

The Bilateral Effect of the Visit of the Russian Fleet in 1863

by Tom Delahaye

The beginning of the historical relationship between Russia and the United States is most often remembered as the purchase of Alaska in 1867. However, these two countries were brought together several years earlier in a cordial setting that is almost forgotten in today's rivalry for world power. The incident was the arrival of the Russian fleet at New York and at San Francisco in the autumn of 1863. It is important because it helped to shape the relationship of the countries for the years that followed.

The birth of the relationship between the United States and Russia began in November, 1809, when John Quincy Adams met with Czar Alexander I. Adams' meeting with the Czar was the start of a "curious and incongruous friendship" that would become "an indestructible part of our folklore." <1>

Russia's relationship with the United States was definitely peculiar. Even though international relationships are not the same as personal friendships, the former being superficial, the bond between these two countries was to the point of incompatibility. <2> Their histories and structure of government have no similarities. Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, points out the glaring differences between the two nations. De Tocqueville writes that:

The American struggles against the natural obstacles which oppose him; the adversaries of the Russian are men; the former combats the wilderness and savage life; the latter, civilization with all its weapons and its arts: the conquest of the one are therefore gained by the ploughshare, those of the other by the sword. The Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends, and gives free scope to the unguided exertions and common sense of the citizens; the Russian centres all the authority in a single arm: the principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter servitude. <3>

The peculiar relationship continued to grow. The young democracy and the old absolute monarchy kept their diplomatic channels open and friendly. Several men had been czar since the time John Quincy Adams was in Russia and the United States had elected a multitude of presidents. By 1860, Czar Alexander II had been on the throne for five years. Abraham Lincoln was just elected president.

In the autumn of 1863, czarism and democracy had a lot more in common than usual. Russia was at the brink of war with the old "Crimean Coalition" (Britain, France, and Austria) over the question of the Polish Rebellion. The Poles had rebelled against Russian rule, hoping to establish an independent state of their own. The "Crimean Coalition" was supporting the Poles. The United States was in the middle of a devastating civil war. The South had seceded from the Union and Lincoln was trying to preserve the Union and free the slaves at the same time. These two events, that do not even appear to be similar,

brought two nations together. It was just one more thing in a long series that was part of a very odd relationship.

Although dissimilar on their surface, the Polish Revolt-Civil War case entails very deep ties between the two countries and has worldwide implications. Civil War in the United States was damaging to Russian foreign policy. Thomas Bailey, in *America Faces Russia*, claims that "for more than a half-century, that is since 1809, the fixed policy of the Czar's government had been to encourage the growth of the United States as a potentially strong commercial and naval make weight against the foes of the Empire." <4> With the Union split, Russia had to face her enemies alone. Therefore, Russia had a vested interest in the outcome of the Civil War. Bailey reasserts that idea by writing that "the Russian government and ruling class disliked democracy, but in the interest of the balance of power they favored the Union." <5> In favoring the Union, Russia supported Lincoln's actions to preserve the nation. Thus, what appears to be unrelated, does in fact exhibit close ties between the two countries.

There were other factors that linked Russia and the United States in the Polish Revolt-Civil War case. Bailey claims that Lincoln and Alexander II, as leaders of their countries, both faced insurrection. Bailey writes that "if President Lincoln had his seceding Southerners, Czar Alexander II had his unrepentant Poles" <6> The London *Punch* also expressed the peculiar relationship between the two countries. In the October 24, 1863 issue, the *Punch* printed a cartoon with Lincoln saying to Alexander:

Imperial son of Nicholas the Great,
We air in the same fix, I calculate,
You with your Poles, with Southern rebels I,
Who spurn my rule and my revenge defy. <7>

The Russian interest in the Civil War was not just to protect her own foreign policy. Russia had other motives. F. A. Golder, in "The Russian Fleet and the Civil War," refers to the Russian fleet coming to America as purely a self-serving action. He claims that "in Russia it is regarded from the point of view of European politics" and was not intended to benefit the Union. <8> Other historians agree with Golder's thesis. William F. Nagenast, in "The Visit of the Russian Fleet to the United States: Were Americans Deceived," states:

A legend grew up on Russia's gallant gesture to uphold the Union which would persist for more than a half century and only to be completely demolished when historic research in the Russian archives finally brought to light the Tsar's secret order to the fleet. <9>

The thesis of Russia acting for her own self interest by sailing her fleet to America in 1863 is also supported by a Russian scholar, E. A. Adamov. Adamov claims that Russia wished not only to save the fleet from other European powers, but to "put them in the most favorable position for the opening of warlike activities with maximum of energy and productivity against England and France." <10> Russia's motives for sending the fleet to America were indeed self-serving. Alexander intended the mission as protection

for the fleet. He wanted to get "the fleet out of the Baltic to distant seas where it could damage the British merchant marine." <11>

Alexander's reasons for wanting to send the Russian fleet off to America are related to a complicated European situation that began long before the Civil War. The basis ' for Alexander's action was a Polish insurrection in 1863. Poland had been under Russian domination for a long time. The country was partitioned out of existence in the 18th century. It had been given some recognition by Napoleon with the creation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. The Poles were not satisfied. They were tired of being ruled by other nations. This desire for independence brought them to open revolt in January 1863.

In their revolt, the Poles were demanding social and political reforms. Hugh Seton-Watson, in *The Russian Empire, 1801-1917*, claims there was more to the Polish revolt than just reforms. He writes that "behind these great social and cultural problems lay the wider political aspiration of the Poles as a nation" <12> Poland was led into revolt by Polish nationalists who "would be content with nothing less than the recognition by Russia of Polish nationhood." <13>

The nationalists led the country in revolt in January, 1863, hoping to get outside assistance. France had supported a national unification movement in Italy. The Poles hoped that France would give them assistance. The nationalists also hoped that England would aid their cause because she was a traditional enemy of Russia.

Russia refused to compromise with the Poles or any other nations. The situation became very tense. Barbara Jelavich, author of *A Century of Russian Foreign Policy: 1814-1914*, writes that "the international aspects of the problem made the Russian government particularly sensitive to the interference of other governments in Polish affairs." <14> France and England continued to agitate for the Poles, thus aggravating the Russians. Seton-Watson claims that "the traditional sympathy of both French and British public opinion for Poland expressed itself with great fervor . . ." <15> The European powers gradually moved closer to war.

Russia's intransigence to Polish independence continued along with Franco-British agitation. In *The American Impact on Russia: 1784-1917*, Max M. Laserson states that the French and British put unrelenting pressure on the Russians. He states that "humiliating notes from these two powers rained on St. Petersburg between April and July, 1863, in which Russian rejection of Polish independence was branded as an act that placed Russia outside the civilized world" <16> F. A. Golder maintains that France and England argued that the Polish question was international in scope as a result of the Congress of Vienna, and therefore all those who signed the 1815 treaty (France, England and Russia) should have a voice in the settlement of the Polish insurrection. <17> He claims that "Russia, on the other hand, insisted that the question was a purely domestic one and that no intervention would be acceptable." <18> The disagreement between the powers was very clear; one of them had to back down or all of them would end up at war. <19>

Russia expected to have to defend her "rights" in Poland because by June, 1863, war seemed inevitable. It was prudent, therefore, for her to make preparations for the ensuing conflict. <20> Russian General-Adjutant Krabbe submitted a contingency plan to the emperor for the navy. Golder explains the condition of Krabbe's navy. He states:

The fleet was very weak, even weaker than it appeared on paper. It was made up of a small squadron in the Pacific, seven war vessels of various descriptions at Cronstadt, and a frigate in the Mediterranean. They were all, or nearly all, of wood, and although they had engines, the principal means of motion was still the sail, the orders being that steam should be resorted to only in case of urgent necessity. <21>

Since the fleet was very weak, Krabbe maintained that a direct confrontation with the superior British navy would not be wise.

Realizing the weaknesses, Krabbe wanted to take advantage of them in the best possible manner. He claimed that the fleet could be best utilized by preying on British and French commerce. Krabbe also realized that "if the fleet remained at home it would probably be blocked in; it was therefore necessary that it should be sent away to some place more conveniently situated for the purpose in mind." <22> Krabbe submitted his proposal to Alexander II and on July 7, 1863, he accepted the proposal.

Russia's plan of action was set. Krabbe picked Captain Lisoskii to lead the fleet out of the Gulf of Finland. He was ordered to "proceed directly to New York." <23> Krabbe also told Lisoskii to try to keep all the ships in New York Harbor, if the Americans permitted it. The same orders were given to Rear-Admiral Popov, with the exception that he was to bring his fleet to San Francisco.

Although the Russians were very confident of their success in the event of a war, they still felt a need to justify the movements of their fleet. M. N. Katkov, editor of the *Moscow Viedomosti* (Gazette), justifies the fleet movement by placing the blame on France. He writes:

The Polish problem, which was exploited against us by France with so much enmity, has compelled us to send a part of our military forces into American waters. We anchored there without either aggressive or altruistic intentions. We don't wish to interfere in American affairs; we went there merely for our own convenience, while the Americans can appreciate these conveniences as well as ourselves. <24>

The Russian flagship *Alexander Nevskii* arrived in New York harbor on September 24, 1863 in the middle of the Civil War. The war became bogged down and neither side was able to make significant advances. The Union had just defeated Confederate forces at Antietam. The South had also been defeated at Gettysburg. Both victories raised hopes for a Union triumph and a quick end to the war. The cost in human lives for these victories was very high. With these high costs for the Union, and continued persistence by the South, enthusiasm from the victories began to fade. Howard L. Kushner, in his article "The Russian Fleet and the American Civil War: Another View," claims that:

By early September 1863, the jubilation in the North over the victory at Gettysburg began to wane. Reports persisted that two iron-clad rams being built at Laird's in Liverpool for the Confederates were completed and about to be released to batter the Union blockade.

<25>

Times were desperate for Lincoln and his Union. Victories were essential to help boost their spirits. Union morale was not helped by the actions of Britain and France. Both countries had declared neutrality. The neutrality, though, was very peculiar, because it meant interference by these countries when it best served their national interest.

In Britain, the ruling class sympathized with the Union's idea of freeing the slaves. Lincoln abandoned that idea at first in order to keep Southern border states in the Union. By doing that, Lincoln lost the support of the British ruling class who wished to see an end to slavery. It was not difficult for the British aristocracy to stop supporting the Union. They had always feared the growing power of the United States. With the nation split, it seemed less of a threat to Britain. Neutrality was the appropriate course for the British. Thomas Bailey supports the idea of neutrality for Britain's self-interest. He claims that "her Britannic Majesty's possessions in North America would be more secure" with a divided United States. <26> Britain refused to get involved in the conflict. The Northerners regarded this "cold neutrality as hardly less than veiled hostility." <27>

France also decided to remain neutral in the American conflict. The neutrality, though, was like the British non-interference. France openly negotiated with the Confederates. Napoleon III had interest in Mexico. These interests were protected best by the United States' inability to divert any attention from the war. French negotiations with the Confederates gave the South some credibility and only made the war effort for the North more difficult.

The actions of Britain and France were damaging to the Union war effort. Their neutrality was superficial in nature and changed at their own convenience. The North was alone in its fight for survival. With the actions of these two countries, morale was low in the North. A foreboding mood spread over the North in the autumn of 1863.

All of a sudden, when events seemed to be at their worst for the North, a ray of sunshine came over the horizon. The Russian fleet had arrived in New York and San Francisco harbors. It was the saving grace the Union needed. Oliver Wendell Holmes, referring to Alexander sending the Russian fleet to America, said he was "our friend when the world was our foe." <28> In *Europe and the American Civil War*, Donaldson Jordan and Edwin Pratt claim that "Europe and the North saw this visit of the Russian fleet as a significant demonstration of Russian friendship for the Union in its hour of need." <29> The incident had a lasting impact on Russian-American relations.

The arrival of the fleet delighted the Lincoln administration. Thomas Bailey claims that "the morale of the United States received a definite boost at a time when it needed stimulants" <30> An excerpt from the diary of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles is an example of the jubilation felt by many Americans. He writes that:

In sending them [the fleet] to this country there is something significant. What will be its effect on France and the French policy we shall learn in due time. It may be moderate; it may exasperate. God bless the Russians. <31>

The president sent Mrs. Lincoln with other dignitaries to New York to greet the Russians. The president's wife drank a toast to the czar. The *New York Sun* wrote that Mrs. Lincoln's visit with the Russians was important because Russia was "the only European power that has maintained a hearty sympathy with the United States during our present troubles." <32> The *New York Herald* commented that "Mrs. Lincoln knew what she was doing" because she knew it would create "a hearty response throughout the country." <33> Mrs. Lincoln's toast was symbolic of the new hope felt by the Union with the arrival of the Russian fleet.

The arrival of the fleets meant hope for the Union, and therefore the Americans were ready to show their gratitude to the Russians. A reception was held in New York City and then the Russian visitors were paraded down Broadway where American and Russia flags were displayed. Tiffany and Company decorated their building with a huge banner that stretched from the roof to the sidewalk. Cheering New Yorkers lined Broadway as the Russians rode by in carriages.

On November 5, the New Yorkers gave the Russians a ball at the Academy of Music. It was a very important affair attended by leading society people. *Harper's Weekly* ran several pages of illustrations of the dancing ladies and their Russian partners. <34> A *Harper's Weekly* reporter commented that "the Russian guests from the fleet were worn out by the expressions of friendship and affection extended to them." <35>

During all of the balls and banquets, each country toasted the other. Alexander was hailed as the emancipator of the serfs and the friend of America. Lincoln was toasted as the friend of Russia. F. A. Golder points out an interesting fact about the celebrations. Golder writes:

All references to the European situation (i.e. Poland) were, purposely avoided. This was good diplomacy, for on the one hand it concealed the real purpose of the visit and on the other it strengthened the Americans in their belief that the fleet came especially for their benefit. The fact that this idea still has such strong hold on our country shows how skillfully the game was played. <36>

It is not clear if the Russians purposely intended to hide the reasons for their visit. It seems very probable that many Americans suspected their true motives, but wanted to think otherwise to help the morale of the Union.

Several articles in journals have been published that analyze American public opinion during the time the fleet arrived in America. The survey of opinions was done by researching editorials in newspapers across the country. Thomas Bailey in his journal article titled "Notes and Documents: The Russian Fleet Myth Re-examined" makes a very concise survey of opinions. Bailey comments that "there was not consistency: different

theories might be mentioned by the same editor on succeeding days." <37> Bailey concludes that the most popular reason for the landing of the fleet (mentioned by 15 editors) was "the one relating to friendship, alliance and succor." <38> Bailey elaborates on this idea, writing:

The Russian warships had come, so the theory ran, as a demonstration of friendship, with the possibility of an alliance, as a result of which the Czar would fight on the side of the North should France and Britain intervene for the South. The fight-on-our-side aspect of this assumption, though suggested in its baldest form by only a few editors, took on greater prominence in the public as the legend crystallized. <39>

Other explanations were found by Bailey in the editorials. He mentions the second most popular explanation was known as the "bottling up" thesis (i.e., the Russians wanted to get their ships out of European waters in order to avoid the possibility of being trapped).

He claims that after the editors mentioned the idea, they "belittle(d) it or threw cold water on it." <40> Bailey concludes, claiming that although other reasons were given for the arrival of the fleet, the friendship-alliance hypothesis is the one that took root. <41>

In April, 1864, orders were sent to the fleet in America by Alexander telling them to return home. The fleet had served a two-fold purpose. It helped to preserve the Union by its presence in America and it protected itself by leaving Europe. Philip Van Doren Stern, author of *When The Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War*, maintains there was an unintended effect of the Russian fleet visit. Stern comments that:

The Russian visit was one more nail in the coffin of the ailing Confederacy, for it ended the last chance of European intervention. And it was now practically impossible for the South to be recognized as an independent nation although its leaders never gave up hope or ceased to make active efforts to gain that status. <42>

The purpose and the effects of the fleet's visit are still debatable. Many have de-emphasized the importance of the fleet and its effect on the outcome of the war. No one can deny that it was a "unique and interesting episode in Russo-American diplomatic relations." <43>

The most questionable part of the entire episode was, "What was the Russians' true intention by sending the fleet to America?" Was Alexander just trying to preserve his own fleet by getting it out of European waters? Did Alexander intend the visit to America to be a show of support to the Union? These questions are important ones to discuss when concluding this topic. F. A. Golder makes some interesting points in the conclusion of his article. He points out some very sensible ideas that help to answer these questions. Golder claims that "it is, of course, true that the fleet was not ordered to America for our benefit, but this should not blind us to the fact that we did not profit by the event as if this had been the case." <44> Alexander was trying to avoid a European war, and in doing so, he indirectly aided the Union. One must remember that this "was a most extraordinary situation: Russia had not in mind to help us but did render us distinct service; the United

States was not conscious that it was contributing in any way to Russia's welfare and yet seems to have saved her from humiliation and perhaps war." <45> Golder best concludes the subject, writing that "there is probably nothing to compare with it in diplomatic history." <46>

Notes

- 1 Thomas A. Bailey, *America Faces Russia: Russian American Relations from Early Times to Our Day* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 1.
- 2 Ibid., p. 2.
- 3 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, The Colonial Press, 1899), p. 422.
- 4 Bailey, p. 72.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., p. 73.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 F. A. Golder, "The Russian Fleet and the Civil War," *American Historical Review* 20 (1915), p. 80-1.
- 9 William F. Nagenast, "The Visit of the Russian Fleet to the United States: Were Americans Deceived," *Russian Review* 8 (1949), p. 46.
- 10 Philip Van Doren Stern, *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965), p. 235.
- 11 Nagenast, p. 47.
- 12 Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire: 1801-1917* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 370.
- 13 Ibid., p. 371.
- 14 Barbara Jelavich, *A Century of Russian Foreign Policy: 1814-1914* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1964), p. 144.
- 15 Watson, p. 433.
- 16 Max M. Laserson, *The American Impact on Russia: 1784-1917* (New York: Collier Books, 1950), p. 220.

17 Golder, p. 802.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 803.

23 Ibid.

24 Laserson, p. 222.

25 Howard I. Kushner, "The Russian Fleet and the American Civil War: Another View," *Historian* 34 (1972), p. 633.

26 Bailey, p. 71.

27 Ibid.

28 Donaldson Jordon and Edwin Pratt, *Europe and the American Civil War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), p. 201.

29 Ibid.

30 Bailey, p. 91.

31 Albert A. Woldman, *Lincoln and the Russians* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1952), p. 141.

32 Kushner, p. 635.

33 Ibid.

34 Stern, p. 232.

35 Ibid.

36 Golder, p. 808.

37 Thomas A. Bailey, "Notes and Documents: The Russian Fleet Myth Re-Examined," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38 (1951), p. 81.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 86.

41 Ibid., p. 87.

42 Stern, p. 234.

43 Golder, p. 811.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p. 812.

46 Ibid.

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