



# Russia

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# Teen Lives around the World

A GLOBAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Volume 2: Pakistan to Zimbabwe

Karen Wells, Editor



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# Russia (Siberia)

## **COUNTRY OVERVIEW**

Siberia covers a geographically vast, ethnically and culturally diverse area. Its territory stretches eastwards from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific coast and southwards from the Arctic Ocean to the national borders of Northern China and Mongolia. The vast territory of Siberia is populated by over 4.5 million people. The ethnic composition of Siberia today is quite complex but dominated by ethnic Russians. This is a result of the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Russian colonization of Siberia, subjugation of indigenous groups, the subsequent process of industrialization of the Russian Far North aimed at extraction and exploitation of natural resources in the Soviet era. There remain a considerable number of Native/indigenous Siberians, between them accounting for below 10 percent of total Siberian population.

The Eveny are one of the Tungus-speaking indigenous minorities (around 15,000) inhabiting the Arctic and sub-Arctic districts of Yakutia, which is approximately the size of India and contains a little over one million people. Together with the Evenki, Nanai (Goldi), Ulchi, Orochi, Orok, Udege, and Negidal, they represent the Tungus-Manchurian language group. Eveny economy relies mostly on such subsistence activities as reindeer herding and hunting. These economic activities, which involve close engagement with and dependence on subsistence animals, contribute to and still play a crucial role in the Eveny cosmology, rituals, and oral tradition. By virtue of their reindeer-herding activity and nomadic mode of living, the Eveny expanded and occupied an enormous area of the mountain/taiga zone of North Asia.

In Siberia, social upheaval associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and withdrawal of the state support resulted in a situation of economic and social desolation. Social scientists (Gray 2005; Kerttula 2000; Pika 1993; Vitebsky 2005) have argued that today's critical situation throughout the indigenous Russian North is a result of violence of the Soviet state, which included uprooting and deportation of entire communities and the separation of young children from parents. The violence and oppression occurred in several phases (Fondahl 1998; Vakhtin 1994; Vitebsky 1992, 2005) and involved: (1) the persecution and killing of shamans (Suslov 1931), indigenous leaders, poets, and scholars (Balzer 1991); (2) confiscation of private herds of reindeer; (3) coercive sedentarization and deportation of the residents of smaller villages into larger concentrations far from the land and natural resources on which they depended; (4)

placing indigenous children in harsh and distant boarding schools; and (5) turning reindeer herders into shift-workers and traditional subsistence camps into all-male communities (Vitebsky 1992; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001). Post-perestroika (the period of opening up prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union) has been a downfall from an initial euphoria to the period of the greatest economic deprivation, with nonpayment of wages and the collapse of the social welfare system. Today, with the absence of roads and virtual disappearance of aviation, remote northern indigenous communities are virtually cut off from the outside world and their infrastructures are collapsing. Youth represents one of the most vulnerable sectors of the population in the region.

Over the last few decades, a developmental stage of adolescence in the Eveny community has undergone a profound shift from a marked period of rapid physical, social, and psychological change occurring mostly in a context of certain ecological and economic conditions of a reindeer-herding camp in the forest to a new, stationary context of the village. Similar processes have been analyzed by Richard Condon (1988, 1990), who referred to the “rise of adolescence” in the Arctic as a direct outcome of the imposed settlement of Canadian Inuit. He argued that the settlement of Inuit in the Canadian Arctic had disrupted traditional patterns of life-stage management and created the “aspirational dilemmas” and adjustment problems faced by young people who can no longer look to members of the parental generation for appropriate role models (Condon 1990, 267).

Among Eveny, adolescence has been understood as a stage of physical, social, and emotional growth that involves the intensification of everyday engagement with relationships most central to producing and reproducing life and culture. In the recent past, youth socialization methods rooted in indigenous emotional economy were mainly managed through human-animal relationships established out on the land through hunting and reindeer-herding practices (Rasmus 2008; Ulturgasheva 2012, 2013). Nowadays youth in the village are still socialized to respond to the unpredictable and potentially dangerous aspects of the subsistence activities; however, the strong feelings such as excitement, alertness, and fear associated with risk-taking traditional activities find no other outlet or intervention and are channeled into the relationships and activities in the village rather than those on the land (Ulturgasheva 2012).

Moreover, the space of an artificially imposed village and its schooling (compulsory from the age of 7 to 18) has now rendered most young people unfit to survive and stay on the land, leaving them bottled up in the village, unable to contribute economically to the families, marginalized, and likely to become delinquent. High rate of violent deaths and suicide has created the situation when children are growing up in the absence of one or both parents while enduring economic and emotional hardship. This gives rise to, what we term, a “new adolescence,” as the latest social changes produced subtle and yet tangible modifications for child and youth socialization practices that require more detailed and nuanced ethnography centering on the emotional aspect of contemporary youth lives.

The process of growing up and becoming a person in an Eveny reindeer-herding community involves not only youth acquisition of concepts and meanings transmitted by adults or significant elders but also modifying them in accordance with new contexts and recently introduced social changes. One of the means by which Eveny are still socially intervening in adolescents' successful transition into adulthood is diverting the emotional intensity of adolescents from the inter-human relations of a human encampment to human–animal relations established in the course of hunting. Eveny also recognize that late adolescence is closely associated with the heightened likelihood of risk-taking, and they often take advantage of this risky behavior by channeling it into productive hunting activity.

## SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION

At present, schooling in Eveny communities provides bilingual and bicultural programs: however, quite often these programs do not seek to maintain the indigenous language on an equal footing with the dominant language (i.e., Russian). The schooling effectively aims to produce a society of “docile bodies through disciplinary techniques” (Foucault 1977, 298) and is designed for “mainstreaming the students as quickly as possible” (Fienup-Riordan 2000, 262) while largely reinforcing the value of being part of the Russian society rather than the value of being Eveny. The formation of strong constructions of identity requires continuity between the values and identifications learned in childhood and the roles available in adulthood, where those learned values can be expressed. Youth today find themselves searching for ways to put traditional native values and teachings into practice in the context of dominant Russian culture, and find themselves largely constrained by structural and institutional obstacles (see also Fienup-Riordan 2000). Although youth believe that they need to succeed in school to succeed in their future, many of them have trouble finding meaningful learning and teaching in the school environment.

In Siberia, the introduction of residential schooling in the early twentieth century had a dramatic effect on experiences of indigenous childhood and adolescence in the Russian North (Rethman 2001; Slezkine 1994; Vitebsky 2005, 186–192). The experience and process of growing up have drastically changed as a result of new spatial arrangements induced by Soviet educational policies and discourses on childhood, which were substantially shaped by Soviet ideology that put special emphasis on institutionalized childhood and the child as a property of the state (Khlinovskaya Rockhill 2010; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). As a result, the intimate space of family camp in the forest where all Eveny children and adolescents grew up was replaced by a harsh and distant boarding school located in the village, which was viewed by the Soviet authorities as the only venue designed for social engineering and the making of Soviet citizens.

The *internat* or boarding school was, and in some regions still is, a permanent element of all reindeer-herder communities since the 1940s. It served as a site for stationary residence and school training for children and adolescents separated

from their parents, who had to stay in the forest and look after reindeer herds that were also turned into the property of a state farm. From the early 1930s, the boarding or residential schools in indigenous Siberian societies were a part of the project of acculturation whose ultimate goal was to transform people into citizens of Soviet society. Many of the schools were sites of mistreatment of children, a great deal of whom had been forcibly removed from their parents, and for this reason they have strong negative connotations in today's society. However, these schools should not be seen as one homogeneous body. They varied widely in terms of their treatment of children and their relationship with the surrounding community according to factors such as location and the specific individuals involved.

Residential schools could be said to have imposed disciplines on the bodies of individuals in order that they would become more "civilized" or "modern." The process of Sovietization involved attempts to establish cultural hegemony, an important part of which was the dissemination of information through printed media. Thus, literacy was important, and for this reason there were a large number of state-controlled literacy programs, many of them in minority languages as well as in Russian. Consolidation refers to the emergence of a common ethnic or national identity, and a lessening of differences between groups with similar or related languages, cultures, or histories. For some northerners, consolidation meant the development of written forms of their language, and their use in media such as textbooks and newspapers. In some cases, it also meant state support for the development of traditional forms of arts, crafts, literature, music, and dance, and maintenance and expansion of traditional occupations such as hunting and reindeer herding. Thus, at the same time as Sovietization was occurring, there was also ethnic and national consolidation on a smaller scale. In addition, an unplanned effect of these programs was that northern groups were brought together, and a common northern identity began to emerge. Thus, there was not one clear process; rather, three processes coexisted, and sometimes came into conflict.

In the Soviet era, the idea of the collective was closely associated with discipline, and this was defined in several concrete ways, uniform being one, and compulsory classes in Communist history and philosophy being another. These overt manifestations disappeared in the post-Soviet era, but the idea of the collective is still held dear by many members of the older generation, who associate its decline with a concomitant decline in discipline. For this reason, Alexia Bloch (2004) has suggested that it is possible to identify more subtle manifestations of the collective still at work in schools today. In her study of Siberian Evenki, Bloch argues that "in the context of post-Soviet society, the residential school represents both a Soviet institution which played a key role in erasing and recreating Evenki traditions, and a contemporary institution through which Evenki leaders see potential for re-imagining community and solidifying political clout" (2004, 147). That is to say, the boarding school serves as a common symbolic capital and as a historical site for emerging concepts of kinship and Evenki identities.

Since the Soviet state used education to bring about social transformation according to a Marxist-Leninist worldview, residential schools were sites for the

negotiation of national and cultural identities. The main aim of the Soviet state was to create a population that could be deemed “modern” or “civilized” in order that differences might be minimized, and the indigenous peoples could be incorporated into “mainstream” society. At least part of the consideration here was resources; if the native populations were assimilated, then their land and resources could be easily appropriated to the advantage of the state. It is, of course, difficult to separate government rhetoric from actual intentions, and the extent to which assimilation was encouraged for the sole purpose of increasing the government’s wealth is likely to have varied on a local scale.

The long period of boarding school education has produced the situation where parents’ reliance on institutional support has become inevitable. Families of reindeer herders were obliged to hand over their children for a compulsory 10 years of schooling when children reached the age of 7. Children of reindeer herders used to stay in school dormitories or boarding school away from their families, under the control of teachers and tutors from outside the community.

Before abolishment of boarding schools in the early 1990s, children whose parents were working in the forest stayed there throughout the whole period of their schooling. During the summer time, the state farm usually provided a helicopter or other transport that brought the children back to their parents in the camp for the summer vacation. In the post-perestroika period the local boarding school was closed, owing to the lack of financial support by the state, which had maintained its existence and functioning. So, nowadays, there are a couple of generations of local Eveny who spent their childhood and adolescence in the internat and a younger generation who never stayed in a boarding school but were still separated from the parents in the forest.

Schooling in Russia including Siberia continues to be compulsory for all children between the ages of 6 and 17. The process of schooling, which lasts 11 years is divided into several stages: it starts with primary school education for ages 6–10, followed by senior school for ages 10–17. After completing this stage, pupils are awarded the *Attestat o Srednem (Polnom) Obshchem Obrazovanii* (Certificate of Secondary Complete General Education). At 15 years old, adolescents may choose to take a course at a vocational school or nonuniversity institute. These typically offer programs of academic subjects and a program of training in a technical field until students reach 17 or 18. Such institutions used to be called *technikum* but now most of them are known as colleges.

## **EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES: ART, MUSIC, AND SPORTS**

Throughout the region music, literature, and fine arts have always been prominent in the process of child and youth development. The arts involving drawing, wood-carving, ivory, dance, and singing have been important aesthetic means for nurturing imagination, memory, intellectual growth, and, generally, child socialization among Siberian indigenous groups. Dance and singing have been central

aspects of the rituals aimed at establishing relations with animal and ancestor spirits and helped to attract subsistence animals. Each young hunter was expected to come up with a personal song or a chant about his first hunt and also know a song of his ancestor spirits for appeasing them and assuring their protection. They are still performed in an intimate space of the forest. In other contexts, indigenous youth who have resided in the city for a long time take on other artistic forms of expression manifesting their creativity and agency. The space that has provided an opportunity to exert their creative force have lately become the global language of hip-hop music, which serves as a resource for expressing their own political stance and evoking solidarity of the community. Hip-hop performed in an indigenous language can be found in almost any urban corner of Siberia especially due to increasing use of the internet. Youth appropriations of hip-hop show how it can be used to increase awareness of and pride in local culture. So, far from being a destructive aspect of globalization, when appropriated by youth, hip-hop music seems to be one vehicle of cultural revitalization. Through the hip-hop, indigenous youth are trying to create something idiosyncratic and distinguishing themselves from previous generations and domineering cultures.

Moreover, while singing, dancing, and poetry is always recognized as part of “culture,” sport is not necessarily perceived as such. Sports could be understood as an inherent part of cultural practices and subsistence activities. At the same time, team sports remain ideal vehicles for the expression of group identities. Looking at Siberian indigenous sports, one is tempted to focus only on “northern” activities, or sports that seem to fit the climatic conditions of the Arctic (such as skiing, sledding, and reindeer races, etc.). On the other hand, a number of mainstream sports have become northernized in the process. One example is the popularity of basketball and soccer in rural Siberia. The northern reindeer-herding villages host annual reindeer festivals during which youth compete in reindeer sledge races, traditional male wrestling, lassoing, cross-country skiing, and sledge jumping. The annual festivals showcase a variety of competitions that are based on demonstrations of traditional skills and endurance, such as the “greased pole walk,” the “kneel jump,” and the “ear pull.” In addition, they include dance performances, beauty pageants, and best-dressed baby contests. Held in the spring months, such events have become a major attraction for locals and tourists alike. The events serve as important contributions to identity formation and subsistence skills.

## **FAMILY AND SOCIAL LIFE**

Youth often find the support of networks of family and friends very important in enabling them to be resilient to the challenges of growing up in conditions of rapid social change in a fragile and precarious economy. However, parents and wider families can also be a source of stress to youth. Parents and grandparents do not always find it easy to help their children and grandchildren manage the rapid social change that has frequently been imposed by external forces.





Indigenous Yakut youth participate in a wrestling competition in Oymyakon, Siberia. Wrestling is a traditional sport in the region. (Pro-syanov/iStockphoto.com)

As young people transition toward adulthood, parents often remove themselves from their children's lives and give them more freedom. Children and teenagers can experience this freedom from parental discipline and expectations as a lack of parental interest. Some commentators consider a lack of parental guidance as a source of boredom and mischief. However, many scholars have suggested that this parental distance is part of a strategy for raising future hunters and reindeer herders who in the past (and in some communities this is still the case) must be able to cope without supervision and learn to make their own decisions and innovate solutions to problems that might arise in the struggle for survival (Balto 1997; Bodenhorn 1988, 1997; Briggs 1998; Condon 1988; Ulturgasheva 2012, 2015).

However most communities are now living in settlements where these kinds of skills are often no longer needed. In the absence of external constraints from family and at the same time dramatic changes in what is expected of young people in relation to work and responsibility, various kinds of mischief are common. These include drinking, interpersonal drama, fighting, robbery, and glue or petrol sniffing. In the restricted structural and social arrangements of modern settlements, these behaviors make sense, and they can even be thought of as coming-of-age rites for a new social structure in which the peer group is critical to how the transition to adulthood is accomplished.

A peer-group-driven passage to adulthood has a potential to instigate social alienation and exclusion especially when it comes to the dynamic involving bullying. However, in a modern peer-group-focused culture in the Arctic, traditional

kinship systems represent both resource and challenge, especially in acts of bullying. The social logic behind acts of bullying can be understood by the history of the place and the community, especially in the context of a group's long-term defense of its territories and anti-colonial resistance.

Undercurrents of youth bullying should be viewed in terms of a youth response to a complex dynamic within the community. Kinship ties serve as one of the grounds on which bullies pick a victim for their bullying. Grievances may stem from conflicts between factions and long-term feuds within the community. Therefore, some acts of bullying among youth may reflect larger interfamilial relations that can go back for generations. Youth, as a part of an extended family, inherit their family's grievances and disagreements. These disagreements often extend over many generations and youth can grow up experiencing the intergenerational outcomes of such conflicts that impact their overall sense of well-being and security in their own community (Ulturgasheva 2012, 2014; Ulturgasheva et al. 2014). Intergenerational family relationships can also strengthen ties between youth. Here inter- and intragenerational kinship ties still play a crucial role in peer relationships, since a young person's parents usually convene with the same people (i.e., their relatives and friends) and that children of these select friends and relatives would most likely be part of a young person's intragenerational peer group. This suggests that kinship still serves as a basis in the Arctic for a young person's smooth integration into a peer group. Moreover, youth contribution to the collective labor of the kinship-based community remains an important factor shaping their sense of camaraderie and solidarity as a generation or group of peers.

## **RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL RITES OF PASSAGE**

Cultural universes of Siberian indigenous groups can be better understood through their embeddedness in subsistence activities and those knowledge systems that have helped maintain human productive and reproductive relations with the land, animals, and those spiritual and ancestral beings who have possessed power to affect well-being of the human communities over the long history of human habitation of the Arctic region. The knowledge systems shaped in response to Arctic social and material ecologies involve complex and sophisticated religious forms, ideologies, and practices that revolved around the activity of hunting. The concern over the necessity "to kill in order to live" expressed in the animist beliefs about return of animal souls and ancestor spirits in charge of souls of animals has remained a significant feature of spirituality of most indigenous groups within the region (Fienup-Riordan 1994; Willerslev 2007). The practice of hunting, which required intense human contact with animal spirits, entailed and is still shaping specific perceptions of "animals as persons" (Bird-David 1999, 2006; Brightman, Grotti, and Ulturgasheva 2012). So it is the category of person or personhood, according to which humanity is attributed not only to humans but also to certain nonhuman beings, whether animals, plants, or "things" that lies at the basis of

current constructs of human identity, acquisition of humanity, and the process of growing up among indigenous groups in the Arctic.

Although limited access to land resources has led to a lack of opportunity to hunt game or engage in fishing, youth continue to place great value on the transmission and acquisition of essential survival techniques and opportunities for family bonding. In the past, hunting was a core activity for youth and contributed to the making of youth as resilient people. Older male relatives would be around and have enough resources to take younger men and boys out hunting and fishing. These activities are considered essential for children to achieve developmental milestones. This is no longer the case as opportunities for hunting and fishing become increasingly limited. The expense of buying fuel and hunting gear and the unavailability of snow machines and boats make it very difficult for youth to go hunting.

The celebration of a youth's first successful hunt among Eveny shows that the ritual of celebrating the "first catch" not only serves as a formative and critical event for a young person's gradual acquisition of social competence and maturity but also is an affirmation of male adolescents' agency and potential for resilience. Engagement in subsistence activities is a vital component of indigenous adolescent maturation and development. Moreover, young women's cultural identities are partly made through their craftwork and artwork (Ulturgasheva 2012, 89–91). Many Eveny cultural practices, including dancing, singing, sewing, drawing, beading, and working animal fur and skin enable young people to build resilience. Through their involvement with subsistence practices, young people are able to express themselves individually but also socially. Subsistence-based values and practices involve many different social occupations that incorporate aesthetic, rhythmic, expressive, musical, and therapeutic qualities. These qualities contribute to the formation of teenagers' social and emotional competence. Their involvement in subsistence practices give them the resources to work through difficult issues, interpret events, rethink perspectives, express their inner world, and imagine their futures. These practices are therefore highly significant for the well-being and resilience of Arctic youth.

## **INEQUALITIES**

An externally imposed pattern of settlement common across the Arctic has resulted in social inequalities between a majority of impoverished local population and affluent newcomers who occupy positions in local administrative and governmental organizations. Contemporary outcomes of imposed settlement for many indigenous groups in Siberia include relentless poverty and unemployment, increases in suicide, substance and alcohol abuse, and interpersonal violence among youth. All of these factors contribute to a dramatically changed experience of growing-up for Arctic young people with every new generation. In Yakutia, suicides and accidents have become the leading cause of death of adolescents (10–17 years old), while in Russia as a whole the leading cause of death from external causes for this group are

road traffic injuries. For those from 15–17 years old, suicide and murder prevails as a predominant cause of death. Death rates from these causes are highest in the remote districts with the highest percentage of indigenous population. Contributing factors of social deprivation and youth disadvantage are exacerbated by inadequate and poor-quality prevention strategies in terms of education, social support, health care and family support (Fondahl, Crate, and Filippova 2014, 57–88).

Recent studies have indicated that in the Arctic, including Siberia, the young have a higher inclination to migrate (Institute of Social and Economic Research 2007) and have listed remittances, marriage, and rural poverty as the main determinants for youth urban migration. A marked dearth of jobs in remote villages of the Russian Arctic engenders the feeling of uselessness among young people. The economic prosperity found in larger towns or cities like Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) rarely reach the villages (Vitebsky 2000, 34–36). Market conditions, which require reliance on their own resources, offer young people from remote northern communities very few opportunities for advancement. So young people are likely to move to the city to get away from depressed villages that have little in the way of cash-generating economic activity and lack employment, prospects, transport, medicine, cinema, clubs, or youth activities. Although the latter has been associated with long-standing trends related to changes in the availability of resources, the scale of youth urban migration however does differ today due to widespread decline in subsistence production and participation, inadequate housing, food insecurity, and limited educational and economic opportunities.

Lately, outmigration has been linked in environmental literature to climate change-related disasters that require relocation of entire villages. Pressures associated with relocation include the movement of rural populations including youth to urban areas where they join the army of already disadvantaged and marginalized communities. This dynamic once again reinforces or exacerbates the already rigidly stratified society and the hierarchy of inequalities in post-Soviet Siberia.

## ISSUES TODAY

The Arctic is constantly changing and so are experiences of youth in the region. Long-term socioeconomic development has major effects on youth identities. Climate change acts as an additional contributor to other factors that have a far-reaching impact. It has a most negative effect on subsistence, traveling on sea ice, pasture conditions, and thereby on cultural youth identities (Hovelsrud et al. 2011). Changing environmental conditions and increasing competition for resources challenge community viability and a sense of common identity, especially among adolescents (Caulfield 2000; Kvernmo and Heyerdahl 2003). Loss of social identity increases the risk for social alienation and destructive behaviors.

Contemporary Siberian youth are developing and deploying new strategies for dealing with new issues and challenges. In the context of a modern settlement, these strategies include everyday activities such as sports, games, online social

networking, “romantic relations” and “hanging out” (Condon 1988; Ulturgasheva et al. 2014).

In the face of pressures and challenges, youth are developing specific capacities to navigate successfully through them. However, successful transition to adulthood is possible only if a young person has access to the necessary social and economic resources critical for movement through the developmental stages (Ulturgasheva 2012). Successful transition to adulthood depends on various contingencies, and fluctuations of cultural and developmental variables, that shape resilience. Even though the nature of hardship and challenges has changed and these are now largely an outcome of postcolonial modernity, indigenous youth still rely on important and integral aspects of the community life such as sharing, extended family, fluid households, kinship-based peer networks, subsistence activities (reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing) and culturally important practices (speaking the native language, beadwork, traditional dance, and sewing traditional clothes). Thus, young people in Siberia are still drawing from the community strengths and culturally integrated mechanisms of protection as they creatively reimagine and strategically gain access to available resources.

Olga Ulturgasheva

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