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

James Forsyth

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A history of the peoples of Siberia is the first ethnohistory of Siberia to appear in English, analysing ethnographic and linguistic features of the native peoples and tracing their history from the Russian conquest onwards. James Forsyth assesses the impact of Russian exploration and settlement, and looks at Siberian relations with Kazakstan, Mongolia and China. He shows how Russian occupation generated warfare, tribute-exaction and exploitation to such an extent that many doubted the capacity of the Siberian peoples to survive.

After the 1917 Revolution and the vicissitudes of civil war (not to mention the growth of Altai, Buryat and Yakut separatist movements) the new Soviet regime brought 'autonomy', medical services and education. However, the policies of the Stalinist era – collectivisation, denomadisation, amalgamation of settlements, Russification and the destructive environmental effects of Russian industrial development – further undermined the native communities, as did conscription during the Second World War. Their critical situation in the post-war period, revealed to outsiders as a result of Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, is viewed as the inevitable outcome of Leninist 'nationalities policy', and gave rise in the 1980s to a notable 'native rights' movement. James Forsyth compares the Siberian experience with those of Indians and Eskimos in Canada and the USA, and the book as a whole will provide anglophone readers with a vast corpus of ethnographic information previously inaccessible to Western scholars.

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A HISTORY OF THE PEOPLES OF SIBERIA

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Symbols of colonial empire from the atlas of Siberia compiled for Peter the Great by S. Remezov, showing, below the double-headed eagle of the Russian Empire with allegorical figures, angels supporting the arms of Siberia: two sabres trapped in a bow, and two crossed arrows. The kneeling figures are a Russian Siberian (*sibirets*) with an anchor, representing the river-borne exploration of Siberia, and three submissive natives offering fur tribute: a Tatar (here *tartarinets*) identifiable by his bow-case and quiver, a Samoyed with characteristic knife, and an *obdarinets* or Ostyak of the river Ob in typical head-dress.

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A HISTORY OF THE PEOPLES OF SIBERIA

RUSSIA'S NORTH ASIAN COLONY

1581–1990

JAMES FORSYTH

*Reader in and Head of the
Department of Russian, University of Aberdeen*



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To Jo and Marion

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PREFACE

MY reason for writing this book was that, as a consumer of histories of Russia (although not a professional historian) I could find no book in English which narrated and interpreted the stages in the conquest and exploitation of Siberia and the place of this process in Russian and world history. As Siberia, which is another name for northern Asia (roughly everything lying east of 60°E and north of 50°N) occupies almost one-third of the land mass of Asia – an area larger than the United States or Australia – this seems hardly a negligible matter. Quite a number of books and articles in European languages have been published in recent years dealing with Siberia as one of the regions of the Soviet Union occupying an important place in the state economy, and its relationship to other parts of the world in terms of strategy and economic resources to be developed in the service of a late twentieth-century style of prosperity. From this point of view Siberia is usually considered to be simply an extension and integral part of Russia – her eastern treasure-house of mineral wealth awaiting exploitation. And of course it is true that the great majority of Siberia's inhabitants are now Russians, just as the overwhelming majority of people in North and South America are the descendants of settlers from Europe. Up to the eighteenth century, however, this was not the case. As in the Americas, the colonists shared the territory with a large number of native tribes whose presence long predated theirs.

This is the aspect which has attracted least attention – the role of the native peoples: who they are, how they lived before the Russian invasion, the effects of the latter on their lives, their present state and future prospects. As the indigenous peoples of Siberia – Buryat Mongols, Yakuts, Tatars, Samoyeds, Tunguses, Chukchis and others – have been under Russian rule for 350 years or more (Yermak's expedition beyond the Urals began in 1581) several obvious questions arise. In the first place – have they been as well treated by the Russians as the picture presented by Soviet propaganda would have us believe? Their numbers are small: in 1989 some 1.6 million among the total of 32 million inhabitants of Siberia. Are they therefore so insignifi-

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cant numerically as to warrant no more than a footnote in the history of Russia? Have they now lost their cultural identity, swallowed up by the great mass of Russian and other incomers? Are the thirty or so indigenous communities of Siberia – the largest numbering only 350,000, the smallest 350 – destined to disappear altogether? In considering these questions it is natural to think also of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas. Has the fate of the Siberian natives been similar to that of the Indians and Eskimos of North America? Is there a parallel with the Indians of the South American forest who face extinction as a result of the ruthless commercialism of the dominant whites? This question leads inevitably to the related problem of the natural environment, as the original habitat of the native peoples is threatened by the inexorable destruction of forest and tundra.

Such were the general concerns underlying my investigation of what has been written, mainly in Russian, about the past and present of Siberia. The literature is enormous, if not always revealing, and the sources I have used are diverse, including: printed collections of early documents, scholarly surveys based on unpublished documents, Russian-language histories of Siberia, both nineteenth-century and Soviet, works on aspects of Siberian history published in the West, ethnographic accounts of native peoples, their traditions and religion, works about the ethnic history of northern Asia, recent Soviet sociological studies, books on the languages of Siberia, censuses of the USSR, geographical descriptions, travellers' accounts, literary works by Siberian authors, and popular propagandist narratives – material which has been utilised only to a relatively small extent in English-language publications. What I have put together from these sources has, I hope, resulted in a many-sided account of the peoples who live in Siberia – not entirely neglecting the Russians – and what happened to them in the course of the four centuries of their recorded history. (Archaeological evidence goes back much farther than this, but the speculation about the prehistory of Siberia which arises from it falls beyond the scope of this book.)

My aim has in fact been to write in the genre that some recent North American writers have called ethnohistory – 'a common-law marriage of history and anthropology' (J. Axtell, *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*, Oxford, 1981, p. vii) – in which an account of the way of life of the different aboriginal communities is presented in its changing (and reciprocal) relationship with the society and national history of the Russian incomers. My book does not set out to be a history of Russian Siberia as such – the visitors and settlers of many kinds who carried Russian life and culture eastward into northern Asia and established this as the dominant element in the colony. That would require a study of the military conquerors and administrators, the growth of towns, of agriculture and of trade, the origins of the rank-and-file settlers, the exile and prison system, and so on. None of this – which has been and no doubt will be the

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subject of works by other writers – can be more than sketched in a book which concentrates on the indigenous peoples and their problems as the subjects of their Russian rulers. My venturing into this field of historical and ethnographic specialisms is perhaps somewhat rash, but as the time is ripe for a general history of the peoples of Siberia to be attempted, I take the risk in the hope that what I have written may be a useful contribution to the study of a vast area of human activity which has been largely neglected by historians willing to dismiss pre-conquest Siberia as an ‘empty land’ inhabited by only ‘thinly scattered natives’.

As any work on Siberian history must take into account the many works published in Russia between the 1920s and the 1980s, the Soviet Marxist formulations continually repeated therein offer the main body of historical interpretation which the investigator has to confront. It is with reference to such ideological commonplaces, and their echoes in some Western works, that at various points I focus attention on some of the larger misconceptions which have been presented as unquestioned dogma in the Soviet Union until very recently. Such are, for instance, the assertions that the occupation of Siberia by the Russians was on the whole a peaceful process, that incorporation into Russia was of more benefit than harm to the native peoples because it brought them into contact with a ‘higher culture’, and that there was no resemblance between Russian rule and other colonial régimes under which native peoples were cruelly exploited. Distortion and the hushing-up of facts reached a preposterous level in Soviet writings about the post-revolutionary period: while on the one hand it is asserted that ‘Leninist nationalities policy’ led the world in humanity and justice in dealing with minority peoples, including those of Siberia, the facts of the actual suffering they underwent during enforced acculturation to Soviet Russian social and political institutions – in particular collectivisation, denomadisation and the destruction of traditional cultures and occupations – have been almost totally suppressed. *Glasnost* under the aegis of Mikhail Gorbachev has begun to open up such questions, but much of the truth about the twentieth-century history of the peoples of Siberia still has to be revealed before a comprehensive account can be written.

My own, far from complete, account will inevitably be superficial or inaccurate in places, either through shortcomings in the sources I have used or through my own errors, and I take full responsibility for them.

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NOTE ON SPELLINGS AND TERMS

RUSSIAN words and names are transliterated according to the widely accepted British system, with *ya, yu* for я, ю (i.e. Yakut, Iya not Iakut, Iia) and *ye, yo* for е, ё initially and after vowels, but *e* after consonants (i.e. Yenisey, Khrushchev not Enisey, Khrushchov). The essential difference between the vowel и and the semivowel ъ is conveyed by *i* and *y* respectively (e.g. *moy* 'my' singular and *moi* 'my' plural), and *y* is also used for ы (pronounced approximately as *i* in 'give'), e.g. Irtysh. The soft sign ь, often rendered by *'*, is ignored throughout as its occurrence is obvious to those who speak Russian and it adds little for those who do not (e.g. Ob, Ilmen not Ob', Il'men').

In the case of many names which are not Russian but belong to other languages of Siberia or to Mongolian, Tatar, Arabic, etc., spelling conventions appropriate to these are used. Thus such spellings as Altai, Baikal (not Altay, Baykal) are used, as are *yasak, yasyr* (not *iasak, iasyr*). Russified spellings such as *dzh* for *j* as in 'jar' have been eschewed (e.g. not Selemdzha, Dzhugdzhur but Selemja, Jugjur), as has the Russian obsession with palatalisation which gives to e.g. Vilui, Korak the unnecessarily clumsy appearance Vilyuy, Koryak. In, for example, Turkic names the Russian spellings я, ю, е have been rendered as *ä, ü, ö* where appropriate. As English has the bilabial consonant *w* which Russian lacks, it has been used in names which contain it in the original language, e.g. Ewen, Ewenki. Other Russian, as opposed to indigenous, spellings have been avoided in e.g. Ulaan-Üde, Örgöö (in Russian Ulan-Uda, Urgu). Similarly, Polish names retain their native form: Czersky not Cherskiy. For Chinese words traditional spellings or the Wade-Giles romanisation is used, not Pinyin, e.g. Sinkiang, Ch'ing, Hsing-an.

In naming administrative territories the following equivalents have been used: *guberniya, oblast* – 'province', *kray* – 'territory', *okrug* – 'region', *rayon* – 'district'.