

## 12 SIBERIAN ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD: A VIEW FROM MOSCOW

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### Introduction

There is a wide range of opinions regarding the past thirty years of Russian ethnology. Academician Valery A. Tishkov, scientific director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereafter – IEA RAS), who headed this institute from 1989 to 2015 (until 1990, the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, IE USSR AS), gave a high assessment of this period in his article "From Where is Russian Ethnology and Where is it Going? A Personal View in Global Perspective" (Tishkov 2020). Research fellow at the IEA RAS, Doctor of Science Sergei V. Sokolovskii, and Professor of the Department of Ethnology at the Faculty of History at Moscow State University Tatiana D. Solovei, on the other hand, offer a highly critical assessment of this period, albeit from opposing positions: the former comment on the insufficiently rapid and deep integration of Russian ethnology into global anthropology (e.g. Sokolovskii 2011), while the latter argues that Russian ethnography became a colonial science, falling into a strong dependence on Western ideas and concepts and thereby losing its independence and ability to formulate big theories (Solovei 2022). Upon careful analysis of all these publications, a weakness in the authors' arguments becomes apparent: insufficient attention to regional studies. However, the fact that five of the seven participants in the discussion of Tishkov's article conduct fieldwork in Siberia – and three of them are foreigners – speaks for itself: the Siberian field has become a global field of research after decades of being closed to foreign scholars wishing to work in Siberia. Previously, they could only learn about the lives of people in this region – whose geopolitical and economic significance had increased by the late 20th and early 21st centuries – from "secondary" sources (i.e., publications by Soviet scholars and translated works). This, in my view, explains the great interest in the Siberian field, which was previously visited only sporadically and did not fall within the sphere of British and American anthropology – whose traditions were formed on different grounds in their own colonial possessions, and where it became difficult to conduct research, especially in the postcolonial period. An exception is the region of southeastern Siberia, which is part of Central Asia and has long attracted Britain's attention.

The inclusion of the Siberian field within the sphere of interest of the Anglo-American anthropological tradition in the late 20th and early 21st centuries can be viewed as a new and significant episode in its development. As for German ethnography, it

was originally linked to Siberia, since in the 18th century German scholars were hired by the Russian state to conduct scientific research in Siberia, and, as Han Vermeulen argues, “systematic ethnography emerged in Siberia as a result of interaction between German historians and natural scientists, on the one hand, and Russian scholars and administrative officials, on the other” (Vermeulen 2018: 61). Although the subject matter of such research has changed significantly to date, the German tradition retains a focus on the material world, cultural artifacts, and collecting, with a contemporary emphasis on mutually beneficial cooperation with Indigenous peoples under the banner of returning knowledge to Indigenous communities (Kasten et al. 2025).

The most recent period of development in Russian ethnology and its regional studies (1990s–2020s) is linked to the restructuring of Russian ethnology initiated in the 1990s, and it was not uniform across all three decades. It can be conditionally divided into several sub-periods or stages, namely:

- The 1990s–early 2000s (this period has become firmly associated with the term “post-Soviet;” another description is “a period of crisis and hope” (Wiener 2020);
- mid-2000s – early 2010s (I will call this the “transitional” period; Boris Wiener proposed the alternative term “thematic and theoretical diversification”) (ibid.);
- mid-2010s – early 2020s, tentatively titled “the period of gaining strength.”

This periodization is based on factors of the internal logic of Russian science’s development (including institutional, educational, thematic, and other aspects) within the context of ongoing political and socio-economic processes (Sirina 2024).

Discussions continue to this day regarding when *perestroika* began and when it ended. According to research by some Russian sociologists, for the majority of the Russian population, the period of *perestroika* is not limited to the time of Gorbachev (1986–1993) or Yeltsin (1993–1999); it continued even later (Klimov 2005).

The historical period of the 1990s and early 2000s has not yet been fully understood in Russian ethnography and, in particular, in Northern studies. This requires self-reflection on the part of those who, like myself, were actively working during that time. This article is written with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the distinctive features of the post-Soviet period in the history of Russian Northern studies and in the lives of Northerners. The article is based on field materials from those years, scholarly literature, and personal recollections, and does not claim to be exhaustive on this broad topic. Other researchers and colleagues undoubtedly have their own experiences working during the same period and their own perspectives on the processes unfolding in academia and in the Siberian North. In this article some results of my field research among the peoples of the North in these years are presented. I also trace situation regarding the discipline’s development at the IEA RAS during the post-Soviet period, including the international contacts that influenced Russian science as a whole and Northern studies in particular.

## Post-graduate education at the IEA RAS

After graduating from Irkutsk State University in 1984, I entered the post-graduate program at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1988. The Institute was considered the country's leading research institution in the field of the study of the peoples and cultures of the world. At that time, the Northern Studies section of the IE USSR AS, where I was assigned to write my dissertation, was staffed by leading Soviet scholars of Northern studies: Ilia S. Gurvich, Anna V. Smoliak, Sevan I. Weinstein, Zoia P. Sokolova, Vladimir I. Vasilev, Yurii B. Simchenko, Maria Y. Zhornitskaia, and Tatiana V. Lukianchenko. At that time, they were between 50 and 70 years old. There were literally only two or three young staff members.

At the IEA RAS, postgraduate education was primarily pursued by Russia state citizens. In the Northern Studies section, graduate and doctoral students came from various regions, but mainly from Siberia – from Altai, Buriatia, Yakutia, Tuva, the Irkutsk Region, and other areas. There were also several foreign graduate students from Japan and South Korea. I remember them with respect and fondness. The case of Atsushi Yoshida, who studied in the post-graduate program at the IEA RAS from 1994 to 1997, although an exception to the rule (the vast majority of foreign polar researchers studied in post-graduate programs at various universities in the United States, England, and Germany), is indicative of a conscious choice of the Russian Siberian studies tradition. During his studies under the supervision of Simchenko (1935–1995) and Sokolova (1930–2020), Yoshida undertook five field trips to the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug and the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). The result of his travels across the Tazovskaiia tundra was the dissertation “The Food Culture of the Gydan Nenets: Interpretation and Social Adaptation,” which he brilliantly defended in 1997.

By the time I became a post-graduate student, the era of the Institute's director, Academician Yulian V. Bromlei (1921–1990), was coming to an end (Sirina 2023). In 1989, a young and active Doctor of Historical Sciences, Valerii A. Tishkov, head of the Department for American studies, was elected as the new director.<sup>1</sup> My studies in Moscow coincided with a time of great change – the country in which I was born and raised officially ceased to exist on 26 December, 1991. Gradually, Russia was turning into a state controlled from abroad, a kind of colony. Such was the price of defeat in the Cold War between the two superpowers of those time – the USSR and the United States. Deborah Schindler, an American anthropologist who worked in Russia in the early 1990s, noted: “The Russian government is under pressure from all sides, and particularly strong pressure from Western states and international banking organizations to restructure the economy and introduce a market system” (Schindler 1993). Positive changes – openness to the world, the opening of borders, and freedom of movement – were intertwined with the severe consequences of ill-conceived and

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1 The department was dissolved in 2006 and reestablished in 2019.

harsh reforms. As a respondent from the North put it, using the image close to his native nomadic culture:

Moving away from the state farm structure – that might be a good idea, but you can't just cut everything down without thinking. Before nomadizing somewhere, people think where to move. They decide first. Then they specifically prepare a place to set up camp, and only after that do they nomadize. And in the development of society, we need to determine where we're going and what to do. But we first grab an axe and start chopping. And only after that do we think: did we do the right thing or not? It seems to me that first we need to think, draw on past experience, take what's good, and adapt it accordingly. (V. A. Keimetinov, Yakutsk, see Sirina 2010: 122)



Fig. 1 Russian goldminers during protest demonstration. Yakutsk, 1998.  
Photo: Anna Sirina.

Problems with food supplies, lost savings, a shortage of money, mass migrations of people from one region of the former USSR to another and from one sector of employment to another due to economic restructuring and nationalistic movement – all of this seemed like the costs of geopolitical processes. In our youth, all of this was perceived superficially and quite easily and was overcome thanks to youthful energy, a desire to learn, new experiences, social contacts and connections, including family ties, and, as Bruce Grant noted, thanks to immense dedication and passion for scientific research, despite modest or non-existent funding (Grant 2004: 39–41). We, as young researchers, were drawn to the emerging opportunities for personal careers

– including international ones – and direct communication with foreign colleagues. Just as the latter were fascinated by the opening-up of the Siberian field in the 1990s (Stammmler 2014), they themselves and their work were viewed by young Russian scholars in a very positive and even romanticized light.

In June 1992, I defended my PhD dissertation; by this time, my Institute was already called the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. I was returning to Irkutsk by train. In the neighboring compartment, Russian Old Believers from Uruguay were traveling to Siberia to meet and establish ties with their relatives in the Krasnoiarsk Krai. It seemed as though the whole world had been set in motion, and ethnography would not let go.

### The 7th International Congress “Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern World”

This congress was held in Moscow on 18–22 August 1993, “despite the rapid political changes that had taken place in Moscow over the past three years” (VII International... 1993: 13). The initiative to hold the congress in Moscow came from Tishkov, who proposed the idea in the summer of 1990 (Shnirelman 1994: 140). The congress played a significant role in bringing Western and Russian anthropologists closer together. Financial support for its organization was provided by the U.S. National Science Foundation and the Wenner-Gren Foundation – the Russian Academy of Sciences lacked the funds for this (ibid.: 144). The congress was organized into five sections, co-chaired by well-known Russian and foreign scholars – Sergei A. Arutiunov, Pierrette Desy, Tim Ingold, Sofia Maretina, Alexander Pika, Zoia P. Sokolova, Eric A. Smith, Pauline Wiessner, Robert Hitchcock, and Viktor Shnirelman. Russian participants were represented by researchers mainly from Moscow (including the Northern Sector) and St. Petersburg, as well as from Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Irkutsk. I, a recent post-graduate student, managed to take part in this congress, which in the past would have been impossible, since international events were the preserve of the scientific elite. Scientists from the U.S., Canada, Australia, and other countries attended. I will list just a few names: Serge Bahuchet, Harvey Feit, Robert Hitchcock, Mitsuo Ichikawa, Tim Ingold, Takashi Irimoto, Nikolas Peterson, Edith Turner, Thomas Widlock. Foreign polar researchers who started to work in Russia also participated in the congress, including Deborah Schindler, Peter Schweitzer, Petra Rethmann and David Anderson.

Informal discussions took place during breaks in the hallways of the congress and at the official banquet, which was held on 20 August 1993, in the magnificent halls of the House of Scientists of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The congress is remembered as a significant, extraordinary international event, a unique platform for exchanging ideas, opinions, and research findings in the field of the study of hunter-gatherer societies from various parts of the world. Most importantly, it provided an opportunity to meet colleagues engaged with the same issues but using different methodological approaches and framing their research topics somewhat differently.

### The 1993 expedition to the Kolyma-Indigirka interfluve

A month and a half later, in early October 1993, I flew from Irkutsk to Yakutsk, and from there to the village of Zyrianka on the upper Kolyma River. The IEA RAS had managed to secure a small budget for this expedition. I learned about the events of October 1993 in Moscow – which I had left less than two months earlier – and the shelling of the Supreme Soviet while in Yakutsk. Winter had already set in here, and snow had fallen. Someone asked: “Why are you going in the winter?” “Well, they just gave me the money.” “It’s good that they’re still giving it.” The situation was very unsettling due to the political and economic crisis, but I had to work.



Fig. 2 Anna Sirina with local resident during a trip to reindeer herders. Upper Kolyma district, Yakutiia, 1993. Photo: personal archive Anna Sirina.

I flew to a remote Even village in the mountains of the Kolyma-Indigirka interfluve, from where I set out to visit the reindeer herders. People were no longer being paid their salaries; the state farms were being liquidated “from above.” There were still supplies of goods and food in the stores and warehouses, but people had little money. Social connections, the taiga, and reindeer came to the rescue.

Once I watched as two female officials arrived in the village from Yakutsk. They held a meeting with the residents, urging them to leave the state farms and organize private households and clan communities. Most of the local reindeer herders did not want to unite into clan communities; only one family wanted this.

State property (and, accordingly, forms of socio-economic organization such as state farms and collective farms) was to be privatized as a condition for Russia receiving IMF loans and transitioning to a capitalist model of development. Privatization was presented to the Russian population as a boon from which every citizen would benefit, but in reality, its goal was to transfer state property into the hands of those private individuals who, at that time, were closer to the authorities, and to rapidly establish capitalist relations. “We were living in a state of euphoria, expecting that with the introduction of private property, some benefits would rain down on us, but today (1997 – A.S.) 95% of the population is low-income. How can people with a communal, communist mindset survive today in the economic conditions imposed on us by Western civilization?” asked the Evenk woman, Parliament of Yakutiia republic Deputy Avgusta D. Marfusaloova (Sirina 2010:111).



Fig. 3 Reindeer herders. Photo: Anna Sirina, 1993.

I succeeded in collecting rich field data and published a report (Sirina 1994). The new situation required the study of contemporary processes in the spheres of the economy, land use, social structure, and self-determination – that is, socio-economic and political transformations.

### The fragmentation of Russian Northern studies

As a result of ideological, political, and socioeconomic reforms, Russian academia – and the ethnology of the North and Siberia is no exception – found itself in crisis.

In the 1990s, Russian Northern studies were simultaneously undergoing multifaceted, multidirectional processes that had a long-term impact on our discipline, transforming and weakening it, yet also laying the groundwork for certain potential, multi-component systemic changes that, as time has shown, ultimately strengthened it. These processes, with their regional variations, were characteristic of Russian Northern studies as a whole. They included:

- 1 The passing away in the 1990s of half the members of the older Soviet generation of researchers at the Moscow Sector of the North of the IEA RAS, whose works are still considered classics, with a similar situation having arisen at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (hereafter – MAE RAS);
- 2 the tragic deaths during international expeditions in Chukotka of the Leningrad ethnographer Galina N. Gracheva (1934–1993) and the Moscow demographer and ethnographer Aleksandr I. Pika (1951–1995),<sup>2</sup> who were among the first to establish contact with foreign researchers;
- 3 the interruption of academician career, despite a promising start, and transition to other fields of activity of some talented young scholars, like Konstantin A. Alekhin, who made a year of fieldwork among the Evenks of the Podkamennaya Tunguska region, and defended PhD dissertation (supervisor: prof. Izmail N. Gemuev, Novosibirsk 2001);
- 4 the emigration of some former Institute staff members: Michail V. Kriukov, Doctor of Sciences, DSc (*Doktor nauk*) in History and a sinologist, left for China; Vladimir R. Kabo, DSc in History and an Australian studies scholar, for Australia; and Igor I. Krupnik, DSc in Biology and a Northern studies scholar, for the United States;
- 5 the departure of young researchers, including the Institute's post-graduate students, to study abroad (e.g., Nikolai V. Ssorin-Chaikov to Stanford University, USA; and Tatiana I. Argunova from Yakutia to Cambridge, England). Subsequently, the departure of young people to study abroad and the processes of emigration only gained momentum.

Few scholars remained in Northern studies; middle-aged and young women numerically predominated. The younger generation had not yet gained influence, experience, or authority. Approximately half of the young staff members in the Northern Studies department were born and educated in Siberia, while the rest were from Moscow or other parts of Russia. We were all looking for opportunities to work and

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2 Pika gained fame thanks to the publication of the article “The Big Problems of Small Peoples” in the journal *Kommunist* (Pika and Prokhorov 1988) ([http://www.arctic.org.ru/1996/1\\_3\\_96.htm](http://www.arctic.org.ru/1996/1_3_96.htm)) [accessed 20.03.2026]. The concept of neotraditionalism also is associated with his name.



conduct field research. These were provided mainly by various international foundations officially operating in Russia. A new situation had emerged in which domestic research was funded from abroad. Russian science, like the rest of the country, in the 1990s faced financial difficulties and foreign foundations played a role in maintaining the continuity of the scientific process.<sup>3</sup> Within Russia, in addition to funds for conducting research, recipients of foreign grants acquired social capital, which allowed them to gain a higher social status and professional position. Many Russian scientists, including ethnographers, participated in competitive applications for foreign grants at that time.

Meanwhile, in the late 1980s, nationalist movements became noticeably more active in the republics of the USSR. Between 1988 and 1991, approximately twenty ethnic conflicts broke out across the country, claiming human lives. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of these conflicts escalated into armed clashes. These processes demanded analysis. During those years, a small brochure by Tishkov titled “May My Prayer Be Changed” was published, and in the late 1990s, his “Requiem for an Ethnos” was released. In line with the policy of rapprochement with the Western world pursued by the country’s leadership at the time, the new director set out to search the arsenal of foreign anthropology for methodological approaches that would serve as an alternative to Bromlei’s, as well as a more flexible understanding of ethnicity, taking into account its subjective (constructivist) component (Tishkov 1992; 2020). In the changed reality, a neoliberal science was taking shape, linked to market conditions and Western approaches, while retaining dependence on state commissions and regional needs, as well as continuity with Soviet science.

### Fellowship in Australia

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Russian citizens gained the opportunity to travel abroad freely. I had the opportunity in 1994 to spend three and a half months as a visiting researcher at the Northern Australian Research Center (NARU) of the Australian National University (ANU) in Darwin, under the guidance of Deborah Rose (1946–2018), who I met at the Congress of Hunter-Gatherers in Moscow. Debbie was one of the most prominent and unconventional Australian anthropologists of her time. She focused on aboriginal communities’ relationships with “the land,” studying the ethical aspects of colonization and processes of decolonization, as well as human relationships with other animal species.<sup>4</sup> Like many of her contemporaries in anthropology, Rose had actively documented Aboriginal relationships with the land since the 1980s in the context of land claims under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory). Thom van Dooren wrote beautifully about her: “Her great art

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3 The amount of funding allocated to Russian citizens was inconsiderable to that allocated by the same foundations to citizens of their own countries.

4 See, for instance, Rose 1992.



Fig. 4 Debbie Rose (1946–2018), 1991. Photo: Darrell Lewis.



Fig. 5 Anna Sirina, during her stay in the Northern Territory, Australia, 1994. Photo: Darrell Lewis.

and skill lay in bringing together disparate stories, ideas, and concepts into a fruitful dialogue. Not to create harmony or synergy, but rather to take them beyond their comfort zones, bringing them into contact with one another to see what sparks might fly” (van Dooren 2020: 193).

Rose planned to conduct comparative research on the Indigenous peoples of Australia and Russia. At the time, these were advanced ideas. At the Center’s library, I read a literature on Australia’s experience in resolving Aboriginal land use issues. My communications with Australian anthropologists, ordinary people, and Aboriginal people were of great importance. Debbie took me to court hearings on Aboriginal land claims. Trips through the Northern Territory with experts on Australian history, Darrell Lewis and Jock Schmichen, broadened my horizons and opened up new research perspectives. At the Center, I had a unique opportunity to see and hear presentations by former prominent political figures who played a significant role in granting rights to Australia’s Aborigines during the 1960s and 1970s. Among them were economist and Center researcher Nugget Coombs (1906–1997), who helped secure the passage of federal legislation regarding Indigenous Australians and served as Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs (from 1967); former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, whose cabinet, starting in 1973, provided Indigenous Australians with resources and the opportunity to obtain land rights.



Fig. 6 9th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Edinburgh, Scotland, September 9–13, 2002. Left to right: First – Debbie Rose, third – Linda Ford, fourth – Anna Sirina. Photo: personal archive Anna Sirina.

Despite significant differences in the political systems of Russia and Australia, as well as different historical experiences, including the history of colonization – the similarities in the problems faced by the Indigenous peoples of both countries were striking. Getting to know Australia, its history, and its multicultural society, the situation of the Aboriginal people, and the Australian approach to addressing their issues turned out to be very useful; new thoughts and ideas emerged, which were reflected in articles, reviews, and translations (e.g. Sirina 1998).

### The Siberian Field in the 1990s

The impression that Russian Northern researchers did not go into the field at all in the 1990s arose as a reflection of a situation in which funding for science and field



Fig. 7 Even Vitalii Nikolaevich Elrika, a reindeer herder brigadier. 2002. Photo: Anna Sirina.

trips was severely limited. However, judging by the published works (e.g., in *Studies in applied and urgent anthropology* series) scientists did not stay at home, having participated in expeditions to the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, Tomsk Oblast, Krasnoiarsk Krai, Khakassia, Tuva, Buriatia, Irkutsk Oblast, Yakutia, Khabarovsk Krai, Magadan Oblast, Primorskii Krai, the Altai, Kamchatka, and Chukotka, utilizing all possible sources of funding for this purpose.

As for me, practically every year from the late 1980s to the late 2000s, I went conducted fieldwork, in the Irkutsk and Magadan regions, the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Kamchatka, and the Republic of Buryatia, for periods ranging from two weeks to three months, sometimes twice a year.

What made fieldwork during the *perestroika* years unique was that the people I interacted with were exceptionally open to dialogue, even though many were living through the economic, social, and spiritual crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Perhaps interacting with ethnographers allowed them, at least for a time, to overcome the feeling of being abandoned by the state, which they undoubtedly experienced. As one of my Evenk interlocutors put it:

Listen, Anya, I know you'll leave soon, write up your interview, and will forget about us – a forgotten village, a bear's corner. No one will help us until we ourselves get back on our feet. Who will help us, besides Putin? Tell him on behalf of the Evenki people. Take a note from us. Anya, leave us hope, after all, people are living in trouble. If only some diesel fuel would be given to us. (Sirina 2010: 127)

My interlocutors helped us with our research, but we, too, upon returning to Moscow, tried to justify this attitude in some way, to bring these people's problems to the attention of the public and the authorities through our publications and speeches, and maintained personal contacts. The people we worked with often encouraged to do so. Our predecessors who worked in the Northern sector had done exactly the same.

It has always been my dream to bring into the scientific discourse the voices of the people who were not heard in television debates or in the pages of newspapers. The new reality of the 1990s and postmodernist approaches made this possible.<sup>5</sup> From academic texts and interviews with representatives of the peoples of the North collected during those years, it is evident how strained the process of their integration into new socio-economic relations was.<sup>6</sup>

Life got worse with *perestroika*. All our savings went up in smoke. Now we live on a single pension. They robbed us in broad daylight. (Pavel Efimovich Paderin, born 1928, Kamchadal, pensioner, Evensk, Magadan Oblast)

It used to be better, I guess. But now everything is expensive. Back when the collective farm worked, things were lively. There was a construction workshop, a saw-mill – lots of people were working. The collective farm was prosperous; it raised reindeer and grew vegetables. They sold potatoes, cabbage, and carrots. There were hunting teams that caught squirrels, and that was income for the collective farm. There was plenty of meat, reindeer meat. Now they've closed the kindergarten and torn everything down. They demolished the collective farm office. They closed the dairy farm. They tore down the warehouses and the hayloft. They divided up the collective farm's assets into shares." (Mikhail Innokentevich Popov, born 1933, Kamchadal, retiree, village of Tauisk, Magadan Oblast)

Imagine if your homeland were being ruined right before your eyes, and you couldn't do anything about it. We had a large game farm here (in Gizhiga – A.S.), a dairy farm. We had large vegetable gardens; we grew all the staple crops on our land. That is, cabbage and potatoes. We had milk, sour cream, and cottage cheese all year round. We churned our own butter. We only had to bring in grains, salt, and sugar. The vegetable gardens have been abandoned. They only catch fish and then trade the caviar for food. Now the salary is so small that there's no motivation to work. (Liudmila Viktorovna Chernikova, born 1955, Kamchatka, Regional Center for Folk Art, Magadan)

Life was better in the Soviet Union back then. There were more reindeer, and we got paid on time. Nowadays, the management hasn't been paid in ages – it's the reindeer herders who get paid. Things used to be good; goods and food were cheap. But now, with *perestroika*, everyone's jumped into business. Back then, we pro-

5 How strikingly different this is from the practice of encrypting informants' names and research locations – a practice that is new to Russian ethnology and not inherent to it!

6 All excerpts from the interviews cited here were taken in 1997–2001 and have been published (Sirina 2010: 47; 50–51; 53–54; 106–108; 176–177).

duced things, we worked conscientiously. But now they're bringing in all sorts of junk from abroad. We don't deliver reindeer meat anymore. We used to deliver 1,500 centners; we had a state quota. We raised two special herds. Back then, there were 21 herds. [...] Things have gotten worse. We don't know how we'll get by from now on. [...] We used to live just fine, and then came *perestroika*, and things started going downhill after *perestroika*. And down, down, down.... (Igor Alekseevich Kolesov, born 1962, Evenk, chief zootechnician at the Zolotinskii State Unitary Enterprise, village of Yengra, Southern Yakutia)

Back then, all the *labazy* [storing houses] were stocked: you are right, and there would be flour and there would be flour. If we were herding all summer, just imagine – with reindeer like that, how far would you go? Supplies were distributed to all the *labazy*. In the winter, they brought everything in – flour, sugar, and butter in boxes. We had money. They transferred it to our accounts and gave it to us in cash. There were no problems. My parents even bought this little house back then, though it was expensive for those times – 700 rubles. They used to pay more money. To you I am telling, these days a hunter is only out to pay off what he's already taken, not to acquire anything. But back then, one hunted without a care; had no debts. (Tatiana Vasilievna Mitina, born 1959, village of Erbogachen, Irkutsk Region)

The post-soviet period in the Northern studies is distinctive for the fact that Western anthropologists were actively starting to explore Siberian anthropology and conduct field research in Siberia. They were well-prepared for expeditions both methodologically and materially and worked hard and productively. Post-graduate students conducted one-year field research, gathering materials for their dissertations. This precipitated some changes in the fieldwork methodology of Russian scientists.

Foreigners in Russia are always treated better than Russians – this is our long-standing tradition. Elena P. Batianova, a researcher in the Department of the North and Siberia at the IEA RAS, while working in 1997 in the Koryak Autonomous Okrug in Kamchatka, wrote in her diary: "Foreigners in the district are held in high esteem and surrounded by attention and care" (Batianova 2026: 133).<sup>7</sup> From Batianova's 1995 diary entry on Kamchatka:

Tomorrow they are expecting a helicopter carrying yet another group of "Americans." Over the past decade, foreigners have 'surrounded the region with care.' Here, there are not only "Bush's legs,"<sup>8</sup> but also preachers representing various Protestant churches, companies patronizing villages, diverse scientific expeditions, and museum workers purchasing traditional cultural artifacts from residents. The

7 The positive attitude of Russian citizens toward foreigners, even under such harsh conditions as those of the 1990s and early 2000s, is noted by our foreign colleagues who worked in the North (e.g., King 2025).

8 Frozen chicken legs, imported to Russia from the United States in the 1990s, were named after American President George Bush by ordinary Russians.

administration and the population itself are very favorable toward contacts with foreign neighbors. “Why should I sell my crafts to the museums of impoverished Russia when wealthy Americans can buy them from me?!” – one of the Kamchatka craftswomen told me. (Batianova 2026:105)

Another challenge posed by the changing field was the participation of Indigenous communities themselves in the academic process and their attempts to “usurp the right to interpret culture” (Tishkov 2020: 89). “In time, I am certain, experts will emerge from among the small groups who, like Evdokia A. Gaer, will strongly assert their priority not only for political representation but also for the scholarly interpretation of their own culture” (Tishkov 1992: 15). The situation that has developed in Western Siberia serves as confirmation of these words. The rapid industrial development of Western Siberia has made it possible to invest significant funds in the socio-economic and cultural development of the region – in particular, in local Indigenous cultures – which has led to “the consolidation of the Indigenous small-numbered peoples of Yugra and the growth of their ethnic self-awareness,” as well as the formation of new Indigenous institutions (Pivneva 2020: 185). The increase in the number of specialists from among the peoples of the North – particularly in the vicinity of oil and gas fields – such as the Khanty, Mansi, and Nenets, along with the creation of relevant scientific infrastructure, direct contacts with foreign scholars, and internships in the West (see, e.g., Kharuchii 2010) are transforming their identity and leading to an understanding of the importance – and in some cases, the exclusivity – of their culture. This may give rise to misunderstandings and tensions between scholars who worked during the Soviet era (Sokolova 2010) and contemporary scholars from Indigenous peoples, since this sphere is heavily entangled with ideology, politics, competition for “one’s own” field – which has begun to yield dividends – as well as increasing demands for both Russian and Indigenous scholars to conduct such research.

### Directions of Northern studies research in the 1990s – early 2000s

At the IEA RAS in the 1990s, despite a lack of state funding, active research and publishing work was carried out. On the initiative of Simchenko and Tishkov, in 1989 the Social Sciences Section of the USSR Academy of Sciences commissioned the Institute of Ethnography to publish the series “Peoples of the Soviet Union,” as a remake of the series “Peoples of the World” (1956). In 1992, following the dissolution of the USSR, the series was renamed “Peoples and Cultures.”<sup>9</sup> The book *Peoples of the Soviet North* (1991) served as a kind of culmination of the work of the older generation of the Northern sector of the Institute of Ethnography USSR Academy of Sciences. The establishment of the Institute’s own in-house printing facility made it possible to pub-

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9 Over the past thirty years, 38 volumes have been published on more than 100 peoples, including seven volumes on the peoples of the North and Southern Siberia. To date, the series has been largely completed.

lish research findings much more quickly than before, which added dynamism to academic life and the exchange of information.

The almanacs *Russian Ethnographer* and *Library of the Russian Ethnographer*, initiated by Simchenko, were intended to publish materials for the “Peoples and Cultures” series mentioned above, with a focus on works on the ethnography of the peoples of the North. This series published numerous books on the North and Siberia, including popular science and scientific-literary works, notably Simchenko’s *Nganasan Summer* (Issue 7, 1993), *Ordinary Shamanic Life* (Issue 10, 1993), *The Selkup Taiga* (1995), Atsushi Yoshida’s monograph *The Food Culture of the Gydan Nenets: Interpretation and Social Adaptation* (1997), and many others.

Dmitrii A. Funk, Head of the Department of the North and Siberia from 1995 to 2015, noted, in particular, the following changes in the department’s organizational structure between 1995 and 2003: a shift in priorities toward individual research projects; long-term internships abroad, the expansion of international contacts and an increase in the proportion of major international projects; the integration of research projects with educational activities, and the intensification of field research (Funk 2003).

The research areas of Russian Northern studies scholars – based on the experience of Moscow ethnographers – included traditional and contemporary ethnography, as well as applied ethnology. In the 1990s, within the field of contemporary ethnography, the greatest attention was paid to post-Soviet transformations. The themes developed in the 1990s were reflected in numerous publications, particularly in the Institute’s serial publications.

### *Research on cultural adaptations and transformations*

In the early 1990s, two major projects were carried out by the Northern Studies Department under the leadership of Sokolova: “The Adaptive Function of National Culture Among the Peoples of the North” and “The Peoples of the North and Siberia in the Context of Economic Reforms and Democratic Transformations.” The scientific output of these projects consisted of collections of articles documenting the first stage of post-Soviet sociocultural transformations in the regions of the North and Siberia (The Peoples of the North and Siberia 1994; Socio-Economic and Cultural Development 1995). It was then that a proposal was made by some scholars, Indigenous activists and government officials to reconsider the question of the paths and prospects for the development of northern communities, in particular, to abandon a policy of paternalism in favor of the possibility of choosing one’s own development path (Pivneva 2022: 138–139).

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the Department of the North and Siberia carried out several projects supported by Russian foundations (the Russian Humanitarian Science Foundation and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research),



as well as two major international research and educational projects. Namely these were “The Small Indigenous Nations of Northern Russia” (in collaboration with the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, 1997–2003) and “Post-Soviet Political and Socio-economic Transformation among the Indigenous Peoples of Northern Russia: Current Administrative Policies, Legal Rights, and Applied Strategies” (in collaboration with Uppsala University and the University of Helsinki, 2001–2004).

The project, initiated by Lennard Sillanpää, a Canadian politician and scholar of Finnish descent, was one of the most successful for the Department of the North and Siberia. The project involved field trips to the peoples of the North – from the Sami to the Aleut – using a standardized questionnaire, ranging from biographical data on our respondents and their knowledge of traditional culture to questions about contemporary politics, the economy, and international cooperation. This made it possible to compile a snapshot of the state of northern communities at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries and to present the voices of Indigenous peoples in a broad international context. The unique experience gained by the Northern studies scholars was significant from both a scientific and an organizational standpoint. Together with other collective and individual domestic projects carried out by the department’s staff, its implementation broadened the researchers’ own horizons and experience and contributed to the strengthening of the department (Funk and Sillanpää, eds. 1999).



Fig. 8 The Moscow-based ethnographer's team with Lennard Sillanpää. Left to right, seated: Anna Sirina, Lennard Sillanpää, Nataľia Novikova, standing: Aleksandr Kalabanov, Akeksandr Karpukhin, Elena Batianova, Dmitrii Funk, Nikolai Pluzhnikov, Tat'iana Lukianchenko, Moscow, around 2000. Photo: personal archive Anna Sirina.

In 2008, Sillanpää's monograph *Awakening Siberia: From Marginalization to Self-Determination: The Small Indigenous Nations of Northern Russia on the Eve of the Millennium* (Sillanpää 2008) was published, featuring an extensive appendix that included modified texts of our interviews. In particular, the project made it possible to observe a general trend toward increasing stratification within Indigenous communities.

Another international project, "Post-Soviet Political and Socio-Economic Transformations Among the Indigenous Peoples of the North," had both educational and research components. The research focused on several remote regions of the Russian Federation following the collapse of the Soviet Union: Chukotka, Sakhalin, Khabarovsk Krai, Irkutsk Oblast, Taimyr, and southern Western Siberia. This international project, like the previous one, facilitated the conduct of field research, the collection of new materials, and their publication in two languages – Russian and English – as well as the consolidation of the sector. Participation in these projects, among other things, made it possible to complete the work begun as early as the 1980s–1990s on the study of the peoples and cultures of the North and to present it in the form of dissertation research (Funk, Batianova, Ludmilla I. Missonova, Nina A. Meschtyb). Comprehensive reports on the sociocultural development of the North and the Arctic, prepared by international teams, were published, illustrating the complex processes of adaptation of the small peoples of the North to post-Soviet reality: *The Practice of Post-Soviet Adaptations of the Peoples of Siberia* (Funk, Beach, and Sillanpää, eds., 2006, in Russian); *Post-Soviet Transformations: Politics of Identity and Resource Use in Russia* (Beach, Funk, Sillanpää 2009), and others. In their preface to this book, they drew important conclusions about some intermediate results of *perestroika* in the North, the most important of which was that capitalism is not necessarily a good remedy for small ethnic minorities struggling to survive after the collapse of the former Soviet infrastructure and state support. Soviet structures remain in a new guise, old and new economic relations mix and merge into unique transformations, and ethnic groups mobilize their efforts to secure recognition and special rights to resources. These conclusions align with those of other researchers of post-post-socialism, as summarized in Maduhai Buyandelgeriyn's work, in particular, regarding the fact that "the new impositions of neoliberalism have created new culturally specific relationships, languages, and practices [...] that do not fit within the framework of evolutionary methodology"; the author uses the term "indeterminacy" as a distinctive feature of post-socialism, which will help "reconsider our preconceptions and find a way to understand the diversity of practices from a new perspective" (Buyandelgeriyn 2008: 236).

Field research from those years revealed contradictory, multidirectional, and non-linear trends characteristic of the process by which Northern people adapted to socioeconomic changes and integrated into new market relations.

Based on my observations (Sirina 2010), in the field of *demography and settlement*, against the backdrop of a sharp outflow of the migrant population, the peoples of the North were characterized by:

- low birth rates and high mortality rates, primarily among men of working age due to unnatural causes;
- migration from small settlements to regional centers and cities;
- a reverse, extremely weak trend of returning to the places of residence of their ancestors;
- a decline in the nomadic population, i.e., its forced settlement;
- the strengthening of kinship ties, including those linking the taiga/tundra-settlement-city.

In the sphere of *natural resource use and employment*, the following occurred as a result of the cessation of state support, the transition to private ownership, and the state's withdrawal from the economy:

- a sharp increase in the number of unemployed and a decline in the standard of living;
- an increase in the role of traditional natural resource use for personal consumption;
- the de-modernization of traditional economic activities, a return to a subsistence economy, and barter exchange;
- a shift from a single-sector and specialized economy to a diversified one;
- a decline in the domestic reindeer number (in some regions of the taiga, the complete disappearance of reindeer herding); though in some cases an increase of reindeer numbers for transportation goals;
- the reduction or elimination of cage-based fur farming, wild plant gathering, vegetable gardening, and agriculture introduced during the Soviet period;
- attempts to engage in non-traditional economic practices, including gold mining, for the purpose of survival and subsistence;
- an increase in poaching in hunting and fishing for the purpose of subsistence.

In the area of *land use*, due to the uncertain status of official land use following the dissolution of state farms, the following trends were observed:

- a generally more chaotic nature of nomadic movement;
- shifts in migration toward creditworthy exchange points, on the one hand, and toward relatives, on the other;
- a reduction of nomadic routes and increased competition for land from various land users;
- underuse of remote hunting grounds by hunters;
- increased competition for the use of nearby hunting and grazing territories;
- a desire to secure lands for traditional economic activities at the regional and local levels.

As a result of the withdrawal of state support, the vast majority of economic collectives underwent a restructuring, which manifested itself in the organization of for-

mer employees of state farms, hunting farms, and cooperative fur and hunting farms into small collectives based on kinship and territorial unity. At that stage, these collectives were given various names and statuses: clan communities, reindeer-herding peasant-farmer and hunting-fishing enterprises – in Yakutia and the Irkutsk Region; indigenous economic entities (primarily in fishing) and peasant-farmer enterprises (in reindeer herding) – in the Magadan Region. Leaders of the new economic associations emerged, and bases for these associations were established in the settlements. By the late 2000s, new forms of economic entities had been created, such as municipal unitary enterprises in the Magadan Region, indicating a trend toward consolidation. Economic collectives were reconfigured by type of activity, and their gender and age composition became more diverse. In small settlements with a single-ethnic population, in some cases, clan communities began to perform the functions of local self-government bodies.

The crisis had the greatest impact on those social groups of the peoples of the North who led a traditional way of life and were simultaneously integrated into the Soviet planned economy. In place of the well-organized collective sector of the economy in the North, weak, fragmented, and economically extremely inefficient enterprises emerged, all of whose efforts were directed toward self-preservation and self-reproduction.

Negative trends in the economy were accompanied by positive developments in the socio-political sphere: in 1990, the Association of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation was established, which currently unites forty regional and ethnic associations of the peoples of the North. Articles guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous peoples were included in the new Russian Constitution of 1993. In the Siberian regions, particularly in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), efforts were made to legislatively regulate the natural resources and land use by the peoples of the North. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, three federal “ethnic” laws were adopted (see below). Self-organization and self-governance among the peoples of the North increased, informal leaders emerged, traditional cultural values were reevaluated, and the movement for the revival of language and culture gained momentum. Certain cultural elements, such as festivals that had seemed irretrievably lost, were revived and restored, in part based on past scientific research and museum collections.

### *Religious studies*

On 2 September 1997, the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” (No. 125-FZ) was adopted. A process of reviving the traditional Russian religions, had been weakened over the years of Soviet atheism, began. At the same time, a rapid growth in the number of followers of various branches of Protestantism, the Baha’i Faith, and others occurred. During expeditions, we constantly observed and/

or heard from colleagues about instances of proselytism among the Nenets, Khanty, Chukchi, Koryak, Even, Evenk, Nanai, and other peoples. In the early 2000s, Altai ethnographers sounded the alarm regarding the activities of various foreign or foreign-funded missions and sects amid a religious and ideological crisis among the Altai people (Kharitonova et al. 2004: 127).

In Russian Northern studies, research into the prevailing religious situation began somewhat later than that conducted by our foreign colleagues. An important exception is the theme of shamanism (and neo-shamanism), traditional to Siberian ethnography, which has in fact continued uninterrupted and has been particularly actively developed at the Institute and in the Department of the North and Siberia since the mid-1990s. In 1995, Funk initiated the creation of the series “Ethnological Studies on Shamanism and Other Traditional Beliefs and Practices” (Funk 2003). By 2012, seventeen volumes of this series had been published. Two volumes were dedicated to the memory of renowned researchers – the prominent Leningrad Siberianist, director of the Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences (1948–1967), head of the Department of Ethnography of the Peoples of Siberia Leonid P. Potapov, as well as to the Moscow-based shamanism scholar and leading expert on Central Asian shamanism, Vladimir N. Basilov. In 2004, Funk’s monograph on shamanism and storytelling among the peoples of southern Western Siberia was published (Funk 2005); in 2006, Valentina I. Kharitonova’s monograph on the phenomenon of neo-shamanism in Siberia was published (Kharitonova 2006).

In addition to the study of shamanism, the Institute also conducted research on the revival of Buddhism in Buryatia and Tuva (Zhukovskaia 1997, among others).

### *Studies in the history of science*

In the 1990s, Russian ethnographers paid tribute to repressed scholars. A significant milestone was the publication of the two volumes of “Repressed Ethnographers” (Tumarkin, ed. 1999, 2003). More than half of the total number of articles were devoted to scholars of the North and Siberia: Alexandr V. Adrianov, Glafira M. Vasilevich, Nina I. Hagen-Thorn, Boris O. Dolgikh, Aleksandr M. Zolotarev, Nikolai N. Kozmin, Erukhim A. Kreinovich, Gavril V. Ksenofontov, Boris A. Kuftin, Albert N. Lipskii, Bernhard E. Petri, Georgi M. Tokmashev, Vladimir Charnoluskii, who in the 1920s–1950s fell victim to Stalinist repression on trumped-up charges related to their professional activities.

This was followed by another book edited by Daniil D. Tumarkin (2004), *Outstanding Russian Ethnologists and Anthropologists of the 20th Century*. Amid the criticism of all things Soviet in the 1990s, Russian academic community was marked by a lack of attention to and underestimation of the scientific achievements of the Soviet era, as well as an unjustified rejection of the methodology of their predecessors. As Grant noted, “historicism has reached its peak in British, American, Ger-

man, and French anthropology today. Is Russian science now inclined to abandon its most enduring and significant achievements?" (Grant 2004). The book's publication reminded of prominent Soviet scholars who made important discoveries and generalizations, including those whose sphere of interest included Siberia: Lev Ya. Sternberg, Maksim G. Levin, Georgi F. Debets, and Mikhail M. Gerasimov.

### Applied ethnology of the 1990s

In the late 1990s, a well-known ethnologist from Yakutia, the Even Anatolii Afanasevich Alekseev, recalled in a conversation with me: "I took part in a seminar at the Arctic Center in Rovaniemi this year and realized that the international community needs us as guinea pigs. When I started raising socio-economic issues and asking what needs to be done, they say: we don't need that... But where are the people? Where are the peoples? What are we working for? Just say that you need pure science" (Sirina 2010: 120). Russian Northern studies have always faced not only scientific but also scientific-practical challenges, and Russian ethnography – or at least its main branch – has been oriented toward the internal needs of the country since its inception.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1990s, the knowledge and experience of ethnographers were in high demand. Applied work, alongside strictly scientific research, took up a great deal of time and effort, while simultaneously allowing them to keep their finger on the pulse of current events. This was particularly true of Moscow ethnographers, due to their location in the Russian capital, where the centers of legislative and executive power are concentrated, as well as because of a tradition of continuity, in which research in the field of traditional ethnography was combined with the study of contemporary problems and their applied nature.

In 1990, the Institute launched a new publication series, "Studies in Applied and Urgent Ethnology."<sup>11</sup> This series promptly published texts on current economic and cultural issues facing the peoples of Russia, ranging in length from one to three author's sheets. From 1990 to 2001, 145 issues of the series were published, of which 27 works (about 19%) were devoted to Siberian topics and based on field research. The areas of focus included: issues of interethnic relations; analysis of the ethnopolitical situation, elections, and religious revival in the southern republics of Eastern Siberia and in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia); issues of natural resource use, land use, adaptation, and ecology, including traditional natural resource use territories and biosphere reserves among the peoples of the North. Some of these studies were funded by foreign grants or conducted as part of international expert projects.

10 This was also the case in the 1950s–1980s, when Russian ethnographers wrote memos to relevant ministries (e.g. Sokolova and Pivneva 2004). (See Kasten, *this volume*, p. 306, Chichlo, *this volume*, p. 86 – E.K.)

11 An overview of publications on the peoples of Siberia and the North during the six-year existence of the series is provided in (Lopulenko and Uvarova 1997).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the following federal laws were adopted: “On Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the Russian Federation” (No. 82-FZ of 30 April, 1999), “On the General Principles of Organizing Communities of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation” (No. 104-FZ of 20 July, 2000), “On the Territories of Traditional Natural Resource Use of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation” (No. 49-FZ of 7 May, 2001). The adoption of these laws was preceded by a long-term uneasy work by federal and regional legislators and the Association of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East, along with its regional branches. Moscow-based lawyers and ethnologists also played a significant role in this work.

For example, in the 1990s and 2000s, ethnographers from the Department of the North and Siberia at the IEA RAS actively participated in parliamentary hearings and roundtables at the State Duma and the Northern Committee on Northern Affairs and Small Indigenous Peoples of the Federation Council,<sup>12</sup> dedicated to the legal framework for the socio-economic development policy of the Russian North, the use of land and other natural resources in the territories inhabited by Indigenous small-numbered peoples, and other issues. We observed attentively, listened, and sometimes made reports or comments, because, having gone on expeditions to various regions of the North and met with local people, we knew the situation from the inside. This was also a matter of scientific ethics. At the invitation of the Association, department staff actively participated in the All-Russian Congresses of the Peoples of the North. These congresses, especially in the early 1990s, were attended by quite a few Western colleagues and advisors from abroad.

In the mid-1990s, the journal *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* [Ethnographic Review] published an article by Zoia Sokolova, Natal’ia I. Novikova, and Nikolai V. Ssorin-Chaikov titled “Ethnographers Write a Law: Context and Challenges” (Sokolova et al. 1995). The article sparked a discussion on the draft Russian Federation law “Fundamentals of the Legal Status of the Indigenous Peoples of the North.” The authors of the article, in particular, noted that “at present, the academic community represents one of the few, and perhaps the only, sphere where this issue is systematically discussed” (Sokolova et al. 1995: 75). Questions were raised regarding what constitutes a traditional economy in modern conditions, and what form the entities of traditional land-use territories and communities should take – economic associations or local self-government bodies. Russian and foreign scholars participated in the discussion of the draft, including those who participated in the Hunter-Gatherers Congress in Moscow. Many comments and observations were made, interesting from both a practical and a scientific point of view. For scholars accustomed to the language of science, it was not easy to define clearly and in legally precise terms the complex concepts of

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12 Established in 1994.

“traditional livelihood,” “community,” and the criteria for classifying peoples of the North, bearing in mind mixed marriages and the historical presence of representatives of other ethnic groups in the same territories; what constitutes individual and collective rights – these were new phenomena of post-Soviet life that had not been sufficiently studied, albeit bearing old names. Some pointed to protectionist elements in the draft law, while others shared their experience with legislative solutions to the problems of national minorities and Indigenous peoples in the United States (John Ziker) and Australia (David Trigger). In those years, ideas about completely restricting industry in Siberia in favor of the development of the peoples of the North were extremely popular. D. Trigger, drawing on the Australian experience of interaction between industry and Aboriginal peoples, emphasized that such a dichotomy oversimplifies the matter; not all Aboriginal peoples are opposed to industrial development (Trigger 1996:141). The experience of lawmaking and broad discussion of the fundamental concepts and principles of the law, which was intended to take into account the specificities of the life and way of life of the peoples of the North, was highly beneficial.

In addition, the Institute received various requests for expert review from relevant ministries and committees regarding appeals from the regions concerning the separation of individual peoples from larger groups, for example, the Teleut from the Altai people (Funk 1999), as well as the inclusion of new peoples – such as the Shor, Soyot, Teleut, Kamchadal, and others – in the Unified List of Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East. Qualified responses to these inquiries were primarily drafted by staff of the Department of the North and Siberia.

It is no coincidence that it was precisely in Moscow, at the IEA RAS, that a new (or “largely forgotten”: see Sokolovskii 2003: 10) field of study emerged and flourished – legal anthropology (Novikova and Osipov 1997; Novikova and Tishkov 1999a). Between 1995 and 1999, the journal *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* published 12 articles on this topic (Sokolovskii 2003:10), several collections were compiled, and summer schools have been held since the late 1990s-early 2000s (Novikova and Tishkov 1999b).

In 2003 Tishkov, then Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, initiated an independent expert report “The Current Situation and Development Prospects of the Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East.” Staff members of the Department of the North and Siberia prepared it (Tishkov 2003), that effectively drew a symbolic line under the post-Soviet period in our discipline. The report represented a new direction in Russian Northern Siberian studies; it was distinguished by a modern format for presenting material, already in use in the West, – in the form of a multi-layered text based on new data and constant monitoring of the situation, which included, alongside analytical materials, quotations from interviews, numerous photographs, and scientific recommendations. The topics presented in the report covered a wide range, from the current demographic situation to legal issues regarding the protection of the rights of the small peoples of the North. The



editor's preface was unusual, written on the basis of postmodernist and constructivist approaches and viewing the lists of Northern peoples as a kind of "iron cage of otherness," which was received with mixed feelings by some representatives of the Northern peoples, as an attempt to deprive them of their historically established privileges and special relations with the Russian state. The report put forward a number of conceptual propositions regarding the prospects for the development of the peoples of the North. The most significant innovation proposed was a shift from recognizing a separate ethnic community (an Indigenous small-numbered people) as the primary object of understanding and governance to local territorial communities,<sup>13</sup> as well as a broader category of Indigenous populations sharing common identities, interests, and solidarity. The publication of the report became a landmark event in Russian Northern studies, which seemed to be gradually emerging from a crisis.

### Who owns Siberian ethnography?

The turn of the century was marked by the internationalization of Siberian studies and their integration into a global context. Foreign scholars gained the opportunity to freely travel to Siberia for research, while Russian researchers were able to work and study abroad. The circle of scholars specializing in the North expanded, resulting in new works that enriched the historiographical base.

Foreign colleagues made a significant contribution to the decentralization of ethnology in Russia by establishing direct ties with Siberian research centers, primarily in the republics where, during the Soviet era, a strong scientific base had been established with state support and the expertise of qualified specialists. This allowed representatives of Siberian regional scholarship to establish contact with Western partners practically at the same time as their counterparts in the capital (Vitebsky and Alekseev 2015). Joint projects and works emerged, although the terms of such cooperation were not always equal.

Promising research topics, so to speak, were in the air, since we were working in the same field, observing the same processes. These topics were quickly absorbed during brainstorming sessions organized by our Western colleagues at various seminars and conferences, and were also discussed in private conversations, correspondence, and academic publications. The circulation of information itself created an informational field in which similar ideas could emerge. Although the topics of Russian and foreign Northern studies scholars were similar in the 1990s – namely, identity, reindeer herding, and transformations (though not exclusively) – the language of analysis and description differed (Ventsel and Struchkova 2016). To this day, there is a perception in the West that the Russian ethnological tradition is derivative and backward, although it remains little known abroad. Foreign specialists felt a sense of superiority toward their Russian colleagues "due to the vast differences in their theor-

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13 Simchenko expressed a similar understanding of the problem in a 1994 (Simchenko 1998).

etical approaches and methodology” (Gray et al. 2003). Aimar Ventsel and Natal’ia Struchkova argue that the relationship between “foreign” and “domestic” traditions in the post-Soviet period “can be described as a power relationship” (Ventsel and Struchkova 2016: 122). In the 2010s, Russia still “for some reason continues to be perceived by the majority as something ‘backward’ and ‘foreign’” (Habeck 2014: 92).

A “weakness” of Russian ethnology – a lack of modern interpretation and conceptualization despite the wealth of collected field materials might be viewed differently: as prudent caution, since major conclusions require substantial factual data. Dubious theoretical interpretations can be accumulated, leading away from a genuine understanding of people and their culture. In this regard, the race for publication activity and following the certain theories can play a cruel joke, and genuine – or simply decent – results will be obtained somewhere on the fringes of mainstream science.

Upon beginning their work in the Siberian field, some foreign colleagues were initially intent on revising the research of Soviet and Russian scholars in the field of identity, including ethnic identity. For instance, at a conference in Edinburgh in 2002, Alexander King noted that the Kamchatka Koryak with whom he worked were concerned that he “correctly” understand and represent the identities of the local population. At the same time, while criticizing the objectivist approach to the study of ethnic groups and ethnic processes adopted during the Soviet era, some believed that it was entirely suitable for legislation and for self-determination in political terms.

A significant portion of David Anderson’s (1998) monograph<sup>14</sup> *Tundroviki. Ecology and Self-Identity of the Taimyr Evenks and Dolgan* is devoted to issues of identity and interethnic relations between the Evenk and Dolgan in Taimyr. The book was translated into Russian and, due to its accessibility, lively style, modern methodology, as well as an insufficient knowledge on the history of the region<sup>15</sup> and some author’s preferences sparked a heated debate within our then-small international community of Northern studies scholars. First linguists,<sup>16</sup> then ethnographers<sup>17</sup> discussed the book’s content at international conferences and in the pages of academic journals. Evgenii A. Khelimskii (1950–2007), Doctor of Philology and a world-renowned specialist in the field of Uralic languages, who at that time lived and worked in Germany and had previously conducted fieldwork in Taimyr, responded sharply negatively to the book.<sup>18</sup> Today, returning to this discussion and carefully rereading the reviews, I

14 Now a professor at the University of Aberdeen, in those years – a post-graduate student of the University of Cambridge (supervisor C. Humphrey).

15 Anderson’s subsequent interest in 2000s in ethnohistory may have been prompted by criticism in this field.

16 See reviews by E.A. Khelimskii, N.B. Vakhtin, and A.A. Burykin. It is interesting that they represented different schools – the Leningrad-St. Petersburg and Moscow-Hamburg schools (Khelimskii 2001; Vakhtin 2000; Burykin 2001).

17 See Savoskul and Sirina 2001.

18 From 1998, he was a professor at the University of Hamburg and director of the Institute of Finno-Ugric and Uralic Studies in Hamburg.

see that Khelimskii's assessments, alongside negative formulations, contained important thoughts and arguments concerning the methodology and ethics of field research, the stratification of Northern peoples' communities, and other issues (Khelimskii 2001).

The international seminar "Who Owns Siberian Ethnography?", held in March 2002 in Halle (Germany), was in fact devoted to the issues raised in the aforementioned review by Khelimskii; therefore, it can be viewed as a sort of response to the criticism that had been voiced. The organizers invited Russian and foreign specialists in Northern studies to discuss pre-determined questions concerning Siberian ethnographic research. A unique opportunity was provided to reflect on the first decade of joint work in the Siberian field, to develop a roadmap for international cooperation, and to resolve mutual misunderstandings (for more details, see Gray et al. 2003; Vakhtin and Sirina 2003). In those years, such a seminar was perhaps needed more by our foreign colleagues, because they had not yet gained sufficient standing in Northern Studies, and their numbers were small. The holding of the seminar demonstrated a high degree of self-organization among Siberian studies scholars, as well as the presence of bright leaders among them.<sup>19</sup> The seminar, as it were, drew a line under the post-Soviet period in the development of Northern studies both in Russia and abroad.

### Some conclusions

Russian Arctic studies, like the Arctic region and the country as a whole, underwent a process of fragmentation and decline in the 1990s. By the early 2000s, a process of defragmentation had already concluded, and the situation gradually stabilized. There was a slow, but noticeable shift in the research focus from individual peoples to a multi-component social environment. The work of Russian Northern studies scholars in the 1990s, as before, was characterized by a multifaceted approach: interest in traditional cultures was complemented by the study of contemporary processes, with an applied orientation. The main themes in the 1990s were the transformations in the Russian North in the spheres of natural resource use, the economy, and culture, as well as the study of customary law in its contemporary state and in interaction with state law (legal anthropology), identity, social structure, shamanism, including neo-shamanism. The development of legislation for the peoples of the North involved, in addition to legislators, representatives of the peoples of the North and, predominantly, Moscow-based ethnologists and anthropologists. Throughout these years, international contacts and cooperation had a significant influence on the unfolding processes, which, taken as a whole, had a positive impact on Northern anthropology.

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19 The international community of Northern studies scholars demonstrated a high level of self-organization even after February 2022, when seminars and conference sessions were held and the book series "A Fractured North" (Kasten, Krupnik and Fondahl, eds., 2024, 2025) was published.

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## Figures

- 1 Russian goldminers during protest demonstration. Yakutsk, 1998. Photo: Anna Sirina.
- 2 Anna Sirina with local resident during a trip to reindeer herders. Upper Kolyma district, Yakutiia, 1993. Photo: personal archive Anna Sirina.
- 3 Reindeer herders, 1993. Photo: Anna Sirina.
- 4 Debbie Rose (1946–2018), 1991. Photo: Darrell Lewis.
- 5 Anna Sirina, during her stay in the Northern Territory, Australia, 1994. Photo: Darrell Lewis.
- 6 9th International Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies, Edinburgh, Scotland, September 9–13, 2002. Left to right: First – Debbie Rose, third – Linda Ford, fourth – Anna Sirina. Photo: personal archive Anna Sirina.
- 7 Even Vitalii Nikolaevich Elrika, a reindeer herder brigadier, 2002. Photo: Anna Sirina.
- 8 The Moscow-based ethnographer's team with Lennard Sillanpää. Left to right, seated: Anna Sirina, Lennard Sillanpää, Nataliia Novikova, standing: Aleksandr Kalabanov, Aleksandr Karpukhin, Elena Batianova, Dmitrii Funk, Nikolai Pluzhnikov, Tatiana Lukianchenko, Moscow, around 2000. Photo: personal archive Anna Sirina.