



Father I.V. Gromoff, right, shares a van ride with other Aleuts during hearings held in Unalaska in September of 1981. Gromoff was the Aleut member of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

## Report terms World War II Aleut evacuation/ internment 'deplorable,' not justifiable

By Bill Hess

Tundra Times

In a report made public last week, the special Presidential/Congressional commission looking into the World War II evacuation of the Aleuts from their homes said it was "a rational response to the danger presented," but that what happened afterwards in the refugee camps in Southeast Alaska was "deplorable," and could not be justified.

The Aleuts have not been compensated for their losses of

the time, the report concluded, and the history of the event has been largely forgotten by the American public, if indeed, it was ever aware of the episode at all.

"The Japanese attacked the two most western islands in the Aleutians chain in the summer of 1942 and took 42 Aleut prisoners," Joan Z. Bernstein, chairwoman of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, stated at a press conference held in Washington, D.C., last

Thursday.

"As part of the reaction to that attack, the military evacuated the Aleuts from a large part of the Aleutian chain. The evidence shows that the evacuation was a rational response," said Bernstein.

During hearings on the evacuation which took place in Alaska during September of 1981, a frequent complaint heard was that in Unalaska, only civilians with one-eighth blood or more were

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# Commission finds Aleut treatment 'deplorable'

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required to leave, while non-Aleuts stayed behind.

"Both whites and Aleuts," Bernstein said, "apart from those necessary to defense work, were removed. The protection of an exposed popula-

tion was the motivating force for the evacuation."

Philemon Tutiakoff, Chairman of the Aleutian/Pribiloff Island Association and one of those evacuated from Unalaska, said the report had not yet been made available to him

and wanted to wait until he had seen it before commenting.

Bernstein's comments on the refugee camps were more harsh. "Approximately 850 Aleuts were housed in abandoned buildings, typically at gold mines and fish canneries," he said. "The conditions and care were deplorable. In some camps there were inadequate sleeping quarters and sanitation. Health conditions were particularly bad.

"Epidemics raged throughout the Aleuts' stay in Southeastern Alaska; they suffered from influenza, measles and pneumonia along with tuberculosis. Twenty-five died at Funtier Bay in 1943 alone, and it is estimated that probably ten percent of the evacuated Aleuts died during their two or three year stay in Southeastern Alaska.

"The standard of care which the government owes to those under its protection was clearly violated by this treatment," Bernstein said.

"The Aleuts were only returned to their islands in 1944

and 1945," the chairwoman continued, "on arriving home, they found that their communities had been vandalized and looted by the military forces. Many homes were uninhabitable and many heirlooms of great spiritual as well as material value, particularly religious icons, had been destroyed.

"Other possessions, such as furniture, boats and fishing gear, were also gone. The Aleuts rebuilt their homes themselves, being 'paid' with free groceries and military surplus goods. The Aleuts' ancestral treasures can never be replaced. The Aleuts have never received full or fair compensation for their wartime losses."

With all this, Bernstein noted, the public is basically unaware the Aleut evacuation ever occurred. "The World War II history of the Aleuts is largely unknown or forgotten," she noted.

During her short statement, Bernstein did not address many

of the concerns of the Aleut people, which are presumably taken up in the report, such as the forced return of Pribilof Aleuts to their islands to harvest seals for the U.S. Government, while their women and children had to stay behind, clean-up of the miles and miles of World War II left-overs still cluttering the Aleutians.

No recommendations as to reparations were made with this report. The commission has also been investigating the incarceration of some 120,000 American civilians of Japanese descent during the war, and their findings are included in the same 467-page report, entitled "Personal Justice Denied."

The Aleut and Japanese situations are looked as being very different by the commission, and it is reportedly still deciding whether reparations for the two groups should be considered singly or together. The committee's recommendations are expected no later than June.

