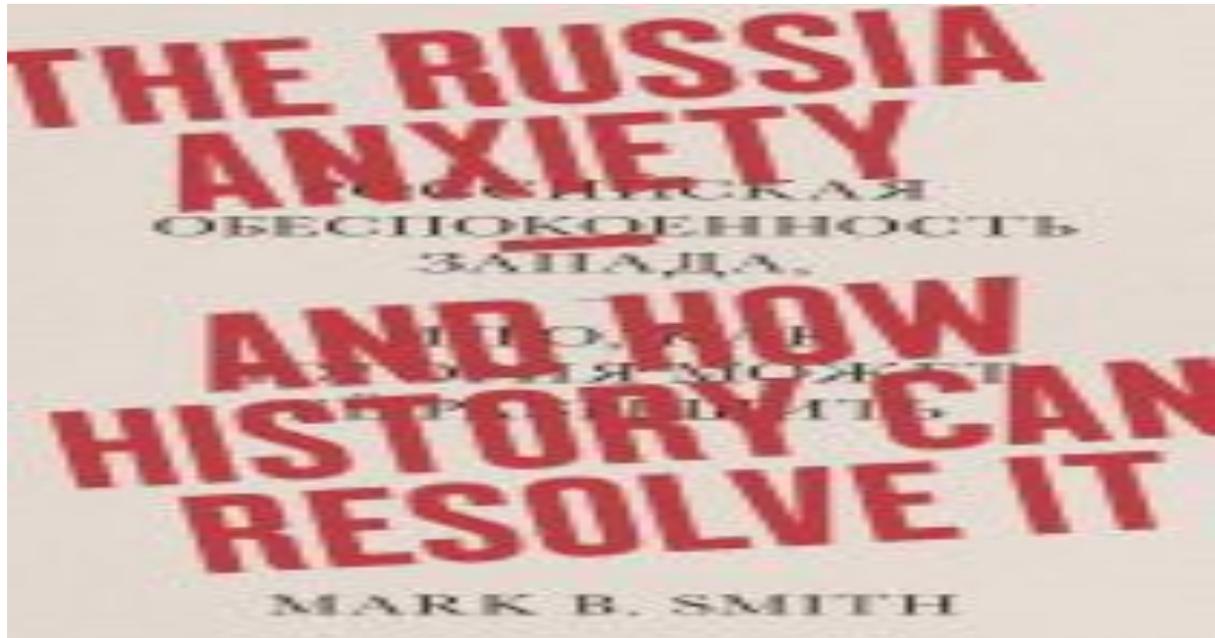


The Russia Anxiety: Astute look at the West's 'fake history' of Russia

Review: Mark B Smith argues tropes of Russophobic history bear little or no relation to reality



Geoffrey Roberts, Irish Times, 6 July 2019

The wave of Russophobia sweeping through Western states and societies today is, according to Mark Smith's compelling book, powered by a "fake history" that he aims to refute. For Smith, recurrent outbreaks of Russophobia express the Russia Anxiety – a long-term pattern of thinking and feeling about Russia that alternates between fear, contempt and disregard for the country. This pattern has repeated throughout the 500 years since the 16th century when Russia was established as a player in the great game of European politics through the expansion of Muscovy under Ivan the Terrible. Smith views the Russia Anxiety as pernicious and persistent, but not as permanent; rather "it is a syndrome whose symptoms come and go".

Hysteria, whipped up around Russia's supposed threat to Western civilization, has been based on such "fake history" as the 19th-century publication in France of Russia's 14-point plan for world domination – the Testament of Peter the Great. This blatant forgery is but one example of what Smith calls the "Black Legend" of Russian history – the idea that expansionism, aggressiveness and authoritarianism are inherent and indelible to the country's identity.

Much of Smith's book is devoted to showing that far from being the threatening, exceptional state depicted in the Black Legend, Russia's international interests are unexceptional and its patterns of behaviour predictable. It was and remains as "normal" as any other European great power in pursuit of its interests. When Russia has deviated from mainstream European history – for example during the period of Soviet socialism – this was the result of chance and contingency.

Geopolitically Russia is a Eurasian state and contains within its borders many different nationalities and cultures. It was, and always will be, part of Europe, as long as we don't succumb to the orientalist fantasies of those seeking to turn the country into a threatening, subversive Other.

'Miscast scenario'

Smith notes that fear, contempt and disregard are not the only motifs in the history of Russian-Western relations. "The Anxiety could quickly dissolve when circumstances demanded," he writes. Russia has often been the West's partner and its saviour, as well as its apparent nemesis. Tsar Alexander I defeated Napoleon and Stalin overcame Hitler and the Nazis. And it was Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union's final visionary leader, who tore down the postwar iron curtain, ending the cold war and reunifying Europe. Nor was any foreign leader firmer in their support for the United States than Vladimir Putin after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While Russia Anxiety may seem absurd and superficial, it can also be deadly dangerous. In July 1914, Germany precipitated a World war because its leaders feared Russian power and calculated they should tackle and defeat this assumed adversary sooner rather than later. Could such a miscast scenario be repeated in the 21st century? We must hope not. Yet in our nuclear age there is a chilling ring to hyperbolic Western claims that Russia is waging a "hybrid war" against EU nations and NATO members; that Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election was equivalent to Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor; and that Putin is a dictator who seeks to re-expand the Russian empire and spread illiberalism across the globe.

So we should be thankful that the Russia Anxiety is not a universal phenomenon. Neither China nor other Asian states suffer from this particular apprehension and there is little sign of the syndrome from African or Latin American states. Even in the West, public opinion is split and the Russophobes do not have things all their own way.

Moral certitude

In a particularly effective passage Smith captures what many people feel when they encounter the hypocrisy and evasions generated by the Russia Anxiety:

"Is external interference in an election more egregious when it happens to the United States? Has Russia's Syria policy done more to destabilise the Middle East than the interventions of the United States? Is 'hybrid war' in Eastern Europe different from CIA covert action in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and elsewhere? Is Russia's choice of partners any different from America's selection of friendly dictators? Is the projection of Russian power through social media in the same category as American cultural diplomacy? Are the human rights interventions of the twenty-first century any different from the imperialism of the nineteenth? Is hacking worse than drone strikes? Are oligarchs worse when they are Russian?"

As Smith says, simply asking such questions destabilises the Russia Anxiety and helps to deflate the excessive and bombastic moral certitude of Western policy towards Russia. Smith's cure for the Russian Anxiety is authentic, not fake, history, especially comparative history, which reveals Russia to be a state that conducts itself no better or worse than any other big power. Russian history is many layered, Smith argues, and the deeper we dig the

more apparent it becomes that the tropes of Russophobic history bear little or no relation to reality.

Smith's narrative is much enlivened by the inclusion of biographical sketches depicting those who have created, resisted and lived with the Russia Anxiety. As a Russian history specialist, he deploys his deep knowledge of the country's culture, society and peoples to capture with verve and imagination the grand sweep of its history, and combines this with an astute commentary on contemporary politics.

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