

The Age of Russian Imperialism in the North Pacific

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Introduction

I was honored when Peter Mills and Antoinette Martinez sought to include me in the publication of this volume of the *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, one which deals with a subject that has remained near and dear to my heart for the past fifteen years. When I began my work on the old warehouse site at Fort Ross in 1981 (Farris 1990), there was a notable dearth of published material on the archaeology of Russian America (cf. Hussey 1979). The two publications for many years were by the late Adan Treganza (1954) on work accomplished by him in 1953, and by Francis A. ("Frits") Riddell (1955) dealing with excavations at the site of the Russian artel on the Farralon Islands in 1949. At the same time, there was a wealth of unfinished manuscripts and the associated artifacts tucked away in various places, most notably at the California Department of Parks and Recreation. Thanks to the selfless enthusiasm of Dr. Kent Lightfoot of the Anthropology Department of U.C. Berkeley who chose the chill shores of Sonoma County over the archaeological fleshpots of the world, thus risking terminal anonymity in the academic realm (Lightfoot 1995) a large number of bright and energetic students have been introduced to the history and archaeology of Fort Ross. Several of these students became sufficiently inspired that they undertook studies involving the artifacts from earlier excavations stored at the Archeology Lab of the Department of Parks and Recreation in West Sacramento. Several excellent papers derived in whole or in part from studies of these collections (cf. Cohen 1992, Ballard 1995, Wake 1995, Silliman in press). In addition, some students have pursued their interests in the sites of the Russian-American Company even further afield to Alaska (Crowell, this volume) and Hawaii (Mills, this volume). In cooperation with Ann Schiff and Thomas Wake, Lightfoot has already published one volume (Lightfoot et al. 1991) and a follow-up volume is in press dealing with the archaeology of Fort Ross. By stepping outside the boundaries of the stockade, he and his colleagues have expanded our focus on the too-often historically anonymous people who made up the bulk of the population of Fort Ross in the best tradition of archaeology contributing to the democratization of history.

Russia In The North Pacific

In his introduction to this volume, Kent Lightfoot has provided a fine summary, one which would be difficult to improve upon. Thus, I would like to focus on a view of the broadened understanding of the Russian colonial adventure in the north Pacific in the 18th and 19th centuries. Perhaps the best study of the Russian imperial venture in America was done by Dr. James Gibson (1976). Gibson, a cultural geographer fluent in Russian, writes with great detail about the economic base developed in Russian America.

One area that has not been dealt with in this volume is that of the western Pacific, particularly the Kurile Islands. This research area has been dominated by Dr. Valery Shubin of the Sakhalin Regional Museum. Although Dr. Shubin has published extensively in Russian (cf.

Shubin 1992 a, b), only one of his papers on his research on the Kurile Island of Urup has been published in English (Shubin 1990). Despite the distance to the Kuriles from the California shore, there are some notable parallels in the settlements at Urup and at Fort Ross. Apart from their being settled under the direction of the Russian-American Company led by ethnic Russians, they also had a large group of Alaskan Native peoples brought there to conduct the sea mammal hunting. Thus the main difference between the two areas would be the Native inhabitants of the Kuriles (Ainu peoples) as opposed to the Coast Miwok and Kashaya encountered at Fort Ross. From the standpoint of archaeological remains, another difference was the fact that the Urup Counter of the RAC remained in existence for about a decade after Alaska had been sold to the United States and thus 36 years after the departure of the Russians from Fort Ross (Shubin 1994). Among other things, the trade arrangement with the Hudson's Bay Company that came into effect around 1839 (Gibson 1990) led to a greater number of English ceramics (Jackson 1994) from the post-1840 period being found at Urup (e.g. a large number of Copeland Spode ceramics) that are not found at Fort Ross.

The Alaskan Experience

In Alaska, the Russian colonial experience was company-directed with little or no settlement of immigrants. The number of ethnic Russians living in Russian America is reported to have never amounted to more than 823 at any one time (Fedorova 1973:151). When the final sale of Alaska occurred in 1867, the overwhelming majority of the Russians returned home. The earliest contacts were between small private groups of Russian hunters and the Native peoples of the Aleutians and later of the mainland of Alaska. These encounters were often bloody and the early history of Alaska was replete with massacres of both Native peoples and occasionally Russians. One of these companies, the Golikov-Shelikhov Company, established itself at Three Saints Harbor in 1784 (see Crowell, this volume). In 1799 with the granting of a monopoly charter to the fur hunting territory of the north Pacific given to the Shelikhov Company, now renamed the Russian-American Company, a more orderly administration was developed with a Chief Manager based first in Kodiak, but soon after in New Arcangel (Sitka). This was the canny and hard-working Alexander Baranov. Baranov guided the development of the RAC in the north Pacific until his replacement in 1818. With his departure, there seemed to be a shift to a closer tie with the government. More naval officers were appointed to the administration of the company and many of these became governors of Russian America starting with Ludwig von Hagemeister in 1818 right through to Dmitrii Petrovich Maksutov who was present at the sale of Alaska in 1867 (Pierce 1986). Whereas the initial contacts had often been bloody, over the years efforts were made to be more humane, often at the behest of the tsar or tsarina. The most militant group encountered was the Tlingit whose successful attack and occupation of Sitka from 1802-1804 left the Russians with a healthy respect for the fighting abilities of the "Kolosh" as they called them. Following the retaking of Sitka an uneasy peace ensued for many years with the fierce war-chief of 1804, Kotlean, remaining in charge of the Tlingits living on the other side of the long stockade wall from the Russians.

Throughout the period of RAC ascendancy there was a steady stream of mainly English and American shipmasters who sought to enter the lucrative fur trade. They were often involved in arming and inciting the Native peoples and it was arms provided by an English ship that allowed the Tlingit to successfully overpower the Russian community in Sitka in 1802 (and

again, at Yakutat, in 1805). It became sufficiently touchy that in 1821 the Tsar issued a "ukase" limiting the access of foreign vessels to the Bering Strait. The warship *Apollo* was duly sent to do picket duty (Farris 1993c). It arrived shortly before the Monroe Doctrine was promulgated in 1823 expressing concern over European colonization within the Americas. The RAC also had its problems with the powerful Hudson's Bay Company until an accommodation was reached in 1839 (Gibson 1990). Ultimately, a combination of political distraction at home with a diminution of profits from the Alaska venture led to the sale of the property to the United States in 1867, a sale whose ultimate value to the United States was hotly debated at the time.

Russian Impacts On California

In an earlier publication (Farris 1989) I outlined what I called "The Russian Imprint on the Colonization of California," in which I tried to put into perspective the impact of the Russian settlements at Bodega Bay and Fort Ross in terms of the broader Spanish settlement of Alta California. To begin with, the concerns over the Russian movement into Alaska was a prime instigation in the decision to accelerate the establishment of a real presence in Alta California (Watson and Temple 1934). It had been 166 years since the last major expedition to seek out possible bases along the coast (Vizcaino in 1602-03) and nothing had been done to follow up on his favorable reports on the Bay of Monterey as a principal place to establish a solid fortified haven for the defense of the territory and for the use of Manila galleons that had made landfall in California before proceeding down the coast to the main seaports of Mexico. It must be remembered that until the land expedition came north in 1769, the presence of the even more fabulous harbor of San Francisco was unknown.

Although it is common to date the beginning of Russian presence in California to 1812 when Fort Ross was constructed, the impact of the Russians in the guise of their hunters (*promyshlenniki*) guiding contingents of Kodiak Native sea mammal hunters, was already being felt. As early as 1803 an enterprising American sea captain, Joseph O' Cain, had struck a deal with the manager of the Russian-American Company in Alaska, Baranov. This cooperative venture involved the borrowing of a number of Alaskan Native men and their *baidarkas* (skin boats, kayaks) to be carried to the California waters to hunt, primarily, sea otters. This cut into an important economic source for the coastal California settlers and priests of the time who were doing their own harvesting of the sea otter population and selling them often to American smugglers (cf. the *Mercury*). In the first decade of the 19th century, sea otter furs were a major part of the valuable goods available to the Californians to trade to the visiting ship captains and likewise made for an important source of income to the rancheros and missionaries. This income has not been adequately studied primarily because of the general lack of documentation for what was a contraband activity. However, the account book of the *Mercury* for the years 1806-1807--trading in the area between Todos Santos in northern Baja California and the Ortega Rancho at Point Concepcion in Alta California--details the acquisition of a total of 2,848 sea otter pelts for which a range of from 1 (for a small pelt) to 10 (for a prime adult pelt) pesos (read dollars) was given (Ogden 1941:52).

Soon after this initial intervention came a higher level contact in the person of Russian Court Chamberlain Nikolai Rezanov who sailed into San Francisco Bay in 1806 seeking food supplies for the starving Russian colonies in Alaska, principally at New Arcangel (Sitka). This

began a corollary impact of Russian attempts to secure a reliable supply of grains (bread is life to Russians) which ran into some initial objections by the Spanish authorities.

In 1808, Chief Manager in New Arcangel, Alexander Baranov, sent his trusted assistant, Ivan Kuskov, to explore the shores of northern California, which the Russians referred to as New Albion, after the claims of the English Captain, Sir Francis Drake. Kuskov set up his base at the harbor of Bodega Bay, which was then re-christened Port Rumiantsev in honor of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikolai Rumiantsev. In advance of his coming, the way had been paved by the *promyshlennik*, Timofei Tarakanov, who had entered into agreements with the chiefs of Bodega Bay and of *Metini* (the future location of Fort Ross) to allow Russian use of their land (Farris 1993a). Over the next several years, Kuskov went back and forth between New Arcangel and Bodega Bay until he decided that the position was too exposed and he deemed it necessary to seek a more fortifiable location. The site of Fort Ross was selected and in the spring of 1812 work was begun on the construction of buildings and a stockade.

This new settlement has had the various titles of *Krepost'* (fort), *Selenie* (colony), and *Kontor* (counter, its commercial name within the Russian-American Company). It was initially staffed with only about 25 Russians, but a larger number of Alaskan Native peoples and some creoles (as the offspring of Russians and American Natives were called). Interaction with the Native peoples increased mainly due to the desires and needs of the numerous Alaskan males who had come to California without women. But, for the most part, the community was self-sustaining. Its two major occupations were sea mammal hunting and agriculture. However, over time a series of local small industries were undertaken, the major one being ship-building.

Throughout its existence Fort Ross retained the character of a company town rather than a real colony. Politically, it was fully governed by the RAC. Demographically, it was staffed by individuals who generally did not want to come there. For most Russians it was the end of the world, although the final commandant, Alexander Rotchev, later expressed fondly romantic memories of his time in California. For the most part, there was little real attempt to incorporate the Native peoples of the area into the settlement, although they were encouraged to set up encampments nearby to provide labor for the Russians, specifically in agriculture and in brick-making (Gibson 1969).

It is hard to equate the experience at Fort Ross with the colonial endeavors of the Spanish, English, and other nations since the Russians neither encouraged settlers to come nor made attempts to make the local Indian peoples citizens of the colony. Even in cases of transgression against the Russians by local Indians, the punishment was generally in the form of labor rather than the more severe flogging or even capital punishment that would be meted out to employees of the RAC (cf. Istomin 1992:4-5). It was perhaps for these reasons that a number of the Native Californians in the vicinity of the Russian establishment came to view it as an alternative to the encroaching Spanish and later Mexican movement into their territories.

Although it is unclear that the Russians actively sought to undermine Spanish and Mexican authority, the writings of several of the Russian visitors seems to clearly indicate a level of sympathy with the Indians of California. In particular, during the period shortly after the successful conclusion of the Mexican Revolution against Spain when liberty and freedom were watchwords of the new government in Mexico, several visitors wrote rather critically of the plight of the Indians around 1822-24 (cf. Gibson 1973; Farris 1993b). It is interesting that at least

one of them (Zavalishin) returned to Russia filled with liberal ideas and became involved in the ill-fated Decembrist Plot against the Tsar which led to an early retirement to Siberia. In another case, a Russian deserter from Fort Ross became involved in the Chumash Revolt of 1824 (Khlebnikov 1990:153; Farris 1993c). Whether he did it as an adventurer or for idealistic reasons is uncertain.

In the matter of trade, the Russians continued throughout their time in California to trade for crop foods from the missions and from the ranches. In some years they acquired a considerable proportion of the year's production from a given mission. They were particularly interested in wheat and barley. This trade set them apart from the numerous American traders who were principally looking to acquire hides and tallow during this time. I don't believe that this impact on the food supplies of the missions, that were nominally for the use of the Indian neophytes, has been sufficiently explored. It is inaccurate, therefore, for scholars of mission subsistence to simply divide the reported crop harvests by the number of Indians at a given mission to determine the pro-rata share. Of course, there were some bumper crop years in which an overabundance was available, but there were also years in which the priests had to send the Indians out to forage for Native foods.

Hawaii

As reported in this volume by Peter Mills, the Russian "adventure" in Hawaii (Pierce 1965) was short-lived and the ultimate influence of Russia on this cross-roads island was of lesser consequence than was that of the British and Americans. They did help construct a fort at Waimea Bay on the island of Kauai which remains in part even today. The failure to solidly establish themselves in Hawaii probably also hurt the Russian chances of becoming a more important participant in the Pacific trade, especially the lucrative trade with Canton. In fact, the exclusion of the Russians from this rich port, forcing them to trade instead through the far less convenient northern city of Kiakhta, may well have been a key to the overall failure of the RAC in the north Pacific.

Conclusions

When compared with the other colonial powers, Russia's adventure in the north Pacific, particularly in Alaska, California and Hawaii, was the least successful. They even lost their holding in the Kurile Islands following the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and only regained it at the close of World War II. As much as anything, it would appear to be the failure of a mass Russian emigration to the new world to provide them a real presence such as was enjoyed by the Spanish, English, French and Portuguese in various other parts of the Western Hemisphere. Relying solely on the vicissitudes of company profits and royal whim, their presence in the eastern Pacific was tenuous. However, the fact that they were present for over 120 years certainly made their neighbors take note and they became a factor in the decision-making of a number of the other powers. Most notably, the impetus to colonize Alta California was certainly made more imperative by virtue of the Russian presence to the north.

The ultimate legacy of the Russian presence in the new world is seen today in the structures of Fort Ross State Historic Park in California and Fort Elizabeth on Kaua'i. It is more noticeable in Alaska where many place names and personal names recollect the influence of the

Russian occupation. Likewise, the onion-domed churches that dot the landscape attest to a continuity in the religious impact on the Native peoples of Alaska.

During the early 1950s when the Cold War between Russia and the West heated up noticeably there appeared a rather lengthy episode of a popular cartoon series named Casey Ruggles in which a band of Russians from Fort Ross return from a ten year absence bent on reclaiming their territory (San Francisco *Chronicle* November 25, 1950 - February 17, 1951). It appeared to be a none-too-subtle suggestion that Russia might cast strategically covetous eyes on Alaska. The finale of the episode has the Russian leader enlisting the local native Pomo people, who had every reason not to appreciate the influence of Americans on their culture, in an abortive attack on the Presidio of San Francisco. Of course, right won out in the end and the Russians were last seen anticipating an unhappy homecoming (probably a ticket to the Gulag).

Today, with the dramatic political changes that have occurred in recent years, Russians are once again returning to "Russian America," but now as tourists, scholars and friends.

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