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# Encountering soviet geography: oral histories of British geographical studies of the USSR and Eastern Europe 1945-1991

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## Encountering British geographical studies of the USSR and Eastern Europe

The dissolution of the USSR at midnight on 31 December 1991 marked the passing of an episode in the disciplinary history of post-war human geography. For geographers that studied the Soviet Union and its satellite states, the disappearance of the object of study—a social, economic and political system and, in the cases of the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, individual states—had a particular resonance. John Dewdney, of the University of Durham, who published textbooks and an atlas on the USSR, saw the end of the USSR in terms of the evolution of his own career: 'it ceased to exist at just the right time as far as I was concerned because it was the year I retired'.<sup>1</sup> This paper presents material from a research project on the practices and cultures of British soviet geography, addressing the nature of research on these states during the Cold War. Oral history has been central to the project, enabling an appreciation of the distinctive circumstances through which such geographical knowledge was produced. We have so far interviewed thirty-two figures, the majority of whom were involved in the production of academic geographical knowledge concerning the USSR and Eastern Europe between the end of the Second World War and the dissolution of the USSR.<sup>2</sup> Succinctly phrasing the field of study is awkward, in terms of defining the group of geographers whose work we have scrutinized, and the geographical area with which they were concerned. The term 'soviet geography' can act as useful shorthand, and yet can mislead in suggesting a concern only for the USSR, or a concern for geographers from the USSR, or a focus on a particular political structure. A more complex yet accurate definition of our work is that of studies by British-based geographers of the USSR and those East European countries within the 'Soviet bloc', plus Yugoslavia and Albania.

Our project finds strong methodological parallels in Trevor Barnes' use of oral history to explore the emergence of spatial science within geography in the 1950s and 1960s (Barnes [1998](#), [2001](#), [2002](#), [2004a](#), [2004b](#)). Using interviews with thirty-six geographers alongside documentary and archival sources, Barnes has sought to understand the place of geography's quantitative revolution in terms of the geography and sociology of scientific knowledge (Barnes [2004a](#)). Barnes employs a distinction between 'lives lived', the narrative of 'a scientist's final accomplishments' (Barnes [2001](#): 410), and 'lives told', emphasizing 'the processes producing science' (Barnes [2001](#): 412), with the latter especially accessible through oral history. Biography thereby becomes a means to unsettle orthodox accounts of the progress of spatial science. While our subject matter has less retrospective disciplinary status than that studied by Barnes, and lacks equivalent subdisciplinary narratives of the products of 'lives lived' to put into question, oral history nevertheless broadened and challenged our sense of the history of the field. In our research we sought to capture the multiplicity of standpoints

on the field by interviewing all relevant surviving academics. The geography of our own research process took us beyond the more obvious institutional and biographical foci of soviet geography to those individuals and organizations with a lower profile in the field. Whilst most individuals were identified from more or less substantial published traces, we also interviewed those who primarily taught on the region or only briefly studied the area before moving to other academic or non-academic work. In this sense the project echoes, for the study of soviet geography, Paul Thompson's general characterization of the oral historical engagement with the past: 'The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched; and at the same time its social message changes' (Thompson [1988](#): 9).

Material on oral histories of academics and professional groups (cf. Sidaway [1997](#)) is largely absent from Thompson's survey of oral history, *The Voice of the Past*, though he does note the work of Thomas Reeves, who found American liberal intellectuals to be 'demanding informants' (Thompson [1988](#): 224), often effectively quizzing their interviewer in a series of 'status games' (Reeves, quoted by Thompson [1988](#): 224). Our research in part involved a two-way questioning process, interviewees at times quizzical about why we should find their past interesting, concerned for the value of their testimony, yet also cautious as to how their testimony might be used. We would not regard such exchange as formal 'status games', although often the effect of such conversation was to establish the credibility of the researcher and indeed the respondent. The three authors of this paper came to this subject matter from different perspectives. Two practice the contemporary geographical study of the former Soviet bloc, Oldfield in Russia and Swain in Ukraine and Hungary. Direct parallels in field experience with respondents could generate discussion and produce particular forms of authority and reflexivity in the interview. The third author, Matless, had no experience of researching these regions, but brought a wider concern for the cultures of geographical knowledge and the post-war history of British geography. While not all researchers were present at each interview, for most interviews at least two were there, and the interviewers' differing experiences and historical and geographical knowledge could be employed as framing devices for questions, whether asked from a position of apparent insight or ignorance. One issue which became apparent through interviews, and which is returned to in the main body of the paper, was the subtle ways in which geographers were perceived as suitable '*persona grata*' for conducting research in the USSR and Eastern Europe; in some senses a parallel process occurred in at least some of our interviews, with interviewers having to achieve legitimacy and trust in the eyes of the interviewees.

Interviews were preceded by the provision of a project outline to the interviewee, further explanation of which often began the interview. Interviews were in most cases held in the offices of working respondents or the homes of the retired, with a checklist of topics to cover though no rigid structure to follow. A broad career narrative generally structured the discussion, though with interviews often lasting several hours discussion could move in many directions. Interviews were fully transcribed and transcripts sent to respondents for any necessary correction, clarification and approval. Some interview material confirmed events already familiar from documentary records, but much would have been impossible to access in any other way. Documentary sources were used to cross-check the

accuracy of memory for dates and other precise factual information, but we have not assumed any hierarchy of truth between the oral and the documentary, rather respecting each source for its merits and conventions. Interviews were often indeed conducted alongside documentary sources, where our visit had prompted interviewees to search out material, including souvenirs of field visits.

Respondents often evidently briefed themselves in advance concerning events which may have occurred several decades ago.

We have not written up oral history material biographically, but have couched discussion in terms of categories of experience which became apparent through interviews, on which more below.

Autobiographical accounts on parallel academic experience can be found in *Adventures in Russian Historical Research* (Baron and Frierson [2003](#)), a collection of autobiographical reminiscences by US historians researching in the USSR and post-Soviet Russia.<sup>3</sup> The trope of 'adventure' here highlights issues of difficult access to historical material, and the cultural and political contexts of Cold War humanities research (Baron and Frierson [2003](#)), themes echoed in our analysis. Interviews also allowed exploration of how individual recollections worked in relation to a collective memory. The 'collective' here is cut across by differing regional interests and generational divides, and we discuss the degree and nature of collective identity below where pertinent, but one regular reference point within interviews was to figures who we were unable to talk to, notably in this case scholars who had died relatively young, such as Frank Carter, Graham Smith and F. E. Ian Hamilton.<sup>4</sup> The chance event of some who would have been key respondents dying prematurely may have shaped the collective memory apparent through the interviews.

Oral history has recently been used in contrasting ways to investigate Cold War topics. William Wohlforth's edited *Cold War Endgame* includes as its 'oral history' component the transcript of a conference of nine former key officials of the US and Soviet governments held at Princeton in 1996 (Wohlforth [1996](#)). Oral history here entails the largely verbatim testimonies of those close to key events, which are then followed by chapters of analysis. If oral histories have often been concerned to give voice to the relatively powerless, here the voices of those able to shape events are given space. Conversely in *On Living Through Soviet Russia*, Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson and Anna Rotkirch bring together contributions which embed elements of testimony from Soviet citizens within analytical accounts of issues such as family, motherhood, poverty, work and political repression (Bertaux, Thompson and Rotkirch [2004](#)).<sup>5</sup> The voices of the past, some anonymized, are quoted only for a few hundred words at a time, and make sense only within an author's analytical frame. These two books show a contrast in both the purposes and rhetorical strategies of works using oral history, and indeed different senses of what oral history entails. Our paper does not anonymize testimony, indeed the identity of the individuals concerned is key to the story, but their words are integrated within a more general analysis of the academic experience of research in the period. Oral history enables an appreciation of institutional and political events, albeit at a lower level than those covered by Wohlforth, of career narratives, adventurous or otherwise, and of Soviet and East European life as experienced by visitors cast in a specific and circumscribed role. Oral history highlights in particular the peculiar ways in which formality and informality came together in

researching those states, whether the research was on contemporary or, as in many cases, historical issues. We explore this issue in relation to different modes of encounter making up the academic experience and knowledge of a set of countries in a particular period; formal academic meetings and exchanges, and unofficial meetings and exchanges. Another key mode of encounter, through general travel and field excursions, will be the subject of a further paper. Informal encounter could also at times lean towards another kind of formal, yet clandestine relationship, where scholarship could meet intelligence of the espionage kind. This issue remains in the background for much of this paper, indeed while oral history is an ideal method for investigating many kinds of overlooked informality, the clandestine remains an area which, should it exist, would for most respondents remain off limits for discussion. As with any form of research, unknowns remain, though one should perhaps resist the temptation to assume that there is an untold cloak and dagger story lurking here. The story of soviet geography seems likely to have been for the most part the story of intelligence of a more conventional kind.

### **Establishing British geographical studies of the USSR and Eastern Europe**

While the detailed history of the field is not the concern of this paper, some key contextual points should be noted. The field shows a clear relationship between geography and the British state, which drew in part on the experience of geographers in preparing the World War Two Admiralty Handbooks. Clout and Gosme note that projected Handbooks on the USSR and various Eastern European countries were abandoned, countries 'for which, ironically, intelligence information would have proved particularly valuable at a later stage of the war' (Clout and Gosme [2003](#): 158). Only Yugoslavia and Albania were the subject of published handbooks. However, the broad Handbook project provided a model of geographical intelligence with an obvious Cold War resonance, and similar projects may have proceeded outside of the Handbook scheme. For example, in interview John Cole recalled later seeing a similar document relating to the USSR: 'when I was in the Admiralty in 1954 for three months finishing my National Service the guy there gave me the equivalent of the Admiralty Handbooks ... it was confidential ... about Russia and they let me read it and take notes'.[6](#) The encounters considered in this paper clearly demonstrate the way the Cold War structured this sub-disciplinary field, the British state seeking to align academic studies with its perceived strategic interests.[7](#) Even before the Cold War had begun in earnest, a government Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry, chaired by the Earl of Scarborough, recommended the expansion of Slavonic and East European studies in British universities (Interdepartmental Commission of Enquiry on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies [1947](#)). In 1951 the Armed Forces Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL) was established to train a cadre of Russian linguists as part of their National Service (Elliott and Shukman [2002](#)). Several JSSL students, such as John Cole, Arthur Morris and Colin Crossley, subsequently became academic geographers[8](#); wartime or post-war military service of various kinds was an important influence on a number of our respondents (cf. Balchin [1987](#)). State initiatives were often channelled through the British Council. As part of government

efforts to use "friendship" as a political weapon behind the Iron Curtain' (Shaw [2001](#): 64), the Council established a Soviet Relations Committee to foster cultural relations between the UK and the USSR. A Cultural Agreement was signed at governmental level between the UK and the USSR in 1959 (and renegotiated every two years thereafter), followed by agreements with its satellite states. These agreements established the British Council as the intermediary through which formal academic visits to Soviet bloc countries by the figures discussed in this paper were organized and sanctioned. The first geographer to visit the USSR under the auspices of these Agreements was Tony French, then a lecturer at University College London (UCL), in 1959-60.[9](#)

In the late 1950s the University Grants Committee convened the Sub-committee on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies, chaired by a former ambassador to the USSR, Sir William Goodenough Hayter. The 1961 'Hayter Report' led to a significant expansion in Slavonic and East European studies that involved new positions and the establishment of area studies centres to expand language training and produce an academic community engaged in socio-economic research on the contemporary Soviet bloc (University Grants Committee [1961](#)). Universities where posts were established in geography departments included Nottingham, St Andrews, Ulster and Oxford, whilst geographers were also appointed to positions in area studies centres in London and Swansea. Whilst circumstances varied from country to country, and according to the intensity of the Cold War at any point in time, geographers also had to negotiate the Cold War bureaucracy on the other side of the iron curtain. Geographers had to solicit official invitations from host geographers to secure visas and submit work programmes for vetting by the host authorities. Restrictions on activity might concern archival access, travel, topic area and historical study period. Once accepted, British geographers had to navigate a hierarchical and bureaucratic system of higher education in which academic freedom was severely curtailed and teaching and research was divided between universities and research institutes, respectively. The intricacies of negotiating this formal machinery on both sides of the ideological divide could for some serve as a powerful incentive to circumvent the bureaucracy associated with formal academic visits.

Senses of disciplinary identity strongly informed the work under discussion, formed and sustained in part through institutional initiatives such as Institute of British Geographers (IBG) seminars in association with Soviet and Eastern European geographers, discussed below, and the meetings of the International Geographical Union, including those in London in 1964 and Moscow in 1976.

Geographers would also meet in sessions at the annual IBG conference, though there were insufficient numbers to warrant the establishment of a Study Group, and a Limited Life Working Party was only established much later. For some researchers their regional specialism dominated, though others maintained this alongside work in other fields such as medical or rural geography. An important theme for most, especially in the earlier part of the period, was a strong sense of what made their work geographical, and therefore what the intellectual boundaries of their work should be. The identity of British soviet geography comes also in part through restriction, through a self-policing whereby a wide-ranging interest in and experience of the world is channelled into a published output which, in the name of disciplinary identity, may give little sense of that breadth. For some, however,

geography as a discipline was only part of their academic allegiance, with often complex intellectual and institutional relationships to area studies, and commitments to specialist cross-disciplinary fields such as peasant studies, urban studies and transport studies.

Some sense of the published output of the field is also required here. Work on the USSR broadly divides into three categories; textbooks drawing on published documents, statistics and limited field observation; archival research, often focusing on historical issues in part for reasons of very limited access to post-revolutionary material; and contemporary research on the spatiality of planning and urban geography. For Eastern Europe the picture varies from country to country. Textbooks, some covering the whole region and some on individual countries, and based on travels and published sources, go alongside historical research but in some cases also contemporary research (including urban, economic, settlement and transport geography) in countries with more liberal access policies, for example Poland (for reviews see Pallot [1983](#); Turnock [1984](#)). Wider theoretical debates in geography had relatively little impact on the field, with few engagements with spatial science and little connection to radical geography. The presence of Marx as a reference point in the Soviet bloc did not imply a link between soviet geography and western Marxist geography, an intellectual distance noted by David Harvey in an August 2000 interview with *New Left Review*: 'I had no background in Soviet geography ... Marx was my anchor, and what Marx wrote was a critique of capitalism' (Harvey [2000](#): 93-94).

Much of the published record, especially in the earlier period, is dryly empirical in tone, in keeping with disciplinary conventions of what counted as geographical knowledge and how it might be recorded and expressed, and in accordance with the expectations of those countries under scrutiny to which the researcher might wish to return. Highly critical publications, or indeed publications that might display strong sympathy for the Soviet project, might jeopardize any future visa applications. The dryness of some accounts almost mirrors the contemporary object of study in its idealized version of itself; efficient, planned, orderly. Oral history helps in understanding the intriguing combination of political, stylistic and disciplinary self-policing factors producing an output which might otherwise be passed over as one more example of post-war regional geography; a geography whose regulation output turns out to have run alongside, yet for the most been unable to register, extraordinary experiences. It is to some of these experiences that we turn in the remainder of this paper.

### **Formal academic encounters**

Academic lives and disciplines are made in part through formal encounters entailing the presentation or exchange of knowledge, the gathering of research or teaching material, the furthering of relations between individuals and organizations. While some of those interviewed encountered émigré figures from their prospective or eventual study areas during language training within the UK, undertaken by some in conjunction with military service and by others in university settings, most first encountered the USSR or Eastern Europe as academic geographers. If for some this involved ostensibly private



tourist excursions, most journeyed as official scholarly visitors, either alone or as part of a delegation or research group.

The British Council played a key role in facilitating extended visits for those undertaking doctoral research, students journeying with parties of similar postgraduate or undergraduate scholars by boat and rail to Leningrad or Moscow, from where some would disperse to other cities where they had been placed to conduct their research. Judith Pallot, then undertaking a PhD at UCL, recalls the journey in the early 1970s, with around twenty fellow researchers: 'back in those days we all went there by boat, so we had another three days of lectures and getting to know one another, I think it was clearly felt that we needed to bond with one another'. The journey was the beginning of a nine-month research stay:

It seemed a long, long way away, and this is very important, both the geographical distance at that time between the UK and the Soviet Union, as well as the cultural distance was enormous and of course it was emphasized by going on the boat. And I remember as we went down the canal into Leningrad, it was very weird, I had this image of a zip being closed behind me, because we already knew that we couldn't telephone home, apart from we were told we would be able to on Christmas Day, from the Embassy, and that letters were going to take one or two months—in fact they took three months ... Plus we weren't allowed to leave, this was the other thing that the British Council said—if you go you stay your full term, because you needed a visa to leave as well, the Soviets wouldn't let you go.[10](#)

Students and academics funded by the British Council might be required to submit post-visit reports. While most written reports appear to have been destroyed, that produced by Tony French on his 1959-60 British Council exchange studentship at the University of Moscow survives in the UK National Archives at Kew, retained as illustrative of the first post-war group of British scholars to visit the USSR. French documents the difficulties and benefits of an extended research stay:

I achieved very little of what I had hoped to do in way of research ... Nevertheless, the year was of great value in acquainting me with the country and in allowing me to become versant with secondary sources, through the use of libraries ...The friendly contacts established with a large number of Russian geographers forms, perhaps, the main achievement of my visit.[11](#)

If the British Council sought to guide geographers into the USSR as part of a wider, albeit small, British scholarly community, others encountered the USSR as solo academic visitors, although the definition of 'academic' was not always clear cut. Thus Melvyn Howe, then a lecturer in geography at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, travelled to the USSR in August 1956 on a grant for travel and scholarship obtained through his university, aiming partly to gather material for teaching



use. Howe believed himself to be the first British geographer to visit since the Revolution, and while not officially travelling as an academic geographer did visit geographical societies and faculties in Leningrad and Moscow. Howe recalls his arrival in the USSR, in his case without any prior language training: 'I relied on the Intourist guide all along'.<sup>12</sup> On returning Howe wrote an article for the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) *Geographical Journal* on 'Geography in the Soviet Universities', conveying information on the geography curriculum, the role and geographical extent of field expeditions in the USSR, student life in general, philosophical debate in USSR geography, and the employment destinations of geography graduates. The RGS clarified the nature of his visit in a footnote: 'The visit was entirely non-political in character' (Howe 1958: 78).

In the USSR and Eastern Europe access to source material could be difficult. Those researching doctorates in the USSR, for example, were assigned a local supervisor whose role could be more resource facilitator than academic advisor. As with research anywhere the personal relationship to an archivist could open literal and metaphorical doors, with research success relying on clever working of the system. Andrew Dawson, researching in Poland in the mid-1960s as part of his UCL doctorate, recalls difficulties when approaching material closer to the present day concerning the textile industry:

There was material which was held in the Institute of Geography library in Warsaw, which was only available to full-time members of staff who were Polish nationals ..., or there were other restrictions. ... And I fortunately was able to persuade the nice ladies that were around the library that I was eligible to see some of this, and of course I wasn't eligible, and there were maps ... locked away in the cupboard, and occasionally late in the afternoon when everybody else had gone away ... I could get access to this material and look at it ... I used quite a lot of it in my PhD but I didn't acknowledge it properly.<sup>13</sup>

Complex strategies of persuasion, deception and non-acknowledgement of sources here shape the research process and its outputs, non-acknowledgement in this case benefiting both student and kindly/errant archivist. Geographers could also seek to circumvent the regulation of information through choosing research topics accessible beyond the archive. David Turnock explains his choice of research on forestry in Romania as in part a means to get outdoors beyond the earshot of perceived eavesdroppers or bugs: 'I found if I spoke to people in Bucharest I very rarely made very much progress ... I found you were better off in the countryside where there were no microphones and where often the professionals did get away [from] their minders'. Professional foresters would be 'very direct' in criticisms of 'unrealistic state plans': 'Of course the ... trees didn't have microphones attached to them, so they were fairly confident. They were very hospitable ... you'd wind up for a sort of banquet in a forest cabin in the middle of the afternoon and have convivial get togethers'.<sup>14</sup> Individual academic researchers would also formally encounter geographers and others through giving presentations on their own research. Here the topic was often other than that of the country

they were in, for example a study of, say, UK population change would be deemed more appropriate than work on the industrial geography of Bulgaria. Thus Dick Osborne, then at the University of Edinburgh, visited Bulgaria and Romania in 1958, giving lectures as part of the arrangements for the trip: 'the most common lecture I gave was on the economic geography of Scotland'.<sup>15</sup> Reflections on Eastern European economic or social geography, however preliminary and tentative, would not have been considered suitable for public discussion. Such presentations in the USSR or Eastern Europe on things other than the USSR or Eastern Europe could however be turned to other purposes. Andrew Dawson describes lecturing on a UK topic in Poland during a period of political unrest, which deliberately functioned as an allegory of the current situation, and was heard as such:

I remember once being invited to give a lecture in Krakow, it must have been about '85, to the School of Geography there, and so I did a typical Polish thing, I went and I talked to them about the reform of local government in Scotland and every member of the audience knew that in fact I was ... commenting on what was going on in Poland, though I never mentioned Poland once in the hour's lecture, and afterwards the head of the department and I were walking ... to lunch, and he said, you must realize that you could cause us a lot of trouble if you're not careful in what you say, and I hadn't mentioned Poland once. That was the situation.

Dawson explains this as a strategy by which political sympathies could be expressed without putting Polish colleagues at risk in the Solidarity era:

It would have done nobody any good to go to Poland and start agitating or trying to make connections and so on, with Solidarity people. You knew who they were, and we would go for a walk with them and they'd tell you about what was going on, walk to the park, this sort of thing, but it would have been monstrous to put them in a false position.<sup>16</sup>

Geographers also encountered the USSR and Eastern Europe as delegates to seminars and conferences, such as the International Geographical Union conference in Moscow in 1976. Many British geographers attended this event, most of whom had no research or teaching interests in the USSR, and indeed British Soviet geographers often found themselves acting as guides or translators for colleagues, with only a minor presence in the academic programme. By contrast seminars held under IBG auspices brought together small groups of British geographers with academics from specific countries, enabling a more specialist encounter. The first such event was the 1959 Anglo-Polish seminar held in Nieborow, Poland, with a reciprocal event at Keele in 1962. Further Anglo-Polish seminars followed, along with Anglo-Romanian, British-Hungarian, British-Soviet and British-Bulgarian events.<sup>17</sup> Dick Osborne, then at Edinburgh, had visited Poland in 1958, following the 1957 visit to Edinburgh of Leszek Kosinski of the Institute of Geography of the Polish Academy of Sciences:

We got on very well together, and I took him round ... he was one of the up and coming researchers at the Institute ... So I went to Poland in 1958 because Kosinski and I brokered a deal whereby I went to Poland for six weeks at the expense of the Institute of Geography, and then I, or my university, had to support him for six weeks in this country ... the following year I prevailed upon various other departments to host him ... One result of that exchange was the first Anglo-Polish seminar, which I think was a Polish initiative. They said, well we would like to host twelve British geographers on the assumption that this can be reciprocated in future years the other way. And on the theme of ... well the theme was fairly vague, applied geography which was the OK phrase you see in Poland, making geography useful, helping the country and so on.[18](#)

Details of the six-day post-seminar tour around Poland are given in the proceedings, published in Poland (in English) as *Problems of Applied Geography* (Polish Academy of Sciences [1961](#)) where participants are listed, the meeting is reported, the 'Resolution approved by the Participants in the Seminar' given, and papers printed. The geographical vision of Britain and Poland given in post-seminar tours warrants further analysis, beyond this paper. Michael Wise, then at the London School of Economics (LSE) and participant in the 1959 seminar, comments: 'the Polish did use the opportunity to impress upon us the spirit of Poland, the nationality, the independence of Polish culture, and that they weren't Russian, they were quite separate'.[19](#) A contrasting story of academic atmosphere emerges from Osborne's account of the 1983 British-Bulgarian seminar:

I stayed in Edinburgh with them for several days, and then came back with them to Nottingham, and one or two of them I'd met already in previous years, and they certainly were a little bit nervous ... In fact one of them, who I'd met before, we travelled alone in a lift in one of the halls in Edinburgh and he took something out of his briefcase and gave me a small present and he said, please take this, I didn't want to give it to you in public. Very cautious. But the Poles would never have got into that state.[20](#)

Official delegations could encounter or provoke political sensitivities, most notably around the British-Soviet seminar in the USSR in 1982. From the 1970s Russian geographer Yuri Medvedkov had produced a form of social geography to which the Soviet academic and political authorities became increasingly hostile, effectively excluding Medvedkov from the 1976 International Geographical Union. The ostracization of Medvedkov and his wife Olga from Soviet academic life was linked to their involvement in unofficial peace movements, and also their Jewishness; the Medvedkovs' successful application for visas to emigrate to Israel prompted further academic exclusion. British geographers were active in supporting their case within the USSR and their eventual move to the USA. The seminar delegation of British geographers made a point (after some debate) of visiting Medvedkov in

his flat to express intellectual and moral support. The leader of the British delegation, Emrys Jones, then Professor at the LSE, recalls: 'that meeting was shrouded in secrecy'.<sup>21</sup> The British delegation wished to include support for Medvedkov and his colleagues in the seminar resolution, much to the irritation of Academician Gerasimov, the leader of the Soviet delegation and dominant figure in USSR geography. Tony French recalls the pressure on himself and Jones to sign Gerasimov's version of the resolution:

We had the group statement for our support for the Medvedkovs ... and Gerasimov separated us and took us from the rest, having a final sort of reception, took us by car with his driver across Moscow, trying to get us to sign his version ... and this driver was driving, even by Russian standards, like a lunatic, wheeling in and out of these huge lorries and was doing it deliberately.

This tactic, interpreted as an attempt to encourage Jones to sign Gerasimov's statement, did not succeed. French comments: 'after that I was *persona non grata* for Gerasimov'.<sup>22</sup>

The 1964 International Geographical Union conference, held in London, included a Soviet delegation for the first time, and Russian-speaking British geographers were delegated to help host the visitors on this and subsequent visits. Denis Shaw recalls hosting a Soviet delegation in Birmingham after the 1978 British-Soviet seminar, meeting the party at New Street Station: 'we took them on field courses and they had a formal dinner with the Vice Chancellor giving a medal to Academician Gerasimov'.<sup>23</sup> Regional excursions could, however, have supplementary attractions: 'when we came to going on the field course I remember we went to Coventry, I wanted to show them the Cathedral, well Academician Gerasimov was keener to get to Marks and Spencers'. Soviet visits to the UK proceeded through a circuit of host geography departments, with Gerasimov always in attendance, and respect seemingly due to him more for his institutional and organizing role, sometimes in difficult political circumstances, than his intellectual contribution. Behavioural rules might be relaxed in his absence. Tony French remembers hosting a party at his home in Chorley Wood:

We had a Chilterns excursion ... and because I lived there I invited them all to come and have lunch at our house. So they all arrived and Gerasimov was with them, and while we were there he said can I use your telephone to ring the Embassy, and he rang the Embassy, and he said, oh I have to go to the Embassy, he said will you drive me to the Embassy ... And my wife said, the moment you and Gerasimov had left the house the whole atmosphere changed, coats were off, and everyone started to have fun.<sup>24</sup>

French continues: 'Gerasimov was an exception, most of ... their geographers ... went out of their way to be helpful, they were extremely friendly, and you know, both sides recognized that there were certain areas that couldn't really be explored in depth'. British entertainment should here be put in

the context of the relatively privileged treatment received by visiting geographers in the USSR, particularly those visiting as invited individuals. Thus Michael Wise of LSE, who visited the USSR in November 1963 funded by the British Council as part of the 1963-65 Cultural Agreement, comments on the difficulties of reciprocating visits to the opera and ballet, as there were no equivalent entertainment funds in most British universities.<sup>25</sup> The judgements made on the relative excitement of official and unofficial academic excursions and entertainments which might be made by hosts and guests in either location must be understood in the context of broader cultural assumptions made by each side in relation to the other. Perspectives from the Soviet and Eastern European side are however beyond the scope of our current research.

### **Unofficial encounters**

The geographies of Eastern Europe and the USSR produced in the UK between 1945 and 1991 were also the product of and occasion for unofficial meetings and exchanges, working various systems in the UK and elsewhere and at times working against systems deemed to be restrictive and/or oppressive. Researching in the USSR or Eastern Europe gave an acute sense of the boundaries between official and unofficial, and the occasions where such boundaries might blur, in terms of the conduct of the researcher in the countries under scrutiny. The blurring of such boundaries might also occur in terms of the relationship between British geography and the British state, though such stories, if they exist, may be beyond oral history as method, not least given the role of the Official Secrets Act in the less public aspects of British public service. Some respondents wondered if there were any spies amongst their geographical and non-geographical academic colleagues; tentative guesses were occasionally made in relation to other participants on British Council trips. On returning from research visits the British state might be more interested in geographers' experience of other scholars than their geographical knowledge, with some called in for off-the-record official meetings at the Foreign Office. The British Council also reflected on the wider informational value of scholarly excursions, noting in a review of the exchanges under the Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreements between 1959 and 1963: 'We do not send our students to the Soviet Union to collect intelligence, but they are often in a position to pick up interesting information which would not be readily available from other sources. We have learnt quite a lot from them about the system of higher education as seen from the inside'.<sup>26</sup>

The Soviet bloc was an undeniably sensitive region for research, and there is a clear sense that individuals were chosen in part for their abilities to conduct themselves in an appropriate fashion in informal as well as formal encounters. This of course begs many questions as to the nature of 'appropriateness'. Politics may play a part here, though there is considerable variation in political views in the group, which certainly cannot be characterized as populated by either stridently pro- or anti-Soviet figures. Appropriateness may have been more a matter of certain expectations of conduct to follow, rooted in particular disciplinary conventions, a detached, objective approach to academic

geography, and a model of masculine professional conduct, emphasizing rationality, organization, particular codes of manners, and particular licensed forms of sociability. The loosely defined nature of such assumptions is itself significant in their operation; it is striking how often in interviews the terms *persona grata* or *persona non grata* have been used to suggest the abilities or inabilities of individuals to make their way as British geographers in the Soviet bloc, as well as within the British geographical community.

In some cases individuals who had embarked on research and writing on the Soviet bloc circumscribed behaviour which they thought might endanger access to the field, or even chose not to visit the region due to wariness about security. John Cole of the University of Nottingham, who published on the USSR from the mid-1950s (Cole and German [1961](#)), prioritized field research on Latin America rather than the USSR in part because of the Soviets' likely knowledge of his national service Russian-language training at the JSSL in the early 1950s (Elliott and Shukman [2002](#)).<sup>27</sup> Cole was aware of the entrapment of a fellow student at the JSSL who had later visited the Soviet bloc as a journalist, and did not himself visit the USSR until a 1976 Intourist tour.

Briefings on etiquette and security for researchers were provided throughout our study period by the British Council, Foreign Office and colleagues or supervisors. Pallot describes the meeting held in advance of travel by boat to the USSR:

They talked about security and we were told we were going to be followed, there was going to be a file kept on us, we were told that our rooms would be bugged and ... they showed us the bugging technology ... they talked about the various ways in which we would try to be captured and compromised, and ... that we would be viewed by the Soviets as high achievers in the UK ... we were told that they would try to get a file on us, so they would try to identify our weak points.<sup>28</sup>

Individual reactions to such briefings varied as much as memories of early research trips, some suggesting they quickly came to terms with the nuances of things, some recalling their naivety whether through general inexperience of travel or political ignorance, some suggesting naivety could be a useful tactical pose when engaging with individuals or institutions. Such issues are hardly unique to this research area, but the peculiar mixture of formal and informal encounter make them especially acute here, not least because of the presence of the formal state in everyday life. Tony French's written report to the British Council on his 1959-60 stay noted issues of surveillance:

Many students believed our rooms were tapped. (This is possible; out of the thousands of rooms in the building we were in exactly the same rooms as the Americans had been in the previous year). Often a Russian friend would appear nervous if caught by another Russian in our company ... It seems that certain students were given the task of making reports on our activities and contacts. One

Russian acquaintance of mine revealed this, when drunk, to another Russian who warned us.[29](#)

Others gave similar accounts, although as Denis Shaw, who initially spent ten months in Voronezh in southern European Russia in the early 1970s, funded by the British Council, suggests, this did not mean that discussion ignored politics: 'there were occasions where we'd have conversations, you know, even heated arguments with students on critical issues'. Shaw recalls:

interesting discussion about the nature of Communism ... I was saying I couldn't imagine this ideal society that you're talking about and he was saying well, 'we don't think of it in those terms...' ... my experience was that in those days there were quite a few people who did still believe that, you know, the system was basically sound, it was heading somewhere and it was going to achieve something in the end.[30](#)

By contrast French's experience in 1959 was of reticence, which may indicate a general thaw in atmosphere through the 1960s, or simply that he met different kinds of individual:

On the whole we avoided politics. I mean unless they brought it up. But on the whole it wasn't safe for them to discuss politics with us. What one found oneself doing was often correcting false impressions. You see they'd all been told how well they lived in the Soviet Union, how badly we all lived in the West. Well they knew the first bit wasn't true, so they assumed the second bit wasn't true, and that we all lived the life of Riley, the streets of London were paved with gold. And you had to say, it's not as good as all that.[31](#)

Dick Osborne similarly found reticence in Bulgaria in 1958, as the first visiting British geographer since the war, although a walk up a hill could offer different possibilities for exchange:

In Sofia I was invited to go for a Sunday morning hike ... I thought there'd just be two or three people but ... about fifteen or twenty turned up and it was explained to me that these were friends of my Sofia contacts who were variously architects or teachers or civil servants, what have you, and it was their habit, this was in mid-October, late October, still very pleasant weather in Bulgaria, to go for a walk up the mountain on a Sunday, and clearly it was recreation and a breather but it was also a chance to let down their hair and speak freely, that bore in on me as I began to gather what it was all about.[32](#)

Geographers often had possibilities of travel beyond those of diplomats and other official British visitors, and interviews show their awareness of the potential for activities to be perceived as having an intelligence dimension by Soviet states, though this issue indicates more the general intelligence



value of producing, say, an industrial geography of the Czech steel industry, than any cloak and dagger research. Andrew Dawson reflected on the theme in relation to his work on archival sources in Poland, and concurred that it could have been construed that he was gathering intelligence on the current state of Polish industry: 'Yes, I was a "spy" ... I would have been in serious trouble if I had been caught doing it deliberately, knowing that I was doing it deliberately and doing it repeatedly'.<sup>33</sup> Discussion with David Turnock on his solo research visits to Romania brings out senses of mutual and self-surveillance when conducting research which, while never approaching espionage, might be regarded by all sides as going beyond accepted inquisitiveness. The procedures of individual research carried the potential of generating encounters more threatening than official academic exchange. Turnock recalls his relationship with staff of the Geographical Institute of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest:

DT: Well some thought I was a spy of course. I mean it wasn't long before the security minded bods at the Institute had me sussed out and presumed I was a spy ... because I didn't just go once, I came back and came back and came back ... and I tried to do my own thing. The security-minded people soon sussed that the people I was getting on with were the wrong people as they saw it.

Interviewer: I know you weren't a spy, but did you feel yourself that you were in a way?

DT: Well I could understand why they thought I was a spy because I was constantly trying to suck up material.

Interviewer: So you're talking about borrowing things and going back to your hotel, a feeling of being under cover?

DT: Oh yes, there was sort of sweat at the back of one's neck as it were, you know, I'm sort of smuggling stuff around. I mean I don't think there was anything I was doing that was particularly incriminating but I was aware of the fact that the people who were helping me were taking slight risks ... So I realized I had some responsibility to be extremely discreet.<sup>34</sup>

Processes of surveillance could also extend in some cases to formal approaches on intelligence matters from those within the countries concerned, exploring the possibilities of recruitment for the KGB or other bodies. Sometimes such approaches might be hard to read and are difficult retrospectively to define; in other cases definite attempts to recruit were made. Tony French, then a lecturer at UCL, recalls an encounter with the KGB, and subsequently British intelligence, during his third or fourth visit to Moscow in the mid-1960s. French had travelled to Leningrad to conduct library research: 'this chap rang me up and said he was from the Ministry of Higher Education, and he said

he'd been asked to do a report on the working of the cultural exchange group ... and could he have a chat with me, could he give me lunch'. French took the approach 'completely at face value' and accepted the offer, although over lunch 'it did strike me that he wasn't as interested as he ought to have been in my wonderful ideas'. At the end of the meeting the official suggested further discussion: 'he said ... I've found it very interesting talking to you, perhaps when you go back to Moscow ... we could meet again ... what are you doing next? I said, oh I'm going out to Irkutsk ... He said I've found it so interesting talking to you, I'd like to fly out and we might meet in Irkutsk'. Such comments made French 'highly suspicious of this guy', and while they did not meet in Irkutsk (2600 miles from Moscow in Siberia), immediately on returning to his Moscow hotel French was telephoned by the official once again: 'he said, tomorrow is a public holiday... is there somewhere I can take you?' French asked to visit a new town near Moscow, modelled on the post-war new towns around London, which was closed to foreigners. En route French was struck by the way in which local police readily allowed his acquaintance to drive through a village parade when all other traffic was being diverted elsewhere:

Over lunch that day, he said, I have to admit ... I'm with the KGB, and we know you're a spy ... it became clear that they weren't too worried about me being 'a spy' ... but what he was trying to do was pressurize me into being helpful and obliging for them. He said ... you've asked to go at different times to various places, and you've never been turned down, we can be really helpful, and we can arrange for you to visit these places, but then I mean you can always help us.

The official mixed accusations of espionage with offers of research assistance in an attempt to solicit information, asking French whether he might provide details on the destination of graduates from School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the University of London; information which, even if he had wanted to, French was in no position to provide. With six weeks still remaining on his visit, French reflected on the request:

I didn't want to rush off to the Embassy, or if I'd got on the first plane home they would be convinced I really am a spy. And so I just thought I'll sit it out and I met him at least twice more ... the night before I left the country he took me to a restaurant in Moscow, and we had a private room and he said, you think about what I've said, and so when I got back to England, I must say I was distinctly relieved, and I rang up a friend of mine in the Foreign Office ... I was asked to go down to Whitehall and spoke to a couple of gentlemen, ... MI5 or MI6, they never said who they were, and I had a cup of rather bad coffee and two biscuits; the KGB gave me about six square meals. And all they could advise me is well don't go back there. And in fact for about six years I didn't.[35](#)

French did not relate this encounter to any academic colleagues in the UK or USSR, with the exception of his departmental head Clifford Darby, who would otherwise have questioned his reluctance to return to the country. From our interviews French's experience appears to have been rare, with no other respondents giving such an account, but there may be other stories.

## **Conclusion**

We have sought in this paper to draw attention to the now historic subdisciplinary field of 'soviet geography', a field that does not figure highly in conventional histories of the discipline. Specifically we have attempted to indicate the ways in which oral history can contribute to the story of the production of a particular field of geographical knowledge, not least because of the specific distinctions of formality and informality which played out in these eastern encounters. Whilst considerations of formal and unofficial encounters could of course inform accounts of any field of academic geography, the relationship between the two has a particular purchase in the ideological context of the Soviet bloc and the Cold War. Equally oral history contributes to a varied and complex story of a subdiscipline that might otherwise be dismissed as homogenous or insignificant from other vantage points within the discipline. Despite the role of formal group encounters such as the exchange of delegations, the geographers we have studied were largely individual scholars, geographically dispersed and forming a loose community of researchers, lacking shared intellectual heroes or villains or one conceptual framework which could bind a subdiscipline tightly together. Oral history helps to caution against any easy retrospective assumption of strong and coherent collective identity. Oral history's relationship to the passing of time also has a particular resonance in a field which has by definition ceased to operate in its previous incarnation. Our interviews also reveal the conditions and conventions under which the scholars we have scrutinized operated at particular places and points in time. One feature of this is an acute sense of the formative role of informal, extra-academic and non-academic encounters in shaping academic lives, whether in the UK or overseas, encounters which were nevertheless concealed from view by the publishing conventions of the time.

It is important not to privilege oral histories, or, to use Barnes' terminology, 'lives told', over other forms of historical record. Oral history does not reveal the messy and/or deeper truth underneath the polished veneer of the published record, but provides a further appreciation of the circumstances and ways in which the knowledge and truths generated by this field of geography were produced. Oral history entails appreciating individuals as elements within a system, and sometimes as a product of impersonal forces and institutions (the state, geopolitics, terms of employment etc.). Lashmar and Oliver have commented that: 'the effect of the Cold War on British academia is a relatively unexplored subject and, despite ideals of academic freedom, there is no doubt that some academics waged the Cold War with fervour' (1998: 122). Our explorations through interview and related publications do not suggest that British geographers can be classed as fervent Cold War warriors, indeed none retrospectively presented themselves as waging the Cold War. Nevertheless their research constituted

a practice which made sense in terms of the Cold War, with the academic posts which some people occupied a specific outcome of Cold War circumstances, and the geographical knowledge produced being shaped by Cold War structures and received in its geopolitical and cultural context. While, in terms of the conscious aims of those concerned, we may not be studying Cold War geographers, British geographical studies of the USSR and Eastern Europe were very much Cold War geographies.

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### **Notes**

1 Interview with John Dewdney, 14 November 2001, Durham.

2 Twenty were British-based geographers studying the USSR and Eastern Europe; one was the widow of a British geographer who studied Eastern Europe; one was a British geographer who taught for a number of years at a university in Poland; two were North American-based geographers studying the USSR; three were geographers in Moscow who subsequently emigrated and took up academic positions in the USA; three were prominent figures in British geography; and two were non-geographers involved in Slavonic and East European Area Studies. The interviews with British-based geographers form the core of the arguments in this paper. Some of the interviewees held academic positions, others were retired yet academically active whilst some were retired but academically inactive. Three were interviewed more than once, and four in pairs. A small number failed to respond to our invitation to be interviewed. Interviews followed a standard checklist of topics to discuss, were conducted in offices, restaurants, pubs and homes, and lasted between one and six hours. Sometimes all of the authors were present at the interviews, whilst on other occasions one or two of us took part. The complete list of people interviewed between 2001 and 2005 is: Roger Bivand, Michael Bradshaw, Krystyna Carter, John Cole, Paul Compton, Andrew Dawson, John Dewdney, Alan Dingsdale, David Fox, Tony French, Clifford German, Derek Hall, Cyril Halstead, David Hooson,

Melvyn Howe, Grigory Ioffe, Emrys Jones, Bill Mead, Olga Medvedkov, Yuri Medvedkov, Roy Mellor, Arthur Morris, Geoffrey North, Robert North, Dick Osborne, Judy Pallot, John Sallnow, Denis Shaw, Leslie Symons, Alan Smith, David Smith, David Turnock, James White and Michael Wise. In each case the interview was taped and transcribed. The transcript was subsequently sent to the interviewee who was invited to revise it if required. John Dewdney died before we were able to return the transcripts to him. In addition to the oral history interviews we undertook an interview by correspondence with Colin Thomas.

3 Autobiographical essays by geographers are the basis of Anne Buttimer's [1983](#) collection *The Practice of Geography*, which seeks to show the intellectual, emotional and cultural make up of leading geographers of the time via essays and discussion.

4 We were fortunate to be able to interview Frank Carter's widow, Krystyna, who gave valuable insights into his life and work. On Carter see Clout ([2001](#)), French ([2001](#)) and Wise ([2001](#)).

5 An approach combining analytical essays with the transcripts of individual testimonies of those outside the elite is found in Siegelbaum and Walkowitz ([1995](#)). For oral histories of one aspect of soviet life see Sherbakova ([1998](#)).

6 Interview with John Cole, 6 August 2001, Nottingham.

7 This was of course not the first occasion on which geography, the British state and intelligence had met. On British geography, intelligence and espionage in the First World War see Heffernan ([1996](#), [2000](#)). On US geography and intelligence in World War Two see Barnes ([2006](#)). For contrasting stories of the Cold War role and experience of geographers in the USA see Harvey ([2001](#) [1983]) on Owen Lattimore, and Smith ([2003](#)) on Isaiah Bowman. The relationship between the British state, intelligence and the Cold War is discussed in Aldrich ([2001](#)), which includes discussion of the Information Research Department of the Foreign Office (IRD), set up in January 1948 as a 'covert political warfare section' (2001: 128) against the USSR and communism. On the IRD's role and connection to various institutions, professions and individuals in British life, including academia, see Lashmar and Oliver ([1998](#)).

8 Clifford German also attended the JSSL but later left academia to become a journalist. Tony French participated in JSSL courses as a civilian.

9 This and subsequent information is drawn from archival material relating to the British Council and Cultural Agreements held in the National Archives at Kew. On the wider role of culture in the Cold War see Saunders ([1999](#)).

10 Interview with Judith Pallot, 26 March 2003, Oxford.

11 BW 64/28—Exchange Schemes: Students: Postgraduate Exchange (1959-60); National Archives, Kew. [French](#) also produced a *Geographical Journal* article on 'Geography and geographers in the Soviet Union' (1961).

12 Interview with Melvyn Howe, 14 August 2003, Porthcawl. Intourist was the official state-owned tourist company in the USSR.

13 Interview with Andrew Dawson, 19 June 2003, St Andrews.

14 Interview with David Turnock, 10 February 2003, Leicester.

15 Interview with Dick Osborne, 18 July 2003, Nottingham.

16 Interview with Andrew Dawson, 19 June 2003, St Andrews.

17 Up to 1983 the following seminars took place: Anglo-Polish: 1959 Nieborow, 1962 Keele, 1967 Baranow Sandomierski, 1970 Nottingham, 1974 Torun, 1977 Sheffield; Anglo-Romanian: 1972 London; British-Hungarian: 1974 Nottingham/London, 1977 Szeged, 1982 Durham; British-Soviet: 1978 London, 1982 Moscow; British-Bulgarian: 1979 UK, 1983 UK (Steel [1983](#): 156-157). Archival material relating to these events, largely uncatalogued, is held in the IBG Archive, lodged in the RGS-IBG, London.

18 Interview with Dick Osborne, 18 July 2003, Nottingham.

19 Interview with Michael Wise, 2 September 2004, London.

20 Interview with Dick Osborne, 18 July 2003, Nottingham.

21 Interview with Emrys Jones, 10 August 2004, London. An unpublished thirteen-page report on the seminar was produced as E. Jones and I. P. Gerasimov, *The Anglo-Soviet Seminar* (1982). A copy is held in the library of the RGS-IBG, classmark FF/116.

22 Interview with Tony French, 17 June 2003, London. Jones, who did not study the USSR, performed a diplomatic role as head of the delegation.

23 Interview with Denis Shaw, 21 November 2002, Birmingham.

24 Interview with Tony French, 17 June 2003, London.

25 Interview with Michael Wise, 2 September 2004, London. BW64/39—USSR Policy: Cultural Agreement 1963-65, National Archives, Kew.

26 BW 64/42—USSR General Policies: Cultural Agreement 1960-61, National Archives, Kew.

27 Interview with John Cole, 6 August 2001, Nottingham.

28 Interview with Judith Pallot, 26 March 2003, Oxford.

29 BW 64/28—Exchange Schemes: Students: Postgraduate Exchange (1959-60), National Archives, Kew.

30 Interview with Denis Shaw, 21 November 2002, Birmingham.

31 Interview with Tony French, 17 June 2003, London.

32 Interview with Dick Osborne, 18 July 2003, Nottingham.

33 Interview with Andrew Dawson, 19 June 2003, St Andrews.

34 Interview with David Turnock, 10 February 2003, Leicester.

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