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Parallels between the U.S. and Russia: The Trump Administration

Cover Page Footnote

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Parallels between the U.S. and Russia: The Trump Administration

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Russia has come up repeatedly in discussions of Donald Trump and the current U.S. administration. In time for the 100th anniversary of the 1917 Russian revolution, this paper aims to describe the importance and interconnectedness of image, information, hegemony, and power by exploring connections between the U.S. and Russia. An interdisciplinary approach drawing from fields such as cultural studies, linguistics, and anthropology will be applied to selected events and actions of the Trump administration. This study provides a method of framing US political events against Russian history and contemporary reality.

The contentious 2016 elections brought U.S.-Russian relations to the forefront of the public imagination. Additionally, some of the Trump Administration's actions have been deemed exceptional. This study will provide a brief insight into Russian history and contemporary politics in order to provide a new perspective on the Trump administration's actions. The importance to a government of mobilizing support, of appearing legitimate, and of hegemony will be established first. Then, the Russian context will be introduced, with a focus on the importance of image and information in Russia, followed by specific actions that the Trump administration has taken. These specific actions include the concern over inauguration crowd size, relationship with media, and the drive for a complete border wall, and their importance will be explained and connected to Russia. Characteristics of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin will also be examined and compared when relevant.

Some key government concepts will be useful when comparing Russia and the US. The ability to mobilize support is a very important concern for any government (Rose et al. 1). Some theories as to why individuals give or withhold support include belief in a government's legitimacy, or a resigned acceptance of choosing the lesser evil (Rose et al. 6). Generally, consent to being governed is the most effective long term, and consent is generated in different ways depending on how democratic the government is perceived to be (Rose et al. 3-4, Lull 52). In many ways, the struggle for support is intrinsically tied into hegemony, to differences of power between parts of society as well as methods of gaining and maintaining that power. Hegemony's effectiveness is closely related to norming, that is, that subordinates "[accept] the dominant ideology as normal reality or common sense" (Lull 51). Gramsci also specifically identified the importance of media in maintaining hegemony (Lull 49), and the media has played important roles in both contemporary Russian and US politics. Russian manipulation of image is a common way of constructing and controlling hegemony so as to both gain support and suppress dissidence.

In 1920's post-revolution Russia, the Bolsheviks wished to present their view of the October Revolution. Several films were commissioned, one of which was Eisenstein's *October*, released in 1928. The film culminates in the storming of the Winter Palace. This fictional recreation acquired the legitimacy of documentary footage, partly due to a lack of other documentary material. *October* was modelled off of a recreation, and due to the transmissibility of film, became *the* recreation. Beyond those that saw the film and were directly impacted, historians and other film makers later used *October* as reference material, and it is safe to say that this dramatized version became the one embedded in the popular imagination (Taylor 92-101; Neidhart 65). This film is indicative of larger Russian ideas regarding image manipulation,

history, and propaganda. Christoph Neidhart states in *Russia's Carnival*, "Russia has a long history of make-believes" (63). The concept of Potemkin villages, of a façade designed to impress or mislead, stems from a story of unknown truth about Catherine the Great and one of her lovers, Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin. Potemkin purportedly ordered the construction of a fake, portable village that was placed along a river route to impress Catherine the Great as she travelled through the region (Neidhart 63). Entire Russian cities can be shown to have Potemkin elements: St. Petersburg presents itself as older than it is through architectural cues, and has historically been used as both a guide for Russian modernization and as a model for how Russia wanted to present itself to foreigners (Neidhart 63). The city of Magnitogorsk's dual purpose as a model of Soviet industrial might and as an actual center of industry resulted in issues where the city's development and productivity was hampered by time pressure and geographical concerns (Neidhart 67, 127; Rowe). While some Marxist thinkers (Neidhart 64) found reliance on image over substance to be highly distasteful, the Russian communist system relied heavily on projecting the image that it functions well (Neidhart 64). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was initial hope for the democratization of Russia. However, the transition was fraught with problems, and the 1990's were known as a period of chaos. At the end of the 90's, Vladimir Putin arrived offering security after nearly a decade of troubled times. Relatively unknown by the masses, he and his team commissioned a biography. Given how unknown he was, this left something of a blank slate, and is an early example of Putin attempting to control his own image for political gains. As Hill and Gaddy also state in *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, referring to Putin's biography, "This story offers a classic case of Putin and his team imparting and spinning information in a confusing manner so that it can be interpreted in different ways" (Hill and Gaddy 13). One of Putin's more famous and visible quirks are his

publicity events. Putin is portrayed in these scenes as being a conservationist, a biker, an explorer, a sportsman, and more. These events provide several advantages: primarily “a sense of commonality and unity” (Hill and Gaddy 16) through recognition of different walks of life and ambiguity as to Putin’s true character (Hill and Gaddy 13, 16-17).

History is also very important to both Putin and his administration, “Throughout his time in office, Putin has actively deployed his own and his team’s interpretations of Russian history to reinforce policy positions and frame key events. Putin has recognized the power of history both to accomplish his and the state’s goals and to cloak himself and the Russian state with an additional mantle of legitimacy” (Hill and Gaddy 63). He also “asserted in biographical interviews that one of his main skills is to get people . . . to see him as what they want him to be, not what he really is” (Hill and Gaddy 5) and that he “deliberately usurped the agendas of nationalist and religiously motivated political groups that could provide alternative means for public mobilization” (Hill and Gaddy 6). These two quotes help to show Putin’s effective use of image and information. From Petersburg to Putin, these examples have ranged from the 18th to the 21st century of Russia. While manipulation of appearances is not unique to Russia, it has undeniably played many important roles there.

Shifting from Russian ideas to the current events in the US, interest in inauguration crowd size begins early with a tweet by President Trump. On December 16, 2016, Trump states that he would like an “all time record” (@realDonaldTrump). After the inauguration occurred on January 20, 2017, the January 21st White House press conference focused on inauguration crowd size. The White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer stated at this conference, “That was the largest audience to witness an inauguration, period” and that “photographs of the inaugural proceedings were intentionally framed in a way . . . to minimize the enormous support that had

gathered” (The White House). This marked an official response to media and tweet coverage stating that the inauguration crowd size was lower than expected, and was followed up on the 23rd when Spicer reaffirmed that it was the “largest audience witnessed in person and around the globe” (CBS, “Transcript”). In the examination “Donald Trump had biggest inaugural crowd ever? Metrics don't show it” by Linda Qiu for Politifact, Sean Spicer’s evidence is shown to be “misleading or inaccurate” (Qiu, par. 3). These events are made more interesting by Donald Trump’s decision to place a panoramic photo of his inauguration in the press hall (@realDonaldTrump; Nelson). In his first interview since taking the oath of office, he also pauses and takes time to discuss the picture with the reporter (ABC, “The White House Interview”).

The Trump administration’s statements could have been an attempt to rewrite reality to be perceived as more legitimate, in the vein of the Bolshevik’s *October*. If this was indeed the case, it likely failed. 21st century US is not the same as early 20th century Russia; a government must contend with a greatly increased flow of information, as well as a different and increased awareness from the public. Russia also is aware of this, and has developed their own methods to account for the 21st century context. Roman Skaskiw wrote an article published just prior to the changeover from the Obama to the Trump administration, “9 Lessons of Russian Propaganda.” In it, Skaskiw discusses some of his experiences of contemporary Russian propaganda after moving to Ukraine. In drawing a comparison between the US and Russia he states: “The West isn't completely innocent when it comes to truth telling, but while Western propaganda attempts to construct a narrative and convince people of it, Russia propaganda often seems to strive for contradiction and dissonance” (Skaskiw, par). However, when examining the 9 lessons, including “destroy and ridicule the idea of truth” “pollute the information space”¹ and “move the

conversation,” they can very easily read as a playbook for the current US administration, suggesting that while there are undoubtedly differences between Russia and “The West,” there are also similarities, and some of those differences lessened recently.

The information flow allowed by the internet and by widespread camera usage with mobile phones means that situations in which there is a complete lack of documentary evidence are rare. An official line must compete and be compared to not only media outlets, but individuals with the aforementioned mobile phones. Posted footage from these phones on social media can be a powerful way to probe inconsistencies in a story. Trump is not ignorant of this difference, he himself is known for heavily using Twitter. His social media usage can be seen as bypassing mainstream media outlets to directly reach out to his base and court their continued support. The language of his tweets is also further evidence of his “visually-oriented, gesturally-rich style” (Hodges, par. 2). Whether in his tweets or in his statements in front of crowds of people, his use of language is crafted “consciously or not” (Flitter) such that “supporters can tailor his statements to their own beliefs” (Flitter). Aldous Huxley stated in “Notes on Propaganda” in *Harper’s Magazine*, “propaganda is effective, it would seem, only upon those who are already partly or entirely convinced of its truth.” His language usage and the nature of propaganda explain how fully rewriting history is unnecessary, Trump’s base doesn’t need further convincing so much as reinforcing. Russia takes different and more aggressive approaches to using the internet to maintain hegemony and support. Paid commentators influence online content and thus pollute and direct what is accessible by Russians (Freedom house, “Country Report: Russia 2016”; Skaskiw). Public awareness has also changed: Erwin Fellows states in his article *‘Propaganda:’ History of a Word*, “Accompanying this recognition and acceptance [of propaganda], however, is an increasing awareness of the techniques used to

influence opinion and an indifference toward the content communicated“ (Fellows 189). While Fellow’s argument wrote this half a century ago, it is still relevant today. In the early 1900’s, directed propaganda, and indeed the word propaganda itself, were both still novel (Fellows). However, awareness and indifference is not always a problem for effective propaganda. Indifference towards propaganda can bleed over into indifference for news and information as a whole, and this is part of Russian strategy (Skaskiw) and of post-truth Trump administration tactics. While rewriting history might not be feasible in the short term, there is more to the propaganda game. Ambiguity leads to room to maneuver, confusion can lead to frustration and exhaustion,² and what might be ambiguous and confusing to one is reassuring to the devout follower.

In addition to the crowd panorama in the West Wing, Trump hung a portrait of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office. Evoking Jackson’s populist ties was likely very intentional, either by Donald Trump or by an aide or team member. In Russia, “Putin’s antechamber in the Kremlin was adorned with busts and portraits of the most celebrated Russian tsars” (Hill and Gaddy 66-67). Putin has a strong history background (Hill and Gaddy 63-75) and is known/purported to be a heavy reader, primarily of Russian history. Trump is not an avid reader and prefers television (Megyn Kelly Presents; Haberman). Regardless, these displays are a simple, subtle, and non-controversial method of presenting their respective administrations as legitimate by invoking image and historical ties.

Trump has benefited extensively from traditional media coverage (Uberti; Patterson; Confessore and Yourish), as he is particularly talented in taking advantage of it (Patterson). Some of his understanding of the media likely comes from his time on *The Apprentice*, where Trump was the host for 11 years. In “The Hands of Donald Trump” by Hall, Goldstein, and

Ingram, Trump's business empire interests are described as all broadly appealing to spectacle, and Trump himself as having used the spectacle of his political campaigning to drive him to victory. Trump has also been described as "shrewd" and "charming" (Kruse), and is known for very effective image management; he arguably "managed his image more effectively than he has managed his interests (Kruse). In a quotation from Schwarz and Trump's book *The Art of the Deal*, "I play to people's fantasies . . . People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It's an innocent form of exaggeration—and it's a very effective form of promotion" (qtd. in Hodges, par. 7). Also note that *The Art of the Deal* and other books from Donald Trump utilized "co-" writers or ghostwriters, and that these cowriters are responsible in part for aspects of Trump's image and portrayal (Mayer). Part of Trump's appeal also lies in his status as an outsider, as a non-career politician purportedly uniquely suited to "draining the swamp" that represents the status quo. Remember that Putin, too, has made image management a crucial part of his political strategy, and part of Putin's appeal and mentality stems from his Outsider status (Hill and Gaddy 106-131). While Putin might have pointed to his publicity stunts as a way of promoting "commonality and unity" (Hill and Gaddy 16), Trump prefers rallies, and is continuing to hold them even after taking office. Trump claimed at an Ohio rally that "I've always brought people together... We are going to bring our country together, all of our country. We're going to find common ground, and we will get the job done properly" (qtd. in Johnson and Wagner), suggesting that he wants to appeal to this goal. However, this sentiment and similar sentiment in his inauguration address can also be interpreted as a further contribution to an incoherent "reality" (Kakutani).

While Trump has benefited from media coverage, he and his administration have gone out of their way to express a distaste for them, going so far as to call them “the enemy of the American people” (@realDonaldTrump). This prompts comparisons to early Soviet Russia, where being labeled as a *vrag naroda*, or enemy of the people, was often a death sentence. After the death of Stalin, it fell out of use given its charged nature and a denunciation of the term by Nikita Khrushchev (Higgins, par. 1-4). The granddaughter of Nikita Khrushchev, Nina Khrushchev, observed that “the language of ‘...state nationalism is always the same regardless of the country, and no nation is exempt’” (qtd. in Higgins, par. 8). Beyond the language connection, Russia has seen expansions and contractions of media freedom throughout its history. Prior to the communist revolution, Russia had a flourishing media culture, “there were fourteen thousand newspapers and magazines in Russia...which reflected every shade of political, philosophical, and artistic opinion” (Massey 450). In the Soviet era, until the era of Perestroika, media was restricted. From Perestroika to Putin’s first term as president, media saw a relaxation on restrictions. Upon assuming his position as president, Putin quickly recognized the importance of media control, and through legislation, acquisitions, and fear (Rose et al. 47-48; Freedom House, “Country Report: Russia 2003”), helped establish Russia’s “not-free” media status from 2003 to the present day. Trump called for changes to libel laws during campaigning, and his administration confirmed after his victory that they were considering it (Gold and Gass; @realDonaldTrump; ABC, “Transcript”). The US has traditionally been a bastion of media freedom, however, Freedom House expresses concern about the near-future prospects of media globally, largely due to rhetoric of the Trump administration (“Freedom of the Press 2017”).

Russian manipulation of architecture both large and small can also be connected with the Trump administration’s push for the additional construction to the border wall. Beyond just

fulfilling promises made to Trump's base, the wall is a large scale, expensive, and visible project that has the potential to symbolize Trump's ability to get things done and keep his promises. It's advertised functions center around protecting Americans from undesired flow of people and things. Reece Jones suggests in "Why Build a Border Wall?" that walls reify the concept of borders and are more symbolic, while border enforcement agents play the practical enforcement rule (70). The Trump administration has coupled its push for a wall with a push for more employees, however, the overall costs for the wall dwarf the costs surrounding the 15,000 new hires called for (Kakaes; The White House, "President Trump is Delivering on Immigration..."). This has been combined by calls for cuts to the US Coast Guard (Coast Guard News), an agency with a proven anti-smuggling track record on the southern border, and other national security related institutions (Lamothe et al.). In terms of whether or not the wall will be effective, Carter and Poast both suggest in "Why Do States Build Walls: Political Economy, Security, and Border Stability:" "In sum, unless by 'good fences' we quite unrealistically mean 'perfect fences' ... 'good fences' may not make good neighbors" (33). Carter and Poast also acknowledge that there has been no systematic study to their knowledge as to whether or not a wall is an effective strategy (32), and others suggest that it will be ineffectual (Dear). A White House press release quotes a study as justification for tougher immigration policy, however, the conclusion of that study is that immigration provides a net benefit (The White House, "President Trump is Delivering on Immigration..."; National Academies of S. E. & M. et al.). Taken together, the building of the wall would be a triumph of form over function.

From the Russian side of things, the most famous wall was likely the Berlin wall. The context of the Berlin wall was very different, as it was designed to keep people in. However, it could be argued that it was both effective at its job and effective as a physical manifestation of

the iron curtain. It is also easy to say that the wall was a symbol of pain and of repression for many people, and it should not be romanticized.

Often when examining events, viewing it from a different perspective is useful. These comparisons between Russia and the US can provide one such perspective. Additionally, claiming that an individual who has gone so far as to gain office is simply incompetent or insane (as is often popular with leaders such as Putin, Trump, and Kim Jong-un) is unwise³. Each got to their position somehow, and it is safer to overestimate someone rather than underestimate. Furthermore, if a leader truly appears to be lacking in one aspect or another, looking into who they surround themselves with and how they got to their position may be enlightening; and thus, comparing the dynamics of Trump, Bannon, and Pence to Medvedev as president and Putin's time as Prime Minister may prove interesting. Further research may also look into comparisons between Russian oligarchical systems and US ones, particularly in regard to business elites influencing and controlling policy. A comparison of US voter interests to Russian via pollsters or other methods is one final area of interest beyond the scope of this paper. Finally, the work of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin directly underpins Neidhart's *Russia's Carnival*, which significantly inspired this paper and is used extensively in describing Russia. It is also mentioned in Hall et al. and Hodge's works. These commonalities suggest that Bakhtin's work may hold additional insight into America post-Trump and is worth a look. Pulling from a relatively limited selection of events tied to Trump and Putin's administrations, this article's description of the importance of and connections between image, information, hegemony, and power applies to other events past, present, and almost certainly future in the U.S. and Russia.

Notes

- (1) Numerous news articles about “What happened in Sweden” and “The Bowling Green, Kentucky terrorist attack” provide specific examples of “polluting the information space.”
- (2) See Michiko Kakutani’s “Donald Trump's Chilling Language, and the Fearsome Power of Words” for more.
- (3) For more on the potential mental instability of Trump, see the BBC’s “Trump's mental health debate: What is it about?” and Sharon Begley’s “Trump wasn’t always so linguistically challenged. What could explain the change?” on STAT. Note that these articles also acknowledge the controversial nature of arm-chair diagnoses, and of the potential for the language to be strategic.

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