Anna Zvansky, University of California, Los Angeles

Russian Immigrants in the United States of America

The North American continent was explored by representatives of many different countries in colonial times. It is not surprising that at one point New Spain, New England, and New France existed on this continent. While Western European settlers landed first on the Atlantic coast, Russians explored the Pacific coast of North America. The first Russians to land were fur traders who came with the sole intention of making a quick profit from their newly acquired goods after returning to the motherland. Little did they realize the tremendous effect their voyage would make on America in the next centuries.

The first fur traders to reach North America arrived in Alaska in 1741. Sent on the mission by Tsar Peter I of Russia, the fur traders boarded two vessels in June of 1741: the St. Peter, captained by Vitus Bering, and the St. Paul, captained by Alexei Chirikov. Both sailed as part of the Kamchatka expedition. Chirikov and the St. Paul headed back to Russia after sighting Mount Saint Elias on Alaskan mainland. The St. Peter continued to advance towards Alaskan territory, but was wrecked on Bering Island soon after. Vitus Bering died in the wreck and the St. Peter was reduced to rubble. The surviving crew took refuge on Bering Island and built a boat from what remained of the ship. They returned to Russia with fine sea otter pelts, which were judged to be the finest fur in the world. Following this trip, many groups of fur traders began sailing from Siberia towards the Aleutian Islands, sometimes staying for years. This led to the development of trading and hunting posts in Alaska. These temporary posts soon turned into permanent settlements. The first official Russian settlement in America was established by
Gregoriy Shelikhov in 1784 at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island. The new settlements were not established peacefully since the Russians were constantly feuding with the native Aleuts. The feud intensified with the Russians forcing Aleuts into slavery. Catherine the Great urged her people not to mistreat the local inhabitants, but throughout Alaska’s new Russian settlements, the fur traders continued to enslave them, leading to brutal battles. The Russians attempted to take over all aspects of Alaska’s native inhabitants’ lives. Eight missionaries arrived in Alaska in 1794 and started building schools and churches. The Russians started learning the native languages and were able to convert many natives to Christianity. Gregoriy Shelikhov died in 1795 and his wife, Nataliya, was left in charge of running the settlement. After a merger in 1797, it was re-named the United American Company (Chevigny, 1979).

On July 8, 1799, the Russian-American Trading Company was formed by the order of Tsar Paul I for the trading and sale of joint stock. The first leader of the company was Aleksander Baranov. Also founded later that year was Novo-Arkhangelsk, known today as Sitka, which grew into an important administrative location for Russian settlements in America. The company thrived initially, but its success was compromised at the beginning of the nineteenth century by ongoing battles with English and American corporations, which supplied the native inhabitants with weapons for battle against the Russians. Their goal was to get rid of Russian settlements in America. The arrival of missionaries helped improve conditions for Aleutians who were previously mistreated. The missionaries worked hard with settlement leaders to end this inhumane treatment. Russian men of all ranks married local women, and a community arose with an economic base of farming and fur trade. Shipbuilding began in 1807, and Sitka became Alaska’s Russian capital in 1808 following Baranov’s victory over Alaskan natives in the Battle
of Sitka. Baranov, however, never succeeded in colonizing the entire state of Alaska, and Russian settlements were restricted to the coastal parts.

In 1812, Baranov’s assistant Ivan Kusov founded Fort Ross, the first Russian settlement in California. Fort Ross became the southernmost point of Russian settlements in America during that time period. The fort was used as an agricultural base where northern settlements could obtain food and continue trade. The usage of the fort soon expanded and the settlement grew to be known as “The Russian Colony.” In 1836, the population at Fort Ross consisted of 260 individuals who served as trainers and breeders of seals. They also sold metal that they produced in San Francisco. The Russian fur-trading economy soon drastically slowed due to the emergence of the Hudson Bay Company on the southern edge of Russian America. To try and repair the economy, Baranov drafted the Treaty of St. Petersburg with the British in 1825 and the Russo-American Treaty of 1824. These treaties were briefly abided, but after Baranov’s retirement the Russians’ rule over Alaska diminished. With the decline in Alaska’s animal population and escalating tensions between Russians, Aleutians, and other European settlements in the state, Russia started to view Alaska as unprofitable and detrimental to its economy. Noticing this, the leaders of the U.S. took advantage of Russia’s tense relationship with the British during the Crimean War and offered to purchase Alaska from Russia. In one of the most profitable land sales of recent history, the U.S. purchased Alaska in 1867 for $7,200,000. Russian America thus became part of the U.S. on March 30, 1867. Many Russians moved back to Russia while others settled in California or Oregon. The number of Russians in America drastically decreased as a result of this; however, this number increased exponentially following a wave of pogroms brought on by the assassination of Alexander II in 1881.
Between 1820 and 1870, only 7,550 Russian immigrants arrived in America, but beginning in 1881, the number of immigrants exceeded 10,000 people a year. The Russians’ large-scale immigration to North America came in four waves. The first wave predominantly consisted of immigrants fleeing religious persecution. This wave started in the second half of the nineteenth century and lasted until the early twentieth century, just before World War I. Many of the members of this wave were Jews escaping the Pale Settlement, a territory in Poland where they had been forced to live. The majority of Russian Jewish immigrants settled in large coastal cities such as New York. This group of immigrants was known for their high rate of enrollment in universities. Many of them eventually started their own businesses, and typically practiced Orthodox Judaism. These newcomers generally married and conducted business within their Russian immigrant communities. The rest of the immigrants of the first wave were members of religious groups that had separated from the Russian Orthodox Church such as Russian Molokans and Old Believers. The Molokans were persecuted by both the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church for their refusal to accept traditional beliefs and religious customs. The Molokans settled predominantly in Los Angeles and Oregon, where they formed isolated communities and maintained an agrarian way of life. The Old Believers were former Orthodox Russians who separated from the church in the course of the ecclesiastical reforms of the mid-seventeenth century. The Old Believers dressed in a unique style, wearing a shirt, belt, and cross at all times, and strictly obeyed the rules of fasting. They refused to let any non-Old Believers enter their homes or eat with them. These immigrants mostly settled in Oregon and Alaska where they established agricultural communities, fisheries, and commercial fishing boat building centers.
The next wave of immigration began after the October Revolution and Civil War of 1917-1921. This group was known as the “White Russians” because they came from the elite ruling class of imperial Russia. Most of them were aristocrats, shopkeepers, lawyers, members of the clergy, and other professionals who became targets of the political radicalism that broke out following the revolution. The majority of this group settled in large urban centers such as Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and New York since they tended to find employment within the same industries that they populated in Russia. The American government considered this wave of immigrants to be a threat. President Woodrow Wilson appointed Mitchell Palmer as his attorney general, who was convinced that Communist agents were preparing to overthrow the American government. Palmer and special assistant John Hoover used the Sedition Act and Espionage Act of 1918 to protect against radicals. Nearly 10,000 Russian immigrants were imprisoned on November 7th, 1919 as part of the Palmer Raids (Magosci, 1989). Most of these immigrants were quickly released, since no evidence of a staged overthrow could be found, but several of the detainees remained imprisoned for years and 245 people were deported to Russia.

The third wave of immigration was dominated by Russians who were forced to leave their homes following World War II. The immigrants came from all social classes, though this wave mostly consisted of industrial and farm laborers. It brought in nearly 50,000 immigrants, most of whom did not come straight from Russia. The majority of them had fled westward to avoid the Red Army, and many had been forcefully moved to concentration camps by the Nazis prior to coming to America. A small portion of this wave was made up of anti-Bolsheviks who had migrated to other Eastern European countries following the October Revolution. The fact
that many of these countries came under Russia’s control after World War II forced the anti-Bolsheviks to migrate to North America. At the end of World War II, all Western countries were ordered to deport any Soviet-born resident back to Soviet Russia. As a result of this, nearly two million Russian refugees residing in the United States were forced to return between 1945 and 1948. These deportees knew exactly what they would face when they returned: exile to Siberia, imprisonment, and execution. They took whatever measures they could to avoid this fate, including obtaining false documentation and claiming to be of any nationality except Russian. Like members of the second wave, third wave immigrants were suspected of espionage by the American government. Many of these immigrants were victims of false accusations formulated in the course of the investigations led by Senator McCarthy on Communist infiltration. The Red Scare of the 1950s was a particularly terrible time to be an individual of Russian descent. Despite the hardships they faced in America, members of the third wave of immigration were able to find jobs as government employees, factory workers, and educators across large industrial American cities like Chicago and New York (Jacobs and Paul, 1981).

The fourth wave, which began in 1969, consisted primarily of individuals who were at odds with the Soviet Union due to their political and religious beliefs. Anti-Semitism, government oppression, and an unstable economy provided the impetus for the fourth wave. The majority of the immigrants that arrived were Jews. This stemmed from the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which pressured the Soviet Union to allow the emigration of Jews and other religious minorities. Originally this agreement only allowed Jews to move to Israel, but Russian immigrants found a way around this, and by 1985 nearly 300,000 had arrived in the United States. Immigration restrictions loosed after 1985 under Gorbachev’s rule, resulting in thousands
more Russians of both Jewish and non-Jewish descent immigrating to the U.S. (Sullivan, 1988). In the last decade of the twentieth century, Russian immigration to the U.S. slowed drastically due to tight immigration restrictions. This last massive wave of immigrants consisted of highly educated individuals, with as many as 55.7% claiming to be academics, scientists, and other professional workers. Most of these immigrants settled in large metropolitan cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago.

Since arriving to the United States, Russian immigrants have made a significant impact on all aspects of American culture. Part of our knowledge of Russia comes from immigrants who chose to share stories of their struggles in their homeland. Historians such as Georges Florovsky, John Meyendorff, and Michael Karpovich became famous for their efforts at educating the rest of the world in Russia’s history. In the field of art, many Russian immigrants, such as Anatoli Efimoff and Ilya Bolotowsky, have earned fame as composers, sculptors, and painters. Several Russian authors have succeeded in the U.S. Vladimir Nabokov, as well as Nobel Prize winners in Literature, Josef Brodsky, and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, were all able to conquer the difficult task of gaining American audiences. In the military, Ivan Turchinov rose to the ranks of U.S. Brigadier General, a momentous accomplishment for anyone, let alone an immigrant. Russian immigrants made a profound influence on the music, dance, and film cultures in America. Ballet dancers came to fame for their exquisite performances on American stages. Russian immigrants such as Modest Altschuler, Nikolai Sokoloff, and Ilya Schkolnik joined large symphony orchestras and even conducted them. Several film directors and actors emerged from the immigrant cohort as well. The field of science and technology would not have been the same without the contributions of Russian immigrants. Vladimir Zworykin, father of television, helped
revolutionize American life forever (Levinson et al., 1997). The hardships experienced by the Russian people have helped them develop into a determined and hard-working group. This in part explains the success achieved by many of these immigrants. Today Russian Americans can be found residing all over the United States; their contributions can be found in just about every field.

Works Cited


