

Frost, Ice, and Snow: Cold Climate in Russian History

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: German Historical Institute (DHI Moscow), Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

Conveners: Julia Herzberg (RCC Munich), Ingrid Schierle (DHI Moscow), Andreas Renner (University of Tübingen), Klaus Gestwa (University of Tübingen)

Presenters: Aleksandr V. Anan'ev (DHI Moscow), Andy Bruno (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Oksana Bulgakowa (Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz), Ian W. Campbell (University of California-Davis/Harvard University), Katarzyna Chimiak (University of Warsaw), Pey-Yi Chu (Princeton University), Ekaterina A. Degal'tseva (Biisk), Marc Elie (CNRS-EHESS Paris), Susanne Frank (Humboldt Universität Berlin), Anthony J. Heywood (University of Aberdeen), Paul Josephson (Colby College Waterville), Aleksandr L. Kuz'minykh (Vologda), Julia Lajus (European University St. Petersburg), Roman Mauer (Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz), Jonathan Oldfield (University of Glasgow, UK), Aleksei D. Popov (Simferopol'), Svetlana A. Rafikova (SibGGU Krasnojarsk), Nataliia N. Rodogina (Universität Novosibirsk), Carolin F. Roeder (Harvard University), David Saunders (Newcastle University, UK), Josef Schovanec (Alfortville), Denis J. B. Shaw (University of Birmingham, UK), Erki Tammiksaar (University of Tartu)

In January 2012 inhabitants of the Northern Hemisphere experienced firsthand how much cold can influence our daily life. The fact that tabloid newspapers in Western Europe referred to it as “Russian cold” demonstrates the strength of the popular association of Russia with cold. It is therefore all the more fitting that the conference “Frost, Ice, and Snow: Cold Climate in Russian History” followed in the footsteps of this cold spell, bringing both of these topics into connection with each other. At the conference, which was organized by the German Historical Institute in Moscow and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society and took place between 16 and 18 February 2012, scholars of environmental history, philosophy, and geography, as well as

religious, film, and literary studies discussed the influence of cold climate on the Russian culture and history.

After the greeting by **NIKOLAUS KATZER**, the director of the German Historical Institute in Moscow, **JULIA HERZBERG** (RCC Munich) introduced the goals of the conference, with the primary aim being to shed light on the relationship between environment and the study of history. She mentioned the discrepancy between the significance of climate for particular historical events in Russian history and the ignorance of historians up to now concerning these factors. Herzberg emphasized that the conference not only aimed to look at the gaps in research but also offered an opportunity to discuss the reasons why environmental history and climatic factors have played a minor role in previous historical scholarship. Furthermore the conference hoped to bring about a shift in focus within the environmental history of Russia and Eastern Europe. A large proportion of environmental history studies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union consider nature and the environment one-sidedly as a target of human activity. Therefore they typically focus on pollution—or, approaching the problem from the other direction—on conservation. The conference offered a chance to understand the relationship between nature and society as truly interdependent, with the environment and nature playing an active role. It also presented new directions in research by looking at the history of science, as well as placing everyday practices and issues of risk and vulnerability at the center of the discussion and offered an opportunity to discuss how individual and collective identities are created through discussions about cold and what significance these representations have for the understanding of oneself and others.

The first session was dedicated to ways of dealing with cold in everyday life and during the war.

SVETLANA A. RAFIKOVA (SibGGU Krasnojarsk) focused on adaptive practices, showing how city dwellers in the Krasnojarsk region in the 1960s managed the cold weather. Rafikova argued that climate and weather have contributed to the development of a specifically Siberian culture.

KATARZYNA CHIMIAK (University of Warsaw) presented her dissertation project, in which she compared the behavior of inhabitants of Dnepropetrovsk, Łódź, Essen and Manchester during the hard winter of 1946/47. A central question was whether and to what degree different social and economic structures led to different strategies for adaptation. The second half of the session was concerned above all with snow, ice, and sub-freezing temperatures during the war. **ANTHONY J. HEYWOOD** (University of Aberdeen) lectured on the effects of extreme cold on railroads from the First World War through the February Revolution of 1917. Heywood argued against the thesis that the difficulties with transportation and distribution of supplies resulting from the snow and extreme cold were a primary cause for the February Revolution. The atrocious weather of early 1917 was a matter of very bad luck for the tsarist regime, but did not constitute the critical fatal blow, he suggested. **ALEKSANDER L. KUZ'MINYKH** (Vologda) took as his subject the Second World War and examined the influence of the Russian winter on German soldiers first on the front

and later in prisoner of war camps. He discussed reasons why Russian and Soviet historians of World War II, in contrast with their German colleagues, have ignored the importance of climate for so long. He argued that it would not diminish the accomplishments of the Red Army to acknowledge the cold climate as a key category in historical analysis.

The second session, “Coping with Cold” looked at the function of cold and snow both as a threat and as a focal point for building a common identity, as well as serving a recreational function. Using a catastrophic avalanche in the Khibiny Region on the Kola Peninsula in 1935, **ANDY BRUNO** (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) showed how socially produced vulnerabilities are expressed environmentally. Peasants forced to migrate during the settlement and industrialization of the north were the people most exposed to the dangers of avalanches. The tragic event was a catalyst for renewed efforts to scientifically predict the likelihood of avalanches. The presentation of **MARC ELIE** (CNRS-EHESS Paris) also focused on a catastrophic avalanche, looking at the disaster in 1966 in Alma-Ata. He emphasized the importance of the accident in Khibiny for the responses to and reception of the avalanche in Kazakhstan. Avalanches, he argued, present the greatest threat to city growth and sport tourism. Elie showed how a local disaster in central Asia led to avalanches becoming a focus of scientific, technological, and government efforts.

The phenomenon of cold also influenced the formation of masculine identity and cultural heroes, as **ALEKSANDR ANAN’EV** (DHI Moscow) showed using examples of polar explorers and hockey players. **ALEKSEI D. POPOV** (Simferopol’) offered a new perspective on the history of tourism with his presentation on Soviet winter tourism as a seasonal phenomenon. He described how the significance of winter tourism changed over the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s. It ceased to function as ideological and physical training in preparation for wartime duties. This “de-ideologizing” of winter tourism was particularly evident in international magazines, where trips to the Soviet Union were advertized using antimodern symbolism to portray the “Russian winter.”

“Changing Climates” was the topic of the third session, which began the second day of the conference. **JULIA LAJUS** (European University St. Petersburg) presented her work with **SVERKER SÖRLIN** (Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm). Lajus discussed the significance of sea ice studies for Soviet arctic science and looked at its connections to ice and snow research in Sweden. She used the biographies and research results of Soviet and Swedish scientists such as Nikolai Zubov and Hans Ahlmann to show how much contact there was across the Iron Curtain. Sea ice studies was a field that offered opportunities for cooperation and exchange of knowledge, even during the Cold War. **PAUL JOSEPHSON** (Colby College Waterville) looked at the industrialization of the Russian north as ordered by Moscow and inquired into the environmental

damage and social costs which the transformation of the region brought with it. He demonstrated that the Bolsheviks ignored both the climatic and geological conditions as well as the knowledge of the local population, which resulted in a sharp increase in the environmental costs. **JONATHAN OLDFIELD** (University of Glasgow, UK) presented a counterpoint to this in his paper, arguing that the understanding of the reciprocal relationship between society and nature improved after the Second World War. He showed that Soviet geographers of the 1950s not only recognized the importance of climate as a historical and dynamic process, but also pointed out the dangers of climate change. Like Oldfield, **DENIS J. B. SHAW** (University of Birmingham, UK) concerned himself with one of the most important Soviet geographers, A. A. Grigor'ev and his text "Subarktika," focusing on Grigor'ev's studies of the tundra. The discussion following both contributions showed once again how much research and politics were intertwined during the Cold War.

The papers in the following session, "Civilizing Coldness," focused on the period around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Thus **EKATERINA A. DEGAL'TSEVA** (Biisk) talked about the mythically colored image of the "Sibiryak" that developed in Russia in the nineteenth century. She showed how climatic conditions influenced how residents of Siberia were perceived by themselves and others. **NATALIA RODOGINA** (Universität Novosibirsk) focused on the significance of climate on the representations of Siberia in the Russian media in the second half of the nineteenth century. Of central importance was the question of whether the narrative of Siberia as a land of cold helped to integrate the region into the empire or whether it hindered this process. Imperial attitudes towards the periphery were also the subject of the presentation by **IAN W. CAMPBELL** (University of California-Davis/Harvard University) on *zhut* in Kazakhstan. *Zhut*, Campbell explained, is a weather phenomenon occurring every ten to twelve years, characterized by the freezing of fodder grasses and resulting starvation of livestock, and was used by the scientists and bureaucrats in the waning empire to devalue the nomadic lifestyle and promote their ideas about the "modernization" of the steppes. **DAVID SAUNDERS** (Newcastle University, UK) looked at the economic and technological development of the Russian arctic. Saunders made clear that the personal aptitudes of the people involved played a decisive role, suggesting that the combination of the trade-oriented methods of the merchant Joseph Wiggins and the technical expertise of Admiral Stepan Osipovich Makarov, who relied on icebreakers, would probably have been successful, but since they did not cooperate neither reached his goal. The discussion once again brought up tensions between East and West in the form of a debate about who should be credited with having built the first icebreaker. **ERKI TAMMIKSAAR** (University of Tartu) also thematized this East-West competition in his paper. From the perspective of a geographer, he reconstructed the discovery of the Antarctic in the 1820s, another controversial topic during the

Cold War due to the difficulty of clearly delineating a mass of ice. Therefore he argued that one should acknowledge multiple discoverers in different time periods, and base our evaluation on the knowledge available in their time. The competition to develop the Antarctic, as well as the initial discovery of it, demonstrates once again how scientific accomplishments were used for propaganda or as symbols of superiority during the Cold War.

The last session of the second day examined cold as an aesthetic phenomenon and an imagined feeling. **OKSANA BULGAKOWA** (Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz) began with a media and film studies approach to the topic. Using key examples from Russian/Soviet film history, she looked at the ways cold was narrated and portrayed, pointing out the difficulties of conveying the experience of snow and ice through the medium of film. Bulgakowa showed that the films contributed to making snow an important component of national identity. While Bulgakowa was concerned with the Russians' image of themselves, **ROMAN MAUER** (Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz) was interested in the portrayal of Russian cold in German films of the post-war period. Here cold functioned as a symbol of trauma, allowing Germans to portray themselves as victims of the Soviet regime and to suppress questions of guilt and responsibility.

The third day continued the examination of artistic portrayals of cold, now turning to the medium of literature. **SUSANNE FRANK** (Humboldt Universität Berlin) discussed permafrost as a metaphor for memory in gulag literature. Starting with "ice" as a figure for the "other" in eighteenth-century literature, she suggested that in gulag literature ice gained a new function in addition to the classical one: it allowed projections of the future and of the possibility of living on (after death). The subsequent discussion picked up this idea again and emphasized that, particularly in hagiographic writing, the usual negative connotations of cold may be supplemented with positive ones. Similar comments were made regarding the presentation of religious scholar **JOSEF SCHOVANEC** (Alfortville) on freezing as a spiritual experience. He, too, used literary treatments of gulag experiences as the basis for his arguments. Oksana Bulgakowa pointed out that in Russian culture blizzards, which prevent sight of the physical world, can represent clarity and insight. Schovanec emphasized that authors of autobiographical gulag literature often portray snow, ice, and cold as active forces. This presentation thus offered an opportunity to discuss to what degree nature can be thought of as an actor and whether this approach has analytical value.

The next session, "Representations Between Science and Politics" was introduced by **PEY-YI CHU** (Princeton University). She described how a scientific discipline developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s which made permafrost soil the object of scientific investigation and argued that this was also a strategy to present the permafrost zones as regions of economic significance. She discussed how different conceptions of the permafrost led to it being manifested in various

visualizations. **CAROLIN F. ROEDER** (Harvard University) dedicated her presentation to the Yeti, the Abominable Snowman, as a “transnational monster.” She showed how even during the Cold War discourses about the Yeti overcame national boundaries and how the figure of the Yeti became a locus for discussion about the boundaries between “science” and “pseudoscience.”

In his concluding remarks **KLAUS GESTWA** (University of Tübingen) reflected upon the results of the conference in relation to its goals, identified a number of central themes and suggested possibilities for further research. In many presentations, he noted, the human, societal and economic costs of the harsh climate were particularly evident. At the same time, events such as Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812 or the Second World War also had a protective function and saved Russia from being conquered. The conference showed, Gestwa concluded, how closely the history of cold is linked with science and technology. Branches of science such as meteorology, glaciology, and climatology developed in order to master the problems of ice, snow, and freezing temperatures. Above all the history of science during the Cold War, which was the subject of multiple presentations, showed that during the Cold War the investigation of *cold*, of all things, offered opportunities for scientific collaboration which transcended ideological differences. Gestwa expressed regret that the majority of presentations approached the cold regions from the point of view of outsiders, while the perspective of the indigenous population was only rarely considered. He proposed using the dichotomy “challenge” and “threat” as analytical categories and giving further consideration to the problem of whether nature can be described as an agent or actor. In the final discussion conference participants suggested other topics for further investigation, for example, to look more closely at ways of dealing with cold in everyday life, at the connection between climate and perceptions of space, as well as linguistic aspects of the subject. Many contributions to the conference made clear that snow and cold can develop their own dynamic, demonstrating that nature is more than just an object of human activity.

--Saskia Geisler, Ruhr-Universität Bochum