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RUSSIAN PLANS FOR AMERICAN DOMINION

When Gregory Ivanovich Shelikof established his trading post at Three Saints Bay on the 3rd day of August 1784 it was not an ordinary venture of a common fur trader to gather a few skins for a temporary profit. It was part of a far-reaching plan devised for the extension of Russian dominion over the larger part of the western coast of what is now Canada and the United States. This plan was in his mind at the time he made his preparation for his return voyage, if not before he left Russia. It is not necessary to go farther to prove this than to take extracts from Russian records that outline the scheme and follow the development of it to its partial consummation.

The Russian hunters and traders had been advancing for a hundred years, crossing Siberia over the broad steppes and the frozen tundra. They had pushed out on the waters of the Pacific to the southeast coast of Alaska; they had explored the Aleutian Islands; and now Shelikof had established a permanent post on the island of Kadiak. It was yet twenty years before Lewis and Clark made their winter stay at the mouth of the Columbia River, and seven years before Vancouver made his surveys of the southeastern coast of Alaska, or Alexander Mackenzie came by land to tide water near Bella Coola.

On May 22, 1786, Shelikof went to sea on his return voyage to Siberia, leaving Samoilofo, one of the leaders of his fur-traders (*promishileniki*), in command of his establishment on the island.

He gave Samoilofo instructions outlining the policy to be pursued in relation to the fur trade and in reference to the extension of the posts to the outlying places, especially toward the south. His own language, as translated from the text of his orders, dated May 4th 1786, reads as follows;

“For rapidly extending the power of the Russian people it

is possible to step farther and farther along the shore on the American Continent, at the furthest extension to California, supplying these tokens* as from me to you were prescribed to be distributed to the natives of Kenai and Chugach."

("Note* The tokens were the Imperial arms on medals and they were distributed to the *toyons*, or chiefs, at many places, at least as far south as Yakutat and Lituya Bay.")¹

Again referring to the same subject he says;

"And to try to extend the land of Alyaska to California from 50 degrees north latitude.*** Generally to put settlements of Russians for accommodation of the Americans and the glorification of the Russian Government in the profitable land of America and California to 40 degrees."²

Samoilof at once took measures to carry out the plan as far as lay in his power. He sent Ismailof and Bocharof, two of his navigators, on the ship *Three Saints*, in 1788, to Prince William Sound, to Yakutat Bay, and to Lituya Bay; from the latter point they were compelled to return on account of sickness among the crew, probably scurvy. At each landing they distributed the copper medals, signs of Russian sovereignty.

Alexander Andreevich Baranof arrived at Three Saints Bay in 1791 to assume the duties of Chief Manager of the Colonies. To him were also given instructions, the third paragraph of which contains the following:

"Send out a detachment to Cape St. Elias, and from there to Nootka, to ascertain in detail to what place toward our side the Spanish boundary is extended, and to see if any one is holding a settlement between the Russian Dominion and the Spanish Possessions. In this case try to describe a favorable place and haven and establish friendly bonds with the inhabitants dwelling there. Such is permitted with settlements others are holding, in particular with the Spanish, to enter into friendly relations and trade, if from it is foreseen profit, but without need do not divulge the number of people in trade or about our affairs."³

Baranof's energies were first devoted to the building of the *Phoenix*, which, after many difficulties had been overcome, was launched in 1794. He then turned his attention to the pushing of his explorations southward with the intention of establishing settlements along those shores as soon as his limited resources

¹ See *Istoricheskoe Obozryenie Obrazovania Rossiisko-Amerikanskoi Kompanii*, by T. Tikhmenev, Appendix, Pt. 2, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³ *Tikhmenev*, part 1, p. 34.

in men and materials would permit. The arrival of the *Settlers*, for the agricultural colony, who were sent by Shelikof, permitted the first step. Two more small boats were built, poorly built and equipped through necessity in that far land of meagre supplies, then he began his campaign of aggression along the coast to the southeast.

A party of hunters sent to Yakutat in 1794 under Purtof added more information to that gathered by Ismailof and Bocharof in 1788. The next year Shields, the builder of the *Phoenix*, was ordered to map the coast from the Queen Charlotte Islands to Edgumbe, while Polomoshno, agent of Shelikof for taking charge of the Agricultural colony, with Pribilof, the discoverer of the Seal Islands, as navigator, was detailed with a party of the *Settlers* to make a permanent establishment at Yakutat. Baranof himself, navigating his little cutter *Olga*, went to Yakutat, waited for Polomoshno until too late to expect him, then left a detachment of his crew to hold the station until the next year, and went to Sitka to inspect the harbor in person. He went into the bay through the passage at the north of Kruzof Island which is yet known as Olga Strait from the name of the cutter, surveyed the harbor of Old Sitka (*Starry Gaven*), made friends with the Sitkas, then went back to Kadiak. Shields fulfilled his commission and mapped the west coast of Prince of Wales Island, called Kigani by the Russians, and as far as Sitka on the island afterward named for Baranof. Polomoshno played traitor, went with his party to Nuchek, on Hinchinbrook Island, on the excuse of shortage of water of the ship, then returned to Kadiak.⁴

With the summer of 1796 Baranof was again at Yakutat Bay with men and material, where he completed the fortification of a post and named it New Russia.⁵

There is no question of the intention of Baranof to advance to Nootka at the earliest opportunity and as soon as his resources were equal to the undertaking, for his biographer, Khlebnikof says:

“From receiving an occasional Gazette he knew that Nootka Bay (the aim of his wishes from the time the Spanish Court gave way to the English) was vacant, in his despatches to the Company he states his mind as follows: ‘At present nothing is in Nootka, neither English nor Spanish, it is an abandoned place,

⁴ Khlebnikof, in *Zhizneopisanie Baranova*, pp. 28-29; Copy of letter Baranof to Lariionof, March 3, 1798, in *Tikhmenef*, App. to Part 2, p. 121.

⁵ *Tikhmenef*, Pt. 1, p. 54.

when the time comes then to make an attempt to extend our trade and occupy it on our side.*** This is easy in the present time when Nootka is unoccupied by the English and they are engaged in war with the French.”⁶

His work was delayed by the loss of the ship *Three Saints* in Kamishak Bay during the fall of 1796, but by two years later he had overcome the opposition of the Lebedef Company that worried him from Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet. Their last fort, Constantine, was taken over in September of 1798, and that left him a free hand to push to the southward again.

His objective was Sitka, and this was occupied the next year. When the fort was completed, he composed a song which was sung at the dedication, known as the Song of Baranof, and which was sung at the founding of every fort placed by the Russians on American soil thereafter. One of the stanzas, voicing his inward wish, is as follows;

“Buildings are raised on New World ground,
Now Russia rushes to Nootka Sound,
The Peoples wild are Nature’s child,
And friendly now to Russian rule.”⁷

Fortune frowned on the Russians and delayed their progress for a time. When Baranof returned to Kadiak he found that Talin, one of his mutinous Lieutenants, had wrecked the *Orel* on Montague Island with a loss of the ship, twenty-two thousand rubles in furs and five men. Perhaps one consolation was that Polomoshno was among the drowned. Then wreckage came drifting in that indicated that the supply ship *Phoenix* was lost, and the drifting fragments were all that ever brought tidings of ship or crew. It was four years before a supply ship reached the colony. A hundred of his hunters were poisoned by mussels in Peril Strait and died. His only remaining ships were the little *Olga* and the brig *Ekaterina*. Neither were fit for sailing to Okhotsk. All available resources were required to maintain the colony and gather a few furs—to found new posts was beyond hope for the present. Then came the staggering blow of the loss of Sitka. Men, fort, thousands of rubles in value of precious furs, all lost at the hands of the merciless Kolosh (Thlingits).

The English Captain, Barber, of the *Unicorn* brought the few miserable captives rescued from the savages by the trading

⁶ *Zhizncopisanie*, p. 43 et seq.

⁷ The song was published in the *Muscovite* by Zagoskin who heard it sung at Michnelovsk (St. Michael) in 1833. A copy of the paper is in the Library of Congress and this is translated from it.

vessels among the islands, and demanded a ransom of 50,000 rubles for their delivery. It is doubtful if the thrifty Captain had very keen regrets over the destruction of the Russian fort in his trading grounds.

Still more to add to the misery of the situation a few straggling Aleuts arrived at Yakutat, the last remnants of a sea otter hunting party of 90 bidarkas that had been destroyed on Chatham Strait by the Thlingits almost simultaneously with the attack upon Sitka.

Baranof's biographer says of the loss of Sitka: "This misfortune placed a great obstacle in the way of his purpose to occupy a place farther than Sitka."⁸

Nothing long daunted the indomitable spirit of Baranof. His purpose to achieve the consummation of the great Russian plan seemed to blaze before him like the Cross of Constantine flamed in the Heavens. The darkest hour of night is sometimes just before the dawn. In November, 1802, the ship *Elizabeth* sailed into the harbor at St. Paul's (Kadiak) with reinforcement of men, supplies and trading goods. On this ship came the news of the granting of the charter and special privileges of the Russian-American Company, with a copy of the privileges attached. The second paragraph read:

"To make discoveries not only above 55 degrees north latitude, but further to the south, and to occupy discovered lands in Russian dominion on before given rules if on these lands no other nations have occupied and placed their dependency."

With his accustomed energy Baranof set about preparing for recovering his lost ground. The next summer he personally inspected the scene of the disaster, sailing there on his cutter from Kadiak, and from there he went to Yakutat where he ordered Kusof to build two small boats to be in readiness for the next year's advance. By the last of July, 1804, the Russians were again in possession of their lost ground at Sitka and on a new site the rebuilding of fortifications began. Building the fort and making its defences strong enough to withstand the revengeful Kolosh was a work of some importance. It was another year before the stockades and bastions were in place so the garrison felt at all secure. The enemy were at the gates continually. They lurked in the forest to cut off the working parties at their task of hewing beams for the palisades and de-

⁸ *Zhizncopisanié*, p. 71.

layed the progress of the work. They watched with keen eyes among the islands for Aleut fishermen and sealhunters, making the getting of fresh foods a dangerous occupation. Scurvy attacked the garrison, weakening and killing the men. It was a weary winter.

During the summer, of 1805 came Nicholas P. Resanof, the Chamberlain of the Tzar, son-in-law of Shelikof, whose plans he had carried out in securing the organization of the Russian-American Company after death had taken the great founder of Russian settlements in the New World in 1795. A practised diplomat, a brilliant courtier acquainted in all the courts of Europe, ambitious to accomplish something notable in the eyes of his Sovereign, he looked on the New World as his special field of action. He came with full power of command in all matters of the Company, and his position with reference to the progress to the southward was the same as his illustrious father-in-law had outlined, for he writes to his Emperor:

"Port New Archangel, my gracious Soverign, is to be the Capital of the lands of the Company and the residence of the chief commander unless we do not extend our occupation. When we conceive the possibility of a settlement on the River Columbia being made, then the controlling place will be it, from which it will be necessary to occupy the island of Kaigan (Prince of Wales) and to settle on the opposite Charlotte Islands to build a new port. Fur is there most abundant, forest is still more excellent than here, the harbor good and climate two degrees farther south.*** And to the Straits of Juan de Fuca, and on the Columbia to settle.*** For getting this we must construct here a war brig that will drive forever the Bostons from this trade and meantime to establish on the Columbia River a settlement, from which little by little we might extend farther to the south to port San Francisco, which composes the boundary of California. This is but the beginning and the possibility that, boldly attracting inhabitants from different places, in the course of ten years strengthening ourselves, with the California shore always in view, that on the least conflict in advantage to us in European conditions, we might include it in the number of Russian Possessions.

"The Spanish are very weak in this country and in 1798, when war was declared on the Spanish Court, if our Company had been found in strength occupying the country, easily the

part of California from lat. 34 north at Cape Santa Barbara might have profitably have been held and always by us kept afterward."⁹

Resanof remained for the winter at Sitka, inspecting the colony and busy with affairs of administration. It was another winter of hardship and privation with another visitation of the dreaded scurvy. In February, 1806, he sailed south, primarily to secure food for his stricken garrison, but his plans were ever before him.

On his way he attempted to enter the Columbia River to reconnoitre for his proposed settlement, but was prevented by adverse winds and the weakened condition of his diseased seamen. So he continued his voyage to San Francisco Bay. There he exercised his ability as a diplomat in securing a cargo of meats and grains, and there he met Dona Concepcion, the Spanish Beauty. It is yet a question as to whether his attentions to her, so sweetly sung by Bret Harte and so delightfully told by Gertrude Atherton, were more the wiles of a politician than the wooing of a lover. He has left a record of it:

"We spent the day in the home of the hospitable Arguello and very soon became acquainted. From the charming sister of the Commandant, Dona Concepcion, we learned of the beauty of California, and so your Excellency, we accepted with a will, and after our sufferings were well rewarded in our entertainment. Pardon me, Gracious Sir, that in such a serious letter I insert something romantic."

Resanof's career ended with his death at Krasnoyarsk as he was hastening across Siberia on his return in the dead of winter, but Baranof clung to his work with dogged persistence. He gathered information about the settlements of the Spanish from the Boston traders with whom he sent Aleuts to hunt for sea otter on the California coast, and he attempted to send parties of hunters into the channels of the coast toward Bella Bella. A detachment under Kushof, convoyed by two ships, the *Juno* under command of Captain Benjamin, and another sailed by Captain Winship, went down below Dixon's Entrance. They were met near Dundas Island by an American ship under Captain Hill, probably the one Douglas mentions as firing on the Auks near Lynn Canal in the early part of last century.¹⁰ Hill incited the

⁹ Letter of Resanof, *Tikhmenef*, Part 2, Appendix, pp. 232 *et seq.*

¹⁰ Captain Hill of the brig *Lydia*, probably, mentioned by Judge F. W. Howay, in *Washington Historical Quarterly*, Oct. 1925, p. 282. For account of the massacre of the Auks, see Journal of Sir James Douglas.

Kolosh, probably the Simpsiens, Hydahs and others, to attack the Russian hunters. As a result Kuskof was compelled to retreat with the loss of eight Aleuts and the expedition was defeated in its aims.

The next move was toward California. The ship *Kadiak* and the schooner *St. Nicholas* were sent in 1808 to make surveys on the Oregon coast about the mouth of the Columbia, afterward to sail to the California coast. Some work was done by the *St. Nicholas* on the west shore of Vancouver Island, then she was sailed to the coast of Washington near Destruction Island where she was thrown on shore, wrecked, and the crew made captives by the Indians.¹¹ The *Kadiak* was in charge of Kuskof who went on to the California shore and selected a location on the Russian River above Bodega Bay for the proposed settlement. In November, 1811, Kuskof went on the *Chirikof* with men and material for the fort which was built on the long coveted California soil, and the name Ross, the root of the word for Russia, was given. It was established in 1812, consisted of a four cornered palisaded enclosure, thick and high, with two wooden towers on the side and protected by thirteen guns. The garrison consisted of twenty-six Russians and 102 Aleuts, in the beginning. Farms were cultivated, horses, cattle, and sheep were pastured on the surrounding country. Explorations were made in the interior, concerning which Captain Golofnin of the Russian Navy says:

"Here the Russians settled in New Albion. In a short time they sought after rivers, bays and mountains, which to the Spanish were unknown. For proof I will not enumerate the discoveries, enough will be in the following examples; two great rivers opening into the north side of the Bay of San Francisco, to the Spanish entirely unknown, even the limits of this same bay they did not know, and the Russians went in and found, that the bay extended to the north to the parallel opening into Great Bodega."¹²

Thus far the dream of Shelikof had come true. A Russian post had been established in the land of California at nearly the fortieth degree of north latitude, as he had written more than a quarter of a century before.

The Spanish protested against the establishment of the fort, demanded its removal and threatened to destroy it by armed

¹¹ See Wreck of the *St. Nicholas* in the *Washington Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XIII, pp. 27-31.

¹² *Materialui dlya Istorii Russkikh Kolonii po beregam Vostochnoi Okcan*, Part 4. Materials for the history of the Russian Colonies on the shores of the Eastern Ocean.

force. Kuskof held the ground, unperturbed by threats, making answer that he was acting under orders and had no discretion in the matter. For nearly thirty years the Russians and Aleuts hunted the seal and the sea otter on the sea and farmed the soil for supplies to maintain their fur posts in the North.

The tide of Russian progress to the south reached its flood in the founding of the fort on the Russian River. The aim of more than a quarter of a century of effort had been reached in that fortified rectangle on the hills above Bodega, but the intervening links in the proposed chain of occupation, at Nootka, Juan de Fuca, on the Columbia, were missing, the American had come with the fort at Astoria, and the Briton had reached out to the shore of the Pacific. The power behind the Russian advance was weakening for Baranof was growing old. He made one more effort to extend the Russian dominion. In 1815 he built the fort at Honolulu¹³ the ruins of which may yet be seen in the limits of the modern city. This effort failed through the blundering of his agent, Dr. Scheffer, and the brave old Chief Manager was censured by his government although there is no doubt that the plan was approved by the powers at St. Petersburg. He was censured for not succeeding.

With the passing of Baranof passed the last man in whose breast burned the fire of an Empire Builder. Baron Von Wrangell was the only one of the line of chief managers who followed him who even built a fort of importance to extend the Russian trade in their own dominions. He founded Fort Michaelovsk (St. Michael), at the mouth of the Yukon River in 1833, to hold the trade of the Yukon Valley that was surely drifting to the factories of the Hudson's Bay Company, and in 1834 he placed Fort Dionysius at the mouth of the Stikene to hold the same company in check on the waters of that stream. But Russian power and aggression in America was on the wane. At the meeting in Hamburg over the Stikene controversy the British won a victory, the strip of coast from Portland Canal to Cape Spencer passed into the hands of the Honourable, the Hudson's Bay Company; Fort Dionysius became Fort Stikine, and Russian power began its decline in the American Possessions in 1840. A year after the transfer of Fort Dionysius the fort at Ross was sold to Sutter and the retreat of the Russian was well under way. In 1847 Alexander Hunter Murray placed the post of Fort Yukon,

¹³ See *Kamahamaha, the Napoleon of the Pacific*, by H. H. Gowen.

as he boasts in his Journal, "beyond the boundary according to my reckoning," a defiance to which the Russian Bear replied with no more than a growl.

When the reins of government dropped from the hands of Baranof in the Colonies, the transfer of the Possessions in America might have been predicted. None of the Naval Officers who intrigued against him, and in the end secured his dismissal under conditions that he deemed an insult, had the pertinacity of purpose or the breadth of mind to take up the guidance of affairs that slipped from his dying hand, and direct the way to success. After his death not a single new enterprise was initiated. Not a new industry was established except an ice trade with San Francisco and an effort to mine for minerals, both of which failed. Baranof established shipyards, foundries and sawmills, gathered copper from the Copper River and endeavored to find the source of the supply, the mine that was not found for a hundred years after. He searched the hills of the Kenai Peninsula for iron ore, found it and tried to smelt it with the meagre means he had in that wild land. He placed cattle on Kodiak Island, at Unalaska, at Cook Inlet, at Yakutat and at Sitka. He had kitchen gardens at Sitka in 1805, and he established farms on the Russian River in 1813. His successors added nothing.

There has been much search for a reason for the sale of Alaska to the United States. There is no need to pry into dead records for some deep intrigue to explain it. The Russian hand slipped its grip when it permitted the British flag to be run up at Fort Stikene and it was but a matter of time when it would lose its hold entirely. It was but little over a quarter of a century before the end came. They had done as all the European countries did with their colonies in America, they had exploited the land, or let the fur trader do it, and neglected the settler. They did not plant a population there. Had a hundred thousand Russians made homes on the soil of Russian America, the land would never have passed to the United States.

Thus faded the hopes of Shelikof for a Russian Empire in the New World. Had Resanof not died on the Russian Steppes and had a worthy successor to Baranof caught the reins that fell from his aged hand the history of the Pacific Coast might have been written as a different story.

CLARENCE L. ANDREWS