Pivotal Moments Alaska's Role in Russian-American Relations during the First Half of the 19th Century[1]

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Issue: Vol. 10, No. 2 (2026)

Abstract
The article offers analysis of Alaska's multifaceted historical role as a pivotal geopolitical and cultural crossroads that has profoundly shaped the trajectory of Russian-American relations over several centuries. The article explores the era of Russian America (late 18th – mid19th century), tracing the establishment and operations of the RussianAmerican Company (RAC), the chartered colonial enterprise that served as the de facto administrator of Russia's North American possessions. Special attention is given to the RAC's dual function: as an economic engine driving fur trade and exploration, and as a vehicle for extending imperial influence through outposts, missions, and alliances with Indigenous peoples. The study then examines key diplomatic milestones, including the RussoAmerican Treaty of 1824, which delineated maritime boundaries and regulated commercial privileges in the North Pacific. These agreements not only formalized spheres of influence but also reflected evolving dynamics and competing claims in the region. The framework established by these treaties particularly provisions safeguarding the RAC's trading rights until 1844 is analyzed. A portion of the article addresses the 1867 sale of Alaska to the United States, situating this transfer within broader geopolitical currents: Russia's postCrimean War reorientation, American expansionism, and the economic challenges facing the RAC. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, which maintained parishes, schools, and linguistic traditions long after political sovereignty shifted. the Russian Orthodox Church presence became a crucial conduit for preserving Russian identity among Alaska Natives and settlers. The article underscores Alaska's enduring significance as a lens through which to understand centuries of transnational interaction.

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The history of Alaska, once peripheral to historical scholarship, has increasingly gained prominence on the academic agenda. This shift is primarily driven by the relevance of international issues and the desire to elevate interstate relations to a level commensurate with their historical depth and complexity. The largest body of research focuses on the history of Russian America and Russian American relations. In this context, the fundamental works of N. N. Bolkhovitinov and Norman Saul are of special importance: they comprehensively examined the history of Russian America and Russian American relations in their monographs and articles.[1] There is also collective three-volume study dedicated to the History of Russian America.[2] However, despite their broad scope, these works touch upon different issues and vast geographical areas, leaving more narrow subject of Alaska's role relatively unfocused. Moreover, the most notable works of these scholars were published back in the previous century, while a substantial body of material has been accumulated over the first quarter of the 21st century, making it possible to redefine research priorities in a new way.

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[1] Bolkhovitinov N. N. *Stanovlenie russkoamerikanskikh otnoshenii. 1775–1815* [The Formation of RussianAmerican Relations. 1775–1815]. Moscow: Nauka, 1966; Idem. *Russkoamerikanskie otnosheniia. 1815–1832* [RussianAmerican Relations. 1815–1832]. Moscow: Nauka, 1975; Idem. *Rossiia i voina SShA za nezavisimost'. 1775–1783* [Russia and the American War of Independence. 1775–1783]. Moscow: Mysl', 1976; Idem. *SShA: problemy istorii i sovremennaia istoriografiia* [USA: Problems of History and Modern Historiography]. Moscow: Nauka, 1980; Idem. *Russkoamerikanskie otnosheniia i prodazha Aliaski, 1834–1867* [RussianAmerican Relations and the Sale of Alaska, 1834–1867]. Moscow: Nauka, 1990; Saul N. E. *Distant Friends: The United States and Russia, 1763–1867*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991.1

[2] *Istoriia Russkoi Ameriki (1732–1867): V 3 t.* / Ed. by N. N. Bolkhovitinov. T. 1: Osnovanie Russkoi Ameriki (1732–1799) [The Founding of Russian America (1732–1799)]. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1997; T. 2: Deiatel'nost' Rossiiskoamerikanskoi kompanii (1799–1825) [The Activities of the RussianAmerican Company (1799–1825)]. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1997, 1999; T. 3: Russkaia Amerika: ot zenita k zakatu (1825–1867) [Russian America: From Zenith to Decline (1825–1867)]. Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1997, 1999. Vol. 1, p. 479 (hereafter - IRA).

An important dimension enriching this chronological framework is the history of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska. Here, the studies by Metropolitan Kliment and V.O. and Val. V. Pechatnovs are essential, as they illuminate the confessional, churchdiplomatic, and cultural aspects.[3]

In our publications, we have already explored the development of RussianAmerican relations in the North Pacific, as well as the legal dimensions of Russian colonial activities in Alaska. During international conferences in 2025 – 2026 and subsequent discussions, repeated proposals were made to refocus research: instead of covering the entire region of Russian colonial presence (California, the Aleutian and Commander Islands, Hawaii), to concentrate specifically on Alaska in order to demonstrate its pivotal role in the evolution of RussianAmerican ties. Moreover, this approach is highly relevant in contemporary historiography.[4] This article aims to fill the identified historiographical gap by elucidating Alaska's place in the bilateral interaction between the two powers over a prolonged historical period.

Russia was the first of the great powers to reach Alaska during Vitus Bering's Second Kamchatka Expedition, which followed a series of geographical discoveries. Peter I played a key role in initiating the movement toward America. In 1799 Emperor Paul I approved the charter of the RussianAmerican Company (RAC), which formalized Russia's presence in the North Pacific. The document established the 55th parallel north as the initial southern boundary of the RAC's operational zone.[5] The company was granted the right to explore new lands south of this line, provided they were not under the jurisdiction of other states. The northern boundary of its activities ran along the Bering Strait; the western limits encompassed the Kuril and Aleutian Islands; and the eastern reaches extended to the coast of NorthEastern America. The charter also granted the RAC monopoly rights over fishing, trade, and the exploitation of natural resources within the designated zone, providing the legal basis for establishing further Russian settlements, including Fort Ross and the Elizabeth Fortress in Hawaii. The territorial policy of the Russian Empire had a dual character: on the one hand, it consolidated the existing status quo; on the other, it opened opportunities for expansion. The RAC's legal standing rested on the doctrine of *de facto* possession, which developed amid competition with Great Britain, particularly during the

[3] Kliment (Kapalin German Mikhailovich, mitr. Kaluzhskii i Borovskii). *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' na Aliaske do 1917 goda* [The Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska before 1917]. Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2009, 604 p.; Pechatnov V. O., Pechatnov Val. V. *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov' v Amerike: ocherki istorii, 1867–1917* [The Russian Orthodox Church in America: Historical Essays, 1867–1917] / Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia. Moscow: Aspekt Press, 2025, 447 p.

[4] Petrov A. Yu., Savel'ev I. V., Kliment (Kapalin). Stanovlenie kolonial'nogo prava v Russkoi Amerike [The Formation of Colonial Law in Russian America] // *Rossiiskaia istoriia* [Russian History], 2015, no. 4, pp. 101–112.

[5] Petrov A. Yu. *Nataliia Shelikhova u istokov Russkoi Ameriki* [Natalia Shelikhova at the Origins of Russian America]. Moscow: Ves' mir, 2012.

Nootka Sound crisis.[6] Sea otter furs were gathered with the help of natives by company hunting parties along the coast, stored in warehouses at Kodiak or Sitka, then shipped to China by way of Siberia or through the port of Canton.[7]

By the early 19th century, a system of colonial rivalries and diplomatic agreements had taken shape in North America. For the United States, which had gained independence after the War of Independence (1775–1783), borders were fixed by the 1783 Treaty of Paris: the western boundary ran along the Mississippi River, while the southern boundary followed the 31st parallel to the Apalachicola River and thence along the St. Marys River to the Atlantic. Thus, by 1799 the jurisdiction of the USA covered the territory of the original 13 states, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River, with no access to the Pacific coast.[8]

During the era of Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809), interest in the Pacific Ocean grew significantly. In 1803, he oversaw the Louisiana Purchase, which opened the way for the country's westward expansion. To grasp the scale of Louisiana, whose territory far exceeded the modern size of the state bearing the same name, an expedition was organized under the leadership of Jefferson's associates Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (1804–1806). This expedition reached the Pacific coast via the Columbia River and established Fort Clatsop; later known as Astoria. This strengthened US claims to Oregon and demonstrated growing interest in the Pacific frontier.[9]

In 1803–1806, the first Russian circumnavigation expedition took place under the leadership of chamberlain Nikolai Petrovich Rezanov, who visited Alaska and also established connections with California. His activities contributed to the development of RussianAmerican trade relations. The ship "Yunona" was purchased from American Captain De Wolf, on which he sailed to California. Rezanov wrote: "Our company already has sufficient establishments and capital to establish trade with other powers. First of all, attention must be directed to

[6] Iz raporta kapitanleitenanta I. N. Bukharina vitseprezidentu Admiralteistvkollegii admiralu grafu G. G. Kushelevu o poseleniiakh RAK na Kuril'skikh i Aleutskikh ostrovakh, v severovostochnoi Amerike, 28 ianvaria 1800 g. [From the report of Lieutenant Commander I. N. Bukharin to the VicePresident of the Admiralty Board, Admiral Count G. G. Kushelev, on the settlements of the RAC in the Kuril and Aleutian Islands and in Northeast America, January 28, 1800] // RGAVMF [Russian State Archive of the Navy]. F. 198. Op. 1. D. 59. L. 124–125.

[7] Saul N. California-Alaska Trade, 1851–1867: The American Russian Commercial Company and the Russian America Company and the Sale/Purchase of Alaska // *Journal of Russian American Studies* 2.1 (May 2018). p. 1–2.

[8] Bemis S. *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*. Read Books, 2008, p. 320.

[9] Allen P. History of the Expedition under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clark by Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Vol. I. Toronto: George N. Morang & Co. Ltd., 1902. 435 p.; Ambrose Stephen E. Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. 519 p.; Adams H. History of the United States of America During the Administration of Jefferson and Madison: In 9 vols. New York, 1931, vol. 3, pp. 215–216; Lavender D. The Way to the Western Sea: Lewis and Clark across the Continent. New York: Anchor Books, 1990. 462 p.

discoveries in the maritime sphere."[10]

Other US expeditions took place simultaneously with the first Russian circumnavigation, one of whose key objectives was Alaska. The results of these expeditions were quickly leveraged by Boston merchants, who obtained proof of the feasibility of making stops along the Columbia coast. They gradually strengthened their presence in Alaska, and in exchange for furs, the Boston traders were even willing to part with their own vessels. These contacts played a notable role in shaping RussianAmerican relations, which were officially established in 1807.[11]

At that time, there were no direct land or sea borders between the United States and Russia in the North American region. Relations between the two powers had the character of potential neighborhood: their zones of interest did not geographically overlap, but came into contact through the interactions of Russians and Americans in the northern Pacific Ocean. Figuratively speaking, the formation of the future border between Russia and the United States was carried out by merchants from Boston, who supplied colonial goods (sugar, coffee, tobacco, and foodstuffs). In the early 19th century, Bostonbased American traders gradually increased their presence in Alaska. They engaged in barter, exchanging furs for foodstuffs and even vessels. However, they tended to supply the local population with weapons, and violated the monopoly rights of the RAC. This aroused dissatisfaction on the part of the Russian government, which sought to protect its interests. Meanwhile, these contacts played a notable role in shaping RussianAmerican relations and became an important stimulus for establishing diplomatic relations between the countries in 1806-1807.[12]

In the first quarter of the 19th century, the RAC sought to expand its holdings. In 1819, its directors proposed shifting the southern boundary, incorporating the Northwest Coast. After a year of review, the government approved a new charter on 18 August 1821: it extended the RAC's privileges for 20 years, moved the boundary to 51° N, and prohibited foreigners from trading in Russian America within 100 Italian miles of the coast. The decree sparked protests from France, Britain, and the United States.[13] The imperial decree of 4 September 1821 was translated into several languages and sent to various countries via diplomatic channels. As was later noted in one of the office memoranda: "France, England and America became acquainted with the content of the decree and almost simultaneously lodged successive protests against its unconditional implementation. Our government initially defended its rights with factual and historical arguments, while the aforementioned powers —and particularly the USA, refuted them on the grounds of popular rights. Diplomatic debates continued

[10] OR RNB. Fund 542 (Olenin Collection). File 799. Sheet 12.

[11] Bolkhovitinov N. N. *Stanovlenie russkoamerikanskikh otnoshenii. 1775–1815*. Moscow: Nauka, 1966, pp. 269–281.

[12] *Meeting of Frontiers: About this Collection* [Electronic resource] // Library of Congress. URL: https://www.loc.gov/collections/meeting-of-frontiers/about-this-collection (accessed: [15 March 2026]).

[13] Saul N. E. *Distant Friends: The United States and Russia, 1763–1867*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991.p. 96 – 105/

from late 1821 until the conclusion of special conventions on this matter: with America in 1824 and with England in 1825." The United States of America, in particular, expressed strong objections. As early as February 1822, they sent a protest addressed to the Russian extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador in America, P. I. Poletika. The Russian diplomat countered the American claims with historical facts and invoked three rights: "the right of first discovery, the right of first occupation, and the right of undisputed use."[14]

The Americans succeeded in having the issue of borders brought to special negotiations. In the history of Russian Pacific colonization, these negotiations became the first to be held under pressure from another country. The pressure exerted by British diplomacy after Captain J. Cook's third voyage was not successful, and its results, as applied to Russia's actions, turned out to be secondary. Even the establishment of the fortress and settlement Ross in territories that Spain considered its own colonies had only a very minor impact on the generally detached attitude of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs towards the activities of the RAC in California. The United States, as in the case of establishing diplomatic and trade relations with Russia, became the initiator of this process. Diplomatic negotiations between the two countries began in Saint Petersburg in February 1824. The negotiation strategy, apparently, was developed by J. Q. Adams. The American representative at the negotiations, G. Middleton, immediately stated the U.S. position, which amounted to a demand for: freedom of navigation; permission for U.S. citizens to engage in fishing in the northern part of the Pacific Ocean; trade with indigenous peoples in areas where there were no Russian settlements. However, the greatest objections arose regarding the southern boundary of the colonial possessions. Middleton proposed pushing the border northward, up to 55° N, or 4° further north. Middleton was a Southerner and a slaveholder, accustomed throughout his career to fierce debates and to defending his positions. Moreover, the scope of his authority was unusually broad and extended to matters related to Eastern Europe, which made him a highly competent negotiator. In addition, as American researcher H. Berkvist discovered, Middleton had managed to establish direct contacts with the Russian Ministry of Finance and had at his disposal quite confidential documents related to the budget of the Russian Empire. Middleton was well aware of which goods from the United States and other countries Russia was interested in. He successfully leveraged this knowledge during the negotiations.[15]

A very narrow circle of persons took part in the negotiations: G. Middleton, K. V. Nesselrode, and P. I. Poletika, as well as assistants on either side. The negotiations took place in secrecy; other ministries and agencies of the Russian Empire, if they had any understanding of the essence of the negotiations at all, had only the most general one. Apparently, the tsar was briefed on the progress of the negotiations. American researcher B. Hall acknowledged back in 1930 that

[14] RGAVMF [Russian State Archive of the Navy]. F. 410. Op. 2. D. 313. L. 44, 46 ob. (underline in the document).

[15] Bergquist H. E. Henry Middleton as Political Reporter: The United States, the Near East, and Eastern Europe, 1821–1829 // *The Historian*, 1983, no. 45 (3), pp. 355–357.

"trade factors were the main reasons for concluding the convention; moreover, Russia had wellfounded claims to the territories under discussion, both by right of first discovery and by their settlement." The Americans drew attention to the need to preserve the principle of freedom of navigation. In general, this was one of the key principles upheld by the United States since the establishment of trade and diplomatic relations. Thus, as early as 1799, U.S. Secretary of State T. Pickering wrote to the U.S. Envoy to London R. King: "An important and relevant condition is that citizens and subjects of both parties be granted full freedom of navigation and trade in all possessions of said parties, where navigation and trade are currently permitted to any other state."[16]

The archives preserve correspondence between G. Middleton and R. Rush, analysis of which has shown that the negotiations were preceded by intensive consultations between the United States and Great Britain. N. N. Bolkhovitinov believed that the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine had prevented joint anti antiRussia actions by Britain and the United States, and cited Rush's letter to Washington as an example. Meanwhile, Rush wrote this letter on January 9, 1824, to Middleton, who was at that time in Saint Petersburg: "… Mr. Cannag hinted to me that acting separately had been the original intention of his [i.e., the British - A.P.] government; instructions to this effect had been given to Sir Charles Bagot, and that our government wishes all three powers to conduct the negotiations…". Based on the text of this letter, it nevertheless seems that although the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine on December 2, 1823, was perceived ambiguously in Great Britain, the decision to hold negotiations with Russia had been made in advance.[17]

In the modern American interpretation of the 1824 events, the following conclusion is presented: "Great Britain considered the ban on the movement of foreign vessels to be contrary to the laws of nations, while the United States declared that Russia was violating the principle of the Monroe Doctrine, according to which no new European colonies should emerge on the American continent."[18]

In April 1824, Russia and the United States concluded a convention officially titled *The Convention Concluded at Saint Petersburg Between the Emperor of All the Russia and the Government of the United States of America for the Indestructible Preservation of the Friendly Relations Existing Between Them*. A comparison of the Russian and English versions reveals some differences in wording and emphasis; specifies the regulated spheres (navigation, fishing) and

[16] Bashkina N. N., Bolkhovitinov N. N., Brown J. H. et al., comps., *Russia and the United States: The Formation of Relations, 1765–1815* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), 752 p., p. 218.

[17] *Correspondence in Relation to the Proposed Interoceanic Canal Between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the ClaytonBulwer Treaty and the Monroe Doctrine: Being a Reprint of Senate Ex. Docs. No. 112, 46th Cong., 2nd Sess.; No. 194, 47th Cong., 1st Sess.; and No. 26, 48th Cong., 1st Sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1885), p. 185.*

[18] State of the Union History. Available at: http://www.stateoftheunionhistory.com/2017/11/1824-james-monroe-russo-american-treaty.html?m=1 (accessed 07.03. 2026)

geographic scope (the Pacific Ocean). The Russian version emphasizes the nature of interstate relations ("friendly relations") and their permanence ("indestructible preservation"), though a more substantive formulation also appears: "Convention on Friendly Relations, Trade, Navigation, and Fishing." Article 1 uses antonymic translation: the English *disturb* ("to hinder") and *restrain* ("to restrict") are rendered in Russian as "unhindered and with full freedom." Terminological differences are also evident: Americans are referred to as *citizens*, while Russians are *subjects*, reflecting the political realities of the two states. The Russian text is more emotive ("good mutual accord" vs. *perfect concord*) and replete with archaisms ("graciously faithful," "thereof,","these," "for"), whereas the English version adheres to a strictly official style, free of obsolete lexical units. In terms of substance, the convention had farreaching consequences. Its preamble declared the strengthening of friendly relations, yet Article 1 effectively annulled Russia's 1821 decree banning foreign trade in Russian America, meeting key U.S. demands. Subsequent provisions regulated the admission of American vessels to trade with Indigenous peoples in the Northwest of America, provided they obtained permits from local authorities.[19] For Russia, this meant significant concessions: U.S. citizens were allowed to engage in fishing and trade in areas free from Russian settlements. Monitoring the vast coastal zone with just a few thousand colonists was virtually impossible, and the Russian Empire's policy, which even barred its own subjects from settling in the colonies; exacerbated the situation. Unlike the United States, where the population grew through emigration, Russia offered no such opportunities.

The delimitation boundary was set at latitude 54°40′ N, with the United States receiving territories that had no Russian settlements. Notably, the RAC was completely excluded from the negotiations: its interests were not discussed, and no analysis was made of the potential impact on the company's financial and economic standing. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not seek the views of RAC shareholders, including the imperial family, who may have been the only wellinformed circle. Archival documents show that even the Ministry of the Navy was skeptical about the convention, particularly due to the lack of consultations with the governors of Russian colonies in America. The only statesman who spoke in support of the RAC was Admiral N. S. Mordvinov. In January–February 1824, he sent three memoranda to Foreign Minister K. V. Nesselrode, arguing for maintaining the border at 53°40′ N (Cape Charlotte). His arguments rested on the right of first discovery and settlement of the territories, as well as considerations of state prestige. Mordvinov warned that concessions could provoke demands from other powers (notably Britain) and harm Indigenous peoples who had adopted Orthodoxy. However, Nesselrode's response, conveyed on behalf of Alexander I, signaled that diplomatic agreement took precedence over RAC interests: the emperor believed that while some circumstances should be taken into account, others, related to broader state tasks, must also be considered.[20]

[19] Saul N. E. *Distant Friends: The United States and Russia, 1763–1867*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991.p. 103.

[20] From the letter of the General Board of the RAC to M. M. Muravyov, April 16, 1825 // Russian State Archive of the Navy (RGAVMF). F. 1375. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 422–423.

After the convention was signed, the RAC's General Board initiated a Special Council, which on 10 May 1824 concluded that the company faced potential damage. Council members insisted on revising the articles, especially those concerning American trade with Indigenous peoples, and submitted petitions to Alexander I. In response, a special committee was formed, including Finance Minister E. F. Kankrin, V. K. Nesselrode, M. M. Speransky, and other highranking officials. Despite the presence of RAC directors at the 21 July 1824 meeting, their views were not taken into account: the Foreign Ministry's position, that the southern border of the Russian colonies needed to be fixed, prevailed. The committee decided to limit American trade and fishing between 59°30′ and 54°40′ N, instructing envoy F. V. Teil to convey this position to Washington. However, during the ratification process in the United States, Teil did not advance additional demands, yielding to the arguments of Secretary of State J. Q. Adams about risks to bilateral relations.

In the end, all provisions of the convention remained in force in their original version of 5 April 1824. The RAC and its supporters failed to influence the terms of the agreement. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs under K.V. Nesselrode ignored alternative viewpoints; in contrast to the American side, which consistently defended the interests of its commercial circles. Thus, the 1824 convention became Russia's first major territorial concession to the United States, and the negotiations took place without involving representatives of other states whose interests were indirectly affected by the agreement.[21]

After trade with representatives of foreign countries in Russian America was permitted, a special document to this effect was sent to M. I. Muravyov. The first ship to arrive on trading business from the United States to Russian America was the *Tameamea* under the command of J. Meek, dispatched by J. Astor. Muravyov purchased expensive cigars, 90 gallons of wine, and a fireplace for his house from Meek.[22] Soon, other ships from the United States also began to actively visit the Russian colonies. At that time, the General Board of the RussianAmerican Company became concerned that no specific norms had been developed in trade with the Americans to meet the requirements of the time. For example, in 1824–1830, the price of a sea otter pelt when sold to Americans was 8 rubles in banknotes, or 2 rubles 28 kopecks in silver. Meanwhile, the price of a similar pelt delivered to Okhotsk was already 15 rubles in banknotes and reached 25–30 rubles in Kyakhta or Saint Petersburg. It turned out that sea otter pelts in Russian America were being sold at clearly low prices.[23]

In 1839, RAC entered into a 10year contract with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) for joint fur hunting. This agreement reflected a pragmatic approach: despite growing competition from American trappers and traders, Russia opted to cooperate with the British. The treaty helped streamline the extraction and sale

[21] N. N. Bolkhovitinov, Russian American Relations and the Sale of Alaska, 1834–1867 (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 368 p., pp. 187–201.

[22] From the letter of M. I. Muravyov to the General Board of the RAC, December 13, 1824 // NARS. RRAC. R. 29, p. 160.

[23] Exchange rate of the silver ruble to the paper ruble averaged 1 : 3{,}5 in the 1820s.

of furs in the region, reduce costs, and avoid direct confrontation with the HBC, which held strong positions in North America. Consequently, the contract served as a balancing tool, it helped safeguard Russian interests under pressure from American competitors while simultaneously fostering working relations with the British side.

Preparation of the RAC's activity report for 1843–1844 coincided with the approval of its new charter, a key document that defined Alaska's role in RussianAmerican interactions. Since the RAC's founding in 1799, its founding acts had consisted of "rules" and "privileges," later consolidated into a single charter. Extending the "privileges" was critically important: they secured the company's monopoly right to commercial and trading activities in the North Pacific, imperial patronage, and a jointstock operational model.[24] The drafting of the new charter began in 1840. After discussion in the State Council, the draft was provisionally approved by the emperor on 7 March 1841. The document then underwent согласование in the Ministry of Finance and received comments from the Ministries of Justice and State Property. Following revisions, a new version was submitted on 24 March 1844, and the charter was finally approved on 10 October 1844.[25]

The 1844 charter significantly expanded upon previous regulations: whereas the 1799 version contained 34 sections and the 1821 version 70, the new charter grew to 286 sections. Key changes concerned status and territory: the RAC remained "under the highest patronage," and its area of operations was expanded to "the entire part of the Northeast Sea," including the Northwest of America, the Aleutian and Kuril Islands. Monopoly rights were confirmed for 20 years (from 1 January 1842).[26]

The charter included clarifications on trade with China (via the ports of Canton and Shanghai), with a ban on opium imports. The company's right to engage in trade and fishing with neighboring peoples, provided their governments consented, was reaffirmed. For nonnobles, 10 years of service entitled them to personal honorary citizenship, and in exceptional cases, hereditary status. Employees gained the right to wear the uniform of the Ministry of Finance and advance through the Table of Ranks.

Share value was set in silver rubles. Profits were calculated after debts and contributions to the reserve capital (10 %) were deducted; this reserve could only

[24] Bolkhovitinov N. N. *Russkoamerikanskie otnosheniia i prodazha Aliaski, 1834–1867*. Moscow: Nauka, 1990, 368 p., pp. 187–201.

[25] Report of the Main Board of the Russian-American Company for Two Years, up to January 1, 1842 (Saint Petersburg, 1842), pp. 33, 38. Note: The balance sheet was prepared on September 21, 1842, but the main calculations were made as of January 1, 1842 - hence both dates appear in the document. Starting in 1842, reports of the General Board of the RAC were printed at the printing house.

[26] As noted, a detailed analysis of the entire set of measures related to the adoption of the company's new charter was not the aim of this study. In addition, extensive files related to correspondence on the new charter can be found in the following archives: Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA). F. 18. Op. 5. D. 1338; Archive of the Russian Geographical Society (ARGO). Razr. 99. Op. 1. D. 79, 82.

be used in extraordinary circumstances. Unclaimed dividends could be added to the reserve capital. The General Board of the Russian-American Company (GP RAC) was expanded to five members, elected for twoyear terms from among shareholders with experience in trade or colonial affairs. A system of bonuses tied to the company's annual profits was introduced. The GP RAC was required to submit an annual balance sheet and a report on the export of commercial goods to the Ministry of Finance. Internal audits included cash and recordkeeping checks, while external audits involved reporting to the general shareholders' meeting. The Chief Governor of the colonies retained broad powers but could not exceed the limits set by the GP RAC, especially in financial matters.[27]

The 1844 charter reflected the evolving role of Alaska in the context of growing RussianU.S. interaction. On one hand, it consolidated Russia's position in the region by expanding the company's hunting grounds and confirming the RAC's monopoly. On the other, it took into account international agreements delimiting possessions in the Pacific Ocean, signaling a desire to avoid conflicts with the United States and Great Britain. At the same time, the document revealed the contradictory nature of imperial policy: on one hand, the state maintained control through the Ministry of Finance and reporting requirements; on the other, it granted the company considerable autonomy in trade operations, including the right to appeal directly to the emperor in cases of disagreement with the ministry.[28] Thus, the 1844 charter became not only the legal foundation for the RAC's operations but also an indicator of the balance between imperial interests and the need to account for the realities of international trade in the Pacific region. It cemented Alaska as a key node in RussianAmerican economic and geopolitical ties, while simultaneously defining the limits of the company's capabilities under mounting external pressure.

The process of gradual rapprochement between Russia and the United States reached its peak during the American Civil War. As part of a demonstration of political support for Abraham Lincoln's administration, two Russian squadrons were dispatched to the shores of America: one to the East Coast under the command of S. S. Lesovsky, and the other to the West Coast under A. A. Popov. The visit of the Russian warships generated a wide public response. During the events organized by the American side in honor of the Russian sailors, the significance of bilateral relations was particularly emphasized, including their importance in the Pacific region.[29]

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[27] Report of the Main Board of the Russian-American Company for the One-Year Period Ending January 1, 1847 (Saint Petersburg, 1847); Report of the Main Board of the Russian-American Company for the One-Year Period Ending January 1, 1848 (Saint Petersburg, 1848); Report of the Main Board of the Russian-American Company for the One-Year Period Ending January 1, 1849 (Saint Petersburg, 1849).

[28] RGAVMF. F. 1375. Op. 1. D. 48. L. 111 ob.–112 ob

[29] «Privetstvennyi banket, dannyi Gorodskim bostonskim sovetom kontradmiralu [Stepanu Stepanovichu] Lesovskomu i ofitseram russkogo flota», 7 iiunia 1864 g. [«Welcome Banquet Given by the Boston City Council to Rear Admiral [Stepan Stepanovich] Lesovsky and Officers of the Russian Navy», June 7, 1864] // Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional'noi biblioteki (OR RNB) [Manuscript Department of the Russian National Library]. F. 1000. Op. 2. D. 1110. L. 1–27.

In the mid-19th century, there was a substantial expansion of American whaling operations in the waters off the coast of Alaska. The dynamics of whaleoil production show impressive growth: the figure increased from 35.0 thousand tons in 1825 to 146.0 thousand tons by 1850. The intensity of whaling activity is confirmed by fleet data: in 1846, the United States had 656 whaling vessels with a total displacement of 233.0 thousand tons, with the Hawaiian Islands serving as the key logistical hub for these operations. Shipcall statistics also reflect US dominance in the industry: in 1853, American whalers accounted for the vast majority of recorded visits, 500 out of 533 total entries. The expansion of whaling had begun earlier: as early as 1835, Captain B. T. Folgers identified promising whalefeeding grounds near Kodiak Island. By 1841, at least 50 American vessels were operating in the Alaskan region, and by 1842 the number of ships visiting the waters off the western tip of Alaska and the eastern part of the Aleutian Chain had reached 200. By 1845, 263 out of 690 American whaling vessels were engaged in whaling in the waters of the RAC. Economic indicators for the period 1848–1861 show that whale oil and baleen were exported to the value of 130 million dollars, equivalent to approximately 200 million silver rubles. Such largescale and unregulated harvesting led to a serious decline in whale populations, which in turn undermined the traditional way of life of the region's indigenous peoples (Aleuts, Eskimos, Tlingits), depriving them of their usual food sources.

Moreover, in the course of pursuing whales, American whalers increasingly entered the waters off the coast of Kamchatka, an area that the Main Board of the RussianAmerican Company regarded as one of its key bases for trade and commercial fishing activities.[30]

The management of the RAC proposed to impose restrictions on the entry of American whaling vessels into Alaskan waters, but this request failed to gain the support of Foreign Minister K. V. Nesselrode. Furthermore, the RAC directors' proposal to organize cruising patrols along the Alaskan coast was never implemented. In the 1850s, the presence of representatives from the British Hudson's Bay Company noticeably intensified in Alaska. This was accompanied by an increase in its trade and commercial fishing influence in the region, which led to heightened competition with the RussianAmerican Company. During this period, negotiations even took place at the highest level regarding the potential cession of Russian possessions in Alaska to the British. Various geopolitical and economic aspects of a possible deal were discussed. However, after considering all the options, the decision made by a limited circle of highranking officials under the leadership of Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich was ultimately taken in favor of the United States of America. This outcome determined the future trajectory of relations between the Russian Empire and the North American continent and had a significant impact on the geopolitical situation in the Pacific region.[31]

[30] Zavoiko V. S. – Konstantinu Nikolaevichu, 16 avgusta 1855 g. [Zavoiko V. S. to Konstantin Nikolaevich, August 16, 1855] // AVPRI [Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire]. F. RAK. Op. 888. D. 391. L. 33.

[31] Murav'evAmurskii N. N. – Konstantinu Nikolaevichu, 26 maia 1853 g. [Murav'evAmursky N. N. to Konstantin Nikolaevich, May 26, 1853] // Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Voennomorskogo flota (RGAVMF) [Russian State Archive of the Navy]. F. 410. Op. 2. D. 313. L. 1–7.

In the 1850s, Alaska played an important role in the interaction between the Russian Empire and the United States of America, which was determined primarily by the economic interests of both sides in the Pacific region; the key factor was the rapid development of California following the start of the gold rush in 1848–1849, when the rapidly growing population of San Francisco and other cities in the state created enormous demand for basic resources, primarily for construction timber and fresh water in the form of ice for domestic and commercial needs. Russian America, administered by the RAC under the direction of the General Board, leveraged its natural resources to establish stable trade: highquality coniferous timber and massive blocks of natural ice, harvested during the winter from Alaska's mountain rivers and lakes, were shipped from Aleutian and Alaskan territories to San-Francisco. This trade proved extremely beneficial for both Russians and Americans: for the RAC, it became a significant source of revenue that helped partially offset the growing operational costs of colonial administration, while for California entrepreneurs it provided a reliable supply channel for critical materials amid limited local production and difficulties in transporting goods from the eastern U.S. states.[32]

Key figures of the time played an important role in organizing and developing these trade ties: Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangel, manager of the RAC's affairs, who had laid the foundations for interaction with American traders in previous decades, and subsequent colonial administrators, who ensured logistics and sales. The American side was represented by major trading houses and private entrepreneurs from San Francisco, such as the companies of William H. Davis and other merchants specializing in supplying the rapidly growing city. Diplomatic contacts also had a significant impact on the intensity of trade: during this period, a relatively favorable climate persisted in RussianAmerican relations, supported by both informal agreements at the local level and the stance of Russian diplomats in Washington, including Ambassador Alexander Andreevich Bodisko, who sought to maintain a constructive dialogue with the U.S. government. Technically, shipments were organized by sea: Russian sailing ships and schooners regularly plied between the ports of Russian America and San Francisco; a typical expedition took several weeks, taking into account weather conditions and ice conditions in the northern Pacific Ocean. As a result, by the mid1850s, trade between Alaska and California had reached considerable volumes: according to available estimates, several thousand cubic metres of timber and hundreds of tons of ice were delivered to San Francisco annually, which not only strengthened the economic ties between the two countries but also facilitated informal cultural exchange between Russian settlers, Aleuts, Tlingits, and the rapidly growing multiethnic population of California. Two significant challenges disrupted trade between Alaska and California during this period. Firstly, the unusually mild winter of 1855–1856 resulted in a severe shortage of ice available for harvesting and shipment to San Francisco. This scarcity prompted trading companies to

[32] Saul N. California-Alaska Trade, 1851–1867: The American Russian Commercial Company and the Russian America Company and the Sale/Purchase of Alaska // Journal of Russian American Studies 2.1 (May 2018). p. 1-13.

search for new ice harvesting locations farther north, ultimately identifying Wood Island near Kodiak as a viable source. The first ice shipments from this site commenced in 1858. Secondly, large vessels transporting ice faced a persistent hazard: submerged rocks, particularly abundant in Sitka Harbor. This danger led to the loss of several key vessels, including the *Zenobia* (the workhorse of the ARCC) in 1858, the *Kodiak* of the RAC in 1860, and the RAC's replacement flagship, the New Englandbuilt Yankee clipper *Tsaritsa*, in 1861. These incidents accelerated the shift towards safer waters less prone to such navigational hazards.[33]

In 1859–1860, Russia negotiated with Great Britain over a possible sale of Alaska. The talks yielded no results: the British did not accept the terms. This experience showed that London was unwilling to assume the costs and risks of developing a remote territory. Meanwhile, the United States maintained a steady interest in Alaska and had the resources to develop it. Moreover, selling to the U.S. would allow Russia to strengthen relations with Washington and gain a counterweight to British influence in the region. For these reasons, after failed negotiations with London, the Russian government ultimately opted for a deal with the United States.[34] The key event was the sale of Alaska: on 30 March 1867, a treaty was signed in Washington ceding Russian possessions to the United States for 7.2 million dollars in gold. The transferred territories included the Alaska Peninsula, the Alexander and Kodiak Archipelagos, the Aleutian Islands, and the islands of St. Lawrence, St. Matthew, Nunivak, and Pribilof, among others.[35] The border was drawn based on the 1824 and 1825 conventions: the western line ran through a point in the Bering Strait (65°30′ N) along a meridian equidistant from Ratmanov Island (retained by Russia) and Kruzenshtern Island (ceded to the U.S.); the southern border followed 54°40′ N; and the eastern border followed the 1825 RussianBritish convention line (141° E). The transaction covering approximately 1,519,000 square kilometres became the largest territorial transfer in the history of the Russian Empire. After the cession, Alaska ceased to be an internal Russian space in the North Pacific, necessitating subsequent resolution of maritime jurisdiction issues.[36] The 1867 treaty transferring Russian possessions in North America to the United States, which established the boundary line in the North Pacific, served as a foundational document that predetermined the

[33] Saul N. California-Alaska Trade, 1851–1867: The American Russian Commercial Company and the Russian America Company and the Sale/Purchase of Alaska // Journal of Russian American Studies 2.1 (May 2018). p. 1-2.

[34] The history of the preparation and adoption of this treaty has been described in sufficient detail in the works of N. N. Bolkhovitinov. He also thoroughly identified the reasons behind the Russian government's decision to sell Alaska to the United States. N. N. Bolkhovitinov, Russia Opens America, pp. 213–228; Idem, Russian American Relations and the Sale of Alaska, pp. 167–214.

[35] Doklad M. Kh. Reiterna Aleksandru II «O merakh k ispolneniiu dogovora ob ustupke severoamerikanskikh kolonii», 5 maia 1867 g. [Report by M. Kh. Reutern to Alexander II "On Measures for the Implementation of the Treaty on the Cession of the North American Colonies", May 5, 1867] // AVPRI. F. RAK. D. 412. L. 98–99 (copy).

[36] Bolkhovitinov N. N. *Russkoamerikanskie otnosheniia i prodazha Aliaski, 1834–1867* [RussianAmerican Relations and the Sale of Alaska, 1834–1867]. Moscow: Nauka, 1990, 368 p., pp. 187–201.

nature of subsequent agreements on the border in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. Its significance extended far beyond mere territorial delimitation, exerting a longterm impact on the geopolitical configuration of the region and the logic of future international arrangements.

Norman Saul added more arguments to Bolkhovitinov's reasoning about why Russia decided to sell Alaska to the USA. In his recent article, he argues that the California–Alaska trade heavily influenced Russia's 1862 decision to sell Alaska to the United States, following reports from inspectors of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of the Navy. The sale was delayed until the Union's victory in the Civil War. By then, the RAC had failed to build profitable ties with California: ice was its only viable export, as coal, fish, and lumber found no market. Costly ship losses during ice transport and the shift of operations from Sitka to Kodiak, which disrupted supply returns to Sitka — further undermined the RAC's position and likely affected the incomes of the Tlingit and Aleut peoples.[37]

Reflecting the level of development of international maritime law in the mid19th century, the document detailed the transfer of land territories and adjacent islands but entirely omitted the issue of maritime boundaries. This omission stemmed from the absence at that time of codified concepts of exclusive economic zones and continental shelves, a gap that later gave rise to a series of legal disputes.

It is important to note that even after the dissolution of the RussianAmerican Company and the closing of Russian America as an administrative entity, Russian cultural and religious presence in the North Pacific not only persisted but continued to develop steadily; primarily thanks to the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. Its continuity was ensured by the purposeful missionary work of a number of outstanding church figures, among whom special mention must be made of Saint Innocent (Veniaminov), later Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna, and Venerable Herman of Alaska. Their decadeslong pastoral, educational, and linguistic work, including the translation of liturgical texts into local languages and the compilation of grammars; not only preserved but systematically strengthened Russia's spiritual heritage in Alaska, and later extended its influence to California, where Orthodox parishes emerged in the 19th century.[38]

The legal foundation for the continuation of church activities was directly embedded in the 1867 treaty on the sale of Alaska. According to its provisions, the Russian Orthodox Church retained special jurisdiction over real property rights, in particular, the right to use land plots on which churches, chapels, and other religious buildings were located. This ensured the institutional stability of the church infrastructure and prevented its liquidation or secularization following the change of state sovereignty over the territory. Subsequently, Alaskan parishes

[37] Saul N. California-Alaska Trade, 1851–1867: The American Russian Commercial Company and the Russian America Company and the Sale/Purchase of Alaska // Journal of Russian American Studies 2.1 (May 2018). p. 10.

[38] Kliment (Kapalin German Mikhailovich, mitr. Kaluzhskii i Borovskii). *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' na Aliaske do 1917 goda* [The Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska before 1917]. Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2009, 604 p.

became an important training ground for missionaries. Among those who served in these parishes was the future Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Saint Tikhon (Bellavin), whose work in Alaska during the 1890s not only strengthened local communities but also contributed to the development of models for intercultural dialogue with Indigenous peoples. Moreover, Orthodox clergy consistently pursued pastoral and educational activities among diverse ethnic and social groups across the vast expanses of the North Pacific; from the Aleut and Tlingit peoples to Russian colonists and American settlers. This work encompassed: organizing parish schools and teaching literacy; maintaining metric records and preserving the historical memory of communities; adapting liturgical practices to local conditions while upholding canonical tradition; providing medical and social assistance to the population. Clergy undertook long journeys to remote areas of northern and northwestern America.[39]

A new impetus to the RussianAmerican dialogue in Alaska was given in 2025 during a meeting between Presidents V.V. Putin and D.J. Trump at the ElmendorfRichardson military base in Anchorage (Alaska), where the prospects for cooperation in the Arctic and in Alaska were discussed. Following the talks, D. Trump stated that the USA also had excellent representatives from the business sector and others present there. If one wished to cooperate with the United States, the country looked forward to it and eagerly anticipated working together.[40]

The significance of Alaska for RussianAmerican relations was emphasized by Russian President V. V. Putin at a joint press conference with U.S. President D. J. Trump in Anchorage on August 16, 2025: “It is also important that a significant part of the shared history of Russia and the United States, along with many positive events, is linked to Alaska. For instance, the vast cultural heritage of the Russian America era is still preserved here to this day: Orthodox churches, and a great number of geographical names...”[41] Indeed, Alaska unites Russia and the United States through a shared historical and cultural heritage, which must be restored to the historical memory of the peoples of America and Russia. One possible approach is to resume international conferences on various aspects of history and cooperation in different fields, which were held annually in Russia and the United States.[42]

In the first half of the 19th century, Alaska was a key node in RussianAmerican relations. The activities of the RAC consolidated Russia’s presence in the North Pacific: through fur trapping, trading posts, and agreements, it defined spheres of influence and rules of interaction with foreign powers. Alaska became a testing

[39] For details, see: Kliment (Kapalin German Mikhailovich, mitr. Kaluzhskii i Borovskii). *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov’ na Aliaske do 1917 goda* [The Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska before 1917]. Moscow: OLMA Media Grupp, 2009, 604 p

[40] *Kremlin.ru [Electronic resource]. URL: (accessed: 07 February 2026).*

[41] A. Yu. Petrov, Metropolitan Kliment (Kapalin), M. G. Malakhov, A. N. Ermolaev, I. V. Savel’ev, History and Heritage of Russian America // Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2011, vol. 81, no. 12, pp. 1090–1099.

[42] A. Yu. Petrov, The Study of the History and Heritage of Russian America: New Approaches, Books, International Conferences and Round Tables (2012–2013) // American Yearbook. Moscow, 2013, pp. 341–347.

ground for models of interaction between Russia and the United States. Economic interests, diplomatic compromises, and cultural heritage shaped the trajectory of bilateral relations for decades to come.

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