

## The Cool Peace?

Resolved: Russia is becoming our enemy again. by Michael Weiss 11/07/2007

TUESDAY NIGHT MARKED the eleventh Intelligence Squared U.S. debate hosted at the Asia Society and Museum on Park Avenue. Generously endowed by the conservative philanthropist Robert Rosenkranz, IQ2US underwrites a series of intellectual exchanges modeled on the full-blooded forensic style of the Oxford Union, though given that the august society has lately invited speakers like Nick Griffin, head of the fascist British National Party, and David Irving, Holocaust denier in chief, one wonders if like so many other British traditions this one has better thrived by crossing the Atlantic.

The proposition before the house on Wednesday was perhaps the most tantalizing yet: "Russia Is Becoming Our Enemy Again." Arguing in favor of the motion were Bret Stephens, an editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, Claudia Rossett, journalist-in-residence at the Defense of Democracies and a WEEKLY STANDARD contributor, and J. Michael Waller, the Annenberg Chair in International Communication at the Institute for World Politics. Arguing against were Nina Khrushcheva, granddaughter of the Soviet premier and professor of International Affairs at the New School, Robert Legvold, a political science professor at Columbia University, and Mark Medish, a former Clinton administration official and now the vice president for Studies of Russia, China and Eurasia at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. A nicely arrayed Sovnarkom of laurels, yet the most interesting curriculum vitae of the evening belonged to moderator Edward Lucas, who has a new book coming out titled *The New Cold War: The Future of Russia and the Threat to the West.* 

If that language strikes you as assured then perhaps it's because the calendar of bilateral relations does appear to be heading back to 1962. World headlines announce Le Carré-esque tales of irradiated expatriates, gunned-down journalists, and poisoned politicians, all of whom were guilty of the unforgivable crime of opposing Moscow. The bald-faced euphemism of Eastern dictatorship has returned in the form of Russia's post-millennial "managed democracy." Gas and oil pipelines have been made hostage to the pro-Russian sentiments of Caucasian peoples who rely on them stay warm in winter. A Baltic state and NATO ally has been subjected to a costly cyberwar, with at least a few soldiers of the invading army residing, according to their virtual signatures, in the fortified offices of the Kremlin. And Vladimir Putin, the KGB Tsar who has presided over all these episodes of intimidation and repression--and likely plans, as prime minister, to preside over many more--happily finances a Middle Eastern theocracy's "peaceful" wish to explore the varied uses of the atom. Yet it's soft brinkmanship when the U.S. announces plans to construct a defensive missile shield on European soil.

American debates over Russia's present and future have always lent themselves to witty theatrics. Rossett alone twice reminded me of the Trotskyist Max Shachtman's devastating indictment of CPUSA chief Earl Browder in 1950: "There but for an accident of geography, stands a corpse!" First she recounted a dinner she attended in Moscow ten years ago at which one Russian held forth against a tide of Western skepticism about the positive direction in his which his country was headed. "His name was Gary Kasparov." Next, having poured herself a cup of tea at the lectern prior to her opening remarks, Rossett brandished the photographs of the dying Alexander Litvinenko, the ex-KGB agent turned British citizen who was poisoned by Polonium 210, and a badly disfigured Victor Yushchenko, the current pro-Western reformist president of Ukraine. She invited the audience to imagine itself a Russian dissident sitting down with an envoy from the Kremlin to discuss the murder of a journalist in a foreign city. "Would you, without a second thought these days, drink that tea?"

Stephens went a step further by coining a few powerful phrases to describe the Great Russian Chauvinism of *Putinshchina*. He referred to the Kremlin's "pipeline warfare" against Belarus, Ukraine, and Georgia, and cited the murder of Litvinenko as an act of "nuclear homicide, if not nuclear terrorism," Scotland Yard's investigations of which the Russian Foreign Ministry has dismissed as so much of a fuss "over one man." Meanwhile, Litvinenko's accused and un-extradited murderer, Andrei Lugovoi, will likely be elected to the Duma next month. Stephens misspoke, however, when he claimed that the Siberian prison term of Mikhail Khordorkovsky, Putin's oligarchic archnemesis and the CEO of Yukos convicted on sham charges, has been "prolonged." Actually, Khordorkovsky's parole was denied but for an unsurprisingly nominal infraction of prison rules: he didn't keep his hands behind his back upon returning to his cell from exercise.

Stephens and his colleagues might have made more of the specifically Cold War provenance of the methods used to kill Litvinenko. The notorious "Umbrella Murder" of Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov in 1978 also occurred in London in broad daylight. The weapon was also a *recherché* component of WMD, ricin. And, according to former KGB agents Oleg Gordievsky and Oleg Kalugin, Yuri Andropov personally gave the go-ahead to the Bulgarian secret police to carry out the assassination.

J. Michael Waller provided the most thorough, insider analysis of Russian military infrastructure and its regnant political ideology. His brief rested on the strong evidence that Soviet tendencies, rather than simply reviving, never really died off. If Russia had erased or buried its Communist past the better to emerge more confident as a market democracy, then how to explain that the Foreign Intelligence Services offices, the FSB State Security Services offices, and the state prosecutor's offices all bear the sword and shield insignia of Felix Dzerzhinsky's Bolshevik Cheka? Waller spoke of the arrant "KGB-ization" of the state, and indeed, the most prominent form of "dissent" within the country occurs among the various factions of the siloviki--the new military and espionage class of which Putin is primus inter pares. Waller made the often-overlooked point that Russia never had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the corpse-strewn nightmare of Stalinism. To the contrary, the Kremlin has released new "ideological guidelines" for teaching social studies and history to schoolchildren.

Textbooks being studied by future Russian generations thus inform that Stalin was the "most successful leader of the U.S.S.R.," resurrect his personality cult on behalf of Putin, and resort to a level of hostile rhetoric against the United States not heard since the grumbling days of Brezhnev. Add to this that for all of Putin's de-escalationist posturing, he has commissioned the Yuri Dolgoruky, an advanced Borei class nuclear submarine that is currently undergoing sea trials and carrying a payload unnecessary to, say, level Grozny (again).

As for the "anti" side, their case relied heavily on the phrasing of the proposition. No one dared challenge the above-cited high crimes of the Putin regime, so the task was to show how those crimes do not an enemy make. Robert Legvold said that to characterize Russia in such a Manichean way is:

wrong because it misunderstands what Russia's all about, and it misunderstands what motivates its foreign policy. And it's unhelpful, maybe even harmful because it almost certainly runs the risk of bringing about the behavior and stance on Russia's part that we fear in the first place

If we're to read this assessment right, then Legvold is saying that Russia might become our enemy simply by our saying that Russia might become our enemy. This was by no means the most evasive or tautological that his team got. Legvold spoke of Russia as a "challenge," a recovering nation that is motivated by three desires: a "renewed voice," "respect of its national interests as it defines them, not the way in which we define them," and an "end to the assigned role as either a pupil or as a junior partner." It's just acting out, in other words. Obstructing justice in the murder investigation of a British citizen, supplying Hamas and Hezbollah with arms, building the ayatollahs a nuclear reaction at Bushehr--what more to expect from the rebellious phase of a pubescent superpower?

Nina Khrushcheva also resorted to a neat logical troika to explain away Russia's belligerence. She said the country couldn't possibly be becoming our enemy because we no longer live in a "bipolar" world--the Great Game has been won, the board has been reset with a multitude of big players. Furthermore, there is no "ideological divide" between democracy and communism. And Vladimir Putin is not an emperor, although he likes to sound like one. However, he may well be driven to take up the imperial mantle by American hectoring or bullying. (The corollary--that the U.S. might be driven to become Russia's avowed enemy by Russian behavior--was never discussed).

Khrushcheva's strangest utterance, though, was this one: "[P]utin would argue that both Russia and the United States today are of the same ideology, that is democracy, and of the same economic system, which is capitalism." Odd, then, that the same man told Der Spiegel during the last G-8 summit: "I am an absolutely true democrat. The tragedy is that I am alone. There are no such other democrats in the world," and then took the occasion of the 62nd anniversary of VE-Day to compare the United States to the Third Reich. The "bipolar" Khrushcheva was alluding to might have been to the psychological disorder.

Mark Medish presented the most cogent case for the opposition, which is to say that his was the most legalistic. The motion was "wrong on its face," he claimed, because this Russia has never before been our enemy before (the Soviet Union was), and therefore it can't possibly become our enemy "again." Those years in the Clinton White House certainly weren't misspent.

Medish also warned that a "friend-foe" dichotomy had "self-fulfilling prophecy" written all over it, and he, for one, preferred to highlight shared U.S.-Russian interests--namely, stopping WMD proliferation and fighting Islamic terrorism (never mind about that facility in Bushehr and rocket-running for Hezbollah and Hamas). Medish was also very fond of downy d-words to portray a hard reality: "We may have disagreements, there may be friction, there may be deep disappointments and indeed there is great disillusionment and disenchantment in the mutual relationship today." But I think his prize moment arrived when said that, in contradistinction to a new cold war, what the two powers are embroiled in now is a "cool peace." Well, he brightened my mood, anyway.

Technically, the pros won the day, but the antis made an impressive come-around. The audience vote at the start of the debate was 41 percent in favor of the motion, 23 percent against, and 36 percent undecided. At the end those percentages were 47, 41, 12. How many FSB agents showed up late remains a mystery.

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