Central Geographical Museum: To the 150th anniversary of V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky

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Abstract. The paper is dedicated to the 150th anniversary of the outstanding Russian scientist V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky and the 100th anniversary of the Central Geographical Museum that he organized in Leningrad and that existed from 1919 to 1941. The authors, basing on analysis of publications concerned both with the museum itself and those people who were involved in its arrangement, made an attempt to outline historical and cultural conditions that hastened the emergence of the museum, to reveal its specificity as compared with similar museums, and to briefly describe its founders. The paper deals with such issues as the environment which gave birth to the idea of a “museum in nature”; Semenov-Tian-Shansky’s activities preceding his museum practice; the influence of V.I. Lamansky’s ideas on principles of the museum building; earlier museums of similar character; the role of the Russian Geographical Society and its members in the establishment of the museum; the beginning of the museum’s exposition activity. Despite the fact that this absolutely original, unparalleled project of the geographical park-museum was not realized in full it belongs to national cultural heritage and its practical experience remains demanded and relevant.

1. Introduction

This year marks the 150th anniversary of birth of the prominent Russian scientist Veniamin Petrovich Semenov-Tian-Shansky (1870-1942), a member of a large and talented family, whose center was Petr Petrovich Semenov-Tian-Shansky—a distinguished scientist, traveller, major state and public figure. V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky is known primarily as a statistician and geographer, author of numerous works on country studies and regional geography, theorist of geography, one of the founders of Russian anthropological and political geography. The latter area of his academic research attracted considerable attention in the 2010s. [1, 2], while another aspect of his activity, to which he devoted almost 20 years of his life—foundation of the Central Geographical Museum (CGM)—a distinguished scientist, traveller, major state and public figure. V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky is known primarily as a statistician and geographer, author of numerous works on country studies and regional geography, theorist of geography, one of the founders of Russian anthropological and political geography. The latter area of his academic research attracted considerable attention in the 2010s. [1, 2], while another aspect of his activity, to which he devoted almost 20 years of his life—foundation of the Central Geographical Museum (CGM)—still remains poorly studied. In the past year the museum could have celebrated its centenary. Three works specifically devoted to the CGM [3–5], its history, activity, and the vast contribution of Semenov-Tian-Shansky, who tried to realize in the museum exposition his idea of geography as a synthetic science. They focused their attention on the unhappy history of this unique museum project, which by the end of the 20th century fell into oblivion and was removed from cultural memory. However, great scientific, educational, and cultural significance of the project presupposes continuation of the work begun, which is facilitated by the large volume of preserved archival materials and publications of contemporaries. In the present paper we have made a preliminary attempt to answer some questions that arose in the process of our research, while we gradually got acquainted with the history of the museum foundation, development of its
exposition, with those people involved in the establishment and functioning of the museum, with the social and cultural context that contributed to its emergence.

2. Materials and Methods
The present paper is based on the study of published sources, which may be divided into two groups. The first one includes works and memoirs by V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky, in which he discussed the goals and objectives of the CGM and his ideas concerning development of its exposition. The second one is represented by general works on the history of the museum, which helped us to put our research into a wider social and cultural context. Methods of comparative historical study were used to establish reliability of some facts, concerned with the history of the museum.

3. Establishing the CGM, role of Semenov-Tian-Shansky, project participants
In February 1919 the First All-Russian Conference on Museum Affairs was held in Petrograd. It was focused on development of museology and museums under new historic conditions. At the conference People's Commissar for Education A.V. Lunacharsky referred to the Skansen Park Museum opened in Sweden in 1891 as an example of a museum of the future. He was followed by an inspiring speech by professor A.A. Borzov, well-known for his active educational activities in the field of physical geography and after that the Conference came forward with an initiative to establish geographical museums in Petrograd and Moscow. The idea found support, though partial, and on May 18, 1919 at the meeting of the board of the People's Commissariat for Education it was decided to found Geographical Museum in Petrograd [6].

Organization and directorship of the museum was entrusted to V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky, a sophisticated scientist with broad academic interests, who authored works on physical, economic, and political geography, as well as population geography, anthropogeography and cartography and promoted ideas of geography as a synthetic science. He also was an organizer, editor, and author of the multi-volume reference book “Russia. Full Geographical Description of Our Country” and had some experience in the field of museology, as well as conservation. Working in the Permanent Conservation Committee of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society (IRGS) in 1917 he drew up a note “On the types of localities in which it is necessary to establish nature reserves akin to American national parks”. This work, according to Semenov’s biographers, played an essential role in development of reserve management and studies in our country [7]. Also it should not go unmentioned that Semenov was actively involved in the work of the Ethnographic Department of the IRGS. At the meeting on March 4, 1916, where the head of the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum N.M. Mogilyansky presented his paper “The scope and objectives of ethnography”. Semenov-Tian-Shansky in the discussion that followed drew attention to the fact that the main objective of the IRGS Ethnographical Department was the study of anthropological geography understood as "the science that connects geographical conditions with human life". And since IRGS was a geographical society, all departments of the society should primarily focus on geography and related academic disciplines. These views were in the best possible way agreed with the idea of geographical park-museum or, as contemporaries coined it, “museum in nature”.

The museum was officially established on June 23, 1919, when the palace and park ensemble of the Elagin Islands were allocated for it. Then, at the beginning of 1920, a more spacious and convenient area was provided—the “Mikhailovskaya Dacha” estate with the English landscape garden. Previously it was owned by Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich, chairman of the IRGS in 1892-1917. Here the museum lasted until December 1922, when circumstances changed not in its favor and it was urgently moved to Petrograd. Deputy Director of the Geographical Institute S.Ya. Edelstein offered to house museum exposition in a residence hall on the embankment of the Catherine’s (since 1923 – Griboedov’s) Channel. This moving put an end to the first in our country practical attempt to establish a park-museum with a comprehensive exposition of physical and anthropological geography [8]. In 1929 the situation in the museum changed for the better and it was once more relocated, this time to much more spacious premises of Bobrinsky mansion in Red Street (in 1991 the historical name of the street – Galernaya –
was restored. Museum staff was increased and new support departments were organized.

The very idea of integrated geographical museum was not new. Its origins are visible, for example, in the 1832 "Project of the National Museum" by G.I. Fischer von Waldheim. He nurtured a plan to compile collections demonstrating "those curious and useful objects that Russia presents in various climates", which inter alia should contribute to development of trade and industry [9]. Another source of the idea of comprehensive geographical museum was presented by local history museums, which were actively emerging in the post-reform period throughout the country. They were established by private persons or voluntary organizations. Among the latter the IRGS museum network should be mentioned in the first place. At the beginning of 20th c. it included ten museums, nine of which were in Siberia and the Far East. These museums were some kind of regional scientific centers exploring local natural resources, population, economy, and trade and storing rich natural and ethnographic collections.

Among those whose ideas provided the basis for the CGM, Semenov-Tian-Shansky named the chairman of the IRGS Ethnographical Department V. I. Lamansky, a prominent Slavic historian and public figure. In a letter to Kropotkin dated September 3, 1920 he mentioned that “The late V.I. Lamansky in the end of 1890s designed something similar for the Russian Museum in Petrograd, but narrow-minded ethnographers did not understand his broad ideas and fell back into conventional ethnographic clichés, so nothing came of it, even despite my father’s ardent advocacy” [10]. Lamansky was the founder and editor of the journal "Living Anciency" ("Zhivaia Starina"), which presented materials and research on ethnography, folklore, anthropology, statistics, and economics of the peoples of Russia and gave a wide coverage of various aspects of museology. He was one of the ideologists and founders of the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum, the author of the "Notes with a Project of the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum" (1898) [11]. Semenov-Tian-Shansky was close to Lamansky not only because of their kin relations. He considered Lamansky one of his teachers and shared most of his philosophical and scientific views [12]. In memory of his teacher he published the article “V.I. Lamansky as an anthropological and political geographer”.

Paying tribute to his immediate predecessors, Semenov-Tian-Shansky referred to the geographical museum founded in the 1890s as part of The Grassi Museum in Leipzig by a volcanologist A. Stübel. At first it was an exhibition presenting his collections gathered during his expeditions to South America, which was decorated by some purpose made panoramas and mountain landscapes. In 1907 the exhibition was transformed into the Museum for Regional Geography and in the 1930s—into research institute, which since 1992 is known as the Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography. The scientist also mentioned two other "small", according to him, educational museums by departments of geography of the Moscow and Kazan Universities. Geographical Museum of the Moscow University was established by D.N. Anuchin on the basis of the exhibits gathered for the Geographical Exhibition held in 1892 in the Historical Museum. It included collections of maps, atlases, globes, tools, paintings, slides, and photographs, and a well-stocked library and was used for student classes in geography. At first the museum occupied several rooms in the Historical Museum, but in 1906 it was moved to one of the University buildings, where its small exposition lasted until the Great Patriotic War. Nowadays some of his survived exhibits are present in the collection of the Earth Science Museum of the M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University. The Museum of the Kazan University was one of the best ethnographic university museums of its time. It was founded by B.F. Adler, Anuchin’s student and professor of the Kazan University (1911-1923). Adler managed to assemble numerous segmentary gatherings and considerably replenish museum funds. Nevertheless the project of geographical park-museum, which Semenov-Tian-Shansky and his associates wanted to bring to life, radically differed from its predecessors, had no analogues, and was inherently innovative.

In spite of several relocations and, consequently, problems with exposition arrangement in new premises, severe cutbacks in funding and staff, active museum work never stopped. In the late 19th–early 20th century Russia museums as institutes of science and centers of research maintained close ties to the scientific institutions and individual scientists who supported them and were well aware of their academic and educational work. During different periods of the CGM history many leading scientists and cultural figures, as well as less known persons or those known only among narrow circle of
professionals were involved into museum activities. These people were more or less acquainted with each other, were connected by professional or friendly ties, shared common interests, and, for the most part, were members of the Russian Geographical Society (RGS).

The first organizational meeting of the new museum was held on February 21, 1919, even before its official establishment. Besides V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky participants of the meeting included the chairman of the Russian Geographical Society since 1917, geographer and oceanographer Yu.M. Shokalsky, with whom Semenov-Tian-Shansky had close professional contacts due to their work in the RGS Department of Physical Geography; Semenov’s younger colleague L.S. Berg, a zoologist, physical geographer, climatologist, and specialist in many other branches of geography, a head of the Department of Fish, Amphibians, and Reptiles of the Zoological Museum of the Academy of Sciences (1905-1913), editor of two volumes of the multi-volume series “Russia”; Veniamin Petrovich’s elder brother, Andrei Petrovich Semenov-Tian-Shansky, who was one of the initiators of the RGS Permanent Conservation Committee and greatly influenced ideas and activities of his younger brother; a mineralogist and geochemist, director of the Geological and Mineralogical Museum of the Academy of Sciences A.E. Fersman, with whom Semenov-Tian-Shansky was acquainted since his work in the Commission for the Study of Natural Productive Forces and whom he characterized as “an extremely energetic, capable, lively and friendly person”; and D.I. Mushketov, director of the Mining Institute and head of the museum committee of the Institute’s Geological Museum. Economic geography, which was to become one of the essential constituents of the future museum, was represented at the meeting, besides Semenov-Tian-Shansky, by a statistician, professor of economic geography, deputy chairman of the RGS Department of Statistics V.I. Shary, whose joint exhibition activities with Semenov-Tian-Shansky will be discussed below. The meeting was also attended by the head of the Hermitage Art Gallery A.N. Benoit, an organizer of numerous exhibitions and active member of conservation movement of the first post-revolutionary years. It should be noted that the families of Benoit and Semenov-Tian-Shansky maintained friendly relations. Pedagogical community was presented by a teacher and author of textbooks and manuals on geography and cartography S.P. Bobbin. Semenov-Tian-Shansky described him as “one of the most cultured, knowledgeable, and diverse teachers of geography in St. Petersburg”. The meeting was also attended by zoologist and hydrobiologist K.M. Deriugin; limnologist, curator of the Zoological Museum of the Academy of Sciences G.Yu. Vereshchagin; botanist and geographer, conservator of the Botanical Museum N.A. Bush; ethnographer, anthropologist, curator of the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum D.A. Zolotarev; and hydraulic engineer V.M. Trenyukhin, lecturer at the Shipbuilding Department of the Petersburg Polytechnic Institute.

The beginning of the museum collection was laid by exhibits and materials received from the exhibition "Russia Before the War and Nowadays", which was held by the Civil Education Committee in Petrograd in 1918. Among the organizers of the exhibition were V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky, who headed the Geographical and Ethnographical Department of the exhibition and V.I. Shary, who headed the Department of Industry, Commerce, Transport, and Finance. D.I. Mushketov and A.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky gave public lectures.

The Russian Museum rendered to the new museum the unique panoramic rotating watercolor tapes of P.Ya. Pyasetsky, physician and artist, a friend of A.N. Benois. The tapes visualized the routes of his travels with the embassy to Tehran in 1895 and along the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1894–1899. (When in 1941 the CGM was closed they were handed over to the State Hermitage Museum; later they were restored and exhibited twice: in 2007 in the Vitebsky Station during festivities devoted to the 170th anniversary of Russian Railways and in 2015 at the exhibition "Culture and Art of Iran of the 8th – Beginning of 20th Centuries"). The watercolors were one by one sticked down on fabric and rolled. While these rolls were gradually unfolded, they produced the impression of a moving picture. The Museum also received Pyasetsky’s watercolors depicting landscapes of Mongolia, China, and Japan. Semenov-Tian-Shansky donated to the Museum a series of Karelian landscapes made in 1921, when he took part in the Olonets Scientific Expedition, organized by Vereshchagin. Deriugin presented museum with his White and Barents Sea collections and as curator of the museum’s Department of Seas and Fresh Water Pools did much to develop exposition of his department and make it more attractive and
entertaining with the help of dioramas “Bird Bazaars of Murman and Novaya Zemlya”, “The bottom of the the Kola Bay”, “Coral Reef”, and others. Semenov-Tian-Shansky wrote about him: “He was a wonderful, very energetic, direct person, with whom it was very pleasant and easy to work, and at the same time he was certainly very talented and intelligent, particularly esteemed the museum, while his personal relentless efforts contributed to the foundation of the maritime department, which was very much appreciated” [13]. The collection of stuffed animals was made by S.K. Prikhod’ko, a taxidermist and animal sculptor of the Zoological Museum of the Academy of Sciences. He received professional training in Germany and his works are highly valued even nowadays. At the initiative of A.N. Benoit the museum commissioned a series of plastic images of outstanding geographers. Benoit attracted to this work a number of well-known sculptors, e.g. the portrait of Kropotkin was made by a member of the Academy of Arts I.Ya. Gunzburg, famous for the cycle of sculptures and portrait figurines of prominent cultural figures. During a short period of time when the CGM was housed in the estate "Mikhailovskaya Dacha", one of the curators of the Museum, botanist and geographer V.M. Savich developing the idea of "museum in nature" divided the surrounding park into landscape zones, where it was planned to reproduce typical for each zone dwellings and their inhabitants with all their household.

The CGM, in spite of numerous technical, financial, and organizational problems actively developed all through the 1920th but in the 1930th the situation began to be changed dramatically. The Museum and Semenov-Tian-Shansky himself experienced the growing ideological pressure. The idea of the exposition was considered ideologically inappropriate, so Semenov had either to change it or to leave. He preferred the latter and in 1937 he resigned. Without Semenov-Tian-Shiansky the Museum was gradually destroying and in 1941 a decision was made to close it. That was the end of the story of the wonderful one-of-a-kind museum.

4. Conclusion
The idea of a geographical museum of the type suggested by V.P. Semenov-Tian-Shansky still survives in the cultural space and attempts to recreate it repeat once and again. This question was raised by the public in 1970 and 1987 and discussed in more detail in 2012 at a visiting session of the Board of Trustees of the Russian Geographical Society. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees President of Russia V.V. Putin in his speech presented the project of the Rossiya Museum Park and mentioned in this connection the CGM "museum in nature" that was planned in the early 1930s in the area of Vsevolozhskaya Station near Leningrad. A vast area was allotted for the new project in the Moscow Region near the Domodedovo airport. However, the project was not realized due to the lack of funding. More successful was the Zaryadie Park [14] presenting vegetation of various landscape zones.

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