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Review article

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## The Project “Arctic Oral Memory” as an Audiovisual Resource on the History of the Arctic Exploration and Exploitation \*

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**Abstract.** The research group of the Arctic Museum and Exhibition Center, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, in cooperation with the Marine Heritage Association and the media group of the Marine Technical College in St. Petersburg are implementing the Arctic Oral Memory project, supported by the Presidential Grants Fund. The project involves the creation of an open Internet resource <https://arcticmemory.ru/> with video recordings of oral histories of famous Russian polar explorers. The article is devoted to the results and experience of the implementation of this project, which is at the intersection of journalism (popularization), cultural anthropology and history, providing the opportunity to see and hear first-hand information from those who personally participated in the study and development Arctic.

**Keywords:** *Arctic, oral memory, oral history, Arctic memory, Arctic heritage, polar explorer*

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### Introduction

Oral history is one of the most important areas of historical research in Russia and in the world. The problems and methodology of this field were actively developed. This direction was formed in the second half of the 20th century and is associated with the studies of such representatives of American and European science as J. Evans, A. Portelli, A. Haley, J. Vansina, P. Thompson, D. Berto, L. Nithammer, L. Passerini and others [1, Loskutova M.V.; 2, Rostovtsev E.A.]. In Russia, historian S.O. Schmidt was one of the first to use this concept [3]. Since the 1990s, a significant number of projects have been implemented in Russia to record and analyze certain aspects of oral history. Thus, the materials presented by the project “Oral History” of the scientific library of Moscow State University, based on the phonological archive of the philologist and archivist V.D. Duvakin (<https://oralhistory.ru/>), have become very popular [4, Timofeev L.I., Pospelov G.N.].

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Projects related to the study of the oral history of the peoples of the Arctic exist in Russia and around the world. Collections of oral ethnographic sources are widespread, for example, the database of the Center for the Study of Traditional Culture of the European North at the Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V. Lomonosov (<http://folk.pomorsu.ru/>) or the "Wandering Memory" project aimed at studying the oral history of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic [5, Dudek Sh.]. In Murmansk, in the mid-2010s, the project "Cultural Memory of Modern Russia: Euro-Arctic North" was implemented. On its basis, the Internet resource <http://cultmemory.ru/> was created, and a number of collections of sources were formed, including audio recordings, memoirs, and photographs. The materials presented on the site are a source of study of the cultural heritage of the Arctic [6, Tereshchenko E.Yu., Fedorov P.V.].

However, these projects focus only on certain spectrums of Arctic oral history. In addition, they do not imply a wide popularization of the acquired knowledge.

### ***Problem description***

A generation of polar explorers, who in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods took part in intensive development of the Arctic and Antarctic, is passing away beneath our eyes; they have knowledge, competencies and life experience that are important to record and pass on to future generations. First of all, these are participants in such outstanding and no longer existing projects as the drifting stations "North Pole", high-latitude air expeditions, ice air reconnaissance and work of polar aviation, maritime operations, mass housing construction in the Arctic, and much more. Unfortunately, the COVID epidemic has significantly accelerated this process.

Considering that a new wave of interest in the Arctic is now developing, large-scale projects are being implemented there. It is important to take the accumulated experience as carefully as possible and create mechanisms for transferring knowledge and experience accumulated by generations of those who explored and mastered the Arctic.

The aim of the project is to preserve the historical memory and information about the acquired competencies "from the first person" — famous Russian polar explorers.

Project objectives:

- providing conditions for recording and transferring the unique competencies and life experience of Russian polar explorers to the next generations;
- formation of a database of audiovisual sources for further historical and anthropological analysis.

Russia has a unique historical experience of exploring the polar regions. At the same time, many phenomena and episodes of exploration and study remain "behind the scenes", are not recorded either in literature or in research, and exist only in the oral stories of those who took part in these processes.

It should be noted that the "compilation" of the post-war history of the development and study of the Arctic has not yet been made, it is "fragmented" into articles and separate studies

with numerous thematic gaps. Moreover, in the domestic tradition, the approach to the description of historical plots is highly depersonalized, with only the first person acting in the process of description. But even these individuals are rarely "given a voice" (what might be called "a first-person story").

The Oral Memory of the Arctic project is designed to fill this gap and is aimed at creating a resource that would present the life stories of polar explorers as an integral part of the general history of Arctic exploration and exploitation.

Such an approach is more accustomed to journalism and cultural anthropology, where interviewing is the main method of obtaining information, and where we hear and see our respondents in person.

A feature of oral history is that it often reflects aspects of an activity that are difficult to capture in a written text. Due to the fusion of information received both visually (face, facial expressions, gestures) and aurally (verbal information, intonation, etc.), a complex information field of various meanings is formed. Such information is capable of forming a deep understanding of the material presented.

In addition to preserving historical memory, the project is aimed at identifying unique knowledge and competencies that are important to tell about in the "first person". There is no doubt that those who were directly involved in the study and development of the Arctic and achieved success in this have unique knowledge and competencies that are important to record, study and pass on to future generations. This project aims to transfer knowledge and competencies to the next generations.

### ***Project methodology***

The main method of the project is recording video interviews, in a broader sense — an ethnographic method. However, it is not just a method of "collecting field material", but an activity to "create a source" [7, Shcheglova T.K.].

Within the framework of the Presidential Grant, a video recording of 30 famous people whose life paths are connected to the Arctic is being made.

When selecting polar explorers, we proceeded from the following criteria:

1) The most important and large groups, identified by thematic feature, should be presented. We have identified four groups:

- researchers (employees of various institutes and institutions), observers (at polar stations), engineers, etc.;
- managers (heads of polar stations, heads of communal services, managers of various levels);
- participants in maritime navigation (captains, navigators), sailors, employees of port services. There are also representatives of polar aviation;
- travelers, popularizers of the polar regions.

2) When selecting polar explorers for video recording, experience (at least 20 years), work experience and real achievements in their field of competence were taken into account.

3) Ability to express thoughts correctly.

The last criterion was very important, because a significant component of the project is popularization, which is impossible without a clear and precisely stated thought. The ability to express a thought is also a criterion for the awareness and quality of the competencies that our respondents possess.

The polar explorers for the video interviews were selected in several stages. The initiators of the project have a broad outlook and understanding of the profile specialists due to the fact that they have been organizers of the scientific-practical conference "Polar Readings" for many years <http://polarconf.ru/>. This conference has become a well-known scientific project among specialists. Consultants of the Polar Commission of the Russian Geographical Society and the Association of Polar Explorers of Russia were engaged, who also proposed a number of candidates.

This was followed by phone calls to the proposed candidates in order to find out the possibility of an interview. In the context of the pandemic, the possibility of conducting interviews via the Internet (in Zoom) was offered.

Once agreement was reached, a biographical note was prepared. An individual questionnaire was prepared based on the basic questionnaire and the respondent's specific skills. The basic sequence of questions was preserved in order to build some overlap between different interviews. We tried to keep the temporal sequence of the interview (questions about personal development, education, family — with a transition to the first acquaintance with the Arctic, further development of various competencies and life experience). In conclusion, they were asked to identify the key points for younger followers.

The prepared questionnaire was sent to the respondent in advance for acquaintance and internal preparation for the interview. They tried to record in rooms that are somehow thematically connected with the Arctic — in the Russian State Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic, the Krasin Icebreaker Museum, the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute, on operating icebreakers.

During the interview, the moderator, trying to keep the general line of the questionnaire, could freely vary and come up with new or guiding questions in order to maintain an active conversation. Thus, the interaction was a form of a semi-structured interview in order to obtain deep, exciting information for the respondent, which was important for transferring to potential listeners as expressed knowledge. This means that the interview was passed through double reflection by the respondent himself: 1) comprehending his own life path and competencies on the basis of the questionnaire and 2) keeping the invisible audience to which the interview was directed: the respondent was asked to choose and tell what, in his opinion would be important to pass on to future generations.

The duration of the conversation was individual, and experience has shown that it practically always ranges from half an hour to an hour and a half.

The result of the interview was a video recording (produced with proprietary equipment within the framework of the grant), which was then subjected to minor correction — pronounced gaps and hiccups that did not affect the meaningfulness of the speech were deleted. The recording was mastered with opening and closing titles. In addition to a long recording, a short 2–3 minute video was prepared for each interview with the most interesting statements of the respondent.

All videos are posted on YouTube on the Arctic Memory channel. Using a YouTube function called "subtitles", the interviews were transcribed and presented as texts on the website and as subtitles. When transcribing, we followed a literary approach, removing parasitic words and sometimes simplifying statements while maintaining the meaning. The presence of subtitles makes it potentially possible to translate the interviews into any language used by Google Translator. This feature will contribute to the widespread global promotion of this content.

A 26-minute film compilation based on the most interesting statements of polar explorers was produced as a result of the grant; it is available online on the project website.

All basic materials — biographies, photos of polar explorers and videos (as links to Youtube) are posted on the information resource <https://arcticmemory.ru/>. Additional materials (photos, documents, links to articles and books), provided by the polar explorers, are also placed there.

### ***Conclusions and next steps***

It would certainly be wrong to stop the project at the recording of 30 known polar explorers. Obviously, the project has great potential for development. This includes expanding the geography of the project to include specialists who have worked not only in the Arctic, but also in the Antarctic. A promising area of work is cooperation with various enterprises operating in the Arctic by organizing video recording of interviews with their veterans.

Given the constraints imposed by the pandemic, the focus of the project was on respondents from St. Petersburg (where the project team was located). At the same time, there are specialists who have worked in the Arctic and Antarctic and have unique competencies in all regions of Russia, as well as abroad. Obviously, these groups can also gradually be covered by the project. To expand the geography, it is important to connect local schools and museums to the project, as they can organize interaction with a particular polar explorer and record it. It is important that the project has created a resource aggregator where the filmed stories can be placed. Remote methods — conducting interviews with the recording function via the Internet — significantly facilitate the task.

Thus, the materials can be used for a number of different purposes: for wide popularization and acquaintance with real personalities who have contributed to the study and development of the polar regions; for historical and anthropological analysis in order to study various aspects, such as everyday life in the Arctic, biographies of polar explorers, hidden and obvious causes of certain events, etc.; to organize the educational and upbringing process both by watching videos

and by involving young people in the implementation of the project — participation in video recordings, preparation of questionnaires and biographies, transcription of records.

The resulting materials are a visual, personalized resource, highlighting the contribution of Russian polar explorers to the development of the Arctic. The life paths of these people are an invaluable source for studying the history of the development of the polar regions.

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