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WANTED: RUSSIA EXPERTS, NO EXPERTISE REQUIRED

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There's a lot to unpack about the newly formed Committee to Investigate Russia, which aims to "help Americans recognize and understand the gravity of Russias continuing attacks on our democracy." Perhaps its most striking feature is that no Russia experts are involved; that's a sign of the times.

The Committee's birth received broad coverage in the U.S. because of the involvement of two celebrity actors, Rob Reiner and Morgan Freeman, who introduced the new nonprofit in a video asserting that "We are at war." Reiner doesn't appear to have come into contact with Russia in his long career. Freeman made two movies with Timur Bekmambetov, a Russian director, including the 2016 flop "Ben Hur."

The Committee's advisory board includes one person born in Moscow -- the conservative commentator and military historian Max Boot. But he came to the U.S. at an early age, and none of his major works have been focused on Russia. Former National Security Agency chief James Clapper probably came into contact with Russia experts during his service, but he isn't one himself. Nor have other advisory board members demonstrated any previous deep interest in Russia. They aren't, of course, real "investigators" -- they lack the background for it -- but the organization was set up to collect the public evidence and, it seems, to sell a preconceived narrative, rather than provide an impartial evaluation of it.

Those capable of a more nuanced approach are in increasingly short supply in the U.S. According to the Modern Language Association, about a third fewer U.S. college students took Russian language courses in 2013 than in 1960.

Interest in Russian peaked in 1990, when the Soviet Union was opening up to the world and thus providing a new reason to study the language -- not as the enemy's tongue but as one spoken in an exciting new market. But years of low funding and poor career opportunities have thinned out the Russia expert community. The situation has been similar in the rest of the English-speaking world -- only a small number of Dostoevsky nerds have been interested in a country often described as a fading regional power.

Even so, the high-profile Committee to Investigate Russia -- and all the other groups interested in Russian meddling with the U.S. democracy -- could have found some qualified people to advise them, had they really been interested in the subject matter. Instead, as Sam Green, director of the Russia Institute and King's College London, wrote in a recent blog post:

Too many Russian friends and colleagues living in America immigrants and American citizens, professionals, journalists, academics, all of them ardent opponents of Putin keep their heads down and voices hushed in public. Too many American analysts feel compelled to keep their dissenting opinions to themselves. I have spent a decade and a half explaining to Russian politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens that the knee-jerk American Russophobia of the Cold War was dead and buried, only to see it resurrected.

Green makes an impassioned call for a more thoughtful approach to Russian-watching. But, as another eminent Russia expert -- Mark Galeotti, who used teach at New York University and now works at the Institute of International Relations in Prague -- tweeted recently, "Clearly any attempt to introduce nuance is tantamount to treason."

The experts who are in demand are those like Molly McKew, a former consultant to former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili. Her writings are prominently cited on the Committee to Investigate Russia website. Largely focused on information warfare, her take, repeated in lengthy magazine pieces and at many forums, is that Russia is waging an information war on the U.S. "In our strategic thinking, information operations of this kind are meant to amplify military operations," she said in recent testimony to the U.S. Helsinki Commission. "In Russian doctrine, it is the other way around: Military operations amplify information operations. The smoke and mirrors are a primary means of power projection."

The argument is both simplistic and misguided; the real problem, though, is that there is no market for a robust rebuttal. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff, whose name repeatedly comes up in connection with Russia's embrace of non-military warfare, asserted in a 2013 speech that Russia needed to pay close attention to the way the U.S. combines military action with information campaigns, diplomacy and economic sanctions. Roger McDermott, an expert on Russian military and security issues, debunked talk of a "Gerasimov doctrine" in a comprehensive paper last year. "Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the current chasm that divides Russia and NATO is the mythical interpretation that Moscow has devised a lethal and new hybrid warfare doctrine," he wrote.

These voices are hardly heard. Any suggestion that the Kremlin isn't powerful or sophisticated enough to tip U.S. elections, that Russian foreign policy (and Gerasimov's thinking) is reactive

rather than based on any solid long-term plan, or that Russian propagandists are better at justifying their budgets than at packaging Russian positions for Western audiences, gets swept under the rug.

I make all three of these suggestions based on my experience of running an independent, Western-owned media outlet in Russia while it was still possible, of being involved in journalistic investigations and dealing with government sources. But, like the academics knowledgeable about the country of my birth, it's easy these days to dismiss my judgments. McKew herself has noted that far fewer people are trained in the Russian language and culture, but seems to assume that anyone who is will immediately draw the same conclusions of organized interference that she does. In his post, Green wrote,

Can we learn to listen to the voices of Russians without first sorting them into boxes that reflect our own insecurities more than their complex realities? Can we learn to trust the insight of people who have spent their lives studying the countrys language, culture, people, economy and politics, without accusing them of having been somehow contaminated by proximity to their subject?

Since the first reports of Russian interference in the U.S. election last year, the terms "propaganda" and "hacks" have morphed into "war" in the American political mind. The U.S. knows how to do war; war excludes nuance and equivocation. It needs Morgan Freeman's well-rehearsed gravitas.

But Russia will still be there when this phase is over -- resentful and hungry for Western praise, defiant and confused, thuggish and loftily intellectual, muscular and aggressive and weakened by graft and incompetence. Someday, the pieces will need to be picked up, and only people capable of taking in the nuance will be able to do it. These people have been "investigating Russia" all along. It's just that a less thorough and more politicized "investigation" is temporarily supplanting their work.

Kaynak/Source: