During the exploration and conquest of the Americas, the historical narrative focuses on westward expansion. However, in the late eighteenth century, there was eastern expansion into the Americas. The Russian colony of Alaska was an exploration of the artic land and sea, the first encounter between the Native Alaskans and others, and an exchange of furs that dominated the economy. In 1867, the Russian government sold Alaska, a very large landmass in the Northwest Pacific to the United States. Many Russian officials questioned why its colony was such a failure, why it couldn’t be as successful as the other European powers. The lack of regulation of the Russian American Company, the exorbitant fur hunting, and poor treatment of Native Alaskans made the Russian colony of Alaska extremely unsustainable.

By the eighteenth century, most of the world was dominated by the European powers, mainly the kingdoms of England, France, and Spain. The Empire of Russia was another force, spreading its influence, especially Russian Orthodoxy through way of the *promyshlenniki*, fur hunters. In the late 1500s, fur hunters and trappers moved eastward into the frontier of Siberia. The fur business was lucrative, animal pelts were sold for high prices in Europe and China. The Russian Empire reached the Kamchatka Peninsula, extending into the Pacific, in the 1690s. Tsar Peter requested an expedition of the sea, primarily for the purpose of discovering if Asia and North America were connected by land between Asia. Even though he died in 1725, the exploration of the Pacific continued. In 1728, the First Kamchatka Expedition was launched, headed by Vitus Bering, a Dane who served in Russia’s navy. He discovered that there was no land joining Asia and the Americas. However, Bering and his crew did not come into contact with Alaska. It wasn’t until June 1741 that the Second Kamchatka Expedition began.¹ It was once again led by Bering, commanding the ship St. Peter, and Alexei Chirikov, commanding the

ship St. Paul. Early in the expedition, Bering and Chirikov were separated, but both were able to discover the Commander Islands, the Aleutian Islands, and Alaska.\(^2\)

The first contact between Europeans and Native Alaskans occurred on July 17th, 1741. Chirikov anchored the St. Paul off an island near Prince of Wales. He ordered a longboat to be sent to get drinking water and to find anything else of value. The boats and their crews did not return. After six days, Chirikov ordered another longboat to investigate. The crew did not return. According to Russian accounts, musket fire was heard, and two native canoes came in view of the ship, but left. The Russian story says that the longboat crews were killed by the natives. Without any more water, the St. Paul sailed back to Russia. The native story of the encounter sharply contrasts with the Russian story. According to native elder Mark Jacobs, Jr., the sailors decided to desert the ship, believing they would die. They met the local natives and sought refuge with them, even marrying native women.\(^3\)

Bering did not come into contact with any Native Alaskans, but he, and many of his crew did not make it back to Russia. The crew of the St. Peter were suffering from scurvy, and crashed while trying to reach home. Bering and 19 other sailors died of scurvy in December of 1741. The survivors built a boat from the wreckage, and eventually made it back to Russia in the springtime.\(^4\)

The Imperial Russian government placed few restrictions on the Russian American Company, which led to untenable policies. Alaska was home to a wide variety of animals, mainly the sea otter, with extremely valuable fur. After the Second Kamchatka Expedition, promyshlenniki quickly traveled to the Aleutians Islands, and eventually the Alaskan mainland.


However, these were trappers and hunters, who were not planning to create any settlements. The first settlements were founded by the Shelikhov-Golikov Company, the precursor to the Russian Alaska Company, which would later run Russian Alaska. The Shelikhov-Golikov Company was led by Grigory Shelikhov, a popular merchant. In the 1780’s, Shelikhov established some of the first settlements on Kodiak and on the Kenai Peninsula. To establish these colonies, Shelikhov needed serfs, supplied by the province of Irkutsk. Serfs were cheap, and could work in agriculture or shipyards, as opposed to the fur hunters, who only wanted to hunt. Along with the harsh conditions of the far north, the serfs were under strict rule. Under the contract, the serfs only belonged to the Shelikhov Company, however, Shelikhov managed to financially bind them to him, through loans for food and supplies. These factors led to an unsuccessful revolt in 1795.5

The main competition for the Shelikhov Company was the Lebedev Company. Both companies’ profits relied on the fur trade, and without any regulatory government, they could achieve these profits by any means. Both companies traded, and sometimes exploited native tribes and hunters for fur. This resulted in native tribes attacking Russian outposts.6 Shelikhov died in 1795,7 but his visions for the colonization of Alaska were partially achieved. By 1797, the Shelikhov Company, managed by Alexander Baranov, was able to control the southern coast of Alaska, including a colony at Sitka. In 1799, at the order of the Tsar, the Russian American Company was formed, led by Baranov.8 The company was treated as an individual nation. It had its own military and flag, and full economic and political power over Alaska. Any action made in Alaska

7 Grinev, “The First Russian Settlers in Alaska.” 443-74
8 Ritter, Alaska's History: The People, Land, and Events of the North Country, 28-44.
did not need the support of the Tsar. While the company remained prosperous at the beginning of the 19th century, the company began to deteriorate. The RAC was not very popular with the royal government, especially Grand Duke Nikolaevich, and as a result of aristocrats gaining more and more power, poor decisions were made. The RAC put more emphasis on buying tea from China. The fall in price was disastrous for the profits of the company. There was no widespread colonization of Alaska. The lack of regulation of the RAC caused violent conflicts with the Tlingit, and weak economic decisions led to the decline of the colony of Russian Alaska.

The relentless hunting of fur bearing animals made Russian Alaska extremely unsustainable. The primary reason any European traveled to Alaska was for the fur. The Shelikhov and Russian Alaskan Companies made the majority of their income from fur. During the Second Kamchatka Expedition, Georg Steller, a German naturalist, was able to identify much of the wildlife. One such species he came across was the massive Steller’s sea cow, Rytina stelleri. The shipwrecked crew of the St. Peter was able to survive by eating one. These mammals had little contact with humans, and the crew was able to kill hundreds before sailing back to Russia. The pelts were sold in China, which cover a good part of the expedition. News spread of the vast number of fur bearing animals, mainly sea otter in the Aleutians and Alaska, sparking waves of fur hunters to venture to these lands. The pelts and furs could be sold for extremely high prices in China. The fur trade was not limited to the Russians. English, French, Spanish, and later hunters from the United States arrived for the sea otters. This drive for profit had disastrous consequences for the environment. Steller’s sea cow was hunted to extinction.

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The sea otter and seal population plummeted. Even after Alaska was sold to the United States, mass hunting still continued. It wasn’t until 1911 when an international treaty fully protected sea otters and restricted sealing. The loss of animals’ fur meant the loss of profit, and therefore the loss of purpose for Alaska.

The subjugation of the Native Alaskans and the resulting conflicts created fatal dilemmas for Russian Alaska. Across the new world, native populations were subjugated by the European powers. Russian Alaska was no exception. The Russians massacred, raped, and exploited the natives. This then caused bloody conflicts between the groups. The natives of Alaska had thrived in the subarctic conditions for thousands of years. Due to biological differences with natives in the continental US, anthropologists believe that the groups in Alaska arrived there about 10,000 years ago. There are two main language groups in Alaska, the Eskimo-Aleut and the Athabascan. These groups branch out to several different groups of people. The Aleut, part of the Eskimo-Aleut language family inhabit the Aleutian Islands. They called themselves the Unangan, “Original People.” The Alutiiq, known as the Pacific Eskimo, were part of the Eskimo-Aleut language family. The Chugach was another group in the Eskimo-Aleut family, native to the Kenai Peninsula and Prince William Sound. The Athabascan, also known as Tlingit, are not a single people. The Athabascan are divided into several groups that live in inland Alaska and around Cook inland. This includes the Dena’ina and the Ahtna. The Eyak are closely related to the Chugach, but are in the Athabascan language group. Their population was significantly smaller than the other native groups, with only four major villages. The Inuit are a large group of people, spreading from Alaska to Greenland. Located in northern Alaska, they are known especially for the domestication of dogs. The Inupiat are closely related to the Inuit, but are

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classified as a different group of people due to their distinct culture and experiences. They are native to the north coast of Alaska, known as the North Slope. Another group in Alaska was the Yup’ik. The Yup’ik are thought to have arrived in Alaska later than the other groups.\textsuperscript{12}

The natives were experts at surviving in the harsh Alaskan climate. Their skill in hunting and fishing got the attention of the Russian merchants, who would use them as forced labor. The Russian American Company exploited the natives, especially the Aleut, into hunting for the fur trade. In the Aleutians, the Aleuts attempted to resist the Russian colonization, but were killed by the hundreds. The Russians raped an innumerable amount of native women. Today, most Aleuts are part Russian. When Shelikhov landed at Kodiak Island, his forces killed hundreds of the natives. In 1784, 500 Alutiiq were massacred. The abuse of the natives continued throughout the Russian colonization. The Aleut, Alutiiq, Chugach, and Yup’ik were forced to hunt and fish for the Russians for fur. The excessive hunting had negative effects for other groups of natives, even those who had little contact with the Russians. The Inupiat relied on whaling and hunting. With less and less seals, whales and other animals making it into the Arctic sea, the Inupiat struggled to get food. The Russians also forced the natives to relocate. The Alutiiq were forced to leave their cultural lands. In the 1820s, the Aleuts were forced to live on the Pribilof Islands, off the coast of Russia. Their population dropped to 500. The Russians brought Orthodoxy with them. Most of the Alutiiq were forced to convert to the Russian Orthodox Church. The Natives also suffered from diseases. The Eyak, already small, suffered greatly from the Russian diseases.\textsuperscript{13}

Although they exploited and abused the natives, many of the key figures of Russian Alaska did realize the importance of the native Alaskans. Shelikhov wanted the settlers to marry

\textsuperscript{12} Treuer, \textit{Atlas of Indian Nations}, 88-113
\textsuperscript{13} Treuer, \textit{Atlas of Indian Nations}, 88-113
native women, which many did. Baranov, the head of the RAC, married a native woman and had children. However, most of the native women were forced into these positions. In the Lebedev trading post of St. Constantine, each man had a native prostitute. In 1795, Archimandrite Ioasaf of the Orthodox Church found that the Russians exchanged their mistresses freely, some of them girls as young as ten.

The Lebedev and Shelikhov Companies traded and exploited different groups of natives for fur. This system enabled one company to sabotage the other by attacking the tribes affiliated with them. Not only would this disrupt the exchange of fur, but it would also damage alliances between a company and native tribes. There was a wave of violence in the late 18th century. In Cook Inlet, between 1788 and 1798, there were 178 reported cases of Russian violence against the Dena’ina. These included killings, assault, theft, and kidnapping. The actual number of crimes committed is probably much higher.

The ruthlessness of the Russians towards the natives caused several conflicts, especially with the Athabascan (Tlingit). The conflicts with the Dena’ina ensured that the Russians would not be able to expand their colonies. From 1785 to 1786, the Dena’ina and Alutiiq unsuccessfully tried to fight the Russians. The Russians were able to establish forts and outposts, but these belonged to Lebedev and Shelikhov. Both companies tried to sabotage the other by attacking the natives who traded with them. These actions caused the natives to retaliate, attacking Russian forts. The extreme abuse towards the native women was another cause of native aggression. According to elder Shem Pete, the Dena’ina would kill any Russians that came into their territory in response to the Russian violence. According to several storytellers, the Dena’ina wiped out

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14 Grinev, “The First Russian Settlers in Alaska.” 443-74
15 Ritter, Alaska’s History: The People, Land, and Events of the North Country, 28-44.
16 Boraas and Legget, "Dena’ina Resistance to Russian Hegemony, Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Cook Inlet, Alaska." Ethnohistory
entire forts of Russians. In 1797, the natives killed all the Russians in the Tyonek artel, since the Russians had kidnapped native women for years. Between 1792 and 1800, the Russians abused native children. When the natives discovered this, they attacked and killed all the Russians in the colony at Lake Iliamna. In 1797 the increasing hostilities between the natives and the Russians led to the Battle of Kenai. The Dena’ina attacked the Lebedev posts at Tyonek and Iliamna and the fort of St. Nicholas. Between 25 and 70 Russians were killed, and the Dena’ina killed one hundred other Dena’ina affiliated with the Russians. The result of the battle was the Lebedev Company leaving Alaska, and the Russian presence in the Kenai Peninsula falling to about 20 for the rest of the occupation of Alaska.\(^{17}\) The Russian atrocities towards the natives, including massacres, forced labor, kidnappings, and rapes sparked resistance from the natives, who were able to fight back against the Russians and limit their control of territory.

The Russian colony of Alaska was not sustainable. After Russia lost the Crimean War, they owed several debts, and sold it to the United States for only 7 million dollars. The US was able to gain long lasting success from Alaska, finding numerous resources such as gold, lumber, fishing, and oil. The US was even able to utilize Alaska against its former masters during the Cold War. Other imperial powers were able to keep colonies since they were strongly regulated, and didn’t rely on a single industry, like fur. Although the Russians had initial success in the fur market, their effort could not be sustained due to the lack of oversight of the Russian Alaska Company, unsustainable hunting, and the conflicts that arose with the natives as result of Russian atrocities. The violent encounters and poor exchanges doomed the Russian exploration of Alaska.

\(^{17}\) Boraas and Legget, "Dena'ina Resistance to Russian Hegemony, Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: Cook Inlet, Alaska." *Ethnohistory*
Annotated Bibliography

Secondary Sources

This essay from an academic journal is important to my project as it provides information on how the actions of the Dena’ina prevented the Russians from complete control in Alaska. This helped me further understand the native Alaskans and their interactions with the Russians.

This article talks about the cultural conflicts between the Native Alaskans and the Russians, along with the US. This is very helpful as it explains cultural encounters between the two groups, as well as the first known encounter between the Alaskans and Europeans.

This article gives an analysis of a specific area during the Russian period of Alaska. It describes the initial encounter in the Copper River Basin, and the fur exchange, along with hostilities between the groups. This article is crucial to the ‘exchange’, the trade of furs.

This article talks about the first Russians settlers and trappers, including some of the key people and legislation that took place. It provides information from the Russian side of events.

This article discusses the ‘Kake War’, between the US army and the Tlingit natives. Although this does not directly involve Russia, this event transpired only 15 months after Russia sold Alaska. This shows how the subjugation of the natives continued.

This book briefly explains Russian atrocities against the Aleuts.

This article explains how the Russian American Company failed due to poor economic decisions by the higher class. This information was crucial to the downfall of the company.

This book chapter provides lots of information on the explorers of Alaska, as well as the fur trade. It not only discusses the Russians but other European explorers as well. The book also contains information on the government and religion.

This article is key as it addresses the social life in Russian Alaska. It talks about the disparity between Russians and Native Alaskans, and it provides insight on interracial marriages in Russian Alaska.

Kan, Sergei. "Sergei Ionovich Kostromitirov (1854-1915), or "Colonel George Konstrometinoff": From a Creole Teenager to the Number-One Russian-American Citizen of Sitka." Ethnohistory 60, no. 3 (2013): 385-402. This article talks about Sergei Kostromitirov, a Creole (part native part russian) who lived during the Russian period of Alaska. This article can help my project address the social lives in Russian Alaska.


This document is key to my project, as it outlines one of the main reasons why Russia colonized Alaska. The article includes information on the sea-otter, their value in the world at the time, and the impact of the Russian colonization on them.

Primary Sources
This article provides a first person account of a massacre of Alaskan Native sailors. While this took place after the US bought Alaska, it shows how discrimination and cruelty towards the natives persisted.

"The Russian Treaty." New-York Tribune, April 1, 1867. This front page article from a newspaper provides basic information on the trade with Russia, giving the US Alaska. This contributes the opinion of average Americans at the time.

Kan, Sergei. "Sergei Ionovich Kostromitirov (1854-1915), or "Colonel George Konstrometinoff": From a Creole Teenager to the Number-One Russian-American Citizen of Sitka." Ethnohistory 60, no. 3 (2013): 385-402.
Includes pictures of him and the colony of Alaska when it was Russian. This gave insight on how the people lived.