Playing the Odds Against the Solid Men of Boston: The Gamble of Russian America
The Effects of Supply Insecurity on Russian America
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Introduction
1802 was a bad year for the Russian-American Company (RAC). It was barely in its third year as a state-sponsored monopoly to hunt the valuable furs grounds in what is now the state of Alaska. The colonial capital, Sitka, had been overrun by angry, alcohol-fueled Kolosh natives, today known as the Tlingit, who had access to superior firearms thanks to visiting American traders and desired to kick the strange foreigners out of their territory. The Kolosh had stormed the fort, overrun the garrison left by the governor while he was away exploring new areas for settlement, plundered the storehouses, and set fire to various buildings. The governor of Russian America, Alexander Baranov, fumed over this disaster in the Russian settlement in Three Saints Bay, on Kodiak Island, several hundred miles away from the recently taken fort. He plotted a desperate attempt to retake the fort—around six hundred men, a mix of Russian and their Aleutian native allies, would travel the open seas in several hundred bidarkas, a small boat resembling a canoe, and retake the fort. The Russian-Aleut force travelled the distance in the North Pacific and landed at Sitka, but was unable at first to retake the fort, which was armed with several small cannons—enough to keep the Russian force at bay. Then, amazingly, the Russian Naval ship the Neva, undergoing the first Russian round-the-world voyage, paid a port call to what they thought was the Russian-American capital. The Neva possessed a compliment of large cannons which were used to shell the fort, and drive the outmatched Kolosh away. This arrival was both fortuitous and seemingly impossible; Russia had a weak presence in the Pacific and a small navy, and most of the ships in service in Russian America were barely-seaworthy cargo ships. In fact, during the years of 1800-1805, not one RAC ship passed by Sitka, and only two Russian naval ships called on the port, the first of which was the Neva¹. However, many American ships called on Russian American ports during this time, some aiding the Russians by bringing supplies and transporting furs to market in China; other American merchants acting against Russian wishes by trading alcohol and firearms to the Native people of Alaska for furs. While ships of other nationalities operated in Russian America, after 1800 the Americans from Boston, known as “Boston Men” or “Bostonians,” made up the overwhelming majority of visiting foreigners, and as such deserve attention in any narrative of Russian America. While the Russians did not favor foreign intrusions into their internationally recognized colonial territory, it was permitted, even at times encouraged, because in the end the Russians could not control it.

This incident is a microcosm of the Russian American colonial experience. While the Russians were the first Europeans to ‘discover’ the areas they eventually colonized in the North Pacific, they did not have exclusive control over their vast colonial empire. Russian-America outposts were often small and impermanent, dwarfed by the large distances between them. During the period of Russian American colonization the Tsarist government underwent numerous European wars, servile insurrections, several invasions, and was just beginning to realize the extent and promise of its Siberian territory, and was not very concerned with mapping or trying to colonize its claimed American holdings. Russian America truly represented the definition of frontier, in that it was beyond the boundary of control.

How strong was the Russian hold on Russian-America? At no point were there more than eight hundred and twenty three Russians in all of Russian-America². Russian-America is roughly comparable to the Spanish territories stretching from Mexico to Peru, or the English territory on the Atlantic seaboard on the eve of revolution in 1776. The small number of Russians over such a vast territory meant that defense was problematic at best. The sheer distance of Russian America from the seat of the Tsarist government in St. Petersburg was to play the biggest part in the colonization of Russian America, the source of woes for the RAC, and eventually one of the deciding factors of the sale of Russian America to the United States of America in October of 1867. This inability of the RAC to supply its bases in Alaska forced it to extend further into the frontier in search of land suitable for farming and to burden the Russian navy with the task of supply, the failure of which led to the company’s continued reliance on frontier American traders, and, ultimately the sale of Russian America.

Geoffrey Blaine in The Tyranny of Distance had this to say about the power of distance:
It may be that distance and transport are revealing mirrors through which to see the rise of a satellite land in the new world, because they keep that land’s vital relationship with the old world in the forefront. In contrast many studies of a new land which ignore that relationship unwittingly isolate the land from the outside world which suckled and shaped it.3

It is this distance that heavily influenced the view and treatment of Russian America by the Imperial government, and the problem of supply and distance haunted the Russian colonial enterprise. Whether conscious of it or not, these frontier traders were de facto instruments of their countries colonial policies, and despite Russian protestations of American interferences in Russian America these very interferences were necessary to the supply of the colony, at the cost of Russian sovereignty.

The small influence of Russia on Alaska can still be seen on the names of geographic features and towns, in the practice of the Russian Orthodox faith among many of the Native groups that were exposed to heavy Russian contact, and in the surnames of many Alaska residents. However, this influence pales in comparison to the American presence in Alaska, and like Russian America itself, is relegated to a historical curiosity except in a few places of what truly was “The Last Frontier.”4

Foundation of the Russian-American Company

Although the Russians were established on the western Pacific coast by the mid-seventeenth century, it took almost seventy more years before they ventured further eastward. The impetus for this next round of exploration came from Tsar Peter I, otherwise known as Peter the Great. While spending time in Amsterdam in 1697, Peter came under the influence of Nicholas Witsen, a Dutch scholar who believed there was a “close connection between Kamchatka and America by way of a large island or American peninsula.”5 Shortly before his death in 1725, Peter selected the Danish mariner Vitus Bering to head an expedition under instructions to make his way to Kamchatka and from there to sail “along the land which goes to the north, and according to expectations (because its end is not known) that appears to be part of America.”6 This first expedition was technically not a success, as Bering did not see the American coast, but it did clear up many misunderstandings about the Siberian coast. Bering was tapped again to lead what came to be known as the Great Northern expedition of 1738-1742. This time he found the American coast, and while the mission brought back conflicting and confusing geographic information, it made an undeniable impression on many in Russia of the superior quality of the fur samples collected in the Aleutian Islands.

Beginning in 1743 successive expeditions of Russian fur trappers voyaged to the Eastern (Aleutian) Islands. Many of the promyshlenniki recruited in Siberia “were often uneducated, unskilled, and undesirable, inept and drunken laborers,” the dregs of Siberian society.7 This societal makeup, combined with the crude conditions in Russian America led an anonymous deacon to comment that, “It is better to go into the army than go to [Russian] America.”8 Time did not improve the problem; Michael Tebenkov, a manager for the RAC, quipped in 1852 that “A good worker not only will not go to the colonies but a good man can get there only accidentally.”9 While in Siberia the promyshlenniki conducted much of the trapping themselves as they were unskilled at maritime hunting and in Russian American they virtually enslaved the Aleuts to provide furs for them.10 The RAC completely depended on the Aleut that a later company official remarked in 1820 that:

If the company should somehow loose the Aleuts, then it will completely forfeit the hunting of sea animals, because not one Russian knows how to hunt the animals, and none of our settlers has learned how in all the time that the company has had its possessions here.11

Conditions did not notably improve until state control over the Russian-American Company was enacted in 1819, and they were particularly bad in the first fifty years of contact. During this first, or boom, phase between 1743 and 1797, forty-two independent Russian companies made 101 voyages along the Aleutians and obtained pelts worth around eight million rubles.12 These were often short-term companies, put together by a group of merchants and staffed with Siberian promyshlenniki. The large number of companies in this early phase reflects the amateur ambition of these pioneering Russians; over time many of the companies went bankrupt or merged, as the voyage was perilous, due both to the unpredictable weather of the Bering Sea, and the general lack of geographic knowledge of the area. By the mid 1790’s, only the Shelikhov-Golikov Company was left, and the owners petitioned for an official charter by the Imperial government granting them a twenty-year monopoly on the fur trade. On July 8, 1799, Emperor Paul I granted this charter to the Shelikhov-Golikov Company which reorganized as the Rossisko-Amerikanskaia Kompaniia, or RAC, and was now responsible for Russian settlement and the exploitation of Native peoples and furs in Russian America.13

Early History of the Russian America Company and the Problems of Supply

Russian America was now entering a new era. Gone were the days of sailing to America to ply the rich coastline for furs; with the official monopoly on the American fur trade came the need for colonization. The RAC found itself tasked with the responsibility to establish and maintain permanent settlements, provide for the promyshlenniki and other Russian officials,
expand operations and colonize unclaimed territory, and secure existing and future holdings in America.14

Perhaps the most daunting of these responsibilities was the expansion and security of RAC possessions. Nevertheless, the Russian officials were highly motivated to accomplish this task with very limited resources at their disposal. The head of the RAC during the first charter (1799-1819) was the cunning and able Aleksandr A. Baranov, Chief Manager of Russia’s American colonies.15 Already a veteran of the American fur trade, Baranov summed up his hopes and those of RAC officials: “In spite of our inadequate number of personnel, and the circumstances of the Company, it is our decision to establish the first settlement, familiarize ourselves with existing conditions, and in time expect important results.”16 Looking to expand East and South to counter British and Spanish colonization of the Pacific, as well as to establish an ice-free harbor, Baranov drew on information gained from earlier punitive Russian expeditions and voyages by Cook and Vancouver and decided to establish a settlement on Sitka Island (later re-named Baranov Island) in the fall of 1799. To this end Baranov sailed from Three Saints Bay with “several hundred baidarkas [kayak] and one Russian ship, a force of one hundred Russians, seven hundred Aleuts, and three hundred Koniags [the native people of Kodiak Island, today called Kodiak islanders]” over one thousand miles to Sitka in deplorable weather.17 Baranov negotiated with the local Kolosh (Tlingit) to build a settlement on the island of Norvo-Archarangelisk (New Archangel) later renamed Sitka.18

It is notable that the Russians chose to bring their Aleut and Koniag hunters with them for this voyage; they would even bring the Native hunters employed by the company to the far-off establishments in Hawai‘i and California. The Russians found it relatively easy to subdue the Aleut and Koniag, who lived in scattered settlements and practiced a subsistence lifestyle in the remote and barren landscapes of the Aleutian chain and Kodiak archipelago. Drawing almost all of their food and building material out of the rich seas around these islands, the Aleut and Koniag were masters of sea hunting, learning from a very early age how to navigate the rough seas in their baidarkas. The Kolosh by comparison lived in the rich temperate rainforests of what is now the Alaskan Panhandle, and as a result had evolved into a highly stratified society. The Russians tried, and failed, to subdue the Kolosh and tension between the two groups soured relations for the remainder of Russian settlement of Sitka, with the Russians constantly afraid of Kolosh attack. The Kolosh exploited this situation to their advantage, establishing settlements near the Russian American capital and forcing the poorly supplied Russians to trade for goods at unfavorable rates. The settlement was also threatened in its infancy by the Kolosh. Kyrill T. Khlebnikov, a prikashchik (agent) writing a report of early Russian America in the 1820’s, described the early relations with the Kolosh:

The Kolosh initially treated us with indifference, but when they realized that we were building a substantial permanent settlement, which they had not expected, they armed themselves with spears and tried several times to seize it from us. They were unsuccessful, however, due to Baranov’s vigilance and caution. On April 20, 1800, Baranov left to sail to Kodiak on a galley...The garrison was careless, and the Kolosh attacked and destroyed the settlement in 1802.19

The Russians were able to retake the fort, mainly due to the timely arrival of the Neva and its shelling of the Kolosh living in the ruined fort. During the first charter of the company (1799-1819) ships from Russia were relatively rare; on average one ship from either Okhotsk or St. Petersburg arrived yearly, although some years saw no Russian ships. The wants and needs of settlers in Russian America forced the Russians to attempt to build a supply line that stretched halfway around the world. This supply line, possibly the longest in the world at this time, was inefficient and dangerous, forcing the RAC to rely increasingly on foreign, mainly American, traders and shippers.

The Russian-American Company during the first charter period used three methods of supply. They were: directly from Russia via an overland route through Siberia, organic (local foodstuffs), and trade with foreigners. Each had its benefits and detractions. The promyshlenniki all came from Russia and demanded “tame,” or “Russian,” supplies when they could be procured—grain, beef, butter, common garden vegetables, tree fruits, sugar, and tea.20 The Aleut and Koniag who worked for the company, as well as the Creole class that was the product of promyshlenniki—Native liaisons, had also adapted to the aforementioned Russian goods.21 Nevertheless, Russian supplies were in high demand in the colonies and the Russian officials during the first charter expended a massive effort in attempting to secure them overland via Siberia.

The overland supply route through the vastness of Siberia was crude, time-consuming, and the distance of over 4,000 miles from St. Petersburg to Okhotsk meant that the majority of goods transported spoiled along the way. Many of the non-perishable goods such as shipbuilding materials were produced in the industrial areas of western Russia while food items such as wheat and butter were procured as close to eastern Siberia as possible. Having to use horses as pack animals due to the rugged terrain and a lack of sizeable rivers for navigation, the RAC depended on native Siberian herders to act as transporters and guides. This route was perilous for several reasons: horses often perished due to the grueling terrain, Siberian exiles often raided the caravans, the distance between settlements at times forced the caravan to forage from the wilderness, and the route crossed more than 1,000 rivers and streams that had to be forded.22


Leaving Irkutsk in the spring the shipments arrived in Okhotsk in the middle of the summer and reached their final destination of Sitka by October, and, due to exposure to the harsh Siberian summer, shipments were often spoiled by the time they arrived in Okhotsk. The cost was high as well—the price of flour shipped from Irkutsk to Okhotsk increased by six hundred percent. Grain shipments, a staple of the Russian diet, were often so rancid by the time they reached Okhotsk that Kamchatka received most of its useable grain from visiting American traders. Okhotsk, the main harbor in Eastern Siberia during the time of the first company charter, suffered from strong winds, shifting sandbars, and was shallow. For all these reasons landing at Okhotsk was detrimental to the large Russian transport ships that plied the North Pacific. The Russian ships and the Russians who sailed them were both poor quality; ships built in Russian American and Siberia suffered from a lack of experienced shipwrights, and Okhotsk itself had low quality timber for shipbuilding. The average life of a Russian built ship in the colonies was 3-5 years, and their fate was often shipwreck—in 1819, eighteen company built ship in the colonies alone, which Russian officials attributed to a lack of training and the poor quality of sailors. According to Captain-Lieutenant Frederick Lütke many of the best ships in service in Russian America were purchased from visiting American traders, and Lütke’s judgment is echoed by many others, both visiting foreigners and Russians, throughout Russian American history. The poor quality of the goods shipped overland in Siberia, and the hazards of navigation in the North Pacific left Count Mardvinov, Chief Manager of the RAC in 1824, to remark that, “Provisionment of Alaska via Okhotsk was almost the same as no provisionment at all.” Realizing the difficulty of supply through Siberia from an early date, attempts were made to create a self-sufficient colony within Alaska but were met with complete failure.

Attempts to organically supply food for Russian America were made from the beginning of permanent establishment in 1784. Working against the Russians was the short growing season in Alaska, as well as the wet, damp weather of the Alaskan coast where the Russians settled. Another factor hurting agriculture in Russian America was the existence of the “Little Ice Age” in the years between 1560 and 1850, with particularly cold years during the last one hundred years of the cooling cycle. This cooling resulted in a shorter, colder, and wetter growing season and these effects were amplified in locations near glaciers, like Sitka. Nevertheless, some crops such as potatoes, carrots, radishes, turnips, and other tubers fared well in Alaska as they could withstand the wet and early frost, although the Russians often complained that they tasted “watery.” Ranching in Russian Alaska, except in the interior of Kodiak Island, suffered a similar fate; the hay needed to feed livestock in the winter would often mold during the wet summer and winter seasons. The result was that most of the animals sent to Russian Alaska were slaughtered, although the meat gained from them was marginal as they were often underfed during the long voyage to Russian America.

One constant supply of food for Russian America was the meat gained off of the various animals hunted for the fur trade, mainly fur seals, but also including sea lions, beaver, and otter. The Russians coerced and later employed the vast majority of Aleut and Koniag males to hunt for them, which left few experienced hunters to gather food for the winter. Added to the problems of food supply insecurity was the initial resistance of Aleuts and Koniags to the adoption of European agriculture and that the women and children were often forced to help cure hides instead of prepare food for the winter. During the first charter of the RAC, before it was charged with supplying the Native workers and their families with supplies and time off to subsistence hunt, many natives starved to death. This perilous situation of supply and its effects on both the health and morale of promyshlenniki and Native workers soon began to hurt RAC finances, forcing the colonial government under Alexander Baranov not only to conduct trade with passing foreign ships, but to enter into commercial contracts with them. American traders became very active in both the rich fur trade of the Pacific Northwest and in supplying the colonial Russian possessions. Between 1787 and 1806, sixty-one of the seventy-two ships that visited Russian America sailed from Boston. The predominance of the Boston Men is explained by several factors. Sailing from Boston they were several thousand miles closer to Russian America than the Russians in St. Petersburg. They spent less time at sea which meant decreased mortality rates aboard ship and increased profits due to a quicker turnaround time to either an American port or Canton, where they would trade Russian furs obtained in Russian America for a tidy profit. The British were pre-occupied with their emerging colonial empires in India, Burma, and the West Indies and had few ships to send on a longer voyage to the Pacific Northwest. While the British were engaged in fur trapping via the Hudson’s Bay Company, their activities during the first charter period were confined to the interior of Canada, several thousand miles from Russian America. Politics was also a factor: the Russians in many ways preferred to work with Americans because of their wish to subvert the shipping powerhouse that was Great Britain, and to that end they hoped to form a friendly relationship with America.

As early as 1798, Russia and America were looking to promote the doctrine of “neutral rights” on the seas and, by doing so, weakening England’s hold on trans-oceanic shipping. It is telling that the 1799 RAC Charter, in article five, authorized the company to “sail to all nearby nations and enter into trade with all adjacent powers, providing it has their permission and Our Imperial consent.” Colonial officials, namely Baranov, used this as permission to enter into trade with visiting foreign merchants, owing to the fact that the Russians could not engage in any trade with other powers in foreign ports.
due to its limited number of ships which were in poor condition. American traders took full advantage of this situation; in the two years after the chartering of the RAC, 82,000 rubles (one ruble is equal to one-half of a dollar) worth of goods were bought from visiting Bostonians.\(^{31}\) Describing the attraction of New Archangel to foreigners, the Russian Captain Yury Lisyansky, commander of the Neva during the aforementioned battle of Sitka, noted that

The settlement of New Archangel will always be a place of resort for ships trading on the coast; as the Russian company are ready to purchase flour, brandy, woolen cloth, and every necessary, at a profit of at least fifty per cent to the trader; which is more than he would obtain at Canton, besides the chance of his being obliged to sell there at a loss.\(^{34}\)

Nevertheless, the Imperial government and main administration of the RAC was worried about too much foreign contact in its colonies, for in 1802, during the Napoleonic period, it instructed Baranov to "receive every foreign ship with great caution at all times, because distance prevents us from being able to keep you informed about rapidly changing political situations."\(^{35}\) While this warning was directed at all foreign ships, the perilous situation of supply in Russian America forced Baranov to depend on visiting American traders. Kheblnikov expressed this need and apprehension later:

There were obvious advantages in establishing relations with the Americans who after trading along the northwest coast on their homeward voyages, would dispose of their [surplus] goods at moderate prices. This cannot be considered a very great advantage, however, for if the Americans knew that the Company would buy their goods, they would willingly come to Kodiak and even more remote places.\(^{36}\)

During the first decade of the nineteenth century the Bostonians and RAC decided to engage in a number of efforts to jointly hunt furs off the coast of California and, separately, agreements were sought to form a consistent base of supply from the newly formed American Fur Company, headed by the Bostonian John Jacob Astor.

One of the Bostonians, Joseph O'Cain, who visited Sitka in 1803, had more on his mind than trade; he wished to join forces with Baranov to hunt the rich fur grounds off the coast of California. Neither the Russians nor Americans had any rights nor jurisdiction in this area, but O'Cain and Baranov sensed correctly that the Spanish would provide little resistance at the northern edge of their New World possessions. The RAC was constantly looking for new fur trapping sites as their large harvests often depleted the area adjacent to Russian settlement within a few years from the start of the hunts.\(^{37}\) The proposed agreement was mutually beneficial: O’Cain could provide transport on his ship, the Eclipse, and access to markets in Canton but lacked the necessary equipment and hunters, which the RAC had, in abundance. Baranov had another motivation for agreeing to the venture: in 1802 he had received secret instructions to scout and establish Russian settlements as far south as he could manage, to both enrich the company and check English expansion into the North Pacific.\(^{38}\) It is likely that Baranov saw this venture with O’Cain as an opportunity to use the visiting Bostonian for Russian gain and establish a stronger Russian presence in the North Pacific that could check foreign powers looking to undercut RAC profitability.

On October 26, 1803, O’Cain left Kodiak Island with several Russian promyshlenniki and twenty baidarkas to set sail for California. Although welcomed at first in San Diego, the Spanish soon sent several requests to O’Cain asking him to leave. While Americans were allowed in the waters of Spanish California, the Russians were prohibited and the Spanish could tell by the presence of the Aleut hunters that O’Cain was in league with the RAC. All of these warnings were ignored, the voyage was mutually profitable, and the impotence of the Spanish in preventing foreign activity in the waters off California was revealed to a pleased Baranov who now devoted his attention to this new hunting area.\(^{39}\) Trade with Bostonians continued on a regular basis for several more years and Baranov even employed Bostonians directly to bring supplies from Spanish California.\(^{40}\)

American-Russian joint ventures continued for several more years and proved very fruitful for both parties until the War of 1812 interrupted American commerce due to English assault on worldwide American shipping.\(^{41}\) However, before the war concerns were aired in Russia over the increasing presence of the American traders and the questionable profitability of RAC-American contracts. Russian officials were upset over the predilection of Bostonians to hunt furs in RAC territory, and to trade both weapons and alcohol to the Native Americans there which threatened RAC profitability and security.\(^{42}\) In 1810 Russian Ambassador Theodore Von Pahlen told the RAC that

The Government of the United States has neither the desire nor the power to stop this illicit trade. Many individuals who have influence in the East of this nation and who greatly dislike the present administration share in the profits of this trade, and the Government is afraid of annoying those who act against its interests.\(^{43}\)

In a letter to Baranov, Andrei Iakovlevich Dashkov, the Russian Consul General in Philadelphia, noted the above concerns and added that the English had recently established a fur trade outpost on the Columbia River and that he was instructed by the Tsar to try and establish a commercial contract with the United States.\(^{44}\) Dashkov
and the RAC hoped to entice the Bostonians with commercial contracts that would both present a united economic bloc to keep the English fur traders out of RAC territory and to control the Bostonian-Native trade that was so detrimental to RAC profitability and security.

The governments in Washington and St. Petersburg supported commercial ties between the RAC and the Bostonians, but for different reasons. The U.S. wanted to conduct trade in the Northwest on a “mutually liberal” basis, wanting free reign to trade with the Russians there and realize profit in the open market. For the Russians, any commercial agreement, aside from the benefit to the supply of Russian America, took on a more international role. An anonymous spokesperson for Tsar Alexander I noted in 1810 that “it is the interest of Russia... to encourage and strengthen and multiply commercial powers which might be the rivals of England, to form a balance to her overbearing power.” The ensuing commercial contracts between visiting Bostonians and Baranov were quite fruitful; by 1811 Baranov was able to stockpile three to four years of supplies. Although the RAC possessed enough supplies to continue operations, Baranov wished to establish a permanent contract to not only bring in supplies but to transport furs to Canton. To this end, in May 1812, he entered into a contract with the American Fur Company headed by the Bostonian John Jacob Astor. Prospects for the agreement were high. Dashkov, in a letter to Baranov, stated that this exclusive contract would allow Astor’s company to monopolize the American end of the fur trade and extinguish trade with the Natives, establish regular and cheaper supply to Russian America, ensure transport of furs to market at Canton, and squeeze the British out of the fur trade in the Pacific. However, tensions between the English and the United States over impressments of American sailors erupted into the War of 1812 and Astor, fearing British attack, sold his Pacific holdings to the British North West Company. With the cancelling of this contract the unregulated and somewhat unpredictable trade reemerged with foreigners; both Baranovs both traded the RAC needed supplies, and resumed trading weapons and alcohol to the Natives. Hoping to end this reliance on foreign merchants the RAC attempted to establish colonies in California and Hawaiʻi, but these failed due to the lack of consistent supply and experienced personnel, as well as being completely unprofitable. The anger and impatience of RAC officials in St. Petersburg with the colonial experiment and its leader, Alexander Baranov, resulted in moves for his replacement during the debate over whether a second charter to the RAC should be granted by an apprehensive Imperial government.

The Second Charter of the Russian America Company and the Ukase of 1821

Granted in 1799, the first charter of the RAC was issued for twenty years and subject to imperial review after this period. At the beginning of the first charter Russian America consisted of several sparsely populated settlements that stretched as far East as Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island. By 1817, 450 to 500 promyshlenniki and twenty-six sailors lived in sixteen settlements stretching from the western end of the Aleutian Chain at Adak to Russian America’s eastern terminus at New Archangel and Fort Ross in modern day California. Baranov did much to grow the empire, perhaps more than any private citizen, but his health was deteriorating from age and the company sought to replace him with a more able administrator. Because he had been part of the RAC before incorporation and the only governor up to 1817, a “cult of personality” surrounding Baranov had grown and the main administration was looking to break up this cult that at times bucked attempts to impose bureaucratic control from St. Petersburg in Russian America.

To this end the RAC accepted the imperial suggestion that a placement for Baranov be selected from the Imperial Navy, and in 1817 Leontii Andreianovich Hagemeister sailed to New Archangel aboard the Kutuzov, arriving in November of that year. One of Hagemeister’s first directives was to place all company employees, including all Aleut and Kaidak hunters, under a universal salary system. One effect of this directive, perhaps unintended, was to increase the reliance of all inhabitants of Russian America on supplies, which came at a high cost from American traders and at an even higher cost from Russia. In addition to the earlier suggestion the RAC reluctantly agreed that the company be administered by the Imperial Navy, effectively bringing the company under direct government control. The biggest change concerned the ‘cult of personality’—the company was no longer to be governed by merchants for long periods of time, rather a senior naval officer that would serve a five-year term.

While the debate over the second company charter was progressing in St. Petersburg, the Imperial government received various reports sent to it by new naval officers warning of a large American presence in the colonies. After a lengthy debate the Tsar in September 4, 1821, enacted a Ukase prohibiting all foreign merchant ships from trading with Russian colonies. Act II stipulated that “no foreign vessel may anchor on the coast or islands belonging to Russia...nor may such vessel even approach closer than 100 Italian miles. Any vessel violating this prohibition will be confiscated with its entire cargo.” Less than two weeks later, on September 13, 1821, the Tsar issued a personal ukase renewing the charter of the RAC for another twenty years. American merchants vigorously protested the ukase prohibiting trade and pressed Washington to ask the Russians to remove this barrier, mainly basing their argument on the Monroe Doctrine and free trade principles. The RAC was determined to become self-sufficient and be the sole provider of supplies and transport to the colonies. Like the overland route through Siberia, this effort at self-supply turned out to be a great disaster.

By the mid-1810’s Bostonian activity made the Siberian route obsolete and the naval administration
decided that to meet supply needs ships would be sent out of Cronstadt, the naval station near St. Petersburg. Ships from Cronstadt would then, on the return trip, carry furs from warehouses in Russian America to Okhotsk where they would travel overland to Klikhta, as the Russians were still not allowed to conduct trade with the Chinese at Canton. The supplies sent from Cronstadt “rotted, rusted, or broke,” cereal grains such as wheat fell prey to rats, and iron goods such as nails fared poorly in the tropical conditions through Indonesia and the South Pacific. Ships were often delayed and the furs for the return trip rotted in the warehouses, and the furs that did not rot in the warehouses often arrived at Klikhta too late in the trading season, having to then sit for another year, increasing the chance of spoilage. Finally, ships were vulnerable to the complex and changing international political situations in Europe or the dangerous geography along the 13,000 mile route from Cronstadt to New Archangel. The few voyages taken during this time illustrate the high level of cost associated with supply from Cronstadt. The 1819-1822 Kutuzov voyage cost the RAC 700,000 rubles in provisions, salaries and lost furs, while only returning 200,000 rubles in furs sold at market. In 1822 no ship was sent from Cronstadt, and the voyage of the Helena in 1823 further cost the RAC 500,000 rubles.

It should be noted that although transport by sea was expensive, the overland route through Siberia was three times the cost of an average sea transport. Because the Siberian route was so inefficient supply via Cronstadt would remain the RAC-sponsored method of supply for Russian America. Of the sixty-five ships sent to New Archangel from Cronstadt between 1803 and 1864, two-thirds, or forty-six were for supply. Yet supply through visiting foreign traders was still the cheapest option for the RAC.

The Russo-American Convention of 1824 and the 1839 Hudson’s Bay Company Agreement

While trade with foreign powers had been prohibited by the 1821 ukase, this declaration from the Tsar had not stopped colonial officials from taking advantage of visiting Americans, especially when supplies were precariously low. Khlebnikov, in his published reports, states that over one million rubles in trade with foreigners was conducted from 1820-1825. Nevertheless, by early 1824 the St. Petersburg office was petitioning the Imperial government to lift the prohibition on foreign merchants. In a letter to the minister of Finance the main office made the argument in terms of practical economics:

It is necessary only to imagine that our settlement comprise no more than 2000 people, including 500 Russians, scattered over an area of several thousand miles to realize whether they are strong enough to resist well-capitalized and numerous Americans acting in concert. Because of the low Russian population in Russian-America and for the sake of profitability, the RAC needed to work with the Americans, not against. It was to this end that the “Russo-American Convention Concerning the Pacific Ocean and Northwest Coast of America” was signed on April 5, 1824. The agreement removed the ban on American merchants for ten years, with the proviso that the Americans would not trade any firearms or alcohol to the Native peoples of Russian America. This agreement removed the need for the RAC to wholly supply itself internally—by 1826 the head office shipped from Cronstadt only what the Americans could not bring.

By 1825, the British were making their presence felt again in Russian territory, and on that year were the same terms as the Americans under the Russo-American Convention. When the ten-year contract expired in 1834, Governor Ferdinand P. Wrangell immediately imposed the former restrictions on visiting Americans in New Archangel. Wrangell’s order to cease trade with the Americans was at this time hard to enforce; with few naval ships and an ever-present need for supplies he was forced at times to bend his own prohibition. At this point the U.S. government stepped in on behalf of private commerce and lobbied the Russians to remove this trade barrier; after much debate the Russians relented and reestablished the 1824 agreement subject to yearly review. Although British activity in the North Pacific during the next two decades grew, Americans still dominated the RAC supply: from 1801 to 1841 of the 120 foreign vessels that called on New Archangel, 111 were American. However, around 1834 American fur trade started a gradual decline as Americans refocused on the whaling industry, leaving the British and Russians to manage the fur trade. By 1842 the Americans fielded over two hundred ships in rich whaling grounds of the North Pacific, moving on from furs to exploit this abundant resource.

The British presence on the West coast of America continued to grow, and in 1839 the RAC entered into a ten year agreement with the HBC to lease the RAC ‘panhandle’ section of Alaska in exchange for a yearly delivery of supplies, such as wheat, flour, salted meat, and butter among others, all at a fixed price. While this agreement ensured regular supply, according to Richard Neunherz it “caused the Russians to surrender one of the richest portions of their holdings for 10 years.” Nevertheless supply from the HBC met RAC needs until the latter part of the 1840’s. In 1846 England and the United States concluded the Oregon Treaty, resolving a territorial dispute in the Pacific Northwest and depriving the HBC of its most productive farmland, the product of which made up the main grain supply for the RAC. Later in 1848 the California gold rush drained many settlers in the entire Pacific Northwest by the promise of quick riches, further depriving the HBC of settlers on lands it held as agricultural colonies. The RAC-HBC contract was renewed for another ten years in 1849, but
without a clause for yearly supply. Instead, the RAC now relied on supplies from American merchants operating out of California (which became an American territory in 1848) and supplies from Cronstadt.

The RAC charter was renewed again in 1841, and was mostly identical as the 1821 renewal. While most of the financial records perished in a fire in the company archives, Tikhmenev notes that the company was increasing in profitability during the end of the second charter. The main office and Imperial government by this time had uneasily accepted foreign involvement in RAC territory and chose to maximize profits, which required a cheap source of supply and a steady stream of revenue. This last charter period was marked by an impressive diversification of RAC activities; attention was shifted away from the declining fur trade to gold mining, timber harvesting, coal mining, fisheries, whaling, and even the ice trade to California. However, these industries were plagued by the very problems that had dogged the RAC from its inception—a lack of manpower, insufficient supply networks, and vulnerability to international rivalries.

In 1848 gold was discovered in California near the former Russian Fort Ross, much to the dismay of RAC officials, although most conceded that they would have been unable to stop the tide of immigration to the gold fields. Tsar Nicholas I in 1848 declared that “the Russian American Company be informed that it would be useful if it would follow the example of other private persons in mining gold in California.” The company was reluctant to engage in mining gold as it had a very limited number of personnel it could spare and it was worried that those sent to mine gold would flee service. It is notable that at this time the majority of the Americans in the North Pacific operated out of fast growing California, not the former capital of American shipping, Boston. Beverly Sanders, a California merchant and president of the American-Russian Trading Company (ARTC), traveled to St. Petersburg in 1848 to propose a twenty year agreement to transport ice, coal, fish, and timber to the new American territories on the West coast in return for supplies needed by the RAC. The RAC accepted this promising agreement for secure supply and the ARTC was able to supply Russian America until its sale in 1867. The RAC also attempted to enter into the whaling industry, which by 1846 the Americans dominated with a fleet of 736 vessels operating in the North Pacific. This RAC set aside 200,000 rubles to form the Finnish-Russian Whaling Company to hunt in the North Pacific, but they were stymied by the low revenue set aside for this project, and trouble operating in the open sea during the Crimean War because of open hostilities with Great Britain.

The Crimean War and Sale of Russian America

The outbreak of tensions in the Crimea due to the English and French desire to check Russian aggression against the Ottoman Empire was a great crisis for the RAC. Suddenly, Russia found itself at war with Great Britain, and Russian America shared a border with the British HBC. Although neither the British nor the French attacked any ports in Russian America the Crimean War did serve to break the commercial agreements between the RAC and HBC, and to draw the Russians closer to their new American allies over their mutual dislike of Great Britain. The United States, a growing commercial power, constantly ran afoul of the British who were their main competitor in trans-oceanic shipping. To influential men in the U.S. government the answer to British power was to increase U.S. presence in the Pacific. Many voices within both the Russian and American governments were clamoring for American acquisition of Russian America, including the East-Siberia governor N.N. Murav'ev-Amurskii and General-Admiral Grand Duke Konstantin, brother of Tsar Alexander II and his most trusted advisor. The RAC and ARTC mutual dislike of the British and existing commercial contracts between the two companies spurned talk of a possible sale of Russian America to the U.S. In fact, the RAC had gone one step ahead and had a ‘fake’ document of sale to the ARTC drawn up in case of English or French attack during the Crimean War. This trickery was done with the thinking that the two powers would not want to force America to enter the war on the side of the Russians.

The RAC was still a profitable enterprise, but the Crimean War had highlighted the weaknesses of the Russian Navy and the Imperial government was dealing with economic chaos and political strife in European Russia resulting from the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Added to RAC woes was the increasing presence of both the HBC and the Americans in the Pacific, and the Imperial government felt that it was only a matter of time before one of the aforementioned powers forcibly annexed Russian America. With these problems forming a backdrop the RAC had an impetus to sell, and it wished to sell to Russia’s greatest ally in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. Talk of sale was postponed by the American Civil War, but this event drew Russia and America closer as allies. The Russians were pleased to see the English economy disrupted due to the Union blockade of Confederate cotton to England, and threatened to give support to the Union if either England or France recognized the Confederacy. After the war negotiations resumed in earnest, and in October 30, 1867, the territory of Russian America was officially sold to the United States for the sum of $7,200,000. The ceremony took place in old New Archangel, now renamed Sitka, and ushered in the end of over one hundred years of Russian exploration and colonization of the Pacific.

Conclusion

Russia has a unique character as a European power: in terms of its geography it is Eurasian in character, stretching from the Baltic to the North Pacific. Seeking to colonize new lands but lacking a sophisticated navy like its European rivals, Russia looked eastward, venturing
further into Siberia in search of ever richer fur grounds. Eventually this search led the Russians to the Aleutian Islands and mainland America, where profit was realized in the rich fur grounds there. The early pell-mell of independent fur companies dwindled to just one; the Shelikhov-Golikov Company, which was granted an imperial charter in 1799, formally becoming the Russian American Company. Charged with colonization as well as making a profit, the RAC faced a challenge of problems: a low colonial population, harsh and varied climate unsuitable for farming, inefficient and infrequent supply, hostile natives, and interloping American and British traders. Stretched beyond its limits of self-supply, the RAC was forced to rely on the American traders from Boston, known to the Russians as the Bostonians, who plied the North Pacific bartering for furs to trade for Chinese goods in Canton. A growing resentment of Bostonian profits at the expense of the RAC and a desire to secure Russian sovereignty in its American possessions led the imperial government and RAC to attempt to expand settlement to the more suitable climes for agriculture of California and Hawai‘i. These efforts were failures in terms of profitability and were eventually abandoned (Fort Elizabeth, Kaua‘i) or sold (Fort Ross, California). Despite a three-year prohibition from 1821-1824, American trade with Russian America continued to ebb and flow, and the Russians were more reliant on American trade than on their own supply lines. Russia and America enjoyed a greater international relationship as tensions between Russia and England deteriorated during the Crimean War. This war heightened the insecurity Russia felt over the lack of sovereignty it held over Russian America—while peaceful American contacts were more or less encouraged, it would not take much for a foreign power to drive the Russians out, repeating the situation during the Battle of Sitka in 1802.

Russia decided to sell its American holdings to the United States for several reasons: the growing presence of the U.S. in the Pacific, declining profitability despite RAC efforts to diversify income generating operations, an inability to effectively defend and supply Russian America, and a need to focus on growing internal unrest. Delayed by the American Civil War, the sale of Russian America was enacted on October 30, 1867 at a ceremony in Sitka. The legacy of Russian America is complex: as a colonial power Russia held a weak and unstable hold on its colonies and left few markers of over one hundred years as a colonial power in America. As a commercial empire however, the RAC was a mixed success, but was profitable until the very end, fetching a price of 7.2 million dollars for a large area which the Russians held a dubious sovereignty over. The Russian settlement of the North Pacific is unique in terms of European colonization in the Americas. Mostly neglected and managed by an imperial government half the world away, the few Russian businessmen and colonial officials, with needed help from foreign merchants, managed to control a vast area and make a tidy profit in the last frontier.
Notes

1From Davydov, Dvukratnoye puteshestvie, 1, 195: Materialy, IV, 63. Quoted in Gibson, Imperial Russian in Frontier America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 13


4Alaska State Motto


6James Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 48.

7Army service was a mandatory twenty-five year commitment. From Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 47.

8Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 48.

9Perhaps as a justification for the poor conditions and brutality the Russian colonists inflicted on the Aleuts they sought to portray the Aleuts as willing subjects whose unbridled animalistic savagery was being harnessed by the Russians for the mutual benefit of both groups. In support of this view is a passage from the diary of Fedor P. Lütke dated September 12, 1818: “The passion of the Aleuts for hunting sea otter transcends any description and can only be compared with the zeal of a cat for catching mice.” From The Russian American Colonies, 1798-1867, edited and translated by Basil Dmytryshyn, E.A.P. Crownhard-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, (Oregon Historical Society Press, 1989), 269.

10See Appendix A.

11The RAC was tasked with providing for the Natives and any Creoles, but they were not considered Russian citizens and thus not granted the rights of Russian citizenship.

12This was not Baranov’s first service in the fur trade; he had served as Chief Manager for the Shelikhov-Golikov company from 1794.


14Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America, Kyrill T. Khlebnikov’s Reports, 1817-1832, 3.

15Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 60-61.

16Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 57.

17Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 51.

18Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 67. This information should be treated as a suspect opinion, given that the officials were attempting to shift blame in reports back to the main office in St. Petersburg. Nevertheless, the high number of shipwrecks must have something to do with the quality of the sailors and the ships, considering that ships of other nationalities did not have such appallingly high rates of shipwreck.

19Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 72.


21Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 100.

22An anonymous account by a Russian Orthodox clergyman described the painful hunger endured by the villagers in winter: they eat the seal bladders in which they store fat and salmon roes, laftaks [the cured hide of a seal, walrus or seal lion, used to cover baidarkas], cord, and other articles made from gut, because they have no shellfish and seaweed when the beaches are covered with ice...[t]hey look more like corpses than living people.


24Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 155.


26Haycox, Alaska: An American Colony, 97.
An Imperial Decree From Emperor Paul I Granting Special Privileges To The Russian American Company For A Period Of Twenty Years,” in Dmytryshyn, Basil, E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, ed and trans., The Russian American Colonies, 1798-1867, To Siberia and Russian America, Three Centuries of Russian Eastward Expansion. Vol. 3 of A Documentary Record, 19.

Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America: Kyrill T. Khlebnikov’s Reports, 1817-1832, 4.

Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 154.


Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America: Kyrill T. Khlebnikov’s Reports, 1817-1832, 4.

It was not until the third charter to the company in 1840 that large scale limits were placed on quotas in an attempt to stabilize the rapidly declining population of fur bearing animals. This attempt to shore up the decreasing catches was simply too late to have the effectiveness sought by the RAC and contributed to the efforts to diversify RAC operations into Whaling, Timber, Fishing, and other pursuits during the last charter period.

Baranov made a second contract in 1806 with the Bostonian Jonathan Winship sailing the O’Cain, and the efforts of this voyage were again satisfactory to both parties. However, Baranov’s subsequent dealing with O’Cain was not quite as fruitful. Again in 1806 O’Cain and the Eclipse landed again in Sitka and proposed to explore trade possibilities in Nagasaki, Canton or ports in eastern India. Finding this proposal agreeable, Baranov loaded O’Cain with pelts and according to Khlebnikov O’Cain failed to exchange them in Canton for an agreeable rate and then shipwrecked on his way back to Sitka with the Chinese goods, much to the chagrin of Baranov who felt that O’Cain had “duped him.” From Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America: Kyrill T. Khlebnikov’s Reports, 1817-1832, 11.

In the fall of 1809 Baranov concluded a secret agreement with Captain George Eayrs of the Mercury to trade covertly for supplies under the pretense of an otter-hunting contract, and after returning to New Archangel he continued to smuggle supplies to Baranov for several years until captured by the Spanish. From Essig, Ogden, and DuFour, Fort Ross: California Outpost of Russian Alaska, 1812-1841, edited by Richard A. Pierce, 41. Also see Table II in Appendix for a list of RAC-American trades.

See table II in Appendix.

It was weapons supplied by the Boston Men that the Kolosh used to attack New Archangel in 1802.

Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 159-160.


It was weapons supplied by the Boston Men that the Kolosh used to attack New Archangel in 1802.


William Appleman Williams, American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947, 8.

Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 158.


The impetus for the construction of Fort Elizabeth on Kaua‘i, Hawai‘i was actually not at the bequest of the RAC but rather on a free-agent named Gregory Schaffer who was sent by Baranov to recover the cargo of a RAC ship that shipwrecked off the coast of Kaua‘i. For a more through account see Peter Mills, Hawai‘i’s Russian Adventure.

Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 11.

This was purportedly done to ensure that workers would have year-round access to food instead of receiving a portion of the hunt which in lean years left many facing starvation. From Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America.


See appendix B. The act did contain exemptions for vessels caught in storms, on exploratory missions, or in desperate need of provisions or repairs.

Ships were also sent from Fort Ross bearing agricultural goods grown and processed there. However as these goods cost more to produce than to buy from visiting merchants (if available) this attempt at self-supply must be considered a failure.

When the frigate Cruiser was unloaded and fumigated at New Archangel in 1823, more than 1000 dead rats were found on board." From Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 85.

See Appendix C.


Murav’ev in 1853 stated that “we cannot avoid the expectation that sooner or later we must cede our North American possessions to them [Americans],” From Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, Russian-American Relations and the Sale of Alaska, 1834-1867, Translated and Edited by Richard A. Pierce, 85.

Table I
English and American Ships in the Northwest Pacific, 1785-1814

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>American</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1785-1794</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795-1804</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1805-1814</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II
Fur Trade Contracts With Bostonians 1803-1813

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Captain</th>
<th>Name of Ship</th>
<th>Year of Contract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph O’Cain</td>
<td>Eclipse</td>
<td>1803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Winship</td>
<td>O’Cain</td>
<td>1806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Winship</td>
<td>O’Cain</td>
<td>1809</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan Winship</td>
<td>Albatross</td>
<td>1810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Davis</td>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>1811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Meek</td>
<td>Amethyst</td>
<td>1811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Blanchard</td>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>1811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Whittemore</td>
<td>Charon</td>
<td>1813</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America, 155.

From Khlebnikov, Colonial Russian America: Kyrill T. Khlebnikov’s Reports, 1817-1832, 7.
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DVD