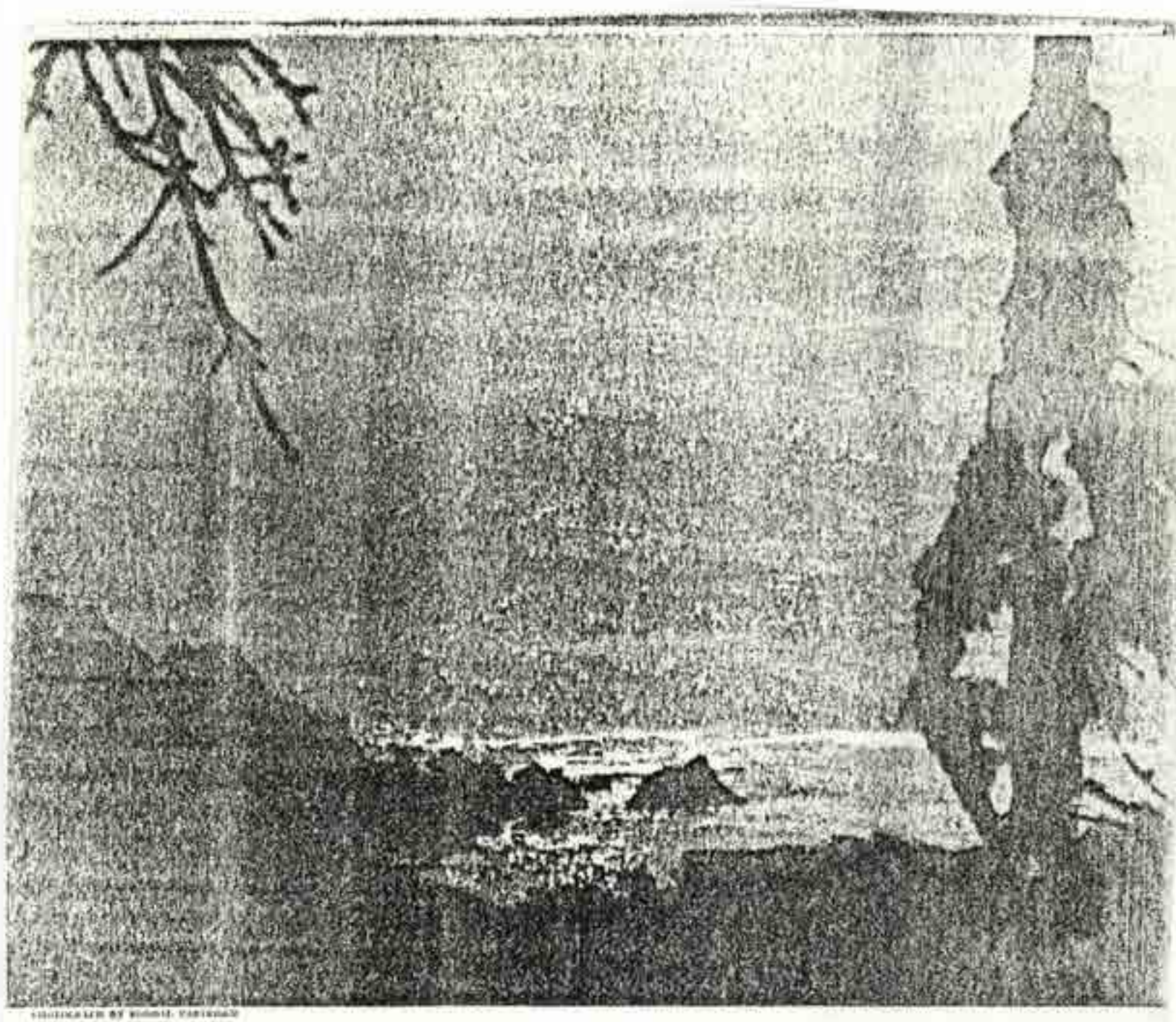


ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT FARKASH

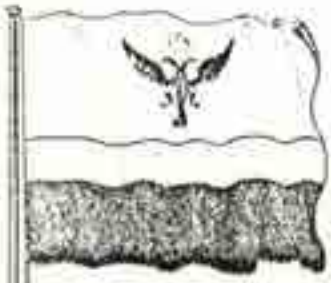
AMERICA AND RUSSIA: PART II

RUSSIANS IN CALIFORNIA

By ALLAN TEMKO

Situated on a bleak Pacific headland, the reconstructed Fort Ross even today seems lonely and remote from civilization.

An Imperial colony on our West Coast was their aim; Fort Ross was their military outpost; and the stakes—higher than they realized



On the swell of the morning tide, with all sails full, the *Juno* ran before the wind into San Francisco Bay. As the ship approached the Golden Gate, Fort San Joaquin—so unimposing that at first it seemed merely a group of rocks, rather than the main defense of the harbor—was sighted on the southern point. A "great commotion" within the fort, plainly visible from the ship, revealed the garrison's alarm at the unannounced arrival of a strange vessel. A soldier with a speaking trumpet hailed her in Spanish: "What ship is that?" For nearly half a century the Californios had been expecting the reply that now—at nine o'clock in the morning on April 8,

Flag of the Russian-American Company

1816—they heard for the first time: "Russian."

The *Juno* was instructed immediately to cast anchor near the fort, under the guns of the battery. "*Sí, señor; sí, señor*," answered the Russians, but they only simulated efforts to comply with the order. The ship continued swiftly into the deserted bay until she was out of range of the fort's battery. Then, prudently covering the beach with her own small cannon, she finally let go the anchor.

The appearance of the *Juno* in California culminated two hundred years of Russian expansion eastward from the Urals to the coasts of North America. Early in the sixteenth century, at the moment when English colonists were founding Virginia and Massachusetts, Cossack adventurers in search of sable and other furs swept across Siberia with a speed—and cruelty—unparalleled in the history of European conquest. By 1638, leaving behind them a wake of wanton slaughter, torture, and brutal exploitation of the natives, they reached the Sea of Okhotsk. Soon they were venturing out upon the Pacific, and before 1720 were at the Kuriles.

In 1741, after an earlier voyage in 1727–28 failed to touch the mainland, an expedition led by Vitus Bering, a Dane in the Czarist service, and the Russian Alexei Chirikov finally landed in North America. There the Russians soon made what was probably the greatest fur strike of all time, an almost incredible harvest of seal, blue fox, and sea otter pelts, which were marketed in China at extraordinary profit.

The rest of the world took notice; the long, relatively uneventful era of Hispanic supremacy in the Pacific was coming to an end. Spain, of course, although her massive and ornate imperial façade would not collapse until the next century, was especially apprehensive of the Russian presence in the northern ocean. For the vast and undefined province of Upper California, whose coast line alone had been explored, and that imperfectly, lay exposed to any intruder. After 1750, when garbled reports of Bering's discoveries commenced to reach western Europe, intrusion by Russia seemed imminent. The Spanish embassy at St. Petersburg repeatedly warned Madrid of Russian ambitions in the New World; and the able Bourbon Charles III acted.

A vigorous official, José de Gálvez, was sent to New Spain as *visitador general*, and in 1769 he launched five "sacred expeditions" of leather-jacketed troops and Franciscan missionaries—two groups proceeding overland from Mexico through deserts and mountain ranges, and three by sea along the wind-buffeted coast—to establish Spanish settlements in California at last. That year the Mission and Presidio of San Diego were founded. The following spring a fort was erected at Monterey "to defend us from the atrocities of the Russians, who were about to invade us." But not until 1776, a week before the signing of the Declaration of Independence on the other side of the continent, did the occupation of San Francisco begin. For the moment the Spaniards could advance no farther northward. They spent the rest of the century completing the chain of nineteen missions—spaced roughly a day's journey apart along the coast—between San Diego and San Francisco.

Spain had acted none too quickly in California. By this time every maritime power—Britain, France, Holland, the United States—was alive to colonial and commercial possibilities in the Pacific. No one realized how high the stakes actually were, but the known stake in furs was high enough. Captain Cook's account of his famous voyage of 1778–79, in which he dwelled on the wealth of furs in Nootka Sound near what is now Vancouver Island, electrified Europe and America. English and Yankee vessels commenced taking pelts in northern waters. A French expedition under the Comte de La Pérouse reconnoitered the coast in 1786, and put in for ten days at Monterey,

The sea otter (above) brought European fur hunters to the California coast. Their base at Fort Ross, shown at right in a sketch made about 1840, supplied Alaska with much needed food as well as valuable pelts.

Waning fortunes made the Russians give up Fort Ross in 1841; twenty-six years later they sold Alaska to the U.S. Posts like New Archangel (at left) fell into decay as the sea otter and northern fur seal almost were hunted almost out of existence.

The growing number of foreign vessels in the region increased Spain's suspicions. Measures were taken to seal California from the rest of the world. Trade was forbidden. Additional guns were mounted at the tiny presidios. But audacious Yankees poached furs along the sparsely settled coast, openly defying the Spaniards, who lacked ships to chastise them.

In the meantime, despite fierce native resistance, the Russians were consolidating their own position in the north. A station was set up on the island of Kodiak in 1783; and in 1799 headquarters were established at Sitka for the Russian-American Company, a fur monopoly whose interests went well beyond mere trade. Although Catherine the Great had renounced territorial aspirations in the New World, her mad son, Paul I, had given way to his counters, and granted the company a far-reaching charter. Now Paul's son—and perhaps his murderer—the young Alexander I, was Czar. At this stage of his reign Alexander gave signs of being a liberal ruler of the Western type; and he was surrounded by ministers whose ideas and methods —rational and efficient to a degree unprecedented in Russia—apparently also resembled those of the West. Most of these men of the new type, like their Czar, had ambitious plans for Russia. One of them, in fact, the Czar's Chamberlain, Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov,* stood on the *Juno*'s deck, coolly directing her when she ran past the guns of Fort San Joaquin, through the Golden Gate and into San Francisco Bay.

A curious train of circumstances brought the Grand Chamberlain of the Russian Empire to the remote Spanish outpost. Nearly three years earlier, on August 7, 1803, Rezanov had sailed from the Baltic as the senior dignitary of the first Russian expedition around the world. Two ships, the *Nadezhda* and the *Neva*, made the journey. Officially the Chamberlain's title for this mission was Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary to the Emperor of Japan, but his broad discretionary powers extended to the entire Pacific.

At Nagasaki in the winter of 1803–04, however, Rezanov met with humiliation and failure when he sought a trade agreement with the xenophobic Japanese. Rezanov, a proud man, was furious, and intended to return immediately to St. Petersburg to request the Czar's permission to conduct a punitive expedition against Japan. But at Kamchatka in Siberia, he found letters ordering him to inspect the Alaskan holdings of the Russian-American Company.

Rezanov was admirably qualified to make this inspection tour. Few Russians were as familiar as he with their nation's interests in the Pacific; few had as great a personal stake in the struggle for power that was taking place on the American coast. For although he came from a family that had possessed noble status since the sixteenth century, Rezanov was a self-made man whose future was bound closely to the fate of Russian America. His hereditary title of *baron*, which is often mistranslated as "baron," signified only that he was a member of the minor nobility. He did well at court as a guards officer, but the turning point of his career was his marriage to a daughter of the principal founder of the Russian American Company, Grigori Ivanovich Shelekhov. The girl's dowry consisted of a large block of shares in the company; and when she died in 1802, shortly after the birth of their second child, Rezanov became independently wealthy. With Shelekhov's widow, he directed the operations of the company, and he advanced brilliantly at the court of Alexander I. As protégé of the Czar's leading minister, Count Rumiantsev, he was named Chamberlain, Privy Councilor, and Procurator of the Senate. Yet, although Rezanov was only forty-one years old when he was or-

* For another view of Rezanov, see George Howe's "The Voyage of Nor'west John" in the April, 1956, American Heritage.

Alexander Baranov

dered to Sitka, and had become one of the powerful men of the empire, he was in ill health, fatigued by his travels, and still deeply saddened by the death of his young wife.

At Sitka, Rezanov was shocked to find the colony on the verge of starvation. Throughout their occupation of North America the Russians, faced by a chronic shortage of ships, had the utmost difficulty in maintaining their supply lines. The commandant, Alexander Baranov, was brave, energetic, and loyal, but under the pressure of brutal northern conditions, he had also become an alcoholic.

In this atmosphere Rezanov and his suite, which included two young naval officers, a valet, and his personal physician, the German naturalist George Heinrich von Langsdorff, endured a terrible winter in 1805–06. By the end of February, eight of the 192 Russians at Sitka had died of scurvy.

To make matters worse, fur-taking had declined seriously after a half century of ruthless extermination. The remaining sea otter were moving southward, and Baranov had no ships to chase them.

Astutely Rezanov decided that the survival of Russian America depended on the establishment of a new colony in the south, where both food and fur could be gotten easily. The question was how to get there, even for reconnaissance.

A Yankee vessel provided the answer. The *Juno*, a fast, copper-bottomed schooner out of Bristol, Rhode Island, lay in Sitka's harbor. Her captain, John de Wolf, sold the vessel with her cargo and provisions to the Russians, Rezanov paying him in a bill of exchange on St. Petersburg. Sitka was momentarily saved by Rezanov's bold stroke. Substantial foodstuffs from the *Juno* allayed the famine, and her cargo of excellent New England cloth and other goods could be bartered for additional food elsewhere. Hawaii might have proved more suitable than California for this purpose, Dr. Langsdorff wrote later, "but political reasons led to the choice of San Francisco."

Grand strategy, magnificent in both its aims and audacity, was developing in Rezanov's mind. The *Juno* set sail early in March. Storms wracked the ship. Half the crew were ill and unfit for duty. One man died. "With pallid, deathlike faces," about a month out of Sitka, they headed into San Francisco Bay.

Twenty horsemen galloped down from the presidio to confront the Russians. They made a gallant sight. Their black and scarlet uniforms, sombreros trimmed with silver, embroidered deerskin boots, and unusually large silver spurs, revealed the dash and charm that Spanish California could display whenever it was roused from provincial torpor. By calls and signs they requested that a boat be sent ashore.

Langsdorff and Lieutenant Gavriil Davydov were rowed to the beach. To their relief they found that orders had been received from Madrid "to render all necessary assistance" to Rezanov if he visited California. Unfortunately the commandant, Don José Darío Argüello, was temporarily at Monterey, but the handsome officer in charge during his absence was his twenty-one-year-old son, Luis Antonio, who warmly invited Rezanov and his staff to dine at the presidio.

The Chamberlain was moved by the graciousness of the welcome. He came ashore promptly; and since he knew a little Spanish, he was able to exchange friendly words with the Californians. Although he was ill and had lost considerable weight, Rezanov made a powerful impression in his uniform of green and gold. Never before had a foreigner, or for that matter even a Spanish official, of such high rank appeared in California.

The next ten days passed pleasantly. Don Luis reported the arrival of the *Juno* to Governor Arrillaga and to his father at Monterey. With the same messenger Rezanov sent word that, since repair of storm damage would keep the *Juno* in port for some time, he was prepared to travel overland to the capital in order to confer with the governor. Arrillaga replied, politely but firmly, that he himself would come to San Francisco. Rezanov correctly interpreted this as a sign of weakness, rather than of Latin courtesy. Arrillaga obviously did not wish him to see the undeveloped and defenseless interior of the country.

The governor and Commandant Argüello finally arrived, to nine-gun salutes from Fort San Joaquín and from another small fortress, hidden behind a point, which the Russians had not previously noticed. The white-haired Arrillaga was exhausted by the journey, but he nevertheless received Rezanov the next day. Arrillaga spoke French, so that for the first time Rezanov was able to converse easily with a Californian. Both Arrillaga and Argüello were gracious, but their orders from Mexico were clear: no trade whatever was to be permitted.

Nevertheless the atmosphere remained friendly. The visitors were enchanted by the warmth and charm of the Argüellos. "Mutual esteem and harmony," wrote Langsdorff, "glowed in . . . this kindly family, who knew scarcely any other diversions or pleasures than those resulting from family joys and domestic happiness."

The naturalist himself was short and homely; as Bancroft remarked, he had "a singularly unprepossessing face." But he loved to dance, and taught the smiling *señoritas* the latest English steps. And he was utterly smitten by the loveliest of the Argüello daughters, Doña Concepción, Concha, as she was called, was the *favorita* of the province. She was two months past her fifteenth birthday.

Rezanov was also taken by her vitality and loveliness. As time passed, and his negotiations with the governor and her father remained unsuccessful, he formed "a plan"—to use Langsdorff's words—"very different . . . from the original scheme for the establishment of commercial relations . . . He conceived the idea that through a marriage with the daughter of the Comandante . . . a close bond would be formed for future business intercourse between the Russian-American Company and the province of Nueva California."

Rezanov, in a confidential report to his government, also remarked that the romance was "not begun in hot passion." Yet he added that he was also influenced by "remnants of feelings that in the past were a source of happiness in my life"—his wife had not been much older than Concepción. Certainly the Chamberlain could have made a much more brilliant match in Europe than with the daughter of a petty Spanish official. Yet there can be no doubt that he fully intended to go through with the affair and to behave with honor toward the girl.

For her part—whatever the depth of Rezanov's feelings—Concha fell deeply in love with him. "At length," Rezanov wrote with remarkable frankness in his report, "I imperceptibly created in her an impatient desire to hear something more explicit from me." He proposed, and was accepted.

Her parents were dumbfounded. Not only were they horrified by the prospect of her marriage to a non-Catholic, but they dreaded a separation from her which might turn out to be permanent. They sought the advice of the padres. Concha faced down all objections. Finally the priests decided to refer the matter to Rome, partly because they did not feel qualified to resolve the difficult theological problem involved, and also because it would delay the wedding for several years.

To the staunchly Greek Orthodox Rezanov the religious objection seemed "fanatical." But he, too, was not a free agent. He needed permission from the Czar. He was compelled to be satisfied with a written agreement of betrothal, subject to approval by the Pope. Celebrations followed, during which neither the ship nor the two Spanish forts spared their gunpowder.

Thereafter Rezanov became virtually a member of the Argüello family. In his report he said that he "managed this [part] of His Catholic Majesty" as his interests demanded. Despite the prohibition on trade, the hold of the *Juno* was filled with food for Sitka in return for her much needed cargo. But Arrillaga and Argüello granted the Russians no permanent trading agreement, and the future remained open. Much might happen before Rezanov would return to California. First he must proceed to St. Petersburg; then, if the Czar were willing he would come back to San Francisco via Madrid and Mexico. Probably the journey would take two or three years. Concha was willing to wait.

On May 21, after six weeks in port, the *Juno* sailed at six in the afternoon. As she passed through the Golden Gate, Concha, her family, the governor, and virtually all the rest of the small community stood on the battlements of the fort, waving farewell with their hats and kerchiefs.

During the voyage north Rezanov set down his thoughts in an official report. He foresaw the day when "all this country could be made a colonial part of the Russian Empire": an immense province devoted to agriculture and cattle-raising, and worked by Chinese labor—Rezanov seems to have been the first to hit upon the idea of importing coolies from Canton. Russia's trade in the New World, he thought, "would make notable and even gigantic strides." He was aware that such "far-reaching plans" might cause laughter in St. Petersburg. Yet—and here he was writing for the ages rather than to the Czar and Rumiantsev—"All great plans appear visionary on paper, but . . . their execution compels admiration."

After a brief stop at Sitka, Rezanov sailed to Kamchatka and from there set out with a Cossack escort across the Siberian wastes. Although suffering from a fever, he pushed on rashly. On a wind-swept steppe he fell from his horse, and suffered a brain concussion. The Cossacks carried him to the town of Krasnoyarsk, where he died on March 1, 1807. His grave was marked with a large stone, fashioned in the shape of an altar, without any inscription.

Concha survived him by fifty years, and lived to see California pass from Spanish and Mexican to American rule. She never married. Several years passed before she first heard of Rezanov's death, and not until 1812 did she learn the exact circumstances in which

Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov

Russians in California

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

he died. By then she had already assumed the habit of a nun, without taking formal vows. When California's first convent and seminary for women was founded in 1851, she became a novice. Six years later she died in the convent at Benicia.

Rezanov's report reached the Czar, who seriously considered its proposals; but he was too deeply engaged in the Napoleonic Wars to undertake so sweeping a program of expansion in the Pacific. At distant Sitka, however, another Alexander—the Commandant Baranov—was bent on carrying out Rezanov's plans with the slender means at his disposal. Without giving him much material encouragement, the Czar and Count Rumiantsev let him go ahead.

To advance as quickly as possible to California and to remain there, Baranov depended on the assistance of his friends the Americans, who even before Rezanov's visit helped the Russians to poach furs along the California coast. As early as 1803 he entered into a profit-sharing agreement with Captain Joseph ("Honest Joe") O'Cain, who commanded a ship bearing his own name, the *O'Cain* out of Boston. The partnership admirably suited the needs of both parties. The Russians were faced with the depletion of the Alaskan hunting grounds, but had no seaworthy vessels. The New Englanders, on the other hand, could cruise almost at will in Spanish waters, but lacked the skill and equipment to take pelts. For this purpose the Aleuts, whom the Russians ruled absolutely, were incomparable. They were the finest seal and sea otter hunters in the world. In their light *bidarkas*, two-man skin canoes, they pursued the animals into rocky inlets and among dangerous shoals, harpooning them with deadly accuracy. On this first joint operation Baranov provided the *O'Cain* with twenty *bidarkas*, forty Aleuts, and two Russian officers to supervise them. When they returned north in June, 1804, after a hunt that extended below San Diego, they had caught eleven hundred otters.

Other Americans saw the advantages of collaboration with the Russians. The skippers of the *Mercury*, the *Derby*, and the *Peacock* also signed contracts with Baranov, and started operating off California. At the same time, Baranov gathered information concerning California from his officers who accompanied the Aleuts; and in 1807 Vasily Tarakanov came back aboard the *Peacock* with the news his chief wanted: an excellent site for a base had been found.

Scarcely fifty miles above the Golden Gate, but virtually inaccessible to the land-bound Spaniards, who would have to make the enormous circuit of San Francisco Bay to get there, was Bodega Bay. Today this sheltered anchorage is sanded up, but then it could receive good-sized sailing ships. The surrounding territory seemed fertile. There was a plentiful supply of fresh water and timber. The climate was foggy, but mild. The local Indians, who hated the Spaniards, were friendly to other Europeans. Most important, the Spanish claim to the harbor and region, made in 1775, was doubtful. Drake had been there two centuries earlier. If the Russians chose, they could regard the land as part of New Albion. Conceivably, they could maintain that it belonged to the natives. Baranov, who finally had received two ships from Russia, decided the time was ripe to dispatch expeditionary forces. One was wrecked off the Columbia late in 1808, but the *Kodiak* arrived safely at Bodega for the New Year of 1809.

Forty Russians and one hundred and fifty Aleuts, twenty of them women, brought the Czar's flag ashore, and stayed eight months. The party was led by Ivan Kuskov, a former clerk in the company, who for years had been Baranov's trusted assistant. Far from appearing the intrepid leader of a hazardous expedition, Kuskov was a picture of mildness. He wore spectacles, and sometimes, at Sitka, drunken naval officers used to beat him, as if he were a character in a Gogol story. But a promotion recommended by Rezanov had given him new status, and he was to display unexpected strength and resourcefulness in a position of command.

On this preliminary visit to Bodega, which he named Fort Rumiantsev in honor of the powerful minister, Kuskov erected a few temporary buildings, inspected the neighboring countryside, and—like Tarakanov before him—sent his hunters into the forbidden waters of San Francisco Bay. This time, rather than risk an entrance through the Gate (where on one occasion a shot from the fort had destroyed two of Tarakanov's *bidarkas*), the Aleuts made a portage overland across modern Marin County. It was open provocation of the Spaniards, but the catch in furs was worth the risk. For the "precious sea otter . . . almost unheeded, was swimming about the Bay in great numbers." The Aleuts began killing otters on Angel Island, within sight of the presidio, and then rashly descended to the southern arm of the bay. Late in March a company of soldiers surprised them ashore, and four of the intruders were killed and two wounded. But sporadic Spanish resistance never deterred the poachers. The *Kodiak* stayed five months longer at Bodega, leaving with two thousand skins.

Eighteen months later, in February, 1811, Kuskov was back on a new ship, the *Chirikov*, to make ex-

tensive preparations for the founding of a permanent settlement the following year. The Russians were acting slowly, but with considerable thoroughness and skill. That spring and summer they conducted what was actually a trial run of their colonial plans. Fur hunting continued unabated. A post was set up at the Farallon Islands, a favorite haunt of the fur seal, just off the Golden Gate; and during a four-month period three thousand of the animals were killed. Additional buildings were erected at Bodega, and a crop of wheat was sown, harvested, and carried to Sitka. Counting the Aleuts aboard the half dozen American ships that were present, the Russians had a formidable force of five hundred men on the coast: the total garrison of Spanish California was not much larger.

Thus far open warfare had been avoided, but relations with the Spaniards grew tense. Kuskov decided that Bodega was too exposed to serve as the main Russian base. The rugged terrain north of the Russian River (the Russians named it the Slavianka, "charming little one") seemed more promising. Headlands curved above the gray ocean, and the land fell steeply to the sea in cliffs and deep, wooded gulches. The high coastal plateau was hemmed by a forest of titanic redwoods that extended to Oregon. So secluded is this spot that even now it is thinly populated.

Thirteen miles above the river and thirty above Bodega, Kuskov discovered a safe cove. San Francisco was eighty miles away. The little harbor, fronting on the open sea, was inferior to the enclosed anchorage at Bodega (which in any case Kuskov intended to keep), but it could be used nevertheless. One hundred feet above the water, protected on three sides by the ocean, was a flat tableland where the Pomo Indians had established the village of Mad-Shui-Nui. Kuskov looked no farther. For "three blankets, two axes, three hoes, and a miscellaneous assortment of beads"—some accounts say that three pairs of trousers were also included—he purchased about one thousand acres from the Indians. If the payment seems niggardly, it may be said for Kuskov that this was the only known occasion during the colonial period when the California Indians were given anything at all for their land. The Spaniards did not pay them even beads.

Kuskov wintered in Sitka, but on March 15, 1812—a fateful year in the history of both Europe and America—he was back in California to construct a fort. He laid out a quadrangle about one hundred yards square, its corners corresponding roughly to the cardinal points of the compass; and his force of ninety-five Russians and eighty Aleuts, aided by some local Pomos, went to work.

Huge redwood trees were felled. The logs were hewn into posts and planks; and a stockade commenced to rise. At the northern and southern corners were blockhouses, fitted with cannon ports. These bastions were designed to control all the approaches to the fort. Eventually, when there was a full complement of forty-one guns, the fort did become impregnable to any force the Spaniards could have mustered.

Throughout the spring and summer, work continued on the doughty little fortress, but some portions remained unfinished when Kuskov dedicated the colony with a ceremony on September 11. He named it Rossiya—an ancient name for Russia, which sometimes was written simply as Ross. Usually the establishment was called Fort Ross, the name that has persisted.

A finger shield, used by Alaska Indians for sewing, was drawn by Langsdorff.

In the context of world history the dedication of Ross, in its lonely setting of natural grandeur, was an event of minor but poignant significance. The raising of the Czarist standard, to the accompaniment of salutes, prayers, and singing, occurred at a moment when Russia's very survival as an independent nation was in peril. Napoleon occupied Moscow only three days later, and on the day following that, the city was set afire, probably by French looters. It burned for six days; and a month afterward began the dismal retreat westward across the snow.

The colonists endured their first winter in California with great hardship, largely because the Spaniards refused to provide them with food in exchange for cloth and iron they offered to trade. The situation was made worse by the outbreak of war between the United States and Britain; the Yankee ships on which so much depended were soon bottled up in their home ports. But in 1813 the authorities at Monterey relented. Goods and produce valued at $14,000 were exchanged. The Russians received cattle and horses, wheat, beans, dried beef, tallow, and other supplies. Yet they could never count on this commerce. Spanish policy often hardened without warning.

Kuskov, however, did not sit idle. He was handicapped by the inefficiency and laziness of many of his men, the majority of whom were convicts from Siberian penal camps; but he was an enthusiastic builder and farmer, and he drove them as hard as he could. More buildings, including a windmill, were erected at Ross; the installations at Bodega were enlarged and improved; a permanent post was established on the

Farallon Islands. The Aleuts went out regularly in their *bidarkas*. Land was fenced and tilled. A vineyard was started in 1817 with grapevines brought from Peru. Three years later an orchard of one hundred trees—apple, pear, cherry, peach, and bergamot—was planted on an enclosed rise of land some distance from the fort. There was a garden of roses and other flowers.

Slowly the settlement became more comfortable. Women arrived from Alaska; none at first was Russian-born, but some had Russian fathers. There were marriages, and children were born. Population passed two hundred.

Fear of Spanish retaliation declined with each year. The Napoleonic Wars had dealt Spain blows from which she had yet to recover, and her American possessions were moving toward independence. Russia, on the other hand, emerged from the fighting as one of the great victors. One sign of revivified Russian power was the arrival of the brig *Rurik* in San Francisco on October 2, 1816.

Although the vessel was commanded by Lieutenant Otto von Kotzebue of the Russian Navy, and flew the imperial war flag, she ostensibly was bound on a round-the-world voyage of exploration. The expedition had been personally underwritten by Count Rumiantsev, acting as a private individual, for he had retired from office two years earlier. Aboard the *Rurik* were two eminent young scientists: the entomologist Johann Friedrich Eschscholtz, and the naturalist and poet Adelbert von Chamisso.

Yet Kotzebue evidently was more interested in showing the flag in civilized ports than in braving unmapped coasts in the Arctic. He behaved in San Francisco with singular hauteur, insisting for example that the Spaniards salute his ship deferentially with a larger number of guns than was usual. The Spaniards for their part acted with traditional politeness and warm hospitality.

Then Governor Pablo Vincente de Sola arrived from Monterey to demand the immediate abandonment of Ross. Suddenly Kotzebue became amiable. He replied that, although justice seemed clearly on Spain's side, he was without authority to act in the matter, but he would be glad to bring it to the attention of his emperor. Sola (it would seem gratuitously) agreed to refrain from violence against the intruders until the Czar ordered them to leave. More profound developments were taking place which eventually compelled the Russians to leave California. Russia was preoccupied by ambitions in Europe and Asia, but the fate of Ross was actually determined by events in the New World.

Of most immediate importance was the approaching extinction of the sea otter: by 1821 the catches had fallen off so alarmingly that the Czar issued a ukase that barred foreign vessels from the coast north of San Francisco.

Meanwhile the United States had become aroused. To the American people Alexander was the incarnation of political evil. He had lost all trace of his youthful liberalism; instead he stood guilty before the young Republic as the author of the autocratic Holy Alliance —"unholy," Americans called it. Russian provocation is frequently overlooked as one of the main reasons for Monroe's epochal message of December 2, 1823—now known as the Monroe Doctrine—but both the President and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, as well as the Congress, suspected that the Czar was "occupied with a scheme worthy of his vast ambition . . . the acquisition of the gulf and peninsula of California and of the Spanish claim to North America." It was Rezanov's scheme.

The Americans were not acting selflessly. They were aware that the harbor of San Francisco was, in the words of a secret report received by Congress, "one of the most convenient, extensive, and safe in the world, wholly without defense, and in the neighborhood of a feeble, diffused, and disaffected population." Already some Americans were determined that the magnificent bay should be controlled by no other nation than their own. The Monroe Doctrine made it clear to Russia that she could contemplate no further expansion in the New World without the risk of battle with the American fleet. Thus ended the grandiose plans of Rezanov and Alexander, of Rumiantsev, Baranov, and Kuskov. Within a few years all of them were dead, and the impulse toward colonization—never strong at the Russian court—failed to survive them.

Eighteen years remained to the Russians in California after the Monroe Doctrine was issued in 1823. By paradox this final period was the most pleasant in the history of the colony. As the settlement lost economic and political justification for its continuance, it acquired comforts, such as window glass, which were counted as rare luxuries in Spanish California. When the French traveler Bernard Duhaut-Cilly arrived at Bodega on June 3, 1827, he found none of the "rudeness" of the presidios he had visited. Instead, he saw "well-made roofs, houses of elegant form, fields well-sown and surrounded with palisades." The place had a "wholly European air."

This unusual Kodiak Indian percussion instrument was made of puffin beaks.

Fort Ross, after fifteen years of steady improvement, stood impressively complete. At the north and south rose the turrets of the blockhouses. At the eastern corner was the chapel built in 1823, surmounted by a belfry and a low dome; it was built into the stockade and seems to have been fitted with gun ports, so that it too could be used as a defensive bastion. Diagonally across from the chapel, but standing separate from the walls, was the "fine house" of the commandant. There were seven other buildings within the stockade: officers' quarters, storehouses, a kitchen, and a jail. Discipline was severe at Ross; floggings were administered; and social distinctions between officers and men were strictly enforced.

Outside the walls was the "town." Some fifty structures were scattered among gardens, vineyards, and cultivated fields. Close to the stockade were the "pretty little houses" of the Russian colonists; it is difficult to have a clear idea of them from drawings of the period, all of which disagree in detail. Further away were the "flattened cabins" of the Aleuts and the "cone-shaped huts" of the California Indians. According to Duhaut-Cilly, sixty Russians, eighty Aleuts, and eighty Indians, together with their families, were living at Ross at this time. The total population must have been about four hundred.

Meanwhile, the Spanish *frontera del norte* finally had been extended above the Golden Gate by the establishment of the last two units in the mission chain, at San Rafael (founded in 1817) and Sonoma (1823). As replies to the Russian intrusion in California they were tardy enough, but they did hasten the settlement of modern Marin and Sonoma counties. With the padres came troops and rancheros, who in 1822 became subjects of the new Republic of Mexico. They were led by the great man of the period, Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. After the missions were secularized by order of the Mexican government—San Rafael in 1833, and Sonoma in 1834—Vallejo's power was unopposed in the region. His splendid feudal hacienda, Casa Grande, which stands in broad fields in the Petaluma valley, was designed to resist further Russian encroachment. The two-story adobe structure, whose continuous open balconies and wide sheltering roofs give it exceptional architectural distinction, was essentially a fortress. It was laid out in a U-plan around a large patio; the walls were four feet thick; and there were caches of arms and defensive earthworks in the surrounding fields. The long northern side faced Ross—only forty miles away. If Vallejo was unable to expel the Russians, although he sometimes dreamed of making the attempt, they certainly lacked the strength to chase him from Casa Grande.

A modus vivendi developed. There was a steady exchange of produce between Ross and Casa Grande. The Russians were permitted to open a commercial agency in Yerba Buena, as the trading station that would become the city of San Francisco was then called. Nevertheless, Ross went into steady financial decline. As the fur trade fell off, expenditures exceeded receipts by five to one.

The later commandants at Ross perceived that the basic wealth of the colony consisted of the immense forests that today comprise the "Redwood Empire," one of the richest stands of timber in the world. They sold what lumber they could in California and Hawaii, but the market was necessarily limited. Shipbuilding was attempted, but the tan oak—unsuitable for this purpose in any case—was used while the wood was green, and the four vessels that were built did not last on the water. The Russian carpenters even prefabricated houses, ingeniously designing them to be assembled without nails; but few of these structures were needed on the coast. During the Gold Rush, ready-made buildings were to be shipped tremendous distances by sea to California. But by then the Russians were gone.

One hope remained for the salvation of the colony. Mexico, which won independence in 1821, was eager to obtain Russian recognition—eager enough to consider making a cession of land in return. The governor of Alaska, the distinguished explorer Ferdinand von Wrangell, hoped that he could thus obtain the lands of the missions at Sonoma and San Rafael, and perhaps the entire territory north of the Golden Gate; but negotiations were fruitless. Wrangell did lay the basis for a commercial treaty, but Czar Nicholas I, whose motto was "orthodoxy, autocracy, and national unity," would not countenance dealings with the upstart republic.

Ross was doomed. The stockholders of the Russian-American Company asked to be relieved of the burden of maintaining the colony, and on April 15, 1859, the Czar approved the decision to withdraw.

Two years were required to close down the settlement. They were spent in an atmosphere that suggests Chekhov's drama *The Cherry Orchard*. The last commandant, Alexander Rotchev, wrote lyric poetry and translated Shakespeare, Schiller, and Victor Hugo into Russian. His wife, the blond young Princess Helena Gagarin, was the most brilliant woman who had yet appeared in California. Vallejo, like everyone else, was captivated by her. She was "a very beautiful lady of twenty Aprils," he wrote with his usual eloquence, "who united to her other gifts an irresistible affability." Even the Indian chief Solano was fascinated by her; and if Vallejo's account can be trusted, he and his

Liberal as a young man, Czar Alexander I encouraged Russia's colonizing efforts; later he lost interest in them.

warriors once planned to steal her during a visit that she and her husband made to Sonoma.

The wives of two or three other Russian officers had also come to California, and for the first time Ross lost its masculine somberness. The ladies were elegantly dressed; there were parties and dancing; and the Princess had a glass conservatory—it caused a sensation in California—where she spent happy hours among her plants. A summer house was erected in the fruit orchard—there were nearly three hundred trees now—and when the Rotchevs dined with their guests in the open pavilion, it was hung with the imperial colors. The commandant's house was the only one in California that really pleased a finicky French visitor, Count Eugene Duflot de Mofras, who "appreciated the joy of a choice library, French wines, a piano, and a score of Mozart" when he visited Ross.

At last arrangements were made for evacuation. The Hudson's Bay Company agreed to take over the task of provisioning Sitka; and the ruler of the Sacramento Valley, John Augustus Sutter, purchased the buildings, furnishings, equipment, and stock of the fort for $30,000. The land, to which the Russians had no title in spite of the payment made to the Indians, was not offered for sale. Later it came into the hands of American ranchers.

The Americans were spreading out everywhere in California. They were coming through the passes of the Sierras and by ship around the Horn. When Wrangell passed through Monterey en route to Mexico in 1833, a young sailor before the mast of the *Pilgrim*, Richard Henry Dana, gave him a letter to be forwarded to Boston. Dana's observations of the potential wealth and present defenselessness of California, together with the reports of fellow countrymen who had come west, were public knowledge in the United States. The drive against Mexico had begun. Texas was independent. Soon Frémont and his party would enter California, and it also would be detached from Mexican rule.

The end of the Hispanic era, too, was in sight. Squatters were taking land in the vicinity of Ross and Sonoma. These intruders, who were to stage the Bear Flag Revolt in 1846, simply "would not give up the places occupied by them," complained Lieutenant Dimitri Zavalashin, who conceded that the only choice remaining to the Russians was to fight the Americans or leave. It was the better part of wisdom to depart.

The Russians left early in 1841, and everything movable was transferred from Ross to Sutter's Fort on the Sacramento, including the dismantled buildings. Sutter recalled that Madame Rotchev begged him not to destroy her conservatory. But his men "could not put it together because they did not understand the workmanship of the Russian carpenters."

History moved swiftly in the next decade. In 1848 gold was found at Sutter's Mill, and all Sutter had acquired from the Russians, together with all that he had in the world, was engulfed in the rush for wealth. In 1850 California joined the Union, and a new phase of history began.

Throughout their twenty-nine years at Ross, the Russians had regarded Mount Mayacamas, as the Indians called it, the highest peak in the region. Shortly before their departure Ivan Voznesensky and Gyorgy Tschernikh climbed to the crest, and named it Mount St. Helena, probably in honor of the reigning Czarina, or the saint whose day it was, rather than in honor of Helena Gagarin. From the summit of this formidable mountain, 4,343 feet above the sea, the Russians looked out over some of the richest and most beautiful country in California: the Napa and Sonoma valleys directly below with their farms, orchards, and vineyards; and to the south, the great sheet of bay, quite silver in the sun. Today the region is dotted with cities and towns. Smoke rises from the industrial plants on the shores of the incomparable harbor. The silver bridge, tiny but distinct, leaps in its great trajectory from Oakland to San Francisco; and there in the sunlit distance rise the towers of the metropolis. All this was at stake when the Russians contended in the great international struggle for California.

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