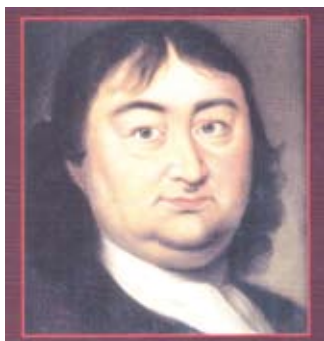


# Vitus Bering and the Rediscovery of America

by Tom Gillesberg

Often it takes a great and ominous crisis for decision-makers to finally change those ingrained axioms that are leading themselves and their nation to doom. Such a moment came for Peter the Great and Russia in the year 1700. Czar Peter I (1682-1725), later known as Peter the Great, had become the sole ruler of a backward and medieval Russia in 1696, when he was only 14 years old. Four years later, Russia, together with Denmark and Poland-Saxony, entered into the Great Nordic War with Sweden.



*Vitus Jonassen Bering (1681-1741) led two expeditions to Russia's northern territories.*

Once Sweden, with the aid of the British-Dutch Navy, got its Army to Zealand, peace was swiftly reached between Sweden and Denmark, and later in that year, at the Battle of Narva, the Russian Army suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of a Swedish Army only one third of its size. At that disastrous moment, Peter the Great decided that he and Russia would abort the tragic course to which their commonly accepted axioms had led them, and change the principles governing the country. The decision was made to transform Russia from a medieval empire into a modern European nation.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the towering intellectual giant of the 17th Century, had long been eyeing Russia. With amazement, Leibniz had studied the reports coming back from expeditions to China and concluded that here was an ancient civilization with signs of that “art of discovery” which Leibniz took to be the most precious talent Europe had. But in order for those two great civilizations to link up with each other, the vast area in between—Russia—had to be developed, although he observed with despair the manners of what he called “the Turks of the North.” With the leadership of Peter the Great, Leibniz saw the opportunity to transform medieval Russia into the great modern land-bridge that could link Europe to China and Asia.

As a young man, Peter the Great himself travelled to Europe incognito, in order to learn everything he could about science and technology, so that he would be able to put them to use at home. The defeat at Narva was the signal to transform all of backward Russia into a modern European nation.

He launched a “head hunt” for capable European hands and minds that could help in the transformation. Among other projects, he sent people out to recruit a Russian navy. In 1703, Peter the Great founded a new city on territory conquered from Sweden, St. Petersburg on the Baltic coast, which was to become Russia’s window to Europe. In 1712, he elevated St. Petersburg to be the new Russian capital, and from that time on, Russia was a European power.

### Leibniz Becomes Peter’s Advisor

In the course of the protracted Great Nordic War, Peter adopted Leibniz as an advisor to help in uplifting Russia through the promotion of scientific and technological progress. Before that point, Leibniz had tried to influence things in Russia through his extensive networks, and at the end of November 1711, he finally managed to have an audience with Peter in Torgau, Saxony. At that meeting, Leibniz gave Peter an *aide-mémoire* that “presented a program consisting of plans for printing, trade and publishing, secondary schools, agriculture, research into the magnetic declinations of Russian soil, research into Slavonic languages, promoting the manufacture industry and, most important of all, founding an academy. Other topics brought up during the audience concerned the mapping of the Siberian landmass and improving sea- and land-routes, Leibniz’s plan for sending an expedition to explore the border between Asia and North America. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

Leibniz later met Peter again and was “offered the opportunity to be the Solon of Russia” when he was appointed a Privy Councillor to Russia in Carlsbad, one year later.<sup>2</sup> From then on, Leibniz corresponded with high officials at the Russian court, even though he never travelled to Russia. In 1716, when Peter visited the French Academy in Paris during a trip to Europe, the Academy brought up Leibniz’s idea of investigating the East, and asked Peter’s permission to explore the border between Asia and North America. At the time, Peter refused, insisting that Russia would do so by itself.

### Bering and the Kamchatka Expedition

Fortunately, the influence of Leibniz’s ideas at the Russian court continued after his death in 1716. In 1724, Peter the Great gave the order to fulfill Leibniz’s dream of establishing a Russian Academy of Sciences, and in early 1725, just five weeks before his own death, Peter signed the instructions to

send an expedition to map out Eastern Siberia and discover the connection between Asia and North America. This expedition was to be led by the Dane Vitus Bering.

At that time, Vitus Jonassen Bering (1681-1741) had been in Russian service for 22 years. He was born in the little Danish city of Horsens, where his father was customs officer and churchwarden. At an early age, he went to sea and travelled to both the Danish East Indian and West Indian colonies, and he learned how to command a ship and draw maps. In 1703, he was in Amsterdam searching for new adventures and responsibilities when he met the Norwegian Cornelius Cruys, a vice admiral in the Russian service, and he became one of the many Danish and Norwegian sailors recruited into the navy that Peter the Great was building at the time. Bering was a participant in the Russian fight against Denmark’s traditional arch-enemy, Sweden, until the Great Nordic War ended with the Swedish-Russian peace in 1721.

In 1725, Bering, who had been seeking for some time the opportunity to take on more leadership, was happy to take charge of the Kamchatka expedition. Peter’s instructions to him from Dec. 23, 1724, ordered him to travel to the east coast of Kamchatka and there to: 1) build one or two ships; 2) go north and find out how the coast ends; 3) go to a European-controlled city, find out to whom it belongs, make a map, and come back home. Since the Russian Academy of Sciences was too young to be involved in this so-called First Kamchatka Expedition, the science of the matter was left to Vitus Bering.

How is it possible that such a top-priority, top-secret sensitive expedition was put under the command of the Dane, Bering? Well, that Dane had served faithfully in the Russian Navy for more than two decades, and Peter likely thought he was the only person capable of carrying out such an “impossible” expedition. Of course, Bering must have excelled in his command duties up to that point and proven himself extremely capable in seafaring and as a map-maker. But this expedition was not just about sailing a ship. It was about leading a grand expedition under the most extreme circumstances, and with very little help from civilization along the way.

Before the “real” expedition could be launched from the eastern shore of Russia, one first had to get there. That meant travelling across one-third of the globe, over the huge, virtually unpopulated Siberian land-mass, with its hostile climate. As one progressed east, the conditions would get worse and worse, and the people at hand to help out would get scarcer and scarcer. One would be a small army on a forced march through Hell, having to solve ever new problems.



Library of Congress  
Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716)  
urged Peter the Great to set up a Russian Academy of Sciences.

1. Markku Roinila, “Leibniz and the Great Mission: Russia” [www.helsinki.fi/~mroinila/russia.htm](http://www.helsinki.fi/~mroinila/russia.htm)

2. Elisabeth Hellenbroich, “G.W. Leibniz and the Ecumenical Alliance of All Eurasia” *Fidelio*, Fall 1996.

Almost all of supplies for shipbuilding (except the wood), had to be carried along, before the ships could be built on the east coast and the final scientific sea voyage could begin. Weapons, anchors, other iron parts, ropes, sails, equipment, and so on—everything had to be carried all the way from Tobolsk, Siberia. Only in very few cities and towns on the way could they get supplies to keep the expedition alive. At Irkutsk, at mid-journey, they would procure the grain to serve as supplies on board, and the pack horses to carry it the long distance from Yakutsk to Okhotsk. Transportation across Siberia had to go along different rivers and, in many cases, by rowing and pulling the barges upstream. In between rivers, they trekked overland with all their supplies. Arriving at the next river, new barges or vessels had to be built. Corrupt local officials and the backward local labor force had to be mobilized (or forced) to help, so that the expedition could stay alive and advance.

As insurmountable as all these practical problems might seem, there was an additional subjective factor. The expedition had to embark on a year-long journey into the great unknown, without even a map or a tried and tested travel route for a major part of the journey. They had to gather the intelligence needed along the way and adapt to circumstances. If they survived all the tribulations of crossing Siberia, they would embark on the great ocean to new unknown dangers and, possibly, a hostile reception by uncivilized tribes or a foreign power. Whether and when they would make it back home was highly uncertain. Only a person with adventure in the blood and an idea of his personal role to play as an historic individual in the service of mankind would leave the safe pleasures of St. Petersburg to lead such an expedition.

For that reason, we Danes are proud that Bering was chosen to lead the mission. Respect for the Danish officers in the Russian Navy at the time must have been considerable, for not only was Vitus Bering chosen to lead this extraordinary expedition, but another Dane, Martin Spangsborg, was installed as his second-in-command. In February 1725, Bering left St. Petersburg, and after travelling through the relatively “civilized and populated” areas of Russia, he arrived in Tobolsk. Here the expedition started out, as soon as Winter loosened its grip, on May 15, 1725.

## Getting to Kamchatka

From Tobolsk, the river-jumping began. First the expedition sailed down the Irtysh, and up the Ob and Ket Rivers. They went overland to Yeniseysk, and from there by boat to the mouth of the Ilim River. Here, they were to spend the Winter in Ilimsk, but Bering sent 39 men under Spangsborg’s command to Ust-Kut, where they would build 15 barges for next year’s travel. During the Winter, Bering visited the nearby trading center, Irkutsk, to organize the supply of grain and horses from the local governor, and to gather information on the further hazardous travel route to Okhotsk. He was sternly warned not to meddle with the tribes too far north, because they had the habit of killing Russian officials.

In the Spring, the expedition united in Ust-Kut and travelled on barges down the Lena River to Yakutsk. Here they split up. Bering travelled on horseback with a few people and the grain supplies to Okhotsk, while Spangsborg transported the heavy equipment down the Lena and then the hard way, up the Aldan and Maja Rivers, to a place called Yudoma Cross. From there, he had to travel a couple of hundred kilometers overland to get to Okhotsk.

After rough times, with many men deserting and most of his horses dying, Bering’s smaller expedition finally made it to Okhotsk. Most of the supplies had to be left under guard along the way. But before resting, Bering’s group had to build houses and storage space; they needed lodgings for themselves and the other men they awaited, in order to make it through the Winter. (Okhotsk consisted of only ten small houses.) Meanwhile, Spangsborg, whose route was much tougher, got caught in the Siberian Winter. Two of his men, half dead, arrived at Okhotsk and reported that Spangsborg’s group was hanging by a thread. Only because they had found the grain and dead horses left by Bering had they so far survived.

Bering put together a rescue team, but its members refused to leave the safety of the camp. Bering, who is often accused of being too soft towards his men, had to be rough. Gallows were erected and the men were warned that they would be immediately hanged, and their families at home punished as well, if they did not carry out their orders and save Spangsborg and his men. This pedagogy worked: The rescue team left, and all the men were saved.

During the Winter, Spangsborg and 90 men went back with dog teams to retrieve the supplies they had had to leave behind. At the same time, the ship *Fortuna* was being built, and by Spring, it was ready to sail supplies across the Okhotsk Sea to the western side of Kamchatka. In late August, the last men and supplies were transported to Kamchatka, where 14 small houses comprised the village called Bolscheretsk. They then used the Fall and Winter to cross over the mountains on the Kamchatka Peninsula to Klyuchevskaya Sopka on the other side. At last, they could begin building the ship for their expedition. Christened *Gabriel*, it was ready to set sail in July 1728.

Looking at a map today, one asks, of course, why the expedition did not just sail south of Kamchatka Peninsula, instead of making the difficult crossing over the mountains on Kamchatka. Had they had a map, they would have. But the area was uncharted, and at the time it was generally believed that the peninsula went much farther south. Thus, Bering went overland.

## The Search for America

On July 13, 1728, three and a half years after Bering left St. Petersburg, and after countless dangers and tribulations, the expedition set sail and travelled up the Siberian coast. They mapped the coastline and met local tribes in small boats. On Aug. 13, they could see the coastline turning to the west (fitting the description they had from the locals) and they were certain that Russia’s coast continued west and could not be connected



*The map shows the first and second expeditions of Vitus Bering, across northern Russia to Okhotsk, and from there across the Kamchatka Peninsula. The second expedition landed in America and determined that Eurasia and America were not connected by land.*

with America. They had just gone through the passage we today know as the Bering Strait, and would have seen the American coast, but for foggy weather. Bering then had to decide whether to follow the coastline westward, and try to make it to the Russian outpost of Nizhne-Kolymsk at the mouth of the Kolyma River. That involved the danger of being caught in the icy waters during the Siberian Winter. They decided not to take the risk, and instead turned around and returned safely to Klyuchevskaya Sopka, where they spent the Winter.

Bering, of course, was not satisfied. They had not found America. Local reports convinced him that there was land not far away to the east, because exotic foreigners had been encountered from time to time. Unfortunately, he was also under the influence of the official maps then in circulation in Europe, on which something called “Juan da Gama Land” (which Juan Vasco da Gama thought he had seen on a journey), was placed to the east of Kamchatka. In June 1729, therefore, Bering sailed southeast on the *Gabriel* to seek Juan da Gama Land and America.

But Bering’s expedition discovered no land, and after searching for the American coast for ten days, they returned to the Kamchatka coast, mapped it, and found a perfect place for a future harbor, Avacha Bay. Then they mapped the coast all the way back to Bolscheretsk, where they arrived on July 2, 1730. Leaving the extra supplies, Bering returned to Okhotsk and began the long trip back to St. Petersburg. Without the burden of supplies, it was much easier, and on March 1, 1730, a little more than five years after embarking on his journey, Bering was back.

Bering could be quite proud. Not only did he and most of his crew survive this incredible journey, but he could report that Asia was not connected by land with America. He also returned with extraordinarily precise maps of previously un-

known areas. The precision of Bering’s maps would impress subsequent travellers, because even the longitude of the positions was correct, which was extremely difficult to get right. Bering, like all capable sailors at the time, was well acquainted with astronomy, as much of the travel was “astrogation”—navigation by use of the stars. But the extraordinary scientific precision of Bering’s work was the result of using two lunar eclipses in 1728 and 1729 to pinpoint the longitude.

### The Russian Academy of Sciences

Bering was returning to a German-cultured St. Petersburg, where the Academy of Sciences was now up and running. The Academy was composed, among others, of scientists who came from Halle, Germany, where there was a strong Leibnizian tradition; these Halle scientists helped to build a Russian scientific cadre. In Halle, these networks were centered on August Hermann Francke, who ran orphanages called the Franckeschen Stiftungen, and who collaborated with Cotton Mather in Massachusetts. From these circles came Daniel Gottlieb Messerschmidt, who later made important discoveries in Siberia, and Georg Wilhelm Steller, who were to join Bering on his second Kamchatka expedition. While the Francke networks were sending scientists to help transform Russia, they were also recruiting people to go to the American colonies and help lay the foundations for what later became the United States of America—a nation founded on the Leibnizian notion that all men have certain inalienable rights, among those, life, liberty, and “the pursuit of happiness,” Leibniz’s term for making scientific and technological progress on behalf of mankind.<sup>3</sup>

3. Edward Spannaus, “Leibniz, Halle, and the American Revolution,” *Fidelio*, Spring 2003.

As Leibniz wrote to Russian Chancellor Golovkin on Jan. 16, 1712: "Since my youth, it has been my goal, to work for the glory of God for the growth of the sciences . . . in which I have in part succeeded through Godly grace, in that I made new discoveries in the Republic of Sciences . . . , I am constantly ready, to direct my thoughts to the great goal. And I have only sought a prince who has the same goal. And therein I make no differentiation, neither in regard to the nation nor the party. . . . I would rather see these sciences bloom strongly with Russians, than work only in a mediocre fashion in Germany."<sup>4</sup>

The Academy of Sciences was not satisfied with the results of Bering's expedition. After all, he did not find America, and there was no absolute proof of the fact that there was no connection between Asia and America, because he had not gone all the way to the mouth of the Kolyma River. Furthermore, the Academy did not believe Bering's report on the nonexistence of Juan da Gama Island, and could not, of course, appreciate the precision of his maps. Many other questions remained open on the state of affairs in the eastern part of Russia and in America.

Although he was not properly rewarded for accomplishing a successful expedition, Bering agreed that many important questions still needed to be answered. And he knew that although he was five years older and somewhat worn down by the hardships of the first expedition, the mission could not be accomplished unless he took responsibility for it. Therefore, Bering suggested a new expedition under his leadership that would answer all the outstanding questions and map out the unknown rivers of Russia. He proposed that the expedition travel to Kamchatka, where they would build a ship and 1) sail along the west coast of America, 2) find the sea route from Kamchatka to the Amur River, and 3) map the coastline from the Ob to the Yenisei River, and from there to the Lena.

### The Second Bering Expedition

In December 1732, Czarina Anna signed the order for the new expedition and ordered the commander in Okhotsk to begin gathering supplies and to build five or six ships. At Bering's suggestion, this new expedition was greatly expanded, and it included members of the Academy of Sciences to help investigate multiple aspects of the new territory. The Great Northern Expedition, as the new expedition was named, was to last from 1733 to 1743. Its mission was to: 1) map the entire Northern Asian coastline, 2) map the route to Japan, and 3) explore the Pacific Ocean to the east of Kamchatka, and find Juan da Gama Land and America. Bering was also instructed to organize the local production of ropes and other supplies in faraway places to be used for shipbuilding. The expedition was also ordered to try and convince those foreigners they would meet in the new territories to come under the protection of Russia. Further, the scientists were to investigate minerals, ores, and so on, in the new territories and consider if they

might be of economic importance.

Bering's second-in-command from the first expedition, Martin Spangenberg, was to lead the part of the expedition that went to Japan; and a third Dane, Peter Lassenius, was put in charge of the expedition that started at the mouth of the Lena River. Bering was the overall leader, and he and officer Aleksei Chirikov were each to lead a ship on the expedition to America. But before that point, it would take the next eight years to start the mapping and construction projects and move the expedition, with all its men and equipment, over the 7,000 km to Avacha Bay on the Kamchatka Peninsula.

The involvement of the Academy of Sciences made this expedition much larger than the first one. The core consisted of 500 persons with families and 500 soldiers. Local assistance of up to 2,000 persons at a time was called upon. Because the expedition included prominent scientists and their families, there was much more personal baggage and supplies to carry along, and the quality of lodging and other accommodations had to be higher. For the same reason, many more ships were needed, requiring larger amounts of materials and supplies. At least 28 cannons, among other things, were brought along.

### The Great Northern Expedition

The large caravan left St. Petersburg in February 1733. Bering sent Spangenberg ahead to Okhotsk, where he arrived in the Spring of 1735. Despite the orders from Czarina Anna to build five or six ships, nothing had been done. Meanwhile, Bering oversaw the building of two ships in Tobolsk, that then departed under the command of Lassenius for the Arctic Sea (they never completed their mission).

By 1737, Bering reached Okhotsk, where only two ships were ready to sail. Under heavy pressure from St. Petersburg to show results, Bering sent the two finished ships and his old vessel *Gabriel* to Japan under the command of Spangenberg. Even the labor that was meant to build his new ships had to be diverted to help ready the supplies for this trip to Japan. Then, from 1738 to 1740, two new ships, *St. Peter* and *St. Paul*, were built, and supplies made ready. Each ship had 14 cannons and carried 76 men. In 1739, Ivan Yelagin was sent by Bering to the east coast of Kamchatka to build a base with houses and supply depots at Avacha Bay, at a place later named Petropavlovsk, in honor of the two ships.

On May 30, 1741, *St. Peter* and *St. Paul*, under the commands of Bering and Chirikov, finally left Petropavlovsk, each with five months' supplies. They had expected to double the total supplies so that they could spend the Winter in America, but could not do so because a supply ship sank with half of their supplies. In accordance with their instructions for the expedition, Bering and Chirikov then sailed southeast to find Juan da Gama Land. Had they sailed due east, they would have reached what were later called the Aleutian Islands, which they could have followed all the way to America. Had they sailed north-northeast, they would have had a much shorter journey.

4. See note 2.

But because their instructions were to find Juan da Gama Land, they took a long trip without sighting land.

Later a storm separated the two ships, and they were on their own. On July 17, Bering's crew sighted a mountain, later called Mount St. Elias, on the American coast. Four days later, they went ashore on Kayak Island to get freshwater. Here the scientist Steller, after heavy pleading, was allowed to go on land to study the new continent for a grand total of ten hours. As he later bitterly complained, it took ten years of travel for the expedition to get to this new continent, and science was only given ten hours to study it. Bering then sailed north while mapping the coastline. With supplies running low, he decided on Aug. 10 not to spend the Winter in America, but to head back west. By then, they already had problems on board with scurvy.

### **The End of Bering's Journey**

In hindsight, it seems a shame that Bering did not simply set up a camp and winter over in America while investigating the area. But their supplies were low, and Bering and his crew they had no idea of what the Winter would be like, or if hostile local tribes or powers would turn up and finish off the expedition. Also, a sailing vessel depends on the winds. Had they hesitated too long before turning back, they might not make it before the Winter. It does not help humanity that you have travelled to the ends of the world, if you do not make it back to tell about it.

Bering decided to head west, while continuing to map the coastline and islands along the way. But, as they continued west, encountering various adventures, Bering and most of the crew fell ill with scurvy. On Nov. 10, too late in the year to still be out on the ocean, they finally saw the island that was later named after him—Bering Island. They could hardly sail the ship, since scurvy had so taken its toll, that only ten men were still capable of standing up.

They were hoping to land on Kamchatka. But 12 men had already died and 49 were sick. They settled on the uninhabited island, and most of the men recovered. Bering was among those who died. Despite the hardships, and although a storm later smashed their ship, the rest of the expedition survived the Winter. Under the command of a Swede named Sven Waxell, they built a smaller ship that allowed 46 of the original 76 onboard to arrive at Avacha Bay on Aug. 27, 1742. They spent the Winter in Petropavlovsk, and arrived in Okhotsk the next year, much to the surprise of the local residents, who had given up hope of seeing the expedition again, and had sold off the personal belongings of expedition members.

While Bering found his final resting place on the island that came to bear his name, most of his crew made it back to Russia. Over the coming years, all the maps and scientific records slowly made their way back to St. Petersburg, and with much delay, to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the scientific impulse had been weakened in Russia during the decade of the expedition, and it would take time before the sacrifices its members made were truly appreciated. One of the immedi-

ate effects, however, after the crew members came back with many rare furs and skins from their stay on the Bering Island, was that commercial expeditions were sent to Eastern Siberia, North America, and the islands in between, in a "gold rush" to hunt for more such furs. That secured those new territories for Russia, and Alaska came under Russian rule until 1867, when it was sold to Russia's good friend and ally, the United States, for \$7.2 million.

### **'Manifest Destiny'**

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz saw in Peter the Great the chance to transform Russia from a brutish and backward country into a modern European nation that could be a bridge between Europe and China, and that Chinese culture Leibniz respected so much. Key to the manifest destiny Leibniz envisioned for Russia was the establishment of a Russian Academy of Sciences, and the sending of expeditions to discover and conquer the wild and unknown eastern part of Russia. As history had it, it was a Dane, Vitus Bering, who, nine years after Leibniz's death, took on the mission of leading the two expeditions through the vast Siberia. He also visited and mapped part of America and cleared the way for incorporating the Eastern Frontier and parts of North America into the nation of Russia.

Today, another project that carries Bering's name, the Bering Strait Tunnel Project, is the key to fulfilling Russia's manifest destiny of conquering Siberia and putting its vast raw material resources to use for mankind, while connecting the world's two transcontinental powers in a strategic partnership that also fulfills the manifest destiny of the United States. The United States was not only created to secure the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for its own population, but as a power that could finally defeat imperialism, like that of the British Empire, and fulfill the hopes and aspirations in the rest of the world, throwing off the shackles of the European oligarchy to have free and sovereign nations prospering through scientific and technological progress. The time has come for the United States to heed the advice of its Leibniz, Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., and join Russia, India, and China in building a New Bretton Woods financial system with the Eurasian Land-Bridge and the Bering Strait Continental Bridge as its backbone.

In a decade or two, a Danish maglev net, now being discussed under the inspiration of the Schiller Institute, will be connected to maglev lines extending over the vast areas of Russia, linking up with North America through the Bering Strait tunnel. As for the Eurasian land mass that took Bering years to traverse, we will pass over it comfortably in less than a day's time. From Alaska, the line will continue through Canada to a revitalized United States that once again has become the beacon of hope and temple of liberty for all mankind. And it will take place in a world where the promises of the American Dream for the first time can be available to all men.

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