Beware the Anglo-Saxons! Why Russia likes to invoke a medieval tribe when talking about the West

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A new, old specter is haunting the world: the bloodthirsty Anglo-Saxons.

Well, that is what the Kremlin wants the world to believe.

Take the new Russian state-backed film "Tolerance." Released in September 2025 to a less than enthusiastic public response, the dystopian tale of moral decay in the West opens with a warning of an "omnipresent Anglo-Saxon liberalism" that will "cause the ultimate degradation and extinction of once-prosperous countries and peoples."

Scary stuff. But the film isn't the first time that Anglo-Saxons have been cited as a threat to the Russian way of life.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian officials and their colleagues in the Kremlin-controlled media have taken to referring to their Western adversaries as "Anglo-Saxons." Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov even stated that the "Anglo-Saxons" in question are bent on defeating Russia "with the hands of the Kyiv regime."

Indeed, analysis one of us conducted with Adrian Rogstad at the University of Groningen looking at statements posted on the Russian foreign ministry website found a marked increase in "Anglo-Saxon" references after the invasion of Ukraine – 86 of them in the course of 2022, compared to just 27 in the previous 20 years. Foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova's March 2022 comment that the "Anglo-Saxon world will never stop … It's like an insatiable monster," is typical of the way "Anglo-Saxon" is used. The term even made it into the official Russian foreign policy concept published a year later, where in the section titled "The U.S. and other Anglo-Saxon states," the United States is referred to as "the main inspirer, organizer and executor of the aggressive anti-Russian policy of the collective West".

The term is a particular favorite of Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov. In February 2024, Peskov explained that Putin agreed to be interviewed by the right-wing commentator Tucker Carlson because he "stands in clear contrast to the position of the traditional Anglo-Saxon media."

This creeping use of "Anglo-Saxon" as a slur hasn't gone unnoticed in the West. Former U.S. ambassador to Moscow Lynne Tracy said in 2023 that the use of the term was "very strange" given the multiethnic character of American society.

Reports suggest that with the election of a more Russia-friendly president in Donald Trump, the word from the Kremlin was not to use the term for Americans, specifically. But it appears not everyone got the memo – pro-Putin State Duma Deputy Viktor Vodolatsky recently warned against "Anglo-Saxons" creating a "point of tension" in the South Caucasus through the U.S.-led peace efforts between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

As experts in Russian discourse and post-Soviet nations, we see the increased use of "Anglo-Saxons" as reflecting deeper trends that tap into Putin's use of history to justify the invasion of Ukraine and smear his perceived enemies, while exploiting political divisions in Europe and America.

Who were the Anglo-Saxons?

The original Anglo-Saxons comprised the waves of conquerors from Germanic tribes in Europe that flooded into England – Jutes as well as Angles and Saxons – in the fifth and sixth centuries. Alfred the Great united the warring fiefdoms of southern England in the ninth century and declared himself king of the Anglo-Saxon realm.

An 11th-century depiction of Alfred the Great.

But the term did not enter wider usage until long after the "Anglo-Saxon period" ended with the invasion of England by French-speaking Normans in 1066.

In fact, it wasn't until the reign of Henry VIII in the 16th century that scholars started to refer to the Anglo-Saxon origins of the English, in a bid to differentiate the country from Catholic Europe – another use of history for political aims.

But the term really took off in the 19th century, when it was folded into pseudoscientific racist justification for the British Empire. That came to an end in World War I, when Britain and America found themselves fighting against Germany – the location of Saxony. In 1917, the British royal family changed their name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor. Even U.S. President Woodrow Wilson – an acknowledged racist – insisted that Americans were not Anglo-Saxons.

There things stood until 1964, when American professor E. Digby Baltzell published "The Protestant Establishment," which popularized the term "White Anglo Saxon Protestant," or WASP, to refer to middle-class Americans of European descent.

By the 2000s, it was mostly white supremacists who were using the term Anglo-Saxon as a synonym for a modern-day demographic. Academic journals and groups dedicated to studying the Middle Ages dropped references to "Anglo-Saxons" due to the racist connotations.

Make Moscow medieval again!

It is against this background of Anglo-Saxon as a term appropriated by white supremacists that modern Russian usage should be seen.

Russian propaganda has long sought to talk up the far right in Europe and America, with whom Putin's "national conservatism" has a close affinity. It does so to sow division in Western democracies and fracture the liberal international order. The aim is to portray the U.S. and U.K. as warmongering Anglo-Saxon nations, thereby encouraging the French, Germans and other Europeans to avoid following their lead.

More broadly, the references to Anglo-Saxons reflects Russia's view that global politics is driven by a "clash of civilizations," in which Russia represents the values of traditional Europe, and it taps into a centuries-old fear of perfidious Western encroachment on the Russian state.

It also fits a pattern of Putin referencing Russia's medieval past to explain the country's current policies, even if he needs the invasion of Turkic tribes in the 11th century to justify COVID-19 measures.

Putin has tried to justify the invasion of Ukraine by claiming that modern Russia is the direct descendant of ninth-century Kyivan Rus, and that Ukrainians are therefore really Russians.

The Russian government has invested heavily in trying to persuade its citizens that they can trace their identity all the way back to a distant past in medieval times – at a time when Anglo-Saxons ruled England.

But in leaning on outdated terminology popular with white supremacist groups in a bid to sow division and antagonism in the West, Putin seems to be retreating into an imaginary world of the medieval past.