RUSSIA'S REGIONAL MUSEUMS

REPRESENTING AND MISREPRESENTING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT NATURE, HISTORY, AND SOCIETY

Sofia Gavrilova
This book presents the results of extensive research into the very interesting phenomenon of local museums—kraevedschskyi museums—in Russia’s regions. It outlines how numerous such museums are, how long they have existed, what they display, and how this has changed, or not, from Soviet times up to the present. It shows how the museums’ displays often are about nature, history, and society. It goes on to discuss how what is portrayed represents particular interpretations of knowledge—including the heroism of the Soviet past, a colonial-style view of Russia’s very many non-Russian people, and the failure to mention things which might present Russia in a critical way. The book is much more than ‘museum studies’: it sheds a great deal of light on how Russians think about themselves and about how this self-view is fostered, and it also highlights the vast regional differences which exist in Russia.

Sofia Gavrilova completed her doctorate at the University of Oxford.
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Russia’s Regional Museums
Representing and Misrepresenting Knowledge About Nature, History, and Society

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Note on transliteration

I have used a simplified version of the phonetically based Library of Congress system for transliterating Russian Cyrillic. Exceptions to this are where I have used accepted spellings for surnames, towns, and places, where these have been introduced in English-language works. I have also avoided using case endings for nouns and adjectives. For example, I refer to kraevedenie museums, not kraevedcheskie museums. I have used the English versions of institution’s names whenever these were provided by the institutions in question.
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Introduction

Even a seasoned traveller with an encyclopaedic knowledge of Russian geography might find it difficult to name a town or city in the country that is not home to a public establishment known as a ‘kraevedenie museum’. An industrial or regional city might lack certain elements of urban infrastructure, but somewhere on its streets, there is likely to be a building—perhaps a section of a building or something resembling a shack—adorned with a plaque that proudly announces the presence of a kraevedenie museum. This institution may occupy a tiny room on the ground floor of a residential building, as in Chusovoy, or a large former monastery complex in the city centre, as in Solikamsk; it might play a vital role in the cultural life of the community, as in Tomsk, or be completely disconnected from the local cultural agenda, as in Perm; it can be run by individuals and activists, as in the villages across northern Perm Krai,1 central Yakutia, and parts of northern Chukotka, or professionally staffed and divided into museum and scientific sections, as in Kazan, where it attracts more visitors than the region’s more famous art museums. Despite being scattered all around Russia’s vast territory, coming in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and playing various roles in the lives of local communities, these organisations can be identified as ‘kraevedenie museums’ by the one aspect they all have in common: the expositions on offer and the ways they are presented to the public.

There is no established equivalent in Western academia to kraevedenie, the Russian-language term for the area of knowledge that these museums are intended to represent, but it can be translated literally as ‘the knowledge (or study) of a certain area’. This name suggests the museums’ apparent purpose: to provide a summary of essential information about the nature and society of a given area or territory from a historical perspective. However, this literal meaning is misleading, or at least incomplete.

The word kraevedenie originates from two Russian words: krai, literally meaning ‘land, country, or administrative division of the USSR and Russia’2 and the verb ‘vedat’, meaning ‘to learn or manage’.3 It originally emerged in 1921, at the first All-Russian Conference of Scientific Societies for the Study of Local Krai. This conference was the first step towards a centralisation of the informal or semi-formal scholarly activities that had been taking place for decades in the peripheries of the Russian Empire. ‘Kraevedenie’ was accepted as the best term.

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for Russian, being an almost literal translation of the German *Heimatkunde*—‘homeland studies’—but it was one of the three suggested translations, the other two being *rodinovedeniye* (‘motherland studies’) and *stranovedeniye* (‘country studies’). The phenomenon of *kraevedenie* has not yet become embedded in international scholarship, and there is not even an established translation of the term. It is usually translated as ‘history of local lore’ or ‘local history’,
5 which are the common English-language terms for *Heimatkunde*. The *Oxford Russian–English Dictionary* defines *kraevedenie* as ‘the study of local lore, history, and economy’ and notes that the related term ‘*kraevedenie* museum’ denotes a ‘museum of local lore, history, and economy’.
6 This is, however, a translation, rather than an academic definition, given the absence of an established definition of *kraevedenie* in the field of critical studies, and even amongst Russian scholars the understanding of the term’s meaning varies dramatically.
7 Against this background, I argue that ‘*kraevedenie*’ refers to a unique phenomenon of knowledge production with its own set of distinguishing traits, but to preserve the full meaning that is inherent in the word into the post-Soviet world, ‘*kraevedenie*’ ought to be incorporated into the vocabulary common to Russian studies alongside other familiar terms such as *babushka*, *dacha*, or Stakhanovites. When I travelled to various corners of Russia, the local *kraevedenie* museums have always been high on my list of places to visit, but despite the name, I did not go to these museums to discover something new about the region. On the contrary, I would already have a clear picture of what I would find inside the doors of yet another *kraevedenie* museum in a local administrative centre mostly populated by an ethnic minority in Chukotka, or a town in western Russia.

Such expectations had been engraved on my mind even before I embarked on my formal academic study of these museums; I am always on the lookout for places that challenge my assumptions and that I can deconstruct to reveal how they came into being. Like most people in the post-Soviet space, I have been exposed to the phenomenon of *kraevedenie* museums since childhood; during school and family trips, teachers or tour guides would take me through a (fairly boring, to be honest) panopticon of taxidermied animals, bones, mannequins wearing strange clothes, weapons and pictures of Bolsheviks waving red banners. The guides would say that these objects all somehow reflected the identity of a place and a people, and where they had come from historically and geographically. Indeed, to this day, these museums (which together form one of the largest cultural networks in the post-Soviet space and even the world) affect how people in Russia think about their history, geography, culture, and identity on a population level, from Chukotka to Kaliningrad. Academic debates in post-Soviet museum studies have tended to largely ignore *kraevedenie* museums, but perhaps it is precisely because of their ubiquity, tedium, and embeddedness in the social fabric of Russia that they attract little interest among academics, museum scholars, or even the general public.

Having studied dozens of such museums all over the country, I feel able to assert that this phenomenon is unique and specific to a particular time and region—that
of the Soviet and post-Soviet spaces. As such, *kraevedenie* museums are not just an important and gravely understudied aspect of the region’s cultural landscape but a very powerful example of the decolonisation of the predominant Western paradigm of knowledge production. In this work, I aim to broaden the existing paradigms of the ‘geographies of scientific knowledge’ by revealing the main principles that lie behind the functioning of *kraevedenie* and *kraevedenie* museums and what types of knowledge they produce. Another purpose of this book is to introduce the ‘Soviet taxonomy’ that was imposed on these museums during the period of Soviet centralisation and unified governance to reveal the common patterns that have made the museums so alike even today, and therefore bring to light the silences that these museums reproduce.

The book starts by outlining the history of *kraevedenie* museums, tracing their academic roots in Soviet ethnography, history, and geography, and unpacking the predominant theories that have shaped the phenomenon of *kraevedenie*. These theories were first manifested in the exposition guidelines imposed by the Soviet authorities and implemented mandatorily across the Soviet space. The guidelines on the representation of a place formed this ‘Soviet taxonomy’, cultural myths, and common silences that are still discernible to this day, more than 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following this history, the rest of the book is devoted to an examination of *kraevedenie* museums as they currently exist, both in terms of what they exhibit and—just as importantly—what they do not exhibit. By comparing a range of current approaches to exhibitions and historical data, I will demonstrate how Soviet guidelines still affect presentations of regional identities in Russia and perceptions of the ‘little Motherland’ to produce the characteristic ‘blank spots’ of regional identity that affect the lives of Russian citizens today.

The book is aligned along two chronological frames. The first follows the history of *kraevedenie* museums, paying special attention to 1920–1955, the period in which the ‘Soviet taxonomy’ was developed and enforced, while the second is 2014–2017, when I carried out the fieldwork for this project.

The book draws on the different strands of the materials, which are the documentary and visual sources, as well as the extensive interview with curators and participatory observations. The documentary sources include the archival documents from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) on the development of the *kraevedenie* as knowledge production system, and the exhibition guidelines from 1930 to 1955 for the *kraevedenie* museums; it also uses the regional archival data from the Yakutsk, Anadyr, and Perm regional archives on the exhibition production and on the way system of *kraevedenie* functioned on regional level.

The extensive fieldwork that I have been conducting in 2014–2016 resulted in the series of the reflection in my field notebook, where I was capturing the particularities of the Russian post-Soviet spaces, that I have been visiting to work in a museum. The second chapter, which introduces some of the places I was fortunate to visit, holds some of the reflections on my personal experiences in these
different distant places. I believe that this context is important for the people who have limited experience of visiting Russian periphery, to get a sense of the places the museums are representing.

The choice of the case studies for this book was not an easy one. Russia has more than 800 kraevedenie museums today in regional centres, villages, and indigenous settlements. How to capture the regional differences or (and) similarities in such a widespread system? My approach was to explore and compare the museums in different social, economical, and cultural settings (such as rich Muslim region of Tatarstan, industrial Ural region of Perm, quite poor Chukotka of Far East with indigenous population, or central-based Tver region); but also I was curious to approach museums on different scale levels—in the regional’s capitals (Yakutsk, Perm, Anadyr, and Kazan) and in smaller cities and settlements (Krasnovishersk, Lavertia, Kashin, Solikamsk, and others). The book includes a range of photographs from the places I have visited, and from the exhibitions in the museums. My background in photography allowed me to create an extensive photographic archive of the expositions of the kraevedenie museums; some of the photos which I find useful for the comparative analysis that this book draws on are featured in the book.

In 2020 onwards, Russian government started to discuss the plans for redesigning the network of the kraevedenie museums and implementing the new ‘model’ and ‘standard’ for the regional museums; so far, these ideas haven’t been implemented countrywide and are still in the process of discussions and negotiations. Whatever changes the network will face in the upcoming years, I hope that this book will be still a valuable source to approach the conceptual particularities and spirit of the kraevedenie museums in post-Soviet Russia.

Notes

1 A krai is a ‘federal subject’ of the Russian Federation that enjoys a varying degree of autonomy.
5 See below for the discussion.
7 Again, see below for the discussion.
1 Cultural myths and common silences in (post-)Soviet museums

Introduction

The architecture of this book rests on a number of theoretical frames and concepts. *Kraevedenie* museums are considered to be material representations of *kraevedenie* and in this regard, the book engages with museums studies, in particular research on the construction of knowledge in and by museums. *Kraevedenie* encompassed Soviet geography, history, and ethnography, and *kraevedenie* museums are a material expression of this broad scholarly mixture, and therefore the theoretical challenge of this study is to bring together the various academic debates that have been held concerning the Soviet school of geography, dominating and submissive societies, and representations of historical narratives on memory, Soviet traumas, silences, erasing narratives, and being forgotten in history. To this end, this book engages with analyses of metanarratives of Soviet history (Fitzpatrick, 1999; Baron, 2007), geography (Shaw & Oldfield, 2007; Oldfield & Shaw, 2015; Hooson, 1964; Martin, 2005), the construction of Soviet ethnography (Slezkine, 1991, 1994; Tishkov, 1992). My overall argument is that the Soviet modernist project of *kraevedenie* gave rise to a specific metanarrative that affected the way Soviet knowledge about places and areas was represented in *kraevedenie* museums. This ‘Soviet taxonomy’, as I term it, alludes to the specific way of organising this knowledge that is present in *kraevedenie* museums, and is composed of specific methods of organising the geographical knowledge, historical narratives, and knowledges of society that were imposed in the Soviet Union, and created specific patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

‘Blank spots’ in Soviet cultural studies

This book is not the first work to approach the subject of ‘the excluded’ in (post-)Soviet representations; the notion of cultural silences, and the exclusion of certain topics from predominant representations or narratives, is one of the most popular debates in memory studies and public history research. The term ‘blank spot’ is widely used today in various scientific disciplines, art projects, and policy guidelines to refer to something that has been omitted or deliberately not included (Wertsch, 2008; Herminghouse, 1991; Dickerman & King, 1998; Ellman &