The Russian vs. Native American Wars
By Christopher Feely

1792

The Russians and their native allies made camp on an island off the coast of Alaska, on the orders of company leader Aleksandr Baranov. When daylight left them, the lapping waves, and trees and sand began to crawl. Dark figures fell upon the camp guards, tore into tents and stabbed at the scattering men.[1] The Russians responded with gunfire while their allies shot arrows, but in the words of Baranov, the attackers charged in "*wooden and plaited [armor]...and…helmets with images of various monsters' faces, of which none of our bullets or buckshot pierced…they…appeared to us in the darkness more frightful than the most hellish devils."*[2]

Some of the several hundred encamped men fled in their boats while others fended off attacks with a cannon until reinforcements arrived and the enemy fell back.[3] Baranov surveyed the bleeding camp, his own life having only been saved by a coat of mail. He and his men were fur traders, seeking fortune while advancing the frontier of the mother country. What began as the eastward conquest of Siberia centuries before under Ivan the Terrible, now brought the Russians to the edge of the vast American continent.[4]

The raiders of the previous night were an armored and mighty people called the Tlingit, who Baranov learned had been seeking revenge against their enemies, the Chugach people, before they stumbled upon the Russians and decided to plunder them instead.[5] The Tlingit dominion lay in the waters beyond: a stretch of Alaskan coastline formed by misty islands and white mountains, and fortified by powerful villages and clans. This was the region that Baranov and the Russians would invade next. And it would be the stage of the Russian vs. Native American Wars.

Alaska
1799

The outsiders had begun to flock here in ever greater numbers. They were the standard bearers of a *new* empire on the American continent, one that would answer to the Russian Tsar. The leader of these pioneers, Aleksandr Baranov, now led his company down the coast and founded a fort in the name of St. Michael the Archangel. Fort Mikhailovskii was to serve the fatherland as a vital outpost in prime waters, for the Russians and their indigenous allies had tracked east for years, rapaciously hunting sea otters for the fur trade. Amidst islands of cold, trickling evergreens, Baranov declared, "*Almighty God aids us here, affirming everywhere the glory of Rus'...We shall create and further take American land that is useful to Russia.*"[6]

Their intrusion would surely meet resistance. It was seven years since that dreadful night. The Tlingit attack. And only with the tenuous permission of a local Tlingit chief did Baranov now begin construction

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[1] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America,* 101.
[2] Ibid., 101.
[3] Aleksandr Baranov, "Letter to G. I. Shelikhov, July 24, 1793," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 57.
[4] Nordlander, *For God and Tsar,* 1-3.
[5] Aleksandr Baranov, "Letter to G. I. Shelikhov, July 24, 1793," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 57.
[6] Aleksandr Baranov, "The Song of Baranov," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 131-132.

of Fort Mikhailovskii. A few dozen men of the company spent the coming winter in the creaking fort, cold months plagued by leaks, scurvy, and rumors of impending native attack.[7]

The coasts of this region were here and there framed by looming totem poles and great houses, the abodes of the distinct clans and lineages of some ten thousand or more Tlingit.[8] This people had long expanded and guarded their territory by combat.[9] As the Russian interlopers proclaimed the supremacy of a distant emperor, the warrior Kalyaan of Raven Clan was not alone in his thoughts of armed resistance. Like all Tlingit men, Kalyaan had been raised to endure pain.[10] To seek honor in battle. And to repay blood with blood.[11]

The serene veil of mist, which lingered often on these shores, covered the movements of the shadow fleets. Tlingit raiders had for generations brought ruin to their enemies, taking plunder, captives, and vengeance. Lightly armed fighters might carry a bow and arrow, with their hair in a top-knot, but the characteristic Tlingit warrior attacked in layers of hide, cuirasses of wood and scowling helmets, charging with spears, daggers, and other sidearms. These titans of the northwest met their greatest match against the equally armored Haida and Tsimshian people along their borders.

Still, life in this region was not dominated by war, but by the coming and going of fish. The warmer months drew the Tlingit to fishing camps to harvest the bountiful salmon, much of it to be dried and stored for later in the year. They enriched this diet with other fish and fish oil, and collected crabs and mollusks, and hunted deer, seals, porpoises and many other animals.[12] And the approach of winter drew them back to their sprawling villages; where the people lived together in large, open houses; where shamans danced, and chiefs and nobles displayed status through generosity and the possession of luxury goods, including jewelry, copper plates, and robes trimmed with ermine fur or puffin beaks.[13] Commoners traditionally dressed in plaited cedar bark, fur and hide. And toiling away were the slaves, often the maltreated captured enemies of Tlingit.

These ancient ways of life and war afforded the Tlingit security, a surplus of food, and ample time for the arts. Yet what most worried Baranov was that the Tlingit were changing. Adapting. Baranov forbade his men from trading firearms to them.[14]

As the head of a new state-backed monopoly called the Russian-American Company, Baranov had command of all of his merchant countrymen on the continent.[15] But Russians were hardly the only foreigners to wander these lands. Spanish galleons from the Philippines had traced the Alaskan coast back in the 16th century.[16] And after a 1741 Russian expedition under Vitus Bering reached the shores of

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[7] Aleksander Baranov, “Letter to Unknown Recipient, April 7, 1800” and “Letter to Rodionov, May 14, 1800,” in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 133, 135.

[8] Olson, *The Tlingit: An Introduction,* 23; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 28.

[9] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 20.

[10] Ibid., 67.

[11] Ibid., 64.

[12] Ibid., 29, 33, 39.

[13] Ibid., 36, 37-38, 45, 48-49.

[14] Notti, “The Russian Occupation of Alaska,” 41; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 116.

[15] Nordlander, *For God and Tsar*, 8; W. Wilfried Schuhmacher, “Aftermath of the Sitka Massacre of 1802,” in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 204.

[16] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 91.

southeast Alaska, the latter half of the century brought the Tlingit also into contact with the Spanish, French, and English, with whom they ambitiously traded pelts for iron to craft into tools and weapons.[17] They knew already how to work native copper and may have possessed iron in small quantities, salvaged from Chinese or Japanese shipwrecks.[18]

Whispers passed now between the village of Kalyaan to the other coves and islands, a secret call to uprising. It was no longer the ports of Europe that strengthened these Tlingit, but the ships of Boston. To the unease of Baranov, merchants from the fledgling United States of America supplied firearms and gunpowder to the Tlingit in exchange for otter pelts, which were in turn sold to Chinese markets.[19] Owing to this commerce, some Tlingit warriors now brandished American guns and wore armor made of Chinese coins.[20] Day by day this arsenal grew, and so it seemed a new kind of war would soon sweep over these lands.

In the spring of 1802, a fleet departed the Russian base at Yakutat. This was a massive hunting expedition, comprising Russians and several hundred native allies. At the command of Baranov's associate Ivan Kuskov, they moved southeast along shores that felt more hostile than before. Resentment toward the Russians had spread like fire among the old Tlingit lineages. For these hunting ventures had begun to deplete the sea otter population and undercut Tlingit trade. And in scattered instances over the preceding years, the Russians and their allies had stolen from, imprisoned and killed members of Tlingit.[21]

Now, 40 miles from base, the wrathful Tlingit appeared before them; hundreds rushed forth with guns, daggers and lances. In the firefight the Tlingit feigned retreat to lure the Russians into the forest. Kuskov instead drew back to a defensible island. Both sides had suffered only a handful of casualties, but with his ammunition dwindling, Kuskov struck a truce, then turned back to base to restock on ammo and supplies.[22] He had little idea that this was the beginning of the great Tlingit rebellion.

When the chief of the Kiksadi Tlingit clan allowed the construction of Fort Mikhailovskii years before, he may have unknowingly pledged his clan to the Russian Tsar. It was now well known how Russian merchants regarded their newest subjects—many of the hunters who sailed with them were the indigenous people of the Aleutian Islands, whom the merchants had colonized and forced to work as their hunters.[23]

Though the prospect of this sort of servitude stirred the Tlingit, they lacked a king or council to rally their many clans to war. The autonomous Tlingit groups nevertheless maintained ties through potlatch ceremonies and gift exchange. Each clan moreover belonged to either the Raven or Eagle division; the Tlingit were obliged to marry members from the opposite moiety.

And so the old allegiances between clans were now called upon as Tlingit men took up their armor and weapons. They sent entreaties to other indigenous groups, even former enemies, to join the rebellion. In

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[17] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 94-99
[18] Ibid., 31; Olson, *The Tlingit: An Introduction,* 32.
[19] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 113-114
[20] Glass, "Hide Armor."
[21] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 117,123.
[22] Ibid., 117-118
[23] Mason,"Background: Attu Prehistory and History," 140-141; Lepola, "The Aleuts and the Pacific Eskimo," 68.

June of 1802, over a thousand warriors of the Tlingit, joined by some Haida and Tsimshian, converged on Fort Mikhailovskii in an unprecedented alliance.[24] The Russians and their allies were slaughtered where they stood, run through with spears and riddled with gunfire. As Kalyaan led attacking warriors through the fort, the defenders pulled back to the upper barracks, desperately firing cannons, until they fell to the onslaught. The vanquished lay dead, and the fort became a pyre, around which the victorious Tlingit hauled away captives and plundered furs.

The next day, a party of Russians and their allies returned from a sea lion hunt—and the Tlingit crushed them.[25] The rebels, in their triumph, had severed the head of the Russian imperial snake in their lands. The gray shores of Sitka Sound, from the field of battle to the Tlingit dwellings, acquired a grave stillness about them.

Before long, a British merchant vessel under Captain Henry Barber sailed into the region. Barber wrote, "*[W]here the late Russian Factory stood...I found the place entirely destroyed by fire, and mangled bodies of about twenty men laying scatter among the ruins, a prey to the ravens and wild beasts of the forest.*"[26]

More than 20 indigenous and Russian survivors of the attacks had fallen into the hands of the Tlingit. So Captain Barber, backed by a few American vessels, invited aboard Kalyaan and his uncle, Chief Ska-yut-lelt, under the pretense of trade. He then arrested and threatened to execute both of them unless their clan handed over the captive survivors and the furs taken from the Russian fort. The Tlingit accepted the terms. Barber was not, however, a gallant rescuer: he kept the plundered furs for himself and held the prisoners for ransom, as he set a course for the Russian harbor at Kodiak Island. There, he met with Aleksander Baranov, from whom he brazenly extorted a haul of furs worth 10,000 rubles in exchange for the freedom of the survivors.[27]

Far from Tlingit territory, Kodiak served as a headquarters for Baranov, and he had thus emerged from the rebellion unscathed. His countrymen insisted that English and American merchants had instigated the uprising, but Baranov had long sensed a brewing anger among many Tlingit. He had taken pains to stop his men from plundering and abusing locals, and to keep their hunting expeditions out of Tlingit sight.[28]

Whatever restraint they had exercised had not saved them. Baranov lamented, "*Many of our brethren, the bravest…perished together with many of [our] allies…[at the hands of] barbarians in America*."[29] The profitable frontier of southeast Alaska was lost—forever, he feared— if the Russians could not retake the region at once. But even as official governor of the Russian colonies in America, Baranov found himself short of resources. Months passed and seasons changed as Aleksandr Baranov gathered hundreds of men and weapons for the reconquest. In early 1803 he wrote the men of his company, "*...I address you as faithful sons of the fatherland, bound to our Monarch by oath of allegiance... and ask you not to be weak*

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[24] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 126-128.

[25] Ibid., 119.

[26] W. Wilfried Schuhmacher, "Aftermath of the Sitka Massacre of 1802," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 205.

[27] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America,* 120-121; *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká,* xxxiv-xxxv.

[28] *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, xxxii; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 123.

[29] Aleksandr Baranov, "Proposal to Employees, February 15, 1803," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 219.

and ungrateful…[let us] regain the lost hunting grounds…and by this we shall prove the essence of courage, not a timid but brave spirit of the Russian people."[30]

Kalyaan and his clan expected the return of the Russians—and they would resist it with their lives. The clan stockpiled gunpowder and weapons. If the instruments of combat had changed, the nature of war had not. On clear nights, the Tlingit often beheld the *aurora borealis*, believed to be the noble spirits of fallen warriors, exalted for their bravery in the afterlife.[31] The world, as the elders told it, was a place of divine mystery, crafted and imbued with knowledge by the Raven, Yéil. The Tlingit believed the creatures of the world possessed great intelligence and spiritual potency, and they held in high esteem bears, wolves, killer whales, eagles, and ravens.

It was the Kiksadi Raven clan that would now look to Kalyaan to serve as their warchief. The clan abandoned their village and settled on a defensible peninsula elsewhere in Sitka. Around their new dwellings they raised a massive palisade— 245 feet across on one end, with gates, and reinforcing timbers along the base and outside, as well as gunports for their cannons.[32] It was called the Sapling Fort. No effort could be spared in protecting their civilians. Only two decades before, fur traders under Baranov's predecessor perpetrated the Awa'uq Massacre of some 300 indigenous men, women and children after the people resisted Russian settlement around Kodiak Island.[33]

It was now the summer of 1804. The fleets of Baranov—which comprised some hundred armed Russians in several ships, and many more indigenous otter hunters—began to cruise past Tlingit villages to deter resistance; they punished those who had been heavily involved in the uprising of 1802 and negotiated truce with others.[34] The distant settlements of the Tlingit may have tenuously allied for the rebellion two years before, but they would not now risk coming to the aid of the Kiksadi clan. Those in the Sapling Fort would face the Russian-led force alone.

Baranov assembled this force at the old abandoned Tlingit village, where he came across a Russian naval ship called the *Neva* (Нева). The captain and his crew of 41 men had learned of the situation in Alaska.[35] Having recently completed the first Russian circumnavigation of the world, they came to join Baranov and bring military might against the Tlingit.

Kalyaan needed firepower to resist them. A party of high-ranking Tlingit men went out to collect more gunpowder and guns, but as they returned, the *Neva* emerged and fired on them. A spark struck the cargo when the Tlingit fired back, and the canoe exploded.[36] Two days later, on October the 1st, the Russian fleet gathered beyond the shallows of the Sapling Fort and prepared to land the forces. The oral traditions told that the mighty Kalyaan placed his hands in charcoal, and smeared it in lines about his face in the

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[30] Ibid., 219-220.

[31] *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, xxxviii; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 16.

[32] Iurii F. Lisianskii, "Eyewitness Account of the Battle of 1804 and Peacemaking of 1805," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 234.

[33] Steffian and Laktonen Counceller, *Alutiiq Traditions*, 14.

[34] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 133-134.

[35] *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, xxxvi-xxxvii.

[36] Ibid., xxxviii, 260; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 134.

image of a fallen raven. The warpaint of a man prepared to die. His head adorned by the raven helmet, he took up a hammer looted from a Russian blacksmith slain in the rebellion, and stirred his men to battle.[37]

As the sun sank low over the water, the Russians and their allies advanced on the fort, hauling artillery behind them. Tlingit gunfire began to cut them down as they neared the walls. Some of the attackers broke ranks, and Tlingit warriors sallied out from the fort.[38] Another contingent under Kalyaan then rushed the flanks of the fleeing enemies in a scene of furious combat, shattered bone and pierced flesh.[39] A fallen sailor was hoisted on a Tlingit spear, and Kalyaan was said to have crushed several enemies with his hammer.[40] The Russians and their allies fell back to their ships under the cover of cannon fire. Around 10 of them died, and Baranov, shot through the arm, was among the 24 wounded.[41]

The Tlingit had won the first day of battle. And over the coming days, the strong walls of their fort withstood sporadic bombardment from the Russian fleet, but Kalyaan recognized that he lacked the gunpowder supply to fend off Russian attacks for much longer.[42] While in negotiations with the Russians, the several hundred Tlingit began to escape into the forest under the cover of night. First the elders, women, and children, followed at last by the warriors, in one long survival march through damp woods and cold mountain paths. Hunger and the elements took the lives of many during the retreat to Peril Strait.[43]

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On the 7th of October, the Russians entered the silent fort, and found it abandoned. Inside were several slain young children and elderly Tlingit, killed by their own clan, possibly because they were deemed too weak to endure the journey.[44] The Russians burned the Sapling Fort, and founded an establishment they called New Archangel. The following summer of 1805, they received delegations from the exiled Kiksadi Tlingit. An air of authority accompanied the arrival of Kalyaan, of whom the Russian captain said,"*He is considered the best shot [and] keeps with him up to twenty fine guns."*[45] Baranov welcomed his former adversaries and paid respect to their customs. Negotiating between days of ritual dances and songs, the parties exchanged gifts and prisoners, and Baranov traded a cherished copper crest for the right to settle the land around New Archangel.[46]

Grievances remained among the Tlingit in the north, who suffered hunger as Russians barred them from their traditional fishing waters and openly hunted otters off the coast. Tlingit warriors retaliated by swarming the merchant base at Yakutat. They killed all the Russians within and burned it to the ground.[47] The fort was never rebuilt.

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[37] A. P. Johnson, "Part Two: The Battle of 1804," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 259.

[38] Iurii F. Lisianskii, "Eyewitness Account of the Battle of 1804 and Peacemaking of 1805," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 231-232.

[39] Anooshi, xxxviii

[40] Iurii F. Lisianskii, "Eyewitness Account of the Battle of 1804 and Peacemaking of 1805," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 232; A. P. Johnson, "Part Two: The Battle of 1804," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, 259.

[41] *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, xxxviii; Aleksandr Baranov, "Letter to D. I. Kulikalov (Excerpts), April 29, 1805," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká,* 249.

[42] Notti, "The Russian Occupation of Alaska," 42.

[43] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 137.

[44] Mark Jacobs Jr., "Early Encounters between the Tlingits" in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká,* 289; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America,*136.

[45] *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, XL.

[46] Ibid.; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian Americ*a, 141.

[47] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 142-143.

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It was a time of great change in the world beyond, when old empires and civilizations faced the prospect of their own ruin. Kings fell, Napoleon scattered the armies of Europe, and the forays of Lewis and Clark signaled the dawn of US westward expansion. Yet here, in this modest corner of Alaska, the Tlingit had fractured a looming frontier. Although New Archangel became the capital of Russian America, Kuskov set up the next Russian establishment south, along the coast of California, far from the armed Pacific Northwest groups that disrupted his hunting ventures.[48]

The Russian-Native American wars in southeast Alaska did not end in true conquest, but rather a kind of negotiated coexistence. When Baranov retired in 1818, Tlingit chiefs came to bid him farewell, including Kalyaan, long admired by the governor for his intelligence and courage.The 71-year-old Baranov sailed off; he succumbed to disease before reaching Russia.[49]

Russian merchants had extracted labor and tribute from indigenous populations in their push across Alaska—it was the armed resistance of Tlingit warriors and later advocacy from Russian Orthodox missionaries that helped bring change.[50] Orders signed by the Tsar in the 1820s prohibited merchants from taxing or demanding tribute from the Tlingit and surrounding peoples, adding that Russian merchants were "*to use every kind of method to preserve their good will, avoiding everything which might stir up suspicion in them about the intention of violating their independence*."[51]

There would be no wave of thousands of Russian settlers. No mass exile of peoples here. Kalyaan enjoyed a long reign as chief of his clan, who at length were permitted to return to Sitka.[52] And all along the coasts, drifting canoes, great totems and palatial houses continued to mark the lands of the Tlingit.

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[48] Nordlander, *For God and Tsar*, 12; Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 149-150.
[49] K. T. Khlebnikov, "Baranov's Departure from Sitka," in *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká,* 323-324.
[50] Nordlander, *For God and Tsar*, 19-20.
[51] Grinev, *Tlingit Indians in Russian America*, 159.
[52] Ibid., 162; *Anóoshi Lingít Aaní Ká*, XLII.

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