

Guest Editor's Introduction: Individuals and Groups of Mixed Russian-Native Parentage in Siberia, Russian America, and Alaska

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The four articles in this collection address the historical and cultural causes and consequences of intermarriage among Russian men and native women on the Russian colonial frontier in northeastern Siberia and Alaska. Bringing together a historian, three anthropologists, and two linguists, these works examine this issue in diachronic as well as synchronic perspective.

The impetus for this project was a special session of the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory organized by me and titled "Creating Creoles and Being Creole in Siberia, Russian America, and Alaska." The idea of having such a session seemed quite timely: in the prior decade there had been a fair amount of important new research by historians and anthropologists on the racially/ethnically and culturally mixed social group composed of the descendants of Russian *promysblenniki* (fur traders, fur trade workers) and Native Alaskan women, a group who came to be known as "Creoles."¹ This work, however, has largely escaped the attention of scholars working on interracial mixing and mixed-race populations in the Canadian fur trade and elsewhere in the New World.² My attempts to find articles in this journal dealing with the Alaska Creoles did not yield results, either.

In our opinion, this is a significant oversight. After all, the Russian expansion into Alaska is part of the colonial history of North America and must be incorporated into both its grand narrative and its theory-inspired analysis. Moreover, the Russian encounter with Native Alaskans, with its unique characteristics as well as important similarities to other colonial projects (especially the Hudson's Bay Company case), offers an excellent opportunity for scholars interested in comparative ethnohistorical research.

For example, both the Russian-American Company (RAC), which controlled the entire process of colonization of Alaska, and the Hudson's Bay Company had been granted monopolies in their territories by the Russian and the British governments, respectively, yet only the former was required to underwrite various (often expensive) missionary, scientific, educational, and medical undertakings. Most importantly, from the point of view of these essays, the Russian Creoles were similar to the Canadian métis³—or even the New Mexican Hispanics, in some respects—yet significantly different from them as well (see Brown 1980; Van Kirk 1980; Peterson and Brown 1985; Macdougall 2010; Podruchny and Peers 2010a; Nieto-Philippis 2004).

As elsewhere in North America, male newcomers from Russia and Native Alaskan women established various types of intimate relations, from short-term liaisons to legal marriages sanctified by the Church. Some of the offspring of these relationships stayed with their mothers and thus remained culturally native, yet many others became cultural hybrids. As mentioned above, their experiences and the economic and social roles played by them on this northern frontier paralleled in a number of ways those of the métis children of French men and aboriginal women in the Canadian fur trade. Thus many of the men of mixed Russian-native parentage were bilingual, got baptized in the Russian Church, and shared many of the tastes and habits of their fathers. Most important from the point of view of the Russians was their involvement in the fur trade as laborers, guides, sailors, navigators, managers of small trading posts, and so forth.

A unique attribute of the Alaska “mixed-bloods” was a special estate to which they were eventually assigned by the RAC in its first charter adopted in 1821. As is well known, the biggest problem faced by this company and the Russian state that supported it in their efforts to profit from and exercise some degree of control over the Russian empire's only overseas colony was the very small number of Russian-born skilled laborers and other employees as well as settlers who were willing to go to the New World.⁴ In addition, these newcomers lacked the skills needed to hunt marine mammals—the main reason for the Russian presence in Alaska. Consequently, the RAC had to rely on indigenous (mostly Aleut and Alutiiq) men for hunting and on Creole men as a large percentage of its labor force. Eventually, the Alaska Russian Orthodox mission also came to depend on the latter to perform the services of readers, deacons, and occasionally even priests.

The Creoles constituted a *completely new* estate (or semi-estate), considered equal to but different from that of the burghers. In metropolitan Russia, the children of Russian fathers and indigenous Siberian mothers generally belonged to the father's estate (peasant, burgher, merchant,

clergy, etc.). Such marriages were common during the Russian expansion into Siberia, with many of the descendants of such marriages considering themselves Russian, some others becoming indigenized (e.g., becoming culturally Yakut or Sakha), and some even developing an identity as people of mixed Russian-native heritage, seen as such by outsiders but without the state's creating a separate estate for them (see Schweitzer, Golovko, and Vakhtin in this issue; cf. Slezkine 1994: 97–98; Luehrmann 2008: 116).

As Sonja Luehrmann (2008) points out, the situation in Alaska was very different because it was not legally part of the Russian empire, and hence the RAC's Russian employees stayed there legally only on seven-year passports and continued to be registered in their city of origin. In order to become members of a particular Russian estate, their mixed-blood children had to be registered in the father's city. However, such an arrangement was inconvenient both for the Russian men who themselves—and/or whose Alaskan-born wives and children—might not have wanted to go back to Russia and especially for the RAC, which desperately needed a self-sustaining population in Alaska to alleviate the difficulty of hiring employees from European Russia and Siberia to work in a distant part of the world, not terribly attractive to most ordinary Russians. As Ilya Vinkovetsky (2011: 40, 46) suggests, the RAC leadership must have borrowed the term *creole* from the Spanish in the early 1800s to identify this new type of people as persons born outside Russia to non-Russian mothers who were supposed to remain in Alaska rather than settle back in the old country. To underscore this objective, the Creoles, while proclaimed to be Russian subjects, were freed from taxation as long as they remained in Alaska.⁵

Unlike the Alaska Natives, the Creoles usually received some form of Russian education, from that of the basic elementary parish to specialized training in navigation and other skills. Unlike the natives, the Creoles were not indentured to the RAC; but those who had pursued their education at company expense in Russia or in Russian America's capital, Novo-Arkhangel'sk (Sitka), were obligated to work for the company for ten years. Moreover, having been separated spatially and culturally from their native kin and being often indebted to the company, they had few choices but to work for it anyway. The Creoles lived in Russian communities or their own communities and were strongly discouraged from taking part in the marine mammal hunting activities reserved for the RAC's native employees. In fact, they developed a strong disdain for such activities and tended to look down on the latter. Russian men preferred to marry Creole rather than native women, since the former tended to be culturally closer to them. Their children were counted as Creoles unless the father occupied a high rank in the RAC hierarchy and could claim Russian identity for his children. Cre-

ole men married Creole or native women, with their children joining the father's estate.

Although the Creoles were first and foremost a social group and an estate, they were not at all a monolithic group, and how they were viewed by Russians depended on the individual status of the Russian observer and that of the Creole being observed. Thus a relatively small group of Creoles achieved high status within the RAC, becoming skippers, priests, and managers of company posts. Among them were such well-known families as the Kashevaroffs and the Kostromitinovs (Kostrometinoffs), who continued to play an important role in post-1867 Alaska frontier society and whose lives are discussed in my essay and that of Susan Smith-Peter in this issue. A larger group of Creoles was composed of mid- and lower-level RAC employees, whose status was definitely higher than that of the company's native workers but lower than that of its Russian ones. As the work of a Russian historian, Andrei Grinev (2010), and Smith-Peter (this issue) has recently demonstrated, most Creoles never reached the higher ranks of the RAC hierarchy.⁶ On the bottom of Creole society were those workers who performed the most menial jobs, those known for their poor discipline and heavy drinking, or those whose lifestyle and socializing habits were seen as being close to that of the natives.⁷

Russian perceptions of and attitudes toward the Creoles included a (more or less) full acceptance, typical of the RAC's old-time employees and more common in the early years of the company. One can imagine that it might have been difficult for those Russian men whose own wives were Creoles to be too critical of Creole men, many of whom were related to them through marriage or the godfather-godson relationship. The Russian clergy, especially the better educated and more progressive among them, also treated the Creoles as a social rather than a racial category. At the same time, I agree with Vinkovetsky, who argues that members of the RAC upper echelon (especially the navy officers) tended to view and portray the Creoles in rather negative terms and to exhibit a certain degree of racial prejudice not unlike that which was common in the other European colonies at the time. As he puts it, "The description of the Creoles by Europeanized Russian observers, which liberally combined environmental, social, and hereditary explanations, dwelt repeatedly on the physical and moral qualities of the off-spring of inter-ethnic unions" (Vinkovetsky 2011: 148). Arguing that such unions tended to produce weak and inferior offspring, these nineteenth-century observers, many of them members of the nobility, attributed Creoles' drunkenness and susceptibility to disease to their biological or racial inferiority (described as the influence of their mother's blood) and saw this as a negative consequence of race mixing. One might

add that whether the Creoles were a purely social category or a category that combined social and racial elements is a question that continues to be debated by scholars working on the history of Russian America.

In fact, the first essay in our group, by Smith-Peter, aims to shed more light on this complex issue by offering a detailed examination of the origin of the first generation of Creoles, using an important document: a census taken in 1816 in Kodiak and Sitka, the two principal centers of the Creole population. Smith-Peter's findings are very interesting. While, as expected, most of the fathers of these Creoles were Russian-born *promyshlenniki*, one finds Western Europeans as well as Siberian Natives and even several Aleuts among them. As the author convincingly argues, the presence of a significant percentage of aboriginal Siberians in this group supports the claim that the category of Creole was a sociocultural rather than a racial one. Her data also indicate that the so-called Russian population of colonial Alaska actually included a significant number of Native Siberians whose ethnic affiliation was marked in the RAC documents but who spoke Russian and most have been rather heavily Russified culturally. An even more interesting case reported by Smith-Peter is that of Grigorii Vertoprakhov, who was listed as a Creole even though both of his parents were Aleuts. In this case, his education at the Novo-Arkhangel'sk school and subsequent exemplary service in the RAC qualified him for advancement from the ranks of the natives into that of the Creoles. This and several other examples reported by the author demonstrate that the category of Creole was a fairly flexible one.

Smith-Peter's essay also provides new data for the argument that has been going on for quite some time between those scholars who tend to idealize the RAC's treatment of Creoles, arguing that most if not all of them had an opportunity to find better jobs within the colony and thus advance through the ranks (e.g., Black 2004), and the more recent position advocated by Grinev (2010), who insists that the Creoles' upward mobility was quite limited. Most of the information presented here does support the latter viewpoint. Smith-Peter shows that the majority of Creoles who managed to occupy prominent positions within the RAC's professional hierarchy were children of Russian or Creole men who themselves were part of that elite. However, there were a few exceptions, which suggests that, as was the case in Russia itself, upward mobility within an estate was possible: an especially ambitious and well-educated Creole youngster could rise above his father's station.

Next, my essay deals precisely with a representative of the Creole elite whose father was a Russian merchant and a manager of one of the RAC's Alaska offices and whose mother was a Creole. However, thanks to having been adopted by the wife of the Russian colony's governor, she had received

a proper Russian education and must have been culturally (much?) more Russian than Creole. The protagonist of the essay is Sergei Ionovich Kostromitinov (1854–1916), whose childhood and adolescence took place during the Russian colonial era but whose adult life was spent under the Stars and Stripes, after most of the Russian-born employees of the RAC had left Alaska. Using a biographical approach, I discuss the Creoles' predicament during the first decades of American rule in Alaska, when US government representatives, let alone fortune seekers and settlers, did not recognize or understand their special legal and social status. To make matters worse, without the employment the RAC had offered to able-bodied Creoles and the pensions it had been providing to the retired ones,⁸ many of them suffered a rapid and drastic decline in their standard of living. The situation was particularly dire in Sitka, the first Alaska community to be inundated by American frontiersmen and US Army soldiers, who looked down upon the Creoles as miserable and immoral "half-breeds" without any steady occupations. Thus from 1867 on, Creole definitely became much more a racial than a sociocultural category.

The only exception was a small group of well-educated and well-to-do Creoles as well as those of more modest means who possessed the special trades and skills badly needed by the newcomers. Such individuals tended to be classified as Russians (i.e., White or Euro-American) or at least characterized as the respectable Creoles. Thus wealth, social status, and lifestyle continued to play at least a certain role in the way the Creoles were differentiated and their moral character evaluated. Along the same lines, those Sitka Creoles who were married to or who socialized with the local Indians or for other reasons found themselves on the bottom of the town's multiracial social hierarchy were often lumped together with the Indians. As the life of Kostromitinov demonstrates, a true cultural broker like him managed to use his personal charisma, business skills, and impressive linguistic abilities to maintain an influential position and accumulate social capital in both the American and the Creole communities. Thus over the course of his life, Kostromitinov served as the US government interpreter (from Russian, Tlingit, Aleut, and Alutiiq), deputy marshal, store owner and investor, president of the local historical society, Alaska governor's representative at the St. Louis Fair, and so forth. Of course, it helped that he was only one-quarter native and had accumulated a decent amount of money in a fairly short period of time through successful business dealings. Nonetheless, in a racialized and ethnocentric American environment of post-1867 frontier Alaska, even a man like him—called "Colonel George" by the local Euro-American elite—did not feel fully American and had to carefully downplay his Creole ancestry.

A complex identity and the challenges faced by the Alaska Creoles after

the departure of the RAC is also the subject of Gordon L. Pullar's essay. Unlike my piece, however, his is focused on the recent decades and on a different region: Kodiak Island. Like Sitka, Kodiak was a major area of Creole inhabitation during the RAC era. In fact, several villages on the island were occupied exclusively by Creoles (including those who had retired from the RAC) while others were home to the Alutiiqs (also known as the Sugpiaq) (see Luehrmann 2008: 21–62). As a descendant of one such Creole family, Pullar offers a unique and valuable perspective on the local peoples' own sense of ethnic identity and ethno-ethnohistory (in the Fogelsonian sense). Thus we learn from this essay that after the sale of Alaska, Pullar's people eventually stopped calling themselves Creoles because in the American-dominated territory, where racial prejudice and discrimination were quite strong, this term had a connotation of "half-breed" while also linking them more closely to the natives (Alutiiqs) than many of them wished to be. For that reason, in post-1867 Kodiak, most Creoles became "Russians."

All this, however, changed dramatically in the wake of agitation related to the Alaska Native Land Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of the 1960s and the eventual passing of this landmark legislation in 1971. Drawing on the political activities of his own uncle, Karl Armstrong Jr., who had been a major pro-ANCSA activist on Kodiak and a very proud Creole, Pullar explains why the descendants of the Kodiak Creoles (who by then had also been intermarrying with Euro-Americans for quite some time) were much more reluctant than their Alutiiq neighbors and kin to identify themselves as Native Alaskans in order to pursue the land claims, even though as Creoles they had a sufficient blood quantum to legally do so. Thus the case described in this essay is a good example of the power of historical memory and established ethnic and sociocultural identity over present-day political conduct. Only after a great deal of persuasion by Karl Armstrong and a few other local activists did these Native Alaskans of mixed ancestry realize that they were just as entitled to be part of the land claims as the Kodiak Alutiiqs, whose own blood often had European admixture as well but who for years had been identifying as native rather than Russian. Similar to my essay, this one relies on biographical (or autobiographical) data to unpack the politics of Creole identity both past and present.

The last essay in this collection, by Peter P. Schweitzer and his two Russian colleagues, Evgeniy V. Golovko and Nikolai B. Vakhtin, takes us across the Bering Strait to the arctic and subarctic sections of Eastern Siberia, where since the time of the completion of Russian colonization in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a number of groups and communities of mixed Russian-native descent had developed. As in Alaska, most of the first settlers were single *promyshlenniki* who married local native women

and whose descendants, who came to be known as the “Old Settlers,” incorporated elements of the local indigenous languages and cultures to various degrees. Thus some of them simply borrowed words, hunting methods, and clothing; others began speaking a creole-type language; and some even became fully indigenized as they switched to speaking the local native language and adopted many of the local customs (see Sunderland 1996).

However, as Schweitzer and his two Russian colleagues (both prominent Russian linguists) argue, despite the fact that since the coming of the first Russian settlers there has been a great deal of biological and cultural mixing in this region, most of these mixed populations defined and continue to define themselves as Russian, at least if pressed by researchers. While they are well aware of their distinct history and cultural heritage and differentiate themselves sharply from the much more numerous newcomers from Russia (i.e., those migrants who had come here mainly in the twentieth century and especially since the 1930s), they do not see themselves as a special social or ethnic group akin to the Alaska Creoles. The only exception discussed by Schweitzer is the village of Markovo, whose people today call themselves Chuvans and have a strong sense of a distinct self-identity. Most anthropologists and historians believe that they are the descendants of the Yukagirs (a small indigenous group) who intermixed with the Russians and to a lesser extent with other local indigenous peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As this essay shows, in the Siberian case, because of the great power of the Russian and especially the Soviet state, the labels it used for these racially/ethnically and culturally mixed groups had a great deal of influence on how the neighboring groups referred to them and even to some extent on their own self-designation.

The essay by Schweitzer, Golovko, and Vakhtin is unique in our collection because it explores the issue of racially/ethnically and culturally mixed populations in the Russian-dominated North on the basis of ethnographic rather than archival research.⁹ It is also the only one of the four essays to raise an important general question about the reasons for the absence of the distinct category of Creoles in Siberia. After a brief review of the reasons for the creation of the Creole estate in Alaska and a comparison of attitudes toward biological and cultural mixing in Russian and other European colonies in the Western Hemisphere, the authors actually find that the question, “Why were there no Creoles in Siberia?” should be turned on its head; that is, “Why *were* there Creoles in Alaska if there had not been any in Siberia?”

Their answer to this modified question is straightforward and makes good sense. In Siberia the Russian newcomers and their mixed-blood descendants did not have to be identified as a special social group or estate. Many of them were quite capable of hunting forest-based fur-bearers with-

out having to rely on the natives, as was the case in Alaska. Others pursued a variety of subsistence activities and trades, some more profitable and prestigious than others. Only a small percentage of them became the employees of various fur trading companies. Consequently, no Creole estate was ever established. As all of the essays in our collection demonstrate, in Russian America the situation was completely different.

As the editor of this collection of essays, I, as well as the other authors, hope that publication in *Ethnohistory* will be an important step in a continuous dialogue among ethnohistorians working on developing innovative, interdisciplinary, and comparative approaches to fur trade history, colonial and postcolonial history of the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America, and the social and cultural history of racially/ethnically mixed peoples.

Notes

- 1 I use the term *race* to refer only to a cultural category as constructed by the people whose history and culture are being discussed or by our present-day society. In this introduction and my essay on Sergei Kostromitinov in this section, I capitalize the word *Creole*, treating it as both a social and an ethnic category (analogous to Native American and Native Alaskan). This is in fact what the Creoles became after Alaska was acquired by the United States, and for that reason both Gordon L. Pullar and I capitalize the word. However, Susan Smith-Peter, whose essay discusses the Russian-American Company's creation of the creole estate, uses the lowercase. Peter Schweitzer, Nikolai Vakhtin, and Evgeniy Golovko (2005), who compare the Siberian mixed-bloods with the Alaska Creoles, also prefer capitalizing the latter. For the main recent works on the Alaska Creoles, see Lydia T. Black (2004), Andrei Grinev (2010), Sonja Luehrmann (2008), Gwenn A. Miller (2010), and Ilya Vinkovetsky (2011).
- 2 Two recent exceptions are an essay by Miller (2006) on the Kodiak Alutiiq women, their Russian husbands, and Creole children published in an edited volume on, as the title expresses it, the "geographies of intimacy in North American history" (Stoller 2006) and an essay by Roxanne Easley (2008) that compares the status of mixed-heritage people in Russian America and the Hudson's Bay Company-controlled part of the Canadian fur trade.
- 3 I do not capitalize the term *métis* in referring to *all* descendants of European men and aboriginal women rather than to members of the Métis Nation that originated in the vicinity of Red River (cf. Podruchny and Peers 2010b: 16n2).
- 4 The Russian population of colonial Alaska was never greater than about eight hundred persons.
- 5 The retired employees of the RAC wishing to remain in Alaska had to petition the government to do so, and those who were permitted to stay were eventually designated as a new social category called "colonial citizens" (Luehrmann 2008: 117; cf. Vinkovetsky 2011: 142–43).
- 6 However, some interesting exceptions to this rule did exist, as Smith-Peter's essay in this issue demonstrates.

- 7 For example, in Novo-Arkhangel'sk the Creole men known for their regular fraternization with the Tlingits living next door to the Russian community were looked down upon (Kan 1999: 131–33).
- 8 Some of the retired employees of the RAC and their widows continued to receive modest pensions after 1867, but to do so they had to struggle with a notorious tsarist bureaucracy.
- 9 For more on these scholars' research on this topic, see Schweitzer, Vakhtin, and Golovko 2005; and Vakhtin, Golovko, and Schweitzer 2004.

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