The American Black Press and Late Imperial Russia

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Abstract
During the 19th century, many western observers of Russia described the country as brutish and tyrannical, qualities that they believed separated Russia from their homelands. But in the United States, Black editors and journalists looked to Russian serfdom and pogroms and saw something familiar. To a growing and evolving Black press, comparisons between the United States and Russia became a way to attack slavery and racism in America. While the accounts of Russia in Black newspapers were often faulty, they provide great insight into the evolution of the Black press and Black elites' understanding of oppression.

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Benjamin Pierce

In November 1882, the *Sentinel*, a Black newspaper from Trenton, New Jersey, printed that "the late Czar of Russia was eminently a great man, as his action in liberating thirty-six million serfs from slavery qualified him to be. Yet with all his greatness, Alexander left it to Dr. Swayne to liberate the world from the annoyance and pain of scores of skin diseases."[1] The advertisement, while glib, shows the importance of Russia and Tsar Alexander II to 19th century Black Americans. For the first generations of Black newspapers, Russia was an important foil for the United States, the two countries bound by similar systems of forced labor. By the second half of the 19th century, Black newspapers felt the connection between Russia and the United States was so popular, so evident, that they used Russia in advertisements, political appeals, and entertainment. Yet despite Russia's prevalence in the public eye, there are few studies of how Black Americans saw Russia before the 1917 Revolution. This paper details the evolution of Black thought on Russia, using Black and abolitionist newspapers to trace the shifting opinions and rhetoric on the Tsarist state from 1827 to 1917.

For centuries, white western observers had looked to Russia and seen a place fundamentally different from their home countries. In their accounts, Russia was distinctly oppressive, a state characterized by tyranny, barbarism, and Mongolian influence. But the accounts were faulty. They were written by merchants, diplomats, and explorers, wealthy white men who had never experienced the kind of repression they witnessed in Russia. When Black Americans looked to Imperial Russia, however, they saw a place fundamentally similar to the United States. Both countries were large, multiethnic empires driven by territorial acquisition and fueled by forced labor. This article argues that these connections drove Black newspapers' attitudes toward late Imperial Russia, making Black accounts of Russia reflective of circumstances in the United States, Russia, and the Black press itself.

Before the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of the serfs, the first Black newspapers covered Russia in much the same vein as contemporary white observers. Russia was a tyrannical state, uncivilized, backward, and barely European. Black newspapers used this stereotype to advance the abolitionist

[1] "What Alexander Might Have Done," *Sentinel*, November 13, 1882.

cause, comparing a universally reviled Russia to the United States. After Alexander II announced his intent to end serfdom in 1856, the Black press reversed its coverage, portraying Russia as a potential role model for the United States. Black papers showered both Russia and Alexander II with praise. When the United States abolished slavery, this coverage expanded and emphasized the perceived connections between the two countries. But following the failures of Reconstruction, the Black press looked to Russia once more and found something different, increasingly identifying with the nation's Jewish and Polish populations instead of the former serfs. As such, the changes in Black coverage over time reflects not only the more concrete changes in American and Russian politics but in Black Americans' understanding of their own situation as well.

Historians have long drawn comparisons between American slavery and Russian serfdom. At the beginning of his landmark work, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*, Peter Kolchin claims that "at approximately the same time two systems of human bondage, American slavery and Russian serfdom, emerged on Europe's borders […] Russian serfdom and American slavery were by no means identical, but as systems of unfree labor they played similar social and economic roles in the development of the two countries."[2] In Russia, peasants became serfs over the span of centuries as their movements and freedoms were gradually restricted by Tsars and feudal lords.[3] By the 19th century, serfs were largely bound to the land and their social status. In the Americas, colonial ambitions led to the expansion of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the codification of race-based chattel slavery. According to Kolchin, by the eighteenth-century the social divisions between serfs and lords in Russia became so distinct that they mirrored American race relations.[4] Studies on the relationship between American slavery and Russian serfdom have become more common since Kolchin's book was first published. Amanda Brickell Bellows, in her recent study of post-abolition media in Russia and America, argues that since Kolchin the scholarship on comparative abolition is primarily concerned with the "similarities and differences between the political, economic, demographic, and social aspects of the two systems."[5] But importantly, these comparisons also existed before abolition. Just as modern scholars have recognized the important similarities between American slavery and Russian serfdom, contemporary abolitionists did as well. In Russia, the pre-abolition Black press saw a system of labor resembling slavery and a system of government resembling the American South, and they sought to fit this comparison into the prevailing western European and American negative portrayals of Russia.

The Black press's views of Russia were not conceived in a vacuum. For centuries, western observers had seen Russia as a barely European backwater. Historian Martin Malia, in his foundational *Russia Under Western Eyes*, argues

[2] Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1.

[3] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 10.

[4] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 40.

[5] Amanda Brickell Bellows, *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 3.

that many early European accounts of Russia were more reflective of the observers' biases and origins than Russia itself.[6] Russia was a mirror, and early observers were often more concerned with making a point about their own country than accurately portraying Russia. By the mid-19th century, abolitionists agreed with the consensus of western Europe and white America: Russia was a largely uncivilized country, predisposed to tyranny and barbarity. These perceptions were more than just simple reflections, however. They represented another way for these abolitionists to critique slavery.

Narratives of Russia became popular in Europe starting in the mid-16th century, and these depictions colored perceptions of Russia for the succeeding centuries. In 1549, Sigismund von Herberstein, a German ambassador to Muscovy, released the *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii.* According to historian Felicity Stout, Herberstein's account was one of the first to be widely read in western Europe, and it emphasized many of the negative stereotypes of Russians—tyranny, violence, laziness—that characterized later accounts.[7] The historian Samuel Baron agrees, arguing that Herberstein had never before witnessed the oppression that he saw in Russia.[8] Later accounts of Russia followed the same general trend. English interactions with Russia grew dramatically in the late 16th century, and the resulting travel narratives emphasized the perceived deficiencies of Russia. Richard Chancellor, pilot of the first English voyage to Muscovy, wrote that Russian culture was nothing more than "the foolish and childish dotages of such ignorant barbarians."[9] These early depictions of Russia fundamentally shaped the views of Western Europe in the coming centuries. Martin Malia claims that Russia was often seen as Asian, occupying a similar place as the Ottomans.[10] These perceptions of Russia were also appraisals of Russians. Historian David C. Engerman argues that many of the observers equated Russia's brutality and backwardness to the intrinsic character of Russian people and argued that Russians were born for servitude.[11] Further, Larry Wolff, in his seminal *Inventing Eastern Europe*, posits that the notion of a fundamentally distinct Eastern Europe derived from Enlightenment ideals and writings.[12]

These accounts of Russia, a fusion of long-engrained prejudices and

[6] Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

[7] Felicity Stout, "'The Countrey is too Colde, the People Beastly Be': Elizabethan Representations of Russia," *Literature Compass* 10, no. 6 (2013): 483.

[8] Samuel H. Baron, "European Images of Muscovy," *History Today* 36, no. 9 (1986): 19.

[9] Richard Chancellor, "The Voyage of Richard Chancellor," in *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom,* ed. by L.E. Berry and R.O. Crummey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 21, 22.

[10] Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 17.

[11] David C. Engerman, "Studying Our Nearest Oriental Neighbor: American Scholars and Late Imperial Russia" in *Americans Experience Russia: Encountering the Enigma, 1917 to the Present*, ed. by Choi Chatterjee and Beth Holmgren (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 12, 16.

[12] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 356.

Enlightenment thought, were the foundation of American perceptions. Negative depictions of the country dominated books, schools, plays, and the news in the United States. Engerman finds that "writers in Victorian America suggested that Russian character was a product of its despotism. Politics made character, not vice versa."[13] To contemporary white Americans, Russia was a warning of what America could become. Like the United States, Russia was a large multiethnic, multiracial empire. But it was also a country dominated by barbarism, violence, and tyranny. These conclusions were shared by the first Black newspapers and journalists. William Jordan, in his book on Black coverage of World War I, argues that Black newspapers were distinctly Victorian and that they, like many other contemporary observers, believed in the notion of civilized and uncivilized peoples.[14] Further, playing into these negative preconceptions of Russia and the perceived connection between slavery and serfdom allowed the early Black press to criticize America by proxy to its largely white audience. By accepting the rhetorical framework of earlier observers, Black newspapers were able to equate slavery to a near-universally reviled country and its national character.

The first generation of Black newspapers reflected these trends. The papers, published and edited by prominent Black businessmen and activists, held an elite point of view. According to scholars Gayle Berardi and Thomas Segady, "from 1827 to the Civil War period, the press was committed to addressing African American grievances" but "aimed primarily at a white audience."[15] The *Freedom's Journal*, the first Black newspaper in America, was founded in New York in March 1827.[16] Frederick Douglass began publication of *The North Star*, the first of his several papers, in 1847.[17] In its earliest issues, the *Freedom's Journal* emphasized Russian stereotypes. In an editorial, the paper stated that Russia "was hardly considered a civilized power" before the 18th century.[18] Often the paper explicitly echoed white abolitionists. Throughout its first year, the *Freedom's Journal* repeatedly published a letter written by English abolitionist Adam Hodgson on "the comparative expense of Free and Slave Labour" that likened American slavery to Russian serfdom and provided an economic argument against both.[19] These comparisons between the United States and Russia became the driving force of early Black coverage.

By the 1840s and 1850s, the Black press had expanded, and its condemnation of Russia became more explicit. In December 1848, Frederick Douglass's *The*

[13] David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 29.

[14] William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 22.

[15] Gayle Berardi and Thomas Segady, "The Development of African-American Newspapers in the American West: A Sociohistorical Perspective," *The Journal of Negro History* 75, no. 3 (1990): 96.

[16] Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920,* 21.

[17] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Park, 1882), 324.

[18] "Mutability of Human Affairs," *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.

[19] Adam Hodgson, "A Letter," *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.

North Star published an article on bathing, stating that "in Russia, where the people have not got beyond the middle ages, the lower classes do not yet know the use of a shirt."[20] In Samuel E. Cornish's *Colored American*, the Tsar was the foremost example of the "principle of despotism."[21] The Black press utilized these popular orientalist portrayals of Russia to further indict slavery. To the papers, the connection was self-evident. In 1849, *The North Star* compared the freedoms awarded to serfs to the limited privileges granted to slaves.[22] Later, the same publication proclaimed that "we may object to Slavery in America, as we may object to the same institution in Turkey, or to serfage in Russia."[23] Importantly, the papers' argument hinged on a one-two punch. First, they attacked Russia using historical stereotypes. Second, they compared American slavery to Russian serfdom. To *The North Star*, America was "more despotic than Russia, more barbarous than the chieftaid of Barbary, she establishes ferocity by federal law."[24]

Early Black coverage of Russia also played into the most important abolitionist arguments. To early Black newspapers, the tyranny of Russia was akin to the tyranny of Slave Power. Eric Foner, renowned American historian, argues that contemporary Republicans believed that the interests of slaveowners and southerners had subverted the United States' government in a grand conspiracy referred to as 'Slave Power.'[25] Further, Foner claims that Slave Power "provided the link between the Republican view of the South as an alien society and their belief in the necessity of political organization to combat southern influence."[26] In October 1849, *The North Star* argued that "the tyrannical acts of Russia have given occasion for much railing [...] but the tyranny of these countries must henceforth cease to be regarded as at all to be compared with the unmitigated despotism of South Carolina."[27] During congressional debate over fugitive slave laws, *The North Star* referenced a 902 AD treaty between Russia and Greece, stating that "it is remarkable, that after the lapse of nearly nine centuries, we find a barbarous stipulation between two barbarous nations reproduced in the compact of union of the most civilized and humane republics of the nineteenth century."[28] In 1854, the paper claimed that "slavery requires a despotism like that of Russia to save it from being absurd, as well as pernicious and inhuman."[29] By likening Southern despotism to Russian despotism, the newspapers connected the antebellum South to the country seen as the most backwards in the world.

The first Black editors centered the perceived connections between Russia

[20] "Human Hydrophobia," *The North Star*, December 8, 1848.

[21] William Whipper, "An Address on Non-Resistance to Offensive Aggression," *Colored American,* September 30, 1837.

[22] "Another Rivet in the Fetter of the Slave," *The North Star*, October 19, 1849.

[23] "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* September 29, 1854.

[24] Theodore Parker, "From Parker's Letter on Slavery," *The North Star*, May 5, 1848.

[25] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

[26] Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men,* 102.

[27] "Doings in South Carolina," *The North Star*, October 12, 1849.

[28] "The Congress Fugitive Bill," *The North Star*, June 13, 1850.

[29] "Poetry and Truth," *The North Star*, April 21, 1854.

and the United States in their coverage. Black abolitionists sought to evoke the prejudices of their largely white audience, criticizing the United States through more accepted and historical critiques of Russia. Yet the perceived relationship between Russia and the United States was not static. By the 1850s, the American abolition movement had significant momentum, and Russian lords had begun to recognize the harmful effects of serfdom and, perhaps more motivating, the need to modernize. The resulting emancipations fundamentally changed Black coverage of Russia as a new generation of Black journalists and editors wrote under new circumstances.

At the close of the Crimean War in 1856, Tsar Alexander II announced that "all of you understand that the existing conditions of owning souls cannot remain unchanged. It is better to begin eliminating serfdom from above than to wait until it begins to eliminate itself from below."[30] Russia's defeat led the Tsar to believe emancipation and economic reform were political and diplomatic necessities. Serfdom was no longer an asset to the empire. It was a burden. By 1861, Russia had fully abolished serfdom.[31] Simultaneously, American debate over slavery was reaching a fever pitch. Conflict over the expansion of slavery westward led to the collapse of the Whig party and the Second Party System. To both Northern and Southern Americans, slavery was an increasingly dire issue, one that defined the character of the nation. Following Alexander II's 1856 proclamation, Black coverage of Russia shifted dramatically in response to events in both America and Russia. The Russian empire was no longer the symbol of tyranny, and the Tsar was no longer the most barbarous despot. To the Black press, Russia became a country to be emulated.

A new generation of Black newspapers and journalists met the news of Russian emancipation with excitement. In August 1856, the New Orleans *Daily Creole* published a short article, stating simply that "the Czar is sincere in his desire to abolish serfdom."[32] Later, the *Daily Creole* praised the "progress in Russia" and the Tsar's efforts to "aid the development of commerce between Russia and the rest of the Christian world."[33] In January 1859, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* republished an article from the *Christian Press* that claimed "the new emperor Alexander, of Russia, is engaged, at this very time, in the great work doing homage to Christian civilization, by emancipating all the serfs of the empire."[34] In early 1861, the *Weekly Anglo-African* attributed the "freedom of 20,000,000 Russian serfs" to "the influence of Christianity in the semi-barbarous

[30] Larissa Zakharova, "Autocracy and the Reforms of 1861-1874 in Russia: Choosing Paths of Development," in *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855-1881*, ed. by Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova, 19-39 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 20.

[31] Zakharova, "Autocracy and the Reforms of 1861-1874 in Russia," 21-23, 37.

[32] "Serfdom in Russia," *Daily Creole*, August 2, 1856.

[33] "Progress in Russia," *Daily Creole*, August 11, 1856, and "The Emperor of Russia," *Daily Creole*, November 11, 1856.

[34] Armstrong and Van Rensselaer, "Old School D. D's and Slavery," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* January 21, 1859.

empire of Russia." [35] In November 1862, New Orleans's *L'Union* stated that the Russian serfs' "condition sociale s'améliore d'une manière merveilleuse."[36] This tonal shift was also present in prominent white abolitionist newspapers. Over the course of five months in 1856, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* went from condemning the Tsar as ruling "not only by the fears but by the veneration and fanaticism of his subjects" to stating that that "Russia has been taught a lesson, the beautiful results of which will appear in the advancement of her civilization and the final emancipation of all the oppressed within her dominions."[37]

This shifting coverage coincided with the outbreak of the American Civil War and, eventually, abolition. After the abolition of slavery, the Black press grew to accommodate an increasingly literate and politically active Black population.[38] Gayle Berardi and Thomas Segady find that "between April 1865 and January 1866, twelve newspapers were started […] by 1890, the number of African-American papers had increased tremendously to 575."[39] Further, as the papers transitioned from serving a largely white audience to a largely Black one, they fundamentally changed. Historian Charlotte G. O'Kelly argues that the papers filled the space once occupied by abolitionist content with more general subjects like art and science.[40] This changed how most Black newspapers mentioned Russia. Instead of being included in articles advocating abolition, Russia was often relegated to sections covering Europe and foreign affairs. Yet despite this shift, Russia continued to be treated as a corollary to the United States, the two countries now linked by recent emancipations. At the same time however, it is important to note the sheer diversity and fluctuations of the Reconstruction-era Black press. Emma Lou Thornbrough, an early historian of Black newspapers, stresses that these Black papers faced many barriers to survival and often failed rapidly.[41] But during Reconstruction, this increasingly large and diverse press continued to see Russia as an important subject.

In the years immediately following the abolition of slavery, this new Black press emphasized the strange new kinship between the United States and Russia. In September 1866, the *New Orleans Tribune*'s Paris correspondent wrote that "the resemblance is striking between the Russians and Americans. Neither of us are liked by old Eastern Europe, or the barbarous nations of other countries."[42] In 1868, San Francisco's *Elevator* republished an article from the *Dramatic Chronicle* that stated "the last six years have witnessed the emancipation of 25,000,000

[35] "Lecture on Slavery," *Weekly Anglo-African*, February 16, 1861.

[36] "Considerable," *L'Union*, November 5, 1862. Translated as "social condition improves in a marvelous manner."

[37] "France and Her 'Infant'," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 19, 1856, and "Slavery and Serfdom in Russia," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 6, 1856.

[38] Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, 24.

[39] Berardi and Segady, "The Development of African-American Newspapers in the American West," 97.

[40] Charlotte G. O'Kelly, "Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement: Their Historical Relationship, 1827-1945," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982): 2.

[41] Emma Lou Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers, 1880-1914," *The Business History Review* 40, no. 4 (1966): 468.

[42] "Letter from Paris," *New Orleans Tribune*, September 12, 1866.

serfs in Russia, of 4,000,000 slaves in the United States, and of 3,000,000 in Brazil. Thus, the crime and curse of slavery has been removed from three great empires."[43] Not content on noting the similarity, some Black newspapers used Russia as an example for the United States to follow. On October 3rd, 1866, the *New Orleans Tribune* republished a speech made by Russian diplomat Alexander Gorchakov to the American delegation to Russia. Gorchakov argued that "in Russia there exists not a single enemy to emancipation; all classes owe to that all their liberty."[44] Further, he stated that the country's respective emancipations created "the germs of a kind feeling, a natural friendship, which will bear its fruit in forming tradition and tending to consolidate relation bond in the spirit of genuine Christian civilization."[45] These germs were transmitted by Black newspapers as a prescription for America.

This new tone was also present in the newspapers' opinions of Tsar Alexander II. The Black press increasingly praised the Tsar, portraying him as an enlightened despot. At first, this coverage was explicitly linked to emancipation. In 1865, the *New Orleans Tribune* declared that "Czar Alexander of Russia achieved his beneficent plan, commenced in 1862, for the freedom of 40,000,000 serfs."[46] Two years later, the *New Orleans Tribune* reported admiringly that "the Czar of Russia left a million of francs for the poor of Paris."[47] In January 1872, the *New National Era* wrote that the Tsar "has always been our friend."[48] Often this coverage explicitly referenced Russia's history of tyranny, arguing that Alexander's despotism was beneficial and a departure from Russia's historical character. This theme echoed the contemporaneous coverage of Reconstruction in the United States, emphasizing transformation away from historical tyranny. When discussing the prospect of the Brazilian abolition in 1871, Frederick Douglass' *New National Era* declared that "Russia, the most strictly monarchical state, where the Emperor Alexander, by his supreme will, put an end to serfdom, forms a remarkable exception from the general rule."[49] In 1872, the *New National Era* doubled down, republishing a Harper's Magazine article that argued that while "Nicholas was a despot of the Asiatic fashion, Alexander is a modern despot–one of intelligence, one whose boast is that he exercises despotism for the good of the people."[50] Further, Black newspapers praised Alexander's authoritarian rule when it was seen as in line with other social issues. In November 1868, the San Francisco *Elevator* wrote that "the Czar of Russia has issued an ukase, abolishing nine tenths of the drinking saloons in his Empire. There are other countries in

[43] "The Curse Removed," *Elevator*, June 26, 1868.

[44] "Prince Gortchakoff's Speech at the Banquet to the American Delegation," *New Orleans Tribune*, October 3, 1866.

[45] "Prince Gortchakoff's Speech at the Banquet to the American Delegation."

[46] "Truth vs. Error," *New Orleans Tribune*, October 10, 1865.

[47] "From Europe," *New Orleans Tribune*, June 29, 1867.

[48] J.F. Dezendorf, "Gen. Grant Our Next President," *New National Era*, January 26, 1872.

[49] "Emancipation in Brazil," *New National Era,* November 9, 1871.

[50] "Nicholas and Alexander," *New National Era,* October 31, 1872.

which a similar act of despotism would be productive of good to the inhabitants."[51]

After Tsar Alexander II's assassination by a radical nihilist group known as the People's Will in 1881, Black newspapers sought to cement his legacy as an emancipator. Washington D.C. *People's Advocate* condemned the nihilists' plot as a "horrible crime."[52] Two weeks later, the paper compared Alexander to "the immortal Lincoln" despite his "faults."[53] The Tsar's obituary in the *Sentinel* praised his great reforms but detailed how his push for emancipation ultimately led to his demise. To the *Sentinel*, the Tsar "had alienated the nobles by his reforms; he vainly endeavored to become reconciled to them by attempting repressions which alienated the people. Shortly afterward the Nihilists began their operations."[54] In these eulogies, there are glimpses of cracks in Black newspapers' praise of Alexander II and Russia. To the Black press, Russia was no longer the great, enlightened state that had emancipated millions of serfs. By the early 1880s, the country had reverted to its history of repression and backwardness. In a retrospective of the Romanov dynasty, the *New York Globe* argued that "the history of the Russian crown-bearers is a history of violence and blood."[55] Further, the *New York Globe* stated that "Alexander II began his reign most auspiciously, inaugurating beneficent reforms; he gave freedom to the peasants, restored trial by jury and granted provincial self-government" but "the country will know no rest until proper reforms are instituted. Without this the coronation of Sunday will be a vain mockery."[56]

These cracks were the start of a new direction for Black coverage of Russia. By the mid-1870s, Reconstruction had effectively ended. Eric Foner argues that "in the Deep South, where electoral fraud and the threat of violence hung heavily over the Black community, the Republican party crumbled after 1877."[57] Decades later, W.E.B. Du Bois described Reconstruction by writing "the slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun, then moved back again toward slavery."[58] When the post-Reconstruction Black press looked to Russia, they could no longer praise emancipation by itself. Black American's experience in the late-19th century led to a re-evaluation of abolition, and with that, a re-evaluation of Russia. As the circumstances facing Black Americans, Russia, and the United States changed, Black Americans looked to Russia and connected with different groups and different forms of oppression than before.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, disappointment over the failures of Reconstruction and the assassination of Alexander II led to the Black press steadily disassociating the fates of the formerly enslaved from the former serfs. At the dedication for the Washington D.C. Freedman's monument, Frederick

[51] "A Strange Legacy," *Elevator*, November 27, 1868.
[52] Untitled, *People's Advocate*, March 19, 1881.
[53] "From Kansas," *People's Advocate*, April 2, 1881.
[54] "The Murdered Czar," *Sentinel*, March 19, 1881.
[55] "The Bloody Romanoffs," *New York Globe*, July 2, 1883.
[56] "The Bloody Romanoffs"
[57] Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 249.
[58] Foner, A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877, 254.

Douglass stated that "when the serfs of Russia were emancipated, they were given three acres of ground upon which they could live and make a living. But not so when our slaves were emancipated. They were sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends, and without a foot of land to stand upon."[59] Many former serfs were forced into agreements to buy the land they had previously cultivated, binding them with debilitating debts that resembled the cyclical debt plaguing sharecroppers. Yet for the Black press, the perceived differences between the plights of the former serfs and the formerly enslaved became a potent method to advocate for civil rights. In 1881, Detroit's *Plaindealer* argued that "the Russian serf was provided with farming tools and three acres upon which to begin life, but the Negro has neither spoils, implements, nor land, and to-day he is practically a slave on the very plantations where he was formerly driven to toil under the lash."[60] Other Black newspapers agreed. In 1881, the *Sentinel* bemoaned that "the serf owns the soil he tills even in despotic Russia."[61] The Indianapolis *Freeman* published a sermon that claimed the Black man is in a condition "more deplorable than that of the Russian serf."[62] Reverand M.C.B. Mason's 1898 sermon, reprinted by the *Iowa State Bystander*, argued that Black people continued to be oppressed "because the government of the United States, unlike Russia, even turned her serfs upon the flood of despair and mistreatment. Penniless, homeless, ignorant, but free."[63] At first glance, this dissociation feels somewhat superficial. Former Russian serfs faced many of the same problems as the formerly enslaved. But importantly, this disassociation condemned the United States' treatment of Black Americans and led to a new direction for the Black press's coverage of Russia, one more reflective of the new generation of Black editors and proprietors.

This disassociation occurred at the same time as a dramatic transformation of the Black press, spurred by the end of Reconstruction. Democrats' return to governance throughout the South led to increased repression of Black Americans and the closure of many southern Black newspapers. Further, financial instability plagued even northern Black papers. While the heartiest papers remaining were published in the North, in cities like Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Washington D.C., where they were able to survive on the size of a significant urban Black population, even these papers were less stable.[64] Financial instability caused many Black newspapers to become more reliant on more conservative owners and benefactors. Emma Lou Thornbrough argues that during this period, most papers could survive only as long as their owners.[65] Relatively wealthy Black entrepreneurs acquired many Black newspapers during the Gilded Age, and their papers became reflective of a particular brand of Black conservative Republicanism. This trend is perhaps best seen with George L. Knox and the

[59] Kelly Cummings and B. Amarilis Lugo de Fabritz, "Rereading Russia through the Contact Zone of HBCUs," *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (2021): 308.

[60] "Favors the Scheme," *Plaindealer*, August 21, 1891.

[61] "Parnell's Partisans," *Sentinel*, February 26, 1881.

[62] L. A. Hagood, "Prospects for the Negro," *Freeman*, December 7, 1895.

[63] "Special from Battle Creek, Mich," *Iowa State Bystander*, October 28, 1898.

[64] Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers, 1880-1914," 472-474.

[65] Ibid., 473

Indianapolis *Freeman*, one of the largest and most important Black papers of the era. Historian Willard Gatewood claimed that Knox was "generally recognized as the most prominent black citizen in Indiana."[66] Knox took over the *Freeman* in June 1892 and used the paper to project his vehement support for civil rights and the pro-industry economic platform of the Republican party.[67] Moreover, Black newspapers became increasingly reliant on the funds of more conservative activists like Booker T. Washington. Charlotte O'Kelly emphasized this reliance, arguing that Washington and the Tuskegee Institute's financial backing of many Black newspapers gave them increased influence.[68] By the end of the 19th century, the Black press represented an almost entirely new force, one whose coverage differed dramatically from early papers like the *North Star* and the *Freedom's Journal*.

As this new Black press disassociated with the former serfs, the papers increasingly covered the oppression of Polish and Jewish people in Russia. This shift corresponded with similar coverage in the international press. David Foglesong, in his book *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire'*, outlines how white America's increased concern with Russian repression gave rise to the 'free Russia' movement beginning in the 1880s.[69] Further, historian Victoria Zhuravleva emphasizes how support for the free Russia movement exploded in response to increased violence towards Jewish Russians in the early 1900s.[70] Yet, even as Black newspapers' coverage of Russia converged with the white press, the Black editors' motivations were fundamentally different from their white counterparts. White editors used Russian atrocities to deflect from racial problems at home, while Black editors used them to reflect upon racial injustice within the United States.

Black newspapers had long covered Russian oppression in Poland, but this coverage intensified by the end of the 19th century. In 1848, the *North Star* recounted the story of Count Holinski of Poland, condemning Russia and Germany's division of Polish lands and people.[71] The next year, the *North Star* claimed that "freedom is heard as the theme of every tongue […] when Poland fell beneath the crushing weight of Russian despotism, American indignation was aroused to madness."[72] This tone continued even as the press praised Alexander II's reforms. In 1872, the *New National Era* published that "only in Poland […] has Alexander been cruel."[73] This coverage intensified during the 1880s and 1890s,

[66] Willard Gatewood, *Slave and Freeman: The Autobiography of George L. Knox* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), vii.

[67] "What They Said," *The Freeman*, June 11, 1892.

[68] O'Kelly, "Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement," 3.

[69] David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7.

[70] Victoria Zhuravleva, "Anti-Jewish Violence in Russia and the American 'Mission for Freedom' at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *East European Jewish Affairs* 40, no. 1 (2010): 43-60.

[71] Maria Weston Chapman, "The Fourteenth National Anti Slavery Bazar," *North Star,* January 28, 1848.

[72] "Communications: The Redemption of Cubs," *The North Star*, July 20, 1849.

[73] "Nicholas and Alexander."

as the free Russia movement grew in America. The *Washington Bee* reprinted a *Temple Bar* article in 1882 that praised Poles as "extraordinarily hospitable" and "fond a gayety, of amusement and of society."[74] By 1885, the *Topeka Tribune and Western Recorder* declared that Russia and Germany had a "united policy to entirely suppress the Polish nationality" and the *Huntsville Gazette* reported that "there are now 70,000 Russian troops in Poland."[75] An October 1891 issue of the *Southern Argus* published German socialist August Bebel's claims that Russia "ought to be revolutionized both externally and internally" and that "Poland should be made an independent state."[76] Further, coverage of Poland in the Black press increasingly took the form of longer narratives. In 1882, the *People's Advocate* published a portion of Henry Greville's "The Jewess Roudnia" that emphasized the poverty and ethnic strife in Poland.[77] Five years later, the *Wisconsin Labor Advocate* reprinted a *New York World* article on Professor M. Bachrach, a Hungarian and former officer of the Hungarian and Polish legion that spent seven years in a Siberian prison.[78]

This attention to Poland was inextricably linked to the Black press' coverage of Russian antisemitism in the 19th century. After the assassination of Alexander II, antisemitic violence erupted throughout the Russian empire, and the state did little to intervene. In 1881, the *Sentinel* reported that "the peasants are sacking the Jewish quarters […] the rich Jews are escaping into Austria, but their poor brethren are at the mercy of the mob."[79] The following year, the *People's Advocate* argued that "the crimes recently perpetrated against Israelites in Russia are only comparable with the […] middle ages."[80] To Black newspapers, this antisemitism was set against the backdrop of Russian Poland. The section of "The Jewess Roudnia" reprinted in the *People's Advocate* claimed that in Poland, "when a Jew's house is on fire only the Jews run forth and endeavor to extinguish it, while the others stand motionless, looking on—not, perhaps, without a secret satisfaction."[81] Stories about Jewish refugees to America centered Poland as well. In 1884, the *Washington Bee* reported that "large numbers of Jews are emigrating from Poland to America."[82] In 1886, The *Huntsville Gazette* reported that "the exodus of Jews from Russian Poland has attained extraordinary figures […] during the year 1884 no less than 20,150 left the country for America."[83]

After the turn of the century, when political instability in Russia contributed to heightened antisemitism and a series of violent pogroms, Black newspapers

[74] "The Hospitable Poles," *Washington Bee*, December 23, 1882.

[75] "Foreign," *Topeka Tribune and Western Recorder*, May 30, 1885, and "Personal and General," *Huntsville Gazette*, May 2, 1885.

[76] "General Review," *Southern Argus*, October 15, 1891.

[77] Henry Greville, "The Jewess Roudnia: Translated from the French of Henry Greville by George D. Cox," *People's Advocate*, April 1, 1882.

[78] "Prison Life in Siberia," *Wisconsin Labor Advocate,* April 29, 1887.

[79] "Foreign News," *Sentinel*, May 28, 1881.

[80] "The Sufferings of Jews in Russia," *People's Advocate*, February 25, 1882.

[81] Greville, "The Jewess Roudnia."

[82] "Foreign," Washington Bee, July 5, 1884.

[83] "Personal and General," *Huntsville Gazette*, March 27, 1886.

increasingly likened violence towards Jewish Russians to racial violence in America. Zhuravleva argues that following the Kishinev pogrom and the failed Revolution of 1905, "the great majority of leading American newspapers and magazines had changed their attitudes from hopes of rapid transformation in Russia to pessimism, disillusionment, and Russophobic despair."[84] The same can be seen in prominent Black newspapers. In 1903, Milwaukee's *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate* outlined the rising antisemitic violence, describing how mobs attacked Jewish communities in Berestechko, Bialystok, Kishinev, and Odessa and how "Saul Laudan, a prominent Jew, was compelled to publicly abjure his faith […] the mob surrounding him, eager to lynch him if he hesitated."[85] In 1911, the *Cleveland Gazette* claimed that although the lynchings of Black Americans were "so common as to attract little attention," they were altogether less severe than the "silent extermination of Russian Jews."[86] The same year, the *Washington Bee* detailed how "these United States stood aghast when the ignorant, blood-inured Russian soldiers killed and pillaged the defenseless Jews at Kishineff" but paid no mind to how "a mob of 'white hopes' as ferocious as ever was a horde of Russian Cossacks […] tied a poor, wounded, ignorant Negro upon his cot and burned him alive."[87]

Although Black newspapers coverage of antisemitic violence in Russia mirrored their white counterparts, the papers' motivations remained fundamentally different. Foglesong argues that the free Russia movement was encouraged by white Americans' desire to assuage their guilt for abandoning their advocacy for Black Americans.[88] Foglesong goes farther, arguing that "American racial attitudes were not transformed but momentarily transcended, in part through faith in the spiritual rebirth of Russia" while citing a Baptist newspaper editor who compared the plight of the enslaved to the oppressed people of Russia.[89] While white American editors highlighted the plight of Jews and Poles under Russian rule as part of an effort to ignore race problems at home, Black editors did the opposite. They used the same outrages to reflect upon racial violence in the United States. When comparing American lynching to Russian pogroms, race was not transcended, it was made saliant.

This evolving solidarity again reflects the connections the Black press drew between Russia and the United States. In its earliest coverage of Russia, the Black press empathized with the serfs because their oppression mirrored that faced by enslaved Americans. Black editors saw American slavery as a fundamentally similar system to Russian serfdom, allowing the Black press to draw comparisons in places many western observers found stark differences. But following the abolition of slavery and the failures of Reconstruction, Black Americans faced

[84] Zhuravleva, "Anti-Jewish Violence in Russia and the American 'Mission for Freedom' at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," 46.

[85] "Pillage Homes of Jews: People of Bealystok, Russia, Attack Hebrews," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, June 4, 1903.

[86] "Silent Extermination of Russian Jews," *Cleveland Gazette,* April 22, 1911.

[87] Ralph W. Tyler, "Lord, How Long?" *Washington Bee*, August 19, 1911.

[88] Foglesong, *The American Mission and the 'Evil Empire*', 20-21.

[89] Ibid., 31.

an oppression more explicitly rooted in their race. When the new generation of Black newspapers looked to Russia, they found this brand of oppression in the country's treatment of its Jewish and Polish populations. Kolchin argues that the formerly enslaved, unlike Russian serfs, developed a sense of identity rooted in their oppression.[90] It was this identity that drove the shifts in the Black press's coverage of Russia. As Black Americans faced new layers of oppression, they looked to Russia and drew new conclusions.

Alongside these new connections, the Gilded Age Black press paid increased attention to Russia's internal violence, opting for sensationalist reporting on the country's revolutionaries and radicals. Following Alexander II's assassination, Black newspapers focused on the murderous plots of revolutionaries. The *Sentinel's* article "The Murdered Czar" gave an in-depth analysis of the successful assassination plot.[91] Two months later, the paper described how "the Nihilists are encouraging the peasants, with the view of bringing on a conflict with the civil and military authorities. The St. Petersburg police are unearthing fresh Nihilist plots […] the city is honeycombed with mines."[92] In 1895, the *Washington Bee* described how hundreds were killed in a Nihilist attack on Russian barracks.[93] Many of the articles described Russia as it was presented in contemporary American fiction: a dangerous country full of radical nihilists and scheming nobles and characterized by mass persecution.[94] This sensationalist coverage helped sell papers, but it also demonstrated the more conservative nature of the new Black press and, by emphasizing the chaos, delegitimized the Russian government.

Black coverage of Russia became more sensationalist following the Revolution of 1905. On January 28, 1905, "The Russian Revolt" headlined the front page of the *Cleveland Gazette*.[95] As the year progressed, Black newspapers featured headlines like "Day of Bloodshed in Russia" and "Now White Terror."[96] In 1906, the Wisconsin Weekly Advocate claimed that "there must be thousands of bombs in Russia alone—all intended for the reaping of a bloody harvest."[97] Simultaneously, the Black press attacked Tsar Nicholas II's efforts to regain control and stave off the state's collapse. In April 1906, the *Washington Bee* published an article that argued "the council of the empire and the Duma are foredoomed to a disagreeable struggle."[98] Four months later, the *Washington Bee* attacked Pyotr Stolypin, the authoritarian Russian prime minister, stating that "little doubt now exists that Stolypin is a reactionary and that he is distrusted by the progressive

[90] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor,* 328.

[91] "The Murdered Czar."

[92] "Foreign News."

[93] "300 Russian Soldiers Killed," *Washington Bee,* August 24, 1895.

[94] Choi Chatterjee, "Transnational Romance, Terror, and Heroism: Russia in American Popular Fiction, 1860-1917," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, no. 3 (2008), 762.

[95] "The Russian Revolt," *Cleveland Gazette*, January 28, 1905.

[96] "Day of Bloodshed in Russia," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate,* December 21, 1905, and "Now White Terror," *Savannah Tribune*, December 23, 1905.

[97] "Anarchy's Deadly Bombs," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, July 19, 1906.

[98] "Future Not Bright," *Washington Bee,* April 28, 1906.

element."[99] To Portland's *New Age,* "the establishment of parliament government in countries accustomed to autocracy is not easy. Russia is having trouble over the problem."[100] In this coverage, Black newspapers emphasized Russia's instability, the Tsar's inability to effectively combat it, and the state's strong-arm tactics, thereby signaling the need for more significant reform.

Black newspapers continued to attack the Russian government during World War I. Scholar William Jordan argues that during the war Black newspapers were paradoxically divided between "democratic advocacy and nationalistic loyalty."[101] While America did not enter the war until 1917, the Black press preemptively voiced support for the Allied war effort but criticized Russia for its war effort. Throughout the war, Black newspapers thoroughly documented the martial failures of Russia. In 1915, the *Cleveland Gazette* reported that the "Russians are in full retreat from Hungary."[102] In a 1917 article, the *New York Age* wished that "Russia had been able to maintain a defensive, to say nothing of an offensive."[103] In Russia's failures, the newspapers found an avenue to criticize Russian autocracy while still echoing support for the allied cause. In August 1914, the *Savannah Tribune* asked "what if the Russia people, sick of war and enormous taxes, should demand liberty through the substitution for absolutism of real representative government."[104] In 1917, the *New York Age*'s summary of Russia's war effort blamed the Tsar's government for the army's failures.[105]

When the Tsarist government fell in February 1917, Black newspapers felt vindicated for their previous coverage. After Tsar Nicholas II abdicated his throne in early march, the *Savannah Tribune* published glowing praise of the new state, calling the revolt "inevitable."[106] The *Washington Bee* described the "care" taken by the February revolutionaries.[107] For the *New York Age*, even the Provisional Government, a self-selected group of leading businessmen and bureaucrats, was a better democracy than America.[108] Newspaper editors, working with incomplete, third-hand reportage of a chaotic, muddled year in Russia fell back to praise of any sign of true reform. But this tone was not universal. In June, the *Kansas City Advocate* declared that "anarchy is spreading in Russia" and that "the revolution in Rusia has wrecked the 1917 campaign for the allies."[109] In December, after the fall of the Provisional Government, the Fort Scott *Messenger* asserted that the Bolsheviks were agents of Germany and the central powers.[110] In

[99] "New Premier of Russia," *Washington Bee,* August 25, 1906.
[100] "Topics of the Times," *New Age*, February 9, 1907.
[101] Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, 40.
[102] "Russians Retreat," *Cleveland Gazette,* May 8, 1915.
[103] "Japan's Position Among the Allies," *New York Age*, November 22, 1917.
[104] "The Three Fates of War; Autocrats of Europe May Lose Their Thrones," *Savannah Tribune*, August 15, 1914.
[105] "The Russian Collapse," *New York Age*, August 9, 1917.
[106] "Russ Autocracy Falls," *Savannah Tribune*, March 31, 1917.
[107] "Latest Russian Revolt and Previous Uprising," *Washington Bee*, April 7, 1917.
[108] "The Russian Collapse."
[109] "Russian Anarchy Fast Spreading; New Rule is Set Up in Kronstadt," *Kansas City Advocate*, June 8, 1917.
[110] "Germans Advise Bolsheviki," *Messenger*, December 7, 1917.

the midst of this chaos, there was little consensus about anything other than the late Tsarist state being a disaster.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Black newspapers' coverage of Russia was incredibly dynamic. In its earliest iterations, the Black press reflected the dominant portrayals of Russia in western Europe and white America. Russia was a monolith, the world's most barbaric country, and a place with a system of labor analogous to slavery. The early Black press used these perceptions to advocate abolition, hoping that negative stereotypes of Russia would be evocative for their white readers. After the abolition of serfdom in Russia, however, coverage shifted. Russia was no longer the most barbaric country, and Tsar Alexander II became an enlightened despot working in the Christian spirit. Black newspapers continued to praise Russia as they grew and evolved following the Civil War. But, during the Gilded Age, as Black newspapers shifted northward and towards a more conservative tone, coverage shifted. The papers gradually disassociated from Russian serfs and increasingly covered the persecuted Jewish Russians and Poles. As the Russian state collapsed in the late 19th century and early 20th century, the Black press condemned the Tsar and called for reform.

Importantly, these shifts were reflective of the comparisons that Black newspapers drew between the United States and Tsarist Russia. The first generation of Black journalists looked to Russia, and unlike many contemporary observers, found systems of labor and government that they could relate to. Then, for a brief time following the abolition of slavery and serfdom, the Black press made positive comparisons between the United States and Russia, two temporary and flawed beacons of freedom and reform. During the Gilded Age and the fall of the Tsarist state, the newspapers shifted their attention from Russian serfdom to the persecution of Russia's Jewish and Polish population when that oppression became more recognizable. These connections built on each other over time. The Black press continued to compare the United States to Russia, and the next generation of Black activists found those comparisons as well. When W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, and other 20th century Black activists looked to the USSR, they were not reflecting on a blank canvas, a nation that sprung from the earth devoid of history and context. They saw the USSR through the past comparisons between the United States and Russia, making their observations more complex and impactful than previously thought.

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