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The Fall of Soviet Ethnography, 1928–38[1]

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In the spring of 1928, not quite 11 years after the Bolshevik revolution, Stalin plunged the Soviet Union into another 'Great Transformation," this time surely "the last and decisive." All surviving exploiters were to be exterminated, all backwardness was to be banished, and all caution and hesitation were to be thrown to the winds. Once again, Russia would leap over centuries and catch up with its perennial nemesis, the West.

The road to socialism (increasingly understood as military and economic self-sufficiency) lay through a rapid build-up of heavy industry. The money for industrialization had to come from the peasantry, and, to make procurement easier and agriculture more productive, unruly villages had to be transformed into large collective farms. At the same time, the workers and poor peasants were urged to become truly self-sufficient by going to school, "liquidating their illiteracy," and acquiring professional skills as well as "real culture."

The inspiration for the new socialist revolution was provided by the old Bolshevik belief that objective laws were made to be broken. In Stalin's revised version, economic constraints, "levels of social development," and even physical environment counted for nothing. According to the main slogan of the time, there were no fortresses that the Bolsheviks could not storm. No economic plan was too ambitious, no ethnic or social group too backward, and no climate too severe for a cohesive army of determined revolutionaries.

In keeping with the Bolshevik tradition, this was a class war, and every vestige of the past was personified and socially defined. To achieve industrialization, one had to unmask the numerous wreckers and saboteurs among the bourgeois engineers; to collectivize the peasants, one needed to divide them along class lines and then "dekulakize"[2] the enemy; to rationalize the administration, one had to purge the scheming and stalling bureaucrats. Every village and every profession had its own dark forces of the past, and in the course of the Stalinist revolution all of these groups, real or imagined, were fused into one hostile army so that refusal to join an agricultural collective or to endorse a "progressive" theory of literary criticism put one alongside terrorists, spies, and saboteurs. Bourgeois ethnographers were as dangerous as unrepentant kulaks, and errors in the theory of backwardness were as pernicious as backwardness itself. In fact, as party leaders made clear, they were one and the same thing or, even better, one and the same person. "The enemy" was akin to a shaman's spirit: ubiquitous, perfidious, and ever pretending to be someone else. As one Stalinist ethnographer put it (Khotinskii 1930:5, my translation),

> In the desperate last struggle the class enemy keeps changing and modifying his strategy, mobilizing all forces from religion to school, from desk-bound theoretician to petty thief or pacifist, from supposedly innocent researcher to arrogant wrecker, from social-fascist to downright bandit and arsonist. . . . It would be ludicrous to think that a wrecker armed with "scholarly" glasses is less dangerous than his companion armed with a gas mask or some other kind of lethal mask [*sic*].

Exposing the enemy among desk-bound theoreticians was sometimes as difficult as finding exploiters among the hunters and gatherers of Siberia. To draw the line between friend and foe, one needed to know the difference between a progressive and a harmful theory, and in most academic fields there was no direct guidance from either "the classics of Marxism" or the current party leadership. The country's new rulers assumed that every aspect of reality had one correct interpretation that corresponded to the objective laws of nature. They also agreed on who the ultimate arbiter was and derived their legitimacy from their "faithfulness to the theory of Marx-Engels-Lenin." Thus, in principle, government officials could issue encyclicals on doctrinal problems in every field of inquiry, from pedagogy to chemistry. In

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2. I.e., repress or eliminate. *Kulak* ("fist") was an old Russian word for prosperous peasant and a new Bolshevik term for rural exploiter and—by extension—any enemy of collectivization.

the 1920s, however, they almost never did: there were limits to what the old Bolsheviks saw as politically relevant or even socially appropriate. Instead they opened up the professions by instituting a system of social selection in higher education, hoping that healthy social roots would guarantee sound theoretical judgment (Fitzpatrick 1979:89–112).

In one sense these hopes were realized. By the beginning of the Stalinist revolution most professions included young Soviet-educated practitioners bent on transforming their fields in accordance with Marxist principles. Triumphant yet defensive beneficiaries of class-based college quotas, they were passionately committed to the people and the ideology that had pulled them out of the "swamp of backwardness" and distrusted and often disliked their "bourgeois" professors (and eventually colleagues), who tended to be older, more experienced, and better-trained professionally (Fitzpatrick 1978:28–31). Politically the young communists enjoyed a definite edge—or at least had high hopes for the future: they were trying to apply the official discourse to their disciplines and could easily claim that any opposition to their activities was tantamount to counterrevolution. It was the "theoretical front" that presented them with the greatest challenge. What did Marxism stand for in each particular case? In art and literature, was it forward-looking avant-gardism or down-to-earth forms accessible to the masses? In philosophy, was it "mechanism" or dialectics? In psychology, was it "materialist" biological reductionism or activist social environmentalism? The degree of intensity of the antiestablishment struggle and of the Marxist internal debate varied from one profession to another. By 1928 the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers had bullied its way to the top of the publishing world; the physiologists, reactologists, and reflexologists had all but outlawed subjective psychology while still fighting it out among themselves, and Marxist historians seemed united behind their leader Mikhail Pokrovskii while coexisting rather amicably with their non-Marxist colleagues (Barber 1981, Bauer 1952, Brown 1953, Fitzpatrick 1978, Joravsky 1961, Graham 1967).

Of all the disciplines that fell within the confines of traditional Marxism, ethnography was the most innocent of "bolshevizing" (Joravsky's term) tendencies. It was associated with the study of backward peoples and bizarre customs and thus did not seem very attractive to many young communists, who thirsted for "real action" or ideological controversy. Furthermore, although the acknowledged leaders of the field, Lev Shternberg and Vladimir Bogoraz, were not Marxists, they did not easily fit into the "bourgeois scholar" category. Both were well-known martyrs to the revolutionary cause, and Shternberg had been mentioned favorably by Engels himself. The international reputation of the two men went far beyond that, and both were known at home as "the classics of Russian ethnography."[3]

How to define ethnography, or ethnology, was a matter of lively debate. The 1920s saw a great expansion of the discipline in Western Europe and the United States. Classical evolutionism was in decline: post–World War scepticism had led to doubts about global progress and the psychic unity of mankind, while a new emphasis on fieldwork seemed to confirm these doubts by producing numerous examples of apparent retrogression and simplification. Theories of universal development were out of fashion, and Morgan's, Tylor's, and Spencer's grand systems were being criticized as too abstract and based on preselected and secondhand evidence. Great stress was laid on pragmatism and scientific rigor, and the theories that seemed to meet those criteria were usually concerned with migrations and diffusion. At the same time, the growing fields of sociology and psychology were encroaching on traditional ethnographic territory and prompting a great deal of soul-searching.

The Russia of the 1920s was fertile terrain for some of the new approaches. Young scholars and politicians worshipped materialism, the natural sciences, and the "limitless possibilities" of technology. Popular gurus claimed that all social sciences could be reduced to basic biological or mechanical components or at least improved through the introduction of "truly scientific" methods. Among ethnographers, Boas was often praised for his historicism and moderation, but it was German ethnology, particularly the work of Ratzel, Frobenius, and the *Kulturkreis* school of Schmidt and Graebner, that received the greatest acclaim. According to Bogoraz (1926:129, my translation),

> Approximately 20 years ago ethnography knew only two approaches: either isolated descriptions of individual tribes or broad universal generalizations based on superficial and uncritically selected material. Now broad generalizations are to be supplemented by narrower theories that encompass the natural ties of peoples and groups that live in close proximity, united (albeit not always) by a common origin and above all linked into a single geographical complex by common natural conditions and common cultural achievements produced as a result of mutual influences.

Bogoraz went on to formulate—and to teach his students—something he called ethnogeography, the history of culture as a "resultant of geographical, anthropological, and economic factors." He talked about the spread of culture according to the laws of geometry, about positive and negative "alternating currents of culture," and about the mutual repulsion of races (Bogoraz 1928*a*, *b*). For most of Bogoraz's colleagues this was go-

3. Before the revolution both men had been "populists," i.e., believed in the moral purity, social justice, and socialist potential of the Russian peasant commune. Both had joined the underground revolutionary organization "The People's Will" and had eventually been exiled to Siberia, where they discovered even purer noble savages as well as the new and exciting science of ethnography. Shternberg had been commended by Engels for finding survivals of "group marriage" among the Sakhalin Nivkh, and Bogoraz—along with his fellow exile Vladimir Jochelson—had participated in Boas's North Pacific Expedition.

ing too far, but the spirit of daring experimentation was shared by all. Even Shternberg, who never wavered in his commitment to classical evolutionism, was greatly intrigued by some Freudian notions and incorporated them into his work (Shternberg 1927).

One influence that was conspicuous by its absence was Marxism. In contrast to what was happening in many other fields, there were Marxist ethnographers but no serious attempt to construct a Marxist ethnography. In 1924 one militant atheist accused contemporary ethnographers of fruitless theorizing (a standard formula used by young activists), adding that Shternberg's Institute of Geography "reeked of old-fashioned populism" (Matorin 1931:12). In the summer of the same year, when all colleges were being purged of "socially alien elements," a group of radical "proletarian" students from the Institute of Geography complained to Moscow and asked for a new curriculum (both Shternberg and Bogoraz were abroad at the time). When classes resumed in the fall, the Institute had to offer a host of Marxist and political subjects and to drop all of its courses deemed unrelated to the humanities (Ratner-Shternberg 1935: 144–45). The latter was not only a blow to ethnogeography but also a great disappointment for Shternberg, who had hoped to build up ethnography as a universal science of culture. At the end of the school year the Institute was attached to Leningrad University and lost its administrative autonomy altogether. Still, the cause of Marxist ethnography as a doctrine and a school was not greatly advanced. Professional publications remained undisturbed by Marxism, and professional organizations had few Marxists. Young would-be iconoclasts were lurking in the background (and were still being taught ethnogeography, among other things), but in 1928 they were not organized and had no theoretical platform.

Thus when Stalin announced that the class war was on and that all non-Marxist scholars were on the wrong side of the barricade, the attack against ethnography had to come from the outside. During the first battle V. D. Aptekar', a delegate from the Academy of the History of Material Culture, fired a salvo against Bogoraz and his "hidden struggle against Marxism." The alleged offense was "the attitude of the scholarly community towards the Japhetic theory of N. Ia. Marr, which is being subjected to a most disgraceful campaign of persecution—all the more disgraceful because it is taking place in Soviet Russia" (Aptekar' 1928).

N. Ia. Marr and his disciples from the Academy of the History of Material Culture had good reason to dislike the scholarly community in general and ethnography in particular. As a young Georgian linguist never trained in comparative methodology, Marr had developed a strong antipathy for the Indo-Europeanist slant of mainstream academic linguistics. He claimed that the other languages (including Georgian) were neglected, patronized, and colonized in much the same way as were their speakers. The same held true for the class-based concern with "literary languages" at the expense of "living popular speech." Marr's declared task and moral duty was to restore justice and to triumph over linguistic imperialism in both the national and the social realm.

By the late 1920s he had come a long way. Greatly encouraged by the postrevolutionary interest in intellectual reductionism, he had formulated his revolutionary "new theory of language," otherwise known as the "Japhetic theory," and had become something of an elder statesman among Marxist scholars. According to Marr, language belonged to the social superstructure and thus reflected the cyclical changes of the economic base. In other words, it belonged to history and, like any other institution, was characterized by a tendency towards progress. The Indo-Europeanist theory of a constantly fragmented protolanguage was idealistic and unnatural in that it postulated a movement towards plurality. In fact the history of language, like that of the society it served, was a process of steady amalgamation until all speech became fused under communism. The numerous "diffuse," "mollusk-like" languages of primitive societies had given rise to the more sophisticated languages of later stages, but their four basic elements (the names of the original "totemic production units") remained the irreducible components of human speech. All the words in all languages were ultimately derived from one of these four elements. On the other hand, the so-called linguistic families represented different but historically related developmental stages. Chinese was a relict of ancient monosyllabic and polysemantic languages; next on the scale of evolution came the Uralo-Altaic, the Japhetic (Georgian and other languages of the Caucasus), and finally the Semitic family. In a different formulation, the history of language consisted of linear, synthetic, agglutinative, and inflective stages, each corresponding to a specific socioeconomic formation and developing dialectically (i.e., replacing another via a revolutionary "leap"). This meant that all languages were historically and semantically connected; all contributed to the global "glottogony," and none—except for future communist speech—could claim superiority over others. The formalism of Indo-Europeanism had finally been overcome, the unity of human language had been restored, and linguistics had become part of history. The job of the "new linguist" was to reconstruct material evolution through language (hence the name of the academy) (Marr 1930, Bykhovskaia 1930, Bykovskii 1931*a*, Kusik'ian 1933, Meshchaninov 1935, Khudiakov 1935).

Marr's irritation with ethnography stemmed from the intellectual and emotional core of his doctrine. As far as he was concerned, ethnography had artificially—and maliciously—divorced the history of the exploited classes and preliterate peoples from the history of mankind. With imperialistic arrogance, ethnographers were involved in a patronizing examination of whatever had been discarded by bourgeois historians and linguists. There was no room for them in the Marxist scheme of things (Marr 1930, Bykhovskaia 1930). Another reason for the particular shrillness and enthusiasm with which Marr and his youthful students answered the call for class war in the academic world was that in spite (and, as they would have it, because) of their "momentous

achievements," they had not managed to break into the professional establishment. In contrast to some other Marxist groupings, such as Pokrovskii's school in history, they had seen nothing but ridicule and indifference. Marr was routinely referred to as a charlatan and his four elements as alchemy. Characteristically, a dissertation by one of Marr's closest disciples was described as "sheer fantasy" by an anonymous outside reviewer (Aptekar' and Bykovskii 1931:31–34; Bykovskii 1931*a*:1). When the cultural revolution began, their desire for revenge was almost palpable.

It began in April 1929, when the Academy of the History of Material Culture organized a large conference for Moscow and Leningrad ethnographers. Speaking for the hosts, V. B. Aptekar' declared that ethnology was "a bourgeois surrogate for social sciences" that claimed a separate existence for such phenomena as "culture" and "ethnos." By looking for causal explanations within the superstructure rather than the base, it stood the problem "on its head" and contradicted the very essence of the only truly scientific approach to the study of culture—historical materialism. Marxism and ethnology were incompatible: theoretical ethnology was a class-based distortion, and practical ethnography was not (and should not be) any different from Marxist sociology (Soveshchanie 1929:115–16).

The young bolshevizing ethnographers faced a serious problem. On the one hand, they were eager to dislodge their seniors, disrupt the status quo, and generally wreak havoc on the unwelcoming "bourgeois" world of academe. On the other, they were now part of this world and wanted to prove the usefulness of their newly acquired expertise to true science and socialist construction. Most of them were sympathetic to various kinds of intellectual and organizational reductionism but not quite prepared to have themselves decreed out of existence. After a long debate the conference accepted Aptekar's theses in the case of *ethnology*, which was defined as a bourgeois attempt to construct a separate science devoted to the study of culture, but made it clear that within historical materialism there was room for practical *ethnography*, "the historical study of temporally and spatially specific human societies and cultural phenomena" (Soveshchanie 1929:118). In what way such a study would be different from Marxist historiography was not explained—presumably because the sponsors of the resolution did not know themselves. What they did know was that their work had to be useful: it had to be a part of the party's struggle for a better future. The practical (as opposed to theoretical) goals of Soviet ethnographers consisted in the study of popular life in the light of the "Great Transformation" and in the participation of ethnographers in that transformation (Soveshchanie 1929:118–23).

As elsewhere in the country, the transformation was usually understood in terms of a struggle against its enemies. For three years after the conference the young radicals, implicitly supported by party leaders (or so everybody thought), waged war on the non-Marxists and their organizations, journals, professional goals, and professional topics. Museums were closed, scholarly societies disbanded, the teaching of ethnography discontinued, and teachers of ethnography persecuted (Tolstov 1930:87; Matorin 1931:34; Etnograficheskaia 1931; Leningradskoe 1931; Khudiakov 1931:167–69; K organizatsii 1931; Bykovskii 1931*b*::4, Maizel' 1931; Razmanov 1931; Ersari 1932; Matorin 1932).[4] As the exhilaration of destruction grew, so did the number of enemies, taboo subjects, and "subversive activities." At the same time the social and generational aspects of the campaign became more explicit, with the "revolutionaries" accusing the "counterrevolutionaries" of "individualistic class habits which had led . . . to caste-like isolationism and hierarchical divisions" (Leningradskoe 1931), as well as of writing books which had been "muddling the minds of the new generation of scholars" (Bykovskii 1931*b*:4).

The non-Marxists put up some resistance in the early stages of the cultural revolution. At the 1929 conference P. F. Preobrazhenskii defended ethnology and the *Kulturkreis* school, while Bogoraz cautiously remarked that ethnography was, after all, broader than linguistics. (Shternberg died before the start of the hostilities and thus remained a "classic.") Later, as tension mounted and the distinction between "scholarly glasses" and a "gas mask" disappeared completely, most of the older professors either fell silent or, as with Preobrazhenskii and Bogoraz, tried their best to become Marxists (Bogoraz 1930, 1931; Preobrazhenskii 1930).

Unfortunately for them, however, this was not much easier in 1931 than it had been in 1929. One way of being a Marxist was to discover and analyze class differentiation and class conflict. This was a political requirement: collectivization was a given, and collectivization presupposed the existence of classes. On a loftier theoretical plane, all Marxist ethnographers agreed that their primary task was to define the place of a given society in the chain of sociopolitical formations and, having thus established their bearings, proceed to examine the interplay of base and superstructure and the operation of specific economic, social, and cultural phenomena. They also assumed, however, that the unique subject of ethnography (as part of history) was the study of backward or, rather, primitive communist societies. In other words, the ethnographers' usefulness to the building of socialism consisted in their ability to uncover class structures, while their task as scholars was to study societies that by definition had no classes. The resulting difficulty led to great terminological confusion and con-

4. One of the most bloodthirsty young Turks was S. P. Tolstov, who ruled the Soviet ethnographic profession in the 1940s–1960s. Among his contributions to the cultural revolution was a vicious attack on D. K. Zelenin, an influential non-Marxist philologist whom he accused of "providing a 'scientific' justification for those groups inside and outside the Soviet Union that were interested in the growth of Russian chauvinism" (Tolstov 1930:87). Nineteen years later Tolstov presided over a campaign that found Zelenin guilty of antipatriotic "cosmopolitanism" and of minimizing the cultural accomplishments of the Russian people (Potekhin 1949:24; Obsuzhdenie doklada 1949:171).

tributed to painful doubts about ethnography's raison d'être (Tokarev 1929; Bogoraz 1930:6–16; Preobrazhenskii 1930; Tolstov 1931).

Some unexpected help came from psychology. While ethnographers were having a hard time trying to be Marxists, Marxist psychologists were having a field day with "primitive peoples." The ideological inspiration for the Great Transformation in general and the cultural revolution in particular was the belief in the total plasticity of man and the unconditional primacy of the environment. The environment bore the sole responsibility for backwardness and superstition, and a revolutionary change in the environment was expected to result in prompt and predictable changes in society and the human psyche. The theoretical foundation and the ultramodern methodology for studying such processes were provided by the new science of pedology, or applied child psychology. Using various testing techniques, the pedologists claimed to be able to measure and predict the degree and forms of psychological mutability and thus put human engineering on a truly "scientific" basis. In this connection a "primitive" child was an especially fascinating and useful object for study, "particularly if one [bore] in mind that such a human organism should develop and grow at an accelerated rate, skipping whole historic periods" (Ventskovskii 1930:98). With the help of pedology, it would be possible to "speed up the adoption by various nationalities, particularly the backward ones, of Soviet technology, economy, and ideology" (Ventskovskii 1930:98). In other words (Bikchentai 1931:32),

> We need a builder, a member of the future communist society. We have a hunter, a pastoralist, a beekeeper, a peasant. How we can transform his psyche in the shortest time possible in such a way that he will inevitably become a member of the communist society—which environmental changes produce more effective results in this regard—is what interests us.

All but abandoned by bewildered ethnographers, the preindustrial peoples of the U.S.S.R. provided a testing ground for pedologists. Scientific expeditions were sent to Siberia and Central Asia, and native children had their IQ's measured and their attitudes evaluated—for the most part by student interns (Shubert 1930). The pedologists suggested environmental reasons for various instances of backwardness and made recommendations for their speedy elimination. Soon they ran into trouble, however. According to most tests, the native children were either hopelessly retarded or so different as to require a total revision of the testing techniques. At first this did not worry the researchers very much: great differences in both the social and the natural environment made such findings understandable. But as time went on, more and more pedologists found themselves saying that overcoming these differences might take more time and effort than they had anticipated. In some cases the numerous and enduring peculiarities of the "primitive mind" led the researchers away from pure environmentalism toward a study of the biological and psychological uniqueness of backward peoples (Frenkel' 1930; Shubert 1931:56–59; Blonskii 1932). This view was reinforced by a very successful exhibit of drawings by the native students of the Institute of the Peoples of the North. Influential avant-garde critics were impressed by their "high formal culture" and warned against the imposition of European conventions on people who obviously possessed "a unique artistic world view totally different from ours" (L. N. 1930, Mess 1930).

All this was unacceptable to both the party leaders and the majority of the new Soviet intelligentsia, who saw any suggestion of genetic ("racial") determinism as an attack on the revolution and on their own status. As Bukharin had put it in the early days of the Great Transformation, "If we were to take the point of view that racial and national characteristics were so great that it would take thousands of years to change them, then, naturally, all our work would be absurd" (Bauer 1952:81). The original sin of pedology was that no matter how optimistic the researchers were and how much they believed in psychic unity, the very formulation of their goals presupposed that there were limits to change—at least in time (Ventskovskii 1930:98). The pedologists owed their existence to the belief that some environmental factors were prejudicial to growth and saw their primary task as finding ways to compensate for these drawbacks. Consequently, they could not help irritating certain groups by devising separate (usually more long-term) educational strategies for women, national minorities, and the socially disadvantaged (Gasilov 1929:31; Blonskii 1932).

Even more unfortunate was the fact that while the First Five-Year Plan was "changing the face of Russia," the test results did not indicate a parallel change in human minds. Given the expectation of an immediate and automatic connection between the two, pedologists had a lot of explaining to do. The speed, thoroughness, and correctness of the Great Transformation itself could not be doubted, so the obvious culprits were the tests and the people who put them together. By mid-1932 pedology had all but disintegrated under the accusations—and later confessions—of incompetence, slander against Soviet children, and other politically harmful activities (Nikolaev 1931, Protiv 1932, Bikchentai 1932). The field languished for a while longer, but in the era of consciousness, individual achievement, and cadres "deciding everything" there was no legitimate place for it (Fitzpatrick 1979:228–30). All peoples, including the most backward, were subject to limitless change, and that change could be effected directly through education. In fact, with no slanderous tests to disprove it, both environmental and psychological change could be postulated as givens, and the work of practical training could begin in earnest (Bauer 1952:83–112).

Pedology was not the only discipline that produced unacceptable evidence with respect to the "underdeveloped peoples." The very existence of ethnography seemed to suggest that some groups took too long to become modern. Highly suspect from the start, it was a prime candidate for abolition or self-destruction. In early 1932 N. M. Matorin, formerly the "populist"-bashing

provincial atheist and now the uncontested leader of Soviet ethnographers, declared that practical fieldwork under the existing conditions was imperialistic by nature. At the conference of 1929 he had led the pragmatists against the abolitionists and had insisted on a special role for ethnography; now he agreed that ethnography was nothing but the first chapter in a history book. "The term 'ethnography' may be retained for that part of history which studies the preclass society and its survivals" (Matorin 1931:20). This meant that the parts of reality that had undergone the Great Transformation could not be studied by ethnographers lest doubt be cast on the effectiveness of the transformation. "It is clear to me now," wrote Matorin (p. 21), "that there is nothing specifically ethnographic in a study of a kolkhoz [collective farm] or sovkhoz [state farm] equipped with modern technology." And as all kolkhozes and sovkhozes were expected to be thus equipped, ethnographers had no business studying them.

The logical step of dropping a name that had effectively lost all meaning was taken by the All-Russian Conference on Archaeology and Ethnography in May 1932. On the basis of addresses by Matorin and chief archaeologist (and a student of Marr) S. N. Bykovskii, the conference formally expelled both sciences from Marxism. Archaeology was charged with separating and deifying material things while ethnography was accused of doing the same for culture. Sciences were real (Marxist) inasmuch as they studied separate forms of the movement of matter (objective laws). Neither the excavation of cultural artifacts nor the participant observation of society was based on any separate set of laws, and therefore the distinction between Marxist ethnography and bourgeois ethnology was in itself "a particularly harmful and disorienting activity which employed leftist jargon to conceal rightist contents and various forms of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois opportunism and eclecticism" (Rezoliutsiia 1932:13). Archaeology and ethnography were in fact nothing but concrete methods of historical data gathering, and any claim to the contrary was patently anti-Marxist. Even keeping a special name for the branch of history that dealt with "primitive peoples" was a tribute to colonialism (Rezoliutsiia 1932:12–13). Rather than constructing nonexistent sciences, the practitioners of this kind of history should devote themselves to the study of the issues raised by Marx, Engels, and Lenin, namely (p. 14),

> (1) the process of ethnogenesis and the distribution of ethnic and national groups; (2) material production in its specific variants; (3) the origins of the family; (4) the origins of classes; (5) the origins and various forms of religion, art, and other superstructures; (6) the forms of disintegration of primitive-communist feudal [*sic*] society in the capitalist environment; (7) the forms of transformation of precapitalist society into socialism directly, bypassing capitalism; (8) the construction of culture national in form and socialist in content.

The victory of Marr's men came at the wrong time. In October 1931 Stalin's letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* had signalled the beginning of the end of the cultural revolution (Stalin 1946:84–102). Radical experimentation, utopianism, professor-bashing, and professional abolitionism were counterproductive in the midst of a campaign for the "consolidation of achievements"—all the more so because the new breed of party leaders obviously found cultural and academic iconoclasm in poor taste. Teachers, rote memorization, and discipline were returning to schools, romantic heroes to literature, "middle-class values" to family life, and punishment to the legal system. Equality was proclaimed to have been a confused petit-bourgeois invention, and the institutions that had been destined to "wither away" were reasserting themselves. The "cultural heritage" and its embattled representatives were coming back to replace their former prosecutors, now "left deviationists."

In this context the decisions of the conference struck a false note. Shortly after Matorin and Bykovskii had erased the last reminder of separate appoaches to "historic" and "nonhistoric" peoples, the party's Central Committee issued a decree against collectivizers in the Arctic territories, declaring such levelling to be the root of all evil and demanding an immediate stop to the "mechanical and crude application of the experience of the advanced regions of the Union to backward native regions" (O rabote 1932:53). In relation to the new party line, ethnography was in danger of moving toward an extreme that was opposite to that of pedology. When the conference resolution was finally published, it was accompanied by a disclaimer stating that the "burial" of ethnography and archaeology was the result of "simplistic leftist attitudes" and led to the "nihilistic negation of the role of the old heritage in science" (Itogi 1932). More "self-criticism" followed, and Soviet ethnography continued to exist. Still, the party did not intervene directly, and Matorin, Bykovskii, and their comrades retained their positions at the head of Soviet ethnography and even succeeded in carrying out their ideological agenda. (In this they were helped by the fact that most scholars were not certain what to do under the new conditions and thus adhered by default to the Marrist minimalist platform.) Fieldwork and the study of specific contemporary societies disappeared almost completely, to be replaced by an exegesis of Marr's Japhetic writings and Engels's *Origin of the Family*. Ethnography had been effectively reduced to the theory of the "primitive communist formation," and the debate revolved around the genesis of class institutions, the problem of internal contradictions within preclass societies, and the role of survivals in subsequent evolution (see *Sovetskaia etnografiia* 1933–36).

Thus, all the preindustrial peoples of the U.S.S.R. had become survivals. As the present was assumed to be socialist, nonsocialist reality became past. Almost overnight, peoples without history were summarily consigned to history. In an indirect rebuke to those who still thought (or thought it their duty to state) that there was no life without class struggle, Stalin's letter to *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* had asserted that an alliance with "oppressed peoples and colonies"—and not with the oppressed classes among those peoples—had always been

the cornerstone of Bolshevik ideology (Stalin 1946:91–92).[5] A consequence of this statement was the appearance of numerous works on the struggle of native peoples against tsarist colonialism, a trend greatly reinforced by a special exhortation from *Pravda* on January 27, 1936 (see also O. K. 1936:79–83).

However, the traditional ("primitive") subjects of ethnography were not to be reduced to mere episodes in the history of Russian imperialism. First and foremost, they were to represent stages in the development of mankind. In accordance with the new goals of ethnography/history, researchers' most important task was to determine a particular group's stage of development and decide what to do about it. This remained a dangerous undertaking, with most of the participants in the discussion struggling against logic and exposing themselves to accusations of being non-Marxist. The old ethnographers had had to accept the political imperative of finding exploiters in societies they considered classless, while the radicals continued to claim that hunting and gathering peoples had somehow progressed to the feudal or even capitalist stage without changing their economies. The latter view was mostly held by the practitioners of collectivization and those cultural revolutionaries for whom class struggle was a way of life. The legitimacy of their position was derived from the posited reality of the Great Transformation and from Engels's (1970 [1884]:86–87, as quoted and analyzed in Khaptaev 1933) definition of the "childlike simplicity" of preclass society:

> No soldiers, no gendarmes or police, no nobles, kings, regents, prefects, or judges, no prisons, no lawsuits—and everything takes its orderly course. . . . There cannot be any poor or needy—the communal household and the gens know their responsibilities towards the old, the sick, and those disabled in war. All are equal and free—the women included.

Could this be said about any group in the U.S.S.R.? No, it could not. Therefore primitive communism (preclass society, the clan system) no longer existed; anything that looked like it was actually a survival of the previous stage of development. The notion of survivals was central to all arguments: it provided an almost limitless flexibility of analysis by allowing the researcher to dismiss any fact that did not fit the adopted definition. Moreover, in the eyes of the professional discoverers of exploitation the survivals were nothing but cynical kulak mystification, artificially maintained under the "slogan of clan solidarity and blood relationship" (Anisimov 1933:47). Traditional kinship-based social units were seen as hotbeds of militant backwardness, "an obstacle to socialist construction and a tool of the class enemy" (Danilin 1933:115). The implication was that non-Russian exploiters were equal to Russian exploiters were equal to capitalists (or at least feudal lords), but the actual attribution of a given group to a particular socioeconomic formation usually got lost in the survivals. The important thing was the struggle—the struggle against the kulaks and the struggle against the "neopopulists" ("right opportunists") who were myopic or malicious enough to regard the survivals as genuinely collective social and economic communities (Medvedev 1932:76; Khaptaev 1933; Danilin 1933; Anisimov 1933; Maslov 1934; Khaptaev 1935; Skachko 1934:6–9).[6]

For their part, the alleged neopopulists accused the radicals of theoretical ignorance and occasionally of Trotskyism. Obviously encouraged by the official campaign against "leftist simplifications," they insisted that certain—particularly circumpolar—societies did not know capital, surplus value, or an agricultural proletariat, that the idyllic picture of primitive communism was an example of the "vulgar egalitarianism" so derided now by comrade Stalin, and that traditional collective institutions could and should be used as a basis for new socialist collectives (Bilibin 1932, 1933; Skachko 1933, 1934; Terletskii 1934; Krylov 1935:93). After 1932 the political climate in Moscow seemed right for this message, but attempts to develop the argument ran into severe conceptual problems. One still could not deny the existence of class struggle, and not even the broadest definition of primitive communism could be stretched that far. Just as in the 18th century, native societies had to be defined in terms of what they were not—except that now the picture was not static and the various peoples were seen as constantly moving from one point to another, never quite arriving. According to one of the leaders of the so-called Committee of the North (created in 1924 as the Soviet answer to the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs), Soviet Arctic foragers were "in transition from barter to commodity production and from preclass to class society," while another Committee theoretician suggested that they represented a "system of underdeveloped serf relations" (Skachko 1933:51; Bilibin 1933). Even the direction of evolution seemed problematic. Why were the "preclan" Chukchi so much more developed than the clan Iukagir? Why was it that the farther away one got from the Russian market, the greater was the social differentiation and the economic develop-

5. See also Arzhanov (1932). *Revoliutsiia i natsional'nosti* withdrew as "erroneous" its favorable review (no. 1, 1930) of Drabkina's popular *Natsional'nyi i kolonial'nyi vopros v tsarskoi Rossii* (1930).

6. Most of the examples come from my own field of circumpolar history and ethnography, but all Soviet scholars faced the same basic challenge: the Great Transformation was a class phenomenon, hence all societies that had undergone the Great Transformation used to be class societies. Accordingly, following collectivization and forced settlement, experts on Central Asia ended up with the concept of "nomadic feudalism" (Vladimirtsov 1934, Bernshtam 1934, Preobrazhenskii 1930); after the last word had been said on the "antifeudal" revolution in China, Sinologists rejected the "Asiatic mode of production" (Barber 1981:46–56; Shteppa 1962:71–78), and in the wake of the reinterpretation of the term *socialism* ("in one country"), historians had to reconsider the nature of Russia's own feudalism and capitalism (Barber 1981:56–79; Shteppa 1962:78–90; Yaresh 1956:48–61). Though ultimately very important for Soviet ethnographic theory, however, the latter two battles were waged "on the historical front" and did not affect ethnography as a discipline.

ment? Why did commodity fur production produce less wealth and fewer exploiters than primitive reindeer breeding? Moreover, if there were no full-fledged classes among the native northerners, what was the antagonistic contradiction that propelled their historic development? And how come the 200 years of "Russian serf-owning capitalism" had failed to produce classes if, in the accepted view of the time, it "acted in Siberia with all the cynicism of primary accumulation" (Drabkina 1930:60; Skachko 1935)?

The debate was still unresolved when in 1936 the last debaters departed the scene. The neopopulists lost their institutional base and publication outlet after the Committee of the North was quietly disbanded as useless, while the radicals were accused of heresy and effectively banned together with their science of Soviet ethnography and their journal *Sovetskaia etnografiia.* Matorin and Bykovskii were arrested as terrorists and enemies of the people who had deliberately sabotaged the sciences that had been entrusted to them: "instead of studying specific facts on the basis of the methodology of Marxism-Leninism, they engaged in pseudosociological scholasticism and demanded the same from others, disorienting a number of scholars and distracting them from their direct responsibilities" (Ot redaktsii 1936:3). Thus disoriented, the young ethnographers had embarked on "an abstract formal-logical search for the law of contradiction and development of preclass society" while replacing real scholarship with "pompous but totally meaningless talk about stages" (pp. 4–5).

The wording of the indictment seemed to suggest that the old ethnography was back, but the uncertainty, fear, and disarray were so great as to render the surviving ethnographers practically speechless. Fieldwork was largely ignored, and some of the old professors (including Preobrazhenskii, Matorin's most vocal "bourgeois" opponent) followed their former persecutors into prison. At about the same time, pedology was delivered the coup de grace when all its "pseudoscientific experiments" and "meaningless and harmful tests" were outlawed by a Central Committee decree (Valitov 1936:44). As for the new Marxist linguistics, it survived until 1950, when Stalin personally dethroned Marr and put an end to the "pompous talk about stages."

By then, however, ethnography was back on its feet. Revived during World War II in its 1932 form, it had picked up where Matorin and friends had left off and proceeded to apply itself primarily to the study of "ethnogenesis," "material culture," origins of classes, and ways to bypass capitalism, among other things. The men in charge were former radicals who had survived the purges and, on Stalin's prodding (1967:99–101, 114–71), managed to exorcise the ghosts of their past and reinvent ethnography as a study of ethnicity. In the late 1960s they began to make room for the emerging "ethnosociologists," and the nature of the discipline once again became a problem as Iu. Bromlei embarked on his long search for the elusive "ethnos." By the mid-1980s "culture" had begun to compete with "ethnicity" as a legitimate field of study and Gorbachev had plunged the Soviet Union into another Great Transformation. Once more, but in a very different fashion, Russia was to catch up with its perennial nemesis, the West. Whither ethnography?

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