

3 THE FIRST CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLES OF THE NORTH IN THE CONTEXT OF PERESTROIKA

Boris P. Chichlo

We must not forget that the years of the cult have taken deep root in the consciousness of entire generations, and it is impossible to do away with that spirit in one fell swoop: it is like serfdom, which, even after being abolished, continued to operate, giving rise to and fostering a slave mentality.

– Dmitry Likhachev, 1987

And remember, too, that all this is happening in a country that is still in its infancy, only just finding its footing on the path to democracy.

– Mark Kostrov, 1993¹

"Foreigners" in Moscow

The First Congress of the Peoples of the North (as it was officially called), held in the last days of March 1990, was undoubtedly a significant event for the USSR during the years of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. For these peoples themselves, it became, without exaggeration, a unique event. Their representatives – delegates from the Kola Peninsula to Kamchatka and Chukotka, from Yamal and Taimyr to the shores of the Amur and Sakhalin – were able to gather together for the first time in history! And not just anywhere, but in Moscow, in its very heart – the Kremlin. Here, for the first time, in the presence of heads of state, they were able to speak openly about the problems that had arisen during the long experiment of incorporating all these peoples into the Soviet-Russian world.

This stood in sharp contrast to the presence of Indigenous peoples at public events in the Russian imperial capital in earlier times. In the early 18th century, Peter the Great used representatives of them, referred to in contemporary sources as "Samo-yeds," in public court spectacles. During the celebrations of the Russian victory at

1 Mark Kostrov (1929–2012) was a writer, engineer, inventor, and traveler, as described by the Russian Wikipedia. It is hard to imagine a more Russian person, and he, a reformist who realized that "I *am* the helmsman of my own life today," offers this man "lessons in survival" in the marshes of the Novgorod region, which boil down to one thing: "Don't be lazy, and don't demand 'give, give, give' from anyone."

Poltava in 1710, they appeared in a procession with reindeer-drawn sleds, creating a striking contrast to the military parade of Russian heroes, Swedish prisoners, and war trophies. Contemporary observers described the scene as both amusing and unusual, but it also carried symbolic meaning by presenting Russia's northern periphery within a narrative of imperial power and cultural transformation.

This practice continued under Empress Anna Ioannovna. During the famous Ice Palace wedding festivities of 1740, northern peoples and other ethnic groups from across the empire participated in a highly theatrical procession through St. Petersburg. Scholars argue that these performances were not intended to document the empire's ethnic diversity, but rather to entertain audiences and demonstrate the authority of the Russian state over its many peoples and territories.

In the 19th century, the Indigenous peoples of the Russian North entered the public sphere through ethnographic exhibitions that sought to visualize the empire's ethnic diversity. At the Moscow Ethnographic Exhibition of 1867, northern Indigenous groups were represented by carefully crafted mannequins dressed in authentic clothing and placed within reconstructed environments. Although conceived as a scientific undertaking, the organizers emphasized the culture and history of Russians and other Slavic peoples, while non-Slavic groups, including northern Indigenous communities, were positioned as peripheral elements within a broader imperial hierarchy.

Indigenous self-representation towards the end of the 20th century

On March 30, 1990, representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North gathered in Moscow. For the first time, they presented themselves here not as objects of the state's political and ideological manipulation, but as free agents, determined to remind the Soviet leaders standing before them of their civil rights.

What were the country's leaders thinking as they listened to the complaints, reproaches, and demands leveled at them by the Ket, the Itelmen, the Yukaghir, and others? They were surely hearing the names of many of these small ethnic groups for the first time. Yes, they knew of the existence of the Chukchi, most likely from Chukchi jokes and, perhaps, from Yuri Rytkheu's articles in the permitted press; they must have known the names of the Khanty, Mansi, and Nenets at least from the names of the districts where oil and gas came from – resources that, converted into dollars, fed the Soviet Union with imported goods.

What preceded the phenomenon of the congress? What and who spurred its organization? Why did the congress take place precisely in the most critical year of *perestroika*? How did this unique forum unfold? What were its outcomes, and how far did the echoes of the debates resonate? I sought answers to these questions specifically within the context of *perestroika*. Documents of contemporary history – which recorded what was happening during those years – helped me understand the nature of *perestroika* and the place of this First Congress within it: the diaries of Gorbachev's

closest associates, his own memoirs, the accounts of various eyewitnesses, and materials from the central and Siberian press – many of which appeared during the rise of *glasnost* in ephemeral newspapers and magazines that later disappeared but remain in my archive.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to this congress and to record the speeches of its delegates, which are included in this article. I was also fortunate to meet and converse on numerous occasions with experts and specialists well-versed in the actual conditions in the regions inhabited by Indigenous peoples, such as Boris Prokhorov (1936–2015), Aleksandr Pika (1951–1995), Liudmila Bogoslovskaja (1937–2015), and other enthusiasts of the tiny “democratic republic” of the Anxious North [*Trevozhnyi Sever*], founded in the very first days of *perestroika*.

An analysis of written and oral sources also made it possible, without hagiographic intentions or insinuations, to demonstrate the role played in the pre-Congress period by writers of the Northern peoples, two of whom would become the first leaders of the newly established Association. During the brief period of *glasnost*, open discussions among the country’s writers influenced the very nature of *perestroika*. This was the last, vivid flash of “literature-centrism” before this mode of Russian culture finally faded away (Kovtun 2014).

The documentation I studied was incorporated into the background of observations and impressions that took shape in my mind during my nearly annual trips across the country (to the North, Siberia, and the Far East) from March 1990 through the fall of 2012.

This article starts with extensive quotes from the Congress, captured in my recordings of the proceedings, and transcribed here. An Appendix (p. 321–352) provides a chronological account of macro- and micro-events from 1985 to 2001, which contributes to understanding the complexity of the problems faced by the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East in “New Russia.” It then presents

Perestroika

*Our hearts demand change!
Our eyes demand change!
In our laughter and in our tears,
and in the pulsing of our veins
Change! We are waiting for change!*

–Viktor Tsoi²

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- 2 The song, which was first performed on June 1, 1986, at the Leningrad Rock Festival, had no political meaning: “The changes that Viktor sang about [...] – are changes far deeper within oneself, about which all the artists of the world sang, wrote, painted, and sculpted,” said one of the guitarists from the original lineup of the rock band *Kino* on the *Dozhd* channel in 2014. The song became widely known a year later, after Tsoi performed it at the end of the film *Assa*, which was then a “cult classic.” But at many rallies, it became the anthem of *Perestroika*.

Just like in the famous Eastern fairy tale, *perestroika* – this “*Open Sesame*” – swung open the doors to the Kremlin for the delegates of the peoples of the North. It seems paradoxical, however, that this gesture was made at a time when the magic of the word “*perestroika*” was already losing its power, and less than two years remained before the demise of the country where it was born. The word was first uttered in Leningrad on May 17, 1985, by Gorbachev, two months after he became head of the Soviet state, as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He considered the trip during which he spoke this word to be the “first act of *glasnost*” as well, since to the amazement of all the country’s citizens (many watching on television), but also to the horror of his security detail and members of the Politburo, he stepped out of the car and was immediately surrounded by a crowd of people with whom he wished to speak “without a script” (Gorbachev 1995: 315). So, he applied these words to himself as well:

Apparently, we all need to adapt, everyone. I would even say this – from the worker to the minister, to the secretary of the Party’s Central Committee, to the heads of government. Everyone needs to master new approaches and understand that we have no other way. (Gorbachev 1987: 212; see Kasten, *this volume*, p. 267 – E.K.)

The main meaning that Gorbachev attributed to the term “*perestroika*” at the time was “the acceleration [*uskorenie*] of the socioeconomic development of Soviet society.” He spoke about this at two Plenums of the CPSU Central Committee – on April 23, 1985, and October 15 of the same year – and with this initiative he traveled to the Tiumen Oblast,³ where he visited, from September 4 to 6, first and foremost Nizhnevartovsk, Surgut, and Novyi Urengoi – the centers of oil and gas production in the Khanty-Mansi and Dolgan-Nenets Okrug. There he held direct meetings with workers and enterprise leaders. In Tiumen, speaking before party and economic leaders from the Tiumen and Tomsk Oblast, he reminded them that the main region supplying the entire country with the energy resources it needs had already reduced production over the past three years; he called on everyone to increase output, promising the necessary state support, though also making a nod to the importance of protecting the environment:

It always begins with a change in people’s psychological mindset; without such a restructuring in their minds, there will be none in their practical activities either. (Gorbachev 1987: 380)

https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Хочу_перемен#!cite_note-12 [accessed 1.07.2026]

3 The terms *oblast*, *raion*, *krai* and *okrug* refer to Russian administrative divisions that correspond only approximately to English terms such as district, province or region. Because no direct English equivalents exist and their meanings vary depending on the administrative and historical context, they are retained here in transliterated form throughout this text.

“We in Siberia must act as true stewards; we must care not only for immediate profit, but also for preserving the wealth and beauty of the Siberian land for future generations” (Ibid.: 397).

Perestroika and ethnography

Later, toward the end of *perestroika*, Zoia P. Sokolova, head of the Department of the North and Siberia at the Institute of Ethnography in Moscow, noted that in Gorbachev’s address to the Tiumen Oblast, “which concern the industrial development of Western Siberia, there is no mention of the fate of the peoples of the Ob North.” She blamed this “on the regional and district leadership, who did not even raise this issue with the country’s government” (Sokolova 1990:160). But these leaders were preoccupied with the fact that the enterprises under their jurisdiction were not meeting their oil and gas production quotas. They knew full well that the plummeting oil prices threatened the well-being of the entire country, as well as their own well-being should they fail to comply with the central government’s directives. They heard nothing about the fate of Indigenous peoples from those who, like Sokolova herself, had been conducting field research in this very region for many years – and who could have seized this unique moment to speak out loudly about it.

What information about the situation not only of the peoples of the Ob River region but of ethnic minorities in Siberia in general might Gorbachev’s advisors have provided him after reviewing the works of ethnographers? Based on the articles and monographs published by 1985, they might have concluded that these peoples faced no problems. In fact, the 16 authors of the book (including Sokolova) *The Implementation of Lenin’s National Policy Among the Peoples of the Far North*, prepared at the Institute of Ethnography under the editorship of the then-head of the Department of the North and Siberia, Il’ia S. Gurvich (1971), say nothing about the hardships of the Indigenous peoples. The book proudly mentions the largest oil and gas province in the USSR in the Khanty-Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets National Okrug, where a powerful oil and gas industry is developing for the benefit of the country and its peoples. In an essay on the region the book published the year Gorbachev visited Western Siberia, Sokolova registers no complaints about the fate of the Ob Ugrians (Sokolova 1985). Indeed, the author of *perestroika* would have been most convinced of the complete well-being of the Indigenous peoples of the North had he read this assurance from an ethnographer – who, moreover, represented the Nivkh people and would, 15 years later, head the organizing committee for the First Congress of the Peoples of the North:

Representatives of small ethnic groups employed in industrial production, especially in sectors such as machine building, shipbuilding, the oil industry, and others, have generally not only mastered the necessary specialty but also acquired related skills; and in terms of their cultural level, they are prepared to work at any enterprise. Most of them are graduates of factory and technical schools, as well as technical colleges and universities. (Taksami 1975: 245)

What concerned Soviet ethnography at the onset of *perestroika*? The fate of the Amerindians, far more than that of the Indigenous peoples of its own country (Chichlo 1990a: 215, 230). Soviet ethnography continued to study the Marxist legacy as it applied to the “Great Path” (Slezkin 2008: 329–343), which the peoples of the North had traversed (Bromlei and Its 1987; Gurvich 1987), and ethnic issues remained central to the research plans of the Institute of Ethnography (*Kompleksnaia programma* 1988). It is striking that in the year of the release of the films *Repentance* and *Is It Easy to Be Young*, and the publication of Anatolii Rybakov’s *Children of the Arbat* and M. Bulgakov’s *A Dog’s Heart* – which shook Soviet audiences and readers – it was still possible to “perfect and implement socialist ritual practices” (Urazmanova 1987). It seemed that such pseudoscientific studies had already been abandoned (Chichlo 1985: 321; 1990b).

Ethnographers specialising in Siberian studies were, in fact, well aware of the precarious situation of Indigenous peoples, which deteriorated further in the course of Sovietisation. What they observed during their fieldwork has only recently become fully known through the publication of previously classified reports submitted to governmental authorities (see Kasten, *this volume* p. 306 – E.K.). This remarkable and candid documentation was brought to light by the most recent wave of *glasnost* (Danilova 2024). It is, however, striking that even after 1985, prominent scholars continued to submit frank and often critical memoranda to unresponsive bureaucratic institutions (Sokolova and Pivneva 2007), rather than publishing them in the now uncensored academic press. Yet such action was still largely beyond what was considered permissible at the time.

In 1988, two ethnographers wrote to the USSR’s flagship ethnography journal – apparently seeking support – regarding the Turukhansk Hydroelectric Power Plant construction project (Savoskul and Karlov 1988: 166–168). They pointed out that the implementation of this project threatened to destroy a vast expanse of a unique Siberian ecosystem, which also served as the habitat of the Evenk reindeer herders and taiga hunters (Nemtushkin 1988). A response to this appeal came only the following year, when the deputy chief engineer of the project arrived at the Institute of Ethnography and asked the Department of Northern Peoples to provide recommendations concerning the resettlement and adaptation of Indigenous populations within the future flood zone.

On May 4, the ethnographers of the department, “in an atmosphere of gloom and uncertainty,” nevertheless expressed their opposition to the construction of the Turukhansk (Evenki) Hydroelectric Power Station. However, I. S. Gurvich, who had headed this department from 1965 to 1986, refused to participate in the discussion, stating: “They will build it anyway, regardless of our recommendations; that is how it was, and that is how it will always be” (Starostin 1989).⁴ Such subservience to author-

4 In the post-*perestroika* era, when environmental arguments are no longer considered persuasive in advancing state projects, just as the opinions of Indigenous communities are dis-

ity, even during the period of “liberation,” is very telling.

At the beginning of 1988, Mikhail Kriukov, a distinguished sinologist and head of the Department of Southeast Asia and Oceania at the Institute of Ethnography, remarked during a discussion of the discipline’s challenges: “Although *perestroika* has already become a reality in some of the social sciences, it has as yet had virtually no impact on ethnography” (Kriukov 1988: 56).

Perestroika and writers

Another question must be raised: why was no appeal made to Gorbachev during his visit to Tiumen by the intellectual Indigenous leaders of these communities, asking him to protect their people from the encroachment of industrial development? For example: Yuvan Shestalov, a writer from the Mansi people – director of the House of Folk Art in Khanty-Mansiisk from 1985 to 1988; Yeremei Aipin, a Khanty writer – an employee of the culture department of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug; Roman Rugin, a Khanty poet – a graduate of the Higher Party School and, until 1984, an engineer in the environmental protection department of the *Yamalneftegaz-geologiya* association?

Later Gorbachev recalled how, during a trip to the Krasnoiarsk Krai (September 12–16, 1988), he met with the Evenk writer Alitet Nemtushkin, who pleaded with him: “Leave us our nature! We won’t survive without nature,” and even asked him to “create reservations, following the example of the U.S., to preserve the Indigenous peoples and their habitats.” The head of state himself realized, when “*glasnost* suddenly brought the environmental issue to the forefront of society,” that “the unprecedented damage inflicted on nature had also affected the fate of small ethnic groups who had considered this land their own for centuries” (Gorbachev 1995: 320, 406). A. Nemtushkin spoke with Gorbachev three years after Tiumen, when, in the atmosphere of *glasnost*, the “Soviet person” began to awaken from silence.

The writers of the peoples of the North had awakened even before the ethnographers (see Shibarova, *this volume* – E.K.). They began to speak of the tragic fate of their peoples, to which the state’s policies of the preceding decades had led. In the era of *glasnost*, they had to endure quite a bit of unpleasantness from their “fellow writers.” At one of the plenary sessions of the RSFSR Writers’ Union’s executive committee, the author of the popular novel *The Great Migration*, who had worked as a reindeer herder in his early youth said:

regarded, the Evenki Autonomous Okrug itself having ceased to exist as of January 1, 2007, the project for the construction of the Turukhansk Hydroelectric Power Station (now renamed the Evenki Hydroelectric Power Station) has once again appeared in plans for the coming years. At the public hearings held in 2009, the majority of those surveyed expressed their opposition to the project.

Rytkeu spoke so passionately, and especially Shestalov. But they betrayed their own people. And now Yuvan Shestalov speaks of the people in this way. But what did he write [...] You see, they've long since become estranged from the people, their own people. He should have spoken up sooner. After all, a writer is a prophet, and a writer must always stand with his people. (Builov 1988)

Another writer (Lichutin 1989) lectured Shestalov, who, in his words,

[...] does not grasp that the small peoples have entered the bosom of our land and are now inseparable from it. And if the mother is in trouble, then the small peoples will always be in trouble. They will be well only when Russia is well. Rus, the Russian people.

Nationalist rhetoric within a large part of the Russian literary milieu during the years of *perestroika* grew stronger year by year and led to the split of the unified Union (predetermining the country's collapse?). Reflections of this kind were openly published:

When someone abroad tries to say that there is anti-Semitism in our country, I want to shout out loud: "We, Russian writers in Leningrad, dream of having equal rights with Jews, Chukchi, Uzbeks, Ukrainians [...]" Russian writers are published the least in Leningrad; they receive fewer apartments than anyone else and travel abroad less than anyone else. (Kozlov 1989)

The mention of the Chukchi alongside the Jews is not accidental; it is a veiled allusion directed at Yuri Rytkeu. The former were given the opportunity to leave for Israel, while Rytkeu was able to travel to various countries long before many other citizens of Russia; he also has no housing issues, and his books were published in large print runs.

Rytkeu, the chief mouthpiece of propaganda about the happiness of Indigenous peoples in the Soviet Union, had to radically restructure his discourse. Now he "revealed the truth" about the poverty of residents in northern settlements compared to outsiders, about unemployment, alcoholism, and suicides among the Chukchi and Eskimos, and about how the younger generation is ashamed of their language and even their physical appearance. In several separate articles he repeated that the school principal in the village of Novoe Chaplino had burned textbooks and books in the Eskimo language as unnecessary (Rytkeu 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990).

Finally, a group of writers⁵ decided to take action: on April 20, 1988, Vladimir Sangi (Nivkh), Yuvan Shestalov (Mansi), Vasilii Ledkov (Nenets), Roman Rugin (Khant), Yeremei Aipin (Khant), Vladimir Koianto (Koryak), and Galina Varlamova-Kaptuke (Evenk) sent a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, in which they described the

5 There was no "main" figure during this era of epistolary activity, when appeals to Gorbachev signed by large groups (mainly writers) for and against *perestroika* were published in the press, the (unpublished) *Letter of the Seven* from the small peoples raises quite a few questions.

dire situation of the inhabitants of the tundra and taiga and requested assistance in organizing a congress of these peoples and establishing their public organization, the Association of the Indigenous Small Peoples of the North. Almost all publications about the congress emphasize the initiative of V. Sangi and, more generally, the leaders of the Indigenous peoples in carrying out this project. But this is not entirely accurate.

Perestroika and anthropology

Toward the end of 1988, the journal *Sovetskaia etnografiia* [Soviet Ethnography] took the liberty of giving itself a slight facelift, as reported by its editor-in-chief, Kirill V. Chistov:

This issue is, in a sense, experimental. It was compiled and edited by young researchers at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. We believe that this endeavor is fully in line with *perestroika*, which calls for the increasing involvement of new, fresh talent in active creative work. (Chistov 1988: 3)

It was in this issue that a letter about the Turukhansk Hydroelectric Power Plant was published. The first critical review of recent publications on the Indigenous peoples of the North (Oborotova 1988) also appeared here. The driving force of this initiative by the Institute was anthropologist Igor Krupnik, already known for his research on Siberian Yupik (Siberian Eskimo) culture in Chukotka. There he often worked alongside his friend, the equally renowned anthropologist Mikhail Chlenov (1940–2024). Their joint publication in a Chukotka's newspaper was the first example of a concrete approach to the problems of a specific settlement of the Indigenous peoples of the North, rather than mere lamentations over their “lost happiness.” They discussed the problems of Novoe Chaplino, the largest settlement of Siberian Yupik, with its residents and administration (Chlenov and Krupnik 1987). Journalist Valerii Sharov met them during their field research and “heard from them for the first time about scientific censorship concerning the problems of small peoples,” such as morbidity and mortality statistics or the problems associated with the transition of nomadic reindeer herders to a sedentary lifestyle (Sharov 1988).

A unique anthropological experiment, the Samotlor Practicum II, initiated by Vladimir I. Bakshtanovskii, was held in Khanty-Mansiysk from 1–3 June 1989. Its overarching theme, “Ethos and Ethnos: Social and Ethical Justice as an Object of Political Decision-Making”, was operationalized through a sociological practicum organized as a simulation exercise. The objective was to identify an optimal model of self-governance for the Indigenous communities of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug. Participants included economists, legal scholars, sociologists, ethnographers, physicians, philosophers, and representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North.

Three approaches to addressing nationalities issues in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug were critically evaluated: (1) non-intervention; (2) the establishment of

protected territories; and (3) cultural assimilation. Particularly noteworthy are the contributions of the *Anxious North* experts, published in two short volumes entitled “Development without Alienation.”

Liudmila Bogoslovskaja (1989:15–17) argued that, “in full accordance with international legal norms,” it was necessary to “ensure the legal and socio-economic priority of traditional resource use as the fundamental condition for the survival of the unique national cultures of the Indigenous peoples of the North and the Far East.” Igor Krupnik (1989:42–44) advocated a fourth model centred on two fundamental principles: the recognition of Indigenous peoples’ rights to land and their right to make decisions independently – that is, their right to self-government. For his part, Aleksandr Pika (1989:7–11) did not rule out the establishment of “protected zones,” also referred to as “ethnic territories” or “reservations.” According to Pika, such arrangements would entail legal and social institutions that “do not currently exist in our country” and could provide territories in which production within traditional sectors – and beyond them – could achieve a fully modern form of development.⁶



Fig. 1 Aleksandr Pika (left) and Boris Prochorov. Moscow, 1994. Photo: Boris Chichlo.

In the early 1990s, Aleksandr Pika, at my request, spoke on the record about how he became an ethnographer, his travels, and his research. It was a long interview. According to him, the work of American anthropologists Melville Herskovits and

6 On this „representative meeting of 35 scholars expert on the Northern Minorities,” also known as Samotlor Practicum II, see Vakhtin (1992: 32). In the concluding pages of his book, Nikolai Vakhtin describes the meeting as a significant milestone in the rethinking of approaches to Indigenous issues during the *perestroika* period. Characteristically, *Sovetskaia etnografiia* did not mention the event in its reports on scholarly activities.

Ralph Linton on acculturation, nativist movements, and Cargo Cults opened his eyes to the possibilities of interesting research on Indigenous peoples. He began to reflect on these ideas in relation to what he observed in the life around him.

And back then – this was still in the late 1970s – I began to think that I had the key to understanding all these processes in my head, that if acculturation was proceeding this way, it would lead to something and something would happen. And basically, I see roughly the same thing now: there are many so-called Indigenous political leaders [in the country]; they sit in the Kremlin, they're in the Federal Assembly, in the Duma. And generally, [they] are such dunces [*balbesy*] there. **Their heads are such a mess, such a jumble, like those wooden phones of the Melanesians.**⁷

Perestroika. Everyone started talking about various problems. And that's when I thought I needed to say something about the peoples of the North. Back then, it wasn't even permitted to publish, say, the average life expectancy, which we had calculated and which was 18 years lower for them [the northern Indigenous peoples] than the national average, and mortality data couldn't be published at all. But when *perestroika* began, we decided that we, as citizens, had to do something, to speak out. We started organizing small seminars on the peoples of the North. At the time, I was secretary of the medical geography commission at the Geographical Society, and we began gathering a small group of about ten people. We prepared a report on the dire situation of the peoples of the North. And so, there at the Geographical Society, we held a meeting [to which we invited various colleagues working on the same topics]. I began to criticize all sorts of communist-style views on the peoples of the North; in particular, **I touched on the holy of holies of Leninist theory – the non-capitalist development of the peoples of the North – and said that this theory explains absolutely nothing and is unnecessary for the peoples of the North.** It doesn't explain what they should do or how they should live; it simply argues, as it were, why the peoples of the North should stand in solidarity with the Russian working class in the struggle against the rest of humanity, and so on. **Some ethnographers of the older generation even left the room. They said it was crude propaganda and all that sort of thing.** So, gradually, a group of people with shared interests gathered around us. They were biologists, geographers, doctors, and others. We were constantly calling each other and exchanging [news]: who had found out what, that such-and-such a ministry was plotting such-and-such a nasty scheme against the peoples of the North, and that we should do this and that here, somehow unite our efforts. And in general, we decided to call ourselves some kind of group; we named ourselves the Anxious North [*Trevozhnyi Sever*] – Boris Borisovich Prokhorov came up with that name. This was 1987–1989.

7 Regardless of Sasha's perspective, I observed that during the years of *perestroika* Soviet people (the "people" as a social category) "attributed an entirely magical meaning to the terms democracy, free market, manager, and convertibility, while simultaneously expecting Western assistance in exactly the same way as the followers of the cargo cults in Melanesia" (Chichlo 1992: 150).

One day we grabbed a dozen bottles of beer and met with this Nivkh writer, Vladimir Sangi, and started telling him that we should create an association of the peoples of the North, some kind of Northern organization, and we wrote a manifesto. And then, sure enough, they gathered writers and created such an association. It held meetings in the Kremlin, attended by Gorbachev and Ryzhkov. Then we participated in state expert reviews conducted by the State Planning Committee and the Ministry of Nature Conservation, gathered a large amount of all kinds of data, and met with many scientists. And in general, this was done for the first time, because previously, no peoples of the North, no population at all, were considered in state expert reviews regarding the location of large industrial enterprises.” (Emphasis mine – B. Ch.)

Interview with A. Pika, 1994. Transcript in possession of the author.

I have highlighted three aspects in Pika’s account. First, there is the episode involving the “older generation of ethnographers” invited to the latest seminar, evidently from the Siberian and Northern sectors. Their reaction is quite understandable given what was said about them earlier. Second, regarding Soviet “natives,” in his terminology. The word *balbesy*, which he uses, is difficult to translate directly into any Western language (it has 176 synonyms).⁸ Pika, who regarded Indigenous peoples as “real people,” naturally imbues this word with a gentle meaning. These are people who, lacking real knowledge, cannot adequately reflect on, assess, or seek optimal solutions to what is happening. A *balbes* (dunce) is, in general, a typical Soviet person who could also be labeled a *vatnik* (brainwashed). And finally, an explanation of how the *Letter of the Seven*⁹ came to be. Pika was telling the truth. He never aspired to be a Hero of *perestroika*. He didn’t need to “restructure” himself according to the party’s word. He simply seized the opportunity that had opened up to conduct anthropological research and to seek opportunities to publish it, most often in specialized professional journals inaccessible to the general public.¹⁰

I found an interesting confirmation of what Pika had said. At the aforementioned plenum of RSFSR writers, which was devoted to the topic “*Perestroika* and Journalism,” Sangi stated:

If large ethnic groups have the opportunity to develop their culture in cities – and there is even such a term as “urban culture,” say, of the Russians, or the rural culture of the Russians – then the Nivkh, Eskimo, and Udegei in cities can only assimilate, losing their language, culture, and identity.

He concluded his speech as follows:

I am submitting this proposal to the draft resolution of our plenum. Based on the decisions of the 19th Party Conference and the November Plenum, to establish a

8 These are the Russian titles given to American and Danish films in Russia: *The Goonies* (1985) and *Olsen-banden på de bonede gulve* (2010).

9 See footnote 5.

10 Before his tragic death, he published a number of important works (*List* 2005).

(public) organization in the RSFSR that would address the economic, social, and cultural the problems of the peoples of the RSFSR, and would assist in resolving these issues; that is, I am proposing the creation of an association of the peoples of the RSFSR. (Sangi 1988: 6)

This writers' meeting took place on December 30, 1988 – that is, eight months after the letter, which Anxious North [*Trevozhnyi Sever*] had helped draft and which contained a request for assistance in establishing an association of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, had been delivered to the country's leadership. Why did Sangi speak here of a completely different organization? Because the atmosphere of this two-day, exclusively pro-Russian gathering was so charged with nationalism that the non-Russian writer, frightened, did not dare to inform his "older brothers" that the "small nationalities," without consulting the Russian "nation," had already made their bold move directly to the Kremlin.

There is reason to believe that the actual situation among the Indigenous peoples of the North was known before the *Letter of the Seven* appeared on Gorbachev's desk. Anatolii Cherniaev, Gorbachev's closest aide and advisor, noted the following remark by his boss in his diary on August 31, 1987 (Cherniaev 1987): To Academician Bromlei (then director of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences):

Let him prepare a detailed report on the situation of the nations and nationalities of the USSR – on what has been done under Soviet rule and what has been done wrong. **And let it be a frank analysis. Let him show everything honestly.** (Emphasis mine, B. Ch.)

The fact is that Anxious North [*Trevozhnyi Sever*], due to the nature of its research ("the human factor"), was linked to the Institute of Economics and Forecasting of Scientific and Technical Progress of the USSR Academy of Sciences and, directly, to two of its prominent staff members – Alexander Shokhin and Yegor Gaidar. In 1987 Gaidar became editor of the CPSU Central Committee's journal *Kommunist*,¹¹ in which the famous article *The Big Problems of Small Peoples* (Pika and Prokhorov 1988) was published. It appeared in the November issue, but had undoubtedly been submitted to the editorial board much earlier and was read first and foremost by party and state leaders. It was precisely this article in the leading political publication of *perestroika* that emboldened those who had previously remained silent and forced others to stop lying. If anyone were to take the trouble to compile statistics on publications about the Indigenous peoples of the North, they would see that their number began to rise precisely from the end of 1988.

11 From the very beginning of *perestroika*, *Kommunist*, the theoretical and political organ of the CPSU Central Committee, opposed new ideas. This came as no surprise: the magazine was headed by Richard Kosolapov, a self-important philosopher and fanatical adherent of the scholasticism of "developed socialism" (Gorbachev 1995: 325). *Kommunist* became a leader of progressive thought (Cherniaev 1987: 44).

Thus, at the conclusion of the September 20 session of the CPSU Central Committee Plenum on national issues, the following resolution was adopted:

To convene in the near future a congress of representatives of the Indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East and to form an association that would represent their interests at all levels of government. All other small peoples of our country require the same careful attention and care. (*Materialy* 1989: 228)

First congress of the Indigenous peoples of the North of the Soviet Union,
March 30–31, 1990

*...none of us knew very well
the country in which we live.*
– Mikhail Gorbachev (1989: 110)

*The peoples inhabiting Russia are truly heroic. It is not easy to preserve
love for one's homeland under conditions where the very possibility of
naming the place where you live after yourself has been eliminated.*

– Yuri Druzhnikov (1998: 44)

After providing some statistics on the Congress attendees, this section offers direct quotations from speeches made by some of the delegates, exposing the concerns and revealing the demands made at this first national meeting of what would become the leading national organization of the Indigenous peoples of the North.

The Congress involved 341 delegates in total, including 35 members of the organizing committee. They represented, in official terminology, 35 “nations and nationalities” of the Soviet Union (consequently, beyond the 26 northern “*narodnosti*,” another five nations were represented among the delegates – Russians and others). They arrived from 16 different regions of the country. The largest number of delegates – 35 – came from the Khabarovsk Krai; 34 came from the Kamchatka Oblast, which includes the Koryak Autonomous Okrug; 29 from the Magadan Oblast, including the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug; 25 delegates each from the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the Evenk Autonomous Okrug, and Yakutia; and 24 from the Dolgan-Nenets Autonomous Okrug.

The organizing committee determined the number of delegates based on the population of each specific ethnic group. Thus, the “ethnic composition” of the delegates was as follows:

- Nenets 54, Evenk 47, Khanty 28, Chukchi 23, Even 16, Nivkh 13, Koryak 13, Dolgan 14, Yukaghir 11, Nanai 11, Itelmen 13, Udege 8, Selkup 7, Sami 7, Ket 6, Mansi 5, Tofalar 4, Ulchi 4, Oroch 4, Negidal 4, Eskimo (Siberian Yupik) 4, Nganasan 4, Aleut 4, Chuvan 3, Orok 1, Enets 1.

Other data:

- Delegates with higher education and incomplete higher education: 174 or 51%.
- Social composition: 108 workers, 70 reindeer herders, hunters, and fishermen, 140 writers, artists, performers, teachers, and doctors, 68 party, Soviet, and economic workers, 13 deputies of the USSR, RSFSR, and ASSR, 115 deputies of local councils 190 Communists, 9 Komsomol members, 132 women(38.7%).¹²

Chuner Taksami was appointed as chairman of the congress organizing committee; he was a representative of the Indigenous Nivkh people, an ethnographer, a Doctor of Historical Sciences, and head of the Siberian Department at the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology in Leningrad. He read his extensive report on the critical situation facing the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North. This report was published by IWGIA (1990). Jens Dahl, who was among the invited foreign guests, noted: "In general terms, he outlined the goals and ambitions of a new Indigenous association. Although the tone was extremely diplomatic, it was clear that demands for radical changes were on the agenda" (Dahl 1990:14). However, he said nothing about the second report at this plenary session, delivered by Khomiakov, the chairman of the RSFSR State Planning Committee, after which the discussions began.

Aleksander Khomiakov

Dear comrades, questions have been raised here as to whether the program we are discussing today – the comprehensive program through 2005 – will meet the same fate as the previous two programs. [...] In the previous programs, all resources – financial and material – were directed toward the areas where [Indigenous peoples] live, and if we look at the previous program, it has largely been implemented, but the money and resources were not directed there. [...] This program should not suffer the same fate as the two previous ones. Why? Because, first of all, we developed it together with you, and it is not yet complete; we are currently, so to speak, reviewing it with you [...], and now it will be under our joint control. [...] And most importantly, we believe that, given the remarks made here and, as you yourselves have seen, the attitude of the Union and Russian governments toward the problems of the North, I think that the goals set out in this program will, this time, actually be achieved – but with our joint participation.

The Northerners speak

Now the Indigenous peoples could speak for themselves, and the content, as well as the tone of their speeches, was, in accordance with the openness proclaimed by *perestroika*, far less diplomatic. (Unfortunately, the length of the article, dictated by the overall volume of this collection, necessitates presenting them in abridged form). The first to speak was a Chukchi reindeer herder from the village of Kanchalan. He was

12 All data were obtained by the author from the Congress Organizing Committee.

the only one who spoke in his people's language; a translation of his speech was then provided.

Chukchi

Aleksandr Sergeevich Gyrgolkav

A well-known reindeer herder from the Kanchalansky State Farm. He was the only participant to speak in his native language, after which his remarks were translated.

My main issue, which I want to raise at our congress, is the issue of land. I was born on my land and have lived on it for over 60 years. During my lifetime, radical changes have taken place on my land over the years. This land has been scorched by fires, its body torn apart by all-terrain vehicles, and crippled by industrial activity. That is why we are talking today about the lack of pastures, and we do not know how our traditional reindeer herding will survive. I think that while it is not too late, we need to decide whether we need so many all-terrain vehicles and so many geological expeditions. Nothing is being done in the tundra today to restore the land, even though everyone has been talking about the need for this for a long time. The second issue concerns the wages of women who work alongside their husbands and relatives in reindeer herding. Today, they are the most disadvantaged group in nomadic communities. If we do not consider how to immediately and more effectively provide for the material and moral well-being of our women working in reindeer herding, the future of the tundra, as we can say right now in this room, will not be secured. We must also address the issue of financial incentives for young reindeer herders, whose numbers are dwindling.

Evenk

Zinaida Nikolaevna Pikunova

Senior Researcher at the Research Institute of National Schools of the Ministry of Education of the RSFSR; first president of the *Arun* Association – “Revival of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North” – of the Evenki Autonomous Okrug. The association was established on her initiative on September 27, 1989.

If we look deeper, both into the past and into the future, our congress, like the creation of an Association itself, is many irretrievable years overdue. The small Indigenous peoples of the North have reached the point beyond which, if they do not die out physically, they will be permanently severed from the taiga and tundra, disperse into cities and towns, and fade into oblivion. This process is accelerating year by year. While there were about 70,000 Evenk at the end of the last century, and 40,000 by the early 1940s, the 1979 census recorded only 28,000. [...] It is the natural desire of every people, just as it is the desire of every individual, to survive, and there is no act more merciful and noble in modern civilized society than helping such a person and people get back on their feet. We do not demand sacrifices

to save our peoples at the expense of anyone's well-being; we do not demand any special privileges or benefits for ourselves, much less special constitutional rights and freedoms, because we are equal citizens of a multinational socialist state whose fundamental principle is "from each according to their ability, to each according to their work." We simply wish to apply our abilities to the work to which we have adapted over the centuries, and on this basis build our well-being [...].

Even

Andrei Vasilevich Krivoschapkin

Writer, Deputy Head of the Ideological Department of the Yakut Regional Committee of the CPSU, Chairman of the Yakut Republic Association of the Peoples of the North.

Our veteran reindeer herders express concern that young, capable men are willing to work in reindeer herding only until they are drafted into the army. When they return from the army, they are unrecognizable, and many of them no longer return to reindeer herding. And those who do eventually become herders do not display the same enthusiasm as before. Therefore, we pose the question this way: instead of conscripting young people from the Indigenous peoples of the North into military service, we should give them more opportunities to master the skills of their ancestors, to preserve and develop their traditional way of life.

Nanai

Nikolai Semenovich Aktanko

First Chairman of the Board of the Association of Indigenous Peoples of the Nanai Raion, which on April 20, 1989, became the first such organization in the Khabarovsk Krai.

Comrades, when I was leaving for the congress, we received a report that a joint Soviet-South Korean enterprise [Hyundai] was planning to begin operations in the upper reaches of the Bikin River. We appealed to the residents of Primorskii Krai and Pozharskii Raion, asking them to stand up for our interests and defend our territory. Before my departure, I was handed a telegram from three collectives in the Pozharskii Raion stating that if, by April 4, the Primorskii Krai Executive Committee and our government do not make a decision to ban such an enterprise in the upper reaches of the Bikin River, then on April 4 these collectives, including the Luchegorsk coal mine, which supplies coal to the Primorskaia GRES, would hold a preliminary strike. [He then speaks in detail about the destruction of unique forest tracts, which deprived various groups of Udege and Nanai people of their hunting grounds, and about the beginning of industrial logging by workers who had arrived from Cuba.]

The Udege people¹³ of the village of Agzu in the Samargi River basin, upon learning that logging was planned there, categorically opposed it and declared that they would defend their taiga even with weapons in hand.

The Indigenous people's demands to secure territories for their councils with the right of sole ownership do not conflict with the slogan "All Power to the Soviets," proclaimed by our forefathers many years ago. Now, in the era of *perestroika*, when the issue of power is widely debated by the peoples, we should return to this slogan and grant power only to the Councils, not to the government agencies that wield economic power and have reduced the rural Councils to a state of destitution. [...] It is my opinion that if a person sincerely loves his people and sincerely respects his traditions, he will never encroach upon the cultural traditions of another people; he will strive to understand them, and it is in this mutual understanding that the enrichment of the cultures and traditions of our peoples will take place, and there will never be those acute problems of interethnic relations that exist among us today. [Loud applause.]

Enets

Galina Spiridonovna Bolina

Vice President of the Association of Northern Peoples of the Taimyr Autonomous Okrug representing the Enets.

I am a representative of the Enets, the smallest ethnic group in Taimyr. There are fewer than 100 of us. I work as a teacher at a school and see the harm that so-called universal secondary education has caused us. The children of Indigenous peoples – the Nenets, Dolgan, Enets, Nganasan, and Evenk – live in large boarding schools, cut off for years from their parents, their native language, and traditional livelihoods, and are being conditioned to dependence. Right now, our best workers in traditional cultural fields are those who ran away from the boarding schools and dropped out in sixth or seventh grade.

Uilta (Orok)

Nikolai Vasilevich Solov'ev

President of the Association of Indigenous Small Peoples of the North of Sakhalin Oblast.

To our great misfortune, oil – truly black gold – was recently discovered deep within Sakhalin. The industrial exploitation of these natural resources has attracted a host of people with a penchant for adventure. People with great drive but min-

13 Pavel Sulandziga – a representative of the Udege people, a prominent defender of Indigenous peoples' rights, and former vice president of RAIPON, who was forced to leave the country due to threats and persecution, has frequently raised the issues facing the Udege people, including before the Russian government. See, for example: http://debri-dv.ru/m/article/17224/nacional-nyy_park_bikin_istoriya_sozdaniya_-_vzglyad_iznutri [accessed 1.07.2026]

imal moral standards – the oil extractors – easily pushed the Indigenous peoples, who until recently were the masters of this land, to the margins of public and social life [...] and they soon lost their traditional ways of life – reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing. [...]

Of the four largest ethnic groups historically inhabiting Sakhalin – the Nivkh, Oroch, Nanai, and Evenk – the Oroch-Uilta have perhaps suffered the most from civilization. There are very few of them, just over 300 people, and they live only on Sakhalin. For the Uilta Oroch, who are natural reindeer herders, the most difficult times in their entire history have arrived. [...] Today, as a result of the actions of oil companies, unpunished poaching, and devastating fires, reindeer herding has dwindled to a catastrophically low level. The cause is poaching. Moreover, the poaching is often carried out by people – one would think – whose very roles are meant to protect reindeer herders from destruction: gamekeepers, hunting experts, and inspectors. The poacher is under the protection of high-ranking friends.

Khanty

Iosif Ivanovich Sopochin¹⁴

Dear comrades, dear delegates, I would like to tell you about the problems of our ancient people living in the Surgut region. I am a hunter myself, speaking before you [...] No one has any idea what a fisherman or a hunter [among us] is. It's just a name. There are those among us whom the [Indigenous] people do not consider human. Comrades, we hunters face problems in our lives: what are we to do, and where are we to go from our native land? Must we really extract only oil from the land, while letting [everything] else on the land perish, let it die? We have been evicted from many places; we have lost so much in our lives. Soon we will have neither reindeer, nor fishing, nor hunting [...] Soon we ourselves will disappear; many of our [Indigenous] people are left with nothing – no reindeer, no fishing, no hunting; they have no homes, no yards. All the [Indigenous] people, you might as well say, have vanished from us; all of nature, the entire taiga, has been destroyed; in the rivers and lakes there are no fish, nothing at all – only oil floats there.¹⁵

We have nowhere to live, and where are we supposed to go? Are we supposed to live in settlements or cities? We will not live in settlements or cities. If we are supposed to live in settlements or cities, then we are already [...] we are already, as they say, lost. We, the [Indigenous] people, were made to live and work in nature; we want to fight for our lives and our culture. It is not just us who want to live on our land. We want our children to live here, our future Indigenous people.

14 It was not very easy for him to speak Russian; he was very nervous and paused frequently, which I have indicated with ellipses. I had to carefully edit the flow of his spoken words, but in places when it clearly conveys the meaning I left the author's narrative intact.

15 "Eternity Smells of Oil" is the title of a song written in 1988 by Yegor Letov (1964–2008), the influential Omsk-based founder of Siberian punk rock, who had already established his reputation before *perestroika*. The song appeared on his album *Russkoe pole eksperimentov* [The Russian Field of Experiments].

Dear comrades, I ask and demand on behalf of the Indigenous people that you give us the opportunity to live an Indigenous life, to at least preserve what remains – the headwaters of the rivers [almost crying], the headwaters of the Pima, the headwaters of the Trom-Agan, [mentions others river, names unclear], how much longer can we endure this life, how much longer can we endure this barbarism and mockery? People [i.e. the oil workers] want to carry out their plans; people want to live a normal life; people want to make money on our land. But does that mean we don't need this? How long can we keep moving from place to place? Are we against oil being extracted on our land? But it must be extracted not barbarically, it must be extracted in a civilized manner, so that the taiga and nature remain, alive and clean. After all, the taiga is not only needed by us; it is needed by everyone living on earth. As they say, the North provides for everyone; we must protect it.

Ulchi

Yuri Leonidovich Dankan

Chairman of the Village Council of Bulava, Khabarovsk Krai.

At this congress I represent the Ulchi people, who live in the Khabarovsk Krai along the banks of the Amur River and number just over 3,000 people. Who is the master of our land? The masters here are the ministries, specifically the Ministry of Forestry. The forest is being cut down and hauled away. Of the 1.5 million cubic meters of timber harvested here, we are not allowed to keep even 5% for our own needs. The raion receives no revenue at all; 75% of it remains in the central government, and the remaining 25% is used to purchase modern, powerful machinery to cut down our forest at an even faster pace. [...]

A similar policy is being pursued by other ministries. About 7,000 tons of fish are caught in the raion each year, and practically all of it leaves the district. We have harvested more than 2,000 sables, as well as mink and other fur-bearing animals, yet we are prohibited from producing fur goods for the local population ourselves. Once again, everything is being shipped out of the raion. [...] The Supreme Soviet of the USSR is preparing to pass a law on local self-government and local economy, under which territories where natural resources are now depleted will be transferred to the local Council. [...] It is necessary, both now and in the future, to fully compensate for the damage caused to the land and its inhabitants at the expense of the responsible agency, and only then to transfer the territories to the jurisdiction of [local] Councils.

Ket

Vladimir Petrovich Zhiganov

In our Ket language, there is no word for “hello.” We have a greeting that goes, “Let's talk things out.” From the establishment of Soviet rule until recently, we were led to believe that the new government had extended a hand of economic aid to the Indigenous peoples and had established education and healthcare systems. All

of this is, of course, true. [...] But let's put the dilapidated schools and boarding schools for our children and the shabby hospitals in most villages on one side of the scale. Estimate their cost. And on the other side of the scale, let's place Yakut diamonds, Chukchi gold, Khanty-Mansi oil, and the timber and furs of all the national okrugs), and it will become clear to you what state aid really amounted to. It wouldn't be so painful if all these riches had been used wisely for the benefit of people of every nationality in the Soviet Union. We know full well today that these riches were, for the most part, exploited in a barbaric manner.¹⁶

Khanty

Vladimir Mikhailovich Kurikov

Head of the Department for the Economic and Cultural Development of the Peoples of the North, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug Executive Committee.

[...] As a result of the recent elections to the Khanty-Mansi Okrug Council, only 9 out of 101 deputies were elected from among the Indigenous peoples. Naturally, they will not be able to defend our rights. Therefore, it is necessary to resolve the issue of establishing a public-private body within the Okrug Council of People's Deputies, composed of deputies of Indigenous nationalities and members of the Association of Small Peoples, for the preliminary review of issues brought before the Okrug Council session and the Executive Committee meeting when these issues concern the interests of these peoples. Such a body should be granted the right of veto in special cases. Furthermore, it is necessary to urgently adopt a law on the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug without postponing it until 1991, as indicated in the draft.

Over the past years of the Okrug's development, its population has increased by 1,200,000 people, and 18 new cities and raions have been established. In light of the adoption of laws on land and property, it is necessary to change the administrative structure. If we are to be the masters of the land and subsoil resources, it is necessary to establish a department of agriculture, fisheries, and procurement, as well as a forestry department.

In international practice, territories similar to ours are exempt from federal taxes for a significant period, allowing Indigenous residents to utilize the value of their natural resources to develop their own infrastructure. This requires clearly defined authorities and guarantees for their implementation. It is necessary to revive the Committee on Northern Development to resolve the accumulated problems as much as possible.

The ratification of ILO Convention No. 107 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples has been unreasonably delayed. On behalf of the Congress, I propose that we

16 The first issue of the newspaper *Avto-Nom*, which managed to survive for only a very short time, published a lengthy article by the chairman of the Baikit Raion Executive Committee of the Evenki Autonomous Okrug, which includes the village of Sulomai (about 300 people, most of whom are Ket). The situation he describes is absolutely catastrophic, and his appeals – as a People's Deputy of the RSFSR – to provide aid to a dying people went unheeded (Sturov 1991).

appeal to the Government to expedite the resolution of this issue. [Applause.] One of the challenges facing the survival of the Indigenous population is the preservation of traditional industries and the restoration of ancestral lands. Therefore, the Russian government must promptly adopt laws on land, property, and priority natural resource use territories, and not postpone their consideration until 1991, as proposed in the draft program.

[...] I cannot agree with Comrade Khomiakov's view that funds for the development of science should be directed to the cities of Leningrad, Novosibirsk, and Khabarovsk. It would be more appropriate for scientific and cultural centers to be established in the capitals of all autonomous okrugs.

Oroch

Liudmila Antonovna Grishina

Chair of the Association of Oroch of the Vaninskii Raion, Khabarovsk Krai.

Over the years of Soviet rule, the Oroch population not only failed to grow but actually declined significantly. The reason for this was the numerous forced resettlements beginning in 1956. We were resettled five times from our ancestral lands, where our forefathers had lived. They herded us together like a herd of cows so as not to burden the Soviet authorities with our concerns. [...] Up to 50% of the Oroch people are registered at tuberculosis clinics. All resolutions adopted by the Krai Council of Deputies and the raion councils remained on paper. Currently, the Oroch are deprived of their hunting grounds. On December 19, 1989, the Vanino Raion Executive Committee adopted a decision to clarify and secure hunting grounds for Indigenous peoples to enable them to obtain their traditional food. But letters are arriving in Vanino from the Khabarovsk territorial Agricultural Association demanding that the Oroch be denied the right to own these plots on the grounds that Russians already hunt there and would be offended if these plots were given to the Oroch.

Nanai

Evdokia Alexandrovna Gaer

People's Deputy of the USSR, Member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.

My dear friends, the first day of our congress is already coming to an end; many have spoken. But you are all saying the same thing. What good is it, my dears, if we endlessly talk about how bad things are for us? We need concrete proposals on how to get out of this shared predicament so that we can take them into account in the Supreme Soviet, in the Commission on National Policy, and in the recently established subcommittee on the small peoples of the North, which I have been tasked with leading. I earnestly ask you for such.

Yukaghir

Semen Nikolaevich Gorokhov

Head of the Department of the History of Yakutia and the Peoples of the Northeast of the USSR, established in February 1989 at Yakutsk State University.

There is an urgent need to establish specialized educational institutions to train personnel in the languages and literatures of the peoples of the North, journalists for the national press, and teachers to instruct in traditional agriculture, applied arts, folk crafts, and so on. In other words, we need research and educational centers affiliated with existing universities to train, first and foremost, specialists who are not trained at other universities in the country. We propose the creation of the Institute of the Peoples of the North at Yakutsk State University. Similar centers and departments could also be established in other regions where the Indigenous peoples of the North reside.

Nganasan

Semen Modievich Kupchik

Hunter and fisherman, Ust'-Avam village, Krasnoiarsk Krai.

I am a representative of the small Nganasan ethnic group in the multi-ethnic Dolgan-Nenets Autonomous Okrug. In February of this year, a meeting of the five autonomous okrugs was held, which I also attended. Certain proposals for this congress were developed there. Unfortunately, however, what was proposed was not reflected in the materials distributed to the delegates of our congress.

Siberian Yupik (Eskimo)

Andrei Ankalin

Sea hunter, Sireniki village, Chukotka.

The natural resources of the tundra – the coastal ocean waters, northern rivers and lakes, and reindeer – as well as the means of production ceased to be the collective property of the workers on the state farms. They effectively passed to the state and became the property of government agencies, primarily the Ministry of Agriculture and its subdivisions, and the USSR Ministry of Fisheries. As a result, members of the marine game hunting, game hunting, and fishing brigades found themselves cut off from their property and deprived of the right to dispose of the results of the hunt – the stocks of marine game and fish.

[...] Currently, our hunters lack motors, spare parts for them, and even marine compasses; they have no rifles or ammunition, whereas our neighbors in Alaska hunt with three motors each and modern, completely reliable weapons.

I believe it is necessary to overturn the local authorities' decision prohibiting going out to sea beyond three miles. But from April to June, the main hunting months, walruses travel far, up to 9–10 miles. We also need to repeal the rule that

only allows people aged 16 and older to go out to sea. A hunter can be trained if they start going out to sea with their father at least from the age of 8–10.

Nanai

Yurii Alexandrovich Samar

President of the Association of the Peoples of the North and the Amur Region of Khabarovsk Krai from February 16, 1990, to March 1991. After establishing the Foundation for the Indigenous Small Peoples of Russia, he moved to Moscow.

Our congress, which is currently taking place, was discussed last summer in Yakutsk, where 26 delegates also gathered, right? And we were deciding on the creation of the Association. I remember how our writers devoted entire days to us so that we could figure out how to resolve the situation and bring proposals to this congress. A coordinating council was established there, but none of the members of that council are represented here. [...] I propose the following: the congress must adopt [...] a resolution to establish a legislative body that could draft Northern laws; without this, we are doomed. [Applause]

Koryak

Ivan Nikolaevich Topanan

President of the Association of Northern Peoples of the Koryak Autonomous Okrug, Kamchatka Oblast.

Only in the memories of the elders remain the beautiful national villages with their melodious names, which were closed in the 1950s and 1960s. Along with them, the centers of distinctive national culture, ethnic groups, and Indigenous communities disappeared. And this process is intensifying. A number of so-called “unpromising” villages have already become problematic. [...]

Nivkh

Gennadii Nikolaevich Psiagin

Secretary of the Party Committee of the “Vostok” State Farm, Sakhalin Oblast

Due to the imperfections of the Election Law of the RSFSR, not a single representative of our people from the Nivkh communities of Sakhalin and the Lower Amur has been elected to either the Oblast Council or any of the raion councils. I believe that we must adopt an appeal today at our congress to the First Session of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, urging them to adopt an extraordinary amendment to the Election Law and organize by-elections in national constituencies. We cannot wait five years to have the opportunity to have our own representatives in the legislative bodies. We may lose many opportunities today. [Applause]

Itelmen

Valerii Nikolaevich Zaporotskii

Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Kovran Village Council. Koryak Autonomous Okrug, Kamchatka Oblast.

Based on Comrade Khomyakov's report and the draft resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, under Council of Ministers Resolution No. 115, more than 30 billion rubles were allocated to the regions inhabited by the peoples of the North. If we divide that by 180,000 (the total number of people in the North), we get a very large figure of 170,000 rubles per person. At the same time, I know that in our most neglected villages, for example, Verkhnee Khairiuzovo and Kovran, not a single ruble has been allocated. The picture is almost the same in other national villages of the Koryak Okrug. According to the figures provided to us here, it turns out that each resident has 13–14 m² of housing, but in reality, it is 2–3 times less. Who are they trying to deceive with these statistics? [...]

First and foremost, we must resolve the issue of building ethnocultural centers, where the way of life of each people must be fully reflected. [...] I believe that we must dispel the myth of reservations. Ideological opponents use this myth to inflame interethnic tensions.

In conclusion, I would like to recall the beautiful words from Danilov's book *On the Land of Yakutia*: "The prosperity of any nation does not always depend on the size of its population. What plays a decisive role here is the physical endurance, moral fortitude of the people, their ability to meet trials with will and courage, and their striving for progress and culture." I wish the representatives of all 26 small peoples of the North precisely these qualities.

Selkup

Vladimir Kuzmich Kirgeev

President of the Selkup Association.

There are only 2,500 Indigenous people in the Tomsk Region, 62% of whom are Selkups. Due to a lack of foresight, our children and grandchildren, at age 16 when it is time to obtain a passport, all try to register as Russian; but later, when they mature and start their own families, they feel a desire to return to their own people. Now they are knocking on the doors of police stations to have their passports amended. The police won't let them do this and say that the regulations don't allow it – once you've registered as Russian, you stay that way forever. A special decree must be enacted to allow for such changes. [Applause]

Yuri Sergeevich Rytkeu

Dear compatriots, in the name of the greatest sense of kinship on our land, which is bounded by the Arctic Circle. My dear compatriots!

The significance of this congress cannot be overstated; we can safely say that our congress represents both hope and the experience we are gaining in defending human rights amid *perestroika*, amid the quest to realize the rights of all peoples, large and small, to self-determination.

But no people are alike, just as every person, even within the same race, differs from another; so too are the peoples whose representatives have gathered today in this historic hall. We are partly united by geography, the Arctic Circle, although there are representatives here of peoples who live at the latitude of in southern France. But I would say that we are united not so much by geography as by a common fate, a shared difficult fate that has brought us to the brink of alarming signs of disappearing from the face of the earth.

Our fellow Arctic peoples, who are facing extinction, unfortunately no longer believe in these plans and concepts extending into the 2000s and beyond. They've had more than enough of these long-term programs, at the end of which the officials entrusted with implementing these plans are nowhere to be found. Well, let's say, from that historic 1980 plan, I don't see anyone here in this room except my friend Sangi (turns to him), who was working in the Council of Ministers at the time. I think it wasn't his fault that all of this failed and led to the fact that today we are once again talking about what came before that plan.

Our gathering today is a call to life, perhaps our very last opportunity to express our shared aspirations to remain alive within the family of modern humanity. Much has already been said, and rightly so, and much more will be said in the future about the disasters we have endured and are still enduring, about poverty, and about the generally destitute aspects of the situation of the peoples of the Soviet Arctic. And when we are reproached for repeating ourselves, for the fact that we are repeating ourselves, there is nothing we can do about it; fate has led us to this. [...]

I propose, and I appeal on behalf of the congress to the government of the Russian Federation, to take concrete measures this very year to improve the lives of northerners. Why not, for example, include in the decisions of our congress and in the measures to be taken this very year a provision that, during this navigation season, deliver at least three house kits to the most remote villages, to improve the housing situation of northerners even a little. [...] It is precisely in implementing urgent measures to save our fellow countrymen in the North that I see the main task of the Association we will establish at this congress. I call on the future leaders of this organization to take responsibility for the lives and fates of the people. [...]

Our congress has convened, I would say, under very difficult financial, organizational, and other conditions; it has convened, of course, thanks to the generosity and kind assistance of the Russian government, and it would be fitting to thank the Government of the Russian Federation from the podium of our congress (applause). But on your behalf, I would like to express the hope that this goodwill will extend to the newly created association, its working bodies, and its future activities. Thank you for your attention. [Applause]

Nivkh

Vladimir Sangi

Comrades, living in different lands, representing different tribes, having arrived in Moscow for your First Congress, comrades, please listen to the Nivkh word!

[...] Regarding the reports. In his report, Chuner Mikhailovich [Taksami] proposed that the congress elect the Association's Council. I propose that the congress elect the President of the Association by direct secret ballot. [Applause.] Regarding the report by Alexander Andreevich Khomiakov. Sakhalin Island should be included among the regions with particularly dire environmental conditions, alongside Yamal and Gydan, where federal ministries have brought the island's environment to a state of utter ruin. Regarding the Association's charter. I have many comments, but I consider it of fundamental importance to read the following amendment: The Association of Small Peoples of the North of the Soviet Union is an organization with the right of legislative initiative.

Now I would like to show you two documents of fundamental importance. This is not a copy, but the original of a 1967 letter from the Nivkh people addressed to Comrade Brezhnev, requesting that at least the last Nivkh village be left for the Nivkh people and that they not be resettled to the district center. L. I. Brezhnev sent a commission from Moscow to Sakhalin, and the commission, using repressive agencies, resettled the Nivkh to the district center, while this village was left to be destroyed.

Second document: Decision No. 95/202 of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dated January 31, 1989, titled "Regarding the letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from writers Sangi, Aipin, Shestalov, Ledkov, Rugin, Koianto, and Varlamova." In 1988, a group of writers wrote a letter to Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev. I have shown you what came of that letter: our congress. This was a direct directive from the Secretariat of the CPSU and from M. S. Gorbachev personally. On August 25, 1988, at my request, a meeting of the Secretariat of the Writers' Union of the RSFSR was held on the topic "Literature and the Problems of Social and Economic Development of the Peoples of the North in the Context of Intensive Industrial Development of Their Regions." Here are the proposals that were made at that time:

1. Establish an Association of Northern Peoples with the right to initiate legislation at all levels of the USSR government.
2. Establish a State Committee of the Peoples of the North.
3. Establish autonomous entities for the Nanai, Sami, Nivkh, Selkup, Mansi, Evenk, Udege, Itelmen, Ket, Ulch, Far Eastern Evenk, Yukaghir, and other peoples of the North, with representation in the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR. [Applause]

I want to take issue with some comrades who have spoken here with proposals such as: "Let's at least make the village council a national one or restore our

TUZRIK.”¹⁷ You understand that when a person, moving forward, finds himself following his own footsteps, it is a sign that he has lost his way. He has lost his way. We must not repeat ourselves. We are now living in revolutionary times, when the real conditions finally exist to implement the fundamental principles of our Union, that is, the equality of peoples. And I propose that we now build our Russian Federation in this way – granting all peoples, regardless of their size, equal state-autonomous entities, and transforming the current RSFSR into the Federation of Equal Peoples of Russia. [Applause]

Valerii Deomidovich Arteev

V. D. Arteev (1938–1993), elected as a deputy during the first free elections in 1989, the first and respected mayor of the city (1991–1993), after whom one of the streets in his native Salekhard is named.

I would like to remind you that quality of life depends first and foremost on the environmental conditions in our country, and the overall environmental situation in the USSR depends – and I am convinced of this – on the state of the Arctic region, which accounts for more than 60% of the territory. And what do we have there today? We are talking about nuclear weapons testing on Novaia Zemlia. The residents of Semipalatinsk are also talking about this. We understand what national defense capability means; we understand that we must ensure our security, but today we need to think in new ways about how to solve this problem. Who can tell me today that moving nuclear weapons testing to Novaia Zemlia is more favorable than conducting it in Nevada or Semipalatinsk? After all, the natural ecosystem of our Arctic is particularly vulnerable. I would like to address our foreign friends who have come to our congress today; I would like to address the public of all Arctic states, the scientists, the President of the USSR, and the President of the United States: “Please, stop all nuclear weapons testing on land once and for all.” [Prolonged applause]

Mansi

Yuvan Shestalov

Writer

Pasia! Vusia! Antorova! Hello!

[...] Have you noticed that this winter is special? The river has awakened before its time. It is alive. The river has awakened in winter. Here, and in Leningrad. And thousands of people, rallies. The river has awakened in winter, and the branches bend low. And the frost’s power is gentle; northerners are deep in thought. Earth and sky. In Mansi, the sky is *torum*. *Torum* is the weather, the cosmos, and God. The weather does not depend on us, but we are all under the sky, we all depend on the cosmos, no matter how much we may deny God. And cosmic energy lives,

17 *Tuzemnyi raionnyi ispolnitel’nyi komitet* [Native Raion Executive Committee].

reigns, and tries to fashion us into intelligent creators, builders. Is this not why we have gathered here? [...]

In this hall are northerners – most of them, I know, true children of nature. The salvation of humanity, its noble mission, may well begin with the northerners. Take note, media: openness, sincerity, rejection of lies and deceit. Shaman of the mass media, pay attention to the true sons of nature, to those who have not learned the tricks of so-called European civilization and the tricks of the Kremlin, and of this podium, which, with *perestroika*'s acceleration, is turning some of our people's deputies into string puppets, circus performers trying to gain fame through the high podium of the Supreme Council rather than through the high labor of creativity. [Applause] [...]

But the lives of northerners have become much worse than last year, when our people's deputies promised us mountains of gold and lavish feasts; they shouldn't be sitting here [noise in the hall]; we must hold them accountable for why things have gone wrong, why things have gotten bad. [Applause] [...]

I'll move on to the business proposals. I see that Comrade Zakharov is here with us – the former Minister of Culture of the USSR and now Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers, also in charge of culture. Yuri Serafimovich Melentev is also here, who has devoted a great deal of attention to the peoples of the North in recent years. It was with his help that we began construction of the Open-Air Museum [...] in Khanty-Mansiisk. [The chairman's gavel signals the end of the speech; applause.] Brothers, let me speak, okay? [Chairman: How much time do you need?] I've only just begun to speak practically [laughter, noise in the hall. Shestalov starts shouting], the open-air museum – it's not a museum, we put the gods there, the ones who stood there 400 years, a thousand years ago; we put the gods back there [noise, applause urging him to finish and leave the podium]. And the Khanty-Mansi Hill is the energy center of Western Siberia, where God, the cosmic mind, is perceived there like the Bermuda Triangle. [...]

I ask that you acknowledge that it is time to restore churches in the North. People of the North have nowhere left to warm their souls; it is time to turn to our ancestral manifestations of pagan religion, the forms of which we will find. If the Association does not help us [noise, protest applause], we will turn to the peoples of other countries, and we will act: we will create popular fronts and establish a shamans' association.

Leonard Giliazovich Rafikov

Head of the Main Production Department for Gas Extraction in the Tiumen Region.

When it was announced that this congress participant would be given the floor, discontent arose in the hall; isolated protests were heard, and someone shouted, "There you go, now you'll be asking him." Several attempts were made to interrupt his speech with noise and applause.

Distinguished delegates, distinguished guests, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak at such a prestigious forum of the peoples of the North. As a representative of the gas concern established under the Ministry of [Gas Industry], I would like to speak about the new ideology that has been developed and is currently in effect within the gas concern. Over the past years, we must say frankly and openly that little has been done, so to speak, to create normal social conditions and ensure environmental protection in the North. [...] In general, we recently discussed and incorporated into our projects concepts such as “compensatory construction” and “providing certain facilities,” and so on. Today we have moved away from that concept. We have simply replaced the term “compensatory construction” with the creation of normal social conditions for the peoples of the Yamalo-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi Okrugs, where we operate. I’ll tell you the truth: this ideology didn’t reach our company or our teams right away, and even today, far from everything is being done in this regard, but this is already a real solution [...] Our task is not simply to develop the North and then leave, leaving behind, as they say, a ravaged landscape, but to approach it in an environmentally responsible manner, to provide the country with fuel, and to create normal social and environmental conditions for the Indigenous peoples of the North to live in. [Loud noise in the hall, protests, and he leaves.]

Teleut

Nikolai Todyshev

Kemerovo Region

It is known that the Congress was originally conceived as a gathering of the small-numbered Indigenous peoples of Siberia, the North, and the Far East. However, it so happened that someone artificially restricted the scope of the Congress. Representatives of southwestern Siberia – the Teleuts, Shors, Mountain Altai, and others – found themselves excluded from the Congress. Yet the problems faced by all these peoples are the same as those faced by the peoples of the North. Dear delegates, our brothers in misfortune, I ask you to grant us, the small-numbered peoples of southern Siberia – the Teleut, Shor, and Altai – just six people – the right to be delegates with a casting vote. In a short while, voting will begin on important decisions. We want to participate in making these decisions. I propose to record that the Association of Small Peoples of Siberia, the North, and the Far East is open to all of them, and to grant the Association’s Council the right to co-opt representatives of those peoples who, unfortunately, are not present at this congress.

Shor

Georgii Chelbogashev

Kemerovo Region

On March 17–18, 1990, for the first time after a half-century hiatus, a congress of the Shor people was held. From 1926 to 1939, the Gorno-Shor National

Raion existed, which greatly contributed to the socio-economic and cultural development of our people. In 1939, the national raion was abolished by a unilateral decision. The resolution of the Shor Congress states: “to recognize the decision to abolish the Gorno-Shor Raion as illegal, to restore the statehood of the Shor people in the form of the Gorno-Shor Autonomous Okrug and to establish an association of the Shor people.” We also request that the Shors and Teleuts be included in the list of small peoples, which is currently limited to 26 peoples, as we share with them the challenges of preserving our environment, language, and culture. We demand genuine autonomy, and we must also have the right to enjoy those benefits that, in particular, allow us to send school graduates to higher education institutions and ensure the retention of national personnel in national settlements.

Conclusion

*Oh, those three finest years,
Oh, that long-awaited, star-lit hour –
Yet our very essence, our true nature,
Asserted itself once again.*

A. Adamishin (2005: 227)¹⁸

The speeches were over. These were not debates in which any ideas for reforming the existing state of affairs might have emerged but were mostly descriptions of life in the regions. And in many newspapers and magazines articles had been published about this for at least three years (see Shibarova, *this volume*). This way of life had also been shown on television programs. Late in the evening on the second day, the delegates elected Vladimir Sangi as president of the association by open vote in the second round, whereas the Kremlin administration’s plan had been to install Chuner Taksami, who had been appointed head of the organizing committee. Why Taksami? I knew him well for several years in the 1970s in Leningrad, and I understand that he was much more suited to that old party guard which, in Gorbachev’s inner circle, resisted the reforms. This is also evident in his article, which he was advised to write before the congress (Taksami 1989).

Among other officials present at the congress were N. I. Ryzhkov (Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR) and Y. D. Masliukov (Chairman of the State Planning Committee of the USSR, Ryzhkov’s first deputy). Some of the speakers addressed Ryzhkov, naturally hoping for assistance from such direct contact. A. S. Cherniaev (1921–2017), who knew both figures well, along with their roles and qualities, recorded

¹⁸ Anatolii L. Adamishin (1934–2025), an eminent diplomat, was fluent in Italian, English, French, and Ukrainian. From 1986 to 1990, he served as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. These poetic lines were composed during the *perelom* [turning point] of *perestroika* – that is, in the late 1980s.

the following exchange on January 28, 1990, between M. S. Gorbachev and his closest aide and advisor, A. N. Yakovlev – the “architect” of *perestroika*:

[We need to] move toward replacing Ryzhkov: “With a prime minister who thinks at the level of a factory director, with a State Planning Committee raised on the methods of the military-industrial complex, you can’t carry out any reforms.” – “And who in his place?” asked M. S. Gorbachev. Yakovlev: “There are plenty of people; we just need to be bolder in bringing them in.”

Back then in Moscow, colleagues and friends who were well acquainted with the situation told me that the delegates to the Congress had been handpicked by the administration to ensure that everything went “smoothly and quietly, just as it should.” It is clear why there were no specialists from the Anxious North [*Trevozhnyi Sever*] among the delegates, nor those professionals who had gained experience in the “Ethos and Ethnos” business simulation in Khanty-Mansiisk. Instead, A. Khomiakov, chairman of the State Planning Committee of the RSFSR’s and L. Rafikov, head of the gas industry, occupied the time with their clumsy promises. The syntax and language of these officials evoke the narratives of the characters in the works of A. Platonov and M. Zoshchenko. It’s good that V. Kurikov was also allowed to speak, as he has done much to benefit the Indigenous people.

It is certainly very positive that the congress took place, and I am confident that this was thanks to Gorbachev. Yes, the congress delegates were inexperienced in such a large-scale project. But the entire country, which had embarked on a new path, was inexperienced. In the context of that time, allowing the congress to take place was truly a humane decision. Its leadership faced a great many urgent and complex problems.

On March 30, the day the congress opened, the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR declared the state authority of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Estonia to be illegal and proclaimed the beginning of the restoration of the Republic of Estonia.

On March 30, the first session of the Federation Council was held in the Kremlin, chaired by USSR President M. S. Gorbachev. The agenda included: “Renewal of the Union Treaty, procedures for resolving issues related to the withdrawal of union republics from the USSR.”

On March 31, the Founding Congress of the Liberal Democratic Party of the Soviet Union took place in Moscow. V. V. Zhirinovskii was elected chairman of the LDP-USSR. Speaking before the participants and guests of his Congress, he noted that the LDP-USSR “is the first opposition party in the USSR.”

In August, five months after the Kremlin’s triumph, Vladimir Sangi traveled to Alaska to meet with the local Indigenous peoples and learn about their experience of living together with Others. Here is what he told a local journalist of the local newspaper *Sovetskaia Chukotka*:

After the congress, I see no other way but to restore clan relations. Everything must be transferred to clan use, as it has been for millennia. The harmonious connection

between humanity and nature, to which the peoples of the North must return – this is also the distant future of European nations. They will come to this anyway: the ecological crisis is evident today, and power is separated from the people. [...] We must create clan councils, nomadic ones. The reindeer herder is a producer, and he is also the highest authority, which must be above both the republican and the federal levels. We must restore the lost way of life (Sangi 1990).

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Figures

- 1 Aleksandr Pika (left) and Boris Prochorov. Moscow, 1994. Photo: Boris Chichlo.