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*Russian California, 1806–1860: A History in Documents*  
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## I

### **Documenting Russian California**

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Throughout my career, spent entirely at York University in Toronto – apart from visiting research and teaching stints in Japan, New Zealand, Hawaii, and Israel – I was fortunate to be able to teach almost solely my special interests: the contemporary geography of the USSR, the Soviet Union as a model of economic development, and the historical geography of Russia. Most of my research efforts, however, have been focused on Russian eastward expansion, for to me as a geographer, with biases towards the locational, environmental, and developmental dimensions of historical processes, it became obvious from the outset that one of the most striking aspects of Russia's development as a state was its constant and massive territorial growth into an empire, especially towards the east.<sup>1</sup> This hallmark afforded fertile ground for a geographer, particularly since not much had yet been done on the topic by historians or geographers alike in the West, although it had long been recognized by Russian scholars. And, trained to problem-orient my research, I pegged it to the obvious problem of logistics, which became more pressing the farther east the Russians advanced (as both Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolph Hitler were to learn the hard way). Moreover, as the Russians entered the sea otter and fur seal waters of what they not illogically called the Eastern Ocean they faced another, and unfamiliar, obstacle – stiff competition from other imperial powers and indigenous peoples, particularly on the Northwest Coast of this New World. This comparative situation raised different and intriguing questions. So my research paradigm was set.

The farthest outpost of the Russian thrust was what I like to call Russian California, an exclave of the monopolistic Russian-American Company on the Pacific rim astride the blurred frontier between New Albion and Alta California. It was founded in 1812 on the remote and exposed *frontera del norte* of the Spanish viceroyalty of New Spain some seventy-five miles north of the *presidio* and mission of San Francisco as one of what the company termed its 'colonies'. It included a fort (Ross), a port (Bodega), four 'ranchos' (farms), and facilities for hunting sea otters, shipbuilding, making bricks, and tanning hides as well as farming, plus a hunting and egg station on the Farallon Islands thirty miles west of the Golden Gate. It was a going concern for thirty years, finally being overwhelmed by an

<sup>1</sup> See my 'Russian Imperial Expansion in Context and by Contrast', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 28/2, 2002, pp. 181–202.

excess of expenses over revenues and the disintegration of neighbouring California – a province of the adolescent and beleaguered Republic of Mexico – as secessionist and federalist Californios squabbled and American settlers intrigued. It was sold in 1841 to the Swiss German adventurer John Sutter, whose millrace on his land grant of New Helvetia was to trigger a gold rush towards the end of the decade.

It was this venture that captured my attention, so much so that I spent part of my honeymoon reconnoitring the locale (leading my bride to wonder what other romantic delights awaited her). The colony intrigued me partly because it was quite different from the other colonies of Russian America and partly because it – like Russian America as a whole – had received very little scholarly treatment on the basis of the Russian primary sources, so it was possible to make a solid contribution. Most of those sources were found in the archives of Moscow and Leningrad, but – quite unlike today – all of the country's archives were totally or largely closed to foreign scholars for a variety of reasons: paranoia ('all foreigners are spies'), chauvinism ('Russians should do it first'), ideology ('bourgeois studies are unsound'), or, it sometimes seemed, for no apparent reason at all. And if Westerners were fortunate enough to be admitted – thanks to a Soviet advisor or colleague who had *blat* (influence) or *cojones*, a benevolent curator, a discreet 'present', an innocuous topic, a clerical oversight, political expediency, or pure luck – they were not permitted to consult the essential *opisi*, the detailed inventories of documents in particular collections. That left hapless readers at the tender mercies of archival guidebooks (general, out-of-date, incomplete, and scarce), documentary citations in Soviet publications (sporadic and unreliable), and the unhelpful factotums in the repositories who fetched requested manuscripts. A maximum of fifty pages of inferior microfilm was sometimes allowed – and invoiced at the officially inflated exchange rate and payable in dollars.

Then, at the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union's longtime *zastoy*, or 'stagnation', under Brezhnev disintegrated in the face of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. A high-level decision was made to open the archives to any accredited researcher, and I saw my chance to make hay while the sun shone. I received funding from Canada's national exchange program for my project, which envisioned the collection, translation, and annotation of the most informative and most trustworthy firsthand accounts of Russian California. It had already been accepted for publication by the Hakluyt Society, thanks to the support of the late Terence Armstrong. My original intention had been to include mostly documents from the so-called 'colonial', or 'Sitka', archive, comprising the incoming and outgoing correspondence between the governor of Russian America in Sitka and the Board of Directors of the Russian-American Company in St Petersburg. This handwritten correspondence, which passed to the United States with the Alaska purchase, had been available since 1942 on seventy-seven reels of microfilm from the National Archives in Washington, DC. Although not cited in the scholarly literature until the 1960s, it was a basic source, since the company had discarded its papers – forty wagon loads, apparently – sometime in the 1870s after the company's representatives had offered it to the Department of Trade and Industry, which declined it for want of the 100 rubles that the transfer would have cost.<sup>2</sup> Now, thanks to the loosening of restrictions under Gorbachov and his successors, I had the opportunity to make the documentary collection more inclusive and more

<sup>2</sup> A. F. Bryukhanov, 'K sud'be arkhiva Rossiisko-amerikanskoy kompanii', *Vestnik Akademii nauk SSSR*, no. 9, 1934, p. 36; Raymond H. Fisher, *Records of the Russian-American Company 1802, 1817–1867*, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC, 1971, p. 6. The extent of the company's archive can be imagined from the fact that in 1842 alone some 3,500 individual dispatches were exchanged between its headquarters in the imperial capital of St Petersburg and the colonial capital of Sitka.

authoritative by scouring the Russian archives, including even provincial ones.

When I reached the USSR in that first spring of 1990, I was indeed excited by the prospect of archival access but still wary, expecting the customary Soviet obstacles. And I was not to be disappointed, at least at first. Tired and testy after a long overnight flight from Toronto via London, I arrived on a Friday afternoon in May at Moscow's dreary Sheremetovo airport, where I had to wait until one of my bags (its zipper broken) arrived on a later flight. After clearing customs, where the officer tried unsuccessfully to keep some of my foreign currency, I found that – contrary to official assurances beforehand – nobody awaited me with transport and a stipend. So I risked a ride to town in a freelance taxi, whose owner proved to be a much better drinker than driver.

At the Academy Hotel overlooking October Square with its towering statue of a heroic Lenin, no room had been reserved for me – again, contrary to official assurances – and I was told not to expect one, while a desperate phone call to the Canadian Embassy evinced a lukewarm offer of possible help provided my life hung in the balance (after all, it was after business hours, I was not a businessman, and the weekend was nigh). Lacking the honour or valour to commit seppuku, I simply sat down and looked as immobile and forlorn as possible until the stern but kindly manageress found a room for me for one night only. Then I sampled the culinary delights of the smoke-filled *bufet* and went to bed in a vain attempt to fall asleep in the face of jet lag and a sagging mattress (but at least my toilet was ensuite and sported a seat).

My misfortune continued the next day, when just up Lenin Prospect at the old headquarters of the Academy of Sciences my file could not be found for some time, and when it finally was located it turned out that no archival admittances at all had been obtained for me beforehand and no Soviet colleagues had been apprised of my coming – and all of this in spite of prior letters and telexes from the authorities assuring me that I was expected and that all necessary arrangements had been made. I was left to survive on my dimmed wits and rusty Russian, consoling myself with the thought that, Gorbachov notwithstanding, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

Then, on day three, I was suddenly swept off my feet by the counter-revolution. The director of one of the academy's institutes, Valery Tishkov (who was later to become Boris Yeltsin's Minister for Ethnic Relations), stunned me by proposing that my project become a joint endeavour, with me and one of his colleagues, Alexei Istomin, as co-editors and with Russian and English editions. Upon regaining consciousness I listened in disbelief as he and another academician, the recently-deceased and sorely-missed Nikolay Bolkhovitinov, offered to phone and write various archival directors forthwith to secure access for me. Meanwhile, a generous ruble allowance for meals and books materialized, as did a long-term, rent-free room at the convenient Academy Hotel.

Within a few days I was working euphorically in my first archive, which, in addition to being within a pleasant walk from my hotel, also happened to be the exalted foreign policy archive, long deemed one of the country's most inaccessible. Its building had been refurbished, with a spacious, well-lit reading room. I was met by a polite guard and welcomed by an attractive and congenial female staffer, who not only offered *opisi* to me, brought documents to me promptly and in the original, and encouraged me to order an unlimited number of photocopies free of charge but also personally conducted me at lunchtime to one of the new cooperative cafes nearby where the food was tasty and cheap and the service prompt. This heady treatment was repeated, if in a somewhat milder form, at the remaining repositories during that and three subsequent summer visits, including the

formerly off-limits Central State Military History Archive in the old Lefortovo noble estate complex, which also included the notorious Lefortovo Prison of dissidents' memory.

Two time zones east of Moscow at the oblast' archive in Perm, the old gateway to Siberia and the World War II relocation site for many members of the Soviet intelligentsia, especially performers, I was given free legal-size xeroxes of manuscripts, and in the best tradition of Russian *khlebosolstvo* (meaning literally 'bread and salt' but figuratively 'hospitality') the kindly Communist Party overseer of the archive, taking pity on my emaciated condition, took me with her every day in her chauffeur-driven car to a subsidized and bountiful lunch at her expense in the exclusive Communist Party cafeteria downtown (I have often wondered what happened to her; she had no immediate family and was soon to have a pittance of a pension instead of an official position – God bless you, wherever you are). In off-hours on foot I delighted in exploring unmolested and photographing unchallenged the old and still very wooden city, on whose buildings political graffiti now vied with official slogans. And so it went, too, in charming Tartu, soon-to-be-independent Estonia's old university town, and dilapidated but still captivating Leningrad, soon to revert to St Petersburg, where I even succeeded in using my credit card at the Astoria Hotel restaurant. Like George Kennan and George Frost in 1885, when they were given almost *carte blanche* to document Siberia's exile system, a century later I had been given the same mandate to document Russian California. Unlike Kennan, however, I have not, I trust, overstated my findings and turned from Russophile into Russophobe. Lest you think otherwise after listening to these remarks, I hasten to assure you that I have a longstanding affection and admiration for Russia and its people.

It was not until fifteen years after this archival windfall, however, that my lifelong labour of love culminated in the dispatch of my finished manuscript to the publisher. Several factors had conspired to delay the project. Having several research irons in the fire at once, I always kept Russian California on the back burner, simmering rather than boiling, because, not being totally in control of it and not yet having complete confidence in the Russians (Cold War habits die hard), I concentrated on projects that I knew I could see to completion. Also, although my task was eased greatly by the fact that I was able to work from my co-editor's typescripts instead of the handwritten originals, I translate laboriously, my Russian being neither native nor fluent. Besides, because I was translating primary sources that will be used as such by some readers, it behooved me to be meticulous, double and triple checking meanings, especially for contemporary senses, such as *chernozjom* and *tundra* meaning not a particular natural zone but any dark, fertile soil and the barren outback, respectively. Moreover, sometimes the archaic Russian on the part of semi-literate traders, let alone the bureaucratic circumlocution, was baffling. So, too, was the script of some of the documents, whose deciphering benefitted from the lessons in paleography that I had been given gratis at a Moscow archive in the middle 1960s. The painstaking work has given me newfound respect for translators; now when I reference a translated title I *never* fail to list the name of the translator after the author's. Furthermore, the documents have to be thoroughly annotated; nearly every place, person, plant, animal, unit of weight or measure, special term, etc. must be fully identified – all of which requires resort to a wide array of reference books.

At any rate, the published manuscript totals some 1,200 pages and includes nearly 500 documents in two volumes. The documents consist mostly of reports from the managers of Fort Ross to the governor of Russian America in Sitka (the former probably sent the latter up to 100 or more such reports annually and some 3,000 totally), orders from the governor to the manager, and reports from the governor to the Board of Directors of the Russian-

American Company in St Petersburg, but they also include memoranda from government functionaries to the company, excerpts from ships' journals and travel diaries, instructions to shipmasters and supercargos, official and personal letters, reports by inspectors, censuses, contracts, protocols, warrants, advisories, testimonies, testimonials, reports to company shareholders, minutes of company meetings, contemporary articles in obscure and rare journals, and so on.

These mostly support in much more detail what we already know about Russian California, and they also furnish considerable new information about its affairs. Admittedly, they constitute a skewed picture, for the voices of the colony's labourers, females, the young and the elderly of both sexes, and Californian, Alaskan and Siberian natives are missing. Nevertheless, they do make accessible in English a detailed and reliable database for the study of an interesting and instructive but underappreciated theatre of the political, economic, military, and cultural struggles for control of the Pacific Slope of North America generally and its most promising component especially. The documents also reflect some of the fundamental weaknesses of Russia's tenure in the North Pacific as exemplified by its farthest colony, whose abandonment in 1841 presaged Russia's complete withdrawal from North America a quarter of a century later in favour of more promising prospects closer to home in the Far East in the wake of the decline of Manchu China – a reorientation that was facilitated by the climate of reform stemming from Russia's ignominious defeat in the Crimean War.

Allow me to end on a personal note. I am grateful to Valery Tishkov of the Russian Academy of Sciences for his influential and persistent participation in the project, which simply would not have got off the ground without his active support, and I am even more indebted to my co-editor, Alexei Istomin, who laboured long and hard in spite of frail health. And I want to warmly thank my Hakluyt Society editor, Will Ryan. I have been especially fortunate to have had him as not only a diligent and congenial redactor but also as a Russianist better versed than I in the witchery of the Russian language.

## II

### **Why is Russian America Important?**

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‘Russia is a European state’. These were the opening words of Catherine II’s ‘Great Instruction’ which she compiled for the opening of the Legislative Commission in 1767 at the beginning of her reign. One of her senior advisers, Prince Mikhail Shcherbatov responded rather tartly that the empress was incorrect because ‘it is impossible to call all Russia a European state, for many of her provinces are in Asia’. Catherine’s statement was, of course, not geographical but political: Russia, she declared, was a monarchy, which was a European form of government, and not a despotism, which was a feature of Oriental rule. Russia, in other words, was one of the family of civilized nations.

This self-perception as ‘European’ is one of the defining characteristics of tsarist rule in Russia from the time of Peter I to the Revolution of 1917. Intellectuals disputed the extent of Russia’s ‘Europeanness’ and did so in particular in the so-called Slavophile-Westerniser controversy in the 1830s and 1840s – indeed, during the period when the Russian Californian adventure came to an end – and that dispute continues to this day amongst Russian intellectuals. But there is no doubt in the minds of the tsars that Russia’s orientation was to the West and to Europe. Russia became one of the ‘European Great Powers’ in the course of the eighteenth century and reached the peak of that power and influence at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. European great-power status coincided with other visible signs of ‘Europeanness’ for the tsars and the Russian ruling elites: they dressed, acted and spoke like their counterparts in central and western Europe; they participated in the diplomatic and social circles of Europe; they shared the same cultural and intellectual movements; they built their places in the European style and filled them with examples of the most fashionable European paintings and furniture.

If the ‘European’ status of the Russian empire was a central concern for the way the tsars projected their country it was also true for the perception of Russia by other European states. It was the prowess of the Russian army, and to a lesser extent the Russian navy, in battles in the European arena which made other European countries respect, and fear, Russia. The sight of Alexander I leading Russian troops down the Champs Élysées in 1814 sent shock waves around Europe – Russian troops had never penetrated so far west before and never did so again, either in the tsarist or the Soviet period. Siberia, however, and to a lesser extent the lands beyond, was a source of fascination to a number of Western travellers and explorers because of the perceived wildness and exotic qualities of both the terrain and the indigenous peoples who lived there, but not of international or diplomatic importance. Maps of ‘the Russian empire’, whether of the old-fashioned kind which university teachers used to hang on walls or ones now accessed from Google images, usually only depict ‘Russia in Europe’ with the Urals marking the edge of the political world which mattered.

In this context, Russia’s ‘many provinces in Asia’, as Shcherbatov put it, or even further afield, are a neglected part of the empire and its history. And the Russian possessions in California are the most neglected of all the Russia’s distant possessions. Most people are aware that Siberia exists, albeit as a strange, frightening and inhospitable land; popular

knowledge of Russian Alaska is thin but it is known that Alaska was sold by Russia to the United States (indeed, there were references to that in the context of the recent annexation of the Crimea by Russia). But Russian California has rarely penetrated popular consciousness. Perhaps that is in part because it fits poorly with theories of American expansion to the West, that is the Turner thesis and the counter arguments to that thesis; perhaps it is because ultimately it was a failure; perhaps it is simply that its story has hitherto been told only partially, even in Russian.

We can see from Professor Gibson's presentation today that compiling a serious history of Russian California was an enormous task and required both great personal determination and years of painstaking scholarship. The result is an extraordinary collection of documents which fully chart the origin, evolution and final decline of Russia's colonial presence in California. This will be the authoritative account of the colony, both in its thorough and studious introduction and then in the two volumes of documents. At one level this is a very good story and very well told. But the significance of this book goes way beyond Fort Ross and its immediate environs. What, in fact, can be learnt about the Russian empire from a study of Russian California? In my view, this work helps us to understand four key features of the development of the Russian empire: the economics of empire; the existence of an eastern international nexus; the process of Russian colonization; and the relationship between centre and periphery in empire.

It was the economic potential which opened up Siberia and then the north-west coast of North America and which led to the establishment of the Russian-American Company in 1799 (originally as a private enterprise). The greatest value was furs and ivory (tusks). Furs were so valuable that the chance of acquiring furs could be seen as something akin to a gold rush. One successful hunting expedition could make a man wealthy overnight; it was the offer of 2,400 sables and 2,000 beaver skins to Ivan IV by Ermak and his Cossack band in the 1580s which resulted in the tsar claiming overlordship of Siberia. It was sea otters, an immensely valuable export, which drew men to Russian California. The documents vividly describe the culling of hundreds of thousands of sea otters in the period of colonization. This trade was the basis of formal settlement at Fort Ross and determined the willingness of the Russian government to give formal recognition and support to the Russian-American Company.

The documents in Professor Gibson's book show not only the importance of sea otters but also that the leaders of the Company had hopes that the colony could be of much broader economic value. The land south of Fort Ross had potential for the cultivation of grain, which potentially could have not only supplied the colonists but could also have become a valuable export. If this had been achieved the west coast of North America would have become a new trade nexus for Russia, spanning the coasts of America and Russia but also potentially penetrating southwards to Japan. The hoped-for development of Fort Ross as a significant shipbuilding centre, described in these documents, was certainly a pre-requisite for this.

Nevertheless, the history of Russian California demonstrates how these ambitious plans were never achieved, in the same way that hopes that opening up the Amur region in eastern Siberia in the 1850s and 1860s would lead to great economic benefits were never realised. One reason for this was appalling level of over-hunting and shockingly poor planning: sea otters were ruthlessly and carelessly hunted out and thousands of carcasses of sea otters were left rotting on the shores of Kodiak island because there were too few ships to transport them. Furthermore, the Russian settlers continued to rely on indigenous Kodiak and Aleuts to hunt the otters. The grain trade never prospered as desired. The colony never

attracted enough settlers to be viable – there were only 563 Russians in Fort Ross in 1833. Indigenous people could not fulfil all the tasks required of them by the settlers – there are almost comical documents in this text with appeals for milkmaids or carpenters to be sent to Fort Ross from Siberia as local population lacked these skills. Nor could the Company cover some of their costs by taxing the local population, either in goods (tribute) or cash.

Underlying all these problems was the basic issue of transport over vast distances, something which is very well illustrated in these documents. Russian California was never self-sufficient and shipping from Russian or other ports never replaced Russian overland land routes for supply. Goods, including foodstuffs, had to be supplied over land from European Russia to the post of Okhotsk and then by sea – with the result that food was often putrid by the time it arrived. It is a counter-factual question but would Russian California have flourished if the Russian government had hung onto it after 1841? Could it have taken advantage of developments in eastern Siberia after Russia acquired the Amur region in 1860? What if Russian California had been able to take advantage of the impact of the Trans-Siberian railway at the end of the nineteenth century and the economic boom which took place in Siberia in the two decades before the First World War? For that matter, what if gold had been discovered earlier in California? We will never know of course, but the difficulties of developing eastern Siberia after 1860 suggest that transport difficulties and the lack of an easy market would have hampered the economic development Russian California for a long time.

If there were hopes that Russian California would become a new economic nexus in the east could there be the same aspirations to establish a new international presence of Russia in the east or within North America? What is particularly interesting about these documents is the emphasis, particularly in the later documents, on relations with other countries, particularly Spain and then, after 1810, an independent Mexico. One of the key features about the Russian expansion into Siberia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the lack of effective resistance by indigenous peoples and the lack of any opposing state with claims on the area. It is also significant that the only region where Russian expansion was checked in the seventeenth century was the Amur region in the east, because there the Cossacks found themselves in opposition to a state – China – which had a military force which could challenge the Russians. It was only when China was hopelessly weakened by the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century that Russia was able to regain that territory. In North America the Russian settlement faced a very different political/international situation: Spain was the main rival but was in decline; after 1810 the newly-independent state of Mexico became a new factor; most importantly, there was the pressure of entrepreneurs and settlers from a United States of America which was emerging as a powerful competitor from the west.

The particular configuration of power in North America created both opportunities and problems for the Fort Ross settlement. The second volume of documents demonstrates how seriously the members of the Russian-American Company, and the Russian government, took this situation. A number of long reports are included, of which the most interesting are by Dmitrii Zavalishin, the future Decembrist rebel, putting forward a serious proposition for Russia to colonize much more extensively in California. Zavalishin saw this primarily in economic terms – the new lands would yield grain which could support the colony – but clearly the significance of this for Russian colonization would have been dramatic. In fact, the factors which hampered economic development – the distances, the small number of



Russian settlers, the poor supply chain – would have made a permanent Russian presence in North America untenable. It was not totally unrealistic to assert some parity with Spain or Mexico in North America, but would have been quite impossible to do so with a dynamic, powerful, United States. Perhaps if the colony had held out longer it would have been sold to the United States rather than being sold in a private, and not very satisfactory, deal in 1841; but that is more counter-factual history.

The relations with other powers brings me to my third point: the significance of Russian California as an example of the process of colonization of the Russian Empire. This is not the place to look in more depth at colonzation theories, which in any event, all have their own characteristics when applied to individual experiences, be it for the United States, Spain, Britain, France or Russia. The reality in the case of Russian California was that Zavalishin's proposal required a commitment from the Russian government that it was not prepared to give and the basic reason for that was simple: it was impossible to support and defend the colony with Russian troops if it were threatened. The perceived economic value of the colony was not high enough to risk such an encounter. This was a colony which the Russian state took on with some reluctance, did little to develop and then sold off in 1841. To this extent, it was a failed colony and reveals the weakness of the Russian state as a colonial power.

Nevertheless, the history of Russian California does illuminate some of the features of Russian colonization which were present in Siberia, Central Asia and the Far East as well. One of these is the role played by individuals in Russian colonization – demonstrated in these documents here by the activities of the initial settlers and members of what became the Russian-American Company. The sheer determination and courage of the initial settlers (and sometimes their wives) is extraordinary, and was a story which was repeated in other areas of colonization in Siberia. Of course men opened up hostile territories and sailed through treacherous seas for booty and for personal profit, but that does not make our admiration for their courage and endurance any the less. Once there, many settlers showed a real interest in the lands they had acquired – in the flora and fauna and the minerals as much as the potential for profit – and that sense of inquiry and desire to explore, map and settle was as true in Russian California as much as it was in other areas of Russian colonization.

Moreover, the ethnic composition of Russian California was complex, as it was in other areas of colonization; in Siberia Russian and Ukrainian settlers had to mix with settlers who were non-European and non-Christian. Some of the most fascinating documents in this collection relate to the indigenous peoples in Russian California, and in the Aleutian islands, and the role they played in the settlement. What these document also expose, however, is the fragility of Russian colonization in North America. There were vast regions in more remote parts of Siberia where the Russian presence was confined to a small garrison of Cossacks and regular soldiers – on the Kamchatka peninsula for example. But settlements in Siberia – fortified stockades which later became towns – rapidly became predominantly ethnically Russian, and Russian peasants began to settle land in western Siberia from the seventeenth century onwards. In Russian California, however, the Russian settlers were always in a tiny minority, and were always far outnumbered by indigenous people and creoles. This meant that they were dependent on the local population to an extent which occurred onbly in the most remote parts of Siberia. Throughout Siberia and the Far East there was a gender imbalance because far more men than women voluntarily settled in Siberia (or, for that matter, were exiled there for crimes, although criminals were always a small part of the Siberian population). This was accentuated in Russian California because of the shortage of Russian settlers – and mixed marriages, and mixed relationships, were common as a result.

One of the most interesting documents in this collection shows this clearly, as it lists the ethnic origin of all the settlers within households.

The relationship between colonizer and the state in Russian California was also typical of the pattern of Russian colonization. The state needed settlers to farm and occupy the land they claimed and to collect tribute or tax from indigenous people; but the settlers also needed the state for protection and support. In the case of Russian California it can be said that the settlers needed the state more than the other way round. The initial explorations in the eighteenth century to find a passage through the Bering Strait and to chart the coastline of North America were commissioned by the tsars: it was only later in the nineteenth century that individuals commissioned the exploration of particular routes for their own potential profit. Tsars traded on their own account; the penetration of Siberia could not have taken place without that support. The most valuable products from Siberia – furs and medicinal rhubarb – were made into state monopolies from which the tsars took a cut. The state then provided the military and bureaucratic presence from which to govern the territory. Stockades were built to protect the colonizers and to receive the tribute from indigenous peoples, but they also housed the garrison, the military commander's or civil governor's office and the Orthodox church – all symbols of the Russian imperial presence. Proselytizing was a key part of the Russian presence in Siberia, and many indigenous peoples converted to Christianity, although the genuineness of that conversion has often been questioned. The same was true in Russian North America where there were missions and Orthodox churches (one in Fort Ross), but conversions proceeded with difficulty given the overwhelming presence of indigenous people compared with the size of the Russian presence. Trade, military strength and religion – all went together, as indeed they did in other European colonies.

It was of crucial importance that the Russian-American Company had formal state backing – perhaps even more necessary than it was for the British East India Company. It was no coincidence that the flag of the Russian-American Company included the imperial eagle. We can see in the documents that members of the Company appealed to the state for initial support and in the memoranda by Zavalishin as he tried, unsuccessfully, to get state backing for further expansion. But Russian California was weaker than other Russian colonial territories in Asia. It was economically weaker and that weakness became more apparent as the nineteenth century progressed when the sea otters were hunted out and nothing else emerged to take the place of this trade. It was also weaker because of the complexity of relations with other countries, including other European countries, in North America to which I shall now return in my concluding section of this paper.

What does the experience of Russian California tell us about the relationship between the centre and the periphery in the Russian empire? The themes which I have already covered all refer this to a greater or lesser extent. We can see that both economically and politically the colony at Fort Ross could not stand alone without support from the Russian government. The Russian state seriously reflected on the establishment, maintenance and even the extension of this colony, but, as we have seen, in the end decided that the colony was not worth the cost and effort. Indeed, the documents show that from the start there was a reluctance on the part of the tsars to take formal possession of Russian California. Part of this was practical – the sheer distance from Moscow of the colony which made it impossible to control, supply or defend the colony. The uncertain and then diminishing economic returns made any such effort disproportionate.

Underlying this reluctance, however, was the centrality of political concerns in Moscow which lay with European affairs and not with east. The reality was that the tsars were always more concerned about events in Europe than about the east; and if this was true of border disputes with China in the far east of Siberia then it was even more of an isolated colony on the coast of North America. When the Russian-American Company was being proposed the Russian government was more concerned with events in Europe than in the east – the French Revolutionary Wars. Indeed, it is significant that the Company was granted its charter in 1799 when Paul I was on the throne and seemed to have different, very non-traditional, and to an extent non-European, priorities including an abortive expedition to India, priorities which ultimately led to his assassination in 1801. The pleas from Zavalishin to Alexander I in the 1820s came at the time when the tsar was far more concerned with revolts within the Italian peninsula and in Greece than with events in North America. The sale of Fort Ross came in 1841 during the Mehmet Ali crisis when Nicholas I was most concerned with events in the Middle East and relations between Egypt and the Ottoman empire and with the threat posed to the security of the other Straits, not the Bering Strait but the Straits which gave access from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. And the situation in North America was made far more complex, and difficult, by the Russian government's reluctance to harm relations with other European states, or with the United States, for the sake of such a small and distant colony.

So I end this presentation by coming full circle – the fascinating story of Russian California demonstrates that it was the European interests of the tsars which predominated over non-European ones. That was as true of the settlement reached with China in 1689 when Russia ceded the Amur region; in the end it resulted in the Russo-British convention of 1907 despite the conflicting ambitions of these powers in Asia. And it explains the policy in Russian America – in Alaska and in California – and the willingness of the Russian government to cede these territories. For all the real, potential, or imagined benefits of Russian California for members of the Russian-American Company and the Russian state, in the end the lesson to be learned from the experience of Russian California in this splendid collection is that 'Russia is a European State'.