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THE VOYAGE OF THE ILMEN

by

MARINA D. ILYIN

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Interesting program -
well-written
a good basis for
being enjoyed while
being with them!

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- INTRODUCTION -

This paper is actually a spinoff of background materials that I have been collecting on the Russian Orthodox Aleut Martyr Peter, but I will cover his life in detail elsewhere.

Since most secondary sources, understandably viewed California's early history from the point of view of Spanish and American colonizers, this present essay will examine the coast of California in the early 1800's, through the voyage of the brig Ilmen, from the standpoint of a shipload of fly-by-night Russian sea-otter poachers operating in Spanish territorial waters.

THE VOYAGE OF THE ILMEN

The fur trade in Alaska was initiated by Russian promyshlenniki¹ who headed eastward from Siberia in search of fur-bearing animals. As the news of uncharted fur lands spread, and competition grew stiffer, rivals by 1799 consolidated to form the Russian-American Company. In so doing, the trappers hoped to maximize their pelt profits, as well as solve their ongoing problem of a consistent food supply. When business was booming, the problem was largely ignored; but when business was at a standstill, belts were tightened until ships could bring needed supplies from Russia. Unfortunately, because the vessels were often delayed across the sea, or shipwrecked, the Russians had to buy what little visiting foreigners could spare. If feedstuffs could not be had, a ship or two were purchased at great prices to enable them to try their luck trading to the Spanish in California.

This is exactly what occurred in 1806, when Rezanov sailed to San Francisco. He saved the Alaskan colonies for the time being from their present famine, but the supplies he obtained were not enough. Since the establishment of permanent trade relations was contrary to Spanish laws, an alternate long-term solution was needed. Soon the Russian-American Company faced the facts that because pelt profits

were directly proportionate to well-fed employees, and because society depended upon adequate agricultural crops, new settlements were eventually founded in California atodega Bay and Fort Ross, for farming.

Quite soon the fur business rapidly recovered again to the heights of its infancy, but this jump was short-lived. By 1813, Alaska's prosperity equally rapidly changed for the worse, because fewer pelts were available and because of marketing, unemployment, and equipment problems. Not only were the sea otters heading south towards California, but larger ships were needed to keep up with this migration. As Russians in Russia were losing interest in fur commodities and Asian ports continued to be closed to Russian merchants, stored furs could not easily be sold, nor were there enough large vessels to have every promyshlennik hunting as before.

In the eyes of Alaska's Governor and Company Manager, Alexander Baranov, the immediate solution to these problems rested once more in buying foreign ships and having the Americans market their pelts for them in Asia through the establishment of a contract system. The major drawbacks were the danger of conflicts with Spanish authorities, rules, and regulations regarding foreigners in Spain's California land holdings; but despite these risks, Baranov decided to go ahead and buy two American ships called the Atahualpa and the Lydia, which were both, respectively, renamed the Behring and the Ilmen.

At this point finding himself short-handed, Baranov had to hire non-Russians to command his ships, as well as

additional Aleut Indians for hunting. An American named Vodsdwit (Wodswith or Wadsworth) was appointed Captain of the teakwood East-Indies-built brig, Ilmen.

He was then ordered to go to the new Fort Ross with goods and supplies, and then go on a sea otter hunt, down the coast of California. For this latter purpose an Aleut bidarka fleet was attached to the brig under command of Taraschkoff.²

Peter was one of the Indians on board, with forty-nine other Aleuts and Creoles. Vasilii Petrovitch Taraschkoff also took charge of the twenty-five bidarkas, or canoes, needed for every two hunters.³ Doctor John Elliot d'Castro, "supercargo and pilot," was another American commissioned by the Russian-American Company. Because of his long years of previous dealings both in trade and hunting with the California missionaries and inhabitants, it was hoped that he would be able to act as agent, diplomat, and translator, should any difficulties arise.⁴ The other men we know by name were Antopatro, son of Barnaoff, Boris Tarasov, and the sales clerk Nikiferov, who was in charge of trading goods.⁵

One can just imagine the excitement and hopes of the people aboard ship as it left Sitka.

This expedition started out in December, 1813. Elliot remained at Fort Ross, trading and afterward did good service in the same capacity at San Francisco Harbor. He brought their breadstuffs and other provisions, and forwarded them to Kuskoff, the Agent at Ross, and then went along the coast selling his goods for cash, sending over 10,000 piastres to Kuskoff for transmittal to Sitka. All this time the party of Aleuts were hunting sea-otter.⁶

Hunting above the Cape of Mendocino proved unsuccessful because of hostile natives. Since no otters could be found north of San Francisco in Drake's Bay, or "Great Bodega" Bay, the vessel sailed down the coast so the Aleuts could hunt for two days around the Farallon Islands. A short while later, Captain Wedswit ordered the natives illegally to enter San Francisco Bay at night. Tarakanoff tells what happened:

The Aleuts did so, and hunted all day, killing about 100 sea otter, but when we went to the beach on the south side to camp for the night, we found soldiers stationed at all the springs who would not allow anyone to take any water. At this, the Aleuts became frightened, and started back towards the ship, which had remained outside. It was dark and some wind was blowing, and two bidarkas were capsized, and the men, being tired with their days work, could not save themselves.

These capsized Aleuts must have fallen into Spanish hands, because a letter dated June 9, 1814, from Kuskoff to Luis Antonio Arguella, San Francisco Governor, petitioned for the release of these hunters held at the Presidio, explaining that "they (had) done no wrong but were only compelled to save themselves from the surf in the Bay at the Port of San Francisco where they were captured."⁸

Learning a new lesson, the crew became more cautious as the Ilmer continued down the coast, to hunt around the Santa Barbara Channel Islands.⁹ They took 150 sea otters and some fur seals there, but trouble was just around the corner. As the brig passed cattle grazing on the hills of San Pedro, several Russian sailors were ordered to take

Tarakanoff and eleven Aleuts ashore to get fresh meat. Almost as soon as the men landed, they were surrounded by Spanish soldiers on horseback, while the frightened sailors pushed off as quickly as possible to avoid the same fate. Taken prisoner, Tarakanoff and the Aleuts were tied together with ropes and made to march first to Santa Barbara, and then to Los Angeles.¹⁰ From several sources on Peter's death, we can deduce that he was among these Aleuts captured.¹¹

While imprisoned, most of the captives had to labor in the fields.¹² In his journal Tarakanoff tells us that in a year's time most of the Aleuts were sent away to another mission, probably to San Francisco, where Peter died soon after.

By October, 1815, Tarakanoff was reunited with his men, who were still alive, before they were transferred to Monterey. Unfortunately another year was to pass before they were released.

Because Tarakanoff was still a prisoner, Tarasov was appointed the new Commander of the Aleut Indians on the Ilmen, in early 1815. Meanwhile, the Ilmen continued on journey, stopping only to drop off Tarasov and his men on the Santa Barbara Channel Islands to hunt sea otters for seven months, before heading back to Fort Ross to deliver 400 of the 955 pelts they had taken.¹³ All the other pelts were hidden or were kept for trading purposes, since the Commandant of San Francisco and the Superintendent of Missions unofficially maintained friendly relations toward

the Russians, as did Governor Arillago.¹⁴

Unfortunately, with the untimely death of the Governor, mid-1815, California's new Governor Pablo Vicente de Sola rapidly changed a laissez-faire policy of cordial diplomacy to one of outward hostility. In attempts to keep the marine wealth of the coast from the Russians, Madrid issued orders to limit trade with them to agricultural and manufactured products only. Sola was more than happy to comply in enforcing this and every other law written on the Spanish books.¹⁵ In fact, he was so zealous in his duties that he spent much of his time denouncing the settlement at Ross as an illegal encroachment on Spanish territory. This just made talks on the releasing of Russian prisoner near to impossible, since Sola would agree to nothing short of Russian withdrawal completely from New Albion (California).¹⁶

Completely unaware of this drastic change in the political climate, the Ilmen resumed its hunting and trading mission southward, after first stopping in San Francisco to come to buy supplies. In July, the vessel operated between San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara, since it was a common practice to move from place to place as the furs were caught and collected.¹⁷ The following month, Boris Tarasov came ashore in San Pedro with eight kayaks, but he was brought in for questioning by the Comisionado Sergeant Guillermo Cota, to learn the intentions of his presence in Spanish waters. As soon as Tarasov made known that his purpose was none other than for otter-hunting, he was ordered not to trade, but to

leave and not return. But to this arrogant man, after such successful hunting on the Santa Barbara Channel Islands, no threats or warnings had any effect to bother Tarasov in the least. Tarasov was so sure of himself that he appeared again in San Pedro on September 17th, asking to speak to Cota. This time the Sergeant, on orders of the Santa Barbara Commander, made full preparations to seize these intruders. The following day, as dawn broke, Cota ambushed Tarasov and 26 Aleuts, as the men approached land in their bidarkas. Almost instantly, out of nowhere, the Spaniards pounced, to exchange blows, stunning and wounding many Aleuts until 24 of them and Tarasov submitted to their force and were taken to prison.¹⁸

At the trial, Tarasov stated first that he only wanted to talk to Cota concerning the return of his companions held at Los Angeles, but later he gave other reasons for his return. According to Bancroft:

"It is amusing to read the transparent excuses the Russian prisoners always made when taken red-handed at smuggling or poaching. They were "driven in by excesses of weather" or had "lost their way," and if suddenly cornered by cross-examination, they suddenly became profoundly ignorant of every language but the simplest Russian." When captured, Tarasov had some silk goods in his bidarka, "which he had the impudence to declare were intended for his own use! When asked if he had not been warned to quit the coast, he could not understand the question."¹⁹

Incidentally, these excuses aren't too different from the ones given by Soviet poachers who are caught fishing or whaling illegally off our coasts today. Since Russians haven't changed much, in the Soviet language of the under-

world, Tarasov would also have been known as a "blatnoi," or a "zhenk" -- a big operator, or a beetle, for the way he ran his hunting operation.

Getting back to the Ilmen, the day after Tarasov and his men were captured at San Pedro, the ship put in at San Luis Obispo for water but was refused help. Two days later, Dr. Elliot d'Castro was ordered ashore for water just north of Santa Barbara, but was turned back by the threats of Sgt. Juan Ortega. On the 22nd, Jose de la Guerra y Noriega, Commander at Santa Barbara, sent five soldiers to that part of the coast to apprehend as many Russians as possible, but they arrived too late. After reporting that the vessel had sailed, Noriega quickly dispatched nine additional men farther up the coast to seize them and their boats if possible. At Refugio, the Ilmen was resting quietly in the cove. It was just a matter of an appropriate time to ambush the foreigners. When 22 Russians and Aleuts came ashore to kill some cattle, the Spaniards attacked. All but Elliot, four Russians, one American, and one Aleut made it back to the ship.²⁰

Elliot tried to no avail to bribe his way out of jail, but he and Tarasov were both only freed after a trip to Tepic, Mexico. Two or three more years were to pass before the other captives were returned home. After Elliot's capture, Captain Wodswit sailed the Ilmen onto Bodega Bay, the Sandwich Islands in 1816, and then to Sitka, before

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returning again to Hawaii. It is unclear how this brig was used for the next four years, but in 1820, the Ilmen sailed again from Sitka, under Kiril Khlebnikov to Monterey and back, before being scrapped.²¹

- CONCLUSION -

What effect does the adventure of the Ilmen really have on history? Perhaps it is significant in that the Russians were the primary stimulus for the Spaniards' expanding even further north in California than they had originally intended. But then, what? Perhaps it is interesting simply as a picture of the farthest-flung and weakened tides of two grand empires, lapping at each other, only to recede and make way for the eventual onslaught of the American wave.

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NOTES.

1. Promyshleniki were men who left their homes to hunt, mine or trade etc. to make a big profit. The term promyshleniki was a word that went back to Old Novogorod, signifying freelance exploiters of natural resources.
Chevigny, Hector, Russian America - the Great Alaskan Venture, 1741-1867, p. 10.
2. Khlebnikov, Kiril, Biography of Alexander Andreievich Baranoff (Transcript and translation in Bancroft Library, University of California.) Vol. IV, part 4, p. 135.
3. Ogdin, Adele, The California Sea Otter Trade 1784-1848 (Berkeley, 1941), p. 165.
4. Khlebnikov, p. 135
5. Ogdin, pp. 165 and 61
Bancroft, H.H. History of California (San Francisco, 1890) vol. II, p. 307
6. Khlebnikov, p. 136
Russian sources use the Julian calendar to establish their dates. At that time the Gregorian calendar was 12 days ahead of the Julian which explains the small discrepancy of dating used by American historians who obviously did not use the calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church.
7. Ogdin, p. 60
Tarakanov, "Statement" Russian America vol. II, pt 2 p.5
8. Ogdin, p. 61
9. Tarakanov, p. 7
10. Ogdin, pp. 61 and 62
11. Anonymous, The Orthodox Word (Platina 1967) p. 111
Kovach, M.G. The Russian Orthodox Church in Russian America (University of Pittsburgh 1957) p. 119-120
12. Bancroft, p. 307
13. Ogdin, p. 61
14. Tikhmenev, P. "Historical Review of the Origin of the Russian American Company" Russian America (Bancroft Library, Univ. of Calif.) p. 274 Bancroft p. 307
15. Ogdin p. 61
16. Tikhmenev, pp. 280-281
17. Ibid. p. 274
18. Ogdin, p. 61-62

19. Bancroft, p. 307-308
Ogdin gives the same quote but proved that Bancroft confused
Tarakanov with Tarasov. p. 198
20. Ogdin p. 62
21. Ogdin p. 169

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