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Въ этомъ году исполнилось 90 лѣтъ со времени посѣщенія С. Ш. А. въ 1863 г., русскими эскадрами адмираловъ Лесовскаго и Попова. Желая отмѣтить этотъ юбилей, редакция ниже сего помѣщаетъ статьи Lt. Comm. В. М. Kassel, U. S. N. и А. Г. Тарсаидзе, относящіяся къ этому событію.

## RUSSIAN SQUADRONS IN U. S. WATERS IN 1863.

*by*

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BERNARD M. KASSELL, U.S.N.

Opinion, contained in this article are those of the author, and do not reflect the views of the Navy Department nor the Department of Defence.

One of the more intriguing bits of historical argument still raging in scholarly circles revolves around the visit of the Imperial Russian squadrons to the ports of New York and San Francisco during the Civil War period. Virtually every historian has undertaken to write something on the subject, but the argument remains and groups, about equally divided, can be found on either side of this historical fence.

On the one side is the group which feels that the visits were made out of friendship, purely and simply. This group bases its argument on the fact that Russian-American relations, particularly in the maritime sphere, were particularly cordial when either one of the two nations was embroiled with the maritime Titan, Great Britain.

On the other side is the group which feels that the squadrons were sent to the United States because the Russian Czar, Alexander II, feared an attack by England and France, both hostile to Russia as a result of the ruthless suppression of the Polish revolt by the Czar's forces.

Each side has something to be said for its argument, but neither side, it seems, can completely convince the other. Settlement of the argument, however, seems relatively unimportant when the argument itself is reviewed within the setting of events prior to, and after, the actual visit of the two squadrons.

Whatever the true reason for the visits, and however taken in the partisans of the Northern cause may have been, it is a historical fact, agreed to by all, that from the time the Russian squadrons appeared in our waters, Northern fortunes prospered and, oddly enough, the fortunes of the Czar and his successors did not.

The year was 1863.

In Washington, President Abraham Lincoln sat at his desk in the White House trying to bring into proper perspective reports on two widely separated problems. On the one hand were the reports concerned with the war effort; on the other, reports having to do with the international situation.

We, from our vantage point in time can appreciate the fact that Gettysburg and Vicksburg had been important signposts on the road to ultimate victory for the Union forces. It had not seemed so in 1863. At that time the war did not appear to be going well at all. Perhaps if Mr. Lincoln had had only the problem of domestic relations to deal with he might have been more optimistic.

Mr. Lincoln's difficulties were compounded by the spectre of foreign intervention. England and France, while officially neutral, were not sitting on the sidelines and maintaining that impartial view of the conflict dictated by the principles of international law on the subject of neutrality. Each nation, for different reasons, hoped for a Southern victory. The United States, in English eyes at least, had shown signs of becoming a power of increasing strength in world affairs. To colony owning England this was a disturbing fact indeed. Hence, England hoped for a Southern victory, reasoning that two weak nations to the south of Canada would be, to England at any rate, better than one strong nation.

France, with Napoleon III on the throne, was also officially neutral, but her connivings with the Confederate agents were far more open than were those of England. Her violations of the neutrality laws were more flagrant than were the violations perpetrated by England. Napoleon too was hoping for a division of strength north of Mexico because of his plan, doomed to failure, to establish the Austrian Archduke Maximilian on the Mexican throne.

Let us now travel to St. Petersburg, there to look in on Czar Alexander II, in this fateful year 1863. Alexander too was having his troubles.

Alexander, in 1861, had abolished serfdom in Russia and had managed to avoid a civil war as a result of this action. By 1863, however, revolution had broken out in Poland. Alexander had attempted to win the support of the Poles by restoring, in 1862, the arrangements completed during the period 1815-1830. These arrangements failed to satisfy the extreme Polish nationalists who wanted complete independence. The insurrection spread to Lithuania and White Russia. Insurrection it was, for the Poles had no army. Most of the fighting was done by guerrilla bands. England, France, and Austria made protests to the Czar because of his actions in suppressing the rebellion, but he chose to ignore these protests.

At the same time, Alexander was astute enough to realize that, while he *might* ignore the protests with impunity, there was always a possibility that England and France, with strong naval power on their side, *might*

decide to act with force rather than more words. He was also astute enough to realize that, if the war got hot his Baltic Fleet, which was in a sad state of disrepair, would be bottled up in the Baltic Sea, just as it had been during the Crimean War. His Siberian squadron, in no better shape materially than the Baltic Fleet, was equally vulnerable to attack by British and French naval forces.

Alexander, meanwhile had refused to deal with Confederate agents and in point of fact, had maintained what is termed a "benevolent neutrality" towards the North, a fact which the North was quick to realize. The Czar had also refused to join with England and France in their intervention plans.

On its side the North had refused to join in the protest because of the Polish suppressions. This, in its turn, was not overlooked by Russia.

Thus was the stage set for the unheralded, and dramatic entry of the two squadrons of Russian war vessels into United States waters. And thus began the argument which is still going on.

Why did the Russian ships come to the United States? Was it friendship or was it pure selfishness, the desire to save the ships in the event of war, on the part of the Russian Czar?

Strangely enough, both the United States and Russia were faced with a similar problem with regard to where their ships could go. Russia was faced with the realization that, in the event of war, her ships could be blockaded and destroyed. Treaties, to which Russia was a party, would be null and void in the event of war so that, even if the ships broke out of the Baltic or managed to get into the Pacific Ocean, there were no ports wherein Russian ships might find sanctuary or obtain supplies - except in the United States.

In the United States the government was not unaware, nor was it indifferent to the ravages committed by the Confederate cruisers fitted out in England for the purpose of preying on Northern commerce. Admiral David D. Porter, writing in 1886, was far from objective when he stated that: <sup>1</sup>

"The prompt recognition of the Confederates as belligerents by foreign powers, on the breaking out of the Rebellion, gave to the insurrection a character and strength it could never otherwise have obtained. It encouraged the Confederates to persevere, and assured them of support abroad in any measures they might think proper to undertake, and gave them an opportunity to strike a blow at the most vulnerable point of the north — its commerce"...

While Admiral Porter conceded that "the apparent intention of the declaration of neutrality by the powers of Europe was to exhibit a semb-

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<sup>1</sup> Admiral David D. Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York 1886), p. 466.

lance of fairness," this neutrality was a deception which redounded to the advantage of the South. The North was obliged to acquiesce in the acknowledgement of belligerent rights and assume all the consequences resulting therefrom. The obstacles thrown in the path of Northern cruisers, other than the natural obstacles involved in guarding 7,500 miles of coasts and rivers dotted with harbors and indentations well able to afford refuge to blockade runners, engendered a bitterness on the part of the North which was not easily dispelled. Conversely, the actions of the so-called neutrals made any gestures of friendship all the more acceptable.

The maritime powers of Europe, primarily England and France, after granting belligerent rights to the Confederates, declared that both belligerents should be treated alike in their ports, that the public armed vessels of neither should remain longer than twenty-four hours in their harbors, nor receive supplies or assistance except such as might be absolutely necessary to carry them to their own coasts, and for three months thereafter they should not again receive supplies in any of the ports of those governments.<sup>2</sup>

The neutrality proclamations did not, at any time, affect the Confederates for the simple reason that they then had no vessels afloat. What rankled in the naval breast was the fact that Northern ships were excluded from the principal ports of the world. Admiral Porter concluded:

"...As to the fairness which assumed to be the motive of the proclamation of neutrality, that must be judged from the history of the times, which will show that these proclamations were merely excuses to allow Confederate cruisers to prey upon American commerce and then find protection from United States vessels-of-war within the jurisdiction of the Great European powers that were professedly in close amity with the United States..."<sup>3</sup>

So the two powers, the United States and Russia, each beset by internal disorder and each pressured by the power politics of England and France were drawn together in much the same manner as any two lonely people are drawn together by the merest gesture of friendship. So strong, in fact, was the desire on the part of the United States for a friendly gesture, that for some time prior to the actual arrival of the Russian squadrons in the United States waters rumors went the rounds that in the offing loomed an alliance between the two nations, an alliance designed to counter Anglo-French intervention.

Suddenly, and dramatically, the Russian squadrons arrived. Not in "fleet" formation, however. The ships straggled into port and, in the ensuing excitement, few people bothered to look beyond the "friendship" read into the coming to look at the condition of the ships. None of the

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<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> *Loc. cit.*

ships were in any condition to fight, nor were they powerful enough to stand against the "modern" warships of the times. Practically all were sailing vessels-ill-equipped at that. Yet even this did not seem to matter. The important thing was that here was friendship!

The ships had arrived in two squadrons. One group anchored in New York in September, 1863; the other in San Francisco in October. The New York squadron ultimately grew to six vessels and was under the command of Admiral Lessovsky, with his flag in the *Alexander Nevsky*. The San Francisco squadron, which also numbered about six vessels, was commanded by Admiral Popov. Both fleets were entertained in a lavish manner as befitted the reason for their coming. Relations were most cordial indeed. But Northern enthusiasm was not shared by the South. The South, pinning its hopes for victory on Anglo-French intervention, failed to appreciate the anti-interventionist attitude of the Russians.

The feeling that the Russians had come out of friendship persisted without serious challenge for some time. In fact, the Russians appear to have accepted the American reaction wholeheartedly and, at a later date invoked memories of the visits when a more mellow United States attitude towards Russia seemed desirable.

It was not until 1915 that evidence appeared which seemed to scuttle the theory that the Russian ships came to America out of friendship.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Golder's article, based on material from Russian archives, "proved" that Russia, faced with the possibility of finding her fleets trapped in the event of war, decided to sail them to United States ports where, because of the world situation, they were certain to find a welcome haven and from which, in the event of war, they would be able to sail to prey on enemy commerce.

Not all scholars have accepted Mr. Golder's "proof," however.<sup>5</sup> In essence it appears to boil down to the fact that those who accepted the "save the ships" theory are scholars; those who advocate the "friendship" theory are not. The point is a moot one. Regardless of the theory involved, the point is, did the visit help the people of the North or not?

Remember, the days were dark ones in 1863. The North was beset by its problems, both internal and external. The years between the Declaration of Independence and the beginning of the Civil War had found the United States embroiled in conflicts with both England and France, conflicts which, on occasion, had erupted into open warfare in the case of England. Despite the differences between Russia and the United States,

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<sup>4</sup> F. A. Golder, "The Russian Fleet and the Civil War", *American Historical Review*\*\* (July, 1915), pp. 801-812.

<sup>5</sup> For the "friendship" theory see George Vernadsky, *A History of Russia* (New Haven, 1944, Rev. Ed.), p. 166 and Walter Lippman, *U. S. Foreign Policy's Shield of the Republic* (Boston, 1943), p. 141. Those favoring the "save the ships" theory include Pauline Tompkins, *American-Russian Relations in the Far East* (New York, 1949), p. 12 and Thomas A. Bailey, *America Face Russia* (Ithaca, New York, 1950), p. 81.

no such open conflicts had taken place. These thoughts undoubtedly occurred in the minds of statesmen and others who could, with horrible clarity, foresee the results of failure on the part of the North to retain the union of the states. These people, with pardonable understanding, may well have been blinded to the realities of the situation leading to the visits of the Russian squadrons. In fact, the manner in which the Russians were greeted, the celebrations rivaled anything previously seen, seems to indicate that all native caution about entangling alliances had gone overboard.

Yet it must be remembered that no *actual* alliance was forthcoming, despite the rumors already mentioned concerning the possibilities of such alliance. Hence we can assume that native sagacity was not entirely lost in the heady atmosphere which prevailed. And, despite the air of defeatism which had prevailed in the North prior to the arrival of the squadrons, from that time forward success crowned the efforts of the North and yielded the ultimate victory. Whatever may have been the real reason for the visits, the mere presence of these hulls in Northern waters seems to have had a vital psychological effect on the peoples of the North. If, as suggested by some writers, the people were taken in by the Russians, no lasting harm appears to have been done, and, if the beliefs of the people in the friendship of the visits helped them, so much the better.

As a matter of fact a survey of contemporary American newspapers and the editorial opinions contained therein has been made, primarily in an attempt to determine whether or not the North was taken in by the visits. The results failed to establish any definite pattern so we are right back where we started from. The ultimate answer to the puzzle lies, necessarily, in the results achieved rather than in the thoughts of this or that editorial writer. Certainly no harm was done by the visits, perhaps only good resulted. It would be idle to attempt to rewrite history in the vein of "what might have been" has had no permanent effect.

In point of fact, the American people, despite the lingering of the "myth" of the reason behind the fleet visit, and despite the not universally accepted "facts" of the visit, have seen fit to draw their conclusions of friendship or enmity, with appropriate gradations of feelings between the two extremes, from the facts of each individual agreement or disagreement — not from the facts or fallacies of historical events.

The scholarly dispute on this historical episode bids fair to continue for some time. Where, if anywhere, it will end, remains for the future. But it can not be denied that, whatever the reason for the visit during those troubled days in 1863, we, as a nation, despite the gullibility charged to us, have survived. Nor can it be denied that Russia, despite the realism and selfishness of the action in sending the ships, failed to survive. Perhaps there are times when it pays *not* to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Тихоокеанская эскадра Свиты Е. В. Конгръ-адмирала А. А. Попова въ Санъ-Франциско въ 1863 г.



(Смотри слѣва направо): Климеръ «Абрекъ» (въ докъ), Корсетъ «Рында», шлюпки со «Святлань», Корсетъ  
Ботатърь, (флагъ Адм. Попова), Климеръ «Гайдамакъ» (у пристани), Корсетъ «Калевада».