

# Siberia Caught between **Collapse** and Continuity

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.

Almost 7,000 kilometres separate the regions where Stammler and Gray carry out comparative research into property issues, economic development, social change, and political structures.



Like their ancestors before them, Nentsy reindeer herders on the Yamal peninsula move nomadically across the countryside. They live not just with, but also from the reindeer, which provide meat and also skins for clothing and tents.

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 there 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 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 definer of identity and a symbol of ancestral ties.

**COMPARISON FORMS  
A BASIS FOR THE STUDIES**

The Siberia group is situated within Prof. Chris Hann’s department, which is currently focussing on the study of changing property relations across Eurasia. Although it would be very easy to make Siberia seem exotic, members of the Siberia group are far more interested in showing how their research demonstrates the commonalities that exist across the former socialist countries. In spite of its seeming remoteness, Siberia was quite as thoroughly integrated into the Soviet State as the rest of Russia. Many of the processes that occurred in the Soviet satellite countries also occurred here, and many institutions are remarkably similar.

For example, the process of consolidating state farms in Siberia, which involved closing down villages and relocating their residents, is similar to what happened in East Germany, as we have learned from the research of fellow institute colleague John Eidson in Saxony. Siberia is just one of many localities struggling to cope with its socialist heritage, and comparing it with the rest of Eastern Europe provides a fuller picture of the nature of socialism and its legacy.

The Siberia group has found links in another department of the institute, headed by Günther Schlee, which focuses on integration and

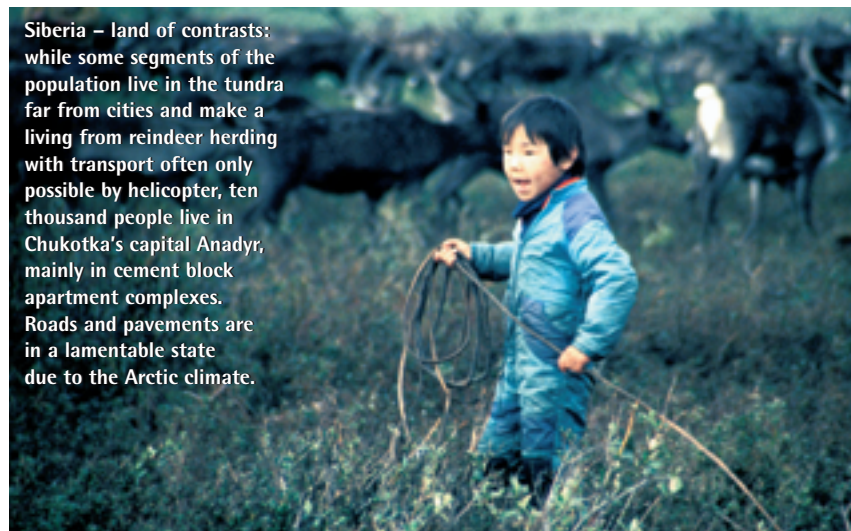
conflict in Africa and Central Asia. Several of the researchers in Schlee’s department are interested in pastoral systems, and this provides a point of common interest with the Siberia group’s study of reindeer herding. Researchers from both departments have the opportunity to compare issues that are 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, at least outside 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 Stammler, 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 Stammler worked in the course of one year among state farm brigades, private



Siberia – land of contrasts: while some segments of the population live in the tundra far from cities and make a living from reindeer herding with transport often only possible by helicopter, ten thousand people live in Chukotka’s capital Anadyr, mainly in cement block apartment complexes. Roads and pavements are in a lamentable state due to the Arctic climate.



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 and the evolving market economy. Analysis of the data shows that property in private reindeer is crucial for the Nentsy. They managed to re-

tain 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 mi-

gration 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 be-

tween 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 so often in the halls of power chasing down the people who make and implement policies that can affect reindeer herders for good or ill.

#### BREAKDOWNS IN INFRASTRUCTURE

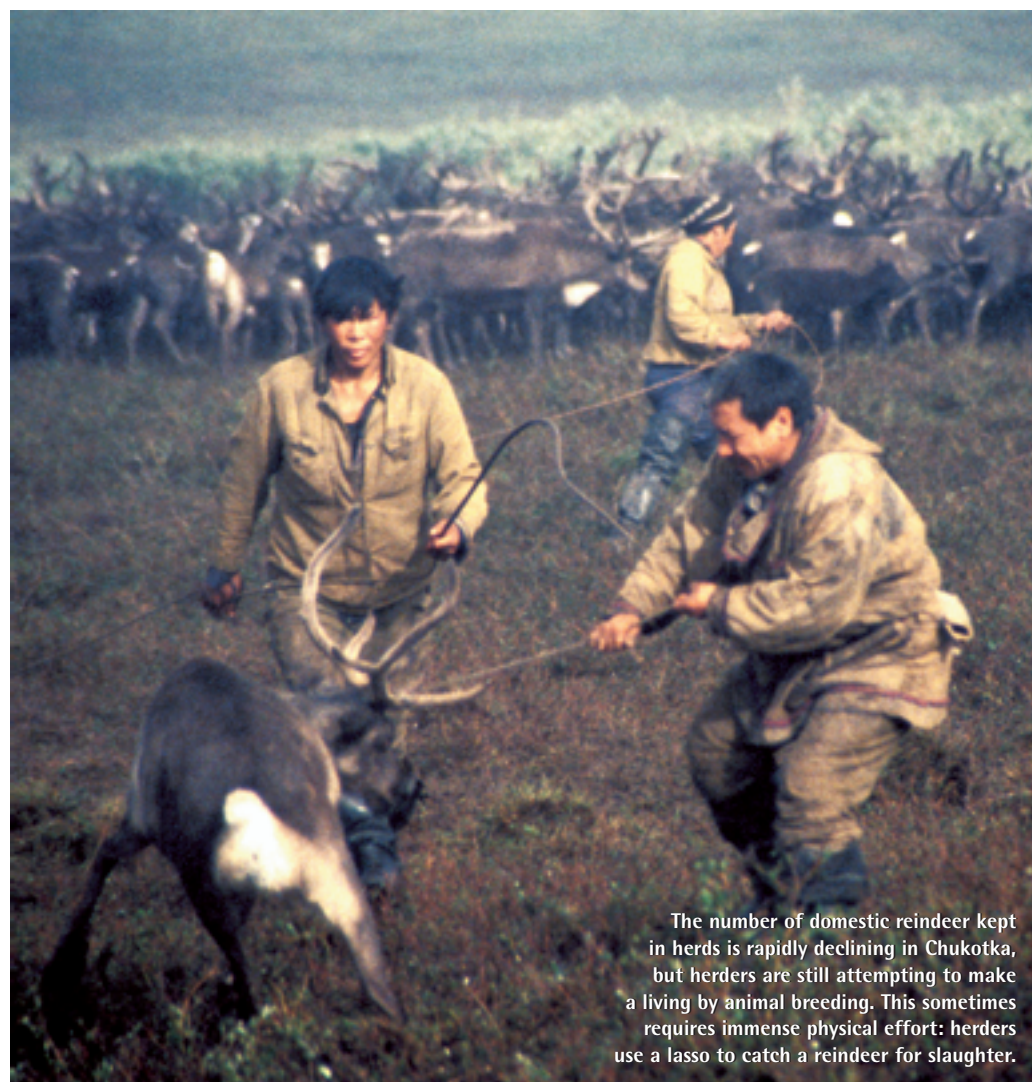
Over the years, Gray's research has turned up an increasingly bleak picture in Chukotka, especially in reindeer herding villages. Chukotka's economy has been in a shambles since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and this has caused serious breakdowns in infrastructure. In the past, there were regular 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 obshchiny that had been established

in Chukotka in the 1990s – which is in contrast to other regions of Siberia, where obshchiny 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 obshchiny that would have supported existing obshchiny and encouraged the creation of new ones. This meant that Chukotka's three obshchiny 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 520,000 in 2001. In Chukotka, the total deer 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



The number of domestic reindeer kept in herds is rapidly declining in Chukotka, but herders are still attempting to make a living by animal breeding. This sometimes requires immense physical effort: herders use a lasso to catch a reindeer for slaughter.



In Yamal, however, reindeer herding is developing positively; meat processed in slaughterhouses supplies industrial companies whose gas drilling camps dominate huge swathes of countryside.

thoroughly incorporated into the Soviet system of central planning, the collapse of this structure meant 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 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.

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 often “fuzzy”. In Yamal, only reindeer herders and zoo technicians specially trained in herd manage-

ment and veterinary care know who owns which deer. Animals are often transferred surreptitiously from collective into private property, with the state earmarks simply being replaced by those of a reindeer owner, resulting in some state farm employees in Yamal commenting cynically that privately owned deer “amazingly never die”. In Chukotka, it is more likely to be the opposite – the comment is that only private deer are lost or die.

For the purposes of building a market economy, the differences in the size of herds matter greatly, for how can a commercial reindeer industry be built without deer? In Ya-

mal, where reindeer stocks are growing, commercialisation of reindeer herding has already begun to develop. For example, the sale of reindeer antler, for which there is much demand in China and Korea, began in the mid-1990s. Private enterprises were formed for this purpose, and most of these were run by natives who formerly worked in the state farms. There have been some experiments in local processing and marketing of reindeer products, such as locally produced vodka with antler extract added, reindeer sausage, and even baby food.

A very different picture is found in Chukotka. Although there was enthu-

siasm for the antler business in the early 1990s, it was so poorly managed that it was not profitable and people gave it up. Reindeer herding is virtually not at all commercialised, because there is almost no market – problems with transportation inhibit marketing outside the region, and there are no industrial cities nearby to consume meat. Moreover, a rent-seeking regional administration quashed the few attempts that were made at true private enterprise.

We were surprised to find that the role of industry may be an instrumental factor in these differences between Yamal and Chukotka. Since Yamal is the number one gas-pro-

ducing region in Russia and the number two oil-producing region, the regional government is rich from taxes and profit-sharing deals with industry. Industry finds it to their advantage to maintain good business relations with herders. They get meat for their workers at a better price, and hope to win favour from herders in case there are disputes over environmental damage – which does happen, and this will probably become a more contentious issue in the future.

In Chukotka, industry is poorly developed. What Chukotka mainly has is gold, but mines have so far been unprofitable. When gold mines have been developed, they have tended to take over reindeer pastures and push herders off. Industry has not enriched the Chukotka administration, unlike Yamal – in fact, Chukotka has been Russia’s number one debtor region, and last year the regional government was declared bankrupt. However, Chukotka now has a new governor who is actively seeking to develop both gold and oil deposits in Chukotka. If he succeeds, we will be able to test this hypothesis about the benefits of healthy industry for reindeer herders.

To sum up, when all these points are compared, one sees a general trend of continuity in Yamal, but one of disruption in Chukotka. We are working towards a better understanding of these differences and finding explanations for them. In general, when one considers issues such as the role of industry, how state farms were reorganised, and how property was distributed, Siberia represents very well both the socialist condition and the post-socialist transformation. Comparative

research here not only helps us have a fuller picture of the North, but also shows the range of variation typical of post-socialist situations across Eurasia. In that sense, our research encourages comparisons not just with Siberia as a whole, but between specific locations within Siberia and specific locations in Eastern Europe, and has lessons for all societies undergoing a transformation away from socialism. ●



Dog sledge race day in the Anadyr area: inhabitants welcome the competitors with drums as they approach the finish line.



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FLORIAN STÄMMLER (b. 1973) is a Ph.D. candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. He completed his M.A. studies in 2000 at the University of Cologne with a dissertation on the survival strategies of reindeer herders in West Siberia. For his dissertation in Halle, Stämmler carried out research in Yamal, NorthWest Siberia, in 2000 and 2001. He is studying the property issues of reindeer herders, the development of market economy in the Russian North and the interrelation between industrialisation and original forms of resource extraction. His theoretical interests include nomadism, studies on radical changes in the market economy, and cultural change.