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Melanie Arndt, Laurent Coumel

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**Melanie ARNDT
Laurent COUMEL**

**A GREEN END TO THE RED EMPIRE?
ECOLOGICAL MOBILIZATIONS IN THE SOVIET UNION
AND ITS SUCCESSOR STATES, 1950–2000:
A DECENTRALIZED APPROACH***

Published almost a decade ago, Laura Henry's book *Red to Green* not only challenged the widespread public stereotype of a nonexistent ecological awareness behind the Iron Curtain.¹ It also problematized one of the most popular assumptions among students of the post-Soviet period, namely, that the ecological movement – which took to the streets in the late 1980s after the Chernobyl disaster in April 1986 and semidemocratic general election in March 1989 – disappeared completely after the breakup of the Soviet Union.²

* We thank Nicky Brown for her help with English copyediting.

¹ Laura Henry. *Red to Green: Environmental Activism in Post-Soviet Russia*. Ithaca, 2010. For a brief overview of the field at the time, see Jonathan Oldfield. *Russia's Contemporary Environmental Movement // International Studies Review*. 2011. Vol. 13. No. 2. Pp. 334–336; Laurent Coumel and Marc Elie. *A Belated and Tragic Ecological Revolution: Nature, Disasters, and Green Activists in the Soviet Union and the Post-Soviet States, 1960s–2010s // Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*. 2013. Vol. 40. No. 2. Pp. 157–165.

² For ecological and social mobilization after Chernobyl, see: Melanie Arndt. *Tschernobylkinder. Die transnationale Geschichte einer nuklearen Katastrophe*. Göttingen, 2019 (forthcoming); Melanie Arndt (Ed.). *Politik und Gesellschaft nach Tschernobyl*. Berlin,

In many ways, political scientist Henry succeeded in showing the complexity and diversity of post-Soviet Russian environmentalism during the Yeltsin years, looking at the regional capitals (St. Petersburg, Vladimir, Bryansk, Novosibirsk, and Vladivostok). She thus confirmed the finding of Russian sociologist Oleg Yanitsky, who had provided a systematic typology of several ecological mobilizations of the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods.³ Focusing on the actors' networks and strategies, he put together a chart of "shades of Green" of the late Soviet and post-Soviet era by distinguishing between eco-politicians, eco-patriots, eco-technocrats, conservationists, alternativists, members of civil initiatives, and traditionalists.⁴

Neither Henry nor Yanitsky, however, explored the genesis of the green movement. "Movement" is understood here not in the strict sociological terms of the (New) Social Movement, but as a common orientation of smaller forms of social action that existed even under the condition of limited public freedom. By relying on a variety of sources (archival materials, memoirs, mass media, interviews), this forum tackles two main themes in the historiography of Soviet environmental mobilizations. On the one hand, we intend to contribute to localized approaches to the history of environmental movements in the late Soviet Union that link local, regional, central, and international aspects of popular mobilizations. Such studies are still rare,⁵ which can be partly explained by the marginal status of the environmental history of the region until recently.⁶ Although transnational histories of the Cold War have already contributed toward connecting the Soviet, East European, and Western contexts at the general (mostly national) level, the domestic dynamics of environmentalism have not yet

2016. Still highly instructive are the works of the political scientist Astrid Sahn and the early works of historian David R. Marples, for example: Astrid Sahn. *Transformation im Schatten von Tschernobyl. Umwelt- und Energiepolitik im gesellschaftlichen Wandel von Belarus und Ukraine*. Münster et al., 1998; David Marples. *The Social Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster*. London, 1988.

³ Oleg Yanitsky. *Russian Greens in a Risk Society: A Structural Analysis*. Helsinki, 2000. For an earlier Russian version: Oleg N. Ianitskii. *Ekologicheskoe dvizhenie v Rossii. Kriticheskii analiz*. Moscow, 1996.

⁴ Compare: Christof Mauch, Nathan Stoltzfus, and Douglas R. Weiner (Eds.). *Shades of Green. Environmental Activism around the Globe*. Lanham, 2006.

⁵ An exception is Yanitsky's introductory but fragmentary work, oriented towards a sociology of militant circles in the 1990s and the 2000s.

⁶ David Moon. *The Curious Case of the Marginalization or Distortion of Russian and Soviet Environmental History in Global Environmental Histories // International Review of Environmental History*. 2017. Vol. 3. No. 2. Pp. 31–50.

been studied in their spatial implications.⁷ For other empires or former empires, histories of environmentalism are becoming more and more local.⁸ On the other hand, we try to reconsider the role of environmentalism in the processes of reconfiguration of societies that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet system.

In this forum, we address the historical processes that generated and shaped the powerful ecological mobilizations of the late Soviet period. To counterbalance the still predominant Moscow-centrist approach to the period, the authors focus on regional and local developments in the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Armenia. In so doing, they are not reproducing the approach of political scientist Jane Dawson, who studied regional anti-nuclear movements as a powerful driving force of nationalist mobilization in several Soviet republics – Russia (the Tatar Republic and the Gorky region), Lithuania, and Ukraine (Crimea and Khmelnytskyi region) – and put forward the influential thesis of “eco-nationalism.”⁹ There is nothing uniquely Soviet and post-Soviet in the amalgamation of nationalist and nature protection movements.¹⁰ Nature has been “turn[ed] ... into a nationalist symbol of paradise”¹¹ ever since groups of people transformed “land” into “place” and defined themselves as nations.¹² Rather, the authors of articles published in this forum set out to contextualize and historicize less media-tized environmental controversies in the regions and republics that helped to shape certain state policies in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras.

To unlock the complex position of the environment in history and its mobilizing force, we indeed need to understand it as a “middle ground

⁷ John R. McNeill and Corinna R. Unger (Eds.). *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*. Washington, 2013. A recent exception is: Julia Herzberg, Christian Kehrt and Franziska Torma (Eds.). *Ice and Snow in the Cold War. Histories of Extreme Climatic Environments*. New York, 2018.

⁸ See for example: Marco Armiero and Lise Sedrez (Eds.). *A History of Environmentalism: Local Struggles, Global Histories*. London, 2013.

⁹ Jane I. Dawson. *Eco-Nationalism. Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine*. Durham, 1996.

¹⁰ For the nineteenth century United States, see: Kenneth R. Olwig. *Reinventing Common Nature: Yosemite and Mount Rushmore – A Meandering Tale of a Double Nature* // William Cronon (Ed.). *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. London, 1996. Pp. 379–408.

¹¹ William Cronon. Introduction: In Search of Nature // Cronon (Ed.). *Uncommon Ground*. P. 37.

¹² See Jane Carruthers. From “Land” to “Place”: Landscape Conservation and Environmental Activism in the Magaliesberg, South Africa, and Cooper’s Creek, Australia // Mauch, Stoltzfus and Weiner (Eds.). *Shades of Green*. Pp. 69–99.

where societal discourses and political ideologies directed toward ‘nature’ are refracted not through the frames of nationalizing histories of Russian (or Tatar, Ukrainian, or American) landscapes, but through the context of their production” as was stated in this journal more than ten years ago.¹³ Even though many works have been published since historians of Eastern Europe have rediscovered nature as a legitimate topic,¹⁴ environmentalism in the Soviet Union has been approached primarily as an *elite* phenomenon viewed from the *center*. In this interpretation, Soviet authoritarianism provided spaces of autonomy or “corners of freedom” for environmentalists perceived as oddballs (*chudaki*), as long as they did not appear to threaten the political order. The best known case is the All-Russian Society for Nature Protection (Vserossiiskoe obshchestvo okhrany prirody, henceforth: VOOP), which Douglas Weiner has extensively studied using the materials of its head office archive.¹⁵ Although the centralism of the Soviet society is unquestionable and the influence of “scientific public opinion” (*nauchnaia obshchestvennost’*) – as VOOP activists referred to themselves in memoirs, official documents and public discourses – was significant, the underlying bias toward the elitist approach can be even better explained by the absence of studies of the construction of cultural values from below. The elite-centrism of the existing historiography convinced us that the field needs regional and local stories to reveal the particularities of the East Side Story of environmentalism and its commonalities as well as differences with developments in the rest of the world.¹⁶ These were the main concerns that guided the French-German research project “Contemporary Environmental History of the Soviet Union and the Successor States, 1970–2000: Ecological Globalization and Regional Dynamics”

¹³ Editors. *Environmental History as Middle Ground // Ab Imperio*. 2008. No. 4. P. 25.

¹⁴ For recent overviews of Russian and Soviet environmental history, see: Andy Bruno. *Russian Environmental History: Directions and Potentials // Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 2007. Vol. 8. No. 3. Pp. 635–50; Brian Bonhomme. *Writing the Environmental History of the World’s Largest State: Four Decades of Scholarship on Russia and the USSR // Global Environment*. 2013. Vol. 6. No. 12. Pp. 12–37; Julia Lajus. *Environmental History in Russia and about Russia // Environment and History*. 2017. Vol. 23. No. 4. Pp. 627–630.

¹⁵ Douglas R. Weiner. *A Little Corner of Freedom. Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Berkeley, 1999.

¹⁶ Before this forum, a conference dedicated to Eurasian environments was held at Ohio State University in 2011. The papers have recently been published in a notable volume: Nicholas Breyfogle (Ed.). *Eurasian Environments: Nature and Ecology in Imperial Russian and Soviet History*. Pittsburgh, 2018.

(EcoGlobReg, 2014–2018).¹⁷ The present forum took shape within the framework of that project.¹⁸

In Search of Soviet Environmentalism

Although historians of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century have used “environmentalism” for at least two decades to refer to the changing inter-relationship between societies and their natural environments, the word lacks a stable and definite characterization. We understand it in William Cronon’s “classic” interpretation as “the broad cultural movement in the decades since World War II that has expressed growing concern about protecting nature and the environment against harms caused by human actions.”¹⁹ Cronon underlines how the idea of nature as a “moral imperative” helped in attracting attention for environmental causes.²⁰ Since Weiner’s pioneering works, with the first results published at the end of the 1980s, historians have used the term mostly as a synonym for “conservationism,” although the “preservationist” dimension of the Soviet scientist-driven green movement that focused on protected areas was hypertrophied.²¹ For Weiner, the main caesura of the Soviet century from an environmental history perspective remains – and rightly so – the “standard” one: Stalin’s death in 1953. The societies engaged in the protection of nature since the late imperial period could normalize their activity only after the end of Stalin’s reign, during which they had been decimated by the Great Terror and manipulated by the postwar ideological campaigns. They rebuilt a network of activists – here understood as individuals committed to the environmental cause regardless of their official positions – who tried to reorient politics toward the

¹⁷ The EcoGlobReg project (2014–2018) was based at the Centre d’études des mondes russe, caucasien et centre-européen, CNRS-EHESS, Paris, the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg, and Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen. For a conference report on the concluding conference, see <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7309> (last visit of all Internet resources: April 26, 2019).

¹⁸ The forum was first projected after the international conference “Resistance, Protest and Criticism in the Name of Nature: USSR and Post-Soviet States, 1950–2010,” held by the French-German EcoGlobReg team in Moscow in October 2015.

¹⁹ Cronon. Introduction. P. 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.* P. 36.

²¹ Compare: Marc Elie. Formulating the Global Environment: Soviet Soil Scientists and the International Desertification Discussion, 1968–91 // *The Slavonic and East European Review*. 2015. Vol. 93. No. 1. Pp. 181–204. For the distinction between conservationism and preservationism in the U.S. context, see Thomas R. Wellock. *Preserving the Nation: The Conservation and Environmental Movements 1870–2000*. Wheeling, IL, 2007.

protection of nature. However, their efforts remained mostly in vain up to the mid-1980s, notwithstanding a short-lived and limited “environmental turn” under Khrushchev.²²

Some historians have revised this periodization. For Stephen Brain, the Soviet government under Stalin “consistently advanced forest conservation.”²³ Brain’s use of “environmentalism” to qualify nature policies in the 1930s and 1940s is controversial.²⁴ In his study of the post-Stalin debates over inland water pollution, Christopher Burton characterizes “environmentalism” as a public discussion of the human impact on nature, just as it emerged in Western countries, especially in the United States after Rachel Carson’s work on the effects of pesticides.²⁵ Burton thus supports Weiner’s periodization by stressing the necessary precondition of the existence of a certain public space for criticism of the state policies in the name of nature and/or human health. Paul Josephson points to “the legacy of limited public involvement” to explain the weakness of environmental concerns in the decision making of state policies.²⁶ In the present forum, Elena Kochetkova argues that the latter was not an obstacle to real environmental concerns among engineers occupying key positions inside the industrial ministries. Sociologist Diana Mincyte turns the top-down approach around and em-

²² Vladislav Larin et al. *Okhrana prirody Rossii: ot Gorbacheva do Putina*. Moscow, 2003; Laurent Coumel. A Failed Environmental Turn? Khrushchev’s Thaw and Nature Protection in Soviet Russia // *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*. 2013. Vol. 40. No. 2. Pp. 167–189.

²³ Stephen Brain. *The Appeal of Appearing Green: Soviet-American Ideological Competition and Cold War Environmental Diplomacy* // *Cold War History*. 2016. Vol. 16. No. 4. P. 7.

²⁴ Stephen Brain. *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905–1953*. Pittsburgh, 2011. For a discussion of the book, see H-Environment Roundtable Reviews. 2013. Vol. 3. No. 5. <https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/env-roundtable-3-5.pdf>. For parallel discussions on nature protection under German National Socialism, see, for example: Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekötter (Eds.). *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus*. Frankfurt a.M., 2003; Thomas M. Lekan. *Imagining the Nation in Nature. Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885–1945*. Cambridge, MA, 2004; Sandra Chaney. *Nature of the Miracle Years. Conservation in West Germany, 1945–1975*. New York, 2008.

²⁵ Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*. New York, 1962; Christopher Burton. *Destalinization as Detoxification? The Expert Debate on Industrial Toxins under Khrushchev* // Christopher Burton, Frances L. Bernstein, and Dan Healey. *Soviet Medicine: Culture, Practice, and Science*. De Kalb, 2010. Pp. 237–257.

²⁶ Paul Josephson. *Russia, State Power, and the Environment* // Soundararajan Ravi Rajan and Lise Sedrez (Eds.). *The Great Convergence: Environmental Histories of BRICS*. New Delhi; Oxford, 2018. P. 44.

phasizes that agricultural labor was a medium through which Lithuania's peasants negotiated their relationship with the late Stalinist state. She defines "environmentalism" broadly as "practices" that imply "everyday human interactions with natural environments."²⁷ Nature thus effectively escaped political and ideological constraints.

But not only the notion of Stalin's "environmentalism" is contested. Whether one can speak of a "Soviet environmentalism" with regard to the largely declarative policies of the Brezhnev era is equally open to discussion.²⁸ In her study of the literary movement of "village prose" writers (*pisateli-derevenshchiki*), Anna Razuvalova has underscored the numerous ties between environmentalism and regionalism, and between the defense of natural resources and cultural heritage, on the one hand, and the nationalist-conservationist camp, on the other.²⁹

Is the appeal to "greening" industries among engineers a variety of "environmentalism?" Is the critical expertise of a dam building or the Siberian rivers diversion project? And what about the national parks created by administrations that mainly set out to affirm their regional sovereignty? Or public mobilizations after an earthquake? Such questions are not unique to the Soviet case. They cross all the geopolitical areas of the Cold War and correspond to what, following Donald Worster's book about the history of western ecological ideas, the German doyen of environmental history Joachim Radkau has called the "era of ecology."³⁰

The multilayered ambivalence of the era of ecology is reflected in the ambiguity and vagueness of the language used by scholars to describe it. While clarity of terminology is important, we agree with Radkau's argument that "terminological hairsplitting" will not help us to understand environmentalism as a historical phenomenon.³¹ Hence we and the contributors to the forum use the overlapping terms "ecological," "environmental," and "green" as synonyms. By "ecological" (or "environmental," "green") "mobilizations," and consequently "environmentalism," we mean any kind of group

²⁷ Diana Mincyte. *Everyday Environmentalism: The Practice, Politics, and Nature of Subsidiary Farming in Stalin's Lithuania* // *Slavic Review*. 2009. Vol. 68. No. 1. Pp. 31–49.

²⁸ For a vision of Brezhnevism as not particularly environmentally beneficial, see Paul Josephson et al. *An Environmental History of Russia*. Cambridge, 2013. For another interpretation, see Brain. *The Appeal of Appearing Green*.

²⁹ Anna Razuvalova. *Pisateli-"derevenshchiki": literatura i konservativnaia ideologiya 1970-kh godov*. Moscow, 2015. See also N. M. Dronin and J. M. Francis. *Econationalism in Soviet Literature* // *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*. 2018. Vol. 45. No. 1. Pp. 51–72.

³⁰ Donald Worster. *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology*. San Francisco, 1977.

³¹ Joachim Radkau. *Ära der Ökologie*. Munich, 2011. P. 24.

or individual action, aimed at questioning and/or criticizing existing policies because of their impact on the ecology of landscapes and resources as well as the ecology of the human body. To be clear: by speaking of environmentalism in the Soviet context, we do not intend to “greenwash” the USSR, relativizing the insufficiencies, administrative errors, and envirotechnical disasters that have marked the history of the USSR.³² At the same time, we recognize the role played by ecological mobilization and commitments, official and nonofficial, at the local and national or regional level, professional and amateur, in the history of the Soviet Union. As there existed not one, but many forms of environmentalism, a decentralized approach helps reveal different shades of Soviet environmentalism.

In this forum the term “environmentalism” refers to individuals or groups engaged in the active promotion of nature protection (in the form of defense of protected areas, criticism of pollution, radical transformation of ecosystems, etc.), rather than the state and its administrative organs. Still, the question remains as to who were the actual stakeholders and actors of these types of social mobilization.

Toward a Social History of Green Activism under State Socialism

Social actors employ already established “repertoires of contention” (petitions, strikes, meetings, etc.) as “the limited, familiar, historically created arrays of claim-making performances that under most circumstances greatly circumscribe the means by which people engage in contentious politics.”³³ The environmental movement also developed new “repertoires of contention” such as planting trees, recording bird songs, or collecting trash, which often resembled activities by green groups in other parts of the world. Of course, these repertoires proved far more limited in a country under authoritarian rule. The scientist-driven ecological movement reemerged when the scientific and literary intelligentsias met confidentially at the Academy of Sciences and expressed their discontent in publications in the specialized and occasionally the general press.³⁴ Forming a new

³² For the term “envirotechnical,” see Sara Pritchard. *An Envirotechnical Disaster: Nature, Technology, and Politics at Fukushima* // *Environmental History*. 2012. Vol. 17. No. 2. Pp. 219–243.

³³ Charles Tilly. *Regimes and Repertoires*. Chicago, 2006. P. vii.

³⁴ Weiner. *A Little Corner*; Klaus Gestwa. *Ökologischer Notstand und sozialer Protest. Ein umwelthistorischer Blick auf die Reformunfähigkeit und den Zerfall der Sowjetunion* // *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*. 2003. Vol. 43. Pp. 349–384.

environmental-sensitive mindset was the main socially meaningful action at this early stage of late Soviet green activism. In line with this approach and narrative, Nicholas Breyfogle recently examined Lake Baikal environmentalism during Khrushchev's Thaw.³⁵ The mobilization of scientists and writers in the late 1950s to save Lake Baikal – which contains one-fifth of the world's freshwater – from industrial pollution became archetypal for the entire green movement in the USSR.

Recent studies of environmental activism in the Soviet Union and its successor states have identified elements of Soviet environmentalism that can be meaningfully compared with green movements in the rest of the industrialized world at the time, thus “de-exceptionalizing” it.³⁶ Despite differences in the political, economic, and social contexts, such comparisons have high epistemological value because they allow us to look beyond the obvious political differences and discuss common characteristics and expressions of environmentalism. This helps us to understand the fundamental motives that mobilize people on ecological grounds.

Thus, Joan Martinez-Alier has juxtaposed an “environmentalism of the rich” with an “environmentalism of the poor.” From his perspective, “environmentalism of the rich” is “a cultural and social movement concerned with the preservation of nature” in the industrialized global North.³⁷ An “environmentalism of the poor” refers to the forms of contestation against domination (colonial and postcolonial) masked behind conservationist discourses.³⁸ This analysis resonates with Weiner's identification of an “elite” or even “caste”-like strain within the Soviet and post-Soviet environmental movement that included even seemingly democratic forms of eco-activism such as student “brigades of nature protection.”³⁹

Still, the idea that ecological concern was limited to the intelligentsia – mostly male scientists and writers – requires a qualification. In the early

³⁵ Nicholas B. Breyfogle. *At the Watershed: 1958 and the Beginnings of Lake Baikal Environmentalism* // *The Slavonic and East European Review*. 2015. Vol. 93. No. 1. Pp. 147–180.

³⁶ Breyfogle (Ed.). *Eurasian Environments*. P. 8.

³⁷ Joan Martinez-Alier. *The Environmentalism of the Poor: Its Origins and Spread* // John R. McNeill and Erin Stewart Mauldin (Eds.). *A Companion to Global Environmental History*. P. 513.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Douglas Weiner. *Environmental Activism in the Soviet Context: A Social Analysis* // Mauch, Stoltzfus and Weiner (Eds.). *Shades of Green*. Pp. 101–133. P. 120; Laurent Coumel. *Student Corporatism, a Matrix for the Russian Environmental Movement (1960–2015)* // *Le Mouvement Social*. 2017. No. 3/260. Pp. 111–27.

Soviet Union, in the 1920s, peasants defended their vital interests, including the natural environment, even if they did not frame them in a “proper” conservationist rhetoric, as Brian Bonhomme has shown.⁴⁰ Peasants first and foremost tried to survive in the asymmetric war of the Soviet regime against the countryside of the 1930s. Later, reindeer herders in the Far North adopted forms of passive resistance that included a greater role of nature as a social agent,⁴¹ when they let their animals go semi-wild to avoid collectivization. Even after Chernobyl, it was first and foremost “ordinary people” – workers and mothers – who took to the streets or went on strike in the most affected regions of Belarus and Ukraine.⁴²

Surveys conducted at the beginning of the 1990s show a high interest in ecological issues among the population of the Soviet Union – with environmental concerns ranked more important than corruption.⁴³ Even if limited in scope, the survey data still reflect certain clear trends in late Soviet society, which are also confirmed by the sheer number of organized environmentalist groups. According to various estimates, between 8,000 and 10,000 environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) existed in the USSR by 1989. The most important of these – the Socio-Ecological Union – claimed one million members in 1990.⁴⁴ The real political influence of these organizations is confirmed by the fact that the Russian Federation joined those former Communist countries that passed environmental protection laws as one of the first legislative acts following independence.

If “elite” Soviet environmentalism was anything but exclusive, the question arises as to whether there existed a Soviet “environmentalism of the poor” then? At first glance, it did not. Martinez-Alier identifies one of the crucial traits of the “environmentalism of the rich” the “cult of wilderness”: it could

⁴⁰ Brian Bonhomme. *Forests, Peasants, and Revolutionaries: Forest Conservation and Organization in Soviet Russia, 1917–1929*. Boulder, 2005.

⁴¹ Bruno. *The Nature of Soviet Power. On the agency of nature in the context of state socialism*, see Zsuzsa Gille. *From Nature as Proxy to Nature as Actor // Slavic Review*. 2009. Vol. 68. No. 1. Pp. 1–9.

⁴² Aliaksandr Dalhouski. *Tschernobyl in Belarus. Ökologische Krise und sozialer Kompromiss (1986–1996)*. Wiesbaden, 2015; Arndt. *Tschernobylkinder*.

⁴³ Boris Z. Doktorov, Boris M. Firsov, and Viatcheslav V. Safronov. *Ecological Consciousness in the USSR: Entering the 1990s // Anna Vari and Pal Tamas (Eds.). Environment and Democratic Transition: Policy and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe*. Dordrecht, 1993. Pp. 249–267.

⁴⁴ Nicolai Dronin. *Non-State Actors in Environmental History of Russia // Soundararajan Ravi Rajan and Lise Sedrez (Eds.). The Great Convergence: Environmental Histories of BRICS*. New Delhi, 2018. P. 153; Elizabeth Darby Junkin. *Green Cries from Red Square // Buzzworm: The Environmental Journal*. 1990. No. 2. P. 32.

become prominent, he argues, only when the soil was no longer needed to ensure bare survival. The cult of wilderness indeed played a central role both in the “rich” West and the socialist East, as the commitment to national parks and protected areas on both sides of the Iron Curtain has proved. Wilderness is still “Russia’s greatest legacy to the planet,”⁴⁵ which makes the largest country in the world an important player in times of climate change and decreasing biodiversity. “Wilderness” as an argument in favor of or against nature protection was a popular trope in the Soviet Union, along with a fascination for concrete and steel (a point mentioned in all the forum articles).

In the end, one might wonder whether the distinction between a “rich” and a “poor” environmentalism is applicable to the Soviet system, where people were neither poor nor rich, but differentiated in terms of their various statuses or “regimes.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the environmental movement was capable of embracing people of various social backgrounds (although this ability should not have been idealized because environmentalism can also “go wrong” and become exclusive). On the other hand, Soviet and post-Soviet environmentalism, like that of any others, always also contained elements of “the environmentalism of the poor” with its more or less explicit demands of social justice, political participation, and human rights. The search for a more adequate explanatory model of Soviet era environmentalism is not solely a historical problem. Research on modern forms of ecological protest at the grassroots level of local residents, fishermen and hunters’ associations, or even peasants and workers, is still in its nascent state. The study of environmentally concerned “dissenting voices,”⁴⁷ found in archives and periodicals of the Soviet period, can shed new light on current developments still viewed through the lens of traditional historiographic schemes dominated by the elitist understanding of protest (associated solely with the innumerable Soviet dissidents of the 1960s–1980s).

The Region as a Tool to Reconsider Late Soviet Environmental History

The “spatial turn” initiated more than a decade ago in Russian and Soviet studies has not yet fulfilled all its promises, particularly when it comes to the study of territorial dimension of Soviet environmentalism, although the

⁴⁵ Joshua P. Newell and Laura A. Henry. *The State of Environmental Protection in the Russian Federation: A Review of the Post-Soviet Era // Eurasian Geography and Economics*. 2017. Vol. 58. No. 6. P. 779.

⁴⁶ Cf.: T. S. Kondrat’eva and A. K. Sokolov. *Rezhimnye liudi v SSSR*. Moscow, 2009.

⁴⁷ Bonhomme. *Writing the Environmental History*. P. 36.

rich potential of a geographical approach to history writing is clear.⁴⁸ Marc Elie has shown how Central Asiatic climatologists, geographers, biologists, and pedologists helped to “formulate global environment” issues at an international level.⁴⁹ Andy Bruno’s recent book on the Kola Peninsula in Northern European Russia connects regional and global approaches: territorial planning, industrialization, chemization, and the nuclearization of terrestrial space in an Arctic region of the Soviet Anthropocene.⁵⁰ Other works by Russian historians have addressed the issue of conservationist debates among Siberian administrators and scientists.⁵¹

One objective of this forum is to make a new contribution in this direction. At a time when historians of Eastern Europe are concerned with producing transnational and connected histories, it is instructive not to lose sight of local specificities and unique historical conjunctures. Undoubtedly part of a bigger story, they may seem unimportant from a global transnational perspective. This is what makes it relevant to take a regional approach (in the geographical sense of the term), corresponding to the level of the federal or autonomous republics or administrative regions (*oblast’* or *krai*) in the Soviet system or, in some cases, historical lands. A carefully and intentionally localized history – not organically “local” in the sense of the traditional *kraevedenie* (local studies) – helps us to better understand both the environmental processes and the conflicts and controversies associated with them.

It is precisely the regional level that has been neglected in historical studies of Soviet and post-Soviet societies, perhaps because of “the fre-

⁴⁸ Malte Rolf. Importing the “Spatial Turn” to Russia: Recent Studies on the Spatialization of Russian History // *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 2010. Vol. 11. No. 2. Pp. 359–380.

⁴⁹ Elie. *Formulating the Global Environment*.

⁵⁰ Andy Bruno. *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History*. Cambridge, 2016.

⁵¹ See, for example: A. M. Kalimullin. *Istoricheskoe issledovanie regional’nykh ekologicheskikh problem*. Moscow, 2006; M. S. Mostovenko. *Problemy traditsionnogo prirodopol’zovaniia na Severe Zapadnoi Sibiri v 1950–1960-e gody XX veka* // *Vestnik Surgutskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta*. 2015. Vol. 37. No. 4. Pp. 190–194; Iu. S. Prikhod’ko. *Deiatel’nost’ regional’nykh organov vlasti na Severe Zapadnoi Sibiri v realizatsii gosudarstvennoi ekologicheskoi politiki vo vtoroi polovine XX v.* // *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Istorii*. 2015. Vol. 36. No. 4. Pp. 47–54; E. I. Gololobov. *Chelovek i priroda na Ob’-Irtyshtskom Severe (1917–1930): istoricheskie korni sovremennykh ekologicheskikh problem: vzaimodeistvie obshchestva i prirody, ekologicheskaiia politika, sistema prirodopol’zovaniia*. Surgut, 2013.

quent replication in scholarship of dismissive perceptions of the regions espoused in Russia's political center," as suggested by Edith Clowes in a recent issue of the journal *Region* (created in 2015).⁵² Mark von Hagen and Anatoly Remnev have convincingly stressed the relevance of this level of inquiry to the history of imperial Russia, thus showing "the centrality of the periphery."⁵³ Why should it be different for the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries? We also share Clowes's conclusion that "in general the existing research on contemporary Russia's regions is: 1) too limited by disciplinary divisions, and 2) too likely to assume that regions are more passive takers than 'makers' of change."⁵⁴ These limitations can be seen in the history of the end of the Soviet Union and are revealed in the studies of post-Soviet countries. In selecting the articles for the forum, we have attempted to compensate for these two shortcomings: they all address social interactions within the purview of regional power. The authors are historians who practice an interdisciplinary approach, imbued with geography, anthropology, and sociology.

Historians of Soviet environmentalism have barely addressed its regional aspects until now, with a few exceptions. While stressing the contradictions among various government agencies and political institutions, such as the Planning Agency (*Gosplan*) or the Komsomol, Weiner also pays attention to the concerns of republican and regional authorities (seeking "to protect 'their own' scientists, territories, and jurisdictional portfolios from the grasp of the center").⁵⁵ Breyfogle has refined the periodization of public ecological mobilizations during the Thaw for his regional case study. He identifies the conference on the "Development of the Productive Forces of Siberia" in August 1958 in Irkutsk as the starting point of this movement. The conference expressed the awareness of "local" (in this context, Siberian) scientists and writers, but also economic and political leaders about the dramatic impact of

⁵² Edith W. Clowes. *Centrifugal Forces? Russia's Regional Identities and Initiatives // Region: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*. 2016. Vol. 5. No. 2. P. 119.

⁵³ Anatolii Remnev. *Istoriografii kak biografii: Avtoportret na fone imperskoi istorii // Ab Imperio*. 2012. No. 1. Pp. 103–5; Mark Von Hagen. *A Tribute to Anatoly Remnev // Ab Imperio*. 2012. No. 1. Pp. 151–59. See also, in the same issue: *Forum: The Marginality of the "Center" in Contemporary National Historical Narratives // Ab Imperio*. 2012. No.1. Pp. 47–101.

⁵⁴ Clowes. *Centrifugal Forces?* P. 119. See also: Edith W. Clowes, Gisela Erbslöh, and Ani Kokobobo. *Russia's Regional Identities: The Power of the Provinces*. Abingdon, 2018.

⁵⁵ Weiner. *Environmental Activism in the Soviet Context: A Social Analysis // Mauch, Stoltzfus and Weiner (Eds.)*. *Shades of Green*. P. 128.

power plant projects on the Angara River.⁵⁶ He proposes that environmental controversies and mobilizations be examined simultaneously on several levels: “The Baikal story underscores the importance of local events in the coalescence of environmental activism and how local concerns were translated into public engagement on the national level.”⁵⁷

Other scholars look at environmental controversies in the late USSR almost exclusively as prerogatives of the political center in Moscow. Thus the geographer Nikolai Dronin understands opposition to the Siberian rivers’ diversion project as a case of convergence between the environmental concerns of the Moscow intelligentsia and conflicts of interests within the state apparatus. In his interpretation, it was not an “expert opinion,” but an alliance of ecologically minded scholars grouped around Academy of Sciences’ vice president Alexander Yanshin, Russian patriots whose voices were the “village prose” writers, and the KGB mistrustful of the Water Ministry (*Minvodkhoz*) that sealed the fate of this pharaonic project.⁵⁸ Dronin concludes that “no letters nor public expertise could have been used to defeat *Minvodkhoz*” if the KGB had remained neutral in this case.⁵⁹ Although it is difficult, and in some cases (in Russia, for example) impossible to comment on the role of the KGB in solving most of the environmental conflicts of the late Soviet period, it seems important to revisit, using the relatively accessible archives,⁶⁰ the role of various actors and modalities of these public campaigns.⁶¹

Can the green movements of the past fifty years in the post-Soviet space be considered a centrifugal force, and if so to what extent? How did they

⁵⁶ For an account of the 1947 Irkutsk conference, during which environmental concerns had already been formulated, see Marie-Hélène Mandrillon. *L’expertise d’État, creuset de l’environnement en URSS // Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*. 2012. No. 113. Pp. 107–16.

⁵⁷ Breyfogle. *At the Watershed*. P. 179.

⁵⁸ Nicolai Dronin. *Non-State Actors in Environmental History of Russia*. Pp. 149–150. On the role of KGB mentioned in this regard see D. J. Peterson. *Troubled Lands: The Legacy of Soviet Environmental Destruction*. Boulder, 1993. P. 196.

⁵⁹ Dronin. *Non-State Actors in Environmental History of Russia*. P. 151.

⁶⁰ While many key documents of central governmental agencies, including the army and the central KGB, remain closed for research, the recent opening of the KGB archives in Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine has made available duplicates of some documents of the central office.

⁶¹ For a promising, multiscale archive-based study along these lines, see V. L. Nekrasov and O. N. Stafeev. *Proekt Nizhne-Obskoi GES (1958–1963 gg.): lobbirovanie, sozdanie koalitsii interesov, opportunizm // Vestnik Surgutskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta*. 2012. No. 4. Pp. 175–181.

contribute to the collapse of the regime? What differences existed between grassroots and top-down initiatives, and where did they intersect? How did they contribute to the decentralization and collapse of the Soviet Union? Were mobilizations on ecological grounds just a pretext to campaign for independence or larger autonomy, a key element of forging national identities? Or should we reverse the perspective and instead look at cultural and political changes as a window of opportunity for eco-activism at the regional level? It might even be instructive to analyze ecological mobilizations as integrative, rather than centrifugal, factors.

Taken together, the case studies presented in the forum demonstrate the complex articulations and negotiations between center-based and regional initiatives in the former USSR, offering us a better understanding of the nature, practices, and impacts of green commitments as evolving and hybrid by nature. By adding new archive-based research to the relatively modest body of works on the topic, this forum sketches a broader field of ecological debates and mobilizations while underscoring their effect on the collapse of the Soviet regime.

The Forum

Using a territorialized and multiscale historical approach, from the republic to the village, the articles collected here help to reconsider Soviet and post-Soviet center-periphery relations in the context of global alarms and vulnerabilities, growing environmental concerns and interactions, and top-down political changes. Thus the collapse of the Soviet Union may be interpreted not as the end of the environmental movement, but as both its factor and a result. The articles augment the traditional periodization of Soviet history with its strong focus on the divides of 1986 and 1991. They pay special attention to the processes that extended across those undoubtedly important ruptures and reveal strong continuities between the Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev periods, as well as between the pre- and post-1991 eras. The authors suggest new insights into the roots, forms, and consequences of green sensitization and mobilization processes from Karelia to Armenia, and from South Ukraine to the Komi Republic in the North Urals.

Elena Kochetkova argues that the central Research Institute for the Paper and Cellulose Industry became a place of *hybridization* between nature and technology during the Thaw. As a subdivision of the ministry supervising one of the most polluting industries, the institute played an ambiguous role. As early as 1950, it raised the alarm over the extent of the pollution

of watercourses by cellulose production residues. It then offered technical solutions that were highly difficult to implement because managers of industrial enterprises had no interest in installing expensive equipment requiring complex maintenance and risking failure in meeting production goals. The article takes us into the cultural world of Soviet engineers who strived to increase production and protect nature at the same time. They combined a faith in progress with the aspiration for cleaner industry: it was they who were greenwashing the Soviet project. This study revisits the familiar narrative of the Baikal controversy as the failure of scientific environmentalism in the face of productivist administration. The authorities needed to show to the entire world (and not just to the Irkutsk or Moscow intelligentsia) that the cellulose plant under construction on the lakeshore was not going to pollute it.

In her article, Anna Olenenko examines the controversy over the construction of the Kakhovsk (Kakhovka) reservoir. Created in the 1950s by flooding the Velykiy Lug floodplains on the lower Dnipro, it destroyed a territory of high national and agricultural value for Ukrainians: the homesteads of the Zaporozhian Sich Cossacks (that existed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries). On the basis of interviews and archival sources, Olenenko evaluates the role that experts – mainly engineers – played in the reservoir project. She supports the thesis that critical discussions among Soviet experts were possible. In the end, however, those who favored a more environmentally cautious approach were not taken into account by decision makers. Here, economic arguments prevailed over the consideration of vulnerable eco-systems or national heritage. The protection of certain areas by not flooding them was found to be too costly, although some experts concluded that the opposite was true, and the economic gain achieved by using the fertile plains would have been far greater.

Katja Doose reassesses the “eco-nationalism” paradigm of Dawson by tracing the commitment to ecological concerns in the Armenian Soviet Republic from the 1950s until the end of the Soviet Union. Environmentalism in Armenia – at the southern periphery of the Soviet empire – reached far beyond the emergence of nationalistic concerns and was not necessarily connected to them. By turning around the eco-nationalist argument, Doose shows that nationalistic claims could actually be used to improve environmental conditions. The political and the ecological were inextricably intertwined in Soviet Armenia, subject to devastating droughts and earthquakes. In her article, Doose analyzes how the environment shaped debates and decisions, and later influenced the political agendas of both the Armenian National

Movement and the Armenian Communist Party. The environment functioned not as a surrogate for nationalism, but rather as an idiom and an argument for support of legitimacy for both the national movement and the political elite. Communist Party leaders themselves discovered the environment as a new field of activity and legitimation in the final years of the Soviet Union's existence. Doose demonstrates that environmental issues were not only used to pursue other political goals, but were also taken seriously.

Alan Roe's study of the Iugyd Va ("clear water" in the Komi language) National Park in Russia illuminates the contradictions of conservation policies under both the Soviet and post-1991 Russian regimes. Hydrologists and writers, who were also nature protection activists, succeeded in mobilizing support from the center to promote natural parks as a new form of conservationism. They elaborated an alternative vision of economic development based on outdoor recreation and tourism, explicitly referring to the United States' most famous national parks – Yellowstone and Great Smoky Mountains. However, the intense lobbying by the proponents of the project never managed to avoid the interference of industrial interests in the design of the protected area. Ironically, one of the main obstacles to a firm protection policy in the early 1990s was regionalization: the Komi Republic appealed to its "economic sovereignty" and endorsed the regional exploitation of resources such as gold mining on the Pechora River. Regionalization can go both ways as far as the environment is concerned: it can help create visible causes for ecological mobilization, as was the case with Lake Baikal, or it can contribute toward destroying it, as Roe shows in his study of the national park.

Outlook

Still, many questions remain open for further research. Further study is needed regarding the ambiguous role of experts, including Soviet environmental activists, who, because of their elitist habitus, indeed prevented the spreading of ecological consciousness among the masses, as Weiner has suggested.⁶² They could contribute to the production of ignorance when they did not make their knowledge broadly available, and tended to focus on specific issues while suppressing others not directly connected to their interest and ignoring the ability of common people to produce knowledge

⁶² Douglas Weiner. A Death-defying Attempt to Articulate a Coherent Definition of Environmental History // *Environmental History*. 2005. Vol. 10. No. 3. Pp. 404–420.

and to question scientific dogmas.⁶³ Toward the end of the Soviet Union, however, they actually helped create what political scientists have termed “civil society” in the republics. We know even less about the role of lay experts who have joined the ranks of the environmental movement. The question of environmental justice has barely been touched upon systematically in the case of Soviet Union.⁶⁴ There is still much to learn about the role of indigenous people in negotiations about nature’s values and the treatment of local knowledge. The role of regional elites, including local scientists and writers, needs to be assessed. Contrary to what Moscow-centered studies usually convey, it was not exclusively the center that provided experts on environmental topics. The gender dimension of the problem has barely been noticed, and women are still mostly ignored in the seemingly all-male scientific sphere. But they were active members of the movement – such as VOOP member Susanna Fridman in the 1950s and 1960s,⁶⁵ for example, and the biologist Liudmila Zhirina who researched the consequences of radioactive contamination for eco-systems before the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. She founded one of the first NGOs after the disaster that occurred in the Russian city of Bryansk.⁶⁶

We should also not overlook stories that contradict mainstream narratives. There was and is, for example, not only growing frustration about unrewarded efforts by enthusiasts to improve the ecological situation but also stories of success. For instance, the story of student brigades for nature protection fighting against poaching, the creation of new protected areas,⁶⁷ or even the treatment of a “Chernobyl child” in a specialized clinic

⁶³ Sylvia Noble Tesh. *Uncertain Hazards: Environmental Activists and Scientific Proof*. Ithaca, 2000.

⁶⁴ For a thought-provoking first step in this direction, see Julian Agyeman and Yelena Ogneva-Himmelberger (Eds.). *Environmental Justice and Sustainability in the Former Soviet Union*. Cambridge, MA, 2009.

⁶⁵ Weiner at least mentions Fridman and her role as a nonscientist “civic activist” in the VOOP, who questioned the dominant role of scientists in nature protection and propagated nature protection as the basis for international cooperation. Weiner. *A Little Corner of Freedom*. Pp. 12–13. Zhirina was also interviewed by Laura Henry for her book, see Henry. *Red to Green*. Pp. 110–11.

⁶⁶ Another interesting research topic would be the transfer of knowledge on the Soviet environment between East and West. Liudmila Zhirina, for example, became one of the main providers of information for a doyen of U.S. environmental history, J. Donald Hughes. See: J. Donald Hughes. *An Environmental History of the World. Humankind’s Changing Role in the Community of Life*. London, 2001. Pp. 193–199.

⁶⁷ Coumel. *Student Corporatism*. Pp. vi–viii.

abroad.⁶⁸ This is true even in today's tough times, when civic commitment for environmentalists has not become much easier in most of the post-Soviet space, and ecological protests are interpreted as working against the good of the nation. In 2018, local protests – mostly small groups of peasants in villages spread throughout the country – succeeded in reestablishing the Komi Republic's Ministry of the Environment, which had been merged with the Ministry of Industry in late 2016. Such developments can be seen as examples of what Christof Mauch very recently termed stories of “slow hope.”⁶⁹ Without endorsing a naively optimistic teleological perspective or denying the legitimacy of stories about frustration, deterioration, and disasters – the history of environmentalism is much more than that – there are indeed stories of “slow hope.” They are, as many examples from Soviet environmental history show, “‘slow’ in their unfolding, and they are slow because they come with setbacks.”⁷⁰ Most of them lack a univocal beginning and “all of them are open-ended”⁷¹ – as are all of our stories.⁷²

The “moral authority” that Cronon defined as characteristic of environmentalism became increasingly publicly expressed by both popular and professional stakeholders in the Soviet Union when the communist ideology lost ground – not least because of its treatment of the environment. But, as these articles confirm, environmentalism has existed throughout the history of the Soviet Union, intertwined, to varying degrees, with the Communist Party and not only as a central phenomenon. To put these findings into perspective and to contribute to the discipline of environmental humanities, it might be fruitful to compare them with studies from other regions of the world and relate them to discourses on the Anthropocene, which have gained a lot of well-deserved attention in the past years.⁷³ Another fertile track for further research is the question of power – regardless of whether the system being looked at is liberal, democratic, or authoritarian socialist. In this forum, power negotiations between the political center and the regions are

⁶⁸ Arndt. *Tschernobylkinder*.

⁶⁹ Christof Mauch. *Slow Hope. Rethinking Ecologies of Crisis and Fear // RCC Perspectives. Transformations in Environment and Society*. 2019. No. 1. Pp. 1–43.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* P. 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* P. 23.

⁷² See, for example, a recent documentary film about environmental activists in Russian provinces (Karelia, Perm, Voronezh, Chelyabinsk, Krasnodar): Konstantin Davydkin and Mariia Muskevich. “Grass ruts”: khroniki “zelenykh” protestov. 2018.

⁷³ Cf.: Christophe Bonneuil, Francois Gemenne, and Clive Hamilton. *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis: Rethinking Modernity in a New Epoch*. Abingdon, 2015.

crucial. Since Foucault and the groundbreaking application of his ideas to Ukrainian history by Adriana Petryna we know that it is true everywhere.⁷⁴

We look forward to new research that we hope will take the adventurous roads to seemingly less tempting regional archives, and also to experiments with hitherto only rarely used sources. The results, we suspect, will be neither solely red nor green.

SUMMARY

In the introduction to the forum “A Green End to the Red Empire,” its editors explore the history of ecological mobilizations during the late Soviet period and in post-Soviet states. They focus on defining the phenomenon of Soviet “environmentalism,” the intertwining of environmental histories of the Cold War with other national and transnational narratives, as well as on the problem of a recent “regional turn” in Soviet and post-Soviet studies. Localized and at the same time multiscale histories open new perspectives on the past and help identify entanglements of central and peripheral actors. Finally, the authors review the main findings of the four articles published in the forum and put them in perspective to answer the question: What was late Soviet environmentalism?

РЕЗЮМЕ

Во введении к форуму “Зеленый итог красной империи” его редакторы обращаются к истории экологического движения в позднесоветский период и в современных постсоветских государствах. Объектом их внимания стал феномен советского энвайронментализма, переплетение экологической истории периода Холодной войны с другими национальными и транснациональными нарративами, а также проблема “регионального поворота” в исследованиях СССР и постсоветских обществ. Локализованные и одновременно разномасштабные перспективы представляют новое видение прошлого и помогают прояснить взаимодействие местных и столичных действующих лиц. Наконец, авторы обсуждают главные инсайты четырех статей, публикуемых в форуме, помещая их в широкий исследовательский контекст и предлагая ответ на вопрос: чем являлся позднесоветский энвайронментализм?

⁷⁴ Adriana Petryna. *Life Exposed. Biological Citizens after Chernobyl*. Princeton, 2002.