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The Cold War, Continued: Post-Election Russophobia

By Gary Leupp
December 16, 2016

Mainstream TV news anchors including MSNBC's Chris Hayes are reporting as fact—with fuming indignation—that Russia (and specifically Vladimir Putin) not only sought to influence the U.S. election (and—gosh!—promote “doubt” about the whole *legitimacy* of the U.S. electoral system) but to throw the vote to Donald Trump.

The main accusation is that the DNC and Podesta emails leaked through Wikileaks were provided by state-backed Russian hackers (while they did not leak material hacked from the Republicans). I have my doubts on this. Former U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan and torture whistle-blower Craig Murray, a friend of Julian Assange, has stated that the DNC emails were leaked by a DNC insider whose identity he knows. The person, Murray contends, handed the material over to him, in a D.C. park. I have met Murray, admire and am inclined to believe him. (I just heard now that John Bolton, of all people, has also opined this was an inside job.)

Contrary to reports, all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies have *not* signed on to the conclusions the CIA has leaked (not announced formally) through anonymous officials to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), Reuters reports, “has not endorsed their assessment because of a lack of conclusive evidence that Moscow intended to boost Trump over Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton.” There is an intelligence football game going on behind the scenes. Meanwhile CounterPunch's Andrew Cockburn has listed a series of good questions about the plausibility of the alleged Russian hacks themselves.

On the other hand, I just read a statement from Edward Snowden, delivered to an internet audience in Berlin: “I have received confirmation through Guccifer 2.0 that malware was used in the electronic voting machines that lead to the victory of Donald Trump.” This is of course a separate and more serious issue than the email leaks. So the plot thickens.

How Could, and Why Would, Russia Interfere?

People asking why Putin would interfere into the U.S. elections sometimes—rarely—point as motive to revenge for Hillary Clinton’s call for protests in Russia after his victory in the 2011 election, which she declared “unfair” and urged Russians to protest. They very occasionally mention U.S. interference in the Russian election of 1996, in which the U.S. darling, the drunken bully Boris Yeltsin who had bombarded the Russian parliament building in 1993, was aided by billions in U.S.-arranged IMF funds needed to pay salaries and pensions (and thus buy votes), and by U.S. political consultants who helped manage his anti-Communist campaign. (Communist candidate Gennady Zhyuganov was an early lead; Yeltsin was in the single digits. But something weird happened and Yeltsin was reelected. How many U.S. politicians protested this interference? Perhaps if you think you live in the Exceptional Nation you believe that global norms and laws don’t apply to your exceptional self.)

Few point out that, while expressing outrage that any foreigner would try to interfere in a U.S. election, the U.S. (the CIA in particular) has intervened in elections elsewhere, indeed as a matter of policy, since the Truman Doctrine announced in 1947. Electoral interference is part of the tool-kit of any imperialist power cynically committed to “democracy” while rejecting any election that doesn’t serve their needs. (Examples: Palestine 2006, Lebanon two months ago.) The outrage of these media talking heads mouthing the State Department line on their teleprompters, moaning about Russian interference, reeks of hypocrisy (although as much, I suspect, from genuine ignorance and intellectual laziness).

How often are people educated to know that the U.S. intervened decisively in Italy in 1948, to prevent the victory of a Communist-Socialist coalition, using all the dirty tricks in the book? (Jack Devigne, CIA chief in Rome at the time, declared proudly “Without the CIA, the Communist Party [of Italy] would surely have won the elections of 1948.”) Such interference continued for a quarter century. Was that okay? How many mention the fact that the U.S. spent \$ 5 billion in order to effect regime change in Ukraine in 2014? Or even have any grasp, beyond the memorization of State Department talking points, of what happened in Ukraine two years ago?

Aleppo, Mosul, and Russophobic Hypocrisy

In general the coverage, as usual, lacks any comparative-historical perspective. These anchors cannot even rationally compare the present situations in Aleppo, Syria and Mosul, Iraq. But the situations are in fact very comparable. Both are terrorist-held cities under siege by state forces backed by foreign powers. Both have been brutally bombed, the civilian toll high. Both are producing massive humanitarian crises. But the first is depicted by the U.S. media uniformly (according to those State Department talking points) as a *tragedy*; the advances of the Syrian

Arab Army as constituting “genocide”; the reconquest of East Aleppo by the Syrian Arab Army as a setback for U.S. policy and an infuriating triumph by the wily, evil Putin!

In contrast, the reconquest of the second city (Mosul) is portrayed as a heroic turning point in the anti-ISIL struggle, a testament to the success of the U.S.’s effort at state-building in the country it invaded (as you recall, criminally and on the basis of lies, producing sheer ongoing disaster) in 2003. An accompanying refugee crisis; the flow of ISIL forces out of Mosul towards Palmyra in Syria and the ISIL capital of Raqqa Syria; the conflicts between Iraqi Arab Shiites and Sunnis, Kurds, Turkish forces in Iraq illegally, and the U.S. over the course of the Mosul battle; are all largely ignored. It’s simple and easy to remember; the one is bad news, the other good. (Meanwhile U.S. mass media reports appears uninterested in actually following the situation on the ground and stationing reporters in dangerous areas. RT television reports every day live from Aleppo; the U.S. channels report from Turkey. So much for the “who-how-when-where-why” tradition of actual journalistic reportage, and the traditional ranking of empirical reality over the mounting challenge of Fake News feeding on the most naive, gullible and ignorant.)

It’s a reversion to the worst sort of Cold War mentality, without the ideological component. Russia is not the enemy because it anymore constitutes a rival system, attractive to the world’s oppressed. Still, it’s the enemy—the number one, *existential* enemy, according to the Secretary of the Air Force the other day.

(Notice by the way how that term, popularized by Jean-Paul Sartre in arguing for the need of the individual to carve out meaning in this existence in a meaningless world, has become mostly used in the paranoid Israeli sense. Just like Israel’s very existence is threatened supposedly by the surrounding hostile Arab masses, or Iran’s mythical nukes, so the U.S.’s very existence is supposedly threatened by the very continued existence of Russia.)

How to make sense of that senseless proposition (aside from citing Goering on the need to deploy mass fear to justify aggressive war)? After all, Russia has a GDP smaller than that of New York State and spends about 14% of what the U.S. spends on its military. Russia has half the U.S. population, living in a country almost twice as large as the U.S. It has few naval ports, and only one aircraft carrier. It has bases in six foreign countries, as compared to the U.S.’s 800 or so. Between 1945 to 1991, the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, Czechoslovakia and (fatally) Afghanistan. During that same period the U.S. invaded or made war on North Korea, Vietnam, Guatemala, Haiti, Cuba, Iraq, Panama, Grenada, Dominican Republic, and Serbia at least. You compare. Compare the death figures. The Korean and Vietnam wars killed at least four million. The Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968 took the lives of maybe 2500 Hungarians and around 100 Czechs. The U.S./NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 is thought to have killed up to 5700 civilians.

The Soviet war in Afghanistan at the max killed two million—and that was a war on the Soviet border, motivated by Russian fears of Islamic fundamentalism in Soviet Central Asia. Jimmy Carter’s national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski wanted to use the Afghan situation to “bleed the Soviets, like they bled us in Vietnam.” In doing so the U.S. unwittingly nurtured those who later formed the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and their many spin-offs. (Good job, Zbigniew!) The U.S.’s objection to a Soviet-aligned Afghanistan, as a secular society such as Turkmenistan or

Uzbekistan, caused it to actively promote a religious *jihad* in Afghanistan that has had horrific ramifications for the world ever since. This intervention brewed the Taliban (originally not anti-U.S. but eager for ties up to 9/11), al-Qaeda, and the predecessor of ISIL now called Fateh al-Sham.

Russia as the Existential Threat

I am 60; the U.S. has been at war somewhere over half of my life. This is, fortunately, not the case for my counterpart living in Russia (for whom the Afghan War—for a mere ten years, 1979-1989—is a painful memory, like my memory of Vietnam). Any sensible person studying the relevant history will realize that the U.S. has been a far, far more bellicose nation than Russia since 1945. That recognition need have nothing to do with one's feelings about the contemporary Russian state. The only thing the military brass can point to (taking its cue from Goering) is Russia's nuclear weapons arsenal as "existential threat."

But recall that the U.S. introduced the use of nuclear weapons to the world when it dropped two bombs in Japan that killed over 200,000 civilians in 1945. (That's back when it was still cool to do that, and boast about it. No talk about "smart bombs" to prevent civilian fatalities then. Gen. Curtis LeMay had indeed boasted of his desire to fry men, women and children and bomb Japan back to the stone age.) The U.S. remains the only country ever to use such weapons, although seven countries now have them.

President Harry Truman insisted after the fact that the use of nukes was necessary to end the war and protect the American lives—lives so much more worthy of continuation and happiness than the Japs who'd had the audacity to *attack us*. (His successor Gen. Eisenhower strongly disagreed; he later opined that "the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing.") But the new bombs were really deployed to warn Russia—emerging triumphant in the anti-Nazi struggle and in a position to dominate post-war Eastern Europe (while the U.S. dominated the rest)—that the U.S. would be a terrible foe. As the international communist movement expanded after the war, Truman established the anti-Soviet NATO alliance in 1949. The Russians responded with their first nuclear test, shocking Washington that had underestimated the maturity of the Soviet nuclear program.

When West Germany, occupied by the U.S. after the war and created as a separate state from the eastern, Soviet-occupied zone in May 1949, joined NATO in 1955, the Russians belatedly organized their own (much smaller) defensive bloc—the Warsaw Pact (disbanded in 1991). Still, nuclear parity caused Moscow to proclaim in 1956 a "policy of peaceful coexistence" and "peaceful transition to power" of communist parties aligned with Moscow around the world. That is to say, Soviet moves were reactive and defensive, while the U.S. engaged in an orgy of violent conflicts, coup plots, covert attacks on democratic processes from Italy to Iran Indonesia, always maintaining geopolitical advantage over the USSR until it finally dissolved.

(The dissolution of the USSR produced an array of "frozen conflicts" in the former soviet socialist republics, produced largely by competing nationalisms, as in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and the Russian Caucasus. In the Georgian conflict the U.S. has stood with the Georgian state, the Russians with the Abkhazians and Ossetians. Russia's brief war with Georgia

in 2008, following NATO's announcement that Georgia would eventually join the alliance, and Moscow's subsequent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was a direct response to Washington's recognition of Kosovo, a province of Serbia wrenched from Serbia by NATO in 1999 after Serbia refused to accept nationwide NATO occupation. Again, relatively speaking, reactive and defensive.)

It's amazing how that Cold War mentality has survived, evolving from anti-communism (which can at least be explained intellectually) to this primitive anti-Russia mentality (which can only be explained as the result of a foolish essentializing of an Other, as a threat, for some unspecified reason). What is this Russian threat? The talking heads (always avoiding any comparative discussion of U.S. actions) always adduce three main arguments for their existential paranoia: the brief war in Georgia in 2008; the annexation of Crimea following the February 2014 coup that threatened to bring Ukraine into NATO and expel Russian naval forces from the peninsula (plus alleged aid to the separatists in the Donbas); and the supposed threats Moscow poses to the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) where expanding NATO has stationed forces and conducted massive military exercises. In NATO's backwards logic, it is not the provocative expansion of the alliance to Russia's very borders in 1999, but Russia's *response* in amassing troops *within Russia* on those borders that constitutes a threat to someone!

Do not expect logic from these Russophobes, these unreconstructed wooden-headed Cold Warriors. What they want is, if not bloody confrontation, at least the opportunity to exploit that Russophobia culturally ingrained in many of my generation in particular. (Educated young people tend to be much less vulnerable to Cold War-typed propaganda.) In this case, liberal Democrats (like most of the cable news anchors), consternated by Trump's unexpected, shocking victory, can do no better than to blame Russia. Didn't a Podesta email to the DNC recommend pushing the putative Putin link to discredit Trump, just assuming that Russian ties are the kiss of death? How many members of the DNC said, "No, that's unprincipled"? I doubt there was any opposition, because it's traditionally fine in U.S. politics to smear your opponent with Russian ties. It didn't end with McCarthyism in the 50s, and while the sophistication level of this practice remains low, it is sometimes effective.

"Any Democracy" would Call for New Elections?

Time's intelligence correspondent Bob Baer told CNN the other day that, given Russian interference, there is "no choice now but to hold a new election." Wow! The longtime CIA agent actually stated: "But I'll tell you, having worked in the CIA, if we had been caught in interfering in European elections or Asian elections or anywhere in the world, those countries would call for new elections. Any democracy would. And I just, I don't see it any other way." As though when the U.S. rigs elections, the people of the country victimized actually enjoy the degree of agency allowing them to call new elections in defiance of Washington? How often does that happen in, say, Honduras? How likely was that in Italy in 1948?

There are efforts underway to get Trump supporters in the Electoral College to change their vote (out of fear of the Russkies). It is both fascinating and ridiculous to see mainstream liberals embracing a crude spin-off of Cold War thinking that has nothing to do with communism but a slavish, frightened hostility to a great, important country no longer a serious geopolitical rival to

the U.S., indeed a potential friend of the U.S.—if only the U.S. would back off on its NATO expansion and its insane regime-change wars in the Middle East producing headaches for Russia and (the rest of) Europe in the form of more terrorism and refugee flows accompanying the slaughter.

In this season of crazy, unexpected events, I expect to be surprised for the duration, humbled when my expectations—my “concrete analysis of concrete conditions” (Lenin) —prove wrong in this new period. It is just barely possible—especially if the CIA has it out for Trump—that his inauguration will be sabotaged by certain folks in the Deep State. Or that this declining country might experience a constitutional crisis. Chris Hayes and Rachel Maddow would be delighted. So would I, if for very different reasons, while fearing the alternatives. I would much prefer paralyzing conflict within the ruling class to a consolidated white nationalist-led regime. But if the multi-pronged attacks on Trump continue, and he is successfully denied the presidency, the likelihood of World War III could grow.

That this whole farce might ultimately enhance the asinine Russophobia that is part of the political DNA of millions—and produce a showdown in Syria and/or Ukraine—is as scary as a smooth transition to a Russia-friendly Exxon presidency.

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Questions for discussion:

If Russia intervened to influence the election, what revelation in the leaked emails most influenced the voters?

The fact that the Democratic leadership wanted to use their press moles to facilitate a Trump nomination, by broadcasting all his campaign talks live?

Or the fact that the DNC worked overtime to prevent Sanders (so much more popular than either Clinton or Trump) from becoming the Democratic nominee?

Isn't it more good than bad that we know what the Wikileaks revealed?

Why should anyone but John Podesta and Debbie Wasserman Schultz be upset?