Keating on Moon and Breyfogle and Bekasova, 'Place and Nature: Essays in Russian Environmental History'

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“History occurs in place, not, as historians commonly believe, in time” (p. 71). Kate Brown’s striking words loom large in this volume, a collection edited by David Moon, Nicholas B. Breyfogle, and Alexandra Bekasova, which sets out to highlight the “importance of local environments and the specificities of individual places in understanding the human-environment nexus” (p. 1). At its core is a group of researchers from Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and beyond who participated in a series of workshops and field trips between 2013 and 2016, funded and organized in part by Moon’s Leverhulme Trust International Network “Exploring Russia’s Environmental History and Natural Resources” and also by a panoply of Russian and international institutions and universities. The researchers visited the White Sea region, Lake Baikal, and the Urals. Their travels and conversations speak to the power of major research grants and cross-institutional support in generating real and defining contributions to a field, and to a dynamic sense of collective endeavor. Indeed, the book is a fantastic example of how a diverse group of scholars can assemble the type of multi-location, multi-method, and multi-archive work that would have been almost impossible as an individual researcher. The contents highlight the work of leading figures in Russian environmental history and some of the excellent work in particular coming out of the Laboratory for Environmental and Technological History at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (NRU HSE) St. Petersburg, and importantly also set up fruitful dialogue between American and British researchers and such scholars as Arkady Kalikhman and Tatiana Kalikhman, who have spent the past four decades involved in the study and protection of Lake Baikal.

Twin processes lie at the heart of this volume: the creation of “place” from “space” and the transformation of “nature” into “environment.” Overall, the authors’ interests lie in “how human engagement and input transforms the wider, undifferentiated ‘spaces’ of the natural world into culturally meaningful and technologically-differentiated ‘places’” (p. 2): how, for instance, the Solovetskie Islands became imbued with a cultural heritage that was rooted in the natural setting. Thus the contributions explore with nuance how ideas about nature contribute to place identities and vice versa, and how place is invested with compound meanings by different parties. Indeed, throughout, the volume is sensitive to contested, overlapping, and multiple narrations of place, whether these are ideas presented on the page, physical actions, or debates between institutions, communities, and groups. More fundamentally, the contributors argue that as social encounters of
various kinds turned abstract space into place, in parallel, nature became environment. This approach draws on Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde’s concept developed elsewhere of "environing"—the idea that when “nature” is established as historical, it becomes “environment” (p. 38). This call to recognize the differences between nature and environment, highlighted particularly in Alexei Kraikovski and Julia Lajus’s chapter, is itself an important intervention in the Russian context.

The chapters, split among three parts, share several common traits, linked at first sight by geographic location in the Northwest and European North of Russia, Siberia, and the Pacific shores of the Russian Far East. Most focus on water history in some form, drawing out the diversity of aquatic environments and their inextricable connections to human life and culture. Many also emphasize the centrality of mobility, movement, and migration in bringing humans into new environmental encounters, while nature conservation and protection is another critical theme. Here the chapters offer a forceful riposte to declensionist narratives of the Soviet Union as nothing more than an ecosystem destroyer, not least by highlighting long-standing preservation campaigns and strategies embodied in the network of zapovedniki (scientific nature reserves) that had begun to be established at the very end of the imperial years and that grew significantly in the Soviet period.

The first four chapters that follow the introduction take the reader to the Northwest and European North of Russia. Kraikovski and Lajus open with perhaps the most evocative and well known of Russia’s northern landscapes, the Solovetskie Islands. Exploring environmental change there over six centuries, the authors uncover the connections between the islands’ natural setting and the rich cultural heritage of the famous monastery, monuments, and the later Soviet labor camp. The varied practices and encounters of monks, pilgrims, naturalists, visitors, and tourists underscore the narratives of devotion, culture, science, and tourism that served to transform nature on the island, itself generative of Solovki as a place. Andy Bruno offers a parallel biography not of an island but of Lake Imandra, located on the Kola Peninsula, considering the lake’s different functions over time, from transportation and fishing to a sink for industrial waste and resource for the energy sector. Again, the multiple uses and conceptualizations of nature come to the fore, as in this case do the pernicious effects of Soviet “development,” manifest in declining fish stocks and pollution from mine tailings, combine waste, and sewage. The increased visibility of the environmental costs of the Soviet experiment also forms the focus of Alan Roe’s chapter on the establishment of the Vodlozero National Park in Karelia and the Arkhangel’sk region. The endeavor was spearheaded by Oleg Cherviakov and his belief that the park (established in 1991) would not simply preserve old-grown taiga forest but also revive the region’s economy via tourism and “clarify the moral health of society” through restoration of churches and monasteries and the leisure activities afforded by visits to the forest (p. 99). Finally, Robert Dale switches emphasis to consider urban environments, comparing the St. Petersburg/Leningrad floods of 1824 and 1924, and the ways vulnerability to flooding became a defining characteristic of the city’s physical, cultural, and imaginative landscape.

The volume is generously illustrated throughout, replete with maps and photographs, which offer a vivid way to visualize place on the page. Nowhere is this more evident than in part 2, in which four short episodes act as a mid-way pivot between the European North and Siberia and the Far East. These photo essays take the reader back to Solovki with Breyfogle, then to industrial heritage sites in the Urals with Catherine Evtuhov, and finally to Lake Baikal and its hinterland in the company firstly of Bryce Stewart and then Moon. Not only do these reflections help to make the places under
discussion more tangible, but they also highlight the personal experiences of the authors (and sometimes the wider group), rendering the writer more visible and the process of research, all too often hidden, more evident. Thus we learn about hikes, boat trips, guided tours, and journeys underground. These are not personal indulgences but important, informal methods to reflect on the role of experience in history writing and on the permanence and impermanence of nature, while underscoring environmental threat and risk as observable features in the present day.

Part 3 continues the journey eastward, concentrating on Siberia and the Russian Far East. Lake Baikal dominates, but the section opens with an exploration of various landscapes on the printed page of Siberian settlement and travel guides. Here Bekasova and Ekaterina Kalemeneva offer an important discussion of a different dimension of place-making by exposing how printed material acted as a conduit for competing visions of regional identity, landscape, and resources in the age of the Trans-Siberian railway’s construction, suggesting that these guidebooks contributed to “the process of transformation of Lake Baikal into an object of natural and cultural heritage” (p. 225). Next, the Kalikhmans chart the varied encounters between humans and Lake Baikal across time, culminating in its recognition as a UNESCO world heritage site following decades of Soviet resource seizure and exploitation. Breyfogle then probes the deeper roots of nature protection around Baikal, tracing the origins of the Barguzin zapovednik—the first state-sponsored nature reserve in Russia founded in 1916—and its later Soviet iteration, before Elena Kochetkova returns to the theme of Soviet exploitation of the lake in the 1950s-70s. Kochetkova again draws out the competing and conflicting narratives surrounding the lake, particularly the tensions between state institutions, such as Gosstroj (the State Committee for Construction), keen to build new pulp and paper plants, and the voices of scientists at the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences. While state institutions claimed ultimate influence, the significant resistance of Siberian scientists not only underscores the tensions between local and central authorities but also offers a counterbalance to overly simplistic readings of Soviet resource exploitation. In closing the volume, Mark Sokolsky picks up the thread of Breyfogle’s contribution, this time examining nature protection in Primor’e in the Russian Far East, here identifying the ways late imperial civil society, particularly elite hunting clubs, was instrumental in early wildlife conservation, which later developed into a far wider scheme of state protection and nature reserves in the Soviet period. In both eras, Sokolsky suggests, nature protection was paternalistic and ethnocentric in its impulses, despite differences in scale and action.

The chapters are arranged geographically rather than chronologically and, as a result, jump backward and forward in time. A good number of the contributions range widely across the late imperial and Soviet periods, while several consider longer time spans of six centuries or more. This loose frame allows the authors to explore the multiple spatial and political configurations that have existed across the centuries, arguably giving additional primacy to place as a key category of analysis rather than any one specific temporal moment. This is not to say that time is unimportant however: the longer durée allows continuities to be drawn between the imperial and Soviet periods, for instance, with regard to the development of nature reserves and the emergence of ideas about nature protection in general. The broader temporal horizon also brings into view deeper ecological time, emphasizing both the types of ecological change that only become visible when stepping back from specific decades or centuries and the rapid and disruptive impact of human action. Many of the chapters also serve to highlight nature itself as a powerful material force in shaping human histories, most explicitly in the contributions of Breyfogle in the context of the location and boundaries of the Barguzin zapovednik and Dale in light of the potent risk posed by St. Petersburg’s riverine location.
Elsewhere, there are hints of how humans might be considered one part of a more universal nature, particularly when Breyfogle notes how the bodies of perished gulag prisoners have returned to the Solovetskie Islands’ ecosystems, and there clearly remains plenty to be said about how nonhuman movement and mobility affects human-nature relationships.

Beyond elaborating on the central themes described above, particularly on place- and environment-making, one extremely powerful contribution that the volume overall makes is to underscore the importance of physically going into nature as a vital component of intellectual exploration. There is a clear commitment here to “being there”: that historians (environmental and otherwise) “need to embed themselves in the places and environments that they study” (p. 1). This raises important questions about the centrality of experience in history writing: the significance of walking, smelling, seeing as integral parts of writing and producing history. In this case, the editors suggest that direct first-hand experience of a place is generative of new connections, new encounters and collaborations, new insights, and new conversations with local experts and inhabitants, and this is evident in many of the contributions. One might also add that this takes on additional resonance in the Russian context, where the ability to “be there” was not and is not always taken as a given, not least as a result of restrictions and closed sites in the Soviet period and restricted access to zapovedniki in the present. This emphasis on experience quite rightly and very usefully highlights the real value in literally having boots on the ground rather than writing at arm’s length, but might be matched by a more critical appraisal of its limitations and blind spots, a reflection on the other work that “being there” might do when viewed from both Russian and international perspectives.

For a beautifully crafted book that has a lot to say both empirically and methodologically, one wonders whether a conclusion of some sort, however short, would have been useful to draw out the innovative contributions that are made here. To some extent, the richness and diversity of the chapters defy being captured in an overarching summary, and the introduction certainly does a good job of setting out a common agenda, but there are themes in the chapters that are identified in the introduction and remain somewhat open-ended. The emphasis on place(s), for instance, is first and foremost suggestive of the local: place is unique to local nature, to geographic setting, and to the conflicting and overlapping ideas attached to a specific landscape or ecosystem. Yet several of the chapters—most explicitly Bruno’s work on Lake Imandra—begin to show how profoundly local ideas of place are themselves intimately bound up with broader regional and national settings: state policy, ethnicity, faith, industrialization, and so forth. Bruno goes further when he asks, “Can there still be a way to tell stories of the Anthropocene that reveal global change while staying focussed on the local?”; he ultimately suggests that the story of Lake Imandra has been shaped by both “the deeply local and the deeply global, whilst the specific politics of Russian history have played a secondary role” (pp. 72, 86). Some reflection on the many scales involved in place and local nature might have further developed threads such as this that are woven within and between the chapters. Likewise, the coverage favors—for good reason—certain well-known spots that are deemed to have particular natural value (most notably, Solovki and Baikal). One can only imagine what the volume and its findings would have looked like had less-“known” places been the focus of study, less remarkable landscapes, nature less famed for its significance or value. Yet this is testament more to the achievements of the volume and its exciting work in outlining areas for future research than it is a drawback. Overall, Place and Nature is a thought-provoking and energizing read. It convincingly demonstrates the contributions of place-based environmental history and provides a creative, heartfelt snapshot of the field as it stands today.
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