

SOVIET BODY POLITICS

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In this paper I attempt to decipher Soviet colonialist policy towards indigenous populations within Russia.¹ Conventionally, Soviet policy is understood as a system of political assumptions, established practices and institutional arrangements which regulated national relationships within the state. As Forsyth (1993), Pipes (1991) and Kappeler (1992) point out, in contrast to Tsarist policy, the Soviet state chose to force its political agenda on the state's indigenous populations. Internal colonialism, dependency theory and imperialism are the most common approaches used to address state dynamics in the former Soviet Union. All these are valuable attempts at conceptualizing center/periphery and dominant/subordinate relations. Soviet policy is understood as the eradication of "traditional" culture enforcing a hegemonic cultural order on its indigenous populations.² Particularly the role of terror and repression, institutionalization of ethnicity and societal integration manifest the items employed by the coercive state-apparatus. While all these factors have and continue to merit serious investigation, there is still significant room for an expansion of vision. The interpretation of Soviet policy as the imposition of a dominant ideology on a culturally diverse group and as a form of cultural management that transforms culture according to state doctrine does not account for the mechanisms by which power was employed in a modern state.

The explanation offered here will be a different one. I want to argue that the Soviet state, in contrast with the Tsarist regime, employed new methods for monitoring and surveying Kamchatka's indigenous populations and that it attempted to acquire a hold upon the bodies and minds of the population. These techniques are best examined and explained within the larger context of a modernity marked by the exercise of power in the form of discipline and bodily corrections.

My example will be the Koryak community of Tymlat. Tymlat is a small village at the north-eastern shore in the Karaginskij rajon in Kamchatka. It was erected in the beginning of the thirties, in the course of the establishment of villages in the north of the Far East. Tymlat's population is a *mélange* of Koryak, Russians,

Ukrainians, and Armenians, the latter who came as migrant workers in the 1950s to work either in the then still existing fish factories or as carpenters. The Koryak population is a conflation of different villages that had been closed in the course of the last thirty years because the Soviet government did not consider them economically viable.

The Koryak used to be a pastoral people migrating with their reindeer over a vast territory that was too hard to survey. Even the groups that are treated in the literature as the maritime Koryak who settled at the eastern and western shore possessed reindeer and split in summer to move to richer fishing grounds. Ethnographic accounts (Jochelson 1908; Bogoras 1904-1909) describe extensively the migrating life-cycle of the Koryak who aligned their activities to the migratory rhythm of the animals. But, movement in itself is elusive and haphazard, volatile bodies too hard to control. Communication is uncertain amidst a dispersed population and the presence of state authority at best intermittent. On this scene the Soviet state introduced new methods of military control, architecture, and school systems intended both to define and confine "Koryak space." These representations of Soviet power not only sought to transform what was perceived of as Koryak culture but tried to conform the Koryak life-world to Soviet ideas about social and economic progress. From the start, the new methods explicitly counter-acted what had been the experience of Koryak life.³

The ethnographic literature on the Far East is classically divided into a "pre-revolutionary" and a "revolutionary" period (Antropova 1971). Prerevolutionary descriptions of the Far East evoke images of a backward and feeble-minded native living in tents, hunting bears, geese and raccoons, catching fish, seal and whale, gathering berries and other tundra plants. The innocent native roams in the wide, wild tundra and does not yet know about the sparkling light that the revolution will shed on her or him. With the dawn of the Soviet power and the proclamation of the finally successful revolution in the Soviet Union the civilized native is introduced to the examiner. In the 1920s a modern and industrialized Far East comes into

being. From this time up to the eighties the native exists only in statistics, tables and ratios. In the 1930s Koryak culture is perceived strictly as the ratio of the number of reindeer per owner, but later on measurement is taken of their productivity and fulfillment of the Five-Year-Plan (Gurvich and Dolgikh 1970). The native is aligned with the Soviet citizen. Koryak culture is marked by its productive and "industrial" efficiency.

The arrival of the Soviets in the mid-twenties in northern Kamchatka brought with it a new model of the individual, or better, the non-individual. The individual ceased as the focus for social and political attention. Collectivity and social components depicted the cornerstones of an ideology that sought to submit social and cultural groups to a hegemonic order of cultural conformity. The Marxist vision of the state proclaimed ideas of sameness and equality for all of its members. Social distinctions based on diverse cultural background, gender, and class differences were supposedly removed and abolished. My main concern, however, is to inquire into the colonizing nature of symbolic representation of discipline that tried to seize hold of the Koryak body and mind. Implicit in such an analysis is a critique of attempts to analyze the establishment and the manifestation of Soviet power as one of subjugation and suppression by means of authority, violence and force. I try to go beyond an understanding of Soviet policy as the imposition of a dominant ideology and a form of cultural management as a ubiquitous form of political manipulation in order to transform culture according to state ideology; instead I propose an analysis that puts an emphasis on an understanding of power as a ubiquitous phenomenon that floods all spheres of cultural and social life.

With the introduction of the Foucauldian understanding of power into cultural and social analysis, the body has slowly moved into the limelight of intellectual attention (Foucault 1978, 1979). A recently growing interest in the body can be attributed to the deconstruction of what are perceived to be false dichotomies governing western philosophical, political and social thought since "modern times" (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; O'Neill 1985; Turner 1984). Body/mind, nature/culture, rationality/emotionality are only some of those ambiguous pairs that signified the project of modernity to a large extent. It is to the merit of authors who refocus attention onto bodily matters again, that analysis of the body is no longer confined to an individualistic volition or the

government of the self. Neither is it just a question of understanding the body as socially constructed and shaped. It is also the fact that social orders have been concerned with bodies and their control and surveillance. Thus modern societies were and are increasingly concerned with the mapping and counting of populations and the threats represented by those defined as aliens or outsiders. One of the factors in this procedure, Foucault states, is exactly the colonization of cultural institutions as new "centers of observation." His example is the "charitable associations" of 18th century Paris. These members had to visit their respective areas regularly. They strove to eradicate places of ill-repute, tobacco-shops, life-classes, gaming houses, public scandals, blasphemy, impiety, and any other disorders that came to their attention. This is an example of a societal organization so successfully colonized by state ideology as to function as a state apparatus.⁴

The emergence of the body as an object of disciplinary measure takes us first through the Cartesian separation of body and mind which gave a modern blush to the traditional regard of the body as the seat of untamed emotions and savage desires. In Descartes, unlike the medieval or classical world, the mind was not merely to control or direct the body to its proper aim (*telos*) but to displace the body as the center of rationality. The body was the site of inchoate phenomena whose unstable, emotional attachment to the world interfered with the task of forming "true" and sound judgments about the world. Certainty was related strictly to cognition, to the capacity to bypass the senses, by means of "intuition" (Descartes 1985). The senses, i.e. the organs of the body, were not merely suspicious but actually untrustworthy. If any judgment was to be "true" since Descartes one was obliged to solve this problem. And the effort to do so continued to mark commentary on the body through Condillac until the time of phenomenology. Even Merleau-Ponty, whose thorough examination of the problem of the body stood out from those of his contemporaries, remained determined to reduce the body to a center of primal synthesis of unspoken, unperceived intuition. The body as such, at face value, is not "real" but rather like a mediating point between the "real" (*mind*) and the world.

It is not until Foucault that the modern binary relationship is achieved. Granted, Foucault is heavily in debt to Nietzsche's genealogy (Foucault 1977, Lash 1991), but it

is the popularization of Foucault's work that has made the break possible. Foucault ably points out, in the second and third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, how in the ancient world the body was not problematized as in modernity but was distinctively "customized" according to specific moral and very public ideas. The body did not get in the way of the true intuitive experience but rather demonstrated publicly the moral achievements of individuals. By contrast, the modern experience is not one of customizing but rather disciplining the body. Modern institutions such as schools, factories, and prisons regulate the body in time and prescribe its gestures, sitting habits, and the space it can occupy. The body is the location produced by relationships of force that train it to submit to the deliberations of the (public) mind.

The arrival of the Russian Revolution in Kamchatka in the mid twenties not only brought a new policy seeking to administrate and rule the Koryak but sought to establish regulations of hegemonic control as well. Villages were erected at points that were thought to be strategically smart. The preferred location of their construction was at the shore close to the ocean in order to facilitate transport to the mainland. The local population was coerced to live in villages, mostly without agreement and in spite of attempts at resistance. To the Soviets the villages offered the opportunity to gain control over Koryak movement. Collective farms [*sovkhozy*] were established and they not only changed the entire production process but also redefined "traditional" Koryak ways of production. With the expropriation of the reindeer the Koryak were crammed into brigades of up to seven men and one or two women. This meant that women became more and more confined to the household and forced to perform tasks that in the Soviet mind were becoming of women.⁵ The migration routes for the herds were determined by the sovkhoz and every brigade had a well defined route from which it could not detour. Sovkhoz helicopters patrolled constantly to ensure that action was executed according to the rules. The sovkhoz and village soviet were erected in the middle of the village and stood as the proud and central display of Soviet rule. The KGB was represented by the presence of a village policeman safe-guarding the order of the village. The boarding school was attached to the building of the village Soviet and the children lived there throughout the year. And while these factors controlled, manipulated, and governed the conduct of the adults, the children wore identical uniforms and learned from school books that emphasized the abolition of

cultural difference and the conformity of individuals. School children in Tymlat were taught to sit straight and quiet in hard benches. Their days were determined by time rhythms that administrated the hours for school work, homework, and one hour for playing in the evening. Having talked to adults that were boarders in their childhood I heard of several attempts by pupils to break out and run away. Most often these attempts met with little success since, after all, there was only the tundra to run to or an old shed or dilapidated building to hide behind. The punishment for such minor crimes was the deprivation of food, the curtailment of play time, or mandatory assignments such as washing the toilettes and scrubbing floors.

In his compelling analysis of British methods to seize control in Egypt Mitchell (1988) takes recourse to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and his understanding of the panopticon as the model institution for the exercise of power. Mitchell argues that such a form of power constructs its object as the reunification that was formerly divided into two main concerns, namely mind and body. Mitchell understand this form as the main characteristic of modern methods of power. Although Foucault's analysis is rooted in Europe's eighteenth century and is not at all concerned with Marxist regimes his analysis is translatable into different contexts. The object of the Soviet system, in my opinion, was to establish, in this case, the Koryak mind as a replication of the mind that surveyed it. The ultimate form of control was to recreate Koryak space, which meant to control the possibilities of Koryak experience. New forms of upbringing and schooling in the former Soviet Union were intended not only to regulate the physical lives of the Koryak but to shape and even colonize individual morality and values. Rituals and celebrations signified yet another space to be colonized for the dispensation of the new ideology. The celebration of culture had to be turned into signifying events for the public affirmation of imagery and ideas of equality and unity. What could not be accommodated provided the opportunity for practicing suppression and the eradication of "undesirable" expression.

In the panopticon writing, Foucault asserts that "a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation (1979: 202)." And it was precisely the new Soviet fiction that would give, if necessary by force, the Koryak their remade eyes. Several techniques to accomplish the task were introduced. The movement of Kamchatka's

population came under strict observance and control. Obtaining a special "Kamchatka visa" became a requirement even for the local population. Travel to the mainland was aggravated, and therefore often delayed or canceled, by the ponderous bureaucratic process one had to undergo in order to receive a visa. Visits of relatives or friends from village to village were prohibited if one was not in possession of a visa. Soviet helicopters were in constant action patrolling the reindeer herds in the tundra. Every Koryak working as a herder was required to carry her or his passport constantly with her or him to be able to show it to KGB representatives upon request. Non-possession of a passport, or its invalidity, had serious consequences such as prison. In short, territory that had been defined as "Koryak land" was transformed into a Soviet "general formula," a set of regulations.

Textnotes

1. This article is the rewritten version of a paper given at the 4th Annual Meeting of the Post-Soviet Study Group at Columbia University. I want to thank Igor Krupnik and Bruce Grant for their discussion of my paper and the participants of the Symposium for their remarks and comments.
2. This is not only true for the Soviet experience but applies to most colonial contexts as well. Canada's North, India and Tanzania are only a few examples that merit such consideration. See Timothy Mitchell's detailed and elaborate investigation of British colonialism in Egypt (1988).
3. I am aware that there is no monolithic reality that can be defined as 'true' Koryak life. Authenticity is a highly contested concept in recent anthropological discussions. This concept evokes holistic imagery that is textually constructed rather than historically founded. (See Clifford and Marcus 1986).
4. See Comaroff (1988) on this point. Jean Comaroff understands ideology as an coercive dimension of culture through which relations of domination become inscribed on the body and in the mundaneness of society and culture.
5. Slezkine (1994) describes indigenous women as a social target group to introduce Soviet policy in Chukotka and in Kamchatka. This valorization of women changed with the manifestation of Soviet power. Women were torn out of their 'traditional' context and had to conform to an Soviet image of female duties and tasks.

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