

## Tsar Alexander II and President Abraham Lincoln: Unlikely Bedfellows?

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Image created by Hunter Bunting

In the past one hundred and fifty years, the earnest allegiance between Russia and America changed to that of vitriol and aggression, and then settled into a sort of uneasy middle ground in the post-Cold War era. The identification of Russia, formerly the Soviet Union, as an enemy and the 'other,' has taken root in successive generations since the 1917 Russian Revolution. Many Americans would find it hard to conceive of having much in common with the communists of the Cold War—and would find it harder still to comprehend peaceful, nay friendly, relations between the two countries. In fact, Russian-American relations were never better than during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the zenith of which was during the period of the American Civil War. The friendly and mutually beneficial relationship that emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century between the seemingly opposed autocratic Tsarist Russia and the democratic United States had its roots in the shared problems of emancipation of a servile class, increasing domestic unrest, and a shared adversary in Great Britain. For Russia, devoid of friendly relations with the entire family of European nations, this alliance was a welcome relief, needed after the humiliating losses suffered in the Crimean War of 1853-1856. America meanwhile gained an ally in the fight to stop English and French intervention in the American Civil War on the side of the Confederacy and benefited from increased trade relations in the Western Hemisphere. The political and

diplomatic relationship between the two countries was not altruistic—it served the security and economic needs of both countries at the time with little regard to other concerns such as human rights, but it was genuine and marked with feelings of goodwill and hope, especially during the Civil War.

Both Tsarist Russia and the United States of America (U.S.) were at the core defined by their opposing systems of governance and the reliance on their separate, but comparable, institutions of bondage. The unique placement of Russia straddling the two continents of Europe and Asia among the other nations of Europe gave Russia somewhat of an identity crisis—considered barbaric and second rate, early Russia resembled little of the great kingdoms of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the early seventeenth century, Tsar Peter the Great attempted to 'modernize' Russia, importing skilled European statesmen, builders, military officers, and others to give Russia a European makeover, while simultaneously imposing a Western calendar, styles of dress, and language. By the end of his reign in 1721 many in the Russian court spoke French, wore the latest European (French) fashions, and lived in his new capital, St. Petersburg. The concept of autocracy was, in the words of Russia historian Michel Beran, "the most opulent and at the same time the most naked form of power."<sup>1</sup> All of this was built on the feudal system of serfdom, wherein serfs, both state and private, were bound to the land (or to the government in the case of state serfs) and forced to toil to support the landowner.

The majority of the serfs were private; the Russian state under Peter the Great was small and controlled only 10 percent of the total serf population.<sup>2</sup> Serfs were largely uneducated, rarely left the village of their birth, and much of their life was steeped in the mysticism of the Russian Orthodox Church. Serfs largely thought of themselves as the obedient children of the *batushka* [little father] of the Tsar and to a lesser extent their landowning masters.<sup>3</sup> The landed, and consequently serf-owning, gentry thought that this situation was beneficial for all parties—Russia lay primarily in the sub-Arctic climate zone with long, dark winters and a short growing season in the summertime; serf labor thus needed to be mobilized to take advantage of the limited productivity of the land, and the owners believed that the uneducated, superstitious peasants would not be able to manage their own labor efficiently. However, a distinction must be made between Russian serfdom and American slavery—landowners owned the absolute labor of the serf, but not the serf themselves. Russian landowners were to provide all the necessities for their serfs, but after 1721, landowners were not allowed to sell serfs publicly, although they could be traded between landowners and collected in place of debt owed.<sup>4</sup> This unfree state of labor hampered the Russian economy for 150 years after the reforms of Tsar Peter I. For example, Russia did not possess a landless middle class to harness for colonization or industrialization, in stark contrast to

her European neighbors. But for the largest landowners, who consequently owned the majority of serfs, the importation of European ways brought a new reliance on the fruits of serf labor that would prove hard to part with when the time for emancipation finally came in 1861. For slave-owners in the United States, this reluctance to part with a system of exploitative labor would be just as difficult.

America, like Russia, was born out of conflict with a distant empirical power. In place of the Mongols, America witnessed a bloody revolution and separation from England. The American economy depended on the labor of millions of enslaved Africans and much of the acrimonious debate in the nineteenth century was rooted in the problem of slavery—notably whether slavery should be extended into the territories or confined to the southern states. The colonies of the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi and Alabama are known as the “Deep South,” and this was where slavery became a vital institution thus becoming the impetus for secession during the Civil War. In South Carolina alone, slaves made up sixty percent of the population. Many of these slaves were owned by large plantation owners who saw themselves as the American version of European aristocracy. This romantic nationalism, the “right of certain (superior) people to impose their will on other (inferior) peoples,” was common for landowners in both the American South and Russia.<sup>5</sup> Wealthy and powerful, much of American planter wealth came from the cotton or rice grown on the large plantations, and although a minority among the white population in the south, the planters nevertheless managed to dominate politics in the region. Planters informally promulgated a theory of racism that appealed to the majority of the white population, focusing on the white status in society as belonging to the better race by defining the worth of a person by the color of their skin. No matter how poor or destitute, a white man was a step above the enslaved African, and this instilled a sense of racist pride that permeated Southern society. However, in the Deep South, the specter of slave revolt or rebellion was a very real possibility in areas where slaves outnumbered whites, and this racism helped bind the slave-owner and the free white together to keep slaves in bondage.

Slavery in America caused political and moral problems for some, but it was an economic institution that both the North and South benefited from. The South produced cotton and other raw materials which were processed in the North or exported to other countries, the lowered economic costs of slave labor kept the raw goods and the manufactured products competitive in local and world markets. The political problems caused by slavery arose from the basis of American government in representative democracy. Many in the largely free North opposed the slave system, but for different reasons. Anti-slavery activists saw it as a dying institution that was morally opposed to the principles of the American system of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ Adding

credence to this view was the somewhat embarrassing fact that most of the nations of Europe (excluding Russia) had abandoned the institutions of serfdom and Slavery by the start of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> Many American politicians were opposed to the conservatism embodied in the slave system—politicians from slave states were often opposed to internal improvements and tariffs, two vital elements that drove the manufacturing economy of the north. Internal improvements by the federal government usually benefitted the industrialized North, not the largely agrarian slave states. Tariffs on imported goods often had reciprocal effects on goods exported such as cotton, making the main export of the South more expensive and less competitive abroad. Much of the post-American Revolution political wrangling was over how to reconcile the opposing viewpoints of the free and slave states. For a time this wound in American democracy was bandaged over with legislation such as the Missouri Compromise which drew a line at the 36° 30' parallel of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, permitting slavery below the line and forbidding its existence above. Later, the principle of “popular sovereignty” from Illinois Senator Stephen Douglass stated that the people of the new Kansas and Nebraska territories could choose whether they wished to be slave or Free states.<sup>7</sup> However, both of these bandages did little to heal the festering germ that was the cause of the infection—slavery. Some in the North were opposed to slavery on moral grounds.

Opposition to slavery took many forms, some wanted to abolish it immediately, others wanted gradual emancipation, and another segment wished to colonize the slaves outside of America to avoid race riots, but one thing that united all opponents of slavery was the wish to curb the political power of the South and limit the spread of slavery to the territories. The failure of “popular sovereignty” in the new territories was exemplified in 1859 by ‘Bloody Kansas’ where both opponents and proponents of slavery rushed to form a government there that would test the idea. The end result was widespread violence and the eventual formation of a pro-slavery government that convinced many politicians in the North to call for justice in Kansas. Called ‘radical’ by their opponents in the South, these men, mostly Republicans, embraced that moniker and Abraham Lincoln for the presidency in 1860. Of poor background and a self-educated lawyer practicing in Illinois, Lincoln was a polarizing candidate in the election of 1860, and came into office facing deep divisions in American politics and society.

Pre-Civil War relations between Tsarist Russia and democratic America were fraught with contradictions. In Russia, almost every Tsar faced revolt that was put down with brutal military suppression common to autocratic regimes.<sup>8</sup> In this light, the Russians could have viewed the rebellion of the American colonies as a threat to established order, and they would have, had it not been targeted at Russia’s most vociferous adversary, Great Britain. For much of the nineteenth century, most

of Europe saw the United States as the “world’s most dangerous and extremist revolutionary government,” and in the early years of the republic treated American dignitaries and merchant fleets as the emissaries of a second rate power.<sup>9</sup> The Russian government took a similar stance towards America, but due to America’s constant tensions with Great Britain, the officials in St. Petersburg were cognizant of the benefits of a possible alliance with America. Speaking of the growing Russian-American economic relations and the strategic alliance against the British, Tsar Nicholas I commented sometime during 1837-1839 that “Not only are our interests alike, but, our enemies are the same.”<sup>10</sup> Russian contacts with Americans increased during the 1840’s and 1850’s as America “acquired” the Mexican territory of California and the Russians were buoyed by increasing American-British conflict over the Oregon and Washington territories.

However, not all Americans were supportive of Russia in this era. Russia’s reactionary stance to the revolutions throughout Europe in 1848, especially their attitude toward the attempts at Hungarian independence from Austria, culminated in the “Kossuth craze.” The “Kossuth craze”<sup>11</sup> began over the succession attempt of Hungary under the leadership of Governor Louis Kossuth from the Austrian Empire. Kossuth pleaded, to no avail, with various countries in Europe and America for help to stave off what turned out to be a brutal Russian intervention in favor of Austria to crush the Hungarian succession. Many in the U.S. protested this foreign interference by Russia in Austrian affairs, and an early leader in the anti-Russian protests in support of Governor Kossuth was a somewhat obscure lawyer from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln. Kossuth supporters were influenced by the thousands of Hungarians that immigrated to the United States in the aftermath of the Russian crackdown, and motivated by a general sense of concern and condemnation for Russia’s repressive measures. On September 6, 1849 in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln was appointed with five other citizens to draft resolutions condemning the Russian action to the U.S. Secretary of State.<sup>12</sup> Stephen Douglas, later in 1858 to be Lincoln’s political opponent in the race for the Illinois senate, gave an eloquent speech in Washington D.C. in support of Kossuth

Shall it be said that democratic America is not to be permitted to grant a hearty welcome to an exile who has become the representative of liberal principles throughout the world lest despotic Austria and Russia shall be offended? The armed intervention of Russia to deprive Hungary of her constitutional rights, was such as violation of the laws of nations as authorized.<sup>13</sup>

According to Woldman, a lawyer and Lincoln historian, and several other authors on the subject, Lincoln saw Russia as the “exemplar of repressive despotism,” and

that he “hated slavery in any form.”<sup>14</sup> Lincoln would eventually change his attitude on the former; his stance on the latter is still under debate by many historians.

During this second demonstration Lincoln was again tasked with sitting on a committee with six other prominent Illinoisans to draft resolutions expressing the sentiments of the demonstrators. These resolutions are a microcosm of the confusing and contradictory nature of politics, and show the depth of Lincoln’s vacillation on issues of non-interference and succession that would prove to be an object of intense scrutiny by later historians. Of note among these resolutions was the first, stating that “it is the right of any people, sufficiently numerous for national independence, to throw off, to revolutionize, their existing form of government, and to establish such other in its stead as they may choose.”<sup>15</sup> Congruent to this was a speech that he gave before Congress in 1848:

Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better. That is a most valuable, a most sacred right—a right which we hope and believe is to liberate the world. Nor is the right confined to cases in which the whole people of an existing government may choose to exercise it. Any portion of such people that can, may revolutionize and make their own so much of the territory as they inhabit.<sup>16</sup>

This was a popular belief in America at the time Lincoln voiced it, yet by 1860 it would not be shared by many in the North, including Lincoln himself. The second resolution, “that it is the duty of our government to neither foment, nor assist, such revolutions in other governments,” was an issue that Lincoln would not change his mind on during the time period up to and through the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> Lincoln’s duplicity can be explained by the changing political situation of America, and his disagreement of Russian actions was confined to that country’s interference in what was an internal revolution in Austria. This principle of non-interference would become the backbone of Union efforts to stop European recognition of the Confederacy, and have important international implications as the Union, by nature of the non-interference principle but in violation of the earlier support for secession, refused multiple calls to intervene in the Russian suppression of internal Polish revolt in 1863. Nevertheless, despite the resolutions of outraged Illinoisans, Russia and America continued during the decade of the 1850’s to have a warm and growing international friendship.

While Russian-American commercial contacts continued to prosper during the 1850’s, it was the Crimean War, fought between 1853-1856, that cemented the alliance between the two powers against England and France and forced Russia to directly confront the economic backwardness of serfdom. The war arose over

tensions between Russia and the Ottoman Empire over Russian efforts to secure rights for its Orthodox Christian subjects living in modern-day Turkey. Initial Russian successes over the Ottomans in the Black Sea areas soon reversed as Britain and France entered the war on the side of the Ottomans, fearing growing Russian influence in the region and perceiving that Russian aggression could force the weak Ottoman Empire to collapse. The British effectively blockaded the Russian Fleet in the Baltic Sea, preventing them from supporting the much smaller Black Sea fleet. Russia suffered a complete destruction of its Black Sea naval forces, mostly at the hands of the Russians as the decision was made to scuttle most of the ships at the Bosphorus Strait to prevent entry to the Black Sea.<sup>18</sup> Russia also suffered defeat on land; although it possessed more men than Britain and France, as well as the defensive advantage, Britain and France were industrialized societies and as such they benefited from higher quality arms, troops, and transport. The Russians by comparison lacked effective transport of both men and materials; many of the weapons used were holdovers from the Napoleonic Wars of fifty years earlier, and Russia's nascent industrial capacity was overwhelmed by the war demands.

While the American president Franklin Pierce, and his Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, wished to remain neutral during the Crimean War, private Americans citizens found many different ways to show support for Russia during the war. When the British and French blockaded the coast of Russian America during the war, the Russians hired American merchants to both conduct economic and governmental business, under the protection of the neutral American flag. While America had much more in common with the British ideologically and politically than with Russia, Americans viewed the Russians as "another great victim of British imperialism" during the 1850's, lending towards the overall feeling of sympathy and support for Russia.<sup>19</sup> This dislike of Britain stretched far back into the beginnings of American history due to repeated conflicts after independence such as the War of 1812 and British opposition to the Monroe Doctrine. This dislike had not abated by 1853, as any war that Britain was in during the nineteenth century "found the Americans cheering for the other side."<sup>20</sup> Most did not expect America to enter the Crimean War on either side, but the Americans gave much needed aid to the Russians.

The United States demanded neutral shipping so they could supply both belligerents. However, Russia suffered through a joint British-French blockade in the Crimea and the Americans wanted access through it to sell arms and trade with the Russians.<sup>21</sup> Ironically less than ten years later the Union would soon be demanding that Britain and France respect efforts of the Union to blockade the Confederacy during the Civil War. While the Americans did supply goods to both sides during the Crimean War, the majority of them went to the Russians, and England gave in to the Americans on almost every

issue involving the blockade.<sup>22</sup> The Russian Chargé d'Affaires at Washington, Edouard de Stoeckl, was instrumental in building the formal relationship between Russia and America that served each country so well during the 1850's and 1860's. He skillfully and actively sought American support for Russia during the Crimean War. In a letter to the Tsar written sometime in 1854, Stoeckl remarked that

The Americans will go after anything that has enough money in it. They have the ships, they have the men, and they have the daring spirit. The blockading fleet will think twice before firing on the Stars and Stripes. When America was weak she refused to submit to England, and now that she is strong she is much less likely to do so.<sup>23</sup>

The assistance to Russia was mainly trade-based, giving the Russians access to modern weapons and materials that they could not produce in mass quantities.

Both Tsars Nicholas I and Alexander II were thankful for American support during the Crimean War and extended several overtures of friendship both during and after the war to the United States. The most significant exchange was the Russian invitation to American businessmen to invest and do business in northern Manchuria and Sakhalin Island, two markets that the Americans were seeking to enter from the period they came into Russian possession earlier in the nineteenth century. During the Civil War, Russia allowed the American company Western Union to build a telegraph line through Russian America and Siberia instead of the undersea route in the Atlantic that proved to be more difficult and expensive than originally planned. Nevertheless, these cooperative commercial and political efforts pale in comparison to Russian and American attempts to solve the internal instability and economic damage caused by serfdom and slavery.

The defeat of the Russians in the Crimea cannot be overstated in its effect on Alexander II, who took over as Tsar in 1855 after the death of his father. Alexander II was considered an "enlightened sovereign."<sup>24</sup> Educated by the leading intellectuals of Russia, Alexander read and spoke four languages and had training in history, science, philosophy, and other elements of a well-rounded aristocratic education by nineteenth century standards. The Tsars, and some aristocrats before Alexander II, recognized the fallibility of the serfdom system yet feared the social upheaval and unpopularity of making changes to what was the foundation of Russian society; the same fear was expressed by many in the American government that recognized the problems of slavery, yet were afraid of the furor and instability its removal would cause. Both systems of serfdom and slavery had their proponents who espoused the benefits of the systems in romantic and paternalistic terms— that those at the bottom of the system were better off with a compassionate father figure to look over them. In Russia, this very system was

a cancer on the health of the economy: although Russia had the largest population and landmass in Europe, Russian grain yields were among the lowest in Europe.<sup>25</sup> Over eighty percent of the population was virtually enslaved under the system of serfdom by the Crimean War and agitation for revolt was a common occurrence in Russia.<sup>26</sup> For example, in the thirty year reign of Nicholas I, 556 serious serf revolts broke out, an average of just above eighteen a year.<sup>27</sup> Alexander II knew that he must liberate the serfs.

Alexander II understood that reform must come from his will alone: previous Tsar's going back as far as Catherine the Great in the 1780's had attempted to discuss serf reform or emancipation, but the aristocracy that owned the serfs declined to participate in any kind of reform to the system. Alexander II's effort would be a revolution from above, made possible by the power of Autocracy. Alexander II emancipated the serfs held under the crown in February 1860 with little opposition, granting them the same freedoms as other rural freemen, namely the right to purchase land, enter into private contracts, and set up local governing bodies. Alexander set up a commission of nobles to study the problem of emancipation of privately held serfs and they came back with what he already knew: that emancipation would have to be forced by the Tsar and that it would be unpopular with the aristocracy. Embodying this opposition was Prince Alexis Orlov, one of the most powerful men in Russia and a large landowner. Sympathy for the aristocracy was not confined to Russia, many in America, especially in the South, identified with the system of serfdom, and consequently this played a large role in the support for Russia during the Crimean War.<sup>28</sup> Orlov believed that emancipation would impoverish the serfs and cause anarchy by removing the protective landowner who directed their labor, believing, along with many other nobles, that the serfs possessed intellects no brighter than simple beasts.<sup>29</sup> It was Orlov who, by his power obtained a seat on the emancipation committee, imparted a conservative tone on the eventual manifesto.

Promulgated in March 3, 1861, the Emancipation Manifesto 'liberated' the private serfs.<sup>30</sup> Technically declared free of bondage, the serfs had to reimburse both the former owners of the land and the government over a period of thirty years. The government stated that it would partially reimburse the nobles, yet in practice this rarely happened due to the poor finances of the Russian government. There was little disturbance with the former serfs at first, as many peasants could not believe that the "little father" (the Tsar) would not grant them full title to the land that they felt was theirs after countless generations of labor, and instead waited for what they considered to be the "true" emancipation.<sup>31</sup> The nobles were unhappy with the manifesto as well: most landowners were already heavy in debt or accustomed to luxuries, and now they lost both their serfs and a portion of their property, and received little of the promised compensation. To complete the dissatisfaction with the

manifesto, the government experienced a major decrease of revenues as grain yields and manufacturing started to decline due to the instability caused by the shock to the economy from emancipation. Internal revolt continued to increase rather than decrease, and adding to the woes of Russia was a Polish uprising and the internal strife of Russia's greatest ally, America. Alexander II knew that the Emancipation Manifesto had to be issued to set free the backward agrarian economy of Russia to prepare for industrialization and capitalism, yet the effects of doing away with a system of bondage that affected over eighty percent of the population was disastrous for the short-term stability and economic health of Russia. The heavy-handed autocracy that issued the manifesto was able to control the instability on the surface, yet autocracy "does not eliminate opposition, it drives it underground...and [it] becomes explosive."<sup>32</sup> The Manifesto was a step in the direction of other European powers, and was even ahead of America, where in that country, and even all over the world, those eyes hoping for the abolition or extension of slavery were watching with rapt gaze. The Friend, a whaling and abolitionist newspaper published in Honolulu, Republic of Hawai'i, had this to say about the Russian Emancipation in the May 2, 1861 issue:

It is the high privilege of the now living generation to see what so many noble men of past ages have in vain longed and toiled for—the beginning of the total abolition of human bondage. While in the New World the most wicked form of slavery the world has ever seen has been quite unexpectedly shaken to its foundation by the mad schemes of men who intended to make it the corner-stone [sic] of a new government and the starting point of a new era of civilization, a monarch of Europe is fast clearing away the last remnants of a milder kind of involuntary servitude in the Old World.

While the author of this editorial and the publisher of The Friend were both American, their comparison of serfdom to American slavery and general attitude toward slavery were both shared and vilified by their countrymen in America.

Slavery caused the American Civil War—it was the arguments over whether slavery should and could be extended to the territories, or even exist in the states at all that drove the growing tensions between the largely industrialized North and the agrarian and rural South. It is no surprise then that those caught up in the debate over slavery, including Lincoln himself, were watching the emancipation in Russia unfold. Russia was on Lincoln's mind, in a different way, when in 1858 he stated that if slavery was allowed to continue to spread in the U.S. that he would "prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."<sup>33</sup> In 1860, President Buchanan, in a message to congress, stated that the

people of the North had no more right to interfere with the institution of slavery in the South than with the serf question in Russia, drawing a comparison between the two systems of bondage.<sup>34</sup> Others in America, like the political agitator Thomas Dorr, worried more about the growing power of the federal government. More specifically, he feared that the efforts to contain and control the new areas would result into the American republic turning into a "vigorous, centralized state, with the center uniting in itself the powers of the Federal and the State Governments."<sup>35</sup> Dorr drew a direct correlation between Russian expansion and governmental instability and despotism, and feared that this centralization of power, not slavery, would dissolve the United States. Dorr's prediction was correct in some ways: during and after the Civil War the power and responsibilities of the Federal government grew to levels unimaginable before the war.

The southern states felt that the extension of slavery was crucial for their political, economic, and cultural existence, and that the new Republican party, headed by Lincoln, would do away with the very institution that furnished their identity. Certainly Lincoln was no friend of slavery and considered it to be detrimental to the principles of the United States.<sup>36</sup> Lincoln thought that the "two great ideas" of slavery and freedom "had been kept apart only by the most artful means"—here he was referring to the various compromises meant to preserve slavery and postpone what he felt was its eventual abolition.<sup>37</sup> Yet he was no friend of Negro equality; in 1858, Lincoln is quoted as saying:

I am not, nor have ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the races which I believe will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.<sup>38</sup>

So why then, just five years later, did Lincoln draft and sign a proclamation to free all of the estimated four million slaves in the then seceded states, knowing the social, economic, and political chaos this would cause if the Union won the war? It was a war measure, to weaken the power of the Confederate States of America, or the Confederacy, and while it did not technically free any slaves because Lincoln at this time had no way to enforce the Proclamation in the succeeded states, it changed the terms of the war, adding a moral dimension that foreign powers who had previously done away with slavery and serfdom would find hard to oppose.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation quickly drew comparisons to Alexander's Emancipation Manifesto of just two years earlier, and served to strengthen the

bonds between the two leaders and their countries. Even before the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, Alexander II had remarked to the U.S. Minister to Russia, Cassius Clay, in 1861, that Russia and America "were bound together by a common sympathy in the common cause of emancipation."<sup>39</sup> In a later meeting in 1864, Cassius Clay declared before Alexander II that the cause of emancipation was "a new bond of union with Russia," to which the Tsar agreed.<sup>40</sup> In 1863, *The St. Petersburg Journal*, a mouthpiece for the Tsar's government, praised the Emancipation Proclamation as "just and sagacious."<sup>41</sup> Literary figures such as the Russian Leo Tolstoy and the American Walt Whitman praised the Emancipation Proclamation for the freedoms it would give millions of Americans once the war was over.<sup>42</sup> An article in the *Friend* from the August, 1863 edition stated

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation stands beside the Imperial Ukase of the Emperor Alexander, giving liberty to millions of Russian serfs. The history of nations grants to their supreme rules but few opportunities of thus immortalizing their names—the names of President Lincoln and the Emperor Alexander [III] will never die among the exultant millions of their emancipated fellow men.

Yet not all Russian officials were so optimistic, the Baron de Stoeckl, Russia's minister to America, continued to persist for most of 1863 that the Emancipation Proclamation was "futile," and continued sending reports of its weakness and of Lincoln's troubles to Alexander II.<sup>43</sup>

The Emancipation Proclamation, which was issued on September 22, 1862 but went into effect on January 1, 1863, was signed during a period in American history when Lincoln held almost autocratic powers as a war president. During the war he suspended the writ of habeas corpus, strove to grow the power of the federal government by imposing an income tax to pay for the war, and massively increased the size of the army to fight the Confederacy. Thus the Emancipation Proclamation, a top-down reform that would have only been possible with the dubious gift of 'war powers.' While Lincoln had written the Emancipation Proclamation earlier in 1862, he was advised by his Secretary of State, William Seward, to wait for a Union victory to issue it, knowing that if issued during the disastrous summer of 1862 that it would be seen as "the last act of a crumbling regime."<sup>44</sup> As a lawyer, Lincoln knew the legality of the Emancipation Proclamation was dubious, and to this end he pushed for a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery. The Russian emancipation and the American emancipation, although similar in their attempt to set free from bondage large numbers of people residing in those countries, were undertaken for different reasons. The Tsar's Emancipation Manifesto was an attempt to liberate the serfs in Russia to modernize the economy and

to deal with increasing peasant unrest. The main effect of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was not to free the slaves in the Confederacy, but rather to shore up support for the Union among its allies, namely Russia, and damage Confederate efforts for international recognition, a Union aim from the beginning of the war.

One major element that had the power to change the outcome of the Civil War was the matter of foreign intervention. If the governments of Europe unanimously threw their support behind either the Union or the Confederacy, the side chosen would have access to support which the other side could not hope to match. For the Confederacy this was a crucial element of their international activity, and likewise for the Union it was just as important to make sure that recognition was not accorded to the Confederacy. To a cultural observer, the Confederacy seemed to have an advantage to gaining foreign recognition at the beginning of the war. The aristocracy of Europe identified heavily with the lifestyles and attitudes of the southern planters. The representatives of the European governments in America lived in Washington D.C., which by all aspects was considered a southern city. These various European governmental officials socialized with slave owners and did business with them, and their reports back to their respective governments reflected this natural affinity to the southern system. Even Russia's foreign minister, Edouard de Stoeckl, heavily sympathized with the Confederacy in the early war years and was doubtful of Union successes until a few months before the war was over. In 1861, Stoeckl declared in a dispatch to St. Petersburg that in his view, the Confederacy had the courage of its convictions—they claimed a legal right to secession, a right once claimed by their forefathers who "shook off the yoke of English tyranny by revolution."<sup>45</sup> Yet, in writing about the reasons for the conflict he blamed both "the North for having provoked it, and the South for wanting to precipitate events with a speed which makes rapprochement (emphasis in the original) impossible."<sup>46</sup> Important to both the Union and Confederacy in winning the war was the recognition and support of three European governments in particular: Great Britain, France, and Russia.

From the very beginning of the Civil War, Great Britain made no secret of its wish to see America divide into two weaker countries. Much of the aristocracy that dominated the British government felt an affinity with the Southern planters. The government of Great Britain pushed for Confederate recognition because it would "weaken a dangerous commercial competitor, remove a barrier for the advancement of England's interests in the Western Hemisphere, and free a source of cotton supply."<sup>47</sup> In 1861 the Russian minister to England, Baron de Brunov reported

The English Government, at the bottom of its heart, desires the separation of North America into two republics, which will watch each other jealously

and counterbalance each other. Then England, on terms of peace and commerce with both, would have nothing to fear from either; for she would dominate them, restraining them by their rival ambitions.<sup>48</sup>

England did not desire to wage war against the Union for the Confederacy; recognition would serve the economic and political needs of England without involving that country in a costly war. In France, Napoleon III had more militaristic ambitions, proposing an alliance between the Confederacy and his puppet government in Mexico headed by the Austrian Prince Maximilian. Eventually, Napoleon III hoped to create a new empire in the Western Hemisphere to rival the imperialist ambitions of his European neighbors at the expense of the preoccupied Union, and to achieve this he proposed at several different times schemes to recognize the Confederacy.<sup>49</sup> All of these efforts by England and France were failures in the end, and efforts to recognize the Confederacy abated after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union started to realize battlefield success. While many in the governments of England and France were supportive of the Confederacy, the majority of the population in both countries was opposed to slavery and saw in the Confederacy an embodiment of a repressive and morally bankrupt government, in contrast to the Union which was perceived as fighting against bondage and corruption. Nevertheless, the biggest ally on the Union side in its fight to defeat Confederate recognition was Russia.

Looking through the lens of the American Civil War, Russia was opposed to anything that England worked for, like Confederate recognition. If England wanted Confederate recognition to weaken the United States and secure a steady supply of cotton, Russia wanted to ally itself with the Union and oppose Confederate recognition. Russia desired a strong and unified United States and worked to this end to provide for its important geopolitical ally against England. Support for the Union came in many forms. In early 1861, Stoeckl was the first to warn the United States of Napoleon III's plan to form a coalition of three powers, England, France, and Russia, to force the North to grant peace terms to the Confederacy. Stoeckl pledged to Lincoln that if Maryland succeeded from the Union that Russia would still consider Lincoln the president, that Stoeckl would travel to wherever Lincoln moved the government, and would only recognize the Confederacy if it was established as an independent country by peace terms or by winning the war.<sup>50</sup> Although Stoeckl originally was supportive of the principle of succession, he quickly changed his mind when, after the emancipation in Russia, his own country began going through a period of internal instability. In a letter to the Russian Foreign Minister, Prince Gortchakov in May 1861, he stated that

To permit the principle of secession, that is to say,

the right of a State to break the federal pact when it decides that it is appropriate to do so, is to render absurd the very idea of confederation...If a state may secede at will, why...could not a county or city withdraw? The Constitution left wide latitude to future reforms through the amending process. This means was open to the Southern States. They failed to avail themselves of it.<sup>51</sup>

While Russia was an autocracy, the Tsar and his ministers understood the concept of a republic, and looked with disfavor upon any segment of society that attempted to violently revolt against centralized power.<sup>52</sup> In 1862, Lincoln sent a letter to the Tsar asking him where he stood on the question of foreign intervention. Alexander replied through his Foreign Minister, Prince Gorchakov to Bayard Taylor, the American charge at St. Petersburg, stating that "Russia alone, has stood by you from the first, and will continue to stand by you...We desire above all things the maintenance of the American Union as one 'indivisible nation.' Proposals will be made to Russia to join some plan of interference. She will refuse any invitation of the kind."<sup>53</sup> Such proposals were the most loyal that Lincoln received during the Civil War from any European government.

The Confederacy did try to secure recognition from Russia, realizing that without Russian friendship English and French recognition would not be forthcoming. Confederate President Jefferson Davis had some small reason for hope: he had many high-level contacts with Russia during his time as Secretary of War under the Buchanan administration.<sup>54</sup> Davis also held semi-dictatorial powers in his own Confederate government, and his relationship with Stoeckl went back from before the Crimean War. In November 1862, Davis sent Lucius Q. C. Lamar as Commissioner to Russia to plead for Southern independence, but Prince Gortchakov refused to meet with him.<sup>55</sup> The Russian support for the Union was unequivocal, and Davis soon abandoned all hope that he could secure recognition from Russia.

In 1863, Russia found itself facing an internal insurrection in Poland. Polish freedom-fighters buoyed initially by the Emancipation Manifesto but quickly crestfallen when the Tsar refused to extend self-government and land reform to Poland, started a number of demonstrations and uprisings across Poland. Russia was brutal in putting down what it considered an internal problem and considered foreign intervention to be unacceptable, in marked contrast to its own foreign intervention in the Hungarian uprisings of 1848.<sup>56</sup> Russia had few friends, and although America was asked by both England and France to intervene in the Polish rebellion, Lincoln stressed his belief in the principle of non-intervention in domestic disputes. This certainly was not the moral choice, and ran counter to American beliefs in self-determination, but what could the Union say about Russia's actions in Poland while fighting a war against secession and trying to stave off European intervention on

the behalf of the Confederacy? While Lincoln's sympathy lay with the Poles, and it is doubtful that he had forgotten his critical words against the Russians over the Kossuth affair, he had to hold up the principle of nonintervention by foreign powers in domestic affairs.<sup>57</sup> The situation in Poland worried the Tsar, and it caused him to undertake the most misunderstood action in Russian-American relations during the Civil War—sending the Russian Navy on a visit to America.

In September 24, 1863, the New York Times reported in "A Russian Fleet Coming into our Harbor" of the arrival of the Russian Baltic fleet to New York harbor. Two weeks later the Russian Pacific fleet sailed into San Francisco harbor. Many at the time took this as a physical manifestation of the friendly rapport and support Russia had given to the United States throughout the war. In most newspapers on both sides this event completely overshadowed the recent Union defeat at Chickamauga, and many fetes and parades were held in both New York and San Francisco to honor the visiting Russians. It was widely assumed that the Russian fleet sailed to help protect the Union navy in case of direct English or French intervention, yet none of the Russian commanders had any orders to help the Americans in case of attack. The Tsar, not wanting to repeat the mistakes of the Crimean War, sent the fleet out of the Baltic Sea and away to the relative protection of American harbors in case tensions in Europe over the situation in Poland reached open warfare.<sup>58</sup> In a case of historical irony the Tsar sent his ships away for their protection to a country undergoing one of the most destructive wars of the nineteenth century. The Tsar's ships stayed for almost seven months, and spent the entire time in American without any incident, but were they little help to the Union's war effort? The real benefit to the Union was a boost of morale, a physical showing of Russian friendship to the American people. Henry Clews, a New York Banker who also worked as a United States agent, noted that "it [the Russian naval visit] was a splendid 'bluff' at a very critical period in our history."<sup>59</sup> The Russian naval visit wrapped up the need for further Russian shows of support for the Union during the Civil War, as the threat of foreign intervention was almost nonexistent by mid-1864, with England and France losing faith in the Confederacy's ability to win the war.

With the signing of the surrender at Appomattox Courthouse in April 9, 1865, signaling the defeat of the Confederacy and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln just 5 days later on April, 14, 1865, it was the end of an era in America, but not for Russian-American relations. Shortly after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Alexander II sent his condolences to his widow Mary Todd saying that "he [Lincoln] was the noblest and greatest Christian of our generation. He was a beacon to the whole world—nothing but courage, steadfastness and the desire to do good."<sup>60</sup> Russian-American relations continued on a more or less positive vein throughout the nineteenth century and until the second decade of

the twentieth, with the Bolshevik Revolution forever changing the way the two countries thought of each other.

The relationship between Russia and America until the twentieth century was one of friendship, and it was strengthened by a mutual dislike of English power. The two countries were looking to expand their influence internationally, always at the expense of England. Russia and America, on the surface, were very different—despotic Russia was ruled by iron-fisted Tsars who attempted to hold on to autocratic powers while slowly doling out reforms to pacify a largely illiterate and landless serf population. This reliance on serfdom caused massive problems in Russia and was the impediment of industrialization and reform congruent with other Western powers. America was born amongst rhetoric of liberty and equality, founded on democratic principles, and considered the most revolutionary government of its day. Americans both spilled over into the vast frontier in the Western Hemisphere and concentrated commerce and industry, growing throughout the nineteenth century to become a major industrial power, while still relying on the institution of slavery to produce massive amounts of cotton to sell to Europe. Russia and America shared the similar systems of serfdom and slavery respectively, and shared the problems inherent with holding a large amount of the population in bondage.

These problems forced first Russia, then America, to undergo large-scale, top-down emancipations, but for different reasons. Tsar Alexander II, led by intellectuals and opposed by conservative aristocrats, issued what amounted to a partial emancipation that was at first bloodless, but frustration with the sluggishness of the emancipation allowed resentment to ferment in Russia. Abraham Lincoln emancipated the slaves as a war act, and the only real effect at the time was to change the character of the war to place slavery as a moral reason to fight, and this helped in the effort to stymie recognition of the slave-holding Confederacy. Both Russia and America supported each other during the period of the Civil War, with both countries focusing on reinforcing the principle of non-intervention in domestic disputes, and both working to frustrate English and French ambitions to profit from the instability caused by the destructive warfare. This relationship was self-serving, but both Russia and America benefitted, and in studying the correspondence between the two countries, a genuine feeling of friendship can be seen between Russia and America during the Civil War era.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup>Beran, *Forge of Empires 1861-1871*, 12.
- <sup>2</sup>By the time of Emancipation in 1861, the Russian government controlled around twenty-two million serfs out of a total population of around forty-seven million.
- <sup>3</sup>All was not always well in the family, it is estimated that there were six instances of Serfs murdering their landowners per year Beran, *Forge of Empires, 1861-1871*, 91.
- <sup>4</sup>Roger Bartlett, *A History of Russia*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 102.
- <sup>5</sup>Beran, *Forge of Empires, 1861-1871*, 14.
- <sup>6</sup>Alexandre Tarsaidzé, *Czars and Presidents: The Story of a Forgotten Friendship*, (New York: McDowell, Obolensky Inc., 1958), 173.
- <sup>7</sup>Howard Jones, *Abraham Lincoln and a New Birth of Freedom: The Union and Slavery in the Diplomacy of the Civil War*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 20.
- <sup>8</sup>Revolt in Tsarist Russia included The Pugachev Rebellion of 1779, Stenka Razin, and the various Tartar Uprisings.
- <sup>9</sup>Albert Woldman, *Lincoln and the Russians*, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1952), vii.
- <sup>10</sup>Woldman, 125.
- <sup>11</sup>Woldman, *Lincoln and the Russians*, 4.
- <sup>12</sup>Woldman, *Lincoln and the Russians*, 4.
- <sup>13</sup>Woldman, 5.
- <sup>14</sup>See Woldman, Beran, Tarsaidzé
- <sup>15</sup>Woldman, 6.
- <sup>16</sup>Woldman, 6.
- <sup>17</sup>Woldman, 7.
- <sup>18</sup>The incredible story of the American Colonel Gowen and his successful raising of over eighty percent of the ships in the Crimea can be found in Tarsaidzé, 159-164.
- <sup>19</sup>Woldman, 10.
- <sup>20</sup>Tarsaidzé, 150.
- <sup>21</sup>Tarsaidzé, 156.
- <sup>22</sup>Woldman, 11.
- <sup>23</sup>Frank A. Golder, "Russian-American Relations during the Crimean War," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 31 (1925-26), p. 465.
- <sup>24</sup>Williams, 21.
- <sup>25</sup>Beran, 37.
- <sup>26</sup>Bartlett, 112.
- <sup>27</sup>Woldman, 170.
- <sup>28</sup>Williams, 19.
- <sup>29</sup>Beran, 38.
- <sup>30</sup>Alexander II recognized that the impact of the manifesto could be explosive, so he instituted a two year waiting period for its implementation. Coincidentally, it went into effect around the same time as Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.
- <sup>31</sup>Beran, 89-90.
- <sup>32</sup>Beran, 27.
- <sup>33</sup>Beran, 52.
- <sup>34</sup>Woldman, 20.
- <sup>35</sup>Tarsaidzé, 152.
- <sup>36</sup>Woldman, 10.
- <sup>37</sup>Beran, 51.
- <sup>38</sup>James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 186.
- <sup>39</sup>Woldman, 109.
- <sup>40</sup>Woldman, 179.
- <sup>41</sup>Woldman, 181.
- <sup>42</sup>Beran, 62.
- <sup>43</sup>Woldman, 185.
- <sup>44</sup>Beran, 134.
- <sup>45</sup>Woldman, 32.
- <sup>46</sup>Woldman, 25.
- <sup>47</sup>Woldman, 84.
- <sup>48</sup>Dean B. Mahin, *One War at a Time: The International Dimensions of the American Civil War*, (Washington D.C.: Brassey's, 1999), 24.
- <sup>49</sup>Woldman, 86.
- <sup>50</sup>Woldman, 39.
- <sup>51</sup>Woldman, 64.
- <sup>52</sup>Mahin, 199.
- <sup>53</sup>Beran, 156.
- <sup>54</sup>Woldman, 41.
- <sup>55</sup>Woldman, 134.
- <sup>56</sup>Woldman, 157.
- <sup>57</sup>Woldman, 159.
- <sup>58</sup>Woldman, 141.

<sup>59</sup>Woldman, 165.

<sup>60</sup>Beran, 242.

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