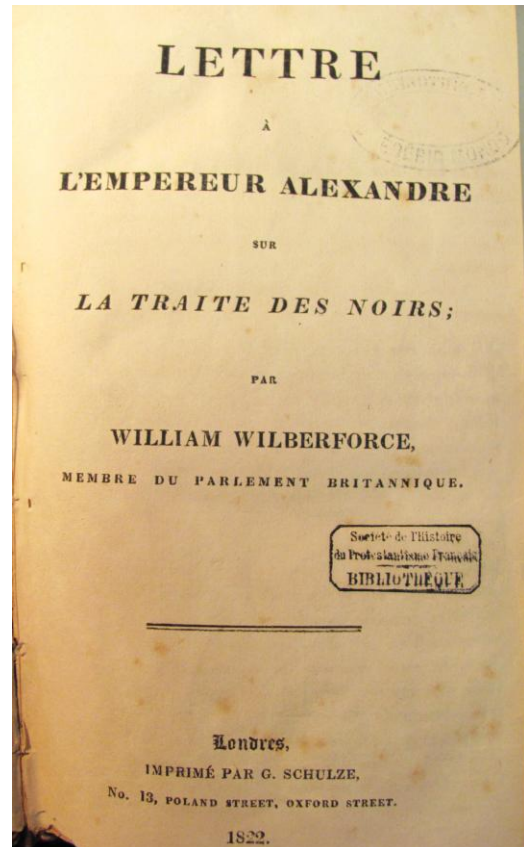


Lettre à l'empereur Alexandre sur la traite des noirs; par William Wilberforce, Membre du Parlement Britannique [Letter to the Emperor Alexander on the slave trade by William Wilberforce, Member of the British Parliament] (London: G. Schulze, 1822).

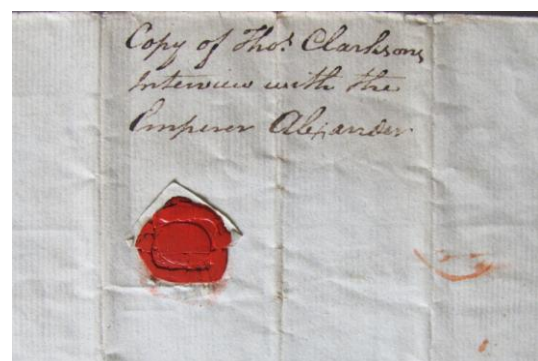
Account of T. C.- Interview with the Emperor of Russia at Paris on Saturday 23 September 1815 [manuscript, Wisbech and Fenland museum].

British abolitionist campaigners Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce were both in contact with Alexander I, Emperor of Russia, in the early nineteenth century on the subject of the slave trade. Clarkson interviewed the Russian Emperor in person twice: first at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and again at Aix la Chapelle in 1818; and Wilberforce published his *Letter to the Emperor Alexander on the slave trade* in French in 1822.

Alexander was seen by the British abolitionists as a useful prospective source of support in international debates over the slave trade. His belief in the centrality of moral and religious concerns within politics appealed to many of the abolitionists, as did his campaigns for a Holy Alliance uniting Europe around Christian principles. Established in 1814 as a popular and charismatic figure on the diplomatic stage, this “hero of Europe”, who “knows that the most noble victories are lost if they are not accompanied by the progress of enlightenment, morality and gentle virtue” was seen as one of the great hopes of the international campaigns for the abolition of the European slave trade in the 1810s and 20s.¹



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¹ J. C. L. Simonde de Sismondi, *De l'intérêt de la France à l'égard de la Traite des Nègres* (Genève & Paris: J. J. Paschoud, 1814), 5.

The initial contact between the Emperor of Russia and the British abolitionists was made through Alexander's personal interest in the Quakers. A deputation of three members of the Society of Friends (including William Allen, a prominent campaigner against slavery and the slave trade) obtained a meeting with Alexander during his state visit to Britain in 1814. At this meeting Alexander expressed support for the abolition of the slave trade: "the Emperor unequivocally declared his sense of the enormity of it, saying of the Africans, 'they are our brethren, and are like ourselves'".²

This initial meeting, along with widespread reports of Alexander's enlightened political and religious beliefs, created a sense of expectation around his presence at the Congress of Vienna. It was hoped by abolitionists that with the Russian Emperor backing them, Europe would finally agree to put an end to the transatlantic slave trade, proving "to the moral and religious world, that there is at least one eminently pious Monarch in Europe".³ After the Congress was over, and it had been agreed in the *Declaration on the abolition of the slave trade* of 8 February 1815 that the slave trade was contrary to "the principles of humanity and universal morality",⁴ Thomas Clarkson met with Alexander in Paris in September 1815, "to thank him in Person for all his Efforts on behalf of this injured People".⁵ Clarkson's description of this interview with the Emperor reveals the global impact of abolitionist publications and images: "when he had seen the Print of the Slave Ship, he felt that he should be unworthy of the high Situation he held, if he had not done his utmost in all the late political Conferences on that Subject to Wipe away such a Pestilence from the Face of the Earth".⁶ Three years later, Clarkson met the Emperor again at Aix-la-Chapelle, where his main objectives were to press for a complete end to the slave trade by 1820, and for the trade to be declared a form of piracy.

Wilberforce's 1822 *Lettre à l'empereur Alexandre sur la traite des noirs* was based upon Alexander's support for abolitionism over the past decade, and his continued involvement in the diplomatic negotiations over the slave trade in Europe. The letter revealed the extent of the continuing transatlantic trade, "one of the most terrifying scourges that ever devastated the world",⁷ and its prolonged effect upon Africa. Wilberforce apologises for having to shock the Emperor with further revelations of the evils of the slave trade, but stresses the importance of sustained campaigning for its abolition. The initial reaction of horror in Britain had not been enough in the late eighteenth century to overcome commercial interests, Wilberforce points out, but the strength of public feeling grew slowly until it had conquered the nation. He suggests that a similar perseverance would be needed in the rest of Europe: "it was completely impossible that one single battle would win the war";⁸ and calls upon Alexander's assistance as an impartial head of state to mediate between Britain and the other European powers in the ongoing struggle to end the transatlantic slave trade.

² A *Correct Statement of what passed at a Conference between the Emperor Alexander and a Deputation from the Society of Quakers; Consisting of J. Wilkinson, S. Grillette, and Wm. Allen, at the time the Northern Monarchs and other great Men were in England, in the Summer of 1814* (London: For W. Fores, by C. H. Reynell, 1817), 15-16.

³ *Ibid.*, title page.

⁴ Lewis Hertslet (ed.), *A Complete Collection of the Treaties and Conventions at present subsisting between Great Britain & Foreign Powers* (London: T. Egerton, 1820), vol. I, 11.

⁵ *Thomas Clarkson's interviews with the Emperor Alexander I of Russia at Paris and Aix-la-Chapelle in 1815 and 1818 as told by himself* (London: Slavery and Native Races Committee of the Society of Friends, 1930), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ William Wilberforce, *Lettre à l'empereur Alexandre sur la traite des noirs; par William Wilberforce, Membre du Parlement Britannique* (London: G. Schulze, 1822), 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.