



19005 Coast Highway One, Jenner, CA 95450 ■ 707.847.3437 ■ info@fortross.org ■ www.fortross.org

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Author (s): Roman Sturmer

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RUSSIANS IN ALASKA

by Very Rev. Fr.
Roman Sturmer
Sept. 1973

During the latter half of the 17th century the Russians had been pushing their explorations across Siberia and along the eastern and northern shores of Asia. In 1728, Vitus Bering passed through the strait named after him and Chirikoff sighted the American coast in 1731. Bering's second expedition in company with Alexei Chirikoff, sailed from the Siberian coast in 1741. The mainland of America was located and numerous islands visited. This expedition is commonly accepted as fixing the date of the discovery of Alaska. Bering's ship was wrecked in early November on what is now called Bering Island. The crew made such provision as was possible against the cold of the approaching winter, but the privations and hardships were very great. "It was under such circumstances that Vitus Bering died - on this cold, forbidding isle, under the sky of an Arctic winter, December 8, 1741."

During the thirty or thirty-five years following, the Russians were active in exploring the coast and islands, and in establishing a trade with the natives.

The excesses committed by private traders and companies, who robbed, massacred and hideously abused the native populations, caused the Russian government in 1799 to confine the trade and administration of its American possessions to a semi-official corporation, called the Russian American Company

for a term of twenty years, afterward twice renewed for similar periods. Alexander Baranoff, Chief Resident Director of the American companies (1790-1819) and one of the administrators of the new company, became famous through the success he achieved as governor. He founded Sitka in 1804, after the massacre by the natives of the inhabitants of an earlier settlement (1799) at a nearby location. The headquarters of the company were at Kodiak until 1805, and at Sitka thereafter.

Part II The Russian American Company

The beginning of the Russian settlement of the Aleutian Islands and of Alaska goes back to the expedition under the command of Capt. Vitus Bering and Capt. Alexei Chirifnov. The latter sighted the territory of Alaska on July 15, 1741. Five days later Capt. Bering landed on Kadyan Island, where he afterward died and was buried. The first Russian to baptize some natives was a Cossack, Andreyan Tolstych, in the islands bearing his name - the Andreznoff Islands. (1743) In 1759 a Russian merchant, Ivan Glotov, was the first preacher of Christianity to the Aleutians. He baptized the son of a native "toen" or chieftain of the territory of Unimak. Later he took the young man to Kamchatka, where the neophyte, named Ivan - after Glotov - learned Russian.

Upon his return he became a chieftain and was active in spreading Christianity. In 1774, Grigori Ivanovich Shelekhov is said to have baptized ^{the} natives of Kodiak Island.

It was he who organized the first permanent commercial settlement on Kodiak, the Shelekhov Golikof company. It was named Three Saints after the ship which had brought Shelekhov to the Aleutians. In 1787 Shelekhov returned to St. Petersburg and laid before Empress Catherine II his plans for the commercial exploitation of the northwestern coast of America. The empress sent an Englishman, Joseph Billings, who had visited Alaska on a tour of exploration. He arrived at Three Saints on June 30, 1790 and apparently found conditions sufficiently promising to report favorably to Catherine. Shelekhov also urged the empress to send missionaries to Kodiak and promised to assume, with his associates, the payment of their traveling expenses as well as their support.

Thereupon Alexander A. Baranoff, a merchant of Kargopol, was appointed manager of the colony. Under his energetic leadership the colony became a powerful factor in the development of the territory. He transferred the headquarters to the northeast part of the island and named the new settlement Paul's Harbor in honor of the heir to the throne, Grand Duke Paul. He also requested the home office for priests to evangelize the natives as well as to serve the religious needs of the Russians.

Such a mission, headed by the Archimandrite Joasaph Bogolov who was accompanied by seven monks, arrived in 1794. The journey took ten months. The missionaries came from

Valaam Monastery on Lake Ladoga. Along with them also arrived one hundred fifty administrators and thirty families of settlers. This group laid the foundations of Russian Orthodoxy in America. Within two months of their arrival, two of their number, Hieromonks Macarius and Juvenal, traveled over the whole island and baptized about six thousand natives (another account says "all the inhabitants"). The letters of some of these earliest missionaries are extant. They were written to the abbot of the home monastery of Valaam. German, for instance, wrote: "The Aleuts greatly surprised us by their dexterity and desire to be baptized." Another monk, Joasaph, wrote: "On Kodiak almost six thousand were baptized. They accepted the baptism so sincerely that they broke all their shaman paraphernalia and burned it." But, "the apostle of the Aleuts", Bishop Innocent, writing more than fifty years later, complained that the Kodiak natives were still half pagan, adhering to their shamanistic practices, although the Unalaska Aleuts persevered sincerely in their Christianity. During the winter of 1794 the missionaries established the first Russian church and school at Paul's Harbor, and consecrated it to the Resurrection of our Lord. This building was destroyed by fire in 1943.

The next spring they extended their missionary labors to other Aleutian islands, and within two years claimed to have baptized twelve thousand natives and to have built a church or chapel "in every more or less important" community.

In 1795 Juvensal left Kodiak for Nuchen and Kenai Bay, and the following year went to the Alaskan mainland. It is not clear how far north he penetrated, but he met his death near Iliamna Lake. He had persuaded some chieftains to entrust him with their children so that he might educate them; but later they changed their minds, perhaps because he had prohibited polygamy, and after a pursuit caught up with him and killed him as "a deceiver".

The commercial company prospered so well the Emperor, Paul I, enlarged it by combining the Shelekhov-Golinov company with the Mylnikov company, renaming the new organization the Russian-American Company. It was under obligation to provide for the religious needs of the colonists as well as of the natives. Shelekhov, who was then living in Russia, was not satisfied with the progress of the missionary work. He estimated the number of inhabitants of Kodiak Island at fifty thousand, of whom only about six thousand had been baptized. It is possible that Shelekhov's estimate refers to all the natives of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska; but Bishop Innocent, who mentions it twice, plainly applies it to Kodiak Island alone. At any rate Shelekhov now urged the authorities to establish a diocese for Russian America. In 1799 the Holy Synod, heeding this request, raised Archimandrite Joasaph to the episcopal rank. The new diocese was comprised of Kodiak, Kamchatka and Alaska. Unfortunately, the new bishop upon his return from Irkutsk, Siberia,

composed of Russians, Aleuts and those of mixed blood, besides thirty-nine Indians. In 1841 the land was sold by the Russian government to a certain Mr. Sutter for \$30,000.

Part III - Fort Ross

In the New World, in 1812, a group of enterprising Russians peacefully took over a territory on which grew up the legendary Fort Ross, a Russian colony which existed independently for thirty years.

In 1806 the Russian-American Company's settlement at Sitka ~~xxxx~~ experienced an extreme food shortage. Nikolai Petrovich Resanoff, a high-ranking employee of the company, had to travel southward on the ship Unona ("June") towards California in order to obtain the needed supplies. After two months of hardships, with a small crew (half of whom had scurvy), Resanoff reached San Francisco Bay. Because the Spanish were suspicious of all foreigners, entrance to the bay without a special permit was not allowed.

Knowing his desperate situation, Resanoff ordered the captain to proceed under full sail past the shouts of the soldiers in the fort. Resanoff ordered his sailors to simulate the movements of dropping anchor, while he politely and respectfully shouted to the Spaniards "Si Senor, Si Senor!" Only when the ship was out of danger from the fort's guns was the anchor dropped.

The anxious commandant of the fort, Don Luis Arguello, immediately boarded the Unona. Resanoff, with apologies, said that his destination was Monterey but, because his ship had been battered by storms and needed repairs, he had to enter the first port available. The commandant was pleased by Resanoff's amiable and kind manner; he invited him and his officers to his home, and also sent plenty of food for the crew. Resanoff was a clever, intelligent, and highly educated man, and also an excellent diplomat. He took advantage of his luck, and in a short time eliminated all the obstacles to his plan for negotiating with the governor, who arrived from Monterey. Despite the strict colonial regulations, a trading agreement was reached. Two hundred fifty tons of provisions, wheat flour, barley, peas, pork salt and nine hundred fifty pounds of dried meat were loaded on the ship. Resanoff's problem was solved, and Sitka received all the necessary supplies.

When speaking of Resanoff's sojourn in San Francisco, one has to recall the episode that was to become known by the whole world through the many novels and poems it inspired. The commandant's seventeen year old daughter, Dona Concepcion Arguello, fell in love with the brilliant Russian courtier, and in spite of all protests by her parents and the objections of the Roman Catholic Church, she was betrothed to Resanoff. Resanoff returned to Sitka and set out for St. Petersburg to obtain the Emperor's permission to marry the daughter of a

Spanish nobleman. On the trek across Siberia, which was partly on horseback, Resanoff caught a severe cold and died. His fiancée waited for him and refused to marry any of her numerous suitors. She learned of his death thirty-six years later, entered a convent and became a nun.

The Russians in Sitka had received the provisions brought by Resanoff; after listening to the stories about the wonderful climate and wealth in California, they started thinking seriously about establishing a colony on that coast which could permanently supply them with food.

The manager of the Russian-American Company, Alexander Andreyevich Baranoff, who was also Governor of Alaska, sent Ivan Alexandrovich Kuskoff on the ship Kodiak in 1808 to explore the shores of California in order to find a suitable place for a settlement. Kuskoff arrived at Bodega Bay, where he stayed for a whole season, hunting otters. During the next four years he returned to California three times; he attempted to settle near San Francisco Bay, but because of hostile actions from the local Spaniards and Indians, Kuskoff was driven away.

Finally, in the spring of 1812, he won the confidence of the Indians, and by giving them three pairs of pants, three hoes, two axes, and a few glass beads, he was able to buy from them a piece of land eighteen miles from Bodega, on a cliff seventy feet above the ocean.

On March 18, 1812, work began on construction of a fort by a group of laborers consisting of ninety-five

Russians, eighty Aleuts, and a few native Indians of the Pomó tribe from the neighboring village of "Niad Shui Novi".

The Fort was built in the form of a rectangle with an area of three hundred by two hundred eighty feet, and was surrounded by a wall with two bastions where six guns were located. There were nine buildings: the church, the house of the commandant, barracks for the officers and the soldiers, kitchen, steam bath, warehouse, a well, and a prison. Outside the Fort there were fifty buildings including a mill, pig pens, blacksmith shop, and houses for Aleuts and Indians. The work on the Fort was finished in 1814.

On September 11, 1812, the name day of Emperor Alexander I, the blessing of the Fort took place. Russians, Aleuts and Indians attended the services. After the *Miolieben* (a Thanksgiving service), the Russian flag was hoisted above Fort Ross, and the active life of the colony began, having two aims - hunting and agriculture.

The Spanish authorities were alarmed by the unexpected newcomers and sent their representatives with protests; for the next five years there were hostile actions toward the Russians. They jailed Russian hunters, and Kuskoff was ordered several times to leave the colony. Kuskoff politely entertained the emissaries, made promises, but continued his work. In 1816, a scientific expedition from Russia, headed by Otto von Kotzebue, visited California, and Pablo de Sola, the Governor at Monterey complained to him of Kuskoff's actions. The latter was called on for an explanation, but

with no results. The whole matter was publicized, reaching St. Petersburg and Madrid. The Spanish complained about the Russians taking their lands, while the Russians argued that there was no indication that the land between the Columbia River and San Francisco belonged to any European nation. While the authorities argued, the activities at Fort Ross flourished.

The Californians heard about the hospitality of the Russians, saw their peaceful activity, and soon stopped being afraid of the newcomers; the Indians even began thinking of them as their defenders. Russian skill in ship-building, wheel-making, implement-making, iron work and tanning attracted buyers, and eventually a lively trade grew up between the Californians and the Russians, reaching a value of three thousand dollars a year in the monetary values of that day.

So, in spite of official hostility, friendly relations grew between the natives and the inhabitants of the Fort. The local authorities could not stop the Russian hunters, so an agreement was made, on a fifty-fifty basis. When the Spanish government founded a Mission in Solano with the aim of spying on the Russians, the Russians reciprocated by sending them housewarming presents of icons and other ecclesiastical appointments.

In 1816, the Governor of Alaska, A. A. Baranoff, after thirty years of service, was replaced by L.A. Gegenmeister,

who was sent for from St. Petersburg. He immediately traveled to Fort Ross, and what he saw was beyond his expectations: amid bright, rolling hills above the blue ocean stood a fort, sturdy and ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ beautifully built, surrounded by gardens and fields where life was going on in full swing; fields were tended, hammering could be heard from the various shops, herds of cattle dotted the hillsides, while on the seashore Indians were working on their primitive skin boats (the Baidarkas), the Aleut hunters were carrying the skins of the animals they had killed - and the spotless cleanliness of exemplary order was seen everywhere.

If the outside picture was somewhat exotic to Gegenmeister, the sight of the interior of the Fort produced almost a shock, for here, Russia was truly to be felt - a small, cozy church, a beautiful commandant's house furnished with a sofa, a piano, pictures, rugs, where wonderful food was prepared by a skilled chefs, and served complete with foreign wines.

Delighted with what he saw, Gegenmeister undertook to expand the activities of the Fort. He visited the governor in San Francisco and signed a trade treaty; and he gathered the Indian chiefs and secured their permission to cultivate surrounding fields. Gegenmeister replaced Kuskoff, who was mainly interested in hunting, with a new commandant, K. Schmidt, instructing him to expand the agricultural activity.

First attention was given to enlarging the orchards and vegetable gardens. Gegenmeister himself went to Monterey and

brought large amounts of fruit-trees, grape-vines and seeds back to Fort Ross. A few fruit-trees were also brought from Siberia - the variety known as "Pipoins" is an example. Vegetables grew in enormous quantities, potatoes yielded two harvests a year, and watermelons, pumpkins, cucumbers for pickling, and cabbages and beets were sent to Sitka. Wheat-growing was somewhat disappointing to the Russians, because it didn't bring the rich results that were expected, despite the fact that four hundred Indians and Aleuts were working in the fields. During the most successful year, 1834, they exported only eighty tons of wheat, as well as barley, rye, corn, beans and tobacco.

Constant cultivation, however, exhausted the soil, and the fields were turned into pasture. Baron F. P. Wrangel, who came from Russia in 1833, insisted on further expansion of the property, and two farms to the south of Fort Ross were established under his management - the Kostronutinoff Ranch and the Chernych Ranch (commonly called the "Gor-i" Ranch). Fruit-trees were also planted, along with grape-vines, as well as various grains. The most profitable ~~xxxxx~~ and successful operation, however, was cattle-raising. The Russians had over two thousand head of cattle, a thousand horses, and a thousand sheep.

The last fifteen years of its existence, the Fort Ross colony not only satisfied its own needs and a continuing trade with Mexican California, but also sent to Sitka a hundred and eight tons of salted meat, eighteen hundred

pounds of butter, and this not counting the furs, wool and hides. In spite of such evident success, further expansion of Russian activities in California was doomed, because of diplomatic opposition, especially from England, Spain and the United States, who constantly sent protests to St. Petersburg.

In 1823 came the President's message with the "Monroe Doctrine", which clearly stated that foreign governments occupying any territories in America were committing hostile acts which could lead to war. Besides this, Fort Ross had gradually lost its economic necessity as a source of food for Sitka, thanks to the free trade between Alaska and Mexican California.

The soil was exhausted, and to acquire new land was impossible; Russia had no intention of sending more colonists or troops.

The End