

# The 250-Year Plot to Destroy Russia | Alexander Mercouris

Alexander Mercouris of The Duran discusses Russophobia as a long-running political and cultural story. Mercouris explains how anti-Russian images were built in Britain and France, how fear and hate mix together, and why the West keeps repeating weak and evil stereotypes about Russia. He also talks about Gorbachev, NATO, Russian agency, and how culture, travel, and open debate could help break these false ideas. Links: The Duran: <https://www.youtube.com/@TheDuran> Alexander Mercouris: <https://www.youtube.com/@AlexMercouris> Alex Christoforou: <https://www.youtube.com/@alexchristoforou> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> (Opt in for Academic Section from your profile settings: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com/s/academic>) Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Introduction and Russophobia origins 00:06:58 Politics behind the narrative 00:13:20 Russia as weak but dangerous 00:18:13 Russia, culture, and the "good Russian" 00:24:30 Gorbachev, reform, and Western bias 00:33:03 NATO, power, and why Russia was excluded 00:37:28 What Russia can do to fight back 00:44:19 Film, music, and culture examples

## #Pascal

Welcome back to Neutrality Studies, everybody. Today again live with me, the one and only Alexander Mercouris. Alexander, welcome.

## #Alexander Mercouris

I'm delighted to be here and to meet you properly for the first time, Pascal, one-to-one. Of course, we've been in contact many, many times, but this is the first time we've met, and it has been an enormous pleasure.

## #Pascal

Likewise, I really enjoyed our many hours that we've now had to talk about world politics. And world politics is what we need to discuss now. We've had a conference on Russophobia, and you actually gave a brilliant exposé where you looked at the—well, the literary heritage that we have about Russophobia. Can you give us the gist of it?

## #Alexander Mercouris

Well, my view about Russophobia is that if we're talking about the West, it is a relatively recent phenomenon. It starts around the late 18th, early 19th century. It begins to take off in a very big

way after the fall of Napoleon, in which Russia played a central role. Russia had emerged as a result of these wars as the greatest military power in Europe. It had done so as a relatively new entrant into the European power system. And the established powers, primarily Britain and France, but especially France initially, were very, very alarmed by this. So straight after the Napoleonic Wars, we have a constant media campaign.

In Britain, directed against Russia, the British media starts talking about Russia in very much the same way that they talk about Russia today—as a militaristic, aggressive empire, and a rather backward and autocratic empire as well. And then France takes up the baton, so to speak, and they put this all in literary form. And we start to get, from the 1840s, all sorts of expressions in French literature about Russia, which distill the Russophobia, if you like, that you're already finding in the British media. And these French literary works—Custine's *\*Russia in 1839\**, that's one. And even more remarkable, a graphic novel produced in 1854 at the start of the Crimean War by the French illustrator Gustave Doré. These basically have created the Russophobic image of Russia that we know today.

## **#Pascal**

And you actually explained how it moves forward, right? And how we see certain stereotypes that keep coming up again and again. What are the actual stereotypes that you've identified through this French and British literature that we find?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

So Russia is backward, Russia is savage, Russia is a tyranny. The people of Russia are oppressed, but they collude in their own oppression. The Russians are devious, they're aggressive, they delight in violence and cruelty, they are absolutely not to be trusted, and anything good that we hear about them is, first and foremost, Russian disinformation. And that's actually a very, very early development, by the way. The Russians are already being blamed for disinformation fairly early on. And we get more literary expressions of this that start to follow. And I discuss various novels that appeared in the 19th century, the second half of the 19th century, that repeat these various stereotypical ideas about the Russians.

And these then continue to get amplified during the 20th century as well, where, of course, the confrontation with the Soviet Union provides a further pretext for them. And a particular point that I made is that one of the reasons these stereotypes and themes about Russia have been so long-lived is that they have never been confronted in the West. People have never come out and said, these are manifestations of Russophobia, a type of racism, that this way of depicting Russians, stereotyping them, is essentially racist. And for that reason, since they're never confronted in that way, people just go on repeating them.

## **#Pascal**

Why do you think that is? Because the West—and this morning I talked to our colleague Richard Sakwa, and he calls it always the political West—I mean, we've had several waves in which we recognized that, no, there are very strong forms of racism that were used. I mean, obviously, like racism based upon skin color, but then also this anti-Semitism is huge, and there's a huge recognition of that. Why do you think that there was never a recognition that we also did this to the Russians, and maybe even beyond the Russians? I mean, the Slavic, the Slavs, actually—and this is something that often comes up in my discussions with people from the former Yugoslavia, right? Croats and Serbs and Bosniaks that say, like, no, it's the Slavic world that's basically being excluded out of the political Western narrative—but that goes together with some form, in my view, of Russophobia, Slavophobia. Why do you think that that was never confronted?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Right, because there has always been a political dimension behind it. Russophobia in itself was a political creation. I went into a discussion about how it came about, how it was deliberately manufactured in France. The original Russophobia was manufactured in France during the time of Napoleon himself, in preparation for his eventual confrontation with Russia. And Russia's position as a great power has meant that Russia's great power rivals—initially Britain, then Britain and France, then Germany, then the United States, but also still Britain and France—politically, they always had an incentive to keep it going and unchallenged. If Russophobia is ever to be quelled, that would require a political decision, firstly to abandon it, and second to confront it. And that decision has never been made.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, so you're of the opinion, of the view, that it is the politics of these two powers, and maybe by now also the United States and whatnot, that is driving Russophobia, and not Russophobia that's driving the politics.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Absolutely. It is the politics, the geopolitics, the rivalry, the aggressiveness that ultimately drives it. Now, one has to qualify that, because of course what then happens is that Russophobic views get so entrenched and embedded in the Western consciousness that they start, in a way, to shape policy. So policymakers themselves come to internalize this image of Russia which has been politically created, and you get the feedback, and that affects the decision-making. But if there's ever a proper, sustained political decision to confront it, to expose it as a type of racism, then I think it would collapse very quickly. And at that point, by the way, we would be moving beyond the Russophobia. And that's the moment when perhaps a real rapprochement with the Russians can take place.

## **#Pascal**

Hey, just a very quick note. The best way to support this channel is by signing up for my free Substack. You can also help with a paid subscription there, or you can get some of our new merch on [neutralitystudies.com](http://neutralitystudies.com). Links below. See you there. It's just funny, fascinating. I mean, especially if you think about it as a type of racism, because the idea is, of course, no, I mean, the Russians are white mostly, right? Although that statement excludes all of the Asian part of Russia, because there are Kazakhs, there are others, there are so many ethnicities inside Russia, but... this idea that, no, no, no, among the whites there's no racism, of course, but there is. I mean, the basic motivation is that one, this exclusion and this stereotyping, and really kind of very dumb stereotyping as well. What... the one that fascinates me the most is the one where you're saying the Russian people are oppressed, but they're guilty of their own oppression. Can you elaborate on that?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Yes, this is the extraordinary idea that the Russian people themselves have a servile nature, so that they actually seek and want a tyrannical government to be imposed on them. And when that happens, the tyrannical government engages in an oppressive way, and the Russians at some level almost welcome it and collude with it. I give a very ridiculous and indeed absurd example, which is from the book by Gustav Dore, the graphic novel that I talked about, where Ivan the Terrible basically annihilates the entire Russian population. There are only two people left, and he orders them to arrest and execute each other. And because they're Russians, that's what they immediately do.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

So, I mean, the whole concept is...

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

It's nonsensical. And of course, it begs the question, if all the Russians have been killed by their own ruler, what kind of history does Russia have afterwards? Which Doré, by the way, never really confronts. But you can see there the example of how Russians are prepared to basically collude in their own oppression. The two last survivors, when ordered, arrest each other and execute each other to fulfill the order of the Tsar.

## **#Pascal**

The point is, and these stereotypes are coming up again right now, right? And we're speaking on the 12th of June today, 2026, right? So after more than four years of the war in Ukraine... This idea of oppression, right, and the Russian people being responsible for that as well, it goes hand in hand with this funny idea in the political West that all you need to do is put a bit of pressure and then the Russian regime will collapse because people will rise up, the Iranian regime will collapse and people will rise up. Is this idea actually inspired by Russophobia that's then applied to other jurisdictions?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

I think where it goes back to is the Russian Revolution, in the sense that, of course, there was a major political crisis in the middle of a war and an economic crisis in Russia. Now, of course, what the West does not acknowledge is that before the Russian Revolution took place, before the monarchy fell, there was a very, very long period of political change and political crisis within Russia itself that was organically developing. But the Russophobic narrative has always found it very difficult to grapple with the idea that Russians have agency, that there is such a thing as Russian society, that Russians actually have opinions, and that these opinions actually have the ability to shape politics in Russia itself.

So the assumption is that despite all of its apparent outward strengths, Russia, because it's savage and primitive and weak—savage and primitive because of the contradictions in the system—ultimately is weak. It's a house of cards, and if you blow hard enough, it'll all come tumbling down. That, by the way, is very, very much the message of Gustav Dyer's book, which was written in the first year of the Crimean War—that Russia isn't as strong as it looks. It's actually really weak. All the West needs to do is confront it, and almost immediately it will collapse.

## **#Pascal**

We had, at the beginning of the war—I mean, it was fascinating, right? How the European Commission and so on kept saying the Russians are fighting with shovels, they're holding on with their teeth to this territory, they've been fought back. Washing machines, right? Chips from washing machines.

## **#Pascal**

That kind of idea. And even when none of this came to pass...

## **#Pascal**

The idea that Russia will collapse soon is still here to this day. And it's the whole inspiration behind the 20th sanctions package and so on. How do you explain to yourself that reality somehow can't convince them that the stereotype is wrong?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Well, this takes us back to the power of the narrative. Because it has never been subjected to sustained pressure, it has formed assumptions, including within the political elite itself, that they find very difficult to walk away from. Because if they ever admitted to themselves that Russia is actually quite resilient, and it's really very strong, and it does have the ability to hit back and to respond to what the West is doing, then, of course, that's not just one part of the Russian narrative, this

Russian stereotype, that starts to crumble. It leads inevitably to every other part of it coming under challenge as well. So this is why they cling to it, and they cling to it so hard. So it's a narrative that Russian history itself contradicts, that is extremely brittle, that if it were ever properly confronted, would fall apart almost immediately. But the point is, it is never confronted.

## **#Pascal**

It's fed. It's like every year we find again this shift in how we are supposed to think about the Russians. And in my perception, there are these two strains to it. One, because we call it Russophobia, but phobia, of course, implies fear, right? And there definitely is an element of fear-mongering against the Russians. It's like the idea that tomorrow they will be in Portugal, that if NATO isn't strong enough, then they will run all over Europe—the Baltics, Poland, Germany, again, all of Europe, right? That idea. And that's the fear part. But then there's the hate part, this kind of, no, again, they're primitive, they're easy, they're simple, they're easy to defeat, they're dumb, they're drunkards, right? And that's obviously inspired by something that is not fear. And these two strains seem to coexist at the same time and then create this need in the political West to also demand from us that we believe at the same time that they're incredibly weak, but also the greatest threat.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Absolutely. The ultimate point about Russophobia is to project the sense that this is a fundamentally evil country. So if it does bad things, that's a manifestation of its inherent evil. And its evil never changes. So the idea is Russia is evil, and it's militaristic, and it is aggressive. So that makes it dangerous. But it is also backward and inferior and primitive and absurd, so that all we need to do is to face up to the Russians. And by definition, they will fail. So we must be strong to confront them. But if we are strong, we will win. That's basically what the function of Russophobia is. It's to mobilize Western opinion, basically by telling people in the West that the Russians are both evil and dangerous and absurd and weak at the same time. So we can confront them and we will win. We must confront them to protect ourselves, and we can confront them because if we do confront them, we are certain to win and they're certain to lose.

## **#Pascal**

The beautiful thing about this is, of course, that then that's something that you don't need to spell out. It's something that runs as kind of a red thread throughout the political development. And actually, as you showed in your presentation, over at least 200 years, the underlying current, and we've never got rid of it.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

No, we've never got rid of it, again, because it has never been confronted. And unfortunately, it has contaminated a lot of public discourse about Russia. I mean, even people who are not, you know, structured to be hostile to Russia will assimilate many of these narratives. So I discussed books and films, and there were more books and films that I could have discussed, in which we see Russophobic narratives seeping into the film — you know, the plot, the characterizations — even though one senses that what the people are up to in writing these books or films is that they're trying to do entertainment or something of that kind, rather than mobilize opinion against Russia.

**#Pascal**

Yeah, but that's the point with Enrico Tocco. Yeah, look, it's part of culture. It's a cultural phenomenon.

**#Alexander Mercouris**

That was the point of my presentation, that what started as a political thing has now developed into a cultural statement and has become very embedded in modern Western culture. So Russians are always represented, or nearly always represented, in Western literature and Western films in a particular way.

**#Pascal**

Yeah, unless it's the Russian who leaves Russia and works against Russia, right?

**#Alexander Mercouris**

That's the good Russian. That's right. And again, this is something that I discussed during the presentation. Since Russia is evil, by definition, for a Russian to be good, that Russian must turn against Russia. And again, I gave examples of films and literature where the good Russian has turned against Russia. A Russian who is loyal to Russia is, by definition, evil, because Russia itself is evil. So this actually puts enormous pressure on Russians themselves and on a section of the Russian intelligentsia, because in order to be accepted in the West, they have to show to the West that they are opposed to their own country.

**#Pascal**

On the other hand, we had this interesting discussion with Russian colleagues, where a couple of them actually took the view that Russians who criticize the Russian government are Russophobic.

**#Alexander Mercouris**

It's kind of an interesting counter-reaction, because I would say, no, that's not what we mean.

## **#Pascal**

Criticism of the Russian government, the current one—be it the Tsar, be it the Soviet Union, be it the current government—that should not be equated one-on-one, right?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

How do you perceive that? I agree, and I think that there is a major mistake and a very, very great danger here, in the sense that you can also see that some people are using all of this within Russia basically to suppress dissent and to stifle argument. And I think we have both seen that there are manifestations of this which are rather concerning. But we have to take some responsibility for this in the West, because this attitude that a good Russian is an anti-government Russian does make it much more difficult for Russians to conduct their own internal conversation about the development of their own society. Because if a Russian wants to be accepted in the West, even if they are loyal to Russia, they feel the need to criticize in ways that they might not do if they'd just been left to themselves, while other Russians might respond to that criticism by saying, well, what you're saying isn't really because you love Russia and you're a patriot, it's because you're acting on behalf of the West.

## **#Pascal**

It just shows how this is a sociological ping-pong, right? The back and forth, and these communities influence each other, and the different parts of the communities influence each other. And it then unfortunately can feed into a self-reinforcing feedback loop that leads to militarization or that leads to negative outcomes. How do you think... how do you think, what could be done in order to, from both sides—well, let's say from the Russian side, because let's assume that, yeah, not assume. You're right, this Russophobia has never been confronted. What could be done from the Russian side to say, like, hey guys, how about we deconstruct a couple of these things?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Right. Well, first of all, the first point you made is a very important one, because Russophobia has proved disastrous for the Russians, and it has proved disastrous for the West as well. One of the fundamental reasons why we have never been able to secure a stable peace in Europe since the Russian Revolution and thereafter is precisely because these Russophobic themes and ideas are left unchallenged to circulate, and they eventually, ultimately, always propel us into some kind of confrontation with the Russians. Because bear in mind, if you think of Russia as evil, then you can't really ever accept it or come to terms with it.

And from a Russian point of view, of course, it's also been an absolute disaster. It means that improving relations in a sustained way, relations with the West, is impossible because of the

Russophobic sentiments in the West and because of the internal problems within Russia that those Russophobic sentiments also create. Now, here of course we point to a major fundamental problem, which is that the Russians have never really themselves confronted Russophobia in a proper way. If you go back to the early 19th century, when Custine writes *\*Russia in 1839\**, the Tsar's government is thrown into total confusion. They don't know what to do. They've seen this terrible book written about Russia.

They make a half-hearted and very, very ineffective attempt to respond to it, which nobody takes seriously. And that has been, unfortunately, the pattern that the Russians have shown ever since. The Russians think of relations with the West purely in terms of power politics. They think that if you have treaties, if you have agreements, if you have foreign ministers and presidents meeting, if you have economic links agreed, that's enough. They don't seem to understand that these ideas, these sentiments, these Russophobic sentiments that exist about them have to be confronted, obviously by the West itself ultimately, but by the Russians too.

## **#Pascal**

The other thing that you pointed out in a discussion earlier was that Russia has this tendency to think about relations with the West in rational terms—rationalistic, right? If we portray this or that long enough, at some point there will be a discussion about it. If we offer these kinds of treaties, you can make them and you can find an agreement if you want. You know, just a rational approach, the way that you would think that the other actor is rational. But if the thesis is correct, that Russophobia is deeply entrenched within these different societies in the West, then one big problem is that it's not based upon rationality, it's actually based upon emotions. And do you think that that is understood in Russia?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

I wonder sometimes, but I think that there are two things at play. Firstly, the Russians are very rational in the way they conduct diplomacy and foreign policy. They are very rational. They're very focused on self-interest. They find it very difficult to understand that others are not, and that these perceptions and ideas and emotions have the sway over the West that they do. So I think that is one conceptual problem that the Russians have.

But I think there is another one, and it goes back to some of the points that Russophobia makes, because Russophobia does identify actual problems that do exist within Russian society. I mean, Russia has been a deeply autocratic country. It has had secret police organizations, it has had, you know, labor camps and those sorts of things. So one of the fundamental problems the Russians have about confronting Russophobia is that in order to confront Russophobia, they need to confront truths about themselves, which is already uncomfortable. But of course, they've also found, basically since the 1950s, that when they do confront truths about themselves, that is seized upon in the West as an admission that the original Russophobic analysis is correct.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, and of course we've had very important Soviet statesmen who actually tried to confront problems in the state, and that was Mikhail Gorbachev. And the last U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, he keeps making the point time and time again: the Cold War wasn't won, it was wound down back in 1989 through a series of treaties because it was in the mutual interest. The breakup of the Soviet Union happened for related but different reasons two years later. And then the West rewrote the entire script, the entire history. But then, in a sense, this kind of outcome and this kind of man who changed something and started confronting—wasn't that then taken again as a way to prove that the Russians are bad?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Yes, that is absolutely correct. And of course, it is one of the reasons why in Russia today, Gorbachev is seen as a traitor by many people, because he started to confront actual, real problems that existed within Russian society. But by doing so, he appeared to validate, to confirm, in the West, the fact that, you know, Russian society had these problems, and that the Russophobic narrative about Russia had been correct all along. What I think would have been needed to really achieve a successful change and a sustained change would be for the West to respond, to have responded in a totally different way. Just as the Russians at that time were confronting truths about themselves, the West needed to do the same and also confront truths about itself—truths about Western society and the problems that exist in Western societies, but also truths about Western foreign policy during the Cold War.

We had a discussion, for example, about how the Cold War began and about the fact that there were Soviet proposals for German neutrality—a united, neutral Germany—right back in the 40s and 50s, and how that was agreed initially between the wartime allies, including the Soviet Union, and how that was not done. But of course, there was no re-examination in the West of any of that. The assumption was that the West was always in the right throughout the Cold War, and the Russians were always in the wrong. And here are the Russians coming along, telling us that they have to change their economy, they have to bring democracy into their political system, they have to respond to truth about their own past, and that proves that we've been right in everything all along.

## **#Pascal**

Instead of humbling the political West and saying, like, oh, thanks for coming around, they said, like, ha, we knew it. When Gorbachev was like, yeah, we haven't learned how to use freedom yet, he literally said so. And that was the ultimate proof that we were wrong, they were right—right side of history again.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Yes. A very sophisticated, highly educated society, which is what Russia had become by this time, was treated in an unbelievably patronizing and condescending way. It was not seen as a society that was mature and properly developed. It was seen as a society that had to be controlled, guided, and nurtured by the West in order to be put onto the right path. And of course, if we helped ourselves to some of the things, well, that was an entirely justified reward for the trouble we were taking to guide them in that fashion.

## **#Pascal**

But then we never did that, did we? I mean, it's now common knowledge that Russia even wanted to join NATO. I mean, they were never against cooperation with NATO. They wanted to join it. The whole idea was to have, you know, a common home, right? From Portugal to Vladivostok. And that didn't materialize. But, and Jeffrey Sachs keeps pointing that out, right? The West, and especially Washington, did that for Poland. It did it for all the former Eastern Bloc countries, except for Russia. Is that also something that you would bring back to the Russophobic narratives, or is it something else that's going on?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Well, first of all, there is something else. For the United States to bring Russia into NATO would be to introduce another great power into NATO, which would rival the United States. Because Russia is the only country in that case within NATO—in fact, it would be the country within NATO that had a degree of power that the United States could not overwhelm. I mean, it still would have been a nuclear power. It would still have been the largest country overall on Earth. It would still have had powerful armed forces, powerful industries. So from a simple point of view of preserving the American position as a great power and its position as NATO's hegemon, you can't have the Russians in.

So that was one reason, and I think it was the main one. But it was very easy to sell, and to sell to the Europeans, because you say to them, well, you know, let's never forget Russia's basically evil. It has always been evil. It continues to be evil. We may be trying, out of the goodness of our heart, to make it better, but ultimately we have to accept the possibility that because it's evil, it's going to start doing evil things again. So we can't possibly have it in NATO, because if we do, we are introducing the wild animal into our beautiful garden.

## **#Pascal**

And that was, of course, never said out loud, right? But that was the—I mean, or that's the claim—that this was the subtext that was kind of understood and shared, understood by this cultural realm that the political West is. Hence, you don't try. So even though the 1990s were fascinating, right? I mean, Gorbachev was basically following whatever he was told about what the right kind of shock therapy is. And Vladimir Putin—I mean, standing ovations in the Bundestag in Germany, first man to

call George W. Bush after 9/11: "We are with you. We will help you." And we were there. But still, it didn't work out. It didn't convince the political West that this Russia should be integrated and not ostracized.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Well, nor could it, because we come back to the point that the good Russian is the one who chooses the West. The bad Russian is the one who sticks to Russia, because Russia is evil.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, but the good Russian is the one who chooses the West over Russia.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Against Russia. Obviously, the Russian government wouldn't do that. Exactly. Well, but you see, this is the thing. If it does, if it's Boris Yeltsin or Yegor Gaidar or Mikhail Gorbachev or the early Putin, then they are taking steps which have been against historic Russian interests, and that proves that they are perhaps not fully good people, because they are still, after all, the government of Russia, but they're aspiring towards the good. But when they start defending Russian national interests, then, of course, they become bad, because then they are aligning themselves with that which is evil in the first place.

## **#Pascal**

In this sense, Russophobia is actually a very convenient tool for maintaining some sort of common structure within these different parts of the political West. Because on the one hand, if it succeeds, it will ultimately lead to the dissolution of Russia. So the thing, the object, goes away. And if that doesn't happen, then that's only proof that the stereotypes are true. They are evil, and they're fighting against us, and they're invading your brain because, obviously, evil—and the man woke up one morning and had a fit of rage and invaded. So it's really self-reinforcing, isn't it?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

It is self-reinforcing, and that is why it survives. Because it always provides the West with a convenient explanation for whatever happens. So if the West does something wrong, if the West acts in a way that provokes a crisis, ultimately, nonetheless, it is Russia's fault.

## **#Pascal**

If we assume that this analysis, or let's call it a diagnosis of the problem, of the sickness that underlies part of the sociological problem—let's assume it's correct and that we are not just two

lonely nuts somewhere in a cabin in the woods. I mean, who knows? But let's assume it's correct. What would you say, what would be some of the antidotes or some of the interventions that Russia could take, or China could take, or BRICS could take in order to help this unwilling psychological patient to kind of move in the right direction?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

I do think the Russians ought to be much more forceful in calling this out. And I think that they should call it out in every international forum, not just in direct discussions with the Europeans and the Americans, but in every international forum at the United Nations, among the Global South countries. I think, by the way, there they would find a very receptive audience. All of these societies have been subject to racism themselves. They understand very well how racism works. Racism in the case of Russia might have a different origin. It might be a more artificial construct.

But it is racism nonetheless, and it operates in very similar ways to the way that racism does. And, of course, there would be nothing more devastating, let us say, in Britain than for the Indian foreign minister, in an interview, to come along to the British embassy and say, "What you're saying about the Russians is utterly unacceptable because it is completely and totally racist. And I'm not going to accept you talking like that about another nation and another country." If that were to happen—mm-hmm—and if that were to happen in a big way, that would provoke shock, and that might lead to a reaction.

So that's one thing the Russians could do. The other thing that the Russians can do, and this is the hard part of it, is they need to go on building up their own society. I mean, this is obvious, and they need to be very focused on that, and they need to build it in ways that, I would say, develop its democracy and develop its society in ways that obviously are not consistent with the propaganda, the Russophobic narrative. So if Russia is a democracy, then it cannot be a tyranny. And you can't realistically say that the Russians are complicit in their own oppression. I mean,

## **#Pascal**

That's one thing you can do.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

And the third thing, the third thing that the Russians do need to do is to promote their own culture to the West. Very difficult, by the way, at this time. And promote contacts with the West, even more difficult. The fact that the very first thing the European Union did in terms of sanctions policy was impose a flight ban—yeah—tells you that deep down in the West, they understand how fragile this Russophobic concept really is.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, and then, you know, the reason given for banning RT and other things, and for banning Russian culture, for banning Russian music, is always, oh, it's propaganda, because then they're going to lie, right? They're going to lie, and our susceptible, stupid population—which is actually, there's a little bit of this racism that they actually apply against their own, right? The population is too dumb to know things, so they need to be protected. But let's put that aside. It's not just about the disinformation, right?

It's also this fear that, you know, maybe the real Russia could disprove that Russia is all of these stereotypes. So you need to prevent the contacts. And we don't see that happening with the Chinese. We don't see that happening with—of course not with—well, no, we see it also with Iran, how the West is trying to keep anyone from finding out what the real Iran is about. But so there are these bridges that make sure that the stereotypes are reinforced and that real human-to-human contacts are as difficult as possible.

### **#Alexander Mercouris**

I think this is actually one of the greatest points of hope, ultimately, because the fact that the West responds in this way, in exactly the way that you describe, shows how ultimately brittle the Russophobic view actually is. And Western leaders, even though they undoubtedly at some level share this view, at some deep level they themselves know that it is brittle and false, and that if it's actually confronted by real facts about the real Russia, then it will crumble.

And the whole disinformation industry that has been constructed in the West has partly been created in order to prevent Westerners from coming to terms with, discovering actual Russian realities. I can remember very well in 2018, when there was the World Cup in Russia, that the British government at that time made an enormous effort to dissuade British fans, football fans, from going to Russia, where they might see it for themselves. And that did indicate to me at the time that, at some level, deep down, the British elite, the British establishment knows perfectly well that its image of Russia is untrue.

### **#Pascal**

So, I mean, it sounds so simplistic, but at the end of the day, one of the important things is to exchange with the Russians, exchange with the Ukrainians, exchange with the French and the Germans, and just make sure that people see how these places actually are. It's kind of unsatisfying, but that's what this Russophobia thing does. That's what any racism does — it tries to divide these people from each other.

### **#Alexander Mercouris**

Yes, and of course the Soviet Union played into that because it made it very difficult for people to go and made it even more difficult for people to leave. So the result was that for all the time that it was

in existence, knowledge about Russia was very, very limited in the West. Today, that problem should not be there, but we see that at the first opportunity, the barriers are put up — but they're put up by us.

Now, as I said, this is a difficult journey, but the thing to remember is that in the West, most people have a very clear idea of what they think Russia is. Right. It's a country that people believe they know an awful lot about, except that the reality is that much of what they know, perhaps most of it, is completely wrong. So it's very fragile. You want to maintain this very fragile reality. Everybody believes something and is sure it's true, and isn't confronted with the actual thing, because it is not the way people believe it to be.

## **#Pascal**

Yeah, and here we have the problem of the Dunning-Kruger effect — that, in general, the less you understand about a topic, the higher the chance that you think you know a lot about it, which is an unfortunate thing, but it's also something natural to happen. Exactly. So even just the realization that we should study the other more, which is already, of course, anathema to the Russophobic narratives. But yeah, I think all those are very, very important aspects of this topic and why it should be addressed more. Alexander, is there something else that you think we haven't covered yet?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Well, I mean, we can just mention very quickly the extent to which Russophobia has corrupted society, our own culture. Because, as I said, we do have cultural stereotypes about Russians being inserted into books and films and all sorts of things. I mean, I could talk about popular films and popular books and the fact that, as I said, I think many of the people who produce these things would be deeply shocked if it were ever pointed out to them that the representations of Russians that appear in these books are actually racist, for example. And if you consider racism to be something wrong in itself, which, of course, most people do, then, as I said, this is corrupt.

I will give you an example, a particular example, which is an extreme example, and perhaps a rather esoteric one, which is that there has been a massive critical discussion of the music of certain Soviet composers, Shostakovich and Prokofiev particularly. And there is an enormous effort by some music critics in the West to claim that this music contains all sorts of anti-Soviet themes, that there are all sorts of coded messages within this music, which makes the music good. Exactly. So that means that an anti-communist, anti-Soviet Russophobe can sit and listen to Shostakovich's 10th Symphony and enjoy it because he believes that this, in fact, is conveying a message which he is receptive to as a Russophobe himself. Now, I think that is a fundamentally forced way of listening to music. And again, it is a corrupt one, ultimately.

## **#Pascal**

You know, it just shows how many layers we have to peel back in order to get to the core of the issue, and how difficult this journey is going to be. Even if the decision was taken, it would take decades, wouldn't it?

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Oh, it would take an enormous deal. Let's go quickly to a more popular medium. I discussed during our talk, the presentation I gave, about how one particular image, a Russophobic image that has been created, is that the good, virtuous Russian woman chooses the West, whilst you have other Russian women who are depraved and evil and murderous and cruel. And it's extraordinary how strong this image of a certain type of Russian woman is. And you have, for example, in Britain, in the last 10 years, a television series called *\*Killing Eve\**, where the central character is a psychopathic young female serial killer who is also depraved. And, of course, she's Russian.

## **#Pascal**

I didn't see that. She has to be.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

But, in fact, if you look at the plot of the story, there's no reason why she has to be Russian. The plot could work. The whole concept could work. The whole television drama could work equally well if she were English. So why make her Russian? Why identify her as Russian in the first place? Now, the makers of that series, I am absolutely sure, had no intention of creating tensions in the geopolitical sphere. They weren't thinking that they were doing anything fundamentally racist. But it would be better if they realized that they were.

## **#Pascal**

You gave this other example, of course, of Ian Fleming's James Bond and how *\*From Russia With Love\** is one of the movies where he actually uses these, but maybe he himself understood that this might not be the best thing to do. And later movies started shifting.

## **#Alexander Mercouris**

Can you just very... Yeah, this is right. Okay, so the novel... The actual original novel *\*From Russia With Love\** comes out in 1957. It has every single Russophobic trope that we've talked about. Russia is evil, it's aggressive, it's militaristic, it's tyrannical. Russians are depraved. They are accessories in their own oppression. Even if they play chess well, that is somehow sinister because it proves how guileful and deceitful they are. And, of course, at the centre of *\*From Russia With*

Love\*, there is the beautiful, virtuous Russian woman who defects to the West. And there is the evil, depraved, actually ugly Russian woman, Rosa Klebb, who is the SMERSH assassin, executioner, utterly evil operator.

So you have all of the Russophobic tropes there. Now, Ian Fleming, who my mother knew, over time, he began to become increasingly concerned about this. And he began to realize, because he was an intelligent man and a sensitive man, what he had been doing. And by the time the films started to be made, he was already shifting his views. So the films, all the films made whilst Fleming is alive, and indeed the films for long after, are careful not to identify the Russians as the adversary. And the same, by the way, is true of Fleming's later James Bond books. So the Russians and this Russian agency that James Bond is fighting, which is completely fictional, by the way, which is SMERSH, are replaced by Spectre, which is essentially a criminal organization.

Now, I happen to know that Fleming, through my mother, I happen to know that Fleming was completely conscious of what he was doing. He had big misgivings about the Cold War. And some of the sentiments in his earlier books, he never repudiated them because, of course, it meant him a lot of money. And \*From Russia With Love\* was John F. Kennedy's favorite novel. So he wasn't able to repudiate it. But he did feel unhappy about it. And he began to change his political views quite significantly. And by the end of his life, this is an almost unknown fact, he had become a supporter of Castro's revolution in Cuba.

**#Pascal**

Did he?

**#Alexander Mercouris**

Yeah.

**#Pascal**

It's a shame. Well, okay. Shows that not all is lost. Shows that not everything is lost and that people can change. And that introspection and reflection about what we do and how we think about others actually can help. That's actually a very hopeful note to end on. Alexander, of course, you are one of the two faces of The Duran, and that's where people should go — The Duran on YouTube. Your own YouTube channel, Alexander Mercouris, under your own name. I'm pretty sure anyone who's watching this knows that. You have the most brilliant show ever on a daily basis. Very generous of you to say, Pascal. And you have a brilliant show, too. I listen to you daily. And so do I. Thank you. Everybody, please support The Duran — Alexander Mercouris and your colleague Alex Christoforou. Alexander, what a great pleasure to have you here. Thank you. Thank you very much, Pascal.