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Is Alaska Next on Russia's List?

By Harley Balzer

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This Saturday marks 147 years since the U.S. bought Alaska from Russia. If the man in charge of Russia's defense industries gets his way, Sarah Palin will not only be able to see Russia from her front porch, but her front porch will be in Russia.

Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin wrote a foreword to a book published earlier this year, "Alaska Betrayed and Sold: The History of a Palace Conspiracy," which argues that Russia has a right to get back "Russian America."

Rogozin endorses the author's conclusion, which recognizes "the historical and judicial right of Russia for the return of the lost colonies, Alaska and the Aleutian Islands [island chain in the Northern Pacific Ocean], over which the Russian flag flew 150 years ago."

Before he became deputy prime minister, with responsibility for coordinating the work of the defense industry, Rogozin was Russia's ambassador to NATO. In 2003, Rogozin was the leader of the Rodina Party, a political organization that received Kremlin support in an effort to draw votes from nationalist parties.

Rodina's nationalist message was given extensive exposure on Russian television until about two weeks before the election, when Kremlin spin doctors realized they had overshot and Rodina might do too well at the polls. Rogozin's loyalty in accepting Rodina's downgrade has been rewarded with major appointments.

The author of the book on Alaska's sale, Ivan Mironov, was accused of attempting to assassinate Russia's privatization architect, Anatoly Chubais, in 2005. He spent two years in prison before being pardoned by the Russian Duma. Mironov's treatise initially appeared in 2007 with the title "Fatal Bargain. How Alaska Was Sold."

Mironov's view of history is that it needs frequent revision in response to how people understand world events. This leads him to revise the evaluation of Russia's sale of Alaska, recognizing it as a betrayal equivalent to Chubais's privatization program in the 1990s. Rather than viewing the sale of Alaska as a decision to jettison unprofitable overseas projects, it now should be seen as a betrayal of Russia's great power status.

Rogozin's foreword fully embraces Mironov's version of history. "Russia giving up its colonial possessions makes it necessary to look in a different way at our diplomacy in the era of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, trading away pieces of the Soviet Empire."

Rogozin argues that by refuting "the outright lies and falsifications" about the transfer of Alaska it becomes possible to "bring down the liberal idols of the 19th century — the Russian reformers of Alexander II and his brother Grand Duke Konstantin." They betrayed Russia's geopolitical interests in the Pacific, demonstrating "the impossibility of establishing diplomatic relations exclusively on concessions and compromises."

For Rogozin, Mironov's book illustrates that a single mistake in foreign policy "can produce an entire century of loss and defeat of a great power." He concludes his short foreword with a call for the return of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands to Russia.

It may well be the case that Putin is simply using Rogozin's hyperbole as a way to put pressure on diplomatic interlocutors. But the fact remains that Rogozin is not on the fringes of Russian politics — he has consistently been promoted and, as deputy prime minister, now oversees the Russian defense industry. The fact that such a prominent figure could make such statements about Russia's claim to Alaska is significant.

After the annexation of Crimea in March, which was only part of Ukraine because of a "historical mistake," according to Russia, could Alaska be next on Russia's list?

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