

Russians in Alaska

1732–1867

LYDIA T. BLACK



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Back cover: Lomonosov's map of 1763, indicating proposed polar routes from the White Sea to Alaska and India.

*In memory of ordinary citizens of the Russian Empire who came to Alaska,
came to love her, made her their home, and now rest in forgotten graves;
and to their descendants in Alaska and Russia.*

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1959, ALASKA (“THE GREAT LAND,” AS ALASKANS OFTEN CALL THEIR homeland) became the forty-ninth state of the United States of America. Before 1867, Alaska was part of the Russian Empire and was called Russian America or, in official documents, the Russian-American Colonies. Russian sovereignty in Alaska was based on the “right of discovery” established by the naval squadrons commanded by Mikhail S. Gvozdev in 1732 and Vitus Bering in 1741 and the “right of occupation” established in the eighteenth century by Russian entrepreneurs.

In literature and political speeches, the period when Alaska was under the Russian scepter is stereotypically represented as a time of unbridled exploitation—indeed, *enslavement*—of Native peoples, and wanton rape and robbery of Alaska’s natural resources. In reality, the Russians (who seldom exceeded 500 persons at any one time) were vastly outnumbered by the Natives. By the 1830s the Russian Crown forbade permanent settlement in Alaska, and only those Russians who legally married Native persons (either men or women) were entitled to petition for permission to remain in Alaska lifelong. The Russian military did not put in an appearance in Alaska until the Crimean War in the 1850s, when a troop of soldiers was stationed at Sitka for defense in case of an attack by British forces.

Russian relationships with the majority of the Native groups were determined by the desirability of continuous, uninterrupted trade. Consequently, the dynamics of intergroup (Russian-Native) and personal relationships and attitudes were qualitatively different from those established later between the people of the United States and Alaska’s indigenous peoples. The United States acquired Alaska at a time when major conflicts with Indians were being played out in the western territories. Military occupation and control were the order of business. The attitudes and expectations of military personnel were dictated by the Indian experience. These attitudes were projected, retroactively, onto the Russian scene. Civilians who flocked to Alaska operated under the *laissez-faire* policies of the time. These policies were in stark contrast to the government-controlled Russian-American Company, where, in return for a monopoly grant to Alaska’s resources, the Imperial Russian government demanded that the company provide social services: public health and education, as well as old age, survivors’, and disability pensions for their employees. In Alaska, during the Russian period, experimental social legislation was tried out.

What happened in Alaska under Russian sovereignty was very different, not only in the sense that colonization had a different character from the British, American, French, or Spanish pattern, but also in that there were differences over time. Changes in Russia's internal political, social, and economic situation affected events in Alaska. The geopolitical context of the eighteenth century was different from that of the early nineteenth century, and changed dramatically in the second half of that century. The United States of America, which did not exist when Russia first claimed Alaska, emerged as a continental power. The Russian emperor, Alexander II, expected the United States to absorb Canada one day—or wished that this would happen. He would have preferred to share a border with the United States and not with a British colony. Much happened in the course of this century and a half.

The origin of the stereotypic view of the Russian period may be safely laid at the doors of Hubert H. Bancroft and William H. Dall, who desired Alaska's rapid Americanization. This view was challenged by the end of the nineteenth century by a pioneer historian of Alaska, Clarence L. Andrews (1862–1948). Andrews came to Alaska when Russian culture was still very much alive. He became fascinated with the Russian period, “one of the most colorful and least known periods of North American history.”¹ Andrews taught himself Russian and began to amass archival and primary sources on various aspects of the Russian period. Eventually he published two pioneering works: *The Story of Sitka* (1922) and *The Story of Alaska* (1931). In 1942, Andrews completed a biography of one of the great movers and shakers in Alaska—Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov (in Alaska 1790–1818)—but the work was never published. Andrews came in contact with radio commentator and writer (newspaper, script, and fiction) Hector Chevigny (1904–1965) in 1938. Until Andrews' death, these two men maintained a lively correspondence on the subject of Russian America. Chevigny, too, became fascinated with Alaska, specifically with the Russian period, after his contact with the eminent historian Edmund Meany. In 1937 Chevigny's first book dealing with Russian America, *Lost Empire* (a highly romanticized account of the life and times of N. P. Rezanov), was published. There followed in 1942 the somewhat unreliable and also romanticized account of Baranov, *Lord of Alaska*. A believer in the “great men” theory of history, which illuminated his approach in general, Chevigny planned to write his next biography on Grigorii Shelikhov, Baranov's employer. Writing, by his own admission, without direct access to Russian sources, like Andrews he was nevertheless able to amass a wealth of materials. Even after he lost his eyesight (and for this reason abandoned the projected biography of Shelikhov), his interest continued. After visiting Alaska twice (in 1959 and 1960) and encountering local enthusiasm for his work, Chevigny wrote the first popular synthesis dealing with the whole of the Russian period, *Russian America* (published in 1965, shortly before his death). This little publication, which largely follows the outline laid down by the historian of the Russian-American Company, Tikhmenev (d. 1888), has established the view among modern readers of a disorderly and violent period when private entrepreneurs competed for Alaska's wealth, followed by the establishment of order, first by Grigorii Shelikhov, then by his heirs, and eventually by the monopolistic Russian-American Company.² In the 1940s a Canadian historian, Stuart Tompkins, who had a long-standing interest in the Russian Far East and Siberia, became interested in the Russian adventure in Alaska. This interest is reflected in his work *Alaska: Promyshlennik and Sourdough* (1945).

These three pioneers in the study of Russian America opened the field for scholarly exploration by American and Canadian scholars, who produced a body of literature on specialized topics that began to grow in the late 1950s, continued through the 1960s, and has come into its own in the subsequent decades. The study became enriched when Richard A. Pierce, a specialist in Russian history, through his association with Chevigny, joined the field in the early 1960s. Realizing that a wealth of material was not accessible to anglophone scholars, he initiated a translation series of Russian primary sources on Alaska. However, no comprehensive study has been attempted since the pioneering work of Chevigny.

This book presents to the public a new synthesis, based primarily on archival materials in Russia and the United States. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Russian sources are my own. In this volume, I attempt to present the Russian advance to the American continent in historic perspective, including the changing geopolitical context, while focusing on the social and cultural data on the Russians who were active in Alaska. This focus includes the northern skippers of the fur-procuring vessels; the great merchants of the Russian north and, later, of Irkutsk in Siberia; the churchmen who brought to Alaska the lasting heritage of the Orthodox faith; the rank-and-file laborers of various ethnic origins, such as the Yakut, the Kamchadal, the Koriak, and the Tungus (Evenk and Even); the imperial naval officers who had their own point of view on how Alaska should be governed (and in the end came to govern her); and the creoles, the social class deliberately created in order to have a bicultural stratum, members of which would be loyal to their native land, Alaska, and to the Russian cultural heritage brought to Alaska by an ancestor or ancestress.

In the process, I came to re-evaluate the role of the “great men” who fascinated Chevigny so much. 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. It is focused on the Russians in Alaska—their motivations, views of life, and attitudes. I truly hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of the history of the forty-ninth state—our beloved Great Land, Alaska—and perhaps to a better knowledge of a fascinating shared chapter in the history of Russia and the United States.

NOTES

1. Richard A. Pierce, “Hector Chevigny: Historian of Russian America,” *Alaska Journal* 15, no. 4 (1985): 33.
2. *Ibid.*, 33–37.

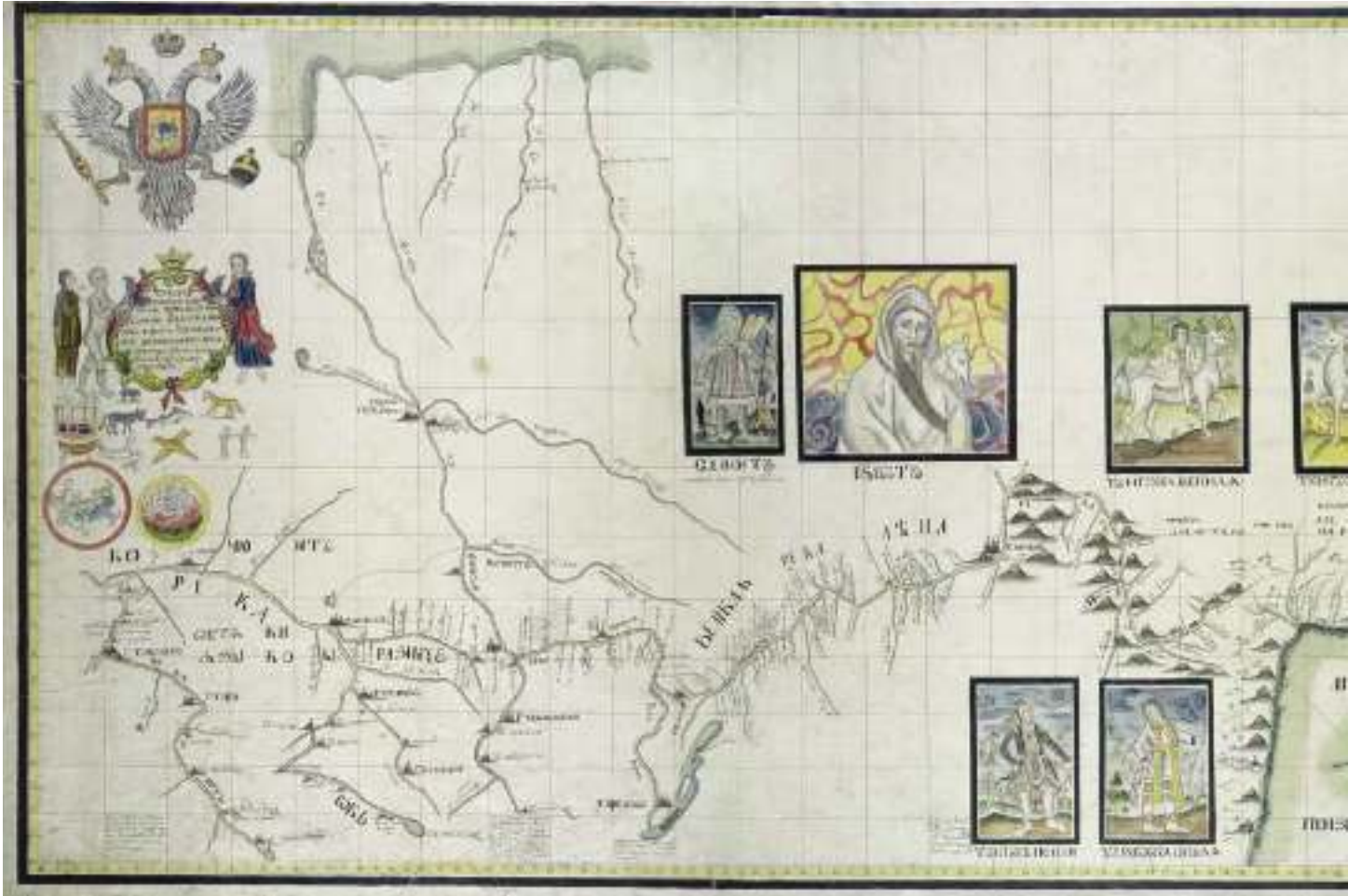


Plate 17. An ethnographic map of Siberia from Tobol'sk to Bering Strait, compiled no later than 1729 by a member of Bering's 1728 voyage. Possibly by the same person who compiled the map of the Bering Strait region. Courtesy University of Göttingen Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, von Asch Collection, no. 246.

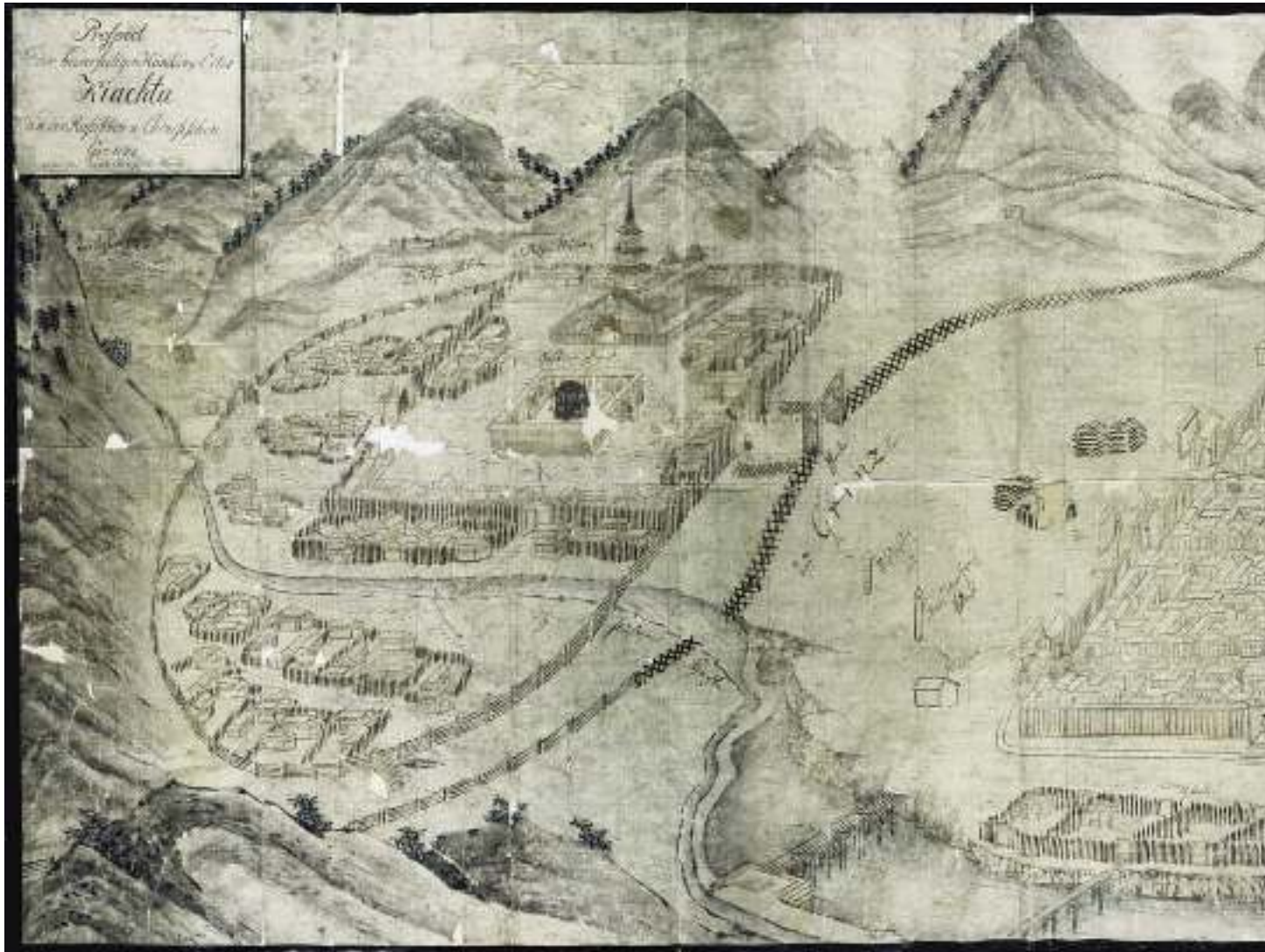


Plate 18. Kiakhta, the trading center on the Russian-Chinese border and entry and checkpoint for caravans traveling to Beijing from the late seventeenth century. Ink and watercolor by an unnamed Chinese artist.

Courtesy University of Göttingen Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts, von Asch Collection, no. 269.

A Long-Established Pattern

✦ RUSSIAN AMERICA, THE PORTION OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE THAT ✦
appeared, flowered, and withered on the North American continent all
within little more than a century, was in several respects a logical outgrowth
of patterns established in the Russian homeland from its earliest days. For many centuries,
the Russians had looked to the north in search of new lands to settle and new oppor-
tunities to exploit. Slavic raiders, entrepreneurs, and settlers had already expanded to the
shores of the White Sea in the tenth century. By the fourteenth century, they were arctic
sailors, marine mammal hunters and fishermen, and hunters of forest animals. In the fol-
lowing three centuries, these northern settlers spearheaded Russian expansion eastward,
across Siberia to the Pacific Ocean, and to the North American continent. This chapter
briefly examines this complex process and how it played itself out from the earliest times
to the seventeenth century.

As was the case with European overseas expansion, Russian expansion and coloniza-
tion succeeded because of concerted effort by both private and governmental interests.
The patterns of their interaction and the dynamics of the expansion process varied from
one European nation to another as well as over time. In Russia this dynamic had very
deep historical roots, extending back many centuries and following a long-established
traditional pattern. S. V. Bakhrushin, the late historian of Siberia and the Russian north,
aptly characterized this pattern:

Thus, the Russian advance beyond the Urals, in the early times, insofar as it may be
characterized on the basis of rather meager sources, was two-pronged. In the forefront
were the merchants and hunters engaged in procurement. Year by year they blazed the
trail along which there gradually grew hunting settlements and wintering places. The
large-scale entrepreneur followed in their footsteps, established himself in the newly
opened lands and, from the township he founded in the border zone and which he used
as a base of operations, continued the conquest of the territory. The state's intention
to subject the new lands followed much later . . . [it] acted very cautiously, preferring to
exploit the results of private activity.¹

To understand this pattern, and how it changed over time, we must turn to the begin-
nings of the Russian state and focus particularly on the Russian north, that is, the shores
of the Baltic, the White and the Barents Seas, and the lake areas and river basins of this

region, extending to the Upper Volga, Kama, and Pechora Rivers. Russian settlement in the north is very ancient and subject to scholarly discussion. However, there is a general agreement on the following sequence.

In prehistoric times, certainly in the Neolithic period of the second millennium B.C. and probably earlier, this vast region was inhabited by peoples speaking Finno-Ugric languages. The population was heterogeneous, however, and it included Saami and some Finnic peoples. The settlements of all these peoples probably were interspersed, especially in the northern areas; in all likelihood they were the first inhabitants of this region. A small influx of ancient Palaeoasiatic peoples, possibly Yukagir, may have occurred. All were foragers, hunters, and fishermen. Also in the second millennium B.C. there appeared in the Baltic regions a culture based on cattle-keeping and incipient agriculture. The ethnicity of the bearers of this culture has not been determined.

In the first millennium B.C., Germanic peoples, probably the ancestors of the later Scandinavians, settled on the Baltic coasts, eventually expanding to southwestern Finland and into modern Scandinavia. Eastern Slavs, a more southern people, began to arrive here also about the first half of the first millennium A.D. They moved in small groups and settled among the local Baltic and Finnish populations. Historians believe that this “voting with the feet” was one of the results of the ever-increasing pressure of the expanding Turkic peoples in the steppe belt.² The Slavs were of diverse tribal origins, each group tending to cluster together in the newly occupied territories. In subsequent centuries some expanded not only north but also to the east and northeast. The Nentsy and Entsy (or the Samoyed peoples in general) are believed to have penetrated this area only in the first millennium A.D. (not much earlier than, and possibly at the same time as, the early Slav settlers).

Meanwhile, the Scandinavians—seafarers, traders, and formidable military raiders—were penetrating the Baltic areas and, by the eighth century, expanding out of Norway along the northern shores of the Kola Peninsula. Sometime in the ninth or tenth century A.D., they moved into the White Sea region. (In fact, the Russian word *murman* from which derive both the name of Murmansk, the famous Russian northern seaport, and the Murman, or the Arctic Ocean coast of Russia to the Norwegian border, means precisely that—a Norman, presumably a Swede or sometimes a Dane.) The Norse movement into what today is the Russian north was motivated by the desire to control the trade routes from the Arctic Ocean and Baltic Sea shores to the Black and Caspian Seas, which followed the major waterways through the Slav territories.

From their bases on the Baltic, the Norsemen very rapidly gained dominance of the Oka-Volga trade route to the Caspian Sea, giving them access to Persia and the great caravan routes to the east, and eventually of the route along the Dniepr River to the Black Sea and hence to Byzantium and the Mediterranean. In 856, the Norseman Roric (in Russian sources called Riurik) took control of the Slav trading city of Novgorod and in 862 built a fortified stronghold at Ladoga.³

The Norsemen, a military and mercantile elite, as historian Vernadsky points out, “were comparatively few in number . . . and were consequently easily and rapidly absorbed by the Slavs . . . they mingled freely with the people whom they now ruled. . . .” On the other hand, the Slavs who fell under Norse dominion in Novgorod (and also in Kiev) readily adapted to the trade-and-raid operations of their overlords. Their trading caravans, by horse or by ship, were formidable fighting units.

The goods sent along the trade routes from the north were products of the forest and the sea: honey and beeswax, fish and marine mammal oil and skins, walrus ivory (which Novgorodian craftsmen transformed into skillfully carved objects of art), and, above all, furs.⁴ Procurement of these trade goods played a role in the rapid expansion of the mixed Slav groups to the shores of the White and Barents Seas, though a northward trickle of individuals and small groups had begun much earlier, would continue through the centuries, and would increase in the wake of Mongol conquest in the middle of the thirteenth century.

True to the long-established pattern, “both before and after the Norse invasion the eastern Slavs mixed freely with peoples of Ural-Altai family. . . .”⁵ Each group often adopted the others’ customs, and each learned from the other. It was from the Vikings that the northern Russians probably learned to utilize their waterways to the utmost—the rivers, the lakes, and the sea—and to master the fine art of shipbuilding that eventually carried them along the coasts of the Arctic Ocean eastward and to the shores of arctic America.⁶

It was not long before Novgorod merchants were sending out armed bands to the White Sea and Arctic Ocean shores for barter and to impose and collect tribute. This tribute, paid in furs, besides bringing in much-desired trade goods, also served as a basis for the later legal claims of overlordship by the city called “The Lord Great Novgorod.” Not far behind were bands of freebooters (*ushkuiniki* and *vatagi*) who raided aborigines and Slav settlers alike to obtain furs. Often, to legitimize their actions, these freebooters delivered part of their booty to the rulers of Novgorod as “collected tribute.”

By the end of the thirteenth century, most of the coastal areas, the Pomor’ie, were settled. People of all classes came to these “new lands,” as they were called, but the majority were independent peasants. By the sixteenth century the descendants of these settlers, who as usual mixed with local populations, had fully adapted to the northern coastal environment. They adopted fishing and marine mammal hunting, especially of walrus, as far away as Novaia Zemlia and the mouth of the Yenisei River; whaling, as far away as Spitsbergen; and bird hunting, for skins, meat, and down, as their main occupations.⁷ A distinct culture, lifestyle, and dialect emerged. The people who, in another 200 years, would provide the majority of Alaska pioneers came into being as a distinct ethnic entity, the Pomory, with their own identity and maritime traditions.⁸ The settlers actively participated in international trade, channeling their take not only through Novgorod but also through the new trading centers, which rapidly developed into cities, such as Arkhangel’sk, Kholmogory, Ustiug, and many others. A glance at a map of the trade network of the city of Ustiug in the seventeenth century (Figure 1) demonstrates the role these cities played in northern Russian commerce.⁹

The Komi, a Finno-Ugric people called Zyriane in earlier Russian sources, were not displaced. The immigrants who settled among them and with whom they freely mixed learned many new skills from them, including how to construct new types of watercraft. The Komi population was concentrated in several areas, notably in the orbit of the city of Ustiug, with its center at Yarensk. The Komi also learned from the newcomers and soon became active in international trade. (Later, they were active participants in the Russian expansion into Siberia and even to Russian America. Several Komi participated in the voyage of Semeon Dezhnev through Bering Strait, and Stepan Glotov of Yarensk, a famous skipper active in the early years of the Aleutian trade, may have been a Komi.)¹⁰

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