The Historical and Cultural Role of Siberia among the Peoples of Foreign Nations

IRKUTSK, SEPTEMBER 3–5, 2003

The eastern region of Russia left a noticeable imprint on the historical fates of the peoples of many foreign countries. Many works on the culture, history, and ethnography of Siberia sprang from the quills of foreign authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The study of Siberia was presented by people who were themselves exiled and cast away by the Russian government as undesirable or dangerous elements. This fate did not escape the peoples of foreign nations: tens of thousands of Poles, Hungarians, Germans, French, and Japanese were in various times forcibly sent to become acquainted with Siberia. Unfortunately the memories of Siberia for the peoples of a number of countries (Japanese, Hungarians, Poles,) became serious impediments in the way to mutual understanding and collaboration between Russia and those countries. The arrival of foreigners in Siberia is in large part chronicled differently by Russian historians in contrast to historians from other countries. There are various 'blank spots' in the history of foreign prisoners in Siberia (for example, prisoners of war from both World Wars), which Russian (Soviet) historians viewed in different terms owing to differing circumstances (with respect to the political character); the Russian ignorance of scholarship by foreign historians was further limited as a result of their inaccessibility.

From September 3–5, 2003, the Interregional Institute of Social Studies (IISS) at Irkutsk State University hosted the international conference, "Siberia in the History and Culture of the Peoples of Foreign Countries," the third such conference on this topic in Irkutsk (the first two were held in 1998 and 2000). It should be noted that thanks to the opportunities of the IISS, the conference enjoyed wider participation than it previously had. The presentations emerged from scholarly centers of the US, Japan, Poland, Finland, Germany, France, and China, as well as from across Russia and Siberia itself: St. Petersburg, Novosi-

birsk, Khabarovsk, Ulan-Ude, Komsomolska-On-Amure, Barunaul, and Krasnoyarsk. The participation of the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Irkutsk, Stanislaw Sokol; representatives of the Polish Congress in Russia; and Polish Cultural Autonomy, Ognivo; and the Polish fund "Defense of the Graves of Polish Heroes" (Warsaw) indicated the importance of this theme beyond scholarly debate. In all, 60 presentations and reports were made, culminating in a speech by the director of the Institute of History in the Siberian Section of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Prof. V. A. Lamin, at the plenary session, "Poles in Siberia," and a round-table discussion, "Cemeteries, Places of Interment, and Memorials of Poles sent to Siberia in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Problems of Study and Preservation." Thematic presentations addressed the following topics: Siberia in scholarly works of foreigners, travelers, and chroniclers of the fifteenth through twentieth centuries; Poles in Siberia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; foreign military prisoners, political exiles, and political prisoners in Siberia; problems of foreign economic partnerships in Siberian regions; modern Siberia in foreign historical, ethnographic, political, and economic research; problems of economic partnership between regions of Siberia and foreign countries; activities of foreign special services in Siberia from the sixteenth to the twentieth century; and the formation of foreign diasporas in Siberia (Polish, Finnish, Chinese, Korean, German, and Baltic diasporas). All of the presentations were, without exception, outstanding, and many developed new approaches to the research of topics on which very little has been published previously. Lively discussions emerged from the numerous questions on the activity of foreign special services in Siberia (V. P. Marchenko and I. V. Nayumov, "Activities of Special Services in Eastern Siberia at the Beginning of the 20th Century and the War with Them"), as well as on the topic of economic activities of foreigners in Siberia and in the Far East, (M. A. Kavalchuk, "Foreign Navigation Along the Amur at the Beginning of the 20th Century From a Regulatory Perspective"; N. L. Zykhova and A. V. Druzhinina, "Peoples of the Far Eastern Countries in the Trade/Industrial Sphere of Eastern Siberia at the End of the 19th Through the Beginning of the 20th Centuries"; V. V. Dvornaya and O. D. Bazarov, "The Use of the Labor of Military Prisoners").

The activity of missionaries in Siberia was the subject of research using firsthand accounts, (Anna Peck, USA, "Perception of Transbaikalian Buddhism in the 19th Century by British Missionaries from the London Missionary Society"; O. N. Polyansky and Ulan-Ude, "English Missionaries and Siberiaphiles"; O. M. Kovalevsky and Eva-Maria Stol-

berg, Germany, "Siberia as a Mental Map in German Imagination, 1880s–1950s"). In the session "Poles in Siberia," a lively discussion and exchange of ideas was evoked by a presentation on Polish exiles and local populations of Siberia entitled "Were Poles Threatened Into Assimilation?" by Franciszek Nowinski of Gdansk University.

The practical elements of the conference included a round-table discussion, "Cemeteries, Places of Interment, and Monuments to Polish Exiles in Siberia of the 19th and 20th Centuries: Problems of Study and Preservation," with the participation of three groups of concerned parties: representatives of Polish and Russian communities; the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland in Irkutsk; and Russian and Polish researchers. In the course of round-table discussions, the participants not only enumerated new locations of the remains of Polish exiles in Siberia, but proposed realistic measures to the restoration, reconstruction, and erection of monuments, markers, etc. In his report, Consular General Stanislaw Sokola was outspoken in his thanks to the leadership of the IISS and to the organizers of the conference for the closure to those questions and their purpose, and gave the presentations high praise.

In concluding discussions and exchanges of ideas, all of the participants resolved to complete their work quickly and with the certain resolve of scholarly contacts between Russian academics, foreign intellectuals, and academic institutions. It was noted that good organization and preparation of the conference insured that an academic, yet friendly atmosphere prevailed. Concrete proposals were made for joint action culminating in publication. The representative of Bonn University, Germany, proposed an exchange of information and invitations to conferences and symposia to representatives of Poland, Japan and Russia.

This international conference was a catalyst to greater active research of a multiplicity of problems connected with Siberia in the history and culture of foreign countries, eradicating 'white spots' in history; establishing mutual collaboration between Siberiaphiles of various nations; affording objective, heightened credence to historical events; removing impediments to historical realization and consciousness which hitherto blocked mutual understanding, and in the end, empowering the establishment of greater mutual understanding between people, and pioneering collaboration in the humanitarian sphere.

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