

<https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2025-24-4-619-631>

EDN: MDNREW

*Research article / Научная статья*


## Exploring Possibilities of Colonization of Pacific Northwest by Russia, Great Britain and Spain in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Aleksandr Yu. Petrov <sup>a</sup>, Larisa M. Troitskaia <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

<sup>a</sup>Moscow State Linguistic University, Moscow, Russia

<sup>b</sup>Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

alaska13@yandex.ru

**Abstract:** The authors consider different assessments of the history of the northwest coast of America, now the territory of the south of Alaska and the west coast of Canada. For a long time, this territory was an arena of struggle between the great powers. In general, in Russian historiography, this issue is poorly studied. The author in their article pays attention to such factors and reasons for the European colonization of the New World and early discoveries of the Pacific coast of North America as climate change, fashion trends, environmental resources, etc. The importance of the fur trade for the process of colonization of the region under study is also shown. The authors conclude that it is appropriate to consider the history of the coast of Alaska and the west coast of Canada through the prism of frontier history, taking into account the regional features of the civilizational model of British colonialism and the broader international relations of the period. The peculiarities of the period under study are the activation of Spain's policy and its claims to the entire Pacific coast, even when there had been no settlements under Madrid, and in turn attitude of the British to Madrid's stance. The formation of the western border in the north of America by the British was facilitated by the search for a mythical northern route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, and during this process, important geographical discoveries were made. The work is part of a series of articles by the authors, which are devoted to the history of the struggle for the territory in the northwest of America up to the early 1870s.

**Keywords:** Russian America, North America, Krenitsyn-Levashov expeditions, G.I. Mulovsky expedition, Aleutian Islands

**Conflicts of interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Authors' contributions:** All authors contributed equally to the research and writing of the article, reviewed the final text and bear equal responsibility.

**Funding:** This article was prepared at the expense of the Russian Science Foundation grant No. 22–18–00043–II at the Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. <https://rscf.ru/project/22–18–00043/>. Project Scientific supervisor – A. Yu. Petrov.

**For citation:** Petrov, A. Yu., Troitskaia, L.M. “Exploring Possibilities of Colonization of Pacific Northwest by Russia, Great Britain and Spain in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 24, no. 4 (November 2025): 619–631. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2025-24-4-619-631>

## Изучение Россией, Великобританией и Испанией возможностей колонизации северо-запада Тихого океана в XVIII веке

Александр Юрьевич Петров <sup>a</sup>, Лариса Михайловна Троицкая <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Институт всеобщей истории РАН, Москва, Россия

<sup>a</sup>Московский государственный лингвистический университет, Москва, Россия

<sup>b</sup>Институт всеобщей истории РАН, Москва, Россия

✉ alaska13@yandex.ru

**Аннотация:** Исследуются основные причины и первые этапы (XVI–XVIII вв.) проникновения России, Испании и Великобритании на тихоокеанское побережье Северной Америки. Эта область ныне находится южнее Аляски и охватывает западное побережье Канады – провинцию Британская Колумбия. Эта территория была ареной борьбы России и великих держав в контексте их колониальной политики в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе (АТР). Статья методологически основана на достижениях современной исторической науки, включая зарубежные и отечественные исследования с акцентом на многофакторный подход. При изучении письменных исторических источников и исследовательских материалов использовался системный и сравнительный анализ, а также были продемонстрированы некоторые аспекты междисциплинарного подхода. Отмечается, что интерес к исследуемой территории возник практически сразу с начала формирования колониальной политики западных держав в Новом Свете. Россия продвигалась к Тихому океану через Сибирь и побережье Северного Ледовитого океана. В статье показано значение торговли мехами для процесса колонизации изучаемого региона. Авторы пришли к выводу о том, что правомерно историю первых этапов открытия европейцами побережья будущей Британской Колумбии рассматривать сквозь призму истории фронта с учетом региональных особенностей цивилизационной модели британского колониализма и международных отношений.

**Ключевые слова:** Русская Америка, Северная Америка, экспедиции Креницына-Левашова, экспедиция Г.И. Муловского, острова Алеутской гряды

**Заявление о конфликте интересов:** Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

**Вклад авторов:** Все авторы внесли равный вклад в исследование и написание статьи, ознакомились с окончательным текстом и несут равную ответственность.

**Финансирование:** Исследование выполнено за счет гранта Российского научного фонда № 22-18-00043-П, <https://rscf.ru/project/22-18-00043/> в Институте всеобщей истории РАН. Руководитель А.Ю. Петров.

**Для цитирования:** Петров А.Ю., Троицкая Л.М. Изучение Россией, Великобританией и Испанией возможностей колонизации северо-запада Тихого океана в XVIII веке // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: История России. 2025. Т. 24. № 4. С. 619–631. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2025-24-4-619-631>

### Introduction

*Relevance.* Presently, public consideration Arctic and subarctic regions, as well as the entire west coast of North America has been increasing sharply. This is in part due to the present-day political agenda in certain countries, including a desire of the President of the United States to include Canada, and therefore British Columbia, into the US. Furthermore, 2025 marks the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russian Geographical Society, under the auspices of which the primary Russian study of the Pacific Ocean and Arctic territories was initially carried out. In addition, from a scientific and historical standpoint, additional relevance to this topic has developed with the discovery of new archival materials and concurrent discussion of this issue at various international conferences.

The issue of our research has contradictions: on the one hand, there was an objective need of the great European powers (Russia, Spain, Great Britain) to develop new territories of the Pacific region, due to various economic, political and geostrategic interests. On the other hand, this process inevitably led to a clash of interests of the various states and the formation of a competitive geopolitical environment. The author investigates interest of Russia and its rivals in the territories now called the province of British Columbia.

*The purpose* of the research lies in the possibility of identifying patterns in the formation of the geopolitical situation in the region and the mechanisms of interaction of powers in the process of developing new territories, which allows us to better understand modern processes in the Asia-Pacific region.

As noted by famous American geopolitician R. Kaplan, the modern American-Canadian border is one of the most unusual of all world borders due to its length and diversity of geographical features<sup>1</sup>. The history of border demarcation in the northwest of America was a complex process involving the major global players. These included Russia, the United States of America, as well as the largest European empires – the Spanish and British.

*Elaboration of the problem.* Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only historians, but also geographers and economists from the USA, Canada, and Great Britain have been engaged in the study of the history of the colonization of both Americas, including its features with regard to the territories adjacent to the Pacific coast of North America<sup>2</sup>.

American, Canadian and British researchers have long and fruitfully been studying the history of British Columbia as a whole, including US-Canada relations in the American Northwest, geographical discoveries, and fur production in the region<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> R. Kaplan, *Mest' geografii. Chto mogut rasskazat' geograficheskie karty o gryadushchikh konfliktakh i bitve protiv neizbezhnogo* [Revenge of Geography. What Geographical Maps Can Tell About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against the Inevitable] (Moscow: KoLibri Publ., Azbuka-Attikus Publ., 2016), 351.

<sup>2</sup> F.A. Golder, *Russian Expansion on the Pacific 1641–1850. An Account of the Earliest and Later Expeditions Made by the Russian along the Pacific Coast of Asia and North America, Including Some Related Expeditions to the Arctic regions* (Cleveland: Clark, 1914); A.C. Laut, *Pioneers of the Pacific Coast: A Chronicle of the Sea Rovers, and Fur Hunters* (Toronto: Glasgow, Book & Company, 1915); *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. History of the North West Coast, 1543–1800* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886); *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. History of the North West Coast, 1800–1846* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886); *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. History of British Columbia, 1792–1887* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1887).

<sup>3</sup> G.P.V. Akkrig, H. Akkrig, *British Columbia Chronicle, 1778–1846. Adventures by Sea and Land* (Vancouver (BC): Discovery Press, 1975); J. Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1991); K. Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967); A.L. Burt, *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America From the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace After the War of 1812* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Toronto: The Reyerson Press, 1940); B.M. Gough, *Distant Dominion: Britain and the Northwest of America, 1579–1809* (Vancouver (BC) and London: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); O. Gutiérrez Rodríguez, *Hispanic Origins of Oregon: A Historical Approximation to Early Hispanic Presence in the West Coast of North America (1543–1819)* (Monmouth; Salem, 2022), <https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/hispanicoriginsoregon/>; F.W. Howay, *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Vancouver; Portland; San Francisco; Chicago: The S.L. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913–1914); H.A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1930); W.D. Jones, *The American Problem in British Diplomacy, 1841–1861* (Athens (GA): University of Georgia Press, 1974); E.E. Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967); *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. History of the North West Coast, 1543–1800* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886); *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. History of the North West Coast, 1800–1846* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1886); *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. History of British Columbia, 1792–1887* (San Francisco: The History Company, Publishers, 1887).

In Russian historiography, the problem of penetration into the Pacific coast and development of the western coast of North America is mainly touched upon in general historical works, above all, on the history of international relations and geographical discoveries, colonization, the activities of fur companies, etc.<sup>4</sup>

*Source base of the study.* When studying the problem, the authors relied on published documents, as well as an array of materials from the library collection of the University of British Columbia (UBC), which is still has very little use by Russian authors.

*The research methodology* is based on modern achievements of Russian and foreign historical science. The authors took into account various schools, trends and methodological approaches, including civilizational ones, which allows them to determine the place of Russia and other global powers in world history. The struggle for territories in the North Pacific Ocean in different periods is considered in the context of the development of interaction between Spain, Great Britain, and from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and the United States, and their struggle to strengthen their own positions in the region, which occurs in parallel with the development of Russia's efforts to consolidate its position in the North Pacific Ocean.

In the process of studying sources and analyzing the entire volume of the collected materials, authors used systemic and comparative approaches. The article has elements of an interdisciplinary approach.

### **The History of discoveries and the movement of Western states in the North Pacific Ocean**

The province of British Columbia, which was part of the Canadian Confederation for over 150 years, had a long history of discovery, exploration, and colonization of this vast, remote region of North America.

As is well known, the history of the process of systematic colonization of the New World by the great European powers from the Atlantic Ocean began with the Age of Discovery, and started with the voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492, an undertaking which marked the beginning of the Spanish conquests in America. Asking the question of why Europe succeeded in this area, American sociologist and political scientist J. Goldstone notes:

In world history, trade and conquest have gone hand in hand. Trade often followed successful conquests, which opened up new routes and brought peace to the frontiers and borderlands. Conquests were often necessary to establish trade, to persuade recalcitrant rulers to open their ports to foreign merchants or gain access to valuable materials. Europe's desire to expand its trade with Asia prompted Europe's conquests in the New World and the coastal regions of Asian states; Europe's conquests in the New World eventually enriched it with silver, allowing it to expand its Asian trade. Later, the growth of

<sup>4</sup> Yu.G. Akimov, *Severnaia Amerika i Sibir' v kontse XVI – seredine XVIII v.: ocherk sravnitel'noi istorii kolonizatsii* [North America and Siberia in the late 16th – mid-18th centuries: An essay on the comparative history of colonization] (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta Publ., 2010); N.N. Bolkhovitinov, "Continental colonization of Siberia and maritime colonization of Alaska: similarities and differences," *Acta Slavica Iaponica (Sapporo, Japan)* 22 (2003): 109–125; A.V. Grinev, "The Plans for Russian Expansion in the New World and the North Pacific in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *European Journal of American Studies*, accessed September, 21, 2021, <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/7805>, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.7805>; Yu.Yu. Ierusalimskiy, V.V. Davydov, M.M. Koskina, "Topical problems of studying Russian America in modern Russian historical literature," *Tomsk State University Journal of History*, no. 66 (2020): 130–142, <https://doi.org/10.17223/19988613/66/16>; A.Yu. Petrov, A.N. Ermolaev, "Formation of borders between Russia, Great Britain, and the USA in the North Pacific ocean at the end of the 18th –first quarter of the 19th centuries," *Perm University Herald. History*, no. 2 (2025): 67–76, <https://doi.org/10.17072/2219-3111-2025-2-67-76>

European colonies in the Americas created the conditions for new Atlantic trade, which linked West Africa, Europe, and the Americas from Canada to Brazil. Thus, trade led to conquest, and conquest led to trade<sup>5</sup>.

The Spanish considered themselves to be primary discoverers. In the Age of Discovery, an important event occurred on September 29, 1513, when conquistador Vasco Nunez de Balboa became the first European man to cross the Isthmus of Panama from the Atlantic in a westerly direction and reach the bay (the Bay of San Miguel) beyond which lay the Pacific Ocean, which he called the South Sea<sup>6</sup>. The day before Balboa, Alonso Martin [a member of V. Nunez de Balboa's expedition – *authors' note*] had reached the Pacific coast; "he boarded an Indian canoe, sailed away from the shore and shouted for his companions to confirm that he was the first to plow this ocean."<sup>7</sup> According to other sources, A. Martin sailed in the Pacific Ocean on September 27, 1513<sup>8</sup>. On September 29, entering the Bay of San Miguel at high tide, Balboa raised the flag and read a charter drawn up by a notary, which stated:

...I take possession for the Crown of Castile ... of these southern seas, lands, coasts, harbors and islands, with all that they contain... The sovereigns of Castile, both present and future, possess both the power and the dominion over these Indies, the islands, both the northern and southern continents with their seas from the North Pole to the South Pole, on both sides of the equator, within and beyond the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn...<sup>9</sup>.

Thus began the Spanish colonial expansion in the New World from the Pacific coast. In the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Spanish advanced from the Atlantic coast into the North American continent, equipping exploratory expeditions, and expanding their colonial possessions. Following Spain, England, France and Russia, other European countries joined the race to discover, conquer and colonize the Americas. They were lured by the dream of getting rich at the expense of the diverse natural resources of the new lands, exploiting the local population, the so-called "savages." The ardent desire to sail from Europe to China and the East as a whole as quickly as possible explained the fact that for several centuries European navigators sought to find the so-called "Northwest Passage" (the legendary "Strait of Anian") between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, from both sides<sup>10</sup>.

After the voyages to North America by the Italians J. Cabot and S. Cabot, who were in English service, attempts to find the desired passage by rounding America from the North Atlantic were undertaken in 1576 and 1577 by Englishman M. Frobisher. His third voyage took place in 1578. Even though the goal of the voyage was not achieved, important geographical discoveries were made: the exploration of Baffin Land began, and the wide straits later became known as the Davis Strait and the Hudson Bay were mapped. Canadian explorers G.P.V. Akkrig and H. Akkrig pointed out that England's colonial interests also extended to the Pacific coast of America; already at the end of the XVI century they were trying to compete with the Spanish claims. Almost simultaneously with Frobisher, namely

<sup>5</sup> J. Goldstone, *Pochemu Evropa? Vozvyshenie Zapada v mirovoi istorii, 1500–1850* [The Rise of the West in World History, 1500–1850] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Instituta Gaidara Publ., 2014), 102–103.

<sup>6</sup> O. Mazen, *Ispanskaia Amerika XVI–XVIII vekov* [Spanish America of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries] (Moscow: Veche Publ., 2015), 301–302.

<sup>7</sup> I.P. Magidovich, V.I. Magidovich, "Velikie geograficheskie otkrytiia (konets XV – seredina XVII v.) [Great Geographical Discoveries (late 15th – mid 17th century)]," in *Ocherki po istorii geograficheskikh otkrytii* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie Publ., 1983), 111.

<sup>8</sup> J.M. González Ochoa, *Quién es quién en la América del Descubrimiento* (Madrid: Editorial Acento, 2003), <https://dbe.rah.es/biografias/95336/alonso-martin>

<sup>9</sup> I.P. Magidovich, V.I. Magidovich, "Velikie geograficheskie otkrytiia," 111.

<sup>10</sup> K.I. Zubkov, "Mysterious strait of Anian: the fate of a one geographical idea," *Ural Historical Journal*, no. 2 (2015): 83–89.



in 1579, English captain Francis Drake, the “famous corsair,” was the first of his compatriots to round South America through the Strait of Magellan and to move along the coast to the North. Presumably, according to some sources, he reached 48° N in the area of the current Strait of Juan de Fuca or even 50° N and allegedly visited Vancouver Island. Others believed that Drake had not crossed 43° N or even 42° N. However, there is no doubt that, turning south, his ship entered a bay located slightly north of modern San Francisco<sup>11</sup>.

Drake named the area “New Albion,” and at the entrance to San Francisco Bay his “chaplain, in the presence of the Admiral and his men, took part in the first service in the English tongue, and in accordance with the rites of the Church of England ever to have taken place on the Pacific coast of what is now the United States.”<sup>12</sup>

There is another version of the history of the search for the strait. Thus, Spanish navigator Maldonado reported that he had allegedly been to the waters of the strait during his voyage to the North Pole. He claimed that the “Strait of Anian” was located at 60° N. Maldonado insisted that on the American shore of the Strait of Anian there was an excellent port, where up to five hundred ships could easily fit. He allegedly stayed there for almost three months and saw with his own eyes a ship with a load of Chinese goods heading to the Russian port of New Arkhangelsk<sup>13</sup>.

Before leaving that place, Drake, “imitating the Portuguese, erected a pillar on the shore and nailed to it a copper plate on which there were carved the name of Queen Elizabeth, the dates of the arrival of the English in the country and the “voluntary submission” of the Indians to the English queen (1579). Below, the pirate inserted a silver coin with the image of the queen and her coat of arms and even lower he carved his name.”<sup>14</sup> Drake mistakenly believed that he could return home via the “Northwest Passage” (Frobisher Bay) from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, he returned to England in 1580 via the: Pacific Ocean, the Mariana Islands, Java, the Indian Ocean, and the Cape of Good Hope.

There is some evidence to suggest that the Strait of Juan de Fuca, off the coast of what would become British Columbia, was actually discovered in 1592 by Greek-born Spanish navigator and pilot Ioannis Fokas (Apostolos Valerianos, according to other sources) (1536–1602), who, under orders from Viceroy of New Spain, Luis de Velasco, Marquis de Salinas, had set out to find the aforementioned “Strait of Anian” in order to fortify the territory after its discovery to protect it from English penetration. Reconnaissance expeditions required very large financial and other material costs. However, they were organized not only by European states and their monarchs, but also by private entrepreneurs or trading companies working under nominal royal authority. In the 1560s–1580s, the initiators of the search for the Northwest Passage were English navigators M. Frobisher and G. Gilbert, famous privateers of Queen Elizabeth I. They developed projects for their own expeditions to polar waters, but it turned out that in England, a monopoly on the exploration of the Arctic straits of North America had already belonged to the English Muscovy Trading Company, which was not going to share it with competitors<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> G.P.V. Akkrig, H. Akkrig, *British Columbia Chronicle*, 6–7.

<sup>12</sup> J.E. Wrench, *Transatlantic London: Three Centuries of Association between England and America* (London, New York, etc.: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) LTD, 1948), 29.

<sup>13</sup> S.N. Markov, *Letopis' Alyaski* [Chronicle of Alaska] (Moscow: Russkii tsentr «Peresvet» Publ., 1991), 14–15.

<sup>14</sup> I.P. Magidovich, *Istoriia otkrytiia i issledovaniia Severnoi Ameriki* [History of the discovery and exploration of North America] (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo geograficheskoi literatury Publ., 1962), 123–124.

<sup>15</sup> A.A. Kiselev, “The Muscovy company and English expeditions to North America in the last quarter of the 16th century,” *Science Journal of Volgograd State University. History. Area Studies. International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2024): 102–112, <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.9>

Later, in 1643, the Dutch expedition of M.G. Fries sent to search for the legendary gold and silver islands north of Japan was also tasked with exploring the northwest coast of America. Moreover, the captain was concerned with the question of finding the northern tip of the continent<sup>16</sup>.

### Interests of the Russian Empire in the Pacific Region

Seeking to gain a foothold in America, European powers penetrated the region by sea from south to north or by land from east to west. Unlike them, Russian pioneers reached the Pacific Ocean, moving through Siberia or along the shores of the Arctic Ocean from west to east.

It is worth noting the global significance of the discovery in 1648 of the Bering Strait, which separates Asia from America, by Russian explorers S. Dezhnev and F. Alekseyev. They reached the mouth of the Anadyr River from the mouth of the Kolyma River by koches. Service class Cossacks and pomor industrialists founded settlements on the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk and engaged in striving for the Aleutian Islands, which began to be actively developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Together with them went the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>17</sup>, who took an active part in this steady movement of Russians to the East and to the shores of North America. Without understanding this fact, it is difficult to imagine the legacy that exists in the North Pacific Ocean to this day.

The Russian state's attention to the North Pacific Ocean is traditionally associated with Peter the Great, who relied on domestic and international experience in geographical discoveries, setting the goal of "studying the possibility of establishing a northern sea route around Eurasia."<sup>18</sup> In this regard, of great importance was his visit to England at the personal invitation of King William III during the Grand Embassy in early 1698. It was then, apparently, that Peter the Great began interested in what the outlines of America were from the Asian side. Later, the views of the Russian emperor developed under the influence of Western European scientists. The information gained from G. Leibniz and N. Witsen was especially important for him. However, the decisive factor for a move to explore the Pacific coast was the idea of ensuring external security and strengthening the frontiers on the eastern borders of the Russian Empire<sup>19</sup>.

The study of the Far Eastern outskirts were first undertaken in 1722 by surveyors I.M. Evreinov and F.F. Luzhin, and then during the First and, especially, the Second Kamchatka Expeditions by V. Bering, had demonstrated Russia's capabilities of further advancement to the shores of British Columbia.

Thus, in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were only two major Russian state expeditions to the northern part of the Pacific Ocean: Krenitsyn-Levashov (1764–1771) and Billings-Sarychev-Gal (1785–1795). Officially, these voyages pursued the goals of

<sup>16</sup> *Osnovanie Russkoi Ameriki (1732–1799)* [The Foundation of Russian America (1732–1799)], vol. 1 of *Istoriia Russkoi Ameriki, 1732–1867* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia Publ., 1997), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Yu.S. Egorova, "The State Church Policy of the Russian Empire in Alaska," *Quaestio Rossica* 11, no. 3 (2023): 834–844, <https://doi.org/10.15826/qr.2023.3.821>, [https://elar.urfu.ru/bitstream/10995/126760/1/qr\\_3\\_2023\\_07.pdf](https://elar.urfu.ru/bitstream/10995/126760/1/qr_3_2023_07.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> V.E. Baghdasaryan, S.I. Resnyansky, "Image of Peter I in Modern Historiographical and Public Discourse," *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 21, no. 3 (2022): 354, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2022-21-3-351-362>

<sup>19</sup> V.E. Bagdasaryan, S.I. Resnyansky, "Book Review of Petr Pervyi i osvoenie severa Tikhogo okeana [Peter the Great and the Development of the North Pacific], by A.Yu. Petrov (Ryazan: Ryazanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni S.A. Yesenina Publ., 2022)," *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 22, no. 1 (2023): 153, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2023-22-1-151-156>

describing and surveying islands in the Pacific Ocean, exploring the routes between Kamchatka and America, and to secure a tribute paid off in furs from the Aleuts. During the Krenitsyn-Levashov expedition, three ships were lost; Billings was unable to find a way to pass by sea along the northern coast of Siberia, although accurate maps of the Chukchi Peninsula and especially from Kolyma to the Bering Strait had already been drawn.

The expedition of G.I. Mulovsky could have become the most promising one. In the mid-1780s it was intended to assert Russia's sovereignty in the new territories. In particular, he was ordered, if necessary, even by force of arms, to preserve Russia's rights to the lands discovered by Russian navigators in the Pacific Ocean (in the Eastern Sea), and to confirm and protect "trade by sea" in the region between Kamchatka and the "western American shores." This territory was believed, by the throne, to only belong to the Russian Empire. In this regard, G.I. Mulovsky was to sail to the shores of North America, lying between 40° and 50° N, where he was to visit Nootka Sound<sup>20</sup> in order to find out whether if there were settlements of the English or representatives of any other European power there. or to find out if there plans for establishing such. However, the expedition was unexpectedly cancelled in 1787, which showed a decline of interest in the northern Pacific Ocean.

The initiative passed to private merchant companies. They were the ones that then promoted Russia's interests in area. Dozens of voyages were organized. Throughout the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was the steady movement of Russians to the shores of Alaska and further south. Efforts were made to include the islands of the Aleutian Ridge into the general economy. The main driving force for them was fur, and more specifically, sea otter fur, which was highly valued on the Chinese market and in the Nizhny Novgorod market, where it was delivered by a difficult route. The specificity of hunting this animal was that its habitat was the coast of southern Alaska, but it was practically absent in the coastal waters of the territory of the western coast of British Columbia, and otherwise it was found only off the coast of California. Therefore, for Russia, further movement to British Columbia was of interest exclusively from the point of view of widening the territory of its own colonies.

American historian F.J. Turner, the founder of the famous frontier theory in US history, came to the following conclusion: "The rifle and axe are symbols of the backwoods pioneer."<sup>21</sup> This is generally true not only with regard to the United States, but also to Canada. In addition to these two most important tools of expansionism in North America, one can include such a "gift of nature" as the furs of wild land animals (above all, beavers, and later bison), as well as the skins of marine animals – seals, sea otters<sup>22</sup>, walruses, and other mammals.

Researchers particularly emphasize the value of beaver pelts, which served as raw material for the production of fashionable felt hats. At first, only wealthy people could afford to buy them, but with the development of mass production in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and felting technologies in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, "hats with a lower beaver content became available to those with more modest incomes."<sup>23</sup> Felt could be made from sheepskin, but

<sup>20</sup> Nootka Sound was the center of international diplomacy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and was an important place for the maritime fur trade. In 1789–1790, relations between Spain and Great Britain, which claimed sovereignty over the region and rights to navigation and trade, sharply deteriorated. As a result, the so-called Nootka Sound Crisis was resolved by concluding three conventions (1790, 1793, 1794). Nevertheless, British claims remained.

<sup>21</sup> F.J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920), 269.

<sup>22</sup> J.R. Gibson, *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785–1841* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> A.M. Carlos, F.D. Lewis, *Commerce by a Frozen Sea: Native Americans and the European Fur Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 3.



the production of felt and high-quality velor (felting from the undercoat of river beaver fur) was a complex technology, and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century only Russia had it. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Western European felt manufacturers had left they had “learned the Russian secret.” Europeans bought two types of beaver fur from North American Indians: “beaver shirt, called ‘fat beaver’ in French and the so-called ‘parchment’ or ‘dry beaver’.”<sup>24</sup> Taking into account such specific factors as the history of everyday life, development of fashion, technology, and the expansion of scientific knowledge against the background of material progress in Europe, this trade in furs was logical. As is known, leading representative of the French historical school “Annals” F. Braudel drew attention to the history of this costume, which “poses many problems: raw materials, manufacturing processes, prime cost, sustainability of cultures, fashion, social hierarchy.”<sup>25</sup>

The demand for furs in Europe increased in the 18<sup>th</sup> century both due to cold weather, and because this prestigious consumer item became in demand by a wider circle of Europeans (above all, wealthy city dwellers)<sup>26</sup>. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, beavers were almost completely exterminated in Western Europe, and the main suppliers of fur were Muscovy and Novgorod, but even there the population of fur animals, including river beavers, considerably decreased. In contrast, the New World was abundant in these animals. They were cheaper to hunt and could be supplied to Europe in large quantities. This gave the French and English, who had settled on the Atlantic coast of North America, the opportunity to begin unprecedented fur trade in the Pacific Ocean, which brought them huge amounts of money.

Various species of whales also became the objects of marine trade. They were caught in ever-increasing quantities by numerous whaling expeditions in different areas of the World Ocean, in particular, on the Pacific coast of North America.

Meanwhile, Spain and Great Britain were seriously concerned about the development of this movement. These concern further increased after the formation in 1799 of the first monopoly joint-stock company in the Russian Empire, the Russian-American Company (RAC), whose activities at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, according to the charter granted to it, extended to a vast territory over the North Pacific. In compliance with the first paragraph of the privileges, the region up to 55° N with the islands of the Aleutian ridge was granted for the economic use to the RAC, since it was believed that Russia had the right to utilize these territories. The RAC could also move further south, to carry out its activities in British Columbia, but on the condition as long as there were no settlements of Western powers there. At the same time, the RAC preferred only to send out research expeditions, but not to establish settlements, which were not needed due to not only the long distances, lack of bays and ports for ships to move, but, most importantly, due to the lack of places for sea hunting, which was its main activity.

### The English claim their rights

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the English were most active in the territories south of 54° N parallel. It was the third expedition of J. Cook in 1776–1780 which caused a great stir in Russia. Although the search for the Northwest Passage was unsuccessful, the

<sup>24</sup> *Istoriia Kanady* [History of Canada] (Moscow: Ves' Mir Publ., 2021), 80.

<sup>25</sup> F. Braudel, *Material'naia tsivilizatsiia, ekonomika i kapitalizm, XV–XVIII vv.* [Material civilization, economy and capitalism, 15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries], vol. 1 of *Struktury povsednevnosti: vozmozhnoe i nevozmozhnoe* [Structures of everyday life: the possible and the impossible] (Moscow: Ves' Mir» Publ., 2011), 279, 284, 286.

<sup>26</sup> *Mir v rannee Novoe vremya* [The World in Early Modern Times], vol. 3 of *Vsemirnaia istoriia* [World History] (Moscow: Nauka Publ., 2013), 14.

English managed to make numerous other geographical discoveries. On the way to Alaska, they spent almost a month in Nootka Sound, actively documenting their observations. They refined the Pacific coastline all the way to the shores of Alaska. Important astronomical observations were made, which were then published and actively used by the English and navigators of other countries.

In the 1790s, by order of the British Crown, G. Vancouver unsuccessfully tried to find the Northwest Passage, thoroughly exploring the Pacific coast of North America during his circumnavigation of the world in 1790–1795. He wrote as follows:

The principal object which His Majesty appears to have had in view, in directing the undertaking of this voyage having at length been completed, I trust the precision with which the survey of the coast of North West America has been carried into effect, will remove any doubts, and set aside every opinion of a *north-west passage*, or any water communication navigable for shipping, existing between the north pacific, and the interior of the American continent, within the limits of our researches. The discovery that no such communication does exist has been zealously pursued, and with a degree of minuteness far exceeding the of my commission or instructions; in this respect I might possibly have incurred the censure of disobedience, had I not been instructed with the most liberal, discretionary orders, as being the fittest and most likely means of attaining the important end in question<sup>27</sup>.

Vancouver also admitted that the English did not yet know everything about the northwest coast of North America and its interior. He believed that there were allegedly no contacts between the coastal tribes and the inhabitants of the interior regions, stating that “nor were there no articles of the Canadian or Hudson’s bay traders found amongst the people with whom we met with on any part of the continent or external sea shores of this extensive country.”<sup>28</sup>

Later, this territory came under the influence of the Hudson’s Bay Company, which called it “New Caledonia.” Already towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the English decided to establish settlements, not on the coast, but on the rivers leading to the ocean. Thus, in 1794, J. Finlay founded Fort St. John at the confluence of the Beatton and Peace Rivers, which is considered the oldest European settlement in what is now Canada. Later, there appeared the settlements of Fort Hudson’s Hope, Fort George, Fort Fraser, and Fort St. James, which became part of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s trading network. The Russians were aware of the existence of these English forts, but there was virtually no direct interaction between the Russian and English settlements occurred during that period due to the significant distance of the Russian settlements from the territory of modern British Columbia.

## Conclusion

Thus, the research of the initial stage of the Pacific Northwest colonization is also a comprehensive study of its historical experience which is important for understanding modern processes in the region.

It was the economic factor which played a key role in the intensification of the region’s development. The growth in demand for furs in Europe, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, became a powerful incentive for the exploration and colonization of the Pacific terri-

<sup>27</sup> *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean, and Round the World; in Which the Coast of North-West America has been Carefully Examined and Accurately Surveyed. Undertaken by His Majesty’s Command, Principally with a View to Ascertain the Existence of Any Navigable Communication Between the North Pacific and North Atlantic Oceans; and Performed in the Years 1790, 1791, 1792, 1793, 1794, and 1795, in the DISCOVERY Sloop of War, and Armed Tender CHATHAM, Under the Command of Captain George Vancouver* (London: Printed for G.G. and J. Robinson, Paternoster-Rqw; J. Edwards, Pall-Mall, 1798), 294–295.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

tories. The almost complete extermination of beavers in Western Europe led to the New World becoming the main source of furs.

The territory that came to be called British Columbia was viewed by Russia and the Western powers through the prism of its broader civilizing model and the development of the foreign policy of Western European powers. Although the origins of British Columbia are seen in the intensification of the policy of Spain and its claims to the entire Pacific coast, the English did not recognize this right in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Russia chose a unique path for the development of the Pacific territories, by moving through Siberia and along the shores of the Arctic Ocean. This determined the special nature of Russia's colonization of the region. One of the most important achievements of Russian explorers was the discovery of the Bering Strait by Semyon Dezhnev and Fedot Alekseyev, which defined the borders between Asia and America. After the formation of the RAC, Russia also declared its claims to the territories south of 55° N. The development of the territories was facilitated by the search for the mythical northern route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. In the course of this process, important geographical discoveries were made.

Despite having legal rights, Russia did not seek to actively develop British Columbia for several reasons: due to the lack of convenient bays and ports for ship mooring, promising places for sea hunting, and due to the large distances from the main Russian territories. Merchant companies, and then the RAC, only sent out research expeditions, and avoided the establishment of permanent settlements. This indicates that Russia did not have serious intentions to actively develop the region. Thus, although Russia formally had the rights to develop part of the territory of British Columbia, in fact the Russian government and the RAC did not actively seek to colonize it in the late 18<sup>th</sup> – early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The priority area remained the territory north of 55° N, where there were more favorable conditions for fur trade.

In general, it can be concluded that the process of developing the Pacific coast of North America became an important stage in the formation of the geopolitical influence of Russia and European powers in this geographical point of the world, determining further development of this strategically important place. In further studying the problem, particular interest is the integrated approach to the development of the territories, which includes not only economic but also spiritual components. The participation of the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church in contacts with representatives of other states in the North Pacific Ocean is also significant.

Поступила в редакцию / Submitted: 19.07.2025

Одобрена после рецензирования / Approved after reviewing: 6.08.2025

Принята к публикации / Accepted for publication: 12.08.2025

## References

- Akimov, Yu.G. *Severnaia Amerika i Sibir' v kontse XVI – seredine XVIII v.: ocherk sravnitel'noi istorii kolonizatsii* [North America and Siberia in the late 16th – mid-18th centuries: An essay on the comparative history of colonization]. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta Publ., 2010 (in Russian).
- Akkrig, G.P.V., and Akkrig, H. *British Columbia Chronicle, 1778–1846. Adventures by Sea and Land*. Vancouver (BC): Discovery Press, 1975.
- Baghdasaryan, V.E., and Resnyansky, S.I. "Image of Peter I in Modern Historiographical and Public Discourse." *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 21, no. 3 (2022): 351–362 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2022-21-3-351-362>

- Baghdasaryan, V.E., and Resnyansky, S.I. “Book Review of Petr Pervyi i osvoenie severa Tikhogo okeana [Peter the Great and the Development of the North Pacific] by A.Yu. Petrov. Ryazan: Ryazanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet imeni S.A. Yesenina Publ., 2022. 280 p.” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 22, no. 1 (2023): 151–156 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2023-22-1-151-156>
- Barman, J. *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1991.
- Bourne, K. *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815–1908*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.
- Braudel, F. *Material'naia tsivilizatsiia, ekonomika i kapitalizm, XV–XVIII vv. T. 1. Struktury povse-dnevnosti: vozmozhnoe i nevozmozhnoe* [Material civilization, economy and capitalism, 15th–18th centuries. Vol. 1. Structures of everyday life: the possible and the impossible]. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo «Ves' Mir» Publ., 2011 (in Russian).
- Burt, A.L. *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America From the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace After The War of 1812*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Toronto: The Reyrson Press, 1940.
- Bolkhovitinov, N.N. “Continental colonization of Siberia and maritime colonization of Alaska: similarities and differences.” *Acta Slavica Iaponica (Sapporo, Japan)* 22 (2003): 109–125 (in Russian).
- Egorova, Yu.S. “The State Church Policy of the Russian Empire in Alaska.” *Quaestio Rossica* 11, no. 3 (2023): 834–844 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.15826/qr.2023.3.821>
- Carlos, A.M., and Lewis, F.D. *Commerce by a Frozen Sea: Native Americans and the European Fur Trade*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Golder, F.A. *Russian Expansion on the Pacific 1641–1850. An Account of the Earliest and Later Expeditions Made by the Russian along the Pacific Coast of Asia and North America, Including Some Related Expeditions to the Arctic Regions*. Cleveland: Clark, 1914.
- Gough, B.M. *Distant Dominion: Britain and the Northwest of America, 1579–1809*. Vancouver (BC) and London: University of British Columbia Press, 1980.
- González Ochoa, J.M. *Quién es quién en la América del Descubrimiento*. Madrid: Editorial Acento, 2003.
- Goldstone, J. *Pochemu Evropa? Vozvyshenie Zapada v mirovoi istorii, 1500–1850* [The Rise of the West in World History, 1500–1850]. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Instituta Gaidara Publ., 2014 (in Russian).
- Gibson J.R. *Otter Skins, Boston Ships, and China Goods: The Maritime Fur Trade of the Northwest Coast, 1785–1841*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.
- Gutiérrez Rodríguez, O. *Hispanic Origins of Oregon: A Historical Approximation to Early Hispanic Presence in the West Coast of North America (1543–1819)*. Monmouth; Salem, 2022.
- Howay, F.W. *British Columbia from the Earliest Times to the Present*. Vancouver; Portland; San Francisco; Chicago: The S.L. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913–1914.
- Innis, H.A. *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History*. New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Ierusalimskiy, Yu. Yu., Davydov, V.V., and Koskina, M.M. “Topical problems of studying Russian America in modern Russian historical literature.” *Tomsk State University Journal of History*, no. 66 (2020): 130–142 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.17223/19988613/66/16>
- Jones, W.D. *The American Problem in British Diplomacy, 1841–1861*. Athens (GA): University of Georgia Press, 1974.
- Kaplan, R. *Mest' geografii. Chto mogut rasskazat' geograficheskie karty o gryadushchikh konfliktakh i bitve protiv neizbezhnogo* [Revenge of Geography. What Geographical Maps Can Tell About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against the Inevitable]. Moscow: KoLibri Publ., Azbuka-Attikus Publ., 2016 (in Russian).
- Kiselev, A.A. “The Muscovy company and English expeditions to North America in the last quarter of the 16th century.” *Science Journal of Volgograd State University. History. Area Studies. International Relations* 29, no. 1 (2024): 102–112 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.15688/jvolsu4.2024.1.9>
- Laut, A.C. *Pioneers of the Pacific Coast: A Chronicle of the Sea Rovers, and Fur Hunters*. Toronto: Glasgow, Book & Company, 1915.
- Magidovich, I.P. *Istoriia otkrytiia i issledovaniia Severnoi Ameriki* [History of the discovery and exploration of North America]. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo geograficheskoi literatury Publ., 1962 (in Russian).
- Magidovich, I.P., and Magidovich, V.I. “Velikie geograficheskie otkrytiia (konets XV – seredina XVII v.) [Great Geographical Discoveries (late 15th – mid 17th century)].” In *Ocherki po istorii geogra-ficheskikh otkrytii*, 90–125. Moscow: Prosveshchenie Publ., 1983 (in Russian).

- Mazen, O. *Ispanskaia Amerika XVI–XVIII vekov* [Spanish America of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries]. Moscow: Veche Publ., 2015 (in Russian).
- Markov, S.N. *Letopis' Aliaski* [Chronicle of Alaska]. Moscow: Peresvet Publ., 1991 (in Russian).
- Petrov, A. Yu., and Ermolaev, A.N. "Formation of borders between Russia, Great Britain, and the USA in the North Pacific ocean at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> – first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries." *Perm University Herald. History*, no. 2 (2025): 67–76 (in Russian), <https://doi.org/10.17072/2219-3111-2025-2-67-76>
- Rich, E.E. *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1967.
- Turner, F.J. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920.
- Vsemirnaia istoriia. T. 3. Mir v rannee Novoe vremia* [World History. Vol. 3. The World in Early Modern Times]. Moscow: Nauka Publ., 2013 (in Russian).
- Wrench, J.E. *Transatlantic London: Three Centuries of Association between England and America*. London, New York, etc.: Hutchinson & Co. (Publishers) LTD, 1948.
- Zubkov, K.I. "Mysterious strait of Anian: the fate of a one geographical idea." *Ural Historical Journal*, no. 2 (2015): 83–89 (in Russian).

### Information about the authors / Информация об авторах

**Alexander Yurievich Petrov**, Dr. Habil. Hist., Chief Research Fellow of the Center for North American Studies, Institute of World History, Russian Academy of Sciences; 32a, Leninsky prospect, Moscow, 119334, Russia; Professor, Moscow State Linguistic University; 38, Osotozhenka Str., Moscow, 119036, Moscow, Russia; [alaska13@yandex.ru](mailto:alaska13@yandex.ru); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1688-4096>; SPIN-code: 6552-5958.

**Александр Юрьевич Петров**, доктор исторических наук, главный научный сотрудник, Институт всеобщей истории РАН; Россия, 119334, Москва, Ленинский просп., 32а; профессор, Московский государственный лингвистический университет; Россия, 119034, Москва, ул. Остоженка, 38, стр. 1; [alaska13@yandex.ru](mailto:alaska13@yandex.ru); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1688-4096>; SPIN-код: 6552-5958.

**Larisa Mikhailovna Troitskaia**, PhD in History, Senior Researcher, Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences; 32a, Leninsky prospect, Moscow, 119334, Russia; [amercenter@mail.ru](mailto:amercenter@mail.ru); [larisa\\_troitskaia@mail.ru](mailto:larisa_troitskaia@mail.ru); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2775-9629>; SPIN-code: 7818-1617.

**Лариса Михайловна Троицкая**, кандидат исторических наук, старший научный сотрудник, Институт всеобщей истории РАН; Россия, 119334, Москва, Ленинский просп., 32а; [larisa\\_troitskaia@mail.ru](mailto:larisa_troitskaia@mail.ru); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2775-9629>; SPIN-код: 7818-1617.