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# TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA ON STEPPE IMAGINARIES IN RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

**ABSTRACT.** This article proposes that there is a need for a sustained engagement with and deconstruction of steppe imaginaries in Russian and Soviet literature in the twentieth century. It argues that “steppe” is not solely a term describing a particular environment, but also a pivotal idea which has shaped and shapes identities, cultural assumptions, political reasoning and even geopolitical thought. Based on the review of existing scholarship, the paper demonstrates the centrality of the steppe as a key imaginary for Russian history until the nineteenth century. However, it also reveals that the research on the relevance of such imaginaries for Russian and Soviet political history in the twentieth century is largely absent. Yet, it was during this period that the steppe environments underwent largescale transformations through processes of land reclamation, irrigation development and industrial agriculture.

**KEY WORDS:** Russia, steppe, imaginary, Soviet Union, literature, landscape

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## INTRODUCTION

For Russian geographer and eminent steppe expert Alexander Chibilev, there are two kinds of steppe: one kind is the physical environment, the other is a literary figure (Chibilev 1990: 2, 1997: 1). A. Chibilev (2009) further stresses the significance of this latter kind of steppe in his book *Steppe Masterpieces*, which contains a rich collection of nineteenth and twentieth century writings, including poetry, prose, letters and memoirs by authors from Russia to Hungary devoted to the steppe. The historical importance of steppe as a symbolic figure is demonstrated by its prominent place in works of Russian literary writers such as Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol and Ivan Turgenev. Furthermore,

steppe imaginaries significantly characterize geographical descriptions in Soviet scientific and popular literature (Bichsel 2012; 2017). Beyond past times, the steppe as a geopolitical narrative also resurfaces in current political debates. For example, in her analysis of recent political events, Russian journalist and writer Sonja Margolina raises the question whether the political strategy of present-day Russia will attempt to centre its mythological origins and cognitive map rather on the steppe regions of the Volga and Central Asia as opposed to the more European Kievan Rus (Margolina 2014). Overall, the research within and outside Russia reflects the high significance of the steppe for understanding Russian cultural and political space.

During the last several decades, scholars have given considerable attention to exploring the material and symbolic aspects of the steppe for Russian history and identity until the nineteenth century. Their works, which point to the centrality of steppe as a key imaginary, are mainly drawing on artistic writings, but also other types of sources. This article provides a comprehensive review of these scholarly works and arranges them into thematic sections. Based on this review, the paper argues that there remains a need for further research on steppe as a symbolic figure beyond 1900, as it was precisely during this period that steppe's environment underwent significant physical transformation. Thus, the paper directs scholarly attention towards an identified gap in steppe research and explains the continued relevance of steppe and steppe imaginaries in the twentieth century.

The article opens with the discussion of publications which focus on the symbolic significance of the steppe to Russian statehood and nation building. Then, it reviews the research that demonstrates the link between literary and artistic representations of nature and the formation of Russians' perceptions of self and nation. In its last section, the paper discusses scholarly works, which focus on the representations of nature in Soviet artistic, scientific and popular literature. The article concludes with the suggestions on the possible directions and potentials for future research.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical data for this paper consists mainly of scholarly research devoted to the analysis of the physical and symbolic significance of the steppe to Russian social and political thought. In addition, we consider artistic and scientific literature in Russian language written during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The artistic literature represents novels and stories (Rus. "roman", "povest", "rasskaz") in Russian language which address the theme of the steppe. We conceive of this literature as a product of culture being situated in particular social and political contexts. The scientific literature

includes texts written by scientists and naturalists in Russian language which offer geographical descriptions of the steppe. Geographical description is understood as the attempt to characterise a geographical region or a particular environment based on its physical, historical, economic, political and cultural features. These works were produced for a scientific, but sometimes also for a more general public. The selected scientific texts and further secondary literature was obtained through library research in the Russian State Library in Moscow as well as in the library of the Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences. We adopt historical discourse analysis as the methodology for this paper. Historical discourse analysis attempts to uncover the historical changes of statements in the course of time which produce, but are also produced by new forms of being, thinking and acting. It seeks to explain how discourses change in a historical process, and also themselves change social, political, economic and philosophical constellations in history (Landwehr 2008: 21).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Eurasian steppe and Russian statehood

Recent international research proposes that statehood in Russia is intimately tied to the environment of the steppe. Iver B. Neumann and Einar Wigen contend that the emergence of the Russian polity towards the end of the fifteenth century was modelled on what they term a "steppe tradition" which has ordered politics in the Eurasian steppe for almost three thousand years (Neumann and Wigen 2013). This element, in their view, distinguishes Russia and Turkey from other European states. Russia and Turkey, they argue, expose a rationality of rule that is a hybrid of European and steppe elements (see also A. Chibilev, S. Bogdanov, M. Sdykov 2011). They suggest that this historically emerging pattern is still significant today and offers an explanatory frame to historians and other scholars of Russian imperialism and culture, of Russia's perception of self, its borders and the relationship with its neighbours.

In his detailed historical analysis, Willard Sunderland shows how the Eurasian steppe was gradually but persistently transformed over time as it was included in the Russian state between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, he argues, "... the steppe had been so profoundly transformed by Russian imperialism that it was difficult for contemporaries to determine whether it constituted a borderland, a colony, or Russia itself" (Sunderland 2004: 223). While the colonization of the steppe was discursively constructed by statesmen as providing order and security as well as progress and enlightenment, the observed reality of the steppe often contradicted these schemes. Sunderland stresses how the physical and the imagined steppe were mutually constitutive for this process. He demonstrates how these two realities "were deeply intertwined and mutually influential with statesmen, scholars, literature, natives, 'resettlers', and sundry other colonizers all playing their irreplaceable parts in the steppe's material and symbolic creation" (ibid. 224). The steppe as imaginary, in this view, must be understood in its interplay with observed states of the physical environment.

Similarly, in his historical analysis Michael Khodarkovsky points to the diachronically changing definitions of the steppe with the expansion of the Russian settlement toward the south between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century (Khodarkovsky 2002). He shows the complex relationship between Russia and the steppe for this historical period during which the steppe was a frontier that, through intricate transformations, became a part of the Russian Empire. Such a transformation was not a uniformly unfolding process, but was characterised by alternating periods of peaceful interaction and violent clashes between Russians and nomadic peoples who inhabited the steppe. Through the expansion of Russian settlement southward, he argues, the former "wild field" of the steppe became tamed materially and discursively and thus became an integral physical and conceptual part of the Russian Empire. During this process, he argues,

Russian understanding of the steppe repeatedly changed. His research suggests that the steppe cannot be understood as a historically stable category, but must be questioned for its contingent meaning over time.

Further research has been carried out on the ethnic groups or regions of the steppes by such scholars, as Barrett, (1999), O'Rourke, (2000), Khodarkovsky (1992) or agriculture on the steppes (Moon 2008; 2013).

However, while the above-discussed authors trace the symbolic significance of the steppe for Russian history as far back as the ninth century, their reflections mostly end with the late nineteenth century and only marginally touch or do not address the twentieth century. Yet, as recent research has shown, the steppe continues to be a key theme of Russian and then Soviet political development beyond the nineteenth century.

### Landscape and Russian national identity

Recent literature in the field of literary and art criticism as well as in the emerging field of environmental history has argued that the perception of the Russian landscape and its environment is important to understanding the emergence and development of Russian national identity. In his analysis of Imperial Russia, Mark Bassin stresses the importance of geographical imaginaries for processes of nation-building and establishing national identity (Bassin 1999, 2000; Bassin et al. 2010). In his book *Imperial Visions: National imagination and geographical expansion in the Russian Far East 1840—1865*, Bassin examines Russia's imaginative geographies through the analysis of perception of the new territory of the Amur region which came under Russian rule through imperial expansion. He argues that not only specific landscapes, but also entire geographical regions are subject to cultural constructions in specific political context. He thus proposes to analyse not only social institutions and processes, but also these cultural constructions for their perceived and signified ideological content (Bassin 1999).

Christopher Ely takes this reflection further by insightfully demonstrating the close link between literary and artistic representations of nature with the formation of Russians' perceptions of self and nation (Ely 2002). He reveals the historically contingent cultural construction of Russia's landscape which dramatically changed during the nineteenth century. According to Ely, during the early 1800s, Russians commonly accepted the Western European view that their landscape was unattractive and monotonous. An important reason for this was that it did not offer diversity in morphological forms over small distances — a central feature of contemporary aesthetic theory. However, over the next several decades, writers, travellers, painters and photographers sought to offer new interpretations as well as appreciations of their own nature and space in opposition to the dominance of Western European aesthetic models. This must be understood in the light of the political developments, more specifically the growing importance of the concept of the nation. Ely argues that it was during this period that vast, open spaces such as the steppe were no longer thought to be monotonous and non-descript, but rather began to signify immensity and to imply a special Russian sense of freedom (Ely 2002).

In a similar vein, Jane Costlow examines how images of the Russian forest served as icons in the process of articulation of national and spiritual identity in nineteenth century Russian culture (Costlow 2013). Based on her explorations of Russian literary writers such as Turgenev, Tolstoi and Korolenko, along with the scientific foresters and visual artists, she argues that the meaning attributed to natural species or habitats cannot be understood outside a cultural context. Such a cultural context, she contends, consists of "... a dense tissue of stories, images, and metaphors, a thick braid of meanings that emerge over time as authors and artists explore the emotional resonance and cultural significance of place" (ibid. 5). Costlow highlights the role of forest as the "megatext" of Russia's landscape which is foundational for understanding Russian culture (ibid. 6).

At the same time, by reference to Russian thinkers, she confirms the importance of both forest and steppe as "elemental nomadic expansiveness" in the wandering Russian Soul which becomes apparent in the "... poetry of elemental spaciousness of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Kol'tsov" (ibid.).

The importance of landscape in Russian history and the construction of Russian national identity is by no means the sole concern of European and US scholars. It has also been extensively discussed by Russian scholars in the field of History, Geography, Philosophy and Literary Studies. Russia's preeminent historian of the late nineteenth century, Vasilii Kliuchevskii, asserted the centrality of environmental spaces, namely the forest, the steppe and the river to bestow meaning to Russian thought and consciousness, or, in his words, "... in the construction of the life and ideas of the Russian individual" (Kliuchevskii, 1906: 82). In a similar vein, philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev equates the expanse of the Russian land with the Russian soul, both characterised, in his words, by the same "boundlessness, formlessness, aspiration to infinity, width" (Berdyaev 1990: 8). Russian scholar Irina Belyaeva identifies the dominance of spatial over temporal imaginations which characterise Russian consciousness (Rus. *natsional'noe samosoznanie*) (Belyaeva 2008: 59). In her view, this accounts for the centrality that images of boundless, vast spaces have for Russian writers and poets. She argues that both forest and steppe have become "the geocultural symbols of Russia" (ibid. 60). But while the forest is perceived as dense and protective, the steppe is associated with the idea of "transitivity" (*perehodnost'*) and perceived as a space of wandering (*bluzhdanie*), linked to the ideas of "movement, journey, search" (ibid.).

Regarding the steppe, Alexander Chibilev identifies a narrative which shapes much of Russian classical literature (Chibilev 1990: 3). In his understanding, the steppe is the primary element (*prirodnaya stichiya*), to which history and destiny of the Russian state are closely tied. This element, he argues much in C. Ely's vein, is rendered aesthetic and affective through its attributes

of vastness, expanse which signify freedom and liberty (razdol'e). Such an aesthetic interpretation of the steppe characterises, in his analysis, much of Russian classical literature written by authors such as Aksakov, Shevchenko, Gogol', Chehov, Gorkiy, Sholokhov. Emblematic for such a narrative is, in Chibilev's understanding, the poem by Russian Romantic poet and writer Mikhail Lermontov which he quotes:

*The steppe stretches as a lilac veil,  
It is so fresh, and so dear to the soul,  
As if created solely for freedom.*

With his analysis, Chibilev points to the affective qualities of spatial imaginaries. Commenting on Lermontov's poetry, Chibilev asks: "Aren't these the feelings that nurtured our national character?" (Chibilev 1990: 3). In his understanding, such descriptions are not merely abstract formulations, but rather images which please the senses for their aesthetic and poetic content, but also serve to construct a sense of collective belonging mediated through metaphors.

In turn, Russian literary scholar Michail Stroganov's work explores the discursive politics of naming landscapes to produce "imagined communities" (Stroganov 2009). He argues that for Russian national discourse it was of central importance to distinguish the Eurasian steppe linguistically from other, geographically similar landscapes such as the Northern American prairie. That is why the term "prairie" was integrated into Russian language during the nineteenth century to describe this Northern American landscape. For instance, the title of James F. Cooper's novel "The Prairie" was changed from "American steppe" (first edition from 1829) to "Prairie" in its Russian translation in a later edition. During the same period, the yet unnamed landscapes of southern Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan started to be referred to in Russian as "steppe" despite their different environmental characteristics in comparison with steppes in the European part of Russia. He argues that this different treatment in Russian language of American and Central Asian landscapes can be explained by the perception of

the American steppes as a foreign, distant landscape for Russians, associated with a different culture, different nationality and, consequently, requiring another verbal description. In turn, Central Asian steppes, although initially also perceived as a foreign space, were not distant, but adjacent to Russia's territory. Thus, the term "steppe" masked cultural and national differences, and served as a prerequisite for mastery in the sense of conquest and Russification without a further need for discursive change (ibid.). Stroganov argues that such discursive framing is related to the association of the Russian state with ideas of expansive, open spaces. He opposes this to the image of Russia as a swamp, representing a dirty and confined space, which he argues is 'anti-state'. Both images, in his view, have been exploited for political propaganda and were illustratively and allegorically used to underline the contrasting visions of the state (ibid.). Stroganov thus points out not only the cultural construction, but also the deeply political nature of spatial imaginaries in Russia.

All the above-mentioned scholarly research on landscape in Russian artistic literature, painting and poetry suggests the centrality of spatial imaginaries in Russian philosophical and political thought. While anecdotal research exists, the cultural construction of the steppe in Russian thought in the twentieth century remains insufficiently explored. This observation contradicts the above-outlined centrality attributed by several scholars to this particular imaginary.

### **The representations of nature in Soviet scientific, artistic and popular literature**

The twentieth century saw the appearance of many vibrant portrayals of a new transformed steppe. The economy centred changes induced by the Soviet state during this period brought into play a fundamentally altered interpretation of this natural environment. Poems by tselinniki, enthusiastically depicting the first achievements in the early years of Virgin Lands Campaign are a vivid example of this. The steppe in many of these

representations appears as an abundant and productive space achieved by means of human transformation in a modernist framework of thought.

*At full gallop ran gophers and foxes  
Away from the fields, that they for ages  
inhabited...*

*All around, in place of the feather-grass,  
the conqueror - wheat  
stands there stirring its whiskers.<sup>1</sup>*

Some authors have noted the prevalence of the mastery of nature theme in Soviet discourse about the natural world in literature and poetry produced during the twentieth century. So, in her article "From dry hell to blossoming garden: metaphors and poetry in Soviet irrigation literature on the Hungry Steppe, 1950–1980" Christine Bichsel explores the discursive framing of irrigation development as expressed in scientific texts and public media between the 1950s and 1970s. She discusses how in the texts on irrigation development on the Hungry Steppe water technologies, infrastructure and landscapes were described by use of not only factual prose, but also metaphorical expressions. Bichsel argues, that these texts, discussing the transformation from a steppe landscape into a landscape of industrial agriculture, served to propagate, interpret and justify largescale environmental transformations (Bichsel 2017).

Furthermore, William B. Husband in his article "'Correcting Nature's Mistakes': Transforming the Environment and Soviet Children's Literature, 1928–1941" analyses the ways in which Soviet mass propaganda systematically promoted applied science and technology to adults and children as a solution to Russia's "backwardness", and in doing so, favoured the representations of planned and improved environment over the environment in its natural state. Additionally, Frank Westerman (2003) in his explorations of Soviet literature discusses the Soviet strategies of co-opting artistic writing to influence people's interpretation regarding an important process of

transforming the steppe: the building of large-scale waterworks. He brings to light the complex and at times conflicting relationships between the field of applied sciences and engineering, and the domain of literary writing. While the engineers' tasks were the technical planning and realization of large-scale infrastructural projects, in turn literary writers such as Maxim Gorki or Konstantin Paustowski sought to shape popular interpretation by praising the achievements of the former, and by pushing them to always plan and build even more boldly for the glory of socialism. He also explores the fate of those Soviet writers such as Andrei Platonov whose accounts of the Soviet transformation of nature did not match the ideological requirements, and who were subsequently refused publication of their works, subjected to institutional exclusion from the Writer's Union and sometimes also legally prosecuted. Westerman's work thus shows the politics of exclusion and inclusion pertaining to representations of the environment, as well as the complicit, mutually reinforcing and at the same time contradictory relationship between scientific and literary accounts in this field.

Furthermore, in her analysis of the extractive industries of Russia's north Alla Bolotova (2004) discusses, on the one hand, the Soviet dominant discourse on nature, which defined the environment as useless, unless exploited for human needs and, on the other, she explores the experience of the actual people – geologists, whose perceptions of the environment remarkably differed from the hegemonic Soviet discourse. For geologists, as Bolotova writes, "nature was not simply the 'house of treasures' that official rhetoric cherished but also an archipelago of freedom" (Bolotova 2004: 104). Her research further proposes that the Soviet leadership sought to rework people's interpretation of their lived experience by means of providing the words and images through which phenomena could be understood.

<sup>1</sup> Own translation of Anatoliy Bragin's poem "About tselina". For more examples of tselina inspired poetry see: <http://soil.biblhub.ru/smotri-i-slushaj/stihi/> [Accessed 12 March 2018].



Overall, existing research points to the central role attributed politically to artistic literature for shaping public perceptions during the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, it stresses the close exchange between a more science and policy-oriented literature with artistic writing in the form of novels and poetry. While scholars have explored these relationships for extractive industries or waterworks, research on the steppe and its transformations during this period is lacking so far. Existing research on the steppe suggests, however, that similar processes shape its imaginaries. This paper, thus, suggests that there is a need to address this gap in research on steppe imaginaries in artistic and scientific literature during the twentieth century.

Furthermore, there is a lack of scholarly research exploring the literary work produced during the twentieth century by the authors whose accounts of the Soviet transformation of nature did not match the ideological requirements and presented adversarial representations of steppe. Interesting in this regard, would be the writings of such authors as Ivan Bunin, Andrei Platonov, Evgenii Nosov and others.

### **On the historical transformation of scientific views and ideas about the steppe**

Lastly, although with a lesser focus on the political and social significance of steppe imaginaries, research has been done to analyse the transformation of scientific understandings of and ideas about the steppe in historical perspective (Chibilev and Grosheva 2004; Grosheva 2002). For instance, in their article "Conceptual Evolution of Steppe Landscape in Russian Geography" Chibilev and Grosheva refer to Russian scientist M.N. Bogdanov, who in his work "Birds and animals of blackearth stripe of Povolzhie and the valleys of middle and lower Volga" wrote: "*Large or small areas of dry plains are referred to by a Russian person as steppe, open field or wild field. Unlike a wild field, ploughed up land and land under crop are called bread field*" (Chibilev and Grosheva 2004: 53). Their analysis further shows that this view did not receive further

development as most of the leading scientists of the twentieth century such as A.N. Beketov, A.N. Krasnov, G.I. Tanfiliev, L.S. Berg or F.N. Milkov predominantly agreed that the territories within the steppe areas do not stop being steppes in a geographical sense, even if they have been ploughed up and exploited in economic ways for centuries (ibid. 54). So, for instance, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, Russian botanist G. Vysotskiy writes: "*Not every surface covered in grass can be called steppe (fields, meadows, swamps), on the other hand, ploughed up steppe, occupied by cultivated crops, none the less remains steppe*" (ibid.). Their research points to a long and contradictory process of the ongoing formation of the geo-ecological ideas and imaginaries about the steppe landscape which started in Imperial Russian and continued later in Soviet science. Chibilev and Grosheva's work could be considered a useful starting point for the analysis of a broader picture of how steppe imaginaries came to inform the works of scientists, and how, in turn, the works of scientists produce and re-produce the steppe imaginaries.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Drawing on analysis of existing research in History, Geography, Political Science and other fields this article demonstrates the importance of the steppe in Russian history. It shows that for the Russian cultural space, the term steppe cannot be reduced to solely describing a physical environment against the background of which political developments unfold. Rather, in the symbolic domain the steppe becomes a key imaginary for the emergence and consolidation of Russian statehood and identity. While existing research has provided rich insight into how perceptions and interpretations of environmental spaces became incorporated into the project of nation-building until the end of the nineteenth century, scholarship so far only marginally covers and lacks sustained engagement with the twentieth century. At the same time, it is precisely during this period that the steppe environments underwent their greatest transformation through processes of land reclamation,

irrigation development and industrial agriculture. However, scientific insights on how these changes were accompanied by changing imaginaries of the steppe in literature are largely absent. This observation contradicts the outlined above centrality attributed by several scholars to

this imaginary. Therefore, although all the works discussed in this article have made notable contributions to the expanding scope of research on steppe imaginaries, there remains a gap in this topic when it comes to the twentieth century, which this paper calls to fill. ■

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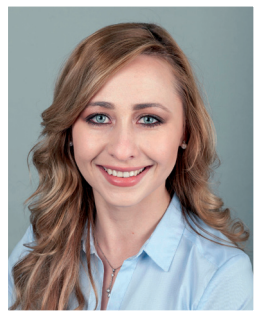
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