

# The Other Emancipation Proclamation

By ADAM GOODHEART

St. Petersburg, Russia, March 3, 1861

Four thousand miles from where President-elect Abraham Lincoln was counting down the final hours before his inauguration, the leader of a very different nation prepared for the most momentous day of his reign. Czar Alexander II rose before dawn and, dressed in his favorite cherry-red dressing gown, stood contemplatively by the window, watching the pale light grow in the square outside the Winter Palace. This morning he would set 23 million of his subjects free.

The tall, bewhiskered Russian emperor differed in many respects from the tall, bewhiskered Illinois lawyer. He had been born not into frontier obscurity, but amid the salutes of cannons and the festive tolling of the Kremlin's bells. The two men would never meet, although they would exchange a number of letters, which they would sign "Your good friend, Alexander" and "Your good friend, A. Lincoln."

Yet when Alexander signed his emancipation decree on the eve of Lincoln's inauguration, 150 years ago today, the coincidence of timing hinted at deeper connections. In fact, the czar's liberation of Russia's serfs may even have lent momentum to the forces that would soon liberate America's slaves.

Comparisons between the two systems were already familiar to Americans of every region and party. In 1858 the Georgia proslavery apologist Thomas Cobb listed certain alleged similarities between Russian serfs and American blacks: "They are contented with their lot and seek no change. They are indolent, constitutionally ... They are filthy in their persons, and in their rude huts; exhibiting, in all their handiworks, the ignorance of a savage and the stupidity of a dolt." A Virginia writer, George Fitzhugh, wrote of the "cheerfulness" of the serfs and noted approvingly that Russia was, along with the American South, "the only conservative section of civilized christendom," since it too kept its inferior classes in bondage. (He condemned all other Western nations, and the free states, as "socialist.")

Northern leaders, on the other hand, pointed with shame to the fact that the world's greatest democracy and its most infamous autocracy stood alone among major Western powers in retaining slavery. In 1850, no less a politician than William Seward, condemning Russia as "the most arbitrary Despotism, and most barbarous State in Europe," asked rhetorically, "Shall we ... select our institutions from the dominions of the Czar?" Five years later, Lincoln himself wrote to his old friend Joshua Speed:

Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes.' When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics.' When it comes to this I should 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.

There were both similarities and differences between the two versions of servitude. Russia's serfs were bought and sold, although never on anything like the scale of America's domestic slave trade. And serfs, too, were viciously flogged and sexually exploited; had few legal rights; and could make hardly any important decisions without their masters' permission.

On the other hand, serfs were customarily required to labor for their masters only three days a week; the rest of the time they were free to work for their own benefit; Russian law even mandated certain minimum allotments of land for each family. (Unlike American slaves, they could also own real estate with their masters' consent.) Serfs had not, of course, been kidnapped from their native country and thrust into the horrors of the Middle Passage. And the relatively static nature of Russia's economy and society meant that serf families were far less vulnerable to sudden, arbitrary separations and dislocations.

Perhaps the most significant difference was that by the 1850s, America's slave system was growing more and more rigid and confining while Russia's was swiftly dissolving. Back in the 1780s, Catherine the Great – like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison – had admitted that serfdom was wrong but done little to curtail it. But her 19th-century successors forbade the sale of serfs apart from the land on which they resided and made various other decrees protecting them from abuse (although these often went unenforced). By mid-century, fewer than half of Russia's peasants lived as serfs.

No one was terribly surprised in 1856 when, barely a year into his reign, Alexander II announced to an assembly of noblemen, "I've decided to do it, gentlemen. If we don't give the peasants freedom from above, they will take it from below." After five more years of bureaucratic dithering among various commissions and committees, he finally determined to abolish serfdom the old-fashioned way: by imperial fiat.

Alexander chose Sunday, March 3, 1861, for his epochal act. (Under Russia's antiquated Julian calendar, the date was reckoned as Feb. 19.) That morning, he prayed alone in the chapel of the Winter Palace, then attended a grand cathedral mass with his family. After breakfast, he went into his private study – separated by a curtain from his bedchamber – and sat down at a desk piled high with papers. Atop this heap lay the historic manifesto that would grant the serfs their freedom in two years' time. The czar crossed himself, dipped his pen in an inkwell and signed.

He waited another couple of weeks to announce this decree to the nation and the world. Some of Alexander's advisors predicted that the serfs, emboldened by the news, would stage a revolution. Others feared that the serf-holding aristocrats would try to overthrow him. Civil wars had been fought in Russia over far less. Wisely, though, the czar had decided to grant land to the newly freed families and reparations to the aristocrats (many of whom promptly decamped with their windfall to live the good life in Paris or Biarritz). In the end, calm prevailed.

Across the Atlantic, however, the news from Russia made waves in an already turbulent political sea. Just a few days before the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, Horace Greeley wrote in the New-York Tribune:

The Manifesto of the Czar is throughout in most striking contrast to the recent Manifestoes of the leaders of the rebel slaveholders in this country. [The Confederates] with brutal coolness doom a whole race to eternal bondage ... The Russian autocrat, on the other hand, admits that man has certain rights ... The whole world and all succeeding ages will applaud the Emperor Alexander for the abolition of Slavery in Russia. But what does the world think, what will future generations think, of the attempt to make Slavery perpetual in America?

Despite the two nations' vast cultural and political differences, some of the same forces were operating in both. Like the United States, 19th-century Russia was expanding aggressively across a continent, building railroads and telegraph lines as fast as it could, and guzzling foreign capital in the process. Those same new technologies had also broken down the geographic isolation of both countries. What the rest of the world thought – especially regarding slavery and serfdom – suddenly mattered more than ever.

In the months that followed Alexander's decree, Americans watched intently to see what the reaction within Russia would be. Eventually news came of certain scattered disturbances among the peasants, who were impatient with the two-year delay of their freedom. In November 1861, Greeley's Tribune suggested that this proved "how delicate a business is partial emancipation." Overall, the paper concluded, it showed that nothing less than instantaneous and total emancipation would suffice in America: "In dealing with our own problem, it concerns us to consider alike the encouragement and the warning of [Russia's] example."

As for the czar, he too was peering across the ocean. In July, his foreign minister sent a communiqué to the Russian envoy in Washington, expressing the strongest support of the Union cause yet offered by any European power:

For the more than 80 years that it has existed, the American Union owes its independence, its towering rise, and its progress, to the concord of its members, consecrated, under the auspices of its illustrious founder, by institutions which have been able to reconcile union with liberty ... 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.

To this document Alexander added a notation in his own hand: "So be it."

The modern-day Russian historian Edvard Radzinsky, an admirer of Alexander, has called him "a reformer for a new kind for Russia – a two-faced Janus, one head looking forward while the other looked back longingly." In this respect, Radzinsky has suggested, the czar resembled Mikhail Gorbachev. He might also have compared Alexander to Lincoln. Like the emperor, the president looked

backward (toward America's founding principles) as well as forward (toward a new birth of freedom). He used radical methods (freeing the slaves) to achieve conservative goals (preserving the Union).

When, more than a year after Alexander's, Lincoln issued his own Emancipation Proclamation, it too was handed down as an executive decree from on high. (The president's opponents assailed him as an "autocrat," an "American Czar.") It too proclaimed only partial freedom. And perhaps unwisely, Lincoln – unlike his Russian counterpart – provided neither compensation to the slaveholders nor land to the freedmen.

The czar outlived the president, but he too would fall by the hand of an assassin. On March 1, 1881 – nearly 20 years to the day after freeing the serfs – Alexander was riding through St. Petersburg in a closed carriage when two young radicals hurled bombs. The emperor, his legs torn to shreds and stomach ripped open, was carried back to his bedroom-study in the Winter Palace. Alexander died just a few feet from the spot where he had signed his decree of liberation.

**Fully answer the following questions from the article "The Other Emancipation"**

1. Identify the similarities between the systems of American slavery and Russian serfdom.
2. What are the main differences that existed between these two systems?
3. By the mid 19th century, how were these systems viewed by their respective countries?
4. Why did Northerners in the United States feel "shame" when comparing the United States to Russia?
5. What did Abraham Lincoln mean when he wrote that Russia is "... where despotism can be taken pure, without the base alloy of hypocrisy."?
6. In what way was Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation "unwise" when compared to the Russian emancipation manifesto?
7. To what do you think the czar was referring to when he declared his "... most heart-felt sympathy ..." for the United States? What were the factors that contributed to him feeling this way?