Officially, there is no such place as Siberia. No political or territorial entity has Siberia as its name. In atlases, the word "Siberia" hovers across the northern third of Asia unconnected to any place in particular, as if designating a zone or a condition; it seems to show through like a watermark on the page. During Soviet times, revised maps erased the name entirely, in order to discourage Siberian regionalism. Despite this invisibility, one can assume that Siberia's traditional status as a threat did not improve.

A tiny fraction of the world's population lives in Siberia. About thirty-eight million Russians and native peoples inhabit that northern third of Asia. By contrast, the state of New Jersey, where I live, has nearly a quarter as many people on about .0015 as much land. For most people, Siberia is not the place itself but a figure of speech. In fashionable restaurants in New York and Los Angeles, Siberia is the section of less desirable tables given to customers whom the maître d' does not especially like.

Newspaper gossip columns take the word even more metaphorically. When an author writes a book about a Park Avenue apartment building, and the book offends some of the residents, and a neighbor who happens to be a friend of the author offers to throw him a book party in her apartment, and the people in the Park Avenue building hear about this plan, the party giver is risking "social Siberia," one of them warns.

In this respect (as in many others), Siberia and America are alike. Apart from their actual, physical selves, both exist as constructs, expressions of the mind. Once when I was in western Russia, a bottle of mineral water was showing my two Russian companions and me around his new dacha outside the city of Vologda. The time was late evening; darkness had fallen. The mineral-water bottle led us from room to room, throwing on all the lights and pointing out the amenities. When we got to the kitchen, he flipped the switch but the light did not go on. This seemed to upset him. He fooled with the switch, then hurried off and came back with a stepladder. Mounting it, he removed the glass globe from the overhead light and unscrewed the bulb. He climbed down, put globe and bulb on the counter, took a fresh bulb, and ascended again. He reached up and screwed the new bulb into Siberia's boundaries encompass about three-quarters of Russia's territory and a twelfth of all land on earth. The continental United States and most of Europe could fit inside. Photographs by Simon Roberts.
strange object encountered inexplicably in a dark forest, spooky-like.

The Vologda road had become a spill of pavement, untrimmed along its edges, with scalloping where the poured asphalt had flowed. Small villages followed, one after another, at regular intervals, roadside signs announcing their names. Often I looked up the names in my pocket Russian-English dictionary to see what they meant. According to my transla-
tions (verified by Sergei), that day we went through villages named Puddele, Jellies, Knee, New Knee, and Smokes.

All along the road, sometimes to heights of ten or twelve feet, grew a plant that Volodya identified as markovnik. This plant resembles a roadside weed in America called Queen Anne’s lace—except that markovnik is like our modest, waist-high plant drastically and Asiati-
cally enlarged. Queen Anne’s lace and markovnik are in fact related, both belong-
ing to the carrot family (markovnik means “carrot”). Along the route we travelled, markovnik grows abundantly from one end of Russia to the other.

In early afternoon, we stopped at an informal rest area like the one at the inter-
section of the Murmansk and Vologda roads. Here for the first time I encoun-
tered big-time Russian roadside trash. Very, very few trash receptacles exist along the roads of Russia. This rest area, and its ad-hoc picnic spots, with their benches of downed tree trunks, featured a ground layer of trash basically everywhere, except in a few places, where there was more. In the all-trash encirclement, trash items had piled themselves together here and there in heaps three and four feet tall, as if mak-
ing common cause. With a quick kicking and scuffling of nearby fragments, Sergei rendered a place beside a log bench relatively trash free and then laid out our cold-
chicken lunch on pieces of cellophane on the ground. I ate hungrily, though I did notice through the cellophane many little pieces of broken eggshell from some pre-
vious traveler’s meal.

Back on the Vologda road, we continued in the direction of Cherepovets. After not many kilometres, the warning light for the engine generator lit up on the dashboard, making a companion for the oil-pressure light, which had never gone off. I expected that soon every warning light on the dashboard would be glowing. I pointed out the generator light to Ser-

A woman selling vegetables in Bilbino, a town above the Arctic Circle, in the district of Chukotka, the part of far north Siberia just across the Bering Strait from Alaska.