

PREFACE

As early as the turn of the millennium conferences held at the Max Planck Institute in Halle, Germany, examined the impact of *perestroika* on Indigenous communities in Russia (Kasten 2002, 2004, 2005). In the years that followed, the initially promising forms of international collaboration began to change, at first almost imperceptibly. Over time, these shifts became increasingly pronounced, culminating in open fractures within the international research community that emerged following the events of 2022 (Kasten et al. 2024a, 2024b, 2025; Melnikova and Vasilyeva 2024). Against this backdrop, the present volume seeks to re-examine developments during the *perestroika* era from a broadened contemporary perspective. By situating these historical processes within the context of subsequent political, social, and scholarly transformations, it aims to reassess both the opportunities and the challenges that *perestroika* created for Indigenous peoples and for the study of Indigenous issues in Russia.

Perestroika literally and specifically refers to the "restructuring" of the Soviet Union, a term that lost its original referent when the Soviet state ceased to exist. Accordingly, *perestroika* is often assigned a clearly defined chronological frame, beginning with Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power in 1985 and ending with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Developments thereafter are also described as "post-Soviet" or "post-*perestroika*," terms that are frequently employed – and in some cases preferred – by Russian scholars as well as by several contributors to this volume.

At the same time, uncertainty remains regarding how best to characterize the entire period between 1985 and the early 2000s, which form the principal focus of the studies collected here. As Anna Sirina (*this volume*, p. 272) notes, discussions continue to this day regarding when *perestroika* began and when it ended: for the majority of the Russian population, the period of *perestroika* is not limited to the time of Gorbachev (1986–1991) or Yeltsin (1991–1999), but it continued even later.

While keeping these different perspectives in mind, I consider it appropriate for the purposes of this volume to view *perestroika* within the broader time frame adopted here, one that encompasses not only the reform period itself but also the subsequent phase of coping with and adapting to its consequences. Accordingly, I argue that *perestroika* extended into the early 2000s, when the economic and scientific transformations, which it had set in motion, became increasingly consolidated, albeit at the expense of *glasnost* and with a gradual erosion of the innovative impulses fostered by international collaboration.

Perestroika Years in the North explores the causes, dynamics, and consequences of the profound political and economic transformation that swept across the Soviet Union from the mid-1980s onward. Through the policies of *glasnost* and the unpreced-

ented opportunities they created for freedom of expression and public debate, representatives of Indigenous communities were, for the first time, able to draw attention to the conditions that threatened their economic livelihoods, cultural self-determination, and ethnic identities. Until then, decisions affecting Indigenous communities had largely been made in a paternalistic manner, often with the support of Soviet-style applied anthropology. Policies were formulated and implemented with little regard for the perspectives, experiences, and aspirations of the people concerned, who were rarely given meaningful opportunities to participate in shaping their own futures.

The volume demonstrates how, even within authoritarian systems, growing public discontent can eventually find expression and become a force for political change. In this respect, the experiences of the *perestroika* period offer insights that remain relevant today and may sustain hope that seemingly stable forms of “managed democracy” [*upravliaemaia demokratiia*] are neither immutable nor immune to challenge. At the same time, the book shows how many of the expectations and aspirations associated with the reforms of the late Soviet period ultimately remained unfulfilled, giving rise to increasingly ambivalent attitudes among local communities. This atmosphere, in turn, created favourable conditions for the consolidation of new authoritarian power structures, which drew legitimacy from anti-Western and, by extension, anti-democratic narratives. The continuing relevance of these developments provides a compelling reason to revisit the *perestroika* era from this perspective. To this end, some chapters offer analytical examinations of political, social, and economic transformations, while others seek to capture the lived experiences of those directly affected by the unexpected wave of new opportunities and the challenges that accompanied them. Particular emphasis is therefore placed on first-hand accounts and personal reflections, especially from those living in Russia, which provide an essential foundation for a deeper understanding of this period and for future in-depth research.

Unlike the Soviet period, when academic research and ethnography documented the cultural specificities of Indigenous peoples which in turn shaped state policies directed toward them, this volume seeks primarily to foreground the voices of those most directly affected and the issues these peoples deemed most critical.

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Stephan Dudeck and **Liivo Niglas** demonstrate how early public debates concerning comparable forms of environmental damage in the Baltic region and Western Siberia gave rise to the collaborative film project of the Estonian cultural scholar and later politician Lennart Meri. The project was guided by the explicitly political statement of its Khanty protagonist, Spiridon Tylchin, whose reflections provided both its inspiration and its central message. **Anna Shibarova** examines press coverage published in major Soviet urban centres between 1987 and 1989. She argues that an annotated bibliography would make it possible to identify key thematic patterns and to better understand the dynamics of the campaign as it unfolded against the

backdrop of such defining concepts and processes as *glasnost* and *perestroika*. **Boris Chichlo** shares his recollections and insights from the First Congress of the Peoples of the North, held in Moscow in 1990, which he attended in person and where he carefully documented the speeches delivered by participants. Extensive excerpts from these speeches are reproduced here, as are the documentary materials presented in the Appendix to Anna Shibarova's chapter, in order to convey as faithfully as possible how people living in these regions themselves perceived and experienced the circumstances of the time. By placing such first-hand testimonies alongside scholarly analysis, the volume seeks to illuminate not only the structural transformations of the *perestroika* era but also the ways in which these changes were understood, negotiated, and lived by Indigenous communities themselves.

Following the decision taken at the 1990 Congress in Moscow to establish an independent association of the Indigenous peoples of the (then still existing) Soviet Union, aimed at fostering their newly self-determined cooperation, the first meetings between ethnologists from Russia and cultural and social anthropologists from the United States took place shortly thereafter in 1991. These encounters, which are described in detail by **Oran Young**, who organized one such meeting, sought to develop collaborative research frameworks for engaging with the rapidly changing social conditions in these regions. The intention was to jointly examine these transformations scientifically, drawing on initially differing methodological traditions in each country and supported to a considerable extent by Western funding structures.

With regard to Chukotka, **Nikolai Vakhtin** draws on data collected during one of the earliest international research initiatives of its kind, the French-Swiss-Russian expedition "Transiberian Longines" (1993), which was later supplemented (1995–1996) by work within the project "Environmental Change and Indigenous Knowledge," conducted together with Igor Krupnik. Against this background, Vakhtin examines how different population groups responded to the social, economic, and political upheavals of the period, as well as to the pervasive sense of uncertainty that accompanied them. From Chukotka themselves, **Mark, Liliya, and Eduard Zdor** describe and analyse local developments and survival strategies, in which the latter two were themselves closely involved over many years in their coastal settlement of Neshkan. The contribution by **Gavriil Malyshev** addresses the late or post-*perestroika* period in Chukotka, focusing on how Indigenous populations engaged with Russian-Canadian housing improvement projects and adapted, in their own ways, to the consequences of these interventions.

The following section presents examples of emerging forms of international collaboration in the Russian Far East as reflected from the perspective of local participants. **Erich Kasten** illustrates how the Nanai craftsman Anatol Donkan was able to further develop his artistic practice through inspirations received from abroad, thereby strengthening his sense of Indigenous identity. Comparable productive stimuli also arose from research conducted by Kasten and his team in Kamchatka during

the *perestroika* period, beginning in 1993. Some of the three chapters which follow – previously published in Russian over 15 years ago – might be framed differently today in light of more recent mainstream political narratives, and these collaborative encounters might now be reinterpreted from alternative perspectives. A central focus is placed by **Elena Dul'chenko** on the significance of traditional ecological knowledge, which is being preserved for future generations through international research collaborations and educational initiatives. **Oleg Zaporotskii** emphasizes the necessity of securing Indigenous land rights and strengthening local self-governance. Both demonstrate that access to sustainable natural resources and biodiversity conservation are inextricably linked to the protection of Indigenous livelihoods, cultural practices, and ways of life. **Valerii Kravchenko** highlights the impact of Indigenous dance traditions on the Kamchatka Peninsula as an important means of preserving the ethnic identity of peoples such as the Itelmen, Koryak, and Even. He argues that choreographic practice functions not only as a form of cultural expression but also as a political statement and a living testament to the resilience of Indigenous communities. **Aleksandra Urkachan, Raisa Avak and Tjan Zaotschnaja** document German-Russian collaborative initiatives aimed at preserving the cultural heritage of the Koryak, Even, and Itelmen peoples on Kamchatka. The use of modern digital media technologies facilitates the transmission of recorded Indigenous knowledge to future generations. In this way, interdisciplinary collaboration and international exchange not only support the preservation of cultural heritage but also strengthen social cohesion at the local level through the active engagement with these traditions.

In the concluding section, the contribution by **Anna Sirina** demonstrates how contemporary Russian ethnography retrospectively frames and evaluates this research period of the *perestroika* era until the early 2000s. In part, current Russian perspectives may differ from the more optimistic assessments that were expressed at the time, as reflected in the contributions to the trilogy *Pathways to Reform in Post-Soviet Siberia* (Kasten 2002, 2004, 2005) and as they have since been further developed within methodological approaches in Western scholarship. This divergence, in turn, raises the question of context-dependent interpretations of history – namely, how historical processes may be understood differently depending on prevailing political discourses. This issue is taken up, among others, by **Erich Kasten's** concluding chapter, in which he explores the possible causes of the breakdown of earlier research collaborations, which had proved mutually beneficial during the *perestroika* period – while such an inquiry takes on renewed significance against the backdrop of an emerging climate of renewed scholarly isolation and stagnation.

At the end of this volume, **Boris Chichlo** has compiled a list of significant events during *perestroika*. This serves as both a legacy to, and a reminder of, the remarkable degree of *glasnost* and the democratic processes of that period, whereas historical facts are sometimes overlooked or obscured in contemporary discourse. It also illustrates how these upheavals could be turned by some individuals to their own advantage.

References

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Notes

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 mostly in transliterated form.

Dedication and acknowledgements

When, in the early 1990s, our SiberiaLab at the Freie Universität Berlin began exploring – in the spirit of *perestroika* – new approaches to community-driven ethnology in Siberia, this work was largely prompted by the groundbreaking contributions of Aleksandr Pika (Pika and Prokhorov 1994). One of us (Stephan Dudeck) had the privilege of meeting him in Moscow shortly before he tragically perished in a boating accident in Chukotka in 1995 while carrying out collaborative research with new colleagues from abroad. I therefore dedicate this volume to the memory of “Sasha,” as he was known to his friends and colleagues.

I am sincerely grateful to Gail Fondahl, Igor Krupnik, and Nikolai Vakhtin for their insightful discussions and critical engagement with several, at times controversial, assessments.

Erich Kasten

