The Aleuts' Last Stand

by Eric Scigliano

"It was pretty sad, pretty sad.... They just dumped us there. The children were all sick. My sister nearly died of double pneumonia. My father and grandfather did die. A lot of the old ones died."

—Alexander Petrof, Aleuts native from St. Patrick Island, now living in Seattle

"One of the physicians... pointed out that the value of this year's fur seal take from the Pribilofs would nearly equal the original purchase price of Alaska, yet the people who had made it possible are being herded into quarters unfit for pigs; denied adequate medical attention; lack... a healthful diet and even facilities to keep warm, and are virtually prisoners of the Government, though theoretically possessing the status of citizenship."

—Frank W. Hynes of the Juneau office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in a letter to his superiors on conditions at the Funter Bay relocation camp, October 28, 1943

THEY'RE CALLED the "other internees"—the forgotten victims of a forgotten war, driven from their homes in 1942 by the only invasion of the United States mainland since 1815. Few Americans born since World War II even know of its most bizarre and enigmatic campaign, the year-long battle for the Aleutian Islands. Fewer still, and even few of the servicemen who slogged through near-perpetual storms to drive the Japanese from the islands, know of the peculiar wartime ordeal of the Aleuts—the sufferings their own government's protection brought them, sufferings which continue to haunt the survivors.

At first, military censorship, abetted by public indifference, kept those sufferings secret. Thirty years' worth of official and popular histories of the Aleutian war make not a mention of how it affected the Aleuts themselves.

That the Aleuts were neglected in the turmoil of a world war that killed millions is not surprising. They had been a forgotten race all their history, isolated in one of the world's most desolate corners, already reduced nearly to the point of extinction by their first contacts with European civilization.

Nor do the events that befell them in World War II, as they were reported at that time, seem so remarkable: when the Japanese launched a withering attack on the Aleutians, the United States military evacuated about 900 Aleuts (nearly half the total population) and their U.S. government overseers from the anticipated combat zone to the Alaskan mainland.

There the Aleuts disappeared from the world's view. The news reports told nothing of the primitive, makeshift camps where they were left to rot for two to three years—long past the complete expulsion of the Japanese invaders—as refugees in their own nation, ravaged by disease and the terror of confinement in a strange place. After the war, some of the survivors were never permitted to return to their island homes. Those who did found them devastated by the very troops sent to protect them.

Even then, the Aleuts' proverbial diffidence worked to keep their story secret. Survivors guarded their wartime memories, even from their own children.

Now the cover is being lifted. Recently organized in a native corporation and association, the Aleuts are speaking in a new-found and vehement collective voice. They joined last year with a much larger and very different group of internees, the Japanese-American *nisei* and *nikei*, to petition Congress for a commission to investigate their wartime sufferings—and, perhaps, to award restitution.

Only Japanese-Americans spoke at the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians' first hearings, on the East Coast and in California. A few Aleut voices were heard at its hearings in Seattle last week; more will be heard at hearings in Alaska this week and next.

But most Aleut survivors of the camps will *not* speak at the hearings, out of fear of antagonizing the government or longing to put old memories to rest. "Many of the old ones are afraid their English isn't good enough," says a frustrated Aleut leader. "It was bad. Why bring it up now?" says one elderly Aleut woman.

Many who are wary of the hearings were willing to speak privately. This is their story—one of the most grim and unusual sagas in American history.

The Aleutians seem an unlikely site for a pivotal campaign of a world war—or for much of any human activity. The islands stretch in a thin intermittent arc over 1,000 miles from the western tip of the Alaska Peninsula. Over 200 miles to the north in the Bering Sea sit two even more isolated outposts—the tiny Pribilof Islands of St. George and St. Paul, now home each summer to two million migrating fur seals, and year-round to 689 hardy Aleuts.

The seas surrounding the treeless Aleutians are among the world's roughest. The islands' weather, alternating between blistering winds and impenetrable fog, is even more notorious. In a verse penned by a soldier, in 1943, St. Peter tells a G.I. who has died after a year in the Aleutians, "Come in and take a harp, you've had your share of hell."

Bleak and dreary as the islands could seem to outsiders, especially in winter, they also show as surpassingly beautiful in many photographs. In spring and summer they are blanketed with lush grass and wildflowers, though until recently not a single tree grew on any of them. There is an epic grandeur to their tortuous, jagged terrain—vast jigsaw patterns of coves, fjords, and rock outcrops, capped by steaming volcanoes and snow-covered peaks.

For about 8,000 years, this serviceman's hell has been home to a people closely adapted to its rigors: the *Unangax* or, in the corrupted modern argot, "Aleuts." Though related in physiognomy to the mainland Eskimos, the Aleuts charted their own history and culture in near-complete isolation. They wrought a better living than might be expected from the surrounding waters, which teemed with fish, whales, seals, birds, and sea otters. Early explorers marveled at their skill and fearlessness at sea; a solo hunter in a small *baidar* (a sealskin boat somewhat like a kayak) would often dart to the middle of a teeming school of whales, any one of which could easily sink him, armed with a single harpoon.

On land, the Aleuts evolved what anthropologists like to call "a highly developed material culture," turning the meager materials of the islands—bone, fur, seal gut, grasses, and feathers—to countless ingenious uses in implements, ceremonial arts, and finely decorated clothing. They mummified their dead, and treated them with reverence. Their supreme works were baskets woven of grasses split to the fineness of thread, as precise and delicate as old lace. The Aleuts' patience at intricate work was legendary; when a Russian trader asked one to weave him "the best basket she could," she spent six years at the task.

Aleut villages were governed by strict law, firm authority vested in the chiefs and elders, and a communal tradition of sharing all food. No such order prevailed between villages, however. When Russian explorers arrived in 1741, the Aleuts were in a near-continual cycle of internecine war, fought over claims of revenge and family honor. Raiding parties would take their rivals as slaves, after massacring the children and old people, and sometimes mutilating their victims.

A century later, in 1840, the Russian bishop Veniaminov found the Aleuts submissive and peaceable ("even when intoxicated"), but still utterly lacking in impulses of greed, thievery, or deceit. He wondered at "their present lack of vengefulness" after their warring past.

The answer may have lain in the Aleuts' hopeless resignation to catastrophe. By 1781, Russian massacres and imported diseases had reduced the original Aleut population of about 20,000 to less than 2,000 (by Russian surveys). In the 1780s the Russians forcibly transplanted about 200 to the uninhabited Pribilofs to harvest fur seals (then Alaska's most lucrative resource, and a main inducement to the U.S. purchase of the territory in 1867).

After some suicidal resistance at the start, the Aleuts enthusiastically embraced the Orthodox church. Priests established rudimentary schools and sought Aleuts for the priesthood. They found the Aleuts to be willing students and noted their aptitude for music, mathematics, and chess. Even today the priests, often villagers who come to the vocation late in life, fill much of the leadership role of the traditional chiefs.

The Aleuts intermixed freely with the Russians and occasional European immigrants; now there is probably not a "pure" Aleut left. Aleut emigres in Seattle have the typically Aleut build—short and powerful—but the features and skin of many seem almost purely Caucasian.

Almost all bear Russian surnames; only in the most recent generations are Christian names given their English spellings. And the old tongues are not yet effaced. Says Michael Stepetin, native of Unalaska and executive of the Native Alaskan Thirteenth Regional Corporation, "When I get mad, I think in Russian, curse in Aleut, and try to express myself in English."

On the Aleutian Islands, fishing continues as the mainstay. Recalls Stepetin, the son and grandson of Unalaska fishermen, "We made a good living before the war. There were only small fishing companies then—my father had his own boat. The herring were abundant right in the bay, and the salmon runs were always good. My dream before the war was to become a fisherman—if I had, maybe I'd be a millionaire now!" According to University of Alaska anthropologist Dorothy Jones, the deciding factor in each village's prosperity and vitality was (and still is) whether its people were able to work as independent fishermen, or had to take unrewarding cannery jobs in a fishing business dominated by outsiders.

On the Pribilofs, a different, and extraordinary, quasi-colonial system prevailed—a government trust-for-profit which is only now being shed. "We were the only slaves in this generation in the United States," says Alexander Petrof bitterly. "We worked for rations. I worked three months, killing seals, came home exhausted and covered with blood every day, and got $90 for all of it." Recalls another St. Paul native now living in Seattle, Paul Swetzof: "I got paid the 'boy's grade' for killing seals, $20 for a year's work. My father got $400 that year."

The seal herds, and every other aspect of Pribilof life, were strictly managed by the Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service, with a close watch on the bottom line. The seal harvest brought the Service a handsome profit each year, and it was the sole employer and source of outside goods. In addition to annual cash "bonuses" set at its discretion, the Service provided housing, fuel, canned food, and clothing. The provisions were less than luxurious. Older Aleuts recall waiting hungrily for "the next shipment to come in." The wife of a doctor stationed on St. Paul in the 1940s, Fredericka Martin, tried to survive on the daily Aleut diet and gave up after a day.

As "wards of the government," these nominal U.S. citizens were sheltered from the start from most of the privileges and burdens of citizenship. They could not vote in U.S. elections, own their homes, drink alcohol, or choose their employment. Aleuts also claim they were discouraged, sometimes prohibited, from traveling off the Pribilofs. U.S. agents threatened those who stayed away too long with demotion on the seal crews, and even expatriation.

Was it exploitive "slavery" or benevolent paternalism? Seattle doctor John Campbell, resident doctor on St. Paul from 1938 to 1940, still expresses the paternalism that underlay the good intentions of even the most conscientious Service employees: "The Aleuts had everything they needed. They're very fine people. But they're just like children."

Sheltered from the world by culture, distance, and official policy, the Aleut "children" were ill-prepared for the tumult and trauma of the war. When it started, recalls Alex Petrof, "We didn't know what in hell was going on. Then we thought we saw Japanese ships coming."

The Japanese attack on the Aleutians also caught the U.S. military off guard. As early as April 1942, intercepted Japanese communiques had warned of an attack on the Aleutians. Alaska commanders for months frantically pleaded with Washington to beef up Alaska's primitive defenses. On April 10, Indian Affairs Commissioner John Collier raised the question of evacuating the Aleuts in a memorandum to Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes, but noted, "The residents of the western islands show no inclination to move.... I am inclined to leave the Natives where they are, unless the Navy insists that they be moved." Ickes agreed, "unless they want to move."

When the attack came in the first week of June, the government was still unprepared to fight or evacuate. The Japanese bombed the naval and army stations at Dutch Harbor three times. One bomb hit the hospital at the nearby Aleut village of Unalaska, damaging it

but miraculously causing no injuries. The Japanese speedily overran the westernmost islands of Attu, Kiska, and Agattu; 42 Attuans were taken as prisoners to Hokkaido; only 25 returned in 1945.

In the panic following the Japanese attack, military intelligence received false reports of a Japanese flotilla steaming toward the Pribilofs. Daniel Benson, St. George agent, and the terrified Aleuts watched the sky for Japanese planes, but heard only distant engines.

Then the military moved on its own to do what Interior had earlier postponed: evacuate the Aleutian islands and Pribilof and convert them to bases.

The "Japanese ships" which 13-year-old Petrof saw approaching St. Paul turned out to be two little American "Yippie" (YP) boats—one sent with provisions for the islands, the other to evacuate their white employees. They were soon followed by the military transport *Delarof*, sent under separate orders to evacuate everybody.

The *Delarof* loaded first St. George's people, then St. Paul's—477 total by Interior Department records. Benson was ordered to rig the St. George houses for explosion, while a navy shore detail was to shoot all St. George's and St. Paul's livestock. Then new orders came: the houses were not detonated, and the St. Paul livestock was spared to provide fresh steaks for the arriving servicemen.

The Pribilof evacuees had notice of just four to 48 hours. Each was allowed just one suitcase. Most didn't have suitcases, having never traveled from the islands, and packed their clothes in the barrels used for seal hides. Fredericka Martin remembers "the most outlandish mess you ever saw. There were 80-some electric washers lined up on the dock," as many villagers pleaded to bring their most recent and prized acquisitions from the Sears catalog. Benson convinced the skipper to let the St. George men bring a 40-foot *baidar*, which later proved indispensible.

The confusion aboard the *Delarof* was compounded by the Aleuts', and even the skipper's, complete ignorance of their destination. Alex Petrof recalls, "There were all kinds of rumors we were going to Seattle, to Anchorage." Martin remembers, "People were running up and down the dock yelling, 'Mrs. Doc! We're going to the states! We're going to get free!'"

Instead, they spent 10 days cramped and sick in the *Delarof*. The first of several births, and many more deaths, to come happened on board: a daughter born to Innokenty and Haretina R. Kochutin died of pneumonia in a few days. Martin wrote that the St. George doctor aboard "did not come to assist," and that "since once aboard ship [he] felt completely free of any responsibility for his islanders and he could not be coaxed into the disagreeable crowded hold."

Martin also claims, "On board we had a great deal of racism . . . the wives of some of the officials [who had quarters separate from the Aleuts] got very upset at having to eat at the same table with some of the Aleut children."

The *Delarof* stopped at Dutch Harbor and picked up 83 refugees from Atka, far to the west, who had fled the Japanese attack and been picked up by U.S. Naval patrols. A Navy shore detail set all the Atkan homes, together with their absent owners' belongings, afire, leaving only buildings large enough for aircraft. Meanwhile, Interior officials in Seattle learned of the sudden evacuation and scurried to find a place to put the now-homeless Aleuts. They considered, but rejected, a camp at Lyman, Washington, and finally sent orders to the *Delarof* as it crossed the Icy Strait: the Pribilof Aleuts were dropped at an abandoned, ramshackle cannery at Funter Bay on Admiralty Island and the Atkans at another cannery at nearby Killisnoo.

"I thought, 'There must be some mistake here," recalls agent Benson. "There was nothing at Funter Bay—no food, nobody to meet us. The Coast Guard cutter wouldn't let me call the Seattle office. The skipper left us what food and blankets he could, and had to go. I thought, 'We'll be okay as long as Seattle gets to know about us.' It was a terrible scene . . . over 600 of us, all bedded down on the floor."

Benson's supervisors arrived to inspect the next day. Food came later—the cutter *Penguin*, with perishables bound originally for the islands. The refugees learned of an abandoned gold mine across the bay, and the St. George villagers moved there from the overcrowded cannery in their *baidar*, the only link between the two camps.

In July, the Aleuts of the other western Aleutians were transferred (by much more comfortable private steamship) to other camps on the Alaskan panhandle: the Akutan and Nikolski villagers to Ward Cove, and those from Kashega, Biorka, Makuskin and, last of all, Unalaska to a cannery on Burnett Inlet, near Ketchikan.

Many non-Aleut civilians at Dutch Harbor and Unalaska were *not* removed from their homes; some were even required to stay. This led to at least one poignant separation: Charles Hope, postmaster at Unalaska, had to stay, while his Aleut wife was forced to spend the next three years at Burnett Inlet.

Others in coastal villages nearer the mainland were also evacuated—but only a short distance, for a short time. August Heitman, a Kodiak Aleut, remembers "over a hundred" were brought to Kodiak, where they stayed with friends and relatives. "They didn't need to go to camps," he says. "They didn't stay long—three weeks at the most, until the scare was over. There were people from Unalaska and farther west too—they drifted all over, to Anchorage and down to Seattle.

No one knows how many Aleuts escaped the move to the camps by leaving first on their own. Nelly Taylor, an Aleut of Atkan descent, was one of about 50 who were evacuated directly to Seattle. She and her husband, a white fisherman, may have received this special treatment because they had a home to come to here—with his parents, in Puyallup (ironically, near an internment camp for Japanese civilians).

For the others (821 by official records), their ordeals—lasting 34 months for some—were enough to make the harsh life of the islands, in the words of one elderly camp survivor, "seem like heaven." When the evacuees arrived, the Funter Bay cannery bunkhouse was, says Petrof, "Just one big building, like a warehouse. It was never finished. There were two-by-fours up, but no partitions." According to agents' reports, floors and woodwork crumbled on touch, eaten with dry rot. To gain some privacy, each family enclosed a small area by hanging woolen blankets which, miraculously, never caused a serious fire though candles were used for light.

"Right next to the kitchen, where we ate, was a meat locker," adds Petrof, "and next to that a slop chute for the kitchen garbage and people's waste buckets. I saw flies from the slop on the meat. I think that's when people started getting sick."

The diet at Funter Bay was, not surprisingly, monotonous and unbalanced. Paul Swetzof grimaces at the memory of daily oatmeal. "I ate clams for months," says Lestenkof. "Fishermen came by and gave us fish," recalls Fedosia Verzola. "The government didn't give us equipment to go fishing." At Burnett Inlet, says Sara Flory, "The government was supposed to bring us all this food, but they didn't. We had to buy our own, from government allowances; there were no outside jobs."

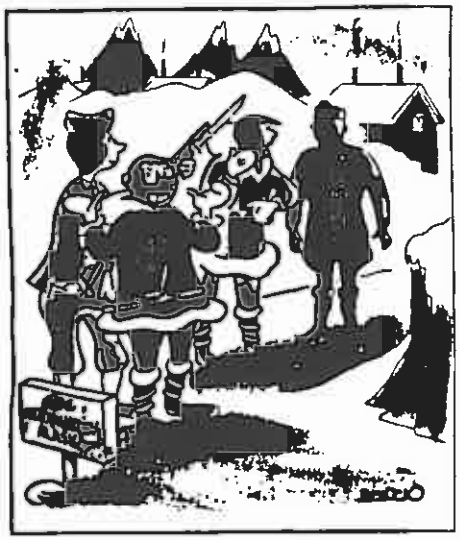
"The only time you could have milk was when you got a damn case of TB and started spitting blood," says Petrof. Many in the camps turned to clamming on the nearby shore—which soon grew contaminated by the "slop chutes" and the outhouses perched above the shallows on stilts. The tides brought the waste back up to the beaches where the children played.

Disease ran rampant in the camps: measles, tuberculosis, dysentery, influenza, pneumonia. The agents' daily Pribilof Log reports, "No work today...Nearly everyone sick...Some few are getting better from the measles..."

Nearly every family lost a member, some many. "Two of my sisters died," says Paul Swetzof. Lestenkof's brother died of pneumonia. After Petrof's father and grandfather died at Funter Bay, his mother never quite recovered from the ordeal; she died soon after returning to St. Paul. Alexandra Tu lost her grandfather at the camp.

"We lost more people in two years at Funter Bay than in the 10 years before at St. George," says Benson.

The quality of medical care varied at the camps. According to the Pribilof Logs, public-health doctors and nurses visited sometimes weekly, sometimes irregularly. Those with serious illnesses, especially tuberculosis, were frequently taken to Juneau. Mrs. Kitty Benson recalls a long wait to get a nurse at Funter Bay, who finally arrived but soon left: "She threw



Alaska Life, Jun 1943

"Ugh! Him not Japanese spy—her my wife."

up her hands and said, "They're dying too fast for me!"

Petrof remembers "one good doctor—he was for us," but claims others, in camp and on the islands, were "reject doctors, sent up to practice on us." He heard a grim charge against one: "My mother said one doctor gave my grandfather, who was paralyzed, a mercy killing. She said she saw him pour chloroform all over his body. I also heard rumors he did the same thing to my father, after he had a stroke—I could never confirm that." Most other camp survivors never heard such rumors.

As if poor diet, flimsy shelter, weak immunities, lack of sanitation and medicine, and a record cold winter weren't enough, the sheer strangeness of the new environment wreaked its own havoc on the Aleuts' health and morale. The hot summers and lush forests of the panhandle might seem more congenial than the barren Aleutians to almost anyone else. To most Aleuts, as Sara Flory says, "It was hell." A few who were very young, like Olga Tchripanoff McGlashan, remember life in the forest as "fun, like camping." But most "were scared to death of the trees," recalls Kitty Benson. "People said they couldn't breathe."

"I think for many of the old folks, the experience was just more than they could take," says Stepetin. "The islands were all they knew. . . . They were torn away from that whole environment." The close-packed communal quarters at Burnett Inlet (similar to Funter Bay's) grated especially on Stepetin's father, "a very private person." Though in good health before the war, he languished and died.

Olga McGlashan of Akutan, who was 10 at the time of the evacuation, paints a rosier picture of the Ward Lake camp: "It was rough at first. We stayed in a tent till they built us houses. . . . Then I thought it was neat. A lot of people had jobs. . . . I wished we could have stayed afterwards in Ketchikan [near the camp], so I could go to high school."

But even Ward Lake was no idyll. Of the 72 Nikolski villagers evacuated there, 18 died, according to the village church record.

No such complete records exist for the other villages, and no one knows just how many were lost in the evacuation. The Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association has compiled an "incomplete tabulation" of 63 names, from the recollections of some survivors. The true tally is certainly much higher. Professor Lydia Black of Providence College, in Rhode Island, who has extensively researched the evacuation, estimates half never returned to their islands.

Did the camp superintendents try to remedy the conditions? In the beginning they made optimistic plans for toilets, running water, separate family housing, medical care, and jobs at the camps—and set the Aleut men at work building. Nearly a year and a half later, a Public Health doctor found 118 St. Paul people sick in bed, and all the projects unfinished: "The overcrowded housing condition is really beyond description. . . . Children were found naked and actually covered with excreta. . . . The water supply is discolored, contaminated." Circumstances—like soil too shallow to dig sewage drains, lack of building materials—and bureaucratic delays and cross-purposes kept the Aleuts in what was supposed to be only "temporary" privation.

Back on the islands, the danger of further Japanese invasion had all but disappeared even before all the refugees arrived at the camps. In June 1942, even as they seized the westernmost Aleutians, the Japanese lost much of their main fleet at Midway, and with it their chance at a Pacific offensive. With the central command unable to spare reinforcements, the 12,000 Japanese troops on Attu and Kiska dug in against a siege. Their purpose was mainly defensive: to keep the U.S. from using the island as bases for bombing Japan.

By the autumn of 1942, the Americans had heavily fortified the island of Adak, west of all Aleut settlements except Attu, and established a base at Amchitka, near Kiska. American forces bombed and shelled Attu and Kiska on a scale never before seen in the history of warfare. American pilots fought daily dogfights with Japanese Zeros—but more planes were lost to bad weather than to enemy guns. The Japanese attempted no further attacks on the inhabited islands, and in June 1943 American troops recaptured Attu in a bloody ground assault. They then waited six weeks to attack Kiska, only to discover the last Japanese garrison had slipped away in the fog.

The war in the Aleutians was over—but the Aleuts weren't told so. "We never got any newspapers," says Alexandra Tu. "We didn't even know the Japanese were out of the Aleutians. The government never explained anything to the Aleuts." The exiles stayed on in the camps far longer than the Japanese stayed in the Aleutians—at Funter Bay until May 1944, and at Burnett Inlet and Ward Lake until April 1945.

Not everyone thought they should stay. St. George agent Benson recalls that he disagreed with St. Paul agent Lee McMillin on basic policy in 1943: "I wanted to return everyone to the Pribilofs. Lee thought it was unsafe, and wanted to stay at Funter Bay." McMillin instead appealed desperately for better services from headquarters. In September 1942, Seattle Fish and Wildlife superintendent Johnson declared, "We have been trying to keep our people in as close a unit as we can in case it is possible to return to the Islands within a reasonable time. Practically all the younger men want to get away to work but, so far, we have not let them go."

In its attempt to hold the Aleuts together, Interior clashed repeatedly with the War Department. Over Interior objections that government "wards" should not be liable to the draft, many young Aleuts were taken into uniform, to serve thousands of miles away, while friends and family died in the camps. Three fought in the bloody recapture of Attu and were decorated within Bronze Stars.

In November 1942, Interior Secretary Ickes appealed to War Secretary Stimson to repatriate the Pribilof Islanders, for their own "Health and livelihood" and to "produce revenue for the government," through the seal harvest. Stimson finally consented to sendin an adult male Aleut crew to harvest the seal, and repatriate St. George.

The next summer, Benson led 151 men from Funter Bay back to the seal grounds. The Pribilof Log records a tearful parting between the men and their families, who had never been separated before, and farewell chants sung in Russian. "It was like the [Iranian] hostages last year, when I was at St. George and couldn't see my family," recalls Michael Lestenkof, now archpriest on St. Paul. "They brought mail just once. I found out afterwards my mother nearly died of sickness. They told us our families would be with us soon, before the winter, on St. George." Indeed, Benson expected the seal hunt to be the first step in a full repatriation; his wife came with him to settle in. After the hunt, he kept 16 men on the island as an advance group.

Meanwhile, measles and flu epidemics had brought Funter Bay to its lowest ebb. On November 1, 1943, agents asked the St. George people if they'd want to leave immediately for home. Most refused, saying that they feared traveling with winter approaching and with so many sick children, and that their husbands

wanted them to await their return. St. Paul survivors say they never received even such an ill-timed offer to leave.

Meanwhile, countless wartime and Cold War articles in *The Seattle Times* and magazines lauded the heroism of the American pilots at Attu, lamented the harshness of the Aleutian weather, and pontificated on the islands' "strategic significance." None even mentioned the Aleut exiles—except for one oblique reference in a 1943 *Alaska Life* profile of St. Paul's priest, Father Baranof.

When the Aleuts finally returned home in 1944 and 1945, again "there was no time to ask questions." At Unalaska and the Pribilofs, they found their homes ransacked by U.S. troops, who used them as barracks: windows and doors smashed, stoves and radiators broken, trash everywhere—and all personal possessions stolen.. On St. Paul, the water tanks had been accidentally burned down and the telephone and electrical lines ruined. Petrof found his house "all painted black—they used it for developing photos—and covered with pin-ups." Kitty Benson found her jewelry, china, and crystal stolen.

Most disturbing of all was the theft of the Aleuts' cherished icons. So many soldiers became amateur archaeologists, trading in ancient mummies and artifacts from overturned burial sites, that the Army tried to impose a prohibition. But the Army's own plans included turning the Unalaska cathedral into an officer's club; one Aleut, John Yatchmenoff, before he was evacuated, threatened to cut his throat on its steps if the cathedral was desecrated. It wasn't.

The abandoned mine across from Funter Bay, occupied by St. George Aleuts.

At Unalaska, says Stepetin, "Some of the Aleuts found their boats burned and sunk. The excuse was, 'We were protecting you from the Japanese.' If you look at Attu, the Japanese left it in better condition."

War Secretary Stimson promised restoration money. President Roosevelt authorized $200,000 for "the return and rehabilitation" of the evacuees, including up to $10,000 for the payment of claims for damages" by the Army and Navy—about $12 average restitution per evacuee. Many, perhaps most, Aleuts never saw that money. Military inspectors came to investigate claims on St. Paul Island but, according to agent Benson, never made it to St. George. Some Aleuts got as much as $300, for losses which included businesses, boats, and livestock. Sara Flory of Unalaska recalls, "They gave us property for compensation—the Quonset huts they were going to abandon anyway." The Atkans received lumber to replace their homes, which the Navy had burned. They built an exact replica of their old church, but could never replace its stolen icons. Resettlement officials admitted the whole restitution process was snarled in red tape; many goods ordered for the Aleuts never showed up.

The government took advantage of the evacuation to "consolidate" many of the smaller villages, and thus save on its services to the islands. The Biorka, Kashega, and Makushkin Aleuts tried unsuccessfully to

return to their homes. The Nikolski villagers succeeded, over official objections. When the Attuan POWs were released from imprisonment in Japan, they were told they could not return to the islands at all. They protested until they were allowed to settle in Atka—the home of their traditional enemies. The government refused to return them to Attu because, it claimed, it could no longer provide transportation and services to that distant island. Nevertheless, it maintains a Coast Guard station at Attu—and has let Atka languish without regular boat or plane service.

Nine-tenths of the major islands remained uninhabited after the war. Those that were resettled are still littered with hazardous wartime debris, including unexploded bombs. After the war, fur trappers were barred from many of their traditional grounds, which became military reserves. The Unalaska fishery was ravaged by oil spills and military construction.

Now, the economic hardship of the postwar period has eased. A booming crab industry has brought Unalaska the largest dollar volume of any U.S. fishing port. The Aleuts fought unsuccessfully to be included in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, after initially being excluded because of their mixed bloodlines. Their native corporation seems to have turned the corner to solvency, after some early boondoggles.

Change has come even to the Pribilofs. Men who'd worked at mainland jobs during the relocation demanded, and received, regular wages on the islands, instead of the meager "seal bonus." The Pribilof Aleuts have taken over the resident Fish and Wildlife jobs, their local government, and ownership of their homes. Emigres who return to visit marvel at the improvements in those homes.

The Pribilofs, artificially settled colonies of the Russians and century-long wards of the United States, are finally growing up. But maturity and independence bring their own dangers. The Reagan administration argues that since 1970 declining seal revenues have not met the government's "mounting expenses" (like real wages for the hunters). Congress proposes to eliminate subsidies next year. Some Aleut leaders fear disaster when that happens; unemployment now stands at 80 percent, and new economic bases like tourism and a fishing harbor are still in formative stages. "I only hope it doesn't happen before we can demonstrate we can become self-sufficient," says native corporation chairman Leo Merculief.

With the peace and order of the old village system gone, Aleuts on all islands are caught in a collective identity crisis. When Fevronia Stepetin McGillivrey returned to visit St. Paul last year, she found it becoming "just like anyplace else—kids were smoking marijuana and disobeying their parents. "The cultural dislocation is even more pronounced for the hundreds of Aleuts who found they couldn't go home again after the war. Eight hundred to 1,000 Aleuts now live in the lower 48 states, about half from the villages which were evacuated.

"Actually, the war was really and truly a good thing for the Aleuts," declares Daniel Benson, "in that they were forced to leave the islands and learn something of the world." Many older Aleuts accuse Benson and his fellow agents of formerly blocking them from leaving and learning. But Ruth Gromoff Chambers is one who agrees with his conclusion: "In a way, the evacuation did help. It exposed us to another world." Yet that new world is not a bed of roses, and many mourn the world that was lost. "Since evacuation, nothing was the same," says Fedosia Verzola. "It never was the quiet village our home was. People took the white man way, white man life."

Change would doubtless have come to the Aleuts regardless of the war. Still, the evacuation did hasten that change, and at the same time made it more difficult and painful than it need have been. Hundreds of young Aleuts were suddenly exposed to the allures of 20th-century life, even as they lost two years of the schooling that might have prepared them to master it. As it thrust them into the 20th century, the evacuation hardened the Aleuts' sense of being outcasts and prisoners and drove a wedge of bitterness into their memories, which many still struggle to extricate.

"You're bringing up some bad memories," says Petrof. "I've tried to wipe all this out. I didn't know it was going to come back and hit me in the face."

Hence the importance of the current investigation, which arrives in the midst of a quiet but determined "Aleut revival." From Seattle to St. Paul, Aleuts who've succeeded (or failed) in assimilating into the American mainstream are still driven by the question, What does it mean to be Aleut? New groups like the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association and the Seattle-based Pacific Northwest Aleut Council work to record and perpetuate Aleut culture. Young, cosmopolitan Aleut artists like Diane Svarny struggle to master the nearly lost exacting art of traditional basket-weaving. After decades in Seattle, Ruth Chambers and Fevronia McGillivrey still try to speak Aleut together, and teach at least a little to their children.

For the survivors of the camps, and even for their children born since, the inquiry into the evacuation is not a dry exercise in history or polemic: it is a quest, with real and unfeigned urgency, to fill a missing chapter in their personal and cultural growth—and to find pride and self-respect in a history which cast them as the victims and losers.

For most Aleuts compensation is not the crux of the question. Some defer the question to "our leaders" or to the commission. Others declare they simply don't "ever expect to get anything, for any reason, from the government." Delicate, diminutive Sara Flory waxes surprisingly vehement against the idea of restitution: "My dad is dead. My mom is dead. How can you compensate for the whole thing? After all these years, why do it now when we needed it *then*? I don't want their money. . . . I would tell them to stick it in their ear."

What all demand is a less tangible redress: public recognition of what happened (and of their status as a people), apologies (for what they're worth) and *answers*. "Was it fair to do what they did to us?" asks Stepetin. "Am I allowed to go into your home and tell you to leave, even for military security? If it was fair,

let's find the true story. Show us it was in our interest."

Most Aleuts, remembering the terror and uncertainty surrounding the Japanese attack (due in part to weak U.S. military intelligence) agree the initial evacuation seemed "in their interest." But there the logic ends. Military efforts to explain the Aleuts' removal to miserable conditions in isolated camps, for years longer than necessary, as "protection," grimly foreshadow the notorious sophism of the Vietnam War: "We had to destroy the village in order to save it."

It's far-fetched to search for motives of genocide in the evacuation, as a few Aleuts are tempted to do. The United States never thought consciously to destroy the Aleuts; at least with respect to the Pribilof Aleuts, officials repeatedly declared how important it was to keep them alive for the seal harvest. Some, including the Fish and Wildlife agents, also expressed real humanitarian concern. But those agents were only trained to harvest seals, and neither prepared nor supplied for a mass exodus. Their pleas for better support for the Aleuts were shuffled about by the Interior Department bureaucracy, and stonewalled by military commanders who wanted the Aleuts out of the way to expedite the fortification of the islands.

Instead of "genocide," what emerges is a pervasive pattern of neglect and insensitivity, with disturbing racist undertones, forged in the long paternal tradition of the islands' administration.

The evacuation of the Pribilofs and Aleutians became boggled in the conflicting goals of the War and Interior Departments, and in the schizoid purposes of the islands' administration. The Fish and Wildlife Service attempted to impose near-penal restrictions to keep the Pribilof evacuees together for an eventual return. But after the war the government forbade other Aleutian villagers who were not needed for seal harvests, from returning to their home islands.

Though the evacuation began in hasty improvisation, the sheer slowness of the bureaucracy afterwards played a part in keeping the Aleuts in their squalid camps. Despite the dire warnings of their own agents, central officials refused to admit the camps were unnecessary and unworkable—in a pattern typical of the blunders documented throughout the Aleutian campaign.

"War is hell," goes the argument. The Aleuts' sufferings in camp and their loss of property were merely the sacrifices one must expect in wartime. And yet, if the Army were forced to occupy homes in Seattle, would it do so without paying rent and compensation, and allow its troops to freely loot and vandalize?

The Aleuts believe, rightly by all evidence, that they suffered so much in the war simply because, as one of the nation's smallest and most isolated minorities, they didn't matter in the official scheme. Alexander Petrof doesn't think he's succumbing to paranoia when he perceives underlying racism in the government's highhandedness: "Sure, lots of people suffered in the war. But did they drag them out of an entirely different culture? Did they tell you you looked like a Jap with slanty eyes?"

No one ever questioned the Aleuts' loyalty outright. But in official and public eyes, the line was thinly drawn between Asian adversaries and Asiatic-looking Americans. Of several hundred "Japanese Americans" interned in Alaska, many were of mixed Eskimo or Indian parentage. One, raised entirely by his Eskimo mother in an Eskimo village, reportedly did not even know of his Japanese ancestry until he was arrested as an "enemy alien."

Racial persecution did not prompt the evacuation. But amidst the anti-Japanese hysteria of the time, unspoken racist generalizations seem to have served to justify it. And in one of those odd reverses which so often make history read like a fable, the Aleuts themselves must now struggle with their own burden of racial resentment, against the Japanese, who many still blame for their exile. "The Aleuts, my people from Unalaska especially, are somewhat prejudiced," admits Stepetin. "Some are wary of working with the Japanese." Sara Flory, who thought she heard death coming in the bombing of Unalaska, is still bitter: "I can never forgive the Japanese for what they did."

Nevertheless, the joint investigation of the twin internments is sparking some reconciliation. Now, says Alex Petrov, "I feel sorry for the Japanese here. They were American citizens too, just like us. The point to it all is like they say, 'So it will never happen again.' I don't give a damn who it is, no matter what race. I don't want it to happen to nobody, not even my worst enemy."□

Hearings update

"We're now going to hear from the *Aloots*," said the hearing chairman.

"That's Aleuts," interjected Alexandra Gromoff Tu. "Don't worry, people have been doing that to us for hundreds of years."

Last Friday, for the first time, Aleut survivors of United States relocation camps in World War II formally presented their grievances to a government body. On the last day of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment's hearings at Seattle Central Community College, four Aleut women described the suffering and loss which they believe the government's wartime policies caused them—as had hundreds of Japanese-Americans before them.

Charlotte Griswold of Bellingham recounted the war's deleterious aftereffects: unexploded shells and other hazardous debris, a disrupted economy, the government's refusal to resettle some villages, and "the waste and insult of the off-limits status of the buildings" which the military abandoned but forbade the Aleuts to use. Alexandra Tu fiercely labeled the relocation just one instance in a long history of government oppression of the Aleuts and other Native Americans. Margaret Misikin, president of the Pacific Northwest Aleut Council, declared, "There was no valid reason to take the Aleuts off the islands." Ruth Stepetin Chambers burst into tears as she tried to recount her family's wartime experience.

All demurred when asked what compensation should be paid them, although many Japanese-Americans who testified earlier firmly stated dollar amounts they thought were due. (The Japanese-Americans have already received considerably more restitution than the Aleuts.) Charlotte Griswold suggested compensation in the form of social services lacking on the islands: "a hospital at Unalaska" to replace the one destroyed in the war and never rebuilt, "a trust fund for the education of young Aleuts, and a senior citizen establishment."

The testimony presented was clearly incomplete, and inconclusive on many points. Nevertheless, several commissioners expressed their shock at only recently learning of Aleut sufferings during the war.

Griswold complained, "We have very little time in relation to the other people here. I think that indicates we're still not considered very important, and I resent that." In fact, the four Aleuts were allowed the same amount of time (one half hour) as similarly sized Japanese-American groups, and the commissioners encouraged them to speak further in an overtime period of cross-examination.

Replied one of the commissioners to Griswold's complaint, "The principle is the same, and that's what it's all about. Quantitative considerations should not enter into inquiries of this kind. Certainly, we'll get a lot more information up in Alaska."

The largely Japanese-American audience frequently interrupted the Aleuts' remarks with applause. As the session ended, the press corps (several of whom declared themselves as startled as the commissioners to learn of the Aleut relocation) rushed to the hallway to interview every Aleut in sight.

—E.S.