

WEST
of the
REVOLUTION

AN UNCOMMON HISTORY
OF 1776

CLAUDIO SAUNT



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Only a decade earlier, Aleuts were reportedly convinced that the only Russians in the world were the few hundred exploring their islands in leaky boats. In the 1770s, sixteen Russian vessels visited the archipelago to gather furs, and each one had a calamitous impact on local residents. The *St. Paul* was not unusual in this regard. The sloop had embarked from Okhotsk on its five-year expedition in September 1770, shortly before British soldiers stood trial for the Boston Massacre on the opposite side of North America. Its captain, Ivan Solov'ev, was an illiterate but experienced navigator from Tobolsk, famed for its historic role as the base for Russia's conquest of Siberia. Solov'ev's crew of seventy-two wintered in the Kurile Islands, hunting and putting up stores for the next year, as was common practice. By the time the vessel headed for the Aleutians in July 1771, six crewmen had already died.⁸

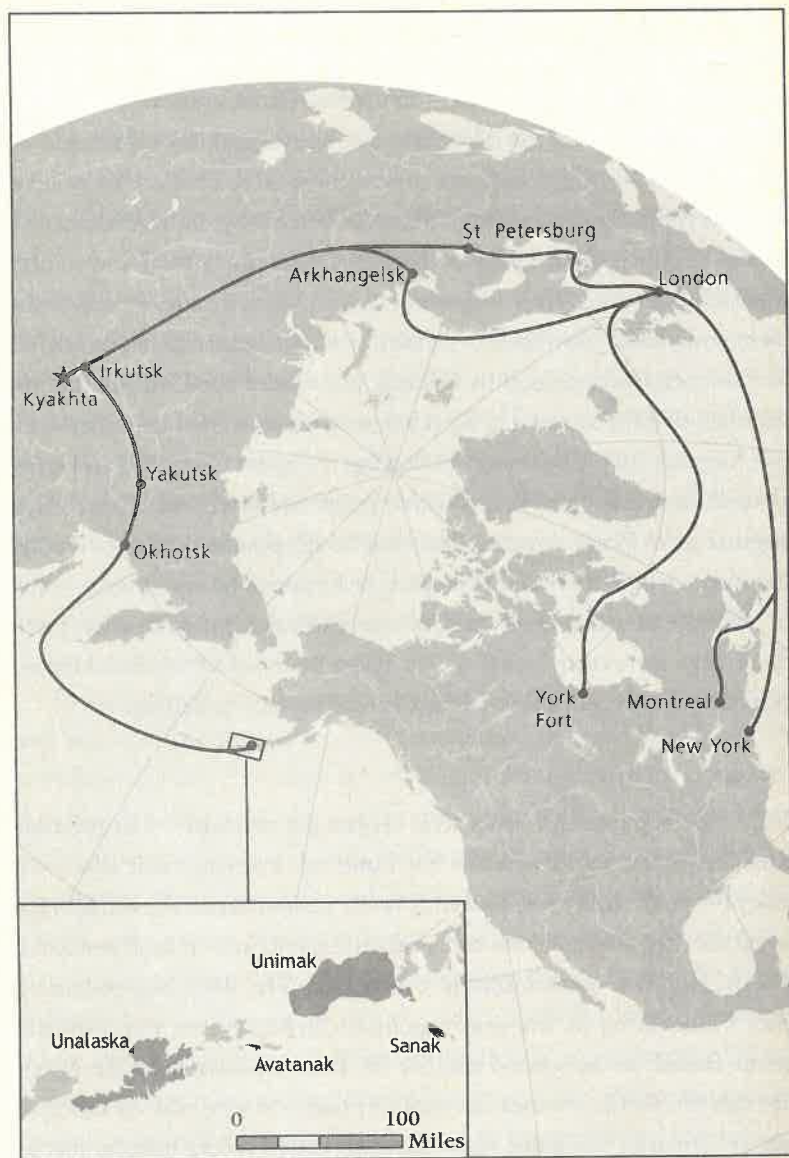


FIGURE 3 The global trade to Kyakhta.

The *St. Paul* followed a well-traveled if still hazardous route in search of furs. In the seventeenth century, trappers, known as *promyshlenniki*, had pushed across Siberia. Aided by the czar's armed forces, these newcomers pursued valuable sable furs and claimed the land for the

Russian state as they pushed eastward. Two practices lay at the heart of the expansion and were carried all the way to the Aleutians: the collection of *iasak* and the taking of *amanaty*. *Iasak* was a form of tribute to the Russian state, usually assessed in furs; to ensure payment, officials seized hostages, or *amanaty*, from local populations. The tribute was burdensome and the method of collection ruthless. Numerous peoples—the Samoyeds, Tungus, Yakuts, and Yakagirs, to name a few—suffered under the strain, and many disintegrated altogether. They were Siberia's "red men," the equivalent of North America's Indians, eighteenth-century Russians held, and Siberia was "our Peru," "our Mexico," or "our East India."⁹

By the 1670s, *promyshlenniki* had hunted out sable in many parts of Siberia, leaving only low-value squirrel and ermine. They pushed on, conquering the native residents, and reached Kamchatka by the end of the century. Rumors of a "Great Land" to the east and uncertainty about the geographic relationship between Asia and America led Russia's Czar Peter I and his successors to support Vitus Bering's exploration of the "Eastern Ocean" in the hopes of finding a land bridge tying North America to Siberia. Instead, the Danish-born navigator revealed the strait that is named for him, though he died near the end of his second voyage, in 1741. Surviving crew members returned with sea otter pelts from the island that now bears his name, setting off a rush for what the Russians called "soft gold." By the 1750s, *promyshlenniki* were trapping and trading in the Aleutian Islands, acquiring thousands of fox and seal furs and, the most valuable, otter pelts.¹⁰

The Aleutian archipelago arcs across the North Pacific like a giant crescent. In August 1771, the *St. Paul* approached the far eastern end of the island chain, where sea otters and foxes were still plentiful. The vessel passed by Umnak, where Mount Vsevidof rises seven thousand feet above sea level. An enormous volcanic crater that stretches seven miles across and belches dense smoke dominates the northern part of the island. Just before reaching Unimak, the easternmost and largest of the Aleutians, the vessel made landfall on Akun, a small hilly island of barely sixty square miles. Captain Solov'ev had skirted Unalaska, a much larger island to the west. Unalaska, with its deeply corrugated

topography and irregular coast, had been the site of a massacre only six years earlier. Solov'ev figured prominently in the event.

In 1763, four ships, the *Zacharias and Elizabeth*, the *Holy Trinity*, the *John*, and the *Adrian and Natalie*, were visiting Umnak and Unalaska, two of the larger islands of the Aleutian chain that Russians had discovered only four years earlier. The captains collected *iasak* from local Aleuts and demanded *amanaty* to ensure prompt payment and their own safety. Then they divided their crews into hunting parties, as Aleuts from Unalaska, Umnak, and neighboring islands had expected. The Aleuts hatched a plan. As Solov'ev reported it, local residents would "live in friendship at first," but when the Russians split up to hunt and trade, they would take them by surprise. "Using this ruse," they hoped to "kill all the Russians."¹¹

On Unalaska, the Aleuts ambushed the hunting parties from the *Zacharias and Elizabeth*. Four survivors, fleeing along the coast to their vessel, spotted a locker washed ashore, then bits and pieces of the ship itself, and finally the bodies of their mates, mangled and strewn about the beach. Months later, they reached the *Holy Trinity*, where they learned that, besides themselves, only three of their thirty-seven crewmates had survived.¹²

The *Holy Trinity* had also come under attack and would soon be destroyed. The skeleton crew, reduced in number and weakened by scurvy, could not control the vessel, and in heavy winds it was driven to Umnak and crushed on the rocky shore. Aleuts set upon fifty-four castaways that same night. In July 1764, the twelve survivors of that raid built a skin boat and rowed around the island, searching for the *John*, the third of the four ships that had been trading in the islands. In a steam bath constructed by the Russians, they found only a charred frame and the garroted bodies of twenty countrymen. (No one from the *John* survived to recount its story, but in 1970, archaeologists discovered the steam bath and the remains of the crew.) The refugees from the *Zacharias and Elizabeth* and the *Holy Trinity* were soon rescued by the last surviving ship, the *Adrian and Natalie*. In September 1764, relief arrived when Solov'ev anchored off Unalaska and learned of the plight of his fellow promyshlenniki.¹³

In retaliation, Solov'ev killed at least seventy Aleuts in five different engagements. "I preferred to talk them out of evil intentions so that they could live in friendship with the Russian people," he maintained. But elderly promyshlenniki, interviewed in the early nineteenth century, would remember differently. On one occasion, Solov'ev, after being provoked, killed one hundred Aleuts "on the spot." The bloodshed was "terrible," they recalled. On another, Solov'ev blew up a fortified structure sheltering three hundred Aleuts and cut down the survivors with guns and sabers. One trader stated that Solov'ev had killed more than three thousand in all, perhaps an exaggeration; another insisted that he had killed no more than two hundred. Considering that Unalaska sheltered only a few thousand inhabitants, even two hundred deaths would have represented a crushing blow to the population.¹⁴

Years later, Aleuts insisted that Solov'ev, above all others, was responsible for their decline. The Russian captain had killed hundreds or thousands, they said, and many others had fled at his approach. He made a practice of destroying their *baidarkas*, as kayaks are known in the Aleutians. The boats were essential for hunting, "as indispensable as the plow and the horse for the farmer," observed one Russian. Many of the refugees died from starvation or exposure while laboring to replace the skin-covered vessels, which took over a year to build.¹⁵

On Unalaska and surrounding islands, Solov'ev "shot all the men," three residents recalled in 1789. He reportedly practiced a cruel experiment: arranging the Aleuts in a line, he fired at the first to discover how many people the bullet would pass through. On one occasion, villagers sought refuge on Egg Island, a tiny outcropping with cliffs four hundred feet high, lying in deep water just off the eastern edge of Unalaska. Its rocky shoreline hindered Solov'ev's approach, but he made landfall on the second attempt and killed the men, women, and children who had gathered there. "The slaughter was so atrocious," Aleuts said, "that the sea around the islet became bloody from those who threw themselves or were thrown into it."¹⁶

In his journal, Solov'ev remained largely silent about his thirty-five months on Unalaska and the surrounding islands, where his crew harvested the vast majority of the furs that would eventually be sent

on to Kyakhta. There was "nothing worthy of notice" in the journal, declared the Russian Senate, which ordered future voyagers to keep better records. Solov'ev's reticence may have been grounded in knowledge of the fate of Ivan Bechevin, a wealthy Irkutsk merchant who was put on trial in 1764 for the actions of his company. The official investigation concluded that Bechevin's *promyshlenniki*—who kidnapped, raped, and murdered a number of Aleut women—committed "indescribable abuses, ruin and murder upon the natives."³⁹

Nonetheless, enough details exist to reveal that relations between Solov'ev and the Aleuts rapidly deteriorated. Shortly after Solov'ev set up camp on Unalaska, he sent out two hunting parties. A detachment from the first became stranded in a cove surrounded by high cliffs. The Aleuts who discovered the vulnerable men severed their arm and leg tendons and then cut off their limbs and heads. Later, they boasted to Solov'ev, "we are going to kill all of you just like we killed Russian people before." Solov'ev ordered two Aleut captives stabbed to death.⁴⁰

The remainder of the first party went west, to hunt on Umnak and other western islands. It met with success, according to Solov'ev. The men lived peacefully with the islanders, who "voluntarily" gave them hostages, traded with them, and paid *iasak*. "I was always happy with those foreigners and nothing bad happened while we stayed there," he stated. (*Inozemtsy*, meaning "foreigners," was the term Russians applied to the native peoples of Siberia, as well as to the Aleuts.) Their acquiescence to Solov'ev's presence may have been forged in the 1760s, when, according to one report, *promyshlenniki* had virtually "exterminated" the "disobedient" populations on southern Umnak and its western islets.⁴¹

The second party went east to Akutan, Akun, Avatanak, and Tigalda, now known as part of the Krenitzin Islands. Together not even a third the size of Unalaska, these tiny outposts with rocky coasts are rich in sea lions, seals, and otters. Until Solov'ev's crew arrived in September 1772, its local residents, unlike those to the west of Unalaska, had successfully turned back the few Russians who had tried to hunt on the islands.⁴²

Among the party was Petr Natrubin, Solov'ev's "henchman," in

Veniaminov's forthright description. He was said to be both pious and "extravagantly fond" of liquor—a combination that must have fortified him against Aleut resistance. Akutan, a high, craggy island with steep shores, had much to recommend it in the spring, as Aleut place names suggest: Qawa(m)-tanangin ("sea lion rookery"), Achan-ingiiga ("salmonberry bushes below it"), and Qakiid(am)-kamga ("silver salmon's head," where coho salmon spawn)—not to mention abundant red foxes, seals, and sea lions. But in October 1772, Natrubin's party encountered heavy blizzards on the island. As Natrubin and others recounted it, by "invitation of the foreigners" they took refuge from the fierce storms in the Aleuts' barabara but were soon driven out when the residents attacked them with knives.⁴³

They moved on to Avatanak, a low, narrow island eight miles to the east, with three small villages. Again, Natrubin and his partners stated they were invited into a toion's barabara. For a few weeks, the promyshlenniki and Aleuts lived uneasily at opposite ends of the house. (The largest barabaras could be over 150 feet long, cover as much as six thousand square feet, and house one hundred people, but on the sparsely populated island of Avatanak, they were probably significantly smaller, perhaps a third the size.) In early December, the Avatanak residents surreptitiously opened up several roof entrances and then, one midnight, stormed the barabara to kill the sleeping Russians. "We do not know for what offence or oppression," claimed Natrubin and his partners, who used their firearms to drive off the attackers. Several more deadly attacks followed, but Solov'ev's crew somehow persevered.⁴⁴

Natrubin and the other promyshlenniki gave no more information about their stay on Avatanak, nor did Solov'ev recount what the hunting party did between spring 1773 and May 1775, when the *St. Paul* set sail for Okhotsk. What happened during those final two years?

In 1833, Veniaminov visited Avatanak. A skilled linguist who was fluent in the local dialect, the missionary conversed directly with elderly Aleuts about Natrubin and Solov'ev. One aged woman pointed out the remnants of the barabaras that the Russians had occupied. Others showed him a small river. "Fish came here plentifully in former

times," they recalled, but after Natrubin murdered several Aleuts and cast the bodies into the stream, "not a single fish has entered it." Natrubin, Veniaminov concluded, "was destroying the Aleuts on Avatanak—unarmed and frequently perfectly innocent."⁴⁵

Aleuts told Veniaminov one more story about Natrubin's activities in the 1770s. When Natrubin's party crossed from Avatanak to the neighboring island of Tigalda, the Aleuts took refuge on a small rock pillar that lies just off Tigalda's northwest coast. With its vertical walls and flat, grass-covered top, the rock appeared to offer protection from marauders, but the Aleuts were "ignorant of the power" of the five-foot-long rifles carried by the hunters. Trapped atop the rock, the Aleuts "became the victims of their own inexperience and were all shot down."⁴⁶

Solov'ev was notable for his brutality but hardly unique. Some eighty ships crossed from Siberia to America in the second half of the eighteenth century, and each one of them brought disease and destruction to the Aleutians. The promyshlenniki pushed ever farther up the island chain in search of soft gold, returning to Okhotsk with hundreds of thousands of sea otter and fox pelts.⁴⁷

The unexpected stream of wealth emanating from the "Great Land" across the Eastern Ocean excited Russian imperialists. "Russian might," speculated one enthusiastic court scientist, "will grow in Siberia and on the Northern Ocean and will reach to the main European settlements in Europe and in America." The future was bright, as long as Russia could thwart rival empires. To safeguard its hard-won geographic intelligence, akin to today's atomic secrets, Russia concealed its discoveries and released falsified maps of the Aleutian archipelago and Alaskan coast.⁴⁸ In this murky climate, Spanish, French, and British strategists struggled to gain a clear picture of the momentous events occurring in the Pacific Northwest.

So, too, did the Aleuts. In March 1776, four of the original seven who had crossed the Bering Sea with Solov'ev were awaiting a smallpox inoculation in Irkutsk before their planned departure for St. Petersburg, where they would have an audience with Catherine II. (Irkutsk

improbably had one of the first centers for smallpox inoculation in the world.) A month later, Fedor Glebovich Nemtsov, governor of eastern Siberia, hosted two visitors and showed them several Irkutsk curiosities: the governor's beautiful gardens, a Kamchatka elk with exceedingly large antlers, a bird that uttered several words in Chinese and Russian, and "two savage people from America." The "dark brown savages" were lying sick with smallpox but being "treated very carefully."⁴⁹

Nemtsov, a man who welcomed bribes and beat Irkutsk residents to extort payments, had little interest in good governance. He also had few qualms about lying to his superiors. Six months after he showed off the ailing Aleuts to his guests, he informed the distant Senate, "As for the Aleuts who had been brought here, none of them were given to me by my predecessor. And nobody told me about them." He had discovered their fate, he lied, only after investigating the matter. All of them had died.⁵⁰

. . .

In 1759, José Torrubia was hard at work in Rome on volume ten of the official Franciscan chronicles when unexpected and exciting news arrived from Modena. The Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg had finally published a report detailing Bering's second voyage to America, nearly two decades after the event. An accompanying map showed that a narrow strait separated Asia and northwestern California. The information resonated with Torrubia, a polymath and world traveler who had recently been thinking a great deal about Pacific geography. In preparing a section of the Franciscan chronicles on the peopling of Mexico, he had gathered "authentic and remarkable" documents showing that native Mexicans had migrated from Siberia. He knew well that both Aztec traditions and Chinese and Japanese geographers suggested that the continents were only narrowly separated. And he recalled his own experience crossing the Pacific from the Philippines to Mexico in the 1730s. Three hundred miles off the California coast, he remembered, the appearance of shorebirds had indicated land to the northeast, a sign

that the coastline hooked toward Asia.⁵¹ The implication was alarming: the Russian navy could sail through the strait and descend on Spanish possessions in America.

Torrubia picked up a pen and "in a very few days" drafted an eighty-three-page tract—"small in volume," according to the papal censor, but "very large" in "erudition" and "research." Torrubia called it *I Muscoviti nella California* (*The Muscovites in California*). In breathless prose, he conveyed the urgency of the situation:

The Muscovites in California? Who ever imagined? Who said so? How could it be? How are they getting there? Pray slow down, these objections are too many at once. But they don't frighten me, nor do they move me from my steadfast belief in the reality of the crossing of the Muscovites to California. Yes. These same Muscovites . . . can go above California with their ships; because in truth their farthest Northern Regions, which have ports on the South Sea, border our North America. (italics in the original)⁵²

With Torrubia and others sounding alarms, Spain's ambassador in St. Petersburg was instructed to investigate, "with the greatest cunning and deceit," Russian attempts to sail to America.⁵³ The results would transform the California coast.