



The RUSSIAN INVASION of the ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

On the evening of September 9th, 1741, a Russian ship silently appeared on the Aleut horizon and entered Adak harbor unannounced.¹ This small ship and its strange crew were seeking shelter from an Aleutian storm that raged throughout the night. The next morning after the gale had passed, people from two vastly different worlds cautiously emerged from their shelters to stare at each other. To the Aleuts on shore the white-skinned, hairy forms that crowded the ship's deck must have looked like apparitions. Yet to the Russians the tattooed Aleuts who wore ivory ornaments on their lips, noses and ears must have also appeared formidable.² That evening, the captain of the ship wrote in his journal that the men on Adak wore "shades" of thin boards decorated with colors, bird feathers and bone carvings, but despite this eccentric costume appeared well-built and healthy.³

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.⁴ 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.

To the thirsty Russians a knife was a cheap price to pay for water and they willingly gave one to the Aleut leader. However, to their surprise, the Aleut did not hand them the full bladder, of water, but rather gave the bladder to the Aleut in the next kayak who also asked for a knife for himself. From kayak to kayak the bladder of water was passed until each man had been appropriately paid for his service to the stranded ship.

After the crucial water was secured, the Russians became more inquisitive about their strange hosts. They were fascinated with the ornately decorated eye shades the Aleut hunters wore and gave one man an axe for his shade. In addition the Aleuts gave the Russians roots in exchange for some of the Russians' biscuits and a copper kettle, but the kettle was inexplicably returned.

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.⁵

The Exploration of Vitus Bering

This ship that appeared at Adak in 1741 was under the command of Fleet Captain Vitus Bering, an elderly Danish officer in the Russian Navy. Bering had been ordered by the Russian Tsar, Peter the Great, to investigate the ocean that lay to the north and east of the Kamchatka Peninsula in Siberia. This area was one of the last parts of the world that was unexplored by Europeans, and therefore was a source of great curiosity to the Russians whose Eastern lands faced this unknown sea.⁶

On his first voyage in 1727, Bering discovered St. Lawrence Island and sailed through the Straits that were later given his name. However these discoveries were not enough for the Russian Tsar who ordered a second expedition in 1730. The new expedition included 2 ships and several scientists. One of the scientists was the great German naturalist, George William Steller, who was also to be the physician to the crew.

He was a brilliant scientist, but a difficult shipmate and an impossible spouse. His new wife's refusal to follow him to Siberia was

dismissed by Steller because, in his own words, his love had shifted from his wife to the study of the Siberian environment.⁷ This new love led him to the Aleutians and his notes provided the first scientific observations of the area.

The two ships of Bering's second expedition left Siberia on June 4th, 1741, to map and study east of Siberia. Alexei Chirikof was captain of the *St. Paul*; Bering's flagship was the *St. Peter*. Sixteen days after leaving Siberia the ships became fatally separated, leaving Chirikof to explore the Aleutians alone on his way home to the Kamchatka Peninsula while Bering wandered blindly eastward. Several days before Chirikof was at Adak obtaining water for his voyage home, Bering was encountering hostile Indians 500 miles to the east. The 5th of September's encounter with the Aleuts was more threatening than Chirikof's meeting in Adak Harbor.

On September 4th the *St. Peter* dropped anchor near Nagai Island. Almost immediately the sailors heard a large shout and to their surprise saw men approaching them in two kayaks. The men kept gesturing towards shore, but the Russians were fearful and instead of following them threw them mirrors and silk. Eventually three Russians went ashore to meet the Aleuts. However, the surf was too strong for their boat, and they ended by swimming through the waves. The Russians brought ashore with them, in waterproof bags, tobacco and brandy which they offered to the Aleuts. The tobacco was accepted, but the brandy was spit out in disgust. The surf continued to increase until it was clear to the Russians that a storm was approaching. The sailors on shore became nervous about returning to the *St. Peter* and made preparations to go. The Aleuts, however, tried to detain the strangers, especially the Siberian Indian who was acting as a translator for the Russians. On board the *St. Peter* Bering anxiously watched the sailors and the Aleuts struggle with each other. In desperation he ordered the ships' cannons fired to scare the Aleuts. The three Russian sailors managed to escape when the Aleuts fell to the ground in fear of the loud noise. As the *St. Peter* sailed off, the Aleuts built a huge fire on shore whose smoke mingled in the distance with the gathering storm.⁸ It had not been an auspicious beginning.

The entire voyage had been frustrating to Steller. He had not been able to spend much time on the American mainland to collect and record all of the scientific observations he had planned to do. Bering had

allowed him to go ashore only three times during the entire trip. After one of Steller's royal rages his landing was sarcastically accompanied by the sound of two trumpets on the *St. Peter*.

Even though his scientific inquiries had been frustrated, Steller had plenty of work as the ship's physician to keep him busy. During the rest of September many of Bering's crew became dangerously ill with scurvy. They sailed through the Aleutians desperately trying to reach Siberia before the whole crew was decimated by the disease. Thirteen days after Chirikof had visited Adak, Bering's vessel passed by the Island not daring to stop. By October 25th, twelve men had already died and sixty-two were sick. Only three men were able to man the ship when it ran aground on a desolate, uninhabited island in the Commander group off the coast of Siberia in November, 1741. Ironically, Steller finally had all the time he wanted on land at last.

The survivors of the *St. Peters* wreck struggled through the winter, living in five underground huts and eating the sea mammals who were the only inhabitants of the island. Steller, despite the extreme poverty of his circumstances, used his island prison as a laboratory to study the habits of the sea mammals he found swarming around the island. Several species he studied that lonely winter were named after him in memory of his painful work. The most famous of these animals is the Steller sea lion that still roams the Bering Sea. By April the survivors of Bering's ship realized that they could not depend on being rescued from this unknown island and they began to plan their own escape.⁹

Chirikof, who had reached the Kamchatka Peninsula safely 6 months before, sailed from Avatcha Bay in May of 1742 in search of Bering. He also wanted to investigate more extensively the American coast he had only glimpsed the year before. However, he was blown off course to the south towards the Commander Islands. On his return to port he passed within sight of the island where the remnants of Bering's crew were stranded. However, there was no sign that the desperate men were on the island since the *St. Peter* had been completely dismembered. Chirikof unwittingly sailed past his stranded comrades without stopping.¹⁰

By August of 1742 the survivors on the Commander Islands had built a new boat out of the remains of the *St. Peter* and had determinedly set sail for the Siberian coast. After 13 days at sea this ragged group of

men reached Petropavlovsk, the base Bering had built on the Kamchatka Peninsula. The citizens of this small port were astonished at their arrival after they had been given up as dead. They were even more astonished at what they brought with them.

The furs that had been captured on the Commander Islands during the lonely winter months were sold for a modest fortune to the Chinese merchants. The Chinese at Kiakhta, the trading outpost on the Chinese-Siberian border, paid 80 to 100 rubles for each of the 900 sea otter skins the crew had brought back with them. One-ninth of this fortune was given to Steller for his medical services during the voyage;¹¹ the rest was used to help pay the costs of the trip. After all the costs and receipts were tallied, it was revealed that the Commander Island furs had paid for more than a quarter of the expenses of the disastrous Bering expedition!¹²

Furs were highly prized in every country that had a cold winter. A new source of furry warmth was an exciting discovery for the cold worlds of Asia and Europe. In Russia the colonization of Siberia had been based largely on the economic rewards of the sable furs. However, the sable had been seriously overhunted, and the Russians desperately needed a new source of fur to keep their Siberian adventure alive. The furs of the *St. Peter's* crew was the encouragement the Russians needed. Siberian trading companies raced to outfit their own hunting expeditions to search for this new fortune that swam in the icy Aleutian waters.

The Arrival of the Promysblenniki

Three years after Bering's voyage the first shipload of fur hunters reached the Aleutian Islands. Unfortunately, the first encounter of Aleuts and the Russian fur hunters (*Promysblenniki*) was a prelude to what would eventually become the gradual destruction of the ancient Aleut way of life. In 1745 a group of fur hunters led by Nevodchikov and the infamous Chuprov landed on the Aleutian Islands. Mikhail Nevodchikov had been a peasant silversmith who had come to Siberia, like so many other peasants, to seek his fortune. His search led him to Agattu Island, a heavily populated island in the western Aleutians.

The Russian ship was greeted by 100 Aleuts from Agattu armed with their harpoons and darts. This assembly of warriors presented too

formidable a welcome to entice the Russians ashore, but they threw the Aleuts some trinkets as gifts, and the Aleuts, in return, threw them some dead birds. Two days later on the 26th of September, Chuprof landed and gave the Aleuts tobacco pipes and the Aleuts reciprocated by giving the Russians the head of a seal carved in bone.¹⁴ This exchange proceeded amicably enough until the Aleuts asked for one of the Russian muskets. It was an innocent mistake on the part of the Aleuts, but these Russians were in no mood to be understanding. Their guns were their main defense against what they considered a strange and hostile world; the Aleuts had asked for their only defense. Within minutes fighting between the two worlds broke out and at least one Aleut was killed.

The Russians retreated to nearby Attu, which they had bypassed earlier, but the disaster was soon repeated. Again they were welcomed by the Attu Aleuts, but the formalities of a welcome were brushed aside by these avaricious men. They had come to the islands to collect furs and there were many visible in the village. The Aleuts protested as their rude guests began to finger and take some of the furs; they protested more strongly when the Russians began to take their women. In the fight that ensued on Attu, 15 of the Aleuts were killed. Soon the village as well as the fallen Aleuts, were stripped of all their furs by the Russians who took over the Island.

As winter descended most of the Russians left, leaving a few behind to force the remaining Aleuts to hunt sea otter for Russian markets.¹⁵ On the return voyage the ship was destroyed in a brutal kind of justice, north of the Kamchatka Peninsula. A year later the remnants of the crew staggered back to their home port with only 300 otter skins to show for their adventure. Once back in port, one of the sailors of Nevodchikov's crew, Shekhundin, reported to the Siberian officials of the cruelty of his shipmates toward the Aleuts. As a result the survivors of the voyage were put on trial for barbarous behavior." The outcome of the trial is uncertain; its influence on future hunters was negligible.

Attu was the first Aleutian Island to be captured and its people enslaved by the Russians. This pattern of invasion, however, would be repeated on island after island over the next 30 years until the Russians controlled the Chain.¹⁸ Among the islands, the news of the invaders spread quickly, but although the Aleuts were forewarned, they had few defenses against the Russian muskets and cannons. The only successful

defense was flight which left their villages unprotected from the thieving invaders. Many of the Aleuts were captured and enslaved or killed depending on the whim of the captor. A few of the Aleuts were taken back to Siberia where they were trained as translators and navigators to accompany the invaders on their eastward conquests.

Temnak, an Aleut from Attu, was adopted by Captain Nevod-chikov and taken to Siberia in 1750 where he was renamed Pavel Nevodchikov. But many of the Russians were less paternalistic than Nevodchikov. His partner Chuprof was accused of having killed a number of Aleuts by cruelly making them eat a poisonous porridge.¹⁹ And there was another incident recorded in Russian documents about the kidnapping of 20 Aleut women to be taken back to Siberia where there was always a chronic shortage of women. The Russian captor, Pushkarev, ordered 14 of the women to go pack some of the berries once they had reached the Siberian Coast. But they quarrelled with him when he followed them and most of them were killed. The women who remained on board jumped into the icy water, committing suicide rather than face this murderer. Only 2 Aleut translators were exempt from his retribution. The Russian officials referred to the incident as a disaster brought about by the "indescribable abuses, ruin and murder among the natives."²⁰ Yet the official Russian warnings had little influence on the behavior of the Russian fortune hunters.

Each year brought more Russian fur hunters to the Aleutian Islands. A few of these *promyshlenniki* were interested in the Aleuts and abhorred the violence they saw being done to them, but many of them were obsessed only with trying to make their own personal fortune. As the western villages became depleted of furs, the Russians moved a little further east on the Chain, but no matter where they went their reputation preceded them.

Because the Russians were not as skilled as the Aleuts in hunting the elusive fur-bearing sea mammals, they were forced to steal rather than hunt for their fortunes. Ultimately, the Russians became dependent on the Aleut hunters to bring them furs and because of this dependence, many Aleuts were able to bargain their hunting skills for their lives. However, there was nothing they could bargain for their freedom. The hopelessness of the situation for the Aleuts led naturally to an increase of violence against their aggressors and each year the violence spread in the wake of the Russian advancement on the Chain.

The Aleut Revolt

In 1758 a Russian navigator named Dimitri Pan'kov landed on the Fox Islands, which include Umnak, Unalaska, Akutan, and Unimak in the Eastern Aleutian Islands. Aggey Galaktionoff, a native of the Pribil-ofs in 1969, remembered the old stories of the first Russian arrivals on Unalaska Island:

My father was from Makuskin, Unalaska Island. He came up to St. Paul Island as a sealer during the Russian time. Before this was only a hunting island for Aleuts from Unalaska. Aleutian Chain was Aleut as far as Belkofski—just about Sand Point, that's where Aleuts were. Aleuts—hard to believe—but Aleuts just about a nation when Russian discovered them. No rifles, they only made their living with spears.

After Russians had been discovered them at Unalaska—the first time—they never seen a ship like that before. Big boat. They thought the big monster was coming to them from the sea. They all went up to the mountains and hide away. Finally they see the boats coming ashore—people walking around and they were surprised cause this was first time they'd seen ship or men.

They didn't show themselves to Russians first time. Russians knowed there were people there cause they went into sod house and they were warm. Another year—they all hide away again and this time chief is wise and see them at distance. They walk as human beings so he put a couple of spies on them when it was dark to find out if they talk Aleut or different language. His spies hide along the trail in the bushes and hear a different language. So spies went up and told chief and chief finally make up his mind to hurry to them.

Chief of Aleut and Russians don't understand each other. And Russians find out it was the chief talking to him and he talk Russian and chief talk Aleut and don't understand each other.

And soon Aleut learn some Russian and Russian talk a little. Finally the Russian brought them salt, tea. Aleuts started eating wheat, bread, they were very happy. For tea they were using these roots from ground—these with a nice smell. Pushkis used for celery. They just roasted meat over the fire. That's all. Russians taught them how to cook meat.

Poor Aleut didn't know what a compass was but just their nose. Before went in bidarkis and go by sun. At night and they're coming from Unalaska to here the bidarkis all get together and tie paddles together and tie themselves all together and went inside bidarki and sleep. And they went to Attu too.

I presume from Unalaska to here about a week. Unalaska to Attu I guess about a month. When they get tired of sea, they can go ashore on the way to Attu.

Just before we became Christians we take our name and my grandfather took the name Galaktionoff. The Russians took them and baptized them and gave names.

When I think about my people in the old days—they had no radio, no television—when nite comes there was seal oil to put in a little bowl with a piece of flannel for a lite. There was no lamps. The Russians taught them to use lamps. They eat only what they get. But they live off the sea only. We can't now.

Unimak Island, the most important of the Fox Islands, was also the most densely populated of all the Aleutian Islands. When Pan'kov arrived, there were 5,000 Aleuts on the Island living in twenty-one different villages.²¹ But within a short time all of the Aleuts on Unimak Island had been reduced to virtual slavery like they had been everywhere else on the Chain.

In September of 1758 a Russian named Stepan Glotov arrived on Umnak Island and became such good friends with the Aleuts that he lived with them for three years before returning to Kamchatka. Pan'kov himself, wintered on Umnak Island in 1759 in a deceptively peaceful winter.²² During these winter camps, the Russian hunters would force the Aleut men to go out to hunt for them and while they were gone, the Russians would freely live with their women.²³ It was a situation that could not last for long.

In the spring of 1760 when 11 Russians arrived at Atka, west of the Fox Islands, they were ambushed without warning by the angry Aleut men. This attack struck fear in the Russian hunters on other Aleutian Islands. They knew that they depended only on their brutality and their guns to keep the Aleuts, who far outnumbered them, from revolting.

In 1762 a ship named *Zakhari Elizaveta* anchored in Unalaska near two other Russian ships who had also decided to winter on the Island. For fear of an Aleut ambush the Russians preferred not to winter on the Aleutian isolated from other ships as they had done in the past. However, in the winter of 1762 the Aleuts appeared friendly enough to permit the Russians to split up as was their custom into small hunting bands on the Island. The Russians did not apparently think it was odd that most of the adult males of the villages were mysteriously absent.

The *Zakhari Elizaveta*, whose captain was Medvedef, weighed anchor and withdrew to the nearby island of Umnak for the winter, assured that everything was secure on the islands. The crews of (the other two ships spread out in small groups on Ufiaska. Soon after they had separated, one group of Russians led by a man named Korovin was approached by 70 Aleut men who all had sea otter furs for trade. Perhaps this generous offer made the Russians suspicious, or the presence of so many Aleut men at one time seemed threatening. The outnumbered Russians fled to their boats, but they were caught in a storm and many were drowned. The survivors eventually reached Umnak Island only to find Medvedef's ship completely destroyed by fire from which there was only one survivor, Stephen Korelin.

The Aleuts had planned carefully. Each group of Aleut warriors had been given a number of wooden splinters to be burned a day at a time. When the splinters were gone, they attacked. Two of the 3 Russian ships were destroyed; only Korovin's ship, the *St. Troitsy*, remained afloat the following March.²⁴ When spring finally came on the Eastern Aleutians there were only 12 Russian survivors from the three Russian ships that had chosen to spend the winter on the Fox Islands.

When word of the attack reached Russian ears they demanded a cruel revenge for their fallen companions. Two captains in particular, took personal responsibility for disciplining the "murderous" Aleuts. Captain Glotov, who had just wintered at Kokiak 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. He was rumored to have left over 3,000 Aleuts dead. It was also rumored that he cruelly experimented with the Aleuts to prove that one bullet would go through nine Aleuts who were forced to line up behind each other. He was a shiftless, dissipated man who met his own miserable death a few years later."

Together these two men perpetuated a reign of terror on the Aleutian Islands which lasted for more than 20 years. Despite the Russian retaliation, the Aleuts continued to fight as long as they could. In 1765 a

ship tried to winter on Umnak, but the men who ventured forth to impose a fur tax on the remaining Aleut hunters were never heard of again. In December of 1765, 28 men arrived on Unalaska and were met by Aleut warriors who killed all of them before they escaped. However, the Aleuts, despite their bravery, could not compete forever against the Russian muskets.

During the Aleut uprising Catherine II of Russia ordered an investigative mission to be sent to the Aleutians to report to her on the conditions of this far-flung colony of Russia's. Captain P.K. Krenitsyn arrived in the Aleutians in 1768 and noted the extreme hardship of the fur tax on the Aleuts and the practice of kidnapping children to ensure that their fathers would hunt through the winter months.²⁶ He also noted the large decrease in the Aleut population since the Russian invasion, caused by either the treachery of the Russian invaders or the disease they inadvertently brought with them.²⁷

The Scourge of Russian Diseases

The common European diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox and the flu had never reached the Aleutian Islands and therefore the Aleuts had no immunity against these viruses when they accompanied the Russian invaders. Within a century after the Russian invasion, syphilis, tuberculosis, flu, pneumonia, measles and smallpox all made their macabre debut on the Islands,²⁸ mercilessly decimating the Aleut nation.

There were other contributing factors, however, to the tragic waves of deaths that followed the introduction of each new disease. The Aleut system of medicine and religion had been largely discredited by the Russians. The Shamans were vilified by the Russians and therefore lost the credibility they needed to provide comfort and moral support to the sick. In addition, many of the Aleut men had been taken away from their families by the Russians to hunt, leaving their villages without food. Many of the starving communities left without their hunters were easy prey to the new diseases that descended on the Islands.²⁹

The first known outbreak of tuberculosis occurred in 1770 in two Aleut men who had been taken to Siberia. The disease quickly spread through the Islands and was considered virtually incurable by the Aleuts until World War II. The effects of smallpox were considerably more dramatic than the slower acting tuberculosis. The disease was first

introduced by Spanish sailors in 1836. In the next few years over half of Alaska's native population died from this dreaded disease.³⁰ On Unalaska alone, 85 people died in 1838 from smallpox.³¹ As if tuberculosis and smallpox weren't enough, measles invaded the islands in 1845 and by 1850 the Aleutian Islands were swept again by another epidemic which killed many of the survivors of the previous diseases.³² Venereal diseases, which were spread by the Russian hunters, also added to the misery of the people and led to an increasing infertility of the Aleuts, the effects of which lasted for many years.

The Origin of the Name "Aleut"

The first Russian hunters on the Aleutian Islands called the people whom they found there Aleutski, although the people called themselves Unungan.³³ It is possible that the Russians had assumed that the Aleuts were related to a distinct tribe in Siberia called the Olutorski. This small Siberian tribe, who lived on the coast of the Kamchatka peninsula, was so different from other Siberian Indians that some people speculated that they were an offshoot of the ancient Japanese Ainu tribe. The Olutorski were the only tribe in Siberia that hunted whales, in a fashion similar to the Aleuts, and therefore the confusion in the minds of Russians between the two peoples was natural.³⁴

There was also an alternative theory about the origin of the "Aleut" name. Some think it was derived from the old Aleut expression "Alik uaia" which meant "What is it?"³⁵ Apparently the Aleuts used this expression a great deal in their conversation with Russians. However, this explanation takes too much advantage of a linguistic coincidence to be convincing.

The Nature of the Promyshlenniki

The original *promyshlennikis* were in general, an adventurous group from the Russian peasant society. They included among them some criminals who had good reason to escape to the Aleutian Islands where the laws of their society could not find them. Therefore it is not surprising that although the Russian Tsar had specifically outlined humane ways to treat the Aleuts, the *promyshlennikis*, behavior went unchecked by the laws made 5,000 miles away.³⁶ "God is high above and

the Tsar is far away" was a saying in (he Aleutian Islands chat the Russians used to excuse all of their excesses and sins.

Many of these early Russians had never seen the sea before and did not know how to hunt the sea mammals. None of them ever mastered the skills of the Aleuts in their kayaks, and consequently they were forced to hunt the sea mammals only when they were lucky enough to find them on land. As a result, most of their hunting consisted of either stealing or expropriating furs from the Aleut hunters who had survived the massacres and the diseases.

In the summer of 1796, several Aleut leaders made the 5,000 mile journey to St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia at the time. They went to protest against the behavior of the Russian hunters before the Russian Tsar Paul I. They had been helped by a merchant, Kiseler, and a priest, Marary, and were given a friendly audience by the Tsar. Their testimony was a poignant description of the impact the Russians had in the Aleutians.

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.³⁷

The Aleuts' complaint was heard, and they were given a new suit of clothes by the Tsar. The old rules of decent behavior in the Aleutians were reiterated; however, rules could not change the basic needs of the men who had become the *promyshlenniki*.

The same *promyshlenniki* often signed up again and again for each new Aleutian voyage, originating in the Siberian ports. They dreamed of fortunes, but usually received only a fraction of their dreams. Most never amassed enough money to ever free themselves from their arctic quest. The records that were kept of that period suggest that the only



ALEUT WOMAN. John Webber, ca. 1798. Courtesy Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.



ALEUT MAN. John Webber, ca. 1798. Courtesy Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.

people who became wealthy from the Alaskan ventures were the Siberian merchants who sold the furs to the Chinese and European markets.³⁸ It was perhaps fitting that the *promyshlenniki*, who exploited the Aleuts unmercifully were in turn exploited just as unmercifully by their Siberian merchant masters.

The Fame of the Alaskan Furs

The furs which were sent to St. Petersburg from the Aleutian Islands electrified the Russian court. Catherine the Great was so impressed with their elegance that she boasted of them to all visitors at her palace and soon many European countries were openly interested in this new source of furs.³⁹ Spain strengthened her defenses in Northern California as news of the increasing Russian presence in Alaska leaked out, and England ordered her great explorer, Captain James Cook, to make a visit to the Alaskan fur kingdom to assess its true wealth.

In 1778 Captain Cook explored the Alaskan mainland and the Bering Sea. His explorations naturally made the Russians nervous since he renamed many landmarks on his excellent maps with English names. Based on his discussions with Russian sea captains and his own findings he made a map of the Aleutians that became the standard map for British and American traders for many years to come.⁴⁰ Captain Cook's vessel spent three weeks in Unalaska in 1778 where he purchased several hundred sea otter skins and became acquainted with the people. He was very impressed with the Aleuts whom he described as "very goodlooking people and decently clean.... As to honesty they might serve as a pattern to the most civilized nation upon earth."⁴¹ Captain Cook died the year after his visit to Unalaska but the furs he had collected in Alaska were sold after his death in Canton, China for \$ 10,000. This posthumous profit confirmed all of Catherine the Great's boasts and catapulted the sea otter skins into international fame.

As the fame of the furs spread, the demand for them increased until it appeared that it was almost insatiable. The Russian fur hunters worked the Aleuts feverishly to create their elusive fortunes, and in the process the sea mammals were killed indiscriminately with no concern for their future supply. The Aleuts had warned the Russians that the mass killing of the sea mammals would seriously deplete their numbers. However, the Russians insisted that the only solution to the diminish-

ing sea mammals was to find new hunting grounds where the killing could proceed as carelessly as it had in the past.

The most highly valued fur in the Aleutian Islands had been the sea otters'; however, by 1772 the sea otters were almost extinct.⁴² The Russian colonial adventure might have floundered then if the Chinese had not invented a secret method of removing the coarse, outer hair of the fur seal, making its skin almost as valuable as the sea otters'.⁴³ Steller had written extensively about the fur seals that bred on the island where he had been shipwrecked. However, these seals had been so overhunted on the Commander Islands since the Bering shipwreck that few of them were left in the Western Pacific. In the Eastern Pacific, however, the situation was more promising. Large numbers of fur seals could be seen migrating north every spring past the Aleutian Islands, and every fall they swam south again. Yet no Russian had ever seen them haul up on land where they could be easily killed. Although a number of Russian sailors had tried to follow the seals northward, they always lost them in the omnipresent Bering Sea fog.

In 1784, the first permanent Russian Colony was established on the southeast side of Kodiak Island at Three Saints Bay. This colony was the creation of a young, ambitious Siberian merchant named Shelekov, and his energetic wife, Natalie.⁴⁴ Shelekov had dreams of beginning a new country in Russian-America, but Catherine the Great had only offered him the rights to colonize Kodiak Island. Still, this was enough to feed his dream and he conscripted 12 Aleuts to help him begin to build his empire in America. It was a treacherous business establishing a colony so far from the homeland. Six Russian ships a year came to the Aleutian Islands at that time, but only 4 would ever return to Siberia. Shipwrecks averaged 1 in 3 due largely to the weather, which in those difficult times was the Aleuts' only ally. Supplying this distant colony was always difficult even under the best of conditions, and under bad conditions it became impossible.

In addition to the hazards of the Aleutian weather, the Russians were also distressed by the continuing decrease in the number of fur sea mammals. Catherine the Great had insisted that the colony established in the New World would have to pay for itself. Shelekov had intended to construct the economic basis of his colony on the furs of the sea mammals. However, without a continuing supply of furs, the fragile structure of the Russian colony would be blown away by the Aleutian

gales. With each year that passed the search became more intense. If a new source of furs was not found, the Russian adventure that had begun with Bering's exploration of the Aleutian Islands would surely collapse.