CONCLUSION
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“There are at the present time two great nations in the world which seem to tend toward the same end, although they started from different points: I allude to the Russians and Americans...their starting point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems to be marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.”
-Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America

We began this book by claiming it was an experiment in Geography to understand two large states by comparing their component regions. We therefore had to decide what to include and compare, and what places to exclude. Our Russian and American team of geographers found little trouble in seeing elements of New York on Moscow’s streets, picturing Siberia’s open space and the great American West as mirror images, and finding pieces of Vermont just northeast of St. Petersburg. But when we sat back at our meetings, closed our eyes, and imagined California, we saw, well...California.
THE PLACES WE LEFT OUT

The places excluded from our new geography help explain why the eleven regions we did include form such strong parallels. They also remind us about the organic nature of boundaries and the fact that people will find ways to adjust to and overcome political borders, living instead within the true lines that define everyday life and culture.

California

The authors could find no legitimate Russian counterpart to California, although the suggestion was made that had Russia held onto Manchuria, it may have evolved into an apt parallel. We borrowed only a small portion of southern California for the Mexistan region, so what makes California largely un-pairable? With its size, economic strength, and agricultural richness, the state could stand on its own as an independent country. Twelve percent of the people in the United States live in California, and despite recent economic troubles, California puts out a remarkably large share of American farming and industrial products. Yet perhaps what makes California so unique is the fact that it best represents the United States of the future. The mixture of people who have converged in California give a demographic preview of the United States of the 21st century, when less Americans than ever before will be of white European ancestry, and people of color or of Hispanic origins will form a significant share of the American profile. This state already receives the major portion of new immigrants coming from Asia and Latin America. In the twentieth century, American culture is being exported all over the world, and most of that culture has been born in California. Los Angeles, with almost 15 million people in its greater urban area, is reaching out beyond the United States and becoming a leading city of the new Pacific Rim world region. In short, California suggested no Russian counterpart to us because it is a phenomenon as much as a place, and has no parallels anywhere in the world.
The Baltic States, Western Ukraine, Moldova

The fluidity of culture and borders was apparent when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics split up, new political units formed, and fifteen independent countries emerged. Yet the outward wave of Slavic society and influence did not quickly recede, and greater “Rossiya” is still alive along the border republics which we have included in the book, such as Belorus and Kazakhstan. On the other hand, when the authors designed the book’s scheme of regions, we excluded the Baltic Republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia from the start. In part this choice represented the recentness and controversy surrounding their incorporation into the USSR in 1940, but the decision to exclude them had as much to do with their cultural and historic differences from Russia. Lithuania itself for many centuries formed its own empire at the western edge of Russia; Estonian culture has more in common with that of Finland; and Latvia is a place of ancient Baltic traditions. With independence, the three republics have looked more toward economic integration with Europe, although Estonia retains a large and restless Russian population.

Western Ukraine bears little resemblance to the South of our book that includes eastern Ukraine, let alone to Russian territory. The religion here is Catholic, and the historic orientation toward the Central Europe of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that once incorporated its lands. Moldova likewise was taken into the USSR relatively late (1940) although as “Bessarabia”, its ancient name, it had been acquired by the tsars in the nineteenth century. Romanian culture dominates here, despite the presence of a significant Russian population with periodic suggestions of secession of the eastern edge from the Moldovan state.

Caucasus

It was not hard to give up immediately trying to find an American counterpart for territory in the Caucasus republics (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). With the exception
of the narrow coastal strip of Georgia we include in the Tropical South, the Caucasus are another peripheral zone separate to itself, despite years of inclusion within the USSR. We also excluded the Caucasian internal republics of Russia just across the mountains, such as Chechenya and Ingushetia. The people in all these areas live in what may be one of the most complex cultural regions of the world, where linguistic, historic, and religious differences all clash. Warfare has been a major feature of this zone of collision, with periodic fighting between Chechens and Russians, Chechens and Ingush, Abkhazians and Georgians, and Azeris and Armenians over control of territory.

Central Asia

In the lands south of Kazakhstan, a new consciousness is emerging for the people of Uzbekistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan who increasingly see themselves in terms of their own native heritage or as part of a greater Islamic or reborn Turkic world. Therefore, these places seem un-pairable with any counterpart in the United States, and indeed, seemed inevitably to be detaching from the USSR even at the start of our project. Tajikstan, with its Persian cultural heritage, has been engaged in fierce civil warfare, and Russia has not yet totally abandoned its influence on the region. The imprint of the communist era is still felt here in terms of the political background of some of its political leadership, the economic structure, and potential commercial ties back to Moscow. Yet culturally, the Russian realm is receding, and even the Cyrillic alphabet may soon be an historic artifact on the landscape.

All these regions did not fit into our book plan not only because they were essentially unpairable with a counterpart, but also because they did not fit into the heart identity of a new geography of Russia and America. They are places out of synch with time as well as territory. Just as California may represent the identity of America in the future, the former USSR republics we excluded were part of the past: a state held together ever so tentatively by a notion of a union “soviet” or a tsarist empire. Whether the borders
of that unit pulse outward again in the future has been less a question here than the core identity of what is and will stay as “Russia.”

THE LAST PLACE

But there is one region left to explain on our Russian and American maps, and it is perhaps unique, even to a greater degree than California. The region where the borders of the two countries actually meet along the Bering Sea is an elephant’s graveyard of boundaries. Here, the lines of longitude which define east and west on the planet begin a frantic convergence toward the poles. Only here did a geologic bridge once unite the two huge landmasses; and in this region geography shows its best irony as the Aleutian island chain goes so far west that Attu Island spills over the 180th meridian and gives Alaska the odd distinction of being both the easternmost and westernmost state in the United States. Even time itself gets converted by an odd boundary in this place as the international dateline turns Russia’s Monday into America’s Sunday.

In this region of strange geographies, Russia and the United States almost touch, with only three miles separating Big and Little Diomede Islands. There are no mirror regions here, only a territory in the Bering Sea where all that has both divided and unified Russia and America has been played out. In 1942, the two World War 2 allies exchanged lend-lease planes across the Alaska-Aiberian route, and by the end of the war, Soviet pilots had flown almost 8,000 U.S. airplanes to Russia; yet, merely a few years later in 1948, the line between the two countries became a wall, and the Cold War closed the touchpoint, isolating native communities who had always lived along these borders.

The bonds in this region between America and Asia went back even longer than the lifetime of the local people; in fact, 15,000 years ago, ice formed a link here and people from Asia traveled that landbridge which was one-thousand miles wide and claimed a
new world. The people who live here today from the Chuckchi of Siberia to the Inuit of Alaska to the decimated Yukaghirs of the Russian Far East, recently saw a reforming of the ancient linkage - this time by air as Alaska Airlines in 1988 reestablished the route that was severed by the Cold War. Yupiks from Nome flew to Provideniya in Russia to reclaim their connections with the people of Siberia.

Americans may be unaware of how many times Russia reached out across that frozen sea. The Russian explorer Simon Dezhnev was the first white man to traverse the water between the two continents. Vitrus Bering, for whom the Bering Strait was named, traveled in the name of the Russian empire, and Alexei Chirikov explored the region in 1741, followed then by a litany of Russian, British, and American seagoers. Russian fur traders and priests left behind a heritage of onion-domed churches along the Alaskan coast. When Count Nikolai Rezanov determined that his fur traders in Alaska were starving, he tried to extend his empire’s food search all the way to California where Fort Ross was established in 1812 (with far more native Alaskans in residence than Russians). Even today, services at St. Michael’s in Sitka, Alaska are given in Russian, English, and Tlingit.

Some of the earliest joint ventures between Russia and America were fishing activities that plied the waters of the Bering Sea, and commercial airline flights as well as tourists now fly the arc that unites the two countries. Non-human inhabitants also persist in overcoming the international border. Every year, 25,000 snow geese from Wrangel Island leave their breeding grounds and fly to distant Washington State for winter break. Cooperative Russian and American scientific work in the Bering Sea and Arctic area focus on polar bear, sea lion, whales, and walruses. An international park has been proposed between western Alaska and eastern Chukhota to unite Russian and American efforts to protect the special cultural and wildlife heritage of the Bering Sea bridge.
Our portrait of Russia and America then may end at this last place where two continents touch and lines defining entire hemispheres and even time itself are drawn in confidence not by nature, but by human convention. But the sureness with which past borders on the globe have been rendered is giving way to puzzlement, and the geography of tomorrow may seem more and more beyond the understanding of most people. With a North American Free Trade Agreement that breaks down boundaries between the neighbors of the western hemisphere and threatened civil wars of secession to trouble Russia, the permanence of borders may increasingly be a comfortable illusion. Perhaps the best way to make sense of a world map that seems to be a moving target is to understand the real regions that people create through their common lives together. At best, the rest may be just lines on a piece of paper.