular culture. The 1954 Allied Artists film *Security Risk* involved an atomic scientist who is murdered by his assistant in order to take his secret papers to the communists. The plot of 1953’s *Pickup on South Street* revolves around a stolen film containing American government secrets to be delivered to the communists. The animated television series *Rocky and His Friends* picked up on the theme in 1959 when Rocky and Bullwinkle invented a new kind of rocket fuel while baking a cake, only to have the Russian spies Boris and Natasha try to steal it. If the technological power of the Soviet Union became a thing to be feared by Americans in the early Cold War period, popular media did their part to mitigate the threat by playing up the dishonest side of Soviet advances.

**The Brainwashers: The Mysterious Soviet Ability to Alter Minds**

Perhaps the most sinister aspect of the machinery of the Soviet state for most Americans was its practice of “brain-washing.” Americans were frightened enough that the Soviet communist state was able to mobilize a vast military force and make rapid

---

36 Vladimir Shabinsky, as told to Ellsworth Raymond and Peter Van Slingerland, “We Gave the Russians the Key to Sputnik,” *Look*. 4 Feb. 1958, pp. 19-23.
technological advancements, but the thought that Soviets were, by some supernatural force, able to control the minds of those who opposed them was too much. American media, particularly in the wake of the Korean War, were complicit in both popularizing the idea of “brain-washing” and demystifying the Soviet methods to show a process of persuasion more mundane than supernatural.

Richard Wilson, writing for Look in 1953, introduced readers to the “fiendish” method of controlling human thought being used on American prisoners of war in Korea. Adapted by the Chinese communists from Russian methods, this “ordeal of mental processing” could lead to hundreds of American POWs refusing repatriation. According to Wilson “Both the CIA and the Pentagon have been baffled by the ‘brain washing’ technique and have organized special groups to study the methods of brain perversion.”

The threat was proven by the POWs who indeed chose not to return to their native country. A spread of photos in an October 1953 issue of LIFE showed Americans the faces of the “PWs who the Reds say do not want to come home to America” – each one a smiling young American soldier, most clad in full uniform. On the opposite page, the family of Cpl. Arlie H. Pate pled plaintively for their son to return to America. “Son, what’s the matter that you can’t come on home?” asked Cpl. Pate’s father. “Your Mommy’s in bad shape and can’t stand it hardly at all, you being gone like that. My lord, why in the world don’t you come on over here?”

After reading the gut-wrenching pleas of each member of this all-American farm family from southern Illinois, it would have been difficult to imagine that a son would make such a decision without some kind of communist mental interference. After Francis Gary Powers’ ill-fated U-2 flight over the

---

Soviet Union in 1960 and his subsequent sentencing to a lengthy prison term in Russia, his family was permitted one last hour with their son. As reported to LIFE, Powers’ father noticed his son’s peeling forehead. Powers replied to his father that he had had two colds and that the Russians had used a too-strong sunlamp to treat them. “But do you know what I suspect?” his father told LIFE. “I think he had undergone some sort of brain-baking. That goes on in Russia, I understand.”

The sort of brain-washing (or brain-baking) envisioned by the elder Mr. Powers and a large segment of the American population found artistic expression in the 1962 film version of Richard Condon’s novel *The Manchurian Candidate*. A group of American GIs in Korea are captured by communists who brainwash them to believe that Sgt. Raymond Shaw led a heroic action that merited conferral of the Congressional Medal of Honor. In a memorably eerie scene, the communist brainwasher warps the minds of the GIs until they are convinced that they are all sitting patiently at a ladies’ garden club meeting rather than a demonstration of the technique to other communists. The brainwashed Shaw is ordered to kill one of his comrades and follows the command unblinkingly. Back in the United States after the war, Raymond Shaw is now a puppet of the communists. At the sight of a Queen of Diamonds, his mind is triggered into obeying any instruction, retaining no knowledge of his subsequent actions. Controlled by his ambitious mother as part of an underground communist conspiracy to capture the U.S. presidency, Shaw kills several people and is finally set to target a presidential candidate.

---

40 Herbert Brean, “Powers’ Parents Describe a Last Hour with Their Son,” LIFE, 5 Sep. 1960, p. 35.
“With the air full of international tension, the film *The Manchurian Candidate* pops up with a rash supposition that could serve to scare some viewers half to death - that is, if they should be dupes enough to believe it, which we solemnly trust they won't,” wrote film critic Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times.* But Crowther may have been engaging in some wishful thinking, if one considers the remarks made by Francis Gary Powers’ father only a few years earlier. The premise was extreme but terrifying, and there were bound to be a few viewers who wondered, in the wake of all the discussion on “brain-washing,” whether the incident depicted in the film might just have been possible.

**Demystifying Soviet Methods of Persuasion**

Not everywhere did American popular media stand mystified regarding the method behind “brain-washing.” “As to the question of what makes an American soldier turn communist in the first place, I was given a double-distilled answer,” wrote William A. Ullman in *The Saturday Evening Post.* “Vanity and self-indulgence on one hand; fear and hunger on the other. In a single phrase, the Pavlovian theory.” Ullman’s article exposed the existence of repatriated POWs still under the spell of communist indoctrination, the method for which could be traced back to the work of the Russian behavioral scientist Ivan Pavlov. Soviet methods of persuasion were more mundane than American imaginations had supposed. Torture and extreme deprivation underscored the process. “The Communist captors in Korean prison camps used no hypnotic powers to influence our men, nor did they in some mysterious fashion ‘wash their brains’ clean of Americanism and replace it with Communist faith,” wrote Dr. Julius Segal for *Look* in

---

Although the idea that the Soviet state had perfected a method of literally altering minds through mysterious processes had certainly been propagated in American popular media during this era, the media also exposed the more mundane side of this nefarious ability.

The Soviet state itself was one of several facets of America’s Cold War enemy that the popular media portrayed. It was typically represented as a leviathan of military and technological power that confronted the United States. The machinery of the Soviet state produced a formidable war machine that dwarfed American mobilization efforts. It created satellites that beat the United States into orbiting the earth, and it developed a method of foisting its bankrupt ideology upon nonbelievers. Yet the threat posed by this popular image of the Soviet state was tempered on occasion by articles that looked at the flawed human side of the Soviet military, played up the dishonesty and theft by which the Soviet Union had acquired many scientific and industrial secrets, and demystified the process of “brain-washing” to show it as a less-than-supernatural process of persuasion by cruelty and deprivation. The American popular media’s representation of the threat posed by the Soviet state was far from a monolithic narrative that emphasized only the overwhelming power of the Soviet machine. To Americans viewing the Soviet Union via popular media, the leviathan was at once powerful and flawed, both supernatural and mundane.

Chapter Three
Those “Exploited Toilers”:
American Views of Soviet Citizens

American audiences were accustomed to the media’s outline of the threats to their way of life posed by villainous Soviet leaders, their robotic sea of followers, and the menacing leviathan of the Soviet state. Popular magazines, films and television not only presented these threats but often provided an avenue for Americans to deal with them. However, one aspect of the Cold War enemy received a quite different portrayal for American audiences. The Soviet masses themselves were never condemned, but rather were depicted as the unfortunate victims of the Soviet system and its leadership. American media showed a great deal of interest in average Russians who were simply living their daily lives under the crushing weight of a system that did more to subdue its masses than it did to uplift them. When discussing the Soviet people, magazines frequently published articles that emphasized the humanity of its subjects while stressing their normality and separation from the communist system. Articles focused on the deprivation of religion, of adequate housing, of a million other consumer goods that the Soviet government had failed to provide, and painted a picture of a people trapped within the demonic workings of a system fueled by the bankrupt ideology of communism.

"More people in the U.S. seem to know more things that are not true about Russia than about almost any other subject,” wrote Rear Admiral Leslie C. Stevens in a 1950 issue of LIFE. “Being denied factual information to think with, they tend to turn to slick and glossy generalizations that mirror only a distorted image of the truth.” Stevens’ article strove to convey an essential truth about these oft-misunderstood Soviet citizens;
Americans, he argued, must understand that Russians truly love their land, despite its bleakness.\(^1\) The patriotism of the people was not fueled by communistic zeal, but a far less threatening love of homeland. Time and again, magazines showed the Soviet people not as America’s enemies, but as normal people striving to live their lives in peace. Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson embarked on a 1955 photo-tour of “The People of Russia” for *LIFE*. The resulting photo spread was a humanizing portrait of the Soviet people. The issue’s cover depicted a pair of Soviet policemen gazing approvingly at two young Russian women on a Moscow street. In one image, Cartier-Bresson photographed a group of Russians who happened to be standing in front of an idealized statue of patriotic Soviet citizens. The disparity between the government’s ideal and the reality could not have been more eloquently stressed – the bronzed figures of the grim, flag-waving heroes of the proletariat set off the smiling families and young women in flowered dresses that passed them by while on a holiday from work.\(^2\) The Soviets, through Cartier-Bresson’s camera lens, were just normal people living within a difficult system - they worked, they played, they watched soccer and fell in love. Their children went to school and played in parks next to a “billboard of big shots,” who represented America’s *real* enemy.

This sort of photo tour of everyday life in Russia was common in *LIFE* magazine during the early Cold War. Cartier-Bresson followed his “People of Russia” series with another documenting travel throughout the U.S.S.R., which portrayed Soviets who Americans would have hardly perceived as a threat, dressed as they were in rather ridiculous striped beach pajamas while enjoying a holiday by the sea. Howard Sochurek

---


Figures 3.1a & b. Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson captured images of the Russians as ordinary people (left) in contrast to the Soviet Union’s idealized image of them (shown on the right in a bas-relief depicting Russian workers surrounding Stalin). Photographed by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Reprinted from LIFE, 17 January 1955, pp. 16-17.
captured more images of Russian life on a tour down the Volga River. In 1961, Carl Mydans did a photo spread of images of Moscow in winter. His photos showed Russians involved in various winter activities in the city park – children sledging down a man-made hill, families skiing over the frozen terrain, and a few adventurous citizens even jumping in the icy river for a swim. Though magazines frequently portrayed the Soviet leadership as villains and the Soviet state as a destructive machine, the Soviet people were simply people.

The problem of the Soviet masses, however, was highlighted by a short article immediately following Carl Mydans’ photos of a magical Russian winter wonderland. In a “Tragic Footnote of Wintry Moscow,” LIFE informed readers that Olga Ivinskaya, the love of Boris Pasternak and basis for the character of Lara in Dr. Zhivago, apparently came to the same fate as her literary counterpart – the Soviet government sentenced her to eight years in a forced labor camp. Soviet people resided within a system that daily threatened their ability to survive and thrive. The American media often portrayed the Soviet people as crushed in the cogs of the Soviet machine and overburdened by the everyday forms of oppression that were a byproduct of the Soviet regime.

Journalist John Scott’s 1949 article “Russia through Russian Eyes” highlighted this particular theme in the media’s narrative of America’s Cold War adversary. Scott recounted for LIFE’s readers the story of a Russian doctor whom Soviet officials forced to practice “class medicine,” a practice that privileged some groups over others and

designated better care for those with more ideologically correct politics.\textsuperscript{5} Anna Palasova Raymond described her upbringing in the Soviet Union for an article in \textit{The Saturday Evening Post}, describing how communism was more of a nuisance to her growing up in the U.S.S.R. than an ideology to be espoused or denied. She recalled how children of certain families were excluded from school lunch and an incident in which her date was arrested by the Soviet police for standing too long in front of the Smolny building, the headquarters of the communist party in St. Petersburg, while waiting for her to arrive.\textsuperscript{6} Magazine articles like these demonstrated to their American readers how the Soviet communist state asserted itself in every area of its people’s daily lives, from doctor visits and school lunches to even the ritual of courtship. American readers could have easily visualized this vast disparity between the Soviet government and their own – while American teenagers “parked” on lovers’ lanes across the country, Anna Raymond’s beau was arrested for simply standing too long in a certain place.

Perhaps the most striking contrast these sources demonstrated between the United States and the Soviet Union appeared in a 1958 issue of \textit{LIFE} on the subject of Russian voting in elections. Two ballots were presented, one in the original Cyrillic script, the other translated into English for the benefit of the magazine’s readers. The ballot contained only a single name for Russian voters to choose. The party’s choice for a position appeared alone, and the only “choice” left to Russian citizens was whether to check the box or voice their displeasure by crossing the name out.\textsuperscript{7} The article noted that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} John Scott, “Russia through Russian Eyes,” \textit{LIFE}, 26 Sep. 1949, pp. 114-130.
\end{itemize}
while some citizens actually did exercise their “no” vote, this was more indicative of the people’s discontent with the party than a real method to bring about change in the system. Magazines showed how the Soviet state invaded the lives of all of its citizens, from adult workers all the way down to the very young. “From the cradle to the grave the Soviet citizen is taught to believe that he is the luckiest man alive,” wrote former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union Walter Bedell Smith in *The Saturday Evening Post*. “And for the skeptics, there are the secret police - who already have some 15,000,000 Russians doing ‘involuntary labor.’” A photograph accompanying Smith’s article displayed a classroom of Soviet schoolchildren who were “caught in the mechanism of the police state.” The Soviet Union uniformed its children in schools, taught them ideals of the communist state from an early age, and even regulated which children would receive school lunches based on the politics of their parents. Soviet children were truly caught in the middle of the communist system, a reality that was vividly depicted in American magazines.

**Religious Deprivation**

American media frequently underscored this constant invasion of the Soviet government into the lives of its individual citizens by highlighting the means by which the communist state attempted to deprive its people of religion. Soviet communists embraced atheism and hoped to stamp out religious practice behind the Iron Curtain, and American magazines often focused on this policy to demonstrate the victimization of average people. In a 1949 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, Soviet Defector Nina Alexieova showed Americans “How Russian children lost their God,” telling a story of

---

her childhood in which a young boy had been ordered by a guide from the Young Pioneers communist youth organization to destroy his family's icons. Torn between the rejection of his peers and the dismay of his family, the boy burned the icons. Having alienated his family, he was then denounced by the Pioneers for attending the funeral service for his grandmother.\(^9\) Yet for all the efforts that the Soviet government made to stamp out religion amongst its population, most evidence in the American media showed a people that fought back and held onto faith against the odds. In his series of articles for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1949, Walter Bedell Smith wrote of the resilience of faith among those under Soviet domination. The former ambassador demonstrated for American readers how people of all faiths refused to surrender their beliefs, “even though the Communists have stopped at nothing to kill religion in Russia.” The images accompanying Smith’s article depicted a Russia that was still very much in step with its religious traditions, but obliged to lie low to avoid the ire of the Kremlin. The Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexei appeared in one photograph, along with a caption indicating to readers that much of his ability to gain this high position was derived from one simple fact: “He doesn’t make trouble for the Kremlin.”\(^10\) William O. Douglas expanded on this theme of Soviet religious suppression for *Look* in 1956, showing photos of ornate Russian churches, many of which had been turned into museums that mocked religion. Despite such efforts, however, Douglas concluded that the Soviet Union could try to stamp out religion, but would never fully succeed due to the virtue of the people.\(^11\)

Charles C. Parlin returned from a tour of Russian churches in 1956 to report on the state


of religion under the Soviet state. Parlin’s article in *Ladies’ Home Journal* acknowledged that the Soviet government had by that time put aside its tactics of overt persecution, but it continued to pursue its goal of an atheistic state by educating its youth against religion. Still, Parlin observed little evidence that Russians had abandoned their faith. A small church he visited in the town of Udelnaya was “as jam-packed as a New York subway at rush hour.”\(^{12}\) In spite of the fact that the Soviet government infringed upon Russian religiosity to an extent unimaginable in the United States, Americans could have taken comfort in the depiction of Soviet people as tenaciously holding onto their ancestral faiths.

Discussion of the state of religion in the Soviet Union was not exclusive to popular magazines in the early Cold War era. A 1961 NBC special report on religion in the U.S.S.R. subtitled "...And the Word Endures" featured not an account of the Russian Orthodox Church, but the story of the single Baptist church in Moscow. The broadcast showed American audiences a church service, an ordination ceremony, a wedding, and a baptism at this enclave of religion in the center of the Soviet communist regime. Dr. Paul Stevens, an American who appeared as a representative of the Southern Baptist Convention, spoke to the congregation in Moscow.\(^{13}\) The program reinforced the similarities between American and Soviet people with this image of a common faith between the two. The majority of Soviet citizens were Russian Orthodox, Muslim, or Jewish – not Baptist. The NBC report’s choice of the Baptist church as the center of its report on religion behind the Iron Curtain is indicative of a desire to stress commonality with Russian people as opposed to demonstrating their otherness. All media made note

---


\(^{13}\) "And the Word Endures...” *NBC Special Report*, NBC, 12 Feb. 1961.
of the religiosity of average people living under the pressure of the communist state, creating a means by which Americans could bond with the human face of the Soviet Union, rather than vilify it.

**Deprivation of Consumer Goods**

The persecution of religion was only one of the ways that American popular media demonstrated the Soviet state’s abuses of its own people. Another reality of life in the Soviet Union that was often remarked upon in the United States was the lack of consumer goods available for sale behind the Iron Curtain. With the Soviet economy geared towards heavy industry and the manufacture of military and agricultural equipment, the Soviet state under-produced in normal household and consumer goods. While Americans enjoyed the endless variety brought about by their postwar prosperity, Soviets struggled to obtain even the most rudimentary necessities.

Walter Bedell Smith commented on the lack of consumer goods he encountered when posted to Moscow, telling readers of *The Saturday Evening Post* how he jumped through considerable hoops to acquire a few chickens so that he might raise them behind Spaso House, the U.S. chancery, in order to provide enough eggs for his family.\(^\text{14}\) Lydia Kirk, wife of Ambassador Alan G. Kirk, gave the readers of *Ladies’ Home Journal* a similar description of housekeeping difficulties while living in Spaso House, though she had a somewhat less adventurous solution, choosing to buy everything for the household in Paris before her arrival.\(^\text{15}\) If such was the state of affairs for the American ambassador to the Soviet Union, readers could only imagine how difficult it was for the lower echelons of Soviet society to buy the necessities.


Nor was it only a deprivation of food and consumer goods that plagued the Soviet people. American magazines showed how housing in Russia was woefully inadequate for its population and often of very poor quality. Even “the shambles of half-kaput Eastern Germany” was more appealing to Russians than their homeland, wrote Joseph Wechsberg for *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1950. Look published a series of exclusive photos of the Soviet capital in 1953, among them was an image of a crumbling apartment building that had been “recently built” by a government too incompetent to provide adequate housing for its citizens. A more modern and well-built apartment house appeared in another photo, the caption noting that the building was reserved for party functionaries. Though Cyril Ray noted in Look in 1952 that Russia seemed dreary, shabby, and overcrowded by Western standards, he also added that to Russians things seemed to be improving somewhat. Even though the American media predominantly followed a narrative that displayed the inability of the Soviet system to meet the needs of the people, it remained hopeful for the situation’s improvement. In 1955, *LIFE* published photos of Soviet inspectors on a tour of the United States, viewing American housing in order to replicate it in the Soviet Union.

In the world of television, Walter Cronkite took American viewers of his *You Are There* series to Moscow in 1955, abandoning the program’s usual routine of staging news reports on famous events in history. The contemporary situation in the U.S.S.R. apparently rated with the truly decisive moments in world history such as the assassination of Julius Caesar or the sinking of the RMS *Titanic*, both of which had been

---

restaged for the program earlier that year. Correspondent Richard C. Hottelet reported from the Moscow department store GUM, where he observed obscenely high prices on goods, noting that average people could not afford them as there was no such thing as credit or installment buying under the Soviet system. Daniel Schorr examined Russian cars, finding prices were still prohibitively high and that luxury cars were only available to Party leaders. The camera followed Cronkite’s reporters as they delved into the reality of life in Moscow. The housing shortage persisted, and most lived in slums and tenements. The government markets made life difficult. People could go to the Central Free Market to find rare or scarce items, but prices were astronomical. The reporters even visited the Baptist congregation in Moscow (although more than five years before NBC would use it as the focus of their special report on religion in the Soviet Union).

You Are There characterized the Soviet Union as “a regime of contrasts.” Though living conditions had improved over the previous nine years, leaders still lied to people about conditions in America.20 This one-hour window into the world behind the Iron Curtain reaffirmed the narrative put forth in magazines. The lives of average Soviet citizens were greatly encumbered by the system under which they were forced to live. The international relationship between the American people and their Soviet counterparts was not an adversarial one in this era. American media pursued an avenue of seeking commonality and solidarity rather than difference and otherness. The true adversaries of the United States were located elsewhere: in missile silos, in Communist Party meetings, and behind the walls of the Kremlin.

“Twisted Women” – Femininity Denied

In their case against the Soviet Union’s exploitation and oppression of its citizenry, American observers often singled out the regime’s treatment of women. Films like *Ninotchka*, *Comrade X*, *Jet Pilot*, *Iron Petticoat*, and *Silk Stockings* each focused on a particular stereotype of the Soviet woman in the early Cold War – indoctrinated communist officials who could be gradually seduced away from strict communist morality with Western luxury. While the unfeminine clothing and appearance and strenuous jobs were a choice for the characters in these films, the American media did not take the same view in reference to the Soviet Union’s real-life female citizens. Magazines consistently portrayed Soviet women as a special segment of the oppressed. The Soviet communist government deprived women of their very femininity not only by depriving them of the variety of feminine clothing and cosmetics that were presently being enjoyed in abundance by their American counterparts, but by creating a society in which women were held to a standard of nominal “gender equality” in order to exploit their labor in strenuous and dangerous occupations.

Russian women were not always “the dedicated zealots that Moscow propagandists paint them,” according to Anna Palasova Raymond, in the same 1949 article of *The Saturday Evening Post* that recounted her date’s arrest while loitering in front of a building in St. Petersburg. Raymond’s article painted a vivid portrait of young Russian women behaving in ways very recognizable to her American audience. They dressed up for dates and hunted assiduously for better clothing, but under the Soviet government, much of this typical female activity of shopping and dressing up was simply impossible. “At no time could you walk into a store and buy the type of dress you
wanted,” she wrote. “The New Look is no problem in Russia, the styles remain almost unchanged forever.” While average women like herself were barred from access to the latest styles, Raymond noted that the same rules did not apply to actresses and the wives of high officials. Raymond wrote of a delegation of girls sent to the 1939 World’s Fair in New York to work as guides for the Soviet exhibition. “For some reason, all were unattractive, but there was no question of their political reliability.” She related how Russian women had almost no jewelry as it was officially criticized. “The Soviet government does not believe women should make themselves attractive that way.”

Nor was Raymond the only Soviet woman to demonstrate this idea in American magazines. When AP correspondent Eddy Gilmore returned to the United States after 11 years in Russia, he brought his Russian wife Tamara. The couple’s story appeared in a 1953 issue of Look, accompanied by photos of Tamara enjoying the freedom and availability of consumer goods. “American silks and nylons delight Tamara,” read the caption to a photo of Mrs. Gilmore unpacking luggage. “She thinks Russian women should not have to wear the purple cotton bloomers their government supplies for them.”

The Soviet system deprived its women of the material trappings of femininity that American enjoyed.

Popular magazines provided evidence that American women absorbed this unflattering information about Russian women’s experience and that it colored their views of life in the Soviet Union. When Minnesota housewife Dodee Wick travelled to Moscow with her husband in 1953, her published account in LIFE demonstrated her

---

assumption that the Russian women she encountered would be unkempt and poorly
groomed. She professed to have been “flabbergasted” when she learned, as a result of
waiting behind a long line of manicure clients at a Moscow salon, that these Soviet
women frequented beauty parlors on a regular. Lydia Kirk, the wife of the United
States Ambassador to Russia, returned from her husband’s diplomatic assignment with an
eyeful of Russian fashion to show the American readers of LIFE. In a feature titled “The
Iron Curtain Look Is Here,” Kirk displayed the Russian clothing she had brought back
with her: all of it, including a knitted pair of bloomers, “drab and stiff” and described as a
shade described as a shade of “MVD blue.” The unattractive female styles, alleged Kirk,
were decreed by “Old Bolsheviks” and were more suited to the 1930s than the 1950s. American student Gay Humphrey traveled with a group of other students to Russia and
was interviewed about her experience with the Russians, who, she remembered, had
“funny reactions” to the westerners’ clothes. Humphrey stressed that although the
Americans had taken pains to dress simply, they still looked elegant in comparison to
their Russian counterparts. A friend she met in Russia told her that she was “much too
extravagantly dressed for daytime.” Humphrey thought this reaction, however, was not
one of disapproval or scorn, but evidence of an “inferiority complex,” a reaction to the
deficiency of Russian clothing when compared to American fashion.

American magazines emphasized that the unfeminine appearance of Soviet
women was not a matter of choice and that when given opportunity, these women
behaved much like American women. The lack of the material trappings of femininity –
stylish clothing, makeup, jewelry – only pointed up a deeper source of female oppression

under the Soviet regime. Russian-born Julie Whitney alluded to this issue in a 1954 *Look* article entitled “Women: Russia's Second-Class Citizens.” “Femininity gets short shrift in Russia, where women wield pneumatic drills, not lipstick,” wrote Whitney. The American popular media frequently demonstrated that while the Soviet regime denied its women the opportunity to consume like women in the West, it also exploited their labor by recruiting women into jobs in traditionally male industries. The real issue for American witnesses was the double burden the socialist government foisted upon Soviet women. While working to build the socialist state, they were also responsible for housework and child-rearing. Student Gay Humphrey reported in a *Ladies’ Home Journal* interview that Russian women who chose to be only housewives were looked down upon by their working peers. Kansas City housewife Lou Atzenweiler lived for some time with a Russian family in Moscow and observed in *Look* that the family’s 8-months-pregnant daughter Tanya was very sensitive about her situation. When her father teased her by saying “Tanya’s job now is to eat and sleep,” Tanya felt that such a statement implied that she was shirking her duties. “Apparently, a woman’s place may be anywhere where there’s work to be done,” reported columnist Dorothy Thompson, noting that although Soviet decrees declared that women should be engaged only in “light work,” they were in actuality performing heavy labor for little reward, in addition to the burden of housework. She even claimed that Russian women appeared to age faster than their male peers due to the heavy strain and commented on the “heavily-lined faces” of women she supposed to be in their early thirties. “I do not believe that Russian women like the regime. Of course there are some who do – those who have gone through the

---

universities and have good and relatively easy jobs. But these are few.”

The exploitation of women’s work by the Soviet communist government was an idea that appeared frequently in the pages of American magazines, often under the bylines of American women appalled by the conditions forced upon their Soviet sisters.

The theme of the masculinized, exploited Soviet women made its way onto American television screens in this era as well. For a 1954 episode of *Caesar’s Hour*, Sid Caesar staged a Russian version of the popular American series *Dragnet* (as of course, the Russians claimed first discovery of even American crime dramas).

“**Dragnyet**” featured Caesar as Sgt. Joe Borscht, hot on the trail of “vodka smuggler no. 1.” The detective traipses across a satirical Moscow landscape (“Rimsky-Korsakov Boulevard” appears to be a dusty cow path, and “Moscow Boulevard” is just a man on a dogsled). In the course of his investigations, Joe Borscht goes to a Soviet factory to interview workers. The detective questions a masked welder in the factory who answers his queries in a deep male voice. The welder then raises the mask to reveal a young and attractive blond woman who smiles winsomely at the camera. The joke is not lost even with the passage of time – a young woman who would not have been out of place as an American pinup girl became a deep-voiced laborer under the pressure of a society that placed less value on her feminine beauty than on her ability to wield a blowtorch.

**Natasha Fatale**, the infamous female spy who plagued the exploits of Rocky and Bullwinkle, was similarly exploited by her despicable partner in crime (and espionage) Boris Badenov. In a climactic chase scene involving canoes, the adventurous squirrel and moose, and a secret formula for rocket fuel, Boris sits back in the canoe and makes

---


30 *Caesar’s Hour*, NBC, 6 Dec. 1954.
Natasha paddle furiously the entire way, offering his help only when the canoe is a few yards from shore. Even though the two are nominally “equals,” the television program shows Natasha taking on the bulk of the labor in an obvious reference to the theme of exploited Soviet women that had long existed in the media.

In a 1961 episode of The Twilight Zone, the theme of masculinized Soviet women was taken a step further. The premise of “Two” involves two rival soldiers who discover each other in the ruins of a destructive world war. While the nationalities of each character were never explicitly identified, and Rod Serling’s introduction noted that the signs on the set were only in English for the sake of the audience, the story was an obvious nod to the adversarial relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union at the time it was broadcast. The male character (Charles Bronson) is a typical American soldier of the early Cold War era. The other soldier, a woman (Elizabeth Montgomery), was understood to represent the Soviet Union – the only word she utters throughout the episode is Russian. The “Soviet” woman appears on screen in a futuristic military uniform (though with an impractically short skirt and bare legs). Wandering around the ruins of a small city, she forages for food in a wrecked shop. When she discovers a can of chicken and begins to eat, the “American” soldier appears and beats her up to get at the food, reduced to animal-like instincts by the necessities of war.

Thanks to Miss February on a conveniently-placed pin-up calendar, a magazine photo of Miss Universe and a feminine dress in a wrecked storefront, he remembers how to treat a lady and goes back to revive the “invader” and give her food. The woman is foreign and taciturn, ravenously devouring the chicken she is offered. The American then goes to find

---

31 “Two for the Ripsaw... or Goodbye, Mr. Chips” and “Farewell, My Ugly or Knots to You,” Rocky and His Friends, ABC, 7 Jan. 1960.
himself a shave in a wrecked barbershop as the Russian woman follows him like a lost cat. She imitates his motions to clean herself and seems slightly confused by the soap. When she admires the aforementioned dress in the shop window, the man takes the dress and tells her to put it on. She goes into the ruins of a recruiting center to change, but seeing the recruiting posters, she is reminded that the man is her enemy and tries to shoot him. In the end, she puts on the dress, sticks her knife in the sash, and forces a smile. The pair walks off together, beginning a beautiful post-apocalyptic friendship. 

The woman represented in the *Twilight Zone* episode seemed to have subjugated all sense of femininity to her primary identity as a warrior. In the barbershop, she did not even remember how to groom herself properly. She admired the dress, but did not put it on until she was urged to by the male soldier. In turn, the male soldier symbolically returned to a sense of civilization when he stopped trying to beat up or kill the “invader” and began to treat her as a woman: bringing her food, giving her a dress, and making himself presentable. The two adversaries finally reconciled when the “Soviet” woman met the expectations of the “American” man – she fixed her hair, exchanged her drab uniform for the dress and laid down her weapon. The character represented the end result of the expectations laid upon women by the Soviet regime. In fulfilling their duty to labor (or fight) for the Soviet Union on the same basis as men, they would be deprived of their femininity and their very sense of themselves as women would be threatened.

The idea of “gender equality” and the way it was implemented in the Soviet Union was a clear target for American media in an era that was best known for advancing domesticity as the preferred occupation for women. It showed a Soviet regime that

---

forced its women into a position entirely at odds with the idealized professional housewife stereotype valued in American society during the early Cold War era. This exploitation of women under the communist government provided a point of contention with the Soviet regime that hit close to home with American families.

**The Defectors: America’s Great Hope**

If the American media’s approach to the Soviet people framed them as the exploited masses toiling under an inhuman regime, then the waves of defectors that escaped to the West essentially became proof of that concept. The tales of Soviet defectors appeared frequently on the pages of popular magazines in this era, emphasizing the trials and difficulties endured to flee from Soviet oppression to Western liberty.

In many cases, Soviet defectors became protagonists in thrilling tales of suspense and intrigue woven in popular magazines. “His picture has never been published. His children do not know their real name. A man marked for death by the Soviet secret police here tells his own true story,” read the opening lines of a 1954 article in *Look*. A shadowy silhouette with a smoldering cigarette between his fingers consumed the remainder of the page. With this dramatic opening, *Look* began the story of Igor Gouzenko, a Soviet defector, who was living in Canada under the protection of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Gouzenko emphasized how even then, under police protection, he lived in fear of assassination for the blow he had dealt to the Soviet espionage network. His story read like a spy thriller – drilling new names with the members of his family, inventing a cover story for his undercover policeman, and faking a cover occupation as an engineering consultant.  

---

A similar tale of drama and suspense surrounded another Soviet agent, Vladimir Petrov, who defected to the West while managing a spy ring in Australia. Dr. Michael Bialoguski, the secret agent who masterminded Petrov’s defection told the story in a six-part feature for *The Saturday Evening Post*. “Spy fiction gives a distorted picture of a secret agent’s life,” wrote Bialoguski. His story, however, was a real-life spy thriller filled with cover identities, secret meetings, and an undercover ring of enemy agents. In the first pages of the article, a full-page photo showed Dr. Bialoguski slipping on a jacket over his holstered pistol – “to guard against M.V.D. reprisals,” read the caption.³⁴ *LIFE* published another side of the “great defection” as “A Spy Thriller that Outdoes Fiction.”

The story focused on the strong-arm methods of the Soviets in trying to force Petrov’s wife onto a flight headed back to the Soviet Union. The article elaborated in detail on the several trials of the unfortunate Evdokia Petrov. Photos accompanying the article showed the tearful woman in the "iron grip" of a Soviet courier and embassy chauffeur, marched towards a waiting plane where she cried despondently. She was shown to be in fear of her armed escorts, who were eventually thwarted by Australian police. A representative of the Australian government approached Mrs. Petrov to make an offer of asylum, but she was too frightened to speak until taken to a closed room away from her armed Soviet captors. “Those guns would have been used,” she declared to the Australian officials who escorted her to safety. At last, Evdokia Petrov accepted the offer and reunited with her husband.³⁵ The defection of Yuri Rastvorov received a similar

---

treatment to his fellows Petrov and Gouzenko. “Russia’s No. 1 Spy” defected from his

Fig. 3.3. Thrilling tales of defection. Above, Soviet enforcers attempt to strong-arm Evdokia Petrov back to Russia after her husband had defected in Australia. Reprinted from LIFE, 3 May 1954, p. 25.
post in Japan in 1954, and his story appeared in the pages of The Saturday Evening Post months later, after Rastvorov had begun spilling his secrets.³⁶

Yet each tale of escape had a darker side to it. While Igor Gouzenko managed to defect with his family, and Vladimir Petrov’s wife was saved by the quick action of the Australian authorities, such was not the case for most of the high-profile defectors. Yuri Rastvorov’s wife and daughter were “liquidated” after he refused to return to Russia. When Lt. Col. Grigori Stepanovich Burlutski fled the Soviet Union, he left his wife Lolya behind, but told LIFE that he hoped the authorities would only make her "sit" in jail for a short while.³⁷ The same issue of LIFE that related the tale of Evdokia Petrov’s narrow escape carried yet another story of defection, this time that of Nikolai Evgenyevich Khokhlov, an agent in Berlin who refused to carry out a planned assassination. His refusal put his wife Yanina and 18-month-old son Aleksandr, who were still in Russia, at risk of reprisals from the Soviet government.³⁸

The story of Nikolai Khokhlov’s defection also highlighted the dangers posed by Soviet agents towards those who had already escaped to the West. Khokhlov’s defection occurred after his superiors ordered him to murder Georgi Okolovich, an anti-Soviet refugee who had escaped years before. “Soviet specialists converted this harmless-looking cigarette case into a fiendish murder weapon,” read the caption to a photo of Khokhlov’s intended murder weapon.³⁹ Even those who had managed to make the difficult escape from Soviet control were never beyond the reach of its agents. “The

---

³⁸ “Plot that Backfired: A Soviet Agent Defects and Imperils His Family,” LIFE, 3 May 1954, p. 52.
Reds Want Them Back,” proclaimed the title of a 1955 article in The Saturday Evening Post. “If we don't offer the anticommunist refugees some hope soon,” it continued, “Moscow will trap them in its web of blackmail and murder.” Charles W. Thayer related the story of how communist agent Elizabeth Kluchevskaia tried to kidnap a refugee living under another name in Germany.40 In 1956, Look told the story of Alexis Chwostov and his daughter Tanya, who were coerced back to Russia. Chwostov had received letters from his elderly mother urging him to return to Russia. Look pointed out that the letters were likely dictated by Soviet officials in order to score the propaganda victory that would be guaranteed by the return of a defector. Photos showed the unfortunate pair as they were led up the gangplank of the Queen Mary by Soviet officials.41 American magazines demonstrated the difficult reality of defection – although some had managed to break free, the agents of the Soviet regime possessed the ability to reach across oceans and threaten the refugees’ newfound liberty. The stories and photos in American popular magazines helped form a popular image of this particular group of Soviet people. By escaping the cruelty of the communist regime, these defectors often received heroic treatment in the American media, which played up the difficulty of their defection and the continued precarious situation that many continued to face after reaching the “safety” of the West.

Adjustment to life outside of the Soviet bloc presented additional challenges to refugees. Though accounts of the homesickness and confusion that refugees from the Soviet Union faced after settling in the West appeared in popular magazines upon

occasion, they were a distinct minority of defector stories told to the American public. In 1949, *LIFE* published excerpts from the diary of Anatoli Barsov, a Soviet defector who eventually returned to the Soviet Union. While the photos that accompanied the article showed Barsov on a tour of the free world, seeing his “first Negro,” viewing “capitalist gadgets,” and eating a “capitalist breakfast,” none of these things seemed to much impress Barsov. His diary entries displayed a deep homesickness for the home he had left behind forever, and combined with the isolation created by his lack of English language skills, Anatoli Barsov was demonstrably gloomy. The diary ended abruptly with a “vitriolic, confused blast” about the communist struggle, after Barsov had determined to return to his homeland. The text that followed the end of the diary mused whether the final paragraph had been written under duress from Soviet agents drawing him back, or if Barsov was in fact trying to save himself from a tragic fate when he arrived back in Russia.42 When Sergei Malakhov defected to the United States, he described for *Look* in 1950 how the options of living in American society could be overwhelming to someone accustomed to having a government decide everything for him. His article, “Freedom Frightens Me,” set this out as a possible reason for Barsov’s return to the Soviet Union. “Freedom costs something, but it is worth it,” Malakhov concluded.43

Throughout the early Cold War period the Barsov and Malakhov articles were, in proportion to the bulk of magazine reporting on Soviet defectors, vastly in the minority. They likely dealt with the problem of poorly-adjusted Soviet refugees only when the issue could not be ignored. Anatoli Barsov’s defection with Piotr Pirogov in 1938 had

been a highly-publicized affair. *TIME* had published excerpts from Barsov and Pirogov’s post-defection press conference, in which Barsov had shouted about rigged elections in Russia, banging his fist on a table. “They must vote at the point of a gun . . . The army doesn’t live badly, and especially the air corps; but the farmer who represents the majority of Russians lives so badly and is treated so badly it pained me, so I decided to leave.”

Some explanation had to be given as to why he eventually returned to the Soviet Union, where he faced execution. Sergei Malakhov offered an explanation in his article but maintained that even in spite of the difficulties of adjusting to life in America – hunting for a job, linguistic isolation, and homesickness – American liberty was still worth the fight. Well and good, considering that the American media also contributed to the view that Soviet defectors were one of the United States’ greatest assets in the Cold War. Not only did they give legitimacy to the idea of the Soviets as a people imprisoned by their own regime and score a propaganda victory for the West, many defectors fled with valuable information. The defecting spies enabled the capture of entire Soviet spy rings. When the United States offered a $100,000 reward to the first person to defect with a Soviet MiG, Lt. No Kum Sok fled communist North Korea, collected his reward (of which he claimed no prior knowledge), then enrolled at the University of Delaware. “It Takes a Russian to Beat a Russian,” wrote Wallace Carroll for *LIFE* in late 1949, arguing that only the Soviet people could really overthrow the Soviet regime. The stream of defections affirmed for Americans the idea that such a sentiment existed in Soviet society. In telling the story of Red Army officers who had defected to the West for *The

*Saturday Evening Post*, writer James P. O’Donnell argued that the United States should have exploited this “Achilles heel” of the powerful Soviet regime a good deal sooner.\(^{47}\) The stories of Soviet defectors appeared in American magazines framed as small victories in the larger Cold War.

In 1959, at the United States Exhibition at Sokolniki Park in Moscow, a young Russian-speaking American named Vera Bacal worked answering the questions of the Russian guests. A sea of Russian visitors crowded into the exhibit to watch films, sample Pepsi Cola, and see the prosperity that had been generated by American capitalism. Such was the mission of the exhibit – it tacitly acknowledged that the average Russian had more interest in capitalist material abundance than communist ideology. *LIFE* reported on the exhibition and highlighted the eagerness of the visitors as they crowded to ask questions about the displays and life in America.\(^{48}\) To Vera Bacal, the people seemed very normal - a saleslady, a construction worker, a physical education teacher. None seemed duped or brainwashed, though many showed pride in their own country. Her experience with the people was published for an article in *Look* under the title “The Russians Ike Won’t Hear.” Regardless of the situation between the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union, at the level of average people, the conversation was always far less contentious. Shown in American magazines as the exploited and oppressed prisoners of the Soviet regime, the common people were not America’s Cold War enemy. “Why didn't you come to Russia before?” a Russian saleslady asked Vera Bacal. “Don’t

---


you think that if we knew more about people like you, and you knew us, that the sun would shine for both our countries?"\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{49} "The Russians Ike Won't Hear," \textit{Look}, 10 Nov. 1959, pp. 29-35.
Chapter Four
The Enemy at Home:
Soviet Spies and Communist Agents in America

America’s Soviet enemy in the early Cold War era was one of many faces. The evils of the communist leadership, the goliath proportions of the Soviet machine of state, and the oppression and exploitation of average Soviet citizens became crucial aspects of how American popular media interpreted the enemy to its audiences. Yet the greatest menace of the Soviet Union that Americans faced was, strictly speaking, not Soviet at all. It was the undercover network of spies and communist agents that put a frighteningly familiar face on the machinations of America’s great enemy. American films, television, and magazines accorded a great deal of effort to deal with this crisis. The uncovering of Soviet spies in government was widely reported in magazines, imagined in popular films and even fabricated into a stock character for television. American communists were, of course, not necessarily spies, and the media also dealt with the issue of communist ideals amongst American citizens and how they posed a threat to the American way of life and corrupted idealistic youth.

While the media played a significant role in framing and disseminating knowledge about the Soviet threat that lived undercover within the American population, its tone was not exclusively alarmist. For every magazine article highlighting Soviet espionage, there appeared another touting the success of the F.B.I. in infiltrating the infiltrators to bring down their organization. There was a move to uncover the actuality of American communism, rather than to whip an already-anxious population into a blind panic. The media also betrayed a fear in Americans that, in rooting out the agents of the Soviet Union working undercover, their own ideals of freedom and liberty would be
abandoned and the country would descend to the level of a fascist regime. American popular media of the early Cold War era reveal that regardless of how frightening the idea of a Soviet infiltration of America had become, the portrayal of the threat in film, television and magazines was still more moderate than alarmist.

**Stealing Secrets**

High profile espionage cases such as that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg preoccupied the American media, trying to make sense of the secret American face of the Soviet Union. The trial of the Rosenbergs in 1951 and their eventual execution in 1953 for their complicity in providing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union sent shock waves through American society. Just how much America’s security had been compromised by Soviet espionage was a story taken up frequently by popular magazines, particularly during the first few years of the 1950s. “The systematic looting of the North American secret vaults by Russia over the past two decades has become abundantly clear in recent months,” began a 1951 exposé in *Look*. “What is not generally known is the frightening extent of the pillage and the ridiculous cheapness of the venture.” Traitors like the Rosenbergs “made it possible for Russia to purchase the treasures of the continent at fire sale prices.” The article contained a laundry list of military, industrial, political and diplomatic secrets that had been purloined by the Soviet spy network in America. A flow chart showed how agents such as the Rosenbergs shuttled information through couriers and KGB handlers to the Soviet Union. Yet one of the most alarming aspects of this crisis of Soviet espionage was the inability to separate loyal Americans from covert agents at a glance. “These homegrown American spies… were as American as apple pie and hot dogs. Some grew up in the slums of New York. Others went to Vassar, Johns
Hopkins, Columbia. Only a handful had Russian parents.”¹ The most dangerous face of the Soviet adversary, it seemed, was not Soviet at all.

Information regarding the threat of Soviet espionage was funneled through the media to a concerned American public on a regular basis. A cover story from the May 24, 1952 issue of The Saturday Evening Post explained how the British nuclear physicist Klaus Fuchs had repaid the generosity of his adopted country by getting “in league with American renegades” to filter atomic secrets to the U.S.S.R.² Nor was the danger limited to the theft perpetrated by the ring of atomic spies. Stories reached Americans of the discovery of communist infiltration at the highest levels of the American government. Whittaker Chambers, a former communist and Soviet spy who gave testimony against alleged fellow spy Alger Hiss before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, figured prominently in the telling of these stories. Chambers authored a series for The Saturday Evening Post entitled “I Was the Witness” in 1952, the same year as the publication of his well-received book Witness. In both this series and a 1953 article for Look, Chambers implicated not only Hiss, who had worked at the State Department, but also Harry Dexter White, the former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury.³ The Soviet Union had employed its American agents to make vast inroads into the inner workings of their homeland.

Fear of high-level espionage ran in tandem with fears of run-of-the-mill communist sabotage and subversion. As it had been demonstrated, the Soviet Union’s

---

agents of destruction could be anyone, anywhere, at any time. Pottstown, Pennsylvania constructed an Iron Curtain of its own, issuing a declaration that made the town off-limits to Russians. A reporter for the *Pottstown Mercury* decided to pose as a Soviet colonel and stage the cover image of the January 17, 1955 issue of *LIFE* in which a Soviet policeman ogled two Russian girls on the streets of Moscow. Wandering through the streets of Pottstown in Soviet garb to test the anti-Soviet declaration, the reporter concluded that “Pottstown's Iron Curtain is made of chintz.”

As amusing as the Pottstown experiment may have been, it did highlight the impossibility of keeping out the Reds. In article after article, the perils of communist subversion were enumerated for American readers who, if not already concerned, would certainly have become so after the torrent of troubling information that spilled from magazines pages. “We Almost Lost Hawaii to the Reds,” declared Richard English in the bold-faced title to a 1952 article in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Trouble was brewing in paradise in 1949 as communists infiltrated Hawaii during strikes that got a stranglehold on U.S. territory. America’s seaports were “a cinch for saboteurs” as *The Saturday Evening Post* showed later in 1952. Investigators Mike Miller and Mike Manning posed as saboteurs coming in from an Italian freighter. They bypassed all security and managed to get away with tossing a bag onto the tracks within a railroad tunnel and dropping suspicious pellets into a reservoir, all to show how insecure America's ports really were against communist agents. In the same year, writers for *The Saturday Evening Post* identified a “Red Pipeline into Our Defense Plants” showing security-cleared workers in

---

defense plants under the heel of the Reds in their labor unions. In 1954, they exposed a communist working as a cop on the streets of New York City, showing alarmingly that sleeper communists could infiltrate even the NYPD.

The concept of Soviet espionage and covert enemy agents made its way onto American television screens during the early Cold War. On a 1952 episode of I Love Lucy, Lucy Ricardo became convinced that her new neighbors were enemy agents intent on murdering her and blowing up the Capitol after overhearing the pair rehearsing lines for a play. By the end of the decade, Soviet spies had infiltrated even children’s programming as Rocky and Bullwinkle tried to keep ahead of the devious Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale, two spies who tried to steal formulas for jet fuel and transmit the secrets to “a band of sinister spies” in their home country of Pottsylvania. Pottsylvania, created to appear like a generic Soviet-bloc country, was composed entirely of spies and saboteurs, some selling atomic secrets on the street corner. At least the cartoonishly-evil Boris and Natasha were easier to spot than the American-born spies that had infiltrated the United States years earlier.

The silver screen adapted headline stories of Soviet espionage and American agents for the plots of several early Cold War era films. Columbia’s 1952 release of Walk East on Beacon capitalized on the current climate of American spy-hunting with a plot that revolved around the attempts of an undercover spy ring in America to steal scientific secrets for the Soviets. A secret U.S. defense project codenamed “Falcon” was

---

9 “New Neighbors,” I Love Lucy, CBS, 10 March 1952.
the target of espionage in the film, and the spies stop at nothing to pressure Dr. Albert Kafer, a mathematician who works on the project from his Boston laboratory, to copy his information to be ferried to the Kremlin. At one point, an agent shows Dr. Kafer a photo of his son, kidnapped in Berlin in order to force the mathematician’s compliance. Kafer assents, but only after a short call to the F.B.I., which eventually foils the whole scheme and rounds up the offending communist spies.\footnote{Walk East on Beacon, Alfred Werker, Columbia, Jun. 1952.} Another film to see exploitation possibilities in the uncovering of Soviet spy rings was Fox’s 1953 film \textit{Pickup on South Street}, in which pickpocket Skip McCoy makes the lift of a lifetime – a set of top-secret films in the handbag of Candy, a young woman who was unwittingly delivering them for communist agents. Joey, the principal villain of the piece, is a communist fellow-traveler character who passes information to the Soviets using his unwitting girlfriend as a delivery girl. His character is a coward, liar, and a murderer – far worse than the average American criminals like the “three-time loser” pickpocket who stole the information. The undercover agents use an oblivious, naïve American girl to help execute their nefarious plots. They do not stop at just killing men, but murder a defenseless old woman and shoot Candy when she betrays them. By the end of the film, McCoy has assisted the authorities in rounding up the spy ring, and Candy decides that she would “rather have a live pickpocket than a dead traitor.”\footnote{Pickup on South Street, Samuel Fuller, Fox, 1 Aug. 1953.} More than simply substituting communists for criminals, \textit{Pickup on South Street} demonstrated that communists were even more brutal than run-of-the-mill criminals.\footnote{Stephen J. Whitfield, \textit{The Culture of the Cold War} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 135.} The rounding-up-the-Reds theme cropped up again in \textit{Security Risk}, a 1954 Allied Artists release in which an atomic
scientist is murdered by an assistant, who is trying to take the scientist’s secret papers to the communists. Just as in Security Risk’s predecessors, the scheming communist agents get their just desserts, rounded up by a heroic F.B.I.14

These espionage-exploitation thrillers did well relatively well at the box office. Variety reported average ticket sale chances for Walk East on Beacon, due to the “exploitation possibilities tied to the timely subject of Commie spy rings.” The film reached as high as third place at the box office during the summer of its release in 1952.15

Pickup on South Street and Security Risk were not as highly ranked, despite Variety’s prediction that the latter “should be moderately satisfactory.”16 Bosley Crowther of The New York Times, however, was less than impressed with the intellectual quality of such films. In a review of Walk East on Beacon, Crowther lamented the state of the film industry. “Considering the state of confusion and anxiety in which many people in this country appear to be over the menace of communism and of Communist agents in our midst,” he wrote, “it would be fine if the motion pictures could in some way help clarify the realities of the situation and the true extent of the peril.” Such, unfortunately, was not the state of affairs in Hollywood. “No one... dares raise a clear, contentious voice. Caution is king. Intellectually, Hollywood is well nigh paralyzed.” The picture in question was “exclusively concerned with the devilishness of foreign agents, clearly Communists, in free nations... The villains are taken for granted, they are not analyzed or defined, nor is the extent of their organization or its relation to the social structure explained. The villains are labeled Communists. You know they will be powdered in the

end - which is gladdening and reassuring, but it doesn't help clear the air.  It was, however, what many Americans wanted – to see their enemies, who had lately seemed to be cropping up everywhere, “powdered” by a triumphant F.B.I.

**Infiltrating the Infiltrators**

If Americans wanted to watch as federal investigators beat the Soviet menace in the United States to a pulp, they had no further to look than the very magazines that informed them of the initial threat. As quickly as one article identified a communist dragon to be slain, another carried the heroic account of the agents who helped bring it down. As early as 1949, *Look* gave Americans an insider’s look at how the Federal Bureau of Investigation took down the undercover Soviet enemy. The F.B.I, as the article demonstrated, had agents infiltrating the Communist Party USA up to the highest levels. The article told the story of “Willie,” an agent who was able to join the party and work his way up. Photos identified the many undercover agents who had testified at trials after busting communist rings. Another 1949 article by Tom C. Clark, the U.S. Attorney General, gave the impression that there was almost no more need to worry about the subversion of Soviet agents. “Communism is on its way out in this country with a one-way ticket,” Clark declared. The Department of Justice had communists on the run, as he demonstrated with several mug shots of those arrested for their subversive activities.

In addition to these testimonials, there were the daring stories of Americans who had posed as communists in order to bring down their organization. These stories rivaled

---

the tales of Soviet defection as real-life cloak-and-dagger thrillers. Matt Cvetic told the story of his nine years as an undercover communist in a 3-part series for *The Saturday Evening Post*. His account gave the impression that the FBI had the agents of the Soviet Union surrounded in the United States. Cvetic even related one story in which the Feds arranged for Pittsburgh communists to spy on themselves by wiring a recording device to turn on with the light switch in the hall they used for weekly meetings.\(^{20}\) In a similar vein to Cvetic’s story, Paramount producer Boris Morros told readers of his life as a double agent for the FBI in a 1957 article for *Look*.\(^{21}\) Morros later made his adventure in espionage into the 1960 film *Man on a String*, though it received only tepid enthusiasm as a twin-bill piece of the already worked-over spy genre.\(^{22}\) Other American infiltrators of the Red menace received similar approbation in the media, especially in television series of the 1950s. Influenced by the true crime genre, television programs such as *I Led 3 Lives* (1953-56), *Treasury Men in Action* (1950-54), and *The Man Called X* (1955-57) told stories of American undercover spies in a documentary style that created the illusion of the episodes as more truth than fiction.\(^{23}\) F.B.I. informant Herbert Philbrick played an integral part in lending an air of authenticity to *I Led 3 Lives*. Having written an account of his time undercover in a 1952 bestselling book entitled *I Led Three Lives*, Philbrick functioned as a consultant when the story was transformed into a successful television series of the same name. Philbrick had considerable input in the program’s content, but the plots of the television serial were a bit more dramatic than the reality described in

---


Philbrick’s book *I Led Three Lives.* Despite the narrative license that writers for the television series frequently took, the documentary style of *I Led 3 Lives* and similar programs effectively blurred the line between reality and fiction. Tales of American heroism in infiltrating the Soviet infiltrators abounded in the 1950s as this realistic spy genre grew increasingly popular and marketable to television’s growing audience.

**Combing for Communists**

The communist hunts of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and McCarthy’s Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations received their share of coverage as well. “A New Red Hunt is on the Trail,” proclaimed *Look* in 1951 with a profile of the “solid citizens” that made up the Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security. In a 1950 article for *Look* that addressed the public anxiety over loyalty investigations, Leo Rosten detailed the anatomy of an FBI investigation in which a potential employee’s name was cleared by FBI agents who only “get the facts.” “No Gestapo Here,” affirmed the article. A 1953 profile of Fifth-Amendment pleaders in *Look* declared that “the evidence shows that the investigations are no McCarthy yowl-fest,” and that many actual communist agents had indeed been rounded up. Not only did the media show the dimensions of the forceful response to Soviet infiltration of the United States, it demonstrated how the investigations were getting results.

---

25 Kackman, pp. 2-5, 26-27.
One film of the era offered a love-letter to the anti-communist investigations like no other. Warner Brothers’ 1952 release of the film *Big Jim McLain* recruited the star power of no less a figure than John Wayne who played, according to the film’s advertising, “A Go-Get-’Em Guy for the U.S.A. on a Treason Trail that leads Half-a-World Away!” If not a sincere homage to the labors of House Un-American Activities Committee, the film was, at the very least, an effort to keep the studio far from investigation and the blacklist. The opening sequence showed an economics professor pleading the fifth before the illustrious House Un-American Activities Committee. John Wayne’s narration as Jim McLain, an investigator for HUAC, clarifies that this (obviously guilty) communist sympathizer was just one of many to slip through the hands of noble Red-hunters like himself. When the committee sends McLain to Honolulu to hunt out communists, the place appears to be literally overrun with them. Jim spends the first few days of his Hawaiian investigation knocking on doors and serving subpoenas. In the course of his investigations, he comes across Mrs. Namaka, the ex-wife of a member of the communist cell. Mrs. Namaka confesses that she used to be a communist, but realized that it was “a conspiracy bent on enslaving the world.” She atones for her days as a communist by working at a leper colony as a nurse for infants. The narrative follows Jim in the process of taking information from various sources, including a batty old man who claims to have met Stalin “scads of times” and an elderly Polish couple reporting on their son, who has joined those “heartless men who have turned their backs on God.” At the climax of the film, Jim McLain crashes a meeting of the 7th Cell, as the communists plan to stop shipping in the harbor. Some of the members are shown as elitist and racist – one remarks, “I’m from the country club set – chopping cotton’s for
white trash and niggers.” Naturally, Jim McLain gets them all in the end, even though they all plead the Fifth Amendment before the Committee.  

Apparently Big Jim McLain producers John Wayne and Robert Fellows had originally announced the plot of their film as “the adventures of a Texas cattle buyer.” Fellows acknowledged that the studio “didn't wish to play up the fact that we were making an anti-Communist film.” “The studio didn't want to scare off exhibitors,” he added. “A lot of them got burned in the past with anti-Communist films which didn't do much business.” Film critic Bosley Crowther of The New York Times was clearly unimpressed by the film. “It is hard to tell whether the Warners’ Big Jim McLain… is supposed to be taken seriously as a documentation of the sort of work that is done by the House Un-American Activities Committee in its investigations of the Communist peril or whether it is merely intended to arouse and entertain.” Crowther proclaimed that “the over-all mixing of cheap fiction with a contemporary crisis in American life is irresponsible and unforgivable. No one deserves credit for this film.” American audiences, however, did not agree with this assumption that the real communist crisis did not mix well with John Wayne’s cowboy-like management of the situation. With a name like Wayne’s behind the picture, Big Jim McLain did not meet the low-grossing fate of the more-preachy-than-entertaining propaganda films. The film held at third place at the box office for two weeks, and continued to draw moviegoers even after its initial popularity had worn off. While popular media was often the source of information about the extent of Soviet infiltration into American society, they also functioned as an

---

outlet for some of the fear and panic by allowing audiences to watch as the foe was vanquished time and time again.

**Corrupting American Youth**

There was also the issue of America’s youth to consider. Americans who were young, impressionable, and hence susceptible to indoctrination with communist ideology were a weak link in American society. The news reported in popular magazines often centered on the touchstone issue of Soviet agents corrupting American youth. *The Saturday Evening Post* showcased a gallery of “Stalin’s American Snoops” in a 1951 article. All were relatively young, natural-born citizens of the United States – but they happened to be reporters for TASS, the Soviet news agency. The article frowned on these young people who claimed the protections of U.S. citizenship while reporting to the Kremlin. Lured by cries of social justice and equality, many young Americans fell into association with the Soviets. It was not only Americans from the working classes that fell prey to Soviet ideology; the article also included an unflattering photo of “toothy Mickey Virden,” who had become an employee of TASS in spite of being the daughter of a Cleveland industrialist.33 Craig Thompson, writing for *The Saturday Evening Post*, had underlined the same point a year earlier: “Do you imagine that all the youthful dupes of the United States reds are embittered misfits from underprivileged families?” Such was far from reality, as he illustrated in an article about the Jefferson School for Social Science in New York City, a front where “American youngsters are taught contempt for their country.”34 American college student Vic Reinemer, while studying in Paris, decided to go to the World Youth and Peace Festival in Budapest. He later wrote of his

experiences there as a feature for *The Saturday Evening Post*, voicing his shock at the way an American communist delegate defamed her homeland in her speech by suggesting that the Soviet Union and China provided examples worthy of emulation. In a photo, the author's friend stood beneath a large festival banner reading “Decay the imperialists, the war instigators and their base agents!”35 Any American could be the potential prey of communist agents, but this imposition of the Soviet face on America’s young people was particularly threatening. Through them, the enemy would be able to destabilize American ideals by corrupting the next generation with communist ideology.

The news items demonstrating the risk that communist ideology posed to America’s young people found their dramatic representation on the silver screen in a 1952 Paramount entitled *My Son John*. A film that has become one of the most infamous anti-communist propaganda pictures to emerge from the McCarthy era, *My Son John* tells the story of the Jeffersons, an all-American family whose son John is suspected of being a communist agent by the F.B.I. In arguments with his mother Lucille and father Dan, John reveals aspects of communist sympathies. He shows contempt for religion (for which he eventually receives a smack on the forehead from the family Bible, wielded by his upright father). When his father asks John to look over an anti-communist speech he plans to give at a meeting of the American Legion, John edits it heavily and includes ideological material about class and racial equality. Tension escalates when it is revealed that John Jefferson is under investigation by the F.B.I. for association with communist spies. Although his mother Lucille initially shields her son, she turns John in after discovering in his possession a key to the apartment of an accused spy. Although John

attempts redemption by turning himself over to the F.B.I., he is killed en route by his communist cronies. To honor his dying wish, the film ends with a new speech John had pre-recorded to be delivered at his alma mater’s commencement ceremony. In the speech, John confesses to being a communist spy. Somewhere along the way, he says, he substituted faith in man for faith in God. John Jefferson’s final words warn the graduating students that they were targeted for potential recruitment to the Soviet cause and asks them to hold to their own ideals.

My Son John was perhaps the most fervently anti-communist of the many films to deal with the subject in this era, reflecting public fears that the hidden face of the Soviet enemy would erode the morals of America’s youth and the fabric of the integral family unit. “Indeed, if it did not exist, students of Red Scare movies would have been compelled to invent it,” commented historian Stephen J. Whitfield.36 While My Son John showcased the dilemma of communists recruiting among America’s younger generation, its reviews were less than stellar. Variety noted that “while the film is a stirring one… it faces selling difficulties because of the usual public indifference to propaganda pix.”37 American audiences, it seems, were quite aware when their films were giving them a lecture about the dangers they faced rather than striving to be entertaining. Bosley Crowther of The New York Times gave the film an overwhelmingly negative review. It was, he wrote, “a picture so strongly dedicated to the purpose of American anti-Communist purge that it seethes with the sort of emotionalism and illogic that is characteristic of so much thinking these days.”38 Though aware of the threat posed

by the undercover face of the Soviet Union in the United States, exploiting the Cold War
anxieties of Americans was not typically a profitable enterprise.

The media were sometimes reticent to sensationalize the susceptibility of
American youth to communist indoctrination. One front in protecting the transmission of
American ideals in the early Cold War was the American university system. While there
was sizable panic about the presence of left-leaning professors or organizations at these
institutions, the reports of communist influence that appeared in magazines were fairly
moderate in tone. Sidney Hook, a philosophy professor at New York University, may
have drawn attention to his 1949 article in *The Saturday Evening Post* with the headline
“What Shall We Do about Communist Teachers?” but the text of the article was far less
alarming. “American education is in no danger of being taken over by members of the
Communist Party or its sympathizers,” wrote Hook.⁴⁹ William L. Worden wrote
similarly the following year in a feature on the history of communism at the University of
California Los Angeles. Communism, he wrote, may find fertile ground at large
university campuses like UCLA, but there were significant obstacles as well. Worden
demonstrated how a few relatively small communist organizations on the large UCLA
campus managed to stir up trouble over issues like racial equality, but were either ignored
or combated by the larger student body. “After all your hard work, they still don’t know
you exist,” Worden closed. “That, little Red friend, is the hell of being a campus
communist.”⁴⁰

---

1949, pp. 33, 164-166.
The discussion of communism in American institutions of higher education often displayed an anxiety over whether the whole process of drumming communists out of universities was a threat to academic independence and a betrayal of the very ideals that colleges and universities endeavored to preserve. No one who wrote about the impact of campus communism was ignorant of this debate. Both Hook and Worden maintained in their articles that academic freedom was not being threatened by the dismissals of known communists. Not everyone felt similarly. Months after Worden’s article, “A Case History of Communism,” appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, Dan Fowler published an article for Look describing the imposition of the loyalty oath at the University of California as the “Case History of a Failure.” Imposition of the oath, he argued cost the university prestige, angered the faculty and violated tenure agreements. He described the injury inflicted on the university as reactionary sentiment “masquerading as respectable anti-Communism.” Fowler was not alone in his differentiation between respectable anti-communism and irresponsible anti-communism during the early 1950s. As the influence of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the Congressionally-led crusade against the undercover Soviet menace waned, the nature of proper anti-communism was more and more called into debate.

**American Media and Understanding Communism**

There is some evidence to suggest that the popular media also served as a source of information to give Americans a realistic picture of the threat of communism they faced on their home soil. Articles described why some Americans had become communists and gave statistics on the size of the communist base drawn more from fact.

---

than from the infamous “list” waved around by Joe McCarthy. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote a piece for *Look* in 1950 offering “a reasonable but hard-headed view of as dangerous a problem as we’ve ever faced.” The Great Depression, he wrote, allowed communists to make inroads into many countries and to build up their network, but their actual force in numbers remained relatively small. The article included a map drawn from FBI sources that showed how many communists were known to reside in each state. New York appeared particularly ripe, containing 25,000 communists, but this number accounted for nearly half of the overall number of communists in America. Many states had only a handful, and the solitary Mississippi communist must have grown awfully lonely at his party meetings.42 “Let’s Help People Quit Being Reds,” read the title of another 1950 *Look* article. Writer Morris Ernst urged Americans to help Reds who wanted to quit the party. Many communists had joined while young, he wrote, but now knew better. According to Ernst, the American practice of ostracizing anyone with any associations to communism was responsible for keeping reluctant Reds in the party.43

Princeton professor Gabriel A. Almond appeared in a 1955 television program to correct the inaccurate picture of the communist enemy. There were different kinds of communists, he demonstrated for viewers. There were small parties in the United States and the United Kingdom, where there was no mass appeal for communist ideas, larger parties in France and Italy, where the party’s massive base made the countries more susceptible to a communist takeover, and the communists of Southeast Asia, who drew on nationalism and racial protest to strengthen their position. The program then provided several sketches of communist types. Communist # 1 became a communist while at the

---

Sorbonne. He was “looking for a philosophy” and was influenced by the impact of the Great Depression. He became a full-time professional communist in the Southwest, but an introduction to Army life caused him to break with the party. Communist #2 had been a runaway; he joined a religious order but left. Thinking that he was “too smart for college,” he had led an aimless existence. The party gave him purpose: he said that it “made a man out of me,” although he never really subscribed to the political beliefs. The narrator also noted that many people joined the Communist Party because of “emotional problems.” It was a party of deviants that had never numbered more than 100,000 in the United States. Most American communists were unreliable, and the Party lacked a stable base. Professor Almond contrasted the examples of American communists to those in Italy, who were much more ideologically dedicated. “To spread the impression that Communism has made deep inroads,” he closed, “is to create a massive diversion from the real issues and problems of our time.”

Even though more sensational accounts might have sold better with readers and viewers, American popular media of this era occasionally served to clarify reality rather than obfuscate it with fear-inducing yellow journalism.

**The Dangers of Zealotry**

As the peak of the McCarthyite fervor passed over American society, magazines, television programs and film became integral in a growing national criticism of the extreme tactics of investigations into American communist subversion. In 1953, Joe McCarthy was still “the Man with the Power,” according to an article in *Look* that acknowledged the less-than-pure motives behind the ardent communist hunts he conducted as chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. A

---

photograph showed McCarthy, who “like[d] parties, pretty women” out on the town with socialite (and future wife) Jean Kerr. McCarthy didn't want the presidency, the writer argued, but wanted to be a “power behind the throne.”

McCarthy appeared here as a dubious figure motivated more by the prospect of political gain than strong conviction in his actions. Other articles highlighted the draconian methods employed in such investigations and the innocent lives that were harmed by the process. The case of Abe Chasanow and his fight against the suspicion that had been unfairly cast upon him was the subject of a 1955 article in Look. “This man was nearly destroyed by lies… His neighbors saved him… Here’s a heart-warming true story that will restore your faith in the human race.”

Suspended from the U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office in 1953 as a security risk, Chasanow’s whole town stood behind him until he was cleared of the charges in 1954. After enduring years of a constant stream of information about undercover spies, atomic espionage, inquisitorial hearings, dismissals and demagoguery, Americans may well have needed something to restore their faith in humanity.

One of the best known examples of American media joining the fray against the extreme tactics of the crusading politicians occurred in spring 1954, on the eve of the pivotal Army-McCarthy hearings. The hearings investigated claims on the part of the Army that committee counsel Roy Cohn had pressured them into giving preferential treatment to former McCarthy aide G. David Schine. McCarthy had characteristically made the counter-claim that the Army’s accusation was no more than retaliation for McCarthy’s investigations into communists in the Army. Edward R. Murrow devoted the March 9th episode of his See It Now investigative news program on CBS to an

---

examination of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy “told mainly in his own words and pictures.”

Murrow made use of footage of McCarthy berating various witnesses during investigations, including General Ralph W. Zwicker, a celebrated hero of World War II.

Murrow concluded the broadcast with a statement:

“This is no time for men who oppose Senator McCarthy’s methods to keep silent, or for those who approve. We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result. There is no way for a citizen of a republic to abdicate his responsibilities. As a nation we have come into our full inheritance at a tender age. We proclaim ourselves, as indeed we are, the defenders of freedom, wherever it continues to exist in the world, but we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home.

The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it -- and rather successfully. Cassius was right. “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.”

Murrow allowed McCarthy the entire span of the April 6th See It Now program to make a taped reply to his charges. McCarthy used his allotted time to attack Murrow, describing him as “the cleverest of the jackal pack which is always found at the throat of anyone who dares to expose individual communists and traitors.”

McCarthy’s attempt to tar Murrow’s credibility with the same brush he had used on so many others failed. On the following week’s program, Murrow responded by featuring the auxiliary Catholic Bishop of Chicago who discussed the necessity of curbing the excesses of American anti-communism. “You cannot fight tyranny with tyranny,” declared the Bishop. He stressed that people must be moral anti-communists, offering a comparison to Hitler, who was an “immoral anti-communist.” At the conclusion of the broadcast, Murrow refuted the false accusations made against him by McCarthy on the previous week’s program.

Edward R. Murrow’s direct attack on the methods of McCarthy in 1954 has become a symbol of the media fighting back against the climate of fear that had been more the work of political demagogues than Soviet conspirators. Yet most broadcasters were unable to take similar risks in their programming. The new medium, television had become all-concerned with the idea of 100% acceptability and avoidance of anything deemed too controversial.\(^{50}\) Jittery sponsors made for nervous network executives. *See It Now*, however benefited from the relatively hands-off approach of its sponsor, Alcoa, whose executives told Murrow “You do the programs, we’ll make the aluminum.” Murrow dissented, and served as a primary exception to the doctrine of 100% acceptability in television programming. *See It Now*’s use of ardent anti-communists, such as the auxiliary Bishop of Chicago, bolstered his show’s anti-communist credentials and enabled Murrow to take the risks he took in calling out McCarthy.\(^{51}\)

Even after the Murrow broadcast, American television did not abandon the theme of extreme anti-communism threatening American liberty. Rocky and Bullwinkle found themselves arrested and falsely accused by governmental authorities after being observed in the vicinity of the sinister spies Boris and Natasha during a 1959 episode of *Rocky and His Friends*.\(^{52}\) Although the inimitable Moose and Squirrel emerged unharmed from their brush with anti-communist paranoia, the residents of Maple Street in *The Twilight Zone* fared much worse. After a loud noise and a flash of light, the idyllic community loses power one summer night. While one resident leaves to check the extent of the problem, the close-knit community gathers in the street. Tommy, a neighborhood boy,

\(^{50}\) Whitfield, pp. 154-55.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 162.

\(^{52}\) “Bars and Stripes Forever” and “Hello Out There! or There’s No Place Like Space,” *Rocky and His Friends*, ABC, 17 Dec. 1959.
maintains that the phenomenon is the result of an alien invasion and that the invaders will have placed a seemingly human family in the neighborhood as advance scouts. Though the adults initially express disbelief in Tommy’s interpretation of events, gradually the neighborhood devolves into panic and riot as suspicion is cast on each neighbor in turn. The camera cuts away to a hillside out of town, where two extraterrestrials are manipulating the neighborhood’s power, conquering Earth one street at a time by turning people’s fear and paranoia against them. The episode demonstrated that not only should people fear infiltration by enemies, but that their fear and paranoia could itself become a weapon against them. Fear of Soviet spies infiltrating American society had unleashed the second Red Scare, which destroyed American ideals more than it preserved them.

Although television’s guideline of “100% acceptability” made its mark on the programming that appeared in American households during the early Cold War, the new medium was far from a conspirator in the conformity and repression that are so often identified as hallmarks of this era in American history. Television expanded freedom of expression and opened American minds to different worlds that they had been previously unable to see. It created a public venue for Murrow’s rebellion and for Rod Serling’s re-imagination of the world in *The Twilight Zone*. In short, as historian Thomas Doherty argues, America became a more open and tolerant society through television.

One of the most compelling indictments of the political demagoguery of the second Red Scare appeared in 1962. *The Manchurian Candidate*, based on Richard Condon’s 1959 novel of the same name, not only offered a frightening vision of the

---

supernatural possibilities of Soviet brainwashing during the Korean War, it showed an America infiltrated by Soviet agents up to the highest level. The infiltrators of this America, however, were not leftists and progressives, but the very people who pretended to hound communists out of the country. The character of Senator John Iselin was a clear reference to Joe McCarthy. Iselin makes loud speeches condemning communists, he accuses people without proof, and even makes claims to have a list of 207 card-carrying communists in the Defense Department. But Iselin is, in fact, a puppet of the Soviet agents who handle him, chiefly his wife Eleanor. The whole conspiracy turns out to have been a plot to have Iselin elected President so that the communists would have the entire country under their control.55 The greatest threat to America was again the demagogue who exploited fear to destroy American principles from within.

American popular media indeed invested a good deal of effort into outlining the secret Soviet threat that resided within American society itself. In the early 1950s, it told stories of Soviet espionage and communist corruption of American youth. It showed these enemies rounded up by the authorities one after another in both news stories and film plots. Yet, these media cannot be described as wholly complicit in creating the climate of fear for which this era is so well known. In much of the news-oriented content of magazines and television, the reality of the crisis was demonstrated to be far less threatening than many had imagined. As time progressed, films and television would re-imagine the era as one in which fear, paranoia, and quests for power had nearly destroyed the country far more efficiently than the undercover agents of the Soviet Union could have ever hoped to manage.

Conclusion

The popular media’s portrayal of the Soviet enemy during the early Cold War era was not consumed with fostering a climate of abject terror. Films, magazines and television framed the Soviet communist leadership as cruel and inhuman, but also showed these apparatchiks as a band of hypocrites who were not as obedient to their own ideology as they claimed. They enjoyed a status as the new bourgeoisie, poised higher on the social ladder than the average Soviet worker. Stalin assumed the position of America’s supreme enemy in the media, occupying a position recently vacated by the downfall of the Nazi German Führer. Yet many of the most negative depictions of the Soviet dictator did not emerge until after his death in 1953, and American media were keen to look favorably on his ultimate successor, Nikita Khrushchev. Representations comparing the relative sizes of the United States and Soviet militaries certainly helped build popular support for American armament and the growing military-industrial complex, but the popular media were not united in this view. The alleged Soviet military leviathan was occasionally characterized as a paper tiger made up of “slave armies” and unwilling conscripts.

If one truth could ease American minds about the effectiveness of their communist arch-nemesis, it was the fact that this regime allegedly established for the benefit of the common worker appeared to have very little popular support. This was a major theme in American popular media stories about the U.S.S.R., which emphasized the exploitation of the Soviet masses and presented them more as potential allies against the regime than as willing collaborators. Even the face of the Soviet enemy that existed undercover on the American home front was a complex one. Communist agents
appeared seemingly everywhere in the early part of the decade, but showed up less frequently in the media as the 1950s progressed. And even in the early 1950s when the memorable, highly publicized cases such as the Rosenbergs and Alger Hiss filled the pages of magazines and Hollywood produced numerous tales of Soviet espionage, the media also showed evil doers receiving their just desserts. Magazines showed the high-profile spies rounded up and sent to prison (or, in the case of the Rosenbergs, to the electric chair). Television spy thrillers of this era focused less on the activities of the Soviet spies and more upon the heroic action of various government agencies rounding up the offenders. Communist spies in American cinema were similarly rounded up in heroic fashion by daring American spy-hunters.

The composite portrait of the Soviet Union that emerges from media of this era is thus a highly complex one. Indeed, the portrayal of America’s Cold War enemy was not without moments of levity. In 1960, after hearing news that Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had established a state-run advertising agency in Russia, David E. Scherman couldn’t help but note the irony of the announcement in a tongue-in-cheek feature for LIFE entitled “Buy Red or you May Drop Dead!” Scherman’s illustrations imagined Soviet ad campaigns carrying slogans such as “I dreamed I jammed Radio Free Europe in my Cominform bra,” “Rinse Your Teeth While You Wash Your Brain!” and, of course, one for the State Funeral Parlor: “We'll Bury You.”

American popular media during this era belongs to the larger concept of Cold War culture that has come to describe everything from civil defense newsreels to the increased importance of the family unit. This long decade under the mushroom cloud of

---

nuclear threat would culminate in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, which for a few days held American society within the grip of its worst fears of nuclear destruction. After so many years of living close to the brink of war, the missile crisis became a breaking point for many Americans. The oppressive existence of the bomb played a role in the cultural revolution that emerged from this decade, a symbol of social and cultural disruption, technological triumph and human failure.² The interpretations of the world that emerged from the Cold War culture of the 1950s, however, proved to be resilient as the Cold War wore on over the course of the following decades. America’s leaders continued to tout their credentials as Soviet-hunting Cold Warriors even as dissent grew against the potentially destructive shadow war between the United States and the Soviet Union. For most Americans, the closest they would come to viewing this Cold War enemy for themselves was the composite image of the Soviets that could be gleaned from the representations of them in the American popular media.

² Margot A Henrikson, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 309.
Bibliography

**Primary Sources**

**Films**


*Pickup on South Street.* Samuel Fuller. (1953, Hollywood, CA: Fox)


Television


Chronoscope. Paley Center for Media


Periodicals

Life
Look
Ladies’ Home Journal
Newsweek
The New York Times
The Saturday Evening Post
Variety

Secondary Sources

Books


