

# Perceptions of Nature, Indigenous Peoples, and Questions of Identity: A Comparative Historical Analysis of Russian and American Frontier Settlement Policies upon the Rise of Modern Environmental Movements<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** *Although driven by vastly different ideologies, both capitalist America and Czarist-Soviet Russia wrought devastating environmental effects. In particular, the frontier regions of the United States and Russia were subject to rampant environmental exploitation of water resources, nuclear testing, mining, and other activities. However, each region also witnessed the genesis of nature and environmental movements that became somewhat mainstream in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This essay explores the reasons why each frontier region was subjected to exploitation and how that exploitation led to the birth of a conservation ethic. Further, this essay explores the common ground that explains how and why these different societies produced an ecological consciousness that currently shapes environmental protection and policy in their respective countries. Specifically the paper explores the links between economic systems, science, philosophy, and cultural identity as possible explanations for the evolution of nature protection.*

## Introduction

Although driven by vastly different ideologies, both capitalist America and Czarist-Soviet Russia have wrought devastating effects upon the environments of each respective country. The frontier regions of the United States and Russia have been particularly subjected to rampant environmental exploitation in terms of water diversions, nuclear testing, mining, and other activities. Further, though the indigenous people of each region have been marginalized, they have also played important roles in the emergence of modern environmental movements that have emerged in these frontier regions in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

This essay will explore the reasons why each nation's frontier regions were subjected to exploitation and how that exploitation led to the birth of a conservation ethic. Specifically this analysis will examine the links between economic systems, the treatment of indigenous and marginalized peoples, and cultural identity as possible explanations for the evolution of modern American and post-Soviet style nature protection and its connections to each society's respective frontier region. Finally, this essay will seek to find common ground in an attempt to explain how and why these two divergent societies pro-

duced the current ecological consciousness that is currently shaping environmental protection and policy in the United States and former Soviet Union.

First I will define several parameters that will be used in this comparative analysis. I will refer to frontier America as the trans-Mississippi west, exclusive of Alaska and Hawaii, and will examine this period between 1803, the date of the Louisiana Purchase, and 1890, the year the frontier closed according to historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Although the settlement of Alaska was influenced by many of the same ideologies that drove the settlement of the trans-Mississippi west, Alaska is also a unique place because it can be considered a frontier region of both cultures, and thus it was not shaped solely by the ideas of one or the other. Accordingly, Alaska will be excluded from this analysis. I will also focus on the pre-Soviet period of Russia's eastward expansion between 1462–1796 that coordinates with the reigns of Ivan III, (1462–1505), Ivan IV (1533–1584), Peter the Great (1689–1725), and Catherine II (1762–1796), because it is during this period that Russia moved into the trans-Ural, Ukrainian, and Siberian frontiers. I will not include Russia's westward expansion towards Europe because it lacks the characteristics of a frontier region, and because various European powers had contested this land for centuries. It is during this 334-year period that the greatest

geographical expansion of Russia occurred and the ideological principles that drove this and future Soviet expansion developed (MacKenzie & Curran, 1991).

Ultimately I will compare the similarities and differences of the forces that drove frontier expansion in each society and how the regions incorporated by these expansions have given rise to modern environmentalism in America and Russia respectively.

## **Background**

The story of America's westward expansion is well known, so I will but briefly outline the process and the ideologies that drove it. Although for the purposes of this discussion, I have defined America's frontier region as the trans-Mississippi west, one must recognize the linkages between this later period of expansion and the settling of the eastern United States. The English colonists who settled on the Atlantic Coast of North America came there for a variety of different reasons. Some, as in the case of the Virginia Company, sought to make a profit from the environment of North America, and in the case of Jamestown they eventually succeeded; failing at first to discover gold or other valuable commodities, the residents of Jamestown began to cultivate tobacco, which by the middle of the seventeenth century had proven to be a valuable commodity. However, tobacco production exhausts the soil and thus westward expansion became inevitable as residents of the Chesapeake sought to open new lands for cultivation. This desire to force the land to turn a profit would constitute a key component in the expansion of the United States into the trans-Mississippi (Morgan, 1975).

The profit motif alone does not explain adequately America's westward expansion. When one examines the colonies of New England one can see that religious motives played a major role in the settlement of that region. John Winthrop and his Puritan followers sought to establish a "city on a hill" as a beacon of true Christianity to the rest of the world. Winthrop, upon encountering Indian villages that had been decimated by diseases such as smallpox, proclaimed that God himself had given the Puritans title to the land. However, New England's colonists also sought to turn a profit from lumber, fur-trapping, and other natural phenomena (Cronon, 1983). Thus in each region of early Colonial America, British perceptions of native peoples and nature's bounty would drive the direction that cultural collisions and environmental exploitation would take two centuries later.

After the acquisition of the Louisiana territory in 1803, the United States government sponsored several expeditions in order to ascertain the human and natural resources of the newly acquired territory of the trans-Mississippi. Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, John C. Fremont, and others explored the west and brought back extensive records of the region's timber, water, and mineral resources, while trappers such as James Ohio Pattie, also pursued fur bearing animals and added colorful accounts of sometimes questionable veracity to the public knowledge of the frontier region. By the mid-nineteenth century Congress had set in motion the forces that would eventually draw hordes of settlers to the west by authorizing the surveying of four transcontinental railroad routes and passing homestead laws. The first waves of Anglo settlers into the trans-Mississippi region were spurred onward by tales of gold and silver strikes in California and Nevada, and they were followed closely by loggers and cattlemen (White, R., 1991). Thus the first industries in the American West would be based upon the utilization of natural wealth by individuals intent upon private gain. Political power would inevitably concentrate into the hands of people who viewed the western environment as something to be exploited rather than preserved.

However, there was more to America's westward expansion than simply the desire to acquire wealth. By the mid nineteenth century, two ideological motives had also ensconced themselves into the American consciousness. The first, called Manifest Destiny, was based upon the belief that God had sanctioned the expansion of the United States across the North American continent, the antecedents of which one can discern in the Puritan colonies of New England. Closely intertwined was the belief in Thomas Jefferson's idea that the United States should become an agricultural utopia. The combination of Jeffersonian Agrarianism and Manifest Destiny constituted the ideological foundation upon which Congress would justify taking land from its indigenous inhabitants on one hand, while granting it through statutes to homesteaders seeking to carve small farms out of the frontier region, and railroad companies and extractive industries on the other (Limerick, 1988). Many environmental historians contend that a variant of Manifest Destiny also drove environmental exploitation because of the Biblical admonition contained within the book of Genesis 1: 28 where God instructed humankind to "subdue" the earth (White, L., 1969). By 1890, the date that historian Frederick Jackson Turner deemed the frontier closed, driven by the desire to turn a profit and justified by religious and ideological ideas, the extractive industries of the United

States had utilized techniques such as hydraulic mining, clear-cutting, and overgrazing to precipitate far-reaching environmental devastation in the American West.

Our discussion of Russian frontiers begins with the expansion eastward that occurred during the latter phase of the Muscovy period. Prior to the reigns of Ivan III and Ivan IV, Muscovite rulers had waged a constant struggle for survival and succeeded in breaking free of the domination of the Mongols between 1452–1480. As the old Mongol Empire broke up, Moscow began a period of expansion driven by three motivating factors. First, Ivan III who ascended the throne in 1462, sought to create a buffer zone between Muscovy and the Mongols to the east by extending the power of the emerging Russian state. In so doing he expanded Muscovy into the northern Urals region to the east and conquered parts of modern-day Ukraine to the southeast.

Second, Ivan III was driven by religious motives as well. Historians of Russia argue that Moscow had become the religious capitol of Russia by 1328, long before the expansion of Muscovy. The role of the church in Russia's expansion cannot be overstated. By the end of the 15th century, the Russian Orthodox Church controlled vast tracts of land and millions of peasants. Additionally, the church had spearheaded efforts to colonize the eastern wilderness by building monasteries far to the east of the recognized boundaries of Muscovy. The Russian church's perceptions of self importance grew as a result of the fall of the seat of Eastern Orthodoxy, Constantinople, to the Turks in 1453. Seeking to preserve the "true" Eastern Orthodox faith, Church clerics formulated the doctrine of the "Third Rome," articulated by Philotheus of Pskov in 1510. He argued that Rome had fallen because of the Catholic "heresy," Constantinople to "infidels" and Moscow—the third Rome—was to remain as the seat, defender, and advocate of the "true" Christian faith. Thus, a spiritual element entered into Russian expansionism (Riasoanovsky, 2000).

Finally, Ivan IV (the Terrible) established tentative links to the west for the purposes of trade, and the Tsar invited doctors, artists and craftsmen from Germany to serve him. More importantly, Muscovy established direct relations with the British who were permitted to trade through the port of Archangel. This increase in trade led to the rise of an important mercantile family, the Stogonovs, who obtained permission from the Tsar to establish industries in salt extraction, furs, and fish beyond the Urals in Siberia. Additionally, Ivan IV also continued his grandfather's expansion to the east and north by destroying and absorbing the republic of Novgorod, which

controlled the roads leading to the White Sea, Baltic, and to the trans-Ural region, bringing a vast area rich in raw materials into the Muscovy fold. Thus under Ivan III and Ivan IV, Russia had gone from a relatively small fiefdom centered in Moscow to a huge state with an expansionist agenda driven by perceptions of nationalism, religious fervor, and the desire to obtain raw materials with which to engage in international commerce (Riasoanovsky, 2000; Yanov, 1981).

With this ideological foundation laid, Russia embarked upon the exploration of Siberia and the far-east. Between 1580–1650 the Russian frontier moved three thousand miles east to the Pacific Ocean (Dmytryshyn, 2000). As with the American westward movement, the vanguard of the Russian advance was led by explorers and individuals seeking to exploit the natural resources of the region. However, these expeditions, which can be compared loosely with American expeditions such as Lewis & Clark, Fremont and others, differed in that they were regulated tightly by the Russian sovereign. Fur trading especially remained under the purview of the Russian government because of its importance in international commerce. As Russia expanded into Siberia, the crown imposed a tribute, or *iasak*, to be paid in furs upon the native peoples brought under its control, and created a bureaucracy designed to prevent the private acquisition of wealth (Riasoanovsky, 2000).

The reforms of Peter the Great (1689–1725) also had a tremendous impact upon the development of extractive industries in the Ural and Siberian frontier regions. After the disastrous defeat of the Russian army at the battle of Narva in 1700 during which it lost all of its artillery, Peter, with visions of continental, and even global conquest, sought to expand Russian heavy industry in order to prepare for future wars. Consequently, Peter recruited metallurgists from Western Europe and invested huge sums of money into state-sponsored exploration and development of heavy industry in the Urals and Siberia. As a result, eleven vast ironworks initiated production between 1702–1707. Thus by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Russian utilization of its eastern environment was now driven primarily by preparations for war under Peter the Great (Anisimov, 1993).

## Laws and Regulations

Spawned from diametrically opposed systems of government, the movements into the frontier regions of Russia and United States gave rise to differing systems

of regulations designed to control the utilization of the environment and collisions with indigenous peoples. A comparison of the regulatory schemes reveals much about the political ideologies and economic systems of Russia and America respectively. The Russian state tightly regulated fur traders and mining companies, thus remaining the principle recipient of the wealth extracted from Siberia. American fur trappers on the other hand engaged in their exploits for private gain and were seldom subjected to regulations anything like those imposed upon their Russian counterparts. Likewise, American laws governing mineral and water rights were often enacted based upon local customs that had become the *de facto* means of resolving disputes. In the area of water rights, for instance, the American West saw the evolution of the doctrine of prior appropriation, which is based upon the idea of “first in time first in right,” whereby if one arrived first the water was theirs to use so long as the use was “beneficial.” The Mining Act of 1872 made it relatively easy for individuals and corporations to stake claims to the west’s mineral resources and to acquire land for a nominal fee. So although individuals and extractive industries played important roles in the development of the natural resources of the frontier region of each country, they did so within vastly different political, economic, and regulatory frameworks.

The expansion of Russia also brought Russian culture into collision with indigenous people in the trans-Ural region. Russian incursions initially precipitated great unrest among the native peoples of the east, as the Eastern Orthodox Church sought to extend its influence by forcing indigenous people to convert despite nominal Czarist policies to the contrary. Beginning in the 16th century, and greatly accelerated under Peter the Great, the state tried to reduce the power of the church by reducing monastic landholdings and transferring peasants to state service. The logistics of imposing these new state regulations in the east led to great confusion and conflict between church and secular authorities, with the peasantry caught in the middle. As a result Russia grappled with numerous uprisings within its eastern frontier region, perhaps most clearly illustrated by the Pugachev revolt of 1773–1774, during the reign of Catherine II (the Great) that briefly threatened the stability of southern and southeastern Russia (Raeff, 1970). Its frontier region in chaos, Russia’s monarchs in the 19th century attempted to bring a degree of pacification to their conquered subjects. In 1822, Russian statesman Mikhail M. Speranskii instituted a set of regulations that are remarkably progressive in their treatment of indig-

enous peoples. These statutes divided the indigenous peoples of Siberia into three groups: “settled peoples”; “nomads who live in specific regions”; and “migratory peoples who are constantly on the move” (Dmytryshyn, 1990, p. 230).

Indigenous people who engaged in settled agriculture and who converted to the Russian Orthodox religion would be considered as equal with any Russian of a corresponding social caste, which in most cases constituted a peasant. However, and remarkably, given the perception of self importance held by the Russian Orthodox church, those who refused to convert were allowed to practice their own religions and were also viewed as the equivalent of state peasants except that they were exempted from military service. This is probably due to the decline of Church power that began under Peter the Great. Cossacks constituted a special group within the settled agriculturalists and were allowed to retain their own code of law and administration, as well as their religion. Settled agriculturalists also were allowed to hold onto their ancestral properties and even permitted to claim additional land (Dmytryshyn, 1990).

These regulations also gave nomadic and migratory groups a great deal of elasticity. They were not forcibly incorporated into the caste of peasant, but given what is in essence, freedom of religion. The only restriction upon these groups appears to be the continence of tribute payments and some restrictions regarding on which lands they could engage in herding and agriculture. Nomads were to be tried in Russian courts of law for crimes while civil disputes were to be settled according to local custom. Likewise, migratory peoples were granted extensive tracts of land to use for hunting, granted freedom of religion and were exempted from paying taxes to the crown (Dmytryshyn, 1990).

Despite these statutory guarantees of indigenous rights and obligations, Russia still sought to quell native uprisings, and the bureaucracy created to govern its far-flung empire was cumbersome to the point of futility. In 1864 the minister of foreign affairs, Prince Alexander Gorchakov, issued a policy statement on the difficulties of these cultural collisions, that is remarkable because of the historical parallels one finds with U.S. government pronouncements on Indian policy:

The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilized states which are brought into contact with half-savage nomad populations possessing no fixed social organization . . .

In order to put a stop to this permanent state of disorder, fortified posts are established in the mist of these hostile tribes, and an influence is brought to bear upon them which reduces them by degrees to a state of submission. But other more distant tribes beyond this outer line come, in turn, to threaten the same dangers and necessitate the same measures of repression. The state is thus forced to choose between two alternatives: either to give up this endless labor and to abandon its frontier to perpetual disturbance, or to plunge deeper and deeper into barbarous countries when the difficulties and expenses increase with every step in advance.

Such has been the fate of every country which has found itself in a similar position. The United States in America, France in Algeria, Holland in her colonies, England in India; all have been forced by imperious necessity into their onward march, where the greatest difficulty is to know when to stop. (Krausse, 1988, p. 224–25)

Thus, the Tsars attempted to incorporate indigenous peoples of the eastern frontier region into the Russian body politic by promising them relative political, cultural, and religious autonomy in exchange for their agreeing to recognize the supremacy of the sovereign and to contribute a portion of what they produced to the state.

In America the treatment of indigenous people has been characterized by contradictory policies virtually since the founding of Jamestown in 1607. Initially, in Virginia, Native Americans were viewed as a monolithic bloc, and some, such as the Powhatan tribe, were driven from their lands in the Tidewater, resulting in numerous bloody clashes. However, by the mid-seventeenth century, a reservation system had been established in Virginia, the historical antecedent of the system in place at the present. Colonial administrators distinguished between these reservation Indians and “hostiles” in the frontier region. In New England, Anglo merchants and traders attempted to incorporate American Indians into the market economy to facilitate the trade in furbearers and other raw materials, while other colonists waged war against the various New England tribes so that by 1700, indigenous people no longer constituted an obstacle to the settlement of New England (Cronon, 1983).

For the next 250 years until the 1960s, American Indian policy vacillated between assimilation, extermination, and the creation of reservations to isolate Native Americans so that they could be “reformed” and “Christianized.” Although generalizations are risky at best, one can find two common threads linking American Indian

policies: first, they are founded upon the Anglocentric premise that native cultures are somehow inferior, and second, that many if not all American Indian policies were designed either overtly or through subterfuge, to separate Native Americans from their land. Perhaps the best articulation of this idea is captured in the words of one 19th century proponent of assimilation who stated that reformers sought to “kill the Indian [and] save the man.” As such, American policy makers have initiated programs to destroy Indian cultures by outlawing the practice of tribal customs and religions, and by attempting to privatize tribal lands, in order to introduce “selfishness” into Indian society (Calloway, 1999). With the passage of the Indian New Deal in 1934 the trend was somewhat reversed, however, the Termination policy of the 1950s precipitated the taking of still more land. It was not until the 1960s that courts began to uphold Indian resource claims and to preserve cultural autonomy. Although historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and politicians acknowledged the integral role the “savage” Indian frontier enemy played in the development of America’s national character, the United States, unlike Russia, has made little attempt to preserve the ancestral lands and uphold the cultural integrity of the indigenous people of its former frontier regions.

However, this is not to suggest that Tsarist Russia was a place of individual autonomy when compared with the United States. Although it is true that within the United States certain groups of people have been exploited and marginalized—American Indians and Africans are but two examples—the United States has never engaged in the wholesale subjugation of virtually its entire populace that characterized the Russian imperial period. Indeed between the reigns of Ivan III and Catherine II, Russian autocrats progressively imposed greater and greater degrees of control upon individuals. Only after the freeing of the serfs in 1861 was there even a temporary relaxation in this state control, which of course evaporated with the Russian Revolution of 1917. Historian Theodore von Laue contends that under Lenin and Stalin, the Soviet state accomplished to a greater degree that which escaped even Peter the Great: the imposition of discipline and collectivization upon the Russian people to such a degree that it virtually enslaved them to the state. As a result, the Soviet Union represents continuity with the imperial past, not a break from it. Soviet Russia became a global superpower just as imperial Russia had progressed along the same path—by exploiting its greatest natural resource: its people. Consequently, although great environmental disasters occurred during the Soviet period, such as the

great Kazakhstan plow up of the 1950s, the draining of the Aral Sea, and the threats to Lake Baikal; these can all be viewed as the incidental result of the Soviet struggle to compete with western industrialization by exploiting and marginalizing the Russian populace on an unprecedented scale (Von Laue, 1971; Worster, 1979).

In contrast, there has not been state-sponsored exploitation of the majority of the population of the United States. The United States has risen to its status as a superpower due to the machinations of a (more or less) free people, in pursuit of private property and wealth, working within a capitalistic system, which places economic considerations above everything else. Historian Donald Worster contends that capitalism is the “decisive factor in this nation’s use of nature.” One can contend that the environmental destruction wrought by overgrazing, hydraulic mining, and the cultivation of marginal lands that has occurred in the old trans-Mississippi frontier region is the result (Worster, 1979).

Perhaps the only common factor driving both Russian and American exploitation of their frontier regions is the Cold War. The United States tested its first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico in 1945, and conducted 935 tests of atomic and nuclear weapons at the Nevada Test Site between 1947–1992. Russia initiated its atomic bomb program in Kazakhstan and exploded 496 atomic and nuclear devices there between 1949–1990 (Norris & Arkin, 1998). In each case the state deemed these former frontier regions appropriate places to conduct environmentally destructive tests, and the result is that people of Kazakhstan and the Southwestern United States live with the legacy of cancer and gene mutation due to exposure from radioactive fallout. Marginalized land and marginalized people exist in each former frontier region, as the result of imperialist, Soviet and capitalistic exploitation, ideology, and competition.

### **The Emergence of Environmental Advocacy**

Yet powerful environmental movements have emerged from these marginalized lands that have addressed a broad range of issues ranging from the preservation of natural phenomena to public health. Furthermore, these environmental movements have also been driven by deeply held philosophical concerns about the preservation of national identity in the case of both the United States and Russia. In the United States, Thomas Jefferson and others sought to distinguish American civilization from Europe by extolling the virtues of the American environment

and its molding effect upon American character. At the beginning of the twentieth century, president Theodore Roosevelt echoed these sentiments by advocating that Americans pursue the “strenuous life,” and he set aside vast tracts of land as national forests, and national parks and monuments. The National Park Service, created in 1916, initially oversaw the parks as tourist attractions, but by 1940, Park Service Director Newton Drury began to articulate a different vision for the national parks, especially the crown jewels such as Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Grand Canyon, located mostly in the former frontier region of the United States. In 1942, with Grand Canyon threatened by the potential construction of hydroelectric dams, Drury drew the line at the boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park and succeeded in mobilizing a constituency of environmental groups in opposition. Drury argued that the national parks constituted sacred space that should be held inviolate because he believed that if these last remaining vestiges of American wilderness were destroyed then American culture would be severed from its foundations which were deeply rooted in its western frontier environment (Pearson, 1999).

Environmental groups such as the Sierra Club and Wilderness Society, struggling to break free from the idea that development and the preservation of the parks were somehow reconcilable, took up Drury’s crusade, and in the 1950s and 1960s fought epic battles over threats to Dinosaur National Monument, Grand Canyon, the preservation of redwoods, and other environmental crusades centered around natural phenomena located mostly in the trans-Mississippi West. Capturing the poignancy of 1960s style environmentalism at the beginning of the Grand Canyon dam controversy, Sierra Club executive director David Brower wrote the following:

Glen Canyon died in 1963 and I was partly responsible for its needless death. So were you. Neither you nor I, nor anyone else, knew it well enough to insist that at all costs it should endure. . . . The best of the canyon is going or gone. Some second best beauty remains along the Colorado of course but much of its meaning vanished when Glen Canyon died. The rest will go the way of Glen Canyon unless enough people begin to feel uneasy about the current interpretation of what progress consists of—unless they are willing to ask if progress has really served good purpose if it wipes out so many of the things that make life worthwhile. . . . Progress need not deny to the people their inalienable right to be informed and to choose. In Glen Canyon the people never knew what their choices were. Next time in other stretches of the Colorado, on other riv-

ers that are still free, and wherever there is wildness that can be part of our civilization instead of victim to it the people need to know before a bureau's elite decide to wipe out what no men can replace. (Porter, 1963, p. 5–7)

Brower characterized rampant water development by the Bureau of Reclamation as a denial of American democracy. This portrayal resonated with the public, who, in a massive grass roots protest at the height of the Civil Rights, Free Speech, and Anti-War movements, sent hundreds of thousands of letters to Congress protesting the proposed Grand Canyon dams. And in an ironic twist, American environmentalists, seeking an alternative model to industrial capitalism and environmental exploitation, adopted Native Americans as representing an alternative, environmentally conscious culture, the very people American capitalism and the westward expansion driven by it had marginalized for most of American history (Krech III, 1999).

Russian environmental protection first emerged as a result of the establishment of protected nature preserves called *zapovedniki*, by scientists with the approval of the Romanov rulers during the latter part of the 19th century. These nature reserves constituted space that was to be held “inviolable” so that scientists could study evolution and other ecological developments. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, as the new communist state sought to stamp out all forms of dissent, according to historian Douglas Weiner, the *zapovedniki* constituted an “archipelago of freedom” within the Soviet sea of repression. Viewing the scientists as harmless “nature kooks,” the Soviet state tolerated their existence, and they remained free to conduct scientific research, maintained foreign contacts with the western scientific community, and even established professional societies that prided themselves on the retention of democratic procedures. These scientists successfully resisted Soviet attempts to open the *zapovedniki* to exploitation until the 1950s when Stalin decreed that the reserves should be opened to development. Even then, and in the face of consequences absent from western environmental struggles, these scientists continued to defend these sacred spaces, and sought the reestablishment of their inviolable status under Brezhnev, and eventually succeeded in preserving many of these reserves in a pristine state (Weiner, 1999).

However, in defending the *zapovedniki*, the scientists did more than just preserve natural laboratories for ecological inquiry. In setting aside these tracts, Soviet scientists also preserved fundamental elements of Russian national identity. The Russian people historically

have viewed the Taiga forest, steppes, and in particular, waterways and lakes, as foundational elements of their very essence as a people. During Stalin's tenure, the Soviet Union initiated a series of gargantuan water projects, including the Moscow-Volga Canal, the reversal of the Dnieper River, and the White Sea Canal, the construction of which took the lives of an estimated 120,000 slave laborers. During the 1950s, Khrushchev planned massive water projects for the Siberian forests and northern rivers in an attempt to replenish the water levels of the Aral Sea. Speaking for the Russian people, based upon almost 1,000 years of historical and folk tradition, the educated “intelligentsia,” including writers and poets, rose up in protest against these projects. According to Weiner, the most objectionable aspect of these projects, “was their threat to Russian villages, and historical monuments . . . progress and modernity now threatened the spiritual home” of the Russian people. The scientific community and intelligentsia focused upon projects including a paper and pulp mill planned for Lake Baikal in the 1960s, the deepest lake in the world, and a place of almost unimaginable beauty and importance to Russian cultural identity. Although these protests ultimately failed, and the industrial plants planned for Baikal went on line, the struggle forged a link between Russian writers and the scientific community and provided a foundation for future, more public environmental demonstrations which would take place in the era of Glasnost (Weiner, 1999).

The plans to reroute northern rivers such as the Ob and Enisei, mired for years in Soviet bureaucracy, were approved in 1976, and studies moved forward so that construction could begin. When the Soviet government released the economic justifications for these proposals in 1983, scientists and writers launched public protests in which the theme of national identity was sounded again and again. In the wake of the Chernobyl disaster of April 1986, environmental writers publicly attacked the projects at a national conference in June. Weiner quotes Iurii Bondarev who perhaps best captured the public outrage of the Russian people, marginalized and exploited by the state for more than half a millennium, who viewed these and other environmental desecrations as threats to their national character:

If we do not stop the destruction of architectural monuments, if we do not stop the violence to the earth and rivers, if there does not take place a moral explosion in science and criticism, then one fine morning, which will be our last . . . , we with our inexhaustible optimism will wake up and realize that the national culture of great Russia—

its spirit, its love for the paternal land, its beauty, its great literature, painting, and philosophy—has been effaced, has disappeared forever, murdered, and we naked and impoverished will sit on the ashes trying to remember the native alphabet . . . and we won't be able to remember, for thought, and feeling, and happiness, and historical memory will have disappeared. (p. 426)

Responding to this withering attack, virtually unprecedented in Soviet history, Mikhail Gorbachev and the rest of the Politburo, cancelled the most noxious elements of these projects on August 14, 1986, opening the floodgates for massive environmental protests over the destruction of nature and especially public health issues during the Gorbachev era.

## **Conclusion**

The trans-Mississippi frontier of the United States and the trans-Ural, and Siberian frontiers of Russia have been subjected to like degrees of environmental exploitation despite the fundamental differences in the economic and political systems of each respective state. In the United States, individual and corporate greed constituted the motivating factor, as private individuals and business sought to wring a profit from the natural bounty of the region. Russian environmental exploitation is also due to greed of a different sort, greed of the elites who used the apparatus of the state to eliminate individual profit taking from the eastern frontiers and to exploit virtually the entire populace as though it was just another natural resource which, to Russian leaders, both imperial and Soviet, it in fact was.

Russia and America have treated their indigenous people far differently, and the comparison is only partially conclusive because of the differences in how each state treated their populace as a whole. While Russia incorporated the indigenous people of the frontier into the popu-

lace that the ruling apparatus had marginalized, throwing them a bone by allowing them some cultural autonomy, America until recently and in response to legal challenges by its indigenous people, has denied cultural autonomy, and kept American Indians marginalized apart from the populace as a whole.

Yet these marginalized people have played an important role in the rise of modern environmental movements in Russia and America. In the case of Russia, the “volk” represent the true Russian identification with the natural world, and provided the inspiration for scientists, writers and other members of the twentieth century “*intelligentsia*” to rise in protest over the threatened destruction of Siberian waters and forests. In America too, environmentalists have linked the American character and cultural identity with the natural world. The natural wonders of the west have become a powerful symbol of who we are as a nation and American Indian societies have been adopted as an alternative model for coexistence with the natural world by many environmentalists.

Ultimately, the common link between Russian and American environmentalism is not based in ideology or oppositional economic systems. It is based upon the collective consciousness of the people who, though laboring within different political systems, found the means to articulate that the continuing destruction of the Earth, either by capitalistic, communistic, or imperialistic machinations, constituted a threat to their own cultural identity as Americans and Russians. In articulating these fears, they have perhaps instinctively sounded a warning for all humankind: that if we continue to destroy the earth, we will, in the end, destroy ourselves. Whether humanity is listening is a mystery only the passage of time can solve.

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## Notes

1. The author presented an abridged version of this essay at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association held in San Francisco, California on January 6, 2002.

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