

CHAPTER FOUR

The Beginnings of Cold War

If the interwar period could be seen as one in which *Reader's Digest* created an ambivalent political geography, then the period that followed the end of World War II would be characterized by a single-minded obsession with the threat that communism posed to the “free world.” In this chapter I explore the ways in which the *Digest* reconstructed the Soviet Union, and communism more generally, as the single alter ego of America, and attempt to explain how this representational shift to an extreme image of the Soviets as Other and evil could be made reasonable and acceptable to the magazine's readership.

The Cold War is generally agreed to have begun immediately after World War II, even though its precedents can be traced much further back in the history of the relations between the American state and communism. Certainly the sheer volume of *Digest* articles on the Soviet Union and communism from 1946 onward would verify this as a starting point (see figure 6). In contrast, there are a number of possible definitions of the extent of its duration. Fred Halliday has written that the “first” Cold War finished in 1953 with, on the one hand, the death of Stalin and the resulting relaxation of Soviet domestic and foreign policies, and, on the other hand, the election of President Eisenhower, who promised to end the Korean War;¹ the following phase of “oscillatory antagonism” lasted until 1969.² My analysis of *Reader's Digest*, however, suggests that for this particular voice of America, the unswerving binarism of the Cold War was unsettled only by the public Sino-Soviet split in the wake of the Soviet signing of the 1963 nuclear test ban.³ After the events of 1963,

the enemy of the *Digest's* conception of Americanness divided in two distinct ways. First, and most obviously, the unitary communist threat of world domination was delivered a significant blow with the breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations. As tensions mounted along the Chinese-Soviet border, the specter of communism clearly fractured and visibly weakened. Second, and more subtly, the *Digest* faced a more insidious threat to its binary scripting of international political praxis: the threat of détente. The “weakening” of American opposition to communism—backing down from the threat of “total war” to accept the possibility of peaceful coexistence—represented a movement of great significance to the magazine. The dis-order that communism had inflicted on international society was not to be eliminated, but to be allowed to exist, albeit in a contained state. The triumphalism of American Manifest Destiny overcoming the Soviet threat to the onward march of freedom and democracy was seen to weaken into an acknowledgment of communism, contained within the sphere of influence of the Soviet state. Both of these themes are central to the narrative of international politics during the period of détente from the mid-1960s to 1979.

But contrary to Halliday’s observations, the Cold War truly ended for the *Digest* only with the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union, and even since then, commentators have recognized a continuation of “Cold War metaphysics,” even in the absence of Cold War geopolitics.⁴ The

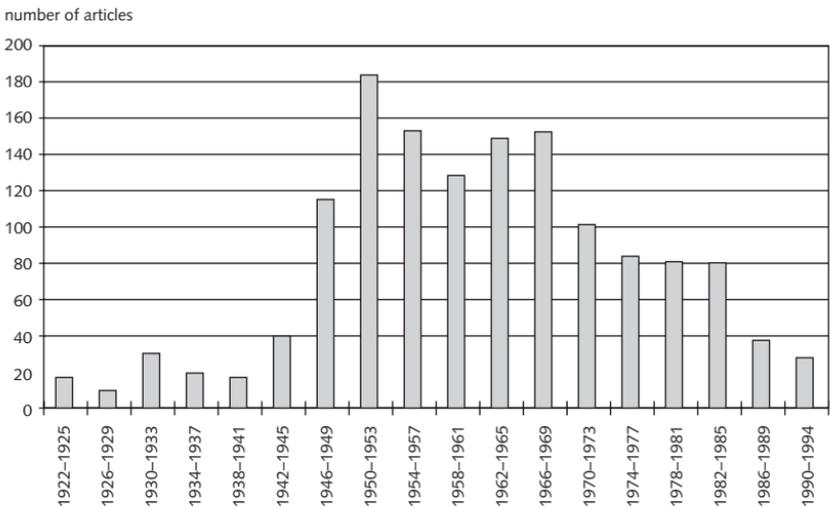


Figure 6. Number of articles about the Soviet Union or communism in the *Reader's Digest*, 1922–1994.

Soviet-communist Other of the Cold War has remained a key anchor in the magazine's narration of international events since the end of World War II and, as I will explain in this chapter, constructed the Soviet Union and communism as the location of America's alter ego and danger.

This chapter is concerned with the rise of the USSR to the position of absolute Other. In the next two chapters I will consider the effects of détente and then the return to extreme Cold War geopolitics in the 1980s under the leadership of Ronald Reagan. In chapter 7 I will analyze the impact of the ending of this binary geopolitics with the formal end to the Cold War.

The "First" Cold War: Othering the Soviet Union

Although *Reader's Digest* had been of growing significance in American popular culture for two decades, its presence became most strongly felt at the height of the Cold War. In many ways it was one of the initiators of American opposition to the Soviet Union as a "Cold War." The *Digest* both picked up on popular American anxieties regarding the postwar world order and helped to maintain popular anticommunism throughout the Cold War years.

No radically new representations of the Soviet Union were introduced to readers after the end of World War II. Instead, there was a silencing of descriptions that had previously been more sympathetic to the *potential* of changes occurring in the USSR and other countries that were undertaking a transition to communism. *Reader's Digest* now presented a more uniformly negative picture.

The magazine's change in representation of the communist system was explained as the result of the Soviets' previous ability to hide the brutality and cruelty of their system from global scrutiny. Propaganda was mentioned in the vast majority of pieces on communist systems, and *Digest* authors portrayed Soviet citizens as slaves whose plight had previously been hidden from view by Soviet leaders pulling down the Iron Curtain to hide their crimes.⁵

With the onset of the Cold War, ambivalence over the origins and potential of the 1917 Russian Revolution disappeared into the rigid ideological binary of freedom versus totalitarianism. Although a 1951 *Digest* article claimed that the Russian Revolution "was a tremendous and spontaneous popular uprising, the end result of a century-old struggle for emancipation," it further disclosed that at the time of the revolution,

the Bolshevik leaders were not to be found in Russia.⁶ According to the magazine, it was only after the Russian people had chosen a new government at the ballot box that the Bolsheviks returned and rushed in to seize power by force.⁷

Narratives describing the emancipatory potential of the uprising against the czars rapidly faded into the background as descriptions of famine, terror, and gulags came to the fore. The *Digest's* belief in the unnaturalness of the Soviet system was underscored by articles claiming that despite the *natural* optimism of the Russian people, they were fearful for the future.⁸ Thus *Reader's Digest* increasingly wrote the Soviet system as one that lacked public support. One train of thought in the magazine insisted that Soviet morale would drop further if the Soviet population was to hear of conditions in America.⁹ This presented the United States with a simple Cold War tactic: instead of posing as an aggressive presence—which would be against the “American way” and more importantly, would prove to be impractical in this situation—America should continue to demonstrate and export the principles of democracy. These principles alone, the *Digest* claimed, would ensure its triumph over the USSR. This clearly demonstrates the importance of ideas in the postwar era: “In the field of ideas,” claimed the *Digest* in 1947, “freedom is the atomic bomb.”¹⁰

Before the end of World War II, Soviet territorial ambition was often explained away by the *Digest* as the Soviet state's understandable anxious desire to protect its borders and maintain a sphere of interest in a world mostly wary of its existence. The Soviets' postwar moves to territorial acquisition, however, proved to be too much for this model and were interpreted in the new geopolitical context as inherently threatening, illustrating a blatantly colonial impulse on the part of the USSR.¹¹

At this time *Reader's Digest* forged an exclusive link between communism and the USSR. From this point onward, the Soviet Union represented the origin of communism. No longer a mere political ideology, communism was now presented as an essentially *Russian* ideology that disguised Soviet national expansionary tactics beneath its utopian claims. The *Digest* reader could be forgiven for mistaking Karl Marx for a player in the Russian Revolution, so often was he lumped together with Lenin and Stalin as a perpetrator of this demonic Russian ideology.¹² Here the *Digest* can be seen to be drawing upon George Kennan's contention that the Soviets' use of Marxism was simply a rationalization for their own

expansionary urges: “Marxism was only a ‘fig-leaf’ of moral and intellectual responsibility which cloaked their essentially naked instinctive desires.”¹³ This solidified the *Digest’s* transition from capitalism as the opposition to Soviet communism, to democracy, and finally to anti-communism per se. Now there was total opposition between Americans and Soviets; readers had nothing in common with the Russians.

Through repetition of this story of communism’s origins, a new “communist” identity was formed in the *Digest*. The origins were power-political ones, but the Russians’ continued use of Marxist ideology was simply a strategy to conceal national-expansionary tactics. Repetition of this narrative served to erase earlier accounts and earlier explanations of origins as the will of the people shaking off their aristocratic rulers.

Articles underscored this national origin of communism by highlighting the unnaturalness of communist doctrine when it was implemented in other places. One piece suggested the continued validity of Sir Bernard Pares’s 1832 reflection that “Russia could only hold Poland by uncivilizing her.”¹⁴ A 1947 article proclaiming “democracy’s last chance in Latin America” argued that communists deviously disguised their antireligious attitudes in order to gain support.¹⁵ Other articles described how certain leaders had masked their communist leanings until they took control. This clearly demonstrates the *Digest’s* moral geography, which constructed a cartography of good and evil for its readers and illustrated the spaces within which future battles between these forces would be fought.

Having eliminated its earlier ambivalence toward communism, *Reader’s Digest* now constructed it as an alter ego for postwar America and the world order it sought to impose. First, the magazine constructed an exclusive communist identity; then it naturalized this different identity. I will explore each of these rhetorical strategies before discussing how the magazine’s representation of the USSR remained credible in the face of inconsistencies in its construction of its Other over the years.

The Communist Identity

The effect of the *Digest’s* rewrite of the origin of communism was to establish it as an absolute identity. The magazine displayed a belief in the existence of what might be called “ontological communists.” In the previous chapter, I described *Digest* narratives in which people either had communist leanings or had suggested possible combinations of communism and capitalism in various social reforms. During the Cold War

period, it was not possible, in the eyes of the *Digest*, to be sympathetic to any communist belief without actually *being* a communist. Identities became singular and exclusive: a person had to be one identity or the other, not a combination of them. This offered a lesson to readers and illustrates the magazine's desire to offer normative visions in addition to describing current events.

The desire to know whether or not a person was essentially a communist or a democrat propelled many *Digest* articles, as it had driven the red scare trials in America. Articles about new leaders coming to power around the world posed urgent questions about their political-ideological leanings, paralleling the biographical scrutiny of the American trials.¹⁶ Mere association with known communists would be enough to color the characters of these leaders a deep scarlet hue. The effects of this drive to identify must surely mirror the disciplinary regime of modern subjectivity through sexual revelation and identification, articulated so eloquently by Michel Foucault.¹⁷ In other words, just as Foucault described modern society's obsession with authentic sexual identification, during the Cold War the *Digest* believed that at some "deep" level, the political identity of an individual was either "democrat" or "communist."

The *Digest* attributed the singular communist identity not only to individuals; countries too were essentially either communist or free. It was at this historic juncture that the concept of the three worlds was introduced to world political-economic discourse.¹⁸ Many *Digest* articles of the time scripted the Third World as an empty space of superpower conflict whose fate was to become developed "naturally" in accordance with American principles or "perversely" along Soviet lines. Even when countries had declared their nonalignment, the *Digest* suspected that they must secretly adhere to one systemic principle or the other.

Reader's Digest presented its articles as being of even more immediate personal importance to its readers now that discerning communist from noncommunist identity was a concern. Sometimes the linkages were spelled out blatantly, as in an article that described how, for the author, "communism was the poison that was to canker and destroy our marriage."¹⁹ More frequently, because of the ontological status of communism, the earlier divisions of political scale I have described simply did not exist in articles during the first two decades of the Cold War. The communist peril was writ large in articles that explained the danger to society if individuals did not act as responsible citizens. Similarly, articles

that described events in the Soviet Union or geopolitical relations between the superpowers rarely failed to mention what the reader could personally do: write to politicians, send article reprints to friends and colleagues, or simply stay alert.²⁰

Increased vigilance was necessary because of communist conspiracies to take over the world. Communists apparently were preparing to attack U.S. government institutions whenever “the interior situation of the United States is suitable for the attack.”²¹ One author quoted a communist in the United States who stated that socialism would “never come about by the ballot box.”²² A good citizen needed to stay informed not only to vote wisely, but also in order to be alert to the communist threat:

The unsuspecting American imagines that we are safe from socialism because he knows the people will never vote for it. But socialism can be put over by a small minority.²³

The *Digest* suggested that communists the world over would take advantage of those who were ignorant of their nature and intentions:

The power of the Soviet Union, and particularly the Soviet Communist Party, is due to the fact that, while in a sense the Soviet state has moved into a power vacuum in Europe and Asia, the Soviet Communist Party has moved into a moral vacuum in the world.²⁴

Intensification of the narrative of communist takeover as a result of ignorance led ultimately to the introduction of the concept of “total war.” Communism could never be truly defeated; because of its insidious tactics, its propaganda, and its utter ruthlessness, it would always be ready to reestablish power if Americans dropped their guard.

Communism had made “the morality of war *its permanent single standard*,” so that war with the USSR would be “*inevitable* the moment we [Americans] become weak.”²⁵ Americans had to remain vigilant because “for Russia anything is a weapon.”²⁶ Indeed, one 1961 article proclaimed “WORLD WAR III HAS ALREADY STARTED!”²⁷ *Reader’s Digest* had established America as the space opposite to that of communism, so the United States would always be on the receiving end of communist threats: “This country is the Number One target of the communist espionage apparatus.”²⁸ This struggle was usually written in dramatic, even apocalyptic terms: the two systems were “competing for the loyalty of the human race,”²⁹ so that “either we must correct the imbalance caused by

our approach . . . or we might just as well write this country off the books.”³⁰ Americans were uniquely placed as the last line of defense of freedom:

Can we survive? At no time in the history of our nation has this question had more urgent meaning. . . . A successful attack on us might give the merciless communist leaders control of the world in a week.³¹

In retrospect and taken out of context, these assertions seem rather hysterical and overwrought. The concept of encirclement by enemies, however, has a long history in America. The imperial frontier narrative of heroic pioneers surrounded by “savage” Indians is central to self-imaginings of American national identity, and is often replayed in Hollywood Westerns. The Cold War narrative simply replaced native peoples with Soviets and communists.³²

Naturalizing the binary of good U.S. system versus bad USSR system—via “objective” language and “common sense”—legitimated the demonization of communism, and especially the USSR.

The Naturalization of Difference

The discourse of the natural runs throughout *Reader’s Digest* representation of the Soviet Union and communist systems. During the Cold War, this discourse was used to an even greater extent to render American activity innocent in the face of Soviet ideological practice. The languages of geopolitics, disease, and perversity all invoked the natural-unnatural binary in such a way as to reinforce the American moral high ground in interpreting international political events and gave credence to interpretations that otherwise might have appeared to be hopelessly biased.

Geopolitics

Orthodox geopolitical concepts depend upon apparently nonideological use of geographical process and elements. Geopolitics can thus be regarded as a myth in the sense in which Roland Barthes employed the term in his study of modern society.³³ As an apparently purely factual argument, geopolitics would be unaffected by political bias, cultural norm, or historical situation. The laws of geopolitics could thus be regarded as ahistorical—as rules that could be extracted from context and applied to situations as different as the Peloponnesian Wars and the invasion of North Korea. Furthermore, drawing upon these apparently

immutable laws, geopolitical arguments in *Reader's Digest* could be used to predict future situations.

The use of geopolitical reasoning in *Reader's Digest* was intended to *naturalize* arguments by explaining issues via geographical *facts*. This use of geopolitical ideas as commonsense knowledge was seen as incompatible with ideology or political bias. Although during the Cold War there was a distinct increase in the number of *Reader's Digest* articles that relied upon traditional fixed-form or fixed-process geopolitical concepts, the term *geopolitics* was rarely used in the magazine. I would speculate that the reason for this omission was the association of *geopolitics* with German *geopolitik*. In the case of *Reader's Digest*, the association with Nazi Germany per se would not be the only problem with using the term, but more generally the *ideological* underpinnings that the term *geopolitik* might conjure up. When the term was used, it was applied only to communist political geography, as if to reinforce the idea that only communist reasoning was ideological.

Geopolitical arguments were especially useful in conveying the significance of Soviet expansion into countries that previously had little international importance. The broader implications were made manifest in the geographical linkages that geopolitical models foregrounded. A 1947 article on the Soviet takeover of Albania stated that "whoever controls this little country can turn the Adriatic into his private lake and have access to the Mediterranean."³⁴ Another *Digest* author claimed that "our stake in the future of Japan is vast. It is nothing less than the future of western civilization in the entire Far East."³⁵ In "Is Russia Prepared to Make War?" the *Digest* claimed that although industry was inefficient, the "menace to peace is appallingly real," for Russia's geographical location was almost impregnable.³⁶ Soviet actions were usually presented as the result of ruthless strategy, but geography was sometimes cited as a truly deterministic variable, leading Russia into irresistible temptation: "Yugoslavia is hemmed in by three satellite foes, each with an inviting plain to invade."³⁷ Finally, for more than one *Digest* writer, Soviet character was perceived to be a result of geography.³⁸ In 1946 one author noted the endurance of certain characteristics in the USSR, claiming that seven hundred years of autocratic rule had made totalitarianism appear normal to the Russians. This argument suggested that they were driven by history to be suspicious of their neighbors and, shifting from geopolitics to chronopolitics, held that they had been separated from "the ways of

Western civilization” by three hundred and fifty years.³⁹ This and articles that insisted “Stalin’s heart is in Asia” reinforced the Orientalist—and so uncivilized—nature of the Soviets.⁴⁰ Thus, distinct from narratives that wrote Soviet action in deliberate power-political or ideological terms were those that made expansionary and repressive Soviet action seem unavoidable because of the laws of history and geopolitical location.

A parallel line of argument explained why communism was not likely to be a permanent feature of Chinese society. The Chinese were individualists, the *Digest* explained, so that “eventually [they] will absorb the communists, just as they swallowed up the Mongols and Manchus.”⁴¹ The superficial hold that communism had over “real” Asian character and culture was emphasized in articles that referred to governments as “puppets” and “dupes.”

The courses of action proposed by *Reader’s Digest* authors similarly insisted on recognition of the facts of geography. The magazine said in 1948 that the country’s location made the Soviet Union

almost impregnable. And the defensive strength which it gives her enables her to behave towards us in the way she is behaving.⁴²

Domino theories and the perils of territorial congruence were the most obvious cases in which geography in the form of containment could be used to counter geography as an aid to expansion. Drawing directly upon both Mackinder’s heartland thesis (although without referencing it) and, particularly, later developments of the geopolitics of airspace, *Digest* authors urged America to build up its air force in response to the power of Russia’s land advantage. In a 1950 article, American strategist Major A. de Seversky argued that depending on its geography, “a nation seeks a clear-cut superiority in a single medium. . . . This law accords with common sense.”⁴³

The *Digest* also recognized geopolitics as based in other geographical facts such as population distribution, which the magazine related directly to possible American strategy. De Seversky argued that it would be impossible for America to match “the swarming communist man power”⁴⁴—“the 800 million people now at the disposal of the Kremlin”—to which Stalin was preparing to add 700 million Asiatics.⁴⁵ Capture of people was a central aspect of *Reader’s Digest* narrativization of the danger in the spread of communism. The danger was particularly acute when the people in question were skilled: “Capture of Japan’s 9.5 million industrial

workers by Communism could seal the fate of democracy in half the world.⁴⁶ The logical conclusion of this polemic was that Russians were after not just territorial acquisition but also peoples' minds, thus reinforcing the argument that the idea of communism was a Soviet tactic. This also allowed the *Digest* to bring the threat of communism directly home to all individual Americans:

This is where *you* come in. No-one is too small or insignificant, too young or too old, to be shackled and regimented, or pauperized and destroyed. . . . By its all-encompassing timetable sooner or later [the "communist masterplot"] has to reach you.⁴⁷

With this, the *Digest* constructed a conceptual bridge that links events occurring in distant parts of the globe to the future freedom of the reader. Thus, indirectly, *Reader's Digest* was constructing for its readers geographies that linked them with world events. The magazine was constantly presenting a model for its readers to adopt in their understanding of their place and role in American society. This allowed the magazine to introduce more prescriptive statements relating to individual and state action. Some articles called directly for the development of Soviet-style devotion in America. Many authors appeared to admire the Soviet single-mindedness about the value of their system, lamenting the lack of missionary zeal about the U.S. system. This ranged from authors who expressed frustration at others' inability to acknowledge the generosity of American action to those who claimed that all that was needed to improve America's reputation overseas was to find a name for the American system with which to replace the unpopular term *capitalism*.⁴⁸

Some authors clearly thought that nominal action would not suffice. A number of them claimed that American national character was naturally not as aggressive as the Russian national character.⁴⁹ Thus, because America was not naturally a militaristic nation, Russia in the next war would "have quantity therefore we need to improve quality."⁵⁰ *Reader's Digest* entered the debate on military spending by asking if too many government resources were channeled to defense. The answer was, overwhelmingly, that it was preferable to becoming a "slave of communism."⁵¹

U.S.-Soviet relations were also written in terms of geopolitical economy.⁵² Postwar Soviet economic weakness was simultaneously a comfort and a concern to *Reader's Digest* in this period. On the one hand, the *Digest* believed that systemic inefficiency and scarcity meant that the

Soviet Union could not implement its internationalist goals through aggressive expansion. The magazine's (neo)realist belief in the effect of the world system on individual state character meant that it believed that the primary American concern would thus be how best to aid Russia in order to have it fall into line in its postwar order. Here, if the Soviet Union could be brought into an American-led system of free trade, its internal political and economic character would soon fall into line with American democracy. Although the United States and the USSR could not cooperate politically in the reconstruction of world society, some *Digest* authors thought it imperative for America to bring the USSR into the world system through trade.⁵³ This represented both fear of the consequences of alienating the Soviet Union and acknowledgment of the power of trade in constructing geopolitical order. Although this was not a major line of reasoning after the early Cold War period, in the 1960s and 1970s, traces of this reasoning could be found running through *Digest* arguments that stated that trade sanctions should be used as a weapon when more overtly hostile action was precluded by détente policies.

Another interpretation of the implications of Soviet economic weakness began to dominate at this time. This second viewpoint argued that the leaders of the USSR recognized their weakness and realized that they needed peace to facilitate growth. *Reader's Digest* recognized the growth potential of the Soviet system, deciding that it might pose a challenge to the United States in the future.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the *Digest* argued, it was the USSR that benefited most from peace. The Soviets would cooperate with the United States and Britain until their economy (and military) was strong enough for them to pursue their ultimate goal of world supremacy. The implications of this situation were drawn out by the *Digest* through its use of the "laws of history" and the predictive powers of geopolitics. Citizens needed to be wary even when the communists appeared to have quite peaceful intentions. For the *Digest*, communists could never be peaceful, as this would go against their nature; instead, they would take advantage of peace to build up their economy and military, then openly end the peace.

All of these articles were structured around a belief that Americans would have to act immediately while they still retained a comparative advantage over the Soviet Union. If they waited until Russia actually threatened them directly—when the Soviet Union had built up its economy and military—it would already be too late. *Reader's Digest* laid out

this argument with regard to France. If communism were to be successful in France,

the smaller states of Europe would succumb one by one ... [and] all Europe will be unified under Soviet tyranny. ... Our only chance to avoid war with the Soviet Union lies in the possibility that today, when we are far stronger than the Soviet Union, we shall have the foresight, energy and courage to prevent Stalin from dominating new strategic areas, and shall ourselves organize the world's free peoples to resist Soviet imperialism, so that the Soviet dictator will be constantly confronted by superior force.⁵⁵

This argument was not limited to Europe but applied to the entire world. Although *Reader's Digest* believed that Stalin could not afford war for the time being, it saw him as “devis[ing] the diabolically shrewd plan to set the world afire.”⁵⁶ In other words, the *Digest* looked at socialist revolutions around the world and saw Stalin behind them; Stalin was the mastermind who left others to do the fighting for him. He took advantage of discontent and then hijacked protest to employ it to his own ends.

This perception of Soviet involvement led to the development of two further *Reader's Digest* narratives. First, by externalizing all local conflicts into interrelated aspects of the overarching global conflict,⁵⁷ the *Digest* was able to support preservation of the status quo in a number of places in the name of international anticommunism, despite the inequities in many of these countries. For example, *Reader's Digest* would recognize the ills of colonialism or dictatorship in a country and would accept the local population's desire for change; yet oppose political or military protest or revolution because it was assumed to be Soviet-promoted.

Second, this argument witnessed the beginnings of development theory in *Reader's Digest* global rhetoric. The *Digest* explained that communists were able to influence revolutions across the globe by “exploiting local difficulties.”⁵⁸ In other words, Soviets took advantage of poor economic conditions that caused political chaos. The *Digest* described disorganized societies in terms that made their susceptibility to communism seem inevitable. One author stated that “poverty is the best breeding ground for theoretical communism,” and another that chaos was “a fertile field for communism.”⁵⁹ Again the *Digest* was pushing for order and discipline in societies so that the communist threat could be repelled. Once again its geographies tied together the necessity for order at a societal level and for the individual American reader.

For America's goal of expanding Western democracy (not to mention

free market economics), investment in development, both economic and political, was the answer. This was first achieved via the Marshall Plan to save Europe from “chaos and communism”;⁶⁰ American aid was then extended to other endangered parts of the world. For example, in Afghanistan it was thought that “poverty attracts swarms of Soviet agents”⁶¹ and that the Philippines might have gone “the way of China” because of the “danger of discontent” there.⁶² Similarly, *Reader’s Digest* urged Japan to “make the reforms necessary to eliminate the misery on which communism thrives”⁶³ and argued that the United States needed to use “prosperity as a weapon.”⁶⁴

In addition to economic support, America should make available the truth about each situation by introducing “moral literacy.”⁶⁵ Reinforcing this idea was a 1950 piece that insisted that communism “has no political appeal to individualistic, liberty-loving Latin Americans. Its only appeal is economic.”⁶⁶ As the *Digest* was never totally negative in its portrayal of any situation, however difficult and challenging, it provided anecdotes of success at halting or turning back communist encroachment: “Libya is a reassuring example of how, by intelligent spending, we can clearly get our money’s worth.”⁶⁷

Elsewhere, communists themselves covertly created political chaos, which meant that they would later be welcomed to these countries as a result of subsequent overt offers of help. *Reader’s Digest* warned that if America did not take control in such instances, the communists would be welcomed by local people as they waltzed in and took control before anyone really knew what was going on.⁶⁸ The communists’ motives were always represented to be at odds with the (genuine dissatisfaction of the) indigenous people. In a 1962 *Digest* article about his trip to Latin America, Richard Nixon wrote that the “communists joined in the revolution not because of any dislike of dictatorship but only because they themselves wanted to become dictators.”⁶⁹

Another *Digest* argument put forward in support of U.S. intervention was also linked to the language of developmentalism in its most “evolutionary” guise stemming from colonialist representations of non-European peoples: political maturity. “The great majority of the responsible people in Guatemala are pro-American” claimed one author, but they were “woefully inexperienced politically.”⁷⁰

One of the rhetorical powers of geopolitical reasoning is the transcendence of history. *Reader’s Digest* also relied upon rhetorical use of history

and its “laws” to naturalize the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. A significant number of articles in this period covered issues or events that were identified as key moments in American history. The situations these articles described were presented as potential turning points in history. According to the *Digest*, the showdown in Cuba in the early 1960s represented “one of the decisive moments of the 20th century.” Other articles explained that Mao’s army was “the most viciously reactionary force in history,” and that communist Chinese society represented “the most frightful regimentation in history.”⁷¹ Similarly, other articles compared current events with key periods of American history to drive home the importance of the event being described. A 1962 piece on America’s potential role in the fate of Soviet people, for example, asserted that “this debate may appear as momentous as the Lincoln-Douglas debate over slavery more than a century ago.”⁷² This familiar and moral example was used to draw readers into complicity with the narrative and accept the importance of its message.

The *Reader’s Digest* use of laws of history was sometimes brought together with geopolitical reasoning to facilitate prediction of future events, often to analyze Russian territorial acquisition in the past as a measure of future threats. Drawing upon what it evidently regarded as the “lessons of history,” the *Digest* explained that “Stalin will not stop. He can only be stopped.”⁷³ Other articles claimed that “each day brings us closer to Russia’s development of the atomic bomb” and that “when the Soviet stockpile [of atomic weapons] reaches a decisive size, war will probably come.”⁷⁴

In short, *Reader’s Digest* believed in the limitless expansive potential of communism, that it “will not stop at international frontiers unless it is opposed.”⁷⁵ Of course, the *Digest* did not see the propagation of communism as coming about solely by political-territorial expansion; it was also driven by the spread of Soviet propaganda. As a result, adding to the predictive nature of geopolitics was the *Digest’s* contention that the conflict could not be understood simply by weighing material capabilities. The confrontation was most importantly an ideological one—in the sense that Soviet ideology threatened to suppress (American) truth. This in turn threatened democracy, for *Reader’s Digest* insisted that citizens are required to be (truthfully) informed of the facts for democracy to work.

Propelled by claims that the *people* of communist regimes, but not their leaders, wanted peace, the *Digest* said it was U.S. duty to provide the Soviet people with help and support.⁷⁶ A 1951 article described the battle

over the truth as “the war we are losing” and complained that Americans were unable to win the battle for people’s minds because they were up against fanatics ready to die for communism.⁷⁷ Other authors used language that implied unnatural devotion on the part of the Soviets: “fanatical crusade; the communist forces have the fire of zealots,” “fanatical discipline,” “rabid communist.”⁷⁸ The 1953 article “What Is a Communist?” provided the following answer: “Most simply, [communism] is a militant faith, engaged in a war, now open, now closed, against all others.”⁷⁹ The most dangerous factor in U.S.-USSR relations, claimed another article, was that “the Russians acted on the assumption that they were at war with us and we acted as though we were at peace with them.”⁸⁰ This theme reappeared with a vengeance in the détente period.

The *Digest’s* fear that American peacefulness was a disadvantage was reinforced by what was apparently a historical example of an open, democratic society falling to communism. In “The First Democracy Destroyed by Communism,” Aleksandr Kerensky told of how the communists took over from the provisional government he led in what he claimed was Russia’s first democracy. He argued that “the myth that communists overthrew Czarism has been purposely spread to conceal their crime of having strangled the first Russian democracy.”⁸¹ For the *Digest*, this was the first of many such stories, the original event that was to be repeated across the globe. Throughout the Cold War, *Reader’s Digest* presented endless repetitions of this story in a variety of settings. For example, in “How the Russians Stole My Government,” the *Digest* described how communists took control of Hungary despite achieving only 17 percent support in the last free elections.⁸² Repetition of this narrative was important to the *Digest’s* representational schema. It did not really matter which country was threatened; the tragic structure of the narrative reinforced the message encoded in the details: eventually America too would succumb.

The lessons of history and the facts of geography proved invaluable in the *Digest’s* naturalization of the communist presence. This process of naturalization was taken one stage further through the use of disease metaphors.

Disease

Although no disease metaphors were to be found in its pages before the end of World War II, during the Cold War *Reader’s Digest* employed a

number of them in its narration of communism.⁸³ The magazine insisted that “disease is bad, but the worst disease of all is communism.”⁸⁴ The *Digest* favored metaphors of diseases that appear harmless at first but inevitably develop into life-threatening forms: “cancerous intrusion of Soviet agents” and “communist cancer [eating] into the body of exhausted France.” *Reader’s Digest* also described various types of communist poison, including “the blood virus type, radiating from communist Russia, [which] is today rotting the souls of two-fifths of all mankind”⁸⁵ and “slow poison” of socialist influence.⁸⁶ Countries that had yet to decide on the political direction that modern development would take them were seen as being not entirely healthy:

The truth is clear: with China lost for the time to Communism, with India pale with the sickness of neutralism, a free and healthy Japan is not only democracy’s best hope in Asia—it is quite probably its only hope.⁸⁷

Within this discourse, resistance to communism was written in the language of the body’s *natural* reaction to viral infections, thus reinforcing the naturalness of resistance to communism: “This attempted Russification has generated a passive but strong resistance, as the invasion of a virus generates antibodies in the human body.”⁸⁸

The structure of these metaphors mirrors the predictive nature of geopolitics. Yet disease metaphors are more powerful interpellators of subjectivity because they not only naturalize danger and perpetuate fear but do so in language that inscribes global ideological conflict onto the territory of the human body. They thus vividly relate international events to the reader’s own familiar terrain. As with its use of geopolitics, in its use of disease metaphors *Reader’s Digest* enacted a double move. First, it uncovered a threat or predicted a deleterious change to the body politic. Articles created a sense of dis-ease over future conditions. Second, the magazine provided a therapeutic discourse.⁸⁹ It offered, and at times administered, a cure or inoculation against whatever had infected—or threatened to infect—American society. The first move was intended to construct a desire for order and stability; the second offered safety through voluntary disciplining of the reader’s thoughts and actions.⁹⁰

The use of disease metaphors here vividly illustrates the role that *Reader’s Digest* has projected for itself in American political culture. As I argued earlier, *Reader’s Digest* sees itself as providing its readership with the essential information they require in order to “stay informed” about

American society and world issues. Staying informed is central to the role of the *Digest's* good citizen, for it is believed that only knowledgeable people can understand what is really going on (as opposed to accepting what others tell them is happening or what appears to be happening) and can act and vote accordingly. *Reader's Digest's* self-projected role within the rhetoric of disease reinforces its more general self-perception as provider of expert knowledge. Medical experts are required not only to find and administer a cure but often also to diagnose a problem: a person can be infected without having any symptoms that an untrained eye can detect.

During the Cold War, *Reader's Digest* scripted communism in much the same way in its insistence that Americans did not realize that changes were already under way, or that American society was already undergoing the first stages of revolution. The *Digest* elevated itself to the status of an expert who could see through the superficial appearance of society to get at what was really happening. The magazine could predict what would develop if society were left untreated. Even apparently healthy people—patriotic, hardworking Americans—could be “infected” with communist leanings (an infection that might be invisible not only to others but also to themselves).⁹¹ To avoid this, people required a course of treatment: a monthly dose of *Reader's Digest's* clearheaded facts. The magazine explained the symptoms to watch for in others and offered advice on how best to avoid contracting bad morals or communist leanings. As the communist threat had become naturalized and dehistoricized, this prescription was indefinite: regular consumption and digestion of information was required to maintain an effective and ideologically healthy citizenship.

Disease metaphors appear to be quite an extreme form of representation. Some articles went a step further, opposing the natural not with an unhealthy state, but with one that was *completely* unnatural, or perverse.

Perversity

Although “the natural” is a constant measure running through all the *Digest's* comparisons of the Soviet and American systems, the infusion of articles with the “unnatural” or “perverse” makes the formation of difference that much clearer. Here, concepts of natural and unnatural were explicit: Soviets were labeled as perverse. Unnaturalness was invoked by a number of tropes that extended from a relatively weak aesthetic form

to sexual perversity and inhumanity. Readers are left in no doubt about the differences between the Soviets and themselves.

Aesthetic descriptions drew heavily upon the unnatural. Russian people and landscapes were described in language that evoked ugliness or dullness. Simply put, the look of Soviet and communist people and places was unnatural in its unattractiveness. For example, Mao Tse-tung was described as ugly (“a short, fat, stooping man of 53 with a warty chin”), the female “Boss of Rumania” was “shaped like a wrestler,” and the “usual Russian countenance is like a hog . . . incredibly filthy and untidy.”⁹²

Aesthetics were presented in such a way as to imply something about character. Soviet women, for example, were described as having a “plodding submissiveness, more animal-like than human” and lacking feminine grace and “coquetry.”⁹³ General Malenkov, described as fat and having an “extremely repulsive” face, was called the “machine that walks like a man.”⁹⁴

Reader's Digest suggested that beauty was scarce in the USSR, and its appearance was written so as to seem incongruous. In 1957 an author remarked that one evening in a Russian restaurant, “I was astonished to see a pretty girl. This is rare in Moscow.”⁹⁵ “Ivan looks at Iowa” noted how visiting Russian farmers were impressed at agricultural efficiency, the range of products available in shops, and the “beautiful bosoms” of the American women.⁹⁶

This use of unnatural aesthetics was more than a simple attempt to make the enemy difficult to like and identify with and therefore easier to hate. Through reference to antiaesthetics, *Reader's Digest* made Soviet people appear unnatural, and therefore beyond any system used to judge normal people.⁹⁷ But the use of aesthetics also implied social process. If it was acknowledged at all, beauty was found in children (who had yet to be fully corrupted by the system) or in women, who were perhaps assumed to have less of a role in official Soviet society than men. Alternatively, the notion of “beauty” could be used to enforce certain “natural” traits of humanity that even Soviet communists could not pervert, such as women's natural beauty or their desire to maintain it as part of their “natural” role within human society. As a result, articles that discussed women who had been successful in the USSR made much of the women's putting their careers ahead of their natural role as mothers.

This binary of natural and unnatural was not limited to the *Digest's*

description of Soviet people. The Soviet landscape too was “shabby and gray.”⁹⁸ On the other hand, pro-American areas in otherwise Soviet-friendly places were described in almost utopian terms, especially West Berlin, “the free island surrounded by the ‘Red Sea’”; it was “an oasis of freedom in the communist desert.”⁹⁹ Communist takeover of a place inevitably made it appear less attractive to *Digest* writers.

The natural-unnatural discursive structure was also expressed through the concept of rationality and its absence. One autobiographical tale confessed that a “purely emotional reaction to this misery”—rather than rational evaluation—“led me to socialism.”¹⁰⁰ *Reader’s Digest* described communist education as proof of the existence of a system of rationality different from that of America and the “free world.” Communists did not offer “real” education but political education and propaganda. Soviet knowledge was so Other to its American counterpart that even science was irrational. One author claimed that for Russians, “to seek a compromise with the capitalist world is not only disloyal to the working class but also ‘unscientific,’”¹⁰¹ and another quoted from the *Short Philosophical Encyclopedia* (Moscow, 1934) to underscore the “perverted code of conduct sanctioned by communist doctrines”:

From the point of view of communist morality, “moral” is only that which facilitates the destruction of the old world and which strengthens the new, communist world.¹⁰²

As a result, as far as the basis for making decisions was concerned, the United States and the USSR were portrayed as truly incompatible systems, both scientifically and morally. *Reader’s Digest* argued that as a result, appeasement would accomplish nothing; negotiation was futile and would only indicate American weakness.

The *Digest* frequently articulated the Soviet system through an overtly sexualized language. For example, communism was “sterile and quixotic,” or a seducer: “The Continent fears Russia will woo frustrated Germany into partnership again.”¹⁰³ One author described the character of Soviet relations with the rest of world in terms of a repressed sexual encounter: “Nonintercourse is the general rule and fraternization is forbidden, except as part of a planned penetration.”¹⁰⁴

In addition, the *Digest* argued that sex was an integral part of communist schemes of capture: “unrestrained sexual license is the principal means by which the communist regimes today seduce young people and

chain them to Moscow's objectives," it claimed in 1955. This was achieved via "a rampant scourge of promiscuity" and the "unique communist institution" of state-sponsored prostitution, both in diametric opposition to the family values of most *Digest* readers.¹⁰⁵ The magazine underscored the unnaturalness of this Soviet policy by explaining in a later article "why and how the communists deliberately destroy family life behind the iron curtain."¹⁰⁶ This line of argument also reinforced the magazine's statements that all aspects of life were politicized under communism: even family life and sexual relations were not free from the all-powerful communist gaze.¹⁰⁷

At times, the relationship between the superpowers was itself written as a sexual one. This was not an open partnership but one enmeshed in tension and frustration, even when the appearance was of *détente*: "When I speak of a settlement with the Soviet Union," wrote a *Digest* author in 1951, "I do not mean a marriage. I mean a divorce. I mean the fixing of boundaries between their world and ours."¹⁰⁸

Discourses of sexuality and geopolitics should not be regarded as separate, since geography was often inferred through sexualized and gendered languages constructing strength, vulnerability, and impenetrability. In some cases, vulnerability was reduced to an embodied essence: nakedness. Nakedness was written in two distinct ways. On the one hand, it was natural, a result of geography, for instance. Russian behavior was often linked directly to its geography and the particular form of sexualized character that its geography promoted. The *Digest* claimed that "another clue to Russian behavior lies in geography. *Naked* plains stretch east and west with no defense barrier."¹⁰⁹ In other cases, places were naked because they had been stripped of protection. One author suggested that in dealing with communism, "we can deter or emasculate attacks on free nations."¹¹⁰ This represented the most powerful, if somewhat hyperbolic, depictions of America's current, or potential, vulnerability: "The United States is naked—incredibly naked—against a Russian atom-bomb attack."¹¹¹ In a similar vein, Carl Spaatz argued in the *Digest* that if Russia were to gain control of the air, Europe would be left "naked and paralyzed."¹¹² Therefore, there were limited options in this zero-sum game: "submitting to it, crushing it by force, or 'containing' it without war by a steel wall."¹¹³ Some pieces talked of perverse sexual penetration in terms of "rape."¹¹⁴

Taken to an extreme, perversity can imply the lack of what humans

are supposedly born with, a sense of humanity. In 1948 *Reader's Digest* recounted famine in Russia in the 1920s as inhuman because it led to terror and then the “final degradation of cannibalism.”¹¹⁵ The perversion of cannibalism was also suggested by the “man-eat-man” nature of the Soviet political system.¹¹⁶ Another author drew upon a different, yet equally powerful, mythology of perverse consumption to declare that Bolshevism “sucks the lifeblood of its victims.”¹¹⁷

Thus, *Reader's Digest* wrote communist life as degeneration from the values of civilized society. The communist system was often described as treating its citizens like animals, with “policies better fitted to beasts than men.”¹¹⁸ Taking this further, articles claimed that “the communist state breeds informers like maggots in a mass-burial pit” and referred to “bestial crime” or “bestial behavior.”¹¹⁹

This period also witnessed several reiterations of incompatibility of communism and democracy in *Reader's Digest*.¹²⁰ “Red China’s war against God” seemed to prove the gulf between good/freedom and evil/communism beyond doubt. The *Digest* suggested that communist behavior should no longer come as a surprise to the informed reader:

Sadism, depravity, bestiality beyond imagination—these are the end products of a system which must invariably depend upon the dregs of society to protect itself from the wrath of the people it has defrauded.¹²¹

As the territorial and rhetorical structures of the Cold War became entrenched, the characteristics of the United States and the Soviet Union were represented as being more and more natural to each place. This meant that the essence of each place was abstracted to transcend the moment, rendering the struggle between them an inevitability. As one *Digest* author put it, “Communism and freedom . . . two irreconcilable faiths of our time.”¹²²

Managing Narrative Contradiction

Although overwhelmingly united in their condemnation of all things communist, *Digest* articles did not create a seamless image of the USSR. For example, there was an exception to *Reader's Digest's* Cold War position on the necessity for high levels of defense spending in 1952. The lone voice of Herbert Hoover warned of the dangers of too much defense spending. Hoover did not display any leftist or liberal concerns over

militarization or present more humane ways to spend defense money. Rather, firmly set within Cold War discursive structures, he argued that overspending might adversely affect the American standard of living, and the resulting discontent would leave the country even more vulnerable to the communist menace.¹²³ Despite the different tack taken by this article, the outcome would be the same, and Hoover concluded in the apocalyptic fashion characteristic of this period: “If our economy should collapse, Stalin’s victory would be complete.”¹²⁴ Other authors challenged defense spending by questioning priorities within the military budget. In particular, *Digest* writers were concerned with America’s apparent obsession with winning the moon race. “Are we suffering from moon madness?” asked one author who feared that America’s enthusiasm for exploration (and for beating the Russians) was naive compared to the Soviets, whose inner space project was “unblushingly *military*.”¹²⁵

A potentially more significant contradiction within the *Digest*’s construction of the USSR lay in its description of the communist system as both hopelessly inefficient *and* militarily superior. This dual representation was possible because any apparent Soviet success was described as dependent upon two factors that distorted comparison with the United States. First, Soviet growth was possible only because of the slavlike conditions that the *Digest* understood workers to suffer in communist countries. Second was the Soviets’ “perverse” use of their resources. The Soviets were seen as being so wrapped up in competition with the West that they allowed their citizens few luxuries. The individual was secondary to the requirements of the state, an arrangement that was opposed to the *Digest*’s ethos of America. Thus, a discourse of irrationality was employed to explain the apparently paradoxical situation that the Soviet Union, “a nation that ‘can’t even make a decent flush toilet’ is, in terms of war potential, overtaking U.S. industry.”¹²⁶

The Othering of the Soviet Union during this period is significant to the construction of U.S. mission and destiny but also to the formation of good citizens to undertake a historic role. The Soviet threat meant that any American intervention could be read as reactive rather than aggressive or confrontational, even when it occurred before Soviet action, because of the predictive power of geopolitics that insisted Soviet action was imminent.

At a time when American intervention—military, cultural, and economic—was spreading throughout the world, the explanation of events

in this chapter offered not only legitimation but also urgency to the U.S. role. A new frontier for the American spirit to conquer was drawn.

At the end of the 1950s, the *Digest's* demonization of the Soviet Union relaxed slightly, but the magazine recognized a new and potentially more damaging threat to America's power: an internal threat from people who believed in the possibility of détente and wanted to relax hostilities between the superpowers. The misguidedness of this view was explained in the 1959 piece "One Trip to Russia Doesn't Make an Expert." This author foreshadowed the *Digest's* narrativization of détente when he warned of the dangers of believing the stories that tourists were told by official guides in Russia.¹²⁷ A subsequent article insisted that visitors became "prisoner[s] of Intourist" and saw only what the Soviet state wanted them to see.¹²⁸ In the next chapter I will examine the *Digest's* construction of a new sense of danger with the relaxation of international relations in détente.