

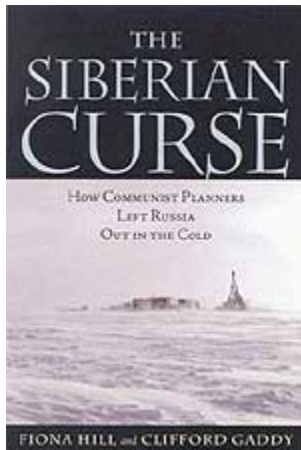
## Siberia: After the Cold Rush

by Sarah Hurst

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*Instead of relocating Siberia's elderly to warmer climes, say the authors of 'The Siberian Curse,' Russia should subsidize them until they die off.*

***The Siberian Curse: How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold***, by Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy. Brookings Institution Press, 2003. Hardcover and paperback, 240 pages.



The announcement that Siberia is too cold will not come as much of a surprise to Russians. If further statistical proof is needed, then this is the book to read. An array of graphs and tables demonstrate exactly how cold Russia is, and how much colder Siberia is compared with other parts of Russia and the world. For example, of the world's 10 coldest cities with more than a million people, nine are in Russia: Novosibirsk, Omsk, Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk, Perm, Samara, Ufa, Kazan, and Nizhny Novgorod. The 10th is Ottawa, Canada. Novosibirsk's mean January temperature is -19 degrees Celsius, while Ottawa's is a balmy -11.7.

*The Siberian Curse* asks why these cities were built in such a forbidding environment and what should be done with them. Both questions bring rather depressing answers. Russia's cities in Siberia are too big, and many shouldn't be there at all, the authors contend. Soviet central planners used slave labor from the Gulag to build cities east of the Urals and placed huge industrial plants there. In a market economy far fewer people would have moved to these places. According to something called "Zipf's law," a country's largest city is approximately twice as big as the second-largest city, three times as big as the third city, four times as big as the fourth, and so on. But after Moscow (10 million) and St. Petersburg (5 million), Russia has a large cluster of cities with more than 1 million people. The cold cities.

### GO EAST, YOUNG MAN

In the Soviet era young Russians cheerfully moved to the far north and east, inspired by a spirit of adventure--and hefty government subsidies. Today, specialists and skilled workers who can afford to do so are leaving for other parts of Russia or other countries. Since 1989, Magadan Oblast has lost one-third of its population and Chukotka one-half. If trends continue, Siberia and the far north will lose a third of its current population over the next 20 years. Those who leave will need jobs and housing elsewhere, while the challenge of making life better for those who stay will be no less pressing.

The authors show how expensive and impractical it is to maintain these cities in the post-Soviet era. They give several examples from the Russian Far East, treating it as an extension of Siberia for the purpose of the book. Mirny, in the vast Republic of Sakha, was built as a diamond-mining center in 1959. "Fixated solely on the physical presence of diamonds in the ground, the planners unfortunately failed to consider (or perhaps chose consciously to ignore)

the constraints of Yakutia's climate and the remoteness of the planned city and port," Hill and Gaddy write. Mirny has a population of 37,000, but it is cut off from export markets by "a frozen river, an impassable road, and an absent rail link. The town's only connection to the outside world is air transportation--itself vulnerable to weather-related delays and ruptures."

Although Sakha's diamond industry, spearheaded by the Russian Alrosa Co., is thriving despite these hazards, Hill and Gaddy are right to point out the impracticalities of keeping cities and towns like Mirny functioning. Even in the most promising economic region in Siberia and the Far East--the island of Sakhalin--the benefits tend to be reaped by a small number of local workers and expatriates, while most people still have to contend with low wages and frequent power outages, which continue in spite of billions of dollars pumped into oil and gas projects by Western and Japanese firms and their Russian partners. Some regions, such as Kamchatka and Primorsky Krai, are also afflicted by power struggles between oblast governors and city mayors. In Vladivostok, the capital of Primorsky Krai, residents had no hot water and only a limited supply of cold water last winter.

#### HOLD THE ICE, PLEASE



IF WINTER IN MAGADAN DOESN'T SUIT . . . when a fleet of supersonic bombers dropped 80 tons of explosives on the dam.

Residents of these regions have to put up with failing heating and electricity systems and frequent natural disasters. In March 2001, rising ground waters in Magadan "gushed to the surface, enveloping the district's houses and transforming them into ice blocks," the authors write. In May of the same year, a massive natural ice dam formed on the Lena River near Lensk, Sakha. Backed up behind the dam, the river had risen 6.5 meters above its flood level. It inundated 98 percent of Lensk. "Nearly all of the town's 27,000 residents had to be evacuated as the floodwaters swept hundreds of homes away and damaged thousands of other buildings, roads, and bridges." The waters began to recede only

So should Russia abandon these cities altogether? It isn't that simple. There are practical and psychological obstacles. To begin with, the centralized energy systems make it impossible to turn off the heating and electricity in individual apartments. Whole blocks would have to be supplied with power even if half the residents moved out. Next, it isn't so easy to find somewhere to move to. Moscow is a giant magnet for migrants, but it has retained the *propiska* (residence permit) for precisely this reason. Other warmer parts of the country, such as the North Caucasus, have failing economies. People tend to move from one cold city to another cold city, which isn't much of an improvement. Older people have their social networks and perhaps a small plot of land or a meager pension, none of which they are keen to give up in return for an uncertain future.

Last year Russia's Ministry of Economic Development and Trade announced plans to move more than half-a-million people to central Russia. Around 800,000 people have registered to move but are staying in the north due to lack of government support and their own insufficient funds. The World Bank is supporting pilot projects in Vorkuta in northern Russia, in Norilsk in western Siberia, and in Magadan in the Far East to move 25,000 people at a cost of \$3,000 per person. The bank's subsidies will help migrants buy homes in small towns in central Russia.

Other foreign organizations, including the U.S. and Canadian international development agencies, are providing assistance and funding for programs to train entrepreneurs in the region--thus stimulating the local economy--and to support the social sector. Some programs are particularly aimed at indigenous peoples, who do not want to leave the far north no matter what incentives are offered. The Alaska Chukotka Development Program, working at the behest of Chukotka's billionaire governor, Roman Abramovich, has successfully campaigned for Chukotka villagers to receive a whaling quota and helped them to set up a traditional mammal hunters association that oversees subsistence activities in this most remote part of Russia.

#### LOCALS ARE GETTING STEAMED UP

Besides, Russian national identity is tied to size. Yes, size does matter. Being the biggest country in the world is a source of immense pride. On the other hand, Russians consider themselves Europeans and traditionally say a tearful goodbye to the motherland when they arrive at the Urals, the gateway to Asia. People east of the Urals refer to European Russia as the *materik* (mainland). Yet, they fear that if they lose their grip on Siberia and the Far East, the Chinese could pour in. For Russians it is not enough to own the land, they have to populate it, or so they think. Hill and Gaddy recommend that they look to Canada, where the majority of the population lives in the warmest climes near the U.S. border, while only 1 percent lives in the northern territories.



... TRY YAKUTSK. PHOTO BY ANNA SYROMY

The book concludes with recommendations for developing Siberia more efficiently, using fewer people and more advanced technology. Instead of relocating the elderly, Russia should encourage younger people to move to warmer climates and subsidize those who remain--for they will eventually die off. Something must be done. The worst scenario would be to continue throwing billions of rubles at deteriorating cities in a desperate attempt to prop them up, the authors argue. But they devote much more space to analyzing the problems of Russia than to suggesting solutions. They hammer the same point home again and again from different angles, even referring to complex mathematical formulas in the appendices. The case studies of people struggling to survive in appalling conditions are more convincing than any of the graphs. If past experience is anything to go by, Russia's leaders will probably not take the

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logical approach to the Siberian curse that Hill and Gaddy are hoping for.

If Russians are leaving Siberia, the Chinese are coming in--particularly to the Far East. Between 100,000 and 200,000 Chinese live and work legally in the Far East, doing anything from running small businesses to fishing to agriculture. Most say they intend to return to China after making some money rather than staying in Russia permanently. Some Russians fear they will lose the Far East to the Chinese, and there have been attacks by skinheads on Chinese students and workers. Instead of resisting the entrepreneurial Chinese, perhaps the Russians should instead follow their example.

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