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American Anthropologists on the Neva: 1930-1940

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CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION.

American Anthropologists on the Neva: 1930-1940.

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In the 1930s many American anthropologists came to the then still new Soviet Union for different reasons--among others, Leslie White and Jack Harris (Madden 1999). Some came because they thought there was a great experiment in socialism going on and they wanted to take part in it. Others, however, came for much less ideological reasons. Two of the latter were Roy Franklin Barton (1883-1947) and Archie Phinney (1903-1949).

In 1905, Barton had been part of the early cohort of military, government and educational/philanthropic workers who came from the United States to the Philippines. For the next two years he carried on fieldwork in northern Luzon, returning for another six months between 1910 and 1912, on the basis of which he produced the ethnography *Ifugao Law* in 1919 (Kroeber 1949; Vincent 1990:137-46). During the 1920s Barton lived in California, where he had contact with members of the Berkeley department of anthropology, and at the time he went to the Soviet Union was apparently trying to avoid a court order to pay alimony and child support in that state. Phinney was a Native American and an enrolled member of the Nez Percé tribe of Idaho, who had collected Nez Percé language texts under Boas' supervision, although he had not been a student working for a degree (Phinney 1934). Barton was recommended to Boas by A. L. Kroeber, although Boas was familiar with his Philippine ethnography, and may have met him in New York on his way to Leningrad in 1930. In each case, their trips to the Soviet Union were mediated by Boas, who recommended them to Vladimir Bogoraz (Waldemar Bogoraz), a participant in the Jesup North Pacific Expedition who had gone on to become a leading figure in Russian and Soviet anthropology. Bogoraz arranged the participation of each of the pair in programs of the Leningrad Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. Barton, who arrived in the Soviet Union in June 1930, was given a position as Curator of the India and Indonesia sections; Phinney, who arrived in November 1932, was entered into the Aspirant (or Ph.D. equivalent) program, which included room and board, along with a stipend.

Phinney remained in the Soviet Union until June, 1937 when he returned to the United States to accept a job in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which he held until the day of his death in October 1949. Barton retained his position in the Leningrad Museum until 1940, when all U.S. passport holders were ordered out because of World War II, and instead of resettling in the United States traveled to the Philippines with the hope of undertaking further fieldwork in the Mountain Province of Luzon. Caught there by the Japanese invasion, he spent the next three and a half years in Baguio and Los Baños prison camps. After being freed in 1944, he returned to California, where he began making plans for further fieldwork in the Mountain Province. Unfortunately, however, he was physically debilitated by his prison camp experience and died in 1947 after surgery for ulcerated leg veins and gall stones.

Letters from, to, and about these two men provide a window into the life of American anthropologists in Leningrad, and in the Soviet Union during the years of the Stalinist Great Terror after the assassination of Sergei Kirov on December 3, 1933. The letters of the duo are much more informative taken together than singly. Until after 1937, when the increasing rigors of the Great Terror made it dangerous to have correspondence with outside countries, Barton wrote chatty notes, with names and details about what he was doing and what was happening around him. Phinney wrote very cautious letters once he found "they ransack my letters" as he said in a December 1932 letter to Boas (not included here). The selections reproduced below are from the Boas Collection in the Library of the American Philosophical Society, and are reproduced with the Library's permission.

Barton/Boas

July 11, 1930

Dear Professor Boas:

I have been here more than three weeks, lodged in this institute, which was formerly a theological seminary. Professor Bogoraz says "We took down the pictures of saints and put live heathen into it."

I have two teachers in Russian, and have acquired more vocabulary than I know how to use. I find it hard to change to the Russian manner of saying things and am also bothered by Spanish or Malay, which it seems, I ought to be speaking to these foreigners! Everybody has been most kind to me. I have been astounded at the contrasts – I have visited several factories and have found them operating efficiently so far as I have been able to judge, and every one has a board displaying statistics showing greater output per man and lowered unit costs. On the other hand there are long lines of people waiting to buy any thing that may happen to be on sale. People have plenty of money and want to spend it – their trouble is to do so. Things cost four or five times as much as in America usually, and there aren't often any for sale. I haven't had any thing good to eat since I've been in Russia. Strange to say, I feel better than I ever did before in my life.

I would have gone to the Far East with the commissioner in charge of the work amongst the primitive folk of Northern Siberia if I had not to wait for galley proofs of my book. It would have been a long trip and I would have had a few days with perhaps twenty tribes. However, I shall probably be able to take the trip with him next summer.

August 26, 1930

Dear Professor Boas:

I have been in Russia more than two months, now, and have made quite a bit of progress in the Russian language. For more than a month I have been doing some research work at the Somatological Institute which is quite absorbing and which may turn out to be of some practical benefit to the country. This work will be in shape to leave with the Russians after two or three months more, and I should then like to go to Siberia with the fellowship we spoke of. I believe that I could most profitably make a cultural study of the Goldi or Oroki of the lower Amur region and at the same time look for Malay influence, which is supposed to have reached into Korea, on the lower Amur. So far as possible I should like to go with a free hand, since I have become acquainted with the chief of the work among the primitive folk, and he has offered me all possible assistance and to take me on one of his trips of inspection. At present, however, and tentatively, the above seems a very interesting and profitable field of study.

[No date]

Dear Professor Boas:

Professor Bogoraz tells me that you are back in New York. I hope you will not let the matter of the fellowship in the Guggenheim Foundation slip your memory; I am quite anxious to get it and have my plans all laid. I am beginning to be able to think in Russian instead of having to translate and to be able to figure out words from their roots and affixes.

I gave an illustrated lecture at the Institute Narodov Cevera on the pagans of the Philippines the other night. The pupils were tremendously interested in the Philippine folk and gathered around afterward to ask quite intelligent questions. My talk was interpreted by a Russian communist and she, two or three Americans and I inspected the dormitories. There are twenty two different tribes there; not much physical difference between them is apparent on casual looking at them. The students are allowed to marry and

there are four young babies. My interpretess was greatly put out at finding that the mothers were sleeping with the babies and told the management to see the rayon soviet about it and get their help to procure beds for the babies. What impressed me was the fact that these young people did not seem to be conscious of any physical difference between themselves and us, or if conscious of it considered it an unimportant detail. They talked as easily and amiably as if they had been Russians and said precisely the same things as Russians would have said. One young lady, badly small-pocked, who had run away from slavery in her tribe and thrown herself on the mercy of soviet officials could not say enough in praise of the institution and will no doubt be a powerful influence when she goes back to her tribe. The students in addition to maintenance get 20 r. a month for spending money.

Prof. Bogoras is an exceedingly hard worker. He told me I could come at any time between 11 o'clock and 1 – and I have gone several times at that hour and found him dictating. Other Russian ethnographers are trying very hard to interpret primitive cultures according to Marx.

November 17, 1940

Dear Dr. Boas:

On this separate sheet, I will tell you something about the death of Professor Bogoras, as I do not know whether you already know all that I am now able to write you. He was laid up with thrombophlebitis in both legs for about three months during the winter. He fretted quite a bit about the Museum of the History of Religion of which he was director and got permission, when he had become better, to go to it. This gave his legs a turn for the worse. He then thought that if he could get down south, to his brother, a physician in the Ukraine, he would recover, and started there by train, with a trained nurse in attendance. He died on the way. As I remember this was in April.

The Academy of Sciences turned out to meet the body and escort it to the Kazansky Cathedral, which now houses his Museum. It was brought back in a little car hitched to the rear of a passenger train. From the station it was loaded on a caisson drawn by a truck. We marched behind it with two or three brass bands, about 1000 in numbers.

The body lay in state for four or five days – had to be reemalmed during this time. From about 11 o'clock till 5, there was a guard of honor which was changed every 10 minutes. There was also an imposing exhibit of his works. The funeral proper occurred on the fourth or fifth day, with long speeches by akademiks and a few professors. These were all of the same type, as, indeed, all speeches in that country are. They praised devotion to his energy, his organizing ability, his mind for detail, his devotion to his science, but all condemned his "mistakes" – these were that he opposed giving an ignorant class absolute power, against perpetuating the old feudal system with merely the exchange of party men for the feudal lords and officials. They had to talk that way whatever they thought about the matter.

In a way, it was perhaps better that he died when he did. The next years would have pained him at the least and "they" might have caught him in the way many other good men have been caught. He was never forgiven for having opposed the Bolsheviks during the Revolution – he was a Menshevik, you know. And, sometimes, this exasperation would get the better of him. True, his energy and keen mind and his organizing and teaching ability had won a high place for him. But the years that followed took many men of great qualities, especially in the social sciences. They are not producing replacements for those they have killed or worked to death, either.

[Julie]Averkiewa [who had studied with Boas] has two children and third husband. Seems well satisfied at last. Concentration on work is not her forte.

Boas letter of introduction for Phinney

December 31, 1931

Dear Sir:

Will you be good enough to give a few minutes of your time next week to a young Nez Percé Indian, Archie Phinney, who has been studying anthropology with me but who is more interested in the practical problems confronting the Indians and intelligently so. Through my relations to the anthropological work of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad it has so happened that he has received an invitation to study the problems relating to Siberian natives which are in many regions quite analogous to our Indian problems. I feel that an acquaintance with the humane spirit with which the problem is being taken up there and the actual working out of these plans can only be of help to Phinney and might make him particularly useful after his return.

Phinney to Boas

Nov. 13, 1932

Dear Prof Boas,

I arrived in Leningrad safe and sound several days ago. The trip was pleasant enough, but, as you said, I had no opportunity to do much work en route. When I arrived here the representatives of the Museum were very friendly to me. Despite the fact that I had been expected several days no arrangements had been made so far as living quarters and board are to be had here. Matters here cannot be done with dispatch yet they prefer to do it later than beforehand. Consequently I find myself temporarily housed, unable to unpack my baggage, expecting momentarily, for almost a week now, to move to permanent quarters. On the other hand they (Mr. Matorin and others of the Academy) are most gracious about entertaining me. After these preliminaries are over I will point out to them that I must go into seclusion for a few months to do my own work, to read general Russian ethnographic material, and to acquaint myself better with the Russian language under the tutelage of a grammarian (most people here seem to understand little about the grammar). They hold innumerable meetings – student meetings, faculty meetings. I've been to half a dozen already, and they talk for hours about plans. Later on, perhaps, I can participate intelligently in this sort of thing so I will make arrangements to become adjusted in my own way.

I gathered at once that I must make my approach to Russian ethnography through two permanent positions – Morgan and Marx. I seem to have plunged suddenly into the functioning and practical aspects of this new methodology. I suppose I shall continue to see Russian life confusedly until I get my proletarian glasses.

Boas to Phinney

July 17, 1933

Dear Archie,

You wrote to me the other day that you were not well. I hope that you are all right again. You must let me know how you are and what you are doing. I hope that your experiences in Leningrad are really helpful to you. I do not know whether you have heard that John Collier is now Commissioner of Indian Affairs. There is no doubt that he means well. I am not sure what he will do in a responsible administration position. I think it would make for a good plan for you to write to him regarding your views and include [your] plans for the Nez Percé and tell him what you know of the Russian methods of handling the Siberian native problem, if that is to the point.

Phinney to Boas

August 8, 1933

Dear Prof. Boas,

I was very happy to receive your letter – a splendid letter. There is nothing alarming about the state of my health, only that my nerves were worn ragged during the past months partly from overwork and partly from lack of patience. I feel better now days.

I am not optimistic about the value of the Russian method as a thing applicable to the US Indian reservations. My study so far has been somewhat limited to those larger groups that were already in a good position to accept full autonomy. The Russian policy is sound enough and effective here but devised to operate within the range of a new set of economic relationships – economic relationships which on one hand the Indian Bureau isn't likely to consider for Indian tribes and on the other are not at once attainable by a moribund reservation group. I will find out, however, what if anything has actually been done to deal with natives who live under the least favorable circumstances. I get, from what I read and from what is constantly told to me, too many facts about the phenomenal development of native groups that were from the beginning rather well constituted socially and economically and not enough facts about the social rehabilitations or regeneration of tribes that haven't achieved an economic status consistent with the soviet industrialization plans.

July 6, 1934

Dear Prof Boas,

I had no opportunity to reply to your previous letter that came early in June. Soon after checking over and returning the text proofs [for the Nez Percé Texts] to Augustin I came away from Leningrad to make some studies of Altaian National Minorities. I have been here a few weeks and have seen some very interesting things in connection with the socialization program of the Soviet government. I visited the Oirot Mongol groups which are generally more retarded than American Indians but which are doing pretty well now. They are at least working out their own welfare with minimum assistance from outsiders.

It has been difficult traveling here. I have just returned to the base from a twenty day trip in the mountains. I covered several hundred kilometers by foot, horseback and row boat. I am returning to Leningrad very soon and I expect to make some definite plans for the coming year. I may, if I wish, remain in the Academy of Sciences another year. I hesitate to do that only because of my health. It is a terrible climate and I haven't stood up very well against it.

September 6, 1934

Dear Prof. Boas:

I received your letter a few days ago and I was glad to learn about the possible opportunity for me to get a position in the Indian Service. There seems to be a good chance for something to come of it. Recently I have received two letters from Collier suggesting that I make formal application for a position. I have done this. It seems that nothing can be done until new appropriations are available next year.

I have written to Collier stating in a general way some of my ideas about the proposed Indian program, and explaining in what way I could make myself useful. I am very anxious to get into this work – it has been my goal for many years, and now through your help I am at last being considered. But such matters are always complicated by the Civil Service Commission. Perhaps Collier will see that my application goes through. He seems to be favorably impressed as a result of your recommendation.

I am getting along well. I have just returned from Moscow where I spent two months doing some special work in Moscow University. At the present time I am getting my material in shape for a complete report on the National Minorities Policies of the Soviet Government. The reports you had concerning my difficulties – losing my money and American passport were true but I was never particularly worried about it. I received a new passport in the course of time. I shall let you know what develops in connection with my application for appointment in the Indian Bureau.

Julia Averkieva sends her greetings to you. She has a very young daughter now.

January 18, 1935

Dear Prof Boas:

It has been quite a long time since my last letter to you. Everything has gone along smoothly here. I have been very busy, between times when I'm not laid up with the grippe, writing up my views on the national minority Caucasus to observe development there.

April 26, 1935

Dear Prof Boas:

It has been quite a long time since I've written to you. Everything is going along in good shape with me. The seemingly endless winter is finishing, and with it my work in the Acad. of Sciences. I'm preparing to take a little trip south to see the Kabardian nationality in the Caucasus.

November 7, 1935

Dear Prof. Boas:

I have received your letter of Sept. 9. There is nothing new as yet to tell you about. My work here is going along very well. In general my contacts here have so broadened on all fronts that I now feel myself fully in the swing of Soviet life.

I haven't heard anything from Washington. It seems, as you say, that the lack of money is the real issue there. I hope something definite develops by next summer, for I have decided, regardless of that situation, to return next summer or fall, and to visit my people in the reservation. Then I can present myself personally in Washington and if nothing comes of it I will at least learn fully what the situation is and be able to make other plans. As it is I'm not worried or disheartened about the development so far, realizing the advantage of having your support in trying to get into that work.

The grammar came through to me all right and I have already done considerable work on it. The grammar in itself is wholly inadequate but it contains much useful material. Before the year is over I'm sure that I will be able to show you many things about the Nez Percé language of great interest to you, which Cataldo himself never fathomed. Otherwise I am continuing my work and studies along the line of the National Minorities policy here.

Recommended Readings

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FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

"From the sense of justice and human sympathy:"

Alice Fletcher, Native Americans, and the Gendering of Victorian Anthropology.

Joy Rohde
National Anthropological Archives

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed increased anthropological activity in the United States, and with it, the burgeoning interest of women in science. Women's involvement in anthropology coincided with the move to professionalize American science. To assert the legitimacy of scientific pursuits and restrict access to specialized forms of scientific knowledge, scientists created a model of scientific investigation that was rigorous, rational and impersonal. Philadelphia anthropologist Daniel Garrison Brinton explained that scientific truth "deals with the actual world about us, its objective realities and present activities... The only conditions which it enjoins are that the imperfections of the senses shall be corrected... and that their observations shall be interpreted by the laws of logical induction (Brinton 1895: 3). Consequently, the sciences became incompatible with the Victorian cultural construction of female identity, which dictated that women were the opposite of science: delicate, irrational and emotional. A woman could be a dilettante at best, for her mental constitution instilled her with characteristics that could only contaminate her attempts at objective observation and reduce her conclusions to unreliable musings (cf. Rossiter 1982).

In the face of such *de facto* sex-exclusion from scientific pursuits, a few female ethnologists, and Alice Cunningham Fletcher in particular, rose to prominence in the anthropological community. Fletcher's successes, in part, were due to her manipulation of gendered and scientific identities, which allowed her to forge investigational niches in the realm of ethnological study. Fletcher utilized the rhetoric of Victorian femininity – which conflated the female character with religiosity, sympathy, emotionality and moral authority – to create a small space for herself in the anthropological community. Already forty when she commenced ethnographic work, Fletcher's labors were an easy outgrowth of her previous involvement in women's clubs and benevolent reform. The following documents provide examples of the unique way in which Fletcher forged a scientific identity that granted her access to Native American cultural institutions and thereby to the burgeoning science of anthropology. They trace the evolution of her anthropological investigations from the "woman question" to the "Indian question" and from explicitly feminine topics to more nebulous gendered realms of moral reform coupled with scientific investigation.¹

¹ Although Fletcher's representation of Native Americans and her vision of their future--as embodied in the Dawes Act, which she played a role in framing--are today politically and ideologically questionable, her writings reflect attitudes common in the late nineteenth century, when many sympathetic reformers felt that the only way to "save" the Native American from extermination by civilization was to "Americanize" them.