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Northerners' Perspectives on American Emancipation and the End of Russian Serfdom

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NORTHERNERS' PERSPECTIVES ON AMERICAN EMANCIPATION AND
THE END OF RUSSIAN SERFDOM

By:

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program
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Abstract

This thesis explores the various perspectives that Northern Americans had on Russian serfdom and its emancipation. This era was significant to both Russia and the United States because each country experienced tremendous reforms including the abolitions of their unfree labor institutions. Generally, Northern Americans viewed serfdom as a milder form of forced labor and suspected that it would be eradicated soon. Abolitionists used rumors of Russian emancipation to advocate for the end of American slavery. Diminishing the realities of serfdom in the American media was a way for abolitionists to condemn the brutality of American slavery by comparison. After the Civil War ended, Reconstruction era politics shaped the way political party-endorsing newspapers would report on the progress of emancipation and reforms in Russia. This thesis will also analyze the frequency of American reports on Russian serfdom and the progress of its emancipation during the Antebellum era, while considering the political affiliation of the news sources when possible. Overall, this thesis provides a much-needed examination of the transnational effect of Russian Emancipation on Northern Americans, the Union effort, and the movement to abolish slavery in America.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Northern Perspectives on Russian Serfdom Before the Emancipation of the Serfs	14
Chapter 2: Northern Perspectives on Russian Serfdom During the Civil War	32
Chapter 3: American Reconstruction, the Status of Freed Slaves and Freed Serfs	48
Bibliography	67

Introduction

The early 1860s brought dramatic changes to both American and Russian societies. The emancipation of Russian serfs and American slaves occurred in that decade. While the timing appears coincidental, discussions about the morality of each system of bondage had been taking place long before emancipation. American abolitionists had debated slavery with proslavery supporters long before the Civil War. Regardless of their views on slavery, Americans of the Antebellum era understood that Russia had its own type of unfree labor and included discussions of serfdom in their discourse.

While Russia was mysterious to most nineteenth-century Americans, well-educated Northerners learned more about serfdom and Russian life through memoirs published by Europeans that had lived abroad in Russia and newspaper articles from European correspondents. Americans also read about serfdom through fictional works, such as Ivan Turgenev's *A Hunter's Sketches*, which was published the same year as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; both works dramatically altered the emancipation debates in their respective countries.¹ As a result, American understanding of Russian serfdom shaped debates over U.S. slavery. To recognize the transnational nature of nineteenth-century emancipation movements, this thesis will analyze the Northern American perspectives on Russian serfdom from the early 1830s to the late 1870s. In addition to identifying these perspectives, this study will examine how these views shaped the debates on the abolition of American slavery and its aftermath during the Reconstruction era. In addition, this thesis will assess the extent to which these views evolved during this period and the effect of this evolution, particularly during the Civil War

¹ David Korn, "Turgenev in Nineteenth Century America," *The Russian Review* 27, no. 4 (1968): 461-67, accessed July 2, 2020, doi:10.2307/127438.

when slaves and serfs were freed. This thesis will analyze how the progress of Russian emancipation influenced Northern attitudes towards American slavery, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction era.

While Northerners included discussion of Russian Emancipation in their debates over American slavery and freedom, this discourse reflected their preexisting views on slavery in the United States and its aftermath. In the antebellum era, many Northerners considered serfdom a milder version of slavery. Abolitionists used what they perceived as the “mildness” of the Russian institution to attack the harshness of American chattel slavery. When northerners realized that Russia planned to end this institution, it was during the secession crisis after Lincoln’s election. As a result, they compared the United States and slaveholders’ actions unfavorably to the Russian aristocracy's acceptance of this reform to condemn Southerner’s disloyalty.

Once the war began in earnest, many Northerners found encouragement from the emancipation of the serfs to advance their abolition efforts. Previously, discussions of serfdom had only appeared in Abolitionist newspapers, now mainstream papers, particularly those that supported Lincoln and the Republican Party reported on serf emancipation. Since these newspapers supported the end of slavery, they often used the example of an autocratic Russia that freed its serfs to the democratic United States that failed to free its slaves as a way of encouraging northerners to embrace emancipation as a war aim. Once the war ended, during Reconstruction, political tensions between the Republicans and the Democrats shaped the way Northerners perceived Russian reforms. Republicans seemed more optimistic about Russian emancipation and endorsed expanding the rights of former serfs, just as they supported increased rights for former slaves. In contrast, Democratic newspapers had a more negative view of

Russian reforms because of their opposition to expanded rights for formerly enslaved Americans. While white Americans understood that emancipation was a transnational phenomenon, the fate of freed men and women relied on which party won the argument in domestic politics. Unfortunately, the Democrats in the North and South prevailed, and black Americans waited another century for the promise of emancipation to be fulfilled.

Historiography

While this topic has not been discussed explicitly in any published scholarship, there are secondary sources that compare American slavery with Russian serfdom. An article by William C. Hines titled *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom: A Preliminary Comparison* (1975) provides a brief comparison between slavery and serfdom in respect to patterns of ownership, obligations, types of labor (for example, maid and butler vs. field hand), and forms of resistance. Hines argues that the two systems had not been compared previously because one was race based and the other was not.² Peter Kolchin's *In Defense of Servitude: American Proslavery and Russian Proserfdom Arguments, 1760-1860* (1980), compares the similarities between the ideologies of those that defended American slavery and Russian serfdom and discusses the developments of their arguments for forced servitude. Kolchin argues that examining the justifications for slavery and serfdom is one way to determine more information about the attitudes of masters, as well as the systems of bondage.³ Expanding on this work, Kolchin's *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (1987) contrasted American slavery and

² William C. Hine, "American Slavery and Russian Serfdom: A Preliminary Comparison," *Phylon* (1960-) 36, no. 4 (1975): 383-384.

³ Peter Kolchin, "In Defense of Servitude: American Proslavery and Russian Proserfdom Arguments, 1760-1860," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 4 (1980): 809-27, accessed July 29, 2020, doi:10.2307/1868873.

Russian serfdom. Kolchin provides a thorough analysis of the many aspects of slavery and serfdom, identifying the parallels between American Slavery and Russian serfdom. Kolchin presents the two systems of labor as in some ways dissimilar, but in others alike, specifically in their roles in social and economic development in their respective nations.⁴ Kolchin's "After Serfdom: Russian Emancipation in Comparative Perspective" (1999) focuses mainly on serfdom and emancipation in Russia but maintains a broad comparative perspective to Western societies, such as the United States. In this study, he assesses agrarian labor relations, the effect of emancipation on peasants and society, and the debates over the meaning of freedom among various social groups.⁵ Similarly, Kolchin's work in "Comparative Perspectives on Emancipation in the U.S. South: Reconstruction, Radicalism, and Russia" (2012) examines emancipation but focuses more on American emancipation.⁶

Background: Chattel Slavery vs. Russian Serfdom; What was Russian Serfdom?

Assessing the Antebellum American perceptions of Russian serfdom requires a discussion on the differences between these institutions. Most Americans of that era were more familiar with our "peculiar" institution. Slaves first appeared in the North American British colonies in 1619 when twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown.⁷ For the first nearly two hundred years of American history, the slave trade flourished. The United States banned slave importation in 1807 (taking effect in 1808).⁸ The United States took this measure because

⁴ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*.

⁵ Peter Kolchin, "After Serfdom: Russian Emancipation in Comparative Perspective," as seen in *Terms of Labor: Slavery, Serfdom, and Free Labor*, edited by Stanley L. Engerman (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁶ Peter Kolchin, "Comparative Perspectives on Emancipation in the U.S. South: Reconstruction, Radicalism, and Russia," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 2 (2012): 203-32, accessed July 29, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/26070223.

⁷ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York, New York: Hill and Wang Press, 1993), 3.

⁸ U.S. Constitution art. I, § 9.

enslaved men and women in North America increased their numbers naturally by having children and maintaining families. By 1860, there were nearly four million slaves living in the U.S., either born into slavery or brought to America to be sold.⁹ American slavery was considered chattel slavery. The word “chattel” was derived from the medieval Latin word *capitale*, which was the root of the words “cattle” and “capital.”¹⁰ In this form of slavery, slaves have no rights in their person because they are property. Slaves could be bought and sold, inherited, or used to pay taxes or debts. These enslaved men and women have no civil, political, or social rights. For example, slave marriage was not legally sanctioned, nor did they have any legal right to their children, who could be sold away from them at any time. These slaves had no civil or political rights and generally lacked the ability to profit from their own labor or even decide when and who to marry. Unless freed, their bondage lasted their lifetime and was hereditary in perpetuity.¹¹

In contrast, serfdom began earlier. The first Russian serfs appeared in the Kievan period of Russian history.¹² From 1497-1649, a series of legal codes were enacted that limited the mobility of peasants to move to another estate, reduced the rights of peasants, and forced many peasants into serfdom. The first major restriction of peasant mobility, under the reign of Vasiliï II, was the introduction of St. George’s Day.¹³ Traditionally, on the feast day of the Orthodox St. George, November 26, peasants could move and rent from another landlord that promised them

⁹ Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 53.

¹⁰David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.

¹¹ Suzanne Miers, “Contemporary Forms of Slavery,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 34, no. 3 (2000): 714-47, accessed July 11, 2020, doi:10.2307/486218.

¹² Jerome Blum, “The Early History of the Russian Peasantry,” *The Journal of Economic History* 11, no. 2 (1951): 153-58, accessed July 13, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/2113128.

¹³ Richard Hellie, *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 83-84.

better conditions. In late 1580, the government temporarily repealed the right of peasants to move on St. George's Day. These years in which the officials blocked peasants' mobility are deemed the "forbidden years."¹⁴ If peasants moved without permission, they were considered fugitives. In the 1590s, a statute of limitations limited lords' right to sue their fugitive peasants to five years; if a runaway peasant was not found before it expired, they would be considered free.¹⁵ Over the next approximately fifty years, landlords failed to convince statesmen to repeal the statute of limitations. While these attempts were unsuccessful, the time limits increased to ten years in 1642 and fifteen years in 1647.¹⁶ Following a 1648 Moscow riot, a law code (known as *Ulozhenie*) eliminated the time limit and removed the last fragments of rights that peasants had to move elsewhere.¹⁷ Historian Richard Hellie in *Enserfment and Military Change in Muscovy* regards the Code of 1649 as "the move [that] instituted the final enserfment of the Russian peasantry."¹⁸ Similarly, Lazar Volin, author of *A Century of Russian Agriculture: From Alexander II to Krushev*, argues that the Code of 1649 signals the peasants' loss of freedom and "supported the tightening noose of serfdom."¹⁹

The main types of Russian serfs were private serfs (*pomescic'i krest' jane*), appanage serfs (*udel'nye krest'jane*), and household serfs (*dvorovye ljudi*).²⁰ Owners often referred to their serfs as "souls," and the government required male serfs to pay a soul tax.²¹ They were bound to the land of their nobles (*pomeshchiki*) and restricted from leaving their noble's estate without

¹⁴ Hellie, 96.

¹⁵ Hellie, 105.

¹⁶ Hellie, 131-134.

¹⁷ Hellie, 137.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Lazar Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture: From Alexander II to Krushev* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), 13-14. Serfs also lost their rights to own private property.

²⁰ Peter Toumanoff, "The Development of the Peasant Commune in Russia," *The Journal of Economic History* 41, no. 1 (1981 Volin.): 514.

²¹ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 27, 63.

permission. In most cases, serfs had no choice in their occupations.²² On some estates, nobles allowed their serfs to seek supplementary income by producing and selling their own goods or traveling to another city for employment. When traveling to another city, the serfs needed to have a passport and pay certain fees to their owners. Wealthier serf households often hired labor from other serfs.²³ Russian serfs paid dues to their masters known as *obrok*, which could be paid either through cash or in kind with goods such as eggs, butter, and meat, or through *barshchina*, where serfs devoted days of labor to their noble owners in which they cultivated seignorial land. Landowners in the western borderlands frequently demanded *barshchina* as the common form of payment, where the soil was less fertile.²⁴ As compensation for these dues, serfs used allotted plots of land from their owner's estate. Generally, Russian serfs and their owners shared the same race and religion, Eastern Orthodox. However, serfs in the Russian borderlands during the Imperial Era had noble owners of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic faiths.²⁵ In general, Jews in Russia did not become serfs and lived in their own communities.²⁶ A unique feature of Russian serfdom is the village commune, known as *mir*. Redistributive and made up of subsistence farmers, *mir* provided village members enough land to produce food for each household based on the number of people living there and the number of workers it housed.²⁷ *Mir* held assemblies to decide the redistribution of land every one to two years.²⁸ Serfs tilled plots of land called strips usually smaller than the average American farm.²⁹ Land was generally

²² Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 111.

²³ Tracy Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom*, Cambridge Studies in Economic History-Second Series (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 150-154. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511974946, accessed June 10, 2020.

²⁴ David Moon, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2014), 15.

²⁵ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 144-145.

²⁶ Serge A. Zenkovsky, "The Emancipation of the Serfs in Retrospect," *The Russian Review* 20, no. 4 (1961): 280-93, accessed July 11, 2020, doi:10.2307/126692.

²⁷ Moon, 16.

²⁸ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 204.

²⁹ Moon, 16; Zenkovsky, 291.

given to the male head of household. The *mir* provided serfs with assistance in times of sudden tragedies, such as illness or fires.³⁰ Households felt obligated to produce enough so that they did not need assistance from the *mir*. Serfs experienced a strong sense of belonging in their village communities, as their ancestors typically lived there for generations.³¹

Serfdom had implications outside small villages. While historians acknowledge that Catherine the Great criticized serfdom, she gave serfs to statesmen and successful generals as rewards.³² Tsars attempted to limit the separation of serf families. In 1721, Peter I forbid the sale of family members apart from one another. Twice during the nineteenth century, Nicholas I halted the sale of unmarried children without their parents.³³ Tsars relied on serfs for manpower. Serfs made up most of the Russian military. For the majority of the eighteenth century, serfs recruited into the army were required to serve for life. In 1793, officials cut their service terms to twenty-five years. In 1834, serfs served twenty years on active duty.³⁴

Thus, while American slaves and Russian serfs shared a dependency on their masters, serfdom was more complex in that there were several categories within serfdom. Serfs and slaves both lacked civil and legal rights and faced punishment for misconduct and attempted escape. Those who benefited from these unfree labor systems made similar arguments in defense of forced servitude.³⁵

American Antislavery and Proslavery Ideologies

³⁰ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 204.

³¹ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 99.

³² Moon, 38.

³³ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 117.

³⁴ Moon, 10, 51.

³⁵ William C. Hine, "American Slavery and Russian Serfdom: A Preliminary Comparison," *Phylon* (1960-) 36, no. 4 (1975):379, 380, 382, accessed July 30, 2020, doi:10.2307/274636.

Debates about abolishing slavery began during the American colonial period. The first attempts to limit slavery in America came from the Northern Quakers, who prohibited their members from owning slaves, and expelled members that refused to free their slaves beginning in 1776.³⁶ The Pennsylvania Quakers became heavily involved in the formation of America's first organization against slavery, the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery.³⁷ Abolitionist societies strove to help slaves and fugitive slaves through legal means, by purchasing their freedom, and by lobbying for more rights for slaves and the abolition of slavery.³⁸

It is important to mention the differences between the ideological views of abolitionists and antislavery individuals.³⁹ In many ways, there was a lack of unity amongst those that rejected slavery. Those favoring antislavery tended to form cliques and would focus on each other's differences instead of similarities.⁴⁰ While both groups shared the same end goal of abolishing slavery, abolitionists tended to favor immediate emancipation, while the antislavery individuals favored gradual emancipation. Also, abolitionists wanted to not only free the slaves but also grant them equality to whites through civil and voting rights. Individuals that considered themselves to be antislavery (but not abolitionist) recognized the immoralities of slavery but

³⁶ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2016), 66.

³⁷ Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 16.

³⁸ M. Scott Heerman, "Abolishing Slavery in Motion: Foreign Captivity and International Abolitionism in the Early United States," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2020): 248-271.

³⁹ Many Antebellum era Republicans would be considered "antislavery" and not "abolitionists." I did not refer to all antislavery individuals as Republicans in part because ideas opposing slavery had been in existence since the beginning of American history, while the Republican party was officially formed in 1856. There were also other political parties that considered themselves "antislavery" besides Republicans, such as the Free-Soil Party that was formed in 1846. For more information about the ideological differences between those that were abolitionists and those that only considered themselves antislavery individuals, see James Oakes' *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics*. (New York, New York: Norton & Company Inc., 2007).

⁴⁰ W. Caleb McDaniel, "The Bonds and Boundaries of Antislavery," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 1 (2014): 84, 87.

believed that slaves to be racially inferior. Whereas abolitionists believed whites and blacks could live in harmony following the emancipation of American slaves, a large portion of antislavery individuals were supporters of the colonization movement in which freed slaves would be sent to the colony of Liberia. Despite this, abolitionists and antislavery advocates both acknowledged the humanity of slaves.⁴¹ For the purpose of this thesis, I will be referring to both abolitionists and antislavery individuals when discussing how antislavery Americans perceived Russian serfdom.

Both supporters and opponents of slavery argued that the Constitution supported their view. Those that desired the abolition of slavery argued that slaves should be entitled to the same natural rights and liberties granted to whites in the U.S. Constitution. They believed that most of the Founders of America had been against slavery in principle and only included it in the Constitution out of necessity, believing it would be abolished later on.⁴² Some Founding Fathers, such as George Washington, specified in their wills that their slaves should be freed upon their death.⁴³ Taking the meaning of inalienable rights a step further, antislavery Americans viewed slavery as a violation of the Christian belief that all men are equal in the eyes of God.⁴⁴ Those who supported slavery considered the Constitution a protector of slavery due to its three-fifths clause and its fugitive slave clause.⁴⁵ Because the Constitution referenced slavery on several occasions, proslavery supporters argued that any clauses that granted rights to Americans

⁴¹ Jeremy J. Tewell, *A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2013), 10-11.

⁴² James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York, New York: Norton & Company Inc., 2007), 65.

⁴³ William W. Freehling, "The Founding Fathers and Slavery," *The American Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (1972): 84.

⁴⁴ David F. Ericson, "The Antislavery and Proslavery Arguments" in *The Debate Over Slavery: Antislavery and Proslavery Liberalism in Antebellum America* (New York; London: NYU Press, 2000), 18. Accessed July 10, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfs2n.5.

⁴⁵ Oakes, 63.

and did not include the word “slave” would exclude slaves. Regarding the notion that slavery was immoral according to Christian doctrine, many supporters of slavery justified their positions by citing the Old Testament, which states that the ancient Hebrews were slaveholders themselves and were told by God to enslave other nations.⁴⁶

Supporters of slavery used many arguments to defend their usage of slaves. Some argued that slavery benefitted the enslaved because it was a means through which to convert the slaves to Christianity.⁴⁷ Others rationalized slavery by arguing that slaves were racially and inherently inferior to whites. Those against slavery believed that it was the conditions that slaves endured that made them appear inferior to proslavery supporters.⁴⁸ A correspondent of the *National Era* wrote, “...their apparent inferiority is owing to circumstances, and not to the endowments of nature.”⁴⁹ Besides the economic arguments for defending slavery, supporters of slavery also believed that slavery was beneficial for the good of society as a whole. By forcing a group of people into slavery with subjective justification, some antislavery individuals feared that similar arguments could be used to enslave white Americans as well and were overall a threat to American liberty.⁵⁰

Methodology

To analyze the perspectives of Northerners on American Emancipation and Russian serfdom, I used American newspapers, Congressional meeting minutes, memoirs, and books as primary sources. These sources discussed serfdom through the perspective of Americans that

⁴⁶ Ericson, 19; Tewell, 82.

⁴⁷ Sinha, 44.

⁴⁸ Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 64.

⁴⁹ “M.B.C.,” to the *National Era*, June 3, 1847.

⁵⁰ Tewell, 70-86.

traveled to Russia firsthand, reprinted European sources, or simply in passing, and shed light on how Northerners may have perceived Russian serfdom and its end. They also compared American slavery to serfdom, as well as the conditions of freed slaves and serfs after their abolitions. These sources were accessed from a variety of sites, including newspapers.com, the Library of Congress, Google Books, and Google Scholar.

When examining nineteenth-century American newspapers, one must be cognizant of their political affiliations. Most newspapers acted as partisan advocates of either the Republican or Democratic party. Sometimes their affiliation is in their newspaper's title, for example. In other cases, it is not as clear to a modern researcher. Where possible, this study also identifies the political affiliation of newspapers.⁵¹

Structure of Thesis

The first chapter will discuss Northern perspectives of Russian serfdom prior to the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. In general, Northerners perceived serfdom as a milder form of slavery and believed that serfdom had the potential to end soon based on rumors of emancipation. Serfdom was often misunderstood in American news sources that sometimes implied that serfs were better off than their masters. Americans that traveled to Russia firsthand often viewed serfdom as much harsher than those that only read about it secondhand.

The second chapter will discuss the Northern perspectives on serfdom during the Civil War. Northerners compared the brutal nature of the Civil War in bringing about the abolition of slavery to the relatively peaceful emancipation of the serfs. Once the war began, Republican

⁵¹ Ross Geoffrey, "American Newspapers: 1800-1860." Created August 10, 2011. Accessed at: <https://guides.library.illinois.edu/antebellum-american-newspapers>

newspapers joined the debate over Russian serfdom. Lincoln supporters used the example of autocratic Russian liberal action to shame Americans into supporting emancipation as a war aim. Others reiterated their beliefs that serfdom was not as harsh an institution as slavery. All the while, freed serfs were beginning to receive more reforms in their favor, and Northerners hoped that the freed peoples of America would also receive more rights and liberties.

The final chapter will discuss the Northern opinions on serfdom after the American Civil War and the status of the newly freed slaves and serfs. During this period, freed serfs were mostly mentioned to discuss the Russian reforms and to compare them with the experiences of the freed peoples in the American South. The political situation in America and the battle over the status of former slaves shaped newspaper reports on Russian serfdom; Republicans were more prone to discuss the positives of serf emancipation and its aftermath than the Democrats who discussed the negative aspect of Russian Emancipation. Each view reflected their partisan perspective on American Emancipation. Despite this interest in Russian serfdom, it was domestic politics that shaped the fate of freed slaves. It was the triumph of the Democratic government in Southern states and the failure of Republican politicians to protect black citizens that sealed the fate of newly freed men and women.

Chapter 1: Northern Perspectives on Russian Serfdom Before the Emancipation of the Serfs

“The condition of Russia is peculiarly interesting to the people of the United States, since it contains an institution similar to, though not identical with, our “peculiar institution” of slavery.”⁵²

Introduction

While American abolitionists focused their efforts on eradicating American slavery, they understood that servitude existed elsewhere and often compared the “peculiar institution” to Russian Serfdom. Prior to the American Civil War and the Emancipation of the Russian serfs, most abolitionists believed that Russian serfdom was a lesser form of forced servitude than chattel slavery. In their writings, abolitionists argued that slavery was much worse than Russian servitude.

In addition to seeing it as a milder type of forced labor, abolitionists suspected that serfdom might be eradicated soon. Compared to the seemingly never-ending legality of American slavery, abolitionists decried the fact that a nation built on freedom was falling behind the “barbarous Russians.” These abolitionists used rumors of Russian emancipation to advocate for the end of American slavery. Mentions of Russian serfdom increasingly appeared in newspapers and other sources leading up to the 1850s. Diminishing the realities of serfdom in the American media was a way for abolitionists to condemn the brutality of American slavery by comparison.

Abolitionist perspectives on serfdom depended on their information sources. American abolitionists frequently cited European newspapers because they had more accessibility to Russia and Russian serfdom. Few Americans ever traveled to or lived in Russia in the mid-nineteenth

⁵² *The National Era*, (Washington, District of Columbia), February 21, 1856.

century. Those Americans that lived in Russia, such as the American diplomat John Stephens, witnessed Russian serfdom firsthand and believed it to be as bad as American slavery. An examination of reprinted European articles in abolitionist newspapers reveals the information that informed their understanding of Russian Serfdom.

Serfdom as a “Milder Institution”

Many Northerners noted the similarities between Russian serfs and American slaves but frequently focused on their differences. Americans who rejected American slavery noted that serf families could not be separated, serf masters did not have total control over their serfs’ lives, and masters could not force a serf to marry against their wishes. Additionally, serfs only owed their masters labor for three days a week (if under the *barschina* system) and were not required to work on the Sabbath day and high festivals.⁵³

Serfdom was a system of forced servitude; however, American slavery represented a crueler institution. *The National Era*, a newspaper of Washington D.C., remarked, “Russian servitude or serfdom, though cruelly oppressive to its victims, is mild and patriarchal, compared to American slavery.”⁵⁴ Similarly, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* reprinted an article that disapproved of the expansion of slavery to the west based on its awareness of Russian serfdom. “It may be well to consider how much milder is that system of bondage which the Czar would extend into a country cursed with sloth and sensuality, than that which our government would spread over the fair and unpolluted regions of our Western territories.”⁵⁵ While this article suggests that abolitionists viewed Russians to be lazy, they also admired certain aspects of their society,

⁵³ *Green-Mountain Freeman* (Montpelier, Vermont), January 18, 1855.

⁵⁴ *The National Era*, (Washington, District of Columbia), February 21, 1856.

⁵⁵ *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, (Lisbon, Ohio), May 13, 1854.

“There is, among the Russians, no prejudice against any class of inhabitants on account of any difference in form, color, or race. Poushchine [Pushkin], the greatest of their poets, boasted that he had African blood in his veins.”⁵⁶ Russian serfs did not face racial discrimination because, in most cases, they were of the same race as their masters. Serfdom did not rest on race but class and social status. Peter Kolchin argues that Russians constructed race; nobles used obvious social differences to support the notion that serfs “deserved” their status. Legislation during the reign of Peter the Great required Russian nobles to adopt Western European styles of clothing and mannerisms, even forcing men to shave their beards.⁵⁷

Abolitionists also believed that the prominent powers of the world during the American Antebellum era regarded the systems of slavery and serfdom as uncivilized and outdated, which reflected poorly on the United States. Abolitionists contended that the United States did poorly when compared to other nations that relied on a form of servitude. A writer in the abolitionist *Daily National Era* of Washington D.C. explained that the only country holding people to forced labor that England and France “regard with a tolerant eye” is Russia because of its “ample provision for the benefit of its laboring people.” The article goes one step further and announces its approval of serfdom, “There is no doubt that the general condition of the people is far superior than what is understood...” in Russia.⁵⁸

The *Daily National Era* reported on the conditions of Russian serfs and peasants. Its London correspondence described the limits on serfs’ master’s powers, noting “If the owner abuses his power, or is guilty of cruelty or rape, the law takes from him the administration of the estate, and he cannot become the purchaser of another.” Community censure supposedly checked

⁵⁶ *Anti-Slavery Bugle*. Ibid.

⁵⁷ Peter Kolchin, “Foreword.” Found in, Nikitenko, Aleksandr. *Up from Serfdom: My Childhood and Youth in Russia, 1804-1824*, translated by Helen Saltz Jacobson.(New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), xi.

⁵⁸ *Daily National Era*, (Washington, District of Columbia), July 8, 1854.

the behaviors of masters towards their serfs, as "...public opinion will not tolerate the robbery of the serf by his master- and fear of assassination is also a powerful sanction to the rights of the serf."⁵⁹ According to the *Daily National Era*, the conditions of serfs were better than those of American slaves because serfs had some rights to protect them from their masters. Thus, abolitionists viewed Russian serfdom as less onus than American slavery.

While serfs may have had legal protections to prevent excessive cruelty, many cases went unreported or were unsuccessful. Officials failed to act when observers reported masters' cruelty. Clergymen attempted to report instances of rape or unlawfully acquired serfs but were sometimes advised not to meddle in civil affairs outside their concern.⁶⁰

In addition to some protection against cruelty, as long as serfs fulfilled their duties to their landlords, they could seek outside employment. Serfs could work in factories after obtaining a passport or license to work and travel from their masters. The *Daily National Era* applauded this practice, "Wages, considered in their purchasing power over commodities, are higher in Russian towns than in the towns of Western Europe." Because of these wages, serfs were "...perfectly willing to pay his master a high price for his passport..." This practice was known as *otkhodnichestvo*, and serfs that received passes could leave their village for short periods to work elsewhere.⁶¹ The *Daily National Era* deemed serfs well off because they could profit from their work and had opportunities to improve their financial situations. While this gave serfs mobility not available to American slaves, serfs had to pay for this privilege.

Affirming the idea that serfs were well off economically, *The National Era* noted, "Many serfs

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Gregory L Freeze, "The Orthodox Church and Serfdom in Prereform Russia," *Slavic Review* 48, no. 3 (1989): 361-87, 375, accessed April 29, 2020, doi:10.2307/2498993.

⁶¹ Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 335.

are wealthy; and instances are not infrequent where serfs are richer than the noblemen to whom they belong.”⁶² While it is true that some serfs were better off than others, they were hardly rich and still belonged to their master.⁶³ *The Pennsylvania* agreed. “To associate the idea of serfdom, as it exists in Russia, with poverty or a feeling of degradation on the part of the serf, and arbitrary power on the part of the noble, would be a great mistake. Many of the serfs are very rich, often richer than their lords, and might easily buy their freedom were they dissatisfied with their lot.”⁶⁴

Prosperous serfs could buy their freedom from their owners, but the cost of freedom was set by their owners. Landowners could raise the price of freedom for a serf, or they could refuse to make the sale. Count Sheremetev declined to allow his serf, Shelyshin, to purchase his freedom despite offering 200,000 rubles. Sheremetev refused because Shelyshin could acquire the oysters Sheremetev loved eating for lunch.⁶⁵

Ambitious serfs might be prosperous, but abolitionists believed that even those who were did not benefit from this system. The *Daily National Era* promoted the idea that even the poorest Russian serf obtained enough food, clothing, and warm shelter to survive.⁶⁶ “His clothing is always complete, and none but beggars, who are extremely rare, want the necessities of life. Every Russian has his sheepskin garments; and we never see in Russia, as we do in other countries, even the poorest without warm apparel during the cold weather. The most needy have also a lodging, well warmed.”⁶⁷

⁶² *The National Era*, (Washington, District of Columbia), February 21, 1856.

⁶³ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 343.

⁶⁴ *The Pennsylvania*, reprinted in *Syracuse Daily Courier and Union*, (Syracuse, New York), May 26, 1858.

⁶⁵ Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 338.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Regardless of whether serfs were rich or poor, some abolitionists rejected the entire notion of unfree labor. A column from *The Buffalo Commercial* argued that, “The beau ideal of a prosperous community is one in which there is, to a degree, an equalization of wealth, where all share in the physical comforts of life and all participate in the intellectual enjoyments of an educated people. New England liberty is the nearest type of this condition. Russian serfdom or Southern Slavery is its opposite.”⁶⁸ The writer of this article rejects the notion that forced labor is necessary for a successful society.

In response to the notion of American slaveholders that “the institution of slavery is essential to the existence of a legitimate republic as are the laws of gravitation to the control of the natural elements,” and that, “its destiny to exist as long as civilization and self-government last,” and contended that, “...on the other hand, in the determined efforts of the Russian Czar to secure the entire abolition of serfdom throughout his vast empire, as an act of justice and humanity, and for the honor and regeneration of Russia; thus confirming, in a most striking manner, the Scriptural prophecy, that “the first shall be last, and the last first.”⁶⁹

Even if American slaves were as prosperous as serfs, they still suffered because of their status as chattel slaves. *The Brandon Post* reprinted a column from the *New York Independent*, a paper with anti-slavery sentiments, which contained a letter from a German correspondent discussing the American Fugitive Slave Law. The correspondent remarked, “You may not be aware in America with what a deep interest your difficulties over the ‘Fugitive Slave Law’ question are watched here in Germany... How free and innocent men are hunted from their homes like beasts; how citizens are found in our country, with whom there is no apology of ancient prejudice, or of debasing ignorance, to capture back men into an oppression infinitely

⁶⁸ *The Buffalo Commercial*, (Buffalo, New York), September 24, 1860.

⁶⁹ *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, (Lisbon, Ohio), May 22, 1858.

worse than Russian serfdom; how within six months a law has been proposed and passed in our National Assembly, which for barbarity, for cunning contrivance and inhuman aim has no parallel in the code of the Sultan or the Czar.”⁷⁰ The reprinting of this letter within *The Brandon Post* indicates that the newspaper agreed with its contents and viewed the horrors of the Fugitive Slave Law of the American Constitution as one of the defining characteristics that distinguishes American slavery and Russian serfdom.

In a similar manner, the *North American Review*, a quarterly literary magazine, compared the rights of Russian serfs and American slaves, “...however curtailed of his rights the Russian serf may be, his condition is still far preferable to that of the negro slave in our own country.... For while the negro is almost abandoned by the law of the land... the Russian law protects the serf in various ways, and his wrongs, so far as they are not owing to his serfdom itself, are principally occasioned by abuses... In short, vicious as the relation of master and servant towards each other in Russia is, it is at least not hopeless.”⁷¹ This writer acknowledges that Russian serfs, like American slaves, have few rights and privileges but that Russian serfdom might be ameliorated.

The *North American Review* writer was correct; Alexander II decided to emancipate the Russian serfs, and American abolitionists applauded this action. In a meeting of the House of Representatives on March 20, 1858, a congressman mocked his own nation. “Thus the strange spectacle is presented of one of the most absolute despotisms which ever existed emancipating its slaves, while the project is hailed with “enlightened heartiness” as a “noble idea” by the nation; whilst at the same time, in this free and enlightened Republic, the Congress of the United

⁷⁰ *The Brandon Post*, (Brandon, Vermont), February 6, 1851.

⁷¹ “Slavery in Russia,” *The North American Review*, 1856; 318-319.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=4XICAAAIAAJ>.

States is engaged from day to day, and week to week, yea, and I may say year to year, in excited and fierce discussions of the rightfulness and propriety of the extension of a system of slavery a hundred fold worse in its nature and effects than Russian serfdom.”⁷² The congressman considered it ironic than an “absolute despotism” like Russia was able to support the freeing of its serfs, while America, which stands for freedom and inalienable rights, continued to debate freeing slaves.

During debates of Kansas’s status as a free or slave state, the *Kansas Herald of Freedom*, a paper that supported the anti-slavery cause, compared the possibility the government would decide their status to serfdom. An October 1855 article announced, “We never expect to see Kansas occupying a similar position to the United States which the American colonies did towards Great Britain, and are firm in the conviction that the powers that be could never drive us to such a position, and yet we would advise to it before we would submit to the gross outrage of having a code of laws enforced upon us enacted by men who came from a foreign State, who have no interest in the soil, or the freedom of the people, and whose only object was to reduce the actual settlers to a condition infinitely worse than Russian serfdom.”⁷³ The writer implies that if slavery were forced upon the state of Kansas, where a majority of settlers wished it to be a free state, the consequences would be worse than serfdom.

Pity for Russian Serfs

Some abolitionists acknowledged Russian serfdom’s severity and rejected the notion of all types of unfree labor. The American writer, explorer, and diplomat John Stephens published a

⁷² *Chicago Tribune*, (Chicago, Illinois), March 20, 1858. The name of the Congressman was never mentioned in this article.

⁷³ *The Kansas Herald of Freedom*, (Wakarusa, Kansas), October 27, 1855.

book on his experiences and observations during his travels to Russia, titled *Incidents of Travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia and Poland*. In this book, he states

I was forcibly struck by a parallel between the white serfs of the north of Europe and the African bondsmen at home. The Russian boor... appeared to me to not less degraded in intellect, character, and personal bearing. Indeed, the marks of physical and personal degradation were so strong, that I was insensibly compelled to abandon certain theories not uncommon among my countrymen at home, in regard to the intrinsic superiority of the white race over others... I had found in Russia many interesting subjects of comparison between that country and my own; but it was with deep humiliation I felt that the most odious feature in that despotic government found a parallel in ours. At this day, with the exception of Russia, some of the West India Islands, and the republic of the United States, every country in the world can respond to the proud boast of the English common law, that the moment a slave sets foot on her soil it is free.⁷⁴

Stephens described scenes of serf poverty as he passed through a rural village. “The streets were strewed with peasants, grim, yellow-bearded fellows, in sheepskin dresses and caps, lying on their backs asleep, each of them with a log of wood under his head for a pillow. . . .the whole village consisted of a single street, with log-houses on each side, having all their gable-ends in front; the doors were all open, and I looked in and saw men and women with all their clothes on, pigs, sheep, and children strewed about the floor.”⁷⁵ In addition to the poor living conditions of the serfs, Stephens saw that they were starving, “Entering the village, we saw a spectacle of wretchedness and misery seldom surpassed even on the banks of the Nile. The whole population was gathered in the streets, in a state of absolute starvation. The miserable serfs had not raised enough to supply themselves with food, and men of all ages, half-grown boys, and little children, were prowling the streets or sitting in the doorways, ravenous with hunger”⁷⁶ Despite his harsh criticism of serfdom, Stephens noted some aspects of serfdom unlike

⁷⁴ J.G Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Greece, Turkey, Russia and Poland*. (William Curry, Jun. 1839), 261. <https://books.google.com/books?id=961JAAAAYAAJ>.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

American slavery. Serfs "...belong to the soil, and cannot be sold except with the estate; they may change masters, but cannot be torn from their connections or their birth-place."⁷⁷

Stephens also reports on the likelihood of a serf purchasing their freedom. One serf he observed had made a significant amount of money for working off the land. "His master's price for his freedom had advanced with his growing wealth, and the poor serf, unable to bring himself to part with his hard earnings, was then rolling in wealth with a collar round his neck; struggling with the inborn spirit of freedom and hesitating whether to die a beggar or a slave."⁷⁸ Stephens explained that most serfs could and would not buy their freedom. "A few rise above their condition, but millions labour like beasts of burden, content with bread put in their mouths, and never even thinking of freedom."⁷⁹

The devotion of Russian serfs to their country was a spectacle that astounded foreigners. Stephens noted that "with the Russian serf, there is always an unbounded love for him who stands at the head of the system of oppression under which they groan, the emperor, whom they regard as their protector against the oppression of their immaculate masters." The reason for this devotion was unknown, but he guessed it could be an "inability to estimate the value of any change in their condition, or a feeling of actual love for the soil on which they were born."⁸⁰

The writers at *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion* (1853) took the same view of serfdom, "These wretched people, living mostly in a state of savage simplicity and subserviency, are bound to the soil and the service of their proprietors. Practically, the serf in Russia is as much the slave of his owner as any slave that has ever

⁷⁷ Ibid., 262.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 263.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 263-264.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 264.

lived.”⁸¹ The *Graham's American Monthly Magazine* protested serfs' punishments by their masters, “The law does not allow the owner to punish a slave, unless he be a certain number of miles distant from the police station; and then he may inflict punishment blameless, so that the slave do not die of it within three days. But if he dies on the spot- as no accusation can be received against the master, although surrounded by the whole village- there is no means of legally convicting him of the act. The serf is allowed to make no defense.”⁸²

An 1829 edition of *The Cabinet of Instruction, Literature, and Amusement* identified a feature of serfdom that abolitionists failed to identify- compulsory military service for life, “When the government wants recruits for the army, each person holding serfs is directed to send his quota of peasants, suitably equipped, to a particular spot. The serfs settle it amongst themselves who are to march. The friends of recruits bewail their fate in the most lamentable manner, and take an everlasting farewell of their children, brothers and relations. They seldom ever see or hear from them again.”⁸³

Francis Wayland in *The Affairs of Rhode Island* (1842), insists that compared to the Russian serfs, American slaves have not accepted their fate of forced labor; “...Russian “serfs” may bow down even to the *knout* of their heartless owners: but American hearts, baptized in the waters of freedom, will never submit to servitude!”⁸⁴ Ironically, Wayland argues that freedom in the United States prompts American slaves to reject slavery. He somehow refused to see that their enslavements made the waters anything but “free.”

⁸¹ G.R. Graham, E.A. Poe, C.J. Peterson, R.W. Griswold, R.T. Conrad, J.R. Chandler, and B. Taylor, *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature, Art, and Fashion*, Vol. 42-43. (G.R. Graham, 1853), 498. <https://books.google.com/books?id=p8glAQAAAJ>.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 498.

⁸³ A. Anderson, A.J. Davis, and J.H. Hall, *The Cabinet of Instruction, Literature, and Amusement*, (Theodore Burling, 1829), 418, <https://books.google.com/books?id=gXIAAAAYAAJ>.

⁸⁴ F. Wayland, *The Affairs of Rhode Island, Being a Review of President W.'S "Discourse," a Vindication of the Sovereignty of the People ... By a Member of the Boston Bar*, 1842, 29, <https://books.google.com/books?id=UZtcAAAACAAJ>.

Some abolitionists believed that if Northern freemen did not unite and stand up for themselves when the time came, they would be "...degraded from their proud position as Northern freemen to a condition but little above a Russian [serf]..."⁸⁵

In his *An Address of West India Emancipation* (1838), James Renwick Willson compared Russian serfs and American slaves to address the assumption that "were slaves all emancipated at once, they would be idle and dissolute paupers, that could not be induced to labor for wages." Instead, he asks and answers his own question. "Are the free Americans less industrious than the oppressed people of Ireland- than the serfs of Russia and Poland? What is it that in all ages and nations has paralysed the arm of industry- that had propagated an idle and lazy race? It is oppression. The rewards of industry... are among the powerful motives which, according to the Will of the Creator, excite men to active and vigorous efforts."⁸⁶ Russian serfs, like American slaves, were placed in environments that did not allow them to prosper, causing them to appear inherently worthy of their statuses and lack of rights in the eyes of proponents of serfdom. Regarding serfdom, Willson believes that serfs' belief that their situation would never improve greatly diminished their motivation to be productive in society.

Russian Serfdom as a Misunderstood Institution

Americans believed serfdom was milder because they misunderstood it. *The National Era* reprinted an extract of Edward Jerrman's *Pictures of St. Petersburg*, written in the late 1840s. A German actor who spent three years working professionally in St. Petersburg, Jerrman's account of Russia's life was translated into English and published extensively. This author portrayed

⁸⁵ *Green-Mountain Freeman* (Montpelier, Vermont), June 24, 1852.

⁸⁶ J.R. Willson, *An Address on West India Emancipation, Etc.* 1838. 9.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=IC5cAAAACAAJ>.

Nicholas I favorably; “Emperor Nicholas. . . is not quite so black as he is sometimes painted.”⁸⁷

Unlike the popular belief that serfs could be freed by their master or bought their own freedom, they had other options. Female serfs could become free upon marrying a non-serf, and male serfs could become free after serving in the Russian military. Previously, serf soldiers served twenty years, but Nicholas I had shortened it to eight.⁸⁸

A column of *The Weekly Wisconsin* containing extracts from the *Augsburg Allgemeine* summarizes the history of serfdom and accuses the hiring system as harmful to peasant morals, “It awakened in the nation a desire for a nomadic life- for trading and swindling. In many cases, serfs thus hired out returned comparatively wealthy to their places of birth. The primitive simplicity of this hospitable people was thus destroyed, and envy, with a host of kindred bad passions, corrupted their hearts, and made them discontented with their lot.” Moreover, “Drunkenness became a national characteristic, and under its influence, the morals of the nation gradually degenerated.”⁸⁹

Rumors about the Russian Serf Emancipation

As tensions grew in the United States over slavery during the late 1850s, the efforts to end Russian serfdom inspired abolitionists.

Well before this decade, Americans heard rumors of serfdom demise. An 1828 Register of the Debates in Congress suggests that Russian serfdom would be ending soon because the system of labor stopped being profitable to Russian landlords. “The moment the labor of the slave ceases to be profitable to the master, or very soon after it has reached that stage- if the slave

⁸⁷ *The National Era*, (Washington, District of Columbia), March 24, 1853.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *The Weekly Wisconsin*, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), August 20, 1856.

will not run away from the master, the master *will* run away from the slave... Are not those of Russia and Poland going through this very operation at this time, and from this very cause?"⁹⁰

One year later, at the Twenty-first Biennial American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Thomas Earle reported the following, "That it has been proposed, as a preliminary to complete emancipation, to reduce slaves to the condition of serfs of Poland and Russia, fixed to the soil, without the right on the part of the master to remove them. It appears extremely doubtful to your committee whether such a measure would in any degree accelerate entire emancipation." While Earle believes this to be a good idea, he also acknowledges that "The proposition moreover, has not received that degree of public approbation which is necessary to justify any expectation of its speedy adoption... Gradual emancipation is the only mode Which at present appears likely to receive the public sanction." These rumors may have reflected the desire of some in America to see abolition in their own nation.⁹¹

Twenty years later, Americans read that increasing numbers of Russian nobles questioned the moralities of serfdom. *The Buffalo Daily Republic* cited the German Baron Haxthausen, who traveled to Russia observations. According to Haxthausen, "Everyone acquainted with the subject will agree that it is impossible that serfdom can subsist much longer. *Everyone in Russia is aware of this*; but how [is] reform to be obtained without revolution and political convulsion?"

Additionally, the column remarked on the changing mentalities of the lower classes themselves towards serfdom, stating, "The armies that returned to Russia after 1815, are known to have brought with them a tendency to liberalism and agitation before unknown in that

⁹⁰ Congress, United States, F.P. Blair, J.C. Rives, F. Rives, and G.A. Bailey, *The Congressional Globe*. Blair & Rives, 1826, 130, <https://books.google.com/books?id=3D8uAAAAIAAJ>.

⁹¹ Thomas B. Town, "Minutes of the Twenty-first Biennial American Convention for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, and Improving the Condition of the African Race, convened at the city of Washington, December 8, 1829, (Philadelphia, printed by order of the Convention), 23-24. <https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/rbc/rbaapc/01400/01400.pdf>

latitude”⁹² This column implies that the nobility in Russia was becoming anxious over the growing liberalist views amongst the lower classes. American abolitionists hoped that Russian serfdom was very near its end.

As the decades of the 1850s passed, the nation became engulfed with slavery. From the Compromise of 1850 to the Kansas Nebraska Act and Bleeding Kansas, the Dred Scott Decision, and the John Brown Raid, few Americans remained unaware of this issue. More rumors of Russian Emancipation appeared in newspapers. The Republican-leaning *Hartford Courant* published an article in 1857 that announced Alexander II was reported to have approved a draft for a project that would partially abolish serfdom and that the project was soon to become a law.⁹³ Similarly, the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* praised Tsar Alexander II by saying, “...we regard with high satisfaction and great admiration the praiseworthy and philanthropic course adopted by the Emperor of Russia.”⁹⁴

In a section of the *North American Review* on “Slavery in Russia,” the writer identified that a “general feeling prevails in Russia, that the state of things cannot remain as it is; and it is principally the conviction that free labor is more profitable, that is winning over landowners to the view of the government, which is decidedly favorable to emancipation.” The author understood that some objected. “There remains, however, a strong, highly influential part,- the *old* Russian party,- opposed to *all* innovation, who look at the loosening of the ties between master and servant as a kind of sacrilege”⁹⁵ Despite this opposition, the writer was confident.

⁹² *The Buffalo Daily Republic*, (Buffalo, New York), August 20, 1849.

⁹³ *Hartford Courant*, (Hartford, Connecticut), October 8, 1857.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ “Slavery in Russia,” *The North American Review*. (O. Everett, 1856), 319.
<https://books.google.com/books?id=4XICAAAIAAJ>.

“The light is even there breaking gradually through those thick black clouds which overshadow the fate of the European proletarian.”⁹⁶

Russia as an Ally for the Slave-holding South

As Northern abolitionists noted the similarities between the slave-holding South and Russia regarding their opinions on forced labor, they began to remark on the two being ideological allies. *The Liberator* reprinted a National Era article that claiming that “The press of the Southern states, so far as it expresses any opinion, is arrayed on the side of Russia.” The author of this column cites an increasing number of Americans who admire Russian power and “American tourists whose letters cram the columns of our press with cunning apologies for Russian aggression.” The abolitionists held that the positive opinions on Russia stemmed from the South and that Southern slaveholders found an ally in Russia. “Russian serfdom and American slavery are identical in principle. Russia has never manifested any repugnance to the ‘peculiar institution’ of the slave States... The Anti-Slavery Idea has no foothold within its bounds... the Southern Interest regards Russia as its natural ally...”⁹⁷ In a global context, Northern abolitionists compared the other large powers who had already abolished slavery and serfdom in their lands and colonies with Southern America and Russia, “Russian Despotism and the Slave Interest, their common enemies prostrate, might then march on *pari passu*, dividing the world between them.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁹⁷ *The Liberator*, (Boston, Massachusetts), July 6, 1855.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* *Pari passu* is a Latin phrase literally meaning “with an equal step,” and generally is used to mean “side by side.”

Objections to Discussion of Serfdom in American Media

In general, American abolitionists were aware of serfdom but did not think of it as a concern to them on a daily basis. Abolitionists occasionally referenced serfdom in America as a hypothetical scenario.

Quoting the *National Intelligencer*, a Washington D.C. newspaper that reported on congressional hearings and was trusted by many Republican papers, “Let slavery be an evil however great, they cannot remedy it. All they can do, in a matter which concerns them constitutionally no more than does serfdom in Russia, is to injure and retard the cause which they profess to have at heart...” the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* responded,

We submit with great deference to the venerable and most respectable authority above quoted, that the question of American slavery is *not quite* so remote and unimportant to us as the question of Russian serfdom. A parallel case may be made when the influence of Russia in this country becomes powerful enough to introduce into the free States the serf system, or to break down the Northern constitutions and laws which secure personal liberty to the laboring man. *Then*, at least we opine that a course on lectures on the subject of Russian serfdom would not be an interference with what is none of our business.⁹⁹

A northern Democratic newspaper that supported the Southern Democratic candidate in 1860 responded to the rumored end of serfdom and rejected the comparison of serfdom with slavery. The *Syracuse Daily Courier and Union* wanted to set the record straight about American views towards serfdom, “Some of our journals comment on this important movement in a manner to identify Russian serfdom with American slavery, they are either ignorantly or willfully guilty of misrepresentation. The two institutions have hardly anything in common.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, (Lisbon, Ohio), February 9, 1856.

¹⁰⁰ *Syracuse Daily Courier and Union*, (Syracuse, New York), May 26, 1858.

Conclusion

In their daily lives, the existence of Russian serfdom was not a direct concern to American abolitionists, largely because of the distance between America and Russia and the general lack of accessibility to news on Russian events and circumstances. However, abolitionists mentioned serfdom for two main reasons: to compare it with American slavery and to encourage America to end its system of slavery.

The perspectives of abolitionists on Russian serfdom varied greatly. Those that depended on European correspondence for their information on serfdom tended to assume that it was much less harsh than the realities of American slavery. The few Americans that traveled to Russia and viewed the situations of Russian serfs for themselves viewed the institution as equally oppressive when compared to American slavery.

Mentions of abolitionists' interest in serfdom increased in the 1850s as rumors of its possible end spread. Simultaneously, tensions within America about ending slavery were on the rise. Additionally, abolitionists argued that Russian serfdom was a much more favorable form of servitude to American slavery more frequently during this period possible as a way of attacking American slavery. Abolitionists felt inspired by the rumors that Alexander II planned to emancipate the serfs and hoped that the slaves of America would also receive their freedom.

Chapter 2: Northern Perspectives on Russian Serfdom During the Civil War

“The American democracy, mightier than any Czar, can, if it be necessary, with equally firm hand suppress the rebellious slave-holders, and remove all cause or pretext for future rebellion, by putting a summary to slavery.”¹⁰¹

While rumors of Russian serfdom emancipation made their appearances in abolitionist and Northern news outlets, the United States faced its own history-altering development. Soon after the election of 1860 and Abraham Lincoln’s announced victory, Southern states began to secede from the Union one by one. State secession started in the lower South led by South Carolina. After the attack on Fort Sumter and Lincoln’s call for troops, states in the upper South seceded. The existence of Slavery and its possible expansion caused the Civil War- a conflict that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives; not surprisingly, Northerners compared slavery and its end to the peaceful emancipation of the Russian serfs.

Americans outside the abolitionist community became aware of serfdom because of the Emancipation Manifesto and because it occurred during the succession crisis in the United States. Abolitionist newspapers discussed serfdom more frequently before the Civil War, while mainstream Union papers mentioned serfdom more after the Manifesto was first released. They would later shift their discussion of serfdom as they compared the liberties promised by the Emancipation Manifesto with the Emancipation Proclamation of the United States and commented on the conditions of former serfs post-emancipation.

Even before the war began, The North resented the South because it received additional political representation because enslaved men and women counted as three-fifths of a person

¹⁰¹ *Vermont Journal* (Windsor, Vermont), February 2, 1861.

when allocating congressional seats. Similarly, the North despised the Fugitive Slave Laws that made it illegal for individuals to turn a blind eye on runaway slaves without turning them in. Part of the Compromise of 1850 passed by Congress gave slave states more political representation. The abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* complained about the Southern double standards and declared that the Northerners have no obligation to defend the continuance of Southern slavery, just as they have no obligation over the serfs of Russia, “The President informs us expressly that we are no more responsible for slavery at the South than for serfdom in Russia. If so, why call on us to suppress insurrections and restore fugitives? And why allow the South a property representation?”¹⁰²

While Americans began their long road to the Civil War, Russian liberals convinced the Russian government to abolish serfdom. The government released the Emancipation Manifesto in early 1861, promising freedom for the Russian serfs by 1862. Before the Civil War, abolitionist newspapers reported rumors of emancipation of the Russian serfs and documented American reaction to this action. Regardless of their opinion on the severity of serfdom, other American abolitionists shared the notion that serfdom became a drag on Russia economically and morally. As expressed by the *North Star*, an abolitionist newspaper of Vermont in November of 1860, “Russia, poor and embarrassed, with her chain of serfdom tied round her neck, has the will but not the power to fight successfully for the divine right of kings.”¹⁰³

Additionally, some mainstream news sources that published anti-slavery sentiments voiced their frustrations that the serfs would be emancipated before the American slaves, whom they believed to have much harsher conditions. A reprinting in the *Vermont Journal*, a mainstream newspaper expressed its pleasure in serfdoms end and states, “The emancipation of

¹⁰² *The Liberator* (Boston, Massachusetts), January 11, 1861.

¹⁰³ *North Star* (Danville, Vermont), November 24, 1860.

Russian serfdom is gloried in, and we are told that the burdens of the serf were moderate compared with the atrocious system for perpetuation and propagation of which, our American slaveholders are now in rebellion against the Union.”¹⁰⁴

American abolitionists’ elation over this victory against unfree labor prompted them to compare Russian Emancipation with the ongoing secession crisis. In their discussion of the Emancipation Manifesto, *The Advocate*, a Christian newspaper of New York, remarked, “This event will make the day memorable in all coming time. Can it be that our rejoicing at the downfall of Slavery in Despotic Russia must be turned into mourning that our own great nation is breaking up for the support of a system of bondage far worse than Russian serfdom?”¹⁰⁵

In addition, to the peril to the Union, abolitionists expressed their embarrassment over the continuation of American slavery. A reprinting in *The New York Times* described Alexander II and what the abolition of serfdom said about the United States. He intends to extinguish “...the serfdom of forty-five million farmers, and of educating them in the course of time, to become free citizens. With his name liberation is associated, and freedom in many directions. This liberation once accomplished, America will be left alone to bear the shame of Slavery.”¹⁰⁶

As a result, abolitionists believed that if the serfs of Russia could become emancipated by their autocratic ruler, surely American slaves in a democratic nation could receive the same emancipation. As expressed by the *Vermont Journal*, “The American democracy, mightier than any Czar, can, if it be necessary, with equally firm hand suppress the rebellious slave-holders, and remove all cause or pretext for future rebellion, by putting a summary to slavery.”¹⁰⁷ As the

¹⁰⁴ *Vermont Journal*, (Windsor, Vermont), February 2, 1861.

¹⁰⁵ *The Advocate* (Buffalo, New York), January 17, 1861.

¹⁰⁶ *The New York Times*, (New York, New York), July 11, 1860.

¹⁰⁷ *Vermont Journal* (Windsor, Vermont), February 2, 1861.

Union cause became about unity and Emancipation, abolitionists and anti-slavery sympathizers increasingly published their ideas and comparisons of serfdom and slavery.

Beginning of the Civil War

Once war came, abolitionists used Russian Emancipation as a way of justifying their own Civil War. While abolitionists regretted the necessity of a civil war to pressure the Southern states to emancipate their slaves, they found inspiration for their own abolition efforts through the situation in Russia. The *Burlington Free Press*, a Republican newspaper, announced, “Serfdom is rapidly yielding to the light and mission of civilization. He [Russia] is correcting time honored abuses, and gradually suiting the progress and emancipation of the Russian Serf, to the demands and intelligence of the times, so that the path of Muscovite Royalty is truly democratic and progressive.”¹⁰⁸ The contrast between America’s republican government and Russia’s autocracy may have led Americans to assume Russians to be stuck in their ways and that they would not implement any reforms that would alter their current state, but the emancipation of the serfs showed America that Russia was not as oppressive as they expected.

In a similar sentiment, *The Voice Among the Mountains*, a newspaper of Ludlow, Vermont, remarked, “Again, look at Imperial Russia and her millions of serfs who were nearly as degraded as our slaves and morally and intellectually on an equal footing and note the practical workings of government... It is the great principle of *liberty* which has brought them to this stage of civilization. Not only is this great principle working in Russia, but it will work the same revolution in ¹⁰⁹ ~~the~~ The common theme of liberty instilled a connection between the reformers of

¹⁰⁸ *The Burlington Free Press*, (Burlington, Vermont), February 11, 1861.

¹⁰⁹ *The Voice Among the Mountains*, (Ludlow, Vermont), December 26, 1861.

the United States and Russia. The Russian emancipation effort created an example for the United States to follow on its path to abolishing slavery and in turn, justified the Civil War.

In a dramatic contrast to the United States and its issue of chattel slavery, the reception to the idea of emancipating the serfs in Russia did not result in a civil war. On the subject of the reaction of the nobles to the news that the serfs would be freed, the *New York Times* announced, “The Imperial decree providing for the emancipation of serfdom, had, notwithstanding the fears to the contrary, been well received at St. Petersburg and Moscow.”¹¹⁰

News sources appeared to disagree upon the amount of opposition the nobility posed regarding the emancipation question. Unlike the *New York Times*, the *Daily Evening Express* believed the nobles played a much larger threat to emancipation. They asserted, “The most powerful obstacle to be overcome was the opposition of the nobles, who opposed to the bitter end a measure so galling to their pride, and destructive to their pecuniary interests.”¹¹¹

Additionally, *The Rebellion Record, a Diary of Events: With Documents, Narratives, Illustrative Incidents, Poetry Etc.*, 1864, and contains a variety of documents from both the Union and Confederate sides throughout the Civil War. *The Rebellion Record* contains a reprinted speech of John Bright, a liberal English statesman that stated, “We hear that the nobles in Russia, to whom these serfs belong in a great measure, have been very hostile to this change and that there has even been some danger that the peace of that empire might be disturbed during this change.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ *The New York Times*, (New York, New York), November 24, 1860.

¹¹¹ *The Daily Evening Express*, (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), April 9, 1861.

¹¹² Frank Moore, (editor). *The Rebellion Record, a Diary of American Events: With Documents, Narratives, Illustrative Incidents, Poetry, Etc.* Volume I (G.P. Putnam and Henry Holt Publication Office: Broadway, New York, 1864), 6.

Another news source indicated the difficulties of gradual emancipation, but that many nobles preferred to advance the abolition of the serfs rather than continue the institution of serfdom. According to *The Enterprise and Vermonter*, “In Russia, the gradual system is working so disastrously that the nobles are petitioning the Emperor to end serfdom at once. But gradual emancipation is preferable to none, and if it may be commenced, then will the star of the nation begin to rise as of yore.”¹¹³ After the release of the Emancipation Manifesto, many serfs became less productive and put little effort into their work because they knew that they would be emancipated soon.

Similarly, the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, a Republican newspaper, reported on opinions about the situation in Russia written by an unnamed “Boston Traveller,” who believed that, “The troubles of Russia appear to be on the increase,” and also makes a note of the uncertainty in Russian society following Alexander II’s reforms, “...had the Czar been content to pursue his father’s policy, and to leave the serfs to serfdom, he would have experienced no trouble of a serious character in governing his dominions; and he might even have conquered some of his neighbor’s territory, and lived and died a popular monarch. But he chose to embark in the work of reform, and there is no saying what is to happen to him and his country, as a consequence...”¹¹⁴ This individual also remarked on the similarities between the American and Russian paths to liberty as he ponders, “It is a strange thing that the two most growing nations of the world, the United States and Russia, should be the victims of internal difficulties; and that in each case an endeavor to lessen the evils of slavery has been the occasion of these difficulties, if not their exact cause.”¹¹⁵ Therefore, these sources suggest that Americans felt unsure of the true

¹¹³ *The Enterprise and Vermonter*, (Vergennes, Vermont), March 14, 1862.

¹¹⁴ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, (Bangor, Maine), August 20, 1862.

¹¹⁵ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*. Ibid.

extent to which nobles and landed gentry that once owned the serfs accepted the abolition of serfdom and that they could only make assumptions based on rumors.

Other news sources reported on the positive effects of the emancipation of the Russian serfs. *The Nashville Daily Union*, a pro-Union paper, described, “In Russia, the serfs are rapidly complying with the conditions on which the land cultivated by them will become their property.”¹¹⁶ Further reporting on the success of the serfdom emancipation, *The Nashville Daily Union* announced, “The taxes have been fully collected this year- something quite unprecedented during the period of serfdom.”¹¹⁷ Thus, this news source informed its readers that former serfs were better off economically than as serfs, likely because they could keep more of the crops that they produced for themselves and paid less fees to their former masters.

Other sources contended that the serfs were not as content as what many believed; they started getting impatient for emancipation. A St. Petersburg correspondence to the *New York Daily Herald* described discontentment amongst the peasantry following the emancipation announcement, as many were “...beginning to lose patience, and serious agrarian disturbances have occurred in several parts of the country... In former times such things used to happen very often; but since the prospect of emancipation has been held out to the peasants they have been waiting very quietly for its realization, and the recurrence of such acts... shows plainly that they are getting tired....”¹¹⁸ Additionally, some peasants held unrealistically high expectations of what the Manifesto offered them, “...believing that the lands of the nobles will be divided amongst the peasantry, that they will have no taxes to pay, no recruits to furnish, [etc.]”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ *The Nashville Daily Union* (Nashville, Tennessee), November 20, 1862.

¹¹⁷ *The Nashville Daily Union*. Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *New York Daily Herald*, (New York, New York), February 16, 1861.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

Despite the benefits and reforms that former serfs received after being abolished, some Americans did not view Russia as a country other Americans should take inspiration from because they lacked liberty in other aspects of their society.

Elias Peissner, a colonel in the 119th New York Infantry and a professor at Union College, wrote in his *The American Question in Its National Aspect* that the situation in Russia was not one that Americans should look up to because, regarding most other qualities, the Russians lacked freedom. He states, “We do not generally take Russia as a model of freedom, nor do we expect much from her in this lime. Nor does she herself much believe in the liberty of the races.” Additionally, he remarks that, “The last Will of PETER the Great is her Bible, and her Czar is her God. Freedom can be hoped for only as far as it does not conflict with the one or the other. The prospects of liberty are, then, not very fair, and we think even a Russian edition of the “Compendium of the Crisis” would change matters but a little.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, the emancipation of the Russian serfs motivated not only many abolitionists of the United States but other European nations as well. In October of 1862, the *New York Tribune*, a newspaper formerly affiliated with the Whig Party, reported that Holland passed legislation to abolish slavery in the Dutch West Indies.¹²¹

As inspirational a feat as some American abolitionists may have considered the abolition of serfdom, comparisons between American slavery and Russian serfdom, and later Russian peasantry would continue throughout the Civil War. One reprinting within *The St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, a Republican supporting newspaper, describes a few fundamental distinctions

¹²⁰ Elias Peissner, *The American Question in Its National Aspect* (H. Lloyd & Co., Publishers: Manhattan, New York, 1861), 69; <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-1iAKBSDP80C&oi=fnd&pg=PA3&dq=russian+serfdom&ots=rqBVAYZxtB&sig=W2FOXQJ3Prf-QLhG988Q0uXGpyQ#v=onepage&q=Russia&f=false>
<https://dmna.ny.gov/historic/reghist/civil/infantry/119thInf/119thInfPersonPeissner.htm>

¹²¹ *New York Tribune*, (New York, New York), October 22, 1862.

between the rights of American slaves and Russian serfs when they asserted, “Serfdom in Russia- Accursed as it is, it has little or no similitude to the greater curse, absolute slavery.”¹²² Unlike American chattel slavery, “The Russian system prohibits the degrading traffic of human beings. Like cattle, in the market; it required a sale of land to accompany the sale of every serf.”¹²³ They also suggested that the institution of serfdom valued family and provided more opportunities for freedom from serfdom compared to American slavery as they stated, “...it guards female purity, recognizing the marriage tie, forbids the separation of families and gives the wife liberty as soon as the husband obtains his.”¹²⁴ Additionally, they regarded serfs as having more influence in the local politics influencing their lives when they stated, “...it allows in general the field serf the right of voting for his own village officers, and gives them a practical if not legal guaranty for the security of such property as they may acquire.”¹²⁵ Sarcastically, the paper mocked the fact that some deemed forced servitude as Biblical when they declared, “If American slavery is a good, just, and Christian institution, there are no words in our language strong enough to express the excellences of that which Russia is blindly throwing away.”¹²⁶ Like defenders of slavery in the United States, pro-serfdom individuals in Russian society also used the Bible as a source from which they could legitimize their right to have serfs.¹²⁷

As the Civil War dragged on, the news sources reporting on serfdom and its abolition shifted from being mostly celebratory that serfdom would be abolished to more critical of the differences between slavery and serfdom. Americans held conflicting opinions on the ease of the road to serfdom emancipation and on the effects of emancipation on Russian society. Mentions

¹²² *The St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, (St. Johnsbury, Vermont), April 19, 1861.

¹²³ *The St. Johnsbury Caledonian*. Ibid.

¹²⁴ *The St. Johnsbury Caledonian*. Ibid.

¹²⁵ *The St. Johnsbury Caledonian*. Ibid.

¹²⁶ *The St. Johnsbury Caledonian*. Ibid.

¹²⁷ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (Bangor, Maine), October 2, 1863.

of serfdom continued to appear in American media sources around one of the significant turning points in the American Civil War, President Lincoln's announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation.

After the Emancipation Proclamation

One month after Lincoln signed the Proclamation, in October of 1863, a Russian fleet visited New York and received great praise from abolitionists and even Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. At a dinner party hosted on one of the Russian ships in a New York harbor, Mrs. Lincoln proposed a toast to the health of Alexander II. The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* responded to this toast enthusiastically, stating, "Amen," we say to that toast, and drink with a will to the "Imperial Abolitionist," who almost reconciles us to despotism by using his power for the promotion of Freedom!"¹²⁸ The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* viewed this unexpected visit as a sign of a potential future alliance between Russia and the Union in the case that European powers contributed their forces to the American Civil War effort.

The Union began to worry that the Confederacy would seek support from European powers; Russian Emancipation suggested that some in Europe shared their antislavery sentiments. If the South succeeded in securing an alliance with England, France, or other European countries, it would be a devastating blow to the Union. With respect to the idea that the South could boost their position through foreign alliances, the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* wrote that the Union would be better off creating an alliance with Russia, a country whose morals aligned with the Union's. They remarked, "It will be clearly seen, therefore, that the interests and sympathies of the Russian government are with us in this struggle, and that there is

¹²⁸ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*. Ibid.

nothing more palpable than an active alliance in case of intervention by France or England.” In addition to believing that Russia and the United States shared similar goals in terms of social reforms, the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* fully trusted Russia as a global power; they stated, “The United States and Russia would be more than a match for France, England, Austria and Spain, with the slaveholders’ “Confederacy” to boot.”¹²⁹

While France and England viewed America as a competing force on the global arena, abolitionists perceived Russia as having, “...no jealousy of the growth or power of the United State, but *has* an interest in the continuance of that power as a check upon her two great European rivals.”¹³⁰ Besides the benefits for Russia in forming an alliance with the United States, the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* went on to state, “...the present Emperor really sympathizes with us in the struggle, as one against slavery. He has made great strides toward abolishing that institution in his own dominions and would like to see the death blow given to the system throughout the world.”¹³¹

Shortly after Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation, newspapers began publishing opinions on the document. Some of these sources contained comparisons of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Russian Emancipation Manifesto. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a Democratic-leaning paper, describes the opinion of a man referred to as Mr. T. who felt that the Proclamation lacked substance. In his words, “It did not contain the word freedom. Without the mention of the word freedom, “...he contended it should be followed up by another proclamation that did, and that speedily.” Mr. T. also compared the Emancipation Proclamation to the Emancipation Manifesto of Russia by commenting on the supposed selflessness of the

¹²⁹ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*. Ibid.

¹³⁰ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (Bangor, Maine), October 1, 1863.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Russian nobility in agreeing with the abolition of serfdom as he remarked, “In the Russian proclamation declaring the emancipation of the serfs he found written- “Russia will not forget that her nobility acting solely on its respect for the dignity of mankind and its love for its neighbor, has spontaneously renounced the right of serfdom.”¹³²

Though the Proclamation declared the intention of abolishing the slaves, American slaves would not be officially freed until the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment. Individuals with abolitionist sentiments grew anxious that slavery in America would persist. In his work *Slavery and the War: A Historical Essay*, 1863, Reverend Henry Darling argued that the U.S. is behind other world powers through its continued oppression of its slaves. He asserted that “Toward the great idea of universal liberty and equality, the race at large has, for the last half century, been steadily advancing. In the old world these principles battling with oppression has... hurled it into the dust. Even in Russia serfdom has been abolished.” In contrast, “It is in enlightened and Christian America alone, that the moral tone of society seems, in this respect, to have been lowered, that the public conscience has deteriorated, and that men have gone back, in their ideas of human rights, to barbaric ages.”¹³³

Ultimately, Russia never became a strong influence in the outcome of the Civil War by providing the Union with immigrants as other European countries did, but the ideological similarities shared by the Union and Russia are noteworthy. Some abolitionists believed that the Emancipation Proclamation made a good start in promising liberty for the slaves but that it could be improved and better resemble the Emancipation Manifesto of Russia. Abolitionists would

¹³² *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, New York), October 24, 1862.

¹³³ Henry Darling, *Slavery and War: A Historical Essay*. (J.B. Lippincott & Co.: Office of the Clerk of the District Court of Pennsylvania, 1863), 41.
https://books.google.com/books?id=flxEAQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=serfdom&f=false

begin to reflect on what they knew of the conditions of former serfs in Russia and the social and political liberties that they received as they pondered on what would soon become of the slaves of America once liberated. They hoped that the ex-slaves would receive similar liberties.

The End of the Civil War

Discussions of the conditions of the former serfs in Russia appeared more frequently in the closing years of the Civil War when the Union established that the slaves would be freed, but white Americans debated the ex-slaves' status in freedom.

The *Green-Mountain Freeman*, a Republican newspaper, published fragments of the accounts of Reverend J. Long, an English missionary that spent the summer of 1863 in Russia, and wrote about his observations on serfdom emancipation. Long held a high opinion of Alexander II and the liberal elites that pushed for the emancipation of the serfs; he states, “I trust that due credit may be given to the present Emperor and the Russian liberals for this noble act of serf emancipation. They had a hard battle to fight against the reactionary party.” Despite the potential for “anarchy and bloodshed,” that nobles against emancipation believed could happen as a result of freeing the serfs, Long insists, “...the Emperor gave no heed, and was prepared to risk his own crown and his life in order to free the peasant.” Additionally, Long acknowledges that the importance of the abolition of serfdom for American anti-slavery initiatives, stating, “The anti-slavery cause receives powerful encouragement from it.”

Many members of the Russian intellectuals and foreign onlookers such as Long believed that the emancipation of the serfs formed the beginning of a series of liberal institutions that would follow. As Long implies, “...I found among all intelligent Russians, the full conviction that a constitution must naturally come in a few years; that as municipal constitutions grow out

of emancipation so provincial assemblies are the result of municipal freedom, and a constitution will be the fruit of provincial assemblies.¹³⁴ As an abolitionist newspaper, the *Green-Mountain Freeman* likely shared the sentiments of the British Reverend Long towards the emancipation of the Russian serfs and thus believed that reprinting sections of his writings created quality content for their readers that would inform them about wins against unfree labor on the global scale while bringing them hope for the American situation.

Besides simply receiving freedom from their masters, the *New York Times* contended that Alexander II provided former serfs with the necessary requirements to achieve social mobility. They remarked, “Nothing could be more adapted to educate the masses for constitutional government, and to elevate the intelligence and character of all classes. It is vastly better than a sudden and wild gift of democratic institutions. It is the laying of the foundation for liberty.” Additionally, the ex-serfs were “...endowed with the most minute and extended system of municipal reform,” and given more political representation through newly formed local self-governing institutions. The *New York Times* emphasized the overall effect of emancipation for the serfs when they said, “Now she first frees the serfs, then elevates them, under certain conditions, to the suffrage, then offers the whole people a series of municipal institutions, which are seminaries of conservative and national liberty.”¹³⁵

Abolitionists may have heard of the reforms taking place in Russia during the 1860s and hoped that freed African slaves in the United States would also receive similar political and social reforms. *The Pennsylvania Inquirer* reprinted the opinion of Reverend Long. In this text, Long claimed, “The intellect and social energies of the serfs, which have been frozen up for centuries, are now set free; and this great social change has been effected within two years...”

¹³⁴ *Green-Mountain Freeman* (Montpelier, Vermont), March 15, 1864.

¹³⁵ *The New York Times* (New York, New York), April 26, 1864.

Among these reforms, he cited municipal institutions for all regions of Russia, increased efforts to educate the peasantry through the building of thousands of new schools, religious progress, and an overall shift away from conquest and more focus on internal affairs. Long considered these reforms an example that other world countries should follow, including the United States. He states, “The influence and example of these emancipated serfs will operate on the world, and will show that, while so beneficial a revolution has taken place successfully in Russia, other countries may learn to ‘go and do likewise...’”¹³⁶

Abel Charles Thomas’ *The Gospel of Slavery: A Primer of Freedom* is an alphabet book in which each letter stands for a word related to enslavement or abolition. Under the letter “T” for “Trader,” Thomas states, “The world moves, slowly it may be, but surely. Russia abolished Serfdom by an imperial decree, and our Republic is cutting a tangled knot by the edge of the sword.”¹³⁷ Thomas regards that while the process for the United States to achieve the abolition of slavery was long and strenuous in comparison to Russian serfdom emancipation, the two countries would eventually reach the same goal.

Conclusion

Abolitionists reacted more celebratory about serfdom abolition in the initial years of the Civil War. However, more news sources appeared in the mid to late years of the Civil War that reported on comparisons on slavery and serfdom while emphasizing the differences that made American slavery a harsher institution. They seemed to have misunderstood the process in which the emancipation of the serfs initiated and thus displayed varying views on whether the nobility

¹³⁶ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), February 16, 1864.

¹³⁷ Abel Charles Thomas, *The Gospel of Slavery: A Primer of Freedom* (T.W. Strong: Manhattan, New York), 1864. https://books.google.com/books?id=LGoAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=serfdom&f=false

posed a significant threat to the emancipation effort proceeding. They also possessed various conflicting views on the effects of abolition and whether the former serfs benefitted from their emancipation. At one point, Northerners considered that Russia could become an ally to the Union based on their ideological values following the abolition of serfdom. This fleeting idea did not actually happen in the end. Abolitionists looked to the Emancipation Manifesto and promises that the Russian government made to its former serfs for examples that America should follow and grant to its former slaves. Among these promises included more, though limited, political representation, more local governmental institutions to meet regional needs, an increased push for education, and the proper conditions in which a former serf could rise in social and economic rankings.

After the abolition of American slavery and the Civil War came to a close, news on former serfs would no longer be focused on comparing the two obsolete unfree labor institutions but would instead compare the conditions of the former forced laborers after emancipation.

Chapter 3: American Reconstruction, the Status of Freed Slaves and Freed Serfs

“The event of the past ten years most nearly resembling the destruction of American slavery is the abolition of Russian serfdom... It was accomplished in opposition to the efforts of a large portion of the Russian nobility... What expectation of the success of this great change in Russia would there be if the emperor should now turn over the execution of the plans for the elevation of the serfs to citizens to the nobility who had always bitterly opposed them, and who still disbelieve the policy? And yet this is what we are asked to do in this country.”¹³⁸

As the Civil War ended and the American slaves received freedom with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, a new dilemma confronted white Americans: assimilating freed people into society and deciding what rights to grant them. Likewise, the Russians faced a similar situation after serf emancipation.

American news sources described the Russian reforms, and at times compared it with the situation of the freed slaves in the South. Both countries addressed issues related to their newly freed peoples regarding land, education, and political representation. Despite this similarity, references to serfdom and freed serfs occurred much less during the post-Civil War years than during the war or prior; American news sources focused on internal matters. Those references that did appear occurred more often in mainstream newspapers than abolitionist newspapers. During the Reconstruction era, abolitionist papers seldom mentioned Russian serfdom. These men and women may have believed that they no longer needed to advocate for freedom by comparing American democracy with slavery to Russian autocracy that enslaved serfs. It may have been that mainstream newspapers reflected the white Americans', who had not been abolitionists, uncertainty about freed people's status. In contrast, the end of serfdom and the status of the newly freed Russians were on part of the debate between mainstream newspapers, particularly those affiliated with the Democrat or Republican party. These partisan periodicals

¹³⁸ *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut), September 30, 1872.

used reports on Russian's post Emancipation to advance their own views on the status of newly freed slaves. Republican papers had a more positive view of post-Emancipation Russia than Democratic newspapers; these periodicals reported on challenges facing Russian and American Emancipation. Each interpretation supported their views on American emancipation and Reconstruction: Republicans supported an expansion of black civil rights, Democrats did not. Ultimately, regardless of the status of Russian serfs, newly freed men and women in the United States failed to receive all the benefits of American citizens. This outcome may have changed if abolitionists did not assume the end of slavery meant full freedom.

To understand the way newspapers used serfdom, it is critical to understand the political context of Reconstruction. Following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, a Democrat, became president and approached Southern Reconstruction in a way that disappointed many Northern Republicans. The Republicans hoped that Reconstruction legislation would do away with the Southern plantation system and provide voting rights for the newly freed peoples. Disagreements initially begun as Johnson easily forgave Southerners through his Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction in 1865, which caused resentment towards him from the Republicans who did not want the former Confederates to receive the representation they once did. The Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in 1866 and tried to manage Reconstruction in the South but were faced with opposition from Andrew Johnson, who did not want to work with them.¹³⁹

Republicans and Democrats would debate the rights of the freed slaves for decades following the abolition of slavery. The newly freed peoples became citizens of the United States,

¹³⁹ P. Scott Corbett, Volker Janssen, John M. Lund, Todd Pfannestiel, Paul Vickery, and Sylvie Waskiewicz. *U.S. History: Reconstruction to the Present- Textbook*. Provided by: OpenStax College. Located at: <http://openstaxcollege.org/textbooks/us-history>.

but there was conflict regarding whether citizenship guaranteed certain rights, including suffrage, equality, and education.¹⁴⁰ Overall, Republicans and abolitionists tended to see positive consequences to the abolition of serfdom. Democrats usually remarked on the effects of emancipation that impacted the former serf owners due to their sympathy for the ex-slave owners of the South. Abolitionists may have held too much positivity over the end of serfdom because it reflected their pleasure for the conclusion of American slavery.

American Reflections on Russia and Serfdom

As time passed following the Civil War, Americans began to reflect on their opinion of serfdom in comparison to American slavery, as well as the potential for an alliance between America and Russia. Various sources regarded the serfs' emancipation as a necessity for other reforms to follow suit. *The Brooklyn Union*, a Republican newspaper in New York, reprinted a letter from a correspondence in Naples that maintained that, "...in one sense old, the [Russian] nation is in its youth. The fibres of power, possession, prestige, wealth have struck down deep and taken tenacious hold. The outgrowth of national life from such roots, when once begun, must be colossal." Thus, "Russia needs, most of all, development. Knowing this, the Emperor has cut the bond which threatened strangulation to national progress, and having freed his peasant population [he] seeks to elevate them."¹⁴¹ The United States faced a similar situation with slavery, "No one can doubt that the future prospects of Virginia, for instance, are far superior to what they could ever have been under the old regime of slavery. But she inherits the impoverished soil, the ignorant laboring class, the lethargic habits of the aristocracy, the lack of

¹⁴⁰ Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 15-18.

¹⁴¹ *The Brooklyn Union* (Brooklyn, New York), February 23, 1866.

internal improvements... of a different state of things, which she must cast off and grow out of before she can profit by her new advantages...”¹⁴² *The Brooklyn Daily Union* viewed the emancipation of unfree labor in America and Russia as a necessity for continued progress in each country, but with freedom came new challenges that called for internal reforms.

Not surprisingly, Americans in 1866 reported on the attempted murder of the Russian monarch; they had lost their own emancipator to an assassin’s bullet the year before. The Republican *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* discussed the assassination attempt against Alexander II and framed the attack as a vengeful move due to bitter tensions caused by the emancipation of the serfs, “We see by the last foreign news that the same arguments against emancipation which have been used in this country are being introduced in Russia. A great land-owner has attempted the assassination of the Emperor by discharging a pistol at him in a crowd—the Emperor’s life being saved by the interposition of a freed peasant, who knocked the assassin’s hand one side.” The reason given for the attempt was that the land-owner “considered himself injured by the emancipation of the serfs.”¹⁴³ The attempted assassination of the Czar resonated with Americans because of Lincoln’s assassination by a bitter pro-Confederate.

The abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* focused on the benefits of Russian Serfdom and not on bitterness. While serfs were freed on paper, they still needed to pay rent for the land they lived and worked on. As stated in *The Liberator*, “...about two millions of peasants are now entirely liberated with regard to the proprietors, thanks to an immediate payment of the redeeming rent. In such cases their annual rent (*redencance*) is capitalized, and the Government gives the proprietor an obligation for the amount of the capital, which bears five per cent interest, and will be redeemed in the course of forty-nine years by annual drawings (*tirages*). In addition,

¹⁴² *The Brooklyn Union*, Ibid.

¹⁴³ *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (Bangor, Maine), May 2, 1866.

“The peasants then pay their redeeming rent to Government, and thus become free and independent proprietors.” The paper described that such agreements became more common because both peasants and proprietors found the proceeding to be “...the most profitable” suggesting that emancipation was good for the peasant and the proprietor.¹⁴⁴

Emancipation was not just about profit, but about politics. To allow the newly freed serfs more political representation in local affairs, the Russian government, “...issued a law on the municipal organization of the country. It is founded upon just and wise principles...” *The Liberator* reprinted an extensive article in 1865 describing these municipal organizations, “Every district and every chef-lieu has every year an assembly of deputies who name a permanent committee for three years. This committee is charged with the municipal administration, under the control of the assembly. Every one is called by law to the election of deputies.” Seemingly, “...it happened in many places that the peasants were the most numerous, and could, therefore, dispose of all the places in the administrative committee. Quotes from peasants in this article remark that, “...we want one or two members of the committee taken from amongst ourselves; they will watch over our interests. As for defending them, as for *action*, the nobles we name will do it far better than we, for they are more learned than we are.”¹⁴⁵

Assemblies were made on local and regional levels, which allowed peasants more chances for representation and direct influence in local matters. After the voting of members for the district assemblies, members were chosen for the larger provincial assembly. Despite being granted the opportunity for increased political representation, peasants did not always find interest in attending such meetings, “The central committee seems to interest the peasants less than those of the districts, and this too is owing to their modesty and moderation.” Abolitionist

¹⁴⁴ *The Liberator* (Boston, Massachusetts), September 1, 1865.

¹⁴⁵ *The Liberator*, Ibid.

newspapers focused on the benefits and progress of Russian Emancipation because this reflected their optimism about American emancipation.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, Democratic newspapers used serf emancipation in their arguments rejecting former slaves receiving expanded political rights. Not surprisingly, a Democratic newspaper, the *Detroit Free Press*, argued that liberal thinkers always wanted newly freed peoples to have more rights besides freedom, “Our radicals, not content with breaking the chains of the slave, must needs give him the right to vote, and the consequences are riots, antagonism of races, misgovernment, if not bloodshed, The Russian Autocrat... has liberated the ignorant and brutalized Russian serfs, and the consequences are that agriculture is at a stand still in the interior of the empire. The landed gentry find no laborers to cultivate the soil, for the freed peasants insist that there shall be a division of the lands...and refuse to work.”¹⁴⁷ The *Detroit Free Press* made a rather strained comparison between the newly-freed slaves' political rights and serfs' agricultural productivity.

Like Democratic newspapers in the North, papers in the former confederacy also used reports of Russian Emancipation's challenges to support their cause. In 1868, the *Fayetteville Observer*, a Democratic and former anti-Union paper of Confederate Tennessee, reported that Russian serfdom remained not yet completely abolished, as many sources confidently proclaimed. In their words, “By a recent official report it appears that there are still 3,629,382 serfs not emancipated.” Though, “Over six millions, however, have been made free, and the freedom of all is only a question of time, the government having very properly undertaken to compensate for their losses through emancipation.”¹⁴⁸ This last statement suggests that the

¹⁴⁶ *The Liberator*, Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, Michigan), June 23, 1867.

¹⁴⁸ *Fayetteville Observer* (Fayetteville, Tennessee), May 7, 1868.

Fayetteville Observer may have sympathized with former serf owners and hoped they would be compensated for losing their serfs and large portions of their property. They likely held the same sentiments for the former slaveholders of the South.

In contrast, Republican papers still applauded Russian Emancipation. On the American opinion of the emancipation of the serfs, the *Hartford Courant*, a Connecticut newspaper that leaned Republican, remarked on the value of the American perspective to Russia, “The liberal politician of whatever country is strengthened by the approval of this country, and despotism when it performs a liberal act, say the emancipation of Russian serfdom, finds of all applause the sweetest that which comes from republican America.”¹⁴⁹ They believed that American support on the Russian liberal reforms was most valuable to Russia. Reflecting upon the brutalities of the Civil War, a reprinted speech in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* remarked on the stark contrast between the ways American slavery and Russian serfdom ceased, “Before our slaves were freed, however... there were millions of money expended, and 750,000 precious lives sacrificed. Serfdom was destroyed by a stroke of the pen, without the shedding of a drop of blood.”¹⁵⁰

The Philadelphia Inquirer, a Democratic-leaning paper, reprinted an article that covered a conspiracy theory in Russia that the serfs were emancipated to get rid of the landholders. Something that Democrats may have feared in the United States. “The aim of the conspiracy was to increase the actual properties of the peasants, by adding to them the lands left to the old proprietors in 1861, at the time of the emancipation of the serfs.” The year 1870 was important for the freed serfs, as “For the execution of the plot on the 19th day of February, 1870 (March 3), was fixed upon, being the day when the freed peasants will enter upon the full exercise of their rights and be at liberty to leave the soil upon which they live, at their own option.” According to

¹⁴⁹ *Hartford Courant* (Hartford Connecticut), October 6, 1873.

¹⁵⁰ *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), March 17, 1873.

the reprinted source from *Gazeta Tosnenska* seen in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, "...it was intended to begin what is called the definitive liberation of the peasants by the extermination of their old lords."¹⁵¹ Surprisingly, in contrast, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, who opposed Lincoln's 1864 reelection, endorsed the Czar's reforms, "The tidal wave of progress will sweep onward. The abolition of serfdom in Russia must be followed by participation in Governmental affairs."¹⁵²

Other newspapers cited American misunderstanding of Russian serfdom to reject any comparison between this action and American emancipation. A reprinting within *The Cecil Whig* of Maryland summarizes the misunderstandings that many Americans held about Russia and the former system of serfdom, remarking, "To confound together Americans abroad is as great a blunder as it would be to suppose that a Russian nobleman on his travels is a representative of a peasant freed from serfdom. The mistake in the latter case would be immaterial, because the Russian peasant has no political power; but whenever the mistake is made with respect to America the result is a certain misapprehension of American politics." This comment touched on the notion that many American news sources erroneously portrayed serfdom and its end and, as a result, questioned the usefulness of these lessons for American Emancipation.

Education Reforms and the End of Serfdom

One topic that Democrats and Republicans seemed to agree on was that the emancipation of the serfs brought education reforms. According to a reprinting in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, a Democratic paper, education played an important role in advancing Russia's position in Europe; "Without primary schools Russia could never become a European power. As soon as serfdom

¹⁵¹ *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), February 4, 1870.

¹⁵² *The Cincinnati Enquirer* (Cincinnati, Ohio), July 8, 1872.

was abolished, schools began to be established.” Additionally, they described the newly formed municipal institutions in Russia, “To day our communities enjoy, to a great extent, self-government under self-chosen officials. And on this foundation the first story of the building of general self-government has been erected in the form of the “Zemstwo,” which might be called a provisional parliament--an institution not to be thought of as long as representation of the people was impossible...”¹⁵³ Republican papers also discussed education in Russia. The *Decatur Daily Republican*, whose affiliation was evident in its title, discussed the education reforms of Alexander II, stating, “The Russian Czar, in introducing to the Empire the system of compulsory education which has been projected, has taken a responsibility greater than since the abolition of serfdom.” The education system would be modeled after the Prussian system, “. . .which has been followed by such wonderful results in Germany, it is to be tried in Russia as it was worked in the country where it originated.”¹⁵⁴ However, they remarked that there could be some differences in the outcome because Germany amounted to a smaller region than Russia, and Russia’s population remained more scattered. Evidently, the education reforms took place only in European Russia and did not include the Russian borderlands.

The Columbian, a Democratic paper of Pennsylvania, reprinted excerpts of a speech that regarded Russia as copying the American education system, stating, “The government has thoroughly investigated the school systems of all other countries, and is gradually extending good schools all over the empire. The speaker was glad to say that the Russians found the school system of our own State so admirable that they have followed it to a great extent.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ *The Cincinnati Enquirer* (Cincinnati, Ohio), June 18, 1868. Taken from St. Petersburg correspondence to the *New York Tribune*.

¹⁵⁴ *Decatur Daily Republican* (Decatur, Illinois), November 18, 1874.

¹⁵⁵ *The Columbian* (Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania), June 18, 1875.

Regarding the reforms of Alexander II, the Republican *Janesville Daily Gazette* of Wisconsin commented that in addition to abolishing serfdom and reforming his administration, “He has relieved the educational institutions of the empire from military supervision, established civil in the place of military government in the colonies, granted a general amnesty for past political offenses, relaxed censorship from and otherwise enlarged the liberty of the press, given a new impulse to the progress of the industrial arts, encouraged scientific research and extended foreign and domestic commerce.” These reforms not only contributed to increased international respect for Russia but also, “...had the effect to elevate the character of the people...”¹⁵⁶

In the American South, the newly freed peoples could become educated with little controversy, but the quality of their schooling was of lower quality due to the segregation of black and white schools.¹⁵⁷

Russian Ex-Serf Owners and Southern Ex-Slaveholders

Facing similar scenarios of losing their labor force and portions of their land, former serf and slave owners of America and Russia found common ground in their discontentment at the progressive movements of their day.

The Republican *Chicago Tribune* sympathized with Russian landlords' discontent because, in contrast to southern slave-owners, they had not rebelled against the government. “The overthrow of serfdom in Russia, like that of slavery in America, is attended with hostile manifestations on the part of those that have been deprived of their ownership of their fellow-men, and who have forfeited the immense social and political power which was connected with

¹⁵⁶ *Janesville Daily Gazette* (Janesville, Wisconsin), August 15, 1873.

¹⁵⁷ David Tyack, and Robert Lowe, "The Constitutional Moment: Reconstruction and Black Education in the South," *American Journal of Education* 94, no. 2 (1986): 236-56. Accessed April 9, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1084950>.

that monstrous monopoly.”¹⁵⁸ While both groups felt discontentment, “The Russian landlords have, however, displayed a far higher sense of humanity and civilization than the Southern slaveholders...” as “They did not resort to armed rebellion and treason. They submitted to the anti-slavery decrees of the national authority, and have not attempted, like the Southerners, to destroy a Government whose only sin consists in delivering them from sin.”¹⁵⁹ Both Abraham Lincoln and Alexander II faced assassination attempts by the year 1866 in which the *Chicago Tribune* article was written, but only the attempt on Lincoln’s life succeeded. Regarding this matter, “The analogy between the abortive attempt to assassinate the foremost friend of the Russian serfs and the successful attempt to murder the Emancipator of the American slaves exists, therefore, only as regards the cause in which all probability prompted the attempt, and does not exist as far as the scope of the successors of the respective victims are concerned...” Unlike in America, “...the prospective Czar being as warmly in favor of his father’s liberal policy as our new President is enamored with the State Right iniquities of the old slavery system.”¹⁶⁰ In this case, the *Tribune* used slavery against Andrew Johnson, the new President, who was often despised by Republican Party members.

The Superior Times, a Republican newspaper in Wisconsin, compared the Russian nobility to former slave-owners, “The Russian nobility, like the ex-slaveholders of the south, are not pleased with the new ideas and conditions which emancipation has brought about. They lately held a meeting at Moscow to devise measures for restoring serfdom under another name.” In addition to bringing back a version of serfdom, the nobles, “...would like to take away from the former serfs all power of self-government, and, under the name of administrators, vest the

¹⁵⁸ *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, Illinois), May 1, 1866.

¹⁵⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, Ibid.

former owners with a large part of their ancient authority.”¹⁶¹ *The Superior Times* did not believe that these nobles would be successful with these initiatives during the lifetime of Alexander II, who proved himself to have liberal tendencies, but that his heir appeared to be more old-fashioned. By the time this article was published in 1875, many Southern states had succeeded in resting political power from newly freed African Americans.

Effects of Emancipation Before the Fight Between Democrats and Republicans

In the aftermath of the war, Northerners seemed hopeful about Emancipation because they believed freedom would make agricultural workers in both nations more diligent. Multiple papers remarked on the mostly positive effects of emancipation on the freed serfs and Russia itself. The *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* asserted, “The Russian peasantry relieved from serfdom are becoming more industrious and prudent.”¹⁶² The *New York Times* believed the industrialization of Russia to be one of the greatest effects of the emancipation of the serfs. According to *The New York Times*, “The development of the agricultural resources of Russia may be said to have commenced anew with the emancipation of the serfs. Their liberation was a new birth to the industry of the nation.” They remarked that under the system of serfdom, the landowners that controlled the soil tilled by the serfs felt “...generally indifferent to all improvements” in agricultural production. The landowners allowed millions of acres to be left unused, and the serfs themselves appeared “...lazy and wasteful.” To summarize the thoughts of *The New York Times* on agriculture in Russia before the abolition of serfdom, “...serfdom deteriorated and weighed down the whole people, from the highest noble to the lowest laborer, and the very soil was blighted by the system.” *The New York Times* article hoped that this would

¹⁶¹ *The Superior Times* (Superior, Wisconsin), May 29, 1875.

¹⁶² *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (Bangor, Maine), July 1, 1869.

happen in the US South after Emancipation. “Russia, under serfdom, was almost an exact likeness of the South under slavery. Both dragged out a miserable existence, or died slowly, under self-inflicted maladies.”¹⁶³ After the abolition of serfdom in Russia, the nobles felt more willing to use new technology to aid in agricultural production, and the serfs became more motivated to work hard. *The New York Times* acknowledged, “The wealthy landowners have been awakened from their sleep of ages. Some have commenced to employ steam machinery in the cultivation of the soil, to practice irrigation where it is needed, to encourage the construction of railroads, and to introduce all those improvements suited to their situation that have proved successful in other countries.” As for the lower classes, they have “...shown a degree of industry and enterprise that has surprised and delighted their friends.” Due to a good harvest, “...quantities of grain which they have raised and have ready for the market are so large that prices even in New-York and Chicago have been governed to some extent by the abundance in Russia.”¹⁶⁴ Thus, the improved agricultural advances in Russia made the Russians a formidable opponent in the world market for cheap food supply.

Not surprisingly, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* of Tennessee, a paper that had allied with the Confederate government, did not condemn former slave owners when it cited Russian emancipation; however, it still highlighted Russia’s agricultural progress. They remarked that the new system in which freed serfs paid small fees to rent and eventually own the land they lived on and tilled allowed, “...about two-thirds of the former serfs are proprietors of the land which they formerly cultivated, and the rest have no fear of being ejected.” Land became cheap at only cents per acre, and “These prices are extremely low, not only in comparison with Western Europe but even with the United States, yet they were about the market price of the time.” The freed serfs

¹⁶³ *The New York Times* (New York, New York), October 28, 1867.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

themselves maintained new and impressive levels of productivity thanks to their status as free people; “The large increase in the grain export of Russia is due solely to emancipation. Even with good railroads and the increased price of grain which resulted from their introduction it would be impossible to raise such crops under the old system of forced labor.”

Emancipation improved the Russian market economy and also the livelihood of the freed serfs. Besides increased agricultural productivity, the financial situations of the freed serfs also improved, “Every one who has lived in the country since 1861 has noticed a great increase of wealth among the peasants.” But despite all the progress, Russia faced an important question: “What is to come of the government system of land-tenure; is it to continue, or will individual ownership prevail? Legislation has wisely refrained from answering this question.”¹⁶⁵

Overall, the abolition of serfdom and slavery allowed their respective countries to behave with more concern for the lives of their citizens, according to the Republican *Lancaster Gazette*. “They may be seen in the better adjustment between labor and capital; in the growing prevalence of religious liberty; in the destruction of Russian serfdom and American slavery; in the significant fact that, the world over, the question of human bondage is being taken out of the arena of mere political strife and debate, and settled before that higher tribunal, *the hearts and consciences of men*.” Russia and the United States showed that, “They may be seen also in the growing amity and commerce of nations, and their reluctance to engage in war, and, when in arms, in their rivalry in the merciful treatment of prisoners, and the tenderness of their care for the sick and the wounded. They also exhibited, “...greater humanity of legislation... the majesty of violated law is no longer vindicated by fire and the rack of all cruel torture, but by penal

¹⁶⁵ *Memphis Daily Appeal* (Memphis, Tennessee), February 22, 1874.

systems as merciful as just.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, this paper believed that America and Russia encouraged broader hope for world progress.

A New “Serfdom” in the South and Usage of Serfdom for Political Purposes

Some news sources argued that the Reconstruction era laws targeting freed slaves created a new form of serfdom similar to that of the Russian serfs, a major concern for Republicans in Reconstruction. The Republican *Burlington Times* of Vermont remarked on various provisions that limited the rights of freed slaves and, “Thus far the code is one succession of outrageous provision, insulting and degrading to any free people, being nothing short of an attempt to establish a condition of things that falls not a whit short of the Russian serfdom.”¹⁶⁷ They believed that South Carolina, specifically, wanted to make conditions for the freed slaves like that of the former serfs.

An 1867 article of the Democratic *Maryland Free Press* admitted that, “On Wednesday last, the bill reported from the joint Committee on Reconstruction, by Thaddeus Stevens, entitled, “A bill to provide for the more efficient government of the insurrectionary States,” passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 109 yeas, to 55 nays.” The provisions of this bill made it so that, “...the entire civil government of ten States is subverted and one third of the population of the country is reduced to a condition hardly preferable to Russian serfdom.”¹⁶⁸ In addition to dividing the Southern states into five military districts, the bill abolished civil tribunals, “...except by the permission of the military authorities; the writ of habeas corpus is

¹⁶⁶ *Lancaster Gazette* (Lancaster, Ohio), May 19, 1870.

¹⁶⁷ *Burlington Times* (Burlington, Vermont), December 2, 1865.

¹⁶⁸ *Maryland Free Press* (Hagerstown, Maryland), February 21, 1867.

swept away, together with the last vestiges of the rights and liberties of the private citizen, which are subjected to the arbitrary power of a military satrap and his minions.”¹⁶⁹

The Republican *Hartford Courant* made the direct connection between the status of freed serfs and free slaves. “Serfdom has been abolished in Russia, but the Russian nobles are still a powerful and threatening class. It was absolutely essential to the safety of the State that the aristocracy, which formed politically the most obnoxious feature of slavery, should be overpowered, and that the aristocratic institutions of the South should be replaced by the democratic institutions of the North.”¹⁷⁰ Republicans advocated the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave the vote for former slaves, as one way of overpowering the Southern aristocracy.

Conclusion

The early Reconstruction era years in America became a time for Americans to reflect on what they knew and believed about the former system of Russian serfdom. They discussed the reforms that took place in Russia after Emancipation, as well as the effects of those reforms on the overall population and the progress of the country. In general, mainstream news sources reported on the freed peasants of Russia much more frequently than the abolitionist papers of the Civil War years. Papers reported in detail the educational reforms and political status of former serfs. When an attempt was made on Czar Alexander II’s life, Northerners compared it to Lincoln’s murder. This reporting often reflected the partisan debates over the status of freed men and women. Democratic and Republic papers held different views as they debated over Reconstruction. For example, Democratic newspapers reported any challenges facing Russian Emancipation, while Republican papers cited its success as an example for the United States.

¹⁶⁹ *Maryland Free Press*, Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ *Hartford Courant* (Hartford, Connecticut), March 12, 1867.

Likely, the status of serfs across the seas had little to do with the ultimate status of African American freedpeople, but these debates demonstrated the transnational debate over freedom in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

The American Antebellum era brought numerous social changes to the United States. Many Northerners found the institution of serfdom, the emancipation of the serfs, and the progress of reforms in Russia to hold many resemblances to the situation in the United States. Russian serfdom was not discussed nearly as much in Northern American news sources as internal issues, but the similarities between American slavery and Russian serfdom were significant enough to catch the attention of many Northerners. The political affiliations and ideologies were often reflected in Northern opinions on serfdom and its demise, especially following the Civil War and Andrew Johnson's new presidency.

Before the Civil War, Northerners displayed a variety of positions on Russian serfdom. Some felt that while the institution of serfdom had similarities to American slavery, they deemed slavery as a much harsher form of forced labor. Americans often depended on reprinted correspondence from European sources in American newspapers to learn more about Russian serfdom, which led many to be misinformed about the realities of serfdom. Still, there were Northerners that felt pity for the serfs and found inspiration to continue striving for the abolition of American slavery when they heard rumors that Russian serfdom was near its end.

During the Civil War, Northerners reflected on serfdom and continued to compare it to American slavery, often still believing it was a milder institution. Northerners reported congratulatory remarks to the Russians for emancipating their serfs and felt that America should follow suit. They regretted that Americans needed a war to move closer to the end of slavery, while the Russians were able to rid themselves of unfree labor through peaceful debate.

Northerners also reported on the reforms for the newly freed serfs and compared the Emancipation Proclamation of the United States to the Emancipation Manifesto to Russia.

Following the Civil War, Northerners discussed the conditions of the freed serfs and the progress of social, political, and educational reforms in Russia. The positive or negative light in which these Russian reforms were discussed was often based on the political affiliation of the paper reporting them. Republican papers were more prone to viewing the reforms as successful for the livelihood of the freed serfs and the country of Russia in general, while Democratic papers appeared to be more concerned over the conditions of the former serf owners. Abolitionist papers were still concerned about the freed serfs and discussed their situations, but very seldom as serfdom was no longer as relevant to discuss after the abolition of American slavery.

Knowledge of American perspectives on Russian serfdom and reforms of the 1860s contribute to a greater understanding of not only how transnational movements influenced the abolitionist effort in the United States but also how they influenced the debates between Republicans and Democrats during the Reconstruction era.

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