

## Southwest Alaska

### 1743-1867 Era of Russian Violence

In this section you will learn about:

Exploitation of insular Southwest Alaska  
Exploration of riverine Southwest Alaska

#### Fur traders conquer insular Southwest Alaska

When survivors of Bering's Alaska expedition struggled back to Russia with their raft load of sea otter skins in 1742, they set off a fur rush. Russians sailed from Kamchatka in makeshift boats in pursuit of furs. Sergeant Emelian Basof made the first fur-gathering expedition in 1743, in a small craft he called The Kapltan. Others quickly sought to imitate his success.

Fugitive serfs, ex convicts, debtors--along with a few sailors--made up the crews of vessels in the new fur trade. All in all, the men heading to the Aleutian Islands were rough and brutal. They soon clashed with the Aleut inhabitants of the islands who were at first friendly but later attempted to repel the intruders.

As the fur fever increased, so did Russian violence and oppression. The fur seekers forced Aleut hunters to provide them with sea otter skins. Often they took the hunters' wives and children hostage to ensure the safe return of Russian overseers. The use of hostages had been common in Siberia at one time, but Tsarina Catherine outlawed the practice after she came to power in 1762.

She told her subjects to treat the Aleuts well, but enforcement of her decree was non-existent in the new, far, corner of the Russian Empire known as Russian America. In 1763, the Aleuts rebelled against the Russians. Four of seven Russian ships wintering at Unalaska were destroyed and their crews were killed. In revenge, the Russians demolished Aleut villages on Umnak, Samalga, and the Islands of Four Mountains. They killed all of the villagers.

Other rebellions such as the one at Unalaska were also punished harshly. Disturbances became rare. As time passed many of the Russian promyshlenniki took Aleut women, had children, and adopted a Native lifestyle during their time, in the islands. When British navigator James Cook sailed into Southwest Alaska waters in 1778, he recorded in his journal that Russians and Aleuts at one of the outposts he visited prayed together and shared the same large barracks built in Aleut style." Russian control, however, resulted not from this but from three other factors. The Aleut population was dispersed in small villages on separate islands. The villages were on small islands vulnerable to ships' cannon fire. The Aleuts had no weapons adequate to resist the Russians' firearms. The Russians soon enslaved the Aleuts. The fur traders, although they had no

permanent settlements in the the islands, often occupied hunting camps at one location for one or two years at a time.

One Russian merchant, Gregorii Shelikhov, saw advantages in occupying a site on a permanent basis and chose to establish his trading post at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island in 1784. Hostile Koniags resisted him there, but Shelikhov subdued them after winning a series of skirmishes and taking hostages. His colony on Kodiak Island struggled to survive. During the first year houses, bunkhouses, barns, blacksmith shops, carpentry shops, and storage buildings were built. Shelikhov organized the Natives into groups to do different kinds of work for his company. Sea otter hunters were the most important. Old men and children hunted birds and collected bird eggs for food. Women cleaned fish, sewed parkas, and picked berries. Other foods and luxuries to which the Russians were accustomed such as flour, tea, and tobacco, were soon gone. The Russians waited in vain for ships that would bring fresh supplies and new colonists. The first permanent Russian settlement in Alaska began with the difficulty that all later Russian posts there would have. This was the problem of obtaining supplies from the homeland.

Pribilov discovers fur seal rookeries

Some of those later settlements were established soon after Three Saints Bay. Shelikhov soon had camps at other Kodiak Island locations and in two years had a full fledged fort on the mainland in Southcentral Alaska. Also in 1786, explorer Gerassim Pribilov discovered a group of islands in the Bering Sea with an immense population of fur seals. At that time there were no Natives on the islands. The Russians organized Aleuts to kill the seals and bring back their furs. At first the Aleut hunters traveled hundreds of miles by bidarka from their villages to the Pribilof Islands. Later the Russians forced Aleut hunters and their families to move to the Pribilof Islands.

Baranov arrives more dead than alive

In 1790 a party of Russians bound for Three Saints Bay shipwrecked on the rocky shores of Unalaska Island. Crew and passengers survived the winter in driftwood huts, living on shellfish and roots. Aleuts helped them make kayaks out of sea lion skins and they completed the remaining 600 miles of their journey the following summer. One of the passengers was Alexander Baranov. Shelikhov had just appointed him manager of his company's activities in Alaska.

The low lying site at Three Saints Bay was almost under water after an earthquake. This, and a shortage of timber for building, influenced Baranov to move the settlement northeast on Kodiak Island. He called the new place St. Paul. It is today's city of Kodiak. As he re-established things there, Baranov

received an unwelcome shipment from Shelikhov a bevy of priests and monks. The company owner, anxious to curry favor with the Russian court, had requested permission for a church mission to Russian America. Baranov, plagued with obtaining enough supplies for his own people, had little to spare. When the Russian clerics got to the Kodiak outpost they found none of the conveniences they had been promised. They became angry with Baranov and tried to discredit him in the eyes of the Russian court. Baranov, in turn, complained uselessly about the clerics' conduct. He left the most critical priests behind when he transferred his headquarters to New Archangel, today's Sitka, in Southeast Alaska.

The transfer, however, was not made to escape the Russian Orthodox priests. It was made because the sea otters, which had drawn Russians first to the Aleutian Islands and then to mainland Southcentral Alaska, had been decimated in those regions. Pursuit of the creatures next took the Russians to Southeast Alaska. The Russians, in turn, took their Aleut hunters with them.

Not only were the Aleuts skilled hunters, the Russians simply could not obtain enough other employees from Russia. Until 1861, the vast majority of Russian laborers were serfs. They were slaves tied to particular parcels of land. They were not free to go to Russian America. Few Russians who could have gone wished to go to the remote and dangerous fur trading outposts on the eastern frontier of their country. As a result, fur trading companies used the Aleuts as slaves or serfs. At first, all of the men in each Aleut village were forced to hunt for the Russians. Then, because when all of the men were away and no one hunted for food, starvation resulted. Later, because of this, only half of the men in each village were forced to hunt furs in any one year. Aleuts were taken away from their islands to hunt in other parts of Alaska and as far south as California. They were also occasionally "rented" to other Euroamerican fur seekers.

#### Russians explore riverine Southwest Alaska

The Yupik Eskimos of riverine Southwest Alaska may have heard rumors of the bloodshed and enslavement that took place in the Aleutian Islands, but they escaped the first decades of Russian contact. Around 1818 the Russians began to investigate riverine Southwest Alaska. By this time British and American expansion to the south had stopped them from expanding further in that direction. Also, sea otter populations to the south had almost disappeared. The Russians' attention was turning to land fur animals such as beaver and land otter.

One group of Russians reportedly skied into the central Kuskokwim in the 1790s, but such journeys were uncommon until 1818. Then Petr Korsakovski led an expedition from Kodiak to establish a fort in the Bristol Bay area. The new post

would give the Russians better access to mainland furs and allow them to learn more about the delta country to the north.

Korsakovski made use of a well known Native portage from Cook Inlet to Iliamna Lake, and then descended the Kvichak River to an arm of Bristol Bay. Traveling by kayak along the shore, he chose a site near the head of Nushagak Bay and named the new fort Alexandrovski. Some members of the party continued the westward journey as far as what is called Goodnews Bay. They had planned to ascend the Kuskokwim River. When Eskimos warned them that food shortages and the approaching winter would make the trip difficult, the Russians gave up this idea. The Nushagak post did not attract as large a fur trade as the Russians had hoped. It did serve as a jumping off point for a number of expeditions during the next 15 years.

Missionaries followed the traders into the Southwest Alaska wilderness and built a church at Alexandrovski. Iliia Petelin was appointed to the mission. Petelin reported that the Eskimos were so eager to prove their Christian faith that they burned their ceremonial masks or threw them into the river. The parish enrolled 700 members by 1846.

### The Good Father

Russian Alaska of the 1830s was not a popular place. Getting there was difficult and dangerous. At length Russian leaders realized that, if the colony were to succeed, they would have to rely on Alaska Natives for their work force. This meant renewing the work of the Russian Orthodox Church. The church could spread Christianity and also educate the Natives in Russian language and other skills to make them more useful employees. A priest was needed quickly at Unalaska to reinforce the skills the Aleuts there had been taught in earlier years.

A scholarly 27 year old priest from Irkutsk volunteered to take the Unalaska post. His name was Ivan Veniaminov. Ivan's mother, wife, young son, and brother went with him to Unalaska. He also took books, tools, and scientific instruments. Two years after Veniaminov's arrival, 100 Aleut children were learning to read and write Russian.

Father Veniamimov taught a class unlike others the Russians had offered to a Native group in Alaska. He taught the class in their dialect, Aleutian Fox, after creating an alphabet for the dialect. He also translated textbooks and parts of the Bible into the dialect.

In addition to his school and church work, Veniaminov carefully recorded winds, tides, and weather at Unalaska. He traveled thousands of miles by kayak each year. During his journeys he wrote down his observations of Aleut life and

recorded Aleut legends and history.

The traditional tracing of Aleut children interested Veniaminov very much. He observed that the Aleuts:

had a habit of bathing the children in cold water or in the sea at all times of the year with the object of strengthening their bodies. They taught them how to ride the bidarka, how to be skillful in unmooring and mooring them, how to save themselves and others in perilous situations and especially how to be skillful in hunting and in war.

For Aleut girls, sewing skills were most important, because women kept the skin boat coverings repaired and made waterproof clothing for hunters. Veniaminov noted that girls did not marry until they had mastered the art of sewing. Men did not marry until "their beards had appeared.

Unlike most later American missionaries who thought Christianity could be successfully introduced only if Native beliefs were destroyed, Father Veniaminov respected the Aleut heritage. "You must win your converts by kindness, consideration, and the power of the Word, and under no circumstances by force or by bribery or by false promise," he told fellow priests. Aleuts called Veniaminov "The Good Father." When he left the Aleutian Islands to be Bishop of Alaska, he said that he owed the Aleuts "much more than they owe me for my work, and I will never forget them."

#### Russians build river posts

As a result of exploration of the mainland, Russian American Company trader Fedor Kolmakov established a station near the juncture of the Holitna and the Kuskokwim rivers. It was not far from the present town of Sleetmute. Travelers to it first used the system of lakes north of the Alexandrovski Redoubt, and followed the Holitna River from its headwaters. Both Yupik Eskimos and Ingalik Athapaskans lived near the station. It operated only briefly and was replaced by a post called "Lukin's Odinochka." The odinochka, the Russian term for the smallest of their posts, was named for Semen Lukin, the manager. Lukin, a Creole, was born at Fort Ross, the Russian colony in California. One of his sons, Ivan Lukin, later accompanied one of the first American expeditions to travel the Yukon River from its mouth to the Canadian border.

Not long after the construction of Lukin's Odinochka, a smallpox epidemic broke out on the Kuskokwim River delta. Eskimos correctly blamed the introduction of the disease on the Russians, but some incorrectly believed that it was a purposeful act. In retaliation, Eskimos killed Russian American Company employees at Russian Mission on the Yukon River in 1839. When Lukin learned that

an attack was also planned on his odinochka he was able to prevent it.

A year later, a new post was built across the Kuskokwim River from the Holitna's mouth. It was named Kolmakovskiy in honor of Fedor Kolmakov. Larger than the two earlier posts, the post included a blockhouse, store, warehouse, separate barracks for Creoles and Eskimos, a kashim, and a bathhouse.

When Lavrentiy Zagoskin stopped over at Kolmakovskiy Redoubt during his exploration of the Yukon and Kuskokwim river valleys in 1842, he was impressed with Lukin's ability to get along with the Native population. He observed that Lukin always kept open house.

We have often seen a dozen Natives in his little room who will wait silently for days at a time until he returns from his work in the woods or at the fish trap. If guests arrive at mealtime, the piece of yukola and the teapot of 'colonial' tea are divided among those present.

Zagoskin also noted that because the post was so remote, few European goods were traded there. The biggest turnover was in Native products such as deerskins, thongs, tanned sealskins, and fats. Yukola was the most important food at the redoubt. In the summer, workers fished all night when the sockeye salmon were running, but they did not always catch enough for the winter food supply. The Native women helped by picking berries, digging roots, and fermenting cow parsnips and forest angelica.

In 1833 the Russians built a fort on Norton Sound to serve as a base. Located north of the Yukon River mouth, St. Michael was centrally located for trading with Natives both north and south along the coast. It became the major trading post in western Alaska and headquarters for the Kuskokwim parish of the Russian Orthodox church.

St. Michael was easily reached by ship during the summer months, but the Russians wanted to find a way to get furs from the trading post to Kodiak during the winter months. Andrei Glazunov led the first attempt to find an overland route from St. Michael to Cook Inlet the same year the northern post was established. It was not successful. The party ate moss, dog harnesses, boots, and sealskin bags to keep from starving before turning back when they reached the Stony River, a tributary of the Kuskokwim River.

Later a station was established at Unalakleet. The small post served as the headquarters for the sled dogs which hauled trade goods to the Interior. Unalakleet was the northernmost post established by the Russians. The Russian American Company maintained their northern posts until the sale of Alaska to the U.S. in 1867, but did not expand their activities in the area because the problems and expenses of supplying these distant posts were simply too great.

## Kolmakovskiy

Cold notched logs, each carefully labeled, were stored away at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks in 1929. They still await the day when they will be reassembled to form an eight sided blockhouse that once stood along the Kuskokwim River. The building was part of a Russian fur trading post called Kolmakovskiy.

When the blockhouse was built in 1841, the Russians were afraid of an attack by local Eskimos. Resentment still smoldered over the smallpox epidemic that had spread with the Russian explorations of Southwest Alaska, killing hundreds of Yupik Eskimos. Many Natives believed the Russians had deliberately introduced the disease. The Russian builders determined how thick to build the blockhouse walls by firing a musket ball into a log. When they saw how far the shot penetrated, they chose logs twice that thick. The blockhouse was never needed for protection, however. The newcomers were accepted peaceably, and the blockhouse was used to store dried fish.

The site for Kolmakovskiy was selected by Fedor Kolmakov, a Creole who managed the Alexandrovski trading post at today's Nushagak. He had made several journeys from the head of the Nushagak River into the Kuskokwim River drainage and built two smaller, temporary posts there. Kolmakov was sure that a trading post on the Kuskokwim River would open a new source of furs for the Russian American Company. Before the Russian traders established the fort, Kolmakov took steps to ensure the success of the venture. He gave selected village elders medals and certificates and asked them to encourage the villagers to bring pelts for trade. Both Kolmakov and Semen Lukin, the station manager, were well-liked by the Natives. They stocked the post with popular trade goods such as tobacco and beads. Luxury items like copper bracelets, earrings, finger rings, and mirrors were also much in demand. Tlingit capes were popular among the upper Kuskokwim River Natives as were calico shirts and cotton cloth for parka covers. The goods, the supportive elders, and the congenial traders all kept a good supply of furs flowing into the post.

For 25 years, Kolmakovskiy served as the center for Russian trade and missionary activity. The fort itself consisted of a large collection of log structures enclosed within a high log fence. Besides the blockhouse, there were bachelor barracks for Creoles and for Eskimos, a bathhouse, a store, a kashim, a small chapel, and a priest's home.

By the 1860s Russia was winding down its involvement in Alaska. When the priest Hieromonk Illarian arrived at Kolmakovskiy on his rounds from Russian Mission in 1861, he found "nothing but a wretched ruin." When the United States took over

Alaska, the Kuskokwim River trade was acquired by Hutchinson, Kohl and Company of San Francisco (later reorganized as the Alaska Commercial Company). The Alaska Commercial Company operated the post until 1917 or 1915 and then abandoned it. In 1929 an historically-minded Alaskan took the blockhouse apart and sent the pieces to Fairbanks to be preserved.

### Kodiak flourishes

The Yukon and Kuskokwim redoubts were not the successes that the Russian American Company had hoped, but their settlements on Kodiak Island were growing. Although the Russian capital had moved to New Archangel, St. Paul on Kodiak Island continued to be a center for company activities. Tanneries operated at Karluk and Uyak Bay, on the western side of the island. Several brick kilns were built around St. Paul. In summer, salmon were caught and salted at several different sites. Boats were built and launched at Woody Island, across the harbor from St. Paul.

A few years before the Russians sold their interest in Alaska to the United States, a new industry was established: ice making. Refrigerators that could make ice had not yet been invented. Instead, ice was cut in winter from lakes and ponds, and preserved in sawdust for use in summer. The Russians began taking as many as 10,000 tons of ice each season from 48 acre Tanagnek Lake on Woody Island. The ice was cut into uniform blocks, and stored in ice houses to await shipment to San Francisco and to Central and South America. Each winter, when the ice houses were filled, the Russian colony put on a great feast. Workmen received a day's pay, an issue of rum, and a gift from the company store to celebrate the occasion.

### Russians take a heavy toll

The years of Russian occupation took a heavy toll on the Native groups of Southwest Alaska. In riverine Southwest Alaska, hundreds of Yupik Eskimos died because of Russian introduced diseases. The violent conquest of insular Southwest Alaska reduced the Aleut population 50 per cent by the mid 1800s. The Koniag Eskimos of Kodiak Island saw their identity absorbed by other cultures.

By the latter years of Russian occupation, the historical differences between the Koniag Eskimos and the Aleuts had virtually disappeared. Inter-marriage with Russians had resulted in a growing population of Creoles. Both Natives and Creoles ran company businesses and held responsible positions in the Russian colony. Some were even trained as assistant physicians. One historian notes:

The old ways persisted in tradition and folklore, in music and dance, in

artifacts and skills, in hunting and conservation practices widely adopted by the Russian management. These blended with the new: bread, pancakes, pastry, salt and tea became necessities. Women used silk thread to embroider their baskets. The use of Russian musical instruments became widespread. Men sang in church choirs. Slowly, an Aleut intellectual tradition, based in pride in their literacy, began to emerge.

This renewed culture was to suffer as heavily as its predecessors when Americans came to replace Russians. They also exploited Southwest Alaska for the benefit of faraway people and places.

### Summery questions

What set off the Russian fur rush to the Aleutian Islands?  
Why could the Russians conquer the Aleuts?  
Why did the Russians need the Aleuts to work for them?  
Why did the Russians start looking for furs in riverine Southwest Alaska?  
What impact did the Russian occupation have on the Aleuts, Koniag Eskimos, and Yupik Eskimos?

### Inquiry questions

See if Southwest Alaska villages of the Russian period are shown on today's maps.  
Make a map of Kodiak Island that shows where the Russians had different industries such as brick kilns, ice yards, salmon salteries, shipyards, and tanneries.

The Sea, A Common Bond 1743-1867 Era of Russian Violence 1867-1912 The Era of American Exploitation 1912-1924 Lessons From The Land 1924-1959 The Recent Years 1959-1980 Joining Old And New Suggested Readings