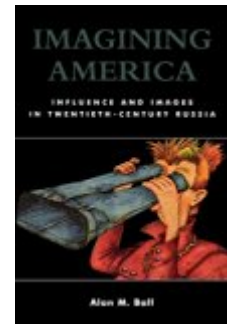


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Alan M. Ball. *Imagining America: Influence and Images in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003. ix + 309 pp. \$102.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-2792-8; \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-2793-5.

Reviewed by Burcak Keskin (Department of Sociology, University of Michigan-Ann Arbor)
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Neither with nor without the American Expertise: Russian Ideas of Development in the Twentieth Century

Neither With nor Without the American Expertise:
Russian Ideas of Development in the Twentieth Century

>From its beginning to its end, the twentieth century was characterized by an antagonistic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union—or, so the conventional text-books and the numerous action movies have told us. Alan M. Ball's *Imagining America* vividly narrates the multi-faceted story that such sources usually leave out. Focusing primarily on the early-twentieth century and the post-1989 period, Ball explores how and why Russians from all walks of life both admired and shunned American technology, industrial progress, and life-styles. He examines the growth and the transformation of this double bind through the circulation of American movies, jazz, architectural designs, tractors, and immigrant narratives in Russia.

The book is divided into two parts. The first five chapters elaborate how American artifacts and styles shaped the ideas and the hopes of the Russian elites, city-dwellers, and peasants at the turn of the century. For example, Ball asserts that the Bolshevik cadres turned to the American work ethic and techniques with the intention of creating a more robust and egalitarian Russian/communist alternative. The elites were fully aware that the American model was imbued with racism and capitalist exploitation of labor, but the motto of the day—"to catch and to surpass" the West—enabled them to adopt and to denounce the American ways at the same time (pp. 145-173).

The Russian masses on the other hand construed their images of America through their encounters with the imported artifacts, artistic styles, and immigrant narratives. Interestingly, the accessibility to such sources was shaped along class lines. Whereas the tractors and letters from emigrants brought the American dream to the Russian village, it was jazz music and Hollywood movies that stirred the interest of Russian city-dwellers. Eventually, the Bolshevik administrators and intellectuals grew uncomfortable with the increasing appeal of the American ethos among the popular masses. To sustain the critical approach to the American ways, they either banned or co-opted the imported techniques, leading to the emergence of peculiarly Russian styles in both arts and industry.

The second part of the book dwells upon the post-1989 developments and delineates continuities as well as the ruptures with the Russian ideals of the early-twentieth century. Ball acknowledges that the images of America still offered miraculous promises after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but he brilliantly notes the dramatic changes in the intensity and constituency of the images. More specifically, the Russian elites, he argues, came to embrace the American techniques with less criticism than before, whereas the nostalgia-stricken masses developed fervent anti-American feelings amid the devastating liberalization endeavors. Though the former gave up surpassing the West on behalf of joining it, the latter turned to neo-nationalist or Eurasian utopias to alleviate the vicissitudes of the U.S.-designed reforms.

I am however troubled with two particular arguments of the book. First of all, Ball frequently asserts that the United States was the most influential actor in the history of Russia over the twentieth century, but he does not substantiate his claim with a comprehensive discussion of the role of other contemporaneous states in this process. When he employs comparisons, for instance, about the relative importance of the United States and Germany in Russian industrial modernization (pp. 147-152), he presents a rudimentary, brief analysis. In this respect, Ball foregoes exploring how Russian rivalry with other states—such as Britain, China or the other Soviet Republics—might have contributed to the Russian inclination toward the United States. The book therefore remains very much within the conventional Cold War paradigm of the U.S.A. versus the U.S.S.R., underestimating the secondary and yet crucial role of other countries on twentieth-century super-power politics.

The other unsatisfactory point is the hastily-supposed relationship between the centralized state and the failure to sustain the further development of imported techniques. Ball specifically asserts that the Soviet Russia could not keep pace with other countries in terms of technology, because “[its] autocratic government, the driving force in the developmental surges, tended in the longer run to retard innovation ... [and] provided scant competitive pressure to spur innovation and productivity, as people had little fear of losing markets or jobs” (p. 267). Though he maintains that the post-1989 liberalization efforts failed to bring about the desired, sustainable growth, he singles out the Soviet state’s intensive regulations as the major reason of technological stagnation. The Russian situation, however, can be better explained by taking into account larger global trends, as well as other, implicit local factors. For instance, how did the

mid-twentieth century immigration of qualified Third World professionals to the West influence the Russian technological stagnation? How did the global economic shift to service sector contribute to the Russian economic development? Did the Russian scientist resist the suffocating state surveillance by not devoting enough time for research and development? Did the Soviet elite close their ranks to the newcomers, and thus to revolutionizing ideas, in order to sustain their power and social status? Raising such questions may, I believe, open up rarely explored analytical horizons and help better untangle the intricate reasons of why the Soviet Russia failed to create a robust alternative to the Western capitalism as it intended.

Nonetheless, the most important strength of the book is its simultaneous evaluation of responses from both the masses and the elites to the American artifacts and techniques. Ball also deserves appreciation for his examination of everyday media, ranging from movies to tractors. He has an exceptionally thorough and captivating writing-style that maintains the reader’s full attention throughout the book. This particularly rare quality partially stems from his digging out interesting examples with a meticulous cross-reading of the Russian and American sources. All of these aspects render the book extremely interesting and easily accessible to readers at all levels who will take it up either for a class or for leisure.

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