

# The Alaskan Panhandle: A Russian Perspective

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Well before the Alaskan Boundary Tribunal in 1903, the Alaskan Panhandle was turning into a cause of Canadian ambition and frustration, both on a provincial and national level. The issues which have prevailed into this very decade are of geographic, economic and political relevance and have provoked, at times, violent anti-American, anti-British or anti-Canadian feelings.

However, no matter has been of greater concern to us than the lack of a Canadian port along the coastal *lisière*, thereby inhibiting parts of northern British Columbia and the Yukon from free access to the Pacific.

The United Colony of British Columbia was first alerted to this problem when, in 1870, barely three years after the sale of Alaska, gold was discovered in the Cassiars. By the time of the Klondike Gold Rush, the coastal boundary restrictions had become a concern of the Dominion of Canada which felt pressured to prevent the economic benefits from slipping into American coffers.

These are some of the well-known facts. Lesser-known by Canadians in general are the historic developments in Russian America, where the foundations of the Panhandle originated and on which this paper will focus. For the information we are indebted to intensive interdisciplinary studies on Russian America undertaken by prominent American, Canadian and Soviet Russian scholars—at present and in the past. It is to be hoped that the historic background of the *lisière*—considered from the Russian perspective—may explain why it became of increasing importance to the very survival of Russian America and to that of the Russian American Company until the Sale of Alaska (1867). It will be up to the reader to determine whether or how Canadian claims could be considered justifiable to what the *Ottawa Citizen* (October 27, 1903), termed as the “desirable territory.”

It is common knowledge that Imperial Russia had been the catalyst which attracted other powers to the rugged, as yet uncharted, coast of the American Pacific Northwest and that they had explored and administered extensive parts of the area including the Alaskan Panhandle.

The Second Kamchatka Expedition undertaken to the very shores of the *Bolsbaya Zemlya* (The Big Land) by Captains Vitus Bering and Aleskei I. Chirikov during 1741-42, established the first official Russian territorial and political claims at latitudes 55°36"N. (Cape Addington) and 59°31"N. (within sight of Mt. St. Elias). As a result of this epic exploratory voyage, a stampede of *promysblyenniki* (Russian or Siberian fur hunters and traders) was unleashed from the coast of Eastern Siberia across the Aleutian Islands toward the shores of America, the extent of which was to be matched some forty years later by the official arrival of British fur traders (1785) following the publication of Captain Cook's Journals. As it is known, the quest in either case was for 'soft gold' and it was from that time on that increasing foreign intrusion posed a threat to Russian territorial sovereignty along the Pacific Northwest Coast where for some forty years Russia had carried out her exploratory and hunting ventures virtually undisturbed by interlopers.

The Spaniards had been the first to receive intelligence that Russia was quietly establishing a fur trading empire.<sup>1</sup> However, the occasional intrusion by Spanish vessels from 1774 onward was regarded more as a nuisance or an affront than a major threat, as was to be the case with the competing British and Americans.

The Bourbons, like the Russians, subscribed to a policy of secrecy. Thus, the first official report acknowledging the existence of a Russian settlement at Unalaska was made known to the Western world through the publication of Captain Cook's Journals in 1784:

The (fur) trade in which the Russians are engaged is very beneficial and it is being undertaken and extended to the eastward of Kamchatka. It was the immediate consequence of the Second Expedition of that able navigator (Bering), whose misfortune proved to be the source of much private advantage to individuals and public utility to the Russian nation. And yet, if his distress had not accidentally carried him to die in the island which bears his name and from whence the miserable remnant of his ship's crew brought back sufficient specimen of his valuable furs, probably the Russians would never have undertaken any further voyages which could lead them to make discoveries in this sea, toward the coast of America.<sup>2</sup>

Despite a variety of problems involving notably the lack of seaworthy vessels and navigational know-how, Russian entrenchment along the Pacific Northwest coast in the late 18th century proceeded at a solid pace. An important contribution to further expansion was made in 1783, when the "Russian Columbus", Gregorii I. Shelikhov set off from the shores of Eastern Siberia with his wife Natalia, two

children and 192 men in three vessels for the coast of Northwest America. Considerably outnumbered by hostile natives they managed, nevertheless, to establish on Kodiak Island the easternmost Russian trading settlement at the time. During the two years of their stay, they initiated plans for the schooling of native children, made arrangements for having Russian Orthodox priests sent out, and encouraged mixed marriages in the hope of speeding up mutual integration and tying the rough *promysblenniki* to the new soil. A few specially talented native youths were taken for a period to Russia where they received training in various trades, in religion and music, as well as in the Russian language which would enable them to act as interpreters upon their return home.

Thus, Shelikhov's endeavours clearly indicated that his plans were of a more permanent nature. In an effort to speed up exploration and lay claim to further areas to the east, he despatched parties of *promysblenniki* in baidaras (native skin or leather boats holding 20-25 people) first to Cook Inlet (Kenai Bay), subsequently to neighboring Afognak and thence to Cape St. Elias where further forts or trading posts were to be established.<sup>3</sup>

Before setting sail back to Okhotsk, Shelikhov left behind detailed instructions for his manager and the remaining 163 *promysblenniki*, ordering them "to establish Russian artels (work crews; large group of hunters) in sundry places and to pacify the Americans (Indians) and to spread the Glory of the Russian State into the unknown lands of America and California as far as parallel 40\_\_N."<sup>4</sup>

The following summer, the Governor-General of Siberia had crests of the Russian Double Headed Eagle sent to the colonies as a sign of further consolidation. They were accompanied by plates emblazoned with a copper cross and the inscription in copper letters proclaiming "Russian Territory". The crests were to be displayed in prominent places and the tablets were to be buried in the ground a few feet away; their locations were to remain a secret even from the Russian crews. Exact charts, some of which may be found in the archives of the University of Washington, marked the positions where the plates had been placed in relation to the crests.<sup>5</sup>

By 1788, Shelikhov was able to confirm that:

... along the American mainland from the island of Kikhtakta (Kodiak) and far beyond Cape St. Elias to California, by my order and at company's expense, Imperial emblems have been left in many places, and we hope to have close ties with the peoples (in those places) to place them under the Russian sceptre.<sup>6</sup>

At this time, some forty Russian fur trading outfits were competing against each other along the coast and it was only in 1798 that Shelikhov's ambitions were realized when Tsar Paul I granted the company monopoly under the title of Russian American Company (RAK).

As the penetration of British and later of American fur traders increased, it provoked vehement accusations that the intruders were infringing on Russian sovereignty, that they were "marauding" up and down the coast from Alaska to the Aleutians and even to Kamchatka, "taking treasure which did not belong to them, charting and renaming territories which had long been discovered."<sup>7</sup>

The astute Madame Natalia Shelikhova, who had taken over as one of the Company's directors after her husband's death in 1795, complained in a letter addressed to the representative of Catherine the Great:

In 1794 English vessels visited Chugach, Kenai and Yakutat Bays where the hunting artels of my company were located. The expedition consisted of a three master frigate, the *Discovery* under Captain Vancouver and a two-masted frigate, the *Chatham* commanded by Captain Puget. They explored thoroughly, making soundings even in the smallest inlets. In Yakutat Bay their third ship, a trading vessel made a call. They met the hunters of my company . . . and asked them how long the Russians had owned this territory. After receiving the answer that this region and the territory beyond L'tua Bay belonged to Russia since 1741, they contested this claim stating that their rights were based on the discoveries of the celebrated Captain Cook . . .<sup>8</sup>

Another Russian report communicated that:

In the spring of 1800 several American and English vessels arrived at the Russian settlement of Novo Archangelsk (Sitka). In plain view of the Russians, the English bartered over 2000 sea otters from the natives. They paid the Kolosh (Tlingit) for the furs with more and better goods than the Russians had to offer, completely disrupting the company's trade, yet complaining all the while that the Americans were cutting them out of the fur trade.<sup>9</sup>

In 1821, an ukaz was passed by Tsar Alexander I which set out the fundamental Russian rights and privileges from along the Eastern Siberian littoral to the Aleutian Islands and the Kuriles across to the Northwest Coast of America as far down as latitude 51°N., including the northern point of today's Vancouver Island. Simultaneously, a limit of 100 Italian miles was imposed on foreign traffic<sup>10</sup> which was considered unacceptable by those concerned.

The resultant disputes over such restrictions brought about the subsequent Treaties of 1824 and 1825 signed by Russia with the United States and Britain respectively.<sup>11</sup> The merger of the Hudson's Bay Company with the Northwest Company (1821) posed a renewed threat to the Russian colonies thereby contributing its share to the relaxation of some of the more stringent Russian navigational rules. Simultaneously, the authorities in St. Petersburg quashed such unrealistic pretensions to Russian dominion over areas west of the Rocky Mountains as expressed by one of their shareholders, Admiral Mordinov.

As from now on foreign ships were permitted to trade along the coast of Russian America from the new boundary of colonies set at 54°40'N. In return, Russia secured complete sovereignty over the islands north of the said parallel and *over the coastal strip extending from the head of the Portland Canal at a distance of 10 marine leagues around all the inlets of the sea as far as Mount St. Elias*. Citizens of the United States were granted a ten-year concession to trade and fish in colonial waters. Likewise, British subjects were permitted to navigate the rivers, inlets, and creeks along that part of the coast. Prohibition of establishing settlements on Russian possessions remained in force, as did the interdiction of traffic in firearms and liquor with the Indians.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically, in addition to being short-changed of profits, constant food shortages caused by supply problems across Siberia and the North Pacific forced the Russians into having to bargain for provisions with their American and, later their British rivals—in direct violation of the Tsar's (Alexander I) ukaz. However humiliating for the Russians, it became a matter of survival. The prevailing lack of regular provisions from Russia was one of the major factors which motivated the Russian American Company to expand its operations further afield. Accordingly, Fort Ross in California was established (some 90 kms. north of San Francisco) to serve as a source for agricultural foodstuffs from 1812-42<sup>13</sup>. Also, Hawaii was considered as a suitable stop-over for Russian vessels from Kronstadt, where furs could be traded in exchange for provisions for the colonies.<sup>14</sup>

Following the controversial *Dryad* Affair at the Stikine River, damage claims by the Hudson's Bay Company were dismissed and a ten year *lease* of the *lisière* was negotiated (1839) in Hamburg between Governors Baron F.P.v. Wrangell and Sir George Simpson to the advantage of both companies concerned. As an important by-product of this transaction the American (Boston) trading activities

along the coast were virtually eliminated. The Hudson's Bay Company simply paid RAK an initial rent with a set number of furs per annum (or 1,500), promised to furnish the Russian colonies with certain supplies and transport goods on their ships for a predetermined price.<sup>15</sup>

As a result of this trade deal the "desirable territory" along the coast was temporarily transferred to the Hudson's Bay Company; *it was never sold or considered a British possession*. The extension of this arrangement, including the temporary Lease<sup>16</sup>, was continued, subject to mutual agreement. Meanwhile, it was inevitable that British power in the Northern Pacific areas increased substantially, thereby stirring up Russian apprehensions of foreign rivalry.

Global events had imposed their influence on the fate of Russian America from the time of its inception. Suffice it to mention here the Crimean War (1854-56) which impressed on the Russian motherland once more the vulnerability of her distant colonies. This shortcoming was demonstrated most dramatically by the unfortunate Anglo-French attack on Petropavlovsk (Kamchatka) in Eastern Siberia (1857), undertaken in flagrant contravention of the Neutrality Agreement signed between the Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian American Company, causing a complete erosion of Russian trust in British promises.

Xenophobia such as expressed in 1863 in the "British Colonist" of Victoria on the Colony of Vancouver Island, strengthened Russia's resolve to see the British position in the North Pacific weakened:

The strip of land which stretches along from Portland Canal to Mount St. Elias with a breadth of 30 miles, and which according to the Treaty of 1825 forms a part of Russian America, must eventually become the property of Great Britain [sic], . . . For it is clearly undesirable that the strip 300 miles long and 30 miles wide, which is only used by the Russians for the collection of furs and walrus teeth, shall for ever control the entrance to our very extensive northern territory. It is a principle of England to acquire territory only as a point of defence. . . . With a Power like Russia it would perhaps be more difficult to get ready, but if we need the seacoast to help us in our business in the precious metals with the interior and for defence, then we must have it. . . . For our national pride the thought, however, is unbearable that the Russian Eagle should possess a point which owes its importance to the British Lion. . . .<sup>17</sup>

By the 19th century, there were still generous numbers among the native Indian population in the coastal strip, who claimed to be Russian subjects. The following is only one of several depositions of a similar nature received in 1899 at Skagway, attesting to the fact that many still remembered their ties with Russian administration:

... I have recollection of the Russians here, and they claimed all of our country. I do not know exactly how far their claim extended. ... We recognized the Russian authorities as the owners of this region and considered ourselves Russian subjects. My ancestors had papers from the Russian governor and a silver medal from the Czar. When the chiefs died who were before me I inherited the papers and the silver medal but lost them in going from Chilkat to Juneau when the canoe upset, about one year ago. I have always recognized the Russians or the United States as owners of this region at the head of the Lynn Canal. My mother told me, who is now a very old woman and still living in upper Chilkat village, that when she was a small girl she had seen Russians come to this country. Key-tee-tey-tchoow was one of the chiefs in my family when the Russians first came here. He was then the chief of my clan. The Russian chief presented him with a Russian flag and armour made of brass. I think it is over one hundred years ago when the flag and armour were presented to him. It makes us feel bad when we have to pay duty when we got in the interior over the trail from Chilkat to the Yukon; this trail that we use now has been in existence many years, made by our tribe; we never paid the duties before; it is only within a year that the Canadian police make us pay duty.

(Signed) Yel Hak x

Witnesses: George Kostrametinoff, and F.B. Bourn

Sworn to and subscribed before me at Skaguay, Alaska, this 4th day of July, A.D. 1899.

JOHN TWEEDLE  
Major, U.S. Army<sup>18</sup>

This study would not be complete without an examination of the various maps pertaining to the *lisière* traced by leading cartographers of the times. We can restrict ourselves to only a few of particular relevance. Notable among them was the map published in 1826 by the Russian Admiralty with the boundary line drawn at 10 leagues distant from the coast up to longitude 141°W. and thence straight up to the Arctic Ocean. This map was superseded by one (in French) a year later by the renowned Baltic Admiral Adam J. (Ivan) v. Krusenstern, showing the same demarcation line to which Britain, evidently, raised no formal objection. In fact, the map showed the very boundary line which the United States later acknowledged when purchasing Alaska in 1867; and it was essentially the one pertaining to the final decisions of the Boundary Tribunal (1903-05).<sup>19</sup>

In 1831, the Deputy General of the Province of Lower Canada, Joseph Bouchette, prepared a map in London reaffirming Krusenstern's boundaries of 1827; similarly, Sir George Simpson in his *Narrative of A Journey around the World, 1841-42*, (published 1847) agreed with the same demarcations.

In addition, Sir George Simpson presented a map in 1857 at an enquiry concerning the said territory, stating that:

There is a margin of coast marked yellow on the map from 54°40'N. up to Cross Sound which we have rented from the Russian Company. This map shows that the strip of land on the continent extended far enough inland to include all the sinuosities of the coast so as to exclude according to the United States claims, the British territories altogether from any outlet upon salt-water above 54°40'.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the chart most damaging to British and Canadian aspirations was issued by the British Admiralty (#787) in 1876 by F.J. Evans, R.N. It acknowledged the frontier of the United States descending longitude 141° west of Greenwich and then advancing on the continent, but passing around the sinuosities of the coast so as to give a continuous *lisière* of territory, cutting off the Dominion of Canada from all contact with any of the fjords between Mount St. Elias and the Portland Canal, and showing the frontier at latitude 54°40'.<sup>21</sup>

As a final example one should mention the map ordered for publication in 1867 by William E. Seward, which followed the Russian demarcation lines. For approximately two decades, it continued to be copied by cartographers the world over without provoking the least British protests over sovereignty claims by the United States of the coastal strip, which had been included in the Purchase of Alaska.<sup>22</sup>

Experience dictated that Russia, from the very beginning, *deliberately* cut England off from all access to the sea. This led to the formation of the *lisière*, known today as the Alaska Panhandle, which was considered to be an effective way to deal with the competition of the Hudson's Bay Company whose advance overland from the east and by sea from the south, seriously threatened Russian interests.

The Sale of Alaska, once considered "Seward's Folly", but today more likely to be considered the folly of Tsar Alexander II, also brought about a number of fateful political changes affecting some Asian countries along the North Pacific Rim.<sup>23</sup> One of the developments momentous to the Dominion of Canada was that since the lease of the *lisière* by the Hudson's Bay Company had expired on June 1, (1867), the Alaskan Panhandle changed into American hands.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Letter by the Comde de Lacy of February 3, 1773* to the Marques Grimaldi warning that: "los Rusos formaron un establecimiento en la costa americana por los 64°, los cuales se empleaban en pieles a Emperatriz, y ultimamente tenan minas mucha importancia."
- <sup>2</sup> Beaglehole, Tome III, Pt.1, *The Journals of Captain Cook on His Voyage of Discovery. The Voyage of the Resolution and Discovery, 1776-1780*. Cambridge: University Press 1967, pp. 371-2.
- <sup>3</sup> P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian American Company*, (I), translated and edited by Richard A. Pierce and Alton S. Donnelly, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978. pp. 16-17.
- <sup>4</sup> A.I. Aleksee'ev, *Osvoenie russkimi liud'mi Dalnego Vostoka i do konca XIX veka*, Moskova: Nauka 1982, pp.103-4.
- <sup>5</sup> R.A. Pierce and A. Doll, "Alaskan Treasure—Our Search for the Russian Plates", *Alaska Journal* 1, 1 (1971) pp.2-7.
- <sup>6</sup> R.V. Makarova, *Russians on the Pacific, 1743-1799*, translated and edited by R.A. Pierce, Kingston, Ont.: Limestone Press, 1975; p. 129.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.
- <sup>8</sup> P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian American Company, Vol. II* transl. D. Krenow, ed. R.A. Pierce & A.S. Donnelly, Kingston: Limestone Press, 1980, pp. 86-7.
- <sup>9</sup> Tikhmenev, Vol. I., *Op.cit.* pp.61-2.
- <sup>10</sup> *Alaskan Boundary Tribunal: The Case of the United States*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903, p.11; and Margaret A Ormsby, *British Columbia: a History* MacMillan of Canada, 1958, p.59.
- <sup>11</sup> Separate treaties had to be signed because the Monroe Doctrine prohibited further colonization of the American continent by any European power.
- <sup>12</sup> *Alaskan Boundary Tribunal: Op.cit.* p.29.
- <sup>13</sup> See James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier America* (The Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867); New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- <sup>14</sup> Richard A. Pierce, *Russia's Hawaiian Adventure, 1815-1817*, Kingston: The Limestone Press, 1976, pp.2-3.
- <sup>15</sup> Tikhmenev, *Op.cit.* Vol. i. p.172.
- <sup>16</sup> John A. Munro, *The Alaska Boundary Dispute*, Cepp, Clark Publishing Co. 1970, p.1.
- <sup>17</sup> Printed also: in *Fur Seal Arbitration*, (Congressional edition) vol. IV., British Case, Appendix Vol. I., p.287; and *Archiv für Wissenschaftliche Kunde von Russland*, by A. Erman, 1863, Vol. XXII, p.47.
- <sup>18</sup> *Alaska Boundary Tribunal*

- <sup>19</sup> Norman Penlington, *The Alaska Boundary Dispute: A Critical Reappraisal*. Toronto: McGraw, Hill and Ryerson, 1972, pp.12-13.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas W. Balch, *The Alaska-Canadian Frontier*, 2nd Ed. Philadelphia: Allen, Lane and Scott, 1902, p.23.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.
- <sup>22</sup> Penlington, *Op.cit.*, p.16.
- <sup>23</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *Russia's American Colony*, "the Sale of Russian America to the United States", Durham: Duke U. Press, 1987, pp.292-4.