

INTRODUCTION

After thousands of Poles revolted against Russian rule in January 1863 – a critical moment during the American Civil War – many in the Union faced a moral and ideological dilemma. Should they be faithful to the traditional American sympathy for brave rebels against Old World monarchies? Or should they side with Imperial Russia, which many had long seen as the only friendly power in Europe? The debate in northern newspapers centered less on factual information than on questions of identity. Was autocratic Russia, as it brutally suppressed the Polish Insurrection, a barbaric empire unlike republican America? Or was Russia, like the United States, a Christian power, whose Tsar Alexander II emancipated its serfs shortly before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and who suppressed secession much as the North fought the South? Southern editors' commentary also often revolved around issues of positioning, with sneering parallels drawn between "Alexander II and Abraham I" and analogies made between the struggles of Poland and the Confederacy – thus giving the same comparisons opposite meanings.¹

When Russia sent warships from the Baltic and Pacific to New York and San Francisco in the fall of 1863, the debate in the North briefly gave way to almost unanimous and euphoric welcomes of the Russian fleets, which many believed deterred British and French intervention on the side of the Confederacy. As lavish balls feted the Russian officers, many editors rapturously explained why Americans were like Russians, citing the vast sweep of their territorial expansion and the huge growth of their populations, as well as the abolition of serfdom and slavery. Russia had its own reasons for sending the ships – to avoid having them bottled up in the Baltic by the British Navy, and to put them in position to prey upon British and French commercial shipping in the event of a clash over the rebellion in Poland. Yet the ways Americans hailed the Russian warships reflected a widespread belief in a genuine and enduring friendship between the two giant and distant countries. Many Russians, including the admiral who commanded the ships at San Francisco, shared that sentiment.²

As the episode reflects, American–Russian relations have often been a focus of contestation over national identities and destinies. For example, while some American writers in the nineteenth century depicted Russian fighting against Circassians as an advance of civilization like America’s wars against Indians, others rejected the parallel and likened the peoples of the Caucasus to the heroic warriors of ancient Greece, birthplace of democracy. Although many African American leaders compared pogroms in Russia to lynching and race riots in the United States, many white Americans denied the analogy or insisted that pogroms were much, much worse. While the United States was a model of freedom to many liberal intellectuals in Russia from the late eighteenth century to the twenty-first, it exemplified a money-mad materialism and vicious racism to other Russian writers, who extolled Russia’s superior spirituality and its supposed banishment of racial discrimination.

The enormous enthusiasm about the Russian fleets in the Union in 1863 also illustrates how the United States and Russia have not always been rivals, adversaries, or enemies. From the mutual diplomatic recognition at the start of the nineteenth century to the 1890s, the American republic and the Russian autocracy had very warm and friendly relations. Despite the differences between their political systems, ideologies, cultural values, and religious beliefs, Americans and Russians³ perceived common enemies (Britain and France) and important mutual interests (particularly freedom of the seas and trade). Although commercial competition in the Far East and American public revulsion at anti-Semitism and political repression in the Russian empire strained ties in the early twentieth century, friendly relations returned during the First World War, when the United States was a vital source of munitions and loans for Russia. Even as the United States intervened against Bolshevism during the Russian Revolutions and Civil War, it upheld the principle of Russian territorial integrity (apart from the independence of Finland and Poland). While Washington refused to recognize Soviet Russia from 1917 to 1933, Bolshevik leaders greatly admired Americans’ advanced technology, which played a vital role in the rapid modernization of the Five-Year Plans. During the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies, and when the war ended most people in both countries believed in the possibility of postwar cooperation. Even during the “Cold War” between 1947 and 1989, there were important phases of reduced tensions when leaders of the two countries focused more on the common interests of avoiding nuclear war, controlling the arms race, and expanding trade. Finally, after the Cold War, US and Russian leaders repeatedly made serious efforts to develop an economic and strategic partnership.

It is therefore not true, as President Vladimir Putin and other prominent Russians have asserted, that the United States (and the West in general) have always sought to contain or break up Russia.⁴ It is also not correct that “there has actually never been a period of sustained good relations between Russia and the United States,” as a distinguished historian wrote in the premier journal of the American foreign policy establishment.⁵

In contrast to views of American–Russian conflict as inherent, inevitable, and perpetual, we emphasize in this book how often clashes have arisen from misunderstandings, illusions, exaggerations, and sensationalist distortions. Thus, false assertions that the tsarist government deliberately instigated a horrible pogrom at Kishinev in 1903 inflamed the rupture in American–Russian relations in the early twentieth century. Erroneous claims that the Soviet government was inciting communist revolutions in the United States and Western Europe after the Second World War figured importantly in the outbreak of what Americans called a “cold war.” Unwarranted fears in this century that Washington seriously sought to spark a “color revolution” inside Russia spurred and justified internal repression by the Kremlin that appalled and alienated many Americans.

Some have argued that the problems in US–Russian relations have stemmed not from misunderstandings, but from “divergent fundamental values and state interests.”⁶ Yet, as many scholars have recognized, perceptions of international threats are subjective, and definitions of interests are contested. It is therefore essential to examine how international “realities” have been imagined and how foreign policy outlooks have been constructed.⁷

As we examine the many shifts from friendly to hostile or from adversarial to amicable relations, then, we focus above all on the stories Americans and Russians have told and the images they have produced. In other words, we concentrate on the discourses that have shaped how Russians and Americans have understood or misunderstood each other. As political scientist Ronald Krebs has argued, “rhetorical contests shape the course of politics,” and facts or events are given meaning when woven into stories.⁸ We do not merely document the manifold mutual perceptions of Russians and Americans. Instead, we investigate the motivations and consequences of the storytelling and image-making. We show how old narratives have been challenged or discarded, with new dominant narratives resetting the boundaries of debate. We also reveal how the hierarchies of images have changed, with some being featured and others being marginalized.

Our focus on how words and images have generated meanings and influenced policies does not mean that we ignore how leaders of states have pursued geopolitical interests or responded to international pressures – themes

emphasized by “realist” scholars of international relations. Yet, in contrast to realists, we do not see interests as simply existing objectively due to geography or economics, and we highlight the influence of non-state as well as state actors (as many “liberal” students of international relations do). While “liberal” scholars have stressed the autocratic or democratic nature of regimes as drivers of international relations, we highlight the ups and downs in American–Russian relations within periods when the types of regimes did not change significantly.⁹

Our “constructivist” approach reveals how persistently the process of constructing national identity both in Russia (be it the Russian Empire, the USSR, or post-Soviet Russia) and in the United States has revolved around images of “the Self” and “the Other.” We study how Russians and Americans created knowledge about each other in relation to their nation-building and as part of the development of their self-images. Each of the countries at any historical moment produced multiple images of itself, but it was the “watching” society that selected features of the Other for use in domestic political debates. Therefore, we analyze when and why Americans used Russia’s image and Russians used America’s image over centuries.¹⁰

To many Americans and Russians, the other country not only posed threats of aggression and subversion, but also constituted the polar opposite of their own values and national identity. American politicians and journalists often depicted bloody Russian “Oriental” or “Asiatic” despotism as the antithesis of peace-loving American or Western democracy and freedom. Russian political and media figures, in turn, condemned American arrogant universalism and hypocrisy as contrasts to Russia’s defense of national sovereignty and faithfulness. In both cases, focusing on the evils of the foreign nation deflected attention from the home nation’s faults and affirmed its virtues.¹¹ Such scapegoating, with the projection onto a foreign nation of traits people wish to downplay or disregard in their own society, has been common in the construction of images of enemies.¹² Yet it has been unusually intense and pervasive in American–Russian relations. More than any other foreign foes that the two nations had fought in the past, America and Russia became intimate enemies.

Although other pairs of countries have also been central to the shaping of each other’s identities for extended periods, Russia and the United States have been imaginary twins or alter egos more persistently than any other couple.¹³ Until late in the nineteenth century, Great Britain was arguably the most important Other both for the United States and for Russia.¹⁴ Yet, after the Anglo-American rapprochement in the 1890s, Britain’s place in American demonology was taken briefly by Spain and Germany, and more enduringly by Russia.¹⁵ True, Anglophobia persisted among Irish Americans

and others in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, but it largely died out with the decline and decolonization of the British empire.¹⁶ After the Anglo-Russian entente of 1907, Britain and Russia ceased being archenemies for a time, and the revival of their enmity after 1917 was not as obsessive or widespread as in the nineteenth century.¹⁷

Even China and the United States have not been as mutually constitutive for as long as Russia and America have been. One distinguished historian argued that Americans have had a uniquely intense and enduring preoccupation with China.¹⁸ Yet Americans have also had a lasting obsession with Russia, and the United States has not been as vital to Chinese dreams and hatreds as it has been to Russians'.¹⁹ In a valuable study of persistent American stereotypes in the twentieth century, Donald Davis and Eugene Trani contrasted positive and romantic views of China to continuing negative and hostile views of Russia.²⁰ Yet, as we show, American attitudes toward Russia have actually swung between enthusiasm and antipathy, with the casting of Russia as alternately an object of an American mission and a demonic foil for affirmation of American moral superiority being a key reason for the special significance of the American–Russian relationship across three centuries.

Several scholars before us have written accounts of the full history of Russian–American relations, and their books were all shaped by the times in which they wrote. During the Second World War, when the United States and the Soviet Union were allies, Foster Rhea Dulles traced the relations between the two peoples in the hope of assisting efforts to find “an enduring basis for understanding and good will.”²¹ As postwar relations deteriorated, Vera Micheles Dean still expressed hope that the two great powers could be peacetime allies, yet she exaggerated continuities between tsarist and Soviet absolutism in a way that unintentionally foreshadowed subsequent American demonization of Russia.²² With Soviet–American hostility peaking by 1950, Thomas Bailey claimed that tsarism had been as hostile to democracy as was Stalinism and tried to show that the idea of a historic Russian–American friendship was a myth.²³ Boldly challenging the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War, William Appleman Williams starkly reversed the blame for that conflict, finding the birth of US “containment” strategies in America’s tragically beclouded responses to the Bolshevik Revolution and in an earlier struggle between the United States and tsarist Russia over Manchuria.²⁴ Amid the easing of superpower tensions in the 1970s, John Lewis Gaddis highlighted how the subordination of ideological differences to the pursuit of common interests had been the key to earlier periods of friendly relations as well as the era of *détente*.²⁵ In the same

period of optimism about opportunities for cooperation, Nikolai Sivachev and Nikolai Yakovlev emphasized the “objective inevitability of peaceful coexistence between countries with different socioeconomic systems,” not conflict or war, and they expressed confidence that the positive developments of the early 1970s in US–Soviet relations could not be destroyed.²⁶ Yet US–Soviet détente soon died, and amid “the New Cold War” of the first half of the 1980s Robert Daniels focused on “the roots of confrontation” between the United States and Russia, which he predicted would “not disappear or cease to challenge the United States, regardless of the coloration of its government.”²⁷ Having read these earlier surveys of American–Russian relations, we are cautioned against trying to forecast the future and we strive to avoid projecting the present back into the past.

Like our predecessors, we have been influenced by major developments in American–Soviet and American–Russian relations during our lives. Early in our scholarly careers, we witnessed astonishingly bold reforms in the USSR, the dramatic ending of the Soviet–American Cold War, and subsequently the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Those personal experiences contribute to our awareness as historians of the possibility of rapid changes in American–Russian relations. As we have written this book, since 2008, we have observed a drastic deterioration of relations between Russia and the United States. That degeneration has heightened our belief in the importance of scholarly collaboration that transcends disputes between the two countries.

One of the major ambitions of this history of Russian–American relations is to put the “Cold War” in perspective as only one segment in more than 200 years of interaction between the governments and peoples of the two countries. The overwhelming majority of scholarly studies of US–Russian relations have focused on the period of “the Cold War,” which they have approached as an unprecedented, unique, and discrete era. In recent decades many scholars of the Cold War have recognized that ideas played central roles and argued for greater attention to ideologies. Yet, even though the ideological conflicts – capitalism vs. socialism, communism vs. liberalism, Protestantism and Catholicism vs. atheism – erupted long before 1945, that has not led many scholars to stretch their frames beyond the forty-five years following the Second World War.²⁸

During the conflict between the superpowers, Soviet journalists, propagandists, and academic authors often depicted the “Cold War” as a new phase of an ideological struggle between socialism and capitalism that began in 1917.²⁹ With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian scholars developed more detached, less ideologically charged analyses of the post-1945 superpower conflict that were based on new access to previously unavailable archival

records.³⁰ Yet few of the post-Soviet studies developed views of the “Cold War” as part of the longer history of relations between Russia and the West.³¹

A second objective of this book is to present a more expansive and inclusive view of “relations” between Russia and America than is available in previous surveys, which focused above all on political and diplomatic developments. Although this new history of American–Russian relations gives due attention to decisions by political leaders and negotiations between diplomats, it also describes and analyzes the roles of many non governmental actors – including American engineers who participated in the building of railroads in Russia, Russian revolutionaries who appealed for support of their efforts to overthrow the tsarist government, American missionaries who sought to convert Russians to Protestant faiths, Russian novelists who captivated American readers, American journalists whose reports from the Soviet Union often reinforced popular stereotypes, and Soviet filmmakers whose images of American threats shaped the Russian public’s conception of living in a besieged fortress.

Our third objective is to delve more deeply into the cultural and ideological dimensions of American–Russian relations by uncovering and analyzing the ideas, assumptions, and aspirations that inspired, guided, and drove the diverse actors. We regard ideologies in a more detached and critical way than earlier overviews which promoted mythological notions about Russian–American kinship³² or perpetuated moralistic judgments about alleged essential differences between the two nations.³³ We also take ideologies more seriously than earlier surveys that viewed them mainly as rationalizations for the pursuit of economic interests³⁴ or treated them primarily as cynical justifications for uses of state power.³⁵ In contrast, we emphasize the importance of ideologies as the systems of ideas, values, and myths that peoples inside and outside of governments used to make sense of the world. From that vantage, formal ideologies were parts of broader political cultures that were affected by ideas about foreign nations. Hence, in this book we examine public discussions in Russia and America of relations with the other nation not only to see the ways they justified or impinged upon policies but also to understand how they shaped visions of future development and drew the boundaries of nations. In each chapter we analyze the changing images of the other nation that shaped each imagined community, and we utilize a variety of images – political cartoons, propaganda posters, magazine covers, advertisements, and paintings – to illustrate how ideas, attitudes, assumptions, and emotions animated Russian–American encounters.

Political cartoons hold a special place among the visual sources used in our book. Because of their specific genre, these images have been

convenient mechanisms for maintaining one-dimensional perceptions of the *Other* and for visually framing long-standing American and Russian myths about each other. Our analysis of political cartoons as historical sources includes careful attention to their language, their use of symbols, and their placement in magazines or newspapers.³⁶ From the late nineteenth century, when political cartoons became a regular feature in newspapers, through much of the twentieth century, editors, propagandists, and political leaders recognized the special power of cartoons. During the First World War, the US Committee on Public Information had a Bureau of Cartoons that made suggestions to cartoonists all across the country and that viewed cartoons as more weighty than pamphlets or editorials in the molding of public opinion.³⁷ Following the Second World War, systematic studies of the habits of newspaper readers across the United States found that editorial cartoons were extremely popular, drawing more attention from men than any other part of newspapers except the most widely read front-page news stories.³⁸ In the Soviet press, cartoons were often closely tied to the rhetoric of top leaders, who sometimes gave instructions directly to cartoonists.³⁹ Both Russian/Soviet and American cartoons therefore merit close analysis.

The fourth major goal of this work is to develop fully perspectives from both sides of the American–Russian relationship. As historian Akira Iriye has pointed out, “a uninational outlook is not adequate for understanding the complex forces that have shaped the mutual interactions between Americans and other peoples.”⁴⁰ Yet the most comprehensive study of Russian–American interactions by Soviet authors was so stridently polemical that it really only presented the official Soviet outlook.⁴¹ Earlier surveys by US historians were based almost exclusively on American sources and focused lopsidedly on American perspectives. In contrast, in this book we devote roughly equal attention to American views of Russia and Russian views of America.

This new survey takes full advantage of the recent publication of a large number of exhaustively researched monographs in Russian and English on specific periods of US–Russian relations, which are listed in the Bibliography. Especially important in the foundation for this survey are the extraordinary series of books by N. N. Bolkhovitinov and Norman Saul.⁴² The Herculean work of such scholars has enabled us to present a new interpretive analysis of more than three centuries of American–Russian interaction based on much broader and deeper knowledge than was available to our predecessors.

INTRODUCTION

We – two Russians and one American – write in different ways, but we have endeavored to harmonize the structures and styles of the chapters for which we are the primary authors. Ivan Kurilla wrote Chapters 1 to 3 and collaborated with Victoria Zhuravleva on Chapter 4. Zhuravleva was responsible for Chapters 5 to 8. David Foglesong wrote Chapters 9 to 18. We have revised all of the chapters in response to comments, criticism, disagreements, and suggestions from each other. Thus, *Distant Friends and Intimate Enemies* is a fully collaborative work, completed despite the drastic worsening of relations between our countries as we wrote.