

## Hating (and Loving) The U.S.A.

Nikita Khrushchev's impassioned 1956 line, "We will bury you," is one illustration of the peculiar mix of emotions (in this case, ire and envy) that has colored Soviet perceptions of the United States. But other sentiments exist, too, observes Vassily Aksyonov, the noted Soviet émigré writer who now resides in Washington, D.C. Here, in the second of two excerpts from Aksyonov's recently published book, *In Search of Melancholy Baby*, the author dwells on the shifting images of America in the eyes of Soviet "Stateniks" and others, during the early post-World War II decades.

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by Vassily Aksyonov

Even now, after living in America for more than five years, I keep wondering what provokes so many people in Latin America, Russia, and Europe to anti-American sentiment of such intensity that it can only be called hatred. There is something oddly hysterical about it all, as if America were not a country but a woman who has hurt a man's pride by cheating on him.

Let us forget (for the time being) the role of anti-American propaganda in the strategy of the opposition, which, in the case of the Soviet Union, is managed by the anything but friendly people down at Agitprop. In the international arena this "war of ideas" exists on a par with bacteriological warfare and the anthrax bomb. Let us limit our discussion here to feelings, complexes, and unconscious hostility.

A Soviet poet once asked the [Argen-

tine-born Cuban] revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara why he hated America with such a passion, and Che launched into a tirade against Yankee imperialism, the enslavement of economically underdeveloped nations by rapacious monopolies, expansionism, the suppression of national liberation movements, and so on. The poet, to give him his due, found Che's lesson in political literacy less than satisfactory and inquired whether there wasn't perhaps something personal behind his feelings. After a few moments of silence, during which the ever-present daiquiri turned slowly in his fingers, Che cast a glance in the direction of Florida and launched into a curious story. Since I'm not sure the story has made it into the biographies adorning leftist bookshop windows these days, I will retell it as I heard it from the poet.

As a teenager in Argentina, Ernesto

made a cult of the United States. He was wild about Hollywood westerns and the latest jazz. One day, riding his bike past the airport, he saw a plane being loaded with racehorses for America. Instantly the revolutionary in him took over. Think of it—a free ride to the land of virile cowboys and forward blondes. All he had to do was stow away. No sooner said than done: on to America, and here he is in America.

In Georgia to be exact. One hundred degrees in the shade. When the ground crew discovered the Argentine adventurer, they beat him black and blue and locked him back up in the empty plane. For three days they left him there to bake without food or water. Then they sent him home.

"I'll never forgive them that airplane," Che whispered to the poet. And flaring up again: "I hate all gringos, their easygoing voices, insolent struts, confident leers, obscene smiles . . ."

#### Fading Superman

Other Latin American anti-American revolutionaries—the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, for instance—may have just such a "plane" in their background. And even if it was not quite so burning an issue as Che made of it, it was still a blow to their self-esteem, a slap in the face. How to deal with it? Blame the fair-haired colossus of the North. Provincial inferiority complexes have played an enormous part in the spread of Marxist doctrine.

Simplistic as it may sound, many if not most of these "planes" can be chalked up to misunderstandings. Americans

take no pleasure in humiliating people. Their voices, easygoing or otherwise, reflect the intonation patterns of American speech, their "insolent struts" the way generations of American bodies have learned to propel themselves from one place to another. As for "confident leers" and "obscene smiles," they are not commonly found among the populace, and when they do occur they generally represent an innocent attempt to copy the latest TV or movie look. Besides, the image of the American superman is becoming a thing of the past.

#### Ignoring October 1917

Take the sad and instructive case of the U.S. Marines entrenched on the outskirts of Beirut in 1983. Soviet propaganda raised an international hue and cry about American invaders, but if you had taken a good look at them you would have seen that they were just a bunch of kids, young, working-class kids. The "insolent struts," "obscene smiles," and "confident leers" belonged to the more-American-than-the-Americans Arab terrorists roaming the streets of the devastated city and its surrounding hills. Anti-American sentiment is essentially hatred for an outdated stereotype, a celluloid phantom.

It would be interesting to trace the roots of anti-American feelings in societies where ideology reigns supreme. Goebbels could not get over the interrogations of the first American prisoners of war (they were captured in the Sahara). They have no ideology, *mein Führer*, he announced. In other words, they lacked

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*"Stateniks" have not been the only followers of U.S. pop culture. Visiting President Richard Nixon in San Clemente, Calif., in 1973, Soviet Premier Leonid I. Brezhnev not only readily recognized another Nixon guest, movie actor Chuck Connors, but ran to him to deliver a bear hug.*

all human qualities.

I believe it is the same lack of ideology that so infuriates today's West German leftists. When a leader of the Greens filled a test tube with his own blood and splashed it over the uniform of an American general, I was reminded of the Nazi spirit in its early days.

On the other hand, I am certain that despite decades of propaganda the Russians have not yet developed an anti-American complex. True, the post-Revolutionary Russian intelligentsia, itself a part of the European Left, has mistrusted (or is it now "used to mistrust"?) American civilization in the abstract, but the reality is something else again: America does in fact refute Spengler's thesis of the decline of the West.

The first Russian revolutionary writer to visit the United States was Maksim Gorky, in 1906. The "stormy petrel of revolution" was irritated by the place. He labeled New York "the city of the

Yellow Devil" and called jazz, with the total lack of aesthetic sensibility that was his trademark, "the music of the fat."

In 1931, Boris Pilnyak, one of the great prose stylists of the previous decade, visited the States and wrote an "American novel" entitled *Okay*. Unfortunately, another four-letter word would have described it better. Pilnyak's anti-Americanism must have been the envy of many an Agitprop hack. At every crossroads he would beat his breast and proclaim with the utmost vulgarity, "I am a Soviet man!" Everything disgusted him. He fled in panic from a vaudeville chorus line: "How can a Soviet writer show his face before such bare-bellied floozies?" And this from a man who had fought to bring naturalism and sex to puritanical Russian literature. There is always the chance that Pilnyak was bitter about a short-lived movie contract he was given in Hollywood, but I discern a modicum of sincerity behind it all.

The poet Vladimir Mayakovsky was torn between delight and hostility during his stay in America a few years earlier. The futurist, artistic side of him reveled in the skyscrapers and enormous steel bridges, and Broadway's Great White Way got his creative juices going. But the leftist, the revolutionary, the Trotskyite in him pushed in a different direction. Here is a literal version of one of his "American" poems:

I'm wild about New York City,  
Though I'm not about to bow to you.  
We Soviets have our own pride  
And look down at the bourgeoisie  
With our noses in the air.

In his prophetic way Mayakovsky saw that the United States would become the last bastion of capitalism. He was seceded in his view and in his general feelings for the country by the satirists Ilf and Petrov in their 1936 travelogue, *One-Story America*.

As I see it, all these Russian (read: leftist European) literary travelers were crushed by America's total indifference to the cardinal event of their lives, the 1917 October Revolution. Some, like Mayakovsky, were able to accept the Revolution lock, stock, and barrel; others, like Pilnyak, were more ambivalent. But for the European Left as a whole it meant a New Flood, a cleansing process, the birth pangs of a new society.

#### Tempest in a Samovar

Everything seemed to come into focus after the Revolution. All the predictions about the decline of Europe and the demise of Western civilization had apparently come true. Even the reactionary governments of England and France could feel the new age dawning. Oppose it as they might, the sun had risen in the East. Many of us may grieve in our hearts for the world we have lost, for its elegance and manners and horn of plenty, yet we still fall in step with the thunderous march of the class now on

the offensive, we still add our voices to the symphony of the future . . . . And suddenly we learn that on the other side of the ocean there is a gigantic society that does not quite grasp the oratory of the New Flood prophets and looks upon our great cosmic event, our Revolution, as a tempest in a samovar.

This society, the United States of America, scandalously refuses to pay attention to Marx or Spengler or Lenin. It shows no intention of disappearing or disintegrating or sinking into decadence. It has no time. It turns its frenzied energy to making money, money, money, a squalid, unseemly proposition resulting in skyscrapers the likes of which the Old World has never imagined and a network of highways crisscrossing the nation. Instead of making revolutions, the workers are buying cars!

Pilnyak, Mayakovsky, and Ilf and Petrov—they all sensed deep down that America represented an alternative to violent revolution. How could they help feeling threatened? America had called into question the great cause to which they had lent their lives.

#### Bing, Louis, Peggy, Woody

Now, in the twilight of the communist world, the threat is all the greater. Many Soviet leaders cannot help realizing that the world they represent is no "new world" at all but a world long past its prime. From today's vantage point the Russian Revolution looks like nothing so much as an outmoded and absurd act of violence, the kind of thing one would expect from a society in the early stages of European bourgeois decadence. American capitalism, on the other hand—riding the crest of a completely different revolution, the technological one—is on its way to a truly new, as yet unknown and undefined age of liberalism.

In 1952, when I was a 19-year-old student from the provinces, I found myself thrust into Moscow's high society. I was invited to a party at the house of an

important diplomat. The guests were mainly diplomatic corps brats and their girlfriends. It was the first time I had ever seen an American radiola, the kind that lets you stack 12 records at a time. And what records! Back in Kazan we spent hours fiddling with the dials on our bulky wireless receivers for even a snatch of jazz, and here it was in all its glory—with the musicians' pictures on the albums to boot. There they all were: Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, Peggy Lee, Woody Herman . . .

### Skirting with Freedom

One girl I danced with asked me the most terrifying question: "Don't you just love the States?"

I mumbled something vague. How could I openly admit to loving America when from just about every issue of *Pravda* or *Izvestia* Uncle Sam bared his ugly teeth at us and stretched out his long, skinny fingers (drenched in the blood of the freedom-loving peoples of the world) for new victims. Overnight our World War II ally had turned back into our worst enemy.

"Well, I do!" she said, lifting her doll-like face in challenge as I concentrated on twirling her correctly. "I hate the Soviet Union and adore America!"

Such trepidation all but shocked me speechless, and the girl dropped me on the spot: The provincial drip! Was he ever out of it!

Sulking in a corner, I scrutinized the mysterious young beauties gliding across the darkened room—the shiny hair so neatly parted, the suave, white-toothed smiles, the Camels and Pall Malls, the sophisticated English vocabulary ("darling," "baby," "let's drink")—and their partners, so elegantly attired in jackets with huge padded shoulders, tight black trousers, and thick-soled shoes. Our gang in Kazan did everything it could to ape American fashion; our girls knit us sweaters with deer on them and embroidered our ties with cowboys and cac-

tuses. But it was only imitation, do-it-yourself. This was the genuine article, made in the U.S.A.

"Wow, what class!" I gushed to the friend who'd wangled me the invitation. But when I referred to the crowd as "real *stilyagi*" (the name given to the disaffected, Western-looking Soviet youth of the 1950s), he corrected me arrogantly—though he himself fit in only slightly better than I—saying, "We're not *stilyagi*; we're Stateniks!"

As I subsequently discovered, there were whole pockets of America lovers in Moscow, and all of them rejected even French fashion in favor of American. Wearing a shirt with buttons that had two or three holes instead of the requisite American four, for example, was considered a disgrace. "Hey, man," your Statenik pals would say, "there's something wrong with your getup."

(I might add that I have met more than one Statenik-turned-émigré who has rejected everything stateside, drives a Volkswagen, and wears the latest in Italian fashion.)

The party I went to climaxed in a spectacular boogie-woogie with the girls flying this way and that. I looked on transfixed as the skirt of my former partner sailed up toward the ceiling. It was all so real—not only the dance but the skirt and what I'd glimpsed under it. I later found out she was the daughter of a high-ranking KGB officer.

### That Postwar Euphoria

Who in the States would have thought that at the height of the Cold War, America had such devoted allies among the Soviet elite? Recently a German director and I were throwing some ideas for a film satire back and forth. The setting is a large European hotel, where a round of Soviet-American disarmament talks has been going on for several months. We see the heads of the negotiation teams, both men in their fifties, sitting face to face. "They don't under-

stand each other, of course," the director said. "They're from different backgrounds, different worlds." "Not so," I objected. "They both may have jitterbugged to Elvis a few years back."

Among the Soviet rank and file, pro-American feeling had a more material base: The people connected the word "America" with the miracle of tasty and nourishing food stuffs in the midst of wartime misery. Bags of yellow egg powder and containers of condensed milk and cured ham saved hundreds of thousands of Soviet children from starving to death. American Studebakers and Dodges were instrumental in keeping lines of communication open throughout the war. Without them the Soviet Army would have taken not two but 10 years to advance. America provided a lifeline during a period of total death—and what a life that line lead to: It was like nothing we Soviets could even imagine. The American presence gave the ordinary Soviet citizen a vague hope for change after the war was over.

Before the war, that ordinary citizen had little sense of America. True, the country figured in a few crude ditties, but they reflect more the offbeat surrealism of folk humor than anything else. A typical example:

America gave Russia a steam-driven boat.  
It had two giant wheels but barely stayed afloat.

Or even worse:

An American—alas!—  
Stuck a finger up his ass  
And thought—what a laugh—  
He'd wound up his phonograph.

Despite the almost total absence of a Russian "sense of America," both these masterpieces relate in their own way to technology. America has always been connected with something revolving and springy.

Not until the war did Russians acquire

a firm sense of America as a country of fabled riches and munificence. The brief, euphoric period of postwar contact in Europe gave rise to the opinion that Russians and Americans were in fact very much alike. When you tried to pin Russians down about what it was that made the two peoples so similar, they tended to say something like: "Americans are down to earth and enjoy a drink." "And do they like to raise Cain?" you might ask to pin them down even further. "No, they don't" would be the reply, "but they can kick up a hell of a rumpus when they feel like it."

### Unmasking Stalin

The decades of anti-American propaganda that followed have done little to shake this belief. Strange as it may seem, the Russians still think of Americans as close relations. The Chinese, on the other hand, they think of as beings from outer space. And although the idea of communism traveled to China via Russia, the Russian in his heart of hearts believes that if anyone is predisposed toward communism it is the Chinese, not he or his fellow Russians.

In 1969, during the skirmishes along the Sino-Soviet border, I happened to be nearby Alma-Ata, the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan. One day I shared a table at the hotel restaurant with an officer from the local missile base. Before long he was dead drunk and weeping like a child: "There's a war about to break, and I've just bought a motorcycle, a real beaut, a Jawa. It took me five long years to save up, and now the Chinese'll come and grab it." "So you're scared of the Chinese?" I asked. "Not in the least," he slobbered. "I just don't want to lose my motorcycle." At this point I couldn't help putting a rather provocative question to him, namely, "What about the Americans, Lieutenant? Are you scared of them?" Whereupon he sobered up for a moment and said in a firm voice, "Americans respect private property."



*What Soviet audiences make of such U.S. pop hits as Billy Joel's "Piano Man," "Uptown Girl," and "Allentown" is unclear, but the American rocker-songwriter, here in Moscow, drew responsive crowds on a Soviet tour last July and August.*

The official goal of Soviet society is to reach the stage of historical development known as communism. For want of religious underpinning, the goal has taken on a purely pragmatic and rather feeble-minded "self-help" kind of image; it is now a means of "satisfying the ever-growing demands of the working people." In 1960, Khrushchev set out to overtake America (Soviet production statistics have always been measured against U.S. production statistics) and build a communist (that is, in the popular imagination, prosperous) society, both by 1980. Although the Soviet Union possibly has overtaken America in the production of tanks, it failed everywhere else: The bounty of Safeway shelves still surpasses the wildest dreams of the Soviet consumer, plagued now as then by endless lines and shortages. As for communism, it still seems to be receding into the future.

The combination of vague pro-American feelings and an all-out anti-American propaganda campaign caused a certain segment of Soviet society to start leaning unconsciously in the direction of America in matters aesthetic, emotional, and, even to some extent, ideological. I have in mind the Soviet intelligentsia of my generation.

It is no easy task to explain the exodus from the Soviet orbit of a generation so thoroughly ready for Soviet life. (What could have been better preparation than the arrests of our fathers during the 1937 purges?) Theoretically, we ought to have turned into "new men" even more ideal than our elder brothers, the intellectuals who *volunteered* to fight against Finland in the belief that their infamous sally would further the great revolutionary struggle for liberation. As far as they were concerned, everything emanating from the Kremlin had a noble,

radiant aura. Members of the Institute of Philosophy and Literature condoned both the purges of the 1930s and the anticommunist campaign of the '40s. For these intellectuals, many of whom spent time in the camps for their communist ardor, the unmasking of Stalin was a catastrophe, the "thaw" an excruciating process of self-reevaluation.

For us, however, it was the start of a great carnival. Down with Stalin! Up with jazz! We were ready for the about-face; in fact, we had been ready since before Stalin's death. Far behind the indestructible Iron Curtain we had somehow managed to develop a pro-Western mentality—and what could be farther west than America?

#### Windows from Hollywood

A number of films, gleaned from the booty brought back from Germany after the war, fell into the hands of the authorities. Most were sentimental trash or Nazi-made anti-British productions, but here and there an American classic of the 1930s would turn up. The authorities, looking for a way to bring in money, decided to swallow their ideological pride and release the films for public consumption. This decision, unusual enough in itself, was rendered even more so by the fact that the impossible burden of making ideologically pure pictures had forced the Soviet film industry to curb its output to three or four films a year.

Since the authorities had no intention of paying royalties on the films, they showed them under false titles. *Stagecoach*, for example, was called *The Journey Will Be Dangerous*; *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town—The Dollar Rules*; *The Roaring Twenties—The Fate of a Soldier in America*. In addition to ideologically emended titles, the films received ludicrous introductions—"The Journey Will Be Dangerous treats the heroic struggle of the Indians against Yankee imperialism"—which replaced the credits and therefore prevented us from get-

ting to know names like John Wayne and James Cagney.

I saw *Stagecoach* no fewer than 10 times and *The Roaring Twenties* no fewer than 15. There was a period when we spoke to our friends almost entirely in quotes from American movies. One such friend, after becoming a senior officer in the Soviet Air Force, confided in me "Comrade Stalin made a big mistake by letting our generation see those films." My friend was right: Those movies provided one of the few windows to the outside world from our stinking Stalinist lair.

Another of those windows was provided by jazz. From the moment I heard a recording of "Melancholy Baby"—a pirate job on an X-ray plate—I couldn't get enough of the revelation coming to me through the shadows of ribs and alveoli, namely, that "every cloud must have a silver lining."

In those days jazz was America's secret weapon Number One. Every night the Voice of America (VOA) would beam a two-hour jazz program at the Soviet Union from Tangiers. The snatches of music and bits of information made for a kind of golden glow over the horizon when the sun went down, that is, in the West, the inaccessible but oh-so-desirable West. How many dreamy Russian boys came to puberty to the strains of Ellington's "Take the A Train" and the dulcet voice of Willis Conover, the VOA's Mr. Jazz. We taped the music on antediluvian recorders and played it over and over at semiunderground parties, which often ended in fistfights with Komsomol patrols or even police raids.

#### Out of the Mist

Clothes provided yet another window on the West, which is why they turned into such a fetish. If a girl in an American dress (how did she come by it?) showed up walking along Leningrad's Nevsky Prospect, she would soon be followed by a crowd of *stilyagi*. Swinging and sway-



ing (which is how they thought Americans moved along Broadway—they even nicknamed Nevsky Prospect “Broad”), they would sing, “I’ve met a girl/As sweet as can be/Her name is Peggy Lee.” The first satirical article about the *stilyagi* described youths swaggering down Nevsky Prospect in stars-and-stripes ties. When you think about it, *stilyagi* were the first dissidents.

Leningrad was far ahead of the rest of the country in terms of Westernization. Soon a Leningrad variety of know-it-all began to proliferate, a cat who could fill you in on anything and everything to do with America, from the early popular (and later banned) editions of Dos Passos and Hemingway in Russian, to Dizzy Gillespie’s latest Greenwich Village concert. (Last Saturday at the Half Note—no, sorry, man, it was Friday; Saturday was Charlie Parker, and was it pouring! Can’t you just picture it, man? The rain, the Village—it’s enough to make you piss your pants.)

The picture of America that our generation pieced together in its imagination was impossibly idealized and distorted, but it also had an amazing—astral, if you like—truth to it. No one paid much attention to the pro-American phenomenon at the time, but looking back on it now from a distance of 30 years I can

say—without any pretense of scholarly analysis, of course—that the American cult had its roots in our basic antirevolutionary character.

Not that we were aware of it at first. But what had once been called the “romance of the revolution” had all but evaporated by the time our generation came along; what is more, it had started giving way to a “romance of counter-revolution”: The young now found the figure of the White Army officer more romantic than his Red counterpart. Unlike Gorky, Pilnyak, or Mayakovsky, we refused—unconsciously as yet—to see the Revolution as a latter-day deluge, a force of universal purification. We knew that instead of purity it had brought in its wake the monstrously bloody, monstrously dreary Stalinist way of life.

America rose up out of the mist as an alternative to an outdated and nauseating belief in socialist revolution, that is, the revolt of the slaves against their masters. The intervening 30 years have dispelled many of my illusions, but on this point I have not wavered. In fact, I perceive with greater clarity that totalitarian decadence must be (and is now in the process of being) outweighed by the forces of liberalism and benevolent inequality. And I thank God that the leader of those forces is a powerful America.