Did Benyovszky reach the Bering Strait?

Andy Drummond, March 2025

According to his published *Memoirs* (London, 1790),[1] the adventurer Móric Benyovszky spent the period between 12 May and 23 July 1771 sailing in a ship up the east coast of Kamchatka, across the Bering Sea, then down and westwards through the Aleutian Islands, before following the chain of the Kuril Islands down to Shikoku in Japan. This voyage was the beginning of his dramatic escape, along with several dozen others, from the Russian ssettlement where many POWs and 'enemies of the State' were being held. The voyage eventually terminated in the Chinese port of Macao, some four months after it began; and four months after that, Benyovszky and his comrades found passage to Europe on board French merchant ships.

Chronologies

The part of the voyage between Kamchatka and Japan took 72 days, or ten weeks. Those ten weeks included the dates and events listed below. Any latitude and longitude figures are Benyovszky's own, rounded to the nearest degree; the longitude figures have been adjusted here to compensate for the fact that Benyovszky took Bolsheretsk (156° east) as his meridian – but they are impossibly inaccurate.

- 12 May, depart Bolsheretsk [2]
- 14 May, passed between the northernmost of the Kuril islands [3]
- 20 May, arrive at Bering Island [55° north, 164° east] [4]
- 27 May, depart Bering Island [5]
- 29 May, heading north towards "Tchukchi territory" [59° north, 170° east] [6]
- 5 June, at mouth of the Anadyr River [65° north, 182° east] [7]
- 12 June, somewhere off the coast of "America" [60° north, 192° east/168° west] [8]
- 17 June, travelling westwards along the chain of the Aleutian Islands [9]
- 21 June, land at the Aleutian island of "Urumusir" (possibly Adak or Atka?) [52° north, 184° east/176° west] [10]
- 29 June, depart Aleutians and sail south-west [11]
- 2 July, arrive at an unknown island, possibly a South Kuril or a Japanese one [46° north, 167° east] [12]
- 16 July, arrive at a Japanese island named 'Liquor' – perhaps Aogashima or Hachijō-jima in the Izu islands? [32° north, 151° east] [13]
- 23 July, arrive at another Japanese island, most likely Shikoku [33° north, 143° east] [14]

Later, on 26 August, the ship arrives at Formosa (present-day Taiwan). [15]

In two alternative accounts of this voyage of escape from Kamchatka, both written by fellow-travellers on the ship, a different set of dates is proposed. The Kamchatkan clerk Ivan Ryumin recorded: [16]

- 12 May, depart Bolsheretsk
- 17 to 29 May, stopped at one of the Kuril islands, described as 'Ikoza' or the 'seventeenth Kuril' (from the north?) This island is otherwise unidentifiable. Here the ship's complement baked bread and repaired the ship's flags and sails.
- 29 May, the sailor Izmailov and two other mutineers are abandoned on this island, before the ship heads south.
- 8 July, arrive at an unnamed Japanese island, probably Shikoku.

On 9 August, they anchor off Formosa.

And the disgraced Russian army captain, Ippolit Stepanov, proposed the following chronology. [17] He provides very few dates, which is unhelpful; his German editor, Ebeling, a man greatly critical of Stepanov, may have inserted some dates which he imagined to be correct, which is also unhelpful.

- 12 May, depart Bolsheretsk
- 18 May to 12 June, at anchor off one of the Kuril islands (unnamed). Here they baked bread and so forth. (It is not impossible that some editorial sleight of hand happened here, to add 11 days to the actual departure date – see 'Dates' section below. This would align better with Ryumin's account.)
- 8 or 9 July, arrive at an unnamed Japanese island, which we must suppose to be Shikoku

On 11 August, they arrive at Formosa.

Distances

Benyovszky's logs are difficult to follow with any confidence. But after his arrival in France, he had the excellent idea of creating his own map, on which he marked the ship's course. [18] If we use that map to measure distances, then: from Bolsheretsk up to the Bering Sea and down to the final island on the Aleutian chain, the distance is approximately 4,500 kms. From there to what we suppose was Shikoku, a further 4,500 kms, so 9,000 kms. In 72 days, 9,000 kms represents around 125 kms per day, assuming no stops. That, in a leaky old ship not designed for high seas sailing, is fast going. And, of course, there were stops, many of them, some for several days: by Benyovszky's own account, seven days were spent ashore on Bering Island, [19] four at the mouth of the Anadyr, [20] and five on the Aleutians [21] – a total 16 days. Which reduces the days under sail to 56 days, and increases the average daily rate to 160 kms. (We will ignore other days and hours spent ashore on random islands.)

A simple comparison can be made between these daily travel rates and those experienced by Benyovszky and his comrades when they sailed from Macao to France in early 1772. The distance between Macao and Mauritius, where supplies and water were taken on, is very approximately 8,700 kms. The French ships – built for the Far East trade, well-maintained, fully-rigged and crewed by experienced and professional seamen – crossed the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean in 54 days, apparently untroubled by bad weather: a rate of 161 kms per day. [22] The onwards journey from Mauritius to France was approximately 16,000 kms, and took 105 days: 152 kms per day. Benyovszky, on his leaky and largely unseaworthy galliot, had a mixed crew of sailors, hunters and soldiers, battling against icebergs and occasional hurricanes. Is it really plausible that he maintained an equivalent – or better – rate of progress? (Another comparison: according to Benyovszky himself, the same type of supply ship as the *St Peter* carried him from Okhotsk, on the Siberian mainland, to Kamchatka in twelve days: the distance is around 1200 kms. An average daily rate, therefore, of 100 kms…)[23]

Dates

But something else odd is happening here. Bear in mind that any dates recorded by Benyovszky and his fellow-travellers would probably be in the "old style" Julian calendar, which was at that time eleven days behind the "new style" Gregorian calendar. Russia did not adopt Gregorian dates until 1918, while most of Europe had done so by 1750. Having been in Russia and Siberia for around 18 months, Benyovszky would have had no reason to adhere to the "New Style" calendar; so his stated date of departure from Kamchatka – 12 May [24] – would have been "Old Style", in full agreement with the two Russians, Ryumin and Stepanov, who would never even have imagined using the "New Style". But while the latter pair reported reaching Formosa on 9 or 11 August, Benyovszky recorded it as 26 August, around sixteen days later. He already arrived at the island of Shikoku fifteen days after Ryumin and Stepanov. Could it be that his narrative switched from Julian to Gregorian calendar, and filled in the extra days with adventures? This is exactly what he seems to have done. On their onward journey to China, Ryumin tells us that they arrived at Macao on 12 September, while Benyovszky and (Stepanov via his German editor) state the 22 September. And European observers in Macao, such as Nathaniel Barlow, also report 22 September (Gregorian "new style") as the date of their arrival.[25] So a switch of

calendar had clearly been made, one which would allow Benyovszky to squeeze in far more activity than might otherwise be possible.

Happily, there is one other witness to the arrival of the ship *St Peter* in Japan. A report written by a Japanese official in "the eighth year of Meiwa" (1771), indicates that one "Han-bengoro" and his ship had landed at the small town of Sakinohama on Shikoku, on "the eighth day of the sixth month". [26] This equates to "New Style" 19 July. "Old Style" would then be 8 July, which – interestingly – is the very date put on that event by both Ryumin and Stepanov. (The Japanese description of the events at Shikoku aligns very closely with those described by all three chroniclers aboard ship.) So did the painstaking Japanese somehow make a mistake about the date of a very rare and potentially dangerous event? Or was perhaps Benyovszky wrong? (On 8 July, Benyovszky said that he and the ship were somewhere in the middle of the ocean: 41° north, 152° east – about 750 kms east of Hokkaido.) [27]

And of course, if just one type of calendar is consistently used throughout, then Benyovszky's account becomes even more impossible: he would only have been 45 days at sea, averaging a turbo-charged 200 kms per day.

Other inconsistencies

The weird and wonderful chronology is not the only problem here. There are other serious problems of credibility in Benyovszky's narrative of the voyage up to the Bering Sea.

The first of these is the ice pack. At that time of the year, the ice north of the Bering Strait is beginning to break up and pour through the strait into the Bering Sea. Icebergs would be a major hazard, and even smaller floes would also be both an obstacle, particularly down the east coast of Siberia. Benyovszky records that they did indeed meet with such dangers when travelling northwards; but, sometimes by a deft use of cannonballs fired from the ship's gun, avoided disaster. [28] However, on their way back south from the most northerly point on their journey, barely a week or two later, very little ice was encountered. [29] There does not seem to be any logic to this.

Then there was the lack of daylight in the evening. On 7 June, Benyovszky records that a landing party had been forced to return to the ship, well before 8 o'clock in the evening, due to "the approach of night". [30] If we consider that this place, by Benyovszky's readings, was at the same latitude as Reykjavik (or slightly further north than Anchorage), and that it was almost midsummer, when the sun sets at that latitude close on midnight … then "the approach of night" some considerable time before eight o'clock is patently absurd.

And finally, there remains the very basic question: why did Benyovszky sail north after leaving Kamchatka? The original plan dreamed up by the plotters on Kamchatka was to make for the south – either Acapulco in Mexico, or Tinian Island in the middle of the Pacific, were the destinations of choice, informed by a book of Lord Anson's voyages. When the escapees first arrived in Macao, the Europeans there were informed that this had been the plan; [31] and when the voyagers were thwarted by adverse weather conditions from reaching Acapulco, they had directed the ship towards the Philippines; and then strayed northwards towards Japan. Such a plan, although doomed to failure, was at least logical: get as far away from Russia as possible, to warmer climes. So why head north, along the Russian coastline, and then through the Aleutian Islands. And, having reached the Aleutians, why not turn south from there to Mexico? According to Benyovszky's account, the decision to head north after passing the southernmost cape of Kamchatka was his alone. [32] The crew had even argued that they should try to reach America by travelling ever northwards – even though Benyovszky himself thought privately that it would be an impossible journey. The whole direction of travel was, in fact, very odd indeed.

Is there a defence case?

There are still plenty of historians and commentators inclined to believe that Benyovszky's account of the voyage into the Bering Sea were quite true. The Polish historian Edward Kajdanski, for example,

states unequivocally that the drawings of islands and headlands, made by Benyovszky during the voyage and reproduced in the printed *Memoirs*, proved without doubt that he had been at Mechigmensky Bay (north of the mouth of the Anadyr) and St Lawrence Island. [33] He also suggests that the diaries of Ryumin and Stepanov were in some way invented or redacted by Russian agents and that other evidence was suppressed by the Russians in order to give Benyovszky a bad name. [34] Others have proposed that the map which Benyovszky produced in 1772, for presentation to the Duc d'Aiguillon, proved beyond doubt that Benyovszky had sailed where he said he sailed. [35] (Sadly, it is only a map showing where Benyovszky said he sailed.) The English editor Pasfield Oliver, who had little time for Benyovszky, still went to the immense trouble of trying to make sense of the adventurer's positions and directions of voyage; but then concluded that the whole Bering Sea episode was a fiction. [36]

If we discount the testaments of both Ryumin and Stepanov; and agree with Kajdanski that the Russians were planting false evidence; and assume, charitably, that Benyovszky was always working with a "New Style" calendar; and let slide the inconsistencies of "approaching night" and vanishing ice; even then, Benyovszky's own timetable explodes the defence case. To date, all evidence adduced to prove that he really had been in the Bering Sea has never yet addressed the huge problems of timetable and distance.

Voyage	Distance (kms)	Total days at sea – single Style calendar (SS)	Total days at sea – mixed Style calendar (MS)	(SS) average progress per day (kms)	(MS) average progress per day (kms)
Kamchatka → Shikoku *(The galliot 'St Peter')*	9,000	45	56	200	160
Macao → Mauritius *(French oceanic merchant ship)*	8,700	54		161	
Mauritius → France *(French oceanic merchant ship)*	16,000	105		152	

Conclusions

Major chronological discrepancies, impossible distances travelled, curious weather and daylight anomalies, the abrupt change of plan – all combine to suggest that what Benyovszky wrote of a voyage northwards from the Kurils, almost as far as – and possibly even into – the Bering Strait, was far from being accurate. The purpose served by such a tale, as with many of the other events and social encounters described in his *Memoirs*, was to enhance Benyovszky's reputation as an explorer of new lands and a reliable coloniser; with such a man, the investments of (say) the French State or of private individuals would surely be guaranteed a profitable return. This man could go anywhere, see everything, charm native peoples and do business with them. The *Memoirs*, in short, constitute a huge and energetic sales pitch.

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1 The Memoirs and Travels of Mauritius Augustus, Count de Benyowsky. Translated from the original manuscript (by W. Nicholson). 2 vols., London, 1790. Available online at https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Rr0NAAAAQAAJ and https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=r70NAAAAQAAJ

2 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.302

3 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.303

4 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.306

5 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.318

6 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.320

7 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.326

8 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.331

9 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.334

10 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.338

11 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.350

12 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.355

13 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.371

14 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.383
15 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.384
16 For Ryumin's account, see *Zapiski Kantselyarista Ryumina o priklyutsheniyach' ego s' Beniovskim*. In: Siberian Archiv. St. Petersburg, 1822
17 For Stepanov's account, see: C.D and J.P. Ebeling (eds.). *Neuere Geschichte der See- und Land-Reisen, Vol.IV. Begebenheiten und Reisen des Grafen Moritz August von Benjowsky […] wie auch einem Auszug aus Hippolitus Stefanows russisch geschriebenem Tagebuche*. Hamburg 1791
18 For more on this map, see https://rcin.org.pl/igipz/Content/33941/WA51_51248_r2013-t86-no2_G-Polonica-Bandzo-An.pdf
19 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.306-318
20 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.326-331
21 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.338-350
22 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. II, pp.88-89
23 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, pp.78-80
24 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.302
25 See Nathaniel Barlow's report in The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle, Vol.52, London 1772, pp.272-273
26 See Luke Roberts, Shipwrecks and Flotsam: The Foreign World in Edo-Period Tosa. In: Monumenta Nipponica, Vol.70, No.1, 2015. pp.83-122; specifically pp.97-102
27 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.363
28 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.302 and p.320
29 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.330
30 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.328
31 See: Barlow (1772), p.272
32 *Memoirs* (1790), Vol. I, p.303
33 Edward Kajdanski, *The First European in the "Great Country"*, in: Warsaw Voice, 30 July 1989.
34 See for example, Edward Kajdanski, *Maurycy Beniowski i hrabia Błudow (Maurice Benyovszky and Count Bludov)* in: Między Innymi, 1988, v. 11-12, p. 56-59
35 See Note 18 above
36 See *The Memoirs and Travels of … Bnyowsky*, edited by Captain Pasfield Oliver, London 1893, p.50