

Review: Holly Miowak Guise. *Alaska Native Resilience: Voices from World War II*.

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Holly Miowak Guise. *Alaska Native Resilience: Voices from World War II*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. Pp. 300. \$30.00.

Academic historians tend to silo their research and teaching. As a result, we read deeply, but not necessarily widely. Secondary teachers, whose curricula are much broader, rarely have time to delve deep into the latest scholarship. Holly Miowak Guise's *Alaska Native Resilience*, therefore, is not a book I likely would have picked up on my own as either a teacher or a researcher – much to my detriment. This book's approach, content, and even its pitfalls, are a wonderful reminder of the perils of drawing hard boundaries.

Guise's goal was to understand the Alaska Native experience of World War II – no easy task given the diversity of the region's population. Guise points out that the United States currently recognizes 228 tribes in present-day Alaska. These Nations can more or less be categorized by geography and language into three umbrella groups – Inuit, who historically inhabited the Arctic Circle and Alaska's western coast; Aleut, from Alaska's many western islands; and Alaskan Indians, whose ancestral homelands are further inland. Through significant archival research and over ninety(!) oral history interviews, Guise has constructed a personalized story that first and foremost acknowledges the diversity of her subjects. Different tribal groups experienced the war differently – but so did different individuals within the same Native Nation. This book's first lesson for educators, then, is the importance of avoiding the overgeneralization that can result from overcategorization.

Its second lesson is a reminder that we cannot ignore what Daniel Immerwahr, in his fantastic *How to Hide an Empire*, terms the "Greater United States."¹ Including the complex histories of American colonies complicates easy narratives and offers needed depth to our understanding of American history. Alaska is and has been a colonial space. As Guise explains, Indigenous Alaskans faced waves of colonization from Russia, Japan, and the United States and were often caught in the middle of competing imperial interests. World War II, when all of these powers came into conflict with each other in one way or another, then, offers a stark example of the ironic – and devastating – consequences wreaked on the Native inhabitants of the contested space. Native Alaskans, members of their own sovereign nations but also inhabitants of a U.S.-controlled territory, once again found themselves pulled in multiple directions. Their decision to support the United States's war effort, ultimately, was a choice, not a foregone conclusion.

Japan became an army of occupation after its 1942 invasion of the U.S. controlled Aleutian Islands, land that had once been claimed by Russia. Native Alaskans and U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs agents both came under attack. Ultimately, the Japanese military captured forty Unanga people from the island of Attu, including children and elders, many of whom bore Russian surnames, and sent them to a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Otaru to perform forced labor in support of the Japanese war effort.

Meanwhile, also during the first half of 1942, the U.S. military, under the authority of President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, began the project of removing people of Japanese descent from so-called military zones of exclusion. Ultimately, 122,000 men, women, and children, more than half of whom were U.S. citizens, were incarcerated in "relocation" camps away from the West Coast of the lower 48 states. Most Japanese Hawaiians avoided deportation because their sheer numbers as a percentage of the Hawaiian population made such a move

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019).

impractical.² But Japanese Alaskans *were* sent south to the camps. More often than not, incarcerated Japanese Alaskans were also Indigenous Alaskans. The U.S.-run Alaska Defense Command, argues Guise, determined who was “Japanese” based on its own conceptions of gender and race. In marriages between Japan-born men and Native Alaskan women, men were forcefully relocated and their wives prohibited from accompanying them. When the wife was of Japanese descent, however, she was permitted to remain in Alaska with her non-Japanese husband. Mixed-race individuals confounded officials even further. What to do with adults, raised in Native Nations, who had two Japanese grandfathers, for example? In Ipñatchiaq (also known as the city of Deering), some Iñupiat people were removed to Idaho, but others were not.

And finally, as Guise ably explains, while the incarceration of Japanese Americans is better known today than it has been in the past, most American students still have no idea that Aleutian and Pribilof islanders, especially the Unanga, were also forcefully relocated to incarceration camps, albeit for different reasons than Japanese relocation. After Japan invaded parts of the Aleutians, the Alaska Defense Command issued orders that allowed Caucasian men to stay in those areas still under U.S. control to aid in defense efforts and support incoming U.S. military forces. White women and children were evacuated from the islands with a large luggage allowance and then given the opportunity to join family elsewhere. Unanga Alaskans (legally measured as those with ancestry of more than 1/8 Native blood quantum), however, regardless of age or sex, were forcefully relocated to hastily constructed camps in Southeast Alaska, near Juneau, where they faced similar hardships as Japanese Americans in incarceration camps – poor food, lack of privacy, limited running water, and disease. Unlike Japanese Americans, whose relocation was justified by U.S. officials as an ostensible national security measure, Alaskan officials justified Unanga relocation as necessary for the people’s own protection.

The rationale was different – paternalistic rather than militaristic – but the impact of racism was the same: loss of land and property, fraying of family ties, and forced labor. In Alaska’s case, a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the private Fouk Fur Company, resulted in Unanga men being coerced into labor, ironically, back in the warzone, from which they were otherwise excluded, hunting seals and preparing pelts for the war effort in return for laughably low wages.

Guise’s purpose in her book is not to linger on this hardship. Rather, it is the importance of her argument that brings us to the work’s third lesson for educators – Native peoples have never been passive victims of American colonization. As the title implies, Alaskan Natives faced the circumstances of World War II with more than resistance; they chose resilience. Guise introduces the concept of “equilibrium restoration” to describe “the actions taken consciously by Indigenous Alaskan women and men during World War II to restore an Indigenous order that disrupt[ed] colonial actors, thereby thwarting colonial efforts of complete control” (2). The bulk of the book consists of chapters outlining how Indigenous peoples “shaped colonial structures, finding ways to maintain Indigenous spaces while retaining Indigenous sovereignty” (13).

Specifically, Guise focuses on how Indigenous Alaskans built connection within and between their Nations through the development of mutual aid organizations, political advocacy, and military service. Ultimately, she argues, Native Alaskans chose to support the U.S. war effort because they viewed U.S. rule as less harmful than Japanese rule, but they never stopped challenging U.S. efforts to destroy their cultural and political sovereignty. The book is full of examples, but one will have to suffice here. As Guise explains, in 1942, the Alaskan Territorial Guard (ATG), itself a primarily Indigenous organization, asked women to help guard the town of Utqiaġvic, also known as Barrow. Iñupiaq women like Irene Itta, who took a pistol and her nursing baby up into a guard tower to watch for Japanese invaders, did so not as a marker of patriotism against an invading enemy but as a way to protect her people’s customs, history, and livelihood. Her people needed her in the guard tower so that the men, including her husband, could partake in necessary whaling expeditions. Concludes Guise, in coopting “the colonial institution of the U.S. military,” “Native communities refashioned a colonial organization like the military and amended the ATG platoons to fit their community needs” (100-101). Beyond exhibiting agency, women like

² See Jonathan Y. Okamura, “Race Relations in Hawai’i during World War II: The Non-Internment of Japanese Americans,” *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 117-141.

Itta built resilience, protecting her people's Indigenous ways.³

As a historian of military manpower, I had a bit of trouble with the chapters on military service. I could not tell if Native Alaskans volunteered or were drafted into the ATG or the nature of the relationship between the ATG and the U.S. military, in part because Guise was not as concise as she could have been with some of her language choices (there is a difference between volunteering for the military and being inducted into the military, for example). But therein lies the fourth lesson for educators – don't stop at one work on any given subject. There is always more to learn. Drawing hard boundaries – between U.S. and not-U.S.; Indigenous vs. not-Indigenous; Aleut and Iñupiak; military history and Indigenous studies – limits all of us.

Native Alaska Resilience, therefore, has much to offer educators, especially those not familiar with this history. By crossing boundaries – between fields, between nations, and between Indigenous Nations – it offers new ways to conceptualize the single lesson or two most of us are able to devote to World War II. It broadens our idea of “the homefront,” where the United States begins and ends, reminds us that the Japanese Empire was not the only empire operating in the Pacific theater of the war, and, perhaps most importantly, introduces the idea of “resilience” into our curricula.

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³ The concept of “resilience” as separate from “agency” is growing in certain circles of the historical profession. The January issue of the *American Historical Review*, the journal of the American Historical Association, for example, ran a special feature on resilience in its December 2024 issue. See articles in *American Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (December 2024): 1381-1701.