

BOOK REVIEW: GALVANIZING NOSTALGIA?
INDIGENEITY AND SOVEREIGNTY IN SIBERIA

Balzer, Marjorie Mandelstam. 2022. *Galvanizing Nostalgia? Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer is a famous anthropologist in Arctic studies, conducting research in Siberia since the last decades of the Soviet era. She is a research professor at Georgetown University and is author or editor of six books on Russia, Central Asia, and the Circumpolar North. Balzer is well known as a student of shamanism among the Siberian indigenous people, a researcher of ethnic processes with a focus on indigenous identities, and is one of the first researchers to publish on interethnic relations in the Russian Arctic.

Galvanizing Nostalgia: Indigeneity and Sovereignty in Siberia is her latest book, based on fieldwork in three republics in the Russian Federation, Sakha (Yakutia), Buryatia and Tyva. Republics in the Russian Federation are so-called sovereign territories, meaning that they are theoretically inhabited by a non-Russian ethnic group that enjoys cultural and language autonomy. In reality, the titular ethnic group constitutes more than half of the republic's population in only roughly half of internationally recognised 21 republics (one, Crimea, is under Russia's de facto control). This book is not, however, a comparative case study of three Russian regions. Balzer draws on her experience in regions starting with the early 1990s and describes long-term developments, cultural, political and identity processes, and discussions around them that shaped the public discourse in Tyva, Buryatia and Sakha. As she writes, every republic is unique, and its character traits are emphasised in the chapter titles.

The Sakha Republic is 'rich and pivotal,' reflecting its diamonds and other key resources. The Republic of Buryatia is 'gerrymandered and struggling,' due to its historical legacies of regional divisions imposed from above. The Republic of Tyva is 'a borderline state with demographic advantages,' due to its geography, history, and the overwhelming majority of its titular nation. (P. 21)

Due to her long-term experience she is able to understand the ideologies of indigenous intellectuals and they way they combine Eurasianism, shamanism, local patriotism, Lamaism, Buddhism, the identity of being Russian citizens (*rossiyane*) and many other positions that are often controversial. In her book, she has undertaken the difficult task of analysing for the Western reader the controversial reality of how non-Russian people in the Russian Federation feel suppressed and colonised in opposition to what Moscow says, and simultaneously be loyal citizens who support their president in all his deeds and misdeeds.

Among the Siberian and Arctic studies community Balzer is mainly known as a long-term student of the Republic of Sakha, especially the ethnic Sakha people. Spending a substantial amount of time in this republic over several decades, she has impressive knowledge of Sakha culture and politics. Therefore, it is not surprising that chapters or passages in this book dealing with the Sakha people and their republic are in more depth than the writing on Tyva and Buryatia. Of course, I might have this

impression because I have also carried out research in and about the Republic of Sakha for a long time, and know Tyva and Buryatia less well. Balzer is also known for what she calls “co-theorizing” (p. 19) or conducting research and analysing data with local scholars. This is mirrored in the way Balzer writes and the depth of her knowledge.

Interestingly, one key topic in the book is ecology. The wellbeing of non-Russian indigenous people depends on the ecological conditions of their homeland. Ecology in Russia is also a political, ethnic, cultural and social issue. Fighting for environmental preservation means also fighting for the right to a certain self-determination. A very good example is Sakha sociologist Yury Zhegusov, who is mentioned in this book as an ecology activist and the person who launched the Save Lena! campaign in 2008. He is also the proponent of a conservative understanding of Sakha identity, propagates abstinence from alcohol and is currently one of the leaders of the pro-Kremlin Sakha nationalist movement Ys Tymsy. The main aim of activists like Zhegusov is to preserve indigenous culture and identity in their homeland, although in their activism, ecology and nature are tightly connected with identity politics. Another important factor in understanding regional politics is indigenous demography. Here Balzer hits the nail on the head. In Tyva, Tuvinians are an absolute majority; in the Sakha Republic, the Sakha form a small majority, whereas the Buryats are a minority in a republic that bears their name. What Balzer for some reason does not take into account is the fact that republican elite and heads of administration who enforce federal policies are mainly indigenous people in all three regions. Moreover, Balzer avoids mentioning in this book how non-Russians in Russia perceive the annexation of Crimea (in the majority they support it). Another worthwhile topic is pan-Turkism and Eurasianism. Both ideologies are not coherent but very popular,

especially among intellectuals in the Turkic-speaking Russian minorities. The same is the case with pan-Mongolianism, which is important for the Buryats. These three ideologies, although indeed very important, are little researched in terms of their popularity among non-Russian people in Russia.

What I did not grasp fully was the emphasis on nostalgia. The use of nostalgia is explained as follows:

In a more direct and active usage, it takes a leader to galvanize nostalgia toward social and political change. Who that leader is, whether from a formally educated intelligentsia or not, and what aspects of a historical period are longed for, whether Soviet or earlier, become key to whether the process is productive or destructive. (P. 8)

Throughout the book Balzer mentions the importance of Genghis Khan for the national mythology of all three peoples. I would argue that the claim to have the great warrior khan as an ancestor, and believing in the existence of the ancient Sakha empire, is rather an answer to Russian colonialism and racism where Asians have always been looked down on as backward. The book also provides a nice overview of Buryat, Tyva and Sakha political dissident and human rights groups up to the recent past.

Galvanizing Nostalgia? is an essential read for all who want to know more about the Russian Asian non-Muslim population. It is meticulously researched and based on long-term participant observation. As far as I know, there is no other comprehensive work published in English that addresses the current state of affairs in these regions.

Aimar Ventsel
University of Tartu