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Decollectivization in Rural Russia: A Perspective from the Far North

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The project I carried out as part of the Siberia project group at MPISA was concerned with how the decollectivization of state farms in Russia and attendant changes in property relations were affecting the lived experience of rural residents. I conducted the bulk of my field research in reindeer-herding villages of Chukotka, a region in the Russian Far North. I also made an exploratory comparative field trip in 2001 to a farming village in the Republic of Mari El, in the Volga region. Scholars typically treat the Russian Far North and the Volga region as entirely separate frames of reference, but I wanted to demonstrate the similarities the two regions shared on the basis of their having experienced processes of collectivization and decollectivization that were remarkably uniform throughout Russia (2003a).

Chukotka has two main economic activities that are considered 'agricultural': sea mammal hunting and reindeer herding. I focused on the latter. Reindeer are herded almost exclusively by indigenous inhabitants of Chukotka, who represent several distinct groups, primarily Chukchis, Chuvans, and Evens. Reindeer herding in Chukotka was progressively collectivized beginning in the late 1920s, until by the 1960s myriad individually owned and managed reindeer herds had been consolidated into twenty-eight *sovkhozy*, or state agricultural enterprises. Reindeer herders were no longer owners of the reindeer, nor were they managers; rather, they were salaried state employees who herded their reindeer according to a plan devised by 'experts' and handed down to them through their *sovkhov* director (2003b). Individual herders and their family members might own a few head of reindeer; these were typically earned as bonuses from the *sovkhov* or won as prizes in various socialist competitions, and they could be gifted and passed on as inheritance. In contrast to other parts of the Russian North, such as Yamal in western Siberia, in Chukotka such privately owned reindeer composed only a small proportion of the herds – about 5% throughout the late Soviet period (Gray and Stammler 2002a, 2002b). Because these reindeer were pastured collectively with *sovkhov* herds, many of their owners were

confused over how many reindeer actually belonged to them (forthcoming a).

Thus, by the time of the collapse of state socialism in Russia in 1989, an entire generation of reindeer herders had come of age in Chukotka taking socialist property relations for granted. They did not aspire to become independent owners of reindeer herds; their aspirations were within the given system – to attend a technical college and become trained as a veterinary specialist, or to work up to becoming the *brigadir* of a herd. Few indigenous Chukotkans ever broke into the management tier of the *sovkhos* system, which included the director and his deputy, the economist, the accountant, and various other specialists (2003b). Herders themselves, however, were relatively well paid. Not only did they have buying power in their villages, but they were often granted economic privileges – for example, they might be given an option to purchase scarce goods such as furniture, or, later in the Soviet period, televisions. Although they worked in the tundra, they had state-provided apartments in the village to which they returned as a home base. School-age children and other family members usually spent most of the year in these settlements.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic privatization programs that followed in its wake came as a shock to all state farm employees in Chukotka. Ideally, it meant that reindeer herders could now become owners of their own herds, and some indigenous activists hailed the change as a return to the property relations indigenous people had known before Soviet collectivization. In practice, it meant that state subsidy of reindeer herding abruptly stopped, and with it the regular salary that reindeer herders had taken for granted their entire lives. Very few herders privatized their own reindeer herds, and of those who did, virtually all lost their herds within a few years.

Decollectivization of *sovkhozy* proceeded in Chukotka much as it did elsewhere in Russia: gatherings of *sovkhos* employees were convened, a prescribed set of optional property forms was considered, and a decision was taken by a vote of the employees. In most cases, the vote was to allow the *sovkhos* to remain essentially unchanged and simply reregister it with a new name. In the case of one village I studied, the word *sovkhos* was even retained in the official name of the enterprise. The one thing not controlled by a vote of the employees was the process of stripping the *sovkhos* of all assets and functions that were not immediately relevant to its economic purpose of reindeer meat production. The *sovkhos* director had once presided over a miniature empire in the village, being responsible for utilities (water, heat, electricity), schools, medical facilities, stores and warehouses, the village cafeteria, the library and ‘house of culture’, and so forth. One by one these functions were divorced from the *sovkhos* and turned over to other administrative agencies. The remaining ‘rump *sovkhos*’ was then further stripped of eco-

conomic assets, in an unplanned way, as some employees opted to leave its employ altogether. Each employee was entitled to take out a share commensurate with the number of years worked and salary level achieved. A pattern emerged in which non-indigenous village residents – usually those working at the managerial level of the *sovkhov* – took out their shares in the form of assets such as heavy machinery (tractors). They then sold those assets for cash and used the cash to assist in their outmigration from the region.

Generally, the *sovkhovy* that remained intact were the most successful in the long run, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that the regional administration looked most favourably upon this form and provided it with the most assistance. Nevertheless, in several cases a small group of reindeer herders, often relatives, opted to break off from the main *sovkhov* and register themselves as an independent, collective enterprise. By the mid-1990s, what had previously appeared on the books as 28 consolidated *sovkhovy* now appeared as 57 small, scattered enterprises (2003b). After breaking away, these small enterprises were immediately faced with the problem of how to attend to basic needs that had always been provided by the *sovkhov* – such as supplying themselves with food and other necessities and transporting meat for sale to markets. They also had to pay themselves a salary out of their own proceeds; given the difficulties of accessing markets, this meant in practice that they received no salary whatsoever.

I observed two different outcomes of such attempts at independence in the two villages where I conducted fieldwork. In one case, the independent herding operation simply gave up after about a year and rejoined the rump *sovkhov*. The leader of that venture, a Chukchi man, was later elected director of the entire *sovkhov*. While he enjoyed personal upward mobility, his employees remained, up to the end of my project period (December 2002), without any cash salary, and many were in debt to the *sovkhov* for foodstuffs taken on credit (2003a). In the other village, several family groups had banded together and hired a Russian manager to handle their finances and solve the problems of accessing markets. Within a couple of years, the manager embezzled these families' funds and fled from Chukotka (forthcoming b). These two scenarios were typical of the fates of reindeer herders who attempted to venture away from the safety of the *sovkhov*.

Toward the end of the 1990s, two significant and somewhat opposed developments emerged. First, the Chukotka regional department of agriculture developed a plan to 'municipalize' reindeer herding in the region, meaning that at least 51% of the property of each enterprise – from the large *sovkhovy* to the smaller, independent enterprises – would be signed over to one of Chukotka's eight municipal districts. This was to be done 'voluntarily', although reports abounded of reindeer herders being strong-armed into signing over their assets with the warning that

if they refused, they would be completely cut off from support and assistance. Although some officials argued that this new arrangement would benefit the reindeer herders, the impetus seemed to stem primarily from the (now former) governor's obsessive aspiration to maintain all political and economic activity in the region under his tight control. The head of the department of agriculture himself told me in an interview that people needed to get things back to the way they were in Soviet times, when a single director controlled the *sovkhos* (and was in turn more easily controlled by higher-ups). By the end of municipalization, the figure of 57 independent enterprises that had appeared during decollectivization had again been brought down to the Soviet-era figure of 28 registered on paper. The others had either dissolved, merged into the larger *sovkhozy*, or been written out of existence administratively (while their actual fate remained ambiguous).

Second, a quite different development arose when Russian federal law made available only to indigenous inhabitants an alternative set of property relations associated with an organizational form called an *obshchina* ('community'). *Obshchiny*, in combination with existing regulations on long-term leasing of land, allowed indigenous reindeer herders theoretically to opt out of the municipalization scheme and remain entitled to governmental support. *Obshchiny* had actually been successfully established all across the Russian North since 1992, when the Sakha Republic set a precedent by issuing a local law about them; but of the three attempts in Chukotka to establish *obshchiny* that I know of, all met with resistance from the regional administration and were effectively disabled (2001). A federal law on *obshchiny* passed in 2000 opened up new opportunities for Chukotkans to experiment with this form. Although it still faced administrative resistance, by the end of my project an 'obshchina movement' seemed to be gaining ground.

The common theme running through my research in Chukotka was that increasing inequality was tied not only to changing property relations but also to changing regional politics, which in turn were tied to the changing political economy of Russia (2000). One unfortunate conclusion that emerged was that privatization and democratization were anything but liberating for the rural residents of Chukotka.