

**9.4. Article 4: *Yesterday's Memories, Today's Discourses:  
The Struggle of the Russian Sámi to Construct a Meaningful Past***

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# Yesterday's Memories, Today's Discourses: The Struggle of the Russian Sámi to Construct a Meaningful Past<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract.* When new discourses appear, they can cause a certain pressure to search for new meaning of past actions and therefore even change recollection. During a period of discursive transition, these processes of memory evolution can cause serious social rifts. These insights from oral history theories are applied in this paper to the Sámi people in Russia, who all too often are seen by outsiders as a homogeneous community. I seek to correct this distorted image by analyzing the several interconnected rifts crisscrossing the Russian Sámi society. The following social fault lines are identified: the generational, the gender, the *siyt*, and the Lovozero-and-the-rest rifts, as well as a rift of worldviews, which I describe through two conceptual poles called “activists” and “sovkhoists.” Thus, the article contributes to raising awareness about the potentially differing interests of the individuals who constitute what is usually called the Russian Sámi “community” and increasing the critical distance of outsiders towards generalizing claims about “the” Russian Sámi.

“History is an invention which reality supplies with raw materials. It is not, however, an arbitrary invention, and the interest it arouses is rooted in the interests of the teller,” writes Alessandro Portelli, citing Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s (1972) novel, *The Brief Summer of Anarchy*. He adds: “This is why ‘wrong’ tales are so very valuable. They allow us to *recognize the interests of the tellers*” (Portelli 1991:2, italics added). During my fieldwork among Sámi people in Russian Lapland,<sup>2</sup> I found many examples illustrating this statement, which is of eminent importance in this paper.

In the case of the Russian Sámi, I need to especially stress the fact that I speak about the interests of *each individual* teller. These interests

are the key to understand why a person “regards certain assertions as true, certain values and norms as right and certain experiences as truthful” (Gerbél and Sieder 1988:207, translated by the author). It may seem obvious that each individual has his or her own interests, but it has to be underlined here, because all too often in the “Western”<sup>3</sup> discourse about *the* Russian Sámi, they appear as *one* community with unitary interests (see Berg-Nordlie 2011 for an according media analysis on this topic). However, the stories I have listened to throughout Russian Lapland—which means both in the frequently visited settlement of Lovozero as well as in the more “pristine” areas—show that there is no such thing as one consolidated Russian Sámi community representing a certain set of

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interests, as imagined by the dominating discourse on this “community.” As has been noticed earlier, in Russian Lapland we can meet

very complex perceptions of past and present. . . . A specific research on the topic, with more serious engagement with theoretical contributions on the sphere of historical memory (well developed in anthropology) can bring a more profound analysis (Vladimirova 2006:222).

In this article, this is what I am endeavoring to do.

Grouping people according to ethnic or national boundaries—in our case both together—does not mean that there actually is such a homogeneous group as a substantial thing-in-the-world (Brubaker 2002). Gray et al. (2003:205) point at the same problem in relation to Siberian indigenous minorities:

At issue here is the concept of collaborating with communities, which has become very popular with funding agencies. But does one really collaborate with a *community* or with *individuals* in a community? Any community will contain diverse interests.

Indeed, also among the Eastern Sámi instead of a community we rather have a kaleidoscope of heterogeneous views on the present and the past, which determine how people act. These different views and even worldviews reflect the several, partially overlapping fault lines dividing the around 1,600 people<sup>4</sup> usually grouped under the common category of Russian Sámi. While the problem of seeing them as a community has been addressed earlier (Konstantinov 2015:18, 34; Vladimirova 2006:69–70, 2011:103), no systematic attempt at breaking up the supposed community into the ruptures dividing it has been undertaken so far. The goal of this paper is to describe these rifts and thus—borrowing Benedict Anderson’s (1983) famous term—deconstruct the “imagined community” of the Russian Sámi. Those rifts are not new insights *per se*, as the quoted literature in each section shows, but I wish here to give an amalgamated overview with the goal to counteract the idea of community and to contribute to a more fine-grained view of the Russian Sámi today. Furthermore, the understanding of these fault lines has become a crucial element in my broader oral history research about the Soviet past of the Russian Sámi because it helps to explain the mechanisms of selection of stories researchers are told about the Soviet past and the ways in which they are told. What follows, is an attempt to categorize several fault lines running through the Russian Sámi society. Namely, the rift of worldviews, which is a rather ideological rift characterized by different answers in the quest for a “Golden Age”: the generational rift; the gender rift; the *siyt* rift;<sup>5</sup>

and the Lovozero-and-the-rest rift. These categorizations are highly conceptual and are not in any way to be seen as absolute. Rather, they are subfields of identifications, which, combined in different constellations, reveal different patterns of social affiliations, divergent opinions and varying intentions of the interlocutors.

In many ways inspired by Ries’s (1997) study *Russian Talk*, my wider goal, then, is to offer a set of categories that helps to better grasp, on the one hand, cultural meanings and discursive structures among the Russian Sámi, and, on the other, the social and political sources and resonances of those underlying meanings and structures.

## Deconstructing the Imagined Community

*Where is the ‘Golden Age’? A rift of worldviews*

Well, opinions differ, but I kind of liked the Soviet rule better because there was true leadership. Now people have to live and cope on their own. The more you grab for yourself, the better off you are. . . . We had a millionaire *sovkhov*, it was the richest *sovkhov* [state farm] in the region. . . . But where has all that gone now? When the Soviet rule crumbled, everything disappeared. They ruined everything, just everything! At the time there were very good directors [of the *sovkhov* and of the district], the leadership had a firm hand (Interview of an elderly Sámi woman by the author, Murmansk Region, 2008).<sup>6</sup>

Of course life wasn’t easy in terms of living standards, and I would never want to see the Soviet times back, never! Today, we are much better off. It’s unimaginable that I should want to get back to the Soviet Union (Interview of an elderly Sámi woman by the author, Murmansk Region, 2013).

“In any culture, people (whether peasant, workers, academics, bureaucrats, business persons, or national leaders) do not just act, they act in particular ways because discourse makes these forms of action meaningful, appropriate, and valued” (Ries 1997:20). With changing discourses, the notions of what counts as meaningful, appropriate and valued change accordingly. The choice to do certain things—or also not to do them—is made, and motivations for it are given within the realm of talk.

Ironically, one of the more recent discursive rifts among the Russian Sámi has been created by the Nordic discourse about an imagined Russian Sámi “community.” Berg-Nordlie (2011) has extensively described this discourse about Russian Sámi in Nordic media and calls it a “discourse of need and misery.” What has to be added here is that the starting point for this “Western” discourse was an “Eastern” newspaper article, which had appeared first in the local Soviet newspaper *Lovozerskaia Pravda* (Vatonena 1988). This “raw

material” for a new discourse, as it were, was exported to the West (Vatonena 1989) and, after having been digested and assembled in the Nordic countries to a fullfledged discourse of need and misery, was reimported from the Nordic countries back to Russian Lapland by Westerners, as well as by locals with connections to their Nordic kin and other Western supporters of the new Russian Sámi ethnic revival movement. I propose to see this phenomenon as a nonconventional center-periphery vector. Instead of transporting universalized ideas of indigeneity and accordingly formulated policies from capital cities to remote regions (Stammler et al. in press), this center-periphery movement goes transnationally from one region to another. Both regions are seen by the capital cities of their respective countries as remote peripheries, and they share the same ethnic kin. However, one of the two regions sees itself as more developed in terms of wealth, infrastructure and civic society, and thus less peripheral than its counterpart on the other side of the border.

With this schematic description of a back-and-forth movement of thoughts over a state border, I wish to emphasize that discourses of lament are not a purely internal phenomenon of socialist and postsocialist society. However, such discourses certainly already had their independent social life during Soviet years—not in public, but in private discussions and practices (cf. Ries 1997).

Let me shortly discuss this very first article about the social hardships of the Soviet Sámi, which was published under the title “There are such Problems” (Vatonena 1988) in the height of the *glasnost*’ (transparency) and *perestroika* (re-structuring) policies. It was exactly in this year that revelatory works of history became a mass phenomenon throughout the media in the whole country (Ries 1997:92). The *Lovozerskaia Pravda* was (and is) the main informational organ of Lovozero and its district, where most of the Russian Sámi live since they had been removed from their traditional *siyts* due to collectivization and, later, Khrushchev’s agricultural amalgamation policy (*ukrupnenie*), as well as due to the needs of Soviet military, industry and infrastructure projects (Afanasyeva 2013; Allemann 2013; Gutsol et al. 2007; for more information on these policies and similar effects in Russia’s North as well as its central regions see Anderson 1996; Olson and Adonyeva 2013; Paxson 2005; Slezkine 1994; Vitebsky 2002, 2010; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001). Vatonena’s (1988) short article outlined the main negative aspects of the contemporary situation of Soviet Sámi people, such as the division of families, lack of housing, alcoholism, and suicides. In referring to these sufferings for the first time in an official newspaper, this article was indeed a ground-breaking piece of information.

By that time it was forbidden to export local newspapers, but Vatonena’s article still made its way out of the country and caused quite a furor among Nordic Sámi activists and researchers.<sup>7</sup> A year later an English version of the article was published in the *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs Newsletter* (Vatonena 1989) and thus reached an international audience. Considering the informational vacuum on Russian Sámi in the West before the appearance of this article, I argue that exactly this article was the starting shot to a new Western discourse on the Russian Sámi. However, the shortness and thematic limitedness of this article laid the ground for a subsequent series of “sweeping generalizations and schematizations of a starkly black-and-white character” (Konstantinov 2015:66) in a field that was an almost total “*tabula rasa*” (Berg-Nordlie 2011:33) before the appearance of Vatonena’s mighty article. I am not insinuating the author had any such initial intentions but rather describing self-perpetuating tendencies.

From that moment, during more than two decades, a relatively one-sided discourse of need and misery on the Russian Sámi arose in the neighboring Nordic countries and—this is one of my major conclusions from lengthy fieldwork in Russian Lapland—started to gain increasing dominance also on the eastern side of the border. This discourse is characterized by the *a priori* conviction that in Russian Lapland dominating groups from outside have always appeared as oppressors and exploiters of the indigenous population, that the Russian Sámi have always been passive victims, and that the Nordic Sámi are morally obliged to give a helping hand.<sup>8</sup> Referring to the situation in the 1990s, Overland and Berg-Nordlie (2012:105) rightfully say that “the need was indeed considerable in Lovozero, but hardly at the dramatic level that many people in the Nordic countries believed.” Berg-Nordlie (2011:31) attempts to name the deeper reasons for such tendencies:

Nordic Sámi self-representation has been characterized by “victim representations” focusing on past and present injustices resulting from the Nordic states’ division of Sápmi<sup>9</sup> and subjugation of the Sámi. . . . The “self-imagery of a colonized people” has become an important trait of Sámi national discourse. . . . Against this background, we may comprehend that the discourse of need on the Russian Sámi does not contrast with the Nordic Sámi self-image.

Offering a set of suitable elements of an oppressive state and being short enough to foster generalizations, Vatonena’s (1989) article was thus a legitimating starting point for the transfer of this Nordic self-image to the suddenly opened up *tabula rasa* of Russian Lapland.<sup>10</sup>

Among Nordic Sámi, as Berg-Nordlie (2011:32) puts it, the “self-image as colonized” as a dominant narrative commonplace often harkens back to an “Age of Normality,” which is nostalgically remembered as a lost “Golden Age” against a “Dark Age,” when the Sámi people lost their independence and were suppressed by modern states. In the course of the transfer of this mentioned self-image onto the newly accessible Russian Sámi, the role of the oppressor was naturally and self-evidently assigned to the Soviet state by most Western actors. In this view, the Soviet Union, beginning from the times of collectivization, was a Dark Age that now could be overcome with the support of the Nordic “‘older brother’ of sorts” (Berg-Nordlie 2011:31). From this perspective, the Golden Age would be located in a certainly pre-Soviet but otherwise not clearly defined faraway Arcadian past (a term already used by other authors, for example Cruikshank [1998] and Konstantinov [2015]), the essence of which is the same kind of unquestioned axiom that Julie Cruikshank (1998:59) described in another context: “the axiom that Native Americans lived in harmony with nature before the arrival of Europeans.” The present is seen as a time of traditionalist revival, not as bright as the referential Golden Age, but better than the darkest era of oppression, which lies already behind (a highly recommendable analysis of the trap of traditionalism among the Russian Sámi is given by Kuchinskii 2007).

While the Western need-and-misery discourse on the Eastern Sámi was gaining momentum in the Nordic countries for about a quarter of a century, it has been taken back to the homeland of its subject both by Nordic journalists, researchers, activists, and government officials and by Sámi activists from Russia with ties to the Nordic countries. That is why, when speaking of the Western discourse on Russian Sámi, it might be more appropriate to say Western and Western-influenced discourse. In the words of Berg-Nordlie (2011:32),

the self-image of having once constituted one unitary people, forcibly separated and repressed by alien states, serves as an ideological and rhetorical basis for political activity aimed at cultural revitalization, demands for state compensation, and increased border-transcending cooperation.

Konstantinov (2015) describes the interaction between Western and local actors in the realm of traditionalist revival during the past 20–30 years as a dysfunctional dialogue (or dialogical impasse). Although the dialogue happened within a shared need-and-misery discourse, the goals were only apparently similar. Using speech categories developed by the linguist Roman Jakobson (1960), Konstantinov (2015:66–83) shows that the two sides

have different languages uses: The Western understanding of messages from the East about revival of traditions has been quite literal (“substantive” in Jakobson’s language function term). The wish to return to pre-Soviet private-economy reindeer husbandry as the only traditional way was taken for granted and literal and the help offered was often meant in a similarly literal way, “motivated by postmodern values of indigeneity, cultural survival, gender issues and environmental concerns,” mixed with Cold War “clichés and crudities,” first and foremost the one of passive victims of the state (Konstantinov 2015:71–72). However, for the ethnopoliticians on the Eastern side, the whole back-to-the-roots talk is meant on a much more symbolic (“poetic” in Jakobson’s language function term) level: return to “tradition” must be understood as poetic engagement in the Western discourse of need and misery, which depicts the Soviet time generally as a huge faux pas, and makes a more instrumental use of the need-and-misery discourse. This impasse also has historical reasons about differing communication habits and skills: the new ethnopolitical elites in Russia were recruited from the local intelligentsia; as Soviet intelligentsia they were trained in ideological talk and in Soviet-style grassroots-to-power ways of communication, which entailed being professionally skilled in poetic talk (i.e., performative skills and a certain style of “double speak”). Performing “tradition” has itself become a long-standing Soviet tradition, as part of the “national-in-form, socialist-in-content” formula, in which ethnic components were confined to museal folklore. In that sense, the ethnopoliticians are already well-trained in performing traditionality, and “the art [of poetic talk] lives on, among other domains, in the genre of project proposals to funding agencies” (Konstantinov 2015:98). Yurchak (2006) sees performativity as a key factor in the relations between Soviet people and authoritative discourse during late Soviet years. He correctly states that this performativity

did not disappear in the post-Soviet period. On the contrary, in the new context this principle continued to play a central role in shaping the decisions and activities of many members of the last Soviet generation” (Yurchak 2006:296).

While Yurchak then shortly examines the new generation of business elite who had emerged from the Komsomol youth organization under these premises, the emergence of the new indigenous elite was shaped in the same setting of performativity and trained in the same skills of poetic talk.

According to Konstantinov, many Western interlocutors of the new activists did not grasp that the back-to-the-roots talk about going “traditional” and living in the tundra should be seen as poetic

and not as substantive talk. So, for example, Kals-tad (2009:64) literally understands and quotes,

Now we want to be engaged in what our souls desire. Namely, to engage in reindeer breeding, hunting, freshwater fishing, wild berry and mushroom gathering, and the production of objects of decorative and applied art. We want to be in unity with nature (quoted in Konstantinov 2015:201).

Also, Vladimirova (2006:63) noted a considerable mismatch of visions and prerogatives of the activist cross-border dialogue.

Returning to the threat of sweeping generalizations about the past, Julie Cruikshank (1998:62) adds another important nuance in her discussion of similar processes in North America: "Once appropriated, ideas can be relocated and welded to a dissident ideological agenda, a process that has been discussed elsewhere as the erasure of memory." She further talks about

the inevitable damage that occurs when ideas are separated from the settings in which they are produced. . . . Repatriating exported products is both naïve and dangerous, since it provides a simplified instrument of objectification" (Cruikshank 1998:70).

What is said here, applies not only to all kinds of people from the West who deal with the situation of the Eastern Sámi. Also, many Russian Sámi people have themselves adopted and repatriated these viewpoints. The sum of these viewpoints I call the "activist worldview."

My observation, however, is that by far not all Sámi people share this view, or they share it only partially, depending on the topic or on the occasion. Especially elders or those living in settlements less covered by ethnopolitical activism, and hence less influenced by the need-and-misery discourse, have a "shifted" view concerning what to regard as the Golden and what as the Dark Age. In these lifeworlds, the "Golden Age" is in many aspects situated in the Soviet times. This belief is a prevalent attitude in many post-Soviet settings. In her analysis of the lives of Russian rural women, Paxson (2005:88–119) calls this Soviet-time Golden Age a "radiant past" (*svetloe proshloe*), which today reflects the formerly ubiquitous Soviet concept of a "radiant future" (*svetloe budushchee*), the idealistic promise of a future day when fully developed communism would be achieved. Hence, this view is very common among those (mostly elderly people) who see themselves as having been honest and hardworking, devoting a lifetime to the achievement of a prospect radiant future. The topic of post-Soviet nostalgia and a corresponding Golden Age has been discussed widely and for many regions of the former Soviet Union, among others by Joesalu (2009),

Konstantinov (2015:24, 60–65), Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004), Yurchak (2006:8), and Ziker (2002:83).

Depending on the occasion or the topic, the Soviet Golden Age can be associated with Stalin's rule as a time of discipline and order, or, what I have met more often, the calmer Brezhnev era, mainly during the 1970s. This time is commonly designated as the period of stagnation when speaking about the whole country. In the case of Russian Lapland, it is mainly remembered as a period of relative stability, when the last resettlements—which affected an estimated 70 to 80% of the whole Eastern Sámi population in the 20th century (Bogdanov 2000)—were already completed (Afanasyeva 2013:29–32; Allemann 2013:91–94, 121, 137). This time is associated with common notions like collectivity, solidarity, lack of envy and greed, and regular income—everyday life qualities that are supposed to have vanished in the liberal, post-Soviet times. In the context of Northern rural regions, where most of the Russian Sámi live, this period has been very fittingly baptized by Konstantinov (2005, 2007, 2015) as the era of *sovkhoe* (derived from *sovkhoe* (*sovet'skoe khoziastvo*), meaning state farm). *Sovkhoe*'s main characteristic is a private-in-the-collective social economy. In this system, limited private possession is allowed, which in the case of loss is informally compensated from state farm property. This process is strictly speaking not legal, but it is not seen as morally illegitimate (Konstantinov 2015:16–17). Following Dunham (1990), Fitzpatrick (1994), Mitrany (1951), and other authors looking at the agency of "simple" people in negotiations with state power, Konstantinov (2015) sees the practice as part of an unwritten social contract and argues that the changes of the 1930s and later, in spite of their consequences, contained elements of compromise or deal and were not just ruthless imposition from above. However, such deals are tacit; they do not come into being through overt (again, "substantive") communication. The communication between the pinnacles of power and the grassroots is not direct but reflected in the ad hoc implementation of central decrees, which came from distant power. The private-in-the-collective principle in herding, which means that losses of private reindeer would be compensated by taking animals from the much bigger collective herd, is an example for that. The phenomenon equals to a mutual absolution from responsibility, with a shared preference for security as standing higher than freedom, as understood in modern Western terms. A further implication of that arrangement, however, is potential social, economic and legal vulnerability of the individual. Should an individual displease, punishment is easy because everybody is a transgressor. These outlines

of conversation between power and grassroots have been described by Konstantinov as general traits of grassroots-to-power ways of negotiation in authoritarian or mildly authoritarian regimes (Konstantinov 2015:62–65). In short, sovkhhoism can be described as a view of the world reflected in practice, in which a state entity manages the total life of a community, allowing its members to maintain private domestic economies, informally at its expense” (Konstantinov 2005:173). Concerning people whose lifeworlds are situated far away from the main areas of ethnopolitical activism, Konstantinov (2005:173) speaks of a “prominence of sovkhhoist nonethnic traditionalism, the persistence of sovkhhoism itself as a dominant worldview and practice, and, consequently, the negative position of the majority community as regards pre-Soviet ethnic traditionalism and related resurjective projects” (see also Vitebsky 2002:187). This means that, firstly, in the sovkhhoist mindset people do not so much group themselves along ethnic boundaries as it is the case in the activist mindset; secondly, “traditionalism” here means a back-to-the-Soviet-roots nostalgia. In reindeer husbandry on the Kola Peninsula, forms of sovkhhoism have a strong standing to this day. The adaptation and reinterpretation of the private-in-the-collective principle in post-Soviet times can be seen as an effective grassroots survival strategy in uncertain times (Konstantinov 2015:180–275).

In this worldview, which Konstantinov sees as the most widespread one among the Russian Sámi, the idea about an indefinite pre-Soviet Golden Age counts much less compared to what the Western discourse of suffrage suggests. What is retrospectively seen here as a Golden Age, consists largely of the mature Soviet times as a lived period of relative prosperity, or at least stability, epitomized by the main employer in rural settings, the *sovkhhozy*. As Yurchak (2006) correctly criticizes, such views have all too often been disregarded by Western scholars by reducing them to results of indoctrination of beings without agency, within binary views of an oppressor vs. oppressed relation. However, “for great numbers of Soviet citizens, many of the fundamental values, ideals, and realities of socialism were of genuine importance” (Yurchak 2006:283). The Dark Age, in the sovkhhoist view, began with the reforms of Gorbachev and more or less lasts until now (cf. Konstantinov 2015:61). For the sum of such attitudes, I shall use the term “sovkhhoist worldview,” which I schematically oppose to the already introduced “activist worldview.”

Berg-Nordlie (2011:32) states that the

[Nordic] retellings of Sámi history are common enough to be considered a “national myth”—applying Kaufman and Edelman’s terminology, in

which “myth” denotes not a falsehood, but a narrative that forms a part of an ethnic group’s “national mythology”: it infuses actual or imagined events with meaning, creating a “shared history” for a group of people, and hence unifies them around an historical experience.

It is exactly this mixture of the actual and the imagined that forms a pivotal point in our interpretations as oral historians. What has been mostly ignored by the Western discourse on Russian Sámi is that there does not exist one Golden Age to which more or less everybody would refer, and hence there is also no common, unifying national myth.

Thus, I have outlined one important rift in the Russian Sámi society: the one between the “activists” and the “sovkhhoists.” However, I am far from claiming that these are distinct groups and that each person sticks strictly either to one or the other worldview. Even within one and the same person these two worldviews very often coexist. Similarly to the situation among the Russian Sámi, Gallinat (2009) noticed that there is a dominating victim and survivance discourse among former GDR citizens in rather official settings, whereas in more intimate settings they might also talk about the pleasant aspects of their lives in the GDR (see Stammler et al. 2017 for a deeper analysis of this phenomenon, which they call frontstage and backstage memory). The choice of saying something in the activist or sovkhhoist *code*—speaking in semiotic terms (cf. Eco 1976; Manning 1987)—depends on the intentions, which in their turn depend on many factors, such as the current relationship between the interlocutors or the presence or absence of other people. Many variations and fluctuations exist between these two conceptual poles, which in their “pure” form are formalized theoretical entities and serve as analytic categories. In this paper, I will use these two terms for denominating these worldviews and for people tending in this or that situation to one or the other perspective. In order to avoid confusion, I will use the term “ethnopolitical activists” when talking about activists in the more common and direct sense of ethnopolitically active persons.

Within the Russian Sámi society, the activist-sovkhhoist opposition is primordial an elite versus nonelite one. It is a vital interest of many Russian Sámi ethnopolitical activists—who in most cases are part of the intelligentsia<sup>11</sup>—to engage into the Western need-and-misery discourse and use it in their agenda (for example through articles on the Norwegian online newspaper *Barents Observer*, like Artieva 2014). This attitude of some Sámi politicians, who are among the most well-known both in the West and at home, has only recently started to meet criticism by Western scholars such as Scheller’s multiple disapprovals

in scholarly publications (Scheller 2013), newspapers (Scheller 2011), and an open letter (Scheller 2014). However, many locals, particularly those who tend to rather sovkhoist views, often feel misrepresented by their Sámi politicians. Dismissive attitudes for the need-and-misery discourse and the ethnopolitical activists engaging in it go hand in hand: "The imported Western discourse is locally perceived to serve mainly a small number of urban-based ethnic activists," was already noticed by Vladimirova (2006:341). The undertakings of those engaged in activism are seen mainly as a pursuit for personal material or social gain. In this sense, also the ethnopolitical activists are perceived as behaving in a sovkhoist way by applying the private-in-the-collective principle to ethnopolitical projects: from the projects of the "community," they feel allegedly entitled to "saw off" their personal share (Konstantinov 2015:199–200). However, sovkhoist criticism of the private-in-the-collective economy of ethnopolitical activists applies moral judgment, which it does not apply to own private-in-the-collective actions in tundra-related activities.

In this view, the use of the need-and-misery discourse by Russian Sámi ethnopoliticians—and the instrumental use of a resurrected ethnic self-identity in general (see Karaseva 2012 for a comparison of the use of resurrected ethnicity among the Komi and the Sámi in Lovozero)—can be seen as an acquired cultural capital in Bourdieu's (2002) sense, which under given circumstances can relatively easily be converted into economic capital. As Schweitzer et al. (2015:127) put it, "identity choices can be strategic." This negative attitude is important to mention because in interviews I met it so frequently among Russian Sámi towards some of "their" ethnopoliticians and towards Sámi activism in general. Here is one example:

A: Now listen what I'm telling you: They send money [the Nordic Sámi]. Those who take that money, they dole out a small part of it, and the rest lands in their pockets. That's how they line their pockets.

Q: And the foreigners can't control that?

A: No, they can't. Our folks write some reports, put together some stories. . . . Everybody thinks about their own pocket (Interview of an elderly Sámi woman by the author, Murmansk Region, 2008).

I wish to enter two caveats here. First, by far not all ethnopolitically active Sámi people live and act in the realm of need and misery. Many see the onesidedness of such a discourse in that it fosters support from the West but obstructs a constructive dialogue with the Russian authorities. They prefer a more constructive approach of cautious negotiations with the Russian authorities instead of conjuring a Soviet-Russian continuity

of oppression and constant public blaming of the Russian authorities; as an example for such an approach could serve Iakovleva's (2014) speech at the UN World Conference on Indigenous People. This difference between the "radicals" and "pragmatists" is a considerable line of rupture among the ethnopolitical activists. Second, despite some proven affairs of self-enrichment (cf. Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:96–97), the alleged opportunism is by far not always a demonstrated fact. Independently of proof, it is relevant here as a matter of perception by others and thus a significant reason for the general lack of cohesion between parts of the ethnopolitical leadership and those who should benefit from their activities. As a rule, misdeeds of politicians stick to them much longer than their successes.

To be sure, the need-and-misery discourse in the representation of Soviet realities also plays an important role in oral history interviews. Constructing a Soviet-Russian continuity of oppression by engaging in the need-and-misery discourse serves the contemporary goals and interests of parts of the intellectual elite while pursuing their ethnopolitical agenda. The world of lament of the Sámi intellectual elite, which I describe here, has striking analogies to the dominating discourse of lament during perestroika among Muscovite intelligentsia, as it was brilliantly described by Ries (1997). "In a period of profound social revolution, this voice was full of lamentation, alarm, cynicism, and despair," and, citing Moshe Lewin's "Russia/USSR/Russia: The Drive and Drift of a Superstate," Ries (1997:17) adds: "The contribution of some of the media and many of the intelligentsia to a panicky view of things is undeniable." Continuous lamentation, posits Ries (1997:17, 120), happened at the cost of a reasonable social evaluation and reformulation.

Ries's observations about the Russian intelligentsia can be rightfully applied to the first generation of Russian Sámi ethnocultural and ethnopolitical activists because their educational backgrounds and careers were essentially conformed to the Soviet, culturally Russified, trajectories of intellectuals (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:83; Vitebsky 2002:188; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:85). They almost all obtained a higher education in Murmansk or Leningrad, in most cases at the Faculty of the Peoples of the North at the Herzen Institute<sup>12</sup> (cf. Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:55, 75).

The difference between the activist and sovkhoist stances, which I encountered so much in my narrative interviews, leads us to the inherent relationship between oral history and political agendas. In political struggles, oral testimony very often plays an important role. Remembrance already acquires a political dimension through



**Figure 1.** Image depicting one of two conceptual poles of Eastern Sámi society. Here, urbanized activists (mostly women) with higher education are shown in their roles as ethnopoliticians epitomizing the activist worldview.

the mere fact that every look at the past inevitably occurs from the standpoint of the present. In the process of politicization of oral testimonies, different social players mobilize their energies towards a given cause. Social movements, nongovernmental organizations, and of course the state apparatus, are agents of political ideas and manipulate the past in order to achieve their goals (Lorenz 2011:125–26). “Manipulate” is a strong expression, but we need to keep in mind one of the basic principles of oral history, namely that *there is no one objective truth* when it comes to the representation of history (Allemann 2013:17–21). Hence “manipulation” here means gaining others’ approval of an agent’s meaning-giving constructions, and thus can be explained as a process that is legitimate from the standpoint of an agent.

In the discourse of need and misery, the continuing use of generalizations not only cemented the opinions of the Western recipients of such talks. It has also shaped the tellers’ memories of the past. However, as oral historians, we are far from regarding statements in a pronounced activist or sovkhoint view as lies. “Narrated life stories are bound, at their origins, to the present time of their production. The narrator’s current life situation and his current perspective on life determine the way he reflects back on the past” (Fischer-Rosenthal and Rosenthal 1997:148–49, translated by the author). Nor is memory engraved in stone, nor is it just a static mirror of facts in the past: “Errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings” (Portelli 1991:156).

Over the years, the activist viewpoints have seen a popularization among the Russian Sámi from the first generation of Sámi ethnopoliticians towards a broader public, and the rift between activist and sovkhoint worldviews became an



**Figure 2.** Image depicting the conceptual pole of Eastern Sámi society opposite to the one shown in Figure 1. In this photograph are rural men (in this picture Sámi and Komi herders working together) with a lower level of education, which epitomizes the sovkhoint worldview.

important element running through several other social fault lines dividing the Russian Sámi society: the generational, the gender, and the territorial rifts, which I shall touch upon in the following sections.

Figures 1 and 2 symbolize the two conceptual poles of Eastern Sámi society presented in this article: urbanized Sámi ethnopoliticians, predominantly women, with higher education, with a highly visible publicly performed indigeneness, epitomizing the activist worldview versus the publicly almost-invisible rural men, grouping much less along ethnic lines but rather along common tundra-related occupational interests (in this picture Sámi and Komi herders working together), with a lower level of education, epitomizing the sovkhoint worldview.

## The Generational Rift

Q: Have you ever thought of going back to the lifestyle of your parents?

A: Oh, no. I’ve never even thought about it. I wouldn’t mind visiting and spending some time where my ancestors used to live. But to work there, clean up after somebody, no thanks. I’m quite squeamish about these things, you know [laughing] (Interview of a mid-aged Sámi woman by the author, Murmansk Region, 2013).

The activist–sovkhoint rift is in many ways a generational one. In the oldest generation, the elite versus nonelite opposition is still preserved. There is a majority with nostalgic, sovkhoint perspectives against a smaller group of elders who were among the pioneers of Sámi ethnopolitical activism and who have strong ties with the Nordic and other countries.

The middle generation has proportionally more proponents of the activist point of view, especially among women who, in this generation, already fell into an extreme gender division between “tundra men” and “urban women” and are often employed in the social sector (for more details on this see the section about the gender rift). Many of these people have been raised at boarding schools. They often mention this as the main reason for perceiving themselves as Sámi with an indirect or reconstructed experience and knowledge of their native culture (cf. Scheller 2013:405). One female interlocutor from Lovozero, for example, told me that she feels completely urbanized and blames mainly her education for this. She enjoys living for a certain time in the tundra, but she feels like a visitor there, and she would not want to give up all the comfort of an apartment, like tap water, electricity, and gas. Besides, there was a practice by the boarding school teachers of paying regular visits to parents and convincing them about the “harm” of bilingualism for their children, which made many parents of the older generation adopt Russian as the main language also at home.

Within the youngest generation, we must, first of all, differentiate between those who explicitly identify themselves as Sámi and those who do not. There are many young people who do not identify themselves primarily as Sámi, despite their Sámi roots. It is hard to assess the overall amount of those people in Russian Lapland, with its highly multiple identities (cf. Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:126–27), which are mainly due to Soviet settlement policies and, as a consequence, intermarriage between Sámi, Komi, Nenets, and people arrived from the South during Soviet times (Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Armenians and many others, who are usually subsumed under the term *priezzhye*, in English aptly translated as “newcomers”) (cf. Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:20, 24; see Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:92 about a similar situation in another case study). Especially within the younger generation, self-identifying as a Sámi or not as a Sámi matters a lot, because the continued existence of Sámi culture and languages depends on those who are young and who identify themselves as Sámi. Only they bring along the interest and enthusiasm to, for example, learn a Sámi language from scratch.

My following observations concern those young people who identify themselves primarily as Sámi. Among them, the activist viewpoints are not anymore tied to an elite. They became a relatively common attitude. Konstantinov (2015:66) comes to the same conclusion:

There is an increasing risk that popular perceptions of the Soviet past will take such black-and-white images as accurate. This public by now, it

should be noted, represents not only a loosely defined “Western” popular opinion, but also the younger generations of the post-Soviet world.

This change occurred thanks to the cultural revitalization work carried out over the last two decades by middle and older generation Sámi who, while doing this work, were both carriers of and surrounded by the need-and-misery discourse dominating among activists. This younger generation now represents a public, which learned about both the Sámi culture and the Soviet times from the school desk, from assembly halls and open-air celebrations. The babies of the 1980s and 1990s were thus the true *tabula rasa* generation, who, in their wish to feel Sámi, received the needed knowledge primarily from the activist sources. In many cases, they could not receive this knowledge in full amount from their parents, who belonged to the generation that was most extensively covered by the boarding school system (cf. Bloch 2004; Liarskaya 2013). Hence, the most significant proponents of an activist view on the Soviet past of the Sámi, consist in the young, post-Soviet generation: “As the gap with lived experience widens, the image of the ‘masses’ as passive, downtrodden victims of ruthless power seems to spread” (Konstantinov 2015:66).

Moreover, while the young “masses” absorb the Western discourse on Russian Sámi in their homeland, the new generation Russian Sámi elite is shaped and educated in the West: Among the Russian Sámi, Nordic Sámi educational institutions have taken over the former role of the Herzen Institute of shaping the indigenous educational top layer (for more details on this topic, see chapter “Educational Reorientation” in Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:74–91). An ambivalent effect of this reorientation is that even evidently wrong Western assumptions and prejudices about the Eastern Sámi, which the older generations would reject, are thus on the way to becoming institutionalized. This applies, for example, to the view of the Russian Sámi as a unitary “community,” an idea, which also elderly people with a predominantly activist worldview are ready to deny—usually after our acquaintance has lasted already for some time and only when talking in a private setting. I agree with Konstantinov (2015:18), who talks about an “illusion entertained by visitors that by talking with a few local people one can hear the ‘community voice,’” and I would add that this visitor’s view on an imagined community has been internalized by many Russian Sámi of the younger generation.<sup>13</sup>

However, the positive effects of this educational reorientation cannot be left out of sight. First of all, the Nordic Sámi educational institutions contribute more to the formation of a Sámi

identity rather than to a cultural Russianization, like in the case of the Herzen Institute<sup>14</sup> (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:83). Secondly, this process of shaping a pronounced Sámi identity is likely to contribute to overcoming the social and ideological rifts, which I am presenting in this paper and have so much inhibited the achievement of ethnopolitical goals in the past two-and-a-half decades. There are chances that the in-group cohesion among the next generation Sámi will be greater than before exactly thanks to some of the need-and-misery discourse's generalizations.

## The Gender Rift

To go there [to the tundra], to live and work there for somebody, to cook there for somebody, I'm not ready to do that. They asked me [to work there] when my husband started working there [at the sovkhos as a herder]. They tried to persuade me: "Let's go to the tundra, you will be close to your husband." "And what about the children," I asked. "Well, they will be at the boarding school." But I said, "No, the kids have to be with their mom." So, that's why the tundra simply isn't for me. I was already used to [living in the settlement] (Interview of a mid-aged Sámi woman by the author, Murmansk Region, 2013).

The deep rupture between worldviews within the Russian Sámi society is also marked by a notable gender division. This gender division has several roots, originating both from local and countrywide factors. It is a phenomenon present throughout the Soviet North and has been aptly named "gender shift" by Povoroznyuk et al. (2010; see the whole issue of this journal volume, which is completely dedicated to the gender shift in the Russian North), showing that this gender separation has been a dynamic process. In Russian Lapland, this division had already begun before the revolution through growing contacts with the Russian and the Komi cultures (Konstantinov 2015:161). The Komi way of herding, which already included a stronger gender separation than among many other Northern peoples, formed the foundations for the Soviet forms of reindeer economy (Habeck 2005:207; Povoroznyuk et al. 2010:17–18). Ultimately, the gender division was enforced through sedentarization/urbanization (Slezkine 1994:187–303), which had already begun in the 1930s and was pushed through with the policy of amalgamation (*ukrupnenie*) of the rural sectors of Soviet economy in the 1950s (Postanovlenie TsK KPSS i Soveta Ministrov SSSR ot 16 Marta 1957 G. "O merakh po dal'neishemu razvitiuu ekonomiki i kul'tury narodnostei Severa," 1968). Among all Northern indigenous peoples of the Soviet Union, sedentarization had been accomplished to the fullest degree and at the earliest among the Sámi (Bogoiavlenskii 1985). Already

Anokhin (1963:264) saw the contrast between the nomadic living of the head of the family and the sedentary life of all other family members as the main contradiction of the contemporary life of Soviet Sámi.

The gender separation meant that the families were allocated an apartment and the children sent to school in an urban setting, mostly Lovozero, whereas the working place, mostly for men, remained in the tundra. For traditionally tundra-connected people, private and professional lives were since then territorially separated. This split led to a general devaluation of traditional occupations. When having children of school age, many mothers, having the possibility to do so, preferred to stay near them in the village, taking a job in an urban setting. This understandable wish of mothers was congruent with the goals of Soviet policies: to "civilize" Northern indigenous people by sedentarizing them, to eradicate certain classes and the patrilineal clan as backward forms of social organization, and to replace subsistence economy by more rationalized and productive forms (concerning pre-Soviet patrilineal structures among Eastern Sámi, see Kuchinskii 2008:138–146). In this new, rationalized world, life in the tundra was to be lived only for professional reasons, which means only by male herders and few female housekeepers, and only in shifts. People not related to these activities were to be employed in other jobs in the settlement (Balakshin 1985; Lashov 1985). As a consequence, typical village occupations like cook, teacher, librarian, bookkeeper, shop seller, and others were taken over mostly by women. This process of defeminization of the land was accomplished in Russian Lapland, as well as in many other places of the Russian North, during the 1970s. By that time, the relationship of indigenous women both to their men and to their land had been completely reshaped. Their concept of home and hearth had undergone a significant shift towards urban comfort. The men had to leave for the tundra without their women, and also today the tundra of Russian Lapland is, with only a few exceptions, a women-free space (cf. Vitebsky 2002; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001; concerning analogous gendered consequences of collectivization in central rural Russia, see Olson and Adonyeva 2013:74–75).

In the wake of these socioeconomic changes, exogamy became an important factor. Again, having the choice, women often preferred to keep the achieved urban comfort and marry one of the many *priezzhye* (up to 90% of all marriages between 1975 and 1985, according to Bogoiavlenskii 1985), while Sámi men remained very often unmarried. By 1989, around 60% of all Sámi men in the Lovozero District were unmarried (Vatonena 1988:3; similar developments took place also

elsewhere in the Soviet North, see for example Vitebsky 2002,2010; Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001).

Within the next generation (now the middle one) this development has been accentuated by the boarding school, where girls were generally much better pupils than boys. Boys were often skiving off, much more often held responsible for offenses, and often left school after the basic compulsory schooling period. Here, I will give only a very sketchy explanation for this gendered performance discrepancy, a topic that would certainly deserve a separate paper. Besides other literature, which again shows that this gender discrepancy already at school level is a phenomenon throughout the Russian North (Bartels and Bartels 1998, 1995; Bloch 2004; Konstantinov 2015:155–159), there is evidence from my interviews as well as from archived statistics. For example, according to a report of the Commission on Juvenile Affairs of the Lovozero District, in the second quarter of 1974, ten of a total of 12 offenses by minors were committed by boys (*Otchet o rabote komissii po delam nesovershennoletnikh pri Lovozerskom Raiispolkome* 1974). The proportions are similar in all quarterly reports of that time. As leisure activities were organized by the schools in so-called circles, there was a channeling based not on coercion but on the socially defined gender roles inherent to the majority culture values transmitted by the educational system from the earliest childhood:

Education in the family, in which young boys play with mechanical toys, and girls with dolls, characteristic of mainstream Russian society, has tended to influence both indigenous Sami family educational practices and those of related para-indigenous communities (Konstantinov 2015:158).

According to many of my interviewees, among the teenagers, the girls attended social activities, art or folklore circles, whereas the boys were more engaged in sports or in the circle Young Reindeer Herder (*Iunyi olenevod*), if not skiving off. Thus, girls were pushed towards more intellectual activities, usually performed within urban boundaries, and boys towards more physical activities in the tundra. These boundaries were never completely or officially impermeable to the other sex, but the numbers speak for themselves: In 1981–1982, the Faculty of the Peoples of the North at the Herzen Institute had 240 students, of which only about 25 were men (Bartels and Bartels 1995:63), which is even higher than the countrywide gendered distribution of pedagogical and other social professions (Koval 1995). Relying on the notebooks of a teacher at the Lovozero boarding school, Konstantinov (2015:89) states:

A major problem for the school was that such children continued to see their parents. This breach of administrative discipline could not be eradicated.

It appears that school and other local authorities alike did everything possible for Internat children to stay “this side,” as it were, of the town-tundra rift, tundra being equated . . . with alcoholism and general absence from social life and “culture.”<sup>15</sup>

While the girls were “automatically”—i.e., according to the existing gender roles of the majority society in which they received their education—encouraged and thus more able to achieve success within this system, boys had much more difficulties in adapting. This resulted (and continues to result) in an often dismissive attitude by the boys and later grown-up men to social, intellectual, and political work, which is considered as effeminate. More often than not, men confine themselves to the tundra, be it for work or just during their spare time, as a place far from vague talk (cf. Konstantinov 2015:66–95). This could be, in former times, the Soviet ideological talk or, today, the new Western need-and-misery discourse on topics like traditionalism and revivalism. All in all, men were less resilient than women when it came to adapting to the urbanization of everyday life, but they kept a much stronger connection to the land. Women’s resilience, by contrast, was greater in the new urbanized life introduced by the state, but they lost to a greater extent their ability to live in and interact with the land. “Those who are viewed as resilient in one social and geographical space may be vulnerable in another,” as it was aptly phrased by Ulturgasheva et al. (2014:748) commenting on a strikingly similar situation among Siberian Eveny. These differences in resilience can be explained by the gendered values of the majority society people were shaped in.

It follows that not many Sámi men live in activist lifeworlds or take on activist viewpoints. As a tendency, the elder ones have rather sovkhoist views, whereas younger ones often have a pronounced “devil-may-care” attitude. On the other side, the activist lifeworld is a predominantly female sphere. This firm place of the women in the Sámi society corresponds more to a countrywide tendency: Within “the strongly gendered professional divisions in Soviet (and post-Soviet) society, the so-called ‘ideological sphere’ has a strongly female profile in its lower and middle-level tiers” (Konstantinov 2015:91–92; cf. Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:99). Coming back to the contemporary ideological activist-sovkhoist opposition, this explains why the share of women in the “ideological talk” of need and misery is so high compared to the proportion of men—in the realm of Sámi ethnopolitics, women have occupied not only the lower and middle levels of ideological production but also the upper level. They thus firmly dominate the activist side of the activist-sovkhoist opposition described in this article. The historical explanation of this female-dominated leadership

might sound paradoxical to most Western actors engaged in the need-and-misery discourse about Russian Sámi: their partners in Russia, almost exclusively women, have gained their abilities to engage in such a discourse thanks to their Soviet education and careers. The roles they were assigned by Soviet society in their private and professional lives evoked an association of socially defined female values and official values that included notions of tidiness, moral order, and “culture” in general (Olson and Adonyeva 2013:311; Ries 1997:71–72, 81), which, in turn, were connected to the topos of village/town/city.

In this system of values, the men and the land were marginalized, and rural men—in this case, Sámi men—experienced a downward social movement (cf. Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001:93). The marginalization of men has a long history rooted in the beginnings of collectivization throughout the Soviet Union when men as household leaders were usually more often blamed as exploiters than their women and other household members. From the very start of the revolution, rural men usually had a harder time getting on good terms with Soviet power, while women were more often victimized and thus made natural allies of the Soviet liberators (Massell 1974; Olson and Adonyeva 2013:56; Slezkine 1992:66). These are the main underlying reasons for what superficially looks like a lesser ability of indigenous men to cope with social upheavals in the Soviet North, compared with indigenous women.

Women, as Vitebsky (2010) puts it, are now mothers and wives only in the village, and most do not wish any more to live in the tundra, nor do they have any commitments to a tundra-connected life. On the one hand, they say it is simply too cold and uncomfortable out there, and, on the other hand, life there is perceived as uncultured (*nekul'turnaia*) and uncivilized (*netsivilizovannaia*). These two concepts “lie at the heart of the Soviet ideal of how one should live, and persist into post-Soviet consciousness. The continuum from wild to civilized, from wilderness to village to city, is reflected in all aspects of conduct, dress, and comfort” (Vitebsky 2010:42). Thus, there are two causal strings, which explain the higher social status of women among the relocated Sámi: higher social status within the imposed framework of new social values here clearly met a practical appreciation of everyday comfort, which only the town was able to offer (e.g., gas, electricity, sewage). In this sense, bringing “culture” (understood as “civilization”; see Anderson 1996) to the people has been a productive rather than a repressive effect of power, as Volkov (2000:215) interprets in a Foucauldian manner, which increased the appeal of Soviet power. It also explains why the women became more often or just more active activists: having

focused on an urbanized life with a corresponding educational and professional curriculum, they are more used to verbal communication as practiced in settlements (versus the rather wordless communication in the tundra).

Village girls say that they could not imagine marrying a herder, because of their lack of conversation: Television and magazine portray life as a torrent of words and easily revealed passions. . . . To them, the men's communication with animals, rivers and mountains which make much speech unnecessary seems maladaptive. Rather than a talent, it is now interpreted as a deficiency (Vitebsky 2010:42).

That is also why for me, as an oral history researcher in Eastern Lapland, it has always been much easier to speak with women.

### The *Siyt* Rift

One day I was approached by a woman, I don't know exactly who she was, but she was one of the locals: “You are not one of us [*vy ne nashal*,” she said, and I answered: “No, I'm not and will never be! I have to live here because our people have been resettled here by force, you see? We've never lived here before and never ate your whitefish. We used to eat salmon instead, so shut up” (Interview of an elderly Sámi woman by the author, Murmansk Region, 2013).

In regard to Siberian indigenous settlements, Gray et al. (2003:204) have noted that “many ‘communities’ in Siberia . . . were created relatively recently and artificially (during the forced relocations of the 1960s, or even later, during the destruction of the state farms in the early 1990s).” Exactly the same applies to Russian Lapland. Western and Western-influenced literature often disregards an important set of fault lines across the Russian Sámi society resulting from exactly those relocations. Although deploring the relocations is a prominent feature of the need-and-misery discourse, an important heritage from the prerelocation social organization is completely left out of sight within the Western idea of a primordial, pre-Soviet unitary Sámi “community”: the spiritual and emotional place attachment to the original *siyts*, the Sámi local communities. A good definition of the *siyt* is given by Kuchinskii (2008:96, translated by author):

The *siyt* is: 1) a socially important center; 2) a community of people, interconnected by kinship, culture, religion, husbandry, and history; 3) self-identification; 4) from a historical point of view, a nature compound (also in a religious sense), to which the life of many generations of the same community can be connected.

The *siyt* as a social institution in many ways was remarkably stable for about 400 years (cf. Kuchinskii 2008:134–138, 145–146, 182–186).

Land is in Western juridical terms mostly associated with property. A further very important dimension in local interpretations of land is one of associations, memories, and kinship (Vitebsky 2002:182). Many interviews have shown that the place attachment of people to their *siyts* of origin did not just evaporate together with their elimination in the 20th century and the following creation of new “communities” through relocations (Afanasyeva 2013; Allemann 2013; Gutsol et al. 2007). My collected biographical narratives reveal that the defunct *siyts* have remained an important identity marker to this day (see quotation at the beginning of this section). The sample of interviews collected so far indicates that one could speak even today of several communities depending upon the former *siyt* from which somebody originates.

Here, generational and territorial rifts are interconnected: On the one hand, there is the fact that the original *siyts* have been disbanded and people relocated due to Soviet policies. This upheaval led to the destruction of many cultural features. For example, living together in bigger settlements without regard to the former *siyt* borders rather accelerated the loss of the different Sámi languages because Russian (and in some cases Komi) became the interethnic and intraethnic *lingua franca* (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:60). This situation is most visible in Lovozero, which for centuries had been an average-size Sámi *siyt*, but had become mainly Komi dominated since their immigration to the Kola Peninsula at the end of the 19th century. Due to the relocations, since the 1960–1970s, the high interethnic Sámi/Komi/Nenets/Soviet-incomers differentiation of the vast lands of the Kola Peninsula has been concentrated in the tiny territory of Lovozero. It became the “capital city” of the Russian Sámi, with the biggest number of them living there. But at the same time, in absolute numbers, they were behind the Komi and the Soviet-time incomers population of the village.<sup>16,17</sup> Maybe for this reason too, even today the older and middle generations still feel a strong place attachment to their old *siyts*. In a village like Lovozero, where, according to my sets of interviews, in the aftermath of the relocations there was a shortage of jobs, housing, and other resources, this attachment to the former *siyts* created loyalties and rivalries reaching far behind what short-time visitors to Russian Lapland would generally have a clue about.

On the other hand, being “crammed into this sack called Lovozero” (interview of an elderly Sámi person by author, Murmansk Region, 2008), created the basis for a certain community feeling among the ethnopoliticians of the first days with disregard of the old *siyt* borders—but only to a certain degree and when motivated by

certain interests. In the middle generation, place attachment to the *siyts* (directed inwards) and pan-Russian–Sámi community construction (directed outwards) exist side by side. The memory about the former *siyts* is kept alive somewhat artificially in an attempt to rediscover or recreate the past: there are regular group trips to those places, thanks to the considerable efforts of some ethnopolitical activists, which include procuring access permissions from the authorities and chartering a ship. In the younger generation of those self-identifying as Sámi, place attachment to the *siyts* has become much weaker. Here, a new, more unified Russian Sámi identity is replacing the century-old *siyt*-attached identities.

The different *siyt* attachments are not directly interwoven with the opposition between activist and sovkhhoist worldviews, and they are not much used as an instrument within the need-and-misery discourse. But it has been an important fault line, in particular among the older generations, when suddenly people had to live together who used to live in distinct communities far away from each other, meeting only for trade or intermarriage. The slow fading away of the *siyt* rift due to the weakening attachment to the *siyts* among the younger generation happens in favor of a strengthened pan-Sámi identity. This may result in attaining more cohesion and less internal conflict within the next generation of ethnopolitical activists.

### The Lovozero-and-the-Rest Rift

As I already stated, activist viewpoints are not only adopted by people directly engaged in Sámi activism, and I already spoke about generational and gender differences in the distribution of activist and sovkhhoist worldviews. But the activist-sovkhhoist opposition also expresses itself in a territorial fault line, which I call the Lovozero-and-the-rest rift. During my extensive conversations with people in different localities of Russian Lapland, I noticed that the share of interviewees offering activist perspectives in their stories is above average in the Eastern Sámi “capital” of Lovozero, compared to other towns, villages, or the tundra.

I argue that the discourse of need and misery has soaked through to this “over-researched” town to a much greater extent than to other settlements that have seen less attention by visitors during the past quarter of a century. By tendency, in conversations with Lovozerians, positively perceived moments of the Soviet time are faded out more often than in the average of all my interviews. To put it in a somewhat blunt manner, the typical Sámi interlocutor of Lovozero already knows what the average visitor wants to hear. Elderly ladies—the most accessible interview partners besides the ethnopolitical activists themselves, because,

being pensioners, they are at home for most of the time—have often developed an ability to present in their accounts those aspects they think the short-term visitor wants to hear. This inclination has two causes. First, the visitors themselves—not only researchers but also activists, civil servants, journalists, filmmakers, photographers, travelers—contribute to this situation. They visit Lovozero mostly for only a few days and, having retrieved their preliminary knowledge about the region from need-and-misery-discourse-influenced sources, generally ask similar, suggestive questions. I remember well myself being caught in this trap during my first visits and can see it regularly on the examples of other visitors. Second, the ethnopolitical activists, having their homes mostly in Lovozero and Murmansk, can transmit their views to other Sámi people both in private talks and in public Sámi happenings. These events take place mainly in Lovozero and Murmansk. At the same time, Lovozerians often have reservations about visitors asking questions, just because there have already been so many visitors asking similar questions. Because of this, by tendency, narrative interviews at a very intimate level require more relationship building with Lovozero inhabitants compared to other settlements of Russian Lapland having enjoyed less attention by visitors.

A present-day situation or goal can be greatly legitimized by the construction of the past in the “right way.” In the case of the need-and-misery discourse, which implies a successful act of total victimization, this construction is achieved through the creation of a Soviet-Russian continuity of oppression, which finally serves the goal of obtaining whatever support for whatever kinds of activities of an ethnopolitical agenda. Talking about community leaders in his own fieldwork among Eveny in the northern Sakha Republic, Vitebsky (2010:47–48) speaks of a “rhetoric of extinction (‘we are dying people’) which . . . can be taken as an extreme expression of a lack of agency.” An example of such an extreme victimization in Lovozero is the characterization of Soviet times as genocide against the Sámi. Having been told about this supposed genocide by one of the most well-known abroad Sámi politicians in Lovozero (personal correspondence by email, 2014), I was not surprised to read the same statement in the *Eastern Sámi Atlas*’s short overview of Sámi history during the Soviet period (Mustonen 2011:84–100). The mere brevity of the part dedicated to the Soviet times within this voluminous compendium is a good testimony of the superficial knowledge on the Soviet history of Russian Sámi. This superficiality became self-perpetuating thanks to the reciprocal exchange between visitors and people representing activist perspectives in the realm of the need-and-misery discourse.

Having accepted the need-and-misery discourse more than elsewhere, many Sámi inhabitants of Lovozero consciously or unconsciously contribute to the “need and miserization” of views on the Soviet past by telling the stories to visitors, for which there is most demand. This happens in Lovozero more than in other smaller settlements, which are much less visited, and also more than in Murmansk, where Sámi activism is less present in everyday life due to the mere size of the city’s overall population.

## Conclusions

Deconstructing the imagined “community” of the Russian Sámi has been a central goal of this paper. We have seen that the adaptation to discourses plays a vital role in the evolution of such constructions or even in the production of illusions. I have tried to show that one important discourse both about and among the Russian Sámi people is the current need-and-misery discourse. It was developed out of the interplay between ideological changes since the late Soviet times and the views on these processes in the neighboring Nordic countries.

The ideological change, which started in the 1980s and came of age with the implosion of the Soviet empire, has led to the waning of old barriers, or rather guard rails, and in many ways widened the perspectives of people. However, also new guard rails appeared. Narratives continue to be influenced both by older values and frames and by newer ones as well. This tendency is natural, as their total absence would mean a vacuum of experiences, opinions, and discourses. To assume this, would be as void as the famous claim of the “End of History” (Fukuyama 1989) at the end of the Cold War.

Returning to the very beginning of this article, to Portelli’s statement about the interests of the teller, I would like, first of all, to emphasize that there are two sorts of tellers: me—the author of this paper—and my interlocutors whom I was listening to during my research. The simple fact that we all—both researchers and witnesses—are children of our time influences the questions, perspectives, and motivations on both sides (Gerbel and Sieder 1988:193). In this contribution, the focus was on my informants’ views and interests. The broad and vague word “interests” contains notions like intentions, motivations, goals, and dreams, in short: meaning. I assume that it lies in the nature of humankind that behavior is embedded in a quest for meaningfulness (Goffman 1955; Haumann 2006). Using the example of the Russian Sámi society and the need-and-misery discourse, I have shown that

We need to take into consideration the “social context” of memory, the interaction, and communication of a person with his or her environment. Over long periods of time a myth, a certain image can be constructed, that enters into the common memory of a society, takes root and shapes the way this society sees itself (Haumann 2006:46, translated by the author).

I have described that the Russian Sámi society does not refer to one common myth or interpretation pattern. There are two main interpretational strings followed by Russian Sámi people in their narratives. I called them the activist and the sovkhoid worldviews. In their pure form, they are nothing more than scholarly conceptualized instruments of interpretation, theoretical entities, whereas in practice they are altered and mixed to various degrees depending on the topic, audience, and setting.

Activist viewpoints are more often met among people involved in ethnopolitics, younger people in general (those who primarily identify themselves as Sámi), and individuals in Lovozero in general, a settlement that has been the focus of ethnic revival and material aid projects, research and public attention from outside much more than other part of Russian Lapland. The activist worldview, which has been very much influenced by the need-and-misery discourse, implicitly refers to a Golden Age somewhere in an indefinite, prerevolutionary and precolonialist past when there was an idealized, undisturbed community. In this worldview, between the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, there is a continuity of oppression. The main drawback of such views is that generalizing, superficial, and often wrong assumptions about the past are becoming more and more standard knowledge. Depending on the goals and perspective one has, a maybe positive effect of these stances is that they have significantly contributed to Sámi identity building and a pronounced ethnic self-consciousness in the past roughly 25 years. In this view, there is some probability that exactly the generalizations of the need-and-misery discourse will have the power to build a new generation of a more unified Sámi leadership, which is less caught in the highly fragmented kaleidoscope of the different fault lines described in this article and conflicts resulting from them.

Sovkhoid stances are, by tendency, more widespread among elder and rural people. In this worldview, the referential Golden Age is situated in the Soviet past, among Russian Sámi mostly in the relatively stable 1970s. The sovkhoid discourse emphasizes collectiveness, discipline, and a well-functioning rule from above as the main advantages of that time compared to contemporary times, which are associated with disorder, greed, and the rule of the strongest and boldest, all due to excessive

pluralism and individualism (cf. Vladimirova 2006:66). As has been shown by several scholars, these are attitudes that can be commonly met throughout other post-Soviet regions as well. Also, many people associate these negative aspects with Sámi ethnopolitical activism. I therefore assume that a less quarreling, stronger, more unified, and more transparent ethnopolitical leadership would be very much appreciated by those people and thus reduce the general distance between those poles.

The two worldviews—sovkhoid and activist—are often combined or altered. They can be present in the narratives of one-and-the-same person, and they express themselves in combination with a crisscross of other fault lines within the Russian Sámi society, some of which I have outlined here: the generational, the gender, the Lovozero-and-the-rest, and the *siyt* rifts. Both worldviews are lamenting about the contemporary time, but about different aspects of it. While sovkhoid viewpoints lament the greed and excessive individualism of today, in activist accounts the oppression by forces from outside is in the main focus of the lament. Depending on the topic to be complained about, one interlocutor in one conversation can express sovkhoid and activist stances. The different focuses of lament deploy different functions: sovkhoid's lament fosters a stronger leadership, stronger collective values, less individualism, and less “democracy”—the latter being associated with chaos (Anderson 1996; Konstantinov 2015:24, 264–266; Vladimirova 2014:34–35); activist's lament fosters an increased pan-Sámi identity and self-consciousness.

The analysis of the different fault lines fragmenting the Eastern Sámi society led me to two main conclusions about scholarly work at the crossroads of oral history and anthropology.

Firstly, when collecting biographical narratives, a broad selection of interlocutors is essential. The problem I see when it comes to choosing interviewees is that very often researchers rely on the help of local partners. It is evident that these gatekeepers will very likely come from already existing relationships. In the case of the Russian Sámi, these relationships usually emerge from some form of Sámi activism. It is only natural that, in their efforts to establish the right contacts between the visitors and the locals, these partners with activist background will propose people who in one way or the other are already connected to them and hence are somehow involved in their activities or organizations or at least are recipients of their activities. This tendency creates a preselection according to certain implicit criteria of ideological closeness (Burawoy 1998:23). Exactly this is the trap into which many visitors fall when coming to Russian Lapland—which they all too often equate with Lovozero—with the aim of producing

something about the Russian Sámi. Thus, they absorb a prevalence of activist viewpoints and—again unconsciously, as is the case with “ordinary,” not explicitly ethnopolitically active Sámi people in Lovozero—give additional impetus to the need-and-misery discourse once they are back home. If in the beginning of this paper I was talking about the export of the raw materials for the need-and-misery discourse from Russian Lapland to the Nordic countries, and a subsequent reimport of the ready discourse back to Russian Lapland, the situation described here would be a third stage in this process and equate to a reexport from Russia back to the Nordic countries. The discourse commutes between the borders, as the people involved in it do.

One solution to the problem of preselected interlocutors is to ensure having plenty of time in the field—which journalists, filmmakers, activists, and civil servants, but also historians and other scholars often do not have or do not regard as needed—and to begin to build up a “parallel” network of contacts. In our long-term research project, my fellow researchers and I met people all over the Russian and Finnish North who were not recommended to us by people close to ethnopolitical activism. Only through lengthy stays did we begin to meet people whom the typical mediators would just neglect or who were regarded by them as nonrecommendable (or rather “better-not-to-recommend”)—just because, in the eyes of these mediators, they would have “nothing to tell” to us researchers, or they might even tell the “wrong” tales, using Portelli’s words again.

A second solution is that scholars must be especially aware of understanding correctly and not succumbing to the often-sweeping simplifications of the need-and-misery discourse. An additional pitfall is that not only in the need-and-misery discourse about the Eastern Sámi but also in the academic tradition of everyday history the oppression of ordinary people has been a strong strand. “An anti-bourgeois attitude in everyday history led in the 1970s and 1980s to the situation that ‘small people’ were permanently seen as dominated and oppressed. The search for resistance among these ‘small people’ became almost an obsession” (Obertreis 2004:15–16, translated by the author). Interestingly enough, the present-day need-and-misery discourse on the Russian Sámi also sees the Russian Sámi as a permanently oppressed group, but with the significant difference that there is no search for signs of resistance—they are predominantly seen as downtrodden victims, passive nonagents. This perspective is, in my view, an inherent incongruity of this discourse: either there was resistance or people did not perceive themselves as oppressed; both variants are excluded by the need-and-misery discourse. However,

both attitudes were indeed there, as described in detail by Konstantinov (2015). Also, my corpus of interviews and archival materials indicates that by far not all Russian Sámi perceived themselves as “downtrodden victims” at the time.<sup>18</sup>

In any case, we must oppose both activist and sovkhoid worldviews as everyday interpretation patterns to our epistemological vigilance, or, in Cruikshank’s (1998:49) words: “We need to concern ourselves with the social conditions under which . . . knowledge becomes defined, produced, reproduced, and distributed (or repressed and eliminated) in struggles for legitimacy.” When it comes to Sámi activism, influenced by the Western need-and-misery discourse and with the goal to obtain whatever support, this “ideological talk” is often exaggerating the badness of the past and contemporary situation of the Russian Sámi. In this form, it should be understood as a political instrument, and in this quality, it can be legitimate. By contrast, in sovkhoid storytelling, the many shortcomings of life in Soviet times remain often concealed through the simple opposition to the contemporary era, which in this worldview is perceived as even worse. However, as oral historians, we accept that the stories we hear about the past, be they from activist, sovkhoid or whatever voices, are not the past itself because there is no such thing as a single, objective truth. Concluding with Bakhtin’s (1984) famous term, this polyphony of voices is an inherent advantage of oral history, which lays bare different interests and motivation patterns.

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## Endnotes

1. This paper is part of a series of publications focusing on Arctic Oral History. The series is one outcome of the Finnish Academy Project ORHELIA (Oral History of Empires by Elders in the Arctic), decision number 251111. Papers in this series will be subsequently published in this journal.
2. In this paper the term of Russian Lapland is chosen for designating the traditional living area of the Eastern Sámi. Unlike the majority of texts about Sámi people in Russia, I avoid using the term Kola Peninsula when speaking about their traditional living area. Geographically, the Kola

Peninsula is only the larger eastern part of what we call today the Murmansk Region, which is a political entity of the Russian Federation and largely corresponds to the terminus Russian Lapland as it was predominantly used in prerevolutionary ethnographic literature (cf. Took 2004:xi). I therefore also avoid saying Kola Sámi and use Russian or Eastern Sámi instead.

3. In this paper, I will discuss a Western or Nordic discourse about the Russian Sámi and, in this context, use “Western” or “Nordic” in a synonymous way. With these terms, I refer less to the provenience of the persons engaging into this discourse but to a conceptual framework that I will outline in this paper.

4. According to the all-Russian census of 2010, there were 1771 Sámi in Russia, of which 1599 lived in the Murmansk Region. Of these 1599 people, 947 were living in rural areas (which includes 873 in the Lovozero District) and 652 in urban areas (Itogi vserossiiskoi perepisi naseleniia 2010 goda. 19. Razmeshchenie naseleniia korennykh malochislennykh narodov rossiiskoi federatsii. 2010:2115; Obshchaia informatsiia o korennykh malochislennykh narodakh severa: chislennost' n.d.)

5. *Siyt*: settlement area/common land of a Sámi community (settlement, grazing, hunting and fishing grounds and places of worship). The *siyt* was the original settlement and living form in the pre-Soviet Sámi social system. Known in Russian as *pogost*.

6. For the sake of anonymization, no more exact references are given for this and all following quotations from interviews taken by the author of this paper. Due to the numeric smallness of the group of people discussed in this article, even the indication of the place of residence, age, or sex of the interviewee could lead to identification.

7. From a conversation with the Sámi language lecturer and researcher on Eastern Sámi Leif Rantala, November 2013.

8. It is noteworthy that also the paternalistic Russian and Soviet policies towards their Northern indigenous peoples have a considerable need-and-misery dimension with a century-long history. However, in the case of the Russian Sámi, it was the Nordic discourse that started seeing the Soviet power on the oppressor and not on the liberator side of this discourse.

9. Sápmi means Lapland in North Sámi language.

10. In 1989, a similar but longer and more substantial article was printed in the Moscow-based,

countrywide newspaper *Trud* (Galenkin and Kovalenko 1989). Interestingly enough, this article, which was never translated into a Western language but had a potentially big outreach throughout the Soviet Union, is referred to almost nowhere. It did not in any way trigger a discourse on Sámi people within Russia that could even come close to the content and extent of the Nordic need-and-misery discourse on the Russian Sámi. Obviously, the reason is that the recipients of this article, Soviet citizens, did not have a self-image that they could fittingly transfer to the Russian Sámi, nor did they have any special attachment to the Sámi as an ethnic group, nor did they have a lack of knowledge about Soviet reality. On the contrary, the reaction of an average reader to all the complaints about the Russian Sámi's social evils might be one that I have often heard in conversations with ethnic Russians, Ukrainians and other Soviet-time settlers to the North: “So what? We all have had more than enough problems in Soviet times.” An appropriate reply to this rhetoric question was given by Vitebsky (2002:188). He suggests that “that violence [towards indigenous people of the North] should be understood in a broader sense, to include violence as desecration and denial of identity and racial value. For indigenous peoples whose territory was controlled by an ideology which was initially alien, this is something additional to the many sufferings that many Russians had to endure under the Soviet regime.”

11. Without going into the details about the specific genesis of the Russian and Soviet *intelligentsia*, this succinct definition of *intelligentsia* shall be enough here: “[*Intelligentsia*] refers to people with higher education and is in essence synonymous with ‘academics’ or ‘intellectuals.’ It is also used self-referentially, . . . often invoking a special role and duty in society” (Overland and Berg-Nordlie 2012:92).

12. *Leningradskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut imeni A.I. Gertsena* (Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute named after A.I. Gertsen [Herzen], today named: Russian State Pedagogical University named after A.I. Gertsen [Herzen]).

13. One of the more recent examples is Afanasyeva's (2013) Master's thesis, which was completed at the Centre for Sámi studies at the University of Tromsø. While the thesis has doubtlessly many merits, such as an overview of all relocations of Sámi people during the 20th century, the author throughout her work speaks of a “community” when describing the forcible resettlements of Sámi people from different settlements during Soviet times.

14. In the largely Russianized curriculum, the tuition of indigenous languages as a foreign language was supposed to be the only subject specific to the cultures of provenience of the students. However, according to one interlocutor, at the Herzen Institute, Sámi language was, at times, taught poorly or not at all due to a lack of qualified teachers.

15. Here, the word “culture” has to be understood with all its specifically Soviet connotations, as was meticulously described by Anderson (1996). *Kul'tura* means in fact more than culture; it means civilization. The author describes how he was often warned by benevolent advisors about the low level of *kul'tura* he was going to meet in the remote destinations of his planned fieldwork. This warning was concerning not so much boredom, but rather the lack of infrastructure. As evidence, Anderson mentions the Soviet late 1950s campaign to develop the infrastructure in the Siberian North, which bore the name “Measures to develop the economy and the culture of the peoples of the North.” In official talk, a high level of culture in a village meant it had a bakery, central heating, a public bath, a club, a library, or a similar establishment.

16. Before the immigration of Komi and Nenets people to the Kola Peninsula since 1888, Lovozero had a purely Sámi population (101 people in 1871). In 1926, after the immigration of a considerable Komi and Nenets population but before any relocations were conducted by the state, Lovozero had 436 Komi, 205 Sámi, 70 Nenets and 36 “other” inhabitants. In 1989, these numbers were 948, 1,246, 113, and 1,305 respectively (all numbers from Lovozero, Lujavv'rsyit 2013).

17. Rethmann's (2001) case study about a settlement in Northern Kamchatka at the other end of Russia, where the local population had to cope with an astonishingly similar mixing up of communities, shows in an exemplary way how decisions taken far away in a capital could affect entirely different regions in a similar way (see especially p. 36).

18. Two other remarkable examples of the need-and-misery discourse in Western contributions on the Eastern Sámi are: Sarv (1996) who in a rather sweeping culprit-victim setting, among other things, asserts that children in boarding schools “were force fed Russian food” (136); and the documentary film “*The Tundra Tale*” (Harder 2013), which ignores the significant Komi-Sámi ethnic mix in the portrayed village and cements a somewhat paternalistic view of the wealthy Nordic Sámi who give a helping hand to the supplicating Russian Sámi.

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