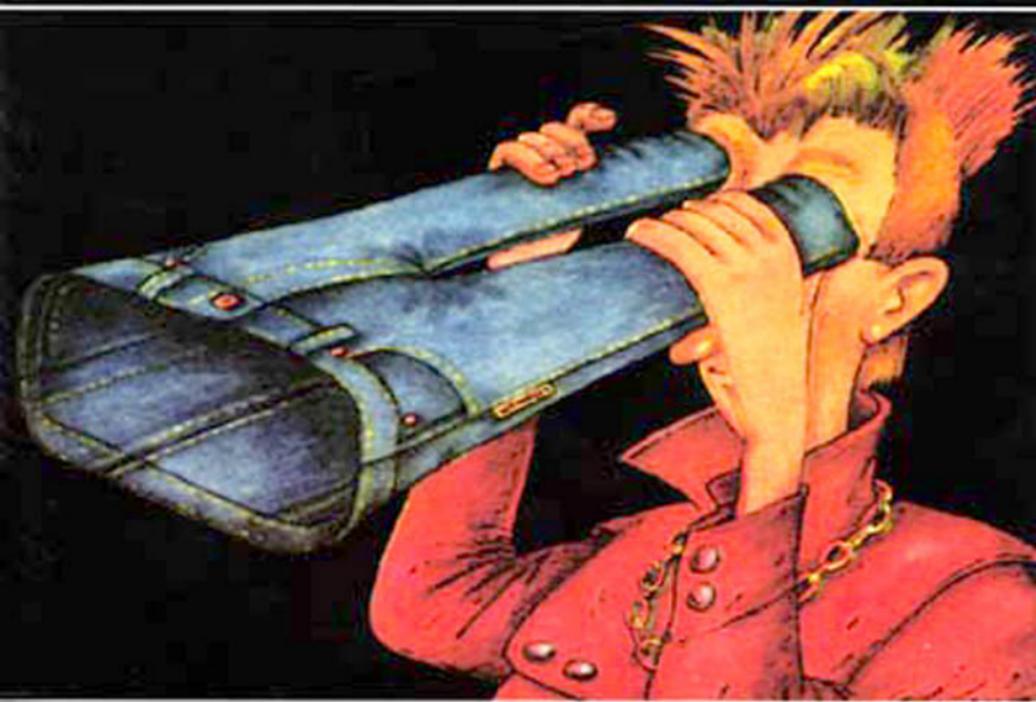


IMAGINING AMERICA

INFLUENCE AND IMAGES
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIA



Alan M. Ball

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*Influence and Images in
Twentieth-Century Russia*

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For Colleen

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Preface

As the Soviet era drew to a close, the Snake Brothers, a rock group from the Ukrainian city of Lvov, introduced a song titled “America”:

When midnight replaces the bright day
And everybody is resting after work
I haven't yet closed my eyes-ey-ey
In my dreams I'm flying to New York.¹

Performed partly in English, the song satirized contemporary idolization of the United States along with shabby conditions in the Soviet homeland that could give rise to such yearning. Its refrain—“America, you say to me ‘welcome’ / I say, Oh-yea, America / Will I ever sail to your shore?”—captured a disposition common not only in the Soviet twilight but also a century earlier, when subjects of Tsar Nicholas II emigrated by the millions to the New World.

Russian fascination with America in tsarist times passed easily through the Bolshevik Revolution and flourished thereafter. Spellbinding images of American bounty, common among the general population in the 1920s, co-existed with the interest of futurist intellectuals in an America brimming with cars, skyscrapers, and the energy of youthful iconoclasm. American jazz and movies soon held sway in Soviet cities, and even the leaders of the Communist Party spoke freely about positive features of bourgeois America that occupied a place in their imaginations. Along with the exploitation that they expected in any capitalist country, prominent officials saw in America—more than in Germany, France, or England—advanced technology and an

energetic devotion to sweeping industrial challenges on a scale similar to those awaiting the builders of Soviet socialism. Late in the decade, when party leaders chose to industrialize in earnest, they did so with vital technical assistance and equipment from hundreds of American companies.

Before long, though, Stalin's government restricted the circulation of American popular culture and stressed that the Soviet Union, now reaching socialism, would soon outstrip the United States altogether. Soviet pride in industrial achievements bolstered these claims, as did Cold War hostility, which also worked to limit technological and cultural transfers from the United States. Once the Soviet Union equaled America's superpower status in the 1970s, any thought of the United States playing an important role in the construction of a new Russian society had long vanished.

Then, to the world's amazement, the Soviet Union crumbled at the end of the 1980s and disappeared altogether in 1991. Suddenly the Russian people faced an event similar to that confronted some seventy years before—the birth of a nation whose leaders promised an end to oppression and stagnation wrought by the preceding regime. More than ever, America seemed a repository of products, methods, and institutions that Russians could study or enjoy openly. In the realm of popular culture, a vast Russian appetite for American TV, movies, music, and apparel emerged from the shadows of Soviet life and recalled the attraction of American jazz and movies in Soviet cities during the 1920s. Moreover, the underlying popular image of an affluent America, widespread in Russia by 1917, survived dogged Soviet criticism and surfaced in robust condition during the century's closing decade.

Meanwhile, Russian officials and publicists looked to the West for assistance in constructing a new society. Like Lenin and Stalin, they hoped to obtain advanced technology to spur economic growth, but they also sought guidance in the formation of Western economic and political institutions loathed by Bolshevik revolutionaries. Scarcely had the 1990s commenced than Russia seemed awash not only in American products but also in U.S. advisers striving to implement such reforms as privatization of state enterprises, a new constitution, and a new judicial system, to name just a few of the ventures that would have been inconceivable less than ten years earlier.

The reforms did not bring general prosperity, however, and the passing years witnessed growing discontent with American prescriptions for Russia. Along with standard Soviet-era condemnation of the United States, critics voiced dismay over American society in terms that had flourished among Russian intellectuals during the nineteenth century and owed nothing to Marxism. America's hand did not vanish in this climate, but the euphoric hopes of reformers early in the 1990s seemed remote and naïve. Thus, at the

dawn of the twenty-first century, America's example as well as its opponents are still much in evidence—new variations of longstanding phenomena.

The American angle of this study furnishes a useful vantage point from which to compare Soviet and Russian efforts to transform society. In each instance, leaders began these quests while facing a United States in ascendance—a robust newcomer to such preeminence in the 1920s and the world's lone superpower seventy years later, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. More to the point, the Kremlin's lodgers saw across the ocean a nation that led the world in matters of importance to them, after 1917 and again after 1991. Both fledgling governments also inherited a population with widespread positive (and often fanciful) notions about opportunities and wealth at hand in America. As a result the United States became a measuring stick of power and prosperity, a country whose unique role in Russian imaginations has confronted officials with the challenge of accelerating toward certain features of this “model” or promoting alternatives said to be superior. In either case, comparison with the American example proved impossible to avoid.

Long before the Snake Brothers held forth, Alexander Pushkin conceded that his heroine in *Evgeny Onegin* “knew our language only barely, / Read Russian magazines but rarely.”

In her own language she was slow
To make her meaning clear, and so
She wrote in French, be it admitted
I cannot help it, it is true:
To speak milady's love, but few
Have thought our native language fitted.²

French seemed even more essential to Pushkin's Tatyana in the early nineteenth century than English does to well-educated young Russians of our day, a reminder that every aspect of America's recent influence and image in Russia finds an approximation in other locations and eras. For hundreds of years Russian rulers, aristocrats, and intellectuals looked more to Europe than to North America for guidance not only in language and culture but also in such areas as industry and administration.

Nor was Russia alone in following foreign practices. The heavy reliance of tsarist authorities and the Soviet Union on Western expertise in industrialization, for example, should not obscure the fact that other industrializing nations, including America, also depended on skills and financing supplied from abroad. Later, when American influence surpassed others' impact on

Soviet Russia and the subsequent republic, this by itself did not distinguish Russia from many lands that either sought or could not resist economic techniques, political reform, and popular culture from an ever more robust and self-assured United States. Even the gap between criticism of America by some Russian intellectuals and the vistas of American abundance more prevalent in the general population resembles divergent assessments of the United States voiced regularly outside Russian borders.

Following World War II, the loss of confidence widespread in western Europe boosted the magnetism of America's example there just as it did in Russia nearly fifty years later. In 1945 and again in 1991 the United States had weathered formidable challenges—first the conflict with the Axis powers and then the Cold War—and appeared more successful than ever to debilitated nations whose institutions had forfeited the respect of many of their citizens, especially the young. In each period America became what some have called a “reference society,” a country whose prosperity, power, or modern culture (depending on the priorities of the observer) made it appear worthy of study and emulation. Foreigners recognized a sharp contrast with their own nations. Awed descriptions of American supermarkets penned by European travelers in the 1950s resemble the reaction of Boris Yeltsin on his tour of Houston in 1989, while people in liberated Europe showed the same craving for American popular culture (largely unavailable during the war) as did Russians when controls collapsed at the end of the 1980s.

Not everyone welcomed America's heft in western Europe or Russia, of course, and concerns went beyond the cultural laments of intellectuals. In Great Britain and France, resentment surfaced after the war over the nations' diminished empires and depreciated status in the growing shadow of the United States. Similar disaffection festered in Russia during the 1990s, following the evaporation of the Soviet superpower amid talk of a second “American century.” If prosperity had not returned to western Europe in the 1950s, and had fear of the Soviet Union not persisted, grievances over America's global swagger might have reached a louder crescendo in domestic politics than the occasional applause won by Charles de Gaulle for defying the United States. No European politician could get far in a period of increasing affluence by saying “American measures have made your lives worse.” Had better times not commenced, though, this assertion might have grown louder, as it did in Russia at the century's close.

Despite these parallels, however, America's role in modern Russia does not simply duplicate previous tsarist experience with Europe, nor does it copy American influence in other countries. European examples may have captivated tsarist administrators and intellectuals at least as much as practices

from the United States drew top-level attention in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. But nothing in the era of European predominance approached the allure of American popular culture throughout the Russian population. During most of the Romanov dynasty's three hundred years, only a small number of Russians revealed an interest in the West or sought anything from it. Then, in the twentieth century, came the birth in the United States of entertainment with international appeal, rapidly spread around the globe by new technologies of mass communication. The most determined efforts of Soviet officials could not remove (and, in the long run, simply whetted) appetites for products from the American cultural machine. Nor could Bolsheviks extinguish the popular fascination with America that had previously influenced the choice of destination made by millions of immigrants and that survived Russia's transformation from a peasant realm to a nation of urban, well-educated citizens. No European state had ever attracted such interest from ordinary Russians beneath the summit of tsarist society.

American influence on Soviet Russia stands out as well for reasons associated with the inevitable rivalry between two large countries each convinced that it alone offered the best model for other lands. Both nations cast themselves as leaders of crusades bent on the eventual demise of the other's system, and both became superpowers atop mammoth nuclear arsenals. This atmosphere dramatized almost any interaction between the two titans and imparted gravity to perceptions of influence. Regarding popular culture, for example, countries elsewhere may have absorbed more from the United States and done so earlier, but the stakes seemed higher in the Soviet Union. Washington, D.C., came to view American amusements and consumerism as weapons against communism, while Soviet officials pronounced their ideals endangered by this bourgeois contamination. To some, the confrontation suggested desperation characteristic of sixteenth-century Protestant and Catholic adversaries fighting to save their populations from damnation and struggling to extend their own paths of salvation to those less fortunate. In this light, the tenacious appeal of American popular culture in Soviet Russia meant more to both sides than it did in any other country, for the consequences associated with success or failure were momentous.

I welcome another opportunity to thank colleagues who have shared their time and advice on this enterprise over the years. At different stages of the process Samuel Baron and Richard Stites read the entire manuscript and offered thoughtful suggestions combined with encouragement sufficient to preserve my morale. Both have done so while I toiled on previous books as well, and I am grateful to have benefited from their counsel for so long. Many

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Notes

1. For complete lyrics see Sabrina Petra Ramet, ed., *Rocking the State: Rock Music and Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), 264–65.
2. Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*, trans. Walter Arndt, 2d. ed., revised (New York: Dutton, 1981), 73.

INTRODUCTION



The Land of the Benzine Pegasus

There is apparently much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, are the results of natural selection; the more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe having emigrated during the last ten or twelve generations to that great country and having there succeeded best.

—Charles Darwin

I must see America. I think one can feel hope there. I think that there the life comes up from the roots, crude but vital. Here the whole tree of life is dying. It is like being dead: the underworld. I must see America. I believe it is beginning, not ending.

—D. H. Lawrence

Describing passions felt when gazing upon a lover, John Donne found a parallel in the discovery of America.

O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,
My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie,
How blest am I in this discovering thee!¹

Three hundred years later, Salvador Dalí compared the allure of America to his anticipation of a different pleasure. In France, as he leafed through issues

of *Town and Country* and *The New Yorker*, with Cole Porter's "Night and Day" playing on a phonograph, he savored images of the United States "with the voluptuousness with which one welcomes the inaugural fragrances of a sensational meal. . . . I want to go to America," his mind raced on such occasions, "I want to go to America."²

For centuries, inhabitants of diverse nations have regarded America as a land of promise—the harbinger of something new, perhaps, or the preserve of something elemental—in any case a territory enticing or reassuring by its very presence. These impressions might bear little resemblance to America seen firsthand, and they encountered scathing rebuttals from disillusioned travelers and other critics concerned about America's hold on prevailing imagination. It did not matter. No one could dam the flood of eager, desperate, or curious hopes that fed Europe's resilient notions of the New World. The earliest works of artists and writers concerned with America often contrasted an allegedly innocent, unspoiled land with an exhausted Europe whose best days lay in the past. America represented a return to uncorrupted nature or an opportunity to create something new and vibrant, free of whatever qualities the author disliked in the Old World.³

Looking back no further than the eighteenth century, we find the Abbé Galiani, a well-known figure among the philosophes in Parisian salons, informing a friend in 1776 that "the epoch has come of the total fall of Europe, and of transmigration into America. All here turns into rotteness, —religion, laws, arts, sciences,—and all hastens to renew itself in America." This observation, he added, was not meant as a joke or a casual prediction. He had stuck to his forecast for twenty years and saw it coming true. "Therefore, do not buy your house in the *Chausée d'Antin*; you must buy it in Philadelphia. My trouble is that there are no abbeys in America."⁴ The outbreak of the American Revolution prompted Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, a radical voice of the Enlightenment, to present America as Europe's likely successor: "To the extent that our Peoples, one after the other, weaken and succumb, the population and the agriculture of America will increase; the arts, brought there by our efforts, will soon be born; the country arisen from Nothing, burns with zeal to make a spectacle upon the face of the earth and in the history of the world."⁵

America stirred imaginations beyond France and the Enlightenment's domain of reason. Romantics, too, could find appeal in visions of primordial nature. Mysterious forests, rivers leading deep into unknown territory, and exotic natives all roused their fancy. So did thoughts of the New World as a sanctuary from political or economic distress at home. On into the nineteenth century, then, America continued to flourish in European reveries.

Goethe, for one, declared in 1819, “if we were twenty years younger, we should sail for America,” and he later addressed an enthusiastic verse to the new republic across the Atlantic.

America, with thee life's better,
 Thou'rt free from our old Europe's faults;
 Thee no ruined castles fetter,
 Cumber no basalts.
 No useless tradition.
 No purposeless strife,
 Hinder the fruition
 Of thy pulsing life.⁶

Another prominent German, the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, described America as “the land of the future, . . . the land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of Europe.”⁷ He pictured vitality across the ocean, and similar transatlantic contrasts occurred to others. For Percy Bysshe Shelley, young America became a bird soaring over the doomed nations of the Old World.

That land is like an Eagle, whose young gaze
 Feeds on the noontide beam, whose golden plume
 Floats moveless on the storm, and in the blaze
 Of sunrise gleams when Earth is wrapped in gloom;
 An epitaph of glory for the tomb
 Of murdered Europe may thy fame be made,
 Great People! As the sands shalt thou become;
 Thy growth is swift as morn, when night must fade;
 The multitudinous Earth shall sleep beneath thy shade.⁸

The most influential observations on the United States in the nineteenth century, and perhaps any century, flowed from the pen of Alexis de Tocqueville, who published the first volume of *Democracy in America* in 1835. His findings ensured that America would not appear as a paradise to European readers. He tempered enthusiasm—“choose any American at random, and he should be a man of burning desires, enterprising, adventurous, and, above all, an innovator”—with misgivings or criticism about numerous aspects of life in the United States.⁹ American politicians left a lackluster impression, and he judged any democracy, including the United States, deficient in the patient attention necessary for a successful foreign policy. Slavery, too, he decried in America, predicting that race relations would bedevil the new republic in years to come. More broadly, he identified a

“tyranny of the majority” arising from conformity imposed by a public that was not always wise. Freedom of speech could not protect unorthodox opinion from citizens as zealous as any autocrat in combating challenges to prevailing norms. Indeed, he saw the nation threatened by the spread of a narrow-minded cultural consensus that inclined the American people to stifle eccentricity and genius, to say nothing of dissent.

Nevertheless, Tocqueville did find much to admire in America, especially when compared to Europe. He gave the advantage more often to the United States in matters ranging from the character of women and relations among family members to equality of opportunity and political freedom. “Where else,” he asked, “can we find greater cause of hope or more valuable lessons?”¹⁰ Certainly, American lawmakers could be uninspiring and democracy as a whole inefficient. Tocqueville even granted that an enlightened autocrat would run the United States more adroitly. “Democracy does not provide a people with the most skillful of governments,” he explained, “but it does that which the most skillful government often cannot do: it spreads throughout the body social a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favored by circumstance, can do wonders.” “What good is it to me,” he inquired in another chapter, “if there is an authority always busy to see to the tranquil enjoyment of my pleasures and going ahead to brush all dangers away from my path without giving me even the trouble to think about it, if that authority, which protects me from the smallest thorns on my journey, is also the absolute master of my liberty and of my life?”¹¹

Tocqueville’s fascination and hope for the United States outweighed his numerous misgivings, and *Democracy in America* helped steer many European minds in the same direction. A country of dynamism and innovation had begun to grow in foreign imaginations, promoted by Tocqueville with such comments as “the American lives in a land of wonders; everything around him is in constant movement, and every movement seems an advance.” Newness and improvement were two sides of the same coin to the American, and “nowhere does he see any limit placed by nature to human endeavor; in his eyes something which does not exist is just something that has not been tried yet.”¹²

While Tocqueville’s voice rang loudly for years to come, European intellectuals late in the century found their thoughts drawn less to America as a land of incipient democracy and more to images of American factories and technology. Sixty years after *Democracy in America*, a second Tocqueville would sooner have published *INDUSTRY in America* to examine the accomplishments most readily associated with the United States by that time. “The

industrial progress of the United States is so striking," declared a prominent Russian scholar in 1904, "that some easily frightened European publicists even speak of the impending, inevitable industrial enslavement of Europe by America."¹³ Acknowledgment of American technical superiority grew ever more frequent as the years passed. Henry Nevinson, a journalist returning from New York to Great Britain shortly after World War I, combined disapproval of some American qualities ("grotesque exaggeration is called humor, and people gape in bewilderment at irony") with a farewell to technical achievements little known in his "ancient" London. "Good-bye to central heating and radiators, fit symbols of the hearts they warm! Good-bye to frequent and well-appointed bathrooms, glory to the plumber's art! . . . Good-bye to the long stream of motors—'limousines' or 'flivvers'! . . . Good-bye America! I am going home."¹⁴ During a journey in the opposite direction, to New York in 1915, the artist Francis Picabia declared simply, "Upon coming to America it flashed on me that the genius of the modern world is in machinery." Two years earlier, a visit to America convinced France's most fashionable dress designer, Paul Poiret, that the science fiction of such authors as Jules Verne and H. G. Wells was "surpassed by the reality."¹⁵

With each decade, there seemed less doubt to Europeans that America had already reached the future awaiting others. Whether the prospect of this destiny moved an observer to despair or rejoice, the image of America as trailblazer gained prominence relentlessly in the European mind. In 1888 the English politician and diplomat James Bryce asked readers of his book on the United States to conclude that "America has in some respects anticipated European nations. She is walking before them along a path which they may probably follow." The twentieth century saw Europe prepared to offer more of these conclusions and with less reserve. Jean Cocteau, upon learning of Klaus Mann's impending journey to America, informed his fellow author: "You'll see New York? It's like visiting a fortune teller."¹⁶ The English writer Mary Borden provided a similar briefing by advising in her article "The American Man" that Americans "be watched by everyone interested in the future of mankind, for the scaffolding of the world of the future is reared against the sky of America." Even in the realm of fashion, scarcely the zenith of American influence, F. Scott Fitzgerald found London's Bond Street tailors modifying their cuts to suit the New World and remarked that "the style of man" had "passed to America."¹⁷

Much of America's futurist image stemmed from—and contributed to—the flowering of modernism. Contemporaries sensed that something new was jostling the traditional world off the stage in the early twentieth century, and