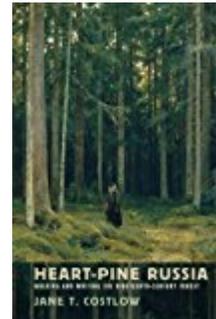


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jane Costlow. *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest*. Ithaca, United States: Cornell University Press, 2012. 270 S. \$36.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5059-4.



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In 1890, the Russian writer Vladimir Korolenko and his two nephews traveled into Russia's "heart-pine woodlands" north of Nizhnii Novgorod. They sailed up the Vetluga River (a tributary of the Volga) and then made their way overland to Lake Svetloyar. The writer decided to jump in: "I went straight down into the depths. It was cold, the water was very dense. There was an involuntary feeling of mystery and awe.... I'm quickly carried back to the surface.... I give it a second try. This time more successful, I go deeper. The water is even colder and pushes upwards like a spring, but I still manage to feel an object of some sort with my foot. The branch of a tree ... but there's a second and a third. It's like the tops of a drowned forest" (pp.135-136).

In her book, subtitled "Walking [but not swimming] and Writing in the Nineteenth-Century Forest," Jane Costlow takes her readers by the hand and leads them deep into Russia's dark forests. As guides, she has employed some of Russia's greatest writers, artists, and forestry specialists. Costlow also takes her readers into the realm of myths and legends, folkloric and sacred, that grew up over the centuries Russians lived in this wooded environment. For example, Lake Svetloyar—which forms a curious, nearly circular, opening in the forest—was the supposed location of the legendary city of Kitezh. In the

thirteenth century, Kitezh allegedly escaped an attack by a Mongol army invading from the steppes to the south by sinking beneath the water.

Korolenko was consciously retracing the steps of Pavel Mel'nikov-Pechersky, the author of a novel *In the Forests* (1871-74), which offered "an epic account of folkways and religious dissenters" (Old Believers) who had sought refuge in the forests beyond the Volga in the seventeenth century. In Costlow's words, Mel'nikov "celebrated the ecstatic, life-affirming energies of the 'slumbering forests' of Russia's north" (pp. 53-54). Back at the start of the book, for we have jumped in part of the way through, Costlow discusses place, and the place of humans in nature, through a rich analysis of Ivan Turgenev's 1857 story "Journey into Polesye." She considers how Turgenev portrayed the forest world and its inhabitants—arboreal, bird, and insect, animal and human—and reminds her readers of the significance of these forests, near Orel, south of Moscow, in Russia's history. For centuries, the forest-dwelling Russians used them as natural barriers to hold back invading armies from the steppes.

Costlow also employs artists as guides to the cultural significance of Russia's forests. She considers the

works of Russia's most well-known painter of forests, Ivan Shishkin, in her discussion of Mel'nikov's "sacred geographies of the woods." A whole chapter is devoted to the paintings of Mikhail Nesterov. In contrast to Shishkin's stern forests without people, Nesterov depicted an old, forested Rus', inhabited by Orthodox hermits and saints, in particular the fourteenth-century saint Sergius of Radonezh, elegantly carved onion-domed churches, wooden houses, and Russians in traditional dress. His paintings included representations of the legend of Kitezh and scenes from the lives of Old Believers from Mel'nikov's novels. According to Costlow, Nesterov's work "is almost synonymous with a certain kind of sentimental Slavophilism" (p. 147) and his canvases render "Orthodox Russia as ethnoscape" (p. 177). It is perhaps a slightly awkward step from Nesterov's paintings of the woods of old Rus' to the work of Dmitrii Kaigorodov, a professor of forestry, in following, and final, chapter. As well as teaching and researching forestry sciences in the forest institute in St. Petersburg, however, Kaigorodov authored many popular essays on natural history, birds and fishing, music and memoir, but most of all on Russia's forests. He emphasized the need to teach children about natural history and the importance of taking them on field trips to see nature at first hand. Through his writings he invited his fellow Russians and their children into the woods to appreciate and value Russia's forested nature. In the midst of this celebration of Russia's forests Costlow includes a chapter on loss, deforestation. It draws to our attention once again that people often only really come to appreciate the natural world that surrounds them and its wider significance in their lives and culture as it starts, alarmingly and unsettlingly, to recede, succumbing to the axe. Costlow resists the temptation to describe the end of Anton Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (1904), in which the old servant Firs is left behind in the house after the family has moved out and dies listening to the sound of relentless chopping as the much-loved orchard is being felled. This chapter—on the "forest question"—draws on works of literature (Tolstoy rather than Chekhov) and painting (revealing Ilya Repin as acutely environmentally conscious) as well as more technical and scientific writings by forestry experts in their specialized journals. Costlow may seem a little more comfortable analyzing works of art and literature, but importantly she reminds us that "artists and forest scientists occupied a common space, both geographic and symbolic" (p. 84).

In the acknowledgements, Costlow thanks her husband, a historian, for "his insistence that I get my

chronology straight" (p. x). And yet, in the book she makes imaginative use of time, taking us back to past times, real and imagined. She uses Mel'nikov's image of "heart-pine Russia" to represent an older Russia, Old Rus'. For Mel'nikov, this was "undefiled, —the way it was in our great-grandfathers' time.... It's a kindhearted land, though it looks with anger on the stranger" (p. 67). Costlow thus draws on her expertise in literary criticism to present time and place in different layers with different meanings. The representation of forests and nature in the book shows the value of her interdisciplinary approach: Costlow holds a chair in environmental studies and collaborates with ecologists, economists, and chemists as well as specialists in the humanities. Above all, Costlow draws on her own experiences of visiting and walking through many of the locations she discusses (and in one place comparing Russia's northern forests with the countryside near her home in Maine). She also recalls conversations with Russians, specialists in a variety of fields and members of the public, during her frequent visits to Russia. She is quite open in putting herself and her experiences into the book, thereby adding another layer to her reading of the texts and paintings and making it as much about her process of researching and writing as an analysis of the significance of forests in Russia's culture and history.[1]

The forests, real and imagined, that Costlow presents represent a mythic past, an old, Orthodox Rus' of legends and folklore, saints and wooden churches, a refuge from persecution and modernity, mostly north of the Volga. Such images lie at the heart of one aspect of Russian identity. In the introduction to the book, she describes citizens' recollections of protests in the 1970s against felling an alley of linden trees in Orel in order to expand the city's public square. In the book's conclusion, she considers "[q]uasi-nationalist imaginings of Russia as forest—or forest as Russia" in film and writing, official and unofficial, in the second half of the twentieth century. Both of these more recent examples, however, are looking back to Russia's forested past.

Much has been written on Russia and forests and much of this supports Costlow's interpretation. But, without seeking to deny or contradict her view, it would be possible to present other images of forests and timber in Russian history and culture, that look forward and outward as well as backward and inward. Russians treated trees and forests as a resource. They made their houses, churches, agricultural implements, household utensils, and much else from timber, and they burned firewood in their stoves. They also looked to the forest to aid them

against their enemies. On the steppe frontier for centuries they had protected areas of woodland as barriers against invasion. Harrison Salisbury related a different approach adopted by the Red Army during the Second World War. A British general who had visited the Red Army at the front told Salisbury how the troops reached a river and found that the German army had destroyed all the bridges. In response, “the Red Army men drew their axes. They glanced up at the trees along the river; then—without an order—they went to work. In almost less time that it takes to tell they had trees toppled across the water and were hewing other trees ... into cross timbers and flooring. The bridge was built before a Western army could have got word back to the engineers to come forward.” The improvised bridge, hurriedly hewed from the forest, was heavy enough to take all the Red Army unit’s transport, including their tanks.[2]

It did not occur to the retreating German army to dynamite the forest as well as the bridges, but Germany also has a history and culture which are deeply rooted in forests. In his book *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama opens his chapter on forests in German identity with a story from another war, almost two millennia earlier. Around the year 98 AD, when the Roman emperor Trajan’s legions were locked in battle with the barbaric Teutonic tribes, Tacitus wrote his *Germania; or, On the Origins and Situation of the Germans*. The Teutons’ obduracy in battle Tacitus attributed to their nature, which was for the most part “bristling forests and foul bogs.” Tacitus’s “wooded Germania” was the antithesis of the Roman world. The significance of this identification of Germany with forests was so great that in a rather later period of intense nationalism an SS unit tried to seize an authentic text of *Germania* in Italy in 1943.[3]

Thus, if we raise our heads above the canopy of Russia’s trees, we find that forests are important in other cultures. Over time, moreover, other types of environment assumed significance in Russian culture and identity. Over the nineteenth century, Russian artists and writers, including such leading figures as Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Leo Tolstoy, presented images of the mountains of the Crimea and the Caucasus as Russian. The steppes, which were almost defined by their treelessness, moreover, also became “Russian.”[4] Willard Sunderland concluded that by 1900, the Russians had so colonized, reinvented, and naturalized

the once alien steppes “that it seemed hard to believe that [they] could ever have belonged to anyone else.”[5] Over the same period that is the focus of Costlow’s book, therefore, a new, imperial identity that incorporated and celebrated quite different, and nonforested, landscapes, emerged: an expansionist, multiethnic, and multiconfessional *Rossiia* in opposition to the Slav, Orthodox (and also Old Believer) Rus’ so imaginatively presented by Costlow.

In conclusion—and in spite of the desire of this reviewer to look out through the trees to the steppes rather than carry on ever deeper into the woods—this is a wonderful book that invites reading and rereading (and the chapters can be read individually or in a different order from which they are presented in the book). The book evokes a sense of place in the writings and paintings Costlow analyzes, and a feeling for place that the author gained during her visits to many of the locations. *Heart-Pine Russia* will be of great and enduring interest to eco-critics, environmental historians, literary scholars, and historians more broadly, and many other readers who will take delight in fine writing that conjures up the sensation of walking through Russia’s dense forests that are so laden with myths and meanings.

#### Notes

[1]. In this way, the book resembles Catherine Merri-dale’s oral history of veterans of the Great Patriotic War, *Ivan’s War: The Red Army 1939-45* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), where the reader is taken to visit the battlefields and veterans by the author.

[2]. Harrison Salisbury, *Russia on the Way* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 43.

[3]. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 75-100.

[4]. See Christopher Ely, *This Meagre Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002); and Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[5]. Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 228.

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