

First Impressions

The Earliest Description of Florida
to Circulate in Russia (1710)

*by Max J. Okenfuss**

Russians first learned about Florida in a rather curious fashion. In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Russia possessed an energetic and ambitious tsar in Peter the Great. Continuing the policies of his forebears in the previous century, Peter looked to the West for the skills, schools and institutions which would make Russia a major European power, but he did so with such persistence and thoroughness that most contemporaries saw a sharp distinction between his reign and those of his precursors.

Becoming a European power meant fighting European wars. In addition to an old enemy, Ottoman Turkey, which dominated the Black Sea and the southern reaches of Russian rivers, Peter suddenly found himself at war with Sweden across the Baltic in the north. Fighting both these powers required a navy, one which could guard coastlines, protect trade, transport armies, and if possible, carry the battle to the enemy's homeland. With the enthusiasm and energy for which he was famous, Peter created a navy.

Within a very few years, Serbs from Venice, Hollanders, and Englishmen had arrived to teach mathematics and naval skills in Russia. Master shipbuilders and artisans were recruited throughout Europe, and foreign-born officers were commissioned in the nascent Russian navy. Russian youths were sent to learn the naval arts in European shipyards, and Russian seamen were placed in naval apprenticeship upon the vessels of several European nations. Within a decade Russia acquired not only a navy, but also the urge to participate in the age of exploration. Russian expeditions soon were charting the Arctic coastline, exploring the Kamchatka peninsula and eastern Siberia, eventually colonizing Alaska and the California coast, and they nearly established a trading company in Hawaii in the nineteenth century.

Peter's new schools required textbooks in Russian, and the tsar order-

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ed the translation of a wide range of European works, including manuals of navigation and sea-faring, and of land-surveying, geometry textbooks, and handbooks of artillery, fortifications, ship-building and the like. Among them was a *Geography, or A Short Description of the Globe*,¹ which first appeared in March 1710, and was later reprinted three times in 1715 and 1716.

This was not the first Western geographical work to be translated into Russian. The Russian translator of 1710 told his readers of an earlier edition of the massive Atlas or Cosmography of J. and W. Blaeu, famous Dutch cartographers of the seventeenth century. He noted that his was a shorter work, and designed for a wider, more general audience. This earlier work was never published in Russia, although it apparently circulated rather widely in manuscript copies. The *Short Description* of 1710 can be regarded as the first printed geography to appear in Russia.

Although portions of the book were added by the anonymous Russian author-translator, the basic text was taken from another Dutch compendium by Johannes (Jean) van Keulen, published in French as *Le Grand Nouvel Atlas de la Mer* (Amsterdam, 1682), and in Dutch as *De groote Nieuwe vermeerderende Zee-Atlas* (Amsterdam, 1697). Van Keulen was the basic source for the short section on Florida in the Russian geography (pp. 96-97), a translation of which is printed below. It may be considered the first impression of this portion of the Americas to circulate among Russian students and the Russian reading public. Some of its judgments were common to other European geographers of the day, as indicated by the footnotes.

Concerning the country of Florida

Florida is a fertile land with a pleasant climate²
and it abounds with luscious if strange fruits.³

It also has many wild beasts of every sort, bears, wolves, leopards, bobcats and jaguars. In its waters are snakes and crocodiles and other such crawling reptiles, with which the inhabitants of the land have an incessant struggle,⁴ and they beat them [to death] and eat them.

¹*Geografia ili kratkoe zemnago kruga opisanie* (Moscow, 1710).

²"This countrey lying Parallel to Castile in Spain, is said to be of the same temper both for Aire and Soyl [soil], but that it is abundantly more fruitful"; Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie in foure Bookes* . . . (2nd ed. London, 1660) p. 1031. "Florida est plaisante, & mediocrement fertile"; Van Keulen, *Le Grand Nouvel Atlas*, f. 4v.

³"Well stored with several sorts of Fruit, as Mulberries, Cherries, Chestnuts, Grapes and Plums of both excellent taste and colour"; Heylyn, *loc. cit.*

⁴"Divers serpens, & coleuvres, & crocodils se tiennent dans ses fleuves, avec qui les habitans combattent sans cesse"; Van Keulen, *loc. cit.*

The people of this land are coarse folk, who go about on foot, and to whom all the blessings of civil custom are alien, since they have constant wars among themselves.⁵ And whenever a stranger is captured alive, they feed him, and when he is filled, and fattened, at one of their festivals, they consume the one they have murdered. And although they confess the resurrection of man's soul, they bow down to idols,⁶ and in their behavior toward new-comers, they are very stern, and are not reliable.

⁵"So stomachfull, that they do naturally love War and Revenge, insomuch that they are continually in War with one, or other"; Heylen, *loc. cit.* "Leurs moeurs sont mal honnestes, . . . & de s'approprier de larcin"; Van Keulen, *loc. cit.*

⁶"They have also a grosse believe of the soules immortality, but are otherwise Idolaters"; Peter Heylen, *Mikrokosmos. A Little Description of the Great World* (8th ed. Oxford, 1639), p. 785.