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Before Lincoln Issued the Emancipation Proclamation, This Russian Czar Freed 20 Million Serfs

The parallels between the U.S. president and Alexander II, both of whom fought to end servitude in their nations, are striking



In the not-so-distant past, the Russian and American governments talked up the shared crucibles of their two mid-19th century leaders as a way of improving diplomatic relations. Illustration by Meilan Solly / Photos via Wikimedia Commons under public domain



Frederic J. Frommer

Relations between the United States and Russia haven't always been so frosty. A century and a half ago, in the 1860s, the countries' leaders—President Abraham Lincoln and Czar Alexander II—enjoyed a warm rapport and a common purpose: ending servitude in their respective nations.

Leading up to the American Civil War, the two countries were on similar paths, with momentum to end serfdom growing in Russia as abolitionists fought to end slavery in the U.S. Proponents of both movements pointed to the example set by such European powers as France, Britain and Denmark, all of which had abolished slavery by 1848.

"Both President Lincoln and Czar Alexander II were aware that their countries had become outliers when it came to slavery and serfdom," says Carolyn Harris, an author and historian at the University of Toronto. "They were both aware that change was on the horizon and contemplated how to manage this change."



A 1907 painting by Boris Kustodiev depicting Russian serfs listening to the proclamation of the Emancipation Manifesto in 1861 [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

Alexander took action first, freeing some 20 million serfs through the Emancipation Manifesto on March 3, 1861. In one of several striking historical connections between the two men, that happened to be the day before Lincoln's first inauguration.

But the new American president—who ran on a campaign platform of stopping slavery's expansion into new territories and states, not abolishing it—wasn't at the same point as his Russian counterpart yet. "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists," he declared in his inaugural speech. "I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."

Still, Americans took note of the czar's proclamation, which ended a centuries-old practice that bound peasants to the land they lived on and, by extension, their landlords.

The manifesto "absolutely accelerated the demise of slavery" in the United States, says Ted Widmer, a historian at the City University of New York and author of the book *Lincoln on the Verge: Thirteen Days to Washington*. "It got favorable press coverage in the North. It was considered a triumph of enlightened leadership."

Alexander's decision to free the serfs made the U.S. even more of an outsider among Western nations. By then, it was one of the few to still allow slavery, alongside the Netherlands and several other prominent holdouts. (At the time of Russia's Emancipation Manifesto, most countries that previously practiced serfdom had already abolished it, among them Hungary, Denmark and Croatia.)



Grigory Myasoyedov, *Peasants Reading the Emancipation Manifesto*, 1873 [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

"It's embarrassing if you consider your nation to be modern and ethical," Widmer says. "So much of our history was founded upon the idea that we were giving a lot of freedom to our people—it's right there in the Declaration of Independence, which Lincoln cited all the time. Slavery was such a glaring contradiction that it forced a lot of self-contemplation. Lincoln was fantastic about pointing out these inconsistencies."

Horace Greeley, editor of the *New-York Tribune* and one of America's leading abolitionists, was quick to contrast the czar's decisive emancipation with the inaction of the U.S.

"The whole world and all succeeding ages will applaud the Emperor Alexander for the abolition of Slavery in Russia," he wrote in April 1861, a few days before

the start of the Civil War. "But what does the world think, what will future generations think, of the attempt to make Slavery perpetual in America?"

In Russia, the battle over serfdom was part of a larger debate between two opposing intellectual movements: the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. As Harris explains, the groups questioned whether Russia should be "looking outward to the West and comparing itself to European powers. Or should Russia look to its own history, ... view itself more as an Asian power and look to the East, and focus on its own traditions, rather than comparing with the West?"

The pro-modernization Westernizers opposed serfdom, seeing it as a sign of Russia being a backward nation. To them, "the idea of serfdom and the peasantry being bound to the land seemed particularly dated. Serfdom was associated with the Middle Ages," Harris says. Not all Slavophiles defended the institution, she adds, but they argued that whatever decision Russia made should come from its own history and culture.



Portrait of Alexander II [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

Russian serfdom dated back to a 1649 legal code that gave landowners total authority over peasant serfs who lived on their land. That control included authority over serfs' freedom to move to other places. In the U.S., slavery's defenders drew on baseless claims of physical differences between races to justify slavery; in Russia, serfdom's advocates cited class differences. A key distinction between the two practices was that Russian serfs were the same race and national origin as their landowners. They were also viewed as members of society, however lowly they might be.

Alexander was a Westernizer, and he wasted little time in divulging his plans to free the serfs upon becoming czar in 1855.

"I've decided to do it, gentlemen," he told an assembly of noblemen in 1856. "If we don't give the peasants freedom from above, they will take it from below."

The czar had toured Europe as a young man and met Queen Victoria, who ascended to the British throne in 1837, four years after Britain abolished slavery. "Alexander II had a very clear idea of what was happening elsewhere in Europe," Harris says, "and wanted to bring Russia into line as a European power," as opposed to an Eastern power. She notes that Russia had previously been a Western power, most prominently during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century.

Prior to the Civil War, the debates swirling around American slavery and Russian serfdom influenced each other across the Atlantic. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an antislavery novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, had a significant impact in Russia, striking a familiar chord with Russian opponents of serfdom. "Many of the scenes described in the book seem like an exact depiction of equally frightful scenes in Russia," wrote Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev to American abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman after receiving a copy of the book from her.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin* circulated widely after its publication in 1852," says Amanda Bellows, a historian at the New School and author of the book *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination*. "It stimulated a great deal of debate globally about the topics of slavery and freedom."



Eliza comes to tell Uncle Tom that he is sold, and that she is running away to save her child. Page 62.

Full-page illustration by Hammatt Billings for the first edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Eliza tells Uncle Tom that he has been sold and she is running away to save her child. [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

She adds, "Educated Russians read and discussed the book in the late 1850s. That was a time when Russian government officials, many of whom were members of the nobility who owned serfs, crafted the terms of Russia's Emancipation Manifesto."

Slavery advocates, meanwhile, found common cause with defenders of serfdom. George Fitzhugh, a pro-slavery Virginia lawyer and author, wrote in an 1857 essay that "excluding Russia, the South is the only conservative section of

civilized Christendom.” He fretted that in the North, “Black Republicanism is in the ascendant, and that is radical and revolutionary in the extreme.”

A century before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Red Scare vilified suspected communists in the U.S., Fitzhugh declared that “all abolitionists are socialists, who propose to destroy all institutions of society.”

Soon after the American Civil War started in April 1861, Russia made it clear to the U.S. where its loyalties lied.

“In all cases, the American Union may count on the most heart-felt sympathy on the part of the [czar] in the course of the serious crisis which the Union is currently going through,” wrote Russia’s foreign minister in a July 1861 communique to the Russian envoy in Washington. Alexander even added a handwritten notation: “So be it.”

In response, Lincoln told Russia’s ambassador to the U.S. to “please inform the Emperor of our gratitude and assure His Majesty that the whole nation appreciates this new manifestation of friendship.” The two leaders would continue to correspond during the war, signing letters to each other “Your Good Friend.”

“It does seem like they were approaching genuine friendliness in their letters,” says Widmer, noting that the closing salutation is warmer than diplomatic protocol requires.



Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln*, 1864 [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

“There is that very meaningful early expression of support for the union cause from Russia, which is surprising because Russia is so far away,” Widmer adds. “Russia sends a genuine and heartfelt welcome message of support for the union cause. It gave Lincoln some encouragement from a very unexpected quarter.”

In January 1863—two years after Alexander freed the serfs—Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, liberating enslaved people in rebellious states. The edict was limited in its reach, maintaining slavery in the border states that had remained loyal to the Union; slavery wasn’t officially abolished in the U.S. until the ratification of the 13th Amendment in December 1865.

Bellows notes that the two leaders had similar monikers: the Czar-Liberator and the Great Emancipator. But Lincoln’s Southern critics invoked the

comparison in a negative light, calling the Emancipation Proclamation a high-handed decree in the manner of the czar's edict and attacking the president as an "American czar."

Later in 1863, Russia went beyond encouraging letters, sending Navy ships to New York and San Francisco harbors in a show of support for the Union cause at a time when the U.S. was worried that France and Britain might recognize the Confederacy. In New York, Russia's sailors were feted at a lavish ball that featured decorations of U.S. and Russian flags. "The presence in our waters of a squadron belonging to His Imperial Majesty's Navy cannot but be a source of pleasure and happiness to our countrymen," wrote U.S. Navy Secretary Gideon Welles in a letter to the Russian ambassador, adding in his diary, "God bless the Russians."

Around this same time, Russia's foreign minister warned an American diplomat in St. Petersburg that the Union had "few friends among the powers. England rejoices over what is happening to you" and France "is not your friend. ... I cannot express to you how profound an anxiety we feel—how serious are our fears."



A drawing depicting the 1881 assassination of Alexander II [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

“This was a time period when relations between the United States and Russia were quite strong, because both were concerned about Britain,” says Harris. “They saw they had some common interests.” (A few years earlier, Russia had lost the Crimean War to an alliance of Britain, the Ottoman Empire, France and Sardinia-Piedmont.)

In Europe, some observers took note of this strange dynamic. An October 1863 cartoon in a London magazine, for instance, showed Alexander and Lincoln shaking hands across the divide as deadly fighting unfolded behind them, above a caption that reads “Extremes Meet.”

During the Civil War, Lincoln saw political advantage in comparing serfdom and slavery. On Christmas Day in 1863, the president wrote a letter to his former diplomat in Russia, who had recently returned to Washington, with this request: "I think a good lecture or two on 'Serfs, Serfdom and Emancipation in Russia' would be both interesting and valuable. Could not you get up such a thing?"

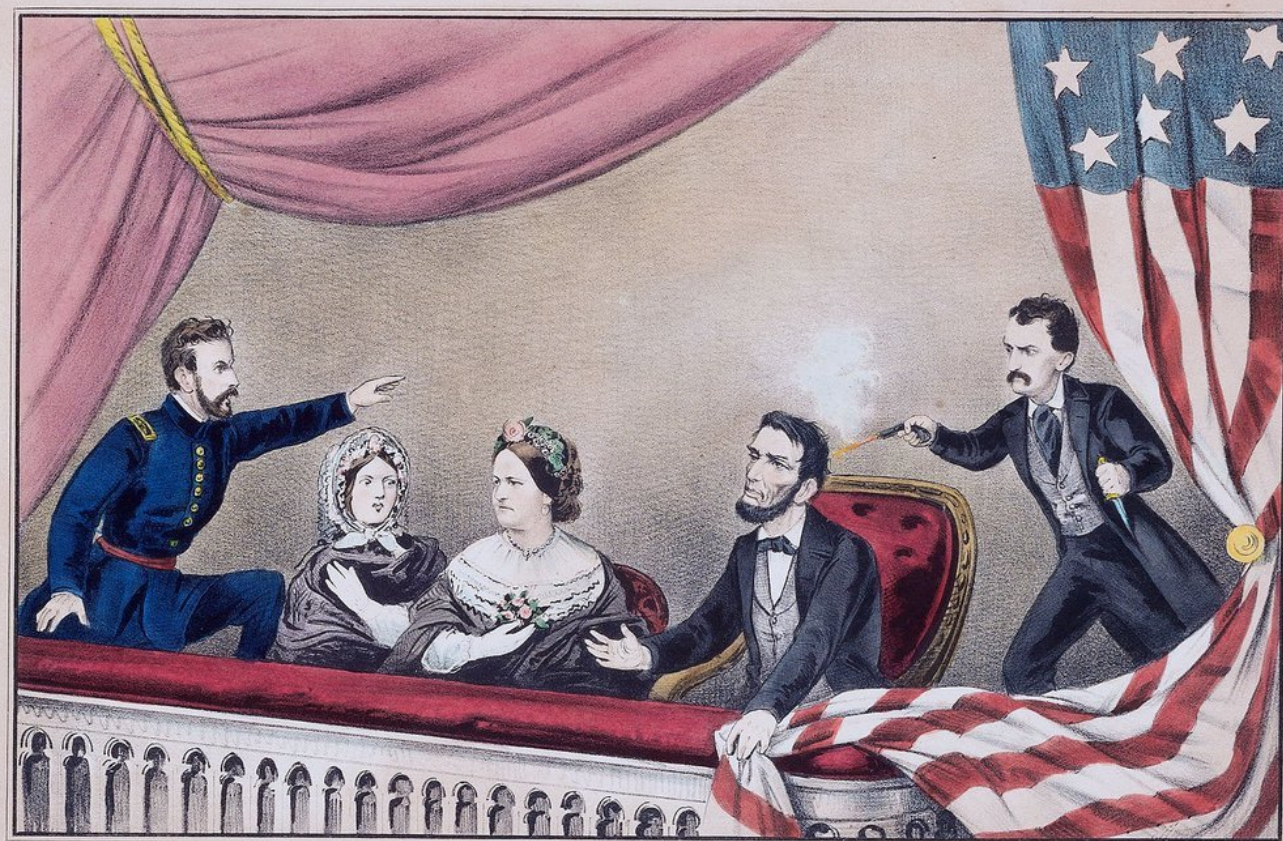
There were, of course, significant differences between serfdom and slavery and how they were abolished. "The serfs were not enslaved in quite the same way. They had certain limited rights," notes Widmer. "The defenders of serfdom in Russia were never as ideologically committed as the defenders of slavery in America were, and of course the racial politics were very different."

And while Russia ended serfdom by edict, it took a bloody Civil War to end slavery in the United States.

Still, the parallels are notable.

"These two hugely significant acts of emancipation are less than two years apart, in these two countries that are oddly similar in some ways and very different in other ways," Widmer says. He adds that people had "been thinking about America and Russia in the same thought. Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* speculates on the future and thinks [it] will be dominated by Russia and America. And he was correct in a lot of ways."

Lincoln and Alexander had something else in common. Both would be assassinated—Lincoln by a Confederate sympathizer just a few days after the U.S. won the Civil War in April 1865, and Alexander in 1881, roughly 20 years after his Emancipation Manifesto, by a revolutionary group that aimed to overthrow the Russian autocracy.



Maj. Rathbone.

Miss Harris.

Mrs. Lincoln.

President.

Assassin.

**THE ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN,
AT FORD'S THEATRE WASHINGTON, D.C. APRIL 14TH 1865.**

Engraved according to Act of Congress, 1865, by Currier & Ives, in the artist's office of the District Court of the United States, for the Southern District of N.Y.
Published by Currier & Ives, 152 Nassau St. New York.

Lithograph depicting the assassination of Abraham Lincoln [Public domain via Wikimedia Commons](#)

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“Both were fighting and introducing respect for human beings and respect for freedom that hadn’t been known in either the United States or in Russia,” said Russia’s then-ambassador to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak, at a 2009 event in Kansas City commemorating Lincoln’s 200th birthday and the exhibition “The Tsar and the President.”

Two years later, the State Department and the Russian government helped finance a similar exhibition in Moscow, “The Tsar & The President, Alexander II & Abraham Lincoln: Liberator & Emancipator,” in the Russian federal archives building. In front of the building stood a newly created, larger-than-life sculpture of the two leaders shaking hands. Some attendees at the opening viewed the exhibition as a reflection of President Barack Obama’s “reset” in relations between the two countries.

One of the speakers was former Missouri Democratic congressman James W. Symington, chairman of the American-Russian Cultural Cooperation Foundation, whose great-grandfather, John Hay, had been Lincoln’s personal secretary and biographer. Lincoln and Alexander, Symington said, were “two friends who never personally met but were together in spirit.”



Frederic J. Frommer

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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