Russian America:

Where Culture and Economy Mixed

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In 1867 Russian America became the territory of Alaska. Russian America only existed for one hundred and twenty years, but the Russian colony left a lasting impression still visible today. These remnants of Russian culture, primarily the Russian Orthodox Church, are proof of Russian hegemony.\(^1\) The Russians coerced many of the native groups to work for them; some natives were even kidnapped. Yet, for the continued submission of indigenous groups, the different clans received something in return. Many times the Russian Orthodox Church clergy not only educated the indigenous groups, but also learned the native languages themselves. This consent to Russian domination not only let the colony function, but also altered the culture of the native groups.

Russian America existed primarily for hunting and trading. The Russians understood how profitable the sea otter pelt trade could be. Starting with the second expedition to North America in the 1740s, the Russians learned of the high demand for sea otter pelts in China. These pelts were extremely fashionable in China at the time. In 1810 China, a prime adult female sea otter pelt could sell for as much as one thousand rubles.\(^2\) The Russians would recover other furs, but because of this high demand for sea otters, the Russians built communities primarily on the Aleutians and on the Alaskan panhandle where sea otters were more available.

The natives on these islands, the Aleut and the Kodiak, became the first groups to come in contact with the Russians. The Russians were continually short on labor. In 1799 only two hundred and twenty-five Russians lived in Russian America.\(^3\) This affected Russian society in many ways. The key aspect on this shortage was the reliance on native labor. The Russians

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\(^1\) Hegemony in this context follows the Gramsci theory on hegemony where hegemony is more than just coercion. Hegemony involves consent by the dominated group. The dominated group has to have its own reasons for being dominated. For more, see Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980) and Gramsci’s own work in *The Gramsci reader: selected writings, 1916-1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).


observed the high quality of hunting and kayaking that Aleuts had acquired. Priest Veniaminov who lived with Aleuts for twelve years recognized how the Aleuts had such great eyesight that they could detect the height and speed of waves even in the roughest seas. Others also observed the talents of the Aleuts. Cyril Khelbnikov noted that the Aleuts seemed to be the only group with a great passion for sea otter hunting. This passion derived from a life on the ocean. All of

Figure 1: Map of region. The Aleut were located on the Aleutian Island, the Kodak on Kodiak Island and the Tlingit in the region near Juneau

the Aleuts lived on small islands. The ability to kayak served many purposes for the Aleuts; it was a way of communication through travel and, most importantly a tool used in attaining food.

4 Ioann Veniaminov, Zapisiki ob ustrovakh Unalashkinshavo otdela [Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District]. (St. Petersburg, Russia, Rosiisko-Amerikanskaya Kompaniya, 1840) 2: 13-14
Aleut boys learned how to kayak and hunt by the age of seven. The Aleuts also created wooden kayaks that only weighed thirty-six pounds, lighter than other native kayaks.\(^6\) Fishing and hunting at sea were necessary parts of life for the Aleut. The Russians recognized their talents and saw how to fill a labor need.

To attain Aleut labor, the Russians coerced the natives by several means. At the beginning of the Russian period, *promyshlenniki* or Russian hunters, used force and kidnapped natives to acquire sea otter pelts. Hunting sea otters is a dangerous career, which is described as a cat and mouse chase, but in the dangerous sea. Not only were the promyshlenniki unsure of how to masterfully hunt the sea otter, they did not want to face the danger in doing so.\(^7\) The Aleuts with their high skills seemed perfect for the task. The *promyshlenniki* would often take hostages until a village produced a required number of pelts. In 1790 one hundred and fifty to two hundred natives were killed by *promyshlenniki* Ismailov when the village refused to send hostages. Other abuses were also committed by the different *promyshlenniki*. In 1789 Chief Algamaling reported that *promyshlennikis* forced men in his village to hunt during the worst storm of the winter. Three of the Aleuts died. In another situation Baiderskav Pshenichney treated the Aleuts tyrannically by whipping six natives to death and starving sixteen others.\(^8\) For the Russians, these abuses coerced the natives into completing Russian objectives. This coercion is a portion of the hegemonic qualities of the society. Without the use of force, the Russian American Colony would not have been nearly as successful. However, the Russians understood

\(^6\) Gibson, 361.

\(^7\) Gibson, 362.

that to have a successful colony they also needed the use of civic institution, which will be discussed later on.

These abuses combined with hunting dangers and disease caused massive drops in the native island populations. Once local seas were depleted, native hunters were moved from their homeland and families to hunt in new waters. Exposure to cold, disease, hunger, and the inevitable accidents of the hunt resulted in population downfalls. By 1790, the Aleut population decreased by as much as two thirds of its pre-contact level. With fewer Aleuts to exploit, the Russians turned to other groups for hunting. The populations of these groups also fell. The Fox Island population dropped from 1,904 to 1,046 in a time span of eleven years. In 1792, the Kodiak numbered 5,700; by 1834 the population plummeted to 1,500, a seventy-five percent decrease! All of the island populations were severely affect by the Russian dominance.

During this period of Russian involvement, several different companies existed in the region attempting to maximize profits in the newly explored Russian colony. The Russian government knew of the abuses and atrocities occurring to native groups. Both Imperial Decrees of March 1766 and August 1787 attempted to discontinue these abuses, but theses decrees were not enough. The government did not have substantial control over Russians in Russian America to correct all of these wrong doings. The imperial government recognized that some of the abuses did result in increased profits, but the government also worried about the will of the indigenous groups. A full revolt by the indigenous groups would bring sea otter hunting to a halt. The imperial powers saw the need for control of Russian in the region. This needed control somewhat occurred with the creation of the Russian American Company. One company is easier

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9 Gibson, 363.
to control than several in a competition with each other to make the most profits in any way possible.

In 1799 the Russian American Company was formed, creating a monopoly for hunting and trading in Russia America. Theoretically, the Russian American Company paralleled the British East India Company. Shareholders officially owned the corporation, but the three shareholders for the Russian American Company all were government officials. The Russian American Company was not a private joint-stock company like the East India Company, but rather a government owned company. The decision of the Russian American Company represented the beliefs of the emperor and his government. The Russian American Company now had a charter that directly stated how the indigenous peoples should be treated. The original charter of 1799 stated that tribute should not be charged to natives. The second and third charters of 1821 and 1844 were more specific. Sections forty two through fifty in the 1821 Charter state that the Russian American Company is to protect the Aleutian Islands indigenous population and that these persons are recognized as Russian subjects. Sections 143 and 271 in the 1844 charter state that Russians have a duty to protect natives and improve their way of life. By authorizing the operations of the Russian American Company, the Russian government gained some of the control that it needed. Moscow was still thousands of miles away, but the charters helped in emphasizing what Company employees should be doing in Russian America. The Russian American Company had more organization. To some degree, it held its employees to a higher standard. If an employee failed to follow his obligation to protect the natives and instead beat or abused them in other ways, that Russian American Company employee could be punished by the company. Abuses occurred during all periods of Russian colonization, but records tend to


12 Gsovski, 45-46.
indicate that after the formation of the Company murders and other horrific abuses did not occur as often.

The Russian American Company was financially profitable for Russia, even though it was not as bright of a venture for the indigenous groups. Section fifty-one of the 1821 charter, as in other charters, states that fifty percent of males eighteen to fifty in the indigenous population of the islands are to hunt for the Russian American Company. Section 56 of the same charter also states that those native not employed by the Russian American Company are allowed to fish on their home shores, but are not allowed to travel to other shores. These conditions created a quasi-feudal system where the native islanders became serfs for the Russians. The pay that the Aleut received was so meager that even the Board of Directors of the Russian American Company suggested giving the Aleuts a small raise. Although this same council realized the importance of keeping the Aleuts in submission, they considered the current policy “the least offensive to the Aleuts and not discreditable to the Company.” The Board of Directors was correct; the current model made profits for the Company and little if any international pressure existed to change treatment. The Russian American Company is still a company. As with all large corporations, profit is the ultimate goal. In the past and today, large companies and corporations will follow the policy that generates the most profits without putting the company in a very harsh light. The Russian American Company might have been run by government officials, but the Company is still a company searching for profits.

One abuse in particular perpetuated by the promyshlennikis helped in forming bonds between the indigenous groups and the Russians. Promyshlennikis were known to take native

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13 Gsovski, 45.
14 Letter from the Board of Directors to Administrator-General Muraviev. 4 March 1820. Documents. Trans Lavrischoff. 223.
15 Letter from the Board of Directors to Administrator-General Muraviev. 4 March 1821. Documents. Trans Lavrischoff. 224.
women and make them their wives. Sometimes the *promyshlennikis* would take a child as young as ten years old back to their barracks. Many of these men had wives back in Russia. This action of taking mistresses not only angered the natives, but demonstrated the corruption among some of the hunters.\(^{16}\) Some single men did take native wives. It was even encouraged by Russian American Company officials.\(^{17}\) Wanting unmarried Russians to find native wives helped with the gender disparity in the colony. In 1819, the number of Russian men compared to Russian women was 29 to 1. Either taking wives or mistresses would lead to mixed children. These Creoles, half native and half Russian, became very important to colonial society. Those children were a connection between the two cultures. The indigenous groups of the area were matrilineal, so the creoles had a strong connection back to his or her native roots.\(^{18}\) The Russians viewed Creoles as Russian subjects. The 1821 Charter section forty-one states “Creoles are Russian subjects with the right to have lawful protection equal to Russian commoners.\(^{19}\) Creoles were often accepted by both cultures. The Creoles represented living signs of friendship between the two cultures.

Creoles also represented a labor group for the Russians. The Russians were continually short on labor. 1839 and 1867 are the only two years in the history of the Russian American colony that there were at least eight hundred Russians in all of Russian America.\(^{20}\) People already in Alaska were seen as a great asset. The Russians viewed the Creoles as the next generation in Russian America. Beyond the 1821 statement of rights, it also states that Creole employees of the Russian American Company were to be treated the same as Russian employees. The Russian American Company wanted to mold the Creoles into skilled workers.

\(^{16}\) Archimendrite Icsasaph to Sir Gregory Ivaonovich. 18 May 1795. *Documents.* Trans Lavrischoff. 144-152.

\(^{17}\) Orders from lieutenant-General Ivan Peel to Sholokhov. 12 May 1794. *Document.* Trans Lavrischoff. 161.

\(^{18}\) Sergei Kan, *Memory Eternal: Tlingit Culture and the Russian Orthodox Christianity through Two Centuries.* (Seattle; U of Washington Press. 1999.) 7.

\(^{19}\) Gsovski, 43.

\(^{20}\) Fedorova, 2-6.
The Company would pay for the higher education of Creoles so that they could become doctors or military officers or other high ranking officials in the colony. The Company’s charter stipulated that each Creole after training must work in the colony for the next ten years. 21 The ultimate goal for the Creole population was its transformation into the next generation of skilled laborers in the colony. In theory in the Russian American Charters, Creoles were considered equal Russian commoners. In practice, the Creoles would have received better social standing than indigenous peoples, but pure equality to the Russians might have been difficult to reach. Russian held racist ideologies toward the natives. It is hard to believe that none of these ideologies were placed on Creoles, a race in a Russian view that mixed Russian superiority with native inferiority.

Where Creoles represented the biological mixture of indigenous and Russian culture, the Russian Orthodox Church was and still is a mixture of Russian and native spirituality. To better understand the Russian Orthodox Church’s ability to convert indigenous groups, we need to comprehend the formation of the Russian Orthodox Church and its missionaries prior to Russian America. The Orthodox Church developed after the 1054 schism between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The Orthodox Church does not believe in the Pope; instead, an Ecumenical Council decides church positions. The Orthodox Church tends to be more conservative than other denominations. Like Catholicism, the Orthodox Church uses icons and symbols. The Russian Orthodox Church became the state church in 1448. The Church represented the state, but operated independently. Missionary work in the Church began with the Russian expansion into Siberia. Missionaries converted indigenous tribes and learned how to cooperate with indigenous

21 Gsovski, 43.
chiefs in Siberia before Russian America existed. When the Church arrived in Alaska, the clergy understood its mission by remembering occurrences in Siberia.

The Russian Orthodox Church spread in the same areas as the promyshlenniki hunted and lived. In 1762 the Church agreed to an alliance with the promyshlenniki. The Russian settlers and hunters brought portions of their culture with them to Russian America. When promyshlenniki married native women, they often wanted their wives to understand Christianity. This intermixing of cultures meant that some natives knew of Christianity years before a priest reached the area. Unalaska, today’s Dutch Harbor, in the Aleutians is an example of one of these areas. In 1824 Priest Ioann Veniaminov became the first permanent member of the clergy to reside in Unalaska. Veniaminov was warmly greeted on his arrival to the island and officially baptized many in the village. Veniaminov spoke to Aleuts, the same indigenous group that became caught in Russian serfdom.

Understanding the scripture through native languages became a very important part of the missionary work in Russian America. Missionaries were expected to learn the native tongue, to translate some religious work into the native language, and then to teach at least fifty natives to read the translation. The church wanted to ensure that the indigenous groups comprehended as clear a meaning of the scripture as possible. Often the Russian Orthodox Church used the services of translators when the missionary did not know the native tongue fluently. While Veniaminov was stationed as the Priest of Unalaska, a region spanning over a thousand miles, he often would travel to remote villages and preach to the natives in isolated areas. In the beginning

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22 Kan, 26-32.
24 Ukase of the Emperor of Russia from the Holy Ruling Synod to Bishop Innokenty. 10 January 1841. Documents. Trans Lavrischoff. 134-137.
of his stay in Unalaska, he would request a translator so that the natives would better understand the scripture. This use of native languages seems to have placed the Russian Orthodox Church in a better religious position than other missions in the area. In 1829 Priest Jacob Netszvetov commented in his journal on meeting a Protestant pastor who failed to convert Tlingit. He added “it is absolutely necessary to know the language.” The ability to communicate with the indigenous groups in native languages was not only in order of the Russian government, but also an integral piece in the foundation of the ministry.

Translations of holy works into native languages led to simplification of ideas, religious morals, and stories. The simplification of religious theories and morals occurs because of the attempt to teach a different religion to a group of people with little understanding of the European world. To preach the Path to the Heavenly Kingdom, an integral piece in understanding Christianity, Veniaminov broke the lesson into five parts. The first one simply stated that man was created by God and that all happiness is from God. The second portion discussed how Jesus suffered on Earth. Part three described how the death of Jesus Christ brought salvation. Part four told the followers they must keep on the path of Jesus. The final section stated they could not follow the path to heaven without Jesus. Veniaminov preached the key understanding to the Aleuts and they seemed to have understood.

The Russian Orthodox Church used language and aspects from the local culture to convert the indigenous groups. Previous to Christianity, the Aleuts and Tlingits and other groups believed in the spiritual powers of the Shaman. The Shaman represented the only human link to the spirit world. Shaman cured the ill, foretold the future, influenced the weather and protected the village from epidemics. To help explain Christianity, clergy would use vocabulary from the

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26 Netszvetov Travel Journal. 28 February 1829. Trans Lavrischoff. 23.
Shaman. In Veniaminov’s translation of scripture for the Tlingit, he used *shagoon* to represent god. *Shagoon* originated from *haa shagoon* which represented the ancient spirits and destiny spirits which Tlingit would call upon in times of great need. The concept of a soul translated into *daseikw*, meaning breath or life. Veniaminov also encouraged other clergy to practice his openness to the traditional culture. Veniaminov believed that all cultures had some good natural laws in place in the society. The indigenous groups should be encouraged to follow these natural laws. He also encouraged missionaries not to be extremely vocal against the polygamy in native society.28 Not all of the clergy followed the ideals of Veniaminov, but many did lend words leading to a syncretism of religions.

The Russian Orthodox Church became not only the colonial church, but also the people’s church. This process involved both spiritual and social ties. These ties often began, as previously stated, with the *promyshlenniki*. These Russian hunters’ contribution to religion in the colony reaches beyond taking native wives and fathering Creole children. Often, these *promyshlenniki* would be the only European inhabitants of the region. These hunters, especially in the remote northern areas, would assimilate to the local culture. While living out in hunting grounds, eating native food became a needed sustenance for many *promyshlenniki*. Depending on how far a Russian hunter lived from a Russian community, traditional Russian food and clothing could be expensive and difficult to come by. Hunters would eat native food and wear native clothing. Englishman George Vancouver stated his amazement at how well some Russians cohabitated in native villages.29 For some *promyshlenniki*, using native food and goods became a necessary part of life. This also demonstrated the respect the Russian hunters held for the native lifestyle. If

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28 Kan, 104-135.
the Russians used native ways, then the *promyshlenniki* must have felt that these traditions had value. This relationship also showed the reverse: the indigenous groups must have respected the Russians. Meals with both Russian and natives took place in indigenous homes. The Aleuts or Eskimo or other indigenous people would invite a foreigner to eat in their home. A mutual respect developed in different areas at different times.

This respect between the Russian hunters and natives led to cultural understanding between the two groups. The *promyshlenniki* wanted to share their culture with the indigenous groups. In Russia, folk tales served as part of the Russian oral history passed from one generation to the next. These folk tales would sometimes match the spiritual religion in indigenous life. One Russian tale told how a Russian woman had to receive acceptance from God before she was allowed to plow the earth to grow food. This tale sounds remarkably similar to indigenous myths where a spirit took the form of an animal to announce to the people that they could live off the land. The idea of a creator is also prevalent in both religions. The two different cultures seemed to have an understanding of the other. The image that natives created of Christianity told by *promyshlenniki* might not be perfect, but they could see some of the commonalities. The Russians did not fully understand all of the beliefs of the indigenous peoples, but the Russians did see parallels. These groups blended the lifestyles of Russians and natives and tried to understand what each culture had to offer.

Once the Russian Orthodox Church was in an area, it also viewed the spiritual cultural parallels in Christianity and Shamanism. The different groups in the region whether if Aleut, Kodiak, Tlingit or Eskimo, believed in very similar religions, all believing in an overall creator of the universe and that different spirits in the universe inhabited different objects. In these communities, the Shaman was the only individual able to communicate with the spirit world.

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church paralleled the Shaman acting as a type of clergy communicating with a god. The Russian Orthodox Church also identified with the icons used in the religious ceremonies. During different events whether it is a memorial service or a ceremony to ask for good weather, shaman would wear special masks. These masks were religious icons physically connecting the shaman to the spirit world. The Russian Orthodox Church also used icons in worship. Churches and chapels in Russian America were required to have some amount of icons visible. As with Catholicism, iconic images such as the Virgin Mary are often prominently displayed in the church. The

Figure 2: Photograph taken in the 1880s of the Alter of St. Michael’s Cathedral in Sitka

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The indigenous groups felt a connection to the Orthodox Church with this communal use of icons. Icons became a material connection between the Church and the indigenous populations. This connection helped in the lasting relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the indigenous peoples of Alaska.

Language also played an important role in the education of Russian American Company employees’ offspring and indigenous children. The Russian Orthodox Church educated hundreds of children in different region of Alaska. The main objective for these schools was to educate children on the Holy Scripture. One of the most effective modes to teach about the scripture was to also educate the children in a bilingual environment. Native children were taught Russian and Russian children learned some of the native languages. The higher the education level a student achieved, the more languages a student would be taught. The schools created in Russian Alaska could not have functioned without the lessons on language.

The schools administered by the Russian Orthodox Church taught language, but it also helped to create stronger bonds in the community. All of the schools operated by the Russian Orthodox Church were free. The Russian American Company would contribute the funds for the construction of school buildings while school supplies were financed by Church funds. The Russian American Company’s funding was stipulated in its Charter. Many of the children educated at these establishments were employees’ children. Another factor explaining why the Russian American Company contributed was to establish a positive institution in Russian America that could improve the lives of the indigenous students. This idea of using education as a tool for improving relations connects to our theory on hegemony. Education is an excellent

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34 Regulations regarding the primary education of settlers, approved by the Emperor. 3 Sept 1836. *Documents*. Trans Lavrischoff 347-348.
example of an institution that improves the dominated group’s lives, but also continues the status quo of Russian domination in the colony.

The schools not only taught Russian and native languages, but in many instances schools taught different races in the same classroom setting. Church records indicate year by year how many students attended each school and gender and race of the attendees. The school in Atka educated Russians, Creoles, and Aleuts. In 1843 eleven creoles and fourteen Aleuts attended the school. In 1850 nine boys and six girls attended.35 This school building strived to teach all races and genders. Creoles, as previously stated, were considered in hierarchal terms equal to Russian commoners, yet Creoles attended the same schools as Aleuts and other indigenous groups. Schools in Russian American had integrations. Indigenous children were instructed alongside Russian children. Integrated schools boosted the positive hegemonic qualities of the society. Teaching all races together demonstrates respect for all of the different students. For the 1800s, this integration is ahead of its time for North America. The United States’ Civil Right Movement caused integration in the 1950s, over one hundred years after the Russian Orthodox educational system.

The education of indigenous children and Russian American Company employee children moved well beyond simple Russian and Holy Scripture. These two subjects were extremely important, but other subjects were also taught in these schools. The Holy Ruling Synod sent the official school curriculum to Russian America in 1844. Russian education had four classes. The first class included reading Russian and Slavic primers, penmanship, singing by notes and Arithmetic part I. The second class taught Russian and Slavic grammar, general and Russian geography, Sacred History, the complete Catechism, more singing by notes and

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Arithmetic part II. The third and forth classes advanced beyond primary education. In the third class students studied Rhetoric, Russian Civic History, Elementary Physics, Bible History, Holy Scripture and native languages. The fourth class aimed to train students at how to enter the clergy. Dogmatic, Moral and Ministerial theology were studied. The History of the Russian Church and medicine were also discussed.\(^{36}\) In missionary school out in the districts, the curriculum did not extend to the advanced level, but children did receive an education. In Unalaska, Veniaminov founded a school for the native Aleuts. Students at this school were tested on Russian grammar and reading, mathematics up to decimals and fractions, and Divine Law. This education took place despite horrific weather conditions of horrible winds and freezing cold weather.\(^{37}\) A tremendous amount of knowledge was taught to the inhabitants of Russian America. This education system in nineteenth century Russian American is a large achievement.

In Novo Arkhangelsk, four schools existed solely to educate the children of Russian American Company employees. Novo Arkhangelsk, present day Sitka, was the Russian capital during this period. The administrators lived in Novo Arkhangelsk more often than in any other Russian American city. A certain amount of hierarchy did exist in the Russian community itself. Two of the schools served to educate the male and female children of higher company employees. This brings back the idea that Creoles were equal to Russian commoners, but the society in Russian American contained more individuals than Russian commoners and natives. The administrators of the colony viewed themselves in a higher position than all other Russians in the region. The majority of the schools in the colony were multiracial, but higher class Russian could not have their children in the same school as commoners. The other two schools served orphans of the Russian American Company. One served as a day school and the other as a

\(^{36}\) Holy Ruling Synod to Bishop Innokenty, 26 April 1844. . Documents. Trans Lavrischoff.\textit{356-357.} \\
^{37}\textit{S Mousalimas, Journals Veniaminov.104-135.}
boarding school.\textsuperscript{38} The Russian government recognized the dangers of working in Russian
America. People lost lives on the hunt or from disease or just from accidents. These deaths
sometimes left orphans in the colony. These schools solely for orphans have existed to create a
familial feeling for those without any family. These two schools are not examples of colonial
hierarchy, but rather Russian attempts to heal some of the wounds it caused.

The hegemonic aspects of society tended to affect indigenous groups in different aspects
depending on the period of contact. As previously stated, the Aleuts came in contact with the
Russians before other groups. The Aleut society became a standard for indigenous groups. The
Russians viewed the Aleuts as peaceful, somewhat civilized and most importantly Christian.\textsuperscript{39}
The Aleuts tended to be viewed in a positive way by the Russians. Almost all of the Aleuts had
converted to Christianity by the mid-nineteenth century. Shamanism became displaced in Aleut
society.\textsuperscript{40} The Aleuts acted as the Russian thought indigenous groups should. Russian officials
assumed that other groups would follow the Aleut example of rather quickly adjusting to Russian
rule without much disobedience. The Russian assumptions were faulty.

The Tlingits tended to demonstrate how hegemonic coercion did not lead to domination
of this group. Only more positive ties led to any sort of mixing of cultures. The Tlingit-Russian
relationship was much more complex than that of other groups. One key difference, the Aleuts
and the Kodiak and other island groups tended to have few options but to agree with the
Russians. The Tlingit were not geographically located solely on islands. The Tlingit also lived in
the interior of the southeastern part of the colony, referred to today as the Alaskan panhandle.

\textsuperscript{38} Bishop Peter of Novo Arkhangelsk to the Holy Ruling Synod on information about Condition of the Diocese in
Russian America. 1864, Documents, Trans Lavrischoff. 147-148.
\textsuperscript{39} Bishop Peter, 147.
\textsuperscript{40} S Mousalimas. Transition, 31.
The culture of the Tlingits is the oldest and most developed in the area. The Tlingit material culture had steady foundations in the area by 500 BC. The region where the Tlingits lived had many resources, including spruce, pine and cedar. The more important factor was the variety of foods available. On land, Tlingits hunted for deer, bears, sheep, and other game. At sea the Tlingit hunted for seal, sea otters, whales, and salmon. This richness of the area led to the high development of the culture. For this culture, a life with submission to another power was slavery. Also, the Tlingits did not have any model to understand what an empire was. The Tlingit were misunderstood by the Russians. The Tlingit or Kolosh, the Russian term for Tlingits, were often cited as being wild and uncontrollable. In a report on conditions in the colony, Bishop Peter stated “the missionary activities with the Kolosh are not successful because the Kolosh are too greedy.” With these issues, obviously the Russian-Tlingit relationship would be strained. The Tlingits were disinterested in any colonization by a foreign power and the Russians wanted an easy group to dominate. Both would have to learn to respect and understand the other culture.

Before creating ties with the Russians, Tlingit had already created trading connections with the British, Americans and Spanish. Before 1790, the British acted as the key trading partner to the Tlingit. After 1790, the Americans became their key trading partner for the Tlingits. The Russian government had declared trade with countries other than Russia illegal, but this decree did not stop the trade. The American and British would pay high prices for fur pelt, much more than Russians would offer. The Americans would sell guns and ammunition to the Tlingit, making the Tlingit the only armed indigenous group in the colony. These differences

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41 Kan, 3.
43 Grinev, 110.
44 Bishop Peter, 147.
added to the unique circumstances in which the Russians and Tlingit first made contact. Russians did not meet Tlingits until 1783, forty years after the Russians came into contact with the Aleuts.\footnote{Grinev, 94-100.} The Tlingits understood foreigners to a better extent than other indigenous groups. The Russians would need to take this into perspective when eventual relations began.

The Russian-Tlingit relationship did not start on positive terms; the Tlingits felt resentment at the conduct and presence of Russians in Tlingit homelands. Starting in 1796, the Russian American Company hunted in Sitka harbor. In Tlingit eyes, the Russians were hunting in Tlingit ancestral land and were depleting the fish and sea otter in this homeland. The promyshleniki took Tlingit women by force to become wives and mistresses. The Tlingit also believed that the “Aleut” hunters were stealing Tlingit valuables.\footnote{Kan, 59.} In 1801, many Tlingit villages became outraged at the imprisonment of Stunuka, an influential shaman. In June of the following year, the Tlingit successfully attacked and destroyed the barracks at Novo Arkhangelsk. The entire fort had to be rebuilt.\footnote{Grinev, 166-120.} Both sides understood how each side intended to live. The Russian succeeded in rebuilding the colony at Novo Arkhangelsk, and the Tlingit demonstrated that they would not be suppressed like the Aleuts. Standard hegemonic force would never solve the Tlingit issue. The Tlingits would have to have their own reasons for consenting to any Russian rule.

The Tlingit-Russian relationship started to blossom in the 1820s and especially flourished in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1831 the “Kolosh Market” started in Sitka. This new policy of mutual respect allowing Tlingit to sell goods to Russians helped relations, while providing food for a desperate Russian colony. As with labor, the Russian colony seemed to run continually short on food. Shipping goods transpacifically is expensive and only preserved foods could last the journey.
The Russians could buy food from the Americans or British, but this would have shown Russian weakness not to survive independently in America. At the market Tlingits would sell Russians needed fresh vegetables, especially the potato and the turnip. Russian attempts to cultivate fresh foods ended largely in failure, the potato being the only exception. The Russians demonstrated how to grow the potatoes to the Tlingit. The Tlingit then perfected this and sold excess potatoes to the Russians. The Tlingit also provided fresh game and fish at the Kolosh Market. Some have argued that without this food supply from natives, the Russians would have starved and failed in Russian America.\textsuperscript{48} This lack of resources demonstrates another need for hegemony with consent in the colony. Total domination of the indigenous group would not have led to native groups supplying the Russians with food.

The 1840s is considered the golden age for the Russian Orthodox Church in Alaska. The decade increased Tlingit conversion along with other groups in the area. One of the reasons behind this renaissance for the Orthodox Church was Priest Veniaminov’s elevation to Bishop of Russian America. Veniaminov served as a constant advocate for the Church. He continually searched for better ways to connect with the native populations. In 1845, his dream of a seminary for natives and creoles became a reality. By training the indigenous to be Russian Orthodox trained clergy, the Russian Orthodox Church hoped to expand into areas previously unsuccessful with Russian missionaries.\textsuperscript{49} The Russian American Company was still in existence and still helped the Church. The Russian Orthodox Church seems to have perfected the system of conversion and education during this period.

\textsuperscript{48} Gibson, 361. .  
\textsuperscript{49} David Norlander. "Innokentii Veniaminov and the Expansion of Orthodoxy in Russia America".  
Relations between Russians and the Tlingit strengthened due to Russian American Company and Russian Orthodox Church actions. The Russian American Company hired more Tlingit workers, an obvious sign of trust. The Russian American Company established an annual feast for the Tlingits. Honorable Tlingits were expected to attend and eat alongside the Russians. This feast paralleled the native Potlatch. At a potlatch, the host would give away his wealth to his guests. Here, the Russian American Company spent large amounts of money to ensure the Tlingits understood the respect the Russians had for them. Another sign of respect for the native culture appeared in trade. The Russian government would sell guns to the Tlingit because firearms helped tremendously in the hunt, but not all European goods were sold to the natives. The Russians did not want traditional ways of life to be lost to European fashions. One logical reason for keeping the traditional culture was again the lack of Russian labor. Resanev, the director of the colony stated that “the Russian population is small; it is hard to keep land we have, not to mention expand.”\(^{50}\) Hegemony only spreads so far into a dominated area. The Russian ideology of keeping the native culture alive demonstrated the respect the Russians held for this and other indigenous groups. During the 1840s, the Russian Orthodox Church started to translate Holy Scripture into the Tlingit language. From 1840 to 1845 Priest Etholen traveled by steam ship up the rivers into the interior of Tlingit lands to discuss Orthodoxy with the natives. In 1844 Etholen’s trip and Russian attempts for better Tlingit relations led to the conversion of a large group of Tlingit at Easter.\(^{51}\) For the first time, a stable relationship with the Tlingits developed. This stability depended on efforts from both sides.

Unfortunately, the Golden Age for the Russian Orthodox Church did not continue in the late 1850s and 1860s. The Russian American colony as a whole declined. The Russian

\(^{50}\) Resanev to Mr. Baranov. 20 July 1806. *Documents* Trans Lavrischoff. 176.

\(^{51}\) Kan, 133-120.
government stopped policies of respect towards the indigenous groups. Native were not hired and the annual Russian Potlatch no longer occurred. The Russian American Company’s financial status dwindled towards bankruptcy. Sea otters and other animals suffered from overhunting. Each year the pelt harvest decreased. Not only were fewer pelts available, but hunters had to travel farther to find the animals they did trap. These changes caused the price of the hunt to increase. In China, the sea otter pelt became less fashionable and prices in China dropped. Russian American society declined years before the sale of Alaska to the United States. The Russian government did not invest more money than necessary into a declining market. Without the financial ability to continue, society tends to die.

Directly following the sale of Alaska in 1867, the society in the region shifted. American goods and trade were very enticing to the indigenous groups. American traders had no limits on what type of items could be traded, especially alcohol. Larger qualities of alcohol were sold to the Tlingits and other indigenous groups. Many natives were eager for this trade and followed American ways. The Tlingits had traded with the Americans for generations, so Americans were not a new group to them. American companies brought new opportunities for careers in salmon canneries, woodcutting, and mining. At the same time, Russian culture suffered. Creoles especially suffered during this period. Although a mixed race, Russian government viewed Creoles equal to Russian commoners. Americans viewed Creoles as part of the native community. The Americans viewed social status in a hierarchy where Americans were superior, followed by Russians, then natives. Also, Russians and Creole were not included in the newly

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52 Kan, 146-149.
emerging industries and largely lived in poverty. At this point Russian culture in Alaska seemed to be dying out.

The American used the military to strengthen the American presence in the region. The US military traveled into the interior of Alaska as well as maintaining a continual presence in the coastal communities. The United States Army and Navy never attacked any locals, but their presence increased the American rule. Russia’s military never traveled across the ocean to control Russian America. The United States’ control reached levels never possible by the Russian administration. Gramsci’s idea that hegemony includes consent does not fit the situation in Alaska as well as in Russian America. The United States had a much stronger force available. The United States was not in the perpetual situation of cooperating with the indigenous groups or starving. The United States made relationships with the indigenous groups, but this relationship differed from the Russian relationship with the natives.

During the initial introduction of American culture, the Presbyterians became the leading mission in Alaska. The different indigenous group hoped to encourage the Americans to continue trade by converting to American Protestant religion. The Presbyterian Church became the most successful Protestant mission. The Presbyterians aimed to civilize the indigenous groups leading to a period when the indigenous people become just as civilized as other Americans. They established churches and school and believed that to be civilized, students had to give up all traditional ways of life. Students were discouraged from speaking in any other language other than English. Potlatches were looked down upon. American military even

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54 Kan, 190-205.  
55 Kan, 205-206.
arrested and fined Shaman for continuing to practice traditional beliefs. Many natives followed
this more modern approach that the Americans taught.

The Russian Orthodox Church still functioned in Alaska, but it suffered from fewer
followers and meager finances. Many of the Russians and Creoles moved back to Russia after
the sale of Alaska. The Church lost its core Russian followers. Without governmental or Russian
American Company funding, education could not be free to all as before. Indigenous converts
felt betrayed by the Russians. Natives did not understand why they should be expected to pay for
education now when schools were free of charge for years. Others recognized the lack of
traveling Orthodox missionaries in remote areas and felt left behind. Some converts were
ridiculed by shamanists for being fooled by Russians into believing. Orthodoxy seemed to be a
dying religion in Alaska. Aleuts, Tlingits and other groups all were losing faith. The Church had
few followers and little money.

In the 1880s, the religious atmosphere started to change. Natives began to tire of the
civilizing process the Presbyterians wanted indigenous groups to complete. In the early 1880s, a
few high ranking Tlingits wished to be baptized. If these Tlingits followed the Americanizing
Presbyterian methods, they would lose their high standing with in the clan. The Russian
Orthodox Church let native worship with Russians. Clergy participated in traditional native
funeral feasts. In contrast, the Presbyterians never worshipped and never participated in any sort
of traditional rituals with the natives. The Tlingits and other groups respected the Russian
Orthodoxy and viewed the respect the Orthodox Church gave to native traditions. In 1886 more
than 300 Tlingits converted. By 1889 all Sitkans were converted. In 1889, a group of indigenous

56 Kan, 210-217.
57 Bishop John to the Holy Ruling Synod and conditions in the Alaska Diocese in 1876. 27 July 1876. Documents.
Trans Lavrischoff. 162.
58 Shayashnikov of Unalaska to Bishop Jon. 29 1878. .. Trans Lavrischoff. 155.
leaders from all over Alaska visited Sitka and observed the Russian Orthodox Church. These leaders asked that Orthodox missionaries be sent to their villages near Juneau, Chillkat and other areas. This spread Orthodoxy to areas never converted before.\textsuperscript{59} This switch back to Russian Orthodoxy also relates to the use of Icons in the church. Icons still held importance for the Tlingits and other groups. The Tlingits craved the spiritual materialism in both ritual ceremonies and Orthodox services. Protestants do not use powerful icons as the Orthodox do.

The Russian Orthodox Church returned as the leading religion of indigenous peoples in Alaska. The return occurred because of the traditional linguistic and ceremonial ties created during the Russian American Colonial period. The Russians successfully traded and hunted for fur pelt for over one hundred years. Force and violence were tools used for dominance, but the religious multiculturalism by the Orthodox Church became a much greater factor. The Church connected to the traditional culture of the indigenous tribes. The Tlingits and Aleuts respected the Russians for respecting their traditional culture. Russian America had a hegemonic society where native consented to rule because of the respect to traditional ways of life.

\textsuperscript{59} Kan, 243-255.
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