

Public Organization "Irkutsk - Fort Ross"

Maria Barsukova, Elena Yemelyanova

Addressing major challenges associated with successful social adaptation of younger generations for an independent life is possible only by establishing of a coherent system of continuous civic education and by familiarizing students with cultural values and traditions of surrounding society. It is no secret that today's young people from Russian hinterland are characterized by typical trends: fragmentation of interests and needs, lack of knowledge of historical roots of their family names and history of their native land, lack of continuity between generations, and a large gap in value orientations. Thus, we can identify a problem of the absence of common ideological foundations among youth, which hinders with the formation of positive life goals and values.

A case study conducted by us in 2009 on a small-group of young travelers vacationing on the shores of Baikal Lake has confirmed our assumptions.

The purpose of the study was to find out the level of familiarity of young people on the issues related to the development of Russian America and their awareness of role of the city of Irkutsk in the activities of Russian American Company.

We initially assumed that young people of our region are not aware of these issues, but some of the answers of the respondents have really surprised us. For example, 15% of the respondents have heard or had some idea about the activities of Russian American Company, and 50% of respondents have never heard of it. Figure 1 provides a diagram of the outcomes for the first question of the survey.

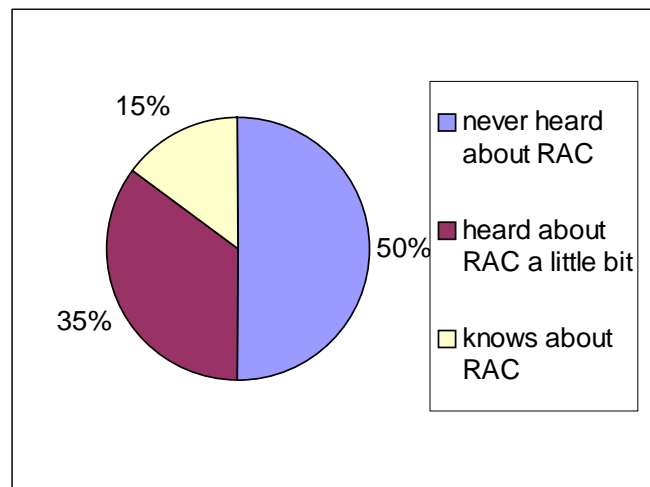


Figure 1* : What have you heard about the activities of Russian American Company?

Not surprisingly, only 2% of all survey participants knew about the location of the former Office of the Russian American Company in Irkutsk.

In addition, respondents were rather poorly informed about the marine expeditions and navigators of that time: 70% of respondents could not answer the question, and those who responded, have mentioned among the marine expeditions to the shores of the North-Western coast of America the expeditions of Rezanov, Bering (15%), Dezhnev, Krasheninnikov, Sedov, Shelikhov, Khabarov, Chirikov, Amerigo Vespucci and Columbus (Figure 2).

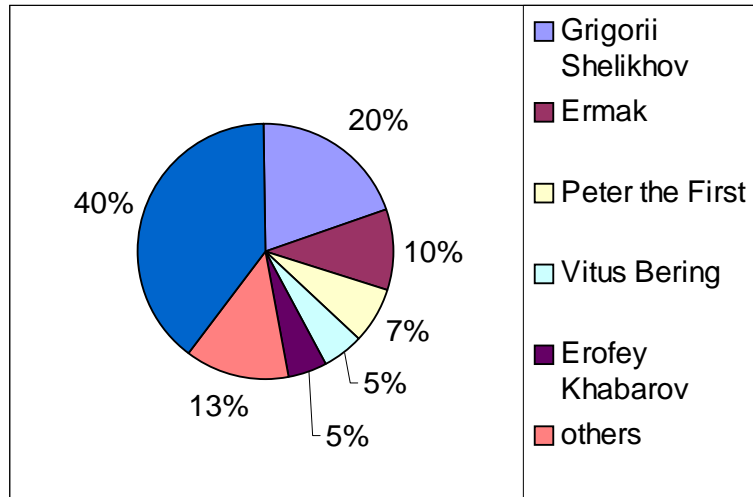


Figure 2: Please give the names of navigators who travelled to the shores of Russian America.

In response to the question "Who is called the Russian Columbus?" 20% of the respondents said it was Grigory Shelikhov, 10% felt that it was Ermak, 7% said it was Peter the Great, 5% said Bering and 5% said Khabarov. Also people mentioned the names of Sannikov, Nikitin, and Rezanov. 40% of tourists were unable to answer the question (Figure 3).

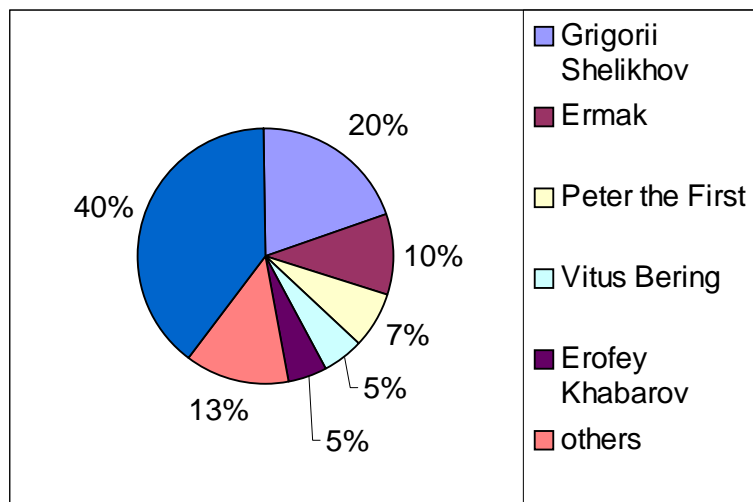


Figure 3: Who is called "the Russian Columbus"?

Several tourists were more informed about the Russian merchants, who organized expeditions to the shores of Russian America. Although, 50% of travelers were not aware of the names, 30% pointed out Shelikhov, 10% pointed out Baranov and 4% pointed out Speransky and Radishchev. Also, respondents mentioned the names of Muraviev-Amursky, Ponomorev and even Ermak.

Since this survey was conducted by the club "Irkutsk - Fort Ross", we certainly were interested in finding out whether the travelers were familiar with the name of Fort Ross. 13% of respondents indicated that they knew or heard about our organization. Only 20% of respondents mentioned that Fort Ross is a fortress, and also they called it a "settlement in Alaska", 6% of respondents mentioned the California coast as a possible location of the Fort, and for 8% of the respondents stated that Fort Ross was a camp on Baikal Lake (Figure 4).

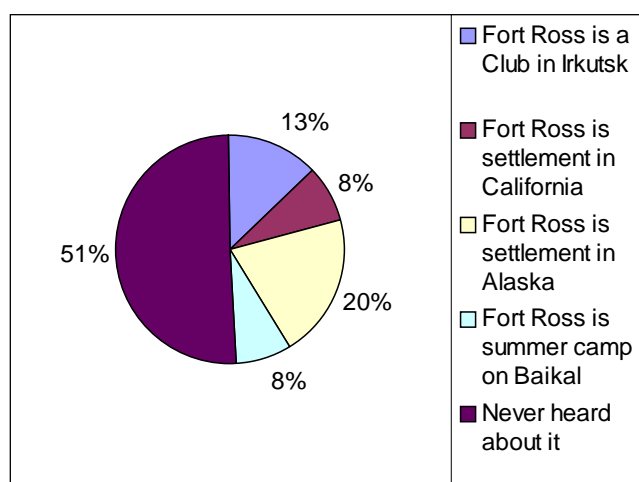


Figure 4: What is Fort Ross?

Regarding the purpose and time of formation of the Fort Ross, the responses were quite scattered. The answers varied from "explorations of Alaska in 16th -17th centuries" to a "travel spot in the 21st century." However, few travelers responded that Fort Ross was established to protect Russian borders and to conduct diplomatic missions, as well as to strengthen Russian-American relations, or with a defensive purpose. Overall, 75% of respondents failed to answer the question (Figure 5).

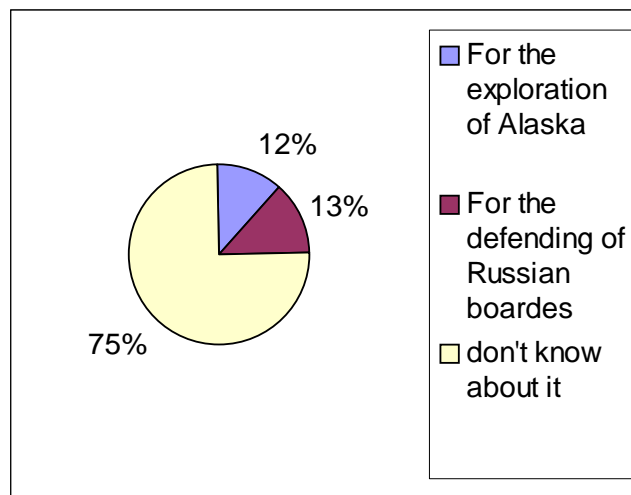


Figure 5: When and for what purpose was Fort Ross built?

It should be noted that 10% of travelers on Baikal Lake are aware of the geographical location of the Marine Church in Irkutsk and correctly indicated its name, however, the knowledge and fragmental information obtained during this pilot study could hardly be called satisfactory. For example, 80% of respondents did not know who was the first bishop of Alaska, 15% of the respondents mentioned Innokenty Veniaminov, and others mentioned bishop Nicolai, and John Paul the Second.

It is important to note that more than 50% of respondents mentioned the name of the rock opera "Juno and Avos" that depicted the activities of Russian American Company. It is an indication that cultural and historical knowledge is often being better perceived through audio-visual media rather than classroom lectures.

Because of that, we think there is a need to create a museum complex, reflecting the activities of Russian American Company in Irkutsk. As a part of our survey we asked about the need to create a museum of Russian America. We received very diverse responses. Generally, most respondents supported the initiative: 50% were in favor of creation of such institution, as well as furthering education of the public by the club, 13% of respondents saw no need to create a museum and 7% were not against this initiative (Figure 6).

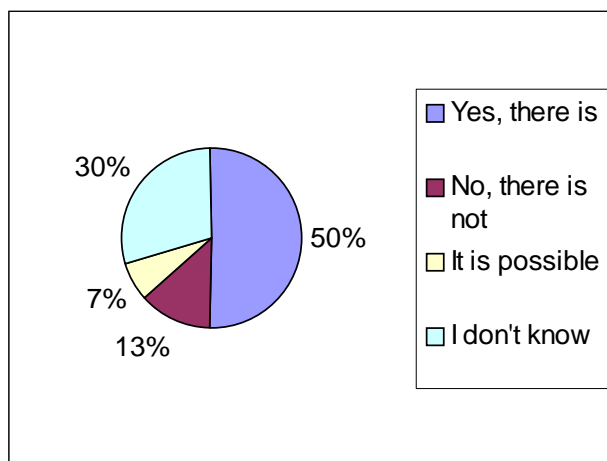


Figure 6: Is there a need to create a museum of Russian America in Irkutsk?

We think there is a real need for such museum, and its activities would be in high demand not only by local residents, but also it could become an attraction for tourists and anyone interested in the history of exploration and development of Russian America.

The analysis showed that the level of awareness of the respondents in general could be much better, although some respondents were quite informed about the history of explorations and settlements of the Russian American territory and of the city of Irkutsk.

Of course, knowledge of historical nuances of the region development is not mandatory for life and survival of today's citizens. However, when we speak about cultural development of the population and further progressive development of the territory we must appeal to the original sources.

Thus, the opinion poll has shown that there is a need to establish a museum of Russian America in the city of Irkutsk. Such museum is really needed because it could become an attractive cultural center for tourists and anyone interested in the history of exploration and development of Russian America.

The Siberian city of Irkutsk marks 350 years in 2011. Unfortunately, many of its residents do not know that one third of the history of the city is closely connected to the activities of Russian American Company (RAC), since its main Office was originally located in Irkutsk. The major shareholders of the Russian American Company were Irkutsk merchants. The names and great deeds of the city fathers for the sake of the Motherland are fading away from the memories of new generations. On the contrary, on the American continent, where the history of a single state sometimes is equal to a short period of history of some Russian city, they treat carefully even small historical facts related to development of certain federal districts. For example, in California and Alaska students must study an entire section devoted to Russian America while studying the history of their state.

Regional historical club "Irkutsk - Fort Ross" is the Irkutsk city public youth organization that was founded in 1997 by the Irkutsk City Historical Museum. This organization was established after Irkutsk school students took part in the international telecommunication project "Global Village: Fort Ross", organized by the volunteers from the Fort Ross Park Museum in California. The main objective of this project consisted in educating school children and youth of both countries about the research and interpretation of the historical facts concerning the period of the activities of Russian American Company.



Figure 7: Members of the Club "Irkutsk-Fort Ross" visiting home of Innokenty Veniaminov in the Village of Anga, Irkutsk Region.

The main focus of the activities of club "Irkutsk - Fort Ross" is promotion of the historical research of Irkutsk and contributions of Irkutsk residents into development of the Northern Coast of America.

Basic club activities include: participation in conferences, trips to places associated with the history of Russian America, work with sources of information that are difficult to access, communication with the descendants of famous figures from the Russian American Company.

Participants of our social organization have been also involved in archaeological excavations in the territory of Russia and the United States, conducting ethnographic research. The outcomes of that work were presented at scientific conferences and have been displayed in museum exhibits.

New opportunities for outreach activities have opened up during the existence of the club. Also a team was formed for participation in intellectual games that already had travelled several times outside of Irkutsk and participated in the Games of the city of Arkhangelsk. As a result of a joint initiative with the Shelikhov City Museum of History a costume game "The Wheel of History" was organized.

One of the completed projects was the annual competition "Live, Baikal!" It coincided with release of the book with the same name, in which the literary and artistic works of young talents were presented. Club members developed a guided tour "Historic sites linked to the activities of Russian American Company", and prepared a photo-exhibition dedicated to the Fort Ross Park-Museum in California, which was displayed during the international conference "Russian America" in August of 2007 in Irkutsk.

Club members organized a local history summer-camp on the Baikal Lake, where students from high schools and colleges are able to learn about the historical facts linked to the history of Russian American Company and receive their civil and patriotic education. Since 2000 the club organized and held 11 sessions in the local history camps for children and youth; more than 500 students were exposed to the theme of "Russian America".



Figure 8: Ecology/history summer-camp "Fort Ross - 2009 "on the Baikal Lake.

One of the important forms of the club's activities is organization of art competitions for children. This way, in preparation for the Irkutsk city anniversary celebration our public organization, regional history club "Irkutsk - Fort Ross", organized and conducted a photo contest for students by the name of "The Wooden Irkutsk" and a painting competition of children's drawings by the name of "Russian America through the eyes of young Irkutsk residents" (<http://ifrc.irk.ru>). The best works from these competitions made to the children's mobile exhibition that travelled between Irkutsk, Fort Ross (California) and Sitka (Alaska). Implementation of such projects, in our opinion, allows better development of individual participants' potential, strengthens their love for their native city, and allows them to be exposed to the history of previous generations, as well as to attract public attention to problems of preservation of historical and cultural heritage.



Figure 9: Organizers of the exhibition of children's drawings of Russian America

In the course of its activities this public organization works very closely with the regional and city administrations, and other social and cultural associations. The club holds events designed to provide recreational activities for youth. The organization has started a new type of activity, a series of local history games with elements of navigation in the city of Irkutsk. An important trend in the local history games is learning about the monuments and historical places associated with the activities of Russian American Company.

We believe that these types of educational activities greatly expand the world perspectives of our members, and also contribute to development of social, cultural and patriotic education, promoting positive life goals, spiritual and moral foundations of the youth, enhancing development of sense of responsibility for preservation and promotion of the statehood.

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* Translators' note: All diagrams were translated by the authors of the article.