



John Basil Turchin and the Fight to Free the Slaves

Stephen Chicoine

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This book highlights the contributions of a Russian immigrant who became a Union officer during the Civil War. John Basil Turchin left Czarist Russia to embrace democracy in America. When the Civil War began, he rushed to defend the Union, his formal training in the Imperial Russian Army and his combat experience in the Crimean making him a valuable officer. A man of conviction, he refused to be intimidated by commanding officers that were lenient toward rebels and the return of fugitive slaves to their masters. His subsequent court martial turned the trial into a focal point for Northern debate on the conduct of the war and the issue of slavery.

John Basil Turchin left Czarist Russia to embrace democracy in America. When the Civil War began, he rushed to defend the Union, his formal training in the Imperial Russian Army and his combat experience in the Crimean making him a valuable officer. He was among those determined to see the war as revolutionary—a vehicle by which to put an end to Southern aristocracy and the institution of slavery. A man of conviction, he refused to be intimidated by commanding officers that were lenient toward rebels and the return of fugitive slaves to their masters. His actions during the Union thrust into northern Alabama in the spring of 1862 led to his court martial. The national attention given to the proceedings turned the trial into a focal point for Northern debate on the conduct of the war and the issue of slavery.

Turchin took advantage of his exposure during the trial to express his position to the nation. His reinstatement by Lincoln in the aftermath of the court-martial and his promotion to brigadier general signaled that the administration was beginning to take a stronger position. The Emancipation Proclamation, delivered by Lincoln shortly thereafter, transformed the war into a crusade to free the slaves. John Basil Turchin returned to the field and played important roles on the battlefields of Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge.

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