

THE ALASKA-AMERICAN DISPUTE

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Like the Bering Sea fur seal dispute, the Alaska boundary controversy had its origins in complications associated with the period of Russian dominion in Alaska. While explorers from western Europe were moving across the vast expanses of North America and up its Pacific coast towards the northwestern extremity of the continent, Russian adventurers were approaching the same region from the opposite direction; and they got there well in advance of their rivals. In 1639, only about sixty years after the great march from Muscovy eastward across Siberia had been started by the Stroganovs and Yermak the Cossack, a small party under Andrei Kopilov is said to have reached the waters of the Pacific and found the post of Okhotsk.¹ The Cossack Simeon Dezhnev in 1648 sailed a vessel around the northeastern extremity of Siberia from the Kolyma River to south of the Anadyr, according to records discovered nearly a hundred years after the event is supposed to have taken place, and he thus proved that Asia did not join North America in that region.² There was desultory Russian activity around the Sea of Okhotsk and in Kamchatka Peninsula during the years following, but the next major advance came with the two great voyages of Vitus Bering. Acting on instructions given by Peter the Great just before his death in 1725, this Danish captain with his lieutenant Alexei Chirikov sailed from Kamchatka in 1728 and followed the Siberian coast through Bering Strait, reaching 67°18' N. lat. before turning back. In 1741, after years of delay, they set out from Kamchatka again, and although their two ships became separated they both succeeded in reaching and cruising along the southern coast of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands, thus accomplishing the modern discovery of North America from the Asiatic side.³

After Bering's second voyage Russian explorers and traders sailed from Okhotsk and Kamchatka to Alaskan waters in increasing numbers, and they gradually