



World War I Hysteria Redux: The Hate Everything Russian Campaign

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered anger, vitriol, and bigotry in the United States and much of the democratic West. It is an atmosphere of intolerance that surpasses the immediate post-9-11 period (especially the lead-up to the Iraq War) and even the height of McCarthyism in the early and mid-1950s. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the toxic ideological environment in the United States during World War I. Vladimir Putin is presented not merely as a reckless leader who has launched a war that is destabilizing Europe. Instead, the image that Western officials and their media allies foster is that Putin is a monstrous aggressor and possibly even insane. The dominant narrative is reminiscent of the World War I propaganda offensive that portrayed Kaiser Wilhelm II as the "Beast of Berlin" whose troops had invaded neighboring countries without provocation.

Loathing the Kaiser broadened into a campaign of hatred against all things German. The German people became stereotyped as "the Hun," barbaric aggressors despoiling Europe. As in that earlier campaign, Western opposition to Putin and his war has morphed into pervasive animus against all things Russian. In World War I, manifestations of anti-German attitudes ranged from silly to sinister. Efforts to ban pretzels from restaurants, and the movement to rename items that had German names were prominent examples of the first category. Thus, dachshunds became "liberty dogs," sauerkraut became "liberty cabbage," and hamburgers became "liberty steak".

However, other efforts to strengthen anti-German sentiment proved to be much more alarming and destructive. People were harassed and even assaulted for daring to speak German, which was the primary language for first-generation immigrants from that country. Worse, critics of the war were prosecuted and imprisoned merely for questioning the wisdom of President Woodrow Wilson's crusade to "make the world safe for democracy" or the constitutionality of the new military draft.

The hangover from the wartime hysteria persisted into the postwar period. The targets, though, changed from Germans to left-wing activists. The new wave of intolerance culminated in the Red Scare, when leftists (especially immigrants suspected of harboring such views) were accused of being Bolshevik terrorists. Several thousand suspects were rounded up in the infamous Palmer raids and detained in hastily constructed prison camps. Americans came perilously close to losing the Bill of Rights during Wilson's presidency because of government-promoted hysteria.

The current vilification of Russia also has run the gamut from silly, to obnoxious, to sinister. Liquor stores and supermarkets in most states have pulled Russian vodka from their shelves. State governments are proposing far more extensive bans on a range of Russian products. Some of the intolerance has taken on a distinctly personal quality. Anna Netrebko, the famous Russian soprano, will no longer be invited to perform at the Metropolitan Opera after failing to comply with the company's demand that she publicly repudiate Putin.

To a greater extent than in World War I, the current anti-Russian sentiment is at least as pervasive and nasty in the rest of the West as it is in the United States. The Munich Philharmonic Orchestra fired its Russian conductor because he refused to condemn Putin. Similar incidents have occurred elsewhere. The prize for cruel intolerance, though, goes to the organizers of the Paralympic Winter Games for barring disabled Russian athletes from their event.

As in World War I, members of the press have aided and abetted the current onslaught against all things Russian. Moreover, in an echo of that earlier campaign, anti-Russia fanatics are demanding that anyone who opposes their views be silenced and even criminally prosecuted. The hosts of "The View" lobbied their viewers to insist that the Justice Department investigate (and hopefully charge) Fox News host Tucker Carlson and former Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) for being Russian agents and committing "treason." Host Whoopi Goldberg observed that "they used to arrest people for stuff like this." Pundit Keith Olbermann called on the military to arrest Carlson and Gabbard as "enemy combatants" and hold them in jail to await trial for "participating in a campaign of [Russian] disinformation." Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT), accused Gabbard of circulating "treasonous lies" that might cost lives.

These calls go well beyond the usual innuendoes and smears directed against Carlson and other opponents of Washington's crusade against Russia by the likes of Hillary Clinton and Anne Applebaum. The latest episodes constitute a specific threat against dissenters, and it reflects an effort to generate not only hysteria, but dangerous hysteria. Leaving aside the key point that Goldberg, Olbermann, and other intolerant pro-war types clearly have no clue about the definition of treason in the Constitution, the attitude they express is toxic. It is precisely the same mentality that led to the horrid civil liberties abuses during and immediately after World War I. Their calls for the suppression of opposing views need to be repudiated emphatically and repeatedly. They, rather than Carlson, Gabbard, and other opponents of U.S. meddling in the Russia-Ukraine war, constitute the real threat to peace and freedom. We cannot afford a repetition of World War I-style hysteria.

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