Article

Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North and Cold War Ideology

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Abstract: During the Soviet period, much of Western scholarship on the smaller indigenous groups of the Russian north and far east—that is Northern Peoples—was shaped by Cold War ideology. In this paper, the ways in which Cold War ideology distorted representations of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples, and some of the consequences of these distortions, are analyzed.

Keywords: Siberian Northern Peoples, Cold War, ideology, Soviet policy, free market

Résumé : Au cours de la période soviétique, la plupart des études occidentales portant sur les petits groupes autochtones russes du Nord et de l'Extrême-Orient – autrement dit, les peuples du Nord – ont été façonnées par l'idéologie de la guerre froide. Cet article analyse les façons dont l'idéologie de la guerre froide a déformé les représentations de la politique soviétique envers les peuples du Nord ainsi que certaines des conséquences de ces déformations.

Mots-clés : peuples du Nord sibérien, guerre froide, idéologie, politique soviétique, économie de marché

During the Soviet period, much of Western scholarship on the smaller indigenous groups of the Russian north and far east—that is, Northern Peoples—was shaped by Cold War ideology. In this paper, we analyze ways in which Cold War ideology distorted representations of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples, and some of the consequences of these distortions.[1]

By "Northern Peoples" we mean the 26 relatively small, indigenous groups of the north and far east of the former U.S.S.R. which were designated as "nationalities" by the Soviet state. Their traditional cultures were based on hunting, fishing, trapping, and reindeer breeding. In the late 1980s, the 26 Northern Peoples ranged in population from approximately 34 000 Nenets to approximately 200 Oroki (International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) 1990). Two larger groups in northern Siberia—the Sakha/Yakut and the Komi, each numbering around 300 000—were not counted among the smaller nationalities.

Most of the Northern Peoples lived in seven Autonomous Regions created by the Soviet state in the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR). By the 1960s, in practically all of these regions, Northern Peoples were greatly outnumbered by people from elsewhere in the U.S.S.R., mostly Russians (Armstrong 1978). Generally, the newcomers were transients who lived in urban centres while Northerners lived in rural areas.

Cold War Ideologies

The Cold War (1945-91) can be characterized as a contest between the former Soviet Bloc, led by the U.S.S.R., and the West, led by the U.S., which stopped short of direct U.S.–Soviet armed conflict largely because of the threat of mutual assured destruction posed by nuclear war. This contest involved, among other things, comparisons between various aspects of life in the West and the Soviet Bloc in an effort to marshal political support for capitalism or socialism. Such comparisons were embedded in

particular ideologies. These ideologies attempted to provide answers to fundamental questions about the nature and direction of the West and the Soviet Bloc: why was each side the way it was? Was this good or bad? What should be done about it, if anything? (see Dolbeare and Dolbeare 1971; Eagleton 1991).

Marxism-Leninism, the official ideology of the former U.S.S.R., was based on the view that capitalism involved exploitation of workers by capitalists (Bartels 1999), and that such exploitation had been eliminated in the U.S.S.R. The Soviet state, which owned the major means of production, communication, and exchange, viewed itseld as an instrument of working people's rule, and thus as democratic. It was illegal for individuals to own the major means of production, exchange and communication. Otherwise, exploitation would reappear. Surplus provided by Soviet workers was to be used to insure security of the state and the socialist social order, and to improve Soviet living standards (see Afanasyev et al. 1974; Bartels 1999). Revenues from state-owned enterprises largely supported all social services, including housing, education, daycare, heat, light, medical care, and pensions. As a result, taxes were very low, as were basic living expenses such as the cost of certain food items, rent, utilities, and public transport, including internal air travel. Employment was guaranteed by the state. Soviet socialism was based on the principle, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their work," and was seen as the penultimate stage in an evolutionary progression culminating in a stateless, technologically-advanced communist society based on the principle, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need" (see Khorzov et al. 1977:393-406).

In contrast, the ideological foundation of Western societies during the Cold War centred on freedom of individuals to publicly express their political views, to worship, to travel, to participate in a multiparty electoral system, and to own property, including the major means of production, communication and exchange. The right to hire waged labour was legally recognized and regulated by states. Liberal democracy, despite obvious social and economic inequalities, was widely seen in the West as the apogee of social, political and economic organization.

Western "middle class" prosperity was sometimes seen as evidence of the superiority of liberal democracy and the "free market." The absence of a multiparty electoral system and restrictions on external travel for most Soviet citizens were also seen as conclusive evidence of the superiority of liberal democracy.

A tenet of Western Cold War ideology was that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were varieties of totalitarianism, the worst kind of political-economic organization of industrial society (see Arendt 1968; Schapiro 1972). Evidence for this view was found in reports of millions of victims of Stalinist policies during the 1930s (see Conquest 1969), Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956, Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, et cetera. These alleged massive violations of human rights assured many Westerners of the moral superiority of the West over the Soviets and led to another largely tacit Cold War assumption: nothing could be worse than Soviet totalitarianism.

During the Cold War, individuals or groups, consciously or otherwise, sometimes suppressed or played down experience and knowledge which was inconsistent with the ideological orientations characterized above. But this does not imply that ideologically-skewed representations of Soviet and Western societies are immutable and incorrigible. It is possible that heterodox knowledge and experience which contradict ideologically "correct" Cold War views may, especially in hindsight, yield new or different pictures of the major Cold War antagonists.

The major features of Cold War ideology mentioned above provided the context for Soviet and Western representations of the development of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples.

Soviet Policy toward Northern Peoples

Early European contact with indigenous peoples in northern North America paralleled Tsarist contact with indigenous peoples of the Siberian north in so far as both involved repeated attempts at military conquest and promotion of harvesting of furs which mainly benefited non-indigenous businesses and states. After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet state took measures aimed at ending exploitation of indigenous peoples in the Siberian north and far east. Consequently, an interesting facet of the Cold War involved the question of whether the Northern Peoples of the former U.S.S.R. fared better or worse than indigenous peoples in Canada and the U.S.

In 1917, the new Soviet state abolished Tsarist fur taxes for Northerners, attempted to eradicate exploitation of Northerners by private fur traders, and sent emergency supplies to Siberia in the disastrous conditions which followed the Civil War (1918-24).

The initiative in creating policy toward Northern Peoples was taken by ethnographers who, while exiled to Siberia for subversive political activity during Tsarist times, had done research on some of the Northern Peoples. In 1924, Waldemar Bogoras, who had done research while in exile on the Chukchi for the American Museum of Natural History's Jesup Expedition under the direction

of Franz Boas, founded the Committee for the Assistance to the Smaller Peoples of the Lesser Nationalities of the North, usually known as the Committee of the North (Bogoras and Leonov 1930). Other ethnographers on the Committee were E.A. Kreinovich, S. Kertselli, and L.Ya. Sternberg. All had spent considerable time in Siberia as exiles before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Early Soviet policies included banning of blood feuds, forced marriage, bride price, polygyny and punishments involving humiliation and torture. Traditional occupations began to be reorganized on a co-operative basis. Soviet institutions such as co-operative trading posts, collective farms, schools—including travelling schools and boarding schools—and people's courts were to provide occupational, educational and political opportunities that were independent of kin connections. According to a 1933 article in *American Anthropologist* by E. Golomshtok, alphabets for some unwritten Northern languages were devised and an Institute of the North was created in Leningrad in 1926 to train teachers, writers, para-veterinarians and political leaders from each Northern group (Golomshtok 1933).

In the mid-1920s, the Committee of the North debated Bogoras' proposal to establish American-style "reservations" to protect Northern cultures from disruption by non-Northern settlers while "improving the overall economic life of the natives and introducing new elements that would ensure painless progress" (Slezkine 1989:274-275). Bogoras' proposal was rejected in favour of the Leninist view that Northern Peoples could, with assistance from the Soviet state, skip the capitalist stage of socio-cultural evolution in a direct transition to socialism. Bogoras and other members of the Committee of the North believed that Northerners could provide food and local knowledge that would allow Soviet workers to access the vast resources of the north (Bogoras and Leonov 1930).

Leninist doctrine on the formation of nations within a socialist society was interpreted by the Committee of the North to mean creating "national unity" among disparate groups of Northerners who shared languages and territories. On the basis of a census of Northern Peoples completed in 1926 (Vakhtin 1992:8), "national territories" for Northern groups were designated. "Culture bases," with meeting halls, clinics, co-operative shops, bath houses, boarding schools and cinemas, were eventually to become "national" capitals for transhumant hunters, fishers and reindeer breeders. With assistance from the new Soviet state, Northern Peoples could, theoretically, "progress from vestigial clan-based social organization to socialist nations, skipping the socio-cultural evolutionary stages of feudalism and capitalism" (Uvachan 1960:222).

Among reindeer-breeding groups, large herds were controlled by the heads of patriarchal families. While patriarchs were customarily obliged to supply meat and reindeer to "poor" relatives, these obligations were not always met. Soviet policy makers believed that "poor" reindeer breeders would support co-operatives formed with reindeer from the herds of "rich" reindeer breeders. In some cases, large herds were forcibly expropriated by Soviet cadres and turned over to co-operatives. Violent opposition to collectivization was sometimes organized by shamans or patriarchs. Among the Khanty of Western Siberia, for example, some shamans and elders participated in violent resistance to the supporters of Soviet power with the assistance of anti-Bolshevik "whites" who had fled to northwestern Siberia after the Civil War had ended in southwestern Russia. Many Khanty supporters of Soviet power were killed. The Soviet state called in the Red Army to suppress this revolt, but it also halted forced collectivization and returned animals to their former owners (Bartels 1983; Taracouzio 1938).

Soviet abolition of forced marriage and bride price, as well as increasing opportunities for waged labour, were popular among Northern women (Forsyth 1992; Slezkine 1994). Effects of these policies were themes of several Soviet novels, including *Lake Emeron* (Khojer *ca.* 1965), and *Alitet Goes to the Hills*, which won the Stalin Prize for Literature in 1946. An English translation of this novel was published in 1952 (Syomushkin 1952).

Stalin and his supporters consolidated power in 1929 with a commitment to "build socialism in one country." Stalinist policy involved purging the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) of "international connections" that could potentially compromise state security, and purging institutions of "nationalistic elements" which posed potential challenges to the increasingly powerful centralized state bureaucracy (Heynen 2000). This resulted in a shift in policy toward Northern Peoples. The Committee of the North was accused of promoting excessive nationalism and dissolved in 1934. Some of its members and some of the Northerners who had participated in its activities lost power and were persecuted (Bartels and Bartels 1995; Grant 1999). The Institute of the North was closed, but some of its policies survived. These included access to a proportion of reserved places for Northern students at certain post-secondary institutions, state provision of food, clothing, and transport from home to school at post-secondary institutions, and access to a proportion of reserved positions for Northerners on local and regional organs of government in certain Northern regions. Also, some of the functions of the Institute of the North were taken over by other institutions. For example, training of

teachers of Northern languages for northern schools was taken over by the Faculty of Peoples of Northern Regions at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad (Bartels and Bartels 1995; Grant 1999).

Culture bases established by the Committee of the North were not closed, but funding and supplies were reduced.

The Great Patriotic War (1941-45) drew practically all Northern Peoples into Soviet institutions as men were conscripted and women joined the waged work force in increasing numbers, often taking over traditional male occupations. Thousands of Northerners were killed in combat against the Nazis. When we visited the town of Gorky in Western Siberia in 1986, we were told that several thousand men went to war, and only one in 10 returned.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Soviet state carried out a policy of resettlement in most Northern regions. Residents of many small villages were moved to larger centres and many collective farms were combined into larger state farms. While resettlement made it easier for the state to provide services and allowed school children to live at home rather than in boarding schools, it removed many Northern People from areas where traditional occupations could be easily and profitably pursued. While some Northerners supported resettlement, others did not. It seems likely that Northerners in some small settlements had no option but to move as government services were moved to larger centres.

Soviet and Western Accounts of Northern Peoples

Cold War politics affected representations of Northern Peoples. Prior to the Gorbachev regime, Soviet accounts generally contrasted the negative effects of Tsarist policy with the benefits of Soviet policy for Northerners. Armed rebellions by factions within certain Northern groups were not mentioned. Nor was the suppression of the Committee of the North. For example, the following passage is from *The Peoples of Siberia*, published in 1956 by the Soviet Academy of Sciences:

> Thanks to the great attention and care shown by the Soviet government and Communist Party, [Northern Peoples] are gradually overcoming their economic and cultural backwardness and are becoming part of socialist culture. Nevertheless, they still have a long way to go in economic and cultural development. Their profound economic and cultural backwardness, smallness in number and division into small units, inherited from pre-Revolutionary times, have made for a variety of difficulties in further development, even under socialist conditions....These small people, who possess hundreds of years of experience of living under the severe climatic conditions of the North, are unsurpassed hunters and reindeer-breeders, and great experts in local natural conditions. No one knows as well as they how to utilize the natural wealth of the enormous expanses of taiga and tundra by developing hunting and reindeer breeding. It is therefore quite natural that their economic and cultural reconstruction involves specific features of its own. A careful study of these features will permit a quicker sharing of the treasures of Soviet socialist culture with the Siberian people and, in turn, utilization of the tremendous resources of the distant Siberian lands for the benefit of socialist construction of the entire Soviet state. [Potapov and Levin 1964:11-12]

The following passages are from *Peoples of the North and Their Road to Socialism*, by the late Evenk Communist, V.N. Uvachan:

> the northerner's work before the revolution was of poor productivity, it was insufficient to meet even minimal subsistence requirements. So the peoples of the North eked out a poverty-ridden life.
>
> Socialism has radically changed the character of work, it has become the labour of free and equal members of a socialist society. Modern machines came to the assistance of the northerner, his work became productive and necessary for the prosperity of the whole country. His work is just as important for the country as the work of steel-smelters, grain-growers, oilmen or cotton growers.
>
> The toilers of the North, led by the Communist Party, have scored major successes in the development of productive forces and natural resources, in raising the economy and culture of the indigenous peoples. The principal success lies in the fact that the northern peoples have by-passed capitalism on the road from the clan system to socialism and that they are now actively participating in building communism. [1960:208, 222]

In North America, mass media Cold War comparisons between the West and the former Soviet Bloc seldom extended to indigenous peoples, partly because few people in Canada and the U.S. were aware of the existence of Soviet Northern groups whose traditional cultures were similar in some respects to those of certain North American indigenous groups. This changed somewhat after the Canadian author, Farley Mowat, wrote a popular book, *Sibir* (1970), about his experiences in the Soviet North. He suggested that Yakut/Sakha people had the option of pursuing "modern" occupations requiring post-second-

ary education, or pursuing traditional occupations such as reindeer breeding. Since Mowat had written extensively about the Canadian north and Canadian Inuit people (1952), his views carried some weight. The publication of *Sibir* made many Canadians aware that there were counterparts of some Canadian First Nations in the Soviet north.

In 1985, the U.S. government banned Mowat from entering the U.S., ostensibly because of his extreme environmentalism (Mowat 1985). But Mowat may also have been excluded because his positive characterization of the Soviet North was inconsistent with U.S. President Ronald Reagan's 1982 characterization of the former U.S.S.R. as the heart of an "evil empire."

During the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet sources on Northern Peoples were generally distrusted in the West. For example, Terence Armstrong of the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge, wrote,

> the treatment of minorities in general, and primitive minorities in particular, is a subject on which there were solemn pronouncements by Lenin himself, involving fundamental principles of sociology, and these pronouncements later acquired the status of dogma; and—a more practical consideration—there are minority peoples in many countries, and the Soviet Union would like to make a strong appeal to them. The Soviet government thus has a compelling reason for painting a rosy picture, and at the same time no non-Soviet observer has been permitted to study any of the northern peoples since certainly the 1930s, probably earlier. So Soviet publications, constituting the main, virtually the only, source material, are not likely to present much which is unflattering to government policy, and the outsider seeking to determine the truth has no way to check his findings. [1966:57]

On the basis of Soviet publications on Northerners, Armstrong characterized Soviet resource extraction in the north as a form of colonialism that excluded Northerners (1966). He characterized members of the Northern "intelligentsia" as "good Soviet citizens. Their indoctrination in Marxism-Leninism has been thorough, and their views on affairs beyond their personal experience are naïve....Like Soviet citizens who have come to the top in other parts of Soviet society, they owe everything to the regime, and identify themselves with it rather than with whatever national group they may belong to" (1966:77). He claimed that, although there were "many members of the northern peoples filling positions in the local administration, and sitting as representatives in local soviets," there was no "real" political autonomy of Northerners (1966:82). He characterized collectivization of traditional occupations during the 1930s as "the work of missionaries fired by the spirit of the inquisition" (1966:87). Armstrong concluded that Canadian officials who made policy for First Nations had little to learn from Soviet policy toward Northerners except in the field of education.

From Soviet sources, the U.S. anthropologists, Stephen and Ethel Dunn inferred that "all pretense of using the Northern languages as cultural media has now been abandoned" (1963:23). They wrote that "the education of the children of Northern peoples is out of step with the objective requirements of their lives. Their educational level appears to be markedly below the general level in European Russia or even in Central Asia. For this situation past Soviet national and linguistic policy is largely to blame" (1963:26).

The Danish ethnographer, Paul Thoe Nielsen carried out research in Moscow and Leningrad during spring, 1971, on the importance of Northern languages. He predicted that written forms of minor languages such as Nivkh and Koryak would "disappear" (1972-73:229).

One of the few relatively positive views of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples was published in 1965 by the U.S. anthropologist, Charles Hughes. He compared U.S., Soviet, Danish, and Canadian policy toward Inuit/Inupiak peoples of the circumpolar north (Hughes 1965). Hughes raised the question of

> the extent to which there has been success in the Soviet program of encouraging, on the one hand, retention of many aspects of local ethnic identity and affiliation; and, on the other, orientation to a nation-state, to universalistic criteria in economic and political affairs. The problems this poses both in terms of the role shifts and, at a deeper level, of self-image raise important questions for investigations into processes of development, questions which have implications far beyond northeastern Siberia. [1965:47]

Major features of early Soviet policy toward Northerners were described by one of its architects, Waldemar Bogoras, in a paper delivered in New York at the 23rd International Congress of Americanists in 1928, and published (in English) in the conference proceedings by E.J. Brill (Bogoras and Leonov 1930). This article was not referenced by the Dunns, Armstrong, or by Marjorie Balzer, whose bibliography on "Peoples of Siberia" was published in 1982. Nor did these authors reference a 1933 article by Eugene Golomshtok in the *American Anthropologist* which described the work of the Institute of the North. Balzer did, however, reference the work of T.A. Taracouzio (1938), a lawyer who published a valuable collection of

Soviet documents regarding early Soviet policy in the north (Balzer 1982). His work has rarely been cited by other scholars.

A detailed description of the development of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples by the Soviet scholar, S.S. Savoskul, was published in 1978 in the *Polar Record*, the journal of the Scott Polar Research Institute of the University of Cambridge. Savoskul's work is seldom cited by Western scholars.

Ethnographic Accounts of Northern Peoples

While all major Western treatments of anthropological theory and history during the last decades of the Cold War mentioned the pioneering work of Franz Boas, discussion of his connection to Bogoras' participation in the Jesup Expedition was largely absent. For example, Marvin Harris, in his influential book, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968), did not mention the Jesup Expedition at all. Some might argue that this omission occurred because the Jesup Expedition was irrelevant to anthropological theory. But in our opinion, the Jesup Expedition was informed by Boas' view that "the geographical conditions [of the North Pacific rim] favor migration along the coastline, and exchange of culture. Have such migrations, has such exchange of culture, taken place?" (Boas 1974:108-109). Harris's failure to mention the ethnographic work of Bogoras in *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* seems unwarranted and was, perhaps, a product of Cold War ideology.

While the U.S. historian of anthropology, George Stocking (1968) wrote of Boas' supervision of the Jesup Expedition for the American Museum of Natural History, Boas' connection to Bogoras, and Bogoras' pivotal role in the Expedition were not mentioned. Nor did Stocking mention that Boas wrote Bogoras' obituary in the *American Anthropologist* (1937).

A major work on the Nivkhi (Gilyak) by L. Shternberg, produced by the Jesup Expedition, lay unpublished in the American Museum of Natural History from 1927-28 to 1999 when it was finally published under the editorship of Bruce Grant (1999). Shternberg, like Bogoras, had carried out ethnographic research while he was in exile during Tsarist times. He was a Bolshevik and a proponent of the socio-cultural evolutionary views put forward by Lewis Henry Morgan and elaborated by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1972). After the Bolshevik Revolution, Shternberg became a member of the Committee of the North. Grant (1999) suggests that Shternberg's manuscript was not published in the first place because of budget restraints at the American Museum of Natural History during the 1930s depression. Later, the Cold War "did little to permit the international scholarship that had given the Jesup Expedition its original verve" (Grant 1999:xxiv).

The classic ethnographic works on Northern groups that were produced by the participants in the Jesup Expedition and published by the American Museum of Natural History—that is, Bogoras' *The Chukchee* (1904–09), and Waldemar Jochelson's *The Koryak* (1905–08) and *The Yukaghir and the Yukaghirized Tungus* (1910–26)—were seldom mentioned during the Cold War in works by Western scholars. A notable exception was *Circumpolar Peoples: An Anthropological Perspective* by Nelson Graburn and Stephen Strong (1973). They characterized Bogoras as a "neglected founder of anthropology, a man who worked for long periods both in the field and in the university, and who turned his scientific work to practical account in the political struggle in the development of the peoples of the North" (1973:57). Graburn and Strong characterized Bogoras' ethnography of the Chukchi as "one of the most complete conducted by one man on a people; for example, he [Bogoras] records such details as the Chukchi way of dividing and naming star constellations, their division of the color spectrum, and their large vocabulary of names differentiating reindeer by color pattern and by age and sex" (1973:57).[2]

A short entry by Lawrence Krader on Bogoras, Jochelson, and Shternberg appeared in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Krader 1968). Krader, who died in 1998, was Director of the Institute for Ethnology at the Free University of Berlin.

Not surprisingly, introductory anthropology textbooks that were widely used in Canada and the United States during the 1970s and 1980s omitted all references to Soviet Northern Peoples (see Alland, Jr. 1980; Ember and Ember 1973 and 1977; Keesing 1976). Marvin Harris' popular introductory text, however, referred to genocidal attacks during the 19th century and earlier on indigenous peoples in Siberia by "state-level societies" (1987:221-222). Harris also wrote, "the Siberian shamans...signaled the arrival of the possessing spirit by secretly shaking the walls of a darkened tent" (1987:267). Harris implied that all Siberian shamans were charlatans. This is consistent with his advocacy of cultural materialism. But Harris did not reference the Jesup materials or other ethnographic sources to support this claim.

In light of Cold War biases in most published sources on Soviet Northern Peoples, we decided to try to ask Northern People themselves about their lives (Bartels and Bartels 1995:9-10). During our first research trip to Leningrad (September 1981 to April 1982), we were able

to interview students and faculty from most Northern groups at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute's Faculty of Peoples of Northern Regions. Interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter, and focused, among other things, on the educational and occupational opportunities open to Northerners. This issue was clearly relevant to Western and Soviet Cold War claims regarding Northern Peoples. We concluded that educational and occupational opportunities for Northerners had greatly expanded since the 1930s (Bartels and Bartels 1986).

One of our aims during our second research trip to the former U.S.S.R. in 1986 was to see for ourselves the extent to which both traditional occupations and educational and occupational opportunities in the larger society were open to Northerners. This question was also relevant to Soviet and Western Cold War claims regarding Northern Peoples. A brief trip to northwestern Siberia in 1986 convinced us that Northern People in that region could still choose to pursue traditional occupations, although these were in some cases threatened by industrial development. As well, many Northern People chose to pursue non-traditional occupations.

After a 56-hour train ride from Moscow to Labitnangi, we were taken on a one and one-half hour boat ride across the Ob River to the town of Salekhard by a Russian woman member of the Salekhard Soviet who taught English at a vocational school, and by two men, one Russian and one Nenets, who were Deputies in the District Soviet. Our hosts, all members of the CPSU, told us about education programs for Northern students and answered our questions about Soviet policy toward Northerners. Our hosts did not hesitate to mention problems such as pollution of the Ob by industrial development. After visiting schools in Salekhard, we were to travel by hydrofoil to Muzhi, and then to smaller communities on a small medical vessel. One of the Russian teachers of English had not known of these plans, but accepted at once when the Nenets Deputy asked her to join us and to act as an interpreter.

The medical vessel took us into an area inhabited mainly by Khanty people, and we were able to visit a Khanty fishing brigade that was working on the Ob. The brigade was headed by a middle-aged Khant woman. We stopped at the villages of Gorky and Pitliar to tour schools. In a school gym, several Khanty women were at work repairing fishing nets. Most of the men from these villages were away with the reindeer herds, taking the animals to summer grazing areas. We were told that individuals could own a small number of reindeer, and that these animals could be cared for along with herds owned by state or collective farms.

It seemed that Khanty households in the villages that we saw were to some degree self-sufficient, living off bush resources such as fish and reindeer meat. Alongside some dwellings were greenhouses that were covered with clear plastic sheeting.

Soviet Northern Peoples and the End of the Cold War

In the late 1980s and immediately after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., criticism of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples by Western academics and by some Soviet scholars reached a crescendo. Few if any positive features of Soviet policy were mentioned. An exception was *The Revolution in the North, Soviet Ethnography and Nationality Policy* (1985), by the Swedish ethnologist, Kerstin Eidlitz Kuoljok, which related Soviet ethnography to the development of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples. Kuoljok's book received little attention from Western scholars. A more typical and influential work was *A History of Siberia* (1992) by the British historian, James Forsyth. He condemned the Soviet state for criminalizing "age old practices" of clan vengeance, blood money, bride price, and arranged marriage between minors, "irrespective of the wishes of the people themselves" (1992:244). Yuri Slezkine, who had emigrated to the U.S. from the Soviet Union, claimed that the Soviet state tried to make the "backwardness" of Northern Peoples "illegal" because in 1928, a "chapter" on "Crimes That Constitute Survivals of Tribalism" was added to the Criminal Code of the Russian Republic. "Highest on the list were various forms of blood feud and those aspects of family organization that the legislators considered based on inequality, particularly bridewealth and polygamy" (Slezkine 1994:226). Slezkine (1994) characterized Northerners' responses to Soviet policy as implacably hostile and quoted Soviet publications of the early 1930s which described Northerners' refusal to support culture bases, refusal to give up shamanism, and refusal to send their children to boarding schools. Roger Moody and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) characterized Soviet policy as follows: "Although some Soviet ethnologists in the Committee of the North tried benevolently to save tribal cultures, government policies were clear and uncompromising: shamanism was to be ruthlessly suppressed, young "Eskimos" inducted into boarding schools, and indigenous languages to be "liquidated" (an official term)" (1988:70). Moody did not cite sources for these claims.

Cold War characterizations of Soviet policy toward Northerners as exclusively coercive sometimes involved serious inconsistencies. For example, while Forsyth

claimed that Soviet policy was imposed irrespective of "the wishes of the people themselves" (see above), he also wrote that Northern women generally welcomed Soviet abolition of bride-price, polygamy, the levirate, arranged marriages, birthing and menstrual huts, and exclusion of women from clan councils (1992:287):

> The generally subordinate position of women...militated against their participation in soviet meetings as speakers and voters. From 1929, therefore, the Soviet authorities organized women's meetings and propaganda, and it was the assertion by these means of women's rights to a voice in clan soviets that set native women on the path to "equality of rights." This, in turn, created among native women in Siberia an important body of support for the Soviet systems, and led to the active participation of women in political life. As a result, by 1931 about one quarter of all deputies of soviets in the autonomous republics of Siberian were women. [Forsyth 1992:287]

A similar inconsistency was present in the work of Slezkine. After claiming that Northern People were implacably hostile to Soviet policy (see above), he wrote, "most [Northern] women used the new [Soviet] policies and new politicians to improve their position within their communities, not to subvert these communities" (1994:235-236). Slezkine tacitly equated strong support for Soviet policies with "subversion," suggesting that most Northern women did not provide the strong support for which Soviet policy makers had hoped. At the same time, he characterized the Northern women who accepted Soviet policies as those who "could not support themselves but did not like their [male] protectors, wanted to remarry but were not prepared to part with their children, or decided to return home but were not welcome" (1994:235-236). Soviet policies offered new alternatives to many Northern women in these categories.

The former U.S.S.R. was not the only place where state attempts to promote women's rights came into conflict with patriarchal aspects of traditional cultures. For example, Roger M. Keesing discussed state attempts in Guinea-Bissau during the early 1970s to overcome subordination of women among the Balante (1976). In Canada, there was extensive discussion among academics and politicians of the 1985 amendment to the Indian Act which allowed First Nations women who married non-Indians to retain First Nations Status (for example, see Cairns 2000; Weaver 1993). We believe that Cold War ideology played a role in preventing comparison of attempts by the Soviet state to promote rights of Northern women with similar attempts in Guinea-Bissau, Canada and elsewhere.

While Soviet efforts to produce educational materials in Northern languages languished during the 1950s and 1960s, the IWGIA's claim that the Soviet state attempted to "liquidate" Northern languages, and Nielsen's prediction that written forms of minor Northern languages would disappear (see above), did not take into account the efforts of Northern educators to revive or expand Northern language education programs during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Some of the primers and other elementary school texts in Northern languages published during this period are referenced in the appendix. As well, teachers' manuals on Koryak grammar and on Chukchi grammar were published in Russian during this period (Emelyanova 1987; Nyomuisova 1988; Zhukova 1987; see also RSFSR Institute of National Schools 1988). During our last research trip to the U.S.S.R. in late 1989, we were asked by some Northern educators to bring books in Northern languages to Canada because they could not be preserved in deteriorating Soviet facilities. Institutions which produced books in Northern languages were subject to vacillating policies and uncertain funding under Gorbachev's *perestroika.*

In 1989, several Northern educators told us that the resettlements of the 1950s and 1960s had discouraged young Northerners, particularly women, from choosing to pursue traditional occupations that would have removed them from the amenities available in larger settlements. They said that boarding school education had distanced young Northerners from their languages and traditional occupations, and that resource development had sometimes disrupted hunting, fishing and reindeer breeding. As well, alcoholism and relatively early mortality were seen as serious problems for Northern Peoples. These criticisms were also mounted by Soviet ethnographers (for example, see Pika and Prokhorov 1989) and by Western critics. For example, in the Preface to a report on *Native Peoples of the Russian Far North,* by the Soviet linguist, Nikolai Vakhtin, Alan Phillips, Executive Director of the Minority Rights Group International, wrote:

> The basis of the "Northern minorities" way of life is land and water and the animals and fish that live there. Yet the government of the U.S.S.R. did not respect either the people or the land, seeing it only as an area ripe for exploitation and settlement. Massive industrial projects have destroyed the forests, poisoned the waterways and skies. The native people who lived with their harsh environment for centuries, had to dismantle their traditional habitats and move into arbitrarily designated government settlements. These policies carried out over a period of 40 years, need to be reconsidered and reversed if native peoples are to survive. [1992:5]

We encountered four themes that were prominent during the final years of the U.S.S.R. in discussions among political leaders of Northern Peoples and academics regarding possible ways to preserve or revive their traditional cultures, and to secure control of traditional lands and resources: (1) revival of the Leninist policies of the Committee of the North which was to involve significant devolution of political power by the Soviet state to Northern-dominated local governments in native regions; (2) adoption of Western institutions such as "Indian reservations" (Sokolovsky 1990) and "nature preserves" in which traditional Northern occupations were expected to thrive; (3) moral and legal appeals for redress for past and ongoing suppression of Northern cultures and despoliation of traditional lands and resources by more powerful non-Northern groups and states (see Anderson 2002; Bartels and Bartels 2003); and, (4) adoption of the Western-style "free market."

The possibility of a revival of the Leninist policies of the Committee of the North (no. 1 above) disappeared with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and the outlawing of the CPSU in the early 1990s.

As noted above, the Committee of the North debated adoption of American-style "Indian reservations" for Northerners. Some Soviet academics and Northerners with whom we spoke in 1989 were aware of this debate, but seemed to believe that American Indian reservations had improved since the 1920s, and could serve as a model for Northerners (no. 2 above). They seemed to be unaware of discussion of problems by North American academics, First Nations leaders and others, about life on reservations in the United States and on Indian reserves in Canada.

Post-Soviet attempts to establish nature reserves on Northerners' traditional lands (no. 2 above) have apparently been fraught with difficulties (see below).

Interestingly, few Northern political activists with whom we spoke in 1989 discussed wholesale adoption of Western-style democracy. They realized that in northern regions, Northerners were outnumbered by non-Northerners. Without some sort of guarantee of Northern Peoples' political hegemony by a strong centralized state, non-Northern majorities would gain control of northern regions through democratic elections.

Some Northerners hoped to base claims for redress for suppression of Northern cultures and for despoliation of traditional lands on the concept of aboriginal rights, as in Canada (no. 3 above). But in the Soviet context, this was problematic. In Canada and in the U.S., First Nations Peoples and Native-Americans are widely acknowledged as descendants of aboriginal groups. While Northern Peoples were descended from aboriginal groups in the north and far east of Russia, members of larger groups—for example, Russians and Ukrainians—were descended from the earliest-known inhabitants of other regions of the U.S.S.R. If redress for Northerners was to include exclusion of Russians and Ukrainians from "aboriginal" Northern regions, as some Northern political activists proposed, then Russian and Ukrainian governments could, in turn, exclude Northerners from Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, et cetera. Cold War ideology may have led some Western and Soviet academics and some Northern political activists to focus exclusively on using the North American concept of aboriginal rights to gain redress for Northerners irrespective of the problem mentioned above. It should be noted, however, that some Northern and non-Northern Soviet academics—most of whom lived in Moscow or Leningrad—seemed to hope in 1989 that loss of educational and occupational opportunities in the larger society would force Northerners back into traditional occupations, and that this would preserve their traditional cultures. This went beyond allowing Northerners themselves to choose between traditional and "modern" occupations (see Bartels and Bartels 1995).

Discussion of the adoption of Western institutions such as the "free market" (no. 4 above) in order to deal with problems of Northern Peoples involved a belief that the activities of privately-owned corporations would not disrupt the traditional cultures, lands, and resources of Northerners in the ways that it had disrupted indigenous cultures elsewhere. This belief can be explained, in part, by Soviet restrictions on external travel which greatly limited Northerners' familiarity with indigenous cultures outside the U.S.S.R.

In the late 1980s, some Northerners were invited by the Canadian federal government to visit certain indigenous groups in Canada. In 1989, we heard some of the Northerners' impressions of their visit. One man, a Nivkh ethnographer, was favourably impressed after meeting women chiefs on some reserves. He was, however, unfavourably impressed at the number of young girls giving birth. "Children having children," he remarked. An Evenk woman who had spent many years working on production of school textbooks in Northern languages was impressed by syllabic word-processing programs at an Inuit school. Another woman was impressed by an oil rig that she saw in the Canadian north whose operation required few workers. Use of such rigs in the Soviet north, she believed, would mean fewer non-Northern workers who could disrupt the lives of Northerners. We do not know whether these Northerners were made aware by their Canadian hosts of chronic problems such as high

rates of alcoholism, unemployment, incarceration, family violence, substance abuse or the racism endured by First Nations peoples in Canada. Our impression was that some of the Northern visitors were overwhelmed by the relative material prosperity that they saw in selected indigenous communities in Canada.

A Khant political activist who was a member of the Supreme Soviet who had not yet visited Canada said to us in 1989 that he had heard that Canadian indigenous people were doing very well. He wanted to know if that was true. We said that Canadian indigenous people had the highest rates of unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse, family violence, et cetera, in Canada. He was disappointed to hear that. He was hoping, we believe, that relations between Canadian First Nations and the Canadian state could provide a model for Northerners to emulate in the midst of the turmoil of perestroika.

Some Russians and Northerners told us in 1989 that introduction of the "free market" would be a very good thing for the Soviet Union. Others were more skeptical. One of the optimists was a Northern woman who made traditional necklaces from glass beads, feathers and reindeer antler. She told us that she planned to export her crafts for hard currency[3] and expected to be successful. Some Northern political activists told us that they looked forward to exporting reindeer meat for hard currency. None of the people who spoke to us about the expected benefits of the "free market" seemed to understand what it was or how it might work.

Northern Peoples after the Cold War

Although we were aware in 1989 of some of the negative aspects of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples, we feared that introduction of the "free market" would prove to be much worse than anything that had happened to them during the Soviet period with the exception of the Great Patriotic War. Despite problems of Soviet policy, most Northerners had the choice of pursuing traditional occupations or pursuing educational and occupational opportunities in the larger society. We feared that this range of choices would diminish with the introduction of the "free market." We also feared that introduction of the "free market" would exacerbate threats to Northerners' traditional lands and resources and erode the benefits that most Soviet citizens enjoyed such as state-subsidized food, housing, transport, daycare, health care, guaranteed jobs, et cetera.

Unfortunately, our fears regarding the negative impact of the "free market" on Northerners were realized. For example, according to a 1996 document released by the Russian Federation Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North and Far East:

> Our native lands are being annexed and barbarically destroyed by rapacious petroleum and natural gas, coal, gold and non-ferrous mining interests without any form of just compensation.
>
> ...the transition to a market economy is characterized by a total break down of traditional economic activity and way of life, an uncontrolled growth of unemployment, impoverishment, life threatening levels of crime and alcoholism. [1996]

According to a report entitled, "Indigenous Reindeer herders under siege by oil industry," released in 1997 by the Institute for Ecology and Action Anthropology:

> Many Khanty fear legal confrontation with the oil industry. Even Khanty intellectuals doubt the legal validity of [agreements between oil companies and the Khanty] and they assume that in court they would be seen merely as voluntary self-commitments by the companies. In today's Russia there are no legal safeguards for the Khanty's land rights or usufruct rights. Due to the fact that Russia's budget depends largely on oil and gas exports it seems rather unlikely that an act could be pushed through that limits the power of the industry. [1997]

In a 1998 *National Geographic* article, Fen Montaigne wrote that Nenets "migratory traditions and clan allegiances were stronger than a Moscow-imposed ideology. As many elders predicted, Nenets traditions outlived those of Marx and Lenin" (1998:131). He continued, "Today, two-thirds of the reindeer are privately owned, and demand for venison has plummeted because it's too expensive to get it to market without state price supports [which existed in the Soviet period]. The herds are growing, and there are now more than 175,000 reindeer on the Yamal [Peninsula], which, some ecologists say, has enough lichens and other plants to support 120,000 at most" (1998:131).

In the *Guardian Weekly* of August 22-28, 2002, Paul Brown wrote:

> Ironically, the freedom that the end of communism might have brought to enable [the Evenks] to return to their centuries-old way of life brought further disaster. As the collective farms were privatized, the reindeer were sold or swapped for vodka supplies with newly arrived oil prospectors who needed fresh meat. Almost no domesticated reindeer remain....
>
> Oil men say that Evenks, desperate for drink, were prepared to swap once-prized reindeer for vodka; the Evenks claim the oil men shot some of their reindeer herds from helicopters. Both versions of events are likely. [2002:3]

According to a Cultural Survival document of February, 2003, entitled, "Illegal Logging Threatens Survival of Russia's Indigenous Udege":

> The Udege live in the Khabarovsk Krai and the Primorsky Krai in the eastern part of Siberia. Their traditional subsistence economy is based on fishing, hunting and gathering. But the advent of various "development" projects in the region has led to restrictions on their freedom to hunt and fish. The Udege's methods of hunting and gathering food were sustainable long before the word was even required, reflecting their understanding of the need for stewardship of the species they depend on for their food. But clear-cuts in their forests have resulted in the extinction or disappearance of many species. As the numbers of elk and boar decline, so do the Siberian tigers. With no game left in the forest, the Udege are experiencing enormous pressure on their traditional ways of life. [2003]

The following editorial comments appeared in the *Barents Observer*:

> *Sami People without jobs in Murmansk Oblast*
> Two out of three Sami workers are without jobs in Murmasnk Oblast. Vice President of the Organisation for the Sami People at the Kola Peninsula, Lyubov Vatonina, explains the high unemployment rate with discriminating policies from the authorities and the major employers. [2004]
>
> *Murmansk Sami population opposes plans for oil pipeline*
> At a conference on petroleum activities in the Russian North, taking place in Apatity (Murmansk Obl.), representatives of the Murmansk Sami population have express[ed] opposition to the plans for a Western Siberian- Murmansk oil pipeline. The representatives, Larisa Avdeeva and Marina Matskevich, say the plans threaten to ruin local ecology and deprive the Sami people of their reindeer herds. [2003]

While some traditional territories of Northern groups have been designated as nature reserves, legal and practical protection of these territories from resource exploitation by privately owned corporations remains problematic. Oleksandr Byelyakov writes:

> Current trends in land privatization threaten what few land rights Russian indigenous peoples have.
>
> Russia's indigenous peoples are responding to this threat by asserting their legal rights and taking an active role in managing their traditional lands. For example, due to pressure from RAIPON [Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North], the Russian government passed a federal law last year guaranteeing Russian indigenous peoples the right to create protected Territories of Traditional Nature Use (TTPs). "While TTPs are an encouraging development on paper, the reality is that it is very difficult to implement such laws," said Sibyl Diver, exchange coordinator at [the U.S. organization] Pacific Environment, "especially when corporate interests are competing for the same land and resource base." [2002; also, see Anderson 2002]

There are cases where Northerners have established successful enterprises in post-Soviet times. David Anderson writes:

> In Taimyr, after a period of uncertainty following the inauguration of the new governor, there is tangible evidence for strategic purchases of meat and fish with the aim of supporting the local, native economy. The speaker of the Taimyr Duma and the Governor speak in unison of generously funded programmes to rebuild native villages using in some cases imported windpower technologies or pre-fabricated houses from Scandinavia and Canada. One of the first acts of the newly elected Gasprom Duma was to devote a line item to support the activities of the Taimyr Association of Sparse Native Peoples for the first time since its foundation ten years ago. All of these programmes are flashy, expensive, and not terribly well thought out. However they do stand out after almost fifteen years of stagnation and even starvation within rural villages at the end of the Soviet period and the beginning of the period of reform. [2002:108][4]

Nevertheless, corporate resource extraction which threatens the traditional lands and occupations of Northern Peoples seems to be the norm in much of northern and far eastern Siberia (see Shalamova 2002).

In light of the problems mentioned above, it is not surprising that, according to the U.S. anthropologist, John P. Ziker, the Dolgans, a Northern group numbering about 6000, now view the last decades of Soviet power as a "golden age" (2002:83).

The failure of many Western academics and Soviet intellectuals to anticipate the disastrous effects mentioned above was perhaps partly a product of the Cold War ideological doctrine that Western economic superiority arose from the dynamism of what former U.S. President Ronald Reagan called "the magic of the market." Other effects of Cold War ideology included the near exclusion of Jesup Expedition materials on Siberian Northern Peoples from Western anthropological literature, and the appearance of serious inconsistencies in some Western academic accounts of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples.

The Cold War supposedly ended more than a decade ago. Is it now possible to carry out a re-examination of Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples that is shorn of the more obvious distortions of Cold War ideology?

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Notes

1 Research for this paper was supported by grants and stipends from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, and the former U.S.S.R. Ministry of Education. Parts of this paper are based on a conference paper entitled, "Anthropological Research on Siberian Northern Peoples during and after the Cold War," by Dennis Bartels and Alice L. Bartels, presented at the Conference of the Society for Socialist Studies, Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities, May-June, 2003, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

2 The relevance of the Jesup Siberian materials to Soviet policy toward Northern Peoples is discussed in Bartels and Bartels (1995).

3 "Hard" currencies such as the Canadian dollar can be freely exchanged for other currencies. During the Soviet period, the exchange rate of the ruble was state-controlled. Currencies whose exchange rates are state-controlled are characterized as "soft currencies."

4 We do not know what funding sources were referred to here.

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* These books, in languages of indigenous peoples of the Russian north and far east, are in the Kenny Collection at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at The University of Toronto.