

IF ALASKA WERE STILL RUSSIAN

GEORGE ADAMKIEWICZ*

I.

IN these turbulent times, one is apt to forget that the current year marks the eightieth anniversary of an important event in American history: the cession, by Russia, of all her possessions in North America to the United States.

According to the terms of the treaty signed in Washington on 30 March, 1867, "the Emperor of all the Russians agrees to cede to the United States all his territory and dominion on the continent of America and in the adjacent islands, as far east as the demarcation line between the Russian and British possessions in North America established forty-two years earlier." On the west, the possessions of the United States in the North Pacific were separated from those of Russia by a line drawn from Bering Strait, in a south-westerly direction, to a point west of the Kurile Islands. The consideration for this purchase was fixed at \$7,200,000 in gold.

General Rousseau was appointed American, and Captain Petchourof Russian, commissioner, with orders to proceed to Sitka (New Archangel), the seat of the Russian governor, Prince Maksoutof, where the transfer was to be effected. A detail of United States troops was dispatched from San Francisco to occupy the new possessions. The ceremony of transfer, which took place on 18 October, was colourful and impressive. A Russian detachment, in dark uniforms trimmed with red, with flat glazed caps, was drawn up on the right of the flag-staff, a fir mast 100 feet high. The United States troops embarked in the launches belonging to the men-of-war; the boat of the commanding officer, General Jeff C. Davis, with the flag and guard of honour, took the lead. A contemporary correspondent wrote:

This movement covered the little harbour with boats, and the sheen of the muskets, the uniforms of the officers, with the dark and lofty mountains as a background, presented a novel and arresting picture. Then the Stars and Stripes was landed for the first time on new American territory.

The American soldiers filed past the flag-staff and took their position on the left of the Russians, the latter presenting arms, and the former returning the salute. The governor,

*Professor in St. Mary's College, Halifax.

with the two commissioners, then made his appearance, saluted by the troops. The Russian flag was lowered. As soon as it began to move down the staff, a gun thundered from the *Ossi-ppee*, the flag-ship of the American squadron. A moment later it was answered by a gun from the Russian battery. Twenty-one guns were fired, alternately, by each. The "Stars and Stripes" was now raised, slowly and surely, to the head of the staff. Again a gun thundered from the Russian battery, to be answered by one from the American ship. The firing continued, alternately, until each had fired a national salute. The correspondent concludes:

The Russian Eagle had given place to the American, and the national colours floated over a new, wide spread territory. The dominion of the United States now borders on a new ocean, and almost touches the old continent, Asia. Democratic institutions now extend over an area hitherto the possession of a despotic government. The occasion inspired the soul of every American present, and as the officers retired three mighty cheers were given, and we all rejoiced that we now stood on American soil.

What induced Russia to divest herself, so suddenly and for so small a sum, of her possessions in North America, which, if only inhabited by about six hundred Russians and half breeds, had, at least, a considerable nuisance value in her hands? Some light is thrown on this question in a note submitted to the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate by Secretary of State William H. Seward, who had negotiated the treaty. He wrote:

The Civil War, which disturbed the relations between the United States and most of the European states, was marked in its very beginning by demonstrations of sympathy and solicitude for the stability of the Union on the part of Russia. (There had been a) continuous growth of friendship and cordiality between the United States and Russia. It was understood between the two governments that the United States would be at liberty to carry prizes into Russian ports. No confederate agent was ever received or encouraged at St. Petersburg . . . The visit of the Russian fleet to the United States in the winter of 1863 was intended, by the Emperor, Alexander II, and accepted by the United States, as a demonstration of good will. As early as 1861 the two governments came to an understanding to act in concert with a view to establishing a connection between San Francisco and St. Petersburg, by an interoceanic cable across Bering's Strait. In the spring of 1866 Mr. Fox, late Assistant Secretary of the Navy, was made bearer of expressions of sympathy with the Emperor, arising out of an attempt on his

life. In the same year, a memorial of the legislature of Washington territory was made the occasion for communicating to M. de Stoeckl, the Russian Minister to the United States, the importance of some early arrangement with respect to the fisheries in the Russian possessions.

On the other hand, the relations between Russia and Great Britain were far less cordial. During the Crimean War the neutrality of the west coast of British North America had been violated by Russia, but this was not brought to the notice of the British Government at the time. Otherwise the British fleet in the Pacific might have seized Alaska.

What finally inclined Russia to sell the whole of Alaska to the United States was the expiry, in 1867, of the term for which she had leased a coast strip, north and south of the Stikine River on the Gulf of Alaska, to the Hudson's Bay Company, which contemplated the sale to Canada of its territorial rights and claims. This issue Russia wished to avoid.

The United States was fully aware of the great advantages to be derived from the bargain. The American Minister in St. Petersburg, C. M. Clay, wrote to Secretary Seward as follows:

I congratulate you upon this brilliant achievement which adds so vast a territory to our Union whose ports, mines, waters, furs, fisheries are of untold value, and whose fields will produce many grains, even wheat, and become, hereafter, the seat of a hearty white population. I regard it as worth at least fifty millions of dollars; and the wonder will be, hereafter, that we ever got it at all.

II.

The whole story of Russia's occupation of Northwest America is a typical instance of expansionism carried forward by its own impetus, even though it is to end in a blind alleys. While England, France and Spain had been planting colonies on the eastern side of the American continent, the Russians had been pushing their way, gradually, across Siberia to the Sea of Okhotsk, Kamchatka and the Pacific, which they reached towards the close of the seventeenth century. In 1728 Vitus Bering discovered the Strait named after him. In 1741 he explored the Aleutian Islands, the "stepping stones from Asia to America," and discovered the Commander Islands, upon one of which he was shipwrecked. Russian hunters and traders established themselves throughout the Aleutians, whence they

carried on a lucrative fur trade with the Chinese market of Kiachta. In 1781 Gregory Shelikof erected a factory on Kodiak Island. In 1790 The Shelikof Company was formed, with headquarters at Irkutsk. It was granted a monopoly of the American fur trade by Catherine II. In 1798 the company, which now comprised several independent groups of traders, was renamed The Shelikof United Trading Company. In 1799, under the name of The Russian American Company, it received from the Emperor Paul I a charter patterned on that of the Hudson's Bay Company. For a period of twenty years it was to have the exclusive right of carrying on the fur trade on the American continent north of 55 degrees N. L., as well as on the islands "extending from Kamchatka to the American mainland and southwards to Japan." Furthermore, the Company was authorized to establish settlements south of the above latitude and to "administer, fortify and defend" them. The Imperial land and sea forces were to aid the company, whenever required.

A new colonial system was thus created, over which the energetic director of the company, Alexander Baranof, maintained a despotic sway. In 1804 he established his headquarters at Sitka. The monopoly of the company, however, was already being challenged from two quarters: by American traders, who were gaining access to the Northwest Coast and its islands by sea, and by the Hudson's Bay Company, which was expanding its operations by land from the Mackenzie River westwards over the Rocky Mountains. In September, 1821, Tsar Alexander I issued his famous ukase, reserving the "pursuits of commerce, whaling and fishing, and all other industry on all islands, posts and gulfs, including the whole northwest coast of America, beginning from Bering Straits down to the fifty-first degree of northern latitude, exclusively to Russian subjects." All foreign vessels were forbidden not only to land on these coasts and islands belonging to Russia, but also to approach them within less than 100 Italian-miles. The transgressor's ship would be liable to confiscation, along with the whole cargo.

The arbitrariness of this decree is obvious. Canning called it an "offensive and unjustifiable arrogation of exclusive jurisdiction over an ocean of unmeasured extent." It virtually closed the North Pacific to foreign shipping by fixing the limit of territorial waters at a far greater distance from shore than admissible under international law. The southern limit of this

Russian "mare nostrum" was to be a line drawn from Urop in the Kuriles to a point on the American mainland just above the tip of Vancouver Island.

The governments of the United States and Great Britain both protested against the maritime and territorial rights asserted by Russia. The Emperor, anxious to avoid conflicts that would have resulted from a strict enforcement of the ukase, decided to confine, temporarily, operations of Russian war-ships to the "usual limit of sea recognized as territorial by other nations."

It was clear that Russia would not be in a position to withstand a joint action by the two leading maritime powers of the period. Precisely such a joint action was contemplated by the then Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams. When, on 2 December, 1823, however, President Monroe sent his epochal message to Congress in which he declared that, in connection with the negotiations with Russia, "the occasion had been judged proper for asserting that the American continents are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for colonization by *any* European powers," Great Britain preferred to act on her own.

On 17 April, 1824, the treaty between the United States and Russia was signed. The new demarcation line was fixed at 54 degrees, forty minutes N. L., as indicated by the location of Dixon Entrance. American citizens and Russian subjects were forbidden to form settlements to the north, or south, of this line, as the case might be, either on the coast or the adjacent islands. Navigation and fishing were declared free, in any part of the Pacific, to the nationals of both powers, provided they would not resort, without permission, to any point already occupied by the other party. Moreover, it was stipulated that for a term of ten years these nationals might "reciprocally frequent, without any hindrance, the interior waters upon the coasts, for the purpose of fishing and trading with the natives." Thus, impliedly, the United States recognized the territorial sovereignty of Russia north of the line of demarcation.

The Anglo-Russian treaty was signed on 28 February, 1825. It was based on the principles agreed to in the Russo-American treaty. In addition, Great Britain expressly conceded to Russia an unbroken barrier along the water front, within which, as also on the adjoining islands, British subjects would be prohibited from establishing settlements. The extreme width of this *lisière* was fixed at ten marine leagues following

the indentations of the coast. British traders were to have the free use of the rivers and streams crossing the *lisière*, in the direction to and from the sea.

A dispute over the interpretation of these provisions arose in 1834, when the "Dryad," belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company, approached the Russian fort St. Dionysius, at the mouth of the Stikine river, with the intention of proceeding upstream. She was stopped and forced to withdraw by the Russians, who claimed that, having already occupied this region, they could, under the terms of the treaty, bar the entry to British subjects. This incident led to an embittered diplomatic correspondence, in the course of which the British Government demanded that the Russian-American Company pay a large indemnity to the Hudson's Bay Company. The former finally decided, by way of compensation, to lease the disputed territory to the latter. The expiry of this lease, in 1867, was, as already mentioned, the main reason that induced Russia to sell the whole of Alaska to the United States.

The discovery of gold, in 1896, in the Klondike Valley, to which access was mainly through the coastal strip belonging to the United States, resulted in the final settlement of the Alaska-Canadian boundary question by an international tribunal of six "jurists of repute," including Lord Alverstone, the Hon. Elihu Root, U. S. Secretary of War, and the Hon. Henry Cabot Lodge, member of the United States Senate. The award of this tribunal, in 1903, adjusted the boundary somewhat in favour of the United States in the region north of the Lynn Canal and on the south, where the limit was fixed by a line drawn from Cape Muzon, on Dall Island, to the entrance of the Portland Canal, leaving all the islands north of this line to Alaska. As was pointed out at the time, the question of the Alaska boundary, had it remained unsettled, might have involved the two countries in war. It is doubtful whether, if Alaska had remained in Russian hands, the problem could have been solved so peacefully, with the Russo-Japanese War still in the offing.

III.

It may be asked what would be the position, to-day, if Alaska, an area of 586,000 square miles—or nearly one-fifth of the continental United States—were still a Russian dependency. A clue is contained in a report addressed by Count Lieven, the Russian Chargé d'Affaires in London, to Count

Nesselrode, as early as July, 1824. He wrote that Canning insisted on free entrance for English vessels into the Arctic Ocean through Bering Strait "in order that Russia may not, in the course of time, take advantage of her possession of both coasts forming Bering Strait to prohibit foreign vessels from entering it, as is now done by the Turks in the Dardanelles." In other words, if Russia were still in possession of this passage, she would command a strategic position similar to the one she has, for centuries, been endeavouring to secure at Constantinople. She would be able to convert the Arctic into a Russian lake, as she has vainly attempted to do with the Black Sea, and, in control of both shores of the North Pacific as far as Korea on the West and Prince Rupert on the East, she would threaten the vital communications of the United States with the Far East and make the Hawaiian Islands practically useless as a central vantage-point dominating the approaches to four continents.

In the course of their Five Year Plans, the Soviets have systematically developed their Far Eastern territory and linked its urban centres, by regular air lines, with Lake Baikal and the Trans-Siberian railway. They have increased the output of their oil wells in Sakhalin, which now produce about 1 million tons annually. A huge metallurgical plant, "Amurstal", has been built in the new city of Komsomolsk, near the Manchurian border. They are developing nickel mines at Norlisk, near the Yenisei estuary, Astride the North Pacific, they would have been able, not only to establish military and naval bases in Alaska within easy reach of vital American nerve centres, but also to build up in this part of the American continent a bridgehead for subversive action against neighbouring countries, the same as they have done, e.g., in Yugoslavia.

It would have been relatively easy for the Soviets, skilled as they are in the methods of mass transfer of populations, to colonize that territory, especially its central plateau, with reliable protagonists of the Communist dispensation. At present the only inhabitants of Alaska and of the Russian Far East territories who can freely enter each other's area are the Eskimos, who are frequently inter-married and otherwise linked by common interests. Apart from them, the Russians are known to be the best Arctic settlers in the world, and it can be taken for granted that they would have moved into Alaska in large numbers and populated it within a comparatively short space of time. As it is, the Soviets have a foothold among the natives

in Alaska and on the Aleutians, through the agency of the Russian Orthodox Church, which they have revived as an instrument of policy.

For many years the Russian Arctic Institute has been exploring the sub-polar zone and spreading scientific knowledge about those regions. When American troops landed in Alaska during the war, this Arctic Institute was part of the Russian naval establishment. It was due to American initiative that a similar United States and Canadian Institute was founded only three years ago, so that it has been possible to reduce Russia's priority in this respect, at least in part.

Russia has been endeavouring to establish a "North-East Passage", wholly under her control, from the White Sea through the Arctic to the east and, through Bering Strait, to the Far East and Siberia, so as to reduce the distance from Murmansk to Vladivostok to less than half that by way of either the Indian Ocean or the Panama Canal. This Arctic route, including Bering Strait, would be comparatively safe from enemy attack, in time of war, if Alaska still belonged to Russia. By decree of 1926, the Soviet government claimed all lands and islands north of its territory, up to the Pole. In 1932 it established a "Central Board of the North Sea Route" for the purpose of opening up the Arctic region and stimulating navigation. This body has already developed many new ports along the Arctic coast, at the mouths of the great Siberian rivers, and the round trip from Yakutsk via Tiksi to Nome in Alaska now takes only about one month, with the possibility of making three voyages to and fro during the Arctic summer. Numerous meteorological stations have been installed, air and wireless services report on ice conditions, and powerful ice-breakers are used to convoy ships through the pack-ice. Already the Soviet Union possesses the largest Arctic territory; with Alaska, it would comprise two-thirds of the entire coast line skirting the Arctic Circle.

In connection with the above should be noted the determination of the Soviets to link the Far East more closely to European Russia and to strengthen its defences along the rearward approaches to Siberia. From Vladivostok to the new town of Nogaëvo, on the Sea of Okhotsk, ports have been improved and naval and military establishments reinforced. Large sections of the Siberian armies, permanently stationed there, form independent operational units, ready for any emergency. Lester Raymond, former chief of the United States

Army's Russian economic section, has pointed out quite recently that the Siberian industrial region will also include a Russian "Oak Ridge" for atomic energy development.

The total value of the mineral output of Alaska, including gold, silver, copper, coal, tin, lead, petroleum and natural gas, from 1880 to 1939, exceeded 800 million; that of the fish marketed, 1 billion; of furs produced, 142 million dollars. The national forests are estimated to contain 84 billion board feet of sawn timber. Agriculture, including vegetable growing and poultry raising, has been developed, especially in the Matanuska valley. Seal and reindeer herds have been increasing rapidly. All this wealth would have been lost to the United States, had Alaska not been purchased.

If Russia still held Alaska, she would undoubtedly claim to be an American continental power and, as such, to be entitled to a voice in Pan-American affairs. To counter objections arising out of the Monroe doctrine, the U.S.S.R. could have easily declared Alaska to be an independent Soviet Socialist Republic, with the right "freely" to secede from the Soviet Union, in accordance with Article 17 of the Constitution, and to manage its own external affairs. Another Soviet puppet state, installed in the western hemisphere, would be making its weight felt, and the continental "defence zone," approved by the Inter-American Conference at Quitandinha, Brazil, which includes Alaska, could never have taken shape.

In American hands, Alaska was a strong bulwark against Japanese invasion in World War II; this has been widely appreciated in Canada, whose forces, instead of being tied down, could be employed elsewhere. What could be more significant than Hitler's avowed intention, before his break with the Soviets, to demand that the United States return Alaska to Russia, in addition to abrogating the Monroe doctrine, so that Germany, with Russian support, might obtain a foothold on the American continent? To subdue a fortress, a key position must be taken first. Alaska is a cornerstone in the structure of American unity.