First published in "A Fractured North – Maintaining Connections," edited by Erich Kasten, Igor Krupnik, Gail Fondahl 2025: 241 – 260. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. — *Electronic edition for* dh-north.org

IN PLACE OF AN EPILOGUE / *ВМЕСТО ЭПИЛОГА*

Piers Vitebsky

The unfractured North

> [Let us] conduct affairs so that the climate here is determined by the warm Gulf Stream of the European process and not by the Polar chill of accumulated suspicions and prejudices … and prevent the North of the planet ... from ever again becoming an arena of war, forming there a genuine zone of peace and fruitful cooperation. (Gorbachev 1987)

Mikhail Gorbachev's astounding "Murmansk speech" in October 1987 made the obscure detective work of Western Kremlinologists suddenly obsolete and uninteresting. Political science careers based on grimness were washed away in a wave of hope.

Now the grimness is back, but the detective work is more nuanced. For nearly forty years, hands-off study of the Russian North through a telescope by astronomers (as the Russians' own joke went) had been replaced by actual fieldwork. Foreign specialists on the Russian North had moved far outside Moscow and now know these outlying areas at first hand. People living there are our friends and colleagues; we have shared lives and projects, stayed in each other's homes and mingled with each other's families. The "we" of these chapters face the new fracture with much more insight, but also a new kind of sadness, as friendship and faith are tested to the limit.

The word "fracture" in the title of this series carries forward the chilly imagery of so much Arctic speech-making: a single sheet of ice has been split. Yet again: Peter Schweitzer (2024) shows how openings and closures form a cycle, evoking metaphors of seasonal temperature shifts. Whether in terms of thawing and re-freezing, or their inversion as hot war and cold war, these meteorological metaphors represent a tension between trust and suspicion, collaboration, and obstruction. The iron curtain in eastern Europe was paralleled by an "ice curtain" in the Bering Strait, which melted in 1988 and then re-froze in 2022 (Naumova 2024; Zdor 2024).

But the metaphor of fracture also points to the possibility of wholeness. What is it that gets fractured? In what way is the North really one? There were no political curtains in ancient times, just extraordinary ingenuity and adaptation as humans harnessed animals to give low-friction ice transport, invested the spiritual symbolism of fire with a life-giving intensity beyond anything imaginable in warmer regions (Anderson et al 2013; Laptander and Vitebsky 2021), and adapted their metabolic processes and even genetics to remain and thrive in the North (Milovanov 1981; Leonard et al 2005).

A pan-Arctic circumpolar perspective reveals a coherent region with internal transformations, like Fortes' and Evans-Pritchard's *African Political Systems* (1940) or Lévi-Strauss' *Amazonian Mythologiques* (1964-1971). This regional unity also shines through – as in Africa or Amazonia – in traditional cosmology. Arctic Indigenous religions broadly share distinctive common features (Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2021): an environment imbued with spirits, human and animal reincarnation, and a vertical cosmology operationalised through shamanic soul-flight, in which human life is sustained via animals' life-force, consciousness and volition. The moral tension between killing and the necessity to eat is mediated through ideas of respect and gratitude toward the animals' bodies and souls to ensure their future return.

Franz Boas' Jesup North Pacific Expedition of 1897-1902 (Krupnik 1998) did much to establish the Russian and non-Russian Arctic as an integrated culture area and a major region in world anthropology, influencing works such as Hallowell's circumpolar survey (1926) of bear-killing rituals and Mauss's work on the gift (Mauss 1925).

However, political developments from the 1920s onwards made it almost impossible to sustain this perspective, which was not revived as a fieldwork possibility until the late 1980s (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988). As the volumes in this series show, this has now become an impossibility once again. From the 1920s to the 1980s, ethnography and related social science in the Russian North and outside developed in separate worlds (Vitebsky and Alekseyev 2015), pursuing quite different theoretical questions and ideological agendas (though with some permeability through in-between countries like Hungary and Finland). Communication was occasionally possible, but only through a few very fragile personal contacts. Siberia was virtually closed to non-Soviet researchers, and Soviet researchers very rarely reached other parts of the Arctic. Some were imprisoned or executed after they had visited foreign countries or published in foreign journals (Tumarkin 2002-2003). Until recently, this catalogue of suffering seemed safely historical. But it arouses uncomfortable echoes today, as does that period's hardening of policies towards Indigenous minorities.

The Russian North disappeared from world anthropology, but inside this closed universe, Soviet researchers developed rich and complex regional research, which still remains largely unknown, or poorly appreciated, outside. Each wrapped up in their own intellectual and ideological world, scholars on both sides pursued topics that seemed obscure to each other. Instead of the social relations and social problems that animated Western community studies (e.g. Condon 1988), there was historical determinism (Sergeyev 1955); the Soviet quest for "ethnogenesis" (Bromley 1974) constructed the very homogenised ethnic groups that Western anthropologists were keen to deconstruct, while the presentism of many Western researchers frustrated the historical consciousness of their Soviet colleagues.

The uneasy intimacy of *perestroika*

Roza Laptander writes about her childhood in the early 1980s in remote Yamal, fearing nuclear attack from a mysterious enemy (Laptander et al. 2024: 17). As a child in London in the 1950s I felt the same. Yet in the late 1980s it emerged that fallout from their own government's nuclear tests in Novaia Zemlia had been polluting reindeer pastures across Siberia, and the body tissues of Siberian children, long before the Chernobyl accident which alerted the monitoring stations of Scandinavia in April 1986. The scandal over the Chernobyl cover-up helped lead the way to Gorbachev's Murmansk speech the following year. There are few people alive today anywhere on the planet who have not been affected by the physics or the politics of this radiation. Truly, the North was "everywhere," but not in Ingold's (2020) benign animist sense.

Perestroika, starting around 1986, felt like one of the great (irreversible?) transformations in history. The world was transformed for Arctic researchers too, from both sides of the Iron Curtain. For foreign researchers, there was an amazing opening up of the Russian North. These foreigners came from Europe, North America, and Japan, working in Russian and sometimes also in Indigenous languages. They were largely welcomed in Russia, both from curiosity and out of relief at the easing of the need to fear each other.

But this was not without some ambivalences, hesitations and continuing restrictions. The foreign scholars also brought an influx of Western fieldwork techniques, research questions – and funding. One collaborative review (Gray et al. 2003) talks of local anthropologists being struck by the foreigners' "dizzying theoretical plurality." But in more recent retrospect, this may be putting too positive a spin. The nationalistic mood in Russia today is largely a backlash against the crude triumphalism in the 1990s of Western economists, political scientists, policymakers and politicians who boasted of "winning the cold war" as they pushed to introduce a so-called "market economy."

I believe that the new foreign anthropologists did not match this arrogant rhetoric with a corresponding intellectual imperialism, though the research establishment in Russia sometimes felt it as such. Valery Tishkov, then head of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow, and having a professional familiarity with North American ethnography, felt that the "strong [Soviet] school with noble traditions and achievements" (1998: 3) was being overwhelmed, both intellectually and financially, by foreign research agendas and budgets. These new researchers in the North were mostly PhD students on their first fieldwork. Exhilarated at being pioneers at a unique moment in a new field, their approach was generally fresh and ethnography-driven. True, they often leap-frogged over what seemed stale Soviet topics like ethnogenesis. But while asking different questions, they were filled with admiration for how much their Russian colleagues actually knew about the North, from painstaking searches of historical archives, to detailed stylistic commentaries on ritual texts, to studies of

Indigenous vocabularies (e.g. Dutkin 1991, offering an astonishing 1,500 terms in the Even language for reindeer colours, ages, body shapes, antlers, moods, and equipment).

From 1988 onwards, nearly a century after Boas, the growing rapport between Western and Russian researchers allowed the Arctic to return to mainstream global discussions of culture, history, religion, archaeology, and environment. For example, it became apparent as never before that Sámi shamanism and reindeer herding – both topics of intense but inward-turning attention in Scandinavia – are northwestern outliers of a huge Eurasian culture area. One leading Sámi herder and activist from Norway told me how he was amazed when visiting a reindeer farm in Yakutia in 1990: "I still thought we were the only reindeer people in the world." Similarly, Chukotka in the far northeast was previously the end of any road to anywhere, but now it could be studied through archaeology, genetics and linguistics as a prehistoric gateway to the Americas (Fortescue 1998).

Most of the articles and monographs which were available to underpin this view were in Russian, as they still are today. But in the 1990s-2000s, the literature on the Russian North in English (and occasionally in other languages, like French or Japanese) became large enough that for the first time ever, the entire circumpolar Arctic could now be taught worldwide as an ethnographic region alongside Amazonia, Africa, the Indian subcontinent or Oceania. The "noble" part of this story (to echo Tishkov's term) is how this encounter gradually became collaborative, as authors evolved ways of working together on shared topics to reach insights which could not have been achieved from one side alone. Examples among many include Lavrillier and Gabyshev (2017), Golovnev and Osherenko (1999); Stammler and Sidorova 2015; and Safonova and Sántha (2019).

The effect on scholars inside Russia was less transformative. Few in 1990 could obtain or read works in foreign languages, or would have been interested, especially in older generations. To this day, few works on the Russian North by foreign authors have been translated (e.g. Anderson 1998; Tichotsky 2001), while few Russian authors have done fieldwork in the non-Russian Arctic (but see Schweitzer and Golovko 1997; Bergelson et al 2020; Novikova 2014).

If the scholarly fruits of this rapprochement were mostly in English and unread by Russian scholars, the effect of contact was particularly liberating for Indigenous communities, especially those living near an international border. Young Siberian Yupik had been uninterested in the language of their ancestors, but when the ice curtain melted in 1988 and the first planeload of Alaskan Yupik arrived, they suddenly realized that their elders could communicate freely with these Americans in a shared language (Nikolai Vakhtin, personal communication). Sámi from Kola Peninsula received scholarships to northern Norway as they were rapidly plugged into transnational Sámi networks, while a Norwegian sea captain collected aid in Tromsø and sailed it farther around the Arctic coast to reach Nenets communities.

In Russia, a landmark article, "Big problems of small peoples" (Pika and Prokhorov 1988), published in the Communist Party's own journal, was the first to acknowledge openly the many social and policy problems of Indigenous Northern peoples in Russia. In March 1990 I attended the inaugural meeting of the NGO *Association of Northern Indigenous Peoples* (later RAIPON), as did Jens Dahl from the Copenhagen-based *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs* (IWGIA 1990). This was held in a large hall inside the Kremlin and was addressed by Gorbachev himself, as we watched him engaging with the delegates' vehement grievances.

By 1998, the University of the Arctic was created as a pathbreaking global network of universities for research and student exchange, in which Russia participated enthusiastically. Yet the political, economic, and legal status of Indigenous peoples in Siberia remained much weaker than those in Scandinavia or North America. To a certain extent the Soviet state had protected them as minorities (literally "Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North," *korennye malochislennye narody Severa*), but in Russia the principle of aboriginality – so powerful for arguments about Indigenous rights in the other half of the Arctic – had very little moral or legal weight. Even while their contact with Indigenous organisations abroad was increasing, their rights and powers remained limited.

In the late 1990s, I became the UK representative of the Chukotka Association of Traditional Marine Mammal Hunters, whose complicated history is recounted by Eduard Zdor (2024: 195–197). The fact that it was so worth the authorities' while to subvert this Association, like RAIPON later (Sulyanziga 2024), is a testimony to its significance. I spent a month in Barrow (today re-named Utqiagvik), Alaska, interpreting and writing reports for a delegation of Siberian Chukchi and Yupik when they visited the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission. The Mayor of Alaska's North Slope Borough, which was using its phenomenal oil revenue to bankroll the revival of subsistence whaling across the Bering Strait in Chukotka, explained: "The trick is, you need to find a valuable resource on your land, and tax it." This was so far removed from Russian reality that I could hardly bring myself to translate it. For me it was one of the saddest sentences of the 1990s.

A personal journey

I had come to the Arctic in a roundabout way. A degree in Greek and Latin Classics had aroused my interest in animistic religions, and in 1982 I completed a PhD on shamans among an Indigenous jungle tribe in India.

My parallel interest in Siberian shamanism was blocked by the lack of possible field access. Nonetheless, in January 1986 I was hired by the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) in Cambridge to develop a wide programme of social science research on Siberia – probably the only such designated post in the Western world. I succeeded

Terence Armstrong (1920-1996), a human geographer who since 1947 had been the leading scholar of the Russian Arctic in the West, specialising in Indigenous peoples and also the Northern Sea Route. Terence had made brief official visits to the USSR (including to Yakutsk) but otherwise like other "astronomers" of the period had operated through a close reading of written sources. I remember the daily *Pravda* and the monthly *Vodnyi transport* [*Water Transport*] arriving by post in his pigeonhole.

This soon became a period of unexpected opportunities for more involvement on the ground. It seemed anything was possible if one was determined and flexible. In 1986 I joined an Intourist package tour to Leningrad and slipped into the Kunstkamera to seek out the director, Rudolf Its. Actual research in the USSR was possible only through formal country-to-country exchange programmes, and the British Academy was allowed to nominate only ten people a year in all social science and humanities disciplines combined. Professor Its agreed to sign my form if it crossed his desk. I got myself nominated and he must have signed it, for in January 1988 I started a three-month placement in the Kunstkamera; in September 1988 I left my family in an Academy of Sciences apartment in Leningrad, flew to Yakutsk and moved on to spend a month building a reindeer corral in the remote Verkhoyansk Mountains.

Compared to working in restricted tribal areas of India, Siberia was ultimately easier because, though tricky, the channels were specific and operable. The director of the reindeer State Farm was against *perestroika* and did not want a foreign researcher nosing around; he hoped the hardship would drive me away from the village airstrip on the next little biplane. But I made friends with his reformist opponents in the village, and while in Yakutsk had also obtained a "cover" (*krysha*) at a high level in the regional Communist Party. So I stayed, and returned often. My book (Vitebsky 2005) chronicles the next twenty years of different families' destinies as demography, ideology, and personal character made them scatter in different directions like billiard balls from the impact of change.

The herders taught me to pay attention to what *they* thought mattered. On the way out to Yakutsk, I had visited the Siberianist elder Ilia Gurvich in Moscow. He approved of my plan to study the classic topic of shamanism. But in Yakutia, shamanism had become a preoccupation of urban cultural activists, physicists and mystics (Balzer 2011; Vitebsky 2024). Out in the mountains, the herders persuaded me to become interested in reindeer economic reform. When I told this to Gurvich on my way back, he replied sternly that this was not an appropriate topic for an ethnographer.

Already in 1989, I was inviting Its and many other guests to Cambridge from Leningrad, Moscow, Yakutsk and reindeer villages. Visas were freely given by the British Embassy in Moscow, but back home the British Intelligence services visited my house, wondering why I had so many Russians staying there. In 1990 I spent six months moving around Yakutia unimpeded, also taking my teenage son across the mountains on horseback and making a TV documentary (Johnson et al. 1990) in which the herders featured as admirable hard-working heroes and outspoken thinkers.

Terence Armstrong had long been gathering Russian material for SPRI library, and now this grew into a unique global research facility. Our resourceful bibliographer Isabella Warren ran an exchange with the Novosibirsk Public Library through which they sent us much of what was published across Siberia, especially in ethnography, archaeology, geography, literature, history, and reindeerology, in exchange for expensive medical publications from the UK. Our own students brought additional local material published in tiny print runs from Syktyvkar, Dudinka, Magadan or Anadyr, while yet more parcels arrived by post from local contacts. This material was available nowhere else in one place, even in Russia, where libraries were much harder to use anyway. Isabella filled the SPRI catalogue with detailed abstracts of every article and chapter. Scholars from all over Russia came over to read or lecture, and also donated their own material.

By being very creative with funding, sometimes working with Caroline Humphrey in the Anthropology Department, we sent many students on fieldwork for a year or more, from Kola and Komi to Chukotka, Kamchatka and Sakhalin. Many significant monographs and other publications from this period originated in a Cambridge PhD thesis (Anderson 1998, 2000; Argounova-Low 2012; Badger [and Balikci] 1992; Broz 2024; Dwyer [and Istomin] 2008; Habeck 2005; Halemba 2006; Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010; Kwon 1998; Overland [and Nordlie] 2015; Sidortsov 2019; Tarasova 2021; Thompson 2008; Tichotsky 2000; Ulturgasheva 2012; Vallikivi 2024; Willerslev 2007; Wilson 1999; Zorbas 2021). These students mixed in a non-fractured way with others studying Scandinavia, Greenland, Canada and Alaska.

From 2006-2009 I designed and chaired the European Science Foundation's BOREAS programme. This was the first internationally funded Arctic research programme in which social sciences and humanities took the lead, and the biggest in terms of the number of participants and the size of the area covered. With much delicate negotiation we put together a coalition of research councils from six European countries, plus Canada and the US, and eventually – with the help of Academician Anatoly Derevyanko in Novosibirsk – the Russian Academy of Sciences too, holding meetings and workshops internationally and across Russia, from St Petersburg to Novy Urengoy to Kamchatka. Five out of the seven BOREAS projects involved topics and personnel across the Russia/non-Russia divide, approaching migration, environment, religion, and empire in innovative and dialogic ways.[1]

Running BOREAS made me even more aware of other fractures which bedevil Arctic research to this day: (i) between the Arctic and the rest of the world; and (ii) between the social and the natural sciences.

(i) Scholars studying Amazonia, Africa, Malaysia, or Indonesia often use each other's writings. But they very rarely read about the Arctic, and Arctic researchers reciprocate this neglect. Yet if we set the Arctic in a wider global picture, we see how

1 http://archives.esf.org/coordinating-research/eurocores/programmes/boreas.html [accessed 21.02.2025]

a similar impulse of colonialism started in the proto-industrial proto-capitalist temperate zone of Europe and went both South and North. In each region it encountered different conditions, leading in modern times to different discourses: in the heavily populated tropics, of under-developed people; in the thinly populated Arctic, of a pristine wilderness. So in some of the BOREAS workshops presentations about the Arctic had discussants who were specialists in tropical regions. This attempt at deprovincialising Arctic research revealed some surprising and enlightening parallels.

In fact, we could already have learned something from our Russian colleagues, whose vision de-fractures the idea of Eurasia, as their "North" transitions seamlessly southwards, through the southern sources of the great northern rivers and very early human and Denisovan remains, into Central Asia, Mongolia and China: thus, Basilov (1989) offered a southern-oriented counterpart to Fitzhugh and Crowell's (1988) across the North Pacific.

(ii) The other fracture is between social and natural sciences. In the 1990s the natural sciences began to catch up with the anthropologists, hand in hand with national policies and international diplomacy. In 1990 the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) was founded, bringing together all eight Arctic countries including the then-Soviet Union. It later expanded to include fifteen non-Arctic members such as Italy and India, as countries which had previously shown no special interest in the Arctic scrambled to establish their own national Arctic organisations.

However, these focused almost exclusively on the natural sciences. Though Boas had tried to unite these with the social sciences and humanities, this remains contrary to the funding model of most research bodies in the West, and also to the stubbornly persistent idea of the Arctic as an uninhabited wilderness in which humans are interlopers (the "human dimension" which funding agencies occasionally add as an afterthought to Arctic calls). Natural scientists tell us that the Arctic resembles the Antarctic, and for them, the research techniques and terminology are indeed largely interchangeable (Armstrong et al. 1973). Even while we are told that the Arctic is vital for global environmental systems, much discourse about the Arctic still ignores the people living there, as if we are hearing about the ice-caps on Mars.

But for social scientists the point of the Arctic is that it does not resemble the Antarctic. Rather, it resembles Amazonia or the Sahara: with a low population density for environmental or historical reasons, but all crisscrossed by millennia of human habitation, experience and naming. When I collaborated on projects in the Nenets Autonomous District from 1998-2004 with the SPRI physicist Gareth Rees and local scientists and NGOs, the point was to ground-truth vegetation change in satellite images against the reindeer herders' own understanding of change and variation (Rees et al. 2003).

Here, too, there are many lessons from Russia for the world outside, ranging from their interdisciplinary scientific expeditions in remote areas, to governance of large urban populations (since Russia contains most of the world's Arctic cities, Bolotova and Stammler 2010), to the combination of a continuing Indigenous presence on

the land with exceptionally high levels of education, to enlightened regional laws on "anthropological expert review" (Murashko 2002).

The hegemony of Western research models made itself felt in various ways, even in those resisted by Western social scientists themselves. Around 2010, Russia started moving toward the bibliometric approach increasingly imposed by Western funders and detested by Western researchers. The budgets of Russian federal universities started to depend on their ratings, according to their publication record in journals listed in Scopus and Web of Science. These indexes, dominated by huge international publishing corporations, are indeed an instrument of English-language hegemony, and feature very few journals in other languages. This is a realistic reflection of the current role of English as the world language of science, unmoored from actual native speakers, much as Latin was a few centuries earlier – a situation which the Russian authorities resolved in March 2022 by simply denying it (see below).

From 2013 onward, I worked with Anatoly Alekseyev, a local Indigenous reindeer herder-turned-anthropology professor, to run a joint programme between Cambridge and the North-Eastern Federal University (NEFU) in Yakutsk. The project's rather ponderous title was "The peoples of the north-east of the Russian Federation: Choosing a new adaptive strategy under conditions of globalisation / A social-anthropological approach (perspectives of Sakha/Yakut and British Researchers)." The Cambridge team's job (helped by Florian Stammler) was to train local researchers to co-write articles in English that could realistically be published in these international journals. We had to choose authors from both sides who could conduct a dialogue (hence no postmodernism), based on topics which would also interest an international journal (hence no ethnogenesis either). Some of our younger colleagues had benefited from the excellent English teaching at NEFU's Foreign Languages Department, but even so, some fashionable Western academic preoccupations were baffling. There were striking achievements of mutual understanding, enabling genuinely innovative research which the authors on both sides could not have produced separately. Topics included governance, family, legal anthropology, human-animal relations, oral history, space and movement, extractive industries, urbanisation, shamanic revivalism, language education, and ethnic pop music. NEFU co-authors featured in a wide range of good foreign anthropology and geography journals.

The NEFU administration was playing a numbers game, but they never seemed to fully accept that there is no automatic path from submission to publication, and that most papers submitted to top journals are returned for reworking or are rejected altogether, giving a final acceptance rate of 20-30% or less. They seemed to think that any article submitted should be published, sometimes helped by paying the journal. But if this was so, why would those journals have a high status? To make the reality clear, we collected and translated journal reviews generously donated by English colleagues (at some cost to their pride) in which their own articles had been criticised and sometimes rejected, and presented these at a workshop in Yakutsk.

We submitted over fifty articles, and through judicious matching of authors and careful editing of texts, we achieved an acceptance rate of almost 100%. NEFU shot up in the Russian university ratings. But we also achieved something more important, though never fully recognised by the university administration: to open the more receptive younger local scholars to a more pluralistic (not just hegemonic) way of thinking.

The fracture cracks asunder

On 9 February 2022 the Cambridge-Yakutsk programme staged a grand final display conference, in Yakutsk and by zoom around the world, with great publicity and high-level official participation. Fifteen days later, Russia invaded Ukraine. The fracture of 24 February 2022 was very swift – not so much a break in a sheet of ice, as a snap between strained tectonic plates. Collaborations were suddenly frozen like mammoths with undigested grass in their stomach. It seemed appropriate that within a few months, Gorbachev passed away.

NEFU was among the almost total list of Russian Federation universities whose chiefs signed a letter on 4 March 2022 supporting the "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine."[2] Other statements from around the Russian university system regretted the resources they had "wasted" on learning about international research methods, and said that researchers in Russia should now avoid international journals (except perhaps for those in India and China – ironically still in the English language) and publish only in – and about – the "Russian world."

The Russian world was what our project had indeed been writing about, but by bringing its Arctic portion into dialogue with the wider Arctic and beyond. It was this dialogue which was now being repudiated at the same high official level at which it had been enthusiastically embraced and paraded only a few days earlier.

But perhaps the fracture should not have come as a surprise after all. Everyone was always skating on thin ice, and this was the latest turn in Schweitzer's cycle. Within our growing intimacy, there had always been an undercurrent of ambivalence, as so vividly conveyed in several chapters in the present volume. Our friends in Russia could not always hold back from making uneasy jokes about "spies." Anywhere in the world, the border between empirical research and espionage is not clear at the best of times, and governments' hostility to anthropologists testifies to their skills at getting close to grass roots and finding things out. In Russia this is a particularly well-worn groove for talking about foreigners, almost a folkloristic trope. Transplanting Indigenous empowerment strategies from foreign NGOs in particular was an open threat to vested interests. I shall never forget the satisfaction expressed by some of

2 https://rsr-online.ru/news/2022/3/4/obrashenie-rossijskogo-soyuza-rektorov/ [accessed 21.02.2025]

those interests in 1995 at the drowning of Russian anthropologist Aleksandr Pika (co-author of "Big problems of small peoples") and his Indigenous and American colleagues in a boating accident off the Chukotka coast.

In the West, the process of post-2022 detachment has been different. Most discourses about the Scandinavian or North American Arctic are so self-absorbed that curiosity about Russia was always in a tension with indifference. In 2021 the triennial conference of the International Arctic Social Sciences Association (IASSA) was held in Arkhangelsk, for the first time in Russia and riding on the crest of a wave of internationalization, though Covid made participation largely virtual. By the time of the next conference, in-person in Bodø (Norway) in 2024, the session titles showed how rapidly the Russian North had been forgotten by most foreign Arctic scholars and Indigenous activists, who seemed content to talk about the "Arctic" almost entirely without acknowledging the missing other half. Some of us pushed for the addition of a couple of sessions on fractured relations with the Russian North. These were surprisingly well attended, but nothing could disguise the wider disengagement. We have slid down an icy slope to somewhere far before 1986. Internal Russian research is self-sufficient and will glide on without involvement from outsiders, just as the programme of the Bodø conference contained hardly a hint of the Russian Arctic – glaciers flowing down two opposite valleys away from what was once, briefly, a common watershed.

Could the present situation have been predicted, and maybe even guarded against, if so many people on both sides had not been blinded by wishful thinking? Here, I have learned from the Indigenous Siberian way of interpreting dreams and omens (Vitebsky 2005: 285-310). This functions retrospectively: a bad event happens, and then you realise that it was foretold by signs which you failed to notice or understand at the time. As with any divinatory system (including history and political science) in which the future is already contained in the present, it is the lateness of the realisation which sabotages attempts to avoid disaster.

The chapters in the present volume contain very little vision of what may come afterwards. This is not surprising: *perestroika* too would have been hard to predict during Stalinism or the Cold War. As Sulyandziga explains (2024: 10), even people who hope for an end to the present nightmare, look forward to going back to the same place as before. But this seems impossible. There will surely be a reckoning, a reconstruction, a reassessment of colonialism and cosmopolitanism, and of the position of northern regions and populations within the framework of the Russian Federation.

This may include a very long-lasting freeze on international contact. In terms of restoring relations across the fracture, IASSA may survive through personal relations among individual scholars and local communities, helped by the relative insignificance of social sciences and Indigenous people at higher political levels. It is harder to predict a future for inter-governmental structures like the International Arctic Science Committee (IASC) or the Arctic Council, which apart from Russia is now composed

entirely of NATO members. And what of the University of the Arctic, where Russia is now present only through exiled diaspora scholars? Or the next International Polar Year, scheduled for 2032-2033? It will take new Murmansk speeches of great vision, on all sides, to make this viable.

Hoping, preparing, and keeping faith

And yet – like Siberian people themselves – we must continue to have faith in the future, even if we cannot imagine what form it may take. A holistic vision of the circumpolar North must remain our ideal, as this is the true nature of the region which underlies all temporary political fractures. But as universities on both sides discourage or forbid collaboration, it seems there will be very little exchange of new material or new insights between Russia and the rest of the Arctic for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile there are tasks of preservation on several levels: of existing material, of the ability to understand and interpret it, and – most delicate and difficult – of relationships.

Preserving existing material: The accumulated experience of hundreds of researchers in tattered notebooks, scratched cassettes, and now digital files are sometimes the most detailed documentation available about a community, and a major investment for its future generations. There are vast reserves of such material inside Russia, but that collected by foreigners has its own distinctive qualities and value. As foreign observers we may be little more than bystanders in scenarios which would continue without us, but we bring a presence from an outside world and some of our ethnographic material is generated by this encounter itself. We cannot predict how it will be used, but if it is not sorted, indexed and made accessible, then there will be no potential use at all.

We should not be too complacent that material is safe just because it is deposited in institutions, archives, and libraries. Primary documents can get locked up behind obstructive access protocols, and I have even seen custodians throw out precious, irreplaceable material without consultation. There is also routine institutional change. Though SPRI alumni now occupy Siberianist posts in other places, I retired in 2016 and the Institute itself no longer has its own researcher on the Russian North (the specialist bibliographer in Russian and Siberian languages has also left). So my plea is: multiply and spread materials, to increase their chance of survival.

The mammoth's frozen stomach contains different species of vegetation. The more generic level of "culture," which includes the cosmological ideas which highlight pan-Arctic unity, will remain relatively safe for discussion. The more specific the material, the more potentially sensitive. We can never guard completely against this, even if we had the time and foresight to go through our material censoring it. And

even histories of conflict may be a valuable resource in future, because they show the strength and resilience of local communities as reality, not just as project buzzwords.

A particular loss is the ability of Indigenous peoples' organisations in Siberia to gain sustenance from similar organisations abroad. And changes of policy regarding schooling, language, subsidies or aviation routes can have sharper and swifter consequences than any climate change. People who were children in the 1990s ask me to translate sections of my book where their families are depicted in positive terms, but our material also contains details with the potential for opening old wounds and waking sleeping ghosts (even literally, as in Ulturgasheva's nearby village [2012] where the Asiatic Even inhabitants are haunted by ghosts of blond Russian Gulag prisoners). In the 1920s one Indigenous man died in prison for going to Finland as a linguist's informant (Sotavalta and Halén 1978), another for setting up a cooperative and a school for local children. In the 1990s his aged son was the greatest remaining bearer of the community's ancient songs and clan history, but I still heard him being condemned by his enemies as the "Son of a Bandit" (Vitebsky 2005: 226-230).

Preserving the ability to understand and interpret this material: The preservation of material is useless without sustainable reading skills. Good ethnography goes beyond mere accumulation of data, while being sufficiently transparent to allow for new interpretations. Even while career paths for new foreign researchers are stalled, we need to keep training people to read about the Russian North critically, with respect and alert eyes – to understand the fashions of the moment when texts were written, whether Marxist or postmodern, whether about ethnogenesis or the "ontological turn."

There is a parallel that occurs to me, as a former classicist. In Western Europe, after the collapse of the Roman empire, there was a panic about preserving the huge corpus of Greek and Latin literature. Even though its paganism contradicted the new Christian faith of the monks who were the only literate people who could do the job, this literature was considered precious without question. Even so, only a tiny proportion survives today: manuscripts fell apart from over-use, and everything had to be copied by hand over and over again. Writing was a scarce resource, so copyists had to be ruthlessly selective, according to their values of the moment.

Preserving relationships: However, there is one big difference from the previous great Northern fracture of the 1920-80s: the contributors to the present volumes are all foreigners or scholars originally from inside Russia but now based abroad. The absence of voice from those who remain inside might seem to hark back to an earlier phase, except that this time all of these contributors carry first-hand knowledge of communities in the Russian North. If this is a new era of astronomy, there are plenty of people who have been to the moon themselves, or were even born there. The information border cannot be sealed, but is more of a permeable membrane. Some researchers who are Russian citizens based abroad continue to go back and forth, and these deserve our special respect. Others explore the enigmatic and limited

possibilities of long-distance electronic research or "netnography" (Ollila, *this volume*; Stammler and Ivanova, *this volume*; Dudeck and Szmyt 2024) – a new form of Kremlinology transferred to the remotest communities.

For those who have come together to contribute to these chapters, the fracture feels catastrophic. This is the "we" of our general pronouncements. How does it feel to our friends in the Russian North? Through the screen of cautious, bland messages it is hard from outside to know what is happening on the ground, and unwise to say what one knows. Posts from our local friends on social media show mushroom gathering, picnics, fashion, feasts, dances, and kids partying, making life look unchanged. But we know that their men have gone to the front, and are facing weapons supplied by our own countries. The drone technology which so recently promised to ease reindeer herders' hard work – supplementing the lasso as the "long arm of the herder" with a new "long gaze" – has now taken on a terrible new meaning. As with earlier traumas, new griefs will become known only much later.

Though friendship and collaboration were little noticed on either side beyond specialised researchers and local residents, they were actually momentous, reaching to the furthest, most closed regions of Russia in a way never before achieved. Our multiplicity of approaches opened up new ways of understanding local resilience, and helped us all to understand each other's stories – and our own. Amidst hardship and tragedy, we also had a lot of fun together. Those days may never come back, and there is so much to mourn:

> The herders rode reindeer over ice for fifteen hours a day, survived encounters with angry bears, crawled for help with an inflamed appendix, hunted alone for six months in winter, saved each others' lives in blizzards and avalanches, and took constant care to feed the spirits of the land through fire … Vladimir Nikolayevich's astonishing competence, Kostya's dedication to productivity and Party work, Kesha's experiments in re-routing his reindeers' winter migration, Granny's watchfulness over her family, Lidia's determination to nurture her frail husband, Ivan's careful planning in advance of each move of his herd, Kristina's everlasting stew awaiting the return of her frozen herders, or Lyuda's fortitude as she bathed her baby in a tin bowl while snow weighed down the outside of her tent … (Vitebsky 2005: 254–255).

These are the people who kept me and my children alive on their vast, awesome landscape (Fig. 1). For those of us who have been welcomed into the lives of such heroic people, how can we forget them or our admiration? For future young scholars who can know it only through "netnography," such people are the reason why it is worth clinging to a hope that they too may one day be allowed to share that world directly, with all their non-virtual senses.

Without continued and new relationships, friendship can cease to be a sustainable resource. Some will become unwilling or scared to make or resume contact,

and younger generations will have no baseline of good memories, except perhaps for occasional family legends. We may seek ways to continue working discreetly with existing local friends and colleagues while waiting for the next thaw, though their safety, as far as we can understand it, must always take priority. The chapter by Chechushkov and others (*this volume*) shows just how persistent suspicions can be, but we do know that some on the other side have the same desire. Dear friends may agree not to discuss what is unsafe, or what they may not agree on anyway. But there are some – from officials, to scholars, to reindeer herders – who will keep trying to touch chilled finger-tips across the Fractured North.

Fig. 1 The all-competent Vladimir Nikolayevich Keymetinov, eight days out from Sebyan village in the Verkhoyansk Mountains, December 1990. His animals were disciplined and his equipment always worked.

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Figures

1 The all-competent Vladimir Nikolayevich Keymetinov, eight days out from Sebyan village in the Verkhoyansk Mountains, December 1990. His animals were disciplined and his equipment always worked. Photo: Piers Vitebsky.