

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

THE SIBERIAN CURSE:

How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold.

By Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy.

Brookings. 303 pp. \$46.95,

\$18.95 paper

Ever since the age of the tsars, Siberia has embodied the Russian paradox—a place of seemingly boundless abundance (oil and gas, timber and coal, gold and other precious metals) lying amid frozen wastelands. Today, Siberia has captured the Russian imagination. The vast lands east of the Urals represent, to the men at Russia's helm, a source of contention—seen alternately as Russia's destiny and its burden, either a sacred cornucopia of the motherland's treasures or an endless stretch of tundra and taiga where only survivalists could live and slave labor grow. Among Russian politicians, the debate over what to do with Siberia—invest in it, abandon it, defend it against Chinese annexation, sell it to the Japanese—dominates discussions about the country's future. Whatever the viewpoint, all sides seem to agree: Siberia remains the key to Russia's fate.

In *The Siberian Curse*, Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, scholars at the Brookings Institution, offer a refreshing, well-documented addition to the literature on post-Soviet Russia. They recommend “downsizing Siberia” as the only way to reverse the colossal mistakes of Soviet economic planning and streamline Russia for a 21st-century game of catch-up. Much of their case rests on the hardships of the Siberian winter—and spring, summer, and fall. They also make the good point, rarely heard in this debate, that a chief obstacle to transforming Siberia, and the Russian economy more broadly, is the absence of employment migration. “We’re not Americans,” the head of Russia's privatization program once told me. “We don’t move for work. If Sergei loses his job in Tomsk, he still stays in Tomsk until he dies.” Siberia gave the Soviets, as the authors wryly note, plenty of “room for error,” and the lack of economic mobility is among the worst errors, one that remains a

hidden tax on Russia's economy.

Hill and Gaddy do have a plan. A force of migrant workers should labor in the regions rich in minerals and petrochemicals. (Gazprom, the natural gas giant, is in fact moving in this direction by rotating workers in remote areas in quarter-year shifts.) Above all, the authors argue, Moscow must lure the population from Siberia westward, to the region geographers call “European Russia,” the lands west of the Urals. But talk of such downsizing would bring bloodshed in the Duma, let alone in Siberia. And the World Bank's \$80 million pilot program to move pensioners and the unemployed from three cities in the Far North, a high-minded plan sketched here in favorable terms, has been a mitigated disaster. Those who live near the Arctic Circle are a tough lot; of the 25,000 residents targeted for resettlement, only a few hundred have taken up the offer. Some have even outsmarted the Western economists and social planners by accepting the financial incentives and staying put.

There are gaps in Hill and Gaddy's analysis—the role of the oligarchs in putting whole swaths of Siberia on life support is all but ignored, while the emphasis on geography slights demography, which is the greatest present danger. (Each year the country's population shrinks by nearly one million.) The authors concede that the odds that Vladimir Putin will elect to “shrink” Siberia are long. But they note that if neither Napoleon nor Hitler, not to mention the Soviet central planners, could conquer Russia's ice fields, then President Putin, if indeed he wishes his country to compete in the global market, has little choice but to downsize.

—ANDREW MEIER

LOVE ONLINE:

Emotions on the Internet.

By Aaron Ben-Ze'ev.

Cambridge Univ. Press. 289 pp. \$25

Most of the books published on love and the Internet fall into two categories: alarmist pseudoexposés (beware: people have cyber-