

Awa'uq – REFUGE ROCK: CONQUEST OF KODIAK



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, small pox, 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/Sugpiaq people. 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. While scouting eastern Kodiak Island, Shelikov's men learned of a tiny, cliff-bound island filled with people. Fearful of the Russians, several thousand Alutiiq people had gathered at this defensive site. The Russians surrounded the island with their boats and demanded hostages. The Alutiiq refused. After a five-day standoff, the Russian's attacked the settlement with cannons, storming the island as people tried to flee. Hundreds were killed and many others taken hostage.

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.



By the numbers...

3	boats commanded by Gregorii Shelikov
2,000	Alutiiq people who retreated to Awa'uq
5	days Russian sailors surrounded Awa'uq
5	2 ½ pound cannons used in the attack
71	Russians who attacked Awa'uq
5	Russians wounded in the attack
300	Alutiiq people killed or drowned while trying to escape
1,000	Alutiiq hostages taken

*Awa'uq, site of the 1784 massacre.
Awa'uq means "to become numb." Photo by Patrick Saltonstall.*

LEARN MORE:

Ethnic Identity, Cultural Pride, and Generations of Baggage: A Personal Experience, 1992, by Gordon Pullar. *Arctic Anthropology* 29(2):182–191.

The Russian Conquest of Kodiak, 1992, by Lydia Black. *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, Volume 24 (1-2):163-182.