Colonizing Russia's Promised Land: Orthodoxy and Community on the Siberian Steppe

Aileen E. Friesen

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), xiii + 224 pp., index, illustrations (black and white), map. \$48.75 (cloth). ISBN: 978-1-4426-3719-1.

In this engaging monograph, Aileen Friesen examines the role of the Orthodox Church in colonizing, Russifying, and “civilizing” the Siberian frontier between 1895 and the Bolshevik Revolution. Focusing on the Omsk diocese—a vast territory nearly twice the size of France whose extensive boundaries overlapped with the four provinces of Tomsk, Tobolsk, Akmolinsk, and Semipalatinsk—Friesen argues that for two decades, church and state successfully collaborated in their efforts to transform Siberia. By the Resettlement Act of 1889 and the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (begun in 1891), the Russian state encouraged mass migration to Siberia. The Orthodox Church also played its role by opening eight new dioceses with all or part of their territory in Siberia: Blagoveshchensk (1858), Krasnoiarsk (1861), Yakutsk (1870), Tashkent (1871), Ekaterinburg (1885), Chita (1894), Omsk (1895), and Vladivostok (1898). Slavs from the western reaches of the empire moved to the Siberian frontier in large numbers to take possession of the available land, begin farming, establish churches, and build schools. They brought with them their dialects, customs, folklore, rituals, and—often conflicting—ecclesiastical cultures.

In many respects, the imperial colonization project was wildly successful. The newcomers did establish a substantial Russian and Ukrainian presence in the east. In 1858, there were fewer than 3 million nonindigenous persons in Siberia; by 1911, that number had ballooned to over 8 million. Yet the cultural and religious element of this project faced many challenges. The Siberian eparchies experienced high turnover in their leadership; the Omsk diocese changed bishops every three years on average. The Orthodox Church suffered from the logistical difficulties of administering such a huge diocese, from insufficient resources, and from lack of personnel. For Friesen, the greatest challenge that the Church faced in developing and strengthening a Christian culture on the new frontier was not competition from other faiths but rather the unexpected conflict among Slavic Orthodox Christians, who often had opposing ideas about correct belief and practice. Forced together on the Omsk steppes, Ukrainians and Russians from different

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regions had to reconcile their rival conceptions of their supposedly common faith. "In Siberia, colonization forced Orthodox settlers and clergy to define the meaning of Orthodoxy, a process that in turn highlighted fractures within the community" (149).

In the first chapter, "A Settler Diocese," Friesen demonstrates how the church changed its mission in Siberia from converting the indigenous population to serving the growing numbers of migrants from European Russia who had moved east. Chapter 2, "Churches as a National Project," recounts the ways that church and state sought to popularize their colonization by offering ordinary Orthodox Christians the possibility of participating through donations to the Alexander III Fund, which helped finance church construction. In the third chapter, "Parishes under Construction," Friesen analyzes the development of Orthodox life at the local level in the newly built villages of migrants from Ukraine and European Russia. In Chapter 4, "The Politics of Pastoring" Friesen explores the debate and conflict over the innovative system introduced by the missionary priest Ioann Vostorgov (1864–1918) to train clergy for service in Siberia. An outspoken right-wing monarchist (whom the Bolsheviks executed shortly after gaining power), Vostorgov willingly embraced innovations that he believed would benefit the church he loved. Bypassing the traditional clerical seminary, Vostorgov brought large numbers of lower-ranked clergy and even pious believers without a clerical background to Moscow for intense courses designed to make them effective frontier pastors. A polarizing figure, Vostorgov energetically advanced new means to combat the vices of socialism, atheism, and revolution—even if his methods sometimes rankled traditional clerics and highlighted the difficulties of an Orthodox culture on the frontier.

Friesen offers a sensitive and nuanced analysis of local religious life and ritual in her fifth chapter, "Living and Dying among Strangers." The final chapter, "An Anthill of Baptists in a Land of Muslims," examines the Church's response to its rivals: the traditional Islam of the indigenous Kazakhs and the rapidly growing Protestant movements (Baptism and Evangelical Christianity) that were attracting new converts among Russians and Ukrainians. Surprisingly, this book does not connect Siberia to the broader events and processes that are the typical focus of historians of Russia focused on the late imperial period. There is little about how the Russo-Japanese War, the revolutionary movement, or World War I affected the diocese. Instead, Friesen emphasizes the rhythms of parish life, church construction, ecclesiastical conflict, and missionary outreach.

Despite problems of logistics, administration, and petty rivalry that Friesen documents, she concludes that church and state fruitfully cooperated to support Orthodox life and to “use religion as a tool for bringing about the cultural transformation of Siberia” (147). The Bolshevik victory in the civil war cut short this experiment in church-state collaboration, so Friesen remains agnostic about its ultimate legacy. Nevertheless, one could argue that this experiment set the groundwork for developments in the twentieth century. After all, Omsk did briefly become the capital of an alternative, Orthodox Russia during the civil war, when the Supreme Leader of the anti-Bolshevik forces, Admiral Aleksandr Vasil’evich Kolchak, made the town his headquarters. Afterward, under Soviet rule, the colonization of Siberia continued with a different ideological justification; whereas before church and state had worked together to civilize the wilderness, now the state and the Party collaborated in the transformation of the frontier. The Soviets also built on earlier imperial efforts to “civilize” the nomadic Kazakhs. While the church had abortively implemented a program of sedentarization in the early twentieth century, it was the erstwhile seminarian Joseph Stalin who successfully forced them to settle into farms, at an enormous human cost. These important continuities underscore the value of Friesen’s analysis, which is a significant contribution to our understanding of the great Siberian migration in the early twentieth century.

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Multispecies Households in the Saian Mountains: Ecology at the Russia-Mongolia Border

Edited by Alex Oehler and Anna Varfolomeeva

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The volume *Multispecies Households in the Saian Mountains: Ecology at the Russia-Mongolia Border* sets its narratives in a large upland region of the Eastern Saian Mountain region, along the frontier between central Russia and northern Mongolia. While offering a closer perspective on various regions within this vast geographical area, the book provides a recollection of research findings, stories, and impressions resulting from the extensive fieldwork carried out in three Siberian adminis-

trative units of the Russian Federation (specifically, the Republics of Buriatiia and of Tyva, and Irkutsk oblast) and the Khövsgöl province of Mongolia. Across the various locations, the authors examine how the delicate relationships between human and nonhuman agents contribute to the creation of an environment, wherein individual or kin survival is dependent on a carefully balanced ability to attune one's self to the rhythms of the taiga. Here, the taiga represents an ecosystem, whose ability to influence the living beings goes beyond the levels that may be rationalized and measured, but rather experienced and felt, albeit to a varying degree, by both the local human dwellers and the authors, whose research constitutes the backbone of the volume.

Introduction by one of the two editors, Alex Oehler, outlines focus areas, theoretical starting points, and a number of ideas to think with while examining the diverse ethnographic material presented in the volume, particularly in the context of proliferation of research on the matters of domestication and human-animal interaction. The first chapter, by Tayana Mongush-Arakchaa, begins a trilogy of entries dedicated to the Republic of Tyva and examines the categories of freedom and trust, contrasted with those of captivity and dominance, as underpinning the relationships within taiga multispecies communities. The author of the next chapter, Aivaras Jefanovas, presents the results of ethnographic research with reindeer herders and hunters, conducted in 2017, on what the author defines as sociocultural interaction between humans and predators (wolves and bears) with the objective of managing their respective survival in shared geographical areas. The last chapter of the Tyva trilogy, by Victoria Soyan Peemot, presents an ethnographic account of horses around humans, based on the research findings collected between 2015 and 2018.

Elegantly translated from Russian into English by one of the editors, the chapter by Konstantin Klovov opens a trilogy devoted to the Irkutsk oblast. The latter represents the only region in the volume that bears no reference to an ethnic group in its name, while being home to a number of such groups, including the Tofa, upon which all contributors to the trilogy have concentrated their research. This toponymical peculiarity highlights the similarities and differences in patterns of human-animal interaction among the Russian and the indigenous Siberians. A joint chapter by Alex Oehler and Igor Rassadin offers a combination of a historiographical overview and ethnographic observations regarding the choices that underpin the selection of animal breeds for the deployment in the taiga. This theme is taken forward in a subsequent entry by Alex Oehler, with a focus on the transformations accompanying reindeer

breeding among the Tofa while assessing the impact of the Soviet heritage on the associated practices.

A chapter by Nicolas Rasiulis moves across the border and looks at the attributes of a multispecies household among the nomadic reindeer herding and hunting Dukha people—a Tyvan minority living in the extreme north of Mongolia. The subsequent chapter by Selcen Küçüküstel delves into the link between a household and a home, and how a dichotomy between a static landscape and perpetual movement of the animated species within the taiga ecosystem is bridged by protuberant manifestations of existence of other-than-human sentient beings. The latter theme is taken further by Benedikte Møller Kristensen, who presents the results of her fieldwork dedicated to the instances of ethnographic evidence on the outcomes of (im)proper dealing with nonhuman agencies within and beyond the household, and the possible impact thereof upon individual and kin existence.

The theme of the relativity of borders in the taiga features prominently in a chapter by Anna Varfolomeeva, who returns the narrative to the Russian territory and opens a section on the Republic of Buriatia. The chapter presents the results of the fieldwork carried out by the author in the summers of 2016 and 2017 and examines the boundaries within the process of extraction of resources—or the expropriation thereof. The closing contribution by Alex Oehler reflects on the evolution of psychology of domestication, herding, and hunting in transhumant households, which seem to garner the desired results when duly attuned to the divergent animal rhythms and life-cycles, on the one hand, and the other-than-human intentions, on the other hand.

The conclusion by one of the two editors, Anna Varfolomeeva, in addition to the synopsis of key themes underpinning the volume, offers a number of forward-looking elements. The latter put forward tentative recommendations for both the advancement of research within the discipline and for the follow up by the individual and state actors who choose to interact with the taiga ecosystem.

The volume's addition of high caliber photographs of the landscapes of the regions examined, as well as its human and other denizens, offer readers an insightful counterpoint to the texts, bringing to life the narratives described by the authors. The transliteration of Russian terms alongside translation lends an additional context to the volume. It guides readers through the historical evolution of the subject matter, highlighting the differences between the technocratic terminology of the Soviet period with the present-day forms of the language.

The adopted angles of research reflect upon the idea of what contemporary anthropology may offer as a discipline in a context in which human and nonhuman interactions are observed to be influenced by exogenous factors. The research-based contributions revisit those themes, which formerly constituted the backbone of ethnographic research but were ousted out from the Soviet-era historiography. By means of addressing certain themes across the chapters, which resonate with the anthropological studies prior to the tilt of focus toward pragmatic operational objectives of the Soviet period, the volume contributes to re-establishing a degree of continuity within the discipline.

One such central theme is the broader theme of the taiga itself, examined as an ecosystem and a shared resource. Questions are raised throughout the volume as to what extent the vast space may be engaged with and where the individual, the kin, or the state may step in, and what function these actors should hope to fulfill. Most frequently, the contributions capture the perception of the taiga as, by and large, an estranged and adversarial physical space for human existence, including via human agency, which turned parts of the taiga into places associated with tragedy, abandonment, and deprivation. Linked to the ambivalence of the environment, another notable locus of attention is that of the agency of food. Its varying and unpredictable availability enforces the role of feeding as a uniting or a dividing act, which in the taiga environment may have life-defining repercussions. Against this background, broader questions concerning the division between what belongs to individuals personally, what is *res communes*, and what does not belong—and perhaps cannot belong—to anyone, are constantly revisited, albeit without any conclusive resolution. Such themes reinforce the idea that all those wishing to make a life in this environment—including by carrying out research wherein—are to play by rules that they neither set nor control.

An acknowledgment of the limitations of human power is linked to the frequent invocation of ethereal and spiritual powers as prominent actors within the taiga ecosystem. Hunting for animate and inanimate resources is often undertaken with the permission or help of not only human agents but also nonhuman sentient beings superintending a given territory. This leads to a hierarchy of power, linked to the control of resources, that goes beyond rational human understandings. Overall, the theme of the supranatural, with its ability to influence human existence, resonates with the increasing attention to the role of the transient facets of human life within the discipline.

Across the narratives, the manifestation of supranatural vibrations is recognized as necessitating deployment of protective practices at an individual and kin levels. The curiosity of this particular finding is that the authors have registered the varied demonstrations thereof both via the accounts of their protagonists and through their own personal experiences. In this context, the theme of danger emerges either explicitly or en passant in a range of narratives, covering in equal measure the instances of interaction with nature, other humans, animals, or supranatural transient beings, and contributing to the sense of the overall fluidity of roles as aggressors and as cooperators, interchangeably assumed by all of the various categories of taiga dwellers. The authors refer to diverse circumstances of their protagonists' lives or their own experiences, establishing a legacy for the adaptation of individual survival strategies dependent on conscious choices and a sense of responsibility, where the latter manifests itself in the ability to respond rationally and with a clear intent to the environments that set conditions for one's existence beyond what may be seen.

An additional welcome element of the volume in examining the varied themes linked to the ecosystem of the endogenous Siberian tribes in Russia and Mongolia, as well as Russian Siberians, is the presence of comparators such as indigenous tribes of the North American continent. This comparative methodology adds depth to the volume, rendering it a scientifically solid contribution to the new territory within the discipline of ethnoecology that ventures beyond the merely human. With the novel formats of research on the multilayered ecosystem of taiga, the book truly merits the time invested into acquainting the reader with its protagonists and carries the potential to stimulate the intellectual curiosity beyond its own remit.

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