



*Red Ties and Residential Schools: Indigenous Siberians in a Post Soviet State.* Bloch, Alexia. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. 235pp.

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The book gives a vivid and an in depth picture of the process of transformations in the life and views of the *Evenki*, one of about 40 indigenous peoples of the North living in the periphery of Russia. The Evenki, comprising 30,000 people living primarily in Siberia and the Far East and divided by territorial borders of ten different subjects of the Russian Federation, have always been in the periphery of scholarship attention. Alexia Bloch has made a great contribution to fill this gap. She examines the way different segments of the Evenki population are negotiating and shifting socioeconomic contexts and renegotiating relationships with residential schools and “red” or socialist ties while in a state in crisis. The fact that the analyses of contemporary life of the Evenk community is based on the author’s 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Evenk District of Central Siberia during the dramatic period of 1992 to 1999 makes the book extremely valuable, truthful, powerful and convincing.

For Indigenous peoples of Russia, the early 1990s is characterized by great enthusiasm and romantic illusions. It was during this period that the first Federal Law (1991) for the support of the languages of the Indigenous peoples of Russia on all levels of the power hierarchy was adopted. Unfortunately, in 1998 there were some significant changes in this law that impacted the survival of these languages. For instance, *must* was substituted by *should* in many cases, though according to the *Red Book of the Languages of Russia* (1994), 63 Indigenous languages of Russia (Evenk included) were extinct or seriously endangered. The changes in the wording of the law resulted in the “watering down” or weakening of the federal policies supporting and encouraging the retention and perpetuation of Indigenous languages. As Alexia Bloch shows, these changes in federal commitments to the survival of Russia’s Indigenous languages were reflected in the local official policies in the North. In turn, this resulted in giving rise to a complex and contradictory evolution of local intellectuals’ concepts of authentic Evenk identity. On one hand, it ultimately increased efforts for cultural revitalization and control over natural resources by Russia’s Indigenous populations but, on the other hand, it contributed to the devaluation of traditional culture and mother tongue in residential schools.

Analyses of the role and place of residential schools in the life of Evenki proves that in spite of the negative attitude towards it as a holdover from the Soviet past and an instrument of assimilation, for the majority of common Evenki today this institution serves as an important opportunity for children who struggle against deep poverty to obtain an education and basic material support. There is no better alternative. Equally important, it provides Evenki children refuge from racial taunts so common in the Russian town schools where official and public authorities tend to ignore the disparaging treatment of indigenous children by Russian students. The author found that this resentful attitude towards the Evenk children is commonly held by some Russian teachers in the residential school in Tura.



Dozens of life histories gathered among three generations of Evenk women from various social backgrounds and educational and economic levels enable the author to provide valuable observations with rich detail to support her conclusions about the intricate and unique ways that indigenous Siberians were drawn into the new educational system and became a product of the Soviet project of solidifying a nation-state in the North. As a result many of the Evenk elders, still largely celebrate socialist successes and achievements. Sometimes it is difficult for the author, a citizen of United States, to understand their longing for the red ties of the Soviet past. But these memories became more positively colored for the Evenk elders in the rough contexts of life during the first decade of the post Soviet crucial socioeconomic reforms. These changes left them no jobs, no salaries, no help and practically no opportunities and tools to influence unfair political and economic changes to safeguard their communities and cultural distinctiveness.

Alexia Block is an expert in the difficult and complex problems of Indigenous “false consciousness” and the power relationships associated with resistance and personal and collective well-being. The book is made more useful and informative by her use of worldwide experience and scholarship to create a deeper understanding of the contours of Soviet and post-Soviet power in an Indigenous community. Many illustrations enhance the effectiveness of the book presentation.

Soon the Evenk District will be joined to the huge Krasnojarsk territory. In October of 2004, on one of the federal television channels, President Putin expressed his concern about maintaining indigenous culture and languages from assimilation after this enlargement reform. It would be ideal if Alexia Bloch could return to Evenkija after the implementation of the reform to see if changes in the life of the Evenks in the first decade of the 21st century are positive. For me, a Siberian Indigenous educator, the strength of the book is also in the amazing warm positivism and the subtle yet strong optimism of the author. This will help the readers not only to continue “dreaming of utopia,” as is written in the epigraph, but continue fighting for the sake of Indigenous communities. It will also help researchers, educators and leaders of Indigenous peoples to better understand contemporary challenges, foresee consequences of certain actions and policies, and to choose appropriate and effective strategies for preserving the ethnocultural heritage of a changing Russia.

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