

## REMEMBERING RUSSIA-AMERICA DEAL ON ALASKA, 150 YEARS AFTER

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### Abstract

*Many may have forgotten or may not have known, abinitio, that the present day State of Alaska in the United States of America was a territory of the Russian Empire until it was bought by USA in 1867. Alaska became a US "territory" until May 1957 when it was made a state. On January 3, 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower of the United States signed a proclamation admitting the Territory of Alaska in the Union as the 49<sup>th</sup> State. The land added 586,412 square miles (1,518,800km) of new territory to the United States, which is one-fifth the size of the rest of the United States. The sale and possession of Alaska attracted mixed reactions among Americans at the initial stage. Critics dubbed the deal "Seward Folly" after U.S. Secretary of State, William Seward who arranged the purchase of the land from Russia. They believed that the land had nothing to offer, until the discovery of gold in the 1890s created a stampede of prospectors and settlers. Supporters of the deal praised it as a means of weakening both the UK and Russia as rivals to American commercial expansion in the Pacific Region. In this piece, efforts are made to determine the true beneficiary of the deal 150 years after: Russia or America. To achieve this, a vivid historical account of the sale and purchase of the territory of Alaska and reactions of many Americans to the deal is thoroughly analyzed with findings that America is the real beneficiary of the deal.*

**Keywords:** *Alaska, Russian Empire, USA, Sale and Purchase.*

### Historical Account of Discovery and Possession of Alaska

Historically, Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 2017 marked exactly 150 years since the signing of the Treaty concerning the cession of the Russian possessions in the North America by his Majesty, the Emperor of all the Russians to the United States of America. In 1725, Emperor Peter the Great ordered navigator, Vitus Bering to explore the North Pacific for potential colonization. Bering's first voyage was foiled by thick fog and ice, but in 1741 a second voyage by Bering and Aleksei Chirikov made sight of the North American Mainland. Another account has it that Mikhail Gvozdev and Ivan Fyrodov discovered Alaska in the course of an expedition on the Ship Svyatoi Gavrii (St. Gabriel) in 1732. The peninsula was further explored in details in 1741 during the second expedition of Vitus Bering and Alexei Chirikov, and, according to *Timeline of Alaska's History*, a Russian expedition led by Vitus Bering, along with George Steller, made the first "discovery" of Alaska, landing on or near what today is Kayak Island. It continued by saying that Bering explored the Western Coast of Alaska until he was shipwrecked and died on Commodorsky Island, later named Bering Island.

Another expedition led by Grigory Shelekhov arrived at Kodiak Island in 1784, thus heralding a period of Russian America. The first Russian settlement in Alaska was established in Kodiak Island at Three Saints Bay. From 1799 to 1867, Alaska and the adjoining islands stayed under the way of the Russian-American Company (RAC) that organized the study and charting of the peninsula from 1825 to 1860.

The Russians were primarily interested in the abundance of fur-bearing animals on Alaska's coast, as stocks had been reduced by excessive hunting in Siberia. The fur trade proved to be a profitable enterprise, capturing the attention of other European nations. In response to potential competitors, the Russians extended their claims eastward from the Commander Islands to the shores of Alaska. In 1784 with encouragement from Empress Catherine the Great, the explorer, Grigory Shelekhov founded Russia's first permanent settlement in Alaska at Three-Saints Bay. After about ten years, the first group of Orthodox Christian missionaries began to arrive, evangelizing thousands of Indians, many of whose descendants continued to maintain the religion. By the late 1780s, trade relations had opened with the Tlingits and in 1799 the Russian-American Company was formed in order to monopolize the fur trade, and also to serve as an imperialist vehicle for the Russification of Alaskan Natives. The indigenous tribes who depended on the company were obliged to make up "game teams" and to hunt for furred animals under the guidance of the company's overseers. According to an online source; [therussophile.org](http://therussophile.org), the first Russian Orthodox missionaries arrived in Alaska in 1794. The diocese of Kamchatka, the Kurites and Aleutian Lands was established in 1840. It was organized in 1852 into the New Arkhangelsk

Vicariate of the Kamchatka diocese. By 1867, Alaska had about 12,000 Orthodox Christians from among the indigenous ethnic groups.

### **The Sale and Purchase of Alaska**

The indigenous people of Alaska's relations with Russians were not entirely cordial because of their perceived encroachment on their land. According to the Wikipedia, in 1802, Tlingit warriors destroyed several Russian settlements, most notably Redoubt Saint Michael (Old Sitka), leaving New Russia as the only remaining outpost on mainland Alaska. This, however, did not expel the Russians who reestablished their presence two years after following the Battle of Sitka. In 1808, Redoubt Saif Michael was rebuilt as New Archangel and became the capital of Russian America after the previous colonial headquarters were moved from Kodiak.

Again, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, profits from Russia's American colonies were in steep decline. Competition with the British Hudson's Bay Company had brought the sea otter to near extinction, while the population of bears, wolves and foxes on land was also nearing depletion. Counting on the reality of periodic Indian revolts, the political ramifications of the Crimean War, and unable to fully colonize the Americas to their satisfaction, the Russians concluded that their American colonies were too expensive to retain.

Besides, Russia was in a difficult financial position and feared it might lose Russian America without compensation in some future conflict, especially to Britain, whom they had fought in the Crimean War (1853-1856). To Russians at that time, Britain, not America, was Russia's arch enemy. Therefore, it was better to get money by selling off the territory to a neutral country than losing it to an enemy. Russian Emperor Alexander II therefore offered to sell Alaska to the United States in 1859, believing that the United States would checkmate the designs of Britain which was Russia's greatest rival in the Pacific.

Apart from financial difficulties of Russia at that time and the fear of losing Alaska to Britain in a possible war, Russia was aware that the seas around Alaska had some utility for trading in items such as fur and walrus ivory but that alone was not enough to pay the cost of controlling a territory far away from Russia. Again, in the opinion of the Tsar, Alaska was just a cold wilderness on the other side of a strait and Russia was already incredibly massive, first or second largest nation depending on how the landmass is calculated.

The idea of selling Alaska to the United States emerged for the first time in spring 1853. It was initiated by the Governor General of Eastern Siberia, Nikolai Nuravy-or-Amursky, who sent a memorandum to Emperor Nicholas I that it was important for Russia to cede the North American possessions, as the country did not have either military or economic capacity to defend them against the US aspirations. The proposal found a powerful supporter, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich, a younger brother of Emperor Alexander II, who was president of the State Council and the Maritime Minister. He made the first official presentation of the proposal for selling Alaska on April 3 (March 22 Old Style), 1854 in a letter to Chancellor (Foreign Minister) Alexander Gorchakov. As he wrote in a memorandum to Gorchakov, "there should be no deceiving ourselves as we must foresee a situation where the United States, which is seeking permanently to expand its possessions and to establish unchallenged domination in North America, will take these colonies away from us while we will be unable to return them" (Russian Opinion on the cession of Alaska). When Konstantin letter was shown to his brother, Tsar Alexander II, according to Bolkhovitinov (1990), he noted that "this idea is worth considering" on the front peace.

Following the Union victory in the Civil War, the Tsar instructed the Russian Minister to the United States, Edward de Stoeckl to re-enter into negotiations with American Secretary of State, William Seward in the beginning of March 1867. The negotiations were concluded after an all-night session with the signing of the Treaty at 04:00 on March 30, 1867, with the purchase price set at \$7.2 million or about 2 cents per acre. The American Senate approved the Treaty of Purchase on April 9; President Andrew Johnson signed the treaty on May 28, 1867 and Alaska was formally transferred to the United States on October 18, 1867. This purchase ended Russia's presence in North America and ensured America's access to the Pacific northern rim.

The treaty was compiled in English and French. The US received the entire Alaska Peninsula, the Alexander and Kodiak archipelagos, the Aleutian chain islands, and several islands in the Bering Sea. The total land surface area sold to the U.S. stood at 1.519 million sq. km. Under the treaty, Russia ceded to the US for free all the properties of the Russian-America Company, inclusive of buildings and installations but exclusive of churches, and pleaded to withdraw its troops.

The indigenous population of the new territories was transferred to the US jurisdiction but Russian colonists received the right to move to Russia over a period of several years. The Russian-America Company was disbanded and its shareholders received insignificant bonuses, the payment of which dragged on almost into 1880s. Alexander II signed the document on May 15, 1867. On October 1867, the Governing Senate issued a decree on implementation of the treaty and published its Russian text in Full Code of Laws of the Russian Empire. US senate ratified the treaty by a margin of just one vote on May 3, 1867 and an exchange of ratification instruments between the two countries took place in Washington on June 20.

### **The Transfer Ceremony**

The official transfer ceremony and handover of Alaska to the US sovereign ownership took place in a town of Sitka in New Arkhangelsk on October 18, 1867. Russian and American soldiers paraded in front of the governor's house, the Russian flag was lowered and the American flag hoisted amid peals of artillery. A detailed account of the event of the handover was published in Finland six years later by a blacksmith named T. Ahllund, who was recruited to work in Sitka only less than two years previously. According to him: Wikipedia quoted him as saying:

*We had not spent many weeks at Sitka when two large steam ships arrived there, bringing things that belonged to the American crown, and a few days later, the new governor also arrived in a ship together with soldiers. The wooden two-story mansion of the Russian governor stood on a high hill, and in front of it in the yard at the end of a tall spar flew the Russian flag with the double-headed eagle in the middle of it. Of course, this flag now had to give way to the flag of the United States, which is full of stripes and stars.*

Continuing with the analysis, the Wikipedia said that on a predetermined day in the afternoon, a group of soldiers came from the American ships, led by one who carried the flag. Marching solemnly, but without accompaniment, they came to the governor's mansion, where the Russian troops were already lined up and waiting for the Americans. Now they started to pull the (Russian double-headed) eagle down, but – whatever had gone into its head – it only came down a little bit, and then entangled its claws around the spar so that it could not be pulled down any further. A Russian soldier was therefore ordered to climb up the spar and disentangle it, but it seems that the eagle cast a spell on his hands, too – for he was not able to arrive at where the flag was, but instead slipped down without it. The next one to try was not able to do any better; only the third soldier was able to bring the unwilling eagle down to the ground. While the flag was brought down, music was played and cannons were fired off from the shore; and then while the other flag was hoisted, the Americans fired off their cannons from the ships equally many times. After that, American soldiers replaced the Russian ones at the gates of the fence surrounding the Kolosh (i.e. Tlingit) village.

According to Bancroft (1886) and Pierce (1990) accounts, when the business with the flags was finally over, Captain 2<sup>nd</sup> Rank Aleksei Alekseyevich Peshchurov said “General Rousseau, by authority from His Majesty, the Emperor of Russia, I transfer to the United States the territory of Alaska”. General Lovell Rousseau accepted the territory (Peshchurov had been sent to Sitka as commissioner for the Russian government in the transfer of Alaska). A number of forts, blockhouses and timber buildings were handed over to the Americans. The troops occupied the barracks; General Jefferson C. Davis established his residence in the governor's house, and most of the Russian citizens went home, leaving a few traders and priests who chose to remain.

The online *therussophil.org* adds that in January 1868, sixty-nine soldiers and officers of The New Arkhangelsk Garrison were evacuated to Nikolayevsk-on-Amur in the Russian Far East. The last group of 30 Russians left Alaska on the Winged Arrow Ship, specially purchased for the operation on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 1868. It eventually brought them to Kronstadt naval base. At the same time, fifteen Russians accepted US citizenship. Ahllundo's account gives vivid description of the voyage on the *Winged Arrow*; “the over-crowded vessel, with

crewmembers who got roaring drunk at every port, must have made the voyage a memorable one". Ahllund mentions stops at the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, Tahiti, Brazil, London, and finally Kronstadt, the port for St. Petersburg, where they arrived on August 28, 1869 (Pierce 2006).

### **Reactions and Reflections on the Sale of Alaska**

The sale and purchase of Alaska elicited reactions among Americans, some positive and some negative. Critics termed the purchase "Seward's folly, or "Seward's icebox". According to Haycox (1990) some opposed the United States obtaining its first non-contiguous territory, seeing it as a colony; others saw no need to pay for land that they expected the country to obtain through manifest destiny. Opposing newspaper editorials contended that taxpayer money had been wasted on a "Polar bear garden". The principal urban newspaper that opposed the purchase was the *New York Tribune* published by Seward's opponent, Horace Greeley. Historian Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer summarized the minority opinion of some American newspaper editors who opposed the purchase thus:

*Already, so it was said, we were burdened with territory we had no population to fill. The Indians within the present boundaries of the republic strained our power to govern aboriginal peoples. Could it be that we would now, with open eyes, seek to add to our difficulties by increasing the number of such peoples under our national care? The purchase price was small; the annual charges for administration, civil and military, would be yet greater, and continuing. The territory included in the proposed cession was not contiguous to the national domain. It lay away at an inconvenient and a dangerous distance. The treaty had been secretly prepared, and signed and foisted upon the country at one o'clock in the morning. It was a dark deed done in the night.*

Still on the matter, The *New York World* said that it was a "sucked orange". It contained nothing of value but furbearing animals, and these had been hunted until they were nearly extinct. Except for the Aleutian Islands and a narrow strip of land extending along the southern coast, the country would be not worth taking as a gift ... Unless gold were found in the country, much time would elapse before it would be blessed with Hoe printing presses, Methodist chapels and metropolitan police. It was "a frozen wilderness".

Nonetheless, most newspaper editors argued that the US would probably derive great economic benefits from the Alaska purchase. For example, it was thought that friendship with Russia was important, and it would facilitate the acquisition of British Columbia. According to Neunherz (1989), forty-five percent of newspapers endorsing the purchase cited the increased potential for annexing British Columbia in their support. Dall (1872) wrote that "there can be no doubt that the feelings of a majority of citizens of the United States are in favor of it..." while referring to purchasing the territories of Russia in America. A review of dozens of newspapers of the day reveals general support for the purchase, especially in California and most of the 48 major newspapers supported the purchase at the time.

Skeptics as already indicated had dubbed the purchase of Alaska "Seward's Folly", but the former Secretary of State was vindicated when a major gold deposit was discovered in the Yukon in 1896, and Alaska became the gateway to the Klondike gold fields. The strategic importance of Alaska was finally recognized in World War II. Alaska became a state on January 3, 1959.

### **Conclusion**

Although the Alaska deal has lasted 150 years now, many Americans still feel that it was not worth the effort and the cost as at the time. This is notwithstanding the huge mineral resources later found in the territory and the massive landmass that the territory added to the United States of America. The large landmass of Alaska is rich in commercial forests and exportable timber reserves. It also possesses an excellent coastline as an additional advantage (Paterson, 1970). There is no gainsaying, therefore, the fact, that America is the beneficiary of the deal 150 years after, and even beyond. Being able to edge Russia out of the North Pacific squabble at that time at a peanut cost was a good deal for the US. Today, America is in absolute control of the region without any interference. Besides, it is significant that the present day Alaskans have put the history behind them and have joined the rest of Americans. They are today very proud of their country and they are contributing towards its greatness.

For Russians too, many remember the history of the deal with nostalgia. To many, losing the huge territory and its resources for little cash was not the best but the deal could not have been avoided without possible greater loss. They therefore, have very few or no blames on their people for the deal because anything short of this

arrangement could have led to the possibility of losing the territory through war. Russians still believe that it was still better gaining some cash than losing both cash and the territory. To them the deal is bye-gone. Finally, the Alaska deal will remain historically significant to Russians, Americans and historians alike.

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