

# A b s t r a c t s

## In flux Environmental policy in Russia

Klaus Gestwa

A complex issue

Research on the environmental history of the Soviet Union

It was against the background of the political debates of the 1970s and 1980s that the historiographical sub-discipline of the environmental history of the Soviet Union was created. Initially, it covered topics such as “ecocide” and “econationalism”. More recent research from a regional, imperial and global historical perspective has taken up new themes. Environmental history illustrates the extent to which humans as social beings are characterised by the conflict between wanting to dominate their environment while at the same time being unable to extricate themselves from the natural cycles of which they are a part.

## Climate and Forest

Angelina Davydova

No bananas from Siberia!

Climate change and climate policy in Russia

After a long period of prevarication, Russia ratified the Paris Agreement. The population now accepts that climate change is real and that it has negative consequences. Yet Russia is only willing to make a small-scale contribution to limiting climate change. Ambitious strategies for reducing greenhouse gases are being thwarted by powerful political and business opponents, and Russian citizens are almost entirely unwilling change their behaviour. Energy efficiency is an important issue, but renewable energies remain a low priority. One reason for initiating rapid change could come from outside Russia, however. The European Union is planning to take greenhouse gas emissions into account when setting import duty levels, and this is now a cause for concern.

Albrecht Bemann, Vladimir Petrov

Woodland and forest management in Russia

Its development, current status and prospects for the future

Russia has more woodland and forest than any other country in the world. The woodlands are of major national and global ecological importance, particularly since they

capture carbon in the soil, in dead wood and in the trees. Wood as a sustainable raw material is also an important economic factor, and for the state, the use of wood is of particular importance. Since trees take many years to grow, the positive and negative impact of forest management only becomes evident many decades after the event.

**Markus Radday**

**Tigers, pine nuts and logging**

**The temperate forests in Russia's Far East**

The temperate mixed pine and deciduous forests in the Far East of Russia are home to an extraordinary variety of plants and animals. They are a part of the Amur Basin and are of considerable economic importance to the local population. They also help protect the global climate. Non-sustainable use, illegal logging and forest fires are all endangering these forests. As acts of human interference intensify, the degree of biodiversity in the forests lessens, as does the amount of carbon that they store. The ecological, environmental and social contribution made by these forests must be maintained. However, Russia's forestry industry has been undermined, and is in need of reform.

**Ulrich Schmid**

**The representative of the Russian forest**

**Leonid Leonov's early commitment to environmental protection**

Leonid Leonov (1899–1984) was one of the most successful writers in the Soviet Union. His novel *The Russian Forest* (1953) was printed millions of times and is regarded as a classic of Socialist Realism. However, the novel's literary quality suffers as a result of its programmatic overload. In his journalism and literary works, Leonov presented surprisingly modern ecological demands, such as sustainable forest management, raising the status of woodland to a legal entity, founding support associations and the creation of a state nature protection committee. As such, Leonov can be regarded as the founder of public debate on environmental issues in Russia.

## Coal and Steel

**Stephen Fortescue, Ellie Martus**

**Black Jack**

**Russia's coal industry in the age of climate change**

Russia is playing an increasingly important role on the global coal market. The large mining corporations in the country have expanded their coal extraction, and ever larger quantities of coal are being exported. The coal sector simply ignores the existence of climate change – as does the state, which assists the entirely privately-owned companies in the coal sector with huge, covert subsidies. In particular, the government is providing funds for the expansion of the railway routes from the main extraction region in the Kuzbass to the Pacific ports more than 5,000 kilometres away. These measures are based on the assumption that international climate policy will fail, since if it does succeed, enormous investments will be lost. However, it is the people living in Russia who are paying the price for this huge gamble, particularly in the Kuzbass. They are the ones who are suffering from the devastating air pollution, noise and appropriation of land that are the direct result of the extraction and transportation of coal.

**Anton Lementuev**  
**Black poison**  
**Extracting coal in the Kuzbass**

Coal is known as the black gold of the Kuzbass. However, for the people living in the southern Siberian region, it is poison. Coal dust endangers their health, open-caste mines are moving ever closer to their homes, and noise and dirt are a common feature of everyday life. While coal mining has been halted in many parts of the world, in the Kuzbass, the amount of coal being excavated has trebled over the past two decades. The authoritarian local government, which is hand in glove with the coal mining companies, has made the Kemerovo area almost entirely dependent on coal. This has become possible because the demand for coal from the Kuzbass has grown – and not least in Europe. Coal mining has made the pit owners extremely wealthy. However, for the people in the Kemerovo area, it means living against the backdrop of an ecological catastrophe.

**Stephen Fortescue**  
**Russia's dirty smelting plants**  
**The environmental impact of the metal industry**

Ten of the twelve cities in Russia with the worst air pollution are home to the metal industry. The industry is also responsible for a significant portion of greenhouse gas emissions. The state supports the position taken by the five large corporations in the sector that investments to reduce the level of sulphur and carbon dioxide emissions are only appropriate when they are of economic benefit. Serious national environmental standards are almost non-existent, and the environmental authorities are powerless to act. These are the reasons why the modernisation and replacement of old plants from the Soviet era is making such slow progress.

**Lukas Latz**  
**StopGOK in Chelyabinsk**  
**Copper, protests and repression**

Researchers into authoritarianism tend to underestimate the significance of repression as an instrument of power. It is regarded as the reckless ultima ratio of an authoritarian regime. In Russia, repression is an integral political and administrative tool. Here, federal, regional and local elites work hand in hand, as is the case, for example, with the StopGOK civic initiative, which has been protesting against the construction of a copper mine on the edge of Chelyabinsk, where millions of people live. The state and the private sector are together employing regressive tactics to weaken the civic initiative and to force through the construction project.

## Three sources of power: water, atom, oil

Evgeny Simonov

Hydropower in Russia

An epilogue

In the Soviet Union, hydropower stations were a symbol of modernity and engines of industrialisation. However, dams destroy the sensitive freshwater systems and cause irreparable damage to the local population, fishing and agriculture. Russia produces around 17 percent of its electricity from hydropower, and effectively has unlimited potential in this field. In the age of the “battle against climate change”, hydropower could flourish again. Yet the reality is different. While heavy industry companies have used electricity from hydropower to make their production look green from the outside, they, and the state, choose to ignore basic nature and environmental conservation standards. Not only that: large-scale power stations are unprofitable. It seems as though hydropower has come to the end of the road.

Lara Rindt

A non-ideal world

Nature and humanity in contemporary Russian literature

Nature is a central motif in Russian literature. There were certain phases from the 18th to the 20th centuries when an intense interest in various natural phenomena and ecological issues could be observed among works of literature. What is less well known is that in contemporary Russian literature, too, current ecological and environmental problems are also taken up in numerous works, which take an active, and often critical, stance in the Russian environmental debate.

Nadezhda Kutepova

The many crises of Mayak

Sites contaminated by radioactive and political fallout

Since the USSR began producing plutonium for atomic bombs, the Mayak plant near Chelyabinsk has been a source of environmental pollution, emitting radioactive waste into rivers and lakes. In 1957, there was a major explosion, exposing hundreds of thousands of people to radiation. The authorities concealed the disaster, and Mayak is regarded as a state secret. When the East-West conflict ended, the plant lost its importance. Nuclear missiles were dismantled, and Mayak became known as a global centre for reprocessing spent nuclear fuels. Today, the Soviet spirit still dominates at Mayak. Information is kept secret, the truth is denied, justification is found for illegal activities and there is a refusal to pay compensation to the people who have suffered. This is the basis on which the Mayak enterprise is founded.

Vladimir Sliviyak

Geopolitics only

### Sold at a loss: The export of nuclear reactors

Rosatom boasts of its orders from abroad. The people in charge of managing the nuclear industry stress the importance of the money that flows into Russia from the export of reactors. In fact, however, rather than enjoying the hard currency income, Russia is paying for many of the nuclear power stations itself. This is conditional on having unlimited access to the state budget and on a lack of monitoring as to whether state funds are being used efficiently.

Olesya Vikulova, Violetta Ryabko, Lukas Latz

A disaster waiting to happen

### The oil spill in Norilsk

In May 2020, around 20,000 tonnes of diesel oil leaked into the environment. The damage caused to the sensitive Arctic ecosystems has been enormous. The accident sheds light on a general problem: climate protection regulations have many loopholes, and the state-run climate monitoring authorities have little power. Businesses are hardly monitored at all, and the corrupt system means that they are able to avoid meeting environmental standards. The penalties that have to be paid after accidents occur are lower than the cost of repairing and replacing dilapidated installations. The situation is becoming worse, since climate change is accelerating the rate at which permafrost is melting. The subsoil on which industrial plants are built is becoming increasingly unstable. If nothing is done, the number of leakages and accidents will increase.

Vladimir Chuprov, Veda Koshovskaya

The forlorn tundra

### Oil spills in Russia: causes and solutions

One of the most serious environmental problems in Russia is the contamination of soil and water through crude oil and crude oil products. The main cause is corrosion damage to oilfield pipes that have outlasted their permitted period of operation. Significant sums of money are needed in order to repair and replace them – sums that the oil companies are not willing to pay. The current standards are not enough to fundamentally reduce the number of breakages in oilfield pipes. As long as Russia fails to make it mandatory for the oil companies to replace the oil pipelines that have reached the end of their operational life, there is no improvement in sight.

## Urban waste, poison in the countryside

Gerit Schulze

Dispensing with concerns

Waste management in Russia

In Russia, waste was not regarded for a long time as being either a valuable resource or a source of hazard. This perception was linked to the wealth of raw materials and the sparse population in the country. However, attitudes have changed in recent years. Following huge public demonstrations against waste disposal sites, waste management has suddenly become a hot political topic. The industry also aims to increase efficiency by re-using raw materials. State funding programmes totalling billions of roubles aim at increasing the recycling quota and making waste a part of the economic cycle. While this transition will take longer than planned due to the upheaval caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, in the longer term, Russia will continue to experience a fundamental cultural change with regard to waste management.

Robert Argenbright

The refuse and the rulers

Waste management and power under Putin

Russia does not have a modern, efficient waste policy. There is no attempt to avoid waste, and just five percent of household waste is recycled. No high-capacity recycling system has been put in place, and there is a lack of awareness of the issue among the general public. At the same time, an increasing number of citizens are protesting against waste disposal sites. The plan by the Moscow city authority to dispose of its waste over 1,100 kilometres to the north-east in the Archangelsk region was hugely controversial. The waste problem has become a national crisis. In order to remedy the situation, waste policy must be reformed from the ground up. Yet to date, economic and political structural problems under the Putin system have hindered any attempts at change.

Timm Schönfelder

Soil erosion and pesticide pollution

The legacy of rice cultivation in the Krasnodar area

During the second half of the 20th century, in the Kuban region of southern Russia, a vast agriculture infrastructure that used hydraulic engineering was established over an area the size of Portugal, with the aim of enforcing rice cultivation there. The toxins were quickly washed out and ultimately became a part of the food cycle. Incidents of cancer increased, as did malignant diseases of the lung and the digestive system. During the 1990s, the agricultural industry collapsed, but the damage to the environment remained. For 20 years, the agricultural sector in Kuban has been experiencing an upturn – and is once again riddled with corruption while destroying the environment. No lessons have been learned from the experience of the Soviet era.