

Chapter 4: Unangan/Aleut, Sugpiaq/Alutiiq and Russian Conquest

I.

*“On the evening of September 9th, 1741, a Russian ship silently appeared on the Aleut horizon and entered Adak harbor unannounced. The next morning after the gale had passed, people from two vastly different worlds cautiously emerged from their shelters to stare at each other. The first move between these two different peoples was made by seven Aleut men in kayaks who cautiously approached the Russian ship to investigate its nature. What the Aleuts did not know was that this Russian ship, the St. Paul, had attempted to get fresh water at Chichagof Island, west of Kodiak, but had lost both of its landing boats and 18 men. Now the remaining crew had no way to get water except to give the approaching Aleuts their empty water barrels, asking through gestures to have them filled. The Aleuts understood the requests, but refused the barrels, preferring to carry the water to the ship in the bladders of sea mammals which they had on shore. When the Aleut men returned to the ship with their cargo of water, their leader proposed a trade — his bladder of water for one of the Russian's metal knives. A few pieces of metal had found their way to the Aleutian Islands in the past and were highly prized for their usefulness.” In the afternoon of the same day, 14 Aleut men came out to the Russian ship and performed a ceremony in their kayaks. They stayed three or four hours, communicating with the Russians in sign language, but when the winds became favorable the Russians made preparations to leave. As the St. Paul sailed out of Adak harbor it left behind several biscuits, seven knives, and an axe as ominous symbols of the first major encounter between the Aleut and Russian nations. Barbara Boyle Torrey with Agafon Krukoff Jr., *Slaves of the Harvest*¹*

¹ Barbara Boyle Torrey with Agafon Krukoff Jr., *Slaves of the Harvest*. St. Paul Island, Alaska: TDX Corp., 1983. This important work is on-line: <http://tanamawaa.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/SlavesoftheHarvestChapter2.pdf>

II. Introduction

The history of the Unangan/Aleut of the Aleutians, and Sugpiaq/Alutiiq of the Kodiak Archipelago, Alaska Peninsula, and Prince William Sound is perhaps the most difficult to recover, as their villages and societies were so completely devastated by the Russian invasion. It has been estimated that over 80% of the population died in the fifty years following the first contact with the Russian fur traders. Perhaps this is why so much effort has been put into recovering the cultures through archeological investigation. At the same time, trying to understand the experience of the Unangan and Sugpiaq people conquered by the Russians is extremely difficult. Like the survivors of other genocides, survivors were reluctant to discuss the experience, and now, their descendants have only relatively recently begun to recover their history.²

Because the both the Sugpiat and Unangan were so decimated and displaced by Russian conquerors, I think it is important to thoroughly try to understand the civilization that they had developed in multiple villages and settlements prior to conquest.

The Unangan Nations occupied dozens of villages from the tip of the Alaska Peninsula to the western end of the Aleutian chain, an environment that seems forbidding to outsiders, but that is abundant in resources. The Unangan developed the technologies to support a rich and complex culture that stretched back perhaps 9,000 years.

The Sugpiaq Nations occupied and controlled part of the Alaska Peninsula, and the Kodiak archipelago, which became the homeland of their culture. Discoveries on Afognak, and at other sites on Kodiak Island have uncovered a treasure trove of archeological resources and information. Unangan and Sugpiaq people developed brilliant technologies to most efficiently

² See <https://alutiiqmuseum.org/learn/the-alutiiq-sugpiaq-people>

exploit the resources of their homeland, including kayaks, *iqyax* in Unangan, *qayaq* in Sugpiaq, and baidarka in Russian, and made waterproof parkas and spray skirts from animal gut to hunt sea mammals. The modern kayak and Gore-Tex spray skirt that attaches to it to keep the kayaker dry are copied directly from these indigenous technologies.

Scholar Lydia Black makes very clear that the various Unangan villages in the islands constituted separate polities, or nations, with their own chiefs, sometimes allied, sometimes at war with each other. And that a state of war was more or less constant, they were a warlike people.

A. Names and Identities

Because the Sugpiaq and Unangan in recent history have been known as Aleuts they have often been considered together. But, they speak different languages, and they have different cultures and histories. Some groups of Supiaq lived in villages on the Alaska Peninsula, where there was a clear dividing line between Sugpiaq and Unangan territories, and the two groups had generally hostile relations. Russian fur traders introduced the name "Aleut" for the people of the Aleutians, the Alaska Peninsula the Kodiak area. Before Western contact, the people of the Kodiak Archipelago called themselves Sugpiaq, "the real people." The Sugpiaq term for Aleut is "Alutiiq." The Unangan name for people of Kodiak was pronounced Konaig by the Russians, and that became another name for the culture. As cultural revival has accelerated, people are once again using the traditional self-names.³

³ Who are the Alutiiq People? Alutiiq Museum, <https://www.alutiiqmuseum.org/files/Ed%20Handouts/2%20WhoAreAlutiiqs.pdf>

It is generally understood that the Sugpiaq were first settled on the Alaska Peninsula, and later make their way to Kodiak where they developed a rich and enduring culture.⁴ The penetrating museum exhibit and book “Looking Both Ways,” created in conjunction with the Smithsonian, examined Alutiiq culture and also sparked a cultural revival and renewed familiarity with Sugpiaq culture.⁵

Today an individual’s choice to identify as Sugpiaq or Alutiiq is a personal one. In his essay, “The tides and currents’ of historical change,” elder Roy Madsen wrote,

*“the homogeneous culture of our ancestors has been transformed into the heterogeneous culture that we experience today, mixed, mingled, blended and combined with those many other cultures, retaining some of each but still with some recognizable and acknowledged aspects of the culture of our Alutiiq ancestors.”*⁶

Looking Both Ways includes a number of answers to the question of why a person might choose one term vs. another:

- “Sugpiaq,” evokes ties with older, pre-Russian traditions,
- “This relational way of being Alutiiq depends on participation in Native life: residence in a village, Orthodox religious practice, language use, subsistence activities, heritage revival and transmission.”
- “Alutiiqness is something constantly rearticulated in changing circumstances and power-charged relations with relatives and outsiders.”⁷

⁴ Patricia Partnow, *Making History: Alutiiq/Sugpiaq Life on the Alaska Peninsula*. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 2001.

⁵ Aron L. Crowell, *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*. Fairbanks: Univ. of Alaska Press, 2001.

⁶ Crowell, Aron L. *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*. Fairbanks: Univ. of Alaska Press, 2001

⁷ Crowell, *Looking Both Ways*

In this text I will use Sugpiaq for the people before the Russian conquest, and Alutiiq for the culture and people after the conquest.

III. Histories

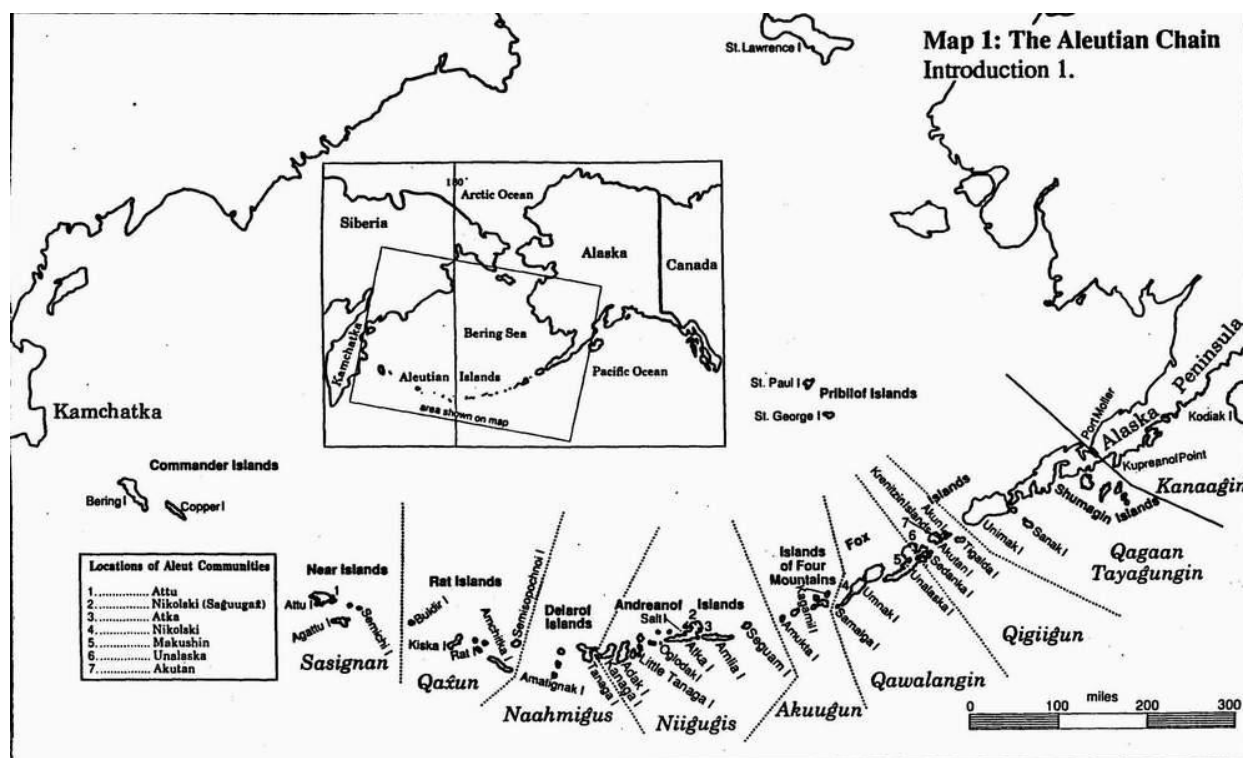
A. Unangan

The Unangan developed a complex civilization consisting of multiple villages and settlements on the Aleutian Chain, one of the harshest places in North America and seemingly a forbidding and a difficult place to live. Archaeologists estimate the Unangan and their forbearers occupied the islands for at least 9,000 years. Anthropologist Douglas Veltre has spent decades studying Unangan civilization, and working with Unangan people. His history appears on the website of the Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Corporation, the tribal organization of the Unangan people.⁸ By the time of the Russian invasions, and “based on estimates from Unangan oral history, archaeology, and early Russian period documents,” he writes, “it is likely that about 12,000-15,0000 Unangan occupied a territory that included the western end of the Alaska Peninsula, the Shumagin Islands just south of the Peninsula, and the whole of the Aleutian archipelago from Unimak Island in the far east to Attu Island at the western tip of the island chain. Population was likely higher in the eastern portion of this territory due to the greater coastline available and a concentration of food resources.”⁹ Unangan spoke multiple distinct regional dialects of their Native language, *Unangam tunuu*, reflecting the multiple bands or

⁸ <https://www.apiai.org/culture-history/history/>

⁹ Douglas Veltre, “Unangaˆ: Coastal People of Far Southwestern Alaska,” published on the web site of the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, <http://www.apiai.org/culture-history/history/>. Veltre is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Alaska Anchorage. He has conducted archaeological and ethnohistorical research in the Aleutian and Pribilof islands since 1971. All of the following is based on his writing.

tribes. But by shortly after the Russian invasions, only three of these dialects remained, Attuan, Atkan, and an eastern Unangax dialect.¹⁰



Map: Pre-contact Aleutian languages.¹¹

Like all indigenous peoples, the Unangan created and maintained a rich and unique culture. The earliest peoples used stone tools, they began the construction of semi-subterranean houses, built-up out of sod, and kept warm with oil lamps. They used whale bones and driftwood for roof beams. But these houses could be very sophisticated and large enough to house entire communities. “On Unimak Island and the Alaska Peninsula, archaeologists have found a number of “nucleus-satellite” houses. These have central floors up to about 20 by 50 feet in size, to which some 2 to 14 side rooms are attached by low, narrow passageways. In the Unalaska Island

¹⁰ Veltre, “Unangaĕ: Coastal People of Far Southwestern Alaska”

¹¹ Source Knut Bergland and Moses L. Dirks, “Aleut Tales and Narratives” Alaskaool.org
http://www.alaskaool.org/language/Aleut/Image/Use_map3.JPG

area, archaeologists located the largest houses in the Unanga region, termed longhouses, which also have multiple side rooms, but have central floors measuring up to 20 by 165 feet. Also in the Unalaska area, some houses dating to about 3,000 years ago had stone-lined troughs in their floors to aid in distributing warm air from fireplaces to the entire structure.”¹² The sod houses, called ‘barbara’ by the Russians, continued to be used until the Russian occupation.

The Unangan made their living off of the tremendous bounty of the sea, with an abundance of halibut, cod, and shellfish. While to outsiders the islands may seem forbidding, with no trees, and only windswept alpine and tundra vegetation, the area is actually very rich in food resources, mostly due to the mixing of the waters of the North Pacific and Bering Sea. And the weather, moderated by the seas provides a coastal climate, with little to no snow, is much warmer than that of the interior or the Northwest coast. The Unangan lived in many villages spread out over the island archipelago. In the richest locations, they were able to establish large permanent, year-round settlements, some occupied for as long as 4,000 years.¹³ Other sites were occupied seasonally as hunting and fishing camps. With few land mammals, people depended on hunting the abundant sea mammals: sea otters, Steller sea lions, and harbor seals, in addition to whales. It is believed that the Unangan were organized according to matrilineal descent, as were the Tlingit.

B. Sugpiaq/Alutiiq

The Sugpiaq/Alutiiq have inhabited the Alaska Peninsula, islands and coasts of the Kodiak Archipelago, the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula, and parts of Prince William Sound for more than 7,500 years. Like other coastal peoples, they developed distinct and lasting

¹² Douglas Veltre, “Unanga: Coastal People of Far Southwestern Alaska”

¹³ Veltre, Unanga: Coastal People of Far Southwestern Alaska

technologies to take advantage of a rich marine and coastal environment. The Sugpiaq culture was far from timeless and unchanging.

Anthropologists Amy Steffian, Patrick Saltonstall and Linda Finn Yarbourough, have attempted to synthesize the history of Sugpiaq nations. They see, “a continuous sequence of cultural development for over 7,500 years,” illustrating that the “deep cultural history of the Alutiiq region is cohesive across space and time. Each major prehistoric cultural tradition is represented in each region of the central gulf.”¹⁴ As they continue, “From the earliest occupation the distribution of prehistoric cultures mimics the historic distribution of Alutiiq peoples. There are enduring cultural ties across central Gulf of Alaska and a persistent population.”¹⁵

The ancestors of the Sugpiaq developed unique and ingenious technologies to make use of the resources they controlled. From small growing from from small mobile groups

“Through human ingenuity,” the anthropologists write, “the ability to harvest resources with increasing efficiency, and to manage inevitable fluctuations in the availability of foods and raw materials in the regions productive but dynamic environment,” the ancestors developed prosperous permanent villages

“Changing environments, and conditions, population growth, technological innovation and interaction with other peoples continuously shaped ancient societies into powerful chiefdoms.”¹⁶

The three major subdivisions and languages of the Alutiiq are *Chugachmiut* or Chugach of the Prince William Sound area, *Unegkurmiut* of the lower Kenai Peninsula, and *Koniagmiut*, Koniag of the Kodiak Island and Alaska Peninsula.

¹⁴ Amy Steffian, Patrick Saltonstall and Linda Finn Yarbourough, “Maritime Economies of the Central Gulf of Alaska after 4000 BP” Ch. 12, *Oxford Handbook of the Prehistoric Arctic*, 2016

¹⁵ Steffian, et al. “Maritime Economies”

¹⁶ Steffian, et al. “Maritime Economies”

C. Sugpiak. Sugpiaq/Alutiiq on the Alaska Peninsula



Alutiq/Augpiaq, ANLC

D. Archeological discoveries

Anthropologists and archeologists have intensively studied the Sugpiaq culture, and excavated and studied many traditional sites, which have been the subject of numerous dissertations and the foundation of many academic careers. Through extensive archeological

investigation scholars have theorized at least three major periods of Alutiiq cultural evolution.¹⁷ During the earliest period, from 5,500 BC to 1800 BC, known by anthropologists as Ocean Bay, the ancestors of the Sugpiaq lived a mostly nomadic life. They established multiple campsites throughout the year as they pursued the subsistence foods they depended on. About 5,000 years ago the people began to develop small single family sod dwellings. From 1800 BC to 1400 AD, called the Kachemak period by anthropologists, the Sugpiak people began to live in larger, multi-room extended family sod houses in seasonal communities. Archeological finds have established that people began to develop fishing nets and other new tools for fishing and processing fish. The Koniag period began only 800 years ago, and lasted basically until the Russian invasions.¹⁸ “The Koniag period was marked by climate change and increased trade with other tribes, leading to creation of a complex class system and more elaborate ceremonies and arts.”¹⁹ According to archeologists, this was a period of rapid change. It must have been a time of great availability of resources, because populations peaked, and “house and settlement sizes increased, markedly, suggesting social ranking. These new large houses were also architecturally elaborated, and volume of storage features increased sharply. They were pit-dwellings with rectangular central sections and smaller circular features, or lobes connected to them with short tunnels. Villages shifted to Kodiak Island’s outer coast perhaps for better access to whales and improved defense.²⁰ Intensified salmon fishing, food production, processing specializations, exchange and

¹⁷ Alisha Drabek, “Liitukut Sugpiat’stun (We Are Learning How to Be Real People): Exploring Kodiak Alutiiq Literature through Core Values, PhD Dissertation, UAF 2012, citing Crowell et al., 2001; Clark, 1990, 1998.

¹⁸ Drabek, dissertation, p. 100, (Luerhmann, 2008; Clark & Black, 2002; Crowell et al., 2001).
<http://alutiiqeducation.org/html/history/precolonial.php>

¹⁹ Drabek, p. 100

²⁰ Kenneth M. Ames, “Tempo and Scale in the Evolution of Social Complexity in Western North America: Four Case Studies.” in *North American Archeology*, eds. T.R. Pauketat, and D. Di Paolo Loren, 56-78, Blackwell, 2005. Citing Fitzhugh, 1996., <http://tuvalu.santafe.edu/~bowles/Tempo>

investment in carpentry, wood, or perhaps whalebone.”²¹ As Sugpiak scholar Allison Drabek writes, “These economic and societal shifts within the Alutiiq pre-contact history contributed to development of traditional values and education practices still evident today. Knowledge of cultural phases in Alutiiq history informs us about trade, traditional harvest practices, and concepts of wealth, which were the foundation of the Alutiiq economy prior to Russian conquest.”²²

E. Adaptations, Trade, and international relations

Like all Native peoples, trade was an important part of their economy. “The Alutiiq were far from isolated prior to Russian invasion, as there are many stories of water voyages between the mainland and the archipelago, including forays to the Aleutian Chain, Cook Inlet, and Southeast Alaska. Language, or multilingualism, were vital for trade and intermarriage, as traditionally our families incorporated cultural diversity and a blending of cultural knowledge from neighboring tribes, indicated in our stories, tools and arts.”²³ “The Unangax and Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) people traded among themselves as well as with others such as the Yup’ik of Bristol Bay, Dena’ina Athabascans of the Cook Inlet area, the Ahtna Athabascans of the Copper River, the Eyak and Tlingit. This trade enabled them to balance their diet as well as take advantage of foreign technology.”²⁴

IV. Russian period

After Russians discovered valuable fur resources in the Aleutians, circa 1741, they continued their fur-hunting expansion, which had already led them to conquer Siberia. Russian

²¹ Kenneth Ames, “Tempo and Scale.”

²² Drabek

²³ Drabek

²⁴ <http://www.alaskanative.net/en/main-nav/education-and-programs/cultures-of-alaska/unangax-and-alutiiq/>

methods were far different than those of the French and British in Northern Canada. The French and British respected American Indian sovereignty and cultures and initiated trade. They understood that for the Iroquois and Algonquin, and Cree trapping was an integral part of a life on the land and that French and British trappers could not compete on that level. When they entered the market economy by selling their furs, the First Nations increased the amount of trapping proportional to other activities, but did not essentially change their lives.

A. Comparative colonialism

The Russians only understood conquest, perhaps modeled on the Mongol conquests of Russia in the 13th century. Siberia had continued to be controlled by Mongol khanates into the 16th century when they were conquered by Russia, with the aid of mercenary Cossacks. In this paradigm, conquest was followed not by trade, but by tribute from the conquered. Furthermore, in Russia itself, the peasants who worked the land were called serfs, but their condition of servitude was the equivalent of slavery. They were unfree people, who could be sold with the land, or forced to work in mines or even industries for the profit of their owner. So when the Russians conquered the Aleutians, and then Kodiak in the late 18th century, they naturally applied the models they were familiar with, and enslaved the Unangan and Sugpiak.

The Aleut society was centered on extended families living in semi-underground complexes called *barabara* by the Russians. The extended family together maintained the complex technologies and subsistence resource hunting and gathering. Men hunted, but women prepared the skins that covered the boats, made the waterproof clothing, and prepared food.

When the Russians appropriated the labor of the men, sending them off on long voyages, it was left to the women to assume responsibility for providing food for their families, in addition

to their other tasks. And the Russians appropriated the women for partners, reconfiguring Unangan and Sugpiaq families.

B. Comparative colonialism

The Russian conquest and later colonial administration had nothing in common with the English, or French model of colonialism. It is very different from settler colonialism. The Russian model for conquest in the 18th century was based on their experience under the rule of the Mongols, who had conquered all Russian lands in the 13th century and held on for 200 years. Following their liberation, Russians wanted to be seen as Europeans, especially under Peter the Great and after. Yet they remained a centralized autocratic regimen where the State and the Czar were one.²⁵ The Russian empire operated on an extremely class based system, where classes were referred to by the term ‘estates.’ A strict hierarchy of estates meant that one was locked into one’s station in life. The peasants were the lowest of the low, and were, in effect slaves. Also, the idea of subject in Russia involved service to the state, at every level. Every citizen was expected to serve the state, and the state and the Tsar were the same.

When Cossacks pushed east through Siberia, on behalf of the Russian state, they Russians adopted the Mongol pattern of conquest and conquered lands that were still Khanates. This is a very different model from colonialism based on colonial settlement, like the English, or on trade with Indigenous people, like the French. As far as settlers, there were never more than 1,000 Russians in Alaska. On Kodiak there were never more than 150 Russian peasant settlers, the rest were craftsmen and administrators of the Russian America Company.

²⁵ See Gwen Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*, for another scholar who also makes the point about the after-effects of Mongol rule.

In the tightly controlled Russian economy, they needed business licenses from the Siberian government in Irkutsk, and had to pay a portion of their fur catch as a tax. It was this tax that was the impetus for the conquest of Siberia.

When Russians continued East to conquer the Unangan and Alutiiq, it was following this very ancient model of conquest. The value of otter skins in China was the setting and context. Alerted to the huge population of valuable sea otters, Russian entrepreneurs funded independent companies and chartered ships to seek them. Each expedition was a private enterprise, and each voyage took five years for a round trip. For a work force, they relied on Promyshlenniki, Siberian frontiersmen, most of whom were of mixed Indigenous Siberian and European Russian descent. One out of three were Kamchadal, Russian-Siberians with much Siberian ancestry. They were often violent, and often continued the pattern of intermarriage by marrying, officially or unofficially, into the Aleutian tribes as they had in Siberia.

The model of conquest centered around the concept of *Iasuk*, tribute.

All merchant vessels had a skipper or navigator on board, and a peredovshchik -a foreman responsible for organization of the fur gathering enterprise, account keeping, work assignments and so on, and a representative of the government, ... whose responsibility it was to take a population census, to accept iasak--a head tax imposed on adult able bodied heads of households and which signified that the population of the newly acquired territory accepted the sovereignty of the Russian Imperial government. Payment of iasak, supposedly on voluntary basis, signified that Imperial citizenship under the Russian Crown has been conferred and accepted.²⁶

The primary mode of conquest was the taking of women and children as hostages in order to force the men to hunt for furs. Like American frontiersmen, they may not have set out to attack and kill the Unangan, but they seem to have had no compunction about doing so. If the Unangan resisted, the Russians retaliated.

²⁶ Lydia Black, *Russians in Alaska, 1732-1867*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2004

The Russian conquest of the Aleutians was terrifically brutal. As the Mongols advanced in their conquest of Slavic lands in the 1200s, they brutally exterminated a village or city, and then went to the next and asked if they preferred to submit, or be annihilated. So the Russians proceeded in the Aleutians, picking first locales with small Unangan populations with no help available, they kidnapped children and women, and then forced the men into hunting otters for them.

The *promyshlenniki* were unregulated, they were continuing the pattern that was used in Siberia, where they had conquered the lands of the indigenous people. But the *promyshlenniki* could themselves hunt and trap sable and other fur bearing animals in Siberia. They did not have the skills to hunt otters at sea, and therefore depended on the skills of the Unangan and Sugpiak. Conquest itself was brutal. Only by a show of force could the Russians convince the people that resistance was futile.

C. Conquest of the Unangan

The conquest of the Aleutians was a drawn out and brutal affair. Contrary to popular narrative, the Unangan actively and violently resisted the Russians. Russian *promyshlenniki* began hunting in Aleutians as early as 1743 in the furthest West and the ‘nearest’ populated lands to Russia: the Near Islands, including Attu. “The Russian crew was met on shore by 100 armed men and moved instead to the less populated Attu Island.” In a foretaste of what was to come, “the Russians began with kidnapping and murder.” “The Russians captured an old woman and a boy, keeping the boy to train as translator.”²⁷ This may have been Temnak, an Aleut from Attu, who was adopted by a Russian captain and taken to Siberia in 1750 where he was renamed

²⁷ Mason, “Background” *Attu Boy* intro.

Pavel Nevodchiko.²⁸ “Within a few weeks, a Russian party attacked another settlement and killed 15 men to get women. These violent acts are memorialized in the names Murder Point and Massacre Bay on Attu.”²⁹

As Lydia Black, perhaps the premier scholar of Russian America explains:

*“..The eastern Aleutians,, from Umnak to the Alaska Peninsula, had larger population and had a tradition of organized warfare. Infringement of territorial rights was considered a matter for war: by Aleut customary law, no one could even collect driftwood or shellfish in a territory of a community without express permission of the local leadership. Intruders were dealt with swiftly and severely: as a rule, they were killed. Consequently, when the Russian fur hunters arrived, Aleut reaction followed the same pattern, eventually culminating in a massive conflict of 1763-1766 which engulfed Unimak, Unalaska and Umnak.”*³⁰

The Aleutian campaign continued. Over the next twenty years, the Russian promyshlenniki continued their conquests, moving eastward to Umnak and Unalaska triggering numerous skirmishes. Finally, the Sugpiaq had had enough, and organized an uprising in 1763-1764. Multiple Unangan/Eastern Aleut tribes “reacting to trespass of their territory,” united to attack four Russian ships simultaneously at Umnak, Unimak and Unalaska. Only twelve of the 200 Russian hunters survived.³¹

²⁸ Barbara Torrey, *Slaves of the Harvest*, p. 33

²⁹ Mason, “Background,” citing (Berkh 1974:16).

³⁰ This and the following quotes are from a series of lectures in which Black goes into more detail than she does in her book, *Russians in Alaska*. Lydia Black, “Conquest of the Eastern Aleutians,” (pdf) <https://absilcc.org/science/aiwg/Local%20Documents/Black,%20Lydia%20T.,%20The%20Conquest%20of%20the%20Eastern%20Aleutians.pdf>

³¹ Mason, “Background,” and Larry Mercurieff, *Wisdom Keeper*

Following the uprising of 1763-1764 the Russians retaliated. As Barbara Torry explains in *Slaves of the Harvest*:

“Captain Glotov, who had just wintered at Kodiak Island in 1763 returned in shock to Umnak to discover the dead Russian hunters. After the Aleuts attempted to prevent him from landing, he destroyed all the villages on the south side of Umnak Island to teach his erstwhile friends a lesson in Russian tyranny. Soloviev, known as “the Terrible Nightingale” for his wanton cruelty, arrived on the Fox Islands in the Spring of 1765 and killed every male he could find.”³²

Russian Captain Solev’iev also took charge of retaliation. While he attacked some villages, the chiefs in *Tshqalax* had apparently made common cause with him, to attack their enemies.

“Glotov reported that the islands of Umnak and Unalashka, the Quawalang people, constituted an alliance and that Umnak polity was preeminent - carried more weight, was more important within the alliance, than Unalaska, though the latter island was bigger.”³³

Black sums up the result:

“Conquest is never pretty and that the lot of the conquered is never enviable: at the very least, the conquered peoples lose the power to decide independently on their life conduct. At worst, the conquered are exterminated. In the eastern Aleutians, the outcome of the Russian conquest fell somewhere in-between: after initial traumatic conflict (which the Aleuts lost: having won several battles, they eventually lost the war), some of the independent skippers imposed their will on the Aleuts.

³² Barbara Torry, *Slaves of the Harvest*.

³³ Black, *Conquest*

As Black continues, she notes that “ *Contrary to popular belief, this war did not break Aleut resistance. True, Unalaska and Umnak Aleuts, for the most part reconciled themselves to the fact that they lost the war and had to live with the consequences of their defeat.*”³⁴

But Black notes that not all of the Aleutian Islands were conquered by the Russians at this time, and even Captain Cook was incorrect in his notes from 1778, “*Cook, visiting in 1778,*” she says, “ *was quite in error when he reported total subjugation of the Aleuts.*”³⁵

At least a few islands were not conquered until the 1780s and she notes that “In 1769, even the Russian naval commander, Cpt. Krenitsyn, feared the Unimak Aleuts. Unimak people were not conquered until sometime in 1770’s.”³⁶

To reiterate, Lydia Black was one of the first scholars of the Russian conquest to actually go back and read the original sources in Russian. So we should take seriously her conclusions. “*We should not view the conquest of the eastern Aleutians in simplistic terms: it was a long, drawn out conflict, sporadic and [the resistance] failed not only because the Russians in the wake of 1763 - 1766 gained the right to carry heavier armament, but also because Aleuts could not muster a sustained, coordinated long-range effort, uniting all the political units in a concerted action. Aleuts were fierce warriors, but their theories of warfare, strategy and tactics, were no match for the Russians' willingness to stage stand-fast face-to-face hand-to hand battles, or eventual use of explosives (powder) to destroy Aleut bases.*”³⁷

³⁴ Black *Conquest*

³⁵ Black, *Conquest*

³⁶ Black, *Conquest*

³⁷ Black, *Conquest*

The resistance, no matter how much we admire it in retrospect, had another very sad consequence: it gave many a skipper the justification to exploit the Aleuts, treating them as a conquered enemy, not, as the government orders mandated, citizens brought under the Imperial scepter: claims of self-defense, potential danger and so on, became used as reasons for taking Aleuts forcibly as additional crew members, leaving villages depleted in manpower and hence making the survival of the dependents so much more difficult; taking Aleut food stores, clothing and so on, also became viewed as legitimate booty.³⁸

The violence in the Aleutians was not a direct policy of the Russian Empire, but a side-effect of the distance from St. Petersburg, and the concomitant lack of accountability. In truth it was a years long journey from Alaska to St. Petersburg. Finally, in 1796 a number of Aleut leaders travel to St. Petersburg to air complaints against Russian Fur companies. Their recorded testimony documents the Russian assaults and the resulting complete devastation of Unangan life.

“The Russians are coming to America and to our Fox Islands and Andreanof Island to hunt sea and land animals. We receive them in friendly fashion, but they act like barbarians with us. They seize our wives and children as hostages, they send us early in the spring, against our will, five hundred versts (about 330 miles) away to hunt otters, and they keep us there until fall and at home they leave the lame, the sick, the blind, and these, too, they force to process fish for the Company and to do other Company work without receiving any pay ... The remaining women are sent out on Company labor and are beaten to death. They are removed by force to desert islands, and the children are taken away from those who walk with crutches, and there is no one to feed them.”³⁹

³⁸ Black, *Conquest*

³⁹ Quoted in Torrey p37

D. Pribilof Islands

Following the Russian Conquest, the Unangan people were completely subjugated with the men forced to hunt the valuable otters both on and off the chain. Then, in 1786 Russian fur trader Gavriil Prilbylov found an Unangan to guide him to even more where remote islands in the Bering Sea where the Unangan had infrequently hunted fur seals. The Russians insisted on leading Unangan hunters to the islands to hunt the Northern Fur Seals that breed there. Then the Russians forcefully relocated Unangan families to the islands to live permanently. Those families were virtually enslaved, they were not paid, but forced to work for the seal harvest, and were not permitted to leave the islands. This enslavement continued under the Russian America company until 1867. Shamefully, the American Government continued the enslavement of these Unangan families and their descendants until the 1960s. Little was known or said about these families, and little was written until the local Alaska Native Corporation for St. Paul Island, Tanadgusix Corporation (TDX), published *Slaves of the Harvest* written by Barbara Boyle Torrey with Agafon Krukoff Jr. in 1983. Larry Mercurieff also recounts the story of his people in *Wisdom Keeper: One Man's Journey to Honor the Untold History of the Unangan People* published in 2016.

E. Conquest of Kodiak

By the 1780s, Russian independent fur hunters had decimated the sea otters in the Aleutian Islands, and a number of Russian companies were competing. Russian fur trader Gregorii Shelikov sought to create a monopoly trading company, along with Russian colonial settlements. He could not, at first, get permission from Catherine the Great. But he went ahead on his own, and eventually managed to establish a colony on at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island. Shlikov's company began in the Aleutians. Despite earlier eras of violence, Black

maintains: “*The worst time was the late 1780s, when Shelikhov/Golokov Company was squeezing out the competition, and used the pretext that they are the dominant company representing the government, to shamelessly exploit the Aleuts in the eastern islands.*”⁴⁰ The Shelikov company continued their violent ways as the Russians conquered Kodiak. This was the beginning of the Russian America Company, the RAC, for far too long romanticized as the exotic Russian heritage of Alaska

Russians had visited Kodiak as early as 1764, when a Russian skipper, Stepan Glotov, and his crew wintered on Kodiak Island. They repelled several organized attacks on the camp, and Glotov brought back to his associates the word that Kodiak islanders were armed and that Russians must expect resistance. So when Shelikov headed for Kodiak, he was prepared for violence. His takeover of Kodiak was brutal in the extreme.

F. 1784 The massacre at Refuge Rock, Awa'uq

In 1784 Shelikov led a party of Russians and their enslaved Unangan to Kodiak. Having heard of the Russian brutality in the Aleutians, over 1,000 Sugpiaq, men, women and children took refuge on a small rocky outcrop off of Sitkalidak Island, accessible only via a narrow causeway at low tide. But an Unangan man who had been captured and was serving as a translator for the Russians betrayed them. Russians and Unangan impressed hunters slaughtered 500 to 1,000 men women and children, some in the shelters they had built, while some jumped from the cliffs. “Over 300 people were massacred, or jumped off the rock to their deaths. The rest were taken hostages, forcing all surviving men into slavery while women and children were held hostage. Russians also destroyed several villages on Shuyak Island, in an effort to force the

⁴⁰ Black, *Conquest*, *ibid.*

Natives on the island into submission.”⁴¹ And then, according to Lydia Black again, “*All accounts agree that several hundred survivors were taken to Three Saints Bay and that a number of male prisoners were executed.*”⁴²

Alutiiq scholar anthropologist and scholar Sven Haakanson joined archeologists Rick Knecht, and Shawn Dickson in their analysis of the Awa’uq site conclude, “*The events at the Awa’uq refuge rock broke the back of Alutiiq resistance and the Russians were able to establish a permanent base on Kodiak Island. It is difficult to imagine what was going through the minds of the Alutiiq hostages as they were taken back to Three Saints Bay. Two weeks before, most of them had probably never seen a European; now they were prisoners in their own land. What they felt at the time is perhaps best summarized by the traditional place name for the spot, Awa’uq, which means to become numb.*”⁴³

V. Transitions and adaptations

As Knecht, Haakanson and Dickson write, the Au’aq massacre broke the back of the Sugpiaq resistance. The Russian’s brutal bullying and threats of violence had their intended effect, and Sugpiaq realized that resistance was futile, and began a new era of going along to get along. They began to accommodate and adapt.

Russians entirely seized and co-opted the means of subsistence and production.⁴⁴ Sugpiaq

⁴¹ Lydia Black, *Russians in Alaska*; Knecht, Rick, Sven Haakanson, and Shawn Dickson. "Awa’uq: discovery and excavation of an 18th century Alutiiq refuge rock in the Kodiak Archipelago;" and Drabek dissertation

⁴² Black, 1992

⁴³ Knecht, Rick, Sven Haakanson, and Shawn Dickson. "Awa’uq: discovery and excavation of an 18th century Alutiiq refuge rock in the Kodiak Archipelago." *To the Aleutians and beyond: The anthropology of William S. Laughlin* 20 (2002): 177. citing (*Samwell 1967:1149*).177.

⁴⁴ Partnow, *Making History*

men joined the Unangan men in being forced to take to their kayaks to hunt otters at the direction of the Russians. Since the Russians referred to them all as Aleut, it becomes difficult in the records to separate them. The Sugpiaq word for Aleut was and is Alutiiq. So the Sugpiaq became Alutiiq. Russian-led Sugpiaq and Unangan hunting parties traveled as far as California, 2,000 miles away by sailboat and kayak, with many men never to return. One Alutiiq song, “*Ukut Skuunat*—These Schooners,” tells of this sad story when Alutiiq men were taken away from their women to hunt. *Akhiok* Elder Mary Peterson narrates an introduction and history of the song’s story about when men from *Akhiok* were enslaved to hunt sea otter and later abandoned near Unalaska.⁴⁵

With the men away for much of the year, or never to return, women and children struggled to survive on their own due to starvation from insufficient winter stores of food.⁴⁶ But even more insidiously, in addition to telling men where and when to hunt, Russians commandeered the work of women, employing them to sew the traditional clothing that had always made as part of the family system of production. Now the Russian overseers distributed clothing only in exchange for cooperation. In traditional Sugpiaq culture, a man’s first kayak was an important life event, but now distribution of kayaks, too, became part of the Russian system.

This tragic era suddenly interrupted the transmission of knowledge and forever changed family and social dynamics, introducing new devastating traditions of alcoholism, depression, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and suicide.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ René Edelman Azzara, citing Alutiiq Museum & Blanchett, 2007, Generations CD, Track 25

⁴⁶ Miller, Kodiak Kreol

⁴⁷ René Edelman Azzara

A. Creole

With the Russians firmly in control, the remaining Sugpiaq now faced new kinds of life choices. The Russian America Company under Shelikov actually sent peasants and craftsmen to Kodiak to create a colony, the only Russian effort at settler colonialism. The Russians embraced a policy which encouraged Russian men, including peasants, promyshlenniki and RAC officers to marry Alutiiq women. On the woman's part, marrying a Russian man and the connections it offered insured sustenance for her extended family. For the same reasons, many Alutiiq converted to Russian Orthodoxy, because they saw it as part of the power structure that now controlled their lives.⁴⁸

The Russians created a Creole class as a new, fixed class. It's important to understand that Imperial Russia operated on a strict class system. The classes, from nobility, to merchant, to peasant, were referred to as estates, and boundaries between estates became hereditary and fixed: if you were born a peasant, that would be your place for life.

The RAC knew there would never be enough actual Russians to operate the company, and they fully intended to breed a new class of citizens. Creoles, the sons of Russian men and Alutiiq women that would be capable of becoming an administrative work force. Russian law required the RAC to educate the Creole class. This was not contested by the company because they needed educated Creoles children to take their places in the Russian order. The company selected some young Creole men and women and sent them to Russia for training in a number of professions, everything from Russian Orthodox priests to ships captains and ship builders.

These efforts are still viewed through opposing lenses. On the one hand, some Alutiiq see this as kidnapping children, and forcibly assimilating them away from their traditional

⁴⁸ Miller, *Kodiak Kreol*

families and beliefs. On the other hand, some appreciate the education and opportunities granted to these children. According to Lydia Black, “Creole” was a designated class, but it was undeniably also an ethnicity. As the colony matured, Creole men and women married each other, and adopted Russian Orthodoxy and the new culture, becoming more Alutiiq than Sugpiaq. By the beginning of 19th century, there were probably second, and maybe even third, generation Creoles and Creole men formed 90% of the educated labor including shopkeepers, traders, priests, ship captains, navigators.⁴⁹

Taking advantage of the dislocation of many indigenous Sugpiaq due to disease and the Russian own predations, the RAC set up a new town around a trading post on the Alaska Peninsula. Life in Katmai was structured not at all like a traditional village, and attracted essentially refugees from epidemic disease and genocide of the Russians.⁵⁰

B. Attu, 100 years later

Reflections on life in Attu, an Unangan village on the western end of the Aleutian Chain 100 years after Russian conquest cast some light on the fate of the Unangan who survived.

“A Russian-American Company census of Attu in 1860 found 227 Unangan and 21 Creoles including the company manager. About 50 men and 10 women were sent out each year to hunt, and furs were shipped out at the end of each year’s hunt. The village included a chapel, a wooden house, a bathhouse, a barracks, a wharf and a store (BIA 1988:19) “After the sale of Alaska in 1867 to the United States, a decline in services on remote islands contributed to a dramatic drop in the population. By 1880, the village had 107 inhabitants, down from 220 in 1870 (Scammon 1874; U. S. Census 1884). The economy depended on sea otter and fox furs.”

⁴⁹ Black, *Russians in Alaska*, p. 217

⁵⁰ Partnow, *Making History*

Despite the conquest by Russians, even 100 years later the Attuans were mostly self-sufficient, “except for tea, sugar, molasses, and biscuits, the islanders were self-sufficient in food. They traded fox and sea otter furs for rifles, shot and powder, and fiber to make nets. The most sought after goods were wool worsted, linen, Chinese cotton and silk, velveteen, velvet, and taffeta. Finished clothing, such as vests, shirts, trousers, caps and hats, and silk shawls was also popular. Other necessities included cooking vessels, copper tea kettles, casks, wooden beams, and needles and thread.⁵¹

⁵¹ Mason, ‘Background,’ *Attu Boy*, p. 8