

Russian geography and the Commission for the Study of the Natural Productive Forces of Russia (KEPS), 1915-1930

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In recent years, I (together with my colleague Denis Shaw, University of Birmingham) have been exploring the various ways in which Russian geographers and cognate scientist have conceptualised the physical environment from the late tsarist period through to the late Soviet period. The Commission for the Study of the Natural Productive Forces of Russia (KEPS) [1915-1930] emerges as an influential element of the resulting analysis and particularly with respect to explaining the institutional development of geography during the early Soviet period. The significance of KEPS prompted a deeper analysis of its activities via an examination of annual 'accounts' and related materials. This process was assisted greatly by the recent work of Russian scholars, most notably A.V. Kol'tsov's 1999 monograph titled *Sozdanie i deyatelnosti Komissii po izucheniyu estestvennykh proizvoditel'nykh sil Rossii, 1915-1930* [*The establishment and activities of the Commission for the Study of the Natural Productive Forces of Russia, 1915-1930*]. The work of KEPS covered a considerable range of activities and I am very much in the early stages of analysis. What follows is a brief overview of a paper I delivered at the first Workshop of the Leverhulme International Network, *Exploring Russia's Environmental History and Natural Resources*, which took place in St Petersburg during August 2013.

First, it is perhaps important to say a little bit about the paper's disciplinary focus on geography. Russia's geographical tradition has a long history stretching back beyond its formal inclusion in the Russian university system during the late nineteenth century. A defining characteristic of this legacy has been an interest in both describing and explaining the geographical distribution of the country's natural resource endowment. As such, the expeditionary activities of the Russian Academy of Science during the 18th and 19th centuries, often allied to the strategic concerns of the state, form an influential aspect of geography's broader historical development. As part of ambitious efforts to determine the object and purpose of geographical study, scholars such as L.S. Berg [1876-1950] and A.A. Grigor'ev [1883-1968] advanced complex understandings of the physical environment during the late tsarist and early Soviet period in order to try and account, in part at least, for the distribution of distinct combinations of natural resources and associated natural processes. Post-1945, the work of Soviet geographers matured in order to consider the rational use of natural resources within the broader context of global environmental change. As noted above, the activities of the Commission for the Study of the Natural Productive Forces of Russia (KEPS) form a further influential period in the development of Russian geography during the early years of Soviet power, and particularly in terms of its institutional development.

Generally speaking, KEPS was influential for at least three reasons. First, it represented a major effort to determine the extent of Russia's natural resource endowment drawing from

a diverse range of existing accounts as well as the findings from new expeditionary initiatives. Second, it provided a key stimulus for the subsequent development of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. And, third, it marked the emergence of a more overt centralised approach towards natural resource management which would strengthen during the Soviet period.

KEPS was established in 1915. The natural philosopher and scientist, Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadskii [1863-1945], was a key figure behind the creation of the Commission. Vernadskii was acutely aware of the relative weakness of Russia during the early phase of WWI, due in no small way to its economic dependence on Germany. Indeed, the advent of war had highlighted the generally poor level of strategic knowledge concerning Russia's natural resources (Kamanin, 1957, 111; See also Bailes, 1990). Allied to this, Vernadskii was a firm believer in the importance of science with respect to its contribution to the war effort as well as more generally in Russian society, a point he made forcibly in a 1915 publication entitled 'War and the progress of science' (Kol'tsov, 1999, 8). A range of institutions, departments and affiliated scientific establishments emerged in tandem with the work of KEPS as it developed post-1915. They coalesced around particular natural resources such as rare elements, radioactive materials and non-metallic minerals. The specific configuration of such organisational elements changed over time in response to the perceived strategic priorities.

I am particularly interested in the foundation of the Department for the Industrial-Geographical Study of Russia (DIGS) within KEPS in 1918, following a proposal by the geographer A.A. Grigor'ev [1883-1968]. In terms of geography's institutional history, DIGS represents the earliest manifestation of what would become the Institute of Geography of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Grigor'ev's rationale for promoting this departmental specialisation was predicated on his belief that for the 'correct and rationale organisation of the economy, it was necessary to create not only a clear picture of the natural, domestic and economic conditions of the country but also to explain the causal dependencies between them' (Kotlyakov, 2008, p. 12). Such concerns echoed, at least in part, the debates at the time over the nature and focus of geography within Russia.

The early work of DIGS included generating materials to assist monetary reform in Russia and included historical analyses of monetary trends within the country. Related work examined the supply and demand of key goods within the Russian market with a view to uncovering strategic weaknesses as well as the economic character of the Baltic region. Work was also started on the economic future of Russia's regions. However, the relatively narrow focus of the Department widened over the course of the next few years and this included moving beyond an economic focus in order to embrace physical studies. Early work in this direction tended to focus on hitherto understudied parts of the northern European part of the Soviet Union.

As suggested above, KEPS has great significance for the disciplinary development of geography in Russia. At the same time, it also signifies an important stage in the evolution of Russia's general approach towards natural resource management. In spite of extensive expeditionary initiatives criss-crossing the Russian empire during the course of the 18th-19th centuries, KEPS provided clear evidence of the need for more focussed work related to both systematising and extending knowledge of Russia's vast natural resource reserves. KEPS, under the powerful influence of V.I. Vernadskii, also placed science very much at the heart of this endeavour. As such, KEPS emerges as a key initiative within the context of Russia's efforts to manage its natural resource base.

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