

# REVIEW

## THE END OF RUSSIAN AMERICA

[Review by Marvin Falk\* of *The end of Russian America: Captain P. N. Golovin's last report, 1862*, translated by Basil Dymtryshyn and E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan. Portland, Oregon Historical Society, 1979, 250 p, illus. Hardcover US\$21.95.]

Russian American studies are experiencing a renaissance based upon three developments: maturing scholarship, increasingly accessible primary source material, and a growing body of published translations. A new picture of this era of colonialism is emerging through the imaginative use of commercial records and the accounts of first hand observers.

The Oregon Historical Society is adding a number of significant texts published in its *North Pacific Studies Series*. The present volume is the official report of an 'independent' observer, Captain Pavel N. Golovin, which is to be followed by a volume of Golovin's unofficial correspondence reflecting his personal views. There was a growing faction that wanted to liquidate the Russian American Company operations in North America. As part of the ensuing debate, a number of studies and visits were made. Golovin's report is an overall analysis of the situation in Alaska which includes a brief history; a description of the climate, resources and native population; a look at the various activities and obligations of the company; and a set of recommendations. The report is especially valuable when read in conjunction with the reports of Petr A. Tikhmenev, Kyrill T. Khlebnikov and the report of the official Committee on the Organization of the Russian American Colonies—all of which are, or soon will be, available in translation.

The Russian American Company was faced with a series of restraints which affected its performance in its dual role of profit-oriented commercial venture and government of the colony. Golovin examines the profitability of the venture. His conclusion is, in summary, that although a profit could be made in some areas through rationalization, the company was not very competitive nor was it likely to be. As a governmental agency, the company had obligations concerning the welfare of its employees, most of whom were not especially well-suited for service in the colony anyway, as well as a number of natives and creoles who had been made legally dependent upon the company. With some notable exceptions, service in Russian America attracted a very low-calibre individual because of poor remuneration and unattractive living and working conditions. The company had so altered the life of certain native groups, especially the Aleut, through organized fur hunting, that they were dependent, even in terms of basic survival. Legally independent native groups, such as the Kolosh (Tlingit) were not governable and even threatened the very existence of Russian settlement.

The report does not discuss the option of selling the colony. Golovin, instead, offers a number of recommendations which amount to a radical alteration of policy toward employees and native groups. He advocates making goods more readily available and fostering a dependence upon them by independent natives in order to control them. After discussing the harm wrought by whalers trading in arms and spirits, he calls for permission for the company to do likewise in a controlled manner in order to compete. Somewhat inconsistently, he suggests that the material dependence of the Aleut population should be lessened through negotiated agreement on the supply of furs rather than on company-organized hunts. A number of native children should be removed from their native environment for training, and a desire for formal education should be fostered among native groups. He calls for a more independent governorship based upon an improved and clarified legal foundation, and recommends the establishment of an independent judiciary.

Golovin does not shrink from unflattering descriptions. Colonial citizens—those who took up permanent residency, usually upon retirement—were 'nothing more than moral parasites' (p 13). He repeatedly refers to many of former Governor Baranov's policies as lawless and criminal. He discusses the thriving black-market economy in Sitka, based upon vodka. He consistently refers to the Aleut people as lazy.

\* Elmer E. Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701, USA.

The book is handsomely published with a number of illustrations drawn from a variety of sources; the maps unfortunately are poorly reproduced. The translation itself is carefully done and reads well, with editorial explanation kept short and to the point. The editors have appended a useful but by no means complete bibliography. Any personal or public collection with more than a passing interest in Russian America should have this book.

### ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN THE USSR

[Review by Terence Armstrong\* of Boris Komarov's *The destruction of nature in the Soviet Union*. London, Pluto Press, [1980], 150 p. £2.95.]

This is a translation of a book first published in Frankfurt by Possev-Verlag in 1978 under the title *Obostreniye ekologicheskogo krizisa v SSSR*. The manuscript was smuggled out of the USSR, and the author, whose real name is not Komarov, gives evidence in his writing of being in close touch with officialdom in ecological matters—perhaps he is a civil servant. His indictment of Soviet policies, or lack of policies, is indeed severe. He makes clear however—and the reader very quickly realizes this—that he will ‘discuss only one side of the matter, the ravaging of nature’ (p 19), since the other, good side is to be found in the official publications; but most western readers do not peruse Soviet official publications, and so will lack balance and may tend to mistrust the virtually unrelieved blackness of the picture. This would be a pity, for although in my opinion, Komarov does exaggerate, there is likely to be more than a grain of truth in his allegations.

The book is short, and mostly concerned with the nation-wide situation—air and water pollution, land erosion, legal controls, threatened species, and so forth—but it is chapter 9, ‘A country in reserve’, that will most interest students of the north. Komarov argues that whereas Ward and Dubos in *Only one earth* said that we cannot conduct experiments to determine maximum permissible pollution levels because we do not have a planet in reserve, the USSR does have a country in reserve in the shape of the relatively untouched northlands. He then describes the ‘ravaging’ that has gone on there, coming to the conclusion that the need now is to prevent this ‘second USSR’ from destruction even before the first one. He writes of ice fog, forest fires, sewage and oil in rivers, and erosion by vehicle tracks, and he touches on the sad state of the native peoples. The difficulty of checking his statements is severe here, for so few non-Soviet citizens visit the region. All I can say is that three short visits to Yakutskaya ASSR between 1965 and 1973 did not leave me with the same impression as Komarov wishes to give his readers. Of course I saw only a fraction of that vast territory, and it was no doubt a carefully selected fraction; but I travelled, mostly by air but partly on the surface, for some 6 000 km within the republic, and what I saw of forest fire action, ice fog, sewage disposal and mining debris, while significant, was neither outrageous nor worse than what is visible in the American northlands. On the native peoples question there is some confirmation that the natives of the Soviet north are not exempt from the problems that beset other northern minorities, and that ‘Russians go home’ is not an unknown slogan. But Komarov argues that the Soviet northern peoples are degenerating, and then weakens this by saying that this has always been true to some extent, and there was no such thing as a golden age in the past; an attitude that smacks a little of the metropolitan bureaucrat who sees only administrative inconvenience in native affairs.

The somewhat negative character of this review must not be taken as indicating that the book is anything but a useful and indeed illuminating source on a subject about which westerners know very little. It is just that balance is lacking for the western reader. Accounts like this are extremely valuable, but their emphasis is the natural result of a long period of censorship: the pendulum swings to the other side. The situation (in the Soviet north) is certainly not the ecological paradise that some apologists may try to maintain; but it is probably not a disaster either.

\* Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.