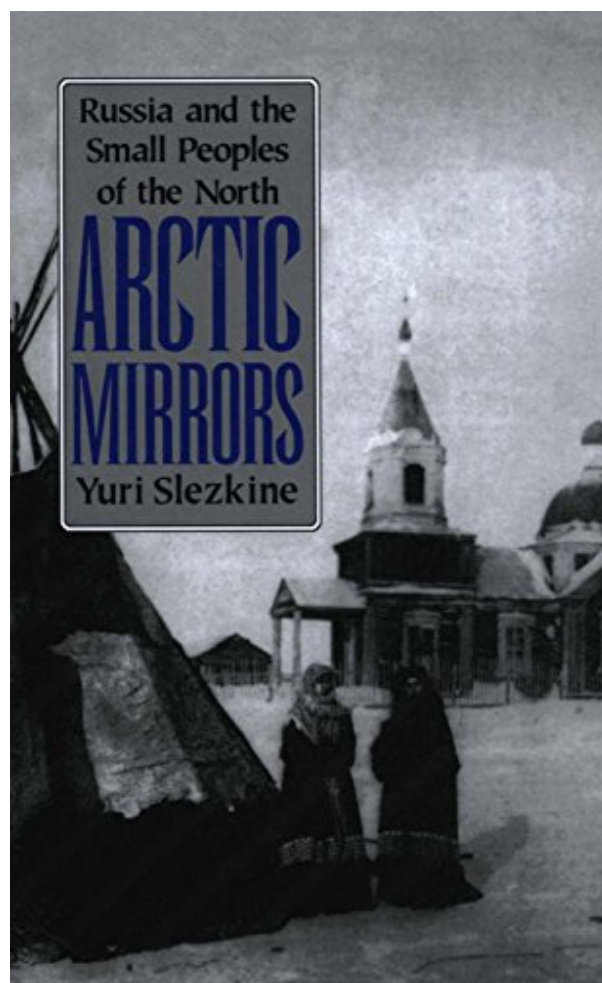
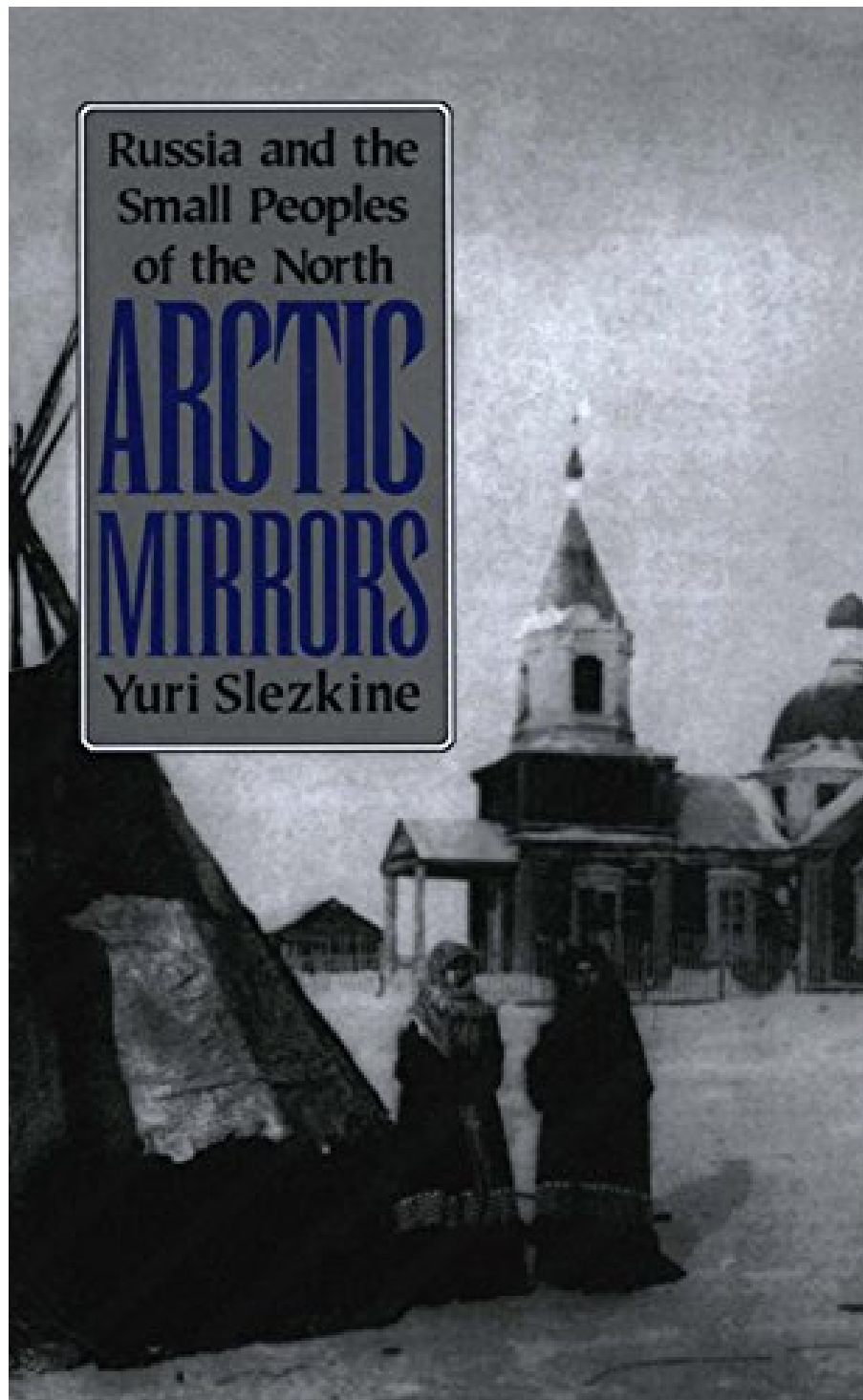


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For over five hundred years the Russians wondered what kind of people their Arctic and sub-Arctic subjects were. "They have mouths between their shoulders and eyes in their chests," reported a fifteenth-century tale. "They rove around, live of their own free will, and beat the Russian people," complained a seventeenth-century Cossack. "Their actions are exceedingly rude. They do not take off their hats and do not bow to each other," huffed an eighteenth-century scholar. They are "children of nature" and "guardians of ecological balance," rhapsodized early nineteenth-century and late twentieth-century romantics. Even the Bolsheviks, who categorized the circumpolar foragers as "authentic proletarians," were repeatedly puzzled by the "peoples from the late Neolithic period who, by virtue of their extreme backwardness, cannot keep up either economically or culturally with the furious speed of the emerging socialist society."

Whether described as brutes, aliens, or endangered indigenous populations, the so-called small peoples of the north have consistently remained a point of contrast for speculations on Russian identity and a convenient testing ground for policies and images that grew out of these speculations. In *Arctic Mirrors*, a vividly rendered history of circumpolar peoples in the Russian empire and the Russian mind, Yuri Slezkine offers the first in-depth interpretation of this relationship. No other book in any language links the history of a colonized non-Russian people to the full sweep of Russian intellectual and cultural history. Enhancing his account with vintage prints and photographs, Slezkine reenacts the procession of Russian fur traders, missionaries, tsarist bureaucrats, radical intellectuals, professional ethnographers, and commissars who struggled to reform and conceptualize this most "alien" of their subject populations.

Slezkine reconstructs from a vast range of sources the successive official policies and prevailing attitudes toward the northern peoples, interweaving the resonant narratives of Russian and indigenous contemporaries with the extravagant images of popular Russian fiction. As he examines the many ironies and ambivalences involved in successive Russian attempts to overcome northern—and hence their own—otherness, Slezkine explores the wider issues of ethnic identity, cultural change, nationalist rhetoric, and not-so European colonialism.

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Native Siberians as Russian foil

By Alexander D. King

This is a great book. Slezkine has provided us with a comprehensive history of the encounter between the Russians and the indigenous peoples of the Arctic and northwestern Pacific. Based on original archival sources whenever possible, the narrative is thick in detail and rich in analysis. I enjoyed his writing style, but his arguments can be difficult to follow for non-academics. He focuses on the "numerically small" peoples of Siberia, who are often subordinated in accounts which privilege ethnic Russians, Komi and Sakha (Yakut) peoples in the east. Believing that ideas matter, Slezkine grounds the events and policies of his history in the intellectual fashions current at the time. Thus, we get a cultural and intellectual history of conquest and administration structuring the narrative which tacks between the Russian and native Siberian points of view. Cossacks did not establish any "New Russia" because they did not understand Siberia as a discovery. The Princes of Rus long knew about "Ostiaks" to the east, and sixteenth century empire-building consisted of conquering foreign peoples throughout the continuous Eurasian landmass. There were no breakthroughs across great divides like the Atlantic. At the same time, the conquerors knew they were among foreign peoples, and it was imperative to get the "real" names from the locals. Foreigners were expected to remain foreign; they had only to pay their tribute and express appropriate obsequies to the Tsar, who discouraged the church from converting foreign tribute-payers to Orthodox Russians. Not that Russian conquest was less brutal than Spanish or English conquests elsewhere, but early Russian conquerors' open-ended world-view did not force new people and territories into closed, Old World categories.

The rules of the relationship changed during the era of Peter the Great. With the coming of the Enlightenment to Russia, "foreigners" (of a different land) became "aliens" (of different birth). Peter's fascination with western science led to several scientific expeditions into the north and the east to enumerate and classify everything (and every one) under the dominion of the Tsar. Groups were distinguished by language in a typology of peoples that has persisted to the present day. This second encounter "between the Russian and the native northerners was that between perfection and crudity" (p. 56). German anti-primitivism held sway in Russian thought, and the savages were certainly not noble.

By the close of the eighteenth century the increasing currency of the French Encyclopedists in intellectual

circles paralleled the rise of Russian sentimentalism, and a different picture of natives emerged. As disease and warfare decimated the tribute payers, they became ennobled and in need of “protection.” Under Alexander I, reformers established the first comprehensive statement of global policy on the natives with the Statute of Alien Administration in Siberia in 1822. Classifying all (non-Russian) peoples into one of three categories (settled, nomadic, or wanderers), this statute structured native status for the next one hundred years.

Arctic Mirrors presents the story of the rise and fall of Russian anthropology for the first time. This is a significant contribution to the history of anthropology as an international discipline. More than half of the book deals with the Soviet period. Slezkine offers a lucid analysis of the surreal logic of Stalinist social policy and social science, where bureaucrats and scientists alike were often forced to recant truths they adamantly defended only months before in order to save their skins. He also traces the current nationalist ideology largely responsible for the breakup of the Soviet Union to the conscious and consistent ethnic policies of Lenin and Stalin, another legacy of romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century.

Slezkine succeeds in presenting the complexities of a complex encounter. The natives of the north are not passive dupes or innocent victims. Arctic Mirrors has already become required reading for anyone interested in the history or anthropology of Siberia, and it will soon establish itself as an invaluable contribution to the growing field of studies on the Newly Independent States. It also points up interesting parallels and contrasts with other European empires in the Americas, Africa, and Asia.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

A Must read

By Seth J. Frantzman

This must read opens the door on the many 'small' peoples of Russias North, who live in Siberia and have for thousands of years, comparable to the native Americans, they were crushed and moved around in soviet times, wiht many different methods applied to make them 'russian' 'christian' or good 'socialists'. This is an excellent account and a great eye opener to the vastness and diversity of the Russian landscape, a tragedy unto itself but the people will be preserved through accounts such as this.

Seth J. Frantzman

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Siberia as a Problem

By Benjamin Trovato

In contrast to Forsyth's History of the Native Peoples of Siberia, this is Siberia as seen by the bureaucrats and thinkers who tried to administer and understand it. There are many detailed quotes and anecdotes, but it does not add up to a coherent history. For the beginner, there is not enough background on who and where the peoples were. Students of the soviet period will be interested the the problem of collectivizing nomadic hunters. So: a good backup, but read Forsyth first.

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