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Russian-America
or
Russia's Role in the
History of Alaska.

By Marina U. Ilyin.

Hist. 123-03.
Prof. Gordon Seely.
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explain Russia's role in the history of our 49th state, Alaska. Aside from being of Russian-American decent, I chose this topic because both Russians and Americans had a frontier and because Alaska was unique in being the only state in the union that was settled from the east without American manifest destiny. Basically, I hope to cover: Russia's move east, Russian-America and Alaska's Russian Legacy.

RUSSIA'S MOVE EAST

One of Russia's greatest periods of expansion began under Ivan the IV. He killed and tortured so many people that eventually thousands left to escape his wrath. Many of the cultured and rich fled the outskirts of Russia into Europe while most common men went to join the Cossack outlaw bands that lived democratically in isolated wilderness areas.

In 1579, to be even farther away from Ivan the Terrible's wrath, one Cossack river pirate, Yermak Timofeivich, led a group of 1,000 Cossacks past the Stogonov family salt mines on the Ural Mountain's west slope. They were in search of the valuable furs that were no longer readily available in European Russia. Fur or Yasa^{ck} as it was called was in great demand because it was often used as money and was the usual tribute to the Tsar-- a custom left over from the Mongolian rule known as the Tartar yoke.¹

By 1581, Yermak had crossed the Urals and attacked the Tartars of Khan Kuchun in their capital called Isker or Siber. Within fifty years this area became what is now called Siberia. Yermak died a short time later, but for his conquest was pardoned of all crimes and was exalted as a hero for centuries after.

The news of undeveloped fur lands spread so quickly throughout Russia that Russia's wild proyshleniki,² fur merchants and tax tribute collectors reached the Pacific Ocean within sixty years. The speed, vigor and daring of those frontiersmen was amazing since they lacked charts, instruments or any sort of navigational knowledge.³

Aside from the lures of the fur trade, Russia's first expansion east was influenced by 1) the urge to reach the sea⁴ and make the northern Pacific Ocean Russian, 2) the quest for security⁵ by getting

back at the Tartars⁶, 3) the idea of migration or colonization⁷, 4) religious beliefs such as Moscow becoming the third Rome-- destined to rule the world as a universal empire⁸, and lastly 5) Russian nationalism⁹ based on the concept of nationality as the same religion, not the same race.

Wherever the promyshleniki went, the church eventually followed. Since nationality was based on having the same religion, the church played a big role in Russifying the natives. Once becoming Orthodox, natives no longer had to pay¹⁰ Yasak to the frontiersmen, and could become promyshleniki or tradesmen and explorers themselves. Hector Chevigny writes the following description of this period:

"The Russians were, moreover, given to mating quickly with the women of the lands they penetrated. Always the children were bapitized. From them came many of the promyshleniki of the future- a new breed of frontiersmen even more daring than their fathers, fearful least of all of distance, restless, carriers behind meaning, having always to see what lay ahead, if only for the sake of seeing it."¹⁰

After reaching the Pacific, the Russians expanded north and south but were stopped at the Amur River Valley by the Chinese. The Chinese were so upset that they did not allow Russia to trade by ships, instead limiting Russian trading to only two overland places--Kia-Khta in China and Irkatsk in Russia. (Through this trade with China, tea became the Russian national beverage.) Eventually, the furs in Siberia began to diminish as they had in European Russia. Now the only barrier to further expansion was the Pacific Ocean itself. Unfortunately up to that time, Russians did not know how to build ships and had little desire or visible ability to become sailors.

Fortunately when Peter the Great came to power, he started the Russian navy and sent many sailors and foreign shipbuilders to Siberia to develop it. At this time, in addition to the ^{4u.r.} greed, the discovery of the Krilca Island,¹¹ the wish to reach Japan¹² as well as the beginnings of scientific curiosity¹³ helped advance new expeditions. These expeditions were led by men such as Bering, who was a Dane in the Russian navy. He was sent to 1) see if America and Asia were joined, 2) locate the northwest passage, 3) chart the Arctic coast, and 4) locate the non-existent continent of Gamaland. Bering died in 1741, before all of his work was completed, but due to his discovery of other skins called "Morskie Bobri" (Sea beaver) a new promyshlenik stampede was started. Bering is credited with the discovery of the Bering Strait, the Aleutian Islands, Alaska, and the northern route to Japan.¹⁴ Bering did not receive all the credit he deserved because of the extreme secrecy of those voyages due to fears of French and British exploration.

After 1742, Russia did very little significant exploring. This was because the north Pacific was becoming a sphere of international rivalry that had to be continuously dealt with, taking much time, money, and effort. At one point, Catherine the Great was so upset by French and European presence that she contemplated dispatching one squadron of Russian warships to deal with foreign ships, but a war with Turkey prevented this course of action.¹⁵

RUSSIAN-AMERICA

The first stampede in search of Morskie Bobri (sea beaver) began at Bering Island by promyshleniki who crossed in woven boats called, "shitiki."¹⁶ This advance to the Aleutian Islands was really funny and yet pathetic at the same time because previously the promyshleniki had

only navigated rivers and traveled in boats held together solely by leather thongs.¹⁷ Once reaching the Aleutians only one in three promyshleniki returned.

In those Islands history repeated itself, with the promyshleniki wildly exploiting the natives, taking graft, and especially fighting among themselves, keeping no records until civilization crept up on them again. Eventually some order did come, but no settlements were made in Russian-America until Gregory Ivanovich Shelikov founded "Three Saints Bay" on Kodiak Island in 1784.

Known for lying Shelikov was a merchant hated by other dealers. When he had made enough money he started the Shelikov-Golikov Company in an attempt to ultimately acquire a government monopoly to control the fur trade. Shelikov first started a permanent settlement at Kodiak to strengthen the Russian claim to this land and to also ensure himself a government monopoly. He had no luck getting his monopoly until Catherine the Great died, and Paul took the throne. Catherine did grant Shelikov many privileges, however, that other traders did not get.¹⁸ Shelikov's big break came when Nicholas Petrovich Rezanov was sent to see that Shelikov's latest boasts and promises would be kept in return for his privileges for government serfs to farm and for ten missionaries for Yakutat, 100 miles away from Three Saints Bay.

Rezanov was a poor noble who earned his living working for the government. On a trip to investigate Shelikov's latest stories, Rezanov fell in love with Shelikov's daughter. He married her receiving many shares of stock as a wedding present. Motivated by his marriage and his future in the enterprise, Rezanov, through his high government position, fulfilled Shelikov's lifelong dream of a government monopoly. In 1799 he legally formed and began the Russian-American Company.

This Russian American Company was modeled after the British East India Company which was a combined government and private enterprise. It was formed to spread Christianity, trade, colonize and expand with part of the profits going to the government as well as part to the stockholders.

When Shelikov died, Alexander Andreyevich Baranov took over as manager of the Company. A short time later, Baranov was named Governor of Russian-America, where he was almost in complete control until his death in 1819. It was Baranov who really made the Russian-American Company thrive and made Russia-America what it was. In 1799, he founded a settlement on the west coast of the Baranov Islands called New Archangel, which is now called Sitka.

In 1802, although this settlement was burned to the ground by the Tlinget and the Kolosh Indians, Baranov, beat them in battle and built a new fort. 1000 people lived in the Russian town of New Archangel before there were a hundred people living in San Francisco.¹⁹

Aside from the hostile Kolosh and Tlinget Indians, Baranov had to also deal with about two hundred some odd promyshleniki who hated each other even more than they hated the friendly Aleutes and Kodiak Indians responsible for helping restore and rebuild New Archangel.

Often to keep peace, Baranov had to resort to imposed military discipline such as inspecting the barracks, and the evening flag lowering ceremony and the confiscation of all cards to prevent gambling.²⁰ He did not allow stills or liquor except Kvass, a light fermented drink and did not allow prostitution. By these measures Baranov saved the Aleuts from liquor and venereal disease.²¹ Also each of his men while stationed in Russian America had to take one native girl as his wife and he could not leave her for another. In fact, due to this, most men after their five years enlistment was up, preferred to re-enlist to live and stay longer with their wives and children.

Aside from the problems with the barbaric promishlenniki and Indian attacks, Baranov had even graver problems yearly in obtaining enough food for the colony to keep it from starvation. He first tried to get food directly from Russia but was unable to get able seamen to man the ships. At the time, the only seamen in Russia were in the navy. This situation eventually led to the occasional "round the world" trips of Russian warships to supply the colony. However the ships arrived too rarely to be much good. Another way was to find a new, closer food source, which led to the establishment of Fort Ross in California and another small settlement in Hawaii. (Baranov envisioned a Russian empire in the North Pacific based upon -1- Okhotsk, Siberia; -2- New Archangel in Alaska; -3- Fort Ross in California; and -4- the Sandwich Islands).

A third alternative was to open up Japan to Russian trade; and a fourth alternative was to build industries to produce products to pay for food, thereby making the colony self-sufficient.

Baranov sent Rezanov to Japan and gave him the responsibility of setting up factories. Rezanov failed in Japan but did set up shipyards in Kodiak and New Archangel and established mills and foundries at Bodega Bay where many of the California Mission Bells were cast. On his way back from Japan, Rezanov found the Alaskan colony starving but managed to save it by buying John DeWolf's ship and provisions.

John DeWolf was the American sea captain who, after selling his ship for a big profit, spent one year in Russian-America waiting for another ship to pick him up. He wrote a small log describing everyday life in New Archangel in about 1805.

Most people usually dressed in hooded Kamleika raincoats, sewn out the entrails of the harbor seals, wore wooden hats, and

in colder weather wore seal skin parkas.²² The colony's diet consisted of seal and other dried fish with cranberries in candlefish oil with Kvass and maybe rarely some vodka.²³ It was possible to grow some vegetables, but the Russians were either too lazy or too preoccupied with their other work. There was little to do with one's spare time, but to visit one another and John De Wolf spent most of his time with Rezanov or Baranov and his Kodiak wife and children, or traveling. AT this time, Kodiak was more civilized than New Archangel, having forty houses, a barracks and church and a school.²⁴

When De Wolf's ship ran out of supplies, Rezanov sailed to San Francisco to trade with the Spanish and to arrange a treaty for supplying the company's colonies twice a year. There he fell in love with the sister of the Spanish Comandante, Dona Conception De Arguello. (His first wife had died). Although he got one shipment of food for Alaska, he did not get a signed trade agreement as he had hoped. He did get a promise that the treaty would be forwarded to Spain. On his way back to Russia to present the treaty to the Tsar and to obtain permission from the Tsar and then from the Pope to marry Dona Conception, his fiance, he died in Siberia after falling from his horse ^{falling} and kicked in the head. Dona Conception became a nun. Rezanov's treaty was never ratified, his many reforms to help the employees and natives were allowed to lapse and his dreams of annexing the western coast of North America to Russia were never fulfilled.

Each year Baranov's problems got worse and worse because they got bigger and more numerous. One of Baranov's largest headaches were the ten monks sent over for missionary work before Shelikov died. Shelikov had told so many lies that the monks expected to live under somewhat civilized conditions, but found themselves without adequate food or shelter. In the beginning, things were so bad that the monks had to sleep in the same barracks with the fighting promyshlemiki and their Indian women companions. Also

no previous missionary work had been done and no church had been built as yet in New Archangel. Barnaov had to bear their wrath; and the added complications their presence brought to the colony at a time when it was starving. Five of the monks died within the first five years, but the others lived to establish the Orthodox faith as the native's new religion, as it still is so today.

The most well known monk was father V²⁵laminov. In addition to converting many natives, he wrote the first Aleutian dictionary, grammar, and primer for his school, and he functioned also as a scientist. Father ^{eniam}V²⁵laminov, while on visits to different parts of his huge parish, kept wind, tide, thermometric, and barometric readings as well as a log of his observations of plant life, wild life, rocks and soil, along with the ethnology of the region. His other interests were in medicine, watch making, and linguistics. To this day we are thankful to his scientific work and use his logs as a basis for the study of the southern Alaska region.²⁶

By 1812, Russia stopped most of its territorial expansion and concerned itself with commercial relations and maintaining its present lands. Baranov was still governor and continued to try to resign as conditions and problems got worse every year, but he could not. The Tsar ^{sent} sent him a medal, but no ship to take him back to Russia. Baranov grew more and more gloomy and got to using up the company's vodka supply, although he was very honest with the company's money. He often paid debts for some of the promishleniki in the colony out of his own pocket.²⁷

He was driven to drinking also by another problem; a continued loss of profits from the rapidly deminishing fur trade. Eventually, Baranov was able to resign, but he did not want to by then. In 1818, Baranov went to live in Hawaii, but died a year later, a broken and

despondent man. The high tide of Russian influence in the Pacific was reached at Baranov's death. After that, everything went downhill. After this time: 1) ruthless methods had exterminated the seals,²⁸ 2) profits still had to be divided with the American captains who sold the furs in China and Russia due to closed ports,²⁹ 3) the fur trade as a whole stagnated, and 4) the question of the lawfulness of Fort Ross was on the world's mind.³¹ (Technically, by law that land did not belong to the Russians, although they bought it fair and square from the Indians.)

In 1820, the Company charter was renewed, but the navy took over the governing, which broke it away at last from the promyshleniki past.³² Although failing outwardly, and inwardly the colony acquired culture that was brought by the navy and by Father V^{eni}aminov when he was made Bishop of Irkutsk. The naval officers brought their wives, who in turn dragged in civilization by its heels, until soon, New Archangel could boast of a cathedral, a seminary, a college and two institutions of scientific research giving it the reputation of being the Paris of the Pacific.³³

In 1821, one last effort was made to confirm consolidation with expansion when Tsar Alexander I declared the North American Russian domain extended as far as the 51° parallel with a ban on all foreign trade. This proclamation combined with the threat of Alexander I's Holy Alliance to the Latin American colonies led to the establishment of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823.³⁴

By 1825, the fur trade was almost all gone; with it went all of Russia's many military and civilian posts. When the Russian government could no longer provide adequate help for her North American colony after the Crimean War, she began to think of selling it. Russia had always regarded Alaska as an investment, but not as a colony. When gold was discovered, the Russian government envisioned economic

problems and dangers of penetration from foreigners, that would make the land most undesirable. Russia then sold Alaska to America in 1867 through Seward for \$7,000,000.00 after the Russian-American Company's last charter expired in 1861. Another reason for the sale of Alaska was the desire and hope of ^{restoring} British and American rivalry to be free to expand in Asia, without any intervention or complications.³⁵

ALASKA'S-RUSSIAN LEGACY

In 1867, at the time of the sale, the ^{name} Russian-America was changed to Alaska,³⁶ along with several other names of places. (For example: New Archangel to Sitka). The Russians who had been born in Russia went back, but those who had been born in America, especially those of Russian and native blood, remained. When sold, Alaska was placed under marshal rule, but due to the cruelty of the soldiers, many of the native Russian-Americans left also. The cost to the United States was a culture.³⁷

The main remnant of the culture is the adherence of many to Orthodoxy. For nearly fifty years up until the Bolshivic Revolution, according to the comment of the territorial government, the Russian Church was actually spending more on schooling than \$40,000.00 the United States spent for the education of whites and natives in the entire territory.³⁸ Also, the church canonized one of the ten missionary monks as the first American saint, Saint Herman of Alaska.

Lastly, aside from religion, much of the old Russian heritage still exists in customs, folklore and ^{language} ³⁹. The method of carrying buckets of ^{water} ^{method} ^{the} bear hunting and a few folk remedies (such as tying red yarn on one's legs and arms to prevent swelling)⁴⁰ have not changed since pre-communist times. Also in most villages, the men

play accordians and boys play ball games called "miatchee".

In old Russia, accordians were introduced from Italy and soon became Russian folk instruments. "Miatchee" comes from a Russian word "miachik" meaning hardball that was and still is a favorite game in Russia today.⁴¹ In Tsarist time, Christmas was celebrated, aside from the religious services for twelve days with caroling and carrying a six pointed star, masquerading, and at midnight-- walks into unlighted churches, or bath houses to learn the future.⁴² All these traditions are alive today.

The Russian language is very clearly visible too, not only on maps of Alaska, but especially in the Aleutian language for words such as sugar, tea, bread, milk, parsley, ptarmigan grass, etc. usually in corrected form. 43.

^ In fact, it has often been said that before World War II, any person knowing Russian could get along fine in Kodiak, for example, without knowing any other language.⁴⁴ Many families, tracing their heritage back to Russian decent, still consider themselves Russian although they don't speak the language or weren't born in Russia. It is interesting to note that it is still a mark of high distinction in Alaska to be a Russian.⁴⁵

Footnotes

- 1) Promyshlenik was the Russian equivalent to the American mountain-man, coming from a word that went back to Old Novgorod signifying freelance exploiters of natural resources. Hector Chevigny, Russian-America. p. 10.
- 2) Yasak was the name given to tribute in furs called after Yasa, the name for Genghis's code of laws. Ibid p. 7.
- 3) Chevigny Op. cit. p. 3.
- 4) O. Halecki, "Imperialism in Slavic and East European History", Slavic Review 1952:1:1.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Chevigny Op. cit. p. 4.
- 7) Philip E. Mosely "Aspects of Russian Expansion" Slavic Review 1948: 3:197.
- 8) Halecki, Op. Cit.
- 9) Mosely Op.cit.
- 10) Ibid p. 13.
- 11) A.E. Sokol, "Russian Expansion and Exploration in the Pacific" Slavic Review 1952:2:85.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Ibid.
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Ibid.
- 16) David Lander, "Empires in the North Pacific" American Heritage, Vol. VII No. 5. pp. 69-73.
- 17) Chevigny Op. cit. P. 31.
- 18) Clarence A. Manning, Russian Influence on Early America. Pp.22,2
- 19) Chevigny Op. Cit. pg.VII
- 20) Ibid.
- 21) Ibid.
- 22) George Howe "The Voyage of Northwest John" American Heritage Vol. X No. 3. Pg.159. pg 65-80.
- 23) Ibid.
- 24) Ibid.

25) Helen A. Shenitz, "Father Veniaminov-the enlightener of Alaska!" Slavic Review. 1959:1:75.

26) Ibid.

27) Chevigny Op. cit.

28) Sokol Op. cit.

29) Ibid.

30) Ibid.

31) Ibid.

32) Chevigny Op. cit. p.174.

33) Ibid. p. 175.

34) Nanning Op. cit. p.114.

35) Ibid. p 173.

36) The name Alaska came from an Aleut word meaning continent and was used previously as the name for the land east of the Aleutian Islands. Charles Sumner proposed to call Russian-America--Alaska. Chevigny. Op. cit. p. 242.

37) Chevigny Op. cit. p.261.

38) Ibid. p.261.

39) Helen A. Shenitz "The Vistiges of Old Russia in Alaska!" Russian Review. Vol. 14. 1955 p. 55.

40) Ibid.

41) Ibid.

42) Ibid.

43) Ibid.

44) Ibid.

45) Ibid.

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