

TRANSLATION

The letter that precipitated this explanatory note by Ivan Kuskov was written by Leontii Hagemeister, dated January 28, 1818, as communication No. 24, translated into English by Richard Pierce (Pierce 1884:11). Hagemeister's missive covered many topics and was the first sent to Kuskov after Hagemeister assumed the position of Chief Administrator of the RAC colonial enterprise on January 11th of that year. One of the instructions that Hagemeister issued was the following:

“Please send here, under close guard, the fur hunter Iakov Babin, whose actions on Il'mena Island may have been known to you. At the same time, furnish an explanation as to whether the events on Il'mena Island were known, and if so, why he was not sent here before, and also why (if you knew!) you did not tell me when I was there as an auditor.”⁵

Hagemeister, a Captain-Lieutenant of the Russian Navy, visited Fort Ross in 1817 while traveling onboard the ship, *Kutuzov*. He had been ordered by the RAC Main Office to observe operations at Fort Ross and to assess the effectiveness of RAC Chief Administrator Alexander Baranov in Sitka, and to take the place of Baranov as head of the enterprise if he felt it was warranted (Tikhmenev 1978:139).

Document

Explanatory note of I. A. Kuskov to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Colonies in America

L. A. Hagemeister concerning the investigation of fur trader I. Babin.⁶

Ross, July 15, 1818.

Copy

Your High Nobleness

Dear Sir Leontii Andreevich

Per your instruction No. 24 dated January 28, 1818 from Sitka, as is my duty to explain the incident concerning the fur trader Iakov Babin, which took place on San Nicolas Island. Upon his arrival in 1814 with the ship *Il'mena* from Sitka, fur trader Babin was to stay with the Tarakanov

hunting party. However, Tarakanov had ordered him to stay behind on San Nicolas Island with some canoes, while the rest of the Tarakanov party went on to stay on San Clemente Island.

In August of 1814 an American ship *Pedler* landed at San Clemente Island from Sitka under the command of Mr. Hunt. The ship carried goods that were in the custody of the company associate Mr. Nepogod'ev. The cargo comprised provisions for the colony and Fort Ross, as well as goods to be sold to Commissioner Elliot, his assistant, and the Tarakanov hunting party. As per the arrangements previously made with Mr. Hunt in Sitka, the entire cargo was to remain in Bodega Bay and *Pedler* was to pick up another cargo in Bodega Bay for delivery to Sitka. If, however, the ship *Il'mena* was absent, Mr. Hunt was to go on to California, seek out the *Il'mena*, and deliver the cargo to the ship. From there, the *Pedler* was not to stop at Bodega Bay but, as agreed, sail on to Sitka. There, Mr. Hunt was supposed to receive some sea otters. In April of 1814, I received some letters from Mr. Elliot, which were delivered to me from the port of San Francisco. From the information contained in these letters, I was expecting the return of the *Il'mena* to Bodega Bay as early as June, but no later than July. As such, I began to have concerns about the safety of the ship. I also began to suspect that something had delayed the ship's arrival at Bodega Bay. If the ship was delayed, Mr. Hunt's ship would not meet the *Il'mena* and its hunting party, which would then force him to return the cargo to Sitka. This would cause all kinds of disturbances in business operations. With this in mind, I decided to request the following from Mr. Hunt: if he does not find the *Il'mena* at the coast of California, he should try and locate the ship, take the *Il'mena* people and the Tarakanov hunting party as well. Then, deliver them along with the goods to Bodega Bay.

I also requested the following of Mr. Hunt: if the *Il'mena* has come to Bodega Bay, Mr. Hunt is to leave the goods designated for Tarakanov's party only, and receive for them one thousand small sea otters. As it happened, the *Pedler* left the aforementioned Bodega Bay and located the *Il'mena* at San Clemente Island. He learned that the *Il'mena* had gone from California to Bodega Bay. That according to the orders I gave Hunt, the entire cargo that was on the *Pedler* was supposed to be immediately deposited at Bodega Bay for the commercial production and the hunting party. Tarakanov took the whole ship cargo, for which he had no authority, and thereby caused a considerable amount of disturbance.

Tarakanov also gave the company associate Nepogod'ev a number of sea otters which his party had procured.

From there, the *Pedler* went on to San Nicolas Island where Babin and the rest of the hunting party were staying. But Babin was not on the island. As it happened, he took a few men in some canoes and went to Santa Catalina Island. Nepogod'ev picked up the take which was left under the supervision of the locals and left them a receipt. Near the mission of San Luis Obispo, the *Pedler* was seized by Spaniards and taken to Santa Barbara. The local government freed the ship, giving it leave. Nepogod'ev also found out from the remaining Kad'iaks that the locals of San Nicolas Island killed one of Babin's otter hunters. In retaliation, Babin was insolent and acted inhumanely towards the islanders. I learned about this from Nepogod'ev, although briefly, and even though I learned little, I did not remain silent about Babin's actions and described them in the report of 22nd October 1814, which was delivered by the *Pedler*. In my report, I cited Nepogod'ev's account. Nepogod'ev independently reported these occurrences to the former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Colonies in America, Collegiate Counselor and Cavalier Mr. Baranov. But it is unclear if he reported the facts of the incident or just what he surmised. Mr. Baranov mentioned in his instructions dated May 1815, delivered via the ship *Chirikov*, the following: "...in regards to Tarakanov and Babin, remind them about their bad behavior and tell them that this comes from me, that Tarakanov [is] to stay within the limits of his service, and reprimand Babin for his act of madness, as Tarakanov was ordered to remove the islanders without causing them any harm."

After the American ship *Pedler* left for Sitka, the *Il'mena* was sent to the coast of California for business trade and delivery of the hunting party to other places. When the ship came back from the coast of California to Bodega Bay in the last days of April 1815, Babin was demoted to a sailor and later Tarakanov dismissed him due to the complaints of the party. He was replaced by another member of the company by the name of Tarasov. Tarasov was sent with a hunting party to San Nicolas Island on the foreign ship *Forester*. As per Mr. Baranov's orders, Babin was severely reprimanded. In self-defense, he blamed everything on his people, who, he said, had committed these atrocities to avenge the killing of one

of their party. Babin said that he was unable to control their anger. Babin was ordered to stay on the *Il'mena* as a sailor, and was supposed to be going to Sitka. But he was not liked by the ship captain Mr. Wadsworth. To satisfy the captain's request, he was replaced by Pashennyi. I have reported all of this on the *Il'mena* to the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Colonies in America, Collegiate Counselor and Cavalier Mr. Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov. I have also reported to Your High Nobleness the details of our trade. The report was sent via the *Kutuzov* in 1817 when I last had the honor to request Your High Nobleness to review many matters on which there was information. I had not previously mentioned Babin's situation because I assumed that it was already known in Sitka, as it was reported by Nepogod'ev. Upon arrival of Your High Nobleness to Bodega Bay and per Your Excellency's order, Iakov Babin was sent away from Colony Ross.

With honor and devotion

Your High Nobleness

Dear Sir

Your humble servant

Colony and Fort Ross

July 15, 1818