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REVIEW

Paul Josephson, Nicolai Dronin, Ruben Mnatsakanian, Aleh Cherp, Dmitry Efremenko, Vladislav Larin, *An Environmental History of Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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To be specific, this book is an environmental history of the Soviet Union, though it includes a discussion of the Russian environment from the Middle Ages to the 1917 Revolution in chapter one, and a concluding chapter on the environment in former Soviet states in the post-Soviet era. In between are four chapters divided according to Soviet leadership eras, exploring the environment under Stalin, Krushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev. It is a bleak story for the most part. The Bolsheviks cultivated a nascent conservationist ethos, working against a fairly erratic and often poor environmental record in the last years of the Tsarist regime. As Douglas Weiner documented in two books that *An Environmental History of Russia* is indebted to, Bolshevik scientists promoted a form of nature reserve, or *Zapovednik*, and pioneering ecological research. But after 1930 Joseph Stalin's drive towards rapid industrialization and modernization saw reserves abandoned as unproductive, while agriculture and biological theory was left to the likes of Trofim Lysenko to dominate from the mid-1930s. For the next half-century Soviet leaders gave primary importance to economic growth and industrialization, and as the state succeeded in rapid development of engineering, factories, defence systems and infrastructure projects, so it also degraded and destroyed the environment. That environment was breathtaking in its scale and diversity, ranging from arctic to desert climates, from Tundra to Taiga. Under the Soviets it took in one sixth of the Earth's land surface. But development and growth caused serious damage to humans and nature. Humans suffered from the forced labour of the gulag camps under Stalin (which in turn transformed mining and road-building), famines brought about by the collectivization of agriculture, air pollution and epidemics due to increasingly large urban populations and the radioactive fallout of atom bomb tests in the Kazakhstan Steppe. Grand state plans such as Stalin's postwar project for the "Transformation of Nature" and Krushchev's "Virgin Lands" scheme produced ambiguous results or failure and laid waste to huge swathes of territory. Industrial and academic chemistry contributed to the damage, in the development of pesticides, herbicides, substances and processes that generated soil erosion, deforestation, and acid rain. As the conclusion makes clear, despite reform under Gorbachev and post-Soviet governments, an ominous legacy of Soviet damage to the environment still remains to be dealt with. Not that this is a problem unique to the Soviet Union, as the authors recognize. But the USSR did have a distinctive environmental context, which is explored very effectively in the introduction. While the Soviet and western nations were all profligate in their exploitation of nature in the name of economic growth in the twentieth century, Soviet conditions led to an "exaggeration of modernity" with profound environmental consequences. The authors' focus throughout is on the political and economic factors that created this situation. They point to the lack of a developed civic culture and opportunities for raising concern and protest about the environment as a

particularly problematic feature of the Soviet era. State control, centralization, and weak regulation also intensified problems. But the USSR was not devoid of protest or champions for the environment and as the authors show, diverse communities discussed the environment throughout the Soviet era, even if these could only emerge as a force for environmental protection late in the Soviet era. The disaster at Chernobyl in April 1986 hastened this protest, and was even “one of the factors that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union” (258-9). This book will be very useful for courses in environmental history and the history of science, as a complement to Russian history courses, and for comparison with the environmental record of other nations and states in the twentieth century. It also stands as a document of environmental destruction on a massive scale.