

“Fireman on the Devil’s Train”: Image of the Soviet Leaders in American Popular Music during the Cold War

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to determine the place and role of American popular music in the process of formation and evolution of the images of Soviet leaders in the context of the Cold War based on the constructivist approach. Popular culture reflects ideas and views deeply rooted in the public consciousness, and at the same time creates such ideas and stereotypes through the formation of spontaneous images and their consolidation in popular culture. In this regard, the analysis of the repertoire of images replicated by American popular music of various genres allows us to contribute to the historiography of the Cold War from the point of view of studying it as an image confrontation between the two powers. In addition, identifying the evolution of ideas about Soviet leaders in American popular culture makes it possible to expand our understanding of the socio-cultural context of the development of Soviet-American relations. This article examines the lyrics of songs by popular US performers as a source for understanding the set of values through the prism of which the authors gave characteristics, assessed the personalities and activities of their characters, thereby actually acting as actors in the ideological confrontation between the two systems. The evolution of the images of Soviet leaders in American popular music from the second half of the 1940s to the 1960s clearly demonstrates how their perception changed radically three times in a relatively short period of time. Due to the tradition of personifying countries through the images of their rulers, this change reflected the transformation of ideas about the possibility of interaction with the Soviet Union as a potential international partner. The transition from the allied relations of the Second World War to the confrontation in the conditions of the Cold War was accompanied by the demonization of the image of I.V. Stalin. A short-term “thaw” in the domestic and foreign policies of the Soviet Union gave rise to hopes for the possibility of cooperation between the two countries in ensuring peace and security. These hopes and the associated humanized image of N.S. Khrushchev were replicated both by the American mass media and the work of musicians working in various genres of popular music. However, in the context of the aggravation of Soviet-American relations during the Cuban Missile Crisis, which put the countries on the brink of a nuclear conflict, hopes were replaced by new disappointment. This disappointment was compounded by high expectations from the new Soviet leadership, which resulted in a return to the radical rhetoric of the Cold War.

“Fireman on the Devil’s Train”: Image of the Soviet Leaders in American Popular Music during the Cold War

Aleksandr Okun

Methodology: Taking the Popular Music Seriously

Popular culture reflects ideas and views deeply rooted in the mass consciousness. But it also creates these ideas and stereotypes. American popular music plays a major role in both senses. Using its specific means of communication with the listener, it offers the audience its vision of the essential image of the truth, speaking in a language it understands, simultaneously reflecting its preferences and participating in their formation. Considering the existence in American popular political culture of a stable tradition of expressing one’s attitude to Russia/the USSR through personified images of political leaders, the most fruitful is the constructivist approach to analyzing the evolution of these images in the context of the development of bilateral relations. In this sense, popular music is an interesting object of study, since it forms spontaneous replicable images, fixing them in the mass consciousness. This article is focused on the images of the Soviet leaders in various genres of American popular music in the context of the relations between two countries during the Cold War. The hypothesis of the author is that popular music, along with other genres of popular culture, plays a crucial role in shaping the self-identity of American society. One of the ways in this process is to oppose oneself to a constitutive “Other,” which was the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Using the specific means of communication with the mass public, the authors operated with the dichotomies of Good and Evil, Freedom and Despotism. This made it possible to formulate a simple and understandable picture of the world, one of the elements of which was the confrontation between the political leaders of the two countries as the personification of the struggle between Light and Darkness. In this discourse Soviet leaders acted as “dark twins” of the American presidents.

The article uses the ideas of the British cultural scientist Simon Frith, who was apparently one of the first to call for taking popular music seriously and defined its social functions as follows:

We use pop songs to create for ourselves a particular sort of self-definition, a particular place in society... Folk music, similarly, continue to be used to mark the boundaries of ethnic identity... Only music seems capable of creating this sort of spontaneous collective identity, this kind of personally felt patriotism.

Music's second social function is to give us a way of managing the relationship between our public and private emotional lives...The third function of popular music is to shape popular memory, to organize our sense of time... One of the most obvious consequences of music's organization of our sense of time is that songs and tunes are often the key to our remembrance of things past...Popular music is something possessed... In 'possessing' music, we make it part of our own identity and build it into our sense of ourselves...The social functions of popular music are in the creation of identity, in the management of feelings, in the organization of time.¹

Professor Hugo Keesing of the University of Maryland cited statistical data in his study showing that the authors of American popular songs during the Cold War most frequently addressed the personalities of Soviet political leaders in the late 1940s to the first half of the 1960s, with 75% of them dedicated to Nikita S. Khrushchev.² In this regard, the article examines the evolution of the images of Soviet leaders in American popular music during this period, since the availability of a fairly representative range of sources allows not only to determine the repertoire of these images, but also to record the process of their transformation in the context of bilateral relations between the countries. It should also be noted that the most politicized genre in this sense was country music, oriented toward traditional American values (individualism, religiosity, patriotism), through the prism of which the authors gave characteristics, assessed the personalities and activities of their characters. Hence the clearly expressed patriotic character of the lyrics, the use of religious rhetoric and the manipulation of dichotomies of Good and Evil, Light and Darkness, Freedom and Despotism, which allowed the formulation of a simple and understandable picture of the world for Americans, in which the USSR and its leaders represented a threat to the free world led by the USA.³ Probably, the most succinct interrelation of religiosity and patriotism in this musical genre is expressed in the song from 1949: "The Bible on the Table and the Flag upon the Wall" performed by many musicians, including the famous "singing cowboy" Gene Autry:

*They're the backbone of the nation,
And we'll always find salvation
With the Bible on the table and the flag upon the wall.*⁴

¹ Simon Frith, *Taking the Popular Music Seriously* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 265-268.

² Hugo A. Keesing, *The Cold War on Record*. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=2f5046f6f56cab6bdb2de6f0d0e9f121588c7fc9>

³ K. Fontenot, "Dear Ivan" in *Country Music Goes to War* Ed. By Charles K. Wolfe, and James E. Akenson, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 143-144.

⁴ G. J. Bennett., P. Cunningham, and L. Whitcup, "The Bible on the Table and the Flag upon the Wall." <https://www.songlyrics.com/gene-autry/bible-on-the-table-and-the-flag-upon-the-wall-lyrics/>; Gene Autry, "The Bible on the Table and the Flag upon the Wall." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqpmdd3lyJho&list=RDRqpmdd3lyJho&start_radio=1

Thus, country music in the conditions of the Cold War had a significant mobilization potential for the consolidation of the nation in the face of an existential threat, which was the Soviet Union and the international communist movement. This potential was actively used in the image war, which was an important component of the confrontation between the two superpowers.⁵

The Godless Land of Russia

An important element in the formation of the images of the Soviet Union and Soviet leaders, especially in country music, was the use of religious rhetoric and religious justification for the confrontation between the USA and the USSR. This approach helped to create a simple dual picture of the world, in which this confrontation appeared as an eternal struggle between the forces of Good and Evil, Divine and Satanic principles.

Under these conditions, the Soviet Union was viewed as the country, Magog, as described in the Book of Ezekiel in the Bible. At least that's what the country/gospel singer and Baptist preacher Alfred Grant Karnes proclaimed in his sermons in 1950s. And this was not merely a consequence of the preacher's religious exaltation, but a fairly popular idea, it was confirmed by the virtually literal reproduction of this idea by California Governor Ronald Reagan in 1971:

Ezekiel tells us that Gog, the nation that will lead all of the other powers against Israel, will come out of the north. Biblical scholars have been saying for generations that Gog must be Russia. What other powerful nation is to the north of Israel? None. But it didn't seem to make sense before the Russian revolution, when Russia was a Christian country. Now it does, now that Russia has become communistic and atheistic, now that Russia has set itself against God. Now it fits the description perfectly.⁶

One of the most striking musical embodiments of this thesis was the song of Little Jimmy Dickens "They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain" (1952), which was recorded by other different musicians also:

*There's a land where little children cannot play
And the people have forgotten how to pray
It's a land where peace and friendship should be tried
But an iron curtain keeps the Lord outside
They locked God outside the iron curtain
On old Satan, they have placed a kingly crown
But this evil nation will never find salvation
Till the Lord tears the iron curtain down*

⁵ Joseph M. Thompson, *Cold War Country: How Nashville's Music Row and the Pentagon Created the Sound of American Patriotism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2024).

⁶ S. D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of the Millennial Rhetoric*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 184.

*It's a nation full of hate and full of fear
Where a man must whisper so no one can hear
And all those who dare object have quickly died
While an iron curtain keeps the Lord outside
They have tried to chop away the rugged cross
But someday the Lord will show them who is boss
He will count the faithful standing at his side
And in judgment He will lock the rest outside
They locked the God outside the iron curtain
On old Satan, they have placed a kingly crown
But Heaven's great power will name that fatal hour⁷*

This image of a Godless country under the control of Satan has been used many times by country music singers before and after Little Jimmy Dickens. Jack Holden and Frances Kay in their song "The Fiery Bear" (1950) sang:

*They know not the terms or the Bible's words
They laugh at the Golden Rule
They've never seen the Great Speckled Bird
They don't teach those things in their schools⁸*

This idea also sounds in songs of Red River Dave McEnery dedicated to Francis Powers "Trial of Francis Powers" (1960) and "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving / The Ballad of Francis Powers" (1960):

*Far across the foreign waters in the state USSR
O'er the Lubianka prison shines a bright foreboding star
In that godless land of Russia, in that veil of endless tears
They gave him 10 long years!⁹*

*In a lonesome prison cell in godless Russia
Where no Bible ever speaks His precious name
There's the boy who flew the U2 for his country
To make sure that no Pearl Harbor comes again¹⁰*

⁷ Fontenot, "Dear Ivan, 145; "Little Jimmy Dickson They Locked God Outside the Iron Curtain" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfUheqJBYYtw&list=RDLfUheqJBYYtw&start_radio=1

⁸ J. Holden and F. Kay, "The Fiery Bear." " https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEQ2WxNYRCQ&list=RDIEQ2WxNYRCQ&start_radio=1

⁹ Red River Dave McEnery, "Trial of Francis Powers." <https://genius.com/Red-river-dave-mcenery-trial-of-francis-power-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zu6NJVEFYcY&list=RDZu6NJVEFYcY&start_radio=1

¹⁰ Red River Dave McEnery, "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving / The Ballad of Francis Powers." <https://www.lyricsvault.net/php/artist.php?s=132081>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLymJPEz5bk&list=RDNLymJPEz5bk&start_radio=1

Red River Dave McEnery (as many other singers) often wrote his lyrics to famous and popular melodies, which allowed him to attract a larger audience and enhanced the emotional impact on listeners due to the recognition effect. The basis for the first song about Powers was the famous “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (“Glory, glory, hallelujah”) and for the another one – the most popular song of the Second World War “There’s a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere” by Bob Miller. He used the same technique in his recitative song “The Red Deck of Cards” (1953) devoted to the Korean War. In this song religion became the battlefield between American Land of God and Soviet Godless Russia.¹¹

An important element of this fundamentally religious picture of the world was the image of the leader of a godless country as the Devil’s henchman.

From Stalin to Khrushchev: From Demonization to Humanization

Formation of the image of the enemy in the context of the outbreak of the Cold War included the gradual transition from images of abstract communists who pose a threat to the free world, to the personification of absolute Evil in the person of Joseph Stalin in songs in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A special role in this transition was played by the emergence of nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union and the Korean War, which was perceived as a direct conflict between the United States and the USSR. Under these conditions, the Soviet dictator was viewed as a demonic figure who had the power to single-handedly decide to initiate a nuclear disaster.

Hank Williams, who is regarded as one of the most significant and influential American singers and songwriters of the twentieth century, the father of modern country music, responded to this threat with his song “No, No Joe”:

*‘Cause the Kaiser tried it and Hitler tried it
Mussolini tried it too
Now they’re all sittin’ around a fire and did you know something?
They’re saving a place for you
Now Joe you ought to get it clear
You can’t push folks around with fear
‘Cause we don’t scare easy over here
No, no Joe
What makes you do the things you do?
You gettin’ folks mad at you
Don’t bite off more ‘n you can chew
No, no Joe¹²*

¹¹ Red River Dave McEnery, “The Red Deck of Cards,” <https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/t/thereddeckofcards.html>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsAXgYxWY3Q&list=RDOsAXgYxWY3Q&start_radio=1

¹² Stephanie Schafer, “Cashville”: *Dilution of Original Country Music Identity through Increasing Commercialization*. (Hamburg: Diplomica, 2012), 91; Hank Williams, “No, No, Joe.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_m3GVys3s4&list=RDV_m3GVys3s4&start_radio=1

Hank Williams established the tradition of directly addressing Soviet leaders as a rhetorical device that was further developed in the songs of other authors. Another common theme in the songs was the likening of Stalin to other dictators, primarily Hitler and Mussolini, which was actually a return to the rhetoric of the period before the emergence of the anti-Hitler coalition. We can remember the blues by Peter “Doctor” Clayton written in July 1941:

*Yeah, Hitler and Mussolini, they must have the snatchin' disease.
Ain't gonna be no peace in Europe, till we cut off Hitler's head,
Ooh, Mussolini have heart failure, when he hears Stalin is dead.
I hope Hitler catch consumption, I mean the galloping kind,
And Stalin catch the leprosy, Mussolini lose his mind.*¹³

Interestingly, after the United States entered World War II, another musician, Bill “Jazz” Gillam, recorded this blues song without mentioning Stalin.¹⁴ Moreover, in American wartime songs Stalin as an ally received much more complimentary reviews. Thus, the political context largely determined the composers’ attitudes toward the Soviet leader.

American musician, composer, and record producer Arthur ‘Guitar Boogie’ Smith recorded in 1950 the song “Mr. Stalin You’re Eating Too High on The Hog” in which he warns Stalin against excessive ambitions using the same narrative:

*Now, Joe, you better change your way
Or like Hitler you will pay
For eating too high on the hog
Now old Joe's getting' up in age
But they say he ain't so dumb
He knows all about ships and tanks
And maybe atom bombs
If he keeps eatin' like he is
At his own discretion
One of these days he's going to wake up
With American indigestion*¹⁵

Another American country music star Roy Acuff (the son of a Baptist preacher who ran for governor of Tennessee in 1948) seeks to give similar advice to Stalin

¹³ Guido van Rijn, *Roosevelt's Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 171; Peter “Doctor” Clayton 41 Blues. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRTLbyOxDHw&list=RDnRTLbyOxDHw&start_radio=1

¹⁴ van Rijn, *Roosevelt's Blues*, 172.

¹⁵ “Arthur ‘Guitar Boogie’ Smith Mr. Stalin You’re Eating Too High on The Hog.” <https://genius.com/Arthur-smith-country-mr-stalin-youre-eating-too-high-on-the-hog-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3HcAUGk6N4&list=RDo3HcAUGk6N4&start_radio=1

in his song “Advice to Joe” (1951):

*There's a Communist ambition now to rule or wreck us all
With atomic ammunition they would like to see us fall
Peaceful men of every nation would become as common slaves
We'll prevent that situation better we shall fill our graves
You will see the lightnin' flashin' hear atomic thunders roll
When Moscow lies in ashes God have you mercy on your soul
Here's a question Mr. Stalin and it's you who must decide
When atomic bombs start falling do you have a place to hide?
Uncle Sam will still be living when the smoke of battle's o'er
He will make a noose to fit you God will close up Heaven's door
You'll come face to face with Satan see the loved ones who have died
So be sure that when bombs start falling that you have a place to hide”*

It also introduces another popular thesis about the treachery and ingratitude of Stalin, who forgot the help that Uncle Sam provided to the Soviet Union during the war:

*Just remember Mr. Stalin how we both fought side by side
When Hitler and Mussolini had you whipped and how you cried
Uncle Sammy came to help you gave you strength, we gave you all
And now your great ambition is to see our nation fall!¹⁶*

Such an important event as the death of Stalin could not go unnoticed by American songwriters. Billy Hawk recorded his interpretation of the significance of the event in “The Death of Joe Stalin (Good Riddance)” in 1953:

*“For years we fought a cold, cold war
We tried to have piece in our land
But with every effort an evil was born
With the trick and lie in each hand
So long, old Joe, you had to go
Your reservation came through
Just one last wish from all people today
That there'll never be another like you!”*

Billy Hawk used the death as a reason to take stock and evaluate Stalin's political activities:

*Some men were born to rule in their land
It must be all written we know
But now you've moved on to a stronger hand*

¹⁶ Gerard J. De Groot, *The Bomb. A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 186; Roy Acuff, “Advice to Joe.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmEcLC0xgiE&list=RDtmEcLC0xgiE&start_radio=1

*As the Devil's helper I know*¹⁷

Ray Anderson talks the similar ideas in his song "Stalin Kicked the Bucket" (1953):

*Old Joe kicked the bucket, he's long gone
He won't worry us from now on
He lived in a place they call Moscow
His number came up and he had to go...
While near the end, he couldn't talk
He's paralyzed and he couldn't walk
He died with a hemorrhage in the brain
They have a new fireman on the devil's train...
So now the devil can retire
'Cause old Joe Stalin will keep the fire*¹⁸

Thus, in the American mass consciousness by the time of the change of power Soviet Union had the image of the Evil Empire, ruled, if not by Satan himself, then by his closest assistants. Stalin's successors inevitably became the heirs of this image, from whose shadow either could emerge "a new fireman on the devil's train" or a creator of the new personality. Nikita Khrushchev became this heir. Gradually, over the course of several years, as changes occurred in the domestic and, most importantly, foreign policy of the USSR, the perception of the Soviet political leader in the American public consciousness also changed. From a threatening monster, he turned into a figure, with a very peculiar, but still human face. We can fix these changes by the covers of *Time* magazine from 1953 to 1959 and we can hear them in the songs of 1959 – 1962. Khrushchev's visit to the United States in 1959, the first by a Soviet leader to the United States, played a key role in this transformation. For the first time, Americans saw the head of the communist empire in person, and he turned out to be not so scary. The first spontaneous reaction to his appearance from one of the participants in Khrushchev's meeting at the airport was: "What a funny little man!"¹⁹

This new image inspired Jimmy Driftwood, a country singer and college professor, to write his version of the classic song "The Bear Went Over the Mountain," dedicated to Khrushchev's visit:

Oh, the bear flew over the ocean

17 Billy Hawk and His Buddies, "The Death of Joe Stalin (Good Riddance)." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_WA-oRlw54&list=RDw_WA-oRlw54&start_radio=1

18 Ray Anderson, "Stalin Kicked the Bucket." <https://genius.com/Ray-anderson-stalin-kicked-the-bucket-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaaIh9S-hlM&list=RDqaaIh9S-hlM&start_radio=1

19 Peter Carlson, *K Blows Top. A Cold War Comic Interlude Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 98; Jimmy Driftwood, "The Bear Flew Over the Ocean." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGyRAqB5PM&list=RDZGyRAqB5PM&start_radio=1

*The bear flew over the ocean
 The bear flew over the ocean
 To see what he could see
 He saw a friendly nation
 He saw a friendly nation
 He saw a friendly nation
 And all of our people were free-ee, oh
 Big bear go back and tell them
 Big bear go back and tell them
 Big bear go back and tell them
 That all of our people are free!²⁰*

The song “The Bear Flew Over the Ocean” is remarkable for its presentation of the American people as powerful but peaceful and friendly toward Russians. This offer of peace and friendship is the main message of the song and the main thing that the Russian bear should take with him from America. Driftwood used the classic image of the Russian Bear but it was no longer the apocalyptic “Fiery Bear” from the song by Jack Holden and Frances Kay (1950):

*We don't like to think of atomic power
 The weapon we'd rather not use
 But now we enter the critical hour
 And there you're holding the fuse
 You bear, you bear, you fiery bear
 Is there no stopping your prowl
 You bear, you bear, you fiery bear
 We're not afraid of your growl.²¹*

Now it was a friendly Big Bear with whom you could have a dialogue, cooperate, not be afraid, and even play jokes on him. The image of Khrushchev as a funny little man provoked the writing of humorous and ironic songs. His American trip inspired Irving Caesar, the author of “Tea for Two” and many other tunes, for the piece called “Let's Pow-Wow, Not KowTow” in which he contrasted the Indian festival of unity with the Chinese ceremony of kneeling before the emperor, thereby calling for the development of friendly and equal relations. Another example of such songs was “Russian Bandstand” by Dickie Goodman and Mickey Shorr. In it they tried to imagine what would happen if Nikita Khrushchev decided to host a Russian version of Dick Clark's popular rock and roll TV show, American Bandstand.²² In their version, nothing good would have come of this, but the very fact that the question was posed in this way

²⁰ Carlson, *K Blows Top*, 135.

²¹ J. Holden J and F. Kay, “The Fiery Bear.” <https://genius.com/Jack-holden-and-frances-kay-the-fiery-bear-lyrics>;
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZP7Vk6-ojo&list=RDkZP7Vk6-ojo&start_radio=1

²² Carlson, *K Blows Top*, 136.

indicated a radical revision of the attitude towards the Soviet leader. One could hardly even imagine anything similar about Stalin and his time.

This positive inspiration and hope prevailed until 1962. Even the Berlin Crisis and U-2 incident could not change the a generally benevolent, although largely ironic, attitude towards Khrushchev. American actor and puppeteer Walker Edmiston recorded the song using the voice of one of his puppet characters Barky the Dog and expressing the popular hope that exposure to the American way of life would encourage the Soviet leader to change his attitude toward the United States and stop perceiving it as an enemy. "I Dreamt I Saw Khrushchev (In A Pink Cadillac)" (1962):

*"I dreamt I saw Khrushchev in a pink Cadillac
He drove down the freeway with two chicks in the back
I pulled up beside him and I heard him say
Is good fine country here in USA
He munched on a hot dog and he sipped on a coke
The chicks rubbed his bald head while they told him a joke
He blushed and he chuckled as he rolled away
Is good fine country here in USA
He turned off the freeway and was lost in the crowd
But somewhere in traffic boomed a voice clear and loud
He gone out to ball game he see Dodgers play
Is good fine country here in USA
The TV awakened me I jumped from my chair
The scene was the Kremlin with mob standing there
The new Russian anthem introduced today
Is good fine country there in USA."²³*

Khrushchev's popularity in the United States at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s is difficult to overstate. His photographs were constantly on magazine covers, and he rivaled movie stars in the frequency of press mentions, effectively becoming part of the daily information flow that the media bombarded Americans with. A peculiar reflection of this was the mention of Khrushchev in Allan Sherman's parodic and somewhat absurdist song "The Ballad of Oh Boy" (1962), which listed iconic American phenomena and characters: taxes, Buffalo Bill, astronaut John Glenn, Barry Goldwater, Truman Capote, Elizabeth Taylor and her men, and so on. And in this chaos, the following couplet was present:

*What do you think of the twist?
Oh boy
Khrushchev the bald communist*

²³ W. Edmiston, "I Dreamt I Saw Khrushchev (In a Pink Cadillac)." <https://genius.com/Walker-edmiston-as-barky-i-dreamt-i-saw-krushchev-in-a-pink-cadillac-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNiD_19HY-k&list=RDhNiD_19HY-k&start_radio=1

*Oh boy*²⁴

Khrushchev's association with the twist is likely linked to their simultaneous arrival in the United States in 1959. These same considerations likely motivated Melvin Gale to write "Khrushchev Twist" (1962), in which the Soviet leader came to New York to learn how to dance the twist. Despite his preoccupation with the atomic bomb, he was so fascinated by the dance that he vowed not to bomb America.²⁵

This positive irony applied not only to Khrushchev himself, but also to his wife Nina, whose popularity in America also began during the 1959 visit. Orin Freenie in his 1962 song "Mrs. Khrushchev, Honey Baby" confessed his mad love for her, which he felt as soon as he saw her.²⁶

Satan's Buddy

The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated the true face of the Soviet leader in the perception of the American mass consciousness. The positive image of a sincere, impulsive, spontaneous person with whom you can deal, turned out to be only a mask behind which hid an insidious enemy seeking to destroy America. Demonic features once again emerged through the human face, and this transformation was immediately reflected in American popular music. Erle Standridge and the rockabilly music star Jay Chevalier recorded two songs with a very similar content and very close titles in 1962 (Erle Standridge's "Satan's Call to Khrushchev" and Jay Chevalier's "Khrushchev and the Devil"). In these songs Khrushchev and the Devil discussed the problem of destroying the United States in a telephone conversation. Khrushchev asked the Devil for advice and help, but he also turned out to be powerless before the power of America. The authors especially emphasize the long-standing friendly relations of the interlocutors and the commonality of their interests to rule the world:

*"Old Khrushchev called the devil on the phone the other day
The operator listened in on what they had to say
"Hello", came old Khrushchev's voice, "Is my pal Satan at home?
Just tell him it's his buddy Khru, that-a wants him on the phone."
Old Satan finally answered and said, "Hello there, old pal!
If I can be of service, you know I surely shall!"
"Listen, please," said Khrushchev, "my story I will tell,
Of how I'm changin' this old world into a modern... we-elll
I got atomic submarines, plenty of Sputniks, too,*

²⁴ Allan Sherman, "The Ballad of Oh Boy." <https://genius.com/Allan-sherman-oh-boy-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-rCFBmsetw&list=RDM-rCFBmsetw&start_radio=1

²⁵ M. Gayle, "Khrushchev Twist." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wQL44oGXMl&list=RD4wQL44oGXMl&start_radio=1

²⁶ O. Freenie, "Mrs. Khrushchev, Honey Baby." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L73BTSA5XQ&list=RDL73BTSA5XQ&start_radio=1

*I've got them so afraid of me that they don't know what to do
 My long range guided missiles will go just where I say
 And with your help, Satan's power, I'll rule the world some day!"
 Old Satan said, "Now good old buddy, there's something you don't know
 The Yankee people build things too, they're really on the go.
 If I could only help my friend, you can be sure I would
 But they'll make it hotter for you than I ever could!
 They've got atomic submarines and plenty of Sputniks, too.
 They've got you so afraid of them that you don't know what to do"
 Their long range guided missiles will go just where they say
 Let's face it Khru, me and you can't whip the USA!²⁷*

Thus, the circle was closed, there was a return from humanization to demonization of the image of Soviet leaders, Khrushchev actually lost his difference from Stalin and turned into another "Satan's buddy" and henchman, seeking to destroy the free world and establish world domination of communism.

"Commie Lies": Double talk.

The Devil's essential attribute is the lie with which he tempts innocent souls. This is exactly what his assistants who lead the Soviet Union do striving to preserve and extend their power throughout the world. In previously mentioned song of Arthur 'Guitar Boogie' Smith "Mr. Stalin You're Eating Too High on The Hog" we can find following words:

*Mr. Stalin, you're eatin' too high on the hog
 Mr. Stalin, quit feedin' those lies to your mob²⁸*

The thesis of Communists' double talk and the desire for world domination can be traced throughout the entire period of the Cold War in the different pieces of the American popular culture. Country singer Janet Greene declared it even in the title of her song "Commie Lies" (1966):

*When I was young, it seemed to me
 The whole wide world would soon be free
 But communism is on the rise
 And Satan has a new disguise
 Be careful of the commie lies
 Swallow them and freedom dies*

²⁷ J. Chevalier, "Khrushchev Meets the Devil." <https://genius.com/Jay-chevalier-khrushchev-meets-the-devil-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMEs00DeUq8&list=RDMEs00DeUq8&start_radio=1

²⁸ Arthur 'Guitar Boogie' Smith, "Mr. Stalin You're Eating Too High on The Hog." <https://genius.com/Arthur-smith-country-mr-stalin-youre-eating-too-high-on-the-hog-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3HcAUGk6N4&list=RDo3HcAUGk6N4&start_radio=1

*The USA must realize
 That she's the biggest prize
 Why be surprised when they retreat?
 Their major weapon is deceit
 When will we learn? Alas, alack
 It's three steps forward, two steps back.
 We'll expose the commie lies
 And truth throughout the world will rise
 With evil we'll not compromise
 The truth shall keep us free²⁹*

Such views were not limited to conservative country singers and their lyrics with strong religious connotations. Representatives of the critical trend of folk music shared the idea of the Soviet regime and Soviet leaders as criminals who suppressed freedom and enslaved peoples. Thus, Joe Glaser, a labor activist and folk singer-songwriter who was dubbed a “labor’s troubadour”³⁰ but was highly critical of the US Communist Party and the communist movement in general responded to Stalin’s death with the song “Little Joe the Rustler” (1953), setting his own lyrics to a popular tune (a technique often used by songwriters to attract a larger audience). The lyrics were a satirical depiction of Stalin’s political career, which he described as a continuous series of robberies, political intrigues, power struggles, the destruction of his rival comrades, the seizure of neighboring countries and the enslavement of their populations, and the construction of an Iron Curtain that separated half the world:

*Oh, Little Joe, the Rustler, will rustle nevermore
 His schemin' in the Kremlin is all through
 'Twas back in 1907 that he robbed the Tiflis bank
 & he landed in the prison at Baku -
 Well, he rustled off through Europe & he rustled through the world
 From Germany out to the China Sea
 Joe Stalin purged & plundered as his black mustache he twirled
 & he did it in the name of liberty
 He rode with Nicolai Lenin who was leader of the band
 But Stalin had ambitions of his own
 He learned to rope & shoot & ride until he led them all
 & he succeeded Lenin to the throne
 Now Little Joe he purged Bukharin & Trotsky & the rest
 Zenoviev & many others too
 He said they all were traitors & he shot them down like dogs
 Till he alone remained of all the crew
 Well, he wove an Iron Curtain & encircled half the world*

²⁹ Janet Greene, “Commie Lies” https://genius.com/Janet-greene-commie-lies-lyrics;https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUNuNilqrDQ&list=RDjUNuNilqrDQ&start_radio=1

³⁰ J. Glazer, *Labor’s Troubadour* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

*He gobbled up his neighbors one by one
 He called it liberation but his name was cursed by all
 As the people saw their countries overrun
 "Twas in the spring of '53 that Joseph Stalin died
 They laid him next to Lenin in a tomb
 There were no tears, no broken hearts, no grief throughout the world
 When Little Joe' the Rustler, met his doom³¹*

Stalin's successors continued the same strategy, hypocritically proclaiming slogans of peace and freedom while suppressing democracy and trying to spread Communist regimes all over the world. Star of calypso style Mighty Sparrow used following words to express these ideas in his song "Kennedy and Khrushchev" (1963):

*All Khrushchev do is laying threats
 But I will bet he will regret
 Kennedy is a genius
 Khrushchev playing robust
 Always talking tough
 Finally Kennedy called his bluff ...*

*Worldwide communism they want to spread
 But my mother said she rather dead
 Than live in a world of communism
 She will drink poison³²*

Famous folk singer Joan Baez blamed Leonid Brezhnev of doing so in her satirical song congratulating him on his 75th birthday "Happy Birthday Leonid Brezhnev" (1981):

*Happy birthday, Leonid Brezhnev
 What a lovely seventy-fifth
 We watched the party on TV
 You seemed to be taking things casually
 What a mighty heart must beat in your breast
 To hold forty-nine medals on your chest
 Think of all the gifts that you've got
 Some were acquired and some were not
 Like a natural talent for marionettes
 Who do your dirty work and cover your bets*

³¹ J. Glazer, "Little Joe the Rustler." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M20Vf0Xh65Y&list=RDM20Vf0Xh65Y&start_radio=1

³² Mighty Sparrow, "Kennedy and Khrushchev." [https://genius.com/Mighty-sparrow-kennedy-and-khrushchev-lyrics; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXs-r2dPqVs&list=RDiXs-r2dPqVs&start_radio=1](https://genius.com/Mighty-sparrow-kennedy-and-khrushchev-lyrics;https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXs-r2dPqVs&list=RDiXs-r2dPqVs&start_radio=1)

*So with one hand waving free
The other one crushed a budding democracy*³³

After this song, the name of Joan Baez disappeared from the Soviet cultural space.

Binary Oppositions: Stalin – Eisenhower and Khrushchev – Kennedy.

The only way to stop the threat of Soviet expansion is to oppose the forces of evil with an even more powerful force of good, light, freedom and democracy. And if in this binary opposition the Soviet Union and the Soviet leader act as a representative of the dark side of the force, then it is the United States and the American president who became the personification of the opposite light side.

The image of Stalin as a threat to the United States and the American way of life was also used in the domestic political agenda to motivate the electoral behavior of voters. Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 presidential campaign song "I Like Ike" (written by the famous composer Irving Berlin) in one of its versions ended with the words: "Uncle Joe is worried 'cause we like Ike."³⁴ Thus, Stalin (Uncle Joe as he was called in America) who personified the Soviet Union in this context acted as a constitutive "Other" influencing the political choice of the American people. The idea of Stalin's special attitude towards Eisenhower was also reflected in the already mentioned song of Ray Anderson, which was a kind of epitaph for Stalin:

*Although he was a man of power,
He was scared of Eisenhower.*³⁵

Another pair of leaders who opposed each other were Khrushchev and Kennedy. The relations between Khrushchev and Kennedy became the special subject in American popular music. A brief thaw in relations between the two countries gave rise to hopes for possible cooperation in solving international problems, which was reflected in the "Champion" Jack Dupree's "President Kennedy Blues" (1961) inspired by famous meeting and negotiations of two leaders in Vienna. Jack Dupree expressed these hopes and expectations by putting into the mouths of political leaders the same concern for preserving peace and cooperation in space exploration and the lunar program. Indicative in this sense is the author's inclusion in the current agenda, which was generally characteristic of American popular culture of this time:

³³ Joan Baez, "Happy Birthday, Leonid Brezhnev." <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/joanbaez/happybirthdayleonidbrezhnev.html>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jRREm7plyU&list=RD9jRREm7plyU&start_radio=1

³⁴ Irwin Silbir, *Songs America Voted By* (Harrisburg: Stackpole, 1988), 287.

³⁵ Ray Anderson, "Stalin Kicked the Bucket." <https://genius.com/Ray-anderson-stalin-kicked-the-bucket-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaalh9S-hlM&list=RDqaalh9S-hlM&start_radio=1

*Well, when President Kennedy got elected, the news went around the world,
He is the youngest man, to try to satisfy the world.
He said: "I'm gonna find Khrushchev, I want to see what he's putting down,
We gonna try to get together, see can't we settle down."
He sent Mr. Khrushchev a letter, said: "Meet me in Geneva town,
Then we can get together, talk peace, talk peace, to settle down."
Mr. Khrushchev agreed, but he said: "Have to be in Vienna town,
Then we can get right on down to business, we'll talk peace for the
whole world round."
"Then we won't have no war, we'll talk satellites and hitting the moon,
And everybody will be happy, and all the boys will go back home."³⁶*

But these hopes quickly dissipated and were replaced by another disappointment during the Cuban Missile Crisis. And in January 1962 (even before Crisis) the famous bluesman Bo Diddley expresses willingness to join the army to help JFK to stop Khrushchev:

*I think I want to go to the army
I think I want to go overseas.
I want to see Khrushchev
I want to see him all by myself...
He don't believe that water's wet
If he did he could've stopped those tests.
JFK can't do it by his self
C'mon fellas, let's give him a little help...
We as Americans understand
We got to unite and protect our land.
We got to keep us on alert
To keep our families from getting hurt*

The inclusion of the American domestic political agenda in the international context is also indicative. The importance of the civil rights movement takes a backseat to the need to unite the nation to counter external threats:

*We fightin' over a six-wheel bus
Now bald-headed Khrushchev's plotting on us³⁷*

³⁶ Guido Van Rijn, *Kennedy's Blues. African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on JFK* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 27; "Champion" Jack Dupree, "President Kennedy Blues" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZewjeboTjI&list=RD-ZewjeboTjI&start_radio=1

³⁷ Bo Diddley, "Mr. Khrushchev." <https://genius.com/Bo-diddley-mr-khrushchev-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIXnyz7_T98&list=RDPIXnyz7_T98&start_radio=1

In fact, Bo Diddley was suggesting temporarily putting the fight against segregation (including on intercity buses, mentioned in the song) aside so as not to weaken the country in such dire circumstances. At the same time, Khrushchev is no longer portrayed as a potential partner in resolving complex international problems, but as an enemy threatening the American people. Also interesting is the emphasis on the Soviet leader's most distinctive feature—his bald head. It is no longer simply a humorous detail of the politician's image, but a symbol of a cunning enemy hatching sinister plans. In other words, a detail with a negative connotation.

Another bluesman and Korean war veteran Louisiana Red (Iverson Minter) in his "Red's Dream" (1962) moved from words to action. He describes a dream in which he visits the United Nations and threatens Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro over the placement of missiles in Cuba:

*It was a dream, a dream I had last night
I dreamed I went to the UN
And set the whole nation right
Then I told old Khrushchev
Sittin' there looking bad,
"Get that junk outta Cuba
'Fore you make me mad.
Dig up them missile bases
Take them planes and all
Or I'll grab me a bat
With your head for the ball!"³⁸*

As can be seen from the above fragment, there is no longer any talk of dialogue or diplomacy. The problem is resolved solely through force and threats. In the final part of this dream President Kennedy invited Red to the White House and praised him for helping to "run the Russians from the Western Hemisphere." To some extent, this can be considered as a specific interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine in the context of the Cold War.

The result of this evolution of Khrushchev from a partner to an antagonist to Kennedy was summed up by The Mighty Sparrow in his song "Kennedy and Khrushchev" (1963):

*I have confidence in Kennedy
Khrushchev ain't mean nothing to me
All Khrushchev do is laying threats
But I will bet he will regret
Kennedy is a genius
Khrushchev playing robust*

³⁸ Louisiana Red, "Red's Dream." <https://genius.com/Louisiana-red-reds-dream-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jolQ4s8D7A&list=RD8jolQ4s8D7A&start_radio=1

*Always talking tough
 Finally Kennedy called his bluff
 And make him turn them ships in the opposite direction
 (Kennedy is the master)
 Any retaliation will be met with explosion
 (Kennedy will take care of him)
 Stop them, search them,
 Sink them to the bottom of the ocean
 (Kennedy is the master) ...
 Not as long as we have Kennedy
 Together with Canada, England, and France
 Nikita Khrushchev ain't stand a chance*

Khrushchev appears here as a deceitful, bluffing political poker player whose ruse was discovered by Kennedy. The American president is pitted against the Soviet premier as the leader of the free world fighting against the communist threat:

*We ain't want no war not again
 But it is plain we ain't go remain
 And let communism just step in
 And ain't do nutten that never happen
 We got brains, we got weapon
 To stifle Russian aggression
 Don't make a fool of you in space
 Kennedy will put Khrushchev in place³⁹*

Conclusion

American popular music of various genres during the Cold War reflected the ideas, prejudices, and fears that existed in the mass public consciousness. It played a significant role in the formation of a simplified black-and-white picture of the world, in which the Good Empire and the Evil Empire opposed each other. This dualism was personified in the images of political leaders who acted as antagonists. The evolution of the image of Soviet leaders in American popular music clearly demonstrates how, in less than twenty years, the perception of the Soviet leader changed dramatically. Due to the tradition of personifying countries through the images of their rulers, this change reflected the transformation of ideas about the possibility of interaction with the Soviet Union as a potential international partner. Hopes for such cooperation and the humanized image of Khrushchev associated with these hopes (in contrast to the demonic image of Stalin) generated by a short-term “thaw” in the domestic and foreign policy of the Soviet Union gave way to disappointment. This disappointment was compounded

³⁹ Mighty Sparrow Kennedy and Khrushchev. <https://genius.com/Mighty-sparrow-kennedy-and-khrushchev-lyrics>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXs-r2dPqVs&list=RDiXs-r2dPqVs&start_radio=1

by the high level of expectations from the new Soviet leadership, which resulted in a return to the radical rhetoric of the Cold War with a direct identification of Stalin and Khrushchev as “Devil’s helpers.” Thus continued the changes of cycles of hope and disappointment that characterized the attitude of the American public consciousness towards Russia/Soviet Union.

In this context, the demonization of the Soviet Union and Soviet rulers was used as a way of self-identifying the United States and American presidents as the leaders of the free world, who were on the side of Good and Light. The power and pressure of the communist empire was opposed by the power and conviction of the United States in its superiority. In this eternal struggle between the Darkness and Light Soviet leaders acquired the appearance of “dark twins” of American presidents.

About the Author

Aleksandr Okun is an Associate Professor at the Samara University, Russia. His field of research includes the history of Russian-American relations, mutual images in American and Russian popular culture during the Cold War.