

Dennis A. Bartels and Alice L. Bartels. *When the North Was Red: Aboriginal Education in Soviet Siberia*. McGill-Queens University Press, 1995, 122 pp.

Review by Gary Alan Hanson, Department of History, University of Saskatchewan.

*When the North Was Red* explores early Soviet policy toward the Aboriginal peoples of Siberia, now a minority in their regions because of the influx of migrants from other parts of the Soviet Union. They retained traditional languages and occupations and included Native people in Soviet institutions, for example schools, collective farms and the Communist party. The major focus of the book is the final years of the Soviet Union before 1991.

The Bartels became interested in comparison of Canadian Aboriginal people to the Aboriginals of Siberia for a twenty-year period. They wanted to examine Siberian Aboriginals who could pursue industrial or other non-traditional occupations in their own sphere without giving up their language and culture, or who could become hunters, trappers or reindeer breeders without giving up the benefits of industrial society. In Siberia, boarding schools provided some new educational and occupational opportunities for Aboriginal people, though traditional occupations and Indigenous languages suffered. The Bartels traced the final years of the Soviet Union, during which Aboriginal political activists treated the problem of how to protect the rights of Aboriginal minorities with large, non-Aboriginal majorities.

Dennis A. Bartels is an associate professor of anthropology at Memorial University at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, and Alice L. Bartels is field a associate with the Department of Ethnology at the Royal Ontario Museum at Toronto. This work is a volume in the Native and Northern Series of McGill/Queen's Press.

Consecutively, chapters in the book deal with tsarist conditions, early Soviet policy, Stalin and after, northern education in the 1980s, *perestroika* and the Association of Northern Peoples (ANP) of the USSR. An incisive seventh chapter, a postscript, compares Soviet and Canadian policies toward Aboriginal peoples.

The Bartels spent eight months in 1981–82 with Soviet ethnographers, students and teachers in Leningrad and Moscow, most of whom were Aboriginal people from the Soviet north and far east. They returned to the USSR for six weeks in 1986, spending time in Moscow, Leningrad and northwestern Siberia during two months in 1989. The book contains useful photographs of teachers and students visited by the Bartels in

Leningrad and Moscow.

Some books that have appeared since 1995 would have aided the authors: Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton, 1995), about the Nivkhi of Sakhalin Island; and John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939* (Oxford, 1988).

In the late 1930s the Latin alphabet was dropped for northern languages because using Cyrillic script would make it easier for northern students to learn Russian. Exemption of northern men from conscription was dropped in the Second World War, and hunters often became snipers in the Red Army.

Many policies that originated in the Committee of the North in the 1920s were dropped or neglected during the postwar years. The Northern Department of the Institute of Northern Schools prepared curriculum and materials for teaching northern languages; it was closed for eleven years and reopened in 1973, preparing materials in Evenk, Chukchi and Nenets.

Resettlement of northerners during the 1980s created Aboriginal bitterness toward the Soviet state. Construction of the Baikal-Amur railway (BAM) through Evenk territory did not lead to the destruction of traditional occupations, but did lead to state pressure on Evenkii to give up hunting and trapping in favour of reindeer breeding, which could provide meat for migrant labourers on the BAM project.

The authors showed that the policy aims of the Committee of the North differed from Canadian policy and were based on Sovietization and consolidation. Soviet policy aimed at adjusting traditional occupations to collective farms and training of a bilingual northern intelligentsia in new educational programs. In Canada, legal separation of off-reserve Indians, status Indians, Inuit and Metis prevented formation of a political organization that could represent all Canadian Aboriginals.

The Bartels concluded with a warning for post-Soviet Russia, where majority rule in the north and far east may override the interests of northern Aboriginals in the absence of a strong central government that could or would protect the minorities. The reviewer hopes that the Bartels return to Russia for a renewed glimpse of northern Natives today.

This book would be useful for Canadian Aboriginals and Canadians in general. The book is a plea for further help for both Aboriginal peoples and migrants in the far north of Russia. This reviewer is teaching a seminar on the history of Siberia and Alaska in 1999-2000 and is using this valuable work in his class. This book is especially valuable for all nations where Native peoples co-exist with non-Aboriginal majorities.

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