

# The Russian side of Anchorage?

By Katrina Kline

Alaska has long experienced a more particular association with Russia than have the other US states. Sharing a maritime border, Alaska's proximity to Russia has recently provoked national attention through Sarah Palin's famous justification for her foreign policy experience. Moreover, over 150 years of Alaska's history was dominated by Russian control and presence. Having spent several months living with my fiancé – Michael Zlatkovsky – and his Russian family, who immigrated to Anchorage in 1999, I have been immersed in Russian immigrant culture, and – as a former Alaskan resident myself – I have been curious to discover more about the Russian elements of Alaska's history and current culture. As a result of these studies, I have explored the unique connection between the Russian heritage of recent immigrants with that of Alaska itself, and how this interaction has added a unique Russian flavor to the city of Anchorage.

Simply on account of its physical location, Alaska bears a direct connection with its Russian neighbor. Alaska and Russian share a border that zigzags down the Bering Strait, and in the winter it is possible to walk the mere 2.4 miles of frozen water that separate the Big Diomedede (Russian) and Little Diomedede (American) Islands. Even the mainlands are only 55 miles apart. Indeed, the Alaskan and Russian Far East cities are actually closer to each other than to their own national capitols. Alaska and the Russian Far East – as would be expected – therefore share much of the same flora, fauna, and geology, and hence share in cooperative research focused on studying the volcanoes making up the Ring of Fire – split between the two continents – and

various species including polar bears, whales, and walruses. The similarity of resources available in the two areas have lead to an interest in resource development companies (oil production, mining) to extend their work-fields to Siberia. Not only do geology and biology transverse the Russian-Alaskan border, but also Native tribes, given that their ancestry extends beyond the days of colonial expansion. Though separated by the “Ice Curtain” during the days of the Cold War, they now continue their traditions of visiting each other to trade and celebrate festivals together. The existent interaction between Alaska and the Russian Far East is thereby evident (though whether it justifies Palin’s claim of having foreign policy experience is more questionable). However, while this physical nearness does not necessarily indicate any actual inclusion of Russian elements into Alaskan culture, Alaska can boast not only of physical nearness to Russia, but of its own Russian past. (“Alaska-RFE Relations”, “Alaska-RFE Facts”)

It was not until the arrival of Russian fur traders in the early 1700s that indigenous Alaskan tribes (including two groups of Aleuts, the Alutiiqs, Chugachs, Ehaks, Tlingits, Haidas, and Tsimshians) were first exposed to European presence (Hardwick 49, 50). Peter the Great (Russian Tsar between 1682 and 1725) was behind the initial exploration of Alaskan territory by Russian traders. Always interested in expanding Russia’s land and trade dominance, Peter the Great ordered Vitus Bering to explore the lands east of Kamchatka on his deathbed, “to find out whether Asia and America are connected” (Hardwick 52-3). Braving the frequent fog, high winds, and heavy rainstorms that barrage the seas separating the two continents, Bering discovered this continental division in 1728, along with the straits that would henceforth bear his name (Hardwick 53). In 1741, Bering’s ship was wrecked in the Bering Sea during his second voyage to Alaska : this shipwreck lead to Bering’s death, but marked the beginning of the Russian-American trading era as the surviving crew members spent their stranded time hunting

for seals, foxes and sea otters (Hardwick 53). Russian trappers and merchants – emboldened by reports of such large numbers of fur-bearing animals – quickly began venturing to the Alaskan lands and setting up permanent bases along the coastlines (Hardwick 54).

The merchant Shelikov, who had lived in Alaska from 1783-87 and founded a fort at Three Saints Harbor (Hardwick 54), was largely responsible for the Russian Orthodox missionary outreach to the Native Alaskan populations. He was the first to baptize Natives at Kodiak, and spent several years struggling to gain Catherine the Great's support (Tsarina from 1762-96) for his plan to establish a single trading company that would have a monopoly on hunting and trading in the Alaskan region, and that would also be charged with looking after the educational and spiritual needs of the Native people (Hardwick 55). Catherine denied the monopoly request, but did allow for the first Orthodox missionaries to travel to Kodiak, where the first Russian Orthodox Church was constructed in 1794, and several years later, the first school for Native children (Hardwick 56).

Catherine's son Paul I (Tsar from 1796-1801) approved Shelikov's plan to establish a monopoly in 1799, granting "total control over the economic and spiritual development of the Russian colonies" to the newly created, government-controlled Russian-American Company (Hardwick 57). This company was entrusted with spreading the Orthodox faith throughout Alaska by building churches, and by paying for this and all other spiritual expenses (Hardwick 58). In the early 1800s, Aleksandr Baranov, head of the Russian-American Company from 1790-1818, extended his expansionist gaze beyond Alaska towards Hawaii and California: both of which offered strategic trade-route positions, as well as a climate propitious for growing food and stocking the provisions of the Russian American Company (Hardwick 61, 65). Setting up forts at Fort Ross near San Francisco, and in Princeville on Kauai, Russia attempted to maintain

dominance, but – thanks to Hawaiian revolts and American expansion in California – had to abandon these settlements which would later serve as focal points for Russian immigration.

Despite the Russian State approval for their mission work in Alaska, Russian Orthodox missionaries found many obstacles in their attempts to convert the Native population: differences in languages, culture, and spiritual views (Hardwick 56). However, both worship styles were mystical in nature, and included the basic beliefs in a creator, the soul, immortality, heaven and hell, and good and evil spirits (Hardwick 56). Moreover, the Natives were strongly pressured by Russian traders to convert; Russian hunters – originating for the most part from inland Siberia – depended upon the skill of the Native population to successfully hunt fur-bearing animals. The Natives were thereby virtually enslaved by the Russian intruders, forced to go on hunting expeditions, help with the construction of forts, and prepare food for their Russian subjugators (Hardwick 59). Part of this enslavement entailed the forced acceptance of Russian Orthodoxy, which offered a release from burdensome taxes. The Native population was especially abused during Baranov's rule over the Russian-American Company from 1790-1818, during which many fights broke out between the Russians and locals, and so many complaints were made that Baranov was eventually replaced by a gentler administration (Hardwick 59). The harsh treatment suffered by Natives, along with their exposure to previously unknown European diseases, caused 80% of their population to perish during these first few generations of Russian conquest (Hardwick 58).

Despite the loathing that one would expect the Native Alaskans to have felt towards their vanquishing enslavers, this aversion did not extend towards the Russian Orthodox Church. Indeed, unlike many other Christian missionary habits, Orthodox missionaries encouraged the superimposition of Orthodox beliefs upon Native ones. Rather than deny the authenticity of

Native religion and require its complete suppression, Orthodoxy allowed Native converts to retain many of their former beliefs and practices (Hardwick 57). Likewise, Native Alaskan languages were not disparaged, but missionaries instead undertook to learn Native languages: establishing bilingualism as school policy, creating written forms for these oral languages, and translating a variety of sacred texts from Russian into the Native languages. Russian missionaries also trained Native clergy to spread the faith among their own people (Hardwick 61). This respect for and encouragement of Native traditions – coupled with the Church’s concern for Native wellbeing that offered a shield against the abusive trading practices – helped contribute to the initial flourishing and long-lasting endurance of the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska. By 1850, nine Russian Orthodox churches and 37 chapels had been established (Hardwick 61).

By the mid 1800s, the depletion of fur-bearing animals, along with the increasing advancement of English and American traders, eventually led to the end of Russia’s colonial empire in North America (Hardwick 69). In 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the United States for the marginal price of 2¢ per acre (Hardwick 70, “Alaska-RFE Facts”). Even at such a bargain price, this deal – seeming to enhance US holdings by only an expansive “icebox” – was ridiculed as “Seward’s Folly” (as it was undertaken by the US Secretary of State William Seward) (“Alaska-RFE Facts”).

At its height, the Russian population in Alaska did not exceed 1,000 people, and after the sale, very few traders or missionaries remained (Hardwick 51). Most returned to Russia, though some migrated down to Russia’s previous settlements in California (Hardwick 75). Nonetheless, the Russian Orthodox Church survived, its work carried on primarily by lay clergy. As part of the Treaty of Cession to the United States, the Russian Orthodox Church had been assured of its right to retain its property and continue its mission (Hardwick 71). This it managed to do, despite

the incoming Protestant missionaries supported by the United States government (Russian Orthodox Museum). Protestant church services were conducted only in English, and the use of Native languages was eventually banned in schools, causing most of the Orthodox parish schools to be forcibly closed (Russian Orthodox Museum). Protestant schools, on the other hand, were financed with government money, and the Protestant faith became a social distinguisher of status (Tsapina 3). Nonetheless, Orthodoxy survived – and even grew – due in large part to its similarities with Native religions and most importantly, to its respect of Native peoples and their culture (Tsapina 3). By keeping alive the Orthodox Church, the Natives likewise managed to keep alive their own Native cultures and languages. And in the process, they have kept alive elements of Russian culture as well: from the cooking of Russian dishes, to the playing of the balalaika, to the inclusion of Russian words into their own languages and Russian folk tales into their Native folklore (Hardwick 73, “Alaska-RFE Facts”, Black 287).

Not only did the Orthodox Church survive among the Native Alaskan population, but it continued to spread throughout the rest of North America. After the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the secular Soviet Union, relations between Orthodox Americans and Orthodox Russians were hindered (Matusiak). In the early 1920s, the Patriarch of Moscow, Saint Tikhon, called on the non-Russian dioceses to organize themselves autonomously (Matusiak). Following Tikhon’s arrest shortly thereafter, the various ethnic groups in America organized themselves into separate, and largely ethnic-based, dioceses and became completely independent from the Russian Church (Matusiak, Hardwick 107). In the 1960s, communication resumed between Russia and the various American Orthodox churches, and in 1970 the Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church, Romanian Orthodox Episcopate, Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese, and Bulgarian Orthodox Diocese re-organized themselves into The Orthodox

Church in America (Matusiak), though several other diverse Orthodox groups continue to maintain independent jurisdiction (“Orthodoxy in America”). Today, there are some five million Orthodox Christians in America (“Orthodox Alaska Visitor’s and Pilgrim’s Guide”).

The diversity of American Orthodox Church jurisdiction can be seen in Anchorage, home to six Orthodox Church of America (OCA) churches (St. Innocent Cathedral, St. Tikhon of Moscow Mission, St. Alexis Mission, the Protecting Veil of the Theotokos Orthodox Community, St. Lazarus Mission, and St. Nicholas Church), two Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America churches (St. John Cathedral and St. Herman Mission), one Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) church (St. James the Just Orthodox Mission Parish), and one Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America (GOARCH) church (Holy Transfiguration Church). Only a few of the original Russian churches are still in use in Alaska, as the expanding Orthodox Church needed both to construct new churches and to rebuild old churches as they were destroyed by fires (Fuchs). Of the Anchorage Orthodox churches, St. Nicholas Church (OCA), in the Native village of Eklutna, is the only one that can date back to the times of Russian occupation: built at least by 1870, and potentially as early as 1830, it is actually the oldest building in Anchorage (Anchorage itself was not established until 1914 as a railroad construction port) (Rosen).

Today, the legacy of Alaska’s Russian past is most visible in the manifest onion-domed Churches that dot the landscape. Almost all of the Russian Orthodox Churches in Anchorage are topped by colorful onion domes, adding through this traditional Russian architecture to the Russian flavor of the city. Inside the churches, too, the Russian heritage of the Orthodox Church is celebrated (Hardwick 74), with all the usual components of Russian Orthodox services: beautiful gilded ornamentation and icons; incense burning; lengthy services conducted through

chanting, singing, and priestly rituals; seating only for the elderly. Moreover, many of the Orthodox Alaskan churches are unique in adhering to the Julian calendar and celebrating Christmas, among other holidays, with Russia on January 7<sup>th</sup> (“Alaska-RFE Facts”).

Indeed, the celebration of Russian heritage and Orthodox history is clearly seen in the namesakes of two of the Orthodox Churches in Anchorage: St. Tikhon (OCA) and St. Herman (Antiochan). St Herman was part of the first group of Orthodox missionaries who arrived at Kodiak in 1784 (Father John). He spent his early years in Alaska spreading the faith among Native Aleuts and defending their rights against the oppressive Russian authorities (Father John). He was the last of the original party to survive, and lived his last years growing his own food and practicing an ascetic hermitism on the remote Spruce Island until his death in 1837 (Father John). He was the first saint to be canonized by the Orthodox Church in America in 1970 (Hardwick 113). St. Tikhon, born Vasily Ivanovich Belavin in 1865, was named Tikhon in honor of St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (Matusiak). In 1898, he was appointed Bishop of the Aleutian Islands and Alaska (Matusiak). He traveled all throughout North America, establishing churches in New York and Pennsylvania along with wandering throughout the Alaskan wilderness by kayak and dogsled to encourage missionary development (Father John). Universally loved for his meekness and devotion, he was made an honorary citizen of the United States by the Americans (Matusiak). Called back to Russia in 1907, he continued his work, and after the Revolution, he condemned the killing of the Tsar’s family and the attacks of the new regime on the Church, including the shooting of some 10,000 believers (Matusiak). From 1922-23 he was imprisoned for his opposition to the confiscation of Church Property, though upon his release, he declared his loyalty to the new regime in an effort to relieve some of the harsh measures taken against the Church and its followers (Matusiak).

While the vibrancy of the Orthodox Church speaks today of Alaska's Russian heritage, it speaks at the same of Alaska's Native heritage in its unique intermingling of the two cultures. Indeed, the Orthodox Church in Alaska remains especially popular with Native Alaskans: some three-fourths of the priests are of Native ancestry, and almost all Native Alutiiqs and Aleuts are Orthodox Christians, along with many Tlingits, Tu'piks, and Denes (Russian Orthodox Museum). The interweaving of both Native and Russian traditions can be seen in the beading of Orthodox icons and vestments, and the woven grass and carved ivory decorations found in Alaskan Orthodox churches (Russian Orthodox Museum). The dual nature of Alaskan Russian Orthodoxy is visible in the exterior of St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church: located in the Native village of Eklutna in the outskirts of Anchorage, this church combines the Russian three-bar crossed onion-domes crowning the Church with the surrounding Native "spirit houses" – topped by Orthodox crosses – that color the encompassing cemetery (Rosen). The celebration of Russian Orthodoxy today – including both its Russian and Native heritage – is further apparent and emphasized in the opening of a Russian Orthodox Museum in downtown Anchorage in 2005, which tells the story of the Orthodoxy's Native and Russian roots along with displaying 18<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox artifacts (Russian Orthodox Museum).

The historical presence of Russians in Alaska has left more marks than just the survival of the Orthodox Church and the visible imprint of Russian religious architecture. While a large portion of Russian place names were translated after the American purchase of Alaska, many still exist, including the Baranov and Chichagof Islands (explorers Alexandr Baranov and Vasili Chichagof), Kasilof River on the Kenai Peninsula (an early Russian post), and Makushin Volcano in the Aleutian Islands (meaning "crown of the head") (Gedney). The name "Alaska" itself partially reflects the state's Russian heritage: the name began to be used by Russian

explorers based on the Aleut word “alaxsxaq” meaning “the mainland” (lit. “the objects towards which the action of the sea is directed”) with which Aleuts referred to the area (Ransom 550-1). Many Russian surnames have also survived as a result of intermarriage between Russians and Natives during the Russian Colonial era (“Alaska-RFE Facts”). This survival of Russian place names and surnames, combined with the state’s Russian history, has also served as inspiration for numerous, more recently-named place names: Anchorage has sections where multitudes of Russian street names (mainly ending in -of) can be found, from Andreanof, Mitkof, and Neva to Glazanof, Sikorof, and Rezanof.

The state’s history and heritage – including its Russian past – form an important component of modern Alaskan identity, as celebrated in history exhibits (as are found in the Anchorage and Russian Orthodox museums) as well as the Russian relics that continue to permeate modern Alaskan life. Samovars and portraits of the Russian Tsar reside in the Alaska State House and the Governor’s House in Juneo (“Alaska-RFE Facts”), while matryoshkas (nesting dolls), lacquer boxes, and other Russian souvenirs can be found at just about any tourist shopping-center in Alaska.

The initial Russian exploration of Alaska – and its subsequent subjugation – was originally provoked by its physical nearness to the Russian Empire. This nearness – on top of Alaska’s Russian heritage – has remained an important incentive for incorporating Russian elements into Alaskan culture. Alaska has sister relations with some dozen Far East cities and regions (Anchorage’s sister-city is Magadan) (“Alaska-RFE Facts”) – which encourages academic and cultural exchange programs – and the Russian language is a popular choice for elementary, middle school, high school, and university students to take. In Anchorage, Russian is offered by four of the more prominent high schools and middle schools (out of 20 total), and is

even one of four partial-immersion programs recently initiated in the city (“World Languages”). High school students studying Russian all throughout Alaska are encouraged to compete in an annual Russian Olympiad held in Anchorage: the students are split up into different levels (including one for heritage speakers) and expected to orally expound upon different topics, answer questions, and recite a poem: the winner is granted a three-week trip to Russia ([http://juneauempire.com/stories/042508/nei\\_272093676.shtml](http://juneauempire.com/stories/042508/nei_272093676.shtml)). Russian is also offered as a major and minor at the University of Alaska Anchorage, which boasts of a Russian Conversation Group that meets every other week, as well as a Russian Club – *Xleb da sol* – that actively “organizes film nights, cultural outings, and Russian-style outdoor activities (e.g., mushroom picking)” (“Russian Related Links”).

Not only do Alaskans study Russian in Anchorage, but many Russians also study at UAA: residents of Alaska sister cities and regions are encouraged to study at UAA by being offered resident tuition rates (“Alaska-RFE Facts”). In fact, more Russians study at UAA than at any other American campus (“Alaska-RFE Facts”). Part of UAA, the American Russian Center has branch campuses in some half a dozen Russian Far East cities aimed at developing “the RFE’s capacity to conduct programs for Russian businesspeople, educational professionals and government leaders so that they may promote democracy, civil society and the growth of a free market economy” (“About ARC”).

As evidence of Alaska’s partiality towards Russia and Russian culture – thanks to its heritage and physical proximity that have encouraged exchanges and joint projects – Alaska has been the single largest source of humanitarian aid given to the Russian Far East. This aid has been initiated by individuals, charities, and churches, as well as businesses and governments

(including the U.S. Agency for International Development) who are aiming to bolster the RFE's democratic institutions and market economy ("Alaska-RFE Facts").

A large part of the Russian culture alive in Anchorage today comes not only from Alaska's physical proximity to Russia and its own Russian heritage, but from the recent arrival of large numbers of Russian immigrants. In the last half a century, over a million Russians have immigrated to the United States (Hardwick 125). While most were drawn to already established Russian nodes in California (Hardwick 146) and Oregon (Hardwick 116) or to large immigrant-attracting cities like New York City, Chicago, Washington D.C. or Detroit, currently somewhere around five thousand ethnic Russians reside in the Anchorage area (estimated at 5,180 +/- 1,416), most having immigrated within the last few decades (Anchorage Municipality, Alaska).

The history of Russian immigration into the United States, and more particularly, into Alaska and Anchorage, begins with the story of the Old Believers. In the mid-seventeenth century, Patriarch Nikon claimed that the Russian church had strayed from some of its original Byzantine rituals (Hardwick 22). A series of reforms (notably changing the number of fingers used to sign the cross from two to three, the spelling of the name Jesus, the direction of the procession, the number of Prospora in the liturgy and a few words in the Creed) were therefore initiated, and finally officialized in 1666 (Hardwick 22). These reforms were intended to bring Russian Orthodoxy back in line with Greek Orthodoxy to emphasize the unity of the Eastern church (Hardwick 22). A dissenting group, however, refused to accept the new changes, insisting on the holiness of the original rites and the necessity to remain faithful to them, as "everything *Russian* was sacred and perfect and needed no alteration" (Hardwick 22-3). Ultimately, this Old Believer movement was excommunicated from the reformed Russian Church, and thousands retreated into remote villages (Hardwick 23).

Throughout the following centuries, they suffered periodic persecution, and after the collectivization of their rural village refuges by the Soviets, thousands migrated into China (Hardwick 115). After the Soviet forces moved into the border lands of China, many of these Old Believer refugees were carted back into the Soviet Union (Hardwick 115). The World Council of Churches stepped in at this point to help secure visas and funds to help Old Believers emigrate, and thousands ended up in Oregon (Hardwick 115). Feeling threatened by daily contact with Americans through school and the community at large, a small group of the Oregon Old Believers moved up to the Kenai Peninsula in 1968 in their unremitting struggle to preserve their unique religious and cultural identity (Hardwick 116). This move was helped by a loan from the Tolstoy Foundation (established by the youngest daughter of Leo Tolstoy to help Russians fleeing from the Soviet Union), which allowed them to purchase 640 acres of government land (Hardwick 118). Their first village, Nikolaevsk, was named after St. Nicholas, and has since grown and prospered with more families moving up from Oregon (Hardwick 118). In 1982, a schism within Nikolaevsk led to the establishment of four other Old Believer settlements nearby: Dolina, Rozdolna, Vozkretenka, and Kachemak Celo, with all of these coastal villages specializing in commercial fishing (Hardwick 120). To further isolate themselves from the invading American culture, some have also made their way to a remote island near Kodiak, and others up to the north of Anchorage, where they have established a small village in the Matanuska Valley (Hardwick 120). Their religion completely dominates their lives, having been their constant buttress which has bound them together and for which they have sacrificed everything: this is readily apparent, given that they tend to avoid interaction with outsiders, the women cover their heads with scarves in public, and the men are forbidden to shave (Hardwick 119). Other Russians living in Anchorage have come across these Old Believers in various stores

– noticing their speaking of Russian along with their conservative dress and covered heads (for women) – but the Old Believers avoid contact even with other Russians.

Old Believers have not been the only Russians to immigrate to the United States (and Alaska): all religious sects and political dissenters were persecuted during the Soviet era, provoking the desire to emigrate. Until the 1980s, known Christians, Jews, or other non-atheists were persecuted for their supposedly “anti-communist” beliefs and were put under constant pressure to denounce their religion. This persecution took many forms, from sporadic slurs and physical aggression to the confiscation of religious buildings; to exclusion from most college and university admission and the impossibility of job advancement; to fines, imprisonment, and labor camp sentences; to forced stays in psychiatric hospitals; and even to taking away one’s children and putting them into an orphanage (Hardwick 44, 127). The height of this persecution occurred during the 50s and 60s, and finally in the late 1980s Gorbachev’s liberalizing *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies permitted Soviet believers the freedom to openly worship (Hardwick 46). Nonetheless, though, while national policies improved hereafter with regard to the legalization of religious freedom, local government attitudes have taken much longer to change, and discrimination against Jews, Christians, and other believers did not end with Gorbachev’s new policies (Hardwick 127).

Another large push for emigration has been the aspiration for economic betterment. Long lines have been an enduring symbol of the Soviet Union, with the emphasis of the Soviet economy placed upon industrial production rather than adequate supply of consumer goods. Shortages of food supplies and other consumer goods became especially problematic during the 1980s, when the economic conditions within the Soviet Union began to drastically deteriorate (Hardwick 126). Forced to stand in line for hours only to discover empty shelves or soaring and

unaffordable prices for meager amounts of poor quality foods was a daily challenge of living in the Soviet Union (Hardwick 126). It could take ten years to finally get an apartment, and another six for a telephone to be installed (Hardwick 127).

The oppressive Communist regime coupled with its economic hardships fostered the desire to emigrate in many a citizen. The United States, perceived as both the land of the free – in a religious and political sense – and as the land of opportunity, has long inspired the poor and down-trodden with dreams of immigration. However, the emigration controls of the Soviet Union (and later the FSU) and immigration controls of the United States have greatly influenced who and how many Russians have been allowed to immigrate. The upheaval brought about by the Russian Revolution instigated a large-scale exodus of those fleeing the new regime. Throughout the 1920s, though, limits began to be established controlling how many could leave and enter the country throughout Europe and North America (Rystad 1171). In the US, restrictive quotas were established limiting the numbers of those allowed to immigrate from each country based on the current proportion of those residing in the United States, which greatly favored the admission of Western Europeans over other nationalities (Hardwick 130). In the Soviet Union, emigration policies became more and repressive, especially when Stalin took over in the 1930s, and exit visas became extremely difficult for Russians to obtain prior to the late 1980s (Hardwick 111, Churgin 317).

After WWII, the US established a special quota for refugees – those fleeing political, religious or racial persecution that currently threatened their life or freedom, or would in the near future, and that was due to their association with a particular group (excluding economic difficulties) (Hardwick 133). During the Cold War, this refugee quota was especially aimed at refugees escaping from communist countries (Churgin 313-14). These refugees were not only

actively helped and supported by the US, but used as propaganda and instruments of foreign policy throughout the Cold War: the Voice of America “encouraged the peoples of Eastern Europe to ‘vote with their feet,’ to flee from Communism to freedom in the West” (Rystad 1191). This massive push from both inside and outside the Soviet Union for an ease of emigration controls finally lead to a large-scale exodus with the legalization of emigration in 1989, after a meeting between Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan (Hardwick 129-130).

After the granting of religious and political freedom, and the permission of emigration, Russians have no longer been considered as refugees (Hardwick 189). Since the late 1980s, Russians have instead been immigrating to the US primarily under the family preference system, which favors the reuniting of family members with those already living in the United States (Hardwick 131-32, 136). Some have also come under the Diversity Immigrant Visa program, or the Green Card Lottery, which allows 50,000 immigrants emigrating from countries with previously low immigration rates to receive permanent resident visas. This program was started in 1995, though Russia was ruled ineligible from 2005 to 2010.

Another recent trend in Russian immigration has been the “Russian mail order bride.” Outnumbering men by about 10 to 9, or by about 10 million total, Russian women seeking to escape their desperate economic conditions and lack of future, or who are simply looking for their ideal man, have readily been engaging in internet dating and accepting American proposals (Petrova). American men are attracted by the often more traditional home-focused values of Russian women and by their greater patience and devotion as compared to the stereotypical independence-asserting American woman.

A final push that has drawn both Russian men and Russian women to immigrate to the United States has been the desire to avoid military service. All Russian men between the ages of

18 and 27 had to serve in the Soviet, and now Russian, Army for two years. This term was recently changed to one year, but it is still considered by many to be a form of “modern slavery”. Russians often go to great lengths to avoid getting conscripted, from making yourself supposedly too sick to serve, to having two children (preferably sick children) by the age of 18, to undergoing military training through a university, to escaping from Russia altogether. Russian women are often led to emigrate before their male children come of age in order to prevent them having to serve their forced term. (Soloview)

Where have the Russians in Alaska, and more particularly in Anchorage, come from? And why have they ended up there? As already seen, a large knot of Old Believers have migrated up to Nikolaevsk, and a small group up to the Matanuska Valley north of Anchorage, seeking further isolation from mainstream American culture. Although generally avoiding interaction with the Anchorage community, they nonetheless do add a distinctive Russian flavor to the city due to their conservative dress and lifestyle combined with their speaking of Russian, much like the Amish in the Midwest. Those on the Kenai Peninsula also attracted recent attention in the news for having lost five members in a plane crash in early January 2008 (Associated Press).

As for the other Russians, I studied the more visible Russians in the community as well as those connected with Michael’s family. Michael’s parents – Alexander Zlatkovski and Yulia Pechersky – decided to emigrate from Russia in 1993. As a Jewish family, they had already experienced some academic and occupational limitations in Russia, as well as the occasional anti-Semitic slur. As the economy began plummeting and the political situation became more unstable in the late 80s and early 90s, Michael’s parents decided to join the mass Jewish exodus towards Israel, where they were enticed by the dream of communal kibbutz life. Both sets of Michael’s grandparents and uncles followed, with those on his mother’s side joining them in

Israel, and those on his father's side attracted by Germany's offers of immigration and significant financial support for Jewish emigrants to help absolve its past anti-Semitic crimes. Within a few years of living in Israel, however, Michael's parents discovered that the hot Israeli sun was a bit too drastic of a change from the cooler Moscow weather, and turned their gaze towards Canada and the United States. Years later, they managed to secure U.S. visas due to the Green Card Lottery and immigrated with Michael and his younger brother Ariel in 1999, letting Michael's older sister Nika stay behind in Israel.

The Russians living in Anchorage are composed of a much larger percentage of women than men (Feodore, Yulia). Most of the men came over with their wives and children, whereas most of the women are married to American men. Almost all seem to have been at least partly attracted to life in the United States based on a greater chance for economic prosperity. Some had business opportunities that first drew them to Anchorage, and at least a few, including Michael's family, have been drawn to Alaska in particular because of its cooler Russian-like weather and environment. Many of the women especially also ended up in Anchorage because of participating in academic or cultural exchanges – several with Anchorage's sister city, Magadan – and then falling in love with American men and choosing to remain here. Some of the women also immigrated purely because of love, resulting from on-line dating and the so-called "Russian bride" marriages. Several other women immigrated to Anchorage in order to save their sons from the army (Soloview). Besides the Old Believers, the majority of the Russians in Anchorage have immigrated within the last decade or so, and hence were pushed to emigrate not as much by Soviet religious or political persecution, but more by the economic collapsing of the FSU.

Unlike other American cities in which large numbers of Russians have immigrated and formed Russian communities – living near each other and establishing Russian stores,

restaurants, and schools – the Russians in Anchorage comprise only about 1.9% of the total population (+/- .5%) (“Anchorage Municipality, Alaska”). Moreover, they are spread throughout the city with many having intermarried and become part of American families. As a consequence, the Russians in Anchorage have needed to interact more with American culture than those who manage to maintain a “mini Russia” with a limited need to learn English or adapt to American cultural norms. Those Russians who immigrated as couples or families in Anchorage do tend to preserve more of their Russian language and cultural heritage and transmit more of it to their children than those who marry Americans. Nonetheless, even within these families, the second-generation children tend to become more American than Russian as they either lose or never fully develop their Russian language skills because of their integration into American culture through the public school system. Many of these second-generation children also forcefully resist their parents’ attempts to have them speak Russian at home and do outside reading in Russian, given that this immigrant culture seems of little use in their new country (Hardwick 164).

Despite being so spread out, the Russians in Anchorage have still managed to bond together and form a Russian network throughout the city. Indeed, being “Russian” continues to form an integral part of their identity. Soviet education aimed to unify Soviet citizens via a Moscow-based Russian language and culture. Michael’s family, for example, is both Jewish and Russian, but places a much stronger emphasis upon their Russian identity and are more connected to Russian circles in Anchorage than to the Jewish community. This is partly because their Jewish identity – thanks to the repressive Soviet regime – is far more secular- and ethnic-based than a practicing religious identity, like most of the Jewish immigrants in the United States (Gold 261, 265). Another who considers herself first and foremost a Russian is a Russian-

speaking woman who is actually Uzbek. She even chose to move to Alaska because of the Soviet portrayal of a very non-Uzbekistan “motherland” which she had never known, one where snow falls and birch trees grow and mushrooms and blueberries can be gathered.

This Soviet-instilled vision of Russian culture and the importance of the Russian language largely forms the vision of Russian culture that remains within most of the Russian immigrants in Anchorage. Though many still return to Russia each year to visit their families and friends and keep up with modern Russian news and culture through television and the Internet, their Russian identity is that which was ingrained within them as children. It is interesting to look at the image of Russian culture that immigrant children inherit – especially for those families who do not often return to Russia. Michael’s parents greatly miss the Soviet-era Russian culture they left behind, and Michael’s vision of his Russian identity is thus almost entirely derived from the culture maintained and referenced by his parents. This identity is in large part based upon songs and movies that were popular in the 70s and 80s: including many songs by Bulat Okudzhava (1924-97) – famous for his subtle challenges to the political authorities – and others by the well-known bard Yuri Vizbor (1934-84), whose songs focus more on nature and travel; and movies such as *Karnavalnaya Noch (Carnival Night)* (1956) – comparable to American secular Christmas classics – *Tot samyy Myunkhgauzen (That Very Munchausen)* (1979), and *Brilliantovaya ruka (The Diamond Arm)* (1968) starring the popular actor and singer Andrei Mironov (1941-87).

What is it that makes these Russian immigrants “Russian”? And how is their “Russianness” apparent in their interaction with American culture? On a superficial level, the mere fact of speaking Russian makes them Russian and bonds them together with other Russians: as one woman said, it is a joy to be somewhere around town and randomly hear

someone else speaking Russian. This is indeed how many of the Russians find each other and enter into the various Russian circles of the city. The knot of Russians that forms thereby helps keep alive Russian culture within the individual Russians. The bonding between Russians is so important that, as one woman explained, when the child of a Russian died, all the Russians in the city turned up at the funeral to pay their respects to the “Russian” woman, even though most did not know her very well. They exchange Russian books and movies – as not many were able to bring large quantities with them when they immigrated – and gather together at one of their houses to celebrate various Russian holidays, including New Years, Victory Day, and – for the Orthodox – Easter. At these parties, they bring Russian foods that each continues to cook at home, given that these are the foods they grew up eating and learning how to cook: borsch, potato salad, piroshkies, mushroom and fish soups, plov, sharlotka. One of the more elderly ladies who immigrated with her daughter used to be commissioned to cook Russian food for many of these gatherings, though now only consents to special requests. Russian immigrants must cook their own ethnic food, as the few Russian cafés that have opened in Anchorage have since gone out of business. This potentially reflects the fact that most of the Russian immigrants are women who have grown up cooking their own food, along with the desire to seek economic betterment that has been a principal push for immigration, which usually does not jibe with the spending of extra money on food that could be made at home.

Many of the Russians also make their own caviar and share this rather disdained-by-Americans delicacy among appreciating Russian friends. Tea is of great importance to all Russian families, and when stopping in to visit a friend, they will usually chat over a cup of tea. Michael’s parents even make their own unique tea, kombucha: this slightly alcoholic tea is made by adding a living kombucha yeast culture – also called a “tea mushroom” – into a mixture of

brewed tea and sugar which then duplicates itself and forms a mushroom-like disc on top of the liquid mix. Like many Alaskans, Russians enjoy berry-picking, but unlike most hesitant Americans, they also enjoy hunting for wild mushrooms (though nature centers do offer mushroom-picking classes to teach Americans how to identify edible ones). One Russian woman who studied in Anchorage as part of a singing cultural exchange and who has since married an American is especially renowned for her hosting of Russian parties because of the *banya* (a Russian steam bath) that she and her husband have built at their house.

Another common trait of Russian immigrants in Alaska is their concern over the second generation. While generally happy to be in the United States as a more economically secure place to raise their children, and in Alaska as a place of fresher air and natural beauty, most of the women, especially, desire their children to be as fluent and literate in Russian as possible, and will debate about whose children speak better Russian and have read more Russian books. Often having American husbands, it is a challenging task to ensure their children's interest and ability in Russian. Some approach the problem more strictly, organizing Russian lessons for their children and even forming Russian classes for groups of immigrant children, while others simply try to talk to their children as much as possible in Russian, and encourage their Russian by routinely visiting relatives in Russia and even having them go to school in Russia during longer stays.

Another trait common to some of the Russian male immigrants is their self-employment and mass of independent business schemes. Michael's father works not only as a performing pianist, but as a ballet and church accompanist and a piano technician, along with attempting to sell CDs of his recordings. Likewise, another Russian, Fyodor Soloviev, has managed to find a way to watch over his children during the day as a stay-at-home father along with organizing

several home-based businesses: building and managing websites in Russian and English for American companies ([www.gold-rus.com](http://www.gold-rus.com), [www.coffeelandak.com](http://www.coffeelandak.com)), offering public notary services ([http://www.rusa.alaska.com/RUSA\\_Russian\\_American/Notary.html](http://www.rusa.alaska.com/RUSA_Russian_American/Notary.html)) (especially for documents written in Russian, as – since 9/11 – American notaries are turning away all notarizations written in foreign languages), and selling his own invented “Six Generations” card game ([www.sixgenerations.com](http://www.sixgenerations.com)). Fyodor also mentioned the different Russian mentality of creative resourcefulness: having arrived at the request of an Anchorage business 19 years ago, he not allowed to earn money from another company for the first four months of his stay. In order to get around this problem, he established his own “company” – RUSA, the Russian American Information Bureau (adding Internet functionality through the website [www.rusa.alaska.com](http://www.rusa.alaska.com), and Notary services in 2006) – which would then allow any proceeds he made from translating and advertising to go directly to the company rather than to himself. As soon as he was able to, he did get a work permit, followed shortly thereafter by a Green Card and nine years later, by US citizenship. (Soloview)

Russian immigrants, having come from a country marked by lacking consumer goods and a lower level of prosperity, also tend to be a little more thrifty than Americans, and enjoy the bulk-buying shopping available at stores like Costco (Old Believers included). They are also often overwhelmed by the complexity of the American economic life and disappointed by the lack of free, universal health care (Gold 264). Many hope to enter into the school system or another government or state job in order to secure the associated health care benefits. The difference in American relations is another cultural difference that is sometimes hard to adjust to, perceiving the constant smiling and “how are you”’s as superficial and fake.

Most of the Russians who immigrated to Anchorage tend to be fairly satisfied with their life in the United States: though missing their Native land, they usually recognize the corruption and instability of the FSU as compared to the United States. A Russian woman and her husband who went back to Russia to visit her family were surprised by the still present corruption when they were forced to pay two bribes of some 5,000 rubles in order to not be detained within the country and have their passports revoked. Furthermore, life in America is often intimately tied to their personal family life for the Russian women who have married Americans. In general, most do accept the fact that American culture will permeate their life and especially that of their children's, and have peacefully established their place as a member of two worlds. Indeed, one of the Russian women who married an Alaskan dog-sledder became the first Russian woman to compete in the Iditarod, combining her Russian and Alaskan worlds in a sport shared by both regions. Most unconsciously come to accept American values of money, hard work, and material possessions (Hardwick 166). With Michael's father, it has been interesting to notice the changes in him over the past few years, as he has gradually gained the comfort of spending money more easily, driving to places instead of trying to walk or bike, being concerned – though somewhat jokingly – about the number of calories he is eating and the exercises he needs to do at the gym, and spending more time driving his son to tennis practice rather than making him take the bus. On the whole, the Russians have integrated into American society, helped by the fact that unlike other immigrants or Alaskan Natives, Russians – being Europeans – do not tend to look distinctly different than most other Americans, and hence have an easier time “melting into the mainstream” (Delgado-Gaitan 146). Moreover, most of the Russians in Alaska have also studied and often mastered English before immigrating. Nonetheless, for some – especially those who did not marry Americans – the enduring accent remains a hindrance.

The Russians in Anchorage, like anywhere in the United States, have continued to maintain their Russian identity in networking with other Russians, all the while adapting to the American life-style. Nonetheless, Anchorage – and other cities in Alaska – provide a unique opportunity for these Russian immigrants to interact with the Russian heritage of Alaska. As Russia is part of the state’s history, Alaskans are more interested in the culture of these immigrants than other immigrants with a seemingly more “foreign” and unrelated culture. The *Style of Russia* in two downtown Anchorage locations – started, owned, and run by Russian immigrants – is a store that sells typical Russian gifts and that survives not on Russian immigrants but on tourists who think of Alaska as being partly Russian.

The Alaskan interest in Russian culture is also seen in the popularity of the Russian language in Alaska. This interest helped ensure the success of a Russian woman – Elena Farkas – in her efforts to initiate the first Russian elementary immersion program in the United States at Turnagain Elementary School. Also teaching Russian at UAA, Elena managed to successfully encourage the opening of a partial-immersion program for Russian in 2003, in which students are immersed in Russian for half the day (“World Languages”). The first year, it started as a Kindergarten level class with one teacher. Each succeeding year, the scope of the immersion program has increased, and the initial Kindergarten class has reached the fifth-grade level with a total of around 180 students enrolled (“World Languages”). By 2015, it will have reached its goal of encompassing K-12 grades. A lottery determines which children are able to enter, which partially favors the children in the Turnagain School District and the siblings of current students (“World Languages”). The success of this endeavor, while applicable to the benefits of bilingualism with any two languages, is nonetheless probably at least partly due to Alaskans’ favorable perception of their Russian heritage and the usefulness of Russian as the language of

Alaska's neighbor (the other two languages currently offered in partial-immersion programs in Anchorage are Spanish and Japanese ("World Languages")). This program also benefits Russian immigrants with the prospect of entering their children in the program, and with the possibility of teaching Russian at the school. The program teaches not only Russian language, but Russian culture as well, through the incorporation of Russian games, theatre, art, puppet shows, children's songs, and costumed theatrical events performed for various holidays (Farkas "Russian Children's Class"). Another Russian couple has also helped support the Russian language programs at UAA in letting their café serve as a weekly meeting place for Russian chats, and have helped expose Alaskans to Russian cuisine in offering Russian specialties on their menu: while their piroshkies did not end up being very popular, their stuffed cabbage rolls continue to enjoy success.

Russian Orthodox immigrants have found a particularly ideal welcome for their culture in that the Russian Orthodox Church is alive and thriving today thanks to the original Russian missionaries and the Native population. One of the churches, St. Tikhon, even performs the ceremony in Russian most weeks, as there are often more Russian-speakers attending than English-speakers.

Another Russian woman in Anchorage initiated the founding of a Russian singing organization in 2007. Helped by a grant from Russia, she established the Russian American Colony Singers (RACS). This choir "rehearses and performs choral literature with a unique emphasis on Russian music in various idioms, folk, classical, and religious" (About RACS). More than half of the singers are Russian immigrants, and they have attracted other American singers by the opportunity to overcome the challenge of performing music in Russian with the help of a Russian conductor and other Native Russians (About RACS). Audience members are

drawn by the distinctive and foreign nature of Russian music as well as culture – as RACS often hosts Russian events in which Russian food, dancing, costumes, and toasting are put on display in combination with a singing concert – which is especially enticing due to its connection with Alaska’s remote Russian heritage. This past year they were promoting Russian-Alaskan cultural exchanges in traveling to Vladivostok for a concert in the fall, and in turn hosting the Vladivostok choir for a concert in Anchorage in the spring.

When I first stayed with Michael’s family in 2007, I was surprised to discover that not only was Michael’s family very Russian, but that we would encounter other elements of Russian culture randomly popping up throughout my stay. Three students playing Ultimate Frisbee in Eagle River had studied Russian at school and would attempt to greet Michael and his brother and count off in Russian, and one of Michael’s friends spent a year in high school studying abroad in Russia, and would likewise speak in Russian while hiking with us. Two other Frisbee players were sons of an Antiochian Orthodox Church priest, and had helped their father build a Russian-style chapel – St. Sergius – near their Church, which Michael’s family would occasionally stop by to admire its Russian beauty. Furthermore, Michael’s parents have themselves been welcomed at various events and jobs because of their Russian heritage. Yulia has assisted in judging the high school Russian Olympiad, and she has also been welcomed as a nanny in several households with the request that she speak in Russian to their children to help expose them to another language at an early age. Alexander has been invited to perform this past year at Alaska’s celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a state to celebrate Alaska’s Russian heritage, and shortly thereafter, he successfully followed this performance with a similar Russian concert accompanied by narrated stories. Just as Michael’s family has helped to spread Russian culture in these small ways throughout the city in the public and professional realms, they have

also introduced elements of Russian culture to their neighbors and friends, by inviting them to go mushroom-picking or offering dishes of freshly cooked mushrooms or home-made caviar. Many of their friends – overcoming their initial revulsion to this latter foreign dish – now request jars of caviar, not only for themselves, but also for their American friends.

Anchorage is a city with a growing number of recent Russian immigrants who, like in other US cities, have attempted to maintain their ethnic cultural identity all the while consciously and unconsciously integrating American values and behavioral standards into their lives. This identity has been fostered individually in their private lives, as well as through establishing Russian networks throughout the city. However, Anchorage, and other Alaskan cities are unique in offering a pre-established connection with Russia through Alaska's history of Russian colonialization combined with its physical proximity to the Russian Far East. This Russian heritage is visibly alive today in the survival of the Russian Orthodox Church and its importance in the maintaining and developing of Native culture, as well as in the shared research endeavors and the many academic and cultural exchanges undertaken between Alaska and the RFE. The unique Russian history of Alaska has fostered a welcoming environment for recent Russian immigrants, and has encouraged their involvement with the community at large in the development of Russian language and singing programs, membership in Russian Orthodox Churches, and the celebration of Alaska's Russian heritage. All these elements – the physical proximity of Russia, the past vestiges of Russian presence, the recent immigration of thousands of ethnic Russians, and their outward integration into the Russian heritage of Alaska – have combined together to add the distinct Russian flavor that currently seasons the city of Anchorage.

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