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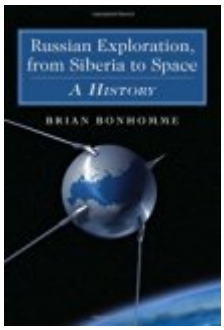

Brian Bonhomme. *Russian Exploration, from Siberia to Space: A History.* Jefferson: McFarland Publishers, 2012. 223 S. $55.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-6687-0.

Reviewed by Eva-Maria Stolberg

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At first glance "Russian exploration from Siberia to Space" appears to be a reader for undergraduates, but Bonhomme's book offers more: the author asks some intriguing questions that are really appetizing for young academia as they open a new horizon by embedding the exploration of Siberia, Russia's eastern frontier, into the context of Russian history of science. The author, associate professor of Russian and environmental history at Youngstown State University in Ohio, is right in saying that Russian discoveries and explorations are still marginalized in world history. While the achievements by Columbus, Cortés, Magellan, Cook, Lewis and Clark, and Neil Armstrong remain unassailable, Russian endeavors are often unmentioned. Insofar, Bonhomme is courageous to step into a new field, moreover he finds out the sore point of an asymmetrically constructed historiography where Russians and Soviets still appeared as have-nots. Actually, Russians have contributed to explorations as much as Western nations. But according to Bonhomme there is a main plausible difference: Russian explorations focused on their landlocked, continental empire while Western explorations had to overcome oceans and were therefore global-tended. There were also different starting patterns of expansionism: for Russians it began with the "gathering of the Russian lands", for the Western Europeans with the discovery of an alien world. Another stark argument presented here by Bonhomme is the over-glorifications of Russian explorations by Soviet historiography. Obviously, Soviet historians and representatives of other academic disciplines (like the involved natural sciences) were conscious of this marginalization by the Western world and fought their own "Cold War" against Western domination. Furthermore, the whole history of Russian explorations, especially that of the Eurasian continent, is still nebulous because much of the original source materialsis scattered and fragmentary. Bonhomme criticizes that historiography on Russia's explorations have marginalized the role of women. Indeed, Russian explorations seemed to be man's profession. Like in Western societies, few Russian women were courageous to discover alien environments. Women like Baroness Elizabeth von Wrangell or A.V. Potanina were presented as "pure" comrades of their husbands. Other women like MariiaPron-

chishcheva, the world's first female Arctic explorer, were secluded from public and academic attention.

Bonhomme's reader is insofar innovative as he compares Russian scientific tradition on the field of exploration with that of English-language scholarship. Bonhomme correctly argues that since the era of enlightenment there was a Russian and a Western (i.e. British) position in interpreting discoveries. But I disagree with Bonhomme's argument that the Russian scientific tradition differed from the British by its early nationalistic overtunes (Bonhomme pinpoints to the battle over whom to credit for the discovery of Alaska – the Dane Vitus Bering or the Russian Aleksei Chirikov). British scientific tradition was no less nationalistic by boasting the great discoveries of the "Anglo-Saxons". But, of course, there is a fine difference in nationalisms: while the British were the undisputed masters in their imperial world with their own "Old English" scientific tradition institutionalized in Medieval England, the Russian Academy of Science established in the eighteenth century was a mental product of German science (Wilhelm Leibniz) and many German or other foreign scientists were hired by the Russian empire. This practice was highly effective, but it put Russia's national pride in question. And in this context, Bonhomme's argument that the great share of non-Russian scientists has contributed to Russia's marginalization in world discoveries is striking.

Bonhomme's elucidations begin with the conquest of Siberia by Ermak in the late sixteenth century. Ermak is often compared with other compradors like Cortés and Pizarro, but actually, as the author mentions, we do not know much about the Russian conqueror. Only small parts of his biography (he was a pirate on the Volga river before his arrival on the Ural mountains) are illuminated. Trustful historical reports are rare, instead there exist many fictitious narratives. Insofar, Ermak is more a protagonist of Russian folk tradition than of serious historiography. And this made him different from his Western counterparts. Bonhomme shows that Ermak himself became part of the "Terra incognita" Siberia. Although Russian historiography is celebrating Ermak as the conqueror of Siberia, this is far from truth. Actually, as Bonhomme correctly argues, Ivan IV thought primarily of a peaceful and economic infiltration of Western Siberia. The ruler issued a charter allowing the Stroganov merchants to establish towns, agriculture for Russian settlers and to respect indigenous traditions. Ivan IV favored the payment of tributes and not military subjugation. But two factors later contributed to brutal colonial practices: first, the increasing interethnic conflicts between Russian settlers and natives, second Ivan IV's war experiences with the southern Tatars of the Kazan Khanate.

The conquest of Siberia was not the single act of the superhero Ermak and his 480 men, but – as the author convincingly argues – a broad campaign of promyshlenniki, those numerous and unknown trappers and fur traders who "explored" the terra incognita off their own's bat. Bonhomme shows that the "conquest" of Siberia between the late sixteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century was not a regular, systematic state endeavor. The push of promyshlenniki into the Wild East was improvised, the information that the Muscovite government got from their reports was rudimentary. With Tsar Peter I the conquest of Siberia was definitely completed. Bonhomme brings here two big arguments: 1) the Russo-Chinese treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) sealed the limits of Russia's expansion, 2) a scientific exploration of the Siberian realm began that replaced rumors and anecdotes of the terra incognita.

Most interesting is Bonhomme's view that Russian discoveries of Siberia were water-based, in inland Siberia explorers followed the rivers from Northeast Russia to Western Siberia – and last but not least – to the Pacific shores. Into this framework of discovery it belongs that maritime

voyages along the Arctic littoral from the White Sea to the Bering Straits were part of it. Tsar Peter the Great recognized the great importance of waterways and oceans in order to participate in global trade. Insofar, the two great Kamchatka expeditions (1724/1725-1730, and 1732-1743) were ambitious endeavors. The Russian empire of the eighteenth century was seeking for a maritime route from Northern Russia to the Pacific. It becomes clear that Russian discoveries were carried out by inhabitants of two regions, i.e. the Cossacks of Ermak from the lower Volga, and the fishermen from the White Sea coast, i.e. the so called Pomory. Insofar, state-initiated operations of the eighteenth century relied on the numerous experiences of common people. This opens a view on Russia's imperial history from "below". Bonhomme convincingly explains that from the very beginning, i.e. the era of Ivan IV, Russian rulers observed foreign intrusions into Russian waters with much suspicion. Ivan IV had banned English ships from the White Sea, Catherine II built up fortifications on Kamchatka when James Cook appeared in the North Pacific. In the mid-nineteenth century Russians competed with the Japanese in exploring the island of Sakhalin. By exploring the Amur river and Sakhalin, the Russian empire tried to lock its back door against East Asian neighbors. There is a strong continuity between the Tsarist and the Soviet period. On one hand, the Soviets were eager to explore the Northeast Passage in order to create a "Red Arctic", on the other hand they were always suspicious of potential rivals on this route to the "Far North", i.e. the United States.

With Vitus Bering's landing on the coast of Alaska the Russian discovery of the North Pacific and the Pacific coast of the North American continent began. From Siberian natives, i.e. the Chukchi, the Russians learnt of a "Big Land" in the East. Behind this imagery there stood the scientific question whether there was a land bridge between the Eurasian and North American continent. The expedition had to meet with several problems characteristic for the age of discoveries: harsh weather conditions on the sea, unpredictable water currents, personal conflicts among the crew members, cultural misunderstandings with the natives. Exploration was a difficult task not without setbacks. Ambition and stubbornness were the main traits of explorers.

Alaska became the springboard for discovering warmer climes. Lieutenant Ivan F. Kruzenshtern made the start-up with the first Russian global circumnavigation in the years 1803-1806. There stood a strong geopolitical motive behind this ambitious endeavor: it was the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Imperial Russia wanted to push the window to the Pacific by establishing diplomatic contact and commerce with Spanish and Portuguese America, and with East Asia. In fact, the political and economic outcome of the global circumnavigation proved to be marginal, but Russian imperial science earned respectable merits. Explorers made basic research in geology, mineralogy, astronomy, botany, cartography, and they studied the ocean depths. But the Tsarist government also initiated expeditions into the interior of continents, i.e. the Langsdorf expedition to Brasil and the Amazonas in the years 1825-1828, twenty years after the great Humboldtian expedition to South America. However, Langsdorf's merits are in the shadow of scholarly attention to Humboldt's legacy. In the first half of the nineteenth century Russian vessels frequently visited the coasts of Australia. To sum up, Russian explorations made important contributions on the field of geology, meteorology, flora and fauna of the Southern Pacific.

Another spot of Russian exploration were the southern frontier zones touching Central Asia. The interior of this world region was a terra incognita in the nineteenth century. With the decline of the "Oriental empires", i.e. the Ottoman Empire in the West and Qing China in the East, the way to Central Asia was open to the Russians. Not only because of geopolitical interests (the

Great Game with Britain), this region was intriguing. Its topography, natural resources and vastness were still undiscovered. The Aral and Caspian Sea, the Central Asian plateaus were still waiting for their discovery. And indeed, here again, Russians as Petr P. Semenov-Tian-Shanskii and Nikolai M. Przeval'skii merited a great deal in undertaking basic research. As Bonhomme puts, Russian science was at that time really "imperial", because first, expeditions were initiated by the Russian Imperial Geographical Society, second explorers like Semenov-Tian-Shanski favored the Russian annexation of Central Asia, i.e. "imperial science" became imperialist. From Bonhomme's description it becomes clear that despite the state-minded character of all these expeditions explorers like Semenov-Tian-shanski and Przeval'skii were self-driven. They were energetic men, ambitious to gain official reputation. At the same time this was their weakness: their mania made them susceptible to chauvinistic overtunes.

On his tour de force through Russian discoveries of the globe Bonhomme shifts the focus on colder climes, i.e. the North and South Polar regions what the author calls the "end of the earth". Somewhat irritating that Bonhomme does not explain which image the Russians had on these "ends of the earth". Certainly, because of the nearness to Siberia, the North Polar and Arctic zone was more interesting for Russians. In Bonhomme's description it remains unclear what perception the Russians did have on the "North". For example, one of the greatest isles in the Arctic near Cape Cheliuskin was named "SevernaiaZemlia" (Northern Land). Was this an allusion to the location of the North Pole, i.e. the image of a great continent in the Far North? Judging all these expeditions, i.e. through the seas of the Arctic and Antarctica, Kruzenshtern's global circumnavigation and the Bering's voyages before, the passages to the Southern Pacific, Russian discoveries were not only landbound. In fact, Russia was both – a land and a seapower.

Bonhomme's last chapter is devoted to Russia's new frontier in the twentieth century – the space. This chapter does not really fit into the framework, it has no ties with the other chapters of the monograph. This is a general weakness of the book: Bonhomme fails to give a clear concept of Russian discoveries, there is no interpretative thread, although most of the chapters give intriguing insights in the history of Russian discoveries. He shows that the history of Russian exploration developed from early spontaneous activities of illiterate Cossacks and promyshlenniki to progressing professionalism of scientific scholars and talented navigators from the eighteenth century onward. Simultaneously the imperial regime became aware of the significance of science and professionalism in order to accelerate expansion. But this expansion based on scientific exploration and was distinct from Western annexionism. To the end, Bonhomme fails to explain this striking difference. It can be assumed that the history of Russian geographical exploration in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was less annexionist because it predominately depended on international, especially German scholars. Therefore, Russian imperial science followed German geographic traditions which were in contrast to the British not empire-based.

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