

Jay Jennings
Anthropology 200
September 22, 2015

Aleut Story

A Commentary on the Documentary at AleutStory.tv

Aleut Story is a 2005 documentary film that details an event in United States history that most American don't know about.

During World War II the Japanese invaded the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. The United States government leapt in to help and the people living on several islands were evacuated. Since an aboriginal people can't be counted on to look after themselves, the government graciously placed them in internment camps (such as an abandoned fishing cannery) 1500 miles from their home. This was bad for the Aleut people because due to their living conditions it's estimated that 10 percent of the people sent to the camps died there. And it was bad for the United States because it lost use of the Aleut people as slave labor for harvesting seals on the Aleutian Islands.

Sidebar: If you didn't read the preceding paragraph with a politician's attitude of "I know better than you" then please go back and read it again from that position. Because that's the only way you can talk about what happened without getting angry.

From the time the Aleut people came under the thumb of the United State government (when Alaska was purchased from Russia) they were taken advantage of and not treated as full citizens of the US. While the internment during WWII took a huge toll on the people and their villages, it appears the freedoms they saw other Americans enjoy was an eye-opening experience that led them to lobby for changes.

While those changes eventually happened and the United States made financial reparations, it was a situation that should have never happened, and highlights the abuses made by politicians the world over.

Based on information from the film it's hard to say how the Aleut culture was harmed by this event since the culture was already being reshaped due to Russian missionaries and other non-indigenous influence. For example, in the film it was mentioned that while soldiers were living in the evacuated villages some churches were looted and religious icons taken. It appears those icons were not traditional Aleut artifacts, so I'm not sure how that would affect their culture anymore than a church in Anytown, USA being looted would harm that local culture.

I don't mean to downplay the loss of life and property — **the financial reparation made by the government doesn't begin to make up for what happened** — but the decades of forced seal harvesting was probably more influential in changing Aleut culture than the forced internment for a few years. The latter, I think, had more of an effect on individual Aleuts than on the culture as a whole (although yes, change enough individuals and the culture changes, too).

This is not a film someone who's cynical of politicians/government should watch, because it will just compound those feelings. While some people might learn about this incident and consider it "ancient history," the more discerning will see it as "business as usual" from those people who hold power over others.