Americans in the Crimean War

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Russia is not the barbarous nation which her late adversaries have represented her to be.
—THOMAS SEYMOUR to Secretary Marcy, 1856

Long before the Crimean War, when discussing the possibility of a future conflict between Russia and England, both the Russians and the Americans considered their countries as potential allies. It was, therefore, natural that during the Crimean War the traditional friendship of Russia and the United States was greatly strengthened. The two countries had supported one another usually for reasons of self-interest. During the Crimean War, the Anglo-French alliance was directed not only against Russia, but also against the United States. At the beginning of the struggle, Palmerston formulated his program of partitioning the Russian Empire, and Lord Clarendon, in his speech at the opening of Parliament, made it clear that England and France were also united in their efforts to thwart American expansion.

Preservation of the integrity of the United States was an imperative necessity for Russia. She wanted the United States to be a strong power, so that in case of war the United States would be helpful to her. Thomas Seymour of Connecticut, appointed Minister to Russia, arrived in St. Petersburg in March, 1854, and reported to Secretary of State Marcy that the Russian government had an "ardent desire for the friendship of the U. S. and for drawing

1As early as 1832, the Russian Foreign Office wrote to the Russian envoy to the United States, Krudener, that in case of war between Russia and England, the United States would necessarily become "nos alliés obligées," and, in 1836, Secretary Forsyth assured Krudener that in case of war with England, Russia might count on the United States. (See F. Golder, Guide to Materials for American History in Russian Archives, 1917, vol. I, pp. 58 and 62.)

2The British plans of dismembering Russia were as follows: Finland was to be restored to Sweden, the Baltic provinces were to be turned over to Prussia, Poland was to be re-established as a buffer state between Germany and Russia, Wallachia and Moldavia were to be given to Austria, Crimea, Circassia, and Georgia were to be ceded to Turkey. (See Letters of Palmerston . . ., London, 1927, pp. 360-361.)

3Golder, op. cit., p. 63.
still closer the bonds of political and commercial intercourse."4

Although the United States preserved strict neutrality during the Crimean War, Seymour soon realized that he had become an active supporter of Russia in her crisis, as had his predecessor, John Quincy Adams, during the Napoleonic invasion.5 Seymour compared the Russian situation in the Crimean War with that of the year 1812. He wrote to Marcy: "... the Russians are quite as ready to make sacrifices of every kind for the defense of their country, as in the days of the French invasion. ..." He had, he continued, "no idea that there is any class of men among them who would be willing to give up Sebastopol and the Crimea, any more than we should be willing to give up California, in the event of any future war which might occur to us."

Although the neutrality of the United States permitted the employment of American vessels to convey munitions and troops of the Anglo-French coalition to the Crimea, Seymour protested and wrote to Marcy:

The principles of our government forbid interference of any kind in the struggle which is going on. But if it would be right to show the slightest leaning towards one side. . . . I see nothing to convince me that we should not give our preference to the masters of the Baltic and the Euxine.

It is interesting to note the personal admiration of Seymour for the Russian Emperor, Nicholas I, who was considered at that time the most despotic ruler in Europe. The American envoy found the Russian monarch "perfectly irresistible," likened his handshake to "a good republican grasp" and assured Marcy that "after all the Autocrat of Russia had been much misrepresented" to the world by his enemies. The admiration of Seymour for Nicholas I was shared by other American diplomats of the time and even by the American press.6

Here it is necessary to mention the young attaché of the American Legation at St. Petersburg, Andrew White, who later became founder and President of Cornell University and, in 1892, Minister to Russia. He wrote in his Autobiography that Nicholas I "was generally considered the most perfect specimen of a human being, physically speaking, in all Europe . . . the most majestic being ever created.

4National Archives, Washington, D. C.
Colossal in stature, with a face such as one finds on a Greek coin, but overcast with a shadow of Muscovite melancholy . . . he bore himself like a god."7

The American colony in Russia at the beginning of the Crimean War was small. In May, 1854, Seymour wrote to Marcy: "There are several Americans here, who receive much attention from the government offices and the citizens." Among them, the famous Colonel Samuel Colt of Hartford, inventor of the revolver which bears his name, came to offer his improved arms to the Russian officials. Dickerson, an expert in mechanical matters, came with Colt. The young White conducted them through the Museum of the Hermitage. Among the relics of Peter the Great, Dickerson discovered machines which had only recently been reinvented in Europe and were worth a fortune. As White said, "These machines had stood there open to everybody, since two hundred years before, and no human being had apparently ever taken the trouble to find the value of them."8

In September, 1855, Seymour reported to the Secretary of State the arrival in St. Petersburg of about fifteen American mechanics who were to work at the several workshops of the Moscow railroad. "If it should be decided to build more railways," wrote Seymour, "there is scarcely a doubt that Americans will be wanted to engage in these undertakings." A private company under the direction of Nicholas Perozio was formed to supply the Russian government with rails. Perozio said that he wished to employ Americans and only Americans in these works. Rails were manufactured in southern Russia on the river Donets, in the province of Ekaterinoslav, and Perozio made this statement in order to attract the attention of American mechanics, who understood "how to smelt iron by anthracite coal." Perozio also wanted to know the price of machines in America, so as to order them there if necessary.9

Seymour also reported to Marcy about Grand Duke Constantin's plans for building up the Russian fleet. Describing the Grand Duke as a man of a practical turn of mind, Seymour added that "he approaches nearer to the American character than any public man I have met since I came to Europe," and that "in order to carry out

8Ibid., pp. 454-455.
9Original letters in the National Archives, Washington, D. C.
his plans, it is his purpose to draw to some extent on American genius and enterprise.”

In February, 1856, Seymour forwarded to Marcy some interesting documents relating to a project for improving the navigation of the lower part of the river Dnieper by steam. The founders of the company formed to promote steam navigation on the Dnieper offered to the Americans the construction of several steam-tugs and steamers for that river. We don't know the result of this Russian offer, but evidence that a steamboat was ordered in New York by the Russian government during the Crimean War was found in the Russian Archives by Dr. F. Golder, who wrote:

When the boat was completed and named America, it hoisted the Stars and Stripes and sailed for the Pacific by way of Cape Horn. On the way it put in at Rio de Janeiro and while there, an English warship threatened to seize it as a Russian vessel and would probably have done so, had not the American naval officer come to the rescue.

We find additional details about the S.S. America in other sources. The boat was ordered by the Russian government for the river Amur in Siberia and arrived safely at the mouth of that river in 1856. The commander of the America was Captain Hudson from the American frigate Niagara. In 1857, Seymour reported to Secretary Marcy the arrival of Captain Hudson in St. Petersburg, from Amur, by way of Irkubsk. A year later, a young Lieutenant of the Russian Navy, the aide-de-camp of Grand Duke Constantin, Baron Boyé, was sent by the Russian government to the United States to witness the laying of the electric cable between America and Europe, from the American frigate Niagara. Seymour gave him a letter of introduction to Captain Hudson and expressed the hope that he would be cordially received by the President.

At the same time an expedition by the Boston Submarine and Wrecking Company came to Sebastopol with machinery on board

The American sympathies of Grand Duke Constantin were mentioned in such a literary monument of the Crimean War as Lev Tolstoy's Tales of Sebastopol. During the siege of Sebastopol a hope was expressed by one of the Russian soldiers that the brother of the Tsar, the Grand Duke Constantin, would come with the American fleet to help the besieged.

F. Golder, "Russian-American Relations during the Crimean War," American Historical Review, XXXI (1926), p. 474. The article is based on material found in the archives of the Russian Foreign Office in 1917.


National Archives, Washington, D. C.
to raise the sunken Russian fleet. The American Consul in Odessa reported to Secretary Marcy that another Boston company had sent to Sebastopol its agent and Chief Engineer, J. E. Gowen, and that "it does not seem now quite certain whether both parties can work there at the same time."  

The U. S. Consul in Odessa, S. Ralli, a Russian citizen of Greek origin, was of much service to the Americans who came to Odessa and Sebastopol during the Crimean War, especially to American doctors. About thirty American surgeons and physicians obtained positions on the medical staff of the Russian Army between the opening of the war and the year of peace. Twenty of them were medical students in Paris, who had set out from there to join the Russian medical corps.

Almost half of the American doctors in Russia during the Crimean War fell victim to such diseases as typhus fever, cholera, and smallpox, diseases which swept away more human lives than were lost on the battle field. Doctors and nurses on the medical staff of the Russian Army were especially exposed to epidemic diseases. One of the American physicians, Dr. Courtney King of South Carolina, describing the epidemic of typhus in the Crimea, wrote to Ralli, in February, 1855: "My friends and myself, I am happy to say, have escaped it up to this time, and with three or four more Russian physicians are the only ones."  

Two months later, Ralli reported to Seymour the death of Dr. King of malignant typhus fever, and Seymour wrote to Secretary Marcy:

I have just received the painful intelligence of the death of Dr. King, one of the young American surgeons in the Russian service. He was much beloved by all who knew him, and the news of his decease will be a severe blow to his relations and friends in Charleston. . . . On the occasion of his burial, the clergy of the Greek Orthodox Church, inspired by truly Christian feelings attended the funeral of the deceased in a body.

Seymour enclosed with his dispatch a letter to the bereaved family of Dr. King, with all the information he could procure concerning the sickness and death of this highly promising physician, and a note from Count Nesselrode containing "a recognition of the valuable service of Dr. King, together with an expression of the sympathy of the Imperial Government with the family of the lamented deceased."

Two American doctors, Draper of Massachusetts and Turnipseed,
who were sent in the summer of 1854 directly to Sebastopol, reported to Ralli and Seymour the latest news concerning military operations in the Crimea. Dr. Draper wrote:

Since the 26th December, the position of Dr. Turnipseed and myself has undergone a material change. Two days subsequently we passed from the north side of the road, to be located in the city of Sebastopol itself, by virtue of a special request to that effect, made by General Osten-Saken. Quarters were assigned us in the house occupied by himself, and I am happy to say that from the General we receive every kindness and from his gentlemanly aids every attention to our comfort, which we could possibly desire. Our professional occupation is at the place where the wounded are first brought from the 4th, 5th, and 6th bastions, the building appropriated for this purpose being the "Hall of the Noblesse," which in its taste and beauty is an ornament and credit to the city. . . . The progress of events at Sebastopol was at first looked for from day to day, afterwards from week to week. Now, month by month should be the gauge of measurement of progress and results.

Dr. Turnipseed wrote in April, 1855:

The Allies bombarded the bastions as well as the city with redoubled energy for eight days commencing the day after le jour de Paques, but I believe did little damage to the bastions. . . . The numbers of killed and wounded each day was about 600 on the Russian side. There have been quite a quantity of bombs thrown into the city itself. . . . I was expecting nothing better than that the house in which I have apartments would receive some of their unwelcomed visits.16

No less interesting and important was the report about the Crimean War made to the U. S. government by a special American military commission sent to Europe in 1855 to study the European military systems and observe the war-like operations. The American officers selected for this trust were: Major Delafield of the Engineers, Major Mordecai of Ordnance, and Captain McClellan of Cavalry.17 McClellan was the youngest of the three and was selected on account of the brilliant military qualities he had displayed in the Mexican war. He spoke the principal languages of Europe and his report, being most excellent, was used for the text-books on the art of war at the American Military Academy. McClellan was to observe particularly the engineers and cavalry, as well as to make a special study of the Russian Army at large. The commission first visited

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16The communications of American doctors from Crimea about the principal events and exploits certainly deserve to be published in a special work, being an interesting contribution to the history of the Crimean War.

17Later General George B. McClellan of Civil War fame.
England, then France. In May, 1855, they left Paris, intending to visit the Russian camp in the Crimea, by way of Warsaw and Kiev. In Warsaw, however, they learned that no person, not even the veteran hero Paskevich, who treated them with much courtesy, had the power to grant them permission to go from Warsaw direct to Crimea. They decided, therefore, to proceed first to St. Petersburg.

There is a very interesting description of the trip from Warsaw to St. Petersburg in the private letters of Captain McClellan. He wrote to his brother:

The road from Warsaw here is truly a magnificent one. . . . So great is the traffic upon it that it is literally covered from one end to the other with trains of wagons passing in both directions. . . . So great is this now that it seems hardly possible that Russia can feel the effect of the blockade very sensibly.18

McClellan described also with enthusiasm the "most magnificent city" of St. Petersburg, which fully equaled his expectations. During their residence at St. Petersburg, the officers of the American commission were presented to the Emperor at his request, but could not succeed in obtaining his permission to go to Sebastopol, because the Russian officers in command there had requested that no strangers should be permitted to come to Sebastopol. In July the commission visited Moscow and examined whatever was of interest from a military point of view there. They left Russia in August and went to Crimea in October, through Germany, Trieste, Smyrna, and Constantinople, on the first English steamer that sailed for Balaklava. McClellan, therefore, was able to make a very complete study of the siege of Sebastopol, and the Russian siege technique observed there influenced later his actions in the American Civil War. In his book, The Armies of Europe, half of which is devoted to a description of the Russian Army, McClellan expressed his admiration for the skill and the energy of the Russian engineer, Totleben, whose "labors and their results," he wrote, "will be handed down in history as the most triumphant and enduring monument of the value of fortifications." He called the siege of Sebastopol "the most magnificent defense of fortifications that has ever yet occurred."19

As McClellan was a captain of cavalry, this arm of the military forces engaged his particular attention, and he gave, in his book, a detailed description of the Russian cavalry, especially of the Russian

irregulars, the Cossacks. McClellan believed that this system should be imitated by the American Army in fighting against the Indians. It is interesting to note that the first time the military organization of the Russian Cossacks, especially their fortifications, was described and used in America against the Indians, was in the seventeenth century, by the founder of Virginia, John Smith.

Russian-American friendship during the Crimean War brought numerous advantages to both nations. One of the important practical results of this friendship was the help given by Russia to the United States in the conclusion of a commercial treaty between the United States and Persia. Requesting Russian support, Seymour wrote to Nesselrode:

There was a time, a few years ago, when we had nearly completed a treaty with the Shah of Persia, but before an exchange of ratifications could take place, the negotiations were suddenly broken off, and there was reason to believe English influence had been used to produce such a result.20

In response to this request, the Russian Legation at Teheran was instructed by the Russian government not only to aid the negotiations but to extend its protection to the American citizens in Persia until the establishment there of a diplomatic representation of the United States.

Another important commercial advantage which came to America during the Crimean War was the establishment of American trading houses on the Amur River in Eastern Siberia and on Sakhalin Island.

As early as 1853, the Russian Minister to the United States, de Bodisco, wrote to St. Petersburg: "Americans say that this is the time for Russia to seize both banks of the Amur river and to open commerce with the United States."21 In May, 1856, an American Consul for Amur was appointed and sent to St. Petersburg, but he could not yet be officially recognized by the Russian government, because, at that time, the station at the mouth of the Amur was not considered a commercial port. However, with the help of Seymour and the protection of the great Russian Americanophile General Muraviev, Governor of Eastern Siberia, the American Consul, Perry

20Seymour to Marcy, June, 1955. National Archives, Washington, D. C. It is interesting to note here that England also gained her first access to Persia in the sixteenth century with Russian support, when the Russian Tsar, Ivan the Terrible, gave English merchants the exclusive right of free transit by way of the Volga to Central Asia.

McD. Collins of California, and his companion, Peyton of Virginia, obtained a passport to proceed unofficially to the banks of the Amur river. They set out for Eastern Siberia in November, 1856, in company with General Muraviev.

In April, 1857, Seymour wrote to the Department of State:

I have the honor to enclose a communication to the Department from Mr. Collins. Mr. Peyton of Virginia, who accompanied Mr. Collins as far as Kiakhta, has returned to this city, and will set out for the U.S. in the course of eight or ten days. On reaching Washington, he will give you interesting particulars of his late journey and of the attentions which he received from General Muravieff.

Although, for international reasons, no foreign consuls could, for the time being, be admitted on the Amur and on Sakhalin Island, the American merchants there were protected by secret orders of the Russian government. In 1860, there were already seven American trading houses established on the Amur river. It happened as Seymour predicted to Collins:

The quiet way in which you will go there and enter upon the discharge of the duties with which you can now occupy your mind, may, after all, be the best way to initiate a trade between Russia and America, which will be for the mutual advantage of the two countries.

22 F. Golder, “Russian-American Relations . . .”, p. 475.
23 National Archives, Washington, D.C.