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# *Russia And The American Revolutionary War*

Most Americans who take the American Revolutionary War into consideration, tend to have a somewhat biased viewpoint which causes them to assume that the War only involved America and Great Britain. In their view, limited by the shallow depth to which their public school studies allowed them to go, the only other countries which had any influence over, or were influenced by, the conflict were France and Spain. Actually, of those two countries, most people never even become aware of the fact that Spain had any sort of involvement in the War. But, as with any conflict, there were other countries that were affected by our revolution, one of which was Russia. The purpose of this essay will be to note the effect the American Revolutionary War had on the north-Asian country, and to consider certain of the War's international ramifications.

During the late summer of 1775, King George III of Great Britain made a request of the Russian tsarina, Empress Catherine II (*aka* the Great), for 20,000 Russian troops to assist Great Britain's forces in her war with the rebellious American colonies. Initially, Catherine expressed an interest in supplying troops to the English as a paid mercenary force. But later the Empress, upon the advice of her advisors, decided that she could not accommodate the English king's request.

Russia had just emerged from an alliance, between 1758 and 1762, with France and Austria against England and her allies in the Seven Years' War (better known in America as the French and Indian War) in addition to a war with Turkey from 1768 to 1774. She had also, in 1774, quelled an internal conflict, known as the Pugachev Rebellion, in which a peasant, Emelian Pugachev (who claimed to be the dead Peter III) led a revolt of the common people against the long-distance control of St Petersburg. Catherine, who had been born Sophia of Anhalt-Zerbst of Prussia, and renamed when she became the bride of Peter III, ended the rebellion by sending government troops, just returning from the war with Turkey, against the rebels.

The German principalities of Hesse-Cassel and Brunswick had offered to supply troops, having been assured by the English ambassadors that they would be sent to Ireland to relieve the British troops maintaining the peace there. It was only after the Irish executive protested the intention of the English parliament, that it was decided that the German mercenaries should be sent to America to serve garrison duties there. The English were not so sure that the Germans could be trusted on the field of battle. The Hessians, as all of the mercenary troops from Hesse-Cassel and

Brunswick would come to be known, were the second choice, though; the English parliament's first choice had been the Russians. When the refusal was received from Catherine, the offers from Hesse-Cassel and Brunswick were quickly accepted.

Although the matter was ended, the rumors of Russia aiding England continued to surface in America for a long time after England had lost hope in it. In a letter to Richard Henry Lee, dated 18 November, 1777 from his camp at White Marsh, General George Washington asked:

*"Have you any late advices from Europe? Is there any good grounds for the report of Rufsians coming out?"*

The British Cabinet had approved the Navy's practice of seizing any ship which it thought might be carrying goods (*i.e.* contraband) for the Americans, and taking possession of the cargo. The practice infuriated the governments of the maritime countries of Europe because the British seized not only true contraband, but also practically anything else they found on board the ships. In effect, it was a sort of piracy, sanctioned by the government. Largely a result of that practice, as the American Revolutionary War progressed, Great Britain found herself running out of allies. The Netherlands, on whom the British had relied at the start of the War, was, by the Autumn of 1779, actually engaged in transporting supplies for the Americans. Spain's loyalties to Great Britain were questionable, and will be noted later. Russia would not enter into any alliances with the British, and her neighbors on the Baltic Sea, Sweden and Denmark, likewise snubbed the British.

It quickly became apparent that the only allies that Great Britain could count on were the Hanoverian principalities of Germany and Portugal.

General George Washington wrote a letter to the President of the Congress on 05 August, 1776, in which he stated:

*"The Seizure of our Vefsels by the Portuguefe, is I fear, an event too true, their dependence upon the Britifh Crown for aid againft the Spaniards, muft force them to comply with every thing required of them."*

Spain had her own objectives that she hoped the American Revolution would facilitate. At the beginning of the War, Spain was somewhat neutral on the decision of with whom to side. The Treaty of Paris of 1763, closing the Seven Years War (*aka* the French and Indian War), had awarded to Spain the French regions west of the Mississippi River and the island of Cuba, while taking from her the Florida territory. Spain did not particularly favor the British over the French, her traditional enemy, but she did favor opposing the British on account of Britain's alliances with Portugal, with whom Spain was presently on good terms, but desired to dominate.

As the American Revolutionary War unfolded, Spain maintained a neutral stance. At first, Spain's involvement in the American War was the furnishing of money secretly to the colonies (through the War, Spain furnished the colonies with subsidies and loans to the amount of \$645,000). Open war with Great Britain was not favored by the Spanish government because of three factors: 1.) King Charles III feared that he would appear to be under the influence of his nephew, Louis XVI of France; 2.) the Spanish class of gentry disliked the French and were opposed to any alliance with that country; and 3.) it was justifiably feared that were the American colonies to gain their independence, they would next go after the Spanish territories in the New World. So rather than openly oppose Great Britain, Spain chose to attempt to subvert her, hoping in the end to regain Gibraltar, Minorca, Jamaica and the Florida territories.

Count Floridablanca, the Spanish foreign minister, made an offer to Great Britain to mediate that country's disputes with France; her price would be the island of Gibraltar. But George III refused the offer, and so, on 12 April, 1779 Spain entered into a treaty with France, the Convention

of Aranjuez, in which the two countries agreed to assist the Americans until Gibraltar would be won for Spain. Although Spain did not agree to recognize American independence, her diplomatic relations with Great Britain certainly were at an end. The Spanish/French alliance was a favorable thing for Russia. It assured her that she could

continue to maintain her trade route from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean without too much trouble.

John Jay, a delegate to the Continental Congress from New York, and later the minister to Spain, wrote to General Washington on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 1779 in which he stated that:

*Britain refused the mediation of Spain at a Time when their Spirits were elated by their Succesfes in the Weft Indies, and the fouthern States; and by the accounts they received of Difcord in Congrefs, Difcontent among the People, and a Proffpect of the Evils with which we were threatened by the Depreciation of our Currency. Deceived by thefe illufory Gleams of Hope, they permitted their Counfels to be guided by their Pride. What Reafon they may have to expect Succor from other Powers, is as yet a Secret. Mr. Gerard is decided in his opinion, that they will obtain none. The Conduct of France in eftablifhing Peace between Rufsia and the Porte has won the Heart of the Emprefs; and the influence of Verfailles at Conftantinople, will probably give Duration to her Gratitude. The Emporer and Prufsia are under fimilar obligations. The latter wifhes us well, and the Finances of the former are too much exhausted to fupport the Expences of War without Subfidies from Britain, who at prefent cannot afford them. There is no Reafon to fufpect that the Peace of Germany will foon be interrupted. Britain may hire fome Troops there, but it is not probable fhe will be able to do more. Portugal and the Dutch, while directed by their Intereft, will not rafhly raife their Hands to fupport a Nation, which like a Tower in an Earthquake, fliding from its Bafe, will crufh every flender Prop that may be raifed to prevent its Fall.*

In his reply to Jay, dated 7 September, 1779 from West Point, General Washington conjectured on the possibility, though not

probability, of an alliance between Great Britain and Russia, Denmark, the Holy Roman Empire (i.e. Germany), Holland and Portugal.

*Dr Sir: I have received Your obliging Favors of the 25th. and 31st. of last month and thank you for them.*

*It really appears impofsible to reconcile the conduct Britain is purfuing, to any fyftem of prudence or policy. For the reafons you afsign, appearances are againft her deriving aid from other powers; and if it is truly the cafe, that fhe has rejected the mediation of Spain, without having made allies, it will exceed all paff instances of her infatuation. Notwithftanding appearances, I can hardly bring myfelf fully to believe that it is the cafe; or that there is fo general a combination againft the interests of Britain among the European powers, as will permit them to endanger the political ballance. I think it probable enough, that the conduct of France in the affairs of the Porte and Rufsia will make an impreffion on the Emprefs; but I doubt whether it will be fufficient to counterballance the powerful motives fhe has to fupport England; and the Porte has been perhaps too much weakened in the laft war with Rufsia to be overfond of renewing it. The Emperor is alfo the natural ally of England*

*notwithstanding the connexions of Blood between his family and that of France; and he may prefer reasons of National policy to those of private attachment. 'Tis true his finances may not be in the best state, though one campaign could hardly have exhausted them, but as Holland looks up to him for her chief protection, if he should be inclined to favor England, it may give her Councils a decided bias the same way. She can easily supply what is wanting in the Article of money; and by this aid, give finews to that confederacy. Denmark is also the natural ally of England; and though there has lately been a family bickering, her political interest may outweigh private animosity. Her marine assistance would be considerable. Portugal too, though timid and cautious at present, if she was to see connexions formed by England able to give her countenance and security, would probably declare for her interests. Russia, Denmark, The Emperor, Holland, Portugal and England would form a respectable counterpoise to the opposite scale. Though all the maritime powers of Europe were interested in the independence of this Country, as it tended to diminish the overgrown power of Britain, yet they may be unwilling to see too great a preponderancy on the side of her rivals; and when the question changes itself from the separation of America to the ruin of England as a Naval power, I should not be surpris'd at a proportionable change in the sentiments of some of those States which have been heretofore unconcerned Spectators or inclining to our side. I suggest these things rather as possible than probable; it is even to be expected that the decisive blow will be struck, before the interposition of the Allies England may acquire can have effect. But still as possible events, they ought to have their influence and prevent our relaxing in any measures necessary for our safety, on the supposition of a speedy peace or removal of the War from the present Theatre in America.*

An alliance was indeed made between a number of the countries that General Washington feared would join with Great Britain, but it was not with Great Britain that they joined. Instead, during the winter of 1779, they formed their own alliance in the form of a treaty which was given the name of the League of Armed Neutrality, declaring their neutrality in the conflict between Britain and her American colonies. The League was initially conceived by the Danes, but it was Catherine of Russia who, on 29 February, 1780, proclaimed it to the world. Sweden soon joined her Baltic Sea neighbors in the League.

The purpose of the League of Armed Neutrality was to oppose the English assertion that she had the right to seize anything believed to be 'enemy' goods, regardless of whether or not they were being carried on enemy or neutral ships.

The principles of the treaty were issued by the League and the belligerent countries involved in the American war (*i.e.* Great Britain, Spain and

France) were invited to accept them. Both Spain and France readily accepted the principles as they were presented. But Great Britain, as one would assume, refused to accept them; rather she chose to simply ignore them.

Despite the fact that it took nearly the whole duration of the war to accomplish, all of the principal European maritime countries eventually joined the League. The States General of the Netherlands voted to join the League on 18 November, 1780, and formally ratified the treaty on 04 January, 1781. Portugal, Britain's old ally, ratified the treaty on 24 July, 1782. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies joined the League on 21 February, 1783. Though not maritime countries, Prussia and Austria also joined the League in 1782, perhaps simply to show the British where they stood.

Since the purpose of the League was to counter the British seizure of goods on their ships, there was no overt reason for the Americans to

subscribe to, or otherwise accept, the principles. Nonetheless, the Empress Catherine sent a letter stating the League's principles to the Continental Congress. In September of 1780 the delegates assembled in the Second Continental Congress

took into consideration the proposal sent by the Empress Catherine concerning neutrality on the world's seas. The report to the Congress by Samuel Adams was as follows:

Whereas her Imperial Majesty of all the Russias, animated with the clearest sentiments of Justice, equity and moderation, and a strict regard to the unquestionable rights of neutrality and the most perfect freedom of Commerce that can consist with such neutrality has notified both to the belligerent and neutral Powers, the following propositions to which his Most Christian Majesty, the Illustrious ally of these United States and his Catholic Majesty two of the Belligerent Powers, and most of the neutral maritime Powers in Europe have acceded, to wit:

1. That Neutral vessels may sail, without being liable to molestation from port to port and along the coasts of nations at war.
2. That the effects belonging to the subjects of powers at war should be free in neutral vessels, excepting only contraband.
3. That in ascertaining what shall be deemed *contraband* the Empress will hold herself bound by that which is declared in the 10 and 11 articles of her Treaty of Commerce with Great Britain, and extend the obligations contained in those articles to all the powers at war.
4. That to determine when a port shall be said to be *blocked up*, this term shall only be applied to that where a sufficient number of vessels belonging to the power that invests it are stationed so near as evidently to render the entrance into it hazardous.
5. That the principles above stated ought to serve as a rule in all proceedings whenever there is a question concerning the legality of captures.

The Congress of the United States of America willing to testify their moderation and regard to the rights of neutrality and freedom of commerce, as well as their respect for the powers and potentates who have adopted the propositions aforesaid have Resolved, That all Neutral vessels have by the Law of Nations a right to navigate freely to and from the ports and on the coasts of powers at war, when not prohibited by treaty or municipal law.

That in the cases aforesaid the effects of belligerent powers, or belonging to their subjects shall be free in neutral vessels except always contraband. That the term contraband be confined to those articles expressly declared such by the ----- article of the Treaty of amity and Commerce of the 6<sup>th</sup> day of February 1778 between his Most Christian Majesty and these United States.

That with regard to ports or places blocked up or closely invested, none shall be considered as such but those which by a siege or blockade are so closely invested that an attempt cannot be made to enter such ports or places without evident danger.

That the above principles serve as a rule in all proceedings of justice in the United States on all questions of capture.

That all captains and commanders of armed vessels whether public and of war or private holding commissions from and under the United States of America in

Congress assembled be and hereby are strictly enjoined and required to observe the propositions above stated as a rule of conduct and govern themselves accordingly, and that the Board of Admiralty in the Instructions which they may give, and the Maritime Courts or Courts of Admiralty of the several states, and the Court of Appeals in the Cases of Captures in their several proceedings and adjudications concerning the legality of captures determine and decide agreeably to the principles aforesaid.

Ordered that the Committee of Foreign affairs transmit copies of the above act to the Minister Plenipotentiary of these States at the Court of Versailles to be by him communicated to the Neutral Powers in Europe and others whom it may concern.

The delegates assembled in Congress discussed the proposal of Empress Catherine, and then voted whether or not to accept it. The vote was fourteen 'yeas' to eight 'nays' and therefore accepted. It was also resolved by the delegates assembled in Congress that copies of the resolution be transmitted to the 'Ministers of the United States' and to Monsieur de Marbois, the charges des affaires for the French King (*aka* his Most Christian Majesty).

During the session of 15 December, 1780, the delegates assembled in Congress considered a suggestion made by Arthur Lee that it might be advantageous to cultivate the friendship of the Court of Russia. Out of that discussion came the following resolution: *Resolved, that an Envoy be sent (for that purpose) as soon as possible to reside at the Court of Russia.* On 19 December, Francis Dana, a delegate from the state of Massachusetts Bay, was elected to serve as the minister to the Court of Russia. The commission given to Mr. Dana stated that in addition to cultivating the friendship between the United States and Russia, he was "*authorized in our name, and on behalf of the United States, to propose a treaty of amity and commerce between these United States and her said Imperial Majesty...*" The written instructions to Mr. Dana stated that "*The great object of your negotiation is to engage her imperial majesty to favour and support the sovereignty and independence of*

*these United States...*" It might be noted that during his two-year sojourn in Russia, Dana was neither received nor recognized in his official capacity. Catherine was said to have observed strict impartiality. Only after Great Britain acknowledged the independence of the United States did the Russian empress enter into any kind of formal dealings with the United States representatives.

In the Autumn of 1780, with no end in sight for the War, the parliament of Great Britain made one final effort to secure Russia as an ally. On 28 October, 1780 Sir James Harris was instructed by the British Cabinet to discover if the offer of some British colony to the Russian empress in exchange for an alliance and the promise of troops would be fruitful. Harris suggested the island of Minorca, having learned that a base in the Mediterranean was one thing that Catherine had wanted for some time. The British Cabinet made their proposal to the king on 03 January, 1781. But George III was not in favor of the idea of offering anything; he stated that he would never cede a possession which had not been conquered. As it turned out, Catherine, when informed of the scheme to gain a Russian alliance, responded that she was not interested in it anyways. She was then preoccupied with the Ottoman Empire, and did not wish to be bothered with the conflict between Great Britain and her colonies.

**Just a reminder... The 3rd Quarterly Meeting of the Blair County Chapter will be held at Kings Restaurant - August 9, 2003**