

13 THE PERESTROIKA YEARS IN THE NORTH: CRISIS OR RENEWAL IN RUSSIAN ETHNOGRAPHY? CONTRASTING EASTERN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

Erich Kasten

For Russian ethnography, *perestroika* or post-Soviet studies until the early 2000s¹ often represented a period of crisis or a "process of decline" (cf. Sirina, *this volume*, pp. 272, 297), whereas this discipline has only in recent years begun to regain some of its former acknowledged "strength." In this context, reference is often made to the long-standing tradition of Soviet applied anthropology. However, this tradition primarily served the implementation of state-led socio-economic experiments, which largely neglected the precarious conditions faced by Indigenous populations in the midst of the recurring transformative processes that are vividly described in the Indigenous testimonies rendered at the beginning of the *perestroika* period and presented in this volume (Shibarova, Chichlo, *this volume*). At the same time, brief moments of renewed engagement did emerge within Russian research during the 1990s, when scholars began to address key concerns of Indigenous communities, including the formulation of new land-use legislation (Sirina, *this volume*, pp. 290, 292, 297). Yet these initiatives gradually lost momentum over the following years and eventually faded away, after the political framework shifted once again, preventing the realization of Gorbachev's and other's original visions of a peaceful and sustainable North.

It is striking that, in Russian ethnological research, certain contemporary topics – particularly since 2022 – appear to have become largely taboo, even though these directly affect Indigenous communities in the country's peripheral regions. It is equally noteworthy that studies of ethnic identity in the context of resource conflicts are scarcely addressed in today's Russian Siberian studies, despite the fact that such issues were central to Russian research during the *perestroika* era and continue to play a significant role in research projects on the North conducted outside Russia.² Also unthinkable in the present context would be an appeal to the United Nations as made by an Itelmen village community in 1993, facilitated through the mediation of Western ethnologists (Koester 2005: 649).³

1 For the terminology and periodization of the events of this period, see Preface, p. 11.

2 See, for example, the Birgejupmi project *Indigenous Knowledge & Sustainable Arctic Futures*, which, although not always explicitly, is connected to Sámi and Kalaallit ethnicity, as does much contemporary museum research in the West. <https://birgejupmi.eu> [accessed 11.06.2026]

3 The photographs by Anselm Graubner (Kuhr-Korolev 2026) provide visual documentation of Kamchatka's then-precarious economic conditions.

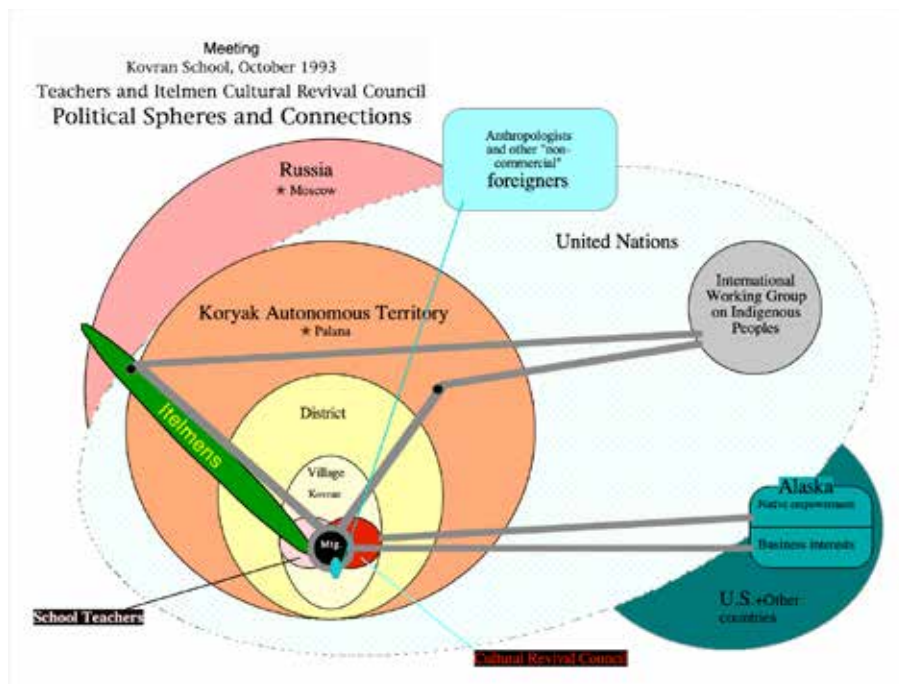


Fig. 1 Circular shapes indicate the political span of various groups with which meeting participants could identify. The circular “International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs” (IWGIA) represents its place within the organization of the UN. Thick gray lines indicate influences coming into the meeting. Illustration by David Koester (Source: Koester 2005).

Ethnologists working in Russia today, again under conditions of increasingly restricted *glasnost* face a range of options similar to those that existed in the pre-*perestroika* period: repression, including adaptation to the prevailing political and academic mainstream, including a renewed form of top-down “applied anthropology” or the risk of arrest or the necessity to emigrate to avoid such, and continue their work in the diaspora. Another option is discreet ethnographic work, guided by a clear ethical and moral compass and informed by empathy and understanding toward Indigenous communities. The latter, it may be noted, existed even under more overtly totalitarian conditions in the Soviet period⁴ and appears, in modified form, to remain so today.

Accordingly, heterogeneous positions have emerged within the Russian ethno-

4 From as early as 1956 and throughout the following decades until the 1980s, ethnographers submitted reports to the Soviet Council of Ministers documenting the dire situation of Indigenous peoples. However, these *dokladnye zapiski* [internal reports] were largely disregarded at the time and remained unpublished (see Chichlo, *this volume*, p. 86). Only in the early 2000s were they made available through the *Etnologicheskaja ekspertiza* series (Sokolova and Pivneva 2004–2007).

logical research community with regard to the current situation and with evaluation of its recent past. For this reason, one of the aims of this volume has been to assemble as broad a range of perspectives as possible, in order to foster a deeper understanding of this dilemma – one that ethnologists have, it would appear, long been confronted with (Kasten et al. 2024a).⁵

Some research institutions in Germany have responded to the political sanctions imposed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in their own way. In some cases, these measures have been guided by the sentiments of Ukrainian colleagues working within these institutions, adopting a policy of categorically refusing to publish work by scholars residing in Russia. By contrast, the German Federal Foreign Office has encouraged continued dialogue with some of these scholars, as well as with Russian civil society more broadly, arguing that maintaining channels of communication is essential in order not to abandon those who once placed their hopes for political renewal in engagement with the West.⁶ (See Young, *this volume*, p. 212)

Scholars in Russia who actively disseminate anti-democratic and, ultimately, war-supporting narratives should not be provided with publication platforms in the West. At the same time, contemporary developments in Russia cannot be adequately understood without engaging critically with the experiences and perspectives of colleagues who continue to live and work there, as this volume seeks to do. Refusing any such engagement risks developing significant blind spots in our understanding of Russian society and politics. In doing so, we may inadvertently fall into a pattern often criticized in scholarship which emerges under “managed democracies” and totalitarian regimes: the exclusion of perspectives that challenge prevailing orthodoxies.

By incorporating the voices of colleagues who continue to live and work in Russia into this broader discussion it is possible to better discern certain underlying dynamics. Particularly illuminating in this regard is the recognition that retrospective assessments are shaped by the political contexts in which they are made. For this reason, several contributions on international scholarly cooperation during the *perestroika* period, originally published in Russian in the early 2000s, are republished here in English translation, while acknowledging that some of the views expressed in them would likely be formulated differently today. Precisely because they capture perspectives from different points in time, these texts offer valuable historical insights. Approaches of this kind could likewise enrich historical scholarship more broadly, provided it remains open to such critical dialogue.

Relations between Western and Russian ethnologists during the 1990s were often marked by an “elephant in the room” – the profound inequality of financial resources

5 Similar dilemmas were also faced by German ethnologists during the Nazi period, many of whom chose to align themselves with a state-serving form of applied anthropology that contributed to the reinforcement of racial theories.

6 See the projects supported by its “Eastern Partnership and Russia” program: <https://ek-north.org>; <https://mu-north.org> [accessed: 7.07.2026]

available to research teams during the period of economic collapse and monetary instability. This structural imbalance, rooted in the systemic crises of the late Soviet period, was frequently addressed only cautiously at the time, and in later, often more critical retrospectives, sometimes explicitly attributed to shortcomings in Western academic conduct.

Indeed, there were cases that were later perceived as humiliating in hindsight (see Young, *this volume*, p. 126), and in which some Western colleagues may at times have behaved in an insensitive manner (cf. Gross 2024). However, the relationship between Western researchers and Indigenous partners was in most cases not primarily shaped by financial considerations, but rather by a shared commitment to engaging with urgent local concerns, as clearly articulated already at the First Congress of the Peoples of the North in 1990 (see Chichlo, *this volume*). This also helps to explain the often productive collaboration between Western scholars and Indigenous communities.⁷

An early example of how research relationships can shift in the opposite direction as contexts change is provided by the critical reassessment of developments in Waldemar Jochelson's fieldwork practice. Whereas his relationships with the Yukaghir during his initial fieldwork were remarkably empathetic by the standards of the time, his interest in the living conditions and lifeworlds of the Itelmen appears to have waned as he became increasingly concerned with substantiating some of Franz Boas's theories on North Pacific cultural relations. During these later expeditions, the intimate personal relationships that had characterised Jochelson's earlier fieldwork gave way to more instrumental working arrangements, or "business relations," in which Itelmen participants were employed as paid labour for his excavations. (Koester and Kasten 2026: 31)

By contrast, rather than testing prevailing anthropological theories, our teams' research⁸ was directly informed by the issues raised at the 1990 conference, as well as in earlier press reports, where they had been articulated in particularly urgent terms as matters of central concern for Indigenous communities – such as self-government, control over the sustainability of their livelihoods and natural resources, and the preservation or regaining of their ethnic identity, including through language, craftsmanship, and performative arts, among others.

In such approaches, the emphasis lies primarily on mutually valuable outcomes rather than on direct financial compensation. Therefore, research could be continued even during periods without project funding, when I had to finance field visits from my own resources. However, even when projects were funded with Western resources, their allocation required considerable prudence. This was necessary not only to

7 A good example of this is provided by the engaged collaborations of David Koester and Jonathan Boblajik with Itelmen communities, as well as by my own collaborative work with Itelmen, Even, and Koryak partners and with Russian and Ukrainian scholars in the regional capital, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii (see footnote 8).

8 See Dul'chenko and Zaporotskii; Urkachan et al.; Kravchenko, *this volume*.

avoid undermining the trust-based foundations of collaboration described above and replacing them with donor-client relationships and thereby undermining and ultimately eroding the partnership itself.

Particular care was required in the appropriate distribution of available project funds among partners, as can be illustrated by the example of the INTAS project in 1996 (see Dul'chenko, *this volume*). This programme constituted an EU-funded support scheme for research groups in Russia during a period of severe economic crisis, when many institutions could no longer be sustained through domestic funding alone. It was widely known what level of salaries Western colleagues received, and it might therefore have seemed appropriate to remunerate Russian project partners accordingly. However, given the limited resources available, this would have allowed for only one single partner in Russia to be funded. Beyond the inevitable tensions this would have generated among colleagues within the institute, the INTAS programme was explicitly designed to rely on collegial solidarity among Russian researchers. Owing to the purchasing power of the funds provided in Western currency, it was nevertheless possible in this case to support 16 staff members of the Kamchatka Institute of Ecology and Nature Management (KIEP) for more than two years with urgently needed financial resources. In this context, it could be ensured that the funds were disbursed directly to the individual staff members, rather than – as initially requested – being channelled through the institute's administration, a procedure that, in the Russian context, carried a well-known risk of uncontrolled diversion of resources to non-designated recipients.

Later, I sought to pursue a similar initiative in 2000, which, however, failed for a number of reasons. At the time, it appeared particularly promising to invite a group of Indigenous knowledge holders from Chukotka to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin (then the Museum für Völkerkunde), in order to engage with its significant collections assembled by the brothers Arthur and Aurel Krause, as well as by Johan Adrian Jacobsen. The aim was to collaboratively explore these holdings and subsequently return the documented results, together with visual materials, to Indigenous communities in Chukotka, thereby providing access to lost parts of their cultural heritage. In addition to the scholarly value of such an endeavour, all partners would have been compensated in accordance with local income levels.

One of my interlocutors at the time was the Chukchi writer Yurii Rytkeu, who is also mentioned on several occasions in this volume in his ambivalent role in relation to emerging new trends (Shibarova, *this volume*, p. 49; Chichlo, *this volume*, p. 88). In response to the proposed remuneration, he reacted sharply, stating that he would not be “paid off with beads” as in colonial times, and suggested that I should conduct any further negotiations with his agent in Switzerland, where he had already accumulated considerable wealth through his international literary publications.

Solidarity was not taken into account here (cf. the above-mentioned project with KIEP) with his compatriots living under precarious conditions, as he was unwilling to accept a fair distribution of the available resources. However, this project was eventu-

ally realised, albeit in a modified form, some 25 years later, thanks to the expertise and dedication of the team led by Liliya Zdor (see also her contribution in this volume) (Kasten 2026).

The case of Rytkeu discussed here likewise illustrates how some intellectuals and ethnologists were able to adapt to shifting political and ideological currents to their own advantage.⁹ This category of opportunists was aptly described during the peaceful German Revolution of 1989 by the term “Wendehälse” (“turncoats”), referring to individuals who quickly adjusted their positions to align with changing circumstances – as also during more recent transformations in Russia.

As already noted, the then-open and often friendly research relationships between Western ethnologists and Indigenous communities were generally not based on the former’s privileged access to greater financial resources than their Russian colleagues, as is sometimes implied or explicitly claimed. In this context, a Russian ethnologist points out that she was unable to compete with the offers made by Western colleagues when acquiring ethnographic objects (Sirina, *this volume*, p. 284). Of particular relevance in this regard is the observation by Anatol Donkan (Kasten, *this volume*, p. 268) that Russian museum practice appears to have been shaped by an expectation that such objects would be provided free of charge, since it was considered an honour for the makers to have their work exhibited. In contrast, acquisitions of small collections for German museums ensured that the artists were appropriately compensated for their work, in addition to receiving recognition through presentations at international exhibitions (see Zaotschnaja, *this volume*).¹⁰

During one of the routine visits by the Russian secret service FSB officials to my local research partners, one of them responded to an inquiry as to why she did not collaborate with the supposedly better Russian ethnologists by stating, to my great dismay, that Western researchers showed greater understanding of the situation and the urgent concerns of Indigenous communities. Many Western researchers brought with them experience from their involvement in self-government movements among American First Nations in the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹ Some were also influenced by more recent approaches in Action Anthropology, which were directly oriented toward the concerns of Indigenous populations and, at times, contributed to a shift in the previously prevailing Soviet-style applied anthropology among Russian colleagues.

These colleagues initially provided notable support for the emerging *obshchina* legislation (Vakhtin, *this volume*, p. 134). At the same time, however, it should be noted that these developments were often embedded in, and not unaffected by, broader international scholarly discourses, such as those advanced during conferences at the

9 See Shibarova, Chichlo (*this volume*) for examples of the contradictory positions he adopted in his articles and speeches.

10 For further details on the acquisition of these collections, see Kasten 2025: 207–209.

11 Itelmen activist Oleg Zaporotskii attentively received the accounts of my relevant experiences in the Canadian Pacific Northwest. See also the engagement by D. Koester (p. 305 f.)

Max Planck Institute in Halle (Novikova 2002; Sirina 2005; Stammmler 2005; Fondahl 2005; Ziker 2002). This applies in particular to collaborative research on the then newly introduced legislation on “Territories of Traditional Resource Use” [*Territorii traditsionnogo prirodopol'zovaniia*] conducted jointly with Western researchers (Fondahl et al. 2021).

Between the lines of Russian scholars’ writings, one can occasionally discern traces of how a periodically experienced sense of perceived economic and academic disadvantage appears to have left its mark. In such deeply rooted sentiments, state-promoted patriotic narratives of the above-mentioned “restored strength” can today readily take hold.

Donkan’s biography (Kasten, *this volume*) illustrates how mistrust and fear produced through Soviet-era propaganda could be rapidly overcome once people were given the opportunity to take their affairs back into their own hands. This raises the prospect for a future normalisation of research relations, comparable to those of the 1990s and early 2000s, in which Western anthropologists may again be able – and willing – to conduct joint fieldwork with Russian colleagues and Indigenous partners. At the same time, increasing isolation due to fractured research relationships and disrupted scientific discourse is likely to result in renewed stagnation, including within academia, following the valuable impulses that Russian ethnology received during its period of opening in the *perestroika* era.

References

- Fondahl, Gail 2005. “Everything is as if Beyond a Boundary”: Reflections on Apprehensions Regarding Aboriginal Re-Territorialization in Northern Russia. In *Rebuilding Identities. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*. E. Kasten (ed.): 89–107. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag. https://dh-north.org/siberian_studies/publications/rifondahl.pdf [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Fondahl, Gail, Nicholas Parlato, Viktoriia Filippova, and Antonina Savvinova 2021. The Evolution of Forming Territories of Traditional Nature Use in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). *Sibirica* 20(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.3167/sib.2021.200102>
- Gross, Martin 2024. What Went Wrong Between East and West? An Assessment Using the Example of European-Russian Science Projects. In *A Fractured North – Journeys on Hold*. E. Kasten, I. Krupnik and G. Fondahl (eds.), 249–262. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. <https://bolt-dev.dh-north.org/files/dhn-pdf/fn2gross.pdf> [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Kasten, Erich (ed.) 2025. *Sprechende Objekte – Ethnografica und ihre Erzählungen*. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. <https://dh-north.org/publikationen/sprechende-objekte> [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- 2026. *Yazyk i kul'tura chukchei – rasskazy tundry i poberezh'ia / Chukchi Language and Culture – Narratives from the Tundra and the Coast*. Fürstenberg/Havel:

- Kulturstiftung Sibirien. <https://dh-north.org/publikationen/chukchi-language-and-culture-narratives-from-the-tundra-and-the-coast> [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Kasten, Erich, Igor Krupnik, and Gail Fondahl (eds.) 2024. *A Fractured North – Facing Dilemmas*. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. <https://dh-north.org/publikationen/a-fractured-north-facing-dilemmas> [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- 2025. *A Fractured North – Maintaining Connections*. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. <https://dh-north.org/publikationen/a-fractured-north-maintaining-connections> [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Koester, David 2005. Global Movements and Local Historical Events: Itelmens of Kamchatka Appeal to the United Nations. *American Ethnologist* 32(4): 642–659.
- Koester, David and Erich Kasten 2026. Waldemar Jochelson's Unpublished Typescript "The Kamchadals". In *Anthropological Research in Kamchatka*. E. Kasten and D. Koester (eds.). Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien (*in print*)
- Kuhr-Korolev, Corinna (ed.) 2026: *Weiter geht's nicht. Das Ende der Sowjetunion auf Kamtschatka 1991/92*. Weimar: Hartkoch Verlag.
- Novikova, Natalia 2002. Self-government of the Indigenous minority people of West Siberia: Analysis of law and practice. In *People and the Land. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*. E. Kasten (ed.): 83–97. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag. https://dh-north.org/siberian_studies/publications/plnovikova.pdf [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Sirina, Anna 2005. Clan Communities Among the Northern Indigenous Peoples of the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic: A Step to Self-determination? In *Rebuilding Identities. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*. E. Kasten (ed.): 197–216. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag. https://dh-north.org/siberian_studies/publications/risirina.pdf [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Sokolova, Zoia P. and Elena A. Pivneva 2004–2007. *Etnograficheskaja ekspertiza: Narody Severa Rossii* [Ethnological expertise: Peoples of the North of Russia]. 5 vols. Moskva: Institut etnologii i antropologii RAN.
- Stammler, Florian 2005. The Obshchina Movement in Yamal: Defending Territories to Build Identities? In *Rebuilding Identities. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*. E. Kasten (ed.): 109–134. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag. https://dh-north.org/siberian_studies/publications/ristammler.pdf [accessed: 11.06.2026]
- Ziker, John P. 2002. Land use and economic change among the Dolgan and Nganasan. In *People and the Land. Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia*. E. Kasten (ed.): 207–224. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag. https://dh-north.org/siberian_studies/publications/plziker.pdf [accessed: 11.06.2026]

Figures

- 1 Circular shapes indicate the political span of various groups with which meeting participants could identify. Illustration by David Koester (Source: Koester 2005).