The colonization of the New World is a difficult chapter of history. Throughout the Americas, the arrival of Western settlers brought tragedy to Native communities. Fear, misunderstanding, and competition for resources led to intense conflict. Native peoples were forced from their lands, slaughtered, and enslaved. The rapid spread of diseases added to the devastation. Colonists introduced tuberculosis, smallpox, and many other illnesses that killed vast numbers of people and hastened the loss of cultural traditions.

The clash between Alaska Native and Western cultures began in the 1700s, as Russian traders began to chart the North Pacific coast. In 1762, seafarer Stephen Glotov reached southern Kodiak Island. Here, Glotov’s crew wintered aboard their ship. The large wooden boat and strangely dressed people bewildered the Alutiiq. Contact with the ship was erratic, with both peaceful trade and skirmishes. Other brief encounters with traders followed in the 1770s, but Alutiiq warriors scared the strangers away.

By the late 1700s, news of Kodiak’s rich environment and large population attracted permanent Russian settlement. Merchant Gregorii Shelikov arrived in 1784, intent on establishing a fur trading business manned by Native laborers. He chose Kodiak for its abundant natural resources and large population, and was prepared to fight. Following two years of bloody battles, the Russian set up forts and conscripted Native workers. More than 5,000 Alutiiq died of starvation and disease by 1824.

This siege at Awa’uq was a defining moment in Alutiiq history. Here, Alutiiq people lost control of their homeland and a period of great suffering and loss began. Russian traders set up forts, took Alutiiq hostages, and forced men and women to work for little pay. Many people starved. Others died from small pox and the flu. By 1824, the Alutiiq population had dropped from 8,000 people to less than 2,900. By 1837, so many had died that the Russians consolidated the survivors into new villages, including some of the communities where Alutiiq people live today.

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