Russian Settlers in Hawaii 
in the Early 1900s

Amir KHISAMUTDINOV

In the early 20th century, the Hawaiian Islands were a bridge of sorts for emigrants from the Russian Far East on their way to the New World. It was mostly Finns and Poles who became Americans, but there were Russians among them as well. At first only few of them lingered for a while on the islands, but soon an inflow of Russian immigrants to Hawaii intensified. The resettlement movement swelled because the Russo-Japanese war had made America revise its policy vis-à-vis Japan, whose expansion in the Asia-Pacific region was increasingly manifest. Japanese workers were turning up at Hawaiian sugar cane plantations in increasing numbers, something that made the US Government apprehensive that the fast growing Japanese population could play a negative role in a potential war with Japan. To counter this trend, the Americans decided to bring to Hawaii, where a US naval base had been deployed by that time, white emigrant labor, who would help to “save” Hawaii from the Japanese.

The Territorial Board of Immigration in Hawaii was tipped off by Russians coming to Honolulu from Primorye and the Amur Area that it was possible to invite workers from Russian Manchuria to the Hawaiian Islands. The TBI officials were aware, of course, that this could displease the Russian authorities, given their strenuous efforts to settle the Russian Far East and the waysides of the Chinese Eastern Railroad. For this reason, the Board did nothing about Russian emigration until 1909, when a Japanese strike forced it to revive this idea.

An opportunity soon presented itself in the person of a Russian national, A. Perelestrous, who came to Honolulu for medical treatment and rest on Waikiki and saw a good opening for business. He introduced himself to the Secretary of the Territory of Hawaii and the Territorial Board of Immigration as a major railway contractor in Manchuria and offered his services in delivering Russian workers to local sugar cane plantations. He said that workers’ pay at the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway was much lower and the working and living conditions worse than at the plantations. He declared that he could undertake to deliver thousands of workers from the Russian Far East.

A. Khisamutdinov, D. Sc. (History), professor, Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok. This article was first published in Russian in Voprosy istorii, No. 1, 2013.
attractive point in his offer was the claim that the Russians in their mass were of peasant stock and used to hard agricultural work.

In spite of their promises, the Hawaii Board of Immigration were in no hurry to take concrete steps. It was not until Perelestrous returned to Honolulu, in August 1909, with 50 applications for resettlement to Hawaii and promised to organize relocation of another 10,000 or so that the Board made up its mind to send a representative to Manchuria. This representative, A. Atkinson, former Secretary of the Territory of Hawaii and member of the Territorial Board of Immigration, who had had some experience resettling Russian Molokans to the Kauai Island, was given precise instructions on selecting 50 families, or about 300 resettlers, from Manchuria. The Governor of Hawaii provided the necessary funds. On August 30, 1909, Atkinson and Perelestrous boarded the steamer Siberia and set out for Tsuruga, Japan, whence they reached Vladivostok on board the Governor Jack. This immediately became known to the Russian authorities.1

Organized in September, their very first delivery (250 people) came under the scrutiny of Russian diplomats in Japan: “On September 8, the said group of emigrants went on the steamer Siberia through the port of Yokohama, where, while she was in the roadstead, I had an opportunity to visit the steamer to attend to a resettlement-related business. The thing is that a child was born into an Orthodox family on its way from Harbin to Kobe; since there are no Orthodox priests in Hawaii, Perelestrous, on behalf of that family, asked me to bring to the steamer a priest from the Spiritual Mission in Tokyo. The latter, however, found it impossible to meet the Consulate’s request to this effect, pointing out that it had no priest for this purpose. It was only Your Excellency’s (Ambassador Nikolay Malevsky’s.—A.K.) considerate attitude that made it possible to invite the senior priest of the Imperial Embassy church and thus satisfy the spiritual needs of these Russian subjects. Following the Sacrament of Baptism, the emigrants submitted through Mr. Perelestrous a request for a parting service to be held, which the priest, Father Bulgakov, did with visible pleasure. Many volunteers responded to his invitation to join in the canticle and a rather harmonious choir was formed, whose participants, in all evidence, were not new to this business. In fact, it was enough to look at the singers to make sure that the main contingent was made up of rank-and-file reservists, something that they later confirmed to me as we talked. After the service several people asked me to give them crosses. Regrettably, I had only three on me, of which one had been donated to the newly baptized infant, and thus I was unable to satisfy all those who asked me for one.”2

The Consul left to the Russians 30 envelopes with his address. And he added this to the foregoing: “If the emigration to Hawaii grows, Russia might not only lose a considerable number of its settlers, whom she is relocating to the Far East with so much pain and huge monetary sacrifices but also, in all likelihood, will have to adopt certain measures to remove reciprocal misunderstandings between Russian and Japanese workers on Hawaii and to protect the interests of her subjects lest they are left to the mercy of planters.”3 The Russian Government, too,
strongly disapproved of Americans recruiting Russians. Governor General of the Amur Territory Pavel Unterberger immediately issued orders to make an inquiry and to oppose the relocation in every way. He also ordered to collect data on reasons for the resettlement and the problems that forced Russians to leave. The Russian Embassy in Japan continued tipping off the authorities on Perelestrous’ and Atkinson’s travels to Vladivostok in order to have the police cut short their business. The Military Governor was given the appropriate orders.

The recruiting took place in Harbin, the center of the Chinese Eastern Railroad, where Atkinson opened his office. That way it was easier to draw up exit papers: emigrants left through the port of Dalny, where there was no Russian customs post. His mission was also facilitated by the fact that Manchuria did not fall under the Russian jurisdiction and there was no need to carry a foreign travel passport in its territory. Atkinson’s staff included Perelestrous, his main helper, Secretary J.W. Lloyd, S. Kashnitsky, the interpreter Kalashnikov, and doctor Aleksandr Krakovsky. Soon newspapers in Harbin and other cities in the Russian Far East published announcements about people being recruited for work on sugar cane plantations in Hawaii. Special agents were also spreading this information among peasants in the Amur Territory.

Interviews with potential settlers were for the most part conducted by Atkinson with the help of the interpreter, with Kashnitsky verifying the details. The recruiters explained that the American Government had a special plan for Russian resettlement to the Hawaiian Islands. They promised each family a three-room house with a separate kitchen and a small kitchen-garden measuring one acre. Asked by Clara Sazonova about contracts, Atkinson replied with laughter that no contracts or agreements were signed in the United States and that people were believed upon their word of honor. In fact, emigrants could not sign contracts under the contemporary US laws.

During his travels to the stations of the Chinese Eastern Railroad—Jailanar, Manchuria and others—Perelestrous harangued audiences on the paradisiacal living in Hawaii. No one in the Far East knew anything about Hawaii at that time and so his tales fell on a fertile soil. Soon a special booklet was printed for future settlers, for Atkinson had assured the Board that Russians believed every printed word. He promised that after three months on the plantations the settlers, if they did not like that job, would be able to lease 20 acres of land for a small fee and work on that plot. He did not specify, however, that Russian settlers would have to become US citizens. Atkinson promised that men would earn between 45 and 75 rubles per month, women 22 rubles, and children helping their parents, 14 rubles. If they so wished, he explained, women and daughters could stay at home and tend the kitchen-garden and house; when it was time to harvest coffee—a very clean and easy job—they could lend a hand and be paid three dollars per day. But the plantation work was not hard either, he claimed. Living in Hawaii was much easier and better than in Manchuria; in addition, everyone was promised free medical services, schooling for children aged from 6 to 15 years and for adults in the evening. He also praised the cheapness of food and abundance of Russian staples like cabbages and potatoes that cost next to nothing in
hawaii, assuring them that in three months time each family would be able to harvest their own vegetables and fruit. After three years’ work, both the house and kitchen-garden would become the settlers’ property. If they thought better of staying on the islands, they would be paid 300 rubles for their property. Must it be said that there was little truth in what the recruiters were saying? Speaking about cheap food, they kept silent about the fact that in all other respects life on the islands was very expensive.

Perelestrous emphasized: “The planters, lest there are any misunderstandings, have all their lands divided into plots, for which reason all newly arrived settlers should regard themselves as absolutely independent and conduct business in such a way as to rely solely on their own strength and energy; good results can be easily achieved with the help of the planters’ company.”

An important reason why Perelestrous decided to make Harbin his recruiting base was the easiness of exit paperwork. At first he asked the personnel directorate of the Chinese Eastern Railroad to write out a single foreign travel ticket for the entire group but, as is only natural, his request was turned down. After that he began sending settlers via the Quangchengzy and Dalny stations, where passports were not to be stamped.

There were most different people in the groups of Russians who went to Hawaii. Well-organized, close-knit families were a rare exception. Those leaving were mostly skilled workers, although the Immigration Board insisted on agricultural labor being sent. The departure to Hawaii helped some settlers to avoid being drafted into the army. There were many revolutionaries as well (P. Moshkovsky, M. Chibisov, N. Shapovalov and others) because the departure of these groups coincided in time with a wholesale rout of political organizations in Russia. By virtue of their semilegal relocation, Atkinson could not ask volunteers to show loyalty certificates. This is why there was a large proportion of criminals, deserters or simply demented people in the groups of settlers. No one asked them to present identification papers, for which reason many immediately assumed aliases. Upon their arrival to Honolulu, some settlers were confined to prison or were involved in inciting unrest.

The Siberia arrived in Honolulu on October 22, 1909, with 255 Russian emigrants on board. The successful delivery of the first Russians to the islands, their good physical state and satisfaction with living standards and conditions of work prompted the Board to continue the experiment.

In mid-November 1909, Atkinson and Perelestrous revisited Harbin. By that time, however, a collective complaint signed by 27 members of the first group of settlers had been sent to the administrator of the Imperial Consulate in Yokohama, Collegiate Assessor E. Lebedev: “We have the honor to humbly ask Your Excellency to consider our critical situation and help us, because, as you know, when we were shipped via Yokohama, Mr. Perelestrous and Mr. Atkinson deceived us by each word. As we were being recruited in Harbin, it was explained to us that we would be transported at the expense of the American Government in order to populate the Hawaiian Islands with whites. Whoever had no means to tend a farm, they said, could get a job at 45 rubles per month for
men and 35 rubles per month for women. Lodgings, heating, lighting, water supply, a hospital, a school, and a half-acre kitchen-garden; after 3 years the houses would become our property, and if anyone of us conceives the wish to leave, they will receive 300 rubles for the house; they explained that each working day with lunch and breakfast was 10 hours long and that food was very cheap; they even advised us not to take along any footwear nor to buy any en route, and we complied. But it turns out that the local shops are twice as expensive and what they sell is rot. The flour they feed to horses seems very old, too... We learned from this that they had brought us here, not on behalf of the Government, but on behalf of the Trust, and we were scattered over the plantations one family here, another there, and we have to work like mules from 6 in the morning until half past four in the afternoon, and walk seven miles or so to and back from work, for which we are paid 22 rubles for men and 13 rubles for women; with this she can barely feed herself, and if she has a family, she might as well lie down and die. While recruiting us in Harbin, they explained that there was no need for contracts in America; they were delivering us on the American word of honor. Everyone sold whatever they had for cheap; whoever possessed houses, coaches and horses—all this was sold, and now we have to spend this sweat money on food. ... And we have no one to turn to. Therefore, we ask Your Excellence to heed our request and help us in our critical situation; we also ask you to inform the Consul in Dalny and, most importantly, in Harbin—on what grounds they have let family people leave for so far-away a land. Each of us now sees that we have been thoroughly cheated because Messrs. Perelestrous and Atkinson brought us here at night, handed us over to planters by the tally, and vanished, so that we didn’t see them again."

This letter arrived at the Russian General Consulate in Yokohama on February 3, 1910, and was relayed to Russia. At the request of the authorities, it was published by local newspapers.10

Nevertheless, during their second trip to the Russian Far East Atkinson and his staff sent to Hawaii another 1,535 people (815 men, 333 women and 387 children). While their first delivery caused no trouble, the next one was beset with many problems, some of which proved insurmountable for the local authorities. On November 28, 1909, Russian emigrants established a 20-man Hawaiian Union of Russian Workers.11 Some of its most active members were Russian revolutionaries.

On February 17, 1910, 315 Russians arrived to Hawaii on board the Mongolia. On completing emigration procedures, the Emigration Board staff informed them about the kind of working and living conditions they would be entitled to on the Hawaiian Islands. To their surprise, the Russians refused to accept the conditions and put forward some of their own. Even at that stage, the Hawaiian officials spotted political activists at work among the Russian emigrants. As soon as steamers with settlers began approaching the shore, shouts were heard: “Don’t go to the plantations! Better drown in the sea than go there and work!” Many believed this and did not even leave for Honolulu, where the representatives were waiting for the new arrivals.
The settlers soon made sure that no one was in a hurry to provide them with what had been promised by Atkinson. They were offered 20 dollars per month per family and living quarters in a plantation common shed. To top it all, fumigation of clothes was ordered, during which some garments were destroyed or stolen by fellow Russians. About 400 people were crowding the pier, all of them determined not to leave until they were issued what they had been promised. A rumor was spreading that meat and other food products in local shops were three times as expensive as in Russia; that settlers were not provided with enough firewood for cooking, and that only rain water from the roof had to be used.

The resentment felt by the Russian emigrants was aggravated by an outbreak of diphtheria on board the Mongolia. The epidemic, which affected other ships as well, highly complicated the resettlement. Seventy passengers from the Tenyo Maru, which arrived to the port on February 25, 1910, and 249 passengers from the Korea, which arrived on March 7, had to be sent to a quarantine island. The Board paid $17,735.79 for their treatment, service and meals.

On March 21, 1910, Russian emigrants went on strike. The authorities suggested that they should elect representatives who would tour the plantations and familiarize themselves with working and living conditions there. But they refused to do so because they no longer believed any promises. The emigrants hired a lawyer to represent their interests. Their demands were as follows: if what they had been promised was not granted, the Board should pay the settlers a lump sum amounting to $500 and pay passage home. The authorities had to arrest several persons and banish 12 from the Hawaiian Islands. It was only in this way that they managed to save the situation.

The French consul, Dr. Auguste Marques,12 was entrusted with a fact-finding mission.

There were 1,799 Russian settlers in Hawaii by July 1, 1910.13 To make their propaganda more effective, Perelestrous and Kashnitsky decided to publish a magazine entitled In Foreign Parts (Russians in America and Australia). The magazine wrote this about Hawaii: “At first our workers suffered numerous hardships on the Hawaiian Islands, but gradually they began to adapt. Some emigrated to America, some found jobs in accordance with their skills, some bought farms of their own on time, while the majority for the time being accepted their fate and were working—at least this can be surmised from the fact that they summon relatives from Russia...”14

In 1911, 32 Russians arrived in Honolulu. An office manager wrote this to Perelestrous: “Settlers would not travel to Harbin. The Harbin public, aside from tramps and bachelors, would not like to hear anything about Hawaii, except for several families that are making preparations, if we should believe what they say, to leave for Hawaii, but this is, of course, a pittance and we should prepare others in advance; therefore, I find it expedient, in order to speed up things, to send someone to Iman (now Dalnerechensk, Primorye Territory.—A.K.), and to send something to Katyukha (Pyotr Katyukhin, peasant of the village of Nikolsk-Ussuriysky and Perelestrous’ agent.—A.K.) to brace him up for work.” It was mostly bachelors who left.15 Even in this case, incidentally, the Board continued
defraying the cost of tickets for family members who could not leave. In the summer of 1911, for example, the Governor ordered to buy tickets for Praskovya Bogdanova, who was given tickets to Hawaii for herself and four children, and for Aleksandra Perova for a visit to her son.16

In opposition to the Perelestrous Board, Russian diplomats in Japan suggested putting up “announcements from local Russian authorities or still better from the Russian Consulates, which are in touch with the emigration movement, in all public places in Harbin, Dalny and Vladivostok. These announcements should contain the true terms of emigration and requirements placed on emigrants by the American rules on terms of descent to the American shore.”17 The Russian Government adopted more resolute measures. On January 12, 1912, Kashnitsky was arrested in Harbin and sent by prison transport to Russia.18 Pyotr Katyukhin was arrested as well.19 This was the end of the Russian resettlement to Hawaii.20

NOTES
1 Russian State Historical Archive of the Far East (RGIA DV f. 702, op. 1, d. 551, l. 178 (in Russian).
2 Ibid., l. 176.
3 Ibid., l. 177.
6 Ibid., ll. 326-326 ob.
8 RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 1, d. 551, ll. 180-180ob.
9 The Hawaii State Archives, Frear-Territorial Depts. Immigration, Board of, 1910.
10 RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 1, d. 551, l. 200.
11 “To Australia...to Hawaii,” Railway Life in the Far East, Harbin, Nov. 17, 1910, No. 7, p. 18 (in Russian).
12 Auguste J. B. Marques (17.11.1841, Toulon, France—13.03.1929, Honolulu, Hawaii). He was born into the family of a French army general and spent his childhood years in North Africa. He received a medical education at the Paris University and was trained as a musician at the University of Lisbon. He came to Honolulu in 1878 and bought (1880) 400 acres of land near a school at Panahou, where he taught music. He was a founding member of the Philharmonic Society and the Theosophical Society (1893). He was sent with a diplomatic mission to Russia in 1886. The Hawaiian General Consul in Lisbon (1888-1889). An active member of the Anti-Asian Union (1887-1888). A committee chairman at the Hawaiian Senate (1890). General Consul of France and Panama in Honolulu. As of March 8, 1911, Vice Consul of the Russian Empire in Honolulu.
13 Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire (AVPRI), f. Pacific Desk, op. 487, d. 1442 (Marques’ report—L’immigration Russe en Hawaii), l. 81.
In Foreign Parts, Harbin, 1911, No. 1, pp. 30-31 (in Russian).

RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 1, d. 551, ll. 328-329.

The Hawaii State Archives, Frear-Territorial Depts. Immigration, Board of, 1911.

RGIA DV, f. 702, op. 1, d. 551, l. 322.

Ibid., l. 335.

Ibid.

The author thanks University of Hawaii Librarian Patricia Polansky for access to her research on Russians in Hawaii.

Translated by Aram Yavrumyan