

Beyond Nuclear Wessels: The Historical and Symbolic Implications of *Star Trek's* Mr. Chekov

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Why Popular Culture?

The music, people, and media that make up popular culture are often **tools to explore real-life events and experiences, making complex social and political issues accessible to wider audiences in tandem with the accessible content** (Weldes). The accessibility of information popular culture provides has sparked an entire field of study regarding the effects of the presentation of popular culture on politics and society.



The original *Star Trek* series (*TOS*) has particularly been the focus of a great deal of analysis for its **themes on race, gender, sexuality, the Vietnam conflict, and the Cold War.**



A snapshot of the *Star Trek: TOS* crew on the Enterprise bridge

Research on *Star Trek's* presentation of the Cold War largely centers around the series' use of allegory. Main antagonists in the series, the Klingons and Romulans, represent a **communist, collectivist Soviet enemy**, and the *Enterprise* crew represents **diverse, democratic America** with a half-alien, a Japanese-American man, an African woman, and a Russian man in the main cast of characters.

Interestingly, though *TOS* is the product of an era characterized by conflict between the US and Russia, little analysis exists on the series' Russian character: Pavel Chekov.

Main Idea

Added in the second season of *TOS* to appeal to younger viewers and played by Walter Koenig, Chekov was largely an expositional character (Koenig). His significance, as actor Walter Koenig has described, comes from his participation in the group and consequent contribution to the overall messages of the series, both related and unrelated to the Cold War ("Walter Koenig Reflects") **As part of the *Star Trek: TOS* crew, Chekov represents two central tenants of American Cold War discourse: assimilationism and multicultural unity.**



On the hunt for "nuclear wessels" in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*

A Statement on Americanism

America in the 1960s represented **democracy, free enterprise, and personal choice: anything and everything antithetical to the Soviet Union.** The prevailing foreign policy attitude was that the **"American way" was the only way a nation could be civilized and successful.** Domestically, there was also a strong push for **national conformity as a weapon against communism.** Though neither America nor the Soviet Union exist in *Star Trek: TOS*, assimilationist and conformist attitudes are more than present – and Chekov is part of them.

In "*The Apple*," aliens controlled by a computer learn to "love" after watching Chekov and Yeoman Landon share a stereotypically sensual and overtly heterosexual moment.



In "*The Way to Eden*," Chekov is one of the main forces of opposition against a group of "space hippies," serving as a model representative of the highly Americanized culture of the world of the show.

Like other non-American characters in the show, *Chekov's cultural identity revolves largely around stereotypes.* For him, a Russian, this means liking vodka and speaking with a clumsy accent.



A Statement About Unity

America in the 1960s was increasingly a place of increasing acceptance and multiculturalism, with civil rights movements focusing on race, gender, and sexuality. **America prided itself on the support of individualism and diversity in contrast to the Soviet Union's tenants of collectivism and homogeneity.**

Additionally, **by the time of *Star Trek: TOS*, Americans had begun to realize that the true "enemy" of the Cold War was the threat of human annihilation, and not necessarily the Soviets themselves.** This push for détente is obvious in *Star Trek: TOS*, with Chekov's presence on the *Enterprise* bridge being the most telling example.



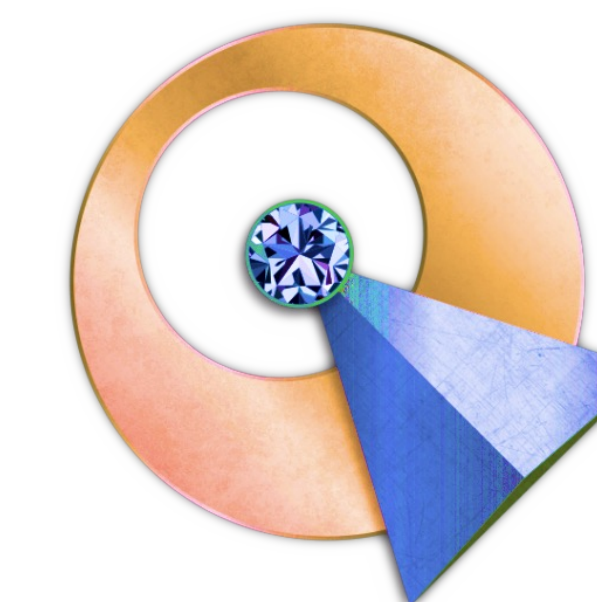
Chekov frequently takes pride in his national heritage. During the episodes "*The Trouble with Tribbles*" (left) and "*I, Mudd*," he even mentions the city Leningrad directly, a bold move for the 1960s given the city's World War and Bolshevik revolution connotations (Hatzivassiliou 86-87).

Chekov serves a crucial role on the ship: the navigator. He also occasionally assumes Mr. Spock's role at the science station, and frequently participates in solving the central conflict of the episode.



Conclusion

Perhaps the most famous moment for *Star Trek's* Mr. Chekov is the "nuclear wessels" bit in 1986's *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, when he walks up to a police officer and asks, in his obviously Russian accent, for the location of "nuclear wessels" at the Alameda Naval Base. According to Walter Koenig, *Star Trek IV* was the first time Chekov was afforded the chance to do much of anything substantial ("Pavel Chekov's Screen Moments"). But with all due respect to Mr. Koenig, **Chekov clearly did plenty in *The Original Series*. He stood as a representative of the central tenants both of *Star Trek* and of real-world America of the time.**



Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, the central tenant of the Star Trek universe

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