Comparison between the Russian and North American fur trades is often in the minds of historians, perhaps especially of those who happen to be writing in English or French. Professor Noonan argued for drawing analogies with North America, and not just for the Siberian trade, which as in North America grew up within a framework of colonial exploitation; he found that a three-stage model proposed for sub-Arctic Canada by Arthur Ray and Charles Bishop can be applied to Finno-Ugrian peoples of the Lomovatovo culture in the Kama-Urals region from the fifth to the ninth centuries, who traded with their steppe neighbors to the south not as dependents, but as equals. To be sure, the idea of comparison is sometimes raised only to be dismissed because of obvious and important differences. While the desire in distant lands for Russia's furs seems to extend as far back as archeologists have any knowledge of the forest and steppe regions, the export of North America's furs across the sea begins only at the end of the sixteenth century. If North America's European companies and even some of their indigenous partners are copiously documented by written evidence, the lineaments of Russia's trade have to be inferred, as in so many of Professor Noonan's studies, from the silent evidence of archeology and numismatics.

But a difficult question does not go away for being difficult. Perhaps the most compelling reason for trying to think about the Russian and North American trades in conjunction with each other, at least for the early modern period, is that the outward thrust of European backwoodsmen - coureurs de bois and promyshtleniki - was in both cases spurred on by a rising European demand for furs. A recent Université de Laval dissertation, published in Paris, brings out with particular clarity the connections between these alternate sources of supply.

for the European market. Bernard Allaire shows that Parisian furriers developed an interest in Canadian pelts only after political events of the 1570s severely disrupted traditional supply routes from the north and east; that Parisian hatters found a use for beaver hair by reviving craft techniques that had been in abeyance ever since the supply of Russian beaver had died out over a century earlier; and that for processing the so-called castor sec or dry beaver pelts from the Great Lakes region, Parisian masters still relied on Russian expertise — these pelts were first sent east to be prepared for further work in ways that only Russian craftsmen understood.

Can one, then, start from the assumption that the trade in furs on both continents was driven by the export market? Or, to put matters slightly differently, can one properly apply to Russia the "staples thesis" that Harold Innis developed for the role of the fur trade in the growth and development of Canada? As a small contribution toward the continuing discussion of a very complex issue, this essay will consider one point that might be alleged in support of the idea that market conditions will not work as a basis for explaining the basic features of both fur trades: namely, that the Siberian trade of the early modern era was largely a matter of iasak, or compulsory tribute, a feature quite absent from the Canadian trade. In other words, if Muscovite officials responded to market conditions when they sent on to Europe the tribute furs delivered to the capital, the tsar’s men on the frontier, as well as the indigenous peoples who supplied most of the furs, were acting according to a logic of force.

The description of iasak in Fisher’s The Russian Fur Trade may serve as a starting point. In Fisher’s recounting, tribute and voluntary exchange went hand in hand from the earliest days of the Russian trade. Kiev’s merchant princes collected tribute or dan’ from their subjects, usually in the form of furs. From the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, Novgorod’s merchant princes colonized the Dvina valley, but the only manifestation of Novgorodian sovereignty in the Pechora and Urals regions was the collection of tribute, “and that occasional,” because indigenous peoples often resisted the armed parties sent out to collect the tribute in furs. At the same time, Samoeds trekked across the Urals, bringing sable pelts to Postozersk on the Pechora in exchange for linens, kettles, and foodstuffs; through the fifteenth and most of the sixteenth centuries, this was how merchants in Novgorod and later Moscow obtained the sable pelts that were their most valuable export. But after about 1570, due to rising demand in Europe, sable was not to be had in Moscow — one had to send across the Urals to