

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Arctic scientist, Gulag survivor: the biography of Mikhail Mikhailovich Ermolaev, 1905–1991*, translated and edited by William Barr (2009). Calgary: Arctic Institute of North America/University of Calgary Press. 591 pp. ISBN 978-1-55238-256-7.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Ermolaev (pronounced *Yermolayev*)—a Russian pre- and post-war geographer and geologist—is not a well-known scientist, neither in an international nor a Russian context. But he was an outstanding person in the lives of the many people he met during his long academic career. His difficult life in many ways reflects Russian scholarship during all stages of the Soviet era, from the Bolshevik Revolution to its dissolution, including the terrible years of Stalin’s reign of terror against academic society.

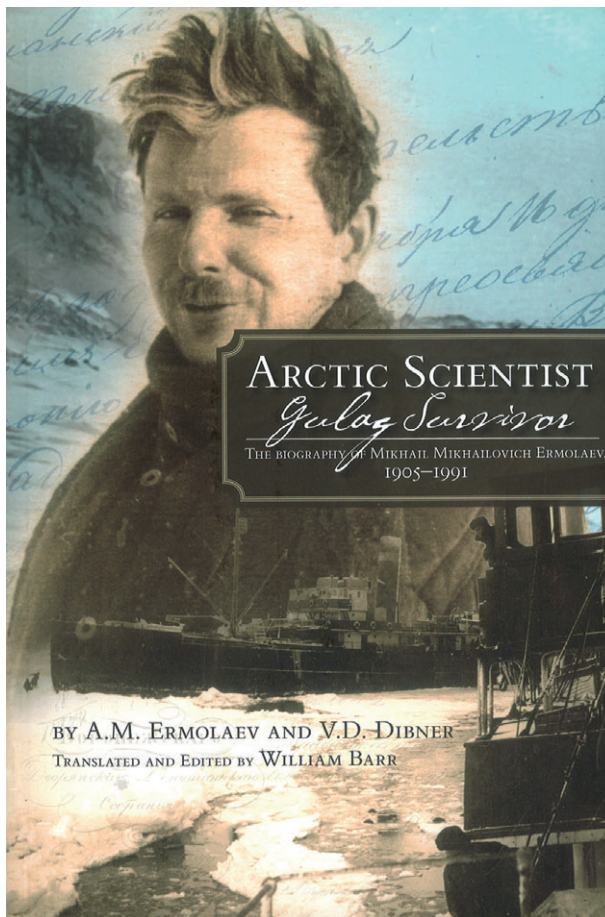
Though the book is clearly a biography, it also communicates interesting perspectives on Soviet polar research during the 1920s and 1930s, the arbitrary prosecutions of scholars under Stalin during the late 1930s to 1940s, the Gulag labour camps and academic life in the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the 1980s.

This biography was originally published in 2005 as *Mihajl Mihajlovič Ermolaev—žizn’ issledovatelja i učenogo*, written by one of Ermolaev’s sons (A.M. Ermolaev) and one of his close colleagues (V.D. Dibner) of his later years. The book’s subject is portrayed as a hard-working, devoted scientist, but also as an honest, fair-minded, gentle and eminently humane person, who—despite his horrible experiences during the Stalin era—believed in the goodness of people.

Ermolaev slid into his career as an Arctic scientist by chance. Fleeing the struggles of the Bolshevik Revolution in Leningrad, the youthful Ermolaev and his mother came to live in Petrograd with his elder sister, who was married to Rudolf L. Samoilovich. Samoilovich was a geologist and leader of the Northern Scientific Commercial Expeditions (the later Arctic Institute). Suffering from tuberculosis and hoping to be cured by the cold Arctic climate, Ermolaev joined the expeditions as an assistant and fell in love with geosciences. During and after his studies he made important scientific contributions on expeditions to Novaya Zemlya, the New Siberian Islands, the Timan area and other places. His work was not confined to geography and geology, but also included

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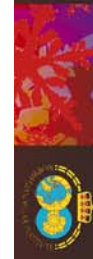
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glaciological issues and seismic sounding of the atmosphere.

The book presents some background information on the international race to the North Pole at that time, seen from a Russian perspective. Although it is well known in the West that Roald Amundsen was lost with his airplane during his attempt to rescue Umberto Nobile’s failed dirigible expedition, here we learn about the Russian rescue of Nobile’s party with the icebreaker *Krasin* in 1928: what happened behind the scenes, who did the job and who got credit for it.

Ermolaev’s participation in the Third High-Latitude Expedition of 1937 would prove fateful. A sudden change in sea-ice conditions in the autumn forced an involuntary offshore wintering of a large number of ships, including three of the Arctic Institute’s icebreakers, under the leadership of Samoilovich. The dispute about who was to blame was used as a pretext for the prosecution of Ermolaev, Samoilovich and many others by the Peoples’



Commissariat of Internal Affairs in 1938, culminating in the conviction of Ermolaev and Samoilovich as “enemies of the people”. Whereas Samoilovich was executed in 1939, Ermolaev was sent to a correctional labour camp in the Komi Republic, where he stayed until the end of the war.

It is interesting to learn that for the rest of his life Ermolaev blamed Otto Yulevich Shmidt for his fate. Shmidt was the leader of the Northern Sea Route and later of the Arctic Institute, and in the end was a well-known and celebrated “hero of the Soviet Union”. Before 1938, Ermolaev had considered Shmidt a trusted colleague, but according to Ermolaev, Shmidt failed to intervene on his and others’ behalf when he had the opportunity, and could have made a difference.

Being sent to the labour camps at the construction sites of the Vorkuta railroad was a severe disruption of Ermolaev’s life at all levels. Through his knowledge and abilities he attained higher positions and better living conditions in the camps compared with most of his fellow prisoners, but his life was by no means easy. Ermolaev was released in 1945 but had to remain in exile until his rehabilitation in 1953. He was reunited with his family, first in Syktyvkar (Komi Republic) and then in Arkhangelsk. Through old acquaintances he obtained meaningful work as a geologist, investigating mineral deposits in the Urals, the Onega bauxites and then specializing in rare mineral occurrences. During this time he was not allowed to publish under his own name and had to travel to scientific meetings in Moscow illegally. After his rehabilitation following Stalin’s death, Ermolaev returned to Leningrad University and rebuilt his academic career. The establishment of the Institute of the Geography of the Ocean at Kaliningrad University in 1970 marked the realization of Ermolaev’s dream.

The biography embraces 487 pages of the book and another 100 pages are devoted to appendices such as surveys of Ermolaev’s scientific work and legacy, end-notes, a bibliography, glossaries and an index. Although these are very useful, the absence of a timetable of events is a severe lacking, because the abundance of information, reviews and digressions sometimes makes it difficult to keep track of the chain of events.

Although the story told is generally interesting and in places exciting, the quantity of details and digressions can sometimes make for tedious reading. In some chapters, the authors’ priority was apparently to present the complete set of available data rather than to select those necessary for a representative outline of Ermolaev’s life. A typical example of this is the three-page-long calculation of coal consumption for alternative shipping routes

during the severe ice conditions of the 1937 expedition. The historical importance of this is unequivocal, as it played an important role in the subsequent prosecution of the expedition’s leaders, but the level of detail included here is difficult to justify in this biography. Other examples are the plethora of details about geological observations that can only be of interest to geologist readers, but which are of no value without knowing how these observations contributed to some higher understanding of the geological development of the areas in question. Although some of this material has not been published previously because of the political circumstances of the time, this book is not the right forum to make up for this absence. The many pages of scientific details regarding the Onega bauxites, for example, would be better placed in a different sort of work, one aimed at geologists. An alternative option would have been to put more information into endnotes or appendices for those readers with special interests.

Having some experience working with translations of Russian texts, I feel qualified to say that this translation is very good. Only in a very few places can the characteristic intricacy of the original Russian sentences be glimpsed through the English. Geological terms are generally well translated, with a few exceptions, where unfamiliar Russian terms or spellings are retained. Names of Russian places, institutions and the like are not translated, but are instead explained in a glossary, which makes it easier for those interested in such details. This goes a little too far when place names that are well known internationally, such as the Kola Peninsula, are kept in Russian (Kolsky Poluostrov), and when some place names of non-Russian origin are replaced with Russianized versions, as when Zemlya Frantsa Iosifa is used instead of Franz Josef Land.

There are other relatively minor flaws and shortcomings. For example, many personal names are mentioned in the book, making it sometimes difficult to remember who is who, and who should be remembered in order to understand later parts of the book. Although descriptions of some of Ermolaev’s expeditions are illustrated with maps, others are not.

This biography tells a fascinating story about a remarkable man who should be better known. It communicates interesting perspectives on Soviet academic society that should be of interest to many Western academics, particularly those forging research collaborations with Russian scientists in the post-Soviet era. Well-translated, it should have great potential to become a popular book in the West. Unfortunately, the many lengthy, tedious passages will limit the number of readers who will persevere to the book’s conclusion.