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David S. Foglesong. *The American Mission and the "Evil Empire": The Crusade for a "Free Russia" since 1881.* New York: Cambridge University Press, October 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0521855907 (hardback); 978-0521671835 (paperback).

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Review by Deborah Welch Larson, University of California, Los Angeles

How we see others is often directly related to how we see ourselves. An intellectual is likely to judge others' intelligence, while a successful entrepreneur evaluates others according to their earning ability.¹ According to David S. Foglesong, since the late nineteenth century, how Americans view Russia has been shaped more by how they perceive the United States than by political and economic developments in that country. Despite the title, which seems to suggest a study of U.S. efforts at changing the Russian regime, Foglesong's stimulating book is part of the literature on

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¹ Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London, 1988), 23.

national identities and their relationship to foreign policy.² He is more concerned with American popular perceptions of Russia and their divergence from reality than U.S. governmental policy.

At various historical transitions, the U.S. people have believed that Russians were becoming more similar to themselves, and that Russia was launched on the path toward democracy, freedom, and federalism. To expedite what they see as an inevitable process, Americans have had a sense of mission to remake Russia over in the image of U.S. business, democracy, and society. Rarely is Russia treated as a society with a distinctive history, culture, and political trajectory. When popular expectations of Russian reform are disappointed, Russia is viewed as a negative image of the United States, having those traits that are the polar opposite of the aspects of U.S. culture and society in which the American people take pride. Even when crusades to improve Russia have yielded disappointing results, the very effort has made Americans feel better about themselves by demonstrating U.S. idealism and its unique mission. When Americans are anxious and depressed about the future of their country, invidious comparisons to Russia help to provide a more positive frame of mind.

As a historically backward nation, Russia has tried to catch up with the West. Historically, this effort has entailed maintaining a stronger state apparatus than is compatible with American liberal beliefs. In choosing state-led development, Russia resembles other economically backward countries that have been forced by international pressures to catch up quickly. Failure to consider Russia's unique heritage, lack of civil society, and sense of cultural alienation³ has repeatedly led to misunderstanding, misperception, and missed opportunities for cooperation.

Foglesong draws on a variety of primary sources, including private letters, editorials, cartoons, and movies to portray popular American images of Russia from the late nineteenth century through the present, with an epilogue on the U.S. reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin. As I will discuss below, the American tendency to use Russia as a foil for their identity is explained by social identity theory in social psychology. Interestingly, U.S. leaders have had fewer illusions about Russia's prospects for reform, their policies largely motivated by power and interest rather than ideals. The contrast between the attitudes of the American people and the political elite is intriguing, but is not explicitly analyzed by Foglesong. It is consistent, however, with tenets of realism.

The recurrence of these patterns throughout U.S. history is striking. Initially Imperial Russia was viewed as a distant, friendly power. But in the late nineteenth century, at the same time that Protestant evangelists began to do missionary work in Russia, liberal

² Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, 2002); Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America's Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, 2002).

³ Alfred J. Reiber, "How Persistent Are Persistent Factors?" in Robert Legvold, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past* (New York, 2007), 205-78.

activists in the United States began campaigning for a “free Russia.” Why did American attitudes toward Russia change? Commercial, humanitarian, political and religious motives combined to form a new American mission to free Russia from its bureaucratic backwardness and autocratic regime. As the tsarist government launched a program of industrialization, American business leaders began to perceive economic opportunities in Russia as an enormous market for U.S. exports. In order for Russians to be able to buy American products, they needed U.S. help in overcoming an inefficient agriculture, inept government, oppressive police, and medieval religion. In addition, negative views of Russia helped overcome the sense of unease and anxieties that many Americans felt about developments in the United States—declining religious faith, the rise of materialism, mistreatment of Native Americans, and disenfranchisement and lynching of African Americans. In comparison with Russia’s troubles, American imperfections seemed relatively minor. Russia “gradually came to serve as a ‘dark double’ or ‘imaginary twin’ for the United States.” (11)

Much of the popular interest in Russian reform derived from the writings of journalist George Kennan, a distant relative of his namesake George F. Kennan. In the 1880s, Kennan traveled to Russia to report on the tsarist exile system in Siberia. Although he had originally defended the Siberian system as no worse than prisons in the United States, Kennan underwent a conversion, having been favorably impressed by the intelligence, suffering, and sacrifices of the political exiles that he met in Siberia. At the same time, Kennan underwent a spiritual rebirth in which he rediscovered his religious roots, after having experienced periods of doubt and skepticism due to the conflict between religion and science and the examples of inhumanity that he witnessed firsthand. When he returned to the United States, from 1887 through the mid-1990s, he wrote dozens of articles in popular journals and an influential book, *Siberia and the Exile System*, proclaiming the evils of the tsarist regime and the nobility of Russian revolutionaries. In public lectures, Kennan argued that Russians longed to emulate America. In order to dramatize this point, he described how three hundred political prisoners in a St. Petersburg prison had secretly sewed small American flags, and bravely waved them through the bars of their cells to celebrate the Fourth of July. This anecdote was repeatedly cited and printed by fellow supporters of the movement for a free Russia. Kennan also described democratic self-governing societies in Russia’s western frontier, Manchuria. This analogy, by evoking parallels to the American West, heightened American expectations that Russian were eager for democracy and could evolve into a United States of Russia. Contradicting the idea that Russia was ready for democracy was the popular image of Russian peasants as backward, illiterate, and barbaric. Kennan turned this belief to his advantage by drawing similarities between the Russian serfs and American slaves to make the case for liberation. Russian revolutionaries and anarchists were compared to U.S. abolitionists, who had traveled to the American South to teach in African-American schools. This analogy appealed to liberal activists; many of the members of the Society of American Friends of Russian Freedom were in fact descendants of abolitionists.

Kennan’s propagandizing paid off. His writings had a major impact on American attitudes toward Russia. Early in the 1890s, newspaper editors observed that Russia was in the

“public gaze” and “for most people in the United States the gospel according to Kennan has become the truth about Russia.” (26)

While the crusade for Russian freedom never attracted more than a small number of supporters and lost steam by the mid 1890s, there was a recurrence of the U.S. messianic impulse after 1905 when Tsar Nicholas II signed an edict promising religious toleration, opening up the gates to American evangelists who wanted to liberate Russians from the supposedly medieval Orthodox Church. Missionaries from the Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, and Baptists flocked to Russia, where their efforts threatened the Orthodox clergy and prompted a governmental backlash.

Americans greeted the 1917 revolution and the overthrow of the tsarist regime with jubilation, expecting that Russia would be open to American political, economic and social influence. *Life* magazine printed a drawing in which a woman representing the Statue of Liberty rode a Bear while Russian people worshipped America’s liberty. But the Russian revolution became fractured between the liberal provisional government and a soviet led by socialist intellectuals. After the Bolsheviks took control, President Woodrow Wilson sent a small expeditionary force to Russia in hopes that the Russian people would rise up and throw off Bolshevism. President Wilson declared that the Bolshevik revolution was the “negation of everything that is American” (57), again demonstrating the tendency to evaluate Russia relative to the United States. Many Americans believed that the Bolshevik regime was not authentically Russian, allowing them to continue to believe that Russia would eventually evolve into a democracy like the United States. Despite official hostility, during the 1920s, American missionaries, business leaders, relief workers, and engineers continued their efforts to educate Russians about U.S. culture and practices until the Bolsheviks became more hostile to religion and foreign influence at the end of the decade.

Not surprisingly, the Grand Alliance between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain against Hitler’s Germany reawakened American hopes that after the war Russia would be converted to traditional religion and democracy. These illusions were encouraged by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Henry Luce-owned magazines such as *Life* in order to reduce public opposition to lend-lease aid to the Soviet Union. American business leaders anticipated not only that they would expand U.S. exports to the Soviet Union after the war, but also help to liberalize the country, despite the government’s control of trade and the traditional Soviet emphasis on heavy industry rather than consumer goods.

In the early part of the Cold War, books and magazine articles by such authors as James Burnham, Eugene Lyons, historian William Henry Chamberlin, and John Foster Dulles predicted the imminent collapse of communism and the rebirth of a spiritual Russia. American hopes for “liberation” of the Soviet Union were derived from particularistic readings of history, spiritual beliefs, and racial attitudes. Supposedly the Russian people had a long record of revolting against tyranny, as demonstrated by those who fought on the side of the Nazis during World War II and the numerous Soviet soldiers and diplomats who defected to the West. The Russian Orthodox faith, which lay too deep within the Russian psyche to be eradicated by government policies, was a potential source of resistance to the Soviet regime. Russians were Slavs and Europeans and therefore capable of democratic

practices. Finally, many believed that exposure of the Russian people during World War II to the material wealth of America and Western Europe would increase popular discontent that could eventually destabilize the regime.

In contrast to the flood of popular writings about liberation, after the death of Stalin in 1953, the United States did little to try to exploit potential domestic instability in the Soviet Union. President Dwight David Eisenhower preferred to work for the long-term evolution of the Soviet Union toward greater democracy by means of expanding contacts and negotiations. A favored tactic was to penetrate the Soviet Union through educational exchanges and cultural exhibitions. Of the cultural exhibitions, the most famous was the first in 1959, where Vice President Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev debated over whether the futuristic model of an American kitchen demonstrated the superiority of capitalism. The United States Information Agency organized nine other exhibitions over the following decade, displaying everything from plastics to graphic arts to recreational vehicles in order to win over the “hearts and minds” of the Russian people.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union once again became the target of Manichean criticism: conservatives denounced détente as a one-way street while liberals campaigned for human rights in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Foglesong argues that the renewed American zeal for liberating the Soviet Union cannot be entirely explained by the renewed Soviet repression of dissidents and tightening restrictions on Jewish emigration, which followed rather than provoked U.S. pressure for human rights, nor by Soviet adventurism in the Third World, which reached a climax in 1979 with the invasion of Afghanistan. Instead, Foglesong attributes the renewed moralistic attacks on the Soviet Union to a crisis of self-confidence within the United States that was brought about by the war in Vietnam, energy shortages, exposure of CIA abuses, challenges to traditional authority by feminists and the youth culture, and exposure of presidential abuses of power. Although President Jimmy Carter did not believe that communist repression could be easily eradicated, he thought that promoting human rights in foreign countries could bring domestic political benefits and renew the American spirit. Similarly, President Ronald Reagan’s supporters believed that a crusade against totalitarianism and for freedom would help to overcome the “malaise” of the Carter era.

Reagan dreamed of reforming the Soviet system, offering the Soviets the opportunity to join the civilized nations and to be integrated economically with the West. Foglesong attributes Reagan’s sense of mission to his religious upbringing, which included teaching Sunday School and attending a college founded by the Disciplines of Christ. Reagan believed that God had a plan for him and the world and that America was destined to carry the torch of freedom in the world. When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev instituted more radical reforms, including freeing political dissidents, allowing critical discussion of the Soviet past, and encouraging liberalization in Eastern Europe, Americans were particularly impressed by the movement toward greater religious freedom in the U.S.S.R.

In the final decade of the 20th century, America’s mission to extend democracy, capitalism, and religion to Russia seemed to be on the verge of fulfillment. As in previous eras, Americans were attracted to the cause of Russian reform. Christian evangelists supported

publishing houses, economists advised the government on the transition to capitalism, lawyers encouraged the adoption of a jury system, and political scientists educated Russian politicians on electoral strategies. Excessive expectations for a Russia that would mirror the United States were followed by equally unrealistic pessimism that Russia was returning to dictatorship and aggression toward its neighbors. While American efforts were well-intentioned, they were often ill-suited to Russian realities, as the abrupt transition to capitalism had a disastrous impact on Russian living standards and the “democratic” reformers on whom Americans pinned their hopes were corrupt and venal. Ironically, American economic assistance to Russia was relatively stingy when Russia was most open to American ideas, largely because of the George H. W. Bush administration’s risk aversion and the William Clinton administration’s absorption with domestic politics. Disappointed hopes in Russian democracy have led to harsh public criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who predictably has responded with some acerbity and irritation at the United States for sticking its nose into Russian affairs.

At the end, Foglesong draws comparisons between previous demonization of Russia and contemporary criticism by public figures such as Vice President Dick Cheney that Russia is abandoning democracy and using its oil resources to dominate other states. It is striking how Americans feel entitled to criticize Russia for failing to live up to liberal democratic ideals, regardless of whether such ideals are suited for Russia at its current stage of political, social, and economic development. Public disparagement of a regime’s democratic record rarely leads to reform, but can instead provoke a nationalist backlash, as seen recently in Russian elite references to their being a “sovereign democracy.” Since public criticism only increases Russian obduracy, Foglesong questions why intelligent Americans persist in verbal attacks. Could it be that critics wish to draw comparisons with Russia on traits that highlight America’s moral superiority?

Foglesong does not provide a theoretical explanation for why Americans have so often compared themselves to Russia, but it is consistent with social identity theory. According to social identity theory, people derive part of their sense of self from their membership in various social groups. Group members enhance their sense of worth by denigrating out-group members on dimensions that they regard as important to their own identity.⁴ So from this perspective, it is not surprising that Americans have found fault with Russia on those traits that are characteristic of the United States—democracy, capitalism, and religion.

Foglesong’s thesis about an American mission to remake the Soviet Union applies to popular attitudes rather than official government policy. He points out that official policy toward the Soviet domestic political system was quite restrained. During the Cold War, support for covert action was limited by the fear of war and nuclear retaliation. As a result of détente, President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger accepted that communism would endure in the Soviet Union and that the Soviet Union was the political equal of the United

⁴ Henri Tajfel and John Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, ed., *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1986), 7-24; Hogg and Abrams, *Social Identification*.

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States. The gap between public attitudes and governmental policy is consistent with realism, which argues that leaders are guided by material factors and *Realpolitik* rather than ideals. This raises the question of what impact popular writings and attitudes have on governmental actions. Did the American mission to reform Russia constrain U.S. policy? To what extent were U.S. leaders inhibited in their ability to engage with Soviet leaders by popular anticommunist beliefs?

Foglesong's book provides a panoramic view of American popular attitudes toward Russia, one that is illustrated with many arresting cartoons and magazine covers. It should provoke a wider debate about the rationality of evaluating Russia with reference to an idealized view of the United States, as well as the deeper sources of this tendency.

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