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American Nightmare:  
Images of Brainwashing, Thought Control and  
Terror in Soviet Russia

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## Introduction

*Like the white dog before the phonograph, they hear only the "master's voice."*

- George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," 1947 (574)

During the earliest and most frigid years of the Cold War, 1947-1953, the overwhelming majority of America's media and public opinion promoted the idea that Soviet society was something close to a complete "dystopia." Life in the land of Stalin was said to be fraught with terror, stifling conformity, mental and physical regimentation, and, for many, slavery and extermination. For Americans, no charges concerning the "cradle to grave" control over Soviet citizens seemed too outlandish or horrifying to be believed. In fact, by 1947, the thought of being made subject to the "ghoulish" rule of the Kremlin had become *the* American nightmare.

The obsessive "better dead than red" mentality which pervaded this era is a curious phenomenon. The United States emerged victorious from the Second World War with half the gross national product of the planet, an enormous newly-built military establishment, and a public prepared for a period of sustained economic expansion. What cause could there be for concern in such happy circumstance? Where was the setting for an "age of anxiety," an intense fear and loathing for its recent wartime ally? To be sure, some of the ghastly tales concerning life in the USSR had considerable foundation in fact, but why were such stories so pervasive, so sensationalized and (except on the political left) so completely one-sided?

Previous studies of American anti-Soviet sentiment have focused primarily on American perceptions and fears concerning the Soviet external threat or on hostility toward domestic Communism (the amount of material on McCarthyism alone could fill a

small library). This essay will take a somewhat different approach by examining Americans' most commonly held perception of day-to-day life in the USSR: that modern methods of thought control and terror had transformed the Russian people into an enslaved mob of subservient, dull, and militaristic robots. To present this dominant image of life in Stalin's Russia and to demonstrate its pervasiveness, I will draw on mass-circulation periodicals, movies, television programs, popular literature, widely-read writings of professionals in various fields, the statements of those who influenced domestic opinion and foreign policy, and public opinion polls. These sources reveal identifiable "nightmare" themes that help explain America's pervasive anti-Communism during the early postwar period. Most notably, evidence suggests that Americans were generally much less optimistic about the future of their own society than many scholars have assumed<sup>1</sup>, and that the nation's obsessive, paranoiac anti-Soviet imagery was in large part a product of *domestic* problems and anxieties that pre-occupied the American people in the late 1940s.

### **Historical Background**

Prior to the onset of the Cold War, American attitudes toward Soviet Russia ranged from intense hostility, especially following the 1917 Revolution and Stalin's purges of the 1930's, to a cautiously friendly 'marriage of convenience' during World War II. Both traditional American culture and contemporary social tensions were crucial in fanning the flames of the early anti-Soviet sentiment. Individualism, regarded as the most basic of American values—along with the accompanying concern for civil liberties and property rights—was disdained by the Reds in Moscow who emphasized collective rather than individual action. Still, as Robin Fillmore writes in her recent dissertation, *Transforming the "Enemy"*, "the Soviet Union did not emerge from World War II as a

ready-made enemy of the United States. The wartime ally was reconstructed over a period of years.... As a symbol for the Soviet regime, war-time Stalin was [initially] reconstructed as a 'good guy' in the fight against Hitler" (Fillmore 10).

As the war's end drew nearer, however, tensions increasingly replaced the cordiality of this alliance of expediency, and the World War II image of the "brave Russians" again began to sour. In April 1945, President Roosevelt's successor, Harry Truman, quickly demonstrated a tougher policy in dealing with the Soviets. At the Potsdam Conference in July, Truman and Stalin exchanged verbal blows over Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, where the Russians soon imposed undemocratic pro-Soviet governments in Poland, Rumania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, and (with Tito's assistance) Yugoslavia. The temporary division of Germany following Hitler's defeat looked more and more permanent as the victors failed to agree on how to handle the question of reparations. In February 1946, Stalin spoke of an irreconcilable conflict between the world's Communist and Capitalist nations, and three months later, in Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill spoke of an "iron curtain" across Central Europe. The opening guns of the Cold War had fired.

Within a year and a half after the end of World War II, the harsh realities of the postwar world shattered Americans' optimistic wartime image of the Russians; in this milieu, the United States opted for a "get tough" policy of active resistance to the ambitions of its rival superpower. On March 12, 1947, President Truman went before a joint session of Congress to promulgate the Truman Doctrine which officially acknowledged Washington's new containment policy and formalized the Cold War.

Not surprisingly, negative attitudes from previous decades burst forth once again. Most prominent among these was the image of Soviet life as similar to a vast concentration camp in which the will of the individual had been totally crushed as the

Russian people were reduced to mere slaves of a few fanatical masters. During the early postwar period, however, this vision became much more virulent and widespread and was joined by a host of new characterizations of life under Stalin—significantly different in content from those of the past.

### **“The Country of the Blind”**

Americans became increasingly convinced that in the USSR, as nowhere else in history, the state had taken *everything* under its control. This was said to be the result of a system which placed society ahead of the individual. Using twentieth-century technology to full advantage, Stalin and the Politburo were charged with replacing the Government in Russia with a “machine” which “instinctively [thought] in terms of force,” to smash opposition, build its own power base and generally “push people around” (Atkinson 85). This brutal state apparatus was widely viewed as having gone so far that it had gained almost complete control not only of human actions, but of human *thoughts* as well (Counts and Lodge 158).

After World War II, publications on Russian life devoted unprecedented attention to the alleged measures taken by Soviet leaders to establish mind control over their subjects. As more and more Americans were discovering in magazines such as *Reader’s Digest*, *Time*, *Life* and *Collier’s*, all forms of mass communication in the USSR fell under the “absolute control” of the Kremlin and the Communist Party. The Soviet Ministry of Propaganda and Agitation, Howard Metz explained, ran everything, including radio and television, newspaper, journal and book publishing, the film industry, and the fine arts. Each sector or level of this Ministry, throughout the USSR, was closely scrutinized by the next higher party unit until the top of the pyramid was reached at the Central Administration. Allegedly, the informer, the government official, the Ministry of

Internal Affairs (MVD) agent, and the party member all worked together with great effectiveness to ensure purity in any areas of communication which had not been sanitized ahead of time by the Ministry. At every stage, Americans reported, those responsible had to keep their eyes focused on Joseph Stalin and such “Politburo pundits” as Molotov and Zhadnov as “the final authority on everything” (Metz and Thomson 199, 203, 209). Punishments of job loss, public disgrace, forced labor, exile, or death were said to have been dished out to deviants (Inkeles 36-37).

By mid-century, Americans had come to view the Soviet “octopus” of mind control as so vast and all-embracing that it had achieved (or nearly achieved) its alleged goal of turning the Soviet people into hordes of absolute conformists willing to bend to the Leader’s every order. This was a theme repeated over and over again in American media and popular culture.

On his immensely popular early fifties television program *Life Is Worth Living*—“sponsored by God” and by the Admiral Corporation (and watched by 20 to 25 million viewers each week)—Bishop Fulton J. Sheen labeled the root cause of this regimentation as the Soviet system’s absolute suffocation of liberty. “Liberty for them exists only when the citizens desire what the state desires, and do what the dictators order, and think only what the Party thinks,” he said. “Such is the liberty of dogs under the leash of their masters, and the liberty of cuckoos in cuckoo clocks, or the liberty of prisoners in prison” (Sheen quoted in MacDonald 129).

American media sources frequently noted that well over one million personnel made up the Soviet political police, the MVD. This organization, rated as “the best housed, fed and clothed forces in the Union,” was also portrayed as the most wicked. Feared by even high Soviet officials, the MVD—with its hidden microphones, torture chambers, and concentration camps—recognized no inalienable human rights and

answered to no one but the top Kremlin hierarchy. “Its sleuths infiltrate the domestic population at every angle,” insisted one of the reports, “from the topside down into each local party segmentation, armed unit, factory, office, collective farm and apartment and more than possibly one’s own family.” Indeed, according to *Collier’s*, every five Russian families had at least one agent watching them day and night. In an atmosphere that was “always tense and cautious” people were afraid even to talk to one another. “The helpless masses”, so the account went, never knew which of the neighbors might turn out to be an informer, for everyday somebody would be arrested “to vanish into the unknown” (“Preview” in *Collier’s* 38). The same journal explained that 22,000,000 Russians (equivalent to more than half the number of adult males living in the USSR in 1950) had been condemned to Nazi-like slave camps (Nevins 80). And *Reader’s Digest* stated that citizens were subjected to these “living hells” for *any* minor aberration—including “forgetting to salt the food” or “selling lemonade” (Eastman 140-141). As one “witness” in Eastern Europe told *America* magazine in 1947: “More and more the people I know are disappearing. They have heard the knock on the door at night” (Drake 601).

Joanne P. Sharp’s study *Condensing the Cold War: Reader’s Digest and American Identity* (2000), finds that during the twentieth century, the number of *Digest* articles about the Soviet Union or communism reached a peak in the 1950-1953 period (180, or more than six times the number appearing in the pre-1946 issues) and that the picture presented after the end of World War II was much more “uniformly negative” than at earlier times (84-85). Sharp writes that characterizations of the Russian people evoked ugliness, slavery, mechanization, or dullness (85, 101). Soviet women were described in the *Digest’s* pages as having a “plodding submissiveness, more animal-like than human” and as “a sexless lot, indistinguishable from sacks of cement, flour or rags” (Kirk 143). General Malenkov, meanwhile, was portrayed as fat, having an “extremely

repulsive” face and, ultimately, as the “machine that walks like a man” (Sharp 101). In the USSR, the *Digest* reported with regularity, “there is no room... for mental independence. The only way to survive is to conform” (Alexiev 15). These portrayals are especially significant given that the *Digest* was the highest-circulation general-interest magazine in the United States (Sharp xiv).

The Bowman Gum Company played its part in the Cold War by releasing “Fight the Red Menace” trading cards in 1951. Along with the gum, when American kids opened a package they found cards displaying hideous portraits of the Kremlin hierarchy, their faces painted green, sketches of the secret police arresting terrified Russian families, and of Soviet slave labor camps. Card #72 “Olga and Ivan” read:

A knock at the door—and the typical Russian family fears the worst. They are told where to work, where to live and what subjects they must master at school. Their daily routine insists on absolute obedience to their leaders and following Communist doctrine. A simple anti-communist remark by anyone of them could result in a visit by the police. An explanation will be demanded. Prison without fair trial or appeal faces all. This is life under Communism! FIGHT THE RED MENACE! (Barson and Heller 110-11)

“All over the world,” another card explained, “agents of the Red Menace seek chances to make trouble. They even fool well-meaning people into helping them do their dirty work” (Buckingham 73). Throughout the popular media, the Soviets were typically portrayed as militant, deceitful and cruel. They stirred up revolutions, craved power and lived in a godless, gray, regimented world. Worst of all, these miserable Russians intended to remake the rest of the planet in their own dismal image.

The degree to which the Russian-as-submissive-robot image had entrenched itself in the American mind was demonstrated in a 1948 American Legion “docudrama” portraying the Soviet takeover of a Mid-Western town. Following a cartoon invasion of

Europe by goose-stepping Red Army soldiers, a narrator breaks in to describe footage of even more ominous developments:

Ah, but this is Europe you say? But let's see what can happen elsewhere, in say the small town of Mosinee, Wisconsin. [We see a tranquil street scene]. Peaceful, isn't it? But the Red trenchant falls and the chief of police is hustled off to jail. Next, public utilities are seized by fifth columnists. Watch carefully what happens to an editor who operates under a free press. He goes to jail too and his newspaper is confiscated—exit freedom of thought. Yes, this is life under the Soviet form of government.

We are then shown another series of clips with now stone-faced citizens of Mosinee raising a Red (“Soviet States of America”) Star and portrait of Stalin over city hall, standing in soup lines, and marching mechanically down the town’s streets carrying “Stalin is The Leader” and “The Communist Party is the Only Party” signs—their right arms raised in obedient salute. Utterly drained of their humanity, the poor Mosinians look as if they would be better off dead (except perhaps for one woman who somehow managed to hang on to her mink stole and jewelry). In an emotionally-charged voice, the narrator signs off with a warning: “The little town of Mosinee made this experiment for 24 hours, a public service to ALL America. It can't happen here? Well, this is what it looks like....IF IT SHOULD!”<sup>2</sup>(*The Atomic Café*).

Whether described as “robots,” “cogs,” “cannon fodder,” “atoms,” or “masses with a capital M,” to most Americans the Russian people seemed fated to be stripped of their identities, and the Soviet Union as a whole reduced to a regimented “country of the blind.”

At the movies, the obsession with Soviet-like conformity and regimentation was reflected in the slew of alien invasion, “we’ll-all-be-zombies” films of the early 1950’s. These two-hour flirtations with doom featured Martians, sea monsters, and giant insects

serving as direct stand-ins for Communists. Cold, calculating and completely lacking in emotion, these creatures showed the same robot-like traits that were said to plague Stalin's subjects and, as the movies delighted in pointing out, Americans were vulnerable to them (Savage 37).

*The Thing from Another World* (1951), *Them!* (1954), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are prominent examples of the numerous anti-communist/anti-conformist films of the pod and blob variety. *The Thing* is a giant man-eating creature resembling a carrot that crash lands at the North Pole in a flying saucer and before long is devouring men and dogs as it reproduces at will. While the *Thing* appears to be a part of the natural world, a kind of super-vegetable, film historian Peter Biskind has pointed out that its behavior more resembles that of a robot than an animal. Like a machine, the *Thing* feels no pain, has no emotions, and is not restrained by moral principles. *Them!*, one of Warner Brothers highest grossing movies of 1954, features giant homicidal ants that run amok in the Los Angeles sewer system. A scientist explains that "ants are savage, ruthless, and courageous fighters...the only creatures on earth aside from man who make war....Chronic aggressors, they make slaves of those they can't kill." It is also repeated that the ingenious ants (like Martians) have an unsettling talent for "social organization." If ants are like humans it is obvious which people Americans regarded as the most antlike. (Though filmed in black and white, the theatrical release featured a technicolor opening title, the word "Them!", hurtled towards the audience in vibrant Commie-red.) The political allegory of *Them!*, "anty-Communism," is carried a step further in the nightmarish *Invaders from Mars* (1953). This is the story of a small boy who knows that Martians are kidnapping prominent citizens and implanting crystals in their brains which will drive them to commit treasonous acts. The Martians and the programmed Earthlings are all under the control

of the same leader—a disembodied silver head inside a plastic fish bowl who gives orders like a commissar—they are “slaves to his will.” Worst of all, by assuming human form, the clever Martians are insidiously normal; like real Reds, the spaced-out folks must be ferreted out! In *Body Snatchers*, released three years later, humans actually become “hosts to an alien form of life.” Extra-terrestrial plant pods want “not just our bodies but our minds,” so the body snatchers are “taking us over cell by cell” (Sayre 201). The Thing, the ants, the Martians and the pods multiply rapidly. The beings they create are interchangeable members of a mechanistic mass society; devoid or robbed of their souls they lack any sense of emotion or stamp of individuality. Significantly, the alien creatures are also technologically advanced, except for the giant ants which we learn are the mutant by-products of atomic testing. They are all, in the purest sense, the New Soviet Man.

By the early 1950s, movie-goers watched heads in fish tanks and queen ants direct the creation of a world too horrible for Americans to even contemplate. In the real world USSR, Americans believed, such mindless mass behavior already existed, and the Soviet octopus was purportedly reaching out for more. What kind of people were behind all this?

Americans had always sensed that Communists were not “normal,” not natural, just not *right*, and during the early Cold War era, some writers suspected Soviet leaders and many of their most fanatical followers of being mentally unbalanced, even crazy. By the late 1940’s, hundreds of crazed Soviets were showing up in American films, novels, and comic books as well. Out of the more than fifty anti-Communist films that flooded from Hollywood’s movie studios between 1948 and 1953, Nora Sayre writes that one of her favorite “mad scenes” appears in Republic’s *Red Menace* (1949). The segment features a Communist woman in Washington, D.C., who is beset by imaginary

drumbeats while being politely questioned by the Department of Justice. The Red functionary shrieks, “You’re too late!...Our ammunition is already here.” The soundtrack starts pounding as we too begin to hear drums. “The legions—they’re entering the city. In a few minutes they’ll be here.” The drums rumble even louder. “Hear them!” she laughs deliriously. “You fools! Don’t you hear them?!” As she is led out of the room cackling, one puzzled FBI agent says to the other, “We only wanted her statement for clarification” (Sayre 51). The main villain in Mickey Spillane’s *One Lonely Night* (published in 1951, it sold more than three million copies) is also an insane lackey of Uncle Joe’s. Just before he chokes him to death, Mike Hammer tells this master killer, Oscar Deamer: “You were a Commie, Oscar, because you were batty. It was the only philosophy that would appeal to your crazy mind. It justified everything you did and you saw a chance of getting back at the world” (quoted in Whitfield 36). Once again, the seeming explanation for Communism’s appeal is insanity.

Joseph Stalin himself was usually portrayed less as a raving kook than as an extremely evil and paranoid murderer, constantly coming up with new and often “mad” measures of securing his own personal safety. In shocking portrayals such as Arthur Koestler’s novels *Darkness at Noon* (1941) and *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1946), Americans had read blood-curdling accounts of a seemingly crazed, purge-happy Stalin of the 1930’s. Articles such as *Saturday Review*’s “In Soviet Inferno; Russian Purges” (1952) and *Scholastic*’s “Red Russia: By Trial and Terror” (1953) did little to improve the image of the postwar Stalin. For the *Saturday Review*, such “random” slaughter only made sense to Stalin on one principle: “If you want to make your enemies afraid, begin by cutting off the heads of your friends” (Wolfe 13-14). That Stalin himself was extremely fearful seemed a given to the American public. Journalists from the United States frequently reported that Moscow was being converted into an armed camp “with

soldiers carrying tommy-guns on almost every street corner,” and that Stalin had deployed look-alikes of himself all over the city to thwart any would-be assassins (“Red Russia” 13-15). What seemed even more peculiar was the *extent* to which Stalin had apparently sealed himself off from the outside world. In *A Window on Red Square* (1953), Frank Rounds, an American Embassy official in Moscow, typically asserted that “*Nothing is known* about Stalin and his inner circle by anybody in Moscow or by anybody anywhere else.” Rounds added that no previous dictator had ever set up such an “abnormal way for himself or his people,” and that “there has never before been anything like this on earth” (88). In short, Stalin was completely different from other totalitarian despots because, as the *Saturday Evening Post* put it, he was “completely unrecognizable as a man” (Smith 20).

American images of the USSR were often simplistic, one-sided and charged with emotion. The Soviets had some impressive accomplishments to their credit: no ten years in the history of any Western nation ever showed a rate of economic growth as dramatic as the decade of the first two five year plans (1928-1938); an energetic campaign against illiteracy was carried out successfully throughout the USSR; a national medical program set up which benefited the entire population; and the Soviet Union had somewhat miraculously driven back the massive German onslaught of World War II and, despite tremendous losses, was on the road to economic recovery. These and other apparent pluses of Soviet rule, however, were almost never acknowledged in mid-century America. In 1951, a United Nations survey of eight Western countries asked respondents to describe their attitudes toward the Russians. The UN found that Americans regarded themselves as the “least friendly” with 91.1% “Unfavorable” and 0.9% “Favorable” ratings; significantly, no other people, not even Russia’s enemies of World War II, responded with such clear animosity (Buchanan and Cantril 83). In the

United States in particular, reports on Soviet life tended to highlight those aspects which were most repulsive to the public and to minimize those which might have seemed more acceptable. The outcome was an overall set of images which negated and even reversed American values and visions of an “American way of life.” Still, in some respects, the images of life under Red rule remained a somewhat intangible set of ideas until they received expression in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (published in 1949), the anti-Utopian novel by English socialist George Orwell. For serious scholars and the general public alike, *1984* provided a model of Stalinist totalitarianism—combining the most terrifying Soviet images into one hideous nightmare.

When Orwell’s book was published in the United States in 1949, it gained a vast popular as well as intellectual following. *1984* was chosen as a Book of the Month Club selection, was condensed in *Reader’s Digest* for its September 1949 issue, and quickly became a required course reading in universities and schools. The novel was a runaway best-seller, selling 400,000 copies in its first year and eleven million copies by the early 1970’s (Mitter and Major 147). In his essay, “America’s View of George Orwell,” political-scientist John P. Rossi notes that *1984* won Orwell a larger following in the United States than in his homeland, and that, while some English critics initially blasted the work as unbelievably gloomy or as an ideological “superweapon of the Cold War,” there were virtually no negative reactions or reviews in the United States (Rossi 574).

According to Orwell’s biographer and friend George Woodcock—and several other contemporary critics—the subject of *1984* was not intended to be just Soviet Russia but Western industrial nations as well, including the United States. Woodcock insists that, first and foremost, *1984* was written as a satire (even “caricature”) of modern society (Woodcock 218). But, regardless of Orwell’s intentions, most Americans chose to receive the book as a realistic portrayal of life in the Soviet Union. In *Reader’s*

*Digest's* September 1949 reprint from *Life* magazine, *Life's* editors identified the character of Big Brother as a "mating" of Stalin and Hitler, and noted that London was an obvious substitute for the novel's real setting—Russia. "Behind the iron curtain," they insisted, Orwell's dystopia "will not seem strange or imaginative at all." The *Life* commentary expressed one concern: that the book was, in fact, "so good, so full of excitement and horror, that there is some danger of its message being ignored" (156). Nicholas Prychodko likewise warned readers of *Moscow's Drive for World Domination* that Orwell's vision was "no fantasy, but a clear preview of what is entirely possible. Read that book and decide for yourself whether you want to be involved in that second billion to fall on your knees before the throne of Stalin!" (72).

For these and many other reviewers, *1984* was not viewed as a partly real, partly unreal vision, but as a direct attack on the system already existing in the Communist world. Given this general reaction it is hardly surprising that, almost immediately, the terms coined by Orwell—"Newspeak," "Mutability of the Past," "Ministry of Truth," "Thought Police," "Crime-think," "Double-think," and the well-known caption "Big Brother is Watching You"—began showing up everywhere in American newspaper articles and speeches on the subject of the USSR. Appearing just as the Cold War reached its zenith, Orwell's "inverted utopian" vision gave substance to "the nightmares that obsess...millions of men and women who are too inarticulate to put their fears into words" (Walsh 134). *1984's* nightmarish picture of totalitarianism was confirmed daily in reports on the USSR by America's press, and in popular culture. To Americans in the post-war decade, it appeared that if this frozen, anti-natural apocalypse where one's every action was monitored and controlled by the state, had not already been realized its arrival could not long be delayed. The Soviet Union "was the enemy, absolute and evil in the best Orwellian tradition" (Blumoff 7).

## **“Red Dawn” in America**

As the paranoid nature of the nightmare images of the USSR would suggest, reflective Americans were feeling uneasy during the early postwar era. Many were beginning to question, if only subconsciously, some of the central assumptions of their own culture as they became more and more bewildered by the deep social and political changes at work in the twentieth century. As Norman Mailer wrote in 1964, “Obviously we were afraid of something more than Communists” (quoted in Field 6). Against the backdrop of a terrible Second World War, the extermination of six million Jews in the Holocaust, the construction and use of the atomic bomb, and the beginning of the Cold War (the outcome of which could not be predicted with any certainty), Americans of the early postwar era were increasingly doubtful about the innate rationality and goodness of man, inevitable progress, the plausibility of freedom, and the benefits of science<sup>3</sup>.

On the domestic front, many Americans were increasingly convinced that that modern technology, industry, government bureaucracy and the mass media were sapping citizens of their freedom and individualism and forcing American culture into a homogenized mass of conformity, and that, overall, America’s best days were behind her and the worst was yet to come. It is no mere coincidence that Americans’ most prominent and harrowing inner fears about the future mirror, almost exactly, their overt images of contemporary life in the USSR.

Popular fiction and commentaries from the era indicate that many were disturbed by the startling scientific and technological events that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century—particularly the creation of the atomic bomb and the computer. Historian Robert J. Lifton has argued convincingly that the A-bomb forced Americans to question one of their most deeply held convictions: that scientific discoveries would bring about progress (Lifton

338). Anxieties about the bomb were channeled into a fantasy culture in science-fiction films and popular magazine stories portraying an atomic apocalypse. In January 1952, *Galaxy Science Fiction's* editor reported that over 90 percent of recent stories submitted to the journal dealt with atomic or bacteriological warfare, devolution, or mutant children (Gilbert 171). *New York Times Magazine* similarly feared that "No matter what shape it may assume," the atomic future "will be an uncomfortable place for the individual," for "this new source of energy....must increase enormously the power of the state over the citizen" (Boyer 147).

Patricia Warrick writes in *The Cybernetic Imagination in Science Fiction* that while twentieth-century American science-fiction had been generally optimistic, it became predominantly negative during the early stages of the Cold War. Tellingly in postwar fiction, the computer is always used to repress the masses. In some of the most terrifying sci-fi tales of the early fifties—including Jack Williamson's "With Folded Hands" (1947), Kurt Vonnegut's "Player Piano" (1952), and Bernard Wolfe's "Limbo" (1952)—computers take over closed societies and do away with love, creativity and imagination, turning the minds of their victims into virtual machines. At the same time, "the nostalgic longing to return to nature," writes Warrick, "is a recurring element of the dystopian fiction" (146).

In the Soviet Union, Americans believed, through total organization and power, the Soviet state had gained complete control over the actions of its people, be it in the factory or the slave labor camp. Utterly lacking any individual rights or freedoms, the Russian drones worked night and day, not for their own benefit or for that of future generations (as they were told), but instead to help calm the fears and satisfy the evil expansionist aims of their paranoid and unbalanced leaders in the Kremlin. The future worlds now being created in postwar fiction were parallel to that of Soviet Russia where the Gosplan and the MVD had supposedly used all means at their disposal to penetrate "into every corner of the home of a

Soviet citizen” intruding “authoritatively and unceremoniously into his bedroom, kitchen, meal pots, his coffers and at last, but not least, into his brain, soul and liver” (*Russia Magazine*, 1947). Only now all this Big Brotherism was effectively enhanced with computer technology. Was the United States in danger of following a similar path at the hands of faceless technocrats?

Overall, the primary anxiety of the age was that modern Americans were being held hostage by ultimately inhuman institutions and values which crushed their most basic desires for freedom of will and action. This new fear was the fear of determinism and its closely related ally, the fear of conformity.

By the close of the 1940s there was considerable talk about the widespread acceptance of blandness, phoniness, and the general pressures of conformity. As Henry Miller aptly phrased it, America was usually portrayed as an “air-conditioned nightmare” (quotation in Hartstone 174). The daily experience of most Americans was, without question, with an increasingly homogenized culture. Just as the merger movement of the 1890s had led to nationally recognized name brands, and the automobile craze of the 1920s had helped bring about a decline of regional differences, the forties brought a new large dose of cultural uniformity. The mid-century years had seen rapid technological change, standardization, bureaucratization, and gigantism, and, in their desperate, even hysterical desire to find security in a very threatening world, Americans appeared to have retreated into an ultimately boring mass culture. Indeed, conformity seemed to pervade all aspects of life. In John Keats’ best-seller, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956), the shallow, fearful American of the 1950s was described in the following passage: “He read books to make conversation, listened to music to establish his social position, chose his clothes for the impression they would make on his business associates, entertained his friends in order to get ahead, and held the affection of his wife and children only by continuous bribery” (Keats

quoted in Perret 302). Charles Morris' *The Open Self* (1948) likewise identified the problems of maintaining an open society under modern conditions. In discussing personal relationships, Morris described the object of conversation as no longer being that of thought or humor but agreement—contradiction and cynicism were considered in bad taste. There were some communities, he noted, where simply wearing a beard would cause a stir, where bearded strangers were frequently asked by local police for identification (see Perret 297-298). One anti-conformist publication reported that even Superman had become a cause for concern. A 1949 interview on comic book heroes quotes a twelve-year old girl as saying: "I like Superman better than others because they can't do everything Superman can do. Batman can't fly and that is very important. Question. Would you like to be able to fly? Answer. I would like to be able to fly if everybody else did, but otherwise it would be kind of conspicuous." This girl's fear of flying may have been well grounded. For most Americans it was said to be better to fit in than to stand out, better to be average and safe than special and sorry (Riesman 105). Paradoxically, however, Americans were not complacent about conformity. In fact they were deeply troubled by this phenomenon, and almost no one defended it (even *Reader's Digest* was critical) or wanted to be accused of it even if they knew it was true. This fear of the dangers of the other-directed self and the herd instinct, one of democracy's oldest bugaboos, dated back to Alexis de Tocqueville's concerns of a tyranny of the majority in the 1830s and emerged in popular novels such as Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* in the 1920s. But during the postwar era this anxiety became particularly troubling.

The links between American fears of conformity and their images of life in the Soviet Union are obvious. The average Russian had reportedly become an "absolute conformist" in the purest sense—a dull, obedient, soldier, completely void of any sense of personal identity. Defector Andrey Olkhovsky had asked: "What is more important, man or the system which enslaves him, the personal or the impersonal, the spiritual or the material?"

(Olkhovsky 276). In the USSR these questions were all said to have been answered wrongly, with terrifying results; now, it seemed, similar responses were taking shape in modern American life as well. In a plethora of anti-conformist 1950s publications such as *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, and *The Organization Man*, Americans read examinations of dehumanizing corporate situations that forced middle class men to be other-directed “organization men” locked into the new worship of “togetherness” and “group think” and cajoled into altering their own behavior in response to the pressures of the larger community. Their families lived in bland suburbias, rows “of identical boxes spreading like gangrene” that had been “vomited up” across the countryside and given names like “Park Forest”, “Sweet Hollow,” and “Crystal Stream”—whilst in reality the trees which once grew there had been cut down, the hollows filled in, and the streams polluted with “stinking refuse” (Keats xi, xii). Millions of Americans feared that they were witnessing their individualism slipping away in a nation of increasing uniformity, phoniness and “bigness”. Just how far this trend would continue in their own country no one knew for sure, but that it would continue seemed certain.

Obsessions with conformity in early Cold War America were bolstered by the belief that the human personality could be easily manipulated. A serious academic literature was established on the subject of “brainwashing”—the effectiveness of which seemed to be confirmed by stories that American POW’s in Korea had had their fundamental values and beliefs changed by such techniques (a perception further enhanced with the release of films such as *The Manchurian Candidate*, a few years later). The field of communications research had been developed by intellectuals intrigued by the impact of Nazi and, later, Soviet propaganda. Many American liberals grew increasingly concerned about the growing public relations industry and the influential powers of advertising, including subliminal messages.

For the most part, Americans saw little in the historical past to put their minds at ease about the future. There was another sort of past, however, that could be easily summoned by anyone willing to use their imaginations to go backward in time. The most prominent model for an alternative lifestyle was the mythic Old West—a region that flourished with a peculiar intensity in Cold War films, fiction, radio, television, and comics. Whether in its original orientation toward children, or in the ‘adult’ Western that emerged in the 1950’s, the Western was relevant drama which embodied the psychology of the East-West struggle. It was there on that “virgin land” that all of the alleged rugged and simple truths of pre-industrial life—individualism, self-reliance, “know how” and higher values—could be portrayed most effectively. In this age of deep social anxiety and international tension, the Western hero answered to a higher law, not bureaucratic red tape, and offered straight solutions. The cowboy is left completely free with open options and no ties as he roams a territory of endless space. This aspect of the Western was expounded upon by James Arness the star of *Gunsmoke*. “People like Westerns because they represent a time of freedom,” he told *TV Guide* in 1958. “That is why they tune in on Western shows to escape from conformity. They [presumably the male viewers] don’t want to see a U.S. Marshal come home and help his wife wash the dishes” (quoted in MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff?* 75). John W. Evans agrees in his article “Modern Man and the Cowboy.” Evans points out that the adult Western hero has no boss and is not a mere cog in some huge and impersonal organization; rather, the cowboy stands alone and independent. Furthermore, “through his vicarious position in the powerful and final act of the gunfight,” writes Evans, “the factory worker or the organization man symbolically shoots down all the individual officials and impersonal forces that restrict, schedule, supervise, direct, frustrate and control his daily existence” (Evans 36). At its height, as many as 60 million viewers per night watched the television Westerns and, by January 1959, eight of the top ten programs were

of that genre (McDonald 138).<sup>4</sup> The Western story's pervasiveness during the postwar era, is indicative of Americans' obsessive fear of conformity and determinism, the desire for simple answers in difficult times, and an overall urge to withdraw from civilization's growing complexity.

Americans' images of their foe reflected not only their fears of Soviet power, but also demonstrated their distaste for modern society. Despite a relatively easy time for the United States during World War II, there was a strong sense of doom in victory. The war itself had repeatedly displayed the extremes of human cruelty. Mass society, atomic warfare, propaganda, and totalitarianism became words infused with fear and urgency. In the years immediately following the war it appeared that government bureaucracy, big corporations, and new technologies such as the modern mass media were turning American culture into a homogenized mass that was smothering individualism and preparing the way for a new kind of social order. In this disturbing milieu, Americans transferred their deepest fears onto their hated rival.

Without fully understanding recent societal changes, many Americans of the 1947-1953 period also held on to their visions of an earlier age. (The ironies of this dependence were obvious. The amazing spectacle of millions of Americans re-living the "frontier days" replete with "natural" role models—all with the aid of the advanced techniques of mass communication—is worthy of a Mencken.) The fact that these idealized images of an older America were repeatedly counterpoised against the negative images of modern life—which the Soviet Union came to symbolize—was indicative of Americans' desperate attempt during anxious times to define themselves as a people and a nation. In the American mind, the canyon separating the Old American West from the New Soviet East stretched as far as the imagination could reach. If Americans were comfortable with their visions of "the West as America" it would also appear that, in their images of the Soviet Union, they had created

an opposite definition of themselves revealing their deepest fears and anxieties about the future of their own society.

Since the end of the Cold War, almost two decades ago, other American enemies have appeared including Libya, Panamanian drug lords, Iraq and al Qaeda, just to name a few; but none has taken on an image as nightmarish or pervasive as that of “Red Russia” during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In American eyes, the Soviet Union was viewed as the incarnation of the most troubling features of mid-twentieth century life. Given the Soviets’ association with enormous concentrations of power, total state control over the individual, and with the concerted effort to place machines and production over human needs or values, it is not at all surprising that the USSR aroused some of Americans’ deepest fears and anxieties during the early postwar era. As the Reverend Billy Graham told Americans at an evangelical rally in 1953: “Almost all ministers of the gospel and students of the Bible agree that it [Communism] is master-minded by Satan himself” (Whitfield 81). The images of Soviet life were not, of course, bought into by all Americans and some had their own personal reasons for holding intense, negative attitudes toward the Soviet state. But the images do reveal general cultural concerns. For much of the American public, the dystopian images served two purposes. First, in a postwar world of bewildering complexity, it was comfortable and flattering to see the world in simple terms of good versus evil. Second, at a deeper level, the images prophesized the dangers that many believed faced their own society in the postwar world. Americans would need to be vigilant to preclude these threats and prevent the destruction of what they perceived as their own “traditional” ways of life.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Studies which present a case counter to my own include: William L. O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: Free Press, 1986); and John Brooks, *The Great Leap: The Past Twenty-Five Years in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> The American Legion film is shown in part in *The Atomic Café* (1982); for an in-depth description of this staged event see "Springtime for Stalin in Mosinee" in Fried 67-86.

<sup>3</sup> For a concise summary of early postwar anxieties see Boyer 149.

<sup>4</sup> Nielson U.S. television-ratings for January 1959:  
1. Gunsmoke; 2. Have Gun Will Travel; 3. The Rifleman; 4. Wagon Train; 5. The Danny Thomas Show (comedy); 6. The Real McCoys (comedy); 7. Tales of Wells Fargo; 8. Maverick; 9. The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp; and 10. Zane Grey Theater. Source: MacDonald 139.