

**John McCannon.** *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union 1932-1939.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 243 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-511436-2.



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During the 1930s, the period of High Stalinism, the "Red Arctic" became a wonderland where northern explorers and pilots, breathing fresh air and inspired by a dashing pioneer spirit, met polar bears and shamans. But despite the sparkling view of the aurora borealis and the breathtaking scientific accomplishments, the vast tundra had also a frightful face that mirrored the grim struggle of Stalinist bureaucrats and NKVD agents against class enemies and which, as an indispensable link of the Gulag archipelago, exhaled the smell of putrefying corpses.

Based on a quite colossal array of archival sources (ARAN, TsGA RSFSR, RTsKhIDNI, RGAE, GARF) and a meticulous screening of unpublished materials including film and photo documents, John McCannon delivers an engagingly written study on the most neglected area of High Stalinism era in Soviet history, by combining the social and cultural approach in modern historiography. One feels the methodological impact of Lynne Viola's or Stephen Kotkin's works.[1]

The book has a triple purpose. The first is to document the process of Arctic exploration, in-

cluding the Soviet role in the international race to the North Pole, as part of a scientific and technological history with remarkable reflections on man's struggle with nature. The second is to show how the "Arctic Myth" stimulated popular culture, by molding explorers, scientists, and pilots into socialist heroes for the Stalinist dream factory where individual and collective imaginations were melted into the golden "Socialist Future". The third is to debunk this myth. The Stalinist regime never succeeded in pressing nature into the socialist planned economy. Even human character—either in its individual or its collective existence—proved to be unruly. Neither were the Soviet citizens merely passive receivers of official propaganda, instead, they did not lose a sense of reality, of the true face of Stalinism, nor was the machinery of the GUSMP (Glavsevmorput'), the institution which promoted the exploration and economic exploitation of the Soviet Arctic, without any gearbox troubles. Like many other Stalinist bureaucracies, it suffered from the ills of inefficiency, waste and individual animosity among its staff.

Russian exploration of the Arctic has a long tradition. Over four centuries Russia has invested manpower and money into the development of its far northern frontier. So, McCannon is right in starting Chapter One with Imperial Russia's footholds in the Arctic. With the general historiography on polar discovery slanted in favor of Anglo-American and Scandinavian feats, it is often forgotten that the Russians also showed pioneer spirit and should be included in the pantheon of explorers. The Russian push to the North, beginning with the founding of the Arctic port of Arkhangelsk in 1584 and that of legendary Mangazeia in 1601 [2], met from the very beginning with the harsh rivalry of the Western powers, especially the British and the Dutch. In this sense, the absorption of the Arctic - like that of Siberia - into the Russian empire resulted from the immediate concern for state security and national prestige.

The next round of the race to the Far North was initiated by Peter the Great, the "Enlightenment tsar" and promoter of science per se. The Great Northern Expedition [3], although only fully realized after Peter's death between 1733 and 1749, was Russia's first mammoth undertaking in conquering the Arctic, two centuries before Stalin's gigantomania rediscovered the northern frontier. The pre-modern forerunners, however, conducted comprehensive research of a broad scope from geology, zoology, botany to anthropology.

The Great Northern Expedition was the first and last state-sponsored endeavor of Imperial Russia. Until the October Revolution it was common for individuals to explore and develop the Arctic at their own expense and at the risk of their lives. However, the history of the Arctic enthusiasts under Imperial rule such as Fedor Vrangeli[4], Count Fedor Litke, gold-mining magnate Mikhail Sidorov, Admiral Kolchak or, at least, Yan Nagursky (the first pilot to cross the Arctic Circle), still deserves further elaboration than McCannon gives here.[5] A comparison between the

Imperial and Soviet era would probably be a fascinating undertaking, especially under the aspects of the explorers' self-image and its impact on popular culture. Such a task goes beyond the scope of the author's intentions and, therefore, still awaits scholarly reflection.

How did Soviet power come to the Arctic? During the revolution and civil war, Lenin eagerly signed some ukazy which dealt purely with troop movements and logistical problems like fuel shipments. The Bolshevik network of party cells, executive committees and local soviets, scanty and primitive, was based mainly on the old ostrog system. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Bolsheviks did not gain a real foothold among the "small peoples of the North". The "youngest children of the great Soviet family" trusted more in their shamans than in Leninist prophets. It took a decade before they lost their paradise in the whirlwinds of collectivization and industrialization for the sake of being incorporated into the Stalinist dream factory. More detailed insights into these matters are presented in the works of Adele Weiser and Yuri Slezkine.[6]

The impact of the Northern exploration on the natives' identity is generally missing in this book.[7] McCannon writes the history of the "white man's" feats in the Arctic. But, the natives' response to the breathtaking records of socialist explorers and pilots, conquering their paradise with high technology and without respect for the natural environment is an important question that escaped the author's notice.

Chapter Two delivers the institutional framework of Arctic exploration, embodied by Glavsevmorput (1932-1936), the "Commissariat of Ice". Before Stalin's grip was extended to the Far North there were several commissariats like that of supply (Narkomsnab), Agriculture (Narkomzem), Food provisioning (Narkomprod) and Forest Industries (Narkomles) which competed for the economic control over the natural resources. Disorganization, bureaucratic overlap and incompe-

tence were widespread during the twenties. This excrescence on the central administration met the increasing independence and rivalry of regional powers in nearby Siberia such as the Sibirskii Revoliutsionnyi Komitet (Sibrevkom) in Novosibirsk. Despite Five-Year plan slogans, the Soviets had not yet come far enough to storm the Arctic. In 1932 Stalin declared: "The Arctic and our northern regions contain colossal wealth. We must create a Soviet organization which can, in the shortest period possible, include this wealth in the general resources of our socialist economic structure" (p.33).

This was the birth of Glavsevmorput (GUSMP), founded on 17 December 1932 and managed by the well-known Arctic explorer, Professor Otto Iulevich Shmidt. GUSMP was a single institution with the sole jurisdiction over the Arctic, simultaneously exemplifying hypercentralization. As originally planned, this institution was to explore the Northern Sea Route and transform it into a regular, operational sea-line for relieving the Transsiberian Railway. With time, however, GUSMP became the "master" of the "Arctic dominion" with all its administrative, economic, and cultural facets. The variety was reflected through special sections of the executive apparatus: from political administration, maritime transport, polar aviation, meteorology, mining, to promotion of native culture. The institution maintained its own towns and factories and even polar theaters. GUSMP sent its armada of scientists, technicians and builders with their families into the Far North.

Unfortunately, McCannon does not examine how the Arctic and its roughness shaped family life and the identity of the accompanying women, far away from Russian civilization and its cultural centers. One wonders if in the Arctic more divorces occurred than in Central Russia. What about mortality rates and suicide in the Far North? How many of the GUSMP staff left their

jobs due to miserable living conditions, alcoholism, corruption, crime and mental disorder?

The author's perspective is strictly institutional. He vividly describes the intra-institutional clashes in GUSMP between the promoters of pure science and those of practical application like economists and technicians, revealing superiority and inferiority feelings alike. The inner life of a giant and seemingly anonymous bureaucracy was characterized by human strength and weakness--personal ambitions and self-centeredness. Above all, the Five-Year Plan seemed to be a rigid corset. Without basic research on climate, ice formation, permafrost soil etc., economic progress in the Arctic was nil. However, for the central planners exploration should be hurried and not waste money. It was typical for Stalinist voluntarism that economic results came before scientific findings. Patience was not the strength of Stalinism. The "Arctic dominion" was, therefore, not built on a solid base. Industrial sites, rails and so on, corroded due to wind, ice and frost, sank into the Arctic swamps. Indeed, GUSMP resembled a drifting and cracked ice floe.

Under the apt headlines "Days of Glory" and "The Pole is Ours!," Chapter Three is devoted to the parade of expeditions across the Arctic sea and sky. The struggle of the *Sibiriakovy* and *Cheiluskinites* against ice barriers and fog banks on the Northeast Sea Passage and the storming through the Pole's blizzards by Chkalov, the Russian Charles Lindbergh, made Soviet heroes of these seamen and pilots. Long before the Cold War, the race between the USA and USSR had started here in the Far North, the first round of a technological race that would jump into space three decades later.

As with the moon in the sixties, the Pole became the popular myth of the thirties. The Arctic meant mankind's adventure. More than navigation, aviation became the cultural leitmotif of a whole generation. Nothing seemed better for charting new land than the airplane. The air-

plane, indeed, evolutionized transport and communications in vast and remote regions such as the Arctic; a forceful machine in the natives' garden of Eden. Moreover, "air power" had a military-strategic dimension as a significant tool in future wars, and the vast Arctic presented a good field for exercise and demonstration. It is striking that women were absent from the Arctic skies. Male flyers broke the records. On the technological side "Red Arctic" remained in fact a man's world. McCannon does not depict clearly the ways in which "Red Arctic" and "Red Aviation" engineered male self-pride, and how they shaped male imaginations and attitudes under the linguistic turn of body culture.

Chapters Four and Five compare the myth and anti-myth of the Arctic in Soviet culture. Not only were Arctic heroes (often labeled as *bogatyr*) Stalin's favorites, they also broke people's hearts. The Arctic became a media festival or carnival with innumerable portraits of the explorers in books, films, radio broadcasts, even on postage stamps. Pilots and explorers were celebrated in every factory, collective farm and classroom. Unmarried pilots received baskets full of letters from young women. In 1936 alone, almost 400,000 people flooded into Arctic exhibitions. Quiz games like "What do you know about the Arctic" were a special attraction for kids. Adolescents dreamt of a career as pilot or explorer. The Arctic and its heroes became a good subject for a Stalinist ideology that boasted: "We have conquered time and space. Technology has conquered nature, man has conquered death" (p.84). Apparently, Stalinism had succeeded in the mastery of the world.

The Arctic became a common metaphor glamorizing the USSR as a "mighty icebreaker" with Stalin as its "sturdy, steel-willed captain" on the voyage to the modern technological and industrial world (p.106). However, Arctic heroes let ordinary people forget the terror, the hardships and the boredom of everyday life in the 1930s. Myth and ideology became a substitute for religion. In a

Freudian sense, the Arctic myth was the magic-illusory comfort for all real privations and losses. Unconscious wishes and conflicts poured into the institutions, culture, myths and national character.[8] Moreover, the storm to the Arctic as man's technological struggle against nature laid open man's psychological structure in an increasingly changing industrial society.[9]

But, vox populi there was sometimes negative feedback, as in the comment "What is there to gain from sliding around the thick polar ice? If you ask me, not a thing," cited by McCannon (p. 141). People often criticized the fact that while explorers and pilots gained prizes, ordinary men had to struggle to survive in their everyday lives. Moreover, people often ridiculed the Arctic feats, e.g., mocking at "Stalin's Pole". Obviously, mass persuasion under Stalin had its limits. The organized myth did not succeed in taking hold of everyone's entire personality. People had their own ambivalent visions on the Arctic and of their life under Stalin. Even when they celebrated their heroes this does not necessarily mean that they adopted a passive herd instinct as the state and media tried to inject them.[10]

Chapter Six gives a brief overview of GUSMP's decline in the years 1936-1939. Like many other bureaucracies, GUSMP felt the sledgehammer of the great terror. Through a fury of mutual observation and denunciation, the qualified staff was replaced by inexperienced opportunists who brought confusion into the institution and, at least, strangled it by inefficiency. The Arctic heroes quickly became anti-heroes. Labeled as enemies of the people, they vanished in the Arctic camps of Dal'stroi.

In short, the author has succeeded in demonstrating the ambivalence behind "Red Arctic:" in Old Russian tradition "Red" means "magnificence". And indeed, the exploration of the Far North was breathtaking, an opalescent carnival of popular culture under Stalin. On the other hand, "Red" symbolizes the bloody terror in the

Arctic camps. With these two sides, "Red Arctic" was one more example of the schizophrenia of Stalinism. McCannon's "Red Arctic" convincingly documents the failure of the Stalinist crusade against nature. Indeed, it was the battle of two giants –the earth's greatest empire, homeland of a new (socialist) mankind, and the archaic forces of nature. Regardless of the economic costs and man's energy (including the loss of human lives in the Arctic camps) it was, at least, nature that won this struggle.[11] High-flying visions of polar aviators, explorers, and planners had to come back to earth.

#### Notes

[1]. Stephen Kotkin *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley 1995; Lynne Viola *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*, Oxford 1996.

[2]. P.N. Butskinskii *Mangazeia i Mangazeiskii uezd, 1601-1645*, Khar'kov, 1893.

[3]. Doris Posselt (ed), *Die Grose Nordische Expedition von 1733 bis 1743. Aus Berichten der Forschungsreisenden Johann Georg Gmelin und Georg Wilhelm Steller*, Leipzig-Weimar, 1990; Wieland Hintzsche and Thomas Nickol, eds. *Die Grose Nordische Expedition: Georg Wilhelm Steller, Ein Lutheraner erforscht Sibirien und Alaska*, Gotha, 1996.

[4]. F. Vrangeli' *Narrative of an Expedition to the Polar Sea in the Years 1820, 1821, 1822, and 1823*, London, 1844.

[5]. For the Imperial period there exist only two older monographs by Terence E. Armstrong: *The Russians in the Arctic*, London, 1958; and *Russian Settlement in the North*, Cambridge, 1965.

[6]. Adele Weiser *Die Volker Nordsibiriens unter sowjetischer Herrschaft von 1917 bis 1936*, Munich, 1989. Preferable for methodological aspects, Yuri Slezkine, "From Savages to Citizens: The Cultural Revolution in the Far North, 1928-1938," *Slavic Review*, 51 (1992): 52-76; idem

*Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, Ithaca 1994. From a more generalized, but good anthropological perspective, see Ernest Gellner *The Soviet and the Savage*, *Current Anthropology* 10 (1975), no.4: 595-617.

[7]. Iurii Rytkeu *Magicheskie chisla*, Leningrad, 1986 offers a fictional reflection on the Amundsen expedition to Chukotka and its perception by the natives.

[8]. Sigmund Freud *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, Leipzig-Wien-Zurich, 1921 (Reprint 1993), p.22; for details on the aspects of "carneval," see p.93.

[9]. Herbert Marcuse *Schriften in neun Banden*, vol.8, Frankfurt a.M. 1984, pp.63-64, 76; more detailed: *Der eindimensionale Mensch. Studien zur Ideologie der fortgeschrittenen Industriegesellschaft*, Neuwied-Berlin, 1967.

[10]. For "herd instinct" see: Freud *Der Herdentrieb* (chapter IX) or *Die Masse und die Urhorde* (chapt. X), in: op. cit., pp. 78-83, 83-90.

[11]. For general views on man's struggle with nature: Joseph Bixby Hoyt *Man and Earth* Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1973; see also Murray Feshbach, and Alfred Friendly, Jr. *Ecocide in the USSR*, New York 1992; Demosthenes James Peterson, *Troubled Lands: The Legacy of Soviet Environmental Destruction*, Boulder, 1993.

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