



Alan D. Roe. *Into Russian Nature: Tourism, Environmental Protection, and National Parks in the Twentieth Century.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 360 pp. \$41.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-091455-4.

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Many volumes have been filled detailing the creation of the American National Park Service and what some environmental historians consider to the beginning of American environmentalism. However, few realize that Russia also grappled with the idea of creating its own national parks for over a century and has its own rich history of nature conservation. In this thoroughly enjoyable and deeply personal monograph, Alan D. Roe explores the history of Russia's protected territories and the century-long movement to codify them into state-protected tourist destinations.

Roe's work contributes to a growing historiography of Russian nature protection alongside studies by Douglas R. Weiner, David Moon, Paul Josephson, Stephen Brain, Nicholas Breyfogle, and more.[1] However, *Into Russian Nature* stands out because it traces the history of a foreign idea (national parks) within three state formations (the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation). Least there be any misunderstanding, Roe's argument is not that Russian nature protection was ever objectively "backward"; instead, his claim is that the American national park system offered a form of conservation combined with tourism that many Russian conservationists be-

lieved was superior to the Russian *zapovedniki* (which restricted public access). The tension between *zapovedniki* as a distinctly Russian form of conservation and national parks, therefore, echoes the historical tensions between Westernizers and Slavophiles in Russian historiography.

The work is organized in a rather unorthodox but effective way that conforms with more recent historiographical trends focusing on continuity in Russian history rather than rupture after 1917. There are three sections. The first section details the overall history of Russian *zapovedniki* and the national park movement from the late imperial period to Russia's first national park in 1983. In the earliest period described, liberal-minded scientists understood that studying "models of nature," whether through American-influenced nationalized parks or sanctuaries for scientific study and observation, could improve agricultural knowledge and help prevent famine. However, over time, and after the revolution, Russian nature protection diverged from American idealism, as the state sought to use natural resources for industrial and agricultural growth. Nature for nature's sake was strictly taboo, specifically during the first two five-year plans. As Weiner has ar-

gued elsewhere, during the height of Joseph Stalin's industrialization drive, committed scientists used the language of the party to argue that zapovedniki should offer a place of leisure to help raise the "cultural level" of the masses (p. 32).[2] National parks were not promoted as nature conservation alone but as the first stage toward a robust tourist infrastructure in the USSR's beautiful countryside. After Stalin, the conservation community, increasingly in contact with their Western counterparts, advocated for national parks that merged responsible tourism with environmental protection, bringing revenue to the state while protecting more territory from exploitation.

In the 1960s, it was clear that tourist advocacy had backfired on the conservationists as leisurely Soviets, without proper information about restrictions, littered the zapovedniki. Kamchatka's Valley of Geysers, for example, was touted throughout the late '50s as an ideal tourist destination, but it was liquidated as a protected zone in 1961. This meant that tourists flocked to the region, including hunters who poached salmon eggs and bear without limits and campers who left trash and broke off pieces of the geysers. In 1967 the region was rebranded a zapovednik, but without the necessary educational infrastructure for tourists there was little that could be done to avoid the consequences of negligence and popular ignorance.

Roe describes the 1970s as a decade of contradiction, where the Brezhnevite "projects of the century" that ultimately transformed the landscape (water diversion schemes, Baikal, and Baikal-Amur Mainline to name a few) accompanied increased official attention to nature protection and the benefits of "appearing green" (p. 74). My favorite point that illustrates this contradiction is Roe's mention of *subbotnik*, or voluntary clean-up days, which became increasingly popular between 1969 and 1971. Speaking of the litter problem on Elk Island, Roe states that despite the

widespread practice of voluntary clean-up days, the litter problem worsened each year.

In the 1980s, the state established its first national parks at a time when political reform allowed citizens to voice their concerns over the USSR's environment. Underlying this moment, as well as the entire history of the national park idea in the USSR, is the state's reluctance to accept the American model as the most effective at combining territorial preservation and responsible tourism. By the end of the '80s, with increasing connections to Western experts and Mikhail Gorbachev's aim to "join the path of world civilization," park advocates won official sanction, even though they lacked the resources to educate average Russians on what being a national park entailed (p. 136).

The second section of the book goes through the individual histories of some of Russia's national parks in order to show their long path to official protection. Roe details the parks on Baikal's shoreline, the Samara Bend, the Circumpolar Urals, and the Karelian Taiga. In all these cases the protagonists' lofty efforts faced the effects of economic and political crash that provided the form of a national park without the educational and social commitment. I was particularly impressed by Roe's discussion of the growth of a Green Party within Kuibyshev Oblast (now Samara), but one wonders whether their primary concern was over the national park or the chemical weapons destruction factory seeking to operate south of the Samara Bend, just outside of Chapaevsk. Of course, these concerns were not mutually exclusive to the nascent greens. In any case, these four chapters are striking in their detail and act as a tourist primer for anyone wishing to visit these sites, achieving a double task of scholarly contribution and historical guide.

The final section describes what Roe calls the "crisis of Russia's national parks," or the Russian Federation's increasing neglect of its protected territories. As Roe states, "by 1999, the Russian Feder-

ation's parks were funded at just 25 percent of the level necessary for them to carry out their essential functions" (p. 247). Today, workers at Russia's national parks echo a broader global concern over the lack of popular environmental stewardship, arguing that without increasing society's understanding of their social and economic purpose, the parks are doomed to destruction. This section reiterates a classic argument of environmental studies but within contemporary Russia: that is, to confront things like pollution, resource exploitation, littering, and climate change, we need a social and cultural revolution that fundamentally reimagines our existing relationship to nature.

In the final analysis, Roe's work paints a picture of a country aware of its beauty but ambivalent over how to effectively preserve it. According to Roe, the historical reason for this is the state's unwillingness to fully acquiesce to a foreign model despite the persistent expert belief in its superiority. The result is not only a fractured national park infrastructure but also a cultural and social

myopia concerning nature conservation among average Russian tourists and nature seekers.

Notes

[1]. These are just a few of the notable works: Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); David Moon, *The Plough That Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul Josephson et al., *An Environmental History of Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Stephen Brain, *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905-1953* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2011); and Nicholas Breyfogle, "At the Watershed: 1958 and the Beginnings of Lake Baikal Environmentalism," *Slavonic and East European Review* 93, no. 1 (January 2015): 147-80.

[2]. Weiner, *Little Corner of Freedom*, 226.

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