The British Policy toward Independent Texas as seen by a Soviet Historian

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Soviet historians have done extensive research in United States history. Their emphases chronologically center upon the struggle for Independence and its immediate aftermath, the early National history, the Civil War, and the New Deal. Thematically, the focus has been on the labor and trade union movement, the history of the two-party system, the development of Soviet-American relations, and current United States policies. Very recently, research has been broadening still further. A major event was the publication between 1983 and 1987 of a four-volume *History of the United States of America*. Nevertheless, Soviet historians have neglected the history of the separate states. The writer’s own publications represent pioneer work in this area. At the first All-Union meeting of Soviet Americanists in Moscow in 1971, she pointed out the importance of studying both the process of American westward expansion and the history of the individual states. The result has been the publication of two books on the expansionist theme, but no advance with regard to state history.

In Soviet Libraries and archives are numerous documents on American history. These have been supplemented by new material, as it appears. Still, there is nothing to match an immediate personal acquaintance with a country and its libraries and archives. In 1979 I spent some time in the United States doing research. In this connection, I would like to express my gratitude to Professors Idris Traylor and Lowell L. Blaisdell, and to Director David Murrah and Associate Archivist Doris A. Blaisdell, both of the Southwest Collection, and all four at Texas Tech, for their help to me. Others also helped on a lesser scale. As the result of my research in Texas history, on my return I was able to publish a number of papers and a book, *The Annexation of Texas*.

Among the problems of interest concerning independent Texas, one that attracts special attention is that of the British policy toward the Republic. Despite the Monroe Doctrine, this European power showed a very noticeable inclination to try to extend her influence over the great territory that had detached itself from Mexico, but stayed separate from the United States.
In examining the British role, this paper is based on references from the British archives, even though unfortunately I have not had the opportunity to work in them directly. In the Lenin Public Library in Moscow are various source materials, including the London Times in its entirety, selections from other portions of the British press, and some other original documents.

It is the object of this paper to explore the economic and political forces behind British actions, and to emphasize how desirous Britain was to prevent the Republic's absorption into the United States. Such eminent American historians as Ephraim D. Adams and Frederick Merk, for example, seem to imply that Britain followed an essentially conciliatory policy, eventually accepting Texas' annexation by the United States in a resigned frame of mind. However, as records show, their officials strove to maintain Texas' independence, hoping to exercise a large influence in the Southwest and to have Texas serve as a buffer between the United States and Mexico.

Britain did not recognize Texas until 1842. While throughout Texas' independence, there were forces drawing England and the Lone Star Republic toward each other that outweighed the ones keeping them apart, the latter were of sufficient importance to retard recognition for some years. One source of strain was that, with Britain having just abolished slavery in her West Indies islands, its presence in the new commonwealth represented a considerable obstacle. In the House of Commons, a well-known abolitionist, Barlow Hoy, instigated debates and pestered the government with regard to the Texans' acceptance of slavery and involvement in the slave trade. This issue had some impact on policy. In an editorial, "Texas and Slavery," the London Times offered as its opinion that the "United States annexation of Texas will result in the spread and perpetuation of slavery." Other British papers asserted that Britain and France were willing to recognize the Southwesterners' breakaway from Mexico only if slavery were abolished.

Another restraining factor stemmed from Britain's multiple interests in the northern hemisphere. Because the Americans continually pushed northward into Canada's eastern and westernmost extremities, Britain had to take account of these pressures on a plane of importance equal to, if not greater than, the issue of Texas' relations with the United States. Canada, an outright possession, deserved greater attention than Texas. Yet, in view of the United States' swift expansion, to stand by while she next made a valuable addition to the southwest was an event to be forestalled, if possible. Lesser aspects of England's varied responsibilities concerned her conflicting interests in Mexico, and the question of Texas' solidity. In relations with Mexico, since British citizens were invested in Mexican mines, here was a reason for encouraging Texas' emergence as a buffer state to block any United States push toward Mexico. On the other hand, British shareholders in Mexican bonds had recently had them refunded.
on the security of public lands in northern Mexico. The bondholders did not want recognition of Texas, lest this arouse Mexico's ire, and thus diminish their chances of repayment. As for Texas itself, it might hardly be worth encouraging. Its finances were in such a plight that no European power — to most of which the Texans applied — was willing to grant the Lone Star state a loan.

By comparison to Britain, France did not have the same complicated problems. This simplified her Texas policy. On September 25, 1839, France became the first European power to recognize the Lone Star republic. In the Franco-Texas Treaty of Navigation, Trade and Friendship there was provision for cotton shipping to France. Soon, through J.B. Dubois de Savigny, the charge'd'affaires in Texas, France sought to gain a huge 3,000,000-acre land concession. Following France, the Netherlands signed a Treaty of Trade, Navigation and Friendship, September 1, 1840, thereby also granting recognition.

As for the Texans, for obvious reasons they cultivated friendly relations with England even more than France. As an example, in response to reports in the North of slave trading that tended to create a poor impression of Texas in Great Britain, the Telegraph and Texas Register argued that since slaves were cheap and money scarce, the importation of African slaves was not occurring because it was unprofitable. According to this paper, "After the revolution took place, not a single party of African slaves landed on the Texas coast." Actually small groups of slaves were smuggled in as late as 1858.

Meantime, in the case of the British, the elements that tended to advance relations with Texas to the primary plane became increasingly weighty. The most potent factor drawing the island nation and Texas toward each other was that the Industrial Revolution in the first and the rise in cotton production in the second coincided. In general, Southern cotton found a ready market in the British textile industry. In Texas, the rich virgin soil of the settled areas proved to be very suitable to cotton production. As early as April 1, 1826, the Nashville (Tennessee) Republican, as part of an advertisement aimed at attracting colonists, reported that "Local soils yield 2500 to 3000 weight of the world's best cotton per each acre of Texas lands." This is probably not much of an overstatement of the agricultural potential of Texas at the time.

According to John MacGregor, in his then authoritative history of the United States, The Progress of America from the Discovery by Columbus to the Year 1846, the export of cotton from Texas to the United States went up from 1,473,133 to 7,593,107 pounds between 1836 and 1843. The total value increased from $232,336.00 to $379,750.00 despite the price reduction caused by the economic slump in 1837.

In England, while the sugar interests took a dim view of Texas due to its potential for becoming a rival of British West Indies sugar produc-
tion, the textile manufacturers’ pro-Texas attitude was much more influential. At the time, England imported considerable cotton from the slave-holding South, despite the tariffs imposed on her products by the manufacturing North. It was easy to see that in the emergence of a new cotton market in an independent Texas unencumbered by United States tariffs, a great opportunity existed for British textile manufacturers to import a cheap raw product.

By the 1840s British trade with Texas far exceeded that of France and was somewhat greater than any other country except the United States. This exasperated charge’d’ affaires Saligny in his reports to his government. In his letter to Adolphe Thiers, June 17, 1840, he complained that only a single French ship from Marseilles had reached Texas. Meantime, though Britain had not even recognized the new state, eight or nine of her crafts had arrived in the course of the previous eighteen months, and “two more ships were soon expected in Matagorda.” Saligny saw the English traders as constantly outdoing his countrymen, to their own and their nation’s profit. In February 1841 he complained to Paris again, remarking that since winter had set in, five new British ships had arrived at Galveston and Matagorda. They had left loaded with cotton, while the Marseilles one continued to be the only one under French flag in the Republic’s ports.

Texas’ trade quickly expanded in scope. Over the entire year of 1844, at Galveston alone fifty-four United States cargo ships anchored, eleven British ones, thirteen from the German port of Bremen, one from France, one from the Austrian Empire, and three from Belgium. In the same year, twenty-seven American cargo ships departed, loaded with cotton valued at $33,500, and fifteen British ones carrying £59,000 worth of cotton. Further, ten Bremen ships left, the three from Belgium, and the one each from Austria and France. In its trade with Texas, Great Britain stood second only to the United States.

Along with the economic considerations encouraging close British-Texas ties, there existed a very important political one: the need to try to find some means to curb the seemingly insatiable appetite for territorial expansion of the United States. So far did the Americans’ roving eye extend that they were suspected — correctly as it soon turned out — of aiming at California. If Texans were stabilized as an independent nation, this clearly would constitute an obstacle to the United States’ westward outreach. Thus it is easy to see why in 1837 Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston suggested in a communication to the Chancellor of the Exchequer Thomas Spring-Rice that “...it would be better that Texas should not be incorporated with the Union.”

By 1841-1842, the mutual attractions between Britain and Texas were large enough to bring recognition from the first. Three treaties were prepared. As the price of recognition, Britain insisted in one of them that Texas agree to bring to an end any of her citizens’ participation in the
slave trade. Further, England nudged her foot in the door for a future expanded influence by means of a clause in one of the treaties providing for her to act as intermediary in Texas' troubles with Mexico. On its side, Texas, as a gesture, offered to pay part of Mexico's debt to Great Britain, which amounted to £9,000,000. Two of the treaties the Texas Senate ratified in 1841, but it took until the following year for it to accept the one abolishing the slave trade. That done, ratification papers were exchanged, and on June 28, 1842, Great Britain formally recognized the Texas Republic. 17

In so acting, England committed herself to Texas' future. Since at least at that moment Texas' acceptance of slavery represented a major obstacle to the North's willingness to accept the Lone Star Republic into the Union, it was in Britain's interest to bolster her Southwestern friend's inclination to stay independent, and thus to enhance the likelihood that Albion herself would be able before long to exert a large, long-term influence.

On Texas' side, for some time her leaders, feeling endangered by Mexico's continued threats and her unwillingness to concede independence, and spurned by the United States, were in a mood to be susceptible to blandishments. As former President Anton Jones wrote, Texas brought home to Britain that she had "cotton lands enough to raise sufficient of this great staple for the supply of the world. Texas was then [i.e., about 1843] a rich jewel lying derelict by the way." 18 As a further example, the famous Samuel Houston, writing charge'd'affairs Sir Charles Elliot in 1843, compared the United States territorial voraciousness to Rome of the late Republic and Empire. In response, it made him "...desire to see Texas occupy an independent position among the Nations of the earth." 19

In the effort to encourage Texas, England in the early 1840s had at her back the moral support of France and the other European powers, all of whom were concerned about the rapidly growing potency of the United States. This was so to such a degree at about 1843 that in one-time President Jones' opinion afterwards, war between the United States on the one hand and Britain, France, and Mexico on the other was entirely possible. 20

However, more important than the European powers' attitude at a distance was the need to induce Mexico to concede Texas' independence in time to forestall any possible increase of a favorable attitude toward annexation in the United States. Likewise essential was the nerve to brazen out accusations from the United States of undue interference in New World affairs on the part of Uncle Sam's favorite scapegoat and old-time enemy.

We have indications of the efforts to realize the first objective. In July 1843, Elliot sent a note to President Jones, a copy of which he dispatched to the new Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Aberdeen. In it, he offered "...assurances of the continued interest left by Her Majesty's
Government in the prosperity and independence of Texas, and of the full determination to persevere in efforts for the peaceful adjustment of the difficulties between this country (i.e., Texas) and Mexico, whenever a hope of success should present itself."21 As further evidence, in 1844, as the possibility of United States annexation became more likely, Britain and France drew up a joint statement that time did not permit them to put into effect. It read: "'Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom and Ireland and His Majesty the King of the French [are] strongly impressed with the importance of restoring Peace between the Republick of Texas and the Mexican Republick and of the establishment and preservation of the Republick of Texas as an Independent State under her own national Government."22

As it turned out, Britain failed in the attainment of both of her essential tactical needs, but not because she switched to a restrained and uninvolved policy. What changed was the person of the foreign secretary. Had the ever-aggressive Palmerston continued in office until the mid-40s, he surely would have pressed Mexico extremely hard to grant recognition to Texas without a moment more of delay, and he would have answered belligerently any American complaints of interference in New World concerns. However, his successor, the cautious Aberdeen, moved more sluggishly than he, and outcries from the United States made him hesitate. Loose talk had spread in the United States of British intentions to bring about the abolition of slavery everywhere, including Texas, and thus threatening the security of the southern half of the country. Through his minister to Washington, Richard Pakenham, Aberdeen gave reassurance of Britain's intention not to impose its influence in Texas nor try to abolish slavery there.23 He later warned Elliot, "You...should observe the greatest caution in all your dealings and conversation with the authorities of Texas, and...you should in no way commit your Government to any line of active policy with regard to that Country."24

That Aberdeen's fundamental outlook, however, was no different from Palmerston's is made plain by what he wrote next: "We consider that Independence of the highest importance for Mexico, for Texas herself, and even eventually for the United States, to which country, in the opinion of her Majesty's Government, the possession of Texas, although it might at the present Moment satisfy the peculiar interests of the South, and gratify the National vanity of all the States, would scarce fail, in no long time, to become a serious source of Contention, between the Northern and the Southern States and, at the same time expose the whole Confederation to great hazard."25

It was too late. The Democrats' victory in the November 1844 election made the United States acceptance of Texas more likely. It came to pass, when on March 1, 1845, Congress, by joint resolution of the two houses, case a majority in favor of incorporating the Lone Star entity. Thus, through inability to act rapidly and decisively, Britain found that time
had overtaken her desires. Belatedly, Elliott, in a secret, unauthorized trip to Mexico in May 1845, finally prevailed upon that nation to admit Texas' independence. In the recognition a provision was attached specifying that Texas must not unite with another. The Texas Congress, given the choice of an independence with this restriction, as well as no guarantee from Britain and France, or the offer to join the United States, much preferred the latter. It was unanimously so voted, June 16, 1845.

As for the afterward, William Kennedy, the British consul in Texas from 1841 to 1847, writing to Aberdeen's successor, the reinstituted Palmerston, gave it as his view that Britain could have forestalled annexation without producing war. By implication, he criticized Aberdeen as showing insufficient determination. All along, England had striven for an independent Texas, at whose side she hoped to stand as overseer and patron. Had this come to pass, the United States would have had a more stunted future than came her way through the acquisition of Texas.

NOTES

2American Expansionism in Modern times. (Moscow, 1985).
3Contemporary American Expansionism (Moscow, 1986).
5London Times, November 27, 1837.
6Morning Gazette (London), November 7, 1837.
7David M. Pletcher, The Diplomacy of Annexation (Columbia, Missouri, 1973), p. 79.
8Telegraph and Texas Register, July 5, 1843.
10Malcolm D. McLean, ed., Papers Concerning Robertson's Colony (Fort Worth, Texas, 1972); II, pp. 479-480, 531-532.
13Ibid., p. 206.
16Ibid., p. 81.
19"The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, 16 (July, 1912-April, 1913), pp. 321-323. After annexation, Houston, in need of regaining popularity, said the contrary — The Southwestern Historical Quarterly. 20 (July, 1916-April, 1917) pp. 400-403-, but we can assume his viewpoint at the time expressed his true feeling.
11 The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, 17 (July, 1913-April, 1914), pp. 74-75.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 21 (July, 1917-April, 1918), pp. 211-213.