**John Ledyard and the Russians**

**BY EUFROSINA DVOICHENKO-MARKOV**

*In Russia I am treated as an American with politeness and respect and on my account the healths of Dr. Franklin and General Washington have been drunk at the tables of two Governors; and at Irkutsk the name of Adams has found its way.*

J. Ledyard to Colonel Smith, 1787

In the spring of 1776, the celebrated Captain Cook sailed from England for his third and last expedition. This time he had to explore the North Pacific and to find a northern passage to Europe. The commander’s ship, the *Resolution*, had among its officers a young corporal from Connecticut, John Ledyard.

Since the sixteenth century the world had been anxious to find out whether America was really divided from Asia by a passage and whether communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans through this passage was possible. The accounts of the Russian expeditions remained unpublished. Spain, as well as Russia, preferred to keep the results of their explorations in the Pacific a well-guarded secret; both countries feared that otherwise the Pacific might be invaded by a horde of foreign adventurers. The urge to discover a Northwest Passage was especially strong in England. During Cook’s third expedition, rewards were offered “to such of his Majesty’s subjects as shall first discover a communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean in the Northern hemisphere.”

Cook’s third expedition was also to bring the young United States into the Pacific for the first time, in the person of John Ledyard, who later became the author of the project of the first American expedition to the Pacific. It was also in the person of Ledyard that America for the first time met Russia in the Pacific.

When, in June, 1778, Cook’s expedition reached the Aleutian Islands, some natives brought to one of the ships a letter written in Russian. Although Cook “could not decipher the alphabet of the writer,” he understood that others had preceded him “in visiting this dreary part of the globe.” The presence of the Russians in this re-

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2Ibid., p. 414. The Aleutian Islands were discovered by the Russians in 1741.

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region was marked also by blue linen shirts and drawers among the natives of the islands. "But the most remarkable circumstance was a cake of rye meal newly baked with a piece of salmon in it, seasoned with pepper and salt, which was brought and presented to Cook by a comely young chief attended by two of those Indians, whom we supposed to be Asians," wrote Ledyard in his *Journal of Captain Cook's Last Voyage.* These Indians from the Aleutian Islands tried to explain to the expedition that there were some white men on their island. Cook decided to send with them to their island Ledyard, who, as an American and a student from Dartmouth College, knew Indian dialects and habits. In his book Ledyard described his first meeting with the Russians on the Aleutian Islands in October, 1778. The Indians took him to the interior of the island. It was during the night when they reached a village. Ledyard was introduced into a house inhabited by Europeans. They were "light and comely" and from their appearance the American concluded that they were Russians. Ledyard wrote:

As I was much fatigued, wet and cold, I had a change of garments brought to me, consisting of a blue silk shirt and drawers, a fur cap, boots, and gown, all which I put on with the same cheerfulness they were presented with. . . . All the Russians in the house sat down round me. One of the company gave me to understand, that all the white people I saw there were subjects of the Empress Catherine of Russia. . . . I had a very comfortable bed composed of different skins. After I had lain down, the Russians assembled the Indians in a very silent manner, and said prayers after the manner of the Greek Church. I could not but observe with what particular satisfaction the Indians performed their devours to God through the medium of their little crucifixes, and with what pleasure they went through the multitude of ceremonies attendant on that sort of worship. . . . As soon as I was up, I was conducted to a hut, where I saw a number of platforms. . . . Several Indians were heating water in a large copper caldron. I soon understood this was a hot bath, of which I was asked to make use in a friendly manner. The apparatus being a little curious, I consented to it, but before I had finished undressing myself, I was overcome by the sudden change of the air, fainted away, and fell back on the platform. I was, however, soon relieved by having cold and luke-warm water administered to my face and different parts of my body.

After having investigated "how those Russian adventurers were situated," on the island, Ledyard returned to the ship bringing with him three Russians. With them and another Russian fur trader, Gherasim Ismailov, who arrived a few days later, Cook was able to exchange some information about the North Pacific by sign language.

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3Hartford, 1783, p. 90.
4Ibid., pp. 94-96.
and with the help of charts, brought by Ismailov, which he allowed Cook to copy. Cook entrusted Ismailov with dispatches to the Admiralty in London to be sent through Kamchatka or Okhotsk. Ledyard, who supposed Siberia to be a wild country, was surprised to learn that there was a system of communication with Europe.

The Russian penetration so far into the Pacific and so close to the American northwestern shores, which Ledyard considered should belong geographically to his country, impressed him so deeply that after his return home from Cook's expedition, he decided to organize an American trade expedition to the Pacific. But Ledyard was unable to achieve his purpose in America. His enterprise seemed to the American merchants "wild and visionary." Consequently, Ledyard decided to go to Europe, hoping to find the backers for a fur-trading expedition to the northwest coast.

In Paris Ledyard visited Thomas Jefferson, who was then American Ambassador to France. A wish to explore the great West had long been Jefferson's favorite hobby. His dream was realized twenty years later, when Congress gave him the authority to send the famous Lewis and Clark expedition overland to the Pacific, but the first attempt to explore the western part of northern America was made by him in 1785.

During that year Jefferson proposed to Ledyard, instead of a commercial enterprise, a scientific expedition of exploration. He was to go "by land to Kamchatka, cross in . . . the Russian vessels to Nootka Sound, fall down into the latitude of the Missouri and penetrate to and through that to the United States." Jefferson also wanted Ledyard to make anthropological observations in Siberia in order to prove the similarity of the Asiatic natives to the American Indians, and to uphold in this way the theory that Asia and America were one continent. He wrote to Ezra Stiles in 1786: "I suppose, the settlement of our continent is of the most remote antiquity. The similitude between its inhabitants and those of Eastern parts of Asia renders it probable that ours are descended from them or theirs from ours."

The bold attempt to reach western America through Siberia was impossible without special permission from the Russian government. Jefferson knew personally the Russian Minister at Paris, Simoulin. He was also well acquainted with a more important person, the well-known agent and correspondent of the Russian Empress, Baron de

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6Ibid., Vol. 4, pp. 298-299.
Grimm. According to Jefferson’s own statement, Simoulin and Grimm solicited the permission of the Empress for Ledyard to pass through the Russian dominions to the western coast of America.

At that time, a Russian naval expedition under the command of Captain Joseph Billings, former seaman of Captain Cook, was to be sent by Catherine the Great “to complete the geographical knowledge of the most distant possessions of that Empire, and of such northern parts of the opposite continent as Captain Cook could not possibly ascertain.” From the answer of the Russian Empress to Grimm one can assume that he proposed that Ledyard should take part in this expedition. Catherine wrote on June 17, 1786:

M. Ledyard fera bien de prendre un autre chemin que celui du Kamtchatka, parce que pour cette expédition il n’y a plus le moyen de l’atteindre. Au reste, tout ce qu’on a publié de cette expédition est parfaitement faux et un rêve creux: jamais il n’y a eu de compagnie ambulante, et tout se réduit à l’expédition du capitaine Billings et d’un équipage choisi par lui et Pallas. Laissez à l’Américain l’argent que vous lui avez donné ou promis; mais ne jetez pas à l’avenir mon argent par les fenêtres: je ne connais point ces gens-là et n’ai aucune affaire jusqu’ici avec eux.8

Grimm probably insisted, because a month later, the Russian Empress wrote again: “Je vous ai dit tout ce que j’avais à dire sur le Sr. Ledyar[d].”

It must be noted that Catherine’s attitude toward Americans cannot be judged by this letter; she later accepted John Paul Jones into her service. But her experience with Americans was not always successful. It is known that in 1778 American privateers attacked Russian commercial vessels, and in 1780 Stephen Sayre, an American pseudo-agent, tried to burn down the Russian fleet in the Baltic.9

Catherine’s second letter to Grimm was probably received in August, because on August 16, Jefferson wrote to Ledyard: “I saw Baron de Grimm yesterday at Versailles, and he told me he had received an answer from the Empress who declines the proposition made on your account. She thinks it chimerical.”10

But it was too late to stop Ledyard. It was not the first time that his project had been considered “wild and visionary.” He decided

8Lettres de Catherine II à Grimm, St. Petersburg, 1878, p. 378.
10Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. This letter as well as Catherine’s letters to Grimm were not used by the biographers of Ledyard.
to go to Russia without any permission, only with letters of recommenda-
tion from Lafayette to his cousin and companion in the
American War for Independence, Count de Ségur, who was at that
time Ambassador of France at St. Peters burg.
In the fall of 1786, Ledyard left Paris and went to London, where
he spent the winter, and in March, 1787, he already was writing to
Jefferson from St. Peters burg:

I cannot tell you by what means I came to Petersburg, and hardly know by
what means I shall quit it, in the further prosecution of my tour round the
world by land. If I have any merit in the affair, it is perseverance, for most
severely have I been buffeted; and yet still am even more obstinate than
before. . . . How the matter will terminate I know not.11

When Ledyard arrived in St. Peters burg, which he called “this
Aurora Borealis of a city,”12 the Russian Empress was on a trip to
the Crimea, together with her court and the foreign diplomatic corps.
Ledyard probably had letters of introduction from London to the
Russian academician, the famous naturalist, Simon Pallas, whom he
visited in St. Peters burg.13 Pallas helped Ledyard to obtain a pass-
port from the French Embassy. Strangely enough, Ledyard was
also helped in this affair by an officer from the suite of Grand Duke
Paul.14 The transportation to Siberia had also been arranged by
Pallas. The first part of the trip, to Barnaul, across the Urals,
Ledyard made in the Russian stage coach, called kibitka, with a
young Scottish physician, William Braun, a member of Billings’ ex-
pedition, who was returning to his post with some additional equip-
ment for the expedition.15

Ledyard continued his anthropological research in Siberia and
soon deduced that America was peopled from Asia and not the other
way around, which at that time was the generally accepted theory
of Buffon. Thus Ledyard was the precursor of the modern anthro-

11Ledyard’s papers in Dartmouth College Library.
12Ibid.
13Pallas was a member of the English Royal Society and later became a member
of the American Philosophical Society. In 1768-1774 he led the Russian expedition
in Siberia, an account of which he published in 1771-1776.
14It is known that Grand Duke Paul was in opposition to his mother’s politics and
his help could arouse the suspicion of Catherine the Great.
15Ledyard wrote to Jefferson about Billings’ expedition: “There is an equipment
now on foot here for that ocean and it is first to visit the N. W. Coast of America.
It is to consist of four ships. This, and the equipment that went from here twelve
months since by land for Kamchatka, are to cooperate in a design of some sort in
the Northern Pacific Ocean.” H. Augur, Passage to Glory, New York, 1946, p. 203.
polological theory which holds that the Mongols, crossing from Siberia to the American continent, became Indians.

In the city of Barnaul, Ledyard was met with traditional Russian hospitality. The ordinary people had never heard of America and concluded from the tattoo marks on Ledyard’s hands “that Americans were wild men.” There is probably some connection between this mention of the “tattoo marks” on Ledyard’s hands and the instruction given him by Jefferson: “to keep the journal of his travels by pricking it with thorn upon his skin. He had a scale of a foot marked out with Indian ink in inches and lines, upon his arm between the elbow and the wrist.”

But the educated Russians knew a great deal about America and the American Revolution from the Russian newspapers of the time, and especially from the publications of Novikov, a liberal Russian journalist, who paid great attention to events across the ocean. In Barnaul the healths of Washington and Franklin were drunk in compliment to Ledyard at the Governor’s table, where he was treated with the greatest hospitality.

From Barnaul Ledyard gave to Jefferson a detailed account about the natural richness of the country and the distances from Petersburg to Barnaul and from Barnaul to Kamchatka. Then, with the help of the Governor, he got horses for a post-kibitka and continued his trip to Irkutsk with the mail courier.

In his Siberian diary and letters, only partly published, Ledyard gives a very interesting description of Siberia of that time, which is a valuable contribution to the history of that region in the eighteenth century. This unique early American source has remained unknown to Russian historians of Siberia.

In the letter to Colonel William Smith, the secretary of the American Legation in London, Ledyard describes Irkutsk as follows:

At this place I am in a circle as gay, rich, polite and scientific as if at Petersburg. I drink my French and Spanish wines and have Majors, Colonels, and Brigadiers, by Brigades, to wait on me in the town, and disciples of Linnaeus to accompany me in my philosophic walks. Among the middling class of people, I am a kind of phenomenon. Among the peasantry a right down wizard. The first characters know very little of our history, except the military part of it, and that they have had through the medium of some Septennial English Gazette.

18 Ledyard’s papers in Dartmouth College Library.
In Irkutsk Ledyard met such persons of eighteenth-century Siberia as Governor-General Ivan Yakobi, the merchant Grigory Shelikhov, and the above-mentioned trader, Gherasim Ismailov. In his diary Ledyard describes a very interesting conversation which he had with an exiled Russian officer of French origin. The Frenchman came to Irkutsk "with terrible dread," but soon realized that the political exiles in Tsarist Siberia "are taken in as members of the community." Ledyard replied: "It occurs to me that allowed such freedom here, you are under no worse conditions than the early settlers in America." The Frenchman laughed: "We live in luxury compared to the Americans. I know, I have been in Quebec." 19

In Irkutsk Ledyard also met two Russian academicians, who happened to be there, Alexander Karamyshev and Cyril (Eric) Laxman, both disciples of the celebrated Swedish scientist Linnaeus. Karamyshev helped Ledyard to mail his correspondence to Europe. He addressed Ledyard’s letters to Pallas, who sent them to "Brown & Porter" in London. In this way, a good part of Ledyard’s Siberian impressions was saved for posterity. Professor Karamyshev, one of the founders of Russian geology, was at that time temporarily in Siberia, serving as director of the Irkutsk Bank. Ledyard spent a great deal of time with him, engrossed in discussions about the Siberian tribes. "He is carried away with the wild notions of the French naturalist Buffon," Ledyard wrote about him. In Karamyshev’s garden Ledyard saw an apple tree, the only one in Siberia, with fruit the size of big peas. For Ledyard Karamyshev got three Kalmucks in native dress so that the American guest could study them and measure their heads.

Karamyshev introduced Ledyard to General Yakobi, Governor of all Eastern Siberia, who promised to help the American traveller in his further trip to Yakutsk. Yakobi gave Ledyard a letter of recommendation to the Commandant of Yakutsk, Gregory Markovskiy. Then he wished him a successful voyage and that his travels "might be productive of information to mankind."

Yakobi introduced Ledyard to the professor of mineralogy, Laxman, who during his explorations happened to be in Irkutsk and had plans to go by way of the Pacific to visit the American shores. Now Ledyard had company to travel with him from Irkutsk to Yakutsk and even to the shores of America. He described to Colonel Smith a part of this journey as follows: "I cannot say that my voyage on

the Lena has furnished me with anything new, and yet no traveller ever passed by scenes that more constantly engage the heart and the imagination. I suppose no two philosophers would think alike about them. A painter and a poet would be much more likely to agree.”

The villagers of Siberia were prodigal in selling them provisions for a song. In one village “they killed for us a sheep, gave us three quarts of milk, two loaves of bread, cakes with carrots and radishes baked in them, onions, a dozen of fresh and two dozens of salt fish, straw and bark to mend the covering of our boat; and all for the value of fourteen pence sterling.”

When they arrived in Yakutsk, they soon realized that they have been “overtaken and arrested by winter”; Commandant Marklovsky explained to them that during the winter their journey to Okhotsk would be impracticable. He invited Ledyard and Laxman to be his guests in Yakutsk during the whole winter, assigned to them a little wooden house, gave Ledyard some warm clothing, and invited him often to dinner. In Yakutsk Ledyard continued his anthropological research for Jefferson and his correspondence through Pallas. He was not able to refrain from sending Colonel Smith some samples of the salt mined near Yakutsk and of the fossil ivory from the banks of the river Lena. He also tried to take weather observations. One day a Yakut came into the house with a bag of ice over his shoulders. Ledyard could not understand why he wanted to sell ice. But soon he realized that it was frozen milk!

In Yakutsk Ledyard was a great deal in the company of Russian traders. He wrote in his journal:

They are very interesting, hardy men. It is the most remote Russian town in the north of Siberia and on that account particularly is the resort as well as residence of those men from every known corner of that country. . . . Some had been at the mouth of the river Yenesey, others the Lena and others the Kolyma. Among them all there was hardly any place in the North or East where they had not been. They all agreed in the voluntary accounts they gave me of the great quantities of drift wood at the mouths of the Lena and Yenesey. . . . They have often asked me where I thought so much wood came from since there was none that grew on the coasts. . . . A rich intelligent merchant, Popoff, gave me also the same accounts and added also others, the result of his travels to the eastward on the American coast and also among the Kuril Islands . . . on the coast of Korea. 

Augur, op. cit., p. 222.

Some of Ledyard’s Siberian garments are preserved by his relatives in New England.

Ledyard’s papers in Dartmouth College Library.
In October, 1787, Yakutsk was visited by the French traveller, Lesseps, a member of the French expedition around the world headed by La Perouse, which reached Kamchatka. Lesseps was sent by La Perouse with dispatches from Kamchatka to Paris, having the permission of the Russian government to travel across Siberia. Unfortunately, Ledyard's diary, as far as can be ascertained from available sources, does not mention this event which was so important for Yakutsk.

At the beginning of November, Captain Billings and his command arrived to spend the winter in Yakutsk. Under the date of November 24, Ledyard wrote in his journal:

The arrival of Captain Billings at Yakutsk is a circumstance that gives a turn to my affairs. I have before had no occasion to write daily. I now commence. Captain Billings is last from the Kolyma River where he has some small cutter-type built vessels in which he last summer made an attempt to pass the Shootskoi Noss. The event of this undertaking and other circumstances relative to the tour both by land and water I am yet uninformed of; perhaps some accounts will be kept secret from me, but as others will naturally transpire in the course of my acquaintance with him I shall write them as they occur.

A few days later Ledyard recorded: "I went to live with him at his lodgings as one of his family and his friend."

A more detailed account of Ledyard's meeting with the expedition was made by Martin Sauer, the secretary and the translator of Captain Billings. Sauer wrote:

In Yakutsk we found to our great surprise, Mr. Ledyard, an old companion of Captain Billings in Cook's voyage round the world; he then served in the capacity of a corporal, but now called himself an American Colonel, and wished to cross over to the American Continent with our Expedition, for the purpose of exploring it on foot.

By a strange coincidence, at the same time (November 26) Catherine the Great wrote to Grimm:

Vous avez eu tort, ne vous en déplaise, de rayer de mes comptes la très petite dépense de l'Américain le Dijar [Ledyard]; au reste, il est très juste que vous ayez votre pension au même temps que tous ceux qui sont hors du pays. Pour ce qui regarde le Dijar [Ledyard], ce qui fait trouvaille pour les autres, ne le fait pas toujours pour nous, vu la différence des langues, des moeurs, et des usages.

Two months later, the private secretary of the Russian Empress, A. V. Khrapovitsky, recorded in his diary under the date of De-

22Ibid.
24Lettres de Catherine II, op. cit., p. 424.
Ledyard’s arrest and deportation were described in detail by Sauer, who mentions that Ledyard was accused of being a French spy. There is no primary Russian source to support this statement, yet it was used by all the biographers of Ledyard.

The majority of Ledyard’s biographers were led astray by Jefferson’s statement in the preface to the _Account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition_. In his preface Jefferson maintains that the permission of the Russian Empress was obtained for Ledyard through Baron de Grimm, “and an assurance of protection while the course of the voyage should be through her territories” was even granted, but only 200 miles off Kamchatka Ledyard was suddenly “arrested by an officer of the Empress, who by this time had changed her mind and forbidden his proceeding.” Later, in his _Autobiography_, Jefferson recognized his error and wrote: “I find, on recurring to my letters of that date, that the Empress refused permission at once, considering the enterprise as entirely chimerical.”

But the general erroneous impression of an injustice inflicted on Ledyard by a capricious Empress who could not make up her mind, has remained in the American literature on the subject. Only John Quincy Adams did not share this general impression, although he himself had a rather unpleasant experience in his youth while taking part in the unsuccessful mission of Dana to the court of Catherine the Great in 1781-1783. Adams wrote:

> Ledyard undertook the journey without permission and was arrested. There was nothing in this dishonorable to the Empress Catherine who certainly acted by the advice of her counselors; who could have no personal motive for opposition to the undertaking of Ledyard, and who was individually as ambitious of philosophical fame and as eager for the progress of discovery as Mr. Jefferson himself.27

An additional explanatory remark on the political situation in Russia and Siberia at that time is necessary, because it gives us a different perspective on the forces and circumstances which Ledyard had to contend with. It is known that in August, 1787, Russia was attacked by Turkey, which was supported by France, England, and Prussia. As to Siberia, Russia was still under the impact left after

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26A. V. Khrapovitsky, _Dnevnik_, Moscow, 1901, p. 34.
27J. Q. Adams, _op. cit._, vol. 8, p. 310.
the famous uprising, organized by the exiled Pole Beniowski, who in 1771, under the pretext of supporting the Grand Duke Paul against Catherine the Great, fled with a group of exiled Russians from Kamchatka to France on a captured Russian ship. Later, Beniowski, supported by France and America, went to organize a colony on Madagascar, but Catherine the Great feared that knowing the way to Kamchatka he would return with the help of his protectors, and from 1771 to 1787 Russia secretly fortified Kamchatka.

From Siberia Ledyard was conveyed to Moscow and from there to the Governor-General of Byelorussia, Peter Passek, who had his headquarters at Moghilev.

General Passek, a venerable senator and a personal friend of Catherine the Great, who helped her ascent to the throne, is described by his biographers as a Russian “boyar,” heavy, lazy, but very intelligent. When Ledyard arrived in Moghilev, the General was slightly indisposed, sitting up in bed, chatting with a priest. He received the American “with the most endearing politeness” and offered him some refreshments. Drinking his tea the prisoner received his sentence, which ordered that he “should be conveyed out of the Empire into Poland” and that he was forbidden “ever to enter it again without permission.” Ledyard protested furiously. Then Passek “rambled off into a proverb about sovereigns having long arms.” Ledyard sprang to his feet: “Yes, by God, Monsieur le Général, her arm is very long eastward, but if your Empress should stretch the other arm westward she will never bring it back whole—and I myself would fight for the privilege of lopping it off.”

Ledyard remained in Moghilev five days. We don’t know what happened in the interval, but Ledyard mentions the “generous solicitude” of General Passek, who gave him money, clothes and also “a servant to interpret for me, and to serve me as long as I pleased.”

Ledyard left Moghilev on March 18, 1788, and that evening reached the Polish border. His escort took him to the house of a Jewish family, where he had a hot bath prepared for him. Thus, Ledyard’s acquaintance with the Russians, which began in 1778 in the Aleutian Islands with a traditional Russian steam bath, ended now, ten years later, also with the same Russian bath. Ledyard wrote in his diary:

29Ledyard’s papers in Dartmouth College Library.
I received as a present of the Commandant of the Russian frontier village 4 bottles of a small wine of some kind and from the commanding officer of the Russian guard 6 lemons and some white bread, which was a friendly present here, where the bread is very black. . . . In the evening I contracted with a Russian trader, with the precautions of writing and signing and taking his passport in my own possession, to carry me from this place to Königsberg in Prussia for 600 versts for 40 roubles. 20

On March 21, Ledyard set out with his valet-courier borrowed from Passek. When he left the Russian kibitka, he discovered that the coachman had stolen his coat. At the same time, this Russian yamshchik took off his hat, bowed and asked Ledyard to remain in Russia. But the American refused to understand this complexity of Russian psychology. At that time, Dostoevsky was not yet born to explain to the world the contradictory aspects of the Russian soul. Ledyard was furious and wrote, closing his Russian diary: “Let no European put entire confidence in a Russian of whatever condition, and none at all in the lower and middle ranks of people!” 31

20 Ibid.
31 Ibid.