

Echoes of the Atux̂: Western Perspectives and Tribal Realities

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The U.S. government has seen the Atux̂ tribe as many things: A gateway to Russia, A pawn of the Japanese during WWII, and a “simple trapping community,” but rarely have they been seen as whole people in any of these deductions. This research paper does not serve to document the personal experiences of the Attuan people throughout their experiences in between hegemonic powers but to show how these Western perspectives have retold and separated these stories from the Attuans themselves and have subsequently drafted various policies by the U.S government that have not given Attuans the necessary or adequate resources in their survival before and after of their treatment by the Japanese and WWII and the proper recognition of the Atux̂ tribe as a federally recognized U.S tribe. To define what is meant by the use of the phrase “Western Perspectives” in the context of the decisions made by the U.S government and military for Attuans is to outline the elements shown in a colonial power dynamic in many studied actions of U.S government interactions with other Native American groups and nations. The effects of possible shifts in ideologies and modes of existence, whether marked by capitalism, forced assimilation, cultural erasure, or disease, are often written from a “Western perspective” with little input from Native Americans themselves. Modern Philosopher V.F Cordova's book, *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F Cordova*, explains the resulting contrast: "A society that has power over another is not in a position to understand the matrix of the society over which it exercises power. The less powerful society's matrix, however, is constantly under attack. Through this attack, both matrices are exposed... The conflict between America's indigenous

peoples and the European colonial is another example. Early in the contact between the two peoples, there was an attempt on the part of the colonial to “coexist.” This was followed by an attempt to exterminate the other, then the incarceration of the other (in bounded locations), and finally the turning over of the indigenous to the religious missionaries. The attempt to convert the “other” to one’s own matrix, regardless of how well intended or peaceable, is extermination by other means” (1).

The system of Capitalism was first introduced to the Attuans by the Russians, who co-opted the use of Northern Sea Otter for Fur trade on a global market. Once this land was bought by the United States in 1867, this extortion was continued until the Northern Sea Otter went extinct (2). Bureaucratic systems such as the Alaskan Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs had a significant role in keeping the set up of corporate structures on Attuan resources that had substantial effects on the Attuan way of life and belief systems that did not previously engage in a system of capitalism, in which they actively expressed their wishes against it. In documenting the Western perspective, introducing a capitalist system introduces new stakeholders to the Attuan land beside the Attuans, with entities with significantly more legislative and capital power behind them. The estimated population decline from the beginning of Russian Encroachment to before the Japanese Invasion in the Summer of 1942 during WWII was anywhere from 80-90% (2). The timeline of the U.S. hegemony and its effects on the Attuans have led to this population decline through loss of tradition and lack of resources to aid in these forced transitions, including following the events of WWII and their forced relocations.

“The Aleutian Campaign” is the U.S. military context in which many decisions would alter the course of many natives across the Aleutian island chain. For Attuans, this campaign became even more of a tragedy when their whole community was taken as prisoners of war by

the Japanese in the Summer of 1942, with occupation before leaving Attu lasting about fourteen weeks (2). In the months leading up to the invasion, tensions were increased on a once calm island, with an attempted evacuation by the U.S. military in April of 1942 that never made it to Attu and was canceled due to weather. *When the Wind Was A River* by Dean Kohlhoff was the leading and most up-to-date resource on military actions and documented decisions of U.S. government officials. Though some officials advocated for the Aleutian and Attuans people, many emphasized the cost and “burden” of taking preventive measures against possible harm to the native populations and actively advocated against it.

Some communication that was critical on these decisions was Governor Bartlett and his team’s sentiments in Governor Gruening’s absence, “no general attempt should be made even in case of actual enemy attack, to evacuate Eskimos or other primitive natives from Alaska...these people could never adjust themselves to life outside their present environment” (2). Despite challenges that may be faced in relocation, the lack of consideration of potential solutions after the war, intentional decision-making based on cultural understanding by a key U.S official was part of a chain of critical decisions that did not aid in building any form of stability for the Attuan people during their multiple forced transitions. The hesitations Governor Gruening expressed were due to his concluded belief, after incorrectly sighting the Fletcher V. Peck Case (1810) as emphasis that Alaskan citizens were responsible for their safety when the case solidified that a state had a constitutional right to alter the terms of a land contract if that alteration was related to protecting the public’s welfare as evacuations begin on the surrounding Aleutian Islands, “...Attuan Aleuts, who never were rescued, either by the military or the government. Don Pichard and his Wife, Giner, who were boat operators, visited the island in

April 1942 and could have evacuated the residents. They had, however, been given no orders to do so” (2).

The Japanese occupied Attu and took forty Attuans as prisoners of war from September 1942 to October 1945 in the Wakatakecho District of Otaru, Hokkaido. Many Attuans were subject to forced labor in Japan with poor medical conditions and inconsistent food supply that resulted in a 44% death rate with only 25 survivors. There are few first hand accounts of conditions for Attuans while camps in Otaru, Japan. *Attu Boy: A Young Alaskan's WWII Memoir* by Nick Golohoff is one of the most comprehensive and detailed works on their experiences. Since the subject of this Essay pertains more specifically to the U.S. government and military actions towards the Attuan populations leading up to their imprisonment in Japan and their return and treatment when arriving back in the U.S., there will not be too much detail on their experience in these camps (3). The U.S. military picked up the remaining Attuans in October 1945 and traveled to San Francisco by November 3rd, then to Seattle, Washington, at the end of November for “processing” for another month. The U.S. military gave clearance for Attuans to be able to resettle in Attu. But the following actions and sentiments reiterated by some U.S government officials prevented this resettlement. Don Foster, director of Alaska’s National Service and in charge of leading the resettlement of the Aleutian Islands, was reluctant to take on the responsibility. He ultimately suggested that Attuans be settled at Atka despite their strong desire to be placed back in the home of Attu; their hope of returning home is a large part of what kept them going throughout being prisoners of war.

Attuans also wanted proper compensation for the loss of income while being held in Japan due to the forced labor they had to undertake, the lost members of their community, and the destruction of their homes. Total Claims by the Attuans totaled \$294,425, which first needed

to be approved by the State Department through fieldwork that would be carried out by the work of the Alaskan Indian Service with a deadline of March 1st, 1951. Still, the claims were temporarily lost by the Department of Interior, then reclaimed by the War Claims Commission, but only totalling a little over \$32,000 (2). These funds come from the “proceeds of enemy property vested and retained by the Office of Alien Property, Department of Justice,” with no funds coming directly from the American or Japanese government. Despite that, in October of 1945, *CHAPTER 52—RESTITUTION FOR WORLD WAR II INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE-AMERICANS AND ALEUTS* was approved by the U.S House of Representatives with Sec 4201, subsection five stating that make restitution to Aleut residents of the Pribilof Islands and the Aleutian Islands west of Unimak Island. But simultaneously, in the eyes of the U.S government, this did not include Attuans, let alone the possibility of Attuans returning to Attu, citing that since the Japanese government was the ones to evacuate Attuans, they can not be included in “Aleutian and Pribilof Islands Restitution.” Secretary Don Foster stated, “Settling the Attu people at Atka has saved the government an enormous amount.”

Looking into The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) has also provided an interesting point of analysis when looking at the treatment of Attuans from the U.S. perspective. ANCSA marked a distinct switch in federal Native American policy, changing the way Native American tribes could be entitled to their land, “It divided the state into twelve distinct regions and mandated the creation of twelve private, for-profit Alaska Native regional corporations and over 200 private, for-profit Alaska Native village corporations. ANCSA also mandated that both regional and village corporations be owned by enrolled Alaska Native shareholders. Unlike in the lower 48 states where the reservation system was the norm, ANCSA departed significantly – its foundation was in Alaska Native corporate ownership” (4). Within the legislation, this system

is framed as one that would bring significant economic benefits to some of the Native populations in Alaska. It allows them to be “self-sustaining” in the same financial system they were once forced to be a part of. It has significantly created large land settlements and numerous economic opportunities for many Alaskan Native groups. However, out of the twelve Alaskan National Regional Corporations and two hundred local village corporations, the Attu tribe was not included in this settlement process. The Aleut corporation appealed this decision of ineligibility on behalf of the Attu tribe; their direct summary of reasons for appeal are stated here, “While the Village of Attu is no longer inhabited, it has long been recognized as a traditional Native Village. It is only due to the acts of the government after World War II which prevented the Attu Aleuts from returning to their village. Since World War II, the government's subsequent actions have continued prohibiting the Aleuts from residing at Attu. As it is the government's action, beginning in 1945 and continuing thereafter, which caused Attu to be unoccupied in 1970, it should be certified as an eligible village..” (5). This request was denied and would require a congressional vote to change the terms of the ANSCA itself. For Attu to be granted the same recognition due to their extreme hardships during WWII, the requirements of population and occupation of their desired settlement were made impossible due to the same forces that led to their tragedy initially.

Attuans were further separated due to these now systemic barriers; with Two Attuans too sick to travel, they were left in Manila on their journey back to the U.S, another Three Attuans got ill and stayed at a hospital in Tacoma, Washington, and five orphaned WWII Attuan children sent to Eklutna, Alaska by U.S. government officials, with only eleven Attuans being sent to Atka by government officials, with five Attuans later leaving for Unalaska. These separations and the various policies implemented by the U.S. government emphasize the lack of Attuans'

freedom throughout this process, resulting in them not meeting the requirements to be federally recognized under ANCSA.

The experience of the Attuans is one of cultural erasure, with no justice ever being entirely given. The non-profit organization *Atux Forever* was established in 2019 to work on gaining federal recognition as a U.S. tribe, which was not restored after WWII, as mentioned above (6).

At the beginning of this Essay, I mentioned the philosopher V.F Cordova and the contrast she discusses underlying thought patterns in Native American philosophy and Euro-American philosophy. Near the end of her book, detailing the importance of profoundly exploring the attempt at assimilation of new conceptual framework patterns, she emphasizes why the sense of land and culture is worth preserving and protecting by their descendants, “Their “place” is the foundation of cultural mooring and values; it is not simply “the environment” that they accidentally “occupy”- they are children of that place” (1).

Citations

1. Cordova, V. F., and Kathleen Dean Moore. *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*. University of Arizona Press, 2007.
2. Kohlhoff, Dean. *When the Wind Was a River : Aleut Evacuation in World War II*. Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association, Anchorage, 1995. Print.
3. Golodoff, Nick. *Attu Boy: A Young Alaskan's WWII Memoir*. 1st ed. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Press, 2015. Print.
4. "About the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act." ANCSA Regional Association, <https://ancsaregional.com/about-ancsa/>. Accessed 12 July 2024.
5. UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR, Re: VILLAGE OF ATTU, VE#74-19, (Appeal of Ineligibility), Dec. 6th, 1974
6. "Atux Forever | Indigenous." Atuxforever, <https://www.atuxforever.net>. Accessed 12 July 2024.