

Publications

How Race Became a Problem for the Soviet Union

by Francine Hirsch

Soviet Applied Science in the 1920s: The “German Model” Idealized

The Soviet and Nazi regimes, and their visions for transforming their societies, were built on dramatically different ideological foundations. These ideologies, in turn, were grounded in irreconcilable social science theories regarding the relationship between the biological and the social.[1] The breakdown in Soviet and German scientific relations in the late 1930s is thus not surprising — but it makes the strength of the collaboration between Soviet and German social scientists in the 1920s all the more striking in retrospect. On the Soviet side, this collaboration was grounded in a deep respect for the German model of applied science. Sergei F. Ol'denburg, Vladimir Vernadskii, and Vladimir Il'ich Lenin himself had long admired the German approach to the scientific management and use of productive forces, which German scientists had developed in South West Africa (a former German colony) and had used to their government's advantage during World War I.[2] The Commission for the Study of Natural Productive Forces (KEPS), which Vernadskii had organized in Russia in 1915, and the Gosplan Bureau for the Study of Productive Forces, which Arsenii Iarilov had helped establish in 1926, were both based in part on the German model. Iarilov (the former head of the State Colonization Research Institute) maintained that the bureau would further the work of “Soviet colonization (kolonizatsiia),” which he continued to define as a program for the economic and cultural development “of the entire Soviet Union in agreement with a general plan.” In this case, Iarilov had in mind the first Five-Year Plan, which Gosplan was developing and which Stalin would introduce in 1928.[3]

Soviet economists and other experts with the new Gosplan Bureau were on the whole enthusiastic about using applied science to promote planned economic development. Most also welcomed the chance to work with and learn from German scholars. By June 1926, when the Soviet government sent Ol'denburg (the permanent secretary of the Academy of Sciences) to Berlin to meet with [...Friedrich Schmidt-Ott at the Notgemeinschaft der Deutschen Wissenschaft], such collaboration was already under way.[4]

At the Notgemeinschaft, Ol'denburg discussed potential areas of German-Soviet research with Schmidt-Ott and other prominent German scholars (among them geographers, anthropologists, and geographers). The German scholars expressed a strong interest in doing fieldwork in the Caucasus and Central Asia.[5] As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had lost its colonies in Africa and East Asia, which had been important sites of German fieldwork. Schmidt-Ott and his colleagues saw the “Russian Reich with its range of racial differences,” and “Russia's colonial hinterland” in the east in particular, as a promising place to continue their research agenda.[6]

Applied Science and the Study of Race and Culture

In 1927, on the eve of the First Five-Year Plan, the Soviet government allocated additional funds for scientific studies of the Union's productive forces, and Soviet anthropologists and ethnographers went

to the field to further research the transmission of racial traits and the dynamics of cultural contact.[7] For the next two years, these experts — most of whom were affiliated with the Gosplan Bureau for the Study of Productive Forces — participated in more than a dozen larger “complex” or multifaceted (kompleksnyi) expeditions with explicit economic aims connected to the First Five-Year Plan.[8] One such expedition went to the Chuvash ASSR in the summer of 1927 in order to “elucidate the young republic’s productive forces” and promote “the development of local industries and agriculture”. [9] The expedition’s main detachment conducted geological and soil research, while a smaller anthropological-ethnographical detachment studied the republic’s population from racial, linguistic, and social-hygiene perspectives. The anthropological-ethnographical detachment brought together physical anthropologists, ethnographers, and linguists from three Leningrad institutions: The Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of the USSR (KIPS), the Japhetic Institute (which specialized in linguistics), and the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE). The ethnographer and linguist Nikolai Marr (a member of KIPS and the head of the Japhetic Institute) led the detachment and supervised its ethnographic program. Boris Vishnevskii (a physical anthropologist from MAE) oversaw the detachment’s anthropological research, which focused on the Chuvash — and in particular on the physical and constitutional similarities and differences between them and the Russians, Mordva, and Mishers of the region.[10]

Vishnevskii and his assistants examined the correlation between narodnost’ (nationality) and racial traits. They conducted blood-group studies; recorded morphological data (head measurements and height, as well as skin, eye, and hair color) on some one thousand men and women; and took photographs of representative Chuvash, Misher, Russian, and Mordva “types”. [11] In his expedition report, Vishnevskii noted that, on the whole, there was a different blood group distribution among the Chuvash than among their Russian neighbors — but he pointed out that there was a continuum, and that notable differences could be found between Chuvash of different regions. He also described significant differences between the Chuvash and the Mishers in blood group distribution as well as in skin, eye, and hair color, and concluded that the two peoples belonged to “different anthropological groups”. [14] Vishnevskii did not make value judgments about these anthropological groups, or attempt to link racial traits to particular cultural, behavioral, or psychological traits. He did show that the patterns of racial and linguistic intermixing in the region resembled each other, and on the basis of available historical data he argued that this was the result of migration and settlement patterns. Blood group studies, like dialect studies, Vishnevskii concluded, could provide important information about the historical interrelationships among different peoples.[13]

In the 1920s, most expeditions to research “the human being,” like the Chuvash expedition, attempted to construct a “biosocial profile” of targeted population groups but made an effort to define “race” in “neutral” (or at least nonsociobiological) terms.[15] There were, however, some notable exceptions. For example, the anthropologists and ethnographers on a 1927 complex expedition to the Far East drew a direct link between biological and cultural traits and even warned about the dangers of racial mixing. In the expedition’s published report, the ethnographer Vladamir Arsen’ev argued that the Russians, Chinese, Yakuts, and Chukchi were “the most viable peoples” in the Far East and that the Tungus and other “backward narodnosti” of the region were doomed to extinction. In this same report, another

researcher (the physician A. A. Beliaevskii) warned that the “cross-breeding” of Russians “with a lower weaker race” was damaging to “the physical constitution of the Slavic race” and to “the Slavo-Russian [nationality]”.^[16] Expedition reports like this one, which gave no credence to the official line — that all races were equal and that nurture trumped nature — were the exception to the rule. But in the 1930s, officials and experts alike would invoke these examples in justifying the regime’s crackdown on the social sciences and asserting the importance of fighting race theories with a unified voice.

While some expeditions to study the “human being” in the 1920s had a physical-anthropological orientation, others focused on the relationship between nationality and culture. Most of these expeditions looked at nationalities that had migrated from one part of the Soviet Union to another and found themselves in a different “ethnic milieu” and under “natural conditions that were new to them”.^[17] A case in point was the 1928 KIPS-Ethnographic Department expedition to the Amur-Ussuri region of the Far East. The research team, under (the physical anthropologist Sergei) Rudenko’s leadership, studied Ukrainian settlers, evaluating changes in their economic organization and byt. In particular, Rudenko and his colleagues sought to determine the “degree and character of influence” that the Koreans, with their “elevated agricultural culture,” had on the Ukrainians. The ethnographers also investigated how the arrival of the Ukrainians had affected the native peoples of the region, such as the Udegei, Orochi, and Manegri.^[18] While Rudenko’s team was in the Far East, other KIPS and Ethnographic Department ethnographers were conducting similar research in the Kuban region of the North Caucasus: studying how Ukrainian settlers were adapting to local forms of agricultural labor and evaluating the process of cultural exchange between them and the region’s other nationalities.^[19] These studies of settler populations preceded the forced resettlement operations that were connected with the collectivization campaign — and there is no evidence that the ethnographers foresaw the vicious character that these operations would take. But the ethnographers, like other experts, did anticipate that the regime would need to “move” people to “underpopulated regions” in order to sow fields and extract raw materials. The idea of “the human being” as an economic resource that could be moved and maximized — and that could adapt to a new environment — became an important part of Soviet scientific discourse during the 1920s and gave Stalin’s economic policies a scientific rationale.^[20]

A small but important subset of anthropological-ethnographical expeditions during these years involved Soviet and German collaboration. The meeting between Schmidt-Ott and Ol’denburg in 1926 had laid the groundwork for collaborative expeditions to Central Asia and the Far East, some of which had a medical-anthropological focus. For example, in the summer of 1928, a Soviet-German team of venereologists, serologists, physicians, and other experts traveled to the Buriat-Mongol ASSR to investigate the high incidence of syphilis among the republic’s Buriats and to test the effects of a particular drug on the course of the disease.^[21] The Soviet side of the expedition had in its ranks two ethnographers [...] who, taking a social-hygiene approach, studied the cultural reasons for the disease’s prevalence among the Buriat population. These ethnographers investigated local health and sanitation practices and interviewed Buriats about their sexual practices. Both the Soviet and the German researchers characterized the Buriats as a “primitive” people with a “backward” culture who were in danger of extinction. However, only the Soviet researchers made a serious effort to evaluate Buriat

culture, which Soviet ethnographers characterized as the reflection of economic and social conditions — and thus as changeable.[22]

Even while the Buriat-Mongol expedition was under way, Soviet and German geneticists, pathologists, and other experts were putting together a still more ambitious program for systematic collaborative research on “the human being.” In 1927, Soviet and German experts and their respective governments had begun negotiations about the establishment of a German-Russian Institute for Racial Research specializing in constitutional medicine and disease pathology. In late 1927, a branch was set up in Moscow, and in 1930 a second office was established in Tbilisi, in the Georgian SSR. Using the Tbilisi office as their base, German and Soviet researchers began to evaluate the prevalence of certain diseases among different nationalities in Georgia and in other parts of the Caucasus.[23]

The initiation of collaborative German-Russian racial research in the Caucasus coincided with the rise of national socialism in German universities. Over the next two years the relationship between Soviet and German scientists came under strain, as Soviet leaders came to see German race theories as an ideological threat. German pathologists and anthropologists in the Soviet Union, in discussions with their Soviet colleagues, continued to define “race” in “neutral” terms as “differentiating factors”. [24] But back in Germany, anthropologists were forging close ties with the “Nordic movement,” and race science was taking a pronounced turn toward sociobiologism. As German anthropologists argued that there were higher and lower races — and that lower races as a matter of course had “lower cultures” which were impervious to reform — the observations of German researchers in the Soviet Union that certain nationalities, such as the Buriats, were “primitives” with “backward cultures” took on new undertones challenging the very premises of the Soviet project. It was in this context that “race” became a “problem” for the Soviet regime.

Notes

1 For a thoughtful discussion about science and ideology see Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, 1990).

2 St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (PFA RAN) f. 208 op. 2, d. 104, l. 5.

3 *Ibid.*, d. 114, ll. 112-114ob, 153. [...]

4 Susan G. Solomon, “The Soviet-German Syphilis Expedition to Buriat Mongolia, 1928: Scientific Research on National Minorities,” *Slavic Review* 52, no. 2 (1993): 207-10, and Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890-1945* (Oxford, 2000), 183-88.

5 PFA RAN f. 208, op. 2, d. 104, ll. 4-8.

6 The quote is from Solomon, “Soviet-German Syphilis Expedition,” 204-5. Solomon is citing an August 1927 letter from Schmidt-Ott to the Foreign Office. Also see PFA RAN f. 208, op. 2, d. 104, l. 5.

7 Economists and applied geographers hoped that this research would determine whether different nationalities could adapt to “different types of labor.” See A. A. Grigoriev, “Geografiia teoreticheskaia i

prikladnaia, ikh sovremennoe sostoianie i namechaiushchiesiia puti razvitiia," in Akademiia nauk SSSR, Komissiiia po izucheniiu estestvennykh proizvoditel'nykh sil soiuz, Trudy Geograficheskogo otdela, vol. 2 (Leningrad, 1930), 1- 48.

8 For an account of other KIPS expeditions from 1927 see PFA RAN f. 135, op. 1, d. 22, ll. 82-84. [...]

9 Akademiia nauk, Chuvashkaia respublika: Predvaritel'nye itogi rabot Chuvashkoi ekspeditsii, 3-4. The expedition received funds from Gosplan, the Chuvash government, and the Academy of Sciences.

10 Ibid., 3-7, 229-32. [...]

11 Ibid., 237-52 and tables.

12 Ibid., 237-44.

13 Ibid., 250-52.

14 See the description of the Bashkir expedition of 1928 to 1930 in Akademiia nauk SSSR Otchet o deiatel'nosti Akademii nauk SSSR za 1930 g. (Leningrad, 1931), 75-6.

15 A. A. Beliavskii, "Metisatsiia zabaikal'skogo naseleniia," and V. K. Arsen'ev, "Naselenie Dal'nego Vostoka kak proizvoditel'nyi faktor," in V. M. Sabitch et al., eds., Proizvoditel'nye sily Dal'nego Vostoka, Chelovek, vol. 5 (Vladivostok, 1927). Cited in G. I. Petrov et al., eds., Materialy Buriat-Mongol'skoi antropologicheskoi ekspeditsii 1931 goda, pt. 1, Obzor rabot ekspeditsii (Leningrad, 1933), 16-19.

16 Archive of the Russian Ethnographic Museum (REM) f. 2, op. 1, d. 233, l. 121.

17 Ibid., ll. 25, 121. [...]

18 Ibid., ll. 24, 29. [...]

19 See, for example, Ar. N. Petrov, "K vyivleniiu organizatsionnykh form industrial'no promyslovoi kolonizatsii," in Problemy promyshlenno-promyslovoi kolonizatsii, vol. 2, Trudy Gosudarstvennogo nauchno-issledovatel'skogo Instituta Zemleustroistva i Pereseleniia, vol. 11 (Moscow, 1930), 57-77. [...]

20 The drug was Salvarsan. Solomon, "Soviet-German Syphilis Expedition."

21 Primary funding came from the Notgemeinschaft, with some funds from the Commissariat of Health and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. [...] Solomon, "Soviet-German Syphilis Expedition," 211, 215-20, 229-31. That same summer, another Soviet-German brigade studied the spread of tuberculosis among the population of the Kirgiz ASSR, and a team of Soviet and German geographers and geologists surveyed the Pamir region of Tajikistan. See PFA RAN f. 4, op. 28, d. 2 ll. 5-11; Akademiia nauk SSR, Otchet o deiatel'nosti Akademii nauk SSR za 1932 g. (Leningrad, 1933), 293; Weindling, Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 188-89; and Solomon, "Soviet-German Syphilis Expedition," 206-7.

22 Weindling, "German-Soviet Medical Co-operation"; Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe*, chapter 7; and Susan Gross Solomon and Jochen Richter, eds., *Ludwig Aschoff: Vergleichende Volkerpathologie oder Rassenpathologie* (Pfaffenweiler, 1998).

23 Weindling, "German-Soviet Medical Co-operation," 193.

24 Proctor, *Racial Hygiene*, chapter 2.