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0521477719 - A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581-1990

James Forsyth

Excerpt

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## I

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**SIBERIA 'DISCOVERED'****SIXTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIA AND THE ADVANCE TO THE  
URALS**

BY the middle of the sixteenth century the colonial expansion of European states was well under way. Tempted by dreams of trade, the merchant-adventurers of Western Europe had set out to explore unknown parts of the world, and the bases they established in various foreign lands became bridgeheads for the conquest of colonies, the introduction of settlers from the metropolis, and economic exploitation at the expense of the native inhabitants. In the Americas the empires of Spain, Portugal, England, Holland and France embraced vast territories by the middle of the seventeenth century, and bases for later European conquests existed in Africa, India and the East Indies.

Muscovite Russia, using similar means of conquest and colonisation, participated in this European expansionism by annexing the largest continuous territory of any empire – the whole of northern Asia, which came to be called Siberia. The only basic difference between Russia's colonial expansion and that of the West European states was that it was not dependent upon fleets of sailing-ships plying long distances across the ocean, but on an advance overland (or rather, by river) into 'unexplored' regions of the same Eurasian continent. Otherwise the Russian explorer-conquerors shared with their West European contemporaries the developments in state and military organisation and technology – above all, firearms – which gave them a powerful advantage over the less 'advanced' native inhabitants of the lands they seized.

Russia in the sixteenth century had become one of the most formidable states in Europe. The yoke of Tatar domination imposed by the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century had gradually weakened and was eventually thrown off by successive grand princes of Moscow. Thereafter the Moscow grand princes succeeded in building up their own power during the

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fifteenth century as the Golden Horde disintegrated into the separate khanates of Crimea, Astrakhan, Kazan, Nogai and Siberia. This process culminated in the subjugation of the other Russian principalities by Ivan III, called the Great (1462–1505). The universal role first claimed for Russia by this grand prince was symbolised by his assumption of the imperial insignia of the double-headed eagle and the title Caesar (i.e. Tsar). At the same time he adopted the nationalist doctrine of Moscow as the 'Third Rome', the centre of Christendom which, unlike Rome itself and Constantinople, was destined never to fall to heathen invaders.

However, the Tatar khans continued to consider the grand princes of Moscow to be their vassals, and from time to time they still raided the territory of Moscow and indeed the city itself. Moreover, the Kazan Tatars controlled the middle Volga, frustrating the ambitions of Russia's rulers to extend their trading activities to the east. In 1552, therefore, Ivan IV, 'the Terrible', sent a large army to attack Kazan, and, in the words of the chronicler, 'by the help of our Lord Jesus Christ and the prayers of our Sovereign Lady and Mother of God and the intervention of the Archangel Michael'<sup>1</sup> the city was captured, the khan cast down from his throne, and a large territory from the Volga to the Ural mountains was claimed for Russia. The Russians, who on the one hand were unable to defeat the Crimean Tatars for another 200 years, and on the other were being hard pressed in the west by Sweden and Poland, found scope for expansion in the east. Before them lay a whole continent of practically 'unknown land' – northern Asia. Of its inhabitants the Russians had had contact only with the 'Yugrians' of the northern Urals, some of whom were nominally subjugated first by Novgorod and later by Moscow.

Novgorod, which long before the emergence of the principality of Moscow was one of the two main centres of early cultural development among the eastern Slavs (the other being Kiev), lived by trade, deriving its wealth from furs and other products to be found in the northern forests and the Arctic shore. Its merchant boyars had begun extending their activities in that direction as early as the tenth century, the main routes for their ships being the great rivers of the north, such as the Sukhona, which flows 300 miles to the north-east before joining the Vychegda to form the Northern Dvina. Because the low watershed at White Lake (Beloje ozero) was the door to the whole north-western region, the Novgoroders' name for these lands was Zavolochye – 'beyond the portage', from the Russian word *vólok* (portage) – and its Komi inhabitants were 'the Chud beyond the portage'. Expeditions 'beyond the portage', instead of taking the northward course of the Dvina to the White Sea, could sail along a 1,000 mile waterway from the Sukhona up the river Vychegda to the north-east, where other low water-

<sup>1</sup> *Lvovskaya letopis (Polnoye sobraniye russkikh letopisey, t. 20)*, St Petersburg, 1910, vol. II, p. 530.

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sheds made it possible to cross to the northward-flowing river Pechora, one of whose tributaries, the Usa, led upstream as far as the Ural mountains, or to the Kama, which flows in a great clockwise arc first north, then south to join the Volga. All this land lies within the *taiga* or northern coniferous forest, with spruce and fir predominating.

The Novgoroders had penetrated far into Zavolochye by the eleventh century, setting up their posts on river banks and forcing the Komi people to bring in furs as tribute. Official Soviet historians gloss over the facts of colonial exploitation with such bland statements as: 'As in most of the subordinated lands the political dependence of Komi territory on Novgorod was expressed merely by the regular payment of tribute: the Novgoroders did not interfere in the internal life of the territory.'<sup>2</sup> In fact the violent methods used in subjugating the natives of the northern European forest west of the Urals were typical of those used by the Russians throughout their subsequent campaigns in quest of wealth from furs. Their subjection of the peoples of Zavolochye proved to be only the first stage in their conquest of the whole of northern Eurasia – a drive to the east which would develop a powerful momentum of its own, although the Russians in the twelfth century could not be aware of the magnitude of the enterprise they had initiated.

If the Komi living in the basin of the Vychehda (whose land was known as Perm) submitted to the Novgorod Russians without any recorded resistance at this time, people living farther east and north, near the Ural mountains, inflicted sufficiently serious blows on the invaders to warrant the attention of the monastic chronicler: the Pechora (presumably Samoyeds) living in the basin of the river of that name, and the Yugra (probably ancestors of the present-day Khantys) in the vicinity of the Urals, killed the Novgorod marauders who came to extort tribute in 1187. A few years later:

they set out from Novgorod to the Yugra with an army led by Yadreyko, and . . . came to another town. And [the Yugrians] barricaded themselves up in the town, and it was besieged for five weeks. And they sent out false word [to the Russians] that 'we are gathering silver and sable-skins and other treasure, so do not destroy us your serfs or your tribute', but all the time they were assembling an army. And when they had gathered warriors they send out word to the commander: 'come into the town with twelve men'. And they entered the town . . . and they slew them.

Similar events are recorded 150 years later, and another century after that, when in 1445 two Novgorod commanders took an army of 3,000 into Yugra-land, again meeting disaster after demonstrating their methods of coercion: 'they seized many Yugrian people and their women and children, who were terrified. But the Yugrians succeeded in deceiving them, saying "we shall give you tribute . . .", but meanwhile they gathered together and struck at

<sup>2</sup> B.N. Ponomarev, ed., *Istoriya SSSR s drevneyshikh vremen do nashikh dney*, Moscow, 1966–, vol. II, p. 24.

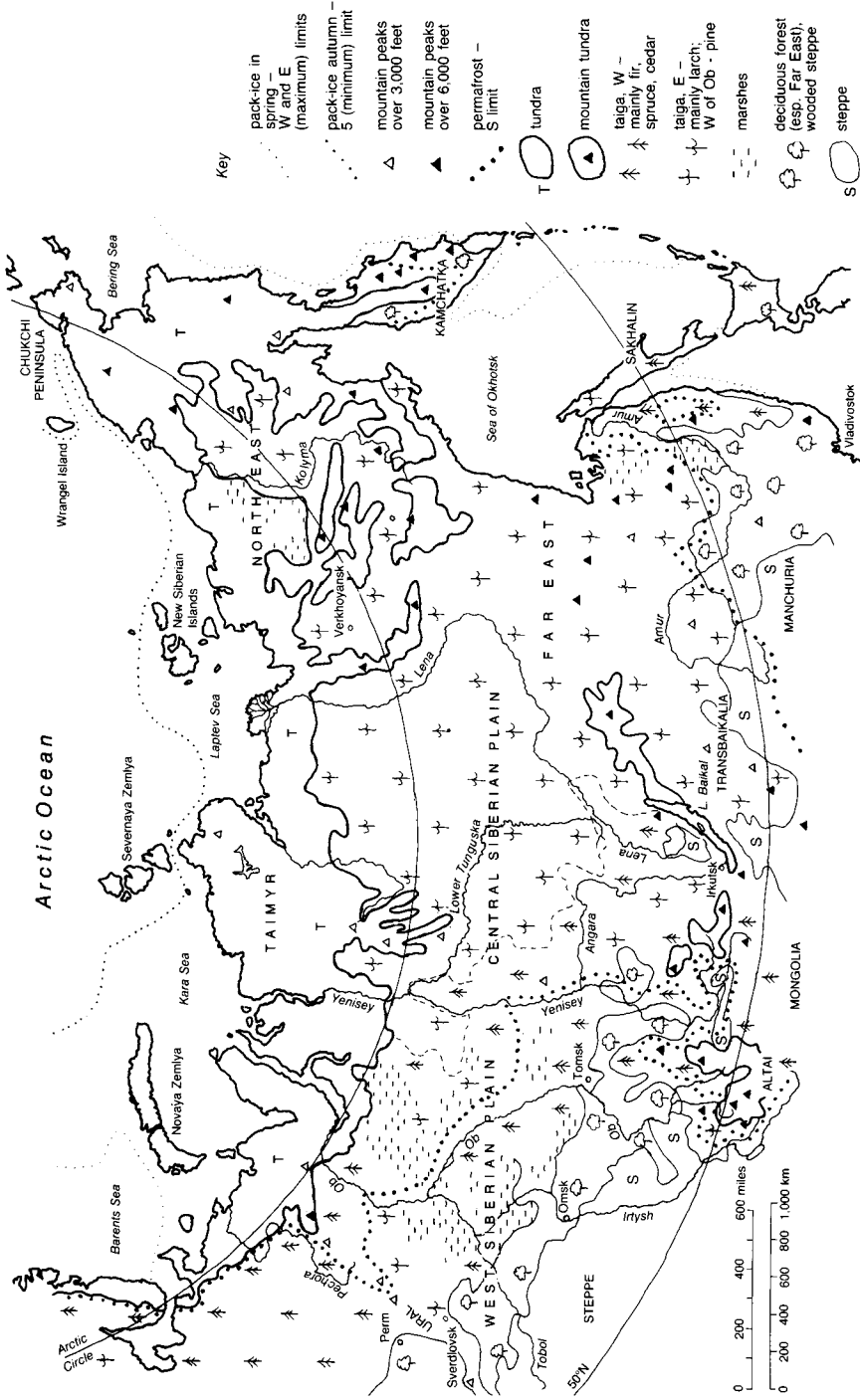
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Map 1 Natural features of Siberia

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Vasilii's fort, and they killed as many as eighty good [Russian] people, of boyar line and gallant people, and it was pitiful to hear the slaughter.<sup>3</sup> The mention of boyars is a reminder that the Novgorod colonisation of Zavolochye was essentially a private enterprise undertaken by the great magnates of the city for commercial ends. Some boyars, having dug themselves in and established a retinue of workers and warriors around them, began to act as land-owners in their own right and to forget the interests of the mother city.

The rulers of Novgorod had to cope not only with insubordination among their own people, but also with the growing rivalry of the princes of Moscow. During the first century of Tatar domination of the Volga–Oka region its princes had little time for skirmishing with the Novgoroders, but in the fourteenth century the raiding on both sides intensified, with ever-increasing anger on the part of the Moscow princes at the refusal of Novgorod to recognise their suzerainty. The outcome was scarcely in doubt, considering the Muscovites' determination to crush all rivals, but during the last century of its independent existence Novgorod defended its lands valiantly in a long series of wars for the possession of Zavolochye.

An important development in Moscow's intrusion into 'the land beyond the portage' was the part played by the Christian church. There had been a great upsurge in monastic activity in the Moscow lands during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, emanating from the Trinity-Sergiev monastery, founded by St Sergiy of Radonezh. It was this expansion of the field of activity of the Orthodox church from Muscovy which made the first inroads upon the traditional life and beliefs of the Komi or Permian people (the northern group of which was called by the Russians 'Zyrians'). In 1383 the monk Stefan Khrap, a native of Ustyug, decided to go to preach the Christian religion among them. The missionary, later known as St Stefan of Perm, sailed up the Vychegda to the mouth of the river Vym, where he built his church and set about learning the Komi language and creating an alphabet in order to write translations of religious texts. The account of his life tells of the hostility of the people of Perm and of Stefan's profanation of their shrines and religious images ('and he struck the idols on the head with the back of an axe, and chopped their legs, and felled them . . . and smashed them to pieces', etc.). His frenzied zeal triumphs in the final theological debate against the head shaman, Pan, when the latter sensibly refuses either to jump into a fire or into a hole in the ice, hand-in-hand with Stefan, to prove whose god is the stronger.<sup>4</sup> Stefan of Perm's proselytising was followed sixty years later by the baptism of the Komi on the river Kama by the Moscow bishop Ioan – an event which required reaffirmation by military

<sup>3</sup> *Novgorodskaya pervaya letopis*, Moscow, 1950, pp. 232, 425.

<sup>4</sup> Yepifanii Premudryi, *Zhitiye Svyatago Stefana, yepiskopa Permskago*, St Petersburg, 1897, pp. 8, 17–19, 22–3, 27, 35–40, 50–6.

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means in 1472, when prince Fyodor Pestryy was sent from Moscow to subdue the Komi prince of Great Perm.<sup>5</sup>

The religion Stefan of Perm found among the Komi combined animism with the cult of ancestors. All natural phenomena were endowed with soul, and each clan had a sacred grove in the forest in which they congregated from time to time to invoke the spirits and make sacrifices to them. One of Stefan's acts was to cut down a tall birch-tree near his settlement, which was revered and used as a sacrificial site by the Komi people. The rituals performed by the shamans or priests included propitiatory sacrifices of animals in the fields, and rain-making. There was a variety of gods, both great and small, such as the sky-god, the mother of the sun, or the mother of water.

Christianity was imposed upon the Finnic peoples, but for many it never fully replaced their old religion. Despite campaigns organised by the Russian state from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, in which shrines and sacred groves were destroyed, paganism persisted as the real religion, especially in places most isolated from the attention of the authorities.<sup>6</sup>

To the south and east of the territory of Moscow and Novgorod the native inhabitants of the Urals came within the orbit of the Tatar khanate of Sibir. Like the Russians, the Turco-Tatar rulers of Sibir had forced some of their immediate neighbours in the Ural region – the Khantys and Mansis – into subjection, and thus obtained from them as tribute the furs in which the virgin forest was so rich. As furs were much in demand in the countries of Central Asia and the Middle East, some awareness of the dark northern land was carried across the steppes and desert of what is now Kazakstan to such centres of Islamic civilisation as Bukhara, Samarkand and Baghdad. Similarly, in the Far East the people of China had from the beginning of their civilisation known something of the distant forests which lay beyond their immediate 'barbarian' neighbours, the Mongolian, Tungus and Turkic nomads of Inner Asia. The earliest accounts of some of the peoples inhabiting the southern fringe of Siberia are therefore preserved in Chinese chronicles.<sup>7</sup> Little of this, however, was known to the Russian adventurers who set out to explore and conquer Siberia in the late sixteenth century.

## THE GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The land of northern Asia which lay before them stretches for some 2,800 miles from the Urals to the shores of the Pacific Ocean (roughly the distance

<sup>5</sup> S.M. Solovyov, *Istoriya Rossii s drevneyshikh vremen*, Moscow, 1962–6, vol. III, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Narody yevropeyskoy chasti SSSR*, V.N. Belitser et al., eds., vol. II, Moscow, 1964, pp. 401–3, 431–2, 444–6, 455, 472–9, 491–3, 499–502.

<sup>7</sup> e.g. N.Ya. Bichurin (Iakin), *Sobraniye svedeniy o narodakh, obitavshikh v Sredney Azii v drevniye vremena*, St Petersburg, 1851, revised and reprinted, Moscow, 1950; A.G. Malyavkin, *Istoricheskaya geografiya Tsentralnoy Azii: materialy i issledovaniya*, Novosibirsk, 1981.

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across North America from coast to coast at the latitude of the Great Lakes), while in its most northerly, arctic latitudes, it extends for a further 950 miles eastward to the tip of Chukchi-land (in Russian *Chukotka*) where the 50-mile-wide Bering Strait separates Asia from Alaska. As nearly all of Siberia lies north of the fiftieth parallel of latitude, its position on the earth is comparable with that of northern Europe or Canada.

It is also to Canada that Siberia must be compared with regard to climate. The range of temperatures over the seasons is similar, but Siberia, because of the huge land-mass of Eurasia, is even more extreme than Canada, with average winter temperatures over much of its territory between  $-30^{\circ}$  and  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ . In some parts of the north-east, such as Verkhoyansk and Oymyakon – the coldest places in the northern hemisphere – the temperatures can fall as low as  $-71^{\circ}\text{C}$ , although in summer it may rise to  $+34^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

Despite the severity of its climate, every part of Siberia had had its human inhabitants for thousands of years before the Russians came in the seventeenth century. The very earliest signs of habitation in Siberia during the Stone Age occur in the more southerly regions and the upper Lena valley, but by about 3500 BC several different Neolithic cultures existed which, however sparsely distributed their population may have been, extended over the whole of Northern Asia, including the shores of the Arctic Ocean.<sup>8</sup> The ethnic and linguistic composition of these cultures as they developed during the course of many centuries can only be surmised from scant relics of material culture and the evidence of languages, and in practice it was not until the seventeenth century that the recorded history of most of the native peoples of Siberia began. The ethnic pattern was already complex by that time, and Siberia was certainly not an 'empty', uninhabited land.

The vast territory of Siberia falls into three sections from west to east. From the Ural mountains the land descends to the wide plain of Western Siberia which forms the basin of the great river Ob and its equally majestic tributary the Irtysh. These rivers carry the abundant waters of the Altai mountains northward across the low-lying plain into the sub-arctic region where the ground is permanently frozen and the surface of the Arctic Ocean is icebound for many months in the year. Over most of their course the Irtysh and Ob have a relatively slight gradient, so that they flow slowly. The watersheds between their many tributaries are low, and as their exit to the sea is blocked by northern ice, large areas of the plain are flooded in spring when the snow begins to melt, and numerous lakes and marshes are a permanent feature of much of Western Siberia. South of the Arctic Circle

<sup>8</sup> V.N. Chernetsov and W. Moszyńska, *Prehistory of Western Siberia*, ed. H.N. Michael, Montreal and London, 1974; I.S. Gurvich, ed., *Etnogenez narodov Severa*, Moscow, 1980; *Istoriya Sibiri*, A.P. Okladnikov, ed., Leningrad, 1968–9, vol. I, pp. 39–44, 94–6; A.P. Okladnikov, *Yakutia before its Incorporation into the Russian State*, ed. H.N. Michael, Montreal 1970.

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the vegetation is rather sparse forest of pine, cedar, larch and spruce interspersed with peaty bogs of moss and lichen. This coniferous forest, generally known in Russian by its Turkic name *taiga*, is the home of wild animals which occur throughout Siberia – brown bear, wolf, elk, reindeer, lynx and many smaller fur-bearing animals such as squirrel, chipmunk, polecat, ermine and sable. Towards the south, about the latitude of Tomsk, the land gets drier and the coniferous forest gives way to aspen and birch woods, which thin out first into wooded steppe and then the open steppe-land where grasses form the predominant vegetation. This transitional fringe between forest and steppe is the only natural boundary which Western Siberia has in the south. From here the plains of Turkestan stretch away for 1,000 miles, in the direction of Afghanistan and Iran.

East of the Western Siberian plain the uplands of Central Siberia rise to an average height of about 2,000 feet, with the river Yenisey running northward along their western edge. The Yenisey contrasts strongly with the Ob-Irtysh: all its main tributaries, such as the Lower Tunguska, Mountain Tunguska and Angara, flow into it from the east, falling rapidly from sources at over 1,300 feet. East of the Yenisey the zone of permanently frozen subsoil (permafrost) extends much farther south to embrace practically the whole of Central and Eastern Siberia. However, because of more broken relief and better drainage, the *taiga* in this central part of Siberia is more dense and continuous, the most typical tree being the larch. In the south-east the Central Siberian uplands come to an end on the shores of Lake Baikal, which is over 400 miles long and 30 wide and is the deepest lake in the world. Fed by over 300 rivers, Baikal has only one outlet, the Angara, one of the tributaries of the Yenisey. The Yenisey itself rises in the Sayan mountains amid snow-clad peaks of up to 9,800 feet. These mountains along with the Altai originally formed the natural southern limit of Central Siberia, separating it from the plateau of Mongolia. The western shore of Lake Baikal rises in a steep wall of mountains, just beyond whose crest, a mere 6 miles from the lake, is the source of the third great river of Siberia – the Lena. Like the others it flows northward, making its way through Yakutia towards the Arctic Ocean.

East of Baikal and the Lena lie the larch-clad mountains and plateaux of the Far East. From Lake Baikal the Yablonovyy and Stanovoy mountain ranges run out towards the Okhotsk Sea, with summits as high as 10,000 feet. To the south of these the dominant larch, cedar and pine forests give way to areas of grassy steppe in the basins of the rivers Selenga, Onon (or Shilka) and Argun, all of which rise in Mongolia or Manchuria. The Shilka and Argun combine to form the largest river of south-eastern Siberia, the Amur, which flows in a great S-bend for 1,790 miles to reach the sea opposite the island of Sakhalin. Most of this territory shares the same kind of climate and vegetation as Central Siberia. Beyond the middle reaches of the



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Amur, however, from the point where it is joined by the river Ussuri near the present-day city of Khabarovsk, a very different region begins. The climate of this maritime region (called *Primorye* in Russian) has warmer summers and is affected by monsoon winds from the Pacific which bring much rain. As a result the vegetation differs from that of Siberia proper, the coniferous forests of the mountains giving way at lower levels to such deciduous trees as oak, maple, walnut, ash and lilac. Among these forests and the high grasses and cane-brakes of the river-valleys live spotted deer, black Himalayan bears and tigers.

In the northern part of Eastern Siberia, beyond the lower reaches of the Lena, rise the austere Verkhoyansk, Suntar-Khayat and Cherskiy mountains, with peaks exceeding 10,000 feet. Here, in the coldest region of the earth outside the Antarctic, the rivers Yana, Indigirka and Kolyma rise and flow north to the Arctic Ocean. Despite the extremely low temperatures of the north-east, its somewhat dry climate gives relatively favourable conditions for human life. The forest is sparser than that of the *taiga* to the west of the Lena, and towards the Pacific coast the prevailing tall larch is replaced by impenetrable thickets of low, recumbent cedar-pine clothing the lower slopes of the mountains. Towards the shores of the northern Pacific or Bering Sea, the climate becomes somewhat less extreme than in the interior of Eastern Siberia, but the summer monsoon brings much rain and mist. As a result, the maritime region of the north-east is in some ways more inhospitable to human beings than Central Siberia. The Kamchatka peninsula, which projects south-westward into the Pacific Ocean, has a high ridge of mountains with peaks up to 15,586 feet. This is a 'young' mountain system with many active volcanoes located along a line which continues southward from Kamchatka into the Kuril Islands and Japan. Thanks to the abundance of moisture in Kamchatka its vegetation is luxuriant, with deciduous forests and tall grasses.

Right across the far north of Siberia stretches the tundra, which forms a fringe along the shores of the Arctic Ocean, mainly about 200 miles wide, but in many places much more extensive than this. Between the mouths of the Yenisey and the Lena the Taimyr peninsula takes the tundra 750 miles north of the Arctic Circle, while in the Putoran plateau and in Eastern Siberia large expanses of mountain tundra extend far south beyond the Arctic Circle. In the tundra the average day temperature rises above  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  on no more than half of the days in the year, the 'summer' of frost-free days lasts no more than two-and-a-half months, and although the total snowfall is not great, the ground is snow covered for at least 240 days in the year. In such conditions the only plants which can grow are mosses, lichens and stunted woody shrubs, with a brief flowering of small herbaceous plants in the summer. Animal life in the tundra is restricted to small rodents, fox, reindeer, snowy owls and other birds of prey, and the hosts of aquatic birds

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which congregate along the shore in summer. The Arctic coast, islands and offshore ice also provide a home for seals, walrus and Polar bears.

Despite the climatic rigours of its relatively featureless coniferous forests and its treeless tundra, Siberia offered a variety of environments for human habitation, and these gave rise to the different ways of life of the numerous indigenous peoples who populated it before the advent of the Russians. The number of aboriginal nationalities is less obvious than present-day administrative divisions or lists of the peoples and languages of the USSR might suggest. Some thirty-five indigenous languages are recognised in Siberia today,<sup>9</sup> but many of these fall into several dialects which are more or less unintelligible to each other – two in the case of Selkup, four in Buryat, eight or even twelve in Khanty, and so on. (It is by no means easy to define ‘dialects’ and ‘languages’ in a consistent way.)<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it is known that at least nine languages or dialects of the Samoyed and Ket families, such as Kamas and Arin, have died out since the seventeenth century. Thus it is likely that the number of different language communities encountered by the Russians in their penetration of Northern Asia was about 120. This is a more probable degree of complexity, comparable with the linguistic situation in other parts of Asia as well as in North America, where between 200 and 300 native languages are known to have existed.

## THE KHANTYS AND MANSIS OF WESTERN SIBERIA

In the sixteenth century the territory lying to the north-east of the Grand Princedom of Moscow was inhabited by Finno-Ugrian peoples: the Komi in the basins of the Vychegda, Pechora and Kama rivers west of the Ural mountain range, and the Samoyed (Nenets) in the tundra both west and east of the Urals. The Muscovite state had already encroached upon these peoples and founded outlying towns at Ust-Vym, Pustozersk, Cherdyn and Solikamsk, and Russian expeditions had even penetrated beyond the northern end of the Urals and established nominal suzerainty over the Khanty and Samoyed inhabitants of the region around the mouth of the Ob. On this basis the phrase ‘ruler of Obdor, Konda and all Siberian lands’ was added to the title of the Tsar of Muscovy in the middle of the sixteenth century.

Up until that time the Russians were restrained in their advance to the east by a double barrier: the Ural mountains themselves, and their native inhabitants the Ostyaks (Khanty), Voguls (Mansi) and Siberian Tatars. Although the Urals are not particularly high mountains, rising to occasional peaks up to 6,000 feet, they constitute an obstacle to movement at least as serious as the highlands of Scotland or the Appalachians. At the latitudes

<sup>9</sup> *Yazyki narodov SSSR*, 5 vols., V.V. Vinogradov, ed., Moscow, 1966–8 – see appropriate sections in vols. II, III and V.

<sup>10</sup> B. Comrie, *The Languages of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 6–8.