Introduction

In the afternoon on March 1, 1881, members of the People's Will revolutionary organization, who believed regicide was a necessary step toward freedom for Russia, threw two bombs at Tsar Alexander II, who had that morning approved the establishment of a consultative commission, a possible step toward constitutional government. The first bomb exploded behind the tsar's carriage, killing and wounding Cossacks and passers-by but leaving the tsar unscathed. After Alexander stepped out of the carriage, the second bomb detonated at his feet, mangling his legs and causing him to bleed slowly to death.[1]

News of the gory assassination of the tsar flashed by telegraph across the world and burst across the front pages of American newspapers the next day. In the following months, anti-Semitic riots (pogroms) led many Jews to emigrate to the United States with stories of savage beatings by drunken mobs. Together with lurid tales of the abuse of tsarist political prisoners, these developments spurred a rising American fascination with exotic Russia.

This suggested an opportunity to James William Buel, a Missouri journalist who had just finished a popular account of the exploits of outlaws Jesse and Frank James. With the aid of a German guide and an interpreter, Buel dashed across the tsarist empire in the summer of 1882 to gather material, then quickly published *Russian Nihilism and Exile Life in Siberia*, a thick, lavishly illustrated volume that sold briskly in multiple editions. Written more to appeal to a market than to advance a political agenda, Buel's book abundantly reflected the contradictions in American popular views of Russia. In spite of his scorn for Russian "nihilists" (revolutionaries) as "frenzied" and "insane," Buel thought their "bloody power" was needed to "purge the nation and give it a new growth." Although he doubted whether autocratic Russia could be more progressive than her barbarous neighbors, Buel avowed that Russia would "advance by gradual steps and finally become established as a free and fully enlightened government." Finally, while Buel marveled at the beauty of Russian cathedrals and savored the "delicious" music of Russian choirs, he

vehemently condemned the Orthodox Church, whose creed's essence was "ignorance and superstition." Since that church was the primary cause of Russia's backwardness, Buel argued, "the first important step toward reforming Russia must be directed to the curtailment of the Church power and influence." Spurred on by such convictions, Buel boldly prophesied: "Civilization is spreading rapidly eastward, it cannot stop or go around Russia, and whether with bayonet or psalm-book the march will be made through every part of the Czar's dominions."[2]

Buel's ambivalent but zealous book thus foreshadowed American thinking about a wide array of efforts to reform Russia in the following century. While US soldiers went to Russia with bayonets only briefly and peripherally during the civil war of 1918–20, numerous other Americans journeyed to Russia with psalm-books and other products of their civilization, including harvesting machines, steel-making technology, jazz, and economic theories. Although many Americans grew alarmed by the danger of revolution in their own country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, even conservatives would hail uprisings in Russia that promised, at least for a time, to liberate and modernize that distant land. Despite their doubts about whether the Russian national character was suited for intelligent self-government, Americans would repeatedly proclaim their faith in the eventual emergence of a free Russia.

Journalists like Buel would play leading roles in this drama by stigmatizing Russian governments as "barbarous" or "Asiatic," by publicizing challenges to the regimes, and by assuring Americans of the ultimate triumph of their civilization or values. Many other Americans would be drawn into efforts to remake Russia as missionaries, propagandists, human rights activists, and economic advisers, as well as diplomats and government policy-makers. Even broader groups of Americans would participate vicariously in the crusades by hearing impassioned public lectures and reading vivid magazine articles about the heroic struggles of Russian dissidents and their brutal repression by Russian despots.

As they thought about changing Russia, many Americans were influenced by ideas rooted in the religious traditions of the United States. In particular, Americans exhibited a belief in a duty to spread their creed, a belief that a benighted foreign people yearned for the enlightenment they could bring, a belief in the possibility of inducing a sudden conversion from an old way of life, a belief that religion is central to the virtue or depravity and the progress or backwardness of societies, a belief in a single ultimate destiny for humanity, and a belief that opposition to the dissemination of their gospel is evil.

These ideas shaped recurring patterns in American views of Russia. At several moments, especially in response to the Russian revolutions of 1905, March 1917, and August 1991, many Americans expressed

euphoric enthusiasm about the rapid transformation of Russia into a nation resembling the United States, with democratic institutions, religious liberty, and a market economy. Then, when Russia diverged from that expected course, many Americans grew bitterly disillusioned, blamed defects in the Russian national character for the failure or degeneration of the revolutions, and demonized Russian political leaders who frustrated American aspirations.

While some top US government officials showed little or no interest in a crusade for a free Russia, even they could not completely disregard public indignation about events in Russia and demands to put pressure on Russian governments. Moreover, many US leaders were imbued with the dominant political culture, with its marked evangelistic streak. In several crucial phases, key policy-makers (most notably Woodrow Wilson, George F. Kennan, and Ronald Reagan) passionately shared the popular ambition to liberate Russia, and the sharp antipathy to the malignant forces that resisted that mission.

* * * * *

While focusing on the surges in the American drive for a free Russia and the vilification of Russian tyranny allows us to trace such persistent dynamics over a long term, it also enables us to view American-Russian relations in the wider context of an American global mission and the resistance it has encountered around the planet.

James Buel's venture to the tsarist empire came at a turning point in American-Russian relations and in the American "civilizing mission."[3] From the early Puritan proselytizers through the Protestant agents on Indian reservations two centuries later, missionaries and philanthropists had tried to convert "savages" to Christianity and turn communalist tribes into individualist farmers.[4] Although fewer Indians were Christianized and civilized than were dispatched and dispossessed, in the late nineteenth century a more fervent American mission extended beyond the North American continent. After Commodore Matthew Perry pressed Japan to open its doors in the 1850s, American educators and military advisers eagerly worked to turn Japanese students and soldiers into "Yankees of the East."[5] Following the US defeat of Spain in 1898, American officers and missionaries sought to reconstruct and regenerate Cuba and the Philippines.[6] In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the United States occupied and tried to guide the development of several neighbors, including Mexico, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.[7] At mid-century, Americans undertook their most ambitious and successful efforts to reshape foreign countries, in both Western Europe and the Far East.[8] Most recently, American soldiers, diplomats, and economic advisers have been involved in numerous campaigns to rebuild other nations, including Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq.[9]

American-Russian relations have not often been set in the context of this diverse historical experience. Studies of the attempt to transform post-Soviet Russia have treated it as a distinct post-Cold War project, with little awareness of precedents in earlier decades.[10] The term "Cold War" itself has marked off an era of superpower rivalry (roughly 1945–89) as a discrete epoch, and the campaigns for "liberation" in the early part of that period have often been depicted as responses to the specific menace of Stalinist subversion. Moreover, the triumphalist American interpretation of the Cold War as a necessary struggle against an evil empire that culminated in a decisive, final victory of American moral and political principles[11] has perpetuated a millenarian view of the contest with communism rather than promoting critical analysis of that historical project in the light of other American missions.

There are sound reasons for the conventional focus on the peculiarities of American-Soviet relations. The Bolshevik ideology of world revolution was the sole truly global rival to American liberal universalism in the twentieth century. Soviet nuclear weapons posed a unique threat of total annihilation of the United States. And Russian culture has reflected distinctive minglings of extraordinarily diverse influences from across Eurasia.[12]

Despite the special features of American-Soviet relations and the particularity of the Russian case, it is appropriate to view the American-Russian encounter in the longer and wider perspective of the American global mission. In the late nineteenth century, when American political, commercial, and evangelical energies surged overseas, the tsarist empire was one of many lands Americans sought to liberalize, develop, and redeem. Although US troops occupied only small parts of Russia for short periods around the end of the First World War, some Americans imagined military occupation of the Soviet Union during the Cold War and many viewed post-Soviet Russia as a defeated adversary. Like the spiritual and political leaders of many other countries, Orthodox priests and both tsarist and Soviet rulers stubbornly resisted unwanted penetration of their realms by Protestant faiths, propaganda broadcasts, and rock music. On the other hand, American political ideals and popular culture have at times been as attractive to peoples in Russia as to other peoples of the world.[13] The attempts by tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet authorities to prevent or at least contain American infiltration can be seen as part of a worldwide confrontation between American drives to open doors and efforts by leaders of other countries to close or guard their frontiers.

Yet Russian leaders have also sought to attract American investment and acquire American technology to spur the development of their country. Contrary to the assertions of some proponents of globalization, Soviet Russia did not simply isolate itself and became an autarkic outlier of

the process of economic integration.[14] It is more useful to view Russia's experience as like that of other "backward" countries that have sought modernization without subordination to more advanced nations.[15]

Impressed by the railway construction and rapid industrialization in the tsarist empire at the outset of the twentieth century, historian Henry Adams envisioned that "The last and highest triumph of history would . . . be the bringing of Russia into the Atlantic combine."[16] In subsequent decades, visions of remaking and integrating Russia would be inspired by surges in American trade with that enormous empire. During both world wars, booms in American exports sparked euphoric talk about how Russians were very much like Americans, while the more modest growth in commerce during the détente era figured in the hopes of corporate executives and policy-makers to domesticate the Russian bear.

At some moments, the stream of American goods and ideas flowing into Russia has risen to become a flood. Americans have been of different minds about these inundations. Many have hailed the uplifting, energizing, or liberating influence of products, techniques, and values from the United States, such as Singer sewing-machines in the late tsarist era, Ford tractors during the reign of Stalin, or rock-'n'-roll in the post-Stalin decades. Some recent authors have even suggested that such cultural infiltration played a decisive role in the collapse of the Soviet and East European communist regimes.[17] A smaller number of Russophiles have lamented the ways Russian traditions and institutions have been shaken by a too sudden influx, or gradually undermined by what one called "the termites of western influence."[18] Yet few historians have set the American impact on tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia in the context of the broader "Americanization" of the world over the last century.[19]

Like other peoples, Russians have been deeply ambivalent about America. On one hand, both political leaders and popular writers have been fascinated by American speed, energy, and efficiency, and have sought to instill those traits in Russia. On the other hand, many Russians have expressed harshly negative views of the American mania for money-making, the vulgarity of American mass culture, and the hypocrisy of American foreign policy. Hence, while Soviet anti-Americanism may have been primarily a product of "official xenophobia," as some have maintained, it was neither peculiar to the Soviet era, nor propagated exclusively by political elites, nor unique to Russia.[20] In moments of disappointment, Americans have sometimes despaired about Russia's allegedly peculiar inability to change. Yet Russians have in reality been like many foreign peoples in selectively assimilating elements of American culture and adapting them to their own societies; they have altered their habits and values in response to American influences, but not necessarily in the ways Americans wished or expected.[21]

At times of discouragement with Russia's reversion to authoritarianism, Americans have often expressed scorn for Russians as "Asiatic" or "dark," with the latter comparison to Africans being especially irksome to Russians.[22] However, many Americans' religious beliefs encouraged them to set aside racially tinged pessimism and have faith in the elevation of Russia, much as they had faith in uplifting countries such as China. In the late nineteenth century, at the same time as Protestant evangelists from America began to do missionary work inside the tsarist empire, liberal activists in the United States launched a publicity campaign on behalf of a "free Russia." During the following decades, Christian missionaries and secular crusaders who were often influenced by their religious upbringings encouraged many Americans to believe in the redemption and liberation of the peoples of Russia. Until the last years of the twentieth century, this Messianic outlook fostered unrealistic expectations that Russians could overthrow supposedly alien regimes, escape their pasts, and transcend their historical condition.

When those hopes for a free Russia were obstructed, Americans often characterized opposing forces in Russia as not merely despotic but diabolical. Much like the Spanish oppression of Cuba, for example, the tsarist oppression of Russia was denounced as "medieval," "cruel," and "bigoted," thereby reinforcing a sense of the contrasting virtues of the modern, humane, and tolerant United States.[23] Although the results of missions to remake foreign countries such as Russia, Cuba, and China were often disappointing or reversed, the popular sense of engagement in such crusades still had strong influence on how Americans felt about themselves, particularly by offering proof of American idealism and reassurance about the special place of the United States in the world.[24]

Despite those similarities, there was something about Russia that made it more persistently fascinating. Since Russia could be seen as both like and unlike America – both Christian and heathen, European and Asiatic, white and dark – gazing at Russia involved the strange fascination of looking into a skewed mirror. The commonalities such as youth, vast territory, and frontier expansion that made Russia seem akin to the United States for much of the nineteenth century served to make Russia especially fitted for the role of "imaginary twin" or "dark double"[25] that it assumed after the 1880s and continued to play through the twentieth century. Soviet communism, as an atheist and universalist ideology, came to seem, more than any other rival creed, the antithesis of the American spirit. Thus, more enduringly than any other country, Russia came to be seen as both an object of the American mission and the opposite of American virtues.

1 "Free Russia": origins of the first crusade, 1881–1905

Through most of the nineteenth century, few Americans considered it appropriate or possible to liberate and remake Russia. As Americans pushed westward and Russians pursued their own manifest destiny to the south and east, Americans tended to regard Imperial Russia as a distant, friendly power and an agent rather than an object of the Christian civilizing mission (see figure 1).[1] Despite their republican convictions, US diplomats showed little interest in reforming Russia, which many of them found unfit for self-government.[2] Although a handful of radical abolitionists embraced the cause of Russian revolutionaries,[3] in decades when African Americans were enslaved and then disenfranchised, the notion of extending democracy to an empire where more than 80 percent of the people were illiterate peasants – the so-called "dark people" – struck many Americans as absurd or grotesque. Long after the take-off of industrialization in the United States, Russia's relatively low level of development, small urban population, and poor transportation system made it seem a weak market, with few attractive opportunities for American manufacturers.[4] And at least until the 1890s, conservatives who feared the rise of anarchism and socialism in the United States tended to sympathize more with the tsarist government than with Russian revolutionaries (see figure 2).

Despite those fears, doubts, and objections, a movement for a "free Russia" developed in the United States in the last two decades of the century. In collaboration with Russian revolutionaries, American activists formed organizations that vehemently denounced political oppression and religious persecution in the tsarist empire. Challenging and reversing conventional images, the crusaders argued that the tsarist government was brutally uncivilized and that the Russian people were capable of orderly self-government. By the time of the Russian revolution of 1905, many Americans came to embrace the idea that Russia could and should be remade to resemble the United States.

The traditional explanation of this dramatic shift has held that a growing "realism" about Russia spurred forceful criticism of tsarist

Figure 1. The present crusade – the attitude of the tsar in declaring war against the Turks. Thomas Nast cartoon, *Harper's Weekly*, May 26, 1877. Tsar Alexander II is depicted as a Christian crusader at the time of the Russo-Turkish War.

Figure 2. The Devil tips his hat to immigrants plotting assassination. *The Judge*, February 21, 1885.

"barbarism" by the 1890s. According to this view, mushy notions of a historic Russian-American friendship were dispelled when leaders of the anti-tsarist movement exposed and documented Russian despotism, anti-Semitism, and other wicked violations of human rights.[5]

It is true that after revolutionaries killed Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the Russian government became more oppressive, and in the late nineteenth century Americans received more information about Russia than they had earlier. However, there are several problems with the "realist" explanation. Treating American critics of tsarism as objective observers ignores their imaginative exaggerations of the evils in the Russian empire. Placing primary emphasis on American sympathy for Russian Jews disregards the intensifying anti-Semitism in the United States. And seeing the movement for reform of Russia as an almost exclusively political phenomenon neglects economic, cultural, and religious influences on the activists' views. Since political oppression and pogroms had not provoked many protests from the United States before the 1880s,[6] one must examine why Americans grew increasingly predisposed to vilify the Russian autocracy. It is therefore essential to examine the crusade for a

free Russia in relation to the commercial expansion, racial tension, and religious turmoil in the US in this era.

The principal alternative to the "realist" explanation has been the "revisionist" interpretation that economic competition and expansionist friction in the Far East were the primary causes of the shift away from friendly American-Russian relations. By the 1890s, "New Left" historians have argued, key US officials and intellectual advisers feared that Russia was becoming a formidable industrial rival and a powerful threat to American commercial interests. These Russophobes urged US leaders to oppose Russian expansion in Manchuria, and they published articles that whipped up public antipathy toward the tsarist government.[7]

Some prominent critics of tsarism did, indeed, anticipate a clash between Anglo-American and Russian colonization of Asia, and as early as the 1880s they began trying to prepare public opinion for that collision by agitating against Russian "barbarism."[8] However, the overall significance of export competition and expansionist confrontation should not be exaggerated. Through the turn of the century few Americans greatly feared Russia, which was widely regarded as a backward country – decades, generations, or even centuries behind the United States.[9] While hostility to the prolonged Russian occupation of Manchuria was a major factor in the peak of outrage against the tsarist empire from 1903 to 1905, prior to that time, US businessmen and statesmen had applauded Russian railroad construction and territorial administration as an advance of civilization that opened new commercial opportunities for Americans in Asia.[10]

To understand the shift in American attitudes toward Russia, then, one must recognize not only the intensifying rivalry in the Far East, but also the awakening of American interest in the economic development of Russia itself. In the late 1880s and 1890s, as the tsarist government launched a program of rapid industrialization, some American business leaders began to see enormous export opportunities in Russia.[11] This reconsideration of Russia's potential as a market was one of several factors – including increased immigration from the tsarist empire and the campaign against autocratic oppression – that drew more attention to Russia and led Americans to think in new ways about that land. While South Carolina businessman Alexander Hume Ford dreamed about the "regeneration" of Russian agriculture by American machines, missionary Ludwig Conradi declared that Russia was an "immense field" for evangelism, historian Henry Adams envisioned the Americanization of Siberia as a project worthy of America's great energies, and novelist Mark Twain imagined buying Siberia in order to "start a republic."[12]