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CULTURAL CONFRONTATION OR COEXISTENCE? INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE NORTH SOVIET UNION BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND CO-OPTATION

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The Arctic Eurasian people's historical memory is characterised by the rise and fall of the Soviet Empire with its immediate pre- and after-history.

For native northerners this meant an intensified cultural contact, which we analyse along a continuum over time between resistance and co-optation. Taking the example of the Sakha (Yakuts) and the Nenets, we suggest an interpretation of these contacts in parallel waves, in the early 20th and 21st century:

In the 1920s the Yakut intelligencia tried an resistance movement, which was subsequently coopted into the Soviet system. We draw a parallel with the sovereignty movement of the 1990s and subsequent co-optation into Putin-Russias centralised order. Correspondingly, the Yamal-Nenets reindeer herders had their attempt in resistance against the Soviet order in the 1930s and 1940s, and after supression became most successful in preserving their own livelihood as part of the Soviet system. This is repeated now as their private herding economy develops within the legal niche given by the state, while attempts of emancipating from the state-controlled reindeer herding system were not long-lasting. As a result, we argue that the Arctic has explanatory potential as an area for a diachronical understanding of the graduality between contact, confrontation, resistance and co-optation of native communities. In people's memory the borders between these concepts and time periods is more fluent than we often assume judging from historical evidence.

keywords: Soviet Union, indigenous peoples, cultural intrusion