

Notes on
Distant Fiends and Intimate Enemies:
A History of American-Russia Relations
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Overview The history of Russia-America relations has had MANY ups and downs. Here are some points that recur in the book:

1. Russia has always been an autocratic society that has no notion of freedom of the press or of religion. America has always been a democracy which values those freedoms.
2. Even so, there are times when the countries have gotten along and noted similarities:
 - (a) America and Slaves, Russia had Serfs. They both ended at about the same time: American slavery in 1865, Russian Serfdom in 1861. They both got replaced by systems that ensured cheap labor was still available.

RUSSIA

When Alexander II issued the Emancipation Manifesto of 1861, it officially ended serfdom and granted personal liberty to over 23 million people. However, the tsarists government balanced this reform with severe economic traps designed to prevent peasant self-sufficiency and maintain a steady supply of low-wage agricultural and industrial labor. Rather than absolute freedom, several state-imposed mechanisms effectively forced former serfs back onto noble estates as cheap laborers:

1. The Debt Trap: *Redemption Payments Peasants were granted the right to buy the land they lived on, but they could not afford it out of pocket. The government paid landowners up front using state bonds, and the peasants were required to pay the government back through redemption payments.*

The Catch: These loans carried high interest rates and were stretched out over 49 years.

The Result: The payments were heavily inflated—often vastly exceeding the actual market value or profit potential of the land.

Saddled with inescapable, generational debt, peasants were forced to take low-wage seasonal labor on aristocratic estates or in growing urban factories just to pay their annual dues.

2. The Land Trap: Otrezki ("Cut-off Lands") *The nobility retained the vast majority of the arable territory and kept the highest-quality acreage for themselves.*

The Catch: The plots allocated to peasant families were intentionally kept too small to sustain them. Furthermore, the landlords strategically "cut off" (otrezki) essential common spaces—such as vital pastures, water sources, and forests.

The Result: Peasants could not survive on their allocated plots alone. To gain access to roads, rivers, or extra farming plots, they had to lease the land back from their former masters, paying for it either with low-wage labor or a large share of their crop yields (sharecropping).

3. The "Temporary Obligation" Period: *The transition to freedom was explicitly slowed down to protect noble interests. The Catch: The manifesto mandated a two-year transition period during which the peasants remained legally obligated to perform the exact same labor services (barshchina) or pay the same dues (obrok) to their former masters as they did under serfdom.*

The Result: In many regions, landowners deliberately dragged out the process of finalizing land registries, meaning hundreds of thousands of "freed" peasants spent years trapped under these "temporary obligations".

4. Bondage to the Commune (Mir): *To ensure the state still received its taxes and redemption payments, the government heavily empowered the mir (the traditional village commune).*

The Catch: The land did not belong to individual peasants; it belonged collectively to the mir. The commune held "joint responsibility" for the village's entire debt.

The Result: To prevent people from running away from their debts, the mir strictly controlled internal passports and travel permissions. If a peasant wanted to leave the village to find a job elsewhere, they needed the commune's explicit blessing. This restriction kept the labor pool anchored to the local region, driving down wages for local land barons.

Through this combination of extreme debt, land scarcity, and communal restriction, the Russian establishment successfully transitioned from an economy of ownership-based forced labor to one driven by economic desperation. If you want to explore the long-term impact of this reform, let me know if you would like to: Look into how these economic traps fueled the peasant revolts that followed Examine how these conditions directly set the stage for the 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolution section From First Contacts to Fledgling Diplomatic Relations: 1607-1807

AMERICA

Following the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865, which officially abolished slavery, Southern states enacted a series of legal, economic, and social systems designed to bypass the amendment and maintain a continuous supply of cheap, subjugated Black labor. Because the 13th Amendment left a critical loophole—allowing involuntary servitude as a “punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted”—Southern legislatures systematically criminalized Black life to exploit it.

1. The Convict Leasing System *The loophole in the 13th Amendment birthed a lucrative and brutal pipeline known as convict leasing. How it worked: States arrested thousands of newly freed Black Americans under minor or fabricated charges. Private companies, plantation owners, and industrial enterprises (like coal mines and railroads) then leased these prisoners from the state for a fee.*

The Result: Private employers gained an unpaid, unprotected workforce, while states made massive profits. Because employers did not “own” the workers, they had no financial incentive to keep them healthy, leading to extreme violence and mortality rates that often exceeded those of antebellum slavery.

2. Black Codes and Vagrancy Laws: *Immediately following the Civil War, Southern states passed restrictive laws known as the Black Codes to legally compel Black Americans back onto plantations.*

How it worked: A central pillar of these codes was vagrancy laws, which made it a crime for a Black person to be unemployed or

unable to prove employment. Black citizens were required to sign restrictive, annual labor contracts with white landowners.

The Result: If a Black person refused to sign a contract, or left a job before the year was up, they were arrested for vagrancy. They were then fined, and if they could not pay, they were forced into involuntary labor or leased out to private employers to work off the debt.

3. Debt Peonage and Sharecropping: *With no capital or land of their own, many freed people had little choice but to enter into sharecropping agreements with white landowners.*

How it worked: Landowners provided sharecroppers with a plot of land, seeds, and tools in exchange for a large share of the harvested crop (often half or more). To buy food and clothes, workers had to borrow money on credit from the landlord's local store at exorbitant, predatory interest rates.

The Result: At the end of the harvest, the landowner manipulated the accounting books so that the sharecropper's debt always exceeded the value of their share of the crop. This created a cycle of debt peonage. It was legally impossible for a worker to leave a plantation while owing a debt, effectively locking generations of families to the same land.

COMPARE RUSSIA AND AMERICA

The tactics used in the American South shared striking parallels with Russia's post-serfdom transition, relying on systemic traps rather than outright ownership to enforce labor:

Mechanism	American South	Tsarists Russia
Legal Exploitation	Black Codes / Vagrancy Laws: Criminalized unemployment to force Black laborers to sign annual plantation contracts.	Temp Obligation: Forced peasants to continue performing traditional labor services for landlords during a lengthy transition.
The Debt Trap	Sharecropping and Debt Peonage: Trapped families in inescapable debt cycles via high-interest landlord store credit.	Redemption Pay: Saddled villages with 49-year government loans to pay for inflated, low-quality land plots.
Forced Servitude	Convict Leasing: Exploited the 13th Amendment loophole to lease out arrested Black citizens as free industrial labor.	Mir Restrictions: Used village communes to restrict internal passports, keeping peasants from leaving the local labor pool.

3. The similarities between slavery and serfdom were used by abolitionists and people in Russia who wanted to abolish serfdom to reinforce their arguments, but also by slave owners and nobles to enforce their arguments.
4. Both countries had a notion of Manifest destiny..
5. At times Russia and America cooperated as a unifying force against Britain. The book stresses that it was not just pragmatic—during the friendly times there was also a genuine affection. Russians admired American’s engineering know-how and can-do spirit. Americans admired Russian music and literature.
6. At times they didn’t get along Russia would point out American’s only care about money, and America would point to the lack of freedoms in Russia.
7. Some of the Czar’s seemed to want to reform the country. When they did, even a little, America Cheered. But it never got very far.

8. When Russia criticized American Slavery, America responded by pointing out Serfdom. When Russia criticized Americas lynchings, America responded by pointing out Pogroms. Gee- all these things are bad!
9. Russian Radicals (anti-Czar) viewed America as a Utopia of freedom, though were troubled by slavery and the killing of native Americans.

1 From First Contact to Fledgling Diplomatic Relations 1607-1807

1. John Smith, later governor of Jamestown, fought the Turks in Europe and was captured. He escaped and got to Russia where the Russian Governor helped him. He was happy and enchanted by Russia and its people and spoke well of them.
2. For this period of time, and later, when Russia's said *Americans* they meant *Native Americans*.
3. Americans and Russians met in the Pacific Northwest sometimes, but there was not much contact.
4. Peter the Great (Born 1672, Reigned 1682-1725) modernized and westernized Russia. Gemini:

Westernization: *He introduced European culture, science, and technology to Russia, even forcing noblemen to cut off their traditional beards.*

Building a Navy and Army: *He created Russia's first navy from scratch and reorganized the military along modern European lines. Founding St. Petersburg: He built the new capital city on the Baltic Sea in 1703, calling it his "window to Europe".*

World History Encyclopedia Territorial Expansion: *He won the Great Northern War against Sweden, securing vital sea ports and elevating Russia to an empire in 1721.*

As part of his westernization campaign he introduced **Tobacco Smoking**. He imported tobacco from England starting in 1697 and America

in 1707. The key point is that this was *trade and contact with America*. Here is a quote from the book

The Westernizing efforts of a Russian czar brought profits to Americans while proving unhealthy to those who adapted the habit.

5. During the Revolutionary War Catherine the Great was the czar of Russia. She could either see the war as threatening a king and hence be against it, or more pragmatically a hurting England which was good. King George III asked her to help send troops. She declined for pragmatic reasons. However, Americans were told a different story. The French minister to America conveyed the story by saying *She would not send her troops against a people who asked only for justice and liberty*. Americans believed this though it was not true.

This is a common theme for the book: If Russia is helping is it for ideological or pragmatic reasons.

6. Russia also helped America by setting up a treaty allowing free passage of neutral ships. between nations at war, so long as the ships are not carrying contraband. Spain and France and some other countries signed on. The treaty made it harder for England to block trade with America. Russia wanted free trade in general, not just for America's sake.
7. Russian intellectuals (prob Radicals) were very interested in the Revolution, and later the French revolution, wondering if such a thing could happen in Russia.
8. Alexander the First wanted to reform Russia. Jefferson recognized this and praised it. Alexander also admired Jefferson. Alexander DID accomplish some reforms: he made it legal to free serfs, and he made it legal for (some) non-Nobles to acquire land. He wanted to do more but the Napoleonic wars got in the way. He did broaden education.

2 Diplomacy and Rebellion: 1807-1841

1. There were many revolutions Europe and in Latin America in this time period. Some (maybe all) were overthrowing authoritarian governments. This made the Tsar's nervous (The Decembrist revolution

in 1825 was against Russia and the Polish uprising in 1830 was against Russia).

Some Americans worried that Russia might intervene in the revolutions. Americans were beginning to think of Russia as an Autocratic country (which it was). The (alleged) friendship they had during the American Revolution began to come apart.

Some Americans cheered on these revolutions, likening them to America's revolution.

2. IN 1815 Alexander I proposed *The Holy Alliance* which would unify the signers to (to quote Google search) *actively suppress secular liberalism, Democracy, and revolutionary movements*. They also claimed to share Christian Principles. It was signed by all European countries accepts
 - (1) Britain
 - (2) The Papal States. He was not invites since they knew he would decline. Note that Orthodox Russia, Protestant Prussia, and Catholic Austria did sign it.
 - (3) The Ottoman Empire. This was a Muslim country so they were not invited.
3. The war of 1812 was awkward for Alexander I. Russia was a critical trading partner, but Russia relied on British military to survive Napoleon's war with Europe. Russia tried to be a mediator but that didn't work. One of the causes of the war of 1812 was Britain blocking Europe from trading with America (though they agreed to stop that before the war began- though communication was slower then so the President didn't know). Russia, wanting to be on Britain good side, NOW was AGAINST neutral nations being able to trade.
4. France invaded Russia. Madison was pro-French, the Federalist (the other party) wanted better terms with Britain so they were anti-French. Hence, when Russia invaded France:

Those who were ANTI-Madison were ANTI-France, so PRO-Russia you viewed Russia positively.

Those who were PRO-Madison were PRO-France, so ANTI-Russia, you viewed Russia negatively.

5. There were some disputes in the Pacific northwest about (1) Americans selling guns to the Native Americans who might attack Russian, and (2) Russia passing laws (later repealed) that banned some types of trade.
6. The Decembrist Revolution: A group of Liberal Russian Military officers and aristocrats fought in the Napoleonic wars and were exposed to enlightenment ideas. These ideas impressed them (The book says they were influenced by the American ideal) They wanted a constitutional Government, the abolishing of serfdom, and Civil Liberties. Their effort was poorly coordinated. The entire attempt was over in one day- December 26.

The point of the book is that this was inspired by America. However, America did not know that and didn't notice it much.

The American Ambassador to Russia's report on them painted them as selfish aristocrats who wanted a bigger piece of the pie.

CONTRAST THIS TO

7. From 1815 on (and earlier depending on how you count) Poland was ruled by the Russian czar. In 1830 Poland was controlled by Russia. In that year Poland revolted against the Russians since they wanted their freedom. Americans saw this revolution as similar to their own and hence began to dislike Russia. Poland's revolution failed in 1831 and Tzar Nicholas I made their lives even worse.

Poland became its own country in 1918 in the aftermath of WW I.

But the main point of the book is American support.

8. Russia had NO freedom of the press. The book says that may have hurt it in that it had no idea HOW to convince other countries that its war with Poland was right (also, it was wrong).
9. In 1832 Russia signed a trade treaty with America. They also traded with Britain at the time.
10. In 1837 Canada had a rebellion. Quebec and Ontario were the main Provinces involved. At the time there was a sep Upper Canada (Ontario was in that) and Lower Canada (Quebec) They lost and leaders were exiled to America. (In 1841 Canada was unified and in 1867 England peacefully let Canada go with some exceptions. In 1931 Canada

was granted full control over its foreign policy. In 1982 the British Parliament stopped having any affect, though it didn't have much.)

Russia really was strictly neutral; however, there were rumors of a secret alliance with Canada.

3 Beginning of a Friendship: 1841-1860

1. Page 50. It is a paradox that a democracy with no state religion gets along with a monarchy with a state religion. Here is a quote from a leading Russia Newspaper:

If to maintain commercial and friendly intercourse with a foreign country one should require it to possess political and societal organization in accordance with the principles of modern philosophy [I think they mean the principles of the country], the majority of countries would live in solitude.

2. Russian wanted to advance technologically: ships and trains. Americans had the know-how and Russia would rather work with them than with Britain. This lead to a win-win where American Businessman and engineers would build stuff for Russia for money.
3. Both Russia and America made the following analogies:
American wars with the Indians : Russian wars in the Caucasus
American Mexican-American war : Russian-Turk war
Cuba : Turkey (both were strategic for waterways).
4. The Crimean war made Americans more pro-Russia. This seems odd to me since the Russians were the aggressor and in the wrong. Russians pretext was that the Orthodox Christians in The Ottoman Empire were being oppressed. In reality, (1) The Ottomans were beginning to relax restrictions-Russia knew this and hence wanted to attack while the pretext had a shred of reality, (2) The Christians in The Ottoman Empire *did not* welcome the troops as liberators. Nicholas I truly believed the "oppression" and also thought that the other Christian powers, especially Austria and Great Britain, would join on his side. They were on the The Ottoman Empires side (who were Muslims) because they wanted to weaken Russia.

Why were Americans on Russia's side. Since Britain was anti-Russia, America was pro-Russia.. Officially America was neutral. But America still viewed Britain negatively and feared that if the won they might once again meddle in America's affairs. America helped Russia in the following ways:

- 1) Russian ships were sold to America (not really) so that they could sail safely under the protection of the American Flag.
 - 2) American ships delivered vital supplies to Russian settlements in Siberia and Alaska (then in Russian hands)
 - 3) Arms deals: America sold guns and gunpowder to Russia.
 - 4) American doctors sent to the battle lines and treated wounded soldiers.
 - 5) Civil Engineers build fortifications.
5. (Not in the book) I wondered how much of foreign policy is allying with the nation in the right, and how much is national interest. Gemini tells me that its almost always national interest, but if the country happens to be in the right, that will be mentioned as well. So Americas currently being in the right by supporting Ukraine is an accident.
6. Slavery and Serfdom were compared to each other both by supporters of both and detractors of both.

You would think that people would be PRO or ANTI both but here are some counterexamples:

- 1) The Russian Tzar and other elites were ANTI-slavery but PRO-Serfdom. Their argument was that Serfs were not owned by the landlord and that the agreement was paternalistic and protective.
- 2) Some American Southerners though blacks were inferior so Slavery is fine but keeping white people as Serfs was terrible.

4 The Noonday of Friendship: 1861-1881

1. Russia was formally neutral in the America Civil War but was really pro-America. It was grateful for America's support during the Crimean war, even though Russia lost.

Russia did the following:

- 1) Napoleon III of France was trying to get a pro-South alliance but Russia quickly said NYET.
- 2) Russian Ships were sent to New York and San Francisco as a sign of support. They didn't actually fight but they might have. And they were good for morale. They made some people think Russia was going to send help. Lincoln liked those rumors since it frightened the south.
2. In 1863 there was a rebellion in Poland against Russia. Poland was in the right but America was distracted by the Civil war. The few politically powerful Americans who voiced an opinion were Pro-Russia since Russia was Pro-America.
3. Serfdom was abolished in 1861 by the Tsar's decree. Americans who were anti-slavery used this as an argument for abolition. This was perhaps the only time when Russia was ahead of America on a moral issue.
4. (This happens a lot.) Whenever a Tzar did something "liberal" like abolishing serfdom or do some reforms (Alexander I did that) Americans cheer and think Russia is progressing and become pro-Russia. Then no further reforms come and Americans turn anti-Russia. Also, it was generally thought that the country liked the Tzar.
5. Alaska. The Russian America Company administered Alaska. Part of that was exploiting the Native population. After Serfdom ended Russia also wanted to end similar things. And the Treatment of Alaska was similar. Plus Alaska wasn't that profitable. So Russia sold it to America for 7.2 million in 1867. William Seward was Johnson's Sec to State (left over from Lincoln) arranged the deal. Those who thought Alaska was not worth much called it *Seward's Folly*.
6. Britain and France were worried that the selling of Alaska was a sign of a greater Russian-American Alliance. But there were more important issues distracting them—the Austria-Prussian war of 1866 that led to the unification of Germany.
7. Some of the rest of this chapter is repetitive: Wars in Europe, American supports Russia since both are anti-Britain, visits from high level Russians to America. Friendly on all sides. But see next point.

8. After abolishing Serfdom Russia retreated from further liberal policies and began (or really continued) persecuting minorities, especially Jews. The Anti-Jewish Pogrom in 1871 attracted negative attention in the US press. So Anti-Russia attitudes began to form. Once Jews began to emigrate from Russia to America and told their stories more anti-Russian attitudes on this issue formed.
9. At the same time (1870s) Americans were reading and enjoying Russian Literature. More generally the countries were beginning to learn more about each other and it was mostly positive.

5 Romance and Revulsion: 1881-1901

1. There were rules restricting what Jews in Russia could do. This caused a conflict: If an American Jew is on a boat docked in Russia, is he treated using Russian anti-Jewish laws or does he have American protection. America gave up and warned Jews that they were on their own..
2. Russia wanted to be able to extradite criminals who fled to America. This sounds reasonable except that some of the criminals were just Revolutionaries who America tended to support. The treaty was delayed for 6 years but then passed.
- 3.

- 6 Collision and Revolution: 1901-1905
 - 7 Interaction and Contradiction: 1906-1914
 - 8 Wartime Honeymoon: 1914-1917
 - 9 Revolution and Interventions: 1917-1920
 - 10 From Estrangement to Engagement: 1921-1933
 - 11 Hopes and Horrors: 1934-1941
 - 12 Allies: 1941-1945
 - 13 From Alliance to Enmity: 1945-1953
 - 14 Crises and Coexistence: 1953-1963
 - 15 Detente: 1964-1979
 - 16 From Armageddon to Accommodation: 1980-1989
 - 17 Transformation and Reversion: 1989-1999
 - 18 From Partners to Archenemies: 2000-2020
- Conclusion