

ARTICLE

Political Imagery and the Russia-Germany-America Triangle

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Abstract

The material dimension of Russian foreign and domestic policy is accompanied by one of images and performativity. The Putin regime has affective-emotional and instrumental motives. Its main target audience is the Russian public. Its principal adversary is the United States. The decisive external audience is the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), a pluralist entity that is also concerned with past and present images of itself. Politics in this critical international triangle is infused with theatrical, mediatized, and psychological elements, and the (re)construction of national and individual personae.

Keywords: Russia; political imagery; Germany; USA; personae; affect; instrumentality

Nichts ist bedeutender in jedem Zustande als die Dazwischenkunft eines Dritten – Goethe

Introduction

Imagery has been part of politics for millennia. Its prevalence and impact increases in the era of 24/7 global media. For Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia, the image dimension is indispensable for internal control and international competition. This article argues that the political dynamics of a special international triangle are critical. These span historical time and memory, geo-strategic and cyber space, emotions and psychologies, and social contexts. The main target audience of Russian image politics is the Russian public. The regime conflates Russia with itself in theatrics combining iconophilia, iconomachy, "eventocracy" (Kalyan 2020) and (re)constructions of national and individual personae. The chief adversary, and overt obsession, is the United States. An older and more complex preoccupation is that with Germany, a partial model, defeated foe, economic partner, and most important external audience. The Kremlin strives to aggravate and benefit from tensions between these allies: one a rival (the USA), and the other a past enemy and ambivalent friend (the FRG).

The article draws on official sources, practitioner interviews, opinion surveys, global media, and multidisciplinary scholarship. It proceeds with a discussion of images in politics and international affairs, setting out a theoretical terrain that encompasses affective-emotional and cognitive-instrumental motives. These are concurrent or interspersing, rather than mutually exclusive (Tomkins 2008; Mercer 2010; Manghani 2013; Markwica 2018). Though one type of motive may take precedence at a given moment, each infuses political practice (Damasio 1994; Elster 1999; Lebow 2005; Chiao 2015).

The next section considers features of Russian image politics: a fixation with greatness and retorts to diminution of that ideal; the manipulation of "history"; the dramaturgical fashioning of

the USA as an enemy; the fusion of cultish leader and nation; and the use of religion to mythologise Russia's purity and heroism. These strands feed into discursive and visual propaganda on the Ukraine crisis. Status concerns, resentment, cynicism, and anxiety inform regime behaviour as much as strategic or economic considerations. The third section examines German-Russian relations. Though strained at the official level, the two nations share economic interests, socio-cultural connections, and a mercurial past, which lives in the present. Russian agencies appeal to fringe and mainstream targets in German politics, society, and economy, endeavouring to exploit or even shape Germany's images of itself.

Images and International Theory

Imagery is a basic element of mental processes and communication. Visual images are provided by monuments, statues, painting, photography, cartoons, effigies, maps, masks, television, and pixels. Thought images are evoked by memory, narrative, mythology, historiography, reportage, and discourse (Lippmann 1922; Benjamin 1994; Richter 2007; Tschofen 2016). Over time the two forms of image coalesce (Shepard 1978).

The Iconomachy (ca. 700–845) demonstrated how images could inspire protracted doctrinal and militarized conflict (Irmscher 1980; Besançon 2000; Brubaker 2010). Iconoclasts destroyed and banned other representations of the sacred in favour of the cross as Christianity's universal symbol. Iconodules resisted and re-established iconography. The Iconomachy was a precursor of modern and postmodern competition over regional and global orders. In these later contexts the term is understood not as a war *against* images, as in its original meaning, but a war *of* or *between* images. Propaganda and psy-ops replaced direct military confrontation between the Cold War's main rivals. Political imagery was examined in contemporaneous scholarship, from structural theory to psychological accounts and case studies. Williams (2018) summarized that "Images pervade international politics" (880). Forms and effects multiply as new devices enable mass access to technical means (Bleiker 2018).

Much earlier, Plato discerned that images appealed "to passions rather than reason" (Carnes 2017, 3; Crawford 2000; Mercer 2006; Bleiker and Hutchinson 2008; Koschut 2017; Koschut et al. 2017). Passion or affect induced by images interacts with cognition and calculation, most consequentially in politics (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995; Hall and Ross 2015). Rose McDermott (2004) elucidated that "a general mood of fear or anger, triggered by vivid image or rhetoric, can influence decision making. The leader's mood may then affect which lessons from history are drawn on [...] history can thus be driven by affect as well as by rational thought" (696). Thomas Lindemann (2011) informed that "state decision makers seek to cultivate a certain image of themselves and of their community (homo symbolicus) for "strategic" (internal and international legitimacy) as well as "emotional" reasons" (68). With public diplomacy and nation branding (Melissen 2005; Cull 2008; Gregory 2008), state agencies practice image refinement, dissemination and (re)creation. Ratings and rankings (Cooley and Snyder 2015) resonate in the social psychology of international affairs (Pouliot 2016). National elites respond to assessments of reputation and desirability. Images perceived as underrating or disparaging their nations (and themselves) incite affront and the production of counter-images that seek to project their nations favourably and rivals unfavourably.

Images then promote confidence and stability or discontent and resentment. They convey status, prestige, honour (Lebow 2008; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Wood 2013; Onea 2014; Wolf 2014; Wolf 2019), hierarchy and "standards of civilization" (Gong 1984; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Lake 2009; Schulz 2019), and recognition (Honneth 1992). They impact on the ontological (in)security of state elites and populations (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Steele and Homolar 2019). Negative instances stimulate the more powerful emotional force and the formation of resentful subjects and resented objects (Wolf 2018).

Russian Image Politics

Images of the “West” were identity shapers in various “ideological iterations” of the “Russian World” (Figes 2002; Trenin 2004; Suslov 2018). Putin governments tried to refashion images of Russia and its leader (Feklyunina 2008; Alekseyeva 2014; Suslov 2014; Goscilo 2014; Zygare 2016; Von Seth 2018). Seen from outside the makeover has been unsuccessful (Simons 2011; Simons 2013; Shchelin 2016; Transparency International 2018; Simons 2019).¹ A residual Soviet aura is sustained by actions that diminish trust and acceptance (A. Wood 2013; Sharafutdinova 2020), and inform an external image of a despotic, resentful, and dangerous state (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). Some commentators transmit an alternative image of an unfairly treated party, forced into a defensive posture from which it lashed out, and whose behaviour is understandable (Mearsheimer 2014; Krone-Schmalz 2015; Roberts 2017). Surveys suggest Russia is perceived unfavourably in western countries and favourably in parts of Asia and Africa. Some countries are indifferent (PEW 2014, 2015, 2017; Letterman and PEW 2018; Gallup 2014–2021).

Greatness

Russian political and military figures divulge an infatuation with “greatness” that has persisted through centuries, ideologies, and state forms. Even the “new thinking” of the Gorbachev era envisaged a greatness based on “soft power” (Larson and Shevchenko 2003). Adomeit (1995) offered a prescient account of early post-Soviet Russia and a return to traditional understandings. Symbolic demotion in an imagined international hierarchy distresses those who believe Russia to be equal if not superior to others that preoccupy it (Neumann and Pouliot 2011; Neumann 2016). Anger is one reaction: an emotional episode and an instrumentalized energy (Hall 2011; Forsberg and Pursiainen 2017; Heller 2018). It was displayed in Putin’s speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, about which he had informed insiders the night before (Teltschik 2019). A few years later the thought image of Russia as a “regional power,” elicited by Barack Obama’s description, was infuriating. Putin felt “disrespect.”²

Most states craft idealized accounts of their pasts. For the contemporary Russian state, “history” is a domain from which details are harvested, retrospectively projected, airbrushed out, or otherwise politicized (Gjerde 2015; Pearce 2020). Censorship was well advanced when it was announced that a “Commission to Counteract Attempts to Harm Russia’s Interests by Falsifying History” would “analyze information [...] aimed at diminishing the international prestige of the Russian Federation and report such incidents to the president” (President of Russia 2010). Other laws against political criticism were introduced. Old symbols and motifs, “the Soviet anthem but with new words, the coat of arms from the pre-imperial era and the flag from the imperial period,” returned (Bacon 2012, 779). “New” Russia is disassociated from crimes and failings of predecessors (Chatterje-Doody 2014; Petrov 2018) while asserting inheritance of the Soviet or Tsarist empire’s rights, privileges, and fame. The “Russian Federation” is selectively interchangeable with these defunct entities.

Sport is a well tried and generally acceptable means to achieve and broadcast national greatness.³ Persson and Petersson (2014) consider the 2014 Winter Olympics, an event “intimately bound up with the international image of Russia” (192). The authors distinguish states “with disputable democratic credentials” from others that also have prestige goals. They note that “cognitively oriented literature on images does not do full justice to the emotive components propelling political action” (Persson and Petersson 2014, 192–194). Anna Alekseyeva (2014, 159) emphasizes Olympics images as intended to promote “diffuse notions of affective loyalty to one’s political system and the desire for national greatness.” Orttung and Zhemukov (2014, 177) impress “intangible goals of image-building” alongside material aims. Success in gaining hosting rights for the 2014 Olympics and the 2018 football World Cup, gestures of goodwill from others, coincided with anti-government protests, the possibility of a color revolution (Horvath 2013), competitors in the field of nationalist ideology, one calling itself “Russian Image” (Horvath 2014), and the Ukraine crisis. A new public relations campaign appealed to sentiment and status ambitions, asserted in self-referential homage

(Malinkova 2014; Forsberg, Heller, and Wolf 2014). The regime's "machine politics" (Hale 2016) incorporated a more nationalistic posture and intensified discourses of internal resolve and external enemies.

The Adversary

Nikolai Ostapenko (2010, 62) argued that "many Russian official attempts to change and improve" a "grand, mysterious, and unfortunately dark" image, "have been politicized and rejected by influential individuals and governments worldwide" (62). The chief perpetrator, according to Andrei Tsygankov (2009), is a Russophobic lobby in the USA. This group, and others it guided, affronted Russia's sense of honour (Tsygankov 2012). Tsygankov (2014) later contended "Russia has been responsive to the behavior of the West and prepared to pursue cooperation" (26). Whenever it moved "toward its significant other, Moscow has only continued so long as it felt a sufficiently progressive recognition." Without such recognition, "the reform-minded leadership in the Kremlin [...] runs into opposition." In works covering the Medvedev interval and first years of Putin's third term, Tsygankov (2017, 2019) maintained that US' politics and media concocted and spread an image of Russia as a "dark double."

If parts of the US policy elite and media are preoccupied with Russia, it is more than reciprocated. In an existential mega-drama, Russia is under siege, dependent on Putin to defend it and assert a rightful place in a world where America strives for hegemony. The Russian armed forces and defence industry are central to a branding strategy around the "symbolic value of safety," and its counterpoint, fear (Danilova 2017). The show runs simultaneous to a contrary storyline propounding the terminal decline of the "liberal order" and its (until Donald Trump's partial revisions) main proponent. Russia grows stronger and a shift to a "multipolar/polycentric world" proceeds inexorably, the narrative suggests. These ideas inform a unique "geo-imagery" (Omelicheva 2016). A passage from Tsygankov (2019, xii) is instructive. It describes a Q&A where that author asked Putin "whether the growing polarization between the Russian image of the West as spiritually corrupt and the Western image of Russia as the oppressive neo-Soviet autocracy reflect the inevitable struggle between culturally distinct entities." Putin responded that "Russia's worldview"

is based on good and evil, higher forces, and God's will [...] the Western worldview – and I don't mean it in a derogatory way – is based upon individual interest, pragmatism, and pragmatic accommodation. [...] It is hard for us to conduct a dialogue with those who are guided by ideas of messianism and exceptionalism because this means a radical departure from our common traditional values [...].

The exchange concluded with Putin declaring that US society and "those who make political decisions" should treat Russia "with respect." Personal respect conflates with that for the nation and state (Wolf 2011). Breslauer (2017) notes that "a demand to be treated with 'dignity' is driven by a sense of 'indignation'" (148). At the Valdai Club (2018), Putin declared that "Stirring up emotions is not our approach" before expounding on Russia's destiny, posited against "post-heroic" nations (Münkler 2007). A few years after a friendly bear mascot welcomed Olympic visitors, Putin was prompted on the metaphor of a (different) bear protecting his/our taiga:

Fyodor Lukyanov: You once coined a wonderful phrase ... The bear will not ask anyone for permission. He is the master of the taiga ... he will not give up his taiga to anyone, either. And everyone should be clear about that ... ?

Vladimir Putin: Look, we live in a world where security relies on nuclear capability ... we are improving our attack systems as an answer to the United States building its missile defence system ... we have overtaken all our, so to speak, partners and competitors in this sphere ... No one has a high-precision hypersonic weapon. Some plan to begin testing it in one or two

years, while we have this high-tech modern weapon in service. So, we feel confident in this sense. (Valdai Club 2018)

The “bear” transforms into an offensive/defensive nuclear weapons system, fused with nation and leader in an ontological and physical security complex:

We are not afraid of anything. Given our territory, our defence system, and our people that are ready to fight for independence and sovereignty — the willingness of our men and women to give up their lives for their country is not common among all nations. Nobody can change these things, and this makes us certain that we can feel secure. (Valdai Club 2018)

Credible foreign media coverage does not blame or threaten the Russian population. It critiques the regime, which is not a “mirror image” of the USA (cf. Greene and Robertson 2019). On Russian state television, anti-American sentiment fueled in Rossiya 1’s *Vesti Nedeli* reaches a large audience (Figure 1). The USA and NATO (Figure 2) were castigated even as censure of Trump intermittently halted when he adopted a more accommodating stance. The EU is not immune. Samoilenko and Laruelle (2020) “typologize attacks on the EU’s image into three main categories: [...] decadent values [...] puppet of the US [...] supporting the revival of fascism” (149).

When it began as *Russia Today*, RT’s goal was to “change the image of Russia in the world.” It is now a “weapon in the war of images” (Bidder 2013), specializing in fabrication, distortion, and performativity (Stewart 2017, 18–23). Pomerantzev and Weiss (2014) argued that “feeling itself relatively weak, the Kremlin has systematically learnt to use the principles of liberal democracies against them” (4). The ruling clique rebels against and heeds a “standard of civilization” (Kaczmarek 2016). It imitates the West while asserting distinctiveness (Wood and Cox 2021). RT and *Sputnik* rely on western journalists and producers to help fashion, subtly or crudely, a



Figure 1. The US on Russian State TV.
Source: Rossiya 1.

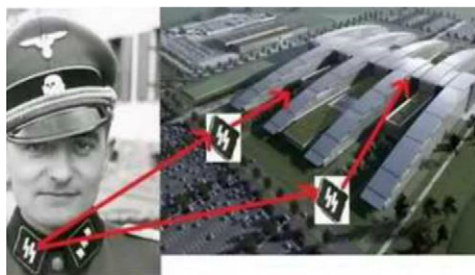


Figure 2. NATO HQ Compared to SS Insignia.
Source: Sputnik (2016).

Kremlin view (Rutland and Kazantsev 2016). Former German “Commissioner for Russia,” Gernot Erler, described the output as “fakes from A to Z” and “propaganda without end” (Erler 2015). Foot soldiers fight on print, television, and Internet battlefields. Ridicule, sarcasm, and mimicry are used to provoke the West, techniques that the regime cannot abide being applied to itself. Satires like *The Death of Stalin* film and other “denigrations” are banned. Spectacle, censorship, and a personality cult strive to camouflage decision-making processes and yet betray the regime’s anxiety.

The rise of populism in some western polities was a windfall for the Kremlin, enabling specifically targeted and trans-ideological appeals to a mélange of discontents and into the political centre (Braghioli and Makarychev 2016, 2018). These appeals market cordial relations with a peaceful though fearless and alert Russia (Saremba 2019), which is contrasted with depictions of the USA as a warmongering menace. The Internet Research Agency (IRA) also aims at god-fearing America, staging “tests of allegiance” (Shane 2018). Dawson and Innes (2019) detail the IRA’s agenda and methods: “one would function as ‘the villain’ criticising the authorities; then the others would enter a debate with him/her. One would post an image/meme in support of their argument, the other posting a link to a supportive source. [. . .] Operators wrote Twitter bots to amplify visibility” (4).

Hyperspace helps to relativize a disparity of resources between Russia and the West. Their production and distribution of disinformation demonstrates the skill and “malign influence” of Russian “political technologists” (US official representation, Germany 2019). Although “sovereign morality” (Sharafutdinova 2014) emerged to accompany “sovereign democracy,” there is scope for diversions beyond these quasi-official concepts if they serve the state’s purposes. Fedor and Fredheim (2017) show that it was prepared to draw on “young creatives” who supply “outlandish” Internet imagery that could complement traditional material and messages. Domination of the agenda is more important than specific content. But the Internet is a two-edged sword and not entirely controllable. The regime tried to disconnect the “Russian Internet” from the global to stop the wrong sort of imagery entering or leaving Russia (Szostek 2018; Gaufman 2019; Prokopenko 2019). For example, Google was embroiled in a dispute with Russian officialdom over maps showing Crimea as disputed or foreign territory. Google was also fined for not obeying the Russian censor (Luxmoore 2019a).

Putin: Cult, Hero, Image

Putin’s crafted persona synthesizes imperial-orthodox and Soviet elements with narcissism, new media, and literary representations. He is the model for a “Chosen One” character in a novel released shortly after he became president. Another portrays him engaged in battle against Chechen militants, whom he disposes of and is wounded in the process (Rogatchevski 2008). The “West” is charged with excessive attention on Putin and its reportage reflects a strange liaison of autocrat and media icon. But Russian sources industriously broadcast images of Putin superimposed over nation and land, tailored for the occasion and target group: action man, paragon of “Russian glamour” (Menzel 2013), caring father figure, respecter of religion, international statesman, military expert. Putin’s qualities merge with those of a heroic nation. His praise for Russia is praise for himself. The President’s hospital visits and appearances at televised gatherings of young people convey his popularity and provide an irenic contrast to the apocalyptic scenarios said to threaten Russia (Figure 3).

Public support is not explainable by sustained economic performance, competent governance, or Russia’s reputation and friendships. It could be apprehended via the concept of “charisma” and Putin as projecting something “quintessentially Russian” (Ioffe 2014; Goscilo 2014; Gloger 2017b; Sharafutdinova 2020). Other observers offer different views. Richard Sakwa (2020) opined that Putin has “contempt for demagogic populism other than his own formulation” (20). A German official noted, “when you are in charge for 20 years you get used to giving the orders, and you take everything personally” (Office of the German Federal President 2019).

presidential website is full of references to religion. Proclamations about sovereignty and vigilance against threats are flanked by appeals to “traditional values” (Horvath 2016) fusing religion and patriotism (Halbach 2019). A holy Russia/distinctive civilization discourse (Tsygankov 2016) repeats staple tropes. Victory in *the* war increases in spiritual and political meaning the more it recedes chronologically.

The imposing physical and symbolic qualities of architecture are also drawn on. Having erected a giant statue of his namesake in Moscow in 2016 (“A tale of two Vladimirs,” *Economist*, November 5, 2016), Putin contributed his “own money” for an icon to adorn a Cathedral of the Armed Forces built where the Red Army had repelled the *Wehrmacht* in December 1941. The phantasmagorical project combines titanic visual imagery with endorsed historiography and partisan spirituality. Church, military, and leader merge as a holy troika. The cathedral, located in Patriot Park, was due to open on May 9, 2020, the 75th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, replete with steps made from melted German military material (Kremlin 2018; Figure 5 and Figure 6). The park will include a “Multimedia Museum and Exhibition Complex dedicated to the Russian Spiritual Army” and “house unique expositions dedicated to various episodes of heroic history of Russian army” [sic]:⁴

Guests will enter three-dimensional historical reenactment displayed on the walls in the halls. Incredible VR technologies will place visitors on the ice of the Lake Peipus in the middle of the Battle on the ice, inside an aircraft cockpit, at the heart of the naval Battle of Kerch Strait. Guest will walk along the Mercy hero gallery, and watch a movie in 360-degree movie theater [sic]. (CAF/HRAM 2019)

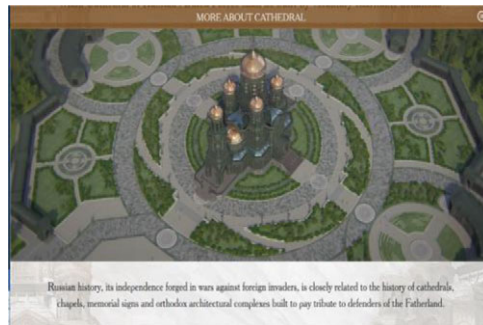


Figure 5. Armed Forces Cathedral Model.
Source: Russian Defence Ministry.



Figure 6. Proclaiming a Cathedral of the Armed Forces.
Source: Kremlin/Tass.

After Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, initiated the venture (Russian Ministry of Defence 2020), some clergy were dubious about a secular takeover of the divine. The cathedral's scheduled consecration was thwarted by the pandemic and a reaction against the inclusion of mosaics representing Stalin, Putin, and Shoigu (Bennetts 2020). These were removed and the consecration occurred on June 14. Putin visited on June 22, the "Day of Memory and Sorrow," accompanied by Shoigu and Kirill. The crypt is named after Saint Vladimir (Kremlin 2020).

Crimea and Other Parts of Ukraine are Ours

Discourses of Russia's greatness, a threatening adversary, vigilance, and the godsend of a saintly warrior, are incorporated into the Ukraine crisis. In speeches justifying the seizure of Crimea, Putin (2014) and Lavrov (2014) expressed plaintive anger at how history had unfolded and the asymmetry in global influence between Russia and the USA. They extolled a balance of power as inviolable. Suslov (2014) interpreted the annexation as "linked to the reshuffling of the mental landscape" (588). He vividly elucidates the interplay of historical thought images with topical visuals in film, cartoons, and social media. Putin (2020; Figure 7) explained to a public audience that he had congratulated "builders of the Crimean Bridge [...] a landmark that 'visualises' the reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol with the rest of Russia. In addition to 'visualising', it has created good conditions for the steady and sound development" (1–2). He outlined material benefits that would complement the spiritual connection conveyed by the bridge's physical presence. The "sacred character of Crimea" was reprised in a history lesson:⁵

Chersonese is the birthplace of both our faith and the Russian [...] Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples [...] this place is sacred [...]. After Vladimir was christened here, he christened his troops, and the Conversion of Rus' got underway. As our outstanding historians write, it was based on [...] the power of the prince, a single market, and a common language joined by the same faith. This united isolated Slavic group resided closely together on that territory [...] this is how the Russian people came into being. (Putin 2020, 6)

Beyond Crimea, the creation *Novorossiya*, a "Delightful and Unique State," aspired to subsume Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions in a union of "Russian republics" (Hosaka 2019).

The Frenemy

Russian politicians often use the term "Western partners" to avoid direct reference to the USA and sometimes its "lackey" EUrope. Russia's diplomatic and propaganda effort is concentrated on



Figure 7. Crimea is (Still) Ours.
Source: Kremlin.

Germany, its most important interlocutor. Bilateral relations are a unique complex of empathy, friction, anxiety, recognition-seeking, business interests, and intense historical reference points. Atrocities and oppression that former regimes inflicted on the other population and their own endure in intergenerational memory. Their savage conflicts did not prevent Russians and Germans resuming cooperation. Post-Cold War optimism was greatest in Germany. It was envisaged that Russia would develop as a liberal democracy, with Western help. Germans upheld this ideal as chaos and decline became signatures of the Yeltsin era.

The inauguration at the start of the millennium of a then non-descript Putin engendered new hope for transformation. Within months of becoming President, Putin visited Germany, making a private visit to the Spandau citadel where he was knighted in a mock ceremony (Figure 8). His 2001 speech to the Bundestag, delivered mostly in German, produced a special imagery (Figure 9) and encouraged anticipation that he would be a “German in the Kremlin” (Rahr 2000). It reinvigorated visions of programs, in EU frameworks, driving Russian modernization. German governments were deeply invested in this conception. It is now consigned to storage, superseded by effort to minimize further deterioration. Early perceptions of Putin were, for former German President Joachim Gauck, a “grotesque rejection of reality” (Gloger 2017a, 410). Conversely, Putin’s experience with Germany led him to believe “he could read us. But he understood us wrongly – as we have wrongly understood him,” said a German diplomat (Gloger 2017a, 419–420). According to another, Russia is not ready to become a normal European state (German Foreign Ministry, official



Figure 8. Berlin Citadel Visit.
Source: Author (orig. *Tagesspiegel*).



Figure 9. Putin’s Bundestag Speech.
Source: Kremlin.

of the Russia section 2019). Official relations are ritualized. German leaders emphasize negotiation and go through the motions of congratulating Putin on his electoral victories as overlapping images send contrasting signals: friend/enemy, cooperation/distrust, approval/censure, hope/trepidation.

Russian diplomacy and media peddle several narratives about Germany. A derisive refrain caricatures it as a vassal of the USA, taking instructions from Washington, and cajoles to assert independence and emancipation. This is sometimes combined with threats to sabotage the FRG's intermittent attempts to become a permanent member of the UNSC (Kiku 2021). Another discourse invokes the German-Soviet war and transmits that the Kremlin is as reliant on a past Germany as it is on that of the present. Repetition of wartime references and associations with the FRG's predecessor impart that Russia has expectations. Such statements aim to evoke certain images in the German mind in a time between "old and new world order" (Pomerantsev 2015; Meister 2018). The meta-signal is to condone Kremlin policy. Celebrating the Crimean annexation, Putin declared that "citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity" (Auer 2015, 959). The message is that the Soviet Union/Russia allowed German reunification to happen. Germany should have paid a greater price, a point repeated by Russian diplomats (Russian Embassy 2015).

Demanding rhetoric contrasts with professions of love for German culture, often classical elements. Russian ambassador, Sergey Nechayev, accented personal and national ties:

I feel myself connected to Germany not least through many years of diplomatic service here. I am well acquainted with German culture, before all literature and music. I love Goethe, Schiller and Heine, also Eric Maria Remarque or Heinrich Böll. There is a strong interdependence between German literature and Russian, very old cultural links. I believe that Russians and Germans are closely connected intellectually. (Huth 2019)

The projected meaning is of resemblance and camaraderie between two great culture nations, noble and authentic. These qualities contrast with a cultureless, consumerist America: the profound versus the superficial. But Russia's "love" for Germany is unrequited by many among the German public and political class (Köcher 2014; Shevtsova 2015). Insufficient reciprocity incites displeasure. Cultural connections inevitably defer to politics. Germany's failure to take Russia's side on Ukraine and other disputes caused disappointment. The German government "threw the relationship on the heap" (Russian Embassy 2015). On the surface, official Germany responded in a measured manner, displaying "a political self-understanding that communicates neither loudly nor demonstratively" (Münkler 2009, 10). There is no exaggerated imagery. Chancellor Angela Merkel embodies a certain view of Germany: calm and *sachlich*. One survey found that "The German nation is led by a personality whom many see as the mirror image of its people" (GiZ 2015, 35). Most understand the FRG as a multilateral civilian power, stable and sensible. It "does not seek to promote the use of violence" and "can afford to tell less dichotomous, more 'complicated' stories that may involve perspectives for negotiation or de-escalation, and perhaps even self-criticism" (Sangar et al. 2018, 186).

Maintaining and credibly projecting this international political self-image is becoming harder. The autobiographical narrative (Eberle and Handl 2020; Berenskötter and Stritzel 2021) vital to Germany's ontological and conventional security is a discursive portrait. Only so many adjustments can be made (cf. Forsberg 2016). Although the present government has not switched to prioritizing Russia over an afflicted "transatlantic community," its policy stance is interposed with ambiguity and ambivalence (Wood and Henke 2018). This is a reminder to avoid a unitary state trap. The FRG's pluralism contrasts with a polarized USA and Russia's "virtual" polity. But the current configuration of a multiparty system is straining a traditional consensus style in foreign policy. There are attitudinal and policy differences within the government, ministries, and the public. These reasons, and the constraints of a Grand Coalition, partly explain contradictory or vacillating behaviour. Clashing images of Russia correspond to conceptions of *Russlandkritiker* (critics) and *Russlandversther* (empathizers) (von Beyme 2016; Wood 2020). A shifting mainstream contains a

significant minority in the second category, mainly in the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and somewhat less in the Christian Democratic (CDU-CSU) and Free Democratic (FDP) parties. With a few aging exceptions, Greens are critical of Putin. A theatre production on Königsberg/Kaliningrad supported by the Green party foundation was attacked in Russian media as “unpatriotic,” “extremist,” and promoting a “re-Germanisation” of the exclave (Voswinkel 2019).

There are various sources of direct or indirect support for the Russian state in Germany: a simple desire for peace; policy differences with the USA; anti-Americanism beyond policy; business interests; the refugee/immigration crisis (Stewart 2017; Pomerantsev 2017; Braghiroli and Makarychev 2018); and feelings of guilt, repentance, or affection for ordinary Russians (Scherbakova and Schlögel 2015). These offer opportunities for the manipulation of images and emotions. Soon after the Crimea annexation, a group of Germans, largely drawn from the political and cultural establishment, published an appeal against war with Russia. Above the text was a photo of American and Polish soldiers engaged in a NATO exercise (*Die Zeit* 2014). The appeal was an example of German anxiety prompted by perceptions of Russian ruling elite anxiety and the consequences of offending it (cf. Eberle and Handl 2020; Siddi 2018). Outside establishment circles there is more vociferous “pro-Russia” expression. A plethora of recent books tells how western media constructed a negative and false image of Russia (Bröckers and Schreyer 2014; Krone-Schmalz 2015, 2017; Schmidt 2016; Bollinger 2016; Bittner 2017; Bahr 2018). *Anti-Spiegel* caustically derides the news magazine, *Der Spiegel*. *RT Deutsch* (Hanfeld 2015), *Junge Welt*, and *Compact* propagandize for Moscow. These and other groups and individuals fulminate against, as they see it, German subordination to the USA. This is also a status issue with emotional motivation. Germany’s post-war transformation was accompanied by some residual *ressentiment* towards American liberators (Barclay and Glaser-Schmidt 1997; Junker et al. 2004; Berman 2004; Parkinson 2015; Knappertbusch 2016). Appeals to “profound German anti-Americanism” (Gloger 2017a, 410) and shared feelings of asymmetry *vis-à-vis* the USA have resonance (Voigt 2019). Russia is seen as defiant and honourable for resisting America. When the Kremlin taps into this reservoir it speaks to a faithful. It was easy to present Trump, *ergo* the USA, as a danger, despite the Trump agenda having more similarities with Putin’s or the *Alternative für Deutschland*’s (AfD) than with Obama’s or Joe Biden’s. It is, however, the image that counts (Cf. Simons 2019).

The confluence of contemporary politics with history features a vast stock of imagery generated by the Second World War. Nazi Germany fought many states and nations. The Soviet Great Patriotic War was fought almost exclusively against that one antagonist. Institutionalized and personal memory of the period engendered deep introspection in the FRG. A poignant example was the Bundestag debate on the Wehrmacht Exhibition in 1997, filled with emotional speeches (Deutscher Bundestag 1997; *Die Zeit* 1997). That said much about the FRG and its contrite political center. The ongoing production of physical and digital images⁶ inevitably influences German attitudes towards today’s Russia, regardless of its political system. By contrast, in that Russia, victory in war and the sacrifice of ordinary Russians are instrumentalized by a “cynical tactician of power” (Gloger 2017a, 413–4; Forsberg and Pursiainen 2017). The war justified state repression then and serves as a legitimization device in the present (E. Wood 2011; Nelson 2015; Hebel 2018). Reference in this context to Stalinism, which endured much longer, prompts a charge of relativising the ignominy of Nazism.⁷ Their nearly two-year alliance is dissimulated or unmentionable as are Soviet casualties up to June 1941 (Edele 2017; Harrison 2019). Consistent with government discourses, Russian films, including co-productions with German companies, convey only one dictatorship in the confrontation.

Seen in historical context, German domestic politics entails some staggering incongruity. Today’s nominal far-left and far-right are opponents though their positive views of Putin’s Russia and negative views of the USA align, in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms (Laruelle and Rivera 2019). In the media world, *Junge Welt* and *Compact* are representative of these extremes. The Russian embassy and *Die Linke* (The Left) party, some of which wishfully identifies Putin’s Russia as the recrudescence of a communist state, organized a “call to peace” Stalingrad



Figure 10. Call to Peace.
Source: Russian Embassy Berlin.

exhibition in the Bundestag while war raged in Ukraine (Figure 10). The German far-right honours the Nazi military. It had vehemently opposed the Wehrmacht exhibition, which focused on the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. They now praise Putin and his Russia as a bulwark against the USA. The AfD depict Germany as a threatened nation. Russia is a proxy through which to express their version of national pride. AfD politician Markus Frohnmaier’s Facebook post of a wolf and a bear symbolized his hoped-for German-Russian partnership, with a caption, in English, “Never again against each other.”

The centrist German government’s inconsistency is exhibited by sanctions on Russia fortifying an image of the FRG as a defender of a liberal democratic order while simultaneous support for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project impairs that image (Meister 2019; Wood and Henke 2021). US sanctions on companies associated with the project incited outrage among some sections of the polity. Germany’s “sovereignty,” usually represented as embedded or “pooled” in the EU, had been infringed. The controversy illustrates a “dividual actor” (Eberle 2021) in an awkward balancing act. Despite protestations about Russian cyber-attacks, violations of international law and other provocations, poisonings of former spy Sergei Skripal and political challenger Alexei Navalny, and the latter’s imprisonment after returning to Russia following medical treatment in Germany, the German political establishment shows a remarkable degree of toleration. When asked about the Nord Stream 2 project and German relations with Russia and the USA, the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier claimed that dialogue with the new American government had not yet begun and that energy was almost the last remaining “bridge” between Russia and Europe. He continued:

For us Germans, there also is a very different dimension: We look back at a very eventful history with Russia ... The 22nd of June is the 80th anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union. More than 20 million people of the former Soviet Union were victims in the war. That does not justify any wrongdoing in Russian policy today, but we cannot lose sight of the bigger picture ... (Steinmeier 2021, 5)

Conclusion

This article has examined the Putin regime’s use of and response to political imagery. It identifies a critical international triangle in which affective and emotive impulses interact with instrumental purposes. Each of three bilateral relationships in the triangle comprises its own type of estrangement and each dyad is aware of the respective third party and its impact. That factor pervades a 21st century image and information war between Russia and the “West” that is fought

“with all means.” This was the “new reality,” said a Russian diplomat; state and private media in western countries, including Germany, were also selective in their reporting (Russian Embassy 2015). The Kremlin has intermittently held the initiative in this contest without a sustained strategy. It improvises political theatre and its version of public diplomacy, combining pre-modern, modern, and postmodern elements. The Russian national persona projected at home and abroad is pious, defiant, and loyal to the leader. The struggle of everyday life for the majority is rewarded with a trinity of compensatory images: military, from past glory to new hypersonic weapons systems; the supernatural powers of religion dwelling in state-funded architecture and icons; and the celebrity figure of Putin presiding, in public fora, television, and hyperspace, over a common destiny. Actions in Ukraine aimed to demonstrate Russia’s regional potency, and in Syria, its global impact. A “travelling exhibition” of trophies reprised history in the present, passing through cities and towns with iconic wartime status, including Sevastopol, Kursk, Moscow, and Murmansk (Luxmoore 2019b).

Concurrently, the USA is fabricated as a threat to Russia and all peace-loving states and peoples. The Great Patriotic War resonates in a scenario of Russia confronting a coercive USA and NATO, combined as a proxy image for Nazi Germany (cf. Forsberg and Herd 2015, 55). Russian agencies and supporters appeal to or provoke German political elites, business, and the public/electorate, evoking images of the FRG’s Nazi predecessor, subordination to the USA, and European political crises. Mutual benefit through partnership with Russia is portrayed as a route to prosperity, security, and atonement. An uneasy German political center, tensions with US administrations, structural anti-Americanism, and economic-financial relations provide opportunities for the Putin regime.

While domestic media control⁸ and the Internet enable some consoling expression of the regime’s resentments, a coveted self-image of equal standing *vis-à-vis* the USA or Germany remains, according to one German foreign policy expert, illusory (Voigt 2019). The Russian people cannot live on an image of greatness alone (Levada 2019). More than the USA or NATO, it is they who cannot be trusted (Hans 2014) and are the reason for a national guard subordinate to Putin himself (Klein 2016). Filmed demises of Saddam and Gaddafi (Meister 2018, 3), Navalny’s popularity and positive international image, anti-corruption protests, and the 2020 uprising in Belarus, intensify apprehension about coups or assassination attempts. The potential of “counter-regime imagery” (Placek 2019; Ryabovolova and Hemment 2020) was displayed when dissident group *Agit Rossija* mourned Putin’s “virtual death” and installed bereavement posters outside a real cathedral (Holm 2019; Figure 11). This ironic reverse iconography was an intimation of the president for life’s mortality.



Figure 11. Putin’s Virtual Death.
Source: Agit Rossija.

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Notes

- 1 In 2018 Russia ranked 138 of 180 states in the Corruption Perceptions Index. In 2014 it ranked 136.
- 2 A US source said the Obama speech was a mistake (US official representation, Germany, 2019).
- 3 Some states sponsor illegal practices to achieve sporting victories and thereby “greatness.” Russia is one of them.
- 4 Not the Red Army, which included many Ukrainians and numerous other nationalities.
- 5 The speech coincidentally also noted constitutional revisions affirming that Putin could remain president for life.
- 6 Among countless examples, the cover of *Der Spiegel*, March 21, 2015, presents an image of Merkel inserted in a photo of German officers standing by the Parthenon during the Second World War.
- 7 The Russian NGO, Memorial (2020), established a Soviet Topography of Terror exhibition, named after a museum in Berlin.
- 8 Russia ranked 149 of 180 on the 2018 world press freedom index (*World Press Freedom Index* 2019).

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