

Hollywood Reboots Russophobia for the New Cold War

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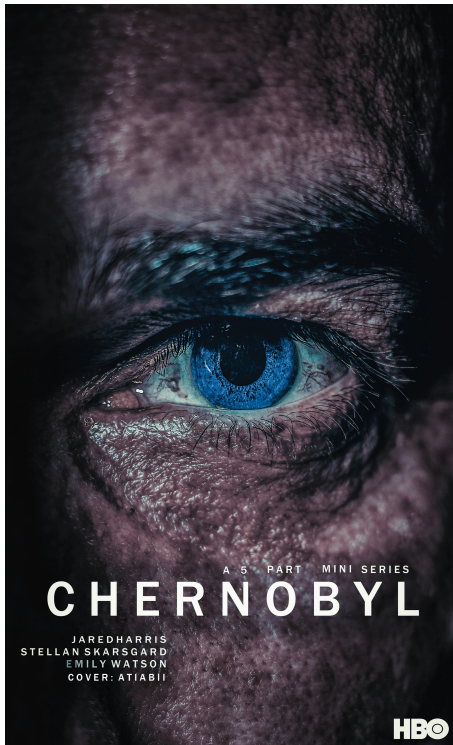
It is an age-old question as to the extent art reflects the world we live in. Bertolt Brecht allegedly said to the contrary that art was “not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.”

The Marxist German playwright devised theatrical methods designed to distance the audience from the staged drama while drawing self-reflexive attention to the contrived nature of the spectacle itself. The idea was that by estranging the spectator and encouraging critical examination, they would come to view society’s manmade injustices as similarly unnatural and be given agency to transform them in the real world.

One of the implications of Brecht’s notion was that art in its more conventional forms often functions as a tool of mass persuasion for those in power to reinforce those inequities. Marx and Engels themselves professed to have learned more about the contradictions of French society from the novels of Honoré de Balzac, which upheld the monarchy and the Church, than any historians or philosophers of their day. At its very worst, artistic mediums can be used by governments to manipulate a nation’s attitude towards other countries in order to justify war.

Brecht’s life and work coincided with the development of the film industry. However, most productions influenced by his ‘epic theatre’ were art-house and foreign films while commercial, mass-market Hollywood movies placed greater emphasis on appealing to the emotions over intellect. However, there were some exceptions such as Charlie Chaplin who not coincidentally was persecuted for his politics by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the Red Scare.

In the Cold War, Tinseltown played an important role in the cultural battlefield against the USSR and anti-Soviet paranoia was an ever-present theme in American cinema for decades, from the McCarthy era until the Berlin Wall fell. Contemporaneously, a revival of geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Russian Federation — which many have dubbed a second Cold War — has seen the return of such tropes on the silver screen. Most recently, it has resurfaced in popular web television shows such as the third season of Netflix’s retro science fiction/horror series *Stranger Things*, as well as HBO’s miniseries *Chernobyl*, which dramatizes the 1986 nuclear accident in Soviet Ukraine.



It was a famous cinematic work that many believe ominously foreshadowed Chernobyl in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 science fiction film, *Stalker*, less than a decade prior to the calamity. It is unlikely that HBO would have been as interested in green-lighting a five-part program on the disaster without the current hysteria surrounding the unproven allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and 'collusion' between Moscow and the Trump campaign. 'Russiagate' has become a national obsession and suddenly the very idea of corruption and intrigue has been made synonymous with the Kremlin.

Hollywood liberal figures have been some of the hoax's biggest proponents, including the show's writer, Craig Mazin. It is equally as hard to imagine Americans themselves being as captivated by a re-enactment of the nuclear accident without the current political climate of fear-mongering bombarding them everyday in corporate media. From the perspective of the U.S. political establishment, what better way to deflect attention away from its own sins than onto a manufactured adversary?

For instance, a recent Columbia University study [found](#) that sections of the Marshall Islands, which the U.S. acquired from Japan following WWII and conducted countless nuclear tests nearby in the Pacific, is significantly more radioactive than Chernobyl. The highest radiation levels were found on the Bikini atoll, where evacuated islanders were initially told they could return shortly after tests began in 1946 but have been waiting more than seventy years to come home. On other coral atolls in the island country such as Rogelapp, the U.S. Navy allowed the native population to return too soon knowing full well the food and water were highly contaminated, resulting in a generation with high birth defects and cancer rates. The U.S. ceded the territory in 1994 only after the Marshallese negotiated a meager \$150 million in damages for their mistreatment while permitting the establishment of a U.S. ballistic missile defense test site targeting China. Unfortunately, the press is too preoccupied with sensational coverage of the recent accident at the Russian military base in Nyonska, salivating at another prospective Chernobyl. Not to mention, the ongoing cover-up of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011 in the U.S. vassal state of Japan.

Already featuring a non-native cast and in the English language spoken with British accents, HBO's *Chernobyl* is loaded with historical inaccuracies. The narrative takes many liberties both for the purpose of entertainment value and to create blatant propaganda seemingly as intent on discrediting socialism as it is in demonizing Moscow. This is unsurprising considering that screenwriter Craig Mazin is not only an establishment liberal with Putin derangement syndrome but a vocal critic of Bernie Sanders who has even ludicrously attempted to tie the Senator from Vermont to Russiagate [on social media](#).

Mazin has virtue signaled about the show as a parable about global warming ("*the flaws that led to Chernobyl are the same flaws shown by climate deniers*") while simultaneously [denouncing](#) the candidate in the 2020 Democratic field with arguably the most comprehensive climate plan, leaving aside whether Sanders' New Dealism is genuine socialism. For centre-rightists, the climate crisis is not tied to capitalism which as Marx reportedly said, "tends to destroy its two sources of wealth, nature and human beings" but is merely the failure of individual corrupt leaders like Trump. Early on in the series, Mazin invents a fictional elderly Soviet official who points to a bust of Vladimir Lenin while invoking socialism to silence those urging an immediate evacuation of Pripyat in the initial days of the disaster.



Mazin takes further artistic license to assign a protagonist in the story in Valery Legasov (played by Jared Harris, image on the left), the high-ranking chemist who led the inquiry of the disaster and testified before the International Atomic Energy Agency before committing suicide in 1987. The story deviates from factual events in order to portray the scientist as a honest official blowing the whistle on a bureaucratic government. While his sworn statement was indeed straightforward, in real life Legasov did not blame reactor design flaws and deviate from the official government account of "human error" or breach of protocol as portrayed in the series, nor was he a witness in the trial of the nuclear plant operators who were found to be at fault. This is entirely a work of fiction designed to depict an incompetent and secretive Soviet government to be the cause of the accident. One would have no idea this same state was capable of inventing human space travel or industrializing an agrarian society in a single decade, a feat which took the British more than a century to accomplish. Not to mention that the accident occurred while the USSR was undergoing market-oriented reforms, a period in which the Soviet economy was at its most *de-centralized* and on the verge of collapse during *perestroika*.

At every turn, Legasov is up against cartoonish authoritarian officials who attempt to cover-up the severity of the catastrophe, including one particularly absurd scene when a Soviet apparatchik threatens to throw him out of a helicopter to his death if he does not explain how a reactor works. The Soviet working class are not spared, either, as miners are coerced at gunpoint by Soviet troops at the order of the coal minister to dig a sarcophagus underneath the reactor to prevent radioactive contamination of the country's water supply with the promise of financial reward. However, by all accounts no such use of the military ever took place and is contradicted by Legasov's own statements which were not nearly as critical of state management as represented. The scientist had also attempted to take his own life once before while in the hospital suffering from radiation exposure, a more likely motive for his suicide. It is also rumored that the real reason for the Kremlin's 'secrecy' about Chernobyl was that Pripyat was home to more than just a reactor-grade power station but [possibly](#) an undisclosed missile launching site or a facility producing warheads, with the meltdown a case of deliberate cyber sabotage by the C.I.A..

The series even finds time to rewrite WWII history in a scene where a stubborn babushka refuses to evacuate Pripyat, claiming to have endured worse surviving the Banderite hoax of the Holodomor. There was indeed a famine (throughout the entire USSR), but using the reconstruction of the tragedy to insert Ukrainian nationalist propaganda and Nazi myths of deliberate starvation is part of the West's ongoing whitewashing of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators whose ultra-right descendants were instrumental in the 2014 Maidan coup. It is an insult to the Soviet people who sprung to action voluntarily and heroically to prevent the disaster from worsening to what could have left much of Europe uninhabitable, killed millions and caused incalculable damage to the environment. Then again, the West has never given the Soviets credit for defeating Germany, so it is to be expected they wouldn't truly acknowledge the sacrifices made in Chernobyl.



During the 1980s as the Cold War reached a crescendo, Hollywood was churning out anti-Soviet movies marketed at teens like *Red Dawn* where a group of adolescents defend their small midwestern town from a fictional Soviet invasion. The same premise has been recycled for the most recent season of Netflix's popular *Stranger Things*, a sci-fi horror vehicle carrying on the genre's legacy of association with cold war paranoia going back to the 1950s with classics like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* which evoked domestic fears about communist infiltration in the form of an alien invasion. Stylishly imitative of the 1980s with a synth-heavy soundtrack, the first two seasons saw its young characters living in a fictional Indiana town, some of whom possess telekinetic powers, who battle paranormal beings from another dimension called the "Upside Down" on which a nearby U.S. Department of Energy facility has been secretly performing experiments.

The third season takes a different turn, however, where the adolescents go up against "evil

Russians” and “Soviet scum” infiltrating the U.S. Perhaps it was for the better that *Chernobyl* decided to use British actors speaking in their own tongue because the Russians in *Stranger Things* are cartoonish, brute thugs that resemble Ivan Drago from *Rocky IV*. Even more absurdly, the children discover that a new local shopping mall in the town putting mom-and-pop stores out of business has been constructed by Russian operatives (not by multinational chains as it was in real life under Reaganism) to hide an underground laboratory. The preposterous sequence can only be interpreted as an expression of the anxiety underlying the U.S. decline and fear of the ascendancy of Moscow on the international stage. Like *Chernobyl*, the nostalgia-driven program disparages socialism as much as it villainizes Russia, including one ludicrous scene where a 10-year old black girl agrees to help the other kids on the condition they agree to give her free ice cream from the mall shop where several of the teens work. She then proceeds to lecture them on the purported benefits of trickle-down theory, because if anyone can appreciate the alleged rewards of Reaganomics with the reduction of social programs and spending cuts, it would be an African-American child during the 1980s.



It is apparent that the caricature of the Soviet Union in both productions is really a stand-in for the present-day Russian government under Vladimir Putin. As only American exceptionalism could permit, Hollywood did not hold the same disdain for his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, whose legacy of high inflation and national debt have since been eliminated. In fact, most have forgotten that the same filmdom community outraged about Russia’s supposed interference in the 2016 U.S. election made a celebratory movie back in 2003, *Spinning Boris*, which practically boasted about the instrumental role the West played in Yeltsin’s 1996 reelection in Russia.

The highly unpopular alcoholic politician benefited from a near universal media bias as virtually all the federation’s news outlets came under the control of the ‘oligarchs’ (in America known simply as billionaires) which his economic policies of mass privatization of state industry enriched overnight. Yeltsin initially polled at less than 10% and was far behind Communist Party candidate Gennady Zyuganov until he became the recipient of billions from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) thanks to his corrupt campaign manager, Anatoly Chubais, now one of the most hated men in all of Russia. After the purging of votes and rampant ballot-box stuffing, Yeltsin successfully closed the gap between his opponent thanks to the overt U.S. meddling.

Spinning Boris was directed by Roger Spottiswoode, who previously helmed an installment in the James Bond series, *Tomorrow Never Dies*. The 1997 entry in the franchise is one of thousands of Hollywood films and network television shows exposed by journalists Matthew Alford and Tom Secker as having been influenced or directly assisted by the Pentagon and CIA in their must-read book *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood*. Based on evidence from documents revealed in Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, their investigation divulges the previously unknown extent to which the national security complex has gone in exerting control over content in the film industry. While it has always been known that the military held sway over movies that required usage of its facilities and equipment to be produced, the level of impact on such films in the pre-production and editing stages, as well as the control over non-military themed flicks one wouldn't suspect to be under supervision by Washington and Langley, is exhaustively uncovered.



As expected, Hollywood and the military-industrial complex's intimate relationship during the Cold War is featured prominently in Alford and Secker's investigative work. It is unclear whether HBO or Netflix sought US military assistance or were directly involved with the national security state in their respective productions, but these are just two recent examples of many where the correlated increase in geopolitical tensions with Moscow is reflected.

The upcoming sequel to DC's *Wonder Woman* set to be released next year, *Wonder Woman 1984*, featuring the female superhero "coming into conflict with the Soviet Union during the Cold War in the 1980s", is yet another. Reprising her role is Israeli actress and IDF veteran Gal Gadot as the title character, ironically starring in a blockbuster that will demonize the Eurasian state which saved her ethnicity from extinction. Given the Pentagon's involvement in the debacle surrounding 2014's *The Interview* which provoked very real tensions with North Korea, it is likely they are at least closely examining any entertainment with content regarding Russia, if not directly pre-approving it for review.

Ultimately, the Western panic about its imperial decline is not limited to assigning blame to Moscow. Sinophobia has manifested as well in recent films such as the 2016 sci-fi film *Arrival* where the extra-terrestrials who reach Earth seem more interested in communicating with Beijing as the global superpower than the U.S. However, while the West forebodes the return of Russia and China to greater standing, you can be certain its real fear lies elsewhere. The fact that *Chernobyl* and *Stranger Things* are as preoccupied with portraying socialism in a bad light as they are in rendering Moscow nefarious shows the real underlying trepidation of the ruling elite that concerns the resurgence of class consciousness. The West must learn its lesson that its state of perpetual war has caused its

own downfall or it could attempt a last line of defense that would inevitably conscript all of humanity to its death as the ruling class nearly did to the world in 1914 and 1939.

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