

Etnos: A Life History of the *etnos* Concept among the Peoples of the North

Building on the observation of Ernest Gellner (1988), that social and political thought was incubated within Russian ethnography, this project will examine the status of ethnogenetic thinking in post-Soviet Russia. The *etnos* concept (Bromley 1973; 1988), with its radical primordialism, has been associated strongly with Soviet state-building (Anderson 2000; Banks 1996; Skalnik 2006) creating the unarticulated assumption that the theory crumbled along with Soviet institutions. It has been one of the surprises of the post-Soviet transition that 'etnos-style' arguments not only persist but are a vibrant part of Russian anthropology (Pavlinkaia 1996, 2008; Panchenko 2002) as in everyday life (Putin 2012). Given that European and North American anthropologists have traditionally interpreted *etnos* theory as a sort of deserted island, isolated from the main currents of the discipline, this project aims to rewrite the concept in an active mood demonstrating its evocativeness both to contemporary Russian society and to the discipline as a whole.

Through a linked programme of archival research, directed interviews, field research and debate during open seminars and at conferences, the project will investigate the complex way that arguments over identity have both shaped a community of ethnologists and have become an important part of the 'life projects' of northern peoples today (Blaser et al. 2004). Although focussed on the Russian intellectual tradition, the project will build bridges to similar contexts and processes in Europe and North America. The project is timely as it will interview a senior cohort of Soviet ethnographers and may be one of the last opportunities to document the development of this anthropological tradition in their own words.

Although *etnos* theory has been widely documented and criticised in both English language anthropology (Banks 1996) and Russian language anthropology (Tishkov 2003; Shnirelman 2003), this project will be one of the first to write a life history of the concept. Rather than adjudicating whether or not particular *etnosy* exist as natural objects, the project instead will listen to accounts of how the concept has both built the lives of several generations of ethnographers and continues to enliven debates over entitlements in the public sphere. The project will narrow its scope to one specialised branch of ethnogenetic thinking – that concentrating on describing the construction of several specific 'less-numerous' peoples of the North (Potapov 1969; Gurvich 1980; Khomich 1976). This choice also allows us to focus our attention on recent post-Soviet discourses of 'indigeneity' which allows us to create new links to recent critiques of the concept in the English language literature (Kuper 2003, Krech 1999, Geschiere 2009).

The concept of *etnos* has a long history in Russian anthropology reaching well back into the Imperial period (Sokolovskii 1998). The first scholar to widely publish his thoughts on the concept was S.M. Shirokogoroff (1934, 1935) who developed his thoughts in dialogue with his fieldwork among Siberian Evenki (Tunguses). Shirokogoroff's model of the *etnos* emphasised in addition to the hallmarks of a common language, territory, ethnonym, a 'psychomental complex' which might today be best understood as a type of habitus. From the date that he published his works in English while working in exile, the concept of the *etnos* took divergent trajectories. It was built into the fundamental framework of Soviet Marxism-Leninism through an influential article published under Stalin's name (1950), was supported by the ethnolinguistic work of Nikolai Marr (2002; Alpatov 2004), and through Shirokogoroff's students in China became one of the founding pillars of contemporary Chinese *minzu* policy today (Liebold 2007; Wang 2010). The concept played an important role in the professionalization and institutionalisation of ethnography within the Soviet Union through the publication of a series of descriptive works which delimited the boundaries of the component nationalities of the new state. The series 'Peoples of the Earth' (*Narody mira*) and the northernist equivalent the volume *Peoples of Siberia (Narody Sibiri 1939-1940; Potapov*

& Levin 1956, 1964) sparked a discussion about identity, social organisation, 'class struggle', and the origins of *etnoses* (*etnogenezis*) (Institut etnografii 1800-1941). *Peoples of Siberia* was translated in 1964 and exercised a strong influence on the development of Euroamerican anthropology during the Cold War (Potapov & Levin 1964). A second bridge between East and West was built around the theory during the International Congress of Ethnological and Anthropological sciences that was held in Moscow in 1964 (Trudy 1968). At that time *etnos* was first presented to an international audience as a Soviet project common frame of discourse between European, American and Soviet anthropologists (Skalnik 2007). A key product of these debates was the development of a scientific consensus over a type of ethnological architecture wherein identities were framed by fundamental features such as 'diet', 'clothing', 'language'. While this consensus was being negotiated, these features also gradually came to life as they were built into the internal administrative boundaries of the state and the redistributive and educational policies within each ethno-political unit. We argue that the 'spatial' component to *etnos* thinking was one of the unique contributions of Soviet ethnographers to the term, although a persistent 'vitalism' is also a defining quality of this period (Ouskiné 2010). *Etnos* discourse in this period was not confined to the study of northern peoples, but the fact that these hunting and gathering peoples were seen to have 'jumped' stages of development while preserving an ethic of communalism provided an interesting intellectual case for developing the theory (Sergeev 1955; Slezkiné 1992) as captured by Ernest Gellner's (1975) seminal article 'The Soviet and the Savage'.

As is well-known, the development of American and European theories of identity instead focussed on individual ascriptions to collective markers. Various schools placed their emphasis on either perceptual or instrumentalist innovations such as the role of literacy (B. Anderson 1983), scholarly elites (Gellner 1983), Goffmanesque face-to-face transactions (Barth 1969) and ethnocultural traditions (Smith 1987). In addition, the discipline of ethnohistory developed, seemingly independently, a parallel tradition of theorising 'ethnogenesis'. That tradition writes of the origins of peoples through processes of hybridisation which are much more vibrant and voluntaristic than those sketched by B. Anderson, Gellner, and Smith. It is important to note that much of the Americanist ethnogenetic literature was built on a dialogue with indigenous people in the Americas, some of whom are Arctic peoples (Mulins & Paynter 2000; Galloway 1998; Sider 1994).

Over the last 120 years, these separate traditions have come into contact sporadically – interestingly usually at historically significant junctures. During the high Soviet period a series of translations was aimed at disseminating knowledge of Eurasian cultures primarily to cultural ecologists and archaeologists (Michael 1962; Dunn & Dunn 1974). Often these translator-editors had a deliberate pro-Soviet aim (Bartels & Bartels 1995). It is interesting to note that those pragmatic passages that we argue 'enlivened' the theory – the passages relating to class struggle and political reorganization – were often simply omitted in these translations. Most European audiences came to know of *etnos* theory through the mediating work of the East European émigré Ernest Gellner (1975; 1980, 1988). The period of perestroika also provided a new platform for contacts between East and West (Balzer 1999; Schindler 1991; Schweitzer 2000). Since that time, *etnos* theory has been analysed only on the side by European and North American ethnographers conducting fieldwork in the 'newly opened' region (Grant 1995; Gray 2004; Anderson 2000) Most of this analysis were based on rather former encounters with ethnographers at conferences or seminars and not through a deliberate strategy of interviewing or 'laboratory studies' as is now standard in the history of science. It would not be accurate to describe these sporadic contacts as a dialogue. On the whole, Euroamerican scholars distanced themselves from what they saw as the conceit of Soviet ethnologists that they documented 'objective' processes. Soviet scholars, when they were lucky enough to have access to source material, dismissed the emic perspective

pervasive in Western anthropology on the grounds that it did nothing to adjudicate what we might term today as the ‘resilience’ of communities. Teodor Shanin (1989), in an early sympathetic assessment, characterised *ethnos* thinking as a unique ‘toolkit’ which came up with a unique answer to the problem of describing the relation between individual and state without resorting to a corrosive relativism. The existence of these bridges calls into attention the ‘ruptures’, sometimes principled sometimes staged, separating these traditions from each other (Bertrand 2002).

Since the end of the Soviet period, there has not been a new moment of dialogue between these traditions. There are many possible reasons for this, but none has been deliberately researched. Schweitzer (2000) has noted the predominant influx of Western trained researchers into Russian fields somewhat overshadowing the work of local scholars. Certainly within Russian sociology and the new field of cultural studies (*kulturologiia*) there has been a growing interest in translation of Western scholars working on ethnicity (*etnichnost'*) and identity (*identichnost'*) (Tishkov 2003; Sokolovskii 1998, 2001). However arguably, these terms have been translated and applied at some distance from their originals. Nevertheless ethnogenetic thinking continues to grow both within the academy (Abaeva & Zhukovskaia 2004; Gemuev et al. 2005) and the public sphere (Putin 2012). There is also some evidence of this in the exponential popularity of the works of the geographer Lev Gumiliev (1990, 1997). Ethnogenetic discourse has been particularly prominent within the policy documents pertaining to Northern peoples, and as outlined below, in the way that northern peoples frame their claims to recognition.

Despite this diplomatic stand-off, European and North American scholars have also developed an interest in deep forms of symbolic attachment to place or to traditions, particularly with reference to recognised indigenous peoples enjoying the protection of international legislation. Warren (1998) made an early defence of so-called essentialist thinking among Pan-Mayan activists, to be followed by several impassioned defenses by indigenous scholars advocating indigenous methodologies (Kuokkanen 2007; Smith 1999; Alfred 2004). In the Canadian Arctic, the regional government of Nunavut requires that researchers adhere to a specific form ethnogenetic knowledge known as *Inuit Qaujimaqatuqangit* or IQ (Tester & Irniq 2008). Given this long history of interrupted debate, and evidence of convergence in thinking, we feel the time is ripe to initiate a new dialogue through the programme of archival work, interviews, publications and debate as outlined below. The primary ‘impact’ of this project will be re-build the bridges uniting these two traditions.

Proposed Research Methods

This project is designed to answer several specific research questions:

- How was the scholarly consensus on *ethnos* theory crafted in the early Soviet period?
- To what extent has the theory changed since the end of the Soviet period in 1991?
- To what degree are scholarly debates on *ethnos* theory mirrored or altered by debates in the public sphere within Russia, and how do contemporary academics relate to those debates?
- How do indigenous, 'less-numerous' peoples of the North describe their entitlements within a legal framework so strongly shaped by ethnogenetic discourse?

The project is guided by three hypotheses:

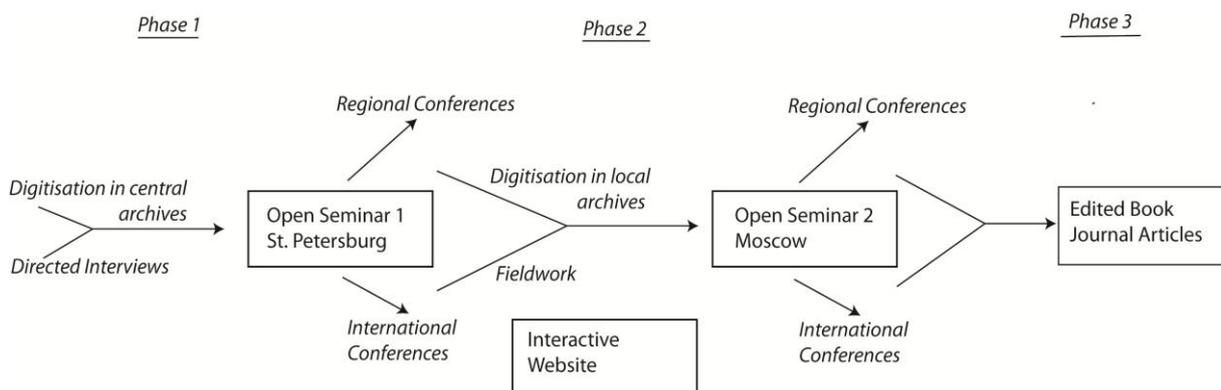
- That in Russia today, as within neo-liberal states worldwide, aggressive market institutions have led to a fundamentalist approach to identity, which is marked by essentialism, nationalism, and discussions of ‘purity’ in public and scientific discourse.

- That the idiom of primordialism in Russian scientific and public discourse can find its analogues in European and North American discussions of indigeneity, ethnohistory, and landscape – creating a bridge between these two disciplines.
- That an analysis of the construction of *ethnos* theory using archival research and interviews across the 20th century gives us a broader perspective on the interrelation between state power and identity politics.

To test these hypotheses, we have designed a method composed of five concrete activities:

1. The digitisation of previously unpublished ethnographic articles, discussions and fieldnotes regarding the classification of Russian and Siberian indigenous peoples;
2. A set of directed interviews and two open seminars with Russian and overseas experts on the history of the development of the concepts of *ethnos* and *etnogenezis*;
3. A set of short field expeditions to consult archival and administrative archives and to interview representatives of three peoples: Pomors, Arkhangel'sk Nenetses, and Altaians
4. A dissemination plan which includes the publication of primary (archival) material, an analysis of that material, and the debate of experts surrounding that material.
5. An impact plan involving the publication of primary data and interviews in newspapers, social media sites, and an interactive website. The above mentioned open seminars form an important bridge between traditional 'data gathering' and to generate texts and discussions designed to encourage public debate.

Each activity is designed to build on each other as described in the figure below.



These activities are a representation of critical qualitative methods aimed at outlining the life history or archaeology of a concept. Here we take our inspiration from both historians of science (Latour & Woolgar 1986; Law 2004) as from historians of anthropology (Stocking 1991; Hirsch 2005). In the first phase, we will transcribe and assemble a set of unpublished archived manuscripts where ideas about the identity of Russian northern peoples were exchanged, compared, and then pruned before being made public. Our method will be to share these recovered texts in a series of 'open field seminars' with contemporary ethnographers to interpret and analyse the changes in tone in the texts. The objective will be to document how a consensus was reached about framing specific 'natural' categories to describe a people. We will supplement this archived discussion with transcripts of interviews of many of the ethnographers, now retired, who attended these meetings. This may be the last opportunity to interview this elderly generation. In the second phase of the project, we will conduct field work in some of the regions that were subject to these debates. Here, again, we will not be testing to see if these traits exist but instead will conduct a hear-say ethnography to hear how claims to resources or administrative attention are made. In the third phase we will publish both the primary manuscript and our analysis of them. In the first two phases we have budgeted for travel money to invite Russian, national, and international experts to comment

on the interview data and the archived minutes to draw comparison to the life history of this concept in Russia to that of similar concepts in other parts of the world. In this project we do not view dissemination at regional and international conferences simply as reporting, but as an important part in re-establishing the 'bridges' analysed above and for identifying how naturalized identity categories reproduce themselves within important policy contexts both East and West.

The digitisation work will take place in the following archives:

1. Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology, St. Petersburg (AMAE)
 - Manuscripts and discussions surrounding the publication of *Narody Sibiri*.
 - Manuscripts of Verbov, Potapov, Vasilevich, Danilin, Karnuovsaia and Popov manuscripts.
2. Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg (PfARAN)
 - Pre WWII agendas and minutes from the Institute of Ethnography
 - Shternberg manuscripts and Bogoras manuscripts
 - Discussions surrounding *Narody mira*.
3. St. Petersburg State University (ASbGU)
 - Manuscript collections of the first academic department of ethnography
4. Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow (AIEA)
 - Manuscript collections of M.G. Levin, S.A. Tokarev, B.O. Dolgikh, Iu P. Petrova-Averkiva, N.N. Cheboksarov
5. Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow (MfARAN)
 - Post WWII agendas and minutes from the Institute of Ethnography and fragments of Pre WWII minutes
 - Materials of the VII Int'l Congress of Ethnological Sciences Moscow 1964

A strength of this particular project is our research team made up of experienced Russian researchers with formal affiliations to these archives which guarantees both accuracy of interpretation and access to the material. The existence of these manuscripts and their indexing was done during our pilot project funded by the Wenner Gren Foundation (2011-2012).

A set of directed interviews will be conducted with ethnographers who had been active in the Soviet period or are still active in the design of *ethnos* theory. Some of these interviews have already been conducted by Dr. Arziutov: L.V. Khomich (2008, StP), N.A. Tadina (2009, 2010, Gorno-Altai), and E.E. Iamaeva (Gorno-Altai, 2010). Prof Anderson and Dr Arziutov interviewed the following scholars in 2012 with funding from the Wenner Gren Foundation: Valerii Tishkov, Sergei Arutiunov, Sergei Sokolovskii, Victor Shnirel'man, Zoia Sokolova, and Larisa Pavlinskaia. For this project we will interview Evdokiia Alekseenko, Natalia Zhukovskaia, Daniil Tumarkin, Nikolai Vakhtin, Lev Klein, Valerian Koz'min, We have also asked for funds to interview two American scholars, Ethel Dunn (Berkeley, CA) and Marjorie Balzer (Washington, DC), both of whom played a front-line role of translating and disseminating early Soviet publications in English. Prof. Balzer inherited the manuscript archive of Dmitrii Shimkin, which we understand from correspondence should contain materials relevant to understanding the reception of the book *Peoples of Siberia* in America.

In order to best understand the contemporary influence of *ethnos* theory we have designed fieldwork in three Northern regions among Pomors, Arkhangel'sk Nenetses, and Altaians. One of these sites will also be the fieldsite for the PhD student. Each of these regions have been chosen in order to reflect certain tensions in the way that we understand from our own previous fieldwork, and in conversations with our colleagues, that *ethnos* discourse is being activated today.

1. The *Pomor* case is a powerful example of state scepticism of ethnogenetic arguments as activists of this coastal Russian-speaking people struggle to secure official recognition as an indigenous 'less-numerous' minority. Since 2002 Pomors have attempted to ascribe themselves as an *ethnos* to secure fishing quotas and to protect rural infrastructure. Pomors were first distinguished as merely an 'ethno-cultural' group by Tat'iana A. Bernshtam

(1978). A short note also appeared in *Peoples of the European Part of SSSR* (Aleksandrov 1964). These texts are further supported by unpublished documents in the AMAE (Protocols 1915-1926; Verbatim transcripts 1938-1940). All of these works use ambiguous categories (language, architecture, subsistence) as compared to classic ethnogenetic examples illustrating the an 'unsuccessful' academic consensus.

2. Nenetses are seen by many as being a 'classic' indigenous group due to the strength of their reindeer herding traditions, language competence, and rural lifestyle. Nevertheless they were somewhat arbitrarily delineated from a large family of other neighbouring Samoedic groups in the *Peoples of Siberia* volume by Verbov, who went on to compose an unpublished book-length manuscript specifying the component building blocks of their identity (Verbov 1935-1940). Nenetses challenged early classification schemes due to the fact they live in both Europe and Asia (Prokofiev 1939a-b). Today the political and economic integration of the Arctic through the Barents region has made ethnogenetic arguments popular once again wherein a concept of historical belonging to the land indexes rights to the exploitation of mineral resources. (<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1152862.html>). A comparison of the early unpublished archival material to modern interviews will help chart the development of these new ideologies.

3. The *Altaians* are one of the classic groups often cited as being 'created' by Soviet ethnography through the textual unification of several pre-existing local groups (*chelkantsy, tublalary, kumandintsy, teluty, altai-kizhi, telengity*). The volume *Peoples of Siberia* was one of the first public presentations of this new identity and it left a rich legacy of debate within the central archives (Potapov 1946, 1940-1949, Narody Sibiri 1939-1940). The Altaians were the subject of Dr. Arziutov's *kandidatskaya* dissertation (2007) and he holds a rich store of archival and local publications on their identity. Today, this identity is being challenged as 'pre-existing' groups separate from the Altai identity in a centrifugal process opposite to that of the Nenetses. An interesting development is the bid by some pan-Altaiian activists to include this southern republic in the official definition of 'Northern' territories.

Each of the planned expeditions will be between 4 weeks and 3 months. The investigators working either in pairs or alone will interview local intelligentsia, teachers, and representatives of political movements, and study local museum displays. The researchers will ask open-endedly about how people make arguments about their identity, and the extent to which they see their identity as being recognised by state and market institutions.

Building on these interviews and the fieldwork, the project will organise two open field seminars where we will invite prominent experts to gather together and discuss the correspondence and discussions gathered during the fieldwork. The first field seminar, in St. Petersburg, will focus upon the codification of *ethnos* theory based on material and interviews in central archives. Here we will present transcripts of debates over which frames were seen as indicators of identities while a specific *ethnos* under construction. During the second field seminar, in Moscow, we will discuss the contemporary relevance of *ethnos* theory in the ethnopolitical context of contemporary Northern Russian and Siberian societies. Here we will present interview data and fieldnotes with the goal of trying to make links to the life history of the concept in the early Soviet past. We expect that changing arenas of discussion (ie economic vs. cultural; ethnographic vs. linguistic) will be important in this debate. The size of each seminar will be approximately ten persons with four experts invited from overseas. Our tentative list of experts includes Bruce Grant, Caroline Humphrey, Nikolai Vakhtin, Francine Hirsch, Mark Bassin, Peter Schweitzer, Igor Krupnik, Sergei Ariutunov, Sergei Sokolovsky.

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