

Native & Indigenous Communities in Siberia: Beginnings to 1917

Like the United States, Russia's population is incredibly diverse. People practice a variety of religions including Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. In absolute numbers, Russia takes in the largest number of immigrants of any country after the United States and Germany. More than 120 languages are spoken in Russia, and many of these languages are indigenous languages. While there are indigenous people all over Russia, the majority of Russia's indigenous communities live in Siberia, the part of Russia that sits in Asia.



The bright green part of the map is the part of Russia located in Asia, east of the Ural Mountains. This part of Russia is called Siberia.

Many indigenous groups in Siberia were nomads. In the 13th century, the Mongol Empire conquered part of Siberia, and indigenous communities under Mongolian rule had to pay the Mongols a kind of tax called a tribute. These tributes could be furs, goods, or services. The Mongol Empire stretched all the way to the European part of Russia. By the beginning of the 15th century, the empire began to lose power and other groups took over various territories. One of those groups was the Muscovy, which would eventually become the Tsardom of Muscovy, and then the Russian Empire.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, forces from the Tsardom of Muscovy fought other groups which had conquered land from the Mongols in Siberia. The Tsardom wanted land and the people's tributes. These fights became known as the Russian conquest of Siberia. By 1639, ethnic Russians reached the Pacific Ocean and by 1640, the Tsardom included all of northern Asia, or Siberia. The conquest did not end in 1640, however. While some communities didn't mind paying tribute to the Tsardom, there were many battles between ethnic Russians and indigenous communities who did not want to pay tribute. Many were killed in battles or by European germs. In some communities, the majority of the community died.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Europeans who lived in Siberia were hunters and those looking for a new life outside of European Russia. Some of those people were Old Believers. Like the Puritans and other first European settlers in North America, the Old Believers lived in Siberia so that they could practice their religion in peace. Even as time passed, there were few Europeans in Siberia, and indigenous communities and European newcomers lived in relative harmony following the conquest.

- What are some key events in indigenous history of Russia?
- Why do you think the Tsardom of Muscovy wanted to take Siberian land?

Native & Indigenous Communities in Siberia: The Soviet Union and Boarding Schools

In 1917, there was a revolution in the Russian Empire. The USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), or the Soviet Union, took its place. The Soviet Union was a country from 1922-1991.

In the early years of the Soviet Union, the government adopted policies designed to preserve indigenous traditions. Schools were opened for indigenous children in their traditional territories and the schedule reflected their seasonal activities. For example, some indigenous groups migrated to a warmer area in the winter. That meant children who were in the area attended school in the warmer months, and in the colder months, the school was closed. The government also created a written standardized version of several languages so that children could learn to read and write in their own language. However, indigenous communities were not invited to take part in these initiatives, and thus some initiatives were more effective than others.



Nenets (an indigenous group of Siberia) children before they head on the helicopter to school. These children live with their families in the summer and live at a boarding school 9 months of the year. The helicopter takes them to and from school. Photograph by Ikuru Kuwajima , <https://flashbak.com/tundra-kids-nenet-children-inside-russias-indigenous-boarding-school-370914/>

When a new leader, Joseph Stalin, came to power, initiatives to empower indigenous communities were stopped. Following World War II, nomadic indigenous groups were forced to settle into one place. This practice is called involuntary sedentism. From age 2, indigenous children had to attend boarding schools where they could not speak their indigenous language. Students could be taken from their families if their parents refused to send them to boarding school. Students learned Russian language and Russian culture far away from their families and were not able to talk with them during the school year.

By the mid-1980s, children were allowed to return to their home communities thanks to the new openness or *glasnost* policies of the USSR. For the first time, people

were able to openly talk about the problems of boarding schools and of children not being able to live with their families. Smaller schools in settlements and towns began to be built and some nomadic schools reopened. Boarding schools remained open, but families could now choose whether or not they wanted to study at them.

- What do you think life was like for children at the Russian indigenous boarding schools?
- Why do you think it took about 40 years for the Soviet government to let indigenous parents choose where their children went to school?