

A: Environmental history studies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union are rare and in several ways one-sided. They often consider nature and the environment only as a target of human activity, neglect trans-boundary phenomena, or overlook the crucial role of the material world (non-human things as for example land, plants, animals, climate and weather) in historical events. It is therefore the aim of a new research initiative to shed light from different perspectives on the relationship between the environment and the study of history. Likewise in agricultural or economic studies, there is a broad overlap between environmental, transnational and world histories.

The association of Russia with cold ("Russian cold") is a strong popular stereotype. Nonetheless, scholars mention a discrepancy between the significance of climate for particular historical events and the ignorance of historians. It should be discussed not only by scholars of environmental history, but also by philosophers and geographers, as well as by specialists in religious, film, and literary studies. Central questions could be the protective or destructive function

of a cold climate (for example during wartime), or how local disasters led to avalanches became a focus of scientific, technological, and government efforts.

A representative and highly productive new field of research is the history of the Arctic Region during the Cold War. It shows how much contact and cooperation there was across the Iron Curtain, how the cold is narrated and portrayed as an aesthetic phenomenon, imagined feeling, or object of dispute between science and politics. The history of science showed that after 1945 the investigation of the Arctic offered opportunities for academic collaboration transcending ideological differences. While mainly approaching the cold regions from the point of view of outsiders, the perspective of the indigenous population was only rarely considered by scholars. At all times the Arctic seemed to be severe and heartless to a human being, and man has always tried to explore and conquer this ice power. No wonder that the area beyond the Arctic Circle has been the focus of attention of different countries and peoples for several years, encouraging various historical, political, economic and environmental discussions.



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IMPERIAL DECAY OR RENEWAL: REGIONALISM, AUTONOMISM, AND FEDERALISM IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

The talk is focused on the development of historical studies of the Russian Empire, and analysis of two great conceptual perils of current historiography: the conception of the Russian Empire as the territorial and continental one, and the teleology of transition from empire to nation. The presenter highlighted the problematic relationship between hierarchies of power and structures of imperial society to the territorial dimension and stressed the fact of contingent transition from empire to nation-state after the collapse of the Russian empire, pointing to the prevalence of beyond-the-nation-state politics in the aftermath of 1917 and 1918: the conceptions of federalist political arrangements and regional architecture of the international relations. The talk concluded with a suggestion of a research agenda aimed to explore the multiple political cultures produced by the imperial context, including the pluralist or non-conformist political thinking about the political space.

Q: You are one of the editors of the international peer-review journal "Ab Imperio". Studies from which areas are covered by your journal and what sort of papers do you accept for publication?

A: Ab Imperio is the periodical that publishes research articles related to the history of empire,

nationalism, colonialism, ethnicity, and diversity in the post-Soviet Space and covers the historical period from nomadic empires and early Eurasian history through the Russian and Soviet empires to contemporary politics and society in the region. It also publishes discussions of the com-



parative dimension of the history of empires and dialogues with different traditions of historical studies of empires, including the post-colonial studies. The scope of publications is not limited to professional historical research: the journal welcomes contributions from literary scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists. The mission of the journal is also to foster a nuanced and theoretically grounded discussion of diversity, hybridity and different political views, as regular features that accompany modern and contemporary history.

Q: The subtopic of the week was "German-Russian Perspectives on Regional Studies". Is there a difference between German and Russian approaches to historical research?

A: It must be noted that historically the German historical school has exerted a powerful influence over the formation of the field of Russian sciences and universities and the historical profession, in particular. For example, the German system of training doctoral students is undergoing a reform away from the Doktorvater system to the graduate training and supervision by the committee. The same is happening in a few Russian universities, the Higher School of Economics included. There are three differences I would like to note in terms of substance of historical studies. First, the German historical profession is much more versed in understanding the importance and relevance of the comparative historical research. Starting with the Sonderweg Debate and on to the development of the field of global history, it sets one of the models for opening new research agendas in history. The Russian history can offer a rich ground for exploration of comparative dimension and entanglements and the Russian historical profession still has to travel the path to fully embrace the research agenda beyond the confines of the national history. Second, German historians include, in their research, issues of historical memory and public relevance of historical discussion. A notable example is Historikerstreit. There is less cognizance of public history among the Russian historians and all too often they are inclined to remain in the ivory tower of purely historical research. Third, the Russian historical profession has produced an interesting convergence between social, political, and cultural history on the one hand and literary studies and cultural anthropology, on the other. This convergence produced a much more nuanced under-

standing of lived historical experience and political mythologies that coincide with or frame it.

Q: You are Dean of the Faculty of History of the Higher School of Economics in St. Petersburg. What are your research priorities and in which areas do you cooperate with Germany?

A: My colleagues and I recently started a new history department in 2012. The overarching goal of the department is the systematic development of the field of global, comparative, and transnational history as a potent tool for overcoming the limitations of the national history canon; fostering interdisciplinary dialogue in the field of social sciences and humanities; and bringing new public relevance to historical knowledge. The school mission includes the development of a new type of historical undergraduate and graduate education in Russia; and pioneering new research fields in Russian historiography, in dialogue with the global historical profession. Fields of excellence of the departmental work include: history of empire, nationalism, and colonialism; environmental and technological history, urban history; early modern social and cultural history; intellectual history and history of science; digital humanities and GIS. We are already developing cooperation with German colleagues in the fields of comparative history of empire and nationalism, history of borders and crossing-points, environmental history and history of science. We are looking forward to further cooperation with German historians and will particularly welcome dialogue in the field of history of science, including historical profession, and in the field of spatial history and historical geography.

Aleksandr Semoylov is Professor of History and Dean of the Historical Faculty at the National Research University-Higher School of Economics (HSE) in St. Petersburg. His research priorities include Russian history, history of empires, history of nationalism, and intellectual history. Aleksandr Semoylov graduated from Ivanovo State University in 1997. In 2006 he received his PhD on "The Political Language of Russian Liberalism: The Liberation Movement, Constitutional-Democratic Party, and Public Politics in Late Imperial Russia" at the Central European University, Budapest. Among other temporary positions, he was a Visiting Associate Professor at the Universities of Chicago (2010) and Michigan (2009). He has worked on a number of researches of Russian and international research projects and has been involved in educational projects for the Russian Ministry of Education. He has been affiliated with the collaborative project "Languages of Self-Description and Representation in the Russian Empire" at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz. Now he is leading a group of comparative historical studies of empire and nationalism at the HSE. Professor Semoylov is also a co-founder and an editor of the International Journal "Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in Post Soviet Space".

