

James Buchanan's "Calm of Despotism"

WHEN Congressman James Buchanan of Pennsylvania sought to frustrate a move on the part of the Whigs in the House of Representatives to strike from the General Appropriations Bill a provision for the salary and allowance of the minister to Russia, John Randolph,¹ he did not envision himself occupying that same position in St. Petersburg. It was not until he had lost a chance at the position of Attorney General to Roger B. Taney² that Buchanan was confidentially offered as a consolation the post in Russia.³ He hoped that the appointment would dispel the impression that he had fallen from favor with the Jackson administration, and therefore urged the new Attorney General to use his

¹ See remarks of Buchanan before the House of Representatives on Feb. 8, 1831, in John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan* (Philadelphia, 1908-1911), II, 163-166, hereafter cited as *Buchanan, Works*; George T. Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan* (New York, 1883), I, 129. Martin Van Buren was responsible for the appointment of John Randolph to a foreign station where "simple and friendly harm would be done if it should turn out that [the President] had made a mistake. . . ." He anticipated Randolph's return as soon as a treaty of commerce was concluded with Russia. John C. Kirkpatrick, ed., "The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1918* (Washington, D. C., 1920), II, 419, hereafter cited as *Autobiography of Van Buren*. Soon after Randolph's arrival in Russia in August, 1830, the climate proved so bad for his health that he quickly retired to London and in a short time sailed for the United States. The opposition in Congress, under the direction of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay, tried to embarrass the Jackson administration by an attack on Randolph for drawing his salary and expenses as minister to Russia after his return to the United States. Gerald W. Johnson, *Randolph of Roanoke, A Political Fantastic* (New York, 1929), 260-261. See also letters of John Randolph to Jackson, Aug. 22, 1830, and Mar. 18, 1832, John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, D. C., 1926-1933), IV, 174, hereafter cited as *Correspondence of Jackson*.

² See letters of Francis S. Key to Roger B. Taney, June 14 and 21, 1831, Samuel Tyler, ed., *Memoir of Roger Brooke Taney* (Baltimore, Md., 1876), 168-172.

³ Maj. J. H. Eaton to Buchanan, May 31, 1831, *Buchanan, Works*, II, 173. Jackson perhaps also appointed Buchanan with the hope of correcting the bad impression caused by Randolph's mission to Russia. He was undoubtedly aware of current opinion that "John Randolph was about as well equipped for diplomacy as a blacksmith for embroidery. . . ." Johnson, 258-259. Prof. Auchampaugh states that Buchanan was sent to St. Petersburg because he was proving "too clever" for Jackson. Philip Gerald Auchampaugh, *James Buchanan and his Cabinet on the Eve of Secession* (Lancaster, Pa., 1926), 10. In this direction, see also *Autobiography of Van Buren*, 289.

influence with the President and Secretary of State to persuade them to make public quickly his selection for the mission to Russia.⁴ Jackson, however, refused to accede to this request until the return of Randolph, lest the opposition in Congress use the news for another attack on his administration.⁵

Yet, Buchanan was keenly aware of the need for a good man in Russia and of the importance of the nation from which "The madness and folly of a single despot . . . [had] aroused the people of [Europe] to vindicate their rights. . . ."⁶ Thus, in spite of the fear that his imperfect knowledge of French might handicap his work in St. Petersburg and despite the strong opposition of his mother,⁷ Buchanan left the United States to assume his duties in April, 1832, with sober reflections regarding life in "a despotism more severe than any [other] which exists in Europe."⁸ Although the new minister did not anticipate "much happiness" or success in the Tsar's domain,⁹ he proved himself one of the most popular and successful diplomats of the Jackson era.

During his stay in England, Buchanan had learned that Russia's ability to exercise "a vast power over the affairs of Europe" was due to "The internal condition of both England and France. . . ."¹⁰ He correctly surmised that the preoccupation of the English with parliamentary reform, and the uncertain status of the July Monarchy in France, left Russia "almost uncontrolled" in Europe. Thus, it was with a new understanding of the importance of his post that Buchanan arrived in St. Petersburg on June 2, 1832.¹¹

The records of Buchanan's impressions during his stay in the Russian empire are not only "unusually illuminating because they

⁴ Roger B. Taney to Buchanan, Aug. 2, 1831, Curtis, I, 133. Mr. Steiner is perhaps in error when he states that Buchanan requested Taney's aid in securing the mission in St. Petersburg. Bernard C. Steiner, *Life of Roger Brooke Taney, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court* (Baltimore, Md., 1922), 103.

⁵ Edward Livingston, Secretary of State, to Buchanan, Aug. 2, 1831, Curtis, I, 133.

⁶ See Buchanan's statement before the House of Representatives on Feb. 8, 1831, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 164.

⁷ Buchanan to Maj. Eaton, June 4, 1831, and Mrs. Buchanan to her son, Oct. 21, 1831, *ibid.*, 174, 181.

⁸ Diary, Mar. 21, 1832, *ibid.*, 182.

⁹ Buchanan to Rev. Edward Buchanan, May 12, 1832, *ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰ Buchanan to Jackson, May 14, 1832, *ibid.*, 189.

¹¹ Buchanan to Livingston, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 203.

represent the Russian scene against the background of his sturdy Americanism,"¹² but also because they reveal an attempt on the part of an admittedly prejudiced observer really to understand the empire and its autocratic government. Buchanan's attitude was undoubtedly conditioned by the cordiality with which the Emperor Nicholas I welcomed him and by the knowledge of the Emperor's desire, in view of the threatening situation in Europe, to cultivate the best possible relations with the United States.¹³ The new envoy sought to use this good feeling to complete his predecessor's work¹⁴ toward the negotiation of a treaty of commerce and a maritime agreement with Russia.¹⁵

Buchanan's task was not easy. He was beset with difficulties which were the result of poor communications with the United States,¹⁶ lack of information from the Department of State, and the ever-present suspicion, spies, and censorship of the lethargic imperial government.¹⁷ After acquainting himself with the nature of Randolph's negotiations for a trade treaty, Buchanan concluded that the Russian government's lack of energy was due not to a want of respect for the United States, but to a preoccupation with the Belgian question and the repercussions of the recent Polish rebellion.¹⁸ He quickly perceived that the only way to get the Russians to act was to persuade them that a treaty of commerce with the United States was strictly in the best interests of the empire.¹⁹ By persistence, tact, and appeals to personal interest, Buchanan was able to enlist the sympathy and secret aid of the Chancellor, Count Nesselrode, and his confidant,

¹² Thomas A. Bailey, *America Faces Russia. Russian-American Relations from the Earliest Times to Our Day* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1950), 139. Professor Bailey included an excellent short summary of Buchanan's mission in the chapter entitled "The Calm of Despotism."

¹³ Benjamin Platt Thomas, "Russo-American Relations, 1815-1867," *Johns Hopkins University Studies* (Baltimore, Md., 1930), XLVIII, 73; Buchanan, *Works*, II, 197.

¹⁴ See William Cabell Bruce, *John Randolph of Roanoke, 1773-1867* (New York, 1922), I, 545; Buchanan, *Works*, II, 195; Johnson, 260.

¹⁵ Curtis, I, 161; Buchanan to Livingston, June 12, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 193.

¹⁶ Buchanan to Livingston, June 3, 1832, and Buchanan to Jackson, June 22, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 193, 199.

¹⁷ Bailey, 47. Randolph wrote Jackson: ". . . I could not endure to be at a Court where I must smother my indignation at the infernal Tyranny which the Autocrat's fears causes him to practice against the brave but unfortunate Poles." Randolph to Jackson, Mar. 18, 1832, *Correspondence of Jackson*, IV, 419.

¹⁸ Randolph referred to Buchanan's mission to secure a treaty of commerce as a "'sleeveless errand.'" Randolph to Jackson, *ibid.*

¹⁹ Buchanan to Livingston, June 12, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 195; Thomas, 74.

Baron Brunnow, in overcoming the strenuous opposition of the Ministers of Finance and Interior.²⁰ Yet, Buchanan's success varied with the disposition of the Emperor to conciliate England in the hope of breaking the united front between the English and French governments on the question of Belgian independence.

There were also the Russian objections to the Tariff of Abominations of 1828²¹ and the matter of including in a treaty of commerce a provision for the extradition of Russian sailors inclined to desert while in American ports, which Russian officials considered so important as to declare that "Without this [provision] Russian trade with the United States would be impossible."²² Although Buchanan agreed to the inclusion of an extradition clause, he persistently refused to allow the Russians to force the United States to buy the treaty of commerce by making tariff concessions.²³

While blowing alternately hot and cold on the treaty of commerce, the Russians were reluctant to conclude a maritime treaty with the United States which would include such American concepts of neutral rights as the principle that "free ships make free goods," a strict definition of contraband goods, and what constitutes a lawful blockade.²⁴ The Emperor and Count Nesselrode approved of the American definitions, but hesitated to make their approval a matter of record lest Russia incur the displeasure of England at this time.²⁵ This did not displease Buchanan who was already beginning to doubt the value of a maritime treaty for the United States.²⁶

Suddenly, on October 30, 1832, Count Nesselrode informed Buchanan of the Emperor's decision to conclude the long-awaited treaty of commerce with the United States.²⁷ Yet, in spite of this abrupt announcement, it was several weeks before anything more

²⁰ Buchanan to Livingston, Aug. 9, 1832, and Oct. 19/31, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 225, 253-259; Curtis, I, 161-163; Thomas, 81.

²¹ Thomas, 75-76, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 75.

²³ Buchanan was a devotee of a high tariff. *Ibid.*, 79-80.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁵ Record of Buchanan's conversation with Pozzo di Borgo, the Russian minister in Paris. Diary, Sept. 13, 1833, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 391; Thomas, 77.

²⁶ Buchanan to Livingston, Oct. 19/31, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 260-261. The negotiation of such a maritime treaty was the cherished hope of Livingston. Francis Rawle, "Edward Livingston," *The American Secretaries of State and their Diplomacy*, ed. by Samuel Flagg Bemis (New York, 1927-1929), IV, 240-244.

²⁷ Count Nesselrode to Buchanan, Oct. 18/30, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 252.

was said or done by the Foreign Office. Then, again, Buchanan was told by Count Nesselrode, with dramatic suddenness at a social gathering, that the treaty was ready for his perusal.²⁸ However, Buchanan's satisfaction with the turn of events was short-lived. Even though he had approved the final details of the treaty, the Foreign Office again lapsed into silence until prodded by the American minister to make haste so that it might be possible to secure the ratification of the agreement by the United States before the adjournment of Congress in March, 1833.²⁹ To avoid any further delay, Buchanan cleverly suggested to Nesselrode that the treaty be signed on the Emperor's birthday, December 18, in honor of his Imperial Majesty. The results were more than gratifying to Buchanan, who reported: "The expedition which they have manifested since this suggestion, compared with the delays which I had before experienced, has convinced me that I had not been mistaken in my anticipation."³⁰

However, the haste of the Russian Foreign Office resulted also from the news of the conclusion of a Franco-British treaty on October 22, which asserted the determination of these nations to maintain the independence of Belgium.³¹ This forced Nicholas to abandon his policy of conciliating England, and he showed his displeasure with the turn of events at the imperial birthday fete by requesting the British minister to translate to Buchanan the information that "the treaty" was ready to be signed.³² Thus, the course of events in Europe, combined with the tact and persistence of Buchanan, secured for the United States what it had sought for over twenty years. At the same time, Buchanan learned much of the ways of Russian statesmen and diplomacy, but, with the exception of Nicholas I, he was not impressed with either their energy or abilities.

Buchanan's opinion of Nicholas I rose considerably during his stay in Russia. In his initial interview he had found Nicholas to be "a man of fine manners, and . . . commanding and dignified appearance," who, in spite of what one might think of his reactionary

²⁸ Buchanan to Livingston, Dec. 20, 1832, *ibid.*, 271-272.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 278.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

³¹ Thomas, 87. See also Buchanan to Livingston, Dec. 20, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 282.

³² Cf. Buchanan, *Works*, II, 282; Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties and other International Acts of the United States of America* (Washington, D. C., 1931-), III, 723-734.

policies, "stands pre-eminent among his subjects."³³ Although Buchanan agreed with most foreign residents that the Emperor was "one of the best . . . Despots" in Europe and an excellent politician, his ardent republicanism caused him to pause and reflect: "*But still he is a despot.*"³⁴ Buchanan correctly attributed the Emperor's desire to maintain a close friendship "with the most free people on Earth" to his intense fear and dislike of England and France.³⁵ "To remove any impression which may exist at Washington, that Russia entertains a very kind feeling for the United States," Buchanan warned that the chief object of the Emperor is "to retard the march of civilization and arrest the progress of free institutions throughout Europe."³⁶

In view of Buchanan's knowledge of "the Decembrist tradition of pro-Americanism"³⁷ in Russia, he was unable to reconcile Nicholas' "great and good qualities" with his well-known antipathy for "liberal principles." He found it difficult to believe that it was possible for the Emperor, "whilst he continues to be animated by such feelings," to regard the United States with much favor.³⁸ Buchanan had already surmised that while the Russians decidedly preferred the United States to England or France, "they must attribute to [the American] example the existence of those liberal principles in Europe which give them so much trouble."³⁹ Later, he was even more convinced that "It is utterly impossible for these people [in Russia] to realize the state of affairs in the United States [because] we are political antipodes."⁴⁰

After only a few months in Russia, Buchanan was convinced that in the "present condition" of the Russian people, the government

³³ Buchanan to Livingston, June 12, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 198.

³⁴ Buchanan to Jackson, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 199.

³⁵ Buchanan to Livingston, June 29, 1832, *ibid.*, 210-211.

³⁶ Buchanan to Livingston, Aug. 9, 1832, *ibid.*, 227. Randolph was also of the opinion that "of all the Powers of Europe Russia is beyond all doubt the most unfriendly to us." Randolph to Jackson, Mar. 28, 1832, *Correspondence of Jackson*, IV, 427.

³⁷ Professor Laserson writes that "Russian liberalism . . . after the blow of 1825, and down to February, 1917, tried to continue the Decembrist tradition of pro-Americanism." Max M. Laserson, *The American Impact on Russia, Diplomatic and Ideological, 1784-1917* (New York, 1950), 141.

³⁸ Cf. Buchanan, *Works*, II, 227.

³⁹ Buchanan to Jackson, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 200.

⁴⁰ Buchanan to Livingston, Dec. 20, 1832, *ibid.*, 304.

they possessed would be the best they could enjoy were it not for the Emperor's policy of perpetuating ignorance and superstition in order to prevent the introduction of liberal ideas into the empire. He did not believe that Russia was in danger of revolution, because the Emperor's control of the government was so complete and firm that "a circumstance which under a weak prince might produce [an upheaval] may never shake his power."⁴¹ The American minister was much impressed with the great popularity of Nicholas among all classes in Russia and believed this a phenomenon which was seldom "the lot of a Despot."⁴² Buchanan, however, significantly discerned that while the Emperor "received full credit for all the good which is done, [all] evil is charged to the account of his Ministers."⁴³ He could hardly reconcile the Emperor's desire that more Americans visit the Russian empire, so that they might see for themselves that his regime was being viciously maligned by Russia's enemies in Western Europe,⁴⁴ with the knowledge that "all strangers, before they are permitted to enter the Country, undergo the strictest examination."⁴⁵

Nicholas' show of kindness and cordiality to Buchanan undoubtedly did much to influence Buchanan's evaluation of the monarch. The minister's "frank yet affable manner won the favor of the [Emperor] who found in him an agreeable contrast to the evasive European diplomats" at the imperial court.⁴⁶ Thus, after reciting his opinion that the mass of the Russian people were "ignorant and superstitious barbarians . . . perfectly contented" with their miserable lot, Buchanan described the Emperor to Jackson as "The very beau ideal of a sovereign for Russia . . ." and "a [much] better man than any of those by whom he is surrounded."⁴⁷

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁴² Buchanan to Livingston, Jan. 14/26, 1833, *ibid.*, 313.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 313-314.

⁴⁵ Buchanan to Louis McLane, Secretary of State, July 20, 1833, *ibid.*, 370. McLane succeeded Edward Livingston as Secretary of State when the latter resigned on May 29, 1833. McLane had previously served as minister to England and as Secretary of the Treasury. See Eugene Irving McCormac, "Louis McLane," in Bemis, IV, 267-288.

⁴⁶ Auchampaugh, 10. See also Buchanan to Judge John B. Sterigere, May 19, 1833, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 334. Randolph had previously prophesied that "Buchanan will be ramped at the Tartar's Levees" because Nicholas is a "genuine Cossack: implacable, remorseless and blood thirsty." Randolph to Jackson, Mar. 28, 1832, *Correspondence of Jackson*, IV, 426 (note).

⁴⁷ Buchanan to Jackson, May 29, 1833, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 339.

In spite of his earlier sympathy for the unfortunate Poles, toward the end of Buchanan's stay in St. Petersburg he found himself "more and more convinced every day that [Nicholas] could have pursued no other course with safety towards the Poles than that which he did."⁴⁸ Similarly, in reporting his last audience with the Emperor, Buchanan declared that Nicholas was being unjustly handled by his critics in the Congress of the United States because the cruelties of the imperial government toward the Poles had been "greatly exaggerated."⁴⁹ Still, he attributed the longevity of much of these "wrong" impressions to the absence of a free press in Russia which could refute such alleged calumnies.⁵⁰ While Buchanan was prepared to admit that Russian officials and military officers abuse their power over the Poles, he also explained, with great perception of the real issue, that the arrogance of the Russians stems "from the ancient and malignant hatred existing between the two races."⁵¹

In Buchanan's final audience with Nicholas I, the Emperor tried hard to show that he was not the ogre he was portrayed by European liberals to be, who meddled in the internal affairs of every continental state with a popular government. Nicholas fervently protested that his only concern was the maintenance of peace in Europe and that he had never interfered with the concerns of other nations, "*when it could possibly be avoided.*"⁵² On the contrary, declared the Emperor, it was the libertarian and restless French who were trying everywhere to "excite disturbances and destroy the peace all over Europe."⁵³ Nicholas told the departing envoy that the world was possessed with the "evil spirit" of liberalism and that he was convinced that he was "peculiarly the object of its malevolence."⁵⁴ It is clear that the Emperor was seriously attempting to impress upon Buchanan a point of view which would help dispel American misgivings regarding Russia's reactionary policy in Europe.

Buchanan was less charitable in his evaluation of the Russian system of government. While he admired the Emperor and saw the

⁴⁸ Diary, June 5/17, 1833, *ibid.*, 359.

⁴⁹ Buchanan to McLane, Aug. 7, 1833, *ibid.*, 380.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* See also entry in Diary, June 5/17, 1833, *ibid.*, 359.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 381. My italics.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

necessity for his benevolent despotism, Buchanan was too much of a republican to be able to rationalize the existence of arbitrary government and the absence of liberty anywhere in the world. As time went on, he tended to make a distinction between the good Emperor and the cumbersome and corrupt bureaucracy which he held responsible for much of the stultifying atmosphere in Russia. It was Buchanan's opinion that only the great and good character and firm hand of the Emperor tempered the despotism of the bureaucratic *Tchinovniks*.⁵⁵ Thus, not long after his arrival in St. Petersburg, Buchanan reported to the Department of State that "The great objection which an American must feel to a residence in this Country does not arise from the climate. . . . It is because there is no freedom of the Press, no public opinion, and but little political conversation, and that very much guarded. In short, we live in the *calm of despotism*."⁵⁶

While the American envoy expected to experience a severe censorship of the press which prevented the publication of anything except what pleased the imperial government, he was appalled to find that "Every avenue through which liberal opinions might enter [the] empire is carefully closed. . . ." ⁵⁷ This, in his opinion, explained why so few, even in the upper classes, knew anything of the United States and its institutions. Buchanan noted the absence of a middle class and correctly attributed it to the backwardness of the empire. He did not expect much from the "ignorant & barbarous" peasantry, because he was convinced that the *muzhik* was completely lacking in honesty.⁵⁸ The serfs, he observed, were "not unkindly treated," but their state of development, and that of other freemen of the lower classes, impelled Buchanan to conclude that "No one can be here for a month without being fully convinced that these people are wholly unfit to take any share in the Government, & it is doubtless the policy of the Emperor & nobles to keep them in this state of ignorance. . . . here Despotism must yet prevail for a long time. . . ." ⁵⁹ That these observations strengthened Buchanan's appreciation of the American heritage of freedom and equality of opportunity is

⁵⁵ Cf. Buchanan to Livingston, Jan. 14/26, 1833, and Buchanan to Jackson, May 29, 1833, *ibid.*, 313, 339.

⁵⁶ Buchanan to Jackson, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 199. My italics.

⁵⁷ Buchanan to Rev. Edward Buchanan, July 15/27, 1832, *ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 218. See also Buchanan to Judge Sterigere, Aug. 2, 1832, *ibid.*, 219.

⁵⁹ Buchanan to Judge Sterigere, *ibid.*

evident in the concluding comment of his letter to a close friend: "Would that we [Americans] knew our own happiness!"⁶⁰

The chief strength of the Russian empire, Buchanan correctly assessed, resided in Great Russia and in the dominant nationality of Great Russians, "where but two classes exist—the Nobles and their Serfs."⁶¹ Yet, he believed that the Emperor was not prepared to wage war because the heavy draft of peasant conscripts would "deprive some master of a slave" and lead to a "muttering of discontent which in a Despotic Government often precedes a convulsion."⁶² While noting "What a temptation for revolution!," Buchanan soberly and somewhat prophetically reflected that "*such a revolution would only be a change of Masters*" for Russia.⁶³ He felt that an upheaval in Russia would not result in an improvement in the condition of the masses or the nobility because he was convinced that "They are utterly unfit for liberal institutions."⁶⁴ Leadership for reform was sadly lacking among "The Nobles [who] . . . have . . . all the vices of French civilization in it's highest state without any of it's redeeming qualities."⁶⁵ Buchanan noted that the Russian nobility "know but little of our Country, & probably desire to know still less, as *they are afraid of the contamination of liberty*."⁶⁶ Thus, while visiting an orphanage in Moscow, he was not surprised when his guide, a Russian journalist, in a speech to the foundlings, described the United States as "a great and powerful republic," but quickly reminded the children "how grateful they ought to be to the emperor, and how much a monarchical government ought . . . to be preferred to a republic."⁶⁷

In spite of the fact that it was patent that the Russian people admired and respected their ruler "as the author of their security and prosperity," Buchanan sensed the prevalence of a fear for the future of the existing political and social order in the event of the untimely demise of the Emperor.⁶⁸ He found that foreign residents in the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Buchanan to Livingston, Aug. 9, 1832, *ibid.*, 229.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.* My italics.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Buchanan to Mrs. Jane Slaymaker, Oct. 31, 1832, *ibid.*, 265. My italics.

⁶⁷ Diary, June 5/17, 1833, *ibid.*, 358.

⁶⁸ Buchanan to Livingston, July 3, 1833, *ibid.*, 365.

empire shared the aristocracy's trepidation of the "deadly hostility" of the lower classes, and for that reason were apprehensive about any rumor of a plot against the life of Nicholas I. To Buchanan, it was the paradox of "the miserable condition of despotism" that such feelings of insecurity should exist "at the very moment when this Government . . . has acquired a commanding influence throughout Europe."⁶⁹ This situation offers a striking resemblance to the apprehension which existed in the Soviet Union regarding the future of the autocracy of the Communist Party prior to the death of its dictator, Stalin, at a time when Soviet power exercises such a commanding influence in Europe and the world. Similarly, Buchanan unconsciously anticipated current Soviet illusions regarding the United States, when he reported to President Jackson: "The truth is, that . . . those of this Country cannot be made to understand the operations of our Government. Upon hearing of severe conflicts of opinion in the United States, *they believe what they wish, that a revolution may be the consequence.*"⁷⁰

Somewhat later he wrote to the President that "The principles of the American Government, the connection between our greatness and prosperity as a nation, and the freedom of our institutions, are a sealed book in regard to the Russians. Their own press dare publish nothing upon the subject, and all foreign papers . . . are prohibited."⁷¹

Buchanan possessed few illusions regarding the strength of Russia which was so feared in Europe. He appears to have anticipated Russia's weakness long before the Crimean War, when he informed Jackson that "Russia has not yet sufficiently recovered from the four wars which she has sustained since the accession of [Nicholas I], to enable her to be as *formidable and efficient as the world believes her.*"⁷² Buchanan discerned that it was more by the exercise of superior policy than by real power that the Russian empire had been so successful in Europe, and warned that "The day . . . may not be far distant when [Russian] conquests like those of Rome will prove the weakness instead of the strength of the Russian empire."⁷³

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Buchanan to Jackson, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 199-200. My italics.

⁷¹ Buchanan to Jackson, October 1/13, 1832, *ibid.*, 239.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 237. My italics.

⁷³ Buchanan to Livingston, Jan. 9, 1833, *ibid.*, 310.

He was well aware of the internal stresses and strains which the Russians were seeking to conceal from the world by a show of "superior policy." It was perhaps also apparent to him that the "iron curtain" which the imperial government was attempting to maintain between her people and the rest of Europe and the United States was designed not only to isolate Russia from liberalism, but also to keep from the rest of the world a knowledge of the empire's weakness. Internal stability was a major prerequisite of external power, and the social and economic fabric of the Russian empire was too weak to fulfill this requirement. The Russians, declared Buchanan, unfortunately judge everything by appearances.⁷⁴

Most irritating to Buchanan in the discharge of his duties was the constant and often ludicrous spying and suspicion of the imperial government. Thus, in one of his first letters to the President from St. Petersburg, he emphasized that he would seek to keep the Department of State informed regarding the status of negotiations for the treaty of commerce "by the *first safe opportunity*."⁷⁵ To the Secretary of State, Buchanan wrote that to forward dispatches through the imperial post office "would . . . be a certain exposure [of information] . . . to the Imperial Ministry. . . ."⁷⁶ Indeed, he declared, "they scarcely think it necessary to do up the seals decently of those [letters] which I receive."⁷⁷ The American minister was compelled to caution his friends to "please . . . say nothing of Russia in your letters but what may be favorable, as the Post office here is not too secure."⁷⁸

The tampering and interference with the American legation's mail became so flagrant that Buchanan, realizing that any remonstrance to the Foreign Office would be futile, was constrained to apprise the Secretary of State of this state of affairs. When the Department continued to be careless in its communications to the legation, Buchanan strongly reminded Edward Livingston that since his arrival in St. Petersburg he had not received a single official or private communication through the Russian post office or Foreign Office which had not

⁷⁴ Cf. Buchanan to Jackson, Oct. 1/3, 1832, *ibid.*, 240.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 201. See also Buchanan to Judge George Leiper, July 3, 1833, *ibid.*, 368.

⁷⁶ Buchanan to Livingston, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 204.

⁷⁷ Buchanan to Jackson, Oct. 1/13, 1832, *ibid.*, 237.

⁷⁸ Buchanan to Mrs. Slaymaker, Oct. 31, 1832, *ibid.*, 267.

been violated!⁷⁹ Nor was there any attempt to conceal or deny such violations. Letters were received by Buchanan which were either almost open or resealed "with [such] awkward imitations of the seals as to excite merriment"—their crude attempts made "the Post Office American Eagle . . . a sorry bird."⁸⁰ Thus he urged the more extensive use of diplomatic couriers, unless the Department of State wished to use the regular mails "for the purpose of communicating matters to this Government which it would be difficult to do in any other manner."⁸¹ Lest the Department attempt to outwit the Russians by resorting to the use of cyphers, Buchanan cautioned that imperial officials and the Third Section were so skillful in the "art of decyphering, and in obtaining the possession of the cyphers of Foreign Ministers, that even these [were] not considered any great security. . . ."⁸² He did not fear for his private correspondence, because all of his friends in America had already been "placed on guard."⁸³

Buchanan's "great objection" to residence in Russia was "the extreme jealousy and suspicion of the Government" which force a minister to "conceal the most ennobling sentiments of his soul" in order to perform his duty successfully.⁸⁴ He was well aware that the extreme suspicion of the government compelled it to surround continually all foreign diplomats and residents with so many Third Section "spies both of high and low degree" that one could "scarcely hire a servant who [was] not a secret agent of the police."⁸⁵ To aid the Department of State in orienting a successor to the post in St. Petersburg, Buchanan advised the Secretary of State to caution any prospective minister to the Russians that in the "general society" of the Russian empire, "no man can tell who are spies of the secret police."⁸⁶ Thus "Every Minister, *and especially an American Minister*, on his first arrival, is narrowly watched," and because of this, "if he has not sufficient self command to restrain his tongue, he might do more

⁷⁹ Buchanan to Livingston, Feb. 22, 1833, *ibid.*, 320.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁸⁴ Buchanan to Jackson, May 29, 1833, *ibid.*, 339.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Buchanan to McLane, July 31, 1833, *ibid.*, 375-376.

harm in three Months, than a prudent man could repair in as many years. . . . he ought to know . . . when to speak."⁸⁷

In concluding his advice, Buchanan mused that Count Nesselrode would certainly not be pleased with his "delineation 'of the kind of man' best qualified to promote the interests of our Country at this Court."⁸⁸ He urged great care in the selection of his successor, because in Russia "the character of the country [represented] must depend in a considerable degree upon that of [its] minister."⁸⁹

Buchanan appears to have been especially aware of the importance of the American minister and legation as a source of information regarding the United States and its institutions in the Russian empire. Toward the end of his stay in Russia, Buchanan undoubtedly became cognizant of the existence of an "American myth" which was being perpetuated in the works of the versatile diplomat, Pavel Svin'in, and the Decembrist exile and novelist, Nikolai Turgenev.⁹⁰ Thus, his earlier conviction that the upper classes "know but little . . . and desire to know still less" of the United States⁹¹ changed as he mingled more freely with the Russian nobility and discovered the existence of a liberal minority. Buchanan found them "anxious" to obtain information concerning the United States and its political institutions, "*provided they [could] do it with safety to themselves.*"⁹² He believed that these considerations were of tremendous importance in a nation like Russia, "where there is no public opinion," and therefore urged the Secretary of State to instruct the next minister to St. Petersburg to "take advantage of every *safe opportunity* which may present of making an impression in favor of his Country."⁹³ Such opportunities, wrote Buchanan, would be many.

What particularly vexed the American minister, and undoubtedly his legation staff, was the lack of news from the United States which prevented them from acting as a source of information on the events in their homeland bearing on its relations with the Russian empire.⁹⁴

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* My italics.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Cf. Buchanan to Jackson, Oct. 1/13, 1832, *ibid.*, 239.

⁹⁰ See Laserson, 141, 142, 149.

⁹¹ Cf. Buchanan to Mrs. Slaymaker, Oct. 31, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 265.

⁹² Buchanan to McLane, July 31, 1833, *ibid.*, 376. My italics.

⁹³ *Ibid.* My italics.

⁹⁴ See Buchanan to Jackson, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 199.

Besides handicapping Buchanan's negotiations with the Russians for a commercial treaty, it was also quite embarrassing for him to learn that his colleagues in the diplomatic corps obtained news of events in the United States long before it reached the American legation.⁹⁵ Thus, in desperation, Buchanan complained to President Jackson that after six months in Russia he had not received "the scrape of a pen" from the Department of State, and bitterly declared: "I have had to evade many questions when a direct answer would imply that I had heard nothing on the subject from Washington. . . . I think that one of the Clerks in the Department of State . . . might at least acknowledge the receipt of important Despatches, and send such documents . . . and any thing which occurred in Congress of importance to be known at the Legations abroad. . . ."⁹⁶ In vain did the minister suggest to the Secretary of State the establishment of at least a monthly courier service between London and St. Petersburg.⁹⁷ It was not until eight months after his arrival in the Russian capital that he received his first newspapers and Congressional journals.⁹⁸

Buchanan considered it highly important that "The higher classes [in Russia] . . . in a great degree receive their information concerning our country from [the American] minister."⁹⁹ Furthermore, it was necessary that the ruling class have complete and accurate information, and under the "Nicholas System" the principal source of news regarding the United States should be its legation. Thus, when Jackson's "unhappy contest" with South Carolina over the nullification of Federal laws caused much speculation in St. Petersburg as to the future of the American experiment in federalism, Buchanan complained that "Every person at present expects to receive information from me in relation to the United States, whilst all that I am able to obtain myself consists of scraps contained in English Newspapers kindly furnished me by [the English minister], & of an occasional

⁹⁵ Buchanan to Livingston, June 22, 1832, *ibid.*, 204. For the delay of the Department of State in acquainting Buchanan with the details of the von Sacken affair, see Thomas, 90.

⁹⁶ Buchanan to Jackson, Dec. 20, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 307-308.

⁹⁷ Buchanan to Livingston, June 3, 1832, *ibid.*, 193.

⁹⁸ Buchanan to Livingston, Jan. 9, 1833, *ibid.*, 309.

⁹⁹ Buchanan to Jackson, Oct. 1/13, 1832, *ibid.*, 239.

remark in the letters received from the United States by . . . an American Merchant in this city."¹⁰⁰

The continued lack of co-operation of the Department of State in this matter and the irritation undoubtedly caused by Livingston's refusal of Buchanan's request to return to the United States,¹⁰¹ finally provoked Buchanan into judging the Secretary of State as being wholly unfit to perform the duties of his office because "He is either too old, or too much engrossed with other affairs."¹⁰² By this time Buchanan was also firmly convinced that "There is no department in the Government where reform is more wanted."¹⁰³ He was therefore not displeased when Livingston, who had fallen from favor with Jackson, resigned and was replaced by the ambitious Louis McLane.¹⁰⁴

Although he had finally mastered with great skill the technique of submitting to the drudgery of etiquette in "the most formal Court in Europe," Buchanan was ready to come home at the end of his first year in Russia.¹⁰⁵ The strain of living on a low salary and allowance at a court noted for its fondness of "extravagance and show" and for its disdain for simplicity, was too much even for the popular and urbane bachelor.¹⁰⁶ Worse yet was the stanch republican's distaste of living under a system which was marked by suspicion, intrigue, and the suppression of freedom of thought. There was also the increasing fear that his absence from the United States might hurt his promising career.¹⁰⁷ And so, in spite of his enjoyment of the

¹⁰⁰ Buchanan to Livingston, Feb. 5, 1833, *ibid.*, 319.

¹⁰¹ *House Documents, Thirty-Third Congress, First Session*, No. 111, pp. 54-57.

¹⁰² Buchanan to Judge Sterigere, Aug. 2, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 332. Livingston's biographer asserts that in spite of his age and political difficulties, Livingston displayed "marked ability" in his handling of foreign problems. William B. Thatcher, *Edward Livingston, Jeffersonian Republican and Jacksonian Democrat* (University, La., 1940), 357. This is substantiated by Rawle, "Edward Livingston," in Bemis, IV, 221-263ff.

¹⁰³ See Buchanan to Judge Sterigere, Aug. 2, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 332.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Thatcher, 416-418. McLane attempted to reform the Department of State by introducing a "systematic and orderly procedure to the business of the Department," but his greatest liability was inordinate "ambition and jealousy. . . ." McCormac, "Louis McLane," in Bemis, IV, 298.

¹⁰⁵ Buchanan to Judge Sterigere, Aug. 2, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 220.

¹⁰⁶ Buchanan to Jackson, Oct. 1/13, 1832, *ibid.*, 239.

¹⁰⁷ That this fear was not unfounded, see Louis McLane to Martin Van Buren, Nov. 26, 1832, *Autobiography of Van Buren*, 597.

fashionable salons of St. Petersburg's society, his greater appreciation for the *raison d'être* of the despotism, and his sympathy for the well-meaning Autocrat of all the Russias, Buchanan left St. Petersburg on August 7, 1833, with a sense of relief. He departed from the Russian empire strengthened in his belief that "a residence in this country can never become agreeable to a man of my feelings."¹⁰⁸

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¹⁰⁸ Buchanan to Jackson, Dec. 20, 1832, Buchanan, *Works*, II, 307. Since Buchanan achieved the main object of his mission, the President was in no hurry to select a successor to the post in St. Petersburg. Jackson to Vice-President Van Buren, Aug. 16, 1833, *Correspondence of Jackson*, V, 159.