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Lincoln and Tsar Share Spotlight

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They wrote letters to each other, were both assassinated in public and led separate campaigns to free large swathes of their countrymen.

Tsar Alexander II and President Abraham Lincoln now share the spotlight in a new exhibit, which Russia and the United States opened last week in the State Archive in Moscow.

"This is a chance to bring to life a marvelous relationship," said James Symington, a former U.S. congressman who heads the American-Russian Cultural Cooperation Foundation, which co-sponsored the exhibit.

Designed to coincide with the 150th anniversary this month of Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs, the exhibit features 200 items including the two liberators' clothing, bayonets, pictures and, most important, their writing tools.

Alexander II's ink-stained quill with which he scribed the 1861 emancipation sits in a glass box opposite the metal nib pen Lincoln used to free the slaves in 1863, both forever changing the political landscape of their countries.

"Here are two friends who never met personally but were together in spirit," Symington told reporters before a brass band clad in Russian imperial regalia opened the exhibit.

Nineteenth-century prints of the tsar congregating with joyous serfs — he emancipated 23 million of them — hang on the pastel pink walls of the secretive State Archive next to whips and shackles American slaves were subjected to.

During the middle of the U.S. Civil War, Lincoln's Emancipation of Proclamation freed about 4 million slaves.

"This is about men sharing a dream, about a dream shared by two countries," said Alexander Bourganov, an award-winning Russian artist who designed a white sculpture of the two leaders in an embrace, which guards the door to the State Archive.

While Alexander II was killed 20 years after he freed the serfs — a bomb blew him up in the imperial capital of St. Petersburg — Lincoln was gunned down in 1865 as the Civil War drew to a close.

The display is part of a series of conciliatory cultural gestures by the United States as part of the "reset" in relations with its Cold War foe, said U.S. Ambassador John Beyrle.

He added that a visiting U.S. dance troupe, sports collaborations and cultural exchanges with teenagers are also planned over the next few months.

U.S. President Barack Obama's administration has pledged to "reset" relations with Russia, which sank to a post-Cold War low during the presidencies of George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, now prime minister.

Ties have warmed since Washington and Moscow wrestled out the New START nuclear arms reduction treaty, which came into force this month.

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