

CONSTRUCTING THE “SOVIET”? REGIONAL DIVERSITY AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY.

Introduction

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Studies of science have long accepted the thesis that in the regions science is divided into “provincial” and “indigenous,” the difference between which is in the understanding of what scientific research is aimed at. According to this division, researchers working within the framework of “provincial” science strive to produce knowledge by focusing on global processes from a local context, while adherents of “indigenous” science tend to direct their attention inward (Sokolov and Titaev 2013). However, even when prioritizing the importance of a broad historiographical framework, most studies of Russia’s regional history produced in Russia, which are close to *kraevedenie* (the field of local history), still remain closed in on themselves, rarely reaching the level of comparative analysis (Boltunova 2022). At the same time, it has become generally accepted that the analysis of both the center and the regions requires consideration of the perspectives of both sides. In this situation, it is even more paradoxical that the history of the regions has a greater chance of being noticed if it gains access, in one way or another, to the resources of the “capitals”: be it through publications in journals, presentations at conferences, study, internships, or work located in the “capitals.” The last is perhaps true of the authors of this special issue of the journal: Of the seven authors (including the authors of this introduction), only one was born in the capital (Moscow), another is from the Moscow region, and the rest represent the “regions” of Russia; yet all of them studied / are studying / work in the capitals (Moscow or Saint Petersburg).

What does the region as an analytical tool give us? What problems does the use of this term raise? How is the image of a region created in the process of building local identity, and what plays the most important role in this process? How should we approach the analysis of regions from the perspective of the regions themselves? Finally, what specific relationships were established between the “center” and the “periphery” in the Soviet and post-Soviet space? These questions were at the forefront of the seventeenth conference of students, graduate students, and young researchers “Constructing the ‘Soviet’? Regional Diversity and the Search for Identity.” Organized by the Departments of History and Anthropology of the European University at

St. Petersburg in 2023, the conference brought together more than 30 historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and philologists from seven cities across Russia. This special issue of *Laboratorium* is an outcome of the conference.

The very concept “region,” which was the central theme of the conference, is quite problematic precisely because it is not often the subject of scholarly reflection. Seemingly self-evident, the concept conceals many contradictions. Similarly, the division into regions often seems self-evident, but the boundaries between them actually depend heavily on the researcher’s perspective and the degree of focus, whether it is macro- or micro-region (Sunderland 2021). To a lesser extent, this lack of reflection is characteristic of the early Soviet period, where the instability of political borders, combined with tensions between economic and national principles in the design of the borders of national autonomies and republics, led to increased sensitivity to the “regional” (see Hirsch 2005). A more rigid understanding of the “region,” derived from the administrative-territorial borders of the Soviet Union, can be found in the scholarship on the late Soviet (post-Stalin) history of the USSR. Thus, in recent key studies devoted to the vertical of power as a multiactor network, there is a clear lack of attention to the term “region” itself. Although the authors show how decisions were made by the Communist Party leadership (Khlevniuk and Gorlizki [2020] 2024) or how administrative decisions were implemented in situations of conflict among different ministries (Stas 2025), including pointing to regional actors as key players in administrative and political processes, the research focus of such works does not include an explication of the term “region.” Moreover, even in conceptual literature on the late Soviet period, regions are conceived only as locations where the discourse of power is eroded, creating “spaces of *vnyenakhodimost’* [inside/outside-ness]” (Yurchak [2005] 2014), or as places where official ideology is reinterpreted (Fokin 2017), while “region” as an analytical concept does not come to the fore.

At the same time, it cannot be said that the concept is not reflected upon at all in the scholarly community. There is a whole body of literature devoted to regional history (see Raleigh 2001; Smith-Peter 2004, 2011; Retish et al. 2015; Repina 2019; Boltunova 2022), and since the early 2000s, conferences on this topic are being held and programmatic articles published (Morozova 2025). Moreover, in 2023, same year with our conference, a conference “Regional Capitals of Russia” was held in Perm’ and Yekaterinburg, where participants not only brought the focus on the capital-region dichotomy, but also problematized the transmission of the center-periphery idea into the regions themselves (see Surzhikova 2023). At the same time, independently of our conference, the publishing house of the European University at St. Petersburg released a collection titled *Russian Regional Capitals: Culture-Based Development* (Karpova 2023). The memory politics in the regions also attracts attention (Miller et al. 2023). All this suggests that specialists in the field of Russian/(post)Soviet studies are increasingly raising the question of the application of “region” as a concept as a specific research framework that focuses on the intertwining of space and identity in analysis, emphasizing the growing movement to shift the research focus from the center to the region (Boltunova 2022).

In this regard, it seems important to briefly outline the spectrum of ideas in which the concept "region" is being rethought. First of all, the understanding of a region as a non-self-evident structure is based on the fact that regions can be distinguished by completely different characteristics, from the most obvious administrative ones to economic, national, cultural, confessional, and so on. At the same time, as historian Ekaterina Boltunova (2022) points out, the trend in historiography toward seeking diversity (ethnic, linguistic, sociocultural, economic) leads to a bias toward studying the "other" within the identified regions, which causes researchers to lose sight of the role of local social, professional, and gender groups in the history of the regions.

The complexity of studying regions is compounded by the fact that, in addition to the various specific analytical focuses that can be used when dividing territories into regions, the boundaries of these regions themselves change over time (Remnev 2004; Glebov 2013; Sunderland 2021). At the same time, the degree of approximation of the research lens also plays an important role: Regions are identified by researchers both within national entities and as supranational complexes that often ignore administrative boundaries (Repina 2019; Morozova 2025). At the same time, they can be broken down into even smaller elements, such as provinces (Smith-Peter 2019) or localities (Raleigh 2001).

The term "region" itself is often contrasted with or, conversely, becomes synonymous with a whole range of other terms, such as "periphery," "outskirts," "province," or "the local." This diversity is linked to different understandings and approaches to the use of the term. In this introductory article, we attempt to group together the key ideas and trends that can be traced in the latest works (a detailed and most comprehensive list of studies on the topic of regions can be found in the following historiographical works: Repina 2019; Boltunova 2022; Morozova 2025). Not all of the sets of ideas presented below can be applied to a single, specific term or synonym for "region." For this reason, we group ideas based on the most commonly used synonym, but emphasize a metaphorical understanding of each of them rather than providing a precise definition. Moreover, the perspectives on the region presented below are not rigidly separated from one another. They are often combined in actual research; nevertheless, it is important to emphasize the differences between them in terms of research focus.

Regional as peripheral. Often, the term "periphery" becomes synonymous with the concept of region, and in this case its description and analysis are inextricably linked to the term "center," making "region" part of the center-periphery dichotomy (see, e.g., Raskolets 2024). However, this leads us to the broader idea that a region can, in principle, only be understood in the context of other regions with which it borders; otherwise, it is impossible to establish the boundaries of the object being analyzed (Sunderland 2021). Moreover, comparisons can be made not only between the center and the region, but also between regions themselves. However, the very dichotomy of center-region/periphery leads not only to the perception of regions as places of backwardness and marginality in the everyday sense. In scholarship, this leads to the "center" itself often ceasing to be thought of as a re-

gion. It more often acts as a “neutral analytical unit” (Boltunova 2022:240), which is necessary for the analysis of a particular periphery. Moreover, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that the “center” itself is often not conceptualized in historiography as a single entity, but is instead fragmented into numerous small areas and cities that do not form a unitary entity. This principle of ignoring the center is inherent not only in research, but also in the very structure of the Soviet Union, where the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (as RSFSR was known between 1918 and 1936) was often associated directly with the entire state and therefore did not have its own republican institutions. This reflected the anti-imperialist internationalist narrative, according to which assistance to “backward” and “oppressed” nations took precedence over “Great Russian chauvinism” (Slezkine 1994; Martin 2001; Hirsch 2005).

Regional as the outskirts (*okraina*). Connected to the theme of periphery, the term “outskirts” is predominantly used in contemporary studies of the Russian Empire, particularly in the “new imperial history” (Dolbilov and Miller 2006; Glebov 2013; Sunderland 2021). Unlike the previous approach, this one emphasizes understanding the entire system through its interaction with the region, thereby avoiding the rigid “center-periphery” model. It is in such studies that the topic of regions has been developed to the greatest extent from a theoretical point of view, since the analysis of the governance of the outskirts was the key to understanding many issues related to the multiactor system of the Russian Empire. Representatives of this school of thought study regions not so much as territories on a map (Sunderland 2021), but rather as the result of the interaction of various elites and social groups (Repina 2019). They examine the structure, methods, and logic of specific actors in this large system because they are interested in the connection of the regions with Moscow and Saint Petersburg and not because the former are remote from the latter (Remnev 2004; Dolbilov and Miller 2006). This perspective has become one of the most productive analytical frameworks applied to the study of regions. Understanding them in this way also draws on the broader historiography of postcolonial studies, where the subject of analysis has long been not only the colonies but also the metropolises themselves (Chakrabarty [2000] 2021). However, it should be noted here that the multiactor approach, which is becoming the subject of study in the field of Soviet history, does not yet sufficiently appeal to the term “region,” overlooking issues of uniting participants according to the principles of territoriality and identity (Boltunova 2022:240–241).

Regional as local within the global. Within this approach, authors often try to talk about regional avoiding the abovementioned center-periphery dichotomy and viewing the region more as a locus of events. In this sense, region is directly linked to the study of microcosms (Sevastyanova 2008) and, more generally, to the anthropological turn in historical sciences. Studies of specific topics that do not always unfold in administrative regions productively draw on anthropological approaches, shifting the focus to the specifics of the region. However, such studies are often limited by the penetration of the center-region dichotomy into the research not as an analytical tool but as a basic theoretical premise that may not be recognized by

the author, whose analysis is reduced to searching for features of the “center” in the local. Moreover, there is a growing trend toward “enlarging” the research lens, with authors turning to the analysis of “regional capitals.” In this situation, the center-periphery model is reproduced at the local level (Surzhikova 2023). We find this shift in focus useful—it details the relationships within the regions themselves, which are no longer perceived as homogeneous spaces. However, despite the fact that the very concept of the region in its local aspect suggests broad prospects for comparative studies and the inclusion of the local in the global (Bruno Latour [(2017) 2019] takes the most fundamental approach to this issue, formulating the concept of glocality and applying it to the analysis of France) and in the history of transfers (Repina 2019), there are few studies in Russian historiography, including that of the Soviet period, that truly reach this level of analysis. More often than not, the examined local topics remain closed in on themselves. English-language literature, on the other hand, is more often aimed at overcoming this barrier (Zeisler-Vralsted 2014; Cusco 2017; Sabol 2017).

Regional as provincial. The last perspective approaches the analysis of regions from two angles simultaneously: cultural and spatial. Since a region is important for historical research not so much as a territory but as a space where different actors interact, it is also viewed as a sociocultural construct linked to the identity of the local community. This research perspective is conditioned by the cultural turn that took place in the humanities in the second half of the twentieth century (Repina 2019). It is important to note that the term “region,” located in the “mental space,” is simultaneously grounded in the existing landscape (Sunderland 2021). This view is also supported by approaches used in the study of local communities and local memory of regions (Miller et al. 2023). However, in the context of studying regional issues, all cultural aspects are linked to an interest in physical space, which, within the framework of the spatial turn, combines the analysis of real and imagined space (Smith-Peter 2019:7). As a result, it is within this approach that the greatest separation of the analytical framework from the standard administrative boundaries of regions occurs, referring us to the boundlessness and difficult-to-localize content of the term “province,” as well as the specific view from the level of the province itself (Glebov 2013; Abashin 2015).

Moving on to the discussion of the articles included in this special issue, we must draw attention to a certain paradox that creates a connection between the research presented and the historiography of the regions. As Boltunova (2022) notes, historiography is clearly divided into two blocks: created by the capitals’ scholars and created in the regions by local historians and regional experts. These two blocks of historiography often exist in parallel worlds and draw on different primary sources. The authors of this issue’s articles attempt to combine these two levels, presenting a view of regional history from both the center and the regions themselves. While the materials presented cannot, of course, encompass the full thematic and conceptual diversity of research on the “Soviet” in the regional dimension, we believe they can provide insight into the key concepts and current research approaches to this phenomenon.

The authors of the articles work with various types of sources, applying a whole range of research methods and approaches to them. Their focus is not only on traditional official records and press coverage, diaries and correspondence, but also on interviews and observations collected during fieldwork. Thus, the study of regions is carried out not only by immersing oneself in the specifics of public-political interaction between various participants, but also by shifting to the regional level and focusing on this perspective (Abashin 2015:48).

The geography of the studies presented here cannot be localized to one specific region. All four texts are devoted to a wide network of actors, from local unions of disabled soldiers in revolutionary Russia, who actively promoted ideas about political agency of veterans, to a Czechoslovak journalist who described dating services for single people in the 1960s. Chronologically, the issue primarily covers the late Soviet period: It is the subject of three texts, while another one focuses on events that took place at the dawn of Soviet history.

The issue opens with an article by Olga Okhotnikova about the community of disabled soldiers in 1917–1918, their self-organization and self-representation. War invalids and their political body—the Union of Maimed Soldiers, which emerged during the February Revolution of 1917—have repeatedly come to the attention of historians, but nevertheless remained on the periphery of research interest, since the history of the “era of wars and revolutions” traditionally gravitates toward the problem of the struggle for power, be it the struggle of parties, armies, or symbols (see Kolonitskii [2001] 2012, 2022; Kolonitskii et al. 2025). Along with the retrospective view of historians, some activists of the Union of Maimed Soldiers, despite their desire to establish their special status as those who had lost their health for the country, were aware of their peripheral status in terms of access to material resources and their place in the cartography of power. This awareness was evident, for example, in the speech of the chairman of the Second Congress of Maimed Soldiers in June 1918, who expressed hope that “there in the center” their voice would be heard by the Soviet authorities.

At the same time, the problem that Okhotnikova examines is far from peripheral: Using the example of war invalids, the author reconstructs the process of subjectivization of a social group, which was facilitated by institutionalization through the creation of a network of associations of disabled people, participation in determining state policy toward their own group, and discursive production of knowledge about who a disabled soldier is. Communication between the center and the regions, as the author shows, took place “from the top down”: The center produced and disseminated discourse on military disability, sought to discipline local unions, acting as an arbitrator in disputes between them and a mediator in conflicts with local authorities. The role of coordinator and informant within the community was combined with the function of its representative outside. The latter, in particular, manifested itself in defending the interests of the community in government structures, through participating in commissions and drafting petitions for the legislative consolidation of a register of rights and benefits for disabled veterans. At the same time, some regional unions had their own resources and opportunities for equal dialogue with the

"center." The author demonstrates the dynamics of interaction between the central and regional unions in the rapidly changing political context of the 1917 Revolution and Civil War.

In her article examining Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's trips around the USSR in 1957–1964, Tatiana Petrova also devotes considerable attention to the topic of discourse production "in the center" and its transmission to the regions. However, unlike the first article, here the author's attention is also focused on Nikita Khrushchev's physical movements to the regions. The trips of the First Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee are analyzed as "scenarios of power" aimed at creating a new, democratic image of the leader, as opposed to the image of his predecessor Joseph Stalin. The author is primarily interested in how Khrushchev's image was created and replicated through regional tours, as well as in how this image, deliberately created by the authorities, correlated with the perception of the leader that had developed among the target audience. At the same time, Petrova notes that such trips were used by the center to promote locally decisions made in Moscow. Khrushchev's visits to various regions had a clear goal: to affirm the legitimacy and effectiveness of the center's intentions and actions at the local level. In this sense, the center constructed itself primarily through interactions with the regions. However, the regions themselves were often deprived of agency, reproducing the established tradition of state leaders' meetings with local residents and creating images of happiness and well-being. Khrushchev's efforts to create a reverse channel of communication from the regions to the center was met with lack of understanding by local actors. Instead of demonstrating to the country's leader the "real" situation on the ground, regional elites constructed a picture of how, in their view, the center should imagine the region.

In the end, Petrova comes to the conclusion that the political leader's trips around the country were an important innovation in Soviet political culture. At the same time, the potential of this model was not fully exploited by the authorities: Khrushchev and his entourage failed to create the image of a democratic leader; contrary to the original plan, the authoritarian traits of the first secretary were prominent, and his interactions with the people reproduced the principle of image creation during the Stalinist period: from "above" to "below." Thus, the article significantly complements the existing historiography (e.g., Khlevniuk and Gorlizki [2020] 2024; Plamper 2010) in understanding how the Soviet government used regional space to construct the image of power and individual leaders.

Mikhail Kulagin's article on loneliness and organizational solutions to overcome it in the late Soviet period continues the theme of constructing the image of regions, but broadens the focus by taking into account the everyday life of Soviet citizens. In a recent review article on the historiography of Russia's regional history, Ekaterina Boltunova noted that "gender history of Russian regions, including territories with a huge disproportion between male and female populations (the North, Siberia, the Far East), not only has not been written, but has not even been recognized as an attention-worthy field of research" (2022:239). In his article, Kulagin shows that this problem was already recognized in the 1960s and 1970s: The con-

centration of industries with a homogeneous workforce in certain regions, leading to gender imbalance, formed entire “infrastructural clusters of loneliness.” The Far North, for example, was one such “lonely” region. The discussion of this issue, as the author demonstrates, led to a shift in the Soviet approach to population management (see Holquist 1997), with individuals’ personal lives being taken into account in planning calculations.

In addition, the author examines various technologies for overcoming loneliness: evenings “For those over 30,” which the author sees as heterotopias (in Michel Foucault’s understanding); personal ads, which, before becoming a “Soviet” phenomenon, underwent ideological neutralization and technical adjustments to their form; and finally, dating services, which came to the attention of Soviet citizens in the 1960s thanks to the experience of Czechoslovakia but only took root in the 1980s. By examining these methods, Kulagin manages to show the mobility of ideas and technologies that were put into practice to combat a new social ill, and to highlight the leading centers of the fight against loneliness: Czechoslovakia, the GDR, and the Baltic republics of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, a series of practices aimed at alleviating loneliness ultimately contributed to the individualization of Soviet citizens. The author emphasizes that newspapers became the main locus of the discourse about loneliness. Discussions in the editorial office of *Literaturnaia gazeta* linked loneliness with modernity and the city, thereby giving the phenomenon a spatial and temporal reference point. Thus, late Soviet experts found a solution to the problem of loneliness by bringing people together through the creation of specialized environments and infrastructures. And while some Soviet citizens met at “For those over 30” social gatherings, others wrote personals and created profiles with dating services, sometimes embarking on long journeys for a dream encounter.

This thematic issue concludes with an essay by Ivan Sapogov and Vadim Danilov. The authors explore Soviet silicate decorations—contrasting brickwork patterns, figures, and slogans—on residential and public buildings that became widespread in the late Soviet Union. The authors raise questions about the agency of the bricklayers who created such compositions and about the role of the visual images themselves—not only in the urban space of the regions, but also in the visual culture of the USSR as a whole. The authors of the essay focus primarily on the subjectivity of the creators of silicate decorations, who transformed the visual appearance of buildings not only on orders from above but also on their own initiative, which sometimes led to conflicts with their superiors. However, at the same time, the authors trace that despite official attempts to eliminate excesses in design and construction associated with the “de-Stalinization” of architecture in the mid-1950s, builders and architects continued to create pilasters, architraves, cornices, and other decorations using silicate or red brick.

An important aspect in comparing the center and the regions for the authors is the different temporalities of architectural images. For example, in a conversation with an Arkhangelsk architecture researcher, they discovered that a building constructed in 1973 was perceived by their interlocutor as “early” modernism (whereas in Moscow this was a period of “mature” modernism) due to the fact that the con-

struction of panel houses in Arkhangelsk only began in the 1970s. The ideological component of silicate decorations also varies: Politicized slogans such as “Peace to the world” and “Lenin’s name and work will live forever,” as well as anniversary dates of various Soviet events, coexist with Olympic Mishka, the mascot of the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow; Cheburashka, a popular cartoon character; and Siberian reindeer—symbols borrowed from everyday culture. This symbolic combination testifies, according to Sapogov and Danilov, to the erosion of the ideological burden (Yurchak [2005] 2014) and the transformation of all decorations into a universal “carpet” of the late Soviet period.

Thus, this special issue fits into the debates about “region” as an analytical category. The emphasis placed in the articles on the political agency and cultural-spatial components of Soviet regions highlights how a close attention to the “regional” in Soviet contexts brings us closer to a more nuanced understanding of the “Soviet” itself.

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