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Book Review of, Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867

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Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867. By Ilya Vinkovetsky. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. xiii þ 258 pp. $49.95)

Reviews of Books

Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804–1867. By Ilya Vinkovetsky. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011. xiii + 258 pp. $49.95)

An illuminating overview of what the author calls the empire's "sole overseas colony" (p. 4), *Russian America* is an invaluable study for understanding how possession of Alaska fit into the larger context of the Russian Empire's continuous expansion since the sixteenth century. Russian arrival in Alaska followed the pursuit of fur by Russian inhabitants of Siberia, the *sibiriaki*, and by Russian traders and merchants based in Siberia, the *promyshlenniki*. Ilya Vinkovetsky argues that the formation of a semi-private enterprise to manage Alaska, the Russian American Company (RAC), signaled a deliberate shift on the part of the Russian state toward adopting a western model of colonial rule. This shift was made more evident as naval officers staffing the RAC increasingly replaced the *promyshlenniki* in running Russian America. The officers brought with them a paternalistic view of the indigenous peoples that was absent among the *sibiriaki*, Vinkovetsky asserts, who neither saw the Natives of Alaska as "exotic" (p. 38), nor sought to acculturate them to civilized ways, as did the officers.

Highlighting the departures marked by Alaska from the Russian perspective, this monograph also brings out the ways Russian exploitation of the colony differed from the conduct of other colonial companies in North America. For instance, the RAC devised "a unique form of organizing the Aleut and Koniag labor force" (p. 23) for sea-otter hunting that Vinkovetsky calls a "hybrid" between slavery and serfdom (p. 81). In conjunction with the 1821 empire-wide reform, a new "estate"—that is, a legal-administrative category—of "Creoles" was created for the mixed children of Russians and indigenous peoples of Alaska. Regarding the Tlingit, Russian tactics emphasized deepening trade ties as part of a larger program to pacify, co-opt, and acculturate an indigenous group that continued to pose a threat to the Russian settlement of Novo-Arkhangel'sk (now Sitka) into the 1860s. Tracing the Christianizing aspect of the Russian agenda of acculturation, the final chapter of the book

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concerns the work of the Russian Orthodox Church. After the 1830s, the church actively began to proselytize among the Aleuts, Creoles, and Tlingit, in part through the use of an indigenous language and developing a written form for it.

The possession of an "overseas" colony, Vinkovetsky finds, "facilitated the transition of the Russian empire-state from a more continental dynastic to a hybrid-colonial type of empire" (p. 188). This argument, which follows the typology delineated by theories of imperialism that separated "continental" from "overseas" empires, may be overly geographically deterministic for considering modes of colonial contact. When Russian practices began to resemble those of Western European colonial rule—especially at the empire's southern and eastern frontiers—it was perhaps propelled more by ever-widening circles of elite and educated Russians who participated in the civilizing discourses that shaped these practices, rather than by Russians' experience in Alaska. But for considering changing modes of imperial expansion, this study's focus on Alaska's location "overseas" sheds much light on the new prominence of the Russian Navy and the repositioning of the Russian Empire as a maritime power. The decision to sell Alaska, Vinkovetsky shows, was based not on a sense of setback or failure in Alaska, but on a redirection of the Russian imperial state's priorities toward China and the building of a new Pacific port at Vladivostok. For the Russian Navy, this redirection of resources was a fitting end to a colony that had served, according to Vinkovetsky, as a "stepping stone for the navy's enhanced role in Russia's Far East" (p. 187).

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