

Jamie Mosel
HIST 320
May, 2011

The Stalinist Persecution of Siberian Shamanism in the Late 1930s As Seen Through the Lens of Cultural Persecution

Introduction

During the 1930s, the Soviet Union espoused hostile and ‘cleansing’ attitudes towards the traditional shamanistic spirituality practiced among many Siberian peoples. By identifying shamans with oppressive kulaks and the priestly caste, Soviet official policy attempted to forcibly introduce class struggle into indigenous culture; by presenting shamans as subversive forces, and manipulators of their peoples, Soviet ideology following the 1930s -- that is, Stalinist ideology -- justified this persecution under the veil of Marxism. However, in doing so, this ideology broke with earlier nation-building and nation-strengthening models provided by Lenin in 1922, concerning the “Question of Nationalities or Autonomisation.” Under Lenin’s model, the cultural identity of national minorities was to be encouraged at the same time that Russia’s own tradition as the ‘oppressor’ might be diminished. Nevertheless, beginning in the late 1930s, shamanism was increasingly persecuted. As shamanism and its inherent framework of beliefs were intertwined with cultural identity, the loss of shamans for many Siberian indigenous peoples did not represent merely the loss of ‘religion’, as has been argued, but also a loss of cultural heritage. Although a number of scholars following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 have approached the persecution of shamans during the Soviet era, this persecution has generally been viewed as it is tied to the Soviet expulsion of religion or mentioned only briefly.¹ Despite this, as shamanism embodies not only a religion but also a specific world view, and as shamans are key transmitters of indigenous culture, the targeting of shamans, whether intentionally or

¹ Bruce Grant’s “In the Soviet House of Culture,” for example, mentions the persecution of shamans only as a side note. Subsequent studies by Andrei Znamenski

inadvertently, persecuted indigenous Siberian culture as well.

In order to understand the 1930s Soviet persecution of Siberian shamanism, it is necessary to understand the historical perceptions of Siberian culture which pre-empted the Stalinist period. The policy of persecution adopted towards shamanism did not develop indistinct from existing historical attitudes. In particular, the belief that indigenous Siberian peoples represented a “backwards” or “primitive” stage in cultural development -- which required “modernization” in order to catch up to more developed civilizations -- fed into violent and aggressive policies seeking to redress this “backwardness.” In accordance with these preconceptions, the historical context of Soviet policy towards Siberian indigenous peoples is prerequisite to understanding the intensification of the persecution of shamans.² It is also necessary to recognize that while the Soviet party itself instigated this persecution, indigeneity did not necessarily contradict party membership or the adoption of Soviet ideology by indigenous Siberians. Thus, the literal acts of persecution pervaded both Soviet officialdom, and indigenous communities themselves. This reality, moreover, emphasizes the necessity of evaluating both the official Soviet narrative of the persecution of shamanism, as well as the narrative as elucidated by indigenous peoples. Fortunately, in the years surrounding and following the fall of the Soviet Union and with it the possibility of open fieldwork studies addressing the persistence of shamanism for specific Siberian peoples allows just such an analysis. Even so, there is much more to be revealed.³ Lastly, to understand the way in which the “liquidation” of shamans worked directly against indigenous Siberian cultures themselves -- drawing from an ethnographic history that employed patronizing and patriarchal ethnic and cultural assumptions -- it is useful to examine post-Soviet

2 For in depth analysis of the perceptions of Siberia, see Diment, Galya and Slezkine, Yuri. *Between Heaven and Hell: the Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture*. St. Martin's Press. 1993.

3 In particular, a large quantity of resources, especially official documents, remain un-translated from Russian, or inaccessible.

indigenous attitudes towards the Stalinist period of persecution. Indigenous Siberian peoples display a wide variety of distinct cultures, and as such, the experience of a given Siberian peoples may vary. While parallels are undoubtedly widespread and useful for comparative study, it becomes vital to examine the experiences of a particular peoples -- the Nanai of the Amur region of southeastern Siberia -- in order to resist generalization, but also to illuminate possible variations in Soviet attitudes themselves.⁴

I. Development of Russian Image of Siberia and the Shaman

Siberia itself contains at least twenty-six separate ethnic groups, generally subsumed under the title of “peoples of the north.”⁵ These include the Nanai (Gol’d) of the southern Amur region, who today number approximately twelve thousand.⁶ According to Yuri Slezkine, these peoples have always been “seen as distinct from their more ‘developed’ neighbors.”⁷ The Amur region was not included into the Russian empire until the late 1850s, when it was acquired from China.⁸ The argument for this addition was made in part because these “according to A.F. Middendorf, who had led an Academy expedition to Siberia in 1842-45, many of the Tungus living on the Chinese side of the border were paying tribute to the Russian Cossacks, which made them de facto Russian subjects and their hunting grounds de facto Russian territory.” Native Siberians themselves were perceived alternately as “savages” and also the last strongholds of uncorrupted culture. That is to say that native Siberians were typified as backwards and uncivilized, yet in being backwards, they preserved a measure of primordial innocence.⁹ The great majority of

4 See Grim, John A. *The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing*. University of Oklahoma Press. 1983. 36. Shamanism is tied to a tribe’s cosmology, or “explanation of the world and its origins.”

5 Slezkine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Cornell University Press. 1994. 1

6 Bulgakova, Tatiana D. “From Drums to Frying Pans, from Party Membership Card to “Magic Branch” *With: Three Generations of Nanai Shamans.*” *Folklore*. 41. 1993?

7 Slezkine. 2. Indeed, the identity of many Siberians as ‘Asian’ or ‘Russian’ has been, and remains, an important question in the discourse.

8 Slezkine. 95. A small group of Nanai live in China today.

9 Diment, Galya and Slezkine, Yuri. *Heaven and Hell*.

ethnographers who embarked into Siberia did so with this assumption guiding their ethnography. Although such a perception incorporated the same romantic ideas that central Russian writers attached to the wild, unadulterated lands of Siberia, it did not come without a degree of patriarchal patronization, and a clear idea of the cultural superiority of the more civilized west. Still, for the initial communist movement and extending somewhat into the 1920s, “early meant primitive, and primitive meant incomplete or backward. . . And yet evolution was not identical to progress, certainly not for the Russian populists. The more primitive, they assumed, the more communist -- and therefore the more admirable.”¹⁰ This judgment, that Siberian peoples were “backwards”, formed the basis for all subsequent Soviet National policy addressing Siberian peoples. The admirability of that backwardness, however, was subject to change.

Prior to Stalin’s rise to power, most ethnographers, in identifying native Siberian peoples as “primitive” and connecting this “primitivism” with inherent communism, exalted Siberian cultures as essentially so behind as to lack the social development of classes. In their innocence and backwardness, “the idea of class and exploitation was totally alien to the native way of life.”

¹¹ Simply to be indigenous, prior to the late 1920s, was to be oppressed. Therefore, importantly, prior to the close of the 1920s, the majority of ethnographic work concerning Siberia did not associate indigenous shamanism with class.¹² There was no need to persecute the shaman, because shamanism, however backwards, posed no threat to communism. Ethnographers, although they condemned the practice as “primitive”, “mysterious”, and “archaic”, adopted a neutral stance towards its continuance. Shamanism had been perceived since the first expeditions

10 Slezkine. 125.

11 Slezkine. 153. “Until the dissolution of Narkomnats in 1924 most of its officials involved in northern affairs believed that the circumpolar peoples presented a special case of a classless communistic society, which in effect meant a society consisting of one exploited class.” 147.

12 Slezkine quotes ethnographer N. Galkin in *Arctic Mirrors*: “they are not clergy needed for officiating religious rites. The shamans are the keepers of tradition and prejudice. They cure the sick, find out the will of the spirits, and stand guard against the machinations of the evil forces.” 153

into Siberia as far back as the eleventh century as “dark”, “exotic”, “pagan”, and “uncivilized”¹³; Orthodox missionaries had sought for centuries to convert native Siberians. However, especially in the light of Lenin’s identification of Russia as the oppressor nation, ethnographers regarded the practice of shamanism with an attitude of mild romanticism, and level condescension.¹⁴ This stance was drastically and devastatingly altered with the start of the Stalinist era.

II. Leninist Nationalities Policy and the ‘Indigenous Peoples of the North’

Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin outlined a specific attempt to “compensate for the past abuses of the tsarist empire by officially recognizing the equal rights of all national minorities.”¹⁵ Lenin believed that only “after a total democratization of all spheres, including the establishment of state borders according to the “sympathies” of the population” could the proletariat “create an opportunity for the total elimination of national oppression.” Such a policy would not result in greater separation between peoples, Lenin asserted, but would instead accelerate the “drawing together and merger of nations which will result in the withering away of the state.”¹⁶ As such, native Siberian peoples were encouraged to explore and enhance their cultural identities; indigenous languages were promoted, and indigenous culture and political integrity was commended. By 1923 the policy of nativization, or *korenizatsiia*, was incited in order to “socialize and industrialize the non-Russian population.” Inherent within this goal,

13 Diment, Galya and Slezkine, Yuri. *Heaven and Hell*. 1. One of the first recorded encounters involves Orthodox missionaries from Novgorod.

14 “The near total overlap of Russian Orthodoxy and Russianness had been assumed by the Church since the first encounter between the Cossacks and the foreigners-as-pagans.” Slezkine. 150.

15 Kerttula, Anna M. *Antler on the Sea: the Yup’ik and Chukchi of the Russian Far East*. Cornell University Press. 2000. 7.

16 Full quote of Lenin: “Having transformed capitalism into socialism, the proletariat will create an opportunity for the total elimination of national oppression; this opportunity will become a reality “only” -- “only”! -- after a total democratization of all spheres, including the establishment of state borders according to the “sympathies” of the population, and including complete freedom of secession. This, in turn, will lead in practice to a total abolition of all national tensions and all national distrust, to an accelerated drawing together and merger of nations which will result in the withering away of the state.” V.I. Lenin, *Voprosy national’noi politiki I proletarskogo internatsionalizma* (Moscow, 1965), pp. 32-33 in Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors*. 142.

however, remained the assumption of native Siberian peoples' "backwardness" and primitiveness along the evolutionary timeline of economic and social development.¹⁷ When native Siberians did not show rapid signs of incorporating themselves in the "merger of nations" that Lenin had predicted, in 1928 "exasperated by the leisurely rate of improvement among northern peoples, the Central Executive Committee of the RSFSR, through an addition to the Criminal Code, "Crimes That Constitute Survivals of Tribalism," made "backwardness" illegal."¹⁸ Stalin drastically hastened Soviet official policy by "plung[ing] the country into another revolution."¹⁹ This revolution would alter the lives and experiences of many Siberian peoples.

Thereafter, "all plans of gradual development had to be revised or discarded."²⁰ Backwardness could not be passively eroded, but must be actively eliminated in order to achieve modernization and mass industrialization.²¹ Stalin more firmly and aggressively advanced that "the essence of the nationality question in the USSR consists of the need to eliminate the backwardness (economic, political, and cultural) that the nationalities have inherited from the past, to allow the backward peoples to catch up with central Russia."²² Stalin's approach to achieving these ends differed greatly from Lenin in its urgent hostility towards all potential opposition. Slezkine summarizes well the shift in policy: now, "industrialization required the unmasking of wreckers; collectivization required the liquidation of kulaks; administrative streamlining required Party

17 This also came with the assumed inability of northerners to govern their own affairs. See Slezkine *Arctic Mirrors* 136.

18 Yuri Slezkine (1991) quoted by Kerttula, 13.

19 Slezkine. 187.

20 Ibid.

21 Kerttula. 10. "By 1945, there was an ideological shift in the country towards Russian control. Russian was declared the official language and culture of the Soviet Union; all higher education took place in Russian, all government business was conducted in Russian, and programs aimed at promoting local language, culture, and political strength were ended. During the 1930s and 1940s many of the state institutions and legal safeguards of national minority rights were liquidated. Industrialization in the non-Russian republics was carried out with blatant disregard for the interest of indigenous peoples. The non-Russian cadre of native elites was lost to Stalin's purges."

22 Stalin, Josef. 'Desiatyi s'ezd Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi partii. Stenograficheskiĭ otchet.' Moscow. 1921. 101. Quoted by Slezkine. 144.

purges; and popular unity required the destruction of the enemies of the people. All people(s) had enemies because the road to classlessness lay through the abolition of deliberate backwardness.”

²³ This had tremendous consequences for Siberian shamans.

III. The Nature of Shamans as Expressed by Official Stalinist Policy

According to Stalin, in order to combat oppression, the oppressive classes needed to be identified and removed. They would not disappear independently. In an attempt to identify some manner of class struggle in peoples widely regarded as “class-less”, Stalinist Soviet officialdom singled out the shaman. Soviet ethnographer A.F. Anisimov illustrates the basis of this identification in his writing on the history of religion; by gaining sole access to the spirits, it was argued, shamans usurped their people and duped them into believing in the indispensability of the shaman. Payment, which the shaman occasionally received in the form of tributes or sacrifices to be used in rituals or to pay the shaman’s spirits, was used as a further example of shamanic trickery. In this way, the position of shaman constituted an indigenous parallel to the kulak, and more precisely, to the manipulative priestly caste which supported the cause of the kulak.²⁴ Innokenty Mikhail Suslov argued that antireligious propaganda would expose “the social and economic roots of shamanism, . . . Its reactionary role both for the past and the present and will prove that in a socialistic society shamanism, like other forms of religion, is doomed to inevitable death.” The shaman, a figure historically persecuted by Russian Orthodoxy for centuries, was slated to be persecuted by the same party that had only years before rejected its

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thrower, James. *Marxist-Leninist ‘Scientific Atheism’ and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR*. Mouton Publishers. 1983. 237. Thrower notes that the British anthropologist, Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, in his celebrated account of *Theories of Primitive Religion*, has described the motive behind the interest of nineteenth century anthropologists in primitive religion as follows: “They sought, and found, in primitive religions, a weapon which could, they thought, be used with deadly effect against Christianity. If primitive religion could be explained away as an intellectual aberration, as a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social function, it was implied that the higher religions could be discredited and disposed of in the same way. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965. 15)

historically oppressive role at the same time that it also denounced more broadly the materialism of Christianity, Islam, and other manifestations of religion. Despite the fact that most shamans were poor themselves -- and thus an inapt example of class exploitation -- their vocation was denounced as “sorcerous”, and “deceitful”²⁵; as Anisimov expounds, “the consolidation of a special, privileged social position in [the person of] the shaman was, in historical perspective, the first step towards the formation of a priesthood.” He continues that “from the point of view of shamanistic ideology, the fate of the clan was wholly in the shaman’s hands, and, standing above the clan, the figure of the shaman was, for his fellow clansmen, not only full of social significance but also an actual force with which they could not fail to reckon in their personal and social life.”²⁶ Under Stalin, it was the shaman who was barricading the Northern people from modernization and imprisoning them in a cult of “backwardness.”²⁷

IV. Religion Under Lenin and Changes Under Stalin

Shamanism was not alone in its experience of state persecution: in May 1909, Lenin stated that “the combating of religion cannot be confined to abstract ideological preaching. . . It must be

25 Znamenski, Andrei A. *The Beauty of the Primitive: Shamanism and the Western Imagination*. Oxford University Press. 2007. 337. “The most popular assessment of Siberian spiritual practitioners was to label them as native clergy who infected the minds of common people with false ideology and thereby served as agents of the rich indigenous aristocracy.”

26 Anisimov, A.F. ‘The Shaman’s Tent of the Evenks and the Origin of the Shamanistic Rite.’ in *Arctic Institute of North America Anthropology of the North, Translations from Russian Sources. Studies in Siberian Shamanism*. No. 4. University of Toronto Press. 1963. 114. (Translated from *Trudy Instituta etnografii Akademii nauk SSSR*. 18. 1952. 199-238.)

27 This is all the more ironic given that among the Nanai, Tatiana Bulgakova shows that in fact the congregation has much more power over the life of the shaman if they refuse to pay tribute. “Shamans have children *duhom* [spirits], that must be fed. If nobody offers anything, the *sewen* gnaws us [shamans] instead. That is such a law!” Bulgakova, Tatiana. ‘Sacrifice or Robbery? One Event in the Light of Different Worldviews.’ *Pro Ethnologia*. 17. 9-11. Moreover, “the most obvious sanction of a shaman is in the form of a tribal initiation. Having recognized the early visionary experiences, the tribe approves the shaman in his or her vocation.” Grim. 42. “The tribe’s sanction of the shaman is evident in its early recognition of the vocation of a potential shaman . . . The types of ‘calls’ that bring a person to the shamanic vocation are extremely varied among the many Siberian tribes. The shaman may be chosen directly by the spirits. On the other hand, he or she may inherit the ancestral spirit of a deceased member of the family or clan who had been a shaman. There is also mention of self-made shamans, though they seem to be a later development and are considered to be lesser, or even fraudulent, shamans.” Grim. 41-46.

linked up with the concrete practice of the class movement, which aims at eliminating the social roots of religion.” This meant “that Social-Democracy’s atheist propaganda must be subordinated to its basic task -- the development of the class struggle of the exploited masses against the exploiters.”²⁸ Stalin intensified this prerogative and made it the aim of the Soviet party "to bring to completion the liquidation of the reactionary clergy in our country."²⁹ In collusion with this statement, Stalin instigated an “atheist five year plan” (1932-1937) to eradicate religion in the USSR.³⁰ The church was persecuted, and clergy imprisoned or purged. Churches and religious icons were burned. The church was denounced for its support of kulaks, and its historical support of the tsar.³¹ Under Stalin, religion in all forms -- Orthodox, Muslim, animistic, and shamanistic -- were to be expunged from the state. Religions were deemed “cultish”, and their religious leaders denounced as the heads of these cults.³² The Militant League of the Godless and the Komsomol fought for atheism against religious expression, citing Marx’s famous statement that religion was “the opiate of the masses.” However, the degree of persecution of religion, which went hand-in-hand with the persecution of shamanism, had not only intensified since Lenin, but also changed its platform. Lenin, like Marx, believed that by ameliorating the struggles of class, religion would naturally cease -- “Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation,” and was in that way the “opiate” of the people. “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the

28 ‘The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion’, May, 1909. Lenin LCW: 15; 405-406 in Thrower. 117.

29 Pospelovsky, Dimitry V. *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory, and Practice, and the Believer*, vol 2: *Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions*. St Martin's Press. 1988. 88.

30 Pospelovsky 88.

31 Ibid.

32 “In Soviet writing ‘religion’ and ‘cult’ go together.” Thrower, 243.

demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.”³³ Stalin, conversely, sought to eliminate the symptom in order to eliminate the cause. This difference in philosophy is evident in the very fact that Stalin adhered more to Marx’s statement that religion was an ‘opiate’, while forgetting that an opiate is very often used to sooth those in sickness; that is, in destroying the ‘illusion’ as a means to eliminate the ‘cause’, Stalin neglected the necessary order of Marx’s stance.

IV. Indigenous Resistance and Persecution of Shamans From the Siberian Perspective

Shamans during the 1930s suffered widespread arrests and murders, the destruction of sacred articles, the confiscation of shamanic dress and drums, and social ostracizing.³⁴ Their vocation was labeled as fraudulent, and their abilities stigmatized as chicanery. Occasionally, a shaman would be brought to local communist headquarters and made to perform in order to humiliate them and reveal them as deceivers. In one story, about the Nenets shaman Nyavo, witnesses claimed that when security forces attempted to shoot him “a miracle happened. Despite being shot at, he did not fall. The commander’s nerves were not strong enough for that. He ran to the Nenets, but the shaman suddenly appeared. . . Unharmd, holding the spent bullets in his hands. . . After that the commander ordered his troops to drown the shaman into an ice hole.”³⁵ A Nanai elder recounted the persecutions that she experienced in an interview with ethnographers:

“They organized meetings. The educated people told us that there is no need for shamans! [...] That there will be no shamans anymore! We will liquidate them! Shamans were forbidden! They told us that we had to go to the doctors not to shamans! After the meetings they searched people’s homes, collected drums, *iangapany*, boxes where people hold *seveny* (spirits) and burned those on the street. *Seveny* and *toro* were burned.”³⁶

33 Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right

34 Even elderly shamans were vulnerable to labor camps and liquidation. Bulgakova interviews a Nanai elder: “How we cried when they went on foot! They were hardly able to walk, they were so old! They had to walk as far as Khabarovsk. They were not able to do that. People were criticized and tortured at that time! Does any of the shamans torture anybody like that?” Bulgakova, Tatiana. “From Drums to Frying Pans, From Party Membership Card to “Magic Branch” *Withe*: Three Generations of Nanai Shamans.” *Electronic Journal of Folklore*. 41. 2009. 6.

35 Quote of Ogryzko in Leete, Art. ‘Religious Revival as Reaction to the Hegemonization of Power in Siberia in the 1920s to 1940s.’ *Asian Folklore Studies*. 64. 2005: 233-245. 238.

36 Bulgakova. ‘From Drums to Frying Pans.’ 2.

Many of the most zealous persecutors of shamanism were, ironically, Nanai themselves.³⁷ Bulgakova points out that “almost since the beginning of the cultural changes in the North, the young generation of the indigenous people had been actively involved in the process of eradicating shamanism. . .”³⁸ This was in large part due to Soviet boarding schools and education curriculums, which imposed communist ideology on indigenous and Nanai youth. Children educated in these schools adopted the ideologies of Soviet revolutionaries, joined the Komsomols, and turned against the practices of their cultures -- practices which they had been made to believe represented pernicious symbols of backwardness. This manifested itself even within the span of one generation.³⁹ Nikolai Vakhtin effectively summarizes the situation when he observes that there existed “opposing trends in the 1920s-1930s among those who were involved in life of the Northern peoples as ‘conservatives’ and those who were ‘radicals’. On the one hand there were members of the State Committee of the Russian Federation for Northern Affairs (*Goskomsever*) whose main goal was to protect the culture and lifestyle of the Northern peoples from external influence (‘conservatives’), but on the other hand there were the government and the Communist Party aspiring towards radical changes and the elimination of ethnic differences (‘radicals’),”⁴⁰ This division also presented itself in the Nanai youth, who had been exposed and instructed under the same shifting ideological trends.

Despite this, shamanism was not been eliminated in Siberia, or among the Nanai, even if it was severely diminished. This must be credited in part to the resilience of its practitioners and to

37 Bulgakova quotes Marjorie M. Balzer: “At the end of the 1920s and at the beginning of the 1930s hundreds of drums were burnt mainly by young enthusiast Komsomol members, who mostly were not visiting Russian revolutionaries, but natives turned themselves to Communism.” ‘Double Oppression.’ 3.

38 Bulgakova. 3. “Fieldnotes show that indigenous youth did not only oppose to shamanism, but became its most active persecutors.”

39 “Cultural demarcation existed even within a single generation of young people.” Bulgakova (‘From Drums to Frying Pans.’) 4.

40 Ibid.

its adherents. Many Nanai resisted the persecution of their shamans. Furthermore, shamans themselves were not passive victims, but often actively sought ways to defend their practices and their lives. Soviet accusations that shamans prevented children from being entered in boarding schools, or initiating rebellions were by and large greatly exaggerated, and these rumors were spread primarily to discredit shamans. However, there remained a grain of truth in such accusations, in that while some indigenous peoples -- and even shamans -- joined the Soviet party, or become members of the Komsomol, many others also exhibited resistance.⁴¹ Shamans would hand over their drums and spiritual dress to party members and police forces, only to make new drums and dresses in secret. Others resorted to adjusting their shamanism to be less conspicuous, performing traditional ceremonies at night behind closed curtains, or to innovation: when drums were confiscated, or when the possession of shaman drums resulted in arrest, or forced labor punishment, some shamans replaced their drums with unassuming household items such as pots.⁴² Some shamans would renounce their vocation, only to continue practicing in secret. Likewise, adherents might become members of the Communist Party or the Komsomol, only to persist in their spiritual beliefs covertly.⁴³ Another interesting reaction involves the proliferation of accounts of the death or sickness of those Komsomol members who had themselves persecuted shamans.⁴⁴ These accounts challenged the Soviet accusation that shamans

41 See Leete, Art. Leete provides one of the most extreme examples: "In 1933, members of the fishing cooperative from the Kazym culture base began to fish on Lake Num-To. The local people informed them that this was taboo.6 Russian agitbrigades were sent to the area (GAHMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934, 7-8; Balzer 1999a, 112-13). One of the delegations reached Num-To in November 1933. A member of this group, a female communist named Shnaider, went to the sacred island in the middle of the Lake Num-To, ignoring the local peoples' beliefs concerning a taboo on women visiting this place. Her action deeply hurt the religious feelings of the local people. On 4 December members of the agitbrigade were taken prisoner by the local people (GAHMAO, Astrakhantseva 1934, 10; Balzer 1999a, 113-14). The Khanty and Nenets held a shamanic seance after which the shamans stated that gods had ordered them to offer the captured Russians as a sacrifice. The Russians were tied up and taken to a hill by reindeer sleds. They were throttled by long ropes tied around their necks. After the killings, the Khanty and Nenets sacrificed seven reindeer and held a traditional ceremony."

42 Bulgakova, Tatiana. 'From Drums to Frying Pans.'

43 "Many of our informants said that they became Komsomolsk (Communist Union of Youth) members as a result of repressions and publicly rejected shamanism, but at the same time they secretly prayed to their spirits during shamanic rituals." Bulgakova. 4.

44 Ibid. 6. For more on the use of rumors and subtle resistance, see Scott, James. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday*

were only deceivers, and promoted the continued belief in spirits, who could only be combated by shamans. Some of these stricken persecutors, ironically, called on their shamans to cure them. Profoundly, some shamans were willing, if distrustful.

In interviews with Lindzja Beldy, a Nanai shaman, Beldy is unhopeful about the continuance of shamanistic practices beyond her death.⁴⁵ “In the old days there used to be female shamans and male shamans. They all are deceased now and with their death everything has come to an end,”⁴⁶ she states. When asked if “other shamans will come in their stead”, she responds that new shamans will not come from the young people, who “do not wish to become shamans any more. . . They are neither able nor willing to.” Even in those instances when a Nanai comes to a shaman for help, Olga Yegorovna points out that they often do not offer a sacrifice once they have recovered. “Only when they need, they ask me to pray for them!” she says.⁴⁷ Beldy, in particular, reacts to the “murders” and “arrests” of Nanai shamans during the late 1930s. More profoundly, Beldy also feels that she is unneeded, a sentiment which she sees validated by her own atheist son, who, in reaction to her shamanism, tells her “that there were no spirits, there existed nothing like that.”⁴⁸ An interview with the Nanai elder, Nesulta Geiker, extends upon Beldy’s concerns: “We, the Nanays, have become nothing. . . The Russians do not respect the Nanays. . . Our people

Forms of Peasant Resistance. Yale University Press. 1987.

45 One of the legacies of intense persecution is that, while historically there were always male and female shamans, the majority of male shamans were targeted and ‘liquidated’, in part because their role was more obvious. Today, there are very few male shamans among the Nanai.

46 Pentikainen, Juha. Interview with Lindzja Beldy in “When a Shaman Dies: Nanay Voices on Death and Immortality” in *Shamanhood Symbolism and Epic*. *Bibliotheca Shamanistica* (2001) 9:19-40.

47 In response to people not paying tribute to the *sevens*: “Olga Yegorovna is indignant about that: “I rescue people, but they don’t give anything for sacrifice. They just don’t want! How many years I have been working [as a shamaness]! For more than 20 years! [They give] nothing! No rooster, nothing do they bring to me! Only when they need, they ask me to pray for them!” The next time she continues: “Some people do not want to know anything after they have recovered. Spirits punish them. They fall sick again and hurry, run back to the shaman. There are lots [of such people]. When a sick person comes and asks for help, I cannot refuse. I shamanize and ask the *sevens* to have pity. Sometimes, if someone is badly sick, I have to shamanize for nine days and nights. So, don’t forget when you are better! Some people do it [properly]. Having recovered, they sacrifice a rooster or a pig right away. . .” Bulgakova. (“Sacrifice or Robbery”) 5.

48 Pentikainen, 29. Beldy: “Nobody needs me.”

have sunk lower than the ground level.”⁴⁹ For Geiker, the loss of shamans is connected intimately with the loss of Nanai cultural heritage.

An interview with a Nanai teacher, Raisa Beldy -- who is identified as having shamanistic gifts -- shows some of the “fear” and hesitancy of the younger generations to embrace a shaman identity by discussing her own reluctance to become a shaman.⁵⁰ A conversation between Raisa Beldy and Geiker elucidates their concerns over future Nanai identity: “nowadays the Nanays are living like the Russians are. . . Now all Nanay children speak only Russian. They cannot speak any Nanay.” Nesulta responds to this: “in the old days the children of this land used to be so proud about themselves!”⁵¹ Here it is evident that shamanism -- and thereby spirituality -- are intertwined with both language and the continuance of Nanai identity. These interviews also indicate a split in the opinions of Nanai peoples. The older generation, represented by Beldy and Geiker, feel that their culture will not be preserved in the younger generations. This generational split has direct ties to the legacy of Soviet education.

IV. Conclusion

While the Soviet union, especially under Stalin, pursued a vigorous atheistic campaign, and while other religions suffered similarly traumatic purges and persecution under Stalinist Soviet policy, the persecution of shamans as religious and class subversives was not only an attack on indigenous spirituality, it was also an attack on indigenous culture. The devastating consequences of this anti-shamanic, anti-religious campaign, intensified during the 1930s, is undoubtedly evident in modern Nanai elders’ pessimism regarding the futures of their cultures. Gomboeva, a

49 Pentikainen, 37. Interview with Geiker.

50 This “hesitancy” is shown also in a Moscow Times article featuring the Udegue activist, Raisa Andreitseva’s reaction; as a child, when her grandmother told her that her dreams indicated Andreitseva could become a great shaman, Andreitseva laughed and responded “Mama, I am a Young Pioneer.” Rebuilding the Spirit House in The Moscow Times. June 20, 1998.

51 Pentikainen, 39.

Buryat scholar, asserts the connection between shamanism and culture: “shamans are important because they activate and unpack traditional culture.”⁵² As such, their vocation is both a religious and a cultural expression: “the shaman’s evocation of sacred power is achieved within the community. Shamans are formed by their particular cultural traditions, in as much as they draw on their cosmology, mythology, ritual, and symbols. They also help form tribal tradition through their own creative experiences.”⁵³ This understanding is made all the more apparent in the post-Soviet attempts of indigenous peoples to recover their cultures and their spirituality. As Znamenski argues, “first and foremost, one should place the 1990s regeneration of shamanism in the context of the ethno cultural revival of indigenous Siberia.”⁵⁴ Soviet historians attempted to define shamanism as a primitive evolutionary stage in the development of religion, and today, this definition remains firmly in place. One of the definitive texts on shamanism, “Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy”⁵⁵, written by Mircea Eliade in the 1950s, emphasized the place of shamanism among other world religions. Subsequent scholarship, while critiquing and expanding Eliade’s work, has not dramatically questioned this. Undoubtedly, shamanism exists as a part of indigenous religious experience. However, alternatively, shamanism encapsulates a people’s conception of the world. As such, shamanic spirituality was and is an intrinsic part of indigenous culture, and a reflection of indigenous philosophy.⁵⁶

52 Znamenski. 348: “to explain why shamans are so important for nourishing ethnic awareness among indigenous Siberians. . . Buryat colleague Gomboeva turned to Carl Jung’s classic concept of the collective unconscious and to transpersonal psychology. She argued that in their séances, shamans dig deeply into the archaic memory of an ethnic group by sampling ancient imagery and symbolism. . . shamans are important because they active and unpack traditional culture.”

53 Grim. 41.

54 Znamenski. 345. Znamenski makes an aside that shamanism was persecuted like Islam, or Christianity. However, it must be noted that shamanism was not initially identified as dangerous like these religions, and also that Znamenski himself negates his statement by the examples he gives of shamans attempting cultural revivals, and also how shamanism represents a certain way of thinking. “I would like to stress that it was not a special ideological campaign that singled out Siberian shamans for eradication. Repressions against shamans were only a minor part of the efforts of the totalitarian communist state to wipe out the sacred and the spiritual from the minds of people and enforce on them the religion of Enlightenment atheism and rationalism. Therefore, Shamanism fully shared the fate of Christinaity, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and other denominations.” 340.

55 See Eliade’s introduction in *Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton University Press. 1964.

56 Grim. 41: “The mode of expression whereby the shaman relates to the social system is not standardized or

Moreover, the historical Western perceptions of shamanism as “primitive” established precedent for denouncing shamanism and its practitioners as “backwards.” In this regard, it is useful to consider the words of Vine Deloria, Jr. with regard to native spirituality in the North American context: “traditional Western thought, and more specifically traditional Christian thought, has been based on the assumption that these religions have often been cruel delusions perpetrated against primitive societies by religious leaders, shamans, and medicine people seeking personal gain or additional power, or people forced into trickery to preserve their place in society.” It is apparent in Deloria’s statement, therefore, that perceptions which delegate indigenous ways of thinking to a “primitive” and somehow less legitimate status are not restricted to Russia, or to Soviet Russia. The United States, in its own persecution of Indian beliefs, has utilized equally harsh methods of suppressing indigenous culture.⁵⁷ However, “we cannot conclude that other peoples spent centuries in a state of delusion simply because their experiences of God were radically different from those of Western peoples. That their experiences could not be either described accurately by Westerners or understood in Western categories of thought does not make them false.”⁵⁸ The persecution of Siberian shamans, although certainly a part of the wider religious repression conducted by the Soviet Union, continued a tradition of cultural subjugation waged against Siberian peoples that dates back to the times of Orthodox missionaries and forced conversions that assumed the inferiority of indigenous belief systems. That Stalinist anti-shamanic campaigns occurred within the larger

ritually fixed. Rather it is a fluid response to certain critical situations. Of the Yakut tribe it has been said, “Shamanism is not the faith or religion of the Yakuts, but an independent set of actions which takes place in certain definite cases.” . . . the tribal view of the healing event, namely, that the shaman calls on certain independent sets of rituals to respond to a variety of tribal needs.”

57 On this note, it may be valuable to consider such instances in U.S. history like the massacre at Wounded Knee, which reacted to the pan-Indian religious movement of the Ghost Dance. Also, for comparisons of the historical treatment of similarities between United States Indian persecution and the relationship of Russia to Siberian peoples, see Anderson, David G. “Post-Socialisms in the Russian North.” *Anthropology Today*. 17, no. 2. 2001: 25-26.

58 See chapter ‘Religion Today’ in Deloria Jr., Vine. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Fulcrum Publishing. 1994. 290.

framework of anti-religious campaigns does not preclude these policies from that legacy of cultural persecution.

Literature Cited

Anderson, David G. "Post-Socialisms in the Russian North." *Anthropology Today*. 17, no. 2. 2001: 25-26.

Anisimov, A.F. 'The Shaman's Tent of the Evenks and the Origin of the Shamanistic Rite.' in *Arctic Institute of North America Anthropology of the North, Translations from Russian Sources. Studies in Siberian Shamanism*. No. 4. University of Toronto Press. 1963

Bogoras, Waldemar. *Tales of Yukaghir, Lamut, and Russianized Natives of Eastern Siberia*. Forgotten Books, 2007.

Bogoras, Waldemar. *The Chukchee*. Forgotten Books, 2007.

Bulgakova, Tatiana. "Sacrifice or Robbery? One Event in the Light of Different Worldviews." *Pro Ethnologia*. 17. 2001

Bulgakova, Tatiana. "From Drums to Frying Pans, From Party Membership Card to "Magic Branch" *Withe: Three Generations of Nanai Shamans.*" *Electronic Journal of Folklore*. 41. 2009.

Bulgakova, Tatyana. "Nanai Shamans Under Double Oppression. Was the Persecution by Soviet Power Stronger than the Power of Shamanistic Spirits?" *Pro Ethnologia, Multiethnic Communities in the Past and the Present*. 15. 2001.

Deloria Jr., Vine. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion*. Fulcrum Publishing. 1994.

Diment, Galya and Slezkine, Yuri. *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture*. St. Martin's Press, New York. 1993.

Grant, Bruce. *In the House of Soviet Culture*. Princeton University Press. 1995.

Grim, John A. *The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing*. University of Oklahoma Press. 1983.

Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton University Press. 1964.

Kerttula, Anna M., *Antler on the Sea: The Yup'ik and Chukchi of the Russian Far East*. Cornell University. 2000.

Leete, Art. 'Religious Revival as Reaction to the Hegemonization of Power in Siberia in the 1920s to 1940s.' *Asian Folklore Studies*. 64. 2005: 233-245.

Lenin. 'The Question of Nationalities or "Autonomisation"' Dec. 31, 1922

Lenin. 'The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion', May, 1909. LCW: 15; 405-406 in Throver

Mandelstam Balzer, Marjorie. *Shamanic Worlds: Rituals and Lore of Siberia and Central Asia*. M.E. Sharpe, 1996.

Marx, Karl. *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge Press. 1977.

Pentikainen, Juha. Interview with Lindzja Beldy in "When a Shaman Dies: Nanay Voices on Death and Immortality" in *Shamanhood Symbolism and Epic*. *Bibliotheca Shamanistica* (2001) 9:19-40.

Pospielovsky, Dimitry V. *A History of Soviet Atheism in Theory, and Practice, and the Believer, vol 2: Soviet Antireligious Campaigns and Persecutions*. St Martin's Press. 1988

Rebuilding the Spirit House in The Moscow Times. June 20, 1998.

Skezine, Yuri. *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*. Cornell University Press. 1994.

Thrower, James. *Marxist-Leninist 'Scientific Atheism' and the Study of Religion and Atheism in the USSR*. Mouton Publishers. 1983

Van Deusen, Kira. *The Flying Tiger: Women Shamans and Storytellers of the Amur*. McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series, 2001.

V.I. Lenin, Voprosy national'noi politiki I proletarskogo internatsionalizma (Moscow, 1965), pp. 32-33 in Slezkine, Arctic Mirrors

Znamenski, Andrei A. *Shamanism and Christianity: Native Encounters with Russian Orthodox Missions in Siberia and Alaska, 1820-1917*. Greenwood Press. 1999.