

**MATERIK L'DA: PERVAYA RUSSKAYA ANTARKTICHESKAYA EKSPEDITSIYA I YEYĖ OTRAZHENIYE V SOVETSKOI ISTORIOGRAFI (1920-e – 1940-e GODY)** [Continent of Ice: the first Russian Antarctic Expedition and its footprint in Soviet historiography from the 1920s to the 1940s]. Aleksandr Ovlashchenko. 2013. Saarbrücken: Palmarium, 307 p, softcover. ISBN 978-3-659-98556-0. £85.

Dr. Ovlashchenko is a jurist who specialises in international maritime law. A graduate of the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations, he now lectures at the Baltic International Academy, formerly Baltic Russian Institute, in Riga. His book is noteworthy because when it appeared, a few months after Petrova (2012), it was only the second original, full-length study of the Bellingshausen expedition in Russian since 1963. However its value as a historiographical essay is much diminished by the author's polemical and generally idiosyncratic approach. It came as no surprise to learn that the Palmarium imprint is a division of the spam-based, peer review-free omni-publisher Verlag Dr. Müller.

Ovlashchenko begins by repeating the oft-heard Soviet and Russian claim that the expedition was the first to discover the Antarctic continent. He supports this with apparently familiar arguments, and relies in particular on a retrospective comment from one of the officers who, unfortunately for Ovlashchenko's purposes, said only that Bellingshausen's voyage indicated that a continent existed, not that Bellingshausen found it (page 10). No logbooks or other shipkeeping records from the voyage have survived. This reviewer has therefore published, both in Russian and in English, an analysis of the overall reliability of the only source for Russian priority (also mentioned by Ovlashchenko), an informal private letter written shortly after the voyage by Mikhail Lazarev, who commanded the expedition's second ship. Having found several inaccuracies in the letter pertaining to other matters, this reviewer concluded that the only reasonable procedure is to trust the alternative account provided by Bellingshausen and other witnesses, which places the sighting in question 20 days later and thus too late to secure an absolute Russian priority, and to set aside the solitary testimony of Lazarev's letter (Balkli 2013; Bulkeley 2014: 174–177, 200–206).

Armed however with an unshakeable belief both in Russian priority and in its self-evident status ever since the nineteenth century, Ovlashchenko accuses almost every Soviet commentator from 1917 to 1949 of willful disregard for those 'facts' – an overworked term. Yulii Shokalskii, president of the Geographical Society for much of that period and a steadfast admirer of Bellingshausen, is a particular target of his wrath. But interestingly, not even scholars such as Lev Berg, another president of the Geographical Society, or Bellingshausen's editor Yevgenii Shvede, who were among those who first deployed, back in 1949, some of the very arguments for priority revived by Ovlashchenko, are exempt.

It is certainly true that, on a close reading, treatments of the expedition by Berg and others during the Cold War suggest that some of them toed the priority line more out of political necessity than from conviction (Bulkeley 2011: 145–146). Where Ovlashchenko finds basely motivated disloyalty to the Motherland, however, others may detect the presence of universal intellectual values in and around the Soviet natural sciences that is associated, in the history of ideas, with the name of Vladimir Vernadskii (Bailes 1986), and that persisted after the Great Patriotic War in the work of leading figures such as Aleksandr Nesmeyanov and Vladimir Belousov.

To be fair to Ovlashchenko, he makes it clear to the reader from the outset that the book is an exercise in forensic rhetoric rather than dispassionate investigation. To expect him to observe such standard procedures of scholarship as self-doubt or the careful evaluation of historical sources would be to miss the point, and readers more fluent in Russian than the reviewer should probably just relax and enjoy the pleasures of an unabashed tirade. They can also look forward to a second installment addressing the last four decades of the Soviet Union, in which Ovlashchenko will perhaps continue his evaluation of the foremost Soviet Bellingshausen scholar, Mikhail Belov, who is largely exempt from criticism here but whose important study of Bellingshausen's navigational charts is not covered. He will also need to discuss the great silence which descended on Bellingshausen studies soon after Leonid Brezhnev came to power, and to explain more fully why he feels that the expedition's alleged achievement as first discoverers of Antarctica has only been properly understood in the post-Soviet era, despite the chorus of support which surrounded that claim for about twenty years after 1949.

For readers with a more academic interest in these matters the most useful elements of the book will be the lengthy quotations from often obscure sources (peppered with scornful interjections from the author), and the comprehensive bibliography, awkwardly presented though that is. (Rip Bulkeley, 38 Lonsdale Road, Oxford, OX2 7EW ([rip@igy50.net](mailto:rip@igy50.net))).

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