

# Welcome to the Czar's Fleet

*An Incident of Civil War Days in San Francisco*

By BENJAMIN F. GILBERT

THE band of the U. S. man-of-war, *North Carolina*, struck up "God Save the Czar." Accepting the compliment, the band of the *Alexander Nevskii*, flagship of the Russian Atlantic fleet, played "Yankee Doodle." Loud and hearty cheers followed. The occasion was the arrival of a squadron of the Russian fleet at New York during the fall of 1863.<sup>1</sup>

The welcome was enthusiastic. The sinking of a million tons of Northern shipping by Confederate raiders since the start of the Civil War was reason enough for the people of New York to welcome a friendly fleet to their harbor, as it strengthened their diplomatic position. Across the continent in San Francisco, another Russian squadron was welcomed as a protection against Confederate corsairs threatening that city.

## *The Political Background*

Analogous situations—a rebellion within the states of the American Union and an insurrection in Poland—cemented for a while a virtual alliance between the United States and czarist Russia. England, France and Austria were threatening war on Russia unless Czar Alexander II erected in rebellious Poland an independent duchy; and rather than permit foreign interference in the domestic affairs of his country, the czar prepared to defend it. He ordered his fleet from undefended and weak home bases to safety at sea. The small Russian ships could never have defended themselves against a combined British and French naval assault, but on the high seas the picture was different. The quickly maneuverable and steam-propelled Russian vessels were more than a match for the British and French sailing craft; therefore squadrons were stationed, one at New York and one at San Francisco, close to British and French shipping lanes.<sup>2</sup>

These enemies of Russia were already taking advantage of the civil conflict raging in the United States. England built and repaired Confederate raiders, Napoleon III of France encouraged Maximilian to accept the Mexican throne as emperor, French troops there schemed to render military assistance to the Southern states and planned to invade California and Arizona. In addition, Spain threatened to grasp bases in the Caribbean and in South America. All these hostile acts violated the then forty-year-old doctrine of Monroe, which held as unfriendly the attempts of European powers to extend their systems in the western hemisphere. With such threats to the nation's security, it was small wonder that President Lincoln, struggling to preserve the Union, welcomed the arrival of the Russian fleet with all the pomp and ceremony due an actual ally.

*Celebrations in New York*

Many courtesies were extended to the Russians in New York. A parade of 30,000, led by Alderman Fromont and Admiral Lisovskii, marched down Fifth Avenue on October 1st, with brass bands playing American and Russian airs, and turned into 14th Street on their way to the City Hall where the royal standard—the dazzling yellow banner of empire with its soaring eagle—was waving beside the Stars and Stripes.<sup>3</sup> A ball, sponsored by John Jacob Astor, Hamilton Fish, and Moses Taylor, was given at the Academy of Music in honor of the czar's officers, but greatest honor of all was the visit of the First Lady, with U. S. military officers, to the frigate, *Osliba*. After introduction of dignitaries and a promenade of inspection, Mrs. Lincoln offered a toast to the health of the emperor. In response, Captain Boutakoff toasted the president.<sup>4</sup>

The welcome extended on the west coast will be described in the following paragraphs. Suffice it to say here that the two squadrons remained in New York and in San Francisco during the late fall and winter of 1863-64, Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy, having offered the facilities of the Brooklyn and Mare Island navy yards for the repair and overhauling of the Russian ships.

*San Francisco as Host*

A shipwreck marked the arrival of the Russian fleet at San Francisco. The steam corvette, *Norvick*, struck a sand beach near Point Reyes at five o'clock on the morning of September 26, 1863, because her officers, believing the ship to be twenty-five miles off shore, were prevented by the thick morning fog from observing land. When attempting to back off, she was turned broadside to the beach by the heavy sea and heaved into from five to ten feet of water. Life boats brought the men ashore, and a Russian lieutenant immediately started out to seek aid. He reached a point near San Quentin where he met a boatman, Charles Driscoll, who rowed him across the waters of the Golden Gate to San Francisco.<sup>5</sup>

William B. Farrell, the collector of the port, upon being notified of the disaster, immediately gave orders for the U. S. revenue cutter, *Shubrick*, to be despatched to the scene of the wreck. Commenting on the arrival of the Russians, the *Daily Alta California*<sup>6</sup> stated: "We learn that the *Novick* [*sic*] is the van vessel of the Russian fleet under the Russian Admiral Popoff, who is shortly expected here with the remainder of his vessels. In times like the present, this hegira, as it were, of the Czar's vessels to this port from Japan, attests their friendly feelings for the great Republic of the western world."

Accompanying Capt. Charles M. Scammon of the *Shubrick* to Point Reyes was the Russian vice-consul, Klinkestrom. The rescue party found the vessel almost a total wreck, only a small piece of the stern remaining. The *Shubrick* bore up for Drake's Bay, where the crew of 160 Russian

officers and men were safely ashore, except for one man who had been drowned by the capsizing of a life boat. Everything movable was salvaged from the wreck and teams were procured to transport the baggage. The Russians boarded the *Shubrick* which returned to San Francisco, anchoring at Meiggs Wharf.<sup>7</sup>

Within two weeks the Russian corvette, *Bogatyre*, with Admiral Popoff, commander of the Russian Pacific fleet, aboard, arrived in San Francisco. The *Bogatyre*, 2200-ton register, had 312 men and 48 guns.<sup>8</sup> Almost immediately a court-martial was held by Admiral Popoff relative to the loss of the *Norvick*, and after a thorough investigation her officers were honorably acquitted of any responsibility for the shipwreck.<sup>9</sup> The salvaged sails, guns, engines, and other relics from the wreck were exhibited in the curiosity shop on Stewart Street owned by Charles Hare, a ship chandler by trade.<sup>10</sup> In the meanwhile, to honor Captain Scammon and the crew of the *Shubrick* for their deed of rescue, the Russian survivors gave a banquet at the Stevenson House, compliments being paid both to the U. S. naval authorities and the San Francisco port officials.<sup>11</sup>

On October 16, 1863, the Russian steamer, *Gaidamack*, arrived from Nicolaifsky after a voyage of thirty-four days. Captain Pestshowroff was the commanding officer of the 1050-ton vessel which had an engine of 250 horsepower, armament consisting of seven guns, and a complement of 166 officers and men.<sup>12</sup> Two days later the Russian steam corvette *Calevala* passed through the Golden Gate, and her captain, Gelteuchine, fired a salvo saluting Fort Alcatraz and the other Russian ships anchored in the harbor. The *Calevala*, 1300-ton register, carried 196 men and fifteen guns.<sup>13</sup> On the twenty-eighth the corvette *Abreck*, Captain Pilxin in command, carrying six guns and 140 men and having a 300-horsepower engine, anchored in the bay.<sup>14</sup> On November 8th steamed in the fifth Russian man-of-war, the corvette *Rynda*, Captain Basarguire commanding. This vessel was described as of 800-ton register, crew of 160 men, and eleven guns.<sup>15</sup>

Elaborate balls were frequently held in San Francisco to celebrate the visits of foreign ships. Accordingly, soon after the wreck of the *Norvick*, preparations were under way for a ball to be given in honor of the Russian officers. Under the caption, "Warships Coming," the *Daily Alta* related: "Fashionable ladies are much elated at the prospect of a large collection of warships, with a host of officers in this harbor."<sup>16</sup> After seven weeks of preparation, the ball was held at Union Hall. A delectable dinner was served; variety and richness in costume were displayed, but the dancing was hindered by the crowded condition of the hall. Nevertheless, the ovation was described as a success throughout the course of the celebration, from the time Admiral Popoff landed on the Pacific Street wharf until "Home Sweet Home," played by the officiating band.<sup>17</sup>

Admiral Popoff showed an appreciation of his kindly welcome to San

Francisco by giving a banquet on his flagship, the frigate *Bogatyre*, in honor of Adm. Charles H. Bell, of the frigate *Lancaster*, commanding officer of the U. S. Pacific squadron. Guests included high-ranking naval officers, Capt. William A. Winder of Fort Alcatraz, Capt. Charles M. Scammon of the *Shubrick*, and the governor of California, Leland Stanford. At the head of the table sat Admiral Popoff, on whose right sat Admiral Bell and on the left, Governor Stanford. The Russian navy band played various national and martial airs, together with the anthems of the United States and Russia.<sup>18</sup>

While their ships were being repaired and overhauled at Mare Island Navy Yard, the Russian sailors received some time off from their regular duties. The following article in a local newspaper,<sup>19</sup> under the caption, "A Russian Beverage," indicates what form their enjoyment took:

Four Russian sailors, who were excessively inebriated yesterday, spent last night in the Station House. The proprietor of one of our large drinking saloons informs us that the favorite beverage of the "tars" of the Czar is an admixture of *ale* and *gin!* No wonder our Russian visitors find themselves in the Calaboose, after imbibing such a villainous decoction of fluids.

The next morning a Russian officer called at the police station, had the men released, and returned them to their ships.<sup>20</sup>

On Friday morning, October 23, 1863, a great conflagration enveloped the financial district of San Francisco in the vicinity of Davis, California, and Sacramento streets. Admiral Popoff ordered a force of his men to help the San Francisco Fire Department combat the blaze. The Russian sailors performed many acts of daring and a few sustained severe injuries. One sailor dislocated his arm and another suffered a badly crushed hand. After the fire was extinguished, the Russian sailors were made the guests of Broderick Engine Company, No. 1, at their fire house.<sup>21</sup>

The citizens of San Francisco showed their appreciation by donating money to aid the injured Russian sailors. Barry and Patten's saloon, southeast corner of Montgomery and Sacramento, became the collection center of the funds, and it was proposed that gold medals bearing suitable inscriptions be presented as testimonials. The local newspapers, commenting editorially on the deeds of the Russian sailors, portrayed them as having demonstrated the cordial feelings existing between the United States and Russia; and by way of official recognition, the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco passed resolutions of thanks, which were framed and presented to Admiral Popoff.<sup>22</sup> The following letter<sup>23</sup> of gratitude indicates the appreciative feeling of the fire department:

Chief Engineer's Office, Fire Dept.,  
San Francisco, Oct. 24, 1863.

*To His Excellency Admiral A. A. Popoff, Commanding H.I.M. fleet in the Pacific and China waters—Dear Sir:*

On behalf of myself and the Fire Department of the city of San Francisco, I tender to you our sincere thanks for the generous and efficient service rendered by yourself,

officers and men, in assisting us at the disastrous fire on the morning of the 23d inst. The Department which I have the honor to command, will, in common with the citizens generally ever retain in grateful remembrance, the noble and heroic conduct of Admiral Popoff, and the officers and men under his command.

Very truly yours, etc.  
David Scannell,  
Chief Engineer, S.F.F.D.

*San Francisco Press on International Situation*

The Russian squadrons came to New York and San Francisco in their own interests, to prevent a war in Europe, not to aid the Union or prevent English and French interference in the affairs of the United States. Russia did not intend to have her fleet blockaded in home ports as she mistakenly did during the Crimean War. Examples of the success of Confederate cruisers in raiding Union commerce suggested to Russia what she might do to French and English shipping.<sup>24</sup> In this vein of reasoning, Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, wrote<sup>25</sup> on October 6, 1863, to the English parliamentarian, John Bright, in these words: "Why is that fleet gathered there? My theory is that when it left the Baltic, war with France was regarded as quite possible, and it was determined not to be sealed up at Cronstadt; if at New York, they could take the French expedition at Vera Cruz."

At the time of the Russian visit to American shores there was much speculation in Europe and America regarding the possible existence of an alliance between the United States and Russia. Although there was no formal alliance between the two countries, many persons of high government authority appreciated the friendship of Russia, and the press and the public attested their approval of the friendship.<sup>26</sup> The *Daily Alta California*, in an editorial written at the time of the Russian visit and entitled, "Russia and America," portrayed the contemporary feeling toward Russia. The editorial stated<sup>27</sup> that Russia was one of the first powers to recognize the independence of America, and continued by praising the Czar Alexander II, who ". . . to all intents and purposes, has now assumed the attitude of defiance towards the powers of England and France. Let the language be couched in what terms state-craft or political diplomacy may suggest, it is, we repeat, an attitude of defiance."

The following excerpts from the editorial will further point out the friendly attitude toward Russia:

Russia, we are happy to see, sympathizes with us in our hour of social affliction.

About the same time that President Lincoln issued his proclamation giving freedom to the slaves, Russia, of its own free will, emancipated the serfs.

Russia has been our natural ally.

Today the world looks upon America and Russia as having attained the apex of civilization in the cultivation of all the practical sciences—in everything that reflects lustre upon a nation and can be beneficial to universal mankind.

It will be noted that one of the excerpts just quoted portrayed Russia as an ally. In an editorial on Alexander II appearing four days later, the same journal alluded to the czar's reforms and condemned the "schemes and intrigues" of Louis Napoleon and the "diplomatic double-shuffling" of the English minister, Lord Palmerston. The article concluded with a reference to an alliance by stating: "The English journals sneer at the idea of an alliance between Washington and St. Petersburg."<sup>28</sup> Two weeks later in an editorial on "Our Russian Visitors" the newspaper asserted: "There are rumors that an alliance has been entered into between our country and Russia. If there has been, it is nothing but a formal recognition of a fact which already exists."<sup>29</sup>

Just at the time of the visit of the Russian fleet, Asbury Harpending and his fellow privateers were convicted on a charge analogous to treason in the Federal Circuit Court of San Francisco for attempting to outfit the *J. M. Chapman* under the flag of the Stars and Bars.<sup>30</sup> It was reported that the Confederate cruisers *Sumter* and *Alabama* were sailing Pacific waters and planned to attack San Francisco.<sup>31</sup> For these reasons it was natural for San Francisco to welcome the presence of the Russian warships.

Admiral Popoff and his squadron afforded some needed protection to San Francisco. He issued orders that if a Confederate corsair should enter the harbor and fire on objectives other than military forts and installations, his ships were to aid the city. If the intruding corsair should fail to heed a warning and open fire, it was to be ordered to leave the harbor, and in case of a refusal it was to be fired upon. Copies of these orders were sent to Alexander Stoeckl, the Russian Ambassador at Washington. Stoeckl in a letter replied to Popoff stating that so far as Russia was concerned there was neither a North nor a South, but a United States; therefore Russia should not interfere with the internal affairs of the country. He instructed Popoff that whatever the Confederate cruisers did in open sea would not concern him. If the corsairs fired on the forts of San Francisco, he was to remain strictly neutral. However, if a corsair passed the forts and threatened the city itself, Stoeckl said:<sup>32</sup> ". . . you have then the right, in the name of humanity, and not for political reasons, to prevent this misfortune."

#### *Results of the Visit of the Russian Squadron*

While the Russians were being honored in American ports, the czar's enemies awoke to the dangers of an attack at their rear on the Atlantic and Pacific shipping lanes. England and France hesitated to interfere in Poland. Then France offered to compromise, and finally even to aid Russia in quelling the Polish revolt.

In April 1864 the Russian squadrons sailed for home.<sup>33</sup> Both the United States and Russia had profited by the visit; and when the Civil War ended, the United States in an exchange of courtesies sent a naval squadron to St. Petersburg to congratulate Alexander II on his deliverance from an attempt

on his life.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the protection afforded the United States by the visiting fleet figured in our purchase of Alaska, then regarded as barren wasteland, to which the opponents of Secretary of State William Seward, who negotiated the purchase in 1867, had referred in derision as "Seward's Icebox," and "Seward's Folly."

Thus, through circumstances which brought the United States and Russia into a virtual alliance in 1863-64, the Russian navy won her greatest victory without firing a shot, New York and San Francisco harbors received some degree of protection, and, after Lee's capitulation at Appomattox in 1865, French and other would-be invaders were discouraged from attempting conquest in the Americas, while the United States, through orderly purchase, extended its own territory in the Pacific.

## NOTES

1. *Daily Alta California*, Oct. 27, 1863.
2. Patrick Laurentz, "Visit of Russian Squadrons in 1863," *U. S. Naval Inst. Proc.*, LXI (May 1935), 692-96.
3. Frank A. Golder, "Russian Fleet and the Civil War," *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XX (July 1915), 808-12; *Daily Alta California*, Oct. 27, 1863.
4. *Daily Alta California*, Oct. 12, 1863, from *New York Herald* of Sept. 17, 1863. See also Earl S. Pomeroy, "The Visit of the Russian Fleet in 1863," in *New York History*, N. Y. State Hist. Assn., XXIV (Oct. 1943), 512-17.
5. *Daily Alta California*, Sept. 28, 1863.
6. *Idem*.
7. *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1863.
8. *Ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1863.
9. *Ibid.*, Oct. 13, 1863.
10. *Ibid.*, Nov. 27, 1863.
11. *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1863.
12. *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1863.
13. *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1863; *San Francisco Directory*, 1863-64, pp. 7-14.
14. *Daily Alta California*, Oct. 29, 1863.
15. *Ibid.*, Nov. 8, 1863.
16. *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1863.
17. *Ibid.*, Nov. 19, 1863.
18. *Ibid.*, Oct. 26, 1863.
19. *Ibid.*, Oct. 16, 1863.
20. *Ibid.*, Oct. 17, 1863.
21. *Ibid.*, Oct. 24, 1863.
22. *Ibid.*, Oct. 25, 1863.
23. *Idem*.
24. Laurentz, *op. cit.*, pp. 692-96.
25. Willis Fletcher Johnson, *America's Foreign Relations* (New York, 1916), II, 48.
26. Harold E. Blinn, "Seward and the Polish Rebellion of 1863," *Am. Hist. Rev.*, XLV (July 1940), 828-33; James Morton Callahan, "Russo-American Relations during the American Civil War," *W. Va. Univ. Studies in Am. Hist.*, Ser. 1, Diplomatic History, No. 1 (Jan. 1908), pp. 1-18.
27. *Daily Alta California*, Oct. 4, 1863.
28. *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1863.
29. *Ibid.*, Oct. 26, 1863. It is interesting to note that in 1863 a book was published in Paris by Felix Aucaigne, entitled *L'Alliance Russo-Américaine*.
30. Benjamin F. Gilbert, "Kentucky Privateers in California," *Register of the Ky. State Hist. Soc.*, XXXVIII (July 1940), 256-66.
31. Golder, *op. cit.*, 809.
32. *Loc. cit.*
33. Golder, *op. cit.*, 812.
34. *Loc. cit.*; Laurentz, *op. cit.*, 692-96.