

SOVIET POLICY TOWARD SIBERIAN NATIVE PEOPLE:  
SOMETHING DIFFERENT?<sup>1</sup>

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INTRODUCTION

In Canada, Native groups often find themselves in conflict with the state (Dyck 1985). We also know that such conflict exists between states and Native groups in Scandinavia and Australia (Dyck 1985). Thus, it seems natural to assume that Siberian Native People are also in conflict with the Soviet state, especially in light of the widespread North American image of the Soviet state as being repressive.

Yet some Western scholars have suggested that most ethnic and national minorities in the USSR are well-represented in political decision-making at local levels (Lane 1981:95). Others have suggested that, because such representation exists, few Soviet ethnic and national minorities actively oppose Soviet state policies (Zaslavsky and Brym 1983). We believe that this conclusion applies to the smaller groups of Siberian Native people (see map and map key; also, see Mandel 1985: 153-61). We base our belief on interviews with over sixty Siberian Native students, teachers, scholars, and professionals, carried out over eight months in 1981-82, mainly in Leningrad, and during a brief visit to the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug in June 1986. This research is described in more detail elsewhere (Bartels and Bartels 1986).

If this conclusion is true, we must ask why Siberian Native people are an exception to the widespread pattern of conflict between aboriginal peoples and

modern states? We believe that the answer to this question lies in three factors which were crucial in the development of Soviet policy toward Siberian Native peoples. These factors were: (1) the intimate knowledge of Siberian Native People and the North that many Bolshevik/Soviet leaders gained when they were exiled to Siberia during Tsarist times; (2) Marxist-Leninist ideology, according to which Siberian Native people, though lacking industrial technology, could skip stages in the development of socialism because they retained elements of communal ownership and distribution in their relations of production; and, (3) the conviction of Soviet policy-makers that retention, expansion, and technological modernization of traditional Native occupations such as hunting, fishing, and reindeer breeding, were absolutely essential to the industrial development of Siberia.

#### POLITICAL EXILES AND SIBERIAN NATIVE PEOPLE DURING TSARIST TIMES

Both the similarities and differences between European incursions into and settlement of North America and Siberia are striking. In Siberia, movements of people from Europe eastward and northward happened somewhat earlier (see Armstrong 1965). This meant not only that they had longer to settle in, but also that European technology was at a lower level at the time of the migrations. Tsarist Russia sent in the military (Cossacks), who established wooden forts and conducted raids on the aboriginal populations. Raids were conducted in return on the wooden forts (see Bogoras 1904-09: 682, 685; also, see Jochelson 1908). Those groups that were unable to defend themselves successfully were forced to acknowledge the Tsar as their ruler, and to pay tribute (often in the form of valuable furs) to Tsarist officials. Nomadic groups,

especially the reindeer herding Chukchi, were harder to defeat. According to Bogoras, the Tsars had, for many years, to give more in "gifts" than they received in "tribute" in order to gain acknowledgement of Tsarist sovereignty from the Chukchi (1904-09: 701-02).

Besides the Tsarist penetration of Siberia, fur traders dealt with Native groups. Russian, Japanese, Chinese, American traders, and the Hudson's Bay Company, exchanged manufactured goods and vodka or whiskey for furs in transactions which can only be characterized as exploitative. Not surprisingly, alcoholism and epidemics of European diseases became serious problems among Native groups (Uvachan 1975: 38-9).

In order to back up claims to sovereignty over Siberia, settlers were moved in, often unwillingly, to areas suitable for agriculture. Life was hard, and those that survived often owed their lives to help received from aboriginal groups. (Like the pilgrims in the U.S., or the settlers in the Red River area of Manitoba).

Siberia was also used as a dumping ground for "undesirables." Criminals of all sorts were exiled to Siberia. During times of political unrest in the Tsarist empire, many "criminals" were actually political prisoners, sometimes with useful skills. For example, some young doctors, upon being exiled to Siberia, requested to be sent to remote regions inhabited by Native people. The Tsarist government was happy to comply. Owen Lattimore, a specialist on Western Asia, wrote,

...[The exiles] exercised over the Yakuts an influence which prepared them for future political aspirations and freedom. Helped, undoubtedly, by the fact that the Tsarist authorities were as corrupt as they were cruel, the exiles evaded the laws, healed the sick, taught the ignorant, gave the Yakuts the benefit of their legal knowledge, and somehow managed to distribute books and literature ...Among the Yakuts, who had

learned to hate and fear Russians, they established such a moral ascendancy that an 'offender against the government', or exile, came to be regarded as representing a higher order of humanity.

There is a story of an exile who, having in some way offended a Yakut, was rebuked by him with the words: "And you call yourself an offender against the government!"

...By the 1890s Marxists began to appear among the exiles. Some of the most famous Bolshevik leaders served periods of exile in Yakutia, including Stalin himself, Ordzhonikidze, and Yaroslavsky. In a legal publication edited by exiles, scientific discussions of the development of Yakut society and the characteristics of Yakut landownership were carried on; but at the same time Yaroslavsky organized secret, illegal revolutionary teaching among Yakut students. From among the eager young students there came eventually, a revolutionary Yakut leadership of the Yakut people (1962: 463).

Many different groups besides the Yakuts had such contacts with political exiles, and thus came to understand that not all non-Natives supported the Tsarist state and its policies which allocated virtually no resources for education and medical care of Siberian Native peoples.

Three of the most valuable ethnographic sources on pre-revolutionary cultures of Siberian Native peoples are Bogoras, Jochelson, and Shternberg--all exiled to the far North for opposition to Tsarist rule while still students. They lived in Siberia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All three spent years living with aboriginal peoples. Bogoras lived with the Yukaghir, a small group who were in danger of dying out at that time. (They did not die out, although there were only about four hundred Yukaghirs at that time. According to recent census data, the Yukaghir population is about eight hundred).

Bogoras also spent some years with the Chukchi, a larger group, some of whom were nomadic reindeer herders. Others were settled sea mammal hunters. Jochelson lived with the Koryak, a people who were similar to the Chukchi. And

Shternberg spent years in the far east with the Gilyak (now called the Nivkhi) who were primarily fishermen and hunters.

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, civil war broke out between the Bolsheviks ("Reds") and Tsarist forces ("Whites") who had the support of British, French, American, and Canadian troops and supplies (see Fleming 1961, Vol. I). In Siberia, this conflict was bitter, and the Whites and their allies were not defeated until 1925. Some of the Siberian aboriginal peoples, such as the Nentsy, a reindeer-breeding group in northwestern Siberia, took an active part in the war on the side of the Reds (Kuoljok 1985: 72). By the end of the war, reindeer herds and game populations were seriously depleted. Trade was disrupted, and Natives were unable to get traps, guns, ammunition, fish, or hooks. Many groups were on the edge of starvation. Bogoras and several others who had been exiled to Siberia and come to know the Native peoples were instrumental in the establishment of the Committee for Assistance to the Lesser Nationalities of the North (known as the Committee of the North). Many of the members of this committee had had served lengthy terms of exile in Siberia, and, therefore, had a depth of understanding of the North not possible among most of their compatriots. The Swedish ethnographer, Kerstin Eidlitz Kuoljok, on the basis of her study of the development of Soviet policy toward Siberian Native People, makes the following comment:

...if the [Social Democratic] decision-makers in Stockholm had lived in political exile in Norrbotten in close contact with [Saami] reindeer-herders, fishermen and farmers, and on the same terms as they, if the Social Democrats, who have been politically dominant in Sweden for over 40 years, had taken seriously the "national question" within the country, if there had been a symbiosis between reindeer-breeding and industry, then the relations between the Swedes and the Saamis would presumably have been different (1985: IX).

From 1924 to 1934, the Committee of the North was responsible for economic development, conservation and management of wildlife, establishment of political and legal institutions, trade, medical care, and education in Native regions (Bogoras and Leonov 1928).

The Committee took immediate steps to aid Native Peoples in recovering from the devastation of the Civil War. These measures included ending exploitative trade, provision of famine relief, medical care, and steps to restore reindeer herds and depleted game populations.

Not all members of the Committee were Marxists, and there were disputes about what long-term policies should be pursued. Some argued in favour of a kind of reservation system in order to protect aboriginal cultures from further assaults by the larger, more powerful Russian and other European cultures. Other Committee members, who eventually prevailed, argued that a reservation system would isolate aboriginal peoples from the beneficial changes that were going to be taking place throughout the country. It would have been wrong, they believed, to artificially freeze the cultures of the North, creating a kind of living museum, rather than to include them in the coming transformation of Tsarist society into socialist society (see Kuoljok 1985: 70).

#### MARXIST-LENINIST IDEOLOGY AND SOVIET POLICY TOWARD SIBERIAN NATIVE PEOPLE

Marxist-Leninist ideology supported the latter argument. According to Marxist-Leninists, some human societies have evolved from "primitive communism", through slavery and feudalism, to capitalism, which would be followed by socialism and, finally, communism. Socialist society involves public ownership of the major means of industrial and agricultural production, and

distribution of goods according to the principle, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his work." Communist society, it is claimed, will involve a withering away of state institutions such as the police and the military, elimination of most kinds of arduous and repetitive labour through the further development of publicly-owned industrial means of production, and implementation of the principle, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." The 1920s and 1930s were seen by Soviet policy-makers as a period of socialist construction which would serve as a prelude to the eventual establishment of communism.

These ideas had relevance to the debate about how best to protect the aboriginal populations of Siberia--to isolate them from Europeans, or to include them in processes of socialist development. It must be remembered that the transition to socialism would involve a change from private to public ownership, industrialization, the overcoming of illiteracy and poverty, the lessening of male authority over women and so forth. It would affect not only Siberian Native people, but also the vast majority of peoples in the new Soviet Union, including Russians, who were mostly illiterate and poor.

Marxist-Leninists assumed that while different peoples had different types of social organization and different levels of technological development, all were capable of mastering and developing industrial technology and socialist forms of ownership (e.g., co-operatives), and that people would do so if given the opportunity. In this respect, Marxist-Leninist ideology represented a rejection of the racist view that various groups, such as aboriginal peoples, were somehow "naturally" and immutably incapable of mastering industrial technology or scientific principles. (It would be interesting to compare this view with the views

of Canadian Native people held by Canadian government officials and educational authorities during the 1920s and 1930s).

Consequently, a reservation system was not adopted. Instead, doctors, teachers, and political workers were sent to help Native groups recover from the devastation of the Civil War, and to implement the policies of the new Soviet government. Some of these policies, as formulated by the Committee of the North, were as follows:

...Elucidation and exposition and then introduction, in the established legal way, of all measures necessary to the economic progress of the north, especially to improve the means of communication and forward the regularity of trade and exchange in the northern territories.

...Collecting facts and data, referring to the life and necessities of the native tribes, and the study of their history, material culture and other conditions of life.

...Exposition of measures necessary for guarding the native tribes against despoliation [*sic*] by more crafty neighbors of stronger nationality, the Russians as well as the Yakut, the Buryat, the Komo-Zyrian, etc.

...The fixing of subsidies and of all sums of money which are to be allotted for the work mentioned.

...The execution of new decrees and orders, issued by the presidium of the Central Executive Committee of Russia, in all cases referring to the lesser nationalities of the north (Bogoras and Leonov 1928: 447).

By the 1930s, Native people themselves were participating in the deliberations of the Committee of the North, studying medicine, co-operative management and pedagogy and returning to Native regions to participate in implementation of the policies outlined above.

According to Marxist-Leninist ideology, the earliest stages of socio-cultural evolution--"primitive communism" and "gentile," or descent-group organized society--are similar to socialist society insofar as they involve communal access



to resources and/or sharing of the fruits of labour. Some Native groups, particularly those who lived by foraging, retained some communal elements, while others, particularly those who lived by reindeer herding, were highly stratified. Clan elders among the Khanty, for example, owned thousands of animals while their poor relations, who owned none, worked for them without pay. In practically all groups, women were subordinated to men (e.g., among the Khanty--see Bartels 1983). But even in such stratified groups, elements of communalism, such as sharing of food, persisted. Thus it is thus not surprising that some Marxist theorists argued that Siberian Native people were actually closer to socialist relations of production than groups which had reached the stages of feudalism or capitalism at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution (see Kuoljok 1985: 107). What was necessary to complete the transition to socialism for Siberian Native people, it was argued, was the application of modern technology to traditional occupations, and the extension of new forms of communal ownership--such as co-operatives--to all aspects of traditional economies. This could be accomplished with assistance from the new proletarian state (Kuoljok, 1985: 34).

Another important aspect of the transition to socialism in the North was the provision of massive affirmative action programmes for Siberian Native people. Although, as noted above, they were considered to be "ahead" on the road to socialism in some respects, they were behind in others, such as education, political organization, and technological development. Affirmative action in these areas would allow them to "catch up."

Native people were not the only groups seen as needing extra resources to "catch up" during the 1920s and 1930s. Workers, peasants, and other groups who

had been deprived of access to education in pre-revolutionary times all qualified for various types of affirmative action programmes.

Affirmative action in North America usually means selecting individuals from groups, which have suffered from discrimination, and giving these individuals extra help to "make it." Sometimes, it is expanded to include attempts to improve the results of "schooling" in various ways. In the Soviet North during the 1930s, such measures were not extended to a small proportion of Natives, but to all Native people. They were excused from conscription and from all taxation. Soviets and "people's courts" in Native regions were required, by law, to encompass Native people, including Native women. Adult literacy classes for Natives and non-Natives, and a network of schools and "culture bases," with libraries and cinemas, clinics, and co-operative stores were established in Native regions. A special Institute of the North was established in Leningrad to train a Native "intelligentsia" of teachers, co-operative organizers, political organizers and journalists. Students and teachers including the above-mentioned Bogoras at the Institute of the North created alphabets for several unwritten Native languages,<sup>2</sup> and wrote the first introductory readers in Native languages. Literacy both in Native languages and Russian became, and remains, a major goal of Native education. Now, there are several prominent Siberian Native authors who write in their Native languages and in Russian. For example, Yuri Ritkheu, a prominent Chukchi writer, has had works published in Chukchi, Russian and English (1981; 1983).

Native students in boarding schools (for children whose parents were working on the tundra or taiga), technical institutes, universities and pedagogical institutes were entitled to free education, including books, clothing, room and

board, and transportation to and from school. Some of these affirmative action education programmes are still in effect (see Bartels and Bartels 1984). Other aspects of affirmative action were discontinued after it was deemed that Native people had "caught up" in various ways with other national and ethnic groups. Native people, like all other Soviet citizens, are now taxed (at very low rates by Western standards), and males are subject to conscription. Application of modern technology to traditional occupations continues, but it can no longer be considered part of affirmative action insofar as these occupations now make a substantial contribution to the national economy.

In the course of these changes, Siberian Native people did not have to give up their traditional skills, or see them rendered useless by "development." Many Native people have become literate in two or more languages their Native language, Russian, and perhaps English or German, have learned how to apply modern technology to their traditional occupations, and, probably most importantly, have seen that their traditional occupations and skills are important to the larger society.

#### INDUSTRIALIZATION OF THE SOVIET NORTH

As noted above, early Soviet policy-makers envisioned traditional Native occupations as eventually providing an essential component of the future industrialization of the Siberian North. For this, it was necessary to combine traditional occupations with modern technology, and socialist forms of ownership. As the Soviet Union became industrialized, and as an educational infrastructure was developed during the 1930s, the products of industrial technology and scientific knowledge increasingly became available to Siberian Native people.

Airplanes, radios, sewing machines, motorized boats, and veterinary medicine became integral parts of life in the North and traditional Native occupations. In the course of this process, increasing numbers of Native doctors, veterinarians, technicians, paramedics, teachers and other professionals appeared in Native regions. Now, technical colleges and research institutes are located in Siberian centres such as Salekhard, Khanty-Mansisk, Anadyr, Petropavlovsk and Nikolaevsk-on-Amur so that young Native people do not always have to travel south in order to become specialists.

Collectivization of traditional occupations was a slow process, and was not completed until the 1950s. The first collective organizations were labour co-operatives in which Native people pooled their efforts at certain tasks, and then shared the fruits of labour. Later, property, such as grazing land and reindeer herds, were shared in co-operatives--i.e., kolkhozii (collective farms). In some cases, co-operation proceeded smoothly, especially as state stores began to offer interest-free loans to co-ops, goods at low-prices, and relatively high and stable prices for furs, reindeer meat and fish to these co-ops. In other cases, particularly among stratified reindeer breeding groups, the transition was more difficult. Wealthy reindeer breeders and shamans, often fearing the displeasure of spiritual forces, or realizing that collectivization would mean loss of their influence and herds, opposed it. Sometimes, such people had a great deal of influence because of kinship ties or of the persistence of traditional religious beliefs. Non-Native officials, often backed by young, poor Native people, tended to be keen supporters of the new Soviet way of life. They sometimes expropriated land and herds from the rich who, in turn, organized their kinsmen in opposition to collectivization (see Bartels 1983). In order to avoid such

conflict, the Central Committee of the Communist Party halted, or even reversed, collectivization at least twice during the 1930s (see Taracouzio 1938: 289, 293).

Eventually, however, collectivization was carried out. Today, hunting, fishing, reindeer breeding, and trapping are almost entirely carried out by work brigades on collective or state-owned "farms." As early Soviet planners envisioned, traditional occupations have been greatly expanded and now serve as a major source of food for the industrial cities of Siberia, and as a valuable component of the overall Soviet economy. For example, about one-third of the meat consumed by the 200,000 inhabitants of the northern Siberian industrial city of Norilsk is reindeer. (During our visit to the Yamalo-Nentz Autonomous Okrug in July, 1986, we were served reindeer steaks at most meals.)

Natives who work at traditional and non-traditional occupations in Native regions are well-paid by Soviet standards, insofar as they receive all the benefits--such as double and triple pay, long holidays, and early retirement--that are used by the Soviet state to attract non-Native workers to the north (see Armstrong 1978: 51).

In many respects, traditional occupations constitute the heart of aboriginal cultures. Thus, retention and expansion of traditional occupations, even in modernized form, make retention of other aspects of traditional cultures easier. For example, it has been suggested by some ethnographers that Native languages are more suited, or adapted, to traditional occupations than non-Native languages, such as Russian. L.V. Khomich, a Soviet ethnographer who specializes in the Nenetz people of northwestern Siberia, told us in 1981 that the Nenetz language was much better for reindeer herding than was Russian, and that among reindeer herders, Nenetz is in no danger of dying out. Another Soviet

ethnographer who studies Soviet Eskimos in far eastern Siberia told us about a Russian man who had joined an Eskimo sea mammal hunting brigade, and had to learn a dialect of Yupik Eskimo, even though all the Eskimo brigade members knew Russian well. The ethnographer explained that Eskimo was a more efficient language for sea mammal hunting than was Russian. Western anthropologists have reported similar phenomena. Ernst Manker writes as follows of the "Lappish" spoken by the Saami in northern Sweden.

...when it comes to reindeer and reindeer management, there's no language to come up to it. Here Lappish has an excessively rich specialized terminology, which is eloquent testimony to the Lapps' age-long familiarity with this, their favorite animal (1972: 54).

The importance of traditional Native occupations to the Soviet economy may guarantee their protection from the environmental impact of industrialization. This is clearly a concern among Soviet policy-makers, and also among many of the Native people with whom we talked in 1981-82 and 1986. This concern is also reflected in introductory readers in Native languages, all of which have pictures and stories on the theme of environmental protection (e.g., see A.A. Antonova 1982; also, see Zhukova, Ikavav, and Agin 1981).

## CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that change among Siberian Native people in the Soviet period has been tremendous and, at times, tempestuous. However, the changes that Siberian Native people went through during this period may well have been less profound than the changes many North American Native peoples have had to endure, such as loss of traditional occupations due to loss of resources, confinement to reservations, and extension of capitalist relations of production and exchange into all areas of life.

It is also important to note that there were no groups in the Soviet Union that were not undergoing the sorts of fundamental changes experienced by Siberian Native people--such as collectivization, reduction of male authority over women, establishment of Soviet power, introduction of compulsory education, industrialization, etc.

The foregoing sketch of the sources of Soviet policy toward Siberian Native people leads us to conclude that it is a serious mistake to project the experience and current struggles of North American Native people on to the contemporary situation of Siberian Native people. It is true that Siberian Native people have concerns regarding preservation of their languages, environmental protection, and so forth that are similar to the concerns of North American Native people; but, for the Siberians, these issues will be resolved in a social and economic context that is vastly different from the social and economic context of North American Native struggles.<sup>4</sup>

While the contemporary conditions of life for Native people in Siberia are very different from the conditions of life for those in Canada, there is much to be learned from the development of Soviet policy toward Siberian Native people that could be useful here. For example, the development of written forms for Native languages involves several key issues which have been extensively explored in the USSR. Soviet linguists and educators, both Native and non-Native, have had to decide whether to develop written languages in different dialects of the same Native language, or to choose one major dialect as a basis for a literary language. Different solutions to this problem have been tried in the Soviet Union. For example, materials are published in three major dialects of Khanty, whereas the Evenk have opted for a single literary language based

upon a major Evenk dialect. (An Evenk educator told us that it was very important to have a single literary language, despite dialect differences, in order to strengthen the unity of the people, and to insure a longer life span for the language). Those interested in minority language retention, education, and use in Canada could learn a great deal from the Soviet experience (Bartels and Bartels 1986). To fail to explore Soviet policy toward Siberian Native people for "political" reasons, or because of preconceptions about Soviet society, is, in our opinion, equivalent to cutting off our noses to spite our faces. Expanded contact and detailed research would benefit both the peoples of the USSR and of Canada.

## NOTES

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We have not used Russian-language sources in this paper in order to insure that readers can check all sources cited. For bibliographies of Russian-language sources on the smaller groups of Siberian Native People, see Kuoljok (1985) and Cardin and Fraysse (1983). Also, see various issues of *Inter-Nord*, published by the Centre d'etudes Arctiques, Paris.

<sup>2</sup>During the mid-1930s, there was extensive discussion among Soviet educational authorities about whether the Latin or Cyrillic alphabet should be used for Native languages. Soviet linguists and ethnographers, such as Bogoras, believed the Latin alphabet to be better suited than the Cyrillic for representing the sounds of Siberian Native languages. So, the Latin alphabet, with some phonetic symbols, was used to publish the first school textbooks in Native languages. But teachers found this alphabet difficult to use. In 1937-38, the Cyrillic alphabet was adapted for Native languages. It was believed that use of



the Cyrillic alphabet, besides being easier for teachers, would make it easier for Native students who would eventually have to use Russian in higher education. They would only have to deal with one alphabet.

<sup>3</sup>The term "Eskimo" is still used in the USSR.

<sup>4</sup>One of the reviewers for this journal asked us why Soviet Eskimos did not attend the last Inuit Circumpolar Conference. We do not know the answer to this question. It should be noted, however, that Siberian Native folk ensembles have visited Greenland, as well as Norway and France. There have also been contacts between U.S. and Soviet Aleuts. Contacts between Alaskan and Siberian Eskimos are planned. Yuri Ritkheu, the Chukchi author, has visited Canada, and V.N. Uvachan, the Evenk scholar and Communist, met Canadian Native People when he visited British Columbia.

## MAP KEY

	<u>Nationality</u>	<u>Approximate Current Population*</u>
1.	Saami	1,900
2.	Nentsy	29,000
3.	Nganasan	900
4.	Entsy	300 (Isayev, 1977:157)
5.	Komi	327,000
6.	Khanty	20,900
7.	Mansi	7,600
8.	Selkup	3,600
9.	Ket	1,100
10.	Dolgan	5,100
11.	Evenk	27,300
12.	Even	12,500
13.	Yakut	328,000
14.	Yukaghir	800
15.	Chukchi	14,000
16.	Koryak	7,900
17.	Itelmen	1,400
18.	Eskimo	1,500
19.	Aluet	500
20.	Nanai	10,500
21.	Nivkhi	4,400
22.	Ulchi	2,600
23.	Udegheitsy	1,600
24.	Orochi	1,200
25.	Oroki	n/a
26.	Tophalari	800
27.	Negidaltsy	500
28.	Chuvantsy	n/a

\* Unless otherwise indicated, these figures come from the Central Statistical Board of the USSR (1981: 14-15).



Map by Warwick Hewitt

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