RESEARCH SUMMARY

Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska

January 1981, R.S. No. 7

U.S. Colonialism in the Pribilofs


Introduction

Dorothy Jones’ new book, A Century of Servitude, presents an unusual history of hidden, internal colonialism in the democratic United States. What makes the story unique is that the federal government itself sponsored and promoted this colonial relationship with the Aleut inhabitants of the remote Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea. During most of the 100-year history of Pribilof colonialism, the government maintained a policy of secrecy about its operations there, so few Americans knew about it until after World War II. While parts of the story have been reported, Dr. Jones is the first to write the full history.

As the Pribilofs have been a federal reservation for over 100 years, Dr. Jones had access to a voluminous and rich record. She used these data to answer three central questions: How did a condition of internal colonialism arise in the democratic United States? What forces sustained it? And what signalled its end? Her answers to these questions, which form the body of her book, are summarized below:

From Russian to U.S. Administration

The Pribilof Islands are the site of the largest Pacific fur seal rookery in the world. Each summer the seals migrate to the islands to birth and breed. After the Russians discovered the Pribilofs and the seals in the late eighteenth century and found the islands uninhabited by people, they imported Aleuts to harvest the seals. Soon they established permanent villages at St. Paul and St. George. These are still the only inhabited islands in the Pribilof group.

By the time of the U.S. purchase in 1867, the Russians had established a profitable seal industry on the islands; in fact, its existence was one of the United States’ main motivations for purchasing Alaska. But how to maintain these profits posed a problem, because shortly after the purchase, free traders plundered the rookeries and threatened the extinction of the seals. Eager to protect this profitable industry, the United States in 1869 declared the Pribilofs a federal reservation, making it, in essence, the first national wildlife refuge. In 1870, Congress enacted legislation which gave the government authority to conserve the seals, protect the Aleuts’ welfare, and grant a private company an exclusive 20-year lease to operate the seal business. The lease required a substantial payment to the federal treasury in the form of rent and royalties. From the outset, Congress and other government officials perceived the Pribilof program as a rich source of federal revenues. This expectation became embedded in the fabric of the Pribilof program and profoundly influenced the evolution of Pribilof management policies and practices. Profits and the conservation of the seals upon which the profits depended came first; the Aleut people came last.

The Reign of the Treasury Agent

The Treasury Department, responsible for administering the Pribilofs, sent agents to the islands to oversee the company operation and manage the people of the islands. Rather quickly, agents established totalitarian control over the people, regulating virtually every aspect of their lives. Concerned about the high and increasing death rate, and convinced it was due to low marriage rates, agents coerced Aleuts to go to other villages and find wives under the threat of exile if they failed. Agents disrupted the Aleuts’ traditional political authority by appropriating the right to appoint and discharge chiefs. They assumed authority for the administration of justice, acting as lawmakers, police, prosecutor, judge and jury. They imposed punishments for disobedience and drunkenness that ranged from putting people in irons to exiling them. They restricted travel to and from the villages; they even regulated the Aleuts’ money expenditures. Though the Washington office was informed of these actions through reports and Congressional hearings, officials remained silent, thus, by implication, condoning such acts. Washington’s inaction probably reflected the official view of the Aleuts as a means to
an end; the end was profits from the seal industry.

Sealing work occupied only a few months of the year. For the rest of the year, the government required Aleuts to work for it, usually at no pay. Nonetheless, with a plentiful supply of seals and high annual harvests, Aleuts earned a relatively good income. Though they received part of their income in goods and services, the major part was paid in cash. Their income (including cash and in-kind payments) compared favorably with that of other United States production workers. But this sanguine economic state did not endure for long.

From Wage-earners to Wards

During the second 20-year lease, 1890-1910, the Aleuts' economic status changed from wage earner to ward. Due to a serious decline in the size of the seal herds, the government greatly restricted the annual harvests. Since Aleuts were paid at a piece rate, the reduced seal harvests impoverished them. In 1894, Congress enacted legislation providing a relief appropriation for the Aleuts. Initially, federal officials perceived the appropriation as a wage supplement, as Aleuts continued to work for the government during the non-sealing season. However, they distributed the appropriation as a gratuity in the form of supplies at the government store. While the appropriation was seen as a temporary measure to weather an economic depression, paying Pribilof Aleuts in kind persisted until the 1960s. One wonders why? The Pribilof program was expected to produce a surplus, and during an economic slump, to at least reduce costs to the bone. As officials later asserted, it was easier to cut costs by reducing the quantity and quality of supplies than by reducing wages. In any event, Pribilof managers justified the payment in kind on the basis that Aleuts were wards of the government, not employees of the United States, even though, as later legal opinion indicated, Aleuts were not legally wards of the government at all.

By the end of the second 20-year lease, Pribilof management had codified practices informally introduced by agents in the past. Official policy now supported labor coercion, interference in the Aleuts' choice of chiefs, alcohol prohibition, exile as punishment, and secrecy about the Pribilof operation. These policies remained in force until World War II.

Sole Federal Jurisdiction, 1910–1918

The precipitous decline in seals continued, due in large part to the growing popularity of open-sea sealing, where, unlike the land-based sealing on the Pribilofs, many seals could not be retrieved. On the international front, the government was involved in negotiations to stop pelagic sealing; at home, Congress decided to end the private lease system; government became solely responsible for the entire Pribilof program, including operating a profit-making business. After satisfactory conclusion of an international treaty outlawing pelagic sealing and a 5-year moratorium on sealing in the Pribilofs, the herd began to recover, and by 1918, the government was again receiving surplus revenues from the seal industry. The revenue surplus was sufficient large to divert some of it to the support of other wildlife programs.

A Colonial Regime

And how did Aleuts fare under sole government jurisdiction? The 1920s and 1930s ushered in dramatic reforms in the nation—social security benefits, wages and hours legislation, collective bargaining rights, and an enlightened Indian Reorganization Act. The Pribilof Aleuts received none of these benefits; management defined them as ineligible since they worked for the government. But neither did they accord them eligibility for benefits to federal workers. For this purpose, they defined the Aleuts as wards of the government. As the wages and economic rights of the rest of American workers increased and improved, those of the Pribilof Aleuts worsened. Even the 1924 act according citizenship to all Native Americans had no impact in the Pribilofs.

From the 1920s on, the colonial relationship that had been evolving in previous years had become entrenched. Managers accorded Aleuts virtually no rights. They:

- Paid them near-starvation wages.
- Destroyed remaining cultural institutions by prohibiting the Russian school (the Russian Orthodox Church to which Aleuts had converted en masse had become an integral cultural symbol); suppressed the Aleut language; prevented Pribilovians from adopting relatives from other villages, thereby disrupting an age-old cultural custom.
- Continued to regulate Aleuts' choice of marriage partners.
- Regulated Aleuts in their private family hours, for example, by separating couples who argued.
- Required official permission to leave or return to the villages.
- Continued to coerce obedience by imposing sanctions such as reductions in sealing wages and deportation.
To compound the degradation, all of the Aleuts' income (including sealing wages) was paid in supplies pre-selected by the agent and distributed once a week only to the family head. The meat and milk of domestic animals was distributed mainly to the whites on the islands. And racial segregation was official policy.

The system on the Pribilofs had come to resemble in fundamental ways a typical colonialism, including the ideology that Pribilovians were subhuman, neither wanting nor entitled to the basic human rights enjoyed by other Americans.

War Refugees, 1942—1945

In June 1942, the Navy evacuated all the Pribilof Aleuts to southeastern Alaska. Though the Aleuts were 1,500 miles from their home, the federal government continued to administer to them as "their wards." Conditions in the new camp matched those experienced by Japanese Americans in internment camps. The Aleuts were housed in an abandoned salmon cannery, where conditions were frightfully overcrowded—rooms separated by blankets, three and four persons to a bed. They lived in unheated rooms, drank impure water, and the eating facilities were located close to a "filthy" outhouse. The death rate increased and the record reported madness among Aleuts for the first time.

Eager to resume sealing operations as soon as possible, management tried to keep the Aleut group intact, suggesting to the selective service board that Aleuts were ineligible for the draft because they were government wards. When they discovered that the Aleuts had the right to leave the camp for jobs in Juneau, managers imported the United States Employment Service to place the Aleuts in groups in isolated places and to pay their wages in a lump sum to the Pribilof supervisor. The employment service rejected this plan out of hand. Nonetheless, by keeping tabs on Aleuts who left the camp, management was able to round them up to return to the Pribilofs for the 1943 sealing season, even though the Japanese were still in the Aleutians.

The Turning Point: 1945-60

In 1944, when the Pribilovians permanently returned to their villages, management tried to restore the colonial relationship of the past. But times had changed. The Aleuts had become emboldened by contacts with the larger world, including members of trade unions, of an Indian Rights group in southeastern Alaska, and with several friends equally appalled at their condition. The Aleuts now wanted independence and had hopes that they could achieve it. At the same time, sympathetic visitors to the camps, and Fredericka Martin, a nurse who had lived in the Pribilofs in 1941 and who had dedicated herself to emancipating the Aleuts, joined efforts in alerting Indian Rights groups and others about the Aleuts' plight. Among those who became involved were two prominent Washington, D.C. attorneys—James Curry and Felix Cohen (the foremost authority on Indian law in the nation).

The Aleuts and their allies exerted increasing pressure on Pribilof management for equality. At first, management responded with resistance, although the resistance took a more covert form than in the past. As the demands continued and as government department heads such as the Secretary of Labor became interested in the case, management began to make concessions. In 1950, it inaugurated a new wage plan which eliminated some (but certainly not all) of the economic inequalities of the past. It granted to the Aleuts the right to be represented by attorneys; it also granted their application for self-government (under the Indian Reorganization Act).

The Abandonment Policy

Equality for the Aleuts, which threatened to significantly increase labor costs on the islands, came at a time when the seal industry was at a standstill. The Pribilof operation, once a significant source of revenues for the government, now threatened to become a serious liability. Management responded with a new policy, to eventually abandon the islands except for the summer sealing season. In preparation for bringing this about, the Fish and Wildlife Service (now responsible for administering the Pribilofs) concentrated on training Aleuts for relocation to other places. Another interim goal in the abandonment policy was to consolidate St. George village at St. Paul. At first, some St. George Aleuts moved voluntarily, but as agents exerted continuous pressure, they resisted. One of the main reasons for the resistance was that as soon as St. George Aleuts moved to St. Paul, managers burned their St. George houses so there could be no returning. After Congressional hearings exposed the demolition of houses, that practice stopped. And the abandonment policy failed—St. George Aleuts did not move to St. Paul in significant numbers, nor did a significant number relocate to other places.

In response to continuing exposes and pressures to give Pribilovians full equality, top managers reversed their policies in the 1960s; the goal now was to emancipate the Aleuts and equip them to manage their own affairs. Managers promoted racial mixing rather than segregation, legalized alcoholic beverages, allowed Aleuts to organize a police force and judi-
ciary, ended federal restrictions on visitors to the islands and on Aleuts’ freedom of movement. They also reformed the wage system, and the Aleuts finally gained full economic equality. With political autonomy and economic equality, the colonial system on the Pribilofs was moribund.

However, there was a hitch. In the past, when Aleuts’ wages were meager, management had provided employment for every able-bodied man in the villages. Now, with revenues from the seal industry declining, with the Pribilof population growing, and with a wage scale comparable to that of other similar workers, the government anticipated an enormous deficit in its Pribilof program. To avert it, management established a policy of selective hiring and introduced a progressive reduction in the size of the Pribilof labor force. This brought widespread poverty. By the 1970s, only a small minority were employed full time. Income levels of most Pribilovians fell to or below the poverty level. What a contradiction—equality gained at the cost of economic security!

1971 to Present

The 1970s brought a new change in Aleuts’ relationship with the government. The enactment of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act established the basis for Aleuts to gain title to most of their lands. The Aleut region and the villages within it formed corporations, both profit and nonprofit. And the Pribilof corporations selected (and were granted) 95 percent of the land on St. Paul and 97 percent on St. George. The government also agreed to convey Aleut houses, property, and other facilities.

Still, poverty persists, and unless these islands, dependent on marine resources, can find sums—very large sums—to construct boat harbors and finance a fishing industry, their economic future indeed looks bleak.

Conclusions

The Congressional expectation that the Pribilof program produce surplus revenues for the Treasury had a profound effect upon management policies. Profits from the seal industry and conservation of the resource that produced the profits were the main priorities. Aleut sealers were seen as the means to this end. This was the one most pervasive factor underlying the evolution of the colonialist system promoted by the United States government and the persistence of that system despite its frightful violation of national norms and laws. Only when unfavorable conditions in the seal industry combined with mounting pressures from individuals and groups, did management finally become convinced that emancipation of the Aleuts was in its interest.

A Century of Servitude closes with a plea to the U.S. government, who profited from Aleut labor for a hundred years, to help the Pribilovians establish a practical economic alternative to the troubled fur seal industry.

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