The Geographical and Geopolitical Foundations of Eurasianism

October 10, 2016

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Article authored in Prague, Czechoslovakia in late 1933 – early 1934, first published in the German theological journal Orient und Occident No. 17 (Leipzig: 1934). Republished in and translated from the collection Osnovy evraziistva [Foundations of Eurasianism] (Moscow: Arktogeia, 2002).

Featured in Foundations of Eurasianism – Volume I

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There are significantly more grounds for calling Russia the “middle state” (Zhongguo in Chinese) rather than China. The more time that passes, the more these grounds will make themselves evident. For Russia, Europe is nothing more than a peninsula of the Old Continent that lies to the West of its borders. On this continent, Russia itself occupies the main space, its torso. The total area of European states, taken together, is close to five million kilometers squared. The area of Russia within the borders of the contemporary USSR is significantly larger than 20 million kilometers squared (especially if one includes the space of the Mongolian and Tuva national republics of former “Outer Mongolia” and the “Uryankhay land” which at the current moment are parts of the Soviet Union).

With rare exception, the Russian people of the late 19th and early 20th centuries forgot about the spaces beyond the Urals (one of those who remembered them was the genius Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev). Now, another time has come. The whole “Ural-Kuznetsk combine,” with its blast furnaces, coal mines, and new cities with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants each, is being built behind the Urals. The Turkestan-Siberian Railway (“Turksib”) is being laid. Nowhere else is the expansion of Russian culture so wide and spontaneous as in another region beyond the Urals, in the so-called “Central Asian republics” (Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan). The whole torso of Russian lands, the “shot from Negoreloe to Suchan station”, is coming to life.

The Eurasianists have their share of merit in this turn of events. At the same time, the nature of the Russian world is being lucidly revealed as the central world of the Old Continent. There were moments when it seemed that between the periphery of Western Europe to which the Russian lands up to the Urals belong (the “European Russia” of the old geographers) and Asia (China, India, Iran), there lay only a void. The Eurasianist arrangement of the Russian present is filling this void with the pulse of animate life. Since the end of the 19th century, a direct path from Europe to China and Japan has been laid through Russia – the Great Siberian Railway. Geography points out with absolute certainty that there is no other way to run roads from Europe (at least from its northern part) to Persia, India, and Indochina. Even today, such opportunities have not yet been fully realized. The Trans-Persian railway, cutting through Persia from the direction of the Northwest toward the Southeast and connected with the same route network as British India and Europe (through the Caucasus, Crimea, and Ukraine), was close to fruition on the eve of the world war. Currently, however, it has receded into the realm of unestablished projects due to political circumstances. There is no connection between the railways of Russian Turkestan (the “Central Asian republics”) and India, and Russian railway networks are not oriented toward Europe-India transit. But sooner or later, this movement will become a fact, whether in the form of railway paths, automobile lines, or air traffic. For the latter, the shortest distances are, let us say, of especially large importance for Russia. The greater the weight that will be procured by air traffic with its propensity and desire to fly in straight lines, the clearer the role of Russia-Eurasia as the “middle world” will become. The establishment of transpolar lines can still further enhance this role. In the Far North, Russia is a neighbor of America over a vast expanse. With the opening of a route through the pole, or rather over the pole, Russia will become the connecting link between Asia and North America.

Successive articles will discuss the Eurasianists’ aspiration to offer a spiritual synthesis of Eastern and Western elements. Here, however, it is important to point out the correspondences of this aspiration which are found in the field of geopolitics. Russia-Eurasia is the center of the Old World. If one eliminates this center, then all of the other parts of the Old World, this whole system of continental margins (Europe, Western Asia, Iran, India, Indochina, China, and Japan) becomes but a mere “scattered temple.” This world which lies to the East of Europe’s borders and to the North of “classical” Asia is the link that binds together the unity of all of these pieces. This is obvious in the present, and it will only become clearer in the future.

The linking and unifying role of this “middle world” has made itself felt throughout history. For several millennia, political dominance in the Eurasian world belonged to nomads. Occupying the space stretching from Europe to China, while simultaneously reaching toward Western Asia, Iran, and India, the nomads served as intermediaries between the disparate worlds of settled cultures in their original states. Let us recall that historical interaction between Iran and China was never so close as in the era of Mongol rule (from the 13th to 14th centuries). And thirteen to fourteen centuries earlier, only through the nomadic Eurasian world did the paths of the Hellenic and Chinese cultures cross, as is shown by the latest excavations in Mongolia. It is an irremovable fact that the Russian world has been called to play a unifying role within the confines of the Old World. Only to the extent that Russia-Eurasia fulfills this vocation can it turn into an organic whole combining all of the diverse cultures of the Old Continent and remove the confrontation between East and West. This fact is not yet sufficiently recognized in our time, but the correlations expressed by it lie in the very nature of things. The tasks of unification first and foremost boil down to tasks of cultural creativity. A new and independent historical force, Russian culture, has emerged at the center of the Old World to fulfill a unifying and conciliatory role. Russian culture can fulfill this task only by cooperating with the cultures of all the surrounding peoples. In this regard, the cultures of the East are just as important for Russia-Eurasia as the cultures of the West. The particularity of Russian culture and geopolitics lies precisely in such a simultaneous and even-footed approach to both East and West. For Russia, there are two equal fronts – Western and South-Eastern. The Russian field of view can and should become one which first and foremost covers the entire Old World to an equal and full extent.

Let us return, however, to phenomena of a purely geographical nature. In comparison to the Russian “torso,” Europe and Asia both represent the outskirts of the Old World. Moreover, from a Russian-Eurasian point of view, Europe is, as has been said, everything that lies to the West of the Russian border, while Asia is everything that lies to the South and Southeast of it. Russia itself is neither Asia nor Europe. Such is the fundamental geopolitical thesis of the Eurasianists. In this view, there is no “European” or “Asiatic” Russia, but merely parts of Russia which lie to the West or East of the Urals, just as there are parts of it lying to the West and East of the Yenisei River, and so on. The Eurasianists continue: Russia is neither Asia nor Europe, but instead represents its own special geographical world. How does this world differ from Europe and Asia? The Western, Southern, and South-Eastern outskirts of the continent differ to a significant extent in their coasts and topographical diversity. This cannot be said of the main “torso” which constitutes Russia-Eurasia. This torso consists first and foremost of three plains (the White Sea Plain, the West Siberian Plain, and the Turkestan Plain), and the regions lying to the east of them (including the low, mountainous countries to the east of the Yenisei river). The zonal composition of the Western and Southern outskirts of the continent are marked by “mosaic-fractional” and far from simple contours. Forested areas, in their natural state, are replaced here in a bizarre sequence by, on the one hand, steppe and desert regions, and on the other side by tundra areas in (the high mountains). This “mosaic” is contrasted on the central plains of the Old World by relatively simple, “flagged” distribution of zones. With the latter designation we point to the fact that, when applied to a map, this distribution resembles the contours of the horizontal stripes of a flag. Going from South to North, deserts, steppes, forests, and tundra follow each other successively. Each of these zones forms a continuous latitudinal band. The broad latitudinal division of the Russian world is further emphasized by the latitudinal stretch of mountain ranges framing the plains from the South: the Crimean ridge, the Caucasus, the Kopet Dag, the Parapamiz, the Hindu Kush, the main mountain ranges of the Tien Shan, the ranges in the North of Tibet, and the Ying Shan in the area of the Great Wall of China. The latter of these ranges lies on the same line bordering the southern, elevated plain occupied by the Gobi desert. This is linked to the Turkestan plain via the Dzhungarian gates.

In the zonal structure of the Old World’s mainland, one can also note features of a peculiar East-West symmetry which render the character of phenomena in its eastern outskirts analogous to those in its western edges and which differ from the character of phenomena in the middle part of the continent. Both the eastern and western margins of the continent (the Far East and Europe) are located at latitudes between 35 and 60 degrees North which are naturally covered by forested regions. Here the boreal forests directly touch and gradually transition into the forests of southern flora. Nothing of the sort can be observed in the middle world, where forests of southern flora exist only in the regions of its mountainous peripheries (Crimea, the Caucasus, and Turkestan) and never meet forests of northern flora or boreal ones, being separated from such by a continuum of steppe-desert strips. The middle world of the Old World can thus be identified as the region of the steppe and desert band stretching in a continuous line from the Carpathians to the Khingan taken together with its mountain frame (in the South) and those regions lying to the North of it (forest and tundra zones). It is this world that the Eurasianists call Eurasia in the exact sense of this word (Eurasia sensu stricto). This must be distinguished from the old “Eurasia” of Alexander von Humboldt which encompassed the whole of the Old Continent (Eurasia sensu latiore).

The Western border of Eurasia runs along the Black Sea-Baltic bridge, i.e. the region where the continent narrows between the Baltic and Black Seas. Along this bridge and in general in the direction from Northwest to Southeast run a number of indicative botanical-geographical borders such as, for example, the Eastern borders of yew, beech, and ivy. Starting on the shores of the Baltic Sea, each of these tree types then extends all the way to the Black Sea. West of these borders, i.e. where the aforementioned species still grow, the stretch of the forest zone is continuous along the entire length from North to South. To the East begins the division into the forest zone in the North and the steppe zone in the South. This boundary can be considered the Western border of Eurasia. Eurasia’s border with Asia in the Far East runs along the longitudes at which the continuous strip of steppes dips in its nearing the Pacific Ocean, i.e., at the longitude of the Khingan.

The Eurasian world is a world of “both periodic and symmetric zone systems.” The boundaries of the main Eurasian zones conform with significant accuracy to the spanning of certain climatic boundaries. For example, the Southern border of the tundra matches the line joining the point of average annual relative humidity of 79.5% at 1 P.M. (The relative humidity in the afternoon is of particularly great importance for the life of vegetation and soils). The Southern border of the forest zone lies along the line connecting points with the same relative humidity of 67.5%. The Southern border of the steppe (with its tip into the desert) is matched by the uniform relative humidity at 1 P.M. of 55.5%. In the desert, it is always lower than this value. Attention should be drawn here to the equality of intervals covering the forest and steppe zones. These coincidences and this rhythmic distribution of intervals can be established in accordance with different indices (see our book The Geographical Particularities of Russia – Part 1, Prague: 1927). This gives grounds to speak of a “periodic table of the zone systems of Russia-Eurasia.” Russia-Eurasia is a symmetric system, not in the sense of the East-West symmetry which we discussed in the preceding, but in a South-North symmetry. The treeless tundra of the North is matched by the treeless steppes of the South. Moreover, the calcium content and percentage of humus in soil from the middle parts of the black soil zone symmetrically decrease when moving in the directions of North and South. This symmetric distribution of phenomena can also be noted in terms of soil colors, which reaches its greatest intensity in the very same middle portions of the horizontal zone. Moving both Northward and Southward, the soil color weakens (passing through shades of brown to whitish ones). In terms of sand and rock substrates, there is also a symmetrical divergence from the border between the forest and steppe zones: between the steppe islands to the North and the “islands” of forests in the South. Russian science defines this phenomenon as “extrazonal.” The steppe sectors in the forest zone can be characterized as a “southward-bearing” phenomenon, while the forest islands in the steppes are essentially a “northward-bearing” phenomenon. The southward-bearing formations of the forest zone match the northward-bearing formations of the steppes.

Nowhere else in the Old World is such a gradual transition in zonal systems, with both its “frequency” and simultaneous “symmetry”, displayed so clearly as on the plains of Russia-Eurasia.

The Russian world thus possesses an exceedingly clear geographic structure. The Urals do not play the defining and divisive role in this structure which they have been attributed (and still are) by geographical “clichés.” By virtue of their orographic and geological specificities, the Urals not only do not divide but, on the contrary, rather closely tie together “pre-Ural” and “post-Ural” Russia, thereby once again demonstrating that, taken together, both geographically constitute the “single undivided continent of Eurasia.” The tundra, as a horizontal zone, lies both to the West and to the East of the Urals just as forest extends beyond one side and the other. The same is the case regarding the steppes and desert (the latter borders the southern continuation of the Ural-Mugodzhary from both the East and West). We can observe no significant changes in geographical environment signified by the “border” of the Urals. More substantial is the geographical border of the “Intermarium”, i.e. the space between the Black and Baltic Seas on the one hand, and the Baltic Sea and the coast of Northern Norway on the other.

This distinctive, lucid, and at the same time simple geographical structure of Russia-Eurasia is tied to a number of important geopolitical circumstances. The nature of the Eurasian world is minimally favorable to any sort of “separatisms,” be they political, cultural, or economic. The specific “mosaic-fractional” structure of Europe and Asia facilitates the appearance of small, confined, and isolated worlds offering the material preconditions for the existence of small states, cultural modes specific to a city or province, and economic regions possessing large economic diversity within a narrow space. But Eurasia is quite another case. The wide-cut sphere of “flag-like” zonal distribution is not conducive to anything of this sort. Endless plains habituate horizontal breadth and the spread of geopolitical combinations. Within the steppes, moving across land along the forests and numerous bodies of water, such as rivers and lakes, man found himself in constant migration, continuously changing his place of inhabitance. Ethnic and cultural elements are drawn into intensive interaction, cross-fertilizing, and mixing. In Europe and Asia, it sometimes happened that one could live only by the interests of his own “belfry.”

But in Eurasia, if this happened at all, then in an historical sense this lasted only an extremely brief period of time. In Northern Eurasia there are hundreds of thousands of kilometers of forests among which there is not a single hectare of arable land. How can the inhabitants of this space survive without contact with the more Southern regions? In the South, on no less vastly spread steppes suitable for livestock and partly for agriculture, there is not a single tree across many thousands of kilometers. How can the population of these regions live without economic interaction with the North? The nature of Eurasia prompts people to the necessity of political, cultural, and economic association to a significantly greater extent than is observed in Europe and Asia. It is thus no wonder that what was in many respects a “unified” way of life, such as that of the nomads, existed across the whole space of the Eurasian steppes from Hungary to Manchuria, and throughout history from the Scythians to the modern Mongols. It is similarly no wonder that such great attempts at political unification were born on the expanses of Eurasia, such as those of the Scythians, Huns, and Mongols (in the 13th-14th centuries), and others. These attempts included not only the steppes and desert, but also the northern forest zone and the southernmost “mountain hem” of Eurasia. It is no coincidence that the spirit of a sort of “brotherhood of peoples” is blowing over Eurasia, having its roots in the centuries-old contact and cultural mergers of peoples of the most diverse races, ranging from Germanic peoples (the Crimean Goths) and Slavs to the Tungus-Manchurians with links via the Finnish, Turkic, and Mongolian peoples. This “brotherhood of peoples” is reflected in the fact that there is no opposition between “higher” and “lower” races, but rather a mutual attraction, much stronger than any repulsion, which easily awakens a “will for a common cause.” The history of Eurasia from its first chapters to its latest is solid proof of this. These traditions were embraced by Russia in her foundational, historic cause. In the 19th and 20th centuries, they were at times clouded by deliberate “Westernism”, which demanded that Russians feel themselves to be “Europeans” (which they in fact weren’t) and treat the other Eurasian peoples as “Asians” or an “inferior race.” Such an interpretation led Russia to nothing other than disaster (such as Russia’s Far Eastern adventure at the beginning of the 20th century). It should be hoped that this concept has been completely overcome by now in the Russian consciousness and that the remnants of Russian “Europeanism” still hiding in emigration are void of any historical significance. Only by overcoming deliberate “Westernism” can the path be opened to real brotherhood between the Eurasian peoples – the Slavic, the Finnic, the Turkic, Mongolian, and others.

Eurasia has previously played a unifying role in the Old World. Contemporary Russia, absorbing this tradition, must resolutely and irrevocably abandon the old methods of unification belonging to an outlived and overcome era, such as those of violence and war. In the modern period, the cause is one of cultural creativity, inspiration, insight, and cooperation. This is what the Eurasianists say. Despite all the modern means of communication, the peoples of Europe and Asia are still, to a large extent, sitting in their own quarters, living by the interests of their own belfries. Eurasian “place-development” propels this common cause by virtue of its fundamental qualities. The Eurasian peoples have been appointed to draw other peoples of the world along these paths by example. And then the relations of ethnographic kinship by which a number of Eurasian peoples are connected with various non-Eurasian nations, such as the Indo-European ties of the Russians, the Near-Asian and Iranian relations of the Eurasian Turks, and those points of contact that exist between the Eurasian Mongols and the peoples of East Asia, will become useful for the ecumenical cause. All of these relations can be beneficial to the construction of a new, organic culture for the “Old” World, which is (we believe) still young, carrying in its womb a grand future.