

Pribiloff article protested by official

Editor's note: The following letter was sent to Robert Henning, editor of the Alaska Geographic Society, by Larry Merculieff, chairman of the Pribiloff Interorganizational Council about a recent Alaska Geographic story on the Pribiloff.

Dear Mr. Henning:

I wish to make a few observations on your introductory statements to the Alaska Geographic publication Islands of the Seals, The Pribiloffs, which are incredibly naive for a "well read" editor such as yourself or a blatant attempt to falsify historical facts.

To give my remarks some credence, I wish to state that I:

1. Am certified as an expert on Aleut History and Culture by the State of Alaska;
2. Have been a member of the Alaska Native Foundation since its inception over 12 years ago.
3. Was designated an International Indian Scholar by the American Indian Historical Society.
4. Have testified before numerous Congressional committees as recognized expert on Aleut affairs.

In your introductory statement, you attempt to minimize documented Russian programs of genocide and enslavement of the Aleut people by euphemistic phraseology such as "One must remember that in the 18th and well into the 19th century, serfdom was both a part of the social structure and the economic modus operandi over much of the globe. It was not a Russian "mistreatment" of Aleuts far from the courts of the Czar . . . there was serfdom all over Russia . . . and in Great Britain . . . yes, and in early America. It was not

'terrible' except in historical afterviews.

If elimination of 80% of a population within 50 years of Russian domination in the Aleutians can be called an "economic modus operandi" of serfdom which is "not terrible except in historical afterview," then such a characterization is nothing less than incredibly warped. It would be interesting to know if the people of Ireland would consider Great Britain's 18th Century atrocities as simply an exercise of "serfdom" which is acceptable because it was practiced worldwide.

With regard to the Pribiloffs specifically, you state:

"As to the charges of 'colonialism' and severe mandate control by various fur company managers and bureaucrats following on the norm of generally accepted, quite probably even by the Aleuts in this instance, 'serfdom,' undoubtedly, as in all social structures there were sometimes managerial excesses."

Please forgive me if I cannot consider death of my male ancestors at an average age of 25 due to malnutrition while laboring 15 hours a day at extremely strenuous tasks, in the 19th century, or death of 25% of my people due to malnutrition and disease while physically interned in WWII as "managerial excesses." As for your speculation that Aleuts probably even accepted it, I can only characterize that statement with negative superlatives.

In your closing paragraph, you state: "In Alaska's case, and in the case of the Pribiloffians, as with other Natives, don't think too harshly of the years of stumbling management . . . neither administrators nor administered really

knew then there was anything different." The "stumbling management" you refer to imported Aleuts from the Aleutians to replenish their labor supply which diminished due to malnutrition and disease; they censored mail to ensure no appeals reached U.S. citizens; they inspected homes for "sanitation"; they deported "trouble-makers"; they prevented Aleut travel to maintain a captive work force. It was only after the intervention by the United Nations in 1958, the Human Rights Commission in 1964 and a Congressional investigation in 1965 that conditions changed for the better.

I rest my case with a quote from a federal court in Washington, in an opinion they rendered in 1980 about Pribiloff Aleut treatment by the government from 1876 to 1946: "The Government was obligated to provide for 'comfort,' but wretchedness and anguish are the words that more accurately describe the condition of the Pribiloff Aleuts."

To the extent that people in your position, responsible for historical documentations, consumed by a public are ignorant of the history they document is the extent that its lessons are lost on coming generations. To the extent that you were aware of the facts before you wrote the introduction is the extent that you have committed a moral crime.

You preach a dangerous moral standard by condoning actions of people because "everyone else" does it. It is just such a standard that eliminated millions of humans and could doom the human race if its application continues.

Larry Merculieff
Chairman