Geography in Russia: Glories and Disappointments

David Hooson

Few countries have had a more tortured history over the past century or so than Russia (or the Soviet Union as it was dubbed for half that time). However, its story is packed with intellectual excitement and has displayed an originality that has derived from its distinctive geographical and historical context. The evolution of Geography as an academic discipline has closely followed the discovery and exploration of this vast part of the world, and the experience of living and working in its natural regions and its ambiguous position between Europe and Asia. Its medieval roots and its "frontier" continental spread mean that it has also been, in many ways, Europe and North America rolled into one over the last two centuries.

In the last half century of Tsarist rule Russia took its place as a fully-fledged participant in the literary, arts and scientific life of Europe, and was distinguished by a number of prominent and original geographers who stood up well in comparison with their contemporaries in other countries. This being so, it was surprising that until the present generation the Russian contribution to geography had not found its way into any of the general histories of the subject. This virtually complete silence about one of the most vigorous of the national schools of geography was, of course, partly a reflection of the "Linguistic Curtain," but by no means entirely, since some of the best work appeared in western languages. It took the sudden surge of curiosity about the activities of the Soviet scientists in the post-Sputnik era to evoke serious search for the pre-Soviet antecedents and for continuity with the present.

Beginnings. While it can be said that, as with Germany and France, the institutionalization of geography as a coherent academic discipline took place in Russia in the last half century of Tsarist rule, roughly from 1870 to 1915, there were important precursors in the previous century and a half. The dawn of notable geographical endeavors came in the reign of Peter the Great in the early 18th
century. He had an intense interest in geographical expeditions, appraisals of resources and map-making, and it seems that the achievements of geography outshone those of other sciences during his reign. Bernard Varenious' *Geographia Generalis* (1650) was translated into Russian, and this helped to stimulate many good regional studies of the parts of the expanding empire of the 18th century. I. K. Kirilov produced the first atlas of Russia (1734) and established good cartographic standards and coverage for the first time. This three-volume atlas, with 120 maps in each volume, covered even the most outlying parts of the Empire and included historical and economic plans and maps of various cities. V. N. Tatishchev was a historian as well as a geographer who was interested in the regional division of labor and began the first scientific questionnaire project in Russia, while at the same time organizing the new industries in the Urals (Vucinich 1963; Letiche, Dmytryshin, and Pierce 1964).

The Academy of Sciences was founded by Peter and originally staffed mainly by German and Danish scientist-explorers, such as Vitus Bering, Georg Wilhelm Steller, and Peter Pallas. They helped to put Russia and Siberia "on the map" as far as Europe was concerned. It would be a mistake, however, to think that this early history of geography in Russia was dominated by foreigners. In addition to Kirilov and Tatishchev, already mentioned, who were thoroughly Russian, two others from among a distinguished group should be singled out here. M. V. Lomonosov, growing up in Archangel on the White Sea, became a polymath scholar and scientist who, among other things, founded Moscow University in 1755, and he was also head of the Geographical Department of the Academy of Sciences. The poet Alexander Pushkin is said to have called Lomonosov "the first Russian university" for his mastery of so many fields. S. P. Krasheninnikov, a close associate of Lomonosov, produced a great work on Kamchatka and the Kuril Islands that was almost Humboldtian in its scope and was translated into western European languages at about the same time that James Cook was making his famous scientific journeys in the Pacific (Krasheninnikov 1764). It was the first Russian regional study to examine the connections among the various natural phenomena themselves (e.g., volcanic activity and plant and animal life), as well as a concern for the improvement of the economic and social lot of the native inhabitants. In fact, this concern, together with a search for reforms, and the delimitation of a national system of regions, incorporating both the natural conditions and the search for optimum molds for human
development, alongside basic exploration, had become implanted as the distinctive hallmark of Russian proto-geography even before the beginning of the 19th century.

The Geographical Society. The Imperial Russian Geographical Society was founded in 1845 in St. Petersburg in response to the build-up of ideas and activities and the urgent need for an institutional forum for the many converging interests. It quickly acquired a prominent and active rôle in Russian life of the mid-century and kept it until the end of the Tsarist era. It was generally considered to be the most successful and popular of the learned societies and clearly struck many chords in tune with prevailing national aspirations and ways of thought. As in comparable societies in Western Europe, a major preoccupation was with exploration, evaluation of natural resources and imperial grandeur, since this was a period of rapid expansion of the Russian empire with both colonialism, as in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and in the newly available grasslands of Ukraine and Siberia where an American-type colonization was underway. On the other hand liberal reformers formed an important faction within the Society, aimed to prepare the ground for social reforms, especially looking towards the emancipation of the serfs, which finally happened in 1861. In addition the Society assumed initial responsibility for geology, meteorology, anthropology and archaeology, and established regional branches in newly colonized areas like the Far East, Siberia and the Caucasus that issued their own periodicals. Some 400 volumes were published, including special reports and regional serials in the first fifty years of the Society's existence. In its vitality and range of interests, this record compares favorably with the contemporary equivalents in any other country.

The leading light of the Society during this period of exceptional growth and influence was P. P. Semyonov (1827-1914), who directed it for over forty years. He received he royal suffix to his name (perhaps an equivalent to a British knighthood) of Tian-Shansky, after the mountain range in Central Asia that he explored. He was, however, a complex man of parts, ideally suited to the task of holding together the very diverse geographical interests. At the time when he was preparing for his Tian Shan expedition he was a leading member of the “Committee for the Emancipation of the Peasants from the Bonds of Serfdom”. He had come under the influence of Carl Ritter in Berlin, where he also compared exploration
plans with Friedrich von Richthofen. On returning to Russia at the time of great ferment for reforming ideas following the death of Tsar Nicholas I, he translated the part of Ritter's *Erdkunde* dealing with Asia and also started to compile his own monumental five-volume *Geografichesko-Statisticheskii Slovar Rossiskoi Imperii* ("Geographical-Statistical Dictionary of the Russian Empire") (1863-1883). The distribution of population, with all its ramifications and pointers to reformist policies, was a major focus of his thought, and he was actively involved in planning for the first all-Russian Census. The pace of development in Russia was quickening rapidly in this period, with urbanization, railroad building, the beginnings of modern industry and international trade, which, together with the imperial expansion and settlement, obviously stimulated geographical ideas. Semyonov was the man who linked the traveller-explorers of the earlier period, many of whom were anyway recognizably geographers in the modern sense, with the institutional development of academic geography in Russia after 1880.

The flowering of Russian geography. In common with other emerging National Schools of Geography in the four decades or so before World War I, there were the fitful beginnings of the establishment of Geography, among other subjects, in the expanding universities. The age-old primary mission of the subject—basic exploration of the world—was drawing to a close, and the prime need thenceforth was for collating the mass of accumulated knowledge and assessing its significance. In turn this called for agreement and affirmation of new frameworks of thought for analysis and synthesis of the data and for the place and aims of geography among the other emerging disciplines (Hooson 1968).

Russian geography at this period can stand favorable comparison with its contemporaries in any other country. In spite of the obvious differences in political and cultural development, it should be emphasized that the Russian scholars of this period, in the face of considerable obstacles, were thoroughgoing participants in the intellectual and academic activities of the modern world, although they often did not receive their due recognition because of the language barrier. Academic freedom, especially after 1905, was comparable to that in Western Europe in many respects. The evolutionary and developmental concerns of Charles Darwin and Karl Marx, though widely known and seriously followed in Russia, were
not at that time accepted and applied as uncritically as they were in countries like Germany and the United States. In particular this was evident in the case of the leading geographers, whose approval was generally functional and pragmatic—dynamic rather than evolutionary—and concerned as much with man's impact on nature as with environmentalism. They also had a vital interest in the practical needs of society.

The chief credit for the building up of geography in Moscow University and for popularizing the subject with a broad section of the educated public (which then comprised only about a quarter of the population) must go to D. N. Anuchin (1843-1923). He was head of the joint Department of Geography and Ethnography at the University from 1884. He was a liberal and humane scholar who was prominent in the general intellectual life of Russia, being, for instance, associated with one of the most influential newspapers, Russkie Vedomosti. His early research projects ranged from the bison to African flora and the Ainu people of Hokkaido, and he conducted several archaeological expeditions. Later he wrote a fine regional study of Japan and detailed analyses of the relief and drainage of European Russia. His main life-work, however, was in the dissemination of geographical and anthropological knowledge, not only in the university but in the production of semi-popular works, and, last but not least, the founding in 1894 of the most scholarly Russian geographical journal, Zemlevedenie ("Earth Science" or "Geography"), which he steered until his death in 1923. It was comparable with its contemporary, the French Annales de géographie, in scope, volume and quality. Anuchin himself wrote some two hundred articles for this journal on a wide range of subjects. Perceptive reviews, often of foreign works, reports of congresses and obituaries appeared above his initials in virtually every issue. All these activities contributed to the development of academic geography as an independent subject in Russia. At Anuchin's death in 1923, most of the occupants of chairs of geography (and anthropology) in Russia were his students, and the Geography Faculty at Moscow University has led the country thereafter. In this respect Anuchin bears comparison with Paul Vidal de la Blache in France as the progenitor of a distinctive national School of Geography.
was the most widely known as early as the 1870s when his book *Meteorology in Russia* was published in Washington DC and he became a regular participant in the activities of the Smithsonian Institution. He had traveled widely in Asia and the Americas from an early age and had become known as an original climatologist focussing on heat and water balance studies, in particular in relation to agriculture. By the time his book *Klimaty zemnogo zhara* ("Climates of the World") appeared in several languages (first Russian edition, 1884), his international authority had become recognized. But he was much more than a climatologist, and his later works were mainly concerned with the influence of man on nature, at a time when various forms of environmental determinism were flourishing in the West. He was also intent on introducing into the Russian Empire suitable crops that he had identified during his extensive travels. His regional monograph on Russian Turkestan is worthy of comparison with the best exemplars of the French School (Woelkof [sic] 1914). Although he taught at St. Petersburg University, his impact, unlike Anuchin’s, was primarily as a researcher with a truly world view and a very broad geographical perspective. As an example of someone who started as a world traveler and grew into a world-famous international scholar and “compleat geographer”, Voeikov can hardly be bettered. In terms of originality and range of expertise—theoretical and practical—he could be considered *primus inter pares* in the galaxy of memorable Russian geographers whose ideas and methods have not lost their resonance today.

V. V. Dokuchaev (1846-1903), unlike Voeikov, did not travel widely outside Russia, nor did he partake at all profoundly in the institutional development of geography as a discipline as did Anuchin. He was, however, very influential as the “father” of world soil classification, with climate recognized as the critical factor. He demonstrated the truly integrated approach to the study of the interacting processes of the natural environment that became the hallmark of Russian (and later Soviet) physical geography. He began with a classic work, *Russkiy Chernozem* ("Russian Blackearth") (1883), which set out the basic principles and was based on meticulous fieldwork. His regions for analysis were the now familiar “natural zones” (steppe, forest, etc.) that have been so crucial in Russian history but had not been explained scientifically before. The impact of his theories on Russian physical geography produced a subject fundamentally different from the geomorphologically-focussed physical geographies of Western Europe and the United States of the time. His teaching in St. Petersburg was disseminated by a number.
of prominent students in Russia and by people like Curtis Marbut in America and A. J. Herbertson in Britain.

The final personality I have selected for mention here, Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), was, paradoxically, absent from Russia from 1876 to 1918—i.e., during virtually all of the period in which university institutionalization was taking place in Russia and Western Europe. In the 1860s he did fundamental geomorphological research in eastern Siberia, following which he was offered the secretarship of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, headed by P. Semyonov. He refused the appointment, however, saying that he felt that he had no right to such “higher joys” while “all around him was misery and struggle for a moldy piece of bread” (Kropotkin 1899 [1962 ed.], 157). Thus was launched the career for which he became much more famous, that of political activist and anarchist. He was clapped into the Peter-Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg and while a prisoner there wrote his work on Siberian orography. He soon escaped from prison and started a new career in London. In addition to promoting his own brand of Anarchism, he also (like his fellow geographer and anarchist Élisée Reclus) kept up his interest in geography and its institutional development, from his base in the Royal Geographical Society where he was popular in spite of his politics. Apart from publishing his Russian research in English and French, he wrote many articles on Russia for the Times and other journals, as well as for the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He gave a speech at Oxford University, before Halford Mackinder went there, proclaiming that if Oxford had “had a Ritter” it would long since have taken the lead in university education. His influential paper, “What Geography Ought to Be” (Kropotkin 1885), published two years before Mackinder’s more famous pronouncement, was more humane than the latter, though perhaps complementary in several ways. Kropotkin had renounced his previous predilection for “Physiography”, asserting that “a study of nature without man is the last tribute paid by modern scientists to their previous scholastic education”. This philosophy was in line with the Russian School of Voeikov, Dokuchaev, Anuchin, et al., and, had Kropotkin felt able to return to Tsarist Russia, he would without doubt have enriched that already distinguished academic community. As it was, he did not return until June 1917. Although he was initially welcomed by V. I. Lenin, Kropotkin died a disappointed man in 1921.

There were many other geographers in this Golden Age of Russian geography who would be well worth mentioning if space
permitted. At this point, however, I should like to suggest some of the more powerful and enduring ways of thought that characterized that vital and productive period.

1) The way of looking at the natural environment was distinctly different from that of other contemporary schools of geography that were developing at the same time in Germany, Britain, France and the United States. The major emphasis was on bioclimatic rather than geomorphological features and on an integrated and functional, rather than a specialized, approach. Although this way of thinking can be traced back to the 18th century scientists mentioned above as well as to the works of Humboldt, the main scientific theories underpinning it derived from Voeikov's heat and water balance concepts and Dokuchaev's on natural zonation as a result of climate.

2) There was more concern with the impact of man on nature than vice-versa, again in contrast to the prevailing balance in America, and this was coupled with ameliorative schemes for modifying or restoring the natural balance.

3) There was a long-standing preoccupation with the delimitation of regional boundaries, both physical and human, usually with the explicit aim of application to the solution of practical problems, particularly towards the betterment of the life of the peasants—the overwhelming majority of the population.

4) The inventory, exploitation and mapping of natural resources, which resulted in a number of comprehensive atlases and hundreds of monographs and articles, mainly produced under the auspices of the Geographical Society. Underlying this was a persistent strain of philanthropy and patriotism.

Throughout this period, which was one that combined features of imperial expansion on the Western colonialist model with the frenetic settlement, railway building and resource exploration of the vast open spaces of the American "frontier" model, the geographers, along with most intellectuals, were preoccupied with a search for a new Russian "Eurasian" identity (Bassin 1999). This was partly in response to a long-standing love-hate affair with Europe and "the West", resulting in a split between "Slavophiles" and "Westernizers". "Visions" of newly
encountered parts of this continental expansionism as extensions and modifiers of Russian identity were a recurrent feature of geographical interpretation at this period.

Those varied but interlocking aspects add up to a remarkably rich legacy bequeathed to the Soviet geographers. In spite of the massive disruptions of the first World War, a ruinous peace, revolution and civil war, these traditions carried over to the 1920s. Also, oddly enough, the achievements of the Russian school of geographers were recognized and praised, not only by Marx himself but also by Lenin and, more to the point, by Georgi Plekhanov, the prime philosopher of Russian Marxism, who also spoke warmly of Friedrich Ratzel's ideas (Plekhanov 1934, 34). In spite of all this, however, the rich Russian tradition in geography was submerged, like so much else, in the tidal wave precipitated by the totalitarian clamp-down after 1929.

The Stalinist period. The intellectual climate, in geography as in all other aspects of Soviet life, changed abruptly with the imposition of Joseph Stalin's first Five Year Plan. Geographers, like others, were fully mobilized and cadres of specialists were quickly trained and sent off on immediate practical tasks. This had the effect of seriously fragmenting geography and sidestepping the traditional broad, integrated philosophy. Cultural, historical, political and regional studies were discontinued, and even a narrowly defined economic geography fell afoul of the political directives, which involved serious risks for honest academic analysis. Some prominent geographers were arrested and even killed for using western location theories to advise against projects that turned out to be dear to Stalin's heart. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many geographers opted for physical topics, partly for a quiet life. Something similar occurred in Germany in Adolf Hitler's time with the rise of Geopolitik, in the way of mind-control and tendentious, sycophantic reactions.

In any case, the upshot was that by the time of the death of Stalin in 1953, the character of Russian geography had been transformed. Publications had become overwhelmingly physical in orientation, and even these had become highly specialized and, surprisingly, given the expressed needs of the regime, often seemed divorced not only from relevance to economic planning but also to be showing signs of having appreciably moved away from the natural
zonation or heat and water balance principles of Dokuchaev and Voeikov.

The elevation of the power of the Academy of Sciences vis-à-vis the universities accentuated the imbalance in the structure of geography, since the directors of the various institutes, including the Institute of Geography, were invested with almost dictatorial power over people in their profession. Two examples: director A. A. Grigoriev was able to publish an authoritative article in the Geographical Journal (London) on “The State of Soviet Geography”, portraying the subject as almost entirely physical and oddly apolitical and parochial (Grigoriev 1955). Shortly afterwards, he was able, as “geographical editor”, to depict geography in the latest edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia as, again, exclusively a collection of physical sciences, while economic geography merited just a sentence submerged in the Economics entry and other brands of human or regional geography were omitted altogether.

In fact, a respectable corpus of high quality work in various branches of human and regional geography had been done, largely contained in a vigorous journal called Voprosy Geografii (“Questions of Geography”), launched by N. N. Baransky and other Moscow University geographers in 1946. Throughout this fearful period there was a tacit agreement between the Regional School headed by Baransky and the Landscape School, headed by L. S. Berg, to keep alive some of the pre-revolutionary traditions (Weiner 1999).

Ferment and renewal around 1960. In retrospect, the period between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s seems like a Golden Age for the Soviet Union, after the death of Stalin and before the onset of the Leonid Brezhnev “era of stagnation”, as it was subsequently dubbed. Essentially, these were the Nikita Khrushchev years, characterized by a new optimism, vigor, openness and improvement in living standards. The emergence of the Soviet Union as a “Super-power” was signalled dramatically by the launching of Sputnik in 1957, which electrified not only the United States but the many “new nations” that were breaking out of colonialism and looking for a new rôle model. The new “Heartland” power, apparently holding sway over Eurasia from Central Europe to the South China Sea, brought back Mackinder’s theories to the Pentagon (as I can personally testify from teaching there in 1958). Although these years were far from tranquil internationally (with the Hungarian suppression, the
building of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban missile crisis) the national economy was stirred up by unprecedented reforms, such as the replacement of coal by oil and gas—stimulated by new discoveries—and by new possibilities for foreign contacts and the publication of previously (and subsequently) banned books.

In this new and exciting atmosphere, the stage was set for grand disputation within the discipline of geography, directed towards the humanizing of the subject and especially restoring the integration of its physical and human aspects, which had, as we have seen, been a fundamental tenet of the pre-revolutionary geographers.

The battle royal. One should have an understanding of the difficulty of overturning established power structures in the Soviet Union, even in the relatively propitious atmosphere of the Khrushchev period. The fact that the heads of the two most powerful institutions in the field, the Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Geography and the All-Union Geographical Society (I. P. Gerasimov and S. V. Kalesnik, respectively) had come out unequivocally against the heresy of a “unified” geography and for the “legal” separation of physical from economic geography (“separate laws”) meant that compromise seemed to be ruled out (Hooson 1959).

But the argument came to a head in 1960 with the publication of a book called *Teoreticheskiye Problemy geografii* ("Theoretical Problems of Geography") by V. A. Anuchin, a professor at Moscow University (Anuchin 1960). It was not only a scholarly historical and philosophical analysis of the evolution of geography, especially though not exclusively in Russia, but also hard-hitting, aimed directly at demolishing the prevailing doctrine of duality in Soviet geographical theory and practice. Anuchin was lucky enough to have the enthusiastic support of N. N. Baransky, then 80 years old and revered by the profession at large, who had built up economic and regional geography at Moscow University, and his influential successor, Yu. G. Saushkin. But even so it was an uphill struggle, involving a dramatic doctoral dissertation defense at Moscow University attended by hundreds of people. By this time the case had become a cause célèbre, but even so the final vote denied Anuchin the required two-thirds majority votes for his doctorate, reflecting the importance of essentially external votes.
Eventually the conflict became so intense that the Communist party itself stepped in and essentially adjudicated in favor of the integrated view, with a denunciation of the Stalinist definition of the environment as "a purely natural category". It was further alleged that this concept had become the pretext for the construction of "an insurmountable wall" between nature and society, damaging the search for solutions to pressing environmental and economic problems and distorting the planning process. Amazingly, Geography thereafter was treated in various national magazines, the most highly visible of which was a series of six articles in the influential Literaturnaya Gazeta, initiated by Anuchin with "A sad tale about geography" and rounded off by Saushkin with "The today and tomorrow of geography", a call for thorough restructuring, with the explicit support of the editors (Soviet Geography 1965). The ideological battle was henceforth over, and a new set of guidelines was set up by the establishment, supplanting the traditional topical specialties with a set of integrated topics focussed on specific problems and regions.

Thus the official line in Soviet geography in the late 1960s had become radically different from that of the late 1950s, so that it seems in retrospect to qualify as a genuine "revolution", consonant not only with pre-soviet, but also, remarkably, Marxist traditions as well.

Therefore, we can look back upon the years about 1960—when I was lucky enough to visit the Soviet Union for the first time and got caught up and involved in their intellectual disputations—as a significant watershed, or perhaps revolution, in the history of Soviet geography. Much the same period would be said by some people to constitute a watershed or revolution in American geography, but there were fundamental differences in what was going on in the two newly emerged rival super-powers at the time. In the mid-1950s, when Soviet geography, as we have seen, had become overwhelmingly physical and "legally" split into two (unequal) parts, American geography had the opposite problem, having by then become dominantly human in emphasis while still holding to the traditional philosophical axiom of the essential unity of the subject. Both national schools of geography were poised for a radical reorientation of their assumptions, theories and practice in the late 1950s, accompanied by bitter arguments and a propensity for polarization and even demonization. However, whereas the American "revolution" focussed on techniques, quantitative methods
and model-building, and was definitely not harking back to earlier national traditions, the Soviet contemporary equivalent was more philosophical and much less technical and contained an important element of intellectual nostalgia for a perceived broken national heritage in Russian Geography.

"The era of stagnation". The two decades between the geographical "revolution" and the dismissal of Khrushchev in the mid-1960s and the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 were characterized by a duller, more repressive and authoritarian period, discouraging originality and controversy, with a corresponding increase in cynicism, opportunism and corruption in Soviet society. In retrospect, this "era of stagnation", coupled with the concentration of resources on armaments, led to the crumbling of the state, which Gorbachev tried, too little and too late, to save. The mania for secrecy led, amongst other things, to widespread deliberate distortion of maps, which obviously had a disastrous effect on geography, to say the least. Some good work was done, of course, and the shift of emphasis towards a more humane economic geography and away from physical geography was continued in some measure. But the power structure remained basically unreformed. Twenty years after the director of the Institute of Geography was publicly castigated and, by implication, threatened with dismissal, he was still in full charge and died on the job at the age of 80.

The Gorbachev period. Following the relative torpor of the rule of Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, a second time of renewal was ushered in with the accession to power in 1985 of Mikhail Gorbachev, who, sensing the sclerotic condition of the system, launched the twin national projects of Glasnost (Openness) and Perestroika (Restructuring), both of which slogans have now faded away. Alongside this was a stated intention to begin to re-write Soviet and Russian history with a regard for the truth, to expose mistakes and start a clean slate. Soviet ideology, while also originally proclaiming a clean slate, with its intention to build "the new society", had in fact consistently downplayed or distorted history, in spite of Marx's preoccupation with it.

The glasnost injunction got a boost with unexpected speed and in an unexpected direction in April 1986, with the atomic explosion at Chernobyl in the Ukrainian SSR. As it turned out, this detonated a
series of explosions of what may be called "environmental nationalism" among the various "republics" of the Soviet Union, directed at, and blamed on, the Moscow overlords. The independence movement in Ukraine and thus eventually the collapse of the Soviet Union itself were hastened by the Chernobyl incident. Other festering environmental grievances surfaced all over the country, such as the oil pollution of sea and air around Baku, the pulp-mill at Lake Baykal and—worst of all—the shrinking of the Aral Sea to half the size it was in 1960. In the last case, the Russians were blamed by the Central Asian peoples for distorting their formerly diversified economies by forcing cotton monoculture on them, together with ill-considered and wasteful irrigation schemes. The final insult for these people was the cancellation in 1986 of long-laid plans to divert water from the Ob-Irtysh system in Siberia "to save the Aral Sea". This was seen as the final proof that the Russians, having raped their natural environment and economy, had callously left the Central Asian peoples to die. "Environmental racism" was charged.

The other half of this upsurge of environmental rage—that of nationalism—was rearing its head in various forms. There was resentment about Stalin's gerrymandering of the various ethnically designated republics in a classic exercise of "divide and rule" techniques. The assignation of the Armenians of Karabakh to Azerbaijan is one of the most intractable legacies of these policies to this day. Then, from the economic angle, resentment arose over the exploitation of natural resources, such as gold and diamonds in Yakutia, or oil in Tatarstan, with the local regions not seeming to benefit as they should.

The emergence of political geography. The most striking feature of the new geography that was precipitated by these convulsions was the emergence of political geography from the shadows (Hooson 1996). For more than half a century from the early 1930s to the late 1980s, this branch of the subject, which had been well developed before, was virtually banned. This may seem to be a paradox, in that most political of states, the Soviet Union, but in fact the dominance of the centralized command-administrative structure left no room for independent analysis of regional characteristics and interests. The old catchall economic geography, with its deadening emphasis on heavy industry and centralized Five Year Plans, as well as a physical geography still curiously unfocussed on environmental
issues and human concerns, proved singularly unsuited to cope with the erupting problems of the Soviet Union in what proved to be its dying years between 1986 and 1991. Conversely, the new political geography suddenly proved to be a heaven-sent framework within which to come to grips with the real, urgent, problems facing the people and regions of this vast country, which had hitherto been swept under the rug.

I well remember the palpable atmosphere of excitement and anticipation at the second conference-seminar on political geography in June 1990 at the Geographical Society in Leningrad, which I had the privilege of attending. Led by Leonid Smirnyagin and Vladimir Kolosov from Moscow, with the active encouragement of Sergei Lavrov, it sent an unmistakable signal that political geography had at last been “legalized” and had struck a chord in tune with the aspirations of some of the brightest of the young geographers, and also with the urgent needs and problems of the country. The level of intellectual excitement was comparable to that of the late 1950s and early 1960s and contrasted with the regressive orthodoxy of the intervening quarter-century. However, as in the earlier period, the deadening persistence of the centralized administrative structure was a formidable impediment to effective application of the “new” ideas to the solution of urgent regional and national problems.

After the Soviet Union. One-sixth of the land area of the earth officially lost its identity at the end of 1991 and, at the time of writing, eight years on, has yet to develop a stable or recognizable identity. Within the newly “independent” Russian federation the first president, Boris Yeltsin, expansively recommended that the often quite dysfunctional administrative sub-regions “take as much autonomy as they could swallow”. The new Russian president, Vladimir Putin, although anointed by Yeltsin as his successor, has publicly repudiated this invitation and has called for a restitution of a strong centralized state authority. The brutality of the war against the secessionist “republic” of Chechnya underlines the seriousness of this problem; however, in the anarchic conditions of the last few years many regional “governors” have in fact established semi-independent fiefdoms, often in the context of criminal activity. This confusing and menacing reality, coupled with the abysmal decline of the economy, public health and the financing of research and educational institutions, has made it difficult for the new geographers to work effectively, in the context of a shrinking
economy and drying up of government subsidies. The end of the binding ideology, the collapse of key institutions and the abandonment of the framework of the (rarely fulfilled) Five Year Plans, have created an organizational vacuum and therefore in theory great opportunities for a clean slate and application of new ideas. There is also an aching vacuum of the spirit, born of disillusionment not only with communism and the betrayal of its ideals but also with the way in which democracy and the market economy have been unfolding in the last few years, under Western tutelage, leading to a deepening poverty for the many and great riches for the very few. What would Kropotkin say today? The cynicism, malaise, anxiety and anger, together with the need for a complete re-writing of hitherto-approved Soviet history, make a new beginning far from easy.

Opportunities and setbacks for geography. Eventually the most fundamental requirement, following the political overturning, will have to be the return of Geography, with the spotlight trained on the real regions, which have a deep meaning for the peoples who have inhabited them, and which are bound up with an identity that includes a familiar and beloved natural environment that they will defend as much against despoliation as against invasion (Pryde 1995). The agenda facing young geographers fits well with the dominant themes of identity, political ecology and socio-economic regional and cultural studies (Hooson 1999). Equally urgent is the broadening of historical and international perspectives, which had been stunted and distorted for the lifetime of all but a very few living today.

But the pitfalls that still bedevil the revival of geography are indicated in an impassioned article published in a major Russian newspaper by a Moscow geographer (Shuper 2000). It began by announcing and lamenting “the recent elimination of the subject of geography from the standard list of required university courses”, and went on to document the continuation even today of the old Soviet habit of deliberately altering published maps (supposedly to confuse “the enemy”) or at least by omission, such as the deliberate absence of scale in a recent (1998) atlas of Moscow. A particularly gruesome practical example cited was that the officers who stormed the Chechen capital of Grozny in the recent costly battles were equipped with xeroxed Soviet-era maps that had intentionally excluded nearly half of the existing roads! More fundamentally, the author
bemoaned the fact that the managers and entrepreneurs who are charged with planning have inadequate educational foundations for distinguishing between different levels of development and specific characteristics of the regions of Russia and for devising appropriate strategies for social and economic reform.

This dismal verdict recalls the "sad tale about geography" in the 1965 national press that began what turned out to be a rather short-lived reform. Incidentally, it may evoke recognizable echoes in the United States, now the sole "indispensable" super-power, which still does not have geography in most high schools or in several of the most prestigious universities, and is constantly being called upon to lead the world with inadequate knowledge about that world and its problems, which increasingly have key geographical dimensions.

Legacy and promise. Having opted to focus my scholarly attention, nearly half a century ago, on a country called the Soviet Union, then considered very important, I am painfully aware that, except for short periods, it has seemed like a study in morbidity. I have been buoyed up by my natural instinct to go historical and philosophical. As a result, when I was swept up in the ferment and disputation about the discipline in the fifties and sixties, and as a by-product was impelled to delve into the rich legacy of pre-revolutionary Russian geography, I was just able to bear the boredom of keeping up with the unnatural economic geography, with its illusory Plans, and the inhuman physical geography of most of the Soviet period.

Now that freedom of thought and expression seems genuinely to have arrived in Russia, at least the bright aspiring young geographers, who are still being nurtured by some fine leading scholars, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg universities, have a chance to show their mettle. That is, of course, the absurd and annoying hangovers from Soviet "secrecy" can gradually be rectified, and if the economy starts to pick up and allow for necessary spending for education.

Of the richness and rightness of the legacy of what may be called the Russian School of Geography, with its emphasis on meaningful integration of human, natural and regional themes, together with its persistent concerns for applications towards the betterment of life, there can be no doubt. Although it is hard to be
optimistic about Russia at the outset of the twenty-first century, I do feel that these traditions, which over the perspective of the past two centuries stand up well in comparison with those of any other countries, will be enormously powerful and supportive to their heirs.

There is no shortage of talent or original ideas in Russia nor of urgent problems and interesting themes pressing for solution from a geographical perspective for the good of the whole. Russian geography has been revitalized and energized before, and can, with our sympathy and encouragement and with luck, do so again. Cautious optimism is still in order.

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