

## The Komi of the Kola Peninsula within ethnographic descriptions and state policies

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For more than 100 years, ethnographic accounts have highlighted the non-nativeness of the Komi diaspora to the Kola Peninsula, contrasting it with the indigenous Sami population. Their legal status there has been a vexed issue unresolved by Tsarist administrators, Soviet ethnic policies, present-day ideas of multiethnic civic nation, and global indigenous activism. In the everyday life, however, there are no apparent differences between the two ethnic groups and their traditional lifestyles in the rural area of Murmansk region. Juxtaposing historical ethnographic accounts on the Izhma Komi with my fieldwork experiences among the Komi on the Kola Peninsula, I show how ethnographers uphold dominant ideologies and promote different state policies. The ambiguous ethnic and indigenous categorizations from their accounts reverberate in popular stereotypes, political mobilizations from below, and state policies from above. In this way, they make an interesting case for the practical problems of generalization and essentialism.

**Keywords:** Komi; Sami; ethnographers; essentialism; government policy; ethnic stereotypes; Northwest Russia

This paper addresses ethnographic scholarship as a form of knowledge saturating both ethnic identifications and state and regional policies, focusing on one particular case – the Izhma Komi living on the Kola Peninsula (Murmansk Region). Their forefathers migrated from the Pechora region to the inland areas of the Kola Peninsula in the late 1880s and established themselves along the native Sami people. In the scholarly literature the Izhma Komi are described as para-indigenous, as unrecognized indigenous, as migrants, as diaspora, as a local [*etnoarealnaia*] group, as newcomers, and as old settlers [*starozhyly*]. In legal terms, they have never been the subject of exclusive governmental policy.<sup>1</sup> By focusing on them, my overall aim is to provide a more nuanced image of the complex constellations of ethnic groups, traditional economic activities, and territories in the Russian Federation, and to understand how ethnographic descriptions have inscribed ethnic and indigenous categorizations on the Izhma Komi, and how these descriptions reverberate in political mobilizations from below and state policies from above. My argument is that symbolic characteristics ascribed to the Izhma Komi often bear the imprint of extrinsic ideological commitments, of ignorance, and preconceptions. The prevailing focus on

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neighboring indigenous people has deflected the attention from the complex reality and tainted the descriptions. Nevertheless, such descriptions become performative – popularized in media, internalized by the people, and activated in the political domain.

My starting point is the discussion of the unfruitful ethnopolitical mobilization among the Izhma Komi, who in 2002 sought to be recognized as an ethnic group and to be included in the official list of “indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North and Far East” [*korennye malochislennye narody Severa i Dalnego Vostoka*]. Scholars explain the rejection of their claim in different ways: from questioning the legal formulation of indigeneity and its applicability in the Russian context, to characterizing the initiative as a form of oppositional politics (Kim, Shabayev, and Istomin 2015, 91–92), as an attempt for self-determination, as a political tool for claiming rights and privileges (Donahoe et al. 2008, 1004), and as an environmentalist strategy to preserve their rural livelihood against extractive industries (Shabaev 2009). These divergent interpretations bring into the open the inconsistent discursive practices tainting the image of the Izhma Komi. This paper aims to broaden our understanding, suggesting that the miscarried attempt at recognition reflects also contradictions inherent in earlier scholarly accounts and discursive practices.

Through a historical overview of ethnographic accounts describing the Izhma Komi, their traditional subsistence and places of habitation, starting in the middle of the nineteenth century – the period preceding the Izhma Komi migration to the Kola Peninsula – I will show how ethnographers have portrayed this group in contrast to the Sami people, who are native to the Kola Peninsula, or to the majority of the Komi people, or to the Russians. The paper roughly follows the chronological order of the descriptions showing how the contrasts between Komi and Sami in the ethnographic descriptions are defined by local political factors as policies of modernization (colonization), collectivization, and industrialization, but also by dominant ideological and disciplinary movements such as Russian nationalism and cultural evolutionism. The Soviet ideology, promoting equality through nationalities policy and industrialization, aimed to wipe out the ethnic differences. The scholars explained them through the historically oriented theory of *ethnogenesis* (Bromlei 1983). The interconnection between policies and ethnographic accounts is not always evident; the ideological commitments overlap and the descriptions show eclectic impulses and influences. Therefore, I have tried to avoid clear-cut periods, and highlighted the main paradigms and historical processes. At some points, I also bring stories from my fieldwork into the text.<sup>2</sup> In this way, I want to remind of the alternative discursive practices – the non-written stories, constantly reworked in the community, but never fixed on paper.

### **The Izhma Komi and the concept of indigeneity**

The entanglement of statecraft and scholarship throughout the history of Russian/Soviet ethnography is well documented (Hirsch 2005; Cvetkovski and Hofmeister 2014; Anderson and Arziutov 2016). In the northern part of Russia, this entanglement incorporated the idea of profound backwardness, the Arctic “backyardism” (Habeck et al. 2009), stimulated not least by ethnographic accounts. From the mid-nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century, ethnographers depicted the northern frontier of the Russian Empire as an uninhabited, uncivilized, underutilized space offering unbearable conditions, cold climates, mosquitoes, and transportation difficulties. Such images predetermined the analytical dimensions of the ethnographic accounts, put their mark on popular perceptions of the North and the Northern peoples, and interfered with the targeted policies of government, especially towards native northerners.

In the late nineteenth century, the Izhma Komi did not fit into this image of backwardness. They adapted their reindeer herding to existing market realities and were well integrated into the Russian state. Therefore, the ethnographers described the Izhma Komi in heterogeneous, often disparate terms. Their expansion was perceived as part of the Russian (Christian) peasant colonization (Donahoe et al. 2008), but also a consequence of natural disasters and epidemics (anthrax) affecting their main subsistence, reindeer herding. In older accounts, the Komi were called Zyrians. They inhabited the vast forest areas east of the White Sea and west of the Ural Mountains, today known as the Komi Autonomous Republic. The northbound expansion of Komi groups along the Pechora River in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries resulted in intensive contacts with the Nenets people (Samoyeds) and the adoption of reindeer herding as their primary subsistence. The reindeer-herding Zyrians settled along the river Izhma and got the name *izvatas* (in Komi), *izhemtsy* (in Russian), or Izhma Komi. Their innovative practices in reindeer herding are well described, their entrepreneurship and sustainable household management based on a combination of reindeer herding, hunting, trade, and horticulture – well documented (Konakov and Kotov 1991; Kim, Shabayev, and Istomin 2015). With population growth and the expansion of their herds, the Izhma Komi started to look for new territories, and some of them established themselves east of the Ural Mountains, while others spread across the White Sea (Zherebtsov 2007; Istomin and Shabaev 2016). Their migration to the Kola Peninsula started in 1883 with four to five families, altogether 65 people and 5000 reindeer, and continued to the 1930s. In 1926 there were 715 Izhma Komi living on the Kola Peninsula (Kihlman 1889; Konakov 1984; Konakov and Black 1993; Konakov and Kotov 1991).

With their history of migrations and expansion, their application to be recognized as “indigenous”<sup>3</sup> was probably doomed to fail from the start. The mobilization of the Izhma Komi was fueled by a sense of injustice caused by the legislative protection of traditional activities such as reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing that provided only for ethnic groups recognized as small-numbered indigenous peoples introduced in 1999–2000.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Komi on the Kola Peninsula live in the rural part of the Lovozero district, a vast area of 53,000 square kilometers. Since collectivization in the early 1930s, the Sami and Komi in this area shared the same way of life on reindeer-based collective farms. The one-sided policy in favor of the Sami was experienced as unfair by their Komi neighbors (Donahoe et al. 2008; Shabaev, Sadokhin, and Shilov 2009; Fryer and Lehtinen 2013). In 2002, the Izhma Komi of the Kola peninsula launched an appeal through their organization “Izvatas,” to use Izhma Komi [*komi izhemtsy*] in the census, an ethnonym they had used in their passports until the 1960s (Razumova and Petrov 2005). This motion was supported by the Izhma Komi living in, or in close proximity to, the Nenets, Yamalo-Nenets, and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrugs, where the titular populations (Nenets, Khanty, and Mansi) are also recognized as small-numbered indigenous populations, and where reindeer herding has been a traditional means of subsistence. Although the Izhma Komi achieved quite a high number (over 16,000) in the 2002 census, their claim to be singled out as a separate ethnic group was not recognized by the general all-Komi political movement “*Komi voytyr*” or by the government of the Komi Republic. The Izhma Komi were accused of separatism and told that their claim was only motivated by a desire to receive “state protection.” The counterargument was that the Komi people as a whole have their roots in and are native [*korennye*] to the North. A representative of the Komi government stated that “the intention to achieve special status in order to fall under state protection is beneath the dignity of Komi people” [*Namerenie poluchit'*

*osobyy status, dlia togo chtoby popast' pod gosudarstvennyi proteksionizm, unizitel'no dlia komi naroda*] (Mezak 2004).

This statement reflects concerns that the status would reflect negatively on their level of cultural development (Habeck 2005b) and sentiments against the state “backyardism,” here interpreted as “state protectionism,” but also a general trend. In recent years, indigenous ethnopolitical mobilization in Russia has been declining for different reasons. First, because the federal legislation in question does not function properly (Donahoe 2011) and the local administrations try to compensate for the differences created by the federal legislation;<sup>5</sup> second, as a consequence of a clearly-articulated centralization policy resulting from the absence of clear ethnic policy (Rutland 2010).

Bearing in mind Tishkov’s (1992, 373) critique of the “politicized scholasticism” of academic language, and the limited field experience (hence – the citational nature of many ethnographic texts), I will look at some substantial aspects of the ethnographic descriptions. On the Kola Peninsula, the Izhma Komi are often described as the counterpart of the indigenous Sami. Describing the settlers in Chukotka, Niobe Thomson asserts: “by enlisting a non-indigenous presence as a counterfoil, they [*the ethnographers*] succeeded instead in more clearly defining the true object of their attention – the native figure. In the process, this technique flattens and ultimately reifies the settler identity” (Thompson 2008, 11). The Komi on the Kola suffered a similar fate.

As a rule they were not the true object of the attention of scholars – David Zolotarev (the anthropologist of *Loparskaia Ekspeditsiia*, the first Soviet research project devoted to the Sami) states that his measurements of children and Izhma Komi, “being additional were made on reduced terms” (Zolotarev 1928, 13). They were seen as a side issue in studies of the indigenous Sami, which added “to the complexity of the Sami identity” (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012, 21), or as fragments of the main Komi ethnic group, living thousands of miles away in the Komi Autonomous Republic east of the White Sea (Kiseljov and Kiseljova 1996).

The long history of non-recognition of their local belonging affects people, their lives, and perception of themselves. In 2012, a well-educated Komi woman, discussing how they have been represented in local sources, told me resignedly: “Oh, we are the Jews of the North!” While this utterance carries connotations of a lack of a homeland, unjust persecution, or economic theft and entrepreneurship, later I discovered the very same phrase, positively charged, in Nikolai Beldytskii’s travelogue “Several days among the Izhma Zyrians” (1910, 11). Such quotes of scholarly origin are becoming performative, and their ambiguity often hampers the self-identification of Izhma Komi as political subjects. The Komi I met in the villages of Lovozero and Krasnoshchelie, the two settlements on the Kola Peninsula where the Komi live today, considered the Kola Peninsula as their home, but never claimed it publicly. After a short trip to their historical homeland, the Izhma district in the Komi Autonomous Republic, as a stand-in for a folklore ensemble, a retired reindeer herder quoted the Russian equivalent of the proverb “East or West, home is best” [*vezde khorosho, a doma luchshe*], with respect to his village and the tundra where his parents were herders, and where his son is now a reindeer herder. For him Izhma was just a place on the “wider world” [*na bolshoi zemle*]. His statement epitomizes the general sentiments of the Komi who live there and counterposes the idea of the old homeland as a mythical place of desire in narratives of migration and diaspora (Brah 1996) or of local belonging preserved as historical memory (Kim, Shabayev, and Istomin 2015). The local administration in Lovozero, on the other hand, marked the days of Komi culture in 2012 as “125 years since the arrival of the Komi,” maintaining the memory of their non-nativeness.

Inspired by the globalized indigenous rhetoric of prior occupancy, some Sami expressed a negative attitude to the Komi, assigning them the role of colonizers. One of the Sami teachers, a former head of a state farm (*sovkhov*), stated that the Komi made a “raiding conquest” [*reiderskii zakhvat*] of their tundra on the Kola Peninsula – the term, a translation of “corporate raid,” is often used about the privatization of state assets in the 1990s. She had used the same term a bit earlier in our conversation to explain how businessmen took over the management of the *sovkhov* from her several years ago. Rather than local memory, her statement reproduced a leitmotif of earlier ethnographic descriptions as discussed below.

### Resettlement and criminal records

In the late 1880s, at the time of the Komi arrival, Kola Peninsula was scarcely populated. There were settlements of Russian Pomors on the south coast (Ter coast) and settlements of Russian, Norwegian, and Finnish fishermen, peasants, and traders (colonists) on the northern coastline (Murman coast). The vast inner part of the peninsula was inhabited only by a small and dispersed semi-nomadic group of Sami people. The resettlement process is sparsely documented by administrative clerks and several scientists exploring mainly the nature. These writings assumed a moral essentialism based on earlier descriptions of Izhma Komi. Konstantinov (2005, 174) cites a document from police correspondence in 1889 arguing against their resettlement because of “bad reputation as having corrupted and impoverished the Mezen Samoed,” and posited that they “will introduce turmoil and discord into the peaceful life of the Lapps.” The Kola district police officer decided to expel them, but this turned out to be difficult: on the one hand, the Komi protested to the governor in Arkhangelsk and the government in Saint Petersburg, on the other hand, they tried to persuade Sami leaders to allow them to settle in the Sami villages. However, they were not allowed to establish their own settlements on the Kola Peninsula until the new Soviet regime waived the old regulations (Zherebtsov 1976; Ushakov and Dashchinskii 1988; Kiselov 2009, 28). Partly because of bureaucratic administrative restrictions (since only a few Komi were initially given the right to resettle on the Kola Peninsula, most of them were obliged to pay taxes and do military service at their birthplaces) and partly because trade remained a major subsistence activity for many of them, the Komi on the Kola Peninsula did not sever their connections with their old homeland, and the migration continued for several decades.

Many scholarly works affirm that the Sami rejected the Komi appeals to settle, while no attention is paid to the clerks and officers who probably tried to restrict the settlement of the Komi in the same way they did with the colonists (Orekhova 2008, 51) or at least protracted its authorization (Rippas 1915, 80). The participants in *Loparskaia ekspeditisiia* even published a record of proceedings from the local authorities. The case was that of Komi pasturing their reindeer in places where local people used to pasture. The wording of the record is unambiguous – the Komi exterminate [*istrebliaui*] the lichen, and the pastures are threatened by full ruin [*grozit polnoe razorenie*]. The judgement confirms that the Komi bring “harm and damage” to the local population and do not have any natural or monetary obligations, but live as old landowners [*prezhnie pomeshchiki*]. Therefore, the jury urged the expulsion of the Komi (Charnoluskii 1930, 163).

According to the authorities, the Komi were neither indigenous nor “colonists,” the special category of people allowed to settle on the Murman coast from 1860 (Orekhova 2008). Thus, their presence on the Kola Peninsula was perceived as transient and temporary, and – in contradictory terms – on the one hand as “benefactors” of the Lapps



(by governor Engelhardt, who was rather interested in the overall modernization (1899, 91); on the other, as criminal elements disturbing the local order harming the Sami who were “too weak to withstand the onslaught of immigrating elements” (Zhilinskiy 1914, 7). An anonymous author, V-r, pointed out that the main reason for the Sami and the Russian bitterness towards the Komi lies, not unlike the more recent discussions sketched above, in the imperfect laws on the use of natural resources (V-r 1909, 47). The underlying attitudes in these descriptions resonate with the main ideological trends among the educated in Russia, as discussed in the next section.

### **Peasant socialism, cultural evolutionism, and Russian nationalism**

In Tsarist Russia, the relationship between scholarship and the political apparatus has been unstable and multifaceted, and the scholarly accounts mediate these contradictions in a similar manner. The early Russian ethnographers were “ethnographic populists;” their political engagement with socialism earned many of them political exile to the outer corners of the Russian Empire, especially Siberia. Descriptions of otherness for them became political critiques of the problems of modernity (Slezkine 1994a, 324; Ssorin-Chaikov 2008; Elfimov 2014). Both the traditionally idyllic and egalitarian Russian peasant commune [*mir*] and the half-savage northernmost hunter-gatherers (considered the most non-modern people) were idealized as alternatives to the social injustices of modernity and counter-posed to the metropolitan society. In my case, such idealization affected the Sami people while the Komi belonged to the obscure modernity.

The state officers and ethnographers, all men of letters, regarded the Sami people as a primitive *Naturvolk*, who in the context of the dominant evolutionist thinking, were to be isolated and protected. On the one hand, they were thought of as revealing earlier stages of human development, on the other, they were considered to be pure and unspoiled by the greed of modern man. Such ideas of cultural evolutionism and historical determinism also underlay the work of Western scholarship on different ethnic groups within the Russian state. The first more detailed descriptions of the Komi on the Kola Peninsula are given by the Swedish archaeologist and ethnographer Gustaf Hallström, who visited the Kola Peninsula in 1910. His observations resulted in a book entitled “The Threatened Existence of the Kola Sami” (1911) whose main argument is that the Izhma Komi migrants were more dangerous for the Sami than any other group. Hallström describes the Komi as “big traders” with “business sense” who speculated on the market, buying at wholesale prices on the Murman coast, where produce was cheaper due of the barter trade with Norway, and traveling back to their place of origin – the rivers Pechora and Izhma – in order to resell it. In this way, they made profits selling items at double price (Hallström 1911, 290–294). Hallström writes in his diary “that all the *izhemtsy* (400) live in Lovozero, but have spread their tentacles”<sup>6</sup> all over the peninsula. The tentacles allude to the conception of ethnic groups as living organisms, but also have a negative connotation of influence and control. Such metaphors of ethnic wholes as living bodies were commonsensical for the dominant evolutionist thinking. The idea of the “survival of the fittest” along with the assumption that modernization destroys became the main ideological background for ethnographic descriptions. The image of the Komi as predators persisted, owing to the fact that many scholars defined their mixed subsistence of meat production and trade as market-oriented and capitalist. As Hallström noted in his diary, the Izhma Komi thrived on the Kola Peninsula, accumulating capital both in reindeer on the tundra and in their bank accounts. Not fitting into the established frame of backward and primitive northern *Naturvolk*, the Komi were

described as the “future people of Northern Russia and Northwest Siberia” (Hallström 1911, 279).

The conventional descriptions of the Sami as vulnerable to the advances of modernity were widespread. The Finnish botanist Alfred Oswald Kihlman, one of the first to describe the inner part of the Kola Peninsula, wrote that civilization had brought a lot of misfortune [*Unglück*] to the Sami people. From free “nature people” they have turned into dependents rolling cigarettes from old newspapers (Kihlman 1889, 40). Exposed to comfort, their own culture was vanishing. In the same manner, the geologist Rippas (1915, 80) writes that “he had heard rumours that the energetic Zyrians [Komi] will destroy the inert Sami as it happened with the Samoyeds,” a rumor I will look into later. The physical anthropologist David Zolotarev (1928, 10) concludes that the Izhma Komi are physically stronger, and also stronger in terms of culture and material wealth. Such an amalgamation of physical qualities with cultural and economic achievements, together with the alignment of ethnic groups along an evolutionary axis, were well-established practices until the interwar period, when this way of thinking degenerated into Nazi ideology. As underlying premises in the scholarly descriptions of the Kola Sami, they left their mark on portraying the resettled Komi as agents of often undesired modernity, but mostly as a serious threat to the local population.

The newly arrived Izhma Komi on the Kola Peninsula were not a *tabula rasa* or an unknown tribe for the ethnographers. They had also been subjects of earlier studies and ethnic stereotypes before their migration. Though recognized as a northern people, the Komi, and especially the Izhma Komi, had, in the eyes of ethnographers, lost their own originality because they had been Russified (Hallström 1911, 278). By virtue of transition from hunting to herding, considered by the scholars a more developed organizational form of subsistence, they had achieved higher evolutionary status. They were not only pastoralists, interested in increasing the size of the herd but also sought opportunities to increase the monetary capital they possessed – as expressed in their proverb: “Money is not rye, it grows in winter time” (Konakov 1986). They were pastoralists, peasants, and traders. In the eyes of the ethnographers, the Komi held a superior position in terms of not only economics, but also culture. However, they were seen not only in contrast to the weaker ethnic groups but also in contrast to Russians, who, in the eyes of the erudite writers, were more advanced. In many accounts describing the Komi from before their migration, they were represented as lagging behind, savage, or at least half-savage in comparison to Russians. Zhakov in his work “*Etnologicheskii ocherk Zyrian*” (Zhakov 1901) wrote that reading Pavel Miliukov’s book on Russian history of the seventeenth–eighteenth century, he felt as if it was written about the Zyrians in the early twentieth century. Pavel Zasodimskii, a populist (*narodnik*), wrote that “from their way of life blows the youth and freshness of the primitive people” (1901). On the other hand, Klavdii Popov, who was getting closely acquainted with the Komi by living among them, defined them as part of the Russian nation. Popov acknowledges that although the Komi lack words for king, tsar, and master, they had already become Russified. The folklorists who worked among them found only borrowings from the Russian folklore (with some originality only in the Komi hunting songs) and confirmed their Russification (Jääts 2009). Russification was seen as unavoidable in the evolutionist way of thinking, since the Russians were considered to be on a higher stage of development than the Komi. This view not only belonged to the world of scientific theories, but also supported the rise of Russian nationalism.

Sergei Maksimov (1890) reports on the popular understanding that the Izhma Komi had taken the tundra from the Nenets (Samoyeds), referring to an old man who had told him that the “tundra is a sin on their conscience.” For him, the Izhma Komi were Komi Zyrians who had settled among the Russians, *borscht*-eaters, historically Russified, but still aliens

(*inorodtsy*). They had used alcohol to cheat the Nenets in the same manner as the Russians in the past cheated them. (Maksimov writes that the Komi did not even have a word for “plunder” but got it from the Russian language (1890, 477)). He also reports that the younger Izhma Komi suffered from the vicious practices ascribed to their forefathers (1890, 511), and states that being confronted so often with misconceptions about their intentions was the main reason for their mistrust of outsiders. In Maksimov’s book the underlying assumption is that the Russian colonizers of the North had achieved a higher degree of moral development and their moral superiority legitimated their mission to spearhead the state, because, as another ethnographer put it, the “*inorodtsy* were people without heads” (Zhakov 1901, 36).

At the turn of the century, cultural evolutionism was well established both among Western and Russian scholars. However, along with the evolutionary thinking in their writings, the Russian ethnographers promoted both Russian nationalist and socialist ideas. In this context, in the ethnographies prior to their migration to Kola Peninsula, the Komi fell between the essentialized images of the “noble savage” and “the morally superior Russian” and as we have seen they continued to maintain this ambiguous status after their arrival on the Kola Peninsula. The essentialized images derived from state policies of colonization, scholarly theories, and nationalist ideology.

### **Soviet policies of territorialization and *korenizatsiia* (nativization)**

The evolutionist way of thinking enhanced with a Marxist understanding of historical development through stages, continued to dominate through the 1930s, supporting the state policy of ethno-territorial federalism. The Bolshevik anti-colonialist rhetoric evoked an image of an “affirmative action empire” (Martin 2001) towards the multi-ethnic population, where all nationalities should be given territories. Instead of granting self-determination, however, this policy was “introduced as a tool for state control” (Rutland 2010). The Soviet Union was territorialized in a strict hierarchy of territorial units where nationality/ethnicity was a major guiding principle (from federal republic, through union republics and autonomous republics, to autonomous oblasts, autonomous okrugs, etc.).

According to Hirsch (2005), Soviet ethnographers facilitated the state policies, under “state-sponsored evolutionism,” the belief that the state had a special and unique civilizing mission. They categorized the ethnic groups following an evolutionist perspective of development: from tribe [*plemia*], through people [*narod*] to nation [*natsiia*] with two additional categories – *narodnost*’ and *natsionalnost*’, often translated as nationality – lying between the people and the nation. For each stage of historical development, there was a corresponding hierarchical political organization: clans and tribes in primitive communism, *people* under feudalism, and *nations* under capitalism. The ethnographers studied the degree of civic organization and classified the population into peoples, nationalities, and nations (Tishkov 1992; Hirsch 2005) This process accompanied the creation of territorial units, based on the understanding that all ethnic groups were to be assigned a territory (an ethno-cultural/national-territorial unit) as in a large communal apartment where all nationalities would have their own room (Slezkine 1994b). The degree of territorial autonomy was adjusted according to the stage of development of the different ethnic groups, presumed by ethnographers and administrators and related to notions of political organization and statehood.

A key factor in the Soviet territorialization policy was educating indigenous cadres for the implementation of Soviet policies in the regions, a process known as *korenizatsiia* (often translated as indigenization or nativization). The Sami were subjected to this



process – Sami teachers were educated at the Institute of the Northern Peoples [*Institut narodov severa*] in Leningrad, and at the pedagogical college (*tekhnikum*) and at the Soviet Party School (*sovpartshkola*) in Murmansk; a new Sami textbook was published in 1933. However, they were given only the lowest administrative-territorial unit – the village soviets (*sel'sovety*) in Lovozero *volost'*. In 1931, the Leningrad county administration granted it the status of national (indigenous) district [*natsional'nyi (tuzemnyi) raion*]. As the major part of the population there were Komi, and the issue was debated on repeated occasions in Murmansk (Kol'skiy Sever 2013). The Sami students (*Saamskoe (loparskoe) zemliachestvo*) at the Institute of the Northern Peoples argued in 1932 for greater autonomy and proposed on the pages of the journal *Taiga i tundra* to establish western and eastern national Sami districts (*okrugs*) on the Kola peninsula (Gerasimov 1932). With rapid industrialization, the population in the region increased dramatically and the administrative-territorial division was revised frequently until 1938, whereas the use of “national” and “indigenous” for the territorial units on the Kola Peninsula was discontinued in the mid-1930s. In this short-lived attempt, in the eyes of the policy-makers the Komi were aligned with the Sami. By using the generalized and ethnic neutral “national and indigenous” [*natsionalnyi-tuzemnyi*] the authorities neither excluded the Komi, nor recognized their presence there.

### From ethnic conflict to class antagonism

The state policy of collectivization and industrialization, introducing the new socialist order, embodied further contradictions. Although a great part of the households on the Kola Peninsula owned reindeer, the collectivization affected mostly the Komi, Sami, and Nenets, whose subsistence was based on reindeer herding. From the official point of view, the collectivization followed two main trajectories – intensifying its production, and (consequently) improving the life of the poor and backward Sami population. Nevertheless, categorizations of class standing activated old ethnic stereotypes. The ideologically anchored class antagonism became entangled with old preconceptions.

As in the rest of the country, the population was divided into clear-cut class categories: proletariat and peasants, the latter classified as *kulaks*, *bedniaks*, *seredniaks*, and *batraks* (rich peasants, poor peasants, mid-level peasants, and farmhands). These categories were considered of higher importance than ethnic background. The reindeer-owning families were listed and divided into small-herd owners and large herd owners (owners of over 250 reindeer). Among the latter were 17 Sami households, 16 Komi, and one Nenets (Osinovskii 1930). Vsevolod Lebedev (1933, 131) observes that although only two or three Izhma Komi were real exploiters [*podlinnye eksploatatory*] “the Lapp transferred the fear of kulaks to all Izhma Komi.” Murmansk-based ethnographer Vassilii Alymov (1924) saw the new regime as a way to improve the position of the Sami people who had lost salmon grounds to the colonists and got a “new stronger rival in the tundra – the Izhma Komi.” This view of the rich Izhma Komi and the Sami suffering under almost feudal oppression found expression in a number of works of fiction as well, such as “*Loparenok Olesa*” (1928) and “*Chelovek pesnia*” (1927) by Aleksei Kozhevnikov, an author who was sent to collectivize this “backward corner” of the country. Such popular images leave out the fact that at the start of collectivization, 30% of Komi peasants were mid-level (*seredniaki*) and 60% poor (*bedniaki*) (Yelkin 1928).

Their “cultural supremacy” was redefined as intolerable economic exploitation and a source of class conflict. Observing that the newly established Komi village of Ivanovka attracted both Sami and Russians from nearby settlements, Charnoluskii (1930, 40)

predicted that it would become a cultural center. In his memoirs, published posthumously, he blamed himself for not having sensed the growing tension between the Komi and the Sami in the late 1920s (1972, 68–71). In the afterword, ethnographers Tatiana Luk'ianchenko and Yurii Simchenko clarify that the above-mentioned ethnic tension was a manifestation of class conflict (Charnoluskii 1972, 266). The entanglement of class and ethnicity was a complex and often self-contradicting problem. The local newspaper "*Poliarnaia pravda*" blamed the kulaks for fomenting interethnic hostility between Sami and Komi on the one hand, and the Russian agents of collectivization on the other.<sup>7</sup> In this way the contradictory image of the Komi as both opposed to and aligned with the Sami persisted.

### State policies and local agents

The state policies of collectivization were chaotic and contradictory, led by different impulses, and implemented through different institutions and agents. In 1928–1929, the state-owned *Gostorg*<sup>8</sup> established its own sovkhos and was interested in export of reindeer meat and local trade, collaborating with large herd owners, who had experience and connections in trade.<sup>9</sup> Concurrently, party functionaries agitated for entering the kolkhozes. Most Murmansk-based scholars regarded the collectivization as advantageous for the small owners, argued for credits for the small Sami reindeer herding households within the kolkhozes (Osinovskii 1930), and were critical of *Gostorg*'s activities. "*Poliarnaia pravda*" even disclosed that through *Gostorg* the kulak reindeer herder intends "to peacefully grow into socialism."<sup>10</sup> In sum, the policy of the state was far from straightforward; there were different actors and agents with different concerns (see also Konstantinov 2015, 96ff).

Collectivization was also influenced by local conditions. During the first years of the Soviet regime, some Komi from Lovozero moved eastwards on the Kola Peninsula and established on the river Ponoï the villages of Ivanovka in 1919, Krasnoshchel'e in 1921, and Kanevka in 1923. Most of these were mid-range reindeer owners and continued with a mixed form of economy at the new places. The process of collectivization and the establishment of kolkhozes coincided with their founding in a new place and are intertwined in the memories of the villagers. The first collective farm "*Krasnaia tundra*" in Ivanovka was established with enthusiasm and in a full-fledged collectivist spirit. The members trusted each other and decided to pay the same daywork rate to everyone, without any differentiation of tasks or efficiency – a practice severely criticized by the supervisor overseeing the collectivization (Budovnits 1931). The authorities did not trust the rural population to implement the state collectivization policy. In 1930, they sent 25,000 proletarians, called twenty-five-thousanders (*dvadtsatipiatitsiachnik*), to build collectives in rural areas. The inner part of the Kola Peninsula also got their twenty-five-thousanders. However, in the memory of my informants, the role of these state-deployed men is rather downplayed. When I asked how the collectivization proceeded in the area, people were in most cases unable to tell me. Their usual answer was that "the parents did as they were told," emphasizing the hard labor and industriousness of the villagers, never questioning the collectivist order.

The name of the man who was sent as twenty-five-thousander to the inner part of Kola Peninsula, to the village of Ivanovka, on the other hand, evoked memories and vivid stories not because of his contribution to collectivization, but because he intruded on the local order. He came to the village and married a local woman. The marriage was turbulent and violent. Finally, she escaped to her parents. He left the village, and the story goes that he got what he deserved during the Great Terror some years later.<sup>11</sup> His ex-wife

married a local man and lived a long and happy life in the village. I heard this narrative several times – it goes beyond a personal story. It is a way to remember the inadequacy of the deployed officials of the state who intruded on the village to ensure the working of government mechanisms. For the greater part of the Komi on the Kola Peninsula living through the collectivization was inseparable from moving to a new place offering new opportunities, building a future. For them the new regime offered also a new opportunity – to settle down in the inner part of the peninsula. The process of collectivization was not only a political technology of control, but entailed a practical engagement with the new place: building houses, finding pastures, mowing, and giving birth, where the state overseer was rather insignificant and superfluous.

In Krasnoshchel'e, mutual cooperation and assistance were particularly emphasized. For example, the following story was told in the local museum:

The first settlers in the village of Krasnoshchel'e came with a small herd, and the first year they lived in a tent [*chum*]. The following year while Mitrofan and Fedor were building the house, Petr was grazing the reindeer and the cow they had bought together.

Such voluntary forms of cooperation existed and accompanied the early collectivization. In pre-Soviet ethnographic writings the significance of the Komi *artels* had been described (Rusanov 1945), but as Sharapov and Zhrebtsov (2014) show, from 1920–1930 the *artels* were not of interest for the ethnographers – Charnoluskii (1930) only mentions that the Ivanovka committee for mutual help (*Ivanovskii komitet vzaimopomoshchi*) opened a product depot. “*Poliarnaia pravda*” even claimed that the old “household” *artels*, turned into kolkhoz brigades, were hampering production.<sup>12</sup> The new regime introduced a new kind of human relations. According to the new instructions, the old order was to be associated exclusively with coercion and oppression, and the new order – with voluntarism and cooperation.

### Material welfare and ethnic differences

Therefore, for years in scholarly discourse, collectivization was represented as entirely one-way, operating from the center to the outskirts, and emancipating the whole population, especially the Sami. The only ethnographic description written in this period – Volkov's “Russian Sami” – ends it in a similar vein: “He [the Sami singer] sings about the Sami poor and oppressed in the past. They were oppressed, robbed, made drunkards, fooled by priests, threatened with hell. And then he sings about the life in the kolkhoz.” The editors of Volkov's work state that they decided not to publish the political descriptions of the happy life as they do not fully reflect the real life (Volkov, Lasko, and Taksami 1996, iv). Most importantly, the new regime introduced the modern lifestyle, and the focus of the ethnographers in the 1920s and early 1930s was to document the everyday life and material culture [*byt*]. Their particular emphasis on the advances and the progress of Soviet life was politically motivated – Nikolai Volkov's work in 1935 was part of a larger exhibition project at the State Museum of Ethnography in Leningrad, “Kola Peninsula and the Socialist Construction,” dedicated to the anniversary of Sergei Kirov's death.<sup>13</sup> But impulses came also from the discipline itself – as Tan-Bogoraz (1924, 7) wrote, the study of the old without the new was “impossible and ridiculous” [*nevozmozhno i nelepo*].

Several writers describing the rural life in the inner part of Kola Peninsula in the early 1920s praise the consumption and cultural habits of the Komi people: they had gramophones and European clothes, their houses were decorated, and their music was “modern” (Orlova 1924; Rikhter 1925; Khalapsin 1927; Ivanov-Diatlov 1928; Zolotarev 1928). With the establishment of the Soviet regime in the late 1920s, all the goods of

modernity that people had owned disappeared, as if they before never existed. The Komi were disparaged for their advantages over the Sami people, and at the same time denied their accomplishments and success. Even though the Komi had cultivated potatoes since their migration to the Kola Peninsula, the Moscow newspaper “*Izvestia*”<sup>14</sup> in reporting from Russian Lapland described how the Komi woman Chuprova attended one of the agricultural exhibitions in Murmansk. There, fascinated by the possibility, she took some seed potatoes and started growing potatoes without being affected by the skeptical and reserved elders. Similarly, the regional paper “*Karelo-Murmanskii kraj*” described how the poor Komi, Nenets, and Sami received radios from the new authorities and could not believe their own ears, spellbound by the broadcast from Moscow (Uchitel’-Lopatin 1928). Despite earlier descriptions, the journalists wrote as if this place totally lacked technological advances before the introduction of the Soviet system. In this way, they legitimized the modernization project as exclusively a Soviet one.

### **Reindeer herding, indigeneity, and ethnogenesis**

The few ethnographic descriptions from the post-war period continued the trend to document material prosperity (Anokhin 1962) and to reveal still-existing inequalities (Luk’ianchenko 2009) focusing mainly on the Sami, and only briefly mentioning the Komi and the Nenets. The reconstruction of the Soviet economy aimed at eradication of all ethnic differences in material life and everyday situations (Konstantinov 2015, 114). In this particular setting, reindeer herding came to play a significant part.

As a branch of the Soviet economy, reindeer herding was the target of intensive state policies. As a primary means of subsistence for the native people, it was an object of ethnographic studies. Sometimes the interests overlapped. The ethnographer Vladimir Charnoluskii (1931) also took part in the policy discussions describing the Sami practices of fence building as a possible practice to implement. Vassilii Alymov, an ethnographer and head of the Murmansk Statistical Bureau in the late 1920s, wrote extensively on reindeer herding and its rationalization that, he believed, would improve the situation of the indigenous Sami population. The idea that the “small-numbered people” needed expert help and credits from the state to develop the herding prevailed among the local scholars. Considering previous expert practice and the supposed low ratio between labor input and production output, the authorities directed their efforts at its intensification. Many scholars have emphasized the role of the Komi in the development of Soviet reindeer herding (Luk’ianchenko 2003, 71; Konstantinov 2015, 115–117). Their intensive and controlled reindeer herding was further enhanced by scholarly and ideological innovations, and the influence of the herders on these standards was minimal. The authorities tried to build up expertise based on cattle breeding to increase the weight of the reindeer, to create milk-giving cows, and find new solutions for reindeer fodder.<sup>15</sup> The implementation was guided by progressive party functionaries, following the plan and the scientifically prescribed practices since the 1930s (Pliss 1933).

In the new Soviet economy of reindeer herding, ethnic labels persisted mostly as attributes of historical artifacts of material culture and folklore, and as characteristics of historically explained practices on the “ecological-economic continuum of human activities in which the reindeer plays a part” (Krupnik 1993). Existing differences were explained as adaptations to different geographical conditions. The ethnographers, however, continued to link reindeer herding to ethnic groups and geographical areas. After her visit to the Kola Peninsula in 1973, Lyudmila Khomich (1977) wrote that the modern reindeer herding there incorporated both Komi-Nenets and Sami reindeer practices. G.M. Kert

(1973) referred to the preserved Sami reindeer herding practices among the Sami people, and Tatiana Luk'ianchenko (2003) argued that the Sami reindeer herding was more suitable for the natural environment on the Kola Peninsula despite the introduction of the Izhma Komi model. Such static typologies are rather detached from the lived reality, and rejected today by the practitioners as “implying backwardness and primitivism” (Vladimirova 2011, 118).

The dominant theory of *ethnogenesis* might explain this persistence. According to this paradigm, scholars should examine how ethnic groups became *historically established on a given territory*. Manifestations of cultural differences were explained in a diachronic perspective, and ethnography became a sub-discipline of historical science (Dragadze 1990; Tishkov 1992; Elfimov 2014). The present could reveal what remained from the past, and the task of the ethnographer was to study human beings within the ethnos as “all the other human interrelations and identities were outside the realm of anthropology” (Habeck 2005a, 11). While in the West Fredrik Barth (1969) introduced ethnic boundaries as constructs created through the contacts between groups and as political mechanisms, most Soviet scientists adopted a primordialist view on ethnicity and turned completely to the past, to find and explain historic and prehistoric particularities and interrelations in search for the ethno-constitutive [*etnoobrazuiushchie*] factors.

The theory of ethnogenesis also influenced the first extensive studies of the Komi on the Kola Peninsula, conducted by scholars from the Komi Branch of the USSR Academy of Science in the 1980s within a larger framework on Komi resettled groups [*etnoarealnye gruppy Komi*].<sup>16</sup> Roughly outlined, their idea was to examine how Komi-ness has been preserved and modified in different geographical settings where Komi have been resettled in the past. Oleg Kotov (1988) described the Komi on the Kola Peninsula in comparison with another group of Komi – the Ob Komi – pointing out the significance of the *stereotype of a territorial optimum* – the border between the tundra and the forest. Nikolai Konakov, on the other hand, concentrated on the ecological adaptations of “resettled” Komi groups (Konakov 1984, 1993; Konakov and Kotov 1991). Konakov (1993) pays particular attention to the formation of the local group as an independent socio-cultural organism (after a very short period of physiological and cultural adaptation) and highlights the role of kinship for ethnic coagulation and continuity, but also the groups' innate ability to adapt and reproduce their traditional use of natural resources, mainly reindeer herding. This ability is defined through the ethno-psychological stereotypes of a “cultural-economic optimum” created on earlier inhabited territories. In his view, the ethnic group persists not within space but despite it and has a quintessence, a “stereotype-optimum” (for the Komi, the market-oriented reindeer herding) that predefines their viability. The idea of the “nurturing landscape” [*landshaft*] as constitutive of an ethnic group, promoted by Lev Gumilev, stimulated this natural-biological perception of ethnicity. Interestingly, not only ethnopolitical mobilization, but also ethnological ecological expertise today is based on such arguments (Klokov 1997, 3).

### Concluding remarks

Since the 1990s both new constructivist and relational approaches have been adopted and applied, but the essentializing practices continue to confine the Izhma Komi to old patterns. Vlasova and Denisenko (2012), favoring Fredrik Barth's ethnic boundaries approach, argue that the constant tension between the Komi and the Sami has preserved the Komi on the Kola Peninsula as a group. Likewise, the persistence of Izhma Komi identity is explained by four major factors, one being the persistent opposition *Komi Izhemtsy* against the



majority of *Komi Zyriani* (Kim, Shabayev, and Istomin 2015). Similarly, Paul Fryer and Ari Lehtinen (2013) argue that a salient factor for retaining the Izhma Komi identity is community-specific ethnic and ecological awareness related to the reindeer and the home river.

Longitudinal studies focusing on reindeer herding have emphasized the distinction between the tundra-dwelling population and ethnopolitical elites in the rural areas of the Kola Peninsula (Vladimirova 2006; Konstantinov 2015). They convincingly show how Sami, Komi, and others engage with the environment, and that at present there is no will to restore the pre-Soviet, pre-collective Sami or Komi forms of reindeer herding. However, the prevailing focus on the reindeer herding (Vladimirova 2006; Konstantinov 2015) and on Sami issues (Robinson 1998; Allemann 2009; Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012) in the monographs covering this geographical area epitomize the blend of reindeer herding and indigeneity. In this way they indirectly provide support for the main arguments in the Izhma Komi's motion for recognition as "small-numbered indigenous people," based on the economic (or subsistence economy based) approach to indigeneity (Sokolovskii 2015, 195).<sup>17</sup> However, such descriptions often leave the non-herding majority of Izhma Komi, but also Sami and other people "the silent majority" (Konstantinov 2015, 119–120) aside.

Agents of modernization and backward peasants, benefactors and exploiters, reindeer people and professional herders: in this article, I have uncovered some of the inherent contradictions tainting the image of the Komi on the Kola Peninsula. The recurrent practices of comparison and contrast with the indigenous Sami and the Russians makes them less indigenous, yet not Russian, whether applying evolutionist theories or collectivizing the reindeer herding. Their legal status has been a vexed issue since their resettlement in the late nineteenth century, and as we have seen until today (see note 5). Their reindeer herding, being closely studied from different angles: as economic rationale, as cultural heritage, as real practices of attachment, first opposed to the indigenous Sami reindeer herding then contrasted with the new scientifically and technocratic approach, has contributed to the hazy picture. This ambiguous discursive tradition, however, is not necessarily a drawback for individuals. The ambivalent discursive practices framing the Komi subjectivities might allow them to recognize a wider range of possibilities and opportunities and to realize themselves.

Epistemologically, the case of the Komi on the Kola Peninsula, exemplifies what Anna Tsing (Tsing 2005) calls "productive friction" of interactions and interconnections across differences, created through the messy and surprising features of encounter. They have been "sand in the machinery" against which dominant paradigms create some friction. Although a fringe phenomenon, this case illustrates some of the practical problems of generalization and essentialism, fundamental for ethnographers, policy-makers, and popular stereotypes. Moreover, as I have demonstrated in this paper, these discourses are extremely porous and easily transgress each other.

## Notes

1. Local historian Aleksei Kiselev writes that the Komi have had privileges [*Igoty*] as the other small-numbered people, but a regulation from 1980 tacitly omitted them (Kiselev 2009).
2. Fieldwork was conducted in 2012, with shorter stays in 2013, 2014, and 2015.
3. Most legal definitions of "indigenous people" are founded on the principle of "prior occupancy" (ILO Convention No. 169 (1989); UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)). In Russian legislation (FZ-82 30/04/1999), indigenous people, as beneficiaries of preferential treatment and special legal status, are

people living in the territories of traditional settlement of their ancestors, preserving a traditional way of life and traditional economic system and economic activities, numbering within the Russian Federation less than fifty thousand and recognizing themselves as independent ethnic communities. (Slezkine 1994a; Donahoe et al. 2008; Sokolovskii 2015)

They are defined in the “Unified list of indigenous small-numbered people” [*Edinyi perechen' korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii*](Governmental order No 536r 17/04/2006).

4. The preferential treatment of the indigenous people is provided by several laws: on indigenous rights (FZ-82 30/04/1999 “*O garantiakh prav korennykh malochislennykh narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii*”), on indigenous *obshchinas* (FZ-104 20/07/2000 “*Ob obshchikh printsipakh organizatsii obshchin korennykh malochislennykh narodov Severa, Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka Rossiiskoi Federatsii*”), on traditional territories (FZ-49 07/05/2001 “*O territoriakh traditsionnogo prirodopol'zovaniia korennykh malochislennykh narodov ...*”).
5. The law on indigenous *obshchinas* (FZ-104 20/07/2000) offers a formulation giving equal rights to “other ethnic groups living on territories of traditional use and employed in traditional subsistence activities.” Many other legislative documents as the Land Code and the Forestry Code of the Russian Federation refer only to the “small-numbered indigenous populations.” In practice, the local authorities often use the extended definition including “other groups.” In 2012, The Plenum of the Supreme Court issued a decree (No. 22 from 18/10/2012) granting rights to nature resources to non-indigenous who live in the same area and live in the same way as those recognized as indigenous.
6. Handskrift 7A. Arkeologen Gustaf Hallströms arkiv 1880-1962. Forskningsarkivet, Umeå Universitetsbibliotek.
7. “Tundra v sotsialisticheskoi peredelke,” *Poliarnaia pravda*, June 23, 1931, no. 71 (1380), 3.
8. State-owned trading company established in 1922.
9. Rippas (1915) mentions that he met an Izhma Komi from Rynda who exported to Norway. The fact that Gostorg had one of its three meat-collecting posts for export there might imply that the old trading connections were revived. In support of this conjecture is the fact that a Komi Ivan Ivanovich Terent'ev lived there in 1920 (GAMO F. P-505, op.1 d.3).
10. “Silnee ogon,” *Poliarnaia Pravda*, December 23, 1930, no. 139 (1307), 1.
11. This story refers to the zigzagging policy of collectivization: the regional authorities in Murmansk first decided to privatize the whole herd. The reindeer herders protested to Moscow and the central authorities, after visiting Murmansk region, issued a resolution “On the wrong decision of the Murmansk Committee ...” and later “On the lack of a management, control, and on the outrageous perversions in policy of the Party on the Far North” (Kisel'gov and Kisel'jova 1996).
12. “Shir'te stroi kolkhoznykh brigad,” *Poliarnaia pravda*, June 23, 1931, no. 71 (1380), 3.
13. Arkhiv REM fond 2, op. 1. delo 510, 514.
14. “V Sovetskoi Laplandii,” *Izvestiia*, November 16, 1927, No. 262 (3196), 4.
15. “Selektsionnaia rabota v olenevodstve Murmana,” *Karelo-Murmanskii krai* 1932; no 3–4, 64.
16. Another classification is “sub-ethnos” – a local group that has developed its own characteristics.
17. See also Tsylev (2013).

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