

The Russian Fur Trade and Industry

People have utilized the skin and fur of animals to keep warm since the prehistoric era of human history. As human beings left the equatorial regions where Homo sapiens evolved, the severity of colder climates forced them to protect their uncovered bodies with the pelts of regional animals that were better adapted to the harsh environment. The exploitation of pelts probably arose as a result of the invention of simple tools, which enabled people to separate the meat for cooking and the fur for wearing. As human civilization advanced, those human societies dependant on fur for warmth also began to utilize animal fur and skin as a luxury item. Communities like the ancient state of Rus flourished and grew in importance in cross continental trade due to the natural abundance of fur-bearing animals in their territories. Despite the growing environmental damage and the suffering of animals harvested for fur, the fur trade and industry gained increasing importance over the centuries. Throughout the history of Russia (including the Soviet Union), the fur trade has enabled the Russian state to pursue the doctrine of Moscow as the third Rome and bolster their economy, while simultaneously and systematically distancing the Russian people from the environment and severing their connection with the natural world.

Even before the fur trade became a crucial component of the Russian economy, the practice of exchanging furs played an integral part in traditional Russian culture. The

use of pelts in ancient Shamanistic rituals established fur as a semi-spiritual commodity. Slavic peoples used furs in the household to keep warm and as comfortable bedding. Fur was also a form of currency and served as a payment for tribute, fines, and taxes.¹ Russians traditionally exchanged fur as gifts, and nobility often rewarded those in their favor with valuable pelts. One of the most important components of a dowry for wealthy Russian young women was the assortment of pelts her family provided her with.² Thus in order to understand the cultural significance of the Russian fur trade, one must recognize that from the very earliest times of the Russian people, fur was as important as the commerce of salt was to other world cultures. Although this analogy is not perfect, because fur was a local commodity and relatively common compared to salt, one cannot stress enough the abundance of fur during this time period and the fundamental role pelts played in Russian life.

Beginning in the ninth and tenth centuries, the fur trade became a very important element of relations between Rus, which was then centered in Kiev, and neighboring states. Russian furs were renowned for their excellent quality due to harsh winters which resulted in the thickest, softest, most beautiful pelts for fur-bearing animals. Medieval aristocracy as far away as China and Byzantium demanded increasing amounts of pelts from what they referred to as “the land of darkness.”³ Kiev flourished as a trade center for merchants from all over the Western hemisphere. The economic success and growing

¹ Sojzpushnina: International Fur Auction. Sojzpushnina EEA. April 24, 2006. < <http://www.sojzpushnina.ru/en/s/2/>>. The webpage for Sojzpushnina, which is the largest fur auction house in Russia, is presented in complete Russian and English translations. Sojzpushnina was formerly a state owned auction company, but since 2003 has been completely privatized. Apparently the company has wasted no time in creating an extensive website that is easily accessible to foreigners who do not speak Russian. Once again the importance of the international market to the Russian fur trade is apparent.

² Sojzpushnina: International Fur Auction. Sojzpushnina EEA.

³ Martin, Janet. Treasure of the Land of Darkness: The Fur Trade and its Significance for Medieval Russia. NY, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 1.

political influence of Kievan Rus was due primarily to the fur trade, which was only rivaled in importance by the sale of slaves.⁴ In exchange for furs, the Russians received goods from technologically superior cultures that they would have been otherwise unable to produce. For almost four hundred years Kiev remained the center of Rus due to the wealth of the fur trade; however, the exhaustion of the fur-bearing animals in the Dnepr River region in combination with the Mongol-Tatar invasion effectively ended Kiev's dominance of Rus. The center of the fur trade then shifted to Novgorod. The Russians of Novgorod were much less self-sufficient economically than Kievans and so were even more dependant upon the commerce of pelts. The demand for furs was so great that Novgorod was forced to expand their sphere of influence due to the exhausting exploitation of natural resources.⁵ Thus the Russian cycle of draining the environment and expanding into the wilderness, which in reality was already populated by indigenous peoples, began with the state of Novgorod and its loose affiliation of semi-colonies. The natives in turn, though they often resisted, were forced to support the fur trade of Novgorod by paying tributes in sable pelts and sometimes human slaves as well. In this way, the Russians utilized two groups of life forms they considered to be inferior, the indigenous peoples and the indigenous animals, in order to gain political, economic, and cultural significance.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the Russian peoples were united for the first time in the region of Muscovy under the rule of Ivan the Great, who seized Novgorod between the years of 1471 and 1478.⁶ From Novgorod, Moscow inherited control of the

⁴ Fisher, Raymond Henry. The Russian Fur Trade: 1550-1700. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1943. p. 2.

⁵ Fisher, Raymond Henry. The Russian Fur Trade: 1550-1700. p. 4.

⁶ Martin, Janet. Treasure of the Land of Darkness. p. 149.

Russian fur trade and all the wealth and power that followed as a result. With the establishment of Muscovy as the center of the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox church, the conceptualization of Moscow as the third Rome was developed and solidified. The third Rome doctrine was the belief that Russia was the inheritor of the religious and political responsibilities of Constantinople. As the third and final Rome, Moscow had the duty of uniting the Slavic people under the banner of Christianity and the Russian empire. In order to consolidate the absolute rule of Muscovy under the policy known as the “gathering of the Russian lands,” the Russian tsars needed a substantial source of income to support their conquest.⁷ The fur trade provided the Russian Empire with the wealth needed to finance territorial advancement and obtain luxury goods from abroad. With the Mongol-Tatar forces eliminated as an obstacle, the Russian tsars turned their sights on Siberia as an untapped source of furs. Orlando Figes, a scholar of Russian cultural history, writes, “From the capture of Kazan in 1552 to the revolution in 1917, the Russian Empire grew at the fantastic rate of over 100,000 square kilometers every year. The Russians were driven east by fur, the ‘soft gold’ that accounted for one-third of the Imperial coffers at the height of the fur trade in the seventeenth century. Russia’s colonial expansion was a massive hunt for bears and minks, sables, ermines, foxes and otters.”⁸ Another scholar makes the comparison between the Russian colonization of Siberia and the European colonization of the Americas by noting that whereas the Americas were

⁷ Gibson, James R. Feeding the Russian Fur Trade: Provisionment of the Okhotsk Seaboard and the Kamchatka Peninsula 1639-1856. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. p. 4.

⁸ Figes, Orlando. Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia. NY, NY: Metropolitan Books, 2002. p 377.

explored in search of gold and silver, Siberia was annexed in order to harvest the furs of the Russian sable and then the Kamchatka beaver (sea otters).⁹

Due to the rapid economic development of Western Europe, which had overtaken the Near East in consumption of Russian furs, the demand for Russian pelts dramatically increased during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The influx of wealth pouring in from the American colonies enabled Europeans to indulge in more luxury goods, especially furs.¹⁰ This factor, as well as the newly discovered vast natural abundance of fur-bearing animals of Siberia, resulted in a boom in the Russian fur trade that lasted almost two centuries. The prosperity of the fur trade in combination with the near exhaustion of most fur-bearing species in European Russia enticed many Russians to venture eastward into the vast wilds of Siberia.

Another primary motivation for settlement of Siberia was the objective of the subjugation of the indigenous peoples. This was a common theme among European colonization efforts of the time. Both in America and in Russia, European conquerors considered their Christian ideology to be far superior to the “barbaric” practices of the natives and so enticed or forced local inhabitants to adopt Western customs. In Siberia, the conversion of the natives also reflected the attempts of Russia to fulfill the third Rome doctrine by establishing a vast Christian empire.¹¹ In general, native Siberians were no match against the Russian invaders. Even though the indigenous peoples

⁹ Gibson, James R. Feeding the Russian Fur Trade. p1. Gibson quotes K. F. German from “Statisticheskaya Svedeniya” In the beginning of his book concerning the background of the annexation of Siberia and later Alaska. Although the exploration of the Americas was also partly in search of furs, Gibson suggests that the Russian quest for pelts was more akin to the European obsession with finding precious metals.

¹⁰ Fisher, Raymond Henry. The Russian Fur Trade: 1550-1700. p.20.

¹¹ Fisher, Raymond Henry. The Russian Fur Trade: 1550-1700. p.28. Interestingly Fisher notes that the conversion of local Siberian peoples was less important to the Russians than to their Western European counterparts in the Americas. Due to the vast distance between the Siberian colonies and Moscow, Siberian furriers were forced to live for long periods of time without European contact. As a result, Russians ended up adapting a large amount of Asiatic culture.

outnumbered the Russians, the peoples of Siberia were not united and many lived nomadic lifestyles. The Russians, on the other hand, were a single unified force with a common goal. All of these factors in combination with the Russian military superiority doomed the native Siberians to many centuries of paying tribute to the foreign occupiers. The indigenous peoples were especially useful to the Russians in the search for new ways to exploit the population of fur-bearing animals. Especially in Alaska, the native peoples were virtually enslaved during the sixteenth century at the height of the sea otter fur trade. Whereas Siberian trappers could hunt fur-bearing animals as well, if not better, than the native peoples, Alaskan furriers needed the help of the indigenous peoples in order to hunt sea-dwelling otters.

The character of the Russian conquest of Siberia in search of furs was in many ways a parasitic process. The high demand for pelts and furs in Russia and abroad brought about a steady decrease in the population of fur-bearing animals in the areas wherever Russian furriers settled.¹² As more and more hunting grounds became exhausted, the push eastward became more urgent. Fur traders would expand into an area, drain the area of furs, and then move on. The expansion into unexploited lands continued until Russians met the opposition of other European forces in what are now Canada and the Pacific Northwest. This pattern served to further desensitize the Russian people to destruction of natural resources. The drive to satiate the demand for furs promoted the Christian conceptualization of man's dominance over the environment.

In fact, the very nature of the fur trade was exploitive and brutal. Traditionally, the Siberian and Slavic peoples hunted animals using bow and arrow. This method of killing, although still painful, was relatively quick. Hunting with bows and arrows,

¹² Fisher, Raymond Henry. The Russian Fur Trade: 1550-1700. p. 33.

however, did not bring in enough pelts to satisfy the increasing demand. Thus traps were developed to enable hunters to gather fur-bearing animals from a distance and presumably at the same time that furriers were gathering pelts in another area. Traps are exceedingly torturous for animals and will often result in animals being driven into a frenzied state. Animals frequently chew off their own legs in order to escape. Those that do not manage to free themselves take hours or days to die. Traps have become a standard industry practice, which in itself is a clear indication of the level of detachment from life that has resulted from the fur trade. Leg hold traps are still legal in Russia, although in the past fifteen years many European countries have banned such practices.

The incredible suffering of the animals utilized for their furs is largely ignored by most scholars that write about the fur trade. Additionally, the very concept of wearing another living being's skin is an idea that must be incorporated over time into a culture's world-view. As was mentioned previously, wearing fur has been an important part of Slavic culture since the prehistoric area; however this practice was at least in part spiritual and always done within the equilibrium of the natural environment. It was the addition of furs as luxury items and as means of currency that was probably one of the first sources of the Russian alienation from nature. In War and Peace, Tolstoy describes a traditional hunting outing of the Russian aristocracy. He writes, "All came to look at the big wolf who, with her broad-browed head hanging down gnawed stick between her jaws, gazed with great glassy eyes at the crowd of dogs and men surrounding her. When they touched her she jerked her bound legs and looked wildly yet simply at them all."¹³

¹³ Tolstoy, Lev. War and Peace. NY, NY: Random House, Inc, 2002. As I mentioned in my first paper for this class, the sex of the wolf may have not been a coincidence. The captivity and futile struggle of the wolf could be interpreted as a metaphor for the oppression and subjugation of the ancient female earth deity by the Russian speciesist patriarchy.

Another further level of detachment from nature resulted from a new method of Russian fur harvesting, which developed in the late tsarist period but was perfected by the Soviets.

By the late nineteenth century, the population of fur-bearing species was depleted to such an extent within the boundaries of the Russian Empire that new ways of acquiring fur were desperately needed if the industry (for that is what it had evolved into) was to survive. The practice of fur farming was developed in order to ensure a steady supply of pelts for the international market. Fur farming originated when furriers began trapping cubs of fur-bearing species and raising them in sheds.¹⁴ Selective breeding programs originated in fur farms in order to produce the most desirable furs. Despite the success of fur farms, wild furs are still more valuable due to the fact that no farm has been able to reproduce the luxurious quality of wild fur. During the Soviet Union, fur farms were collectivized along with most other agriculture. Fur production was divided into massive state farms, known as *sovkhozi*, and collective farms called *kolkhozi*.¹⁵ At the height of Soviet fur farm production during the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties, over six million pelts were produced annually from over two hundred and fifty state owned fur farms.¹⁶ The Soviet fur industry was far more developed than in any other European country. Fur for international trade resulted in reserves of foreign currency desperately needed by the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The agency known as Sojuzpushnina maintained a monopoly on the export of furs and stiffly controlled the price of furs within the Soviet

¹⁴ Sojuzpushnina: International Fur Auction. Sojuzpushnina EEA. The Sojuzpushnina website gives a very favorable account of Russian fur farming, as if the animals in the farms are in some sort of resort as opposed to a small wire mesh cage. They also neglect to mention that all the inhabitants of fur farms will be slaughtered in the prime of their lives.

¹⁵ Fuchs, Victor R. The Economics of the Fur Trade. NY,NY: Columbia University Press, 1957. p. 22. Fuchs writes from the perspective of an insider of the fur industry. He admires the Soviet system for its efficiency, but does not believe the collectivization of fur farms to result in better quality fur.

¹⁶ Sojuzpushnina: International Fur Auction. Sojuzpushnina EEA.

¹⁷ Weiner, Douglas R. Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988. p. 25.

Union.¹⁸ Thus the fur trade once again provided the Russian people with foreign capital and goods. Although furs did not play as significant role in the Soviet economy as in the tsarist economy, the fur industry was nonetheless a substantial portion of the annual revenue of the Soviet Union.

Fur farms also accompanied the Soviet ideology of the transformation of nature to suit the needs of humans, as well as an increased level of disconnection from nature. On fur farms, animals are removed from their natural environments and controlled by human beings. Every aspect of the lives of fur-bearing animals can be manipulated by fur farm employees. In this way, it is easier for people to think of animals on fur farms as machines. Indeed, it takes a greater level of detachment to kill and skin an animal that you have cared for and nourished than it does to trap an anonymous animal in the wild. The conditions for animals raised in fur farms are also notoriously miserable. Animals are kept in small cages, which prevent them from taking more than several steps in any direction for the entirety of their lives. Thousands of animals are kept on one fur farm, which can be torturous for animals such as minks who are naturally solitary creatures. These conditions drive many occupants of fur farms to madness and self-mutilation. The slaughter of fur farm raised animals is especially painful due to the desire of manufacturers not to damage the pelt in any way. Most animals are killed by a combination of anal and oral electrocution or by strangulation. Often times, though not in the majority of circumstances, animals may be skinned while still alive. Fur farms also contribute a considerable amount of pollution due to the concentration of feces that is too much for any one water supply to handle. Under the Soviet system, the suffering of the

¹⁸ Fuchs, Victor R. The Economics of the Fur Trade. p. 23. Fuchs considers the Soviet internal market to be stiff and mechanized, and believes this to be a weakness of centralized planning.

animals, the trauma of state employees as a result of working on fur farms, and the environmental damage were largely ignored due to the significance of the fur industry to the Soviet economy. Only with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the destabilizing of the Russia's economy did the fur trade cease to be as important as it had been in previous centuries.

Over the past ten years, the Russian fur trade has slumped considerably although it is now on the rise again. The post-Soviet fur trade has been privatized and less subject to government controls. This time around, however, Russian animal rights activists are fighting back. Major international anti-fur campaigns did not begin until the nineteen eighties and in Soviet Union even later. Although environmentalism has been present in Russian since before the Russian Revolution and did result in the creation of *zapovedniki*, their voices during the Soviet Union were usually quiet and wary due to extreme censorship. Up until the period of perestroika and the abolition of article 6 of the Soviet Constitution, environmental work was dangerous if it went against the goals of the communist party.¹⁹ Upon the disintegration of the Soviet state, however, many Russians who had long been disappointed with the condition of the environment and the treatment of wildlife started to voice opposition to the fur industry in Russia. In her article, "A Vegetarian in Russia," Tatyana Pavlova who is the director of the Center for the Ethical Treatment of Animals in Moscow, writes that she is optimistic about the animal rights movement in Russian, but that Russians will never learn to protect animals unless they learn to consume less. Currently the anti-fur campaign in Russia is divided between those activists who want to preserve nature and wildlife in order so that humans may benefit

¹⁹ Partridge, Ernest. "Russian Environmentalism: Conditions and Prospects." *Human Ecology: Progress Through Integrative Perspectives*. The Society for Human Ecology, 1995.

from eco-diversity and those activists who are concerned about the rights of animals. Perhaps in the future, the Russian fur trade, which was one of the earliest causes of the Russian alienation for nature, will unite these two factions and provide the motivation for Russians to re-familiarize themselves with the environment and compassion for life.

Throughout the history of the Russian state, the fur trade/industry have provided Russia with considerable economic clout and the ability to expand their sphere of influence (both geographically and politically) in order to fulfill the doctrine of Moscow as the third Rome and as the center of Slavic heritage. Unfortunately for the animals, the Russians, and the nature, the fur trade also aided to sever the connection between the Russian people and the environment. The wilderness no longer surrounds Russians, because the Russians surround it. The major dilemma for contemporary Russia is how to be free of the fur trade/industry and still support themselves as a nation. Another complicating factor is that fur is such an integral part of Russian culture. Although the progress may be slow and frustrating, I have faith in the ability of the Russian people to change and grow beyond their need for fur, because they have shown such strength and perseverance in the past. Ultimately, we must hope that eventually all human beings (not just Russians) can learn to recognize that as Alice Walker said, “The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men.”

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