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Russian Environmental History Directions and Potentials

ANDY BRUNO

Brian Bonhomme, *Forests, Peasants, and Revolutionaries: Forest Conservation and Organization in Soviet Russia, 1917–1929*. 252 pp. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2005. ISBN 088033553X. \$50.00.

Iu. A. Poliakov, ed., *Istoricheskaia ekologiia i istoricheskaia demografiia: Sbornik nauchnykh statei* [Historical Ecology and Historical Demography: A Collection of Scholarly Articles]. 384 pp. Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2003. ISBN 5824303967.

Arja Rosenholm and Sari Autio-Sarasma, eds., *Understanding Russian Nature: Representations, Values, and Concepts*. 370 pp. Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2005 (Aleksanteri-papers 4:2005). ISBN 9521025980. €25.00.

Just think about how nature abounds in Russian history. The prefatory remarks that many historical surveys make about the harsh climate and geographical conditions of the country, the famous importance of black-earth regions for agriculture, the acerbic debates about land repartitioning at various noteworthy moments, the romance of the forest and the steppe in both elite and popular culture, and the noted disregard for environmental stewardship by both the communist and the post-communist regimes constitute just a few instances of how the natural world already imbues our understanding of the Russian past. A branch of historical research that specifically devotes itself to integrating the natural world is environmental history. Emerging with the environmentalist movement in the 1970s, environmental history encompasses a large range of work addressing conservation movements, conceptions of nature, the ecological dynamics of frontier settlement, and the impact of agricultural and industrial development on the natural

world and human societies (to offer only a few examples). In it the natural world is not simply a background but a dynamic force, treated on the register of interaction.

Though this field of study has become quite well established among historians of the United States, Europe, Africa, Latin America, and other regions, environmental history remains in a paradoxical situation in Russian historiography: Russianists have been at the forefront of the field in terms of its antecedents, its creation, and its development, but currently an undeniable dearth of literature exists on a region that by the size of its territory alone carries global significance in environmental history. The first side of this parity seems to have gone unnoticed, so it is worth briefly remarking on it here. Environmental historians of America and Europe have looked to Frederick Jackson Turner and *Annales* historians such as Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie as influential predecessors.¹ However, our eminent academic ancestors—Sergei Solov'ev and Vasilii Kliuchevskii—also elaborated on the effects of the natural environment on humans and specifically on Russian national character and development.² Additionally, none other than Richard Pipes earned himself a place on an early environmental history bibliography for his theorizing about the effects of geography on Russian political development in *Russia under the Old*

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920). For an engagement with Turner, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Making of the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). Works of *Annales* historians that reflect their interest in the environment are Lucien Febvre with Lionel Bataillon, *A Geographical Introduction to History*, trans. E. G. Mountford and J. H. Paxton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925); Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Collins, 1972); and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate since the Year 1000*, trans. Barbara Bray (Garden City: Doubleday, [1967] 1971). Le Roy Ladurie also edited an issue of *Annales* devoted to "history and environment." See *Annales: Économies, sociétés, civilizations* 29, 3 (1974): 537–647. On the influence of the *Annales* school on environmental history, see Donald Worster, "Appendix: Doing Environmental History," in *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. Worster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 291–92; J. R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42 (December 2003): 12–14; and McNeill, *The Mountains of the Mediterranean World: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

² Mark Bassin notes similarities in the ideas of Solov'ev and Turner and highlights the role that Solov'ev attributed to climate and nature in shaping Russian national character ("Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': The Nationalist Signification of Open Spaces," *Journal of Modern History* 65, 3 [1993]: 473–511). Additionally, Solov'ev once remarked that while nature was a mother for Western Europe, it was a stepmother for Russia; and Kliuchevskii emphasized the role of swamps and forests in shaping Russian character. See S. M. Solov'ev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi literatury, 1962), 7: 8; and V. O. Kluchevsky, *A History of Russia*, trans. C. J. Hogarth (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 1: 217–19.

Regime.³ Scholars also have produced strong work in the discipline of historical geography, which is quite closely related to environmental history, and there has been no shortage of literature exposing Soviet environmental damage.⁴

Furthermore, since the self-conscious emergence of the subfield, historians of Russia have played an active role. Kendall Bailes, perhaps best known to this audience for his 1978 book, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin*, helped organize and host the first conference of the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) and later edited a collection of essays introducing the field.⁵ Douglas Weiner, the most prominent practitioner of Russian environmental history, not only recently served as president of the ASEH but also expressed similar reservations about essentializing tendencies in environmentalism several years before the volume *Uncommon Ground*, edited by William Cronon, pushed environmental historians to be more critical in analyzing inherently contested meanings of nature.⁶

³ See Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth*, 314; and Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974).

⁴ Some works of historical geography are William Parker, *A Historical Geography of Russia* (London: University of London Press, 1968); J. H. Bate and R. A. French, eds., *Studies in Russian Historical Geography*, 2 vols. (London: Academic Press, 1983); Judith Pallot and Denis J. B. Shaw, *Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia, 1613–1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Books that helped expose the environmental record of the Soviet Union are Marshall Goldman, *The Spoils of Progress: Environmental Pollution in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972); Boris Komarov (Ze'ev Wolfson), *The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1980); Murray Feshbach and Alfred Friendly, *Ecocide in the USSR: Health and Nature under Siege* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Feshbach, *Ecological Disaster: Cleaning Up the Hidden Legacy of the Soviet Regime* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press, 1995); and D. J. Peterson, *Troubled Lands: The Legacy of Soviet Environmental Destruction* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).

⁵ Kendall Bailes, ed., *Environmental History: Critical Issues in Comparative Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985). Also see Bailes, *Science and Russian Culture in an Age of Revolutions: V. I. Vernadsky and His Scientific School, 1863–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917–1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). Sadly, Bailes passed away in the middle of his scholarly career. Aleksei Karimov, an environmental historian who conducted impressive research on tsarist land surveys and maps, also passed away at an early age. A recent work on mapmaking that can also be read as a contribution to the environmental history of early modern Russia is Valerie Kivelson, *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and Its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁶ Douglas Weiner, "Demythologizing Environmentalism," *Journal of the History of Biology* 25, 3 (1992): 385–411; and William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995). As ASEH president, Weiner recently had the opportunity to comment on the state of the field: see his "A Death-Defying

Despite these accomplishments, work on Russian environmental history is still just beginning to accumulate. Little more than a handful of monographs exist in the field, allowing J. R. McNeill to claim Russia to be among “world regions that remain almost unexplored by environmental historians, native or foreign,” and a recent anniversary forum in the journal *Environment and History* to explain its exclusion of Russia from its regionally organized essays as primarily a reflection of the state of the discipline.⁷

Nevertheless, recently scholars have started to publish more work in the field, and with books in progress by William Husband, Paul Josephson, Jane Costlow, Nicholas Breyfogle, and David Moon, several dissertation projects underway, and the existence of at least three concentrated centers for environmental history research in Russia, it seems an appropriate moment to reflect on the directions the field is taking and potentials for its future development.⁸

The remainder of this essay explores several recent works, each representing a major strand of environmental history. They also all share a common concern for assessing both social and ecological phenomena. In doing so, they reveal a good deal of the still somewhat limited breadth of Russian environmental history, but also its maturity as calls to integrate carefully

Attempt to Articulate a Coherent Definition of Environmental History,” *Environmental History* 10, 3 (2005): 404–20.

⁷ McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” 30; and John MacKenzie, “Introduction,” *Environment and History* 10, 4 (2004): 372.

⁸ William Husband is working on a project entitled “Nature in Modern Russia: A Social History.” Paul Josephson with a collective of authors, including Aleg Cherp, Ruben Mnatsakian, and others, is completing “An Environmental History of Russia: Statist Approaches to Economic Development and Resource Management from Nicholas I to Vladimir Putin.” Jane Costlow is at work on a study of the cultural symbolism of the Russian forest. Nicholas Breyfogle is researching “Baikal: The Great Lake and Its People.” David Moon’s current project is “The Environmental History of the Russian Steppes, 1700–1914.” Additionally, Stephen Brain just completed his dissertation on forestry (“Transformation: The Russian Forest and the Soviet State, 1900–1953” [Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley]). Ryan Jones at Columbia and Randy Dills and I at the University of Illinois are writing dissertations on Russian environmental history. In Russia, considerable research is being conducted in Tver’, Tambov, and St. Petersburg. See V. V. Kanishchev, ed., *Ekologicheskie problemy modernizatsii rossiiskogo obshchestva v XIX–pervoi polovine XX v.: Materialy mezhhregional’noi konferentsii* (Tambov: Izdatel’stvo Tambovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 2005); T. I. Liubina, ed., *Regional’nye tendentsii vzaimodeistviia cheloveka i prirody v protsesse perekhoda ot agrarnogo k industrial’nomu obshchestvu: Materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (Tver’: Tverskoi gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2003); and Daniel Aleksandrov [Alexandrov] and Iuliia Laius [Julia Lajus], eds., *Materialy po ekologicheskoi istorii Russkogo Severa* (St. Petersburg: European University at St. Petersburg Press, forthcoming). At least two helpful document collections have also been published in Moscow: A. N. Iakovlev, ed., *Ekologiya i vlast’, 1917–1990* (Moscow: Demokratiia, 1999); and A. N. Davydov, ed., *Moskva, vek XX: Istoricheskaia ekologiya, 1901–1917* (Moscow: Mosgorarkhiv, 2000).

human labor and experience with environmental alterations have permeated environmental history as a whole.⁹ While all these books touch on a wide array of issues, Brian Bonhomme's work on Soviet forestry points specifically to some new avenues for conservation history, the collection edited by Arja Rosenholm and Sari Autio-Sarasmo demonstrates the diversity and significance of explorations of the cultural understandings of nature, and the volume edited by Iu. A. Poliakov reveals some of the insights to be gained by the more materially based variant of environmental history. Furthermore, several book chapters, essays, and works in progress have begun to demonstrate the importance of frontier environmental history by analyzing the role of human/nature interaction in Russia's imperial expansion. Beyond outlining these four directions of research, this essay emphasizes the presence of social-historical concerns in this literature and highlights some possibilities for work in Russian environmental history to gain broader significance for historians engaged with different research agendas.

Forests, Peasants, and Revolutions treats early Soviet forestry law and practice, assessing the successes and failures of forest policy from a conservationist point of view. Initially intending a comprehensive analysis of conservation of "wildlife, forests, fresh and saltwater resources" outside the system of nature reserves (*zapovedniki*), Bonhomme decided to focus on one resource, forests, to make the project more tractable. With this more limited focus, the book nevertheless provides interesting discussions about the debates concerning centralized and localized approaches to forestry, the efforts to implement new laws, and the actual practices of felling, replanting, and preservation. The bulk of Bonhomme's examination centers on the 1918 and 1923 forestry laws, though his extensive treatment of the prerevolutionary period and attempt to debunk the efforts of late Soviet historiography to portray Lenin as a nascent environmentalist also constitute contributions of the book. Echoing the argument he made in an earlier article, Bonhomme pivots his analysis around three major points: that prerevolutionary forestry played a large role in shaping the type that emerged in the Soviet era, that analysis of the actual practices of natural resource management reveals a more negative evaluation of early Soviet conservation than is gained by an exclusive focus on *zapovedniki*, and that forest protection suffered because of the peasantry's unwillingness to

⁹ A few theoretical articles that reflect such concerns are Richard White, "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?' Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground*, ed. Cronon, 171–85; Alan Taylor, "Unnatural Inequalities: Social and Environmental Histories," *Environmental History* 1, 4 (1996): 6–19; Ted Steinberg, "Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History," *American Historical Review* 107, 3 (2002): 798–820; and Stephen Mosley, "Common Ground: Integrating Social and Environmental History," *Journal of Social History* 39, 3 (2006): 915–35.

capitulate to state regulations (5).¹⁰ Each of these arguments provides a helpful node for indicating ways to expand conservation history.

Bonhomme is quite critical of a sharp delineation he sees in the historiography on forest policy between the tsarist and the Soviet regimes. By looking at the 1888 forestry law and the debates that emerged among foresters in the period leading up to the revolution, Bonhomme notes that foresters formed a consensus about the need for a central and nationalized system of forestry and often held common goals concerning forest conservation by the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. The strength of Bonhomme's point here is somewhat undermined by his attempt to treat the imperial period as a "necessary background" to the story of Soviet conservation. Conceptualizing his fairly extensive treatment of this era in this way risks re-affirming the periodization dichotomy that he attempts to surmount by reducing imperial developments to influential legacies instead of simply essential parts of the broader narrative of forest conservation under both regimes. My point here is that Bonhomme's claims are even stronger than the author himself seems to suggest. It makes sense to analyze conservation practice, and policy to a somewhat lesser extent, over broad periods; patterns and strategies of natural resources use should determine periodization more than political developments. For what it is worth, several other works of conservation history have also been attuned to the importance of looking across the revolutionary marker.¹¹

The second main argument of Bonhomme's book challenges Douglas Weiner's assertion that "through the 1930s the Soviet Union was on the cutting edge of conservation theory and practice" (2).¹² Bonhomme is cautious in his critique, emphasizing that his study of resource management leads to

¹⁰ Brian Bonhomme, "A Revolution in the Forests? Forest Conservation in Soviet Russia, 1917–1925," *Environmental History* 7, 3 (2002): 411–34.

¹¹ For example, Douglas Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Feliks Shtilmark, *History of the Russian Zapovedniks, 1895–1995*, trans. G. H. Harper (Edinburgh: Russian Nature Press, 2003); and Brain, "Transformation."

¹² Weiner, *Models of Nature*, viii. For other works on Russian and Soviet conservation history, see Douglas Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Shtilmark, *History of the Russian Zapovedniks, 1895–1995*; Philip Pryde, *Conservation in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Oleg Yanitsky, *Russian Environmentalism: Leading Figures, Facts, Opinions* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1993); Thomas Rainey, "Siberian Writers and the Struggle to Save Lake Baikal," *Environmental History Review* 15, 1 (1991): 47–60; and Blair Ruble, "The Emergence of Soviet Environmental Studies," *Environmental Review* 5, 1 (1981): 2–13. Articles specifically concerning Russian forests are Jane Costlow, "Imaginations of Destruction: The 'Forest Question' in Nineteenth-Century Russian Culture," *Russian Review* 62, 1 (2003): 91–118; and Dominique Moran, "Lesniki and Leskhoz: Life and Work in Russia's Northern Forests," *Environment and History* 10, 1 (2004): 83–105.

different conclusions than literature on *zapovedniki*. Weiner's scholarship is nuanced and sophisticated, and it does not really imply that early Soviet environmental stewardship on the whole was anywhere close to exceptional. But Bonhomme's shift of focus from officially protected areas to natural resource use more broadly is indeed welcome since, as Bonhomme rightly asserts, "it should be immediately clear that nature preserves represent only one aspect of Soviet nature conservation overall and a tiny fraction of the total land area of the early Soviet state" (3). Additional studies of how, where, and to what extent conservation ethics filtered into economic practices could add a great deal to explanations of the planned command economy and its ultimate stability. Such research might also be able to tackle more fully the question of why extensive environmental damage occurred under Soviet rule.

The final claim of Bonhomme about the role of the peasantry in forest conservation specifically addresses the task of incorporating the experience of social groups into environmental histories. It is also both the most promising and the most problematic feature of the book. Bonhomme convincingly demonstrates that peasant opposition to Soviet forestry influenced first the concessions made to localized forest management that appeared in the 1923 Forest Code and ultimately the failure of legislative measures to establish a "rational" forestry policy. Yet his focus on policy and his sympathy, which I share, with the conservationist cause results in the absence of an investigation of why the peasants behaved as they did, opposing conservation. Instead, he repeats a sweeping and overstated generalization that the peasantry viewed the forest as a gift from God and notes moments of dire economic need without fully integrating this issue into his analysis.

But there are many reasons to be wary of trusting forestry experts who favored conservation in the early Soviet era. To begin with, environmental historians of Africa have been doing a remarkable job of challenging narratives of desertification caused by peasants' reckless forest usage that have been propagated by contemporary conservation scientists.¹³ If current conservation science needs to be amended and local knowledge of ecological conditions incorporated into environmental assessments, then why would we be so trusting of the opinions of earlier experts? Returning to the Russian context, works by Yanni Kotsonis and Esther Kingston-Mann specifically raise concerns about the coercive effects that late imperial scientists and politicians could impose on the peasantry with ostensibly benevolent rationales.¹⁴

¹³ For example, James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Thomas Bassett and Donald Crummey, eds., *African Savannas: Global Narratives and Local Knowledge of Environmental Change* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003).

¹⁴ Yanni Kotsonis, *Making Peasants Backward: Agricultural Cooperatives and the Agrarian Question in Russia, 1861-1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Esther Kingston-

Specifically in terms of Russian forestry, Stephen Frank's research reveals the more oppressive connotations of legal and educational efforts to transform peasants' treatment of forest resources.¹⁵ Also, Stephen Brain's dissertation probes deeper into peasant relations with forest resources and examines the existence of a somewhat populist branch of forestry in the late imperial era that was much more favorably disposed to the peasantry.¹⁶ On the whole, the conflict between forest conservationists and peasants should be treated sensitively, explaining more fully the rationale of each side, the reasons for impasses when they occur, and the outcomes for both human and environmental well-being. Nevertheless, by raising the issue of the peasantry's opposition to forest conservation, Bonhomme's study points in the direction of more studies that examine popular attitudes, practices, and knowledge concerning conservation.

Though conservation history may be the most developed area of Russian environmental history, several scholars have also studied cultural representations and understandings of the natural world. Monographs by Christopher Ely and Mark Bassin reveal fascinating insights about Russian national identity and its connections to imaginations of geography and landscape.¹⁷ Applying theories of L. N. Gumilev and Iu. M. Lotman, V. I. Korotaev examines the largely harmful effects of modernization efforts on Russia's "social ecology."¹⁸ Additionally, brief discussions in volumes by John McCannon, Kate Petrone, Jeffrey Brooks, Mark Steinberg, and Susan Buck-

Mann, *In Search of the True West: Culture, Economics, and Problems of Russian Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Stephen Frank, "Confronting the Domestic Other: Rural Popular Culture and Its Enemies in Fin-de-Siècle Russia," in *Cultures in Flux: Lower-Class Values, Practices, and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Stephen Frank and Mark Steinberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 97–103; Frank, *Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia, 1856–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 106–14. For a discussion of peasants' interaction with forests, also see Cathy Frierson, *All Russia Is Burning! A Cultural History of Fire and Arson in Late Imperial Russia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 117–19.

¹⁶ Brain, "Transformation."

¹⁷ Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Studies of the relationship between nationalism and environmentalism in a later era are Jane Dawson, *Eco-Nationalism: Anti-Nuclear Activism and National Identity in Russia, Lithuania, and Ukraine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and Katrina Schwartz, *Nature and National Identity after Communism: Globalizing the Ethnoscape* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

¹⁸ V. I. Korotaev, *Russkii sever v kontse XIX–pervoi treti XX veka: Problemy modernizatsii i sotsial'noi ekologii* (Arkhangel'sk: Izdatel'stvo Pomorskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1998).

Morss and works on Russian eco-criticism by scholars such as Rachel May, Mikhail Epstein, Thomas Newlin, Ian Helfant, and Andreas Schönle have all touched on variegated conceptions of nature.¹⁹

Reflecting what has become the dominant theme emphasized in analyses of Soviet conceptions of nature, the volume *Understanding Russian Nature* begins with a telling quote from Maksim Gor'kii: "Man, in changing nature, changes himself" (9).²⁰ While noting the importance of this Promethean impulse in Soviet culture, Rosenholm and Autio-Sarasmo claim that the "primary concern of this ... volume is to point out that there is no singular nature as such but *natures* culturally constructed and sustained" and that each of the authors shares the premise that nature has contested meanings (9). The collection, based on papers delivered at a 2003 conference in Helsinki, includes articles by an international group of scholars. The essays are grouped around four themes: cultural imagery of landscapes and animals, attempts to use nature as a resource, nature–society interaction, and philosophies of nature.

The volume begins with Rosenholm's examination of the symbol of the cow in Russian culture, Jane Costlow's recuperation of Dmitrii Kaigorodov

¹⁹ John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 82–89; Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 46–84; Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 97–105; Mark Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2002), 169–81, 213–20; Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 118–27. Also see John McCannon, "To Storm the Arctic: Soviet Polar Expeditions and Public Visions of Nature in the USSR, 1932–1939," *Ecumene* 2, 1 (1995): 15–31; and Bernd Stevens Richter, "Nature Mastered by Man: Ideology and Water in the Soviet Union," *Environment and History* 3, 1 (1997): 69–96. For some examples of Russian eco-criticism, see the two issues of *Russian Studies in Literature* (39, 2 and 39, 3 [both 2003]) devoted to Russian nature and guest-edited by Rachel May; and M. N. Epstein, *Priroda, mir, tainik vselenoi...: Sistema peizazhnykh obrazov v russkoi poezii* (Moscow: Vysshiaia shkola, 1990).

²⁰ Many scholars have noted the predominance of the mastery of nature theme in Soviet discourse about the natural world. A recent article by William Husband shows that Soviet children's literature did allow a place for less adversarial representations of nature ("'Correcting Nature's Mistakes': Transforming the Environment and Soviet Children's Literature, 1928–1941," *Environmental History* 11, 2 [2006]: 300–18). Mark Bassin also stresses the nuances in the Stalinist landscape aesthetic through an examination of socialist realist painting ("The Greening of Utopia: Nature, Social Vision, and Landscape Art in Stalinist Russia," in *Architectures of Russian Identity: 1500 to the Present*, ed. James Cracraft and Daniel Rowland (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). I make a similar claim about the presence of alternative public representations of nature based on an analysis of local newspapers from the Murmansk region: Andy Bruno, "Images of Nature during the Industrialization of the Kola Peninsula" (M.A. thesis, European University at St. Petersburg, 2004).

as an early Russian environmental thinker worthy of contemporary consideration, and Christopher Ely's engagement with biological models of aesthetic preference.²¹ While affirming the assumptions held in his previous work that culture ultimately plays a profound role in shaping forms of aesthetic preferences for nature environments, Ely nevertheless concedes room for biological factors to have an influence. Ely's essay points to the larger task of engaging natural-science theories in cultural studies, which is important for expanding the influence of historical research overall. Environmental history could serve as a fruitful arena for these types of endeavors.

Many of the articles explicitly address contemporary environmental concerns. In addition to Costlow's focus on the popular nature-writing of a forester and scientist, articles by Tatjana Kochetkova, Mikhail Stroganov, and Jonathan Oldfield and Denis J. B. Shaw highlight environmentalist or proto-environmentalist ideas in thinkers such as Alexander Herzen, V. S. Solov'ev, V. I. Vernadskii, N. V. Timofeev-Resovskii, and V. V. Dokuchaev and note the strong presence of holism in Russian ideas about nature. Furthermore, several other articles concentrate on contemporary issues such as political debates about Russia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol (Nina Tynkkynen) and efforts to establish certified sustainable forestry practices (Maria Tsyiachniouk and Jonathan Reisman). In a chapter on local environmental activism on Sakhalin, Emma Wilson analyzes attitudes of the indigenous population toward phenomena of global ecological significance. Her essay most explicitly engages with the social-historical agenda of giving voice to subaltern groups.

Douglas Weiner offers a historical and sociological analysis to answer the question of why Russian land, water, and air have suffered such extensive environmental degradation.²² He theorizes that Russia's relationship to its natural resources has long suffered from the practices of a militarized tribute-taking state that emerged first with the Muscovite tsar declaring all land his patrimony and continued through Soviet monumentalism and into the post-Soviet world. Weiner sees the utmost significance in the persistence of these tribute-taking practices: "It is likely that the political rationality of

²¹ Also reflecting concerns about aesthetics, Margareta Tillberg's contribution traces a naturalist line in the Soviet avant-garde by looking at the color theories of Elena Gura and her husband Mikhail Matiushun.

²² Paul Josephson also offers an answer to this question by developing the notion of "industrial desert" in his essay "Industrial Deserts: Industry, Science, and the Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union," *Slavonic and East European Review* 85, 2 (2007): 294–321. Discussions of the treatment of nature in different socialist and non-socialist political regimes also appear in James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Josephson, *Resources under Regimes: Technology, Environment, and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

Soviet economic practices—owing precisely to their economic *irrationality* in terms of providing for the long term—fatally undermined the political stability of the system in the last analysis” (226). While Weiner’s analysis has considerable explanatory value, it is highly theoretical and seems better taken as a hypothesis to be further tested than as an insight to be sprinkled throughout future research.

Finally, the essays by Alla Bolotova, Sari Autio-Sarasmo, and Dmitry Vorobyev all demonstrate how culturally constructed ideas about natural resources shaped Soviet resource use. Bolotova’s discussion of the colonization of the Far North emphasizes the role played by geological surveys, ideological proclivities for subduing nature, and use of prison labor in the rapid transformation and degradation of these regions.²³ The attention Bolotova pays to labor issues also finds a place in Autio-Sarasmo’s article, which explains the over-felling of Karelian forests in the 1930s by highlighting the illusion of the endless Russian forest in Soviet economic thinking. Vorobyev explores the utopian character of the famous river-diversion projects and examines the realm of discourse surrounding these efforts. Together with Weiner’s article, these three contributions demonstrate clearly how ideas about the natural environment can have real and significant consequences on processes of economic development and population settlement as well as on the health and livelihood of people and environments.

Another strand of environmental history concentrates more strictly on materialist issues such as resource use, patterns of environmental change, pollution, and the health effects accompanying ecological change. This type of environmental history tends to be the most interdisciplinary and more fully utilizes tools of the natural sciences. *Istoricheskaia ekologiiia i istoricheskaia demografiia* fits well into this tradition.²⁴ It includes 29 articles that strongly emphasize connections between environmental conditions and demographic factors affecting humans such as mortality, population densities, disease rates, and other indices of human health. The collection groups its essays into sections covering methodology, the influence of industrialization and urbanization, environmental crisis and demographic processes, environmental politics and thought, and regional assessments of these problems. The best articles provide insights that well augment some of the research done by Paul

²³ Elsewhere, Bolotova compares the ideological construction of geologists as conquerors of nature with the experiences they recall in oral interviews. See Alla Bolotova, “Colonization of Nature in the Soviet Union: State Ideology, Public Discourse, and the Experience of Geologists,” *Historical Social Research* 29, 3 (2004): 104–23.

²⁴ In part because of the impossibility of making an adjective out of the word “environment” (*okruzhaiushchaia sreda*) in Russian, the words “ecological” (*ekologicheskii*) and “ecology” (*ekologiiia*) often are used to discuss what in English would be rendered as “the environment.”

Josephson, a leading American scholar working on this branch of Russian environmental history.²⁵

Istoricheskaia ekologiia i istoricheskaia demografiia begins with an introduction by the volume's editor, Iu. A. Poliakov—a prolific historian from the Soviet era who has recently turned to environmental history.²⁶ He offers solid justifications for exploring environmental issues but then outlines an unhelpful periodization of human interaction with nature, which theorizes that only in the latter half of the 20th century did the balance between the two become disrupted on a global scale. Though an emphasis on the uniqueness of the 20th century is appropriate, one should not deny the existence of global environmental change induced by humans in earlier eras for the sake of an abstract periodization.²⁷ Fortunately, the other essays do not seem to adopt this framework. In them we learn specifics about the impact of chemical, nuclear, and fuel industries on human health. We hear about various measures of sanitation and environmental causes of epidemics as far back as the 17th century. We see variance in environmental attitudes among social groups at different historical moments. One especially strong article by L. N. Denisova utilizes oral history interviews of rural inhabitants to assess local knowledge of environmental conditions in the postwar Soviet Union. On the whole, the collection demonstrates ways to connect data on human health and demography to changes in environmental conditions both on a local and countrywide scale. In doing so, it suggests methodological options for future researchers to assess human/nature interaction.

Additionally, as a product of the Russian academy, this volume can serve to highlight some features of the field in that country. Perhaps most noteworthy is that the editor and the authors seem unaware of the existence of environmental history in other countries and to a certain extent have begun to treat similar problems on their own accord. While the fact that foreign

²⁵ Josephson, who like Douglas Weiner and Kendall Bailes is also a historian of Soviet science, has written several comparative books that focus heavily on the Soviet Union. See Paul Josephson, *Industrialized Nature: Brute Force Technology and the Transformation of the Natural World* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002); and Josephson, *Resources under Regimes*. A recent account evaluating contemporary environmental and social conditions in Russia is Jonathan Oldfield, *Russian Nature: Exploring the Environmental Consequences of Societal Change* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005).

²⁶ Poliakov, who began working at the Institute of History at the Soviet and then Russian Academy of Sciences in 1949, elsewhere theorizes about environmental history as a new area of research. See Iu. A. Poliakov, *Istoricheskaia nauka: Liudi i problemy* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2004), 2: 147–53.

²⁷ John McNeill, whose comparative work includes plenty of material on Russia, makes the point that the 20th century is a significant era of global environmental change without undermining major developments in earlier epochs (J. R. McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2000]).

researchers have come to see “ecological aspects” of history as important for themselves speaks to the ways that dominant conditions in the contemporary world can shape currents in historical scholarship, ultimately a dialogue among native and foreign historians seems a more promising path for the future. The emphasis on historical demography, which alone has quite an elaborate tradition in Russia, also distinguishes this scholarship. Not really reflected in this volume, however, is the popularity of theories of Gumilev and Vernadskii among some Russian scholars of the environment.²⁸

Nor does the volume under review include scholarship by a group of researchers at the Center for Environmental and Technological History at the European University at St. Petersburg who largely focus on marine history and who also fit well into this category of science-based environmental history. As participants in an international project called History of Marine Animal Populations, these researchers, including Daniel Alexandrov, Julia Lajus, and Alexei Kraikovskii, conduct highly interdisciplinary work involving biologists and historians that concentrate on fisheries in the White, Barents, and Baltic seas.²⁹ They have also put significant energy into internationalizing Russian environmental history by hosting seminar presentations of foreign scholars and editing a collection of translated articles of environmental history for the Russian audience.³⁰

²⁸ Recent re-publications of their work constitute only one manifestation of the popularity enjoyed by Gumilev and Vernadskii. See Lev Gumilev, *Drevniaia Rus' i velikaia step'* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006); and V. I. Vernadskii, *Biosfera i noosfera* (Moscow: Airis, 2004).

²⁹ Some of this research is Iu. A. Laius, “Razvitie rybokhoziaistvennykh issledovaniĭ barentseva moria: Vzaimootnosheniia nauki i promysla, 1898–1934 gg.” (Candidate’s diss., Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk, Institut istorii estestvoznaniia i tekhniki, 2004); Dmitry Lajus, Julia Lajus, Zoya Dmitrieva, Alexei Kraikovskii, and Daniel Alexandrov, “The Use of Historical Catch Data to Trace the Influence of Climate on Fish Populations: Examples from the White and Barents Sea Fisheries in the 17th and 18th Centuries,” *ICES Journal of Marine Science* 62, 7 (2005): 1426–35; and Kraikovskii, Lajus, Dmitrieva, A. Karimov, P. Leontiev, I. Merzliakova, and A. Sukhorukova, “The Study of the Fisheries in the Eastern Baltic in the 15th–18th cc.: Preliminary Results and Further Perspectives,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the European Society for Environmental History* (Florence: Istituto di Studi sulle Società del Mediterraneo—CNR; Università degli Studi di Firenze, Dipartimento di Scienze e Tecnologie Ambientali e Forestali; European Society for Environmental History, 2005), 269–73. On other subjects, see O. Iu. Malinova, “Sotsiokul’turnye faktory formirovaniia dachnogo prostranstva vokrug Sankt-Peterburga (1870–1914)” (Candidate’s diss., Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk, Sankt-Peterburgskii institut istorii, 2005); and N. Kruglikova, “Agents for Change towards Sustainability: An Examination of Environmental Posters from a Historical Perspective,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the European Society for Environmental History*, 46. Additionally, Alla Bolotova and Dmitry Vorobyev, who contributed essays to *Understanding Russian Nature*, have been affiliated with this center.

³⁰ Julia Lajus and Daniel Alexandrov are editing this collection, which will be published as a joint project with Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte supported by the Volkswagen Foundation.

Finally, historians have begun to integrate the role of the natural environment into their examinations of frontier expansion. Currently, no single monograph or collection of essays exists covering the topic.³¹ Several book chapters and essays dealing with the history of the Russian steppe, however, reveal the potential vitality of this area of research.³² Some of Denis Shaw's chapters in the co-authored *Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia*, for instance, test Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis in the case of Russia. Turner famously wrote a century ago that the western frontier of the United States exerted a fundamental influence on the migrants to this vast and "empty" space by promoting rugged individualism and a desire for freedom that served as a cornerstone of American democracy. Shaw employs Turner's ideas as he analyzes steppe "settlement" and assesses the influence played by the frontier environment in this process. He concludes, albeit tentatively, that the steppe frontier served as a factor promoting the centralization and militarization of Russia and a love of freedom among Cossacks before the state encroached on them. It also functioned as a land of economic opportunity and as a "safety valve" for peasants to migrate away from more densely populated regions.³³ However, Thomas Barrett, in his study of the Terek Cossacks, has criticized the way Shaw uses the frontier, arguing that Turner's thesis should not be applied to Russia. Writing in the vein of the "new imperial" history, Barrett instead emphasizes Russian interaction with other ethnic groups and offers his own analysis of human-induced ecological challenges to the Terek Cossacks such as deforestation, flooding, and disease.³⁴

New imperial history of the steppe, especially works by Michael Khodarkovsky and Willard Sunderland, has done an admirable job of exposing the complex interactions between Russians and non-Russians during the colonization of these lands and the ways that the ideological construction of the steppe as empty and open facilitated the denial of imperialist nature of "settlement" and "expansion." To avoid a potential tension that can exist between studies of imperialism and studies of the environment, frontier environmental history should endeavor to fill in "empty spaces" of expansion with both humans and environments.

In addition to Barrett, Nicholas Breyfogle, David Moon, and John Richards have all conducted research in this direction. In his book on the state's use of oppressed religious sectarians as agents of colonial expansion in

³¹ David Moon, however, is in the midst of a book-length project in this area.

³² Most of the work reviewed here concentrates on the southern steppes; there remains much work to be done on the frontier environmental history of Siberia.

³³ Pallot and Shaw, *Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia, 1613–1917*, 12–54.

³⁴ Thomas Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700–1860* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), 5, 57–83.

the South Caucasus in the 19th century, Breyfogle devotes an excellent chapter to demonstrating how sectarian settlers adapted their economic activities through reforming farming practices and expending more energy on raising livestock in response to the new steppe landscape. He also shows how in turn settlers attempted to modify their environment through road-building, mill construction, and species importation.³⁵ Richards's magisterial tome on the environmental history of the early modern world includes two chapters respectively examining steppe and Siberian frontiers.³⁶ He argues that the meeting of forest and steppe ecological zones profoundly shaped Muscovy's protracted southern expansion, which had to proceed gradually and continually through fortification of various defensive lines and peasant migrations beyond these lines. The new Russian colonists transformed the steppe environment by burning grasslands and intensively cultivating the fertile soil.³⁷ Finally, as part of his research for a larger project devoted to steppe environmental history, Moon has completed several pieces that analyze the influence of forest, steppe, and Siberian ecological zones on the patterns of peasant migration and that discuss debates about agricultural exhaustion and environmental modification of steppe lands in the late 19th century.³⁸ This branch of Russian environmental history might be best suited to contribute to an already current hot topic in Russian historiography.

All the works reviewed here have made notable contributions to this expanding field of research. They have all underscored the interconnectedness of histories of human society and natural environments. Yet in the end, conservation, cultural understandings of nature, scientific assessments of the influence of humans and nature on each other, and imperial frontier expansion only represent several potential directions for further research in Russian environmental history.³⁹ Hopefully, the future work of scholars will soon make the paradox I began with disappear; and we will have a deeply

³⁵ Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 87–127.

³⁶ John Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 242–73, 517–46.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 242–73.

³⁸ See David Moon, "Peasant Migration and the Settlement of Russia's Frontiers, 1550–1897," *Historical Journal* 40, 4 (1997): 859–93; Moon, *The Russian Peasantry: 1600–1930* (London: Longman, 1999), 37–65; Moon, "The Environmental History of the Russian Steppes: Vasilii Dokuchaev and the Harvest Failure of 1891," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 15 (December 2005): 149–74; and Moon, "Agriculture and Environment on the Steppes in the Nineteenth Century," in *Peopling the Russian Periphery*, ed. Nicholas Breyfogle, Abby Schrader, and Willard Sunderland (New York: Routledge, 2007). Thanks to Willard Sunderland for supplying me with this essay in advance.

³⁹ In addition to the four areas highlighted in this essay there has also been a recent rise in interest in the related field of Russian animal studies. A conference devoted to the subject

rooted, intellectually sophisticated, and quantitatively abundant field of environmental history in Russian historiography.

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occurred in May 2007 and currently the organizers, Amy Nelson and Jane Costlow, are working on an edited volume concerning animals in Russian history and culture.