Red Ties and Residential Schools: Indigenous Siberians in a Post-Soviet State

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Red Ties and Residential Schools
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To those who continue to dream of utopia
. . . and for Mira Rubina
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Note on Transliteration and Translation

The Library of Congress system is used in transliterating Russian and Evenk terms except when there is a commonly used English version. Thus Moscow and not Moskva is used in the text.

When terms in Russian and Evenk are used in the text, they are explained with the first usage. All translations are my own. For the reader’s reference, with the exception of ethnonyms, terms indicated as Russian in origin are in italics, while those Evenk in origin are in italics and underlined.

Unless noted otherwise, ethnonyms are transliterations of the Russian terms and appear in roman typeface; for instance, throughout the text the term “Evenki” is used instead of “Evenkil,” the Evenk term. The Russian term “Evenki” in the plural form refers to the people, while “Evenk” is used as an adjective (such as “Evenk language,” “Evenk children,” or “Evenk surnames”).
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For many indigenous Siberians, the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) has brought about hardships resulting from the breakdown of government infrastructure such as state farms, medical units, and rural schooling. At the same time, the new era has also presented possibilities for self-representation and self-determination that were absent during Soviet times, and now people are immersed in reconfiguring relationships to local and translocal identities. This book focuses on the experiences of a community of Evenki, an indigenous Siberian group concentrated in central Siberia, to consider how the institution of residential schooling has influenced lives in the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Residential schools established in the 1920s brought indigenous Siberians under the purview of the state, and more than any other institution, came to define the identities of the Evenki. In the post-Soviet period, the relations of power in this central Siberian community, and by extension in broader Russia, are vividly refracted through the lens of the schooling system.

This is an ethnography that weaves together portraits of several layers of community in a central Siberian town to provide insight into a time of jarring social change. I take the residential school as the central axis for considering a range of ways Evenki are redefining their relationships with the post-Soviet state. I consider the place of the residential school from a contemporary as well as historical perspective, because the school continues to be an important nexus for debates about Evenk cultural revitalization. In these pages I seek to provide a sense of the considerable diversity in Evenk perspectives regarding the impact of Soviet cultural practices and institutions on their lives. I examine how Evenk identities were taking shape in the 1990s in conjunction with a wide range of factors, including regional, political, and generational affiliation as well as household strategies for economic survival. Given that Evenk women in particular have been caught between Soviet cultural practices of the past
and the emerging market trends, a gendered perspective extends through the chapters. For almost all Evenk men and women, however, the experience of residential schooling is one they share with their children, parents, and sometimes grandparents. Residential schooling continues to be a significant defining feature of what it is to be Evenki.

Children have been taken away from parents to attend residential schools across the globe in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, parts of Africa, China, and Russia, but their plights have been quite different according to the contexts in which the schools have operated. In some cases, students suffered psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, as recent accounts increasingly indicate. At the very least, no matter what type of ideology existed, many students were homesick, anxious about being in an unfamiliar setting, and numbed by institutional homogeneity. For the indigenous Siberians I came to know, there was a wide range of perspectives on residential schooling, some negative but also many positive; residential schooling has continued to be one of the common factors defining indigenous Siberians even after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

It is difficult to overemphasize how the attendance of more than three generations of indigenous Siberians at boarding schools from age six to sixteen affected their sense of identity. This schooling was not just a matter of learning to read and write; in fact, in the early years when policymakers were involved in crafting the Soviet residential schooling system for indigenous Siberians there was widespread debate about the exact purpose of the institution. Some firmly believed that the schools should refrain from disrupting the native subsistence patterns, while others saw this as the primary purpose. In the early to mid-1920s, many of those cautioning against assimilation were ethnographers working as advisors for the newly created Committee of the North (Komitet Severa) that was charged with overseeing the economic and sociopolitical transformation of indigenous Siberian communities.1 In a 1926 meeting in Moscow where a program of study for indigenous Siberians was being created, an established Soviet ethnographer concluded:

It would be a grave mistake to think that the aim of our work is to transmit our ways to the natives. . . . We should approach the tranquility of the natives’ lives with great care. It’s not hard to destroy these ways, but this will only lead to sure death. . . . The school . . . should only educate natives in such a way that they will not be torn from their way of life. They should not become unfamiliar with their regular subsistence activities. (Leonov 1928: 120)

Ultimately, other positions had more weight. By the early 1930s, the proponents of the residential school as a place to inculcate Soviet values were in charge of designing the residential schooling programs. The