

U.S. Civil War: The US-Russian Alliance that Saved the Union

by Webster G. Tarpley

April 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of the U.S. Civil War, which began when Confederate forces opened fire upon Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. The following essay by Webster Tarpley, tells about the largely untold alliance between President Abraham Lincoln and Russian Tsar Alexander II, which by many accounts was key to the North winning the U.S. Civil War, sealing the defeat of the British strategic design.

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At the point of maximum war danger between Great Britain and the United States, the London satirical publication *Punch* published a vicious caricature of US President Abraham Lincoln and Russian Tsar Alexander II, demonizing the two friends as bloody oppressors.

From *Punch*, October 24, 1863.

"*Who was our friend when the world was our foe.*" -
Oliver Wendell Holmes, 1871

One hundred fifty years after the attack on Fort Sumter, the international strategic dimension of the American Civil War represents a much-neglected aspect of Civil War studies. In offering a survey of some of the main issues involved, one feels required to justify the importance of the topic. It is indeed true that, as things turned out, the international strategic dimension of the 1861-65 conflict was of secondary importance. However, it was an aspect that repeatedly threatened to thrust itself into the center of the war, transforming the entire nature of the conflict and indeed threatening to overturn the entire existing world system. The big issue was always a British-French attack on the United States to preserve the Confederate States of America. This is certainly how Union and Confederate leaders viewed the matter, and how some important people in London, St. Petersburg, Paris, and Berlin did as well.

The result is that today, the international dimension is consistently underestimated: even a writer as sophisticated as Richard Franklin Bensel can repeatedly insist in his recent *Yankee Leviathan* that the US development over the decade before the Civil War was "acted out in a vacuum," while asserting that "the relative isolation of the United States on the North American continent contributed to the comparative unimportance of nationalism in American life prior to secession." [1] Reports of American isolation, however, were

already exaggerated in the era of a British fleet that could summer in the Baltic and winter in the Caribbean.

Views of the domestic side of the Civil War have often been colored by the sectional loyalties of the authors. In the diplomatic sphere, the international alignments of 1861-65 have been experienced as something of an embarrassment or aberration by American scholars of the twentieth century, at least partly because they inverted the alliance patterns that emerged after 1900. In 1865, the United States was friendly to Russia and Prussia, and resentful and suspicious in regard to Britain and France, whose governments had sympathized with and supported the Confederacy. The general tendency of US historians in 1915 or 1945 or 1952 seems to have been to put the best possible face on things, or, better yet, turn to another area of inquiry. As the Civil War centennial approached, the historian Allan Nevins addressed this issue rather directly in a chapter of his 1960 "War for the Union". Here he dramatically evoked the immense worldwide significance of Civil War diplomacy in a fascinating paragraph to which Howard Jones calls attention. Nevins, horrified by the idea of US war with Britain, wrote:

It is hardly too much to say that the future of the world as we know it was at stake. A conflict between Great Britain and America would have crushed all hope of the mutual understanding and growing collaboration which led up to the practical alliance of 1917-18, and the outright alliance which began in 1941. It would have made vastly more difficult if not impossible the coalition which defeated the Central Powers in the First World War, struck down Nazi tyranny in the Second World War, and established the unbreakable front of Western freedom against Communism. Anglo-French intervention in the American conflict would probably have confirmed the splitting and consequent weakening of the United States; might have given French power in Mexico a long lease, with the ruin of the Monroe Doctrine; and would perhaps have led

to the Northern conquest of Canada. The forces of political liberalism in the modern world would have received a disastrous setback. No battle, not Gettysburg, not the Wilderness, was more important than the context waged in the diplomatic arena and the forum of public opinion. The popular conception of this contest is at some points erroneous, and at a few grossly fallacious....
(Nevins II, 242)

While Nevins does make the point that these questions are important, he feels that many accounts are unfair to Lord Russell, the British foreign secretary, and to Prime Minister Palmerston. Nevins sees Palmerston as a man of peace, an attitude which is impossible to square with the bellicose imperialist bluster of Lord Pam's *civis romanus sum* interventionism. Between about 1848 and 1863, the British Empire was at the aggressive height of its world power, had launched attacks on China, India, and Russia, and in the 1860s was backing Napoleon III's adventure in Mexico and Spain's in Santo Domingo, both direct challenges to the US Monroe Doctrine. This is a context which often gets lost. Otherwise, Nevins' assertion that Britain "did not like other nations to fight" turns reality on its head; the greatest art of the Foreign Office was that of divide and conquer. Finally, Nevins pays no attention to the deterrent effect of Russia's refusal to countenance any European intervention against the Union.

Like so many other historians, Nevins would seem to have allowed the needs of the Cold War present to shape his view of the past — the tendency against which Sir Herbert Butterfield, long Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, warned in the 1930s when we wrote that "it is part and parcel of the Whig interpretation of history that it studies the past with reference to the present...." [2] In Butterfield's view, this is a method which "has often been an obstruction to historical understanding because it has been taken to mean the study of the past with direct and perpetual reference to the present...it might be called the historian's 'pathetic fallacy.'"

(Butterfield 11, 30) The following comments are inspired by the conviction that Union diplomacy was Lincoln's diplomacy, and that it offers valuable lessons for today.

As far as I have been able to determine, there exists no modern exhaustive study of Civil War diplomacy. Of the books I have seen, D. P. Crook comes closest. Crook's 1974 work is a very serviceable and reliable survey of the entire topic. Crook naturally places US-British relations at the center of his account, focusing on the three crises when UK and/or French intervention against the Union was threatened: the *Trent* affair of late 1861-1862; the push for intervention by Lord Russell and Gladstone after Antietam in October-November 1862; and the mid-1863 Laird rams/Polish rebellion flare-up (which Howard Jones, by contrast, omits from consideration). For Crook, Secretary of State Seward is the center of attention on the Union side, rather than Lincoln. But Lincoln repeatedly had to override Seward, as in the case of the Secretary of State's 1861 reckless "foreign war panacea" proposal for a US war against France and Spain (probably involving Britain as well), which Lincoln wisely rejected in favor of his "one war at a time" policy. Here Bense is of the opinion that Seward's proposal "revealed the new secretary of state's profound awareness of the narrow basis of northern nationalism during the early months of the Lincoln administration." (Bense 12n) Another view is that Seward was looking for a means of saving face while permitting the south to secede. Seward's panacea theory can also be seen as a flight forward, a kind of political nervous breakdown. Crook has almost nothing to say about the pro-Union role of Prussia (which surely dissuaded Napoleon III from greater activism), nor about the Holy See, where Pius IX – who had lost his moorings after having been driven out of Rome by Mazzini in 1849 — was pro-Confederate and highly controversial at the time. He also plays down the central importance of Russia for the Union. As for Napoleon II, Crook follows the misleading tradition of stressing the conflicts and suspicion between Napoleon III and Palmerston

while downplaying the fundamental fact that *Napoléon le petit* (who had once been a British constable) always operated within the confines of a Franco-British alliance in which he provided the bulk of the land forces but was decidedly the junior partner.

In contrast to Lincoln, Confederate President Jefferson Davis took almost no interest in diplomatic affairs. The Confederacy sent envoys to London and Paris, but never bothered to even send a representative to St. Petersburg, which turned out to be the most important capital of all.

The Threat of British Intervention

The two great interlocutors of Union foreign policy were Great Britain and Russia, and the geopolitical vicissitudes of the twentieth century tended to distort perceptions of both, minimizing the importance of both British threat and Russian friendship. Crook, in his valuable bibliographical essay, traces this tendency back to the “Great Rapprochement” between Britain and the US in the early twentieth century. The standard work on US-UK relations, Crook notes, was for many years E. D. Adams’ *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, which plays down friction between London and Washington, and narrates events “from the meridian of London.” (Crook 381)

The Russia-American Special Relationship that Saved the Union

Adams tells his reader that he does not view his topic as part of American history; rather, he poses for himself the contorted question of “how is the American Civil War to be depicted by historians of Great Britain...?” (Adams I 2) Adams treats the autumn crisis of 1862 as the main danger point of US-UK conflict, writing that “here, and here only, Great Britain voluntarily approached the danger of becoming involved in the American

conflict.” (Adams II 34) He pleads for understanding for the much-vituperated British role, recalling that “the great crisis in America was almost equally a crisis in the domestic history of Great Britain itself...,” and providing valuable materials in this regard. (Adams I 2) Adams generally relegates Russo-American diplomacy to the footnotes, mentioning the “extreme friendship” and even the “special relationship” of these two nations. In the North, he notes, Russia was viewed as a “true friend” in contrast to the “unfriendly neutrality” of Great Britain and France. (Adams II, 45n, 70n, 225) But for Adams, the main lesson is that the Anglo-American disputes of the Civil War era have “distorted” the “natural ties of friendship, based upon ties of blood and a common heritage of literature and history and law” which exist or ought to exist between the two countries. Those disputes, he suggests, can be relegated to the category of “bitter and exaggerated memories.” (Adams II 305)

Seward, 1861: A US-UK War Would “Wrap the World in Flames”

Kenneth Bourne’s *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815-1908* provides an effective antidote to such sentimental thinking in the form of a notable chapter (singled out for attention by Crook) on the British planning for war with the United States at the time of the *Trent* affair in December-January 1861, when Seward threatened to “wrap the world in flames” and the British lion roared in reply. [3] Two Confederate envoys, Mason and Slidell, were taken off the British merchant ship *Trent* by a US warship as they were sailing to plead the cause of intervention in London and Paris; the London press became hysterical with rage, and the anti-Union group in the cabinet saw their chance to start a transatlantic war. This study draws not only upon the British Admiralty archives in the Public Record Office, but also on the papers of Admiral Sir Alexander Milne in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. Bourne depicts the

British predicament as their “defenceless” position in Canada, even with the help of the 10,000 additional regular infantry which Palmerston deployed in response to the crisis. (Bourne 211) A recurrent British fear was that their soldiers would desert to the American side, urged on by “crimps.” (Bourne 217). Their Canadian vulnerability, the British thought, encouraged Seward and others to twist the tail of the British lion. The US had the only serious warships on the Great Lakes, British fortifications were weak, Canadian volunteers were scarce, and there were few decent muskets for them. The greatest problem was that the Saint Lawrence River was blocked by ice in winter, preventing re-enforcements from reaching Quebec City by water; the only roads inland went dangerously parallel to the Maine border. Some of the British staff officers had to land in Boston and take the Grand Trunk Railway to Montreal. [4] One is left with the impression that winter ice might have cooled Palmerston’s aggressivity even before Seward’s release of the captured Confederate envoys Mason and Slidell did.

Admiralty Plans to Bombard and Burn Boston and New York

The heart of the British strategy in case of war was “overwhelming naval strength based on a few select fortresses,” especially Bermuda and Halifax (in today’s Nova Scotia). (Bourne 208) British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston dispatched a powerful squadron of eight ships of the line and thirteen frigates and corvettes under Admiral Milne to the western Atlantic, and wanted to use the *Great Eastern*, the largest ship in the world, as a troop transport. London even considered ways to foment secession in Maine. Bombarding and burning both Boston and New York was actively considered as a contingency; it was concluded that the reduction of Boston would be very difficult because of the channels and forts; New York was seen as more vulnerable, especially to a surprise attack. An Admiralty hydrographer saw New York City as “the true heart of [US] commerce, — the centre

of ...maritime resources; to strike her would be to paralyse all the limbs.” (Bourne 240)

New US Monitors Deterred the British Fleet

By the time spring of 1862 came, the *Monitor* had come on the scene, further complicating British intervention. The Royal Navy had ironclads, but they were only usable in deep water. Bourne aptly notes that “the American monitors might have played havoc with any attempt by the older wooden frigates to maintain a close blockade” of Union ports. (Bourne 240) As more vessels of the *Monitor* type were produced by the US, this aspect of the British predicament became even more acute. The point of detailing these facts here is to suggest the existence of a fascinating array of neglected issues. Crook at least sketches this strategic picture before he falls back on the maudlin tradition that it was the dying Prince Albert who was instrumental in restraining Palmerston’s jingoism and avoiding war. Crook also recognizes that in any warlike denouement to the *Trent* affair, “world-shaking trading and political alignments would be forged.” (136)

Howard Jones, in his account of Anglo-American relations written just after the Thatcher era and the end of the Cold War, pays very little attention to the salient military aspects of the Atlantic situation. Jones offers a limited and legalistic interpretation of the threat of British intervention. He calls “special attention” to the fact that “the most outspoken opponent” of intervention in the British cabinet was the Secretary for War, George Cornwall Lewis. This role emerged through public speeches and cabinet memoranda issued in the wake of Gladstone’s well-known speech in praise of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy at Tyneside on October 7, 1862. However, the role of Lewis had already been highlighted at some length by Crook, who classified Lewis as “one of the ‘do-nothing’ school rather than a partisan,” and possibly urged on by Palmerston for invidious reasons. (Crook 233) Jones

argues that “the great majority of British interventionists were not malevolent persons who wanted the American republic to commit national suicide so they might further their own ends; they wanted to stop the war for the sake of humanity in general and British textile workers in particular.” (Jones 8) It is hard to ascribe such humanitarian motives to a group of politicians who had, according to contemporary accounts, recently shocked the world by their murderous atrocities carried out during the repression of the Sepoy Mutiny in India. Jones regards Lewis’s memoranda more as legal briefs rather than strategic estimates: “Lewis knew that the key person he had to dissuade from intervention was Russell. He also knew that the foreign secretary relied on history and international law to justify his stand and that the only way to undermine his argument for intervention was to appeal to that same history and international law.” (Jones 224) This analysis does not capture what actually went on in the brutal deliberations of the dominant power politicians and imperialists of the age, who were more impressed by American monitors and by Russian infantry divisions than by legalistic niceties or high ideals. Given this emphasis, it is not surprising that Jones has little interest in the Russian aspect of the problem, although he does concede that “Russia’s pro-Union sentiment prevented participation in any policy alien to the Lincoln Administration’s wishes.” (Jones 228)

The Union and Russia

The Russian-British rivalry was of course the central antagonism of European history after the Napoleonic era, and the Russian attitude towards London coincided with the traditional American resentment against the former colonial power. Benjamin Platt Thomas’s older study shows that the US-Russian convergence became decisive during the Crimean War; while Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire attacked Russia, the United States was ostentatiously friendly to the court of St. Petersburg. He depicts Russian minister to Washington Édouard de Stoeckl as a diplomat

“whose sole aim was to nurture the chronic anti-British feeling in the United States.” (Thomas 111) According to Thomas, Stoeckl succeeded so well that there was even a perceptible chance that the United States might enter the Crimean War on the Russian side. The US press and public were all on the side of Russia, and hostile to the Anglo-French, to the chagrin of the erratic US President Pierce (who had been close to Admiralty agent Giuseppe Mazzini’s pro-British Young America organization) and the doughface politician James Buchanan. The latter, at that time US envoy to London, embraced the British view of the Tsar as “the Despot.” (Thomas 117) Thomas finds that “the Crimean War undoubtedly proved the wisdom of Russia’s policy of cultivating American friendship, and in fact, drew the two nations closer together.” (Thomas 120) But Thomas glosses over some of the more important US-UK frictions during this phase, which included British army recruiting in the US, and the ejection of the British ambassador as *persona non grata*. (Thomas 120)

Turning to the conflict of 1861-65, Thomas points out that “in the first two years of the war, when its outcome was still highly uncertain, the attitude of Russia was a potent factor in preventing Great Britain and France from adopting a policy of aggressive intervention.” (Thomas 129) He shows that the proposed British-French interference promoted by Lord Russell, the Foreign Secretary, in October 1862 was “deterred at this time mainly” by the Russian attitude, and cites Russell’s note to Palmerston concluding that Britain “ought not to move at present without Russia.” [5] (Thomas 132)

The critical importance of Russian help in deterring the British and Napoleon III as well is borne out by a closer analysis. As early as 1861, Russia alerted the Lincoln government to the machinations of Napoleon III, who was already scheming to promote a joint UK-France-Russia intervention in favor of the Confederacy. [6] As Henry Adams, the son and private secretary of US Ambassador to

London Charles Francis Adams, sums up the strategic situation during Lee's first invasion of Maryland, on the eve of the Battle of Antietam: These were the terms of this singular problem as they presented themselves to the student of diplomacy in 1862: Palmerston, on September 14, under the impression that the President was about to be driven from Washington and the Army of the Potomac dispersed, suggested to Russell that in such a case, intervention might be feasible. Russell instantly answered that, in any case, he wanted to intervene and should call a Cabinet for the purpose. Palmerston hesitated; Russell insisted...." [7]

On September 22, 1862, Lincoln used the Confederate repulse at Antietam to issue a warning that slavery would be abolished in areas still engaged in rebellion against the United States on January 1, 1863. The Russian Tsar Alexander II had liberated the 23 million serfs of the Russian Empire in 1861, so this underlined the nature of the US-Russian convergence as a force for human freedom. This imminent Emancipation Proclamation was also an important political factor in slowing Anglo-French meddling, but it would not have been decisive by itself. The British cabinet, as Seward had predicted, regarded emancipation as an act of desperation. The *London Times* accused Lincoln in lurid and racist terms of wanting to provoke a slave rebellion and a race war,

Gladstone's Open Hostility to the United States, October 7, 1862

On October 7, 1862, despite the news that the Confederates had been repulsed at Antietam, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer William Gladstone, who spoke for Lord John Russell, pressed for British intervention against the Union and on the side of the Confederacy in a speech at Tyneside, saying: ". . . We know quite well that the people of the Northern States have not yet drunk of the cup [of defeat and partition] — they are still trying to hold it far from their lips — which all the rest of the world see

they nevertheless must drink of. We may have our own opinions about slavery; we may be for or against the South; but there is no doubt that Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears, a navy; and they have made, what is more than either, they have made a nation... We may anticipate with certainty the success of the Southern States so far as regards their separation from the North". [8]

It was practically a declaration of war against the Lincoln government, and it also contained a lie, since Gladstone knew better than most that the only navy the Confederacy ever had was the one provided with British connivance.

On October 13, 1862 Lord John Russell called a meeting of the British cabinet for October 23, with the top agenda item being a deliberation on the "duty of Europe to ask both parties, in the most friendly and conciliatory terms, to agree to a suspension of arms." [9] Russell wanted an ultimatum to Washington and Richmond for an armistice or cease-fire, followed by a lifting of the Union blockade of southern ports, followed then by negotiations leading to Washington's recognition of the CSA as an independent state. If the Union refused, then Britain would recognize the CSA and in all probability begin military cooperation with the Confederates.

US Ambassador Charles Francis Adams asked Russell in advance of the October 23 cabinet meeting what he had in mind. As his son and private secretary Henry Adams recounts, "On October 23, Russell assured Adams that no change in policy was now proposed. On the same day he had proposed it, and was voted down." Henry Adams was doubtless correct in his impression that "every act of Russell, from April, 1861, to November, 1862, showed the clearest determination to break up the Union." [10]

At this point, Napoleon III of France invited London to join him in a move against the Union. According to Adams' memoir, "Instantly Napoleon III appeared as the ally of Russell and Gladstone with a proposition which had no sense except as a bribe to Palmerston to replace America, from pole to pole, in her old dependence on Europe, and to replace England in her old sovereignty of the seas, if Palmerston would support France in Mexico.... The only resolute, vehement, conscientious champion of Russell, Napoleon III, and Jefferson Davis was Gladstone." [11] Napoleon III had conferred with the Confederate envoy Slidell and proposed that France, England, and Russia impose a six-month armistice on the US and CSA. Napoleon III believed that if Lincoln did not accept his intrusion, this would provide a pretext for Anglo-French recognition of the CSA, followed by military intervention against the Union. [12] There was no real hope of getting pro-Union Russia to join such an initiative, and the reason Napoleon III included Russia was merely as camouflage to cloak the fact that the whole enterprise was a hostile act against Washington.

Russia Rejects the Anglo-French Intrigues for Interference

The clouds of world war gathered densely over the planet. Russell and Gladstone, now joined by Napoleon III, continued to demand aggressive meddling in US affairs. This outcome was avoided because of British and French fears of what Russia might do if the continued to launch bellicose gestures against the Union. On October 29, 1862 there occurred in St. Petersburg an extremely cordial meeting of Russian Foreign Minister Gortchakov with US chargé d'affaires Bayard Taylor, which was marked by a formal Russian pledge never to move against the US, and to oppose any attempt by other powers to do so. Taylor reported these comments by Gortchakov to the State Department: "You know the sentiments of Russia. We desire above all things the maintenance of the American Union as one indivisible nation. We cannot take any

part, more than we have done. We have no hostility to the Southern people. Russia has declared her position and will maintain it. There will be proposals of intervention [by Britain and France]. We believe that intervention could do no good at present. Proposals will be made to Russia to join some plan of interference. She will refuse any intervention of the kind. Russia will occupy the same ground as at the beginning of the struggle. You may rely upon it, she will not change. But we entreat you to settle the difficulty. I cannot express to you how profound an anxiety we feel — how serious are our fears.” [13]

The *Journal de St. Petersbourg*, the official gazette of the Tsarist government, denounced the Anglo-French intervention plan against the US, which had been inspired by Russell. This article helped prevent a wider war: the British cabinet, informed of the Russian attitude by telegraph, voted down Russell’s aggressive project. Russell made his last bid to swing the British cabinet in favor of a policy of interference together with Napoleon III against the Union on November 12, 1862, but he was unable to carry the day, and this turned out to be his last chance for the year.

Seward thought that if the Anglo-French were to assail the Union, they would soon find themselves at war with Russia as well. He wrote to John Bigelow early in the war: “I have a belief that the European State, whichever one it may be, that commits itself to intervention anywhere in North America, will sooner or later fetch up in the arms of a native of an oriental country not especially distinguished for amiability of manners or temper.” (Thomas 128)

Adams to Russell: Superfluous to Point Out this Means War

The summer of 1863, despite the news of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, was marked by another close brush with US-UK war. It was on September 5, 1863 that US Ambassador Charles Francis Adams told Lord Russell that if the Laird rams — powerful ironclad

warships capable of breaking the Union blockade which were then under construction in England — were allowed to leave port, “It would be superfluous in me to point out to your Lordship that this is war.” [14] Lord Russell had to pause, and then backed off entirely. The Laird rams were put under surveillance by the British government on September 9, and finally seized by the British government in mid-October, 1863. (Adams II 147) They never fought for the Confederacy.

A revolt against Russian domination of Poland, incited by the British, started in 1863 and lasted into late 1864. Crook points out that it was Lord Russell who told Lord Lyons in March 1863 that the Polish issue had the potential to create a Russo-American common front and thus revolutionize world power relations, evidently to the detriment of London. (Crook 285) Such a prophecy was coherent with the then -fashionable ideas of de Tocqueville about Russia and America as the two great powers of the future.

The Russian Fleets in New York and San Francisco

The most dramatic gestures of cooperation between the Russian Empire and the United States came in the autumn of 1863, as the Laird rams crisis hung in the balance. On September 24, the Russian Baltic fleet began to arrive in New York harbor. On October 12, the Russian Far East fleet began to arrive in San Francisco. The Russians, judging that they were on the verge of war with Britain and France over the British-fomented Polish insurrection of 1863, had taken this measure to prevent their ships from being bottled up in their home ports by the superior British fleet. These ships were also the tokens of the vast Russian land armies that could be thrown in the scales on a number of fronts, including the northwest frontier of India; the British had long been worried about such an eventuality. In mid-July 1863, French Foreign Minister Droun de Lhuys was offering London the joint

occupation of Poland by means of invasion. But the experience of the Confederate commerce raiders had graphically illustrated just how effective even a limited number of warships could be when they turned to commerce raiding, which is what the Russian naval commanders had been ordered to do in case of hostilities. The Russian admirals had also been told that, if the US and Russia were to find themselves at war with Britain and France, the Russian ships should place themselves under Lincoln's command and operate in synergy with the US Navy against the common enemies. It is thus highly significant that the Russian ships were sent to the United States.

US Navy Secretary Gideon Welles: "God Bless the Russians"

Coming on the heels of the bloody Union reverse at Chickamauga, the news of the Russian fleet unleashed an immense wave of euphoria in the North. It was this moment that inspired the later verses of Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the most popular writers in America, for the 1871 friendship visit of the Russian Grand Duke Alexis:

Bleak are our shores with the blasts of December, Fettered and chill is the rivulet's flow; Thrilling and warm are the hearts that remember Who was our friend when the world was our foe. Fires of the North in eternal communion, Blend your broad flashes with evening's bright star; God bless the Empire that loves the Great Union Strength to her people! Long life to the Czar! [15]

The Russians, as Clay reported to Seward and Lincoln, were delighted in turn by the celebration of their fleets, which stayed in American waters for over six months as the Polish revolt was quelled. The Russian officers were lionized and feted, and had their pictures taken by the famous New York photographer Matthew Brady. When an attack on San Francisco by the Confederate cruiser *Shenandoah* seemed to be imminent, the

Russian admiral there gave orders to his ships to defend the city if necessary. There were no major Union warships on the scene, so Russia was about to fight for the United States. In the event, the Confederate raider did not attack. Soon after the war, Russia sold Alaska to the United States, in part because they felt that an influx of Americans searching for gold was inevitable, and in part to keep the British from seizing control of this vast region. Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles wrote in his diary, "The Russian fleet has come out of the Baltic and is now in New York, or a large number of the vessels have arrived.... In sending them to this country at this time there is something significant." Welles was fully justified in his famous concluding words, "God bless the Russians!" [16]

This exceedingly cordial Russo-American friendship set the tone of much nineteenth-century historiography; Thomas indicates that a darker view of Russian motivation began to be heard around 1915 with the work of Professor Frank A. Golder, who emphasized that the Russians were only following their own national interests. [17] According to Thomas, it was "not until Professor Golder published the result of his researches that the matter was finally cleared up and those who were less gullible were found to be correct." (Thomas 138) Surely no one needs to be reminded that great nations defend their national interests. Disinterested philanthropists are admittedly rare in foreign ministries. However, when the interests converge, alliance *de jure* or *de facto* may result, and these can have far-reaching significance. During the American Civil War, the Russian attitude was the most powerful outside factor deterring Anglo-French interference. The need of Russia to prepare its own defenses during the Polish crisis of 1863 was perfectly legitimate and a secret to no one. Nevertheless, Thomas feels compelled to harp repeatedly on point that "the policy of Russia was dictated solely by self-interest." (Thomas 127)

For Crook, the visiting squadrons were not a fleet, but a “fleet,” and a “not very seaworthy” one at that. In his view, the entire matter can be written off as “popular hysteria” and “folklore”. (Crook 317) The attempt to play down the Russian angle is evident. When Simon Cameron is sent to St. Petersburg as US Ambassador, Woldman and others can see nothing in this but an “exile in Siberia.” (Woldman 115) Another favorite target is Cassius Clay, the very capable US Ambassador to Russia for most of the Civil War (apart from the brief Simon Cameron interlude). Crook retails Bayard Taylor’s crack to Horace Greeley that Clay was “better suited to the meridian of Kentucky than of St. Petersburg.” (Crook 44) In reality, St. Petersburg was on a par with London as one of the two most sensitive and important diplomatic posts the Union had. Cassius Clay, who called himself a “remote relative” of Lincoln’s great American System mentor Henry Clay, was a distinguished American diplomat who played a critical role in saving the Union. Another important US diplomat of the time was the Bostonian John Lothrop Motley, who became a friend of the future Prussian leader Otto von Bismarck while studying at the University of Goettingen. Motley served in US legation in St. Petersburg and from 1861-1867 as the US minister to the Austrian Empire, and later wrote an important biography of Oldenbarneveld, the father of the Dutch Republic, and other studies of Dutch history.

Woldman, at the height of the Cold War, devoted an entire book to denigrating the importance of the US-Russian entente cordiale and of the Russian fleet in particular. In addition to Golder, he cites Professor E. A. Adamov as a key precursor of his views. [18] For Woldman, the Russia of 1863 was already an international pariah, “the most hated nation in Europe,” whose policy reflected “no concern or friendship for the United States.” At the hands of Woldman, the well-established Russo-American amity of the 1850s, 1860s, and beyond is reduced to a “myth.” (Woldman, 156-7) This is not history, but propaganda laced with bile.

Russian friendship provided an economic as well as a military brake on the Anglo-French. Statistics provided by Crook show that in 1861-64, the US and Russia together provided more half or more of all Britain's wheat imports (16.3 million cwt out of a total of 30.8 in 1863). In case of war with either the US and Russia (and a fortiori in case of war with both), the British would have faced astronomical bread prices, insufficient supply, and an overall situation of famine which would have been conducive to serious internal revolt against the privileged classes — all in all a situation which aristocrats and oligarchs like Palmerston, Russell and Gladstone had to think twice about courting. King Wheat was therefore more powerful than King Cotton. [19]

Confederate commerce raiders built and fitted out with the help of the British had a devastating and long-lasting effect. As Chester Hearn details, Confederate raiders fitted out in Europe, including the Alabama, Shenandoah, and Florida, destroyed 110,000 tons of US merchant shipping, and were factors in the transfer of 800,000 tons to foreign registry, thus partially crippling the merchant marine of the North over decades. [20] On July 11, 1863 Adams indicted London for “active malevolence” on the question of the Laird rams, which were ironclad battleships capable of breaking the blockade; as noted, on September 5 he told Foreign Secretary John Russell, “It would be superfluous in me to point out to your Lordship that this is war.” (Crook 324, 326) Forty years later, Henry Adams remained “disconcerted that Russell should indignantly and with growing energy, to his dying day, deny and resent the axiom of [US Ambassador] Adams's whole contention, that from the first he meant to break up the Union. [21]

Any international history must tackle the question of the effectiveness of the Union blockade of Southern ports. Crook does a workmanlike job of refuting the Owsley thesis that the blockade was not effective. He reminds us that the statistics used by Owsley and Marcus W. Price are far from conclusive. Crook suggests that

the aggregate tonnages of successful blockade runners need to be examined rather than simply the number of ships getting through, since blockade runners were designed to sacrifice cargo capacity for speed. He notes that many successful runs took place during the first year of the war, “before the cordon tightened.” (Crook 174) Many successful runs counted by Price were actually coastwise traders bound for other parts of the Confederacy. “More realistic,” Crook sums up, “would be an attempt to compare wartime clearances with pre-war figures.” (Crook 174) Using Price’s figures for South Carolina, Crook suggests that the blockade may have cut the number of ships leaving the ports of that state by one half during the first year of the war, and by almost two thirds over 1862-1865. Crook’s finding is that “modern naval opinion is inclined to the broad view that the blockade achieved its major objectives by scaring off a potentially massive trade with the south.” (Crook 174)

The British Working Class

A controversial issue linked to Britain’s failure to intervene on the side of the Confederacy involves the attitude of the British working classes, and the role of working class resistance in deterring the Palmerston government from taking action against the US. The traditional view, reflected during the war by contemporaries from President Lincoln to Karl Marx, is that the textile workers of Lancashire, despite the privations imposed on them by the cutoff of southern cotton deliveries, nevertheless heroically supported the Union, especially once it had become clear that this was the anti-slavery cause. This attitude by the British workers was another factor in dissuading Palmerston from pursuing armed intervention. [22]

Owsley, in his *King Cotton Diplomacy*, mocks any notion that the British working class might have influenced the London cabinet in any way, writing contemptuously that “the population of

Lancashire and of all industrial England was politically apathetic, sodden, ignorant, and docile, with the exception of a few intelligent and earnest leaders. They wanted bread, they wanted clothes, they needed medicines to give their sick children and aged parents, they wanted pretty clothing for their daughters and sisters who were being forced into prostitution.” (Owsley 545-6) But on this point as well, Owsley is blinded by class prejudice and is thus highly vulnerable.

Philip Foner provides a useful summary of this issue in his 1981 *British Labor and the American Civil War*. Foner starts from the acknowledged fact that the British aristocracy was pro-Confederate. Free traders like Cobden and Bright were momentarily antagonized by the Union’s highly protectionist Morrill Tariff of February 1861 (passed the instant the southerners had left the Congress); the Liberals in general were split. But this leaves out the working classes altogether, who remained disenfranchised and alienated from the party structures. He takes issue with the school of writers who claim that British labor was actually sympathetic to the Confederacy. Foner dates the attempt to revise the traditional view of British labor as pro-Union especially from a 1957 article by Royden Harrison of the University of Warwick, which argued that the older thesis was a “legend”; Harrison based his view on an analysis of the labor press, where he discovered that “working-class newspapers and journals were, on the whole, hostile to the Federals” both before and after the Emancipation Proclamation. [23] (Foner 15) Harrison adduced evidence from such papers as *Reynolds’ News* and the *Bee-Hive*, which were sympathetic to the Confederacy. Foner calls special attention to a second article by Harrison, published four years later, which seemed to repudiate much of the first article. Writing in 1961, Harrison found that “from the end of 1862, there is overwhelming evidence to support the view that the great majority of politically conscious workmen were pro-Federal and firmly united to oppose war.” [24] Foner points out that subsequent

historians have often cited Harrison's first article while ignoring his subsequent retractions and qualifications. In Foner's view, the "apex of revisionist historiography" on this issue came in 1973 with the appearance of Mary Ellison's *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War*, with an epilogue by Peter d'A. Jones. [25] Ellison's conclusion was that the workers of the Lancashire textile mills were pro-Southern, suspicious of Lincoln, and adamant for British action to break the Union blockade and save the Confederacy. Peter d'A. Jones seconded her efforts, dismissing the older view as (yet another) "myth." Foner criticizes Ellison's handling of the evidence in blunt terms. "Ellison's methodology in proving her thesis is simplicity personified," writes Foner. "It is to assert repeatedly that pro-Northern meetings were contrived, while pro-Southern gatherings were spontaneous." (Foner 20) For Foner, pro-Confederate sentiment was limited to certain limited types of labor functionaries and to newspaper publishers, who were sometimes suspected of being on the Confederate payroll. Foner shows how the pro-Union agitation, in which British intelligence asset Karl Marx had to participate to keep any credibility along the workers of England and the continent, eventually lead to the extension of the British franchise through the Reform Bill of 1867.

More recent research would seem to decide this controversy in favor of Foner and the traditional view. R. J. M. Blackett of the University of Houston published an extensive study of how the British public viewed the American conflict, with significant attention for the problem of working class attitudes. Blackett's study is largely based on the British press, from the *London Times* to the *Bee-Hive* to the Confederate-controlled *Index*. The result is a detailed analysis which in some ways approximates the methods of social history, albeit in regard to a distinctly political topic. Blackett's title, *Divided Hearts*, relates to his finding that British society as a whole split over the Civil War. "The Tories were with the Confederacy, so too were the Whigs, but among Liberals there

were deep divisions, enough to undermine the unity and strength of the party.” (Blackett 11) After some initial hesitation, Cobden and Bright took up the cudgels for the Union. Free traders were alienated by the Morrill tariff, while abolitionists were unhappy with Lincoln, especially until the end of 1862. British Garrisonians split over whether the Union was worth saving. There was a crisis in the British anti-slavery movement over whether they had lost their old vim of the West Indies abolition era. Literary men like Trollope endorsed the government in Richmond, and Thomas Carlyle’s racism made him a CSA sympathizer; others backed the Union. Chartists split, with Ernest Jones supporting the Union, while most Chartist leaders favored the South. The Church of England went with the South, while Dissenting ministers favored the North. Quakers divided over whether slavery could be extirpated by violence. The overall impression is that the American war stimulated an active politicization which the privileged orders could hardly have welcomed.

Confederate and Union agents were active in Britain, Blackett shows. The Confederate factotum was James Spence, an indefatigable activist who wrote articles, set up organizations, hired speakers, and bribed journalists. Spence was the author of *The American Union*, a best-selling apology for the Confederacy. Spence’s prize recruit was Joseph Barker, who enjoyed the confidence of working class audiences because of his earlier agitation for working-class causes. Among the elite, a leading pro-Confederate was A. J. B. Beresford-Hope, the brother in law of Lord Robert Cecil of the celebrated and influential political clan, which was itself anti-Union. An energetic Confederate agent was Henry Hotze, who published the pro-Confederate weekly, the *Index*. Pro-Confederate organizations included the Society for Promoting the Cessation of Hostilities in America, the Southern Independence Association, the Liverpool Southern Club, the Manchester Southern Club, and others.

The pro-Lincoln operative Thurlow Weed provided money and encouragement for friends of the North during a visit early in the war. On the Union side, there were working-class activists like George Thompson. Black Americans like Frederick Douglass, William Andrew Jackson (the former coachman of Jefferson Davis), J. Sella Martin, and others (Blackett provides a detailed list) were highly effective as lecturers on the Union side. They were joined by Henry Ward Beecher and other touring lecturers. Ambassador Charles Francis Adams restricted his own activity to the diplomatic sphere, but encouraged his consuls to become very active on the political front. Among the pro-Union groups were counted the Union and Emancipation Society, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and more. Blackett describes the way the contending forces attempted to operate through public meetings and resolutions, using tactics that including packing the podium, fixing the agenda, deceptively worded resolutions, parliamentary maneuvers, rump sessions, goons, and intimidation. These meetings and the resolutions they passed were regarded as being of great political importance. Blackett notes that “Lincoln was so concerned that these resolutions express the right sentiment that he crafted and had sent to Charles Sumner for transmission to John Bright a set of resolutions that could be adopted by public meetings in Britain.” (Blackett 209) Jefferson Davis, by contrast, took no personal interest in such mass organizing.

Part of Blackett’s project is to evaluate the Ellison revisionist thesis. He tests Ellison’s assertions of pro-Confederate sentiment in representative towns like Ashton and Stalybridge, and finds that “distress did not drive the towns’ textile workers to declare in favor of an independent Confederacy.” (Blackett 175) Blackett’s survey of meetings further concludes that “if public gatherings can be used to measure levels of activity and support, then over the country as a whole the Confederacy was at a distinct disadvantage.” (Blackett 198) Even in the textile mill towns of Lancashire, Blackett finds substantial support for the Union. He

concludes that “if...the adoption of resolutions are [sic] reasonably accurate indicators of levels of support, then it appears that Ellison has exaggerated the degree to which meetings in Lancashire voted in support of the Confederacy.” And if “in Lancashire the opposing forces seem to be equally divided, the rest of the country voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Union...All the indications are that...even in Lancashire, where Spence and his co-workers had hoped to exploit the crisis to rally support for the Confederacy, the friends of the Union carried the day.” (Blackett 210-212)

Charles Francis Adams wrote to Seward on June 9, 1864 that the British aristocracy was hostile to the Union because “of the fear of the spread of democratic feeling at home in the event of our success.” (Adams II 300) The Civil War awakened the British working class to the degree that Bright in 1866 was able to convince Gladstone that at least part of the urban working class had to be given the vote. Through interaction with Disraeli, the Reform Bill of 1867 was passed; the reactionary romantic Carlyle complained that this was “shooting Niagara.” Foner shows that the measure was due in large part to the agitations unleashed by American events. The formation of the federation of Canada in 1867 was another postwar result.

Crook, to his credit, grapples with the issue of why the Union never attempted after 1865 to use its preponderant power to settle scores with the European powers who had proven hostile, especially Britain. He writes that “one of the puzzles of Civil War history is to explain why the immense anger generated against foreign foes during the war was not translated into expansionist revenge after Appomattox.” (Crook 361) Grant’s and Sherman’s armies were the most effective in the world, and Gideon Welles’ navy was at least among the top three, and most likely preponderant on the coasts of Canada, Mexico, and Cuba, the likely sites of northern *revanche*. Foner sees a brush with transatlantic war in 1869-70, before the British finally agreed to

pay the Union's claims for damages to compensate the depredations of the *Alabama* and the other CSA commerce raiders built by the British. But Lincoln had promised an exhausted nation an end to warfare, and this proved to be the last word.

The British government and aristocracy wanted to split the Union; as long as the Confederates were winning successes on the battlefield, they felt they could bide their time as the US further weakened, thus facilitating intervention if required. The twin Confederate disasters of Gettysburg and Vicksburg on July 3-4, 1863 came as a rapid and stunning reverse, and the arrival of the Russian fleets that same summer on both US coasts radically escalated the costs of Anglo-French military meddling. Shortly thereafter, the Danish War of 1864 placed Bismarck's moves towards German unification at the center of the European and world stage, making it even less likely that the British could tie their own hands by a risky strike against the Union. At the same time, Bismarck's growing activism made Napoleon III – fearing the Prussian threat — less and less likely to denude his eastern border of troops in order to employ them for intervention in the New World. These factors, and not the moderation or humanitarianism of Palmerston, Russell, or Gladstone, prevented an Anglo-French attack on the United States and, quite possibly, on Russia.

If the British had attacked the United States during the Civil War, this move might well have ushered in a world war in which the United States, Russia, Prussia and perhaps Italy would have been arrayed against Great Britain, France, Spain, and perhaps the Portuguese and Austrian Empires. There is reason to believe that the US-Russia-Prussia coalition would have prevailed. This war might have destroyed the British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese colonial empires almost a century early, and would have made the later creation of the triple entente of Britain, France, and Russia by British King Edward VII impossible. World War I would have

taken place during the 1860s rather than half a century later. Fascism and communism might not have occurred in the form they did. As it was, Lincoln fell victim to an assassination plot in which British intelligence, through Canada and other channels, played an important role. Alexander II was killed in 1881 by Russian terrorists of the London-centered post-Bakunin anarchist networks.

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[1] Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America*, 1859, 1877 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[2] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*(London: G. Bell, 1968), pp. 3-4.

[3] For Seward, see Jones, 88.

[4] Bourne glosses over the embarrassing moment when the British were obliged to request permission to have their troops transit US territory. (232n). Fletcher Pratt, in his perennially popular account evoked it as follows: “With a final touch of ingenious irony the Secretary of State offered England the use of Portland, Maine as an entrepôt for the Canadian army; it was winter and so much more convenient than sending them up the ice-bound St. Lawrence.” See *A Short History of the Civil War* (New York 1935; reprint New York: Dover, 1997), 47.

[5] This can be contrasted with Jones' view that "British neutrality remained the chief guarantee against intervention, and yet this reality continued to escape observers in the North..." (Jones, 99)

[6] John Watson Foster, *A Century of American Diplomacy, 1776-1876* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. 372.

[7] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*

[8] Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *The Education of Henry Adams -by- Henry Adams; 10. Political Morality 1862.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] See "Mr. Slidell's Conference with Napoleon III," *New York Times*, November 22, 1862, with a despatch dated Paris, November 7 noting that "Mr. SLIDELL, the agent of the rebellion at Paris, has at length and for the first time, obtained an interview with the Emperor."

[13] US Department of State, *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, Bayard Taylor to Secretary Seward*, October 29, 1862 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1864), Part II, p. 764.

[14] *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Cosmo, 2007) p. 163.

[15] See Holmes, *Poems* (Boston, 1880), p. 256. In August, 1866 a US Navy monitor had visited St. Petersburg, occasioning Holmes' verses: "A nation's love in tears and smiles/We bear across the sea, /O Neva of the banded isles, /We moor our hearts in thee!" See

Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 198-200.

[16] *The Diary of Gideon Welles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), September 25, 1863, vol. I, p. 443.

[17] See Frank A. Golder, "*The Russian Fleet and the American Civil War*," *American Historical Review*, XX.

[18] See E. A. Adamov, "*Russia and the United States at the Time of the Civil War*," *Journal of Modern History* (II, 1930), 586-602.

[19] The acerbic Owsley dismisses wheat as "the scullion in King Cotton's kitchen or at most a buck private in the rear ranks of this sovereign." In any case, he argues, when it came to wheat "Great Britain's deficiencies could be easily supplied in many other places, including Poland, Russia, and Prussia" Owsley does not seem to grasp that Poland and Russia were part of the same empire, or that Bismarck's Prussia might have driven a very hard bargain with its limited production. (Owsley 545, 548).

[20] Bensel, who pays systematic attention to economic factors, agrees that Confederate commerce raiders caused Union vessels to pay higher insurance rates and change to foreign registry. The US merchant marine, he notes, "never recovered afterward." (418n) Bensel cites George W. Dalzell, *The Flight from the Flag: The Continuing Effect of the Civil War upon the American Carrying Trade* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940).

[21] "The Education of Henry Adams -by- Henry Adams; 11. The Battle Of The Rams (1863).

[22] A debate within this debate is whether the main problem of the Lancashire textile industry in 1861-62 was the lack of raw fiber from the American south, or rather a glut resulting from

overproduction and overstocking. The glut thesis was advanced by Eugene A. Brady in 1962, and was supported by Foner and Crook.

[23] See Royden Harrison, “British Labour and the Confederacy,” *International Review of Social History II* (1957), 78-79.

[24] See Royden Harrison, “British Labour and American Slavery,” *Science and Society XXV* (1961), 315-316, cited by Foner (16).

[25] Chicago, 1972; see Foner, 19.



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