

MGIMO • INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

# 1816–2026

## 210 Years of the Russian Flag on Kauai

History of relations between Russia and the Kingdom of Kauai — and  
lessons learned

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# Why this episode matters

A short episode that reveals the structure of early Pacific politics

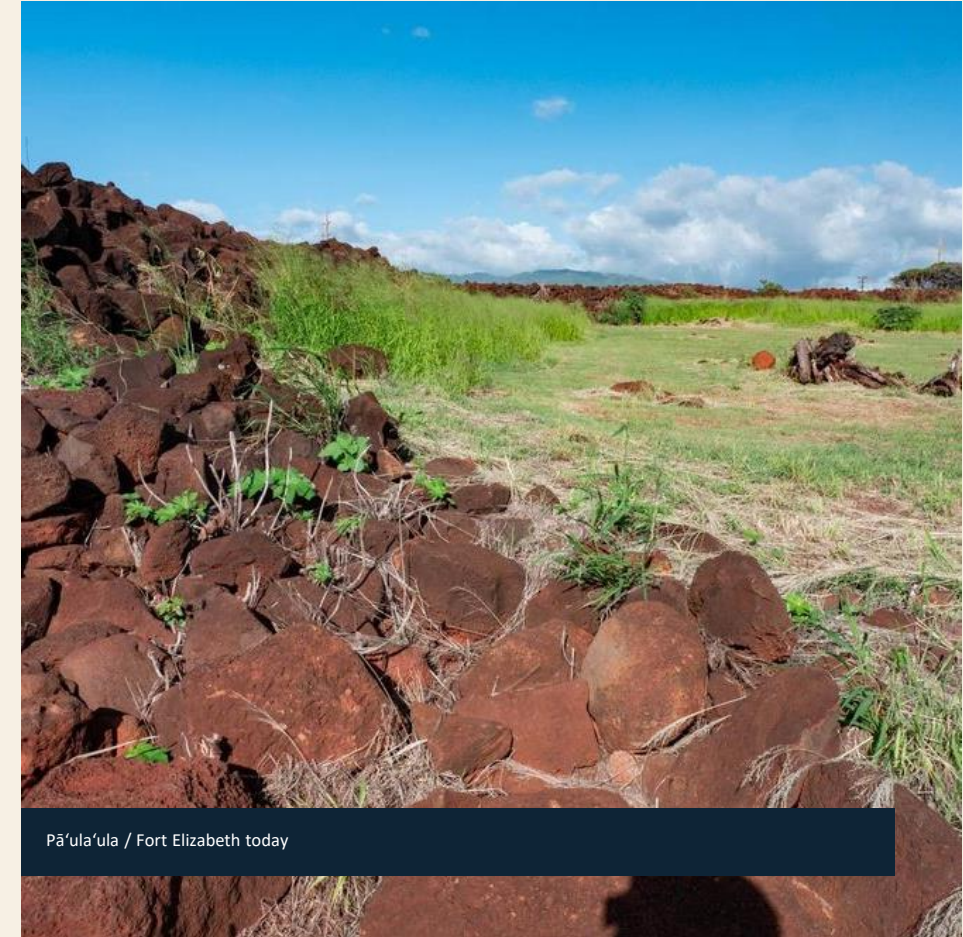
The Kauai episode allows us to read an early Pacific situation through several lenses: **Russian North Pacific interests, Hawaiian political consolidation, maritime logistics**, and the use of external partnerships by local rulers.

- not only a symbolic flag-raising, but a political and commercial arrangement

not a purely external initiative: Kaumualii acted strategically

not a long-term Russian position: Saint Petersburg chose caution

a useful window into mandate, local agency, maritime logistics and historical memory



Pā'ūla'ūla / Fort Elizabeth today

# Russian Pacific horizon by the early 19th century

Hawaii was viewed through the practical needs of Russian America and maritime connectivity

## RUSSIAN NORTH PACIFIC ROUTES

By the early nineteenth century, Russian activity in the North Pacific had already become commercially and logistically significant through Alaska, Kamchatka, and the Russian-American Company.

Russian settlements in Alaska **depended heavily on maritime supply routes** and **regularly faced shortages of food** and other essential goods.

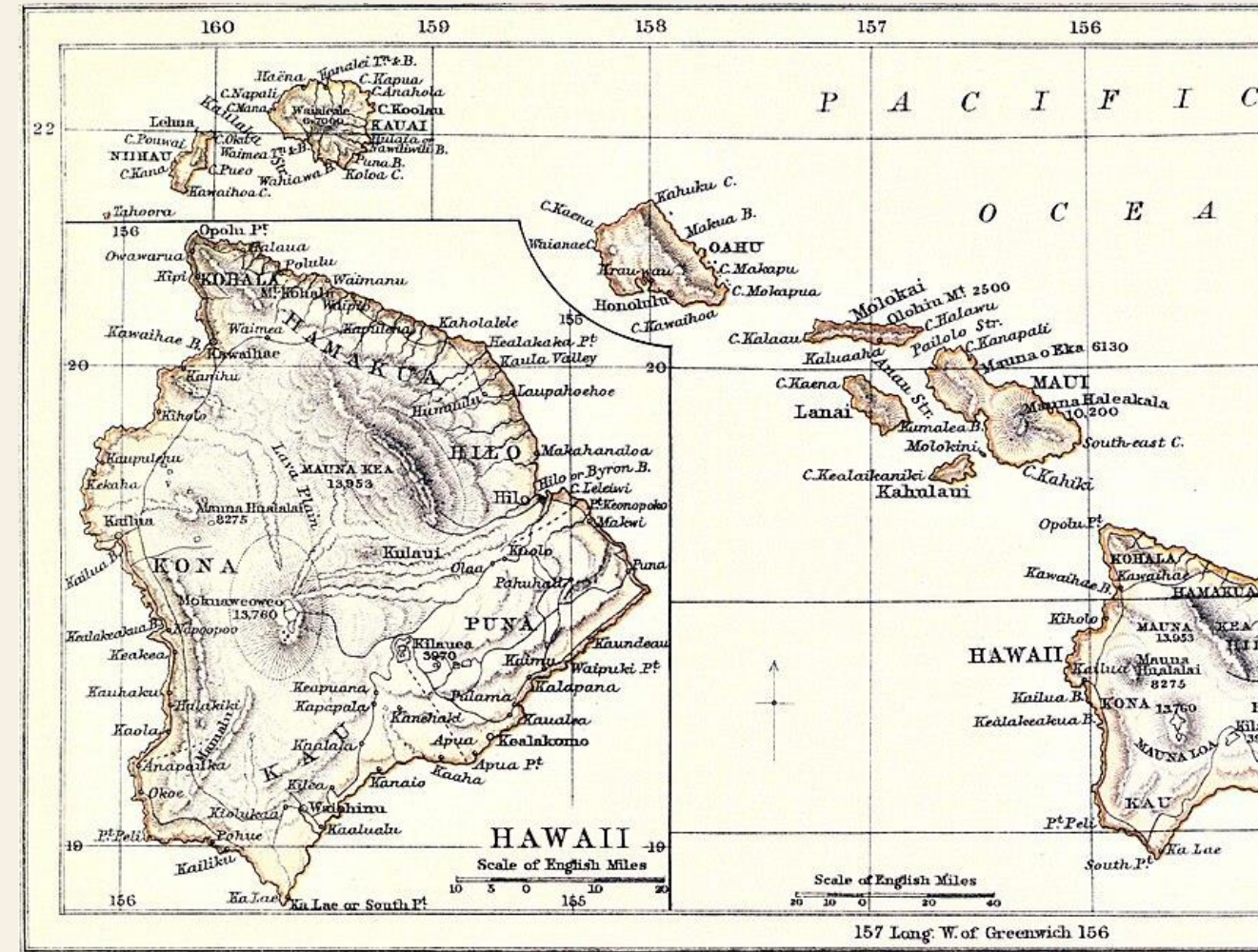
In this context, Hawaii became useful as a logistical and commercial point in the central Pacific.

The islands could provide:

- food supplies,
- ports for resupply,
- and maritime connectivity between Alaska, California, and Asian trade routes.

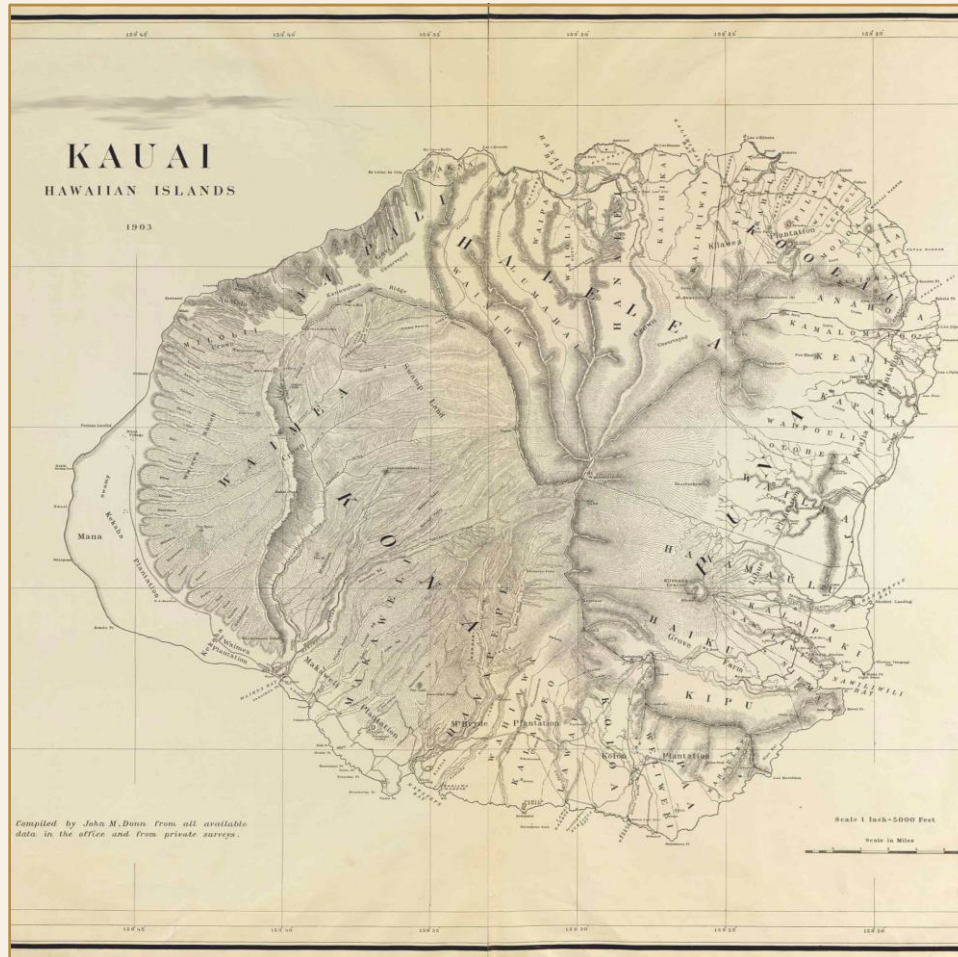
For the Russian-American Company, the Pacific was an **interconnected maritime system**. The RAC needed stable supplies, reliable maritime routes, and trade links for Russian settlements in Alaska and the wider North Pacific.

Kamchatka / Okhotsk → Alaska → Hawaii → Fort Ross / Asia



# Hawaiian political landscape: two kings, one archipelago

The Russian presence intersected with local Hawaiian politics



## KAMEHAMEHA I

Consolidated power over most of the Hawaiian archipelago and viewed foreign-backed support for Kauai as a threat to political unity.

## KAUMUALII

Ruler of Kauai and Niihau; formally accepted Kamehameha's supremacy in 1810, but sought to preserve room for political maneuver.

Internal balance of power

Analytical point: **Kauai was not a passive space. Kaumualii tried to use external contact to strengthen his position within the Hawaiian political order.**

# First Russian contacts with Hawaii

The Kauai episode did not emerge suddenly

Russian contact with Hawaii began well before the events of 1816–1817.

During the first Russian circumnavigation in 1804–1805, the ships **Nadezhda** and **Neva**, led by Ivan Kruzenshtern and Yuri Lisiansky, visited the Hawaiian Islands.

Yuri Lisiansky met Kaumualii, the ruler of Kauai, and Russian reports from the expedition described the economic and navigational potential of the islands.

**The archipelago attracted attention because of its favorable geographic position within Pacific trade and navigation routes.**

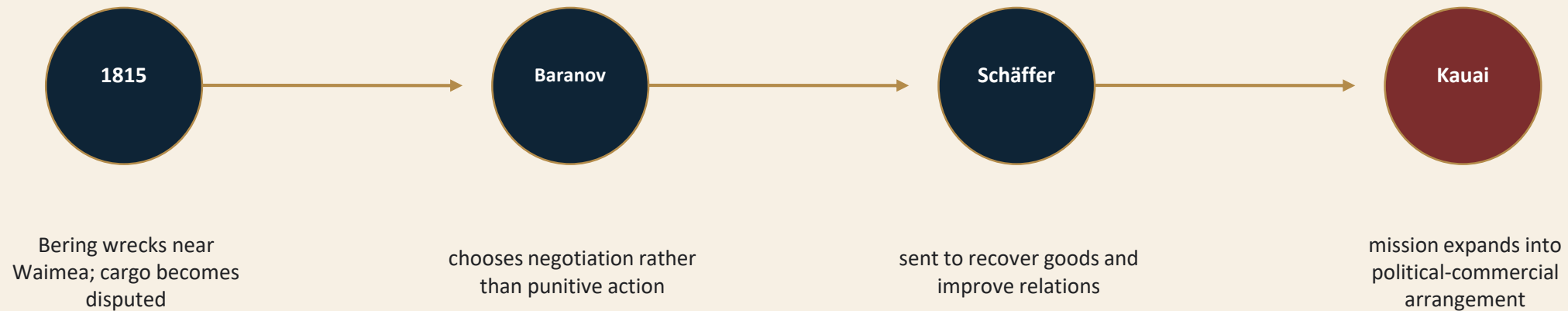
These early encounters created the background for later Russian interest in Hawaii and demonstrated that the **Kauai episode developed from earlier patterns of Russian Pacific exploration.**



The Neva sloop in St. Paul's Harbor on Kodiak Island. Engraving based on a drawing by Yuri Lisiansky

# From shipwreck to political initiative

The Bering incident transformed a commercial dispute into a wider political episode



Schäffer was not a formal ambassador. This distinction later became central: his practical mission developed into a much broader political initiative.

# 1816: the high point of Russian–Kauai rapprochement

Political symbolism developed faster than formal imperial authorization

Relations between Georg Anton Schäffer and Kaumualii developed rapidly during 1816.

**21 May 1816: Kaumualii signed a document requesting Russian patronage over Kauai and Niihau.**

**The Russian flag**, brought from the Russian-American Company ship *Otkrytie*, became a **visible symbol of this political relationship**.

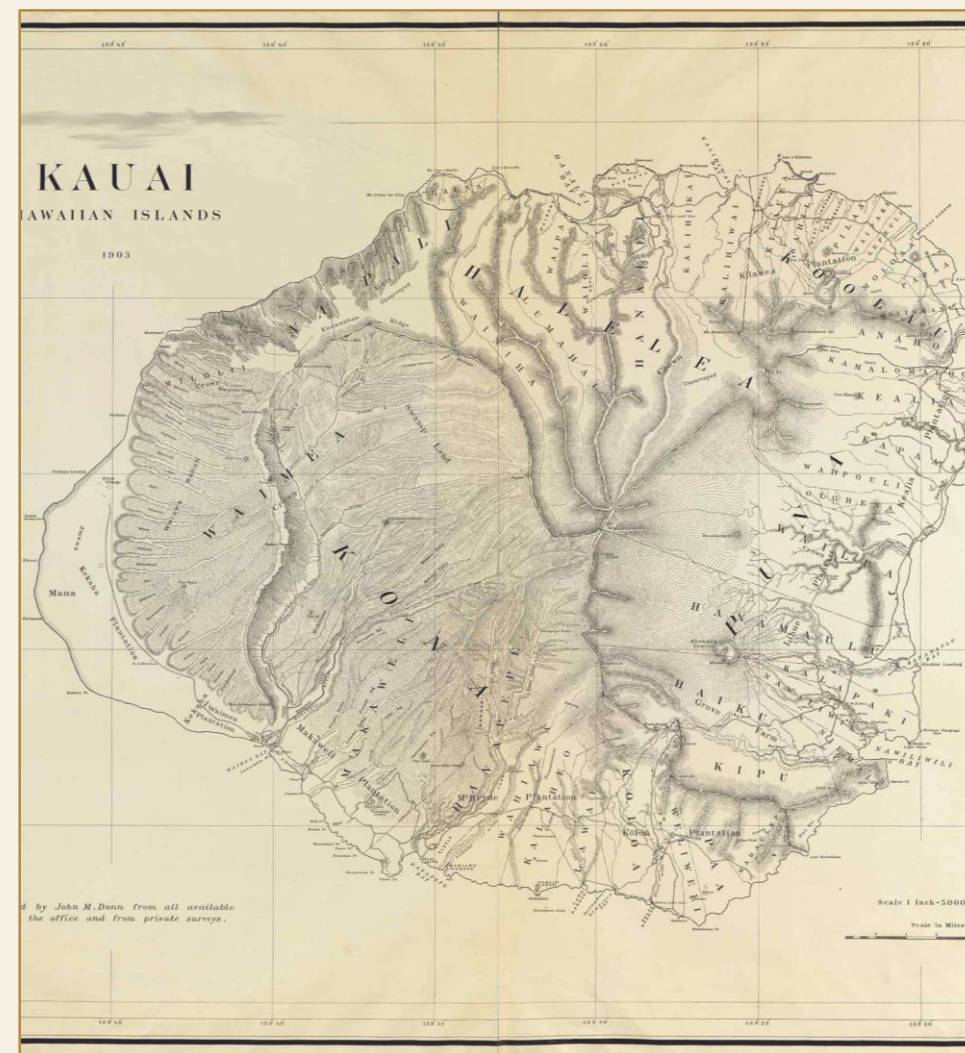
Three fortifications were laid: *Elisabeth, Alexander and Barclay*.

For Kaumualii, cooperation with Russia offered a possible counterbalance against the growing authority of Kamehameha I.

At the same time, the arrangement remained politically fragile. Schäffer's actions moved far beyond his original commercial mission, while Saint Petersburg had not formally approved the creation of a Russian protectorate in Hawaii.

July 1816: a secret agreement reportedly expanded the arrangement beyond trade.

Professional interpretation: the episode was politically significant, but its formal basis remained fragile.



# Pā‘ula‘ula / Fort Elizabeth: one site, several layers

Russian initiative and Hawaiian political history should be read together



Remaining stone walls at the historic site

## RUSSIAN LAYER

Linked to the Russian-American Company, Schäffer's initiative, and the naming of Fort Elizabeth in honor of Empress Elizabeth.

## HAWAIIAN LAYER

Built and used within Kaumualii's political context; the site later remained part of Hawaiian political and military life.

## MEMORY LAYER

The contemporary name Pā‘ula‘ula State Historic Site restores the Native Hawaiian dimension without requiring the Russian episode to be erased.

# Why Schäffer's initiative ended in 1817

The initiative could not survive without local, regional and imperial alignment

## Saint Petersburg

Caution: no desire to accept costly obligations or unnecessary confrontation.

## American actors

Commercial rivalry and concern about Russian activity.

## Kamehameha I

Opposed foreign-backed strengthening of Kauai.

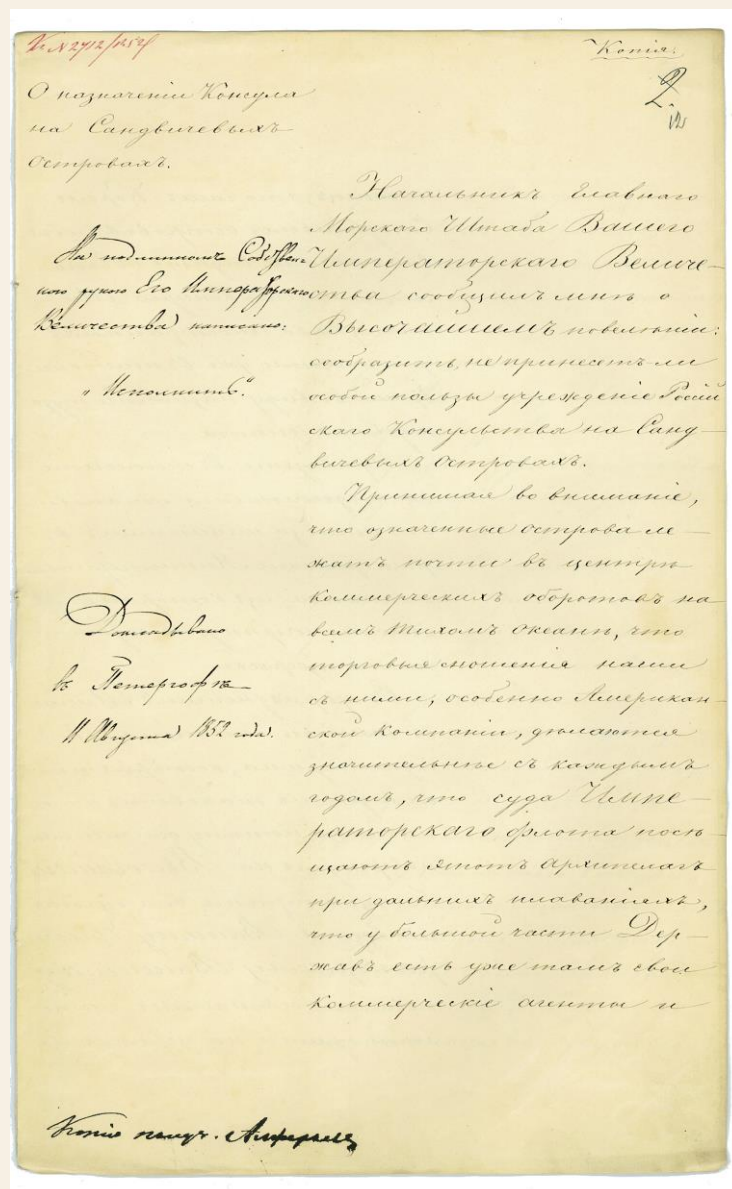
## Schäffer

Ambition exceeded his limited mandate.

1818: Nesselrode conveyed Alexander I's view — preserve friendly relations and trade, but do not accept Kauai and Niihau under Russian patronage.

# A later Russian–Hawaiian connection: settlers in the early 1900s

A different period, but another sign of Hawaii's place in Pacific history



- In the early 20th century, Hawaii became a bridge for emigrants from the Russian Far East.
- After the Russo-Japanese War, the Hawaiian authorities sought to diversify plantation labor.
- Recruitment from Russian Manchuria and the Far East began in 1909.
- By 1 July 1910, there were 1,799 Russian settlers in Hawaii.
- Promised conditions often differed from reality; complaints, unrest and Russian diplomatic concern followed.

Relevance: Hawaii repeatedly appeared in broader Pacific processes — migration, labor policy, and Russia–US–Asia contacts.

# Analytical lessons I

## Mandate, credibility and semi-state actors

01

### Semi-state actor problem

The Russian-American Company advanced Russian interests in the North Pacific, but it was not identical to the imperial government. Flexibility came with risks of overreach.

02

### Mandate and authority

Schäffer's original task was commercial and diplomatic. The Kauai arrangements moved beyond a clearly authorized mandate from Saint Petersburg.

03

### Credibility of commitments

Promises of protection can influence local calculations only when backed by recognized authority and resources. Ambiguity may create instability.

### Analytical takeaway

The Kauai episode shows how commercial initiative can acquire political meaning before the state has defined the limits of responsibility. For the study of international relations, the key issue is not only contact, but who is authorized to convert contact into commitment.

# Analytical lessons II

## Local agency and competitive pressure

04

### Kaumualii's agency

Kauai was not a passive space. Kaumualii used external contact to preserve room for maneuver in relation to Kamehameha.

05

### Internal Hawaiian balance

For Kamehameha, external support for Kauai was a challenge to the consolidation of the archipelago.

06

### Foreign pressure

American and British commercial actors had reasons to be concerned about Russian activity. Rumors and pressure accelerated the end of the initiative.

07

### Russian caution

Saint Petersburg preserved the possibility of friendly relations and trade, but avoided a costly political obligation in Hawaii.

Professional point: local rivalries can broaden a commercial initiative; external actors should assess that risk.

# Analytical lessons III

## Maritime logistics, restraint and historical memory

08

### Maritime geography

Hawaii mattered because of provisions, routes and ports. Its importance began with logistics and connectivity, not with direct military confrontation.

09

### Political restraint

Nesselrode's 1818 position reflected a cost–risk assessment: maintain friendly relations and trade, but avoid excessive obligations.

10

### Historical memory

Pā'ūla'ūla / Fort Elizabeth should be read as both Russian Pacific history and Hawaiian political history; neither layer should erase the other.

### Why this matters today

**Ports, supply chains, commercial access and historical memory** remain relevant for the study of international relations. The Kauai episode is therefore not only a historical narrative, but an early **example of how geography, commerce and authority can acquire political meaning.**

# Conclusion

A short episode with durable analytical value

**The Russian flag on Kauai marked a brief moment when Russian and Hawaiian interests converged in a changing Pacific environment.**

## **Mandate**

Who has the mandate to act on behalf of a state?

## **Agency**

How do smaller actors use external partnerships?

## **Meaning**

How do commercial projects acquire broader political meaning?

## **Memory**

How should historical memory balance Russian and Hawaiian perspectives?

**Thank you for your attention**

# Selected sources

For verification and further reading

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Visual sources: Library of Congress / W.D. Alexander map; Kauaʻi Historical Society map; Trip-Hawaii photo of Fort Elizabeth/Pāʻūlaʻūla.