SIBERIAN MIDDLE GROUND: LANGUAGES OF RULE AND ACCOMMODATION ON THE SIBERIAN FRONTIER

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In recent years historical studies of Siberia have experienced a degree of rejuvenation. Benefiting from new interest in imperial borderlands and a rich historiography, these studies were also strengthened by the newly accessible archives in the case of the Western scholars, and by the emergence of local interest in the history of governance in the case of their Russian counterparts. The emerging field of “new Siberian studies” can roughly be divided into three large blocks. The first, taking stock of political history of governance in late imperial Russia, focuses on the regimes of governors and general-governors; the second, inspired by regional history and the history of symbolic geography, explores the transformations of the image of Siberia through studies of travelogues, exhibitions, visits and deputations. The third, most exciting in its promise, is the emergence of Russian “indigenous studies,” which explore the relationships between the native peoples of Siberia and the state and society of both imperial Russia and the USSR.¹

The problem of the collision of languages of self-description and description in the Russian Empire can be well illustrated by examples from the history of the native peoples of Siberia. In his path-breaking work, Yuri Slezkine explored representations of the so-called “small

peoples of the North” in the course of three hundred years, suggesting that the native peoples functioned as a “mirror” of the modernizing and civilizing discourses produced by governments, missionaries, bureaucrats, travelers, scholars, writers and revolutionaries. As Slezkine noted, throughout the modern period the native populations of the North were categorized on the basis of certain criteria, such as, for example, nomadism and the “hunter-gatherer” complex. Only peoples that qualified under these terms were considered “small” enough, “primitive” enough, “northern” or “circumpolar” and therefore “native” enough. This categorization long ago made its way into modern studies of indigenous peoples and formatted the way in which scholars thought of Siberian natives. In institutional and disciplinary terms, it subdivided the native peoples of Siberia into those who fit the class of “small peoples” (malye narody) and those who do not. Soviet ethnography might have studied both but it was widely expected that larger and more “developed” ethnic groups, such as the Iakut (Sakha) and the Buriats, endowed with their own Soviet quasi-statehood, would qualify as full-fledged Soviet nationalities, and therefore native intelligentsias will have studied their past and culture. As “semi-settled,” “more advanced,” and more numerous, the larger ethnic groups of Siberia came to occupy a strange position between the “primitive” reindeer pastoralists and sea hunters, on the one hand, and “developed” nationalities, such as the Ukrainians, the Georgians, or the Tatars, on the other. These larger native groups were often referred to as “indigenous peoples” (korennye narody). The application of the categorization based on an ethnic group’s level of “civilization,” which was determined by the way they appropriated natural resources, privileged studies of some Siberian experiences and virtually excluded others. Siberian peoples are imagined almost exclusively as small, scattered, economically and politically powerless pawns in the game of imperial administration; their participation in the imperial borderland military service, as was the case with the Buriat Cossacks or with the Tungus regiment of the Gantimurov Princes, or their administrative projects and initiatives, as was the case with Iakut princlings Arzhakov and Syranov discussed in this chapter, are not usually invoked to describe historical experiences of native Siberians.

This interesting outcome of categorization also had an impact on the focus of Western or post-Soviet studies of Siberian history. Thus, for

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2 Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors. Russia and the Peoples of the North…*, 2.