

MISPLACED HISTORY: A CONFRONTATION NEAR CHIGNIK BAY, ALASKA, JUNE–JULY 1782

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ABSTRACT

A mid-nineteenth-century manuscript by A. S. Polonskii reports a hostile encounter between a Russian/Fox Aleut party and a party of Katmai Sugpiat in 1782. The published literature has questioned neither that the incident occurred up near Cook Inlet, or at least somewhere near Katmai village, nor that the people involved were natives of Katmai. A careful reading of Polonskii's description, however, suggests that the encounter took place farther to the southwest, in the vicinity of Chignik Bay, and, while some of the "Koniags" involved may well have been from Katmai, it appears that others were from Kodiak Island.

INTRODUCTION

The earliest reported direct encounter between a Russian party and people who may have been Katmai Sugpiat¹ occurred in 1782. The source of this information is an undated manuscript by A. S. Polonskii that recounts the voyages of Russian fur traders in the Pacific from 1743 to 1800. According to Andreev (1948:27), it was compiled in the 1850s and 1860s, while its author was in government service in Okhotsk, Yakutsk, and Irkutsk.

Polonskii's work is problematic for several reasons, succinctly summarized by Lydia Black (1984:10–12) in her book on Atka ethnohistory. They all come down to one basic difficulty: while scholars have assumed that the author based his work on Siberian archival documents that have since been lost, Polonskii did not cite his sources. This makes it difficult to distinguish which parts of his narrative are based on primary documents, which parts are drawn from derivative works, and which are simply his own interpretations of the materials he had at hand. Andreev found that, in instances in which he was able to check Polonskii's work against original sources, the author proved reliable. Black, however, pointed out that in his own day Polonskii was accused of deliberately inserting passages blackening the Russians' image into the published version of what he claimed to be an original

document. As did Andreev before her, Black urged caution in using any material from Polonskii that had not been verified in other sources and called for publication of the manuscript in full, together with a critical analysis (Andreev 1948:27–28; Black 1984:10–12).

Black based her initial assessment on contradictions she found when comparing primary sources or early summaries of primary sources with more recent works that drew some of their information from Polonskii. Subsequently, she obtained copies of the manuscript itself, completed a draft translation, and began the onerous task of critical analysis and annotation before putting the project aside. In her preliminary annotations to the draft translation, Black pointed out many discrepancies between Polonskii and earlier sources in the details of various voyages, as well as instances in which Polonskii omitted details readily available in other sources and instances in which he added new details from sources he did not identify. Both in the annotations and in my own discussions with her concerning the reliability of the manuscript,² however, Black repeatedly emphasized one point: Polonskii did not have a good grasp of Alaska geography. This led to confusion and outright errors in some of his voyage narratives, particularly in cases in which he added what he believed to be the

mid-nineteenth-century equivalents of obscure or obsolete place names.

If the Polonskii manuscript is so problematic, why discuss its description of an early encounter between Russians and Katmai Natives that cannot be verified in other known sources? The simple answer is: because others have already cited it, sometimes uncritically (Black 1999:38–39; Bolgurtsev 1998:152; Grinev 2009:405, 430; Grinev and Makarova 1997:106; Liapunova 1987:76–77; Partnow 1993:108, 2001:43, 65). Now that brief summaries of the encounter have appeared in the published literature, any study of Katmai ethnohistory would be incomplete without some assessment of it. More importantly, however, it is discussed here, as it was in others' publications, because many details in the description ring true ethnographically. The encounter could well have unfolded as described.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CONFRONTATION

Polonskii's description may be summarized as follows³ (words in parentheses are my interpolations):

On 29 May (8 June)⁴, 1782, the Russians Dmitrii Polutov and Dmitrii Pankov left Unimak Island in four *baidaras* (large, open skin boats) carrying an unspecified number of men,⁵ accompanied by a party of (Fox Islands) Aleuts in two hundred *baidarkas* (kayaks).⁶ They intended to settle work parties beyond Unga, near Aliaska (Alaska Peninsula) and Semidi and Sutkhum (Sutwik) Islands, where there were many sea otters. The Aleuts were to hunt, while the Russians were to guard them against Aliaska Koniags ("Aliaskinskie koniagi"), the Aleuts' ancient enemies. At the same time, the Russians hoped to make the acquaintance of the Koniags, "known only through rumor,"⁷ in order to establish trade with them and hunt sea otters in their territory.

Beyond Unga, on Aliaska, they found a suitable place to settle a work party in "Koliugida Bay" (here Polonskii inserted "Kenaiskaia," the Russian name for Cook Inlet). Fish were plentiful in the bay, and the Aleuts said that there were sea otters in the area. Twenty-three men were left to put up a food supply against the party's return and to build winter quarters so that an Aleut work party could be left there for the winter if the sea otter hunting proved to be good.

The main party left the bay on 18 (28) June. The Aleuts got ahead of the Russians and, approaching "Sanikliuk Island," they noticed a Koniag party from "Ka'ma settle-

ment on Aliaska" that had landed there. The Aleuts notified the main party and took cover behind a point or cape. Polutov and Pankov approached the landing place, but remained a good distance from shore. Through an interpreter they assured the Koniags that they had not come in war but only wanted to hunt sea otters at Sutkhum. The Koniags responded that they were not dangerous, either. The Russians then sent the interpreter and three Aleuts ashore with gifts of beads, and when that party returned, asked permission to come ashore to trade and to be given a hostage for the duration of the trading.⁸ The Koniags consented, gave the Russians a hostage, and demanded hostages in return. As soon as the Koniag hostage was received, however, the Aleuts rushed ashore and the Russians could neither restrain nor protect them. The Koniags seized a *toyon* (headman, 'chief') from Akun Island, and the remainder of the Aleuts retreated.

Attempts to ransom the *toyon* failed. The Koniags painted their faces, began to dance to rattles and drums, and slashed the face and arms of the bound *toyon*. They also continued to shoot at the Russian party with their bows. While the *promyshlennye*⁹ deliberated over what to do, a gunshot was accidentally fired from Pankov's *baidara*, and others began to fire as well, wounding and killing some Koniags. In the confusion that followed, the *promyshlennye* tried to rescue the Akun *toyon* but were repulsed. The battle continued until evening.

The *promyshlennye* spent the night on the water. The Koniags carried their own *baidaras* to a hill about forty *sazhens*¹⁰ (ca. 85 m) from shore and secured themselves there. Their small *baidaras* (*baidarkas*?) they carried to the top of a mountain, no less than a *verst* (ca. 1 km) from its foot, where their families were. There were nine large *baidaras*, (each?) holding twenty-five or more people; of those who had arrived in them, half were women and children. Up to thirty men had come in single-hatch and two-hatch *baidarkas*.

The next day, 19 (29) June, the Russian party went ashore and approached the hill. There the Koniags put up a defense, but, on being subjected to gunfire, they killed the captive *toyon* with a spear thrust and retreated toward the mountain. The women and children on the mountain rolled large rocks down on the pursuers, who had to give up the chase. The Russian party regrouped and again demanded hostages. When they were refused, they opened fire and continued shooting until a *toyon* from the Koniag side gave two young boys as hostages. The Russians gave gifts in exchange, but soon learned that they had been de-

ceived—women who had been Koniag captives but had managed to flee to the Russians during the battle revealed that the boys were not the *toyon*'s sons, but his slaves.

On 21 June (1 July), Polutov and a party of twenty men went to the mountain to make peace and to trade, while Pankov and ten men remained in reserve. The Koniags scoffed at Polutov's demand that they become Russian subjects and give real hostages, citing their own prowess in warfare and the Russians' reputation for betrayal. In particular, they mentioned *promyshlennye* who had been on Kodiak a year earlier and had killed a number of innocent people.¹¹ Firing commenced, three Russians were wounded, and Polutov and Pankov withdrew, posting guards on three sides of the mountain.

The following day, Polutov again went to the Koniags to demand hostages. The "Kat'ma toyon" agreed to give a daughter, but the others not only refused to give hostages but would not let the Kat'ma *toyon* do so either. An arrow was discharged at Polutov. Although the Koniag leaders beat the person who had discharged it and tried to convince the others not to start hostilities, they had no effect. Arrows flew until the Russians responded with gunfire. When negotiations recommenced, a *toyon*, his brother, and another kinsman each gave a child as hostage, while the "distant Koniags" still refused. The *toyon*, not trusting the Russians, kept his distance as he delivered a speech stressing several points. Here I quote from Polonskii's text:

(1) the hostage was given to ensure harmony and peace; (2) in the spring they go to Sutkhum, Semida, and farther along Aliaska toward Unimok to hunt sea otters, seals, and sea lions, while here, on Sanikliuk Island, they annually hunt birds for parkas; when in the course of such travels they met Unga, Unimok and Morzhovskie Aleuts who were coming there for the same purpose, it was considered a feat of daring to kill the foreign islander in a stealthy manner, but they are now renouncing such daring; (3) in the winter he will hunt silver foxes and sea otters, for which the Russians come, on Kodiak, where he has a father and four brothers, and in the spring of 1783 he will come to the harbor¹² to trade for them [the furs] and will bring *iasak* [tribute payment in furs]; and (4) his hostage is to be fed so that he does not starve (Polonskii n.d.:81 verso; my translation).

Once the Koniags had given hostages, the Russian party removed its guards and the Koniags were able to get some water. After they had put in a supply of water, however, they again became uncooperative. When Pankov

came to trade on 23 June (3 July), they said they had nothing to offer and, after bartering one sea otter, began to shoot arrows and roll rocks down upon the *promyshlennye*, killing one and wounding another. Thereafter, the Russian party laid siege to the mountain until 18 (28) July. During that time the Russians periodically went to the mountain and managed to barter some sea otters. The Koniags kept the Russians from their stronghold, but lost many to wounds and starvation; their bodies were found on both sides of the cliff.

The Russians finally gave up. They left the site on 19 (29) July and rejoined the work party in Koliugida Bay the next day. Polutov stayed in Koliugida Bay for the winter before returning to the harbor (on Unimak?) with his party (Polonskii n.d.:79 verso–82).

DISCUSSION

Prior researchers have not questioned that the reported encounter occurred either somewhere near Cook Inlet or at least as far north as the vicinity of Katmai village. Neither have they questioned that the people involved were natives of Katmai. A careful reading of Polonskii's description, however, suggests other possibilities. Specifically, the encounter appears to have taken place a considerable distance to the southwest of Katmai, in the vicinity of Chignik Bay, and, while some of the "Koniags" involved may well have been from Katmai, it appears that others in the group were from Kodiak Island.

Let us examine first the arguments for placing the encounter near Chignik Bay. The Russian party, intending to hunt on Sutkhum (Sutwik) Island and the Semidi Islands, left a work party at "Koliugida" Bay, where fish were plentiful, to put up food supplies and build a camp for the winter. Polonskii's description states only that the bay was "beyond Unga," and does not tell us how long it took the party to get there from Unimak, but if it was to be used as a base camp for hunting in the vicinity of Sutwik and the Semidis, it is reasonable to think that the bay was on the Alaska Peninsula opposite those islands. That would place it somewhere in the vicinity of Chignik and Kujulik bays. The main party left Koliugida Bay on 18 June (28 June), and in considerably less than a day reached "Sanikliuk" Island. As the Russians explained to the Koniag they encountered, their intent still was to hunt at Sutkhum. This reinforces the notion that they were still somewhere in the Sutwik vicinity, rather than far to the north.

Modern maps, and the most readily available Russian-era charts of the area, show a number of small islands lying near the Alaska Peninsula coast between the latitudes of the Semidi Islands and Sutwik Island, but none of them bears the name “Sanikliuk.” There is, however, one very early map that provides a clue to the island’s location. Published in Efimov’s (1964) atlas as Map 180, “Map of the Alaska Peninsula compiled by navigator Bocharov in November 1791,” its full title explains that it is based upon two different surveys by Bocharov, one along the south side of the peninsula completed in 1786 and the other along the north side in 1791. The map is not reproduced sharply enough to allow one to read the place names with confidence, but, in compensation, Efimov (1964:117) also provided transcriptions of all place names and other inscriptions that appear on it. Among them is Saniklug Island, which today is known as Chankliut (Figs. 1, 2).

Could Chankliut Island have been the site of the encounter? To answer that question one needs more detailed knowledge of the local topography than can be gleaned from the topographic maps at my disposal. The account refers both to a hill (*bugor*) about 85 m inland from the island’s coast and to a kilometer-high mountain (*gora*) nearby. Allowing for exaggeration, one would expect to find at least a knoll and a high hill at the site. If Chankliut lacks such features, it is worth considering other islands in the vicinity, particularly Nakchamik, which, on topographic maps, appears to be elevated at one end.¹³ The general notion that the encounter occurred somewhere in the vicinity of Sutwik and the Semidi Islands, rather than far to the north off Katmai village or even in Cook Inlet, is of greater interpretive significance than the precise location of the site.

Let us turn next to discussion of the identity of the “Koniags” involved in the encounter. In the context of the narrative, “Koniag” clearly refers to Sugpiaq speakers in general rather than to Kodiak Islanders in particular, and “Aliaskinskie koniagi” would appear to refer to Sugpiaq speakers from the Alaska Peninsula. That would be in keeping with the narrative’s initial identification of the Koniag party as being from “Kat’ma settlement on Aliaska,” and the interpretation that this really does refer to Katmai settlement on Alaska Peninsula. As the narrative progresses, however, there is reference not only to a “Kat’ma toyon,” but to a *toyon* whose home settlement is not named. The latter, in his speech to the Russians upon yielding up a hostage, mentioned not only that he planned to hunt on Kodiak during the winter, but that his father

and brothers were there. This suggests that some portion of the party the Russians encountered came from Kodiak Island rather than the mainland. Also suggestive that the Koniag party was drawn from multiple localities is the reference to a contingent of “distant Koniags” (*dal’nie koniagi*) who continued to hold out against negotiation with the Russians while the *toyon* with ties to Kodiak, and two of his kinsmen, offered hostages.

While these points are not conclusive evidence that the Koniag party came from places other than Katmai, neither do they allow us to dismiss such a possibility. It is quite conceivable that Sugpiaq speakers from several villages, including Katmai, annually converged on the same general area for seasonal subsistence harvest. That they were all massed at a single site on this occasion, rather than dispersed among separate camps, may have been more a response to the presence of a 200-*baidarka* contingent of their enemy, the Fox Islanders, than a reflection of their usual practice.

These issues of location and identity aside, there is much in the encounter as described by Polonskii that appears familiar in light of what we know of interactions between Russian fur hunters and the Native peoples of the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island just a few years later. From the Russian side, there is the practice of gaining a foothold in new territory by establishing a work party (*artel’*) at a site where it could feed itself and near which it could hunt fur bearers and by creating ties with the local Natives through trade. The Russians demanded Native hostages to assure peaceful relations and perceived any refusal to grant hostages or to trade as a sign that the Natives had evil intentions against them. From the Native side, there is a ready consent to *exchange* hostages and, when the Russians failed to reciprocate, suspicion of the foreigners’ intentions and retreat to a more defensible position.

As the encounter deteriorated into a siege, we see the Russians—stubborn, proud, likely fearful of attacks should they fail to establish relations—demanding that the Natives become Russian subjects, give hostages, and engage in trade, and the Natives—equally proud, their own fears likely heightened by the presence of their traditional Aleut enemies and the fact that their families were in danger—holding their ground even as thirst and hunger took their toll. We see an attempt to deceive the Russians by offering slaves as false hostages and then, that ruse exposed, an offer of real hostages, if only to buy time to replenish water supplies and thus delay full capitulation. We see that the authority of those the Russians perceived

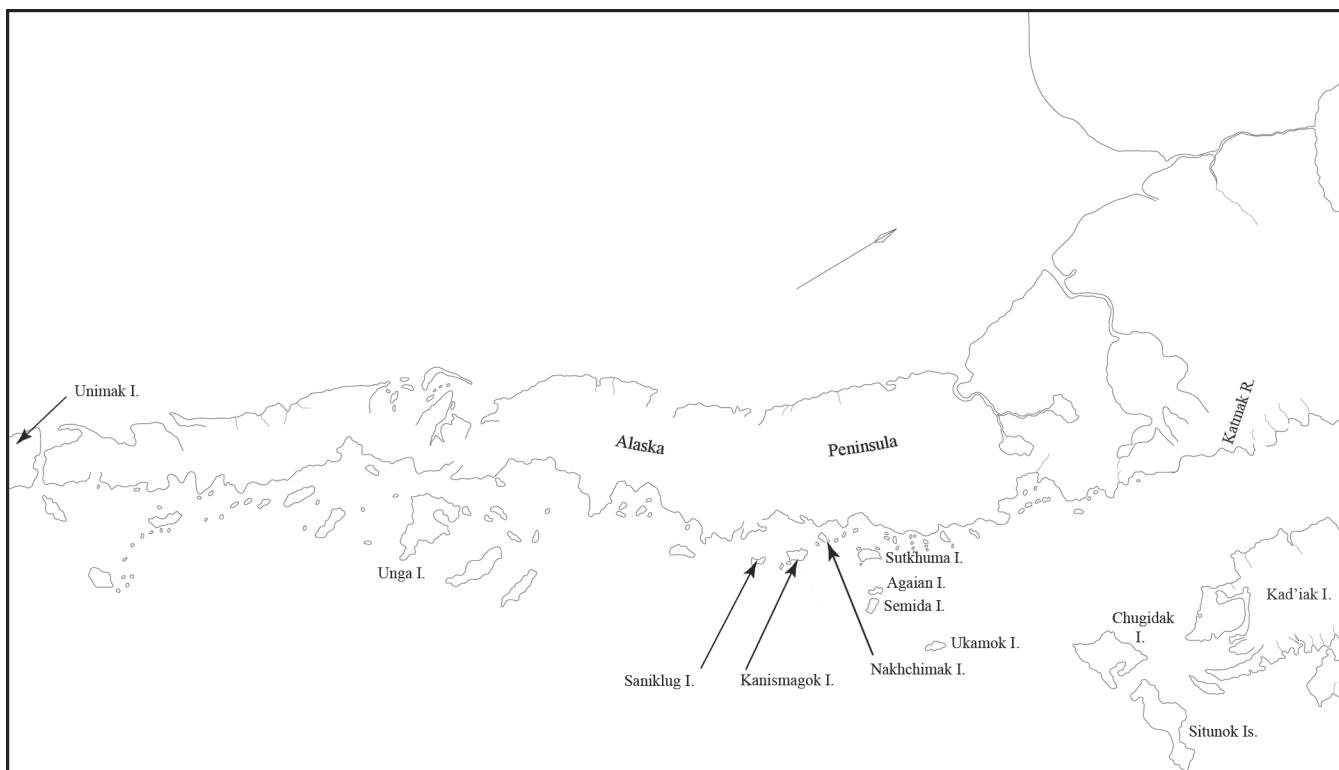


Figure 1. Map of Alaska Peninsula compiled by navigator Bocharov in November 1791. Redrawn by Dale Slaughter from Efimov (1964, map 180).

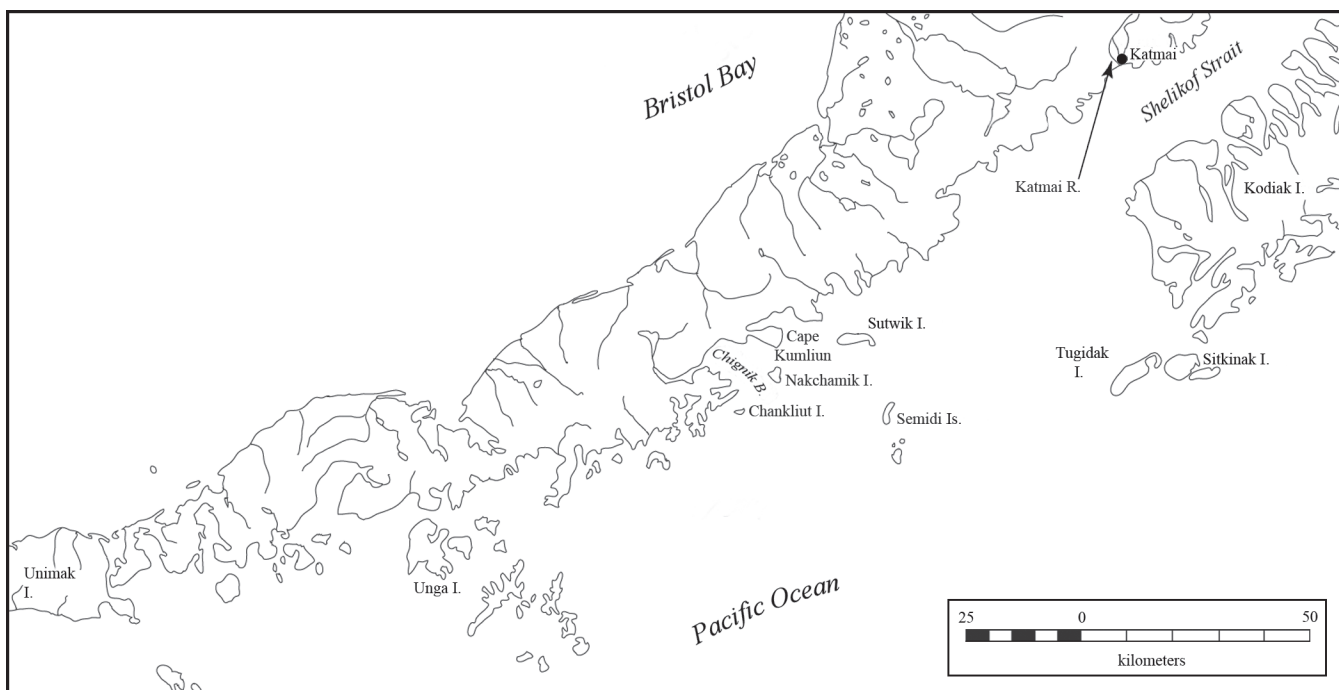


Figure 2. Modern map of Alaska Peninsula. Map by Dale Slaughter.

to be the Natives' leaders or *toyons* was limited, but that they were willing to make personal sacrifices for the good of the group. We also see limitations in the authority of leaders on the Russian side, especially with respect to the actions of the large Aleut party that accompanied them.

Polutov and Pankov did not bring to this encounter the heavy weaponry and determination to establish a permanent settlement that Shelikhov directed against Kodiak Island two years later, and the outcome was quite different. The siege, if it did indeed occur, was an unintended development and, once it had started, they had neither the influence to negotiate an amicable conclusion nor the strength to force capitulation. In the end they simply withdrew, having traded some sea otters under duress, but otherwise having achieved the opposite of their intention to establish friendly relations with the region's Natives. The "Koniags" of Katmai and elsewhere who survived the ordeal must surely have conceived some enmity toward the Russians, perhaps even comparable to the enmity they harbored toward their traditional foe (and now the Russians' apparent allies), the Fox Islanders.

Did the Russian/Aleut/Sugpiat encounter on "Sanikliuk" Island unfold as Polonskii described? Does Polonskii's account have any basis in fact whatsoever? Though the details are ethnographically and historically plausible, the evidence currently at hand provides no conclusive answers. If future researchers are to seek corroborating evidence in the form of oral tradition, place names, or even archaeological remains, it is important that they focus their attention on the proper geographic location. The internal evidence of Polonskii's narrative points not to Cook Inlet, not to some offshore island near Katmai, but to the vicinity of Chignik Bay and Chankliut Island.

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ENDNOTES

1. Sugpiaq/Sugpiat (singular/plural) is the ethnonym of the Native inhabitants of the Kodiak Archipelago, the eastern Alaska Peninsula, lower Cook Inlet, and

Prince William Sound. In the American published literature they are also known as Alutiiq/Alutiit and, less frequently, as the Pacific Gulf Yupik Eskimos.

2. Lydia Black, personal oral communications, March and April 2000.
3. Lydia Black provided me with three versions of Polonskii's text. The first is a microfilmed copy of the manuscript kept by the Russian Geographic Society, St. Petersburg. It is neatly written in ink (whether by Polonskii himself or by a copyist is not indicated) but has many editorial changes marked in what appears on the microfilm to be pencil. The author of the changes is not identified. The second version is a typed transcription of the unedited manuscript, provided by the late Rosa G. Liapunova for a joint Russian-English publication that she planned with Lydia Black. The third version is Black's own draft translation of the unedited manuscript, done in 1991. The summary presented here is based on Black's translation as verified against the microfilmed manuscript. Direct quotes are my own translation from the unedited manuscript.
4. Dates in the Russian manuscript are given according to the Old Style, or Julian, calendar, which in the eighteenth century was eleven days behind the New Style, or Gregorian, calendar that we follow today. In Russian America, however, it was only ten days behind because the international dateline had not yet been devised. I have inserted the New Style dates in parentheses throughout.
5. Though the description does not specifically say so, the *baidaras* were presumably manned by members of Polutov's and Pankov's vessel crews. The vessels themselves, Polutov's *Nikolai* and Pankov's *Evpl*, were left behind.
6. The narrative does not specify whether the *baidarkas* were single-hatched, double-hatched, or a mixture of the two types. Consequently, we can only guess that the Aleut contingent of the party numbered somewhere between 200 and 400 people.
7. Note, however, that one of the participants, Dmitrii Polutov, is the skipper who reportedly visited Kodiak Island aboard the vessel *Mikhail* in 1776 and made fleeting contact with one group of local inhabitants (Berkh 1974:53; Makarova 1975:70–71).
8. The taking or exchange of hostages to ensure peaceful relations was not only a longstanding custom in Russian-Native interactions in Siberia, but in the in-

teractions of Alaska Native peoples among themselves (Black 2004:6, 70).

9. *Promyshlennye*, commonly translated as “hunters,” seems here to refer to the *baidara* crews rather than to the Aleuts who accompanied the party in their *baidarkas*.
10. One Russian *sazhen* equals seven English feet (Dal’ 1882:129).
11. This appears to refer to Afanasii Ocheredin’s voyage of 1779–80 (Berkh 1974:57–58) or 1780–81 (Shelikhov 1981:41) to the Aiaktalik area.
12. Throughout this account, “the harbor” appears to refer to the place on Unimak Island where Polutov and Pankov had their base camps and anchored their vessels. Whether a “Koniag” would actually venture so deep into enemy territory to deliver furs, and so soon after his comrades had killed an Akun *toyon*, seems questionable.
13. On Bocharov’s map, Nakchamik Island is identified as Kanismagok, while the name “Nakhchimak” appears to be applied to present-day Cape Kumliun, shown as an island rather than a cape (Efimov 1964:117 and Map 180).

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