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# The Forgotten People: The Relocation and Internment of Aleuts during World War II

RYAN MADDEN

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In the summer of 1942, the Japanese invasion of Attu and the bombing of American military forces at Dutch Harbor began the only military campaign of World War II fought on North American soil. The bloody battles that ensued, the ordeals of the soldiers, and the eventual American triumph in the Aleutian Islands have been well documented. Yet the tragic consequences of the American military presence for the aboriginal people of the islands has been largely ignored.

After the Japanese attacks, the government took steps to protect the island's inhabitants by ordering the evacuation of all Aleuts west of Unimak Island.<sup>1</sup> (See figure 1.) There was good reason to fear for the Aleutian Island residents, since forty-two Aleuts had been taken prisoner from Attu and would end up in Japanese concentration camps in Hokkaido. However, in trying to protect them, government officials took Aleuts from their ancestral homeland and denied their freedom, placing them in camps unfit for human habitation fifteen hundred miles from their home. Not only did this disastrous policy strip the Aleuts of their basic human rights; it caused the death of 10 percent of their number. More than 880 Aleuts taken were placed haphazardly in abandoned fish canneries on the mainland without proper medical

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treatment or adequate food. When the Aleuts finally returned home at the end of the war, their houses had been ransacked by American military personnel and their Russian Orthodox churches and icons and personal possessions had been looted.

The Aleuts had a population estimated at 16,000 at the time of European contact in 1741. They were supported by their skillful hunting and gathering of the fish, birds, mammals, kelp, and berries of the islands. From 1745 to 1799, the Aleutians were the focus of independently capitalized ventures to expand the Russian fur trade. All the able-bodied Aleut men were made to hunt for the Russians, and families of the hunters were often held captive through the hunts. The population was decimated by disease, and by 1825 there were fewer than fifteen hundred Aleuts remaining. The Russian-American Company, which took over the island in 1799, encouraged missionaries from the Russian Orthodox church to convert the natives. The missionaries were allowed to preach in Aleut as well as Russian.

Although the clergy had limited power in helping the Aleuts with the harsh demands of the company, they did emerge as the first Russian spokesmen for the Aleuts, which contributed to the Aleuts' continuing staunch adherence to the Russian Orthodox religion. The 1867 sale of Alaska to the United States was in part due to a decline in the sea otter population, caused by overhunting. But the United States saw potential in the fur seal of the Pribilof Islands, where Russians had already forcefully relocated some Aleut families. In 1870, a private company from San Francisco was franchised to harvest the seals using Aleut labor. In 1911, the United States government took over direct control. The Aleuts were pushed to abandon native customs and subsistence lifestyles, to speak English in place of Aleut or Russian, and to work for federal wages. Thus, when global events conspired to bring World War II to the islands, the Aleuts' fate rested in the decisions made for them by governmental agencies and officials.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time that the Aleuts were being relocated, Japanese-Americans three thousand miles to the south were being rounded up and interned in massive numbers (110,000) as war hysteria spread along the West Coast. Although the Japanese-Americans and the Aleuts shared many experiences—muddled management, bureaucratic neglect, wretched living conditions—the justifications for the two groups' relocation could not have been more different. Japanese-Americans were interned for their perceived danger to West Coast civilians and to United States

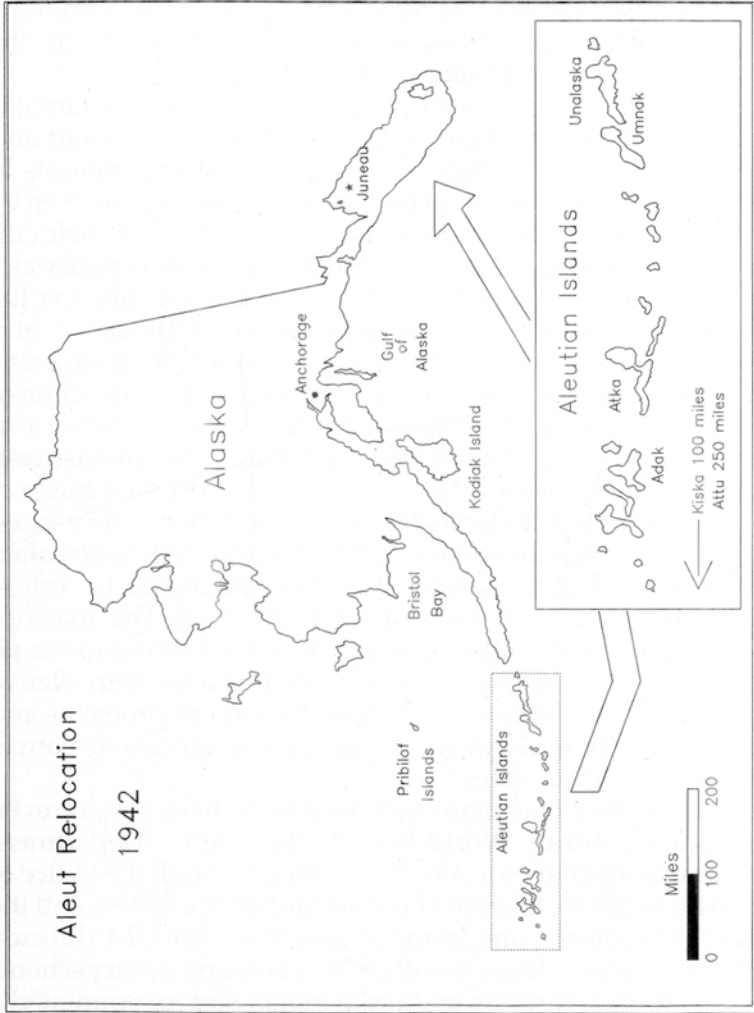


FIGURE 1.

security, and the Aleuts were relocated to protect them from the enemy. Still, camp conditions were actually worse among the Aleuts than among the Japanese-Americans.<sup>3</sup>

The Aleutian relocation and internment follows a familiar pattern in relations between the United States government and Native Americans. Repeatedly in American history, attempts to protect Native Americans from perceived dangers were driven by racism and ended in decimation of entire peoples and their culture. President Andrew Jackson justified his relocation policy as a way to protect Native Americans by isolating them, and yet the policy caused the deaths of as many as eight thousand and exposed them to abuse by uncaring and incompetent bureaucrats. The Dawes Act of 1887 was designed to prevent the destruction of Native Americans by abolishing tribalism and introducing private land ownership, thus integrating them into mainstream American society. Instead, Native Americans lost vast tracts of their land, "allocated" to land speculators and others who wished to use the natural resources on reservation land. Even the so-called Indian New Deal of the late 1930s, which attempted to restore tribalism, has been criticized for ineffectiveness. The injustice done to the Aleuts was not an isolated event but business as usual for the United States government in its relations with Native Americans. The government assumed the role of protector and guardian, but ultimately its Indian policy was guided by convenience for the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The bureaucracy that controlled the Aleuts' lives became even more muddled during World War II. The Interior Department assumed responsibility for Aleuts, working through the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA), the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the Division of Territories and Island Possessions. The OIA directed the education of the Aleuts; the office "established primary schools on the islands, and through its Alaska Indian Service appointed a teacher to the larger villages."<sup>5</sup> The FWS managed the highly profitable fur seal harvest on the Pribilof Islands. The Pribilof Aleuts were the source of labor for the harvest, and the FWS "assumed responsibility for their education and general welfare."<sup>6</sup> A Pribilof Aleut recalled, in July 1991, that, under the FWS, "we were slaves to the United States government . . . Every bit of our life was dictated . . . whether you're going to leave the island or not, even to get married, you had to get permission from the federal government."<sup>7</sup> Lastly, the Division of Territories coordinated federal war agencies on the Aleuts' relocation.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, government officials rejected the relocation of the Aleuts before the Japanese attacked the Aleutian Islands. On 13 March 1942, acting governor E. L. Bartlett called a conference to discuss evacuation plans for Alaska in the event of enemy attack. The minutes reflect "general agreement" that no attempt should be made to evacuate "Eskimos or other primitive natives from Alaska."<sup>9</sup>

The next governor, Ernest Gruening, also opposed the evacuation of the Aleutian Island villages, on the grounds that "bombardment of non-military areas is unlikely" and that the dislocation from a forced evacuation "would be a greater damage and involve greater risks to the ultimate welfare of the people than the probable risks if they remain" in their home villages. Office of Indian Affairs commissioner John Collier, the author of the Indian New Deal, thought that the military should "leave the Natives where they are, unless the Navy insists that they be moved out."<sup>10</sup> Collier's memorandum appears consistent with his goal of keeping Indian societies on their land, but in no way were the Aleuts given the "status, responsibility and power" the New Deal policy supposedly granted to Native Americans. The final decision over the Aleuts' fate would rest with the navy.<sup>11</sup>

Major General Simon B. Buckner, commanding general of the Alaska Defense Command, argued against relocating Aleut villages. Governor Gruening characterized Buckner's position in a 4 June 1942 letter to secretary of the interior Ickes: "He gave me his opinion that it would be a great mistake to evacuate these natives. He said, in effect, that evacuating them was pretty close to destroying them." According to Gruening, Buckner feared "that if they were removed they would be subject to the deterioration of contact with the white man, would likely fall prey to drink and disease, and that probably they would never get back to their historic habitat."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, Buckner's words proved to be prophetic and, ironically, after the Japanese attack, he would order the Aleuts relocated.

Out of consideration for the Aleuts involved, Gruening recommended that no evacuation be conducted without soliciting the views of the affected people.<sup>13</sup> The actions of the Japanese in June, however, precluded this well-intentioned plan, as secretary of the interior Harold Ickes noted in response to Gruening: "[R]ecent events have changed the situation. Attu is now occupied by the enemy, and the Navy is in the process of evacuating the natives of Atka and the Pribilof Islands."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, despite all of the officials' reservations, the navy proceeded to evacuate Aleuts. In retrospect, war hysteria and the Japanese occupation of Attu make the decision to relocate Aleuts understandable. Even though officials understood the probable effects of the policy on the Aleuts, the navy's decision took priority in wartime. Tragically, plans for safe and adequate relocation facilities had not been made, even though officials had recognized for months prior to the bombing of Dutch Harbor and the conquest of Attu the possibility of hostilities. American intelligence had broken the Japanese code and knew of the plans to attack the Aleutians.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the responsible officials had failed to locate or prepare facilities that could be used quickly and safely in the event of an attack, and the Aleut people paid the price for this lack of planning.

In its 1982 report, *Personal Justice Denied*, the United States Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment found "no persuasive showing that evacuation of the Aleuts was motivated by racism or that it was undertaken for any reason but their safety."<sup>16</sup> Flore Lekanof and Alice Petrevilli, a Pribilof Aleut and an Atkan Aleut, respectively, who were interviewed in the summer of 1991, disagreed. While they both acknowledged that safety played a major role in the Aleut evacuation, they both claimed that the relocation cleared their homes for military purposes. Lekanof believed that the Pribilof Aleuts were moved for their own protection, and he thought "General Buckner was sincere in his mind," but, he added, "the other reason was to use the facilities available for military purposes."<sup>17</sup> Petrevilli revealed that, despite an order to raze her village on Atka to leave nothing for the Japanese to use, three houses were spared. "Those three houses had indoor plumbing, running water, hot water; those three houses they didn't burn," she said.<sup>18</sup> She also pointed out that initially the military was going to leave the more than eighty Atkans on the island and move only the OIA teachers, after burning most of the buildings. Only after the teachers wired General Buckner did the Aleut evacuation occur.<sup>19</sup> In the opinion of Petrevilli, the military's willingness to leave them on an island with only three usable houses for over eighty people revealed that the safety of Aleuts was not a high priority.<sup>20</sup>

After the evacuation of the islands, the Aleuts from the Pribilofs and Atka were crammed into one ship for the voyage to undetermined sites. The Aleuts' hardships began on the voyage of the *Delarof* across the Bering Sea and into the Gulf of Alaska. Fredrika

Martin, the wife of a FWS employee, recalled in a 1965 letter that a doctor aboard the ship "had no personal interest" in any of the Aleuts and "could not be coaxed into the disagreeable crowded hold." The healthy and the sick traveled together in restricted quarters, and Martin was convinced this caused the death of a newborn child from bronchial pneumonia. The doctor, however, did attend "the midnight or after funeral of the poor little mite, such a tiny weighted parcel being let down into the deep waters of the Gulf of Alaska against a shoreline of dramatic peaks and blazing sunset sky."<sup>21</sup>

The child was the infant daughter of Innokenty Kochutin and Haretina R. Kochutin of St. Paul. At the age of three days, the infant Kochutin became the first casualty of the Aleuts' dislocation. The nightmare did not end on the *Delarof* for Haretina Kochutin. She later lost another infant child in the camps for the St. Paul Aleuts at Funter Bay.<sup>22</sup> Alice Petrevilli's testimony reinforces Fredricka Martin's letter. Petrevilli recalled that some Aleuts were taken ill aboard the boat and that "sometimes there was not enough food, and no matter how you tried to keep clean, it was just impossible when there were so many people. We had, I think, one bathroom for everybody; there was a lot of sick people and babies."<sup>23</sup>

When the *Delarof* anchored in Dutch Harbor on the island of Unalaska to await sailing instructions, the bulk of the Aleuts' hospital and medical supplies were transferred from the boat, without replacement, to the military hospital at Dutch Harbor. The resulting shortage later contributed to the life-threatening conditions at the internment camps. While the ship sat in harbor, officials evacuated an Aleut village from Unalaska. Captain Hobart L. Copeland, an army officer, recalled that "all natives, or persons as much as one-eighth native blood were compelled to go . . . Only such portable baggage as the people could carry was permitted."<sup>24</sup>

In Copeland's description, all of the civilians evacuated from Unalaska were Aleuts. The white residents of the community, including Charles Hope, whose Aleut wife was evacuated, remained for the duration of the hostilities. Race appears to be the only justification for allowing whites to remain, since the danger of another Japanese attack was present for both natives and nonnatives.<sup>25</sup> Policy shifted from evacuation of all inhabitants, whites included, to evacuation of only Aleuts, even at the cost of separating husbands and wives. The change in policy appears to have been due to the presence of the Siems-Drake Company on Unalaska Island. The company was on the island for defense



construction, and its employees were not evacuated.<sup>26</sup>

These facts raise the question, If the military danger was great enough to evacuate Aleut civilians, why was the danger not great enough to evacuate the white civilians working for Siems-Drake? Three possible answers come to mind: First, the company's defense construction was so vital that the military was willing to risk civilians in a dangerous area; second, the momentum of evacuating Aleuts from other islands led to racially biased orders from military commanders; third, the military thought they could manage the war effort on the island better with the Aleuts out of the way. The answer may be a combination of all three. But one thing is certain: The orders led to the removal and placement of 111 Unalaskans in an abandoned fish cannery at Burnett Inlet on Annettee Island in southeastern Alaska.<sup>27</sup>

As the evacuation proceeded, OIA and FWS officials made a frantic effort to determine where the Aleuts could be relocated for an indefinite term. They decided to keep the Aleuts in Alaska, and assistant Indian affairs commissioner William Zimmerman suggested that the Aleuts "should be housed eventually so that each village keeps its individuality . . ." <sup>28</sup> He also mentioned that fish canneries abandoned after the fishing season would be the best locations for the refugees.<sup>29</sup>

Killisnoo became the internment camp for the eighty-three people from Atka. Located on a small island of the same name in southeastern Alaska, about three miles from the Tlingit village of Angoon,<sup>30</sup> Killisnoo was the location of a native village that had burned in 1928 and was never rebuilt. Because of the declining herring catch, the fish cannery at Killisnoo had been shut for ten years, occupied only by a caretaker prior to the Aleuts' arrival. V. R. Farrell, education director of the Alaska Indian Service, concluded in a memorandum to FWS superintendent Hirst that "approximately 75 to 80 people" could be accommodated at the Killisnoo location.<sup>31</sup> But Farrell's own report shows the sadly inadequate state of the facility. The sanitary facilities consisted of three outdoor pit toilets and one bathtub. The electrical wiring presented a fire hazard. It was doubtful if the dilapidated old generator "could be put back in working order."<sup>32</sup> The Atkans' relocation to this area in spite of Farrell's report reveals that convenience rather than concern for Aleut well-being guided the government's relocation policy.

The Atkan people were apprehensive and angry because they were not sure where they were going, Alice Petrevilli recalled.

Their arrival on "a beautiful morning" that was "warm and with the smell of wild roses" did not foretell the suffering of the coming years. For many, the arrival was a relief after the rough trip aboard the *Delarof*, but, when Petrevilli saw the camp, she came to the realization that it "was just a run-down old thing with dilapidated buildings."<sup>33</sup>

Funter Bay, the site of two other internment camps, is situated on the west coast of Admiralty Island, about sixty miles from Juneau. An abandoned cannery and a gold mine across a bay from the cannery were selected as camps for the Pribilofian Aleuts from St. Paul and St. George islands. Officials there recognized the gross inadequacy of the Funter Bay camps. The cannery's water supply came from about one mile above the camp. Water pressure in the deteriorated system was too weak for use in firefighting. Sanitary facilities were no better. There was no sewage disposal system, and the three outdoor toilets depended "on the action of the tide to remove the sewage." Juneau OIA representatives reported that the "toilets are entirely open, and a probable source of insect-borne contamination."<sup>34</sup>

Juneau officials knew that, across Funter Bay, on the gold mine side, there was danger in "the establishment of a large number of people in these facilities" and that such a population "would immediately create danger of water pollution."<sup>35</sup> Despite the problems with the sites, they were leased and adopted for use. Thus, officials hastily moved Aleuts into camps they fully knew to be hazardous. The officials simply did not take the time to prepare the sites properly, revealing their low esteem for the Aleut people and their fate. A hidden message in the reports appears to be that, although the camp conditions were abhorrent, they were good enough for the natives.

According to assistant Indian affairs commissioner Zimmerman, 881 Aleut citizens were relocated from their villages. Of these, fifty were evacuated to Seattle by the army and navy. The remainder, some 831 people, went to the internment camps at Funter Bay, Killisnoo, Ward Cove, and Burnett Inlet.<sup>36</sup>

Flore Lekanof remembered that "no one really knew until we arrived at Funter Bay that that's where we were going." When he arrived, he could see that

the federal government did not make preparations for us to move to a decent place. They used an old, dilapidated, broken down, unfinished cannery facility. Families were living in

horrible conditions . . . . There was one case I know, one old lady attempted to commit suicide. She just could not face this horrible thing. . . . She didn't know where she was going . . . . [T]he elderly were hurt; they didn't want to leave the island, they were forced.<sup>37</sup>

After two weeks as the official-in-charge of the Funter Bay camps, agent Lee C. McMillin of the FWS could clearly see the problems for the Aleuts in the camps. In an 11 July 1942 letter to his superior, superintendent Johnston, McMillin noted that "the sanitary engineer that was here said this water system can not under any conditions be made usable for winter and if these people are going to stay here then some other arrangements will have to be made and that should be quick."<sup>38</sup> The poor conditions in the unforgiving Alaskan winter would have deadly repercussions. The Aleuts had no practical means of escape from the harsh conditions of Funter Bay. They were virtual prisoners of the government. The only access was by boat; the camp was located on the beach and surrounded by impassable forest. If an Aleut could not receive permission to board a vessel for departure, he stayed.

Another important aspect of keeping the Pribilovians at Funter Bay was the annual fur seal harvest—a harvest that resulted in much-needed cash for the United States Treasury. FWS supervisors were determined to keep Pribilovians together in the event that the harvest could be conducted during the 1943 season.<sup>39</sup> On 2 January 1943, secretary of war Henry L. Stimson approved the return of a "sealing gang" to the Pribilof Islands.<sup>40</sup> A FWS employee recorded the poignant departure of the Pribilovian men: "As we drew away from the dock, a choir of the native voices began a farewell chant in Russian which was answered by those remaining on shore. Many of the women were crying their farewells . . . . [I]t was a sight not soon to be forgotten."<sup>41</sup>

One would think that, if these sealers could be sent back to the Pribilofs for the harvest, the threat of further Japanese attacks must have ceased. Yet the remaining, nonsealing Aleuts were left in the camps for another year or more. The Aleuts did not know the military danger was over. Some believed Stimson and other officials had put the Aleuts at risk for the sake of reaping fur seal profits. Flore Lekanof joined the harvest. He recalled how he and the other men viewed their return to the Pribilofs:

The reason given to us then was that seal oil does not gel in cold weather, so it was needed by the military. Well, you

know, some of us bought it, I suppose, and some of us didn't. I think the reason was the federal government was concerned about profits from the fur seals . . . . In '43 we took 125,000 seals. That was a big take. So taking us back early after two years, before the Aleutian chain people came back, was essential to look after the fur seal industry.<sup>42</sup>

Even the Aleuts who had escaped the camps by going to Juneau to find work were coerced into coming back. Lekanof noted that they were told by representatives of the federal government, "If you don't come back with us, you're going to lose your house at St. George or St. Paul."<sup>43</sup> Assistant FWS supervisor Hynes knew that the "value of this year's fur seal take from the Pribilofs would nearly equal the original purchase price of Alaska." He also knew of the awful irony that the people who had made it possible were "being herded into quarters unfit for pigs, denied adequate medical attention" and "even facilities to keep warm." Supervisor Hynes thought that the Aleuts were "prisoners of the Government, though theoretically possessing the status of citizenship."<sup>44</sup>

On 3 and 4 September 1943, while the sealing gang was in the Pribilofs reaping huge profits for the United States Treasury, John Hall, United States Public Health Service engineer, inspected the Funter Bay camps. Hall found that a "shortage of men prevents necessary work being done." The able-bodied men had been forced back to the islands, leaving behind three hundred women and children. Hall was amazed at the camp doctor's priorities. He could not understand why the physician would go with 150 sealers and not "stay with the 300 women and children."<sup>45</sup>

Poor administration was "indicated by the failure to install any system of calling for help in emergencies." There was no two-way radio, and the Juneau hospitals required advance notice for Aleut patients. That meant a two-week delay while letters were exchanged. A chance encounter with a sympathetic fisherman was the primary way for Aleuts to get to decent medical care. Flore Lekanof recalled that his sister was infected with tuberculosis and pneumonia. A volunteer fisherman took her to Juneau, but it was too late; she died at the hospital in Juneau.<sup>46</sup>

Disease was rampant at the camps. Hall noted that "coughs are numerous" and that "this is an ideal set-up for the spread of tuberculosis but the results may not be evident for some time." Hall ended his report on the cannery side with an ironic note: "[O]nly 8 deaths have occurred which seems to be a good record. (Compare 20 among 184 people at Ward Cove.)"<sup>47</sup>

Alaska Fisheries division chief Ward T. Bower admitted "the need to use drastic measures if the natives are to remain another winter." Bower recognized the injustice of removing able-bodied men who had been responsible for the welfare of their families and promised that "nothing will be left undone to rectify the situation."<sup>48</sup> Despite Bower's promise, the FWS did not take immediate corrective action.

The attorney general of the territory of Alaska, Henry Roden, visited Funter Bay in mid-September 1943. Roden, appalled by camp conditions, reported to Governor Gruening:

I have no language at my command which can adequately describe what I saw; if I had I am confident you would not believe my statements. Just one instance: there is a large two story frame building which the Mining Company intended for a bunkhouse and which was practically completed. The upper floor was provided with uncompleted partitions for some eight or ten rooms. These rooms are about 8 X 10. In them, that is, in each of them are housed families composed of from six to ten persons; there is absolutely no privacy. Parents and children, both male and female, of all ages, are huddled together . . . . There are between 75 to 100 people . . . in this one building. There are no sanitary installations of any kind; in short, the situation is shocking.

Roden concluded, "I have seen some tough places in my days in Alaska, but nothing to equal the situation at Funter."<sup>49</sup>

Dr. N. Berneta Block wrote the most extensive report on Funter Bay conditions. Her report chronicles a visit from 2-6 October 1943. She went to the bay initially to see if she could help control an outbreak of measles. In her report, she noted the horrid health conditions but with a touch of ethnocentrism. "I expected to find a group of people interested in their own health and welfare, thrifty and adept in managing their own affairs. I am sorry to say I was a bit disappointed. I am sure that much effort has been expended in order to provide adequate quarters for these people but it goes without saying that there is still room for much improvement."<sup>50</sup> Block's condescending accusations of laziness are characteristic of the kind of paternalism directed against Native Americans for centuries, but she seemed sincerely to want to help the Aleuts. She had little understanding of what the Aleuts had already been through, however, and she could find "very little excuse" for the conditions. Despite her attitude, the report provides a valuable description of Aleut living conditions.

As we entered the first bunkhouse the odor of human excreta and waste was so pungent that I could hardly make the grade. After a time we did not notice it so much. The buildings were in total darkness except for a few candles here and there. The overcrowded housing conditions is really beyond description since a mother and as many as three or four children were found in several beds and two or three children in one bunk. Children were found naked and covered with excreta.<sup>51</sup>

She also noted that the water supply was "discolored, contaminated and unattractive" and that "facilities for boiling and the cooling of water" were not available. For Block, the situation was a paradox for which she laid blame not only on the Aleuts themselves but also on the public health institutions. She thought it was "strange that they could have reverted from a state of thrift and cleanliness on the islands to the present state of filth, despair, and complete lack of civic pride."<sup>52</sup>

Block's report did not go unnoticed. Assistant fisheries supervisor Hynes corroborated Block's report in a letter to his chief in Chicago, Ward T. Bower: "[T]here is more than a possibility that the death toll from tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza and other diseases will so decimate the ranks of the natives that few will survive to return to the islands." Hynes warned that "it is becoming more and more difficult to defend our position."

Scarcely a day passes that [some] well meaning person does not descend upon us with recrimination for our heartless methods. Censorship has kept the press off our necks thus far but this line of defense is weakening rapidly. A few days ago we were advised by one of the physicians who had inspected the camps and aided in emergency work there, that he was preparing a report to the Surgeon General of the United States and also to Secretary Ickes and had no intention of "pulling any punches." He warned that it was only a matter of time until some publication, such as *Life Magazine*, would get hold of the story and play it up, much to the disadvantage of the Service and the Department of the Interior as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

Hynes's report reveals a wealth of information about the workings of bureaucracy with regard to the Aleuts. He admitted that censorship covered up his own agency's incompetence. Humanitarian concern and a fear of exposure by the national media moved him to call for improvements to the camps. The camp conditions resulted in the deaths of twenty-five Aleuts at Funter Bay during

1943, mainly from influenza and pneumonia. For the small improvements that were made, Flore Lekanof credited the "territorial people" who came to inspect the facilities. "They built a few more cottage type things where people could move in."<sup>54</sup> But there seems little doubt that proper conditions in the camps would have saved lives.

The Aleut people of Atka were interned at the Killisnoo camp. Although contact with the Angoon community three miles away no doubt lessened the trauma of evacuation and relocation, the Atkans suffered physical illness and loss of life unnecessarily while interned at Killisnoo.<sup>55</sup> According to Alice Petrevilli, families of five were crammed into one bedroom, while the best house went to Oscar Peterson, the camp superintendent, and the next best house to the OIA teachers.<sup>56</sup> There was no running water, because "when people put in pipes they found out the water was really badly polluted . . . [T]hat's why we lost 20% of the people at Killisnoo, and out of seven babies born only two lived."<sup>57</sup>

The Ward Cove camp was near Ketchikan and housed the Aleut people of Nikolski, Akutan, and three small Unalaska Island villages. The conditions experienced by the Ward Cove Aleuts was distinct from the Aleuts at Funter Bay and Killisnoo. The majority of them had never been far from their isolated island homes. Although adept at survival in a rugged environment, they were unprepared for life near Ketchikan, a town with a population of roughly five thousand, mostly fishermen and lumberjacks. The Aleuts came from small villages that, for the most part, consisted of friends and family. In the words of Mark Petikoff, chief of the Akutan village, they became victims of "bootleggers and white exploiters," and they fell prey to epidemics of venereal disease and alcohol abuse.<sup>58</sup>

The death rate at Ward Cove was perhaps the highest among all the Aleut internment camps. An editorial in the local Ketchikan newspaper provided a vivid description of the plight of the Ward Cove Aleuts:

Then crawled the serpent . . . in the form of bootleggers and others with whiskey, demoralizing and spreading venereal diseases, and also aggravating incipient germs of tuberculosis so that 20 of their loved ones died, others being taken away, with more now stricken, and being classed as a menace and undesirable. It was their friendly spirit in greeting and welcoming all comers that betrayed them and turned their camp into mourning over the loss of loved ones. Too late it is now

to begin passing the buck as to the responsibility of their condition. What is needed is immediate emergency care. Moving the camp will not provide a cure.<sup>59</sup>

The camp was yet another failure for the Interior Department, the FWS, and the OIA.

The Aleut community of Unalaska was interned from July 1942 until April 1945 in an abandoned cannery facility located at Burnett Inlet, near Wrangell in southeastern Alaska. Philemon M. Tutiakoff, writing in 1980, summed up what most Aleuts in the camps felt: "The most galling and demeaning feature that many of us recall explicitly is that those in charge regarded us as incapable . . . of any form of decision-making. At no time throughout this entire process were we given the right to make choices of any kind."<sup>60</sup>

Difficult circumstances at Burnett Inlet caused a number of deaths, but conditions there were less life-threatening overall than at the other camps. The most likely explanation of the lower death rate was that the OIA provided, in timely fashion, the building materials required by the people to protect themselves from the ravages of Alaskan winters. Perhaps similar minimal support at the other camps could have preserved more lives. Still, Tutiakoff's words reveal the psychological and emotional damage done to people in the camp. Not being consulted about their own fate was personally degrading for all Aleuts.

The military situation compounded the irony of Aleut suffering. Military historian Stetson Conn concluded that, by 1943, "any danger to Alaska and the Western Hemisphere had long since disappeared."<sup>61</sup> However, the danger to Aleuts was to continue at the hands of the Americans. The Pribilof Aleuts remained in the southeastern camps until May 1944, and the villagers from the Aleutians remained until April to June 1945. Because of the high death rates and the unfavorable inspection reports, officials knew of the suffering in those camps and that the people should be repatriated as soon as possible. The military justification of isolating Aleuts for their "own protection" had vanished. But, with American soldiers using Aleut homes as barracks and with military transports busy on other assignments, the fate of the Aleuts was a low priority. In short, it became more convenient once the Aleuts had been relocated simply to leave them where they were rather than return them to their occupied homes.<sup>62</sup>

Unfortunately for the Aleuts who had been relocated, the



nightmare did not end with their long-awaited return to their home islands in 1944 and 1945. Documents from Aleuts and officials generally agree that the conditions the Aleuts found on returning to their native villages were deplorable. The Pribilof Log—kept by FWS employees—for 13 May 1944 described the conditions in Village Cove on St. Paul Island when the Aleuts returned:

The village was found in very poor shape—all dwellings, both native and employee, had been left dirty and littered; furnaces, radiators and pipes broken through freezing; no water system since tanks had been burned down; lights off in many buildings because of broken lines.

On St. Paul Island, all the Aleut homes had been occupied by military personnel.<sup>63</sup> In every village, conditions were similar to those on St. Paul. Homes and property were used and vandalized by United States military personnel, personal effects were stolen, community halls were vandalized, and churches were desecrated. The most painful aspect for the Aleuts was the destruction of their church icons, of great import to the Russian Orthodox faith.<sup>64</sup>

In an article entitled “The Aleuts Go Home” in *Yank*, the army weekly, Sergeant Ray Duncan voiced sentiments quite different from those expressed by the Aleuts. The preface to the article stated, “It’s hard to believe, but the natives of the Chain are eager to get back to their villages on the dismal tundra slopes that GI’s hate.” Duncan went on to call the Aleuts a “strange people” who cause anthropologists to wonder about their origins. His descriptions of the internment camps did not jibe with the reports of other officials:

The evacuated Aleuts have been living in southeastern Alaska near Juneau and Ketchikan and Sitka. Their quarters are abandoned CCC camps and Army barracks. This was a come down from their cozy island homes. But they’re in a much more pleasant part of Alaska by white man’s standards, the climate and cities are very much like the States. They were anxious to avoid Government help, to make their own living. The evacuated natives soon managed to be almost self-supporting. The Aleuts have never been bitter about their exile.<sup>65</sup>

In Duncan’s version of events, the Aleuts “understood the reasons” for their relocation; then he writes, as if in an aside, that the only thing that bothered them was to “leave behind the graves of

their people who have died during their stay on the mainland."<sup>66</sup>

Upon their return, the Aleuts' ranks were decimated; one in ten had not survived the internment, and many were still debilitated by various epidemics. Their priceless eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox icons, their churches, and their homes had been stolen or destroyed. Such was the result of the government's concern for their welfare. Although the reason for evacuating the Aleuts was valid, the poor conditions at the camps remain unjustified but appear to have been the result of ineffective and inattentive government administration.

The long-term effects on those who were relocated and interned cannot be measured, but, for some Aleuts, the relocation was to change their lives forever. In Flore Lekanof's view, "along with the bad some good comes along." Some Aleuts like Lekanof saw the outside world for the first time, pursued an education, and encouraged other Aleuts to do the same. Surviving Aleuts seem determined not to fall prey to paternalistic control by the government again. Their sense of empowerment has led them to do "the things the federal government used to do for us."<sup>67</sup>

Alice Petrevilli recalled that, during the relocation and internment, she "realized we were different." Suddenly she thought of herself as "a native" who could be told where "she could and could not go." She started questioning her identity—"who you are, what you are, and you start to think, 'gee maybe I am subnormal, subintelligent.'" But then she came to embrace and appreciate her culture and worked to preserve it from further damage. After the internment and relocation, the Aleut culture was in danger of disappearing, because so many of the elders, who had held their societies' traditions, folklore, and language, had been lost. Alice Petrevilli, Flore Lekanof, and other Aleuts are living links to that past and are trying to keep it alive. But there is frustration for many Aleuts over the lack of recognition of their World War II ordeal. Petrevilli recalled that "when I told my daughter, she didn't believe me, because it's not in the history books." In Petrevilli's mind, this painful episode needs to be told, so that

it will be in history so that they wouldn't ever do this kind of thing to anybody again. Even today we have a hard time trying to control our life. Because the government sometimes thinks we don't know what we are doing. But we know. I think we know what's best for us. More so than anybody else. Our history has value.<sup>68</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. In Dorothy M. Jones's *Aleuts in Transition: A Comparison of Two Villages* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976), she states that "it is interesting to note that all the salmon-packing plants in the Aleutian area lay east of that line, and at no time in its history has the salmon industry shown any reluctance to exercise its considerable influence" (p. 30).

2. For more information on Aleut religion, culture, and history, see Alice B. Kehoe, *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 459–67. Dorothy Knee Jones, *A Century of Servitude: Pribilof Aleuts under U.S. Rule* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980) deals primarily with the United States government's use of Aleut labor, in slave-like conditions, for the harvest of fur seals on the Pribilof Islands. Jones includes a chapter on the Aleuts' relocation and internment. Also see Jones, *Aleuts in Transition* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976) for a treatment of how the Aleut people adjusted to contact with Europeans and then later with Americans. Ethel Oliver Ross, *Journal of an Aleutian Year* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) is a journal of the year 1946–47, in which Ross taught school on Atka Island as an employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The journal is an interesting source for the conditions the Aleuts faced after the war. The most comprehensive account of the Aleuts' relocation and internment to this point is by the United States Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1983). While the bulk of the report concerns the relocation and internment of Japanese-Americans, pages 317–59 cover the events surrounding the Aleuts' plight. The commission found that Aleuts should be compensated for their losses and the trauma associated with the relocation and internment. In 1990, the Aleuts received \$12,000 each. The commissioners' report relied on the eight-volume set of documents collected by John C. Kirtland and David F. Coffin, Jr., *The Relocation and Internment of the Aleuts during World War II* (Anchorage, AK: Aleutian-Pribilof Islands Association, Inc., 1981). Kirtland and Coffin also served as council for the Aleuts in their congressional hearings.

3. For more on the relocation and internment of Japanese-Americans, see Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps: North America* (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 1981). Peter Irons, *Justice at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) examines the Japanese-Americans' wartime legal battles. Morton Grodzins, *Americans Betrayed: Politics and the Japanese Evacuation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947) looks at the role of regional public opinion in the forced relocation. Thomas James, *Exile Within: The Schooling of Japanese Americans 1942–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987) deals with the education of the

relocated children in the camps and is an interesting comparison to the lack of education for Aleuts during wartime. Stephen Fox, *The Unknown Internment* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) focuses on oral history accounts of Italian-Americans who were relocated and interned during World War II.

4. Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 195. For an examination of the paternalistic nature of the relations of the federal government with Native Americans for the past two hundred years, see Francis Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). Prucha called Collier's vision for Indians "humane," "yet, despite the high-sounding rhetoric of Indian self-determination, it was a paternalistic program for the Indians, who were expected to accept it willy-nilly" (p. 318). Carlos Embry's *America's Concentration Camps* (New York: David McKay, 1956) points out that the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, known as the "Indian New Deal," "was regarded by many as a means of bringing about a revolutionary change in the methods of handling Indian affairs, the facts are that it has made very little change and that it conforms perfectly to the historic pattern that has been developed since the time the Continental Congress was convened" (p. 195).

5. *Personal Justice Denied*, 323.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Flore Lekanoff, interview conducted by the author, Anchorage, Alaska, 18 July 1991, p. 3. A recording and transcript are held at the American Philosophical Library, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The American Philosophical Society provided funding for the interviews conducted by the author.

8. *Personal Justice Denied*, 323. The territorial government worked with the military offices that evacuated the Aleuts.

9. Minutes, acting governor of Alaska E. L. Bartlett's evacuation planning meeting, 13 March 1942, p. 1. In *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 1. The governor of the territory was appointed by the secretary of the interior. Many of the documents referred to in this essay can be found in an eight-volume collection of documents relating to the relocation and internment of Aleuts, Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*.

10. Memorandum, OIA commissioner John Collier to secretary of the interior Harold L. Ickes, 10 April 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 4.

11. Prucha, *The Great Father*, p. 317, outlines Collier's guiding principles for his administration of Indian affairs, one of which was that "the Indian societies, whether ancient, regenerated, or created anew, must be given status, responsibility and power."

12. Letter, Alaska territorial governor Ernest Gruening to secretary of the interior Harold L. Ickes, 4 June 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 7.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Letter, secretary of the interior Harold L. Ickes to Alaska territorial governor Ernest Gruening, 22 June 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 8. Admiral Yamamoto ordered the attack on the Aleutians to draw the United States fleet northward in hopes of diverting them from Midway.

15. George L. MacGarrigle, *Aleutian Island: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1992), 5.

16. *Personal Justice Denied*, 10.

17. Lekanof interview, p. 6.
18. Alice Petrevilli, interview conducted by the author, Anchorage, Alaska, 22 July 1991. A recording and transcript of the interview are housed at the American Philosophical Society Library, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
19. Ibid.
20. *Personal Justice Denied*, 328, and Petrevilli interview, p. 8. Both sources point out that nineteen Atkan Aleuts who were still at their fish camp were left behind for days, 12–15 June, until two navy planes picked them up.
21. Fredericka Martin, "Personal Narrative," March 1965, in Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 25.
22. Deposition, Haretina R. Kochutin, 23 January 1978.
23. Petrevilli interview, p. 8. There were approximately 560 Aleuts aboard the *Delarof* on the trip to Dutch Harbor. In *Personal Justice Denied* (p. 333), the committee found that the other villages evacuated later in June and early July were Nikolski on Umnak Island; Makushin, Biorka, Chernofski, and Kashega on Unalaska Island; and Akutan on Akutan Island. These village made up the other approximately three hundred evacuated Aleuts.
24. Letter, Captain Hobart W. Copeland to commanding general, Seattle, Washington, 17 January 1944. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 22.
25. In *Personal Justice Denied*, the committee's report notes that Fred Geeslin, a former OIA official, recalled in a 1982 telephone conversation that "the agency's responsibility and authority extended to persons of one-eighth Native American blood" (p. 334).
26. *Personal Justice Denied*, 334.
27. Ibid., 335.
28. Telegram, assistant Indian affairs commissioner William Zimmerman to Indian affairs commissioner Hagerty, 16 June 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 75.
29. Ibid.
30. Tlingit are Athabascan-related people of the northern Northwest Coast.
31. V. R. Farrell, "Memorandum for General Superintendent Claude M. Hirst," 13 May 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 141.
32. Ibid.
33. Petrevilli interview, p. 10.
34. Geeslin, Peters, and Dale, "Memorandum to General Superintendent Claude M. Hirst," 23 June 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 144.
35. Ibid.
36. Memorandum, Indian affairs assistant commissioner William Zimmerman to secretary of the interior Ickes, 31 August 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 2, p. 140.
37. Lekanof interview, pp. 8–9.
38. Lee C. McMillin to superintendent Edward C. Johnston, Sealing Division, FWS, 11 July 1942. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 8.
39. In 1942, there was no fur seal harvest, due to the relocation of the Aleuts.
40. Secretary of War Stimson to Secretary of the Interior Ickes, 2 January 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 4, p. 12.
41. Pribilof Log, 6 May 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 1, p. 40.

42. Lekanof interview, p. 12.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
44. Letter, Hynes to Bower, 28 October 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, pp. 40–42. The purchase price of Alaska in 1867 was \$7,200,000.
45. John Hall, U. S. Public Health Service, "Inspection Report of Funter Bay," 3–4 September 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 21.
46. Lekanof interview, p. 17. Lekanof stated that the only care in the camp was one nurse "to take care of small things . . . . As I recall now 26 graves exist in Funter Bay today. These are people who died in Funter Bay, who died there. And on top of that there are others . . . who went to Juneau and died and were buried there. We lost a lot of people, 10 to 12% passed away. That's above normal."
47. Hall, "Inspection Report."
48. Ward T. Power to Frank Hynes, FWS, Seattle, 16 September 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 27.
49. Henry Roden to governor Ernest Gruening, 20 September 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 28.
50. Report by N. Berneta Block, 2–6 October 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, pp. 34–37.
51. *Ibid.*, 36.
52. *Ibid.*, 37.
53. Letter, Hynes to Bower, 28 October 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 40.
54. Lekanof interview, p. 14.
55. Petrevilli interview, p. 12. Petrevilli remembered that the "first year we were in Killisnoo the people of Angoon really helped us. Every day in the summertime from their fishing village they'd drop by, they heard we were there, they'd stop by and drop fish."
56. Petrevilli interview, p. 11.
57. *Ibid.* According to Petrevilli, eighty-seven Aleuts were at Killisnoo. "Twelve people died there, along with five newborns, for a total of 17 people in a three year period" (p. 11).
58. Mark Petikoff, letter to the editor, in the *Alaska Fishing News*, 21 May 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 87.
59. Editorial, *Alaska Fishing News*, 24 May 1943. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 3, p. 89.
60. Statement by Philemon M. Tutiakoff before the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, Los Angeles, California, 15–16 November 1980. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 1, p. 59.
61. Stetson Conn, *The United States Army in World War II, the Western Hemisphere: Guarding the United States and Its Outposts* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1964), 224. For more on the Aleutian campaign, Brian Garfield, *The Thousand Mile War: World War II in Alaska and the Aleutians* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) gives a thorough survey of the events. Howard Handleman, *Bridge to Victory* (New York: Random, 1943) details the situation in the Aleutians during the campaign.
62. In *Personal Justice Denied*, the committee could not explain the delay of the Aleuts' return: "[D]espite an apparent agreement" between the navy, the army, and the OIA to "move ahead, and funds to finance rehabilitation, no Aleutian islanders were returned to the islands . . . at any time during 1944" (p. 355).

63. Memorandum for the commanding general, Alaska Defense Command, "Restoration of government property in homes and living quarters," by general superintendent Edward C. Johnston, 21 February 1944. In Kirtland and Coffin, *Relocation and Internment*, vol. 4, p. 90.

64. Petrevilli interview, pp. 17–18. Petrevilli recalled that her village on Atka was completely destroyed, and those that returned stayed in Army barracks. In her case, "they stole everything," including the only picture of her mother, who had died when she was five. However, a Bible she had received for her twelfth birthday was returned by a former soldier from Cleveland.

65. Ray Duncan, "The Aleuts Go Home," *Yank*, 18 May 1945.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Lekanof interview, p. 21.

68. Petrevilli interview, pp. 18–19.