

Cultural and Ecological Impacts of the Fur Trade 1765-1840

LESSON PLAN — THE TLINGIT NATION: What if?

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The Russians arrived at Sitka about 1795 and concluded a treaty of sorts with the Kiks.ádi band of Tlingit. Relations soon soured after the people from Ft. St. Mikhailovskii killed chief Kuiu *k*wáan, his wife and children. They also kept a nephew of another chief in chains for a minor theft. Problems with women, furs and other issues also developed. In 1802 the Tlingit sought help from their allies and attacked. They quickly overran the fort and women and children were captured to be sold for slaves.

Expecting the Russians would return war chief K'alyáan rallied the clans to construct a fort. This was built of many layers of green sapling and logs and named Shís'gi Noow. It was placed near shallow water to prevent the Russians from moving the cannons on the sailing ship *Neva* in close.

The leader of the Russians, Alexander Baranov, bided his time and gathered his gunpowder, guns, sailors, workers, and Aleut and Alutiiq hunters. They landed in front of the fort and attacked on the first of October 1804. Baranov led the assault of Russians with 400 Aleut and Alutiiq natives. Ten were killed and 26 wounded. K'alyáan and an elite group of Tlingit warriors attacked the Russian's right flank and shot Baranov. Timely cannon fire from the *Neva* saved them, but the fort proved indestructible.

The Tlingit fought bravely and probably would have won if their gunpowder stocks had not blown up. The Russians were unable to take the fort but the Tlingit could not fight without powder so they finally retreated. They would not return to their home for many years.

The Tlingit remained powerful and concerned the Russians. They were paid a premium for their furs in an effort to reduce the likelihood of a new attack. Diseases weakened the tribe and Sitka remained safe for the Russians.

CLASS LESSON

Imagine the Alaska and British Columbia we might see today if Baranov had been killed and the Russians defeated. This probably would have ended Russian involvement on the coast. Without the Russians the movement of native sea otter hunters might not have happened and the coastal tribes, and particularly the Tlingit might have remained in control of the land and sea. The Klondike Gold Rush might have not happened.

Draw a new map for the Tlingit Nation. Think about and describe how it might have changed North America—and the border between the US and Canada? Would Russia be in control of the Aleutians?