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A Russian geographical tradition? The contested canon of Russian and Soviet geography, 1884–1953

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Abstract

The paper defines a 'geographical canon' as those texts and authors which have been regarded as authoritative by geographers active at particular points in time. The focus is on the development of a geographical canon in Russia and the Soviet Union between the establishment of the first university geography departments in the 1880s and Stalin's death in 1953. A key 1949 meeting of the Academy of Sciences, held at a crisis point in Soviet history, is initially highlighted. The meeting's purpose was to define a canon or list of 'founding fathers' for each of the Soviet sciences, including geography, accenting the Russian provenance of each science. In geography's case, the 'founding father' selected was the eminent soil scientist, V. V. Dokuchaev (1846–1903). The paper discusses Dokuchaev's scientific achievements and questions why he was considered such an important figure by the geographers of the late Stalin era. It then analyzes some of the key works of a number of prominent geographers of the pre-revolutionary and Stalinist periods to discover how far Dokuchaev's work was emphasized. The main finding is that, although Dokuchaev and his school did have an indirect influence on geographical work from early on, only from about 1930 was his importance emphasized whilst that of the Germans was largely erased by Stalinism. The conclusion is that the geographical canon defined in 1949 was less a genuine attempt to describe the history of the discipline than a response to the priorities of the late Stalin era.

Keywords: Russian geographical canon; Dokuchaev; Stalinism; *Zhdanovshchina*; History of science

'References to the authority of Great Scientists are a typical component of the professional culture of every scientific community.' Nikolai Krementsov, 1997.

Whilst widely used in literary studies, the idea of 'canon' appears to pose particular problems for the history of science. Aileen Fyfe has reminded us that there are two interrelated questions which need to be addressed with regard to 'the canonical.'[1] The first is: which texts, or other authorities, appear to be canonical to us who are alive today? Past histories of science, including geography, often sought to address this question, selecting from the mass of available historical material or evidence only those items or events which seem relevant to the science which exists now. The danger here, of course, is what David Livingstone calls 'presentism', divorcing historical ideas and events from their contexts and even of using them to justify our present scientific understanding, as if science developed in some purely progressive, teleological fashion.[2] Changes in the historiography of science, however, have now focused scholarly attention on a second question posed by Fyfe: which texts, or other authorities, have been regarded as canonical by people living in the past? Over the recent period the historiography has increasingly emphasized the need to understand the history of science contextually, meaning that over time scientific development is shaped by a host of social, political, intellectual, personal and other factors, all of which themselves change through time.[3] Given this revised understanding of the history of science, the idea of some stable canon which remains authoritative for practitioners and students of a discipline over an extended period seems problematical. Of course this is not to ignore the possibility of certain continuities or traditions (for example, the fieldwork tradition in geography, or key personalities like Darwin in biology) whose significance may persist. But disciplines evolve, and even 'classical' scientific texts may be interpreted

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[1] A. Fyfe, Publishing and the classics: Paley's *Natural Theology* and the nineteenth-century scientific canon, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 33 (2002) 729–751 (730).

[2] D.N. Livingstone, *The Geographical Tradition: Episodes in the History of a Contested Enterprise*, Oxford, 1992, 4–12.

[3] See, for example, Livingstone, *Geographical Tradition* (note 3); J. Golinski, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science*, Cambridge, 1998; P. Dear, *The Intelligibility of Nature: How Science Makes Sense of the World*, Chicago, 2006.

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differently over time. For these reasons, this paper will address the second of Fyfe's questions, recognizing therefore that canons must be understood contextually.

In analysing the issue of a Russian geographical canon the paper will focus initially on a significant meeting of the USSR Academy of Sciences which occurred in January, 1949. The purpose of this meeting, as shall be seen, was to establish a canon of authoritative scientific figures from the past for each of the Soviet sciences, including geography. In view of this, we first consider the reasons behind the selection of the particular geographical canon chosen at the January 1949 meeting. Second, we question whether that canon contained the names of the geographers who had a major influence on the way that Russian and Soviet geography had developed since its establishment as a university discipline in the 1880s or only those who were considered significant in the Stalinist context of the late 1940s. A key point here is to raise the possibility that much of our present-day understanding of the character of geography as it evolved in pre-revolutionary Russia and the USSR derives not from a study of the subject's actual history but from the process of canonization which occurred in the Stalin period, and in particular from the prominence given to the nineteenth-century soil scientist, Vasilii Vasilievich Dokuchaev (1846–1903). David Hooson and others have argued for the central importance of Dokuchaev and his school for the development of Russian and Soviet geography, albeit acknowledging other influences.[4] The paper examines the utilization of Dokuchaev's work during the Stalin period and reflects on what this tells us about the process of canonization. Two key periods of geographical history will be examined. The first is that between geography's initial organization as a university subject in the 1880s and the 1917 revolution. This was a time when geographers were struggling to define and demarcate their science in the face of considerable scepticism about, and even outright opposition to, geography's new status in university circles. The second is the era between the Russian Revolution and Stalin's death in 1953, and in particular the period following Stalin's 'Great Break' around 1930. In this period geographers faced unprecedented ideological and political pressures, including pressures to demonstrate the relevance of their science to the construction of a socialist society. The latter point had particular poignancy at a time when the Soviet leadership was displaying ever greater environmental ambitions, amounting in the end to talk of a 'transformation of nature.' All this had inevitable consequences for the ways in which geographers defined their discipline and for the past scientific authorities to whom they could appeal.

The paper opens with a description of the 1949 meeting and then moves on to survey the scientific achievements of Dokuchaev, the major authority to be identified at the meeting. The remainder of the paper reflects on the extent to which this championing of Dokuchaev was a fair reflection of the development of Russian geographical science following the establishment of Russia's first chair in geography in 1885. What emerges is a far from straightforward story. On the one hand, there is little doubt that Dokuchaev and his school exerted a strong, albeit at times indirect, influence over the evolution of Russian geography and particularly with respect to general understandings and orderings of the physical environment. On the other hand, Russian geographers were heavily influenced by competing traditions, most notably those linked to the German school of thought and yet the latter were subjected to increasing levels of critique and censorship during the Soviet period. In conclusion, it is suggested that Russian geography was the product of varied influences and that the canon chosen at the 1949 General Assembly only very partially reflected the way the discipline had evolved over the intervening period.

Pre-1917 Russian geography has been researched by a number of scholars, whilst several have undertaken to examine the impact of Stalinism on other sciences, but not thus far on geography.[5] This paper seeks to fill this gap in the existing scholarship and throw light on the nature of canon making. Its principal sources are the published materials of the time, especially books and journal articles, plus more recent work by Soviet and Russian scholars. The accent will be on physical rather than human ('economic') geography in accordance with the major focus of geographical study in the period.

The General Assembly of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 5–11 January, 1949

The General Assembly of the USSR Academy of Sciences which met for seven days in Moscow in January, 1949, was devoted to 'The History of our National Science.'[6] The tone of this event was set by the customary greetings to Stalin with which it commenced:

> Guided by your directions, the Academy of Sciences of the USSR has set itself the task of clarifying as fully as possible the history of science and technology from the only correct scientific position – from that of materialistic dialectics, of informing the people as broadly as possible about the scientific riches created by the progressive agents of science and culture from the past, of unmasking the falsifiers who misrepresent and denigrate the role of our country's science and technology in world culture.[7]

The greetings went on to assert that ever more evidence was being accumulated of 'the brilliant capacities of our people and of the valuable contribution which our national science has made to the fund of the most outstanding achievements of world science and technology.'

The greetings to Stalin were followed by an introductory address by Academician S.I. Vavilov, president of the Academy, in which he underlined the main purpose of the meeting: 'Among historians on the one hand', he asserted, 'and among specialists in different scientific disciplines on the other, there is no agreed point of view on the history of science. The aim of the General Assembly of the Academy is to secure such agreement.'[8]

The background to these extraordinary statements was the post-war period in Soviet history which goes by the name of the *Zhdanovshchina* (after Stalin's ideological henchman, Andrei Zhdanov), which lasted very roughly from 1946 to 7 until Stalin's

[4] D.J.M. Hooson, The development of geography in pre-Soviet Russia, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 58 (1968) 250–272; D.J.M. Hooson, Some recent developments in the content and theory of Soviet geography, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 49 (1959) 73–82 (74); P.E.James and G.J. Martin, *All Possible Worlds: a History of Geographical Ideas*, Second Edition, New York, 1981, 223–244.

[5] On geography see Hooson, *Development* (note 5); L. Mazurkiewicz, *Human Geography in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, London, 1992; A.G. Isachenko, *Razvitie geograficheskikh idei*, Moscow, 1971; on science: L.R. Graham, *Science in Russia and the Soviet Union: A Short History*, New York, 1993; N. Krementsov, *Stalinist Science*, Princeton, 1997, 128–285; E. Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars*, Princeton, 2006.

[6] *Akademiya nauk SSSR. Voprosy istorii otechestvennoi nauki: obshchee sobranie AN SSSR posvyashchennoi istorii otechestvennoi nauki, 5–11 yanvarya, 1949*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1949.

[7] *Akademiya nauk* 5.

[8] S.. Vavilov, Vstupitel'noe slovo, in *Akademiya nauk* 9–14 (10).