On a history of Russian nineteenth century continental explorations in Alaska

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Abstract. In the 1840s, Russian-American Company paid much attention to exploration of the interior of continental Alaska. A ground for such an explorations has been solidly prepared by the Company’s fur extracting activities and by the preceding treks by Vasil’iev, Kolmakov, Glazunov, Malakhov, Lukin and Zagoskin. Russians were by now acquainted in general terms with geography and peoples inhabiting the lower courses of the Kvikhpak (the Yukon) and Kuskokwim rivers. The tribes inhabiting these region, on their part, were informed, at least indirectly, with Russian promyshlenniki’s activities through the process of fur barter trade and by this time did not consider contacts with them as an evil to be avoided at any cost. Zagoskin’s expedition was an outstanding achievement with respect to the study of the environment and population of Alaska’s interior. Arvid Adolf Etholén’s and Voznesenskií’s materials, together with the reports about the remarkable expedition by Zagoskin, attracted close attention of the leadership of the Geographical Society.

1. Introduction

The breakdown of the totalitarian regime and disintegration of the USSR created new opportunities for Russia academics to contact personally with their colleagues in America, as well as new demands in the USA for information about Russia [1, 2]. Nowhere was the new development more apparent than in Alaska, where the end of the Cold War led to a revival of ethnic, religious, and economic ties going back to the Russian settlement of Alaska in the late eighteenth century. The new situation has favorably reflected in the development of the studies on the history of the Russian America. The topic of this paper is a prominent example of this development especially in the Russian research and education literature. The most thorough works in the field were analyzed by Professor Andrei V. Grinёv (Saint-Petersburg) in his paper [3]. This review includes data on most prominent works in the field. Lavrenty Zagoskin’s 200-years anniversary had been celebrated in Kazan (Russia) and Alaska. Kazan International conference dedicated to life and activities of Zagoskin included papers on many aspects of his explorations, especially his ethnological observations of Alaskan Natives. Just recently, the Penza Regional Branch of the Russian Geographical Society compiled a very dependable site on life and activities of Lavrenty Zagoskin dedicated to his 210-years anniversary [4].

All these resources briefly outlined above were not very keen on Zagoskin’s geographical explorations, surveys and mapping of regions, which he had been the first European to explore. The author of this paper had been long involved with research and publications on the history of geographical explorations and mapping of Northern Pacific and the Russian America. The idea of the present publication had come to me as a result of the recent visit to the US Library of the Congress site...
Meeting of the Frontier [5] which copied my paper about history of Exploration and Mapping of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands in Nineteenth Century [6]. I decided to compliment this paper with results of my research of original manuscript materials of Lavrenty Zagoskin’s field explorations of continental Alaska [7]. I presented some results of my research at several conferences (including one in Fairbanks, Alaska) but the present paper would be the first full publication of my research on the topic in English.

2. Preparation for the expedition

In June of 1840, Captain of the Second Rank Arvid Adolf Etholén (1799–1876) replaced Kupreianov as Chief Manager of Russia’s colonies in America. Arvid Adolf Etholén, possessed colossal experience in working in Russian America and knew it well. In his person, the management of the Russian-American Company acquired an enthusiastic scholar of natural history and of the peoples of Alaska. Lavrentii Alexeevich Zagoskin (1808–1890) became one of the most outstanding executors of his plans.

Zagoskin obtained the higher level of naval education at the Naval Cadet Corps in Kronstadt. On October 6 in 1839, Zagoskin arrived at Novoarkhangel’sk in command of the company brig Okhotsk.

The next two years he spent in commercial voyages off American coasts. In particular, in 1841 he sailed aboard the corvette Elena to Fort Ross. On the return trip, he was joined on board by the assistant professor from the Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, Il’ya Gavrilovich Voznesenskii (1816–1871). Voznesenskii gave Zagoskin many tips with respect to natural science observations and collection and conservation of flora and fauna specimen [8]. In the spring of 1842, Etholín proposed to Zagoskin to undertake an expedition into America’s interior. Zagoskin himself initiated this expedition, when he outlined his plan for this enterprise in 1840 in a letter sent to Wrangell in Saint Petersburg. One of the goals of the expedition was to reach the sources of the Kvikhpak [the Yukon] and Kuskokwim as well as to find the best communication route between the basins of these two rivers [9].

In July 1842 Zagoskin was brought to the Mikhailovskii Redoubt where he immediately commenced, aside from preparation for the expedition, natural history observations and collecting geographic information from experienced promyshlenniki, interpreters, and local inhabitants. Zagoskin paid close attention to the details of preceding journeys and the traditional migration routes of the natives [10]. One of the most important assignments given to Zagoskin was the determination of routes, and tribes, through whom Alaska furs were reaching Chukotka, by-passing the employees of the Russian-American Company. The middlemen in this trade with the peoples of northeast Asia were known then under the collective name of Maleimuti. According to the opinion of D.J. Ray, this term was, in the 1830s and 1840s applied to any Eskimo traders from the north. Zagoskin made a map of Stewart Island shore. Besides showing settlements on his map, Zagoskin compiled a «List of settlements along the Unalaklik River to the North to Point Barrow» with brief data on settlements [10].

Zagoskin, when preparing for the expedition, constantly referred to Malakhov’s map and Glazunov’s travel journal. He noted that on Malakhov’s map the locations’ longitude is farther to the east of their correct situation [10]. In perusing these materials, Zagoskin paid particular attention to relations between the travelers and the natives [10].

3. Exploring Nulato Surroundings

On 15 January 1843, the travelers arrived at Nulato [10]. At that time, the Nulato odinochka was managed by the baidarchik (boarman) Deriabin, a participant in all treks undertaken by Glazunov and Malakhov. He, therefore, was in a position to inform Zagoskin about certain details of these expeditions. Zagoskin went on a reconnaissance upstream along the Yukon [10]. Movement through the snow covered taiga and among the ice hummocks on the river was far from simple. Zagoskin did not manage to go by such means sufficiently far from Nulato and therefore had to satisfy himself through the winter season mainly by interrogating natives and making geographic observations [10].
In winter and spring, Zagoskin made phenological observations, the first for the Yukon area [10]. With the onset of summer weather, Zagoskin’s party went up the Yukon [10]. It should be noted, that such careful evaluation by himself of the trek up the Yukon, is one of many instances demonstrating Zagoskin’s exceptional honesty and objectivity as far as his observations and conclusions are concerned. His explorations left little doubt that Kvikhpak has its source in a ridge (more correctly a plateau) separating the Hudson Bay Company possessions from those of the Russian-American Company and that the Kvikhpak is the very same Yukon on the upper reaches of which the English have established themselves. The general geographic considerations, based on orographic and hydrographic structure of the land clarified by Zagoskin and his predecessors, pointed to this conclusion, as did the data collected by Zagoskin from the natives about the river’s names. The concordance of the two forms (Iun-a and Juk-khana) and “Yukon” could hardly be ascribed to coincidence. However, Zagoskin did not have the gumption to assert categorically that the two rivers so called were one and the same. This fact was demonstrated with finality only in 1863 when Ivan Lukin, son of the commander of the Kolmakovskii Redoubt, went up the Yukon to the vicinity of the modern Dawson in Canada. Thus, the Russians have explored this mighty river practically for its entire course and it was demonstrated that this is, indeed, Alexander Mackenzie’s “Great River” [10].

One of Zagoskin’s main assignments was to conduct sketch surveys and mapping on his route [10]. Zagoskin paid exceptional attention to local geographic names, establishing variants used by representatives of various tribes. He also attempted to learn the meaning of these names [10]. It should be noted that it was necessary to overcome considerable linguistic difficulties in order to obtain such details. Zagoskin vividly describes this when talking about information obtained by questioning natives about a locality [10].

In 1838–1839, the Creoles P.F. Kolmakov and Markel Matrosov visited the Tlegon River. Throughout the entire course of the expedition, Zagoskin used the map of this region compiled by Kolmakov in 1839. By 1844, Zagoskin’s questions and doubts about Kolmakov’s map were resolved with finality, because of testimonies by one of Kolmakov’s paddlers who was in Zagoskin’s command and by manager of the Kolmakovskii Redoubt S.I. Lukin and assistant to P.F. Kolmakov Markel Matrozov [10]. In order to reconcile information obtained from the natives, and his own surveys and observations made during the trek to upper reaches of the Kvikhpak, Zagoskin cites “essay on the work” of P.F. Kolmakov which has its own importance. According to Zagoskin’s observations, information supplied by the local inhabitants, no matter how accurate, demanded careful analysis and good knowledge about native concepts of topography, conditioned by mode of subsistence, and even about the narrative style pertaining to the routes of their travels [10].

On the 1st of July 1843, Zagoskin’s party, having failed to negotiate an extensive shoal was forced to turn back and proceeded down the Yukon. The geographic coordinates established that day by the expedition’s commander were 64°56’07” N. lat., and 158°18’45” W. long., (from Greenwich).

Upon return to Nulato, Zagoskin taking advantage of the short stay there, continued to collect information about the locality and started description of the Nulato district. Expedition’s commander, who was, as is well known, a hereditary nobleman, was very favorably impressed with the ordinary men serving at Nulato odin ochka, especially baidarshchik Deriabin [10].

4. Travel to the Yukon
On August 5, the expedition resumed the travel down the Yukon. Zagoskin made this entry at the winter habitation settlement Tuttago known to Russians «under the name of Igudovskoe». The travelers began to note [signs] of approaching autumn. Already at Nulato, Zagoskin recorded temperature drop to –1.5° [10].

On November 30, Zagoskin’s party reached the Kuskokwim River and on December 3 the exhausted travelers came to the Kolmakovskii Redoubt where they were hospitably received by the redoubt’s manager, the Creole S. I. Lukin, a man enjoying well deserved fame in Russian colonies. Zagoskin was deeply impressed by the redoubt and by the manager. According to Zagoskin’s observations, the absence of any kind of defensive fortification at the redoubt was to be explained by
the fact that Lukin, and all those close to him, were totally “included, implanted” into their natural and ethnic environment [10]. Besides, most of the natives from the adjacent region by that time were converted to Orthodoxy by Lukin and Kolmakov.

Zagoskin was greatly struck by Lukin’s knowledge of geography and peoples of the Kuskokwim and Kvikhpak river basins. Besides having been an interpreter for Wrangell and participant in Vasil’ev’s expedition, Lukin was dispatched in 1832 to establish an odinochka on the Kuskokwim [10].

By the time when Zagoskin’s expedition arrived at the Kolmakovskii Redoubt, the commercial and fur extracting activity of the district had assumed a totally routine character. Of course, each of the regular treks, without any doubt, brought new information about geography and local peoples of Alaska’s interior. In spite of the fact that such information was seldom recorded in surveys and maps, they, just the same, became included in what we can call in modern language “traditional geoinformational system” that was used by the natives and by the promyshlenniki of the Russian-American Company. The volume of information that constantly expanded this “system” may be characterized to a certain degree by the fact that for the regular winter and summer treks out of Kolmakovskii Redoubt between 40 and 60 local guides were hired on average [10].

As was the case in the past season at Nulato, Zagoskin, while staying at the Kolmakovskii Redoubt and during the treks along the Kuskokwim in winter of 1844 conducted regular meteorological and phenological observations, paying attention also to synoptic signs.

On 19 May 1844 Zagoskin’s party set out up the Kuskokwim in two three-hatch expedition baidarkas. Lukin, manager of the Kolmakovskii Redoubt, traveled along with the voyagers also with a three-hatch baidarka and a small baidara carrying trade goods. Once again the daily routine of topographic surveys conducted along the march set in. The work was complicated by a very winding character of the Kuskokwim that in his area meandered through a rather broad valley. Lukin, on the Kuskokwim, became a witness to the tragic consequences for the animal world of the taiga not only through predatory hunting the fur bearers but also through irrational actions by the natives [10].

Russian explorers of continental Alaska paid particular attention to the investigation of the possibility to cross from the Kuskokwim River basin to the Gulf of Kenai [Cook Inlet]. It was supposed that one of such passes was at the headwaters of the River Tkhal’kuk [Stony River].

The description cited above appears to have been typical of material [resulting from] the querying of native population by Zagoskin and used by him in compilation of the expedition’s map, the parts for which he lacked data obtained by direct observation. Apparently because it was impossible to obtain such multiple verification through independent sources and personal observation Zagoskin did not mark on his map information «about the existence of a large lake or Mediterranean beautiful sea» [10]. We probably shall never be able to determine with certainty which lake did the natives have in mind when talking to Zagoskin but we cannot exclude the possibility that information about the northern Great Lakes or Hudson Bay was reaching the inhabitants of the Yukon and Kuskokwim Valleys.

On June 4, the party turned back. Having spent the night at the mouth of the Holitna River, in the evening of the next day, at 10 o’clock, they arrived safely at Kolmakovskii Redoubt. The travelers then moved once again toward the Kvikhpak. On the way, Zagoskin made interesting observations at the settlement Khal’kas-miut that once again confirmed, to use modern language, the complex system of environmental traditions and prohibitions that were established among the local population. However, in order to supply the travelers with food stuffs an exception was made to this strict rule [10].

June 10, having crossed the watershed between the Kuskokwim and Kvikhpak basins, Zagoskin’s party came out to the Kvikhpak a mile and a half from the settlement Ikogmiut. In this settlement they were hospitably met by the baidarshchik Glazunov. During the expedition’s rest that lasted to June 13, Glazunov told Zagoskin some particulars about his trek to the Kvikhpak.

On his way down the Kvikhpak, Zagoskin used the Angun (Ankhun) Slough [Apkhun or today Apoon Pass, — A.P.] This fortress, according to Glazunov’s information which Zagoskin confirmed, played a noticeable role in the history of the local tribes, specifically «as Pastol’tsy tell it, in former years the Chnag-miut were at war with the Magg-Miut; having suffered a crushing defeat they retreated to the fortress which later was destroyed by the enemy» [10].
On August 5, 1844, brig Okhotsk took on board Zagoskin’s expedition and on 26 they arrived safely in Novoarkhangel’sk [10].

5. Scientific results of Zagoskin’s expeditions
The Manager of Russia’s colonies in America, reporting to Saint Petersburg the conclusion of the expedition, characterized its results, primarily with respect to the benefits [accrued to] Russian-American Company’s interests. That Zagoskin’s expedition was an outstanding achievement with respect to the study of the environment and population of Alaska interior, is a fact acknowledged by his contemporaries and by scholars of our own age. Zagoskin’s first article about his expedition’s results was published in the Zapiski Gidrogrficheskago departamenta immediately after his return to St. Petersburg [11]. In the winter of 1846, the traveler was given leave and went home. On 8 January of 1847, at the general meeting of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, a report about his journey was read, in his absence, by S.I. Zelenoi; the text of this report with a map was published in the Zapiski of the Society [12]. Immediately following, Zagoskin’s main work, The Overland Survey of Part of Russian Possessions in America was published in two volumes [13]. Accounts of the journey were also published outside Russia [14–16].

The scholarly circles in Russia showed great appreciation for Zagoskin’s works and in 1849 the traveler was elected Active members of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society. The St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences awarded him a prize. Zagoskin’s Overland Survey... [Peshekhdnaia opis’...] was only a second publication to be awarded this Academy’s prize. The first was given to the twenty eight year old P.L. Chebyshev (1821–1894) for his doctoral dissertation, The Theory of Comparisons [Teoriia sravnenii] that became a classic work in mathematics. Zagoskin’s contemporaries noted that even though he was not a professional geographer, his studies were outstanding in their scrupulous accuracy, the directness and clarity of geographic observations and descriptions, based solely on what the traveler saw himself and/or carefully ascertained himself. Precisely because of this, even now, nearly 150 years later, his observations remain a valuable source for scholars. The well known Russian naturalist and traveler, Academician A. F. Middendorf (1815–1894) gave a high assessment to the cartographic work of Zagoskin’s expedition, stressing that it became the bases for cartography of this vast region with precise determination of 40 points by latitude and longitude.

6. The results of cartographic research of Zagoskin’s expeditions
Zagoskin’s continental expedition’s cartographic results were, indeed, remarkable, and this is due not only to the fact that he personally conducted precise surveys on the march and made astronomical determination of coordinates, but because he also summarized the work of his Russian and foreign predecessors, carefully checking their data against information provided by the local inhabitants and experienced company employees. «Mercator chart of part of the Northwest coast of America, compiled by Lieutenant Zagoskin during the expedition of the years 1842, 43 and 44» reflects the immediate results of the expedition is preserved at the State Archive of the Navy of Russia in St. Petersburg [17]. Judging by the official report of the Chief Manager of the colonies Arvid Adolf Etholén , this chart was sent as part of a set together with other surveys of the Russian-American Company’s possessions, attached to the dispatch # 382 dated 15 May 1845. This creation, pertaining to an outstanding stage of the exploration is an incontrovertible evidence that Zagoskin determined the general horographic and hydrographic schema of the lower and middle courses of the rivers Yukon and Kuskokwim. He also represented the relative size of the basins of these great Alaskan rivers cartographically precisely, due to three portages used by the local tribes since times immemorial the expedition traversed and surveyed on their march.

7. Conclusion
The Chief manager of the colonies, Arvid Adolf Etholén used Zagoskin’s data, together with his own information, to formulate new instructions to local management. In prominent part, these were aimed at continuance of exploration of Interior Alaska and its coasts and creating a permanently updatable
A compendium of data, which in modern terms could be named a Geographical Information System. Specifically, Arvid Adolf Etholén ordered Semeon Lukin, manager of the Kolmakovskii redoubt to follow these «Particular instructions» [18]. The manager was required to sail down to the St. Michael redoubt by 10 of July where by that time the vessel from Novoarkhangel’sk was expected to arrive. In his reports, the manager had to present his own notes about number of the inhabitants, the localities and the region’s abundance in potential fur catch. The manager of the Kolmakovskii Redoubt, Semeon Lukin, was extremely useful to Zagoskin’s expedition and aroused the traveler’s admiration. All of this had several pleasant consequences for the old Company employee and for some of Lieutenant Zagoskin’s assistants [18].

Arvid Adolf Etholén assigned a special role in further investigations of a part of interior Alaska close to Nulato odinochka. The entire basin of the Kvikhpak, from the Tutago-Igudovskoe settlement upstream to its very source, was included into its sphere of fur procurement and exploration activity. In 1845 Arvid Adolf Etholén compiled the «Instruction for management and productivity of the Nulato odinochka». In the instruction, much attention was devoted to regulation on hunting of fur animals and measures for their preservation from complete extinction. The party was expected to return to Nulato between 1–10 July [18].

To further exploration and mastering of the Lower Yukon, the same instruction directed development of the new odinochka being established, called the Andreevskia [18].

One should note that in the very same year of 1845, the Kvikhpak Mission (modern Russian Mission) was established in the settlement Ikogmiut, about 200 verst away from the Mikhailovskii Redoubt upstream along the Yukon. It was headed by Priest Iakov Netsvetov, a Creole. The Mission was to bring the Word of God to the inhabitants of the Kvikhpak and Kuskokwim basins and of their tributaries [19]. The Andreevskia odinochka was destroyed by the natives in 1855.

The paper about Zagoskin’s travels read at the meeting of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, and the publication of his «Zapiski...» in 1847 aroused tremendous interest in Russian scholarly circles. It is not to be excluded that the attention of the Russian scholars was focused on the overseas possessions of the Empire by the fact that at that particular time there arrived in Saint Petersburg natural science and ethnographic collections of Voznesenskii and Arvid Adolf Etholén. Both of them left the colonies in 1845. Voznesenskii at various times sent 150 huge boxes to the Academy of Sciences. Collections by Voznesenskii and Arvid Adolf Etholén, to this day remain one of the most valuable sources for scientific studies. The value of Arvid Adolf Etholén’s ethnographic materials was clearly demonstrated in a recent publication by a Finnish scholar Pirjo Varjola with participation of Russian ethnographers the late Iu.P. Averkieva and the late R.G. Lyapunova supported by the National Administration of Antiquities of Finland [20]. Arvid Adolf Etholén’s and Voznesenskii’s materials, together with the reports about the remarkable expedition by Zagoskin, attracted close attention of the leadership of the Geographical Society. The latter decided on a study of Russia’s natural environment and economy, by means of a questionnaire, beginning with Russian America territory.

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