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THE PEOPLES OF THE USSR - AN ETHNOGRAPHIC HANDBOOK - WIXMAN, R

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The main purpose of this reference book is to identify and cross-reference the bewildering array of names (or variants of spellings) for all nations, nationalities, ethnic and ethnographic groups within the present boundaries of the Soviet Union. This includes groups such as Greeks and Koreans, to the extent that they live in the Soviet Union, and groups which became extinct or assimilated during the last century (such as the Yatvigians of Grodno gubernia) or even earlier. The ethnographic descriptions themselves are very short, ranging from ten to twenty lines in the case of the Setus, the Žemaičiai, and the Latgalians to about one page for union republic nations. Included are a brief characterization of history, living style, traditional religion, and language (including dialectal subdivisions). Population figures for the censuses of 1926 to 1979 (and sometimes of 1897 and even earlier) are given for the major groups and some of the minor ones.

The author specializes in the Caucasian area, and the hard test for his success outside that region would be to consider an area far removed from the Caucasus and reasonably well known to the reviewer: the Balto-Finnic and more remotely the Baltic and the eastern Finnic language areas. In general, the information is correct and balanced. Courland (in a broad sense) is a good example of the extent of cross-referencing insofar as it includes both Baltic and Finnic (Livonian) ethnic groups. Separate entries include: CURIAN, CURONIAN, KURONIAN, KURSHI, KURŠI, KURŠIAI (ancient tribe); CURZEME, COURLANDERS, KURZEMIAN, KURZEMNIEKI (modern Kurzeme and its inhabitants); KALAMIED, LIBI, LIV, LIVONIAN, RAANDALIST, RANDAL (Finnic Livonians); COURISH KINGS, CURISH KINGS, CURISCHE KENIGE, KURISCHE KÔNIGE, KURISH KENIGE, KURISH KINGS, KURŠU ŶENIŅI, KURŠU ŶONIŅI (free peasants); KURSENIEKI, KURŠININKAI (sixteenth-century Latvian migrants to the Courish Spit); CREVIN, CRIEVIN, KREVINI, KRIEVINI, KRIEVINGI, RUSAKI (fifteenth-century Finnic Vod settlers, misnamed “Russians”).
Some minor corrections follow. DZUKI (Lithuanian dialect area) should have a dash on the U rather than an umlaut (p. 61). Different groups of Livonians “were called” Raandalist and Kalamied, respectively (p. 128); it should read “called themselves” so as to make clear that these were their self-designations. CHUD is said to designate the Veps (p. 47); it actually designated Baltic Finns in a wider sense, as correctly indicated on p. 215 (VOD). The statement that the “ancestors of the Setu (Estonians) and the Livonians were probably Vod” (p. 215) is akin to the assertion that man descends from the contemporary ape (or vice versa); common ancestry is a different matter. A recurring error (in entries on FINN, FINN OF LENINGRAD OBLAST, IZHORAS, KARELIANS) is the assertion that Karelians and Ingermanlanders migrated to Finland in large numbers during the war; after the war the Soviet Union made Finland forcibly repatriate any former Soviet subjects who could not escape to Sweden. The former Finnish citizens from the areas ceded to the Soviets also migrated west prior to the end of World War II. As for the BALTIC GERMANS, there was little retreat “with the German armies” and even less of a postwar “evacuation east (to Kazakhstan or southern Siberia)” (p. 21) because most Baltic Germans left for Germany already in 1939, prior to Soviet occupation of the Baltic states.

A laudable effort is made to specify the cultural connections and linguistic distances from other groups, but sometimes this results in a possible overemphasis of dialectal differences and interlanguage similarities. To take contrasting examples from the eastern Finnic languages, the lowland and highland Mari dialects are said to be “not mutually intelligible” (p. 132) while the Komi and Udmurt languages are said to be “basically mutually intelligible” (p. 110). Some revision of traditional views on eastern Finnic languages and dialects is certainly underway, but the statements above may overdo it. A wider issue is raised by the author’s classification of Uralic languages as a branch of “Uralo-Altaic,” a feature repeated in nearly every article on a Finno-Ugrian population. The hypothesis of such a connection dates back to the nineteenth century, but it has been questioned or given up by most scholars, who now see as many connections between the Uralic, the Indo-Europeans, and possibly the Yukagir as is the case with the Altaic. Given the precarious status of the “Uralo-Altaic,” nothing would be lost in the present handbook if it were omitted.

In sum, the coverage of the Baltic and Finnic language areas is quite thorough, both regarding separate groups and cross-listing of different spellings encountered for the same group. Factual errors are few, and they occur in non-essential information. It is likely that the other areas of the Soviet Union are covered with equal care, making Wixman’s handbook a trustworthy guide in an often confusing territory.

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