

# Contributors

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# Introduction

## Soviet and post-Soviet anthropology

*Albert Baiburin, Catriona Kelly and  
Nikolai Vakhtin*

In the words of Pier Damiani, the eleventh-century Italian philosopher: 'Philosophy should serve theology as a servant serves her mistress.' Almost a thousand years later, a similar role was imposed on Soviet social and cultural anthropology (locally known as *etnografiya*): together with other social sciences and humanities, particularly history, philosophy and literary studies, anthropology became a servant of Soviet ideology and of the political legitimation of the ruling party, the construction of the state and of nation-building. As Francine Hirsch, among others, has shown, ethnographers were directly involved in such crucial (even though apparently technical) projects as the establishment of lists of nationalities to be used for the official registration of peoples in state censuses and in the passport (identity card) system.<sup>1</sup>

From 1936 onwards, as the Soviet leadership distanced itself from the earlier ideologies of 'world revolution' and sought to construct an ideology of 'national Bolshevism', the gathering of material about traditional customs, and the accumulation of (suitably decorous and heroic) folklore, became activities of central importance.<sup>2</sup> 'State ethnographers', to use the term coined by David Anderson, were directly involved in the regulation of their discipline, and the legitimation of Soviet rule (Anderson 2000: Ch. 4). Those doing academic research in the subject were themselves also extremely vulnerable to political control, which during the Stalin era might go all the way up to arrest, imprisonment, and indeed execution.<sup>3</sup>

Classified with the 'historical sciences', ethnography lay close to the ideological heart of Soviet academia. The aims of the discipline were presented in maximally simplified form by ethnographical museums, whose displays juxtaposed the 'backward' practices of the pre-Soviet era with the enlightenment that had followed the arrival of the new order (Baranov 2012). They also set out another inalienable binary opposition – between the harmonious co-existence of peoples under Soviet power and the exploitation suffered by those exposed to colonial rule.<sup>4</sup>

This progressivist and triumphalist understanding of the world meant that the term 'culture' (*kultura*) was value-laden.<sup>5</sup> In the post-Stalin era, an alternative category with which Soviet scholars operated was 'ethnos' (*etnos*). A later scholarly equivalent of the administrative term *natsionalnost* (nationality), this

signified 'a stable community of people laid down over time', which had come to share a language and territory (it might be comprised of different groups that had originally been associated with different languages and territories).<sup>6</sup> Soviet scholars were expected to research the 'genesis', or emergence, of given *ethnosy* – those corresponding to the 'titular nationalities', or officially acknowledged primary nationalities in particular Soviet republics.<sup>7</sup> As Yuri Slezkine has put it, 'Soviet anthropologists, brought back to life in the late 1930s and provided with a *raison d'être* after the banishment of Marrism, were not supposed to study "culture": their job was to define, dissect and delight in the primordial "ethnos"' (Slezkine 1994: 450). Just as censuses and passports expunged, for political reasons, certain ethnonyms (for instance, the 'Ingrian Finns' of Leningrad province<sup>8</sup> or the Mazours of western Ukraine<sup>9</sup>), so research passed over groups of people living in the Soviet Union whose existence was not considered politically expedient.

While the centrality of 'state ethnography' to ideology meant that the parameters of research were set by *Realpolitik*, this also meant that the understanding of the discipline shifted as Soviet political policy changed. In the Stalin era, and following Stalin's writings, particularly *Marxism and the National Question* (1913: reprinted Stalin 1946), attachment to custom was seen as a force of backwardness. By the late Soviet period, however, leading theorists such as Academician Yulian Bromlei were underlining the centrality of custom to the construction of *ethnos*. As Bromlei put it, 'Ethnic traits are revealed in all the spheres of culture to a greater or lesser extent.'<sup>10</sup> Theorists of the 1970s and 1980s were insistent that ethnic identity was not biologically determined, yet it was definitely a cultural given, a matter of 'slant of mind [*psikhologicheskii sklad*] and cultural characteristics' (Kozlov 1967: 61).

Yet, at the same time as stressing that different 'ethnoses' had diverse 'traditions' (a word that became ubiquitous at this period), some of which were admirable in themselves, and could provide models for the behaviour of modern Soviet people, Soviet ethnographers were also expected to celebrate convergence, and to trace the development of a harmonious and homogeneous Soviet culture.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of political practice, this cognitive dissonance was of little moment. From the late 1950s to the late 1980s, hundreds of pamphlets under titles such as *Traditions and Contemporaneity* or *New Soviet Rituals* poured from publishing houses all over the Soviet Union. They drew a firm line between the positive traditions of the past (to be adopted and imitated in Soviet culture) and those that were to be repudiated (e.g. some wedding rituals).<sup>12</sup> But where academic study was concerned, the 'diversity' versus 'convergence' divide was more problematic. On the one hand, the new emphasis on 'national specificities' led to a boom in particularist work about the past. On the other, anyone who attempted to write about Soviet life had a clear and rigid brief: to depict the emergence of new pan-Soviet social forms and practices. This generated a great deal of work on subjects such as the

incidence of mixed marriages (which were assumed by definition to contribute to creating transnational identities).<sup>13</sup>

Such quantitative work had the virtue of safety, given that the actuality of Soviet life was at significant variance with the theory of harmonious convergence. Whether doing fieldwork or simply getting through the day, ethnographers could not avoid being aware of, say, the centrality of the shadow economy to Soviet life. But censorship as well as self-censorship inhibited the investigation of such topics. After five decades of institutional control, people were well aware not just of what they were supposed to publish, but of what they were supposed to see. As Levon Abrahamian has remarked, 'The ethnography of contemporary Soviet life was studied only by those who at best agreed not to describe the reality they were observing, and at worst described what they had not observed. Those researchers who were governed by nonconformist professional and moral principles consciously or unconsciously preferred to reconstruct the archaic past, because here they enjoyed comparatively greater creative freedom.'<sup>14</sup>

In the circumstances, the central objective of anthropology, as classically conceived – examination of cultural phenomena in their contemporary manifestation – became at best peripheral. What was termed *etnografiya* primarily meant not 'ethnography', but cultural history. In the words of the American anthropologist Bruce Grant, 'When I first began work in the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s, it seemed that at least half of the books in anthropology had titles that ended with 'of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.<sup>15</sup> While Soviet anthropologists did in fact work on other topics (e.g. kin relations in so-called 'feudal' societies, etc.), Grant is right to suggest that the study of Russian heritage particularly was now focused on the decades just before the Revolution.

By the end of the 1960s, the term *ethnos* began to be used broadly as a key category of analysis. This term was first used in Russian by Sergei Shirokogorov (1887–1939) in his 1923 book *Ethnos. A Study of the Main Principles of Change in Ethnic and Ethnographic Phenomena* (Shirokogorov 1923); since the book was written by an émigré and published abroad, mention of it was not allowed in the Soviet Union until the late 1960s. The term *ethnos* was not used, and its derivatives like *etnicheskii* (ethnic) were also little used. In 1951 a book by P.I. Kushner was published where the word was adopted (Kushner 1951). However, its hour of glory came only in the mid-1960s, when Academician Yulian Bromlei became the Director of the Institute of Ethnography in Moscow. In *Soviet and Western Anthropology*, published by Ernest Gellner in 1980, the Soviet contributors focused on the term: Yuliya Petrova-Averkieva (1907–80), the then editor of *Sovetskaya etnografiya*, and Head of Section in the Moscow Institute of Ethnography, contended that 'the historical method of Soviet ethnography was especially productive when applied to the study of the genesis of ethnos, the periods in the ethnic history of peoples, and their relation to the general history of mankind'.<sup>16</sup>

Researchers applied themselves to the history of Russian (and more broadly 'East Slavonic') peasant life around 1900, concentrating on areas such as folk belief, the specificities of the rural world-view and, last but not least, so-called 'material culture' (food, clothes, houses, means of transport). Distinction between 'material culture' and 'spiritual culture' (beliefs and customs of various kinds) was at the time crucial for Soviet ethnography. Not just primary materials, but also interpretative frameworks, were drawn from ethnographers such as Dmitry Zelenin (1878–1954), with social institutions such as sacrifices and taboos seen as the expression of a residuum of pre-Christian beliefs.

The concentration on symbolic, rather than economic, realities was an equally important move away from established values.<sup>17</sup> As Sergey Sokolovskiy has pointed out, increasingly, there was 'a gulf between "bosses who dabbled in theory"' – that is, who still paid lip-service to Marxism-Leninism – and 'practical researchers, who had no truck with this scholasticism'.<sup>18</sup> For researchers of the younger generation, 'theory' in a positive sense meant the work of structuralists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Victor Turner. The ubiquity of the term *ethnos* concealed major faultlines in the interpretation of the term, which ranged from the implicitly essentialist understanding set out in the work of Lev Gumilev to strongly constructivist approaches such as analysis in terms of 'the stereotypes of ethnic behaviour'.<sup>19</sup> In the late 1980s, as the policy of glasnost led to the suspension of print censorship, these incipient alternative traditions were able to emerge into the open.

In 1991, the hegemony of 'state ethnography' collapsed as dramatically as the Soviet system of governance that had underwritten it over the decades. An intense examination of the intellectual heritage of the Soviet period began. It was now criticised not just by former and present mavericks, but by establishment figures, such as Valery Tishkov, Director of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences from 1989.<sup>20</sup> The scholars once under strict control were now free to associate with their colleagues in the West (a process that had begun in the Gorbachev years), to make study visits abroad, to do fieldwork together with their colleagues from other countries, to submit their work to foreign journals, and to read whatever academic work local and long-distance colleagues might choose to publish.

This process was perhaps the most visible, and went the fastest, in what is called Arctic anthropology: studies of the peoples of Siberia, the Russian Far East and the Arctic. Over the previous period,<sup>21</sup> Russian ethnographers had difficulty accessing field sites outside the country, so Siberia became an 'exotic' field site right in one's 'backyard' – 'a logical career choice for many ethnographers (the Caucasus region and Central Asia were other favoured options)'.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Western anthropologists could not get permission to do fieldwork in the country<sup>23</sup> and were thus 'virtually cut off from contemporary Siberia' (Habeck 2005: 13). When in the late 1980s the situation changed, it came as exciting news to anthropologists worldwide: there was 'a small explosion of field studies in Siberia, as well as a proliferation of

publications based on this fresh, cutting edge material' (Grey, Schweitzer and Vakhtin 2003: 195). Western ethnographers were literally turning eastward to take advantage of a newly opened field site. In Russia, the slow growth of modern anthropological research in Siberia and the Arctic also began, primarily through joint research projects with anthropologists from the US, Canada, Germany, Britain, France and other countries (Grey, Schweitzer and Vakhtin 2003; Habeck 2005; Vakhtin 2006).

One result of these developments was a surge of interest in the theory and methodology of the subject. Already in the 1980s work by leading international scholars in the field began to appear in Russian: Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structural Anthropology* was published in Russian in 1983, Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*, in 1985; in the 1990s–2000s, dozens of translations appeared (for example, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* appeared in 2000 and Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* in 2004, to name but two), and these individual books were accompanied by numerous excerpts in journals. The classics of Russian anthropology – some not reprinted since 1917 – were also reappearing. Like journals in other subjects, those in anthropology also began to publish original work by foreign authors; by the early 2000s, some journals had made international dialogue and collaboration an explicit part of their platform.<sup>24</sup> By the end of that decade, a variety of general publications had put commitment to anthropology on their mastheads, including the leading journal in literary studies during the 1990s, Moscow's *New Literary Observer* [Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie].<sup>25</sup> Courses, and sometimes programmes, in anthropology began to be taught in some Russian universities (the first such programme appeared at the Department of Sociology at St Petersburg State University). There were healthy numbers of new publications in the field, and many Russian scholars were involved in international collaborations and projects.

In the circumstances, the pessimistic tone of the article with which this collection begins, Sergey Sokolovskiy's 'Problems in the Historiography of Russian Anthropology', might seem surprising. Sokolovskiy argues that Russian anthropology of the early twenty-first century was still trapped in the social relations of the Soviet period, as expressed particularly in a reluctance to challenge established opinion, and a great deal of confusion about analytical objectives. He also points to what he sees as a worrying 'provincialisation' of the field, with the Russian intellectual tradition more or less excluded from view in international discussions of the history of anthropology – even when Marxist anthropology is under review.<sup>26</sup> These concerns are echoed by others.<sup>27</sup> Given the pervasiveness of such anxieties, it seems appropriate to reflect a little on the nature of the perceived problems.

There were certainly some signs of a self-inflicted provincialism among post-Soviet ethnographers of Russia. The chance to inhabit a new international arena was not welcomed by everyone. As a participant in a recent discussion put it flatly:



To be honest, I couldn't much care about the extent to which Western specialists know and cite our work (or are even aware of it). I think that's their problem. I've never seen or heard anything to suggest that Western specialists are bothered by whether their work is known abroad, including in Russia. In Soviet times, efforts were made to publish collections of Russian scholarly work in translation, for propaganda purposes (to show off the achievements of scholars working on Marxist-Leninist principles to the West). I think that publishing an abstract of a given article or book in one or other foreign language ought to be enough. We can leave the rest to our Western colleagues: it's up to them.<sup>28</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the preoccupation with national identity that was already emerging in the 1970s and 1980s; culturalist or even racist views became commonplace in public discourse. The disappearance of the ideal of Soviet cultural homogeneity was replaced by an emphasis on the Russian national heritage. The inclusive usage, *rossiiskii* (meaning a citizen of the Russian Federation, not necessarily an ethnic Russian) did not impede people in the latter category from arguing aggressively that 'Russia' should be for 'the Russians' in a narrow sense. As a discipline intimately connected with debates on national identity, anthropology was, inevitably, close to the firing line. Even the preferred name of the discipline – *etnografiya* versus *antropologiya* – could be revealing. While those aware of an international context often preferred the term *anthropolog*, this term irritated others not just because it traditionally meant 'physical anthropologist', but because it suggested a fashionable adjustment to imported standards:

Ethnography as an autonomous branch of the historical sciences is undergoing progressive devaluation, and its boundaries and its specific features are being washed away. Great efforts are being made to replace the discipline by ethnology, by anthropology, by cultural anthropology, social anthropology, political anthropology, and economic anthropology. Can the originators of these substitute terms really not know that the Western words anthropology, cultural anthropology, social anthropology mean exactly the same as the Russian word *etnografiya* in any case? But no: the term anthropology is being forced upon us instead of the traditional, historically established term *etnografiya*, when in fact the former term already has its own accepted meaning in Russian academic tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Part of the background to the rise of what the Moscow sociologist Lev Gudkov has called 'aggressive nationalism'<sup>30</sup> was the new practical pressure with which anthropologists, like researchers of all kinds, were faced, and which stemmed, above all, from the near-total disappearance of state funding. In the Soviet period, research costs such as fieldwork expenses were routinely covered by a scholar's employing institution; in the early 1990s, on the other hand, even salaries started to be paid irregularly. The minute regulation of

research trips had disappeared, but so had support for getting to a desired destination. Meanwhile, costs of travel and accommodation had sharply increased. For example, in August 2011 round-trip fares to Petropavlovsk Kamchatskii (in the far east of the Russian Federation) were at a minimum of \$700, an average month's salary for a Russian academic.<sup>31</sup> Researchers had to acquire swift expertise in preparing grant applications, a totally unfamiliar activity to most. Libraries were also cash-starved, and could often not afford book purchases and journal subscriptions, making the new freedom to read a dead letter. It was not just dyed-in-the-wool anti-Westerners who resented these developments. In particular, the preference of grant-awarding bodies for work that was of obvious social relevance generated a great deal of criticism, being seen as a way of imposing a research agenda on the Russian professional public that was not too different from the five-year targets of the planned economy. The promotion of 'applied research' was an obvious route (in the view of many post-Soviet academics) to deskilling and loss of status, and away from genuine scholarship:

A professor or lecturer in a Western European or American university who works on some really narrow and not at all 'topical' subject will still have the chance to get on with his or her research, and won't have to worry about how to make the history of some fourteenth-century Croatian town look as though it could qualify for support under 'the development of the rule of law in post-socialist Eastern Europe'. Russian specialists, by contrast, probably ought to be considered world leaders in the art of adapting scholarly projects to the 'practical' demands of today's academic market. Which is why Russian academic society these days sometimes looks like a fleet of trading vessels following the wind of grant sponsorship.<sup>32</sup>

In the Soviet period, many academics had seen scholarship and science (*nauka*) in terms of what they were able to achieve *despite* exhortations to 'reflect Soviet reality' and to pay attention to the latest set of officially-endorsed concerns. It is scarcely surprising that the 'research objectives' advocated by a new set of paymasters should have generated irritation. And given that, in the 1970s and 1980s, the study of national heritage had been at some level a gesture of scholarly autonomy, concentrating on 'traditional culture' did not necessarily seem, for those who chose this route, a way of endorsing what has been termed the 'restorative nostalgia' or 'nostalgic modernisation' promoted by governing elites in the post-Soviet period.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly, large numbers of scholars continued to work on 'traditional culture' and to adopt the established approaches to the subject, taking their primary sources from the records made by ethnographers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet treating the material as though it were outside time, standing for an authentic peasant culture that external interference could not reshape, but only destroy. Several books of this type were published in the 2000s.<sup>34</sup> However, one should note that simultaneously 'traditional culture' is