

Proposal from Robert Bolts to Catherine II, Empress of Russia, for an Expedition to the Northwest Coast of America

To Her Imperial Majesty, Empress of All the Russias

Madam,

The Undersigned, currently Lieutenant Colonel in the Armies of His Majesty the Emperor, encouraged by the great wisdom which Your Majesty has always employed to increase the glory of your Monarchy as much as this glory can accord with the true happiness of your subjects, takes the respectful liberty of offering at your feet a Plan directly aimed at these sublime ends, through the following means:

1. By adding to your Empire a most extensive part of the northwest coast of North America not yet claimed or occupied by Europeans.
2. By opening an immense channel of commerce most advantageous to your subjects, to be carried out between the peninsula of Kamchatka and Japan, China, India, eastern Africa, America and all the islands lying between these vast continents.

The magnanimity with which Your Majesty enraptures all the civilized nations of the terrestrial Globe prevents me from asserting the merit of this Plan in terms of the modest means required for its execution. I beg only that Your Majesty deign to weigh the consequences in your enlightened and far-seeing judgment; and give me the grace of conveying to me your Imperial determination in sufficient time that I shall not suffer the loss of the next sailing season should your Majesty not find it agreeable to approve my Plan.

I have the honour to make my homage at your feet, and to be with the utmost reverence for your Majesty, Madam, your most humble and obedient servant,

William Bolts

at Vienna
November 27, 1782

Proposals

humbly submitted to the consideration of Her Imperial Majesty, Empress of All the Russias on an Expedition to the northwest coast of North America by way of Cape Horn.

The Undersigned Mr. William Bolts, formerly employed for several years in the service of the British East India Company, and currently Lieut. Colonel in the service of His Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty; first holder of an authorisation granted to him on June 5, 1775 by Her Majesty the Empress to conduct the trade which he had shortly before then revived to the said East Indies, in which region, charged with the full powers of the said Majesty to treat with the Indian princes, he has built several establishments; and currently also holder of a trading licence from His Royal Archducal Highness the Grand Duke of Tuscany, of which documents authentic copies are attached; with great effort and pain, and at considerable expense, has obtained maritime and geographical maps and in particular plans of the ports visited by the late Captain Cook in his last voyage to the northwest coast of North America. In addition, he has engaged in his service four fine officers, one of whom is a professional astronomer, and who all accompanied the said Capt. Cook on this voyage. He has also prepared a cargo of trade items appropriate for the inhabitants of that country, as well as constructed in Trieste a large vessel suitable for commerce on these Coasts; all these are currently in readiness in Trieste.

Mr. Bolts, with the permission of his Sovereign, very humbly offers to put the knowledge he has acquired and the means he possesses in the service of Her Majesty the Empress of All the Russias so that this august Sovereign may make of it the use that her wisdom will dictate, in order to increase her glory, the happiness of her subjects, the breadth of her trade, and the civilization of millions of savages, by adding to her Empire a great part of this unclaimed northwest coast of North America where there is an extent of six hundred nautical leagues of coastline as yet unknown to the Russians who sail out of Kamchatka, and where Her Majesty could choose the places most suitable for the achievement of these great objects.

Until the completion of a settled plan which conforms more deeply to the wisdom of Her Majesty and of her ministers, the object of the Undersigned for this initial expedition would simply be to pave the way for this great commerce by opening a more extensive and regular communication to the continents and islands of America and Asia from Petropavlovsk, Okhotsk, and other ports of Her Majesty on the coast of Kamchatka.

To carry out this desirable end Mr. Bolts would propose to take possession for Her Majesty the Empress of a known harbour on the northwest coast of America whose situation is most suited to the conduct of such a trade. This place, where you could find everything needed for setting up a safe port and for the construction of vessels, could be established very easily by a small expedition from Kamchatka; after the officers appointed by Her Majesty to the expedition here proposed had reconnoitred the place, and taken possession of it with a score of men, it would be easy for them to maintain their presence until they could be reinforced by a new detachment from Kamchatka.

After this first expedition, the Undersigned, with his associates, would form within the states of Her Majesty a formal commercial company, which, if Her Majesty would find it advisable, would act in concert with the established company in Kamchatka, and for this purpose Mr. Bolts would also propose to establish immediately at Canton in China, under the flag of Imperial Russia, a trading post which would serve as a warehouse to maintain the connections of this trade with both the coasts of Kamchatka and Europe.

For the execution of this Plan, the Undersigned proposes to use under the flag of Imperial Russia a large freighter of from three hundred and fifty to five hundred tonnes, and a smaller vessel of from forty to forty-five tonnes. The crews for these two ships would contain from seventy to ninety men. The small vessel, the provisions and the cargo proposed for export are even now fully ready in Trieste, where are also the four officers mentioned above, so that the expedition would be ready to leave before the beginning of next summer. As for the larger ship, the Undersigned already has one in mind which would, in all respects, be suitable for this expedition, and which he is able to purchase, provided only that the gracious resolution of Her Majesty the Empress be communicated to him two months before the time of his departure.

He also proposes that the two vessels sail in company until they finish their operations on the American Coast, and thence to the Canton River in China. In the Port of Canton, he would assign the small vessel with a crew of Russian seamen to three of the Russian officers appointed to this service, with orders to continue their voyage to Kamchatka in order to convey there a consignment of charts and notes made during their voyage; to give an account of all their operations; and to receive there any further orders that Her Majesty the Empress wished to make and send there for the pursuit of the objects in view. This vessel, which is Bermuda-rigged, could also serve as a model for building others. The larger vessel would return from Canton to Europe by the ordinary route with duplicates of all the expedition documents.

To make this memorandum as short as possible, Mr. Bolts will explain in a few words, divided into two Articles, A and B, all that he has the honour to propose and to ask from Her Majesty the Empress for the execution of this enterprise.

Article A:

Requests for everything that it will be
necessary to require from
Her Majesty the Empress of All
the Russias for this first
Expedition

1. To provide to the Undersigned, under the sureties and conditions mentioned below, the sum, in full, of 150,000 Rubles [i.e. one hundred and fifty thousand Rubles. G.B.] by means of a credit to her ambassador in Vienna or elsewhere so that the confidentiality of the Plan is preserved.
2. To provide a licence or letters patent, in other words passports, for the two vessels bearing the flag of the Imperial Russian Admiralty.
3. To provide five or six Russian naval officers, of lower rank, who have the trust of Her Majesty; with from sixty to eighty seamen: these to be received from the Commander of the Her Majesty's squadron in the Mediterranean Sea at a time when the Undersigned will ask for them by a particular and secret order sent to the said Commander, who should be charged with supplying brave and good people.
4. To place the Russian officers and seamen under the orders of Mr. Bolts or any other captains of the vessels proposed by him: and to forbid them to engage in any trading whatsoever during the entire voyage.
5. To pay the salaries, supply-costs and gratuities of the Russian officers and seamen; Mr. Bolts undertakes to pay and reward all the other officers and seamen whom he will find it necessary to include in the crews of the two vessels.

Article B:

Proposals for the surety and warranty
of Her Majesty the Empress of All
the Russias, and the terms and conditions of
the initial payment requested for Mr. Bolts.

1. The money requested by Mr. Bolts to be furnished by Her Majesty shall be spent in good faith, and the Undersigned will submit, either in person or through his consul at Trieste, certified documents accounting for the amounts received and disbursed.

2. Mr. Bolts makes over as security for the full amount given to him the large as well as the small vessel with the export and import cargoes. And he undertakes to restore the same sum that he received on the order of Her Majesty three months after the successful arrival of the vessel at the first port in which it makes land on its return, be it Lisbon or Ostend, but deducting the value of the small vessel delivered to Canton with all the expenses of its expedition from Canton to Kamchatka, as well as the refurbishments of both vessels if there should be any during the voyage, with the advances that Mr. Bolts or his agents will have to make during the voyage on the account of the officers & Russian seamen.

Remarks

This is the general Plan which the Undersigned Mr. Bolts has the honour to propose executing. Having himself for five years commanded a vessel in the East Indies, he would willingly have undertaken the conduct of this voyage, if the arrangements, both public and private, which he has had to make as director of the Imperial Asiatic Company of Trieste did not require his presence in Europe.

The limits which he has placed on himself in making this Proposal do not permit him to enter into detail on the advantages which would result from this expedition to the benefit of the subjects of Her Majesty the Empress. It will suffice to observe in short that they would thus acquire a very lucrative new branch of commerce, which will be attractive to merchants in the ports of Kamchatka; it will provide a new outlet for Russian products and increase the flow of imports, and it will open new and extensive lines of communication with Asia, America, and even Africa; all of which together will in a short time place this peninsula and its surrounding area in a position which, without these means, centuries could not bring about.

It should be noted that if the Russian officers requested were well-versed in the ordinary routine of the Navy, all that Mr. Bolts would, if necessary, have to teach them during the voyage would be the theory and practice of determining longitude according to the new method, through the assistance of the officers very expert in this subject that he has engaged for this voyage. As for the Russian seamen, there would be nothing easier than to have them arrive at the port of Livorno, and bring them to Trieste to embark. It must be observed, however, that it would be appropriate to defer the passage of these seamen until the last possible day so that the Plan will not be bandied about; it should be kept secret until the departure of the vessels, since secrecy is the soul of the success of such an expedition.

If Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of All the Russias adopts this Plan, the Undersigned flatters himself that she will deign to make a prompt decision, not only to take advantage of the current means that are at hand for this expedition, and the seasons of the year favourable to the proposed voyage, but more importantly to take advantage of the favourable circumstances of the present political situation of Europe, and to dispatch the vessels as soon as possible so as not to permit another nation to anticipate our designs.

Vienna, November 27, 1782

Guillaume Bolts

Note

Mr. William Bolts, currently in the Service of His Imperial, Royal and Apostolic Majesty, went in 1760 to Bengal, where he was employed for several years in the service of the British Company in the departments of accounting, commerce, jurisprudence, finance and politics; he also managed for several years, as is well known, the largest amount of trade both internal and overseas in all of India and in China, which no other European individual had ever done.

Finally disillusioned by the losses which a change in the administration of the affairs of the British Company, he returned to London, where he published his work entitled *Considerations on India Affairs*, which was later translated into German & French, so as to serve as a supplement to the philosophical and political history of Abbé Raynal.

For the last 7 years he has been in the service of His Majesty the Emperor, and as Lieutenant Colonel commanded the Austrian vessel *Joseph & Therese*, sailing by way of the Cape of Good Hope to the East Indies, and at the same time being charged by His Imperial Majesty of glorious memory with full powers to treat with the princes & sovereigns of this country, he founded on

the coast of Malabar & in the Nicobar Islands several establishments, in order to sustain the Austrian trade, which he had just made known to the public, under an authorisation that His Majesty granted him on June 5, 1775; since then he has sent various vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, namely the *Prince Kaunitz*, the *Baron Binder*, the *Collovrat* & the *Grand Duke of Tuscany*, all of which save the last, which is still in India, after having visited the coast of Malabar & Coromandel & traded there, returned to Europe with rich cargoes, some to Trieste and some to Livorno; aside from this he has employed in the Indies various vessels, which are still there, for the coastal transport of goods.

He returned to Europe in the year 1781 and, by virtue of the grant obtained, formed an official company for this trade, the capital for which amounts to two million Viennese florins *Crt.* [current] divided into shares, of which most are held in Brabant and Flanders: the directors of this company are Mr. Bolts, Count Proly, Mr. Borrekens & Nagels, the last three of whom live in Antwerp.

After putting in order his affairs in Brabant, Mr. Bolts travelled to England, where, with great difficulty and at considerable expense, he engaged in his service four fine officers who had made the voyage with Captain Cook, and obtained there the geographical charts and particular maps of the northwest coast of North America. Returning to Vienna, he proposed to His Majesty the Emperor an expedition under the Austrian flag to the northwest coast of North America by way of Cape Horn, but as His Majesty had no navy, nor found any value in becoming involved, my advice was to offer the means which he possesses for this expedition to Her Majesty the Empress of All the Russias, for no nation can derive so much advantage from it as Her Imperial Russian Majesty, as is stated in the Plan conceived by me jointly with Mr. Bolts.

Mr. Bolts, whose residence is in Vienna, is currently in Trieste, whence he is making an expedition independent of the aforementioned Company, the Ship the *Cobenzell* to depart for China by way of the Cape of Good Hope and return to Trieste, in accordance with his authorisation and with the plan he has made, on which various interested persons have already, up to the 20th December, signed for the sum of 140/7x2 florins Courant of Vienna.

This truthful account is written by order of His Highness Prince Gallitzin [1] by Bargun.

Vienna, December 31, 1782

[1]: Prince Dimitri Gallitzin, Russian Ambassador to Vienna.

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