

Stephen Brain. *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. viii, 232 pp. \$27.95 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-0-82296-165-9.

It almost sounds like a parody of a conservative nightmare – a murderous environmentalist at the head of a communist country siding repeatedly with ecological interests over the desires of business. To those still living the Cold War, it might seem like an unacceptable apology for a dictator and political system that they know were unrepentantly ecocidal. But for scholars willing to weigh the fascinating evidence Stephen Brain has unearthed and follow his astute analysis, *Song of the Forest* will change profoundly how they understand the environmental legacy of the Soviet Union.

This book offers the most important contribution to Soviet environmental history made to date in the twenty-first century. By examining forest policy in Late Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, Brain demonstrates that Soviet achievements in conservation extend far beyond the innovation of the unprecedentedly preservationist *zapovedniki*. Douglas Weiner's groundbreaking scholarship explored how this system of nature reserves burgeoned during the New Economic Policy (NEP) of the 1920s. Unlike national parks elsewhere in the world, the *zapovedniki* were conceived of as inviolable representations of untouched nature where only scientific study, and not tourism or economic exploitation, should occur. Brain's narrative of Soviet forestry displays a comparable novelty. Foresters influenced by original Russian ideas about how to maintain and promote the integrity of forest ecosystems ascended to dominant positions in the management of the country's woodlands. Except for a brief period during the Great Break (1929-1931), high-end party leadership, and likely Stalin himself, supported the more conservationist approach to treating forests over the lobbying of industrialists. Brain labels this forest policy Stalinist environmentalism and in doing so challenges conventional portrayals of the Soviet leadership as entirely antagonistic toward nature.

Brain also highlights the continuity of traditional Russian culture in shaping the form of forest conservation of the Stalin era. What could be called a Slavophile ethic – one that combined conservative Orthodox religiosity and populism – influenced forestry practices of the Soviet Union, despite the Bolsheviks' leftist politics. Succession within what Brain calls the Russian cultural ecosystem, therefore, should not be characterized purely by rupture and revolution. Instead, organic processes such as evolution and regeneration more aptly describe change in Russia. This persistence of cultural forms seems to earn Brain's approbation instead of opprobrium, as he celebrates uniquely Russian approaches to environmental stewardship while not holding this conservatism accountable for abiding authoritarianism.

The hero of the story is a forester from the final decades of the Russian Empire named Georgii Fedorovich Morozov. Born into a merchant family in Saint Petersburg in 1867, Morozov began his career as a forester supporting the German approach to rational and productive forest management. Influ-

enced by both his field experience and the scientific, mystic, nationalist, and populist ideas circulating in Late Imperial Russia, Morozov converted to an architect of an explicitly Russian method to forestry. He hoped to synthesize the spiritual East and rational West and better attend to local landscape characteristics. Two of Morozov's innovations stand out in particular. First, he espoused a holistic notion that "the cut and the regeneration are synonyms," which encouraged management geared toward the natural essence of different types of forests. Second, he invented a technique of organizing forests called stand types, which relied on peasant nomenclature and attempted to capture the full biological integrity of ideal kinds of forests. The last decade of his life witnessed a roller coaster of successes and setbacks as some of his concepts entered official forest policy, only to be abandoned with shifting political tides. He died a distraught anti-Bolshevik in 1920, heart-broken by the ravages of the Russian forests over the previous years of revolution and civil war. Nevertheless, Morozov's ghost lived on as his followers renewed elements of his approach to forestry.

Laws regulating forest use extend back to Muscovy, but the first implementation of forestry policy based on German methods can be attributed, like so many other Westernizing reforms, to the rule of Peter I (1682-1725). German forestry scientists conceptualized woodlands mathematically and abstractly and tended to favor minimal biological diversity in well-ordered forests. They focused on producing harvestable trees that could be clear-cut for timber and fuel, but also embraced a conservationist principle of sustainable yield. This notion meant that forest exploitation in a given year should be limited to the annual growth of the forest cover, thereby preserving the natural resource for the long haul. These ideas dominated Russian forestry until the late imperial era when Morozov began to espouse his theories of indigenous forestry. The contested prerogatives of nationalization (state ownership), democratization (peasant participation), and centralization (hierarchical bureaucratic authority) defined the schemes to transform forest management in revolutionary Russia. When the Bolsheviks took control, they successfully nationalized privately owned forests and attempted central management based on German methods. The havoc in the forest over the next few years and the failures to implement the strictures of the 1918 "Basic Law on Forests" led them to move away from centralization during the New Economic Policy.

NEP-era forestry followed the general trends of this Soviet period, "bringing the same decentralization and pragmatism to forestry as it did to trade" (p. 67). The Central Administration of the Forests (TsULR) under the People's Commissariat of Agriculture had initially sought to exclude peasants from forest management, but the alliance (*smychka*) between urban and rural Russia created a new category of forests of "local significance" to be controlled by peasant communes. TsULR tried to ease tensions between peasants and foresters by propagandizing proper care for forests during the annual Forest Day and involving peasants in seed planting. Soviet forest administra-

tors also recruited an eminent forester from the tsarist era and Morozov's principal opponent in earlier debates, Mikhail Orlov, to compose a new set of instructions for forest organization in the mid-1920s. A plurality of voices on forest matters also reappeared as industrialists, field foresters, academics, and regional representatives pursued different, and often divergent, management schemes. Orlov's attempt to please conservationist foresters, who echoed Morozov by conceiving of woodlands as biologically unified units, and industrialists, who desired practically no limits on cutting whatsoever, foundered with both sides unsatisfied with his 1926 instructions. But the overall trend of the late 1920s favored conservation and the incorporation of Morozovian forestry as a progressive approach. Like much else in the Soviet Union, the Great Break sharply reversed this NEP trajectory in forest policy.

In the middle of 1929 industrial interests, represented by the Supreme Council of the People's Economy (VSNKh), dramatically won control over almost all of the country's forests. VSNKh increased harvesting targets for the first five-year plan from triple the 1925-26 level to six times that amount. Official forest policy in this period embraced a concept known as flying management that essentially justified clear cutting in European Russia and rejected the notion of sustainable yield as bourgeois. However, this forest radicalism of industrialists never gained the adamant support of the Party and began to be reversed in 1931. This reversal more than anything else revealed the character of Stalinist environmentalism. Morozov-inspired foresters argued that de-forestation threatened the hydrology of the country by silting rivers and limiting the effectiveness of hydroelectric dams. With this economic rationale conservationists convinced the Soviet government to set aside woodlands. New forest legislation of 1931, 1937 and 1943 placed successively more area of the most valuable forests outside of the reach of the timber industry. Foresters in the Russian national tradition also advanced efforts at afforestation of the steppe grasslands in the south that eventually grew into the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature of 1948. This time, however, charlatan agronomist Trofim Lysenko co-opted the foresters' campaign and insisted on forest cultivation methods that doomed the effort.

This book intervenes in a diverse set of historiographical discussions. Brain offers fascinating re-interpretations of two prominent episodes of the late Stalin era: the liquidation of the *zapovedniki* in 1951 and the Stalin Plan. He argues against Weiner that the Ministry of Forest Management wanted to take over nature reserves to pursue its own distinct environmentalist agenda, not to expand the economic exploitation of these forests. He also reads the Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature as an effort to mitigate climate change and analyzes the debates around it as a conflict between the technocratic and promethean impulses in Soviet culture. For the historiography of the Soviet Union writ large, this study goes a long way toward exposing how the political economy of Stalinism looks from an environmental angle. While economic logics prevailed in the Soviet relationship to the natural world,

Brain's book shows that it would be an untenable simplification to reduce Stalinist environmental history to an impulse to conquer and industrialize nature. Furthermore, the dictates of the communist command economy did not uniformly cause environmental degradation that exceeded the experience of other countries in all spheres and at all times. Environmental historians will gain insight into the contours of preservationist and conservationist strands of environmentalism in an unfamiliar context. The book also shows the abiding associations of nature and nation, especially under authoritarian regimes, and the influence of this connection even in the avowedly anti-nationalist Soviet Union.

With a book of this stature it would be derelict of a reviewer not to raise some questions about its interpretation. Brain concentrates more on ideas and policy than actual ground fires, clear-cuts, and regeneration. But did Stalinist environmentalism contribute to better ecological practices in Soviet forests as a whole? This is partially a question about the implementation and results of forest management policy (which in contrast to the afforestation campaigns could have been covered in more depth), but also about the causal factors behind the conservationist measures. Brain argues that pre-revolutionary environmental sentiments of professional foresters combined with the preferences of an authoritarian dictator led to this environmentalism, noting that the country made real economic sacrifices to maintain the integrity of nature. This latter contention is less convincing however. VSNKh's lobbying aside, would there have been much economic benefit to the extra cuts proposed by industrialists? Or given the limited capacities of the Soviet economic apparatus, would this have been an expensive and unnecessary endeavor? Was there an available market for timber exports? One only needs to consider the contemporary world to recognize that industrial interests frequently exaggerate the economic benefit of increased production to avoid environmental regulation. And if there was little to be gained by more rapacious cutting, did the actions of foresters and the Politburo really make such a decisive difference? Or might the preservationist ethos of *zapovednik* scientists instead of Morozov-style conservation have prevailed over much of the Soviet forests instead? Or might large inaccessible tracts have been left alone regardless of human conceptions of them? It seems that the scale of industrial activity, which increased precipitously after World War II, and the very vastness of the country's forests belong alongside Stalinist environmentalism in accounting for Soviet treatment of the forest.

One can ponder these issues as they read Brain's insightful re-evaluation of Soviet environmental history. Engagingly written and well priced, *Song of the Forest* can and should be used in advanced undergraduate and graduate courses that incorporate an environmental perspective on Soviet history. His revision of conventional wisdom should alter how historians understand the place of nature in the Stalinist system.

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