

The Contexts of Religion and Violence

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins

St. Peter the Aleut

Sacred Icon and the Iconography of Violence¹

Raymond A. Bucko, S.J., Creighton University

Introduction

[1] On September 24, 1980, the Orthodox Church in America celebrated an important event: the glorification of a Native Alaskan martyr whose title in English is Saint Peter the Aleut (Gregory, *et al.*).² Peter was not this man's original name. His name was Chunagnak. Peter was his baptismal name. Nor was Peter actually an Aleut. He was born in the village of Kaguak on Kodiak Island (Istomen: 2.235), which is neither geographically nor culturally part of the Aleutian Island chain (Pierce 1978: 10-11). Nor can we say for sure that Peter was actually martyred (Pierce 1990: 398). Nevertheless, Peter's glorification and the accounts chronicling his martyrdom are enshrined in stories and icons that focus our attention on religious violence and doctrinal division.

¹ An earlier version of this paper appeared in, "Peter the Aleut: Sacred Icons and the Iconography of Violence," *Boletín: The Journal of the California Mission Studies Association* (Robert Senkewicz, editor) 23, 1 (2006): 22-45; reproduced with permission.

² In response to requests for the canonization of Saint Peter made to the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile, another association of Russian Bishops, their ruling body declared on October 15, 1980 that there is no doubt of the authenticity of Peter's martyrdom and thus no need for a canonization process.

[2] While his martyrdom may well be a non-event, his glorification becomes an epitomizing event for centuries of conflict enshrined in an iconographic image recalling though rarely actually showing religious violence and terror. By focusing on a single act of religious violence, one whose reality is questionable, the icon obscures a long history of concomitant economic, political, and social violence. In order to understand the story of Peter as event and non-event we need to first examine the iconographic image of Peter and then pull back to focus on the larger picture of violence and terror in Russian Alaska.

[3] Consider the iconography of Saint Peter. No contemporaneous drawing or physical description of Peter exists. We do not even know his age although icons representing him consistently portray a young man, perhaps because Russian law restricted Natives working for the Russian American Company to men between the ages of 18 and 50 (Khlebnikov: 50).

[4] The earliest Icon of Peter shows him wearing a white baptismal gown. Three later icons show him wearing Native Alaskan clothing (see Figure 1). A fourth icon further places Peter in a geographical and cultural context by including view of the Aleutian Islands on his right,

Fort Ross on his left and, at bottom center, a visor used in hunting otters (Figure 2). In each image Peter holds an Orthodox cross in his right hand. His image, like Orthodox iconography in general, omits the actual depiction of violence in favor of portraying the saint in his glorified state. In Peter's icons the only indication of his status as a martyr is the position of his left

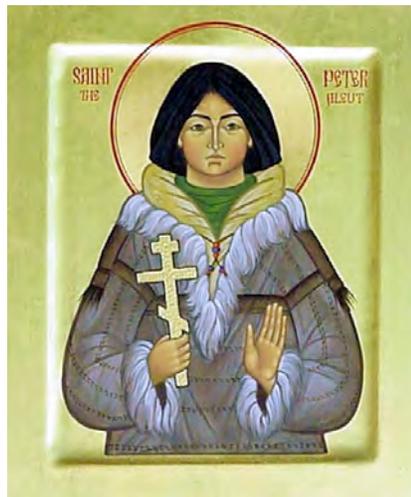


Figure 1



Figure 2

land, which is raised to his chest, palm facing out. A single icon inaccurately depicts his martyrdom, at least according to known accounts, portraying him being cudged to death by three men.

[5] While some icons of Peter place him in the context of other Saints of Alaska, including Juenali, a monk who was martyred by Native Alaskans, none of the icons portray the larger pictures of violence generated among Native peoples such as the Aleut, Kodiak, and Tlingit as well as non-Natives from Russia, the United States and Spain. All of these groups are involved in the story of Peter.

The Martyrdom

[6] We have only one source for Peter's martyrdom, which purportedly took place in 1815. This comes from the single witness to the events, another Kodiak names Kykhklai Ivan, who escaped the Spanish somewhere near Santa Barbara and made his way back to Alaska

by way of Fort Ross. The three accounts which stem from this testimony clearly express a dual agenda: first, to demonstrate the cruelty of the Spanish Catholics and, second, to extol the religious fidelity of Peter.

[7] The first account of Peter's martyrdom comes from a dispatch written on February 15, 1820 by Semen Ivanovich Ianovskii, chief manager of the Russian Colonies (1818-1820) to his superiors in St. Petersburg:

Here is an example of the inhumanity and ignorance of the Spanish clergy: In June 1815, on the coast of California near the Mission San Pedro, they seized 15 baidarkas of Kodiak men under Tarasov, of whom two Kodiaks fled to Il'men Island (possibly a Russian name for San Nicolas Island – Ed.) where one of them died, and the other, Keglii Ivan, lived with the natives of this island until by chance the Russian-American Company brig *Il'men* came in March, 1819, when he appeared before the commander of the vessel, Mr. Banzeman, and was taken to Fort Ross. I enclose the original testimony of this Aleut taken by Mr. Kuskov.³ He has now been sent here on the brig *Il'men* and tells me the same thing. He is not a type who could think up things. The Spanish tortured his unfortunate comrade, who until the very end replied to his torturer that he was a Christian and wanted no other faith, and with these words he died. One must note that this victim though baptized like the others was not taught Christianity, probably did not even know the dogmas of the faith except God the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. I suggest that the Government intervene so that the Spanish do not do the same with the rest. But we have to keep in mind that the colonies cannot get along without grain from California (Pierce 1978: 177).

A second, more elaborate report was sent by the main administrator of the Russian American Company to Emperor Alexander I "sometime before December 20, 1820":

A Company promyshlennick, a native of the island of Kodiak by the name of Kykhklai, who had been taken prisoner by the Spaniards in 1815 and returned to our settlement at Ross and then to the headquarters of the colony on Sitka Island in 1819, gave the following account of inhuman treatment by the Spaniards of one of the Company promyshlenniks.

In 1815 a Company servitor named (Boris) Tarasov was on Ilmen Island, which did not belong to any nation. He was the leader of a group of promyshlenniks who were there to hunt. Since they were unsuccessful there they decided to set out with fifteen dependent islanders from our Kodiak colony to go to the other islands, Santa Rosa and Ekaterina (Catalina?). During the voyage his baidarka began to leak, and he had to proceed to the

³ The transcript of Keglii's testimony that is the basis of all three extant accounts reproduced in this paper has not yet been published in Russian or English. According to Alexei Istomin, this document, essential for understanding what Kykhklai said of the event, was supposed to be published in Russian in 2003 in volume 1 of the book "Russia in California" (edited by J.Gibson, A.Istomin, V.Tishkov) and subsequently translated into English in 2004 (Stephen Little Bear, Personal Communications).

coast of California. They stopped at the bay on Cabo San Pedro, where bad weather detained them until the next day. While they were there a Spanish soldier came to them from the mission of San Pedro and informed Tarasov that in exchange for some gifts, he would bring to him two of our Kodiak men who had previously run off from another such hunting party and were presently in the mission.

When the soldier left, although the weather was calmer and they could proceed on their projected route, the desire to see and to free their fellow islanders persuaded them to remain there longer. On the fourth day of their stay they were suddenly attacked by some 20 armed horsemen, who tied up all of our people and wounded many of them with their sabers. One of the Kodiak islanders named Chunagnak was wounded in the head. The attackers looted all their possessions and all the Company trade goods. The prisoners were then taken to the mission of San Pedro where they actually did find the two Kodiak islanders who had fled from the island of Clement from another party of partisans. When they reached the mission, a missionary who was head of the mission wanted them to accept the Catholic faith. The prisoners replied that they had already accepted the Greek Christian religion and did not wish to change. Some time later Tarasov and almost all the Kodiak people were taken to Santa Barbara. Only two of them, Kykhklai and the wounded Chunagnak, were thrown into prison with the Indians who were being held. They suffered for several days without food or drink.

One night the head of the mission sent the runaway Kodiak islanders with a second order for them to accept the Catholic faith, but again they remained steadfast in their own faith.

At dawn a cleric went to the prison, accompanied by Indians. When the prisoners were brought out, he ordered the Indians to encircle them. Then he ordered the Indians to cut off the fingers from both hands of the above mentioned Chunagnak, then to cut off both his hands; finally, not satisfied with this tyranny, he gave orders that Chunagnak be disemboweled.

Tortured in this manner, Chunagnak breathed his last after the final procedure. The same punishment would have awaited the other Kodiak, Kykhklai, had it not been for the fact that the cleric received a timely piece of paper. When he read it, he ordered that the man who had been killed be buried, and that Kykhklai be returned to prison; several days later they sent him to Santa Barbara. There was not one of his comrades there who had been taken prisoner with him. All of them had been sent off to Monterey. Kykhklai was assigned to the same work as other Company promyshlenniks who had been taken prisoner by the Spanish.

Wanting to escape from a life of such torture, Kykhklai and another man conceived the idea of breaking away. They stole a baidarka and went in to the bay on Cabo San Pedro, and from there to the island of Catalina, then to [Santa] Barbara [Island] and finally to Ilmen, where one of them died and

where Kykhklai was taken aboard the Company brig *Ilmen*, which had come to the island and then went to the Ross settlement. The others who had been taken prisoner at the same time were freed on the insistence of our captains Hagemeister and Kotzebue.

This incident, just one of many, is a striking example of the inhuman way in which the Spanish treat Russian promyshlenniks. Many who had previously been in their captivity were so exhausted with labor and so abused from beatings that they will carry the results with them to the grave. The suffering inflicted on the poor Indians is impossible to conceive without shuddering. Not only do they not consider the Indians human beings, they consider them below animals. The Spanish take great pleasure in beating innocent Indians then bragging about it to other Spaniards (Dmytryshyn, *et al.*: 332-34).

[8] The third account, dated November 22, 1865, two years before Alaska was “sold” to the United States, was also written by Semen Ivanovich Ianovskii 45 years after his first description when he was 77 years of age. In this letter addressed to the abbot of Valaam Monastery, Damascene, he tells about the holy monk German whom he first met in 1819 and recounts his telling German of the martyrdom of Peter:

Once I related to him how the Spaniards in California had taken fourteen of our Aleuts prisoner, and how the Jesuits had tortured one of them, to try and force them all to take the Catholic faith. But the Aleuts would not submit, saying: “We are Christians, we have been baptized,” and they showed them the crosses they wore. But the Jesuits objected, saying “No, you are heretics and schismatics; if you do not agree to take the Catholic faith we will torture you.” And they left them shut up two to a cell until the evening to think it over. In the evening they came back with a lantern and lighted candles, and began again to try and persuade them to become Catholics. But the Aleuts were filled with God’s grace, and firmly and decisively answered, “We are Christians and we would not betray our faith.” Then the fanatics set about torturing them. First they tortured one singly while the other one was made to watch. First they cut off one of the two joints from one foot, and then from the other, but the Aleut bore it all and continued to say: “I am a Christian and I will not betray my faith.” Then they cut a joint off each finger – first from one hand, then the other; then they hacked off one foot at the instep, then one hand at the wrist. The blood poured out, but the martyr bore it all to the end, maintaining his stand, and with this faith he died, from loss of blood! On the following day it was planned to torture the others, but that same night an order was received from Monterey that all the captured Russian Aleuts were to be sent under guard to Monterey. And so in the morning those remaining alive were sent away. This was related to me by an Aleut who was an eyewitness – a colleague of the man put to death – and who later escaped from the Spaniards. At the time I reported all this to the Head Office in St. Petersburg.

When I had finished telling him this, Father German asked me, “What was the name of this tortured Aleut?”

“Petr,” I replied, “but I cannot remember the other name.

Then the Elder stood before the icon, devoutly crossed himself and said, “Holy, newly-martyred Petr, pray to God for us!” (Pierce 1978: 88-89).

[9] Petr Aleksandrovich Tikmenev mentions the martyrdom of Peter in his history of the Russian-American company published in 1861-1863. He cites Kuskov’s report and says that a baptized Kodiak Aleut was tortured to death by the “head of the religious mission in San Francisco” when he refused to convert to Catholicism (138). There is a tradition current among some Orthodox Christians in San Francisco that Saint Peter is buried in the Mission Dolores Cemetery and pious pilgrims come there to pray:

After the meal, we left with Matushka Evgenia’s blessing and went to the place of the martyrdom of St. Peter the Aleut, the Mission Dolores. Even though it is not known the exact location of his martyrdom by the Roman Catholic “missionaries,” we sang the magnification to St. Peter in the cemetery (Duncan).

[10] Spanish records corroborate the capture of a party of Aleut hunters supervised by Boris Tarasov in 1815 but provide no detail of their treatment or specific mention of Peter or description of either his or his companion’s eventual fate (Pierce 1978: 177). However, there is a contemporaneous letter from Franciscan Fr. José Señan dated June 19, 1816 that runs counter to the story of forced conversion and violence against the Native hunters from Alaska:

It seems to me that there are good reasons for sending the four Russian Indians to your [the Santa Barbara] Presidio, all the more because you already have a countryman of theirs through whom pertinent and customary questioning could be conducted.

May God grant that they really want holy baptism, but I think there is not reason why it should be administered here except that the neophytes who brought them happened to belong to this Mission [San Buenaventura] and therefore they were the ones who said that the four wanted to be baptized. As for the Russian Indians themselves, I can hardly understand a word they say. But if they feel inclined to become members of our congregation of San Buenaventura and if the Governor has no objections to their admittance to a mission, we can very well comply with their wishes (Cited in Farris: 8; Señan: 87).

Native Violence and Violence against Natives

[11] According to a single Kodiak witness, Peter died in California in 1815, some 75 years after the initial Russian incursion into the Aleutian islands which began in 1740. It is fashionable today to portray those Native peoples untouched by European influence as essentially peaceful. This was simply not the case with the Aleutians, Kodiaks, and other Native groups in the area that was to become, for a brief period, Russian America. The

Aleuts, whose traditional hierarchical society was composed of high status nobility, commoners, and slaves (usually captured in warfare), prosecuted surprise raids on other Aleuts, engaged in hostage taking, corpse mutilation, and torture of prisoners (Lantis: 177). The Aleuts also engaged in warfare and raiding with the Kodiak before the arrival of Russians.

[12] The Russian Orthodox Missionary Bishop Innokentii Veniaminov (1797–1871) studied the Aleutian language and wrote a natural history and ethnography of the islands and mainland. He was consecrated as a bishop in 1840 and visited Kodiak in 1842 (Pierce 1984). He believed that the coming of the Russians helped put an end to this strife, which some Aleuts believed would have consumed and destroyed them all (250). Veniaminov also made clear that despite their larger role of “peacemakers” among various Native groups, the Russian hunters had exercised their own measures of violence. Veniaminov was unsure if the Russians provoked the Aleuts to violence because of their oppressive trading practices and cruel management or if the Aleuts simply disdained the foreign yoke. Early in the encounter between the groups, the Aleuts destroyed three Russian ships causing the Russians “to become the avengers, and as such they went rather beyond the limit” (251). Under the pretext of vengeance, the Russians murdered the inhabitants of many Aleut villages, including women and children. In many cases these individuals were perfectly innocent of any violence against the Russians. Citing just one instance, Veniaminov states:

On the second attempt [to attack a village] Solov’ev landed on the shore and exterminated all the Aleuts, who were there with their wives and children. The slaughter was so atrocious that the sea around the islet became bloody from those who threw themselves or were thrown into it (252).

Veniaminov estimates the number of Aleuts slaughtered to be between 3,000 and 5,000 (256) while other reports put the total number much lower. While the deliberate slaughter of Aleuts was quelled in 1790 after the Billings Expedition, the diminution of the Native population continued through hunting accidents, famine, epidemics, and venereal disease (Veniaminov: 256-58). British seaman Joseph Billings lead a secret scientific expedition to map and more firmly establish Russian claims to Siberia and Alaska. He also discovered the widespread abuses of Aleuts and other Natives and reported these to the Russian Government. Ironically, he hastened the establishment of a single fur trade monopoly under the assumption that this would stem the exploitation of Natives (Barratt: 84, 88).

[13] After the Russians gained control of these territories, their use of Native hunters supervised by Russian overseers continued to exact a toll:

Certainly the most unfortunate subjects of the Russian American Company were the native peoples of the Aleutian archipelago whom the Russians had subjugated in the second half of the eighteenth century. Many of these tribes perished in the process of Russian conquest. The Russian government freed them from the payment of *iasak* [tribute], but required them to hunt sea animals and to perform other labor for the Company. This obligation fell primarily on men between 18 and 50 years old. Local toions had the responsibility for assigning the native men to the hunts, which were prolonged and often far distant from their families. Many perished en route,

either through intertribal hostilities, as in 1802 when Tlingits killed hundreds of Aleuts who were hunting for the Company, or through maritime disasters, as in 1804 when twenty Aleut Baidaras were swept away by storm and scores of Aleuts lost their lives (Dmytryshyn, *et al.*: xlvi).

[14] One consequence of the drafting of half of the male Aleuts between 18 and 50 to hunt for the various Russian companies was to remove them from their crucial role of economically supporting their own families and communities. Aleut society was further disrupted by the Russian practice of taking hostages to ensure the hunters' compliance. In 1790, one company held 300 hostages, which included 200 daughters of leaders to "encourage" a party of 600 hunters. Dmytryshyn details abuses of the Russian fur hunting operations that were almost entirely dependent on Aleut and Kodiak labor:

Unremitting obligations to the Company disrupted traditional Aleut family life and made their long-term survival problematical. Company work took most men away from the Aleut communities, often bringing famine to the rest. At times their only nourishment was whatever the tides cast up on shore. Many died from eating decayed or toxic shellfish or other rotten sea creatures. Understandably the Aleut population was drastically diminished during the Russian period.

Under the terms of the Charter, the Company theoretically compensated the Aleuts for their work, but compensation was very low. This amounted to 200 paper rubles per year in the 1830's, a sum inadequate to buy even necessities. Moreover, the Company generally paid the Aleuts not in rubles but in goods of very poor quality. Further, Company officials appraised Aleut furs at very low prices and put a high overhead on goods purchased from company stores. If the Aleuts protested, Company officials accused them of insubordination and employed harsh methods to keep them in line. Under such circumstances Aleuts were unable to free themselves from their obligations to the Company.

Under the terms of its Charter, the Company provided housing for Aleut employees, but like the wages and food, housing was deplorable. These employees lived in communal structures more like livestock sheds than human dwellings. Crowded with 150-500 persons, these sheds were filthy and the stench unbearable because they were also used for cleaning fish and preparing furs and hides. Colonial officials naturally avoided mentioning such matters in their annual reports to St. Petersburg, rather, they presented favorable statistics and descriptions of progress.

Aleut girls and women suffered the additional abuse of concubinage (sic) to the Russian men, and their creole children faced an uncertain status and existence. Many Aleuts fell victim to smallpox, scurvy, dysentery, respiratory ailments and venereal disease. Thousands perished from lack of medical care. The previously hearty, energetic Aleuts became lethargic and indifferent and ceased to care for their own needs – they were then a liability to the company rather than an asset (Dmytryshyn, *et al.*: xlvii - xlviii).

[15] By 1790, the Aleut population was reduced by as much as two-thirds through practices of conscripted labor which was both physically debilitating and did not allow the families to prepare properly for their own sustenance through winter. Between 1792 and 1805 records show that 751 Kodiaks were killed in accidents (Gibson 1978: 363-64). There are, however, wide discrepancies in the reports on the numbers of Aleuts killed during the Russian period as exemplified by the Tlingit attack on the Russians and their Native allies at Fort Mikhailovskii, where the reports vary from 20 to 40 to over 200 Aleuts slaughtered (Grinev: 130).

Otter Hunting

[16] The precipitating cause of violence in the story of Peter the Aleut was not over doctrine but over “soft gold”: furs, and access to the rich sea otter colonies off the coast of southern California. Russia expanded into the Alaskan peninsula and down to northern California to satisfy territorial ambitions, but Russians were also lured there by the diminishing numbers of sea otters in their other territories. Otters were hunted to extinction off of Kamchatka by 1750 and decimated off of the Kuriles (an archipelago stretching from the southern tip of Kachatka to the north of the Japanese island of Hokkaido) by 1780 (Gibson 1976: 4). By 1789 there were few otters to be found offshore of the Aleutian Islands or in the Gulf of Alaska (Gibson 1976: 10). Not only had the supply of otters in the Alaska area diminished, but there was increasing conflict with the Tlingit Indians whom the Russians referred to as the Kolosh. The Tlingit occupied the area around Sitka and as early as 1805 they actively opposed the Russians and their Aleut hunters from hunting otters in their territory. This opposition, at times bloody, continued through 1810 with the Tlingit effectively preventing further Russian hunting incursions (Khlebnikov: 4-5) and making California coastal hunting more attractive.

[17] Russians who lacked both personnel and ships also began collaborating with American sea captains in the pursuit of sea otters in more southerly waters. In 1803, Governor Alexander Baranov made a deal with Captain Joseph O’Cain to split the profits on a joint hunting venture to Spanish California. Baranov was to supply Aleut hunters, Russian supervisors, and baidarkas; O’Cain would provide the transport (Ogden: 45). Hunting was done surreptitiously and at considerable risk. The Spanish had a dearth of ships and could not pursue the ships off the coast, but they could capture members of hunting parties when they came to shore for water and other necessities. Parties of hunters, Aleuts, Kodiaks, and other Alaskan Natives, were deposited on inaccessible islands for periods of time and were later collected by the ships or they left the ships at night to hunt, returning by dawn. Baranov eventually mounted his own expeditions as he learned of the richness of the otter colonies in California and wanted to increase the profit for the company by cutting out the Americans (Ogden: 57).

[18] The Spanish, like the Russians, traded in sea otter pelts and recognized their high value, particularly for the Chinese trade. The Spanish wanted to monopolize trade in otter skins and exclude both the Russians and the Americans (Ogden: 16-24). Nevertheless, Native Californians sometimes traded otter skins with passing ships as occasionally did the Spanish themselves. (Ogden: 52).

[19] The Aleuts were essential to acquiring otter pelts. As a Russian Naval Officer stated in 1820:

During our stay here [Unalaska] we noticed that the Russians, going hunting or anywhere else in baidarkas, always knew less about this matter than the Aleuts who live with them here . . . If the company should somehow lose the Aleuts, then it will completely forfeit the hunting of sea animals, because not one Russian knows how to hunt the animals, and none of our settlers has learned how in all the time that the company has had its possessions here”
(Cited in Gibson: 8).

[20] Because Russian fur traders were highly mobile and thus out of the grasp of civil control, they became more and more exploitative of Native hunters. Sea otter pelts were extracted by the traders from the Aleuts as tribute and captives were even taken to force others to work. In 1800, Aleuts were sent out hunting during a storm despite their protests and 64 men were lost (Pierce 1978: 54-55). As the population of Aleuts dwindled, the Russians shifted to the inhabitants of Kodiak who were not considered as good otter hunters.

The Conversion of the Aleuts and Kodiaks

[21] One of the most intriguing comments about Peter, one which sheds doubt on the event of his martyrdom, comes from the earliest description of his demise: “One must note that this victim though baptized like the others was not taught Christianity, probably did not even know the dogmas of the faith except God the Father, Son and the Holy Ghost.” In order to evaluate this statement it is important to review the history of the Orthodox mission to the Kodiaks.

[22] The Russians first established an outpost on Kodiak Island, the birthplace of Peter, under the command of Grigorii Ivanovich Shelekhov in 1784. The Russians had made previous attempts to establish colonies here but had been driven off by the inhabitants in 1761 and 1766. Because he had an inferior force, Shelekhov enlisted hostile Natives as allies with superior Russian technology (Pierce 1978: 5).

[23] Knowledge of Christianity came before the missionaries, as it did in many other parts of North America, through the explanations and beliefs of practicing lay people. What is unique to Russian Orthodoxy is the practice of lay people, in addition to priests, administering baptism.

[24] The first formal religious mission to the Aleuts and Kodiak originated from the Valaam monastery outside of St. Petersburg. In 1794, a group of eight religious and two lay servants arrived on Kodiak Island. The most famous of these, German, who was told of Peter’s martyrdom, spent most of his time on Spruce Island, and died in 1837 (Veniaminov: 235). Of the eight men in the original mission, Hieromonk Juvenaly was martyred by Natives in 1796 on the Alaskan mainland. Archimandrite Ioasaf, Hieromonk Makary, and Hierodeacon Stefan left Kodiak for the consecration of Ioasaf as Archiereus in 1798 and were drowned in a shipwreck on the return voyage. Hierodeacon Nektarii left the mission in 1806, Monk Ioasaf died at Kodiak in 1823, and Hieromonk Afanasii left the mission in 1825 (Veniaminov: 234-35). The initial number of mission personnel on the island was quite small

and quickly diminished to one last monk, Herman, before a second wave of mission activity began.

[25] In 1794 Makary and Juvenaly reportedly baptized the entire population of Kodiak island (Veniaminov: 235). Archimandrite Ioasaf assessed the progress of the mission in May 1795, eight months after his arrival on Kodiak:

I have been living on the island of Kadiak since 24th September 1794. I have, praise, God, baptized more than 7,000 Americans and celebrated more than 2,000 weddings. We have built a church and, if time allows, we shall build another, and two portable ones, but a fifth is needed. We live comfortably, they love us and we them, they are a kind people, but poor. They take baptism so much to heart that they smash and burn all the magic charms given to them by the shamans (Pierce 1978: 42).

[26] Peter was martyred in the year 1815. If we assume he was of young age, say 20, this places his birth in 1795, one year after the initial massive baptism of the population on Kodiak. If he was in his seniority, age 50, then he would have been 29 years of age when the Monks arrived on Kodiak. Only two of the eight monks comprising the original foundation were entrusted with preaching and baptizing the Native inhabitants, which they reportedly accomplished within one year of arriving on Kodiak. One may reasonably question the optimism of this report as well as wonder about the monks' linguistic ability to convey what was meant by baptism and the depth of understanding of the neophytes.

[27] A later missionary to Alaska, Ivan Veniaminov, provides further clues to why this statement was made about Peter. Veniaminov believed that the Aleuts, whom he viewed as quite virtuous, more easily became Christian converts than other Native groups (187). He portrayed them as exemplary Christians who immediately gave up their past shamanic beliefs and religious customs without, according to him, any coercion (229). His assessment of Kodiak Christianity, however, was tempered:

Among the Kad'iak people shamanism and the rest of their old superstitions persist to this day in full force, while among the Aleuts the first no longer exists at all and the latter to a much lesser degree than formerly. Of the Kad'iak people only about a hundredth part fulfill the obligations of Religion to any extent and a very few of them may be acknowledged as diligent in it (231).

[28] Veniaminov found this dichotomy paradoxical because the Kodiak had the original resident missionaries on their island since 1794 while the Aleuts only later acquired a resident priest in 1824. He attributed this difference to the great virtue of the Aleuts. Being both pious and pragmatic, he considered a variety of explanations for Aleut conversion ranging from the Russian view that Aleuts had an inferior religion, to a contention that they acted out of fear of the Russians, and finally to monetary considerations as baptism exempted them from payment of fur tribute (232). Ultimately he cites spiritual motivations for the conversions, but he acknowledges that lay people were permitted to baptize in the Russian tradition and thus some of the fur traders baptized the Aleuts more to make strong trading partners than to spread the faith. He also noted that up until 1780 the Russians were far

more interested in the subjugation and extermination of the Aleut population than their conversion (234).

Violence around the Violence

[29] While the story of Peter the Aleut enshrines a clear opposition between the Catholicism of the Spanish and the Orthodoxy of the Russians, it conceals a deep and complex division between the Russians and the Aleuts created by the incursion of the Russians into Aleutian and later Kodiak territory and the subsequent mistreatment of these peoples by the Russian fur traders during the introduction of Orthodox Christianity to these people. It also conceals the division between the secular Russian American Fur Company and the Orthodox missionaries who early on set themselves up as protectors of the indigenous population and were outspoken critics of the fur hunters' personal lifestyles and their exploitation of the Natives. The missionary monks were especially critical of the head of the Russian American Company, Aleksandr Andreevich Baranov (Dmytryshyn, *et al.*: xlii). He had taken a Native woman as a consort and was, according to the monks, hostile to missionary operations.

[30] The first attempt by the Orthodox monks from Kodiak to intervene politically in the treatment of Native people took place in 1796. The Monk Makary traveled to St. Petersburg with a delegation of 6 Aleuts and a letter of grievance. The letter was quite specific as to both the nature of the abuses and who was carrying them out:

The Shelikhov and Golikov company men threaten other people in a most barbarous way. They lack any human kindness. They take their wives and daughters as mistresses by force, they kill the people. They send out the men to hunt sea otter from the earliest spring, healthy or ailing, it does not matter. Some of those who are ill, die en route. They keep the men hunting until fall and there is no time to put up food for themselves and their families, nor get materials for clothing. They starve to death, and suffer from cold because of lack of clothing. When they are subjected to severe floggings, they commit suicide. If an Aleut does not bring in plenty of fox pelts, they strip him and pin him to the ground and beat him with sinew cords, all the time chanting that "we do not tolerate laziness" (Makarii quoted in Black: 234).

[31] Four of the Aleuts died during the trip (two returned to Alaska after falling ill) and Makary himself drowned on the return journey to Alaska when his ship sank. He did meet with the Emperor Paul to present his case but was rebuked (although later forgiven) for leaving his post (Pierce 1990: 324-325). The Emperor ordered a halt to the abuses (Black: 235).

[32] The Hieromonk Father Gideon from the Aleksandr-Nevskii Monastery came to Kodiak in 1804, ten years after the founding of the mission and eight years after the intervention by the Monk Makary. Gideon investigated the monks' charges against the fur companies of abuse and lack of patriotism, which the monks equated with a lack of observance of Orthodoxy. In a letter to Metropolitan Amvrosii in 1805, Gideon specifically attacked the machinations of Baranov, accusing him of slandering the clergy, forbidding them to have contact with the Natives, and driving off the Natives who were under clergy influence, all in order to decrease their influence among the Natives. He also accuses Baranov of taxing and

exploiting the Natives on behalf of the Russian America Company (Pierce 1978: 55-56). Gideon here chronicled some of the specific abuses:

In 1801 the company drove out the Aleuts in the Sitkhin otter-hunting party in the following manner: They prepared beforehand leg irons and neck yokes, made ready birches for the young ones, ropes' ends for the thirty-year-olds, and canes for the old men. A baidara was sent off armed with cannon and rifles. On the western cape of Kadiak, on coming to the shore the Russian hunters aimed their loaded rifles at the Aleuts, saying: "If you don't want to go on the expedition, just say so now (cocking their guns), and we'll shoot!" Under such pressure who could show displeasure? When they approached the island of Sitkhinak they fired the cannon and, standing with their rifles ready, spread out the iron shackles on the ground near the dwellings, together with the birch rods, ropes' ends, canes, manacles and yokes, saying, "Anyone who does not wish to go with us can choose one of these." At this one man began to protest. They seized him, put him in irons and flogged him until he was hoarse from screaming and could hardly say, "I'll go." . . .

In 1789 some twenty men in the Sitkhin party were drowned and about the same number drowned in the course of the journey . . .

In 1799, 140 men in the same party died as a result of eating shellfish when they were starving. Some 40 more died on the journey.

In 1800, the hunter Lopatin ordered the Tugidok party to sea during a storm, in spite of their protests, and 32 baidarkas were lost – some 64 men . . .

In the same year [1805] in the last days of October as the party was on its way back from Sitkha, some 300 men were drowned.

Because of the above-mentioned onerous company duties the Aleuts in all the villages are subjected to great hunger in the wintertime. They eat the seal bladders in which they store fat, the bitter salmon roe and laftaks, cord and other articles made from gut, because they have no shellfish and seaweed when the beaches are covered with ice. A man with any feeling can hardly keep back the tears when he sees these unfortunates in such a situation. They look more like corpses than living people. When the husband goes off on hunting parties the wives and small children, and the feeble old men and women, both because they have no baidarkas and because of the summer duties imposed upon them by the company, such as cleaning fish, digging sarana root and picking berries, are unable and have no time to lay in the necessary foodstocks for the winter: and thus it often happens that many of them starve to death. Is all this not more onerous and destructive than the payment of iasak or tribute which has not been collected since 1794? And is it a sign of kind and friendly treatment? These words always occupy pride of place on the company's lips and in its documents but not in its deeds (Pierce 1978: 142-44).

Ethnohistory of Events and Non-Events

[33] The three accounts of Peter's martyrdom ultimately stem from the testimony of one witness and are related from the same account. Historians find the description of the Spanish treatment of Peter completely anomalous, which undermines the story's credibility (Pierce 1990: 398). The geography in the account is quite confused and can only be tentatively reconstructed: Peter may have been captured at the port of San Pedro, first taken to Mission San Gabriel, then to Santa Barbara and finally to Monterey (Farris: 4). There was no Mission Saint Pedro.

[34] There are other anomalies in the account such as the lack of military guards in the proceedings. It is also highly unlikely that the priest or accompanying local Natives could speak enough Koniag Alutiiq to convey his demand to Peter, or that the Natives from Kodiak had mastered Spanish. Inconsistencies in the increasingly elaborate description of the tortures inflicted on Peter seem manufactured to elicit outrage. There are simply no other incidents of Orthodox/Catholic conflict in this area as the Russians, mentioned in the first account of Peter's martyrdom, depended on the Spanish for agricultural and other supplies and thus maintained cordial if distant relations. Unlike colonial forces such as England and France (and Spain in other areas), there were never any armed conflicts between the two powers. In fact, some Natives from the Russian colonies easily assimilated themselves to life in the Spanish colony (Farris: 8-9). It was otter and not orthodoxy that generate hostility between the groups.

[35] And so we return to our starting point, which is an indisputable event: the canonization of Peter as a Saint of the Orthodox Church in 1980 (Gregory, *et al.*). While scholars ponder if the event of Peter's martyrdom was in fact an event or a non-event, the reality is that the story is now enshrined as an act of violence by one religious group against another. The larger reality is that violence rarely has a single cause and we must consider the larger realities of violence in colonial Russia and within Native society itself.

[36] Raymond Fogelson defines an event as "that which occurs at a given time and place" (133). As Fogelson astutely points out: "Implicit here is the assumption that events may be recognized, defined, evaluated, and endowed with meaning differentially in different cultural traditions" (135). He reminds us, ". . . historians are never free from history. There is a continual interaction between past and present" (135). Thus non-events, things that did not happen historically, may become events because of their ability to focus and condense a wide variety of experiences into a single moment. Whether historically grounded or not, Peter's martyrdom has become an event in Fogelson's terms precisely because it focuses the difficult relationship between Orthodoxy and Catholicism beginning in the era of the Crusades, occurring in such diverse places as Constantinople and the Ukraine, and continuing to this day.

[37] Thus Jesuits can become antagonists in the third account of Peter's martyrdom because of their larger negative reputation in Russia even though the Society of Jesus had been expelled from Spain and its possessions (including California) in 1767, suppressed by the

Catholic Church from 1773 until 1814, and only returned to San Francisco in 1849.⁴ Peter's martyrdom becomes a proof of the cruelty of the Spanish Catholics, Catholic missionaries, and finally the Jesuits.

[38] The story has other functions as well. It is an exculpation of the Russians who were poaching on territory claimed by the Spanish but also contested by the original Native inhabitants. It can also serve as a cautionary tale of terror for Aleuts who might think of defecting to Spain (Farris). Mission records indicate that some Aleuts and Kodiaks elected to stay in California rather than return to Russian Alaska.

[39] Finally, today, with a growing interest in Native history and Native perspective, the event has become representative of another set of highly complex relationships between Indigenous peoples and the many denominations of Christian missionaries. Peter has also today become a model and patron for Orthodox youth because of his steadfast fidelity to the faith.

Conclusion

[40] The icons of Peter the Aleut both reveal and conceal a series of often violent interrelationships generated on the colonial frontiers of Russia's eastern colonial expansion. Ironically, the focus of the Icon, Peter himself, is the least credible instance of violence in the amazing nexus of relations, often violent, generated by the encounters among European and Native groups. This story of violence creates its own terror – that the account of even a single act of violence has the potential to epitomize, solidify, and perpetuate complex divisions and oppositions. Violence and terror – or rumors thereof – transform social realities. The question, a topic for another paper, is whether icons of violence can also heal, reconcile, and unite those wounded and separated.

Acknowledgements

[41] I first became aware of Christian Orthodoxy growing up amidst the onion-domed Churches in Bayonne, New Jersey. I first learned about Peter the Aleut in the late 1980s while looking through Icon catalogs. Because of my own work with Native Americans and Christianity I was particularly intrigued by this Saint although I knew little beyond the presumption that he was an Aleut, having gleaned that from the title of the icon. In 1988 while conducting my fieldwork on Pine Ridge I visited Sioux Falls, SD and saw an icon of Peter with the other Saints of America in an Orthodox Church there. Later I encountered Stephen Little Bear through my work on the internet and we conversed extensively on Peter and his own involvement at Fort Ross and intense interest in Saint Peter whom he adopted as the patron saint of contemporary baidarka builders and voyagers. When Ronald Simkins mentioned a conference on religion and violence, the story of Peter came to mind and I decided this was a golden opportunity to learn more. I am particularly indebted to Glenn Farris who surfaced the original accounts of Peter's martyrdom and wrote an important

⁴ The first account mentions "the Spanish" as the perpetrators of the crime, the second account says "a cleric," implying a single actor. The final account specifically mentions the Jesuits using the plural. Pierce mistakenly states that the priests at Santa Barbara and most of the other missions were Dominicans (1990: 398). In 1815 the Franciscans staffed all of the California missions.

conference paper on the topic. He has been incredibly generous with his ideas and encouragements. I recently reviewed a book on the Franciscan missions by James Sandos and called upon his very balanced expert opinion. I remained in contact with Stephen Little Bear who also provided a wealth of information. Finally, through my research on this topic I consulted with Fr. Michael Oleksa, a Russian Orthodox priest and scholar, who generously read and commented on this article. I am grateful to all of them for their assistance but take full responsibility for any errors in this piece. The icon of Peter in Figure 2 is by Ina Hecker and is from my own collection. The icon in Figure 2 is from the personal collection of Stephen Little Bear, Santa Rosa, California, and is used with permission; the iconographer chooses to remain anonymous.

Bibliography

Barratt, Glynn

- 1981 *Russia in Pacific Waters, 1715-1825: A Survey of the Origins of Russia's Naval Presence in the North and South Pacific*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Black, Lydia T.

- 2004 *Russians in Alaska 1732-1867*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press.

Dmytryshyn, Basil, E. A. P. Crownhart-Vaughan, and Thomas Vaughan, editors

- 1989 *The Russian-American Colonies, To Siberia and Russian America: Three Centuries of Russian Eastward Expansion*. Volume 3: *The Documentary Record*. Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press.

Duncan, Father Alexis

- 1994 "The Glorification of St. John of San Francisco." *The Orthodox Page*. Accessed at <http://www.cin.org/archives/cineast/199707/0787.html>; no longer available

Farris, Glenn

- 1990 *The Strange Tale of Saint Peter, The Aleut: A Russian Orthodox Martyr on the California Frontier*. Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Fogelson, Raymond D

- 1989 "The Ethnohistory of Events and Nonevents." *Ethnohistory* 36: 133-47.

Gibson, James R

- 1976 *Imperial Russia in Frontier America : the Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 1978 "European Dependence Upon American Natives: The Case of Russian America." *Ethnohistory* 25: 359-85.

Gregory, Bishop of Sitka and Alaska, Archpriest Nicholas Harris, and Sub-deacon John J. Perich

- 1980 *Act of Canonization of the Holy Martyrs Hieromonk Juvenaly and Peter the Aleut.* South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon Library.

Grinev, Andrei Val'terovich

- 2005 *The Tlingit Indians in Russian America 1741-1867.* Translated by R. L. Bland and K. G. Solovjova. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Istomen, Alexander A.

- 1999 "The Foundation of Fort Ross on California in 1812 and the Relations with Spain." In *History of Russian America*. 2 Volumes. Edited by N. N. Bolkhovitinov. Moscow: Moscow Publishing House.

Khlebnikov, K. T.

- 1976 *Colonial Russian America : Kyrill T. Khlebnikov's Reports, 1817-1832.* Translated by B. Dmytryshyv and E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan. Portland: Oregon Historical Society.

Lantis, Margaret

- 1984 "Aleut." Pp. 161-84 in *Handbook of North American Indians*. Volume 5: *Arctic*. Edited by D. Damas. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Ogden, Adele

- 1975 *The California Sea Otter Trade, 1784 - 1848.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pierce, Richard A.,

- 1978 *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in America, 1794-1837: with Materials Concerning the Life and Works of the Monk German, and Ethnographic Notes by the Hieromonk Gedeon.* Edited by R. A. Pierce. Kingston, Ontario: Limestone.

- 1984 "Introduction." Pp. vi-xvii in *Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District*. Volume 27. Edited by R. A. Pierce. Kingston, Ontario: Limestone.

- 1990 *Russian America : A Biographical Dictionary.* Kingston, Ontario: Limestone.

Pierce, Richard A., editor

- 1978 *The Russian Orthodox Religious Mission in America, 1794-1837: with Materials Concerning the Life and Works of the Monk German, and Ethnographic Notes by the Hieromonk Gedeon.* Kingston, Ontario: Limestone.

Señan, José

- 1962 *The Letters of José Señan, O.F.M., Mission San Buenaventura, 1796-1823.* Ventura: The Ventura County Historical Society.

Tikhmenev, Petr Aleksandrovich

1978 *A History of the Russian-American Company*. Translated by R. A. Pierce and A. S. Donnelly. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Veniaminov, Ivan Evieevich Popov

1984 *Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District*. Volume 27. Translated by L. T. Black and R. H. Geoghegan. Kingston, Ontario: Limestone.