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XX в. бывший союзник превратился в злейшего врага, в руках которого Аляска превратилась в «непотопляемый авианосец» и важный стратегический плацдарм на Тихоокеанском Севере. Таким образом, продажу Русской Америки в 1867 г. можно расценить как весьма негативный для России акт, хотя и объяснимый тогдашней ситуацией, общей отсталостью страны и позицией ряда ключевых фигур царского правительства, т.е. всей совокупностью объективных и субъективных факторов. Причем значительная часть их была порождена существовавшей тогда в стране политарной социально-экономической системой.

ACTA SLAVICA IAPONICA, TOMUS 23, PP. 202-210

## Why Did Russia Sell Alaska?

ILYA VINKOVETSKY

Andrei Grinev's analysis of the reasons for the Russian Empire's sale of Alaska to the United States adds to an impressive list of thought-provoking publications. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that Grinev's theoretically inspired body of work has added a much-needed dimension to the field of Russian American studies over the last few years.<sup>1</sup> Among his contributions, Grinev has employed the concept of colonial politarism to add nuance to our understanding of economic and labor structures in Russia's American colony.<sup>2</sup> As he explains in his essay, politarism is a concept that Grinev has borrowed from the work of Yuri Semenov. I will not here go into detail about what I find more (or less) convincing about Semenov's conception of politarism and

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1 For my assessment of Grinev's body of work in the context of recent literature on Russian America, see my review of the publications of Sergei Kan, Andrei Znamenski, and Grinev in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6:3 (Fall 2005), pp. 627-633.

2 Aside from the several articles in which he discusses politarism by name, I have in mind his contributions to the three-volume, N.N. Bolkhovitinov, ed., *Istoriia Russkoi Ameriki, 1732-1867* (Moscow: "Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia," 1997-1999), a work that benefits considerably from Grinev's attention to issues of colonial labor and economy as well as his interpretations of Russia's policies toward the indigenous population. Based on his works over the years, my impression is that Grinev has thought for a long time about related issues before writing about politarism in *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* in 1996. My point is that, particularly in his recent works, Grinev's more general treatment of indigenous policies, economic and labor relations in Russia's American colony is consistent with his ideas about politarism.

Grinev's application of this term for the Russian American setting.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I will let Grinev's definition of politarism speak for itself, and concede that his use of this term, coupled with mastery over a large body of archival sources and a penchant for lively scholarly debate, has meant that politarism is to be reckoned with.<sup>4</sup>

Taking the concept seriously, one can still have reservations and differences. As is the case with any conceptual device, politarism provides a frame. That frame opens up some vistas yet closes others; it makes it easier to perceive certain historical parallels, indeed magnifying them, and makes others appear implausible or remote. As a conceptual filtering device, it can distort and conceal as well as illuminate.

I would emphasize that Grinev has employed politarism to illuminate some long neglected issues in the history of Russia's American colony. Indeed, perhaps more effectively than anyone since the time of Semën Okun' in the late 1930s, Grinev has systematically injected important questions about labor and class into the field.<sup>5</sup> By "politarizing" class analysis, Grinev has been able to go well beyond the traditional Marxist categories, and analyze the Russian-American Company (a politarian institution, in his scheme) and its practices in a novel way. Whether one agrees with him or not, it is beyond dispute that Grinev's contribution has raised the level of debate.

And yet my contention is that the frame of politarism is not as illuminating for analyzing some issues as it is for others. Let us now look at how useful it is for explaining the Russian Empire's sale of Alaska to the United States. Grinev argues that politarism is the *main* reason for the sale. To make his case, he links politarism to the dearth of permanent Russian colonists in Alaska and the social and economic structures as they developed in the colony. Grinev links these factors to the lack of effective initiative on the part of the Russian-

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3 Those interested in further arguments for and against politarism as an analytical frame would do well to turn to the dialogue in *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* between Grinev and Aleksei Istomin: A.V. Grinev, "Kolonial'nyi politarizm' v Novom Svete," *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4 (1996), pp. 52-64; A.A. Istomin, "Nachalo sozdaniia 'obshchikh selenii' na ostrove Kad'iak v Russkoi Amerike (1839-1842 gg.)," *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 5 (1998), pp. 108-123; A.V. Grinev, "Tuzemtsy Aliaski, russkie promyshlenniki i Rossiisko-Amerikanskaia Kompaniia: Sistema ekonomicheskikh otnoshenii," *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 3 (2000), pp. 74-88; A.A. Istomin, "O 'kolonial'nom politarizme, latinoamerikanskom 'feodalizme' i nekotorykh aspektakh otnosheniia k aborigenam v Russkoi Amerike," *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 3 (2000), pp. 89-109.

4 A distinction can also be drawn between Grinev's "colonial" politarism (as it is specifically applied to Russian America) and Semenov's more general use of the term. But that distinction does not affect the current discussion. For a thorough consideration of both Grinev's and Semenov's use of the term, see Sonja Luehrmann, "Russian Colonialism and the Asiatic Mode of Production: (Post-)Soviet Ethnography Goes to Alaska," *Slavic Review* 64:4 (Winter 2005).

5 See S.B. Okun', *Rossiisko-amerikanskaia kompaniia* (Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1939).

American Company (RAC) and its workforce, making the Russian company unsuitable for adapting to and competing in the competitive capitalist market. Let us examine these factors and their connection to politarism and the sale.

Grinev attributes the low numbers of permanent colonists from Russia in Alaska to the restrictions that the Russian state imposed on the mobility of its subjects (the passport and taxation systems, which tied everyone to a particular town or province) as well as the specific restrictions on the movement of people from Eurasia to the American colony. He calls these systems and restrictions politarian and stresses their totalistic, all-embracing features. He reminds us that colonists from Russia were obligated by law to return to Eurasia after a set number of years of service in America.

And yet Grinev himself concedes that in actual *practice* the restrictions on remaining in America after one's passport and term of service expired were routinely overlooked. (Usually, with the full knowledge and consent of RAC officials, one could add.) Of course, serfdom and the passport system did restrict the mobility of Russia's subjects. And yet, in spite of the state's and the nobles' claim to their labor and souls, there was in Russia throughout the centuries a constant flow of people out of serfdom. Escaped serfs fled central Russia and went south (where over time they accounted for much of the Cossack population) and east (where local officials who were in desperate need for new settlers sometimes tacitly welcomed them, even in later centuries). More to the point, in the nineteenth century, as in the eighteenth, there were people who lived in the Far East and Siberia who could potentially go to Russia's American colony if they so desired. Their movement was, of course, legally restricted and regulated by the Russian state; but they could – if they wanted to – apply to work for the Russian-American Company. There was never a rush of applications to go to Russian America. Few of these prospective settlers chose to go, because, especially after the change in the pay system from shares to salary during the first decade of the company's existence (when the merchant Aleksandr Baranov was still the chief manager), those *sibiriaki* who could find ways and means to move perceived better economic opportunities elsewhere. Russian America was not attractive to them. I could cite more examples: the point is that the dearth of Russian colonists in America had as much to do with the fact that they did not want to go there (for lack of incentive and other reasons) as with government and RAC restrictions on their movement. Had there been a strong economic magnet – as there had been on the Aleutian Islands prior to the formation of the RAC – more people would have at least made efforts to come. As matters stood, at least after Baranov's time, people wanted to leave Alaska, not go there.

To be sure, there were additional barriers that kept Eurasian subjects of the Russian Empire from going to Alaska, not least of which was the fact that they had to board an RAC ocean-going vessel to get there. But, if anything, the ocean barrier highlights the importance of Alaska's geographical aloofness and oddity when viewed alongside the rest of Russian territory, a factor developed

in the works of James Gibson and Nikolai Bolkhovitinov that Grinev also cites.<sup>6</sup> Grinev's attempt to frame this geographical factor in a politarian direction is only partially successful.<sup>7</sup> The bottom line is that one does not need politarism to account for the low numbers of Russian colonists in Alaska.

Moreover, although the low population of permanent colonists from mainland Russia was obviously a hindrance to Russia's more ambitious colonial plans, a case remains to be made that it was responsible for the sale of Alaska. Did this demographic factor account for the sale? On the abstract theoretical level, one can perhaps argue that it "contributed" (in combination with other factors) to the sense that Alaska was not a particularly thriving colony, and thus expendable. One can take the argument further and assert that, if only the colony had been "properly" colonized, the idea of pursuing the sale would have never entered the minds of St. Petersburg decision-makers. Yet one can also argue that, as Grinev himself suggests, Alaska could have continued to function as a Russian colony, an underpopulated one perhaps, had there been no decision made to sell it.

Grinev is on firmer ground, it would seem, when he links politarism to the colony's social and economic structures. Indeed, in a certain reading, Grinev's claim that politarism is responsible for Russia's neglect of its American colony and its consequent sale to the United States is roughly equivalent to the claim that the social, political, and economic conditions of pre-Crimean War Russia (grouped together and packaged as "politarism" rather than the more familiar "feudalism") led logically to the Russian Empire's inability to handle colonial affairs in a competitive capitalist world. Stated thus, and provided one accepts the terms, the claim is difficult to refute. Here I should say that I agree that the RAC and the Russian Empire did have many features that Grinev and Semenov would identify as politarian.

And yet I cannot resist the following observation: seeing the Russian-American Company, as Grinev does, chiefly as a "politarch" makes him more reluctant to decipher the features and practices of the RAC that run counter to his theory. The reason that this can be a problem is that there are plenty of instances in which politarian assumptions can do more to cloud the picture than to clear it up.

The Russian-American Company did not always behave in a manner consistent with politarian analysis. And Alaska under Russian rule represented

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6 Specifically, James R. Gibson, "Russian Expansion in Siberia and America: Critical Contrasts," in S. Frederick Starr, ed., *Russia's American Colony* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 32-40, and N.N. Bolkhovitinov, "Kontinental'naia kolonizatsiia Sibiri i morskaiia kolonizatsiia Aliaski: skhodstvo i razlichie," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 20 (2003), pp. 109-125.

7 On the theoretical plane, the geographical difference between the Eurasian continent and the American coast seems to call up a Eurasianist more than a politarian frame: see P.N. Savitskii, *Geograficheskie osobennosti Rossii*. Part I: *Rastitel'nost' i pochvy* (Prague: Evraziiskoe knigoizdatel'stvo, 1927).

an experiment in colonialism that had Western as well as Russian analogues, constituting in practice a new kind of colonial hybridity. As a sole overseas possession of a continental empire, Russia's American colony had a unique position within the Russian Empire. No other part of the Russian Empire was entrusted by St. Petersburg to a chartered company modeled at least in part on Russia's West European rivals.

These chartered companies (such as Great Britain's East India Company and Hudson's Bay Company) functioned in practice as coalitions between mercantile and government interests. They were all the creations of, and existed at the mercy of, the governments that chartered them. From the point view of the governments that sanctioned them, these companies could be said to have performed the function of facilitating "imperialism on the cheap." The existence of such companies could deflect responsibility and conserve resources. These companies could be given assignments and tasks that would potentially reap benefits for the sponsoring empire (for example, the Russian-American Company explored the mouth of the Amur River before the Russian Empire moved to annex the Amur region). When it was convenient for the governments to reap benefits from their activities, they readily did so; when the companies' actions proved politically embarrassing to the governments, then the governments could conveniently distance themselves and deflect blame to the allegedly independent companies. When the existence of the company itself was deemed no longer expedient, the government transformed and/or liquidated it.

The monopolistic chartered company was a colonial tactic pioneered and developed by West European governments (in conjunction with business interests, of course). In comparison to France, England, and the Netherlands, the Russian Empire came to employ the chartered company formula very late. The economic structures of these West European countries could be called, at various stages of their employment of chartered companies, mercantilist or capitalist, but hardly politarian. Yet that did not prevent the governments of these countries from sanctioning very different kind of economies inside what Jürgen Osterhammel called "exploitation colonies" controlled by their monopolistic chartered companies. In Osterhammel's view, the distinguishing characteristics of an exploitation colony include economic exploitation ("by means of trade monopolies, use of natural resources") and "a relatively insignificant numerical colonial presence" composed primarily of people "who return to their mother country after completing their assignments."<sup>8</sup> This is not a bad fit for Russian America – although Osterhammel has other (that is, West European-based) examples in mind.

In the historiography of colonialism, we unfortunately still do not have systematic comparative studies that examine the Russian-American Company

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8 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1997), p. 11.

alongside the West European chartered companies, even its closest rival, the Hudson's Bay Company. My guess is that a thorough comparison of the practices of HBC and RAC (as opposed to a generations-old reliance on largely unexamined assumptions about the "progressive" nature of British "capitalism" vis-à-vis Russian "feudalism"/"polarism") would reveal meaningful commonalities in how these monopolistic companies operated.

I would agree that there were meaningful differences as well. The RAC was more restrained, regulated, controlled, and penetrated by the Russian government than the HBC was by London.<sup>9</sup> But even on this point, which is commonly taken for granted, more comparative analysis would be helpful: How did the governments facilitate oversight of these companies? Was the difference in kind or in measure? The HBC was probably better run as a business than the RAC, but how much better?

One of the key differences between the two was that the RAC was geared toward the marine animal furs whereas the HBC's calling card was land animal furs. This difference in specialization seems to call for a different approach to indigenous labor.<sup>10</sup> Indigenous Aleut and Koniag hunters were far better sea otter hunters than the Russians. Sea otter furs were extremely valuable. The RAC organized Aleut and Koniag men into large hunting parties, and set them loose up and down the western coast of North America. It paid very low compensation to these hunters and saddled them with debt. Early in the nineteenth century, the RAC sometimes loaned these indigenous hunters to American and British ship skippers, who settled accounts with the RAC in furs when their ships returned to Russian America after months at sea. When the RAC was compelled by the decline in the population of marine fur-bearing animals to pay more attention to land furs, it adopted tactics similar to those of the HBC (mainly trade). But the goods and deals the RAC offered in trade to the indigenous hunters and middlemen were commonly deemed inferior to what the HBC offered: HBC agents offered far better deals in areas where they were in competition for furs with other companies than in areas where they had established monopolistic control. The RAC agents had less authority in setting local

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9 The British government kept tabs on to the activities the Hudson's Bay Company in London, and, mainly through the Colonial Office, in North America. The Colonial Office desired the amalgamation of the HBC with the North West Company in 1821, and made its will clear to the boards of both companies; the amalgamation took place, despite the reservations of HBC directors: John S. Galbraith, *Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 6-8.

10 A point emphasized by, among others, Eric Wolf and Aron Crowell, who have pointed out that the RAC exercised more direct and immediate political control over the indigenous population than the Dutch, French, British, and American fur companies, which generally limited themselves to supplying inexpensive manufactured commodities to the fur hunters: Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 158f, and Aron L. Crowell, *Archaeology and the Capitalist World System: A Study from Russian America* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1997), p. 7.

prices on the spot. Granted, this difference reflects something significant about the political conditions in which the two companies and their agents operated, and yet it is also the case that land fur animal trade was fundamentally different from marine fur trade. The RAC proved to be inefficient in the former, but it is unclear what the HBC or any other company would have done if it had the kind of control over the indigenous marine fur hunters that the RAC had. How would the HBC have organized indigenous labor?

My point is that other considerations besides the ones that can be deduced from a politarianism-oriented analysis were at play. As a theoretical framework, the politarian approach cannot explain everything. The RAC was a complex institutional actor; politarianism can illuminate only a part of its activity. Like other chartered companies, the RAC had its share of contradictions: it had a split personality as a colonial administration (for Alaska) and a commercial enterprise (charged with earning a profit for its shareholders). Here I would emphasize that despite all the creeping pressures from the government that limited its prerogatives, the RAC did remain to its very end a company – a badly run and partially government-operated company, perhaps, but a business venture nonetheless.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the problem with using politarianism to frame the explanation for the Russian Empire's sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 is that it deflects attention from the historical context in which the decision to make the sale was actually made. What I mean is that the decision to sell the colony was part and parcel of the Great Reform era. The sale not only occurred during the time of the Great Reforms; it was their integral part, no less so than the other military, financial, and social reforms that were taking place during those same years.

The decision to sell should not be confused with the campaign to discredit and/or reform the Russian-American Company. The campaign to discredit the RAC, conducted publicly over several years in the pages of *Morskoi Sbornik*, Russia's flagship reform journal, as well as in other forums, had a well-defined ideological component. Waged in the name of economic liberalism as well as professed humanism and concern for Alaska's indigenous population, this campaign painted the RAC as a vestige of monopolistic privilege and serfdom. Most pointedly, the RAC was accused of selfishly tending to its own interests at the expense of those of the empire. Nevertheless, the RAC defended itself, embraced certain reforms, and ultimately succeeded in attaining a new charter

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11 In this regard, if one considers that the fur trade was once to the Russian economy what oil and gas are today, it is not difficult to see contemporary analogies to the creeping government takeover of the RAC in today's Russian government's treatment of some of Russia's oil and gas companies. Like oil and natural gas today, the fur trade was for a long time a lucrative export and Russia's signature natural resource. As such, it constituted an enticing prize for bureaucratic intrigue, as well as an arena for a showdown between merchant and government interests – a showdown in which the government had considerable advantages.

from the government. However, its victory was nullified by the government's decision to sell Alaska.

As part of the Great Reforms, the decision for the sale also had an ideological component. But, far more consequentially, it was also part of a broad strategic reassessment that Russia's leading statesmen were conducting ever since the country's debacle of the Crimean War. One of the chief lessons they drew from the Crimean War was that the Russian Empire was made vulnerable by its over-extension.<sup>12</sup> As a colonial possession that was separated from the rest of Russia's territory by ocean waters, required capital investment at a time when the Russian Empire had a serious budget problem, and appeared vulnerable to an attack by British or American fleets, Alaska could hardly escape their gaze. Perception of Alaska's vulnerability to potential foreign military attack was a factor in their decision, but only along with a host of other considerations. As Okun' stressed, Alaska was but one of the many chess pieces on the game board for these statesmen. It was a peripheral piece. Much more central to their thinking was securing Russia's interests in the Far East, Central Asia, and, perhaps most important, parts of the increasingly shaky Ottoman Empire.<sup>13</sup>

The people who made the decision to sell Alaska had prepared for it over a number of years. Their deliberate search for a way out of America began shortly after the Crimean War, earlier than the public debates circling around the RAC, which came to a head around the time when its charter expired in 1861.<sup>14</sup> Was their decision conditioned by Russia's politarism, as Grinev suggests? My inclination would be to view that decision in the context of Russia's contemporary strategic retrenchment and military reforms (more specifically, naval reforms: the naval ministry seems to have been particularly eager to dump Alaska, wishing to focus its resources on other ports). Grinev may interject that such a framing confirms that the sale was one of the consequences of Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (and by extension politarism). But the salient point is that Russia did not *have* to sell Alaska as a result of the Crimean War; its statesmen made a conscious choice to sell it and actively and deliberately pursued that choice.<sup>15</sup>

The insistence on politarism as the main cause for the sale of Alaska obfuscates and trivializes the crucial impact exercised by key historical actors (Russia's strategic thinkers and liberal reformers) and the dynamic developments that occurred during the historical period (the Great Reforms) during

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12 On imperial over-extension, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

13 Okun' suggests that one of the motives behind the sale was the desire by Russia's statesmen to enlist the United States as an ally for the abrogation of the Treaty of Paris and for the partition of the Ottoman Empire (Okun', *Rossiisko-amerikanskaia kompaniia* p. 257).

14 Grinev himself reminds us that in 1865 they even offered to sell most of the Alaska Panhandle to the British, Russia's chief rival. These attempts indicate the deliberateness with which some of Russia's most influential circles pursued an exit strategy out of the New World.

15 An interesting parallel here is to Napoleon's earlier sale of Louisiana to the United States.

which the sale took place. To repeat, I agree that the politarian frame can be useful if employed as one of a number of tools and theoretical support structures for viewing Russian America in general – and, despite my reservations, even the sale of Alaska in particular. More to the point, politarism is useful for examining the social, political, and economic background and broader historical context that prepared the way for the sale. But, on its own, does it explain why the sale was made?

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## Повлиял ли политаризм на продажу Аляски? (Ответ на замечания И. Виньковецкого)

Андрей Гринёв

Начну с того, что мне уже неоднократно доводилось вести дискуссии по проблеме политаризма, о чем упоминает и д-р И. Виньковецкий, ссылаясь на работы А.А. Истомина. Правда, полемика с последним касалась лишь частных аспектов этой темы, поскольку в своих работах Истомин прямо признает существование политарной системы в Новом Свете.<sup>1</sup>

Илья Виньковецкий также не отрицает определенную эвристическую ценность концепции политаризма, хотя и подвергает сомнению его влияние на продажу Русской Америки Соединенным Штатам. Так он полагает, что не политаризм был причиной слабого притока поселенцев из России: а ведь именно это обстоятельство в значительной мере предопределило переход этой территории в руки американцев. По мнению моего оппонента, выходцы из метрополии при желании могли легко попасть на Аляску, так как государство не препятствовало им в подобном переселении, а Российско-Американская компания (РАК) приветствовала бы их решение, особенно, если они были искусные работники. Просто эти люди не видели достаточных экономических стимулов для того, чтобы задерживаться в колониях на постоянной основе.

Этот тезис представляется некорректным. Государство в лице охотской администрации или петербургских властей пропускало в Америку только людей, имеющих паспорт. В России паспортная система имела в первую очередь податную и полицейскую функцию, а именно обес-

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1 Истомин А.А. О «колониальном политаризме», латиноамериканском «феодализме» и некоторых аспектах отношения к аборигенам в Русской Америке // ЭО. 2000. № 3. С. 91. К сожалению, И. Виньковецкий не упоминает еще одну статью, фактически завершившую эту дискуссию: Гринёв А.В. Политаризм и его аспекты в Испанской и Русской Америке // Клио. 2001. № 3. С. 15-24.