THE PREDICAMENT OF CHUKOTKA'S INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT

The Predicament of Chukotka's Indigenous Movement is the first ethnography of the Russian North to focus on post-Soviet relations of domination between an indigenous minority and a nonindigenous majority in an urban setting. As Patty Gray investigates indigenous attempts in Chukotka to overcome this domination, she develops an anthropological approach to social movements that captures the "in-between" activity that is more than everyday resistance, but less than a full-blown movement. In the process, this book explores the post-Soviet transition as it occurred in the part of Russia that is America's closest Eurasian neighbor: Chukotka nearly touches Alaska across the Bering Strait. Gray charts the political transformation in Chukotka as its administration sought to represent itself as "democratic" while becoming ever more repressive and demonstrates how the indigenous population in particular suffered under this new form of domination. The "predicament" refers to how the nascent indigenous movement was prepared to address Soviet-style domination and instead was confronted with this "new-Russian" style.

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To Anatoly M. Khazanov, with affection

The Predicament of Chukotka's Indigenous Movement

POST-SOVIET ACTIVISM IN THE RUSSIAN FAR NORTH

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CHUKOTKA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A Place on the Edge

Chukotka is a region of Russia located at the intersection of Russia's north and east coasts. A huge territory of 737,700 square kilometers (about two-thirds the size of Alaska), it is situated as far north and east from Moscow as one can physically travel and still be in Russia – any further, and you would tumble into the Bering Sea. Along with Alaska, it divides the Pacific Ocean from the Arctic Ocean, and provided one-half of the land bridge that underlies the most popular theory of the peopling of North America. Chukotka lies on the leading edge of time; that is, the Chukotka Peninsula occupies time zone number 1 in the system of twenty-four time zones that girds the earth. In this sense, each new day of the earth begins when the sun hits the Chukotkan island of Big Diomede. When a sea mammal hunter from Chukotka working in the Bering Sea catches sight of the coast of Alaska, which he is quite likely to do, he is looking at yesterday.

In spite of the close proximity of this region of the Russian Far East to the United States (the Chukotka Peninsula is less than one hundred

kilometers from Alaska's Seward Peninsula at its closest point), when the border was closed and tightly guarded during the Soviet period, the distance may as well have been thousands of miles for anyone but the few local indigenous residents who managed to slip back and forth occasionally across the border illegally under the cover of fog (Schweitzer and Golovko 1995). The distance from Chukotka to the Russian capital of Moscow *is* thousands of miles (Chukotka is in fact closer to Washington, D.C.). Thus Chukotka occupies a position on the edge in a multiple sense – it is literally on the border between two continents and figuratively on the edge of two worlds. However, once the Soviet Union collapsed, the border opened and these people who were once so marginalized found themselves for a time occupying a space that was an international crossroads (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988). A flood of relatives, tourists, environmentalists, and journalists, not to mention anthropologists, began to inundate coastal Chukotka, creating what some described as a carnival atmosphere.

Framing Chukotka's "Dark Decade"

This book focuses on the final decade of the twentieth century in Chukotka, its first decade after Soviet rule. This was a time of drastic changes throughout Russia, during which many suffered from shock and confusion and experienced greater poverty than in the Soviet period. However, it is generally agreed that Chukotkans were among those who suffered most, and this was in large part due to the particular audacity and corruption of its governor, Aleksandr Nazarov, and the patronage system he constructed far from the scrutiny of the Kremlin. One should not give too much credit to a single figure for monopolizing all power and causing all suffering, but it is nevertheless true that many refer to the period of his tenure as a particularly dark time in Chukotkan history.

With rather poetic symmetry, the first decade of the twenty-first century marked a radical shift in local political dynamics in Chukotka, and before launching into the main subject of the 1990s, it makes sense to foreshadow what followed this "dark decade." In 1999, an election

was held for Chukotka's single seat in the federal Duma (the lower legislative house), and this seat was captured handily by one of those who are known as Russia's "oligarchs," Roman Arkadevich Abramovich. Abramovich had previously been well-known in Russia as a "Kremlin insider" and the head of one of the country's largest oil and aluminum companies, Sibneft, as well as a close associate of Boris Berezovskii, perhaps the country's most notorious oligarch.[1] The two had been in business together, and later they became deputies in the Duma together. Berezovskii resigned from the Duma in July amid controversy and by the end of 2000 was living in Europe in a kind of exile, leaving Abramovich as Russia's most visible – and most studied by the media – oligarch.[2]

One of Abramovich's first acts as Duma deputy representing Chukotka was to establish a charitable organization called *Polius Nadezhdy* (Pole of Hope). This organization immediately set about investigating, and then solving, many of the most pressing problems plaguing Chukotka's population, such as salary delays and food shortages in villages – acts of charity that in many cases were financed out of Abramovich's own pocket. A program was quickly established to send groups of children on long holidays to camps in the warm Black Sea locales of Annapa, Ivanovo, and Evpatoriya – to the delight of their parents, who felt that they would "get more vitamins" there. Abramovich also established outreach offices in every district center in Chukotka, as well as Anadyr', where any citizen could come and present any problem that needed solving; Abramovich's staff would then investigate the problem and seek a solution with a minimum of red tape. Abramovich himself made two trips to Alaska in 2000 to meet with the many representatives of state government, humanitarian aid organizations, academic institutions, and businesspeople who had been trying for years to cultivate relations with Chukotkans and were utterly exasperated by being thwarted at every turn. One of the purposes of his visits was to discuss joint Alaska–Chukotka projects in all these spheres.

When I arrived for a follow-up visit to Anadyr' in the summer of 2000, I was amazed to hear the name of Abramovich on literally everyone's lips. All of my consultees expressed a palpable sense of optimism

that had simply been nonexistent in all my previous visits, and the source of it was purely Abramovich. Rumors had already begun that this do-gooder deputy might register his candidacy for the upcoming gubernatorial election scheduled for December 2000. In spite of this optimism, hardly anyone fully trusted Abramovich. Some maintained a critical attitude toward his activities as a billionaire businessman and suspected he was interested in Chukotka for its oil and gold deposits. Others accused him of fueling the war in Chechnya for his own financial interests. One could find still worse accusations in the Russian media; many of these accusations were undoubtably false, but they did bespeak the fact that Abramovich was a controversial figure. Yet everyone I spoke to in Chukotka, without exception, said that absolutely anyone would be better than Nazarov – that they could not imagine how anyone else could be worse. They said they would vote for Abramovich if he ran, or for any other candidate opposing Nazarov. Even administration bureaucrats who in the past had never dared to breathe a word of criticism of Nazarov in my presence were now opining on aspects of his policy with which they disagreed. For the first time since I had begun my research in Chukotka in 1995, I sensed the possibility of change on the horizon. It was an intoxicating atmosphere that everyone clearly savored.

Abramovich did finally declare his candidacy for the post of governor in mid-October 2000.[3] On 24 October, the Russian federal tax police reportedly summoned Nazarov for questioning on what the Interfax news agency stated was "an entire array of evil deeds"[4] that included the illegal sale of quotas for the catch of marine bioresources, tax evasion to the tune of $20 million, and misdirection of state funds in relation to deliveries of oil products to the North between 1996 and 2000. Interfax also reported that Nazarov rented a dacha in a health complex maintained by the Russian government and paid for by various enterprises and organizations, providing Nazarov a tax-free financial windfall worth 1.5 million rubles in the year 2000 alone. Nevertheless, Nazarov denied all accusations and proceeded to declare his candidacy for governor of Chukotka on 2 November 2000.[5] But on 16 December, a week before the election, Nazarov withdrew his candidacy, handing Abramovich an easy win.

Rumors immediately circulated that Nazarov pulled out in exchange for a promise that Abramovich would appoint him his representative to the Council of the Federation *(Sovet Federatsii)*, Russia's upper legislative body, in which all elected governors in Russia automatically have a seat. Sure enough, on 18 January 2001, Chukotka's regional legislature officially approved Nazarov's appointment to the Council of the Federation. Thus Nazarov maintained a connection to Chukotka. Yet because he was far away in Moscow and out of the public eye, he was immediately forgotten, one might almost say gleefully, by a Chukotka population that now focused all of its attention on its new hope, Governor Abramovich. Whether or not Abramovich would truly pull Chukotka out of its chronic condition of crisis remained to be seen, but as countless Chukotkans said to me, *"Nadezhda umiraet poslednii"* – hope dies last.

Dramatis Personae

In the chapters that follow, I explore the experience of Chukotka's indigenous peoples in the 1990s, drawing upon a variety of sources: my daily interactions with them, my formal and informal interviews with them, things I read about them in newspapers and heard about them on radio and television, and things said about them by nonindigenous Chukotkans. I endeavor to place their experience in the wider context of Russia's changing social and political environment at the time. It is my desire to make this general Chukotkan experience as specific as possible by providing examples from the lives of individuals. However, this is a delicate matter; although much has changed in Chukotka since the departure of Nazarov as governor, given the extent to which political repression was possible in the 1990s, and may again become possible, I am reluctant to leave my consultees and their sometimes radical views too exposed in these pages.

The solution I have devised is to take the wide variety of individual experiences embodied in the consultees I worked with and concentrate them into a few representative *dramatis personae* bearing pseudonyms. Each character is fictional in the sense that there is

no single person with exactly these traits and life experiences. However, each is nonfictional in the sense that the words she or he speaks were in fact spoken by someone, and the experiences she or he shares were in fact shared with me by someone. I have endeavored to create a set of characters that more or less represent the social roles that I encountered most often among inhabitants of Anadyr', or in some cases, roles that stood out as particularly striking. Alongside these disguised figures, others will also appear under their own real names. If a person is a public figure on the regional level in Chukotka or the national level in Russia, and his or her views have been published in media sources, then I do not disguise that person's identity with a pseudonym.

One additional character also appears, not in the main text, but in the vignettes sandwiched between the chapters. This is Malina Ivanovna Kevyngevyt, a fictional Chukchi woman. I wanted to show somehow that, although the post-Soviet transformation was a shock for indigenous Chukotkans (as it was for everyone in Russia), this was not the only or even the most significant change for them. Indigenous Chukotkans, like all indigenous peoples of Russia, experienced a long series of transformations in their lives throughout the Soviet period. I created Malina and her life story in order to illustrate this. While the vignettes are written in a novelesque form, they are derived from life-history accounts related to me by consultees, and they even contain direct quotations from my notes and/or taped interviews. I have deliberately tried to retain the sometimes sentimental, romanticized tone in which the stories were related to me. My intention is that the juxtaposition of a single life against the factual material of the book will help to illuminate that material. In turn, I hope to flesh out Malina's exemplary life more fully in the reader's imagination as the material in each chapter is read.

A Note About Terminology

The term "indigenous" is used here as a catch-all translation for several Russian terms: *korennoi* ("native"), *aborigeny* ("aboriginals"), *tuzemnyi* ("indigenous"), and sometimes *mestnyi* ("local"). Nonindigenous

residents of Chukotka are most often referred to as *priezzhie*, from the verb *priezzhat'* ("to arrive"), and the gloss used here is "incomers" (cf. Schweitzer 1993). There is some slippage in these terms; *mestnyi* can also refer to a nonindigenous resident who was born in Chukotka and/or who demonstrates a clear commitment to the region and its people. "Incomer" means, most precisely, those who come with a specific purpose in mind and do not intend to stay.

There are several terms for different levels of federal territorial formations within Russia, which I render in translation as follows: territory = *krai*; province = *oblast'*; region = *okrug*; district = *raion*.

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NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

THIS BOOK USES a system for the transliteration of Russian words adapted from the Library of Congress system, with slight adjustments. This transliteration system is violated in cases of familiar words and names whose standard transliteration has already been well established in the media. For example, the name of the former president of the Russian Federation is rendered the familiar *Yeltsin*, rather than the more correct *El'tsyn*. Moreover, the Russian soft sign, which is represented in transliteration by an apostrophe (’), is generally omitted for the sake of readability, especially in the case of proper names. This has been done at the request of the publisher.

The Chukchi language, whose written form uses the Cyrillic alphabet, presents special problems. In particular is the prevalence of the hard letter *e* (often as a word initial), which appears only rarely in the Russian language. The unique spelling of many Chukchi words is therefore poorly represented – and in any case, even Cyrillic poorly represents their pronunciation.

Names of ethnic groups in Russian, upon translation to English, are pluralized according to the rules of English grammar (for

example, *koriaki* becomes in English "Koriaks," *chukchi* becomes "Chukchis," *eskimosy* becomes "Eskimos"). The singular generally has two forms, masculine and feminine (for example, *koriak/koriachka, chukcha/chukchanka, eskimos/eskimoska*). These forms are actively in use in Chukotka but are ignored here for the sake of readability.

PLATE 0.1. "Victory! 1945, 9 May": life-size mural commemorating World War II on Otke Street in Anadyr'

MAP 1.1. The Russian Federation, Showing the Location of Chukotka