BERNHARD VARENIUS’ GEOGRAPHIA GENERALIS AND THE RISE OF MODERN GEOGRAPHICAL STUDIES IN RUSSIA

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Abstract

Bernhard Varenius’ Geographia Generalis and der Aufstieg moderner geographischer Studien in Russland


The publication in Russia of Bernhard Varenius’ Geographia Generalis in 1718 has been rightly seen as a significant step in the introduction of geography as a scientific enterprise in that country and as an important contribution to Peter the Great’s campaign to modernize his realm. The aim of the present paper is to place the book’s publication into its historical context, to suggest a few of the possible reasons for its perceived importance to the ruler of Russia, and to consider some of the ramifications of its appearance.

It is important to place Varenius’ book into what may appear to be the rather unfamiliar context of geography and of science more generally in Russia before Peter the Great’s reign (1682–1725). It is a truism that Russia before Peter had been to a considerable degree sheltered from
many of the great intellectual movements which had influenced western Europe since the close of the medieval period, notably the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. In the words of one scholar, prior to Peter Russian culture was still essentially medieval.\(^1\) The reasons for Russia’s partial isolation were partly political and geographical: from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries the country had been ruled as part of the Khanate of the Golden Horde, an off-shoot of the former Mongol Empire, which served to cut Russia off to some degree from European influences. Situated far from western Europe and the Mediterranean, Russia was hardly known to medieval Europeans and had only limited contacts even with central and eastern Europe prior to the establishment of maritime trading links with the West in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Another reason for Russia’s isolation was cultural. The country’s Byzantine and Orthodox heritage made Russians less than welcoming to intellectual innovations stemming from the Catholic West and caused them to treat such innovations with suspicion. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Moscow’s donning of the mantle of the ‘Third Rome’, citadel of Orthodox truth, probably only exacerbated such tendencies.\(^2\)

However, to suggest that Russia was entirely unaffected by the changes which affected Europe at the close of the medieval period would be a considerable exaggeration. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Russia experienced two processes which were also operative in the West in the same period. These were: the unification of the state under the rule of a single dynasty, in this case centred on Moscow; and the country’s enormous territorial expansion (in Russia’s case, overland rather than overseas as in the case of western European states) to become a multinational empire. Inevitably such changes had important implications for government and for the ways in which the empire was ruled and defended. Central to the perceived need for reform in such matters was a growing consciousness of threats to the country which might emanate from the aggressive and expanding European states situated to the country’s west. Also significant were the longer-standing threats stemming from the steppe peoples and their states situated to the south, now backed by the formidable rising power of the Ottoman Turks. From the fifteenth century Russian rulers began to hire foreign