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Beyond Fort Ross: Defining Russia’s Impact on California

Introduction

California’s Spanish and Mexican colonial history is evident in historic sites and place names, but often overlooked amid this heritage is another imperial power: Russia. The Russian Empire’s influence on the Pacific coast of North America began as an extension of overland expansion to the Pacific in the seventeenth century.¹ From 1725 to 1741, Vitus Bering, a former Danish national and member of the Russian navy, led a series of exploratory voyages at the behest of Tsar Peter I.² Bering’s deputy, Alexis Chirikov, reached mainland Alaska in 1741.³ Chirikov’s identification of this land precipitated the increasing presence of Russian fur traders in the area, which culminated in the development of a colony.⁴

In 1806, the destruction of Russian supply ships traveling to Alaska threatened the colony with starvation. This led Russian plenipotentiary Nikolai Rezanov to journey to California in the hope that its temperate climate would allow him to find “grain, vegetables, and fruit” to relieve the settlements.⁵ Once there, his ambitions broadened. Eager to expand the Russian empire and secure hunting rights in California, he advised that Russia expand its presence in the region.⁶ His plan came to partial fruition in 1812 with the construction of Fort Ross, a commercial and agricultural settlement on the Northern California coast.⁷ However, depletion of the sea otter population and unsuccessful crop and livestock yields plagued the settlement, and Russian presence in areas

¹ Sokol, 86–8; Kerner, 136.
² Sokol, 88–90.
³ Ibid., 89–91.
⁴ Ibid., 93–94.
⁵ Stephens, 45.
⁶ Essig, 191; Stephens, 45–46.
⁷ Essig, 191–192.
claimed first by Spain and later by Mexico taxed relations between the powers. In 1841, Fort Ross was sold to Swiss émigré John Sutter, ending Russia’s imperial involvement in California.

Despite its relatively short tenure, the effects of Russian colonization lasted beyond 1841, and some are part of the fabric of the state even today. Russian influence is reflected in the language and oral traditions of surrounding Indigenous peoples through loan words and oral testimony; Fort Ross’ presence also precipitated Indigenous acculturation through population movement and intermarriage. The fort, the center of Russian colonial influence in California, preserves memory of the colony as a historical site, while many Spanish and Mexican sites, such as the San Francisco Presidio, were constructed with the goal of preventing or halting Russian encroachment.

Names of geographical locations, notably the eponymous river, testify to Russian presence in Northern California. Moreover, scientists on Russian voyages played a major role in the early documentation of the state’s flora and fauna, providing classifications for a large selection of native plants. Finally, early Californian authors such as Bret Harte and Gertrude Atherton composed romantic stories from the Russian period, ensuring a small but secure place for Russian history within the state’s literature. The recorded recollections of Northern California’s Kashaya people helped to inform this literary tradition.

Both Russia’s American colonies and Fort Ross specifically have been the subjects of extensive scholarly work. Writers such as Emilio Carranza Castellanos describe Russian territories

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8 Du Four, 242–243; von Chamisso, 4.
9 Du Four, 242, 248; Sokol, 191.
10 Oswalt, 245–246; Farris, So Far From Home, 309; Lightfoot, Wake, and Schiff, 169, 171–172.
11 Blind et. al., 135; Jackson, 228.
12 Gudde, 323–324.
14 Farris, So Far From Home, 309.
in California and their place in Spanish-Russian and Mexican-Russian relations.\textsuperscript{15} Archeological studies focused on Fort Ross and its outposts, including those led by state archaeologist Glenn Farris, reveal detailed information about the fort’s material structure.\textsuperscript{16} Oren M. Stephens, Clarence John Du Four, and other scholars have chronicled the background and development of the colonies themselves.\textsuperscript{17} However, the study of Russian presence in California has thus far been largely confined to specific subjects: interaction between Russia, Spain, and Mexico; hunting and trading; the purpose and operation of Fort Ross itself; and the chronology of the colony. No scholars have attempted to make a collective study of the results of Russian colonization or to define its influence on California’s development. This analysis will address that gap by examining the period of Russian colonization with a view to its physical, scientific, and cultural impact on California. This paper argues that Russian colonial presence in nineteenth-century California, both independently and through interaction with Spain and Mexico, made consequential contributions to the state’s development by impacting indigenous culture; prompting construction of forts, missions, and other structures; establishing place names; deepening scientific knowledge of the region; and inspiring literary traditions within the state.

\textbf{Historical Background: The Path to Colonization}

Russia’s nineteenth-century presence in California was the result of eastward expansion across Siberia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\textsuperscript{18} The conquest of the Tatar-controlled Khanate of Sibir' by Russian Cossacks provided “the prelude to the Russian […] conquest of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Castellanos, 38–44.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Farris, “Fathoming Fort Ross,” 97–98.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Stephens, 44–54; Du Four, 240–249.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Sokol, 86; Kerner, 136.
\end{itemize}
Driven by the promise of material wealth in the east, Russians advanced across the region and reached the Pacific within sixty years. The Cossacks who had conquered Siberia were soon joined in the territory by “traders […] peasants […] [and] petty townsmen” in a movement focused on the collection of valuable furs. Russian domination of Kamchatka, a peninsula located on Siberia’s east coast, was “begun as early as 1652 […] [and] completed […] in 1696–1699.”

In the context of this expansion, “the Russian emperor [Peter the Great] was occupied by the question of whether Asia was connected to America, which was driven by the desire to accurately map the Russian Empire’s eastern borders.” To find answers, he ordered the navigator Vitus Bering, accompanied by his deputies Alexis Chirikov and Martin Spanberg, to undertake several exploratory voyages in the region. The first expedition, in 1725, did not travel farther than the Bering Sea islands of St. Lawrence and St. Diomede before returning to Russia. The three navigators made a second series of voyages beginning in 1733. While Spanberg was sent to explore the ocean between Kamchatka and Japan and Bering perished before completing his last Alaskan expedition, Chirikov became the first Russian to reach the North American mainland.

Following Chirikov’s discovery of Alaska, the region grew in economic importance. “Private […] individuals and groups” of Russian fur traders frequented the area in pursuit of

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19 Aust, 184.
20 Sokol, 86–87.
21 Ibid.; see also Gibson, “Russian Expansion,” 127.
22 Sokol, 86–87.
23 Российского императора занимал вопрос, соединяется ли Азия с Америкой, который был обусловлен стремлением нанести на карту точные границы Российской империи на востоке. Петров, 14. (All translations by author unless otherwise stated.)
24 Sokol, 88–89.
25 Ibid., 89–90.
26 Ibid., 90–91.
27 Ibid.
valuable animals. The influential merchant Grigorii Shelikhov began to establish permanent settlements on Alaska’s Kodiak Island in the 1780s. In 1799, under pressure from “foreign competition” from Spain and England in the region, Russia formalized Shelikhov’s enterprise as the Russian-American Company. The company was established to create a fur hunting monopoly, supervising a colony based at the coastal settlement of New Archangel with the aim of expanding Russia’s territory and promoting Orthodox Christianity among Indigenous peoples. The colony headquarters, which included hospitals, “educational establishments,” and “agricultural and domestic enterprises,” became a port and fur trading center. Its population included Russians as well as Creoles and Native Alaskan Aleuts. Despite its diverse community, the colony’s economic focus was narrow: the traders “knew nothing about agriculture” and mostly ignored food production, focusing instead “on fur and fur alone.”

In 1806, Russia’s colonial ambitions in North America broadened. Winter saw deteriorating conditions at New Archangel after supply ships traveling to the settlement were destroyed in a storm. In early spring, plenipotentiary Nikolai Rezanov left to seek supplies in the “fabulous domain” of California. His search brought him to the Spanish outpost at Yerba Buena (modern-day San Francisco), where he received a good reception from the local commandant, Don Jose Arguello. Rezanov had already “sketched plans for additional Russian colonies down the

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28 Ibid., 93.
29 Powell, 59.
30 Sokol, 93–94.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Merriam, 20.
35 Stephens, 45.
36 Ibid., 45–46.
37 Ibid., 45–48.
coast of North America” and was impressed with the bounty of California’s oceans. Shortly thereafter, Rezanov recommended that Tsar Alexander I form a permanent colony there to take advantage of the natural resources while expanding Russia’s land territory “north of the Spanish settlements.” Rezanov had major ambitions for the territory: he planned “to spread Russian possessions from Alaska to California and subordinate at least part of this rich region.” In 1808, Alexander Baranov, the chief director of the Russian-American Company, sent his assistant Ivan Kuskov “to explore [the northern] portion of the California coast […] and to select a site suitable for such a colony.” In addition to exploring, Kuskov’s expedition “sowed wheat which was much needed in Alaska” and procured 1,453 sea otter pelts while naming Bodega Bay, an inlet north of San Francisco, “Port Romanov.”

Spain was wary of Russian interference in California, but thanks to an alliance with Russia “against the revolutionary trend” in Europe and Spain’s imperial territories, the Spanish king, Ferdinand VIII, agreed to a “post north of the Golden Gate” provided it was used solely for fur hunting. Although the Russians initially secured Spain’s permission to construct Fort Ross, Spain was already distrustful of Russia’s motives for North American expansion, and Fort Ross’ presence ultimately caused tension between the two powers. The same pattern continued after Mexican independence in 1821, with Mexico disputing Russia’s claims to the territory.

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38 Ibid.
39 Stephens, 45–46; see also Essig, 191.
40 [P]аспространить российские владения с Аляски до Калифорнии и подчинить себе хотя бы часть этого богатого края. Grinev, 47.
41 Essig, 191.
42 Stephens, 51; Essig, 191.
43 Stephens, 51. The Holy Alliance, to which Spain and Russia were both party, was created as a defensive measure against the “periodic revolts and constant ferment” which were prevalent in their respective spheres of influence in the period after the American Revolution.
44 Petrov, Kapalan, and Ermolaev, 5.
government repeatedly requested Russian withdrawal, while Russian leadership neglected to respond to the demands.

Kuskov returned to California in 1811 and established the commercial and agricultural colony of Fort Ross on California’s coast in 1812. The colony functioned until 1841, but in addition to creating diplomatic conflicts with Spain and Mexico, it was less productive than its founders had hoped. Trade with local peoples was not lucrative. Profits from the originally abundant sea otter population also declined rapidly due to overhunting. Furthermore, Fort Ross’ damp and cool coastal location and infertile soil hindered wheat production. Ranches located further inland experienced slightly better climatic conditions but still failed to revitalize the colony’s agriculture. A nascent shipbuilding industry failed when “the wood was ‘cut in sap’ and used before being thoroughly dried.” Fort Ross’s leadership attempted to expand into cattle and sheep ranching, but this too failed to make the settlement profitable. These decreasing financial returns and increasing conflicts with Spanish and Mexican authorities made Fort Ross an inconvenience rather than an asset.

By 1839, “the Russian-American Company saw no further advantage in maintaining the settlements” in California and decided to sell Fort Ross. The company approached several

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45 Parkman, 355. The colony was known to the Russians as “Settlement [поселение] Ross,” while Spanish, Mexican, and American inhabitants called it “Fort Ross.” I will rely on this convention here, as the present site is named Fort Ross State Historic Park.
46 Ibid., 195.
47 Ibid.
49 Essig, 194–195.
50 Schneider, 165–169.
51 Du Four, 242.
52 Ibid., 241–244.
53 Ibid., 244.
potential buyers over the next two years.\textsuperscript{54} The Russian agent Peter Kostromitinov offered the fort to the Mexican government “for the sum of 30,000 pesos,” but the Mexican government did not believe that the Russians had the right to sell the property since Mexico claimed all of California and saw Fort Ross as illegitimate.\textsuperscript{55} At the same time, Kostromitinov began talks with Captain John Sutter, a Swiss émigré whose land would become the epicenter of the California Gold Rush ten years later, over ownership of the Fort.\textsuperscript{56} When the Mexican government failed to make an offer for anything but the fort’s livestock, negotiations with Sutter “moved rapidly.”\textsuperscript{57} In 1841, the “contract of sale was duly executed” and much of Fort Ross’ property moved to Sutter’s Fort near Sacramento.\textsuperscript{58} Fort Ross’ remaining population departed at the same time, leaving the structures to gradually deteriorate.\textsuperscript{59} Russia never regained any territory in California, but its legacy endured in the region long after the last colonists departed.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Impact on Indigenous Communities}

Just as the Spanish and Mexican colonial presence profoundly affected Native Californians, Russians and Alaskans at Fort Ross maintained complex and influential economic relationships with neighboring Indigenous peoples. Spanish and Mexican labor relations with Indigenous groups were equally driven by colonialism, defined for the purposes of this paper as “the process by which a city- or nation-state exerts control over people […] and territories outside of its geographical boundaries.”\textsuperscript{61} In the Spanish colonial environment “nearly everything grown

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 244–247; Parkman, 355.
\textsuperscript{56} DuFour, 246.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 247–248.
\textsuperscript{59} DuFour, 248–249; Essig, 199–201.
\textsuperscript{60} DuFour, 249.
\textsuperscript{61} Silliman, 58.
or manufactured in the missions, presidios, and pueblos resulted from the labor of Indians.”

The Mexican system of ranchos, which developed largely after the privatization of mission lands in 1833, employed Indigenous laborers to “raise and slaughter livestock […] [and] attend to […] domestic chores.” In a comparable colonialist model, Fort Ross’ leadership “actively recruited [Indigenous] peoples from nearby coastal communities and interior villages” to provide agricultural labor. These workers sometimes numbered in the hundreds and were often coerced to work for food and other goods rather than for a salary. Ferdinand von Wrangel, the governor of Russia’s Alaska colonies, noted that in California, “when there are few hunters, then they forcibly collect as many Indians as possible […] without their assistance it would not be at all possible to reap and to haul the wheat.”

Despite these similarities, the Spanish, Mexican, and Russian colonial practices differed from one another. Although the locations of some neighboring Native Californian communities shifted closer to Fort Ross during its tenure, the Russians most likely did not require this movement, in contrast to the practices of the mission and rancho systems. In addition, Fort Ross’ seasonal employment of Indigenous groups was likely less structured than in a mission or rancho environment, where workers lived in permanent settlements. Moreover, Russians do not seem to have assigned any deeper significance to labor, whereas Spanish Franciscans believed that it was a “morally enriching […] activity” and an important part of Indigenous conversion to

62 Hackel, 122.
63 Hackel, 134.
64 Lightfoot, Wake, and Schiff, 161; see also Powell, 62.
65 Quoted in Gibson, “Russians in California,” 210–211; see also Lightfoot, Wake, and Schiff, 161.
66 Lightfoot, Wake, and Schiff, 161, 169.
67 Ibid., 128–134.
Fort Ross was not overtly religious in its colonial aims, while the Spanish system can be considered a missionary enterprise, with a “central role of religious practices.” (Like Fort Ross, the Mexican rancho system was more focused on commercial activity than religion.) Furthermore, although Fort Ross was a colonial enterprise, its relationship with the Native population also included extensive informal cultural and linguistic contact. This contrasted with the regimented influence of Spanish missions intended to transform Native communities into “Spanish-speaking, Catholic, agricultural villagers” and with the Mexican colonial system which often required Indigenous groups to continue the practices adopted at the missions. According to Kent G. Lightfoot, Thomas A. Wake, and Ann M. Schiff, Fort Ross was “the earliest pluralistic community in northern California.” Native Alaskans and Californians frequently intermarried. This led some Native Californians to selectively adopt new forms of cultural expression which aligned with their own traditions, while others, seeking to improve their circumstances, embraced the practices of the Native Alaskans or Creoles who occupied a higher place in the social hierarchy, served in more prestigious positions, and earned more. The account of a visitor to the fort mentions Kashaya (Native Californian) women who had learned “Aleut handicrafts.” Interaction with Russians and Native Alaskans also influenced regional Native Californian linguistic culture. The Kashaya language has been found to contain “Russian loanwords […] [suggesting] that some […] were derived from Aleut or Alutiiq speakers.” These include *kuska*, or cat, from the Russian

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68 Ibid.
69 Lightfoot, 9217.
70 Hoover, 37; see also Panich, 199.
71 Lightfoot, Wake, and Schiff, 161.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
75 Lightfoot, Wake, and Schiff, 162.
koška; loska, spoon, from ложка; moloko, milk, from молоко; and kalikak, letter or book, from the Aleut kalikaq, a possible version of книга. Native Californians also encountered both European and Alaskan glass, ceramics, and hunting implements through contact with the population of Fort Ross, although they generally did not adopt such materials.

**Territory: Forts, Missions and Settlements, and Place Names**

*Domestic and Defensive Structures*

Fort Ross’ colonial presence had a direct impact on development in Northern California. Russia established physical settlements in the region primarily to serve “as a fur trading center and as a place for producing and securing food supplies for […] the colonies in Kamchatka and Alaska.” Fort Ross, constructed in 1812, is the best-known example. The fort’s composition supported trade and agriculture while also providing accommodations for the daily life of at least 175 people. The settlement included a chapel as well as “a commandant’s house […] barracks, kitchen, warehouses, and [a] jail,” while a blacksmith shop, tannery, and other sites lay outside the walls. Included in the fort’s layout were “not only Russian buildings but also the only Native Alaskan village outside Alaska,” home to the Aleut fishermen employed by the Russians. Settlements belonging to the Kashaya Pomo people surrounded the stockade. Fort Ross was also accompanied by other sites intended to support its operation, including ranches, a settlement at

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76 Oswalt, 245–246.
77 Lightfoot, Wake and Schiff, 171–172.
78 Essig, 191.
79 Shur and Gibson, 38; Essig, 191, 194; Stephens, 51.
80 Essig, 192.
81 Ibid.
82 Powell, 62; see also Essig, 191.
83 Powell, 62.
Bodega Bay, and a hunting station on the nearby Farallon Islands.\(^{84}\) While these outlying structures did not survive, they represent the diversity of construction surrounding Fort Ross.

Russia also indirectly influenced the Spanish and Mexican construction of forts and settlements. Spanish concerns over Russian hegemony began long before Rezanov arrived in California. Russia’s voyages to Alaska had “placed [it] as a powerful force in the Pacific,” and as early as the 1750s, Spanish publications such as *Noticia de la California* fomented fears of Russian encroachment into Spain’s North American territories.\(^{85}\) Viceroy Bucareli, the leader of Spain’s North American colonies, argued for precautions against potential Russian intrusion.\(^{86}\) To solidify Spain’s claim to California, the Spanish authorities “initiated ventures by both land and sea” to increase their power in the region.\(^{87}\) One of these expeditions—begun in 1769 and led by Don Gaspar de Portolá and friar Junipero Serra—established a series of missions along California’s coast and opened San Francisco Bay to Spanish development.\(^{88}\) Spain constructed the defensive San Francisco Presidio and the accompanying Mission Dolores within this new territory in 1776.\(^{89}\) A non-religious agricultural and defensive settlement of “farmer-soldiers” at the nearby Villa Branciforte also served to deter encroachment.\(^{90}\)

Concerns about Russian presence lasted into the nineteenth century. Russian naturalist and explorer Adelbert Von Chamisso recalled that in 1816 the Spanish governor of California, Don Pablo Vincente de Sola, was “very angry when he received a late notice” of Fort Ross’s

\(^{84}\) Schneider, 165–169; Shur and Gibson, 38.

\(^{85}\) Blind et al., 136; Hackel, 113. Spain’s wariness was motivated largely by the desire to defend Northern Mexican silver mines from foreign intrusion.

\(^{86}\) Blind et al., 136.

\(^{87}\) Blind et al., 137; see also Stephens, 46.

\(^{88}\) Stephens, 46; Blind et al., 137.

\(^{89}\) Blind et al., 135–139; Stephens, 46.

\(^{90}\) Blind et al., 139.
establishment, and that “various [ineffective] measures had been taken to induce Herr [Kuskov] to evacuate the place.” The Spanish government built Mission San Rafael Archangel in 1817 “in an effort to halt [the] Russian expansion” which had by then extended into California. Spain’s successor state, Mexico, remained resentful of Fort Ross’ presence despite allowing trade with its population. Following Mexican independence in 1821, “the new Mexican authorities continued attempts to get rid of the Russian fortress.” In 1823, Mexico established Mission San Francisco de Solano, the future site of the city of Sonoma, “in a further attempt to contain the Russians.” Thus, Russia contributed to California’s historical landscape by galvanizing Spanish and Mexican construction.

**Place Names**

In addition to physical structures, the Russian presence at Fort Ross influenced regional nomenclature. The name of the Russian River, which winds through Mendocino and Sonoma counties, “commemorate[s] the [nearby] Russian establishment at Fort Ross.” Russian Gulch, in Mendocino County, was “according to local tradition […] so named because a deserter from Fort Ross had settled there.” The fact that these names reference Fort Ross indicates lasting memory of Russian presence in the area. Additionally, many sources have argued that Russians from Fort Ross named California’s Mt. St. Helena in 1841. The name may reference Helena Gagarina, the

91 von Chamisso, 5.  
92 Parkman, 363.  
93 Mathes, 36.  
94 Новые мексиканские власти продолжили попытки избавиться от русской крепости. Petrov, Kapalan, and Ermolaev, 5.  
95 Parkman, 363.  
96 Gudde, 324. The river was known as “Slavianka” in Russian.  
97 Gudde, 323.  
98 Ibid., 326; Essig, 197–198.
wife of the last commandant of Fort Ross, Alexander Rotchev, or the Orthodox Saint Helena. The story’s legendary basis makes it difficult to prove, but it provides another example of Fort Ross’ influence within California.

**Documentation and Scientific Research**

Russia’s colonial presence in California also allowed for greater documentation of the state’s natural features. Early Russian expeditions to the area provided “practical reasons” to improve geographical understanding of a region whose marine life was proving highly lucrative. By 1818, Russians had mapped “the entire coast from Fort Ross to Bodega Bay, and the bay itself.” Voyages north of Cape Mendocino and south to San Francisco Bay provided broader knowledge of the area. On a trip to San Francisco Bay, Captain Vasilii Golovnin reported finding “an active volcano [either Mt. St. Helena or Mt. Lassen] whose existence was not known even to the Spaniards.” An inland expedition resulted in the discovery of Clear Lake, which was designated on a map from the 1830s as “Lac Russe.” These examples suggest that Russians may have been the first Europeans to explore the region in detail. Later exploration and mapping by Spain, Mexico, and the United States thus likely occurred within the context of Russian geographical discoveries and built on this information.

Russians also contributed greatly to early scientific knowledge of California. The first Russian-sponsored study of the area was conducted by Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff, a German

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99 Essig, 197–198.
100 Ibid., 197.
101 Gibson, Istomin and Tishkov, 144.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.; Also Vasily.
106 Ibid., 144–145.
naturalist who accompanied Rezanov to California in 1806. Though officially employed as a physician and interpreter, he “tried to collect natural specimens” and composed journals that became “a valuable source of information about […] California.” This activity later became the responsibility of Fort Ross’s colonial leaders, who were required to collect “objects of natural history—woods, tree and plant seeds, minerals, insects, fish—for dispatch to Russia for the Imperial Academy of Sciences and other depositories.” The Russian government clearly took an interest in California’s natural features, and thus invested in their study, creating a lasting historical and scientific record.

Russia’s best known contribution to this scientific knowledge came during the exploratory voyage of the Russian ship *Rurik* in 1816. The trip was funded by Count Nikolai Rumiantsev, a former Russian chancellor and foreign minister, although its “official purpose […] appears never to have been clearly articulated.” During a month’s stopover in Northern California, the voyage’s naturalists, Adelbert von Chamisso and Johann Freidrich Escholtz, collected numerous specimens of California’s plant species and created an “enduring record of its flora and fauna.” They documented sixty-nine plant species around Fort Ross and the Presidio during the *Rurik*’s voyage; Escholtz recorded an additional thirteen species in the area in 1824. Some of the plants, such as *Gilia chamissonis* and *Lupinus chamissonis*, were named for Chamisso, while Chamisso

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107 Ibid., 146.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., 145.
110 Gibson, Istomin and Tishkov, 146.
111 Mornin, 2.
112 Lewis, iv. Adelbert von Chamisso was originally from France and lived in Berlin as an adult. His study of science and zoology led him to join the *Rurik*’s crew as an interpreter and naturalist. Escholtz, “a Russian of German ancestry,” was the ship’s doctor. On Chamisso and Escholtz, see also Tremain, 64, 66; Mornin, 2–3.
113 Mornin, 4; “Flora Named as a Result of Russian American Activities.”
named California’s state flower, the golden poppy, *Escholzia californica* in honor of Escholtz.\(^{114}\)

The two naturalists also named “many of [the species they collected] after shipmates.”\(^{115}\) Their classifications, which are still used today, made a lasting impact on California’s botanical record.

The information collected by The *Rurik*’s crew expanded knowledge of California in Russia and in Europe. Chamisso received a sea otter pelt that later made its way back to Berlin’s zoological museum.\(^{116}\) Escholtz’s specimen collections of marine invertebrate “were transferred to the Derptskii (Tartuskii) university and the Moscow Society of Naturalists.”\(^{117}\) The *Rurik*’s artist, Louis Choris, composed a series of drawings that were included in the published account of the voyage and depicted everything from “Point Reyes, the Golden Gate, and the Farallones” to a “Young California sea-lion.”\(^{118}\) His illustration of the California grizzly was the first known image of the animal.\(^{119}\) Both Chamisso and Escholtz’s research and Choris’ artwork educated contemporary Europeans on California and left a valuable record of the state as it appeared in the early nineteenth century.

**Literature and Oral Histories**

Russian colonial presence also affected California’s literary culture. One of the earliest Russian voyages to California, plenipotentiary Rezanov’s journey to Yerba Buena in 1806, became the basis for an early literary treatment of the state’s Russian heritage. When Rezanov arrived, he

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\(^{114}\) Mornin, 5; Tremain, 65; Gibson, Istomin and Tishkov, 147; “Flora Named as a Result of Russian American Activities.”

\(^{115}\) Tremain, 65.

\(^{116}\) von Chamisso, 13.

\(^{117}\) Были переданы в Дерптский (Тартуский) университет и Московское Общество испытателей природы. Kafanov, 139.

\(^{118}\) Lewis, iv–iv. Louis Choris was an ethnic German who resided in Russia at the time of the voyage. On Choris, see also von Chamisso, 7, 15.

\(^{119}\)”Bear in Mind: The California Grizzly at the Bancroft Library.”
met governor Don Jose Arguello’s cultured and attractive daughter, Concepción. The two fell in love despite their age difference, and Rezanov realized that if they married “a close bond [would be formed] for future business relations between the Russian-American Company and the province of Nueva California.” However, their relationship was interrupted when Rezanov returned to Russia. He died en route to St. Petersburg, and Concepción spent the rest of her life waiting for his return. This tragic story became a local legend and provided inspiration for prolific California poet and writer Bret Harte, whose 1872 poem “Concepción de Arguello” gives a romantic and largely de-politicized account of Rezanov and Arguello’s relationship: “Forty years on wall and bastion swept the hollow idle breeze / Since the Russian eagle fluttered from the California seas.” Harte was a “literary celebrity” in the late nineteenth century, and the poem would have been widely read, bringing the legend to a larger audience within California.

The presence of Russians in California literature was not limited to Harte’s work. Gertrude Atherton (1857–1948), “a popular writer known for publishing romantic stories” from California’s history, “became entranced with the Russians at Fort Ross” as a subject for her writing. In addition to Rezanov (1906), yet another version of the ambassador’s meeting with Concepción Arguello, her œuvre includes the 1902 tale “Natalie Ivanhoff: A Memory of Fort Ross.” It tells the story of a “young Russian aristocrat [who runs] into her old flame” at Fort Ross before being

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120 Stephens, 48.
121 Тесную связь между Российско-Американской компанией и провинцией Новая Калифорния для последующих деловых сношений. von Chamisso quoted in Tremain, 56.
122 Ibid., 48–50.
123 von Chamisso quoted in Tremain, 50.
124 Harte, “Concepcion de Arguello.”
125 Scharnhorst, xiv, 33, 39, 87. On Rezanov and Arguello, see also Sokol, 95 and Stephens, 50.
126 Farris, So Far From Home, 309–313.
127 Atherton, 10; Farris, So Far From Home, 311.
tragically crushed in a windmill. Atherton’s stories were heavily romanticized, but the fact that historical representations of Fort Ross appeared alongside tales of the Spanish colonial era in her work demonstrates the influence Russian presence had on California writers.

Atherton, moreover, drew inspiration from the local Kashaya people who had firsthand memories of Fort Ross. Lukaria Yorgen Myers, a woman “who had been young during the Russian days and had many stories to tell,” provided a great deal of background information. It is likely that the ending of “Natalie Ivanhoff” was based on a story Myers recounted about a Kashaya girl who had been killed by a windmill at the fort. Meyers related accounts of numerous events of the era, including the Russians’ arrival: “Having landed, they built their houses close to where the Indians were [...]. The Indians started to work for them [...] having lived there for thirty years, they returned home.” These accounts indicate the place of Russian colonialization in the memory of Northern California’s indigenous peoples.

Fort Ross was still represented as a part of California history as late as the 1950s, although its portrayal was less flattering. Amid rising anticommunist sentiment, cartoonist Warren Tufts ran a series of cartoons titled “Casey Ruggles: A Saga of the West,” with “Sutter’s Fort, Fort Ross, and the Presidio of San Francisco as his scenic backgrounds.” The comic strip’s hero, Casey Ruggles, visits Fort Ross in the 1850s to dismantle parts of the infrastructure. His arrival coincides with that of a boorish and highly stereotyped former Russian commandant. A fight

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128 Farris, So Far From Home, 309–310.
129 Farris, So Far From Home, 309.
130 Ibid., 309–310.
131 Tremain, 94. Myers’ accounts were later collected in writing by linguist Robert Oswalt.
132 Ibid., 321.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Ibid., 322–323.
ensues, and the commandant and his wife “head back to their homeland” defeated by the wholesome American hero.\textsuperscript{136} This comic strip provides a fascinating look at the ways in which California’s history was used to fuel anti-Soviet sentiment during the Cold War. Although Russians were portrayed as the enemy, the comics nevertheless show that some memory of the Russian presence at Fort Ross had endured even a century after its abandonment.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Although Fort Ross is “one of the most interesting pages of the early history of California,” Russia’s impact on the state is seen more clearly in oral, literary, and documented culture than in the impressive buildings or artifacts associated with the Spanish and Mexican periods.\textsuperscript{137} Russian colonial presence exerted a discernible influence on California’s indigenous memory, place names, scientific classifications, records, and literature. It thus represents a little-known but essential part of California’s history “during its hectic transition from a pastoral and remote Spanish colony to a turbulent and focal American republic.”\textsuperscript{138} Russia did not singlehandedly shape California, but it played a much greater role in the state’s development than is commonly realized.

To understand a place—particularly one as diverse as California—it is essential that one account for all aspects of the history and heritage that have shaped it. Russia’s activity in Northern California left a significant legacy. A comprehensive knowledge of Russia’s presence is therefore vital not only for an understanding of California’s history, but for an understanding of California itself. To this end, discussions of state history should feature Fort Ross and Russian involvement more prominently. Acknowledging these contributions will promote a more comprehensive view of what shaped California’s identity.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Harkison, 1.
\textsuperscript{138} Shur and Gibson, 37.
Works Cited


