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Mikhail Suslov

GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION

Ideology and Utopia in Post-Soviet Russia

With a foreword by Mark Bassin

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Foreword

The term “geopolitics” — the subject of Mikhail Suslov’s highly original collection of essays — has become remarkably popular since the end of the Cold War. It might therefore be useful to introduce his work by considering more generally where this popularity comes from. Perhaps the most basic source of the appeal of geopolitics is the fact that there is no fixed and universally-accepted definition of exactly what it is supposed to mean or represent. Very much to the contrary, across the century or so since the term made its entrance into public political discourses, it has consistently been used in ways that not only differ quite substantially but indeed not infrequently are simply mutually incompatible.¹ Paradoxically, this pronounced protean character is not a drawback but rather a key to geopolitics’ broad appeal, for it enables the term to appear relevant and useful in a wide variety of different contexts and applications. Suslov’s work does not escape these ambiguities; to the contrary it actively incorporates them — at least implicitly — at its very core. Thus, while the *subject* of his examinations involves one particular conceptualization of geopolitics, the *analytical method* he uses in order to examine this subject is “geopolitical” in an entirely different sense. The considerable skill that he deploys in navigating the undulations between these two alternatives is one of the features that make these essays so fascinating and insightful.

Suslov’s subject is a geopolitics understood as the study of how the objective material conditions of the external world influence the character of political and national life. This perspective dates back to the origins of classical geopolitics as a positivistic and causal “science” that revealed how geographical features and conditions — physical size, location, topography, climate, maritime access, and so on — function as geopolitical “realities” to shape the political character and destinies of states and nations. The intense imperial and post-imperial competition of the Great Powers from the

1 Klaus Dodds and David Atkinson (eds.), *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000).

end of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th saw the flourishing of national schools of geopolitics in Britain, the USA, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and (to a lesser extent) Imperial Russia.² The USSR, however, was a notable exception. In the form of Marxism-Leninism, the Soviet authorities opted for a very different set of causal explanations for the imperatives driving national politics, and they consistently resisted the principle of environmental determination inherent in geopolitics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, *geopolitika* began to take hold in post-Soviet Russia, and it was precisely the reductionist insistence on the salience of environmental-geopolitical “realities” in explaining the twisted contours of Russia’s national predicament that made it appealing. In another deep paradox, despite all the traditional Soviet castigation, the rigid causality and putative objectivity of geopolitics resonated on some subliminal level with the crude positivism of Soviet-Marxist materialism itself, and this made geopolitics seem an attractive candidate when the time came to replace the latter.

The proliferation of neo-classical geopolitics in Russia has been much facilitated by the activities and writings of Aleksandr Dugin, an extremist on the Russian far right who at an early point appreciated the potential appeal of a perspective emphasizing the primacy of geographical factors for understanding and managing Russia’s national affairs. A thoroughly mediocre intellectual but a highly effective ideologue, Dugin carefully armed himself with a knowledge of Western geopolitical theory, readjusted it to fit the post-Soviet context of the 1990s, and emerged as an effective publicist – most notably as the author of a highly popular and successful textbook *The Foundation of Geopolitics*.³ By the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s reign in the early 2000s, *geopolitika* had proven its appeal to a variety of constituencies in Russia: universities, the military, and perhaps most significantly of all to the ruling elite, which quickly came to appreciate the effectiveness of pointing to objective geopolitical realities and imperatives as the basis for its various

2 Geoffrey Parker, *Western Geopolitical Thought in the 20th Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).

3 Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki. Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii. Myslit’ prostranstvom*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Arkhtogeia-tsentr, 2000).

political projects. As Suslov discusses, geopolitics has been and remains one of the great growth industries in Putin's Russia. Regardless of his origins on the extremist fringe and the enduring extremism of his politics, Aleksandr Dugin has today become Russia's chief geopolitician and an entirely mainstream figure.

If Suslov's *subject* is to be understood in terms of the mindsets of classical and neo-classical geopolitics, however, our author's own epistemological and analytical position comes from a much more recent geopolitical tradition. This is so-called "critical geopolitics," more specifically that part of critical geopolitics focused on the problem of geographical representation, or what Suslov calls in his title "geopolitical imagination".⁴ Taking its initial inspiration from the precepts of post-modernism, this perspective begins by rejecting the assumption of an objective and external geographical world that shapes and conditions political life. To the contrary, critical geopolitics teaches that geography is always "constructed" in precisely the same way that history or identity are constructed. A geopolitical reality is therefore nothing of the sort, it is rather a phantom, a representation that makes a claim to objectivity and veracity in order to fortify narratives and interpretations that are in fact politically biased and interest-driven.

Critical geopolitics scrutinizes the arguments of classical or neo-classical geopolitics with a two-fold purpose: first, to reveal the subjective character of geopolitical narratives that claim to be dealing with genuine objective realities, and second to deconstruct them to reveal the underlying political intentions, projects, biases and prejudices that they support and reflect. The great inspiration for this endeavour was Edward Said's seminal deconstruction of Western narratives of "the Orient," which continues to inspire critical-geopolitical analyses of the contemporary policies of the traditional Western powers toward the rest of the world.⁵

As exemplified in the essays collected here, Mikhail Suslov's intervention into the field of critical geopolitics is distinguished by

4 Gearoid Ó'Tuathail and Simon Dalby (eds.), *Rethinking Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 1998).

5 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

a significant nuance — one that might be illustrated by a comparison to Said's own analysis. Said emphasized that the authors of the Orientalist discourse on which he focuses — historians, ethnographers, poets, and artists — did not necessarily recognize the biased and constructed nature of the deeper perspectives they were representing, and so did not necessarily appreciate the hegemonic calculations of political power that underlay them. In other words, Orientalist discourse was not necessarily created with the express purpose of serving as an ideological vehicle for the political project of dominating the Orient. Suslov takes a very different approach. The common thread that runs through all of his analyses of post-Soviet society, whether focused on narratives devised by the political elite or on the work of academic "geopoliticians", is precisely that of intentionality. Whether the theme is "Eurasianism," "Holy Rus," "the Russian World," or something else, Suslov at all times is not only interrogating the narrative itself but beyond this is questioning who are its agents, what is the relevant political context, and what is the transactional goal that they are seeking to achieve? In the final analysis, what Suslov is offering is a different sort of critical geopolitics, one in which the geopolitical narratives and perceptions in question are understood not merely as expressions of social and political attitudes. Beyond this — and often more importantly — they represent practical ideological devices and strategies that are consciously developed and deployed as part of an effort to further a particular political objective or project.

As noted at the outset, geopolitics is a wide-ranging concept with a kaleidoscope of different meanings and associations. In this collection of essays, Mikhail Suslov offers us his own take on the subject: a brilliant exploration of how geographical images and visions work to shape our understanding, organization and signification of the political world.

Mark Bassin

Stockholm, August 2020