Sergei Ivanovich Rudenko (1885-1969) published the first significant contributions to our knowledge of the archaeology and prehistory of the Asiatic Eskimos living on the Russian side of the Bering Strait (Rudenko, 1947a,b). The work on which this was based took place towards the end of a distinguished scientific career and represented an essentially new direction for him, although one of his earliest papers, published in 1910 in the first volume of “Materials on the Ethnography of Russia” with his remarkable teacher and mentor F.K. Volkov, was devoted to an extensive illustrated description of “Ethnographic collections from the former Russian-America”. His seminal publications on Eskimo archaeology resulted from an expedition in the summer of 1945 in which he visited sites along the coast of the Chukotka Peninsula, an expedition that was also remarkable for having taken place immediately after the end of World War II in the face of the extensive destruction and deprivations suffered by the Soviet Union, especially in Leningrad where Rudenko was a professor at the University.

Sergei Rudenko grew up in the city of Perm in the Urals, an area in which there were numerous Finno-Ugric peoples whose culture attracted his interest at an early age, leading to his beginning his own ethnographic collections during his high school years. In 1904 he began his university studies in the Department of Physics and Mathematics in the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the Imperial St. Petersburg University. Although Rudenko is
best known for his important achievements in archaeology, physical anthropology and ethnography, this early interest and grounding in the physical sciences later came to play an important role in his life, especially in relation to the hydrological engineering work he carried out during and following the time he spent as a prisoner after he was arrested and purged (“repressed”) in 1930.

As a student at St. Petersburg University he developed an interest in physical anthropology, and from a 1909-1910 expedition to the Volga region of northwestern Siberia he brought back a rich collection of ethnographic material and anthropometric measurements from the Mansi, Khanty and Nenets (Masson, 1965; Zenko, 2005). After finishing university in 1910 Rudenko became a scientific employee of the Russian Academy of Sciences, where he continued his ethnological, archaeological and physical anthropological studies of the Finno-Ugric peoples. He received a Masters degree from Moscow University in 1917 and from 1919-1921 lived in Tomsk, where he was professor of geography and anthropology at Tomsk University. In 1921 Rudenko returned to Petrograd where he became professor of anthropology at the University, at the same time heading an ethnographic department of what is now the Russian Ethnographic Museum. In the 1920s Rudenko became one of the leaders in Russian ethnology and archaeology, gaining special attention for his excavation of the now world-famous Pazyryk mound in the Altai permafrost, a sensational find that led to a entirely new understanding of Scythian civilization, and whose objects are now a prized part of the collections of the Hermitage museum.

However, life changed abruptly for Rudenko when on August 5th, 1930 he was unexpectedly arrested on false charges by the OGPU (the State Political Department of People's Commissars, or secret police), and sent to Leningrad for interrogation in relation to his supposed involvement with a “counter-revolutionary monarchist organization” allegedly headed by the prominent historian and academician Sergei Platonov (who was arrested earlier in 1930 and exiled to Samara, where he died three years later). In February 1931 Rudenko was sentenced to 10 years in a labor camp, where he worked on problems related to hydrology and geography of the White Sea-Baltic Sea complex (Ponkratova, 2004). After his release in March 1934 he chose to continue his hydrological work, that was highly esteemed by the office of the Soviet secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria. He returned to Leningrad just before the beginning of World War II, and in 1942 he received a doctoral degree in Technical Sciences (engineering) based on hydrological works that he published in the 1930s. Rudenko did not like to remember the 1930s, but there are indications that his work in the special labor camp for prisoners with useful technical knowledge (sharashka) played a crucial role in supplying fuel to besieged Leningrad through pipes laid on the bottom of Lake Ladoga. For this reason, although he was a former political prisoner, at the beginning of the war he was entrusted with work in the office of the Hydrometeorological Service of the Leningrad front (Kocheshkov, 2003).

In 1942 he began work at the Institute of the History of Material Culture (now the Archaeological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences). His primary work was in archaeology, in Chukotka in the summer of 1945, and in the Altai mountains (Gorny Altai) from 1947-1954. During his last years Rudenko was director of the radiocarbon laboratory
at the Archaeological Institute in Leningrad, and also headed the department of
ethnography of the Geographic Society of the USSR (Masson, 1965; Zenko, 2005).

Despite its importance, surprisingly little is known of the circumstances and
organization of Rudenko’s archaeological survey in the summer of 1945 of Eskimo sites
along the coast of the Chukotka Peninsula, from the town of Uelen in the north to the
village of Sireniki in the south. Consultation of Rudenko's personal archives stored in the
St. Petersburg branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences did not help to clarify matters
since there are essentially no surviving documents pertaining to the Chutotka expedition.
However, in one document found in the archives Rudenko wrote that his "trip was due to
the exceptional interest in Denmark and the United States concerning the origin of the
Eskimos and their culture, which could not be resolved without examining the Asian part of
the Bering Strait and the adjacent part of the Asian coast of the Arctic Ocean " (Yanshina
and Ponkratova, 2010). Although up to the time of his Chukotka expedition Rudenko had
no connection with Arctic archaeology, his early interest in this area is evident from an
archival document from 1930 when he was in exile and asked a friend to obtain for him a
book on the archaeology of the Greenland Eskimos from the library of the Museum of
Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE, Kunstkamera) in Leningrad.

Despite many gaps in our knowledge of its background, we know that Rudenko’s
1945 expedition to the Chukotka Peninsula was organized on behalf of the Leningrad
Branch of the Institute of History of Material Culture of the Academy of Sciences in
cooperation with (and financed by) the Arctic Institute of the Northern Sea Route, and that
its objectives were formulated very specifically to explore the coast of the Chukotka
Peninsula in order to identify possible genetic links with the cultures of the local population
in North America, including Alaska.

In 1948, after preparing for publication his book on the “Ancient Culture of the
Bering Sea and the Eskimo Problem”, Rudenko transferred to the Department of
Archaeology of the MAE 18 “collections” (each of which usually contained finds from a
single location) comprising a total of approximately 2000 objects. Although he acted as
registrar of his collections and compiled an inventory of all finds, it is often impossible to
match objects in the collections with those described and illustrated in his publication
(Yanshina and Ponkratova, 2010).

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