

Crisscrossing of Buriad, Sakha, and Tyvan Nostalgia as the Path to Indigenous Solidarity

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Abstract:

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer's book *Galvanizing Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia* explores the relationship between the 'prospective' nature of nostalgic reminiscing and its mobilizing force in construction of indigeneity and strengthening sovereignty of three republics – Sakha (Yakutia), Buryatia, and Tyva (Tuva). The book's implications remain crucial, even if today's collective cross-republic activism is difficult to achieve, it is vital to maintaining what remains of their sovereignty.

Das Zusammentreffen von Burjaten-, Sacha- und Tjwan-Nostalgie im Streben nach Souveränität

German Abstract:

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzers Buch *Galvanizing Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia* untersucht die Beziehung zwischen nostalgischen Erinnerungen und ihrer mobilisierenden Kraft für die Indigenität und Souveränität dreier Republiken – Sacha (Jakutien), Burjatien und Tjowa (Tuwa). Die Implikationen des Buches sind nach wie vor von entscheidender Bedeutung, auch wenn kollektiver Aktivismus über die Grenzen von Republiken hinweg heute schwer zu erreichen ist, ist er doch unerlässlich, um das zu bewahren, was von ihrer Souveränität noch übrig geblieben ist.

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Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer combines extensive ethnography across three republics, Sakha (Yakutia), Buryatia, and Tyva (Tuva), in a comparative study that dissects the intricate relationship between indigeneity and the sovereignty of Siberian Indigenous peoples. She proposes that the strengthening of one can reinforce the other in the context of weakening federalization and the steady course towards centralization of Russian politics and administration. Mandelstam Balzer focuses on the mobilizing and prospective nature of nostalgic memory that can crystallize identities, activism, and solidarity and can potentially direct them toward building a stronger cross-republic civic society. Mandelstam Balzer exemplifies how for Indigenous Siberians nostalgia can go beyond glorified imaginings of Soviet ways of being. Instead, the author turns her gaze to the examples of “romantic nostalgia,” which is “represented by selective pasts when the given group had more power over its own destiny” (p. 9). This type of nostalgia is demonstrated by Mandelstam Balzer’s recounting of ecology movements, cultural and spiritual revival projects, and contested dialogues around some of the cultural monuments in the republics.

Mandelstam Balzer demonstrates a deep understanding of the regions and draws her conclusions from first-hand accounts with civil appraisals embedded within the contexts of tightening language politics, economic hardships, practices of extractivism, Kremlin-appointed officials, demographic imbalances between Slavic Russians and non-Russians, and cultural/spiritual revival projects. She underscores nostalgia in the form of yearning for Indigenous ways of relating to nature as a potentially healthy and mobilizing force for the civil society of the three republics. Mandelstam Balzer posits that collective ecological activism can connect the powers of three republics as ecological concerns transcend imposed borders and

interethnic boundaries. She argues that cases of environmental activism, such as fighting a gas processing plant on the Lena River or raising awareness of environmental damage in the Lake Baikal region, “may provide a positive example of incremental change based on interethnic cooperation” (p. 5) and that “ecology activists who see problems as systemic are more likely to work together on crossover issues that transcend local protests” (p. 166).

In the first three chapters, the author characterizes and analyzes each republic individually. Chapter one is dedicated to the Republic of Sakha and the entanglement of its past, present, and future in its rich natural resources and their expropriation, the Sakha peoples’ relation to their land, cultural revitalization such as the celebration of *Yhyakh* (sacral celebration of summer solstice), and persistent ecological activism. The second chapter centers on the Republic of Buryatia, characterized as “gerrymandered” (p. 64) because of the historically divided territory of the Great Buryatia, which additionally encompasses geographically dispersed Ust-Orda Buryat Okrug and Agin-Buryat Okrug. The chapter explores religious Buddhist and Shamanist revival projects and eco-activism across its divided cross-border communities. In chapter three, Mandelstam Balzer recounts the story of the relative independence of the Republic of Tyva, which merged into the USSR only in 1944. In light of its relatively recent autonomy, Tyva maintains the majority of the ethnically Tyvan population, who actively restores and reinvents their Buddhist/shamanist and Turkic/Mongolic identities.

These different strands are tied together in chapter four, where Mandelstam Balzer approaches cross-republic connections, analyzing civic attempts to crisscross Mongolic and Turkic identities and synthesize religious practices. Her approach is to understand the common ground in cultural projects, experiences of obstructing policies, and addressing economic, societal, and ecological issues. The chapter culminates in the inspiring as well as tragic case of Alexander Gabyshev, a Sakha shaman who ventured on “the long walk” to reach Moscow to challenge Moscow authorities (p. 151). Traveling across the republics, he gained attention and support, exposing collective suppressed grievances and disappointment with economic and political decision-making of the capital. In all four chapters, the author demonstrates a nuanced and intimate understanding of the three regions by describing the variety of cultural and religious revival projects, discourses surrounding indigeneity, and

varying degrees of sovereignty in each of the three republics. Mandelstam Balzer is able to demonstrate how different the histories and circumstances of the republics are, but also how intertwined and contingent their fates can be.

The author's conclusions are sensible and instructive, emphasizing the mobilizing potential and egalitarian nature of transnational, cross-republic identities and the positive effect properly exercised sovereignties can have in reliving fears of assimilation and interethnic tensions. She underscores the unifying nature of ecology movements and the transformative capacity of "prospective nostalgia" in igniting societal dialogue and change (p. 165–167). Mandelstam Balzer's positioning as a researcher and an ally is exemplary. Close reading the book, the first thing that captures attention is her kind compassion and understanding of sensitivities that manifest in her ethnographic work which does not rush to make far-reaching or potentially dangerous conclusions but rather amplifies the voices of people, their experiences, and scholarship. It is most evident with Balzer's careful threading and recounting of the accounts to avoid imposing interpretations, especially on dangerous topics like secessionist themes, yet bringing the questions of Indigenous sovereignty to the fore. It is as important as ever to make sure, especially from the privileged position of relative safety, to raise and engage in discussions about the nature of sovereignty and self-determination and what they mean for Indigenous peoples in Russia. For when the dialogue is preempted as a taboo topic, it makes it too easy for the populist discourses to label it as separatist and extremist.

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer concludes her book by stating that "[a]nthropolgy is always unfinished" (p. 192). And it truly never is finished. There is much to learn and relearn, and it is urgent. Yet, the book's implications remain relevant. They are important for scholars working on these republics as well as for the Buriads, Tyvans, Sakha, and other Indigenous populations of Russia, providing valuable context on power dynamics between Moscow and its subordinated republics while carefully shedding light on what has to be tackled. There is no need for reading in between the lines – cross-republic Indigenous solidarity, as well as a cross-border one, is imperative in upholding sovereignty and Indigenous subjectivities. There is, yet, a need for a certain degree of honesty – the complicity of the republics in the current

state of affairs has nothing to do with the love for our lands. It would be of utmost importance to translate and make the book accessible to the Indigenous people of Russia.