Siberia is legendary: vast expanses of land, crisp cold, punishment camps, but also apparently inexhaustible natural riches and mineral resources. For some of the indigenous “Peoples of the North” who live there, reindeer herding, together with hunting and fishing, is still a core element of everyday life. The Siberia Project Group at the MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY in Halle is investigating how this has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. DR. PATTY A. GRAY and FLORIAN STAMMLER, members of the group situated within Prof. Chris Hann’s department, describe results from their analysis of Yamal and Chukotka.

In the last decade the image of Siberia in the view of the world has changed considerably. Whereas its past reputation was based on its history as a vast prison for all kinds of politically and socially undesirable persons, it has now become famous for its enormous natural resources. Covering half of the territory of what is today the Russian Federation, Siberia provides more than 80 percent of Russia’s gas, 70 percent of its oil, 60 percent of its coal, and almost all of its diamonds, as well as other valuable resources. Most of Russia’s hard currency income is obtained from the export of these resources. Siberia, therefore, is of crucial strategic importance for Russia as well as for other countries that depend on its resources. For example, Germany’s most important supplier of natural gas is Russia, and companies like Ruhrgas and BASF import gas from Siberia through joint ventures and long-term contracts lasting until 2025.

In spite of its strategic significance, Siberia’s population accounts for only 17 percent of the whole Russian Federation, and most of that population immigrated there only in the 1960s and 1970s during the course of industrialisation. The indigenous inhabitants of Siberia are marginalised today, numbering in all less than 180,000 people. In most regions of Siberia, the population is a mix of incomers from all parts of the former Soviet Union, along with a small percentage of indigenous peoples. With the ongoing industrialisation and the opening of Russia to world markets, a discourse on indigenous rights and environmental protection has developed. As a result, over the last decade Russia’s officially designated “Peoples of the North” have become the focus of
growing national and international attention. Siberia thus presents striking contrasts and unprecedented opportunities for social research, and the Siberia Project Group at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology is taking full advantage of this. The six members of the group are working comparatively in various regions of Siberia among different ethnic groups, but there are several key themes that the researchers have in common.

Primary among them is the fate of reindeer herding in the post-Soviet period. Although it might sound odd from a European perspective, reindeer herding was designated by the Soviet State as a branch of agriculture. And reindeer herding is by far the most predominant form of “agriculture” in the Russian North. Another key common theme for members of the Siberia group is the process of privatising state farms in the Russian North. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, each of Russia’s 89 regions was left to its own devices to find a way to implement Russia’s privatisation programme, which was passed down in the early 1990s in the form of presidential decrees and other federal legislation. As a result, there has been a wide variety of outcomes. Nevertheless, almost everywhere people still talk of the “state farm” even when referring to an entity that has been legally privatised, and almost everywhere people express their nostalgia for the old socialist system.

A third important common theme is land, and this is one of the most contentious issues in the Russian North, especially since it involves claims by indigenous peoples who see rights to land as an important part of self-determination. One provision for indigenous peoples in Russian federal law is the option of establishing something called an obshchina, which is meant to be a kind of family-based community engaged in primarily subsistence activities, and which may number over one hundred members. However, the law on obshchina does not once mention the word land, so it remains ambiguous as to whether these communities have the right to make claims to the very territories on which they are established.

A fourth common theme is cultural property. Property rights are not limited to tangible objects, but can also be extended to intangibles ranging from dance forms to one’s sense of entitlement to receive social welfare benefits. Land, for example, is seen by many as not only an economic good, but also as a defining characteristic of identity and a symbol of ancestral ties.

**Comparison forms a basis for the studies**

The Siberia group is situated within the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, which focuses on integration and conflict in Africa and Central Asia. Several of the researchers in Schlee’s department are interested in pastoral systems, and this provides a point of common interest with the Siberia group’s study of reindeer herding. Researchers from both departments have the opportunity to compare issues that are common to the study of pastoralism, such as spatial mobility, the use of pasturelands, and rights to property in animals. Comparison in this sphere could contribute substantially to the theoretical discourse on nomadism and pastoralism, for which data from Siberia has rarely been used.

Of course, the closest and most fruitful comparative work happens between members within the Siberia group. Six anthropologists working comparatively on Siberia in one institute is a unique situation for Siberian studies, as the rest of Russia. Many different comparisons could be made among members of the group, but here we focus on the two sites that are geographically the most distant from one another: Yamal in Western Siberia, studied by Florian Stammel, and Chukotka in the farthest northeast, studied by Patty Gray. As we have discussed our research and compared our preliminary results, we have found remarkable similarities as well as surprising differences between our field sites.

Yamal is typically considered to be the one part of Siberia where reindeer herding was preserved in its most original form. Comparisons with Gray’s research in Chukotka have made it clear that in Yamal there was, ironically, relatively less influence from Soviet institutions, although it is closer to the centre. Yamal’s indigenous peoples, the Nentsy, managed to maintain some autonomy while still being incorporated into the Soviet State. By moving back and forth among different communities, Florian Stammel worked in the course of one year among state farm brigades, private
reindeer herders, and members of an obshchina. He also managed to interview officials at different levels of the administration about political concepts for reindeer herding, legislation related to land, and resource extraction.

In addition to the classic field work method of participant observation, Stammler gathered data for his PhD dissertation using a questionnaire that inquired mainly about herders’ perceptions of property issues with regard to land and animals. Analysis of the data shows that property in private reindeer is crucial for the Nentsy. They managed to retain private ownership in Soviet times, and they maintain that reindeer must remain the personal property of the respective household head, insisting that they will never give it up in the future. This uninterrupted experience in herding private reindeer served as a favourable starting point for Yamal herders as the transition to a market-oriented economy began. This may partly explain why reindeer herding in this region is doing rather well since the collapse of the Soviet Union – Yamal currently boasts the world’s largest herd of domestic reindeer.

Herders’ opinions about the other important object of research – land ownership – seem surprising given their preference for private herds: they feel that the pastures themselves should be officially common property. This makes Yamal a particularly interesting case to examine in light of the “tragedy of the commons” idea, which holds that common lands will always suffer degradation without an outside regulatory mechanism to keep people from overusing them. According to the herders, grazing private herds on common pastures does not mean that everybody will use all of the pastures indiscriminately, as in an “open access” regime. On the contrary, the nomads know all the migration routes and patterns of all their neighbours and they cooperate to use the pastures in a flexible way.

In stark contrast stands Chukotka, located in the far northeast of Russia, facing Alaska across the Bering Strait. Chukotka is perhaps best known for its sea mammal cultures on the Chukchi Peninsula, but these represent only a tiny minority of Chukotka’s indigenous population. All of Patty Gray’s research takes place in two districts in the western tundra region of Chukotka, where the bulk of the indigenous people live and where reindeer herding predominates. Gray is particularly interested in the political dynamics between the regional capital, district centres, and the far-flung villages. Consequently, she is the one member of the group who has probably spent the least time in the tundra with reindeer herders, since she is often in the halls of power chasing down policies that can affect reindeer herders for good or ill.

**Breakdowns in infrastructure**

Over the years, Gray’s research has turned up an increasingly bleak picture in Chukotka, especially in reindeer herding villages. Chukotka’s economy has been in a shambles since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this has caused serious breakdowns in infrastructure. In the past, there were regular plane and helicopter flights that connected every point within Chukotka, but today many residents describe themselves as “hostages”, unable to move about the region in ways they took for granted in the past. State farms were “privatised” in the early 1990s and subsequently began to collapse. All of this has had an extremely negative effect on reindeer herding, and one symptom is a sharp drop in the reindeer headcount. There has also been an increase in mortality among the native population, with a higher share of suicides, homicides, and alcohol-related deaths. The reindeer herders Gray interviewed described the shock they felt when the state farm stopped paying their salaries and no longer made regular deliveries of supplies to their tundra camps.

In 2000, Gray visited an obshchina in Chukotka’s farthest western district. This was one of only three obshchinas that had been officially registered in Chukotka in the 1990s – which is in contrast to other regions of Siberia, where obshchinas have been more common and have received some degree of support from regional administrations. Chukotka’s administration was resistant to the idea of allowing so much local autonomy to village residents, and rejected attempts by the local legislature to pass a law regarding obshchina that would have supported existing obshchinas and encouraged the creation of new ones. This meant that Chukotka’s three obshchinas were left to struggle on their own without support from the regional administration. Thus, the obshchina that Gray visited hardly knew that it was an obshchina – that is, when she conducted a house-to-house survey of residents, she found that they were unaware that their little community had been officially registered as an obshchina.

**Vast differences in reindeer stocks**

In making comparisons between Yamal and Chukotka, the most fundamental difference is that in Yamal there are too many reindeer, whereas in Chukotka they have all but disappeared. In Yamal, the herds have been growing steadily for 20 years, from 363,000 head in 1980 to 523,000 in 2001. In Chukotka, the total reindeer headcount fell from 540,000 in 1980 to 80,000 in 2001, representing the worst case scenario in all of Russia. One explanation for such an obvious difference might be simply our general observation that Soviet interference in Chukotkan reindeer herding seems to have been more disruptive than in Yamal. Since Chukotkan reindeer herding was so
thoroughly incorporated into the Soviet system of central planning, the collapse of reindeer herding as well. In Yamal, where Soviet influence was less thorough, a way could be found to continue with after the breakdown of the state system.

The difference in the degree of Soviet influence is prevalent even in something as basic as the pattern of herd migration routes. In both regions, migration routes were pre-scribed by Soviet planners. However, in Yamal, the prescribed routes were similar to the historical Nentsy pattern of long north-south migrations, while in Chukotka the state farm territories were more circumscribed and arbitrarily defined, oriented around centrally-placed villages.

The analysis of our data on property relations shows that these differences matter even in the present. After privatisation, one might assume that the herders simply came to own their deer privately, but this is not the case. In both Yamal and Chukotka, large municipal enterprises remain in control of a large portion of the reindeer herds. However, in Yamal, the share of privately-owned deer never fell below 30 percent throughout the Soviet period, whereas in Chukotka, collectivisation was so thorough that it fell to 5 percent. During perestroika, the share of privately-owned deer in Yamal grew and is now about 70 percent, whereas in Chukotka it has stayed at the same low level. In both regions, privately owned deer are typically mixed with collective herds, and thus property in deer is typically mixed with collective herds, and thus property in deer is something as basic as the pattern of herd migration routes. In both regions, migration routes were prescribed by Soviet planners. However, in Yamal, the prescribed routes were similar to the historical Nentsy pattern of long north-south migrations, while in Chukotka the state farm territories were more circumscribed and arbitrarily defined, oriented around centrally-placed villages.

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