



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

From Russia With Love

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Image: Russian Frigate *Osliba* in Alexandria Harbor. Photo, Library of Congress.

When the Civil War began in 1861, the Confederate and Union governments courted European support for their causes. Although France's Napoleon III made overtures to Southern leaders and England constructed some warships for them as well, Northern diplomacy ultimately dissuaded both from mounting a major military intervention. However, in the fall of 1863 the North found an unlikely ally in the Czar of Russia, who sent two naval forces detachments without prompting to San Francisco and New York.

In September, the Russian frigate *Osliba* arrived in New York Harbor, much to the surprise of local and national officials, including President Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet. Named for Rodion Oslabya, a Russian monk from St. Sergius's Trinity Abbey noted for his role in the 1380 Battle of Kulikovo, the ship sailed along the East River to Flushing Bay off Long Island's North Shore, where it was soon joined by several other armed ships from the Russian naval fleet. The fleet was welcomed by influential New Yorkers, who viewed the arrival as an expression of international support for the Union cause.

Major New York newspapers, including *The New York Times*, favorably described every detail of the ship. Descriptions of the frigate and its 450-man crew complimented its design, massive armament, impeccable cleanliness and the ability of every crew member to speak fluent English and French. The press commended the ship's commander, Captain Boutakoff, for postponing the acceptance of a city council resolution of welcome, a reception at New York's City Hall and a banquet in his honor at the prestigious Metropolitan Club until the rest of his fleet had arrived.

Several weeks later, the fleet left New York and moved southward, anchoring for the winter just off Alexandria's shoreline. Taken upon its arrival in the Port City, this 1863 photograph of the ship's impressive deck was one of the earliest taken by Andrew J. Russell, who learned the craft only a few months before.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Once here, Russian sailors toured the city and nearby military fortifications ringing Washington. During that time, the Osliba was visited by first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, as well as hundreds of Union soldiers stationed in Alexandria.

While Union authorities and citizens viewed the Russian naval visit with appreciation, the Czar's Union support is now viewed more skeptically. Russia's rocky relations with England and France were coming to a head at that time, and the American visit may have been a subtle signal to both countries to stay out of the conflict. Wintering in warmer American climates, rather than ice-bound Russian ports, also allowed the fleet to respond quickly to any possible international incidents.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.