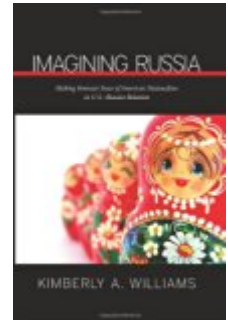


Kimberly A. Williams. *Imagining Russia: Making Feminist Sense of American Nationalism in U.S.-Russian Relations.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. xii + 287 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-3975-4.



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Imagining Russia by Kimberly A. Williams, an assistant professor of Women's Studies at Mount Royal University, is a well-crafted multidisciplinary gender critique of American nationalism as it relates to U.S.-Russian relations between the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 and the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. Using feminist and queer theories and masculinity studies as her analytical frameworks in five case studies, Williams reveals how a diverse array of Americans—from members of Congress and foreign intelligence officers to advertisers, matchmaking agencies, filmmakers, and television writers—came to produce gendered, racialized, and heteronormative narratives about Russia. She also details a number of the effects these narratives had on U.S. policy toward Russia during this period. However, while she is critical of U.S. foreign policy, Williams acknowledges that American policymakers are not fully “or even predominantly” to blame for Russia's socioeconomic and political problems during the 1990s (p. 171).

In the introduction, Williams analyzes a Diesel Jeans advertisement, in which a cowboy in unzipped jeans appears to have been pleased by *matryoshka* (nesting) dolls. The ad, she argues, illustrates the existence of gendered narratives about Russia that reflect a dominant form of American nationalism. This brand of nationalism combines notions of manliness, white supremacy, exceptionalism, and civilization. Furthermore, it helps to perpetuate a triumphalist attitude about “winning” the Cold War and legitimizes a militaristic, unilateral approach to foreign relations. Embracing this mind-set, U.S. officials caused further strains in their country's relations with Russia by supporting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion eastward and leading the 1999 NATO-sponsored war against Serbia, Russia's ally.

Williams effectively uses two case studies to illustrate specifically how widespread neocolonial, paternalistic, and chauvinistic views among members of Congress influenced U.S. policy toward Russia. Her analysis of government docu-

ments sheds light on why U.S. policymakers chose to advocate unilateralism. In the first case, featured in chapter 2, Williams identifies five Russian “imaginaries,” or constructs, that lawmakers implicitly relied on in drafting the 1992 Freedom Support Act (FSA). The imaginaries include “Russia as a helpless child; Russia as an eager student; Russia as an untamed frontier; Russia as a pathologically ill patient; and Russia as a potentially threatening, retrogressive, and obstructive *baba* [old woman]” (p. 41). Conversely, U.S. lawmakers imagined their country as a benevolent and white (Western) father who also served as doctor and tutor. The FSA aimed to help Russia democratize and create a market economy, but, according to the author, contributed—among other factors—to the undermining of its fledgling democracy and civil society.

The other case study of congressional behavior, appearing in chapter 4, analyzes two simultaneous hearings in 1998-99, where lawmakers drew from these same constructs. In one set of hearings about a bill concerning human trafficking (the future Trafficking Victims Protection Act), legislators “relied on a heteropatriarchal anti-trafficking narrative that required the rescue of victimized Russian women from criminal networks” (p. 107). In the other set of hearings, initiated by Republicans, legislators debated why U.S. government-funded programs in Russia, which the Bill Clinton administration had backed, failed to meet their intended goals and why U.S.-Russian relations had soured. Williams argues that, however well-intentioned they may have been, lawmakers in both venues used rhetoric about Russian trafficking victims in focusing blame on Russian male political elites and law enforcement authorities for harming both anti-trafficking efforts and U.S.-Russian relations. This use of a “gendered Russian imaginary,” she concludes, “led to the discursive revictimization within U.S. anti-trafficking discourse of the very bodies U.S. policymakers aimed to rescue and protect” (p. 106).

The remaining three case studies further elucidate the social and cultural context shaping Americans’ gendered attitudes about Russia. In chapter 3, Williams explores how the Anastasia myth, a fictional narrative about how Tsar Nicholas II’s youngest daughter survived the Bolsheviks’ 1918 assassination of her family, has endured in the American psyche. Americans’ fascination with imperial nostalgia and the myth, Williams shows, was skillfully exploited by Twentieth Century Fox, in its popular 1997 film *Anastasia*, and by a matchmaking agency, Anastasia International, which arranged trips for American men to Russia and Ukraine with the purpose of meeting future wives. The portrayal of Russian women as helpless princesses who needed to be saved from corrupt Russian men illustrates the “importance of virile masculinity to triumphalist American nationalism” (p. 68). This affected foreign policy, as Williams notes; the Clinton doctrine, which emphasized “the patriarchal United States’ ability to assist a nascent Russia,” involved sending to Russia consultants like Jeffrey Sachs, whose neoliberal agenda further jeopardized Russia’s economic recovery (p. 84).

In chapter 5, Williams examines how the writers of the hit television series *The West Wing* portrayed Russia as a potentially threatening and feminized Other. Their main method, she explains, was to use particular characters, such as a Russian female ambassador with femme-fatale qualities, as stand-ins for the country. Based on a content analysis of three episodes, Williams concludes that the fictionalized narrative about U.S.-Russian relations in the show “not only justifies continued U.S. suspicion of a feminized Russia, but also legitimates the cold-war mentality with which U.S. policymakers, both fictional and non-fictional, continue to formulate and enact U.S. Russia policy in the post-Soviet era” (p. 145).

In the final case study, outlined in chapter 6, Williams tours a site of public pedagogy, the popular International Spy Museum (ISM) in Washing-

ton DC, which is privately owned and operated. While claiming to be apolitical, the content producers—who include former U.S. intelligence officers—are actually promoting U.S. Cold War triumphalism and avoiding critical assessments of U.S. intelligence history, she asserts. For example, the exhibit on the Ethel and Julius Rosenberg spy case downplays its controversies, with only a superficial mention of McCarthyism. In particular, Ethel is framed as a threat to American family life for violating Cold War-era standards of domesticity. Williams argues that the museum’s curators validate the U.S. role in waging the War on Terror, based at least partly on their triumphalist narrative about how the United States came to win the Cold War.

In her discussion of U.S.-Russian relations after 2003, Williams characterizes the rivalry between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President George W. Bush as a clash of “competing masculinities,” mirroring the growing tensions between the two countries (p. 185). In contrast, relations between Putin’s erstwhile successor, Dmitry Medvedev, and U.S. President Barack Obama, who talked of resetting America’s relations with Russia, appeared to be less gendered (however, with Putin back in the Kremlin, this dynamic is now history).

Overall, Williams persuasively argues that American rhetorical strategies concerning Russia “overtly manipulated U.S. cold-war-era paranoia about Soviet expansionism and the infiltration of communism to fuel an American cultural imaginary of Russia as—still—an obstructive and backward *baba* against which the militarized, masculine United States must continue to protect itself” (p. 183). In supporting her arguments, she analyzes, in thought-provoking ways, a diverse collection of texts. The appendices, which include a timeline of key dates in U.S.-Russian relations and three tables summarizing congressional committee meetings concerning Russia, help readers nav-

igate through her detailed comments in chapters 2 and 4.

My criticisms of the book largely concern ways in which she could have broadened the evidence base and strengthened her comparative perspective. In the congressional case studies, her arguments would have benefited from the addition of interviews with legislators or staffers. For example, ascertaining whether any female members of Congress or their staffers held opinions that diverged from the Russian imaginaries would have shed further light on the construction of Russian imaginaries. She might also have interviewed the curators of the ISM, in order to interrogate their views on Russia and the Cold War. In addition, she could have addressed the issue of whether American attitudes about Russia are *sui generis* or resemble those found in other Western countries, such as Germany, which also provided a significant amount of assistance to Russia during the 1990s. Lastly, I noticed some factual errors concerning the ISM. For example, the ISM does not own the desk of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police, as Williams notes (p. 164); in reality, Dzerzhinsky’s desk is housed in the KGB/FSB’s (Federal Security Service’s) Moscow-based museum, which promotes its own brand of Cold War triumphalism. Also, Williams refers to Dzerzhinsky as chief of the NKVD and as a participant in Joseph Stalin’s purges (p. 165). In fact, the secret police did not come to be called the NKVD until 1934, well after Dzerzhinsky’s death in 1926—a year that also precedes Stalin’s time in power and his campaigns of terror.

These complaints aside, I found that *Imagining Russia* contributes meaningfully to our understanding of how popular perceptions about countries are formed and how they shape foreign policy decisions. Most notably, it adds to the scholarship on the cultural and ideational dimensions of international relations, which is a necessary complement to the large body of work on materialist

approaches to the discipline. It would be a suitable text for undergraduate or graduate courses on feminist theory, international relations, and U.S. foreign policy.

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