Mapping diseases - monitoring health: Geographies of medicine in the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union

International Workshop at the German Historical Institute Moscow, September 19-20, 2019

Since the 18th century, physicians have been preoccupied with the relationship between health and location. In the course of the past two hundred years, the ways of discussing this relation have undergone a permanent change, which can, according to Christopher Sellers be understood "in terms of a seesaw dialogue over the ways and means by which physicians and other health professionals did, and did not, consider the influence of place - airs and waters included – on disease". The aim of this workshop, organized in cooperation with the GHI Moscow, the Higher School of Economics (Moscow) and the LMU München is to explore Russian and Soviet medicine's relation to the spatial dimension as well as the methods that were used to describe and control it from a diachronic perspective between the late 18th and the late 20th centuries.

Late 18th century saw the emergence of the concept of medical geography, which defined disease as an imbalance between living bodies and the environment. Medics studied geographical parameters as well as humans on Russia's imperial periphery in order to fight or prevent diseases. The new medical-geographical discourse about health and disease in environmental contexts evolved through interaction with "traditional" medical cultures at the peripheries and in regular exchange with scholars world-wide. Utilizing medical geography, physicians helped conceptualize the Russian empire's spatial diversity. Preoccupation with the relationship between health and location continued in different forms after 1917: Soviet medics conducted, for example, research on environment-related diseases like goiter or malaria and developed theories of the location of disease. With the interrelation of health and man-made pollution of the environment, a new aspect was added to this field of knowledge in the second half of the 20th century. Concerns about environmental pollution spanned from the application of pesticides over poisonous waste to atomic radiation due to the civil and military exploitations of nuclear energy. At the same time, population genetics opened new ways to connect space and disease, representing the spread of inherited diseases in form of maps.

While space was thought to be a factor influencing health and thus medicine, medicine can also be considered crucial in conceptualizing and mastering space, i.e. in the building, sustaining and understanding of modern Empires. The Russian case highlights the essence of imperial medicine: in Tsarist Russia medicine did not become imperial because it was transferred to a remote periphery, but because medical experts and expertise helped control and define this very periphery as something "other". Medicalized governmentality reached new heights with the expansion of medical infrastructure in Soviet times. The expansion and local deepening of medical infrastructure and care to even remote areas continued until the end of the Soviet Union.

We are calling for papers discussing the relationship between medicine and place in the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union from different angles. We are especially interested in presentations discussing representations of the relationships of health, medicine and place, particularly in cartography or other visual media. This may include disease maps from the 19th century as well as gene mapping of the 20th century. We are also highly interested in papers on statistics. Those might be, for example, papers on the networks and techniques of data collection, but also on statistics as a means of representing diversity in space, allowing to compare different regions from a point of view of epidemiological danger or of living conditions, thus forming mental maps of Russia. Topics for presentations might be, though not exclusively:

- Medical theories of place/space/environment
- Cartographies and visualizations of diseases in relation to environment
- Localization of disease within the body, for example by gene mapping or chromosomal analysis
- Expansion of medical infrastructure and its relationship to place/space
- Environmental pollution and disease
- Physicians and medical infrastructure and the building/sustaining of empires/states
- Quantification of medical-geographical knowledge

We invite proposals from historians and scholars from related backgrounds at any stage of their careers. If you wish to participate in the workshop, please send an abstract of about 350 words in English or Russian and a short CV no later than May 26, 2019 to Birte.Kohtz@dhi-moskau.org. Notification of acceptance will be given by early June.