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## IMPRESSIONS OF RUSSIAN PIONEERS IN THE WEST

JOHN P. KELLEY &amp; CHARLES E. TIMBERLAKE

DURING the nineteenth century the American West and even the cowboy became familiar to Russians, primarily through the fictional works of such foreign authors as James Fenimore Cooper, Gustave Aimard, and Captain Mayne Reid.<sup>1</sup> One of the few non-fictional descriptions of the West and of the American cowboy, or vaquero, by a Russian was written by A. S. Kurbskii in his book, *Russkii rabochii u severo-amerikanskago plantatora* (*A Russian Working for a North American Planter*), published in St. Petersburg in 1875.<sup>2</sup>

A. S. Kurbskii, a member of the Russian gentry and a graduate of a technical institution in St. Petersburg, went to his estate in 1862 to become a farmer. There he found the new conditions arising from the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 so chaotic that he "did not know which way to turn." After a year of attempting to manage his estate, he had merely run through his fortune. The fault, he felt, was not his. He "had done nothing especially foolish." The problem for landowners like himself was that they "knew how the work should be done, but were unable to show others how to do it."

Not wishing to waste his technical and theoretical education, Kurbskii decided to acquire the practical experience he needed of all levels of agricultural management. Since his social status and self pride precluded such activity in Russia, he decided to "set out for America where people, united by the will to work, have in one hundred years, formed a first-class nation out of the wilder-

ness." In America, "God willing," he could also earn money and return to Russia to become a farmer again.

He had read much about America, but found it difficult to understand the "private life of Americans," for the novels he read strongly contradicted each other. So he decided "not to form in advance any exact plan, but to examine everything myself, to rely on the occasion, and to try to take advantage of it." He knew that "one of the reasons for the rapid growth of the population and the good fortune of the United States was the strong influx of immigrants from Europe who brought to America and to their work not only a supply of knowledge, but also some capital acquired in Europe." Thus, the role of Europeans in America was of great interest to Kurbskii, especially the Russians who had settled in the American West and acquired considerable fame as "vacheroes."<sup>3</sup>

Before he reached the frontier, Kurbskii encountered only negative impressions of Russians living in America. In Chicago he was told:

The Russians always act apart, as though afraid of being with one another. . . . They all begin by joining some type of German, French, or Polish circle. . . . Two Russians will not be seen together, even partners in some type of business.

He had also heard that some Russians in San Francisco had formed the Russian-Slavic Society (in 1861?) but were unable to remain united long enough to accomplish anything of lasting significance. Petty squabbles and pride were blamed for this failure. These Russians not only discredited their society but made themselves a laughing stock in the eyes of the Americans.

But "in the deserts of the Far West," Kurbskii reported, "the name 'Russian' possessed significance and served as a good recommendation for all belonging to this nationality." As a result, Kurbskii, a Russian visitor to the American West, found it easy to become a respected vaquero himself and to learn about the activities of his fellow countrymen in America.

Kurbskii worked in Chicago for a time, and then went to a farm in Pekin (Pekin?), Illinois. There he developed a strong friendship with his employer, Mr. Max, and was asked to accompany Mr. Max's son on a visit to the Indian Territory. It was after his arrival at the blockhouse of his employer's brother that Kurbskii first heard about the Russian "vacheroes." The vaqueros were discussing the relative suitability of various nationalities for their work.<sup>4</sup> They agreed that Americans made the best cowboys because of their "ability to establish a good relationship with their employer," and for their "cold courage." Mexicans were also courageous, but they "were not skilled in the art of taking care of animals." The mulattoes and Negroes lacked "the bravery of the whites," but were "unmatched by the whites as stablemen and herdsman." As for the Europeans, the French, English, and Swedes enjoyed good reputations, but the Germans were "arrogant and boastful," and they "lose their nerve when they have to act on their own." The Irish were disliked because of their "crudeness" and their "passion for drinking themselves out of their minds." Russians were valued "especially highly as vacheroes."

Most of the "few hundred" Russians who lived in the American West were fugitive convicts who, having fled prisons in eastern Siberia, had reached America with the help of American whalers. Kurbskii felt that these Russians were "people gifted with unusually sturdy constitutions, vigorous minds, and wills of iron." Past hardships had prepared them for the rigors of frontier life, and they were also favored in America by the lack of interest in people's earlier lives. In addition, Kurbskii felt that they were endowed with the proverbial "native cleverness of the Russian common people." They quickly surmised that "one did not get far [in America] by swindling and robbing, but that by living honestly and working, it was possible in a very short time to achieve such a prosperity as they had never before dreamed of." All these factors, he felt, had contributed to the development of the Russians' good fame.

The majority of the Russians in the West became wagoners, the occupation which they knew best. They saw a promising opportunity in the transportation of goods to California from the East, and formed cooperatives (*arteli*) which soon had a flourishing business. Shippers gladly contracted with the Russian cooperatives, who had established such good relations with the Indians that, according to Kurbskii, "there was not an example of a transport entrusted to a Russian wagoner which was attacked or lost a single package."

When the trans-Continental railroads were built, the cooperatives broke up and the Russians scattered. Some settled in California and others went to the Indian Territory (Oklahoma), where they either "built blockhouses" or served as vaqueros. The Russian cowboys were found to be "fully worthy of trust and difficult to replace." They were known for their reluctance to kill Indians and for their willingness to help anyone, "regardless of the color of his skin."

Some of the Russians who remained on the prairie formed a cooperative called "The Grandfather" (*Ded*). In the western part of the Indian Territory this group constructed a blockhouse and engaged in wheat farming and cattle raising. It was "in the very nest of the Indians," but the Grandfather soon established mutually respectful and peaceful relations with them. Before the blockhouse was built, the Grandfather visited the local chiefs, presented them with "firewater," and assured them that the cooperative wished to live in peace with the Indians. In turn, the Indians promised on oath not to oppose the construction of the blockhouse. The Indians were willing to agree to this, according to Kurbskii, because their past experiences with the Russians had shown that their word could be trusted.

Kurbskii relates two instances which illustrate the way in which the Grandfather, without bloodshed, obtained redress for Indian transgressions. In the first one, an Apache band, led by a white man, stole a number of the Grandfather's cattle. The Grandfather retaliated by entering the Apache camp while the men were away hunting, and taking the women captive. The women were held

until some of the cattle had been returned and compensation in the form of buffalo skins had been given for the others. When the tribe turned the guilty Indians over to the Grandfather, the cooperative smoked the peace pipe with them instead of taking vengeance. The white leader, however, was whipped, tarred, and feathered.

The second instance followed the burning of a large field of wheat by Comanche Indians. The greater numbers of the Comanche made it impossible to seek reparation at the time. But the Grandfather waited and increased the number of its vaqueros. Then, when the Comanche, who apparently had forgotten the incident, left their camp under a light guard, the Grandfather repeated the tactic it had employed so successfully against the Apache. Then the cooperative required the culprits to plow an area equal to that destroyed by the fire. Although the Indians "did not want to take up the odious plow, . . . badly or well, the field was plowed," the women held as hostages were returned, and peace was restored. Kurbskii felt that the avoidance of bloodshed deprived the Indians of any grounds for reprisal. The prudent and effective resolution of such problems resulted in the establishment of a mutually beneficial commerce between the Grandfather and the Indians.

The reputation of his compatriots in the Indian Territory made it unnecessary for the author-traveler Kurbskii to prove himself personally in order to gain the respect of American pioneers and vaqueros there. And this prompted him to note the paradox of the Russians in America: The "better classes" of Russian society, who had settled in the larger cities of America, "founded their society with its long name and served as a joke for the Americans." But those who had been "discarded as unfit by society" in Russia created esteem in the American West for the nationality which had rejected them.

## NOTES

1. In fiction written by Russians, however, Valentin Kiparsky has found: "No Russian authors have introduced a cowboy into their work, even if they gave us realistic descriptions of the American West." See his *English and American Characters in Russian Fiction* (Berlin, 1964), p. 109.

2. Several chapters of Kurbskii's work were published in various periodicals in serial form in Russia before they were collected into a separate book. See, for instance, *Vestnik Evropy* (*European Messenger*), 1873, Nos. 6, 7, 8, 9; 1874, Nos. 10, 11; 1875, Nos. 7, 8; 1876, No. 5; *Otechestvenniia zapiski* (*Annals of the Fatherland*), 1875, No. 8. The section translated here appeared in both these periodicals. The Library of Congress system of transliteration of Russian words has been used in this article; it should be noted that Kurbskii's book used the old Russian orthography (pre-1917). One other brief sociological note on the cowboy was written by P. A. Tverskoi in *Ocherki severo-amerikanskykh Soedinnennykh Shtatov*, or *Sketches of the United States of North America* (St. Petersburg, 1895). Writing between 1881 and 1891, Tverskoi noted (pp. 103-04) that "now these cowboys, or herdsmen, comprise the coarsest class of American society, the last remaining type of the former frontier bravo who, having won all the West from the Indians, have done their job and, having relinquished their place to the peaceful landowner, are quickly vanishing from the horizon."

3. Kurbskii uses the term "vachero" quite loosely. He does, however, provide us with one detailed description of the vaqueros hired to accompany and protect a caravan of wagons going from Towson (Oklahoma) to his employer's blockhouse near the confluence of the "Est" (East?) and the Red Rivers: ". . . At the railroad *debarkadero* [in Towson] a crowd of gentlemen met and greeted us with a loud 'halo.' . . . Some were dressed in large boots, some in special footgear of woven straps and similar to bast sandals. [They wore] dirty leather chaps [*shtany*] and jackets, broad, full leather hats on shaggy heads, and they were armed, so to speak, from head to foot with carbines, revolvers, large knives, and short-handled axes; they had the appearance of a gang of theatrical bandits."

4. The question of nationality was important, Kurbskii says, for "the pioneers who hire 'vacheroes' determine their salary by the personal reputation of the 'vachero' or by the nationality to which he belongs."