THE NEW SIBERIA

Siberia covers an area of 4,786,730 square miles, which is nearly 1,800,000 square miles larger than the area of the United States, exclusive of Alaska, and about one-ninth of the whole continental surface of the globe. To the mind of most readers (writes the Rev. E. Spillane, S.J., in *America*) the name Siberia calls up the picture of a region covered with ice and snow, or a barren and desolate land, uninhabited save by exiled convicts and political prisoners, their keepers, and the agents of the Russian Government with their families. It is the last quarter of the globe where signs of material progress would be looked for, such as any agricultural or industrial activity, or any notable increase in its isolated population. Recent developments, however, seem to indicate that this weird, one is tempted to call it uncanny, region is awakening from the slumber or torpor of ages.

According to data published by the central statistical committee of Russia, the population of Siberia on January 1, 1910, was 8,219,020. This is a million more than the population of Canada, which in 1911 was 7,205,364, and almost the exact figure for the population within the area of the United States in 1820. From the time of the last general census in 1897, the population of the Russian Empire increased 31.1 per cent., while that of Siberia increased 40.5 per cent. The increase for the United States during the same period was about 20 per cent. How productive the Provinces of Siberia are to-day, the American Consul at Vladivostok says, it is impossible to state, but he ventures the prediction that this region will probably be

An Important Source of the World's Food

supply at no distant day. One of the most flourishing districts of Siberia is that embraced in the Government of Amur, where the construction of the railroad on the north bank of the Amur River is progressing, and by 1915 will be completed as far as Khabarovsk. This road will provide a railway across Asia entirely in Russian territory without depending on the Chinese eastern line across Manchuria. The section of the Amur railroad from Khabarovsk to Nikolaiefsk on the Pacific has already been begun. Considering the fact that the work was started only in 1909, and the natural obstacles such as eternal frost, dense thickets of virgin taiga, or native bush, rivers, and mountains and bottomless swamps, have been apparently endless, it must be admitted that the results attained are indeed remarkable.

Though the name 'Sibir' appears in Russian chronicles in 1407 for the first time, Russians knew the territory east of the Ural mountains much earlier. But it was only in the latter part of the sixteenth century that Russia made good her conquests there and founded Tiumen and Tobolsk, the first Russian cities built in Siberia. Seventy-five years after Yermak, the conqueror of Sibir, crossed the Urals into the almost unknown land beyond, Russia had swept across Asia; her boundaries touched the frozen ocean in the north and China in the south; and in 1697 Kamchatka was added.

From 1689 to 1854, however, the junction of the Argun and the Shilka was the most easterly point of the Russian Empire in the region of the Amur. But during all this period of 165 years the frontier Cossacks were constantly penetrating into the country on the north of the Amur. In 1854, Muravieff, the Governor-General of Oriental Siberia, organised a great expedition to explore that river. It was conducted on so vast a scale that the Chinese could neither check his progress nor prevent his taking possession of the north bank of the river. This was the commencement of

A New Era for Siberia,

for Russia was now in possession of a great water course extending from the Pacific more than 2200 miles into the eastern portion of the Empire and affording the only means of access from the sea to the vast plains and mountain districts of Central Asia. Many of the resources of the country that had long been neglceted were called into active operation, and an industrious and intelligent population sprang up, where ignorance and indolence had long held sway. For his acquisition of the Amur River, Muravieff received the title of count, and was known thereafter as Count Muravieff Amuriski. To-day a triumphal arch in Irkutsk, the capital of Eastern Siberia, commemorates the winning of a way to the great ocean.

Manchuria, which is separated from Russian territory by the Amur, lies to the south. It is to-day the field of active and successful missionary work carried on in two Vicariates Apostolic. But the inhabitants north of the Amur have only that exclusive brand of Christianity which the present owners of the soil have carried with them from the West. The present attitude of the Russian Government is decidedly hostile to Catholic propaganda. There was one attempt, however, to carry the Cross into this region before the Russians got possession. The English traveller Atkinson relates

The Story of Two Catholic Missionaries,

De la Bruniere and Venault, who came up from China, and after several years' residence in Manchuria penetrated into the region inhabited by the tribes on the banks of the Amur. De la Bruniere and his companion, about the year 1845, entered the country of the Gelyaks, fanatics of the deepest dye, with whom Shamanism was said to be more ingrained than with any other race in Asia. The missionaries exposed the impious tricks of the high priests of Satan, but they paid for their heroism with their lives. They were cruelly put to death by the fanatical Gelyaks. This happened but a few years before the territory was annexed to Russia by Muravieff's expedition.

The story of Russian colonisation in Siberia has an interest all its own. As early as 1590 the Russian Government aided thirty peasant families to emigrate to her new territory, and three years later the first exiles were deported to that region from Uglitch, a place north of Moscow. In the seventeenth century slowly but steadily the Russians pushed towards the east. In 1652, Irkutsk was founded, and the territory around Lake Baikal was brought under Russian supremacy.

This portion of South Central Siberia is of great historic interest, for the region south of Lake Baikal was the birthplace of the Mongol race, whose great warriors, among them Jinghis Khan and Tamerlane, once subdued and ruled China, devastated Russia, conquered Burma, overran Persia, took possession of Asia Minor and Constantinople, and leaving towns and cities a smoking ruin, deluged a great part of Europe with blood.

At the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century

there were already 250,000 Russians in Siberia, which number had a century later increased to 1,500,000 persons. From 1754 the Russian Government began the systematic exiling of convicts and prisoners of war to Siberia, where they were partly settled on the land and partly employed in the mines. In the fourth decade of the last century Roman Catholics were included among these unfortunates. The first victims fell under the displeasure of Nicholas I., who sought to convert by force Uniat Ruthenians and Lithuanians to the Orthodox Church. After the Polish revolt of 1863, the descendants of the earlier exiles were joined by thousands of Catholics and hundreds of priests, who preferred the hardships of a land of exile to the renunciation of the faith they held so dear.

It will be news to many that the Siberian Catholics to-day number about 75,000, who belong ecclesiastically to the archdiocese of Mohileff. These, however, are scattered over so vast an area that the difficulties of caring for them by the comparatively small number of priests are well-nigh insuperable. Had the exiled Catholics been allowed to form independent settlements of their own the story would be different; but among other restrictions forced upon them by their oppressors they were compelled to live in small towns already established. Add to this the condition of the exiles, exhausted in mind and body by their previous