

Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900–1960

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Book Reviews

YUPIK TRANSITIONS: CHANGE AND SURVIVAL AT BERING STRAIT, 1900–1960. By Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2013. 391 pp. Maps, black-and-white illustrations and photographs, epilogue, appendices, glossary, references, index. \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1-60223-216-7.

This is a beautifully produced, extremely scholarly, yet highly readable work, written by two co-authors who have an intimate knowledge of their topic. The primary focus is the Russian Yupik people who today live in rural and semi-urban communities along the northern shores of the Bering Sea and around Bering Strait. A major aim of the book is stated to be “to assess how an aboriginal society fared and how its social system evolved in collision with a particular ideology of contacts: Russian, and later Soviet” (4)¹. The book is based on oral historical accounts obtained from elders during the course of 9 research expeditions made to Chukotka between 1971 and 1990, as well as on historical documents and other relevant sources.

In a foreword to the book, Ernest S. Burch, Jr., notes the extensive scholarship that has been undertaken regarding “Eskimo” peoples, but that very little research had been done on the Russian (or “Siberian”) Yupik (xvii). Part of the reason for this was that for many years, the Soviet authorities forbade foreigners from visiting Chukotka. This imbalance has now been redressed by the painstaking research undertaken by the authors.

The Yupik people, also called Asiatic or “Siberian” Eskimo, constitute the westernmost, and the smallest, of the culturally and linguistically related Inuit (Eskimo) populations whose area extends across four countries, from Greenland across the northern margins of North America, to the Asian side of Bering Strait, which belongs to Russia. At the time of the publication of the book (2013) the Russian Yupik constituted around 1800 people, and the St. Lawrence Island Yupik around 1600. A few hundred more live in Alaska and elsewhere in the United States (xxix). In the book, these people are referred to as *Yupik*, or *Asiatic Eskimo*, and not Inuit. The authors note that these people do not have the word *Inuit* in their language and do not use it to refer to themselves. Their native tongue belongs to the Yupik group of the Eskimo (Eskaleut) language family (xxix).

The traditional Yupik community was oriented towards two types of resources: large and seasonally migrating sea mammals, whales, and walrus, and the more regularly available small seals, as well as birds and fish (125). They lived in an environment where the sea was usually covered with ice for 7 or 8 months a year, from November until May or June. However, quoting the phrase coined by the explorer and writer Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, the authors note that for the Yupik, although the environment was harsh, it was always a “friendly Arctic” (Stefansson, 1921).

Although the main focus of the book is on developments in the 20th century, a context for these is provided by a historical perspective, and an extremely detailed and insightful documentation of the functioning and demise of what they term the

“contact-traditional” Yupik society in general. The authors use this term to refer to an aboriginal community that “had accumulated extensive experience of contacts with the outside world, remained attached to its traditional land; had direct and continuous access to outside artifacts and goods via trade or exchange; and did not have Europeans living among or next to its local people on a long-term basis” (4). In considering this phase, the authors analyze developments among the Yupik peoples who lived in various locations adjacent to the Bering Sea, both in the Chukchi Peninsula in Asia and on St. Lawrence Island. A map of the Yupik area and main historical communities is provided (22).

In order to analyze developments in the past, in particular with regard to the beginnings of the “contact-traditional” period, the authors use a method they term “upstreaming” (189). This is an approach developed in ethnohistorical research and involves moving backwards (“upstream”) from the present or recent past to lesser known earlier periods. (They suggest that historians tend to prefer to “downstream”, i.e., to move from the past to the present.) The historical sources they used came from two distinct historical traditions. These may be termed “naval hydrographic” and “local administrative”. The former has its origins in the admiralties of the capital cities of London, Washington, and St. Petersburg, and constitutes voyages of discovery combining geographical and navigational exploration, usually mixed with colonial purposes (190). The first of these, incidentally, was that of Vitus Bering (for whom the strait and sea were named) in 1728. The “local administrative” tradition came from people who were in contact with the Native population and who were familiar with their languages and lifestyles (191). These included: local colonial officers; border militiamen (Cossacks); and trappers and traders.

In spite of the voyages of exploration and Russian interest in the remote Chukchi Peninsula, contact with the rest of the world remained very limited. This all changed in the mid-1800s with the arrival of American whalers. The result was new contacts and new trade goods such as tea, flour and sugar. Furthermore, in 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the United States. Clearly, this creation of a new international border in the Bering Strait would have far-reaching consequences. However, for the time being, the most devastating impact came with the overhunting of marine mammal stocks on which the Yupik (and other Native peoples) depended. Between 1849 and 1900 the total estimated catch was over 16,000 bowhead whales and almost 150,000 walrus. Famine, population loss, and the abandonment of many indigenous communities soon followed (8). The collapse of the whaling industry around 1900 was followed by a number of American-led commercial initiatives. Nevertheless, the authors suggest that this late “contact-traditional” era was a time of relative stability for the Yupik people.

As noted above, the main focus of the book is on developments in the 20th century and, in historical terms, a new era beginning with the Russian Revolution of 1917. Although, at first, this had little impact on the Yupik people, the period of nascent Soviet administration between 1920 and 1930 marked the final phase of the contact-traditional era with the main outcome being the complete collapse of the previous aboriginal social life, both Yupik and Chukchi. By about 1935–1940, traditional

¹The numbers in the text refer to page numbers in the book.

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festivals died out and old customs were stamped out. One of most effective mechanisms for their purging was a new system of schooling, and by 1930–1932 government schools opened in all the large Yupik villages. Ironically, however, the worst time for the Russian Yupik was not during the collectivization and purges of the Stalin era, but during the decade of the following liberal reforms of the 1950s. Thus, for example, after 1958, all Native children were placed in state-run boarding schools according to new policies (288). It is interesting that a similar disastrous policy was being carried out elsewhere, for example in Canada. The authors note that the changes of the 1950s delivered a final blow to the remnants of the traditional social system of the tiny Yupik nation (267).

In parallel with these developments, the previously united cultural area has gradually split into two segments. For several decades the islanders viewed the Mainland Yupik as their fellow tribesmen, and vice versa. However, the Cold War transformed the area around Bering Strait into a “zone of antagonism and isolation” (33). A significant event occurred in 1948 with the sealing of the Soviet-American border in the Bering Strait, and the cessation of Yupik contacts with their kinsmen in Alaska and St. Lawrence Island. “An Ice Curtain descended over the Bering Strait for the next 40 years” (262). This sealing of the border marked the abrupt cutoff of age-old relations with the kindred families and thereby converted the Soviet Eskimos into an isolated people without relatives; a tiny minority group at the eastern edge of Russia. In this regard, the authors note: “It is well known that contact is an essential factor for every society’s survival, one that prevents it from cultural stagnation and biological isolation” (148).

The authors pose the question: “What does the story of a small Arctic nation contribute to the global legacy of contacts?” (293). In answer it is noted: “The politics of domination and paternalist engineering of indigenous societies had very much in common across the Russian and North American Arctic. Also broadly similar were the responses of the minority Arctic groups to the state-induced social stress, including the breakdown of traditional institutions and intergenerational conflict” (293). After the collapse of the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, hardly any efforts in resuming Yupik self-governance were successful (293).

In spite of this litany of woes, the book ends on a note of optimism. From the late 1980s, dramatic changes swept across the Russian Yupik area, not least as a result of the resumption of international connections across the Bering Strait (300). A reunion that took place at Shishmaref in 1991 was not of “Americans” and “Russians” but of relatives who were Native Inuit and Chukotkans from the two shores of the Strait. The authors see this event as symbolizing the greater meaning of the many “Yupik transitions” that they explore in the book (301).

The easing of travel and communication restrictions clearly made it easier for the authors of the book to pursue their fieldwork, a labor of love lasting 20 years. It is this research in the field that has ensured that the book is not only a Yupik history, or a study of social organization seen through western eyes (although as such it is superb); but combined with this, it succeeds in presenting an interpretation of events and developments by the Yupik themselves. For present-day Yupik peoples it must represent a treasure trove of information on their history and culture. Although *Yupik Transitions* is exemplary in the scholarship it displays, it is also beautifully written and eminently readable, and would be a most

welcome addition to the bookshelf of anyone who has an interest in Arctic history and social organization in general, and the Chukotka Yupik in particular.

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