CIRCUMNAVIGATION, EMPIRE, MODERNITY, RACE:
THE IMPACT OF ROUND-THE-WORLD VOYAGES ON
RUSSIA'S IMPERIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house...”
(Genesis 12:1)

Advances in communications, connections – examples include the introduction of the telegraph, the telephone, the airplane, and the internet – can radically change the way bureaucracies see and run societies. My hypothesis is that the initiation of voyages from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean via the Southern Hemisphere had far-reaching implications for the mental and cultural geography of the Russian Empire as it was seen from official St. Petersburg. Previous studies have blurred the line between those voyagers, colonists, and observers who came to Russian America (present-day Alaska) and the Russian Far East via Siberia and those who got there by sailing around the world. The present article aspires to demonstrate the relevance of the differences between the two groups. The implications of these differ-

* I am indebted to Diane Clemens, Sergei Kan, Kerwin Klein, Michael Khodarkovsky, Arthur Mason, Sorja Lührmann, Jan Plamper, Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Yuri Slezkine, Dov Yaroshevski, Reggie Zelnik, and Andrei Znamenski for constructive criticism and suggestions.
ences will shed light on broader discussions of modernization, colonialism and the multiethnic empire.

Beginning in 1803-1806, Russians1 traveled from St. Petersburg to the Pacific coast of the Russian Empire by two different routes—a marine round-the-world route around the southern tips of Africa and South America was added to the land route across the territory of Eurasia. With the introduction of Russia’s round-the-world voyages came a shift, largely overlooked in historical literature, in the way that the Russians understood and operated their Empire.2 Twenty-five such circumnavigation voyages were initiated while Alexander I was emperor (1801-1825).3 Given their relative regularity, these voyages became a more or less stable feature of Russian imperial order.4 Instantaneously, the ports of Russia and Eurasia’s Pacific Coast, which had been previously thought of as part of the Russian Empire’s remotest frontier, came to be re-conceptualized in the eyes of the country’s thinkers and bureaucrats as places with better access to Russia. “In normal everyday life it is safe to say that Sitka [Novo-

---

1 “Russians” as used here refers to all subjects of the multiethnic Russian Empire (rossi­tane rather than russkie); as will be elaborated further down in this article, many of the people participating in the round-the-world voyages did not identify themselves as ethnic Russians.

2 Some of the reasons for this oversight are examined in my dissertation: Ilya Vinkovetsky. Native Americans and the Russian Empire / PhD dissertation. UC Berkeley, 2001. Soviet scholars emphasized almost exclusively the strictly scientific contributions of the voyages. Western scholarship either followed suit or neglected Russia’s round-the-world voyages altogether.


4 The vistas opened up for Russian imperialism by the opening of a trans-oceanic route between the two ends of the Russian Empire have remained largely unexamined in scholarship. In contrast, much has been written on the practical impact of changing sea routes on the operation of the British Empire. See: Daniel R. Headrick. The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century. New York, 1981. Especially pp. 129-213 (Part Three: “The Communications Revolution”). It should also be said that the network of contacts that the Russian navy established in various ports as its ships sailed around the world added up to a kind of marine “road of empire,” analogous to the more extensive “roads of empire” that served the British navy. I am grateful to Dov Yaroshhevski for leading me toward this insight. Osterhammel refers to a similar phenomenon when he speaks about the construction of “naval networks” (Jürgen Osterhammel. Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview / Trans. by Shelley L. Frisch. Princeton, 1997. Pp. 9-10.


7 A joint-stock company founded in 1799, the Russian-American Company went on to run Russian America (and its fur trade) until the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867.

8 The list of names of junior and senior naval officers who participated in the early circumnavigation voyages includes many men who went on to hold leading positions in the coming decades.

along with various ministers and other notables, visited the ships as they departed from and arrived at the port of Kronstadt. It was especially the first of the voyages that stirred the imperial imagination of Russia’s educated public of the time.

The round-the-world voyages were by far the most extensive voyages undertaken by the Russian navy up to that point. Until the first round-the-world voyage (by the Neva and the Nadezhda, 1803-1806), no Russian ship had crossed the equator. As the participants in the round-the-world voyages visited British, Portuguese, and Spanish colonies, and encountered various indigenous populations around the globe, they made extensive observations on the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized to which they were not exposed on Russia’s own vast territory. When, in the course of their voyages around the world, they encountered the Russian Empire’s own subject peoples on the Pacific coast, these circumnavigators did not see them through the same eyes as did their predecessors who had come across Siberia. The circumnavigators readily compared the Itelmens, Yakuts, Chukchis, Tlingits, and Aleuts to Polynesians, South American Indians, and other peoples around the globe. The circumnavigators also aspired to apply within the Russian Empire some of the colonialist techniques that they saw in other European colonies. These observations by influential people had resonance; they were published in leading journals, reviewed by officials of different ministries, and permeated the discourse of official St. Petersburg. In this way, the circumnavigation voyages altered the frame of reference of Russians in St. Petersburg for viewing the Empire’s multiethnic population. The implications of this alteration extended far beyond the northern Pacific Rim.

Just as the round-the-world voyages created a new communications and provisionment route between the two ends of the Empire, one that was far


11 The pageantry surrounding these voyages is a subject unto itself. It is a pity that Richard Wortman does not discuss Emperor Alexander I’s visits aboard the vessels in his Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. Vol. I. Princeton, 1995.


11 Nathaniel Knight. Constructing the Science of Nationality: Ethnography in Mid-Nineteenth Century Russia / PhD dissertation. Columbia University, 1994; incidentally, Knight reports that the charter of the Royal Geographical Society in London was used by Litke as a model for the charter of the Russian Geographical Society.


c. 1850s. Experienced Yak (Native Siberian) guides and porters assisted Russian sailors in crossing these mountains, between Yakutsk and Okhotsk.

Indeed, the Russian crossings of Siberia were greatly assisted by the indigenous Siberians who lived along the way. The diversity among indigenous Siberian cultures is impressive, but what is particularly salient is that some of these cultures, particularly in eastern Siberia, bore striking similarities to the indigenous cultures that the Russians would find on the North American side of the Pacific. Drawing on their Siberian frame of reference when they encountered American Natives, Russians venturing to the Aleutian Islands and on to the North American continent saw commonalities between the indigenous populations of Siberia and North America. From earliest contact on, these Russian observers identified the people of the Aleutian Islands as Asians rather than Americans, and perceived the Aleutian Islands (like the Kuriles) as a kind of a cut-off extension of the Siberian Kamchatka peninsula. In a very real sense, in the eighteenth century, for the sibiriaki (the Russians of Siberia) the line between the so-called Old World and New World remained blurred and fuzzy.

Depending on the region and the circumstances, the Russians who settled in Siberia lived side by side with many of the Siberian Natives, and Russian men routinely cohabited with and sometimes married indigenous Siberian women. Thus, many Siberian Russians had close relatives in the Siberian native population. The point to be made here is that, unlike, say, the British in India, the Russians in Siberia, known as sibiriaki, and especially those of peasant, common trader and cossack background who lived in frontier settings, readily adopted indigenous ways. In some cases, entire settlements of Russians in Siberia became “nativized,” adopting indigenous languages and forgetting their own native tongue. The bulk of the Russians who ended up on the Northern Pacific Rim and in Alaska in the eighteenth century, although they continued to speak the Russian language and practice Orthodox (sometimes Old Believer) Christianity, resembled the Siberian Natives in their manners and dress to the point that outsiders sometimes had trouble distinguishing the Russians from the Natives. These sibiriaki were probably the group of Russians who were most isolated from West European influence. Their cultural background and frame of reference – incorporating contemporary Native Siberian influence and vestiges of Mongol and Tatar order – can be described as primarily Eurasian rather than European.

In contrast to the travelers who came overland, the voyagers who came to the Russian Pacific Rim by the high seas from the Russian Empire’s “window to Europe” (St. Petersburg) bypassed the legacy of the centuries of Siberian experience. Instead, they traveled from European Russia by way of various European ports, and then invariably made stops in European-run colonies around the world. Space on the circumnavigating ships was limited, and the ambitions of the voyages were lofty. Russia’s most able and best connected officers and scientists competed to be selected for these prestigious assignments. Consequently, a good number of the people aboard were highly trained and educated in the most advanced European traditions of the day.

These were people who considered themselves to be engaged in active dialogue with general European culture. The very training of Russia’s naval profession, which the future naval officers received as cadets in Kronshadt, was borrowed wholesale from established European models. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the most promising naval students from Russia were sent at state expense to train in the British navy. The Russian navy actively recruited European specialists, especially the British, to serve on its ships and as teachers in Kronshadt. The naval officers sailing on the circumnavigation voyages, selected from among the best the Empire had to offer, were joined aboard their ships by some of Russia’s most promising scientists. Both the scientists and the officers (and the line between them was often blurred) were well-versed in the sizable European – and particularly French, English, and German – travel literature of the day, and aspired to contribute to it. They read avidly the accounts of the most


For a contemporary British perspective on Russian naval service see A Voyage to St. Petersburg in 1814, with remarks on the Imperial Russian Navy, by a surgeon in the British Navy. London, 1822.

For a discussion of the importance of the travel book as a genre in early nineteenth-
famous discoverers, available to them in original languages or in popular
Russian translations.21 We can also surmise that, as children, they often read
the stories of adventure and discovery of popular German writer Joachim
Heinrich Campe (1746-1818), available in Russian versions since the 1780s.
The scientists who traveled aboard circumnavigating ships on various as-
signments from St. Petersburg’s Imperial Academy of Sciences sought to
build on the achievements of their fellow European colleagues. Aspiring to
fame and professing devotion to the advancement of universal science and
culture, the participants of the Russian round-the-world voyages modeled
their travel journals on the journals of previous European voyagers.22 This
was the pattern from the beginning; Ivan Kruzenshtern (1770-1846), the
commander of the first Russian circumnavigation, modeled his journal on
James Cook’s, and looked on the famous Englishman as a role model to
follow in dealing with South Pacific islanders.23

As they read the accounts of past voyages and encounters with indige-
nous peoples throughout the globe, Russian circumnavigators inevitably ab-
sorbed the images embodied in that literature. Setting the pattern for future
Russian voyages, Kruzenshtern’s ship Nadezhda had “a selective but large
library” of travel accounts. The scientists and the officers aboard spent many
hours debating and verifying ethnographic observations of previous (non-
Russian) voyagers.24 Along with their superiors in St. Petersburg, these cir-
umnavigators were gripped by the images presented in the works of Rus-
seau, Voltaire, and other eminent European writers.25 During their years of
apprenticeship abroad, the Russian sailors who had served in the British
navy sailed on lengthy voyages on British ships and absorbed some of the
century Europe, see Victoria Joan Moessner. Translator’s Introduction // Georg Heinrich
von Langsdorff. Remarks and Observations on a Voyage around the World from 1803 to
24.
22 Their desire for fame and glory is beyond dispute; for example, see F. P. Liikhe. Dnev-
nik, vedeniyi vo vremia krugosvetnogo plavaniia na shlute ‘Kamechatka’. P. 89; see also G. I. Davydov. Two Voyages to Russian America / Ed. by Richard A. Pierce, trans.
23 Glynn Barratt. Russia in Pacific Waters, 1715-1825: A Survey of the Origins of Rus-
17.
Epokha Prosveshchenia: Iz istorii mezhdunarodnykh sviazey russkoi literatury. Lenin-

attitudes that the British held toward their subject peoples. As they sailed
the world’s oceans to and from the Russian Far East and Russian America, the
Russian circumnavigators often encountered peoples whom they considered
“exotic” and whose cultures differed greatly from those found either in
northern North America or Eurasia.26 (That is, those cultures that were en-
countered by the Russians who traveled to Alaska and the Russian Far East
via Siberia.) Their encounters with “exotic” far-away peoples, in the course
of which Russia’s circumnavigators were able to compare the published ac-
counts of previous travelers of various European ethnicities and allegiances
to their own observations, gave them a frame of reference that the Siberian
Russians of the Far East and Russian America – in their majority semi-
literate and illiterate fur hunters – could not and did not have.

Given their background, it is hardly surprising that the Russians who
came to the Pacific Rim from Europe via the south seas were far more con-
scious than the sibiriaik of social and ethnic identities and distinctions. The
circumnavigators perceived a wide cultural chasm between themselves and
both the sibiriaik, about whom they had mostly negative things to say, and
the Natives, whom they saw as children in need of guidance. The image of
the Natives that these circumnavigators presented in their writings could
have different sides – but it invariably bore the mark of condescending pa-
ternalism. The Native could be a Noble Savage (emphasis on Noble), an un-
derdeveloped human being, or both. Either way, the Native required being
taken care of in a modern society. Given this outlook, the guff Russian
sibiriaik commoner had to be watched carefully lest he abuse the simple Na-
tive; the merchant could not be entrusted with such oversight because he is
prone to value profit over honor.27 Only an enlightened naval officer – a
member of the nobility social estate (soslovie) – could be entrusted by the

26 A particularly illustrative example of an “exotic” Native who fascinated the circum-
navigators is provided by the Pacific Islander named Kadu, who befriended the captain of
a Russian ship and spent some time sailing on his ship around the Pacific: Otto von
Kotzebue. A Voyage of Discovery into the South Sea and Beering’s Straits, for the Pur-
pose of Exploring a North-East Passage, Undertaken in the Years 1815-1818, at the Ex-
 pense of His Highness the Chancellor of the Empire, Count Romanzoff, in the Ship Ru-
rick, Under the Command of the Lieutenant in the Russian Imperial Navy, Otto von
176, 211, 213. See also Adelbert von Chamisso. A Voyage Around the World with the
Romanzov Expedition in the Years 1815-1818 in the Brig Runik, Captain Otto von
27 On the naval officers’ views of the Siberian promyshlenniki (fur hunters), see Iu.
Davydov. Golovnin. Moscow, 1968. P. 89; and G. I. Davydov. Two Voyages... Pp. 88-
91.
enlightened Russian Crown to make responsible decisions on its behalf. Such was the rationale behind the push of the navy for influence in Russia’s overseas colony (Russian America); the modernized nobleman had a duty to look after the naïve Noble Savage and to temper the impulses of the sibiriaki.

All in all, the Russian naval officers who arrived on the round-the-world voyages expressed benevolent intentions toward the indigenous peoples of Kamchatka and Russian America. They voiced sympathy for the Natives, provided that the Natives knew and kept their place. They expressed respect for the various so-called “natural” adaptations and skills of the indigenous population — such as Aleut expertise in sea otter hunting and Tlingit skill and bravery in warfare. But the point is that they also saw the Natives as a special, distinct “exotic” category of people to be carefully and responsibly integrated into the Russian sphere of influence — and in the process to be studied, pacified, Christianized and, to the extent possible, civilized. To be sure, these Russian naval officers did not create an elaborate racialist ideology of the likes of some other European colonizers. Yet these naval officers from European Russia were sensitive to racial distinctions in ways that the sibiriaki were not.

Consider the attitudes of the two groups to miscegenation. The sibiriaki of both the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries readily co-habited with Native women, married them and had children with them. These unions suited the Russian-American Company, which encouraged them, because they improved its chances of retaining the Russian workforce in America; after living with Native women for a period of years, Russian men working in Alaska often did not want to leave their wives and children to go back to Eurasia. There is no evidence that the older Siberian fur hunters thought in racial terms at all. Their relationships with the Native women of North America continued a centuries-old pattern of ethnic intermixing throughout Eurasia. Often themselves children of liaisons between Siberian Native mothers and Russian fathers, they saw nothing out of the ordinary in taking American Native women as concubines and wives. Adapting to local conditions and freely borrowing from the Native way of life, these men were not particularly concerned with the mission to civilize the Natives. While the

28 On the naval officers’ sense of duty to civilize see V. A. Bil’basov’s introduction to Arkhiv grafov Mordvinovych. St. Petersburg, 1902. Vol. 5. P. ix.
29 Bassin. Imperial Visions... P. 53.
russian vocabulary from the Spanish [criollo] or, less plausibly, the Portuguese. Prior to 1805, Russian ships did not travel from Alaska to Spanish or Portuguese colonies. The two ships of the first circumnavigation voyage topped in the Canary Islands and Brazil en route to the Pacific; Rezanov also made an eventful side trip to California. Contacts between California and Russian America began in 1805 — after the first round-the-world voyage reached America — and increased after 1812, when the Russians established Fort Ross in northern California. The ships involved in later circumnavigation voyages also made frequent stops in various ports of Portuguese and Spanish America (as well as the Philippines, Africa, Australia and elsewhere). Russian scholars and naval officers who went ashore routinely engaged in all kinds of observations and ethnographic descriptions. They sought out the company and writings of other Europeans to compare notes with them.36 They encountered the term “Creole” over and over. The term had different meanings in different settings; in the Russian American context it acquired a meaning that was close but not identical to the meaning it had in the practice of Spanish California. What is salient is that the adoption of the term kreol in nineteenth-century Russian America, and the invention of the social category for which it stood, signaled a more self-conscious awareness on the part of the Russians of the difference between themselves and the Natives.

Once the category was defined, it was commented upon. Russian elites passed various judgments on the Creoles as a group, both in a social and a racial sense. Although there were some exceptions, on the whole, predictably from the point of view of the discourse on the mixing of the races then prevalent in European thought, the Russian circumnavigators saw the emergence of this group as regrettable, if perhaps unavoidable.38 These Rus-

---

36 The German-born naturalist Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff (Grigorii Ivanovich Langsdorf), a participant in the first voyage who became Russia’s consul in Brazil, routinely welcomed the Russian circumnavigators at his Brazilian estate, where they socialized with European scientists, local notables, and foreign dignitaries. When Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangel’ (an officer in the Russian navy and former governor of Russian America who was also known by his Baltic German title and name Baron Ferdinand von Wrangel) went on an official negotiating mission to Mexico, he consulted German and English literary sources, and drew especially on the advice of German diplomats and other members of the “German colony” in Mexico (L. A. Shur (ed.). K beregam Novogo Svetva. P. 183).


38 The Canadian ethnohistorian Jennifer S. H. Brown notes a similar pattern of differentiation and stereotyping by the officials of Hudson’s Bay Company of its métis (half-

---

sians roundly lamented the decline of the “pure” Native population. They saw the Natives as better hunters and in general as more suitable inhabitants of Russian America than the Creoles. These attitudes toward the Creoles persisted and even increased despite the fact that some of them achieved relatively high social status within Russian America and beyond. A few Creoles even became naval cadets, went to train in Kronstadt, and came back to Russian America to serve on Russian-American Company ships. Be that as it may, as a group the Creoles, along with the Natives, were perceived by Europeanized Russians through a racialized prism. More and more stereotypes were attached to the Creoles as the century went on. In their urge to define and organize, the circumnavigators created the Creole group, only to lament its existence later.39

It is of course true that European models of viewing the indigenous population had been important from before the time before the Russian incursion into Kamchatka, the Aleutian Islands, and Alaska. Throughout the eighteenth century, a number of scientists and naval officers sent across Siberia from St. Petersburg took part in several expeditions, government-sponsored and private, to Alaska from the Siberian coast.40 Their voices were recorded and heard. But they were far outnumbered by the sibiriaki. For well over half a century, between the Bering-Chirikov voyages and the first round-the-world voyages, the few Europe-oriented Russians who made it to the Northern Pacific Rim were primarily observers; it was the Siberian merchants and fur hunters who were the actors. The tide turned in the nineteenth century.

In Russia’s overseas North American “laboratory,” the sibiriaki declined in real numbers as well as influence. The opening of the trans-oceanic maritime route between St. Petersburg and the Russian Pacific Rim marked a shift in how Russia’s colony in North America was populated. Their service with the Russian-American Company limited by imperial policy to a fixed number of years, a sizable proportion of Russian men — and there were virtually no Russian women — who were hired by the Russian-American Com...
pany to work in America circulated back to Eurasia within a period of several years. Because of this policy, the general inaccessibility of the region, and other factors, the Russian population of Alaska remained small; at no time prior to the sale of Alaska to the United States did it exceed seven hundred people. The opening of the circumnavigation route, coupled with reforms in the Russian-American Company's pay structure that prompted the sibiriaki to seek their fortunes in other areas, meant that more and more of the workforce from Eurasia would come to Alaska directly from European Russia. It should be added that the term "Russian population" in the records of the Russian-American Company was never limited to ethnic Russians; rossiiane (inhabitants of Russia) rather than russkie (ethnic Russians) was the more accurate term used to apply to these people. The Russian Empire was multiethnic, and that diversity was reflected in the ethnic composition of the workforce recruited by the Russian-American Company. By the 1830s, the Finns, along with a lesser, but no less influential, number of Baltic Germans, would form a substantial minority in Russian America — up to a third of the "Russian" population according to one estimate — prompting the Russian-American Company to invest in the building of a Lutheran Church in Novo-Arkhangel'sk. These Finns, Baltic Germans and European ethnic Russians recruited on the shores of the Baltic were in effect gradually replacing the sibiriaki, many of whom were leaving Alaska to return to Siberia, and indigenous Siberian Natives, who had been involved particularly in the earlier voyages to the Aleutian Islands. Just as the sibiriaki were being replaced on the ground in Alaska, merchants were losing influence in the headquarters of the Russian-American Company. The moving of the Company's headquarters from Irkutsk to St. Petersburg in 1800 had more than symbolic significance. In 1802, prominent St. Petersburg nobles, including Emperor Alexander I and his immediate family, began to buy shares in the Russian-American Company, eroding merchant influence within it, and enhancing that of the nobility. This was the climate in which the Russian navy could stake its claim for increased influence in America. The status-conscious officers of the navy, who belonged to the nobility social estate, felt resentful that members of a less prestigious merchant estate were permitted to run Russia's sole overseas colony. As an overseas colony, and especially one that was initially "discovered" and claimed for Russia by officers of the navy, mainly by Vitus Bering and Aleksei Il'ich Chirikov in 1741, Alaska appeared to these men to be within the natural domain of their institution. The fact that the British (Cook, Vancouver) and the French (La Perouse) succeeded in sailing to the North Pacific from Europe long before the Russians could not but wound the Russian naval officers' institutional pride. Appealing to the need to uphold Russia's prestige, they were determined to make their mark in the Pacific. Their vigorous behind-the-scenes campaign in St. Petersburg produced results in the late 1810s, as they won a major concession that became part of the second charter granted to the Russian-American Company by the emperor. From 1818 on, after the forced retirement of merchant-estate member Aleksandr Andrejevich Baranov, every single "chief manager" (glavnii pravitel', in effect governor) of Russian America was to be an officer of Russia's Imperial Navy appointed directly from St. Petersburg. This meant that from that time until the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, the highest-ranking official in Alaska would always be a nobleman with Europeanized education and naval training.

However, Russian America did not prove to be the coveted prize that the Russian navy imagined it would be. Only a small share for the dashed hopes can be ascribed to the general conservatism of Nicholas I's government and


44 Aleksandr Andrejevich Baranov (1746-1819) was the first and longest-serving glavnii pravitel' of the Russian-American Company (1799-1818). He was born in the town of Kargopol' in north European Russia, but had extensive experience in Siberia from 1780 on, prior to setting off for America from the Siberian port of Okhotsk in 1790. Between 1790 and 1799, he served as the chief manager of the Shelikhov-Golikov Company, which had been the main commercial predecessor of the Russian-American Company.

45 The chief manager of the Russian-American Company was the highest-ranking official and de facto governor of Russian America. He was subservient to the Company's headquarters located in St. Petersburg. From its founding, the Russian-American Company was placed under the protection (pokrovitel'stvo) of the Emperor.
its marked lack of enthusiasm for expensive and potentially daring naval initiatives in the Pacific, and that only after 1825. The pressures from the United States, fortified by the adoption of the Monroe Doctrine, and the formidable and seemingly omnipresent British Empire formed a more important factor in the disappointment. But some of the responsibility rests squarely with the Russian navy itself. The St. Petersburg Admiralty had overreached and miscalculated. It would have had difficulties with fulfilling a mission that its more ambitious boosters had in mind for it on the Pacific even under the best circumstances — and circumstances were nowhere near optimal. The lengthy trans-oceanic voyages from St. Petersburg to Novo-Arkhangelsk were risky and expensive; economically, it made more sense for the Russians in Alaska to buy provisions and supplies from British and American traders.48 Episodes of political instability in Europe and beyond exposed Russian ships to potential detention and confiscation. The prohibition on trading with foreigners, advocated by naval interests and enforced in Russian American waters in the early 1820s, proved an unmitigated disaster for the colony, which was exposed to hunger, privation, and a growing threat from local Indians, who were incensed at the Russians for taking away their opportunity to trade with British and the American ships.49 To make matters worse for the navy, the fur trade of Alaska was in general decline.

Even more to the point, for the navy, and for official St. Petersburg in general, the lure of Alaska in the first place was as a base for trading with other countries, especially China and Japan. The desire to increase and augment Russian trade with the Far East, and to take out of the hands of foreign traders, motivated the vision of Captain Kruzenshtern when he drew up the project for Russia’s first circumnavigation.50 But the Chinese and the Japanese remained firmly opposed to opening up their ports to Russian ships.51 The Russian navy was hardly a match for the British navy with which the Admiralty’s boosters were setting it up to compete. Geographically, Russia simply lacked the access to the open sea that a strong navy required. Kruzenshtern, for one, realized the Russian navy’s shortcomings and proposed the creation of an ambitious merchant marine, but his project was not adopted.52 With feeble and isolated presence on the Pacific coast of Eurasia — the woefully inadequate ports of Okhotsk and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski, closed for much of the year by ice floes — the Russian navy did not have the resources to enforce Russia’s imperial will. All in all, the navy found its victory for control of Russian America a mixed blessing at best. The exaggerated early nineteenth-century visions of turning the Pacific Ocean into a Russian “lake” administered by Russia’s navy proved a mirage.

Nevertheless, Russian America under naval rule represents an important conceptual step for Russian imperialism and colonialism. Russia’s naval officers began to reshape Alaska in the image of a colony on the Western model (as opposed to viewing and treating it as just an extension of the Siberian frontier). This reshaping — or re-conceptualization of the image of Russian America — was initiated shortly before the first circumnavigation voyage left St. Petersburg (and in anticipation of that voyage and later ones to come), when in 1799 the Russian-American Company was formed to run the fur trade of Russian America and, it was hoped by Russian officials, conduct widespread maritime trade with China and Japan for the benefit of Russia. Tellingly, the charter of the Russian-American Company was modeled on the charters of Britain’s East India Company and Hudson’s Bay Company.53 Even the name “Russian-American Company” (Rossitsko-Amerikanskaja kompanija) betrayed the intent of the founders to emulate British example. Like Britain’s far larger East India Company, Russian American Company was designed to play a “double role” as business enterprise and state organization.54 Organized with economic efficiency in mind to exploit the resources and the population of an overseas colony, it was one of the most modern apparatuses in the Russian Empire.

In contrast to frontier Siberia, Russian state presence on the shores of North America after 1818 was not represented by the voevody and the cosacks, but by naval officers and professional sailors. It is undeniable that

51 The Russians of course also traded with the Chinese at the border post market in Kiakhta. But the restrictions imposed on that trade by Chinese officials irked the Russians and made them pine for an opening of Chinese ports to Russian ships. Access to Chinese ports was denied to Russian ships until after the Opium Wars; Russian-American Company ships could then become involved in the port trade on a limited basis.
52 Nasetskii. Kruzenshtern...Pp. 22-23.
53 Fedorova. Russkoj naselenei Aliaski i Kalifornii... P. 123.
54 On the East India Company’s “double role” see: Jurgen Osterhammer. Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview. P. 32.
conducting round-the-world voyages required an impressive degree of scientific and organizational expertise. Consequently, in contrast to the Siberian voevody of earlier centuries, the naval officers, who were to preside over Russian affairs in Alaska from 1818, represented elements of the most modernized (and modernizing) elite of the Russian Empire. In further contrast, all indications are that the naval officers who served as governors of Russian America could not be faulted for the kind of corruption that made the voevody infamous. Naval officers ardently sought to make life in the colony more orderly. (One of them even wanted to require all the residents of Novo-Arkhangelsk to wear military uniforms.) Their quest for order and precision led them to study the Natives in detail. They sought to treat the Natives — and the newly-defined Creoles — more carefully, humanely, and efficiently than did their merchant and fur trader predecessors, and in the process developed a more humanitarian — and a more paternalistic — regime.

The initiation of round-the-world voyages sped up the modernization of Russian American administration, and brought a more differentiated structure to the social relations to the colony. It was only after the round-the-world voyages, that Alaska became a true "laboratory" where Russian imperial planners could experiment with Western-style colonial approaches. Russian America of the early nineteenth century stands as the one part of the Russian Empire where, because of the Russian-American Company's active imitation of colonial techniques employed in other European colonies, theoretical models based on common European colonial experience can yield unexpectedly insightful comparative results. But the impact of Russia's round-the-world voyages was far broader. Wide exposure to European ideas about the Other and visits to European-run colonies in South America, Africa, Australia and elsewhere around the globe made a pronounced impres-