Russia's Colony 1741-1867

Russia was the first European country to explore in the North Pacific. In 1725 the tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725) commissioned Vitus Bering to sail east from the Kamchatka Peninsula. In 1727, Bering sailed north through the Bering Strait to the Arctic ice pack and back to Kamchatka. Due to storms and fog in the Bering Strait he did not see the North American mainland to the east. In the summer of 1732 a Cossack named Mikhail Gvozdev sailed from Kamchatka northward through the Bering Strait and found the Diomede Islands. Eskimos on the second island shot a hail of arrows at the Russian explorers. The next day the Russians anchored off the American coast at Cape Prince of Wales. Soon after Gvozdev sighted King Island where an Alaska Native man approached the ship in a kayak. Following that meeting Gvozdev returned to Kamchatka. His voyage represents the first Russian contact with the American mainland, and with Alaska Native people.

In June of that year Bering and another captain, Aleksi Chirikov, sailed in two ships from Kamchatka for North America. In mid-July Chirikov sighted land southeast of Alaska. Chirikov sent a boat ashore with a crew of eleven men to get fresh water and to look around. They did not come back. Six days later he sent a second boat with a crew of four to see what had happened to the first boat. This boat and its crew also vanished. A day later however, two boats paddled by Alaska Native people emerged from the direction the Russian boats had gone. The Alaskans kept their distance from the ship and after shouting a message, they paddled back to where they had come from. No record exists of the fate of the Russian sailors who disappeared. Disappointed, Chirikov sailed back to Kamchatka.

In the meantime, Bering anchored off an island farther north, near Cape St. Elias. Georg Steller, the expedition's naturalist, spent a number of hours on the island and recorded observations of plants, crustaceans and sea shells, and detailed evidence of Native people and how they lived, even though he did not actually see any Native people. Natives apparently used the island for fishing and hunting sea mammals, but lived elsewhere.

Bering set sail for Kamchatka after only a day on the North American coast. He was low on supplies and his men were beginning to suffer from scurvy. Heading west they passed a number of islands, and anchored in the Shumagins, which they named for a sailor who died on board. From one of the islands two kayaks approached the ship and the Russians and Alaskans exchanged goods. The Natives invited the Russians ashore, and ten men ventured onto the island where they met with nine Aleuts. When the Russians prepared to leave the Aleuts tried to hold one back. He wrestled free and swam to the departing boat while the Russians fired their muskets into the air. The next day nine Aleuts paddled to the ship and exchanged more goods. The following day the Russians sailed away. This was the first recorded, direct encounter between Europeans and Alaska Natives.

Over the next one hundred years the Russians would learn a great deal about the geography of the North Pacific and Alaska. Russian explorers made more than sixty voyages to what they called Russian America before its sale to the United States in 1867. The Russians mapped the Bering Sea coast and some of the Arctic. They gathered important data about the Native people, animals and plants, climate, the ebb and flow of the annual winter ice pack, and the resources of the sea and land, including marine and land fur-bearing mammals and minerals. Their knowledge contributed substantially to world geographical understanding, and to Alaska's important role in the north.
Russia's interest in Alaska was due to the natural resources that could be turned into economic profit. The main resources they exploited were fur-bearing sea and land mammals. After 1741 wealthy Russian merchants put up money to pay experienced Siberian fur traders to voyage to various Aleutian islands in order to trade for pelts. The investors then traded most of the furs to Chinese merchants for a handsome profit. Few of the actual fur traders, however, became rich.

The traders harvested sea otter, black and other foxes, and fur seals. The fur traders did not hunt the animals; instead they forced Aleut hunters to do the work. Often the Russians took Aleut women and children as hostages while the hunters gathered pelts. While not all the encounters between the fur traders and the Natives were hostile, many were, and the Russians often brutalized Aleuts who resisted their demands. In addition, the Russians, like other Europeans wherever they encountered Native Americans, brought diseases not known to the Natives. Throughout the Americas, and in Alaska, disease killed more Natives than any other single cause.

These voyages from Siberia to America were expensive. Investors worked to save costs and increase their profits by forming partnerships. Eventually two groups came to dominate. One group, led by Gregorii Shelikhov, established the first permanent Russian post in Alaska, on Kodiak Island in 1784. From there Shelikhov sent hunters into Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound. They traded with local Natives, sometimes in a friendly manner, sometimes not. Shelikhov's chief rival, Pavel Lebedev-Lastochkin, established several posts in Cook Inlet, at the mouths of the Kasilof and Kenai Rivers, on the west side of the inlet, and near the mouth of Eagle River. Eventually Shelikhov took over all of these posts.

In 1799 the Russian government established a single, government-sponsored company to continue the exploitation of Alaska resources. The new company, called the Russian American Company, directed all Russian commercial activity in America from 1799 until the government sold Alaska to the United States in 1867.

Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov, the Russian American Company's first business manager and governor in Alaska, was aggressive and determined. One of his first acts was to extend the colony into Southeast Alaska. At first the Tlingit Indians there welcomed the Russians. But in 1802 the Tlingit attacked the Russian post in Sitka, killing perhaps as many as eighty Russians and Aleuts. A British trading ship rescued some Russians and charged Baranov a fee to get them back. Baranov considered the Tlingit attack as merely a temporary setback and soon returned to Southeast with a force of several hundred Aleut hunters. When he arrived at the location of his original post, he learned the Indians had
moved to a more easily defended location and had erected a formidable fortress. Baranov would have had great difficulty re-taking the post with the weapons he had. Luckily for him, a Russian naval ship, the Neva, was waiting to help, armed with a number of cannons.

A Russian tsar had sent naval ships to America to help defend Russia’s claim to the archipelago. The ship waiting to help Baranov, the Neva, shelled the Tlingit post. Realizing they could not hang on, the Indians fled over the mountains. Eventually the Tlingit returned to the area and worked out an agreement with the Russians. The Russians taught the Indians how to grow potatoes, and the Tlingit then traded potatoes and deer meat to the Russians. In fact, the Russians came to depend on food supplied by the Tlingit, for the journey from Russia was long and expensive, and often supplies did not arrive. Without the food supplied by the Tlingit and the labor supplied by the Aleuts, the Russians would not have been successful in colonizing Alaska.

Baranov served the Company from 1799 until 1818. During his tenure he directed Russian hunters throughout the Aleutian Islands, around Kodiak Island, in Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound, and in the Alexander Archipelago. He established a Russian post in California, Ft. Ross, on the coast north of San Francisco. The Russians operated Ft. Ross until 1841 when they sold it to a California settler.

The naval governors of Russian America served terms of five years. From 1818 to 1867 they expanded the colony northward along the Bering Sea coast, and up the Yukon River five hundred miles to the village of Nulato. Russian explorers recorded detailed knowledge about North America, as the governors and government agents tried to develop various resources besides furs. At no time during the life of the colony were there more than 833 Russians in all of Alaska. The Russians attempted to hunt whales, and mine coal. They conducted a mineral survey of the Kenai Peninsula and reported finding small amounts of gold. They traded for land mammal furs with the Athabaskans along the Yukon River. The furs were the only resource that returned any significant profit for the Company. By the 1850s, some Russian leaders were raising questions about the viability of their American colony.

Russian fur traders in Alaska came from a culture that believed in Christianity. The Russian religion, Russian Orthodoxy, had been established in the 8th century. The first Russian Orthodox missionaries came to Alaska in 1794. Before that time it was the Russian fur traders who taught the elements of Christianity to the Natives.

Many of the Orthodox missionaries defended Alaska Native people. The tsar in St. Petersburg had always prohibited the poor treatment of Natives, but many fur traders ignored his orders. Several remarkable men served the Orthodox mission in Alaska.

None was more important that Ioann Veniaminov, later named Bishop Innocent, the first Orthodox bishop in Alaska. Beginning in 1824 on Unalaska he worked with Native leaders to develop an alphabet for the Fox Island Aleut language. He and the Aleut Ivan Pan’kov then translated some Russian liturgical texts into the Aleut language.
He also made comprehensive notes on the population of the islands and on various aspects of Aleut culture.

In 1835 Veniaminov moved to Sitka where he began to learn the Tlingit language. Veniaminov was a practical man. He helped design and build a cathedral at Sitka. He instructed Natives and Russians in carpentry, bricklaying and other skills. When a smallpox epidemic threatened the colony in the late 1830s he helped vaccinate many residents. Veniaminov returned to Russia in 1841, where he was named the first Orthodox bishop of Alaska, taking the name Innocent. Bishop Innocent continued to serve Alaska until 1859, when he was appointed Metropolitan of Moscow, the highest office in the Orthodox Church. In 1977, the Orthodox Church named him a saint.

By the middle of the 1850s the Russians had gathered information on all of Alaska's known resources. They had failed in their attempt to hunt whales and mine coal on the Kenai Peninsula, and they had not found enough gold to warrant further mining development. They had gone far up the Yukon River in search of new fur bearers, and faced a dwindling supply. They relied on Aleut labor. In Southeast Alaska they were dependent on the Tlingits for food supplies. In addition, the Tlingit remained powerful, and attempted several times to attack them. In St. Petersburg, the tsar and his advisors began to discuss how they might better supply Russian's American colony, defend it from foreign conquest, and protect it from Indian attacks. The tsar and his council decided that the best course of action was to sell Russian America and concentrate on Asia. When that information became public, the United States quickly indicated an interest in the region.

The final sale had to wait until after the end of the American Civil War. In 1867 Russia and the United States reached an agreement, and the American Secretary of State William H. Seward and Russian envoy Eduard de Stoeckl signed a treaty of purchase that was ratified by both the Russian and the United States Senates. The transfer ceremony took place at Sitka on October 18, 1867.

The Tlingit and Haida Alaska Natives protested the sale. They had not sold their land to the Russians, but the Russians sold it to the U.S. as if Tlingit and Haida land was Russia’s to sell. There was little the Alaska Natives could do except voice their displeasure. Years later, however, the Tlingit and Haida Alaska Natives sued in U.S. federal court, claiming ownership of the lands in 1867. The court agreed and arranged for the Alaska Natives to be paid some compensation. With the sale to the United States, an important chapter in the European colonization of the Americas came to a close.