

Oil into Culture

Energopolitics in the Russian Urals

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Russia's oil industry is old, but its oil boom is new. For much of the twentieth century, the oil pumped from the Soviet subsoil flowed into a socialist political and economic order, one that did not organize production, consumption, price, or value in the ways that have fed oil booms and oil busts around the capitalist world. Oil was crucial to the functioning of the Soviet economy, to be sure, but it was never directly associated with massive inequalities, unimaginable influxes of money, or soaring expectations of overnight modernization. Soviet oil was never the basis for the creation of an industrial or financial elite that could rival—or even take over—agencies of the state. When these common attributes of capitalist oil booms did begin to emerge in Russia over the course of the last decade or so, they followed not only the Soviet past but the “transitional” 1990s, when, even without an oil boom, Russians of all social stations struggled to come to terms with new inequalities, money's often mystifying peregrinations (pyramid schemes, say), and dashed dreams of rapid modernization.

These are some of the contexts for my current research on Russian “oil culture,” which explores Russia's emergence as a “petrostate” not from the perspective of oligarchs and the Kremlin (a common enough approach) but from an array of interconnected sites, groups and perspectives in a single oil-producing region—the Perm region of the Russian Urals. The research project's concrete ethnographic contexts range from new corporate social responsibility programs sponsored by energy companies to the fate of Soviet oil and gas infrastructure, and from new senses of space and vectors of inequality in rural oil-producing districts to the city of Perm's oil-fueled recent effort to brand itself as a cultural capital of Europe. This is the stuff of contemporary Russian energopolitics—fertile ground for providing an anthropological answer to a much broader question: What kinds of human social and cultural formations are being produced in the rapidly shifting energy regimes of the early twenty-first century? Below, I provide one example of how ethnographic attention to energopolitics affords new insights into both contemporary Russia and anthropological studies of energy more broadly.

Oil into Culture

The Perm region's oil is pumped largely by Lukoil-Perm, a subsidiary of Lukoil, Russia's largest private oil company. Strikingly, Lukoil-Perm has also become a major and highly visible sponsor of cultural revival in the Perm region: grants from the company fund everything from folklore ensembles to heritage festivals, and from children's summer camps to the construction of new museum exhibits. Oil companies around the world are frequent practitioners of this sort of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and Lukoil-Perm quite directly borrowed from Western models in designing its own programs. The specific shapes of Lukoil-Perm's involvement in cultural

construction, however, owe much to the Soviet and early post-Soviet past.

Moscow-based Lukoil consolidated control over regional oil operations in and around Perm in the 1990s, a time of tremendous popular dissatisfaction with Russia's *nouveau riche*. As the company began to realize profits from rising world oil prices, its employees in the Perm region's old Soviet oil-producing districts began to receive noticeably higher salaries precisely when the disappearance of Soviet-era subsidies for agriculture impoverished nearly everyone else. Lukoil took these emerging inequalities and accusations that it was pumping out oil, making enormous profits, and returning nothing to struggling populations quite seriously. There were likely a number of reasons for this: Lukoil-Perm's own desire for peaceful relationships with local populations and politicians; pressure from higher-level state officials whose tiny budgets and weak legitimacy left many state agencies unable to respond to the demands of local populations; and the memory of Soviet-style company towns, which made local enterprises responsible for local social and cultural life.

The institutional response to these pressures was Lukoil-Perm's Connections with Society Division, formed in the early 2000s and charged with managing the company's relationships with state agencies and local populations in oil-producing districts. The division quickly set up a procedure for awarding grants for social and cultural projects, and focused on the development of folk crafts and the reclaiming of local cultural identities. In part, this was an effort to provide seed money that would create jobs and new income for newly unemployed residents of former Soviet state farms. If there is no work to be had, one former Connections with Society employee phrased the company's idea in an interview with me, “Sit home ... sew, make pottery, do something else, and maybe you can get some sort of income.” These initiatives expanded to include massive cultural festivals, crafts fairs and museum exhibits about the region's past, all of them unfolding under Lukoil-Perm's distinctive red logo. The Perm region has recently taken to calling itself the “Region of 59 Festivals.” A large percentage of these festivals owe their existence to Lukoil-Perm.

Culture into Politics

Although Lukoil-Perm's efforts were only somewhat successful in a pure business sense—the folk crafts industry became a new career for only a handful of people—this kind of cultural investment paid other dividends for the company. It certainly created some positive PR. Most notably from the perspective of energopolitics, CSR projects aimed at producing local culture became a central vector of regional politics in the Perm region's new oil age. Key to understanding this process is a specifically post-Soviet configuration of cultural production in the districts, towns, and villages that were home to both Lukoil-Perm's oil operations. In these places, some of the most influential residents were members of the Soviet-era “local intelligentsia” working in rural and small city libraries, museums,

schools, clubs, and low-level offices of the state administration. Many were former low-level Communist Party members who were accustomed to organizing events and festivals, and to Soviet cultural construction.

In the 1990s, such projects were habitually underfunded by the state and offered their once moderately influential organizers very little in the way of prestige on the local stage. Lukoil-Perm's new social and cultural projects changed this, while not straying far from the already-surgeing interest in rebuilding elements of local cultural identity muffled or erased by Soviet cultural construction. Suddenly, the production of culture and identity was important to someone, as it had been occasionally in the Soviet period, and there was a new set of cultural initiatives from above to work on and to adapt to local circumstances. This time, they were even backed up with actual funding—from the oil company.

The allegiance of local intelligentsias offered Lukoil-Perm a crucial route through which to influence politics at the level of districts and towns. The company then used these connections to attempt to assure local cooperation and assistance on any number of projects connected with their actual oil production activities. In many oil districts, nearly all factions and elements of the local elite were linked to Lukoil through social and cultural projects of various sorts rather than through the oil industry itself. One effect of these CSR projects, in other words, was to insert Lukoil-Perm and its representatives quite deeply into local political and social networks.

The story of the Perm region's oil boom is, in good part, a story of the reorientation of Soviet and early post-Soviet networks (industrial, political and cultural) to gather around the once low-prestige energy sector. Many in the Perm region were skeptical and even cynical about Lukoil-Perm's omnipresent CSR initiatives, but the fact that the oil company had become a chief sponsor of culture and society was hard to escape. In an age when states often seek to devolve projects dedicated to shaping local populations to private corporations—among them sprawling and wealthy energy companies—the ethnography and theory of energopolitics should increasingly concern anthropologists.

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anthropological study of energy and energopolitics is not only a conceptually important field of future inquiry but that it is also one of the important and pressing issues in anthropology today.

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