The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Cassius Clay Can Teach John Tefft About Russia

By Ivan Kurilla

July 03, 2014



The boxer Muhammed Ali has one of the more unusual connections to Russia. His original name, Cassius Clay, is a tribute to Cassius Marcellus Clay, a fiery Southern abolitionist and U.S. Civil War minister to Russia.

The original Clay brilliantly served U.S. interests in Russia at the time, fitting smoothly into the tsar's court by virtue of his own upbringing as a Southern gentleman. Russia will soon get a new U.S. ambassador, the career diplomat John Tefft, assuming Moscow accepts his nomination. As Tefft prepares for his work, he should remember Clay's lesson.

Although the personality of a foreign government's top representative in another country may mean less in the 21st century than it did in the 19th, it still makes a difference in the eyes of elites and common citizens. As identity politics become ever more important, an ambassador's success depends in part on their ability to match their sociocultural background to the cultural particularities of the country in which they work.

Of course, it is unlikely that John Tefft will ever match Clay's personality. In the long line of U.S. diplomatic representatives in Russia over 200 years Cassius Marcellus Clay was one of the most extravagant.

Before arriving at St. Petersburg in 1861, he published an abolitionist newspaper in the U.S. slaveholding south, fought off multiple assaults and one assassination attempt, threatened to blow up his house should mobsters try to lynch him, and, as rumor has it, even killed a person with his bowie knife.

Clay had seven children with his wife but left his family in the U.S. to move to Russia — soon fellow U.S. diplomats complained that the minister was paying too much attention to ballerinas. He even had a son by one, Lenya or "Launey" Clay, whom he brought back with him to the U.S.

There are numerous anecdotes about his love adventures in Russia, including an incident when one offended husband slapped the minister in the face as the prelude to a duel. Clay reportedly did not understand the challenge and just used his fist to strike back.

Clay later married his 15 year-old servant, despite being 84 years old at the time. Four years later he divorced her. By that time his reputation of being eccentric had changed to "paranoid"; he spent his last years lonely in his White Hall estate in Kentucky.

However, Clay was a popular figure during his time as minister to Russia, and he himself felt satisfied with his diplomatic work. After his first year in office Clay returned home but soon asked President Abraham Lincoln to be sent back to Russia, and stayed in St. Petersburg until 1869, participating in the 1867 Alaska purchase.

What was the reason for his popularity?

First, the international situation promoted good relations between Russia and the U.S. Both countries were fighting for reforms to abolish the similar institutions of slavery and serfdom. Serfs were emancipated in 1861 by Tsar Alexander II's decree, while President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in the midst of the Civil War in 1863.

Clay thus enjoyed the sympathies of Russians who considered the abolition of slavery in the U.S. and emancipation of serfs in Russia to be similarly noble causes. Both sides also bore grievances against England, on Russia's side due to English support for the Polish rebellion of 1863 and on the Northern side for England's tenuous neutrality.

Clay's tenure thus lay within a period of the most intensive contacts and visual demonstrations of friendship between Russia and the U.S. in the 19th century. He was minster to Russia in the fall of 1863 when the Russian Navy arrived at New York harbor to demonstrate support for the Northern cause and he was in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1867 for the sale of Alaska.

Second, Clay was born an "aristocratic" Southerner and obviously felt an affinity for the aristocratic Russian court. Culturally, Russian nobility resembled Clay, an elite of the Old South. He felt at home there — probably more so than he felt among his Northern political allies in the U.S.

In his diplomatic dispatches, Clay cited among his predecessors South Carolinian politician Francis Pickens as the most popular U.S. representative in Russia of the recent years, thereby juxtaposing their shared cultural refinement to the unpolished Northern commoners that filled the position in between.

However, perhaps the most important reason for his success in Russia was his social alienation back home. A Southerner by birth, he could not easily participate in the war on the Northern side nor cheer the destruction of the Old South.

Russia, which abolished serfdom peacefully, offered Clay a much more desirable model for resolving the problem of bondage when, alas, his Motherland choose a bloodier road.

Clay probably realized that his decision to stay out of the Civil War and the political struggle at home would cost him further career advancement, and it was indeed the price he paid.

Decades later Clay lamented his loss of influence while L.Q.C. Lamar, the South's unrecognized representative to Russia, became secretary of interior in President Grover Cleveland's administration.

Nevertheless, his name will be remembered — at least by Muhammed Ali.

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