

CONFERENCE

“NATIONAL CULTURES OF THE URALS – HISTORY, CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE RELATIONS”

ETHNOLOGICAL CONFERENCE,
YEKATERINBURG, MAY 23–25, 2005

The above ethnological/anthropological seminar was held in Yekaterinburg (formerly Sverdlovsk, 1924–1991) “capital of the Urals”, at the end of May 2005 in the Belinsky county library.

The conference was supported by the ministry of culture of Sverdlovsk region and the Yekaterinburg Folklore House (Sverdlovskij oblastnij Dom Folklor, Yekaterinburg, ul. Gorkogo 33., 620075, e-mail: uralfolk@etel.hu). The chief organiser was Andrei Anatolievich Bobrihin, director of the Folklore House. The participants of the conference were all from Russia; besides local experts, there were scholars from Perm, Ufa, Kazan and Moscow. The language of the conference was Russian. I – a postgraduate student at the Ural State University of Yekaterinburg – participated at the conference as a guest.

The first two days of the three-day conference were devoted to papers and anthropological films; a round-table conference was held on the third day. On the last day a local history exhibition was opened and the event closed with a performance by Ural folk ensembles.

The theme of the conference (ethnic groups, ethnicity, ethnic processes) and its programme (film screenings) were in line with one of the main trends of ethnological/anthropological research in Russia.

The Russian Federation is the biggest country in the world by territory. The population of 145 million includes a substantial number of non-Russians. Although Russia – after Armenia – was ethnically the most homogeneous state within the Soviet Union, it has (in 2002) 38 nations with a population exceeding a 100,000 (the Tartars, Ukrainians, Bashkirs, Chuvash, Chechens and Armenians each number over a million). Moreover, in Russia – somewhat contrary to the general European trends – the proportion of the majority nation (Russians) is not increasing, but declining

within the total population (1959: 83.3%; 1989: 81.5%; 2002: 79.8%). Russia is a federative state composed of republics organised on ethnic bases, still following the Stalinist conception of nationality. Although most of these republics have a Russian ethnic majority, the emergence of a native “national intelligentsia” can now be observed. Consequently, because of the country’s unique ethnic structure and the long scholarly traditions going back to Soviet times (Tokariev’s seminal article in *Voprosi Filozofii* in 1964; the “ethnicity debate” launched in *Sovjetskaja Etnografija* in 1967, etc.) the study of ethnicity and ethnic processes has become a focus of attention in the Russian scholarly world.

The other important element of the conference was the screening of ethnological films. Visual anthropology (making ethnographical films) is a fashionable trend in Russia. Courses in visual anthropology are also held at the Ural State University by A. V. Golovnov who presented a lecture at the conference.

The conference dealt with the ethnic groups of the Urals. It should be noted that the Russians use the term Urals in a wider sense to mean not only the Ural Mountains but also the “Ural region”. This is bordered to the east roughly to the Tobol–Tumen–Tavda line (“Zaural”; in Hungary this would be considered as “Siberia”), and to the west by the north-eastern part of Bashkiria and the Perm region (“Priural”).

The present ethnic structure of the Ural region began to take shape in the wake of the Russian conquest. It was only from the 16th–17th centuries that Russians began to appear in large numbers, followed by Tartars, Ukrainians, Maris and even Germans. Earlier, Ugrian-speaking peoples probably made up the majority of the population. Among the peoples living here before the Russian conquest, the Ugrians largely disappeared from the Urals (the Hungarian researcher, Antal Reguly met their last groups along the Chusovaya river in 1844), while groups of Bashkirs living mainly in the Priural began to move eastwards together with the Russian conquest. The first Bashkir settlements in the Zaural, in the vicinity of Chelyabinsk arose at this time.

The conference began with a paper presented by A. A. Bobrihin, giving a general introduction on the peoples of the Urals and the expeditions of the Folklore House. Among others, participants learnt that there are still “two tents” of Mansy, the last remnants, living outside Ivdel in the north of the Sverdlovsk region. He pointed out that in the migrations from the Russian interior and the Volga region into the Urals from west to east, the majority of the early settlers (arriving up to the industrialisation in the 18th century) were fleeing for some reason. It was at this time that the heathen Maris came to the Urals (a large group of Maris live in the vicinity of Krasnoufimsk), who still preserve their cultic traditions, as well as the persecuted Russian Old Believers (sztarobrjadchi).

The director of the nationalities library in Yekaterinburg (Tatiana Kristoforovna Novoshpashina) reported on the operation of the (state-financed) institution which strives to collect books and periodicals published in the national languages of the peoples of the Urals (and also elsewhere in the Russian Federation). Events, dance evenings and performances are regularly held in the library for the nationalities (in

2005 the main focus was on the Tartars in view of the celebrations for the Kazan millennium).

A group of researchers from Perm, led by A. V. Chernih, reported on research on the Gypsies of Perm. The Urals are a meeting place for Gypsies from Eastern Europe (Moldavia, Ukraine, Sub-Carpathia) and Central Asia, especially Tajikistan. The majority of the Perm Gypsies are of Moldavian origin (Romanian- or Russian-speaking), and many of them have settled permanently in more prosperous Russia (Moldavia is a substantial donor state in migration to Russia).

The Perm research group also showed several films on the Gypsies of Perm, mainly focusing on their festive customs. We saw the Easter customs of the Perm Gypsies which have become considerably “modernised”. Karaoke, for example, is now an indispensable part of the celebration. Another film dealt with their marriage customs. The first marriage among the Gypsies is at a very early age, at 13–14 years. This is strictly endogamous, Gypsies marry only Gypsies. The wedding foods are traditionally eaten with the fingers from the lavishly decorated festive table. Here even the champagne bottles are decorated, one shown was festooned with 18th century Austro-Hungarian (!) coins.

One of the most instructive parts of the conference was the contribution of Jelena Danilko from the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow (e-mail: Danja9@yandex.ru, tel.: (095) 4242453). She showed two films. One was on the community of Old Believers living in the area of Zlatoust, and in particular the religious life of an Old Believer woman; the other was about a Mari folk dance, the *typyrdyk*. These films were made without any commentary and without selecting only the “essence”, but showed the process of how the researchers get to know the subject. Professor Danilko said that they are planning to create a “video atlas” covering the whole Volga-Ural region and she is the chief co-ordinator of the project.

A film on the heathen Maris directed by V. V. Vorobjev was shown. Although in theory the Maris are Pravoslav Christians, they still have heathen places of sacrifice in the forests. (One of the aims of the “national intelligentsia” in the Mari Republic is to make the heathen Mari religion the state religion.) The same Mari community also bears witness to its Christian belief. The tiny church used by the Maris was destroyed in 1945, during the years of Stalinism. Only the foundations of the church can be seen today, but the Christian Maris still go to the ruins to light candles and pray.

V. A. Golovnov of Yekaterinburg, a leading figure in Russian anthropological film-making, has made many films in places ranging from Chukotka to the Urals. At the conference he showed a film on a Nenets community of Khanty origin living in the Northern Urals. The film focused on the mourning of a woman who had lost her young child. The atmospheric film gave the viewer an insight into how much the *interpretation* of a person’s customs, inner world, emotions and actions reflect the culture of the community *as a whole*. How deeply imbedded it is in that culture and how personal it is. Besides its naturally deep personal character, mourning also has ethnocultural elements; for example, according to the lecturer the figural portrayal of the dead person indicates a specifically Khanty origin.

The rich programme of the conference also included papers on the Ukrainians living in Sverdlovsk region, on the development of their peasant farms in the Central Urals in the 20th century; on the role of the Bashkir tales in promoting ethnic cohesion; on the German villages in the South Kama region; on the harvest customs of the Russians along the Kama; and finally the participants could also enjoy Bashkir folk songs. The conference was a good example of current Russian ethnological and anthropological research which also has an outlook on Europe and the world.

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