David S. Foglesong has written an ambitious, meticulously researched monograph on American-Russian cultural relations, a book that embraces the multitudinous attempts Americans have made to shape Russia through religious, political, journalistic, popular and other influences since the 1880s. The book is crowded with compelling examples from both Russian and American sources, and shows an undeniable sense of missionary entitlement throughout the past 125 years.

Foglesong makes two major arguments through this work. He suggests, first of all, that beginning with the efforts of the senior George Kennan in the 1880s, Americans have exerted a concerted effort to recreate Russia in their image, as part of a larger missionary project that the United States and its citizens carried out around the world beginning in the late 19th century, from Japan to Nicaragua. Here, he succeeds in placing the anti-Communist framework through which this relationship has been seen for much of its recent history, and especially in the Cold War, within the larger swath of an American program in which Russia was just one of many “targets.” In this, he contextualizes the American role in Russia as part of a much bigger missionary thrust.
Second, the author points out that despite the universality of the American impulse to transform Russia, the relationship also had its singular aspects. Americans, including diplomats, evangelists, efficiency experts, and Cold War mongers, have felt uniquely compelled to remake Russia. Other scholars, such as Norman E. Saul, Michael Cassella-Blackburn, Gregory Mitrovich, and David C. Engerman, have revealed these transformative impulses in their work as well.¹ But Foglesong is the first to put the phenomenon in a fully long-term perspective.

Foglesong also takes a different tack from Engerman, with whom his work will likely be closely compared. Engerman’s recent study explores most closely the years before World War II, and emphasizes the way in which Americans romanticized industrial development for Russia, regardless of its human costs. Foglesong’s work focuses more on the American missionary impulse, the desire to transform Russia culturally and politically, and is less interested in economic developments.² While Engerman sees among American engineers and other social scientists a brand of Victorian progressive thinking that saw Russians as fit for the universal modernization project, Foglesong identifies a particularly Russian-flavored approach among his missionizers. In his view, even though Russia served as just one of many desired ornaments on a broad missionary tree in this era, it also had its own special qualities that made it an especially strong prospect to emulate the United States. Foglesong emphasizes the notion of Russia as an American doppelgänger with its frontier, its revolutionary heritage, and its vastness, among other qualities. Thus rather than simply Westernizing, Foglesong suggests, Americans in their “fascination” with Russia believed that country had a duty to be like them: its “true destiny was to be a democracy like the United States” (6, 59).

As such an “imaginary twin,” Russia served as a useful foil for American self-definition. Besides looking at the Russian and Soviet peoples as amenable to reforms through the assistance that Radio Liberty, American Protestantism, or democratic elections might give them, Foglesong suggests, both U.S. officials and the American people saw Russia as “a screen on which Americans projected their hopes and fears” (62). (The book, by the way, has wonderful cartoons and other illustrations to illuminate such thinking.) It was the United States’ “dark double”: the totalitarian, controlling, oppressive other against which Americans could contrast their virtues (6). Thus, maintaining non-recognition of the Communist state in the 1920s was “gratifying” for Washington’s “righteous honor” (77). What Foglesong doesn’t mention was that this stance was increasingly meaningless as greater and greater trade burgeoned in that decade, facilitated by U.S.-approved credits

¹ Norman E. Saul, Friends or Foes: The United States and Russia, 1921-1941 (Lawrence, KS, 2006); Michael Cassella Blackburn, The Donkey, the Carrot, and the Club: William Bullitt and Soviet-American Relations, 1917-1948 (Westport, CT, 2004); Gregory Mitrovich, Undermining the Kremlin: America’s Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947-1956 (Chapel Hill, 2003); David C. Engerman, Modernization from The Other Shore: American intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development (Cambridge, 2003).

² David C. Engerman, Modernization from the other shore. American intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development (Cambridge, 2003)
and loans; one of the book's weaknesses is the limited attention it devotes to economic developments between the two nations.

Foglesong’s work is compelling, however, in its emphasis on religious efforts to transform Russia. He pays close attention to crusading members of the Protestant tribe, including Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, and Pentecostals who went to Russia over the course of the 20th century. Bashing Orthodoxy themselves, they saw the early Bolsheviks’ own attack on Russia’s church as their opportunity. On this topic, Foglesong’s discussion of World War II is especially compelling, as he notes the way in which Russian “redemption” seemed increasingly likely as Stalin at last legitimized Orthodoxy to build a stronger patriotism, and further welcomed American films and other Western cultural productions. Yet as Foglesong points out, this was short lived; Orthodox leaders were “timid” and did not push for significant openness beyond their allotted portion (p 92). The temples of atheism would return. Foglesong notes as well the way in which Soviet leaders saw the importance of American industrial imports in this era, including not only the plentiful piles of Lend Lease but also the earlier pattern of trade which Soviets hoped to expand in the war; they “admired advanced American technology” (98). This is a rather tepid assertion, though, considering the risks Soviet agents took with their own citizens, and sympathetic Americans like the Rosenbergs and Harry Gold, to obtain such technology during the war. But Foglesong doesn’t mention the espionage story, or any of the secret side of the Soviet search for technology in World War II, which is surprising for an author who made much of intelligence work in the First World War in his earlier book.3

The early Cold War may seem to be the time when Americans were most compelled to “liberate” Russia, and Foglesong affirms this. More interestingly, though, he shows the variety of views in this effort. George Kennan the Younger, for instance, thought Americans needed to cultivate more “spiritual distinction” and snap their “shackles of disunity, confusion, and doubt” before they could hope to influence change in Russia (124). James Burnham, on the other hand, thought such a reflective approach dangerously defeatist. Even as Washington beamed in subversive, anticommunist radio programs (often jammed), many Americans in the 1950s questioned whether the Soviets wanted America style capitalism, or even whether they were at heart protestors against their fate; instead, as Engerman has shown as well, there were longstanding notions of Russian passivity which seemed to preclude their challenging the status quo.4 Rather than count on the Russian people to bring about change, then, after disastrous U.S.-sponsored incursions to rollback communism in places like Albania it seemed that only the forces of the Soviet military, suitably enlightened, could do any such thing. With Stalin’s death and the end of the Korean War, a prosaic Eisenhower ushered in a more gradual approach, even with the brinksmanship like Dulles at his side. With the Voice of America and Radio Liberty continuing, often ineffectually, “liberation” shifted to “liberalization” (139). Thus, Eisenhower stood by


as Hungary exploded and as irresponsible radio journalists sent unfilled promises, although in more distant parts of the world, he was only too eager to support unwise liberation projects that later called forth millions of American troops.

One of the difficulties that Foglesong must wrestle with is the very issue of passivity. How much did Russians want to be “liberated” from their oppressive regime? During the Brezhnev Era—known in Gorbachev’s time as the “era of stagnation”—Foglesong argues that Soviet citizens in fact only rarely wanted “spiritual liberation from Communism.” Instead, they appreciated the “stability, security, and national pride” their strengthened nation gave them (158). But at the same time, as Vaclav Havel has shown, Czechoslovaks and others were inspired by the Helsinki Accords to call their government to account in the Charter 77 proclamation of January 1977, a declaration instigated by the Prague regime’s arrests of the band Plastic People of the Universe.\(^5\) So — which is it? Did Communist peoples want to be liberated, or not? Clearly, something was happening on both sides in this “stagnant” era, as underlined by Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s being summarily bounced from, and then begged back, to the White House between the Ford and Carter Administrations. Foglesong suggests the Russians weren’t getting restless, but the brave words of their neighbors under equally oppressed circumstances suggest the seeds were there for change.

The impact of American missionary activity in undermining the Soviet sphere remains highly controversial. Scholars like John Lewis Gaddis have given Ronald Reagan full credit for “spooking the Soviets” into change in the 1980s.\(^6\) From a somewhat different perspective, Foglesong also offers a positive portrait of Ronald Reagan, building on the message of Michael Schaller that Reagan was “creative” in his approach to the Gorbachev ascendancy.\(^7\) But unlike Gaddis, he does not see “hanging tough” as the root of Reagan’s effectiveness. Rather, it was the President’s gentlemanly restraint from force that gave the General Secretary the room to “take the risk of launching a destabilizing restructuring of the Soviet system” (195). Of course, there was no shortage of fire and brimstone, as Foglesong shows with his compelling portrayal of Reagan’s religious upbringing in the Disciples of Christ and his sense of missionary responsibility. Chernenko’s Russia, too, served Reagan’s goal of revitalizing the United States as it emerged from the crisis of confidence exemplified by Vietnam, Watergate, and Carter’s “malaise” speech of 1979. But as he notes, unlike the true hardliners, Reagan wanted cultural and scientific exchanges with Russia, and enhanced chances for peace.

While not triumphalist, Foglesong’s portrait of Reagan is certainly revisionist. He is suggesting that the American mission was appropriately applied in the 1980s, even though

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the title of his book, with the “Evil Empire” in quotation marks, would seem to suggest the problematic nature of such a crusade. What distinguished the “genial” Ronald Reagan from a hardliner like the “crewcut” Pat Buchanan, when both men loved Barry Goldwater and Buchanan, of course, served in Reagan’s administration during its early years (176, 136)? Perhaps the timing is key — Reagan by 1985 saw the opportunity in Gorbachev that hostile observers like Buchanan were less likely to. Even earlier, as Foglesong shows, the President was only a reluctant cold warrior. Perhaps more interesting, though, is what distinguishes Reagan’s success from the “failed crusade” of his successors.8

It is always risky to write about the very recent past, and the last decade and a half of Russian-American relations are a minefield to be sure. We need only to look at Strobe Talbott’s optimistic appraisal, indeed, forecast, of an “acceleration in... positive trends” in the Russian-American relationship, circa 2002, to see the follies of contemporary history.9 How can one avoid such slippery judgments in a fast-changing political climate? Foglesong’s recent coverage is plagued by the same sort of difficulties, but he gamely soldiers on. These are important issues to wrestle with, so his temerity is to be commended, even if he occasionally slips into the quicksand himself. Like Stephen F. Cohen’s, his portrayal of the 1990s is a negative one: an era, he says, that was riddled with “unrealistic hopes, exaggerated fears” (198). He writes, for instance, that “liberal universalists” were wrong to think most Russians wanted to stop the right-wing coup that nearly overthrew Yeltsin (197). Yet despite the evidence of wide support for Soviet hardliners, he also suggests this was an era when Russia was “most open to American advice and influence,” and that the United States could have been more effectively “promoting American values” at this time—if only done properly. Like Cohen, he sees a terrible mistake made in the 1990s and its too zealous effort to force Russia into “some replica of America.”10 The timing must have seemed right; Boris Yeltsin, after all, was thrilled with what he saw in a Texas supermarket and longed to bring such goodies to Russia. This thinking, Cohen argues, led Americans to support Yeltsin even as he became increasingly unpopular with his reforms that seemed to only benefit a few; the resulting anti-Americanist sentiments set the stage for Putin’s “regressive” rule.11 Foglesong would agree. While arguing for the amenability of Russia to American influence, he suggests that the wrong kind of pressure was applied. An unsubtle push for market reforms forced unpleasant economic measures on the post-Soviet Russians, even as a dizzy post-Cold War euphoria led the West to build up NATO at Russia’s expense—both efforts inspiring a hardline reaction against Westernizing change in the former Soviet Union, driven not only by conservative Communists but by the Orthodox Church, alarmed by the planeloads of proselytizing Protestants. With Russians dying earlier and earlier and their bank accounts shrinking as oligarchs partied, both Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton stood by Yeltsin, and thus blew the chances of a more lasting American influence. As he attacks both

9 Talbott, 421.
10 Cohen, xii.
11 Cohen, 186.
of these former occupants of the Oval Office for pressing a particularly oppressive kind of Westernization, Foglesong is also sharply critical of President George W. Bush for giving up on any transformation: “I don’t expect Russia to look like the United States,” said the president in 2006 (qtd. on p. 224), a view Foglesong finds “excessive” in its negativity (218). Yet when another George (the late Kennan) said “let Russians ‘be Russians’” in the 1950s, Foglesong found this “sage” advice, and indeed, it was (124). One might wish Bush II had harbored more of such ideas in Iraq!

When the present Bush Administration is not abdicating a responsibility to help Russia, Foglesong asserts, its leadership is making criticisms of the Putin regime that are “galling” in their “blatant hypocrisy” and thus driving the Russian president to be “outspokenly defiant” (227). But if it’s wrong to do nothing, and it’s hypocritical to attack, this seems to leaves only warm and involved relations as an option, but there are difficulties here as well. How to work with a regime that exports particles of Polonium 210 on British planes to silence critics and inflicts cosmetic terrorism on Ukrainian opponents? Strikingly, Foglesong finds Western coverage of the death of journalist Aleksandr Litvinenko and the treatment of Ukrainian opposition politician Viktor Yushchenko unnecessarily “vituperative” and representative of a “demonization of Putin” (226). His readers may disagree.

In the last three years, trade between the United States and Russia has surpassed U.S. exports to Costa Rica, one indicator that things may not be all bad. Nevertheless, as Council of Foreign Relations fellow Stephen Sestanovich’s recent testimony to the U.S. Congress suggests, US-Russian relations in most other matters have gotten markedly worse since 2005.12 From the other side, Mikhail Margelov, the head of the Russian Federation Council’s International Affairs Committee, sounded very much like the herald of a new Cold War in comments just six weeks ago, despite his pooh-poohing of just such a development. To him and to his government, he declared, if “the West continues 'advancing democracy' towards the Russian borders...the language of interests unfortunately indicates that this all looks very much like an 'encirclement.'”13 Margelov’s dark mutterings make Foglesong’s book all the more compelling right now. Despite its sometimes questionable coverage of the most recent aspects of the relationship, this tightly written, richly researched work makes a strong case for what evangelist Sherwood Eddy noted in 75 years ago: “For good or evil, Russia matters profoundly” (qtd on p. 81.)