COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH NETWORK:
“SITUATING RUSSIA”

WORKING GROUP ON “GEOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY”

I. THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

The working group “Geography and Identity” is broadly concerned with the multiple ways in which identity in Russia has been and is articulated geographically, and how geography itself (understood in the most catholic sense) constitutes a part of the identity structure. The specific objective of the group is two-fold: a) to allow individuals to pursue—in a collaborative and strongly interactive framework—individual and highly focused research projects; and b) to encourage the group to reflect collectively about the more general intellectual issues that are implied in the thematic focus. It is expected that both of these objectives will be fully represented in the final texts of the members’ research products.

The composition of the group is deliberately wide-ranging and heterogeneous. It is transdisciplinary in that it crosses the line between the two fields of history and geography. The research topics will involve the problem of identity in both historical and contemporary contexts. Finally, a diversity of geographical representation has been sought, and the proposed research team represents institutions in four urban centers across European Russia: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kazan, and Pskov.

The group as a whole breaks down into three distinct sub-groups, devoted to the themes landscapes, boundaries, and provincialism. These particular topics hardly exhaust the range of possible geographical takes on identity, to be sure. They do however provide a useful range of perspectives for comparison and contrast, which does at least some justice to the complexity of the problem. And not least of all, they are all powerfully relevant to the Russian example. The activities of the working group are structured to allow the sub-groups both to work autonomously and to come together to share insights and critique each other’s work. As well, each sub-group, and the working group as a whole, will benefit from the participation of external specialists, both Russian and Western.

Individual team members are charged with the formulation and design of their individual research projects, and they are encouraged to do so in terms of their own particular interests and expertise. At the same time, there are strong thematic links which should be connecting their projects to the research of other colleagues in the ‘Geography and Identity’ group, the other groups in the ‘Situating Russia’ team, and indeed the other national teams in China, Southeast Asia, and France, which together with Russia comprise the Collaborative Research Network enterprise. (These are spelled out more fully in Peter Sahlins’ essay Official and Vernacular Identifications
in the Making of the Modern World.) From this standpoint, it would be useful if members of the ‘Geography and Identity’ group could keep the following general questions in mind when formulating their own projects:

- What exactly does the ‘geography of identity’ mean? In what ways does it form an intrinsic and important part of identity structures overall?
- How can the specific issues of geography and identity in Russia be related to larger theoretical debates between ‘constructed/imagined’ as against ‘essentialist/primordial’ positions on the nature of national identities?
- Where does the impulse driving the identification process come from? To what extent is the agency of the state a critical factor? Do social groups generate identities autonomously, for purposes which they themselves define?

II. TEAM MEMBERS

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**III. SCHEDULE OF WORK**  
(Note: Konstantin Aksenov is the liason for all Russian team members. They should send all of their materials directly to him in St. Petersburg, not to Mark Bassin in London.)

**June-July 2001**  
formal letters of invitation to participate circulated among team members

**1 August 2001**  
all team members respond to invitation confirming intention to participate and acceptance of conditions

**1 Sept 2001**  
individual project statements due (1500 words)  
Sept-Dec 2001  
Research Period I; informal consultation among groups/coordinators  
American post-grad fieldwork in Moscow, collaboration with landscapes group  
identify/invite external Russian specialists for sub-group seminars (1-2 per group)  
1 Jan 2002  
first research report due (2000 words)  
Mid-Late January 2002  
individual day-long seminars for each group, to be attended by at least one coordinator  
external Russian specialists will present formal critique at seminars
Late January 2002
American post-grad returns to US

1 February 2002
each group circulates summary of seminar results
external specialists will circulate final critiques

February-May 2002
Research Period II; informal consultation among groups/coordinators
identify/invite Russian (1) and Western (1-2) specialists for cumulative workshop

1 June 2002
submission/circulation of final papers (7000 words)

Mid-June 2002
cumulative workshop for entire groups