# INDIGENOUS DIAMONDS

# Indigenous Diamonds

## Extractivism and Indigenous Politics in the Diamond Province of Russia

A Ziibiing Lab Special Study on Global Indigenous Politics

"Indigenous Diamonds is a critical historical and ethnographic study of diamond extraction in the Sakha Region. Dr. Nikolaeva makes several important interventions and brings new information about diamond mining and production, Indigenous peoples, and the global diamond trade. This is an important and well-researched study that will resonate beyond academic circles."

Nick Estes (Kul Wicasa), Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies, University of Minnesota

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# Acknowledgements

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—Sardana Nikolaeva, Postdoctoral Fellow, Ziibiing Lab of the University of Toronto

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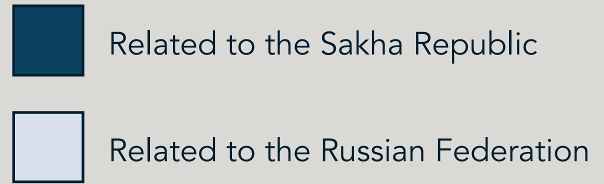
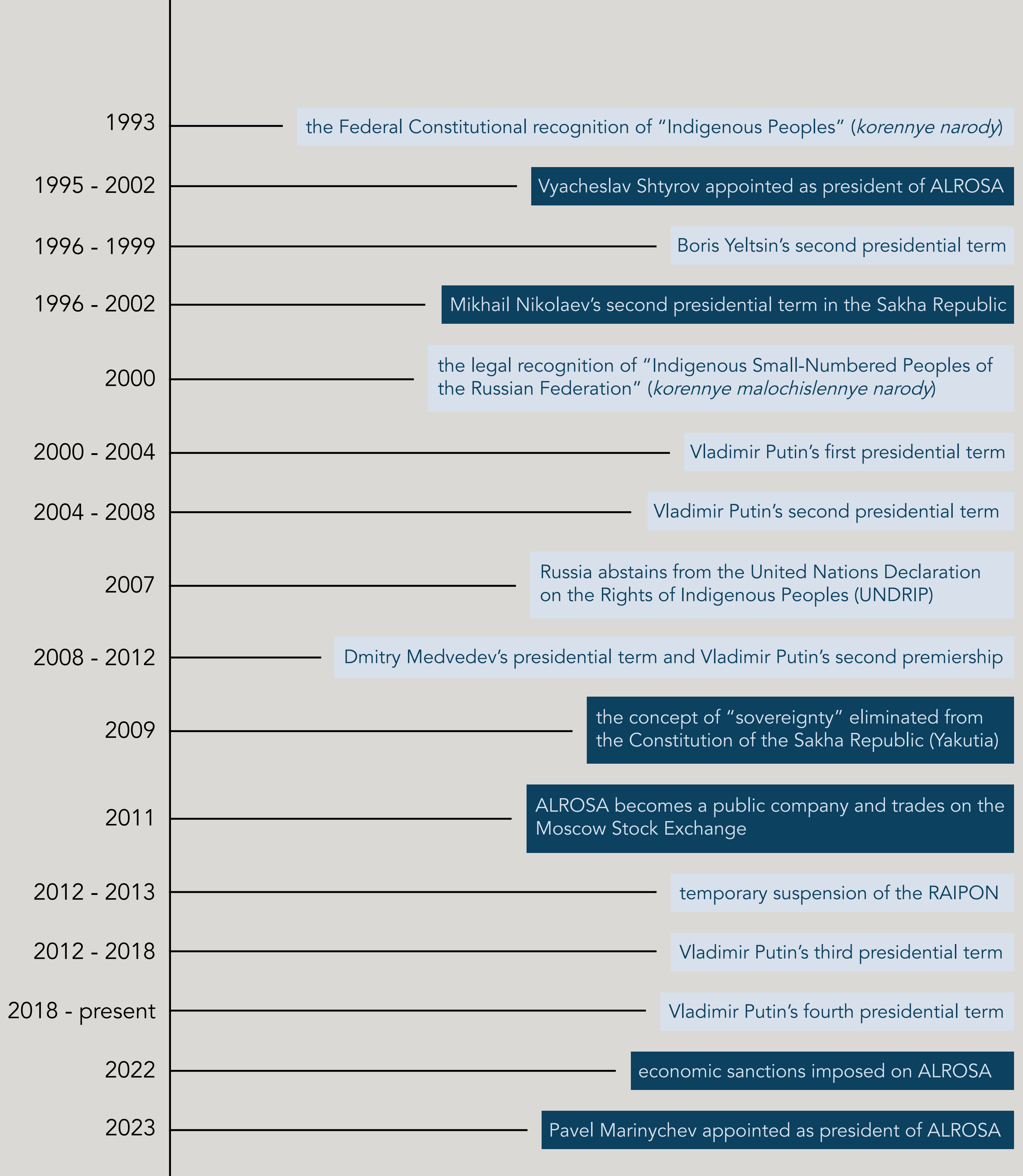
# Timeline




| Year | Event |
|---|---|
| 1632 | establishment of the Fort Lensky (*Lenskii Ostrog*), the first administrative unit of the Russian Imperial Government |
| 1822 | creation of the Charter for the Management of Persons of Different Ethnicity |
| 1917 | the October Revolution |
| 1922 | establishment of the YASSR (Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) |
| 1923 | introduction of the policies of indigenization (*korenizatsiia*) |
| 1954 | discovery of the kimberlite pipe *Zarnitsa* |
| 1955 | discovery of the kimberlite pipe *Mir* |
| 1957 | establishment of *YakutAlmaz*, a state-owned enterprise |
| 1980 - 1990 | the *Glasnost* Policy period (the Gorbachev reforms) |
| 1989 | the International Labor Organization Convention 169 (Russia did not ratify) |
| 1990 | establishment of the RAIPON (Russian Association of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North) |
| 1991 | dissolution of the USSR |
| 1991 - 1996 | Boris Yeltsin's first presidential term |
| 1991 - 1996 | Mikhail Nikolaev's first presidential term in the Sakha Republic |
| 1992 | establishment of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) |
| 1992 | adoption of the Constitution of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia) |
| 1992 | establishment of ALROSA (*Almazy Rossii-Sakha*) |


1993
the Federal Constitutional recognition of "Indigenous Peoples" (*korennye narody*)
1995 - 2002
Vyacheslav Shtyrov appointed as president of ALROSA
1996 - 1999
Boris Yeltsin's second presidential term
1996 - 2002
Mikhail Nikolaev's second presidential term in the Sakha Republic
2000
the legal recognition of "Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the Russian Federation" (*korennye malochislennye narody*)
2000 - 2004
Vladimir Putin's first presidential term
2004 - 2008
Vladimir Putin's second presidential term
2007
Russia abstains from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
2008 - 2012
Dmitry Medvedev's presidential term and Vladimir Putin's second premiership
2009
the concept of "sovereignty" eliminated from the Constitution of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia)
2011
ALROSA becomes a public company and trades on the Moscow Stock Exchange
2012 - 2013
temporary suspension of the RAIPON
2012 - 2018
Vladimir Putin's third presidential term
2018 - present
Vladimir Putin's fourth presidential term
2022
economic sanctions imposed on ALROSA
2023
Pavel Marinychev appointed as president of ALROSA

# Introduction

This study is about diamonds. But it is not about diamonds as symbols of higher social and economic standing or romantic fantasies of eternal love and devotion that are produced and reified by mere purchasing, gifting, or possessing diamonds. On the contrary, this study examines the diamond as not only a global commodity that inconspicuously connects people of the Indigenous Arctic in Russia with people all around the world, but also how people derive and experience particular identities, authenticities, and politics through diamonds. Moreover, global consumerist desire for diamonds successfully conceals tragic realities about the ongoing extraction and exploitation of Indigenous lands.

In North America, the largest regional consumer of diamonds (Falls 2014; Human Rights Watch 2018), diamonds are objects of fascination and desire not because of their geological significance but because of attached "notions of love, status, and romance" (Falls 2014, 2). In such countries as Angola, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Republic of Congo, diamonds labelled as "blood diamonds" or "conflict diamonds"[1] evoke deep entanglements with prolonged political instability, economic chaos, intense labor exploitation, and human rights abuses (De Boeck 2001; Falls 2011; Le Billon and Levin 2009; Schulte et al. 2021).

[1] "Blood diamonds" or "conflict diamonds" are rough diamonds mined in war zones and traded to finance rebel forces, armed conflicts, and terrorism (Bieri 2010).

In the Sakha Republic, the far northeastern region of the Russian Federation, diamonds occupy a critical material niche in the lives of the local people as the diamond industry generates over 40% of the region's annual government budget (ALROSA 2021, 2022). Sakha Republic is the largest in territory size as an administrative unit in the Russia's Far East with an abundance of natural resources; more than 40% of its land falls within the Arctic Circle. It has the harshest climate and is the most sparsely populated of all Russian republics (Crate 2006; Crate and Yakovleva 2008; Tichotsky 2000). The region was developed as a colony by the imperial Russian state in the early 17th century, and later served as a critical stage for the federal campaign to "master" the North and its resource wealth (Hicks 2011; Tichotsky 2000). Capital officials wielded a political rhetoric of modernization and development to justify the exploitation of natural resources, and this rhetoric has persisted in post-Soviet economic and political discourses. After 1991, Sakha Republic was the most economically independent region in the Russian Federation due to continued prioritization of extractivism, with the local Sakha government as the primary beneficiary (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996; Kempton 1996, 2002; Tichotsky 2000). By the late 2000s, however, the federal government recovered control of most of the resource extraction industries there (Balzer 2022; Crate and Yakovleva 2008; Kempton 2002).

**Today, the Sakha Republic still produces 99% of Russia's diamonds, comprising approximately 25% of the global diamond market (ALROSA 2021, 2022; Bain & Company 2022).**

For local populations in Sakha, diamonds are their only export commodity to reach various global markets and thus consumers. In this context, diamonds are ubiquitous in the cultural and national discourses of the local Indigenous population (Argounova-Low 2004) and function as their primary vehicle to access globalization.

Recently, mining companies operating in Sakha have begun to *indigenize* diamonds in order to create new desires and illusions of scarcity, raising their perceived value for consumers on the global market. This *indigenization* process relies on and reproduces spectacular contrived narratives of Indigenous authenticity, traditionality, and primitivity. In turn, ideas about *indigenous* diamonds in the global imagination have produced material effects on the Indigenous territories where the diamonds are extracted, on the Indigenous peoples who come to economically and culturally depend on this extractivism, and on local Indigenous identities reshaped to conform to the ideas and desires of consumers far away.

The Russian Federation, one of the world's wealthiest countries in terms of natural resources (e.g., oil, gas, iron, ore, nickel, platinum, titanium), has recently been increasing its extractive capacity—primarily in the Arctic region—to further its economic and political ascendency (Gustafsson 2021; Krutikov, Smirnova, and Bocharova 2020). However, the extractivist ambitions of the federal government in the Indigenous Arctic are accompanied by privatization and commodification of formerly communal lands, rapid environmental decline, displacement of Indigenous communities, massive influxes of outsider settler-workers, and an overall intensification of social, economic, and political marginalization (Balzer 2014; Berezhkov 2012; Fondahl and Poelzer 2003; Fondahl and Sirina 2006; Hicks 2011; Semenova 2007; Shadrin 2015).

The reorganization of state economies in accordance with neoliberalism[2] is an inherently global process that necessarily adapts to local economic, political, and socio-cultural conditions. In this sense, to understand *global* neoliberal policies and practices,[3] it is imperative to investigate the *local* experiences of those most perversely altered by neoliberalism.

[2] "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices" (Harvey 2005, 2).

[3] The institutional framework of neoliberalism includes "the removal of government regulations on business; the reduction of the power of labor to make demands; the downsizing of the labor force itself; the privatization of many public goods and institutions; and the radical reduction of programs of social assistance for poor people. The effect of all this has been the growth of extreme inequality both within and across nations, with a handful of wealthy individuals getting dramatically richer, the masses of poor people getting significantly poorer, and the middle class hanging on - where it does - only by dint of extremely hard work and self-exploitation" (Ortner 2016, 52).

By examining extractivism in the Indigenous Arctic, this study thus explores how global and local political and economic processes reshape Indigenous peoples' experiences, life ways, politics, and even identities. Research on neoliberal formulations *elsewhere* offers critical insight to interrogate and destabilize neoliberalism at *home*.

To understand the workings of global capitalism in seemingly isolated and remote places like Indigenous villages in the Sakha Arctic, it is useful to focus on the production, circulation, and consumption of certain commodities (Mintz 1985; Trouillot 1988). Tracing the trajectories of specific commodities and identifying sites of interrogation, negotiation, and conflict allow us to understand global capitalist processes and analyze complex and tangled social (and spatial and temporal) relationships between producers and consumers, otherwise undetectable and seemingly insignificant. This materialist analysis of the diamond, and its signification, aids us in examining the globalizing logic of neoliberalism by grounding it to local lived experiences, as well as understanding how the materiality of commodities can affect the lived realities of people.

This study draws upon a wide range of sources, including one year of ethnographic fieldwork in the Sakha Republic; life histories and personal accounts of the Indigenous community members in the Arctic district; journalistic accounts in global, national, and local news media in Sakha, Russian, and English languages; and government and corporate documents.

Edge of the mountains overlooking the Olenyek River in the Evenki National District of Olenyek (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

## OVERVIEW

### CHAPTER 1: Who is Indigenous in Russia?

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of state processes and practices of Indigenous recognition in Russia, critiquing state narratives and policies such as the specific administrative terms and conditions (both qualitative and quantitative) required for the classification of Indigenous status. This chapter also engages in a critical discussion of how and why the politics of Indigenous recognition are tied to the diamond-mining industry in the Sakha Republic.

### CHAPTER 2: A History of Diamond Production in the Sakha Republic

This chapter traces the economic and political motivations for the Soviet and post-Soviet governments' heavy investments in diamond production. It also examines the material, environmental, and cultural consequences of ongoing extraction on Indigenous lands and establishes the primary consumers of diamonds extracted in Sakha. I chronicle the history of diamond production in the Sakha Republic, its transformation within changing political and economic contexts, and unique discourses of culture, Indigeneity, and sovereignty attached to diamonds.

### CHAPTER 3: Indigenous Diamonds

This chapter analyzes the strategic *indigenization* of diamonds by the mining companies in Sakha to understand how fantasies about Indigenous identities and communities as uniquely traditional, authentic, and primitive can produce the illusion of scarcity to increase the value of diamonds extracted in the Indigenous Arctic. The chapter also explores how these *indigenizing* processes impact Indigenous lived realities in the territories of diamond extraction.

### CONCLUSION

Lastly, I discuss the complex effects of U.S. and European sanctions imposed on the diamond-mining company ALROSA, which operates primarily on the Indigenous territories of the Sakha Republic, with a focus on the realities and lived experiences of rural Indigenous communities, and offer final reflections on Indigenous diamonds and the particular narratives of Indigenous reality they produce.

Chapter One:

# Who is Indigenous in Russia?

The term "Indigenous" has been reconfigured multiple times since the mid-17th century, when it was first introduced to identify people or products "born or produced naturally in a land or region; Native or belonging naturally to the soil, region, etc." (Hodgson 2002, 1038). The Martinez Cobo Study (1986) provides the most widely cited definition of Indigenous peoples to date, which highlights a people's pre-colonial historical and territorial continuity; distinct self-determination; non-dominant status within current socio-cultural, political, and economic structures; and their own cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal systems. A number of scholars argue that this definition reproduces the ambiguity inherent in universalizing concepts of "Indigenous" and "Indigenous rights," and that these elements are neither exclusive to nor necessary conditions for Indigenous identification and recognition (Hathaway 2010; Li 2000). Marginalized groups have built upon these vague definitions of "Indigenous" by constructing their own subjectivities in a framework of shared common struggle with Indigenous peoples elsewhere; Anna Tsing (2007) points out that marginalized groups increasingly mobilize "under the banner of Indigenous cultures" and create alliances with other Indigenous groups "left out of the benefits of national development" (53). Indeed, diverse literature on articulations of Indigeneity shows that making salient one's Indigeneity has allowed many marginalized groups globally to strategically represent and promote their rights to land, natural resources, and self-determination. This has attracted the support of international human rights agencies, activists, and environmental organizations

(Hathaway 2010; Hicks 2011; Li 2000; Sylvain 2002).

In Russia, the recognition and politics of Indigeneity are shaped by unique historical contexts; specific global, national, and regional narratives; cultural legacies; and ethnic, gender, and other intersections of identity. These heterogeneous contexts can both ignite and circumscribe Indigenous struggles for social, economic, and political justice at regional and federal levels. To critically interrogate Indigeneity as a historical discursive formation and a local and global phenomenon, this chapter engages with scholarship on Indigeneity and Indigenous subjects in pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet contexts. Most importantly, I show the formation and interpretation of Indigeneity as a politicized positioning, shaped by state discourses of modernization through the development of extractive industries in the Indigenous Arctic.

Reindeer on display in the Olenyek Ethnographic Museum of the Olenyek village (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

## Pre-Soviet Indigeneity: "People of a Different Land" and "People of a Different Birth"

Indigeneity as a category was rarely referred to in state policy before the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, except in general terms such as *inozemtsy* (people of a different land) or *inovertsy* (people of a different faith) (the Charter for the Management of Persons of Different Ethnicity 1822). The imperial Russian government did not recognize Indigenous populations as citizens, viewing them instead as people of other lands, who were to pay *iasak* (fur tribute).[4] Paying *iasak* earned peoples military protection in case of conflict with other local Indigenous groups or imagined foreign enemies, such as Chinese and American traders. The annual fur tribute was imposed on every man between eighteen and fifty years old; the tribute-paying *iasak* people, or *iasachnye liudi*, were to register with the cossacks,[5] the tribute collectors. There were other settler colonial obligations for the Indigenous people in addition to *iasak*, such as "serving as guides and interpreters, building forts, and providing transportation" (Slezkine 1994, 23). The imperial state imposed *iasak* rules mostly through coercion, restricting access to trade goods such as bread, sugar, knives, axes, tea, colored beads, tobacco, and alcohol, but sometimes outright violence. If, for some reason, the Indigenous hunters were not willing to register as fur suppliers and pay *iasak*, the cossacks would assault them; if that did not work, the cossacks were under strict instructions "to wage war and to capture their wives and children" as hostages or kill them (Slezkine 1994, 15). Georgii Ergis (1960), a Sakha ethnographer, describes the following violent encounter between Sakha villagers and cossack settlers:

> The arriving *nuuchcha*[6] built high wooden towers…Marveling at that, both children and grown-ups approached the towers and started looking at them carefully. Then they saw that *nuuchcha* had scattered sweets, gingerbread cookies, and beads all around the houses. Many children, women, and men came and started picking them up. While they were picking them up, [*nuuchcha*] dropped logs that crushed and killed them. After they started killing with flintlocks that shot powder fire. (translated by Slezkine 1994)

[4] *Iasak* was likely seen by Indigenous trappers as a kind of exchange, since the practice of exchange was paramount within the local Indigenous economic ideologies.

[5] Cossacks were the serving men, performing military and administrative service on behalf of the imperial state.

[6] *Nuuchcha* is the Sakha word for white settlers; it is used to describe all white people, including ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and such. In the earlier years of the Imperial occupation, *nuuchcha* were the Cossacks (mostly ethnic Russians and Ukrainians), militarized forces sent to subjugate and tributize the local Indigenous peoples. In Soviet (and post-Soviet) period, *nuuchcha* represented the predominant migrant labor force, involved in the local extractive operations and other large-scale governmental projects.

Many Indigenous groups did not accept forced tributization willingly, and engaged in armed resistance and killed the *iasak* collectors. Their behavior remained "fearless and willful" (*besstrashnoe i samovolnoe)*, making the coveted supply of pelts to the Russian sovereign unreliable (Slezkine 1994, 20). This violent, albeit relatively non-interventionist in the sense of citizenship recognition, attitude changed by the 19th century. *Inozemtsy* (people of a different land) became *inorodtsy* (people of a different birth), which implied innate, ingrained, and irredeemable difference and ultimate alienness of the Indigenous population. According to this social division, "a Khanty Orthodox Christian, a Yakut merchant, and a Tungus cart driver were all *inorodtsy*; a Polish Catholic noble, a Baltic farmer, and a German landowner usually were not"[7] (Skezkine 1992, 53).

In addition, the 19th-century concept of "civilization" promoted by European and North American colonial powers generated another category of "backwardness" that was applied to Indigenous peoples across the globe. "The superior enlightened race" now carried the burden of responsibility to save and civilize Indigenous "savages" (Slzekine 1994, 117). In imperial Russia, the white political exiles and amateur ethnographers discovered their own "native savages" in Siberia; the nomadic Indigenes and "wandering aliens" (*brodiachie inorodtsy*) played an important role in regionalist and populist discourses as symbols of "wretched poverty and pristine innocence" (Slezkine 1992, 56). The observation of Indigenous communities by political exiles, who spent considerable time in the "natural prison" of the Arctic, served as a precursor and a foundation for the Soviet institutional position towards the Indigenous Arctic and its inhabitants. For instance, Vladimir Bogoras, Erukhim Kreinovic, Sergei Kertselli, and Lev Sternberg, among others, established the Committee of the North and the Institute of the North in the 1920s. Both aimed to provide occupational, educational, and political opportunities for the Northern Indigenous people. These institutions were later closed because they were believed to be promoting "excessive nationalism"; the Committee members were persecuted during Stalin's Great Purge of 1937[8] (Bartels and Bartels 2006). Nevertheless, the political exiles, revolutionaries, evolutionist ethnographers, poets and writers managed to ideologically position the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic for years to come as "Russia's own Indians, unspoiled and unstudied, worthy of both scrutiny as remote ancestors and admiration as consistent communalists" (Slezkine 1994, 124).

## Soviet Indigeneity: "Small Nationalities of the North"

After the 1917 October Revolution, the new Soviet government employed several legal terms such as "native peoples and tribes of the Northern regions" and "small nationalities of the North" to legally recognize Indigenous population totaling around 150,000 people mostly residing in the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. Despite targeting these groups with specific socio-cultural, educational, and economic policies and other "protections," the government still denied them full citizenship rights because of their presumed "semi-savagery" or "outright savagery" (Donahoe 2011; Donahoe et al. 2008; Slezkine 1992).

The category of "small nationalities" (*malye narodnosti*), first employed in the 1924 mandate from the Soviet of Nationalities, served as a legal definition of nationality and determined the "rational criteria" to classify the population and advocate for their "civilization" and "modernization." The Committee Assistance to the Peoples of the Northern Borderlands, or the Committee of the North, was also established in 1924 and served to protect "small nationalities" from various "capitalist predators" (Slezkine 1992, 57). A 1926 statute identified 26 groups as fitting the special status thus requiring state protection (Donahoe et al. 2008, 995). These groups were selected based on specific ethnic markers: language; religion; phenotype; traditional mode of subsistence; nomadic way of life; remote residence from local administrative and economic centers; and, most importantly,

[7] The Khanty are the Indigenous people mostly residing in Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District in western Siberia. The Yakuts or Sakha are a legally non-recognized Indigenous people, mainly residing in the Sakha Republic, in the northeastern region of the Russian Federation. The Tungus can refer to an ethno-linguistic group formed by the speakers of Tungusic languages or the Evenki people, an Indigenous group predominantly residing in the Indigenous Arctic.

[8] In 1936-1938, to solidify his political power, Soviet General Secretary Joseph Stalin and his allies engaged in so-called "purges" to eliminate potential political rivals within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

a small population size (Donahoe et al. 2008, 995).

**The legal status *malye narodnosti* implied a lower level of social, economic, and political organization, as well as cultural backwardness.**

Therefore, "small nationalities" came to be seen as "projects that needed to be turned into citizens through the benevolent guidance of the state" (Donahoe 2011, 400). In 1928, the Central Executive Committee included a new chapter on "Crimes that Constitute Survivals of Tribalism" in the Criminal Code of the RSFSR (the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) that effectively criminalized "cultural backwardness" and other "backward behavior" (Slezkine 1992, 61). Behaviors constituting "backwardness" included blood feud; specific kinship practices that legislators characterized as immoral, such as the practices of bride-wealth, polygamy, and bride abduction; certain religious beliefs; and practices of shamanism and spiritualism—generally, practices that could impede the envisioned "progress" of exploited people who were mired in the "swamp" of their own ignorance (Slezkine 1992, 58).

State-run schools specifically for Indigenous children were a rarity in imperial Russia. A lack of interest in literate and educated Indigenous masses, limited funds, a lack of educators, and some opposition from the local population made them undesirable, unfeasible, and unsustainable (Slezkine 1994). However, a robust education system in the form of boarding schools (*shkola-internat*) was introduced for Indigenous children in the late 1920s to promote (or enforce) adaptation to the new Soviet citizenry. For many of the Indigenous communities in the Arctic, the educational policy of *shkola-internat* meant taking children away from their parents for the duration of an academic year, from September to May. This demand was met with obvious hostility and resistance from both parents and children. For one thing, children's labor was often crucial for a family's survival. Moreover, parents believed that the goal of schools was to make their children forget their ways of life and turn them into "little Russians" (Slezkine 1992, 71). Some members of Indigenous Nenets[9] and Khanty groups expressed open defiance with statements such as, "You can't take our children by force; it's against the law. What if we resist, what then?"; "I've got kids who are school age, but I won't let them go to school; only when they shoot me dead will they be able to take them"; "Why are you Russians trying to prevent us from living our way? Why do they take our children to school and teach them to forget and to destroy the Khanty ways? They'll forget their parents and won't come back home…How would you feel if they took away your children and taught them to despise everything about the way you live?" (Slezkine 1992, 71).

*Shkola-internat* was not the only educational approach implemented by the socialist government. The progressive concept of nomadic schooling originated in the earlier years of the Soviet Union. In his analysis of the history of Indigenous education in the Arctic, Vasilii Robbek (2011) describes a specific system of nomadic schools (*kochevaya shkola*), wherein a teacher—someone with authority who was deemed responsible for the cultural and educational development of local populations—moved along with a nomadic group, providing educational instruction whenever they settled for stops. This system aimed to "provide an education without separation from a specific environment, traditional ways of living and production; additionally, the educational content must meet the requirements of the local cultural practices, traditions, and economies" (544). When the Soviet state later introduced collectivization and sedentarization policies targeting nomadic Indigenous populations, nomadic schools were discarded as unnecessary (the newly built settlements had their own schools [546]), but the concept resurged in the 1990s amid post-Soviet Indigenous revitalization movements. In this context, nomadic schools came to be seen as the important instruments of promoting Indigenous cultures and languages. For instance, Alexander Pika (1999) has convincingly argued that to preserve language and cultural traditions and improve psychological and physical health in Indigenous communities, the educational system should

[9] The Nenets (also known as Samoyed) are the Indigenous people mainly residing in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District, Nenets Autonomous District, and Taymyrsky Dolgan-Nenets District in the Far North of the Russian Federation.

be reformed to allow children to spend more time with their families, practice traditional modes of subsistence, and learn traditional knowledge of their communal, spiritual, and material cultures (182).

The educational and socio-cultural policies targeting Indigenous people in the earlier years of the Soviet Union were a part of the ambitious yet contradictory project of *indigenization* or *korenizatsiia* (great transformation from savages to citizens), which was promoted by teachers, doctors, traders and administrators, who were "cultural revolut[ionaries] of a basic kind" and promoted re-learning "how to eat, sleep, talk, dress, and be sick, as well as to assimilate a totally new view of the world and their place in it" (Slezkine 1992, 73). However, *korenizatsiia* also reified cultural differences, which preserved imperialist categories maintained by the Soviet government and demonstrated the new state's desire to distinguish itself from the capitalist interpretations of backwardness that were framed in terms of racial difference (Martin 2001, 126). Martin (2001) refers to this process of legitimization of culturally determined citizenship as a "logic of affirmative action" involving the promotion of ethnic languages and cultures (e.g., symbolic cultural markers such as folklore, dress, food, museums, certain historical events), and specific preferential policies in education, industry, and government (12-3).

**The preferential policies for ethnic minorities and Indigenous groups were applied in two distinct ways: policies based on Indigenousness (*korennost*) were available to all non-Russians; policies based on perceived cultural backwardness (*kulturno-otstalost*) were available only to those groups who were considered developmentally backward vis-à-vis advanced nationalities such as "Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews, and Germans" in the Soviet Union (Martin 2001, 23).**

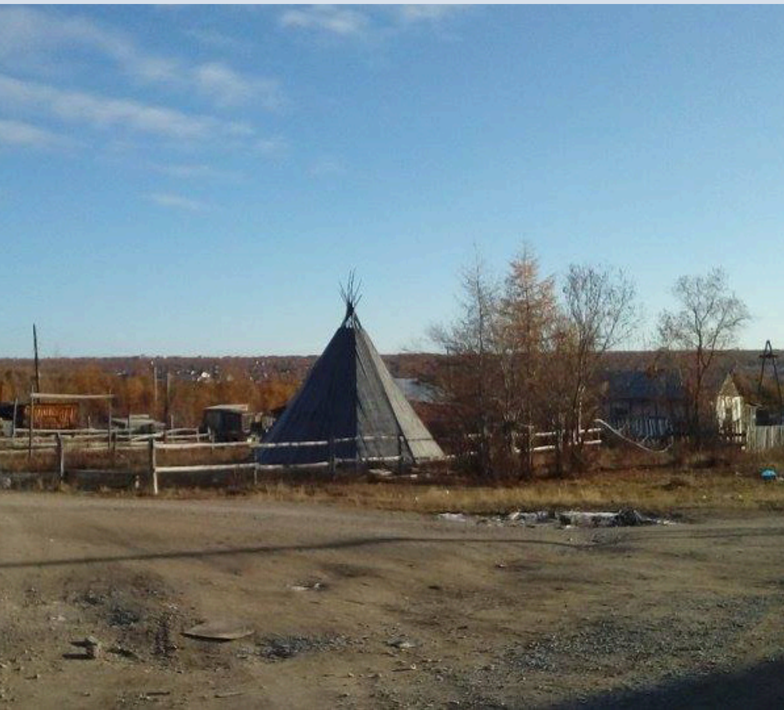
Additionally, the Soviet state deliberately encouraged the development of Indigenous intelligentsia and recruited them to elite positions in government, as a tactic to make the Soviet administration more comprehensible and relatable for Indigenous citizens (Martin 2001, 12). The native elites, who understood "the way of life, customs, and habits of the local population" and spoke the native languages, were meant to make Soviet power seem "indigenous" rather than an external imposition (Gray 2005; Martin 2001; Slezkine 1992). The goal of accelerated nation-building for ethnic minorities was celebrated as the ultimate achievement of cultural revolution. For instance, the establishment of national territories, national languages, cultural institutions, and elites for the Northern Indigenous peoples was represented as "the creation of new nationalities out of tribes which had earlier never dreamed of national existence…[and] their transition in just six years through all the stages of development, which for other peoples required thousands of years" (Martin 2001, 155).

Traditional Sakha *serge* in the *Yhyakh* celebration area in the Olenyek village (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

Overall, the Soviet strategy to engage Indigenous students in a formal education system had variety of long-term consequences in different contexts. Emphasizing the diversity of Indigenous experiences, Alexia Bloch (2004) discusses the historical significance of Soviet boarding schools for the contemporary Evenki in the Evenki Autonomous District.[10] She argues that the discourse about modernization through boarding schools represented the benefits of the Soviet system, and promoted Evenki cultural

[10] The Evenki are the Indigenous people mainly living in the Arctic districts of the Sakha Republic and the Evenki Autonomous District.

identity and traditional ways of life (39). Bloch (2004) notes that, particularly for Evenki women, the Soviet educational project represented "the enfranchisement of Evenki within the broader 'modern' society" (117). The status of women was one of the central indicators of socialist modernity, as women "have been widely seen as reproducing the nation, both biologically and socially as they raise the next generation, and also as the bearers of tradition" (Bloch 2004, 98).



School museum shaped like *chum* in the Kharyialaakh village (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

Therefore, radical Soviet project sought to specifically transform or emancipate Indigenous women, their roles, and conciousness. In this regard, according to Bloch (2004), not all Indigenous people outright resisted the projects of modernization. Many Evenki women were proud of becoming part of the socialist society, enjoyed certain levels of independence, and actively participated in local politics. Additionally, many post-Soviet Evenki, drawing on their memories of the socialist past to navigate the harsh neoliberal market conditions of the 1990s, considered the boarding schools as important sites for Evenki to renegotiate their traditional culture and construct their belonging in the post-Soviet period (Bloch 2004, 187).

Proletarianization or cooptation of the Arctic Indigenous communities into wage labor resulted in the Soviet construction, and post-Soviet re-construction, of a specific category of Indigeneity: "small nationalities of the North." This category referred to the groups residing in the Arctic and sub-Arctic territories of the Soviet Union, who primarily practiced traditional modes of subsistence such as reindeer herding, hunting, fishing, and gathering—those considered by Soviet officials as "the most backward" (Slezkine 1994, 52). In this sense, "to draw the class line across the natives" (Slezkine 1994, 191), eliminating classlessness amongst Indigenous peoples became an important strategy in combatting economic backwardness and creating a Soviet proletarian subject. Yet, it proved difficult to easily identify "class exploiters" among the Arctic Indigenous communities since there was not much accumulated wealth and capital. For example, an inspection in Kolyma area of the Sakha Republic discovered that 73% of the local Indigenous nomads were "*kulaks* or feudal lords" because of the numbers of reindeer they owned, essentially making "the poorest and most exploited" people of the Soviet Union "exploiters hopelessly attached to private property" (199). The native population themselves claimed that there were no rich or poor among them, or else stated that "all natives are poor" (200), making the class differentiation even more ambiguous.

Because traditional economic activities were often considered "economically irrational" (Slezkine 1994, 205), the government introduced collectivization, modernization, and industrialization policies intended to transform local economies into more rational and productive enterprises (i.e., to make Indigenous people more efficient producers). The proletarianization of Indigenous nomadic communities became the quintessential representation of the goal of socialist realism and of scientific communism, in which elevation into class conscious beings under communism solved primordial life contradictions. As Slezkine (1994) puts it, "Indians, savages, children of nature, and all sorts of former aliens emerged from the wilderness to stand beside the workers and peasants" (292).

Other Soviet economic policies deeply affected and transformed the economic and social lives of many Indigenous peoples (Bartels and Bartels 2006; Diatchikova 2011; Vakhtin 1992). For example, through collectivization policies (*kollektivizaciia*), the Soviet government organized the reindeer-herding nomadic groups into collective reindeer farms, while resettlement policies forced approximately 232,000 Indigenous peoples into designated settlements, preventing many of them from pursuing and continuing traditional lifestyles (Koch and Tomaselli 2015). The Soviet resettlement policy relied upon the presumed existence of ethnic territories or homelands, which therein constituted particular ethnic districts, provinces, and republics, "linking peoples to territories and via territories to rights" (Donahoe 2011, 402). This administrative and territorial confinement naturalized monolithic, static, ethnic categories and limited categorization of groups to essentialist ethnic characteristics:

> The interesting fact about socialism is that it has created identities through its command principle, which redistributes goods to defined groups, supplemented by its other major principles based on class and evolution. Territorial-administrative units were set up to accommodate the government's understanding of the relative status between these groups. The result is an inward-looking localism which is closely related to the 'excluding others' type of nationalism. (Bulag 1993, as cited in David Anderson 2000)

The reindeer-herding mode of production, for example, became a key cultural trait identifying the Indigenous Evenki as an ethnic group, despite their diverse traditional subsistence activities and modern economic engagements with mixed production (Anderson 2000, 193).

**These state-created categories displaced and replaced the multiple identities of many Indigenous groups, informed by broad kinship networks, environment, or profession rather than national or ethnic affiliations.**

David Anderson (2000) argues that the pre-Soviet Evenki of the Taymir region historically maintained highly complex forms of social, economic, and political alliances, as well as extensive intermarriages with neighbouring groups regardless of ethnicity; most community members could speak multiple Indigenous languages. Additionally, the Evenki travelled over large distances in their lifetimes, and Soviet and post-Soviet territorial boundaries made little sense for their ethnic self-identification.

Another strategy that affected traditional economies was the demarcation of migration routes, which bounded reindeer herds around newly organized settlements. Mark Dwyer and Kirill Istomin (2009) point out that Soviet forced resettlements and consolidations (*ukrupnenie*), where small cooperatives (*kolkhozy*) and villages were liquidated, drastically changed herders' movements and land use (295). The resulting social, economic, and political changes required herders to make more frequent visits to the settlements, which gradually reduced the length of their migration routes and therefore changed the herding range. The administrative reconfiguration of territorial borders altered not only the migration commutes and herding routes of nomadic Indigenous communities but ultimately disrupted their existing long-distance kinship connections. Tatiana Argounova-Low (2012), for instance, shows how two interrelated groups of Indigenous peoples found themselves in two geographically separate districts and articulated their identities and kinship relations through narratives about the roads connecting them (193). In this sense, as Argounova-Low argues, roads "enable and correspond to wayfaring, accompanied by variety of social engagements, life events, and encounters" (197), which facilitated a rebuilding of previously fragmented kin relationships and identities.

## Post-Soviet Indigeneity: "Indigenous Small-Numbered People"

The post-Soviet Constitution of 1993 was the first political document of contemporary Russia to use the term "Indigenous", emphasizing the difference between national and international understandings of Indigeneity. (Stammler-Gossmann 2009, 70)

**The new Constitution specifically introduced the term "Indigenous small-numbered peoples" (*korennye malochislennye narody*)—peoples that were eventually legally recognized by the federal government on March 24, 2000.**

The word *korennye*, derived from the Russian word "root" (*koren'*), implied rootedness, such as autochthonous, original, primal, and primordial belonging. Rather than "small" (*malye*), the constitution used "small-numbered" (*malochislennye*), shifting from patronizing to a more respectful attitude and reflecting the unique importance of population size for Indigenous groups (Donahoe et al. 2008, 997-98).

Presently, the Russian Federation legally recognizes only 40 groups as Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East.[11] According to the Federal Law No.82-FS "On Guarantees of the Rights of Numerically-Small Indigenous Peoples of the Russian Federation", a group can be recognized as Indigenous if members meet four specific legal conditions:

> (1) group members must reside in ancestral and traditionally inhabited territories;
>
> (2) a group needs to maintain a traditional way of life;
>
> (3) the number of members cannot exceed 50,000; and
>
> (4) the group needs to self-identify as a distinct ethnic community. (Koch and Tomaselli 2015)

Explaining the rationale for 50,000 as the maximum population cut-off, Donahoe et al. (2008) write:

> Using figures from the 1989 census, they [ethnologists and experts of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences (IEA-RAS)] noted that the largest of the recognized *malye* groups, the Nenets, numbered just under 35,000. Thus, initially a population maximum of 35,000 was stipulated, but this was later changed. Ultimately, it was determined that the 50,000 threshold was high enough to allow the largest *malye* group some possibility for growth yet still far enough below the smallest non-*malye* Indigenous group (Altaians with a population of 62,000) that their exclusion from the category would not be questioned. Tishkov [IEA-RAS Director] and other specialists, many of whom were directly involved in the discussions leading to the above definition, insist that the 50,000 threshold was simply a convenient, provisional figure that was never intended to be written in stone. (998)

The numerical politics of Indigenous recognition continue to create considerable tension between Indigenous groups.

**The policy implies that some groups are more authentically Indigenous than others, and communities not classified as Indigenous by these conditions are therefore excluded from discourse about the economic and political disadvantages facing Indigenous peoples (Cruikshank and Argounova 2000; Miller 2003).**

For example, the Sakha, an ethnic minority group residing in the Sakha Republic, do not meet conditions for official recognition as an Indigenous small-numbered people by Soviet legislation because of their

[11] The full list of 40 legally recognized Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East can be found here: https://en.raipon.info/narody/

population size; combined with their relative political power and economic advantages, they are thus considered in a separate category from the official Indigenous small-numbered peoples (Cruikshank and Argounova 2000, 98). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Sakha government attempted to politically re-articulate itself as the northern state to forge economic and political relations with other circumpolar peoples and northern governments (Cruikshank and Argounova 2000, 102). Similarly, Emilie Maj (2012) argues that, for ethnic Sakha, claiming Indigeneity fosters a sense of belonging to a broader community of circumpolar Indigenous peoples, while accentuating Sakha political, economic, and socio-cultural marginalization within the Russian Federation. Environmental concerns regarding the exploitation of natural resources in both Soviet and post-Soviet Sakha also motivated heated debates and antagonisms toward the federal government, which contributed to the development of politicized discourses about Indigeneity. This promoted the revitalization and reinvention of pre-Soviet Sakha cultural traditions and spirituality, including traditional relationships with nature based on reciprocity, which have in turn facilitated the reimagining of Sakha Indigeneity among the local people; the motif of "primitive savages" was shed in favour of "noble people" living in harmony with nature (Maj 2012, 213).

To put Russia's idiosyncratic recognition of Indigeneity into context, Bruce Miller (2003) has suggested that such bureaucratic circumscription of Indigeneity is generally created and employed by states to control, manage, and contain Indigenous populations in a specific area, minimizing the threat posed by their assertions of difference and necessarily causing a conflict between recognized Indigenous groups and would-be but not yet recognized groups. Narrow bureaucratic definitions, categorizations, and recognitions of Indigeneity ignore existing complexities and contradictions of Indigenous lived experiences and realities. This ultimately benefits the state and further marginalizes Indigenous peoples by constricting their access to rights, which diminishes their potential grievances and ongoing struggles.

The Russian Federation passed the Federal Law on National Cultural Autonomy in 1996; the Federal Law on the Guarantees of the Rights of Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples (Indigenous Rights Law) in 1999; the Federal Law on General Principles of the Organization of Communities of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East in 2000; as well as the Federal Law on the Territories of Traditional Nature Use by Indigenous Numerically Small Peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East in 2001 (Xanthaki 2004, 78-9). Together, these guarantee the following rights of Indigenous peoples:

> To freely use land and renewable natural resources in their traditionally occupied territories and areas where they engage in traditional economic activities ("On Guarantees", art.8, para.1);
>
> To establish self-government bodies where densely populated settlements are in place, and to form communities and other organizations ("On Guarantees", 1999, arts.11 and 12);
>
> To revise their educational institutions in line with their traditional way of life ("On Guarantees", 1999, art.8, para.9);
>
> To obtain compensation in the event that their traditional environment is damaged by industrial activities ("On Guarantees", 1999, art.8, para.8);
>
> To consider customary law in court proceedings, so long as it does not contradict federal or regional legislation ("On Guarantees", 1999, art.14). (Koch and Tomaselli 2014, 5)

Out of these legally recognized rights, the right to land came to be seen as the most important aspect of newly defined Indigenous status. For Indigenous peoples, it represented "the goals of defending age-old habitat and the traditional way of life, economy and trades" (Fondahl and Poelzer 2003, 117). Yet, this legal clause implicitly stipulates that if a community no longer follows a "traditional way of life," their land rights can be revoked. Indigenous peoples in

Russia are given land rights with the particular goal of preserving traditional modes of subsistence, such as reindeer-herding, trapping, hunting, and fishing. Gail Fondahl and Greg Poelzer (2003) describe this legal trend as the "protection of traditionality rather than aboriginality" (120). They argue that federal officials make laws pertaining to Indigenous peoples as narrow and constraining as possible to minimize the number of beneficiaries of *l'goty* (privileges) to land and traditional subsistence activities (117). Even though many Indigenous peoples engage in ways of life officially recognized as traditional, many are simultaneously involved in trading, wage labor, and other economic activities considered modern. *L'goty* can be easily revoked if Indigenous life is perceived to deviate from the legally "authorized" norms and state-determined constructions. In her analysis of post-Soviet Indigenous politics, Marjorie Balzer (2014) recalls an absurd incident when the Indigenous Nanai[12] fishermen were deprived of their rights to the land because they had been using snowmobiles to travel between their base and village. A judge revoked their land rights, stating that they should have used reindeer or canoe in a "traditional way" (Balzer 2014, 6)—despite the fact that this particular Indigenous group has never owned or herded reindeer.

Furthermore, by focusing exclusively on narrowly defined traditional economies, the laws addressing rights to land and resources do not include specific provisions for access to non-traditional or modernized resources and opportunities (Fondahl and Poelzer 2003). Alexia Bloch (2004) argues that the inherent tension between ideas of "tradition" and "modernity" can become particularly fraught in this context of Indigenous economic opportunities. She quotes Russian social scientist Alexander Pika, who has said, regarding traditional subsistence activities in the post-Soviet Russian North, "Native people should neither whine nostalgically for the past, nor beg for subsidies for the future. Rather, native people need to use the increasingly severe economic conditions as a means of creating a genuine revival of native traditions in all spheres of life" (cited in Bloch 2004, 183). Bloch (2004) notes that "traditional" culture and modes of subsistence become contained in a binary framework that is "a thin representation of reality"; she wonders, "[W]hy should Indigenous Siberians turn back to simply reviving 'traditions' rather than demanding their fair economic proceeds for building their own transformed infrastructures" (183)? What Bloch (2004) makes clear here is that government efforts to revitalize "traditional" subsistence economies will not benefit many Indigenous peoples in the North. Rather, these efforts have a strong potential to obscure local issues and anxieties over the privatization of lands and natural resources, as well as growing social and economic stratification (206).

A plethora of literature on post-Soviet Indigenous communities demonstrates that the decontextualized view of Indigenous people as bearers of "traditional culture" with no reference to contemporary socio-economic conditions, nor to the predominance of wage labor and local labor considerations, contributes to the further marginalization of these peoples (Anderson 2000; Gray 2000; Petrov 2008; Sokolovskiy 2013). In order to understand local labor dynamics and reconfigurations of traditional subsistence activities in Indigenous Arctic communities, it is essential to examine wage labor; the majority of the Indigenous population has already been propelled into dependence on the wage labor market. Furthermore, the rhetoric of revitalizing traditional economies within neoliberal Russian modernity not only disregards Indigenous participation in so-called modern economies but, through sustained primordialist views of Indigenous people, further facilitates their land dispossession. This discourse is described by David Harvey (2003) as an integral part of primitive accumulation,[13] or the commodification of land and subsequent dispossession of land, water, and other natural resources best exemplified by colonialism, which encompasses other processes of "divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx 1967, 714 cited in Harvey). Harvey defines

[12] The Nanai people are the Indigenous group mainly residing in the Khabarovsk Krai and Primorskii Krai in the Russian Far East.

[13] Building upon Marx's definition, primitive accumulation can be understood to include, "the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labor power and the suppression of alternative (Indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade and usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of primitive accumulation" (Harvey 2003, 145).

proletarianization as "a mix of coercions and of appropriations of pre-capitalist skills, social relations, knowledges, habits of mind, and beliefs," and observes that, "In some instances, the pre-existing structures have to be violently repressed as inconsistent with labor under capitalism, but multiple accounts now exist to suggest that they are just as likely to be co-opted in an attempt to forge some consensual as opposed to coercive basis for working-class formation" (146).

Wild strawberry picking is one of the traditional subsistence activities in Sakha (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

**The labor-power of Indigenous laborers—reindeer herders, hunters, and fishers—was co-opted into communist and then post-Soviet capitalist economic systems. This has embedded Indigenous labor into the wage labor economy and modified self-sufficiency based on available traditional modes of subsistence.**

Regarding land rights and land dispossession, several scholars have recently provided a valuable criticism of the federal legal frameworks mandated to protect traditional lands and economic activities from industrial and extractivist development. They specifically focus on the 2001 law on Territories of Traditional Nature Use (TTPs), constructed as "specially protected nature territories, formed for the purposes of traditional natural resource use and traditional way of life of the Indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (Parlato, Fondahl, Filippova, and Savvinova 2021, 2). This federal law guarantees Indigenous communities "the right to hunt and fish without license and to collect and control information about their territory...to initiate dialogue with non-Indigenous resource users (extractive industries) over issues of ecological damage, compensation, partnership, assistance, and so on" (Parlato, Fondahl, Filippova, and Savvinova 2021, 2). However, TTPs are federal lands, which means that while the legal regulation of TTPs can be formed at local and regional levels, the federal law always takes precedence (Fondahl et al. 2020, 135). Most TTPs are also designated as Specially Protected Nature Territories (OOPTs), where residents are entitled to compensation in the event of any harm caused by industrial development or, most importantly, OOPTs cannot become private or the objects of transactions. However, recently TTPs have had their OOPT status removed, which now opens these lands up for privatization (Fondahl et al. 2020, 135). The loss of OOPT status also means that residents will no longer be compensated for harms perpetrated through industrial development (Fondahl et al. 2020, 135).

Despite some advancements in legal regulation in Russia, existing legislation concerning Indigenous rights is largely declarative in nature and often difficult to implement. The majority of Indigenous peoples still face socioeconomic discrimination (e.g., unemployment, wage disparities, and social disadvantages), a lack of participatory rights—many districts have no system for designating seats for Indigenous people in local and regional legislative bodies, resulting in few Indigenous representatives—and no comprehensive framework for enforcing land rights. For this reason, Alexandra Xanthaki (2004) contends that while the Federal Constitution guarantees protection from discrimination on the basis of race, language, and religion (and other legislation assures the development and promotion of Indigenous cultures, languages, and lifestyles), Indigenous groups in Russia do not, broadly speaking, fully enjoy the rights guaranteed to them by the state.

Ice from the Malaya Kuonamka River is traditionally used as water source by the local Indigenous communities (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

**Indigenous cultural rights receive considerable attention in the Russian Federation, but the major concerns of many Indigenous communities particularly in the Indigenous Arctic revolve around land rights, natural resources, and political participation—specifically, inclusion in regional and federal decision-making as autonomous political agents.**

The importance of Indigenous civil society, activism, and political awareness is paramount in this context (Balzer 2014; Fondahl and Poelzer 2003; Pika 1999; Shadrin 2015). Most Indigenous organizations lacked the legal and political expertise needed to navigate the post-Soviet political landscape and neoliberal system. Fondahl and Sirina (2006) explain this situation as a legacy of Soviet educational policies, wherein Indigenous peoples were primarily trained to be teachers and medical and cultural workers, rather than lawyers, economists, scientists, and business people (132). In addition representatives of settlers came to regulate political life in Soviet Russia, frequently manipulating legal rights to benefit the state rather than Indigenous peoples, thus decreasing opportunity for political activity (Petrov 2008; Semenova 2007).

This situation has changed with the emergence of international Indigenous movements, protesting hegemonic neoliberal governments and the economic, political, and cultural marginalization of Indigenous peoples worldwide. As a result, local Indigenous groups turned to global articulations of Indigeneity and engaged in a wide range of approaches for constructing Indigenous subjectivities beyond dominant representations of "pretty costumes, choreographed dances, and music ensembles" (Donahoe 2011, 404). Gradually, Indigeneity became politicized through claims to land, natural resources, self-determination, and sovereignty, which gave rise to organized mobilizations and grievances focused on these claims (Gray 2005; Koch and Tomaselli 2015; Semenova 2007; Silanpaa 2000).

Furthermore, the 1990s *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies, a restructuring program intended to decentralize and democratize economic and political systems, played an important role in the rise of post-Soviet Indigenous activism, providing Indigenous peoples an opportunity to participate in regional, national, and international policy-making processes primarily about Indigenous rights (Gray 2005; Semenova 2007; Vakhtin 1992). One of the largest Indigenous organizations, the Russian Association of the Indigenous Small-Numbered Peoples of the North (RAIPON), also known as *Assotsiatsiia Korennykh Malochislennykh Narodov Severa*, was established in March 1990 as a non-governmental organization at the first Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the North. The RAIPON's primary goal is "to protect the legitimate interests and rights of the indigenous peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" (Semenova 2007, 8), including rights to land, natural resources, and self-government in line with both international standards and Russian legislation on Indigenous peoples. The RAIPON and its work to transform the discourse on Indigeneity from a primordial notion to politicized concept essentially changed how Indigenous peoples viewed themselves and their experiences within the post-Soviet political and economic landscape. The RAIPON, along with other small-scale Indigenous organizations, linked Indigenous politics to human rights claims in concert with the international Indigenous movement and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The globalized category of Indigeneity,

created and deployed locally to manage Indigenous peoples, became an important and effective resource with which to exercise self-determination, resulting in the number of Indigenous groups recognized in Russia increasing from 26 to 46 between 1993 and 2000 (Donahoe 2011, 999). The RAIPON itself became particularly successful in mobilizing people and promoting the rights of Indigenous peoples. Many Indigenous peoples started to access, practice, and protect their rights by filing lawsuits in situations where their regional and federal rights were violated. Some were successful and some were not. This is mainly because the federal government prioritized economic revenues from industries engaged in resource extraction over Indigenous peoples and their rights (Koch and Tomaselli 2015, 15).

Despite the considerable achievements of post-1990 Indigenous activism, Indigenous peoples' living conditions have continued to deteriorate (Koester 2005; Pika 1999; Tomaselli 2014). Although the problems are well documented, many regional and federal public officials continue to be oblivious to everyday social and economic problems facing Indigenous communities. In addition to the persisting social, economic, and political marginalization, the environmental destruction brought by industrial development and extractive activities seriously threatens the livelihood of many Indigenous peoples dependent on the land for subsistence (Fondahl and Sirina 2006; Hicks 2011; Tomaselli 2014).

**The global transition to neoliberal capitalism brought about a new political order dominated by powerful industrial corporations, which has led to increasingly unequal distributions of wealth and thus power. In this economic transition, the post-Soviet association of Indigeneity in Russia with land struggles and extractivism is not surprising.**

Currently, the federal government is wary about granting rights to groups and individuals claiming Indigenous status as defined by international law and transnational discourses. Such claims come attached to major political and economic issues identified in this chapter and, furthermore, concerns about control over regions with critical natural resources (Berezhkov 2012; Donahoe et al. 2008). Therefore, it is not surprising that the federal government maintains strictly defined category of Indigeneity based primarily on stereotypes about Indigenous peoples (Balzer 2014; Bloch 2004; Ssorin-Chaikov 2003). Any deviation from traditionality seems enough to invalidate a claim to Indigenous rights for land and resources at the local and federal levels.

Billboard "Preserve nature for children" in the Olenyek village (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

Chapter Two:

# A History of Diamond Production in the Sakha Republic

Diamonds were not always the primary natural resource exploited in the Sakha Republic. In the late 16th century, white settlers moved eastward from Central Russia in search of furs, called "soft gold," which brought wealth to merchants and burden to locals in the form of the *iasak* tax (Tichotsky 2000). To this day, the Sakha Republic remains one of the major fur-producing regions in Russia, though profits have declined over time.

Following the October Revolution, the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (YASSR or Yakutia) was established in 1922 as an autonomous republic in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). In 1924, gold was discovered in the Aldan River area in southern Yakutia, prompting development of an illegal gold rush with an influx of miners and small-scale *artel's*[14] (worker communes). The new socialist government quickly nationalized gold-mining and created the state company *YakutZoloto* (Yakut Gold), also prioritizing gold production through infrastructure projects like electric stations, roads, and the Aldan-Yakutskaya railroad as an extension of the Baikalo-Amurskaya railroad (Crate and Yakoveva 2008, 226). Under the control of *YakutZoloto*, the Aldan district was Soviet Russia's main gold-producing

[14] In imperial and early Soviet Russia, an *artel'* was a cooperative of workers and peasants who lived and worked together in communes.

region throughout the 1920s and 1930s. In the early years of Aldan gold production, a mainly white settler workforce encountered some prospectors and miners from China and Korea (Tichotsky 2000), but the makeup of the labor force began to change drastically in the late 1930s; the local construction of *gulags*—work camps—meant that prisoners replaced many of the independent prospectors, miners, and migrant laborers. This system of prison labor persisted until the 1950s. Still, under Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev, the labor force primarily consisted of white settlers, lured to the gold mining areas by wages that ran two or three times higher than what workers earned in the Central Soviet Union (Tichotsky 2000).

**Despite the importance of gold in the Soviet economy, another extractive industry emerged in Yakutia that was even more lucrative: diamonds.**

In this chapter, I show how perspectives on diamond production in the Sakha Republic are more complex than the debate between extractivism as environmental destruction versus development. Building on earlier scholarship, I demonstrate how the history of extractive industry and its impact on Indigenous communities in the Sakha Republic has formed a unique context for global-federal-Indigenous relations. In making my arguments I will rely on ethnographic data and in-depth interviews with community members in the rural Indigenous Arctic, whose voices are often muted in the scholarship on natural resources, development, and global capitalism.

## Soviet Diamonds

When the impending revolution became apparent to the Bolsheviks in 1917, the government exported large quantities of diamonds and other jewels seized from the imperial treasury, most of which were purchased by European diamond cartels. One noteworthy member of which was De Beers, the South African diamond mining and trading corporation. But for the new socialist government in Russia, diamonds were considered a bourgeois luxury commodity and thus did not hold significant value.

World War II was a global turning point in recognizing the industrial potential of diamond production. Industrial diamonds (or technical diamonds)[15] do not meet qualifications of gem diamonds but still have many uses in mechanical production, and during the war effort these became critical to military production. They can be used for "stamp[ing] out precision parts for airplane engines, torpedoes, tanks, artillery, and other weapons; drawing fine wire for radar and other electronic apparatuses; and as jeweled bearings for the stabilizers, gyroscopes and guidance systems of planes and submarines" (Kempton and Levine 1995, 87).

After the war ended, the military significance of diamonds was not forgotten. On December 28, 1950, United States President Harry S. Truman issued a letter to the Departments of Defense and State to determine and recommend measures "to prevent the flow to countries supporting the Communist imperialist aggression of those materials, goods, funds, and services which would serve materially to aid their ability to carry on such aggression" (Cain 2013, 36). In less than a year, the U.S. introduced the Battle Act, or the Mutual Defense Assistance Control Act, based on House Foreign Affairs Committee hearings chaired by Laurie C. Battle on East-West trade (Cain 2013, 37), as part of a larger political and economic strategy against the Soviet Union. With this Act, and similar actions in other member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the

[15] Industrial or technical diamonds are "diamonds which do not meet the purity, color, hardness, or other qualifications of gem diamonds. They are usually sold for a mere fraction of the price of equal-sized gem diamonds" (Kempton and Levine 1995, 87).

United States sought to stop the export of military equipment, machinery, ships, and associated technology to the Soviet Union, China, Korea, and other socialist states. These commodities included industrial diamonds. This Cold War embargo on industrial diamonds to the Soviet Union effectively blocked the Soviet government from acquiring diamonds on the international market, incentivizing them to instead ramp up domestic diamond production (Kempton and Levine 1995, 99).

Ships kept frozen for the winter season on the Vilyuy River (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2011).

In the early 1950s, pressed by economic sanctions, the Soviet government invested significantly in geological explorations in Yakutia following the observation by geologist Victor Sobolev that the Vilyuy region shared important geological similarities with diamond-rich regions in South Africa (Crate and Yakovleva 2008). Highly secretive diamond expeditions had already set out in 1947, first discovering diamonds in the western part of the Yakut ASSR in 1949. Then alluvial diamond deposits[16] were found in 1950. A few years later in 1954, Larisa Popugayeva, a young Russian female geologist, discovered the first kimberlite pipe,[17] later named *Zarnitza* (summer lightning), near the Daldyn River, a tributary of the Vilyuy River (Kempton and Levine 1995, 87). When geologists uncovered the second kimberlite pipe in 1955 near the Irelyakh River, they sent an enthusiastic telegraph to the authorities in Moscow: "We smoke the pipe of peace, excellent tobacco" (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 226). The discovery of the second richest diamond deposit, later called *Mir* (peace), compelled the government to establish a state-owned enterprise in 1957: *YakutAlmaz* (Yakut Diamond). With its new company, the state intended to exploit alluvial and ore diamond mines in newly established mining settlements, such as Mirny (1959), Chernyshevsky (1961), Aykhal (1962), Almazny (1963), and Udachny (1968) (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 226). Diamond production spread into most of Western Yakutia, including eight districts—Anabar, Lensk, MIrny, Verkhnvilyuisk, Villyuisk, Nyurba, Olekminsk, and Suntar—in what came to be known as the "diamond province" with kimberlite deposits sprawling over 600,000 square kilometers (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 8).

From 1956 to 1960, the lucrative diamond industry in Yakutia drew tens of thousands of predominantly white settlers from the central regions of the Soviet Union. They settled in newly formed towns to work in diamond mining and adjacent industries. In the earlier years of the Yakut Autonomous Republic, the Sakha (the largest Indigenous group in Yakutia) had comprised around 82% of the total population (with migrant laborers comprising 12%), but by 1989 the Sakha made up only 33%, with white settlers (e.g., Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians) constituting almost 64% of the population (Balzer 2022, 32; Kempton 1996, 590). On top of demographic shifts, the development of the diamond mining industry often forced the relocation of local communities. For example, flooding from a hydro-electric dam displaced 600 people along the Chona River, a tributary of the Vilyuy (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 228).

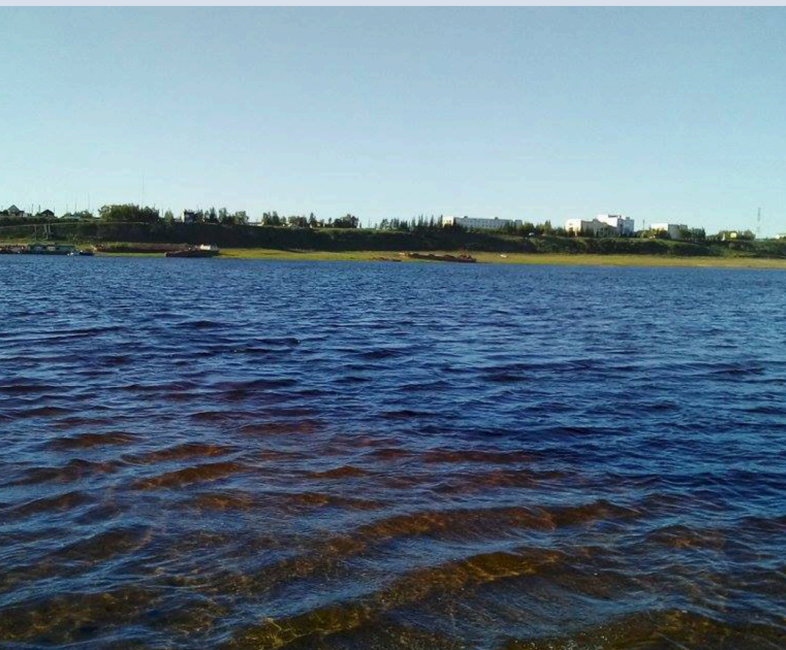
Settler laborers, newly arrived to the region for the diamond industry, required consumer goods. This

[16] Alluvial diamond deposits, often located in riverbeds, are "the diamonds that have been eroded away from the 'hard rock' kimberlite deposits and found on the surface or underground washed into a river" (Tichotsky 2000, 110).

[17] A kimberlite pipe is diamond-bearing ore in the form of giant underground cone, often excavated by digging a large open pit (Tichotsky 2000).

production became a responsibility of the local Indigenous population: "[S]tate-owned farms were required to produce meat and milk for the diamond industry…Vilyuy Sakha had a serf-like relationship with the diamond industry" (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 229). Economic policies prioritized the extractive industry and forged hierarchical relationships among local populations, with Indigenous peoples mostly relegated to poorer agricultural sectors in the central and northern areas, and settler workers who dominated mining industries residing in the southern industrialized regions (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 107). Interethnic relations, particularly in mining towns and villages, were tense because of white settlers' racist and chauvinist behavior towards the local Indigenous population; offensive epithets such as "monkeys," "savages," "woodchips," and "slit eyes" were commonly used. There were also accusations of white male workers, who usually arrived without their families, sexually harassing and exploiting Sakha and other Indigenous women, particularly in rural villages (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 109).

In addition to the local Sakha communities, the regional population of Yakutia also included (and still includes) Indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North. Evens, Evenki, Yukaghirs, Dolgans, and Chukchis currently make up 4.2% of Sakha Republic's total population (2021 All-Russian Population Census).



View on the Vilyuy River and the Nyurba village (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

**Despite widespread misconceptions, Indigenous small-numbered peoples were also actively involved in early development of the diamond mining industry in Sakha.**

Beyond producing consumer products, many Evenki, specifically of the Olenyek district, frequently worked as *kayurs* (reindeer-team drivers) for the geological expeditions between the 1950s and 1970s to explore the district and elsewhere. Anna, an Evenki Elder born in 1940 in the Olenyek district whom I conversed with in 2017, worked as a *kayur* with her husband for several years:

> Those expeditions involved very hard labor; it was always very difficult. During summers, there were so many mosquitoes, during winters, it was very cold making travelling very slow and dangerous. My husband and I oversaw transportation of rock samples, equipment, foodstuffs, but also geologists on our reindeer. We were travelling back and forth all the time between the village and the expedition locations but also between geological locations. You know there is a book published about our *kayur* work, but, so far, we do not get any assistance for our contribution to the development of mining industry from the state.

Anna was one of many of the Olenyek district residents employed as *kayurs* for geological expeditions during the Soviet era. The book that Anna mentioned is *Long Way to Treasures of Ancient Frontier* (2010), written by Natalya Sivtseva, a retired teacher from the Olenyek district. The historical account in this book provides a rare comprehensive description of Soviet state geological explorations in the Olenyek district and the active participation of local Indigenous communities in many expeditions. Even though Olenyek residents' labor for the massive Soviet-era exploration projects are recognized by regional and federal authorities in numerous media publications and corporate and governmental documents, many do not receive any benefits or

assistance either from the state or mining companies to this day. During my conversation with Maya, a former reindeer herder and *kayur*, she expressed bitter disappointment in the political and economic treatment she has experienced from the government and the diamond industry:

> My current pension is only 17,000 rubles; of course, it is not enough with our high prices here. I worked for so many years with those expeditions, but when the companies show up here, they only give us some chocolate and paper notebooks with the company logo. Nothing else. Does it mean that I have worked for a piece of chocolate and a notebook during all those hard years? They used to give 85 rubles before, but only my husband was receiving it, I never got anything. I know that the local activists are trying to get us some money from the companies, but they have not been successful so far. I cannot even imagine how much profits these companies might have, and all those profits are based on our hard labor as *kayurs*. They would not have found anything without us!

While women like Anna and Maya played a key role in many aspects of herding and *kayur* labor, their contributions are still neglected or dismissed.

**The Soviet government was initially interested in technical diamonds for industrial and military production, but quickly recognized the immense profit potential of gem diamonds, making the new mining operations extremely important to the national economy.**

As the Soviet Union did not have a large consumer market for diamonds, most Soviet diamonds were produced for external consumption, exported as uncut, unpolished, and rough diamonds through secret sales with De Beers beginning in 1957. De Beers and the Soviet government came to an agreement that De Beers would earn a 2.5% commission for selling uncut Soviet gem diamonds on the international market (Kempton 1995, 99). This arrangement continued covertly even after the Soviet government officially severed diplomatic relations with the apartheid South African government in 1960; "both sides publicly disavowed any relations, but in reality, Soviet diamonds still found their way to De Beers" (Kempton 1995, 100). By 1990, the price of gem diamonds had increased by 1,800% since 1948 globally which prompted an expansion of production "from an estimated 95,000 carats in 1960 to an estimated 18 million carats in 1992" (Kempton 1995, 101).

**Diamonds became one of the USSR's leading exports to the west, especially because much of the revenue came in the currency of the U.S. dollar, which was needed to purchase many foreign goods and technology.**

Furthermore, De Beers and the Soviet Union had agreed that the company would purchase between 90% and 95% of all uncut gem diamonds produced in the USSR, regardless of increased production and fluctuating consumer demand. Given this requirement, the company was ultimately forced to stockpile a large surplus of Soviet gems. High in purity, silver in color, and smaller in size, "silver bears" extracted in the Soviet mines very quickly overwhelmed De Beers and, by the 1970s, threatened to disrupt the global diamond market if released (Kempton 1995, 101; Kempton and Levine 1995, 88). Attempting to dispose of a voluminous stockpile of Soviet diamonds, De Beers created its most successfully marketed product: the Eternity Ring, featuring many small gems rather than one large one.

**Ironically, many American men at the height of the Cold War purchased the ring and gave their American wives a gift of Soviet diamonds (Tichotsky 2000).**

According to Kempton (1995), the Soviet Union-De Beers relationship was mutually beneficial in many ways. After 1976, for example, they agreed to share

technology: “De Beers eventually introduced an X-ray technique for diamond sorting similar to the one pioneered by the Soviets. Conversely, the Soviets acquired sorting tables and other technology and equipment from De Beers and its subsidiaries” (102). By 1990, the Soviet diamond industry processed about 3.8 million rough carats annually—an estimated 1.6 million carats of polished diamonds, worth between $500-550 million USD (104).

Despite economic success, the impact of diamond-mining went beyond infrastructure development and demographic transformations in Sakha. Intensifying extractivism affected local communities via environmental degradation, deterioration of public health, and infringement on local property rights. In the 1950s, the Soviet government passed several laws and resolutions for protection of land, water, air, and wildlife that were among the strictest and most progressive in place at the time (Peterson 1993, 17); however, they were poorly enforced, and the demands of industrialization often outweighed environmental regulations. Many of the ministries and state committees responsible for environmental protection were underfunded and operating within a highly bureaucratic system, which made the monitoring and enforcing of government regulations difficult (Peterson 1993, 162-67).

The development of the diamond mining industry in the Vilyuy region brought both relative economic prosperity and profound environmental and social problems for the Sakha peoples inhabiting areas along the Vilyuy River. During the Soviet period, the Vilyuy Sakha economies of herding, hunting, and fishing were collectivized and consolidated into agro-industrial state farms, and the ancestral lands (*alaas*) nationalized into state property (Crate and Yakovleva 2008). The environmental impact of extractive activities in this area was particularly enormous; land and water rehabilitation stagnated, air pollution increased, and the regeneration of vegetation was extremely slow (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 10). Moreover, open-pit mines often operated for decades and heavily contaminated local rivers through spoil heaps, dispersion of ground waters, and “technical” waters from the processing operations (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 10). Combinations of aluminium, chromium, nickel, cobalt, copper, zinc, scandium, vanadium, titanium, manganese, barium, and strontium all found their way into the Markha, Malaya Botuobiya, and Vilyuy rivers (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 10).

The diamond industry also required the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects for energy. Since mining operations were dependent on electricity, the Soviet government began construction of a massive hydroelectric dam on the river Vilyuy in 1958, creating a reservoir that flooded an area of 1,960 square kilometers from 1969 to 1973. Crate (2002) writes that “the reservoir, encompassing 356,000 acres of prime fields and woodlands containing haying, pasturing, and hunting areas and economically valuable timberlands, disrupted the river’s natural ebb and flow, ‘softened’ the local climate, inundated native settlements and valuable land resources, and contaminated the surface waters with phenols” (424). The polluted water took more than 10 years to stabilize its oxygen concentration. Moreover, “this artificial regulation of the river Vilyuy flow significantly changed the hydrological, hydro-chemical and hydro-biological characteristics of the flooded area, as well as the ice regime, and the reservoir itself became the source of hydrogen sulphide and phenols that contaminated the environment” (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 11-2). Life in the river was particularly devastated. Many Sakha Elders recalled conditions before damming the Vilyuy River as “crystal-clear waters abundantly teeming with sturgeon, fresh-water salmon and other valuable fish species, which are now rarities if found at all. The river otter (*Lutra lutra L.*) and black or hooded crane (*Grus monacha*), once common to the Vilyuy and its tributaries, are gone” (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 227).

**In addition to being the location of large-scale infrastructure and industrial projects, Yakutia was the epicenter of nuclear explosion tests—though this was highly classified and not revealed to the local population until the 1990s. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its international allies were in an arms race[18] with the United States and other capitalist states.**

Nuclear technology, weapons, and arsenals, as well as development of space systems for monitoring and targeting, became of paramount importance to both sides as they "promised enormous lethality at low cost" (Hoyt 2016, 144). The United States nuclear project(s) affected numerous Native American communities and their Indigenous homelands, which were deemed collateral damage in the country's Cold War agenda of imperialism and industrial capitalism.[19]

In Yakutia, most of the nuclear weapon tests were part of Programme No. 7, Nuclear Explosions for the National Economy. Between 1965 and 1989, an estimated 124 underground nuclear explosions occurred on the territory of the Soviet Union for economic purposes. Peaceful nuclear explosions were used for "seismic and geological prospecting, boosting oil and gas production, creating underground gas stores, excavating reservoirs and dams, and plugging oil and gas 'gushers'" (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 12). Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova (2000) have revealed that, between 1974 and 1987, the government conducted 12 underground explosions in Yakutia, with 10 of them in Western Yakutia. These secret underground explosions planned to clear the subsoil of permafrost to expedite construction of a dam to filter the waste from the diamond industry (Crate 2002, 297). In fact, "[t]wo underground nuclear explosions Kraton-3 and Kristall 'backfired', creating fallout of radioactive elements such as caesium-137, strontium-90, plutonium-239, 240, americium-241, all of which are well documented to have substantial negative environmental and health impacts" (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 13). The average radiation dose around the site was 30-50 microroentgen, exceeding the natural background mean by two to three times (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 13).

Starting in the 1950s, rocket debris began falling in the Vilyuy region (Crate 2002, 295). The Nyurba region of the Vilyuy watershed specifically was used as a drop-off area for rockets launched during the second stage of space exploration from the Baykonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan (Crate 2002, 298). Crate (2002) has discovered that "the shed rocket parts emit highly toxic gases containing heptyl (dimethylhydrazine), which contaminate the taiga and Indigenous settlements. The Vilyuy inhabitants consider this contamination a link to the rise of cancer in their populations since the late 1970s. Local hunters report findings of entire herds of dead animals and flocks of birds in the taiga where the rockets fall" (298).

Combined, these hazardous activities associated with the arms race and rapid industrial development considerably harmed the health of people residing in the diamond province of the Vilyuy region in comparison with the non-mining districts in the Sakha Republic. Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova (2000) report that the Indigenous population in the Vilyuy region today still suffer from increased rates of malignant tumours, congenital cardiovascular anomalies, endocrine pathologies, and chronic inflammatory and allergic diseases of the respiratory organs and urogenital system (15). The Ministry of Health of the republic also noted that the morbidity rate in the region was higher, 659.9 per 1000 people, than the overall morbidity rate in the Sakha Republic (581.9 per 1000 people) in the 1990s. This suggests there is a direct connection between morbidity and proximity to diamond mining operations in the Vilyuy reservoir (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 15).

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[18] An arms race is understood as "two or more parties perceiving themselves to be in an adversary relationship, who are increasing or improving their armaments at a rapid rate and restructuring their respective military postures with a general attention to the past, current, and anticipated military and political behaviour of the other parties" (Gray 1971, 40).

[19] See for example Dana E. Powell's (2018) work on Navajo sovereignty, energy projects, and Desert Rock nuclear tests.

**Nevertheless, the exploitation of diamonds by 1990 accounted for more than 80% of Soviet foreign currency earnings (Kempton and Levine 1995).**

Moreover, according to predictions in the early 1990s by Western corporations and governments, the economic potential for extractivism in post-Soviet Russia was unquestionably enormous. In 1995, Kempton and Levine wrote:

> Russia already produces a wide variety of minerals that the west regularly imports for industrial purposes, including chromite, coal, diamonds, gold, manganese, natural gas, nickel, petroleum and platinum group metals. With western technology and investment, and a market economy, Russia's mineral production and sales could increase markedly. If marketed competitively and globally, the expanded sale of Russia's natural resources could benefit many mineral consuming industries in the west. Conversely, mineral producing industries may find Russia to be a new and powerful competitor on global markets. (109-10)

Diamond-mining was one of the few industries that survived the turmoil of the post-Soviet transition to a neoliberal economy. As such, the Sakha Republic's economy recovered faster than most of Russia precisely because it relied on revenues from diamond production. However, the diamond mining industry underwent drastic transformations, including an intense political struggle between a newly sovereign Sakha government and the post-Soviet federal government.

## Sovereign Diamonds

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought new problems and heated disputes over Soviet-era policies, including those regarding the mining industry and specifically diamond mining in Sakha. By 1990, the Sakha Republic was producing an estimated 99% of all diamonds in Russia, in addition to sizable production of gold, natural gas, coal, tin, and other important resources (Kempton and Levine 1995; Tichotsky 2000). Although the entire Sakha economy was built primarily to facilitate the extraction of natural resources, local people did not directly receive any profits from the lucrative sales, nor were they included in decision-making about how the revenues would be spent. Since the 1950s, the central government in Moscow has conducted all diamond exchange, often in secret; none of the diamond exports nor profits appear in any official governmental accounts, except the secret ledgers of the State Planning Agency and the Communist Party Central Committee (Tichotsky 1993). Profits were partly returned to the Sakha Republic in the form of government subsidies, transforming Yakutia into "a ward of the state" (Tichotsky 2000). These subsidies were primarily spent on the import of consumer goods and other products manufactured elsewhere. Due to climate conditions and underdeveloped, unreliable infrastructure, shipment of goods was possible only in the late spring and summer through the Baikal Amur branch of the Trans-Siberian railroad, the river ports of Vitim and Lensk, and down the Lena River from the Arctic Ocean. Tichotsky (2000) notes that this transport system was only sustainable thanks to the price stability and centralized distribution of all goods during the Soviet period (53). The disintegration of this complex market system after 1991 meant that prices increased drastically for both goods and transportation. Most consumer goods in Sakha became unavailable almost overnight, severely lowering the living and working conditions. Most local industries became incapacitated by a lack of spare parts, fuel, and machinery (Kempton 1996, 590-91).

The 1990s transition to a neoliberal economy weakened government capacity to provide higher standards of living in the Northern areas, specifically for settler laborers mostly employed in the mining industries (Heleniak 1999, 156). The loss of incentives for settler workers, especially in Sakha, prompted a wave of out-migration (Heleniak 1999). In his analysis of local demographic data between 1992 to 1997, Heleniak (1999) has found that 52% of residents had originally moved to the North to earn money, accumulate savings, and take advantage of privileges

and incentives guaranteed specifically for migrants to the North; another motivation for 13% of respondents was romanticism or a desire to see the world (186). The collapse of the Soviet economic system resulted in declining financial benefits and other privileges to compensate for the hardships of living in the Northern region, hence "it became senseless to stay in the North" (187).

The post-Soviet liberalization sparked movements for political and economic independence in the former Soviet republics. The Soviet Constitution of 1977 had recognised republics as sovereign states with the right to secede. In 1990, the new Sakha government adopted a Declaration of State Sovereignty of Sakha Republic in Yakutia with a new head—native Sakha President Mikhail Nikolaev—and legislature in the Yakut Parliament (*Il Tumen*) (Yakovleva, Alabaster, and Petrova 2000, 6). According to Balzer and Vinokurova (1996), the new title "Sakha Republic (Yakutia)"[20] was intended to signal self-determination and sovereignty over political, economic, and cultural matters within the framework of the Russian Federation (103). This move also implied that the historical, political, and economic relationship between the federal government and the Sakha Republic was primarily based on compromise rather than overt opposition. The post-Soviet Sakha Republic was also far from radical or secessionist; its politics embraced ethnic nationalism but not necessarily in supremacist or separatist framing (103). As Balzer and Vinokurova (1996) point out, the Sakha Constitution of 1992 was based on "the principle of governmental sovereignty, and not national sovereignty for the one people after whom the republic was named. A citizenship law passed in 1992 gave rights to any person resident in the republic for 10 years and willing to respect the traditions of all peoples of the republic" (103). Based on this, Sakha sovereignty is limited "with no pretence of establishing a full range of independence attributes, such as a national currency, a banking system, a separate defence strategy or an army. The goal, for what is hoped to be a long-term peaceful post-Soviet transition period, is to carve out new political and legal territory in creative, negotiated federal relations" (Balzer and Vinokurova 1996, 113).

**Как Якутия боролась за суверенитет: от собственной армии до полного права на самоопределение**

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Screenshot of the newspaper article "How Yakutia fought for sovereignty: From national army to full right of self-determination" (Zolotaya Orda 2020).

In a newly sovereign Sakha, the lack of developed infrastructure, poor access to consumer goods, low standard of living, lower wages, and other socio-economic difficulties became more pronounced (Kempton 1995, 107). Mikhail Nikolaev thus focused his efforts on re-negotiating control of the extractive economy at the end of 1991 by "strategically barter[ing] political support for economic privileges from Moscow in a manner that some view as a useful 'model' for Russia's other components" (Kempton 1996, 589). Specifically, the new Sakha government and its leader demanded more economic autonomy, including ownership of natural resources and a larger share of the profits from its most profitable industry: diamonds. In his analysis of the power struggle between the Russian government and Sakha leadership in the early 1990s, Kempton (1996) notes that Nikolaev used diamonds as both "a carrot and a stick" (594). For example, in 1990, the Sakha refused to ship diamonds to Moscow until Boris Yeltsin would ensure the Sakha government greater control of its resources, and more political and economic autonomy in general (594). Yeltsin acquiesced to Sakha demands to ensure political compliance from the financially important region. As such, the Presidium of the Russian Supreme Soviet, a body of state power, authorized the "Law on Mineral Resources" on

[20] "Sakha" is the self-designation of the Sakha people and "Yakut" is an outsiders' name for the Sakha.

February 21, 1992, "which promised all republics and local governments a near equal share of the profits from the minerals mined in their territories," and later enacted statutes "granting the republics the right to approve the development of minerals mined in their territories and an oversight role in the mining process" (Kempton 1995, 107).

Another important result of the intense bargaining between the Sakha and federal governments was the creation, by decree from Boris Yeltsin, of *Almazy Rossii-Sakha* (Diamonds of Russia and Sakha, or ALROSA) in February 1992. *Almazy Rossii-Sakha* became the successor to *RosAlmazZoloto* (Russian Diamond and Gold) and integrated previously separated links in the diamond manufacturing process (i.e., mining, sorting and grading, cutting, marketing) (Bond, Levine, and Austin 1992, 636). In December 1992, ALROSA was given part-ownership in a joint-stock firm with 32% shares held by the Russian Federation, 32% for the Government of Sakha, 23% to workers' groups, 5% to a retirement fund, and 1% each to eight local district governments in the diamond province (Bond, Levine, and Austin 1992, 637; Kempton 1995, 107).

Interestingly, the Sakha government actively sought to expand local diamond cutting operations, since most diamond cutting plants were located outside the republic. According to Kempton (1995) and Tichotsky (2000), diamond mining itself produces few employment opportunities for the local population, but diamond cutting and finishing, as well as jewellery making and manufacturing of diamond tools, held potential for more local employment opportunities and revenue. Securing the right to sort, grade, cut, and market diamonds, rather than merely to extract raw diamonds, the Sakha government established a new firm in 1991: *Tuymaada Diamond*. It was created as a joint-stock company to promote and develop secondary industries to add substantial value to commodity diamonds. *Tuymaada Diamond* immediately signed agreements with Belgian, Japanese, and South Korean companies to build 16 cutting factories and other operations (Kempton 1995, 108). By 1994, *Tuymaada Diamond* "established six plants with more than 900 employees and increased its profit from 10 million roubles to 1,837 billion roubles; the firm was also sending the agreed amount of diamonds to Israel, Hong Kong and Antwerp for cutting" (Kempton 1995, 108). From 1991 to 1997, revenue from the diamond industry accounted for 90% of Sakha's economy, making the government almost fully dependent on extractive activities.
The president of ALROSA, Vyacheslav Shtyrov, was appointed Vice President of the Sakha Republic in 1992, which solidified the "merger of the regional government and a single business" (Kempton 2002, 85).

Some members of the federal government were not happy with the perceived privileges the Sakha Republic gained through direct agreements with Boris Yeltsin. With presidential elections looming ahead in 1997, Yeltsin, a formerly reliable ally but now pressured by the federal parliament, vetoed the law "On Precious Metals and Precious Minerals" passed by the Duma (the legislative house of the Russian Federation) that seemingly provided ALROSA an exclusive right to export uncut gem diamonds (Kempton 2002, 87). The federal government also failed to sign a new agreement with De Beers when their contract expired on December 30, 1995. Throughout 1996, De Beers still purchased some of Russia's diamonds, but suspended purchases on January 1, 1997 (Kempton 2002, 88). Because ALROSA could not afford to pay its employees or invest in new diamond production without a new formal agreement with De Beers, the Sakha government was forced to renegotiate its diamond trade with the federal government and give up some of its earlier advantages. On July 22, 1997, Yeltsin signed a presidential decree to reform the diamond industry and strip the Sakha Republic of the right to independently sell 20% of the diamonds mined on its territory—one of the largest and arguably most important successes of earlier negotiations. Sakha could only buy diamonds under the terms and prices fixed by the Russian Ministry of Finance (Kempton 2002, 88-9). Therefore, the lucrative diamond industry was once again captured by the federal government, and ALROSA was finally allowed to enter into a new agreement with De Beers on December 1, 1997.

## Russian Diamonds

In 2001, then President Mikhail Nikolaev lost support from the federal government in his bid for a third term, due to his favorable stance on nationalism and economic efforts to maintain control over natural resources and mining industries (Bahry 2005). Vyacheslav Shtyrov, an ethnic Russian president of ALROSA since 1995, became President of the Sakha Republic the following year. Shtyrov's presidency was achieved as many believed through "dirty tricks" of the federal center such as forcing the former president Nikolaev out of presidential run, disqualifying the candidates, who could have been potentially successful opponents, on minor technicalities, or coercing the district leaders to guarantee public support for Shtyrov's candidacy ("Vybory v Yakutii" 2001), and he was later hand-picked and confirmed by Vladmir Putin (Balzer 2022). Despite Shtyrov's promises to protect the republic's stake in the diamond industry, Sakha control over ALROSA swiftly decreased. By 2009, the republic closed down most of its diamond processing facilities, and began concentrating on production and exportation. All five presidents of ALROSA since then have been ethnic Russians, non-native to the Sakha Republic. The most recent president, in office since 2017 to 2023, was Sergey Ivanov Jr., the son of a senior Russian politician who is the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation on the Issues of Environmental Activities, Ecology, and Transport. Today, the president of ALROSA is Pavel Marinychev, who started his mining career in just 2016 as president of *Almazy Anabara* (Anabar-Diamonds), a daughter company of ALROSA.

The late-1990s restructuring of ALROSA, combined with the fact that diamond production was prioritized as Russia's main source of economic recovery after the 2008 and 2014–2016 economic crises, has culminated in a complete disregard for environmental deterioration in Sakha by economic and political leaders. Outrage at worsening environmental conditions has sparked local mobilizations for environmental justice numerous times over the years. In the early 1990s, many communities affected by the mining industry actively voiced their concerns about local social and environmental issues. For example, the Vilyuy Committee, formed by Pyotr Martinov and other residents of the village Nyurba, was particularly active at that time, along with the Committee chapters in Suntar, Verkhnevilyuisk, and Vilyuysk districts in the diamond province. The Vilyuy Committee signed an appeal demanding actions for environmental improvement to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, and the Supreme Soviet of the Yakut Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990, and again in 1992, appealing to the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, the President of the Sakha Republic, and the Supreme Soviet of the Sakha Republic (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 230). The appeals were unsuccessful. In 1994, ALROSA announced its discovery of "the biggest diamond pipe in the Vilyuy region" in the Nyurba district, and excitement over this announcement weakened what little public and institutional support there was for the Committee's efforts. Pyotr Martinov passed away from liver cancer in 1997, and most of the original Committee members left the organization.

In an attempt to prevent additional communal mobilizations for environmental rights, between 1997 and 1999, ALROSA launched a successful campaign against local environmental activists. The company openly threatened citizens of the Vilyuy region and their state salaries, subsidies, and pensions if they continued opposition to mining activities. The threats worked. Previously vibrant environmental activism dwindled away and soon disappeared altogether (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 232).

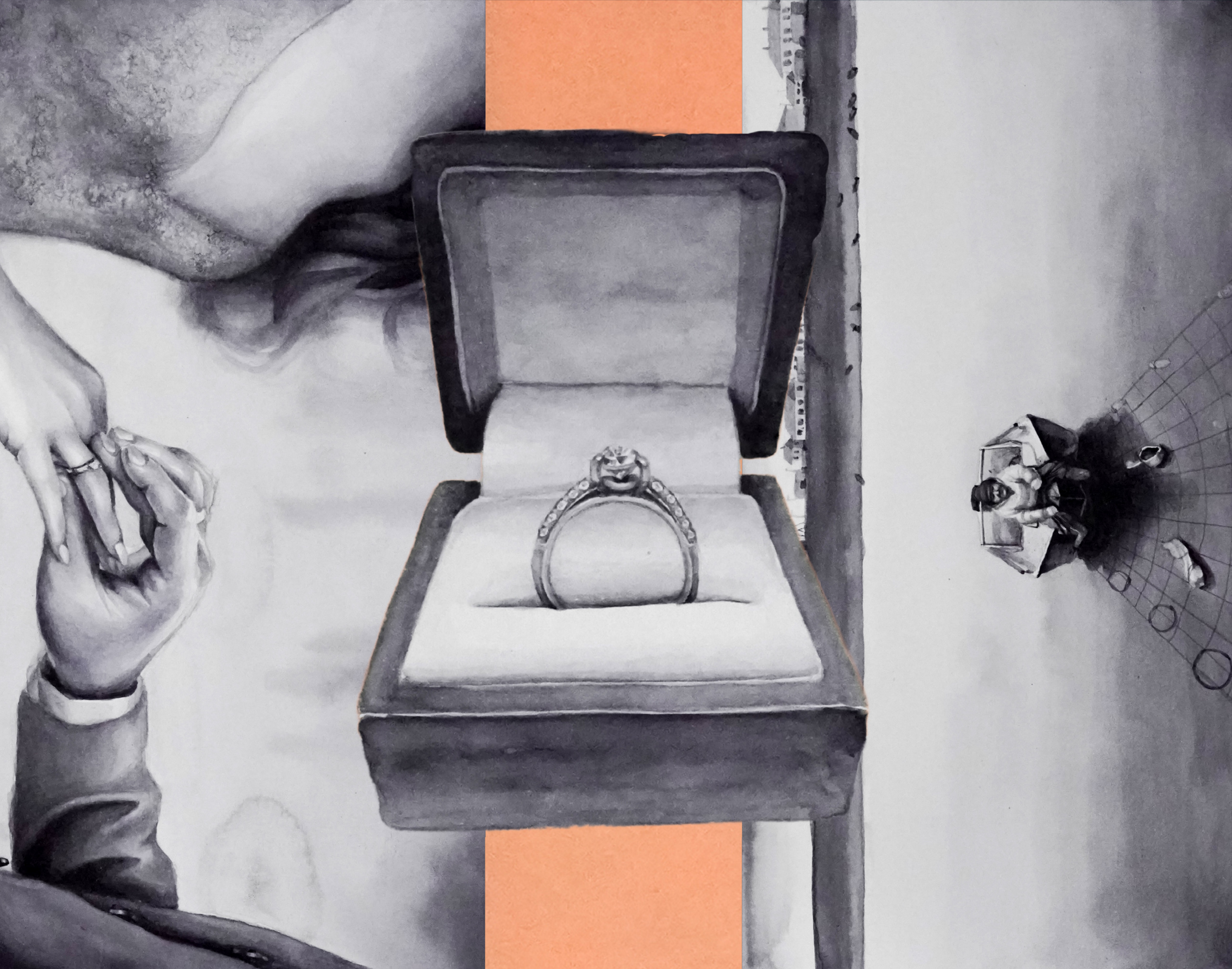
As a semi-private corporation, ALROSA does not own the land on which it operates, but rather leases sites, diamond deposits, and other natural resources for limited periods of time from the Sakha Republic. In 1993, ALROSA began a 50-year lease of diamond deposits, which stipulated several types of lease payments, including "payments for a specially created environmental fund for the rehabilitation of environmental damage in the diamond province, amounting to 2% of the value of ALROSA's diamond output" (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 235). Since then, ALROSA has engaged in various initiatives under the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility targeting

the population of the diamond province. This includes training local community members for future employment in the company; supporting social programs, sports and recreation, and cultural organizations; supporting small businesses operating in diamond cutting, food processing, and agriculture; funding healthcare, childcare, and education; and more (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 236). It is undeniable that ALROSA has contributed towards social and economic development in the region, however these contributions and a fear of losing them render residents silent about complex environmental issues. Additionally, Crate and Yakovleva (2008) point out that local residents may be reluctant to speak out against ALROSA for the following reasons: "the lack of special status of Sakha as Indigenous people within the Russian Federation limits their ability to realise greater concessions…Second, the early 1990s initiatives for regional sovereignty in the republic, and attempts to build regional power by capturing or partaking in the control over economic resources, were not fully developed" (238).

At the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2009, then Russian President Dmitri Medvedev participated in a question-and-answer session at the University of Pittsburgh. I was invited to attend and took the opportunity to ask the President a question about the rights of Indigenous peoples to revenues generated from extractive activities in the Sakha Republic, specifically mentioning the diamond industry. Medvedev responded:

> Yakutia is certainly a rich region, rich in mineral resources, including the diamonds you mentioned. However, my attitude toward this is rather different than yours. As long as we live in the framework of a single country—and I hope this will continue to be so as this is our shared wish—all underground resources on the territory of the Russian Federation, they are in essence, our shared property and it does not make sense to divide them into parts. It is another question, about whether or not a subject of the Russian Federation closely connected with the extraction of these resources should receive more in the way of revenue, say. That is a possible option. The question is about whether we relate to this soberly and take thoughtful action so that one region, where there are many enterprises, a significant amount of profitable industrial production, or many valuable underground resources doesn't live extravagantly, "high on the hog" (*v shokolade*) as they say, while another subject, where there are no resources ekes out a meager existence. For this reason, the federal budget exists and redistributes income. (translation by Hicks 2011)

The response is best understood within the context of the 2009 modification in the republic's status from a sovereign entity to a federal subject, a change that drastically limited the Sakha leadership's ability to negotiate with the federal government on a comparatively equal footing (Crate and Yakovleva 2008). The discourse of the sovereign state was strategically applied by the earlier Sakha government in attempts to establish the rights of the republic's population to natural resources: "Land, its minerals, water, forests, flora and fauna, other natural resources, air space and the continental shelf on the territory of the republic shall be its exclusive property" (Crate and Yakovleva 2008, 238). This way, the Sakha government attempted to secure a vital share in revenues from diamond and gold production. The 2009 constitutional alteration lowered the Sakha Republic's status therefore reducing its ability to control its own economic and political development. Moreover, Dmitry Medvedev's rejection of preferential rights for differentiated minority subjects in Russia and his insistence on the shared Russian entitlement to natural resources seemed at odds with the rapid privatization of formerly state-owned resources, which came under the control of a few extraction companies. His statement not only reflected the federal government's paternalism towards Indigenous citizens, but it also validated an aggressive prioritization of resource extraction and dismissal of Indigenous claims, which are framed as impediments to natural resource development and thus national economic recovery.



Chapter Three:

# Indigenous Diamonds

Since 2011, ALROSA—still the global leader in diamond-mining by carats—has been a public company, with its shares traded on the Moscow Stock Exchange. As of 2023, the Russian Federation, the Sakha Republic, and eight municipal regions of the Sakha Republic own 66% of the company's shares. A diverse group of investors holds the remaining shares. According to the 2013 sale of shares, most of the private investors are from the United States (60%) and Europe (24%), with only 14% from Russia (ALROSA 2021, 2022). According to 2022 Bain & Company market research, ALROSA increased its output by 2.5 million carats in 2021-2022, by enhancing ore processing volumes at several of its mines in the Sakha Republic (10). ALROSA is the largest taxpayer in the region, registered in the town of Mirny and annually contributing between 37% and 42% of the regional budgetary funds (ALROSA 2021, 2022). The authorities of the Sakha Republic and each municipality determine how to spend these funds; most funds from tax contributions and dividends are primarily directed towards the provision of social services and infrastructure development.

In this chapter, drawing on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations in the Arctic district in 2017, I examine the shifting and sometimes contradictory discourses on diamonds as a commodity versus a conduit for development in the Sakha Republic. Analyzing discourses among local Indigenous communities and narratives that have emerged around the diamond-mining industry reveals a profound disconnect between Indigenous lived reality and the images and narratives that come to stand in for that reality. Moreover, when particular Indigenous symbols and histories are attached to commodities like diamonds, they become part of the consumer market and value system. This system largely overlooks the structural causes of dispossession, uneven development, labor exploitation, and environmental crisis in Indigenous communities of the Sakha Republic.

> "Since the beginning of the development of Verkhne-Munskoe ore field in 2015, the Company manifested its interest in the industrial and socio-economic development of Olenyoksky Evenki National District of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), the main population of which are Evenki, Yukaghirs[21] and Nganasans[22] (Maiats), leading a nomadic life due to the traditional subsistence of reindeer herding. At the meeting held by representatives of the company, management of Udachny MPD declared its willingness to provide the population of the national region with work placements in mining production and, accordingly, a regular income and social security. Budget replenishment of Olenyoksky ulus with tax revenues will significantly increase the local community's quality of life and give rise to the social and economic development of the region. As a crucial point, the company also ensured that locals could continue traditional agricultural and cattle breeding activities, as natural eco-systems would not be violated in accordance with the project of new deposit development." (ALROSA 2015, 110)

In early 2015, tensions rose in the most remote village of the Olenyek district. The local community was informed that the company Anabar-Diamonds, a daughter company of ALROSA, had acquired the federal licence for extractive activities in three locations close to the Malaya Kuonamka river and its tributary, Maspaky, both located on village territory. The village residents were outraged, claiming that the company has not conducted the required community consultation nor any public hearings prior to planning the extraction projects as legally required for areas with the TTP status. The district had been granted the protected status of Territory of Traditional Nature Use (TTP) in 2003.

In March 2015, Anabar-Diamonds gave in to community demands and held a public hearing. During the meeting, the village residents expressed concerns about potential environmental damage and its impact on the local river water and water life. After the hearing, the community members in attendance unanimously voted to oppose the extractive project on the Malaya Kuonamka River, and the district leaders commenced a year-long legal proceeding against Anabar-Diamonds. This unprecedented move was heavily publicized in the regional media.

The district representatives based their legal argument upon Olenyek's status as a Territory of Traditional Nature Use, the federally-recognized Indigenous status of the local Evenki residents, and their involvement in traditional modes of subsistence (i.e., reindeer-herding, fishing, hunting, and gathering).

Olenyek welcome sign (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

[21] The Yukaghir people are the Indigenous group mainly residing in the Kolyma region of the Sakha Republic.
[22] The Nganasan people are the Indigenous group mainly residing in the Dolgano-Nenetsky District of Krasnoyarsk Krai in the Northern Siberia.

In this context, traditional subsistence activities came to be seen as a key factor in claiming and recognizing Indigeneity. In early 2016, a federal court refused the district's suit against the company, on the basis of what many perceived to be a technicality. In her coverage of the legal proceedings, Sasha Alexandrova, a journalist for *ykt.ru* news, explains:

> The federal law on the Territories of Traditional Nature Use of the Indigenous numerically small peoples of the North, Siberia, and the Far East of the Russian Federation stipulates the existence of the territorial zoning of the Territory of Traditional Nature Use by the federal government of the Russian Federation. However, as of now, there are no specific zoning processes legally affirmed at the federal level. Therefore, these laws have no authority to regulate federally sanctioned actors, such as extractive industries with federally issued licenses. This inconsistency in the procedures and protocols over the Territories of Traditional Nature Use allowed the company to exploit the legal loophole and win the lawsuit. (2016)

**In this sense, a legal defense based on Indigenous rights tied explicitly to Indigeneity-as-traditionality by the Evenki residents of the Olenyek district was unsuccessful; their supposedly protected status earned them no protection here.**

A year after the conflict, the Olenyek administration and a managing director of Anabar-Diamonds signed an agreement whereby the district complied with the federal license stipulation of extractive activities on the Malaya Kuonamka River, and the company representatives expressed willingness to contribute to the socio-economic and infrastructural development of the Olenyek district ("Podpisano Soglashenie mezhdu Olenekskim Ulusom i AO "Almazy Anabara" 2017). According to several village residents, the company had used "dirty tricks" to win these concessions, especially right after the first public hearing. When the lawsuit had first been announced, company officials responded by declaring that they would no longer hire anyone from the Olenyek district, and in fact they refused employment to several young men who applied. There were also rumours of company workers harassing local hunters and reindeer herders, and even blocking reindeer herds from crossing certain areas by claiming ongoing extractive activities that were unsubstantiated. Regardless of whether or not they were true, these rumours fueled local feelings of antagonism towards Anabar-Diamonds.

Then, in middle of 2016, the company underwent significant changes, which had a favorable effect on negotiations. The then Managing Director of Anabar-Diamonds, Matvey Evseev, who was responsible for the initial acquisition of the federal license and commencement of the extractive activities that spurred the conflict, suddenly resigned from his position. A new Director was almost immediately assigned. Pavel Marinychev, a young, up-and-coming, business-savvy Russian bureaucrat, promptly suspended aggressive harassment of the village residents and initiated productive negotiations with the Olenyek district leadership, effectively incorporating neoliberal discourses of business partnership and corporate social responsibility.

During negotiations with the company, the village residents shifted away from explicit articulations of Indigeneity, which had failed to offer them any legal or political power in the Russian court system. Instead, they articulated a different form of marginalization—specifically, a geographic marginalization due to the remote location of their village. This claim of rural marginality turned out to be more inclusive than Indigeneity, attracting more crucial support within the village itself. The village community consists predominantly of the Indigenous Evenki and a considerable Sakha population who are not officially Indigenous in the eyes of the federal government, as explained earlier. The variety of diverse experiences and subject positions in the community were better encompassed within a collective identity based on rural marginalization than one defined by a singular Indigeneity that was perceived to be exclusive and narrow.

Anabar-Diamonds kept their side of the bargain; the company held several more public hearings after the conflict had been resolved, which resulted in the decision to install an ATM in the local post office. ALROSA's press release about this development declared:

> The positive changes occurred immediately with the arrival of ALROSA. A month after the local community requested Pavel Marinychev, a general director of Anabar-Diamonds, to install a SBERBANK ATM in the village, he fulfilled his promise. Moreover, the bank representative visited the village, taught the local people how to use [the] ATM and informed them about other services that the bank provides. The village residents used to have to withdraw cash from the district centre, located 320 km away, and wasted their time and money on air transportation, gas for snowmobiles, and motorboats. [This] ATM will be serviced at the expense of the company. "This is one of the first cases of installing [an] ATM in such a remote area," Pavel Marinychev states, "Cash exchanges and maintenance require a lot of effort, but we are ready for that. We will learn from this experience and be able to propose the same project in other remote areas." (2016)

The village residents were excited about having an ATM in their tiny rural village, which would save them long and costly trips to and from the district center, but they also recognized their subordinate position in this transaction. When I asked community members about ALROSA and the ATM, one of them uttered with frustration, "Yes, they installed an ATM, but a little after that, Marinychev showed up in the village with a film crew, and they filmed a promotional video of him handing out cookies and candy to our children. I hated that video; it portrayed us like beggars. I felt so much shame when I watched it." This feeling of shame over one's oppressed and dependent position is common in marginal communities surviving within a neoliberal capitalist logic.[23] In addition, most of the company employees were white men from Central Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and gender intensely intersected in local discussions of the company and its treatment of the Indigenous residents.

SBERBANK ATM inside the post-office building of the village Djelinde (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

The ATM, which turns out to be often out of service, owing to unreliable internet service, a lack of cash, and other factors, can be seen as a poignant representation of the unsustainability of capitalist modernizing interventions in local lives. To function properly, ATMs require constant outside mediation, and none of the local residents possessed the skills needed to keep such a machine in working condition. Yet again, the village is rendered dependent on outside forces, both corporate and governmental. Furthermore, the company's claims of providing economic benefits directly to the community, bypassing the regional government, and eliminating local dependence on the state (Kirsch 2014, 169), were in effect untrue; Anabar-Diamonds heavily relies on the regional government and works in close alliance with the state ruling party. Interestingly, the residents' acknowledgment of a small measure of progress in the village thanks to the company serves as an implicit critique of the state, which did not deliver the development it had promised in the new free-market era and

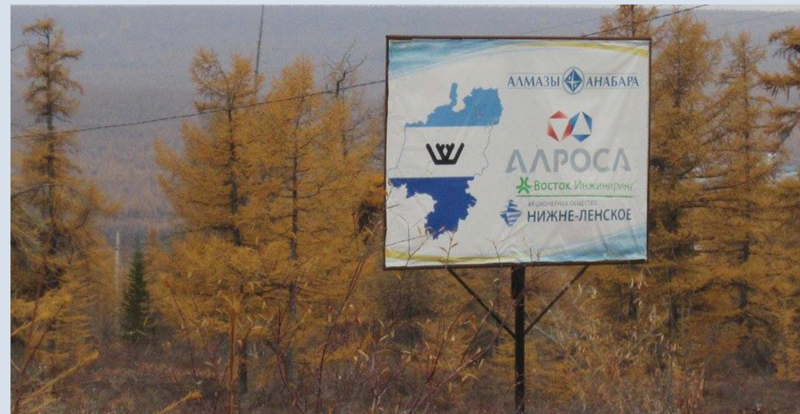
[23] See, for example, Peter Kulchyski's (2016) analysis of economic and cultural inequalities in the context of the Canadian North.

ultimately forced the rural villagers to turn to other outside actors, simultaneously sacrificing their precious environment and their cultural lifeways.

> "The priority republic project 'Local Workforce into Industry' has been underway since 2018 in accordance with the Agreement on Mutual Cooperation on the Implementation of the Priority Project of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) for 2018–2022. The agreement establishes quotas according to which ALROSA conducts joint work with employment centers, and local residents receive referrals to work at the company. As part of this project, 1,392 residents of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) were employed to work for the company in 2019. Within the framework of the Agreement, various employment activities are carried out, which are targeted at unemployed citizens of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), including from rural areas. Together with the State Employment Committee and Employment Center, representatives of ALROSA held job fairs throughout 2019. They took place in Vilyuysk, Verkhnevilyuysk, and Mirny, and attracted more than 2,000 locals. About 11.6% of ALROSA's staff are indigenous, and this proportion has been increasing steadily over the past few years." (ALROSA 2019, 99)

In my conversations with the village residents about local development, one of them pondered, "There seemed to be some progress here; we have an ATM now, and the company promised to assist with building a new school and a kindergarten. However, they are also extracting resources from our lands, harming the environment. Sometimes I think that they have used and lied to us. You know that they also claim to hire the locals, but all the hired ones only work for several months, not full-time." Similarly, many locals raised the issue of labor politics in their critiques of the company.

As has been documented in the literature on extractivism and labor, mining corporations and their proponents often justify extractive activities by claiming that they create employment opportunities for local communities, generate wealth, and alleviate poverty (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Chiasson-LeBel 2015; Kirsch 2014; Smith and Helfgott 2010; Tsing 1993). However, it has also been extensively documented that mining corporations often offer employment under hazardous conditions and mainly require unskilled labor. In these settings, workers can easily be replaced, rendering them expendable and forcing them into precarity. Additionally, as Stuart Kirsch (2014) notes, "Higher wages in the extractive sector of the economy make other forms of labor–at lower wages–less attractive to potential workers, and it may even produce negative incentives for participation in subsistence production, which becomes viewed as hard work in return for comparatively low returns" (31). All of these aspects and conditions of labor exploitation exacerbated by extractive capitalism were present in the Anabar-Diamonds mining facilities.




Billboard with the names of the extractive companies operating in the Olenyek district (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

To explore this particular aspect of the mining industry in the Sakha Republic, I approached local young people employed by the company, as well as their parents and other residents who were willing to share their thoughts on the topic. A local woman, whose husband used to be employed by Anabar-Diamonds, shared:

> My husband worked as a head man on a rotational basis for several seasons at the mining facility of Anabar-Diamonds. The longest period for which he worked was six months. The workers work 12-hour shifts a day. My husband used to stay in the facility for

New Year's because of a holiday double pay. His health is not good right now; his eyesight is even worse, but he still wants to work at the company because there are no other jobs in the village. We have four children, and he must take care of his family. He graduated from the university with a degree in engineering, but there were no open positions at the company, or they just claimed so. That's why he had to work as a head man, the dirtiest job that requires very intense labor. The process of applying for jobs at Anabar-Diamonds is also very complicated. Potential applicants must go to the capital city of Yakutsk to submit their documents to the company's HR department. They also must go through a medical examination beforehand, either in Olenyek or Yakutsk. This medical document is valid only for six months, meaning that if they are not hired during those six months, they must go through the whole process again and submit a new application in Yakutsk. It requires spending money on transportation to Yakutsk and back, lodging, and such. The company does not hire many locals. My husband is currently waiting to hear back from the company, two months have already passed, but we have not heard anything yet. You have seen many young guys hanging aimlessly around the village and getting into trouble, right? All of them are waiting to hear back from the company.

In another conversation, an elderly mother of two young men who worked multiple rotations with Anabar-Diamonds described a company strategy that allowed them to claim that they employ local people but simultaneously avoid any long-term responsibilities:

My son attended several of the company's training workshops. They are usually 2–3 weeks long. He learned to work as a screener, a bulldozer operator, and a heading man. After each workshop, he went through an on-the-job-training period of two months, but the company never offered him full-time employment. He did earn more money for two months than in any other job in the village, but his employment was temporary, and he spent the rest of the year here in the village, hoping to be hired again. Everything that this company does is only for show.

The strategy of short-term employment or "reorganization of the labor process" (Smith and Helfgott 2010, 20) is similar to subcontracting in the extractive sector, whereby subcontracted workers have no direct labor relationship with companies and are always employed under short-term contracts. This reorganized labor is only possible with the prioritization of temporary and part-time labor, de-unionization, outsourcing, and other tactics of labor flexibilization. This strategy decreases an employer's financial responsibility for the workforce and increases corporate control over labor (Smith and Helfgott 2010, 23). These practices can make labor exploitation more obvious and susceptible to scrutiny, exposing the false promises of "corporate responsibility" asserted by extractivist companies (Smith and Helfgott 2010, 23).

The labor exploitation of young workers in the village through short-term contract employment was conspicuous; everyone in the community recognized it, especially the young men themselves. In my conversation with ten on-and-off employees of Anabar-Diamonds, young men shared some important insights on their work with the company. All of them admitted that their employment was highly precarious, some stating, "On the one hand, it is good that we have a job at the company, but on the other hand, it is not full-time and not permanent." The employment with Anabar-Diamonds, albeit exploitative and precarious, was coveted, as one of the young men confirmed: "there is a huge competition for these positions, there are a lot of applicants from other rural districts and from the city itself." Evidently, the labor politics of the company created competition for scarce employment resources as only few applicants are employed and even fewer on full payroll positions, fueled interethnic animosities,

weakened labor (as well as ethnic and Indigenous) solidarity by creating fierce competition between local and other Indigenous applicants, and prevented effective labor organizing. Short-term and temporary employees are not eligible to join most unions, especially the mine workers' unions in the area, leaving these young men outside both the institutional company structure and any workers' organizations that could potentially provide protection from labor exploitation.

When I asked men in the Olenyek district what life would look like when the company eventually closed its operation, they expressed a degree of ambivalence. Several pondered, "If they close Anabar-Diamonds, we will be jobless, then we might go to Udachny or Mirny [other mining towns in Sakha]." The absence of high-paying jobs in the village has led these men to contemplate migrating for work. Involvement in traditional subsistence activities and other forms of employment in the village are not viable options for them; young men complained that "there are no other jobs in the village, and reindeer-herders' wages are too low, one cannot survive on their wages." When I asked about the impacts of extractivism on the local environment, my interlocutors unanimously expressed their deep concerns with mining activities in their territory, one stating, "Of course, we feel for our nature and environment; we grew up here, and if there were another legal proceeding, we would support it, but anonymously, because if we ask any questions about the negative impact of extractive activities on local environment, we would be fired for sure." Their fear of retaliation was rightfully justified; the company had barred local men from employment during the legal conflict in 2015.

> "The activities of ALROSA and its subsidiaries affect the interests of the population of the Sadynsky national nasleg of the Mirninsky district and the national Anabarsky and Oleneksky uluses, where Dolgans,[24] Evenks, Evens[25] and other indigenous communities of the North live. ALROSA strives to strike a balance between the interests of the state, business, and indigenous small-numbered peoples in order to achieve sustainable economic development in the region, improve quality of life, and develop national culture. The company's enterprises support ancestral communities of reindeer herders and fishermen, providing them each year with financial assistance for agricultural activities, the support, and development of traditional species of fishing and hunting, and the acquisition of all-terrain equipment, fishing gear, and hunting equipment. Under mutual cooperation agreements with the nine districts in the 'diamond province,' ALROSA finances its development programs on an annual basis. In 2019, the company allocated RUB 83.3 million for this purpose. In July 2019, ALROSA and the Federal Agency for Ethnic Affairs (FAEA of Russia) signed a cooperative agreement in the field of preserving the traditional way of life of indigenous small-numbered peoples in the North, Siberia, and Far East of Russia. The main area of work will be to develop cooperation between indigenous small-numbered peoples' associations, local governments, and industrial companies. Moreover, FAEA of Russia and ALROSA agreed to participate jointly in the public discussion of draft normative legal acts in the field of protecting the rights of indigenous small-numbered peoples. At the end of December 2019, JSC Anabar-Diamonds and the Arctic uluses of Yakutia signed a cooperation agreement for 2020, according to which the ALROSA Group subsidiary will allocate RUB 109.5 million for the social and economic development of Bulunsky, Anabarsky, Oleneksky, Zhigansky and Eveno-Bytantaisky uluses." (ALROSA 2019, 100)

During my stay in the village in 2017, I one day stumbled upon an old building surrounded by a visibly agitated crowd. I saw the familiar face of my host in the crowd and asked what was happening. My host explained that the building was a state-owned

[24] The Dolgan people are the Indigenous people who mostly reside in Krasnoyarsk Krai and the Sakha Republic.

[25] The Even people are the Indigenous people who mainly live in the Arctic areas of the Sakha Republic, the Magadan Oblast, and the Kamchatka Krai.

store, and the crowd was in line to purchase vegetables (i.e., potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and onions) and fruits (i.e., apples, oranges, and bananas) delivered by plane from Yakutsk just yesterday. Fresh produce was delivered once a month and usually sold out within an hour or so; prices in the state store were significantly lower in comparison with other privately owned shops. It was almost impossible to grow vegetables in the district given the local climate and many villagers could not afford overpriced produce from private sellers, so the agitation of the crowd was understandable. That very evening, my host's daughter showed me a video of an angry crowd posted on Instagram; someone had recorded a video of that day's sale in the government store. As I later learned there were two main reasons of the crowd's agitation; first, there were not enough fresh produce delivered and many people did not receive their share; second, some local entrepreneurs purchased part of produce under-the-counter to resell for higher price in their private shops. As soon as the crowd found out about the latter scheme, they became more frustrated, and things eventually got out of hand. Many Instagram users shared the scandalous video; the comments, though, were predominantly sympathetic, as most commenters in Sakha were aware of the constant produce shortage and high prices in the Arctic districts. This and other events I witnessed during my stay in the village revealed the complex predicament of the local communities existing within particular neoliberal capitalist contexts. On the one hand, the communities seemed to actively reify outsiders' stereotypes about them, deploying the symbolic codes of Indigeneity such as exoticism, traditionality, idealized environmentalism, and primitivism; on the other hand, their efforts also concealed the oppressive realities they had to deal with day-to-day, drastic economic inequalities in the region, and the systemic conditions engendering them.

Images of exotic Indigenous people in tandem with diamonds and diamond production have recently begun circulating alongside extractivist discourses in the Sakha Republic. These imaginaries are far from unusual or unexpected, since diamonds have been long used to create (and re-create) the image of post-Soviet Sakha as "a diamond nation." In his analysis of Venezuela's transformation into an oil nation, Fernando Coronil (1997) describes a similar process of symbolization:

> At the close of the twentieth century, Venezuela is commonly identified as an oil nation. Strange as this may seem, a mere material commodity serves to represent its identity as a national community. The remarkable fact that this rather common manner of identifying a neocolonial nation by its major export product seems unremarkably natural only highlights the need to understand why some nations have become so bonded to some commodities that they have come to be identified by them. (67)

ALROSA offices in the Nyurba village (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2011).

According to Coronil, conceptualization of Venezuela as an oil nation was only possible because oil provided economic means ("oil money") to assert Venezuela's national and political presence through "domestication of value" (1997, 110). Coronil notes that, for Venezuelans, oil was not valuable for its specific use properties but "in its form as money" (ibid.) that could be exchanged for goods and services. Moreover, the transformation of oil into money and of money into goods and services involves contextualized socio-cultural, political, and economic metamorphoses. Hence, oil transforms society when it is

fully incorporated into it through "oil money" permeating all transactions, dominating the national economy, and facilitating the imaginary of oil as the future of Venezuelan society. I argue that the intimate bond between the Sakha nation and its primary export commodity, diamonds, also takes place through domestication of value, which requires the creation of new meanings and transforms the Sakha Republic social body. Moreover, examining the processes and consequences of the domestication of value in Sakha can untangle distinct discourses on diamonds and diamond-mining from discourses on Indigeneity, Indigenous imaginaries, and Indigenous realities.

Argounova-Low (2004) notes that the symbol of diamonds, the only commodity from Sakha that reaches global markets and global consumers came to signify the local importance of not only the diamond mining industry in the region but also sovereignty (257). This is a marked contrast from the socialist period, when the Soviet nation collectively owned diamond production, diamonds, and the wealth they provided, so any visual and discursive representations of diamonds at that time did not refer to any ethnic (or Indigenous) identities—rather, they emphasized ethnic-less "Soviet-ness" (262).

Diamond revenues became a point of contention in the neoliberal nation-state of Russia, when the industry was an important asset for post-Soviet economic development. Conflict over mineral resource extraction rapidly evolved into the struggle for political and economic autonomy for the Sakha government, to whom diamonds "signif[ied] greater self-administration, economic freedom, and at least the imagination of a desired independence" (Argounova-Low 2004, 261). As a result, since the early 1990s, representations of diamonds have become ethnicized, whereby "the photos using Sakha models clearly indicate[d] the ethnic nature of diamonds, thus reinforcing the republic's claim to the mineral resource" (262). Moreover, the rural Sakha became massively involved not only in mining activities but also in processing extracted diamonds—cutting and polishing—which was previously done either in Central Russia or handled through De Beers in their own facilities. This strategy of acquiring new skills for local people was another way of appropriating and localizing the diamond as a symbol; turning a rough diamond into a salable and polished commodity now required authentic Sakha skills and labor (Argounova-Low 2004). The symbolism of diamonds became so prevalent in public and political discourse that, despite the fact that most people in Sakha have never even held one in their hands, diamonds have become "a subject of pride and aspiration for a better life" for Sakha communities (Argounova-Low 2004, 263), reflecting the relationship between mineral resources and national and global imaginaries.

In the early 2000s, the intensification of neoliberal economic policies (e.g., the globalization of trade, consumer-oriented marketing, privatization of communal land) and "the trend to link business and politics" (Argounova-Low 2004, 263) brought diamonds under the control of the Russian nation-state yet again. As with any commoditized object, diamonds can move in and out of being a commodity and also between multiple commodity situations, or "the situation[s] in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature" (Appadurai 1986, 13; Kopytoff 1986, 64). In this sense, diamonds as a commodity, as a cultural phenomenon, and as a symbol can co-exist within multiple social imaginaries. Diamonds in the Sakha Republic simultaneously exist within Russian, Sakha, and, as of recently, Indigenous imaginaries facilitating the production of particular narratives and diamond lore entangled in discourses about Indigeneity, traditionality, and authenticity. In this Indigenous realm of diamonds, the strategic visual and discursive *indigenization* of diamonds invokes fantasies about Indigenous identities and communities as uniquely traditional, authentic, and primitive.

**These fantasies in turn can produce an illusion of scarcity to increase the value of the diamonds, simultaneously naturalizing the consuming desires of the ultimate Other—the Indigenous.**

In January 2022, the Australian and New Zealand industry magazine *Jeweller* published an article titled, "Diamond Named after Indigenous Russian Heroine," which reproduced the discursive *indigenization* of Sakha diamonds:

> A 91.86-carat yellow-brown diamond mined last year has been named '*Kyndykan*' in honour of an indigenous folklore heroine who survived a pandemic that wiped out a nomadic community 200 years ago. The diamond was found in Yakutia in the Arctic territory of Russia, one of the coldest regions in the northern hemisphere, from one of the alluvial diamond deposits of Anabar-Diamonds - a subsidiary of Russian state-owned mining company ALROSA. According to Evgeny Agureev, deputy CEO, ALROSA, "We have a great tradition of giving names to newly mined diamonds. On this occasion, we decided to name a diamond mined in the Far North in honour of the little Even heroine *Kyndykan* and after a wonderful project, which is doing a lot to ensure that voices of indigenous peoples of the North are heard." *Kyndykan* was a young Even (one of Yakutia's indigenous tribes) girl who was miraculously rescued by hunters near the Verkhoyansk Mountains. She was the lone survivor in an ancestral settlement that was decimated due to a smallpox outbreak. The *Kyndykan* diamond symbolised "resilience and strength of character, rich history and age-old traditions," which Agureev explained is a common goal "to preserve all of this for future generations and to tell this story to the world." In September 2021, the company expressed support in preserving the cultural and historical values of indigenous populations in the remote territory of Yakutia, especially the *Kyndykan* project. The Anabar river basin is home to the largest concentration of diamond alluvial deposits outside of Australia and Africa, where a 236-carat intense yellow-brown diamond - considered to be the largest natural color diamond in Russia - was also discovered in 2007. ALROSA is one of the largest international mining companies headquartered in Russia which accounts for an estimated 95 per cent of diamonds produced in the country and 27 percent of diamonds extracted worldwide. (2022)

This promotional text, which published alongside an image of an Indigenous girl and a diamond, encourages the association of ALROSA diamonds with an exotic primordial Indigeneity; moreover, it also aims to represent ALROSA as a benevolent private institution on the vanguard of Indigenous initiatives and projects. This framing, and others in the article, utilizes certain positive representations of Indigenous cultures, primarily romanticized and exoticized images constructed by non-Indigenous outsiders, not for political or advocacy purposes but for the purpose of consumption.

Alrosa named the 91.86-carat yellow-brown diamond 'Kyndykan' after a heroine who symbolises resilience and spiritual strength of the indigenous people of Yakutia. Pictured above is Kristina Cheremkina, a traditional Yakutian girl who is also Alrosa's project ambassador.

**Diamond named after indigenous Russian heroine**

2.4 k views | Posted January 04, 2022 | By Richard Chiu

Screenshot of the online news article "Diamond named after indigenous Russian heroine" (Chiu 2022).

In her work on ethnicity and Otherness, Sara Ahmed (2000) critiques the stranger fetishism, which she says, "invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own" (5). This "cuts 'the stranger' off from the histories of its determination" (5) and exoticizes difference, producing an effect intended for consumption by outsiders. Adopting bell hooks' (1992) argument that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, or seasoning that can liven up the dull dish"

(21), Ahmed contends that ethnicity of the Other is often constructed as "the exotic" through an analogy with food when the Other's foods are different enough from mainstream diet yet agreeable with western tastes, tolerable by western stomachs, and easily consumable (117). As such, difference and Otherness are valuable as long as they are both palatable and consumable, thus capable of nourishing the broader social body. In this sense, Indigeneity in Sakha is also incorporated into consumerist imaginaries to establish the consuming subject in close proximity to the strange and different culture. Similarly, the interplay between Indigeneity and diamonds, an ultimate luxury commodity still inaccessible for consumption for most of the Sakha residents, successfully yet problematically plays off existing simplistic stereotypes of local complex Indigeneities to appeal to global consuming desires as well as aesthetics.

Furthermore, the way Indigeneity is framed in these consumerist imaginaries casts into doubt the "authenticity" and "realness" of those Indigenous people whose lives, experiences, and identities fall outside the bounds of that frame, effectively writing them out of Indigeneity discourses. The essentialized portrayals of "Indigenousness" often contradict, or at best have little relationship to, the realities of Indigenous life, especially in the areas where ALROSA operates. For instance, the Indigenous Evenki are often represented in ALROSA reports and brochures along with reindeer (and diamonds) as "leading a nomadic life due to the traditional subsistence of reindeer herding" (ALROSA 2017, 144). Reindeer are indeed a central symbol in Evenki ontology, one of the essential representations of Evenki culture and spirituality, and reindeer herding is an important mode of subsistence still practiced today (Anderson 2000, 2006; Bloch 1998; Gray 2000; Slezkine 1994; Vitebsky 2009); the Indigenous Evenki of the Olenyek district often point out, "If there are no reindeer, there are no Evenki." For example, in the Olenyek villages, various reindeer images are present in the streets, on buildings, and in paintings on the walls of many institutions (i.e., kindergartens, schools, administrative buildings, hospitals, cultural centres); several monuments of reindeer have recently been erected by the local authorities; and the local children's dance group is named after an Evenki word for a reindeer calf, *Oronchikan.*

Reindeer are ubiquitous, and their prominent status is undisputed. The Indigenous Evenki of Olenyek use symbols of reindeer and reindeer herding to culturally ground and identify themselves. Numerous Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations in Russia also frequently use the symbol of reindeer to represent a wide swatch of Evenki and other Indigenous communities as one homogenous category of people. However, essentializing symbols of Indigeneity, such as reindeer and reindeer herding, can never fully represent a culture, as all cultures are dynamic, in a constant state of flux and transformation. Such symbols can also produce contradictions and unintended consequences when framed around idealized and romanticized images of Indigeneity and Indigenous labor, especially within the context of extractivism.

The narratives circulated by ALROSA often exploit a decontextualized view of Indigenous peoples as bearers of "traditional culture" with no reference to contemporary socio-economic conditions and the predominance of wage labor (as well as local labor politics), which contribute to further marginalization of local Indigenous communities. Moreover, I suggest that the persistent equation of Indigeneity to a specific mode of subsistence reproduces the unequal economic relations, discriminating against and commodifying Indigenous peoples in a captivity of their own ethnicized labor. In her seminal work, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Rey Chow (2002) notes that there are many ways to conceptualize ethnicity, yet the majority of scholarly analyses do not necessarily focus on the relationship between ethnicity and labor. To fill this void, Chow analyzes the diverse experiences of migration, specifically exploring how immigrants become marked as ethnics and foreign outsiders—even after obtaining permanent residency or citizenship status—merely because they occupy socially and economically inferior positions as low-level laborers within a capitalist society. She argues that a laborer becomes ethnicized and treated as a foreigner not only be-

cause of differing race or class status, but also because they are "commodified in specific ways…[and] has to pay for living by performing certain kinds of work, while these kinds of work, despite being generated from within the society, continue to reduce the one who performs them to the position of the outsider, the ethnic" (34). This process of *ethnicization of labor* (34) creates a very specific ethnicized population, who contributes to the accumulation of capital yet does not benefit from it. An Indigenous reindeer herder is, then, ethnicized and associated with a lower socio-economic class, viewed as less qualified, poorly paid, and, ultimately, reduced to the status of an outsider within the neoliberal market economy of post-Soviet Russia.

Soviet-era tents still used by Indigenous reindeer herders (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

Overall, despite the pervasive romanticization of herders' labor within extractivist narratives, the herders themselves seem to be among the most economically marginalized of the working community in the Indigenous villages. One woman in the Olenyek village, whose husband was a highly respected herder with more than 40 years of herding experience, and who herself spent more than 10 years traveling with her husband and children, shared her frustrations:

> You know, when we herded, the conditions were very harsh; we lived in the old Soviet-era tents, using the Soviet-era stoves, and there was no electricity. Now the conditions are much better, but still difficult. Herding is still not a well-paid job. When you read about government officials' wages, which can be more than 100,000 rubles, and when you think about herders' wages, which are only around 20,000 rubles, you are speechless. How can one survive on 20,000 rubles? Herding has not been a prestigious job before, and it is not prestigious now either. People used to respect herders because of their hard labor. But now they do not need to be honoured and praised for their labor; they simply need livable wages. And who becomes a herder now? The young people who have never herded before; they do not know the territory well and can easily get lost in the tundra. Just last summer, a young, inexperienced herder got lost but, fortunately, was found alive later.

It is evident that a reindeer herder is an ethnicized laborer. A proletarian herder is believed to be the product of the Soviet economic project of proletarianization, yet the herder of the present is still differentiated as a primitive outsider, which legitimizes his position at the bottom of the socio-economic (and cultural) hierarchy. Nowadays, most Indigenous people are not directly involved in reindeer herding but hold various wage jobs and reside in rural settlements or urban centres. For example, in the Olenyek district, only one community had a considerable number of reindeer herders (in fact, there were five families whose extended relatives participated in the reindeer husbandry in one way or another); there were just a few reindeer herders in the other two villages. In 2017, there were little more than 60 people officially employed as reindeer herders in the whole Olenyek district, out of more than 4,000 residents according to an employee of the local civil registration office.

"*Diamonds That Care* started as a charity initiative of ALROSA, the world's biggest diamond-mining company by volume. In 2019 alone, the company's social investments totaled $185 million, including 500 charitable and social projects, and $108 million donated to environmental protection, mostly in Yakutia (a region in Siberia). In 2020, ALROSA contributed almost $8 million toward medicine, equipment, and protective gear for company staff and local communities, as well as for other measures to counter the COVID-19 threat. This year, the *Diamonds That Care* initiative has transformed into a brand. Our idea is that a consumer who buys a piece of jewelry under the *Diamonds That Care* brand should know that some of their money will go towards funding community-oriented projects. We want our collection to attract empathetic women. Our dream is that one day these earth-tone diamonds will become a symbol of social responsibility and that anyone who sees a ring with one of these diamonds on a person's finger will know that this person cares about causes bigger than themselves. Filled with the spirit of goodness, the brand's pieces showcase earthtone diamonds in a stream of light for an effortless, edgy look. The significance behind each design draws attention to beauty, which is the real essence of jewelry. 'I Care' is the main message the brand gives to people, and that is why every jewelry piece has an 'I Care' engraving, to symbolize generosity. There are subtle nuances in many *Diamonds That Care* pieces that will touch your heart. Some shapes, in fact, smoothly transition into the heart pattern with the 'I Care' message inside." (Wagner 2020)

In 2022, De Beers Group announced that diamonds are no longer just commodities but "brands," a new marketing strategy to "create desirability and communicate an outstanding idea of quality" (De Beers 2022, 23). Brands are important, according to De Beers, for younger (Gen Z) consumers as they "contribute to their sense of self-worth and desire to express individuality…helping them build their own personal brand as part of their individualistic and competitive nature" (23). The younger generation is more concerned about issues of climate change and social justice, and De Beers aims to capitalize on this by "creat[ing] stories to immerse the end client in the brand's DNA and heritage, and creat[ing] aspirations by providing a vision of beauty and making the end client feel a certain way" (23). It seems that these are aspirations of not only De Beers but ALROSA as well. Since 2015, ALROSA has infused its ultimate luxury commodity with fantasies about Indigenous people in the Arctic who are in dire need of "care" through the most selective and exotic images and narratives possible.

**These images are used not only to justify the neoliberalization of ALROSA since the 1990s and the incorporation of Indigeneity into the global capitalist system, but also to produce consumers by people associated with and employed by the diamond industry.**

In her analysis of the coffee industry in Papua New Guinea, Paige West (2010) reminds us that if coffee production and consumption go through stages of neoliberalization (e.g., reduction of the role of the state and increase of the role of the private sector and of property rights, deregulation, privatization, reorientation of the market around consumer demands), then consumers and producers are equally targeted by neoliberalizing processes, carefully crafted, constructed, and produced. In neoliberalized systems, consumers are bombarded with marketing that highlights "ethical consumption" which "make[s] individuals seem and feel responsible for both the conditions of production and the ecological and social justice issues that stem from these conditions of production" (West 2010, 711). According to West (2010), capitalist narratives especially those in global contexts shape consumer choices, not just economic but also political and social, by endorsing and perpetuating relationships of oppression and

marginalization as being good, ethical, and fair "by telling the consumer that they are a good person just as they are and that through their consumption choices they have an ethical and meaningful relationship with the economic have-nots of the world" (West 2010, 714).

In the case of *indigenous* diamonds, I argue that ALROSA uses romanticized images and elaborate fantasies of Arctic Indigeneity to convince Western consumers, who are the primary consumers of diamonds, that diamonds from this mysterious part of the world, where "authentically primitive and traditional" Indigenous people live, are not only different from diamonds mined elsewhere in non-Indigenous places, but also more rare and therefore more valuable.

**The supposed uniqueness, authenticity, and rarity of Indigenous people is thus transferred, in the consumer's mind, to the diamond itself. Furthermore, since very few Indigenous people directly participate in the production of *indigenous* diamonds, creation of connections with an unattainable luxury commodity to justify the reliable revenues for the communities and rationalize violent extractivism on their territories, local Indigenous people themselves must be creative, imaginative, and contradictory.**

During my third week in the village, my friend invited me to visit her mother, a respected retired herder who spent most of her life moving around the tundra, herding reindeer, and raising eleven children and numerous grandchildren in the same lifeway. During our conversation, her mother told me the following story that took place in the early 1980s:

> One of my daughters, who was four years old at the time, went berry-picking with her brothers and sisters. When they were playing near the river, one of her brothers found that she had something in her mouth. They thought it was a rock that she found in the river and did not pay much attention. My little one kept that "rock" in her pocket for a month. Only when her brothers tried to smash it with a hammer, then with an axe, and it did not break, did they realize that it must have been something more than a simple rock. We took it to the village leaders, and we learned that it was a diamond of around 18–19 carats! The community leaders immediately called the center, and the helicopter with the policemen arrived shortly. They put the diamond securely in a safe and left right away.

Historically, diamonds did not hold the same kind of "value" for the local Indigenous communities as, for example, reindeer or fish. Fish, like reindeer, was particularly important to the local communities, embedded in Evenki understandings of their past, present, and future. In fact, fish also served as a crucial "site of negotiation and conflict" (Todd 2014, 226) during the short-lived anti-mining sentiments in the village in 2015. Fish is an essential traditional food that has ensured food security during hardship for many generations. In conversations with me, many residents recognized their not only nutritional but also cultural dependence on fish, stressing its significance for survival and everyday life: "we survive because of our nature, by hunting and fishing"; "we have food because of our nature, and our vital food is fish"; "we are located too far from the centre, there are many [people] unemployed [and] a lot of

people cannot afford store foods, [plus] reindeer have not crossed our territory for several years, so we rely on fish"; "we used to catch so much fish before but now we have very little fish left, and with the projected extractions, we can lose even that"; "water in the river became so dirty lately that fish have left, my husband and I used to get four full sacks of *tugunok* [freshwater whitefish] but now we barely get one bucket." Indeed, fishing is central to local Indigenous experiences and came to be imperative in determining local Indigeneity, not only because conflict with the company was fueled by acute concerns over the local river, quality of water, and water life, but also because fishing was the traditional activity accessible and practiced by almost everyone in the village, whereas reindeer herding (and, to some degree, hunting) involved only a few community members, predominantly men. Fishing is a comparatively genderless and classless way to procure food, which also allows the participation of both community elders and young people, "to create and sustain relationships with other people and with the environment, and to pass knowledge along to children and grandchildren" (Todd 2016, 191).

Diamonds, in contrast, do not embody the same historical "value" in the Indigenous Evenki sense, though they do have commodity value within the transactional relationship between local communities and the mining company. However, diamonds are not like reindeer or fish; therefore, the relationship with diamonds must be carefully crafted and produced by the Indigenous peoples through symbolism rather than material production, involvement in wage labor, or consumption. Ultimately, this relationship to diamonds—and diamonds' transformation into *indigenous* diamonds, facilitated by ALROSA—is maintained by the reproduction of particular images of the local Indigenous communities as remote, primitive, impoverished, exotic, and traditional, naturalizing these simplistic and stereotypical ideas in the global imaginary.

Boats used for fishing and transportation by local Indigenous people (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

# Conclusion

Since 2022, ALROSA has been sanctioned by the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and the Bahamas as a state-owned enterprise providing resources and revenues for the Government of the Russian Federation (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2022). However, that same year, the European Commission carefully indicated that it would *not* impose sanctions on the largest diamond-producing company for the time being, as a diamond embargo would cost 10,000 jobs in Antwerp, according to the Antwerp World Diamond Centre, and even more in "the poor Russian regions" (Rettman 2022a). Seeking to avoid European Union sanctions and combat the "conflict diamonds" label, Russia's Finance Ministry confirmed that "[t]he livelihoods of one million people of Yakutia fully depend on the stability of diamond-mining in the region," while ALROSA put out a statement arguing that it "has a very strong focus on environmental and social issues and conforms to the highest standards of corporate social responsibility" (Searcey 2022).

View on the Olenyek river (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

The European Commission's decision not to impose sanctions was almost immediately criticized by the U.S. government and media; the *New York Times* reported, "The continued success of Belgium and the broad diamond sector in keeping the Russian diamond trade flowing exemplifies the sacred cows some E.U. nations refuse to sacrifice, even as their peers accept pain to punish the Kremlin. Exports of rough diamonds are very lucrative for Russia, and they flow to the Belgian port of Antwerp, a historically important diamond hub. The trade, worth 1.8 billion euros a year—about $1.75 billion—has been shielded in consecutive rounds of the bloc's sanctions, despite being raised as a possible target soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February" (Stevis-Gridneff 2022).

In April 2023, the *Economic Times* warned that the G7 countries might impose new sanctions on ALROSA, which could further impact the global diamond market and many industries adjacent to diamond production (Ghosal 2023). Circumventing U.S. sanctions, ALROSA has been exporting rough diamonds directly to India to take advantage of its diamond cutting and polishing industry, which employs almost three million people and where diamonds can be marketed to new Middle Eastern and Asian consumers (Ghosal 2023). When cutting and polishing are done outside of Russia, though, diamonds from the Sakha Republic lose their geographical distinction, produced by ALROSA, as well as their significance as a national (and Indigenous) commodity, constructed by Indigenous peoples in Sakha. Precisely because of this dislocation of economic and social connections (at times contradictory and imaginary) as a result of sanctions, diamonds from Sakha are easily transformed into "Putin's diamonds" (Rettman 2022b) or "sacred cows of E.U. nations" (Stevis-Gridneff 2022); however, these are still also *indigenous* diamonds, and they have indeed changed how Indigenous people in Sakha see themselves within the global community as Indigenous people. I know this personally, through my own experiences and the experiences of my family and my community in Nyurba village, which has been a hub for Soviet and post-Soviet diamond production since the 1950s. The way we see our place in the world has been transformed by the endless, diverse intersections and interactions with the Soviet and post-Soviet state extractivist regimes, and our own national political, economic, and cultural ambitions.

Screenshot of the online news article "Putin's diamond firm off the hook in EU sanctions" (Rettman 2022)

For other Indigenous communities, such as the Evenki of the Olenyek district, who have entered the arena of the diamond industry relatively recently, this relationship presents opportunities that the regional and federal governments do not provide. In fact, local communal narratives do not necessarily reveal strong opposition to nor critiques of the industry itself, but rather hint at a problematic and ambivalent relationship (or, better yet, a lack thereof) with the neoliberal capitalist state of Russia.

Take, for example, the narratives of food insecurity in the Indigenous Olenyek district. Generally, food insecurity is not uncommon in the Indigenous Arctic of the Russian Federation, nor in the global Arctic more generally (Argounova-Low 2009; Bogdanova et al. 2020; Bogdanova et al. 2021; Overland 2006). During the Soviet period, the remotely settled Indigenous communities were regularly subsidized not only in terms of air, land, and water transportation but also with a plentiful supply of diverse food commodities, particularly fresh produce, which were not readily available locally because of traditional

consumption and harvesting activities as well as climate characteristics. As I learned, throughout all three villages of the Olenyek district, very few households used greenhouses to grow their own vegetables, as is common in the southern districts of the Sakha Republic, primarily potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots, and onions. The villagers explained that taking care of greenhouses and growing one's own vegetables is an arduous and, often, fruitless occupation because summers in the Indigenous Arctic are short, volatile, and unpredictable. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new challenges to the local communities in terms of food production and consumption. The decrease in centralized food deliveries by the state and the economic crisis in the 1990s culminated in higher costs for store-bought foods, therefore limiting food access and food options.

State store in the village Djelinde of the Olenyek district (Photo by Sardana Nikolaeva, 2017).

During my fieldwork, I learned that the most remote village in the Olenyek district, experiences long periods of food insecurity every year, particularly during the fall and spring when transportation is virtually impossible because of limited infrastructure and difficult climatic conditions. I raised the question of food supply and food affordability during my conversations with the village residents, and received a particularly poignant and representative answer from someone in a group of Indigenous grandmothers:

> We experience food shortages every fall and spring until the ice road is accessible; every winter, the independent sellers transport as many goods as possible by car, but you know that those goods are quite expensive, low quality, and often expired, yet sometimes we have to buy them anyways. The *YakutTorg* [the state-owned store] sells the basic foods for cheaper prices; lots of people buy in bulk, so there is not much left very quickly. Just recently, they were out of sugar! Sugar is necessary to prepare jams and preserves, and I, for one, do not know what to do with the berries I harvested this summer. The *YakutTorg* also requires the specific numbers of how much the village would need and how much would be sold for certain, as well as an estimate of earnings, which is highly unreliable. I have heard that the woman who works there sometimes orders less than people need to sell everything quicker. If you need something aside from basic foodstuffs, you have to go to Olenyek or even Yakutsk; you also have to find a place to stay there while shopping; it becomes very complicated. We get fresh vegetables and fruit rarely here, the *YakutTorg* transports and sells some vegetables, mostly potatoes and cabbage, but potatoes are usually from last year's harvest. It is good that we have our own bakery, though, so we can at least consume fresh bread.

A significant number of the village residents expressed intense ire with the post-Soviet market economy, the privatization of food security through the emergence of local vendors who profit by taking advantage of their own fellow villagers' basic food needs, and the state's negligence of its responsibilities towards its citizens.

A year after my fieldwork in the Sakha Republic, I was perusing the regional news on the online platform *ykt.ru*, hoping to get more updates on the Olenyek district and their dealings with the mining company. While scrolling through the long list of news headlines, I stumbled upon a short article titled "Thank you for Potatoes and Future Kindergarten" in which local residents were thanking the mining company for its initiatives in, at least temporarily, solving the long-existing problems of food insecurity and a lack of important infrastructure:

> The company Anabar-Diamonds held a community hearing in the Olenyek district. It was clear that the company provides important social assistance to the local population. Each person who took the floor was compelled to thank the company representatives and Pavel Marinychev [a managing director of Anabar-Diamonds since 2016] personally. The speakers expressed their gratitude for the delivery of vegetables, meat, and medicine, the organization of air transportation for health and dental screenings, and assistance with the construction of an ice storage room. (2018)

The article was similar to a great number of filler pieces that the local mining companies publish to promote their crucial status within Sakha and reify themselves as socially responsible actors in the regional economy. Yet it was also evident that the local Indigenous communities, finding themselves in an unstable and violent present and suffering from state neglect, were creating new avenues to negotiate with the encroaching mining companies. To analyze socio-economic and political inequalities in the region, particularly in relation to development projects and extractive capitalism, it is crucial to understand the suffering and violence of everyday life for local Indigenous peoples. But it is also important to understand that suffering and violence can reinvigorate communal relations and communal development, which in turn help to restore humanness and dignity for local residents.

Through the global diamond economy, the Indigenous people in Sakha inevitably expand their relationships and value systems beyond their community; however, what happens next is precisely the opposite. In her analysis of Indigenous workers' experiences in Bolivian mines, June Nash (1979) wrote that "to the extent that the community has these generative bonds of new growth ["communitas" and solidarity], the people can sustain the most brutal attacks" (330). This is exactly what sustains the Indigenous people in their contradictory and exploitative encounters with global extractivism in Sakha: the sense of community, or the community as a form of wealth (Kulchyski 2016, 103). For Peter Kulchyski, most communities within the neoliberal capitalist system are communities of consumption, but the primary feature of Indigenous communities is their intergenerationality, as in the "intimate knowledge… that flow[s] down a family line through generations" (104), as well as firm ties to communal lands, which together run contrary to capitalist expectations of the fluidity of the workforce and, therefore, the fluidity of capital. In the capitalist sense, communal land is the source of capital, accumulation of which justifies workers' mobility and dependence on wage economies, however, as Kulchyski notes, Indigenous people are able to create their own subsistence, facilitating Indigenous traditional economic and political autonomy.

Despite the ubiquity of diamond imagery and fantastical narratives about the Indigenous people of the Arctic, diamonds are not valuable to local Indigenous peoples in the same way they are of value to global consumers; rather, diamonds are only commensurable with revenues that can be invested in the community through the development of local infrastructure (e.g., schools, kindergartens, cultural centers, medical centers, centers for elderly), funding for cultural events, educational opportunities for local youth, and support for traditional economic activities like reindeer herding. The images and narratives of *indigenous* diamonds are powerful; they do change how the Indigenous people see and position themselves within the global world—but even more powerful is the erasure of structural causes of inequality, poverty, and oppression, which can justify the further embeddedness of the Indigenous people into the global capitalist system.

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# Artist Statement

My name is Ekaterina Surzhaninova. I am an Indigenous Yukaghir artist from the Sakha Republic; almost all my artwork is inextricably linked with the Indigenous peoples and the Arctic. I have been travelling to different northern regions for plein-airs, painting portraits of local people and landscapes, and making short videos about the Arctic for several years. I had numerous art exhibitions in Yakutsk, the capital city of the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). However, I always thought it was important to present my artwork in the Arctic regions of the republic. The residents of remote rural areas rarely access art due to problematic transportation and logistical accessibility. I organized exhibitions in three Arctic Indigenous districts during the last two years. One of those Arctic areas was my ancestral Nizhnekolymsky district, one of the most remote in the republic; Nizhnekolymsky district is the home to many Indigenous peoples - the Evens, the Yukaghirs, and the Chukchis. The blood of all these Indigenous people flows in me. Therefore, I know firsthand local cultures, histories, experiences, and problems they face daily. Perhaps this was why I immediately agreed when Sardana invited me to collaborate and create an artwork for her study "Indigenous Diamonds". I saw this project as a bold and responsible step on her part.

As for the drawing technique, I decided to use neutral black and white colors yet with a bright accent to visually represent, combine, and separate diverging views on extractivism, existing contrasting interests, illusions, and realities. Some facets of the diamond shine as a bright representation of luxury and prosperity, but if you look at the diamond from a different angle, it reflects bitter reality. The art for the cover of this study depicts a beautiful Indigenous girl (the model for the art is my friend from the Olenyek district); she is holding a handful of diamonds in her fragile hands. Her beautiful image on the cover mirrors different reflections of modern life in the Arctic. On the one hand, we find industrialization and the benefits of development; on the other hand, we find the values of the nomadic lifestyle and communal wealth, which the ancient Tungus peoples measured in reindeer and their relationship with it. Here, I am referring to the choices available and the ambiguity of the situation. In my art contribution, I was also interested in tackling the representation of the colonial history of Siberia, from the first contact of the local Indigenous population with white settlers to the beginning of geological explorations, and how closely intertwined the lifeways of the Indigenous people are with nature and the land where they were born.