

The History They Don't Teach You in School: America and Russia Have a Long History of Collaboration

Relationship Can Be Rekindled Today, Even in These Darkest of Times

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There was a time in the intelligence and diplomatic communities of the United States, when “intelligence” required study of the history and culture of other nations, and their historical relationship with our own country. The current conflict between the United States and Russia, dangerously escalating toward a potential World War III, begs for such an approach.

History shows that, from the period of America’s independence struggle to the time of President John F. Kennedy, American statesmen sought and achieved alliances with Russia (including in the Soviet period) in their common interest. In each case these statesmen were leading representatives of the American System of political economy.

These statesmen saw a common interest with leading Russians in developing their huge land masses through collaboration in scientific and technological ventures, raising the standard of living and conditions of life for their populations and assuring world peace.

Their successes, although constantly under assault and significantly sabotaged, were crucial in creating conditions for progress worldwide—as they intended. The stated commitments of the [American System](#) of Economics—advancing the productive powers of labor, scientific and technological progress, unleashing humankind’s creative powers of mind to “garden” the earth and the universe—led them to find common cause with Russian leaders who, for all their political differences with the United States, shared those aspirations.

In other words, collaboration with Russia on a principled basis is an American System tradition.

The three prime examples I will deal with here are Presidents John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In each case, their determination to develop our

nation led them to seek alliances with Russia which had lasting positive effects.

While this article, a version of which was first published in 2017, is primarily addressed to an American audience, I believe it is also quite relevant for Russian readers as well.

First, Some Crucial Background

While it is beyond the scope of this article to deal in depth with the genesis of the pro-progress factions in both the United States and Russia, a few significant historical aspects should be noted.

The first was the influence of the great German philosopher/scientist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in both nations. The universal thinker Leibniz (1646-1716) headed an international network of scientists and statesmen who devoted themselves to building institutions that would serve the general welfare of their nations. He pioneered discoveries in economics as well as physical science, promoting the development of heat-based machines and scientific academies to foster such scientific work. He looked beyond ideology to find the higher principles upon which nations could be developed, as well as collaborate.

How was Leibniz connected to Russia and America? In Russia, he became an adviser to Czar Peter the Great, from which position he inspired the establishment of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (1724), reshaped the structure of the Russian government, and promoted the remarkable development of industry in Russia under that Czar's reign.

The institutions he created, especially the still-existent network of Russian academies of science, were crucial in producing the later collaborators with the United States. In America, Leibniz's scientific and philosophical input came through the leaders of both the Massachusetts Bay Colony (such as Cotton Mather) and Philadelphia (led by William Penn's secretary James Logan and the great American philosopher/statesman Benjamin Franklin).

Leibniz also had a more indirect influence through his follower Emmerich de Vattel, a Swiss thinker whose writing on statecraft and international law had a major influence on Alexander Hamilton, among others.

A second major precondition for the policies of the three American System presidents we mention here was the critical role played by Russia in the formation of the League of Armed Neutrality, the 1780 pact among Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Prussia, Portugal and the Holy Roman Empire to defend neutral shipping against the British Empire's assaults on the French-American alliance in the American Revolutionary War. This action, while showing no political affinity of Empress Catherine the Great with the American republican cause as such, established a strong sense of sympathy and appreciation from the American side toward the Russians.

The third significant element involved the spread of American System economics to Russia. As early as 1792, Russian diplomatic circles were seeking access to Hamilton's *Report on Manufactures*, submitted to Congress the previous year. That report was then published in Russian in 1807, in a translation sponsored by the Ministry of Finance, with an introduction by Russian educator V.F. Malinovsky, who wrote, "The similarity of American United Provinces with Russia appears both in the expanse of the land, climate and natural conditions, in the size of population disproportionate to the space, and in the general youthfulness of various generally useful institutions; therefore all the rules, remarks and

means proposed here are suitable for our country.”

The influence of Hamilton’s outlook persisted among Russian government circles, enhanced by the interventions of German adherents of the American System, like followers of Friedrich List, and finally coming dramatically into fruition in the late 19th century under Czars Alexander II and Alexander III.

We now turn to the first instance of documented close collaboration between Russian and American elites, that of John Quincy Adams.

John Quincy Adams and Russia

John Quincy Adams was the first ambassador to Russia, following the opening of diplomatic relations in 1807.

While in St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia at that time, he conducted a years-long dialogue on affairs of state, foreign relations and trade with Russian Chancellor Count Nikolay Rumyantsev. Rumyantsev’s devotion to American ideas and interests was such that, when he was ousted from office in 1813, he told Adams: “I could say that my heart belongs to America, and were it not for my age and infirmities, I would go now to that country.”

Image on the right: John Quincy Adams [Source: whitehouse.gov]



Rumyantsev interceded to stop Denmark from aiding the British against America in the War of 1812, and even proposed to join the United States in its anti-British trade policy with South America—although this plan was nixed by the Czar.

In his subsequent career as Secretary of State (1817-25) and then President (1825-29), John Quincy Adams found his potential partners in Russia to be less amenable—Russia having acquiesced to the British and Austrian-engineered post-Napoleonic Concert of Europe at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, but subsequent developments showed that the pro-American strain in Russian institutions was not dead.

For example, cooperation continued among engineering circles, particularly those involved in launching Russia’s railways. Engineer Pavel Melnikov was sent by Czar Nicholas I to the United States in 1839 to meet all the American railroad builders (the era of mass expansion

of rail and canals began under Adams' administration of 1825-1829).

His success is shown by the fact that he ended up hiring American engineers to help build the first major Russian railway, one from St. Petersburg to Moscow. World-famous railroad engineer George Washington Whistler ended up going to Russia to consult on the project; he died there in 1849, leaving a legacy of cooperation that lasted through the end of the century.

Abraham Lincoln's Alliance with Russia

When Abraham Lincoln entered the office of the Presidency in the spring of 1861, Russian Czar Alexander II had just the day before abolished serfdom, which had held 20 million Russians in bondage to the land and its owners.



Czar Alexander II at his desk. [Source: thoughtco.com]

Czar Alexander had been classically educated and was steeped in the ideas of the pro-American German poet of freedom, Friedrich Schiller. He also took power during the devastating British assault on Russia in the Crimean War (1853-56) and was painfully aware of the vulnerability which a society based on serfdom represented. (The United States supported Russia against the British in this war, although not with soldiers.) The new czar was determined to modernize Russia and, throughout his reign, which lasted until his assassination in 1881, encouraged and backed international collaboration that would help develop his nation.

Lincoln appointed the Kentucky anti-slavery politician Cassius Clay as his ambassador to Russia. From his post in St. Petersburg, Clay spread the word of the American System, especially the work of Lincoln's chief economist, Henry Carey.

From the very start of the Civil War, the Russians expressed the "most cordial sympathy" for the Lincoln government. Foreign Minister Alexander Gorchakov wrote a highly publicized note to President Lincoln on July 10, 1861, in which he declared the Czar's "sincere wishes" for U.S. success.

This was not just a sentiment. It was followed on October 29, 1862, by a formal Russian pledge never to act against the United States, and to oppose attempts of others to do so.

The “maintenance of the American Union as one indivisible nation” was the Russian objective. It was also backed up by Russian refusal to join a British-inspired “mediation” effort between North and South, which would, in effect, have resulted in recognition of the Confederacy as a separate nation.



Russian naval officers during their trip to the United States during the Civil War. [Source: americansystemnow.com]

The highlight of the close relations between Russia and the United States in this period was the deployment of the Russian fleet to both New York City and San Francisco in the fall of 1863. While these visits to “ports of call” were not explicitly intended as participation in the fighting (Russia insisted it was actually neutral in the Civil War), they provided enormous moral support for the embattled Union forces and Presidency. And, although they never had to carry them out, the Russian fleet in San Francisco had orders to defend U.S. forts from attacks by the Confederates, should they occur.



Crew of the Russian frigate *Oslaba* while docked in New York harbor in 1863. [Source: usrussiarelations.org]

The Russian fleet was greeted in lavish style in New York City, with parades and a Grand Ball. When it went on to the port of Alexandria, Virginia, in December, Mrs. Lincoln herself joined the celebrations. San Francisco also put out the welcome mat, although in less lavish style. The fleets stayed in American waters until the spring of 1864.



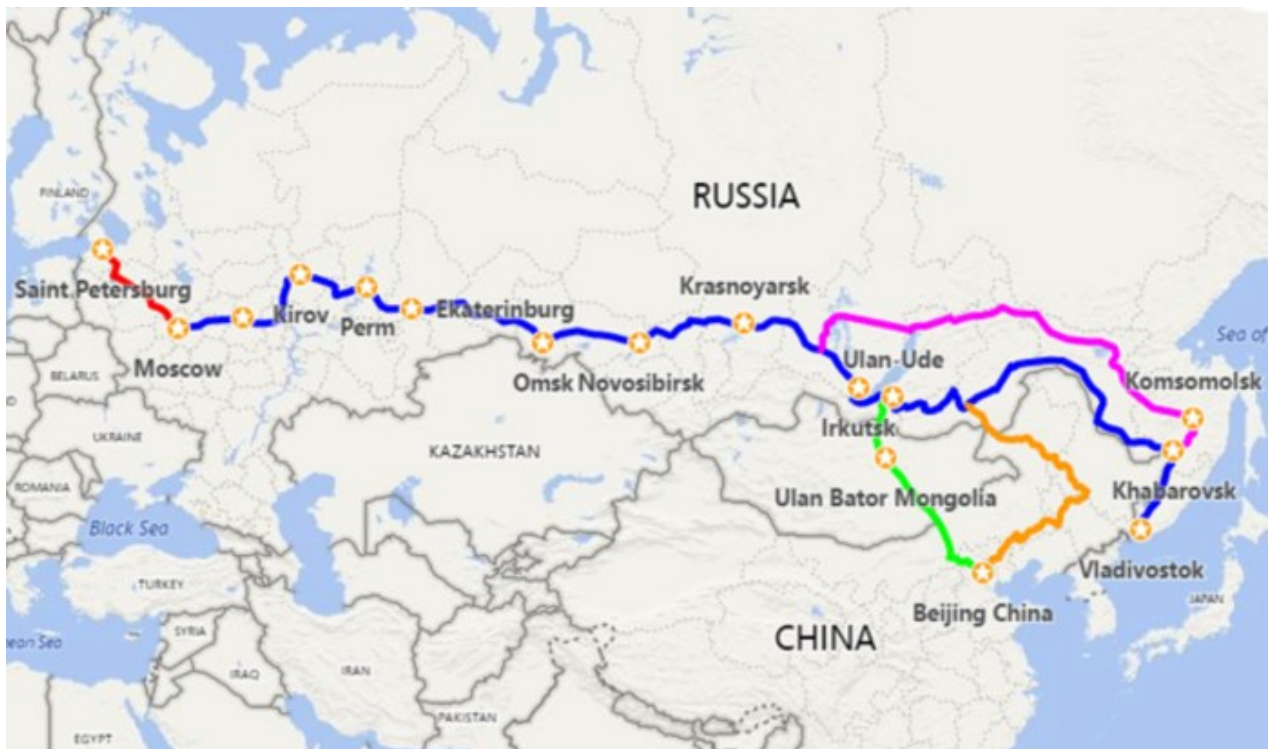
Cartoon depicting Abraham Lincoln and Russian Czar Alexander II with fighting all around them.

[Source: usrussiarelations.org]

Why was Russia so sympathetic to Lincoln's United States? A pamphlet put out by the U.S. Naval Historical Foundation in 1969 cites the agreement between the two governments on getting rid of slavery, maintaining the Union, and supporting domestic manufactures through the protective tariff. The collaboration continued after Lincoln's death, with visits to Russia by American military leaders, public figures, and engineers. The United States sent a naval force to Russia in 1866 after an assassination attempt against Czar Alexander II failed, and was greeted with a grand celebration. "May these two flags in peaceful embrace be thus united forever," wrote Admiral Gustavus Vasa Fox, who led the 1866 U.S. naval force.

The Russians and the Americans saw their alliance as a stepping-stone to cooperation in economic development. In his Annual Address to Congress in 1864, President Lincoln touted the work under way on an overland telegraph linking the American and Asian continents across the Bering Strait. This link would be followed by the construction of the rail route, the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was accomplished under the leadership of Count Sergey Witte, an advocate of an American System approach.

Witte saw the completion of the railroad (1904) as "one of those world events that usher in new epochs in the history of nations and not infrequently bring about the radical upheaval of established economic relations between states." He was thinking in particular of providing the basis for "recognition of tangible mutual interests in the field of the worldwide economic activity of mankind," and the opportunity for "more direct relations with the North American states." The railway would disclose a "solidarity of political interests" between Russia and the United States," Witte wrote.



The route of Witte's Trans-Siberian railroad, built with the aid of the United States. [Source: americansystemnow.org]

Among the significant Russian interlocutors with American scientists and industrialists was

world-famous Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, then a member of the St. Petersburg Academy and government consultant, who visited the United States during the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Mendeleev used his time in the U.S. to work with Thomas Edison, study the oil industry, and learn about the economics of America's developing industries.

He was already familiar with the American System of Economics through his travels and time in Germany (through the List circles), but clearly developed them further during this trip. In 1891 he published a major piece on protective tariffs, which reflects the influence of his American collaborators.

Not to be overlooked in the 19th century, collaboration between the U.S. American System advocates and Russia was the Russian sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867. In Russia, supporters of the sale argued that Russia and the United States were natural allies in the Pacific Basin and that, if Great Britain were to try to seize "Russian America" (Alaska), the U.S. would be in a better position to defend it than Russia would. The British, for their part, were noticeably alarmed at the closeness of Russian-American collaboration.

FDR's Policy Toward Russia

It was the United States that broke diplomatic relations with Russia (then within the Soviet Union) after the Bolshevik Revolution (1917). In early 1918, the Wilson administration invaded the country with six other nations in an attempt to restore czarist rule, but failed.

Though business activity certainly continued through the 1920s, official diplomatic recognition for the Soviet Union did not occur until Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared it in November 1933. FDR sidestepped the State Department professionals and braved significant public opposition in making this decision, but he refused to be dissuaded. The agreement was consummated in the Oval Office through personal diplomacy between FDR and Commissar of Foreign Affairs Maxim Litvinov.

At the time FDR made this decision, all the other major powers had diplomatic relations with the Soviets, and he felt the United States could only lose by maintaining its isolation, commercially and strategically. Renewed relations were not easy, but when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, FDR moved immediately in support. He sent his personal emissary, Harry Hopkins, to Moscow to meet with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

This was followed by an official exchange of notes in August, in which FDR pledged support. Soon afterwards, the Soviets sent Washington a list of the supplies they urgently needed in order to carry out their defense. Despite continued opposition, FDR decided to use the Lend-Lease legislation, which had passed in March of that year (and was being used to supply Great Britain), to provide material support to the Soviets.



This statue stands in Fairbanks, Alaska, as a testament to U.S.-Soviet collaboration in World War II.

[Source: americansystemnow.com]

Ultimately, the United States provided 250,000 tons of materiel, ranging from planes to tanks to foodstuffs, to the Soviet Union to aid in the war effort. The physical aid played a critical role in keeping the Russian resistance going. Meanwhile, FDR carried out personal diplomacy—through both Hopkins and Vice President Henry Wallace—to seek to establish a relationship with Stalin.

This was finally accomplished at the Tehran Conference in 1943, with the aid of humor at the expense of Winston Churchill. When Stalin burst out laughing at FDR's ribbing of Churchill, FDR knew he had succeeded. FDR also went to bat against Churchill's constant attempts to sabotage the invasion of France, the so-called second front, which the Soviets desperately needed in order to divert the Nazis from their mayhem in Russia.

FDR was convinced that patience and good will would make the Soviet Union a good partner in the post-war arrangements to keep world peace. As he said in Tehran, "we have proved... that the varying ideas of our nations can come together in a harmonious whole, moving unitedly for the common good of ourselves and of the world." He had devised a plan for the United Nations that would recognize the Soviet Union as the great power it was.



Henry Wallace, FDR's Vice President, third from left in front row, with Russian guides in Moscow in 1944.
[Source: rbth.com]

The Soviets had borne the brunt of the Nazi onslaught, losing some 27 million people during the war. Had FDR lived into the post-war period, respect for that sacrifice and for the Soviet people would have dictated U.S. policy, and potentially cut the legs out from under the British initiative to go straight from the war against the Nazis to war against the Soviet Union.

The British, for their part, concentrated on destroying Soviet-American collaboration, which they considered a threat to their imperial interests. With Roosevelt dead, they succeeded, and the Cold War ensued. The American System's albeit rhetorical posture to sovereignty, international relations, and progress was increasingly undermined, while the dangers to world peace escalated.

The JFK Echo

President John F. Kennedy attempted to continue the FDR/American System tradition in his brief presidency, including on the question of relations with the Soviet Union. Kennedy's decision to establish personal communication with Soviet leader Khrushchev upon taking office, played a critical role in allowing the Cuban Missile Crisis to be defused.

One of the most striking statements of Kennedy's policy break with the Cold War mentality came in his June 10, 1963, American University [speech](#), where he tackled the question of achieving world peace, and proposed the talks that ultimately resulted in the test-ban treaty. But, more interesting to us today than the final result is the approach which Kennedy took to dealing with the superpower which had—from Cuba to Berlin and elsewhere—become "the enemy." I quote at some length:

Some say that it is useless to speak of world peace or world law or world disarmament—and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it. But I also believe that we must reexamine our own attitude—as individuals and as a Nation—for our attitude is as essential as theirs. And every graduate of this school, every thoughtful citizen who despairs of war and wishes to bring peace, should begin by looking inward—by examining his own attitude toward the possibilities of peace, toward the Soviet Union, toward the course of the cold war and toward freedom and peace here at home.

First: Let us examine our attitude toward peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable—that mankind is doomed—that we are gripped by forces we cannot control.

We need not accept that view. Our problems are man-made—therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable—and we believe they can do it again. ...

Second: Let us reexamine our attitude toward the Soviet Union. It is discouraging to think that their leaders may actually believe what their propagandists write. It is discouraging to read a recent authoritative Soviet text on Military Strategy and find, on page after page, wholly baseless and incredible claims—such as the allegation that “American imperialist circles are preparing to unleash different types of wars” ...

[I]t is sad to read these Soviet statements—to realize the extent of the gulf between us. But it is also a warning—a warning to the American people not to fall into the same trap as the Soviets, not to see only a distorted and desperate view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats.

No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans, we find communism profoundly repugnant as a negation of personal freedom and dignity. But we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements—in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage.

Among the many traits the peoples of our two countries have in common, none is stronger than our mutual abhorrence of war. Almost unique, among the major world powers, we have never been at war with each other. And no nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union suffered in the course of the Second World War. At least 20 million lost their lives. Countless millions of homes and farms were burned or sacked. A third of the nation's territory, including nearly two thirds of its industrial base, was turned into a wasteland—a loss equivalent to the devastation of this country east of Chicago.

Today, should total war ever break out again—no matter how—our two countries would become the primary targets....

So, let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct attention to our common

interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.

Third: Let us reexamine our attitude toward the cold war, remembering that we are not engaged in a debate, seeking to pile up debating points. We are not here distributing blame or pointing the finger of judgment. We must deal with the world as it is, and not as it might have been had the history of the last 18 years been different.

We must, therefore, persevere in the search for peace in the hope that constructive changes within the Communist bloc might bring within reach solutions which now seem beyond us. We must conduct our affairs in such a way that it becomes in the Communists' interest to agree on a genuine peace. Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy—or of a collective death-wish for the world.

The leaders of the Soviet Union were so impressed with this speech that they reprinted it in their press. The negotiations on the test-ban treaty did take place and succeed. Kennedy himself followed up with an offer on September 20 for joint work with the Soviets on space exploration.

What Will the Answer Be?

Kennedy was right. The current breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations is “man-made, and reversible.” The key is to revive those American System principles on the highest level, for they define the common interests which both nations (among others) have in cooperation for improving the lives of all people on earth through scientific and technological progress. Our history augurs it. Our future demands it.

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*Nancy Spannaus is the manager of the blog [americansystemnow](#), which features many historical and topical articles on the political economy of the United States. She is also the author of the book *Hamilton Versus Wall Street: The Core Principles of the American System of Economics*, available [here](#). Nancy can be reached at nancyspannaus@comcast.net.*

Featured image: Statue of Abraham Lincoln and Czar Alexander II in Moscow that commemorates U.S.-Russian friendship in that period. [Source: [twitter.com](#)]

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