

Shifting Loyalties of Grigoriy Vereshagin

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Grigoriy Yegorovich Vereshagin (1851–1930) stands as an influential figure in Finno-Ugric ethnography. Widely regarded as one among the first Udmurt scholars, Vereshagin also gained his recognition as a defender of Udmurts during the Multan Case trial, where he refuted accusations of human sacrifice. However, his later works, including “O bylom kannibalizme u inorodtsev” and “Ostatki yazychestva u votyakov”, present a stark shift by promoting the narrative of Udmurt primitivism, suggesting past practices of cannibalism.

While this shift in perspective may seem to align with colonial expectations, it could also reflect a brave and complex intellectual stance. As one of the few Udmurt intellectuals, Vereshagin's work may have been shaped by his precarious position within both the Russian academic and Udmurt communities. He was likely one of the few Udmurts who openly expressed his views—risky for someone navigating a career under imperial scrutiny. By tackling controversial and stigmatizing subjects, Vereshagin might have risked his career to engage with narratives that were taboo or misunderstood. His decision to engage in these debates — despite the potential personal cost — suggests he may have been seeking to control the narrative around Udmurt culture rather than let outsiders dictate it. Thus, the research question is how did Vereshagin's controversial transformation from an Udmurt defender to a critic challenge our understanding of indigenous scholars working under colonial pressure: was he a traitor to his people or a strategic player in Russian academia?

This hypothesis complicates the earlier view of Vereshagin's work as merely capitulating to colonial stereotypes. Instead, his writings might reflect an attempt to influence the discourse from within, showing bravery in addressing topics others shied away from, even at the expense of further marginalizing his people. This enigma surrounding his legacy—whether as a defender or accuser—reveals the complex relationship between indigenous intellectuals and the power hierarchies they navigated in Russian academia. The contradictions within Vereshagin's scholarship invite further inquiry into the delicate balance between advocacy, survival, and the pressures imposed by a colonial intellectual framework.

Bibliography:

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