

Hartley Janet. *Siberia. A History of the People*. – New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014.

Land, Indigenous Peoples and Communications

Western Siberia was also home to significant numbers of Turkic people, almost all of whom were Sunni Muslim. These included Bashkirs, Tatars, Kazakhs and Kirghiz. Bashkirs, who lived south of the Urals in lands that spanned European Russia and Siberia, acquired a fearsome reputation in the tsarist armies for their brutality as well as for their courage. 'They are courageous, suspicious, obstinate, severe, and consequently dangerous,' commented Johann Georgi. The original khanate of Sibir, conquered by Ermak, was Tatar. Tatars lived, and still live, in the regions around the towns of Tobolsk, Tomsk and Tiumen, and along the river Irtysh. Kuchum, the ruler of the Siberian Tatar khanate who was defeated by Ermak, was a Kazakh, and Kazakhs had mainly settled on the southern steppes of western Siberia and in the Altai region. Kirghiz settlements extended from the Ural mountains to the Lake Baikal area and to the Chinese border in the south. Kirghiz were occupied in hunting, agriculture and the mining of copper, gold, iron and tin, and also traded in goods across Central Asia and to China. The Kirghiz ruling elite were Turkic, but many of their subjects were from Samoed or other tribes.

Tungus (now called Evenki and Eveni) lived in lands which stretched from south-eastern Siberia across to Lake Baikal and reached the Pacific coast. They were mainly forest-dwellers and lived by hunting and fishing. In the north they had reindeer herds, and had developed saddles and bridles so that they could ride them. Tungus were formed into over 20 tribes, each made up of several clans, scattered over vast distances. South of Lake Baikal, Tungus had become cattle-rearers. Like other north Siberian people, Tungus had animistic beliefs and believed in the magical powers of the shaman.

The mountainous Altai region, south of Lake Baikal, was ethnically very mixed, and included Buriats, Kalmyks and other peoples. Buriats and Kalmyks are of Mongolian origin. Buriats lived mainly around the Baikal region and were involved in trade with Mongolia and Central Asia as well as within Siberia. Buriats were shamanistic when the Russians arrived but many converted from shamanism to Buddhism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Kalmyks lived in the Volga region, in a territory which spanned European Russia and western Siberia, and had contact, and conflict, with Bashkirs and Cossacks east of the Urals. In the 1770s, some 200,000 Kalmyks left their lands in Russia and attempted to make their way to their ancestral homeland in China. Kalmyks converted to Buddhism in the late sixteenth century, but many retained shamanistic beliefs alongside Buddhism.

In the north-east lived Iakuts (now called Sakha), who are of Turkic origin. Iakuts were occupied mainly in hunting and fishing but had also settled along the river Lena. Iakuts remained shamanistic unlike other people of Turkic origin in Siberia. In the far north lived the Dolgan people, whose ancestors were Tungus but whose language had become a dialect of Iakut. Iukagirs lived to the north and east of the Iakuts. More settled Iukagirs lived by the rivers and fished or hunted; nomadic Iukagirs herded reindeer and hunted in the tundra.

Further east lived Chukchis, Koriaks and Eskimos, who also held shamanistic beliefs. The Chukchis have given their name to the far north-eastern peninsula of Chukotka. The islands in the Bering Strait were home to Aleuts, who speak a language similar to Eskimo. Koriaks, Kamchadals (sometimes called Itelmen) and Ainu occupied the Kamchatka peninsula. Kamchadals were

distinctive in not having shamans, although they held similar animistic beliefs. According to a French traveller in the late eighteenth century, they were:

in general below the common height; their shape is round and squat, their eyes small and sunk, their cheeks prominent, their nose flat, their hair black, they have scarcely any beard, and their complexion is a little tawny. The complexion and features of the women are very nearly the same; from this representation, it will be supposed they are not very seducing objects.

Ainus lived on Kamchatka and the Kurile Islands – they are rare among Asiatic peoples in having thick, wavy, dark hair. Those who had settled on the coast lived by fishing and the hunting of walrus, whales and seals in the Bering Sea. Others lived a nomadic existence herding reindeer or hunting. In total, in the seventeenth century, the Iukagirs, Chukchis, Koriaks, Itelmen/Kamchadals, Eskimos and Ainus comprised only some 40,000 people out of an indigenous population of Siberia of some 220,000 but inhabited a vast, and mainly hostile, terrain. Sakhalin Island, which was not completely occupied by the Russians until the late nineteenth century, was home to the Ulchi people.

Siberia may be more fertile, and more populous, in reality than it is in popular imagination, but the sheer size and nature of the terrain hindered communications, and this has had a profound effect on its development. The first settlements in Siberia were wooden forts, which were positioned at key points on the rivers. Forts were constructed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries along a ‘Siberian line’ running across the south (on roughly the later route of the Trans-Siberian railway), with spurs along the rivers in order to found settlements to the north.