

Russia, the Supposed New Cold War, and Russiagate

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Fellow socialists and leftists, it is time to dispel that illusion that somehow Putin's Russia of today is somehow positively connected to the USSR of yesterday. That simply is not the case.

In this, the year of the hundredth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, not only does Vladimir Putin repudiate Bolshevism's legacy in its entirety, he even repudiates the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia that preceded the Bolshevik-led October revolution. (See, on this, "Putin Likes to Pretend 1917 Never Happened" in the *Atlantic*.) It was the February Revolution that overthrew the Czar and ushered in a whole new era in repressive, backward, even Oriental Despotism, Russia, a short-lived era of freedom and creativity that made even Lenin marvel that Russia was now "the freest country in the world." The Bolshevik Revolution was going to extend this freedom in the "freest country" even further, not through just a political revolution at the top, but by a social revolution from the bottom that would free the peasantry and the workers from exploitation.

But this Russia of 1917 is anathema to Putin, who sees himself as heir to the Czars, and whose dedication to Russian nationalism is strictly Czarist in tone—as is his contempt for dissent and opposition, as is his devotion to pan-Slavism, as is his support for Russia's corrupt crony capitalist economic system. Not surprisingly, Putin sees spreading "chaos" in the West as a good way to advance Russian nationalist goals, and in furthering such, finds agreeable help in Russophile right-wing populists such as France's Marine le Pen and, of course, the US's Donald Trump, now our President. Nor is it surprising that Russia actively tried to influence the French and US elections in favor of these candidates, which is now the matter of grave concern in the US; and over which Putin was confronted directly to his face by newly-elected French President Macron in Paris. For, certainly standing to reason from the Putin/Russian nationalist standpoint, is sowing "chaos" in the West by helping Russophile politicians such as Le Pen and Trump win office—which the Russians failed to do in France, but which is a major point of contention in the US: did Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election actually help Trump win?

Whether or not there was actual "collusion" between the Trump campaign and the Russians, or whether there were just vast, intertwining interests involved, but short of actual "collusion," is a moot point. After all, it's these extensive involvements of Trump campaign and, later, Administration officials with the Russians, in business deals, as lobbyists, and as government officials, that are currently under investigation; and despite all those who claim there was no Russian interference in the 2016 election, it certainly seems clear that there was such interference. Russian state and

business interests are far more closely intertwined in Russia than they are in the US; and the connections between Russians such as former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort; the forced-to-resign Trump national security advisor Michael Flynn; the major business concession now-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson negotiated as head of Exxon/Mobil with the Russians; Attorney General Jeff Sessions's secret meeting with Russians which he failed to disclose at his confirmation hearings; the attempt by Trump's son-in-law and major advisor Jared Kushner to set up a "back channel" private line with the Russian government that would be sited in the Russian embassy in the US—just these alone have been the subject of numerous media headlines and stories, as have been other contacts with the Russians by campaign and Administration officials. (Which seem to be like the Biblical Hosts of the Lord—their number is legion!) Certainly the appearances are anything but "innocent," or "just doing international business," as certain commentators of the right have complained; the most recent one being a *Forbes* contributor, Paul Roderick Gregory, who writes on "domestic and international economics from a free-market perspective": "There Remains No Evidence of Trump-Russia Collusion."

But it is not the right's enamoring, absolutism, of Russia that concerns me here. After all, Western capitalists have always been willing to do business with authoritarian regimes when lucrative markets and investment capital have been available from them; and Trump's businesses themselves have been the beneficiaries of a considerable influx of investment capital from Russian business oligarchs. Russian plutocrats also have far more direct ties with the Russian state apparatus than their Western counterparts, so good governmental relations are just good business. Also, Western capitalists have never had any political problems with authoritarian or even fascist regimes, as long as "business as usual" remains. We see that is the history of European fascism in the 1930s, with dealings with the Pinochet regime in Chile in the 1970s, and with other unsavory regimes across the world. As stated by two leading conservative political theorists in regard to capitalism and authoritarian regimes: Frederick Hayek stated, "[M]y personal preference leans toward a liberal dictatorship rather than toward a democratic government devoid of liberalism" ("liberal" here meaning, as in the 19th Century sense, an unregulated free-market capitalist economy); while William F. Buckley, Jr. wrote notably,

Let the individual keep his dollar—however few he is able to save—and he can indulge his taste (and never mind who had a role in shaping it) in houses, in doctors, in education,

in groceries, in entertainment, in culture, in religion; give him the right of free speech or the right to go to the polling booth, and at best he contributes to a collective determination, contributes as a rule an exiguous voice. Give me the right to spend my dollars as I see fit—to devote them, as I see fit, to travel, to food, to learning, to taking pleasure, to polemicizing, and, if I must make the choice, I will surrender you my political franchise in trade, confident that by the transaction, assuming the terms of the contract are that no political decision affecting my sovereignty over my dollar can be made, I shall have augmented my dominance over my own affairs. (Quoted in *Yale Alumni Magazine*, April 1978, p. 37; Buckley was a Yale alumnus.)

Hence for conservatives then and now, from hallowed intellectuals such as Hayek and Buckley to the frequently ill-regarded politicians of today's Republican Party, up to and including Trump, the "freedom to shop" is the ultimate freedom that overcomes and subordinates all other "so-called" freedoms!

Unfortunately, sections of the US left, because of visceral anti-Hillary Clinton hatred, have caught this same Russophile pro-Putin virus. During the 2016 campaign, Green Party Presidential candidate Jill Stein charged that, if elected, Hillary Clinton would get the US involved in a war with Russia over Syria, while, to the contrary, Trump would "normalize" relations with Russia. Left

philosopher Slavoj Žižek announced publicly his support for Trump as President because he would “shake things up.”

Not that I doubt Hillary Clinton is a neocon hawk; not in the least. But there is certainly good reason to believe that she would have demonstrated probity in office that Trump has certainly not shown; because what Trump has shown is that he is the proverbial loose cannon, an impulsive man who makes decisions on the spur of the moment. Also, that he is guided by a pro-Putin attitude that most resembles a high-school crush on someone he admires as a strongman. Consider that, when Bill O’Reilly, of all people, declared in an interview with Trump that Putin was “a killer,” Trump agreed with O’Reilly, but then, went on to say, nonetheless, he “respects” Putin! (Perhaps because Putin does to his opponents what Trump would like to do to his?) Trump continued, saying that the US does the same thing, and has blood on its own hands, which is true; but, more likely, when Trump said it he was merely being the blind squirrel who occasionally finds an acorn. It is unlikely that Trump has any serious knowledge of how the US overthrew Arbenz in Guatemala, overthrew Mossadegh in Iran and installed the Shah, overthrew Allende in Chile and installed Pinochet, or waged war against Saddam Hussein and set Iraq onto the road to destruction and perpetual sectarian warfare. It’s really doubtful that Trump is that informed or that smart. But what it does mean, I aver, is that the Russians, under Putin especially, have taken lessons from the US playbook and, in this cybernetics, cyberespionage and cyberwarfare age, have been able to do nonviolently what it took actual physical intervention by the US to accomplish! (Same also in France with Le Pen vs. Macron.) Nothing for the left to be proud of, either in singling out only the US for scolding, or in automatically exonerating the Russians.

Same goes for the charge by certain US leftists that the US government is initiating a “new Cold War” by accusing the Russians of what evidence indicates they did—interfered to tilt the results of the US Presidential election in favor of Trump. (Whether or not they actually succeeded, or whether, in fact, Hillary Clinton defeated herself, is a moot point that may never be settled definitively.) But that is assuming that Putin’s Czarism-revering nationalist Russia is somehow the equivalent of the former USSR, a bastion of “peace” and “socialism,” and that somehow Putin is another Khrushchev or Gorbachev, or even a Brezhnev, Stalin, or Lenin: committed to a left-wing “socialist co-existence” rather than to a resurgent Russian nationalist, and strictly right-wing capitalist, form of Great Power politics and foreign policy. Certainly, Trump’s own avowed admiration for Russia and Putin should put that charge to rest. Even at his most bellicose, when he fired Tomahawk missiles at the Syrian airbase in retaliation for Russian-allied Syrian leader Assad’s gas attack on civilians, Trump was careful to warn the Russians beforehand. No, Putin’s crony-capitalist, repressive Russia is hardly the former Soviet Union, and it certainly can be argued that Russia has very similar imperial ambitions as the US or any other Western capitalist power; and much prefers pliable Russophile right-wing governments in power in the West, same as in Eastern Europe. What blinds the Western left to these actual geopolitical realities is the left’s own naïvete toward Great Power foreign policies, and its mistaken view that imperialism, and imperial ambitions, can only occur among traditional, well-established, Western capitalist powers—in other words, global politics even in 2017 follows as though straight out of the Marxist playbook as articulated in Lenin’s 1916 *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Thus, Russia can’t possibly have Great-Power imperialist ambitions, or a shady and dubious foreign policy!

Fortunately, these naïve illusions are laid well to rest in Stephen Shalom’s definitive article in the Winter 2017 *New Politics*, “Russia and the Left.” Shalom’s carefully-reasoned article justly points out that, when Russia was the former USSR, many well-meaning Communists and other leftists supported the Soviet Union because it was seen as “socialist,” a “workers’ state,” and a progressive, leftist force that supported labor rights, civil rights, and anti-colonialism—even though its own internal practices were highly repressive and its foreign policy checkered, to say the very least. But

such can't even be remotely said for Putin's Russia, which is not only clearly repressive, but even openly right-wing. Contemporary Russia's foreign policy is not progressive or anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, in the least; but is imperialist, allied with truly noxious regimes, and has one clear goal—to undermine the US specifically, and the West generally; and does so to advance a regressively right-wing, openly chauvinist, Russian nationalism that smacks more of inter-imperialist rivalry than of anything else. Not that Russia doesn't spout "anti-imperialist" and "anti-status quo" rhetoric; it clearly does, and assiduously courts allies across the ideological spectrum and among Third World regimes through this. Such is prevalent in patently state-controlled media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. But for those of the left to fall for this appearances-only show—either, as Shalom suggests, from nostalgia or from a narrow "An enemy of my enemy is my friend" perspective—such is both disingenuous and a betrayal of truly left ideals. Further, in order to advance his agenda, Putin and the Russian state apparatus he dominates assiduously court whatever "anti-Western status quo" forces they can, aiming appeals both to the far right, and to the far left, and finding allies in both camps.

Such disingenuousness toward Russia is notably found in US Green Party 2016 Presidential candidate Jill Stein, much to the dismay of European Greens—as shown by articles showing her uncritical pro-Putin apologetics: both in the often center-right *Daily Beast*, Casey Michel's "How Putin Played the Far Left," and in the left-leaning *Raw Story*'s summary article on the *Daily Beast* revelations by Travis Gettys, "Here's How Jill Stein helps Putin promote his right-wing agenda to the American left." Notably, Jill Stein made a visit to Moscow in December 2015 on the tenth anniversary of the founding of RT, where she spoke favorably of Putin at an RT forum, and was feted, even sitting at the same banquet table as Putin and Michael Flynn (according to the *Daily Beast*). Who funded all this, Stein has refused to say.

Fortunately, not all on the left are as naïve as Stein. For example, delving deeper into the Trump-Putin connection on the other side of the ideological divide is the rather alarming article scheduled for the upcoming hard-copy version of the investigative reporting magazine *Mother Jones*, David Corn's "We Already Know Trump Betrayed America." Concerns about "politically incorrect" nationalist sentiments aside, we of the left certainly should understand that if, for example, we regard the US as ethically wrong when it overthrew Arbenz, then it's equally ethically wrong for the Russians to try and influence the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election; or, for that matter, the 2017 French Presidential election. Because when *realpolitik* trumps all (pun only partially intended), then we live in a jungle where the only rule is "eat or be eaten." And no, that's *not* "bourgeois sentimentality." That's hardheaded expression of socialist ideals.

This pro-Putin assiduousness on the part of some generally thought of as being on the left even spills over into pro-Trump attitudes and conspiracy theorizing about a "Deep State" plot by US intelligence and law enforcement agencies, the NSA, the CIA, and the FBI, to topple Trump. As a really egregious example of this line of reasoning, KJ McElrath, writing for the left-wing Ring of Fire Network, quotes pro-Putin, pro-Assad, Russian election interference-denying (until recently) reporter Glenn Greenwald as stating, "Trump was democratically elected and is subject to democratic controls, as these courts just demonstrated and as the media is showing, as citizens are proving;" McElrath then goes on to suggest a "Deep State" conspiracy. But Greenwald, who's guested on both leftist media and Fox News, is wrong on two counts. First of all, Trump was *not* "democratically elected." Hillary Clinton received nearly three million more popular votes than he did. Trump was elected by the *deliberately undemocratic* Electoral College, which over-represents less-populous states over those more populous. Second, as for being "subject to democratic controls, as the courts just demonstrated and as the media is showing, as citizens are proving," those "controls" have come flagrantly under attack from Trump himself, and require constant

vigilance to force what can only presently amount to forcing restraint from Trump and the GOP. But further, whatever the CIA, the NSA, the FBI think of Trump, they are not noticeably at all preparing a coup against him. While Trump would undoubtedly like to be himself a fascist dictator, even under his bullying the US still remains a bourgeois democracy with a Bill of Rights in place; even if these constitutionally-guaranteed rights are under vigorous attack from Trump and others in his Administration (which certainly isn't the first time in US history that a President and his Administrations have tried to quash dissent). Despite several popular books on the CIA and other intelligence, law enforcement, agencies that portray them as an "invisible government," their actual power to launch coups has been severely limited historically and to date, not only by legal safeguards and public opinion, but also by the self-restraint and the studied apolitical, above-the-fray stances of these agencies' personnel themselves. And these are most likely to continue. This is but realism, fellow leftists, not complacency—for truly, "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." But the US is not politically akin to a Latin American banana republic, and it is hysteria to think so. Fear of a "Deep State" conspiracy against Trump, of all people, thus remains but a conspiracist fantasy. Certainly for now. Lest we forget.

So, what should the left be doing in the wake of all this? Obviously, for a starter, we should press for a complete and thorough investigation of the Trump Administration and its ties to Russia, to be conducted honestly, transparently, and without being quashed or interfered with; this is already happening, and we of the left should support it and press for it to continue until all matters are settled. While, of course, continuing with all our vigor to oppose and thwart those specific reactionary policies and proposals independent of Russiagate that come from Trump and the GOP-dominated legislative branches (e.g., the budget, Trumpcare). Second, as socialists committed to democracy, especially grassroots democracy from the bottom up by the people themselves, we should not be suckered into supporting one particular nation-state in its rivalry with other nation-states. That is not what we of the left are about, despite siren calls to line up on the "correct" side, the "anti-imperialist" or "anti-hegemonic" side. It is not our business to declare left allegiance to either the US or to Russia; this is a dispute between two imperialist nation-states, not a college football rivalry. Third, and very important, we must recognize the potential war danger presently existent, not only between the US and Russia, but also between the US and China, possibly over access and control over the South China Sea; or between the US and North Korea. In this world fraught with nuclear-armed powers, the danger of war is omnipresent; meaning that we need an antiwar movement that does not arbitrarily, or in a partisan way, choose Great Power sides. And last, the left must totally abandon any penchant for an "enemy of my enemy is my friend" mentality, as today's "friend" can be tomorrow's "enemy," and vice versa. Just considering the US in isolation, for example, at one time it had as a "friend" an "enemy of its enemy" in—Osama Bin Laden!

For us of the left, a nuanced and sophisticated, not just ideological, approach is what's called for. Above all, a commitment to grassroots democracy and genuine self-determination by the workers and oppressed peoples themselves is called for, wherever and whoever they are: be they Kurds, Syrians, Russians, Mexicans, Koreans, African Americans, or even displaced US white workers! This precludes, I say, taking sides in Great Power rivalries; but instead, upholding "liberty and justice for all." That's what we of the left can take out of this Russiagate imbroglio.

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