



# H-Environment

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**Stephen Brain, *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953*** (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011)  
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**Introduction by Jacob Darwin Hamblin, Oregon State University**

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**W**as Stalin an environmentalist? It may be hard to imagine the long-time leader of the former Soviet Union as anything but a ruthless dictator. His show trials, his executions, and his gulags did not indicate a strong concern for human life, and it is difficult to conceive of a counterbalancing worry for the natural world. On the other hand, the same approach to governance that allowed an all-powerful state to impose collectivized agriculture over such a vast area might have been conducive to halting practices we typically associate with unbridled capitalism, such as the clear-cutting of forests. Today scholars are coming around slowly to the uncomfortable notion that many of the values espoused by later environmentalists, such as sustainable agriculture and pollution controls, also were favored by unsavory leaders from the past. The Nazis, for example, associated natural landscapes with German-ness, and Hitler's views of racial purity blended with his views of bodily and natural purity. Were there similar values at work among Soviet leaders?

**Stephen Brain's** book *Song for the Forest* is an exploration of this question, and his answer may be a surprise. He makes a strong case for a kind of environmental thought at work in the Soviet Union in the era prior to Stalin's death in 1953. Although he identifies an approach that does not match up point-for-point with latter-day environmentalism, he believes that it still qualifies. He calls it Stalinist environmentalism. Focusing on the conservation programs in the various forest zones of the Soviet Union, he shows how Stalin-era conservation was distinct from competing versions of it from Germany and elsewhere, and that leading specialists were often successful in promoting sustainable forestry under Stalin.

Brain takes this a step further and notes that Stalin's plans can be understood as an early attempt to reverse human-induced climate change.

To comment on Brain's book in this roundtable, we have a range of experts on environmental history during the Soviet period. One is **Sari Autio-Sarasmo**, a researcher at the University of Helsinki. A specialist in Soviet-era economic development, she has worked extensively on the role of forest conservation, especially in the Karelia region, in the modernizing plans of Soviet leaders. Like Brain, Autio-Sarasmo has worked on the conceptual strands of what might be considered environmental thought in Russia and the Soviet Union.<sup>1</sup>

**Brian Bonhomme**, an associate professor at Youngstown State University, shares with Stephen Brain an expertise in Soviet forestry, and he also has explored the opportunities that existed when centralized government could attempt to implement the latest scientific ideas on a huge scale. For Bonhomme, there was not

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<sup>1</sup> Arja Rosenholm and Sari Autio-Sarasmo, eds., *Understanding Russian Nature: Representations, Values, and Concepts* (Helsinki: Aleksanteri Institute, 2005).

as firm a break in forestry attitudes as one might expect between imperial Russia and the early Bolshevik years, and in the political and economic strains of the early Soviet years, centralized control of forestry practices was not always easy to achieve.<sup>2</sup>

**Jenny Leigh Smith** is an assistant professor of history at Georgia Tech, and her research has explored the environmental history of the Soviet Union through animals and food. Just as economic strains put pressure on forestry practices, they also shaped the kinds of foods to which Russians, Ukrainians, and others had access. One example was *tushonka*, a canned pork product widely available as a wartime donation from surplus American farms. Through that product, Smith reveals how the Soviet state mobilized to normalize and encourage the mass-production of particular commodities, namely pigs and the crops that fed them.<sup>3</sup>

**Diana Mincyte**, an assistant professor and faculty fellow at New York University, also is an expert on agriculture and food systems, especially in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Some of her work explores how peasants responded to collectivization, often by exerting some control over small semiprivate allotments of land. In her study of Lithuanians under Stalinism, she shows how these subsidiary farms became a way peasants exerted control and gained power in their communities, shielding them from the extractive practices of government. For Mincyte, these small plots became essential parts of the socialist state under Stalin.<sup>4</sup>

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Bonhomme, *Forests, Peasants, and Revolutionaries: Forest Conservation and Organization in Soviet Russia, 1917-1929* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Leigh Smith, "Tushonka: Cultivating Soviet Postwar Taste" in *M/C Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2010). Available at <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/299>

<sup>4</sup> Diana Mincyte, "Everyday Environmentalism: The Practice, Politics, and Nature of Subsidiary Farming in Stalin's Lithuania," *Slavic Review* 68:1 (2009), 31-49.

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**Comments by Sari Autio-Sarasmo, University of Helsinki**

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According to Stephen Brain's book *Song of the forest*, the dark and dense forests were the birthplace of the Russian state (4). Without forests, Russia would be unimaginable. Although Brain gives the forest a metaphorical value in the creation of the Russian identity and culture<sup>5</sup>, the main focus in the book is on the development of Russian forestry and Stalinist environmentalism. The time frame of the book is from 1905 until Stalin's death in 1953, with its repercussions on environmentalism of the late-Soviet period. The author's starting point is that the Soviet Union developed a genuine and effective – although unusual – environmentalist programme that existed during the Stalin era. He challenges the prevailing assumption that Soviet environmental politics during the Stalin era was implacably hostile to any environmentalist initiatives.

The author's analysis is based on the wide understanding about environmentalism. In the case of the Soviet Union, it is possible to define environmentalism as a wider political and philosophical programme striving to preserve the integrity of the environment. The programme included conservation and preservation in addition to public health initiatives. This broad approach gives a strong basis for the book's aim to challenge the 'existing consensus of Soviet environmental politics'. From the point of view of this environmentalist approach, forest conservation was a vital part of the Soviet industrialisation programme, i.e. industrialisation would not have succeeded without environmental protection. This is indeed a new approach to the topic, and definitely one worth introducing. A new approach to analysing the economic policy of Stalin's era based on natural resources, i.e. Stalin's industrialisation process as a whole, is also welcome, since a mainstream approach seems to exist on this subject as well.

Brain starts his reasoning of Stalinist environmentalism by analysing the founding fathers of Russian forestry from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Soviet forest policy had its basis on Russian forest management, which was a combination of economic thinking and cultural imagination. The specific role in the analysis of transition from Russian forestry to Soviet environmentalism is given to Georgii Fedorovich Morozov and his theory of stand types of forests. Morozov's theory creates an interesting storyline from the Russian empire until the late Soviet era. This brings to the fore the historical context of Soviet environmentalism, that is the nationalistic thinking and modernisation aims, as well as the cultural dimension of the Russian empire.

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<sup>5</sup> In this comment the main focus is on forestry and environmentalism. *Song of the Forest* contains a rather strong cultural element, which makes the book more than only environmental history. Those interested in the cultural approach, recommendable reading alongside Brain's book is Jane T. Costlow's new book *Heart-pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-century Forest* (Cornell University Press 2013).

The main aim of the book is to revise the role of environmentalism during the Stalin era and the heritage of Russian environmentalism in Soviet forestry. The structure and the titles of the chapters are constructed according to the circle of life in the forest: old growth, seeds, ground fire, clear-cut, regeneration and transformation. Each chapter analyses one step in the development of Russian or Soviet forestry and environmentalism. This is a fresh way to construct the narrative, but also an innovative way to make the claim of environmentalism's existence during the Stalin era. That existence is treated in the Transformation chapter, dedicated to the Great Stalin Plan for the transformation of nature. According to Brain, the implementation of the plan meant the victory of the ecological viewpoint in Soviet forestry. Several plans of afforestation were implemented around the steppe<sup>6</sup> in order to create forest belts to protect fields. Agronomist Trofim Lysenko also had influence in forestry, which caused failures in the plan, but the main point was that there were aims to protect and regenerate forests.

*Song of the forest* contains a profound and reasonable examination of Soviet forestry and Stalinist environmentalism. The definition of research tasks and focus are the main issues, and Brain has indeed done well from this point. The book is not only a thorough study of the subject, but also well written. The author gives a clear and thorough picture of the creation and organization of Soviet forestry from the Bolshevik revolution until the end of the Stalin period. Numerous organizations and reorganizations took place during the Stalin era, which has made research on the subject challenging. From the point of view of a comprehensive picture of the Soviet forestry, collecting the evolution of forestry in the Soviet Union into one volume and making sense of it is indeed a great favour for any reader interested in the topic. However, taking into account more thoroughly the political and economic changes that took place during the Stalin era would have made the book even better. This, of course would have taken the author more in the direction of mainstream analysis of Stalin's forest policy, but even so, the major question for the foresters in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union was how to make forests produce wealth for their owners without destroying sustainability. My question is: how much would this economic approach have changed the outcome of the research? In other words, how strong was environmentalist thinking when the optimal plan was adapted during the first five-year plan?

Forestry was expected to support the industrialisation process – and thus also the modernisation process – on all levels of society in the centre and the periphery. Brain concludes on page 170 that “the Soviet timber industry was shifted from country's centre to its periphery so that ecological function of forests would be preserved (...)”. As the book concentrates mainly on the state level (centre), developments on the local level (periphery) get less attention. There is no need to deny the author's claim that environmentalism existed during the Stalin period - this

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<sup>6</sup> About the environmental history of the steppe, see David Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700-1914* (Oxford University Press 2013).

was undoubtedly the case on the state level. However, as the focus is shifted on the local level, this situation might change. How representative was Stalinist environmentalism from the point of view of the whole Soviet Union? How was the environmentalism seen in the regions that were defined as forest industrial regions? For example, in the forest areas of north-western Russia, near the good water routes, logging exceeded annual growth without any regeneration during the whole Stalin era. This was the periphery where the industrial use of the forest was shifted during the 1930s. The situation did not change after the decisions of water protection zones or the protection of locally significant forests. Because of the strict demand to fulfil the plan, logging continued and even increased in the protection zones, due to the lack of workforce or technology to utilize remote forest areas. The primary aim was to produce as much timber as possible for export, without too much thought about afforestation or water protection. From this point of view, there were different realities in the Soviet Union, depending on which area and which decision-making level is scrutinized.

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**Comments by Brian Bonhomme, Youngstown State University**


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**“Stalinist Environmentalism”: Its Nature and Some Potential Implications**

**A**mong the many questions *Song of the Forest* provokes, I'd like to treat – somewhat discursively – the nature and some potential implications of what Brain calls “Stalinist Environmentalism.” From the start, Brain warns us that Stalin (whom he sees personally as the ultimate source of Stalinist environmentalism) does not fit the traditional or typical pattern of a conservationist but must instead be understood as a “peculiar kind of environmentalist.” He continues: “although not apparently driven by conservationist or preservationist concerns, [Stalin’s] policies withdrew millions of hectares [of forest] from economic exploitation on the grounds that this would improve the hydrology of the Soviet Union. These millions of hectares were left more or less untouched, in keeping with the supposition that complex, wild forests best regulated water flows, and thus one may conclude that Stalin’s policies were steadfastly environmental – and because of the way they were carried out, preservationist as well” (2). If this risks making Stalin something of an ‘accidental’ conservationist, Brain is unperturbed: “[F]orest protection driven by different motivations than those that animate conservationism in other countries is forest protection nonetheless” (131). Although he does not put it this way, it seems to me Brain is arguing that Stalin was a functional, rather than an intentional environmentalist, and that functional environmentalism can be considered essentially equal to intentional environmentalism. This is an important consideration with significant ramifications, into which I can only dip lightly in this short piece. I'd like to start, however, by considering whether Stalin really deserves to be known as *any* sort of environmentalist, at least based on the evidence Brain produces.

**Stalinist Environmentalism?**

In order to evaluate the environmental significance of Stalin-era forest policies, it is worth looking briefly at three related sub-questions: What were these policies intended to achieve? How well did they work? And what was Stalin’s personal role in formulating them?

As Brain tells it, Stalinist environmentalism in forest matters was manifest primarily in efforts to limit the activities of the economic organs – the VSNKh and its subordinate bureaus. These latter – driven by “Promethean” notions about conquering nature in order to build socialism – treated forests simply as vast sources of exploitable timber and sought to log them aggressively using clear-cuts. Stalinist environmentalism, on the other hand, grew out of more ecologically-informed, “technocratic” notions of forests as complex natural systems performing important physical functions such as minimization of soil erosion and the general preservation of hydrological regimes. These functions were highly valued because they “safeguard[ed] cities from floods and hydroelectric dams from silting up” (170).

Cities and hydroelectric dams, of course, were in turn vital to the Five-Year Plan and the whole socialist-industrial future. In this way, forest health underpinned successful socialist construction. Un-logged forests were vital to the future, perhaps more so than timber was. By contrast, for the Promethean would-be loggers of the economic organs, intact forests were construed as a remnant of the past, as something to be harvested, and in a sense sacrificed, in order to build the future. Timber was more important.

For Stalin's camp, then, forest protection was not meaningful in and of itself, but was only a means to other ends. I am inclined at the outset to agree with Brain, however, that this should not immediately disqualify it as some sort of meaningful environmentalism. After all, protection of natural resources is of necessity *always* a means to another end, at least at some level. Even relatively-irreproachable environmentalists such as Muir, Leopold, or Carson strove, via the preservation of landscapes and natural systems, toward some other end, be it psychological or social well-being, the integrity of large natural systems, the betterment of public health, or something else.

Remaining with the question of intentions and goals, in chapter six, Brain moves his focus to the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature of the late 1940s-early 1950s. Here, an additional goal was sought – not just stabilization of hydrological regimes, but also alteration and moderation of steppe climates for the benefit of collectivized agriculture (and also alteration of the natural hydrological regime itself via extensive canalization and other hydro-engineering). Again, Stalin is cast in the role of functional forest advocate, concerned not with forests for their own sake, but with their physical role in other priorities. However, while it seems clear that the plan was indeed “hijacked” and rendered increasingly Promethean by Lysenko and his supporters (142). I find it very hard to agree with Brain's characterization of this program *at any point* as “the world's first explicit attempt to reverse human-induced climate change” (140) – and by extension, with the notion of Stalin's role here as constituting any meaningful kind of environmentalism. The Russian and Central Asian steppes are essentially natural environments, not the result of widespread forest clearings in historical times. Certainly, there may have been room here and there to restore some degraded stands, but the scale of the envisioned afforestation, the rather geometric shaping and positioning of shelter-belts, major irrigation projects, and above all the large-scale collectivized agriculture at the heart of the whole enterprise, leaves the Great Stalin Plan exactly what its title says it was, a Plan for the *Transformation* of Nature, not for its restoration. In any case, the project ultimately yielded scant benefits, either for the forests or the Soviet economy.

How well did Stalinist environmentalism actually work in the forests? Brain identifies several positive developments, including a 1931 law emanating from the SNK that banned all logging within one kilometer of several major rivers and increased commitment to reforestation (119); a “powerful new administration” (the Main Administration of Forest Protection and Afforestation, or GLO) created in 1936



to manage sensitive forest land (123); increases in GLO's powers during 1939-40; and establishment of an independent Ministry of Forestry in 1947. And yet, the results nearly always seem disappointing: organs tasked with reforestation "repeatedly failed to meet . . . quotas," (122) resources are not allocated, and unsustainable logging continues much as before. Where certain improvements are noted (in water-protective zones during the 1930s, for example), they always appear to be offset or worse by other developments: "From 1928 to 1940, the amount of timber logged in the Soviet Union increased almost tenfold, from 28 million cubic meters to 246 million cubic meters, almost all taken unsustainably in European Russia" (127). And so on. Nor does the Stalinist Terror appear to have fallen any more lightly upon the favored organ of forest protection: "Accusations of wrecking . . . struck the GLO with the same violence and unpredictability it did all Soviet economic managers," as Brain puts it (128).

And what of Stalin's personal role in these matters? "Stalinist" forest policy is largely shaped by a variety of committed individuals and groups working within frameworks established by the great pre-Revolutionary forester G. F. Morozov (1867-1920). Stalin himself appears only fleetingly and blurredly throughout the book. Policies take shape and are implemented; individuals speak out or are criticized; forest affairs move along. Institutionally, much of the opposition to the VSNKh and Promethean loggers emanates from the SNK. But Stalin's specific role always remains opaque, forcing Brain toward frequent inferences and speculations. While these are certainly plausible in many cases, here and there one wonders if there isn't less here than meets the eye – for example when the author cites a comment by deputy Narkomzem head V. M. Solov'ev that Stalin was the "initiator and inspiration" of the 1931 forest law, but then acknowledges the possibility that this may have been the usual "obligatory" rather than genuine gratitude (124). Interestingly, and also relevant to questions about Stalin's role, The Great Stalin Plan itself, though named for the dictator is actively shaped and directed primarily by Lysenko.

On the other hand, Brain's case is clearly strengthened by the fact that shortly after Stalin's death, much of the edifice of "Stalinist forestry" died, too. The Ministry of Forest Management (*Minleskhoz*, the critical organ of Stalinist forest policy from 1947-53) was dismantled just ten days later, its functions given over to the more economically-minded Ministry of Agriculture; and the pace of shelter-belt planting dropped precipitously – effectively ending the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature soon thereafter. Obviously, in the political rearrangements that followed the dictator's death, the balance between constituencies promoting protection/afforestation or exploitation/clear-cutting appears to have been tipped in the latter's favor. This certainly suggests Stalin, and perhaps some others in his entourage, had indeed played an important role over previous years.

### Intentional and Functional Environmentalisms

So while certainly no John Muir, Stalin does perhaps seem to have been *some* sort of environmentalist, as Brain says. And if this is so, what does it matter if he was a functional or an intentional one? Surely outcomes are what matter? Shouldn't *these* be the true yardsticks upon which to judge a person or a policy? One does not get very far into musing upon such a question without realizing how deeply it can complicate cherished narratives and values. Rachel Carson, just to pick one example, was an intentional environmentalist *par excellence*. She devoted much of her life and all of her expertise and personal strength to an impassioned fight on behalf of the natural environment and public health. Her critics, however, have rarely gone after her on account of her intentions. Rather, they have picked on specific, unintended outcomes, such as apparent increases in some malaria rates following the banning of DDT. One may choose to dismiss these criticisms as ideologically-motivated carping, but at the end of the day, there is nothing ideological about malaria. So one has instead to weigh outcomes: are toxin-laden food chains and all their consequences worth some measure of malaria control, for instance? Personally, in Carson's case, I find the good she achieved to greatly outweigh any harm, but whatever the judgment, it seems that to be fair, reasonable, and objective, it ought ultimately to come down to results, not intentions. Neville Chamberlin clearly had honorable intentions in his dealings with Hitler (avoiding war), but he is judged (rightly, I think) instead for the outcome (he failed to prevent war and probably emboldened Hitler).

Back in the smaller realm of Soviet environmentalism, we are confronted with the reverse case – the possibility that in one area at least, some real good came, if unintentionally, from an odious dictator and a repressive and murderous regime. This may indeed turn out to have been the case. If so, it demonstrates an important point, that no one, not even Stalin (and no regime, not even Stalin's) is entirely monochromatic. I do have the sense, however, that in environmentalism (and probably in general), intentions, while secondary to outcomes, *do* matter. For one thing, they provide a level of constancy, focus, and overall vision that can transcend the merely practical outcomes of current circumstances and ensure a greater degree of security for long-term policy. Persons and groups we readily consider genuinely environmentalist (and by extension their policies) typically are grounded in a strong and real connection to nature, and to its protection – a grounding that is neither issue-specific nor dependent upon the existence of justifiable, useful ends, but is instead unconditional, non-negotiable, and instinctive. A functional environmentalist like Stalin (if we allow him the distinction) does not operate in this manner. Nowhere in the book does Brain suggest Stalin felt any real personal connection to the forests. Nor do we hear that Stalin's practical environmentalism spread into advocacy for other environmental issues. In fact, Brain specifies that it did not: "Concerns about pollution, aesthetics, or public support [he might also have said *public health*] played almost no role (169-70). Thus, it is not surprising to hear that increased protections in forests along river basins were counterbalanced by

more uncontrolled exploitation in other forests – nor to know that in the Stalinist economy overall, rampant industrialization, monumental engineering, and Promethean imperatives continued unrestrained.

Interestingly, Brain's Stalin – construed only in the realm of forests – is not only un-Promethean, but is cast as the main figure *leading opposition* to the Prometheans. Stalinist environmentalism, instead, is shown to be “technocratic” – that is, practical and pragmatic in its aims, and reliant on science, expertise, and reason in the formulation of policies and conclusions. Brain does not speak much of the Promethean strains in Stalinist society outside of forestry, but perhaps the main distinction between the two would be that for a technocrat, Nature itself is an *objective* and quantifiable *system* that can be studied, understood, and on the basis of good knowledge, manipulated to achieve best results. For the Prometheans, on the other hand, Nature exists at least in part as a *metaphor*, something *conceptual* and *symbolic* as well as real, something standing in, as I noted earlier, for tradition, backwardness, and inaction. From here stemmed much of the destructive impulses of Soviet industrialization, the metaphors of “conquest” and “battle,” the rhetoric of “fixing” nature's “mistakes,” and so on. To separate Stalin from this tradition, as Brain effectively does, may be appropriate in forest affairs (I am mostly convinced that Stalin did indeed see forests as natural systems, not as metaphors); but it seems to me that it would be wrong to extrapolate this into any kind of general position. Stalin *was* the primary moving force behind his eponymous era, and therefore behind Promethean projects both real and metaphorical, from the construction of Magnitogorsk and the Belomor Canal to literary efforts to “re-engineer human souls.”

It is worth noting also that Stalinist environmentalism – as a component of Stalinism overall – existed in a sort of political vacuum, unaffected by and unaccountable to public opinion or citizen input. As many writers and a wealth of historical experience have shown, such input – whether deriving from formally-organized NGOs, informal public feedback, or otherwise – has been the ultimate and indispensable source of meaningful environmental policy in virtually every time and place. Its absence in Stalin's USSR should give us pause, at the very least, when evaluating the era's, or the leader's, environmental credentials.

In the final analysis, of course, none of this tells us that Stalin absolutely was not an environmentalist of any sort (even though I remain skeptical he was). It only helps further define and delimit the type of “peculiar environmentalist” that Brain has already told us Stalin was.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss Stephen Brain's work and offer my congratulations to the author for a fine and provocative piece of research.

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**Comments by Jenny Leigh Smith, Georgia Institute of Technology**

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In *Song of the Forest*, Stephen Brain describes the development of the science and practice of Russian forestry from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century through the revolutionary and communist period, ending with the death of Stalin in 1953. Concise, extremely well-written, and focused on a topic many Soviet scholars want to learn more about, Stephen Brain's book has been an easy sell for Russianists. *Song of the Forest* is also an exciting and new form of Soviet environmental history because, unlike almost everything else that has been written about natural resources in the Soviet Union, *Song of the Forest* is not purely declensionist in tone. In Brain's story, forest policy in general and Stalin's plans for reforesting large swathes of the country in particular are hubristic, short-sighted, and wildly inconsistent, but there is no inevitable march toward doom and ecocide that remains the dominant trope of English language histories about the Soviet environment. By daring to write a more complex history of Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature, Stephen Brain has ushered in a new era of writing about the Soviet environment; one that I am excited to join.

The first half of Brain's book is not about the Soviet Union at all, and instead focuses on the beginnings of forestry in Imperial Russia. This is another subtle innovation in this work, since Russian historians tend to treat the pre- and post-revolutionary history of Russia as an impermeable divide. Brain's main point here is that Soviet forestry shared important continuities with its imperial precursors. Scientists, ideas and institutions that were created during the imperial period all remained central to the work of forestry in the Soviet period as well. Douglas Weiner was Stephen Brain's first advisor, and his intellectual influence is evident in these early chapters, which blend scientific biography, institutional history and ecological thick description. Brain focuses quickly on the leading figure of Russian forestry, Georgii Morozov, who saw forests and Russian identity as inextricably linked. Forests were a resource that was both natural and cultural and Morozov and other early forestry pioneers strived to create a "soulful new forest science" for Russia's primeval woodlands. Morozov's romantic and nationalistic notion that Russian forests required a holistic, reverential (and less German) method of management persevered into Soviet times.

American environmental historians will note the parallels between Russian and American notions of forest-romanticism. Although inspired by German innovations in forest management, the Russian approach to forestry rapidly diverged from Western Europe, not unlike the experience of American forestry during the same time period.

The second half of the book addresses the persistence of this approach within the broader context of the Soviet regime's natural resource policies from 1917-1953, most significantly in the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature. For Soviet historians, this continuity is surprising because so many scientific institutions,

policies and approaches were radically restructured (or, often, cancelled) after the Soviets seized power. Morozov's ideas endured in the policies of the *Minleskhoz* long after the scientist himself had been denounced by the Soviet state and the *Minleskhoz* became an important government agency that helped the state husband one of its most valuable natural resources. Beginning in the 1930s, one of the centerpieces of this government agency was the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, an outsized plan of restoration ecology that was informed by both Morozov and Trofim Lysenko.

The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature was the first state sponsored plan to reverse human induced climate change. Here is my first challenge to Brain. Indirectly, Brain builds a case for the contemporary relevancy of the Stalin Plan as the first in a long line of human interventions intended to reverse or slow undesirable climate change. However, this is not a point that he addresses directly in his book. I would love for him to do so in this forum. Regardless of the fact that the Great Stalin Plan was born, promulgated and then phased out decades before the phrase "global warming" came into popular use, why is it important or enlightening that Stalin's name is attached to the very first climate-changing scheme of this kind? My second question for Brain addresses one of the central arguments of the book: namely, that there really was such a thing as "Stalinist Environmentalism." As he states on page 10, "the Stalinist political and economic system made meaningful economic and political sacrifices in the interests of environmentalism." The last half of the book contains a thorough description of Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature, but I wondered if Brain can identify this form of Stalinist environmentalism at work in other branches of the government during this time? Have historians missed a crucial ingredient in the authoritarian milieu that was Stalinist governance? Or perhaps forestry was an exceptional science in this regard and Stalinist environmentalism exists nowhere else.

Finally, Brain stops his story in 1953 with the death of Stalin and the quiet shelving of the ambitious reforestation plans Stalin had so strongly supported. This is a natural endpoint to the book, but if pressed to continue his story into the 1960s and 1970s, I wonder what forms of environmentalism Brain might have discovered. What happened to the Ministry of Forestry Production in the post-Stalinist era? Are there still echoes of Morozov's soulful science in 1967, a century after his birth?

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**Comments by Diana Mincyte, New York University**

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In popular and scholarly debates, Stalinism tends to be linked to ideological proclamations that place humans above nature. Yet, as Stephen Brain in his brilliant *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism* shows, it was the Soviet Union that allocated the largest tracts of forest to be preserved at the height of Stalin's rule, in the 1930s and 1940s. Focusing on the politics of forest management in Imperial Russia and the first three decades of the Soviet Union, Brain's book examines the ideas and institutional forces that led to the unexpected expressions of environmentalism in Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature. Framed as an intellectual history, *Song of the Forest* tracks the politics of forest preservation under Stalin to the work of pre-revolutionary forester Georgii Fedorovich Morozov who pushed against the dominant models of German forestry to develop the first national school of thought for Russian forest management that was grounded in environmental ethics.

Meticulously documented, theoretically nuanced, and beautifully written, *Song of the Forest* explores an overlooked subject in Russia's environmental history, connecting environmental governance with national sentiments, scientific institutions, political contestations, and biographies of historical figures. As numerous twists in the evolution of Russian forestry suggest, these linkages were always complicated, contradictory, and at times even violent. Exploring the debates initiated by Morozov, Mikhail Orlov, and several other Russian thinkers and foresters, Brain argues that Morozov's forestry management models were first denounced in the early years of Bolshevik rule, but were later adopted by Stalin's proponents who re-casted forest conservation in the functional language of protecting water and larger hydrological systems. Developing this line of argumentation, Brain makes a case for the variety of environmentalism approach that challenges common assumptions that democratic forms of governance serve as the primary source of mobilization over environmental protection and presents a more complicated picture in which the Stalinist state developed environmental protection agendas. Brain also questions the dominant model of Western environmentalism that "[rejects] the idea that human interests should be subjugated to natural ones" (p. 170).

I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to read and reflect on Brain's work. It is a timely and provocative book, and it brings an important contribution to the growing field of environmental humanities in general and East European/Russian studies in particular. It complicates our understanding of socialist industrialization and adds an important environmental dimension to the debates about legitimacy, cultural politics, and the distribution of power in the Soviet state under Stalin that have dominated the field for almost twenty years. With this in mind, my comments are intended not as a critique of the arguments and approaches taken in *Song of the Forest*, but as an invitation to reflect on how this project could be extended and what new articles could be written using the rich materials covered in the book. I have

two such comments. First, I would like to bring up the ethnic and national dimensions of Russian forest management. Second and relatedly, I am interested in hearing more about the ways in which geopolitics figured in Stalin's forest management politics.

In examining Morozov's writings, Brain documents how Morozov moved away from German forest management science that favored monoculture forests and abstract models of forest regeneration. At the heart of Morozov's approach was a moral and political critique of German scientific models for its "shortage of Russian soul" (p. 17). As Brain shows, Morozov introduced a new forest categorization system that approached forests not as German "tree farms," but as environmental, economic and cultural systems encompassing soil, water, economic calculus and the history of human use of the specific "forest stand." Unlike German foresters who placed emphasis on experts, Morozov embraced local knowledge and advocated for the inclusion of Russian peasants in forest management. Building on romantic and nationalist traditions of the late nineteenth century, Brain shows, Morozov couched his approach to forest management in nationalist language of Russianness and Russia's holistic environmental ethics.

While I agree with Brain's argument that "Russian people possessed a closer cultural, historical, and spiritual connection to the forest than the prevailing [German] management system recognized" (p.12), I am wondering how alternative nationalist narratives about forest management played in the debates about Russian vs. German forestry. More specifically, it would be helpful to hear more about how the ideas of Russian nationalism that were expressed in the forestry debates related to the multi-ethnic, multi-national nature of Russian Empire. While Morozov presented an idealized model of Russia as a nation constituted through its harmonious relationship to nature, it is during this period that the Empire was rocked by the emerging nationalist movements that proclaimed their own rights to forests and the land, and made explicit territorial claims. Katrina Schwartz's analysis of the history of forest management politics in Latvia, for example, suggests that Russia's Western provinces built competing nationalist ideas about landscape management that emphasized productive use of land by negotiating German forestry methods and Russian land-use reforms. While Schwartz does not make this point explicitly, in light of her arguments we might wonder to what extent the adoption of Russian nationalism in forestry was aimed not only at Germany, but also worked to cement internal colonization processes within the Empire.

In addition to the question of nationalism in Imperial Russia, it might also be worthwhile to explore the geopolitics of allocation of forest reserves in Stalin's Plan for the Transformation of Nature, particularly the lack of allocations for the state protected forests in the socially and politically unstable areas in the Caucasus region, and after World War II, Western Ukraine and the Baltic States. As *Song of the Forest* documents, the 1943 decree divided all the forests into three groups. Group I consisted of forest reserves that were allocated in the river basins, around industrial zones, and the areas in Western Siberia as well as wooded steppes, and they enjoyed

full protection from the state (p. 130). Group II included forests located in “the Khazak, Uzbek, Tadzhik, and Turkmen Republics, the Mordovskii, Chuvash, Bashkir, Tatar and Mari autonomous republics, and the forests located on the left bank of the River Volga in Ivanovsk, Yaroslavl, Chelyabinsk, Kurgansk, and Chkalovsk provinces” (p. 130). These forests could be cut, but their output could not exceed annual growth. No restrictions were imposed on clear cutting Group III forests.

While it seems obvious that forests located in the ecologically sensitive areas including extremely dry and mountainous regions in Central Asia were to be preserved, it is not clear why other similar forests such as in the Caucasus were not protected. Is this omission a coincidence or does this reflect a tenuous relationship that Russia had with the region? To what extent did the ideas about the people living in and near these forests play a role in deciding which forests should be preserved and which ones were destined for felling? Scholars writing on the issues of nature preservation, including Chandra Mukerji, Donald Worster, Thomas Lekan, and Andrew Isenberg, among others, have underscored the relationships between ecological issues and political questions of governance. They argue that ecological concerns are inseparable from social and political imaginaries, and that access to natural resources is always political. James C. Scott's recent book makes a similar point to suggest that it is forests and other difficult to access terrains that are central for our understanding of the ways in which state power is exercised. Considering this literature, it could potentially be interesting to see whether and how the geopolitical concerns made their way into Stalin's Plan for the Transformation of Nature.

I understand that both questions are beyond the scope of *Song of the Forest*, as they come from the domain of political ecology and sociology. I do hope, however, that these comments might be helpful in developing this project, and I very much look forward to reading Brain's new work.



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**Response by Stephen Brain, Mississippi State University**

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**B**efore responding to the queries of the reviewers, I first would like to thank each of them, not only for their kind words, but also for the time and care they obviously invested in their critiques. Each of them raises important and thought-provoking questions, and each points the way to new research angles. And I would also like to thank Jacob Hamblin for organizing these H-Environment roundtables, which I esteemed as enormously useful long before I was invited to participate, and especially for assembling such a cosmopolitan panel.

The critical response to *Song of the Forest* suggests to me that, as I sought to illustrate the survival of forest conservationism through the Stalin years, I may have placed too firmly in the background the tragic arc of the story that I was telling. As I conducted my research, I was first surprised that the forest-based conservationism of Georgii Morozov survived during the Stalin years, and then even more surprised to learn that when the forces in favor of conservationism squared off against those who supported maximized exploitation, that the conservationists won, consistently. I wanted to tell that story, so as to revise the scholarly understanding of Stalinism and add nuance to the prevailing characterization of Soviet environmental politics that Brian Bonhomme describes as “monochromatic.” However, though I was excited by the challenge of writing a monograph about Soviet environmental history that was not declensionist, there were other stories I wanted to tell, and stories perhaps with broader application for Soviet and environmental historians. First, I wanted to highlight a tension in the Soviet ideology, between the desire to remake entirely the world via revolution, and the desire to apply science and rationality in ordering society. Neither Lenin nor Stalin would have recognized any conflict between these two impulses, but I wanted to show that forest management made that contradiction patent. Second, I wanted to tell a transnational environmental history, and describe how environmental ideas from one country percolated into another, were embraced, and then changed. Third, given the critiques of modern science as reductionist, elitist, and amoral, I wanted to describe the rise and fall of a scientific system of forest management that rejected all of these attributes. And finally, despite my interest in providing some variety to the declensionist narratives that dominate Soviet and environmental history, I had to acknowledge that the Soviets did destroy these alternative approaches, despite the apparent victory of conservationism—although not as a result of simple animosity. They did so by applying his ideas only in untouched forest preserves, rather than in active forest management, but also by urbanizing the country, a social shift that prevented Morozov’s ideas from gaining new adherents.

In short, in *Song of the Forest*, I wanted to explore whether a dictatorship could accomplish meaningful environmental protection, and the answer I came up with was: yes, but in the long term, no. Dictatorships can protect the environment in ways that liberal democracies cannot, but only in certain circumstances, and even

then, only on foundations riddled with contradictions. Anyone observing the utter failure of liberal democracy to fashion a coherent response to global climate change cannot help but wonder if there is a political system, however odious, able to meet the challenge. Stalin's dictatorship was strong enough, and (I argue) well-disposed to attempt large-scale ecological reconstruction, but because of deeper factors, its largest efforts came to naught and even its apparent successes faded in time, such that when Putin abolished the Group I protected forests in 2007, scarcely anyone noticed, much less protested. Put another way, I suspect that my insistence that there was a Stalinist variant of environmentalism carried along with it the implication that Stalinist environmentalism was an ideal form, or a form of environmentalism preferable to the familiar Western model, but this was not my intention. Rather, I hoped to show that environmentalist ideas remained patent during the Stalin era, and that Stalin's Politburo consistently adjudicated in favor of conservationism, despite the fact that Stalin was clearly not attitudinally an environmentalist; perhaps I argue too elliptically that this disconnect hindered the long-term prospects of Stalinist environmentalism, even while the short-term benefits were much greater than previously suspected.

Turning to specific comments, I notice that some can be grouped together. Sari Autio-Sarasmo and Jenny Smith ask questions related to the presence of conservationism in other kinds of Soviet economic planning. (Autio-Sarasmo asks "How strong was this environmentalist thinking when the optimal plan was adapted during the first five-year plan?," and Smith asks whether I "can identify this form of Stalinist environmentalism at work in other branches of the government during this time?") In response, I can say at this point that I don't have good answers to these questions. It is every scholar's ambition to ask questions interesting enough for others to pursue, and I hope that others will look at Soviet economic planning more expansively. Indeed, in the future, I intend to investigate the importance of the considerations detailed in *Song of the Forest* in Soviet agriculture and urban planning. However, I suspect that forestry was a special case for at least two reasons, and that analyses of other branches of the economy will fail to find such striking outcomes. First, as the panelists noted, the Russian forest possesses a deep cultural meaning as well as an economic meaning, in a way that is not true for ore deposits or other industrial resources. Second, the risks of forest overexploitation were well recognized by the time of the Bolshevik revolution in a way that was not true for other kinds of pollution or environmental disruption; for instance, at the time of the first Five-Year Plan, factory smoke represented a positive, progressive good across the Western world, and not just in the Soviet Union, such that an environmentalist critique of air pollution was not possible at the time. More research is needed.

Another point raised by two panelists is that of the center-periphery relationship in Russian and Soviet governance, a point I discuss only in noting that peripheral forests in Siberia, the far east and the far north, were assigned to Group III, unprotected status, thereby privileging forests of the Russian center. (Autio-Sarasmo asks "How representative was the Stalinist environmentalism from the point of view of the whole Soviet Union?" when, for example, the forest areas of

north-western Russia were so unsustainable, and Diana Mincyte notes that, given the protected status of Central Asian forests, “it is not clear why other similar forests such as in the Caucasus were not protected.) Mincyte adds an additional dimension to this question by asking whether conceptions of the forest and forest health advanced by non-Russian subjects of the Russian empire played a role in either the discussion about forest management or in the formation of policy. To these excellent questions I can again plead ignorance, aside from the perhaps unenlightening observation that the Soviets’ conscious decision to protect the forests of central Russia at the expense of forests where ethnic Russians did not predominate contains a clearly nativist component. I strongly suspect that answers to these questions do exist in the archives, and almost certainly in the scientific journals of the period, although I did not have such questions foremost in my mind when I conducted the research. Even in the nineteenth century, there was a suspicion among Russian foresters that the forests of the periphery were misused, in that they had reached biological maturity and their failure to grow represented wasted biological potential. Whether this is accurate or an artifact of imperial thinking is an interesting question.

Brian Bonhomme’s review raises a number of fascinating questions, especially his observations about nature-as-system versus nature-as-symbol. I’ve responded obliquely to a number of these in my comments above, but I would like to take one last opportunity to convince my readers that the Great Stalin Plan should be thought of as an attempt to reverse human-induced climate change. Bonhomme correctly points out that the Central Asian steppes were never forested, at least not in recent geologic time, and hence the Great Stalin Plan’s attempt to establish forests there could not have checked climate change. Though this may be true from an “objective” point of view, and this misapprehension may have doomed the plan from the start, this does not disqualify the Great Stalin Plan from being an attempt to address climate change. If, in a hundred years’ time, we learned that high concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere were not truly the cause of global warming, but rather some factor that scientists had not yet discovered, that would not mean that the Kyoto Protocol was not an attempt to solve the problem—only that it was a misguided attempt.

My hope for *Song of the Forest* is that it will become part of a body of work about the environmentalism of fully functioning dictatorships, because examining the overlap of these two political phenomena can tell us more about how dictatorships truly operate as well as more about our own perceptions of what constitutes “environmentalism.” Although some work has been done on Nazi environmentalism, much more remains to be done on dictatorships in general, especially in determining how environmentalist sentiments originate and develop; in *Song of the Forest*, for instance, the initiative to protect riparian forests began in the Moscow City Duma, not usually thought of as a locus of Soviet power. How does natural resource management operate in China or Cuba, and how did it interact with popular or scientific opinion in Fascist Italy or the Warsaw Bloc? Do these places function as empires, or something else? And, as Jenny Smith asks with regard to the

Great Stalin Plan, do promising ideas lose all plausibility solely by dint of originating in a dictatorial setting? Again, I'd like to thank the panelists for their comments and for helping to develop this line of inquiry further, and I look forward to their thoughts in the future.

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### About the Contributors

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