

There are few places on the earth's surface about  
which the majority of mankind have such definite  
ideas with so little personal knowledge as Siberia.

—A. F. Spencer, "Siberia in 1919,"  
*Economica*, no. 3 (October 1921), 283

# **SIBERIA**

In the Eyes of Russian Photographers

**LEAH BENDAVID-VAL**

**PRESTEL**

MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK







(Preceding spread)

**ALEXANDER GRONSKY** Lena River, near Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, October 2007



VIKTOR AKHLOMOV Photographing a gushing oil well, Tyumen region, 1961

1/6  
11

Кав



462  
Устьемковская роща верховьях в  
40 от Лобинина.



463  
937-4463  
Село Виново на  
р. Сухова

**SERGEY MIKHAILOVICH PROKUDIN-GORSKII** Views in the Ural Mountains and western Siberia, from the album *Survey of Waterways, Russian Empire, 1912*

Отдых III

Работа 1912 года

Сибирско-Товольский водный путь.



465

Этих облаков.



466

РР7-4462

Село Кирьково на р. Тусовой

4/9  
 32/3 4B/1



467

РР7-4461

Село Тенекки.

Влажный берег р. Тусовой



468

РР7-4611

Склад дров на р. Тусовой, впадающей в Тусовую у сел. Верхние Горюдки



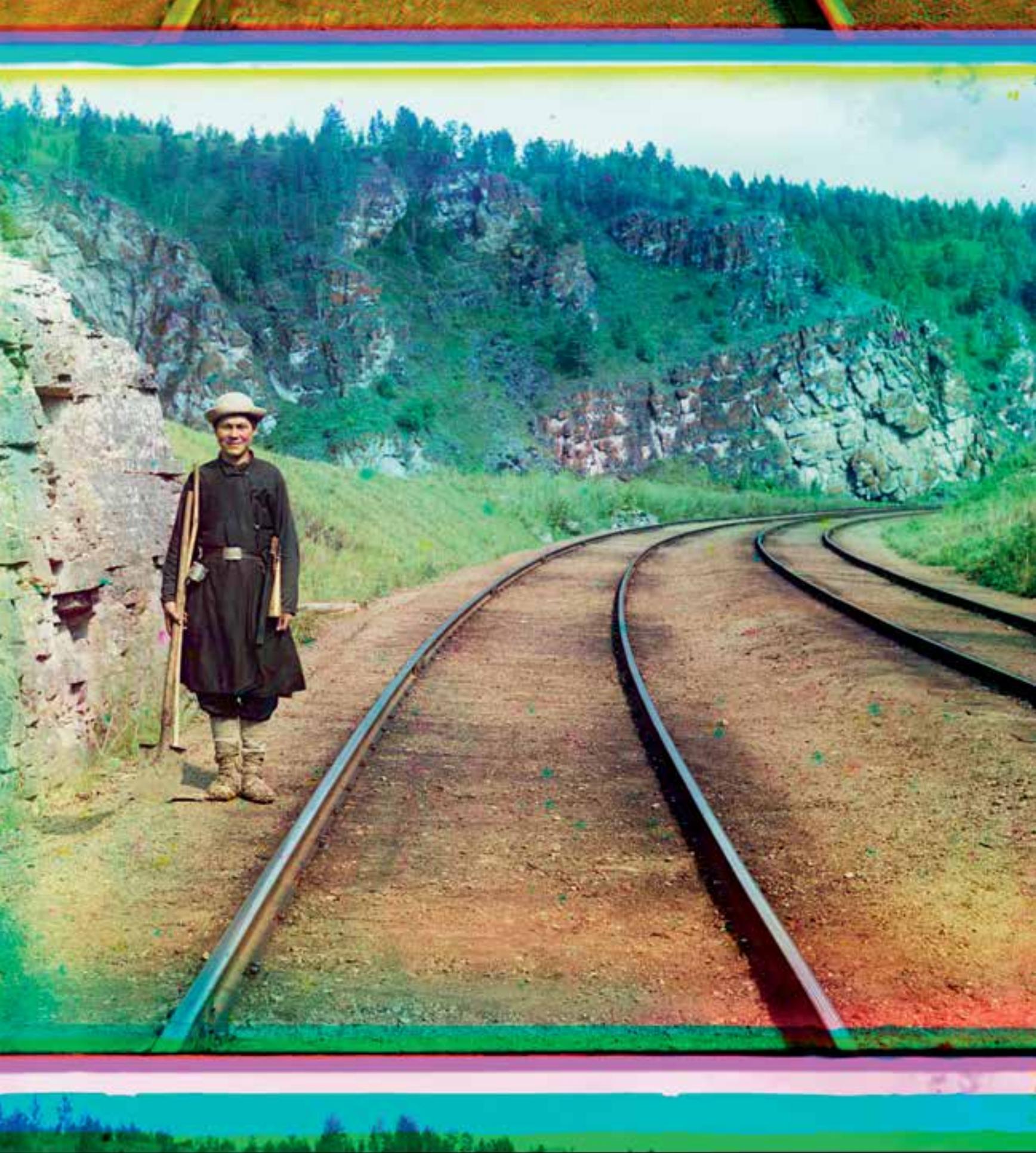
# SIBERIA

**MAP KEY**

- Siberia (historical, and in some usages, present)
- Russia (west of the Ural Mountains)
- Trans-Siberian Railway
- Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM)
- Point of interest
- Hydroelectric plant

0 100 200 300 400 500  
 KILOMETERS  
 0 100 200 300 400 500  
 STATUTE MILES  
 Two-Point Equidistant Projection  
 SCALE 1:20,000,000





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# Looking Back

**MOST PHOTOGRAPHS OF SIBERIA** that we see in the West are by non-Russians, and these pictures by Americans and Western Europeans have shaped our thoughts and opinions of Siberia. Photographs aren't the only data we have on Siberia, of course. Portrayals in fiction and nonfiction contribute to our impressions of this vast, mysterious place. But photography plays an important role, and relying solely on the views of foreigners to this region turns out to be a big mistake.

Siberia is difficult to enter deeply, and visitors, including photographers, tend not to stay long. Foreigners usually hire guides and, consciously or unintentionally, often come out reporting what they expected to see. From mere scraps of evidence our imagined idea of Siberia has become so strong that its name now stands for any remote, intensely undesirable place—bad behavior or bad luck can figuratively land a person in social or physical Siberia.

My own impression of Siberia was, until a few years ago, like most people's. My first visit there wasn't until 2010. But my involvement with Russian photography goes back to August 1987 when I traveled to Russia on behalf of National Geographic to plan a photography book titled *The Soviet Union Today*. Geographic photographers would be doing most of the shooting but were prohibited from working near bridges and military industries and installations. I went to Moscow to identify a few Russian photographers who had access to these places. The Soviet Union's official Novosti Press Agency agreed to point me in the right direction. We meant our book to be an overview of this country that had been closed to us for so long. The volume would be a page-turner showcasing pictures of the great attractions of a mysterious culture.

On that first visit I stayed in Moscow's beautiful, not-yet-renovated National Hotel opposite Red Square. One Saturday morning soon after arriving in the country I was enjoying the view with a shiver of exhilaration





VLADIMIR SEMIN Heading home after walrus hunt, Inchoun, Chukotka, 1989



**GEORGY KORCHENKIN** Burial mounds, Kosh-Agach area, Altay, 1990s

at being in exotic Russia when I was shaken by a sharp knock at my hotel room door. I opened it: three men stood in the corridor looking earnest and a little nervous. One thrust a large bouquet of flowers toward me and another held out a bottle of cognac. Their arms were literally overflowing with photographs. These were not the photographers I had met the day before at the Novosti press office.

The language barrier between us was absolute, but fortunately, after a few minutes my Novosti interpreter, Nikolay Romanov, showed up. Later Nikolay and I wondered how, without passes, the photographers could possibly have gotten past the security guards and KGB personnel stationed at the hotel's entrance. We never found out.

Moscow photographer Vladimir Semin was one of the three who came to the hotel and whose work I looked at that Saturday morning. His pictures struck me strongly. He would soon spend time photographing in Siberia. Of course I was interested.

When Semin reached Siberia in the late 1980s, he didn't think it was miserable in the least. He photographed whale and walrus hunters in the northeast rural settlement of Inchoun on the shores of the Chukchi Sea. It felt exotic and ancient to him. He captured a primordial mood in photographs of walrus hunters wielding spears in rough seas and then hunkered down heading home afterward (*pages 12–13*).

Recently Semin spoke with me about how the Siberia he saw in those days has stayed with him. "In Siberia the vastness influences how you feel, your state of mind," he said. "Even time flows differently, it's something that can't be explained." When I pressed him on this, he searched his mind, then compared experiencing Siberia to the relationship between a man and a woman: "As a child you don't know what it means. Then it just happens and you understand it."

It was late August 2010 when I finally touched down in Siberia myself. First I visited Novosibirsk, a lively and worldly city, culturally, academically, and architecturally diverse, offering every convenience and entertainment a modern person might desire. I attended a meeting of local photographers eager to show and discuss their work. Their photography was interesting, dynamic, devotedly done, and their equipment sophisticated.

From there I traveled to a breathtaking spot at the foot of the Altay Mountains, a children's camp with finely maintained wooden cabins then closed for the summer. Photographers had driven long distances to participate in a regional gathering of Russian photographers, sharing several congenial days of photographs and field stories. That's where I met photographer Georgy Korchenkin.

Korchenkin told me he grew up in Kazakhstan and left his childhood home to settle in the Black Sea town of Sochi, where he made a good living photographing tourists. But he wasn't happy, and in 1979 he moved to the city of Surgut on the Ob River in the west Siberian plain. "I took a job for an oil company and was earning a tenth of what I made in Sochi, but I wanted to get away from the unsatisfying commercial work," he said.

Before he arrived in Surgut, he said, his idea of Siberia was similar to that of most outsiders, including mine: "Prison camps and cold weather." But once there he fell in love with the landscape, and he met people who in his opinion were strong in body and character as a direct result of the bracing climate. For some time now Korchenkin's personal mission has been to photograph the entire Altay landscape. His photographs pay tribute to the endlessly picturesque views he encounters. He, like Semin, is moved by the sense of timelessness he experiences on his photographic expeditions. He's awed, for example, by the ancient presence he senses in the stark Kosh-Agach burial mounds (*opposite*) even without knowing the history of the site.

Korchenkin knows full well that the Altay in August, or for that matter at any time of year, doesn't represent all of Siberia. He has done his share of traveling. In 2002 he had an opportunity to tour countries in Western Europe. "I had never been in Europe before," he said. "There were a lot of impressive things to see, but for me there was nothing to photograph. I was bored. I decided I'll never go to Europe again."

In 2010 my own limited time in Siberia had been pleasant, but this comment struck me as extreme. How was it possible to reject the cultural treasures of Europe in favor of Siberia's isolation, the cold, and its legacy of gulags? It's a fact that Soviet gulags were shut down long ago, and when they did exist they were everywhere in Stalin's Russia, not only in Siberia. Yet Siberia,

daunting and inhospitable, had been a dumping ground for Russia's political and social undesirables since the sixteenth century and the reign of Ivan the Terrible.

Many of the unfortunates who served sentences in Siberia were articulate political and literary figures. Some left personal accounts of their acute suffering in exile, which, despite all the misery they endured, occasionally included surprisingly appreciative tributes to the region. Literary genius Fyodor Dostoevsky had no trouble distinguishing life in the west Siberian prison where he was incarcerated between 1850 and 1854 from life in the surrounding Siberian landscape. In his book *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*, he described the hideousness of prison life and lavished extravagant praise on the Siberia he saw outside. Of the people, he wrote, "their ways are old and fixed, hallowed by centuries. . . . [T]he young ladies bloom like roses and are in the highest degree virtuous." He rhapsodized about the land's fertility: "Wild game flies about the streets and throws itself in the hunter's path. . . . In some places the harvest yields fifteen hundred percent. . . . [A]ll that is required is the capacity to make the best use of it."

In 1857 Dostoevsky married his first wife, Maria Dmitrievna Isaeva, in the old Siberian town of Kuznetsk. How this happened is a long story, but Dostoevsky's esteemed biographer Joseph Frank referred to the then-small town as "a miserable backwater lost in the depths of the Siberian wilderness." Dostoevsky himself didn't think much of the town either. Later it grew into a big industrial city and was renamed Novokuznetsk because of the enormous coal reserves discovered there.

On my first visit to Russia for National Geographic in 1987 I traveled from Moscow to Leningrad, to Kazan, down the Volga River to Astrakhan, and from there to other points west of the Ural Mountains where Siberia begins. Russian photography everywhere was still under the influence of Socialist Realism. Official Soviet photographs—in other words, those that were published—offered staged, heroic moments and pleasant scenes populated with contented people. But change was in the air and Mikhail Gorbachev was presiding over a destabilizing upheaval.

The three photographers who had come to my Moscow hotel room—Farit Gubayev, Alexander Grek, and Vladimir Semin—sat down and looked

on expectantly as I leafed through the prints they brought. Their pictures were of ordinary people in modest circumstances, cooking, hanging laundry, children bicycling on crumbling streets, factory workers enveloped in clouds of pollution, peeling facades on communal apartment buildings, happy domesticity alongside grim scenes of poverty and alcoholism. The photography was tragic and witty, intimate, straightforward, and sophisticated. It was black-and-white and some of it was gritty, so I knew National Geographic would not publish it at that time, but I was immensely moved. Where did this photography come from? Where was it going? I was told these pictures could never be published in the Soviet Union; they were made, in the photographers' words, "for the drawer."

Similar scenes were repeated in city after city. Photographers found me or I found them. They never asked me for anything. They just wanted to show their work to an American. They explained they were on a quest to document reality. I later learned that this undertaking went beyond the photographers I met personally. Their photographic mission was quietly spreading across European Russia and Siberia.

Maybe there has always been a taste for realism among Russian photographers. Photography certainly lends itself to this. But in Soviet times photography was used to hide the real Russia. The most extreme cover-up was in Siberia. Authorities thought it prudent to conceal the heinous crimes being committed there. Hiding Siberia was easy in those days because it had few roads or other infrastructure and was fairly inaccessible.

In the 1970s, during the Brezhnev years, photographers began to take up documentary realism in a heartfelt effort to defy Socialist Realism. The premise was simple: don't stage anything; record what is in front of the camera—no more, no less. French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank were the great inspirations. It wasn't easy to obtain books or magazines with their photographs, but Russians found ways and emulated the work on their own terms. They worked in the streets by day and printed in darkened bathrooms at night, capturing a real world they saw as theirs. I was surprised that this activity not only existed but was actually flourishing.



ЯКУТЫ.



**DMITRY DYEBABOV** Concert in Cape Lopatka, Chukotka, 1936

Yet Siberia remained a mysterious and enigmatic place for most people, a land with a famous name but no definite borders, a monolithic presence far to Moscow's east, as impossible to ignore as it was impossible to grasp. To this day, so I'm told, misunderstandings about Siberia persist among many ordinary Russians living in the western part of the country. To a degree there's no excuse for this. It's no longer hard to discover more about Siberia: as with anything, a wealth of information exists online, on tourism sites, on the radio, and in newspapers, magazines, and books. But this vast region continues to receive attention mostly for its industrial potential and its social failings. Then and now, Russian photographers who closely document Siberian daily life rarely get much notice.

Siberia comprises more than 75 percent of Russia's land and eight of its eleven time zones. Compare this with the four time zones between Maine and California. Siberia's great rivers flow north into the Arctic Ocean. Flat grasslands and dark forests stretch across the Eurasian landscape, presenting to some an interminable sameness, to others a timeless beauty, to still others an unsettling unknowableness. The coldest inhabited place on earth is in Siberia. But Siberia isn't always cold. Despite extremes, every season can be experienced there at its most stunning.

Local residents produced most of the region's photography before the Bolshevik Revolution. They made portraits of dignitaries and native peoples and documented resource development and rural and urban life. Their legacy is spare but important. Pictures go back to the middle of the nineteenth century, nearly to photography's beginnings. Occasionally a curious photographer visited the region from outside, searching for exotic scenes and subjects.

The early photographs are now rightly treasured by Russia's State Historical Museum, even when little can be known about them. Photographer August Karovich Gofman was clearly taken with the foreign people he encountered. He photographed them with appreciation and respect (*page 17*).

After the Revolution of 1917, outsiders had difficulty entering the country, and no one could work freely. Soviet authorities gradually blanketed all of Russia, European and Asiatic, with Socialist Realist images

showing a happy, productive populace. Russian photographers developed innovative photographic techniques during this time. They experimented boldly with framing, camera angles, montages, and image sequencing. Though the political motivations of Soviet authorities can certainly be challenged, the aesthetic merit of the best Socialist Realist photographs is undeniable. Dmitry Dyebabov's image of a concert in Siberia's far northeast (*opposite*) is a choice example. What's going on here? Ethnic Russians have come to bestow their culture on native Chukchi people, to civilize and assimilate them. What does this mean to the mother and child?

Russia's Socialist Realist photographers made important contributions to history, photography, and culture despite the political constraints. The documentary realists who followed them worked in a much more benign political environment, but they still were not entirely free. One of the most talented of those new realists, Vladimir Sokolayev, was born in the Siberian town where Dostoevsky was married. It had been industrialized and renamed Novokuznetsk in 1931 and called Stalinsk between 1932 and 1962, when it was named Novokuznetsk again. The limitations and possibilities of 1980s Russia impressed Sokolayev. "When I and other photographers looked around us, it was obvious that what was going on in the streets was different from what politicians were saying on the screens of TV sets," he told me. "We wanted to record actual people and the reality they lived."

Looking at Sokolayev's photographs in 2010 and 2011, I wondered at the political risks he took in the 1980s and as far back as the 1970s. "Our pictures didn't really endanger us," he assured me, "but we couldn't show them in public." He recorded people submitting to outdated Communist sloganeering and dealing with food shortages, broken-down cars, and other daily inconveniences. His photographs show us sad paradoxes and citizens coping in amusing and touching ways. "This was the Russian reality," said Sokolayev. "Russian cars can break down anywhere at any moment. Every Russian driver must know how to repair his car and must be prepared. This is a typical Russian situation" (*page 20*). In 1983 he and a couple of friends tried to send pictures to a World Press Photo contest in Spain but



**VLADIMIR SOKOLAYEV** Emergency car repair, Novokuznetsk, Kemerovo region, Kuzbass, October 10, 1981



ALEXANDER KUZNETSOV Norilsk, 2006



## **Siberia**

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