

# Peter Simon Pallas, Siberia, and the European Republic of Letters

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Peter Simon Pallas was also a member of what European men of learning in the eighteenth century often called a “Republic of Letters,” an idealized society that cut through state borders and acknowledged no limits to its pursuit of knowledge. His intensive engagement with the leading theorists of the time, his attempts to separate himself from the dilettantish scientific efforts of the nobility, and his struggle to craft a space of independent action within the Academy of Sciences all attest to his membership in the Republic. Admittedly, Pallas often fell short of the Republic’s ideals; some of his scientific work directly supported Russian imperial claims, he refused to investigate the issues at the heart of the Pugachev Rebellion, and by the last decades of his life he was enjoying most of the prerogatives of privilege in Russia. The limitations of the Republic inside Russia were ultimately due to its citizens — men like Pallas — who found the favors offered by the Russian state a seductive alternative to the more demanding Republic of Letters.

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Peter Simon Pallas was a renowned traveler, zoologist, geologist, botanist, ethnographer, and linguist who enjoyed a long and successful career with the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. He was also a member of what European men of learning in the eighteenth century often called a “Republic of Letters,” an idealized society that cut through state borders and acknowledged no limits to its pursuit of knowledge. From Portugal to Poland, even across the Atlantic in parts of the New World, scholars spoke a common language, willingly shared the fruits of their research, and would rally in support of compatriots oppressed by church or state<sup>1</sup> (see Daston, 2004; Eskildsen, 2004). In practice, a host of contradictions and competing loyalties perpetually threatened this Republic, and its members were not always as devoted to its preservation as their rhetoric suggested. In a world of monarchies, a small, fragmented Republic faced constant siege. Nonetheless the Republic persisted, offering scholars throughout Europe comfort, intellectual stimulation, and sometimes real assistance when called upon. In order to understand Peter Simon Pallas’s place in the history of the natural sciences, we must understand his relationship to this Republic of Letters, for its concerns guided his research, shaped his career in Russia, and helped determine the success or failure of his scientific work. Pallas’ life as employee of the Russian empire also offers valuable insight into the strengths and limitations of this imagined Republic, for there the contrasts between the Republic’s ideals and monarchical realities emerged most clearly.

Nowhere did the Republic of Letters face starker contradictions than in eighteenth-century Russia, where the notion of a republic encountered hostility from the highest levels of society. Many European savants would not even have considered Russia a part of their Republic. However, in some respects, Russia offered ideal conditions for the realization of the ideals of the Republic of Letters. Under a series of reforming autocrats beginning with Peter I (1682–1725), the Russian state had embarked on a program of modernization that promised both greater

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<sup>1</sup> See: Daston, 2004; Eskildsen, 2004 — in “Literature”.

engagement with Europe and an increase in national power and influence. This modernization program required a large influx of Western European experts in naval technology, industry, commerce, and science. Emperors from Peter I to Catherine II (1762–1799) hired from the best European universities in France, Switzerland, and, above all, Germany. But, the men of letters who came in constant streams throughout the eighteenth century faced difficult dilemmas upon arrival in St. Petersburg or Moscow. Hired to augment the power of the Russian state, they also maintained personal, intellectual, and national ties to their countries of origin. Most difficult perhaps, these men were expected to retain their place in the Republic of Letters while serving the least republican of governments in Europe.

Pallas' career in Russia embodied all of the difficulties mentioned, but it also shows the resilience of the Republic. Though geographically he sat at the very edge of Europe, Pallas entered wholeheartedly into the Republic of Letters. Maintaining correspondence with over 200 other German, Dutch, English, and Portuguese scholars, and with at least 183 others within the Russian empire (Wendland, 1991, p. 749), Pallas made himself as well-connected as any naturalist of that century. In fact, Pallas occupied a particularly important place in the Republic of Letters. His network of contacts extended not only westward to Europe, but eastward through the vast, and expanding, Russian empire in Siberia and East Asia. Pallas thus tapped into a circuit of information concerning Siberian ethnography and natural history that garnered immense interest in the rest of Europe. Just as the Englishman Joseph Banks stood at the hub of late-eighteenth century research into the South Pacific Ocean (Williams, 1999), so did Pallas gather and disperse the reports of travelers throughout the Russian Empire. At times, the scope of his contacts even extended into Banks' territory; Pallas, it seems, learned about Cook's death at Kealakakua Bay in Hawaii before Banks himself did<sup>2</sup>. Unlike Banks, Pallas made his name and contacts in natural history without the benefit of an aristocratic background, another way in which the German scholar embodied the Republic's ideals.

Still, Pallas had to contend with several challenges to his membership in the Republic, including periods of nationalism within the Academy, interference from meddling aristocrats, and — most difficult perhaps — the growing temptations offered by a Russian society which accentuated privilege for its favored members. Despite some setbacks, however, Pallas' long career offers proof of the vibrancy of the Republic of Letters in Russia, and demonstrates the opportunities for prestige and advancement in European society that the Russian Empire could offer.

### **Pallas' Road to Siberia and Back**

Peter Simon Pallas was no ordinary hired hand. Though of relatively humble birth (his father was a physician), when Catherine II brought him to Russia in 1768, his name had already risen to the top ranks of European natural historians. A native of Berlin, his University of Leiden dissertation (written when he was only 19) on intestinal worms, marked him as the equal of Buffon, Banks, and Linnaeus (Rudolphi, 1812, p. 10). Pallas had spent his formative years taking something of a grand tour of the centers of European science, managing to hear

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<sup>2</sup> Letter, Peter Simon Pallas to Thomas Pennant and Joseph Banks, December 15 (26), 1779, in "Historical Records of New Zealand", New Zealand Electronic Text Centre <http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-McN01Hist-t1-b1-d18.html> (accessed May 10, 2011).

lectures at the Universities of Halle and Göttingen, probably Germany's top two centers of natural history in the eighteenth century. He then traveled through England and Holland, making a number of important scientific acquaintances along the way. Though he never fulfilled his wish of making a voyage of exploration to North America, he became acquainted with the best collections of specimens throughout Europe, and especially in Holland. Back in Berlin, Pallas entered into publishing, editing the *Stralsundisches Magazin*, a periodical that, typical of the time, covered a range of subjects from Zoology to Ethnography, and disseminated to German speakers a large amount of information about Russia (Wendland, Lühman, 2008, p. 741). He also published his *Spicilegia Zoologica*, which laid out a system of species organization meant to compete with Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, then approximately 30 years old and still subject to criticism. Despite these and several other impressive publications, Pallas was unable to secure any permanent employment in Western Europe and gratefully accepted Catherine's invitation to come to St. Petersburg.

When Pallas arrived in St. Petersburg in April, 1768, he knew little of the vast country. However, this changed quickly as he immediately embarked on long tour throughout the Eastern portions of the Russian Empire that would ensure his fame throughout Europe and set his research agenda for the next forty years. The "Academy Expeditions", the program of discovery, classification, and mapping that Pallas participated in, was Russia's most ambitious attempt to date to gain some sort of mental map of its rapidly expanding Asian possessions. As Catherine herself put it, the expedition was meant to "put in proper light the condition and the products of [our] hitherto unknown provinces" (Rudolphi, 1812, p 24). The Academy Expeditions were more than just fact-finding missions, however — they were meant to demonstrate to the rest of Europe that Catherine's Russia could equal France, Britain, or any other nation in the production of enlightened knowledge. Metaphors of casting light on Siberia abounded. As a marker of Russia's Enlightenment, then, it was important that the knowledge gained not merely be proprietary, but be shared openly with the rest of Europe.

For six years Pallas traveled through much of Siberia and Central Asia. His furthest efforts took him east of Lake Baikal, and he even made it to the Chinese border. Plans to go as far as Beijing had to be abandoned due to a combination of ill health and hesitation on the part of the Academy of Sciences, which found the trip to be impractical<sup>3</sup>. Pallas suffered intensely at times during the travels, often succumbing to a creeping melancholy and hypochondria ("how little is my body adapted to this unusual climate" he once complained), and returned to European Russia prematurely grey-haired (Pallas, 1993, p. 162).

Sometimes during his journey Pallas felt cut off from mainstream European intellectual life and depressed by squalid conditions in Siberia. News about Captain James Cook's voyages of the exploration in the Pacific, which were then drawing the attention of all the Republic of Letters, made Pallas question his choice to work for the Russian empire. In 1771, Pallas wrote to his friend and fellow academician Gerhard Friedrich Müller about the Swedish botanist Daniel Solander, who had just returned from Cook's voyage:

What you have written me about your friend Solander makes me extremely envious. I begin to dream when I think of that felicitous and generous field of discovery he had [the South Pacific], and how niggardly in contrast is the cold of Siberia, which I have chosen. And I think how one can travel a hundred versts here without even making a discovery.

<sup>3</sup>"Materialy o Pallase". Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Archive RAN). F. 92. Op. 1. No. 103. P. 10.

Befitting Pallas's gregariousness, cosmopolitanism, and expansive mind, he then requested an introduction to Solander "in any language he may understand"<sup>4</sup> (Pallas himself wrote and spoke Greek, Latin, German, English, and French from childhood, and learned other languages easily throughout his life) (Rudolphi, 1812, p. 7).

Despite his renowned expertise in Siberian natural history, Pallas long retained an inferiority complex when discussing the South Pacific, writing to Joseph Banks that nature there was "by far inferior, in every respect, to the happy climates thro' which your voyage lay"<sup>5</sup>. When Pallas finally did get his hands on some South Pacific articles, by way of Magnus Behm, the Baltic German governor of Kamchatka, he immediately began to fret that the collection of Tahitian artifacts would "soon begin to gather dust under the supervision of the Russians in the *Kunstkammer*"<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, Pallas' Siberian experience — far more than his scientific work — made his name instantly recognizable in European scientific circles and made his acquaintance absolutely necessary for any scholar interested in the vast eastern reaches of the Russian empire (a good chunk of the globe after all). As Pallas, in typically understated tone, put it to Banks, "the productions of [the Russian] empire ... may however pretend to some peculiarities unknown in other parts of the world & more difficult to procure, as the great distance by land and the scarcity of Collectors make them rather rare..."<sup>7</sup>.

One of Siberia's principal attractions, in the opinion of contemporaneous natural historians around Europe, lay in the abundance of fossil remains of mysterious creatures. At least since the seventeenth century, Siberia had been recognized as the world's most fertile hunting ground for the skeletons of giant elephants dug out of river banks, and some of Pallas' predecessors in the Academy of Sciences had already written on the topic (Cohen, 2002, p. 65, 66). It was not long before Pallas joined the search for specimens and speculation over what they might mean. In 1769, while near Samara, he first reported finding "bones from elephants and large buffalos", which were continually being exposed on the banks of the Irgiz River, and he would find many more such specimens during the course of his travels<sup>8</sup>. Pallas also found petrified seal and shark teeth near Krasnoyarsk, thousands of miles from the nearest ocean (Pallas, 1987, p. 63, 175). He wrote his first scientific commentary on fossils in 1769, discussing theories that the normally tropical animals might have been taken there by Alexander the Great or migrated north during Mongol times<sup>9</sup>. He managed to bring parts of a frozen mammoth back to St. Petersburg, which long held a place in the Academy's museum, and formed the basis for many Europeans' musings on the history of extinction<sup>10</sup>. Siberian fossils were a subject Pallas would return to on several occasions, since it evinced great interest in Europe. Gathering evidence from around the

<sup>4</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Müller, November 7, 1771, in Archive RAN. F. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to Joseph Banks, March 2/10, 1779, in the British Library Manuscript Department, Add MS 8094, pp 237, 237 op.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Müller, May 23, 1780, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 22a. P. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to Joseph Banks, March 2/10, 1779, in the British Library Manuscript Department, Add MS 8094, pp 237, 237 op.

<sup>8</sup> Pallas, Report to the Academy of Sciences, February 16, 1771, in Archive RAN. F. 3. Op. 32. D. 12. P. 96.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Simon Pallas. De Ossibus Fossilibus // Novi Commentarii Acad. Scient. Imper. Petrop. (1769), 13 (1768), pp 439, 440.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Tilesius von Tilenau, "Skeleto Mammonteo Sibirico", *Commentarii Academiae Scientiarum Imperialis* (1815); Anton Friedrich Büsching, *Wöchentlichen Nachrichten* (October 31, 1774), p 347.

world, and reading in the major European scientific journals, Pallas concluded by 1795 that the Siberian mammoths and rhinoceroses offered “new proof for the Flood that spread these foreign animal remains across northern Asia”<sup>11</sup>.

Pallas’ interest in fossils helped create some unlikely contacts. Included amongst Pallas’ personal papers kept in the Berlin Staatsbibliothek is an undated letter from “Theophanes Archiepiscopus Novgorodensis”, a still unidentified Russian cleric. In the letter Theophanes asked Pallas’s opinion concerning recent finds of mammoths buried in the Siberian permafrost. Had these animals been washed there by the biblical flood, or, like other mammals such as marmots and moles, did the giant elephants live underground? Why were sea animals found buried under the ground far away from any ocean?<sup>12</sup> Most likely Theophanes was responding to an article on mammoths Pallas had written for the Academy’s newsletter in 1772. He was undoubtedly happy to hear that Pallas, too, believed that the biblical flood had deposited the mammoths in Siberia, but the Archbishop’s engagement in the question tied him to a wide circle of savants throughout Europe who were debating the meaning of Siberian fossils. Even the *encyclopedists* in France weighed in, decisively rejecting the diluvial explanation (Cohen, 2002, p. 80). An intellectual conversation involving Denis Diderot and the archbishop of Novgorod must count amongst the least likely of 18<sup>th</sup>-century encounters, but Pallas made it possible.

During his years of travel on the Academy expeditions, Pallas made most of the Siberian acquaintances who would consistently provide him with local information for the succeeding decades. None of these contacts came from the peasantry, with whom relations were often testy. While near Kazan, Pallas lamented that, despite his best attempts to “win the trust of the locals”, he suspected that they hid many curiosities from him (Pallas, 1987, p 51). He also mistrusted many of the reports he received from Russian fur-traders in the North Pacific, whom he suspected of trying to put the best light on their behavior and anyway were incapable of producing valuable scientific information. Government officials with German backgrounds stationed in Siberia — and there were many of these — proved easier to work with and made for natural allies. Behm, whose Kamchatkan location gave him access to interesting information, became a trusted correspondent, sharing with Pallas the same native language, an interest in the Pacific, and the struggles and rewards of working in Russia. The two later coordinated work on the economic development of Russia’s Far Eastern colonies<sup>13</sup>.

However, Pallas also tapped into a wide circle of educated Russian officials, who often dabbled in natural history. Typical of these men was Pavel Demidov. While in Krasnoyarsk, Pallas enjoyed staying with this Russian nobleman. Demidov had a fine garden there, which he filled with plants from all around Siberia. Pallas gathered some of Demidov’s seeds and sent them onward to the great Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus for classification, in this way connecting Siberia with the leading lights of European biology<sup>14</sup>. Elsewhere, educated government officials presented Pallas with local curiosities they had proudly discovered. The governor of Kazan,

<sup>11</sup> Peter Simon Pallas. Kurze Nachrichten // Neue Nordische Beyträge. V. 6. St. Petersburg and Leipzig, 1795. P. 251.

<sup>12</sup> Undated letter from Archbishop Theophanes, in Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, MS. Germ. Fol. 788.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Simon Pallas. Izvestie of Vvedennom Skotovodstve I Zemlepashestve v Kamchatke... // Trudy Volnogo Ekonomicheskogo Obshchestva. 1783. Part XXXIII. (Паллас П.С. Известия о введённом скотоводстве и землепашестве в Камчатке и около Охотска при Узском остроге, лежащем подле Охотского моря // Продолжения Трудов Вольного экономического общества. 1783. Ч. 3—4. Пер. на русск. яз.)

<sup>14</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G. F. Mueller, October 10, 1772, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 222. P. 141.

the grandly named Prince Andrei Nikitich Kvashnin–Samarin, governor of Kazan, presented Pallas with a black hare, a curiosity “very rarely met with in the animal kingdom” (Pallas, 1993, p. 57). The governor of Irkutsk, von Brill, took regular measurements of the temperature and even slaughtered one of his pregnant donkeys so that Pallas could dissect it and try to resolve the relationship between old- and new-world donkey species<sup>15</sup>. Pallas’s Siberian network was vast, encompassing Cossacks, foreign naturalists, and several prominent government officials. In the course of his career, these Siberian connections would be his most valuable contribution to the Republic of Letters.

### Pallas in St. Petersburg

Such international connections contributed to Pallas’ explicit goals for natural history, which included the widest dissemination of information possible. Writing to Müller in 1770, Pallas expressed a wish that Russia’s knowledge of Siberia and the Pacific would be “finally made completely known to the world”<sup>16</sup>. In fact, much of Russia’s exploration of Siberia had remained secret from Europe (and even from Russians, as important documents long remained buried in the archives). Pallas, by publishing his account of exploration as well as many documents of his predecessors (such as the Pacific journals of Georg Wilhelm Steller) presided over a decisive refutation of the empire’s former secrecy. Reversing decades of policy, in 1776 Catherine gave Pallas obtained permission to share detailed accounts of Russian voyages to the North Pacific with influential foreigners (Wendland, 1991, p. 642). Pallas was the ideal man for the job, for he sat at the hub of a wide wheel of foreign academicians and travelers interested in Russia and the North Pacific. His best-known correspondent, the Comte de Buffon, received Pallas’ extracts from Russian journals of exploration first, and he incorporated information on North Pacific mammals into the twelfth volume of *History of Quadrupeds*. While this openness was a clear shift in Russian policy about its North Pacific activity, old fears still persisted. Writing to another correspondent, the Welshman Thomas Pennant, Pallas requested him to “Be so kind to leave also out ... the wanton cruelties committed by the first Russians that visited the Islands”<sup>17</sup>. Pallas recognized that it was still dangerous to share information too liberally.

To continue research into Russian nature, Pallas trained up a number of students during his travels. One of his Russian assistants, Nikita Sokolov, was especially talented, and Pallas recommended that the Academy of Sciences send the young man to a foreign university for further training. Three years later Sokolov and one other of Pallas’ students ended up at the University of Leiden, bringing their Siberian experience to one of the most outstanding centers of Western European learning (Pallas, 1993, p. 180, 220). Pallas was also an invaluable contact for any foreign traveler in Russia, often providing a place to stay and always ready with advice

<sup>15</sup> Wendland, 1991, p. 388; Pallas P.S. Bemerkungen über den Onager der Alt oder den Eigentlichen Wilden Esel // Neue Nordische Beyträgen. V. 2. St. Petersburg and Leipzig, 1781.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Mueller, November 16, 1770, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 222. P. 95 ob.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to Thomas Pennant, 1779, in Carol Urness, ed., *A Naturalist in Russia: Letters to Thomas Pennant* (Minnesota, 1968), p 119. Sensitivity about Krenitsyn’s remarks by no means died with time. The latest publication of his journals, published in the last years of the Soviet Union, omits his criticisms of Russian behavior towards the Aleuts.



for where to go and what to look for<sup>18</sup>. In 1781 Pallas recommended a young Austrian student to Müller, asking the latter to put in a good word to a Russian prince and thereby “do a good deed for a worthy and currently somewhat oppressed young scholar”<sup>19</sup>. The Englishman Samuel Bentham, traveling through Russia around 1780, also received a high recommendation from Pallas as “a worthy young traveler” full of a “thirst for knowledge” (*Wissbegierde*)<sup>20</sup>. Such was the ideal essence of the European Republic of Letters, a society of (mostly) men thirsting for knowledge, with little attention paid to their social backgrounds. Of course, noble patronage remained necessary to grease the wheels of career advancement, but Pallas himself, despite a decidedly bourgeois background, had become an extremely active and effective benefactor in Russia.

At times Pallas’s cosmopolitanism moved ahead of the state’s interests. His relationship with the famous American traveler, John Ledyard, caused problems for both men. The two had become acquainted in St. Petersburg, and Pallas wrote letters of introduction for the American to help on his onward journey through Siberia<sup>21</sup>. Ledyard’s plans to catch a ride on a Russian ship and sail to America, however, raised suspicions in Siberia, and Empress Catherine became alarmed. As she wrote to the Baron Grimm in Germany, “Regarding Ledyard, discovery for others is not always discovery for us...”<sup>22</sup>. In other words, whereas Pallas may have believed that Ledyard’s travels could benefit the larger Republic of knowledge, Catherine found the political implications of that knowledge far more interesting. Ledyard’s gossipy familiarity with Thomas Jefferson and Joseph Banks threatened to expose the scope of Russian activities in the North Pacific too widely.

In fact, Pallas too played an important role in defending Russian imperial interests. Despite his commitments to disinterested science, Pallas couched his works of natural history in explicitly national terms. His *Flora Rossica* (1784) detailed the plants specific to the Russian Empire, a grouping that made little sense botanically, but displayed the empire’s incredible size and diversity. His *Zoographia Rosso-Asiatica* (1821) defined its animals within similar political boundaries, and reviewers noted the remarkable number of animals found only in Russia (Rudolphi, 1812, p. 56). Such works reinforced to an international audience Catherine’s claims of ruling over the world’s largest, most diverse empire. At other times, Pallas was eager to establish the primacy of Russian geographical discoveries in the Pacific Ocean. Again and again he urged Müller to publish accounts of Russia’s voyages of exploration. These were ostensibly important contributions to the worldwide fund of knowledge, but Pallas saw them in political terms; the accounts would prove that Russia, and not England, had better information about the Arctic Ocean and the North Pacific, important imperial arenas in the late eighteenth century<sup>23</sup>. The patriotic edge Pallas gave to Pacific exploration was particularly notable, since the British voyages were commonly thought to have embodied the essence of disinterested science and international cooperation (Gascoigne, 1998, p. 157). Even in the Republic of Letters, knowledge rarely came without implications for power.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to Samuel Bentham, 12 March, 1781 in Wendland, p 201.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Müller, December 2, 1781, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 22a. P. 187 ob.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Müller, May 17, 1780, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 22a. P. 121.

<sup>21</sup> John Ledyard, Letter to Thomas Jefferson, in Stephen Watrous, ed., John Ledyard’s Journey through Russia and Siberia, 1787–1788. The Journal and Selected Letters (Madison, 1966), p 123.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine II, Letter to Baron von Grimm, November 26, 1787, in “Pis’ma Imperatritsy” in “Sbornik imperatorskago russkago istoricheskago obshchestva”. V. 23. St. Petersburg, 1878. P. 424.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Mueller, May 1, 1777, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 22a. P. 24 ob.

If Pallas had to exercise some caution when sponsoring foreign travelers in Russia, and sometimes used his scholarship to advance imperial aims, he also made sure his own work was widely accessible to Europeans. When he finally had gathered enough material to compose his life's masterpiece — the *Zoologia Rosso-Asiatica* — Pallas took the by then unorthodox step of publishing it in Latin. At a time when other European academies were moving increasingly towards publication in the vernacular<sup>24</sup>, St. Petersburg remained committed to the international languages of Latin and French (even through the Napoleonic invasion). Not until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century would the Academy's publication language change to Russian. Certainly, St. Petersburg found its choice of languages to be limited. Many of its members were not proficient in Russian, and few European readers could be counted on to be familiar with the language. The multinational Empire that Russia was increasingly becoming contributed to this international ideal; Baltic Germans in particular formed an important contingent of academicians by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whether by choice or necessity, Russia's community of scholars remained far more international in composition and language than did its competitors in Western Europe.

This exaggerated cosmopolitanism, however, coexisted uneasily with Russia's growing nationalism (See: Rogger, 1969). In the 1740s, the Academy had been under the influence of members who wanted to sideline foreign members of the Academy, elevating and recruiting new Russian members. Among those who suffered was Pallas's friend Müller (See: Black, 1986). Attempts to russify the Academy failed, as Pallas's hire in the 1760s attested, but the battles over nationality were far from over. In the 1770s the Academy's director insisted that all scientific work be first published in Russia, and only then distributed abroad (Gordin, 2006, p. 17), a precursor to the far more aggressive national politics of the nineteenth century. While Pallas was still new to Russia, in 1768, he had to apologize to the Academy of Sciences for not submitting his reports from Siberia in Russian:

"Only after my last report", he wrote, did it become known to me that, in accordance with the Academy of Science's demand, I should write the names of places in Russian, and that because of negligence on my part there was no Russian written in the last report. I ask your forgiveness for this oversight. (Pallas, 1993, p 55)

Pallas improved his Russian and complied with the Academy's demands in the future. In the end, the incident suggests again the remarkably cosmopolitan and contradictory structures within which he and other naturalists worked. Though they constantly threatened, questions of nationality and language never seriously impeded Pallas's international contacts or cosmopolitan orientation. In the meantime, the lure of knowledge in Russia was great enough to counter the intermittent annoyances. "If I were to return to Germany", Pallas once wrote, "I would die of boredom"<sup>25</sup>.

## Democrats, Bureaucrats, Aristocrats

Despite Pallas's contributions to the Russian Empire, on several occasions he ran into serious problems that call into question the vitality of the Republic of Letters in Russia. Firstly, Pallas kept relations with European scientists that sometimes appeared too cozy to

<sup>24</sup> For example, the Prussian Academy of Sciences began publishing in German in 1804.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Simon Pallas, Letter to G.F. Mueller, May 17, 1773, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 222. P. 172.



the Russians. During his Siberian journey Pallas sent several boxes of specimens to Dutch colleagues instead of St. Petersburg. Furthermore, these boxes were unmarked, suggesting that Pallas was attempting to defraud the Academy of Sciences. When the Academy opened one of the suspicious boxes, Pallas came under fire. Fellow academician Leonhard Euler reprimanded him in Siberia: "You send the best and the rarest things to foreign lands ... without asking the Academy, and we can assume that you've done this previously as well, as the [European] learned newspapers are reporting your finds"<sup>26</sup>. Pallas had run up against one of the significant boundaries of the Republic of Letters — knowledge was not free to cross borders at will, but belonged first and foremost to those who had paid for it. Pallas hardly faced this problem alone; all around Europe, with the rise of the learned Academy as the Republic's home, men of learning found their autonomy compromised in exchange for material support (Goodman, 1994, p. 21). Even the Royal Academy in London, fiercely proud of its independence from the monarchy, in fact was closely tied to the British state (Gascoigne, 1998, p. 31).

Pallas faced far more immediate dangers during his return trip from Siberia to St. Petersburg. In 1773 the Pugachev Rebellion had broken out in Southern Russia, and Pugachev's route to Moscow lay directly in Pallas's path. When Pallas arrived on the Ural River that year the area was in a near panic. Refugees from further south were streaming in. The Cossacks (those "raw people" as Pallas called them) were agitated and looked on the brink of rebellion<sup>27</sup>. In the winter, Pallas's co-expeditionary, Johann Gldenstedt was taken captive in the rebellion. Given the circumstances, perhaps it is not surprising then that Pallas found little sympathy for the revolutionaries. For him they represented an unwanted obstacle to his work, unsavory Steppe-folk descended into anarchy without any real reason. As Pallas put it, the revolt was "a new proof of the old saying that the god of war is no friend of the muses" (Pallas, 1987, p 202). Such statements show a shocking lack of empathy for the barbaric social conditions prevailing on the Steppe. Though Pallas sometimes spoke disparagingly of the "despotism" of Russian provincial officials<sup>28</sup>, he never commented on the grinding serfdom that increasing numbers of Cossacks and Russian peasants were subject to under Catherine's enlightened reign. Instead, his republicanism had seemingly been checked at the door when he entered the service of the Russian Empire. As Folkwart Wendland remarks, Pallas and the others' refusal to grant the rebellion any legitimacy instead legitimized the autocracy they served (Wendland, 1991, p. 63). While the Republic of Letters in Russia usually met its peers abroad in a spirit of open exchange, the metaphor was rarely pursued in the domestic sphere. In other ways, Pallas was readier to stake his claim in the meritocratic Republic that scorned traditional honors and class distinctions. In a society riddled with petty "princes", especially in the provinces where Pallas spent much of his time, there were many easy targets. In Tsaritsyn, Pallas mocked the dilettantish natural history efforts of Major Nikolai Petrovich Rychkov<sup>29</sup>. Rychkov showed an annoying eagerness to help Pallas during the latter's travels, devising his own expedition that, in Pallas' estimation, would bring little new information (an assessment the Academy ultimately agreed with) (Pallas, 1993, p. 134, 160). In addition to doing local topographical and zoological work, the Major had set his whole family to the task of researching silk worms, and was working "for the general good with the

<sup>26</sup> Letter, from Euler to Pallas, 27. August, 1772, "Materialy o Pallase, from the archival collections of the Academy of Sciences, collected by Keppen," p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Pallas to Mueller, 17 May, 1773, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 222. P. 172.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Pallas to Mueller, November 21, 1771, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 222. P. 122.

<sup>29</sup> Rychkov's father, Petr Ivanovich Rychkov, was well-known for his scientific work, including the *Topografiya Orenburgskaya* (1762). See Denis J.B. Shaw (2010).

sweat of his own noble Family" in order "to make his name immortal in the history of worms"<sup>30</sup>. Pallas played up the (for him) comical distinction between the self-interested, provincially-minded Russian gentry and their adoption of modish Enlightenment phrases and cosmopolitanism. Fame, as Loraine Danston has pointed out, was the gold standard in the Republic of Letters, the only unbiased measure of a person's contribution, and Pallas smugly predicted that, whatever his honors, fame was one thing Rychkov would never get.

Later, Pallas would have many opportunities to rue the still-pervasive power of the aristocracy, especially in Russia. In St. Petersburg, unlike in London or Edinburgh, (though in common with Paris) the head of the Academy of Sciences was a member of the aristocracy. Pallas's tenure began under the leadership of Graf V.G. Orlov, who badly neglected the Academy. Graf Domashnev took over in July, 1775, nearly ruining the Academy through an even more total neglect. The academicians finally demanded his removal, in part because he had shown undue favoritism to Pallas (Gordin, 2006, p. 10). In 1783 Domashnev was succeeded by Princess Ekaterina Dashkova. Dashkova, a personal friend of Catherine II, in particular made life difficult for Pallas, who by that time was one of the most famous of the Academy's members. While Dashkova spoke in favor of the Republic of Letters, she also maintained a firmly national version of the Academy's tasks (Quoted in Gordin, 2006, p. 12). Pallas remarked acidly to Joseph Banks that "Princess D. is too well known in England than to demand an explanation" for why Russian academicians faced difficulties in the 1780s.<sup>31</sup>

In 1784 the brewing battle between Dashkova and Pallas came to a head. In that year the Princess attempted to get Pallas's student, Vasilii Zuev, removed from the Academy for supposedly devoting too much time to extra-academic affairs. When the Academy protested the decision, tension escalated. In a surprising display of anti-aristocratic backbone, Pallas supported his student over Dashkova's wishes, claiming explicitly that Zuev could claim a place in the scientific society through his own merits:

I attest that [Zuev] has never been irresponsible in his science ... during the entire time of his service to the academy as an adjunct. The tasks assigned to him for the *Acta Academia* as well as for the Chancellery are proof of this, and in part have already been published. ... I would even go so far as to say that, in general, he is thriftier and more diligent than his compatriots.<sup>32</sup>

Pallas even proposed a ballot be submitted to all members of the Academy asking whether or not Zuev had fulfilled his duties responsibly. The other academicians declined, probably for fear of looking too combative against the Princess. Nonetheless, Pallas persisted and enlisted the Empress Catherine's support. This show of force intimidated Dashkov, who overturned her decision. Pallas must have savored this rare victory over his aristocratic superiors.

As the Zuev incident demonstrates, Pallas' relationship with the aristocracy was by no means simple, and he often benefited tremendously from imperial patronage. Pallas cultivated a personal friendship with Catherine, and reaped the benefits in terms of plum scientific tasks and some measure of influence over imperial policies. Rewards also came in the form of honors and titles that fit uneasily with Republican pretensions. In 1782 the empress granted Pallas the rank of Collegiate Councillor and in 1793 he became a State Councillor, titles which were a great

<sup>30</sup> Pallas, Letter to Müller, 9. April, 1774, in Archive RAN. F. 21. Op. 3. D. 222. P. 238 ob.

<sup>31</sup> Peer Simon Pallas, Letter to Joseph Banks, September 3/14, 1789, in British Library, Add MSS 8097, p 234.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Raikov, 1955, p. 193.

source of pride for Pallas. More seriously for Pallas' independence from the Russian court, in the 1790s Catherine granted him extensive landholdings in the newly-conquered Crimea, along with a large number of serfs. There Pallas behaved as a typical landowner, jealously guarding his rights to the common woods from his peasants (Rudolphi, 1812, p. 43).

Like most Enlightenment men of letters, Pallas craved the benefits of title even as he dismissed their importance. His relationship with the Englishman Joseph Billings illustrates some of the tensions tugging Pallas in different directions. Billings was a simple seaman who had sailed with James Cook on the captain's third, and last, voyage. When looking for a commander of a new government expedition to the North Pacific in the 1780s, Pallas turned to his international contacts for possible naturalists and sailors. After several possibilities led nowhere, Pallas began to consider Billings. Banks responded to an inquiry about the sailor's character with some disparaging remarks:

Not deriving much hope from the station Mr. Billings held on board the Discovery ships that he could gain insight into the manner of conducting an expedition and consequently not forming any sanguine expectations of his success I postponed answering your last letter. I may, however easily be wrong in my judgment of that gentleman not having any personal acquaintance with him although I believe he has been sometimes in my Library, which I hope is open to all who have any pretense to science.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his pessimism, Banks' nod towards the meritocratic aspirations of the Republic of Letters may have helped convince Pallas to give Billings his chance. For a variety of reasons the results of the Billings Expedition (1785–1795) were mixed — Billings has received most of the blame for its shortcomings — but Pallas himself benefitted richly from Billings' scientific endeavors during the voyage. The untutored Englishman diligently sent box after box of Alaskan specimens to Pallas<sup>34</sup>, who used many of them in completing his *Zoologica Rosso-Asiatica*, and still possessed a large collection of “dried fish from Unalashka” at his death in 1810 (Rudolphi, 1812, p. 63). For all his labors, Billings received little thanks. Back in St. Petersburg, he began courting Pallas' daughter. Though Pallas' exact words are not recorded, his response was very unfavorable, and seemed to be based on contempt for Billings' low social status. As Billings wrote in an agonized, pitiful 1795 letter: “I will wait with patience till time and fortune shall prepare a period more propitious to the feeling (sic) of my heart which are not under our command”<sup>35</sup>. Billings died a few years later fighting for the Russian Navy, and Pallas' daughter married the Russian General Lieutenant Baron von Wimpfel (Rudolphi, 1812, p. 48).

## Conclusion

The question of the presence or lack of Republic of Letters in Russia carries particular weight because Russia is often claimed to have lacked the institutions of civil society present in early modern Western Europe (Bradley, 2002). What the life and letters of Peter Simon Pallas tell us,

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Banks, Letter to Peter Simon Pallas, September 22, 1785, in Deutsche Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Handschriftabteilung, MS. germ. fol 788, p 58.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Billings, Letters to Peter Simon Pallas, November 9, 1790, May 8, 1791 in Deutsche Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Handschriftabteilung, MS. germ. fol 788, various pages.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Billings, Letter to Peter Simon Pallas, March 20, 1795 in Deutsche Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Handschriftabteilung, MS. germ. fol 788, p 71 op.

however, is that there was significant independent space for a man of letters to operate. In certain respects, even, Russia was an exemplary Republic. Pallas broached controversial subjects such as evolution and fossils that challenged established religion, bringing Enlightenment Europe's debates to the Russian domestic audience. He contributed — haltingly — to the growing professionalization of Russian intellectual and cultural life, as it moved away from the gentry and into the hands of university-educated men. Most importantly, Pallas gave Russians throughout the expanse of the Empire access to a European market for ideas and opinions that faced no significant limitations. While Pallas sometimes censored materials for foreign audiences, the private letters and reports that constituted the core of the Republic flourished in eighteenth-century Russia. Though this republic inside an autocracy faced immense strains, scholars nonetheless enjoyed or created enough autonomy to maintain their cosmopolitan connections and were able to devote themselves as much as anyone in Europe to the disinterested pursuit of knowledge.

The ideals of the Republic of Letters guided much of Pallas' work. His intensive engagement with the leading theorists of the time, his attempts to separate himself from the dilettantish scientific efforts of the nobility, and his struggle to craft a space of independent action within the Academy of Sciences all attest to his membership in the Republic. Admittedly, Pallas often fell short of the Republic's ideals; some of his scientific work directly supported Russian imperial claims, he refused to investigate the issues at the heart of the Pugachev Rebellion, and by the last decades of his life he was enjoying most of the prerogatives of privilege in Russia. The limitations of the Republic inside Russia were ultimately due to its citizens — men like Pallas — who found the favors offered by the Russian state a seductive alternative to the more demanding Republic of Letters.

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## Пётр Симон Паллас, Сибирь и европейская «Республика Учёных Писем»

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Анализ эпистолярных материалов и трудов П.С. Палласа рассматривается с точки зрения сопричастности его к «Республике Учёных» — прогрессивному, гуманистическому движению, традиционно объединявшему деятелей европейской культуры эпохи Просвещения независимо от государственной принадлежности. Его интенсивные контакты с ведущими теоретиками своего времени, его попытки отмежеваться от дилетантизма в науке и, в то же время, взаимодействовать с аристократами-интеллектуалами, его борьба за независимость Академии Наук от административного произвола — все эти обстоятельства свидетельствуют о принадлежности Палласа к «незримому союзу», хотя неизбежные компромиссы принуждали его отступать от основных принципов «Республики»: поддерживать имперские амбиции государства, игнорировать причины и следствия восстания Емельяна Пугачева, пользоваться рядом привилегий, даруемых его положением при дворе. Ограниченное влияние идеологии «Республики Учёных» в Российской империи проистекало из-за невосприимчивости общественного сознания, тяготеющего к государственности и сформированного абсолютистской иерархией социальной структуры.

**Ключевые слова:** Паллас, «Республика Учёных Писем», европейская культура, Россия, социальный контекст.