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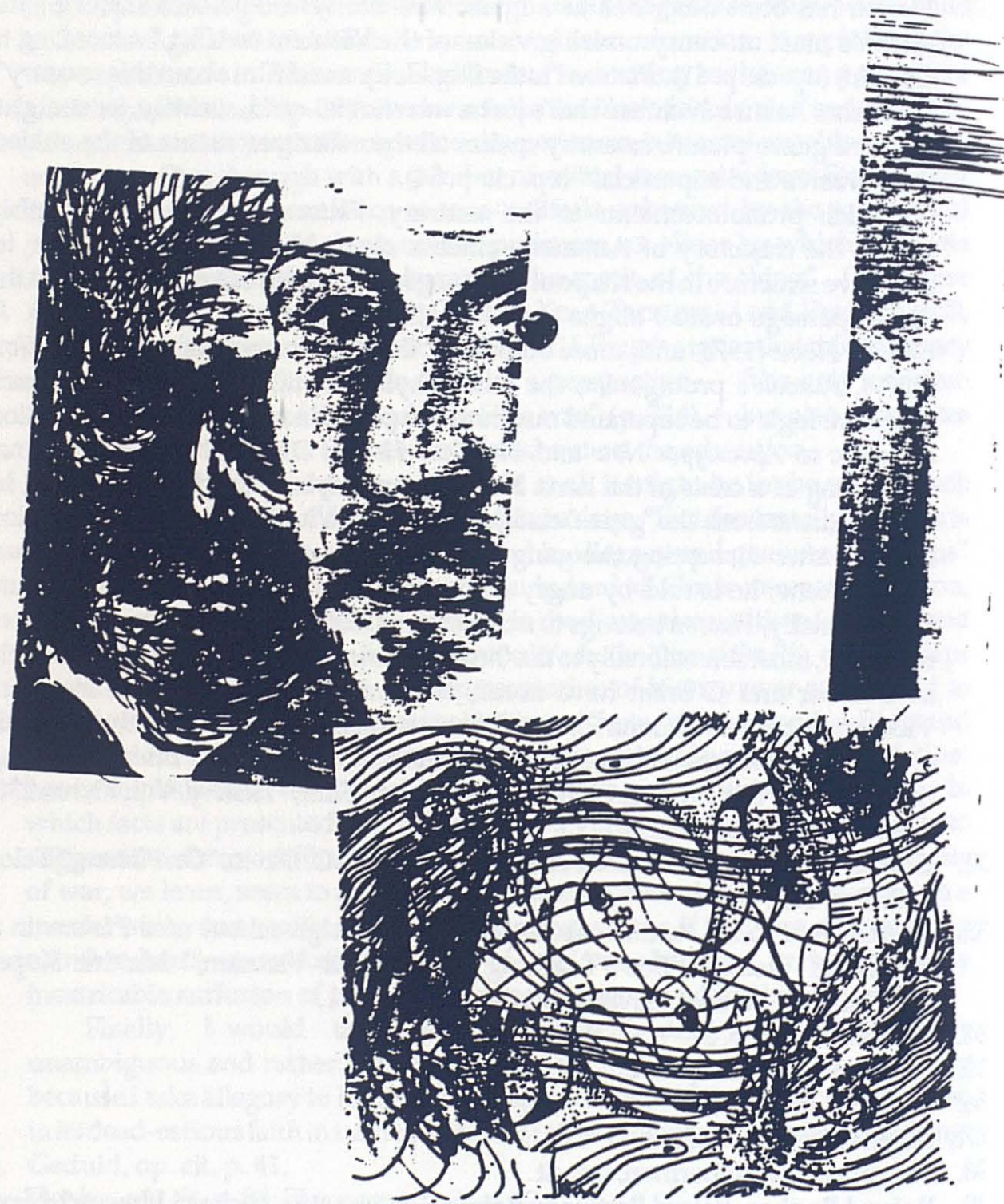
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**"The Russians Acted Like the Russians":
The 'Othering' of the Soviet Union in the
Reader's Digest, 1980-90¹**

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The increasingly widespread introduction of discursive theory into academic research has highlighted the ideological construct of (re)presentations of social 'reality.' Nowhere is this more prevalent than within the realm of popular conceptions of geopolitics. Here geography is manipulated in such a way as to produce an 'objective' reading of the spatial processes and place-bound characteristics of world politics. There is no such thing as a universal geopolitics, however; each theorization is firmly rooted within the cultural assumptions of a particular national subject position. Those existing outside the nation-state boundary of the defining theory (and thus its ideological assumptions) become characterised as Other, a concept which, by definition, is inherently tied to the ideological perception of the national Self.

The Reader's Digest is America's most read magazine. Despite the fact that in the majority of cases, its articles are drawn from other sources, editorial selection provides a coherent textual creation which represents current issues and their relevance to the American reader. One does not require a detailed deconstruction of *The Reader's Digest* (hereafter *RD*) to realise that it presents a very conservative, and characteristically American, discourse.

Although any text produces multiple readings, the *RD* would appear to be sufficiently coherent and recursive to mold certain popular images. Furthermore, it can be argued that the creation of an Other, here the Soviet Union in *RD*'s geopolitical model, produces a reading which reveals as much about the ideological values of the Self as it does the character of the Other.

Before turning to look at the text itself, I think it is important to state the definitions of the textual theory which I will use to deconstruct the *RD*'s discourse of the Soviet Union.

Theoretical Construct of the 'Other'

One could argue that the *RD* has created a discursive field of Soviet Otherness through its manipulation of a particular model of geopolitics to explain the role of the USA and USSR in the world system. It is necessary to unpack the meaning of this statement before presenting the outlines of the *RD*'s discursive field.

It is becoming a widely accepted view that there is no such thing as transparent writing; texts are not mimetic of 'reality' but are representations of the 'reality' they seek to convey (Macdonell, 1986). Geopolitics is one example of textual representation. Conventionally it is seen as a practical and 'objective' attempt at relating geography to international politics. But geography is not objective. It is a form of power/knowledge, a "social and historical discourse always intimately bound up with questions of politics and ideology" (O Tuathail and Agnew, 1991:5). Although a geopolitical discourse may claim to mirror the 'real' situation, this reflection is in fact necessarily coloured with the ideology of the writer's and reader's subject positions.

Since the European Enlightenment, subject positions have been tied to the notion of national identity. In realist theories of politics, the world-system is formed by a series of territorial nation-states. These have become naturalised to the extent that their ontological validity and legitimacy as basic units of analysis and identity are rarely questioned. Certainly this is the hegemonic explanation implicit in much 'popular' geopolitics. Discrete national identities are thus fundamental to the understanding of modern subject positioning. National ideology is also presumed to be natural and thus universal despite its evident construction. This exclusive definition of national identity creates a clear delineation between those people adopting assumed 'universal' values within the national territory and all those outside practicing different, and inferior, values.

This process of 'Othering' those beyond one's national borders is reinforced by orthodox Western philosophy which is based in a tradition of logocentric hierarchical dualisms. The Other becomes "the excluded against which behavior is judged and defined; the mad defines the sane, the deviant the normal" (Dalby, 1988:417).

It would be deterministic to suggest that any representation of an Other is automatically accepted by a national populace. The construction of a hegemonic discursive field of Otherness thus involves the creation of many discourses of difference so that, in any aspect of human life, the Other is posited as fundamentally different from the national Self.

Historically, the most acknowledged example of Othering - if only because of the literature it has generated, both supportive and critical - is Orientalism. This was the creation of a European Other at the time of colonization which effectively homogenized the many cultures stretching from Northern Africa to Japan into a single presence.

Edward Said's (1979) exposé of Orientalism was one of the first and most comprehensive deconstructions of the myth of the Other. I refer to the Orientalist discourses uncovered by Said to help disentangle the discursive

field of the Soviet Other in the *RD*. I do, however, diverge from Said's analysis when looking at power relations inherent in these discourses. The power relations in the two cases are quite different and this affects the nature of the discourses brought into play in each case. Before exploring this in greater detail, I will provide a brief account of my research methodology.

Methodology

The data for this study is drawn from articles from the *RD* in the years 1980-1990. The *RD* was chosen because of its unmatched circulation figures. Although I am aware that the readership of this magazine is not entirely representative of the American population, I think that the sheer size of readership justifies research into its possible appeal and influence. The particular time period was chosen because of the remarkable changes taking place in the Soviet Union during the 1980s. Ideological assumptions, I have presumed, become especially prominent in order to cope with times of change and uncertainty. The individual articles were chosen from the contents page of each issue: any entry which appeared to have connections with the Soviet Union was selected for close reading.

Difference

The *RD* relies heavily on conventional images of the Other in the construction of articles on the Soviet Union. Of the eighty Soviet items in the period studied there was only one which was sympathetic to the Soviet case - a report on the December 1988 Armenian earthquake, but this was constructed as a human tragedy beyond geopolitical bounds. And, even this was darkened with "the specter of a bureaucrat unwilling to deliver bread to a village because there was no surviving official to sign for it" (various, 1989:145). No articles attempt to liken the Soviets to Americans. Instead, their differences were always systematically highlighted.²

This is facilitated by homogenizing the Other. For example, despite the fact that the USSR encompasses over one hundred national groups, the terms Soviet and Russian are used interchangeably. Phrases such as "totalitarian," "the Soviets have reacted in character" and concentration upon bureaucratic "red tape and corruption" also produce a monolithic picture of the USSR. Articles are rarely about individual people, instead the tendency is to dichotomize between the Soviet people and the Soviet system. Obviously, problems of restricted access to information have had much to do with this, however, the Soviet individual is perceived to be clearly subservient to the state.

There are several exceptions which in fact reinforce this discourse. Firstly, political leaders and important spies are given individual description

and articles are devoted to their exploits (corruption and manipulation in the former case, action threatening America and freedom in the latter.) It could be argued that this reinforces the picture of a homogeneous population unquestioningly following the dictates of their (obviously corrupt and untrustworthy) leaders. The second group of Soviets who merit individual description are dissenters. This inclusion of those opposed to the system, whether because of persecution or for ideological reasons, also enforces the homogenized stereotype rather than undermining it. For there is an inherent tautology in the construct of the Other. In other words, Soviet action is described, either explicitly, or more implicitly by relying on the intertextuality of cultural construct, in terms of a set of characteristics which will be described below. Any alternative activity is therefore regarded as non-Soviet. "These people belonged in spirit to the Western intelligentsia," explains one ethnographic article on Russians (Feifer, 1980:208) - the anti-Soviet expressions of this group places them outside the neat definition of the Other. Emigres such as Sakarov are given the same treatment. Such people are not within the definition of "Soviet" and as they are a small yet vocal minority they are able to stand outside of the constructed Other.

This leaves a mass population radically different from, and incompatible with, the American populace. The fundamental and inherent difference perceived as separating Soviets and Americans can be illustrated with phrases such as

we failed . . . because we continued to believe that the Russians would or could think like us (Rowny, 1981, p. 70)

Did they suppose that Moscow would react the way Americans did (Safire, 1986, p. 71)

This discourse is taken to an extreme in an article which appeared in the July 1981 edition. The story is of an American who required a blood transfusion after surgery in Siberia. He was given local blood which his body appeared to reject. The text indicates that there is not usually any problem when a patient is given "blood of the same type but of different ethnic origin" (Knaus, 1981, p. 125). It is admitted that the blood may not have been properly screened before transfusion, but a more revealing question is left hanging:

Is his body rejecting the Russian blood? (p. 125)

Perhaps the implications of this statement are not as damning as I am implying. However, the story ends with the patient being airlifted from

Siberia just before Soviet surgeons have the chance to open him up once more. In the helicopter, they give him another transfusion:

My theory is right! Jim's body is accepting the American blood. (p127)

Placing a nationality on biological characteristics seems somewhat extreme, and produces a reading which suggests that Americans and Soviets really are fundamentally incompatible. However, such statements about difference might not ring true for the reader without some form of evidential support. This comes in the form of a number of discourses which compose *RD's* discursive field of Soviet Otherness.

Time

As with Said's description of European Orientalism, *RD's* discursive field of the Soviet Other contains two contradictory discourses of time.

(a) **Timelessness:** Many articles in *RD* imply an unchanging Soviet character:

Ever since grabbing power in 1917, Soviet leaders have proclaimed their intention to fight for the world-wide triumph of communism. (Chapple, 1982, p. 70)

Stalin is still smiling. (Barron, 1984, p. 111)

They could be seen for what they really were — a modern Mongol horde... (Elliott, 1986, p. 96)

Even the changes wrought by the Gorbachev administration are regarded as only superficial, they are just "polishing the facade":

Is Russia Really Changing?

Don't bet on it . . . along comes a new Bolshevik leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. (Lasky, 1988, pp. 71-4)

But when Gorbachev talks about correcting the mistakes of the Stalin era, he does not mean correcting the underlying socialist system. (Evans and Novak, 1987, p. 92)

The underlying nature of the Soviet system is perceived to be set in concrete and therefore unlikely to change in the future any more than it has been seen to have changed in the past. *RD* articles calibrate Soviet history by leader

character. Subtexts of repression and threatening behavior run through this periodization, however, which limit the effect of its historical differentiation.

(b) **Degeneration:** there are a similar number of articles which employ the trope of degeneration to convey the development of the Soviet Union into its current antipodean ideological position. One use of this trope is to hark back to pre-Revolutionary Russia to highlight the potential of the nation if it had been left to develop 'naturally':

Why is Russia, a net exporter of food under the czars, chronically dependent on food imports? (Satter, 1989, p. 62)

More often though, degeneracy is viewed as a deviation from Marxist texts, in much the same way as European Orientalists charted Muslim societies' deviation from ancient Islamic writings:

Government and Communist Party officials had become a privileged class in what, according to Marxist theory, was a classless society. (Griffith, 1981, p. 102)

Several of the tales of individual escape from USSR indicate that these people *had* been strong believers in the Soviet regime but have become disillusioned by "the system's crippling defects and cruelties, the endless consumer shortages, the staggering wastage and inefficiency" (Feifer, 1985, p. 183). Post *glasnost* tales of worker slacking and drunkenness also provide fertile ground for exposing Soviet system bankruptcy.

The last world empire is collapsing. (Bennett, 1989, p. 99)

Irrationality

The discursive field of Soviet Otherness in the RD is strengthened by the discourse of irrationality which runs through many of the articles in the period studied. Descriptions of inexplicable Soviet rationale helps to reinforce the notion that they can never be like Americans because they even think differently.

Bolshevik rule reduced the land to ruin (Simon, 1988, p. 68)

The nonsensical farm system that undermines hopes of progress in the Soviet Union. (Satter, 1989, p. 61)

This discourse conveys the image that Soviet 'rationality' is so divergent from the American (norm) that they can never equal US achievements or adopt an

"THE RUSSIANS ACTED LIKE THE RUSSIANS":

American way of life (just as Orientals could never match Europeans' superior knowledge and its application.) Descriptions of Soviet inefficiency and wastage also feed into this characterisation:

It was a nuclear power plant run by the Marx Brothers... (Elliott, 1987, p. 132)

Our New Embassy — Bungled and Bugged (Barron, 1987, p. 100)

Environmental Determinism

The cruder forms of Orientalism rely heavily on environmental determinism in the creation of incompatible cultures. There are only three significant instances of environmental tropes in my data but I think they merit mention.

The only article entirely devoted to environmental conditions was entitled "Russian Winter" (Feifer, 1984, p. 97-100). Harsh northern Soviet weather is deemed "a prime cause and a symbol of Russia's fate, it molds an attitude towards life" (p. 98). The text takes the importance of climatic influence on Soviets to an even greater extreme:

Thanks at least in part to their climate, Russians perceive the outside world as hostile, and yet enviable too. Going deeper, what is usually shrugged off as 'bad luck' can also be seen as punishment; like handicapped children, Russians feel that they are 'not like the others,' and tend to blame themselves for the stigma and hardship. (p. 100)

Environmental influence in the other two articles is not so deterministic. Instead, description of place appears to be more aesthetic: the landscape is given colour depending on the level of American recognised freedom existing there. In an article on Soviet intervention in the Persian Gulf, Soviet backed North Yemen is described as a "dark and bloody land" (Reed, 1980, p. 63), whereas Saudia Arabia is placed next to the "sun-sparkled Persian Gulf" (p. 65). Towns in the Baltic states struggling for freedom against "the Kremlin Goliath" are "graceful and pleasing in contrast to the drabness and sameness of most Soviet cities" (Evans and Novak, 1990, p. 127-37).

A Soviet 'Orient'?

Although much of the RD's Soviet discourse can be deconstructed neatly by the discourses unveiled in Said's work on the Orient, there are important deviations. The goal of Said's work was to explore the power relations involved in the construction and rise to hegemony of particular discourses rather than attempting to replace the Orientalists' discourse with

his own. His work, in other words, was concerned with access to power. Orientals have had relatively little power in their relations with Europe and thus their discourses were easily suppressed. Herein lies the great difference between Said's Orient and the Other in this study. The Soviets have traditionally had next to no access to the dominant discourses in America, particularly in a publication such as the *RD*, but it would be impossible to suggest that the USSR lacks power. Moreover, although in earlier periods Islamic societies were perceived as posing a mysterious and threatening presence, in the nineteenth century the European Orient was more or less congruent with colonial extension and, by implication, European knowledge systems. In contrast, the Soviet Other is 'contained' within a territory which has been, until recently, a somewhat grey area in Western knowledge systems and thus the possibility of power formation through knowledge has been limited. This lack of knowledge presents a very threatening presence. I will now turn to a discussion of the discourses relating to evil and strength which form the difference between these discursive fields.

Evilness and Threatening Behavior

Integral to their depiction as somehow inherently different from Americans, is the *RD*'s Othering of the Soviets by way of their threatening behavior and evilness. Indeed, this discourse was invoked more than twice as often as any of the others examined in this study. In its weakest form, this discourse presents the Soviets as uncompromising and always ready to take advantage of unsuspecting Americans who are striving to play the game by its rules:

The Soviets do not believe in compromise. There is no Russian equivalent to the root word of the English 'compromise.' The Soviets have adopted our word, but not embraced our meaning. The search for a reasonable middle ground of agreement, the heart of the Western sense of negotiation, is foreign to them. Soviet negotiators regard compromise as a sign of weakness. (Rowny, 1981, p. 67)

However, this discourse is usually employed in a more extreme version leaving the reader with little chance to question the intentions of the Soviet Union towards innocent America:

There are only two major powers in the world today, and the Soviets keep doing the one thing they do well, which is to build military forces. (Koster, 1983, p. 95)

The Soviet Union has created a massive nuclear stockpile that seems to be designed for the destruction of the United States, rather than as a deterrent to an attack on the USSR. (Jastrow, 1986, p. 78)

The Russian Knife at America's Throat. (Bennett and Mallin, 1982, p. 88)

Metaphors evoking popular fixed-form geopolitical models also enforce the concept of a threatening presence in the USSR: the texts are littered with terms such as "containment," "imperialism" and "expansionism." It is suggested that if the US let up pressure upon the Soviet borders Europe would automatically fall:

If we allow the nuclear balance to tip strongly in Moscow's favor, Western Europe will inevitably be brought under predominantly Soviet influence. (Griffith, 1980, p. 149)

Sexuality and Gender

Intertwined with, and supporting, discourses of evilness and threatening behaviour are those concerning sexuality and gender. Said describes Europe's Orient as very highly sexualised. Sexual activity, especially in deviant forms, has been a prominent element of many Orientalist discourses. There has, in contrast, been only one article in the *RD* in the decade studied which has focused on Soviet sexuality. Entitled "Is There Sex in Russia?" (Popovsky, 1982, p. 134-8), the article's tone suggests the answer is 'no', that state repression has undermined sexual activity to such an extent that declining birth rates have forced the state into the role of Cupid (although, of course, "...the Soviet Cupid... brandishes the iron fist of authoritarianism") (p. 137). However, the article leaves the reader with a message more familiar to an Orientalist-type definition of Other sexual appetites:

To some people in a democratic society, the powerful taboos of a totalitarian state may seem a panacea for raging sexual folly. But illnesses that are covered up tend to rage even stronger and the prognosis grows more dire. (p. 138)

The gendering of the USSR seems to be the opposite to that of the Orient. *RD* articles do not evoke the West's penetration or subjugation of its Other. Instead the Soviet Union is pictured as the aggressor or the forceful masculine courter. One article speaks of a "flirtation with Moscow" (Reed, 1980, p. 65), another of "a garrison state constantly flexing its military muscle" (Bennett, 1989, p. 102).

At times, however, it seems that the Soviets are not human at all. Images of the Soviet "bear" are not infrequent and one article described a Soviet bugging operation as an "electronic zoo" (Barron, 1989, p. 193). Frankenstein's monster is evoked when one text refers to the USSR as "the huge, ill-concieved creation of some mad scientist" (Bennett, 1989, p. 99).

The 'Evil Empire' —Almost an American Creation?

Said states that the Orient was *almost* a European creation. Is the RD discourse of the Soviet Union just one amongst many equally valid interpretations of this country? Or, in the spirit of Said's statement, is there something beyond the discourse; does the success of the RD discourse lie in its resonance with information that readers have gleaned from other sources?

It is unlikely in this communications age that many readers gain all their international information from the RD. This text cannot be viewed in isolation as readers will bring interpretations from other texts (including television, newspapers, political speeches and so on) to their reading of the RD. There is a consensus on many 'facts' related to the international situation and the ultimate authority of the body, violated by torture and war, testifies to the ontological reality of some aggressive actions. RD's Othering of the Soviet Union is thus better seen, like Orientalism, as "a set of constraints on and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine" (Said, 1979, p. 42). The RD's USSR is therefore not arbitrary but instead an intertextual frame of reference that is created for its readers through which to interpret any empirical evidence which comes to light. This helps to explain, therefore, how it is that the RD's discourses on the USSR have taken so long to integrate the notion of change in that country. Although the discourses are slowly evolving, they possess a high degree of inertia; the process of discourse change (let alone changes in the broader discursive field of the Other) is a slow one because of the self-perpetuating nature of such descriptions. This inertia is rooted within the *purpose* of RD's discursive field of Soviet Otherness. I would like to conclude with an examination of the role the RD projects for itself, and how the discourses it draws upon are manipulated to this end as the Soviet Union changes.

Conclusion: The Reader's Digest as Guardian of American Morals

Extremes aside, cautious people favor defense. The less we spend on defense, the greater the risk of war. (Koster, 1983, p. 91)

'Cautious people' read RD. This magazine projects an old-fashioned 'common sense' account of world events. This view produces one more discourse which, I would argue, both draws upon and shapes the other discourses described above in order to facilitate the RD's mission: a discourse of morality. I would like to suggest that this moral discourse stems from the RD's concern to represent the US as the benevolent hegemon. This view invokes a "national exceptionalism" (Agnew, 1987, p. 8) which by destiny *has* to spread American ideals and institutions throughout the post-war world order which it shaped. Agnew (1987) traces this back to the very formation

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of the US as a nation-state where the nature of expansion into America and its release from colonialism has placed US ideology within a spatially abstract concept of 'homeland of liberty' rather than within the finite territorial bounds of nation-state. It is this Otherness, the USSR cannot measure up - it is "a moral void" (Barron, 1983, p. 214).

The time period covered by this study was one of apparent great change in the Soviet Union. The new 'openness' of glasnost produced a challenge to traditional definitions of Soviet immorality. The RD has reacted in two ways to this change, each of which is used to create an unsettling possible future world-order. Both reactions expose the RD's claim to the moral high ground of US paternalistic hegemony. First, by prioritizing the discourse of timelessness, the RD projects the idea of the inability of the Soviet Union to change:

Even if reforms were broadened substantially, the Soviet Union would remain a totalitarian dictatorship. (Barnes, 1988, p. 89)

A more extreme version of this is the suggestion that Gorbachev's reforms are no different from those policies introduced by Lenin. The RD does not hold out bright hopes for the USSR to become more like America:

Gorbachev may...be dooming his best intentions by perpetuating the very ideological-political forces that directly led to Stalinism. (Bennett, 1989, p. 103)

Secondly, and on the surface perhaps more curious, is a fear of the apparent morality of Gorbachev's reforms *per se*. As highlighted above, the RD is highly sceptical of the authenticity of Soviet change and fears the influence of "too many Gorbachev boosters" (Nixon in Barnes, 1988, p. 89) in the West. Widespread acceptance of Gorbachev's project has become the new threat to American moral hegemony:

Gorbachev's nuclear-weapon-free-world proposal was only an attempt to woo public opinion in the west. (Adelman, 1989, p. 69)

His goal, the most ambitious ever sought by a Soviet leader, has profound meaning for the Western alliance. It is nothing less than achieving, in the eyes of the world, full moral equivalence with the United States (Rosenthal, 1988, p. 71)

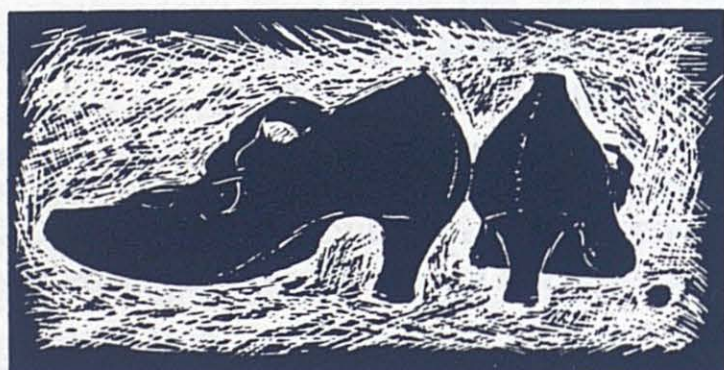
This, it is implied, will all be done without changing the fundamentals of the Soviet system, but, it is feared, only those people who have read the RD know this.

The RD's discursive field of Soviet Otherness is premised upon the moral distancing of the two superpowers — if the two begin to converge, the

logocentric dualism of Self and Other will collapse and the RD's explanatory framework must change significantly to maintain legitimacy:

It is hugely important to Moscow that the world believe there is no great difference between us. (Rosenthal, 1988, p. 72)

... is hugely important to *The Reader's Digest*, and traditional, conservative values of American hegemonic 'benevolence', that they do not.



APPENDIX : Discourses Implicit in The Reader's Digest Articles (by topic)

	DISCOURSES	NO. OF TIMES INVOKED
A	evil/threatening	51
B	homogeneity	20
C	fixed-form geopolitics	10
D	sexuality/gender	4
E	non-human	6
F	environmental determinism	3
G	timelessness	20
H	degeneration	15
I	irrationality	20
*	American common sense/morality	13
	TOTAL NUMBER OF ARTICLES =	80

"THE RUSSIANS ACTED LIKE THE RUSSIANS":

ARTICLE/ TOPIC	YEAR	DISCOURSE(S)									
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	*
MILITARY											
What Price Superpower	1980	A		C							
Standing Up to the Russian Bear		A		C	D	E					
The Real Stakes in Afghanistan		A		C		E		G			
Russia's Real Target		A			D	F					
Soviet Military Might		A									
Poland's Strike for Freedom	1981	A		C					H		
Ban Whose Bomb?	1982	A			D						
The Russian Knife at America's Throat		A									
Dangerous Myths About Nuclear Arms		A									
What You Should Know About America's Defense	1983	A	B					G		*	
Afghanistan: the Soviet Lesson	1984	A	B								
Poison & Plague: Russia's Secret Terror Weapons		A									
Reducing the Risk of Nuclear War		A									
US Eyes Over Russia	1985	A									
Why We Need 'Star Wars'	1986	A							I		
Agony in Afghanistan		A								*	
Spetsnaz: The Soviet's Sinister Strike Force		A									
Russia's Secret 'Red Shield'		A		C				G			
Hungary's Few Shining Days of Freedom		A	B					G			
Common Sense About Strategic Defense	1988	A		C						*	
Victory in Afghanistan: the Inside Story				C		E					
Brilliant Pebbles: Amazing New Missile Killer	1989	A							I		
UNDERCOVER ACTIVITY											
Is This American a Soviet Spy?	1981	A									
The Spy Who Knew Too Much	1983	A						G	H	*	
Double Agents in a Secret War	1985		B						H		
Why We Are Easy Prey For Spies	1986	A									
A New Kind of Soviet Spying		A									
EXPELLED! How We Ousted 80 Soviet Spies	1987	A									
The Spy Family that Imperiled America		A									
The KGB's Deepest Secret	1988	A							G		
DIPLOMACY											
How Not To Negotiate With the Russians	1981	A	B							I	
What's Happened to US Foreign Policy	1982	A		C							
At Helsinki: Shadows of Yalta	1985									I	
Arms Control: Games Soviets Play	1989	A	B					G		I	
DOMESTIC ISSUES											
The Kremlin Versus the Church	1981		B						G		
Stalin is Still Smiling	1984	A									
Who Really Rules Russia?	1985								H		
Buried Alive: the Plight of Soviet Jews	1986	A									
Lessons From Chernobyl			A	B					G		
Deadly Winds: One Year After Chernobyl	1987		B							I	
Gorbachev: the Man With a Nice Smile & Iron Teeth			A	B					G	*	
Gorbachev's Hidden Agenda	1988	A								*	
Can Gorbachev Last?			A	B					G		
Is Russia Really Changing?			A	C					G	I	

