

NARRATIVES OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE IN NORTHWESTERN SIBERIA IN THE 1930S¹

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses official and Indigenous views of the Khanty and Forest Nenets uprising against the Soviets, known as the Kazym War (1931–1934). The rebellion is well documented in archival sources and covered by scholarly research, popular essays, and novels. Almost a century after the uprising, Indigenous narratives about the uprising are still circulating in local communities. Specifically, this paper addresses selected episodes of the Kazym War reflected both in official and Indigenous narratives. I focus on the analysis of diverse modes of narrating hybrid knowledge produced in a contact zone, and the mythic imagination of shamans shaping narratives about the uprising. Here, I argue that perceptions of Indigenous history sometimes adopt and reproduce the dominant discourse about the uprising, but link to the official story predominantly by rejecting it and establishing autonomous discussions.

Keywords: Khanty, Forest Nenets, Indigenous, uprising, narratives, shaman

In this article, I explore reflections on a major Indigenous uprising in the 1930s in northwestern Siberia, known amongst the Indigenous communities as the Kazym War. I intend to discuss official and Indigenous narratives that evolved from different sources. In doing so, I concentrate on various episodes in this revolt from the Khanty and Forest Nenets people.²

Colonisation was the most general and continuous process which began during the Tsarist period shaping the situation in northwestern Siberia along with the continually increasing number of settlers (Iadrntsev 1892: 190–242; Golovnev 1997: 157; Patkanov 1999: 193–240; Sablin and Savel'eva 2011; Khariuchi

2018: 22). The attitude of the Indigenous groups and their leaders towards the Russian/Soviet colonial regime was not well-documented. Thus, we lack sufficient evidence regarding the Indigenous perspective. But, this is typical when considering colonial encounters on a global scale as well.

Indigenous peoples' perceptions of their history are not normally reflected in official documents or in history books. Raymond Fogelson noted that Indigenous people's feelings of the past may appear peculiar for 'literate conditioned perspectives' (Fogelson 1989: 134). The interpretation of any episode from the past depends upon the 'values, meanings, symbolism, worldviews, social structural principles, and

other variables'. If traumatic experiences are forgotten or denied, they become unreal (ibid.: 141–143). Sergei Kan (2019: 171) also allows for the possibility of highly exaggerated events appearing nonexistent.

For Indigenous people, the Kazym uprising was a huge episode in their history, but for the Soviets it was more like a nonevent. During my first fieldwork trip in 1991, the Khanty themselves began talking about 'the Khanty War against the Russians'. I was surprised by the disposition of my field partners to tell stories about the Kazym War at their own initiative. Young people were also aware of the topic. It might have just been by chance that I happened to meet such people, although I felt strongly that everybody knew something about the uprising.

However, according to official accounts, this event should not be considered a war or even an uprising. For example, in the annual report of Berezovo raion's executive committee for 1934, the event was simply described as an 'especially sharp sedition of kulaks and shamans' (GAKhMAO, f. 111, l. 1, f. 9: 9). The official discourse reflects the colonial clash of the early Soviet period rather clearly. Soviet documents and articles by academic and popular authors described the extensive damage done to the Soviet regime by elders, shamans, and the rest of the Indigenous population (see, for example, GAKhMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934; GMPiCh, Loskutov f. 1–9; Pastukhov 1937: 51; Vol'skii 1937: 67–73; Budarin 1968; *Fates of the peoples* 1994). At the same time, the Soviet suppression of Indigenous people following uprisings was generally ignored (Golovnev 1995: 165; Shishkin 2000: 7–8; Sundström 2007: 209). Officials aimed to record all misconduct by Indigenous leaders, shamans, and common people. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine the point where accounts of real

offences shifted toward fabrication. During the 1930s, Soviet propaganda introduced the image of the shaman as a religious class enemy. Over time, people absorbed the guidelines from the discourse. This approach also shaped Indigenous people's modes of reflection, such that at times they remember shamanism based on Soviet rules of understanding it. Thus, Indigenous oral accounts have become more hybrid models over time.

The concept of hybridity involves new cultural experiences that occur through the process of cultural exchange (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 108), particularly in the colonial context. Hybridity employs 'the indeterminate temporality of in-between, that needs to be engaged in creating the conditions through which "newness comes into the world"' (Bhabha 1994: 227–228), engaging confrontation and adjustment (ibid.: 33). Mikhail Bakhtin (1981: 358) explains hybridity as a simultaneously limited and fragmented mode of sensitivity and communication, a meeting of socially diverse genres of perception. The hybridisation of recollections can be spontaneous, but also politically driven, intending to unsettle Indigenous communities. Hybrid memories connect encounter, disruption, and controversy. Colonial control may be overturned or contested, but Indigenous debates may still reiterate colonial discourse from the past. Hybridity, then, acts through a long-term colonial process and quiet subjugation of local traditions (Bhabha 1994: 154–156; Young 1995: 21–24; Ashcroft et al. 2007: 110).

I intend to explore how knowledge is produced in a contact zone, which Mary Louise Pratt (1991: 34; 2003 [1992]: 6–7) conceptualises as colonial spaces where historically and geographically unconnected peoples settle ongoing interactions that often involve highly asymmetrical relations of power and conflict

over time. Departing from Pratt's concept, James Clifford (1997: 192–194) treats a contact zone as 'a power charged set of exchanges' inspired by a continuing colonial relationship. Indigenous narratives, motivated by this contact, depict people's fate by connecting their stories to institutional (as well as academic) representations (Pratt 1991: 35). This intangible dialogue (sometimes explicit, but mainly imagined) penetrates my analysis and serves as the key point of departure for discussion.

Oral history communicates the meaning of events, but it also implies an objective interest by revealing 'unknown events or unknown aspects of known events' and illuminates unknown specifics of life (Portelli 1981: 99). Marshall Sahlins (1987: vii) maintains that history is distinctive in different societies, but always appears meaningful. Furthermore, Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat (2017: 372–376) also argue that, in reconstructive cross-analysis, oral evidence serves as a basis for understanding 'patterns of behaviour or events in the past' as well as details of a social context and 'knowledge, relationships, values, conflicts, and special language, gathered through reflective accounts of practical lived experience'. Amongst others, oral history reflects facts, but those need to be measured comparatively against information from other sources. An analysis of such facts must remain simpler and should aim to recognise only 'strong correlation patterns' without further claims of objective and ultimate truth regarding events.³

Although oral history expresses truth from people's perspectives, it is more complicated to comprehend for a researcher. To unpack these narratives, we need 'a cluster of perspectives' and must attempt to detect social 'images and attitudes' that shape the stories (Thompson and Bornat 2017: 365–366). A scholar, therefore,

must consider modes of narrating, manifested topics, and concealed meanings. Thus, narrative analysis assumes a sympathetic listening by an ethnographer (ibid.: 372).

In the current study, I aim to analyse information about the Kazym uprising attained from various sources, including official documents, literature, and oral history accounts. My analysis relies primarily on field data, collected mainly during the 1990s and later. The entire topic of Indigenous resistance in the early Soviet period appeared to me during fieldwork. My Khanty, Forest Nenets, and Mansi field partners mostly began talking about the Kazym events at their own initiative. Most of these conversations were spontaneous and unstructured. I never wrote down questions for a focussed inquiry of this topic. I specifically prepared only for the most recent interview conducted online in winter 2022. Moreover, I relied on archival materials available in the 1990s and a heterogeneous body of literature on this theme.

I chose four topics related to the Kazym War and reflected in both official and Indigenous discourses. The availability of alternative evidence allows for a comparative interpretation of these cases. In my analysis, I put these competing sources (Indigenous/vernacular and official/authoritative) into conditional and sometimes also explicit negotiation with one another. I attempt to reach a flexible interpretation of the official historical sources and evidence from Indigenous recollections of these Kazym War episodes. In doing so, I attempt to demonstrate how differences in understanding have been maintained or enhanced, but also in what way a cognitive distance between these discourses is sometimes diminished.

THE COURSE OF THE KAZYM WAR

In the 1930s, Soviet authorities entered the northern Indigenous communities' lives to an unprecedented degree. The intensity of the colonial encounter was shocking for the Khanty and Forest Nenets. The Soviets chose the Kazym River region as an arena for particularly intensive reforms. Tensions in the area began to rise after a cultural base⁴ was established in the village of Kazym in 1930. The first violent public act of Indigenous resistance occurred when children gathered at the Kazym school in the autumn of 1931. Parents, upset by the authorities' cruel measures (children were taken to school by force and using threats of violence), invaded the cultural base and returned their children to winter camps in the forest tundra.

Following that first act of resistance, pressure increased as the collectivisation campaign was launched and the repression of shamans began. Active confrontation resumed in 1933, when administration-initiated fishing on Num To Lake began. Since the lake is one of the most sacred bodies of water for the Khanty and Forest Nenets (Leete 2017: 25–27), they obstructed the initiative. Several groups of Soviet administrators and enlighteners ('agit-brigades') were sent to Num To to negotiate with Indigenous leaders. In December 1933, the most prominent group, led by Berezovo raion executive committee head Piotr Astrakhantsev, arrived in Num To. Another member of the group, female communist party officer Polina Shnaider, visited a sacred island in the middle of the lake. Given that it was strictly prohibited for women to step onto that island, the Indigenous people became extremely upset, captured the group of Soviet 'agitators', and killed them through a sacrificial ceremony.

The Soviet side reacted to this act of resistance severely, sending military troops to the forest and tundra to punish the Indigenous people. The uprising was quickly suppressed, tens of Indigenous people were arrested, and many were left in taiga camps to die, whilst their hunting and fishing gear, food supplies and reindeer were confiscated. For more details of the Kazym War, see Golovnev 1995: 165–178; Balzer 1999: 110–117; Ernykhova 2003; Leete 2004.

In what follows, I present an analysis of selected topics that enable a better understanding of the relationship between Indigenous and institutional understandings of the uprising. Each case presented illuminates the different configurations of contesting perspectives on the revolt. These topics also demonstrate important aspects of the conflict, each one in its own way.

SCHOOLTEACHER IN A FOREST CAMP

In 1933, tension between the authorities and Indigenous people escalated because of the fishing *artel'* sent to Num To Lake. Several agit-brigades arrived in the area to solve the ensuing problem. A Russian teacher from the Kazym boarding school, Arkadii Loskutov, was directed to negotiate with Indigenous rebels twice as a member of the second and fourth agit-brigades. During his first trip (from early June to early August 1933), the group met no Indigenous people in the forest tundra (GMPiCh, Loskutov f. 1: 18–20; GAKhMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934: 17; Fates of the Peoples 1994: 212). But, during the second journey, Loskutov made contact with several Khanty families and spent some time in one Khanty forest camp. Later, Loskutov described his experience in his memoirs (written in the 1960s).

Loskutov mentions this trip in several manuscripts he prepared for the Khanty-Mansiisk museum. Loskutov and Konstantin Filipov (from *Uralpushnina⁵ Faktoriia*) left the Kazym base on the 10th (or 14th) of October 1933. According to Loskutov's memoirs, they passed the village of Iuil'sk and learned from nomads that, in the tundra, 'people are preparing for a counter-revolutionary uprising'. Loskutov and Filipov returned to Kazym base by the 6th or 16th of November (GMPiCh, Loskutov f. 1: 22–23, f. 5: 2–3, f. 7: 14).

In another manuscript, Loskutov describes his journey in more detail. Loskutov and Filipov spent the first night in a Khanty forest camp, 40 km from the Kazym cultural base. The master of the family regretted that the Russians had started a dangerous trip, since 'the kulaks and shamans may kill them'. The same concerns were expressed in the next Khanty forest camp where the travellers were hosted during the next evening (GMPiCh, Loskutov f. 3: 3). But, Loskutov and Filipov were not scared by these warnings and decided to move on. Loskutov stressed that danger was growing all the time:

But we continued our road. In Ilbikurt, we met TI⁶, who was astonished and said that we are going to the flames of Hell. After that, we travelled further without a local guide. Sites were familiar to us; we had been there several times. (GMPiCh, Loskutov f. 3: 3–4)

Loskutov and Filipov spent the fourth night in the forest and, by the end of the fifth day, arrived at the camp of MP and MT. Only an elderly woman and her daughter-in-law were present. The old lady said, 'Our men are not at home. You cannot stay overnight here.' Yet, she allowed them to warm up and dry their clothes. Loskutov and Filipov received some food and

were eventually allowed to stay overnight. At four o'clock in the morning, some people arrived on a reindeer sledge. They entered the hut, whispered with the ladies, and soon departed. The Russians pretended to be sleeping. The next morning, Loskutov and Filipov left and, reached the camp thirty to forty kilometres later, finding no one there. The Russians spent another night in the forest and arrived at Num To. They stayed there for two days, but met no Khanty or Forest Nenets people. Loskutov claims that they were in mortal danger, and the Khanty did not kill them only because they were considered 'small chiefs' (GMPiCh, Loskutov f. 3: 4–9).

Indigenous evidence regarding the same episode is also detailed, but provides a different story. I met a Khanty man in the 1990s who claimed that this episode was related to his family. He had also seen Loskutov's manuscripts in the museum's archives and, thus, had a comparative perspective for this incident. According to the Khanty family story, Loskutov appears less heroic than he did in his memoirs:

My mother lives in Iuil'sk. She told me that her grandmother hid Loskutov from her sons. Her granny said that he is a good, peaceful man, teaches our children. But, Loskutov realised that the war had begun and he hid himself. You don't need to kill such a man. And grandmother provided him shelter. She fed Loskutov in secret. He lived there for a full month. After that, he was sent to Kazym. Loskutov's archive is here in Khanty-Mansiisk. He writes that he was starving. He didn't starve at all! He received normal food! He makes himself out as a hero. (M, Khanty, FM 1996, Khanty-Mansiisk)

This story continued with specific comments on details of Loskutov's description of his stay at

the forest camp with his family. A comparison with this Khanty family lore does not favour Loskutov. The Khanty man further stated:

Loskutov stayed in Iuil'sk. Later, he moved away from Iuil'sk and in the forest camp he learned that it was dangerous to proceed further. He stayed at my great grandmother's place. My aunt recounted how they fed that man. She still feels pity for Loskutov because our men almost killed him. Grandmother's older brother arrived and saw that some strange footwear (*kisy*)⁷ was drying. Doesn't he know who wears what kind of *kisy* at his sister's place? But these were rather strange. Something was not right. He started to scream at his sister, but she did not say anything. So, he left. But, he said, 'If I notice something, I'll kill him for sure!' After that, other people arrived and searched. Granny's brother told them that they must be cautious there. My aunt said that men arrived and searched everywhere. Only after that did they unload their carbines. [...] Apparently, the women fed that Communist. This is exactly that incomprehensible woman's heart. Their fathers were killed, but they fed that Loskutov. They simply felt pity. (M, Khanty, FM 1996, Khanty-Mansiisk)

At the time of the uprising, Loskutov was a schoolteacher in a remote village. But, when he wrote his memoirs, he was already a regional celebrity and director of the Khanty-Mansiisk Local History Museum (today, the Museum of Natural History and Man). Thus, he had the authority to shape knowledge about the Kazym uprising and, therefore, felt he could not look like a coward or a marginal figure. Khanty ethnographer Ol'ga Ernykhova (2010: 105–106) points out that all documents about the

first two Kazym school principals in the regional archives and the archives of the Khanty-Mansiisk museum have been destroyed. For a long time, Loskutov was considered the first head of the school. Being a museum director, he took the opportunity to rewrite history a bit, making 'himself out to be the hero', using the interpretation of our Khanty friend.

This piece of Indigenous history is not a pure example of Indigenous remembering. It has two sources—family lore and Loskutov's memoirs. My Khanty friend clearly prefers the story he heard from his mother and aunt, and criticises Loskutov for his arrogance. We cannot prove either narrative, but certainly the role of Loskutov remains ambivalent within this entire story. Furthermore, we can see how even a small incident is interpreted in conflicting ways from the institutional and Indigenous perspectives.

INDIGENOUS BRUTALITY

Various narratives from the Kazym uprising include descriptions of cruel behaviour by the Khanty and Forest Nenets. Regarding this dimension of the uprising, the archival sources and oral narratives concentrate on a key incident during the uprising: the execution of a group of Soviet officials by the Indigenous rebels. The interpretation of possible acts of Indigenous violence remains ambiguous when relying upon different sources.

During the uprising, the Khanty and Forest Nenets detained a group of Soviet officials, led by the administrative head of Berëzovo raion, Piotr Astrakhantsev. Next, the Indigenous protestors, led by chief shaman Efim Vandymov, arranged a shamanic séance, after which the shamans claimed that the gods required the sacrifice of the captured Russians.⁸ The hostages were strangled using reindeer lassos (GAKhMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934: 12–13;

GMPICH, Loskutov f. 1: 24; Loskutov f. 9: 8; Budarin 1968: 226; Golovnev 1995: 175–176; Balzer 1999: 114; Ernykhova 2003: 74–77; Wiget and Balalaeva 2011: 25).

The official discourse adds a description of further savage brutality to this episode. According to archived descriptions of Astrakhantsev's widow, after killing the members of the group, the breasts of Polina Shnaider were cut off and the victims were scalped (GAKhMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934: 13). Although other documents do not confirm this description, this story of Indigenous cruelty has appeared in multiple sources. For example, during one of my field interviews, this description was echoed by one Indigenous respondent:

But, they were cruel to the doctor. She was a good doctor, a young Russian lady. They tied her to a reindeer sledge and dragged her, so that afterwards it was impossible to recognise her—no eyes, no nose, nothing, no breasts. They dragged her naked; it was cruel from their side. (F, Mansi, FM 1991, Khanty-Mansiisk)

The old lady seemed convinced that this torture or desecration of a female body genuinely took place (although she replaces Shnaider with a female doctor in her story). This indicates that the official narrative was adopted into Indigenous discourse to some degree (see also Perevalova 2016: 137). I also recorded another Indigenous report of this episode. This time, the narrator confirmed that all victims of human sacrifice were dragged across a crust of snow:

This place is called Khimti Lor. It lies to the east of Num To, where they were killed. In the tundra, you always have a crust of snow because of the strong wind. They

were tied to a reindeer sledge and the reindeer were set free running. (M, Khanty, FM 1996, Khanty-Mansiisk)

But, stories circulated by officials about Indigenous cruelty could be also rejected by an Indigenous audience. Another Indigenous field partner reported that the Russians, whilst drowning the Khanty in ice holes, '...justified their action by revenge, since the Khanty did the same to the Russians. But this was a fabrication' (M, Khanty, FM 1994, Salekhard, see more details in the next section).

According to another piece of Indigenous oral heritage, documented by medical attendant L. Strus' in 1969 in the village of Num To, the Khanty and Forest Nenets threw members of the fishing unit, sent to the Num To lake to catch fish, into the water, saying, 'You wanted to fish, now you can catch them!' Subsequently, the fishermen were supposedly locked in a house and left to starve to death (Strus' 2003: 35). Although this piece of oral history reflects Indigenous black humour, it also indicates that the plot of throwing opponents into the water is present in Indigenous oral narratives of different kinds.

Indigenous ferocity also appeared in official documents in connection with another Indigenous revolt in the region, the *Mandalada*⁹ of the Yamal Nenets. According to a report by the Yamal Nenets region's party committee, members of the Tambei and Shchucherechye Soviets were undressed, dragged across the snow, and beaten up by Indigenous rebels in 1934 (Fates of the Peoples 1994: 240–241; Golovnev 1995: 185). Indigenous cruelty became a typical motif in Soviet documents. For example, the annual account of the Berëzovo raion from 1934 includes a note about a shaman beating up a Soviet activist (GAKhMAO, f. 111, l. 1, f. 9: 9).

Scholars have discussed the possibility of the torturing and brutal killing of an enemy by Indigenous people during the Kazym uprising using historical and ethnographic evidence. It is possible to deduce from the folklore and oral history that an antagonist must be killed in an especially painful way. Andrei Golovnev exploits the idea that the Indigenous rebels of the 1930s and 1940s took inspiration from their war heritage, and claims that during these uprisings the protestors applied the cruel war traditions of earlier centuries, which involved scalping and human sacrifice¹⁰ (Golovnev 1995: 178, 194; 1997: 154; 2000: 146–147).

The evidence regarding additional cruelty (scalping, cutting breasts, and drowning), reflected in both official and Indigenous sources, provides ambivalent speculation. Official documents, including the summary of charges, do not confirm this brutality (Golovnev 1995: 176; Ernykhova 2003: 77). In the scholarly literature, however, this possibility is overemphasised. For example, Elena Perevalova (2016: 133) hints that scalping is ‘probable’. If cutting breasts and scalping took place, officials would make sure that this could be found in more archival documents than in just one account written down by a non-eyewitness.

The act of human sacrifice is acknowledged in both Indigenous and academic sources, although attitudes toward this episode differ significantly. For Soviets, it demonstrated most vividly the Khanty’s and Forest Nenets’ savageness. Indigenous views predominantly refrain from assessing this episode. Although the most common Indigenous activity during the Kazym War involved avoiding contact with Soviet authorities, the Khanty and Forest Nenets could also be harsh in their actions. Violence renders the contact rigorous and results in intertwined discourses. Possibly, the human

sacrifice ritual was, at least partly, an attempt to imitate the cruelty of authorities, although the narratives of official ferocity clearly prevail over these stories of Indigenous brutality.

INDIGENOUS CASUALTIES

Whilst officials were careful to document the tragic fate of victims from Indigenous actions, the number of Indigenous casualties and the way in which they died remained vague. Yet, Indigenous authors and field partners provided sufficient insights into those fates. A comparative analysis of various sources provides an opportunity to estimate the number of Indigenous victims of the Kazym War as well as how they died.

According to official data, ten Indigenous individuals lost their lives during the active phase of the uprising. Official sources also confirm that 88 Indigenous men were arrested at the end of the revolt, amongst whom 34 were later released because of a lack of evidence against them or due to an insignificant involvement in the rebellion (GAKhMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934, 1978; Golovnev 1995: 177; Balzer 1999: 115; Ernykhova 2003: 82; Ernykhova, Sivkova 2008: 5; Perevalova 2016: 133). The court in Ostiako-Vogul’sk sentenced 11 of the arrested men to death, whilst the others received prison sentences of varying lengths. Later, the death penalty was overruled, and replaced with a 20-year prison sentence. Nine persons were found not guilty by the court (GAKhMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934: 13).

Official evidence validates the claim that nobody was killed by the Red Army or security forces nor executed resulting from court decisions following the uprising. According to this view, the ten individuals who lost their lives in battle remained the only Indigenous

causalities who died because of the revolt. But, the Indigenous perspective offers a completely different view of casualties.

The dominant opinion amongst Indigenous field partners remains that all participants in the Kazym War were killed or arrested, and vanished forever. Several individuals with whom I discussed the topic expressed this outlook (FM 1991–2000). The same view was articulated in the documentary film ‘People from the Other Times’ (1989) by a Khanty elder interviewed and shared by scholars sympathetic to the Indigenous victims of the uprising, as we can see from a short note by Nadezhda Lukina (1993: 62).

Indigenous sources also indicate that not everybody died soon after arrest. Some were even released, although this did not necessarily lead to a happy ending. Those individuals became outcasts, whose destinies could still be rather dreadful:

When they were brought here [Khanty-Mansiisk] to court, I saw them myself. Perhaps they were not so guilty. Perhaps they were not even shamans. In spring, they were released. They had no money. [...] Once I went to take water from that watershed. And he stepped into the yard for some reason. Perhaps he needed food, perhaps he wanted to ask something. And suddenly he collapsed. He was taken somewhere by horse carriage but where... I never asked. I know them in this way. (F, Mansi, FM 1991, Khanty-Mansiisk)

Ereimei Aipin confirmed the possibility that those released did not make it out of Khanty-Mansiisk. According to Aipin’s novel (2002: 255–256), individuals freed from prison died before spring 1934 since they lacked food supplies, shelter, and could not leave town

without transport. Alternatively, they may have been killed by unknown persons.

Furthermore, Indigenous people sometimes claim that some participants in the uprising survived arrest and a prison sentence. Some may have even lived a long life afterwards. I documented one story of a Khanty man who was released following his arrest because of a lucky coincidence:

The Khanty here tell this story, and my father told it as well. An old Khanty man lived on the Tromiugan River. He also participated in that [uprising]. There was an arrangement that if any Khanty or Nenets arrived by chance, they would hold him there by force. [...] That old man was also there. He arrived there by chance and that was it—they captured him. But in one day they started to transport some Russian captives somewhere to kill them. [...] One was put on his sled. There was a snowstorm. He escaped somehow and stopped in some place. He told the Russian that he had fled. And the Russian said that if you escaped, then you rescued me as well. Later, everybody who had been there was arrested. That old man, who was still young at that time, was also arrested. [...] One Russian approached him and smiled. ‘Do you recognise me?’ ‘No,’ said the Khanty. ‘Do you remember how you transported me on a reindeer sled?’ And, so the Russian rescued him from that prison. He was still alive until recently. (M, Khanty, FM 1995, Ai Pim River)

The storyteller belongs to a Khanty clan that lives far from the region of the uprising in a region not connected to the uprising. But, there is nothing impossible in this story (tensions in the Indigenous camp during

the Kazym War were also reported by other informants). This story describes the possibility that some participants in the uprising avoided punishment. There is more oral history evidence about participants in the uprising who survived immediate punishment or even a prison sentence (see GMPiCh, Aksarina, 8–9; Voldina 2003: 7–8; Moldanov 2003: 8–9). For instance, Khanty scholar Maina Lapina (2003: 30) claims that some participants in the uprising were still alive in the 1990s.

However, the uprising also resulted in many officially undocumented Indigenous casualties. Because this topic remains neglected in archival documents, Indigenous storytelling represents the only way of preserving some of the knowledge regarding it. One motif here relates to drowning people in ice holes:

Once an old man suddenly told me this story. One summer after the Kazym War, soldiers arrived on boats. The uprising was suppressed, but the military could not do anything because the Khanty had moved upstream during the fishing season. When the new winter began, they began pushing the Khanty into ice holes along the Kazym River. During the spring when the snow melted, those winter corpses floated for days and did not disappear, but remained visible next to Polnovat Village where an island divides the Ob River into two streams and a huge whirlpool appears. For some of those corpses, only a layer of meat floated on the surface of the water. The Khanty were forced to pull these bodies to shore. (M, Khanty, FM 1994, Salekhard)

The theme of drowning Indigenous rebels also appears in other sources based on oral narratives (Ogryzko 1996: 14; Perevalova 2016: 139). However, drowning innocent people was not the

only form of punishment. Khanty writer Ereimei Aipin touches upon these incidents of the post-revolt killing of Indigenous inhabitants in his short stories ‘The Divine Message’ and ‘The Russian Doctor’ (1995) as well as in the novel *Godmother in Bloody Snow* (2002). According to these fictional stories, Red Army troops killed many Indigenous people, some with rifles and canons, others using grenades and bombs, some left to freeze to death, and others battered to death with clubs made of larch.¹¹ Before punishment, no investigation was conducted. Whoever the Reds succeeded in catching was supposed to receive a penalty. In addition, all actual participants in the uprising were certainly killed (Aipin 1995: 118–119, 134–135, 161; 2002: 7, 123–128). Aipin also describes massacres of Indigenous people (in conical tents, everybody was shot¹²) (2002: 165–169, see also Strus’ 2003: 35).

Supposedly, oral history narratives serve as one source of these descriptions. It seems improbable that Aipin exaggerated the cruelty of authorities, even through a fictional account. He must have had some basis for these descriptions, with no official documents providing such information.

Oral history also involves stories of bombing the Khanty people from planes (FM 1996, 2000; Strus’ 2003: 35; Ernykhova 2003: 82). Aipin used this same motif (2002: 6, 67–68, 171–188, 224), although no proof of this appears in official documents. This is unsurprising since there are no documents left that describe any violent actions by security forces (Ernykhova and Sivkova 2008: 5). We only have oral history accounts, which are unverifiable against official data. We have several descriptions of the use of excessive violence by security forces, much of which quite possibly occurred.

To estimate the potential overall number of Indigenous casualties, we need to consider

the available documented deaths, the statistical evidence of the period, the relevant literature, the settlement pattern of the Khanty and Forest Nenets as well as the oral history of Indigenous peoples. An integrated analysis of these data enables us to provide an approximate number of people who died during the uprising and soon afterwards, or who vanished in prison camps.

Perevalova (2016: 133) claims that according to official records 450 Indigenous people joined the Kazym uprising. Other sources (Kopylov and Retunskii 1965: 169; Timofeev 1995: 32) and oral history data (M, b. 1951, Khanty, FM 1995, Ai Pim River) estimate that 200 to 300 Khanty and Forest Nenets people participated in the uprising. This difference in estimates indicates that it could be difficult to distinguish participants from the rest of the Indigenous population.

Indigenous eyewitnesses confirm that 20 to 30 people, including women and children, were killed by Russian troops during the final phase of the uprising (Ernykhova and Lazareva 2003: 33; Ernykhova and Sivkova 2008: 5). As mentioned before, official documents report only ten Indigenous deaths during the Kazym War. This difference in numbers of immediate casualties stems from different means of counting. Since official data do not reflect the violent actions of security forces in the forest and tundra after Indigenous resistance ceased, there is no documented proof of executions that took place on the spot. At the other extreme, Gennadii Bardin (1994: 6) asserts that 400 people died because of the Kazym War.

This number seems adequate if we also count other deaths resulting from the actions of the Soviets. For instance, the family members of individuals arrested met rather severe hardships in the forest and tundra, with many dying of hunger. From these families, the punishing troops expropriated hunting and fishing

equipment, reindeer, dogs, skis, winter clothing, reindeer hides, rifles, and knives. Conical tents were sometimes burnt down, sledges destroyed, and Indigenous women raped (Moldanova 1995; Aipin 2002: 23–25, 35; Ernykhova and Sivkova 2008: 5). In these conditions, without a master of the forest camp and lacking the means for subsistence, surviving became impossible for many. Ignoring casualties amongst the family members of Indigenous rebels was a typical approach in the writing of Soviet history, with the distortion of evidence within documents widespread (Shishkin 2000: 8–11).

Before the uprising, 1630 people lived in the Kazym area, 1532 of whom represented the Khanty and Forest Nenets (BKM, Summary of Charges 1934). Considering the available official data and oral history evidence, it seems reasonable to propose that 200 to 300 Indigenous people died due to the Kazym War. What we can say is that the death rate in the Kazym area was rather high in 1934 and 1935.

Descriptions of the methods used to suppress the uprising and estimate the Indigenous casualties differ drastically comparing official sources with oral history narratives. Archival documents ignore the topic almost completely, leaving the impression that there were very few Indigenous casualties. Indigenous historical accounts reflect a more adequate number of victims albeit rather vaguely and fragmentary.

There are also other data to consider when discussing the style of Soviet repression. Perevalova (2016: 133–136) provides evidence that, after the Kazym uprising (the real revolt) between 1935 and 1938, NKVD¹³ fabricated several huge Indigenous uprisings in a neighbouring region on the Sosva, Liapin, Voikar and Synia Rivers amongst the Mansi and Khanty peoples. At least 200 Indigenous men were arrested, most of whom were executed,

although these people were not engaged in actual anti-Soviet uprisings or movements. In addition to this, these fabricated revolts were supposedly led by shaman chiefs, similar to the Kazym War.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SHAMAN CHIEF?

In the Indigenous oral history tradition, the fate of the shaman who led the Kazym uprising remains a key topic of discussion. The shamanic component is also prominent in official documents and scholarly approaches to the Kazym revolt. The abundance of data and popularity of the theme enables comparative analysis. On this topic, the most common features of institutional and vernacular history are clearly distinguished.

The Indigenous oral history often connected shamans and war parties long before the twentieth century. In folk narratives, the Nenets and Ob-Ugrian shamans appear as ideological advisors to war leaders. Shamans called clan members to war gatherings and conducted collective sacrificial ceremonies (Khomich 1981: 34; Patkanov 1999: 72, 97). During interclan warfare, the Nenets and Ob-Ugrian military chiefs also had shamanic skills (Patkanov 1999: 77–78; Golovnev 1997: 150, 154, 163; Golovnev and Perevalova 2017: 118–120). For example, Bakhrushin (1935: 46, 57) presents evidence that Khanty military chiefs simultaneously acted as religious leaders during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Wawlyo Nenyang led the prominent Nenets resistance movement during the period from the 1820s through the 1840s. Historical ethnographic evidence indicates that people believed that he possessed shamanic skills, including the ability to avoid arrest and escape imprisonment using miraculous talents. Some

of Wawlyo's fellows and followers also used shamanic talents to escape capture. Real-life facts (Wawlyo Nenyang escaped his first imprisonment) supported these stories to a certain extent (Felinska 1854: 302–305, 309–310; Golovnev 1995: 156–163; Khariuchi 2018: 3, 27–28, 34, 37, 42–43, 62–65, 77, 80, 115).

In the Nenets mythology, heroes fly in the sky and bring themselves back to life. 'In folktales and personal recollections, the appearance of real historical leaders sometimes has miraculous attributes' (Golovnev 1997: 155). At the same time, the Ob-Ugrian shamans did not belong to the upper class; they were not chiefs (Ernykhova 2003: 14). Therefore, during the Kazym War, the Khanty had perhaps two leaders: Ivan Ernykhov, who was not a shaman, and Efim Vandymov, who was. Vandymov became a war chief only during the final stage of active resistance when war rituals became more frequent and the rebels more often turned to their gods for advice (Golovnev 1995: 172–174; Balzer 1999: 113–114; Ernykhova 2003: 71–74; Leete 2005: 238).

During the early decades of the Soviet period, the West Siberian shamans often acted against the new regime (Khomich 1981: 35–36, Golovnev 2000: 146–147). In the case of the Kazym War, different sources (academic, Indigenous as well as official) confirm that some leaders of the uprising were shamans. According to a file on the accused, 29 of the men arrested (out of 51 who made it to court) were shamans (Golovnev 1995: 177; 2000: 146–7; Golovnev and Osherenko 1999: 92–3; Balzer 1999: 115–116; Ernykhova 2003: 144–156).

Official documents confirm and scholars agree that the Khanty shaman Efim Vandymov was elected at the end of 1933 as the war chief for all of the Khanty and Forest Nenets participating in the Kazym War (Golovnev 1995: 173; Ernykhova 1997: 6; 2003: 54, 72;

Aipin 2002: 61). Vandymov's career as a war leader ended before 20 February 1934, when he was caught by security forces (GAKhMAO, f. 111, l. 1, f. 9: 9; Astrakhantseva 1934: 11–12).

From the official documents it is quite clear what happened to Vandymov. Several other shamans who arranged sacrificial rituals during the uprising were also caught. But, Indigenous oral accounts treat Vandymov's fate differently. During interviews, several Khanty field partners claimed that the shaman escaped punishment or, at least, postponed his destiny.

Some of these stories are relatively realistic. Although the fugitive was a shaman, he did not use any extraordinary spiritual skills to avoid or confront the military who came after him. One such story was told by a young Khanty man as evidence of Indigenous bravery and savvy, as well as the Russians' fear of the extraordinary skills of a shaman:

Shamans were caught after the uprising. But when they tracked the leader, a shaman, they could not catch him by any means. Finally, they encircled him in a conical tent, a *chum*. They started to shoot the *chum* using machine guns and, at human height, the *chum* looked like a strainer. But, the shaman continued to shoot back. The Russians were worried that it was impossible to kill him. But then one random shot hit the *chum* higher, and the shaman stopped shooting. He had climbed to the drying poles and lay there, firing back. (M, Khanty, FM 1991, Pim River)

Other documented narratives include notions of some mystical element related to the escape of a shaman. The next example, provided by a middle-aged man, presents him as a great warrior who could also perform a ritual with a dog during his eventual retreat:

During the Khanty War a lot of Russians arrived. A kind of Khanty shaman or some wise man was there. He started to kill them. He killed, killed, and killed them all. Dropped all of them. He escaped and then saw a dog running. He killed the dog, placed its head somehow, and vanished. (M, Khanty, FM 1991, Ai Pim River)

In the following dialogue between two Khanty elders, one mentions the warrior skills of the shaman, but the older Khanty respondent stresses his magical survival and disappearance. Although the discussion appears a little obscure, the emphasis on shamanic powers is still rather evident here:

M1: The most important one who was killed, he fought for a long time.

M2: They tried to catch the most important one, but they managed very narrowly. They thought that he will not die at all. He was a shaman. They went after him, but he disappeared. He cannot be sighted, as if he is a god. He goes holding arrows.¹⁴ He was a shaman, shaman. (FM 1991, Ai Pim River)

I recorded one more story in which the runaway shaman was called Uncle Kolia. He was highly skilled at hiding himself, enjoyed support from the community, and was attributed with some superpowers:

Some legends circulate about one man, Uncle Kolia, who participated in that war. It has been told that he was not a private soldier, but somebody superior. After that war, he came here to the Salekhard region. He carried a revolver, such a huge revolver. He was chased. He had several small houses in different locations, in every village. He

lived here and there. Once he was caught. Somebody was supposed to hide him but got scared and gave him away. Uncle Kolia slept under a mosquito net. When he was found, he ran with the net and in full clothes to the river, dived in, and did not emerge from the water. He was a good swimmer and managed to escape. People say that when he approached, there were signs in the heavens and air and clouds and everywhere before him that signalled his coming. (M, Khanty, FM 1994, Salekhard)

In real life, the shaman Kolka Nettin was actually connected to the Indigenous resistance. He escaped Sverdlovsk prison, spent some time during 1931 near the village of Polnovat around the lower banks of the Kazym River, and was engaged in 'counter-revolutionary agitation'.

Detective I. Urevich, investigating this shaman's possible involvement in the Kazym revolt in 1932, could not confirm his participation (Ernykhova 2003: 108). This evidence proves that memories about a shaman who escaped prison and acted in the area survived decades with adequate details. In another story, the chief shaman, who managed to escape the Reds, was also called White Head Elder.

The elders said that White Head organised the uprising. The Khanty called him the White Head, *Yänk ov iki*. [...] That chief, the White Head, was never captured. It was said that he was a great shaman. Nobody knows what happened to him. He disappeared after that for good. They did not capture him. People say that above his head a pack of geese flies. To demonstrate his skills, if somebody asks, he screams and the wing of one goose breaks. (M, Khanty, FM 1995, Ai Pim River)

Andrew Wiget and Olga Balalaeva (2011: 26) documented another story that they recorded on the Tromiugan River about the escape of White Head who outsmarted his guards. Stories collected from the Pim and Tromiugan Rivers as well as the Salekhard region demonstrate that folk narratives about the Kazym War circulated widely amongst the Indigenous population. But these areas were also destinations for people escaping the Kazym River when the punishment troops arrived after the uprising (GMPiCh, Loskutov 1: 31; Budarin 1968: 226; Fates of the peoples 1994: 227). Therefore, it is not completely peculiar that people in these regions know something about these events and that the related folklore tropes circulate over a broad territory.

The context of distribution of the fugitive shaman's motif includes stories related to narratives about other uprisings in the region over a long period of time. Similar stories about a miraculous escape by a rebel shaman have become attached to other uprisings in the region as well. Legends about the *Mandalada* uprising amongst the Yamal Nenets in 1943 involve narratives about shamans who were caught and killed, who later re-emerged in the tundra, or who were shot but escaped riding reindeer and emerged from the snow (Golovnev 1995: 193–194; Golovnev and Osherenko 1999: 94; Ogryzko 1996: 14; Leete 2005: 237). This represents a rather typical folklore motif, but one that also reflects existential anguish and hope.

Aipin wrote in his *Godmother in Bloody Snow* novel that the shaman chief Small Senia remained in the region after the uprising, whom Red Army troops could not kill or arrest (Aipin 2002: 7, 247). Perevalova recorded similar heroic stories about Small Senia when conducting fieldwork amongst the Khanty in 2002 (Perevalova 2016: 137). This confirms

once again that Indigenous narratives about specific shaman heroes of the Kazym uprising continued to circulate many decades following the revolt. In addition, Aipin's novel relies on folk motifs associated with these narratives.

Although official sources confirm that the chief shaman of the Kazym War, Efim Vandymov, ended his life in prison, people continue to tell stories about the shaman's miraculous escape. This is a legitimate component of Indigenous history. In 1891, Serafim Patkanov (1999: 77–78) analysed legends about miraculous escapes and the ability of Ob-Ugrian shaman chiefs to take the form of animals, birds, and fish. The plot of these stories matches the international folktale type ATU 313 (The Magic Flight), also documented amongst the Khanty (see Uther 2004: 194–198).¹⁵

Indigenous narrators use spiritual tools to adapt to new circumstances. 'By distorting historical facts, through exaggeration and mythologising real-life events, people tried to shield themselves against negative emotions and memories of the past' (Laptander 2014a: 22). Narratives about the Kazym War and other Indigenous uprisings reveal the folkloric understanding of these events, but also carry deeper existential meaning, reflecting the resilience of the Indigenous spirit.

CONCLUSIONS: BECOMING HYBRID KNOWLEDGE

Portelli (1981: 97) claims that 'written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive'. Oral history employs symbols and myths, and can also provide valuable information similar to 'any other human source' (Thompson and Bornat 2017: 373). In oral history both narratives and retrospective fragments matter and count against the background of written evidence.

The official narrative of the Kazym War is evidently pro-Soviet and anti-Indigenous. Documents and research from the Soviet period used real facts if these appeared useful in proving the correctness of officials' own actions and discrediting Indigenous antagonists. When reflecting episodes from the Kazym uprising, authorities stressed the cruel conduct of the Indigenous populations and the infidelity of their leaders, which obstructed collaboration and impeded the implementation of Soviet reforms.

Indigenous scholars also rely heavily on official documents leading to Indigenous oral history accounts being underrepresented in their studies. Yet, Indigenous intellectuals still use more oral records than other researchers. In addition, the archives include a notable number of Indigenous narratives. Sometimes, Indigenous scholars simply avoid writing down everything they know, which might reflect a general fear of touching upon the topic of the Kazym War at all (FM 2016).

The long-term dominance of Soviet ideology has influenced Indigenous recollections. People who spent most of their lives in the Soviet Union have somehow adopted the official rhetoric. My samples also reflect this attitude, such as the view that shamans were bad, whilst teachers were good. Under Soviet propaganda, some people (including Indigenous intellectuals) started to consider shamans as prominent rivals to officials (administrators, doctors, and teachers). It was a public ideological function enforced upon shamans by authorities, but also through a shared social sensitivity. Often, however, the Khanty, Mansi, and Forest Nenets favoured the Indigenous perspective over the official view. In general, shamans have a positive image amongst the Indigenous population and people consider the Kazym uprising justified.

Narratives that rendered the Indigenous perspective on the Kazym War and Soviet repressions public first appeared as fiction writing in short stories or novels by Khanty authors (see Moldanova 1995 [1987]; Aipin 1990, 1995). Details of the uprising were presented first as literary narratives, but everyone understood that the plots of these stories were based on real-life events. At first, this represented the way in which Indigenous intellectuals dared write about this tragedy. But, I am not sure if these stories and books became widely known amongst Indigenous audiences.

In addition, there were other media used to spread knowledge publicly. One of my Khanty informants on the Pim River claimed that in the 1990s he heard about the uprising over the radio: 'I don't know exactly. I know only from the other people's stories. Mostly, the elders tell these stories. Once I heard over the radio; they described it more precisely there' (M, b. 1951, Khanty, FM 1995, Ai Pim River). As many Khanty had radios in their forest camps, this was a highly effective way to spread knowledge about the uprising amongst the Khanty. But, in that case, my Khanty friend clearly had his own sources as well.

To my knowledge, the first photo exhibition about the Kazym War was staged in the mid-1990s. In 1996, the show was presented at a cultural house in the village of Num To. I suspect it added little to the local knowledge, but still carried symbolic significance. The exhibition demonstrated that commemorating the uprising publicly was finally allowed. In 1989, the documentary 'People from the Other Times' was shot about the Kazym War. But, to my knowledge, it is not widely known amongst the Khanty and Forest Nenets. However, a multiplicity of channels providing information about the Kazym War made indigenous

knowledge hybrid once *glasnost* reached western Siberia.

Hybrid narratives of the Kazym uprising represent an outcome of colonial encounters. Usually, these discourses (Indigenous and institutional) have no obvious point of contact. But, on a few occasions, the connection between competing interpretations clearly exists. Yet, the Indigenous narratives generally appear rather independent of the official plot.

Over the years, one of my informants repeatedly stressed the problem of truth regarding the official information on the uprising. He clearly favours Indigenous narratives as a source for reconstructing episodes from the uprising and considers archival documents fabrications, or a collection of lies. Consequently, fiction stories that rely on folk memories must be true, but monographs based on documents reproduce these old but strongly established deceptions (M, Khanty, FM 2022, Khanty-Mansiisk/online).

Eremei Aipin claimed that he intended to be as unbiased as possible when writing his novel *Godmother in Bloody Snow* (Larionova 2010; see also Perevalova 2018: 189). In childhood, Aipin heard many stories about the Kazym uprising from his parents and grandparents. But, he referred to archival material as 'the real documents' that enabled him to write the book (Larionova 2010). Apparently, Aipin considered archival sources more significant and objective than the oral heritage he knew.

Indigenous discourse represents diverse understandings of credibility. Following Fogelson's (1989) approach to nonevents, miraculous escape narratives about a shaman chief appear reliable if we accept the legitimacy of the context of the Indigenous worldview. If informants view something as historical fact, it becomes equal to 'real' events (Portelli 1981: 100; see also Sahlins

1987: vii–x). For the Indigenous perception, historical and mythic incidents are the same (ibid.: xv). In the hybrid narrative space of a contact zone, various Indigenous and official stories clash and the entire tragedy of the Kazym uprising becomes increasingly evident.

From the ethnographic evidence presented, we see how hybrid traces of diverse discourses meet via Indigenous narration. However, Indigenous histories also manufacture their own assessments of truth when referring to eyewitness accounts. This study disclosed how the Indigenous oral and written reports appear to connect with the dominant official discourse by resonating, rejecting, or endorsing it.

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NOTES

- 1 This research was supported by the Estonian Research Council (grant no. PRG1584).
- 2 The Khanty and Forest Nenets are Indigenous peoples inhabiting the northern part of the taiga and forest tundra zones of western Siberia. Both groups belong to the Uralic language family, but their languages are quite distinct from one another and do not enable mutual understanding. According to the official census, the total number of Khanty was 22 170 in 1926 and 18 500 in 1939 (during the most recent census in 2021, 31 467 people identified themselves as Khanty). The Forest Nenets have never been counted separately from the Tundra Nenets; according to estimates, there are around 2000 Forest Nenets.
- 3 For further details on the complementary reconstruction of events using oral history accounts, see Jaago and Kõresaar (2008) and Rahi-Tamm and Salēniece (2016).
- 4 Cultural bases were exemplary settlements, built for Indigenous groups in different regions of the north, consisting of cultural houses and many infrastructure objects. Cultural bases were assumed to provide essential benefits and services, typical for a modern society.
- 5 *Uralpushnina* refers to the Soviet fur trade organisation.
- 6 Some names appearing in the text are coded on ethical reasons.
- 7 *Kisy* are winter boots with soft soles made from reindeer leg skins.
- 8 Sergei Bakhrushin (1935: 29) presents historical evidence of a Mansi human sacrificial ceremony from 1648. Similarly, a shaman turned to the spirits, who demanded that a Nenets captive be sacrificed. The Mansi also arranged public prayers to the spirits before initiating uprisings against the Russians (ibid.: 30, 69–70).
- 9 *Mandalada* ('piled up') in this context refers to 'war-gathering' (in Nenets). There were three major anti-Soviet *mandaladas* in the Nenets tundra: in the early 1930s (on the Yamal Peninsula) and during World War II (in the northern Yamal and Polar Urals) (Golovnev 1995: 183–194; Tolkachev 2000: 297–316; Vallikivi 2005; Leete, Vallikivi 2011: 95; Laptander 2014a, 2014b; Dudeck 2018: 78).
- 10 For more information on scalping and cutting breasts in the Khanty and Mansi legends, see Karjalainen (1918: 31–32) and Patkanov (1999: 101–103); regarding the historical record of alleged human sacrifices amongst the Ob-Ugrians until the eighteenth century, see Bakhrushin (1935: 14, 26, 29–31, 57, 78).
- 11 Spiky larch clubs were especially painful (Aipin 2002: 128).
- 12 According to Ogryzko (1993: 9), a similar suppression method was used by security forces following the *Mandalada* of the Yamal Nenets in 1943.
- 13 *Narodnyi komissariat vnutrennikh del* – People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the Soviet police and secret police from 1934 to 1946.
- 14 According to the story, the Khanty did not have guns and fought with bows and arrows.
- 15 I thank the head of the Estonian Folklore Archives, Risto Järv, for consultations regarding folklore motifs.

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