Visiting the Russian Far East: Yakutsk

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This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

I spent a lot of time in Russia in the 1990s, mostly in Moscow, an ever-changing city, in a state, it seemed, of almost permanent political chaos. As Russia's first president, Yeltsin had struggled. His leadership began with a bitter tussle with the parliament, which ended in 1993 with him turning tanks on the Russian White House and the death of about 150 people inside. He also resorted to selling off state assets at low prices to attain economic stability. Prime Ministers came and went, and Yeltsin himself suffered from poor health and spent many months in sanatoria. A Western-friendly policy prevailed in the early 1990s, and indeed it seemed impossible for the new Russian state to survive without Western aid.

One of my PhD students at Alberta, Aileen Espiritu, wanted to apply for a grant from the Gorbachev Foundation, formally linked to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), to work on a project in eastern Siberia. Aileen, of Filipino background, had focused her thesis on the impact of Russian oil and gas development on the Khanty-Mansi people of Siberia. Her focus, on indigenous peoples of Russia, was not unknown, but from a Canadian perspective, was a bold and pioneering enterprise. Because of her work on health, environment, women, and the circumpolar north, she was hired by the University of Northern British Columbia with her PhD program at Alberta still in mid-course.

Her proposed project concerned the effects of diamond mining on the indigenous population in the regions around the Viliui River in eastern Siberia. But she could not apply for the grant without a PhD. Thus, she proposed to me that I be her research partner and the acting director of the project, which ran from 1996 to 2000. Its official title was "Yakutsk-Sakha and the Siberian Northeast: Resource Development, Environmental, and Health Issues." Aileen wanted to conduct interviews with indigenous people to establish a database. Our application was successful, and unlike McCoy, she was perfectly satisfied with the total of $100,000. I knew very little about the topic when we began. In fact, I did not visit the region initially. Aileen spent the winter of 1996-1997 in Yakutsk in temperatures around -45° C and with only 2-4 hours of daylight.

I did, however, make two trips to Yakutsk. The first was an introductory one in 1997 and lasted only about a week, enough time to meet our partners from Yakutsk State University, as well as local host Aita, an indigenous woman. I began to reflect on this visit, which was unsatisfactory for me on a number of levels, because I had found it quite bewildering and a culture shock. I resolved to return for a longer period in 1998 and make more effort to understand the problems of the locals, as well as the attitudes of the regional Sakha government toward resource development.

Though very remote, the Republic of Yakutsk-Sakha is the largest region of the Russian Federation, encompassing about three million square kilometers – today it makes up half of the Far Eastern Federal District. It is enormously rich in resources, including diamonds (99% of Russian output, and about a quarter of the world's total), gold, coal, oil, gas, silver, and tin, but has a population of just under one million, about 25% of which resides in Yakutsk. Russian settlement there dates from the 17th century, and in 1998, the Russian and Sakha populations were roughly of equal size. Today, the Sakha population is higher than the Russian by around 100,000 people.

In the summer of 1998, I began my journey in Minsk, where I witnessed a protest demonstration by the Belarusian Popular Front in Gorky Park. I had asked a student who was working as a research assistant for my Belarusian projects, Yulia Shymko (mentioned earlier), to accompany me to Siberia. I thought that it would be useful to have someone intelligent and knowledgeable around during interviews. Yulia, who today is a business professor in France with a doctorate in Business Administration, had originally been assigned to the Irish Children of Chernobyl group as a translator. She was exceptionally intelligent. Her father, Sasha, a professor of economics in Minsk, encouraged her to go, and accompanied us as far as Moscow.

We then took the six-hour flight from Moscow's Domodedovo Airport eastward to Yakutsk, encircling the massive Lena River and arriving to the frosty reception that was typical of Yakutsk Airport in the 1990s. Officials were particularly suspicious of Yulia entering the republic with a Belarusian passport, though one informed her that he was an admirer of Lukashenka, who provided a model for Russia to follow in terms of establishing law and order. Yulia had to go to another office to fill out registration forms, delaying our arrival at the Tyghyn Darkan Hotel, widely considered at the time to be the only luxury hotel in the city. I had stayed there the previous summer and had mixed feelings since whenever there was a guest considered important, other guests would be moved around, usually to smaller rooms.

This year, Aileen and I had made arrangements to stay at the university hostel (*obshche zhyttia*). Our unit consisted of three rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. One room had been taken by a visiting graduate student from Vancouver, Aileen and Yulia took the largest one (Aileen was scheduled to leave shortly for Moscow, but delayed her return by several days), and I took the smaller one. The kitchen was bare, aside from a few spices, and the bathroom flooded every time someone took a shower. The toilet paper, incredibly, turned out to be a PhD thesis on coal mining in Neriungri, the second largest town in the republic, handwritten in blue ink. I began to read it on a daily basis – we had brought our own toilet paper – though it was not particularly interesting. There lies a lesson for all graduate students, I thought, 6-7 years of labour on a thesis, only for it to end up as toilet paper for foreigners in a hostel.

Yakutsk is an unusual city. Because of the permafrost, pipes cannot be laid underground. Thus, they were wrapped around buildings. Huge holes appeared along the roads and sidewalks were undulating. Presumably anyone walking along the street today looking at a cell phone would encounter some spectacular tumbles. Cars had no interest in pedestrians and would scream by within inches if one walked along the roadside. Most of them were Japanese models, with the steering wheel on the right side. Thus, in theory, drivers had only limited vision of pedestrians. To walk a single block would leave one soaked in sweat, such was the intensity of the summer heat. Food was only available from the city market, open stalls behind which local women were prepared to haggle prices. Everything in Yakutsk was expensive because of the costs involved in transporting goods. Roads were impassable for lengthy periods of the year – all of winter and for the period of spring flooding. Restaurants were plentiful but often there was a surcharge to the local mafia simply for entering and taking a seat.

The noise also was constant. No one was sleeping during a time of year with about 20 hours of daylight. Radios played constantly, children roamed around, people played music, became drunk, and frequently there were knife and gun fights. It was the wild east. Our main partner, Aita, was visiting constantly and set up a series of meetings with officials and local activists. A proud indigenous woman of barely five feet in height, she would extol the virtues of Sakha and its people: "We are the chosen people. That is why the sun always rises in the east." Her activity contrasted with that of our official host, the Rector of the Yakutsk State University, whom we would meet occasionally, usually for meals.

In our residence we had a *dezhurnaia*, Maria, who would do some cleaning, but more importantly, every night she would enter to spread a white powder along the pipes to kill the cockroaches. Whatever the substance consisted of, it was remarkably successful. An Englishman, John, in the next building, told me that the first thing he did every morning was shake the cockroaches off the blankets before getting out of bed.

One of the early meetings was with the head of the local archives, and involved a picnic on the bank of the Lena River. A group of about 20 had gathered there, driving their cars through a field in order to get closer to the river. To my astonishment several were actually bathing in the river, which was fast flowing and formidably wide. After some

persuasion, I was obliged to join them and given Western sensibilities, I did not unclothe but entered dressed in shorts and a t-shirt. The head of the archives was a tiny man with a squeaky voice who kept insisting on toasts to various things before each course: to Sakha, Siberia, Canada, friendship, etc. Access to the archives was duly granted after the lengthy picnic but once there, I discovered they contained nothing later than 1960. There were no records of laws on exploration, for example.

At this time, the summer of 1998, Yakutsk gold miners were on strike for better wages and working conditions, and we would see them in the central square, close to the statue of Lenin. Most of the leading officials, such as the main ministers in areas such as health care and education, were all ethnic Sakha, but very often the second minister was Russian. In general, there seemed to be a strong resentment at Aileen's questions, and a defensive attitude, particularly with regard to the treatment of the so-called "small peoples of the north" as the Enets and Evenki, many of which were considered to be endangered in terms of ethnic survival. Some numbered only in the hundreds. The Enets numbered less than 400. The Sakha, by contrast, numbered about 400,000 and the president of the republic, Mikhail Nikolaev, whom I saw walking along during a visit to the theatre without any security guards, was also of this nationality.

Much depended also on local assistance and the driver assigned to us was notable for his general slothfulness and bad driving. On several occasions he simply did not show up. We had been promised an environmental trip down the Lena River, with several stops en route but the driver decided on this occasion to absent himself. We were bitterly disappointed. We did visit the plush local hospital, where among other things, I was able to get some medical attention to my ear, having suffered a temporary deafness, mainly because of black fly stings. I had heard about black flies from Canada's Northwest Territories, but had never visited there. Thus, they were something of a shock. Once outside the city, the moment one alighted from a car, the flies would descend like a black cloud, and the only means of protection – until one could light a fire on a hillside – was to don a coat in 35^0 C weather and cover as much of the body as possible.

Shamanism was prevalent in this area, and the word itself may be linked to the Evenki language (it could also be Tungusic or old Turkic). We would frequently encounter Shamanic symbols such as ribbons tied around trees and there was a strong belief among many of the people we encountered of the shaman's ability to contact the spirit world. Both Aita and her close friend Rita seemed to adhere to several spiritual beliefs. When Yulia and I were invited to Rita's apartment for dinner, we encountered a portrait in the bathroom of a saintly looking figure, rather like the Western depictions of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, she told Yulia, with her blonde hair, that she was a descendant of an ancient tribal goddess. They also had a ritual that was something like a séance, which they performed after the meal.

Aileen eventually left us and started another research trip to western Siberia. Yulia and I decided while out walking one day by the harbor, to see if there were any boats that sailed down the Lena, an alternative to our aborted environmental exploration trip. It was a spontaneous decision and we made it before realizing that we had hardly any rubles in our pockets. We just had enough for a round-trip to an island on the small steamer. The boat was packed, mainly it seemed initially with Russians of the "new Russian" variety – men wearing leather jackets with shaved heads, women made up and attractive – and mostly drinking very large bottles of beer.

Once we arrived at the island, the weather deteriorated. It was a disappointment. The Russians had set up a discotheque with loud music and were dancing. There were outlets selling alcohol. We decided to explore a little but the ground was too swampy to go far. Then it began to rain. The only option it seemed was to return to the boat. Many others had the same opinion. The same group of Russians was still around us, but Sakha were more in evidence. There were some angry exchanges. Some were now drinking vodka and the general atmosphere was quite menacing. An enormous man adorned in a thin white t-shirt pushed the boat away from the shore. The t-shirt bore the improbable slogan "Edmonton Welcomes the World!" It could only have originated from the World University Games, held in Edmonton in 1983. A radio was playing a song by the Russian techno-band Ruki Vverkh called "Koshka Moia" over and over again, until I could memorize the lyrics.

As the boat slowly returned to the port of Yakutsk, fights broke out aboard. Yulia and I were alone in a four-seating

area and suddenly there were Sakha all around us. She was utterly fearless, and likely because we were conversing in English, they did not bother us. I assumed they had mistaken us for Russians. More Russians then arrived and several attacked an older Sakha man, knocking him down. It was ugly. Once we arrived, we could see from the deck that a large gang – it seemed to be all made up of Sakha men – was awaiting the ship's arrival. A mass brawl ensued. We learned later that such skirmishes occurred on every sailing. It was simply crude ethnic violence, racism at its starkest, but probably the two groups were of similar size so it was not a matter of basic persecution of one group by another.

Aita arranged a stay in a local village some distance down the Lena for Yulia and myself, with a local Sakha family, who fed us borscht from a single pot, into which everyone dipped a spoon. We were later taken for a horse ride, the first ever in my experience. There was no inside washroom so at night we had to find our way through the black forest to the primitive toilet.

After Aileen departed, I became the chief cook, since Yulia could not make anything other than pancakes. I spent an inordinate amount of time at the market looking for goods and arguing over prices. Preparing them was also difficult since all water had to be boiled before use, and we only had two hot plates on the stove. Sometimes John, the Englishman from the next building, would join us, usually bringing a bottle of white Moldovan wine, which was the only wine available in the stores – beer was more plentiful. We would watch the noon news from Moscow at 6 pm. Yeltsin had fired another Prime Minister, Sergey Kiriyenko, and brought back Viktor Chernomyrdin as Acting Prime Minister. The general chaos in Moscow seemed very distant from our world in eastern Siberia.

Toward the end of the visit, we carried out some very good and useful interviews. Whereas Aileen was conducting interviews amongst the small peoples of the north, I had at least assisted her by attaining a clear picture of official views of industrial development and its impact on indigenous communities. We also visited a diamond factory. I learned subsequently that between 1974 and 1987 Soviet authorities had carried out twelve underground nuclear explosions in Sakha, aimed at improving conditions for diamond extraction. One of the tests took place only 2.5 kilometers from Udachny, the main center for diamond mining. I did not find any information on the impact of such tests, which were conducted under the auspices of the USSR Ministry of Geology. The industry in 1997-98 was in crisis because of a dispute between the Russian Federation and the De Beers company, which had control over the sale of about 70% of the world's diamonds. Sales began again roughly at the time of our arrival in Yakutsk. Prior to that, Sakha was losing about 70% of its projected annual income.

Aita was thinking of the future and suggested that once the project was over we should begin another one, on the possibility of bringing clean water to the city of Yakutsk. But the field was so far from my own that I could only be noncommittal. I could not become an overnight expert on the Russian Far East and its indigenous communities though I could perceive the appeal of such topics.

Though the trip was approaching its end, there was more drama ahead. Aita, Yulia, and myself arrived in good time at Yakutsk Airport for the flight to Moscow. But there was an unusually large crowd and we learned that the previous day's flight to Moscow had been cancelled, and all the passengers had returned with the clear intention of getting on ours. Moreover, it was a Friday, and the last Moscow flight before Monday. The crowd swelled so much that we could barely hold on to our suitcases. Aita, who is tiny, disappeared, re-emerging miraculously about 15 minutes later with two boarding passes in her hand. We found our way to the departure gate, slid through, and the door banged behind us with hands clawing at the window. It was like the last plane out of Saigon.

In Moscow, the financial crisis had arrived. The most obvious manifestation was the exchange rate for dollars, which in a single day rose from six rubles per dollar to around 30. Still, it was a relief to be there after Yakutsk. Without any shame one of my first ports of call was Moscow's first McDonald's, a Canadian enterprise, where I ate my largest meal for some time. Yulia and I smoked cigars with cans of gin and tonic on the balcony of the Sviblovo Hotel before she went to the Belarus station for the long train journey back to Minsk.

I published some of the results of interviews and research in Yakutsk in the journal *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* (1999), while Aileen added the conclusions from her interviews with Sakha in the Viliui River region in

Central Eurasian Studies Review (2002). She remained fascinated with the north and subsequently became Director of the Barents Institute in Arctic Norway. Perhaps the most complete answer to the question we were studying came from Susan A. Crate, who noted how environmental activism, embodied in the Viliui Committee NGO, was usurped by bureaucrats pursuing industrial development. The communities were effectively "bought off" and linked to the same business interests of the diamond industry. Crate's book entitled *Cows, Kin, and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability* (2006) is an outstanding and definitive study of the people of the Viliui River region.

I retained contact with Aita and Raisa, and Aileen and I invited them to Canada the following year. We met in Jasper, Alberta, a halfway point between Edmonton and Prince George, where Aileen was based, amid beautiful mountain scenery. Retrospectively, I think the project was moderately successful, but we struggled with the reticence of Sakha government leaders to acknowledge any problems among the village communities. Some even maintained that illness levels were higher in some non-industrial regions of Russia than in the diamond mining zone. The structure of the ruling elite and government priorities to a large degree determined future directions in Russian industry in the late 1990s. Perhaps the major difference between 2020 and 1998 is that central government control over the regions and macro decision-making have become stronger. In 1998, the Sakha enjoyed a brief period when their opinion mattered, and the fate of the small peoples of the north is more perilous today than it was then.

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