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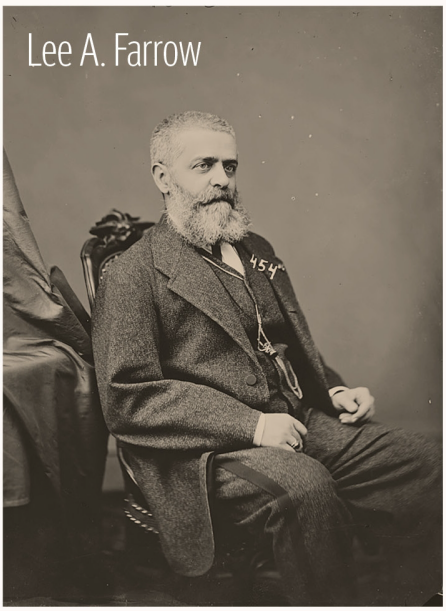

THE CATACAZY AFFAIR AND THE UNEASY PATH OF RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

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The Catacazy Affair and the Uneasy Path of Russian-American Relations

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Introduction

Edwin Heath, a member of the British Parliament for fifty-one years and prime minister from 1970 to 1974, is widely credited with having once said, "A diplomat is a man who thinks twice before saying nothing." Constantin Gavrilovich Catacazy, Russian minister to the United States from 1869 to 1871, could have used such sage advice. In fact, he did receive similar counsel from friends and colleagues, but Catacazy was stubborn and certain of himself, and would not listen. Nor did he have much tact for someone entrusted with securing and enhancing the relationship between Russia and the United States, two of the world's most powerful nations. Instead, he was brash and abrasive, meddling and dishonest. Contemporaries called him mercurial, offensive, intriguing, and "odious and disagreeable." In his short tenure as the representative of Russia he was directly responsible for numerous newspaper articles in the American press that were misleading about the current state of Russian-American relations or critical of the Grant administration and its top officials. He attempted more than once to interfere with American diplomatic negotiations and sent false and deceptive reports back to his own government, always presenting himself in the best light. He resorted to name-calling and implied that certain members of the US government were engaged in corruption. While the administration of General Ulysses S. Grant would indeed be labeled by historians as corrupt and riddled with nepotism, it was not the place of the Russian minister to make those public accusations.

As one of his first charges, the Russian government had instructed Catacazy to investigate a financial claim against Russia by the American citizen Benjamin Perkins over an alleged defaulted contract during the Crimean War; Catacazy, with his usual indelicacy, declared the claim fraudulent and worthless and called those associated with it plunderers and scoundrels. In addition, a document appeared in the *Washington Morning Chronicle*, an

unsigned dispatch addressed to the tsar, that attacked the reputation of the American secretary of state Hamilton Fish, calling him a "very weak and vacillating man." Fish and others suspected Catacazy was the author of the document and the one who leaked it.

Catacazy's involvement in this claim was not his only misstep with the US government, however. The Russian minister also had been suspected of interfering in the resolution of the *Alabama* claims, a protracted and heated dispute between the United States and Great Britain after the Civil War that at various points seemed beyond resolution. In early 1871, rumors mushroomed that Catacazy was attempting to derail the settlement, hoping to drive a wedge between the two English-speaking nations. Catacazy denied any meddling, but Fish believed he was guilty of the charge and there were others who shared his conviction.

Finally, Catacazy had a scandalous personal life. The Russian minister had been the secretary of the Russian Legation in Rio de Janeiro and, while there, he fell in love with, and wooed away, the wife of the Italian minister from Naples. When he became secretary to the Russian Legation in the United States in 1851, he brought her with him to Washington, though their marital status was not entirely clear. A decade and a half later, when he returned to the United States as Russian minister, she accompanied him as his wife, and her appearance in this role set teacups rattling. If Madame Catacazy's checkered past were not enough of an obstacle to her acceptance by the other Washington wives, her renowned beauty was apparently the last nail in the coffin. The American press was convinced that this "tea-party intrigue" was a significant factor in the Catacazy imbroglio, and other sources hint at this as well. By June 1871, Secretary of State Fish and President Grant could take no more of Catacazy, and the US Cabinet requested that the Russian government recall the unwieldy diplomat. The expulsion would not be so easy, however. Preparations had already begun for the tsar's son, Grand Duke Alexis, to visit the United States in the fall of 1871, and the Russian government made it clear that such a visit could not occur without the presence of a Russian representative. Though Grant and Fish were eager to be rid of Catacazy, they were persuaded by the American minister in St. Petersburg, Andrew Curtin, to compromise, and Catacazy was permitted to stay until the end of the Grand Duke's visit. He would be allowed to travel with Alexis and fulfill his official duties, but he would be persona non grata in official Washington circles. This uneasy resolution solved the matter for the purposes of the Russian visit, but the conflict remained an object of scrutiny and speculation, and there

were many who criticized Grant and Fish for their failure to better navigate the scandal, and many others who worried about the future of the Russian-American friendship.

The Catacazy Affair may on the surface seem like a minor tempest, but in reality it had broad implications in both domestic and international arenas. Domestically, the scandal raised a variety of important questions about Congressional purview, the legal rights of American citizens in suing foreign entities, and diplomatic protocol. The lawsuit of Benjamin Perkins and his heirs pushed (or exceeded) the appropriate boundaries of Congressional influence and many in Washington disagreed with the notion of a private dispute impacting national affairs, for example, the appropriations for Alaska. Though the US government did request that the claim be examined and given due consideration, the matter was not clearly one that required government intervention. In fact, there was some debate about the American government's responsibilities in supporting its citizens who engage with a foreign government, a question that still resurfaces today. Catacazy's methods in the case, specifically his habit of taking confidential or private matters to the press, highlighted the importance of diplomatic protocol and the old saying about discretion being the better part of valor.

American historians will appreciate this story as another example of how the personalities and behaviors of individuals in a government can influence policy at the highest levels of power. Most scholars of American history have likely never heard of this diplomatic disaster; consequently, a full discussion of the Catacazy Affair will add to the overall portrait of Grant's administration of one that was rife with turmoil and corruption. At the time, it was front-page news, offering readers the excitement of political intrigue and the salaciousness of social scandal. His choice of the American press as his medium for his efforts at diplomatic deception, political interference, and self-aggrandizement reminds us of the power of the press to influence opinion and craft "reality," then and now. Though American newspapers were becoming less partisan toward the end of the nineteenth century, political news was still central, and a story of this magnitude with such high-level players was bound to attract attention.

Finally, the episode was reminiscent of the "Petticoat Affair" of 1829–31. In that fascinating episode, the wives of President Andrew Jackson's cabinet members played a critical role in the collapse of the government. Jackson had appointed John Eaton as secretary of war, but the wives of the other cabinet members disapproved of his wife Peggy, her family background, and the

circumstances of their marriage. Their pressure on their husbands led to the resignation of all but one cabinet member, contributing to Martin Van Buren's rise to the presidency. In the Catacazy Affair, it was widely reported that Olga Catacazy's relationship with her husband, as well as her notable beauty, made her a target of gossip and social exclusion. The other wives of Washington snubbed her and their disapproval influenced their husbands, especially Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, who had the most contentious interactions with the Russian minister. The Catacazy Affair can be seen as yet another example of the unofficial and unacknowledged power of women in politics in the decades before they could vote.

For Russia, the affair left a bad taste in the mouth of Tsar Alexander and the Russian government. An attempt to recall the Russian minister just as the tsar's son was due to depart for America seemed a clear case of sabotage, an intentional insult to stop the visit from occurring and damage the long-standing Russian-American friendship. Russia was particularly sensitive at this moment about which countries it could count among its friends and which were its enemies. Less than a year earlier, during the instability created by the Franco-Russian War, Russia had renounced the restrictions placed on the Black Sea after the Crimean War, limitations that had forbade the maintenance of a military fleet there. The announcement had caused concern and tension in Europe, and so the clash with the United States over Catacazy's behavior was unwelcome to say the least.

This study will explore the complex intricacies of the Catacazy Affair and its immediate and long-term impact on Russian-American relations. The episode was the first scratch on the shiny veneer of the Russian-American friendship that, at the same moment, was being widely proclaimed during the visit of the Grand Duke Alexis. In the wake of the American Civil War and Russia's own domestic upheavals, including the abolition of serfdom, the United States and Russia sought to redefine and strengthen their relationship. The Grand Duke's visit was part of this effort, and throughout his travels in the United States as he was wined and dined, the importance of the Russian-American friendship was a constant refrain. The unpleasantness of the Russian minister's recall represented the exact opposite of the goodwill declared by both countries. It cast a pall over Alexis's visit to Washington; while in other American cities Alexis was the honoree at balls and dinners, in the Capitol he received a brief and formal reception. It also led Alexis to decline an invitation to return to Washington to witness Congress in session. For years after, the conflict with the Russian minister would be viewed as a failure of democracy and a mark of the declining friendship between the two

nations. Over the next decades, as the two great nations found less common ground, Russian-American relations grew more tenuous, culminating with the United States' opposition to and intervention against the new Bolshevik regime established by the Russian Revolution of October 1917. The Catacazy scandal and the sore feelings it generated was but one early stumble in the uneasy path of Russian-American relations.

1

"There is a great sympathy between the people of the two countries which is a delusion": Russian-American Relations before 1869

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia and the United States had a significantly different and warmer relationship than the one that future generations would come to know.[1] Situated on opposite sides of the globe, they were an unlikely pair in many ways—one a conservative monarchy, the other a young republic—yet over the course of a century the relationship had developed from hesitant and uncertain beginnings to a mature and complex friendship that both countries sought to protect and expand. Repeated encounters in trade, diplomacy, and technological matters had brought the two countries closer, while events on the international scene—war, trade disputes, and the shifting power balance in Europe—often pushed them together as well. Nonetheless, the Russian-American bond was frequently tested by those same events and encounters and, occasionally, the much-revered friendship seemed to be fraying.[2]

Following the abolition of serfdom in Russia and slavery in the United States, both countries were experiencing social transformations and trying to redefine themselves and their relationships with other nations. As the United States recovered from a brutal civil war, tensions continued between North and South, and new problems emerged with the birth of the Ku Klux Klan. On the international scene, the United States was embroiled in conflict over the possible annexation of San Domingo and engaged in a battle of wills with Britain over the *Alabama* claims, an unsettled dispute from the Civil War that charged Britain with failure to enforce its own laws of neutrality. Though both situations were resolved without violence, many had feared war. Meanwhile, Russia faced its own challenges of domestic reform and the growth of an increasingly radical, revolutionary-minded intelligentsia. Russia was also threatened on the

international front, confronted with the birth of new European alliances and rivalries. In particular, Russia faced a Polish uprising, the ominous emergence of a newly unified Germany, and a contentious relationship with the Ottoman Empire. While the rumors in the American press that Tsar Alexander II was seeking an alliance with the United States were probably untrue, the tsar certainly viewed the Russian-American friendship as one worth retaining and the visit of his son, Grand Duke Alexis, in 1871–2 was clearly part of that effort. The American government's request for the Russian minister's recall at virtually the same moment, however, threatened not only the visit itself but also the friendship that it was intended to display and enhance.

Russia and the United States already had a surprisingly long and active relationship by the time the Grand Duke set foot on American soil. To a large extent, this marriage of convenience must be understood in a broader diplomatic context—since the end of the eighteenth century, Russian-American relations were both a reaction to and a facet of other relationships, particularly those between Great Britain and Russia and Great Britain and the United States. The constant, if sometimes simmering, tension between these pairs over maritime power, fishing rights, and territorial expansion repeatedly drove Russia and the United States into one another's arms. Though separated by an ocean and the great land mass of Western Europe, Russia and the United States found common interests more than once at the expense of and in opposition to that imperial powerhouse of the nineteenth century, Great Britain.

The first diplomatic contact between Russia and "America" was actually a decision to avoid contact. When the American Revolution began, Catherine the Great (1762–1796) had no desire to get involved in this faraway conflict, but she issued a Declaration of Armed Neutrality in March 1780, which effectively aided the colonies by declaring the right of neutral ships to enter American ports. The declaration also encouraged leaders in the American colonies to give Russia a closer look, and ultimately resulted in a formal mission to Russia.[3] In 1781, Francis Dana, accompanied by a fourteen-year-old John Quincy Adams, traveled to St. Petersburg. Though the complexities of the war and Catherine's hope of convincing Britain to accept her mediation of the conflict prevented Dana from being received in any official capacity, he did meet with important Russian and foreign diplomats and tried to alleviate concerns that an independent United States would be harmful to Russian commercial interests, specifically its trade in naval stores. Dana's efforts at persuading Russia to assist the colonies were a failure, however, and it would be twenty years before the United States could establish an official representative at St. Petersburg.[4]

There were other contacts during Catherine's reign as well. In 1788, the famous American seaman John Paul Jones secured an appointment in the Russian Navy and served in the Black Sea under the talented soldier and leader Prince Grigorii Potemkin, one of Catherine's favorites. Jones's period of service, however, did not go well. He did not speak Russian, did not get along well with the British officers in the Russian Navy, and in the spring of 1789, was accused of raping a twelve-year-old girl. Whether or not the accusation was true, Catherine took the opportunity to get rid of Jones; he was given a leave, made his way as far as Paris, and died there three years later.[5] Despite this rather disastrous episode, Russian-American commercial ties continued to grow in other areas. At the end of the eighteenth century, at least four hundred commercial ships from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and other American ports brought goods to Russia, and by 1800, "most New England houses and ships were put together with Russian nails, and it would be a rare vessel that did not have sails, tackle and anchors of Russian origin." However, more formal commercial relations were hindered by the lack of an official diplomatic relationship.[6]

Russia and the United States finally established full diplomatic relations in 1809. Alexander I, the liberal grandson of Catherine the Great, had become tsar in 1801, and he and his small circle of liberal friends were more receptive to establishing a diplomatic friendship with the United States. There were practical diplomatic reasons, as well. When President Thomas Jefferson proposed the idea of an official minister in 1807, both the United States and Russia had become increasingly isolated as France proved its superiority on land and Great Britain dominated the seas. In June 1809, the US Senate approved the nomination of John Quincy Adams as minister to Russia, while Alexander had selected Andrei Dashkov as the first Russian minister to the United States.[7] This new diplomatic bond was strengthened when in 1813, Alexander I offered to mediate an end to the war between Britain and the United States. Britain refused and so it was not until the Treaty of Ghent in early 1815 that the war ended, but the Russian offer of assistance impressed the American government as a sign of goodwill.[8]

The following year, however, saw a series of small complications threaten the developing friendship. In November 1815, in an episode oddly reminiscent of the John Paul Jones affair, the Russian consul general in Philadelphia, Nikolai Kozlov, was accused of raping a twelve-year-old girl. A Pennsylvania court denied Kozlov's claim of diplomatic immunity and decided that crimes by foreign diplomats fell within the purview of federal courts. Meanwhile, the outgoing consul general, Dashkov, continued to argue in favor of diplomatic immunity

and demanded that Kozlov be cleared of all charges, and when these demands fell on deaf ears, he declared that he was ceasing all communication with the US government. In retaliation, the Russian government in St. Petersburg declared the American chargé d'affaires there, Levett Harris, to be persona non grata, though he was permitted to carry out his official duties. The crisis settled in late 1816 when Alexander I and his cabinet, eager to maintain good relations, came to accept the argument that diplomats were answerable to the laws of the country where they resided at the time of the offense.[9]

In the 1820s and 1830s, the principal Russian-American interaction was trade. Though no official commercial treaty regulated trade between the two countries, an impressive number of American ships traveled to Kronstadt and St. Petersburg with a variety of valuable goods, including sugar from the West Indies.[10] In 1829, Nicholas I sought to modernize the Russian Navy and sent a mission to the United States to visit various shipyards and naval facilities. The visit led to the purchase of one steam corvette, but anti-Russian sentiment in Washington after the Russian government's suppression of the 1830–1 Polish uprising nearly wrecked the deal and interfered with an expansion of trade that might otherwise have followed.[11] The two countries finally signed a commercial treaty in 1832, by which time many Americans had lost interest in the Polish cause.[12] In 1838, Nicholas I sent another mission to the United States to tour shipyards and port facilities, resulting in the purchase of one steam frigate that was delivered to Kronstadt in 1841.[13] Russia also looked to the United States for help in railroad construction. In 1841, a group of Russian railroad proponents persuaded Nicholas to create a special committee to consider ideas for a Moscow–St. Petersburg rail line; subsequently, the tsar approved a proposal to bring an American railroad expert, George Washington Whistler, to oversee construction. Similarly, the Russian government brought in American locomotive manufacturers, including Joseph Harrison, Jr. of Philadelphia, to set up a factory and train locals in the trade. These men all lived in Russia for several years, and Whistler even brought his family, which included his son James, the future painter.[14]

The Crimean War, which broke out in 1853 between Russia and an alliance of the British, French, and Ottoman Empires, posed a serious challenge to Russian-American relations. Though the theatre of war was far away and not an area of interest for the United States, there was much about the conflict that proved relevant. On the one hand, American officials saw Russia as a friend and Britain as a constant irritant; on the other, British trade was too profitable to cast aside easily. Soon, however, American ambiguity shifted in favor of Russia. In

the summer of 1854, the United States offered to mediate the conflict between Russia and Britain, but the effort came to nothing. Russia and the United States did, however, sign a maritime neutrality agreement that was so friendly that it "bordered on a quasi-alliance." This did not stop the British from actively recruiting in the United States, however, an activity that angered Russian officials who viewed it as a violation of the American position of neutrality. In fact, several British recruiters were arrested and put on trial and the British minister to the United States, John F. Crampton, was dismissed over the matter.[15] Many Russians would have welcomed a fallout between the United States and Great Britain. Constantin Catacazy, who was serving as secretary to the Russian Legation in the United States, advocated encouraging American merchant vessels to set sail for Russia, hoping that if they were stopped by the British it might push America into the war.[16]

The American government had no intention of getting drawn into the Crimean War, but it did take the opportunity to study the military tactics being used in the conflict. In the summer of 1854, the War Department sent a team of military observers to St. Petersburg, where they stayed for six weeks, touring military installations and learning about the Russian Army, as they waited for permission to head south. Ultimately, the American mission never made it to the Russian front, refused under the official claim that other groups had been denied the same request, so the Americans were forced to observe the war from the British side.[17] A considerable number of private citizens traveled from the United States to the Crimea, as well. Thirty-five American doctors from various places traveled to the region to offer medical aid, some out of sympathy for Russia, others for adventure, experience, or money. Pure profit was the motive for many other Americans. Though the United States remained neutral, a number of individuals took the opportunity to sell guns, powder, coal, and cotton to Russia and, in some cases, to its enemies as well.[18]

The Crimean War concluded in March 1856 with the Treaty of Paris. Tsar Nicholas I had died in 1855 and his son, the more liberal Alexander II, took the opportunity to remove Russia from a war that had exposed many of its weaknesses, particularly the poor physical condition of its peasant conscripts.[19] Russia's attitude toward the United States, however, remained positive, and the person who deserves the most credit for this is the Russian minister Eduard de Stoeckl. Serving as head of the Russian Legation in the United States between 1854 and 1868, Stoeckl was personally popular, having married an American woman, and was active in the social activities of the capital. He also made sure to report all examples of American friendliness and sympathy to his government.[20]