

An Environmental History of Russia

Étienne FORESTIER-PEYRAT

With the publication of a book on the environmental history of Russia, Étienne Forestier-Peyrat analyses the link between politics and environment in Russian and Soviet history, from the Czarist campaigns to expand territories to the current and highly controversial construction of the Sochi Olympic Village.

Reviewed: Paul Josephson, Nicolai Dronin, Ruben Mnatsakanian, Aleh Cherp, Dmitry Efremenko and Vladislav Larin, *An Environmental History of Russia*, Cambridge-New York, CUP, 2013, 347 pp.

An Environmental History of Russia is presented as a response to the lack of a comprehensive history of the environment in Russia and the Soviet Union. The introduction to the book promises a reinterpretation of Soviet modernity in the light of the environmental question, stating its aim to provide as broad a picture as possible of the actors, institutions and ideologies involved. This explains the apparent diversity of the issues discussed, from forest management to the exploitation of fishing resources, industrial pollution and natural parks.

Going beyond the division of the Russian Revolution, the authors highlight continuities in the relationship between Czarist, then Soviet, society and nature. They emphasise the link between science, technology and politics in that relationship and in the ways in which the environment was altered. This now classic premise explains the book's central theory, according to which the lack of public debate on the environment in the USSR can explain its environmental challenges, the scale of which became clear to the rest of the world during the perestroika.

It cannot be said with certainty that the book meets its ambitious aims. The environmental history that is presented is often reduced to a series of examples which, while relevant individually, do not contribute to a clear argument. The environmental degradation of the Soviet Union, which culminates in narrative terms with the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, is presented as unavoidable while the interaction and motivations of those involved remain unclear. Moreover, the numerous factual elements, whose collective presentation in a single work is convenient for the non-specialist reader, fail to conceal the book's methodological flaws.

Imperial nature and Soviet nature

There have been a number of studies on the environmental consequences of Czarist expansion in Eurasia from the 16th century onwards, which have highlighted the

transformation of ecosystems through the expansion of farming practices and migrations¹. Colonisation, environmental management and political power went hand in hand, as shown by the influence of monasteries and Cossack communities. The founding of Saint Petersburg on the swamplands of the Neva River in 1703 was as much a victory over nature as over Sweden.

As the authors point out, some aspects related to this territorial expansion and the frontier mindset were debated within local scholarly societies as early as the 18th century. In Saint Petersburg, the Free Economic Society, established in 1765, discussed soil depletion and forest management. Public debates on environmental issues, however, remained limited until the second half of the 19th century. The 1890s marked a real turning point, with the great drought of 1891-1892 on the one hand, which fuelled debates on climate change and soil impoverishment² and, on the other hand, the growing debate on the rapid disappearance of forests in European Russia (the loss is estimated at 9 million hectares between 1888 and 1918, despite the implementation of environmental protection laws). Expeditions into Siberia and the Russian seas in the early 20th century at last brought up questions regarding the extent of the country's fishery resources. However, these debates were limited to expert circles, and there were no major environmental projects during the Czarist period, with the notable exception of the railway network, which quickly expanded from the end of the 19th century onwards.

The early years of the Soviet regime were characterised by an apparent victory for those who believed in nature conservation, with the creation of natural reserves whose numbers rose from 24 in 1925 to 61 in 1929, over an area of 3.9 million hectares³. Under the guidance of the Commissioner for Education, these reserves helped to rouse the population's interest in an idealised image of nature, embodied by the Pan-Russian Nature Conservation Society (1924). The period, however, was marked by some important debates on the relation between Communist ideology and the environment, owing to the rarity of Marxist texts on the subject and the new regime's prioritisation of growth. Increasing tension arose between specialists from the Czarist period, who defended conservationism, and a younger generation of experts who defended the right to exploit the country's natural resources in the service of Communist development.

This industrialist policy grew with Stalin's Great Turn of 1929-1930. The Don-Volga canal, the Dneprostroi hydroelectric power plant and the Turkistan-Siberia railway line were among the regime's first major projects, widely promoted by official propaganda. The creation of factories and mines resulted in new towns, like Magnitogorsk, in the heart of the Ural Mountains. Forced industrialisation caused a swift rise in air and water pollution, as was the case in the Sea of Azov, where waste from steel factories threatened marine life from the 1930s onwards. This political and economic upheaval was therefore an ecological upheaval as well. The link between politics and ecology can be clearly seen from the large-scale use of coercion to transform the Soviet environment. While farmers were being repressed, several hundred thousands of prisoners in Siberia had to take part in deforestation and mining schemes, as in the Kolyma camps immortalised by Varlam Shalamov. The Second World

¹ David Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes. Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700-1914*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe*, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 2004.

² This drought was part of a Eurasian context whose consequences are described by Mike Davis in his book *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London, Verso, 2000.

³ The classic book on this subject is by Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature. Ecology, Conservation and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988.

War, through the spatial redistribution of production it brought about, later perpetuated the existence of some of the camps, which became veritable Arctic ghettos.

The Soviet environment: between thaw and stagnation

A number of utopian projects were carried out during the late Stalinist period, one of which was the famous Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, launched in October 1948. Anticipating the restructuring of the country's hydraulic network and the planting of continental forest belts, it was closely linked to the cult of personality and the promotion of scientifically dubious figures such as Trofim Lysenko⁴. While the plan was scrapped shortly after Stalin's death, the period of Khrushchev's Thaw did not mark a clear break as far as environmental policies were concerned. Voluntarism remained *de rigueur* during the Virgin Lands Campaign, which saw 40 million additional hectares being sown between 1954 and 1957 on steppes that were not suited for growing cereals, particularly in Kazakhstan. Khrushchev's focus on productivism and closing the economic gap with the West intensified the exploitation of certain resources. The forests of the Ukraine, Georgia and the Altai Mountains were thus hit by large-scale felling in the 1950s and 1960s. On the Volga River, the Kuybyshev hydroelectric power station was completed, the largest in the world in terms of electrical production. It was not until the beginning of the 1960s that large-scale projects became rarer, more on account of their cost and duration than for environmental reasons.

The authors rightly recall that the fall of Khrushchev in October 1964 could partly be explained by his environmental adventurism and unfavourable crop conditions from 1960, which made the USSR dependent on foreign cereal imports. The public discussion of environmental issues, however, remained limited to forums and media outlets that were under Party control. The reports on different kinds of pollution that were being produced from 1967 onwards by the Soviet meteorological authority remained confidential. While the energy inefficiency of the Soviet economy was now coming under discussion in scientific and technocratic circles, the measures required to reverse the trend, starting with the end of some free services, was a renegeing of the social pact on which the regime had been constructed. The prosperity that Brezhnev had promised the Soviet population was therefore based on the intensive exploitation of the country's environment. Raw materials and hydrocarbons provided the necessary income for imports, while military programmes resulted in the nuclear, chemical and biological contamination of entire regions. In rural areas, the use of pesticides was increased with the launch of a large-scale food plan in 1982.

The authors finally turn to the perestroika era. At that time, civil society took up these environmental issues, which were often incorporated into broader socio-political claims. The case of the Baltic "eco-nationalisms" is especially well known. The Latvian people's mobilisation against plans to build a dam on the Daugava River in 1987 is one of the most striking examples. In the Ukraine and Belarus, the Chernobyl disaster revealed the regime's failures and fuelled demands that were more politically orientated. The authorities were, however, involved in these developments. In Central Asia, polluting factories were issued fines, while the city of Kazan, in Tatarstan, stood together with local environmentalists to reject the establishment of a biochemical factory in 1988. The central government, meanwhile, created a proper body in charge of protecting nature and, in 1987, decided to introduce environmental impact studies. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, prevented the potential consequences of these new measures from being analysed.

⁴ These questions have recently been analysed in Stephen Brain's book on the forestry issue, *Song of the Forest. Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh, 2011.

Unresolved questions

Despite its factual richness, the book often leaves the reader dissatisfied with regard to the interpretation of events. The link between politics and environment is not properly clarified. The means by which the political authorities utilized a vision of nature and specific projects in order to mobilise the population remain vague. The authors could have better exploited the popular imagination constructed during the interwar period with regard to the Arctic conquest and Brezhnev's mobilisation of young people in favour of the Baikal–Amur Magistral railway (BAM). The lack of public debate on the environment should not cause us to forget the secret negotiations that took place within the State and Party machinery. The book mentions the early measures taken by Estonia to protect its natural heritage by adopting a law on the issue in 1957, three years before Russia. If the Baltic authorities tolerated an environmentalist movement, it means that it revealed something about relations between the Soviet republics and the central government. In Moscow itself, hushed debates took place in the early 1970s regarding the creation of a Ministry of Environment, against a background of conflict between institutions and a proliferation of expert groups⁵.

The authors do not really fulfil their promise to trace an environmental history “from below” and provide an overview of the diversity of local actors. The role of the peasantry in the environmental history of the region is in fact very little analysed. It is unfortunate that the Revolution and the Civil War are absent from the book, while studies of other revolutionary processes have shown that political upheavals were often accompanied by a reshaping of the relationship with nature⁶. Case studies of some major environmental movements add very little new information. The three decades of controversy over the state of Lake Baikal, which began in 1961 with discussions on the pollution caused by a paper factory, should have been analysed in greater depth. An example of this kind would have enabled to discuss both the way in which the regime and the environmental movements accommodated one another, as well as the divergences with the environmental movements in Western countries.

This observation leads us to contemplate the third shortcoming of the book, which lies in its failure to take into account the potential transnational influences in this field. The authors acknowledge from the outset that they have reduced the comparatist dimension of their book to a minimum. They also highlight that Russian then Soviet expertise often developed on the fringes of European and North American debates. However, these hypotheses should have been tested. The reader must make do with basic information on the influence of German forestry theories in the 19th century, the role of Czechoslovakia as a purveyor of ideas on ecology in 1967-1968, and the impact of the 1972 Stockholm conference. It is a pity that the influence of the American model in the interwar period, although mentioned, is not taken more seriously in order to explain certain Soviet representations and policies regarding nature. Likewise, the reference to the Cold War context most likely explains more than the authors suggest⁷.

⁵ On environmental expertise and the challenges it faced in the Soviet Union, see Marie-Hélène Mandrillon's article, “L'expertise d'État, creuset de l'environnement en URSS”, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 2012/1, No. 113, pp. 107-116.

⁶ Historians such as Jonathan Sperber have highlighted the importance of forestry issues in the revolutions of 1848.

⁷ On the links between the Cold War and the environment, see for example J.R. McNeill, Corinna R. Unger, *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, New York-Washington, Cambridge University Press-German Historical Institute, 2010.

Back to basics

The inadequate discussion of such important questions can in fact be explained by more deep-rooted problems concerning the actual outlook of the work under scrutiny. The environmental history developed in it comes across as being extremely positivist, with no proper analysis of the theoretical and methodological reflections developed in the field in recent years. In fact, it amounts to a chronicle of Soviet environmental pollution. Some now classic aspects of environmental history, such as the ideological and cultural construction of the concepts of nature, resources and the environment, are barely touched upon. The link between sciences, technologies and the environment is also undeveloped. In addition, the authors seem to be unaware of a number of current lines of research, particularly regarding the area of environmental risk management⁸. Likewise, would references to the subject of Soviet city parks or zoos not have provided a useful contrast? The way in which the book focuses on the issue of pollution pushes it towards a troublesome determinism, as when we are asked to believe that “Soviet planners and officials never learned from experience” (p. 234). This kind of unfounded general assertion is to be found throughout the book.

Beyond this rather conservative conception of environmental history, the nature of the sources used by the authors posits a real issue. The disproportionate role attributed to the Soviet press of the time and to contemporary Anglo-Saxon articles, along with no apparent thorough critique of the sources used, constitutes an obvious limitation⁹. Yet these sources are vital for understanding decision-making processes and for analysing the tensions that exist in the environmental field, all the more so in a country like the Soviet Union. While the opening of post-Soviet archives at times remains problematic and is not guaranteed for more recent years, their broad diversity would have enabled the authors to make case studies that went below the surface of events. The authors also make insufficient use of witnesses and printed sources from the time, and we are sometimes given the impression that the citing of decrees and laws represents the book’s insurmountable frontier. As a result, without wishing to dispute the authors’ competence, we might question the legitimacy of this type of overview of environmental history, while the patient, precise work on the sources of that history is yet to be done.

Books & Ideas.net, 12 February 2015.

© booksandideas.net

First published in *La Vie des Idées*, 4 February 2014.

Translated by Susannah Dale with the support of the Florence Gould Foundation.

⁸ On this subject see the work of historians Marc Elie and Laurent Coumel, and the seminar “Environnement à l’Est: Identités & Territoires”, <http://hemc.wahost.org/> (in French).

⁹ Only one direct reference to regional archives can be found on page 102 with regard to the Gulag economy.