The mini-conference “World Routes: Arctic Workshop of the University of Tartu” took place on 28–29 May 2010 in Tartu, Estonia. The purpose for launching this workshop series is to link Siberian studies more coherently with Arctic studies and find common topics for discussion. A further goal of this meeting is to bring together colleagues who work in different regions over similar topics or to explore various nuances of the same issue. The specific topic was inspired by the sub-project MOVE (Moved by the State: Perspectives on Relocation and Resettlement in the Circumpolar North) of the European Science Foundation project BOREAS (Histories from the North—Environments, Movements, Narratives) and discussions and panels at the conference “Human Dimensions in the Circumpolar Arctic: An Interdisciplinary Conference under the Auspices of the International Polar Year,” held on 8–10 October 2008 at Umeå University, Sweden. Because it was treated as a test event, participants of the Tartu workshop attended only by invitation of the organizers.

The workshop was truly international, including people from Estonia, Russia, France, and Hungary. Despite original plans of an Arctic perspective, the “World Routes” workshop had strong Siberian focus as only one of seven papers dealt with a region outside of Siberia. However, all presentations discussed different sides of the notion of movement and topics that are not very central in the mainstream of Siberian or Arctic studies. The seven papers and countless debates showed that the expression of “movement” can be interpreted and positioned in multiple various ways, sometimes also surprising for the participants themselves.

The first day of the workshop was spent at the conference of the Estonian Society of Religious Studies, which was followed by an informal gathering of workshop participants and organizers. Talking about
the movement in the Arctic context, one associates it rather with migration of indigenous people as reindeer herders, hunters, or fishers. The presentation that came closest to this kind of “traditional” issue was by Toomas Lapp (University of Tartu) about the economic, cultural, and political meaning of sailing in the history of Faroe Islands. He demonstrated that primitive means of transport and decreasing knowledge of navigating were essential to the Faroe Islands becoming from one of the Vikings’ outposts in a forgotten periphery of Europe and created very specific local culture of viewing the ocean as not dividing but connecting the substance of everyday life. The same local culture, based on short distance travels and light boats helped make Faroe islanders into important supply shippers during World War II because German radars were not able to discover their boats. The experience and tradition to move over the ocean and maneuver between big states helped the Faroe Islands to become one of the little known but still impressive success stories of prosperity in the post–World War II era.

Interestingly, almost half of the presentations at the workshop discussed religion and movement. Eva Toulouze (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Cultures), Paris) focused on migration in the reindeer herding cultures, a traditional topic in Siberian studies, but from the missionaries’ perspective. She demonstrated that there was no coherent position in attitudes toward nomadic life style and the need of missionaries to participate in it. Art Leete (University of Tartu) analyzed changes in identities of strangers in historical perspective. He concluded that distance creates distorted images of other cultures and this model can be used in analyzing modern Western missions in Siberia. According to his findings, not only American missionaries but also their converts are modern time equivalents for distant cannibals. Tatiana Bulgakova (Herzen Russian State Pedagogical University) discussed how recent population moves are linked with changes in clan spirituality in Siberia. All three talks demonstrated that physical movement creates ambivalent identities and strategies to cope with reality. The same issues were addressed by Istvan Santha (Institute of Ethnology at Hungarian Academy of Sciences); in his case of Chinese migration to East Siberian Evenki settlements. Chinese have an ambivalent social, economic, and cultural position in Russian society and especially in the Baikal area where they are “the minority of minorities” through their business and family alliances with Evenki. Santha concluded that movement and semi-legal trade are essential in Chinese strategies of finding their own niche in local society.
Aimar Ventsel (University of Tartu/University of Warwick) addressed similar issues by arguing that the travels of entrepreneurs in Siberia have their “Siberian character” due to the notion of a “civilized space” and “useful time.” Distances are vast in Siberia and travel times are enormous. Modern air and road transport has shortened the travel time but has not changed the concept of space where entrepreneurs travel between “civilized” islands ignoring “wilderness.” The perception of time and space in the context of movement was also the topic of Liivo Niglas’s (University of Tartu) presentation. He showed, using his own film materials, how modern means of transport like vans have changed taiga traveling and meaning of landscape for Khanty people. Interestingly, modern travels by vans are not always less time consuming than with reindeer because vans have to avoid swampy areas.

The materials of the workshop will be published in the Electronic Journal of Folklore of the Estonian Literary Museum in December 2011. The University of Tartu continues with the workshop series and because the focus on the movement in Arctic gave so much inspiring material for discussions, organizers decided to carry on with the topic. The workshop “World Routes 2: Arctic Workshop of the University of Tartu” will take place in Tartu on 27–28 May 2011.

Note

1. Unfortunately this was Toomas Lapp’s last presentation because he died in a tragic accident only few months later while vacationing in South Africa.