



Call for Papers

Resistance, protest and criticism in the name of nature: USSR and post-Soviet states, 1950-2010

Conference in Moscow, 8-9 October 2015
EcoGlobReg | DHI | CEFR

This conference will look at resistance in the name of nature against industrialist and transformist projects in the Soviet and post-Soviet space from the 1950s to the present. How did people at local and regional levels mobilize nature in their practices of discontent (open protests, passive resistance, lawsuits and others) when confronting industrial interests, state projects and rampant transformations that impacted their lifestyle and violated their conception of a proper environment?

In the environmental history of the Soviet Union we usually emphasize the unstoppable bulldozer of progress that turned the rivers into dam cascades, irrigated dry steppes, drained peat bogs, placed nuclear power stations and highly polluting industries near densely populated areas, and destroyed natural and traditional landscapes. Most of the time we present the productivist thrust of the Soviet state as advancing unchallenged, with the force of quasi-historical necessity. Although ecological activists from urban areas have been closely studied by historians (Weiner, Josephson), we have little research on the protest culture of the people affected by these transformations and how they confronted the risks and nuisances associated with them in the Soviet and post-Soviet world: peasants and landowners, indigenous peoples, nomad herders, workers at polluting plants, inhabitants of contaminated areas, hunters and fishermen, “unorganized” tourists and so on.

We wish to put three groups of actors to the fore: first, we want to give a voice to those social actors who refused the obligatory direction of history toward the industrial control of nature (understood as natural resources) and cherished modes of interacting with their local or regional environment other than what “modernization” dictated, or more modestly tried to avoid the most disastrous transformations. How did they express their concerns and what alternative conceptions of nature did they defend?

Second, we study the interaction of state actors informed by visions of a tamed and useful nature with the people who felt directly concerned by their projects. How did Party leaders and state administrators take these challenges and checks into account if at all, whether crushing, ignoring, compensating or integrating them? What compromises in their initial plans were they prepared to make in the name of differing conceptions of the use of nature and a healthy environment?

Third, scientific and technical experts played an important mediating role between local people and decision-makers. How did they create, frame and advocate environmental issues? Or alternatively, how did they make environmental change appear acceptable and desirable to the people it affected?

By drawing attention to bottom-up resistance on behalf of nature from the 1950s and how it was suppressed, incorporated or bypassed in the USSR and its successor States, we hope to go some way in explaining the upsurge of environmental activism in the *perestroika* years and understanding the significance and limits of its decline in the post-Soviet period.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of possible topics:

- What role did international contacts and globalized environmental concepts play in formulating ecological issues and mobilizing opinion around them?
- How did industrial pollution impact workers and their families?
- How did opposition to nuclear power and other industrial sites arise, up to the mass rallies of the 1980s?
- How did usage conflicts develop, especially in the agricultural and tourist sectors (soils, forest, water, pasture)?
- How did state actors take account of the risks of progress in planning?
- How were nature and related concepts (landscape, life, environment, ecology) mobilized in the negotiations around industrial implantation and transformist projects?

Organization

The conference will be held on **8-9 October 2015** in Moscow (exact location will be announced later). Working languages will be Russian and English.

Abstracts (in Russian or English, no more than 400 words) should be submitted by email to in-the-name-of-nature@ecoglobreg.org by **15 March 2015**. The organizers will respond by **15 May 2015**.

The selected speakers will have their travel and accommodation expenses covered.

Papers will be requested by **15 September 2015** so as to be circulated among speakers in advance of the conference.

Institutional and financial support

The German Historical Institute (www.dhi-moskau.org) and the French-Russian Research Center (www.centre-fr.net) in Moscow contribute to financing the conference and provide essential organisational support.

Initiators

EcoGlobReg is a joint French-German historical research project financed by Agence National de la Recherche (ANR) and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). It is devoted to understanding how ecological concerns shaped society and politics in the late Soviet Union and the post-Soviet space. We analyse the sometimes tumultuous processes associated with the ecologization and de-ecologization of politics and society in the last three decades of the 20th century. By “ecologization” we mean the social dissemination and deepening political use of scientific knowledge on the state of the environment. We isolate three main vectors for spreading ecological preoccupations in society and political discourse: social activism and protest for the protection of landscapes and life conditions; environmental disasters understood as catalysts of discontent and revealers of failed relationships between society and nature; and sensitization and popularization (in the media and education) of nature seen as threatened by economic development.

The project takes ecologization and de-ecologization to be essentially globalized processes. It shows how environmental issues acquired a global character at the turn of the 1960s-1970s and what role Soviet citizens played in this process. From there the project moves to asking whether the Soviet Union entered an “environmental turn” comparable to the one identified for capitalist countries. But transnational and globalizing trends are only one aspect of ecologization. The project pays attention to the regionalization of power dynamics: strengthened national and regional identities fired ecological mobilization in the *perestroika* years; well before that point in Soviet history, they played a major role in shaping environmental protest. Last, the apparent de-ecologization of public discourse in the post-Soviet era, marked by green activists withdrawing from the political scene, will be examined to see how environmental practices have evolved and taken on new forms.

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