Long Transit to the Unknown: Bering and the Siberian Context

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Abstract

Proceeding from a general comparison between Bering's Kamchatka Expeditions (1725-30 and 1733-43) and Niebuhr's Danish expedition, the paper attempts to identify some similarities, but also to set off the uniqueness of the two Russian expeditions. Its title points to a characteristic feature of these two expeditions: the duration of the famous voyages of discovery in the North Pacific Ocean was much shorter than the time spent in transit through Siberia and in preparations for the voyages. The sailing could begin only when seagoing vessels had been built on the eastern coast of Siberia. Exploration of the East Siberian frontier – for scholarly as well as practical purposes – was, inevitably, an important expedition task. Special attention is given to the relations between the expedition members, local Russians in Siberia, and aborigines, including mission work.

Vitus Bering (1681-1741), a Dane by birth, is famous for two expeditions, which he undertook as an officer in the Russian Navy. His employers and contemporaries called them the Kamchatka Expeditions, because the major voyages of discovery all set out from the Kamchatka Peninsula on the north-eastern coast of Asia. Scholarly literature refers to them as the First and the Second Kamchatka Expedition. They took place several decades earlier than the expedition we commemorate with the present symposium: Niebuhr's expedition to Arabia. The First Kamchatka Expedition lasted from 1725 to 1730, the Second one from 1733 to 1743. The two "forerunners" were considerably larger than Niebuhr's expedition, in terms of participants and costs. Especially the Second Kamchatka Expedition was a huge undertaking and is frequently described as the largest and most ambitious scientific expedition to have been launched in the eighteenth century. The Kamchatka Expeditions travelled mainly in Siberia, that is, on Russian soil recently incorporated as a result of the eastward expansion of the Muscovite state in the seventeenth century, whereas the Danish expedition of Niebuhr went to places far from, and completely independent of, the north European kingdom that had launched it. The Russian expeditions were ultimately bound for a part of the world that had remained unknown to European geographical science. The Danish expedition was to explore a part of the world venerated as the antique cradle of contemporary European civilization. Still, despite obvious differences, these expeditions emanated from the same intellectual climate, the same thirst for rational knowledge that was nurtured in universities, academies, and other learned institutions of eighteenth-century Europe. Furthermore, each expedition was financed and launched by a European government, for more or less explicit raisons d'État.

Much new material about the Kamchatka Expeditions (henceforth referred to as the KEs) has been published during the recent two decades, through the efforts of Wieland Hintzsche and his colleagues in

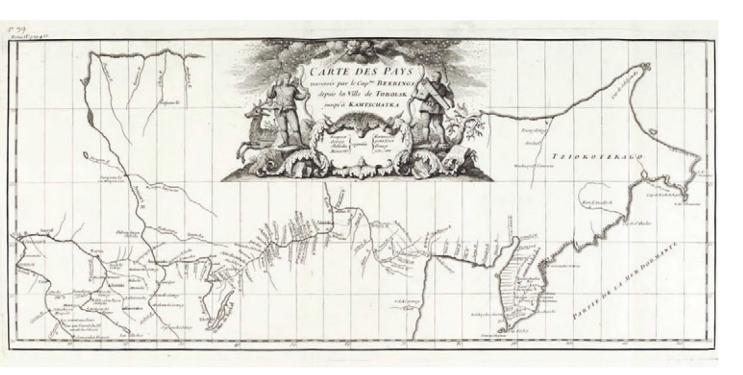


Fig. 1. Engraved map of Bering's route on the First Kamchatka Expedition 1725-1730. From Du Halde (1735) *Description* [...] de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise, vol. IV. Map size 23.4 x 53 cm. The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Halle, Germany, and through the efforts of Natasha Lind and me in Copenhagen. The Halle team has focused on the German scholars that participated in the Second KE as a separate detachment from the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. The Copenhagen team has focused on the navy detachments under our compatriot Bering. Our work has been generously supported by the Carlsberg Foundation. Most of the resulting publications, both by the Halle team and the Copenhagen team, have appeared in the series Quellen zur Geschichte Sibiriens und Alaskas aus russischen Archiven. The volumes in the series are published either in German or in Russian, and are brought out in cooperation between Franckesche Stiftungen in Halle and the Archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. Recently we were also able to bring out the first complete publication of the logbook from

Trying to stay within the formulated scope of the present symposium, I intend to show that both KEs used local informants, but that these informants usually were Russians living in Siberia, rather than aborigines. In relation to the expeditions, the aborigines were mainly seen and used as a workforce. However, during the Second KE, they also became an object of scholarly study and, to some extent, a target for Christian conversion. Missionary work on Kamchatka was specifically mentioned as part of the imperial order of 1732 that launched the Second KE.³

The most illustrious part of the KEs is, of course, the sea voyages beyond Kamchatka, in search for the Bering Strait, in search for Japan, and in search for America. It was, however, a characteristic feature of

Bering's voyage through the Bering Strait during the First KE.²

I. The most recent German publication in the series is: Müller (2010). Russian volumes in the series include Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2009).

^{2.} Fedorova, Møller, Sedov and Urness (eds.) (2010).

^{3.} The order is published in: Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2001), pp. 78-79.

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both expeditions that the duration of the voyages in the Northern Pacific was much shorter than the time spent on dry land, in transit through Siberia and in preparations for the voyages. The sailing could begin only when seagoing vessels had been built on the eastern coast of Siberia. Out of the five years that the First KE lasted, the voyage of the *Holy Gabriel* to the Bering Strait and back took only seven weeks. Out of the 10 years that the Second KE lasted, the voyage of *St. Peter* and *St. Paul* to Alaska and back took less than 6 months. By far the largest portion of the expedition time was spent on *terrafirma*, in Siberia, in an extended struggle to come to terms with this vast frontier region under relatively recent Russian rule.

More or less explicitly, Siberia was part of the territory to be explored and at the same time put to use as a base camp for both KEs. The First KE set out with extremely short instructions dictated by Peter the Great on his deathbed. Basically, the expedition was to build a seagoing ship and examine if the Asian coast line north of Kamchatka was connected with America. Bering decided it was not connected, and fifty years later James Cook recognized his achievement by naming the Bering Strait after him. However, one gets a broader and better understanding of the purpose of the First KE, if one looks at the documentation submitted by Bering to the Russian Admiralty after the expedition had returned to St. Petersburg. It consisted of a short account by Bering which soon after became known in Western Europe through the French translation in the fourth volume of the Jesuit Du Halde's Description de l'empire de la Chine, printed in Paris in 1735. Bering's account is a chronological itinerary of his expedition, from St. Petersburg to what he called 'the turnaround' (in Russian, vozvrashchenie, his turning point in the Arctic Ocean, at 67° 18' northern latitude). The account has two appended schedules, "Catalogue of towns and notable places in Siberia [...], with their latitude and longitude, the latter computed from Tobolsk", and "Table showing distances in Russian versts to the towns and notable places that we passed through [...] ". Along with this material, Bering also submitted his concluding "Final Map" based on the computed distances. This map

gave the world an entirely new and much longer image of Siberia. The expedition had calculated that Siberia was thirty degrees longer than previously reckoned. Some twenty handmade copies of the map have been preserved in various libraries and archives. An engraved copy of it was printed in Du Halde's work, from where it became widely known in Western Europe.4 Bering was first of all proud to have travelled so far east. In a letter to his maternal aunt in Horsens he wrote that "I have traversed several thousand miles of Eastern Tartary [Siberia - PUM], as far as the land extended, past Kamchatka; and several hundred miles farther than can be seen from the maps [...] This journey has taken me beyond China and Japan, and no East Indian journey, whether over land or by sea, can compare with it."5 His letter does not say a word about a strait, nor about a Northeast Passage, nor about America. As far as Bering was concerned, the main result of the expedition was the mapping of Siberia in her full eastward extension.

The tables that Bering submitted along with his short account also contained brief information about which aboriginal peoples living in the different parts of Siberia that the expedition travelled through. In St. Petersburg, and in Western Europe, such information was clearly in brisk demand. Ethnographic information also appeared on copies of Bering's "final map". Four of the preserved handmade copies feature drawings of various Siberian tribes. The most famous of them is the ethnographic map from the Asch collection in the university library in Göttingen. A charming detail shows some Chukchi men in a boat near the north-eastern point of Siberia. This naïve representation of sailing Chukchis refers to Bering's most famous attempt to use local informants. The episode took place on Thursday, August 8, 1728, as the Holy Gabriel approached the strait, and is described in Mid-

^{4.} Fig. 1. This map has clearly influenced Primald's "Map of the World" from 1766; see Fig. 5 in the Introduction to this Volume.

^{5.} Bering's Danish letter was first published in Hofman (1755), pp. 247-253. Reprinted in Danish, with Russian translation, in: Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2001), pp. 30-35.

^{6.} Fig. 2.

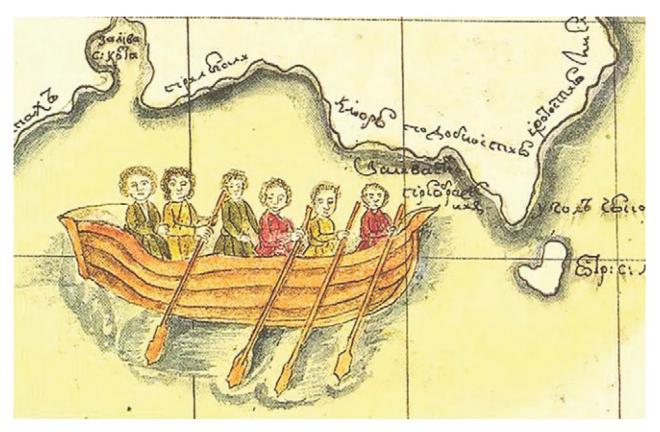


Fig. 2. Chukchi men in a boat, detail from the ethnographic version of Bering's Final Map in the Asch Collection of Niedersächsische Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen.

shipman Chaplin's Journal. The look-out on the ship caught sight of a small craft paddling out from land, in which eight men were seated. When they had paddled up near the ship they asked where it came from, and said about themselves that they were Chukchi. When invited to come to the vessel, they for a long time did not dare to come alongside. Then they put one man on a bladder made of seal hide, and sent him to converse with the people on the Holy Gabriel. The interpreters spoke with them in the Koriak tongue, but they could not understand each other much. It is clear from Midshipman Chaplin's description that Bering was trying to get local information about the further course of the coastline ahead and whether it would keep extending to the east.7 A reconstruction of the scene has been made by a modern Russian marine painter, Igor Pshenichnyj.8 The swimming local informant on his seal skin bladder was an unforeseeable event, but it remains a fact that Bering counted on using local information since he took two Koriak interpreters with him, in spite of the shortage of space on the ship. To give room for them, Bering had to leave his orthodox priest behind on Kamchatka. Bering's choice of Koriaks was an informed decision, not only because the Koriaks were nomads of Northern Kamchatka and beyond, but also because their language was related to the Chukchi language, probably about as close as English to German. He could hardly have brought a Chukchi interpreter, because the Chukchis at this time - and for many years still to come - remained independent of the Russians and did not pay tribute to the Russian Crown. Ten years

^{7.} Fedorova, Møller, Sedov and Urness (eds.) (2010), p. 133.

^{8.} Fig. 3.

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Fig. 3. The encounter between the Holy Gabriel and eight Chuckchis in a skin boat on 8 August 1728, painting by Igor Pshenichnyi. Courtesy the artist. Photo by Nikolai Turkin.

later, during the Second KE, Captain Spangberg brought Ainu interpreters with him on his voyage in search of Japan, but they proved useless when he actually reached Japan.

On the whole, the aboriginal peoples served the Kamchatka-expeditions as a workforce rather than as a source of information. Two cases are usually referred to as examples of the rigid exploitation by the expedition of the natives' labour and resources. For transportation of provisions and heavy materiel from Iakutsk to Okhotsk in the autumn of 1726, Bering requisitioned some 800 pack horses that were provided by the Iakuts who also assisted as skilled horse drivers. All these horses died either en route or after arrival in Okhotsk where no supply of hay had been

prepared. The following winter 1727-28, Bering used the local Itelmens and their dog sleds to transport the same provisions and heavy materiel across Kamchatka which resulted in a serious decrease in the dog population on the peninsula.

During the Second KE, the aboriginal peoples of Siberia became a target for systematical description by members of the academic detachment. The books of Steller and of Krasheninnikov have interesting information on the aborigines of Kamchatka.⁹ However, the most impressive, though until recently not duly acknowledged contribution to the study of the

^{9.} Steller (1774). In English: Steller (2003). - Krašeninnikov (1755). In English: Krasheninnikov (1972).

Siberian peoples was made by Academy Professor Georg Friedrich Müller. According to the historian of eighteenth-century ethnography, Han F. Vermeulen, Müller "deserves a special place in the history of anthropology".10 His ethnographic work includes, perhaps most prominently, a comparative description of Siberian peoples, Beschreibung der Sibirischen Völker, which is also an early attempt at establishing "Völkerbeschreibung" as a scientific discipline in its own right. It has only recently been published in complete form, by Hintzsche and Elert. In his preface, Müller claims that one does not easily find another realm in the world where so many different peoples have been united under one sceptre as in Russia. Especially Siberia, where he has travelled for ten years, offers so much material to a separate, still not sufficiently developed branch of history devoted to the study of peoples in general." Highly interesting are also Müller's instructions for himself and other members of the academic detachment, including elaborate questionnaires for ethnographic fieldwork.12

However, the aborigines were not the only local population in Siberia. During the seventeenth-century Russia had made an impressive push to the east. As a result, Siberia had become a unique frontier, huge in territory, but thinly populated. Here Russian officials, fur hunters, peasants, craftsmen, merchants, and exiled prisoners lived among a variety of aboriginal peoples whom the Russians broadly referred to as *inozemtsy*, that is "foreigners". The expedition personnel had to interact with this multifarious population in order to accomplish their goals. The expeditions clearly stressed the human and material resources of the frontier country they passed through.

The detachments of the KEs carried written orders from the central imperial authorities to the local Russian authorities to provide every kind of assistance to the expedition, including transportation, provisions, and manpower. Unlike Niebuhr and his colleagues, Bering's men were never really abroad, no matter how far they travelled. They crossed through a vast territory under Russian jurisdiction, and could in principle rely on local assistance, even if Eastern Siberia was a frontier with only rudimentary Russian civilization. However, conflicts between the Kamchatka expeditions and the local authorities in Siberia were inevitable and many. There was a basic clash of interests between the two. The most important task of the Russian administration in Eastern Siberia was to extract tribute, the so-called iasak, from the natives. It was a tax usually paid in furs and collected on a yearly basis. Compelled to assist the expeditions, the local authorities felt obstructed, and justifiably so, in their efforts to collect the required quantity of furs. Another important local task was to collect a state income from the sale of vodka and tobacco. The sale of these much demanded stimulants was a state monopoly, also in the Siberian outposts, but became a source of conflict between the local authorities and expedition personnel. The Second KE distilled its own alcohol. Bering had permission and equipment to do so, officially for medical purposes, but the line was hard to draw in the wild East. As for tobacco, the Second KE also appears to have been strikingly self-sufficient. The local authorities, on their part, would often choose to turn a deaf ear to expedition demands for assistance.

Conflicts between local administrations and expedition personnel escalated during the huge Second KE. A kind of diarchy came into existence in the two major Siberian centres of preparation for the expedition, Iakutsk (on the Lena River) and Okhotsk (on the Pacific coast), where expedition personnel periodically may even have outnumbered the local Russians. Frequent quarrels, mutual complaints, denunciations and arrests, physical violence and brawls, became the order of the day. During Bering's long sojourn in Iakutsk (1734-37) his navy personnel played an active part in local affairs, for instance by their violent arrest of Lieutenant Kuz'ma Skader of the Iakutsk Regiment in March 1735. The most painful and

^{10.} Vermeulen (2008), p. 99.

^{11.} Müller (2010), p. 13.

^{12.} Müller's instructions are the theme of a printed PhD thesis by Bucher (2002).

^{13.} For Bering's report on this incident, see Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2009), pp. 233-236. For a more general picture,

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long-lasting conflict was with G. Skorniakov-Pisarev, commander of the port of Okhotsk, where the ships for the Second KE were being built. A peak event occurred in September 1736, when Skorniakov-Pisarev secretly fled from Okhotsk to Iakutsk, where he chose to remain for a year, allegedly as a precautionary measure against the wrath of Captain Spangberg, Bering's commanding officer in Okhotsk. Finally, in 1740, repeated complaints from Bering to the authorities in St. Petersburg resulted in the arrival of a new commander to replace Skorniakov-Pisarev.

Smaller in scale, but no less characteristic of the tensions prevalent in Eastern Siberia at the time of the Second KE, was the experience of navigator Semion Cheliuskin in the polar night of December 1736. He set out for Iakutsk from the winter quarters of his detachment on the Oleniok River, near the coast of the Arctic Ocean, to report to Bering about the navigation of the double-sloop "Iakutsk" in the summer of 1736 and about the death of her commander, Lieutenant Vasilii Pronchishchev, and to receive new instructions. On 18 January 1737, after almost a month of walking, he reached Siktatskoe, the winter quarters of iasak-collectors on the lower Lena River. Presenting his KE credentials to a collector named Tarlykov, Cheliuskin asked for a sledge and dogs to take him to Iakutsk in a hurry. Tarlykov refused flatly and even denied entrance to his yurt, since it contained "iasak belonging to the State Treasury". In the end, Cheliuskin resorted to violence, forcing a local Iakut to surrender his sledge and seven lean dogs for urgent KE business.14

In spite of the described tensions, the Russian population of Siberia harboured information that could be put to use by the KEs. From the very beginning of the First KE, Bering was eager to meet Russians that had travelled to remote parts of the territo-

ry, be it as fur hunters, iasak-collectors or as soldiers in distant forts and outposts. The academic members of the Second KE were to continue his efforts to use local information. A striking example is the "field work" of the above-mentioned Professor Müller as a historian. He understood that local information might also come on paper. One of his great services to the study of Siberian history was to read and copy information preserved in local archives. In 1736 and 1737 he examined the archives of the Iakutsk office and found documentary evidence that a Russian tribute collector, Semion Dezhniov, had managed, as early as in 1648, to sail from the Arctic Ocean through the Bering Strait into the Pacific in a light sailboat. In other words, Müller discovered in the course of the Second KE that Bering had not been the first to pass through the strait later named after him.15

One might add that numerous Chukchi and Eskimos had undoubtedly sailed in and out of the strait before both Dezhniov and Bering, but this only goes to show the Eurocentric nature of geographic discovery. As we know, the route from Africa to India was new to Vasco da Gama, but not to his Arab pilot. However, there is more to geographic discovery than Eurocentrism. There is also the question of geographical overview and mapping skills. In Russia, Dezhniov eventually became the hero of the Strait, the simple, uneducated Russian who had the courage and stamina to make a perilous voyage with primitive means. But Bering remained the modern explorer who could relate his discovery to the contemporary state of knowledge and put it on a map.

When Bering returned to St. Petersburg in 1730 after the First KE, he was welcomed by the Russian Academy of Sciences that had come into existence during his absence. All the professors were foreigners, most of them Germans. Some, especially Müller and the French astronomer Joseph-Nicolas Delisle, took a vivid interest in interpreting the results of the return-

see Chapter 2, "Sojourn in Iakutsk", in Møller and Okhotina Lind (2008), pp. 19-32.

^{14.} Cheliuskin's complaint to the Admiralty College in St. Petersburg about the incident is now in the Russian State Naval Archives (RGAVMF), fond 216, inventory 1, unit 24, pp. 280-282. It will appear in Ochotina-Lind and Meller (eds.) (forthcoming).

^{15.} Müller's original manuscript is in the Russian State Archives of Ancient Documents (RGADA), fond 248, inventory 12, book 669, pp. 164-187. It will appear in Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (forthcoming).

ing expedition. They interviewed Bering, and during their talks Müller acted as interpreter between Delisle who knew neither German nor Russian, and Bering who knew no French.16 Müller saw the achievements of the expedition in the light of the English and Dutch interest in a North-eastern Passage to the Far East. Delisle was more interested in the accuracy of the longitudes of towns in Siberia and on Kamchatka, determined by the expedition. The enthusiasm of the academicians, together with Bering's powerful connections in government circles, led to the imperial decision in 1732 to launch a second, much larger Kamchatka expedition, again under Bering's command. The Academy accepted an invitation to join the Second Kamchatka Expedition, and both professors were active in formulating the instructions for the academic detachment. While the first expedition can hardly be called scientific, in the same sense as Niebuhr's Arabian expedition, the Second one certainly was. It swelled with scientific ambition and personnel, as specified in instructions for the work to be carried out in the natural sciences, history and ethnography. The instructions for the naval detachments were equally ambitious. They aimed at mapping the entire northern coast of Siberia and finding the sea route from Siberia to Japan and to America.

Missionary work among the natives of Kamchatka was explicitly mentioned in Empress Anna Ioannovnas's order to launch the expedition. After his first expedition, Bering had suggested, among a series of 15 proposals for improvements of conditions in Eastern Siberia, that one or two native priests be sent out to spread the Christian faith among the Iakuts, since the Iakuts themselves were reluctant to come to the Russian town of Iakutsk, for fear of small pox. 7 As for Kamchatka, Bering had been appalled to see how the Itelmens in a most unchristian way excluded their sick and old people and left them to die on their own. He also reported on frequent suicides among the Itelmens, by drowning. Russian control over the aboriginal peoples of Siberia was exercised through the sys-

tematic taking of hostages, usually children of native chieftains who came to live in Russian forts and garrisons for an agreed period of time, after which they were returned and replaced by new hostages. Bering recommended giving the hostages on Kamchatka an intensified Christian upbringing, in order that they might after their release carry the Christian faith out to their own people.¹⁸

Possibly moved by Bering's information about the sad plight of the aborigines, the Empress ordered that priests be dispatched with the Second KE for missionary work on Kamchatka. At the time of the First KE there was only one orthodox priest on the peninsula, and only one out of the three major Russian settlements on Kamchatka had a church. Following the imperial order, the Holy Synod (roughly, the church ministry) appointed three orthodox clerics under Igumen Varfolomei Filevskii to travel with the Second KE to Kamchatka. Another seven were appointed to serve the religious needs of the expedition personnel and to participate in the voyages. However, Igumen Filevskii's mission failed, because the missionaries started quarrelling among themselves and were returned before they ever reached Kamchatka.

Nevertheless, conversions did take place during the expedition. One curious proof of it became apparent when Bering's belongings were assessed and sold after his death. It turned out that he owed three rubles to one of his sailors, boatswain Aleksei Ivanov, "for three shirts, which the commander had himself borrowed of him, while they were still in Kamchatka, as a christening present for newly converted Kamchatkans." 19

Another indication of Bering's concern for the missionary work may be found in recently discovered private letters dispatched from Okhotsk in February 1740, by the commander and his wife Anna Christina in Okhotsk to friends and relatives back in St. Petersburg. Writing to his brother-in-law, Bering reported that more than thirty Tungus were baptized in Okhotsk over the past 2½ months, but many more on

^{16.} Fedorova, Møller, Sedov and Urness (eds.) (2010), p. 268.

^{17.} Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2001), p. 19.

^{18.} Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2001), pp. 21-22.

^{19.} Møller and Okhotina Lind (2008), pp. 131-132.

Kamchatka in the preceding year. "I need teachers both here and on *Chamsiatke*." His information was echoed by Madame Bering in her letter to Mrs. Hohenholz, wife of the Austrian Minister in St. Petersburg: "There are plenty of pagans even if many of them have been baptized in the past year." ²¹

The German natural historian Georg Wilhelm Steller, who made it all the way to Kamchatka and sailed with Bering to Alaska, suggested that the Itelmen of Kamchatka were more disposed for Christianity than other peoples in the Russian empire, since they had so little theological and moral culture of their own to start out with:

One can bring one hundred Itelmen to the Christian religion in one hour by simply explaining the religion, when in a hundred years few of the Yakuts, Tungus, Buryats and Tatars have been brought to it. Since 1740 there are few people left on Kamchatka who have not yet been brought into the Christian religion through holy baptism. By now, it takes many people to plead for several months to persuade a person to become a godfather, since this baptism of the heathens is already so common that prospective godfathers shy away from the modest costs of the baptism. The greatest precaution to be taken here is to instruct the new converts in the basics of the religion, which has to happen by establishing schools and installing genuine, conscientious priests who are more concerned with the honour of God and the improvement of the country than with their own interests.22

Bering himself was a religious man and a member of the German speaking protestant congregation in St. Petersburg. Thanks to the religious tolerance in Russia at the time, he was allowed to bring a Lutheran priest with him on the Second KE. The Petersburg congregation was under strong influence from the pietism propagated by August Herman Francke in Halle, and the priest that agreed to come along to Kamchatka was a former teacher at Francke's famous orphanage in Halle. His name was Christian Ernest

Millies. In a letter to his brethren in Halle he delighted in the fact that God had chosen him to bring the natives of distant Kamchatka into the Christian faith. From the Russian navy point of view, however, Millies was only to serve the religious needs of the foreign officers of the Kamchatka expedition. As it turned out, he was unable to do either. Having travelled as far as to Tobolsk in Western Siberia, which was only a minor portion of the total journey, he lost his nerve and demanded instant return to civilization. This, however, was not an option under his contract with the navy, and as the pastor very reluctantly proceeded further east, he gradually went mad, and was haunted by loud threatening voices. In his despair, he accused Bering of high treason. He was then placed under arrest, and spent about a year as a prisoner, most of the time in solitary confinement in Iakutsk, before Bering found a way of escorting him back to St. Petersburg. From here he was later expelled to Germany.²³ So much for hallenser Pietismus on Kamchatka. In real life, conversion of the aborigines of Kamchatka seems to have happened through their inevitable contact with the common orthodox Russian colonizers.

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^{20.} Møller and Okhotina Lind (2008), pp. 53-53.

^{21.} Møller and Okhotina Lind (2008), pp. 104-105.

^{22.} Steller (2003), pp. 212-213.

^{23.} A number of letters by Millies about his Russian *via dolorosa* are printed – in the original German and in Russian translation – in Ochotina-Lind and Mëller (eds.) (2009).

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