CHAPTER 13

A Post-Communist Coexistence in Northeast Asia?
Mutual Racial Attitudes among Russians and Indigenous Peoples of Siberia

David C. Lewis

On going into a bakery in Moscow, a man whom I shall call Zhargal asked the assistant for a loaf of bread. She turned to the shelves behind the counter, took one off the left side and gave it to him. Zhargal returned home with the bread but on eating it that evening noticed that it was not very fresh. The next time he went to that bakery he noticed that the new loaves were being put on the right hand side, the older loaves being moved along to the left. On asking again for some bread, he noticed that the assistant again took a loaf from the left hand side. This time Zhargal decided to protest, but instead of raising the matter directly with the shop assistant he demanded to see the manager. “Why does your assistant give me the older bread and not the fresh bread?” he asked. Both the manager and his assistant were obviously embarrassed. Finally it became clear that the sales assistant had thought that Zhargal was Vietnamese and that she could get away with fobbing off the old bread onto a Vietnamese person. From that time onwards, Zhargal visited the bakery frequently and the sales assistant always gave him fresh bread. In fact, he reported that they had even become friends.

Discrimination against Siberian Peoples as an Outcome of Racial Prejudice

This is one instance of a discriminatory attitude towards “Asian” (that is East and Central Asian)-looking people as manifested in the behavior of certain Russians in Moscow.1 Zhargal was mistaken for a Vietnamese person because his ethnic group, the Buryats, are an Asiatic people but they live in southern Siberia, around the Lake Baikal region to the north of Mongolia. However, being brought up within Russia and speaking Russian fluently, Zhargal was not only more aware of discriminatory behavior but was also able to address it by

1 For a recent and succinct survey of contemporary racism in Russia, see Law, 2012: 23–33.
complaining to the manager (who apparently had encouraged the sales assistant to sell the older bread to their Vietnamese customers).

Discrimination of this kind is difficult to quantify because isolated incidents might not be recognized at first as being racist. There is the question of whether any foreigner could be a victim of attempts to pass off lesser quality goods or whether the practice is explicitly targeted at those of other races. It is only when a pattern seems to build up, or if the person concerned admits that those of (in Zhargal’s case) Asian origin were especially being targeted that one can consider the practice to be racist. If Zhargal’s experiences were unusual one could say that the discrimination he described was atypical. However, in interviewing a variety of different Asiatic people about their experiences, a fairly consistent pattern of discrimination seems to emerge from the data.

Such discrimination is by no means confined to those with ‘Asian’ features. Aspects of antisemitism, for example, have been manifested in Russia since at least the eighteenth century onwards and continue nowadays in the form of occasional attacks on Jews or their property.² People who look as if they are from the Caucasus region feel that they are subject to discrimination and harassment by the police in Moscow and elsewhere.³ This is primarily on account of fears of terrorist activity by Chechen separatists, although the checks on documents may also provide the police with an opportunity for extorting bribes.⁴ A survey conducted in 1999 asked 1,648 Russians to evaluate positively or negatively a variety of nationalities, including Tatars, British, Americans, Japanese, Jews, Uzbeks, Chinese, Turks, Chechens and others. On the whole, the findings indicate the prevalence of a racial and national hierarchy. Russian attitudes towards Europeans and Americans tended to be more positive than towards the Japanese, but the Japanese in turn are evaluated more positively than the Chinese. Any influence of racist attitudes on the results, however, is probably outweighed by the influence of political and economic relations between the peoples in question: the most negative evaluation went to the Chechens.⁵

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² See, for instance, Goble, 2000; Anti-Defamation League 2001a, 2001b; “Antisemitism in Russia” [Online]; “History of the Jews in Russia” [Online]; “Police hunt Ryazan synagogue arsonists” [Online].


⁵ Furman & Kääriäinen, 2000: 125 (Unfortunately the published results do not include any indication of any tests for statistical significance but the small percentage differences between some of the groupings make me suspect that some of the variation, though noticeable, may not be at the level of statistical significance.)