



Amanda Brickell Bellows. *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-emancipation Imagination.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 320 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-5553-6.

Reviewed by Sergey Salushchev (University of California, Santa Barbara)

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Commissioned by Eva M. Stolberg (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

Amanda Brickell Bellows's book is a new and welcome contribution to the growing field of Russo-American comparative history. Bellows's monograph joins the scholarship of historians like Steven Sabol, Peter Kolchin, Alexander Etkind, Ilya Vinkovetsky, and others in exploration of tropes and patterns that make the history of United States and Russia mutually intelligible. In this monograph, Bellows sets out to apply a comparative prism of "cultural production" to understand how "the people of two disparate countries ... reacted to the nearly simultaneous abolition of serfdom and slavery during the mid-nineteenth century" (p. 1). Understandably, many scholars might regard such endeavor with skepticism. Indeed, the histories of servitude in Russia and United States have vastly different geneses. The skeptics will rest easy knowing that each chapter of Bellows's book is premised on a clear recognition of such differences. Particularly important is Bellows's acknowledgement that while "racism played a central role in shaping post-emancipation social dynamics in America, conceptions of racial difference between landowners and serfs were largely absent in Russia" (p. 6).

The book is organized thematically into six chapters that follow a chronological time line that starts in the 1850s, the decade the preceded the

abolition of serfdom in Russia and emancipation of enslaved African Americans in United States, and ends at the turn of the twentieth century. The monograph examines depictions of serfs, enslaved African Americans, peasants, and freedpeople in literature, historical fiction, illustrated periodicals, lithographs, paintings, advertisements, and other ephemera. Bellows deploys comparative analysis to demonstrate "how two societies remembered, imagined, and challenged the legacies of the abolition of serfdom and slavery" (p. 13).

Chapter 1 examines the works of "radical literature" on the eve of emancipation in Russia and the United States. The biggest challenge of writing such an account, as Bellows herself acknowledges, is the fact that while abolitionist literature flourished and was in consistently high demand in the early 1850s United States, there was no comparable literary movement in Russia. Nevertheless, the woeful plight of Russian serfs featured prominently in the literary production of several Russian writers. When considering the works of Russian novelists who exposed the vile nature of serfdom, one immediately thinks of Alexander Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) or Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842). However, Bellows's specific focus on the decade that preceded the abolition of slavery in the

United States and the emancipation of serfs in Russia takes her readers on a path less traveled, to the poignant poetry of Nikolaï Nekrasov and prose of Alekseï Pisemskii. Set primarily in the social landscape of Russia's seignorial estates, Nekrasov and Pisemskii's works throw into sharp relief the quotidian cruelty and injustice of the serf life. Bellows juxtaposes these heart-rending tropes to the works of American female abolitionist writers Martha Griffith Browne and Louisa May Alcott. Bellows's selection of Russian and American writers is cogent, and the chapter's comparative parallels are convincing. Although this reviewer was unaccustomed to regard these Russian writers as "radical" or abolitionist, Bellows offers a persuasive argument for reading Nekrasov's poetry and Pisemskii's novels in precisely these terms.

Chapter 2 explores the works of fictional history in post-emancipation Russia and United States. Bellows's comparative analysis focuses on the series of short stories written by two Southern American writers, Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris, and four Russian writers, Grigorii Danilevskii, Vsevolod Solov'ev, Evgenii Opochnin, and Evgenii Salias. The critical comparison reveals the striking similarities in how these writers chose to ignore the violence of serfdom and slavery and cloaked the cruelty of servitude in saccharine reminiscences of enslaved people's fondness for their masters. At the heart of this alternative reality was a disturbing proposition that institutionalized unfree labor was a social anchor that stabilized rural communities, edified the subaltern estates, and ultimately gave the lives of enslaved African Americans and Russian serfs a noble purpose. As Bellows aptly notes in her analysis, "like the African Americans of Page's and Harris's tales, Russia's peasants of late nineteenth-century historical fiction preferred life under serfdom to liberty" (p. 55).

Chapter 3 examines visual representations of formerly enslaved African Americans and Russian

serfs in lithographs that appeared on the pages of popular illustrated magazines in *fin-de-siècle* Russia and United States. These images, argues Bellows, "constituted an important category of mass-oriented visual culture," which shaped the public's perceptions of emancipated people (p. 74). The author's perceptive analysis pays heed to the conspicuous role of race and racism in the postbellum visual renderings of freedmen in the United States and identifies shared tropes of visual representation of emancipated serfs. Among these tropes were the "sentimental" depictions of the rural life that showed emancipated folk continuing to faithfully serve their former masters. These lithographs imbued with nostalgia portrayed servitude as a cultural artifact worthy of public commemoration. The shared anxiety over the influx of emancipated people into the cities is another important commonality identified by the author. Such lithographs conveyed a troubling narrative of emancipated people's failure "to live disciplined lives" and become "cooperative urban citizens" (p. 97).

In chapter 4, Bellows directs her readers' attention from the mass-produced illustrated periodicals to the medium of oil painting. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of lithographs, the oil paintings created by artists such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, Williams Edouard Scott, Vasiliï Maksimov, and Ilya Repin established a permanent visual canon of the two nations' evolving national identity. At the time of their creation, these paintings interrogated the post-emancipation life chances of Russian peasants and American freedpeople. Today, these paintings serve as a window into a broad range of perceptions and first-hand encounters that prompted the artists to chronicle the tectonic social transformations that destabilized the social foundation of Russian and American societies in the wake of the abolition of serfdom and slavery. The artists' interpretations of the world without servitude generated a multitude of canvas impressions. By the author's own admission, taking comparative stock of representations of enslaved African Americans, freedpeople, serfs, and

peasants in individual works of art of American and Russian painters is a difficult task. Nevertheless, Bellows succeeds in identifying “six distinct thematic categories: relationships between owners and serfs or enslaved people; peasants and freedpeople in the military; post-emancipation agricultural labor; heritage, religion, and rituals; education; and urban migration” (p. 122). These themes, too lengthy to give justice to in this review, present readers with a panoramic view of the poignant visual expressions of the precarity and hope for newfound freedom in post-emancipation Russia and United States.

Chapter 5 shifts from the high culture of oil paintings to the mundane and consumer-oriented objects of visual and textual representation of Russian and American post-emancipation imaginations. Advertisements and ephemera became a new site for channeling biased projections of Russian peasants and emancipated African Americans. Manufacturers in both countries deployed similar marketing strategies to build a loyal customer base. However, Bellows highlights a critical difference in how illustrated posters, trade cards, magazines, and other ephemera portrayed emancipated peasants and freedpeople. Whereas Russian advertisements, generally, ennobled Russian peasants by presenting them as symbols of national character who aspired to reap the benefits of the modern life, the American marketing paraphernalia denigrated African American freedpeople by depicting them as social “outsiders” incapable of integrating into the mainstream of the American society. Racism and the desire to cater to the racial sensibilities of white customers dictated the marketing choices of American businesses and ad agencies.

Chapter 6 is the only chapter in Bellows’s monograph that may cause her readers to stumble (albeit without falling) along the arc of the author’s narrative. The broad scope of the chapter, which examines portrayals of former Russian serfs and enslaved African Americans in literature

and visual culture at the turn of the twentieth century, covers a lot of ground. So much ground that at times this reader felt a little disoriented when trying to discern the chapter’s central argument. Bellows’s keen awareness of how racism influenced the culture of visual and textual representation of African Americans in the postbellum United States and the lack of corresponding racial considerations in Russian society remains constant throughout the chapter. However, the author’s suggestion that brutal race riots in American urban centers and the revolutionary tribulations among Russian city-dwellers of peasant origin in the early twentieth century constituted “comparable forms of upheavals in Russian cities” will likely spark debate (p. 213).

American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination is a great example of thought-provoking and engaging comparative history. This monograph brings to the fore the shared trauma of servitude that afflicted the lives of millions of people in imperial Russia and antebellum United States while recognizing the fundamental differences that shaped the histories of unfree labor in the two nations. More than juxtaposing the post-emancipation imaginations of the two countries, this monograph offers a comparative exploration of subjectivities of visual and textual *lieux de mémoire* of the two nations’ ugly pasts. As Bellows persuasively argues, the search for atonement for the moral sin of human bondage was far from the minds of many Russian and American artists, writers, and businesses who chose to commemorate rather than condemn slavery and serfdom. Finally, Bellows’s book is an invitation for scholars of American slavery and Russian serfdom to consider how the legacies of violent servitude continue to shape the national psyche of Russian and American societies in the twenty-first century.

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