

American National Identity in the Late Nineteenth Century – Anglophilia, Russophobia, and the Frontier Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States experienced a political transformation. Identity politics played a key role in this shift, meaning that as the United States grew in political and economic strength and global significance, the ways in which the United States identified itself as a nation also transformed. American national identity has been as complex and varied as the people who comprise the nation. In the late nineteenth century, three main ideas became significant features of American national identity – the importance of a frontier to American hearts and minds (an argument referred to as The Frontier Thesis), Anglophilia, and Russophobia. These ideas were significant because of how they influenced American national identity which in turn influenced U.S. foreign and domestic policies and shaped its relationship with the rest of the world.

American national identity in the nineteenth century could not be explained without mentioning the importance of the frontier. The Frontier Thesis is a book written by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. In this book he stressed the importance of the frontier in shaping America and how the quest to conquer a frontier would be a driving force behind American ambition and U.S. government policy. The first settlers in America arrived on the east coast of the continent via the Atlantic Ocean. Up until the mid-nineteenth century, settlers considered anything west of the Appalachian Mountains to be the frontier, and the frontier became synonymous with “the west”. The boundary of what was considered the frontier shifted further and further west throughout the 1800s until 1890 when the U.S. Census Bureau declared the frontier closed. This meant that all the Native Americans were accounted for and no longer had any of their own lands (they were resettled onto reservations or eliminated) and most of the land was settled or in the process of being settled by farmers, railroad companies, and other businesses. The Frontier Thesis is related to the idea of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny, a phrase coined in 1845, roughly 50 years before the Turner wrote The Frontier Thesis, was the belief that that it was the fate and destiny of the United States to push its border westwards all the way to the Pacific Ocean. This justified the removal and displacement of American Indians and acted as a motivational tool for the government to acquire and incorporate into the United States of America all the land between the original thirteen colonies and the Pacific Ocean, and subsequently for pioneers and businesses to settle these lands. The concept of Manifest Destiny combined with The Frontier Thesis later impacted foreign relations after the American frontier closed in 1890. The idea that Americans had the right to push to the Pacific Ocean after the American frontier closed came to mean that Americans had the right and obligation to push past the Pacific Ocean. The emphasis was still placed on the Pacific Ocean, which Americans saw as a symbol of a New World order. The “Old World”, meaning the empires of Europe, centered around the Atlantic Ocean so Americans believed that a world centered around the Pacific Ocean showcased the future. This came to mean that Americans would need to find a connection to the Far East and so they could hopefully gain access to these new markets and further leave the “Old World” behind.

In the 1890s, the opportunity for involvement in the Far East finally presented itself to the United States after the Spanish-American War when the United States defeated the Spanish Empire and acquired territories in the Pacific. The Spanish-American War granted Americans access to the Far East, or at least gave them an excuse to be there. The United States defeated the Spanish Empire in 1898 and through that, the U.S. obtained the territories of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines. Access to the Philippines granted the U.S. easier access to China. China appealed greatly to American businessmen, who saw it as a huge market for American goods since by the late nineteenth century the United States was heavily industrialized and had a surplus

of goods and industrialists wanted a new market for these goods. The issue at the time with China was that it was already the domain of the “Old World” and different empires allotted themselves various “spheres of influence” over certain regions of China. France, Germany and Japan all had spheres of influence in China, but the British Empire and the Russian Empire were the two most powerful actors in China and were the ones who the United States contended with when contemplating what their own role would be in China. The U.S. debated whether they should align with Russia or if it would be better to opt for an “open-door” policy in China. The United States had been establishing itself as a world power in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Rapid expansion westwards and settlement of the frontier, massive scale industrialization, the defeat of the Spanish Empire and the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt transformed the United States and gave her massive influence in the global arena, something that became evident in her involvement in China. The United States fancied herself as rational, diplomatic and the symbol of progress and future, unlike the Old-World powers who were tainted with stagnation. The U.S. demonstrated its growing clout with other world powers with the previously mentioned “open-door” policy in China. The “open-door” policy came into place in 1901 and stated that China ought to trade with any foreign entity equally and give no special favors to anyone, and it would eliminate the spheres of influence in China. Most powers agreed with this policy, thinking it was fair and they thought it would be in their best interests to follow suit with the wishes of the United States, considering her growing power, wealth and influence in the world. The Russian Empire, however, opposed this policy. She had received special privileges in China since she had been her long-term neighbor to the north. This had an impact on Russo-American relations and was one of the initial major instances of them clashing in their foreign policy. Relations had begun to sour slightly in the 1890s for various reasons between the United States and the Russian Empire but the involvement of the United States in the Far East revealed that each country had very different goals and that their balance of power was uneven, with the Russian Empire evermore weakening at the turn of the twentieth century while simultaneously the United States began its ascent into world hegemony. The United States would not become solidified as the world hegemon until after the world wars, but her rapid growth in the late nineteenth century gave her considerable influence around the world even over other superpowers. The case of China shows how “American diplomacy” effectively overpowered both the Russian Empire and the British Empire. Each were essentially compelled to accept the “open-door” policy, and the United States viewed this as a victory on her part. America had effectively become involved in the Pacific frontier.

The ideas presented in The Frontier Thesis encouraged U.S. involvement in the Far East; U.S. involvement in the Far East encouraged new relationship dynamics between the U.S. and Great Britain, and the U.S. and the Russian Empire. This stimulated both Anglophilic and Russophobic tendencies in American identity and foreign relations.

Since her conception and until the late nineteenth century, America had long been a friend of the Russian Empire. This relationship remained on friendly terms until the U.S. became more active in world affairs and they began to clash over policies concerning the Far East. Relations changed between the two countries as the United States grew more powerful and the Russian Empire grew weaker. Previously the U.S. and the Russian Empire bonded over a mutual distaste for the British Empire; Americans viewed the British Empire as their former oppressor and someone they did not want to associate with, while Russians viewed the British Empire as their main major competitor in world dominance. Russians did not view America as a threat because America was not powerful or important enough to be a threat throughout most of the nineteenth century. The U.S. was underdeveloped, mostly rural, and many of its citizens were illiterate. This was not very different to the situation in the Russian Empire, and this gave the U.S. and Russia some commonality. A French writer compared the Russian Empire and the United States claiming that both were vast colossal empires with enormous power and influence in their spheres which continued to grow, and the only thing that might infringe upon that growth would be “national chaos”. The United States and Russia both had big, growing populations. Despite Russia’s loss during the Crimean War, Americans boasted of the military and naval strength of Russia and her ability to stave off advances from the other great powers of France and Great Britain. Russian military strength was compared to American economic strength. Russia had potential influence in Asia in the same way that the United States had potential influence in Latin America. The New York Times described the United States as the great Democracy of the West and Russia as the great Autocracy of the East and that both had much to learn from each other which would contribute to each other’s “growth, grandeur and true glory”, and how soon their weight and importance would be acknowledged and felt by other world powers. After the Crimean War, Russia’s reputation experienced a temporary setback. Soon after the war, Russia set its eyes on China. The United States condoned this action and believed it would be in the best interests of the United States if Russia were the one to have influence reaching to the Pacific. The Pacific Ocean was highly regarded in the 1860s as the “Mediterranean of the Future”. The United States had its own goals in advancing to the Pacific Ocean and supported Russia’s advance eastwards to the Pacific Ocean as well. Relations between Great Britain and Russia, on the other hand, were distrustful and disdainful. In the 1890s both were considered the two major “Oriental Powers”. England was uneasy about whether she should trust Russia, and the feeling was likely mutual from Russia’s point of view. Since Russia lost the Crimean War in 1856 to England and her allies, their relationship remained contemptuous.

By the late 1890s, the United States’ relationship with Russia became contended as well. While some journalists wanted the United States and Russia to remain on friendly terms, as presented in an 1899 article titled “A Plea for a Russo-American Understanding”, which noted that both countries were up-and-coming powers and cited the fact that America was founded on the principle of emancipation from England, others were not so eager to align with the Russian Empire. Critics of a Russo-American

alliance were suspicious that such articles had potentially been funded by the Russian Secret Service and Russian government itself to purport some call for an understanding between Russia and the United States. The belief was that Russia wanted to cause turmoil between America and England, despite the two countries both being English-speaking nations, to promote Russian dominance in China, and believed that England was Russia's enemy, so Russia wanted America to be on her side and be an enemy of England. Further reasoning opposing a Russo-American friendship was that Russia was considered more Asian than European, and that this made it impossible for there to be a Russo-American understanding since one was considered an "Asiatic despotism" and the other a "Western Republic". An Anglo-American friendship was seen to make more sense since the two countries understood each other more than America and Russia did. America favored whatever interests Great Britain had in China compared to the interests that Russia had there. Despite some points in opposition of Russia in the press, initially the U.S. government was reluctant to act against Russia in the Far East. Some speculators considered the strong role that Russia played in China and believed that the United States would benefit more from an alliance with Russia regarding her involvement in China. They saw Russia as having more influence and importance in China than other powers like Great Britain. Although Russia was perceived to have a great deal of influence in China compared to other powers, Russia still feared China and Japan to lesser or greater extents and wanted to protect its borders and not provoke any war with a massive number of Chinese troops. America and Russia were seen to be potential friends in the Chinese question, with both having similarities in expansion to the Pacific, where they could find peace together as allies in their political and commercial prospects in Asia. There was fear that Russia and China might develop a plan outside of the open-door policy that would allow Russia special privileges in China. Fear of Russian collusion with China caused some to believe that getting in on a deal with Russia would prove to be advantageous in the question of China, more so than remaining neutral or attempting to side with Great Britain, who did not have as much authority and influence in China as Russia because she had to worry about acting too boldly out of fear that other European powers might hold any resentments towards her.

Ultimately the United States aligned itself with Great Britain in the Far East due to having similar interests and feeling like they had similar character; the U.S. viewed Russian action in China as aggressive whereas British action seemed honorable. England was not looking to obtain any territory but wanted access to trade with China and America viewed itself as having the same interests in China as Great Britain, in that their interests were purely commercial. Americans and Brits described the Russian position as unfriendly, unfair, and hostile. Americans had a large stake in the affairs of the Far East due to their already large and growing commercial involvement in China and the U.S. government felt that outwardly supporting Great Britain's stance in China would be advantageous to the United States in its own dealing with China, and they reaffirmed their commitment to the "open-door" policy of China."

The United States opposed any coalition between Russia and China that would grant Russia special advantages. The U.S. viewed this as constituting a monopoly which would infringe on American citizens' rights to free trade with China. The United States had never been involved in China up until the turn of the twentieth century and when it became involved its primary motivation was access to Chinese markets. The markets that appealed the most to the United States were those in northern China, such as Manchuria, which directly bordered Russia and was the area of most interest to Russia. The United States felt that if China would make any exclusive deals with Russia this would impede Chinese sovereignty as well as interfere with China's responsibility to comply with foreign powers, two things that seem quite contradictory. The U.S. feared that if Russia received special favors, then other powers would too. Russia had agreed to this open-door policy but only after very much opposing it since its first proposal by the United States.

Another component as to why the United States may have deemed it more advantageous to align with the British Empire than with the Russian Empire was simply that the British Empire was more powerful than the Russian Empire. The Russian Empire had been in significant decline throughout the nineteenth century due to constantly being at war abroad and because of political unrest at home. The Russian Empire grew evermore weak until its collapse in 1917 and the Soviet Union that would arise from the ashes of the Russian Empire would only further alienate the United States.

The transition of Russia as friend to foe of the United States happened gradually over time. Once the United States became increasingly industrialized, the frontier was settled and she became a colonial power, the similarities between her and the Russian Empire began to dissipate. After this transformation, many Americans wished to associate themselves more with the British Empire. Relations between the British Empire and the United States throughout the nineteenth century had been tense, but by the early twentieth century, the U.S. and Great Britain began to boast how they were inherently friends. This transition from foe to friend had something to do with massive scale immigration to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. A significant portion of these immigrants did not adhere to what many Americans thought were core American values, i.e. being white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. Many immigrants came from the Russian Empire, most of whom were Jewish while other Eastern European immigrants were either Jewish or Catholic. A significant population of Germans immigrated to the United States, enough to potentially transform the United States into a German-speaking country as opposed to an English-speaking one. This caused insecurity amongst WASPs and encouraged them to cling to their identity as English-speakers and try to protect their own institutions and values. This contributed to the U.S. associating herself more with Great Britain and to view her as more of ally than as an enemy. Many Americans viewed the United States as a continuation and a descendant of the British Empire. Sharing

a common language impacted American decision making as well. As both the U.S. and Great Britain were English-speaking countries this gave them more reason to align together as opposed to aligning with the Slavic empire of Russia.

The presidency of Theodore Roosevelt further contributed to “Russophobia” in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. He became president in 1901 after a self-proclaimed anarchist assassinated President William McKinley. Throughout his presidency Theodore Roosevelt was openly distrustful of Russians, fearing that they might spread bolshevism to the United States and viewed the Russian people as the most untrustworthy people on earth. There was fear in the United States of bolshevism and other extremist movements like anarchism and communism. These extremist movements were often associated with Russians and with Eastern Europeans due to the political unrest and rise of extremist movements throughout the Russian Empire.

The world witnessed the impending collapse of the Russian Empire and its government. The year of 1905 signaled the approaching end of the Russian Empire; she lost the Russo-Japanese War which meant she had to forsake any lands she had in China, and revolution at home in Russia broke out later that year. The Russian government was going bankrupt both literally and meaning it no longer had much power and clout amongst its people thus leading to an eventual a “reorganization” of the government in order to continue the country’s viability. The Russian government had little pull with foreign powers to help her in this situation, showing the weakened reputation of the Russian imperial government both at home and abroad. Russia depleted much of her resources fighting in the Far East. Her military supplies were diminishing and civil unrest at home ensued. Polish uprisings occurred, which the Russian government attempted to cover up by stating that everything was under order. Russian prestige was being depleted and did not seem as though it would or could recover any time soon. The Russians were the predicted losers of the Russo-Japanese War, where speculators thought that a Japanese victory would deplete the Russian military completely, and that due to civil unrest at home it would be the best interests of the Russian government to keep their troops at home where they would be needed. At this point there was no sign that the Russians were considering an armistice with the Japanese. This was Russian unwillingness to surrender, despite a sure loss. The attitude of the media towards the Russian Empire prior to the Treaty of Portsmouth demonstrated a cynical view of the Russian government and its military. The Treaty of Portsmouth, the treaty which was orchestrated by President Theodore Roosevelt that ended the Russo-Japanese War, signified a transition in power dynamics of the world. The United States demonstrated its ability to intervene between two world powers and the Russian Empire had to yield.

The newly found imperialistic tendencies of the United States in the late 1890s and into the early 1900s were met with criticism. Critics viewed imperialist acts by the United States as simply un-American. American exceptionalism meant that America would follow a different path than countries in the “old world”. Empires were supposed to be abandoned in favor of democracy. It was thought that obtaining colonies and being a democratic republic were incompatible. Those in favor of expansion overseas and expanded influence abroad justified these actions by stating that the U.S. would be the better option than older empires and would act as a protector against these older empires. Decades before the Spanish-American War the United States government adopted a policy called the Monroe Doctrine which was a proclamation against European imperialism. The policy advocated to stop European empires from any future colonization of Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine was anti-colonialist; however, U.S. presidents would later interpret this doctrine in a way that justified American colonialism. President Theodore Roosevelt cited the Monroe Doctrine in 1898 as a justification for the United States to intervene in Cuba against the Spanish Empire. This later expanded to the view that the United States ought to be the watchdog of Latin America and in a sense colonize it before European powers had the chance, because Roosevelt viewed the United States as exceptional and as the better choice as a colonizer compared to any other European empire. This reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine demonstrated the dramatic shift in how America thought she ought to behave in the world arena from the 1820s to the 1890s. President Theodore Roosevelt was a prominent figure in this change. He adopted the policy of “speak softly and carry a big stick”, meaning he thought one should first attempt to solve global affairs through peaceful means (as he demonstrated during the Treaty of Portsmouth) and if this failed then one should have the military resources necessary to accomplish one’s goals. The United States by the turn of the twentieth century had enough power and influence to follow through on this policy. The defeat of the Spanish by the United States left the United States feeling invigorated and powerful and demonstrated to the world that they were an up and coming power.

Roosevelt had to manage affairs at home as well as abroad. The rampant Republican Party in the United States and exploitive nature of industrialism in the late 1800s left many American working-class citizens in dire need of a change. Extremist movements began to emerge such as anarchism and communism. Although most of the population did not veer to the poles of these extremist ideologies, the U.S. government feared them. President Roosevelt feared bolshevism and the effect it might have on the United States. Not only did he have to address the Russian government, Roosevelt also had to contend to Russian and Eastern European immigrants in the U.S., many of whom he deemed to be radicals and people who might bring bolshevism to the United States. This encouraged progressive reform because without it the only other alternative would be for the right-wing Republican Party to keep doing what it had always been doing, which was no longer working and only creating more and more radicals. Roosevelt propagated the idea that to be anti-bolshevik meant to be American, and anti-bolshevik came to be interpreted as anti-Russian. President Theodore Roosevelt’s robust personality encouraged and furthered America’s emergence as a world power and contributed to the definition of what it meant to be American.

American involvement in the Far East, namely China, had its roots in The Frontier Thesis, the idea that the frontier is what drove development in America and continues to be an important driving force for Americans. The involvement of the U.S. in China at the turn of the twentieth century was a catalyst for American relationships with Great Britain and the Russian Empire, strengthening ties with Great Britain while weakening them with Russia. This would help shape and solidify subsequent Russophobic and Anglophilic sentiments in the United States that would live on until today. In times of dire need and mutual beneficence, the United States and Russia are able to briefly come together to reach a mutual goal, but President Roosevelt's distrust of Russians has lived on and continues to be the general sentiment throughout U.S. foreign policy and media, i.e. the idea that Russians ought not to be trusted. Russophobia was prevalent throughout the Cold War, but had its beginnings before that, and is still visible in the United States today, with reports in the media about twenty-first century Russian spies and fears of "Russian collusion". Anglophilia and the idea of a white, protestant America is still apparent in the United States, with a general fear of immigration held by some Americans and Protestantism having a soft influence in politics. The role of the frontier, Russophobia, and Anglophilia have been key contributors to American national identity since the late nineteenth century and continue to impact the United States government and its foreign relations today.

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