
Book Review

Girding the Globe with A Tramway of Iron

by William Jones

The Bering Strait Crossing

by James A. Oliver
Information Architects, U.K.,
2006, 2007
256 pages, softcover, \$14.00

Former Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin took a lot of flak for her ill-chosen comments regarding her foreign policy experience in that she could “see Russia from Alaska.” But the media frenzy over the her remarks pretty much ignored the real significance of the fact that, seen from western Alaska, Russia is our closest neighbor, separated by a mere 55-mile-wide body of water. Looking at the globe from the North Pole, you can also observe that the Bering Strait appears almost as a hinge that awaits to connect those two massive continental bodies of America and Eurasia.

The recent agreements between Russia and China, vectored towards infrastructural transportation projects in the Russian Far East, have opened up a new era of global development, and a way out of the collapse of the present London-centered international monetary system. We are now entering a new economic universe oriented around the Pacific Rim countries. In that context, the 55-mile span over the Bering Strait becomes a matter of strategic importance. The significance of Oliver’s book is that it provides the history of the centuries-long attempt to create that “continental hinge” in the northern climes, with which nature has so generously provided us the means. The British writer Oliver has been involved as an activist on the Bering Strait crossing issue since 1992, when he attended the Global

Super Projects Conference in Honolulu that year, where a proposal for a tunnel under the Bering Strait was put forward by George Koumal, the American president of the Interhemispheric Bering Strait Tunnel and Railroad Group. While the idea of a Bering Strait tunnel has gained a new lease on life recently, its long history is usefully recounted in the present volume.

Bering’s Quest

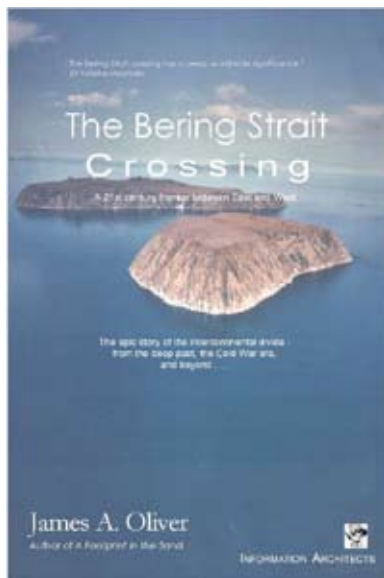
The Russian interest in the area predates any American travelers to the region. Already, in his 1716 memorandum to Peter the Great, the great German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz noted the need for Russia to explore that far-off region of Siberia to determine if it were, in fact, connected to the American continent. Then, in 1725, that same Czar Peter assigned Vitus Bering, a Danish officer in the Russian service, to the task, fitting out an expedition to Kamchatka.

Bering would conduct two very difficult missions to the region, in 1728, and then again, in 1733, on the second of which, Bering perished. He would discover that there is no landmass connecting the two continents, but, arriving when the area was covered by a dense fog, he decided not to venture the

short distance to the other side (an oversight for which he was greatly criticized); on his second voyage, he caught sight of Mount Elias in the distance, on the American shore. The first white man to touch the shores on the American side of the strait was Capt. James Cook, who generously named the body of water separating the two continents after his predecessor.

The location of the strait was important for two reasons. The Russians were interested in finding a north-east passage from the Atlantic across the Russian part of Eurasia, which would make for a shorter route to the East. Since the discovery of America, the Europeans were eager to discover a northwest passage to the Pacific for similar reasons. The end point of both routes would turn out to be the Bering Strait. The Norwegian explorer Capt. Roald Amundsen was the first to navigate a northwest passage in 1903; while Russia’s north-east passage was navigated in its entirety with the help of two ice-breakers in 1914-15.

While the two passages retain a somewhat fragile



existence, being navigable only part of the year, the Strait crossing has a significance that goes far beyond these two thoroughfares. If a railroad link could be forged over that short distance, the entire rail network of the two continents might be linked up permanently, assuring an uninterrupted flow of goods and people between the continents (Figure 1).

A Russian-American Alliance

The strategic value of the Strait was recognized long before the technology existed to tunnel the required distance. The alliance between the U.S. and Russia during the Civil War, when Czar Alexander II sent two Russian fleets to the United States—one to the Atlantic, and one to the Pacific—to prevent British intervention on behalf of the Confederacy, continued after the war.

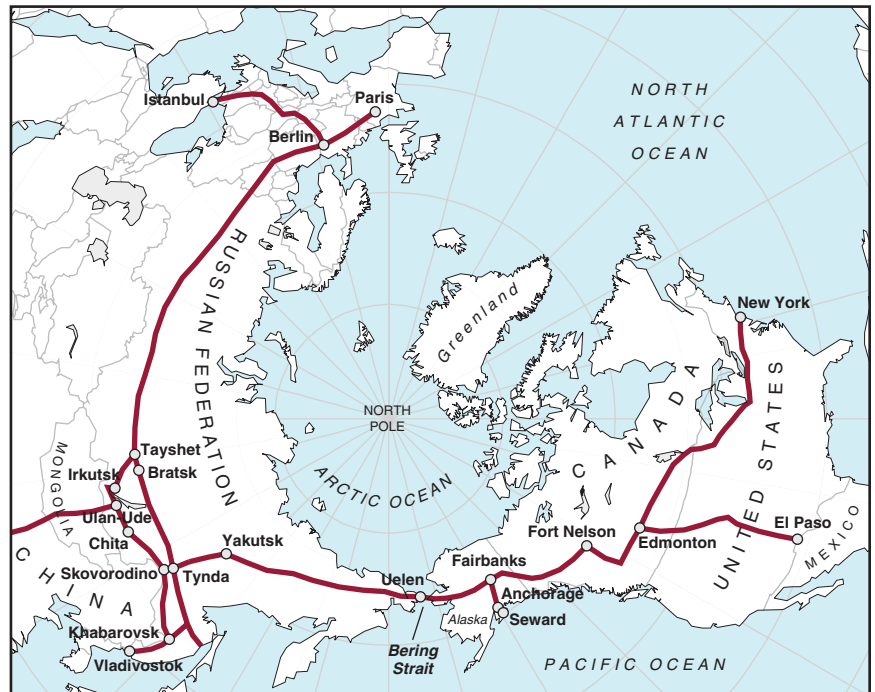
An American patriot, Perry McDonough Collins, from Hyde Park, N.Y., had traversed the steppes of Russia, and was engaged in a railroad-building project there. He was also instrumental in attempting to build a telegraph line through Russia and, via the Strait, to the United States.

Abraham Lincoln himself noted the importance of such a development for the post-Civil War United States in his last message to Congress in December 1864: “The proposed overland telegraph between America and Europe, by the way of Behring’s Straits [sic] and Asiatic Russia, which was sanctioned by Congress at the last session, has been undertaken, under very favorable circumstance,” Lincoln wrote, “by an association of America citizens, with the cordial good-will and support as well of this government as those of Great Britain and Russia. Assurances have been received from most of the South American States of their high appreciation of the enterprise, and their readiness to cooperate in constructing lines tributary to that world-encircling communication.” As Great Britain with her Navy largely controlled the Atlantic trade, the United States was looking toward the Pacific for its future well-being.

And yet, unfortunately, as Oliver indicates, the trans-Pacific telegraph line was largely abandoned,

FIGURE 1

Future Global Rail Connections, as Seen From North Pole



Once the Bering Strait bridge/tunnel project is realized, it will become possible to board a train in Paris or Istanbul, and travel on to Russia (or Asia), across the Strait, and all the way to New York, or, ultimately, Cape Horn, at the southern tip of South America.

when Cyrus Field succeeded in laying, with generous British support, an underwater cable to England instead, thus putting effective control of international communications into British hands. While Oliver seems somewhat unaware of this fact, this, in itself, made the strategic link to Russia and to Asia all the more important, if the United States were not to become entangled in a British-controlled trading network.

In 1867, Secretary of State William Seward, who had served in the Lincoln cabinet, purchased the territory of Alaska from Russia, which had been the first to settle the area, for the sum of \$7.2 million. Oliver notes the discomfiture of the British, who were desperately attempting to secure a toehold in western Canada, by incorporating, in 1866, the western region as the province of British Columbia. Word from London, Oliver reports, was that Seward’s purchase would make of British Columbia “a piece of meat between two slices of bread.”

The surge of railroad building that followed the Civil War spilled over into the Alaska project, with nu-

merous proposals for extending the Transcontinental Railroad northward to the Bering Strait. Also envisioned, was a hemispheric rail network stretching south from the Bering Strait all the way to Cape Hope at the end of Patagonia, Chile.

Initially, the concept was to build a railroad from the U.S. side to the Bering Strait, and to link it up with rail connections on the Russian side, with a ferry across the Strait. As early as 1840, Oliver points out, William Gilpin, the first governor of the Colorado Territory (1861-62), was talking about a Eurasian Railway. In 1890, Gilpin wrote a book expounding on his ideas, entitled "The Cosmopolitan Railway," in which the Bering Strait ferry is envisioned as bringing the two continental rail lines together. In 1896, Joseph Strauss, a student at the University of Cincinnati, wrote a thesis discussing the possibility of building a bridge across the Strait. While the bridge concept has been widely ridiculed because of the severe climate, (even Oliver feels it is simply a red herring, used to discredit the notion of any type of crossing), Strauss went on to design the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge (completed 1937).

But, by the turn of the century, with the development of new tunneling technologies in Switzerland and elsewhere, it was now feasible to build a railroad tunnel under the Strait. Russia was making great progress in extending the Trans-Siberian Railroad toward the Pacific, helping to breathe new life into the idea of an inter-continental rail system. The U.S. Transcontinental Railroad had by that time been doing yeoman's service for nearly three decades, fostering the move westward by pioneer settlers; and, in 1896, surveys were being made for building a railroad to Alaska, where gold had recently been discovered.

The first to publicly broach the idea of a tunnel was a lesser known French entrepreneur, Baron Loicq de Lobel, to whom Oliver attributes the first idea of a tunnel to cross the Strait. By 1898 de Lobel was lobbying for such a project in both St. Petersburg and Washington. In 1902, de Lobel established the Trans-Alaska Railroad & Navigation Company with a capital of \$50 million. As Oliver, with some dismay, points out: "This is the only corporation, to this day, to have mounted a challenge—beyond mere survey work—on the route to the Bering Strait."

The British Deploy Their Japanese Minions

While Oliver correctly points to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 as a turning point in the tunnel project,

he ignores, or is unaware of, the broader political implications of that particular conflict. The British, already feeling themselves as the "meat between the two slices of bread," as the U.S. and Russia began to string together the two landmasses, were busy at work undermining that land-based commercial corridor, which they understood would totally undermine the empire's maritime control of world trade.

Having carefully cultivated Japan as a junior partner in Asia, the British turned them loose, first against China in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1894 (a conflict that would not cease until the Japanese defeat in 1945), and then, against Russia in Manchuria, where Russian Finance Minister Sergei Witte was extending the Trans-Siberian railway, to bring China and the rest of Asia into the orbit of this intercontinental development project.

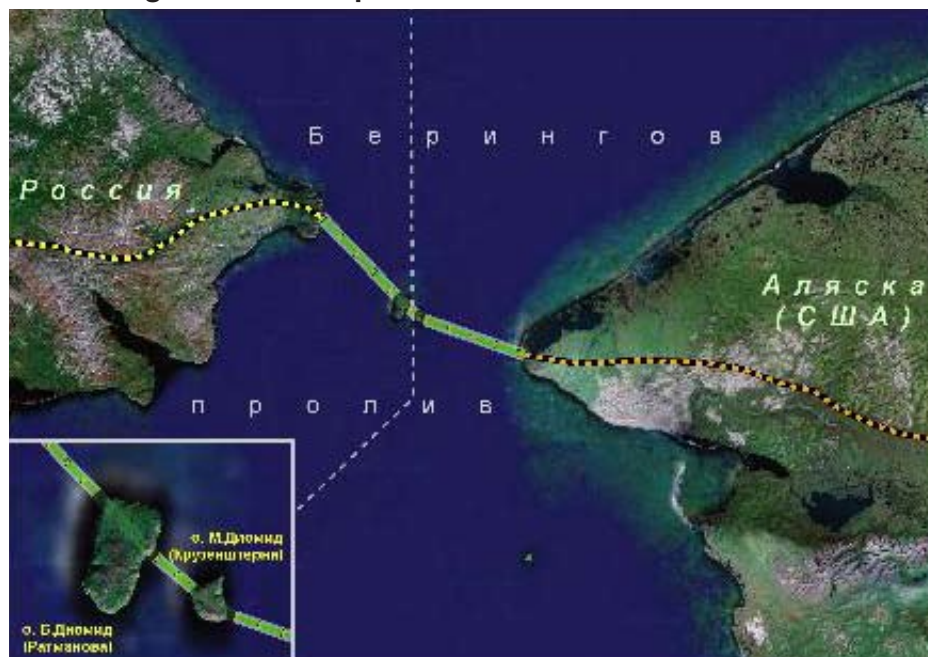
The Russo-Japanese War led to the virtual destruction of the Russian Navy, and to serious unrest in the Russian Empire, that would lead to its downfall in 1917. Ironically, Japan's successes in Manchuria, led the young, and otherwise rather foolish Russian Czar, Nicholas II, to attempt to cement the traditional friendly relations with the United States, established by his grandfather, the Czar-Liberator, Alexander II. Nicholas, therefore, endorsed the Bering Strait tunnel project. As the *New York Times* proclaimed, in March 23, 1906 headline, "FOR BERING STRAIT TUNNEL: Czar Approves Recommendation for All-Rail Route to America."

The *Times* article appeared one month after the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth between Russia and Japan. The treaty negotiations had been mediated by the Anglophile U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had been contacted by Japan in 1905, to intervene with Russia to request negotiations. Although Japan had been largely successful in its military endeavors in Manchuria, Russia had the ability to quickly deploy its armed forces to the field of battle by means of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, while Japan had suffered major losses, and was unable to replace them.

Roosevelt, who was fully in tune with the British efforts to make Japan a junior marcher-lord in the Pacific, was glad to oblige. While he hoped to gain significant rewards for Japan, including a large indemnity by which the Japanese could pay off their war debt to the New York banks that had largely funded the effort, the Russian delegation was led by Sergei Witte, who, aware of Roosevelt's pro-British orientation, was not going to fall for any of his tricks. When the negotiations were concluded, Russia paid no indemnity whatsoever, and

FIGURE 2

The Bering Strait From Space



This Russian image of the proposed Bering Strait tunnel route is projected onto a satellite photo, in which Russia is to the west, and Alaska (U.S.A.) to the east. Straddling the International Dateline (inset), are Russia's Big Diomed Island, and, on the American side, Little Diomed Island.

came off relatively unscathed by terms of the treaty.

The dubious role played by Roosevelt in his role of “mediator” indicated to the Russian leaders, however, that the traditional U.S. policy had now taken a decisively pro-British turn, and they grew wary. With the assumption of the Teddy Roosevelt Presidency, the U.S.-Russian relationship turned suddenly sour. If the Bering Strait tunnel were to be built, the Czar insisted, the U.S. must ensure that it would be neutralized in time of war. Roosevelt never responded to the Czar’s request—putting the project, literally, on ice.

The World War II Alliance

During World War II, when the alliance with Russia again became of paramount importance, the Bering Strait continental hinge was put back on the agenda. Plans to build that much-discussed Alaskan Railroad were revived, but were downgraded to a highway, instead. Russia was included in the wartime Lend-Lease agreements, and equipment was shipped to Alaska for further shipment to the front at Stalingrad and elsewhere. Russian pilots were stationed in Alaska during the war in order to fly the equipment to Russia.

In 1944, Franklin Roosevelt’s Vice President Henry Wallace flew from Washington, across the North Pacific to Irkutsk. Wallace suggested building a highway, following the route traversed by the air corridor, which would encourage business relations between the two continents. *National Geographic* ran a cover story, entitled “New Road to Asia,” in December of that year, outlining Wallace’s idea. By 1947, with the onset of the Churchill-Truman Cold War, this idea also was put on ice.

Oliver summarizes the recent years’ attempts to revive the Bering Strait project, propelled by the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Ministry of Railways in the “World Link” project. Implementation of the project would require expanded agreements among the regional

powers, Russia, Canada, and the United States.

The new geometry created by the October 2009 agreements between Russia and China for the building of a new rail corridor in the Russian Far East, supported by the plans of the Russian Railways to proceed with the extension of the railway to Uelen on the edge of the Bering Strait, has caused a phase-shift in world history, in which the center of gravity has shifted to the Pacific Ocean. An agreement among Russia, China, India, and the U.S.—Lyndon LaRouche’s proposed Four-Power alliance—around a fixed-exchange-rate alternative to the now bankrupt London-centered financial system, could initiate a new era in human history, pivoted around a worldwide rail system that would bring humanity together in a global project of world development. The present plans to construct a tunnel between Spain and Morocco, would also extend that system to the much exploited continent of Africa. In that context, the Bering Strait tunnel is really an old idea whose time has finally come.

Oliver envisions the present volume as the first part of a trilogy, “Where Continents Meet.” Hopefully, the more that is written about this fascinating project, the sooner will it come to realization.