

## BOOK REVIEWS

### ***RUSSIANS IN ALASKA: 1732 – 1867***

BY LYDIA T. BLACK, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA PRESS, FAIRBANKS, AK, 2004.  
328 PAGES, 18 PLATES., 95 FIGURES., INDEX. ISBN: 1-889963-05-4

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As an Historical Archaeologist specializing in the study of Russian America, it is truly a pleasure to see the publication of this book. An authoritative, easy-to-read account of the largely forgotten Russian colonial period in North America was badly needed, and this work fills that need in every respect. Dr. Black's longstanding dedication to revealing the history of Russian America, along with her own native understanding of Russian culture, makes her authorship of this book truly a "natural."

Dr. Black states the importance of this work in concise and clear terms (2004:xv): "A great deal of what I have to say, based on the perusal of documents not readily accessible, is contrary to the received wisdom. In a sense, this book is not simply a new synthesis, it is also a reinterpretation." Indeed. The "reinterpretation" aspect comes from, at least in part, the wealth of information—and hence new insights—uncovered and provided by the author, much of which has not been generally available previously.

The first part of the book is devoted to explaining Russia's advance into Siberia which, of course, would eventually lead to the Russian colonial presence in Alaska and California. The author provides rarely seen data about the colonization of Siberia gleaned from a variety of primary documents, many available only in their native Russian. Chapter One yields an overview of Russian expansion to the north and east, of patterns connected to that expansion that would be carried forward to North America, and of the reason behind the Tsarist government's taking a strong interest in this movement. We are provided intriguing visions of Russian lifeways in early Siberia, directly reflecting the author's knowledge of this typically ignored slice of history. Also presented is an outstanding review of the Bering and Shestakov exploratory expeditions, (Chapters 2, 3), as well as background on the beginnings of the Russian maritime fur

rush eastward following the return of the survivors of Bering's shipwrecked vessel, *Sv. Petr* [St. Peter] (Chapter 4). The focus then shifts once again to the east, and the history of Russian colonization in Alaska and California is clarified with a scope and depth both detailed and fascinating. Discussion includes 18th century Russian commercial activities in the Aleutian Islands (Chapter 5); commercial competition between Russian fur-trading companies in the Aleutians (latter decades of the 18th century); the background of the formation of the Russian American Company (RAC); and the founding of the Russian Orthodox Church (Chapter 6); challenges to, and contributions of, Alexander Baranov (first colonial manager); late 18th century English activity in southern Alaskan waters; and Native leadership in the colonies (Chapter 7); and the doggedness of Baranov with regard to the RAC's expansion plans (Chapter 8). The following chapters include information concerning the attack and destruction of the first New Archangel (Sitka) colony, and why this attack was so devastating to Baranov (Chapter 9); N. P. Rezanov's proposals, and several myths about Russian America for which he's responsible; Baranov's initiatives in expanding colonial trade to the south (California) and west (including Japan, Java, and Canton, China); and the relieving of Baranov and his death (Chapter 10); the reasons for Baranov's removal, and the succession of governors / highlights of their activities, through 1845 (Chapter 11); and the Creoles of Russian America, with note made of their importance in the running of the colonies (Chapter 12). The book concludes by examining the Russian Orthodox Church in North America, and how it got started, to include data concerning Saint Innocent (Venaminov) and Saint Netsvetov (Chapter 13); the three RAC charters and the RAC's mid-century challenges, such as the fading fur market and the Crimean War; and alternative industries in the colonies (whaling, coal mining, ice production) (Chapter 14); and the reasons for selling Rus-

sian America, in spite of good economic and social times, along with activities relating to the actual transfer of the colonies to the United States (Chapter 15).

Missing from the Bibliography are the authors of significant historical archaeology reports—both Russian and U.S.—related to / concerning Russian America. These archaeological projects have uncovered elements of the historical fabric that add significantly to what the documents and oral histories tell us. Should a future, second edition be published, the inclusion of this information would enrich this excellent work even more. Also, the book does not have a glossary for terms and currencies used during the period of Russian America, and could benefit from the addition of such in a second edition.

*Russians in Alaska, 1732 - 1867* sparkles with scholarly competence. The notes which follow each chapter alone reflect the author's command of the subject. They are plentiful and rich in detail, and are an invaluable resource for the serious researcher. Rarely seen—and engrossing—descriptions of daily activities are provided throughout the book, nuggets of information so important to those attempting to understand this little-known area of North American history. Examples include the now extinct sea cow and the hunting technique used to secure it, and hunting procedures used for the sea otter. There are a good number of illustrations in the book, and these do much to allow the reader a “window” into what life was like in the colonies. These include views not often seen, such as Plate 18, a plan view of Kiakhta, the trading center on the Chinese - Russian border, and Figure 12, a Russian *shitik* (a vessel made of planks lashed together with sea mammal leather, and used commonly during the early years of the Russian advance across the Aleutians). In addition to daily lifeway information, Dr. Black clearly delineates the international economic and military strategic concerns which influenced Euroamerican activities (Russian, English, U.S., Spanish, and French) in Alaska and adjacent regions.

This book is an absolute must for the libraries of all those, beginners to experts, interested in exploring and understanding the colorful, rich, and mostly forgotten period of history known as Russian America.