

Forest and Grassland: Recent Trends in Russian Environmental History

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The purpose of this article is to assess recent trends in Russian environmental history over the last five years. I will broadly trace its emergence from the foundation of the field in the 1970s and 1980s. Next, I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of current environmental scholarship about Russia and suggest avenues of potential research. Research on the Soviet era has dominated the scholarship, with a focus on preservation and conservation



amidst disastrous degradation. Often seen as outside the zone of the liberal, capitalist West, where individual values are intimately tied to an environmental ethos, new works are beginning to place the Soviet experience in a broader trajectory of the Russian past, and demonstrate the ways that the Russian experience is far more similar to stories about the environment in the Americas, Asia and Africa than previously thought.

Environmental history plays a key role in Russian historiography as its practitioners revised our understanding of the dominant narratives, especially the totalitarian thesis, about the Soviet past. Less attention has been devoted to earlier eras of Russia's environmental history. Yet, after a promising beginning, Russian environmental historiography developed slowly in comparison to the United States. In 2007, Andy Bruno remarked on the curious state of Russian environmental history. Scholars such as Douglas Weiner were at the forefront of environmental history as it became an accepted discipline, yet "an undeniable dearth of literature exists on a region that by the size of its territory alone carries global significance in environmental history".¹ Two years later, the leading interdisciplinary quarterly of Slavic Studies, *Slavic Review*, published a forum on nature that did not include work by a single historian.² Six years after Bruno's call for a "deeply rooted, intellectually sophisticated, and quantitatively abundant field of environmental history in Russian historiography", that moment has arrived.³ The works under discussion here emphasize the strength of scholarship on the Russian environment, forcing members of the academy to take notice and, hopefully, draw on this body to inform their own narratives of imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia. Indeed, these authors

¹ A. Bruno, "Russian Environmental History: Directions and Potentials", in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 8, 3, 2007, p. 636.

² Id., "Nature, Culture, and Power", in *Slavic Review*, 68, 1, 2009, pp. 1-94.

³ Id., *Russian Environmental History* cit., pp. 649-650. In 2011, many scholars of the Russian environment from France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States, including Brain, Josephson, and Moon, gathered at The Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio under the banner of "Eurasian Environments" to assess the state of the field. The University of Pittsburgh Press plans to publish essays by conference participants, edited by N. Breyfogle, and by those who did not attend.

convincingly demonstrate that study of the Russian environment yields results that firmly entrench the scholarship in transnational and comparative perspectives on topics of forest, plains, and water.

Why was there a significant gap in scholarly writing about Russia's environment? One way to understand this fracture, or in Bruno's term, "paradox", is that the publication of Weiner's two seminal books, as well as works by Murray Feshbach and Alfred Friendly, Philip Pryde, and M. Turnbull roughly coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴ The themes emphasized in these contributions are rooted in the advocacy origins of the field itself, common ground for environmental policy makers, advocacy groups and academics. Namely, these authors analyze the conflict over the environmental attitudes of preservation and conservation. Weiner shows that environmental issues were comparatively safe ways to challenge political authority, and that is why *perestroika* era national movements in the USSR were couched in environmental terms.⁵ At the same time, Weiner revised the totalitarian thesis by demonstrating the way individual and collective groups could challenge Joseph Stalin's power when it seemed impossible. An environmental perspective allowed Weiner to reveal the fallacy of the totalitarian model's emphasis on Soviet exceptionalism. The grand Marxist experiment shared common features with other modern, and capitalist, societies that cold war era scholars elided or refused to acknowledge.⁶ Yet, at the same time, Weiner's thesis contributed to the construction of a powerful narrative about undeniable environmental degradation rooted in the devastating outcome of Soviet environmental policy.

⁴ For a discussion of these works, see J. DeBardeleben's review essay on M. Feshbach, A. Friendly, *Ecocide in the USSR: Health and Nature under Siege*, Basic Books, New York 1993. M. Turnbull, *Soviet Environmental Policies and Practices: The Most Critical Investment*, Dartmouth Pub Co, Aldershot 1991. P. Pryde, "Environmental Management in the Soviet Union", in *Slavic Review*, 52, 3, 1993, pp. 593-596.

⁵ D.R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1999, pp. 3-4, 21.

⁶ For a compelling argument in this vein of interest to environmental scholars, see K. Brown, "Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place", in *The American Historical Review*, 106, 1, 2001, pp. 17-48.

The moment seemed ripe for environmental history to seize an important place in the historiography of Russia. Indeed, a flurry of works appeared after *Models of Nature* in 1988. But Weiner and others blazed a trail at the precise moment that a generation of academics turned their attention to autopsies of the Soviet Union. As a result, at the very moment that environmental scholarship flourished in American history, very few scholars asked the same kinds of questions of Russian and Soviet history until Brian Bonhomme's work appeared in 2002.⁷ There are several possible explanations for this gap in the scholarship. One is that the end of the Soviet Union rekindled debates about revisionism and a new fascination with cultural theory and other models of social history.⁸ Additionally, many historians were not trained as environmental historians and may not have explicitly identified themselves and their work as environmental subjects as they do today. Environmental history, now entering its fourth decade as a discipline is well established, and despite criticisms, revisions and controversy, it is not going away. Environmental history is thriving in the United States and parts of Europe. However, one might ask, whither Russia? As environmental history progresses from its roots in local and regional American stories to the global and comparative scale, scholars of Russian environmental history are uniquely positioned to shape debates about nature, culture, and identity.

The Forest and Steppe in Global Context

Russia is the largest country in the world. Comprising 1/6th of the territorial earth, it stretches 5000 miles from the European borderlands in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east, and up to 3000 miles separate the Arctic Ocean from the Central Asian states that once existed under the banner of the Russian Empire. Much of Russia shares latitude with Alaska, Canada, the Northern Territories

⁷ B. Bonhomme, "A Revolution in the Forests?: Forest Conservation in Soviet Russia, 1917-25", in *Environmental History*, 7, 3, 2002, pp. 411-34.

⁸ Weiner himself points to the attempt to graft the concept of "civil society" onto the Soviet experience. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom* cit., pp. 442-443.

and Scandinavia. Within this immense geographic space, there is great environmental diversity. Three major belts divide Russia from north to south. The frozen arctic region (*tundra*), the massive forest belt (*taiga*) stretching across the middle of the country, and the vast grasslands (*steppe*) in the south. There are also arid desert areas, especially along the borders with the Central Asian states. The Ural Mountains separate European Russia from Siberia, and divide Europe and Asia. In the south, the Caucasus Mountains separate Russia from the Black Sea and nations to the south. There is a major north-south river network on both sides of the Urals, home to five of the twenty longest rivers in the world. Engineers spent 150 years linking many of these rivers together with canals, creating a large transport network. Two of the largest lakes in the world, Lake Baikal and Lake Ladoga, are in Russia. The landscape is full of natural resources, including oil, iron ore, and timber, but one of the main challenges facing both Imperial and Soviet governments was how to extract and transport these resources to market. Russian expansion depended on the fur trade, and both the Soviet and post-Soviet governments have relied on petro-dollars to sustain the economy.

Many students first introduction to Russia is through images and stories of Russia's environment and climate like the one outlined above. Harsh winters affecting military campaigns, adaptation to tundra, taiga and steppe, the fur trade, and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster are some of the common points familiar to most students of Russian history. But after a brief survey of Russia's natural world, most textbooks and monographs move on to political and social histories of tsars, peasants and the intelligentsia without seriously considering the historical impact of the environment on these familiar stories. The political, social, and economic life of Russia is inextricably tied to environmental factors, yet environmental history is largely absent from the historiography of Russia. To some degree, most works of Russian history acknowledge the environment, but few sustain environmental focus beyond opening chapters. This is beginning to change, with the appearance of new monographs that place environmental history much more squarely in the middle of Russian historiography. As of this writing, scholars are at work on many aspects of the Russian en-

vironment including water, ice, forest, steppe, and desert. In recent years, there have been calls to follow path-breaking work by Douglas Weiner, Kendall Bailes, and others with a concentrated examination of human environment interactions in Russia.⁹

Most narratives of Russia begin with reference to the three major geographic bands that divide the territory, the tundra, taiga, and steppe, as this essay did, and most Russian environmental work concerns one of these aspects. They are interdisciplinary books rooted in the material environment with a strong focus on cultural and intellectual developments in Russia.¹⁰ Works by historian Stephen Brain, environmental studies scholar Jane Costlow, and historian David Moon focus on the taiga and the steppe, while historian Paul Josephson, who has a broader topic, discusses all three.¹¹ Each of these works considers broad sweeps of time. Brain's forty-five year chronology is the shortest of the books under discussion. Both Brain and Costlow argue that environmental ideas are not solely about nature and must be read for what they say about Russian cultural identity.¹² Josephson and his colleagues bring strong history of sci-

⁹ In addition to works described here, major contributions to Russian environmental history have been made by K. Bailes, B. Bonhomme, N. Breyfogle, F.R. Shtil'mark, and D. Weiner. Critical assessments of their work appear elsewhere. One also looks forward to the publication of R. Jones' work on the Imperial period, as well as work from a host of recent Ph.D.'s with dissertation topics on the Russian environment. The field is also international in scope, with scholars such as M. Elie in France, C. Teichmann, J. Obertreis, G. Tzifeta and J. Herzberg in Germany, and A. Kraikovskii, J. Lajus, and O. Malinova-Tzifetas in Russia, among many others.

¹⁰ J.R. McNeill and E. Stewart Mauldin argue that most environmental scholarship falls into three broad categories, including the material environment, cultural and intellectual history, and political and policy-related history. See J.R. McNeill, E. Stewart Mauldin, "Global Environmental History: An Introduction", in *A Companion to Global Environmental History*, Id. (eds), Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex 2012, p. xvii.

¹¹ Although not discussed here, there is much interest in the Russian north. In addition to the standard work by J. McCannon, P. Josephson's forthcoming monograph on the Soviet north joins recent dissertations by A. Bruno and P. Chu on the tundra.

¹² S. Brain, *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2011, p. 171. J. Costlow,

ence backgrounds to bear in their story of the environment. In all of these stories scientists and bureaucrats play key roles. Taken together, these works demonstrate that not only does environmental history contribute to understanding of Russian history, but it also can help give a fuller picture of Russian history itself.

David Moon, Anniversary Professor at the University of York, established his reputation through a series of highly regarded works on the Russian peasantry. Here, he turns his attention to the southern grasslands of the Russian Empire, the steppe. Moon's volume is a welcome addition to the environmental historiography, as it is one of the few works that treat the pre-Revolutionary era, covering the period from 1700 to the outbreak of World War I. It is impeccably researched, with a wide variety of sources marshaled into a coherent and compelling narrative. While Moon recognizes the important role that settlers play in the story of the steppe, he is primarily interested in those who engaged the steppe and tried to make it legible, because, unlike most settlers, scientists, landowners and zemstva officials left written records. Moon is distrustful of settler recollections because this local knowledge does not always track with scientific data. However, he is interested in one settler group, the Mennonites, because of their efforts to retain moisture in the soil.¹³ Settlers mostly appear as an indistinguishable group that ploughed up the steppe and whose sedentary livestock practices led to overgrazing.¹⁴ Moon chronicles the settlement of the grasslands by people who could only view the wide, flat expanse through the lens of the forest from which they came. But even here, Russians cannot escape the forest, and Moon's story is shaded by trees in unexpected ways. One of the central questions Moon investigates is the consequence of what happens when people move to a new territory but keep the same patterns of land use.¹⁵ In

Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth Century Forest, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2013, pp. 5-6.

¹³ D. Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700-1914*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

this way, Moon's story becomes global, entering into dialogue with studies on colonization and environment around the world.

After the indigenous population was removed from target areas of the steppe, Russian authorities resettled a patchwork of "soldiers, Cossacks, and foreign colonists from the Balkans" in 1784.¹⁶ Large scale settlement began in 1802 as state peasants began to clear thousands of acres of forest to create space for fields. The destruction of the forest cleared the way for the transport of sand by near constant wind into the area. This, in combination with overgrazing, reduced the amount of arable land by almost 57,000 acres, despite the tree-cutting to clear more arable land, a process that continued throughout the century. By 1890, peasant agricultural practices led to 540,000 acres of land under sand.¹⁷ Disaster came not only from natural factors, but from the deployment of European farming techniques. In plowing up the soil, farmers destroyed its fertility. Traditional farming methods that allowed soil to recover in other parts of Russia were ineffective in the face of the natural cycle of the region. Failure to understand this led to disaster. Russian scientists of the nineteenth century clearly linked agricultural practices with dust storms. Fallow fields that lacked vegetation were easy targets for the strong winds that blew across the steppe, spreading sand throughout the region. As crops grew, the amount of dust in these storms decreased. Tree-planting became the panacea for the steppe, as scientists, Mennonites and landowners became convinced of their defensive potency, an obsession that lasted through to the Great Stalin Plan in 1948. In the end, Moon's subjects remained primarily people of the forest.

Moon encounters, as will Brain, the progenitors of a new science who attempted to ameliorate the sandy conditions, this time Vasily V. Dokuchaev and genetic soil science. In seeking to make the steppe like Europe, Russian settlers created a series of problems that could not be understood through dominant European models. Through careful study and experimentation, Russian scientists and Mennonite settlers developed a new genetic soil science later exported to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

the Great Plains of the United States. This allows Moon to place the Russian steppe in a global context, tracing a clear path between nineteenth century understandings of the steppe sand storms and twentieth century American solutions to the Dust Bowl.¹⁸

It was not just settlers that viewed the steppe through the forest, but scientists as well. In part I, Moon began by introducing us to the “outsiders” and how they understood the grasslands of Russia’s southern frontier. Demonstrating the scope of the book, these include the Greek historian Herodotus, European travelers and Catherine the Great. In their writings, Moon finds reference to wind, heat, fire, and a decided focus on the lack of trees. Moon traced the development of scientific thought and how it was used to interpret and transform the steppe. We are introduced to Russian scientists seeking to divorce themselves from the German science in which they were rooted, but only Dokuchaev, who was not trained in conventional ways, was able to break free from the German model and see the steppe for what it was, a unique environment with its own rhythms distinctive not for its lack of trees, but for the quality of its soil.¹⁹ In part II, Moon guides the reader through the genesis and debates of scientific thinking about the steppe. In part III, Moon details the way that knowledge was deployed to try and solve environmental problems on the steppe, mainly fears of desertification. After a massive plough up of the steppe in the nineteenth century, a concerted effort was made to keep the land productive. In the end, scientists came to understand that efforts to conquer and subdue the steppe were misguided and that instead, one must “work *with* it”.²⁰ This fundamental misreading of the landscape echoes other stories of grasslands and forests, especially in West Africa.

Moon’s book can be read in fruitful dialogue with James Fairhead and Melissa Leach’s *Misreading the African Landscape*. Here, authorities were similarly concerned with degradation and sought to seize control of land from local inhabitants and promote poli-

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 285-289.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 53, 295.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 281. Emphasis in the original.

cies that would protect land. What experts and officials failed to understand was that the local inhabitants had not destroyed their habitat but had planted trees as they settled in order to enrich their savannah environment.²¹ This local knowledge was completely obscured through the scientific lens. The forest islands created in West Africa resemble the shelterbelts advocated by Mennonites and scientists in Moon's work. In both places, anxiety about the landscape brought local tradition, experimentation and scientific knowledge into conflict. What both cases show is that universal applications of scientific knowledge, especially those generated in Western Europe, could not resolve environmental problems everywhere. Pressing environmental concerns led to crisis management that failed to make root causes and conditions legible. In West Africa, this eventually yielded understanding of local practice while on the steppe it yielded the creation of a distinctive new soil science.

Moon is conscious of the fact that the story of grassland transformation is ongoing. As such, he does not identify a scientific "winner" in the debates about proper use and responsibility for degradation. Instead, he investigates the main modes of thinking about the steppe at each point in his story, from the steppe as a treeless empty space through to the attempts to remake the steppe in Moscow's image. To track shifts in thinking about the steppe, Moon draws on travel accounts dating to Herodotus, contemporary period analysis from leading scientific thinkers, including the reports of the 1768-74 Academy of Sciences expeditions and the nineteenth century soil scientist V. Dokuchaev. In other regards, the story of the steppe Moon tells is rooted in Moscow and its institutions and the elite academic societies, including the Free Economic Society. Moon uses these sources not only to tell a story of land-use patterns, but importantly, to track debates about what to do with Russia's colonial possessions to the southeast. Moon acknowledges then, that important actors in the steppe are obscured or elided from this particular story, including peasants and the indigenous population.

²¹ J. Fairhead, M. Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 3-6.

Both Moon, Brain, and to a lesser degree Costlow, connect Russian scientific understanding of the landscape with ideas first promoted in Germany, then reinterpreted based on Russian environmental conditions. Moon and Brain trace how these ideas were developed, transformed by Russian thinkers, and in Moon's case, refracted back to scientific communities in Europe and America. This is part of a wider story of the forest that saw the forest transformed from a multi-purpose space into an economic unit cultivated for rapid growth and maximum profit and provides some of the anxiety of loss present in Costlow's book.²² Europeans, especially the Germans, were at the vanguard of this transformation, and many Russian foresters developed within this tradition before ultimately rejecting it. During the Industrial Revolution states began to take control of the forests away from locals, replacing local knowledge and use patterns with the scientific expertise of the forestry agent.²³ In Russia, the state controlled legal rights to the forests for centuries. Peasants relied on forests for sustenance and accessed them legally and illegally. As agriculture became more central to peasant life in Muscovy, they carved out land from forests for farming. When this land was exhausted, peasants moved on, felling more trees.²⁴ Fears of degradation led to the development of forest science in Russia based on the belief that centralized, legible, state controlled forests would protect state commercial interests. As James Scott has shown, orderly, monoculture forests could be controlled and taxed.²⁵ In Russia, this was limited in practice, as Josephson shows, since both state forests and peasant-controlled forests suffered degradation and mismanagement in the 1880s when several of

²² B-S. Grewe, "Forest History", in *The Turning Points of Environmental History*, F. Uekoetter (ed.), University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2010, p. 45.

²³ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁴ For a broad overview of the relationship between agricultural and forest practices in Russia, see P. Josephson, N. Dronin, R. Mnatsakanian, A. Cherp, D. Efremenko, and V. Larin, *An Environmental History of Russia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, pp. 29-43.

²⁵ J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1998, pp. 14-15.

Costlow's subjects went wandering in the woods.²⁶ Russia may have seen like a state, but it could not act like one.

Jane Costlow's book is, quite frankly, a work of beauty, that restores the local character of particular woods, yet speaks to larger conception of culture and identity. Costlow, Clark A. Griffiths Professor of Environmental Studies at Bates College, in Maine, offers an engaging and original portrait of the Russian forest in *Heart-Pine Russia*. The title is taken from a work by Pavel Mel'nikov-Pechersky called *In the Forest*. Costlow's book is interdisciplinary and readers from a variety of disciplines will profit from reading it. It is the only book explicitly focused on culture. It is evocative, calling on a tapestry of senses and emotions that may be uncomfortable for some historians.²⁷ Using authors and painters as her guide, Costlow takes the reader around the edge of the forest and then into it. Costlow, citing Tatyana Goricheva, argues that the West feared the forest, while Russians did not.²⁸ But what kind of forests are these? European Russians were at home in the forest, depending on it for sustenance and livelihood.²⁹ These are peasant woods, imagined by cultural arbiters for consumption by a literate elite. They retain "cultural associations" despite the growing scientization of the forest. For the westernized Ivan Turgenev it is a dangerous forest, one of estrangement, while for Mel'nikov-Pechersky it is a sacred, Orthodox, therefore Russian forest. Throughout the book, Costlow presents the imagined geography of the forest, but more importantly, maps the real locations discussed in her sources, rooting cultural productions to the spaces in which they were produced.³⁰ In this way, the general becomes specific, and Russian readers may find purchase for national identity in ways that might elude foreign readers. Through

²⁶ Josephson, *An Environmental History of Russia* cit., p. 37.

²⁷ Environmental historians will cringe to see Donald Worster referred to as Daniel, but this should not detract from the power of Costlow's narrative. Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia* cit., p. 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁹ Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes* cit., p. 4.

³⁰ Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia* cit., p. 217.

analysis of Mel'nikov, for example, Costlow is able to demonstrate the way official orthodoxy blended with traditional folk belief to create a unique "Russian" understanding of the forest.³¹ For Russians, the forest "was an *obshchezhitie*, a common dwelling – a topography of memory, perception and physical reality, both literal places and shared languages of meaning".³² Among the books discussed, Costlow's book is distinctive for its faithfulness to places not often covered in the historiography, which she refers to as "real Russia". That is, not the two capitals, St. Petersburg and Moscow that dominate historiography, but neglected places such as Orel, birthplace of Turgenev, located over two-hundred miles south of Moscow. In these places, her sources identified an authentic Russia.

There was purpose to the art created by Costlow's subjects that connect to nineteenth century intellectual currents. Costlow builds her analysis around literary and artistic sources. She analyzes the work of artist Mikhail Nesterov, well-known authors Ivan Turgenev and Pavel Mel'nikov-Pechersky, and of lesser known writers such as Vladimir Korolenko, who retraced Mel'nikov-Pechersky's steps in 1890. She also draws on more traditional historical sources such as forestry and agricultural journals that debated "The Forest Question" in the nineteenth century. Costlow's book is visually impressive, with black-and-white and color reproductions of paintings analyzed. In depicting scenes of loss and degradation, for example Ilya Repin's painting, *Procession of the Cross in Kursk District* (1883) that depicts a clear-cut hill, they contributed to the drive to protect and conserve Russia's natural resources, perceived to be vanishing.³³ Here Costlow's work fits nicely with Brain and complements Moon. In both Costlow and Brain we are introduced to the people who inhabit and work in the forest, especially the forester. In conjunction with the development of German forestry, the forester no longer has only experience to draw on, but scientific knowledge and tools at his disposal to better manage the forest, and by extension, save Russia. From Brain, readers

³¹ Ibid., p. 73.

³² Ibid., p. 217.

³³ Ibid., p. 83.

get a profile of the kinds of people in the forest and how they had to negotiate and compete with landowners and peasants to maintain their position as experts.³⁴ From Costlow, readers learn how foresters work connected and influenced cultural attitudes to the forest. For her, foresters can be poets too.³⁵ Both art and science contributed to the development of a conservation ethos in Russia.³⁶ As scientists struggled to publicize fears of disappearing forests, artists and writers stepped in to create powerful images of loss in their work.³⁷ The most prominent artists and writers participated, including Ilya Repin, Ivan Shishkin, Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Building from this base, Costlow captures Russia at a pivotal moment in the post-Reform era, the birth of ecological consciousness that crystallized in wider society with the publication of the scientist-poet Dmitrii Kaigorodov's extremely popular nature surveys.

Since state and local environmental knowledge is often in conflict, Costlow and Moon also invite comparison to land use practices elsewhere. The same story of scientific knowledge used by authorities to interrupt and subvert local use of the forest and steppe resonates with similar events in Asia and Africa. In Uttarakhand in Himalaya, for example, Ramachandra Guha discovered that scientific forestry threatened "traditional cultural and communal values."³⁸ The inhabitants protested the interruption of traditional practices reminiscent of Goricheva's wooded communities, "grazing, lopping and the burning of the forest floor".³⁹ While the members of the Chipko movement succeeded in saving trees, a solitary oak is preserved in Costlow's Orel to cite just one example. Cultural associations rather than peasant protest preserved other wooded sites Costlow explored, and it is because of culture that these trees stand today.⁴⁰ However,

³⁴ Brain, *Song of the Forest* cit., pp.16-20.

³⁵ Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia* cit., p. 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 114.

³⁸ R. Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1989, p. 190.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁰ Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia* cit., pp. 4, 219.

absent a civic environmental consciousness and despite the development of scientific attitudes toward conservation, many acres of Russian forest are beyond recovery. For both the modernizing Russian Empire and the revolutionary Soviet state, peasant practice lost out to scientific expertise and rational forest management.

Stephen Brain, Associate Professor of history at Mississippi State University, takes the story of the forest into the twentieth century. In *Song of the Forest*, he explores how pre-Revolutionary Romantic forestry ideals survived in the hostile Bolshevik climate. For Brain, cultural continuity trumps political considerations. However, this continuity contributed to a specific sort of environmental ethos in the Soviet era, that Brain calls “Stalinist Environmentalism”. Amid many stories of Stalinist degradation, this is a fresh and original approach. Brain follows Jonathan Oldenfield, who argued that scholars “must move purposefully beyond broad understandings of the Soviet environmental legacy”.⁴¹ To that end, Brain argues against the prevailing declensionist narrative of environmental historiography, asking why “Stalin’s government, so often described as hostile to environmentalism and wild nature, [saw] afforestation as a worthy aim and trees as possessing the power to cure Soviet ills?”⁴² Brain identifies deep pre-revolutionary roots related to the birth of Russian forestry and linked with ideas about conservation and national identity.

The reader is introduced to how Russian forestry emerged and differentiated from German models. Brain sets the development of Russian forestry against and within intellectual trends in Russian history, such as the Slavophile debate, when Russian foresters turned away from German methods. Brain describes how amid breathless industrialization and environmental exploitation, the Stalin regime actually protected more forest than any other nation in the world. Brain follows a rough chronology from the late imperial development of Russian forestry, tracing its contours through revolution, industrialization and the conclusion of the failed Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature in 1953. Brain convincingly shows

⁴¹ Brain, *Song of the Forest* cit., p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

that fears about the Russian forest were tied to anxieties about Russian society itself. Deforestation, depicted in cultural symbols such as Anton Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, pointed to the failure of Russian society to regenerate.⁴³ G.F. Morozov's forest science attempted to remedy both fears. Brain's work dovetails nicely with work on the history of Russian science when discussing the Soviet era. Scholars of Soviet science have commented extensively on Bolshevik attitudes to science, and its vacillation between technocracy and what Brain calls "prometheanism". Brain details the way Russian forestry negotiated these two poles and was nearly destroyed in the process.⁴⁴ While I am sympathetic to Brain's argument, and it is an important one, it is a brave one in the sense that it moves us away from declensionist narratives of the Soviet environment. However, the declensionist narrative remains powerful, as demonstrated by Paul Josephson, even if he and his colleagues use it with nuance.

Of the books under discussion, Stephen Brain's book is the most rooted in the archive, primarily in the main federal archive, GARF, and the economics archive, RGAE. Brain also spends considerable time rehearsing the major debates among scientific thinkers carried out in the surprising number of forest journals of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Major figures in Brain's story wrote and were discussed widely in these pages, especially forest scientists G.F. Morozov and M.M. Orlov whose fierce debates about forest organization set the stage for the development of a coherent Russian-oriented management policy. Morozov argued that forests should be divided according to standtypes, each with their own special characteristics that governed how they regenerated, a belief that resonated with existing ideas of Russia's special character, such as Orthodoxy.⁴⁵ Orlov rejected this culturally infused scientific understanding of the forest, arguing instead for the kind of rational forest management familiar to readers of James Scott. These sources allow Brain to track the changing intellectual attitudes toward the forest from within the competing institutions responsible

⁴³ Ibid., p. 168.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 140-41.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

for its management such as the Central Administration of the Forests of the Republic, the People's Commissariat of Agriculture and later the Main Administration of Forest Protection and Afforestation and others. Brain's story also takes him to the steppe where, fifty years after Moon's narrative ends, Soviet officials are still trying to make the steppe like Moscow through the massive tree-planting effort that was a component of the Great Stalin Plan.

Brain's story demonstrates that foresters were able to protect Russian forests at a time of environmental degradation because foresters girded the concept of a healthy forest with romantic ideology of Russian identity with economic principles amenable to the Bolsheviks. As such Russian forests achieved a measure of protection under Stalin at precisely the time when dominance over natural resources equaled industrial and international power. Even if environmental ideas persisted, most trees failed to survive the five-year plans.

Although Brain demonstrates convincingly that protectionist and environmental rhetoric influenced attitudes about healthy forests at the institutional level, where ideological battles could be fought amongst competitors and won through persuasion, this rhetoric failed to protect much forest cover in practice. Brain attributes this failure to the fragmentation of forests for different purposes under Stalin. The majority of the forests supported Stalin's industrial project and were cut without restriction. Nonetheless, Brain claims that the Soviet Union protected "more forested land than any other country in history" in the 1940s.⁴⁶ One wonders if the destruction of the forest would have been even greater if technology had allowed Russian cutters to penetrate deeper into the cover, as Josephson shows. Perhaps the sheer immensity of Russia's forest combined with poor technology contributed to forest "protection" as much as any ecological ethos. Despite this protection, Josephson demonstrates that pressure on the forest increased after Stalin's death.⁴⁷ According to Josephson, degradation was not a peculiar outcome of socialism, but common to modern industrial society. The difference between

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁷ Josephson, *An Environmental History of Russia* cit., pp. 156-160.

the socialist Soviet system and the capitalist American system, for example, was that the Soviet Union lacked the development of a civic culture and rule of law that could check excess.

The fourth book under discussion is an achievement. Edited, and with significant portions written by Paul Josephson, six scholars share authorial credit. Josephson, professor of history at Colby College in Maine, and his colleagues work is timely, providing the first comprehensive treatment that can be used as a text for environmental history courses. With its publication, Russia now joins the United States, Latin America and Africa with environmental histories of their own. As such it offers both synthesis and original research. Josephson, one of the fields most prolific and accomplished authors, has written widely on topics such as science, technology, and industrialization in comparative contexts. It is an ambitious project, addressing almost every conceivable approach of environmental history. Synthesized in one volume for the first time are chronological overviews of environmental practice from the Imperial period to the post-Soviet era. Science, agriculture, forests, ice, grasslands, water and urban environments are all addressed. Each chapter includes primary or secondary source text boxes highlighting important environmental issues. Still, the bulk of the text concerns the Soviet era. Like many environmental histories there is discussion of the Imperial period, but here it offers promising avenues of research for those interested in writing about the environmental history of Russia before 1917, especially fisheries and ecological thinking in Russia.

After tracing the development of conservationist attitudes about the environment in the imperial period, Josephson demonstrates how Stalinism nearly destroyed this ethic. Marshaling science and engineering, Stalinists believed they could manipulate and transform nature according to plan.⁴⁸ The country was to be transformed at breakneck speed regardless of cost to humans and environment. Those who promoted safety and moderation, such as the engineer Peter Palchinsky, were eliminated, while new industrial cities were built from scratch.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

⁴⁹ On Palchinsky, see L. Graham, *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer: Technol-*

In 1948, Stalin unveiled the Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature, which aimed to protect forests and the steppe.⁵⁰ This plan was followed in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev's Virgin Lands program to plow up millions of acres of fallow land to solve the Soviet Union's agriculture crisis. Both plans failed dismally. Environmental thinking reemerged under Khrushchev when technocrats, rather than ideologues, dominated key positions and promoted utilitarian science.⁵¹ Even then, the devastation was staggering. Intellectual currents about the environment coalesced under Mikhail Gorbachev into active movements, highlighted by the econationalism of the republics, only to fragment in the post-Soviet era. Today, Russia still faces enormous environmental challenges of its industrial past.

The major contribution of Josephson's work is that it recasts major moments in Soviet history as fundamentally environmental stories. Despite the fact that the book lacks a bibliography, *An Environmental History of Russia* provides a useful starting point for students of environmental history and will no doubt find wide use in environmental history seminars and upper level courses. Josephson synthesizes most of the available environmental research published in both Russian and English. Josephson and his co-authors have also sprinkled primary sources throughout the book. Acknowledging that many primary sources can be found on-line, there are links to several websites, all which direct readers to primary sources.⁵² Wherever possible, Josephson challenges the thesis of Russian uniqueness by placing Russia's environmental history in comparative perspective.

ogy and the Fall of the Soviet Union, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1993. On the construction of industrial cities from scratch, see S. Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1995.

⁵⁰ The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature was the popular name of the project. However, as Brain points out, the official title was "On the Plan for Field-Protective Afforestation, the Adoption of Grass-Field Crop Rotation, and the Construction of Ponds and Reservoirs to Ensure High and Stable Harvests in the Steppe and Forest-Steppe Regions of the European Part of the USSR". See Brain, *Song of the Forest* cit., p. 201, n. 43.

⁵¹ Josephson, *An Environmental History of Russia* cit., p. 143.

⁵² The link on page 63, fn. 67 is, unfortunately, dead.

Even the ambitious Great Stalin Plan, which called for massive forest belts on the steppe, was not unique, with similar efforts introduced, some even earlier, throughout the modern world.⁵³

These works make it possible for professors to build undergraduate courses and graduate seminars around scholarly monographs. Surely they will inspire others to explore Russia's environment. A word must also be said about style and tone of these works. Each monograph represents different types of historical writing, the more traditional of Brain and Josephson and the deeply personal of Moon and Costlow. In fact, all of these books are shaped by their author's deep attachment to place, and the importance of physically *being* in a place. Both Moon and Costlow acknowledge their own intimate connections with the worlds they study, positioning themselves as blinkered by location, place of residence, upbringing, even the location where one writes. Or as Costlow noted the feeling of being a stranger at home. Both authors spent considerable time in the landscapes they write about, walking, observing, and participating in research expeditions. Historians, more than most, struggle with the foreignness of the past, and in stories rooted in place, the desire to capture a location with an ever changing existence. Costlow gets close to putting a feeling to this tension when she quotes one of Russia's great twentieth century poets, "*ne rodnaia, no pamiatnaianavsegda...* Not one's own, but remembered forever".⁵⁴ This acknowledgement helps both us and them understand the ways the actors in their narratives may have reacted to the environments described. They sprinkle their narratives with personal anecdotes about bicycling in Maine or visiting Russian nature preserves.⁵⁵ But one does not mind, since both authors blend this approach with professional rigor. It is fresh and commendable and represents the ways that environmental writing about Russia can be in the vanguard of Russian Studies scholarship in general. It also requires skill, which all of these authors possess, and most importantly, the trust of publishers.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 123.

⁵⁴ Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia* cit., p. 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 178. Moon, *The Plough That Broke the Steppes* cit., pp. 301-303.

Conclusion: Future Directions of Research

Much has happened in the field of Russian environmental history since Andy Bruno's 2007 review essay, and each of these monographs is suggestive of the potential avenues of research open to those who study the Russian environment. The weakest area of understanding is in the imperial period, where deterministic understandings of the environment have rarely been challenged. Most historians follow Weiner in identifying roots of Soviet environmental understanding in Imperial Russia, but a sustained focus on the era, beyond introductory chapters of Soviet focused texts is lacking. David Moon and Jane Costlow's work is a welcome challenge to that determinism, but more needs to be done. As a demonstration of the need for a scholarly focus on the pre-Revolution environment to match the work on the Soviet era, the essay on Russia in the recent *A Companion to Global Environmental History* did not deal with the imperial period at all.⁵⁶ However, new work by scholars of various ranks is strengthening, revising, and offering new perspectives on the pre-Soviet period, demonstrating continuity and divergence from the narratives of the Soviet environment.

A second major area requiring exploration is the nexus of urban and environmental history. The lack of attention environmental historians give to urban spaces can be explained by the roots of discipline that saw cities as cultural expressions. Humans have grappled with the natural and urban environment, seeking to control, shape, manage, clean and accommodate it. Often, conflict arises as people from a variety of socio-economic classes, races, genders, and nationalities attempt to make their way in these environments, and imperial cities are just such places where these conflicts played out. Only Josephson considers connections between urbanism and environment, and

⁵⁶ S. Brain, "The Environmental History of the Soviet Union", in *A Companion to Global Environmental History*, J.R. McNeill, E.S. Mauldin (eds), Wiley-Blackwell, West Sussex 2012, pp. 222-243. To be fair, a comparative essay by D. Moon later in the volume partially addresses the imperial period, but this is not the same as an environmental history of Russia that includes all periods of its history.

this promises to be a fruitful avenue of research.⁵⁷ Although Donald Worster famously rejected that urban places were the province of environmental history, the debate was settled long ago. William Cronon, Martin Melosi, Christine Meisner Rosen and Joel Tarr firmly situated urban history within the environmental historiography.⁵⁸ Yet, this idea has yet to take hold in Russian historiography. Given the trajectory of Russia's engagement with the environment, it is tempting to argue that urban development has little to say about the massive large-scale transformation wrought by the Russian state. Yet, Jonathan Keyes convincingly argued that urban and environmental history have much common ground because it is the exchange between the human and nonhuman worlds that drive inquiry, and that as over half the world's populations live in cities, the urban must be considered part of the story of the environment.⁵⁹ In my own work, I draw on urban and environmental methods to revise the historiography of St. Petersburg. By staking claim to the territory on the Neva's delta, Peter the Great and inhabitants explicitly entered into a relationship, antagonistic and dialectic, that became the source of culture and power on its banks. These themes resonate with all of the books under discussion, as a constellation of groups complemented and conflicted with each other based on local tradition, scientific knowledge and interaction with nature. Mediation came in the form of engineers, arriving on the scene en masse in the 1820s, who in keeping with the state's shift toward a

⁵⁷ Works that touch on urban and environmental aspects of the Russian city include A. Martin, *Enlightened Metropolis: Constructing Imperial Moscow, 1762-1855*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013. R. Dills, "The River Neva and the Imperial Façade: Culture and Environment in Nineteenth Century St. Petersburg Russia", PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign 2010. A. Kraikovskii, J. Lajus, "The Neva as a Metropolitan River of Russia: Environment, Economy and Culture", in *A History of Water Rivers and Society: From Early Civilizations to Modern Times*, Series 2, Vol. 2, R. Coopey, T. Tvedt, (eds), I.B. Tauris, New York 2010, pp. 339-364, and forthcoming work by O. Malinova-Tziafeta and G. Tziafetas.

⁵⁸ C. Meisner Rosen, J. Tarr, "Importance of an Urban Perspective in Environmental History", in *Journal of Urban History*, 20, 1994, p. 304.

⁵⁹ J. Keyes, "A Place of Its Own: Urban Environmental History", in *Journal of Urban History*, 26, 2000, pp. 381, 390.

“regularized” and “formalized” government, managed the river and revised the river’s symbolic definition to include the infrastructure that made the Neva, which means “swamp” in Finnish, a “working” river. All the while, non-state actors used the river to their own ends. For them, the Neva was not so much a symbol of power, but a bearer of life and utilitarian in purpose. Imperial authorities sought to create a functional river, a site of commerce and production that connected St. Petersburg with the imperial and global economies.⁶⁰ From these competing uses of the river, an unofficial myth emerged that was depicted in story, poem, song, and painting, one that was at odds with and obscured the cultures of work and production that the Russian state was never eager to promote. Over time, railroad and steamboat conspired to empty out the river, eroding and eclipsing the river culture that was so vibrant in these years. Jobs and economic functions were lost, new methods of sewage and water delivery were devised, and engineers succeeded in separating the river both from the city, and seasonal patterns, so that it all but disappeared from view. The river Neva ceased to be the bearer of a cultural message, instead, in the metaphor of Joseph Brodsky, a screen reflecting a past of imperial pretension, to observers who no longer found imperial narratives persuasive.⁶¹ Due to Russia’s size and geographic features, and the long exclusion of urban history from environmental history, it is tempting to overlook its urban environments. Especially when a major trend in Russian historiography is to acknowledge that St. Petersburg or Moscow do not stand in for Russia as a whole, and that historical evidence from outside these capitals drastically revise our understanding of what Russia is. But there are important environmental stories to tell in Russia’s cities that also significantly transform our understanding.

Environmental history continues to evolve as a discipline. From

⁶⁰ The notion of a “functional” river is drawn from I. Backouche, “From Parisian River to National Waterway: The Social Functions of the Seine, 1750-1850”, in *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America*, C. Mauch, T. Zeller (eds), University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 2008, p. 32.

⁶¹ See J. Brodsky, “A Guide to a Re-named City”, in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York 1986, p. 77.

its origins exploring the role of nature on human life, it developed several strands that focus on culture, place and the city. Each of these works explores meanings of nature in the Russian context and how that changed over time. These books go a long way toward helping us understand how people interact with their environment, what motivates and constrains them, consequences and interpretations, especially the construction of Russian identity and scientific disciplines. Russian environmental history is well positioned to solidify and build on the legacy of scholars like Weiner. These scholars have accomplished the important task of bringing the interactions of humans and environment to the attention not just of Russian scholars, but also into the view of environmental historians. Scholars specifically trained in environmental historical methods now occupy positions in history departments around the world. The future is bright.