

Introduction

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The dissolution of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe and Russia has led to economic transformations and an ongoing collapse of social structures. Rural regions have often been the most seriously affected, and nowhere more so than in the vast areas of the Russian North. Heavily subsidised communities consisting predominantly of native reindeer-herders, hunters and fishermen have been left largely to fend for themselves. In the wake of the rapid and continuous dismantling of social support systems and infrastructure, to which local native people as well as newcomers from other parts of the country were required to adapt in Soviet times, the population is now bereft of what it had come to take for granted. Given this depressing picture of poverty and despair, a great number of different agencies, both domestic and foreign, have sought to test Western models of reform. Scholars from both Eastern European countries and from the West have critically monitored these processes, even in the most remote native communities of the North, in order to achieve a better understanding of the precise economic, social, and cultural processes involved.

By the end of the 1990s, first results of this new phase of anthropological research – usually based on extended periods of fieldwork – were appearing in the form of dissertations and monographs. There evolved a fruitful dialogue among scholars, concerned to explore possible routes to reform in the Russian North. To continue that discussion, a special research group for Siberia was created at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, a new foundation where the department of Chris Hann is investigating changing property relations in the postsocialist world in general. The Siberian project group began its work in January 2000 and will continue until the end of 2002 (for further details of projects and personnel please see the first Institute's report (MPI 2001) or visit the web site <http://www.eth.mpg.de/research/siberia/>).

The series 'Pathways to Reform in post-Soviet Siberia' will publish the results of our projects together with contributions to the numerous seminars, workshops and conferences which we have organised in Halle. The largest

of these conferences, 'Postsocialisms in the Russian North' (November 8–9, 2000) was hailed by Anderson (2001, 25) as 'a certain coming of age of a new genre of ethnography' and a welcome 'return to an old tradition of dialogue between Western Europe and North America and Siberia'. This meeting was held in conjunction with another conference on 'Actually-existing Postsocialisms', whose results have been published elsewhere (Hann ed., 2002). In the course of this week, about 30 Siberianists from all over the world were able to discuss their work and relate it to the wider theoretical and geographical context of postsocialist studies in Eurasia.

'People and the Land', the first volume of the series, concentrates mainly on pressing issues concerning the use of strategic natural resources, environmental impacts and the survival of indigenous peoples. Recently passed Russian legislation has far-reaching effects on indigenous peoples, but a great deal depends on how it is interpreted and applied locally. Another important section of this book deals with native peoples' understandings of the landscape, seen not merely as an economic resource but as a space for spiritual and cultural survival (Vitebsky 2002).

The second volume of this series will concentrate on the theme of 'Rebuilding of Social Identities' and the third volume problematises 'Culture as Property'. These are important and closely interrelated issues of current concern throughout the Russian North. Together, they offer a rich spectrum which could provide, especially when viewed as an integrated whole, possible pathways to reform in post-Soviet Russia for the future.

This volume, in a sense, picks up where Aleksandr Pika (1999) left off. It updates crucial issues and carries several important debates into the 21st century. In his preface to the English edition, Pika expressed the hope that recent experiences in other parts of the world might provide clear signals that it might, after all, be possible to improve conditions for the indigenous peoples of the Russian North. He referred to possible changes in Natives' status, including rights to land and resources, to the organising of autonomous socio-economic units such as the *obshchina*, and to the return of 'ethnic' property. In the meantime, many western scholars have entered the field, to add new perspectives on how precisely these expectations have developed since Pika wrote in 1994.

Pika's term 'neotraditionalism' was not really taken up in the later academic debate. It was sometimes perceived to be misleading, implying a

return to pristine states of earlier life. The concept, however, was not meant in this way. It was understood by Pika as a 'rejection of state "modernizing drive" in favor of demands for legal protection for northern peoples, freedom for independent economic and cultural development, and self-government' (1999, 17). One of his main points, also taken up in this book, was that the move to new forms of market economy can only be made on the basis of a reorientation of northern native villages towards self-sufficiency, the consumption of goods produced locally and the support of those who work in traditional branches of the economy. Pika himself views the rise of a certain 'naturalist economy' as historically necessary to ensure survival in the 'transition period' (1999, 18); no one can presently dare to speculate how long that transition will last or where it will eventually lead.

The case studies presented in this book demonstrate the variety of particular developments and approaches, corresponding to diverse local situations. This is best shown in the laws concerning *obshchina*, and the practical implementation of this specific 'neo-traditional' institution. Land and natural resources are also interpreted accordingly to specific cultural heritage and political histories. This diversity will be more fully investigated in forthcoming volumes.

One crucial factor in native strategies is the proximity of viable local or international markets.¹ The overall economic prosperity of a region, resulting from the health of industries such as mining or gas and oil production, often impacts decisively on the local rural economies in which most native people are engaged (Stammmler 2002). This dimension alone is sufficient to remind us that pathways to reform in the Russian North are not likely to follow a uniform scheme, but have necessarily to build upon the existing particularities of diverse local situations.

Notes

- 1 This was addressed by Yulian Konstantinov in his lecture at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology on January 21st, 2002, with regard to the joint-venture agreement between the Swedish Norfrys Company and a reindeer-herder cooperative on the Kola peninsula. Norfrys lorries can travel directly to northern Sweden via Finland from the cooperative's slaughtering-house.

References

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable support of Chris Hann and many members of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, especially the Siberia research group, for the realisation of this book. Special thanks go to Dr. Elizabeth Ewart and Diana Quetz for their careful editing of the English text.