

# Writing the History of the Northern “Field”: An Introductory Note

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What do we know about the fieldwork of the ethnographers/ anthropologists of the North? How did they organize their research and what ideas have they left behind in their now archived field notes? Historians of anthropology along with anthropologists attempt to find answers to these questions through the analysis of field notes, diaries, letters, and reports, as well as published and unpublished works from the fieldworkers of the past. Despite the thousands of field notes and multiple narratives about how pre-Soviet and Soviet anthropologists heroically conducted their research in “uncivilized conditions” in remote areas, and how they were captured by ideologies of evolutionism, Soviet modernization and development, we still know little about their field research as a practice. This issue titled, “Beyond the Anthropological Texts: History and Theory of Fieldworking in the North” aims to start a discussion on the history and ethnography of ethnographic fieldworking in the North and Siberia. Contributors from different American, British, Estonian, and Russian institutions aim to increase the base of knowledge about these fieldworkers and their working practices.

The most challenging question for the contributors of this issue was how we understand “participant observation” as a concept within Russian anthropology. Historians of anthropology recognize a uniqueness of ethnographic research with certain explorers, such as Nicolas Miklukho-Maclay who spent many years amongst indigenous peoples in the Pacific (Stocking 1990; Tumarkin 2011). From today’s perspective, his experience did not lead anthropology to turn to the so-called participant observation as a key method of research. He had been forgotten until World War II, when Soviet anthropologists became preoccupied with the construction of their institutional genealogy and the search



for a totemic figure (Kan and Arzyutov 2016: 201–202). It was at the conference of ethnographers from Moscow and Leningrad in 1929, just before Miklukho-Maclay's canonization, that the discussion about the meaning of the field took center stage. Ethnographers examined how the field might be organized and what the status of the field in ethnography was, further shaping the development of Soviet field ethnography.<sup>1</sup> Conference participants involved in the discussions were divided into two camps: (1) the supporters of long-term field research, which was akin to the participant observation of Malinowskian anthropology, and (2) the supporters of "route" field research (*marshrutnaia ekspeditsiia*), which took less time and usually focused on one particular research aim. This difference in opinion divided Moscow and Leningrad ethnographers—the former supported the route field research, whereas the latter preferred to follow the ideas of the leader of Siberian ethnography at that time, Vladimir Bogoras, and his charismatic appeal. "It needs to feed two pounds of our own blood to indigenous lice to understand their [indigenous people] mode of life [*byt*]. This meal assimilates a little at a time. It means to learn culture [you] have not to keep away from ignorance, dirt, cold." (Bogoras cited in Arzyutov et al. 2014: 263). Far away from metropolitan anthropology, Vladimir Arseniev conducted his field research among peoples of the Ussuri River and wrote a best-selling book *Dersu Uzala* (*With Dersu the Hunter* or *Dersu the Trapper*) that demonstrated deep ethnographic analysis that corresponds to all the features of high standard ethnographic research. The book was well received in Europe and was translated into many languages. That was the beginning of a bumpy and contradictory road of participant observation in Soviet ethnography. In anthropological books and articles, Soviet ethnographers used three terms when referring to their field partners: *osvedomitel'* (a let-to-knowing person; Potapov 1953: 280), *informator* (a person giving information; Vaschenko and Dolgikh 1962: 182), and *informant* (same meaning as *informant* in English). The first two terms were actively used in investigative research while the last term had more of a sociological meaning. Even this chain of terms demonstrates the difficulties faced by Soviet ethnographers when trying to define the people they worked with.

Despite Bogoras's expressive statements, might be memory about Miklukho-Maclay, the knowledge about Arseniev's experience, and only published handbook for field ethnographers (Makar'ev 1928), Soviet ethnographers had not reflected on the concept of the field until the 1980s. This meant that for almost half a century Soviet ethnographers did not care about such manuals, even though they worked

quite actively in the field and even organized some so-called complex expeditions to different regions of the USSR (Northern expedition, Altai-Saian/Tuva expedition, among others). This paradox is touched upon by Dmitry Arzyutov and Sergei Kan in "The Concept of the 'Field' in Early Soviet Ethnography: A Northern Perspective." In the article the authors explore how fieldwork was carried out without the use of such handbooks. They describe how the knowledge of how to conduct field research was based on oral communication rather than written texts. However, writing practices did shape relations between the metropolitan institutions and remote researchers, which can be seen by the thousands of letters, telegrams, and reports. In this issue we have reconstructed the history of field ethnography using letters, reports and other nuggets of published information. In spite of unclear/unwritten instructions as to how anthropologists carried out their fieldwork, the field, as such, carries the knowledge that shapes anthropological discourse. This has opened up the perspective on the history of anthropology written from the field, where the field is not only a geographical place but also a meeting point, described by Laura Siragusa and Madis Arukask in "Reflecting the 'Field': Two Vepsian Villages and three Researchers" as a place where "different approaches and . . . different geographic territories, and people with different backgrounds and life histories" join.

Gazing into the field we can also see the rarely discussed side of visual documentation of indigenous cultures of the North; how researchers who were observing animals, fishes, and plants turned their heads towards the living people surrounding them. Historically, the first figure to open up the field of visual anthropology was Alfred Haddon who changed his optics from the animal-world to the indigenous one. Haddon's focus, however, remained on biological similarity and primitiveness, rather than looking at social meanings of the practices of local people (Fleure 1941). His impact on the history of anthropology also left a trace in Russian anthropology of the North via the relations between Boas and Borogas. Few people know that the Russian ichthyologist, Ivan Poliakov, had also changed his optics from fish to Khanty people—albeit some twenty years earlier than Haddon—and brought back from his expedition the first ethnographic photographs of the Russian North, currently held at the oldest ethnographic museum in Russia. The analysis of this first photographic collection from Siberia, held at Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), provides the focus Ekaterina Tolmacheva's article in this issue.

We hope that this issue, organized in chronological order, will be the first step toward understanding the phenomenon of the Northern and Siberian field in the history of (Russian) anthropology. Starting with an article by Ekaterina Tolmacheva discussing the early history of visual anthropology in Siberia, namely the photographic collection brought back from Siberia by Ivan Poliakov, this issue also features an article by Dmitry Arzyutov and Sergei Kan dealing with the history of the concept of the field in early Soviet anthropology of the North. The last article by Laura Siragusa and Madis Arukask discusses the Vepsian field as a meeting point in a Geertzian manner, where “thick description” is shaped by collaborations of anthropologists of various generations and their relations with people and local landscape. All articles include a variety of content from Russian and Estonian archives, as well as from the authors’ personal archives.

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## Note

1. Ironically, Miklukho-Maclay’s name was not mentioned even once at the conference.

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