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# Contemporary problems of the Northern and Far Eastern peoples of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in an Australian perspective<sup>1</sup>

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We live in an age when national consciousness is awakening and nations are striving for self-determination. Every continent and country has been affected by this process, which has involved millions of people representing many nations, large and small, living in the most varied social and political conditions. That is why it is so important for nations dealing with their own problems of self-determination to be aware of ways in which peoples of other countries and other political systems are moving toward the same goal.

This applies also to Australian Aborigines. For many years they have watched with keen interest how the indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada have tackled their national problems. The social and political conditions of the life of the indigenous population of North America are known to have much in common with the conditions of life of the Australian Aborigines, since their histories have much in common. Yet, it seems to me that the processes taking place in the USSR, in a different socio-political and historical situation, are of no less interest to Australia. It emerges that the indigenous populations of these countries, so different from one another, face similar problems and that their respective experience in solving them is clearly of interest and significance to the peoples of both countries. At the same time, what is happening in the USSR is

less well known in Australia than is the situation in America and other countries. The actual state of affairs in the Soviet Union for many years was distorted by official propaganda and the problems, sometimes very grave ones, were concealed. Only in recent years has reliable information about what has been happening to the small nations of the USSR begun to penetrate the Soviet press. A comparative analysis of the problems faced by the indigenous peoples of the two countries and the ways in which solutions have been sought requires a special study. However, some observations and conclusions can be made now. One of them follows. While, in democratic Australia, Aborigines were able to press for all-round improvement in their situation, and indeed, in recent decades, made significant progress, helped by the whole of society, the small nations of the Soviet North and Far East were able to do so only recently.

## **Northern and Far Eastern peoples of the USSR**

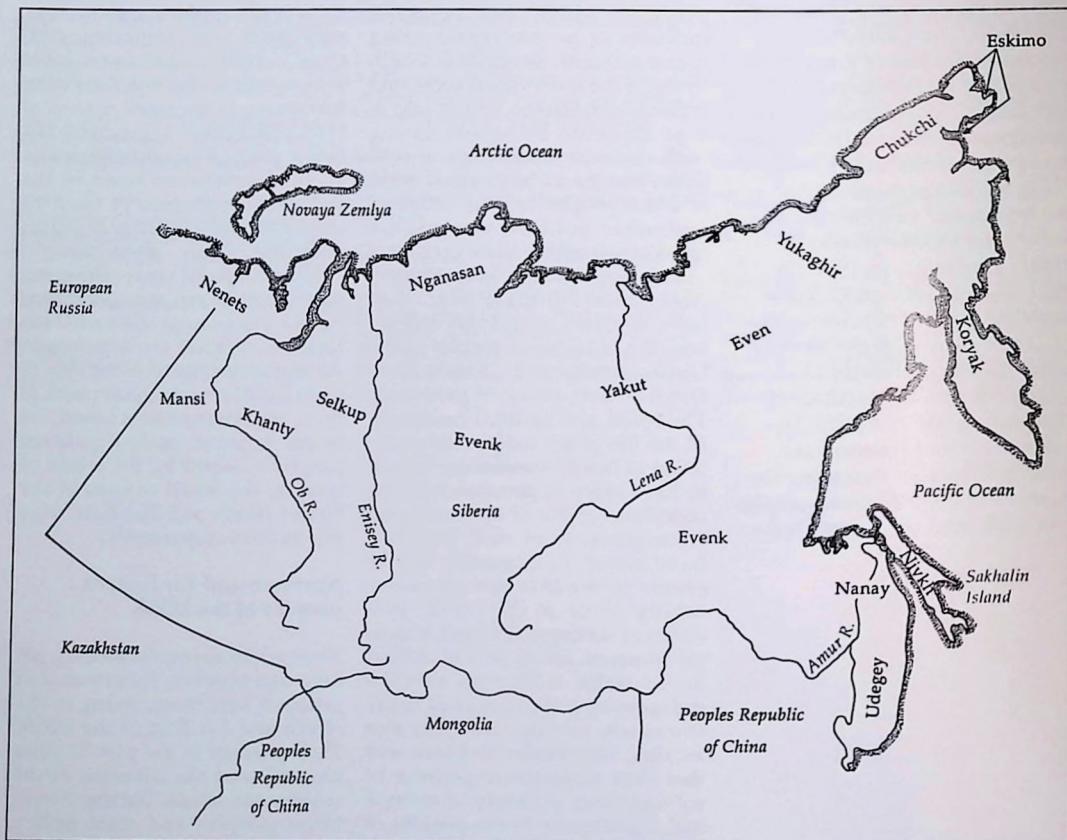
There are 26 aboriginal peoples, not long ago hunters, fishermen and reindeer herdsman, living in the North and Far East of the USSR. Their position in the past 70 years has reflected the situation of the country as a whole. The situation of these peoples and state policy towards them during this period have not been immutable. In the



first years of the existence of the USSR, in the 1920s and first half of the 1930s, the direction of official policy was to develop local autonomy and broaden the rights of the indigenous population, to encourage cooperatives using traditional forms of collective labour (fishing cooperatives, groups of reindeer herdsman, and so on). Some progress was made in economic and cultural development of the small nations and in medical services and health. A wide network of schools was set up, written alphabets were devised for many peoples who had none, and

textbooks and other books were printed in their languages. This process was, however, ambivalent and contradictory. The traditional spiritual culture of the indigenous peoples was extirpated to make way for a unified 'socialist' culture. There began a merciless battle against what were regarded as 'religious prejudices' and against the shamans, the bearers of traditional spiritual values and knowledge ('deshamanisation'). The policy of the state towards the small nations was on the whole paternalist and aimed at achieving a uniform cultural contour.

By the middle of the 1930s, the establishment of national regions (*okrug*) had come to an end, and some were being abolished and local government institutions dissolved. From the mid-1930s onward, and particularly after the war, government policy towards all the peoples of the multinational state, great and small, began to acquire a more overt colonialist and chauvinist nature. It was a continuation of the colonial policy of the Russian Empire. In many respects, the policy of the Soviet state was worse than that of the Tsarist government, since the



Map 1  
Asian part of Russia showing locations of some indigenous peoples.

Soviet regime had much greater opportunities to exploit the indigenous population and to suppress all forms of national self-expression. Only certain, purely propaganda features of national culture were retained (folk dance troupes, a small number of privileged writers), while the Supreme Soviet contained 'representatives' of the indigenous population who had been suborned by the regime. Until very recently the indigenous population was virtually deprived of any part in the administration of its own autonomous regions. The establishment of territories in which native peoples would have residential priority, in which industrial development or mining could not take place without compensation, remains only an unfulfilled hope.

Under the Soviet regime Siberia was transformed into a huge prison camp area. Hundreds of thousands of temporary settlers from the central and southern regions of the country came to the North with the notion that everything living there and the land itself belonged to

them. They have the psychology of predators, determined on taking what is theirs and leaving. They are the instruments of a predatory state. They value nothing in this land. They do not know, nor do they wish to know, that for thousands of years the lands and waters of the North fed their true children and their masters, the aborigines of Siberia and the Far East. This is generally characteristic of the non-indigenous, mainly Russian population of Siberia and the Far East, whose forebears began the colonisation of these lands only 400 years ago.

In the course of many generations, the native peoples of Siberia and the Far East had worked out standards of ecological behaviour and laws of interaction with nature which did not destroy the ecological balance. Now, the environment is being destroyed and the land and waters polluted. Everything has been taken away from the native peoples and they may use only what is left by the new masters. Larches cut down along the banks of Siberian rivers, if they

lie long in the water, secrete from the bark a dark red pigment resembling the colour of blood. Evenk fishermen, when they first saw the river dyed red, were horrified: 'It is the blood of the *taiga* (virgin forest of Siberia). The *taiga* is being murdered, is bleeding to death. It will soon be dead, and then all the Evenks will die' (*Russkaia Mysl'* 28 February 1985). The words are close to the truth. There is now nowhere for the Evenks to fish. Their native rivers are silted up. The blood of the *taiga* is a symbol of the death of nature and the people living at one with it.

While Soviet propaganda continued to proclaim the achievements of the Soviet nationalities policy and the flowering of the small nations, those nations were subjected to the worst violence of their entire history, threatening them with extinction. The German anthropologist A Lommel once characterised the contemporary situation of the Australian Aborigines as 'a path to oblivion'—*Fortschritt ins Nichts* is the title of his book (Lommel 1969).<sup>3</sup> This formula can be applied with even greater justification to the peoples of the Soviet North and Far East. In the words of a contemporary Soviet writer, the threat to them of depopulation and extinction is absolutely real (Pika 1989). The 1979 census showed that, over the preceding 10 years, the population numbers of the 26 northern nations (now about 170,000) had shown practically no increase, and figures for seven of them had even fallen. Figures for average life expectancy for these nations are unprecedentedly low, not only for the USSR, which is below Western countries in this, but also for many third world countries: 45 for men and 55 for women (18–20 years below the national average).

Most of the indigenous population is on the verge of poverty. More than 15,000 still lead a



Plate 1  
Nivkh's dug-out canoe, Sakhalin Island, 1975.



nomadic life in the forests and tundra, with only birch-bark *chums*,<sup>4</sup> old reindeer-skin *yarangas*<sup>5</sup> and tarpaulin tents which are unsuitable for local conditions. The nomadic way of life is officially stigmatised as 'culturally deficient'

and to be liquidated. But someone has to graze the reindeer, not only for themselves but also for the state and government departments.

The basic causes of the present grave situation of the northern nations of the USSR are destruction

of the environment by modern industry and transport, and by the extraction of oil and gas; extensive and predatory development of the North by ministries and government departments; uncontrolled influx of population from other regions; reduction of the area available for the traditional occupations of the northern nations—reindeer raising, hunting and fishing; abandonment by the native peoples of their traditional occupations and industries, which have lost prestige; forced settlement of nomads; low level of health services, no longer meeting modern requirements; and the spread of alcoholism among the native population.

The coastal settlements of the Chukchi and Eskimo in Chukotka, and of the Koryak in Kamchatka, where people lived for hundreds of years, are being destroyed. On the banks of the Amur River alone, 50 settlements of the indigenous peoples, Udegey and Nanay, were recently destroyed: 'The uncontrolled destruction of the very bases of the life of these peoples',—as E Gayer, an ethnographer and Nanay deputy described it in a speech at the Soviet of People's Deputies of the USSR in 1989.<sup>6</sup> Indigenous peoples are being forcibly transferred to new, artificially created large settlements where it is easier to exploit them. All land, including the hunting grounds of the aboriginal people, has been turned virtually into state property. In the North, in Siberia, in the Far East, collectivisation became a weapon of colonisation. This process intensified markedly in the 1950s and 1960s, with the amalgamation of collective farms into larger units and the establishment of state farms. The Khanty and the Mansi, which inhabited the Ob' and Irtysh basins' and were distributed among 650 individual settlements, were concentrated by the authorities in 76 enlarged new



Plate 2  
Nivkh dogsledge and dog lines, Sakhalin Island, 1975.



Plate 3  
Nivkh storage shed, Sakhalin Island, 1975.



centres. The very bases of the communal and family land tenure of the local hunters, fishermen and gatherers were undermined. Many were obliged to give up their traditional occupations. Professional hunters and fishermen turned into unskilled workers, marginals, lumpenproletariat. The aborigines'

lack of legal rights and their inability to change anything on their own home ground has engendered a psychology of dependence, passivity, pessimism and hopelessness. A mass psychology engendered by the disruption of living conditions and loss of traditional spiritual values has led to an increase in

drunkenness, violence and suicide, all at a level three to four times higher than the national level. This very psychological factor is probably one of the causes of the decrease in population growth. The process of turning a traditional society into lumpenproletariat is, in effect, characteristic of the whole country.

Children of the native peoples continue to be forcibly removed from their parents and educated in boarding schools, where for several months of the year they live isolated from their families and are taught indifference to the culture of their ancestors and their own language. Loss of language leads to the disappearance of traditional values and ethnic self-awareness. In the words of E Gayer (see n 6), 'the disappearance of a language is the disappearance of a nation'. The forcible breaking of social and cultural continuity from generation to generation is one of the chief causes of the present national catastrophe.

The disappearance of traditional social and cultural ties and values leads to anomie—a state of normlessness, a point where traditional rules have lost their meaning, a state of alienation, marginality, criminality, violence, conflict, social disorganisation. Youth is particularly gravely affected by these processes. It might be added that these processes are typical of the whole population of the USSR.

The nationalisation of reindeer herds during forced collectivisation destroyed the bases of the traditional concept of the world—the notion of the spiritual connection between a man and his family and its domesticated animals, the connection between the souls of the animals and their masters. Even in a large herd, each animal belonged to an individual and was connected with him by spiritual links. Reindeer herds men had sticks representing the souls of the rein-



Plate 4  
By a Nivkh house, Sakhalin Island, 1975.

deer, and, reminiscent of the *tjurungas* of the Australian Aborigines, connected with the souls of members of the tribe. To sell live reindeer meant death for the master. Reindeer were given as gifts or sacrificed, but not sold.

When Russians and indigenous peoples live together, one observes a contemptuous attitude to the natives, displays of Russian chauvinism and treatment of the aboriginal people as second-class citizens. Jokes about the Chukchi, which have reinforced the old store of jokes about Jews and Armenians, are very popular among Russians and reflect the ethnic image of the aborigine. The Chukchi are presented as rather stupid, primitive and comical. The authors of such jokes, as if aware of their own insufficiency, attempt to lift themselves in their own eyes above other nations.

Discrimination against the indigenous population takes various forms. A person arriving in the North from a distant area obtains accommodation and enjoys other advantages, while the aboriginal hunter 'lives in intolerable conditions' (*Sovetskaiia Chukotka* 19 May 1990). The aboriginal people complain of losing self-respect and human dignity in their own area, the very qualities possessed by their proud and freedom-loving ancestors.

At the present time, naturally, the indigenous population is attempting to protest, something which was never before observed. What form do these protests take? An appeal by the representatives of the indigenous peoples of the North, the inhabitants of the Yamal-Nenets National Okrug, speaks of the ecological catastrophe which could occur as a result of the uncontrolled extraction of Yamal gas and the destruction of the environment, the catastrophic reduction in reindeer pastures—the basic life support of the local population,

mass unemployment among the indigenous population, chronic diseases and shortening of life expectancy (*Severnnye Prostory* June 1989).

Another appeal by the Khanty, Mansi, Nenets and Selkup of the Tiumen' region says that, with the exploitation of Siberian oil and gas, the hunting and fishing grounds of these nations are being destroyed, nomads are being forced out of their native areas, away from the land, from the graves of their ancestors, and the sable—a valuable object in the fur industry—is on the verge of extinction.

In the North, all the land, rivers, lakes and forests were divided amongst clans and families. Now we are to have no land, hunting grounds, reindeer pastures, and nowhere to fish. Losing their land, the people will lose their ethnic distinctions and the cultural and moral values of their nation. The Nenets will cease to be a Nenets, the Khanty to be a Khanty, and will become something between, something amorphous, anxious only to eat, sleep and get drunk... Our ancestors' land must belong to us; we must be the masters of our land. (*Severnnye Prostory* June 1989)

The inhabitants of the Nenets National Okrug recently protested against an increase in atomic tests at the testing ground on Novaya Zemlya and demanded their reduction.

Gayer and other deputies said at the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR:

The exploitation by industry of natural resources means a dead, empty landscape, thousands of square kilometres of taiga destroyed... The small nations must have the right of priority in the use of hunting grounds and reindeer pastures, rivers and lakes. Otherwise, the region is threatened, not only with ecological, but also ethnic catastrophe... Each aboriginal

nation must have the right to a specific territory and the exclusive right to its exploitation. National autonomy is needed.

The demand for national autonomy is a demand for the restoration of that which these nations possessed up to the mid-thirties or the war. The demand that full sovereignty be restored to these nations on their own lands and that their hunting and fishing grounds and reindeer pastures be returned to their unrestricted ownership is essentially a demand for the restoration of what they had before Russian colonisation or, at least, before that still more oppressive stage of colonisation, the establishment of the Soviet regime.

Despite these public protests, demands and statements by people's deputies, the ministries and departments, especially those responsible for the oil and gas industry, continued until recently to arbitrarily seize aboriginal lands and destroy natural wealth. Hence, representatives of the northern nations were recently compelled to state that, since their appeals to the national government were useless, they had no alternative but to appeal to the United Nations for help. The representatives of the indigenous population have to beg for the charity of compensation for the destruction of their people's lands and the exploitation of their minerals.

The first congress of the small nations of the North took place in 1990 in Moscow. The main speech, given by Chuner Taksami, an ethnologist of Nivkh nationality, dealt with the most serious problems of the northern nations: shortening of life expectancy; that revenue from the exploitation of the land and minerals of the North does not go to the indigenous peoples; that indigenous peoples cannot legally hunt or fish on their own land (which is, in fact, not



their own); the need to stop the building of the Turukhan hydro-electricity station, the Yamal railway and other industrial projects destroying the environment; and the need to enable northern nations to administer their own affairs through the local Soviets. The congress set up the Association of the northern nations and elected as its president Vladimir Sangi, a Nivkh writer. He said that for decades, the lands of the northern nations had been systematically taken from them without any compensation while the nations themselves were forced out of their traditional home areas by an influx of thousands of migrants from other parts of the country. The northern nations were doomed to extinction. In Sangi's words, they had only one incontestable right—the right to die.

What was most important was that these words were said in the name of the nations whose representatives had met for the first time at their own congress in the centre of the empire. It was also significant that the real situation of the northern nations and their problems and demands were described by persons who, like many other intellectuals from those very nations, had for many years concealed or distorted the truth and faithfully served the colonial regime.

Are changes occurring in the situation of the northern nations as a result of these protests and demands? The Supreme Soviet of the USSR has passed a law according to which the nations of the North have the right to the land and the use of the natural environment. However, it is still too early to talk about the implementation of this law. To preserve the life and culture of the indigenous populations, a cooperative movement is beginning to develop and production cooperatives of hunters, fishermen and marine hunters are

being formed, as existed in the 1920s. But I believe that most important is the process of national renaissance, the awakening of national self-awareness. The representatives of the younger generation in the Tiumen' region, Khanty and Nenets, have compiled a platform with that title: Renaissance. Their main demands include sovereignty for the nations; establishment of autonomous national districts; right of free choice of way of life and a system of reserves to ensure rebirth of the traditional way of life; property rights for the northern nations over land, minerals and waters; alienation of land, with compulsory compensation, only with the consent of local Soviets; cultural monuments and places of religious significance to be under special protection of the authorities; establishment of conditions for normal family upbringing; and preservation of native languages (Public Opinion 1989). Cultural and spiritual renaissance has an important place in this program.

In May 1990, at Providence Bay in the Chukchi National Okrug, I met representatives of the Avan Association (the sense of the word is also close to 'renaissance'). The aim of this recently formed group of the indigenous population is to revive the national self-awareness of the Chukchi and Eskimo. At one time they were proud, independent masters of the Chukotka Peninsula. In the Soviet period, however, they became serfs on their own land under the full control of the government. Many ancient settlements were destroyed and the people moved to new sites, where the inhabitants of a number of settlements are lumped together. The liquidation of coastal settlements was accompanied by the liquidation of the traditional forms of activity of the aborigines of mainland Chukotka—the Chukchi, Even, Yukaghir. In the past, many

of them were hunters and fishermen; reindeer raising was less important. Now, all have been turned into reindeer herdsman and many were moved from their historical homes to artificially established settlements. This has led to deep psychological depression and failure to adapt in all spheres of life. Women who had just given birth were sent to wander with the reindeer, while their children were left in boarding schools, where they were forbidden to speak their own language. Relics of the traditional culture were destroyed. Traditional clothing and food have disappeared. The natural environment is dying. Fish and marine animals are disappearing. The result is a high incidence of disease and high mortality, especially among men. The proportion of women to men is 60–70 per cent to 40–30 per cent. Society is dominated by active women, which was not the case in male-dominated traditional societies. The land still does not belong to the aborigines. It can be taken by civil and military authorities without compensation. Aborigines take almost no part in deciding their own affairs.

Such was the situation in Chukotka in 1990. Since I am aware how slowly everything changes in this country, particularly on the periphery, I do not believe that any major changes have taken place in a year and a half. I saw a marginal society, cut off from its traditional roots; on the one hand passivity, on the other paternalism, one of the salient features of the attitude to the aborigines. What was, in such a situation, the program of the Avan Association? It aimed at the revival of the national culture and language, a chance for the aborigines to decide their own affairs, the establishment of economic contacts with the Americans (they need modern equipment to process antlers and other products of reindeer-raising which can then be



sold to the Americans for hard currency).

The people of the North are seriously ill. Not only are unique national forms being destroyed, the meaning of life is being destroyed... Our aim is the re-birth of the indigenous people as an equal among equals. (*Sovetskaja Chukotka* 19 May 1990)

Meanwhile, fresh acts of protest by the indigenous peoples of the North continue to occur. Representatives of the local population of Khanty, Mansi and Nenets set up a picket on one of the main highways in Tiumen' region, blocking traffic, and sent a telegram to the President of the USSR:

Twenty-six indigenous inhabitants have met violent deaths on the roads and in the vicinity of oilfields during the period of development of the oil industry... Hundreds of reindeer and thousands of square kilometres of reindeer pastures and hunting and fishing grounds have been destroyed... The Association of Khanty and Nenets has stopped the movement of traffic along the highway as a protest against the piratical destruction of the indigenous peoples and their homeland... We demand that ownership of our historical lands be handed over to the clan communities of the indigenous peoples, that relations between the industrial enterprises and clan communities be based on agreements entered into, that all authority in local affairs be given to the clan councils and that a law on the small nations be passed as a matter of urgency... If the piratical and barbarous destruction of the indigenous peoples and their lands continues, intend a total blockade of work in the oil and gas and timber industries. (*Moskovskie Novosti* 14 October 1990)

The indigenous peoples of Tiumen', one of the major sources of oil for the world market and hard currency for the state, deeply

resent the seizure of their lands and destruction of the natural environment, the murders and abductions, rapes, destruction of reindeer, firing of their settlements in revenge for attempts to protest, and the desecration of their ancestral graves. The most recent protest was organised by a newly formed association of indigenous peoples. For its part, the management of the oil industry proposes that areas be set aside for use by indigenous peoples, where all industry will be banned. This solution has not yet, however, acquired the force of law.

### Comparison with Aboriginal Australia

If the situation in the USSR is compared with that in Australia, it can be said that the nations of the Soviet North and Far East are at the start of a difficult and complex road already traversed by the Australian Aborigines. It is only very recently in the Soviet Union, that the idea has taken shape that the indigenous peoples of the USSR need protection against the threat of physical and spiritual degeneration and extermination, and that this protection could be created by the setting aside of areas belonging to them and closed to uncontrolled invasion from outside—in a sense, reservations. Demands are becoming ever more insistent for real autonomy and financial compensation for land alienated for industry and mining. I recall the campaign against the building of a hydro-electricity scheme in western Tasmania which threatened Aboriginal cultural relics in Frazer Cave and other places. There has never been anything like this in the Soviet Union. There are not only cultural monuments under threat, but also the environment and the people themselves, and we have only just begun to hear demands to stop industrial construction. Finally, there is a growing realisa-

tion of the need for a spiritual revival of the indigenous nations, above all their own realisation—a totally new and very important phenomenon. For the Aborigines of Australia this process is becoming a reality in the revival of traditional religious and moral values. Analogous phenomena can be observed now in the Soviet Union.

Travelling through South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland in 1990, I discovered the existence of many similar problems facing Australian Aborigines and the indigenous peoples of the North and Far East of the USSR. Collecting material on ways of seeking solutions in Australia, including those put forward by Aborigines' own organisations, I became convinced that the small nations of the USSR must study and make use of Australian experience, which is highly germane to them. I have written about this to the officers of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. While travelling, I was particularly interested in the part played by traditional religions in solving current problems and preserving cultural heritage and social institutions, and in the ethnic awareness of Aborigines. I could see that a great deal was being done in this area.

I studied the organisation and work of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). For the first time, Australian Aborigines are able to manage their own affairs through their own representatives, elected by them to regional councils, which, in turn, elect from among themselves representatives to the central bodies. Aboriginal people take part in the decision-making processes of government, in social and economic development and in heritage and cultural programs. In the USSR, there is no similar organisation to manage the affairs of

small nations at a regional level or on a countrywide scale. Local soviets are powerless and the role of representatives of indigenous peoples in them is insignificant.

A visitor from the Soviet Union is very impressed by the many Aboriginal-controlled organisations set up to provide services to Aboriginal communities. An example is Tangentyere Council, the Alice Springs town camp organisation, started in the 1970s as an Aboriginal response to the lack of secure land tenure and the appalling living conditions of people living on the fringes of Alice Springs. Today, Tangentyere Council represents more than 1,200 people living in 19 town camps around Alice Springs. Unemployment here is very high and the council is the major employer of town camp-dwellers. The council also provides a health program, a service for old people, housing, recreation and education programs and land management. It is an Aboriginal community council governed by a representative executive. The total membership includes members of town camp-dwellers. In its purpose, composition and function, it is a distant analogue of the local soviet, the lowest organ of Soviet power. In the USSR, however, in contrast to the Tangentyere Council, representatives of indigenous peoples play an insignificant role in deciding their own affairs and are dependent on state and Party organs. I met Aboriginal leaders on Tangentyere Council, and saw the living conditions of Aborigines and how they are solving their problems. I concluded that the experience of such councils is of great significance for the small nations of the North and Far East of the USSR, where peoples from many communities are concentrated in towns or large settlements. There are, however, no such institutions in the Soviet Union.

Nor is there any organisation like the Central Land Council (in Alice Springs) or the Northern Land Council (in Darwin). I was particularly interested in the part played by social anthropologists in the work of these organisations, for example in studying genealogies and sacred history of Aboriginal people in connection with Aboriginal land claims. There is no such practice in the Soviet Union; here social anthropologists are not involved in solving day-to-day practical problems, in giving day-to-day practical assistance to indigenous peoples or in working in government organs. Nor are there in the USSR state bodies whose objective is to defend the interests of aboriginal people and to solve their land ownership and land use problems, taking into account traditional community land rights. It is not only that there are no such bodies in the USSR, but that there is no recognition in principle of aboriginal land rights. An important aspect of the work of the land councils is assisting Aboriginal people to conclude agreements with mining companies who want to use Aboriginal land. Land councils provide legal aid to Aboriginal people and observe the effect of mining on the environment. Agreements with companies include provision for sacred site protection and respect for the cultural values of traditional owners, opportunities for training and employment of local people and compensation arrangements (Northern Territory Land Councils 1990). There is no institution in the USSR engaged in such activities, which are of great importance and relevance to the small nations of the Soviet North and Far East.

Looking at the work of the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress (based in Alice Springs since 1973) gives some idea of the relatively high standard of health services and free medical treatment

available to Aboriginal people. Some activities of the congress which are important and instructive for the visitor from the USSR are health education, child care, family support and welfare services—a range of services aimed at improving the health and well-being of Aboriginal people who live in and around Alice Springs. The congress is an independent, Aboriginal-controlled and staffed health organisation, and is a model for other health services in more remote regions. The USSR has no such organisation. All medical institutions serving small nations in the USSR are state bodies, with all their inherent faults—poor treatment, obsolete equipment, a shortage of drugs, formalism and indifference.

I also saw the Institute for Aboriginal Development, an independent organisation which is engaged in adult education and teacher training for Aboriginal people, and which is doing much to study Aboriginal languages and compile dictionaries. Among its functions are the production of bilingual publications and provision of an interpreter service. Founded in 1969, the Institute is now supervised by Aboriginal people and offers cross-cultural courses for whites preparing to work in Aboriginal communities. There is no such special training in the USSR; in St Petersburg (then Leningrad) there once existed an Institute of Northern Peoples, but it was dissolved as early as the 1940s.

A visitor familiar with the Soviet system of education in its small nations finds much of interest in the Yipirinya School (in Alice Springs) where, together with the essentials of modern knowledge and English, which they need to live in contemporary society, Aboriginal children study the basics of traditional culture in four indigenous languages ('two-way education'). It is the first bilingual



private Aboriginal school established in the Northern Territory and is supervised by an Aboriginal council. After many years' experience of Soviet schools, of forced russification and standardised education methods, devoid of creativity and experiment, the experience of the Yipirinya School would be very useful for Soviet teachers and administrators.

A visitor from the Soviet Union is particularly impressed by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and Imparja Television Company, which broadcast on radio and television to Aboriginal people in their own languages and do a great deal of cultural and educational work. Radio CAAMA, established in 1980, broadcasts in six Aboriginal languages. Its important function is to deal with a wide range of educational, health and social issues. In 1990, CAAMA Radio and Imparja Television operated 18 radio and television transmitters across a third of the Australian continent, from Victoria and New South Wales to Arnhem Land. The viewing audience of Imparja Television was 102,000. Radio CAAMA broadcasts 110 hours per week, 60 per cent in Aboriginal languages and 40 per cent in English. Programs include local news, items by Aborigines for Aborigines and elders' stories. The television station works 120 hours per week, 60 per cent being rebroadcasts of Australian television material and the rest being its own programs, which reflect the interests of Aboriginal people and are devoted to their problems. Radio CAAMA and Imparja Television play a major role in developing and restoring the traditional culture and national self-awareness of Aborigines. The USSR has nothing like Radio CAAMA or Imparja Television either in scale or content. The peoples of the Soviet North and Far

East can only dream of something on such a scale or with such a focus on their needs. Radio broadcasts in the languages of the most numerous peoples of Siberia are just beginning, and it will probably be a long time before television transmissions start. The main reasons for this are a deep-seated disregard for the culture of the small nations and the contrived supplanting of their languages by the Russian language.

In the meantime, radio broadcasting in Aboriginal languages has now begun in the north of the continent also. This is the Top End Aboriginal Bush Broadcasting Association (TEABBA), which, by early 1991, was planning to broadcast 70 hours per week in at least 25 Aboriginal languages (Northern Territory Land Councils 1990).

In the situation of Australian Aborigines, there are very many complex social, economic and other problems which are far from resolution and which have naturally not escaped my attention. Here, I wish only to note Australian society's achievements in overcoming those problems which are evident to an unprejudiced observer from the Soviet Union. When these achievements are compared with the situation in the USSR, the contrast is striking.

Employment and health are among the problems which Aboriginal society is yet to solve. Aboriginal people are known to have more difficulty finding employment than most other groups in the community. As a result, the income of Aboriginal people is, on average, about two-thirds that of people in the general community, as evidenced in the 1986 census. The census also indicated that about 35 per cent of the Aboriginal workforce was unemployed (Australia 1989a, 1). I do not have employment and income figures for the small nations of the Soviet North and Far East,

although unemployment is known to be very high; this is stated by many authors. While, according to statistics, 50,000,000 of the population of the USSR are below the poverty line by Soviet standards, the situation of the small nations is even worse. The same applies to demographic indices. I have quoted above census figures which show that, by the early 1990s, population increase among them had almost ceased and average life expectancy is currently 20 years below the national average (45 for men and 55 for women). The Aboriginal and Islander population counted at the 1986 census represents an increase in the Aboriginal population of 42.36 per cent over the 1981 census (Australia 1988, 1). At the same time, the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is well below that of other Australians. The first biennial report of the Australian Institute of Health, published in 1988, revealed that Aboriginal life expectancy is nearly 22 years less than that for whites, and that, for nearly all diseases, the mortality rate among Aborigines is far higher than for other Australians (Australia 1989b, 1).

In other words, in this respect the situations in the USSR and Australia can be regarded as close, although the causes may be both similar and different. Among the similar causes, which operated identically in Australia and in the wide stretches of Siberia, was contact with newcomers and colonialists, leading to the introduction and rapid transmission of infectious diseases against which the people had no immunity.

## Conclusion

The similarities and differences in contemporary situations and historical paths of the peoples of Siberia and the Australian Aboriginal people, and the causes

and conditions of these similarities and differences should be the subject of a special study which has never yet been undertaken, but which could be the source of very important generalisations.

The problems of the indigenous peoples of the USSR, looked at in an Australian perspective, appear largely in a new light. For example, the outstation movement, through which many Aboriginal communities of Northern Territory Aborigines have passed, could be the salvation of many aborigines in the Soviet North living in artificially created settlements. The same applies to the establishment in areas populated by the small nations of the USSR of special zones as reservations, referred to above. At the level of state policy, the USSR needs a special law guaranteeing land rights for its indigenous peoples, like the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976.

Finally, both the peoples of the Soviet Union and the Australian Aborigines should know the means employed by each to defend their

rights to land, its natural resources, and sacred sites connected with Aboriginal mythology, enabling them to live on the land which belonged to their ancestors in accordance with the hallowed practices and laws of traditional culture.

#### NOTES

1. This paper was completed in October 1991, two months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. However, the indigenous peoples discussed here are still part of the state of Russia, and their status remains essentially unaltered. It was decided to retain the paper essentially as it was written (ed).

2. Translated by Rosh Ireland.

3. The full title is *Fortschritt ins Nichts. Die Modernisierung der Primitiven Australiens. Beschreibung und Definition eines Psychischen Verfalls (Progress into the Void. The Modernisation of Australia's Primitive People. Description and Definition of a Process of Psychic Decay)* (ed).

4. A traditional shelter of the Evenk people.

5. A traditional shelter of the Chukchi and Eskimo people.

6. Speech made to the First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, 1989. The speech was widely reported in newspapers and broadcast on radio.

7. The Irtysh River is a tributary of the Ob' River (see Map 1).

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