Call for Papers, International Conference:

Vostokovedenie Reconsidered: Exploring Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet Oriental Studies

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Organisers: Heike Liebau (ZMO Berlin), Jeanine Dağyeli (ZMO Berlin), Ashirbek Muminov (L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan) and Aftandil Erkinov (Tashkent, Uzbekistan)

Venue: Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, Germany

The Russian and later Soviet conceptualisation of the term Vostokovedenie (Orientology, Oriental Studies) traces its origins back to a 18th/19th century European model of an Orient which included not only the Islamicate countries of the Middle East, Turkey, Iran and North Africa but encompassed South and South East Asia, Japan, China and Africa. Different from other European colonial powers, Russia did not have overseas colonies; hers were connected to “the motherland” by the Eurasian landmass. Therefore, Russia's imperial gaze on “the Orient” was always twofold: directed towards the outside (especially India) but also towards her “inner Orient”, the conquered territories in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia herself occupied a hybrid space: orientalised by Western and Central European neighbours, the Orient was the place where Russia could claim equality with other European powers in her “civilising mission” (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010). After the Soviet Union consolidated, Vostokovedenie continued to be regarded as an important discipline: it was expected to provide the necessary knowledge to reach out to national liberation movements popping up everywhere. Soviet Vostokovedenie drew as much on its imperial Russian academic roots as on the specific notion of an alternative modernity and became an important pillar in the Soviet academic landscape. Whereas until the first decades of the 20th century Russian Vostokovedenie was part of the wider European academic context (British, French German Oriental Studies), mutual recognition and exchange were impeded by the onset of the Cold War. Although the findings of Soviet Vostokovedenie were intensively discussed within the socialist countries, they were only noticed by few individuals in Western Europe and the USA.

Why do we consider it necessary to readdress these issues almost twenty-five years after the demise of the Soviet Union? One inspiration came from the recent introspection and reframing of Area Studies. The last decades have seen many contributions to rethink and discuss core concepts and objectives. Among the many demands made regarding a fresh and critical
engagement with Area Studies is the on a par discussion of “international” and “local” scholars about their objectives, methodologies etc., similar to the requirements defined by other disciplines. Although few would deny self-reflexivity with regard to their area of specialty and its local academic representatives, the disparity in the academic reception of Western and non-Western knowledge production is still noticeable. There has, however, been a recent interest in the academic history of Soviet Vostokovedenie, both in the West (Mühlfried & Sokolovskiy 2011; Kemper & Conermann 2011) as well as in former Soviet republics (Kozlov 1992; Shastitko & Skvorcova 2000; Tamazishvili 2000).

To engage critically with the history of science and scholarship, and especially with the history of those knowledge fields that deal with “the Orient” (e.g. Islamic Studies, South Asian, South East Asian, and Central Asian Studies, Anthropology of the Middle East) has long been a central concern for the Zentrum Moderner Orient (see e.g. Liebau 2014; Lange 2011, 2014; Roche 2013; Dağyeli, forthcoming). During the workshop, we want to look at the specific characteristics of Russian/Soviet/Post-Soviet understandings of Vostokovedenie from a conceptual history perspective, and ask whether they differ semantically and ontologically from what is commonly called Oriental Studies and if so, in what ways?

The discussion will be structured by three sections:

1. **Section: Conceptualising Vostokovedenie: Continuity or Reinvention?**

This section attempts at investigating conceptions of Vostokovedenie within the general framework of Russian/Soviet science and policy at different periods.

Who were the actors? What were the main historical events that marked turning points and which changes did they effect regarding topics, regional orientation and methodical approaches? To what extent has Vostokovedenie been a centralized enterprise and to which degree could dissenting discourses be voiced? How were the scholarly traditions of Russian/Soviet Oriental Studies balanced against varying political demands? Which role was ascribed to Vostokovedenie in the independent post-Soviet republics in their search for identity? Did the political and social breakup lead to affirmation and continuity, recourse to earlier traditions, new unprecedented approaches or a bricolage of these?

2. **Section: Institutionalising Vostokovedenie: Space and Knowledge**

The focus in the second section will be on “geographies of knowledge”. Knowledge production cannot be regarded as a “neutral” activity divorced from social, political, cultural and material space. Thus, we invite contributions dealing with questions like:

What was the role of academic institutions established after 1918 (Tbilisi, Baku, Tashkent, Yerevan) alongside the already existing sites of knowledge production (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kazan)? How did they develop over different periods and what was the relationship between “centre” and “periphery”? Which kind of hierarchies existed among those sites regarded as “centres” (Moscow and Leningrad) and among those in other parts of the country. How were
institutions affected by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the foundation of independent nation states after 1991? How far did they contribute to the reframing of Vostokovedenie in the new political context?

3. The Expert, the Vostokoved: Biographical and Political Ruptures

Within this section we would like to discuss new approaches to the history of Vostokovedenie based on life trajectories and biographical perspectives. Looking at individuals/scholars who were involved in the history of Russian/Soviet/Post-Soviet Vostokovedenie we invite presentations on the following questions:

How was the access to the various institutions (universities and academy of sciences), international conferences, publications and research areas regulated? How were research topics developed and defined? Who was acknowledged as an expert? What kind of privileges, restrictions and demands did this entail? What kind of fissures existed during Soviet times between scholars of Muslim and non-Muslim background regarding the delicate topic of Islamic Studies? What were reasons for taking up training in this branch of study and how were possible personal motivations (e.g. family background, interest in preserving traditions and local knowledge) modulated with political aspirations like the promotion of socialism and support of liberation movements worldwide? To what extent did the indigenization policy of the 1920/30s (korennyzatsiya) shape the development of the Vostokoved? How are political frictions reflected in biographies and what is perceived as such?

Conference languages will be Russian and English. Abstracts of proposals (in Russian or English – no more than 300 words) should be sent to Heike Liebau and Jeanine Dağyeli (Heike.Liebau@zmo.de, Jeanine.Dagyeli@zmo.de) by March 31, 2015. Please indicate which of the three sections you relate your topic to. The organisers will try to raise additional funding in order to cover all expenses for those whose proposals are accepted for the programme. Notification will be completed by May 31, 2015. Full papers will be due by December 31, 2015. We aim to publish selected papers in a conference volume.