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Eva Toulouze, Laur Vallikivi, Art Leete

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# The Culture Bases in the North

## Sovetisation and Indigenous Resistance

Fifteen culture houses, fifteen ethnographic centres, fifteen veterinary stations, fifteen medical care stations, fifteen boarding schools, fifteen production cooperatives, red tents, red boats, nomadic schools, model production workshops, agricultural stations, and radio-stations adorn as red circles the contemporary map of the Soviet arctic and subarctic zones. These are the fifteen complex culture bases, which at the beginning of the second Bolshevik five-year plan are in fact the forward bearing points of the Soviet power; they lead consequently and obstinately the Northern economy's socialist reconstruction on the basis of Leninist-Stalinist national policy in the faraway frontier of the great proletarian state, harsh but rich in natural strength. These are the future towns. They will grow and become real cultural and political centres.

Suslov 1934: 28

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Sovietisation of the North was not an easy task. The young Bolshevik power was aware of it, and of its inability to implement proper strategy and tactics because of its ignorance of the

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aborigines' world. Not only for the sake of the implementation of socialism, but also for the sake of the perspectives of economic exploitation of the North, they turned for advice from the specialists. This awareness emerged probably already in 1921 or 1922,<sup>2</sup> when at the People's Commissariat for the Affairs of the Nationalities (*Narkomnats*) the Polar Subcommittee was created. The instruments of Sovietisation in the North were the result of cooperation between two rather different worlds: the ethnographic expertise of renowned Russian scholars and Bolshevik administrators. The researchers, while some of them were internationally recognised, as Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan,<sup>3</sup> were not engaged in the Communist Party, while they sympathised with the new leaders of Russia, also because they had generally been hostile to tsarist autocracy and several of them had been exiled to the Far North. The bridge between them and the administrators were the Bolsheviks who had some knowledge of the North.<sup>4</sup> These groups produced policies that were clearly influenced by each other in different periods, while seemingly speaking with one voice.

This cooperation produced original forms of political and cultural action in the North. These were materialised through the peculiar governing board of the Northern areas, the so-called Committee of the North,<sup>5</sup> which was founded in 1924 and whose composition reflected the new cooperation between scholars and politicians. The Committee of the North included representatives of the ministries and shaped the Soviet policy for the North.

It was conceived in order to both satisfy the needs of the Siberian natives and integrating the North into the new political system. But it did not achieve its goal entirely, and triggered often quite resolute resistance by the native communities. The protest actions, often called uprisings (*восстания*), led to relentless repression, which deprived indigenous communities of their best men and vital resources for a long time. Numerous indigenous resistance actions, while they were not directly related to one another, took place between 1932 and 1950 in very different locations in Siberia. They were locally triggered by particular events in various ways, but they can be seen as one multifaceted phenomenon of reaction to homogenous Sovietisation policies.

The goal of this article is to focus on the culture bases, a peculiar instrument implemented by the Committee of the North, imagined to become a kind of model Soviet villages for indigenous peoples of the North. The construction of culture bases was decided in 1925 (Protokol 1925: 111). In this paper, we shall show what the aims of these culture bases were, how they were integrated into the whole Sovietisation process, how they functioned, and how

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<sup>2</sup> The Soviet regime benefitted from the initiative of the Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of Russia, formed in February 1917, with the aim of elaborating scientifically grounded colonial project (see Hirsch 2005: 7–10, 57–61, 85–92).

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Bogoraz (1865–1936) had been exiled to Eastern Siberia for revolutionary activities and became a specialist of the Chukchi. He spent some years in the United States (1901–1904), befriended Franz Boas, and started publishing there his famous three-part monograph *The Chukchee* in English. When he returned to Russia, he became an active participant in policy-making towards the North, well known for his proposal for creating native reservations and for his involvement in native higher education.

<sup>4</sup> For example Avel' Enukidze (1877–1937) was exiled from 1914 to 1916 to the Yenisey government; Emelyan Yaroslavskiy (Miney Guberl'man, 1878–1943) was born in Eastern Siberia and lived in Yakutsk from 1907 to 1917. Both men were so-called "old Bolsheviks".

<sup>5</sup> The full name was the Committee for the Assistance to the Peoples of the Northern Borderlands (*Комитет содействия народностям северных окраин*).

the indigenous peoples of Siberia reacted to these initiatives. Our geographical focus will be on Western Siberia.

## **To Civilise the Natives**

### *Aims*

This idea of bringing civilisation to the indigenous peoples of the North was shared by all the Soviet policy-makers, although the motivations were not always the same for everybody.

In the 1920s, the ethnographers became increasingly aware that there would be unavoidable changes in the natives' lives. From their evolutionist point of view, while largely accepting the need to preserve indigenous lifestyles, the ethnographers envisaged a future in which the natives had to take advantage of the achievements of the modern world from which they had been isolated. This would make the indigenous groups able to negotiate as equals with the state authorities. In short, there was a dream of converting natives into agents of their own fate. The one and only way imagined to be possible for making them modern was to educate them and help them become literate. The development of schools for indigenous peoples was one of the important measures suggested in the first political programmes, even before the constitution of the Committee of the North.

Also from the perspective of Bolshevik administrators, setting up schools throughout the Soviet North was an important goal to achieve. Their wish was to penetrate directly (not only with the help of scholars of dubious allegiance) remote communities through literate natives, who would become mediators between the two worlds and of socialist reconstructions. Schools would allow training of these mediators into firm believers of the Soviet construction project (Toulouze 2005: 140–148). Their understanding of school was highly practical and pursued immediate utilitarian aims:

The boarding-school, cutting children from production activities, mobilises their attention on the reconstruction of Northern economy and gives them skills [...], both within school and by establishing links with the nearest cooperatives. (Suslov 1934:34.)

The politicians were clearly aware of the economic potential of the Northern areas and intended to exploit it in the state's interests.

In order to provide education for the natives, everything had to be built from scratch. As elsewhere, during the 1920s, schools were built and teachers were sent to the field. Very soon, the teachers discovered that education could only be of use if delivered in the pupils' mother tongue. So, languages and dialects were to be studied, orthographies and grammars to be established, literary languages adopted,<sup>6</sup> and textbooks written, both in Russian and vernaculars (Toulouze 1999). We shall here concentrate on the first point: the building of schools—often from scratch, and often by teachers sent by the Committee of the North, which were supposed to become the ultimate instruments of change.

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<sup>6</sup> In a conference in 1932, 14 languages of the North were officially "given" a written form.

School were of course but only one of the means of penetrating into the tundra and the taiga, and a very slow one.<sup>7</sup> Hence the idea of establishing so-called culture bases, socialist outposts around schools (Campbell 2004: 41). They were expected to function as microcosms of the Soviet statehood aimed at hastening the pace and multiplying contacts with the local indigenous population at every level.<sup>8</sup> Guidelines for the culture bases were provided by, amongst other, A. Lvov:

These centres for providing all kinds of exemplary help to indigenous population must thus also be the supporters of indigenous culture and prepare specialists among the indigenous people. These specialists will carry culture to their people and only with their help it is possible to serve all Northern territories as a whole, although culture bases themselves can serve only a small territory. (Lvov 1926: 31.)

The culture bases were supposed to mediate what Soviet life in the tundra and in the taiga could look like. In practice, deprived of its ideological discourse, Soviet life was not very different from Russian life. For the “enlighteners” there was no practical difference between “culture” and “Russian culture,” understood as an absolute category.<sup>9</sup> Therefore promotion of civilised life was paramount for promoting Russian life, and indigenous peoples recognised and understood it immediately.

The culture bases were to be founded in the remotest areas (Kantor 1933:66; Shmyrev 1933: 69; Suslov 1934: 29). It hosted the personnel<sup>10</sup> of all the services and institutions needed for a fully functioning settlement,<sup>11</sup> which could reach 250 persons, which was the case for example in the Yamal culture base (Shmyrev 1933: 70). Besides the stationary institutions, every culture base had “nomadic appendices,” which went out of the base to address the indigenous nomadic communities (Suslov 1934:33). Particularly important were the Red tents or Red boats, used from 1929 by party activists and medical doctors who had to convince the local population of the benefits of the Soviet statehood (Mazurenko 1979: 127). In 1934, there were fifteen culture bases in the Soviet Union (see Map).

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<sup>7</sup> Therefore already in 1925, a course was opened in the Workers University for training Northern aborigines. Vladimir Bogoraz-Tan was one of the most active teachers involved in this project.

<sup>8</sup> Schools were planned and built not only in the culture bases but also elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Forsyth, repeating Bogoraz-Tan’s idea, speaks about “a kind of reforming missionarism without the Christian religion, but with an equally strong conviction of absolute enlightenment” (Forsyth 1992: 284).

<sup>10</sup> For example: instructors for the creation of local councils and the building of cooperatives, leaders of women’s organisations, political instructors, physicians as well as medical and veterinary personnel, teachers, hunting specialists, ichthyologists, reindeer specialists, ethnographers, economists, etc. (Suslov 1934: 32). In 1935, there were more than 500 individuals working in the culture bases (not taking into account the builders) (V komitete 1935: 107).

<sup>11</sup> According to Terletskiy, who wrote not long before the decline of the bases in 1935, the institutions and buildings in a culture house were a “house of culture” (or a “house of the natives”), a hospital with a health centre, a boarding school, a kindergarten, a day nursery, a veterinary, zoological and agronomic station, an ethnographic station with a laboratory allowing agrochemical and bacteriological scientific work, an electric generator, workshops, houses for the personnel, a sauna, warehouses: moreover, there were the office of the cooperative and other economic institutions (Terletskiy 1935: 36). Zelenin adds some other details: bread reserves, a meteorological station and transportation (boats, motorboats, reindeer, dogs, and, in the last years, all-terrain vehicles and even landing strips) (Zelenin 1938: 16).

When analysing the practice of culture bases and the discourse on them, we may define their function for the policy-makers as three-fold: to map, to show, and to act.

### *To map*

Culture bases were supposed to be the meeting points out in the tundra and the taiga between the natives and the Soviets. Therefore, the latter would have the opportunity to discover, to study the local populations and their peculiarities, and to learn to communicate with them (Balzer 1999: 107; Forsyth 1992: 80; Suslov 1934: 28; Terletskiy 1935: 44). We may assume that the institutional part of the staff, in other words the party officials, wished to disentangle themselves from the authority of the specialists, by becoming themselves specialists. Culture bases had to be involved in research, in order to increase deeper knowledge of Northern peoples and Northern conditions (e.g., health situation, natural resources, etc.). For instance, rich photo collections were created at the culture bases (Terletskiy 1935: 44). Moreover, culture bases had the duty to actively involve indigenous peoples in research. Even museums were to be created (Parkhomenko 1930: 125, 128; Suslov 1934: 35; Zelenin 1938: 16). Ethnographers were employed as specialists in all areas concerning the indigenous population, including the issues of economy (for example such outstanding ethnographer as G.N. Prokofyev worked two years at the Khoseda-Khard culture base, cf. Khomich 1999). For instance, when the class enemy concept became part of the Soviet policies in the late 1920s, they had to determine who was a *kulak*, deriving it from the number of reindeer owned and of labourers used, all being relative to the local social and cultural circumstances.

### *To show and to act*

Culture bases were supposed to cover most domains of the local life and thus became small Soviet microcosms illustrating what life was supposed to be (Balzer 1999: 107). Even if they were not the only place where Soviet power was represented, they brought Sovietness to the depths of the local villages. The first way was through hosting. In the “house of the natives,” guests from the tundra or taiga could find refreshments, newspapers, and spend the night. They could even file a complaint or repair a gun (Shmyrev 1933: 72–73).

### Cultural and educational aspect

We have already mentioned the importance of cultural and educational aspects. Schools were always to be the core of a culture base. They were financed by central funds<sup>12</sup> and provided the “best teachers” (Lyarskaya 2003: 79). Debates about the forms of school for natives had been going on since the middle of the 1920s. Although the policy-makers were well aware of the weaknesses of the boarding school system, they found no other working solution. As a result, boarding schools spread all over the North. The tuition was supposed to be in the native

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<sup>12</sup> While this fact enhances the political and symbolic importance of schools and culture bases, it does not mean that actual financing was satisfying. Lyarskaya (2003: 79) emphasises how in the Yamal culture base, opened in 1932, the boarding school there had no beds or chairs; also food was scarce.

languages. In the 1920s, Soviet journals denounced many problems that occurred while setting up the school system. It was difficult to recruit children, to teach them, to feed them, to find teachers not only proficient in the native languages but also willing to work in arduous conditions, and also to communicate with reluctant parents. Thus school, while being an important issue, was also a critical one. Educational aspects were extended to adults as well. For instance, “courses for liquidation of illiteracy,” but also courses for accountants, herders, and nurses were introduced (Petrova&Kharyuchi 1999: 86–94).

From the non-locals perspective, Russian habits, hygiene and way of life were generally considered as civilised, while native customs were seen as backward: people were taught to wash, to go to sauna (*banya*), to reject conical tents, or at least to adopt iron stoves (Khomich 1966: 308; Shmyrev 1933: 73). In this perspective, women were precisely targeted, and were introduced to the new rules of hygiene and prospects for “emancipation” (Khomich 1966: 298). One may see, through these examples, how sensitive all these issues could be, presenting without the shadow of a doubt Russian habits as superior.

### Political aspects

Culture bases were also tightly related to the political field. The local institutions of power like native regional executive committees (*tuzrik*) were responsible for carrying out reforms in the area. Some of them had their offices in culture bases making these settlements actual sites where the state enacted its laws. Moreover, they were places where the political power expressed itself and advertised its goals, achievements, and programmes. These were sites for hosting natives and providing them with propaganda material: for example, culture bases used to print newspapers (the Yamal culture base published thus a newspaper *Naryana Vy* [‘The Red Tundra’], cf. Budarin 1968: 227; Shmyrev 1933: 72).

### Economic aspects

In the 1930s, while “kulaks” and “shamans” were deprived of the political rights given to the rest of the indigenous population, natives were driven forcibly into kolkhozes and much of their possessions expropriated to the kolkhoz. The culture bases could have an important economic role as well. They were supposed to channel the work of the cooperatives, and some of the cooperatives had their offices there. For instance, the Kazym culture base was criticised for its bad results in the work on cooperatives (Kantor 1933: 67). In some places a culture base even created cooperatives, as in Sakhalin (Grant 1993: 232); in others, especially at the end of the 1930s, the culture base was responsible for collectivisation and sedentarisation, as was the one in Yamal, according to its director M. M. Brodnev. He recalls that he had to carry out electrification of the base as well (Lipatova 2008: 70–71). The bases were also supposed to teach northerners horticulture (Kantor 1933: 71), which was a challenge in the harsh climatic conditions. Culture bases functioned also as commercial hubs, as the places where natives could exchange furs, fish or berries for bread, sugar, and other imported goods. Many stores were situated in the culture bases. Private commercial activities had been disrupted first by civil war, then by anti-merchant policies, so that trade had become almost exclusively the

state's field of action. As later collectivisation, and the sedentarisation of nomads, this way of concentrating commercial activities was part of the wider Soviet project of economic rationalisation.

### Medical and veterinary aspects

Another important service offered by the culture bases was medical and veterinary as well as birth care. Veterinary care was at first mainly oriented towards controlling meat production, especially during the slaughter of reindeer, but also on spreading “knowledge” about a scientific approach on reindeer husbandry, and research on reindeer diseases (Suslov 1934: 35; Terletskiy 1935: 43). Veterinary staff was supposed to visit reindeer herds in the tundra (Leete 2004a:56).

Medical care can be seen from two complementary points of view. Firstly, there was certainly the aim to provide the natives with services that they did not have in the tundra and taiga, thus saving both human and animal lives. Soviet authors mention proudly the achievements in this field: in 1934, 13 hospitals were functioning in the culture bases (Skachko 1934: 18). But from another point of view, the culture base had an ideological—hence political—aspect as well: it was in direct competition with what the Soviets called “superstitions” and the role of the “shamans” in the communities (Khomich 1966: 312; see further Leete 2004b).

### Results and consequences

How did all this actually function? One difficulty we always meet when working with Soviet sources is the abundance of programmatic literature and the scarcity of reliable assessment materials. Reports are to be read with previous knowledge of the local conditions, in order to understand the possible realities behind the printed text. Undoubtedly, the ambitions were high. Still, we know that culture bases lacked means of various sorts. They lacked material means, for money was scarcely distributed from the centre; for example, they often did not have means of transportation, they also ran short on food and heating (Terletskiy 1935: 46). Being isolated they did not receive support from the local administrators. Often party and government leaders in the regions did not understand why money and energy had to be spent on a handful of “savages” who were not interested in socialism and could not understand it properly anyway. Moreover, they did not have enough human resources. As Lunacharskiy (1927: 18–19) observed, there were some fairly enthusiastic specialists associated to the culture bases. But it is important to emphasise that the so-called “missionaries of the new culture and of Soviet statehood,” as a well-known anthropologist Bogoraz-Tan (1925: 48; cf. also Leete & Vallikivi 2011) put it were very few compared to the needs that were defined by the Committee of the North. Even Soviet authors emphasise the lack of appropriate personnel (Kantor 1933: 41, 66). Although in Leningrad textbooks in languages of Northern natives were being published, we do not know how many of them were actually used or how many teachers were able to use vernacular languages in their work. This problem was not only to be met in Siberia but also elsewhere in the Soviet Union, where the demand for trained staff largely exceeded the supply.



The results presented by Soviet journalists on for example medical care are, as a rule, bombastic: in the Kazym culturebase, in two years 5,833 individuals were supposed to have gone for check-ups (Kantor 1933:68). This number is confusing and seems exaggerated, especially when one considers the actual population of the region. At the beginning of the 1930s, the population of the Kazym tundra was 1,630 (81 % of them Khanty, 13 % Nenets and 6 % Komi).<sup>13</sup> Still one explanation for very high statistics is that more than 60 per cent of the people attending medical care institutions were Russians and could attend more than once (Terletskiy 1935:41). The attendance of the local population declined clearly between the first and the second year: curiosity might well have been a determining factor in first visits; rising tensions explain quite well the regression. On the other hand, children in boarding schools made up a notable amount of native attendance.

Soviet authors, while emphasising the difficulty of working and convincing the indigenous population in the usefulness of the Soviet project (Suslov 1934:31), wrote at length about the issues of class struggle, especially about the sabotage acts by kulaks, shamans and even by interpreters who reportedly misinformed and frightened the poorer natives (Suslov 1934: 31–33). Undoubtedly, resistance limited widely the state's impact. The existence of culture bases was not as efficient as the authorities hoped for. Moreover, since the beginning of the 1930s, the development of kolkhozes and kolkhoz centres-to-be-formed entered in competition with the culture bases.

#### A hearth of socialism. The Kazym culture base

The implementation of Soviet policy was the most important goal, which meant acting out. All of the abovementioned activities were supposed to be a contribution to achieve the programme's goals. But the vision of the policy-makers, and of some of the theoreticians they relied upon, was much wider and had a long term and global range.

The culture bases were at the centre of a nucleus-based strategy: they were the hearth from which, through a domino effect, socialism was to win the taiga and the tundra. We shall illustrate this theory through what was expected in the case of the Kazym culture base.

The project of opening a base in the region emerged right after the enlarged plenum of the Committee of the North and an expedition was set in 1926 under the leadership of V.M. Novitskiy, an ethnographer and member of the Committee of the North of the Tobolsk area (Leete 2004a: 57).

Novitskiy's leading ideas are particularly interesting, because they illustrate one strand of missionary thinking in the Committee of the North. The first point in his strategy was to identify the areas almost entirely inhabited by natives, surrounded by native regions and characterised by traditional way of life. This he calls "the main hearth of the indigenous culture," the place where a culture base, a "cultural awakener," had to be established, in order to develop friendly relations with the natives and thus influence them as well as the surrounding communities. Through a chain mechanism of "self-influence," by getting into Soviet control the "strongest" natives, the other, weaker links would follow the example of the strongest. When the work was done, the culture base should be transferred elsewhere. The Kazym region was specifically chosen. By empowering the strongest Kazym Khanty, the aim

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<sup>13</sup>Source: Museum of History and Local Heritage of Berezovo District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Region.

was to “better the indigenous race,” as the chosen method for colonising the North was what Novitskiy called the “Iceland method,” that is not to import workforce, but to increase the local one through reduction of mortality (Novitskiy 1928a; Novitskiy 1928b: 77–79).

Novitskiy’s plans were a failure as they did not measure up to reality. While he did not doubt that the stronger natives would accept and welcome Soviet power, the cultural workers confronted with the “fierceness” and “stubbornness” of the Kazym Khanty saw the same features as a proof of savageness (Kantor 1933: 66; cf. also Leete 2004a: 64–65). To impose an alien presence in a context where resistance was supposed to be the strongest was a risk; in Kazym, this triggered the natives’ resistance, as we shall see below.

### **Resistance to Sovietisation. Changes in Policies and an Example of Protest**

Undoubtedly, resistance was connected to the actual changes that the culture bases were intended to implement. But these changes, which originated from global processes, were mediated to the indigenous peoples, among other forms, through the culture bases.

We shall briefly remind of the global processes that provoked resistance, and then concentrate on native views on the culture bases, in order to explain the mechanism of protest.

#### *From lenient to harsh methods*

The Soviet goal never actually changed: it was to integrate all the Union’s populations into one state project. The ways it was implemented were yet diverse in different periods.

While for the overall Soviet Union the chronology is punctuated by the New Economic Policy (NEP) and collectivisation with enhanced class struggle afterwards, there are some peculiarities that deserve to be pointed out in the North, even if the general pattern is the same as elsewhere.

Within the Committee of the North, the ethnographers’ ideas had dominated in the first period from 1924 to 1928. They had argued that class struggle was unknown to the native peoples, untouched by “the capitalist phase of development.” The indigenous peoples as such were the proletarians of the North and they were expected to directly pass from primitiveness to communism (Slezkine 1994: 146–147). With this general orientation, the Committee of the North was able to implement some measures that were to satisfy native communities. Moreover, the attitude of the scholars, who were sent to the area, was often friendly and sensitive.

This situation gradually changed at the end of the 1920s, because of a change in the internal balance of power within the Committee: “the party line,” which emphasised that class struggle was everywhere, including in the North, and therefore required fighting against the “people’s enemies,” became dominant in the Committee at the VI Plenum in 1929. Many of the promoters of the “lenient” approach (e.g. Bogoraz-Tan) tried to adapt and soften the consequences for the natives, without directly confronting the party’s voice.

This change of approach was immediately reflected in concrete policies. So-called kulaks and shamans were deprived of civil rights and forbidden to vote for and be elected to local

councils (Karshakova 1996: 39; Slezkine 1994: 199–201). An extensive interpretation<sup>14</sup> of these notions deprived a considerable number of citizens of the right to vote (for example 569 individuals in the Yamal-Nenets national okrug; more than 1,000 in Khanty-Mansi national okrug, cf. Onishchuk 1986:135). Herds were confiscated and tax pressure increased. Moreover, Russians showed more and more presence and power in these remote areas.

How was this reflected in the culture base and how was all this perceived by the natives?

### *The example of the Kazym war*

We shall illustrate this issue by the example of the so-called Kazym war. Firstly we shall briefly present the complex events of this protest wave, in order to give a more concrete understanding of rebellion forms adopted by the natives. More details are to be found in the synthetic work by Art Leete dedicated to this event (Leete 2002; 2004a; 2007) and his overall comments about native resistance in Siberia (Leete 2007).

This summary is based on different sources: party archive documents, written memoirs of contemporaries, oral history, scholarly work both in Russia and abroad, literary works by Khanty authors (Leete 2004a: 17–25).

Different events led the Kazym Khanty leaders to confront Soviet power through its representatives. The uprising of the Khanty and Forest Nenets began in the autumn of 1931, after the representatives of the local soviet (council) had brought 48 native children to the boarding school at the Kazym culture base. The same year on 28 December, the Khanty raided the culture base and took 43 of their children back.

After a relatively peaceful period of about two years, while discontent with the elimination of the most respected indigenous leader from the soviet elections (in 1932) was growing, in March 1933, four Khanty “shamans” were arrested. Rumours had also circulated about further arrests. This stirred a violent conflict between the authorities and the native peoples.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the fishing co-operative from Kazym was sent to fish on Lake Num-To. The local people informed the fishermen that the lake was sacred and fishing there was not allowed<sup>16</sup>. Because of the tensions between the local people and the communist staff of the culture base, several Russian “propaganda teams” (*agitbrigada*) were sent to the area. Yet they did not meet any of the protesters, who had withdrawn to less accessible areas. The participants of the fourth *agitbrigada* were made up of local party leaders, whose involvement demonstrates the authorities’ growing concern. These were Pyotr Astrakhansev, the head of both the propaganda team and the executive committee of the Beryozovo district; female communist activist Polina Shnaider; Pyotr Smirnov, the head of the culture base; Zakhar Posokhov, a representative of

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<sup>14</sup>E.g., a Khanty possessing 200 or 300 reindeer was considered a “kulak” (Kantor 1935: 10).

<sup>15</sup> There is also another piece of information on possible factors triggering the Kazym resistance. Soviet scholar M. Budarin (1968) wrote that the native leaders brought photographs of Kliment Voroshilov (a Soviet politician), in which he wore a white navy uniform, and then showed them to the Khanty with the accompanying message that a white leader would soon come, from the upper courses of the Ob and Irtysh rivers, with twenty steamers full of soldiers and armaments, and that the Soviet domination of this area would not then last long (Kopylev & Retunsky 1965).

<sup>16</sup> Lake Num-To is not far from the upper course of several tributaries of the Ob River (e.g. the Tromyugan, Pim, Lyamin and Kazym rivers), and is a sacred site for local people. In winter, the Khanty and Nenets of the neighbouring regions used to go there and carry out sacrifices.

the secret police; and also some local “activists,” including Prokopi Spiridonov, a Khanty and head of the Kazym soviet.

On November 26, 1933, the *agitbrigada* reached Num-To. Polina Shnaider, in spite of being informed of the local peoples’ understandings, went to the island in the middle of Num-To. The island, on which there was a sacred site, was taboo for women. This action of sacrilege deeply disturbed the locals’ feelings.

Then Astrakhantsev’s group moved to the forest tundra, and on 3 December they met a group of Khanty and Forest Nenets. On 4 December, the members of the brigade were taken prisoners. The Khanty and Forest Nenets presented their demands in written form: the arrested shamans were to be released; fishing in the waters of Num-To should be prohibited, voting rights restored to shamans and kulaks; taxes on richer natives abolished; reindeer confiscations as well as forced labour for the culture base forbidden; the selling of fish and furs allowed; and all trading posts in the tundra should be closed. Also the children were not to be taken to the boarding school, court not to be held over the natives outside the indigenous areas, and all Russians, that is the culture base staff, must leave Kazym.

In this extraordinary situation, with the party’s envoys held as prisoners, the Khanty and Nenets held a shamanic ritual: the ritual leaders stated that gods ordered the offering of the captured Russians. The members of Astrakhantsev’s group were tied up and taken to a hill by reindeer sleds. They were throttled with a long rope tied around their necks, imitating the way reindeer were killed for sacrifice. After that the Khanty and Nenets sacrificed seven reindeer and held a traditional ceremony.

When the news on the event were heard some weeks later, retaliation started: troops were sent to the Num-To area, and on 18 February, 1934, there was a 30-minute skirmish between secret police troops and natives in a Khanty camp owned by Grigoriy Sengepov. Two Russians and Sengepov with his wife were killed during the fight. Other local people were arrested. It is said that only Engukh, a Forest Nenets, was able to escape.

Sometime before 21 February, another larger group of locals involved in the fighting were arrested, including the leaders of the uprising: Ivan Yernykhov and Yefim Vandymov (in Khanty named *Yänkow-iki*, ‘White Head’), the shamans who had carried out the ritual killing of the members of Astrakhantsev’s brigade. Spiridonov, the head of the Kazym soviet, was also arrested. He was accused of having collaborated with the local fighters throughout this period.

The eventual outcome of the events is confused and sources are hazy and contradictory. According to different official sources, 60 or 88 local people were arrested after the conflict, and 9 or 34 of them were later released. Two persons died before the trial (either heart problems or suicide). The others were condemned to different prison sentences; 11 were previously condemned to death, but they appealed and the death penalty was commuted into 20 years detention. According to archive material, the rest soon died in prison. However, the official data may not be reliable. Researcher G. Bardin has for example reported (without indicating his sources) that several hundred people were arrested (1994: 6). The present-day fieldwork materials – conversations with Khanty or Nenets people, oral history recollections among descendants of the the convicted – also suggest that the number of killed, or otherwise repressed people, is considerably higher than 50 (Leete 2002: 127-130). To avoid retaliation and repression, some natives left for the upper reaches of the neighbouring rivers (Nadym, Pur, Taz, Yugan, Lyamin, Pim, Tromyugan, and even Agan) and for the Yamal Peninsula. Security police

troops pursued participants of the uprisings in the forest tundra until 1935 (Kopylev&Retunsky1965).

In 1993, the relatives of the killed natives made an application for the rehabilitation of those who participated in the uprising, as protectors of their traditional rights and basic patterns of Siberian native life. However, this was turned down by the authorities.<sup>17</sup>

We may add that the impact of these events was enormous on the communities. Tatiana Moldanova, a contemporary Khanty writer elaborates in her story how women, who were not directly involved in the operations, were direct victims of the repressions, since they were deprived of the men, the providers for the family, and were left alone without hunting devices. Many of them starved with their children. The survivors kept silence about the events for several decades.

### **The Culture Bases Seen by the Natives**

While in the first part of this article, we described the culture base from the point of view of its programmatic goals and its activities, and in the second part we described the mode of the resistance in one indigenous community, we shall now attempt to analyse the indigenous point of view and delve into their critical relation with the cultural base.<sup>18</sup>

Of course we lack direct information from the participants of the events in the 1930s, for the natives were not the history-writers of these experiences. Still, we have indirect sources: press accounts, archival documents, memoirs of Soviet activists, and oral history, and through them, we know quite clearly what they wished for. Resistance was triggered by measures and events that were part of the cultural base initiatives. While keeping silent about the indigenous reactions, the press of the time reflects them in two ways, both typical to Soviet discourse— firstly, by emphasising class struggle and sabotage by kulaks and shamans (for example, Al'kor 1934: 29); secondly by observing “errors”<sup>19</sup> in the activity of the cultural base (Suslov 1934:36). We argue however that, while some attitudes by Soviet activists may have exacerbated the conflict, the causes were deeper in Soviet state policy. They were in the project as a whole and in the wider ambitions of Soviet construction, which were completely unacceptable from the indigenous perspective. Not only resolute resistance actions, as not giving to or taking children from school, but acts of avoidance such as not attending school or not using the services offered by cultural bases proved that the spontaneous impact of chain reaction, as predicted by Novitsky, was far from becoming true. Let us examine this in more detail.

### *Cultural misunderstandings*

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<sup>17</sup> From a total of 60, 49 participants of the uprising were found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment of different durations (including 10 persons who had initially been sentenced to death) in a session of the Ob-Irtysh oblast court held in Khanty-Mansiysk on 25 July, 1934. On 29 December, 1993, the Tyumen oblast Prosecution Office had a retrial of the Kazym War case, and decided not to restore the rights of the 49 participants of the war.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to mention that no generalisation is to be drawn from this example. All cases of resistance are shaped according to local conditions and traditions.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Suslov enumerates the “errors” committed by the Kazym culture base: “substitution of the local committee by the base; raw administration instead of political work”. While it is not explicitly said, clearly Suslov presents these “errors” as causes for the Kazym rebellion.

Cultural confrontation is not a new phenomenon in the North, and it is not concentrated only to the activities of culture bases. The first cause is racial prejudice of the Russians towards the indigenous peoples that often led them to attitudes from non-respectfulness to hostility or even violence (for example in the case of Khanty herders who wanted to create their own kolkhoz instead of working in a Russian-Komi cooperative and who were simply murdered by the cooperative leadership (Skachko 1931: 105–107). As a pivotal place in contact, the culture base was also a privileged place for communication and often enough for miscommunication.

The Kazym culture base was opened in a remote area, with few contacts with Russians, hence the natives barely had any knowledge of Russian. The mere name of the institution was ominous for them. Thus for the Khanty, culture base in Russian, *kul'tbaza*, reminded of *kul'*, which denotes an evil spirit (Balzer 1999: 107).<sup>20</sup> The culture bases must have appeared as dangerous places, especially because of the boarding schools, where children were exposed to alien influence without the protection of their parents. On the other hand, the Russians, ignoring all of the local culture and language, were not aware of the unhappy choice of name.

Other misunderstandings, with the same origin—ignorance from both sides—appeared in the children's diet. As noodles were not part of the native's diet, parents thought that their children were being fed with worms (Leete 2004a: 120). Conflicts and miscommunication took place on all levels including those that the Soviets defines as “everyday issues” such as refusal to go to the sauna, wear underwear, undress for night; boys being walked upon by females<sup>21</sup>, living in a multi-storey building that was seen as ritually polluting by the natives.

### *The natives and school*

School was, as we mentioned already, a critical issue in the natives' view.

As experienced by the Russian Orthodox missionaries, who had also attempted to have schools for natives, native families were reluctant to “give” their children to the boarding school (Irinarkh 1904; Irinarkh 1905). This did not change with the Soviet regime. Having a child in the boarding school meant to be deprived of labour force, to be separated for long months from the children, and to have them exposed to unknown teachings, actions and forces. Thus, they did not send their children to school willingly.

Diverse administrative methods were used against parents who did not want to send children to school: sequestration, court files, penalty taxes, forcible abduction. Parents were frightened, and some yielded. This brutal approach, as archival materials shows, was enacted by the director of the Kazym culture base, Filipp Yakovlevich Babkin, and the decisions taken by the local council. While some “results” may have been formally achieved, dissatisfaction was the main consequence of these constraints: Khanty leaders started discussing among themselves about the ways to oppose the Russians (Leete 2004a: 119–121).

The parents were also afraid of more specific dangers, especially after epidemics started to spread very quickly in the community. Actually in the Kazym school there was an epidemic of chickenpox and quarantine was declared, during which children were isolated from their

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<sup>20</sup> There are various Khanty deities with similar names, in which *kul'* is one element: *Kul'-iki* or *Kul'-lunkh* is associated with diseases and the underworld, also identified with the Christian devil; *Kul'-Ortyr* is an underworld god-spirit (Balzer 1999: 85, 87).

<sup>21</sup> In the Natives' tradition, it was not acceptable to have a female situated higher than a male, above a male. Walking on the head of one was thus considered as particularly shameful.

parents (Yernykhova 2003: 50–51). In general, children were weakened by a life very different from the one they were accustomed to live and were probably more sensitive to infections, as they were not resistant to the germs brought by the Russians. Mortality and disease were actually a traditional plague in Russian schools for several centuries (Efirov 1934: 54). Justified or not justified rumours of casualties were certainly one of the reasons of schools lacking popularity.

Moreover, parents were right in their fears of acculturation. True enough, in Soviet discourse and in the enlighteners' understanding, education was not supposed to Russify the children (it was supposed to be delivered in vernacular languages) but to give them instruments to get accustomed to the wider world. But in spite of the absence of this explicit goal in the discourse, parents were well aware that their children were taught how to live in a different world that was going to swallow them in the end (Golovnev&Osherenko 1999: 79). A good example of this reality is to be found in Soviet accounts of achievements: braid cuttings are considered as positive achievements the leaders of the bases were proud of (Terletskiy 1935:42).

It is thus understandable that protest against school was one of the most general points raised by the uprisings. The Kazym events started with the parents invading the school building and taking back their children to the tundra.

#### *The natives and economic exploitation*

Building culture bases was not the easiest of tasks: they were situated in remote locations and often building materials had to be brought to the area (for difficulties in building, see Bazanov&Kazanskiy 1939: 68–70). Some bases organised the whole work from larger villages, but others compelled natives to work, often without being paid as in Kazym, where Khantys were forced to participate in the building of the school. Other forms of economic exploitation, illegal by definition, were connected with the use of natives' reindeer, which were just taken without compensation, or with illegal appropriation of furs brought by Khantys in order to be exchanged (Yernykhova 2003: 99–100). Clearly this was not part of the declared Soviet project and can be seen as part of the denounced "defects and errors."

#### *The natives and the Soviets*

The indigenous communities had lived for centuries under Russian rule. While authorities, until the Soviet period, did not much interfere in the natives' lives, they still had a presence and had institutions that shaped their interaction. The natives did not contest the existence of these institutions. But when the wealthier of the communities, the most respected people as the "shamans," were impeached and forbidden to take part in political life, the local communities protested and acted out against the Soviets' decision. Thus, in Kazym, on 8 January, 1932, while the council wanted to exclude two menas kulaks, the Khanty population elected a board favourable to indigenous interests and did not allow the exclusion of the so-called kulaks (Leete 2004a: 128–129).

The principle of class struggle, so central to Marxism-Leninism, was alien to the natives' not-yet-ideologised worldview. The exclusion of people who were considered as leaders (the very reason they were eliminated) was one of the causes for dissatisfaction. In some cases, the protest went further: we have examples in which the communities demanded the return of their priest and the restoration of an Orthodox church, which was seen as a source of efficient rituals. They were reluctant to the kind of changes Soviet power wanted to impose them.

### *The natives and the staff of the culture base*

Clearly the behaviour of the people the Khanty and the Nenets happened to get in touch with determined at least partially the reaction to their enterprises. We have already mentioned the role of Babkin in the campaign for bringing children to school, and the predatory acts in taking furs or reindeer as well as in compelling people to work for free. Some other attitudes during the conflict worsened the relations: while fishing on the lake had triggered protest and intervention from the natives, the authorities answered by sending to Num-to different representatives, who, as a rule, did not meet with the indigenous representatives. But their attitudes were undoubtedly provocative enough to weight in the conflict. The first delegation was mainly composed of people connected with the base: its following director A. D. Shershnev, and the party secretary and head of the cooperative. While waiting for the natives to appear, they occupied their time with making grenades and preparing a rope for tying the Nenets in case they were "kulaks." These preparations were made openly, and the Nenets, undoubtedly, were informed of it, as it is stated in an official report (Sud'by 1994: 12). There were other Russian provocations during the events, but they came from people unconnected with the culture base as, for example, the party member Polina Shnaider.

### **Conclusion. The Destiny of the Culture Bases**

In the case of the Kazym events, the natives' reactions were triggered by two distinct yet merged provocations. The one concerned actions and behaviours that were not in agreement with the Soviet project and were not justified by it. These abovementioned actions could not but look familiar to the local indigenous population accustomed to Russians' insolence and arrogance. They were due to the same sense of superiority that pervaded the "white" persons' attitudes in relation to the natives: it is discernible even in the official writings (Tolkachev 1999: 13). But even without these provocations, the core of the project was due to spark off reactions.

The bases were developed according to an ideology that ceased to be topical in the mid-thirties. They were not meant to implement a policy of constraint, but to trigger spontaneous developments. Thus, their importance decreased. They did not disappear as locations, but they lost their central role in the process of Sovietisation. Resistance, because of the principles according to which the bases were established, deprived them of any sense. They were children of the Committee of the North. With the decline of its influence, they lost their impact and with its liquidation in 1935, the management of Northern policies was devolved to an economic organ, the one in charge of the Northern Sea Route (Glavsevmorput'). This



shows very well how Northern areas were seen as economic resources and not as human habitat. With this new vision of the North in which the human element is insignificant, real silence swoop down on the North.

As a Khanty scholar emphasises: “culture bases in the northern territories attract attention as a certain social experiment of the Soviet state” (Yernykhova 2010:102). We suggest to go further and to see culture bases as an imaginary site, the kernel of a utopian world, and from this point of view their failure may be seen as the embodiment of Soviet failure.

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