

The Strangeness of Being Briefly Relevant

Law, Culture and the Humanities
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DOI: 10.1177/17438721211035466

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When mid-life announces it's time for a crisis, some men buy a fancy car. Others have affairs.

God help me, I started a blog.

In 2012, my colleague Yanni Kotsonis founded NYU's Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia and agreed that the Center should be at least as active on-line as off. So I started All the Russias blog, and for the first few years, I was virtually the sole contributor. Its audience was pretty much anyone with an interest in Russia, and I took the opportunity to write short pieces about current politics, mass culture, and anything Russia-related that came my way.

The blog changed my professional life. I had already lost patience with the strictures of the formal academic voice, and had stopped submitting unsolicited articles to journals. Not only did the blog lead to other, slightly more visible writing gigs, but it also overhauled my approach to my own scholarship. Nearly all my books since then have started their lives as serialized blogs, giving me real-time feedback. So now I either write something short when invited, or I write books.

I don't know if the public writing “counts,” because I have the luxury of not caring. I was promoted to full professor in 2008, which means I have no more hoops to jump through. Hence the midlife crisis, followed by the blog. But I do know that more people in my field were reading my work, if for no other reason than that some of it was being spammed at them by MailChimp. For what it's worth, I started to get a lot more invitations to speak.

There were also more opportunities to write for more traditional outlets, such as *The Washington Post*, to participate in the occasional documentary, and to serve as the liberal punching bag on RTVI, an American Russian-language television station. My reward? The op-ed equivalent of groupies: trolls, usually Russian, who painted me as a CIA-funded

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Russophobe out to tarnish the Motherland, while delighting in the implications of my clearly Jewish last name. One of them even referred to me as “Reb Eliot,” which made me feel like an extra in an amateur, alt-Right production of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

So I was already engaged in public writing by the time Donald Trump descended an escalator, called Mexicans rapists, and announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States. Not long after that, it became an odd time to be a Russianist.

The field of Russian Studies has a complicated relationship to politics. During the Cold War (when we were “Soviet Studies”), the government lavished funding on departments and centers across the land. But we were also beholden to the stifling binary framework that the Cold War demanded: the field was split between die-hard Cold Warriors and revisionists of all stripes. It took an effort to resist framing every aspect of Russian culture in terms of great power politics while still chasing after the small pot of grant money available to humanists. If a Russian scholar is old enough, they probably have at least one story of trying to convince a government agency that their research on Dostoevsky or Turgenyev had “policy relevance.”

We were in demand when Gorbachev started perestroika, and for the first few years after the Soviet collapse. For a brief time, Russia was always in the news, and our field was actually growing. By the late 1990s, when the West stopped caring about Russia's role on the world stage, we receded to the background. We were underfunded, but at least we had the benefit of escaping from the tiresome burden of international relations.

The All the Russias blog began at the perfect moment: Putin was running for (re-) election, street protests were growing, and an anarcho-feminist performance art collective called Pussy Riot became a cause celebre when three of its members were put on trial for their performance in a Moscow church. When war broke out in Ukraine, we were coming dangerously close to relevance.

What we could not have foreseen was the very thing that the entire political class had failed to anticipate: the election of Donald Trump. At first I found myself wading into the fray simply because of the fundamentally erroneous comparisons being made between Trump and Putin. Putin is intelligent and can hold forth for hours, while Trump is barely coherent within the character limit of a tweet. Putin developed a cult of personality years after attaining the presidency, while Trump's personal magnetism was fundamental to his rise to power. Trump's flirtation with fascism was looking more and more like a long-term commitment, while Putin, contrary to some Western caricatures, has no need of fascism to maintain his power.

As the Russia-related scandals began to accumulate around Trump, the rhetoric surrounding them grew increasingly irritating, if not dangerous. Not because there was no case to be made, but because of how it was being made and what it was encouraging.

I was in the process of writing my book on conspiracy theories in Russia; addressing the Trump/Russia scandals in op-eds was part public outreach, part on-the-fly book revisions. One of the key issues in *Plots against Russia* is Russophobia, a term for anti-Russian animus that emerged in the 19th century, but has come back with a vengeance in the post-Soviet years. I argue that Russophobia is primarily a phenomenon internal to the Russian Federation, because it is such a useful tool for discrediting the state's enemies. Condemning the invasion of Crimea? That's Russophobia. Criticizing anti-LGBT legislation? Russophobia again. The reliance on Russophobia as a constant threat to

Russian statehood is one of the pillars of contemporary Putinism, because it supports the notion that Russia is surrounded by enemies hell-bent on undermining, if not destroying, the Motherland.

Since the Russia investigation, however, the tendency in the American media to blame Russia for our country's ills has been the greatest gift this country could have ever given Putin's government. When we focus on the (very real) involvement of Russian trolls in amplifying MAGA messages, we need to be careful not to neglect the powerful, home-grown forces that are ruining our country in favor of blaming an external enemy. And when the Lincoln Project makes an anti-Trump add dripping in bad Cyrillic and Soviet music, or when people call Mitch McConnell "Moscow Mitch," we are not the victims of Russian propaganda. We are its authors.

For the past five years, our pundits and politicians have been providing unpaid labor for Russian state television. Russia's talking heads barely need to make up lies about America's irrational hatred of Russia, now that we have volunteered as outsourced labor in support of the Russophobia narrative. The biggest irony in our anxiety over Russian hackers and trolls is that Russian forces no longer need actively troll us; when we look for Russia's malign influence under every rock, we are trolling ourselves. Russian propagandists could walk away for a few months, come back, and be delighted that we're still at it.

This, too, shall pass. And when it does, so will one of my few claims to relevance. I still hope to engage in public scholarship and commentary, but if Trump's retreat to Mar-a-Lago proves to be his Saint Helena rather than his Elba, and if the rhetoric about Russia cools off, obscurity is a small price to pay.