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<https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.811821>

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Slavery & Abolition, 2013
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2013.811821>



Monarchy, Gender and Emancipation: Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna of Russia and Princess Isabel of Brazil and the Ending of Servile Labour

Shane O'Rourke

This article examines the long-neglected role of two royal women in the emancipation of servile labour in the empires of Russia and Brazil. It argues that the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna of Russia and Princess Isabel of Brazil were significant actors in the emancipation process. Gender, monarchy and emancipation created a conjuncture which enabled these women, in spite of all the obstacles, to enter into the struggle for emancipation and make a material difference to its outcome. The article emphasizes the importance of the monarchical systems in the emancipation struggle which these women used to further the cause of emancipation.

We should each have our own particular
 interest: for myself I have always
 thought about emancipation.

Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna¹
 Aside from this as I have already
 said the idea of the injustice of slavery
 and the plenty that for too long the
 lords had enjoyed from their slaves
 could not fail to act on my spirit.

Princess Isabel²

Royal women do not occupy a privileged space in the narratives of the emancipation of servile labour in the nineteenth century. It is only relatively recently that the contribution of women in Britain and the USA to the ending of slavery has been recognized by historians.³ In the mid-nineteenth century, the two most completely servile societies in the world, the empires of Russia and Brazil, were authoritarian, monarchical systems which offered much less scope for the type of popular mobilizations seen

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in Britain and the USA. Even here, however, women were to be highly influential in ending servile labour. More precisely, two royal women, Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, the aunt of Tsar Alexander II (1855–1881), and Princess Isabel, heir to the Brazilian throne, intervened decisively to help bring an end to servile labour in their countries. Elena provided the detailed blueprint for the emancipation of some 23 million private serfs and engaged in a prolonged, semi-covert political battle to persuade Tsar Alexander II to accept an emancipation based broadly on the principles she put forward. For the time and place, these principles were extremely radical.⁴ Isabel, acting as regent in 1887–1888, undermined a government that was resolutely opposed to emancipation, engineered its dismissal and appointed a new government committed to abolition which was immediate, unconditional and without indemnification.

It is these royal women and the wider political and cultural contexts in which they existed that makes the ending of servile labour in both empires a suitable case for comparison. This article seeks to explore the activity of the two princesses and those political and cultural contexts. It will give a particular emphasis to the monarchical systems of Russia and Brazil which paradoxically provided the two women with a privileged platform of influence while simultaneously surrounding them with strong ideological and cultural barriers preventing them from using that influence. Both women found in the issue of emancipation the means to take advantage of their position in the power structures while remaining, at least in their own minds, within the cultural and ideological limits of what was permitted to them as women. The intertwining of these elements – gender, monarchy and emancipation – form the subject matter of this article. The convergence of these strands created the context in which Elena and Isabel intervened: a context that was immanent in the nature of both empires. But it was the issue of emancipation that transcended and transformed that context, providing the motive for both women to enter the public sphere and participate in the struggle for emancipation. None of this of course is to argue that emancipation was primarily, still less solely, due to either woman. Nevertheless, their part was significant and needs to be appreciated if we are to understand the complexity of emancipation in Russia and Brazil.

Before starting, however, it is necessary to say a few words about servile labour in the two empires. It is not my purpose here to give a detailed comparison of the similarities and differences between Russian serfdom and Brazilian slavery.⁵ Rather it is to consider them as whole, that is as servile societies rather than societies with serfs or slaves.⁶ It is worth emphasizing that Russian serfdom was much closer to chattel slavery than the serfdoms of western or central Europe. In Russia on the eve of emancipation, serfs formed almost two-thirds of the 74 million population of the empire: 22,676,550 serfs belonged to private owners while a further 25,355,218 belonged to the state and crown.⁷ In Brazil in 1872, slaves made up 1,510,806 out of a total population of 8,419,672 or almost 18 per cent.⁸ In both empires, servile labour was ubiquitous and particularly so in the core areas, including the capitals where large numbers of domestic serfs and slaves existed.⁹ It was not weight of numbers alone, however, that made Russia and Brazil servile societies. The two empires were servile societies because

the essence of the master/bondsman relationship was diffused far beyond that basic relationship: the power of the father over his family, the patron over his client and the superior over his subordinate were an extension of this archetypal relationship.¹⁰ Joachim Nabuco, the great Brazilian abolitionist, recognized the parallels between
85 cognate systems of bondage, especially in their negative effects.

Wherever one studies it, slavery passed over the territory and peoples that received it like a breath of destruction. Whether one looks at the *ergastulas* of ancient Italy, the villages of Russia, the plantations of the southern states or the sugar mills and fazendas of Brazil, it is always ruin, intoxication and death.¹¹

90 It was in this sense that Russia and Brazil were servile societies.

The historiography of Elena and Isabel

95 The historiography of emancipation in Russia and Brazil has given scant attention to either woman. The replacement of both monarchies by militantly republican regimes that, for all their commitment to progress, were aggressively masculine in ethos deepened the obscurity surrounding the two women.¹² Neither regime had any interest in celebrating the achievements of two princesses. Before the 1917 Revolution, there
100 were only two essays devoted to Elena; after the Revolution, there was silence.¹³ In the standard Soviet view, emancipation was the inevitable consequence of a change in the mode of production from feudalism to capitalism, driven by the necessity of the latter for free labour. Individuals, particularly royal ones, were irrelevant.¹⁴ Western historiography is limited to some important articles on Elena and fleeting references to her
105 in works on the emancipation.¹⁵ Most of this scholarship, however, conceives of Elena as essentially passive, her activity restricted to bringing the tsar into contact with the reformers and then discreetly slipping into the background while the men engaged with the great issue of emancipation. Isabel has fared somewhat better, being the subject of three biographies.¹⁶ However, a recent study of Isabel complained that ‘information is generally scarce, insubstantial and in the majority of cases omits even expressing comments on
110 her style of action in the conduct of public affairs.’¹⁷ In the classic explanations of the emancipation in Brazil, there is an emphasis either on the popular movement to end slavery or, reminiscent of the Soviet view, an emphasis on a shift to capitalist modes of production.¹⁸ High politics in general and Isabel in particular are negligible factors
115 in this great transformation.¹⁹ Even a recent perceptive account of Isabel that does give due attention to high politics stresses Isabel’s adherence to the most conservative wing of the emancipation movement which underestimates just how radical Isabel’s actions were during 1887–1888.²⁰ Only one study of the emancipation grasps the importance of Isabel as a political actor in the final year of the existence²¹ of slavery.

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The Romanov and Bragança monarchies

The Romanovs and the Braganças were among the great European dynasties, dominating the political, social and cultural lives of their countries.²² The Russian Empire

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under Nicholas I was a highly authoritarian, repressive police state in which the space for any public discussion was extremely limited. In Russia the tsar was 'a monarch, autocratic and unlimited' according to the Fundamental Laws of the empire, giving an elegant simplicity to the exercise of power.²³ In practice, of course, his rule was limited by a sprawling, inefficient bureaucracy and the interests of the noble class on whom he depended for his military officers and higher officials.²⁴ Nevertheless, the tsar was the focal point of the entire system: his body, the place where the political, social and religious worlds merged. Wherever he was became the centre of the empire.

In contrast to the Russian Empire, the Empire of Brazil was a constitutional monarchy which guaranteed basic liberal freedoms and provided a much greater public sphere. However, beneath its liberal façade, the empire was a highly coercive, authoritarian oligarchy.²⁵ In Brazil, the position of the emperor was more complex than in Russia. Article 101 of the Constitution of 1824 placed considerable power in the hands of the monarch. He shared power with three other pillars of the constitution: an executive, an assembly and an independent judiciary. But the Constitution also charged the emperor with overseeing the smooth running of the system, and he possessed the power to intervene when necessary, the *poder moderador*. This included the right to dismiss the government and dissolve the assembly.²⁶ The Constitution gave little guidance on when this power could be exercised, leaving it to the emperor's discretion.²⁷ The exercise of the *poder moderador* was always controversial, particularly among those who felt that they had lost out because of its use.²⁸ Even more than the Russian tsar, Dom Pedro II (1841–1889) had to take account of powerful vested interests, above all the interests of the slave-owning plantation class. Nevertheless, within these constraints, Dom Pedro II, as he grew in maturity and confidence from the 1850s, asserted his role at the centre of the system, ensuring that all the other elements gravitated towards him.²⁹

The power of the monarch, however, was not limited to those ascribed to him under the law or constitution. Charisma was an essential part of the power of the monarch and adhered to him alone. The monarch's appearance and demeanour were charged with power and meaning for the elites and the masses in both empires.³⁰ This form of power was very easy to overlook but as Sean Wilentz argued, 'nonverbal public displays and private rhetoric – political spectacle, public art, everyday gestures and remarks – can carry far more meaning and significance for contemporaries than the most eloquent, but often unread, political treatises'.³¹ These encounters with the monarch were a vital means of establishing who among the elite had his confidence, much more so than formal declarations of support. No minister or government could survive without enjoying the confidence of the emperor and being seen to enjoy that confidence.³² Charismatic power amplified the authority of the monarch, giving him and his actions, even the most ordinary, a significance that no other figure came close to possessing.

Women and the court

The assumptions and values that sought to shape the lives of women in the nineteenth century placed royal women in a particularly invidious position.³³ For royal women,

the bourgeois ideal of the family predicated on a sharp separation of the public and the private had little meaning in a world where nearly everything about their lives was public. Women of the royal family were expected to be role models for other women, hence their private lives had to be lived in public.³⁴ From the great rites of passage in life to the banalities of everyday existence, they endured a life of intense and unrelenting scrutiny. Royal women were expected to embody contemporary notions of morality, but in the public gaze. In all these ways, they were an essential part of the power of the monarchy, a means of displaying and affirming its right to rule to itself, the elite and to the wider society.³⁵

Despite being an integral part of the display of power, part of the intimate circle of the monarch and a conduit to his attention, royal women were not to succumb to the temptation of making use of these opportunities. Subordination, deference and self-effacement were required from them. Fulfilling both roles simultaneously was difficult to say the least. Queen Victoria was criticized both for interfering too much in the affairs of the state and for taking too little interest in them.³⁶

In the Russian and Brazilian empires, royal women were an indispensable part of the imagery of monarchy just as they were in other European dynasties. In addition, they helped establish the fragile and far from universally recognized European credentials of the two empires.³⁷ Both courts in the nineteenth century grew more patriarchal in tone and more hostile to female influence as the decades passed. Generally, the same values of obedience and deference were expected from royal women as in the wider society.³⁸ A lady-in-waiting at the Russian court in the 1850s described Nicholas' attitude to his wife, but it was equally applicable to all the women of the royal family.

For him she was a charming bird whom he held in a gold and diamond studded cage and to whom he fed nectar and ambrosia and lulled with melodies and scents. But he would have clipped her wings without any regret if she had wanted to break out from the golden bars of this cage.³⁹

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Even in the freer atmosphere of Brazil near the end of the century, large sections of the political nation found the notion of a female ruler abhorrent. The Brazilian political elite had refused to accept Dom Pedro's older sister as regent after the abdication of his father in 1831 because she was a woman.⁴⁰ Isabel attracted a storm of criticism from supposedly the most progressive section of Brazilian society, the Republican movement, during her time as regent. Antonio da Silva Jardim, the doyen of the Republicans, was hysterical in his denunciations of Isabel as in his revealingly titled *A Pátria em Perigo* speech in February 1888:

She does not possess not one, not one of the qualities required in order to govern. The first and original obstacle for her is her sex. Gentlemen, among its wise legislation the French nation has included salic law which prevents a woman succeeding to the throne. It was well advised. First nature and then society through long experience which has always been justified has given to each sex its functions in the human economy: those of advice and love to the wife and of command and action to the husband. When a woman moves beyond her role – it has been said – she tarnishes her sex and is only able to become a bad man.⁴¹

For many men, from the most reactionary to the most progressive, women, royal or otherwise, belonged in a cage. How royal and aristocratic women negotiated the competing demands placed upon them depended a great deal on individual character, inclinations and circumstances. What those who propounded this ideology had not foreseen, however, was a situation in which women felt driven by the demands of the private sphere to cross into the public one.

The early lives of Elena and Isabel

Elena Pavlovna was born Princess Frederika Charlotte of Wurttemberg on 28 December 1806. She spent her formative years in Paris, a city bursting with intellectual creativity and political excitement, where, under the guidance of the scientist, George Cuvier, she developed a lifelong interest in the serious pursuit of knowledge. In 1822, she was selected as a bride for the youngest brother of Tsar Alexander I, moved to Russia and, on her conversion to Orthodoxy, became Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna. Elena's marriage was not a happy one and she detested the life of the Russian Court under Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855). She had exchanged Paris for Moscow and her intellectual ambitions were stifled by the oppressive atmosphere of Nicholas's Russia and an equally oppressive husband. Only in the late 1840s did Elena find an outlet for her intellectual ambitions with the opening of her salon in St Petersburg which became a glittering fixture in the life of the city for nearly 20 years. Intellectuals, artists, writers, young officials, senior statesman and even Tsar Nicholas attended. It was one of the few spaces in the Russia of Nicholas I where difficult subjects could be discussed without fear of the police.⁴²

Princess Isabel was born in 1846 in Rio de Janeiro and experienced a happy, stable and sheltered childhood. She was well educated and brought up with the values and expectations appropriate to an aristocratic women in a deeply patriarchal society. Isabel's outlook on life was shaped by her Catholicism and this remained a reference point for her throughout her life. She married Gaston of Orleans, the Conde D'Eu and the grandson of King Louis-Philippe. Isabel's marriage was happy and she fulfilled the role of wife and mother in an exemplary manner. However, the death of her elder brother when she was four transformed Isabel's life. She became the Princess Imperial and heir to the throne, a deeply troubling notion for a society suffused with patriarchal values.⁴³

The two princesses had profoundly different experiences in their upbringings and their lives. Elena was very much a child of the late Enlightenment while Isabel was a product of the mid-Victorian world. Yet they had in common lives shaped by the experiences of being women and senior members of ruling dynasties. Both conditions defined their existence: one embedding morals and codes of behaviour appropriate to women, the other subtly challenging those morals and codes by forcing these women to be key players in the dynastic theatres of power. Navigating between these shifting poles and somehow fulfilling both demands required constant effort, attention and self-abnegation. As women, the world of public affairs was forbidden them, but as members of the dynasty they were ever-present within the penumbra of power that

surrounded the monarch. Reconciling the world of female expectations with the male world of power appeared impossible. However, emancipation elided the two worlds, enabling the two princesses to act politically because they were women.

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The turn to activism

In opening a salon that rapidly achieved a very high profile, Elena demonstrated that royal women could be more than passive adornments in Nicholas' theatre of power. This had been a deliberate choice by a mature woman. Isabel, through the death of her brother, had more profoundly challenged the notions of male and female spheres even though it had not been her choice. As she grew older and especially when she exercised the powers of regent, that sense of challenge grew, although Isabel remained scrupulously observant of the constitutional proprieties during her first two regencies. Both women had sent ripples through the gender expectations of their society, but had not flagrantly challenged them. Neither woman was a feminist and had little interest in advancing women's rights.⁴⁴ Elena had created a safe haven in which difficult subjects could be discussed while Isabel had clearly demonstrated that she had no personal desire for power and found public office a burden. Neither princess had sought to influence or control public policy. Yet both women deliberately and purposefully entered the political arena on the issue of servile labour which was the most contentious issue of all. In Russia, it was only ever raised in secret committees while even in the freer atmosphere in Brazil, the public spaces in which it could be raised had been systematically closed down.⁴⁵ Elena and Isabel did not naively stray into forbidden territory and were well aware that emancipation was the most taboo subject. The intervention of either woman on this issue in a servile society could not be ambiguous or finessed as a stretching of boundaries but was the clearest possible challenge to the prevailing ideology and to the most powerful class in both empires. How can we explain such a radical shift in behaviour?

Elena had long been interested in the serf question. Since the death of her husband in 1849, she had been the mistress of 15,000 serfs on her Karlovka estates in what is now Ukraine.⁴⁶ In 1859 at the height of her battle for emancipation, she told her close friend, Princess Cherkasskaia, that she had 'always thought about emancipation'.⁴⁷ For virtually the entire reign of Nicholas I, such thoughts had to be hidden. Nicholas and Elena had always enjoyed a close relationship, but that deepened during the Crimean War as Nicholas became emotionally dependent on Elena, visiting her almost daily.⁴⁸ She was one of the very few people in front of whom Nicholas dropped the mask of the all-powerful autocrat. He told Elena that he hoped that 'perhaps his son would succeed in freeing the peasantry from serfdom, which he himself had failed to do'. From this point on, according to one of her closest friends, 'the grand duchess regarded herself as the most faithful defender of the great idea of the liberation of the peasantry . . .'⁴⁹

All those involved in the emancipation, including Elena, regarded the liberation of the peasantry not just as a necessary act of state, but as a moral crusade. In May 1859, Elena got into a blazing row in her salon with Count Otto Von Bismarck, the then

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Prussian ambassador to St Petersburg, over emancipation. Bismarck complained that the emancipation of the serfs in Prussia had been ruinous for the nobility. Elena's friend, Princess Cherkasskaia, related that 'the Grand Duchess took exception to this and began with great fervour to say that the long abuse of peasant labour more than justified the necessity of some losses on the part of the nobility'.⁵⁰ Elena revealed most explicitly her conception of the sacred nature of the emancipation when General Rostovtsev, one of Elena's key allies and chairman of the Editing Commission drafting the emancipation legislation, was dying in January 1860. Speaking of his imminent death, Elena said to Princess Cherkasskaia that 'I have always thought that Rostovtsev will be like Moses. He will not see the promised land'.⁵¹ Such elevated language and metaphor marked the uniqueness of emancipation as a cause in Elena's eyes.⁵²

Isabel had been forced into a public role by circumstances rather than choice. She stood aloof from the day-to-day political fray, allowing her governments to get on with the business of governing.⁵³ There was little to indicate that Isabel was seeking to emulate her father's forceful presence in the governance of the empire during her first two regencies. She appeared content to be guided by her ministers without seeking to impose her will on them. In effect, Isabel appeared to have internalized the belief that politics was essentially a male affair and only unfortunate chance had placed her at the head of the political system. There was no indication that Isabel was capable of or even desired to take command of the political system and impose her will upon it. Yet Isabel was not lacking in beliefs or the will or courage to defend them if necessary. In 1874, when a conflict between the state and the church erupted leading to the arrest of two bishops, Isabel was appalled. Despite the phalanx of male authority, including her father arrayed against her, Isabel did not hesitate to make clear her disapproval. She wrote to him while en route to France: 'One thing that would please me is that when I arrive there I would know that the bishops were free'.⁵⁴ Although she was not regent at the time, her temerity clearly shocked many members of the male political elite who had not expected such resolution from Isabel.⁵⁵ It was an indication that Isabel had independence of mind and sufficient will and courage to act when something touched her core beliefs as the arrest of the bishops did.

In the same way, her rejection of slavery as an evil was long-standing. Her grandfather, Dom Pedro I, described slavery 'as a cancer that is rotting Brazil' while her father's opposition to slavery had been apparent for decades.⁵⁶ Her husband, the Conde D'Eu, as Commander-in-Chief of the Brazilian forces at the end of the Paraguayan War in 1870 had unilaterally abolished slavery in Paraguay by military order.⁵⁷ Isabel shared their revulsion. In an extended note to her children, written hurriedly at the end of 1888 and never revised, Isabel asked 'how did abolitionist opinion gain ground so quickly within me? The idea showed itself, and had done so for a long time, as humanitarian, moral, generous, great and was supported by the Church'.⁵⁸ Isabel's vision of emancipation was a moral one, rooted in the teachings of the Church and in the more secular currents of the time. For her, it was these elements that demanded a response from her, not in spite of the fact that she was a woman but because of it. As regent, that response could only be public and hence political. Again speaking of her actions in engineering the fall of the government of the

Baron of Cotegipe which had steadfastly opposed abolition, Isabel made clear that her response to the promptings of her conscience could not be restricted to her own private sphere but demanded that she enter the public sphere in the most decisive way.

325 Would it have been better to let things continue until the opening of Parliament in which we would have seen the bogging down of the Ministry, forcing me to request its dismissal? I do not believe so. I do not know how the country would have borne a delay of two months. Aside from this, I was well aware of the traditional way of the Baron of Cotegipe's, which, I am not afraid to confess, I feared would box me in and I would not find the a way to give the blow I judged necessary.⁵⁹

330 Nor is there any question that Isabel stumbled into the political arena unaware of the possible consequences of her actions. 'On the day that the Princess Imperial made up her mind to carry out her great coup for humanity,' wrote Joachim Nabucco, 'she knew everything that she was risking'.⁶⁰ Like Elena, morality drove Isabel from the private into the public, reconciling the competing expectations of her as a woman with her public role. For both women, their position at the apex of
335 the two empires provided them with the opportunity to put into effect the demands of their consciences, but neither woman did this in a vacuum. They were dependent on the wider political context to make any intervention on their part feasible. For Elena, it was the change of reign and the new mood in Russia while, for Isabel,
340 it was the growth of a powerful popular anti-slavery movement.

Elena and the abolition of serfdom

Elena's contribution to the abolition of serfdom was twofold. First, she provided the
345 blueprint on which the law of 1861 was largely based. Secondly, she provided the political protection necessary within the royal court for the reformers to see their work through to the end. Overwhelming the court and particularly Alexander's immediate entourage were opposed to the emancipation.⁶¹ Without Elena's intervention, the outcome of the emancipation would have been very different. The bureaucracy had
350 shown repeatedly throughout the reign of Nicholas that it was incapable of coming up with proposals to emancipate the serfs and few believed that Alexander II, widely seen as lacking resolution, would be capable of resisting the intense pressure that the *camarilla* could bring to bear on him.⁶² It was in neutralizing these two inveterate supporters of the status quo that Elena made her contribution to the emancipa-
355 tion. That Elena could do this was only possible because of the monarchical context.

It was Alexander himself, very unexpectedly, who provided Elena with the pretext she had been looking for. In his famous speech to the Moscow nobility in 1856, Alexander told the nobility that 'it was better to abolish serfdom from above than wait until it begins to abolish itself from below'. Denying he had any immediate plans to abolish
360 serfdom, he nevertheless asked the nobility to think of ways of doing this.⁶³ This was the chance for which Elena had been waiting. As a substantial proprietor of serfs, Elena could legitimately respond to the tsar's appeal. In contrast to the myriad nebulous schemes floating around at this time, Elena adopted a very different approach. She commissioned her friend, the talented official Nikolai Miliutin, to draft proposals

for the emancipation of her serfs. These proposals were detailed, legalistic and written in the language of the bureaucracy.⁶⁴ The project was based on three radical principles: immediate ending of the judicial power of the lord over the serf, freeing the peasant with land for which the landlord would be compensated, and the communal ownership of peasant land.⁶⁵ The principles were not in themselves new, but none of them had the rigour or detail of Elena's proposal. Although presented as an act of private charity by a benevolent mistress, thereby offering a fig leaf to gender sensibilities, Elena had set up an effective pilot project for the entire emancipation.⁶⁶ It was an astonishingly bold initiative for a woman to take, far in advance of any other project or proposal. In effect, Elena had cut out the bureaucracy from the critical process of establishing the norms on which emancipation would be based, thereby removing at a stroke one of the major obstacles to emancipation. Elena's action shocked Petersburg society, and even the tsar was taken aback, neither accepting nor rejecting Elena's proposals.⁶⁷

Instead in 1856, he asked the bureaucracy to examine ways of carrying out the emancipation. When nine months later it reported that it was impossible, Alexander unexpectedly refused to accept this. This refusal was the critical change from his father's reign. A public appeal to the nobility in 1857, the so-called Nazimov Rescript, to participate in the reform process took the matter out of the hands of the bureaucracy and led to a deluge of proposals on emancipation.⁶⁸ To review all of these on the advice of his close friend, General Rostovtsev, Alexander set up a new committee to draft proposals for an emancipation law. This committee, known as the Editing Commission, was packed with Elena's friends, men sympathetic to her view of the emancipation, including the chairman, General Rostovtsev, and Nikolai Miliutin who had drafted the Karlovka proposals.⁶⁹ Most importantly, the committee existed outside the normal bureaucratic structures and was answerable directly to Alexander. In bypassing the bureaucracy, Alexander had removed one of the two major obstacles to reform. There was little doubt that the Editing Commission would propose an emancipation along the lines laid out by Elena. What was far less certain was whether its proposals would ever become law.

Elena understood better than anyone the acute vulnerability of the commission in court politics. It was exposed, isolated and an object of intense hatred on the part of the nobility.⁷⁰ Alexander's support was vital, but very uncertain, especially as he never unequivocally backed it. The pressure on Alexander from his entourage to abandon the commission was unrelenting throughout its 15-month existence. Amidst the vitriolic and poisonous politics of the court, the Commission was defenceless. Only Rostovtsev out of the members of the Commission had constant access to the tsar. It was in this viper's pit that Elena set about protecting the Commission, strengthening the tsar's resolution and demoralizing her enemies. Her salon provided her with the means to accomplish these goals. Elena controlled this space, who entered it and the interactions that took place there. In particular, she understood the supreme delicacy of how to approach the intimate space around the body of the tsar. Elena warned her friends that Alexander 'is jealous of his power'.⁷¹ Neither Elena nor her salon had any official standing, of course, and no role in the bureaucratic structure of the state.

But the presence of the tsar transformed the salon into a space that pulsed with power. By getting the tsar to talk to the members of the Commission, by ensuring that he was seen talking to them and demonstrating small gestures of affection to them, she was communicating to the court, the bureaucracy and the elite, in general, his attitude to the Commission. Those watching had a fluent understanding of the semiotics of the tsar's body language, his tone of voice and his demeanour and were in no doubt that the tsar, wittingly or unwittingly, was signalling his support for the Commission and its version of emancipation.⁷² Excluded absolutely as a woman from the bureaucratic power structures, Elena was able to use her access to the charismatic power of the tsar to protect the Commission and ensure that one of the key weapons of its enemies, their access to the tsar, was rendered impotent. When the Commission closed in 1860, it had produced a law substantially in line with the Karlovka proposals. It was subject to minor revisions in the final stages of its passage into law, but the Act of 1861 was very much the one drafted by the Editing Commission between 1858 and 1860.⁷³

Isabel's third regency

Unlike Isabel's first two regencies, her third from June 1887 until August 1889, was unplanned and unexpected. Isabel had just arrived in France for an extended stay when the sudden deterioration of the emperor's health forced her to return to Brazil. He left immediately on her return and Isabel became regent for the third time. The empire, however, was not the stable polity of her first two regencies. The consensus through which it had been governed since the accession of the emperor was breaking down. The slave-owning elite, sections of the political elite, the armed forces and even the Church were all aggrieved, new social forces were challenging the oligarchical system and the emperor himself was no longer the unifying force he had been and had become a figure of derision.⁷⁴ The prestige of the monarchy had probably never been lower than when Isabel assumed the regency for the third time.

But the most immediate crisis was the anti-slavery movement that now gripped the country. Slaves were fleeing the plantations in large numbers and an emancipation movement was surging through the country, drawing in more and more people around the issue of immediate abolition. Public subscriptions were raised to purchase the freedom of slaves and a meticulous campaign, waged street by street, city by city and state by state, was ending slavery in more and more places. For the first time in Brazilian history, large numbers of women participated in a public campaign.⁷⁵ A strident political campaign, led by gifted journalists and activists demanding immediate abolition, gave a much harder edge to this civic activism. Behind the issue of slavery lay a desire for a much broader transformation of the empire and its political and economic structures.⁷⁶ Even more threatening to the established order was the rapid development of an illegal anti-slavery movement which encouraged slaves to flee, provided transport to safe havens and helped to sustain and protect these havens from the police. The symbol of this second movement became a white camellia grown in that most famous of havens for runaway slaves, the *quilombo* of Leblon on the outskirts

of Rio de Janeiro. The camellia was the badge of all those committed to emancipation by direct action.⁷⁷

445 Facing this turmoil was the conservative government of Baron de Cotegipe. Cote-
gipe believed that no government action was either necessary or desirable as the Law
of the Free Womb in 1871 had ensured the eventual demise of slavery, albeit a very
lingering one. He was determined to resist the clamour for emancipation, calculat-
ing that a mixture of force and delay would lead to the dissipation of the move-
ment.⁷⁸ Cotegipe presided over a united cabinet and a stable majority in
450 Parliament and, not surprisingly, he had the unwavering support of the slaveowners
of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Minas Gerais, the three biggest slave states in the
empire. Cotegipe later defended his refusal to introduce emancipation by contemp-
tuously telling the Senate that a good government was not guided by popular
emotion.⁷⁹ He did not greet Isabel's arrival as regent with enthusiasm, preferring
455 to deal with an aged and sick emperor than a woman in the prime of her life
and, moreover, one with strong views on slavery. Nevertheless he did not doubt
that he could manage Isabel.⁸⁰

Isabel for her part believed that she could have a good working relationship with
Cotegipe.⁸¹ What soured the relationship was Isabel's increasing certainty that Cote-
gipe was determined to block emancipation through impassivity. 'Each day convinced
460 me more,' she wrote, 'that he would do nothing'.⁸² It was no secret where Isabel's sym-
pathies lay, but she had to observe the constitutional proprieties of her office, regard-
less of her personal beliefs. It was particularly difficult for her as the clamour which
had greeted her return gave way to stinging criticism of her refusal to intervene.
Typical was an article published in the *Gazeta da Tarde* on 20 August by José de Patro-
465 cínio, a leading abolitionist:

Her Highness the Regent doesn't want to touch what her august father left. To her
filial piety, it seems an irreverence to alter the established order of thing especially as
she is hoping for the quick return of the invalid of Baden-Baden to his domains.⁸³

470 Isabel's public passivity was at odds with her private beliefs and wishes. She wrote:
'the abolition question was gaining ground and worried me more all the time and
every day I was more convinced that we had to go in this direction.'⁸⁴ In private,
she urged Cotegipe to introduce an abolitionist measure, but to Isabel's increasing irri-
tation all he would do was promise he would look into the matter. In fact, relations
475 became so bad that Isabel confessed that the mere sight of Cotegipe infuriated her.⁸⁵

The deadlock between the government and the public would have seemed an ideal
opportunity for Isabel to use the *poder moderador* to dismiss the government and
appoint a new one committed to abolition. However, Cotegipe was the head of a law-
fully elected government which commanded a majority in the Chamber and could not
480 be dismissed because Isabel disliked his government. The use of the *poder moderador*
had always been controversial, but past controversies would pale into insignificance
compared to the one that would erupt if Isabel dismissed the government as both
she and Cotegipe well knew. Isabel as a woman was in a much weaker position than
her father. Cotegipe had warned Isabel that any rash act could put the monarchy

itself in danger.⁸⁶ The use of the *poder moderador* in such a highly polarized situation would be tantamount to a *coup d'état* with incalculable consequences.

485 Confronted with this situation, probably the most appropriate course of action for Isabel to have taken as regent, and certainly as a woman, was to let events take their course. However, she was not prepared to do this. Instead, prevented from using her constitutional powers for the time being or speaking openly on the subject, she drew on the charismatic powers of the monarchy to signal her support for the emancipation movement and undermine the government. Each day, Isabel received bunches of white camellias from the *quilombo* of Leblon for her table and chapel. She even on occasion wore them in public.⁸⁷ The symbolism of Isabel's actions was lost on no one, least of all the government. In choosing the camellia, Isabel identified herself not only with abolition but also with abolition in its most radical form. By publicly extending her support to the *quilombo* of Leblon, Isabel was endorsing the flight of slaves from their masters and the underground movement that sheltered and protected them. Her use of the camellia caused astonishment across the political spectrum and no little annoyance.⁸⁸ In February 1888, Isabel used the camellia to deliver a devastating blow to the authority of the government. To celebrate the freeing of all slaves in the city of Petrópolis, the summer residence of the royal family, Isabel organized a public celebration in the city. Riding in an open carriage with her family through the streets of Petrópolis, the ecstatic citizenry rained camellias down on Isabel's carriage in what became known as the Battle of Flowers. Such a public identification of the acting head of state with the abolition movement in its legal and illegal forms struck a devastating blow to the credibility of the government.⁸⁹

505 Isabel's use of the camellia unequivocally identified her with abolition and with opposition to her own government, draining it of authority and prestige. But she went further than this. She allowed her children to publish an abolitionist newspaper from the Imperial Palace and sent copies to her father, further undermining the government.⁹⁰ Most astonishingly of all, she gave shelter to fugitive slaves in the Palace at Petrópolis. 'Fourteen Africans,' Andre Rebouças recorded in his diary after a visit to the palace, 'who had fled from the neighbouring fazendas were fed in the Imperial Palace at Petrópolis.'⁹¹ Isabel had turned the palace into a *quilombo*, the quintessential Brazilian expression of resistance to slavery.⁹² José de Patrocínio, one of Isabel's fiercest critics, grasped the significance of Isabel's actions, naming her 'the saint and the sweet mother of captives and poured scorn on the republican movement which had remained silent throughout the whole crisis. Isabel's use of the monarchy's charismatic powers to make public and very political statements without saying a word, enabled her to escape the constitutional straightjacket Cotegeipe had tried to put her in and to destroy his government's authority in the country at large.

520 Isabel had undermined the credibility of Cotegeipe's government and its ability to repress the emancipation movement, but this was far from resolving the crisis. As long as Cotegeipe's remained there would be no emancipation and Isabel was still faced with using the *poder moderador* with all its attendant risks if she wanted to bring the crisis to a resolution. What was needed was a pretext to force Cotegeipe's resignation without the use of the *poder moderador*. A relatively trivial incident in April

1888 provided Isabel with the pretext she needed. The police in Rio de Janeiro severely beat a sailor, which provoked a public outcry. Isabel on the 3rd and 4th March sent two highly critical letters to the Minister of Justice. In content, these letters were sharp and made clear her displeasure. The tone was monarchical and commanding, devoid of hesitation, deference or any other supposedly feminine qualities.⁹³ Cotegipe immediately recognized that Isabel's overt displeasure had made his position impossible and he wrote to her on the 7th March that 'there remains to the cabinet no other alternative apart from requesting, as it does respectfully request, its collective dismissal'.⁹⁴ Isabel, however, openly breaking with convention, refused to accept Cotegipe's nomination for his replacement, another Conservative opposed to abolition, and appointed João de Alfredo, a Conservative who was committed to abolition. She insisted that abolition must be immediate, unconditional and without compensation to the slaveowners.⁹⁵ Isabel knew it was her intervention that has caused the fall of the government. In a letter to her father on 14 March, she wrote:

535 My declaration of the loss of moral authority and my insistence on the dismissal of the Chief of Police resulted in the fall of the ministry. I don't regret what I did. Sooner or later I would have done it.⁹⁶

The new government fulfilled Isabel's intentions immediately. An emancipation bill, terse and unambiguous, was presented to Parliament on 8 May 1888 and within a week it had become law.⁹⁷

The consequences of Isabel's actions were profound. The slaveholders transferred their allegiance overnight to the republicans. They blamed Isabel directly for the ending of slavery, especially for its uncompensated ending. Senior politicians accused Isabel of mounting a *coup d'état*.⁹⁸ Cotegipe denounced Isabel in the Senate, acting 'for the love of popularity' while another leading opponent said that the bill's parliamentary passage was designed to 'give the appearance of legality to a measure that in conception and in achievement is frankly revolutionary'.⁹⁹ Among the broader population, however, Isabel's actions provoked adulation. José de Patrocínio bestowed on her the title of *A Redentora*, the Redeemer, which quickly stuck to her and has been associated with her ever since.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

555 Emancipation in both empires was the product of many causes and the actions of many people. No single person can lay claim to the credit for it. But in these monarchical systems, the concentration of power in all its many forms allowed those at the apex of these systems to have a disproportionate influence on policy: the monarchs first and then those in a position to influence them. High politics in the empires of Russia and Brazil were not autonomous from the societies in which they were embedded, but neither were they a mechanical reflection of economic changes or the decisions of the executive committee of the ruling class. There were real choices to be made and alternative courses of action were available. This was true certainly with emancipation. In Russia, Alexander could have backed off and postponed emancipation for another

generation or supported one that created a landless proletariat. Equally in Brazil, it was possible that the government of Cotegipe could have seen off the emancipation movement, introduced a much more conditional emancipation or one that richly compensated landlords for the loss of their slaves. That emancipations took place and that they took the form they did was the result of deliberate decisions taken by people in specific times and places and with in very specific contexts.

Those who were part of that context were fully aware of the importance of what the two women did. Dmitri Miliutin, War Minister for most of Alexander's reign, wrote: 'the grand duchess had the most benign influence on the course of all the important reforms which were enacted during the reign of Emperor Alexander II and in particular the peasant one . . .'¹⁰¹ Miliutin acknowledged Elena's skilful management of the politics that flowed around the body of the tsar and the importance of those politics in that system. In Brazil, Carolina Nabuco, the daughter of Joachim Nabuco, summed up Isabel's contribution: 'She was thus almost exclusively responsible for the Abolition of Slavery at that moment, that is in a vastly more rapid and in a much more complete way than would have been possible in any other circumstances.'¹⁰² Without Isabel's decisive intervention over 1887–1889, the fight for abolition would have dragged on with no guarantee of such an absolute and unequivocal ending of slavery.

It was within this high political context that Elena and Isabel were able to influence emancipation. It was not easy for either woman to do this. Female involvement in politics was seen as unnatural and harmful and Elena and Isabel seemed, at least to some degree, to share these assumptions. However, morality was a female concern whether deriving from Enlightenment values or religious ones or both. Emancipation was one of the very few issues that elided morality and politics. It allowed women in Britain and the USA to enter the political domain with real impact on political outcomes. Similarly for Elena and Isabel, they both recognized that emancipation was a moral issue that demanded their involvement in politics. It was this for both women that determined their decision to enter the fray.

Once that decision had been taken, Elena and Isabel had to use the opportunities open to them. Given that they were royal women, and in Isabel's case the heir to the throne, they had opportunities denied to almost all other woman and most men. Monarchical power provided both women with their unique opportunity. Elena wielded that power indirectly while Isabel used it directly. Both women understood the power of the monarchy lay as much in its charisma as in its formal constitutional powers. One could be deployed to support the other, to prepare the ground for an overt political decision. Using the powers of the monarch in this way required intelligence, determination and no little courage. Both women were subjected to scurrilous attacks by the outraged opponents of emancipation, reflecting both the economic losses they were to suffer and the fury that two women were so openly involved in a political campaign. But this did not deflect either woman from seeing the battle through to the end. Their actions had a powerful impact on both the fact of emancipation and the form it took. Contemporaries gave to Elena the title of the 'Mother Benefactress' and to Isabel 'the Redeemer', acknowledging their contribution to the ending of servile labour.

Acknowledgements

I thank Professor Dick Geary and my colleague and friend Dr Henrice Altink who were kind enough to read early versions of this article and comment upon it. In particular, I thank Senora Neibe Cristina Machado da Costa of the Arquivo da Casa Imperial do Brasil in Petropolis for her kindness in helping me read Princess Isabel's letters.

Notes

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