

MELTING THE ICE CURTAIN: THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF CITIZEN DIPLOMACY ON THE RUSSIA-ALASKA FRONTIER. By DAVID RAMSEUR. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2017. ISBN 9781602233348, xviii + 307 p., preface, prologue, maps, colour and b&w illus., epilogue, appendix, endnotes, select bib., index. Softbound. US\$29.95.

In today's global context, Alaska is the United States' sole qualification for membership in the eight-member intergovernmental Arctic Council of nations. Over the 150 years since Alaska's purchase from Tsarist Russia, however, events and initiatives in the Territory—later State—of Alaska have rarely commanded front-page prominence in international or national news. The author dispels global citizens' and many Alaska residents' ignorance of temporary but significant successes in the 1980s and 1990s at bridging Cold War political and economic chasms between Alaska and the Russian Far East.

Ramseur's book aims high: one hurdle is to organize coherent accounts that follow numerous independent initiatives, which took place across widely separated locations. The narratives unavoidably jump back and forth in time. Alaska's senior Russian-American activist-scholar also discusses some of these events out of chronological order in his autobiographical account of these years (Fischer, 2012). Prospective readers who are wary of such jumps might try reading this book's third chapter first ("A Juneau Peacenik in the Kremlin," p. 31–39). Its nine pages of text follow Dixie Belcher's dizzying sequence of adventures in activism through the years 1977–88, foundational to the rest of many later events. Her story can time-calibrate readers' appreciation of the book, from preface to index.

David Ramseur himself arrived in Fairbanks in the late 1970s with a master's degree in journalism. He wrote for Alaska newspapers from there and from Washington, D.C. Beginning in 1986, he moved among Anchorage, Juneau, and Washington, D.C. for press-relations and other staff positions serving several incumbents of Alaska's elective offices. He compiled *Melting the Ice Curtain* while a visiting scholar at the University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research in Anchorage.

The book's Chapter 6, "The Friendship Flight to Tomorrow" (p. 60–67) identifies and describes one pivotal event. That long-proposed, planned, and finally permitted flight took place on 13 June 1988. A chartered Alaska Airlines Boeing 737-200 jet left Nome, Alaska, and landed in Provideniya on Chukotka's mainland coast after a 45-minute hop across the International Dateline. The 71 passengers disembarked and were greeted by enthusiastic crowds whose calendars registered the date that morning as 14 June. Just over 40 years earlier, the U.S. had closed its only segment of border shared with the U.S.S.R. at the 1867 Treaty Line separating Alaska from Chukotka. The Friendship Flight would have been unthinkable five years earlier. In 1983, Korean Airlines Flight 007 was bound to

Seoul from New York after a refueling stop in Anchorage. When the airplane wandered into closed airspace over the Kamtchatka Peninsula, a Soviet warplane shot it down, and all 269 people on board perished (p. 23–24).

Following the 1988 flight, pent-up desires to breach the thawing "Ice Curtain" were unleashed from both sides, as hinted by the titles of the next four chapters: 7. "Dramatic Reversal" (p. 69); 8. "Soviets Return the Favor" (p. 77); 9. "Breaking the Ice" (p. 85); and 10. "Adventure Diplomacy across the Strait" (p. 89). The events chronicled in Chapter 9 resulted from a freak of nature in October 1988. Three California gray whales became trapped to the east of Point Barrow for some 20 days by early-formed sea ice. The whales were freed by combined efforts of Iñupiat whalers, marine mammal scientists, and by an icebreaker dispatched to Alaska by the Soviets. Two whales were able to make their way westward to open water, and presumably from there southward to their normal wintering grounds. The ordeal of the whales and their rescue became a rare instance of an Alaska event attracting worldwide news coverage, to such an extent that the story inspired a Hollywood feature film released in 2012.

In the Soviet era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* after 1988, as a result of initiatives by Alaskans, an astonishing variety of groups, from Cub Scouts to scientists and educators, entrepreneurs to "well-insulated members of the cold-water swimming Soviet Walrus Club," became involved in citizen exchanges between Alaska and the Russian Far East (p. 69). During a decade of freer exchanges and joint commercial ventures, Alaskans resisted abandoning citizen diplomacy, despite facing their own economic policy and environmental crises, such as a statewide recession and flight of petroleum jobs in 1988, the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in March 1989, and falling revenues from North Slope petroleum by the early 1990s.

The author accompanied Alaska's then-Governor Tony Knowles on a 5000 km C-130 flight to deliver donated medical relief supplies from Alaska to earthquake-devastated Sakhalin Island in June 1995. There, they were appalled by the devastation at the northern town of Neftegorsk, where two-thirds of the town's residents had perished in 17 collapsed five-story apartment buildings. Despite promises made in the Alaskans' presence by Sakhalin's governor to anxious and suffering survivors, Moscow soon ordered the town's remaining structures bulldozed and all its survivors resettled elsewhere by 1996 (p. 175–176). This "haunting" experience proved to be a foretaste of future upheavals in Russian-North American affairs.

In 1996, Canadians with an Arctic Institute of North America project through the Gorbachev Foundation and the University of Calgary began work on the Kola Peninsula with communities of Russian Sami. There, at the opposite end of the former Soviet Union from Sakhalin Island, they detected early signs that post-Soviet reversals of *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies might threaten Sami and other Indigenous communities (Robinson and Kassam, 1998).

Some analyses of actions by Russia's opaque bureaucracy blame the aftermath of Mikhail Gorbachev's dismissal at the end of 1991 for a lawless period of excessive capitalistic greed. Others stress that in August 1998, Boris Yeltsin "floated" the ruble, which promptly dropped to a fraction of its pre-float value (p. 185). The retreat of capital from the Russian Far East was dramatic. Capital fled simultaneously eastward to Alaska, and westward to the European end of Russia and beyond. Non-Indigenous Russians tended to move westward, because many high-paying government positions ceased to exist in the Russian Far East. Predominantly Indigenous communities in Chukotka remained impoverished, short of food, fuel, and other resources. After seven years of regularly scheduled flights between Alaska and Chukotka, Alaska Airlines suspended them in October 1998. The kleptocratic governor of the Chukotkan Autonomous Okrug, Aleksandr Nazarov, added to the misery of Chukotkans by fleecing them for bribes and assessing taxes on activities that kept them from poverty, freezing, or starving.

Recently revived cultural, familial, social, and humanitarian ties directly between Alaskans and Chukotkans could have been chilled out of existence in 1998–99. Instead, another of Russia's enriched post-Soviet capitalists, Roman Abramovich, was sufficiently intrigued by renewed ties to Alaska in the Russian Far East to run for governor of Chukotka in 2000, the same year that hard-liner Vladimir Putin began to return Russia to centralized economic control by the Kremlin. For the next eight years, Abramovich protected gains along the Russia-Alaska frontier, both as governor and as chief philanthropist of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug (p. 180–183).

Some of the infrastructure strengthened by Governor Abramovich even remained in place when Ramseur revisited coastal Chukotka in 2016, although a number of its Indigenous communities had been abandoned or relocated, and populations in others had shrunk (p. 210). The book's final chapter, "A special Alaska-Russia Affinity" (p. 227–241) treats both optimistic and pessimistic sides of its retrospective on three decades since the Freedom Flight of 1988. The Arctic offers the most extensive and best opportunities for international cooperation between North Americans and Russians, but paradoxically is regarded as a region of high military anxiety.

Among short-term projects and joint ventures within reach, Ramseur identifies bilateral oil-spill response and search-and-rescue exercises within a "joint maritime domain-awareness center" for ship traffic management (p. 233–235). Several circumpolar series of studies illustrate the positive effects of collaborative, transboundary, and interdisciplinary research throughout the Arctic. One such series focuses on the human ecology of Indigenous peoples of the circumpolar Arctic and Subarctic (Kassam, 2009). Another series resulted from the Fourth International Polar Year of 2007–08 (Krupnik et al., 2011). Less optimistically, Farrell (2017) shows that Russia's rate of approving U.S. requests to conduct collaborative oceanographic research

within the Russian Arctic's Exclusive Economic Zone has dropped from 70% to 39% since Vladimir Putin's first presidential term began in 2000.

This book's distinguishing achievements include salvaging fading memories from earlier decades of improved relations across the Bering Strait and prescribing their reinstatement. Ramseur's research exemplifies responsible journalism's contributions to history. It is a pleasure to read through the book and its final chapter, digesting many of its endnotes along the way, then to re-read its preface (p. xi–xv) for full enjoyment of a well-reasoned manifesto for international Arctic collaboration.

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