

PHC-6

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

November 5, 1992

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky
Russia

Mr. Peter Bird Martin, Executive Director
The Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire

AS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHAOS SWEEP RUSSIA, THE FAR EAST
INCREASINGLY SEEKS ITS OWN WAY.

Dear Peter,

Russians generally divide their country into three parts--European Russia, the traditional 'Rus' of antiquity; Siberia, the vast land extending from the Ural Mountains across Asia to Lake Baikal; and the Far East, the wild last frontier of the largest nation on earth. The Russian Far East was first explored and claimed by Russian trappers and traders in the 16th century, but it wasn't really opened as a territory until the nineteen thirties, when waves of political prisoners and exiles were sent in exile through Khabarovsk to labor on logging projects along the Amur River, dig gold in Magadan, and 'osvoi'ivat'' (a Russian word meaning to open up, master, or become familiar with) the Kamchatka peninsula. The main road into Kamchatka's interior, for example, was built by slave labor from local prison camps. Russians in the Far East are a breed apart from other Russians. The difference is as much a function of physical as mental geography; it's not just that the Russian Far East is eight time zones away from Moscow (the Kamchatka peninsula is nine). On Kamchatka, a Muscovite gets noticed right away by the characteristic, flattened "aah" and "ooh" vowels accenting his or her speech, and by subtle mannerisms, such as an affected way of smoking a cigarette, or by putting on airs. For this, they get no respect. Out here, there are 'nashi'--our people, 'Siberyaki' and 'Kamchadali' (Siberians and Kamchatkans), and they will be the first to insist on their unique, self-reliant, mind-set. People here dig their own potatoes, and are flinty and phlegmatic, like New Englanders are in America. The ultimate compliment out here is 'on nastoyaschi siberyak'--he's a real Siberian. People here rely on themselves and their neighbors to survive out on the 'edge'. A local proverb aptly sums up the mentality: 'Krai zemli, konets morya, a vezde mnogo gorya'--It's the edge of the earth, and the end of the sea, and there's much sorrow all around. In other

Peter H. Christiansen is researching Pacific Fishing Nations.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

words, if you're out here, you've got enough problems, so don't do anything to make matters worse. And so, in spite of the rising crime, confusion, inflation, and uncertainty about the future of Russia, people in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky are peaceful, even blase, as they go about their daily rounds. The political maneuverings in Moscow generate as much excitement here as waiting for a bus on a frosty morning. As one woman told me, "We don't look for trouble here; we are more occupied with staying fed and warm."

Decisions from Moscow, the 'Center', have always taken a long time to reach the Russian Far East, and people here traditionally are far less dependent on the long, guiding hand of Government than their European counterparts. If the Russian Far East outlook is predisposed towards avoiding unnecessary trouble, then it seems perfectly natural that, as political and economic instability threaten to overwhelm Russia, this part of the world increasingly seeks its own way. So, in its own quiet fashion, (at least compared to Central Asia or the Caucasus), politicians on the Kamchatka peninsula are putting more and more distance between themselves and the faltering Yeltsin Administration.

Oddly enough, the first initiative for this distancing came from the Yeltsin Administration itself, which, in the first flush of democracy following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, loosened central controls over the traditional Russian 'provinces'--the Far North, Siberia, and the Far East--in an attempt to create a 'federalist' system of government in Russia. Federalism, like democracy and the free market, is a rather dim concept for the average Russian politician educated in the old Soviet command-administrative system; but it is easy enough to understand that the present Moscow government is weak, and either unable or unwilling to do much to improve life in the provinces. Whatever the reason, the upshot is that much of the Russian Far East has been left to fend for itself. Kamchatka now has more political autonomy, freedom of economic action, and control over regional natural resources than ever before, but these freedoms are a result of degeneration, and resemble a 'razgul'--a wild debauch--more than some sort of orderly, constitutional process. They are mad, fragile liberties. Modern Russia is a party thrown in the graveyard of Soviet power, with many of the ghosts of the old system invited as honored guests. A degenerating system, and not a vital system, produces political freedom in contemporary Russia, a freedom which will be lost if a stronger government comes to power in Russia.

Still, autonomy, freedom, and control are heady ideas for politicians born and bred to keep their heads down and fulfill the dictates of the all-mighty Party. The post-Soviet era grows its own politicians, opportunistic and willing to move into the power vacuum, and take the initiative while they can. Whether the motivation is dedication to creating a new order, a genuinely

altruistic wish to make life better, or the nakedly greedy urge to get rich by using influence and inside knowledge to sign lucrative contracts with foreigners, politicians in the Russia Far East have embraced these concepts with a passion, and are determined to integrate their resource-rich region into the greater world economy. The Kamchatka peninsula, completely closed off to the outside world five years ago, is now wooing foreign



(Reprinted by permission of the Russian Far East Update.)

gold mining, aviation, fishing, and shipping companies, to 'osvo'iivat' Kamchatka and develop this most remote section of the Russian Far East.

While there is no single politician on Kamchatka to rival Sakhalin Island's colorful Governor Fyodorov, who has created a free-wheeling, open economic zone for Western investors, there is a workman-like group of administrators laboring in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky for local political autonomy, economic freedom, and control over resources. One of them is the Chairman of the Kamchatka Region Soviet of People's Deputies, Pyotr G. Premyak, who I have quoted a number of times in previous newsletters. I have met with Mr. Premyak several times, both formally and informally. He is a quietly impressive man, urbane, personable and 'kontaktni', as Russians say--congenial and approachable. Mr. Premyak is representative of the new breed of Russian politician born in the collapse of the Soviet Union; a former Communist Party member, he turned in his Party card during the August, 1991 Coup, and became the freely-elected Chairman of the Kamchatka Region Soviet of People's Deputies, Kamchatka's first post-Soviet, representative political body. Mr. Premyak's position is delicate. He must simultaneously cope with both the daunting internal problems facing Kamchatka, and the task of helping Kamchatka find its place, and realize its enormous potential, in the Pacific Rim economy.

"Kamchatka is unique in the world, isolated, yet blessed with vast natural gifts, gifts that may allow it to become one of the wealthiest regions in Russia. For too long, our wealth has gone elsewhere, for the benefit of others--you see how we live here. We need to realize our potential. But we must do this wisely. Kamchatka needs a gentle approach as it enters the outside world. We want to make sure that Kamchatka remains ecologically clean", he said during a recent interview, "Our problems all come back to the same thing. There should be a protectionist policy towards the Russian Far East."

Mr. Premyak's biography prepared him well for his present position in Kamchatka's political life. A sailor by profession, he served in the Soviet Navy for nearly 30 years and attained the rank of vice-admiral. "Service taught me discipline and organization", he recalls, "I know what I want to do, right down to the day, hour, and minute." The Navy took him to the United States, Canada, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, and opened his eyes to the outside world at a time when most Soviet citizens could learn about life abroad only through mind-numbing propaganda, rumor, and occasional scraps of information gleaned from illegal media. "Through my travels, I saw the world with my own eyes, and learned that there are no good or bad nations, that all people are part of the world", said Mr. Premyak. He speaks Spanish fluently, and knows a smattering of 'diplomatic' English from his travels to the United States. Mr. Premyak

PHC-6

clearly relishes the role of international ambassador for Kamchatka. He was a key participant in the 'Northern Forum', a meeting of politicians from trans-Arctic nations that took place in November, 1991, to discuss cooperative solutions to regional political, economic, and ecological issues. During one conversation, Mr. Premyak even speculated that he would like to found a regional economic union, similar to the European Common Market, in the North Pacific.

Mr. Premyak has visited Alaska a number of times, and corresponds regularly with Alaska Governor Wally Hickel. A tireless booster for the Russian Far East, he recently travelled to Seattle in search of partners to open Kamchatka for gold mining ("Our resources are equal to those found in South Africa", he said). Mr. Premyak is great admirer of the United States, and even has a picture of himself with American film star Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Despite his decidedly international orientation, however, Mr. Premyak also concentrates on staking out Kamchatka's interests in the tumultuous world of Russia's internal politics. At the 4th All-Russian Convocation of Chairmen of Russian Regional Soviets (September 11-12, 1992, Cheboksary, Russia), Mr. Premyak was selected by his fellow deputies to represent the Russian Far East. He caused a minor sensation with his speech, declaring from the podium, "Mr. President (Yeltsin)! The Far East delegation hopes that your remarks about transferring the center of reform to outlying regions will not just be empty noise. However, for now, permit me not to trust your government!"

Mr. Premyak continued, "We, the Chairmen of Soviets and the Administrative Organs, signed the Federal Treaty without any hesitation at all, and we hoped, that in consequence of the Treaty, the system of governance for society would be changed. But that did not happen. You haven't left any of the reins of authority in the hands of local politicians. A strictly centralized, vertical structure is being formed: agricultural committees, economic committees, privatization committees, anti-monopoly committees, tax collectors...Now the entire fiscal authority answers directly to Moscow, and not only to local political bodies." (excerpts from 'Vesti', Oct. 7, 1992)

Mr. Premyak's comments apparently were taken seriously by the Russian President and Parliament. Key legislation for increased autonomy in the Russian Far East was forthcoming from the Yeltsin Administration on September 22, 1992, in the 'Decree on Measures for the Development of and Governmental Support for the Economy of the Russian Far East and the Regions East of Lake Baikal (Zabaikal'ya).' The Decree acknowledges the special status of the Russian Far East, and the need to utilize its resources for the benefit of its inhabitants. The Decree was accompanied by a September 23, Decree calling for an increase in construction

for the aforementioned regions, which are chronically short of housing. How far the September 22, Decree will extend real autonomy is, of course, an open question; in modern Russia, things like legislation and the latest Presidential decree have a way of being forgotten before they accomplish anything. And a major remaining obstacle to true autonomy in the Russian Far East is the delay by the Yeltsin Administration in registering the Far East Economic Cooperation Association. The status of this regional coordinating body has remained unresolved for over a year and a half.

Kamchatka has already gained more control over its rich natural resources than it ever had under Soviet power, but again, this is likely more a result of the general confusion in Russia than anything else. Taking advantage of the situation, politicians plan on using their new, nominal autonomy to push local interests even farther. For example, Kamchatka annually produces about twelve percent of Russia's total fish, yet sees only a small fraction of the total profit, a story repeated with fishery resources throughout the Russian Far East. This state of affairs may soon change. Far East regional officials plan on taking much of Moscow's remaining powers away by replacing 'Dalryba' (the Far East Fishing Company, currently based in Vladivostok) with a Regional Fisheries Committee, which would be based in Khabarovsk. "'Dalryba' should only have an advisory capacity, not executive powers. We want a regional executive that can look out for our common interests, without prejudice. Khabarovsk is a more neutral city in this regard than Vladivostok, which is one of the Russian Far East's largest fishing ports", said Mr. Premyak, one of the architects of the plan.

Increased regional autonomy is having far-reaching effects on the Russian Far East fishery. Take the distribution of fishery quotas, for example. Whereas formerly Far East fishery quotas were determined in Moscow by the Ministry of Fisheries and distributed vertically through 'Dalryba', they are now established by negotiation between local administrations and 'Dalryba'. Local administrators from each of the jurisdictional 'basins' in the Russian Far East, (which include the Kurile Islands, Sakhalin, the Primorski Krai, the Sea of Okhotsk, Kamchatka, and the Bering Sea) then negotiate (or assign) a 'limit', or quota share, for each local fishing enterprise. Mr. Premyak advocates taking this a step farther, and granting each jurisdictional basin the right to dispose of its fishery as it sees fit. "If we can't catch everything here with our fishing fleet, then we should be free to sell our fish to, say, the Sakhalin fleet", he said, "And they should have the right to sell us their resources, if they can't catch them. We need to establish normal, market relations between the regions of the Russian Far East."

However, the bright, market-economy future now gleams only faintly on a distant horizon. In the present day, the Russian

PHC-6

Far East and its fishing enterprises face far more pressings difficulties, resulting from the contradictory economic policies of the Yeltsin Administration.

The most formidable difficulties are doubtless trade barriers erected as a result of contradictory Russian Parliamentary legislation. Decrees in the Spring of 1992 encouraged the opening of the Russian Far East to foreign business by allowing 30 percent of regional production to be exported. Then, on June 14, 1992, the Yeltsin Administration issued the now-infamous Decree 629, which effectively removed all trade incentive by imposing a customs duty of 26 percent on all exports, and 15 percent on all imports. Decree 629 paralyzed the movement of goods across Russian borders. "On Kamchatka, we concluded important contracts, and earned over 22 million dollars", fumed Mr. Premyak, "Half of the profits would have gone to local enterprises, and half to the local government. Who is preparing these documents that cancel each other out?"

The inordinately high customs duties directly encourage illegal activities in the place of legitimate business. One man I interviewed, who spoke on the condition of strict anonymity, reported that when a Japanese company recently signed a contract with a Russian company to export a significant quantity of high-quality salmon, they offered their Russian partners the option of signing two contracts--one for the customs agents, and one 'real' contract. According to the source, the proposal was presented in a perfectly business-like and ordinary way, and did not seem to surprise the Russians at all, who, by the way, refused the offer.

Yeltsin Administration monetary policy poses another serious barrier to economic development in the Russian Far East. According to present policy, hard currency earnings must be turned over entirely to the government, which then "sells" the hard currency in rubles back to the entity which earned the money in the first place, at the official ruble/dollar exchange rate. Given the physical lack of cash in Russia, and the rapid devaluation of the ruble against the dollar, an enterprise faces grave difficulties repatriating profits, which could be put to use for upgrading deteriorating infrastructures, repairing ships, improving the welfare of workers, and so on.

The flawed monetary policy has very noticable and personal repercussions in a small, mono-industrial city like Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky. It directly causes traffic in illegal fish and 'captain's trading', as fishermen to sell their product to foreigners 'na levo', on the side. For example, I learned that a vessel departing Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky for reoutfitting in Seattle sold five tons of crab 'on the fly' to Japanese middleman for cash dollars. Unfortunately for the crew, there

was a 'stukach' (informer) on board the vessel, and when it

PHC-6

returned home, the captain and first mate were summarily fired. "These people weren't criminals", my source insisted, "But if you're going to the West, and you have no legal way to earn hard currency, you have to resort to 'light crime'. Everyone does."

Another man, the production manager for an important Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky fishing collective, talked about the difficulties Russian crews have in getting paid. "We only get four dollars a day", he said, "Captains get eight. We also get paid in rubles, of course. But our collective can't pay us more in dollars, because of the politics. So we get paid in cash, at sea, for the work we do for foreigners--Japanese, Koreans, whoever." And if they don't get paid the hard currency? "Then we can't guarantee the quality of the fish they get. Who wants to work for rubles? And we do get paid."

The monetary policy places further financial burdens on local governments, already stretched to the budgetary limit by inflation. During our interview, Mr. Premyak commented that the Yeltsin Administration monetary policy caused Kamchatka's regional budget to increase three times in one year, as the local administration was obliged through the "buy-back" scheme to buy inflationary rubles with hard currency earnings. Comments another member of the Kamchatka Region Soviet of People's Deputies, "While it is understandable that Russia needs all of its hard currency to repay the debts incurred by the defunct Soviet Union, the situation does little to help the Russian Far East become financially sound."

One solution, far-fetched but indicative of how frustrated Russian Far East politicians are with the state of Russia's economy, is to collect debts owed by the Third World to the Soviet Union, estimated at about 140 billion dollars. This money could then be applied against Russia's current debts to other nations. "When I spoke at Cheboksary, I asked Boris Nikolayevich (Yeltsin) why the government isn't trying to collect it's debts from Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, and other countries--even in the form of resources, bananas, or something. Why should we have to carry the whole burden?" said Mr. Premyak, "We need to have this money to develop our own country."

Economy in Russia is the eternal domain of the bureaucracy, perhaps now even more than ever, as the Yeltsin Administration struggles to create a structures that can keep pace with privatization and the deconstruction of outdated Soviet enterprises. On Kamchatka, the fishing industry is now a direct target of the recently formed Government Anti-Monopoly Committee. The Committee, designed to dismantle the old Soviet industrial monoliths, has just begun work, and has a staff of only three, but its labors promise to have long-term effects on fishing

politics. The decrees founding the Anti-Monopoly Committee grant

it a wide range of powers to fight the remnants of Soviet industrial gigantism. According to documents, an enterprise can be considered a monopoly if it generates more than thirty-five percent of the total production in a given branch of industry. The Anti-Monopoly Committee has broad investigative and punitive powers. These powers include unrestricted access to all documents at a given enterprise and broad powers to restrict, or even close, an enterprise if it is found to violate antimonopoly laws. It is as yet too early to predict what will happen to the fishing industry in Kamchatka, since most of the giant fishing companies are already privatizing. Likely, when some of the newly-privatized companies go bankrupt--which, by the way, will only happen after Russia has a bankruptcy law--the Anti-Monopoly Committee will step in to referee the activities of the survivors.

Legislation having an even greater effect on the Russian Far East fishery, and on the conduct of business in the Russian Far East in general, is pending in early 1993 when, according to a confidential source, the Russian Parliament will pass a law prohibiting government officials from engaging in commercial activities. "This will likely lead to a mass exodus of government personnel into the private sector", said the source, "These people will have a significant head start on everyone else, since they have excellent contacts, and know how to work the system. But we can't do anything about that. It's far more important to separate our entrepreneurs (in Russian, 'predprinimateli') from the government."

In the whirlwind of economic and political confusion, feelings in even this peaceful region of Russia can get whipped up. Given what is happening in other regions on the territory of the former Soviet Union, it is hardly surprising that the decentralizing trends sweeping the Russian Far East sometimes acquire a separatist undertone. A prime example is the embroglio around the Kurile Islands. These four islands are at the center of a long-festering territorial dispute with Japan. The Kuriles were annexed by the Soviet Union during the last days of the Second World War. Now Japan is demanding that Russia return the Kuriles, and refuses to offer Russia desperately-needed foreign aid until an agreement is reached. In the Russian Far East, the overwhelming sentiment is for keeping the disputed territories Russian, and there is no reason to believe that Russia will ever relinquish them. National pride plays far less a role than economic and strategic reasons. The Kuriles give Russia control over one of the North Pacific's richest fishing grounds, worth an estimated one hundred million rubles a year. The Kuriles also give Russia control over the entrance to the Sea of Okhotsk, and serve as a strategic link between naval fleets located in Vladivostok and Kamchatka. Preferring not to discuss the Kurile problem with Japan while the Russian government is in turmoil, President Yeltsin cancelled a planned September visit to Japan.

But the Kurile problem indicates political undercurrents in the Russian Far East not often discussed in the Western media. During a closed session with the Russian Parliament, the Armed Forces High Command of Russia reported that, if the Yeltsin Administration gave the Kuriles back to Japan, there would be mass social unrest throughout the Russian Far East, and that secession of the entire territory from Russia would become a real possibility. According to one Russian Far East newspaper, the High Command told President Yeltsin, "... (giving away the Kuriles to Japan) would provoke mass anti-government demonstrations in the local population, (and) strengthen the position of separatist forces, right up to the separation of the Far East from Russia and the formation of a Far Eastern republic." (But Our Armoured Train is Waiting on the Sidetrack, 'Vostok Rossii', 40, Oct. 1992.)

I spoke at length with one local Russian businessman about separatist tendencies in Kamchatka and the Russian Far East in general. I was particularly interested in his thoughts on what would happen in the Russian Far East if the Yeltsin Administration is overturned by conservatives during the December Congress of Deputies in Moscow, as many people expect. The businessman said that a change of government is likely, because people are tired of economic instability, but he feared that, unlike the August, 1991, coup, this one would be more violent. "If that happens, Kamchatka could secede from Russia. During August (1991), it was in the air here. People here don't want hardliners, they just want to control what goes on with their own lives in Kamchatka." He doubts, however, that violence would touch Kamchatka. "People here are peaceful", he said, "We're all out here in the same situation. Nobody would gain anything by shooting."

Mr. Premyak, on the other hand, is very definitely for a united government, and a united Russia. "Russia needs to stay together", he said, "'Rus' (the ancient word for Russia) is great, my country is great. We will survive these troubles, and become great again. This I believe." He says that relations between the local Soviet of People's Deputies and the Kamchatka Regional Administration are good, making the Kamchatka Region an exception among many Russian regions, which are crippled by disputes between representative and administrative bodies. "We have enough to do out here without getting involved in petty, administrative disputes. We all know each other here, and we know that if we stay together, life will be much easier."

So will the Russian Far East's tendency to go its own way lead to the formation of a separate, Russian Far East Republic? Or a Republic of Kamchatka? Not likely, at least in the absence

of serious political disturbances in the rest of Russia. But given the chaos on mainland Russian, and with air and sea

communications to the outside world becoming sporadic and even random, Kamchatka is ever more a backwater, forced to solve its own problems.

And the problems are indeed daunting. According to a white paper issued by the Kamchatka Soviet of People's Deputies, the average life expectancy on Kamchatka is five years less than the average for Russia. Due to worsening living conditions, Kamchatka's population has been leaving at a rate of 1,000 per year since 1985; the only thing that might slow the exodus is that airline tickets are going to double in price after the New Year. Crime has increased by 37 percent since 1991. There was a teacher's strike in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky in late October, and the local administration was compelled to fork out more money from its already stretched budget to keep schools open. According to the local militia, half of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky's drivers are unlicensed, and accidents on the overloaded roads are terrible, and common. The social machinery is breaking down, beginning to tear itself apart.

A report issued by the Russian Federation Ministry of Interior Affairs (Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del-Rossiiskaya Federatsiya) on crime in the Kamchatka Region portrays an unravelling society, poised on the brink of chaos. "General shortages are a phenomena presently prevalent throughout the entire (Russian) republic, and are not characteristic for only the Kamchatka Region. The high degree of specialization of the (Kamchatka) regional economy has provoked more tangible, negative consequences regarding shortages. The fact of the matter is, that the absence of many daily consumer goods (especially food products), traditionally brought in from other regions, cannot be compensated by the development of analogous agricultural activity in the harsh climatic conditions on Kamchatka... Progressive price rises in conditions of total shortage even now have led to a tangible reduction in the standard of living for a broad stratum of society. The material need for vitally necessary goods is compounded by their economic inaccessibility and a subjective feeling in people of personal inferiority, (and causes) a neurological condition of want...As a result of the intensification of (these) factors, a new social differentiation (between the rich and poor) and a corresponding rise in social tensions will occur more tangibly and obviously...Mass upheavals in connection with chronic shortages of primary-use items, and pogroms against storage and warehouse facilities, and establishments with crowds of people (airports, seaports, and so forth) cannot be ruled out." (A Prognosis for Crime on Kamchatka, 'Vesti', Nov. 5, 1992.)

It is only once you leave Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky that you really get an idea of how huge and remote a territory Kamchatka is. The land folds and twists back onto itself here to form tortured ridges and abrupt mountain ranges, cut by fast rivers,

pocked with hot springs, and steaming with craters and fumaroles. Volcanoes dominate the peninsula's skyline. The vegetation here is simple--birches, devil's club, scrub beech and low junipers. The most common tree is the stone birch, not a slender, graceful, white stalk like the classic Russian 'beryozka', but a humped, twisted, grotesque northern arabesque of a tree. I have never seen a place where man's living presence seems so temporary. In the villages, the rundown huts and slovenly wooden barracks look like they are collapsing in slow motion, and the dismal five-story concrete apartment buildings slump in heaps of low-grade, pockmarked concrete. Except for a few pockets of habitation, Kamchatka is still a lonely land of secrets, with places never seen by people, a land being violently built by volcanoes even as it is being wrenched back into the sea.

Late one frigid fall evening I was riding back to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatksky through this landscape from a little village, Malki, 170 kilometers from the city, where I had visited a salmon hatchery. The road, which had been built by slave labor back in the thirties, was little more than an improved asphalt track winding through the mountains, and was utterly deserted. As we rattled along, the driver and I made conversation to pass the time; about Russian politics, endless food shortages, our families, life 'u nas i u vas', in our country and in your country. The green service van we jostled along in was unheated, and we drank and spilled cups of hot, sweet tea, and ate 'pryanki' (sugared Russian tea biscuits), in an effort to stay warm. We drove up over a pass and began to descend into the Avacha Valley, the first distant lights of the city winking through the evening. Across the valley, the twin volcanoes, Koryakski and Avachinski, loomed like a fantastic castle, shining white with new snow beneath the rising moon. For no reason at all, the driver turned to me and said, "Odin, kak mesyats v nebo"--I'm all alone, like the moon in the heavens. Another local Kamchatka proverb, passed down through generations of Russians left to fend for themselves out on a cold and lonesome frontier.

All Best,

Peter H. Christiansen

