

Notes on Russian Indianists

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In the present-day world seized by the process of fast technical development, urban-ization, and globalization, more and more people feel a need for the natural lifeway, the return to initial human values. They look for answers to numerous questions in the history, cultures, philosophies, religions, and traditions of the nations and tribes who have tried to carefully preserve the order of the universe and harmony with nature. Native American tribes are some of the brightest representatives of such cultures, in many respects due to the fact that “even today it is possible to live according to American Indian ideals, and one of the reasons for it is that those cultures are themselves alive.”¹

At first sight, it may seem strange that in Russia, which is far-away from the USA, there have appeared many people who not only express an unfeigned interest in the cultures of North American Indians, but also practice their philosophy. However, the historical connections between these two countries should not be forgotten: the communication between the continents via the Bering Strait, “the heroic épopée of Russian America” in the 18th-19th centuries,² and the purchase of Alaska by the USA from Russia in 1867. Undoubtedly, mere imitators can also be found among such admirers, but still hundreds of people in Russia can be rightly regarded as Indianists. It is worth explaining who is meant by “Indianists,” as this term often bears the wrong connotation. At the end of the 20th century in U.S. university curricula there appeared a new discipline known as American Indian Studies (in Russian called “Indianistics”). Unfortunately, this subject is not widely spread in Russia and is only familiar to a narrow circle of specialists rather than to a wider audience; that’s why there are few professional Indianists in the country yet. The majority of the people who are interested in Indianistics could be most likely called amateurs, or “Indianists by vocation.” They are enthusiasts who thoroughly know the history, literature, languages, ethnic peculiarities, and lifestyles of separate Indian tribes and/or cultural regions. Such people cannot be considered as part of the “hobbyist” or “New Age” movements, which are treated strictly negatively both by Native Americans and Indianists. For the latter, this is by no means “playing Indian;” this is really part of their lives. Unfortunately, the Indianists are rather seldom written about, and due to this lack of information the public often erroneously stereotypes them, as it is often the case with Native Americans. American Indian Studies can be regarded as a branch of science by professionals, but for its adherents it is “the state of consciousness, world perception, sometimes the world view based on the ideals and the way of life of Indian cultures.”³

To get an overall idea of the Russian Indianists, it is essential to track the history of their appearance and their activities. Each walked a unique path that finally led them to this choice. Many took a great interest in the history and culture of American Indians already in childhood, while reading books by F. Cooper, M. Read,

J. W. Schultz and other remarkable writers. Inspired by their romantic heroes, children played and imaged themselves in the place of those book characters. The mention of such an inspiration can be found in various sources dating as far back as the 19th century, including the memoirs, diaries, and works of noted Russian writers such as A.S. Pushkin, A.P. Chekhov, V.V. Shulgin, V.V. Mayakovsky, A.P. Shpolyansky, and others. In the early 20th century the enthusiasts I. Zhukov and N. Fatyanov organized the first Scout movement in Russia, which existed until the revolution of 1917 and also promoted the interest of young people in Native Americans.⁴ In the 1970s Soviet cinema was overwhelmed by a series of films about Indians produced in the USA, France, Rumania, and, above all, the German film studio “DEFA,” which produced several films with Gojko Mitich in the leading part, including *Hawk’s Trace*, *Osceola*, *Chief White Feather*, and *Tecumseh*. Surely those films, as well as the majority of fiction works, were based on the stereotypes and did not expose the deep essence of Native American cultures. Still, they all became a strong stimulus to those in whom the passion for this subject remained for the rest of their lives.

Later on these nascent Indianists started to search by themselves for any new information concerning the history, culture and life of American Indians. The older they grew, the more serious their interest became. Thus, for example, Y.V. Kotenko, one of the leaders of the Moscow Indianists and founder of the group “Greengrass Singers,” became the author of several books and a range of articles dedicated to Native American issues. Almost everyone in this movement has found his or her “niche” when going deeper into the subject and has chosen a tribe, a group of tribes, or a cultural region to study. It is important to note that this knowledge is often so deep and versatile that even scholars and specialists from other fields have consulted non-professional amateurs, as well as film-makers working on the domestic films *Pathfinder* and *In the Wilds of the North*.⁵ The circle of Indianists is rather varied from free-lancing individuals, pow-wow habitués, members of the organizations that study American Indian history and culture, or merely enthusiast groups. There is a place for everyone from auto mechanic to scientist, from student to businessman. These people are united by a keen and irresistible desire to learn as much as possible about the tribes which interest them, to really understand and feel their life, to join their ideology after having reconsidered their own values and world perception.

Indianists can be found throughout Russia, and one can come across their big and small societies in a number of cities and towns, such as Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Yekaterinburg, Petrozavodsk, Syktyvkar, Tumen, Tver, and others. A similar situation can be observed in the former Soviet republics—at present independent states—including Byelorussia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Ukraine. History shows many examples of people who were ready for the sake of their ideals to abandon their comfortable urban flats, leave their jobs, change their lifestyle dramatically, and estrange themselves from modern civilization to create separate Indianist communities in the distant places of their vast country. That is exactly how the community “Blue Rock” was founded in 1984, and it successfully existed for several years near the village Verkhnyaya Kukuja in the mountainous Altai.⁶ It is necessary to point out that the people in question are not fanatics who blindly worship their idols (in this case Indians), but intelligent and responsible individuals who have made their choice consciously in accordance with their views and beliefs.

Still, the majority of the Indianists prefer to stay where they are and gain more and more new facts from all possible sources about various tribes with the help of the products of civilization (wonderful libraries, the Internet, etc.) to satisfy their endless desire to know as much as they can about the subject of their research. They meet their “brothers by interest,” share their news and discoveries, and provide any information that can shed at least some light on what has become the central meaning of their lives. Indianists are characterized by mutual support and help, and “as a rule, most [of them] know each other and any event immediately circulates with the speed of the thought.”⁷ They communicate with each other with great pleasure.

Certainly, one of the most important activities is the annual Indian festival pow-wow, which gathers Indianists from all over Russia and other countries, such as Byelorussia, Ukraine, Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, and sometimes even Native Americans from the USA. The first large-scale pow-wow took place in 1980 in the Saint-Petersburg area, and since then that event has become regular. Not everybody who wants to participate in the central summer pow-wow (which is now always held in the Saint-Petersburg region, as this city together with the capital has the greatest number of Indianists) has the opportunity to do so, and that is why there appeared gatherings at other places (for example in the Moscow and Tver regions), as well as in winter. Winter pow-wows in Moscow usually last one day and are held in a big gymnasium, while summer ones (mostly in July, but also from May to August and sometimes even in autumn) in general last about two weeks, with an official opening ceremony, dances, songs, and special rites for a small circle of people. The place for the camp is chosen, as a rule, near a river and woods. Sometimes horses are obtained for the event, which is also of no small importance. The distinguishing feature of Russian pow-wows is the lack of commercial interest (excluding rare cases involving the sale or exchange of books and handicrafts).⁸ Most of the participants wear American Indian dress with all the appropriate accessories handmade by themselves chiefly in the style traditional for the 19th century. Tepees are put up, and at times wigwams can also be seen among them. Guests are welcome at the festival as well. Definitely, not all the guests have costumes and tepees, but they may stay in the camp in more modern tents.

Owing to the effort of the enthusiasts, traditional music and songs can be heard not only at pow-wows, but also during the concerts of Indianist music groups and individual performers in specialized clubs and at folklore festivals. The best-known and the most popular such music group in the countries of the former USSR is the “Greengrass Singers,” founded in Moscow in 1997. They generally have worked in the pow-wow style of the Plains Indians, but they plan to widen their repertoire to include traditional and ceremonial songs as well.⁹

The organization of pow-wows is only one aspect of the activities of Russian Indianists. Some of them take part in the sacred Indian races in different countries, including the USA (Y.V. Kotenko, G.B. Borisov); in rare cases some people even manage to live on the reservations among Native Americans for some time. Many make themselves the traditional clothes of the tribe they are most interested in, such as moccasins, war bonnets from feathers, tepees, weapons (tomahawks), musical instruments, pipes, beadwork, etc. It is amazing that in spite of their attitude to the

Indianist movement, almost all American Indians who have seen the clothes and objects made by Russians, either in person or from photographs, have noted that they are made with great accuracy and a deep knowledge of their history and culture in the traditional style, which nowadays is not always so well-known even to Indian youth.

The creative work of the Indianists is not limited to the making of Native American clothes and paraphernalia. Some of them paint pictures on Indian themes (Y.V. Kotenko, A.V. Kokarev), others perform Indian music and songs (Greengrass Singers), or write their own in the Native American manner (A. Tessar). There are professional dancers (A. Varichev) who have even won prizes at pow-wows conducted in Europe (I. Gurov), photographers (I.V. Kaverin, A.Y. Nefyodov, D.N. Popov), film directors (I.V. Kaverin), translators (A.V. Vaschenko, T.N. Kazakova), as well as writers (Y.V. Stukalin, A.Y. Nefyodov) whose novels and stories can be compared with those of the generally recognized masters of the genre. They are all infinitely devoted to the American Indian themes traced in their works, where their talent merges with the historical accuracy of the reproduction.

Books about northern Native Americans have started to be published more often in Russia, and these include volumes of academic research, popular scientific literature, historical narratives, novels, and stories, both domestic and translated from other languages. Separate attention should be paid to specialized Indianist magazines and journals, which could appear only thanks to the enthusiasts. Among them should be mentioned the almanac *Tomahawk*, which had only several issues in 1989-92 in Syktyvkar, *Iktomi* published in Moscow in the mid-1990s, *American-Indian Bulletin* still issued in Moscow, *First Americans* published since 1996 in Saint-Petersburg, and a whole range of minor projects in other towns. The work continues on the Internet too. Today there are Russian Indianist websites which dwell upon all aspects of the history, culture, religion, and present-day life of the Indians of North, South, and Mesoamerica. Such sites offer a wide selection of scientific and other materials on all relevant Indianist topics (www.mesoamerica.ru) together with other sites dedicated to the movement (<http://www.first-americans.spb.ru>; <http://michilmakinak.narod.ru>; and <http://www.comancheros.narod.ru>, etc.).

In Moscow since 1999, Dr. A.V. Vaschenko, a professor at Moscow State University (MSU) and the leading Russian specialist in northern Native American oral traditions and modern fiction, has supervised the Historical and Cultural Center for North American Indians, which regularly holds enlightening research seminars, annual conferences, presentations of new editions, public exhibitions, and an annual event called "Momaday Readings," which originally featured Native American literature, but now has been expanded to include a variety of other Indian topics as well. Whenever possible American specialists and prominent Native Americans are invited to attend. Examples of recent exhibitions include the following: "Beautyway," dedicated to fine and applied arts of North Native Americans (1999); "On the Ways of Wanderings," about the applied arts of the Khant and Mansi peoples with photographs by L. Lipakova (2000); "Parts of the Whole," presented in compositions by A.Y. Nefyodov on the themes of traditional cultures (2001); "Red Path," consisting of the photographs by I.V. Kaverin from several years of pow-wows in Russia (2003); "Red Man's America. Indians of the USA through the Eyes of a Russian Traveller," illustrating the contemporary life of Native Americans with photographs by D.N.

Popov from his travels around the USA in 1996-2001 (2004); and an exhibition of traditional American Indian costume and accessories made by Russian Indianists (2003). The Center also publishes the historical, cultural, and literary almanac *Red Man's America*, and work on the creation of the encyclopedia *North American Indians: Literature in the Context of Culture* is being conducted under the direction of Dr. Vaschenko with the participation of D.N. Popov, G.B. Borisov, D.N. Vorobyev, and O.Y. Danchevskaya.

It is very pleasant that American Indian Studies as an academic discipline does not exist separately in Russia but enjoys general support among all Indianists, which allows both professionals and amateurs to share their experience and to help each other in studying the history and culture of Native Americans. But there are still rather few scientific centers specializing in American Indian Studies in this country, and they can be easily named. Attached to the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) are the Peter the Great Anthropology and Ethnography Museum in Saint-Petersburg and the N.N. Miklukho-Maklaj Ethnology and Anthropology Institute in Moscow, with a department concentrated on Indianistics which organizes international symposia. At the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) there is the Y.V. Knorozov Center for Mesoamerican Research, while in Moscow the Faculty of Journalism at Lomonosov State University (MSU) sponsors the Russian Society of American Culture Studies. All these institutions organize regular scientific conferences and publish collections of scientific papers dedicated to the life of native peoples.

At other institutions of higher education, specialists in different fields, such as history, philology, literature, anthropology, folklore studies, political science, etc., offer separate individual courses on their own initiative. Thus, Professor Vaschenko in his capacity as Head of the Comparative Studies of National Literatures and Cultures division in the Foreign Languages and Regional Studies Department at MSU not only reads a course in Comparative Mythology with an accent on Native American myths, but also regularly invites scholars from the USA, Canada, Australia to his university, organizing their stay in Russia. He is the author of many translations of works by Indian writers, a researcher of the literary heritage of N. Scott Momaday, and the leader of a number of projects connected with Indianistics. A few years ago at the same department a post-graduate student in Linguistics taught the Lakota language. In Astrakhan State University, Professor of the Chair of Foreign History Dr. S. N. Yakushenkov, well-known in scientific circles, offers three courses on the History and Cultures of North, South, and Mesoamerican Indians. The Chair of Ethnology in the Faculty of History of MSU includes a course on the History of American Indians. In the spring of 2006 Moscow State Pedagogical University (MSPU) presented a course on the History and Culture of North American Indians developed by the author of this paper. Definitely, there are similar courses at other universities, but, unfortunately, the author is unable to detail in full all the work which is being done by the professors and Chairs of Russian institutions.

Today it has become much easier both to find the necessary information and to keep in touch with like-minded people all around the world than it was some 25 years ago, when the modern movement of Russian Indianistics was only starting. Now research and other work is actively conducted, and there are more possibilities for the organization of different Indianist events, even for international championships in a

new kind of sport which appeared in Russia in 1990 known as Indian biathlon (canoe rowing and archery).¹⁰ However, there are still not so many people in Russia who are seriously keen on Indianistics. Even those rare students who choose such topics for their graduation projects do not always venture to continue their research, understanding that they are not ready for it. Probably part of the explanation lies in the fact that in our turbulent world there are too many tempting distractions, and it is human nature to take interest in one thing and then another, but not everyone is destined to feel a keenness which could grow into something greater, becoming a part of his or her life.

The author sees the future of Indianistics in Russia with not unfounded optimism. The enlightening activity of dozens of Russian scholars, as well as the desire of hundreds of the adherents of this discipline to get in close touch with Native American individuals and reservations contributes to the development of Indianistics (American Indian Studies) in this country and its rising to a decidedly new higher level. The rich historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage of Native Americans attracts more and more attention on the part of Russians, where it meets comprehension and finds a deep response in their hearts. This is the best evidence that we, who live on this planet, are all related and there are no boundaries for spiritual interaction. In spite of the fact that contemporary popular and scientific Indianistics has spread across the world from England to Japan, it is in Russia where it has reached its greatest scope, and it seems that “it is in Russia ... where it has found ... its second Motherland”.¹¹

Notes

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