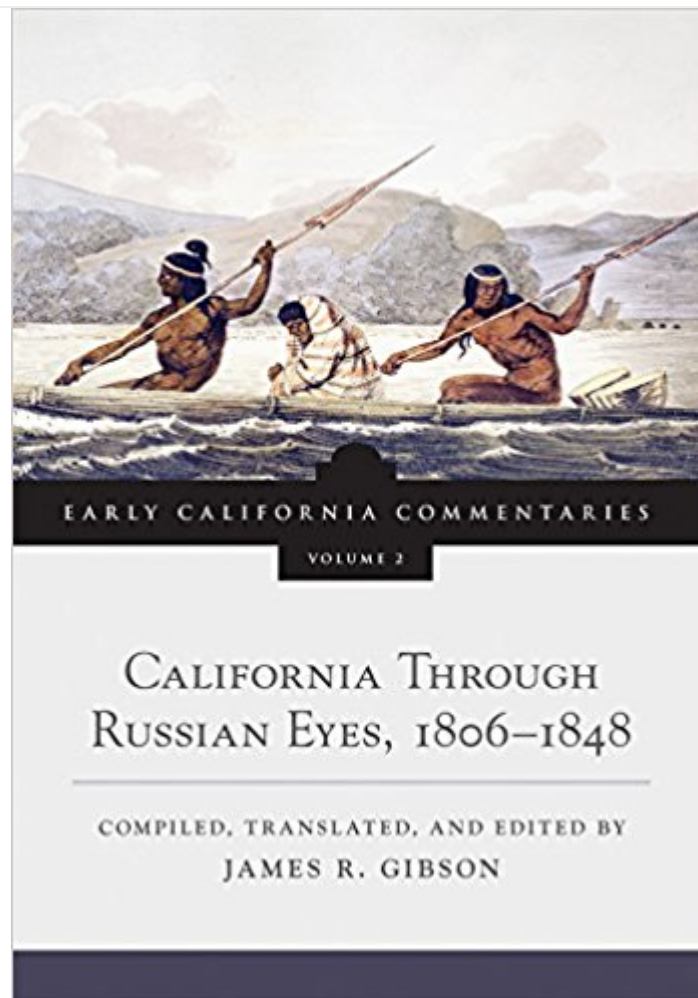


{essays in history}

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California Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1848



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California Through Russian Eyes, 1806-1848. (Early California Commentaries Series.) Edited and translated by James Gibson (Norman, Oklahoma: The Author H. Clark Company an imprint of the, University of Oklahoma Press, 2013). Pp. 506. Hardcover, \$40.50.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Kirill Khlebnikov, an employee of the Russian-American Company (R.A.C.), assessed the situation of the Russian colonies in Alaska. “If for some reason bread is not delivered from California,” he wrote, “then the colonies will be threatened by famine.”^[i] Khlebnikov was referring to the importance of trade connections that sustained the colonial settlements. Hence, the R.A.C. established Fort Ross in California with the intention of farming the fertile land and providing Russia’s Alaskan possessions with sustenance and durable wood for shipbuilding. The abundance of scientific research conducted before and during Russia’s possession of Ross (1812-1841) also presents an interesting picture of the empire’s activity in North America. James Gibson’s primary source reader, *California Through Russian Eyes 1806-1848*, is a collection of translated primary source documents that invites scholars to explore the presence of the Russian Empire in early nineteenth-century California.

A leading scholar in the field, James Gibson^[ii] provides translated commentaries from both Russian appointees in North America and scientists; the collection includes their correspondence with stockholders in St. Petersburg, and a number of Pacific voyagers’ journals. The documents convey the eagerness of the R.A.C. (at this time made up largely of nobles and members of the Royal family) to pursue scientific and empirical research across the Pacific Ocean. For example, Gibson provides a report from 1841 by the agronomist Yegor Chernykh that details “the Seeds sent from Upper California.” The agronomist wrote, “I think that the redwood could grow successfully not only in our southern provinces [in Russia] but wherever conifers grow. For this purpose the seeds that I am sending are fresh and clean and in cones.”^[iii] The willingness to import North American flora suggests that imperial officials and R.A.C. stockholders were interested in importing new materials for domestic development. By providing sources such as this,

James Gibson suggests that historians should be asking questions about Russia's pursuit of empirical knowledge in a trans-continental context. Yet Gibson does not ignore diplomacy. The collection also includes primary sources that provoke broader questions about imperial representatives tasked with measuring the extent and power of rival colonial possessions. To Russian eyes, California represented a land ripe for harvesting; Russian success depended on political and diplomatic maneuvering and a scientific knowledge of the land.

The primary source reader generates many questions that challenge our notions of Russia in North America. For example, does the extent of agronomic and empirical observations conducted by Russians in America indicate the empire's desire for more than territorial or economic expansion in North America? How does the amount of scientific inquiry in North America compare to that undertaken in the Steppe, the Caucasus, and Siberia? To what extent did the Russian government see North America as an opportunity to expand its knowledge of the world outside of Eurasia? *California Through Russian Eyes* suggests that colonial motivations went beyond expansion, profit, and the civilizing mission, and into the realm of scientific inquiry. Assessing how the empire acquired, understood, and utilized scientific knowledge can provide a tantalizing picture of Russia's North American activity.

The documents are organized chronologically, which makes the collection easily accessible to students and researchers of Russia, European imperialism, and the expansion of the United States. For historians of imperial Russia, the collection problematizes the terms "continental empire" and "periphery." Indeed, this collection focuses not on the relationship between the center and periphery, but on the entrepreneurial and scientific activities conducted by representatives of the empire who crossed both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

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[i] *Russaya Amerika v zapiskhak kirilla khlebnikova: Novo-Arkhangelsk*, ed., S. G. Fedorovoi I V.A. Aleksandrov. (Mosckva: Nauka, 1985) 185. "yesli

po kakim-nibud ne budet dostavleno khleba iz kalifornii, to polozheniye kolonii budet ugrozhat'sya golodom”

[ii] For Gibson's extensive work on the subject of Russian-America, see James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier America: The Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America 1784-1867* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).



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