

An American Environmental Historian visits Russia's National Parks

by Alan Roe

For as long as I can remember, I have been spellbound by dramatic landscapes and attracted to wild places. More than any other single factor, this is what drew me to the field of environmental history. Studying American environmental history for my MA, I looked at formation of protected areas in the United States - national parks, wild and scenic rivers, scenic trails, wilderness areas etc... As my interest in Soviet history grew and I considered pursuing graduate work in it, I frequently found myself looking at the map, thinking about the variety and grandeur of the dramatic landscapes in a country that covered one-sixth of the earth's landmass. I wanted to see the towering peaks of the Caucasus, Altai, and Ten Shan, the transparent water of Baikal, the volcanoes of Kamchatka, the dense forests of Karelia; these places and others: how they were perceived, how they were used, and how this changed over time interested me more than any of the traditional questions that historians have asked about the Soviet and Russian states.

In 1957, Constantine Paustovskii wrote in a letter to Pravda "a beautiful landscape is something of great significance to the state." The varied landscapes of the USSR were becoming imminently more accessible to the average Soviet citizen as the standard of living improved, tourism infrastructure expanded, and domestic flights flew more regularly to different parts of the Soviet Union. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Academy of Sciences, the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Nature, the All-Union Geographical Society, and other organizations pushed for the formation of national parks to ensure that extractive industries or tourists themselves would not despoil some of the USSR's most scenic places. Through the tireless efforts of individuals, national parks formed to protect the sort of landscapes that Paustovskii asserted were so important to the state - the sort of landscapes that I have long been drawn to.

My dissertation on tourism and national parks compelled me to go beyond archival research and see some of Russia's most scenic areas with my own eyes. For academic works that focus on specific places, I believe that this is almost imperative. It would be difficult for me to understand the largely under-appreciated reflective and sometimes poetic writings about landscape by Soviet writers if I did not experience these places with all five of my senses. After studying the efforts to establish parks in the Northern Urals, around Baikal, on the Volga near Samara, in Karelia, and on the Kamchatka Peninsula, I went to these places, scoured the archival records, and sought a little inspiration in the very places that so many dedicated Soviet environmentalists dedicated their lives to preserving.

This approach of seeing places after I have done thorough archival research has left me with two distinct impressions about national parks and Russian "Nature" broadly speaking that I will share here. The first is the geographical and biological variety as well as the sheer grandeur of so many landscapes within the Russian Federation and

former Soviet Union. Looking in the right places in archives and libraries, it did not take long to realize that living in a multinational country of great natural variety accessible to the average citizen became a core component of Soviet identity for a large part of the population. To fully appreciate this I needed to see the barren tundra landscape, look out onto the surface of Baikal reflecting the surrounding peaks, to look into a smoke-belching volcano on the Kamchatka Peninsula. In traveling to Russian national parks, citizens of other nations, especially the United States, will be struck not only by their natural beauty but also by the relative lack of development in these territories and the failure of many to protect nature from the rapacity of extractive industries, or tourists who lack the ecological sensibility that national parks were supposed to engender.

During the 1990s, letters from the park director of Yugid Va in the Circumpolar Urals repeatedly complained about the lack of state funding and the resultant impossibility of developing adequate infrastructure to accommodate tourists. Traveling a full seven hours over a 120 kilometer dirt, gully ridden, road just to access the park made these complaints much more salient. My reading of Samara Bend's park directors' rebuffed attempts to remove dachas from the park's territory became much more immediate upon seeing the miles of dachas that stand in the park today 20 years later. Reading about the despoliation of some of the most scenic spots on Baikal where tourists have gathered for decades affected me much more profoundly once I saw the trash heaps strewn over Olkhon Island.

Environmental history will not simply enrich our understanding of the culture, politics, and environment of the Russia and the Soviet Union. It also provides an amazing opportunity to bring the varied physical geography of this part of the world to life on the page. With the USSR having covered 1/6 of the world's landmass and the Russian Federation currently covering 1/8, this subject is no less complex than economics, high politics, culture, society, or geopolitics. Our understanding of it will only be helped if we, as environmental historians, experience the places that are the subjects of the stories we tell.