



Paul R. Josephson. *The Conquest of the Russian Arctic.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. XII, 441 S. ISBN 978-0-674-41982-7.

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P. Josephson: The Conquest of the Russian Arctic

The Russian Arctic is vast: reaching from the Finnish and Norwegian borders in the west, nearly to Alaska over five thousand kilometers to the east. One-fifth of Russia's landmass is north the Arctic Circle. It is a space that contains multitudes: of indigenous cultures, natural resources, and challenges born of the extreme climate. In "The Conquest of the Russian Arctic", Paul R. Josephson sets out to tell the history of how this region was, "assimilated" into the political, economic, and cultural projects of Russia as a whole.

Despite its title, and perhaps wisely, this is not a book about the entirety of the Russian Arctic, or about its millennia of human habitation. Josephson focuses primarily on the Soviet period, and what the communist drive for "economic development, technological modernization, and military security" looked like in the western provinces of Murmansk, Karelia, and Arkhangel'sk (p. 14). Josephson uses this region to advance three main arguments. First, the Soviet economic form was uniquely irrational and unable to deal with the inevitable gaps between Arctic reality and Soviet utopian planning. Secondly, this irrationality did particular and lasting damage to the Arctic space and to people local and imported. And finally, these trends continue into the post-communist present.

After a brief tour through Imperial Russia's limited efforts to explore and exploit the western Arctic, Josephson's six thematic chapters use an admirable spread of regional and national archives to paint a vivid portrait of how local populations, scientists, Party officials, Gulag prisoners, bureaucrats, and laborers participated in build-

ing the White Sea-Baltic Canal, Russia's nuclear ship-building port at Severodvinsk (named Molotovsk before 1957), massive nickel mines, reindeer collectives, logging operations, and efforts to urbanize and electrify the far north. As an historian of science, Josephson is in his element discussing how Soviet experts and explorers learned enough to "develop Arctic resources of fossil fuels, ore, lumber, and fish" (p. 234). That the heroic and discoveries of arctic researchers were not particularly useful in building communism "until the creation of gulag labor" is also treated with care, especially in the third chapter (p. 119). And while Josephson is most attentive to the Stalinist period, his discussions of Leonid Brezhnev's spending on arctic programs, the fate of arctic science under Boris Yeltsin, and other postwar details are useful in a field that often focuses on the 1930s and 1940s.

In aggregate, the historical chapters of the book serve to bring issues familiar to Soviet scholars into the Arctic space. Equipment failed or lacked parts; supplies were late or never came; medical care and housing were substandard. The desires of the central government consistently ran afoul of local conditions. All this made Soviet success in the Arctic tenuous and costly to human life and ecological function. While the centralized economy applied what Josephson terms "brute force technology" across the north, it failed to provide the fruits of that technology to its people in the form of "food, housing, transport, stores, medical care and social overhead capital" (p. 19). The degree of environmental and social destruction that Josephson describes did evidence a degree

of Soviet capability: even as they left behind polluted waters, desecrated forests, starving prisoners, and radically altered indigenous communities, the communist productive drive managed to assimilate raw materials from its northern territories and transform economic life.

Even as Josephson brings Soviet history into the Arctic, he is less successful in using the Arctic to say anything particularly new or revealing about the Soviet past. In many ways this book is best suited as a primer for basic arguments against the command economy: that was it was not rational, that it was wasteful, that it misallocated the talents of people and the worth of non-human things. Josephson blames these issues on ideology, what he calls throughout the text the “Marxist industrial imperative or urban imperative” (p. 6). These imperatives produced the mixture of Arctic competence and failure that Josephson so carefully describes as problems of the Soviet system in particular. Yet, as Josephson rightly notes, Arctic ambitions were not unique to the Soviet Union. Some of his conclusions – for example, that the Soviet Arctic was relatively impoverished compared to other Arctic nations – assumes a level of competence on the part of capitalist Arctic development that might not bear up under sustained comparison. The loss of ecological and cultural communities might be less a Soviet problem than one of

modernity more generally.

This tension between Arctic conquests as a Soviet ambition or one stemming from modern economies and political realities is clearest in the seventh and final chapter. Here Josephson brings the Arctic’s uncertain present into the book explicitly and at length. It is laudable impulse, especially in a region where climate change is radically altering local conditions and political realities. Yet in his argument that the Russian Federation’s present interest in developing its arctic resources and increasing military engagement is a direct inheritor of Soviet ambitions, Josephson leaves the place of ideology, and its capacity to destroy or protect environments and people, rather unstable. If Marxism as practiced by Stalin was the root of Soviet ills, economic and political, then what explains the continuity from communist past into oligarchical, capitalist present? Readers are left to conclude, rather uncomfortably, that the fault is some vague aspect of the Russian character.

Overall, “The Conquest of the Russian Arctic” is filled with winning detail and observation, and is a much needed general introduction to the Russian Arctic as region and especially the characters and issues key to the Soviet period. It will be a useful source for Arctic scholars of Russia and elsewhere for years to come.

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