

**Racism, Narratives, Media and Culture:
Russians in American Films**

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Part 1. Dominant Worldview Story

For many decades, American cinematography has been portraying a Russian person as a villain in popular movies and television shows. According to Sharivker's (2015) analysis of Russian stereotypes in American television, "the archetype maintains that most Russian men are affiliated with the Russian mafia, or the KGB. "

Movies like *From Russia With Love* (1963), *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *The Russians are Coming! The Russians are Coming!* (1966), *Red Dawn* (1984), *Rocky IV* (1985), *An American Tail* (1986), *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *The Boondock Saints* (1999), *Star Trek* (2009), *Salt* (2010) and *Mission Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (2011) are just a few more popular films portraying Russian protagonists in a negative light, mostly as villains and spies. A number of these movies are considered cult classic American films, grossing high in American box offices. This fact reinforces the seriousness of anti-Russian messaging in them, since the popularity of these communicates that the messaging in these movies reaches far and wide and is relatable by many audiences.

It is worth noting that starting in 1990s, the films with Russian themes, "while still retaining some persistent stereotypes of Russians (both negative and otherwise), did have a large shift towards ideas of relatability, humorousness, unification, and friendliness with regard to Russians. This was also the decade that really began to portray specific groups of Russians as evil, rather than all Russians: . . . the Cossacks, the Russian mafia, secret splinter groups of Soviets left over from before the fall of Communism, and others." (Walters, 2012). Walters proceeds by declaring that, based

on her research, the 2000s saw increase in the number of films with Russian themes, with a wider range of roles that Russian protagonists play, and with moderate return to their vilification. Walters (2012) speculates that “we view Russia as once again strong enough to handle some abuse.” Whether Walters’ hypothesis is correct or not, the fact remains: American films in the last decade returned to the reinforcement of the original stereotype of Russians being the bad guys. In addition to films, “television shows such as *Sex and the City*, *2 Broke Girls*, *the Big Bang Theory*, and *the Americans* are examples of shows that were filmed post Cold War, but hold the Cold War enemy close to their script.” (Sharivker, 2015).

Films and shows are powerful sources of stereotypes and narratives. Unlike most other media, their effectiveness lies in delivering a worldview subtly, in an engaging and palatable way, enmeshed with emotional stories, reinforced by music, attractiveness of the characters, popularity of the actors. Due to this “diluting”, the message may not be as evident as one in written media, for example, but the repeating of the same story, especially appended by the entertainment and adrenaline rush, takes root over time. When this message is not explicitly spoken, it makes it more difficult to notice early enough, let alone question its validity.

Part 2. Concealed Story

The message that Russians are villains or spies is one such example. In a survey by Chicago Council of Public Affairs by Helm, Burakovsky & Wojtowicz (2019), to the question “Q5. What is your main source of information about Russia?”, 22% of Americans responded “None”. That means, 22% of population does not access non-fiction public information about Russians - not through domestic or international

television, radio, newspapers, or even social media. Therefore, almost a quarter of the population of this country is at the mercy of the stereotypes perpetuated in fiction, likely in the movies listed above.

The overwhelming majority of perspectives I have encountered on this topic, makes a distinction between structural racism that in America is often depicted by the White/Black delineation of human skin color and the racism experienced as a result of that, and the discrimination, prejudice, and xenophobia that Russian community experiences in this country. The advantage this community has, according to these perspectives, is presenting overwhelmingly as “white” Americans, and thus likely to benefit from the existing racial hierarchy, rather than be primary victims of systemic or structural racism. Overall, I agree with that perspective: none of my research resulted in evidence that Russian Americans’ amount of suffering from the system is nowhere near the amount of suffering that non-white-skinned counterparts experience in this country. That in itself is a confirmation of the pervasiveness of the structural racism based on the color of the skin.

Speaking specifically about Russian Americans (i.e. residents and naturalized citizens of USA, born in a Russian-speaking country), there is enough data to support the claim that they do, in fact, in general benefit, rather than suffer, from the systemic structures in this country. Moreover, there is evidence that, despite “growing tension between younger Russian Americans committed to social justice and the older generation who emphatically deny the existence of structural racism” (Krichevsky, 2020), “many diasporic Russian speakers’ views are informed by [the racism often perpetuated by] far-right Republican talking points” (Gaufman, 2021) and the majority align with a view of America as the land of opportunity. Thus, many are actually

perpetuating, directly and indirectly, structural racism.

Having said that, I want to return to Delgado and Stefancic's statement about race, that got me to consider the topic of Russians in American films to be one of a racial nature: in their book "Critical Race Theory", they speak to the 'social construction thesis' as holding "race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient." (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). This statement leads to a question - what defines "Russianness", and can "Russian" be considered a race. While there is such a country as Russia, the term "Russian" as used in America often refers to anyone from Eastern Europe, likely with Slavic roots, possibly from one of the countries in former USSR, and speaks some Russian language. Before the current war between Russia and Ukraine, many Ukrainians in America, for example, including in my personal first-hand experiences, identified themselves as or have been identified as Russian. So did Belarussians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks that I have encountered. At the same time, according to "Ethnic groups in Russia" (2025), almost 20% of citizens of Russian Federation are not ethnically Russian - and the vast majority of them do not present as white.

Another important piece that played a role in declaring this topic worthy of exploration in this paper was a brief elaboration by R. Kelley in "What Is Racial Capitalism and Why Does It Matter" (13:50) around slavs have been slaves well into 20th century. This is in addition to the well-known history of political repressions during Stalin times for the majority of USSR population.

Bringing all these pieces together, it means that the white-presenting tough-guy spying patriotic government-serving often-armed stereotypes of Russian characters in

American movies are grossly misrepresenting the real Russian (or slavic?) men and are dismissive of Russian women and non-slavic Russians, and the discriminations and xenophobia that these stereotypes lead to in America, while not as grave as deep structural racism that non-white-skinned people experience, are nonetheless noteworthy and worth exploring, as they influence perceptions, attitudes and actions of American public towards this subgroup.

Some of the milder examples of the discriminations that these stereotypes lead to, include surprises and disbeliefs at someone, who is not presenting as white, claiming to be Russian and having to prove that. Expectations of abundantly drinking vodka and playing chess, and disbelief in disinterest in either, is common as well. Another example is the incessant “spy” jokes as in “Are you a spy? Do you work with KGB?’ And I told them there’s been no KGB for years. They were just making a joke, but that was all.” (Heim, 2017). Even research studies exploring Russo-American relationships, which are intended to be unbiased in their surveys in order to obtain most accurate data, can themselves be biased: for example, juxtaposing Russia directly against USA, or deliberately excluding Russia while asking Russians their preferred leading power and offering USA and China as the only options (Poushter, 2018). While these examples are not explicitly harmful, they end up creating a sense of emotional unsafety, hopelessness, protectionism and antagonism in the recipients. These reactions, both conscious and unconscious, are likely to result in deepening the alienation and individuation and distancing themselves from society, which reinforces the individualistic precepts of structural racism in this society.

There are more serious instances of harms and negative impacts, most recently brought on by the speculations about Russia meddling with election results and by the

Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, “the U.S. has deported nearly 190 Russians since the beginning of October 2022, almost three times as many as were removed during the entire prior year.” (Aleaziz & Wilkinson, 2023). Additionally, “within days of the invasion, a restaurant in Washington D.C. called Russia House was vandalized, and U.S. Rep. Eric Swalwell proposed that all Russian students should be removed from U.S. universities... At least 11 states banned imports of Russian vodka, and Electronic Arts Sports proudly removed Russian teams from the hit video game series FIFA.” (Sevcik, 2022). Historically, in early 1900s U.S. government became fearful of a communist revolution on American soil, and began prosecuting and deporting Russians. Later, after World War II, as the “tensions between the U.S. and Soviet Union were rising, prospective emigrants became pawns in a global geopolitical game.” (Library of Congress, n.d.).

These examples are highlighting three important patterns. First, the politics and global events, in addition to film and TV shows’ narratives, have a direct negative effect on the perceptions towards and treatment of everyday-individuals with slavic roots. Second, the word “Russian” in reference to a person carries many meanings, which often remain unacknowledged and unaddressed, and may land as outright offensive, like if a Ukrainian person were referred to as “a Russian” in the recent years. Third, Russophobia, as some call anti-Russian sentiment, has lasted over a century in this country, and continues to exist.

Part 3. Resistance Story

Despite these negative patterns surrounding “Russianness” and its villainism, there exist multiple stories that portray the cooperation of Americans and Russians and

some signs of relatively positive and relatable orientation towards Russians.

Although some stereotypical features of Russians, such as toughness, gruffness, stoicism, vodka-loving, and chess- and tech-sharpness, continue to persist, a few American films and TV shows found a way to make Russian characters be more complex and humane, if not outright good people. Namely films *Red Heat* (1988), *Anastasia* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (2015), and TV series *The Americans* (2013-2018) showcased novel narratives about Russians or presented them outside the common action genre, shifting to comedy or drama as a context of interactions.

In spite of the not-unwarranted mainstream narrative in the news about the antagonism between USA and Russia, which has been fortifying the stereotypes and narratives about Russians, there are numerous examples of the two countries successfully cooperating with each other. Some prominent examples include decades-long partnership in science projects like International Space Station (ISS) and International Thermonuclear Experiment Reactor (ITER) and in war-on-terror political projects like during the war in Afghanistan after 9/11 and the joining of the forces while fighting against ISIS in 2015.

A number of different studies have been conducted in the last decade in regard to Americans' and Russians' mutual perspectives of each other. While the results vary substantially between different sources and dependent on timing and geo-political situation, there appears to be a subtlety that goes unnoticed in most of them. Specifically, most studies refer to Russia as a whole as its president specifically. However, the surveys that asked about "Russians" and "russian people" reflect more positive attitudes. Specifically, according to the study by The Chicago Council of Global

Affairs, despite general disinterest in each other, as of 2019, “68 percent of Americans view Russians as *individuals* either very or fairly positively” (Helm, Burakovsky & Wojtowicz, 2019). This showcases public’s warmer views of the regular people, and potential for discernment between the mainstream narratives regarding Russians and the real people.

History reflects Americans’ support and welcoming of Russian-born immigrants: composer Igor Stravinsky, novelist Vladimir Nabokov, writer Isaac Asimov, dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, Nobel Prize-winning poet Joseph Brodsky and Nobel Prize-winning novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, tennis players Maria Sharapova and Anna Kurnikova, Google co-founder Serge Brin are just a few of them, and continue to be appraised in current America. It is worth noting that they in no way conform to the portrayal of Russians that the dominant worldview of this paper addresses. On the contrary: these examples, and many more that are not immigrants to USA, showcase that American public appreciates not only Russian villains, but also Russian ballet, composers, artists, performers, sports, literature, glamour.

Part 4. Lessons and Applications

This paper sprouted from a discussion of how Russians are portrayed in American films, and I have picked up a few lessons along the way.

One of the first lessons I learned was how unhelpful labels can be. Due to the multiplicity of the concept of “Russians” in this instance, it was important to look at both Russian Americans’ experiences and at the experiences of “Russians” in a global sense and what that may encompass. This made me aware of the vagueness of some labels and caution about making assumptions about them. It is an important lesson for a social

worker to exercise precise use of language and not make assumptions.

Looking into the history of the dynamics between the Americans and the Russians helped me confirm that stereotypes, while often unfounded and unfair in the present, have their reasons and roots. Using this learning, I can support my social work clients who are affected by stereotypes, by encouraging their education about the roots of these stereotypes, as well as the concealed stories and, perhaps most importantly, the resistance stories. I intend to empower the clients through education about struggles that are similar to theirs, about their histories and counter-movements, as a way to counteract their hopelessness and discourage the surrender to the system.

The stereotype-based “positive” expectations of Russians to be good at chess, math, technology brought to mind the reference to Asians as “the model minority” in Denso & Orfano’s TEDEd video from 2021. It is another reminder that even positive stereotypes are harmful for both the stereotyped groups and for the whole, and how that way of thinking may be used to enforce racial hierarchies.

This paper made me reflect on the intersectionality of immigrant identities. While white Americans have to deal with “search for cultural meaning and identification” (Hardiman, 2001), immigrants have to deal with their ethnic identities and finding ways of the merging of those with American ones. As Sevcik put it: “I am a Russian American. I’m still figuring out what this identity means to me, but after years and years of uncertainty, I finally understand that I shouldn’t be ashamed of it.” (Sevcik, 2022). This nuance is very relatable for me personally, but it also informs my social work practice in form of questions like what cultural identities to white-presenting people carry and what cultural identities may they be hiding due to shame, fear or other factors.

Finally, and most importantly, this paper led me to reflect on why this topic is

worth to write about, even though it is not a typical case of structural racism. It was a useful contemplation regarding how such instance of a rigid stereotype leads to discrimination, xenophobia and occasional harm against this small minority of the population of America, and furthermore how it may be contributing to, if not propagation, then at the very least support of the bigger racism. It is important to highlight that the choice of this topic is not at all to minimize the gravity of structural racism experienced in America. On the contrary, it is adding to the nuance of what discrimination is and how it may affect relatively invisible layers of population. I see it as a very important lesson in my future clinical practice for a few reasons. I will be working in Vermont state, which is overwhelmingly white - and as such, the layers of that white majority will need to be examined for the "intra-racial" injustices that may be impacting my clients. This dive into intra-white layer of Russian Americans' experiences, which I feel more informed about due to my own ethnic background and exposure to Russian-speaking diaspora in the past, gave me a template for how to approach other white-presenting clients, who have the intersectionality of identities that does not include "white American" as as such may facilitate invisible injustices and disadvantages. More importantly, I believe, the possible feelings of alienation and not-belonging for such subsets of population, are likely to lead to their reinforcement of the current White Supremacy structures, because those are big and powerful and are safer to align with. I believe, in order to begin dismantling these systems, we must dismantle the stereotypes that create alienation, disconnection, shame and harm in every layer of the population, including white-American-presenting ones.

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