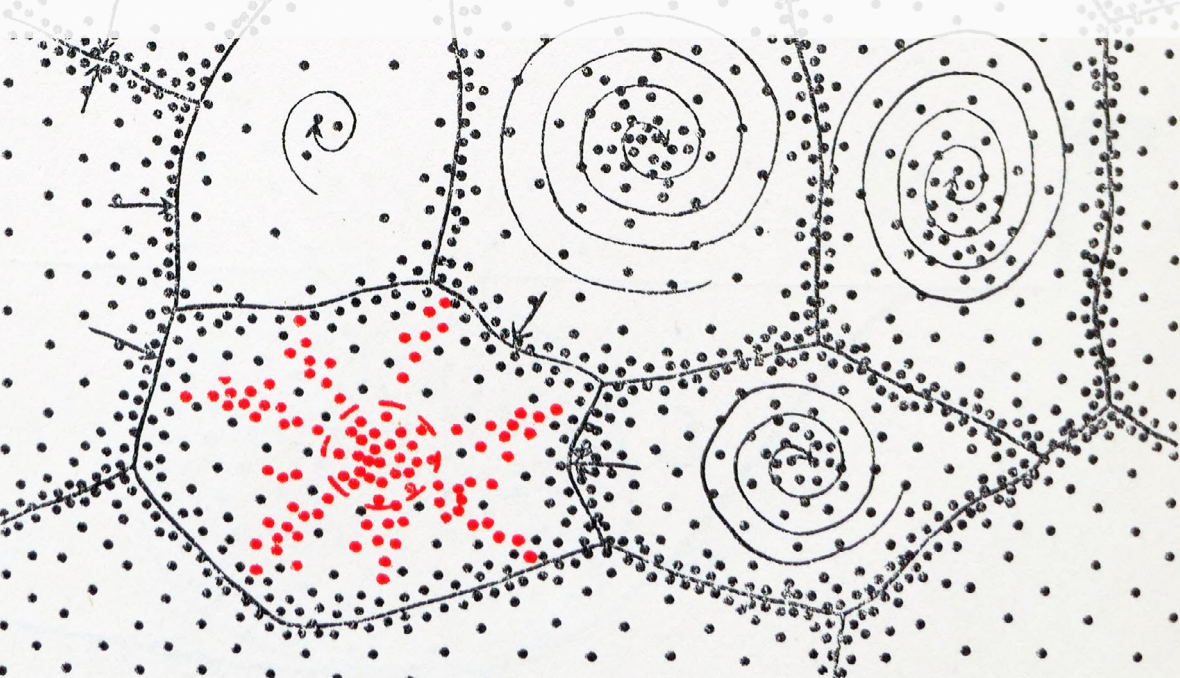


Life Histories of *Etnos* Theory in Russia and Beyond

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9. Epilogue: Why *Etnos* (Still) Matters

Nathaniel Knight

The concept of *etnos* occupies a liminal, contested, yet remarkably durable niche in the array of categories of identity. *Etnos* was first articulated in the Russian context in the waning days of the old Tsarist Empire as a fusion of sorts joining an ethnographic tradition rooted in the humanities, with a cluster of fields in the natural sciences seeking to understand human diversity on the basis of bodily features. The most fervent promoters of *etnos*, Nikolai Mogilanskii and Sergei Shirokogoroff, were of a rising generation of ethnographers, trained internationally, with substantial research experience, and poised to move into leading positions in the field. Both focused on areas at the periphery of the empire, and in the aftermath of the revolution found themselves cast into these peripheral regions, where they participated in political movements in opposition to the Bolshevik regime, before being forced into emigration. Consequently, the concept of *etnos* took shape in the 1920s and 1930s outside the emerging field of Soviet ethnography within which it came to be seen as ideologically suspect.

Yet *etnos* eventually did penetrate into Soviet parlance, tentatively at first in the post-war years and with greater force by the 1960s. By the 1970s, it had been officially enshrined as a central tenet of Soviet ethnography, largely through the efforts of Iulian Bromleĭ, director of the Academy of Sciences Institute of Ethnography (Bromleĭ 1973). The concept attained still broader circulation in the late 1980s and 1990s

with the publication of the semi-suppressed works of Lev Gumilëv (Gumilëv 1989). But no sooner had *ethnos* gained a foothold in the Russian public sphere than it was subjected to a blistering critique by post-Soviet ethnographers led by Valerii Tishkov, Bromlei's successor at the Institute of Ethnography (Tishkov 2003). Tishkov's "requiem for *ethnos*", however, proved premature — the deceased was alive and well and living in Astana, Bishkek, Ulan Bator, Yakutsk, and any number of other locations in the post-Soviet space, including Moscow itself. Not only is *ethnos* well established in public discourse, it has been embraced with particular fervour by minority groups in the very peripheral regions that gave rise to the concept at its outset.

The continuing vitality of the concept of *ethnos*, despite its sporadic rejection within the academic sphere, is a phenomenon that deserves serious and careful consideration. It is not enough simply to label *ethnos* as a "category of practice", as Rogers Brubaker suggests — a kind of ethnographic false consciousness, colouring the way that the uninitiated view the world, but unworthy of application as an authentic "category of analysis" (Brubaker 2004; 2002). And while *ethnos* may have a certain value in legitimatizing claims both symbolic and material on the part of minority groups, an "instrumental" reading of the concept as a tool in the hands of ethnic entrepreneurs is insufficient to explain its pervasiveness and persistence (O'Leary 2001). Even if we resist the temptation to reify *ethnoses* — viewing them, in the style of Gumilëv, as quasi-sentient beings — we must acknowledge that the concept would not persist if it did not have a certain elemental traction, an explanatory power that cannot easily be evoked through other means. This is all the more true if we extend our view, as the authors of this collection suggest, from the actual term *ethnos* to a broader "*ethnos* thinking".

Simply put, *ethnos* offers a middle ground. Free from the rigid, hierarchical, and anti-humanistic connotations of biological determinism associated with the concept of race, *ethnos*, at the same time, is not so contingent and ephemeral that identity becomes purely a matter of individual choice. It is this niche that Teodor Shanin had in mind in identifying *ethnos* as the "missing term" lacking in the existing array of sociological concepts (Shanin 1986). An *ethnos* is hard and durable, persisting over multiple generations, yet it is not immutable. It has a history and an origin, changing over time and facing the prospect of

eventual disappearance. Thus the common characterization of *ethnos* as a “primordialist” concept built around the notion of a fixed unchanging essence may not be entirely justified.

In relation to individuals, *ethnos* can be deployed in complex and dynamic patterns. The concept itself is sufficiently commodious to accommodate a range of interpretations, variations, and nuances. Not only do monolithic understandings of *ethnos* tend not to gain footing, even clear definitions are often hard to come by. Nonetheless, *ethnos* offers a kind of structured flexibility in explaining how individuals accommodate themselves to larger collectivities. Thus in chapter 8 we learn from Masha Shaw and Natalie Wahnsiedler that the Pomors of the Russian north can consider themselves part of their own distinctive *subethnos* without diminishing their broader identify as Russians — in fact, the Pomors are sometimes seen to embody a deeper, purer essence of the Russian *ethnos*. Depending on the context and contingency, individuals can accentuate their closer local identity without negating their belonging to a larger overarching *ethnos*. Nor is it beyond the realm of possibility for individuals to pass from one *ethnos* to another or even maintain separate *ethnos* affiliations concurrently. What is firm and persistent about *ethnos* are the categories themselves, leaving individuals the opportunity to identify with these categories in more nuanced, contingent ways. It was precisely in an effort to move beyond the inconsistencies and unpredictability of individual identity, that Sergei Shirokogoroff gravitated toward the notion of *ethnos* as a means to articulate a transcendent essence of identity existing above and beyond the individuals who might comprise it.

Why, however, should we as scholars lend credence to this notion of *ethnos*, given its tangled history and the problematic strains it has been seen to engender? Why not simply embrace the notion of hybrid individual identities and leave it at that (Ab Imperio Editorial Board 2018)? Yet even acknowledging the prevalence of hybrid identities in the modern world, one still needs to account for the elements out of which hybrids are formulated. A hybrid can only exist, after all, when it is composed of identifiable components; otherwise, it becomes a thing in itself and loses its hybrid features. Thus essentialist categories may not be so easy to evade. *Ethnos*, moreover, need not be seen as a monolithic formation. In so far as *ethnos*, in practically all of its renditions, denotes a totality

of distinctive elements — language, material culture, religious beliefs, folklore and traditions, as well as physical features — it can encompass variation, differing combinations and hues, without ceasing to comprise an integral whole. *Etnos* implies recognisability, not absolute purity.

Most of all, however, *etnos* thinking deserves to be taken seriously because it offers a mode of understanding the social world that, regardless of the views of scholars, is compelling to large numbers of individuals and communities throughout the world. However much we may wish the world to be otherwise, *etnos*, particular for minority populations who face the threat of assimilation, is a reality that cannot be sacrificed. Like the related concepts of nation, tribe, and ethnicity, *etnos* engenders a sense of connectedness that gives rise to social meaning. For the present day Evenki and Orochen — to whom Jocelyn Dudding showed photographs taken by early twentieth-century ethnographers (see chapter 7) — it was a matter of fundamental importance that they shared an ethnic identification with the individuals depicted. *Etnos* provided for them a pathway into the past, a link to their ancestors, a repository of lost knowledge that amounted to a tangible asset, such that inability to recognize the markers of *etnos* constituted a palpable loss. Likewise, the diachronic ties of *etnos* stretching over time engender synchronic links among individuals sharing connections to past ancestors and enacting common cultural traits and ways of life rooted in the past. As recent events continually show, despite technological tools that allow the creation of virtual communities transcending the bounds of culture, locality, and even language, the call of *etnos* has not lost its force.

The authors of the essays in this volume focus particular attention on the context and milieu in which the concept of *etnos* took shape in its initial iterations — *etnos* 1.0, if you will. In chapter 4, Sergei S. Alymov and Svetlana V. Podrezova pinpoint quite convincingly the St Petersburg anthropological school of Fëdor Volkov as the seedbed upon which the concept of *etnos* first took root. In chapter 3, Alymov shows as well how the Ukrainian national movement which inspired both Volkov and his protégé Mogil'ianskiĭ added a critical element which led these scholars to infuse the biological models drawn from

the French anthropological school of Paul Broca with a strong ethno-national awareness. In chapters 5 and 6, David G. Anderson and Dmitry V. Arzyutov trace the fieldwork of Sergei and Elizaveta Shirokogoroff, showing how they turned to the concept of *ethnos* as a means of bringing order to the chaos of ethnographic nomenclature based on untidy, overlapping criteria of language, lifestyle, religious observances, and other traits. By reducing complex identity to an essence of *ethnos*, Sergei Shirokogoroff believed he could reveal the underlying equations that govern ethnic relations and express them with mathematic precision. In chapter 6, Arzyutov in particular shows how Shirokogoroff's vision of *ethnos* seeped into the political realm. Allowed to function unhindered, Shirokogoroff suggested, the dynamics of *ethnos* would set in motion spontaneous processes of self-organization. Ethnic nations, thus, could realize their fundamental interests and enact the popular will without sinking into the destructive and divisive realm of politics. Shirokogoroff, who died in Chinese exile leaving his major works available only in English or unpublished altogether, might appear to have carved out an intellectual dead end, a scholarly path not taken. But ideas that appear obscure and neglected can have a surprising afterlife. This was certainly the case with Shirokogoroff's *ethnos*, which left an imprint on Chinese and Japanese concepts of ethnic nationality (*mínzú*) and played a large role in the rediscovery of *ethnos* by Bromlei and his associates in the 1960s and 1970s.

More could be said about the context in which *ethnos* emerged and the timing of its appearance. While much of *ethnos* was new and distinct, it emerged out of an ethnographic tradition directed toward the phenomenon of *narodnost'* — usually rendered as ethnicity or nationality in the cultural sense. Russia in the nineteenth century was a world of nations, in which ethnic difference served as a primary marker delineating the vertical contours of social space. *Narodnost'* — as defined by Nikolai Nadezhdin, an early architect of the Russian tradition of ethnography — represented the totality of features allowing a population to be recognized as distinct. In turn the spirit of *narodnost'* found concrete actualization in peoples (*narody*), the natural units that structured the composition of the human race. The task of the ethnographer was to study *narodnost'* and peoples in their natural setting in order to identify their distinguishing features and establish their relationship to one another (Nadezhdin 1847).

The notion of ethnography as the science devoted to ethnic distinctiveness set the field in Russia on a somewhat different trajectory from the developing fields of anthropology and ethnology in western Europe, which were directed more toward general problems of the differentiation of the human race as a whole. With the rise of evolutionist theory, anthropology took as its subject a universal human culture divided into a set of discrete stages or levels expressed in particular cultural spheres. An evolutionist anthropologist might focus on a topic such as housing, transportation, musical instruments or religious practices and compare a broad range of artefacts from many different groups to show how the successive stages of cultural evolution were expressed in this particular area (Chapman 1985; Stocking 1995). Elucidating the distinctive features of particular ethnicities was at best a secondary task clearly subordinated to the challenge of tracing the universal trajectory of cultural evolution.

The tradition in Russia of ethnographic research focusing on ethnic distinctiveness remained well entrenched, but by the 1890s, evolutionist models had begun to make inroads. Moscow was particularly receptive to evolutionism. Maksim Kovalevskii, the pioneering Russian sociologist, was an early and prominent proponent of evolutionist thought who remained influential despite the fact that he was obliged to leave his position at Moscow University for political reasons in the early 1890s and move to France (Glebov 2015). Dmitrii Anuchin, the polymath social scientist whose research encompassed the fields of physical anthropology, ethnography and geography, was somewhat more restrained in his evolutionist proclivities, but nonetheless adhered to aspects of the evolutionist model. Anuchin's protégé, Nikolai Kharuzin, an indefatigable young ethnographer whose career was tragically cut short by his untimely death in 1901, was much less constrained in his embrace of evolutionist models. His posthumously published textbook on ethnography was a veritable manifesto of evolutionist theory and practice (Kerimova 2011; Knight 2008). In St Petersburg, the evolutionist camp was well represented by Lev Shternberg, the former political exile, known for his studies of the Giliaks of Sakhalin Island and for his collaboration with Franz Boas (Kan 2009).

The concept of *ethnos* emerged, I would suggest, in the context of a backlash against evolutionist ideas and methods among Russian

ethnographers. The two primary theorists of *ethnos* in its earliest iteration, Mogil'anskii and Shirokogoroff, both formulated their ideas in dialogue with specific evolutionist scholars, who served as foils against which the new ideas took shape.¹ Mogil'anskii first made use of the term *ethnos* in his 1902 review of Kharuzin's textbook, later published in 1908 (Mogil'anskii 1908). In his expanded treatment published in 1916, Mogil'anskii drew a sharp dividing line between his approach based on the centrality of *ethnos* and evolutionist scholars such as Kharuzin and Shternberg who saw ethnography essentially as a history of culture writ large. "For a historian of culture", Mogil'anskii wrote, "all of humanity as a whole stands in the foreground [...] A people, *ethnos*, is a mere substrate on which some phenomenon or another takes place" (Mogil'anskii 1916: 9). Specific examples from the real life of peoples, drawn from the most diverse and disparate groups are used merely to illustrate the larger patterns of human development. Mogil'anskii proposed that ethnography move in a different direction: "an ethnographer should not ignore the concept of *ethnos*" (Ibid: 10).

Sergei Shirokogoroff's path to the concept of *ethnos* is somewhat harder to trace given that in his theoretical works on the topic he neglected to acknowledge the precursors to his ideas or to place them in the context of the development of Russian ethnography. Anderson and Arzyutov, in their exhaustive research into Shirokogoroff's career and work presented in chapters 5 and 6, have, however, uncovered some suggestive hints. A key figure in the development of Shirokogoroff's thinking was undoubtedly Shternberg. A mentor, perhaps even a father figure, Shternberg served at the same time as an intellectual antagonist, a negative point of reference against which Shirokogoroff formulated his own thinking. In a 1932 letter to a Polish collaborator, cited in chapter 6, Shirokogoroff refers to Shternberg's evolutionism and notes with emphatic distaste Shternberg's embrace of the work of James George Frazer, whose magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*, exemplified the comparative method of "historians of culture". Had it been Shternberg who confronted the confusion of ethnic identities among the Tungus and Orochen of Zabaikal'e and Manchuria, he would likely have found it of little consequence and perhaps even seen it as confirmation of the position that "the individual elements that

1 Sergei Glebov makes a similar argument about the reaction against evolutionism as a factor in the formation of Eurasianist theory (Glebov 2015).

appear in among separate peoples, do not act autonomously. They are always inextricably tied to [...] the evolutionary development of culture overall" (Zhurnal zasedaniia 1916: 6). For Shirokogoroff, in contrast, identifying a distinct overarching Tungus and Orochen *etnos* was a critical imperative, necessary to distil a deeper truth out of the confusion of everyday nomenclature.

In asserting the primacy of *etnos* over the evolutionist "history of culture", Mogil'anskii and Shirokogoroff were echoing the older tradition of ethnography as the study of *narodnost'*. For Shirokogoroff, who says little about his predecessors and addresses an international audience, the connection is implicit, but Mogil'anskii is open in acknowledging the continuity. He writes of "preserving *etnos* as the basis for scientific ethnography", not introducing *etnos* as an innovation (Mogil'anskii 1916: 11). Looking back to previous conceptions of ethnography, he cites the conceptions of Nadezhdin and Aleksandr Pypin envisioning ethnography as the study of *narodnost'* and refers approvingly to Anuchin's endorsement of detailed monographic studies of specific peoples as the central task of ethnography. "Ethnography", Mogil'anskii concludes, "is above all the study of peoples (*narodovedenie*)" (Ibid: 12). Shirokogoroff in turn defines *etnos* in terms synonymous with *narodnost'* as a "group of people, speaking the same language, recognizing their common origin, possessing a complex of customs and a social system, which is consciously maintained and explained as tradition and differentiated from those of other groups" (Shirokogoroff 1924: 5). Just as Nadezhdin understood ethnography as the study of *narodnost'*, Shirokogoroff defined the field as the science that studies *etnos*.

Is *etnos* and ethnography as envisioned by Mogil'anskii and Shirokogoroff, therefore, simply a matter of old wine in new bottles? The one aspect of both conceptions that appears distinct and innovative is the insistence that *etnos* be understood to include a biological component. But if *etnos* is, as the editors of this volume suggest in chapter 2, a biosocial concept, where exactly does the biological connect with the social? It would appear that Mogil'anskii and Shirokogoroff each approach this problem from a different angle. Mogil'anskii argued that biometric research — detailed studies characterizing the group from the perspective of physical anthropology and connecting

it to larger racial categories — needed to be included as an integral component of *ethnos*. Therefore ethnography, in his view, should be understood as a compound science, akin to archaeology, that draws on the skills of specialists from a range of fields to address its specific aim (Mogil'anskii 1916: 15). A model for Mogil'anskii's conception can be found in his friend and mentor Volkov's exhaustive and controversial two-volume study of the Ukrainian people which, above and beyond demonstrating the independent status of the Ukrainian language and the distinctiveness of Ukrainian folkways, depicted the Ukrainians as a single and separate anthropological type.²

Shirokogoroff in his early 1920s formulations of the concept of *ethnos* was less insistent on the role of biometric classification. In an arrangement somewhat similar to the Boasian four-field system, he envisioned anthropology and ethnography as separate entities — one based in the natural sciences, the other in the humanities — which joined together with linguistics to form the overarching field of ethnology (Shirokogoroff 2002 [1923]: ch. 2). Anthropology, in his view, was a purely biological science viewing humanity from a zoological perspective. But Shirokogoroff, perhaps influenced by his own attempts at anthropometric classification and analysis, came to question the value of racial classification. He notes the wide variety of schemes of racial divisions, the lack of stable definitions, and the disjuncture between racial types and recognized ethnic or national groups. Ultimately he concluded that the very idea of a limited number of races, which had guided research agendas and classification schemes up to that time, was “unsatisfactory in light of a closer acquaintance with separate peoples” (Ibid: 63). Biometric analysis, he added, was of more use in shedding light on the historical origins of modern populations, foreseeing, perhaps, the modern uses of genomic studies.

More important than biometric data in defining *ethnos* was the nature of the *ethnos* itself as an autonomous organic entity. *Ethnos*, in Shirokogoroff's view, was the core unit through which humans adapted to their environment and engaged in the struggle for survival. As such, the *ethnos* had the capacity for independent action and self-regulation above and beyond the volition of the individuals who composed it.

2 Volkov's study and the reaction it provoked is described in detail in chapter 3. See also Mogil'ner 2008: 138–44.

Shirokogoroff writes, “an *ethnos* is always struggling for its existence, and, if it can oppose other *ethnoses* and becomes victorious, it may continue expanding in territory, which is one of the external manifestations of its growth” (Shirokogoroff 1924: 7).

Shirokogoroff’s conception of *ethnos* easily spilled over into the realm of geopolitics, as nations, infused with the spirit of the *ethnos*, competed with one another for dominance and survival. The *ethnos*, in its reified form, engaged in this autonomous action through its psychological and cognitive capacities, the primary adaptive mechanism through which it engaged in the struggle for survival (Shirokogorov 2002 [1923]: 64). Thus, when Shirokogoroff spoke of *ethnos* as a biological unit, he was referring not to the shared physical traits of a given population, but to the biological functions of adaptation and self-regulation that took place on the level of the *ethnos* and insured the survival of the individuals who comprised it. Shirokogoroff’s conception transcended the view of the organism as a metaphor and endowed the *ethnos* with a hard ontological substance as a living being in its own right, with its own lifecycle and role as the essential actor in the process of human evolution.

Thus, we find, in Mogil’anskii and Shirokogoroff’s conceptions, two contrasting views of *ethnos*, one weighted toward the material sphere, the other arising out of the metaphysical realm. This duality could even be seen to have reappeared in *ethnos* 2.0 — the models of *ethnos* developed in the 1960s and 1970, particularly the contrasting visions of Bromlei and Gumilev. To be sure, the parallel is by no means exact. Bromlei, for example, relied far less on the presence of shared biometric traits in his vision of *ethnos* than did Mogil’anskii. Moreover, the two scholars differ in their placement of ethnography with the larger framework of the human sciences: Bromlei, in keeping with the Soviet tradition, situated ethnography within the humanities, while Mogil’anskii insisted on its close relation to the natural sciences, a position shared by Gumilev. Yet the contrast persisted between views of *ethnos* as an assemblage of distinguishing features and *ethnos* as a reified organic whole.³

3 Bromlei, in fact, directly notes the correspondence between Shirokogoroff and Gumilev’s organic understandings of *ethnos* (Bromlei 1973: 26).

A closer look at Mogil'anskii and Shirokogoroff's concepts of *ethnos* provides some insights as to why this concept has proven so controversial yet at the same time so resilient. Like other categories of identity, *ethnos*, whether understood as a community defined by shared traits or as a social organism, retains the potential to evoke violence. Once the *ethnos* is recognized as a conceptual object, it can serve as a point of reference: elements in the surrounding world are viewed from the perspective of the benefits or harm they confer on the *ethnos*. The resulting interests of the *ethnos* can attain the status of a moral absolute. Individual rights, respect for cultural diversity, maintenance of international order and stability, adherence to law and ethical standards all potentially yield to the overarching interests of the *ethnos*. The events of the 1990s, from the massacres in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda to the turmoil in the former Soviet republics, revealed the destructive potential inherent in visions of collective identity. The surge of ethno-nationalism and tribalism in the current political climate reminds us that this potential is far from exhausted.

Yet while the dangers of *ethnos* are readily apparent, the remedies are far from clear. Is *ethnos* itself the problem, or is it more appropriate to focus on the immediate causes — the hatred, xenophobia, and chauvinistic pride that so often infect ethnic consciousness? If *ethnos* is an organism, are these maladies its diseases? In this case, is it not better to think about how to effect a cure? It is possible to envision a healthy incarnation of *ethnos*, cleansed of its malevolent content? And what are the alternatives? Is it realistic to expect populations to abandon their terms of group identity, terms that often provide the basis for claims, both practical and symbolic, on state and society, in response to abuses for which they may feel no responsibility? Whether we view *ethnos* as a dangerous illusion or a useful means to understand longstanding affinities based on shared culture and history, the phenomena of *ethnos* thinking will continue to exist. Whether couched in the language of tribe, nation, ethnicity or *ethnos*, individuals will continue to seek meaning and coherence by envisioning their lives in the context of larger collectivities whose roots in the past and trajectory into the future extend beyond the finite bounds of individual mortality. The concept of *ethnos*, and the broader *ethnos* thinking that accompanies it, offer a framework for describing and analysing these behaviours. Whatever

the inconsistencies and weaknesses of the concepts developed by Mogil'anskii, Shirokogoroff and their later Soviet successors, these are ideas that still speak to us in the present day.

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