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‘Persona non Grata’: The Diplomatic Way to Say ‘You’re Unwelcome’

The phrase, used during the recent expulsion of Russians from the U.S., is a ‘Neo-Latin’ invention

by Ben Zimmer

Last week, when President Barack Obama ordered the State Department to [expel 35 Russian officials](#) suspected of being intelligence operatives, [the Russians were declared](#) “persona non grata.” Or, to use diplomatic shorthand, they were “PNGed.”

“Persona non grata” is Latin for “unwelcome or unacceptable person,” but unlike other classical expressions, it doesn’t actually date back to ancient Rome. In fact, the phrase didn’t come into use until the 19th century, as a “Neo-Latin” invention. The positive version—“persona grata,” or “welcome person”—came first in the 15th century, in official documents of the European courts. A “persona grata” meant someone nominated to a religious position, such as a bishopric, who was considered acceptable to a secular monarch with veto power over the appointment.

From ecclesiastical law, “persona grata” moved into diplomacy, where it applied to envoys whom their host countries could veto. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the negative phrase, “persona non grata,” appeared in German in the 1840s before making its way into English a few decades later.

In one example, Secretary of State Thomas F. Bayard wrote to President Grover Cleveland in 1888 to recommend the dismissal of the British ambassador, Lionel Sackville-West, after a letter was made public in which the envoy suggested that Cleveland was pro-British (a damaging charge for Cleveland, who lost his bid for re-election that year). “If by his conduct he renders himself persona non grata, an announcement of the fact may be made to his Government,” Bayard wrote.

As “persona non grata” became entrenched in State Department lingo in the 20th century, it got shortened in the telegraphic style of official cables as “PNG.” In 1950, for instance, when an American executive named Robert A. Vogeler was accused of being a spy in communist Hungary, [a telegram](#) from Secretary of State Dean Acheson to diplomatic staff instructed that “we shall not withdraw personnel named in Vogeler trial until officially designated PNG.”

By 1964, “PNG” had become a verb as well. That year, Secretary of State Dean Rusk [sent a cable to the U.S. embassy in the Congo](#) about efforts to get American hostages released. Rusk said that Ghana’s president, Kwame Nkrumah, had been considered as an intermediary, but there were fears that his ambassador to the Congo “may be PNGed.”

Diplomats aren’t the only ones to be “PNGed”; journalists have also been blacklisted by foreign governments. “The infinitive ‘to PNG’ is not found in any dictionary,” Washington Post correspondent Jim Hoagland observed in a 1972 dispatch from Nairobi, Kenya. “But it recurs constantly in the thoughts of journalists in this part of the world, for it stands for Africa’s most frequently used method of censoring and managing news.”

Predictably, it was in Cold War machinations between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, with routine expulsions of operatives on each side, that “PNGing” was most often invoked. An echo of those days could be heard last week when a senior administration official [asserted on a press call](#) that “the officials who have been PNGed are Russian intelligence agents.”

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