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## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

**Dennis Bartels and Alice Bartels**, *When the North Was Red: Aboriginal Education in Soviet Siberia*, McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series 11, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995, 126 pages, plates, map, index.

Reviewer: *David G. Anderson*  
*University of Alberta*

This short book is the culmination of a decade of work by two Canadian anthropologists who pioneered research into the lives of Siberian Aboriginal scholars and intelligentsia. In contrast to the recently growing list of ethnographic work by Western scholars of Siberia, their work is not based upon long-term, on-site, field research in an isolated rural setting nor an intimate familiarity with local languages. However, with the exception of Humphrey (1983), it is one of the only accounts of Siberian indigenous identity and politics from the important period preceeding the crumbling of the Soviet Union.

Bartels and Bartels conducted their field research in the early 1980s for the most part within the institutional environment of the Faculty of Northern Peoples of Hertzen State Pedagogical Institute. Located within the heart of urban Leningrad (St. Petersburg), this institution has been famous since the 1920s for its pivotal role in training Aboriginal "cadres" from all parts of the Siberian North in indigenous languages. The fact that on-site rural fieldwork was forbidden to the authors did not prevent them from meeting and interviewing representatives of some 20 Aboriginal nations; many of whom who have today become significant actors in Siberian Aboriginal-rights organizations.

This work is rather special, some would say controversial, for the fact that Bartels and Bartels took seriously the loyalty and optimism of the students they encountered for Soviet socialist ideals. In the first chapter of the book, they rightly dismiss any discussion of "assimilation" or "Russification" as being inappropriate frames of analysis to account for the complexity of Soviet nationality policy. Instead, throughout the book, they explore two "local" concepts of "national consolidation" and "Sovietization." The former concept refers to what may loosely be described as the Soviet state's affirmative action policy of encouraging representation and

active participation from each of the officially recognized nations of this multinational state. The latter concept refers to this state's characteristic stress upon industrial and urban modes of life. Together the two policies combined in an attempt to provide "modern" housing, health care, education and occupations to all nations in a manner which did not threaten local languages or costume (but impacted strongly upon other aspects of day-to-day life). This privileging of hegemonic discourse during a period of time when the Soviet state was at the apogee of its power may strike some readers as being either naïve or uncritical. However, their ethnographic sensitivity to the goals of this subset of the Soviet intelligentsia has stood the test of time better than other works written in the sardonic genre of Sovietology. As members of the Siberian intelligentsia today look around at their native villages ravaged by the indifferent policies of market liberalization, they fondly recall the "good times" (*rashee bylo luchshee*) of the early 1980s documented in this work. Although Yuri Slezkine's (1994) thick volume may represent Siberian material better within Western scholarly conventions, I can personally attest to the fact that Bartels and Bartels are remembered fondly by all those mentioned and pictured in this book as the "only foreigners who wrote our stories."

Although this book may be one of the only books in English to represent the stories of the people trained in this special institute, it does set its goals somewhat wider. In the opening chapters and conclusion, Bartels and Bartels make conclusions about Soviet nationality and development policy as a whole and contrast it to a selective rendering of the pre-revolutionary literature. Here it would seem the Bartels have extended their argument farther than is appropriate. Recent ethnographic research has shown that indeed Siberian peoples were not marginalised from the task of building the "dictatorship of the proletariat," but that the forced inclusion of socialist reindeer "ranchers" and "brigade" fisherman into an industrial economy went far beyond what is described as "traditional" in this book. The comparison of the pre-revolutionary ethnographic literature to the accounts provided by Leningrad-based cadres does indeed demonstrate great change and improvement in living conditions, but only because some widely available romantic accounts of pre-revolu-

tionary conditions have been left out (for example, Shirokogoroff, 1933) and because the hand-picked cadres with whom they met, although indeed Aboriginal, had their own special view on the fate and lives of their people. The authors do not discuss the fact that often these members of the intelligentsia are treated by local hunters and fishermen as being equally foreign as the Party organizers who arrived to industrialize their lifestyles.

Although this book may provide the reader with some challenges in interpreting the meaning of the life stories presented, it is a solid and definitive account of a particular world view. The bibliography is not comprehensive but gives a large list of English-language sources on this region. The maps and tables give accurate data for these officially ratified nations (but mistakenly identifies their titles as self-designated ethnonyms). The appendices give several relevant illustrations of the type of people and the program common of this very special institute devoted to the proper training of Siberian Aboriginal peoples.

## References

- Humphrey, Caroline  
1983 *Karl Marx Collective: Economy, Society and Religion in a Siberian Collective Farm*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shirokogoroff, S.M.  
1933 *Social Organization of the Northern Tungus*, Shanghai: Commercial Press.
- Slezkine, Yuri  
1994 *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

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Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, No. 98, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 224 pages.

Reviewer: David S. Moyer  
University of Victoria

This book analyzes the interaction between France's highly centralized school system and the local identity of the people of a commune in the Auvergne. Unlike other parts of France, there is no large-scale Auvergnat nationalist movement that prescribes a normative regional identity. Thus the study deals with a locally created identity uncomplicated by political forces telling people how to be "proper" peasants. Interestingly, this work focusses on the most visible aspect of the central government in the local community, its elementary school.

The author's informants use the concept *debrouiller* to describe their situation and their way of manipulating it to their advantage. "In Lavalie, *se debrouiller* refers to the ability to make the best of, or take advantage of, a situation; and

get out of, or manage to cope with, a difficult situation. It has to do with 'making do' in the face of hardship, but also with trying to turn such circumstances to one's own advantage in order to 'make out' . . . this skill is highly valued for both men and women, and it is felt to be an important characteristic of the Auvergnat" (p. 62). Reed-Danahay presents a first-rate description of the local kinship system, domestic organization and socialization practices. Although it is essential to her analysis of the school's position in the community, it is not subservient to that analysis and stands alone as a model of succinct description of the essential elements of rural life.

The discussion of the school system includes a historical description of the French national elementary education system. The author uses archival material, including the reports which a local schoolteacher wrote in the 1870s to explain the situation in the commune. For the 20th-century archival material is augmented by interviews with former teachers. A microhistorical analysis of three commune schools' responses to the central system demonstrates that meaningful variation occurs within the lowest level of the central system, i.e., the commune.

When the author did her field work in the commune there was only one elementary school, where most of the direct ethnographic observation took place. In addition to two classrooms, the school housed an apartment for the married couple who served as teachers, the mayor's office and for a time, the ethnographer. Significantly, the male teacher who worked with the older children was also the town clerk; this bolstered his already-significant position as the local presence of the state. The ethnography of the school presents the dynamics of the imposition of bourgeois French values from above and the side-slipping, non-confrontational response of the parents and their children. This clash of values is clearest in the "lunchroom," where noon meals "involving several sequential courses" were served. "The rigidity and tension associated with eating in the school had no parallel with meal-times at home—which were relaxed, informal, and simpler. . . . In many ways, the lunchroom was symbolically run like the ideal upper-middle-class 'bourgeois' household. . . . While regional identity is conveyed through family meals, national identity was more relevant at school. The food was not Auvergnat, no cheeses were served, and it came mostly from the frozen food service that delivered to the school. Children ate a variety of foods that are standard fare at French schools, and while not unknown to the Lavallois, were not commonly served at home. The menu was decided by the teachers, rather than by families" (pp. 199-200).

This book has all the virtues of good ethnography and raises problems with established theory. In particular, the author points out some weaknesses in Bourdieu's apparent view of "educational strategies of families in Lavalie as playing completely into the hands of the dominant classes in France" (p. 152). Quite simply, the people are more flexible and the situation more fluid than expected. "The Lavallois do not reject French identity outright, and their socialization