

Soviet northern Natives seek unity

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MAGADAN, USSR — The threat of complete assimilation of Northern ethnic minorities in the USSR is worrying Soviet society.

There are demands to protect them from industrial expansion. The dominant ethnic groups in the polar regions have started to form regional organizations.

In 1990, at their joint congress in Moscow, these organizations united into an Association of the Northern Peoples to save the disappearing culture of Native minorities.

The association faces many problems. The people in the North are unable, without legal and other protection, to withstand the increasing migration connected with industrial development (mainly mining and petroleum industries), the growth of towns, the construction of railways and motor roads.

The problem is that in the polar regions, the dominant ethnic groups are not large. Amounting to only 184,000, they are scattered throughout the vast territory.

They live among people who do not know their languages, traditions and way of life. These are people who have come from the south to work in the North for some years and then return home, and they are not interested in protecting the nature there.

The situation on Chukotka is typical of the Soviet Northern regions. The Chukotka Autonomous Area, with its administrative center in Anadyr, is part of Magadan Region whose population is 510,000.

However, the exact number of the ethnic population (Chukchi, Evens, Eskimo, Yukagirs and Aleut) in that area is not known.

The 1989 USSR Census gave a total number of these ethnic groups: Chukchi — 15,200; Evens — 17,200; Eskimo — 1,700; Yukagirs — 1,100; and Aleut — 700.

But it is yet to be specified what part of them and people of other nationalities live in Magadan Region and its center, Magadan.

The work is now being done by the regional organization of the ethnic population of Chukotka and the Kolyma Territory. But even without specification, it is clear that ethnic minorities live in small groups among the immigrants: about 1,000 in Magadan, slightly more in Anadyr, the rest in numerous villages, hundreds and thousands of kilometers apart.

Reindeer breeding, hunting and fishing were traditional occupations of the local inhabitants. Today, new industries have developed: fish processing, mining, production of nonferrous and precious metals, machine building, metal working and so on.

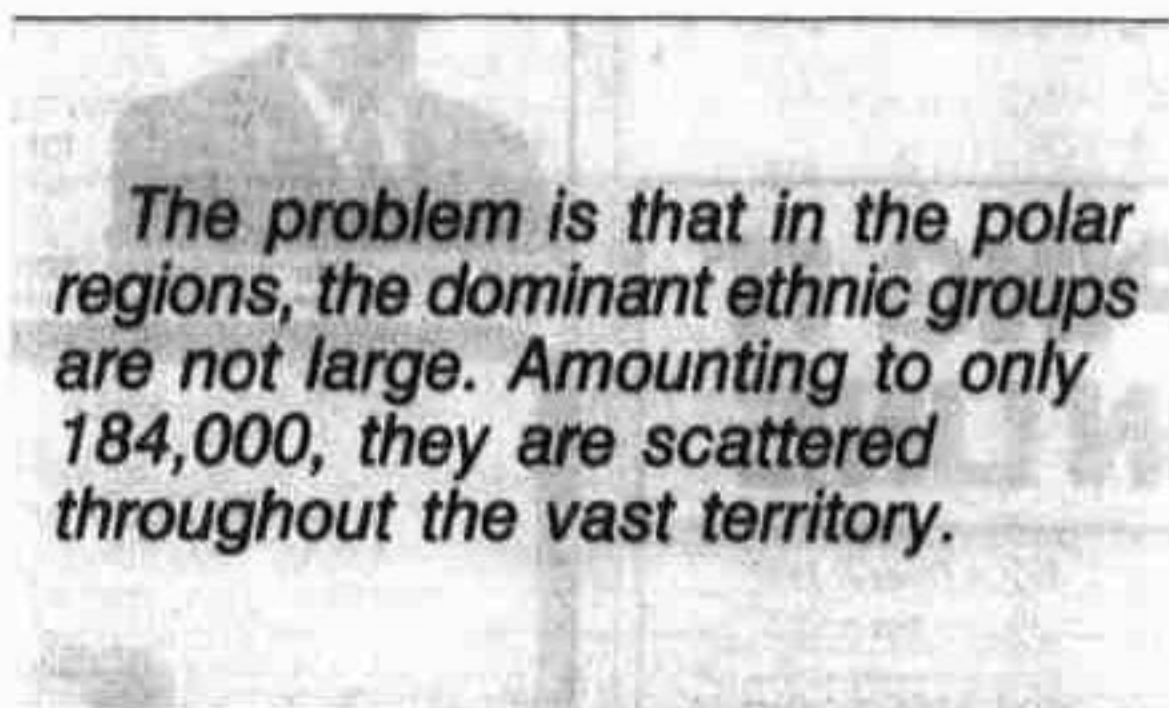
The majority of the population is engaged in them.

The importance of traditional occupations is diminishing, mainly because of the worsening ecological situation and pastures, and the lessening number of fish in rivers and animals in the forests.

Beginning with 1943, the number of whitefish in the Kolyma, the biggest river in the area, has dropped more than 40 times. The number of reindeer is annually going down by over 1 percent.

The recently adopted laws by the USSR Supreme Soviet "On Land" and "On Ownership in the USSR" have made it possible to protect the interests of ethnic minorities in the face of industrial expansion.

From now on, no federal ministry or governmental department has the



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right to use land and resources in the territory of ethnic groups without the consent of the local authorities.

The Soviets of People's Deputies in national areas, districts and villages have become masters of their land. This gives a good chance to revive the culture, traditions and way of life of ethnic minorities.

But any right has to be exercised, for which the minorities have to unite. The Magadan regional organization has started on this.

A cultural center is being set up in Magadan where representatives of the ethnic minorities in the city and the

region could meet. These get-togethers in the center will have clubs for people with different interests. They will have a chance to speak their Native languages and to develop in their children a love for national culture, crafts and occupations.

The enthusiasts for reviving the culture of the Northern peoples include even people not belonging to ethnic groups but who have lived for many years in Magadan.

Among them is V. Lytkin. For three decades he has been studying the art of the Northern peoples. At the beginning of this year he has joined the

Association of the Ethnic Minorities of Chukotka and Kolyma and helps young people in studying the culture of the North, music in particular, as well as the forgotten traditions and customs.

Magadan journalists have also shown interest in the national revival of Northern ethnic minorities.

They have started broadcasting a new program on local television — "Yeti Chukotka." Yeti is a greeting in the Chukchi language.

This regular program soon became very popular. In the near future, the program's journalists plan to start broadcasts for those Russians in Magadan who want to study the Chukchi language.

The region lacks school teachers of the languages of ethnic minorities. The Magadan Pedagogical College has not been doing anything in this area as yet.

The situation is the same in other professions. Now steps are being taken to fill up the gap.

Not much has yet been done in reviving the culture of ethnic minorities on Chukotka, but the ice has been broken.

The attitude to their needs has changed, and the assimilation processes are no longer regarded as something natural and inevitable. Revival has begun.