

# THE PHYSICAL AND REGIONAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE U.S.S.R.

NATURAL REGIONS OF THE U.S.S.R. By L. S. BERG. *Toronto: The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1950. 9½ x 6½ inches; xxxi + 436 pages; maps, diagrams, and illustrations. \$11.50.*

GEOGRAPHY OF THE U.S.S.R.; a regional survey. By THEODORE SHABAD. *Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1951. 9½ x 6½ inches; xxxii + 584 pages; maps and tables. \$10.00.*

The Russians inhabit a vast country, the climate of which varies from arctic to subtropical, and over half of which still lies beyond the "pioneer fringe". It is not surprising that they have long taken a keen interest in the geography of their homeland. Nevertheless, in the early 'twenties of this century, most of the U.S.S.R. still awaited detailed survey. In a little more than two decades, a great deal of this work has been accomplished. By 1947 the entire country had been mapped at scales of 1:2,500,000 and 1:1,000,000, and many regions at larger scales.<sup>1</sup> The Russians are justly proud of the rich literature which has accumulated during this time, and much of this, unlike their maps, they have exported to the West. A number of studies are available, including texts for both primary schools and higher institutions of learning, a large number of regional geographies, and many fascinating although superficial pamphlets.

On the other hand, the scarcity of literature available in Western European languages is as striking as it is frustrating to the reader who does not command Russian. Probably only one good work was written in the inter-war years, a large volume in French by P. Calmena D'Almeida, which appeared in 1932. Even the German General Staff was compelled to prepare its own study in 1941-2; and only in 1944 did the first survey appear in English.<sup>2</sup> During the past six years, however, American, French, and German scholars have been busy; and each year since 1949 has seen the appearance of a major work. Two of these are English versions of important Soviet texts which have been prepared by the Russian Translation Project of the American Council of Learned Studies. The first was the 'Economic Geography of the U.S.S.R.', edited by Balzak, Vasyutin, and Feigin. To cover the physical aspect, Berg's 'Natural regions of the U.S.S.R.' was published as a companion volume last year. Together, these works, with Mr. Shabad's unusual regional survey, which was published in January 1951, will long remain standard English references.

The first edition of Professor L. S. Berg's book was published as long ago as 1930; but, although possibly superior studies have since appeared, the choice of his work by the Russian Translation Project as an authoritative and representative Soviet text on the physical geography of the U.S.S.R. is fortunate. During his long life, Berg wrote some five hundred books and monographs ranging over a dozen different aspects of his field and, long before his death a year ago, he had earned recognition as the dean of Soviet geographers. This book is to be considered as the mature fruit of a very wide scholarship. It is also an important expression of his theory of landscapes. This theory, as well as this particular book, have been used by his younger contemporaries to fabricate a Marxian "methodology" for the science of geography. The essence of Berg's approach is that the earth's surface may be divided into regions in which the interaction of all natural factors active locally produce a characteristic "landscape", and he emphasizes that this interaction, which he calls the "geographical process", is continuous. It is the study of this "process", as opposed to the mere description of "static" landscapes, that is now considered the proper task for a Soviet geography which is informed with the dialectic.

<sup>1</sup>*Izvestiya Akademii Nauk*, Vol. 9 (1947) pp. 373-94.

<sup>2</sup>Gregory, J. S., and D. W. Shave, 'The U.S.S.R., a geographical survey', 1944.

Berg's classification of the Russian countryside into eight lowland landscape-zones and twelve mountain landscapes, three of which are insular, has been substantially adopted by all Soviet geographers. Berg first defines the boundaries of each landscape, and then describes its relief, soils, and vegetation. Among the factors active in the formation of landscapes, he lists fauna (including livestock); but he remains aloof from the Soviet passion for the transformation of nature, and, in describing a country where interesting changes have been and are being wrought, he almost ignores the influence of man. Subdivisions are used to reduce the larger and more complex landscape-zones into readily intelligible units. Berg would probably not have agreed that his lowland landscapes are distinguished mainly on the basis of vegetation, although this is suggested by the nomenclature which he has adopted. Perhaps this characteristic, as well as the fact that about one quarter of the book is devoted to soils and vegetation, can be attributed to his preoccupation with the "organic" or "continuous" aspect of the geographical process.

The Russian countryside exhibits a number of peculiar features, all of which are intriguing, and some of which, in the author's view, merit brief digressions. Thus two pages dealing with the origin of the tundra landscape are appended to Chapter One; Chapter Four contains his theory of the formation of loess, as well as his explanation for the peculiar gullies of the eastern part of the European forest-steppe; and Chapter Five concludes with two pages on the problem of the vegetation of the steppe. The text contains a number of seemingly casual references to curious phenomena, such as the loessial cloud which hovers over Central Asiatic cities and the absence of glaciers in the Far Northeast, which suggest that the author was as fascinated by them as is his Western reader.

Berg's book contains undoubtedly the best simple list of the flora and fauna of the U.S.S.R. yet to appear in English. His treatment of minerals, which, for him, do not appear to enter the proper sphere of interest of the geographer, is disappointingly scanty. Other texts must be consulted for an adequate description of inland waters, climate, and geomorphological regions.

Prior to its first appearance in 1930 as the 'Landscape-geographical zones of the U.S.S.R.', much of the book had already been published in a number of monographs. The first edition was three times expanded and re-issued. It is the last edition, that of 1938, which has been chosen by the translators. In its final form it remains innocent of that turgidity from which many Russian writings suffer. Indeed, many paragraphs consist of monotonously short sentences conveying isolated facts culled from field notes as well as the immense literature available to the author. The book is gratifyingly free of those exasperating polemics which infest many Soviet economic geographies.

The translation is lucid, idiomatic, smooth, and extremely conscientious. A notable feature is the careful correlation of English and Russian names for plants and animals, the first of its kind to be done in the West. It is true that Berg's use of the taxonomic as well as of the common Russian names made such a correlation possible, but the prodigious labour which fell to the translator is evident in the bibliography which she was forced to use to complete this task. No longer can schoolmasters trip their classes up over the classic question of the translation of the Russian "kedr" as "cedar", instead of as "pine". The transliteration of several thousand place names cited in the text is not as fortunate. The translator has made too large a concession to the conventional practice of many researchers, and has developed an over-simplified system which has some four major weaknesses, largely due to the difficulty of ascertaining derivations. These have already been pointed out elsewhere by the author of the second volume reviewed in this article,<sup>1</sup> and need not be discussed here.

The book has been supplied with twenty-three maps, several of which appear to have been taken from other studies, including Sumgin's work on permafrost,

<sup>1</sup>*The American Slavic and East European Rev.*, Vol. 9 (1951) pp. 69-71.

which was presumably not available to Berg when his book was published. The author's bibliography, which was not included in a pre-war French edition, has been retained, and three large indexes covering plants, animals, and other matter mentioned in the text have been added. A glossary containing the more exotic of Russian geographical terms is valuable. There are thirty tables and eighty-one photographs, of which thirty-three have been derived from a very old German source. In a few cases, superior prints could probably have been found in modern Soviet sources.

A number of factors impel the student of Russian geography to adopt a regional approach to his subject. First, there is the obvious fact of the largeness and complexity of the country. Second, geographical studies in the U.S.S.R., both theoretical and applied, have been much exercised with the problem of regionalization; and, as the work of Soviet writers becomes better known in the West, it may be found that, in this field, they have made an interesting contribution to geographical method. Even Nazi writers have grudgingly admitted this.<sup>1</sup> Berg has probably contributed most towards the definition of a physical landscape-complex. Similar methods for the definition of economic and political regions have been evolved by other geographers; and, of especial significance for the foreign student, these methods are largely reflected in the economic and political regions adopted by the government for administrative and planning purposes. In the third place, the rapid industrialization of the country has caused swift and frequent changes in its economic map. These, in turn, have induced related changes in the political map. The former may be no more rapid or extensive than those shown by the nineteenth century map of the U.S.A.; but the dynamism of the Soviet political map is unparalleled elsewhere. This dynamism becomes readily intelligible only in terms of past and current developments, planned and unplanned, within each regional unit. A fourth factor lies in the explicit view of the government that a primary purpose of the whole publishing industry is to encourage the masses to ever greater efforts to build a socialist state. It is partly for this reason that many data concerning new growth have been released for smaller regions, and released through a wide variety of publications, when these are not available for the country as a whole. However incomplete, such data form a large part of the source materials available to the Western geographer. For all these reasons, he is under strong pressure to collate and present his materials by "administrative-territorial" districts of the U.S.S.R. Curiously enough, no single systematic study of all these districts is known to have been published in Russian. Mr. Shabad's book is the first thorough attempt in English at this somewhat novel presentation of Soviet geography.

Part I consists of three chapters which together make up about one-fifth of the book. These provide a background for the very detailed, regional survey which is its principal purpose. The opening chapter consists of summary accounts of the geological history and structure, relief, hydrography, climate, soils, vegetation, and mineral resources of the U.S.S.R. The next two provide highly condensed notes on the political and human geography and on the economic pattern. In this part as a whole, the author has concentrated all the more significant data, which, prior to the appearance of this book, could have been found only by a laborious search through a bewildering variety of sources, many of them obscure. The essential features of Soviet agriculture and industry are covered in only thirty pages. The treatment of "Transportation and Commerce" is less successful. Inevitably, the railways come off best; but those forms of transport which are less important in Russia (road, river, and air), are dealt with about as vaguely as these are in any one Soviet source. It is unfortunate that the whole subject of Soviet "commerce" still awaits even rudimentary treatment in English. With this exception, the "General Survey" remains probably the most serious and easily usable to be written to date.

<sup>1</sup>Schultz, Arved, "Bolschewistische Erdkunde", in 'Bolschewistische Wissenschaft und "Kulturpolitik"', edited by Bolko, Freiherr von Richthofen, Königsberg, 1942, pp. 111-30.

In addition to a studied brevity, Part I has the extra merit of throwing light on many of those questions which arise for the practical researcher rather than in the class room, and which remain troublesome even after much reading. A section on the administrative geography of Russia is the first analysis of its kind to appear in English, and this is probably the first book to give adequate attention to the problem of transliteration into English. The closely associated problem of Soviet place names is also dealt with. The author shows that some names are derived from local non-Slavonic languages; many are associated with the local economy; a large number are those of outstanding citizens, and others are simply Russian adjectives. He then demonstrates that changes in the grammatical form often indicate growth; that place names change as the persons for whom these are named fall into disfavour; that native names may be substituted for Russian and then be yet again replaced by Russian; and that the names of the smaller administrative-territorial units, which are generally named for their centres, may change as new centres grow up and are officially recognized. We have, then, some nine principles governing the derivation and changes in Soviet place names which greatly facilitate the comprehension and handling of these names. Moreover, the more important specific instances of name-changes are listed.

The major portion of the book is a regional survey of the U.S.S.R. The author devotes one chapter to the R.S.F.S.R., five chapters to the four republics of Central Asia, one to the Trans-Caucasian and one to the Baltic republics, and one to each of the remaining republics. It is interesting to note that, whereas regional developments in the Ukraine require only thirty pages, those in Soviet Central Asia require more than twice this space. The R.S.F.S.R. is broken down into eleven regions which are more or less the same as those distinguished by Soviet authorities. Kazakhstan is dealt with under five regional subdivisions, the Ukraine under seven. With four exceptions, the author describes each region *oblast'* by *oblast'*, in the sequence of location and importance, relief, climate, soils and vegetation, minerals, population and settlement, and administration and economy. The absence of repetition between the general descriptions of small regions and the detailed studies of these is an achievement. It is this portion of the book which will be used for reference rather than for general reading.

The Soviet government has required many years for the realization of a number of large projects. The continuity and relationship between different phases of these projects is not obvious to the casual student. Mr. Shabad's book has the merit of outlining such developments within each region. Thus the growth of the Volga-Baltic Water Route is traced until its completion in 1941 (p. 109), and the "Greater Volga" scheme is sketched on pp. 172 and 174. Having sorted a pattern out of past changes, which include those effected during the Fourth (post-war) Five Year Plan, the author occasionally indicates future changes which are still intended by the government. In this respect, he may at times accept more than is justified by the available evidence, as in the case of the Northwest Metallurgical Combine (pp. 159, 160). Similarly, he is probably the first authority to accept the penetration of the chemical industry into the Kol'skiy Poluostrov (p. 163). His attempt to estimate the population of each administrative-territorial division from electoral lists is the first to become available in any language known to the reviewer. While his results are undoubtedly representative, these are probably too high for some units which lie north of 60 degrees North. It is disappointing that he has ignored the question of forced labour, on which a considerable body of evidence must now be available. The maps have the especial merit of representing each region as it appears after all the difficulties of toponymy and of the location and size of settlements have been sifted out.

Together, Berg and Shabad provide the most detailed and authoritative references on the physical and economic geography of the Soviet North yet available in English.

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