

CONTRAILS OF GLOBALIZATION AND THE VIEW FROM THE GROUND: AN ESSAY ON ISOLATION IN EAST-CENTRAL SIBERIA¹

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Abstract: This paper examines the conditions behind the tragic situation of isolation in remote rural settlements of post-Soviet Siberia. Ethnography, archival research, and a literature review are used to show how the landscape itself poses formidable impediments to bettering the lives of indigenous Evenkis living in one northern district of Krasnoyarsk Kray. Over one or two generations, traditional Evenki systems of mobility were reconfigured according to mechanized vehicles, centralized settlements, and a heavy reliance on non-local goods. The fragility of the Soviet system for operating northern settlements can be taken as a general warning to other sub-Arctic and Arctic communities in the circumpolar North.

In 2003, indigenous Siberian peoples living in remote villages and settlements have little or no access to means of travel and subsequently are suffering from a variety of problems directly associated with isolation. The remains of Soviet-era settlements and their requisite infrastructures are material reminders of a built environment that has failed to adapt to the conditions of market capitalism and are poorly suited to provide for the needs of remotely located rural peoples in the post-Soviet era. These settlements were designed to function utilizing the redistributive inputs of fuel and subsidies associated with Soviet socialism and now fail to work in their absence. Soviet settlements in rural Siberia are de-localized (Pelto, 1973) technological systems, now precariously situated because of their dependence upon transfer payments, non-monetary subsidies, and centralized bureaucracies that no longer exist. The post-Soviet landscape is littered with a crippled industrial manufacturing infrastructure, confounding the possibility for rural peoples to develop healthy communities.

This paper explores the dramatic resilience of Soviet Siberia's built environments and landscapes by presenting a history organized around mobility, where travel—and the inability to travel—is taken as a key experience for both indigenous northerners and newcomers. Through field work, archival research, and literature review, it is shown how features of the Soviet landscape endure into the early years of the 21st century as dysfunctional artifacts. I argue that the current predicament of de-mobilization and isolation in remote villages of central Siberia is a result of enduring dysfunctional landscapes and the difficulty of negotiating mobility within

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Fig. 1. General location map of the Evenki Autonomous Okrug.

these landscapes. Although my research is specific to the Evenki Autonomous Okrug (district) (Fig. 1) in central Siberia (hereafter referred to as Evenkia or EAO), I will draw on examples from other areas of the Russian North and the circumpolar Arctic, all of which have extensive rural areas and which suffer not only from being geographic marginality but also tend to be theoretically marginalized in mainstream discourses on globalization.

My discussion focuses on the history of travel and mobility in the experience of indigenous Evenkis in Evenkia,² with primary reference to the district administrative center of Tura and one of the small settlements of the district, known as Ekonda.

²Early 20th century literature refers to the Evenki peoples (among others) as “Tungus” and describes them as hunters and reindeer herders of the taiga. Tungus, however, is not an ethnonym and is regarded by most Evenkis as a pejorative name. I only use the word here in reference to historical usage.

Although these two places make easy points of reference, I also consider the places in-between as equally important. In fact, it is the places in-between that normally elude totalizing academic discourses, and it is against the facility and convenience of such discourses that I attempt to frame this work. I provide an ethnohistorical study that privileges travel and mobility³ over stability and immutable structures, illuminating both the settlements and the forest (*les*) to comprise the geographic, social, and historical landscape of this study. I use specific examples from Ilimpii Rayon (county), the northernmost of three rayons in Evenkia.⁴ After establishing this history I discuss my ideas about the ongoing relevance of de-mobilization and dysfunction in the circum-polar North. Finally, drawing on a more general theoretical discourse on globalization I will situate my own research and propose a space that may be useful for others trying to represent remote arctic and sub-arctic places.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE EVENKI SYSTEM OF PATHS PRIOR TO THE SOVIET ERA

This section provides a brief and general introduction to the history of Evenki peoples of east-central Siberia, framed through the metaphor of mobility, one of the predominant ways that Evenkis experience and understand their world. Mobility works as a meaningful focus to study Evenki histories because their traditional economies were centered around the seasonal cycle of reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing. Reindeer, sleighs, and tents are core symbols of Evenki identity and the idea of traveling through the taiga is as meaningful to Evenkis in urban centers as it is for those living in settlements and reindeer camps.

Evenki form one of the many indigenous minority groups in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Today they live in many places throughout European and Asiatic Russia, although before the 20th century their traditional homelands were generally located between the Yenisey River and the Pacific Ocean. Prior to colonization and later Soviet modernization/industrialization, Evenkis were primarily engaged in more or less nomadic reindeer-herding economies. After generations upon generations of travel, their experience of the world came to be interwoven with their own paths of history marked along both familiar and unknown trails and routes.

In creating this ethnography around travel as both an experience and metaphor, I have appropriated an idea from the work of Sergei Mikhailovich Shirokogoroff—a Russian ethnographer working in the Baikal area of central Siberia at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. I am particularly interested in his characterization of the patterns of mobility of the Tungus, something he has called a “system of paths.” In his book *Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* (1935, p. 87), he wrote that:

³In northern Canada, “the bush” is often used as shorthand for the location of a broad range of activities and identity markers. In Siberia, the Russian words used most commonly by Evenkis to refer to the site of many of their activities is taiga [*taiga*] or forest [*les*].

⁴Traditional homelands of Evenki-speaking peoples include much of Central and East Siberia, as well as the Russian Far East. Although clan names are rarely used to distinguish individual groups in the 21st century (in fact, most Evenkis I have met have no idea what clan their ancestors belonged to), Evenkis continue to make reference to geographic locales (such as Ilimpii) to differentiate themselves from others.

In accordance with the acquired knowledge of the primary milieu the Tungus have worked out their system of migrations, also imposed by their chief industry of hunting and reindeer breeding. . . . We have seen that the Tungus have created a system of communications, the paths. Indeed, in the eyes of the people accustomed to the railways and artificially erected high-roads with bridges [and] dams, the system of Tungus paths would not seem to be a technical achievement, a cultural adaptation. However, it is not so when one looks more closely at the phenomenon.

The intention behind this passage seems to be to expel Eurocentric notions of superiority by showing the logic and art of the Tungus economy—in which mobility was central. In my own work I have used this idea of a system of paths to describe the subject of an ethnography of travel.⁵ My adaptation of Shirokogoroff's "Tungus system of paths" makes a useful metaphor that recognizes the existence of very different understandings of territory, place, and practice. Paths chosen by Evenkis existed in contrast to those of the Russian invaders, traders, and missionaries as well as other indigenous Siberians. In addition, their travel practices have converged and diverged over time with these other peoples. While not all Evenkis have the same experiences of travel, the ways in which they travel and understand their own mobile positions tend to be interwoven in issues of community, history, and identity and are more consistent in relation to one another than they are with other non-Evenki people. By framing it in this way, my argument is meant to ensure that the system of paths resists being de-historicized and typified as a complex of unchanging cultural practices over time that are neither immutable nor rigid. The danger of this has recently been outlined in Dipesh Chakrabarty's book *Provincializing Europe*, where he notes that the "historicist or ethnographic mode of viewing" tends to "convert objects, institutions, and practices with which we have lived relationships into relics of other times" (Urry, 2000, p. 243). By framing this caveat through the metaphor of a menacing anachronism, Chakrabarty reminds us that Indian peasants, like nomadic reindeer herders, are always in danger of appearing as though relics from another time.

By focusing on mobility and the Evenkis' system of paths this work is able to show how Evenki peoples' autonomy over such a system was seriously eroded in the latter half of the 20th century. Mobility, as such, becomes a key tool in historical understanding. The importance of travel to the constitution of social life is noted by John Urry, who wrote that in the mobility of people, ideas, and objects "social life and cultural identity are recursively formed and reformed" (Urry, 2000, p. 49). Urry's point is to move attention away from the rigidity of the center. Zigmunt Bauman (1998) also explored the idea of mobility and used it as a core idiom for describing a process of globalization. "What appears as globalization for some," noted Bauman, "means localization for others" (Bauman, 1998, p. 2). This formulation works well in the context of central Siberia, as rural Evenkis might be considered "locals" who once might have been more accurately classified as globals. What is interesting (and confounding) is just how they came to be localized and what it is that prevents them from doing very much about it.

⁵An approach to ethnography that focuses on travel is certainly not novel. Most recently Petra Rethmann has used this to great effect in her book *Tundra Passages* (2000).

As this paper will show, mobility for Evenkis, until the 1990s, commonly played an important role in the formulation of identities. "Today's existence," continued Bauman "is stretched along the hierarchy of the global and the local, with global freedom of movement signaling social promotion, advancement and success, and immobility exuding the repugnant odor of defeat, failed life and being left behind" (Bauman 1998, p. 121). Although he situates this hierarchy as a novel development at the end of the 20th century, it sounds remarkably similar to the way that early Soviet bureaucrats understood life in the central Siberian taiga. Whereas Bauman located mobility and immobility (global and local) within his globalism heuristic, John Urry allocated to mobility a much more important role; he found that the metaphor works to place attention on networks and borders and serves as a contemporary challenge to the very practice of sociology (Urry, 2000, p. 48).⁶ This focus on peripheries, border crossings, and connections resonates with force in the context of northern industrialization and the introduction of mechanized travel. The rise of mechanized mobility in central Siberia cannot be understood as a simple case of socialist development policies. Since the late 1920s Evenkis participated, to varying degrees and on multiple levels, in the creation of a system of paths that worked within the logic of the Soviet state. It is the artifacts of this very system that, years after the collapse of the socialist state, no longer function and pose serious impediments to Evenkis' mobility in the 21st century. The contemporary Evenki system of paths is characteristically heterogeneous but marked by a lack of mobility in comparison with many other nationalities in Russia. On a global scale, rural Evenkis appear to be marginalized locals, excluded from transnational flows of ideas, objects, and people.

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF MOBILITY IN CENTRAL SIBERIA

Prior to the arrival of mechanized vehicles, mobility choices for the Ilimpii Evenkis, in Central Siberia, were partially governed by the range of economic possibilities held in the seasonal round. As is common throughout the sub-Arctic, great seasonal variations limit the sorts of activity that can occur at any given time. Prior to the arrival of the Russians, who traveled principally by river, the primary mode of travel in east-central Siberia was either on foot or with the aid of reindeer. The Russian ethnographer Glafira Vasilevich (1969) made reference to a range of travel practices among the Evenkis which coincided with the number of reindeer owned. The Evenkis' mixed, forest-based economies generally necessitated a degree of flexible mobility. For those breeding reindeer there was a constant need to travel to new pastures. Within the realm of reindeer breeding there existed different needs as well, which were especially dependent on the size of the herd. It seems that the majority of Evenkis raised reindeer herds to enhance their mobility and to provide an emergency food source. Despite this being the most common form of reindeer husbandry, some Evenkis raised larger herds of deer for meat production. The accumulation of wealth in the form of reindeer engendered stratified social relations. Smaller herds of reindeer were composed of enough animals to meet the transport needs of the family. Larger herds, however, provided for user networks that extended beyond the families'

⁶Ann-Fienup Riordan (1994), several years earlier in her ethnography of Yup'ik Eskimo cosmology, termed this "boundaries and passages."

needs. This meant that “surplus” deer could be “rented” out, given as gifts, lent, and (though rarely) sold.⁷

Evenkis who had no deer (literally, deerless: *bezolen'ye*) were considered impoverished by the Russian colonizers as well as in Russian and Soviet ethnographies. Vasilevich wrote that

Evenki reindeer impoverishment [*maloolennost'*] in the former Turukhansk region . . . was isolated in a particular group of Evenkis on lake Chirinda. A. Chekanov and F. Miller in the 19thC. with difficulty found reindeer among the Evenki of the upper Vilyuy. This last group, occupied with fishing, were singled out from their group who were nomadizing with their reindeer. (Vasilevich, 1969, p. 52, footnote)

If reindeerlessness was necessarily a condition of poverty in pre-colonial times, it is clear that the accumulation of wealth came to be associated with the size of reindeer herds, especially in the Soviet era when census-takers took note not only of people and their clan/tribe affiliations but also the number of deer that they owned. Soviet ethnographers and ideologues, in an effort to apply social class analysis to the indigenous peoples, read this situation as one of exploitation. The wealthy herd owner was thought to control the labor potential of impoverished Evenkis through debt slavery. Based on questionable estimations of herd size and ownership it was later calculated who were the wealthy oppressors, or *kulaks*, and who were the oppressed poor.⁸

The variety of economic pursuits within the taiga environment resulted in an equal variety of travel practices.

Permanent tracks in the taiga were only to be found at the approaches to the trading points. Migrations were always in the direction of new places. Summer tracks usually passed over watersheds and winter tracks along rivers, through the tundra, only deviating in the case of mountain passes. (Vasilevich and Smolyak, 1964, p. 630)

The mobility of Ilimpii Evenkis was not simply a function of their economy; there were numerous factors that shaped the ways in which they traveled through east-central Siberia. Using archival documents associated with expeditions, trading posts, and churches, ethnographers have described the Ilimpii taiga as a tremendously active and changing landscape. Shirokogoroff suggests that for the Tungus of Trans-Baykalia, human-animal relations “in taiga life compel the Tungus, first of all, to know every valley thoroughly, and also to know which animals inhabit it. He must know where he may travel without annoying other animals, just as he does in reference to other ethnical groups” (Shirokogoroff, 1929, p. 43). One type of movement in the colonial period, described by Vladilen A. Tugolukov (1985), is based on both reindeer and pedestrian mobility. Although some of the reasons for migrations and diasporas remain obscure, at least some of the most common ones are known. Vasilevich wrote

⁷David G. Anderson (2002b, p. 143) has referred to this as “lucrative mobility.”

⁸As the intensity of Soviet industrialization in the north increased in the 1960s and 1970s, the wealth of state farms was directly linked to the size of reindeer herds. Rather than democratizing herd ownership, state planners consolidated herds and re-located power to centralized bureaucracies.

that at the end of the 19th century, Evenkis living in remote regions of the Lower and Podkamennaya Tunguskas remained relatively unknown to the Russians, whose expeditions at the beginning of the 20th century had not yet penetrated deeply into Evenki territory: “There had been no meeting with Evenkis in the upper parts of the Podkamennaya and Nizhnyaya Tunguskas and the region between them” (Vasilevich, 1969, p. 32). This anonymity, however, is not equivalent to ignorance. Indeed, such remotely located Evenkis, because of pre-established indigenous trade routes, would have been well aware of the Europeans who had been in the area for over two hundred years.

While the Russians generally stuck to the navigable river systems, Evenkis had the knowledge and technological skills to efficiently travel across the taiga. The forest was, without a doubt, the realm of Evenkis. The seeming isolation of remotely located Evenkis was, in part, a strategy of avoidance. Although the Tsar’s tribute collectors had methods of ensuring that yearly dues of pelts were paid, their spheres of influence must have been highly limited.⁹ The winter forts along the rivers were not, after all, the only points to acquire essential foods like flour and tea and equipment like rifle shells and canvas. Warfare and violent conflict were also reasons for migrations of Evenkis in east-central Siberia.¹⁰ Nonetheless, internecine wars that occurred in east-central Siberia remain unclear markers of territoriality due to frequent migrations of people. Rather than imagining stable geographies of territorial conflict, the landscape is better understood in the context of shifting regimes of migration and travel. Tugolukov observed, for example, an insurrection by local Evenkis in Yessey in the winter of 1682–1683. After the people in the fort were killed, the majority of the Yessey Tungus moved (nomadized away [*otkochevali*]) to the North and the East (Tugolukov, 1985, p. 177). This reflects conditions whereby territorial allegiances were less than stable and Evenkis were able to move with relative freedom to other places.

Despite resistance and avoidance strategies, the necessity of tribute payment and the growing demand for trade goods overshadowed the autonomy of most Evenkis. Vasilevich and Smolyak (1964, p. 643) wrote that “[a]ccording to legends of the Yenisey Evenks, their ancestors lived in clans. . . [which] possessed a ‘river,’ that is to say territory.” In addition to the reasons mentioned above, with the movements spurred on by disease occupation and control of territory may not have been especially stable. Perhaps in response to the increasing power of the state, it seems likely that territorial boundaries began to develop around trap lines and areas that were rich in fur-bearing animals.

Archival records and early colonial reports clearly document that the Central Siberian Plateau region was a well-traversed and culturally mixed landscape prior to the arrival of the Europeans. The difficulty in locating Evenki people among other nations in this region is evidenced in the typically confused and conflicting reports of early explorers, traders, bureaucrats, clergymen, and ethnographers. The task of figuring out who was who and who was living where is confounded by a fluidity of identities and mobile households. The attempt to fix and enforce boundaries and organizational structures was an objective of the new colonial government. Referring to

⁹It is widely reported that the Cossaks took hostages to ransom payments of tribute (Fisher, 1943).

¹⁰Such conflict is noted in Gurvich’s (1977) *Culture of the Northern Yakut Reindeer Herders* as well as Tugolukov’s (1985) *Tunguses (Evenki and Eveni) of Middle and Western Siberia*.

Shirokogoroff's early work in the study of Tungus social organization, Dmitrii Shimkin (1990, p. 319) observed that "Tungus (Evenki) clans had strong leadership, including shamans, and clan ceremonials, but were loosely associated with territories and lacked clan sanctuaries." In the context of Tsarist bureaucracy, Evenki clans and tents came to be more associated with administrative units spatially bound in territories. It would be a mistake, however, to explain this away as an inevitable result of state hegemony. In many instances Evenkis manipulated Russian law and discipline in their own local political struggles (Slezkine, 1994; Ssorin-Chaikov, 1998).

All of this translates into a somewhat shifting set of traditional Evenki practices and identities during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. The most common assessment of the changing cultural landscape through this period suggests that "the Evenki mobile economy was one of reindeer-facilitated hunting, trapping, fishing, and trading" (Anderson, 2000a, p. 226). Gail Fondahl aptly generalized the situation when she wrote that "[i]n the taiga no single activity (hunting, fishing, or reindeer herding) traditionally sustained a family, *obshchina* or clan; rather, a combination of these activities provided for both subsistence and commercial/trade needs" (Fondahl, 1998, p. 113). As the needs changed over time, Evenkis adapted and altered their approaches to work. It is much more reasonable to speak of a shifting, mixed repertoire of Evenki practices than to essentialize any single practice out of time.

Prior to the arrival of the Tsar's tribute collectors to the Central Siberian Plateau at the end of the seventeenth century most Evenkis traveled nomadically throughout the taiga recognizing more or less fluid boundaries negotiated between one-another as well as other Siberian peoples. Through the Tsarist imperial era, their movement came to be more and more associated with trapping areas, sites of tribute payment, as well as the locations of Russian Orthodox missions. In the early 20th century, administrative boundaries rose in importance, leading to the territorial markers that have prevailed for the last 50 years or so. These boundaries determine spheres of Evenki social relations and experience in the first 10 years of the post-Soviet period. Prior to the establishment of these territorial markers, the scope of mobility in the taiga was much broader. Before exploring the broad and sudden imposition of a Soviet landscape, I will first consider the more gradual changes that occurred through the Russian Imperial era and the time of revolution and civil war.

The imperial expansion of European nations in the post-enlightenment era was not restricted to Western Europe. Russia also intended, and was in a position, to expand its empire. Expeditions and military forces, centralized in Moscow under the Tsar's control, were sent east to annex adjacent frontier lands. There were, however, significant distinctions between early Russian imperialism and that of other European nations. The nature of colonization was characterized by the Tsar's interest in extracting wealth in the form of animal hides from the vast taiga regions that lay to the east of the Ural Mountains. This practice was contrary to the pattern of colonialism in British North America, where colonization after 1867 was as much about settlement and nation building as it was about the establishment of a resource colony. With his tributary imperative, the Tsar laid explicit policy dictating the terms on which "natives" were to be treated. Particular emphasis was placed on facilitating their ability to pay tribute. Another difference in the character of Siberian colonization was that the northern Siberian taiga offered little potential for agriculture and was a poor draw

for settlers who might otherwise have competed for territory with the various indigenous groups.

Resistance to the collection of tribute and to the state's intermittent attempts to reorganize Evenki political relations occasionally resulted in bloodshed. Such violent resistance is well reported in other areas of Siberia (Tugolukov, 1985; Forsyth, 1992; Slezkine, 1994). A common Evenki scenario of resistance to the state was avoidance, by traveling deeper into the taiga to escape tribute collectors. The mobility of Evenkis was a constant irritation to the colonial administration's fledgling bureaucracy. In 1906 S. Patkanov wrote, that "[i]n their travels the Tungus pay no attention . . . to District boundaries . . . [and, in the South] they're not even shy of the borders of the state." Patkanov's dissatisfaction was clear, especially as he proceeds to describe the way in which nomadism was so confounding to tribute collectors (Vasilevich, 1969, p. 6). In another instance, the ethnographer Ivan Mainov (writing at the end of the 19th Century) noted that Evenkis "wander almost all year across unknowable forest thickets" (quoted in Ssorin-Chaikov, 1998, p. 29).¹¹

The European demand for fine pelts spurred an active local economy independent of Moscow's tribute system which had, in fact, preceded the arrival of tribute collectors. Both established trading posts and mobile traders became an integral part of the taiga landscape. Tugolukov (1963, p. 18) notes that many Yakut (Sakha)¹² traders moved through the taiga as well, offering an alternative to the Russian traders and trading posts — although not necessarily better terms. In this era, Evenkis' seasonal rounds were expanded to include trapping for tribute and trade, traveling to summer trade fairs, and, occasionally, pilgrimages to Orthodox Christian churches. The political, economic, and spiritual landscape of east-central Siberia was entering a period of radical transformation.

Over the roughly three hundred years of Tsarist rule in Siberia there were many shifts in power relations and in the intensification of the state's involvement in the lives of Evenkis. The pressure of colonization disrupted an already heterogeneous ethnic landscape. In the later years of the Russian imperial era, new systems of political organization among the central Siberian Evenkis emerged, creatively reflecting imposed legal and economic structures. Older clan systems were altered and became more amenable entities for Tsarist bureaucratic practice.

PATTERNS OF RUSSIAN MOBILITY

In east-central Siberia the lands that lay beyond the Yenisey River were not broached by Europeans until the beginning of the 16th century.

In 1614 the Mangazeya Cossacks imposed the fur-tax upon the Evenks living on the Upper Tunguska [Angara]. In 1623, practically all the Evenks living near the Yenisey, on the Lower and Podkamennaya Tunguska, Vilyuy and Chona were paying the tax. (Vasilevich and Smolyak, 1964, p. 623)

¹¹The term "wander" (*brodit'*) came to be used in the classification of forms of mobility and economy, and was understood to be an even more primitive or backward state than nomadism.

¹²Yakut (Sakha) are another non-Russian people of Siberia, but are not a minority (small-numbered people) like the Evenki.

Cossacks—the Siberian colonial forces of the Russian Empire—fronted a more or less systematic Russian invasion of Siberia that culminated in the late 18th century. The geographer Robert North notes that due to the value of the fur trade “and also because the Kazakhs of the Middle Horde continued strong to the south . . . Russian activities were virtually confined to the tayga” (North, 1978, p. 15). While the Muscovite state was the prime mover in the colonization of Siberia, there existed significant ties with private interests and initiative (Collins, 1991, p. 38). Exacting full control, for the state, over its representatives in distant Siberia resulted in the loss of allegiance to Tsarist policy, endemic local corruption, and varying degrees of autonomy. Anderson (1995, p. 142) also noted that although the Russian tribute economy did not impinge greatly upon the Evenkis’ autonomy, the growing presence of Russians in the taiga did have an undeniable effect on Evenki economy and social life. Indeed, “the historical evidence indicates that, at least for many households, the coerced exchange of furs *expanded* the use of space” (Anderson 1995, p. 142.). Tribute, trade, missionization, the imposition of state sanctioned political and legal structures, and general cultural contact all contributed to a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

At the end of the 16th century, the first Cossacks crossed the Yenisey in the North and established winter forts or blockhouses as sites for trade, the collection of tribute, and the enduring confirmation of Tsarist rule. Gurvich (1977, p. 4) wrote that in 1640 Russians arrived at the lower Vilyuy winter fort and recorded ninety-five tribute-paying Yakuts out of a total 380 people. Over the following years other forts in the region were established and the Tsarist presence in east-central Siberia solidified. A strong military presence was vital in the subjugation and settlement of Siberia; the Cossack police force hired by Moscow was governed by the *voyevoda* (military governor), who held considerable power in the early development of Siberia.

The strategy for colonization, given the immensity of Siberia, was to travel “along river routes, fortifying strategic points such as confluences and portages from one river system to another” (Collins, 1991, p. 39). Siberia’s river systems provided the most significant routes of travel for the Tsar’s Cossacks and civil servants, as well as independent traders and missionaries. Turukhansk was strategically positioned at the confluence of the Yenisey and Nizhnyaya Tunguska rivers. The Nizhnyaya Tunguska and the Podkamennaya Tunguska provided deep penetration into the Central Siberian Plateau areas while the Yenisey was a major thoroughfare for riverine transport connecting Siberia to Europe via the Kara sea. The Nizhnyaya Tunguska and Vilyuy rivers were a major east-west route for traffic between Yakutsk and Mangazeya-Turukhansk; this journey could take four to four-and-one-half months (Collins, 1991, p. 39).

Travel on the lesser rivers (like the Nizhnyaya Tunguska, Kochuchum, Vilyuy, and Podkamennaya Tunguska) necessitated flat-bottomed barges (*doschaniks*) that were powered by sail, oar, and hauled by humans or horses from trails on the forested banks. Raymond Fisher (1943, p. 174) observed that on journeys on larger rivers like the Yenisey, “*kochas*, decked boats quite similar to doshchaniks, were used.” The rivers, of course, were not accessible by boat during the long winters. Even when there is no ice and snow there are only a few weeks, between the spring’s high waters and the autumn’s low waters, when barges can successfully navigate the rivers.

In the mid-1800s paddlewheel steamers arrived on the Siberian scene. For over 30 years after their introduction “four firms connected with European Russia trading



Fig. 2. 1924 photograph of the steamer *Krasnoyarets* on the Turukhan River. Photographer I. M. Suslov. Courtesy of the Evenki Okrug Regional Museum.

houses controlled virtually all the Siberian river steamers” (North, 1978, p. 47). The steamers became indisputably useful vehicles in the maintenance of Tsarist control over the new colonies and presented new opportunities for missionization and resource extraction (Fig. 2). While valuable animal pelts continued to dominate northern Siberian trade, there occurred a steady rise of mineral exploration and exploitation. When the importance of the fur trade declined in the second half of the 19th century, alternative ventures were in a position to maintain the state’s interest in Siberia, including several gold mining sites.

Travel journals of the orthodox priest Father Mikhail Suslov from the late 1800s report that much of the land south of Yessey remained unexplored by Russians, confirming Vasilevich’s (1969) statement that the Lower and Podkamennaya Tunguskas were relatively peaceful until the end of the 19th century. Vasilevich discussed a variety of paths, highways, and routes that cut through the taiga in Siberia and the Russian Far East, noting that social and economic relations differed in places where there were no major trade routes (Vasilevich, 1969, p. 180). The trade routes appear to have functioned as east-west corridors for the traffic of goods and people. As North (1978) indicated, the majority of the rivers navigable by barge in central Siberia run from the south to the north, which led to the development of overland trails to move goods between forts, towns, construction sites, and the major riverine routes. Although to the south the Moscow-Siberian highway reached Krasnoyarsk by 1735, there could be no parallel road building in the northern regions (North, 1978).¹³ With regard to overland travel, Fisher (1943, p. 174) noted that it was “in many instances faster and more direct, especially in winter on the snow, but such travel was feasible only for short journeys, since no extensive post system existed and the cost to an individual, or even

¹³To this day, despite modern road making technologies, there are few maintained roads.

to a group, of long journeys by horse and cart or sledge was prohibitive.” Options for overland travel north of the Nizhnyaya Tunguska were severely limited to reindeer conveyance, as horses were ill-suited to the densely wooded and marshy taiga.

Missionaries, traders, and state servants were obliged to seek the aid of guides and chauffeurs to ply the immense Ilimpii taiga. Guides (*kaery*) working in the tundra that borders the north of the Ilimpii area are described in the following passage:

At the turn of the century, *kaery* hauled supplies and people at the behest of less regimented institutions such as trading firms with government monopolies, tax-gathering Cossacks, or missionaries distributing the sacrament, surnames, and ritual calendars. (Anderson, 2000b, p. 136)

This was the beginning of a local freight industry that persisted through to the 1970s. With the modernization of the North in the period of high socialism, Evenkis narrowed their service from guiding and hauling to guiding alone.¹⁴ What is important to consider here is that the 200 years or so of colonial encounter prior to the communist revolution was a time of great changes for the Evenkis due to imperial violence, epidemics, epizootics, internecine wars, and the pressure of displaced indigenous peoples from other regions. The primary means of travel, however, remained localized because of the monopolization of taiga mobility through reindeer conveyance by Evenkis, Sakha/Yakut, and Dolgan peoples.

Following the Imperial Russian era, rapid technological and social change swept through the former Russian Empire. Evenki peoples’ extensive travels were recast in terms of Soviet modernity and in the context of industrial mechanization. Consequently travels were made not only according to traditional routes and trails on reindeer saddle and sleigh, but were also undertaken as journeys in the modern Soviet state, on motorboats and barges and in helicopters, trains, and airplanes.

THE SOVIET SYSTEM OF MECHANIZED TRAVEL

[T]he appearance of modern equipment in the taiga—aircraft, automotive vehicles, motorboats, portable movie projectors, radiotelegraphic communications and the like—have resulted in deep changes in the personalities of the natives in the taiga. (Tugolukov, 1963, p. 35)

The face of the old settlements, the nomadic encampments, and even the very occupations of the people underwent a profound change. (Rytkeu, 1980, p. 23)

The Soviet system of mechanized travel can be framed similarly to how Shirokogoroff (1935) described Tungus mobility in the early 20th century, as a system

¹⁴I was told by one Evenki herder that he was hired by a group of “mammothologists” to guide them through the taiga. I later learned that he had accepted their employ not only for the money they would pay him but also to watch over them. Guiding has the naive implication of taking the passengers where they want/need to go but it also has the covert implication of monitoring and limiting the passengers’ experience. The herder was concerned that the paleontologists would discover that a stream on his territory (*uchastok*) was littered with high-quality coal.



Fig. 3. Arrival/departure. Collagraph by Craig Campbell. The cover of V. N. Uvachan’s 1971 book has been used as the central image in this print. The image of reindeer herders waving to a helicopter works today as both a reminder of the much-touted arrival of Soviet technology in the North and as an ironic portrayal of the departure of this technology following the brutal withdrawal of subsidies that once supported rural communities.

of paths or communications.¹⁵ The system is tightly bound to European modernities—cultural logics that have particular commonalities and histories of dissemination, interpretation, and co-optation. It was not, however, until the period of “high socialism,” beginning in the late 1950s, that the celebrated triumphs of modernity were really extended throughout the Soviet system of mechanized travel (Fig. 3).

In the latter part of the Soviet era, as industrialization and northern development expanded to include the Yenisey basin, a system of state-approved corridors of travel emerged in conjunction with the mechanization of the means of conveyance, notably

¹⁵In context of pre-telegraph history, communication was synonymous with bodily transport, with special emphasis on the union of the subject and the object through space. It also operates as a synonym in Russian: *svyaz*’.

aircraft, tracked vehicles, trucks, snowmachines, and motorboats. These travels included regular flights between the taiga and remote settlements, remote settlements and regional centers, and regional centers and major cities. In 1932 a 1600-kilometer aerial route was established between Krasnoyarsk and Dudinka. By 1935, Tura and Baykit were connected to the growing network of aerial navigation (Uvachan, 1971, p. 235). The revolution in transport brought Siberia and the Far East into much greater contact with European Russia. This sustained contact, in turn, facilitated the Soviet state's policies toward the modernization and administration of indigenous peoples (Grant, 1995). Mongols and Buryats of Inner Asia had a similar experience:

Far from being a time of stability, the socialist period emerges here as a period of almost ceaseless change. A common theme is collectivization, which started in all areas of Inner Asia with small co-operatives, subsequently amalgamated into large and more rigidly organised collectives or communes. (Humphrey and Sneath, 1999, p. 35)

A typical characterization of the Soviet economic and social reorganization marks collectivization and sedentarization as the most acute points of Soviet violence toward Evenkis, their cultures, their economies, and, in this analysis, their system of paths.

[The] tragedy of the Evenkis began with the period of collectivization. At this point the Kolkhozy [collective farms] became the owners of the Tayga lands, later it was the sovkhozy and gosprokhozy. Forest inhabitants lost the basis of life—their clan and family lands. (Grigorevna, 1992 quoted in Fondahl, 1998, p. 57)

Although most scholars start their analysis of the incursion of state forms of social and economic organization with the Civil War that followed the communist revolution (Fondahl, 1998; Pika, 1999), others note that the most radical changes to everyday life occurred in the 1960s—the era of industrialization (Anderson, 2000b, p. 37). An important beginning for the establishment of a distinctly Soviet system of mechanized travel was the removal of women and children from the taiga. While organizational changes made significant contributions to the alteration in the mobility of many Evenkis, it was not until the state's economists, scientists, and bureaucrats sought to modernize the forest economies that the Evenkis' system of paths, maintained by hunters and herders, was truly challenged (*ibid.*).

Soviet modernization and development of northern regions involved both the industrial expansion and exploitation of natural resources and the reorganization of local industries (Kuoljok, 1985, p. 51-52). Kuoljok (1985, p. 52), however, makes the rather naive point that industrialization had not threatened "reindeer-breeding" in the Soviet North because of a nationality policy that preserved "the specific character of each people." The other reason for this, she states, is that polluting industrial complexes were not extensively cast upon the Siberian landscape. Their concentration in industrial centers, along with the "shortage of roads and railways in the North" (*ibid.*) supposedly protected reindeer industries. However, Anderson's ethnography of the Khantayskoe Ozero Evenkis in the Taymyr Peninsula provides some preliminary

evidence of the broad effects of heavy metal pollution on reindeer herds (Anderson 2000b, p. 62-63). Development in Yamal, and nuclear testing on the border of Yakutia (Republic of Sakha) and Evenkia in the Vilyuy basin would also suggest that in Soviet times ecological preservation was certainly not the case (Golovnev and Osherenko, 1999; Yegorova, 1995, Crate, 2002).

For Siberia in general, the momentum of industrialization accelerated after 1956 (Kuoljok, 1985, p. 52). Between 1955 and 1956 “the ‘land tenure regulation’ (*zemleustroitelnaia*) expedition of the Ministry of Rural Economy of the RSFSR gave each kolkhoz concrete recommendations in the use of reindeer pastures” in Evenkia (Kovyazin and Kuzakov, 1963, p. 96). The actual implementation of these recommendations was yet to follow. In the Taymyr “[b]eginning in the late 1960s, a . . . division of labour was enforced by the state. The entire stock of reindeer was divided into separate herds to be managed by professional brigades” (Anderson, 1995, p. 57). The socialist reorganization of Evenki economies was an important part of what Pika (1999, p. 96) pointedly referred to as the “marked experiments of social engineering aimed at destroying nomadic ways of life.” Breaking Evenki autonomies was meant to produce good Soviet citizens. In the words of Evenki historian V.N. Uvachan, “The peoples of the North, as equals, have entered into a new historic community—the Soviet people” (Uvachan, 1971, p. 292).

Through the period of high socialism, Ekonda’s economy was dominated by more or less compartmentalized land-based activities such as hunting, trapping, and reindeer herding. The government established a central *sovkhov* tied to the village administration including a fur farm, and the introduction of cows, pigs, and chickens to replicate southern diets. There was no hospital but the local nurse-practitioner and midwifery clinic (*feld’sherskiy-akusherstvennyy punkt*) was staffed full-time and stocked with medicines. Ekonda inhabitants had regular visits from health care professionals, including general practitioners, dentists, and eye doctors, and from photographers and entertainment troupes alike. The village culture club was staffed full-time and had facilities for musical instruction, volleyball and badminton, dances, and large meetings, and a stage and screen for movies and drama productions.

In addition to being more connected to the rest of the Soviet Union by incoming flows of subsidies, news, and professional services, inhabitants also had access to paths leading beyond the Siberian taiga. One reindeer herder that I met in 1995 had won a socialist competition for overfulfilling his production quotas by nearly 200 percent. His prize was to travel to the 1967 World’s Fair in Montreal. While the Soviet state occasionally allotted significant rewards of travel and vacation through socialist competitions, most people had access only to the Soviet corridors of travel within the USSR. The travel experiences of many people in Siberia during the Soviet era were truly extensive in an increasingly well-travelled socialist world (Rethmann 2000).¹⁶

Concerted industrial exploitation of the northern regions began in central Siberia in the 1970s and 1980s (Pika, 1999, p. 90). The Evenki Autonomous Okrug was “not flooded with a wave of incomers, or *priezhi*, until the 1970s [nonetheless] radical shifts in Evenk social organization and traditional culture from the 1920s to 1990s”

¹⁶This point has been noted by several ethnographers of Siberian peoples, but see especially the writings of Petra Rethmann, an ethnographer who works in Kamchatka with indigenous Koryak women.

resulted from the intensification of state control (Bloch, 1996, p. 43). Industrial modernization was the prerequisite for the success of socialism. For the paradigm of modern socialism to “make sense, however, a concept of traditional culture was emphasized to set the modernization process off in relief” (ibid., p. 66). This is graphically portrayed in the juxtaposition of modern and traditional technologies, or, in the Marxist-Leninist language of the day, “progressive” and “backward” technologies. All aspects of the Soviet economy were expected to conform to the new standards of scientific management, including the most “traditional” occupations like reindeer herding, hunting, trapping, and fishing.

“Collective farms began to organize their reindeer herds by sex and age, to develop rational grazing circuits and to improve the breed” as early as the mid-1950s, and science-based management schemes were developed to replace what were perceived to be “primitive” and “non-rational” forms (Tugolukov 1963, p. 28). Until the 1970s, reindeer breeding was an extension of the transport economy, supporting countless other enterprises like hunting, fishing, trapping, state surveys, military forays, geological explorations, delivery of medicine and food, and the conveyance of people.

The reindeer is a draft animal indispensable in commercial hunting of fur animals. Reindeer transportation is used by geological surveyors, prospecting expeditions, in land management and for other purposes. Reindeer are used to transport freight to remote and otherwise inaccessible regions. (Zhigunov, 1968, p. 1)

In Taymyr, “in order to support the hunting economy in the era before snow machines (pre-1970s) reindeer were bred, trained, and kept for transport (and not for meat)” (Anderson, 1995, p. 57). There was a growing emphasis on economies based on modern science and machines, which sought to rationalize backwards, inefficient, and non-socialist traditional economic practices.

To undertake this massive transition in the north the popularization and introduction of scientific achievements and the experience of leading breeders, and finally, training qualified reindeer breeding experts . . . [were needed]; these measures would improve the efficiency of reindeer breeders, increase the output of reindeer meat and other products, cut the cost of production, and raise the level of reindeer husbandry. (Zhigunov, 1968, p. 4)

One assessment of the division of labor required for “an economy founded upon reindeer for transport, labour of people and animals maximized the mobility of individuals across a vast territory and thus minimized the capacity of the state to control the structure of work units, the number of deer, and the uses to which they are put” (Anderson, 1995, p. 57). In the industrialization and mechanization of northern “agriculture,” the capacity of Evenkis to resist and creatively interpret state forms of social organization diminished. The compartmentalization of “professions” gave the state greater control over mobility. Self-determination in the traditional economies of hunting and herding was undermined by the conflicting scientifically legitimated strategies for herd management, hunting, and fishing introduced by the new “experts” from

urban universities and colleges. “The *gospromkhozy*¹⁷ were set up to concentrate specifically on hunting, and had little incentive to encourage reindeer herding, other than as an auxiliary activity that supported hunting (as a means of transport)” (Fondahl, 1998, p. 74). In the 1970s snow machines began to appear as an alternative to reindeer transport.

Land tenure regulation and “scientific management” marked the beginning of new management strategies that came to dominate in the 1970s. Aside from the ideological motivations, the two main driving incentives of collectivization were the need to produce surplus foods and other goods for growing urban populations in the Russian North (Fondahl, 1998, p. 58) and the creation of industrial employment in regions that were previously undeveloped (Anderson, 1991, p. 13). The notion of cultural and economic “backwardness” was clearly implicated in this effort, a lingering irritation from the earliest days of Soviet development policy. Herding and hunting brigades were pushed to produce ever greater quantities of meat to feed growing administrative centres like Tura.¹⁸ A report entitled “Development of the Technology for Producing Reindeer in the USSR” (Koshelev and Mukhachev, 1986) outlines the thoroughly modern and scientific approach to reindeer herding in Siberia:

The prospects for development in this field [of reindeer breeding] are determined by important economic goals such as strengthening northern economy, improving the prosperity of indigenous peoples, [and] establishing a local food supply. . . . Thanks to Lenin’s national policy which is being carried out by the Soviet government, reindeer breeding is developing successfully . . . (ibid., p. 341)

Throughout the Soviet era, the Evenki system of paths was perpetuated where possible in the cycle of production herding, and most importantly in commercial hunting activities. In most cases the indigenous system of paths was not supported due, for example, to the inaccessibility of the land for many women and children. Geographic shifts from forest to settlement to consolidated settlement “served to decrease the range of a woman’s activities, her cultural and economic options and flexibility, and to channel younger women increasingly away from any level of involvement in such traditional activities” (Fondahl, 1998, p. 69).

Ilimpii Evenkis refer often to one particular story that highlights the state’s botched attempts to manage hunting practices.¹⁹ In the mid-1980s the *gospromkhoz* Turinskiy, with the assistance of the Evenki Okrug Department of Agriculture and the Scientific Institute for Rural Economy (based in Noril’sk), set up long drift-net fences

¹⁷*Gospromkhoz* translates roughly as “state-trade-economy,” and could be described as a governmental agency or corporation that is concerned with the rural economy, and has been present through both the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. John Ziker offers this definition: “Government Hunting/Fishing/Trapping Enterprise, generally larger than a *sovkhov* or *kolkhoz* and administered by the Ministry of Hunting of the Russian Federation” (Ziker, 2002, p. 169).

¹⁸In Tura today, reindeer meat does not garner as high a price as imported meats. As early as the last decade of the Soviet era, wild and domestic reindeer meat were reported to have been sent off to feed prison populations on the Yenisey.

¹⁹It is, however, not clear if Evenki hunters feel that management itself is faulty or if it is simply the ineptitude of the current managers. Looking to other subarctic examples (Fienup-Riordan 1990; Feit 1979, 1991), one is tempted to read the reaction as a point of intercultural contention.

across the tundra to funnel wild herds of migratory sea caribou (*morskiye*) to convenient stations where they could be shot *en masse* and “efficiently” harvested.²⁰ The project was eventually abandoned but the nets were left strewn across the tundra, altering the caribou’s migration routes. The relative wealth of the northern neighbouring village, Yessey, is partially linked to its proximity to the caribou’s current migration route.²¹ Evenki hunters who, prior to that time, were able to hunt the wild herds of sea caribou without travelling great distances, have since had to travel hundreds of kilometers north to encounter the sea caribou. The logistical difficulty of making such a trip, given the failure of mechanical transport (due to the inaccessibility of the machines, the parts, and the fuel to run them) and limited access to domestic reindeer, keeps many Evenki within much more limited bounds and forces them to rely on scarce moose and non-migratory forest caribou for meat.

DE-MOBILIZATION, TECHNOLOGICAL DYSFUNCTION, AND THE ROOTS OF 21ST CENTURY ISOLATION

Although a mixed forest economy did not produce enough wealth to maintain imported modern technologies, the professional and compartmentalized late Soviet socialist economy relied on mechanization subsidized by the state—a standard redistributive practice of the Soviet centralized economy. Subsidies were essential to mechanized production and further alienated rural Evenki from production activities. When communism collapsed in 1991, the Soviet system of mechanized conveyance had replaced traditional Evenki ways of moving on the taiga. While some Evenkis creatively manipulated the new system to their own ends, others were tyrannized by it. The new system was entrenched in enormous networks of centralized bureaucracy. Technologies of mobility depended on this centralization to access the remote settlements, now the permanent home to the “nomads” and “wanderers” of the taiga.

Soviet sedentarization and village consolidation programs dramatically altered the northern landscape. Soviet-era women and children, who formerly traveled with household herds, were socially redefined as settled villagers. Men also ceased to travel nomadically and were deemed semi-nomadic sedentarized shift-workers. The mobility of women and children in the taiga was generally limited to seasonally based short resource-acquisition trips. They traveled by motorboat to collect berries and fish and sometimes by helicopter to visit relatives working in distant reindeer herding camps. Many men, engaged in the herding and hunting, split their time between working on the land and living in the villages. Trips to the countryside were often made with mechanized vehicles. The necessity of rapid conveyance is a concurrent development with the Soviet landscape reformations. Sedentarization and consolidation of villages was made possible through mechanized conveyance and, in turn, necessitated the mechanization of travel. Machine travel and settlements are interconnected elements in the Soviet landscape of east-central Siberia.

²⁰“Sea caribou” is a local appellation for the migratory reindeer that spend part of the year in the tundra and the other in the taiga; they are also called *morskiye* by the Taymyr Evenkis in Khantayskoye Ozero (Anderson 1995).

²¹This is a point aggravated by the fact that Ekonda Evenkis report that the sea deer used to migrate south of their own settlement, a claim supported in Glafira Vasilevich’s ethnography (1969, p. 55).

In the post-Soviet era, the state's violence toward the Evenki system of paths is evident in the chaotic socio-economic landscape. The very machines that were used in the campaign against Evenkis' "backwardness," "irrationality," and "primitivism" in the Soviet era are now dysfunctional and constitute ongoing impediments to cultural renewal and local empowerment. The sedentarization of the Evenki people into central amalgamated villages led to the indigenous abandonment of many taiga regions. The so-called "wandering" (*brodyachiy*) Evenkis were given fixed homes, names, and numbers. Although the professionalization of reindeer herding and its associated state support worked to maintain some of the extensive land use practiced by pre-Soviet Evenkis and the growing attachments to the settlement, the post-Soviet reduction of these subsidies now works to diminish Evenki people's ability to travel extensively on the land.

DE-MOBILIZATION AND EVENKIS IN THE POST-SOVIET ERA

Soviet-period industrialization, which began in east-central Siberia in the 1960s and 1970s, ended in 1991 with the fall of the Soviet Union. Since then, the situation for remote rural residents of Ekonda, Chirinda, Olenek, and Yessey deteriorated to such a degree that the International Red Cross has had on occasion to deliver emergency supplies of food and medicine. The situation for many urban Evenkis in Tura was not much better and sometimes worse due to a crumbling welfare system and eroded networks and corridors of transport that had once facilitated travel as well as cash and commodity remittances. In addition, the general condition of economic and social crisis in the Ilimpii area has been worsened by conflict-ridden district politics. With the displacement of the Evenki system of paths with the Soviet system of mechanized travel, social well-being became contingent on access to mechanical vehicles, which are, in the post-Soviet economy, expensive and scarce.

The Evenki Autonomous Okrug operates administratively between territorial (*kray*) and federal governments. This position generates conflicting obligations and overlapping administrative operations, evident in the bitter political feuds of 1999–2000. In late summer, the local media reported that fuel for heating and electricity, on which Tura is entirely dependent, were not being shipped up the Yenisey and Nizhnyaya Tunguska rivers, a move that was popularly thought to be a contest of power between the governor of Krasnoyarsk Kray and the head of the administration of Evenkia. The contest resulted in a civil emergency due to the failure of the administration to have shipments of fuel delivered from Krasnoyarsk, a crisis highlighting both the fragility of northern transport systems and the instability of de-localization.

The efforts of Soviet and post-Soviet road-building engineers, which facilitated development and modernization in other rural areas of Russia, are greatly hindered in east-central Siberia due to the shifting permafrost and bogs of the subarctic. While winter roads require constant maintenance and have only limited seasonal availability, year-round road travel has been an impossible goal. In east-central Siberia railways have never posed a viable option for travel. The difficulty of organizing mechanized overland conveyance in the taiga has ensured the ongoing importance of reindeer for non-subsidized travel in Evenkia where a lone winter road connects Ilimpii settlements.

Like the rivers throughout the Tsarist and early Soviet eras, the view from the winter road allows only the most limited understanding of the taiga landscape. Much of the Ilimpii taiga, in the post-Soviet era, is rarely visited by non-local travelers, villagers, or even hunters and herders. Local travel for some Evenkis, however, continues to reproduce traditional routes and trails that are maintained by the movement of hunters and herders on reindeer, motor boats, and snowmachines. Anderson (1995, p. 201) observed that “[r]ather than interpreting an extensive land use system as the result of a vulnerability to hunger and poverty, it is better to understand Evenki movements as determined by a multiplicity of strategies.” Such strategies in the post-Soviet era, along with options for resistance to hegemonic practices, organizational structures, and technological systems of the colonial state, have dwindled in response to the breakdown of the redistributive corridors for capital and commodities that had formerly been organized through the centrally planned economy. The lack of opportunities for the creative manipulation of non-local resources from remote settlements in rural Siberia presents daunting and improbable grounds for local empowerment.

The following narrative account from my field work serves to illustrate one instance of travel for Evenkis in east-central Siberia. It shows the difficulty of negotiating movement between the town and the taiga, two radically different social landscapes.

On one trip to the taiga, some Evenki friends and I traveled by boat up the Kochuchum River. We left from the co-operatively guarded docks of Tura to a site roughly fifty kilometres away. It was early autumn and my host, Branat, was returning to his small reindeer herd in the taiga. When we arrived at our destination near the mouth of a small stream, there was no one present to greet us, despite having arranged a meeting in advance. Climbing up the bank and entering the forest, we came upon a path that led into a stand of larch trees and fragrant bushes of labrador tea. We hiked several kilometers towards the camp site and, upon entering the camp we saw a well-established site with many amenities, including a conical summer tent, called a *d’iu* in Evenki. Those present were Branat’s wife, their daughter and her husband and their child, as well as a junior herder working as a hired hand. Branat’s family was nearly ready to leave after a short three-week visit. It was the end of summer and the family was heading back to Tura to meet work and school obligations. Traveling from the camp to the bank of the Kochuchum, Branat’s wife rode on a freight sleigh, while the daughter rode on reindeer saddle, as did the junior herder, carrying the baby in his arms. We gradually made our way back to the river. A second boat showed up soon thereafter to help carry the family back to Tura. A fire was going and tea made. One deer was slaughtered and divided up to all present, especially those who gave their boats for use.

The trip is important for this exploration of Evenki systems of mobility, because Branat originally tried to negotiate the use of a helicopter for the journey. When he was unsuccessful in securing a helicopter, he tried to convince someone to take us in by overland tracked vehicle. These were both forms of transport common under the Soviet system of mechanized mobility. Ultimately, Branat succeeded only in negotiating the use of a couple of motorboats to return to his camp and have his extended

family returned to the settlement. Such accommodations are becoming routine in the herder's shrinking repertoire of transport options. The price for the use of boats was costly, as it was paid in meat from one of Branat's dwindling herd.

CONCLUSION

De-localization and the fragility of northern mechanization is a byproduct of Soviet modernization and development. Alternately, it can be characterized as a situation of delicate contingency on de-localized technological devices and systems. The idiom of localized and de-localized technologies, developed by Pelto (1973, p. 166) in *The Snowmobile Revolution*, is "a large number of interrelated processes . . . best understood in terms of a very generalized loss of local autonomy through the growth of dependence on a worldwide system of resource allocation and political power." Elsewhere he defines de-localization "as the tendency for any territorially defined population to become increasingly dependent on resources, information flow and socioeconomic linkages with the systems of energy and resources outside their particular area" (ibid., 1975, p. 31). Expanding on Pelto's work, I would tie de-localization to the general fragility of mechanized transport throughout the circumpolar North. The situation of crisis in rural Siberia is particularly critical because of the heightened fragility of inter-regional transport systems in the post-Soviet era. The degree of de-localization effected in Siberia under regimes of Soviet development have left very few places untouched and has resulted in an expansive socialist landscape that fails to operate under market conditions.

De-localization is perhaps not a problem in places where networks of distribution and exchange are resilient. More southerly and central locales, although suffering even greater de-localization than remote northern settlements, can cope due to extensive transport systems resilient to crisis. In contrast, the road systems in east-central Siberia are exceedingly treacherous and traversable for less than six months out of the year. River systems are the cheapest forms of long-distance transport but, like the road system, cannot offer year-round, reliable routes for the movement of goods. Due to the scarcity of transport corridors and their high vulnerability to late frosts, early thaws, hazardous rapids, and rising fuel costs, I argue that east-central Siberian transport corridors are fragile, and that the fragility of distribution networks combined with extensive de-localization has led to general technological dysfunction and the de-mobilization of rural Evenkis.

Geographical and social isolation and the failure of transport networks were central problems that came about after the disintegration of the Soviet system. The modes of transport and travel that occur on the land, on the river, and in the air—in addition to the built environments and social landscapes—contextualize Evenki people's rural experience. Each of these modes has been integral to the Soviet projects of northern industrialization and professionalization. They have also been integral to the collapse of the "spatial separation between village settlements and forest herding-hunting camps" (Kwon, n.d., p. 2). More generally, these projects of socialist re-construction were integral to the displacement of the traditional system of paths and have had the effect, in the post-Soviet era, of de-mobilizing Evenkis—isolating rural settlements in east-central Siberia. The kind of isolation experienced by rural Evenkis in Siberia can be understood as a process of ghettoization. The idea of rural ghettos—which has

been effectively used in the United States (Davidson, 1996)—makes for a useful analogy not only in this context but throughout the circumpolar North. For Evenkis, this translates into crumbling infrastructure, poor access to food and medicine, and limits to social and spatial mobility, all of which contribute to dire conditions of impoverishment, ill health, and depression (among other things). As this paper shows, the settlements of rural Ilimpii are built environments that were produced through massive state expenditures and projects throughout much of the 20th century. The current predicament of ghettoized indigenous peoples in Evenkia must be understood as a byproduct of these environments. It is only through an examination of travel practices that isolation and de-mobilization in east-central Siberia can be properly understood as being the result of enduring technological systems rather than being a particular deficiency in local peoples' ability to organize and alter their situation or even local governments' ability to effect change in the short term.

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