The study of the Russian-American mutual perceptions has always attracted researchers on both sides of the Atlantic. For a historian, this is a promising subject and challenging as well. The challenge is particularly obvious when dealing with generalizations over large periods of time. There is always the danger of giving in to the existing stereotypes and academic trends, there is the problem of integrating one’s own stance with a large body of influential scholarship drawing on substantial sources. Finally, it is crucial that one’s evaluations remain impartial regardless of the changing “climate” of the Russian-American relations which might sometimes prompt researchers both in Russia and in the US to self-censorship.

David Foglesong’s book offers an example of successfully overcoming the dangers inherent in carrying out such research. This book dwells on the American attempts, beginning in the 1880s and up till now, to export their own symbols of political and religious beliefs, technological innovations and economic theories, mass culture products, and, once, a military invasion as part of their peculiar crusade to rebirth the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet Russia. Foglesong focuses on “the new messianic idea” which is
linked with the way Russia’s modernization prospects are viewed in the US. This idea is integrated into America’s global mission to reform the world. It has become the projection of Americans’ ideological fervor, economic ambitions, political idealism, religious inspiration, and philanthropic altruism. This book, therefore, does not focus exclusively on the way Americans used to think about Russia and on the way they think about it today. This book also describes Americans’ self-representations, and demonstrates how a demonized Russia serves to revitalize the American nationalism, and how the Russian “Other” was used, in part, to construct the American “Self.”

To achieve his goals, Foglesong uses a broad range of verbal and graphic sources from the American press. He also draws on many new sources from archival collections which help him to illustrate the moods of people involved in various private and public missions to revive and renovate Russia. And, last but not least, Foglesong also offers his own interpretations of previously studied sources. Naturally, the book has a large cast of characters, from presidents, state secretaries, ambassadors, experts on “the Russian question” to journalists, media personalities, missionaries, businessmen, workers, engineers, public figures, Russian émigrés who helped shape the idea of Americans’ special responsibility for carrying out reforms in Russia and who viewed the relations between the two countries within such binary oppositions as “Light and Darkness,” “Civilization and Barbarity,” “Modernity and the Middle ages,” “Democracy and Authoritarianism,” “Freedom and Slavery,” “the West and Asia/the Orient.”

The book has a logical and well thought-through structure which draws particular attention to the specific cycles of “hopes and disappointments” Americans have been experiencing for more than a century as they considered the prospects of Russia’s democratization. Americans embarked on a peculiar crusade to renovate Russia because they were influenced by the ideas of universal liberalism and by the false illusions that Russians desired to embrace the American model and hoped for help from the US. The result was the Americans’ frustration with the issues of yet another stage of Russia’s modernization and their plunge from the euphoria of universalism into the Russophobia and pessimism. As Foglesong justly remarks, the demonization of Russia and the upsurge of the crusading moods coincided with the social and cultural crises in the American society and helped uphold the Americans’ faith in the unique advantages of the United States. For instance, this occurred at the turn of the 20th century when industrialization challenged the American dream, when the mass immigration threatened the national identity, when the decline in interest in the issues of faith and the demoralizing materialism prompted grave concerns on the part of religious and public figures who viewed it as the destruction of the very foundation of the American way of life. At the same time, the discrimination against Native Americans, African Americans, the Chinese immigrants discredited the American right to spread democratic values throughout the world (11-12). Another example was the late 1970s when the conservatives demonized the Soviet Union against the backdrop of the identity crisis brought on by the Vietnam syndrome, as the economy stagnated, as respect for the Presidency declined, as the youth culture and the feminist movement proposed their own challenges, and liberal activists did their utmost fighting for human rights in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Europe (150-156, 167, 170-171).
Foglesong is the first historian to attempt to gauge the importance of religion in constructing the image of Russia in the US. He constantly addresses the features of Americans’ religious beliefs thereby demonstrating the contribution made to the messianic moods in the American society by the Christian upbringing and faith of the missionaries, of the activists fighting for human rights, of the influential diplomats, of the political leaders who strengthened the belief that it was necessary to provide real help in solving Russia’s problems. The Manichean concept which divided the world into the kingdoms of Darkness and Light was particularly influential in shaping the idea of Russia as the Empire of Darkness, the demonic “Other” contrasted with the American “Self.” It also helped shape the idea of Russians viewing America as the source of light. American political cartoons serve as a fine confirmation of David Foglesong’s ideas. During the entire 20th century, American cartoonists invariably employed the images of Darkness and Light as their principal communicative strategy to encode the public opinion.

Foglesong’s emphasis on the religious factor allows for a more subtle explanation of the changes in Americans’ perception of events across the Atlantic. He elaborates on, and refines the description of the initiatives of George Kennan and other “crusaders” at the turn of the 20th century (15-16, 23-25). Foglesong draws special attention to the American missionaries and their role in spreading false illusions during the Russian revolution of 1917, in shaping the image of the Bolsheviks as the hostile “Aliens” for Russia and Russians, and in confirming the need for an American military intervention to save democracy in Russia (35-38, 52, 55). Following Bertrand Patenaude, Foglesong emphasizes the religious missionary zeal of the American Relief Administration during the hunger in the Volga region (65). The author traces the link between the persecution of the Protestant church in 1929 after failure of the messianic project to convert Russian believers and priests to Protestantism on the one hand, and the demonized image of the Soviet Russia on the other (71). Of particular interest is Foglesong’s remark that at the time of the Grand Alliance 1941-1945, “popular magazines and many religious periodicals expressed great enthusiasm about spiritual revival in Russia that was expected to have profound significance for the postwar world, and to create opportunity for Americans to assist a broader regeneration of Russia” (83). In contrast with the traditional disregard for the role religion played in shaping the Americans’ perception of the Soviet Union during World War II, Foglesong considers the special significance of various Evangelical missions for spreading unrealistic expectations concerning reforming Stalin’s regime. When these expectations were dashed the Cold War hostilities increased. Giving credit to George Frost Kennan’s realistic outlook, Foglesong, nevertheless, stresses that Kennan “was squarely within the mainstream of American Christian hopes for a religious reformation of Russia” since “religion was central and persistent element in Kennan’s thinking about the possibility of liberating Russia from Stalinism” (92, 115). Finally, Foglesong thinks that Russia’s spiritual revival was the key element in Ronald Reagan’s view of the Soviet Union manifested in his famous statement about the Evil Empire and in his belief in America’s special mission (190, 193).

What then, according to Foglesong, improved Russia’s image? It could be hopes for entering Russia’s gigantic market which put both political arguments and ideological
ambitions on the back burner. It could be liberal Protestants’ belief that communists were the bearers of the Social Gospel. However, American Russophiles should be largely credited with adjusting Russia’s image. They viewed Russia as the different country, they exhibited a special attitude to the Russian spirituality and national character, and envisioned a very slow and gradual modernization process. The standoff between Russophiles and “crusaders” is David Foglesong’s most intriguing line of inquiry. The Russophiles spoke of Russia’s own way of development, they did not dream of creating the United States of Russia, and they considered the ruler and the people as a unified whole. The “crusaders” considered it a matter of principle to separate these two images and to add a certain Romantic allure to the latter one which helped overcome doubts in the Russian national character¹ and strengthened the conviction that the crusade for a free Russia was a necessity. David Foglesong shows that those who, unlike the Russophiles, depicted Russians as awaiting help in their liberalization from across the ocean, felt it necessary to include the development of the Russian nation into the universal modernization process and to discover the sources of democracy in Russia’s historical past (be it mir or the Novgorod veche). They also sought to emphasize the non-Russianness of the Romanov dynasty (Woodrow Wilson’s opinion), to separate the image of a cosmopolitan Russian people capable of self-government from the image of the xenophobic Kremlin obstructing the country’s Westernization (the Cold War trends) (112). Although this seems to me to be a slight simplification reducing the wide range of evaluations to two basic approaches (“crusaders” vs. Russophiles, or liberals/universalists/optimists vs. conservatives/Russophobes/pessimists), it is nonetheless valid and extremely useful as an analysis tool. This antithesis allows us to grasp the essence of long-standing American myths of Russia, which stood in the way of soberly evaluating both the events within Russia and the prospects of its modernization. One can but agree with Foglesong that this phenomenon is best explained by the Americans’ desire to ground their vision in wishful thinking. At the same time, since the end of the 19th century, the liberals, the radicals, the conservatives, the Russophiles and the Russophobes discussed the American development model using Russia as the “Other.” They were also heavily influenced by the American social and cultural context. There was a surprising continuity in the perception of Tsarist Russia, Soviet Russia, and post-Soviet Russia.² When explaining the Americans’ attitude to the revolutionary Russia of 1917, to the Soviet Russia between the wars, at the time of the Grand Alliance and of the Cold War, and to today’s Russia, David Foglesong correctly draws upon both the realities of today and on the long-standing trends in representing Russia and Russians in the US.

His central tenet is that since the end of the 19th century, Russia has assumed the role of America’s “dark twin” distracting Americans from their own problems. This claim is not

¹ The notion of a national character had the crucial role in Americans’ perception of Russia. See David C. Engerman, Modernization From the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development (Cambridge, 2003).

² For more corroboration, see, for instance, a selection of cartoons in David S. Foglesong and Victoria I. Zhuravleva, «Konstruirovanie obraza Rossi v amerikanskih politicheskikh karikaturah XX veka» in Rossia i SShA na Stranitsah Russkoi iAmerikanskoi Periodiki (Moskva, 2008).
only convincing but also important for understanding the image of Putin’s Russia. It seems to me, however, that the glass house metaphor has been a staple of American discourse about Russia as a whole and of the “crusading” discourse in particular. I could refer, for instance, to the members of the Society of the American Friends of Russian Freedom doubting their right to criticize the evils in Russia when Russians could form their own societies to defend the rights of African Americans, Native Americans and Chinese immigrants.3 I could refer to Lillian Wald’s remarks on the members of the settlement-house movement being mindful of the mission to harmonize both American and Russian societies.4 This is an important nuance worth additional attention. At the same time, there can be no arguing against Foglesong’s thesis that drawing comparisons between Russia and the United States allowed Americans to persevere in their belief that whatever “growing pains” the American society might be suffering from, the treatment was predictable, non-violent, and it merely returned the society into the state of balance it had temporarily lost.

Several key ideas are traced throughout The American Mission although not all of them receive equally thorough treatment in various time periods. For instance, the role of Russian émigrés as the carriers of the negative image of the country they had left is represented in more detail after the revolution of 1917. However, the mass immigration at the turn of the 20th century which involved mostly ethnic and religious minorities contributed significantly to the demonization of the image of the Russian Empire and to upholding the messianic moods in the American society. Foglesong draws a parallel between the Russian revolutionaries and the Soviet dissidents and emphasizes that both viewed Western criticism as a catalyst for reform. Yet Russian pre-revolutionary radicals and liberals, like Soviet Cold War dissidents, put a lot of fuel into the fire of American universal liberalism. Foglesong pays special attention to the influence that stereotypes and peculiar cycles of “hopes and disappointments” had on the academic research in the US in the 1990s. However, this was characteristic of other periods, too. For an example, one might turn to American historian Thomas A. Bailey’s classical work.5 Interesting analogies are gleaned from comparing Bolshevism and religion (61). This idea appeared even before the 1917 revolution, influenced to some degree by A. Leroy-Beaulieu, a French intellectual whose authority in “the Russian question” was recognized in both Europe and the US. He explained the spread of the revolutionary ideas in Russia by the fact that a large portion of the population had lost its religious faith. Consequently, belief in the revolutionary utopia was substituted for Christian faith, and nihilism became the Russian people’s New Gospel. Foglesong emphasizes the role of marriages between Jewish women with radical beliefs

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5 For instance, the inside cover features an illustration from George Kennan, Siberia and the Exile System; political prisoners in the tsarist prisons are compared to the Communists’ prisoners (note on p. 129); 138-139 say: “In the armed forces from 1894 to 1902 there were more than a half-dozen notorious cases of corruption or selling secrets to foreign powers. (Some of these affairs foreshadow the Soviet purge trials of the 1930’s)” in Thomas A. Bailey, America Faces Russia: Russian-American Relations From Early Times to Our Day (Ithaca, 1950).
and Anglo-Saxon Protestant men; this idea is promising, but it would be equally interesting to trace the influence of marriages between Russians and Americans who took an active part in shaping the discourse on Russia in the US, be they Gordon Wasson mentioned by Foglesong (121), or Edmund Noble married to Lydia Lvovna Pimenova.

I am sure that scholars studying the images of Russian-American relations could make various remarks and observation concerning some periods discussed in the book since this highly professional, insightful, and sometimes provocative text prompts serious reflection and stimulates re-considering the process of constructing Russia’s image in the US in historical perspective. This is the book’s principal merit. I would like to draw attention to just one thing. Upon reading the book, one gets the impression that the Russian/Soviet/post-Soviet reality had a rather tangential effect on the American perception of Russia. A myth, however, cannot survive without feeding off reality. It is a different matter, of course, that reality is far more diverse and variegated than its negative or positive components hyperbolized and used for stereotyping an image.6

In the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian “Other” plays a far less significant role in shaping American identity, and the idea of a “crusade” doesn’t resonate as widely in the American society. Nevertheless, Foglesong states that leading American politicians, journalists, intellectuals “seem to have felt that it was vital to affirm America’s mission in the world through rhetorical commitment to a free Russia” (222). Moreover, the image of Russia as a disciple is still significant, and as the disciple’s education progresses, the similarity with the US should increase. However, the idea of a discipleship implies inequality and thus clashes with the idea of Russia as a world power. Pessimists in the US and in the West in general subject Vladimir Putin’s government to increasingly severe criticisms claiming that Russia as a disciple failed in one specific key domain, that of democracy, individual rights and freedoms. These criticisms are not groundless, and they nourish the American myths of Russia and help revitalize them. Yet today, as in the past, the Russian reality is an intricate interweaving of a great number of negative and positive trends, and comprehending Russia by means of bipolar evaluations, rigid transitional paradigms and messianic moralizing provokes a backlash and accusations of hypocrisy and double standards leveled at American leaders as the war in Iraq continues, NATO expands, and the US carries out its policies in the former Soviet republics.

*Time* magazine named Vladimir Putin person of the year stating that “with an iron will--and at significant cost to the principles that free nations prize--Putin has brought Russia back as a world power.” This event (in the past, Stalin was named person of the year twice) and comments in the American press confirm David Foglesong’s principal conclusions—be it Richard Stengel talking about the Soviet Union as the “dark twin” of the US; be it Simon Montefiore describing Putin as a person whose leadership manifests the heritage of the Russian tsars and the Soviet Secretaries General and, most importantly, the heritage of

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Joseph Stalin spiced with nationalistic populism; be it Nathan Thornburgh declaring that Putin’s foreign policy perceived in the West as a threat, and his domestic policy viewed as suppressing democracy in Russia enjoy full support of the Russian people. Influential American politicians with a realistic outlook, for instance, Henry Kissinger still speak up claiming that “America must not confuse foreign policy towards Russia with seeking to prescribe historical processes. It is important to get our priorities right. Restructuring the domestic situation of Russia cannot be achieved by American designs — particularly in the short term. Russia is a vast country adjoining China, the Islamic world and Europe. Cooperative relations with it are important for peace and global solutions...And we need some understanding for the adjustments required by a country in a period of transition... The idea that America has the power to change Russia’s domestic structure by threats is an invitation to permanent crisis.”

In the 21st century, the American debate on the prospects of modernizing Russia and on the Americans’ role in this process is still going strong even though it began more than a century ago. This is why David Foglesong’s book aimed at elucidating the mechanisms of misrepresentations which threaten both Russian-American relations and the world security as a whole is of equal importance for the academic community and for the policy makers in both Russia and the United States.

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