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The Black Press and Late Imperial Russia

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I: Introduction

When W.E.B. Du Bois travelled to the Soviet Union in 1926, he wrote that he felt "astonishment and wonder at the revelation of Russia."[1] He went further, arguing that whether "the present Russian Government succeeds or not, the thing that it is trying to do must and will be done sometime if the world continues to progress."[2] Du Bois was not alone. To contemporary Black Americans, the Soviet experiment provided hope, a glimpse of a country that had seemingly progressed past the racist oppression existing in the United States. After visiting Moscow and St. Petersburg, Claude McKay, renowned poet of the Harlem Renaissance, declared that "Russia is prepared and waiting to receive couriers and heralds of goodwill and interracial understanding for the Negro race."[3] Historian Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore found that "many black Southerners imagined the USSR as the one place in the world free of racial prejudice" and a country that had "legislated the social equality of the races."[4] These perceptions are, however, often discussed without context. While Black activists' views on the USSR are well-documented, there are few studies of how Black Americans saw Russia before the revolution. This paper details the evolution of Black activist thought on Russia, using Black and abolitionist newspapers to trace the shifting opinions and rhetoric regarding the Tsarist state from 1827 to 1917.

This paper also explores the ways in which many Black Americans conceptualized their own oppression and the United States as a whole. For centuries, 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

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[1] Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (Rutgers University Press, 2008), 49.
[2] Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, 49.
[3] Ibid., 23.
[4] Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 32, 31.

influence. But these 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 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 paper argues that these connections drove Black attitudes toward late Imperial Russia, making Black accounts of Russia reflective of circumstances in the United States, Russia, and the Black press itself.

This paper is structured chronologically, tracking how the Black press viewed Russia over time. Part I covers the first half of the 19th century. 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, backwards and un-European. Black newspapers would use this stereotype to advocate abolition, comparing a universally reviled Russia to the United States. Part II then tracks how this coverage changed after Tsar Alexander II announced his plan to end serfdom in 1856. Suddenly Russia became a role model to the Black press, a country that had ended its forced labor system. Black newspapers showered both Russia and Alexander II with praise. After abolition and the expansion of the Black press, this coverage expanded and emphasized the new connections between United States and Russia. Part III then discusses how this praise became condemnation once again in the late 19th century. In response to 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.

I: Russia in the Early Black Press

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."[5] In Russia, peasants became serfs over the span of centuries as their movements and freedoms were gradually restricted by Tsars and feudal lords.[6] In the Americas, colonial ambitions led to the expansion of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the codification of race-based Chattel Slavery. Kolchin argues that "during the eighteenth century noblemen and peasants came to inhabit such different worlds that the distinction between them seemed as inherent as that between white and black."[7] 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 study of post-abolition media in Russia and America, posits that "subsequent [academic] comparisons of Russian serfdom and American slavery have assessed the similarities and differences between the political, economic, demographic, and social aspects of the two systems."[8] But importantly, these comparisons also existed in the 19th century. 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

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[5] Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Harvard University Press, 1987), 1.
[6] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 10.
[7] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 40.
[8] Amanda Brickell Bellows, *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 3.

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. Martin Malia's *Russia Under the Western Eyes* is perhaps the most important study of perceptions of Russia through the modern era. To Malia, "Russia has at different times been demonized or divinized by Western opinion less because of her real role in Europe than because of the fears and frustrations, or the hopes and aspirations, generated within European society by its own domestic problems."[9] Further, he argues that "the Left and the Right, the rationalists and the romantics, or in another sphere, the English, the French, the Germans and the Poles, have simultaneously perceived the same Russia in different ways."[10] By the 19th century, abolitionists agreed with the general consensus of western Europe and white America: Russia was a largely uncivilized country, predisposed to tyranny and barbarity.

First-hand reports of Russia became popular in western Europe starting in the mid-16th century, and these reports colored perceptions of Russia for the succeeding centuries. Sigismund von Herberstein, a German ambassador to Muscovy, released the *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii* in 1549. Herberstein's account was read widely in western Europe, and as Felicity Stout points out that "Herberstein's Russia was tyrannical and brutal, slavish, excessive, and morally destitute."[11] Samuel Baron agrees, further arguing that "Herberstein's implicit frame of

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[9] Martin Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.
[10] Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 8.
[11] Felicity Stout, "'The Countrey is too Colde, the People Beastly Be': Elizabethan Representations of Russia," *Literature Compass* 10, no. 6 (2013): 483.

reference, of course, was the Western societies he knew, where, for all their diversity, nothing was to be found like the extraordinary power of the ruler […] and the seemingly universal servitude in Muscovy."[12] Later accounts of Russia followed the same general trend. English interactions with Russia grew drastically 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."[13] These early depictions of Russia fundamentally shaped the views of western Europe in the coming centuries. Malia argues that "throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans continued to relegate Muscovy almost to the same alien and Asiatic category as the Ottoman Turks."[14] According to historian David C. Engerman, "European writers assessed Russia's political and economic potential in terms of national character. Emphasizing traits like laziness and fatalism, these authors explained Russia's backwardness in terms of its inhabitants' nature."[15] Further, he states that "by the revolutionary era of the late eighteenth century, the terms for understanding Russia were established: Russians were a 'people born to slavery,' with little prospect of anything else."[16]

These negative portrayals of Russia were the foundation of American perceptions. Negative depictions of the country dominated books, schools, plays, and the news. Engerman argues that "writers in Victorian America suggested that Russian character was a product of its

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[12] Samuel H. Baron, "European Images of Muscovy," *History Today* 36, no. 9 (1986): 19.
[13] Richard Chancellor, "The Voyage of Richard Chancellor," in *Rude and Barbarous Kingdom,* ed. by L.E. Berry and R.O. Crummey (University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 21, 22.
[14] Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 17
[15] 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 (Taylor & Francis, 2012), 16.
[16] Engerman, "Studying Our Nearest Oriental Neighbor," 12.

despotism. Politics made character, not vice versa."[17] 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 did not attack "the basic assumptions of Victorianism, which would have been part of their own intellectual makeup […] agreeing that the world was made up of civilized and uncivilized people."[18] 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.

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."[19] The *Freedom's Journal*, the first Black newspaper in America, was founded in New York in March 1827.[20] Frederick Douglass founded the *North Star*, the first of his several papers, in 1847.[21] In its earliest issues, the *Freedom's Journal* emphasized Russia's tyranny. In an editorial, the paper stated that Russia "was hardly considered a civilized power" before the 18th century.[22] Often the paper explicitly echoed white abolitionists. Throughout its first year, the

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[17] David C. Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development*, (Harvard University Press, 2003), 29.
[18] William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 22.
[19] 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.
[20] Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920,* 21.
[21] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Park, 1882), 324.
[22] "Mutability of Human Affairs," *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.

Freedom's Journal repeatedly published a letter written by English abolitionist Adam Hodgson on "the comparative expense of Free and Slave Labour" that compared American slavery to Russian serfdom and provided an economic argument against both.[23] 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 *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."[24] To the *North Star*, America was "more despotic than Russia, more barbarous than the chieftaid of Barbary, she establishes ferocity by federal law."[25] In Samuel E. Cornish's *Colored American*, the Tsar was the foremost example of the "principle of despotism."[26] 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.[27] 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."[28] In July 1855, the abolitionist *National Anti-Slavery Standard* proclaimed that the American federal government "will not be the owner of slaves, as the Autocrat of Russia is."[29]

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

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[23] Adam Hodgson, "A Letter," *Freedom's Journal*, August 10, 1827.
[24] "Human Hydrophobia," *North Star*, December 8, 1848.
[25] Theodore Parker, "From Parker's Letter on Slavery," *North Star*, May 5, 1848.
[26] William Whipper, "An Address on Non-Resistance to Offensive Aggression," *Colored American,* September 30, 1837.
[27] "Another Rivet in the Fetter of the Slave," *North Star*, October 19, 1849.
[28] "Literary Notices," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* September 29, 1854.
[29] "Safe At Last," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, July 14, 1855.

Power. Eric Foner, renowned American political historian, found that contemporary "Republicans also believed in the existence of a conspiratorial 'Slave Power' which had seized control of the federal government and was attempting to pervert the Constitution."[30] Further, Foner claimed 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."[31] 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."[32] 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."[33] 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."[34] By tying 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 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. As Martin Malia argued, Russia was a prism for western perception. People in Western Europe

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[30] Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.
[31] Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men,* 102.
[32] "Doings in South Carolina," *North Star*, October 12, 1849.
[33] "The Congress Fugitive Bill," *North Star*, June 13, 1850.
[34] "Poetry and Truth," *North Star*, April 21, 1854.

and America looked to Russia, and their conclusions were mere reflections of their own beliefs and biases. In Russia, the early Black press found a close reflection of the United States and, as a result, a way to critique slavery and Southern tyranny. Yet this reflection 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.

II: Emancipation and Abolition

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."[35] The Tsar believed emancipation and economic reform were necessities. During the war, Russia's industrial limitations and poor infrastructure hindered their forces, signaling the need for massive societal changes.[36] Serfdom was no longer an asset to the empire, it was a burden. By 1861, Russia had fully abolished serfdom.[37] 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 1856, Black coverage of Russia shifted dramatically in response to events in both America and Russia. The empire was no longer the foremost example of tyranny, and the Tsar

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[35] N.G.O. Pereira, "Alexander II and the Decision to Emancipate the Russian Serfs, 1855-61," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 22, no. 1 (1980): 104.
[36] David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia: Inner Eurasia from the Mongol Empire to Today* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 241.
[37] Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia*, 244.

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."[38] 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."[39] 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."[40] 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 empire of Russia." [41] In November 1862, New Orleans's *L'Union* stated that the Russian serfs' "condition sociale s'améliore d'une manière merveilleuse."[42] 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."[43]

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[38] "Serfdom in Russia," *Daily Creole*, August 2, 1856.
[39] "Progress in Russia," *Daily Creole*, August 11, 1856, and "The Emperor of Russia," *Daily Creole*, November 11, 1856.
[40] Armstrong and Van Rensselaer, "Old School D. D's and Slavery," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* January 21, 1859.
[41] "Lecture on Slavery," *Weekly Anglo-African*, February 16, 1861.
[42] "Considerable," *L'Union*, November 5, 1862. Translated as "social condition improves in a marvellous manner."
[43] "France and Her 'Infant'," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 19, 1856, and "Slavery and Serfdom in Russia," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, September 6, 1856.

This shifting coverage also 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.[44] Berardi and Segady found that "between April 1865 and January 1866, twelve newspapers were started […] by 1890, the number of African-American papers had increased tremendously to 575."[45] Further, as the papers transitioned from serving a largely white audience to a largely Black one, they fundamentally changed. Charlotte G. O'Kelly argues that the papers' "abolitionist content was largely replaced with more varied subjects, including art, literature, and science."[46] This changed how Russia was mentioned in most Black newspapers. 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 an important 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 rapid fluctuations of the reconstruction-era Black press. According to Emma Lou Thornbrough, no Black paper "founded before 1880 survived until 1914."[47] But during Reconstruction, this increasingly large and diverse press continued to find Russia important.

In the years immediately following the abolition of slavery, this new Black press emphasized the strange new kinship between the United States and Russia. 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

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[44] Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, 24.
[45] Berardi and Segady, "The Development of African-American Newspapers in the American West," 97.
[46] Charlotte G. O'Kelly, "Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement: Their Historical Relationship, 1827-1945," *Phylon* 43, no. 1 (1982): 2.
[47] Emma Lou Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers, 1880-1914," *The Business History Review* 40, no. 4 (1966): 468.

enemy to emancipation; all classes owe to that all their liberty."[48] 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."[49] These germs were transmitted by Black newspapers. 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."[50] 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 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."[51]

This new tone was also present in the newspapers' opinions of Tsar Alexander II. During this new period of coverage, 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."[52] Two years later, the *New Orleans Tribune* reported admiringly that "the Czar of Russia left a million of francs for the poor of Paris."[53] In January 1872, the *New National Era* wrote that the Tsar "has always been our

[48] "Prince Gortchakoff's Speech at the Banquet to the American Delegation," *New Orleans Tribune*, October 3, 1866.
[49] "Prince Gortchakoff's Speech at the Banquet to the American Delegation."
[50] "Letter from Paris," *New Orleans Tribune*, September 12, 1866.
[51] "The Curse Removed," *Elevator*, June 26, 1868.
[52] "Truth vs. Error," *New Orleans Tribune*, October 10, 1865.
[53] "From Europe," *New Orleans Tribune*, June 29, 1867.

friend."[54] 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. When discussing the prospect of the Brazillian 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."[55] 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."[56] 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 which a similar act of despotism would be productive of good to the inhabitants."[57]

After Tsar Alexander II's assassination by radical Nihilists 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."[58] Two weeks later, the paper compared Alexander to "the immortal Lincoln" despite his "faults."[59] The Tsar's obituary in the New Jersey *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

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[54] J.F. Dezendorf, "Gen. Grant Our Next President," *New National Era*, January 26, 1872. Importantly, this paper was distinct from the *National Era*. Whereas the *National Era* was a prominent paper for the early Republican party, the *New National Era* was founded by Frederick Douglass in Washington D.C.
[55] "Emancipation in Brazil," *New National Era,* November 9, 1871.
[56] "Nicholas and Alexander," *New National Era,* October 31, 1872.
[57] "A Strange Legacy," *Elevator*, November 27, 1868.
[58] Untitled, *People's Advocate*, March 19, 1881.
[59] "From Kansas," *People's Advocate*, April 2, 1881.

become reconciled to them by attempting repressions which alienated the people. Shortly afterward the Nihilists began their operations."[60] 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 Romanoff dynasty, the *New York Globe* argued that "the history of the Russian crown-bearers is a history of violence and blood."[61] 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."[62]

These cracks were the start of a new direction for Black coverage of Russia. As the circumstances facing Black Americans, Russia, and the United States changed, Black Americans looked to Russia and saw different forms of oppression, drawing new comparisons to the United States. 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."[63] 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."[64] When the post-Reconstruction Black press looked to Russia, they could no longer praise emancipation by itself. Black American's experience in the

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[60] "The Murdered Czar," *Sentinel*, March 19, 1881.
[61] "The Bloody Romanoffs," *New York Globe*. July 2, 1883.
[62] "The Bloody Romanoffs"
[63] Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (HarperCollins, 2014), 249.
[64] Foner, A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877, 254.

late-19th century led to a re-evaluation of abolition, and with that, a re-evaluation of Russia. Just as Alexander II's death led to increased criticism of his reforms in the Black press, Reconstruction's failures led to increased criticism of the American government's efforts following the abolition of slavery.

III: Evolving Solidarity

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, disappointment over the failures of reconstruction led to a drastic re-evaluation of Russia in the Black press. At the dedication for the Washington D.C. Freedman's monument, Frederick 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."[65] In the decades following emancipation, as Black newspapers grew and reconstruction failed, a new generation of Black journalists disassociated their experience from that of the former serfs. At the same time, increased international attention to the plight of Jewish and Polish people and the efforts of Russian radicals transformed Black coverage of Russia in the late 19th century. To the Black press, Russia's redemption was short-lived, and its repression almost eternal.

Reconstruction's failures led to dramatic shifts in the Black press once again. Democrats' return to governance led to increased repression of Black Americans and the closure of many southern Black newspapers. Further, financial instability plagued even northern Black papers. The heartiest papers remaining were published in the North, in cities like Indianapolis, Cleveland, and Washington D.C., where the Black press was able to survive on the size of a

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

significant urban Black population.[66] Yet even these papers were less stable. This financial instability caused many Black newspapers to become more reliant on more conservative owners and benefactors. Emma Lou Thornbrough argues that during this period, "the life of a paper coincided with the life of" their owner.[67] 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 Indianapolis *Freeman*, one of the largest and most important Black papers of the era. The historian Willard Gatewood argues that "by the 1890s George L. Knox was generally recognized as the most prominent black citizen in Indiana."[68] 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.[69] Moreover, Black newspapers became increasingly reliant on the funds of more conservative activists like Booker T. Washington. Charlotte O'Kelly argues that "Washington had considerable power over the press" and that the Tuskegee Institute "provided and paid for news releases and advertisements. It gave several journals indirect and sometimes direct financial assistance."[70] 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*.

The Black press gradually disassociated from the plight of Russian serfs following the end of Reconstruction. After emancipation, Russian serfs faced many of the same problems as formerly enslaved Americans. Kolchin connects the plight of former serfs with sharecroppers,

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[66] Thornbrough, "American Negro Newspapers, 1880-1914," 472-474.
[67] Ibid., 473
[68] Willard Gatewood, *Slave and Freeman: The Autobiography of George L. Knox* (University of Kentucky Press, 1979), vii.
[69] "What They Said," *The Freeman*, June 11, 1892.
[70] O'Kelly, "Black Newspapers and the Black Protest Movement," 3.

describing how "new forms of dependency that provided the ex-bondsmen with at best semifreedom became the rule. Exploitation, poverty, and bitterness endured, even as the freedmen struggled to take advantage of changed condition."[71] Many former serfs were forced to buy the land they had previously cultivated, binding them with debilitating debts that resembled the cyclical debt plaguing sharecroppers. Yet to 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."[72] Other Black newspapers agreed. In 1881, the *Sentinel* bemoaned that "the serf owns the soil he tills even in despotic Russia."[73] The Indianapolis *Freeman* published a sermon that claimed the Black man is in a condition "more deplorable than that of the Russian serf."[74] 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."[75] 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 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.

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[71] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 375.
[72] "Favors the Scheme," *Plaindealer*, August 21, 1891.
[73] "Parnell's Partisans," *Sentinel*, February 26, 1881.
[74] L. A. Hagood, "Prospects for the Negro," *Freeman*, December 7, 1895.
[75] "Special from Battle Creek, Mich," *Iowa State Bystander*, October 28, 1898.

As the Black press devoted less attention to former serfs, it increasingly condemned Russia's oppression of Polish and Jewish populations. The press's coverage of Russian Poles began well before the Gilded Age but 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.[76] 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."[77] This coverage intensified after Russia's attempts to expel Poles from the regions of Posen and Silesia in the 1880s and 1890s. In 1885, the *Topeka Tribune and Western Recorder* declared that Russia and Germany had a "united policy to entirely suppress the Polish nationality."[78]

The Black press also covered violence against Russia's Jewish populations extensively in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After the assassination of Alexander II, the Russian state cracked down on the country's Jewish people. These pogroms were covered widely by newspapers in western Europe and the United States, and the Black press followed suit. 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] In 1882, the *People's Advocate* argued that "the crimes recently perpetrated against Israelites in Russia are only comparable with the […] middle ages."[80] As Russia faced greater instability, violence against the country's Jewish population grew. Following the failed Russian revolutions of 1905, when mass unrest gripped many of the country's cities, the Tsarist state became more oppressive,

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[76] Maria Weston Chapman, "The Fourteenth National Anti Slavery Bazar," *North Star,* January 28, 1848.
[77] "Nicholas and Alexander."
[78] "Foreign," *Topeka Tribune and Western Recorder*, May 30, 1885.
[79] "Foreign News," *Sentinel*, May 28, 1881.
[80] "The Sufferings of Jews in Russia," *People's Advocate*, February 25, 1882.

garnering even more attention in the international press. The Black press gave vivid reports of the violence. In 1914, Minnesota's *Appeal* recounted the crucifixion of a Jewish child in rural Russia. In 1911, the *Cleveland Gazette* claimed that the lynchings of Black Americans were minor in comparison to the "silent extermination of Russia Jews."[81]

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 an oppression more explicitly rooted in their race, their ethnicity. 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.[82] 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 this shifting solidarity, the Gilded Age Black press paid increased attention to Russia's violence, opting for sensationalist reporting on Russia's revolutionaries and radicals. Following Alexander II's assassination by radical Nihilists in 1881, Black newspapers focused on the plots and hijinks of the revolutionaries over Russia's actual political situation. The *Sentinel's* article, "The Murdered Czar," gave an in-depth analysis of the successful assassination

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[81] "Silent Extermination of Russian Jews," *Cleveland Gazette,* April 22, 1911.
[82] Kolchin, *Unfree Labor,* 328.

plot.[83] 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."[84] In 1895, the *Washington Bee* described how hundreds were killed in a Nihilist attack on Russian barracks.[85] Many of the articles described Russia as it was presented in contemporary American fiction: a dangerous country full of radical nihilists and maniacal nobles and characterized by mass persecution.[86] This sensationalist coverage reflected two major characteristics of the new generation of Black newspapers. First, sensationalism sells. Black newspapers, facing economic instability, opted for coverage that entertained and sold papers. Second, the coverage's negative portrayal of radicals showed Black newspapers' tendency to promote civic unity and patriotism, a trend that became even more prevalent with World War I. By condemning Russian Nihilists, the Black press could stave off critiques of civil rights advocates as un-American and violent.

The failed Russian revolutions of 1905 intensified these trends in Black coverage. After the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, the country faced general unrest from 1904 to 1907. Abraham Ascher argues that during the October 1905 general strike, "the pressure from the mass movements became so acute that it drove the autocracy to the verge of collapse, and to many it now seemed possible that the old regime might actually be overthrown."[87] In the following years, Tsar Nicholas II promised meager reforms and liberalization, hoping to stave off the autocracy's collapse. The Black press covered Russia's instability from 1905 to 1917 in accordance with prior trends, combining sensationalized coverage of revolutionaries with

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[83] "The Murdered Czar."
[84] "Foreign News."
[85] "300 Russian Soldiers Killed," *Washington Bee,* August 24, 1895.
[86] 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.
[87] Abraham Ascher, "Introduction," in *The Russian Revolution of 1905: Centenary Perspectives*, ed. by Jon Smele and Anthony Heywood (Taylor & Francis, 1905), 3.

solidarity with Jewish Russians and Poles. On January 28, 1905, "The Russian Revolt" headlined the front page of the *Cleveland Gazette*.[88] As the year progressed, Black newspapers featured headlines like "Day of Bloodshed in Russia" and "Now White Terror."[89] In 1906, the Washington Bee published "Future Not Bright," an article that argued "the council of the empire and the Duma are foredoomed to a disagreeable struggle."[90] Again, during this period sensationalized coverage of Russian violence eclipsed discussion of reforms, limiting potential comparisons of the United States and Russia. Even as the Russian government liberalized, its violence and repression made the international comparisons that once characterized Black coverage of Russia more rare.

Following the outbreak of war in Europe, Black coverage of Russia saw yet another shift. When looking at Black coverage of the broader war, William Jordan argues that the newspapers were paradoxically divided between "democratic advocacy and nationalistic loyalty."[91] While America did not enter the war until 1917, the Black press preemptively voiced support for the Allied war effort. But Russia seems to be an exception to Jordan's claims. Throughout the war, Black newspapers thoroughly documented the failure of Russia to combat Germany.[92] 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

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[88] "The Russian Revolt," *Cleveland Gazette*, January 28, 1905.
[89] "Day of Bloodshed in Russia," *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate,* December 21, 1905, and "Now White Terror," *Savannah Tribune*, December 23, 1905.
[90] "Future Not Bright," *Washington Bee,* April 28, 1906.
[91] Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920*, 40.
[92] "Russians Retreat," *Cleveland Gazette,* May 8, 1915, and "Japan's Position Among the Allies," *New York Age*, November 22, 1917.

for absolutism of real representative government."[93] In 1917, the *New York Age*'s summary of Russia's war effort blamed the Tsar's government for the army's failures.[94]

With the February Revolution and the fall of the Tsar's government, the newspapers found vindication for their wartime critiques of Russia. In February 1917, Russia's government collapsed. The collapse followed mass strikes, peasant revolt, and political insurgency, and Tsar Nicholas II abdicated his throne in early March, 1917.[95] On March 31, 1917, the *Savannah Tribune* published glowing praise of the new state, calling the revolt "inevitable."[96] The *Washington Bee* described the "care" taken by the February revolutionaries.[97] For the *New York Age*, even the provisional government was a better democracy than America.[98] While coverage for the rest of 1917 is largely a mess, with allegations of German collusion with the Bolsheviks, the final fall of the Russian imperial state was met mostly with fanfare.[99] In these articles, the Black press was able to advocate progressive issues while simultaneously appearing supportive of the Allied war effort, and, in turn, loyal to America.

Conclusion

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

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[93] "The Three Fates of War; Autocrats of Europe May Lose Their Thrones," *Savannah Tribune*, August 15, 1914.
[94] "The Russian Collapse," *New York Age*, August 9, 1917.
[95] Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution, Petrograd, 1917: The End of the Tsarist Regime and the Birth of Dual Power* (Brill, 2018), 529-547.
[96] "Russ Autocracy Falls," *Savannah Tribune*, March 31, 1917.
[97] "Latest Russian Revolt and Previous Uprising," *Washington Bee*, April 7, 1917.
[98] "The Russian Collapse."
[99] "Germans Advise Bolsheviki," *Messenger*, December 7, 1917.

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 advocacy, 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 in the context of Russia's past oppressions, and they saw the reforms the United States could make.

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