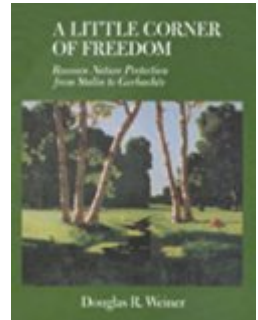


Douglas R. Weiner. *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev.* Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1999. xiv + 556 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21397-5.



Reviewed by Stephen V. Bittner

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Readers of Douglas R. Weiner's superb new study of the Soviet nature-protection movement, *A Little Corner of Freedom* will find an absorbing cast of characters: a school teacher turned biologist who steers a shockingly intrepid group of environmental activists through the difficult years of Stalinism; a pragmatic bureaucrat who wonders why Soviet nature cannot be "souped up" to meet the demands of socialist construction; a party hack in environmentalist garb who is caught (and photographed) fishing with an illegal casting net on the Oka River; a General Secretary who asks from the Central Committee podium whether squirrels and bears care for the company of scientists; and a chorus of European bison, eider geese, raccoon dogs, muskrats, and other assorted flora and fauna, whose plight in the Soviet Union's nature preserves (*zapovedniki*) provides the essential backdrop for much of the book.

While weaving these and other characters into a richly textured and engaging narrative that runs to nineteen chapters and four-hundred odd pages, Weiner makes a unique and provocative contribution to the burgeoning literature on pop-

ular resistance and protest in the Soviet Union.[1] Nature-protection, Weiner argues, constituted an independent and critical-minded social movement that survived the reigns of Stalin and his successors (pp. 1-3). The survival strategies employed by this movement, and the identity politics which were at its core, comprise Weiner's central lines of inquiry.

A Little Corner of Freedom stands as a sequel to Weiner's previous monograph on Soviet nature protection in the 1920s and early 30s, and is grounded in an eclectic body of primary-source data.[2] Weiner cites many of the archives which have become de rigueur for historians in the Soviet field (GARF, RTsKhIDNI, RGAE), but also several private collections belonging to prominent activists, as well as the archives of institutional curiosities like the Moscow Society of Naturalists (MOIP), and the newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta*.

Much to his credit, Weiner is careful to point out instances where these materials contradict or tweak observations made in his first study, particularly his previous distinction between the "aesthetic-ethical" and "scientific-ecological" tenden-

cies in the early-Soviet nature-protection movement (pp. 61-62). In addition, *A Little Corner of Freedom* is distinguished by a refreshingly ambitious chronology. Weiner begins his narrative in the early 1930s, when V. N. Makarov assumed the reins of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Nature (VOOP), and ends it in 1991, after glasnost and perestroika had eclipsed the agenda of the nature-protection movement by transforming the Soviet political landscape.

Weiner orients his analysis of this period around the evolution of the Soviet network of *zapovedniki* – those supposedly inviolable preserves that served as the primary focus of the nature-protection movement. *Zapovedniki* "were among the rare physical and social spaces...that had largely escaped the juggernaut of Stalin's 'Great Break,'" Weiner argues, and thus came to represent an "archipelago of freedom" for the field scientists who labored on their behalf (p. 38). This freedom was embodied both in symbolic terms – i.e., *zapovedniki* represented "the free and untutored flow of life" which had been "denied to human society in Stalin's Russia" (p. 4) – and in the more real sense that *zapovedniki* were dedicated to the long-term study of ecological processes, and thus fell squarely into the realm of science.

This scientific claim on nature protection was premised on the concept of "biocenosis," which held that individual ecological communities (i.e., *zapovedniki*) existed in self-regulating equilibria. When managed by scientists, these communities could be used as "baselines" (*etalony*) to measure the extent of degradation on lands that had been subjected to human exploitation (pp. 28-29, 37), and presumably, to determine the most resource-friendly means for further exploitation. As Weiner points out, this holistic view of a static natural world holds little validity as a scientific doctrine (and was frequently denounced by ideological watchdogs as reactionary), but because it was widely embraced by field scientists, the fates of *zapovedniki* and "scientific public opinion"

(*nauchnaia obshchestvennost'*) became inextricably bound. For many of the scientists active in nature-protection, the struggle to protect/restore/augment the network of *zapovedniki* represented nothing less than the struggle to protect the autonomy of science. In other words, nature-protection was emblematic of the "sacred duty of responsible scientists before *nauka*" (p. 29).

Much of the storyline of *A Little Corner of Freedom*, therefore, concerns the struggle among old-guard activists to protect the prerogatives of "scientific public opinion." During the 1930s and 40s, this struggle manifested itself in the ambivalence of the leadership of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Nature (VOOP) toward occasional calls to rid the organization of its "clublike atmosphere," and to create a truly "mass organization" (pp. 57, 163-64, 171). (VOOP had served as the chief institutional front for *nauchnaia obshchestvennost'* in nature-protection affairs since the 1920s.)

"The ideal of *nauchnaia obshchestvennost'*," Weiner notes, "...was not a truly democratic one, for it regarded the educated –especially the scientific–elite as the truly authentic and enlightened representative of all society" (pp. 72-73). This barely latent exclusivity, as well as VOOP's ensuing failure to accommodate the party's own notions of *obshchestvennost'*, did not escape the attention of higher authorities. A series of bureaucratic investigations and reshufflings in the late 1940s and early 50s led to Makarov's dismissal, and to a merger with Leonid Leonov's Green Plantings Society (pp. 143-47, 161-81). By the mid-1950s, many of the old-guard activists had abandoned VOOP altogether, fleeing to the Moscow Society of Naturalists (MOIP), which provided an atmosphere more intimate than its transmogrified predecessor (p. 195).

This ongoing struggle to maintain the elitist ethos of *nauchnaia obshchestvennost'* is central to Weiner's understanding of the question which frames much of his book, but which is especially

relevant for the chapters concerning the Stalin period: Why did the Soviet regime tolerate a movement which was, at the very least, "implicitly subversive" to the imperatives of socialist construction, and often openly ambivalent about the party/state monopoly on decision making? Weiner admits in the introduction that a unitary answer to this question might never emerge, but he clearly favors one of the several hypotheses which he offers in its absence. For the most part, nature-protection activists "presented a convincing image of harmless and somewhat ridiculous cranks and oddballs-- *chudaki*" (p. 18). A chapter later he adds the following observation: "Such figures, if the Party elite thought about them at all, must have been objects of gentle ridicule. Ultimately, as a 'class,' they were not serious enough to be worth liquidating" (p. 50).

This reading promises to be one of the more controversial elements of Weiner's study, but it provides a certain symmetry to his analysis of *nauchnaia obshchestvennost'*. For the image of "cranks and oddballs" to have been effective as a protective mechanism, it was imperative that the nature-protection movement maintain its "club-like" exclusivity, as the political stakes associated with a "mass organization" (i.e., one that had ceased to be "scientific") were simply too great. Instances of apparent lunacy in VOOP--a request to travel to a conference in Vienna in 1937 (pp. 1-2), praise for the American ideal of conservation in 1938 (p. 53), and a combative inquiry into a tree-cutting campaign run by the state-security apparatus in 1948 (pp. 2, 137-38)--were acceptable only because the language of nature protection was mostly devoid of political meaning. "Despite occasional arrests and episodic characterizations of the movement as a hotbed of counterrevolutionary 'bourgeois professors,'" Weiner notes, "it was hard for the regime to perceive these entomologists, herpetologists, mammalogists, botanical ecologists, and biogeographers as sources of effective political speech. Marginality thus became a

guarantor of the survival of scientific public opinion as a social identity" (p. 9).

Through much of the text, Weiner carefully points out the cracks in this interpretation (and thereby underlines the absence of a "unitary" explanation), but he is clearly hesitant to abandon the primacy of the "crank and oddball" image for the ultimate survival of the nature-protection movement (p. 444). One of the more sizeable fissures in this interpretation, nevertheless, appears as a constant tension between image and action within the movement. While nature-protection activists may have fostered protective, crazy-professor personae on the political stage, they were remarkably smooth operators behind the scenes, relying on patronage (pp. 69-70, 107-108, 189-90), and the discursive strategies which Weiner calls "protective coloration" (pp. 41-42, 101-102, 124-25) and "instrumental shame" (pp. 249, 309-310) to advance their agenda.

The movement's reliance on patronage is especially important, as it helps break down the sense of irreconcilable differences between regime and activist which characterizes much of Weiner's analysis of the Stalin period (pp. 38, 88-93). Although it is clear that many in the high-party leadership had little patience for nature protection (Khrushchev, for instance, helped oversee the dismantlement of the *zapovednik* system in 1950-51), officials at Gosplan, the republic-level Council of Ministers, and the oblast' level were often openly sympathetic to the movement, and took great pains to soften the edges of unfriendly initiatives (pp. 104-116). The existence of these alliances, in turn, leads to a larger question which Weiner raises in the introduction, but leaves largely unanswered in the text: is it possible that the existence of an independent and critical-minded nature-protection movement actually served the interests of the regime (p. 3)? In other words, did the movement owe its survival to official support more broad than the occasional patronage relationship? If so, what, if anything, did

the movement offer in return for its continued existence?

In the years following Stalin's death, the claim of "scientific public opinion" on nature protection began to falter. By the 1970s, the concept of biosphere--the foundation upon which much of the claim had been premised--had fallen into disuse as biologists adopted more modern notions of ecology (i.e., nature as a continuum rather than a set of closed communities) (pp. 387-89). Even more importantly, as the terror of Stalinism slipped into the past, the popular appeal of nature protection grew enormously, and the movement's rhetoric assumed civic (rather than purely scientific) overtones. Soviet citizens joined scientists and journalists to rally on behalf of Lake Baikal and a host quality-of-life issues (water pollution, air quality, etc.) closer to home. University students organized nature protection brigades (*druzhiny*) to patrol poaching in *zapovedniki* (and thus created vehicles to pass on the elite ethos which the old-guard activists had worked so hard to protect), while their counterparts at less prestigious technical schools pursued their own agenda of sustainable forest exploitation (pp. 313-33). By the early 1980s, VOOP counted nearly 29 million names on its membership rolls, making it the largest voluntary organization in the Russian Republic (pp. 403-404).

In scale, at least, these developments were certainly unique, but one suspects that as manifestations of an organized and independent critical-mindedness, they were not as peculiar as they had been prior to 1953. Evidence suggests, for instance, that VOOP's sister organization, the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments, was distinguished by a similar record of popular activism during the late 60s and 70s.[3] Smaller loci of organized and mostly tolerated critical-mindedness existed within the creative unions (the Moscow Sections of the Union of Writers and Union of Architects seemed to be especially aggressive), and at individual

journals.[4] After describing an especially combative *zapovednik* congress in 1954, where activists attacked the decision to dismantle the nature-preserve system two years earlier, Weiner suggests that the nature-protection movement was "the only constituency that was fearless enough and mobilized enough to compel such an appearance at such an early date" (p. 233). Maybe so, but other "little corners of freedom" were not far behind.

It is difficult to do justice to a book as ambitious as *A Little Corner of Freedom* in a 2000-word review. Weiner not only offers a fascinating and eloquent history of the Soviet nature-protection movement, but does so within a conceptual framework that promises to make a substantial splash in the Stalin-era historiography, and to serve as a pioneering contribution to its nascent post-Stalin counterpart. Who would have thought, after all, that it would one day be possible to speak of an independent and "implicitly subversive" social movement that managed to survive the reigns of Stalin and his successors?

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). As a category of analysis for the Soviet period, "resistance" has come under attack as of late. See Jochen Hellbeck, "Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 71-96; Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Ibid.*, 119-46.

[2]. Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East European Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[3]. John B. Dunlop, *The Faces of Contemporary Russian Nationalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 63-92; Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1995), 406-407, 553-66.

[4]. Like much of the post-Stalin period, many of these phenomena await a chronicler. On "thick" journals, the Union of Writers, and literary life in general, see Dina Spechler, *Permitted Dissent in the USSR: Novyi Mir and the Soviet Regime* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982); Dirk Kretzschmar [Krechmar], *Politika i kul'tura pri Brezhneve, Andropove, i Chernenko, 1970-1985 gg.*, trans., M. G. Ratgauza, with an introduction by Karl Eimermacher, *Seriia pervaiia publikatsia v Rossii* (Moscow: Airo-XX, 1997), 11-70; Priscilla Johnson, *Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1965), 1-89; Raisa Orlova and Lev Kopelev, *My zhili v Moskve, 1956-1980* (Moscow: Kniga, 1988). Published material on the activities of the Union of Architects in the post-Stalin period is almost non-existent, but the reviewer's research suggests that the Moscow Section played a substantial role in rallying *obshchestvennost'* on behalf of historical-preservation and urban-planning issues. See "De-Stalinization and Its Conflicts: Social and Cultural Change in Moscow's Arbat District, 1953-1968" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, forthcoming in 2000), chaps. 3-4.

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