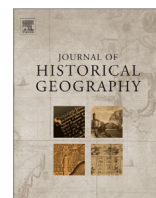




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Melting the glacial curtain: the politics of Scandinavian–Soviet networks in the geophysical field sciences between two polar years, 1932/33–1957/58

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Abstract

While providing a brief background of the development of Scandinavian–Russian relations in the polar sciences in the early 20th century, this paper focuses on the period from the 1930s when the Swedish geographer Hans Ahlmann and Norwegian oceanographer Harald Ulrik Sverdrup developed a curiosity of the Soviet Union as a field for the practice of Arctic science. Visit of the Arctic Research Institute in Leningrad in 1934 further enhanced Ahlmann's sympathy and in 1935 he co-founded the Society for the Promotion of Cultural and Scientific Relations between Sweden and the Soviet Union. After further wartime collaboration, Ahlmann returned to the Soviet Union in 1958 and 1960 as president of the International Union of Geographical Sciences. Using his longtime Soviet contacts to penetrate the Iron Curtain, Ahlmann became a key figure in maintaining the flow of scientific information between East and West. New materials from archives open perspectives for better understanding of the international connections and transfer of knowledge in geophysical and geographical science in its formative period. The key message from this paper is that while tensions did exist and presented scientists with differential loyalties, they still managed to find ways to undertake fruitful scientific collaborations even under political restraints and could sometimes play political roles.

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In a radio broadcast shortly after the outbreak of World War II, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, uttered his famous words about the Soviet Union and its role in the war that lay ahead: 'I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.'¹ This image has become a common stereotype applied to many aspects of Soviet society in the interwar years, through World War II and into the Cold War. It has also been used to describe Soviet science. Depicted as participants in a complex enterprise held tight by the state and ideologically

oppressed, Soviet scientists were often envisioned conducting research in secret laboratories and institutes located in remote 'closed towns'.² Similar notions were applied to Arctic science, which had developed rapidly in the Soviet Union. Arctic research was conducted in a research institute in Leningrad, in several university departments both in Leningrad and Moscow and on ice floes and field stations in or near the Arctic Sea.³ What could the secretive Russians be up to? Certainly nothing good...!

While this image is not altogether false, it is certainly far from complete. Contrary to common beliefs, the Soviet Arctic science

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community maintained important links with some of their Western counterparts during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Scandinavian countries occupied a central position in Soviet Arctic science networks, in some respects replacing German networks that had become less useful in the 1930s after the Nazi *Machtübernahme*. Thus, the experience of Scandinavian Arctic scientists reveals how important field science knowledge about the Arctic was built and brokered with the Soviet Union. In reality Arctic science in the USSR was more accessible and better known than the stereotype implies. Professional networks and unique personal links with key groups and institutions of Soviet society permitted Scandinavian scientists to perform roles that often stretched beyond science in the strict sense and influenced diplomacy and politics. For all scientists involved, such collaborations provided access to important and hard to get data on changing geophysical conditions, not least those that indicated climate change. As the Iron Curtain tightened around the Soviet Arctic and official political relations reached freezing level in the Cold War, work on glaciers and sea ice paradoxically melted them and opened links.

Circulating knowledge between Scandinavia and the Soviet Union

This paper challenges the old cliché that Soviet science simply borrowed from the West, mostly Germany, in the 1920s, only to turn in the 1930s into more or less complete isolation.⁴ It provides new evidence of a more complicated system of knowledge circulation during the Stalinist period. Certainly the intensive connections of the 1920s were seriously reduced in the wake of hardening repression. Professionals in all fields who maintained contact with foreign specialists were increasingly questioned and often unreasonably accused of espionage. Traveling abroad was sharply curtailed and all international collaborations were fully controlled by the state.⁵ Still, connections continued although their locus shifted from one western country to another as the international political situation changed.

Recent scholarship has acknowledged that the exchange and borrowing of knowledge was extensive even during the 1930s.⁶ As Yves Cohen notes, the Bolshevik Revolution inaugurated an ‘area of circulation’, a global zone in which the USSR became simultaneously a receiver and sender.⁷ During the same period the Arctic began to be incorporated into the global circulation of ideas, practices and technologies, not least through the framework of the Second International Polar Year.⁸ Our case study considers the intersection of these two very different circulation patterns – noting that the first, being much more powerful, dominated and shaped the second.

Because it remained aloof from continental European politics and maintained aesthetic, cultural, and diplomatic connections with both the West and the East, Sweden played a distinctive role in trade and cultural exchanges.⁹ Stockholm was a geographically well positioned hub between Leningrad and Europe, where people



Fig. 1. Hans W: son Ahlmann, Swedish glaciologist, making notes from measurements after digging down into a glacier during his expedition to Iceland in 1936. Source: Archive of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. Used with permission.

could meet openly. There, feminist author and ambassador Alexandra Kollontai, who also had Norwegian connections from an earlier diplomatic posting, was the center of Soviet-friendly circles in cultural and political society.

During the 1920s and 1930s, when Stockholm geographer Hans W: son Ahlmann (Fig. 1) and his colleague, Norwegian oceanographer Harald Ulrik Sverdrup (Fig. 2), jointly developed an increasing curiosity about the Soviet Union, they did so in an open and tolerant social atmosphere. Their emerging collaboration, which lasted over four decades, was based on the realistic insight that the Soviet Union was a major power in Arctic science and that it was important to stay abreast with developments there. They also shared an interest in the Arctic as an arena of increased international political

⁴ See e.g. L.R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, 1993, esp. 175–179; L.R. Graham, *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer: Technology and the Fall of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, 1993; L.R. Graham, *Moscow Stories*, Bloomington, 2006; P. Horensma, *The Soviet Arctic*, London, New York, 1991.

⁵ R. Doel, D. Hoffmann and N. Kremontsov, National states and international science: a comparative history of international science congresses in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia and Cold War United States, *Osiris* 20 (2005) 49–76.

⁶ Y. Cohen, Circulation localities: the example of Stalinism in the 1930s, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, 1 (2010) 11–45; S. Gross Solomon (Ed), *Doing Medicine Together: Germany and Russia between the Wars*, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2006; S. Gross Solomon, Circulation of knowledge and the Russian locale, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, 1 (2008) 9–26.

⁷ Cohen, Circulation localities (note 6), 42–43.

⁸ C. Lüdecke and J. Lajus, The Second International Polar Year 1932–1933, in: S. Barr, C. Lüdecke (Eds), *The History of the International Polar Years (IPYs)*, Berlin and Heidelberg, 2010, 135–174.

⁹ The case we provide in this paper could be compared with the well-known move of Soviet–European connections in physics from Germany to Denmark in the same period, see K. Hall, The schooling of Lev Landau: the European context of postrevolutionary Soviet theoretical physics, *Osiris* 23 (2008) 230–259.

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