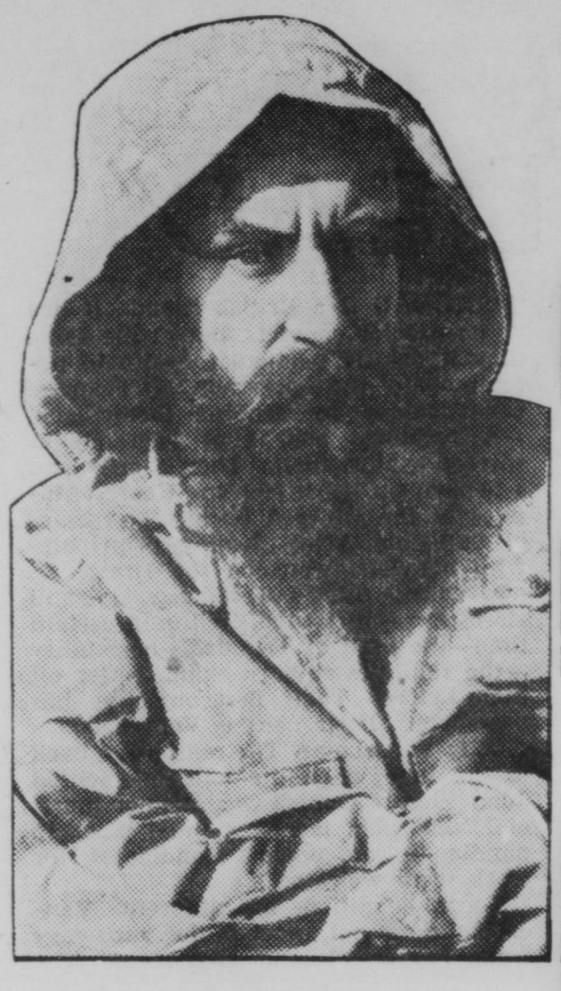
RUSSIA'S CONQUEST of the ARCTIC



Planes brought in equipment and supplies for the four daring men who sought to spend an entire year, despite Arctic hazards, in a camp on the polar ice floe. . . . At left, Prof. Otto J. Schmidt, leader of the spectacular Russian flight to the North Pole.

By Dr. Frank Thone

WHEN a Russian airplane slid to a stop on an ice floe at the North Pole, one day this spring, all of Soviet Russia celebrated jubilantly.

Not because it was a sensational stunt. Other men have visited the pole. Peary got there, something like 30 years ago. Byrd, Amundsen, Nobile and others have flown over it. And the Russian government is not out for stunts, anyway.

Its flight to the pole—where, on a drifting floe, four men planned to stay a year, polar hazards permitting—was simply one more step in a grandiose scheme for conquering the frozen Arctic and putting it to work.

That was why Russia wanted to establish a camp at the pole. Scientific observations over a year's time would tell much about the "weather's kitchen," where the northland's storms are made. They would also show whether a trans-polar air service would be feasible, and would help make possible navigation of the sea along the Arctic coast of Siberia.

The expedition was in the charge of Prof. Otto J. Schmidt. The four men who attempted to establish a permament camp on the floe were Ivan Papanin, once manager of a polar station in Franz Josef Land; Ernest Krenkel, radio operator, who went to the Antarctic with Byrd in 1930; Pytor Shirsoff, hydro-biologist, and Eugene Federoff, magnetologist.

Other airplanes brought equipment, supplies and the like to the men on the ice. Their venture was admittedly risky, due to the way polar ice floes often break up without warning—but they accepted the risks as a part of Russia's long-range plan.

Mightiest undertaking is the conquest of Russia's Arctic—the long-neglected dozenfold Alaska of the Old World.

A GLANCE at a commercial atlas of Asia will show the opportunities, the possibilities, the problems, the difficulties of this conquest. Russian Asia consists mainly of a great plain sloping northward toward the Arctic. Its southern part consists of grassland and desert, giving way northwardly to the world's most enormous virgin forests of evergreens, and these in turn to the bleak inhospitable Arctic brush and grassland known as the Tundra.

Through all this, from south to north, flow half-a-dozen mighty rivers: Ob, Yenisei, Khatanga, Lena, Indirgka, and a number of others. These would be ideal for floating logs down to the sea, for cheap transportation to a world now grown very hungry for lumber and paper-pulp. That is, they would be ideal, if that sea were any but the Arctic Ocean, traditionally the one wide water in the whole world that is forbidden to ships.

But the new effort by the Russians is distinctly aimed at getting paying numbers of commercial ships in and out of the Arctic during the open season, to bring colonists and supplies and to take out lumber, mineral ores, and other products of the country.

The ambitious foundations thus far laid were described a short time ago by an impartial observer, H. P. Smolka, a Viennese geographer—and, incidentally, a non-Communist—before a meeting of the Royal Geographical Survey in London.

For shipping venturers into the Northeast Passage, the starting point is the port of Murmansk, on the coast near the Finnish border. Paradoxically, Murmansk on the Arctic is Russia's only port on open water that is ice-free the year round. A branch of the Gulf Stream accounts for that.

Even newer than Murmansk are the port towns that have been founded on the wide mouths of the great north-flowing rivers of Asia, the Ob, the Yenisei, and the Lena. Here the lumber steamers call for cargo, and here are timber-handling wharves and sawmills. The town names are Novi Port on the Ob (that would be Newport, in English), Port Igarka on the Yenisei, and Port Tiski on the Lena.

Of these three settlements, Port Igarka is the largest. Its population, as reported by Mr. Smolka, is about 14,000—including a couple of thousand children. About 4000 of the population were exiled Kulaks—well-to-do peasants who resisted taxes and the Soviet farm collectivization program.

DISCLAIMING knowledge of actual conditions some years ago, when these Kulaks were alleged by many news sources to be very badly treated. Mr. Smolka made the following statement regarding their present status:

"Now they are paid normal wages for their work in Igarka, and outwardly they can hardly be distinguished from the free workers. They live door to door with them. . . .

"Their children are rapidly assimilated to the new society. They go to school with those of the free workers, and when they reach the age of 18 are given all political rights and allowed to join even the Communist organizations, which is a privilege in Russia.

"The Kulaks themselves are restored to their civil rights and given passports if, after a number of years, the authorities decide that they have worked well, have shown interest in factory production, and on the whole have proved themselves to be 'dekulakized'."

Timber of course is not the only source of wealth that is exported from these Arctic ports, though it is as yet the principal one. In some places metal ores have been discovered and work has begun on these mines, particularly for nickel, because of its importance in the huge Soviet armament program. Coal near the surface is being dug, but principally for refueling the ships that come for cargo and the ice-breakers that open paths for them.

The whole job of navigating on the Siberian north coast is a difficult one, for ice is always a menace to navigation. To scout best ways for cargo ships to get through, airplanes based on shore and island stations take to the air when ships approach, and radio down directions.

There is even the prospect of tourist trade in the Arctic. Tass, official news agency of the U. S. S. R., has announced a tour starting at Murmansk, taking in points of interest around Novaya Zemlya, and returning by way of Archangel.

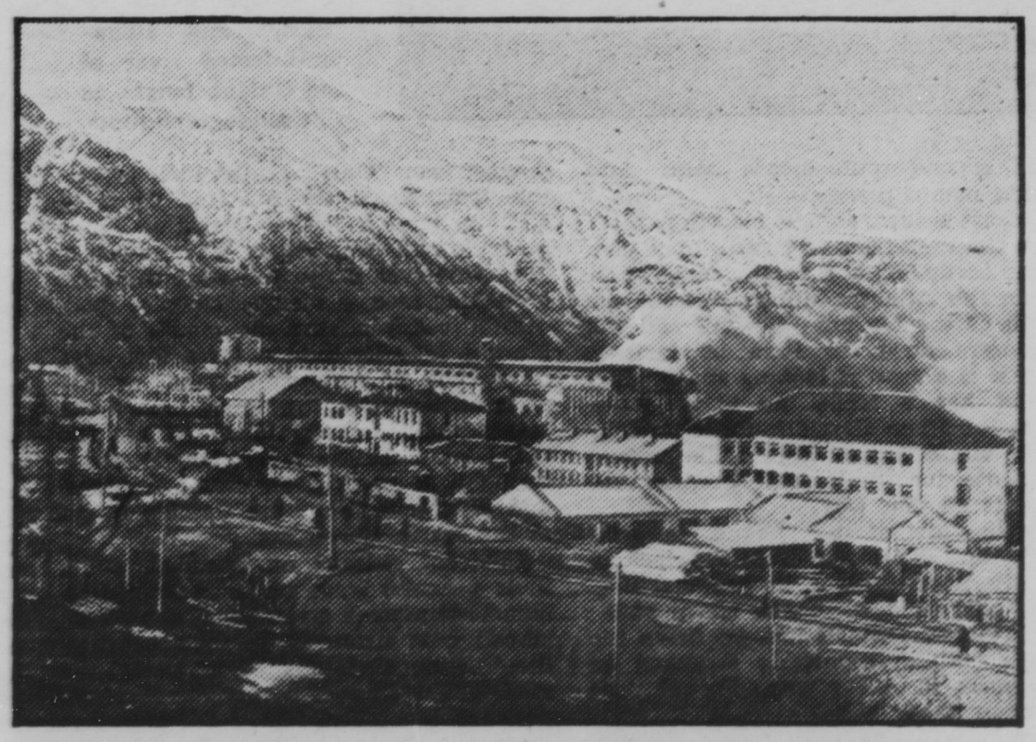
A FURTHER possible usefulness of the Passage is suggested by Mr. Smolka. In the event of a European war bottling up Russia within her own boundaries, it might be possible for steamers to follow the Arctic coast to Bering Strait, thence southwardly along coasts covered by the American and British flags, to obtain supplies in the United States and Canada.

On return, their cargoes would be carried up one of the great Asiatic rivers to Novosibirsk or Omsk on the Siberian Railroad. That would be just about a shellproof route for at least the most vital materials, such as certain drugs and hospital supplies, and possibly the rarer metals.

One aspect of the Soviet venture in the Arctic that always makes the stranger's eyes pop out is the cultivation of vegetables in the Far North. Successful outdoor crops thus far have been principally salad vegetables such as radishes and cabbage, and (with somewhat less eclat) potatoes. Moreover, the presence of fair numbers of horses and cows has necessitated the raising of hay.

One of the factors most likely to be overlooked by anybody unused to high latitudes is the very long day of the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. The vegetables and hay get 24 hours of sunlight every day during the greater part of their growing season. Naturally they grow fast and get big.

Sometimes special breeds are necessary, for this very reason. When the big white radishes that Russians like so well were attempted in the North, they all ran to leaves and produced small, stringy, inedible roots. But geneticists worked out a new strain that would take the long Arctic daylight and turn it into enormous radishes as big around as a man's leg.



There is something suggestive of a raw, new-built city in Uncle Sam's own Alaska, in this view of Khibinogorsk on the Kola peninsula.