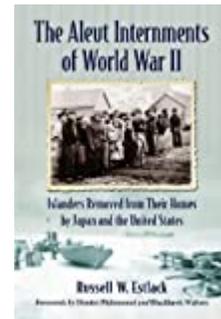


H-Net Reviews

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Russell W. Estlack. *The Aleut Internments of World War II: Islanders Removed from Their Homes by Japan and the United States.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014. 248 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7638-1.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Russell Estlack chronicles the plight of the indigenous people of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands during World War II. His *The Aleut Internments of World War II: Islanders Removed from Their Homes by Japan and the United States* offers the first substantive discussion of this topic. It is one that is long overdue.

Estlack traces both the Japanese and American depopulation of the Aleutian Islands during the war, although the Japanese treatment of the Aleuts comprises only a small portion of the book. The Japanese occupied Attu and Kiska, the westernmost of the islands, in June 1942. They removed the Aleut residents of these two islands and sent them to Japan, where they remained until after the Japanese surrender in August 1945.

The author devotes a great deal more attention to the American displacement of the Aleut people from the remaining Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. Here Estlack's narrative is at its best. He seems rightfully indignant about the haphazard way in which American authorities forcibly removed the Aleut people without allowing them to gather most of their personal possessions. Even worse, American military and civilian authorities placed the Aleuts in abandoned canneries and mining camps in southern Alaska that clearly lacked necessities.

Lack of electricity, running water, adequate medical care, and access to employment characterized virtually all of these camps. Estlack's contention that racist views of the Aleuts drove American internment policy during the war seems well founded.

Furthermore, upon repatriation to their home islands in the spring of 1945, the Aleuts—all except the Attuans, whom the US government forced to relocate to Atka Island for financial reasons—discovered that their villages had been vandalized and, in most cases, destroyed. Despite investigations that confirmed American military complicity in the vandalism and destruction, US authorities provided only scant reparations to the Aleuts. Finally, in 1988, after a lengthy process, President Ronald Reagan apologized to the Aleuts on behalf of the United States government and signed the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands Restitution bill, providing the Aleuts with financial reparations for their wartime losses.

Estlack's book, however, suffers from a number of weaknesses that detract from an otherwise compelling story. First, almost half of the book (the first 87 pages of the 203-page narrative) does not deal with World War II and makes only passing reference to the Aleuts. These first seven chapters provide a survey of eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century Alaskan history through a largely Russian and American lens, with only a few paragraphs devoted to the Aleuts. A much more detailed treatment of the World War II events in question or a deeper examination of the historical Aleut relationship with white settlers would have provided more support for his argument.

Second, the book references events and relies on often lengthy quotations from contemporary participants without analyzing them. For example, Estlack notes several occasions in the early chapters where the Aleuts appear to be allied with the Russians against other indigenous peoples without explaining the circumstances or acknowledging how this might undermine his portrayal of them as victims. Additionally, he later condemns American authorities for their lack of planning for the Aleut internments without considering that the Japanese occupation caught the Americans by surprise and that American authorities—as well as the Aleuts themselves—believed they were in danger of a Japanese sweep across the rest of the Aleutians to the Alaskan mainland. It

seems more important to have asked why the Aleuts were forced to endure substandard accommodations for so long, why the US military believed it needed to utilize a scorched-earth policy in such a barren location, and at what point American authorities determined that the Japanese were no longer a threat to the area.

Finally, Estlack's excessive use of long, block quotations, his reliance on some dated sources, and a few bold, unsupported claims cloud his argument. He undermines his own early contention that "there was no military justification for the relocation and internment of the Aleut people" (p. 5). And, his repeated claim that the Aleuts "suffering was far worse than any other indigenous people since the white man first set foot on the North American continent" seems exaggerated and unnecessary (p. 11).

Ultimately, Estlack tells a tragic story that fills a gap in the historiography of World War II. Yet he leaves a number of important questions unanswered. Hopefully his work will provide the first step in a lengthier, more detailed treatment of the subject.

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