

"BOUNDLESS" RUSSIA AND WHAT TO MAKE OF IT

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Spanning more than 17 million square kilometers, the Russian Federation covers an expanse bigger than any other country on Earth, and houses a population of over 144 million people and 170 ethnic groups. Even before considering Russia's rich and complex history, these facts alone go a long way in explaining why the concept of Russian space and its meaning represent a major challenge not only for the outsider, but also for the citizens of Russia themselves.

Most of the articles which make up the current special issue have been developed from presentations at the monthly seminar of "Russian Space: Concepts, Practices, Representations" (RSCPR), an interdisciplinary research group formed at UiT the Arctic University of Norway in 2015. The group approaches the notion of space in accordance with new spatial history, which stresses the subjectivity of space construction. New spatial history posits that

the psychological processes of cognition and perception play a critical role in rendering space meaningful to the societies or groups that occupy it [...] [so that] real-existing features [of a place] often become imbued with highly emotive meanings and values which can strongly affect social attitudes and even behaviour (Bassin et al, 2010, 8).

Admittedly, a space is hardly ever a mere space. Cartography, which is expected to communicate correct information about spaces as they were or are, exemplifies this. According to a recent study of Soviet maps, "one needs to be aware that [maps in general] represent not only the spatial referents or the 'real' world pictured in the map, but also what the map-maker wants us to believe about the world" (Borén 2009, 175). Borén stresses that the map-maker's intentions and worldview, cultural values (in a wide sense) and the semiotic subsystem, within which he/she acts, must also be taken into account. Thus, in Borén's understanding, the map-maker becomes "a person working within a knowledge-based and politicized institutional framework, and the map [...] a device both to decode and to write the larger text of society" (ibid.)

Borén proceeds to describe how the more accurate Soviet maps were classified, and the less accurate, falsified – by means of elimination, selection or distortion – partly because of the atmosphere of secrecy, characteristic of the USSR with its spy-mania, and partly because the nanny state wanted its citizens to have less "control over the spatial aspects of being in and experiencing the world" (2009, 194). However, it often happens so that "spatial representations in maps, and representations in general, do not have the impact that the map-makers themselves intended them to have" (Borén 2009, 197). As a result, Soviet people apparently "constructed mental maps that were more accurate than the printed maps" (ibid.).

It may well be, though, that the Soviet siege mentality and the Cold War paranoia are not the only reasons for Russia's peculiar relation with and attitude to space. Thus, a compelling comparative linguistic evidence, collected by an experienced high-level Russian-English interpreter, seems to suggest that, in contrast to the Anglophone notion of space, the corresponding Russian notion is "not only unlimited, but also, first and foremost, unstructured, unchartered (*ne rascherchennoe*) and undivided (*ne*

peregorozhennoe). If it is compartmentalised (*raschleniaemoe*), it is done not through language but through science, geography and administrative borders" (Palazhchenko 2005, 27).¹

Quite independently from the interpreter's findings, an influential contemporary Russian thinker attests to the elusiveness and fluidity of (journeys in) Russian space (see Dugin 2001, vol. 1, 242-48), linking Russia's perceived spatial boundlessness² to an old tradition, which

considered the very fact of borders' existence an expression of the incompleteness of cosmos with regard to its cause, understood as something absolute, unified and located beyond all limits. Consequently, the urge to expand one's [zone of] existence [...] and transcend borders was seen as an internal impulse of a movement towards the Divine, an echo of longing for the Absolute, inherent in the world and its inhabitants (Dugin 2001, vol. 2, 319).

These and other fascinating insights into Russian (and non-Russian) spatiality are numerous enough to form at least three distinct subsets of space treatment, namely its ideological conceptualization, practical transformation, and visual or verbal representation. The current special issue makes a foray into all three of these aspects, working towards a coherent whole without aiming to achieve it. Thus, the idea of a whole remains as vast, unbridgeable and unfathomable as the Russian/ex-Soviet expands themselves.

The special issue opens with Kåre Johan Mjør's examination of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev's concept of space. Spatial transformations are analysed by Sander Goes, whose case study is the enforcement of the Russian environmental legislation against the Royal Dutch Shell for its oil extraction in Sakhalin in the early to mid-2000s; and by Arve Hansen, who looks into public spaces in Minsk and their impact on oppositional protest. The section on spatial representations is the largest, ranging from the medieval and early modern mapping of the Arctic (Leonid S. Chekin), to a Soviet cinematic portrayal of a female war-time aviator (Åsne Ø. Høgetveit), a Soviet poet's evocation and interpretation of ruins (Andreas Schönle) and a post-Soviet dystopia by a female writer from an ethnic minority in the Caucasus (Anni Lappela).

Although the geographical, temporal and multidisciplinary scope of the issue clearly speaks in favour of the spatial approach to Russian history and culture, it would be presumptuous to offer the reader any preliminary general conclusions at this stage. The work of the RSCPR research group is only just beginning.

¹ Translations are ours, unless stated otherwise.

² Cf. "The USSR is forever and will conquer our galaxy one day" (Se 2015: 327).

Works Cited

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