

Russian America and the USSR: Striking Parallels

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Abstract. The article is devoted to a comparative analysis of the socioeconomic systems that have formed in the Russian colonies in Alaska and in the USSR. The author shows how these systems evolved and names the main reason for their similarity: the nature of the predominant type of property. In both systems, supreme state property dominated and in this way they can be designated as politaristic. Politariasm (from the Greek πολιτεία—the power of the majority, that is, in a broad sense, the state, the political system) is formation founded on the state's supreme ownership of the basic means of production and the work force. Economic relations of politarism generated the corresponding social structure, administrative management, ideological culture, and even similar psychological features in Russian America and the USSR.

Key words: Russian America, USSR, Alaska, Russian-American Company, politarism, comparative historical research.

The selected theme might seem at first glance paradoxical. And in fact, what is common between the few Russian colonies in Alaska, which existed from the end of the 18th century to 1867, and the huge USSR of the 20th century? Nevertheless, analysis of this topic demonstrates the indisputable similarity between the development of such, it would seem, different-scaled and diachronic socioeconomic systems. It might seem surprising that many phenomena of the economic and social sphere of Russian America subsequently had clear analogies in Soviet society. One can hardly speak of simple coincidences and accidents of history. Therefore, the selected topic is of undoubted scholarly interest. Its study will help better understand the pattern of development of Russia's past, as well as explain many features of Russian colonization of the New World.

The problem of similarity between the socioeconomic development of Russian America and the USSR up to the end of the 1990s has not been an object of special study in Russian or foreign scholarly literature. Some Soviet scholars, if they had guessed about certain analogies of socioeconomic processes that occurred in the Russian colonies in America and in the USSR, were forced to be silent for obvious reasons: a penetrating analysis of this topic could affect their scholarly careers in a most unfortunate way. In fact, in this case, the conclusion would be self-evident that either as early as the 19th century in Russian America “socialism” already existed (which would be obvious nonsense), or there was no socialism at all in the USSR itself. Therefore, only at the end of the 1990s, works appeared that contained references to some socioeconomic parallels between Russian America and the Soviet Union. Thus, the Moscow researcher A. A. Istomin quite correctly pointed out clear similarities in the individual sides of the social life of Russian America and the USSR, but did not, however, provide a clear explanation of this phenomenon (Istomin 1998, 114, 121).

Foreign scholars, some understanding well the problems of the USSR, were entirely unacquainted with the socioeconomic features of Russian America, while those who occupied themselves with the study of the Russian period in the history of Alaska had little idea of the socioeconomic realities of the Soviet Union. Moreover, being in positions of neopositivism, most Western scholars did not seek broad generalizations, confining themselves to careful collection and verification of historical facts. Therefore, foreign researchers could not have brought to mind the existence of the typologically similar features in the development of Russian America and the USSR. If they did cite some parallels, then it was exclusively through comparison of the Russian colonization of Siberia and North America. In this regard, an interesting comparative analysis was made by one of the best foreign specialists on the history of Russian America, the Canadian Professor J. R. Gibson. In the scholar’s opinion, in America, in distinction from Siberia, the Russians depended to a greater degree on hunting for and trading furs, with the chief hunted animal being the sea otter, and not the sable. The Russian colonies in the New World had primarily a marine orientation, and only one administrative center—Novo-Arkhangelsk—existed there. If in Siberia the native peoples were relatively easily conquered by the Cossacks (with the exception of the Chukchi), in Alaska the Russians were rendered much more obstinate and fierce resistance, especially by the Tlingit Indians. Another feature in mastering Alaska was

the presence of foreign competitors in the English and Americans, which the Siberian land did not know (Gibson 1978, 48, 57; 1987, 32–40; 1990, 77).

For their part, Soviet and some post-Soviet historians willingly compared Russian colonization with that of the Spanish and especially the Anglo-American. From their point of view, the first was a purely progressive process, fundamentally different from the rapacious and predatory colonization of America by other European powers (Efimov 1971a, 165; Lyapunova 1985, 294; Mironov 2007, 63–5; Volynchuk and Shvedov 2011, 143; see also Grinëv 1994, 163–7; 2002, 112–21). From the point of view of the adherents to this concept, the “progressiveness” was due especially to the democratic composition of the Russian colonists, whose attitude toward the native population of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands was much more humane than relations toward the Indians by the Spanish or English. Another argument in favor of the “progressiveness” was the multifaceted character of the economic opening up of Russian America, in comparison, for example, with the activities of the British Hudson’s Bay Company or the Danish Royal Greenland Trading Company, which were occupied allegedly exclusively with commercial robbery of the natives. A different thing was the monopolistic Russian-American Company (RAC), founded in 1799 for comprehensive development of Alaska, with shipbuilding and metallurgical, tannery, and woodworking production established there. For the authors of the concept of “progressiveness,” the Russian-American Company was “an exception to the rules of that time” (Zolotarevskaya, Blomkvist, and Lipshits 1959, 101; Agranat 1971, 188; 1997, 53–5). Recently, a view of Russian colonization of Alaska as an event of the modern era has been encountered (the epoch of Enlightenment), with it resembling the Western models of colonialism in the 19th century, in distinction from the former Muscovite development of Siberia in the 17th century (Schweitzer Golovko, and Vakhtin 2013: 430–1).

Thus, Russian and foreign specialists have conducted comparative analysis either by comparing Russian colonization of Siberia and Alaska, or by comparing the latter with colonization of America by Spain, England, or the United States. We will try to go beyond the current scientific paradigm and examine the problem of similarity and difference between the socioeconomic systems, which were formed in Russian America and the USSR, paying attention also to parallels in their historical evolution.

We begin with Russian America, which historically preceded the appearance of the Soviet Union. The main core of possessions of Russia in the New World was the territory of the

modern American state of Alaska.¹ The severe nature of this inhospitable land could not support the development there of agriculture and stock breeding. The chief occupation of the local residents—Aleuts, Eskimos, and Indians—was fishing, coastal sea mammal hunting, and inland hunting. These aspects—the features of the natural environment and sociocultural specifics of the local population—left a conspicuous imprint on the character of Russian colonization of the New World. Another factor played no less, if not a larger, role in this question: the social system of the country that carried out the colonization. Here it is necessary to clarify that Russia of the 18th–19th centuries was, in our view, not a feudal state, as it is traditionally considered to be in Russian historiography, but rather a politaristic one, with the presence, however, of two socioeconomic sub-systems—a feudal one and, gradually gaining strength, a capitalistic one (Grinëv and Iroshnikov 1998, 36–46). Characteristic for a politarian system is the state’s supreme ownership of the basic means of production and the direct producer (Semenov 1988, 59–68; 1993; 2008). It is this system that was reproduced in the Russian colonies in the New World, though, of course, it had a clearly pronounced specificity (Grinëv 1996, 62–3; 2016).

How did politarism arise in Russian America and the Soviet Union? Here it is possible to speak of a similar trend of gradual transformation of capitalistic relations into politaristic ones with the active influence of the state. However, if early capitalistic trends were inherent in Russian America in the beginning period, for Russia at beginning of the 20th century it was the relationship of mature monopolistic capitalism (in the industrial sector of the economy). Nevertheless, the result was the same: the ultimate victory of politarism in both Russian America and the USSR. We will touch on this question in some detail.

The foundation of Russian America was laid by representatives of a nascent capitalist system in Russia—enterprising Siberian merchants and *promyshlenniki*. They rushed to the Aleutian Islands after the return to Kamchatka of members of the V. I. Bering-A. I. Chirikov expedition (1741–1742), who brought with them a large number of valuable furs from the newly discovered lands in the east. Beginning in 1743, merchant ships sailed almost annually from Kamchatka or Okhotsk over the ocean and often returned with rich cargoes of furs (especially

¹ A small Russian enclave in California also belonged to Russian America—the Ross settlement (Fort Ross), which existed for about 30 years (1812–1840) in the territory of the modern state of California near San Francisco. In addition, before the sale of Alaska to the United States, the Commander Islands were also included in Russian America.

valuable were sea otter hides). In spite of the fact that outfitting these ships and hiring crews were carried out at private expense, no ship had the right to leave its home port without permission from state authorities. And the latter sent an “eye of the sovereign” on the merchant ships, usually in the person of a Kamchatka sergeant or a Cossack, designated to monitor the behavior of the crew and oversee the collection of tribute from the Aleuts. By itself, the tribute (in furs) both in the Aleutian Islands and in Siberia was a demonstration of the personal dependence of the once-free natives on the Russian tsar (that is, the state). A special “receipt book” was provided to each merchant ship for recording the tribute payments and the total number of the native population (AVPRI. F. RAK. Op. 888. D. 20. L. 118 ob.–120). The account of the “tribute” and “tax” population with the aid of censuses had an important economic basis: the state had to know about its human resources for more complete collection of surplus products by means of imposition of dues, taxes, and labor services.

The special role of the state was emphasized in many documents connected with the hunting-trading expeditions to the Aleutian Islands and Alaska. For example, in the report of mariner Ivan Korovin, who set off in 1762 to the Aleutian Islands on a ship of the Irkutsk merchant Nikifor Trapeznikov, it said that this trip was necessary “[...] for the spread of the Russian empire of her imperial majesty and the trusted state benefit toward increase of her imperial majesty’s interest, toward bringing into citizenship under the high autocratic hand of her imperial majesty over the non-tribute-paying people of the sea islands found to tribute payment, and especially to search for some similarly useful benefits for the state” (Andreev 1948, 120). Of course, in actuality the main goal of any merchant expedition was the procurement of valuable furs. But in the official papers it was necessary to declare as primary the more noble task of “zeal” in the interests of the state, in which Russia always stood above private interests. Interested in the search for new lands, of course, were both the promyshlenniki themselves and the merchants: depletion of fur resources in the places of the previous intensive hunt forced them to search for new ones, and coming in contact with new peoples opened up good trading prospects. Here, the interests of the merchants, promyshlenniki, and the state objectively coincided. The royal authorities received tribute from the natives and taxes from the development of the hunting and trading on the Pacific islands, through which private efforts and capital were joined to the Russian scepter. Therefore, the most successful entrepreneurs received

subsidies from the treasury for organizing new “voyages” and were even awarded gold medals (Makarova 1968, 109, 139).

The gradual movement of the Russians ever farther to the east along the chain of Aleutian Islands toward Alaska after the sea otters had been exterminated led to the need to construct and equip larger ships and increase the number of their crews. Only wealthy merchants could afford to collect the funds for organizing further expeditions. Therefore, by the 1760s, the tendency toward concentration and centralization of merchant capital emerged, which was manifested especially clearly at the beginning of the 1780s. This tendency was strengthened by sharp competition for the limited fur resources. In the mid 1790s in Alaska, only two merchant companies remained: G. I. Shelikhov-I. L. Golikov and P. S. Lebedev-Lastochkin. During the course of a fierce competitive struggle for the hunting grounds and influence on the natives, the company of Lebedev-Lastochkin suffered complete defeat. In fact, a monopoly of the company of the heirs of Shelikhov (he died in 1795) and his companion Golikov was established in Alaska in May 1798 (Grinëv 2016, 187–210). It was symbolic that at the same time in Irkutsk, through efforts of the tsarist government, a merger occurred between the formerly rival companies of Siberian merchants into one United American Company (Okun’ 1939, 37–48). Figuratively speaking, a monopoly was established on both sides of the Pacific.

The very idea of joining different merchant companies that hunted in the Aleutian Islands was born in the administrative circles of the Irkutsk Province as early as the beginning of the 1770s. A similar plan was proposed in 1772, in the instructions of the Irkutsk governor Adam Bril’ to the commander of Kamchatka, Prime-Major M. K. fon Bem (von Behm) (see Sgibnev 1869, 8). A single company controlled by state agencies corresponded completely with the essence of the centralized Russian state. The tsarist government was interested in regulating the exploitation of the native population and natural wealth of Alaska. In addition, creation of a unified company permitted tsarism not only to place under stricter control the spontaneous movement of its subjects in the New World and their relationship with the natives, but also to effectively resolve questions of its own expansion and counteraction to foreign competitors (the English, Spanish, and Americans) in the northern part of the Pacific Ocean. The last was completely consistent also with the aspirations of the Russian merchants, who advocated for the elimination of foreign rivals under the guise of patriotic rhetoric. A consummate master in this case was G. I. Shelikhov. He actively exploited the idea of the creation of a monopolistic,

government-controlled company, having submitted an appropriate memorandum to the tsarist government in 1787 (Andreev 1948, 223–6). Though Empress Catherine II, being against monopolies, rejected the petition of the zealous merchant, right after her death Shelikhov's dreams were brought to life by his heirs, and in first order, by his son-in-law N. P. Rezanov, an influential royal official. On 8 July 1799, Emperor Paul I signed a decree for the creation of the Russian-American Company (RAC) "under the highest patronage." The new monopolistic organization, created on the base of the United American Company, received exclusive rights from the government to conduct fur hunting and trade in the Russian possessions in the New World for a period of twenty years (subsequently, the period of the privileges was repeatedly extended) (PSZRI. Sobr. 1-e. St. Petersburg, 1830. Vol. XXV. Pp. 700–4).

The RAC was the result of both a natural capitalistic trend toward a monopoly (the consequence of a competitive struggle, the concentration of capital), and the united activities of state authorities. Therefore, it was a unique institutional symbiosis of the interests of Russian entrepreneurs and tsarist bureaucracy. Though formally the company was a private commercial organization, it was in fact a kind of offshoot of a state apparatus. During the existence of the RAC, the process of its "nationalization" constantly grew, reaching an apogee at the beginning of the 1840s which was reflected in the Company Charter adopted in 1844. It was stated directly in it that people "who belong to the classes entitled to go into the service, being in the service of the Company, are considered in active state service and have the right of being promoted in the ranks and of wearing the uniform of the Ministry of Finances" (PSZRI. Sobr. 2-e. St. Petersburg, 1844. Vol. XIX. P. 613). The Minister of Finances himself was entrusted with "watchful supervision" of the activities of the company both in the colonies and in the homeland. And the leadership of the RAC was very much aware of its own true function. "The actions of the Company," it stated in its documents, "are closely associated with the benefits of the State and because of this sole reason the service of the Company is service to the Fatherland" (AVPRI. F. RAK. Op. 888. D. 125. L. 250 ob.). Furthermore, the tsar himself and several of his top officials were among the RAC shareholders. The purchase of company shares was viewed as a patriotic act and social duty (Okun' 1939, 60).

Of course, it would be simplistic to present the RAC in the form of an ordinary instrument of state authority. First, the company had its own economic base, formally independent of the treasury—movable and fixed property and financial means. Of course, this

property bore a subordinate character in relation to the state, and the company itself was in the position of a temporary tenant of the territory, and in fact, the population of Russian America was also at the mercy of this same state. Second, like any other organization, department, or ministry of the empire (later the USSR), the RAC had its own interests and aspirations, which far from always coincided with the views of the government or the requirements of society. At times the contradictions were manifested quite clearly, for example, concerning the provisions of conventions concluded by tsarist authorities with the United States and Great Britain in 1824–1825, as a result of which the rights and privileges of the RAC were substantially restrained. The company leadership tried to protest, which, however, was not successful (Okun’ 1939, 98–100, 108–9). And not surprisingly, such questions were resolved, as usual in Russia, by the strong-willed decision of higher authorities who stood guard over the state’s interests. And the RAC, though formally separated from the state, was forced to obediently follow all the orders of the government, not even trying to challenge its decision in court—tsarist Russia, regardless of the desire, cannot be considered a state ruled by law.

As in its time, natural economic development of early capitalistic relations in Russian America led to the creation of a monopoly in the form of the Russian-American Company and its merger with the state agencies. The later development of capitalism in post-reform Russia led to the establishment of a state-monopolistic system, which was ultimately transformed into politarism after the “revolution” in October 1917. The First World War contributed in no small degree to this process. During the war, the tsarist government began to abandon market relations and economic freedoms to carry out the mobilization of industry brought on by military needs, to introduce fixed fees and rigid prices, to grant monopolies, and to ration consumption. Military-industrial committees actively functioned, which marked the merging of Russian monopolies with the state. During this period, state distribution sharply increased, labor service was introduced, regulation of the foundation of the economy of the country—agricultural production—was begun, and a surplus-appropriation arose, that is, the removal of products from the agricultural producers at fixed low prices. Thus, in Russia the objective economic base of politarism was formed. This process reached logical conclusion in October 1917, when after the Bolshevik coup all property (including land) was declared “obshchenarodnaya” [“belonging to all people”], while in fact being enrolled in a state monopoly, and politarism itself under the guise of “socialism” existed in the USSR for more than seventy years (Grinëv 2017, 426–31).

Of course, both in Soviet Russia and before this in Russian America, politarism was not established immediately: elements of a capitalistic mode continued to be preserved for some time. In the USSR capitalistic elements were completely liquidated by the end of the 1920s during the period of curtailment of the New Economic Policy (1921–1929) and the conducting of complete collectivization. In Russian America, the remains of capitalistic relations finally moved to the second plan in 1818 when all the Russian *promyshlenniki* were transferred to fixed wages (350 rubles per year) and food rations (1.5 *pudy* [~54 lbs.] flour per month) (Khlebnikov 1985, 62, 67–8). Before this time, a large part of them received “half shares.” The essence of the half-share system was in the regular division (every four years) of all furs procured by the RAC into two equal portions (shares): one of them went to the company, while the “workers” received the other. Such system was a remnant of early capitalistic relations of free hiring and participation of the ordinary *promyshlenniki* in the overall profits of the companies that were occupied in procuring furs in the Aleutian Islands during the second half of the 18th century. The half-share system ensured relative interest of the worker in the results of his labor, while he himself had some economic independence. With the transition to a fixed salary, the *promyshlenniki* were turned into ordinary hired workers, summoned to obediently serve a single monopolistic employer—the Russian-American Company—just as later workers of the USSR were forced to work for the good of the “socialist” state.

Thus, similar economic bases were formed in the Russian colonies and later in the USSR: the land, means of production, and labor resources being the supreme property of the state. In Russian America, the state simply delegated part of its powers to the RAC, having monopolized its activities. This had far-reaching economic and social consequences. Due to the almost total monopoly in the Russian colonies, and later in the USSR, the leading relations formed were distributive, and not market-oriented (the presence of independent owners was necessary for development of the latter). Redistribution of produced goods both in this and in the other case bore a strictly centralized character in the form of obligatory turning in of all procured furs to the RAC (in the USSR, metal and grain went into the “bins of the motherland”), and compensation was in the form of food products, clothing, means of production, and so on by the monopolistic owner-manager (Bessonova 1994, 37–40; 1998, 85–100).

It is interesting to note that the redistribution system of a politaristic society created a completely distorted idea of the real economic interdependence every time: it was not the

ordinary workers who maintained the tsar and his entourage, but the reverse, the “father-tsar” acted as the “breadwinner” of the people. In the USSR, the “people’s party” began to play his role, thanks to whose care the people existed. The same was observed in Russian America—it was not the colonies providing furs that gave a comfortable life for the RAC shareholders, but the reverse. It was believed that the company board of directors “maintained” the colonies, directing there the needed goods and food supplies. In this regard, an extract from the order of the head of Novo-Aleksandrovskii Redoubt, Fëdor Kolmakov, to the chief of Kuskokvim Factory, Ivan Lukin, is very characteristic, in which the Russian-American Company was named the “all feeding mother” (Zagoskin 2017, 31). Such metamorphoses of consciousness were evidently brought on by the absolute dependence of the workers on the single and all-powerful owner—the state (or RAC in its person).

Redistribution of surplus goods in politarian systems was always carried out through an authoritative-administrative center, where a substantial part of it also accumulated. Therefore, the supply and level of life in the colonial center—Novo-Arkhangelsk, and later also the Soviet capital—Moscow, were noticeably better than in the rest of the country. As a consequence, there was heartburning envy and resentment by the periphery in regard to the wealthier parasitic center (there is a similar situation in modern Russia today).

Centralization of distribution led to centralization of management. In the USSR, there was the well-known hypertrophic role of Moscow in the business of making decisions literally on all questions of the life of society. Concerning the RAC, business there was a little more complex: the main center of making the decisions was located, of course, in St. Petersburg (where the government was located) at the company board of directors, while all immediate issues were under the authority of the governor of the colonies in Novo-Arkhangelsk (Sitka).

The inevitable consequence of monopolization of property and management was universal directive planning, reaching an unprecedented scale in the USSR. It was more modest in Russian America, since the basic sector of the economy—hunting for furs—depended not so much on directives of the authorities as on weather conditions, animal migrations, and other natural factors. Nevertheless, in the Russian colonies, the governor (after consultation with the board of the company) periodically assigned so-called “zapuski”—bans on hunting during the course of several years in certain territories for the purpose of restoration of the population of fur-bearing animals. A summer navigation of the colonial RAC flotilla, dispatch of hunting

parties, their routes, and so on, were annually planned. All this was reflected in innumerable instructions, guidelines, and regulations of the colonial administration. Every step of subordinates was determined in them to the smallest details. It reached the ridiculous. Thus, in his “written relation” to the RAC’s Atka office on 12 April 1835 (No. 47), the governor of Russian America wrote: “In resolution of the report of the Office for No. 51, concerning 3 silver foxes delivered by the Toen [native leader—*A. G.*] Dedyukhin from Amlia Island, which died falling from cliffs. I instruct the Office to grant the same fee for those animals fallen from the cliffs as for others otherwise procured” (NARS. Washington (D.C.). RG 261. RRAC. Roll 37. P. 29). The office itself did not have the right to resolve such a “complex” question.

The bureaucracy widespread in the colonies was not only a consequence of the domination of the bureaucratic class both in the colonies and in the homeland, but logically flowed from the very nature of the economic relations of politarism. Of course, for the same reasons bureaucracy was inherent in the Soviet system, where the same command-administrative methods of managing the economy flourished. An important function of the bureaucracy, as the collective owner-administrator in politarism, was constant accounting and control: in the colonies—of “company assets and capital,” in the USSR—of “socialist property,” about which the leader of the “proletariat revolution” V. I. Lenin wrote at the dawn of its formation (“Accounting and control—that is the main thing that is required for ‘establishment,’ for the proper functioning of the *first phase* of Communist society”) (Lenin 1974, 100). The bureaucracy was clearly reflected even in the names and system of the managing agencies. The vast administrative territories of Russian America, which were symbolically called *otdely* [departments] were managed by *kontory* [offices] of the Russian-American Company, while in the USSR the real authority was concentrated in the hands of the *politburo*, the secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) and its general *secretary*.

With the lack of a market and independent judicial power, which are the most important regulators of economic relations in societies with a dominance of private-personal property, their function under politarism is fulfilled by complaints, petitions, and denunciations. O. E. Bessonova, who turned attention to this phenomenon, notes that complaints were a noticeable phenomenon of Russian and Soviet culture and a distributing system (as she calls politarism) played an important role in feedback. This was a signaling and correcting mechanism of the

Russian economy. Complaints came from all segments of the population and from all levels of management, “and their minimization was the criterion for the conduct of those governing the distributing system. It could be attained by changing the norms of distribution, allotment of resources, change in leadership, and distribution of promises” (Bessonova 1994, 40–1). Such it was in tsarist Russia and the USSR. Such it also was in Russian America. Several of those managing hunting artels lost their posts because of complaints by subordinates. For example, in 1820, due to numerous complaints by the promyshlennik, Grigorii Uvarov, head of the Konstantinovskii Redoubt, was replaced (NARS. RG 261. RRAC. Roll 2. P. 133).

Total monopoly, that is, the absence of competition of independent commodity producers, inevitably gave rise to low quality products. This was vividly manifested in comparison to most items of Soviet production (with the exception of military technology) with Western analogs. The same could be observed in the Russian colonies. Their primary product—furs—lost its original high quality in the process of inept, hasty, and careless handling, which was a consequence of the lack of interest by the workers in the results of their labor, the emphasis on quantity, and a lack of competition. Therefore, the primary markets for the sale of RAC furs were China and Russia, where consumers did not demand high quality of the product. When in the 1860s the RAC tried to enter the European and American markets, it was forced to face the constant complaints and claims of its counterparts about bad quality of hide processing (NARS. RG 261. RRAC. Roll 25. Pp. 294–5, 356–7). In the USSR, in a similar way, a substantial part of the products, which were especially intended for satisfaction of the needs of the common population, usually did not have high consumer qualities. The low culture of work inherited from the USSR has led to the fact that, up to now, passenger cars produced in modern Russia are usually not outstanding for good quality.

Due to the low competitiveness of products and the distributive nature of the economy, the desire for autarky and self-isolation is inherent in politaristic systems, which is easily traced in the example of Russian America and the USSR. The fact is that external openness and engagement in market systems can lead politaristic systems to crisis and ruin. In this connection the truly obsessive persistence becomes clear, with which the administration of the Russian colonies tried to install agricultural production in Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, neither considering subarctic nature and the lack of appropriate working skills among the natives, nor the great expense of supporting the absolutely unprofitable farms. Later “attempts” of the RAC

were “creatively” continued by Soviet authorities during the tenure of the General Secretary of the CC CPSU Nikita Khrushchev after his trip to the United States in 1959. Having returned from America, he decided that problems of Soviet agriculture were the lack of massive sowings of corn, which his zealous followers began to plant almost everywhere up to the Arctic Circle.

Of course, there was a positive aspect in the diversified economy connected with the general increase in the production forces that took place, for example, in the USSR during the period of Stalin’s industrialization, when new branches of industry rapidly began to emerge. However, it is necessary to simultaneously find out what reasons gave rise to such economic development, by what means it was carried out, and what it served. From this point of view, the establishment of agricultural production in Russian America was brought on by the desire of the colonial leadership to create a closed, self-contained economy in order to spend as little money as possible on its supply of food (this was one of the most painful problems) (Gibson 1976) and to reduce to a minimum the contact with foreign traders—the main suppliers of foods and European wares. At this, it is impossible not to also consider the bureaucratic psychology of the RAC leadership. Cheerfully reporting to the “supreme leadership” in St. Petersburg about the successes of agriculture and stock breeding in the colonies, the directors of the company could expect favor and awards from the upper circles of the empire for a zealous attitude toward the entrusted territory and, in the future, to an extension of monopolistic rights for the company for another twenty-year period.

Regarding methods of establishing new branches of agriculture in the Russian colonies, over the extent of several decades they took the form of forced labor of the dependent natives (from the 1820s for low pay) in company gardens or preparing hay for livestock that belonged to the RAC. It reached the point where, based on the testimony of eyewitnesses, at the beginning of the 19th century on Kodiak Island, plowing the land was carried out with the aid of the local Eskimos harnessed, instead of cattle, to the plow! (“Zapiski ieromonakha Gedeona [...],” 1994, 39). Stalin’s collectivization and industrialization carried out by no less barbaric methods, which of course set as the goal not only the creation of a self-sustaining economy, but also powerful military capability.

Since the Russian-American Company in Alaska, and directly the state in the USSR, were the only owners and managers of the basic means of production and, consequently, the produced product, they monopolistically assigned its price. As a result, both in Russian America

and in the USSR, a dual pricing system developed—one for the company/state receiving the produced product and a quite different one for distribution/sale by the company/state. A similar system of prices emerged in the Muscovy politaristic state as early as the 16th–17th centuries (Bessonova 1994, 42). Of course, the acquisition prices were substantially lowered and the distribution prices, on the contrary, were inflated. Thus, at the beginning of the 19th century, the Aleuts received from the RAC goods worth 8 to 10 rubles at a fixed rate for a sea otter hide; the company then resold the hide to Chinese merchants at a price of 100 to 300 rubles. On the other hand, rugs that cost 2 to 3 rubles in Tyumen' were supplied to the colonies at 10 to 15 rubles a piece (AVPRI. F. Gl. Arkhiv 1-7. Op. 6. D. 1. Papka No. 35. L. 6 ob.). Later a similar system of prices was formed, for example, in the kolkhoz [work-farm] sector of the Soviet economy (Popov 1998, 30–1). Thus, it was in fact an indirect tax, which was the deliberate removal of surplus products with the aid of monopolistically set prices. By the end of the existence of Russian America, the RAC was completely making up its losses by supplying the colonies through so-called “pritsenka” [“addition to the prices”], that is, the sales percent placed on almost all imported goods, especially on alcohol (it is interesting that later in the USSR up to one-third of the budget was formed through the sale of vodka). On average, the *pritsenka* amounted to 77% of the initial price of the ware, which included 42% for the cost of the freight in delivery of the cargo and 35% pure profit for the company (*Doklad Komiteta [...]*, 1863, 133). Since the RAC was officially the sole supplier of European goods and food to the population of the Russian colonies, it not only received the monopolistic profit due to the increase of prices on the imported items, but also profited on their quality. Auditor S. S. Kostlivtsev, who visited Russian America at the beginning of the 1860s, attested: “The ready-made clothes and shoes for the common people exceed all probability in their bad quality, such that a pair of boots is enough only for a few days, and the cloth clothing no more than two months” (*Prilozheniya k Doklad Komiteta [...]*, 1863, 106). Also, most of the consumer goods in the USSR were distinguished for these same reasons of low quality and poor variety.

But manipulation of prices and quality was not the only way to remove surplus goods in Russian America and the USSR. Another financial method was the introduction of a payment means with a directly supported course. In the colonies this was the so-called leather “marks” of the RAC, with face values from 10 kopecks to 25 rubles (Pierce 1992, 145–153), while in the USSR the Soviet ruble had an artificial course of 4 rubles per 1 US dollar. Since such means of

payment were not convertible, in the financial realm they automatically “fenced off” the population from contacts with foreigners, maintaining a closed economic system, supporting its self-imposed isolation, its autarky. For the company and the Soviet state, the advantage of using RAC marks and USSR rubles was in their proprietary issuing possibilities, which brought additional income. And since the mass of wares in the Russian colonies, and later in the USSR, corresponded neither in quantity (toward deficit) nor quality to available monetary funds, the RAC marks and Soviet ruble had a permanent competitor in the form of the product not subjected to inflation and in great demand among the population. Again, such traditional products as vodka emerged in both cases as a kind of analog of “hard” currency. With its aid both in Russian America and in the USSR (especially in the village), it was possible (although illegal) to easily hire a worker or to purchase by means of exchange inexpensive items or products.

In the sphere of work and human resources, the monopolistic position of the RAC in the colonies (and in the USSR of the state) reduced the rights and capabilities of hired workers to a minimum and permitted maximally understating the cost of the work force. This especially concerned some groups of the native population of Russian America (the so-called “kayury”), which in fact were in the position of slaves of the Russian-American Company (in the USSR the inmates of the “GULAG archipelago” had an analogous status). The remaining natives, though considered formally “free,” however, were obligated to work for the company, hunting sea otters as members of specially created baidarka flotillas. Their forced hire was quite reminiscent in its essence of the obligatory work in the USSR (Grinëv 2000, 74–88). In both economic systems, the labor of women and children (as ancillary) was also widely used, objectively intensifying even more the exploitation of the dependent population. It is no wonder that the native workers in Russian America, receiving meager pay by randomly supplied goods, had practically no motive to do conscientious and high-quality work (a similar picture was also observed in the USSR). The constant references in the RAC documents to the phenomenal laziness of the Aleuts can be explained in large degree by the ultimate lack of motivation to work. The position of the Russian promyshlenniki was somewhat better in this regard, but their wages were also not high, bore a temporary character, and were usually not given in full. The overwhelming part of the people from Russia were indebted to the RAC, and therefore the company annually deducted one-third of their wages for repayment of debt. The auditors of RAC activities noted: “With the

exception of the Governor and the most important officials of central management, the Company generally pays its agents a cash salary too modest, rewarding them with the delivery of supplies and various maintenance in kind” (*Doklad Komiteta* [...], 1863, 181). All this, of course, could not stimulate either active attitude toward work or increase its productivity. Very similar problems occurred in the USSR.

Since the relationship toward ownership in a politaristic society was determined by the state (as the supreme owner), accordingly, the principle of distribution of the product received in this society was carried out in strict accordance with the step in the hierarchy of the management apparatus of the state, that is, in accordance with the office. Russian America and the USSR were no exception in this regard. For example, at the end of the 1820s, the salary of the ordinary Russian worker in the colonies amounted to 350 rubles, stewards and officials received from 600 to 3,000 rubles, naval officers received 5,000 rubles, and the governor received 30,000 rubles (Khlebnikov 1985, 171). In the USSR, for ideological reasons, the difference in officials’ salaries was not always so clearly expressed in monetary terms. However, it was supplemented by a system of issuing various scarce products, wares, and services to the representatives of the governing Soviet nomenclature (Voslenskii 1991, 267–350). Incidentally, also in Russian America, the scarce fresh meat of wild sheep and deer was placed regularly only on the table of the colonial administration, while the ordinary *promyshlenniki* were usually forced to be satisfied with stale corned beef. Similarly, a century later, the Soviet nomenclature enjoyed salmon and black caviar, whereas the people choked in huge queues for a loaf of low-quality sausage.

The similarity in the sphere of distribution relations (as derivatives of the economic base) was also inevitably reflected in the social system of the Russian colonies and the USSR. The governing group in Russian America was the so-called “*pochetnye*” [“honorable”]—representatives of the colonial administration led by the governor, captains of RAC ships, stewards, and the higher clergy. An analogous privileged group in the Soviet Union was the now well-known “*nomenklatura*” [“nomenclature” of senior officials]. The ordinary workers formed the broad base of the social pyramid. But it was not uniform. Thus, in Russian America the social base of society had the form of a three-layered cake: in the lowest layer were the dependent natives, above which were the Creoles (*Mestizos*), and the top consisted of the Russian *promyshlenniki*. In the USSR, the bottom part of the social pyramid also had a non-uniform

character, though the differentiation here was not based on race or ethnic features, but on territory and economy. The social bottom was the village population, above was the status of the town residents, and the most privileged position were residents of the metropolitan centers.

Both in Russian America and in the USSR, social mobility (horizontal and vertical) was strictly controlled by the leadership. Without the sanction of the governor not a single promyshlennik could be transferred to neighboring department or assigned as a “baidarshchik,” head of a hunting artel. “I am quite dissatisfied with you,” wrote the governor of Russian America on 11 May 1835 to the baidarshchik of the Novo-Aleksandrovskii Redoubt Fëdor Kolmakov, “that without any instructions you sent Laulin to Novo-Arkangel’sk, and henceforth do not dare without special important reasons to release any of the Russian workers unless you are ordered by the Authorities” (NARS. RG 261. RRAC. Roll 37. P. 251). Similarly, without the agreement of the state and party agencies no person in the USSR could arbitrarily change jobs or occupy a leadership position.

In order to strengthen social control by the state, the ordinary worker was assigned to a permanent place of residence. The institution of *propiska* [residential registration] of the Soviet period goes back to the times of tsarist Russia when all the taxable population (both village and town) was assigned to a specific “community.” To leave voluntarily, without permission of an official (as a representative of the state), was strictly prohibited. This made it very complicated for the RAC to hire a work force in the metropolitan areas, since the government agreed to issue passports for a work period of only seven years. After this the Russian promyshlenniki had to return from the colonies to their “community” (and the company took upon itself payment of all state taxes for the duration of the stay in America). Though later the RAC managed to achieve the right to extend the validity of passports for its workers, in practice this did not help increase the number of permanent residents in the Russian colonies. The dependent native population of the colonies was legally enslaved after adoption of the new “Regulations” (charter) of the RAC in 1821 (PSZRI. Sobr. 1-e. St. Petersburg, 1830. Vol. XXXVII. Pp. 850–2), when politarism in the colonies was finally established as the leading economic system.

Analyzing the features of socioeconomic relations in the USSR, the Russian sociologists V. V. Radaev and O. I. Shkaratan correctly noted: “A characteristic feature of the system was the saving of means in reproduction and human advancement” (Radaev and Shkaratan 1991, 58). With this, through state-controlled means of mass information on a broad scale, propaganda was

carried out among the ordinary people for a modest way of life, rebuking philistinism and acquisition of wealth. In Russian America, such policy was legally reinforced. In the RAC Charter § 176 of 1844, the governor was directed to “observe that no luxury was introduced into the colonies” (PSZRI. Sobr. 2-e. St. Petersburg, 1844. Vol. XIX. P. 629). The essence of such regulations consisted of the desire of Soviet and company leadership to minimize the cost of the labor force and increase the volume of exploitation.

On the other hand, the established politarian system was motivated to preserve the social stability for the normal process of economic reproduction. Therefore, it provides certain guarantees of minimum subsistence for the broad strata of the population. Thus, from 1818, the Russian promyshlenniki received a monthly allowance of flour or grain from the company (increased for families), and a sort of consumption insurance funds were formed for the Aleuts and other dependent natives through public warehouses of food, which were distributed to the needy in case of hunger. Similarly, though invariably larger, were consumption funds in the USSR. As acknowledged by the auditor P. N. Golovin in the early 1860's, in Russian America there were no beggars in the full sense of the word, although the native population lived rather poorly (RGA VMF. F. 224. Op. 1. D. 304. L. 35). The situation in the USSR was very similar.

What is more, with the occurrence of a shortage in the work force (the consequence of high mortality because of over-exploitation, wars, and epidemics) the state, as the supreme owner not only of the primary means of production, but also of labor resources, was forced out of necessity to strengthen its social policy. This explains the periodic surges of “paternalism” in the policies of the tsarist administration toward the native population of Russian America, going back to the roots of the surges in the 18th century. Thus, Siberian authorities demanded that sailors and promyshlenniki who were departing to the Aleutian Islands and Alaska to treat the natives with “tenderness” and not permit during the hunt any of the abuses that took place in the past. “And for failure to comply with the command a fine will be prescribed,” the Irkutsk governor F. G. Nemtsov wrote in instructions to merchants on 16 September 1778. “Whoever will put his old reasoning above the stated cautions and, not submitting to common sense, will neglect or through dark rudeness make any insult and insolent violence to the island residents... that one will be convicted as a violator of high monarchical intentions” (Narochnitskii 1989, 176).

Later, the Siberian administration and central government continued more or less to regularly follow policies of protection and “paternal care” toward the native population of Russian America. Noticing this circumstance, the Moscow researcher A. A. Istomin explains it as the psychology of mistrust of tsarism toward private entrepreneurial initiatives and its concern for maintaining its own authority in the eyes of the public by defending the natives from the tyranny of merchant capital (Istomin 1985, 149). The overwhelming majority of Soviet and partly Russian researchers wrote about the special “humanism” of Russian colonization of the New World, in radical difference from the Spanish and Anglo-American, for which conquest, plunder, and extermination of the natives of America and Australia was characteristic (Efimov 1969, 473; 1971b, 165; Lyapunova 1987, 50–2; Chistyakova 1993, 126). In fact, the very relative “humanity” of Russian colonization is explained not by psychological factors and not by concern of the tsarist government about its own image in the eyes of the public (tsarism gave this serious significance only in the foreign affairs sphere). The point is the politarian essence of the metropolis. The state, viewing natives as its subjects, that is, its “property” and source of replenishment of the treasury (by means of collection of natural tribute—taxes, performance of duties, and so on), tried to defend them from the lawlessness of private individuals and merchant companies, and later, the RAC. British, and later also American colonization, carried out by private individuals and organizations, usually did not stand on ceremony with the natives, “clearing” them from huge territories (in America, Australia, and other colonies) for more effective and profitable use of the land. It is here that Russian politarian colonization primarily differs from capitalistic Anglo-American.

Paternalism began to manifest itself especially clearly in Russian America beginning in the 1820s, when representatives of the state—naval officers—arrived to the authorities in the colonies and state control was increased over the activities of the RAC. The colonial leadership was forced to strengthen care of the dependent natives because of the sharp reduction in their numbers (at a minimum, by one-third) in comparison with the beginning of the century. Therefore, at the beginning of the 1820s, *kayurstvo*, de facto slavery of part of the native population of the colonies, was abolished in Russian America. The dependent natives were supplied with food from the RAC warehouses in case of hunger, were given small-pox vaccinations, and so on (Grinëv 2018, 93–182). Similarly, the huge losses suffered by the Soviet people during the years of the Second World War (1941–1945) and a slowing in the tempo of

population growth forced N. S. Khrushchev and the party he led to turn serious attention to the development of the social sphere. House construction was increased and attempts were made through the development of virgin lands to increase the supply of grain to the population, and so on. This was carried out, naturally, not from altruistic considerations, but by reason of extensive development of the “Socialistic” economy, requiring involvement in the production of new workers, who had become scarce. Continuing the Stalinist practice of over-exploitation in the GULAG camps meant aggravating this problem even more. Therefore, in the 1950s, Khrushchev liquidated the primary “islands of the GULAG archipelago.” And with his successors, the farm workers received passports, that is, relative freedom from collective farms and state serfdom. An additional stimulus for strengthening the social policy was the increased activities of the USSR in the international arena in the post-war years and the necessity, as a consequence, of maintaining the authority of the “socialist system” in the eyes of the world community by abandoning the most odious forms of exploitation of its own population.

At the beginning of the 1960s, a system of social guarantees in the USSR received completed status in the form of practically full employment, small stable incomes for half-hearted work, and confidence and peace of mind that come with the lack of competition. “As a result,” write V. V. Radaev and O. I. Shkaratan, “the initiative of the population died, the people simply had forgotten how to make decisions independently and to bear basic responsibility for them” (Radaev and Shkaratan 1991, 58). Full dependence of the worker on the will of the leadership, behind which stood the all-powerful state, and weak interest in the results of their own labor generated the corresponding psychological stereotypes. Lack of initiative, laziness, blind adherence to any orders of the authorities, and conformism were the most characteristic features of the “new Soviet person.” Similarly, in just a few decades, the psychology of the dependent natives in Russian America underwent drastic changes. At the beginning of the 1860s, S. S. Kostlivtsov wrote regarding this: “[...] Now both the internal and external life of the Aleut has completely changed—from a pagan he became a Christian—from a wild robber that lived by raiding and robbery he became a meek citizen—from wild and willful he became obedient and submissive to the authorities placed over him” (*Doklad Komiteta* [...], 1863, 103). And a colleague of Kostlivtsov, Captain-Lieutenant P. N. Golovin, added, not without irony, that if the leadership suddenly ordered the Aleuts to adopt Islam, then “tomorrow they will be the most

devout Mohammedans” (Golovin 1862, 39). Thus, even in the psychological realm, clear analogies and parallels were observed that took place in Russian America and the USSR.

A politarian system based on monopoly will naturally generate in the spiritual-ideological sphere the same monopolistic unity that will be implanted by the state. In the case of Russian America, it was Orthodox Christianity, and in the case of the Soviet Union, it was the communist ideology that was mandatory for all.

As we see, in spite of the colossal differences between Russian America and the USSR, based on many parameters (noncoincidence of the historical period of existence, orientations of economic branches, differences of the basic composition of population, and so on), striking typological similarity is observed between them. With this, the socioeconomic models of Russian America and the USSR were even closer to each other than to tsarist Russia of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries. The latter did not have a total monopoly that was observed in the Russian colonies, nor did the Soviet Union, since together with supreme state ownership there existed, though in subordinate form, private-personal property in the form of landlord ownership and capitalistic enterprise.

Here it must be noted that the dynamics of the socioeconomic development of Russian America and the USSR also demonstrate clear similarity in their basic stages. Thus, the original multifaceted economic base of the Russian colonies and the USSR (of the period of the New Economic Policy) is replaced by the triumph of state-monopoly politarianism. Then a turbulent stage in its extensive development follows due to over-exploitation of the population and natural wealth (the “Baranov era” in Alaska and the period of Stalinist five-year plans). After this comes a relatively calm period of economic stagnation and social stability, ending with economic crisis and political collapse: the sale of the colonies in 1867 and the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. Both these dramatic processes had a similar economic base, namely, the impossibility to endure economic competition with developed capitalism either in tempo of growth of labor production, or in the quality of production and security of the welfare of the population. It is obvious that before us is the manifestation of a universal historical pattern: *the character and development of any society will be determined by the type of ownership dominating in it*. The task of historical science is not only to collect facts and to know historical events, but to properly understand their character.

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