

Essay 3: Russian and Alaskan indigenous peoples on the 20th century frontiers by Malcolm B. Roberts

The indigenous people on the frontier were highly inventive survivors who spread throughout the vast Russian continent, then to Alaska and beyond. In the early 20th century, their lives and cultures were dominated by incoming frontiersmen, their respective federal governments and missionaries, both Christian and Communist. By the end of the century, however, Native peoples in Alaska, and in parts of Russia, began a cultural, political and economic comeback.

Pre-history

Over the centuries, a wide array of tribes migrated into what is now the Russian Far East. Most were escaping the oppression of powerful regimes in China, Mongolia, Manchuria, Japan and Russia itself. Their languages were linked to the Manchu, Mongol, Turk and Finnish linguistic families and remained largely unwritten until the 20th century. Therefore their shifting identities and movements were left to oral histories and rarely recorded.

“They spread for thousands of miles across forests and tundra, swamps and mountain ranges, from Mongolia to the Arctic Ocean, from the Pacific almost to the Urals, making them the most widely spread indigenous people on any landmass,” writes Piers Vitebsky of the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge University in England. (1)

The most adventurous crossed into Alaska during the Ice Age on the land bridge created by retreating seas. These hardy explorers are thought to be the ancestors of the tribes that populated the American continents from north to south.

The Russians push their way into indigenous territory

In the mid-16th century, a legendary figure known as Yermak worked as a tracker on the Volga River, one of the human beasts of burden who toiled in teams along the river bank, pulling ships by rope up the mighty waterway. After escaping servitude, Yermak became a leader of the Cossacks who pirated the shipping trade. Chased by Ivan the Terrible’s troops, he worked his way north and eventually signed on with the powerful Stroganov

merchant family. The Strogonovs held a franchise from the tsar to the vast wilderness to the east of the Urals now known as Siberia. Yermak's assignment was to lead an expedition of his fellow Cossack bandits and other mercenaries into the frontier lands to conquer the Natives and seize their territory.

In 1582 he and his force of 800 motley men confronted and defeated the Tatars at the outpost of Sibir (reputed to be the linguistic root of the name Siberia). This pivotal victory eventually led to tsarist control of the remote, wilderness lands from the Urals east, and Yermak is known in Russian history as "the conqueror of Siberia." (2)

Dominant invaders have rarely if ever treated historic residents kindly or fairly, and for the next two centuries, as the Cossacks relentlessly pushed eastward, they were no exception. One American adventurer/writer, Olaf Swenson, commented wryly that they treated the indigenous people in Siberia "almost as badly as the Americans treated the Indians." (3)

But unlike the Americans moving west, the Russians were not seeking farm lands, as cold temperatures and permafrost made most of Siberia unsuitable for growing crops. Instead, they sought furs and exacted them from the indigenous peoples in lieu of taxes. In 1647 the Cossacks established a fort at Okhotsk on the Pacific side of Russia, and in 1740 explorer Vitus Bering laid the foundation stone for Petropavlovsk, the first Russian port on the Pacific Ocean, giving Russia access to explore what is now Alaska, hunt for furs and whales and eventually establish a colony in America.

The Russian intelligentsia meet the indigenous people

But it wasn't only Russian Cossacks, fur traders and explorers who migrated into the Russian Far East. One hundred years later, a generation of intellectuals moved there as well, although not by choice. On December, 14, 1825, a group of philosophers and writers, mostly of noble birth, revolted against Tsar Alexander I.

Called the Decembrists, the revolutionaries were highly educated, and the list of their membership includes over 100 names of famous Russians of that time. The revolt was suppressed and many of the organizers shot. Others were sent to the Siberian provinces of Enisei, Tobolsk, Omsk, Tomsk,

Yakutia and Baikal. The wives of twelve of them spent years on horseback searching for and ultimately finding their husbands.

After several years most of the exiles were sent on to the remotest villages in the provinces. Some of them wrote books about the ethnography of the people and tribes they encountered. Others taught local children and built the basis for an educated generation in Siberia. Some married indigenous residents.

Later that century the tsarist authorities exiled over 400 rebels to Siberia following the so-called Polish rebellion of 1863. As a result, by the end of the 19th century, East Siberia was home for many political revolutionaries and intellectuals, both Russian and indigenous. (4)

A snapshot at the start of the 20th century

At the start of the 20th century, over 30 traditional peoples were living in the Russian North and Far East. The majority lived by domesticating reindeer and horses in the interior, and fishing and hunting for walrus, seals and whales on the coast. The land-based reindeer herders were remarkably mobile. “Moving along rivers in winter and over passes in summer from one river system to another, forever pushing into new territory, a Tungus family could travel on journeys lasting for generations.” (1)

The indigenous peoples and the Soviet state

Following the revolution of 1917, the Russian indigenous peoples did not welcome the communist regime; far from it. It took the Soviets an additional five years of civil war to gain complete control of northern and eastern Siberia. Communist economic theories followed Soviet control, and in the 1930s the state confiscated almost every reindeer in Russia and placed them in large herds run by collective farms. This led to conflict and forced submission, illustrating the contrast of a nature-driven lifestyle that accommodated personal and tribal independence living on and from the “commons,” to a rigid ideology-based system designed by academics and enforced by bureaucrats. Many reindeer people resisted and were exiled or shot. Some “responded by abandoning their animals or eating them to

prevent them from falling into State hands, and settled down to a grim test of endurance that lasted until the mid-1980s.” (1)

A two sided coin

In tsarist times, the Cossacks and other early colonists subjugated the Native people and treated them as inferiors. They mostly ignored them except when they were extracting tribute. The early leaders of the Soviet Union, however, took a different approach. Their goal was to incorporate minorities into “the grand plan of human evolution” by giving them an education and a path into the ruling elite.

For that reason, when today’s indigenous leaders look back at the Soviet era, they see it as a two-sided coin. The communist regime designated far more funding than their predecessors to people in the remote corners of the country. When needed, they provided regular deliveries of food, medicine and school supplies. They encouraged subsistence users with free fishing and hunting licenses and even purchased the fish and game harvest.

Hunters, fishermen and reindeer breeders were considered well to do, and many indigenous people enjoyed the privilege of attending institutions of higher learning. Once they had completed their studies, however, the government insisted that the graduates return to their villages taking with them their education and an appreciation for communism and the Russian culture they had experienced in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other centers.

The other side of the Soviet coin was a paternalistic attitude toward indigenous people. As the Soviet bureaucrats in charge and the cadres who promoted communist/socialism assumed more and more control, the Natives eventually acquiesced and became despondent. With their basic daily needs taken care of by the government, some fell idle and many became addicted to alcohol after it was introduced. (5)

The communist government “missionaries” set out to “rescue” Siberian Natives. They built permanent wooden villages, schools and medical facilities and taught them communist values. At the same time they feared the shamans, the traditional Native healers and spiritual leaders, and imprisoned or killed many. (1)

The good and bad of education policies

Between the 1930s and the 1980s, the Soviet Union transformed their uneducated population into one of the most literate in the world. Books on philosophy, literature, and natural history regularly sold 100,000 copies upon their first printings.

The northern Native people were included in this literary program, and many of their brightest sons and daughters attended the Herzen Institute, a Native training college in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) where they became teachers, administrators, and party workers before being sent homes as internal missionaries for the new Soviet culture. (1)

When it encountered resistance, the Soviets in charge of the education of indigenous peoples became heavy-handed; paralleling US efforts to educate Alaska village children (*see the Alaska Native education section later in this essay*). As recently as the 1960s the Soviets sent huge military helicopters to the tundra in search of truant children, reports Anna Kerttula in her book *Antler on the Sea*. Kerttula, an Alaskan anthropologist, lived in the village of Sireniki on the Chukotka Peninsula facing Alaska from 1989 – 1991. A group of Koriak Natives recounted stories to her of “armed men in helicopters circling their small encampments, children running every which way to hide, frantic parents screaming...and children being carried onto the helicopters.” (6)

Changes reach remote Chukotka

The Chukotka Autonomous Okrug experienced a major transformation from the 1950s through the 1970s. With the advent of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States stationed troops and air bases on both sides of the Bering Sea, and with the military came civilian infrastructure. Chukotka was opened to extensive timber and mineral exploration and exploitation. These developments brought a great influx of non-indigenous peoples.

Meanwhile, the government organized Chukchi herdsman and families into cooperatives where they tended large populations of reindeer by the 1980s. But by forcing on them an industrialized lifestyle, the Soviets made the people dependent on the state and damaged the traditional family structure.

Soviet ideology did not condone discrimination against Native peoples and allowed them to wear their traditional dress, perform indigenous dances, and speak their native languages. “But if you spoke Yup’ik or Chukotkan, what you talked about should be socialism,” writes Kerttula. (7)

Until recently, the wider Russian public was unaware of the distress of the Native peoples in the Far East. Most believed romanticized reports in the Soviet media of happy ‘nature children’ who danced in exotic costumes and supposedly lived in harmony with their harsh but beautiful environment. As soon as media controls were relaxed in the late 1980s, Russians were shocked to learn that many northern Natives suffered from poisoned environments, cancer and depression and their life expectancy was 18 years lower than that of the over-all population. (1)

A modern republic with an indigenous heritage

A region in the Russian Far East that deserves special notice is the Sakha Republic, known to the outside world until 1990 as Yakutia. The population numbers nearly one million, and their government has endorsed three official languages - Russian, Yakut (of Turkic origin) and English. The latter was adopted because of the growing use of the internet even in remote Sakha villages.

The Sakha government built two opera houses in Yakutsk, the capital city, demonstrating their appreciation for both Native and Russian culture, Talented local and guest opera stars sing operas in Russian in one and in Yakut in the other.

The traditional livelihood of the Sakha people, with strong cultural and political significance, was the herding of hardy strains of horses and cattle. The small, shaggy Sahka horse is much beloved still today and remains the proud symbol of the Sakha Republic. But it is an unsentimental symbol. Horse meat is considered a dining delicacy.

Located deep in the heart of Eastern Siberia, Sahka is reported to have some of the inhabited world’s coldest temperatures, but the people are undaunted by the cold or the isolation. Not only are they connected to the world by the internet, they are connected by air and the mighty Lena River that flows

south to north 3,000 miles to the Arctic Ocean carrying raw materials and freight from Sakha's rich forests and mineral deposits.

Since the fall of communism, forceful Sakha leaders, many of indigenous heritage, have strengthened the relationship between Sakha and the Kremlin, although friction often arises over resource royalties. Sakha coal, oil and its vast diamond resources are considered to be some of the most important national assets.

Spiritually Sakha survived the militant atheism of the communist era. Orthodox cathedrals in the capital of Yakutsk sparkle with fresh paint and gold leaf, while traditional belief systems also make a comeback. Yakut carvers have created a new generation of totems that powerfully illustrate time-honored principles and values, such as family and the harvest.

In summary, the indigenous peoples of the Russian Far East withstood the intense pressure to conform to Soviet communism much as they dealt with wave after wave of other foreign invaders over the centuries.

In 1990, the leaders of 41 tribes founded an organization to protect human rights for all indigenous people of North Siberia and the Far East. This group, called the Russian Association of the Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and Far East (RAIPON), has a special consultative status with the United Nations and is a permanent participant at the Arctic Council, the quarterly meeting place for the eight Arctic nations. (5) The next phase, and perhaps the most promising chapter in one of the world's most compelling stories of survival, is just beginning.

The Alaska Native people

Twenty distinct groups identify themselves among the Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts in Alaska (9). Each has its own survival and belief system that encompasses both the spiritual and tangible worlds and how humans should live in harmony with both. Explorers, hunters and traders began arriving in the 18th and 19th centuries, and they often came in conflict with and used and abused indigenous Alaskans. Fur traders literally enslaved Aleut hunters to harvest sea otter furs, a precious commodity in the luxury markets of Western Europe.

When welcomed into a Yup'ik village, missionaries and other newcomers viewed traditional celebrations with awe. Elaborate masks, rhythmic songs, and energetic beating of drums and dance have been described by the Yup'ik as "our way of praying." At first contact, neither side could speak the other's language, so foreigners often left the village imagining they had witnessed pagan rituals or even devil worship. (10)

When the U.S. purchased Alaska from Tsar Alexander II (1867), virtually all of the Alaska population was indigenous. The census of 1880 recorded 33,426 Natives living in the Territory and 430 non-Natives. By way of comparison, in 2004, the total Alaska population was 655,000 of which 100,000 (approximately 15 percent) were Natives.

A clash of cultures

At the start of the 20th Century, gold seekers introduced modern ways and deadly diseases for which the indigenous people had no immunity. Yupi'k writer Harold Napoleon estimates that influenza, brought to Nome by prospectors, nearly wiped out a generation of his people. (11) That epidemic had devastating implications. The tribes depended on their elders to pass on survival skills and family histories. When a generation of elders died suddenly, much of that history and many of those skills died with them.

While individual land ownership systems, including feudal rule and market competition, were being developed in Europe, most of the people in the rest of the world, including those living in the Far North, lived on and from the commons. Indigenous tribes on both sides of the converging Russian and American frontiers believed that land and living resources on which they

depended were governed by a Spirit world and belonged to everyone in the community or simply didn't "belong" to anyone. Although protective of their territory, they had no concept of "owning" it.

Property lines in the Far North were meaningless. Wildlife and fish moved freely with the seasons following their food supply and the weather patterns. The environment was beautiful but unforgiving in prehistoric Arctic regions, and it remains so today. Human survival depended on harvesting wild resources, and people did so with reverence. Successful hunters usually said a prayer of thanks to the game they killed, believing their gratitude would be repaid with more animals visiting their region in the future. It was common sense to kill only as much as was needed to support the community.

A Tlingit woman stands up to discrimination

In 1924, the U.S. Congress granted citizenship to Alaska Natives along with all American Indians, allowing Alaska's first people the right to vote and own land. But discrimination persisted. Signs that read "No Natives Allowed" were commonplace in hotels and other public facilities until the Territorial legislature passed the Alaska Anti-Discrimination Act in 1945. Prior to the vote, a debate on the Senate floor came to an end following an eloquent appeal from Elizabeth Peratrovich, a Tlingit Indian. Her comments were preceded by remarks by Senator Allen Shuttuck of Juneau, a prominent and respected businessman:

"Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites, with 5,000 years [sic] of recorded civilization behind us?"

Mrs. Peratrovich responded in part,

"I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind the gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights... No law will eliminate crimes, but at least you, as legislators, can assert to the world that you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak of your intent to help us overcome discrimination... There are three kinds of persons who practice discrimination: (including)...the great superman..."

(who) believes in the superiority of the white race. This super race attitude is wrong and forces our fine Native people to be associated with less than desirable circumstances.” (12)

The Act was the first such legislation passed in the United States and its possessions since the days immediately following the Civil War.

Native education on the Alaska frontier

The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs and the missionaries built and operated most of the early elementary schools in Alaska. But teaching a standard American curriculum proved difficult in rural Alaska. Children in most schools were forbidden to speak their Native language in the classroom, and many Alaska Native parents and grandparents were unhappy that their young people were required to learn English and study about life in the South 48 and Europe. They felt there were more important things to understand. The younger generation needed to learn the intricate lessons of how to live in Alaska’s harsh environment so they could maintain cultural traditions, feed themselves and their families and look after their elders.

Many children, as young as 5 or 6, were forcibly taken from their families in villages without schools and flown to distant schools, as were their counterparts in the Russian Far East. To be separated from one’s family at that age was a traumatic experience with serious consequences for many of the most promising young people. For high school education, teachers in the villages selected talented children to place in boarding schools in other states, once again causing anxiety in the students and their families.

Eventually several boarding schools were established in Alaska and the system was substantially improved. Approximately two out of three of today’s senior Alaska Native leadership attended those schools, most notably Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka where generations of young Alaskans benefited from dedicated teachers and creative curricula. The students, however, were still required to take a series of airplane rides from most villages forcing families to give up their children for months, even years, on end. The pain of this separation would live with many of these outstanding Alaskans for a lifetime. (*For a history of Alaska Native education, see footnote 9.*)

Alaska Natives stake their claims

Soon after Alaska achieved Statehood in 1959, the young State began to select resource potential acreage throughout the territory as part of its 103 million acre entitlement. Some early choices included land that Natives considered traditional, even sacred. This incensed and unified the Native community prompting the leaders to change their long-held view of non-ownership of “the commons.” From that point forward, they were determined to win clear title to a sizeable portion of Alaska. The Alaska Native land claims movement was born.

Willie Hensley, a student in a graduate law course at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1966, provided a rallying point for the Native movement when he wrote a research paper entitled “*What Rights to Land Have the Alaska Natives?*” An Inupiat born in Nome who had graduated from the University of George Washington in Washington, DC, Hensley documented in his paper the legal case for land ownership by Alaska Natives. His paper helped change Alaska. (13)

Leaders step forward

Native representatives and senators in the state legislature’s first sessions gained a reputation for legislative skill and political talent. These leaders gathered with others in 1966 to form what became the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) to present a unified voice. (14)

Two years later, Alaska Governor Walter Hickel created a Native Claims Task Force, and funded travel costs so that its members could meet on a regular basis. Hickel charged the members with finding a solution to their land claims that was fair to the Native people and the State and could win Congressional support.

The Task Force produced an unexpected approach. They recommended that Congress establish regional for-profit corporations to manage and develop Alaska Native lands and resources, patterned with some exceptions along the lines of American capitalism. And they urged that over 10 percent of Alaska’s 365 million acres be conveyed to these corporations and 229 village corporations. The regional corporations would represent 12 regions

of the state based on the historic territory of the major Native groups. A 13th corporation would represent Alaska Natives who lived outside of the state. Finally, they called for substantial financial support to help weather the legal and financial challenges of start-up.

Soon thereafter, newly-elected President Richard Nixon named Alaska's Governor Hickel as US Secretary of Interior. It was fortunate timing. Hickel convinced the President to support Alaska Native claims on moral grounds, and the landmark Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act became law on December 18, 1971. The Natives agreed to select 44 million acres and accepted nearly \$960 million as part of the settlement.

Many of the young and relatively-new Native leadership who had shifted only a few years earlier from their families' subsistence lifestyle to politics, had to shift again. This time they moved from politics into corporate leadership. Once again, the learning curve was steep, but many excelled. Under their leadership, some of the regional corporations were successful immediately, putting to their resources to work and making wise investments. Others struggled, became mired in litigation and faced bankruptcy. Not unusual for any group of 13 new corporations. But today all are still in business and their land estates are in tact.

As these changes took place, identity problems within the Native population increased. Those raised in villages, where friends and families looked out for one another, became lost in cities where individuals not only kept to themselves they were expected to look after themselves. Many turned to alcohol and drugs, producing tragic personal and social problems, including illness, domestic violence, teen pregnancies and suicide. As mentioned earlier, the indigenous people on both sides of the common frontier faced these challenges.

At the same time, a sobriety movement emerged from Alaska's Native community that made an indelible mark on Native culture. Dozens of villages voted themselves "dry" (free of alcohol). They started "spirit camps" to honor cultural values and fought to provide sports programs and other positive alternatives for their young people. At the beginning of the Alaska Federation of Natives, Statewide conventions and other meetings often struggled to conduct business when attendees showed up inebriated. As a result of the sobriety movement, drinking was prohibited at these

meetings, and the AFN continues to provide funding, education and leadership on this issue statewide.

Subsistence becomes a priority in federal law

As Native businesses gained strength, there was a growing sense among rural Alaska Natives that they had seen few benefits from the settlement based on the corporate model. Their greatest concern was the potential loss of subsistence hunting and fishing, their time-honored security system. That lifestyle, central to both survival and cultural connection, required access to fish and wildlife on federal lands. The biggest threats to access were unrestrained resource development and the environmental movement.

In the early 1970s, national environmentalists targeted Alaska for a campaign to set aside the largest land withdrawal for conservation purposes in world history. When they learned about it, the Alaska Native leadership knew immediately that, although it was well motivated, it was a serious threat. Perry Eaton, an Aleut leader who like many of his colleagues has a wry sense of humor, commented later, “We knew we had to put to put our feathers back on and head to DC all over again.”

After nine additional years of living with friends or in inexpensive hotels as they lobbied Congress, these persistent leaders prevailed. The amendment they wrote was added as its own title (Title VIII) in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act before it became law in 1980. This title guarantees priority use of fish and wildlife resources for subsistence purposes on nearly all federal lands in Alaska. The priority is not exclusive to “Native residents,” as some advocates had hoped, but to all “rural residents” (15)

This victory by and for the Native community led to acrimony and litigation between urban and rural Alaskans. The Alaska constitution requires common ownership of all state resources, including fish and game. A lengthy legal battle led by urban sportsmen convinced the Alaska Supreme Court to throw out a state law that mirrored the federal subsistence priority. Since then, federal and state agencies have worked out an uneasy but functional compromise. A dual management system allows state biologists to manage fish and wildlife on all Alaska lands, as per the Alaska Statehood

Act, while federal personnel guarantee subsistence rights to rural residents on the federal lands they oversee, as per federal law.

Historic changes on the horizon

Meanwhile business was booming. Earnings from oil related business ventures by the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, one of the 13 Native regional corporations, placed it in the Fortune 500. Cook Inlet Region Inc, having successfully invested in South 48 communications companies, issued a dividend of \$500 per share in the year 2000. As a result, most of their 6,200 shareholders received \$50,000 each. (16)

At the end of the 20th century, Alaska Native companies represented 15 of the top 49 Alaska-owned businesses in the state. This success represented an economic achievement perhaps unparalleled by indigenous people worldwide. The future looks even brighter. As the 21st century takes shape, a new generation of talented, educated Alaskan Natives are moving into politics and corporate, non-profit and village leadership.

Guiding Questions:

- How do Alaska and the Russian Far East compare in cultural diversity?
- How were the concepts of “land ownership”/commons similar amongst the Alaska and Siberian natives?
- Compare the concept of commons between the Soviet state and the traditional natives of Siberia.
- How was Alaska transformed after 1924 and after 1958 in ways that benefited Alaska Natives?

Class Projects:

- Develop as PowerPoint presentations a set of comparisons of the physical environments, population characteristics (e.g. size, ethnicity), and economies of the Russian Far East and Alaska.

- Prepare a set of group reports on education in the Russian Far East and Alaska during the following time periods:
 - a. 19th Century (For Alaska, consider both the colonial Russian and colonial American periods.)
 - b. 20th Century (Soviet period for Siberia and both pre-1970's and post 1970's in Alaska.)

Bibliography and footnotes

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Recommended reading and resources in addition to the above:

Native People of Chukotka, a coffee table format hardcover volume with outstanding color photography. IOSBN 0-9701429-9-4. No single author or editor. Russian and English. Wild North Publishing House, Magadan, 2005 unisart@yahoo.com.

The Alaska Native Knowledge Network - www.ankn.uaf.edu

Appendix: Indigenous Populations

Russian Far East

The northern indigenous populations of the Tungus language family in the 1998 census:

Aleut	644
Chukchi	15,107
Dolgan	6,929
Evenki (also known as Tungus)	29,901
Eveny (also known as Lamut)	17,055
Eskimos	1,704
Itelmen	2,429
Khanty	22,283
Koryak	8,942
Nanai (also known as Gol'd)	11,883
Nedigal	587
Nenets	34,190
Oroch	883
Orok	179
Sakha (Yakuts)	380,000
Tofalar	722
Udegei	1,902
Ukagir	1,112
Ulcha	3,173

Total

(IWGIA, 2004: 40-48) – from Vitebsky, op. cit.)

Alaska

Eskimo	54,761
Tlingit-Haida	22,365
Athabascan	18,838
Aleut	16,978
Total:	112,942

(U.S. Census 2000. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-15.pdf>)

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