



Jonathan D. Oldfield, Denis J. B. Shaw. *The Development of Russian Environmental Thought: Scientific and Geographical Perspectives on the Natural Environment.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. XV, 196 S. ISBN 978-1-317-36632-4; ISBN 978-1-315-67017-1.

Reviewed by Jan Arend

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2017)

J. Oldfield u.a.: Russian Environmental Thought

Jonathan Oldfield and Denis Shaw jointly authored work is very informative on what the authors term the "Russian geographical tradition" – a particular manner in which Russian geographers and scientists in cognate fields have come to understand the environment over the last three centuries. The authors are among the most active scholars of the history of Russian perspectives on nature and the book under review presents a synthetic overview of many of their findings, with a particular focus on the period between the 1880s and the 1960s.

Oldfield and Shaw's approach to the history of Russian geography focuses on the biographies of the most important specialists in the area and their ideas and concepts as they were presented in their published oeuvre. They draw heavily on secondary scholarship and, where they appeal to primary sources, they tend to rely on published scientific literature by Russian and Soviet geographers. Archival sources are not cited in the main body of the book, an aspect of the work that limits the extent to which the authors can make assertions on some of their topics.

The Russian geographical tradition, as the authors argue, features an affinity among geographers to holistic visions of nature: Many Russian geographers tended to stress "the cumulative [â] character of linkages and connections between different natural phenomena rather than the functioning of individual elements in isolation" (p. 165). The book shows how such holistic leanings have led Russian geographers to develop a range of "in-

tegrated concepts" of the environment – including Lev Berg's concept of landscape and Vladimir Vernadskii's understanding of the biosphere.

The book begins by providing an overview of the history of Russian geographical thought from the time of Peter the Great up to about 1880. This first chapter is perhaps the most useful in the book, as it provides a very concise summary of the early history of Russian geography, locating the history of geographical thought in the context of the development of Russian science more generally. Oldfield and Shaw note two characteristics of post-Petrine Russian science which, they argue, have strongly influenced the development of geography in the country: Firstly, science in Russia was often initiated actively by the state and, secondly, it tended to focus on the practical applications of scientific knowledge. Oldfield and Shaw also stress how foreign influences affected Russian science and demonstrate convincingly that the Russian tradition of geographical thinking should not be seen as a purely Russian invention, since it synthesized a variety of non-Russian influences over the course of its development, with German inspiration figuring especially prominently. As for domestic influences that may have inspired the holistic scientific thinking of Russian geographers, the authors see fit to mention "Russian cultural and religious traditions derived from the theology of the orthodox church" (p. 47). Yet they assert that this influence is difficult to prove and make no attempt to do so. They thus raise the issue but refrain from resolving it. One imagines that the use of archival sources (letters,

personal unpublished writings) would have been helpful in determining the extent to which the outlook on nature of some of the key figures of Russian geography was influenced by Russian cultural traditions.

The next chapter turns to the late imperial period, presenting a detailed account of the work of soil scientist Vasilii Dokuchaev (1846–1903) and his associates, who are presented as a paradigmatic early example of integrative environmental thinking in Russia. Summing up existing research, the chapter shows how Dokuchaev came to develop a holistic understanding of soil as a natural body with manifold connections to the surrounding environment.

Oldfield and Shaw then go on to describe the development of Russian geography during Soviet times up until the 1960s. Two scientists feature prominently in this part of their account: Lev Berg (1876–1950), one of the most important proponents of Russian landscape science, and Andrei Aleksandrovich Grigorâev (1883–1968), a geographer who rose to become the dominant figure in the Institute of Geography at the USSR Academy of Sciences. Both geographers, so claim the authors, stood firmly on the ground laid down by the Russian tradition of integrated thinking on nature, but differed in terms of how they related their science to Soviet ideology. Of these two specialists, Lev Berg is depicted as being the one who had a greater immunity to ideological influences. Grigorâev, by contrast, is described by the authors as either more of an opportunist than Berg or someone who genuinely derived greater scientific inspiration from dialectical materialism. One is almost forced to ask which of the two quite different explanations for Grigorâevâs positions the authors would prefer.

Throughout the section on Soviet geography the authors, following in the footsteps of Loren Graham Loren R. Graham, *Science and Philosophy in the Soviet Union*, London 1973, point to interesting ways in which innovative scientific understandings of the environment may have been inspired by elements within the ideology of dialectical materialism. Dialectical Materialism for example, may have helped provoke the emergence of processual, dynamic models of nature. However, Oldfield and Shaw leave this idea up in the air, as they seem to think it impossible to establish the extent to which Soviet geographers were in fact influenced in their work either by ideological constraints or by politics more generally (p. 106, 130). There are several passages in the book where the reader is left wondering why the interplay between science and ideology is treated at such length if so little

can be said about it with any certainty.

The chapter on the years following World War II (1945–1953) treats the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature. Here the authors depart from much of the previous research on the issue, which tended to stress the inherent shortcomings of the plan and pointed mainly to its âprometheanâ and âmegalomaniacâ tendencies. Oldfield and Shaw provide evidence of manifold disagreements among relevant geographers over definitions of such basic concepts as âlandscapeâ or ânatural zoneâ. Such disagreements âhindered the geographers and others in their attempts to formulate an applied science applicable to the Stalin planâ (p. 110). Science was âfar from [â] having already solved all the key issues in nature transformationâ (p. 125). Oldfield and Shaw thus imply that more advanced science and a unified scientific community capable of finding agreement on basic issues would have been better prepared to help apply the plan productively. This view is certainly an interesting new way of looking at the Great Stalin Plan. However, the evidence presented did not convince this reviewer. It would seem perfectly usual for scientists to lament a lack of consensus on conceptual definitions. There are many reasons why scientists might make such complaints, not least simply to legitimize their status as scientists through the claim that more work has yet to be done in their field. It seems something of an over-interpretation to use the presence of such laments to challenge existing explanations of the failure of the plan.

The final chapter of the book deals with the period after Stalinâs death in 1953 up until about 1960. Here Oldfield and Shaw situate the development of geography within the wider context of the âenvironmental turnâ that occurred in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev. They detect, building on previous research For an overview of research on post-1953 environmentalism in the Soviet Union, see Laurent Coumel / Marc Elie, *A Belated and Tragic Ecological Revolution: Nature, Disasters, and Green Activists in the Soviet Union and the Post-Soviet States, 1960s-2010s*, in: *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 40 (2013), pp. 157–165, a shift in the geographical discourse from the aim of conquering nature to that of protecting nature, as well as to a greater reliance on solid science and a greater concern for the maintenance and renewal of natural resources.

All in all, the book is a useful resource, especially for the purposes of university teaching and for the detailed information it contains on Soviet geography that has not been available up to now in the English-language

research literature. It provides a short and informative overview of environmental thinking in the period covered. Against that, however, is the feeling sensed by this reader that some of the arguments contained in the book are less than convincing. Aside from that is the unsatisfied wish that Oldfield and Shaw would adopt a clearer stance on some of the issues they raise.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Jan Arend. Review of Oldfield, Jonathan D.; Shaw, Denis J. B., *The Development of Russian Environmental Thought: Scientific and Geographical Perspectives on the Natural Environment*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49738>

Copyright © 2017 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.