First published in "A Fractured North – Maintaining Connections," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2025: 89 – 105. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

5 RECONCEPTUALIZING SIBERIA: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF A CHANGING FIELD

Olga Povoroznyuk

Introduction

The images of the Russian North as a remote continuously frozen, sparsely populated and hard-to-access region with predominantly untouched wilderness, continue exciting popular imaginations (Schweitzer et al. 2017). Born and raised in the mid-size eastern Siberian city of Chita, located in a subarctic zone, close to the borders with China and Mongolia, I am used to long cold winters, to large distances, and sparsity of roads and other connections between communities. The region's cities historically developed along the life-supporting transport corridors, such as the world-famous Trans-Siberian and Baikal-Amur Railroads, or emerged with industrial mega-projects. From Chita I made my first fieldtrip as a university student to the Indigenous Evenki people living in the northernmost taiga areas of the then Chita Oblast,[1] which sparked my ethnographic interest. Most importantly, the academic and political freedom that opened Siberia to educational programs and foreign exchange in the 1990s and made my participation in an international expedition an inspirational and formative experience.

The fall of the Iron Curtain, socio-economic integration, cultural exchange, transnational Indigenous and environmental movements and cooperation on common issues and agendas contributed to the conceptualization of the Circumpolar North (sometimes simply glossed as the Arctic)[2] as a unique global region (Young 1998; Evengård et al. 2015). Intensive industrial and technological development, maritime trade and tourism, international research further advanced the idea of the "new Arctic" (Doel et al. 2014; Dodds 2018). More recently, however, this optimistic and exceptionalist vision of a single arctic region was challenged by a more critical analysis of international disputes, growing extractivism, neo-colonialism and militarization (Sörlin 2022).

I argue that the lines of the recent fracture of the North have been predetermined by historical distinctions of the Russian Arctic and Siberia from the rest of the Circum-

1 This administrative unit of the Russian Federation, with its capital in the city of Chita, and with somewhat enlarged territory, is currently called Zabaikal Krai.

2 The notion of the Circumpolar North encompasses both the arctic and subarctic zones characterized by similar extreme climatic conditions, presence of permafrost, particular types of flora and fauna, remoteness and sparse population.

polar North. Unprecedented level of industrialization, urbanization, socio-economic and infrastructural development (Laruelle 2019) combined with environmental degradation (Josephson 1995), and extreme socio-technological engineering constituted the regime of Soviet high modernism (Scott 1998). It was then extended to the northernmost parts of the country. Soviet industrial and infrastructural legacies predetermined post-Soviet socio-economic path-dependences and structural inequalities. Russia's invasion of Ukraine decisively destroyed the illusion of the global Arctic and reminded us about these inherent geopolitical divisions, diverging colonization histories and socio-economic conditions, and diverse cultural characteristics of the arctic regions. Rapid climate change, combined with authoritarianism and the ongoing war, will continue dividing the Arctic, in at least two big segments – the Russian and the Western Arctics (the latter including the North American and the North European Arctics).

In this paper, I aim to conceptualize Siberia and anthropological research on the region in broader geopolitical and epistemological contexts. In doing so, I attempt to provide a personal account of changing research topics, approaches and practices that constituted Russian and Austrian traditions in Siberian ethnology and anthropology after the Cold War. My life trajectory has led me from my home city in Siberia through Moscow to Vienna. On this journey, free-flowing exchange including joyful family reunions and memorable field trips in Russia, and an open and honest dialogue with friends and colleagues based in Russia, have been of immense personal and professional value. These various forms of communication supported my strong ties with Siberia and Moscow and connected three different geographical locations – Chita, Moscow, and Vienna – and ethnological/anthropological schools to which I have belonged. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent blood-shedding war have affected some of those ties and sense of belonging and left me with fewer, uncertain und unsecure personal and professional options. My story revisits the fruitful post-Soviet convergence of national research traditions in the anthropology of Siberia, highlights dramatic consequences of the newly growing epistemological divide and ends with a glimmer of hope for a possibility of maintaining connections between different pieces of the fractured North.

Siberia opening borders: a view from within

"The 1990s was a period of unprecedented opening, a vigorous pendulum swing from the paranoid closure of the Soviet period" (Gray et al. 2003): this is how the authors of a seminal overview article referred to the early post-Soviet period. Back in the 1990s, I was a student at Chita State University's brand-new Department of Regional Studies, which offered majors focusing on the USA and North America and on China. The feeling of freedom, new exciting opportunities and growing contacts with the rest

of the world were in the air in my home city, after the dramatic (official) end of the Soviet epoch in 1991. I dreamt about learning foreign languages and cultures, travelling to overseas destinations, obtaining high quality education in a new promising area – goals unattainable for my parents' generation. China seemed too close; I chose US-American Studies as the more original although more distant field.

From the beginning of my studies, I jumped at the opportunity to learn American English and culture, which was facilitated by emerging NGO initiatives, including teacher's exchange between American and Siberian universities. By the end of my university program, I could work as a Russian-English interpreter and joined an international anthropological expedition to the northern areas of the Chita Oblast. Ethnographic fieldwork among the Indigenous Evenki reindeer herders grew into a life-changing experience that defined my professional path. Three fieldwork seasons spent in Evenki taiga camps and villages within a Norwegian-funded research project on Indigenous ethno-archeology of Siberia helped improve my English language skills and established contacts with international researchers. I was also able to learn the basics of anthropological fieldwork and to gather my first ethnographic materials, that I would go on to analyze for my university diploma and in my first papers about hunter-gatherer societies, traditional lifestyles and economies of East Siberia and northern North America.

My first fieldwork and publication experience, as well as regular communication with the academic circles in Chita and abroad made me think about continuing my education in the field called ethnography/ethnology in Russia and social/cultural anthropology in the West. Just as I graduated, Chita University established a Department of Philosophy and Social Anthropology. The department opened opportunities for studying social anthropology, a discipline that was for the first time officially recognized and included in Russian educational registers along with ethnology. As a young graduate equipped with the knowledge of foreign languages, US history and cultural anthropology, I was welcomed to join the department as an assistant (and soon as a senior) lecturer and researcher.

In parallel to translating the works of the western classics in anthropology and teaching the basics of sociocultural anthropology in Chita, I was actively developing my academic contacts with national research centers focusing on ethnology and anthropology. One of the nearest leading institutions was the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography (IAE) of the Siberian Brach (SO) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) in Novosibirsk. However, its rather narrowly defined research foci including ethnogenesis, material cultural and economic-cultural types, inherited from the Soviet ethnographic school (Knight 2004; Baiburin et al. 2012), did not inspire me. Thus, I focused my attention on the research conducted by IEA RAS in Moscow. As the leading national center, the IAE gave an impression of a more dynamic research center successfully combining classical topics and approaches of Soviet ethnography with the post-Soviet orientation toward internationalization of research agendas and

methodological innovation. My first visit to the Institute in Summer 2000 turned out to be very productive – I met with several Siberian experts and identified my future supervisor, and started preparing for the entrance exams. In the autumn of the same year, I enrolled in IEA RAS' graduate school of the to pursue an academic degree of *kandidat nauk* in historical sciences, in the field of "ethnology and anthropology."[3]

Researching the Russian North in the 2000s: A view from the Russian capital

Post-Soviet ethnology, as a continuation of the Soviet school of ethnography, was often characterized as a discipline in a state of crisis. Those assessments first and foremost came from leading Russian ethnologists themselves, who criticized the "intellectual isolationationism," "lack of professionalism," and the discipline's alliance with political institutions (Tishkov 1992). The erosion of professional identity and the lack of consolidation in the academic community (Abashin 2005) were associated with a number of social, political, intellectual, and institutional shifts (Elfimov 2007; Sokolovskiy 2012). The discipline's rigidity in addressing the new post-Soviet social agenda included delayed reconfiguration and belated broadening of the theoretical and methodological apparatus, combined with the problematic division into "fundamental" and "applied" ethnology. Curtailing of national funding resulted in declining public prestige of the field within the country and its low impact on the international anthropological research in general (Abashin 2005; Yamskov 2006; Sokolovskiy 2012).

These systemic challenges facing post-Soviet anthropology (ethnology) also concerned research conducted in the IEA RAS. Since its inception, the Institute has been organized by regions, with a number of "sectors" or departments: e.g., the Departments of Siberia and the North, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Australia and Oceania. Additionally, it has included thematic and interdisciplinary research centers. Its flagship journal *Sovetskaia etnografiia* (*Soviet Ethnography*) (currently *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* [*Ethnographic Review*]) has covered the mainstream research produced by Soviet and then Russian ethnologists and anthropologists. A number of its ambitious publication projects such as "*Narody i kul'tury*" ("Peoples and Cultures"), which were aimed at capturing the state of the main ethnic groups or "ethnoses" of the Soviet Union, continued in the post-Soviet period.

Part of the IEA's Soviet legacy has historicallly been its close alliance with political bodies and involvement in nation-building and social engineering projects – from population censuses to assessments of socio-economic development of Indigenous peoples of the North. In the post-Soviet period this accumulated collective experience has stimulated the development of applied anthropology and conflict studies

3 According to the educational standard of the Supreme Attestation Commission (VAK), the disciplinary field is formally called "ethnology and anthropology" and is considered to be part of historical sciences.

that included participation of ethnologists in expert assessments of development and resource extraction projects (Yamskov 2006) and in negotiations and regulation of military conflicts in the early post-Soviet period (Tishkov 2021). As the political pressure on the IEA and many other institutions within the Russian Academy of Sciences that depend on federal funding started increasing in the 2010s, carrying out of unbiased independent research became more challenging (Sokolovskiy 2012).

When I joined the IEA RAS in 2001, it was undergoing multiple changes – including shifting research paradigms and debates between "primordialists" and "constructivists," broadening of international networks combined with institutional rebranding, and budgetary cuts and search for new funding sources. With my dissertation topic focusing on Soviet and post-Soviet socio-economic and cultural transformations among the Evenki of Transbaikal Region, I found my home in the Department of Siberia and the North. This department was at the forefront of transformations taking place at the Institute and in the field of ethnology in Russia, following the historical pattern of international collaboration in Siberian studies (e.g., Schweitzer 2001; Funk 2018). In the 1990s – early 2000s, after a prolonged period of isolation, Siberia found itself in the center a booming international research interest. This growing re-internationalization of Siberian studies went hand in hand with the renewal of contacts with foreign institutions, methodological innovation, and diversification of research topics at the Department of Siberia and the North. Headed by Dmitrii Funk, the Department assembled a qualified staff of mid-career and senior researchers while opening the doors for younger scholars equipped with professional and language skills. The research foci of those new generation scholars were shifting from historical ethnography and social organization to legal and medical anthropology, land use and ethnicity, and identity and endangered languages of Indigenous and other local groups of the Russian North. While classical anthropology based on long-term fieldwork remained central, it was now combined with software-based qualitative analysis of texts, digital ethnography and visual anthropology methods. The researchers working at the department were also becoming more and more successful in raising funds at the newly established national agencies – the Russian Humanities Fund and the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Research. Contacts and exchange with the colleagues from research centers focusing on the Arctic and Siberia in Canada, England, Finland, Germany, Japan, Sweden, USA, and had resulted in a number of joint research projects, conference and publications that contributed to the advancement of the Siberian studies at the IEA RAS.

My dissertation research involved issues of ethnicity, identity, Indigenous peoples, land use and postsocialist transformations in Siberia and the Russian North. Regular visits to regional archives and prolonged stays in reindeer herders' camps and Evenki villages in the north of Transbaikal Region were the cornerstones of my academic life from 2001 to 2004. Ethnographic research was combined with library and historical archival research, and enriching and stimulating conversations with my supervisor

Dmitrii Funk and colleagues from the department and beyond, during the months spent in Moscow. The resulting dissertation was later updated and converted into a book (Povoroznyuk 2011), as well as in several book chapters and journal articles drawing on my ethnographic study of Evenki of Transbaikal Region.

I joined the Department of the North and Siberia as an academic researcher in 2005, and became actively involved in a number of Russian and international research projects on the topics of Indigenous identities and endangered languages, Indigenous spiritual, cultural and land use practices, post-Soviet transformations, urbanization, development and extractivism in the North. These projects brought me to the new areas of the Russian North, such as Evenki Okrug in Krasnoiarsk Krai and Nenets Autonomous Okrug. My research horizons were broadening due to invited lectures and guest research stays abroad (Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Estonia and USA). Participation in a Finnish project about rural futures in four European countries including Russia and in a US-funded project about circumpolar land use and ethnicity played a crucial role for my professional growth, including collaboration with the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON) and with local and regional governments and companies, and for broadening of my academic networks within and beyond Russia. In 2013, I acted as the secretary of the Association of Anthropologists and Ethnologists of Russia, which included responsibilities related to a series of congresses. The X Congress of Ethnologists and Anthropologists, that took place in Moscow and gathered hundreds of Russian and dozens of foreign colleagues, became another turning point in my professional life – there I met colleagues from Vienna and discussed the first plans for a joint project. These discussions led to a research proposal on the role of infrastructure projects for communities in Siberia submitted to the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) in early 2014, and a post-doctoral position in Vienna.

Volatile Siberian fields in the 2010s: a view from Vienna

Funding for our project "Configurations of Remoteness: Entanglements of Humans and Transport Infrastructure in the Region of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM (CoRe))" was confirmed in 2014, a few months after the annexation of the Crimea. In September 2015, I joined the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna as a postdoctoral fellow, working with a dynamic research team led by Peter Schweitzer on the topics of infrastructure, built environments and climate change in the Arctic and beyond.

Despite the imposition of Western economic sanctions, scientific collaboration across the borders between Russia and the European countries continued. The CoRe project focused on Siberia, specifically on the greater BAM region, drawing on my previous research in rural and nomadic Evenki communities in the northern Transbaikal

Region. As an Austrian-based team of anthropologists/ethnologists and geographers, we combined ethnographic research with a survey and GIS-based cartographic storytelling, to address the main research question: Given the technosocial entanglement of people and infrastructure, how do changes in remote transportation systems affect human sociality and mobility? To answer this question, we embarked on anthropological fieldwork in several rural communities in *Irkutskaia oblast'*, *Zabaykal Krai*, *Amur Oblast* and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiia) (Fig.1).

Fig. 1 A commuter train arrived at Larba, Amur Oblast, 2017.

Our CoRe project components focused on the role of railroad for mobility, connectivity, transportation of resources and cargo in East Siberia (Sancho-Reinoso et al. 2022). I was responsible for examining infrastructural megaprojects as agents of social dynamics and articulations of national and ethnic identities. Having worked and lived in the region, I was intrigued by the ability of the state to use large-scale infrastructure for shaping Indigenous communities and identities in its remote regions. This research led to a second dissertation, dedicated to the role of Soviet infrastructure in post-Soviet politics of identity and emotion (Povoroznyuk 2022). This research experience broadened my theoretical approaches, sharpened my methodologies and expanded my focus within and beyond the Russian North.

Fieldwork in Russia played a central role for the CoRe project. At the time, working in the Russian field (at least in the parts of East Siberia concerned) on a foreign research project was still possible, although with effort. My Austrian colleagues were able to obtain Russian visas and establish contacts with local communities, largely due to invitations from, and collaborations with, partner institutions in Moscow, Irkutsk, and Yakutsk. Their Russian language skills and preexisting knowledge of the region

also facilitated fieldwork. In my case, social networks of friends and even some family members living in the northern towns along the BAM, along with the contacts established during earlier research in northern Transbaikalia, greatly helped. While my fieldwork experience in other parts of the Russian North and affiliation with the RAS contributed to the overall success of my fieldwork, my social ties made me feel home in the BAM communities and opened the doors of local residents and organizations.

At the same time, some signs of uneasiness and distrust towards the CoRe project revealed themselves when Austrian colleagues arrived. On a joint field trip to Tynda with Peter Schweitzer, we were challenged with questions about the "true" aims of the project and concerns about the economic and military security of the region vis-à-vis presumed international threats, especially from the West. While these concerns did not disrupt our fieldwork plans or close the doors of the local archives to us, they made us think about potential impacts of geopolitical dynamics (back then caused by the Crimean crisis, ensuing sanctions, and Russian media and official discourses) on social relations in the field.

In 2019, as the CoRe project was nearing its end, I joined the EU Horizon 2020 project *Nunataryuk*, studying social impacts of permafrost thaw in the Arctic. In this large-scale international interdisciplinary project, the University of Vienna team was leading a work package on climate adaptation and mitigation of adverse impacts of permafrost degradation on Arctic communities. The study regions included coastal areas of the northeast Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). In July 2019, we headed to Yakutsk to present the project and establish contacts with local researchers, activists and authorities.

Our more remote destinations – the town of Tiksi and rural community of Bykovskii – were located along the Arctic coast, which belongs to Russia's securitized border zone. Visitors, regardless of nationality, are allowed to enter only with a special permit. To apply for such permits, we had to mobilize our international collaboration networks, involving natural science institutions in Yakutsk and Potsdam in Germany. We spent long days in Yakutsk waiting for the border zone permits to be issued. Finally, when the magic happed and we were ready to head to Tiksi, we learned of a procedural mistake made during the application process. It was too late to cancel the trip or apply for new permits; thus, we took the risk — and were detained and fined as soon as we landed at the airport (Fig. 2).

Whenever we were not supervised or invited to meet with local security officers, we used a chance to talk to local residents, experts, and activists, to attend public meetings and to take a boat trip to the coastal community of Bykovskii, 40 km from Tiksi. Our hectic research activities would not have been so efficient, if even possible, without local research partners and their networks in both communities. This "vertiginous" ethnography (see Karaseva 2024) showed the frenzy of growing securitization and isolation of remote communities, especially those located in the border zone. It signaled an approaching closure of the Russian Arctic for anthropologists and others (Schweitzer, n.d.).

Fig. 2 Tiksi, a view from the sea, 2019.

However, these difficult fieldwork experiences did not affect my collaboration with Russian colleagues. We continued to develop joint project proposals, and to invite each other to participate in conference sessions in Russia and abroad. My relatives, friends and research participants in East Siberia kept me updated on the state of affairs in my home city and in the communities along the BAM. Our CoRe project was extended until 2020, yielding a special journal issue (Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2020) and a number of academic articles (Povoroznyuk 2020, 2021; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk, 2019). Most importantly for the communities, we also produced a popular science brochure (Povoroznyuk and Krylov 2020). This collection of essays, field photos and maps, conveying research results in a simple and engaging way, was circulated among the communities and partners who have been involved in our research; it received very positive feedback by local organizations and residents.

Reconfiguring research: from COVID-19 to the war

Building on our earlier work with the communities along the Baikal-Amur Mainline and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutiia), we developed a new project application examining the relationships between transport infrastructure, well-being, and population dynamics in the Arctic. The European Research Council Advanced Grant Project "Building Arctic Futures: Transport Infrastructures and Sustainable Northern Communities" (InfraNorth), led by Peter Schweitzer, was awarded funding in 2020. This large-scale pan-Arctic project brought together social anthropologists and geographers to address the question: "What is the role of transport infrastructures in sustaining arctic communities?" The project proposed ethnographic fieldwork carried out in different locations, a survey, and future scenario workshops, and was to include

Arctic coastal (and some inland) hub communities in three major arctic regions – of Russia, Europe and North America. The Russian study region, the largest, included eight coastal community field sites along the Northern Sea Route.

InfraNorth was launched in the midst of the COVID pandemics in 2021, when travel restrictions prevented fieldwork. We initially spent time reviewing literature and online media and discussing methodologies and existing data via zoom. COVID limitations put our physical travels on hold but created new digital platforms for communication with colleagues from Russia. My preparations for a long-planned field trip to Russia (and a family reunion), lasted for over a year, up to 24 February 2022 – a black day that turned our lives upside down.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused massive destruction and human suffering. On a personal level it caused shock, indignation and shame. As we spent sleepless nights following the military actions in the media, these first affects grew into a lasting anxiety and deep concern for the people dying in Ukraine, and for the safety of relatives, friends, colleagues and interlocutors in Russia, including in Siberia. At the same time, it caused tensions, conflicts and distancing from those who vehemently supported the war.

Not only as a person, but also as an anthropologist with a regional expertise in Siberia, I felt loss, uncertainty and disruption of my values, practices and social networks (cf. Melnikova and Vasilyeva 2024). The realization of the implications of the war for Russia's political and social dynamics that also affected the academia had an eye-opening and paralyzing effect. Russian colleagues participating in anti-war demonstrations were dismissed or oppressed, signatories of protest petitions were publicly ostracized by the heads of academic organizations who chose a safer pro-governmental position vis-à-vis the conflict in Ukraine. The shift of the public discursive regime in Russia spread to academia and was characterized by the "syndrome of public muteness" or the lack of language to describe the new reality combined with self-censorship (ibid.: 9). Collaboration with colleagues based in the West, as well as the travels of Russian colleagues abroad came under surveillance and were not always desirable from the perspective of Russian institutions.

Most anthropological research centers and professional organizations condemned the Russian invasion (Bošković 2022). Western universities, including the University of Vienna, listed Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia as "unsafe" destinations and banned business travel to them. Some European and US academic and non-governmental organizations even banned the use of corporate emails for correspondence with Russian colleagues. Some conferences taking place in Western countries refused Russian participation (unless affiliation with a Russian institution was removed). While the latter two restrictions were not introduced in Austria, the ban on business travel, including fieldwork, and the disruption of direct transport connections and monetary transfers complicated collaboration with Russian institutions and individual researchers on the logistical level.

On top of that all, a number of ethical concerns have arisen: Do we share the same values with the old colleagues who keep silent vis-à-vis the current situation? Can we provide safe space for communication with Russian colleagues and interlocutors whom we are engaging in our research, academic events and other communication? How and what kind of research on Russia can we conduct in the current geopolitical situation? What and how can we research and publish in/on Russia from abroad considering the current political situation in the country? These concerns coupled with the institutional divide between Russia and the West and turbulent changes in Russian academia have challenged joint research initiatives. Thus, for example, our Austrian team had to officially withdraw from a large-scale project about extractivism in Siberia that received support from a Russian foundation right after the beginning of the invasion.

The new geopolitical situation has had inevitable implications for running research in Russia and with Russian partners. Suspension of fieldwork and institutional collaborations with Russia required a considerable reconfiguration of the initial plans. On most of the EU project maps, Russia and the Russian Arctic were "shrunk" dramatically. The InfraNorth team managed to retain its focus only on the communities in Sakha (Yakutiia) und Chukotka, where we had previously worked. While not being able to access Russian field sites anymore, we continued working with the ethnographic data collected during the pilot fieldwork in Tiksi and Bykovskii (Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2022; Povoroznyuk and Schweitzer 2023), and to follow the situation in Russia's Northern communities. Eventually, the impossibility of fieldwork in Russia pushed us to shifting more focus on non-Russian field sites, including coastal communities - Nome in Alaska and Kirkenes in Norway, each located in proximity to, and historically connected with, Russia. Thus, an original focus on the promises and impacts of the Northern Sea Route on local communities and regional development in the Russian Arctic has given a way to comparative ethnography of Arctic maritime infrastructure, connectivity and seaport expansion projects in Tiksi, Nome and Kirkenes.

The past two years have taught us lessons of creativity and flexibility in recalibrating anthropological methodologies and relying on elements of "remote ethnography" (Postill 2017) (see also Ferguson, Ollila *this volume – eds.*), as well as on critical analysis of selected press and media accounts and policy documents. Still, these secondary information sources and thinning communication flows (e.g., occasional emails and exchange in messengers with local partners in Siberia) cannot replace the first-hand ethnographic experience of fieldwork in-situ. A lack of exchange with critically minded research partners and Siberian experts based in Russia is another current challenge to producing rich and multifaceted knowledge about the North. Finally, but most importantly, increasing border control over Russian non-residents and unaffordable travel prices challenge my family visits to Russia. How can I keep the old bridges between the Russian and the Austrian academia? Will a return to Russia

be still a feasible and secure option after my next project in Austria, and working contract associated with it, ends? Will visiting loved ones left behind in Russia be still possible?

In September 2022, Peter Schweitzer and I convened a round table, "What is the Future of Collaboration with Russia?" at the Vienna Anthropology Days (VANDA). It attracted primarily EU-based Siberian studies experts and anthropologists working in other parts of Russia to discuss the crisis in academic relations with Russia. For obvious reasons Russian-based colleagues could not take part in the event. At the VANDA in September 2024, four Siberian specialists from Austria co-hosted the panel "History of an Opening and Handling of a Closure: Possible Ways of Social Anthropological Research on Russia Today," where I presented a shorter version of this paper. The panel addressed methodological, logistical, ethical and other challenges to anthropological research in the current geopolitical situation from a historical perspective. In contrast to VANDA 2022, the panel and the conference were attended by a few Russia-based researchers who were able to travel to Vienna, despite the restrictions and risks. It turned out to be a rare opportunity to reconnect with Russian colleagues and marked the first attempt at an open discussion about the situation in Russian academia since February 2022. This communication gave hope that a fractured dialogue and disrupted relations across the border can still survive the difficult and turbulent time of a new closure of Siberia and Russia for foreign research (Schweitzer 2024).

Conclusions: From a global Arctic back to the "Ice Curtain"?

Following the dissolution of the USSR, the Cold War lines that had divided the Arctic seemed to be gone. Growing academic freedom and exchange between Russian and "western" researchers and institutions resulted in an increasing number of international projects, joint events and publications and created the optimistic vision the Circumpolar North as a global region (Young 1993). More cautious perspectives on the "new Arctic" as an arena of latent competition and militarization were foregrounded again in the middle of the 2010s (Doel et al. 2014). By now it seems clear that the three decades of openness, international cooperation and research came to an end in February 2022. Further political events, such as Russia's withdrawal from the Barents Region cooperative structures, suspension of its participation in the Arctic Council, mutual closure of diplomatic missions and consulates in the North, restricted cross-border mobility and shipping, etc., have dramatically reconfigured the architecture of the Circumpolar North.

Russia's ongoing attacks on Ukraine and withdrawal from Arctic cooperation, have had dramatic implications for Arctic communities, personal ties, and for academic relations. The status of Siberian studies as an international field of research is

now questioned. The newly growing separation between Russia and the other Arctic countries has provided almost unsurmountable challenges to keeping up contacts with institutions and colleagues, as well as to conducting field-based anthropological research in Russia. The combination of turbulent and worrying socio-political shifts in Russia with growing institutional, informational, and epistemological divides between the Russia and the rest of the Circumpolar North, already labeled as the "New Ice Curtain" several years ago (Conley and Rohloff 2015), has only gained in relevance ever since.

In this article, I have given a personal account of re-opening of the field of ethnology and anthropology of Siberia leading to productive exchanges between the Russian and the European (Austrian) academic traditions in the early post-Soviet period. Such internationalization played an important role for the evolution of the methodological frameworks and broadening of a repertoire of research topics and practices, especially within Russia. At the same time, access to Siberian field sites and a dialogue with Russian researchers were strategically important for the advancement of anthropological research on the region in Austria and elsewhere in Europe (Schweitzer forthcoming). Using the examples of several recent projects on Siberia, I showed how the gradual closure of Siberia to international research has culminated in a new epistemological divide since the beginning of the war against Ukraine.

Using my own experiences from Chita to Moscow to Vienna, I argue that three co-evolving and interconnected geographical and epistemological locations formed a diverse but at the same time continuous and vibrant field of the post-Soviet Siberian anthropology. Changing a vantage point and moving to different locations while keeping the sense of belonging and connection to all of them, immensely contributed to my personal well-being and professional growth. The disruption of the disciplinary field and closure of Siberia and Russia towards the West, which came as a shock, cancelled the dialogue and disconnected the locations in Russia from those in Austria and Europe, in the spatial, temporal and cognitive sense. Changing vantages points and places of residence, just as crossing borders, becomes increasingly complicated and risky.

In this difficult time, holistic anthropological knowledge-production about the Arctic and Siberia also becomes a challenging endeavor. There are certainly some lessons of science diplomacy to be learned from the Cold War period, at least by the late Soviet/early post-Soviet generation of researchers. The most important principle of keeping the doors open implies maintaining contacts with colleagues, friends and informants, even if only on an informal or a personal level or in a digital format. Mutual invitations and participation in conferences providing safe space for online communication or taking place in neutral or third countries can become another way of sustaining exchange and the research infrastructure of cooperation. Some methodological lessons from the past include the utility of archival research and reliance on one's own memories, field data and diaries. However, new opportunities presented by media and high technologies also allow us to experiment with digital or remote

anthropology tools – from Zoom meetings and distant interviews to social media and other online platforms.

Thus, resistance, resilience and hope for the return to a more peaceful and connected world might help us overcome the feelings of frustration and loss and to navigate our uncertain personal and professional futures. At the same time, the willingness to maintain the old ties combined with methodological creativity can facilitate our efforts of putting together the pieces of the fractured North and passing on of the wholistic anthropological knowledge of the Arctic and Siberia and to next generations.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family, friends, interlocutors and partners who participated in and facilitated my research in Siberia. I am also thankful to the editors of this volume for their thoughtful comments and suggestions and to Peter Schweitzer for his generous feedback on the first draft of the article. My research would not have been possible without support from: the Austrian Science Fund FWF (Project "CoRe," P 27625 Einzelprojekte), the European Research Council (Project "InfraNorth," PROJECT-ID: 885646), the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Project "Nunataryuk," grant agreement No. 773421), and the Belmont Forum, the Austrian Research Promotion Agency FFG and the Austrian Ministry of Education and Research BMBW (Project "ARCA," project ID: 999909343/52036292).

References

Abashin, Sergei, et al. 2005. The Current State of Ethnography and Anthropology in Russia. *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* (2): 448–489.

Baiburin, Albert, Catriona Kelly, and Nikolai Vakhtin (eds.) 2012. *Russian Cultural Anthropology After the Collapse of Communism*. London: Routledge.

Bošković, A. 2022. Anthropologists at War? *Anthropology Today* 38(3): 3–4. doi:10.1111/1467-8322.12724

Conley, Heather and Caroline Rohloff 2015. *The New Ice Curtain: Russia's Strategic Reach to the Arctic*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Dodds, Klaus 2018. Global Arctic. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 33(2): 191–194. doi:10.1080/08865655.2017.1332488

Doel, Ronald E., Urban Wråkberg, and Suzanne Zeller 2014. Science, Environment, and the New Arctic. *Journal of Historical Geography* 44: 2–14.

Elfimov, Alexei 2007. Russian Ethnography: Dilemmas of the Present and the Past. *Anthropological Yearbook of European Cultures* 16(1): 77–100.

Evengård, Birgitta, Joan Nymand Larsen, and Øyvind Paasche (eds.) 2015. *The New Arctic*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Funk, Dmitriy 2018. Siberia, Anthropology. In *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. H. Callan (ed.), 1–15. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Gray, Patty, Nikolai Vakhtin, and Peter Schweitzer 2003. Who Owns Siberian Ethnography? A Critical Assessment of a Re-internationalized Field. *Sibirica* 3(2): 194–216. doi:10.1080/1361736042000245312

Josephson, Paul R. 1995. "Projects of the Century" in Soviet History: Large-scale Technologies from Lenin to Gorbachev. *Technology and Culture* 36(3): 519–559.

Karaseva, Asya 2024. Against "Methodological Soloism": An Account of Vertiginous Ethnography in Kolyma in 2022. In *A Fractured North: Facing Dilemmas*. E. Kasten, I. Krupnik, and G. Fondahl (eds.), 39–57. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien.

Knight, Nathaniel 2004. Ethnography, Russian and Soviet. In *Encyclopedia of Russian History*. Encyclopedia.com. http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3404100416.html

Laruelle, Marlene 2019. The Three Waves of Arctic Urbanisation: Drivers, Evolutions, Prospects. *Polar Record* 55(1): 1–12.

Melnikova, Ekaterina and Zinaida Vasilyeva (eds.) 2024. *Academia Across the Borders*. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien.

Postill, John 2017. Remote Ethnography: Studying Culture from Afar. In *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*. E. Hjort, H. Horst, A. Galloway, and G. Bell (eds.), 61–69. New York: Routledge.

Povoroznyuk, Olga 2011. *Zabaykal'skie Evenki: Sotsialnye, ekonomicheskie i kul'turnye transformatsii v XX-XXI vekakh* [Evenkis of the Transbaikal Region: Social, Economic and Cultural Transformations in the 20th-21st Centuries]. Moscow: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences.

— 2020. (Re)constructing the Baikal-Amur Mainline: Continuity and Change of (Post)socialist Infrastructure. *Transfers* 10(2-3): 250–269.

— 2021. Ambiguous Entanglements: Infrastructure, Memory and Identity in Indigenous Evenki Communities along the Baikal-Amur Mainline. *Social Anthropology* 29(4): 1064–1080.

— 2022. *Soviet Infrastructure in the Post-Soviet Era? Building a Railroad and Identity along the Baikal-Amur Mainline in East Siberia*. PhD dissertation, University of Vienna.

Povoroznyuk, Olga and Ilya Krylov (eds.) 2020. *Zhizn' BAMa* [Life of BAM]. Vienna: Institut für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie der Universität Wien.

Povoroznyuk, Olga and Peter Schweitzer 2023. Ignoring Environmental Change? On Fishing Quotas and Collapsing Coastlines in Bykovskiy, Northern Sakha (Yakutiya). *Ambio* 52(7): 1211–1220.

Sancho-Reinoso, Alexis et al. 2022. Mapping Hierarchies of Mobility in the Baikal

Amur Mainline region: A Quantitative Account of Needs and Expectations Relating to Railroad Usage. *Polar Geography* 45(2): 1–20.

Schweitzer, Peter P. 2001. *Siberia and Anthropology: National Traditions and Transnational Moments in the History of Research*. Post-doctoral Thesis, University of Vienna.

— 2024. Openings and Closures: The Anthropology of Siberia and the Politics of Field Access. In *A Fractured North – Journeys on Hold*. E. Kasten, I. Krupnik and G. Fondahl (eds.), 263–281. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien.

— *n.d.* Siberia as Seen from Vienna: What Makes a Research Tradition? In *Anthropology of Siberia in the Making: Openings and Closures from the 1840s to the Present*. V. Vaté and J. O. Habeck (eds.). Münster: LIT Verlag. (forthcoming)

Schweitzer, Peter and Olga Povoroznyuk 2019. A Right to Remoteness? A Missing Bridge and Articulations of Indigeneity along an East Siberian Railroad. *Social Anthropology* 27(2): 236–252.

— 2020. Introduction: Precarious Connections: On the Promise and Menace of Railroad Projects. *Transfers* 10(2-3): 137–151.

— 2022. Infrastructural Legacies and post-Soviet Transformations in Northern Sakha (Yakutiia), Russia. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 24(3): 297–308.

Schweitzer, Peter, Olga Povoroznyuk, and Sigrid Schiesser 2017. Beyond Wilderness: Towards an Anthropology of Infrastructure and the Built Environment in the Russian North. *The Polar Journal* 7(1): 58–85.

Scott, James C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sokolovskiy, Sergey 2012. Writing the History of Russian Anthropology. In *Russian Cultural Anthropology After the Collapse of Communism*. A. Baiburin, C. Kelly, and N. Vakhtin (eds.), 25–49. London: Routledge.

Sörlin, Sverker 2022. Extractivism after the "New Arctic." In *Resource Extraction and Arctic Communities: The New Extractivist Paradigm*. S. Sörlin (ed.), 265–273. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tishkov, V. A. 1992. Crisis in Soviet Ethnography. *Current Anthropology* 33(4): 371–394.

— 2021. Past and Future of Russian Anthropology: A Personal View in a Global Perspective. *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 91(2): 118–132.

Yamskov, Anatoly N. 2006. Practicing Ethnology in Contemporary Russia. *NAPA Bulletin* 25: 82–103.

Young, Oran R. 1993. *Arctic Politics: Conflict and Cooperation in the Circumpolar North.* Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England.

— 1998. *Creating Regimes: Arctic Accords and International Governance*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Figures