

U.S. Records Show Soviets Kidnapped American Colony On Wrangel Island

EXCLUSIVE TO SPOTLIGHT

By Christopher Todd

Government records show that a small colony of Americans settled on Wrangel Island in the 1920's and lived there until they were kidnapped at gunpoint and forcibly removed by Soviet soldiers. Several of the American Arctic pioneers died in a Russian prison while waiting for the State Department to act.

Since that time, the Soviets have maintained complete control over the forbidding island, and the U.S. Government has done nothing to assert its rightful claim to the territory.

"We have never had an occasion since the 1920's to address squarely the question of whether we wished to recognize that the physical and actual Soviet presence on Wrangel Island should be accorded, in our view, formal and undisputed sovereignty over the island and relinquish any and all claim that we might have had at one time to it," the legal officer said in typical bureaucratic fashion.

"They (the Russians) are certainly in control of it. That fact is not in dispute," he said.

But according to the State Department's own official "Digest of International Law," the Russians can never be legally recognized as owners of the territory because of the violent and illegal way they seized it from American settlers:

"The exercise or display of sovereignty must be peaceful . . . the first assertion of sovereignty must not be a usurpation of another's subsisting occupation nor contested from the first by competing acts of sovereignty."

"(Soviet occupancy) in itself does not mean that we have recognized as a legal matter that the Soviets have complete sovereignty over the island," the legal

office explained, "and that we waived all color of claim that we might have had."

"We don't choose to pursue it formally or formally declare otherwise, because we don't see the point in it. To us, it's a non-issue."

"The point is that nobody really considers it to be really a very important subject, to be frank with you," he added.

In December, 1974, more than a year after the shocking facts about violation of human rights on Wrangel Island came to light, the U.S. signed an environmental agreement which specifically recognized Wrangel Island as Russian territory.

This particular agreement, signed by Russell E. Train as chairman of the U.S. side of the Joint Committee on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Protection, was never sent to Congress for approval. It was quietly buried in the wake of the Ford-Kissinger-Brezhnev Vladivostok summit.

Under the deal drawn up by the State Department and the Environmental Protection Agency, three environmental projects dealing with a transfer of musk oxen, marking snow geese and a polar bear study would be carried out on Wrangel Island. They would be under the direction of the Russian Academy of Science and the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service. An exchange of Russian and American scientists was to take place freely, but mysteriously only one American ever set foot on Wrangel Island. He refuses to talk about it.

A spokesman for the legal adviser for European affairs, which is the State Department's authority on Wrangel Island and the environmental agreement, tried bluffing when questioned about the role of Wrangel Island in the agreement: "The agreement itself in 1974 had nothing to do with Wrangel Island. No indeed."

But when confronted by The SPOTLIGHT with a copy of the little-publicized document dated December 12, 1974, and clearly mentioning Wrangel Island as the site of the three projects, the State Department legal flack grudgingly admitted, "I stand corrected."

(Last week, SPOTLIGHT revealed that the Soviet Union is holding thousands of war prisoners on Wrangel Island. This second, concluding part describes how the Soviets took over the island claimed by the United States.)

The last American known to have visited the island was Dr. William J.L. Sladen, an ornithologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Dr. Sladen went there to study and mark snow geese that nest on the island so that they could be traced in their southern migration.

Despite repeated attempts by The SPOTLIGHT to interview Dr. Sladen, he refused to talk about his experiences or what he saw on the island.

"I hope you can see my side," said the scientist. "We have a good relation going with the Soviets that is totally non-political and I think it very important that we preserve the integrity of that."

"You are a free press and we are free scientists."

A source close to the snow geese project confirmed that Dr. Sladen was the last American on the island.

"He was there alone. He was invited by the Russians to go, and he was alone up there with the Russians."

"He was invited by the people from the Academy of Sciences, some of his counterparts in ornithology over there."

Our source recognized Sladen's reluctance to talk, "If he talks then probably he'd be cut off, and never be able to visit again."

"I know nothing about the scientific cooperation program," said the lawyer in the European Affairs Office. "I had nothing to do with it."

"I am sure that there are people, elsewhere in this building (State Department) or at the Interior Department, who know all the precise details."

When Earl Baysinger, chief of interna-



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tional affairs at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was questioned about the Wrangel Island environmental projects, his discussion of the "precise details" didn't agree with the documented facts.

"The U.S. didn't send musk oxen to the Soviet Union to be placed on Wrangel Island," Baysinger said. "We agreed to give them some musk oxen, and the decision as to where they were to go wasn't part of our dealings."

"Wrangel Island was simply a piece of geography."

However, the joint environmental agreement of 1974 specifically recognized Wrangel Island, not only as Soviet territory, but as the site of the musk oxen project as well:

"During the first quarter (of 1974) Soviet specialists will participate in the capture of 40 musk oxen on Wrangel Island and shipment to the USSR for resettlement. As soon as possible, the Soviet side will initiate vegetation studies in the release sites (Taimyr Peninsula and Wrangel Island) as part of a program of exchanges of information and specialists in the ecology and management of musk oxen."

Another part of the agreement dealt with an exchange of scientists to study polar bear populations. U.S. scientists were never allowed on Wrangel Island for their portion of the project.

"Both sides agreed to study in 1975 the U.S. proposal for a visit of U.S. specialists to Wrangel Island in 1976," the agreement read.

Travel to the island was banned by the Russians in August, 1976, when Wrangel Island was proclaimed to be a nature reserve.

When pressed for an answer about whether the State Department knew that Wrangel had been used as a hard-labor concentration camp or that it was claimed as American territory when the agreement was signed, the State Department legal adviser said:

"I would have no way of answering that. I just wouldn't know, to be honest with you."

"I think that the honest answer to that probably you will find out is that nobody had the faintest idea that we ever had a claim to Wrangel Island."

The State Department's cavalier attitude giving away American territory and violation of human rights did not sit well with fiery Rep. Robert Dornan (R-Calif.)

"I frankly, am appalled at the department's lack of interest in or sensitivity to the human rights issue on Wrangel Island."

"I think Congress and the people of this country deserve some fast and comprehensive answers about these shocking disclosures. And I, for one, intend to seek and hopefully get those answers," he stormed.

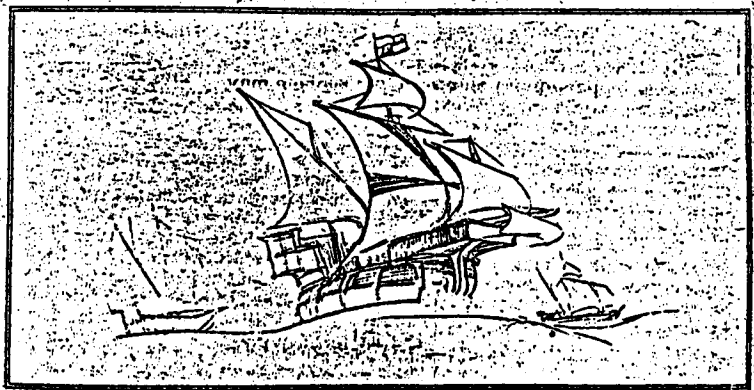
Wrangel Island is a large island in the Arctic Ocean about 270 miles northwest of Cape Lisburne. It was discovered by Captain Thomas Long of the New London, Conn. whaler "Nile" and named by him in honor of Admiral Baron Ferdinand Petrovich von Wrangel, IRN, on August 14, 1867.

In 1880, Captain Calvin L. Hooper was placed in charge of the Bering Sea Patrol, which made him the defacto governor of Alaska. Captain Hooper, with a party from the steamer "Thomas Corwin" landed on Wrangel Island on August 12, 1881 and took formal possession in the name of the United States Government based on the right of discovery by the American Barque "Nile" in 1867.

The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey then placed this newly annexed island in the district of Alaska. The official survey of the island was carried out by the crew of the "USS John Rodgers" between August 26 and September 13, 1881.

Between 1881 and 1910 the island was used only by the American whalers and hunters of walrus. On September 8, 1889 the "USS Thetis" went to Wrangel Island to reinforce the U.S. claim of sovereignty. In 1920 the ship "Adler" of Nome, Alaska with a motion picture company from Hollywood landed on Wrangel Island to make a movie about a polar bear hunt.

In the summer of 1911, the Imperial Russian Steamer "Vaigatch" under the command of Konstantin V. Loman made the first Russian landing on Wrangel Island. They anchored at the Bay of Kolchak only long enough to establish the astronomical position of the landing place.



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