

The real “geopoetry,” and the “poets of the soil”: Geological school of 20th century poetry in St. Petersburg, Russia, explores why we are geologists

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This talk will be about “geopoetry”, but not the one by Harry Hess. It will be about real “geopoetry” - modern Russian poetry on earth science themes. Few outside of Russia know that an important movement in 20th century poetry was started in St. Petersburg by geology students at the Leningrad Mining Institute in the 1950’s and was called the “geological school of poetry”. Some of their poems laid foundation to a new genre of unofficial, brutally honest, and often politically risky songs that were sung in the kitchens, scientific research institutes, and around campfires throughout the Soviet Union. These poems and songs played a big role in changing attitudes and opening up Soviet society in the 1960’s. The earth and soil represents one of the main themes for the poets of the geological school. So much so that other poets have nicknamed them “pochvenicks”, which in Russian translates to “poets of the soil”. This talk explores reasons why they (and perhaps we also) have become geologists. It includes my translations of about a dozen of their poems on geological themes (many of them translated for the first time) and cultural and biographical context for this remarkable phenomenon in the history of geology.

Dr. Paul Belasky is an Associate Professor of Geology at Ohlone College, Fremont. Paul Belasky was born in St. Petersburg, Russia and moved to the U.S. in 1974 at the age of 14. He grew up in California and studied geology, paleontology and, specifically, Late Paleozoic paleobiogeography at UC Berkeley, San Jose State, and UCLA. He traveled and did field work in many parts of Russia, Kazakhstan, and other former republics of the Soviet Union. He has worked as a Russian-English translator for a variety of organizations (including oil companies and Yu Luzhkov, the current Mayor of Moscow) and has written (and occasionally published) songs and poetry in Russian. So he jumped at the chance to translate and write about the work of the geologist poets of St. Petersburg, “the poets of the soil”.