

# Two Centuries of Russian-U.S. Relations

## Internal Agendas and the Mutual Construction of Images

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The image of another country depends on a state's internal agenda much more than we usually admit. Our knowledge of the life and values of the "other" is limited, so we tend to learn only about aspects of a foreign country that are relevant to our current problems. For instance, the United States never paid attention to civil rights problems in foreign countries until the civil rights movement in the United States succeeded in making that agenda the core of national debates.

Over the past two centuries of Russian-U.S. relations, Russia has also constructed and used different images of the United States, reflecting alternating waves of pro- and anti-Americanism. Each time, change in the Russian perception of the United States occurred for a number of reasons, but it always coincided with general change in Russia's domestic agenda.

### **The First Cycle: Nicholas I to Nicholas II**

The first period of transnational friendship occurred between 1830 to 1880, when Tsar Nicholas I implemented an ambitious program of technological reform and his son, Alexander II, took steps to reform the Russian state and society. A little-known collaboration between Russia and the United States began with the construction of the best Russian steamships in New York shipyards, the construction of the first major Russian railroad between St. Petersburg and Moscow with the expert supervision of American engineers, and the adoption of American inventions in firearms, including Samuel Colt's revolvers and Hiram Berdan's rifles. Nicholas I aimed to modernize the technology of his empire, while facing the jealousy of its major rival, England, which refused Russia entrance into the "high-tech" industry of the age, Royal Navy steamers.

That is how Russia discovered the United States as an alternative source of modern inventions.

By the beginning of Nicholas' son's reign, the shortcomings of a purely technological modernization had become obvious. Alexander II initiated a period of "Great Reforms" which included the abolition of serfdom (1861), the creation of elected local governments (*zemstvos*) (1863), and other social innovations. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was obligatory reading for mid-century Russian intellectuals. It was the United States that provided both reformers with alternative visions of state and society and their critics with material to use against them. Thus, during the entire period of reform, American democracy was an indispensable element of discussions about Russia's future.

After the assassination of Alexander II in March 1881, Russian history changed course. The two subsequent tsars adopted policies of counter-reform and stabilization that gradually led to the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. At the same time, the import of the U.S. example dwindled in Russia. Instead, the United States became an irritant that continued to attract the attention of the *narodniks* and other revolutionaries aimed at changing the existing order but did not inspire state authorities or mainstream public opinion. Ethnic minorities unhappy with the Russian Empire's new kind of stability, like Jews and Germans, immigrated *en masse* to the United States during that epoch. Those who stayed tended to criticize American customs. Russian history textbooks of the early twentieth century discussed on the same page "two evils" that were preserved by the founding fathers of the United States – slavery and presidential elections.

## **The Second Cycle: Lenin to Stalin**

The October Revolution of 1917 launched another period of reforms in Russia, and once again the U.S. example became popular. Soviet leaders adored American efficiency and hoped that Russia would be able to make great advances by introducing "Fordism" to domestic industries. Leon Trotsky reflected this belief in 1927, asserting that "[t]he Soviet system shod with American technology will be socialism." Despite the absence of diplomatic relations until 1933, U.S. companies sold the USSR equipment for its industrialization and sent engineers to build plants and factories, including the Stalingrad tractor plant (International Harvester), the Nizhny Novgorod automobile plant (Ford), the Dnieper hydroelectric station, and many others.

During the 1920s, leading Russian writers, including Vladimir Mayakovsky, Sergey Esenin, and Boris Pilnyak, traveled across the United States at the expense of the Soviet state in order to discover a new mode of life. One of the most popular Soviet travelogues in the mid-1930s was Ilya Ilf and Evgenii Petrov's *American Road Trip (One-Story America)*, in Russian). Jealous of Europeans, especially the British, Joseph Stalin himself seemed to be relatively benevolent toward Americans. The Second World War was the culmination of this friendship, when good feelings were determined by a common agenda of fighting Nazism. Again, in an epoch of reforms, the United States became attractive as an alternative economic model that could help the USSR excel in comparison to its European neighbors.

A new wave of hostility emerged after 1945. Leaving aside consideration of who was to blame for the Cold War, this was a period of stabilization for the Soviet Union. For more than a decade, the Soviet leadership did not formulate a reformist political

agenda. At the same time, in this period anti-American propaganda peaked.

### **The Third Cycle: Khrushchev to Brezhnev**

As soon as Nikita Khrushchev put forth another reformist program, however, the United States again served as a source of inspiration for the Soviet leadership. After visiting the United States in 1959, Khrushchev introduced corn planting and supermarkets, cheap housing (with American-style bathrooms with joint toilet and bath, a combination most Russians still spurn), and mass car production. After that, the USSR began to formulate its goals relative to the United States: "to overtake and surpass America."

This program of reforms came to an end by the middle of Leonid Brezhnev's rule. Brezhnev began with détente but finished with a war in Afghanistan. The United States was again portrayed as "the most probable enemy." In economic policy, Alexei Kosygin's reforms were abandoned by the mid-1970s. No reform at home accompanied a foreign policy of no friendship with the United States. Brezhnev's "stagnation" coincided with the "second edition" of the Cold War.

### **The Latest Cycle: Gorbachev to Putin**

Russian history in the time of Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin was marked with a renewed reformist spirit when the U.S. example again looked attractive. Market reforms and democracy-building required foreign advisors, and Americans filled the vacancies. Moreover, the population, frightened by the hardship of the monumental tasks of reform, hoped that the United States would assist Russia to make a quick and efficient leap. Disarmament and Gorbachev's popularity in the United States helped Russians look at their former rival with kinder feelings. Boris Yeltsin made the biggest contribution to Russian-U.S. friendship by adopting some of the language of democracy and market reform and denying the existence of any difference in values between Russians and Americans.

By the end of his presidency, however, Yeltsin's program of reform began to slip. At the same time as disillusionment with reforms grew within Russian society, disenchantment with the American example also grew. Vladimir Putin came to power in time to take advantage of both trends. He proclaimed stability as his major goal and asserted that, under him, Russia did not need American advice. As always during an epoch of "stability," anti-Americanism again was on the rise. This is not to say that U.S. foreign policy did not contribute to this rise in anti-American sentiments, nor to vindicate or blame any particular statesman. However, the recurrent cycles in Russian-U.S. relations provide us with enough material to link internal agendas with the construction of images of the "other."

### **Cycles of Russian Images in the United States**

Throughout two centuries of relations with Russia, the United States experienced its own cycles of hope and disillusionment. Each time Russia began a reform cycle, U.S. public opinion enthusiastically endorsed it in the hope that a U.S.-style democratic republic would appear in the eastern part of Europe. Once reforms gave way to stabilization, however, American disillusionment in Russia grew, and the belief that the country was immutable spread. Such a cycle of hope and disenchantment repeated itself in the late nineteenth century, during and after the Russian Revolution, during

Khrushchev's "thaw," during Gorbachev's "perestroika," and through Yeltsin's reforms. Each time the disillusionment was very deep because the American public felt that their hope had been betrayed, and they subsequently portrayed Russia in darker colors. New attempts at reform excited Americans each time, however, and another cycle began.

Discussions about the U.S. domestic agenda rarely mentioned Russia, and when they did, it was as a model of autocracy that opposed everything American. That was true in the early nineteenth century, the turn of the twentieth century, most of the Cold War, and again in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Most of the time, the usage was generated by an internal national wound like slavery, segregation, Communist "witch hunts," or foreign wars. Russia (or the USSR) served as an example of a permanently worse government that enabled critics to come to terms with the United States' own problems.

There were times, however, when U.S. agendas concurred with Russian agendas. This was mostly in times of war. During the American Revolutionary War, the Russian Manifesto of Armed Neutrality helped colonists withstand a British naval blockade. In the Civil War, Russian fleets were sent to New York and San Francisco harbors to keep ships free in case of a Russian war with England but in fact symbolically helped the Northern cause. This concurrence of agendas was also seen during the two World Wars, especially during the Second World War when the two nations were allies. This mode of relations revived at the start of the "war on terror," when it looked like Russia and the United States were once again fighting a common foe.

## Conclusion

One can not tell what came earlier in Russia — public anti-American opinion or official and "elite" use of it. However, if we look at the 200 years of Russian-U.S. relations, we see definite waves in the attitude of Russian authorities toward the United States connected to their own domestic agendas. In the broadest terms, every time Russia tried to reform, it viewed the United States positively, but during each period of retrenchment, whether conceived of as "stabilization" or "stagnation" or "reaction," it portrayed the United States as a foe. Thus, growing anti-Americanism in today's Russia may be considered just another sign of the end of a reformist epoch.

For the United States, the best policy to attract Russia as an ally would not be to wait for another twist in Russian politics, however. Rather, it ought to search for a common agenda to align the two states: fighting, say, terrorism, poverty, or climate change, or by building new space stations or even joint antiballistic missile (ABM) systems. Such an approach may work surprisingly well.

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