

# Imaginary Russia. The Orientalisation of USSR in *Command & Conquer: Red Alert* series

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## INTRODUCTION

*Red Alert* is probably the most widely known subseries of *Command & Conquer* franchise, and for years the leading one in the real time strategy genre (alongside Blizzard's *WarCraft* and *StarCraft* sagas). An alternate reality universe of the subseries (with its core concept of Cold War turning hot and the Soviet Union substituting the Third Reich as main threat to Western Europe in the early 1940s) has been initially conceived as highly realistic, with only minor additions of sci-fi; thus adapting not only real-life Soviet military equipment into the game world, but also various themes from World War II along with some historical characters. However, from the second installment onward, the poetics of the series changed significantly, evolving into camp, thus allowing more liberty in shaping virtual Russia. In essence, the image of the Soviet Union was reshaped not only by adapting more clichés of the Cold War era into the game (e.g. James Bond movies), but also by modifying various aspects of the game world (and mechanics) to achieve more clear polarization between the two sides of the conflict, visible not only on ethical, but also on technological level (as typical for the real time strategies of the early 90s). As a result, the Soviet Union in late *Red Alert* games is not fully 'modern' superpower, but rather malevolent 'Eastern' empire, bearing characteristics of almost 90th-century construct of 'Orient'. This was also a typical way of diversifying two sides of other fictional conflicts in two other subseries of the *Command & Conquer* franchise set in different alternate universes (i.e. Brotherhood of Nod fanatics in *Tiberium* series, as well as Global Liberation Army terrorist in *Command & Conquer: Generals* [Sisler 2008]) which underlines the importance of the practice in question.

It has been already shown that Postcolonial approach to strategy games (as well as other game genres, like FPS [Höglund 2008]) can be applied not only to those portraying wars set on Middle East, like *C&C: Generals* [Sisler 2008], but also to non-Asian cultures, typically perceived by the West as inferior in the past (like latinidad as shown in *Tropico* [Magnet 2006]). It can be also shown in relation to the Soviet Russia in *Red Alert* (especially portrayed as in fact Asian, and not European power). To this end, three-dimensional game model of Espen Aarseth can be used, with modifications based on the approach of Elliott and Kapell, devised for historical games analysis [Elliott,

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Kapell 2013]. In the specific example of RTS, three layers of game content, goals and rules can be interpreted as game fictional framework (the plot on strategic level), the kind of missions the player needs to accomplish in the course of the campaign (the plot on tactical level), and arsenal available during subsequent missions. Each of those three layers differ heavily depending on the campaign (i.e. whether its Western or Eastern one); and on each of those layers, differences between sides are used to give Oriental characteristics to the virtual Soviets.

On the strategic level, all Allied (i.e. Western) campaigns are the stories of self-defense against the Soviet aggression, which the player's character in turn has to direct in the Soviet campaign (with the exception of *Red Alert 3* where the conflict is multilateral). This is not only a reproduction of a typical pop-culture scenario (like in John Milius's *Red Dawn* referred to in *Red Alert 2*); it's also shown as another iteration of historical 'Asian' invasions, by emphasizing the historical and cultural differences between Russia and the West in various ways, even regarding to characteristics clearly opposed by real Communism (e.g. golden domes of Orthodox churches seen on the roofs of Soviet tank factories). The same can be observed on the 'tactical' level, where the player has to accomplish missions of different kind depending on the campaign; and although many Soviet missions allude to real events of World War II or the Cold War (e.g. Cuban missile crisis, attack on Pearl Harbor with the Soviets taking the role of the Japanese, or their Blitz-like airstrikes on Britain), particular goals of the majority of Soviet missions (including killing civilians, kidnappings or assassinations) tend to emphasize 'typical' lack of moral standards, cruelty, or 'Eastern' tendency for deceit, which are all distinctive features of Orient in Western perspective, as described much earlier in the 70s by Edward Said. The same goal is achieved by giving different arsenals to the players of each side during the missions: *Red Alert* pretended to be a 'historical' game by incorporating as many real-life planes or tanks from NATO and Warsaw Pact arsenals into the game, but the way the vehicles of different eras are mixed and distributed heavily distorts the image of both sides, portraying the Soviets as technologically inferior in the way that is almost grotesque (e.g. M1 Abrams tanks of the 80s coexist with Yak-9 piston engine fighters on the same battlefield), which is made even more visible in the subsequent games in the series where fictional weapons emphasize that handicap even more (e.g. Soviet airships servings as bombers in *Red Alert 2* as opposed to British-made Harriers of the 70s). The practice of showing various 'Eastern' characteristics of Soviet army (like 'Asian' brutality) governs the evolution of almost any kind of weaponry throughout the series: from the weakest units of infantry (with Soviet conscripts being slightly cheaper, thus allowing the usage of 'human wave' tactics, iconic for Korea and Vietnam, but also underlining 'Asian' indifference to casualties) up to the 'ultimate' weaponry of each side (e.g. although Soviet nuclear missiles are based on real world R-7 missiles, thus alluding to 'missile gap' myth of the late 50s, the lack of nuclear weapons in American arsenal, and its substitution by more 'precise' high-tech technologies, is obviously ahistorical and is meant to underline the Western supposed inability of using weaponry perceived as illegal or immoral). All those practices are very similar to those used in two other *Command & Conquer* settings (in regard to Middle Eastern terrorists), which emphasizes that characteristics given to Russia in *Red Alert* are in fact those of 'Orient', thus suggesting that Postcolonial approach is a legitimate one in this case, even outside its original framework.

## OPTIONAL BIO

Szymon Piotr Kukulak, born 1983, PhD student in Faculty of Polish Studies, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland. Working mainly in the fields of literary studies and game studies, specializes on the research of the connections between real-life technology and

hard science of the Cold War era and fictional depictions thereof given by contemporary literature (mainly sci-fi), as well as it's reflection in the modern historical themed video games, mainly strategies and city-builders.

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