

Native Sons and Soviet Fathers: Forging Far Eastern Literatures in 1950s Leningrad

Rebecca Stanton

In the 1950s, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began to renew its official interest in the "national-cultural individuality" of the small peoples of the North, which had languished since the abandonment of korenizatsiia and its replacement by Russification in the late 1930s. The science of ethnography, which had undergone existential convulsions in the 1930s, experienced a resurrection: it had a new mission, which was to tell the story of the triumphant emergence of the USSR's ethnic minorities from backwardness to modernity, the successful conversion of their "primitive" cultural features from dangerous "survivals" of the pre-Revolutionary past to rich treasurehouses of folklore.

Amid this atmosphere of renewed interest in the "small peoples" of the USSR's northern and eastern margins—tempered by a vocal commitment to Russian leadership, paternalism, and Marxist-Leninist Messianism—three budding writers travelled from their native settlements in the Russian Far East to Leningrad to pursue higher education. Each followed an orthodox path to professional status as a writer. Grigorii Khodzher (b. 1929), a Nanai, joined the CPSU in 1954 and graduated from the Herzen Pedagogical Institute (*ЛГПИ имени А. И. Герцена*) in 1956; Yuri Rytkheu (b. 1930), a Chukchi, graduated from Leningrad State University in 1954, joining the Writers' Union that same year, and the CPSU in 1967; and Vladimir Sangi (b. 1935), a Nivkh, graduated from the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in 1959, joining the Writers' Union in 1962 and the CPSU in 1967. Each went on to be hailed as the "founder" or "father" of his native literature, despite the fact that all three worked primarily or solely in Russian, reserving their native languages for the collection of folklore or the translation of the Russian classics. This paper examines the careers of Khodzher, Rytkheu, and Sangi as simultaneously paradigmatic and paradoxical examples of the post-war drive to create "modern" national cultures for the minority peoples of the Soviet Union, and poses the question: how should we understand a "native" literature whose roots spring from the institutional soil of the colonizing power?