

Perestroika's Legacy and Indigenous Peoples in Magadan

Winfried K. Dallmann
Norwegian Polar Institute



In many places only handicrafts give a reminder of reindeer herding...

Winfried K. Dallmann is a research scholar at the Norwegian Polar Research Institute in Tromsø, Norway, and also coordinates an information network about and with indigenous peoples in Russia (see <http://npolar.no/ansipra/>)

By air from Moscow to Magadan – seven and a half hours over Russian tundra and taiga. It's a cloudy and dark night. I'm thankful that the Ilyushin planes have comfortable seats with ample legroom that allow for a rest. I'm in much too much suspense about what awaits me. A half hour before landing the sun comes over the horizon, the clouds break up and disappear, and the full beauty of the countryside is visible.

Kolyma-country

Well into September, autumn has begun. I see mountain tundra below – low, undulating mountains with block fields on the tops. The mountainsides are carpeted in red. There are yellow islands in places, made up of groups of birch or perhaps willow bushes. Wide river valleys with light banks of stones cut through the mountains in all directions. A steep and snow-covered mountain chain makes up the background. From this height it is not possible to see any trace whatsoever of human activity. This is Kolymskoe Nagore, the Kolyma Mountains.

We are at 60°N, about the same latitude as Oslo, but there is a 10-hour time difference between here and there. The temperature here, in the middle of September, is about the same as at home in Tromsø in northern Norway. The summers can be warm, but the winters are cold, very cold. Minus 30°C is not uncommon, and inland it can go down to minus 50°C and even

colder. The Sea of Okhotsk is covered by ice for three months starting in December or January.



Kolyma-country



The coniferous forest in Kolyma-country consists mostly of larch

Contrasts

The city of Magadan, the urban center of the region of Magadan, was first established under Stalin in 1939. A wealth of minerals were – and still are – found in the inner regions: gold, silver, copper, molybdenum and much more. Much of the development of the city, the mines and the roads was done under terrible conditions by prisoners in the GULAG-system. Mining remains the lifeline of the region. The Russian gold reserves lie in the ground here.



In the city of Magadan

After a great reduction in population during the 1990s, the city has again grown somewhat in recent years, and now has more than 160 000 residents. These are people from central Russia who are here to earn a living. Magadan is a special economical zone with low taxes and higher wages. It is hoped that the area will become attractive for investors. Wear and tear is still apparent on houses and thoroughly rusty playground equipment. Much has been done in the center of the city, and in places it has started looking like a modern city. Beyond the center, however, down towards the Nagaeva Bay, lies 'Shanghai', a district of the city with older Russian villas – partly slum cabins – which gives an impression of relative untidiness and poverty.



'Shanghai' in Magadan

Indigenous peoples

Faces in the city are mostly Russian – Russian and Ukrainian – the majority here as well as in most of the country's larger cities. There is, however, a small portion of the population – just a few per cent – with Asian, Tungusic features, that belong to populations that usually live spread throughout Kolyma-country, and who have lived here for thousands of years before the Russians. These are the Evens, the Chukchi, the Koryaks, and others. The Evens are the original population in most of the region.



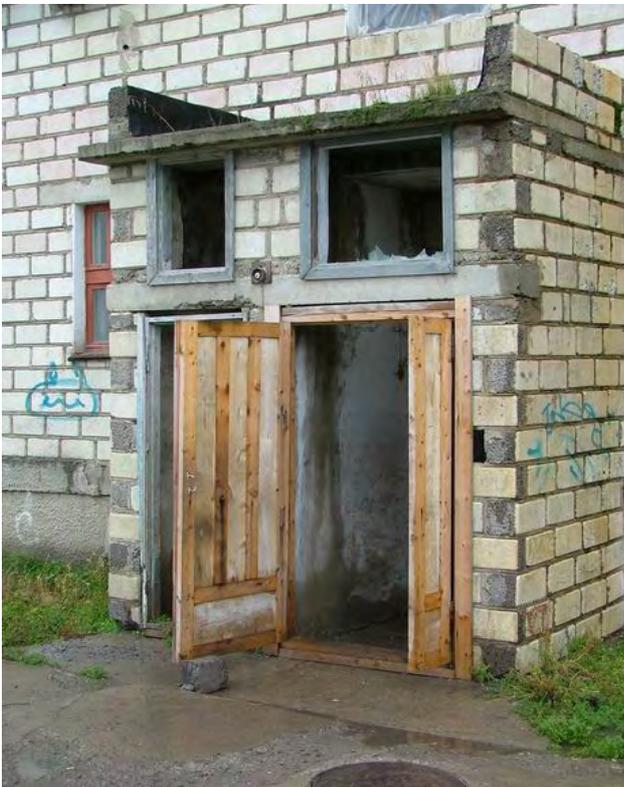
The Even national group 'Ener'

There are in addition a number of *starozhily* ('old residents'), descendants from early Russian settlers, which have lived for many generations in tact with nature, often together with the indigenous population.

I'll be going back to the city later, but first I'm heading for the village of Ola, 30 km farther to the East. My host, Mikhail, lives here. He invited me here so that I can see the conditions under which people live with my own eyes. While parts of the city of Magadan seem worn and reveal poor maintenance, Ola is completely in disrepair. Regarding the material standard, nothing positive has occurred since Yeltsin came to power and set about to implement capitalism overnight – intending to quickly remove all that is old, and build up the country from scratch.

The ruins of Perestroika

In Ola, all that is old has been abandoned quickly, but they are still waiting for renewal. Most businesses went bankrupt in the early 1990s; factories, warehouses and other buildings are abandoned. Nothing has been torn down; everything is decaying and still standing there in ruins. Residential buildings, many of them 5-6 story apartment buildings, have experienced the same destiny. The difference is that they are not abandoned; people still live there. On several occasions when we passed houses with worn façades and broken window panes, and with garbage strewn in the courtyards, I had to ask if anyone really lived there. Yes, they did.



In the village of Ola

'Perestroika', says Mikhail and points with disdain to a warehouse where not one single windowpane is in place, and where weeds have taken over. Large puddles that, due to permafrost lie everywhere across the roads in all kinds of weather, only add to the dismal impression.

Some people have surprisingly cozy homes, once we enter their apartments. Others don't. In Gadlya, a small Even neighboring village, a woman and her two daughters invited us in and welcomed us to their apartment, in the second floor of a 6-floor building. The ceiling was ruined by moisture, and it dripped steadily to the floor.

Reindeer are gone

Gadlya is classified as an indigenous village, that is to say a village community where primarily indigenous people live and support themselves by traditional trades. Fifteen years ago Gadlya had a large flock of reindeer. After the *kolkhos* (a collective, state-owned enterprise from Soviet times) dissolved when the market failed and the infrastructure and transport broke down, the reindeer vanished. The last of them were shot by the military from helicopters, either for the meat or just for fun. This is not a civilized country, it is 'the wild East' – and the conditions are mostly due to those who governed or govern, more than the people who live here. Although it also should be said that many still think in the old way, where no one needs to take responsibility, because the Party does. The Party is gone, however, and not all have learned to assume responsibility for their own fate.

Self-sufficiency is necessary

Many of the smaller villages have only a few apartment buildings in the old Soviet style, or none at all. People who live in small one-family houses are often able to repair them when necessary so as to have relatively serviceable housing. A good number of people also grow vegetables in their gardens, have greenhouses and potato fields. Those who live in apartments often grow potatoes in fields on the outskirts of the city. The potatoes grown here are very good. People know how to take care of themselves in many other ways as well. I had a cold when I came from Norway, and Mikhail took me to a friend who had a homemade sauna in a hut outside his house, where they tried to get rid of my cold with various herbs, while I was dripping with sweat.

The region of Magadan, a large area of about 460 000 km² (Norway, without Spitsbergen, has 320 000 km²), has experienced a dramatic drop in population during the 1990s; from almost 400 000 in 1989 to 227 000 in 2001. This happened in the aftermath of Perestroika, and many of those who moved away from the area were highly educated, which of course led to a noticeable deterioration of the socio-economic situation.



People provide for themselves as far as possible

Vulnerable traditional trades

The indigenous population in the area consists of about 6000 people, and the percentage increased in this same period from 1.5 to 2.5 per cent. Ola is a village with 6400 inhabitants, where 715, or 11 per cent, are indigenous. Several such villages with a mixed population are found not far from the city of Magadan and have roads, while most hamlets with almost exclusively indigenous population, have very poor or no roads at all. These are located mostly along the coast. The main trades are fishing, some hunting, and miserable remains of reindeer herds which previously were much larger.

In Ola the indigenous people and descendants of early Russian settlers, the 'old residents', subsist and earn a livelihood by fishing. There are seven enterprises which have official status as 'indigenous enterprises', and six clan communities. The greatest obstacles to economic development are lack of capital, with no access to low-interest loans, and problems in obtaining catch quotas. Each person has permission to catch 50 kg of fish per year without a quota, for their own consumption. This is very little for people who traditionally make their living from fish products. To receive a quota in addition, an enterprise must prove that it has adequate resources for catching, storing and transport, and there are few who qualify. Most quotas go to larger, Russian companies which are already better off financially. Several establishments and fish-processing factories along the coast previously belonging to indigenous enterprises, and where catches were delivered in earlier days, lie today in ruin and spoil the otherwise beautiful coastal landscape. This is Perestroika's legacy.

A new administrative subsidy arrangement is meant to give economic support to small enterprises, but in practice they support only those which were already productive. 'There is no chance for most of the small indigenous enterprises to qualify for these subsidies. The administration has not yet realized that it is we – the Evens, the Chukchi, the Koryaks – that have owned this country immemorially' is what I am told. It is only natural that it is perceived as unfair when the new Rus-

sian administration takes over, distributes the resources among themselves, and lets the indigenous population live without employment.



A fisherman's house on the coast near Ola



Coastal fishing is the main trade in villages near the sea – the author with an Even fisher near the village of Arman



Lunch on a fishing outing – Mikhail tastes nature's gifts

Employment – but only for the outsiders

While official unemployment in Magadan Region is 12.8 per cent, it is higher in remote areas where a large segment of the population is indigenous (16–18 per cent). The actual unemployment figures must be much higher, because many people who live in remote areas have no opportunity to register as unemployed. In some places unemployment is probably almost 50 per cent, although this is not officially recognized. While reindeer herding is ruined in many places, and fishing quotas are nearly impossible to get, the fraction of in-

indigenous workers in industry and mining is almost invisible.

Back to Magadan. I've been invited to the region's administration building for a briefing on an economic subsidy project financed by CIDA, the Canadian national organization for development assistance. Several Russian women give the briefing in flawless English. The project aims primarily to stimulate mining in order to induce economic recovery in the area, but also includes other projects, but to a lesser degree. In answer to my somewhat provoking question about whether or not anyone is looking into the judicial basis for retaining some of the income taken from the area to benefit the indigenous population – something which is normal in North America – I received only some surprised and puzzled looks. In Russia all mineral resources are owned by the State.

A little help goes a long way

Liliya, an Even woman from the village of Evensk who is at this meeting, has put on her national costume of reindeer skin decorated with leather fringes and glass beads, a beautiful sight. We soon discover that we know each other from previous correspondence. She tells me of a successful handicrafts venture that, stimulated by a CIDA project, has received funding and seems to be self-supporting. So there is hope.

Otherwise in the villages it is not possible to see any such progress. 'In the Barents region the Scandinavian countries help out', someone says to me. 'Alaska invests in Chukotka. But here? Nothing. No one is interested in us'.

And that is just the problem. In this area it is possible to find a willing workforce, a wealth of fish and sea mammals, enormous opportunities for reindeer herding, picking berries, and much more. Starting capital is, however, not available. It doesn't take much to start up a small fishing business: a couple of small fishing boats, a small installation to receive, store and freeze the fish, and people would then be self-sufficient. The quotas would be given almost automatically, as the administration is also interested in attracting investments to this area. Considering the local knowledge and workforce found here, why is it so difficult to get outsiders to engage themselves in this area?

Rebuilding their culture

The population does not want gifts of money. They want cooperation and joint ventures, but in the West a number of investors have had disappointing experiences in Russia, and Magadan seems much too distant. Those who might have been interested, are not aware that in this area they would not be met with the same type of attitudes as in Murmansk or Arkhangelsk. These are indigenous people who have suffered for a long time under Russian administration, and who have an entirely different motivation – to survive as a people, as a cultural group with their ethnical identity intact.

'We have our own ventures, our clan communities, and we have a legal right to use the resources. If we receive income from cooperation with foreign companies, we intend to invest in other traditional trades and eventually build up our culture again. We need a starting point, however. For the time being we have nothing; we manage only to stay alive', says Mikhail.

What does the future hold?

Oil has been found on the continental shelf outside of Magadan Region. One waits in suspense to see what will happen now. Will the countryside be ruined, as in other parts of Russia, or will it be possible to use these resources in the best interests of the population? Does Russia for once have anything to learn from other countries? The income will probably flow to Moscow, and the small portion of it that returns here from the State budget, gets swallowed by the administration. Most people here no longer expect help from above. That is why they are so eager to make outside contacts in the world, and get others to come here. That is why they have invited me.

When I leave Magadan, autumn has progressed. Not only deciduous trees turn yellow here, but also the coniferous forest, which is composed of larch trees which shed their needles in winter. The whole forest is now yellow; so yellow that it almost hurts the eyes. When the Ilyushin-aircraft enters the clouds, the countryside disappears under me and I daydream, seeing these people again with their facial expressions somewhere between despair and hope. Hope that they may in the future be able to live a respectable life. If nothing happens, as Mikhail said to me, 'then I will have to tell my people that they must choose between drinking themselves to death, or moving away – and losing their cultural identity forever'.



Ruins from the 1990s – an installation near Ola that once received fish



Engraving on a walrus tooth, episodes from traditional daily life, Even handicraft, Historical Museum

