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Environmental Influences and the Construction of National History: Afanasii Shchapov's "Frontier Hypothesis" of Russian Nationhood

The significance of Frederick Jackson Turner's celebrated 'frontier hypothesis' as an environmentalist and naturalistic interpretation of American nationhood has been richly documented and exhaustively studied. Much less well appreciated, however, is the fact that a Turnerian environmentalist perspective on national history was not limited to the American example. Very much to the contrary, a range of national historiographies in the 19th and 20th centuries deployed the same environmentalist argument that the presence of open lands and frontier conditions shaped the historical evolution of their respective homelands and the formation of its particular national ethos. In all cases, the historical-environmental analysis was driven conceptually by a set of assumptions common to the social sciences of the day, with the result that historians from different national milieux who shared these precepts could produce analyses of environmental conditioning that displayed remarkable affinities in their structure and logic of argumentation. At the same time, however, the interpretation attached to this analysis—the ultimate significance, in other words, of frontier influences for the nation in question—rested entirely upon the idiosyncratic ideological strictures of each historian's nationalist *Weltanschauung*. In this way, very similar explanatory scenarios could, in sharply differing national contexts, be interpreted as having produced sharply differing results.

The development of a national historiography in Russia offers a particularly rich example of the sort of this environmentalist logic and argumentation, which focused on Turnerian factors of open geographical space, incessant social movement and internal agricultural colonization. I am currently working on a project that traces this particular theme in the work of Russian historians and philosophers in the 19th and 20th centuries. For the workshop, I propose to speak about one important example: the Siberian historian Afanasii Shchapov. I will demonstrate how Shchapov's environmentalist ideas about historical development were influenced by the scientific materialism of the Reform period in Russia in the 1860s, and specifically by Charles Darwin's recently-translated *Origin of Species* which had become the bible of the day for Russian social as well as natural science. Moreover, I will explore how Shchapov deployed his frontier hypothesis ideologically as part of a very important nationalist argument about the relationship of Russian civilization to that of Western Europe.