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National Identity, Modernization, and the Environment

SARI AUTIO-SARASMO

Stephen Brain, *Song of the Forest: Russian Forestry and Stalinist Environmentalism, 1905–1953*. 232 pp., illus. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. ISBN-13 978-0822961659. \$27.95.

Tricia Cusack, *Riverscapes and National Identities: Space, Place, and Society*. 237 pp., illus. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010. ISBN-13 978-0815632115. \$29.95.

Anthony Heywood, *Engineer of Revolutionary Russia: Iurii V. Lomonosov (1876–1952) and the Railways*. 400 pp., illus. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011. ISBN-13 978-0754655398. £75.00.

Different as they are, the three books under review are unified by broader themes, including the development of new nations, the construction of national identities, and processes of modernization. Each book also reveals an environmental dimension of space, as well as the nature of technological progress from the early 19th century to the mid-20th. More implicit—but nonetheless present—are the themes of the transfer of ideas and technologies across national borders. These themes of interaction, exchange, and flow of information are elements of transnational history, which can serve as a tool for analyzing all three books.¹ This review concentrates on these common themes with special focus on transnational exchange and interaction. How

¹ This is a simplified picture of transnational history, but it nevertheless offers an interesting tool with which to analyze these books. For a more comprehensive view on transnational history, see Ian Tyrrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in United States History: Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Global History* 4, 3 (2009): 453–74. For a specific transnational approach on the history of Central and Eastern Europe, see Tara Zahra, “Imagined Non-Communities:

did these exchanges—as well as internal exchanges and interaction—influence the development of nation building and modernization? While the books of Stephen Brain and Anthony Heywood clearly focus on Russia and the Soviet Union, Tricia Cusack's monograph offers a comparative analysis encompassing several nations.

Cusack's *Riverscapes* explores the relationship between painted riverscapes and the creation of national identities in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Ranging from America to Europe as far as Russia, she has chosen five rivers—the Hudson, Thames, Seine, Volga, and Shannon—to reflect early examples of nationalizing states that were distinct in geographical, cultural, and political terms (3). In her effort to incorporate riverscapes into her analysis of nation building, Cusack relies on the works of Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith, and Christopher Ely, among others. She begins with several key assumptions—for instance, that nations are modern and socially constructed—and proposes that modernization and industrialization are particularly important to this construction.² In her analysis, the author connects theories of nationalism to visual imagery, notably landscape painting (10). She states that visual imagery, including “visual print” (mass-produced illustrations or prints of celebrated paintings), contributes significantly to nationalist discourses. The study's starting point is that the geographical imaginings of place constitute an essential component of nation formation and national identity (15). Through an analysis of individual painters' influence and role in constructing nationalist discourse, Cusack also emphasizes the importance of individual agency.

The book is structured according to the rivers noted above, so each chapter focuses on visual representations of what the author labels a “national” river—that is, one that acquired iconic status as a key national image in a particular country. The author starts her analysis with the Anglo-American narrative of national riverscapes, focussing on the role of the Hudson in U.S. identity. The process of modernization and the place of Native Americans in how Europeans imagined the Hudson play an important role in nationalist discourse surrounding that river. U.S. identity is an interesting topic from the point of view of transnational history as well. It was in the United States

National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,” *Slavic Review* 69, 1 (2010): 93–119 (esp. 114–15).

² Zahra, “Imagined Non-Communities,” 96, 98. Zahra refers in her article about national indifferences to the modernist paradigm based on the works of Anderson, Gellner, Ranger, Hobsbawm, and Weber. See also Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); and Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), which are both mentioned in the book under review.

that the transnational turn took place in early 1990s, when the question of the specificity of U.S. history emerged. The connection between national development and cross-national influences came to the fore.³ In this regard, it would be interesting to know more about individual agency and external influence in the creation of the national imagery with regard to the Hudson, because, as the author claims, the role of immigrant painters in the process was important. What was the role of international and cross-national influence in the creation of national imagery and how specifically North American was the imagery?

From the United States, Cusack moves to England. She connects the Thames to environmental discourse through an analysis of the polluted national riverscape and what this meant for the self-understanding of Britons, above all Londoners. This theme is interesting, yet a closer analysis of modernization might have enabled a deeper understanding of urbanization and industrialization. By connecting the construction of the Thames's embankment to modernization and, more generally, to the idea of the modern city, Cusack might also have connected the developments she discusses to the issues of empire and expansion and their relation to nation building (71). The embankments of the Thames became a major feature of London as an imperial capital. There is an interesting European context for the construction of embankments, since London competed with Paris in its modernization project (88–89). The existence of such similar projects raises an interesting question in terms of transnational history: how was this process influenced by the global understanding of modernity and the idea of a “modern city” in the 19th century? Here, it is a pity that Cusack's analysis of the Seine takes a different approach. The main focus in that chapter is on culture and French impressionist views of the Seine as a recreational site for city dwellers. The chapter also reflects on the role of history and art in policy making—and, of course, on identity building as a whole. This is an interesting approach to that topic, but it would have been useful to connect the case of the Seine to the Thames and analyze similarities (107).

Since the main focus in this review is on Russia, the Volga provides an especially interesting point of contact with the other two books considered here. Cusack brings to the fore cultural nationalism and the tensions in imperial Russian discourse about national identity. The intelligentsia's division into Slavophiles and Westernizers had broad repercussions for self-understanding and identity building. According to the author, the Slavophiles dominated the discourse of cultural nationalism, for which the Volga provided a valuable

³ Tyrrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn,” 455–56.



Il'ia Repin, *Volga Boatmen* (1872)

Source: The Yorck Project.

This picture is in the public domain worldwide as part of the Yorck Project.

symbol. The painted riverscapes of Il'ia Repin and Isaak Levitan offered iconic representations that helped create an imagined native geography for Russia, which, strengthened by Orthodox Christianity, in turn established the basis for the building of national identity (157). In Russia's case, the role of outside influence is fascinating. The Westernizers were eager to adopt foreign institutions and ideas in order to overcome Russian backwardness. With regard to Russian modernization, it is interesting to see how national identity was constructed on the basis of Slavophile ideas of Russianness. To what extent did transnational exchange—here, the penetration of ideas from abroad—take place among the Russian intelligentsia, in spite of Slavophile ideas? As Cusack shows, Russian artists were acquainted with West European art and discussions (136), and in the end she concludes that national identity in Russia was informed by discussions that were spreading throughout Western Europe as well. The idea had specific Russian characteristics, but it did not emerge in a vacuum.

While Cusack's analysis of the Volga remains rooted in the imperial era, her analysis of the Irish river Shannon provides an interesting perspective on the 20th century. This chapter connects identity construction with the discourse on technological modernization. The Shannon was harnessed for electrification in the 1920s, and this gave a specific character to the discourse of national identity in the Irish Free State. Although Cusack does not draw the



Isaak Levitan, *Above Eternal Tranquillity* (1894)

The Volga near Sviiazhsk

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

This picture is in the public domain in the United States because of its age.

connection, the Irish narrative of national identity based on technological modernization was very similar to the narrative in the Soviet Union of the 1920s and Lenin's famous electrification plan. Yet while the Shannon offered a mythical scent of the past to Irish national identity, the Bolshevik utopia met the same need by appealing to the future. Such similarity in the imagery of the two young nations is surprising. Séan Keating's paintings of the Shannon were very similar to the contemporary art of the USSR.⁴ The aim, however, in the Soviet Union was more or less to enhance internationalism and socialism, rather than nationalism. This, once again, can be traced to wider developments in Europe in the early 20th century—namely, the spread of socialist ideas and the adoption of technological modernization as a model of development for all nations in spite of their respective political or social systems.

Cusack's book thus provides an intriguing approach to the topic of national identity. The use of painted riverscapes as a tool of national construction

⁴ See, e.g., the painting by Boris Ioganson, *Building of Zaporozhnoe Station* (1925), reproduced in the exhibition catalogue *Socialist Realism: The Great Utopia/Sotsializm—Velikaia utopiia* (Helsinki: Cultural Center of the City of Helsinki, 2002), 58.

on the basis of an imagined past and national geography opens a somewhat different view onto the general theme. When paintings or drawings represent the main object of analysis, however, it is important that they be available for the reader. The book contains 40 illustrations, but that selection remains too small to support Cusack's analysis, which extends much more broadly than that. Consequently, many paintings and drawings discussed in the text are not reproduced in the book and are thus not conveniently accessible to the reader. This, of course, is understandable, but adjustments in the text should have been made accordingly. For example, by moving beyond a mere description of the paintings and drawings to the analysis of political and social contexts with comparative aspects, Cusack might have rendered the absence of some visual material less problematic. Such a broadened analysis might have further strengthened the explanatory power of the book.

If the role of the environment in the development of the nation is visible in Cusack's book, it occupies an even bigger place in Stephen Brain's *Song of the Forest*. Indeed, for Brain nature creates the basis for social and political development. *Song of the Forest* focuses on the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, ranging from 1905 until Stalin's death in 1953 and treating the repercussions of the earlier period for later environmentalism in the USSR. Brain approaches forestry from the standpoint of environmental history while addressing wider themes such as modernization, industrialization, and sustainability. While Cusack concentrates on riverscapes, Brain focuses on forests, which he defines as the birthplace of the Russian state (4). The book does not focus on nation building and national identity as such, but the author shows that Russia's vast size and different natural environments created a foundation for certain ideological and cultural aspects of nationhood. Without nature it is impossible to understand Russia; for Brain, rivers and the steppe had a role to play, but the dark and dense forests were Russia's heart.⁵ Although Brain attributes metaphorical and cultural significance to the forest in the creation of national identity (7), his main preoccupation is with the practices of Russian forestry and Stalinist environmentalism. What is new in the book in comparison to earlier analyses of Soviet environmental history is the author's wide conception of environmentalism as a broad political and philosophical program striving to preserve the integrity of the environment.

⁵ A fine companion to Brain's book is Jane T. Costlow, *Heart-Pine Russia: Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). While Brain focuses mainly on the environmentalist approach, Costlow's book is about the cultural aspect of the Russian forests. The recent book by David Moon, *The Plough that Broke the Steppes: Agriculture and Environment on Russia's Grasslands, 1700–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), meanwhile, offers an interesting perspective on the role of the steppe in Russia's environmental history that complements Brain's study of forests.

The author begins from the premise that the Soviet Union developed a genuine and effective—although also unusual—environmentalist program during the Stalin era. He challenges the prevailing assumption that Stalin-era environmental politics was implacably hostile to environmentalist initiatives. Indeed, according to Brain, at that time the USSR had an environmentalist program that went beyond conservationism and preservationism by contemplating also regeneration and the sustainable use of forests (2). This approach gives a strong basis for the author's aim to challenge the "existing consensus of Soviet environmental politics" (3). The author contests the existing literature of the Soviet environmental history, where environmentalism has been presented purely as a victim of Stalin's policy.⁶ According to Brain, forest conservation was in fact a vital part of the Soviet industrialization program, and industrialization would not have succeeded without environmental protection. This is a new perspective on the topic and definitely merits consideration.

Brain begins by analyzing the works of the founding fathers of Russian forestry from the early 20th century. One of the major themes in their writings was the role of forests in the economic growth of and—to a lesser extent—environmentalism in imperial Russia. A major question for the foresters in the tsarist era, as well as in the Soviet Union, was how to derive wealth from forests while ensuring their sustainability.⁷ In effect, discussions about forest management were entwined in broader debates about Russian modernization, and here, too, the dichotomy between Slavophile and Westernizer approaches was replicated: should Russian forest science create something of its own or should it primarily imitate German practices?⁸ This dilemma creates an important connection to Cusack's example of the Volga River by again demonstrating the pervasiveness of transnational exchanges and information flows into Russia, especially on matters of modernization and economic development. As Brain reminds us, Marxism was a Western ideology (169), and the modernization plan adopted by the Bolsheviks had a strong

⁶ For example, Brain characterizes Douglas Weiner's two books—*Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and *A Little Corner of Freedom: Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)—as "consensus books" about Soviet environmental politics that define Stalinist politics as being hostile to environmentalist initiatives.

⁷ On economic development in Russia broadly, see, e.g., Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850–1917* (London: Batsford Academic, 1986).

⁸ On Russian–German exchanges and interaction in the field of science and technology, see Eduard Kolchinskii, Dietrich Beyrau, and Iuliia Laius, eds., *Nauka, tekhnika i obschestvo Rossii i Germanii vo vremia Pervoi mirovoi voiny* (St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2007).

connection to the Western conceptions of technological progress. Although the information flows and exchanges were originally transnational, in Russia internal exchanges endowed ideas with Russian national characteristics. Despite outside influences, there was a strong Slavophile component as well, one that is clearly discernable in the imagery of Russian identity. Just as there were German influences in Russian forestry, Georgii Fedorovich Morozov brought a specific cultural imagination to Russian forestry. He connected the idea of *modernizm* with the economic development and modernization of the Russian Empire by emphasizing the sustainable use of forests. Morozov's ideas survived in the USSR, since the Soviet leadership thought that Morozov's *modernizm* would promote Soviet modernization: Morozov's theories would maximize efficiency, reduce waste, and thus enhance economic progress (94).

The book is explicitly structured according to the cycle of life in the forest: old growth, seeds, ground fire, clear-cut, regeneration, and transformation. This is not only a fresh way to construct the narrative but also an innovative manner in which to assert environmentalism's existence even during the Stalin era. Each chapter analyzes one step in the development of Russian or Soviet forestry and environmentalism. Brain gives a clear and thorough picture of the creation and organization of Soviet forestry and of the accompanying development of environmentalism, from the Bolshevik revolution until the end of the Stalin period. Numerous reorganizations of the administrative and economic structure took place during the Stalin era, which has made research on the subject challenging. Tracing the evolution of forestry in the Soviet Union through Stalin to create a comprehensive picture in a single volume—and making sense of it—is indeed a great accomplishment.

Song of the Forest contains a profound examination of Soviet forestry and Stalinist environmentalism. Brain has done interesting and high-quality research work that merits a prominent place in studies of Soviet environmentalism. The book is not only thorough but well written. However, constructing a fuller account of the political changes and economic development during the Stalin era would have made the book even better. The many reorganizations of forest management were connected not only to the changing goals of the planned economy but also to the regionalization of the Soviet Union. Forestry was expected to support the industrialization—and thus the modernization—of Soviet society.

There is no need to dispute the author's claim that environmentalism existed during the Stalin period; this was undoubtedly the case on the all-union level. If we shift the focus to the local level, however, the situation might be different. For example, in the industrial forest areas of northwest

Russia near good water routes, logging exceeded annual growth without any regeneration for the duration of the Stalin era. This situation did not change after the creation of water protection zones. Logging continued and increased even in such zones or in forests situated close to villages and other population points, because those resources were readily available and facilitated fulfillment of Soviet economic plans. The primary aim was to produce as much timber as possible for export, without much thought given to reforestation or water protection. From this point of view one may ask how strong was the environmentalism in those areas that were slated for exploiting forest resources?

If Brain focuses on Russian space through the dark and dense forests that created the basis for Soviet industrialization and modernization, then Anthony Heywood's *Engineer of Revolutionary Russia* is a study of the role of Russian railways in connecting the country's periphery to that modernization.⁹ The book is also a comprehensive biography of the engineer Yuri Vladimirovich Lomonosov (1876–1952), who was an unusual character. By all accounts, he was not an easy person to work with, and his personal life was rife with controversies. His career as a Russian railwayman started in 1898 and continued during the Great War and three revolutions, ending in 1925. His decision not to return from Germany to the Soviet Union in 1927 most likely spared him from the purges of Russia's prerevolutionary engineers and scientists a year later, but he was therefore castigated as a traitor and "non-returner" (271). In spite of the decision to stay abroad, Lomonosov remained a supporter of the Soviet system until the great purges in mid-1930s. In 1938, he applied and received UK citizenship and never visited his home country again.

The book is based on a wealth of archival material, including Lomonosov's private papers. Lomonosov's unpublished diary of 1918–52 and his unpublished memoirs comprise more than 20,000 handwritten folios. Heywood uses these materials as a basis for wider analysis, combining them with other archival materials, contemporary studies, and literature. The result is a solid piece of scholarship, not only because of its 400 pages, but because it uses the life of an individual to create a multilayered illustration of a complicated era in Russian history.

Railways played an important part in modernization in the 19th century: for example, economically, by transforming rural communities into

⁹ Anthony Heywood is a specialist on the Russian and Soviet railway system. His earlier books include *Modernising Lenin's Russia: Economic Reconstruction, Foreign Trade, and the Railways* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and *Soviet Locomotive Types: The Union Legacy* (Malmö: Stenvall, 1995).

industrialized urban settlements.¹⁰ They offered a modern way to master Russia's vast spaces—and its vast natural resources, the basis of economic growth and industrialization. In this sense, Russia's size gave it an advantage in terms of modernization. At the same time, Russia's vast size has been regarded as an obstacle to modernization because of infrastructure problems.¹¹ From this point of view, Heywood's book can meaningfully be compared to Brain's *Song of the Forest*. The role of the environment and nature in modernization was always related to the question of economic growth. By focusing on the development of railways during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the book sheds light on the role of technology in the Russian Revolution and the emergence of the new Soviet state, as well as on changing ideas about modernization. Railways were crucial vehicles of change and development of the new state, and locomotives were tangible examples of technological modernization in the new era. As Heywood demonstrates, railways also played an important role in the collapse of tsarist Russia and were critically important for the revolution. Control of the railways was essential, since the railway telegraph system was used to publicize the revolution throughout the empire, and revolutionary railwaymen were able to control traffic (146).

After the Bolshevik revolution, the development of railways became an important aspect of Soviet Russia's economic modernization. In the early 1920s, Soviet Russia invested 30 percent of its gold reserve in Western railway equipment, which reflects the perceived importance of railways as a driving sector for national economic development (208). Locomotives provided an apt symbol for Soviet modernization, just as railways became a practical necessity. Lomonosov participated in all these processes during his career as a locomotive engineer and developer of Russian railways. He gained an international professional reputation by participating in the development of diesel locomotives. As a railwayman, he also participated in the construction of a new Soviet state. During his time in Soviet Russia, Lomonosov had various administrative and research responsibilities concerned with the operation, repair, and upgrade of the Soviet railway system (189). This is also a story

¹⁰ On modernization theories and Russian history, see Simon Dixon, *The Modernisation of Russia, 1676–1825* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ There is a wide variety of literature on space and spatiality. See, e.g., Barney Warf and Santa Arias, eds., *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2009); Mark Bassin, Christopher Ely, and Melissa Stockdale, eds., *Space, Place, and Power in Modern Russia: Essays in the New Spatial History* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2010); and Nick Baron, "New Spatial Histories of 20th-Century Russia and the Soviet Union: Exploring the Terrain," *Kritika* 9, 2 (2008): 433–47. For a book connecting space and empire, see Sanna Turoma and Maxim Waldstein, eds., *Empire De/Centered: New Spatial Histories of Russia and the Soviet Union* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

of the limits of individual agency in a society that was constantly changing. Because he was an internationally distinguished professional, in Bolshevik eyes Lomonosov became an untrustworthy prerevolutionary specialist (*spets*), a classification that raised mixed feelings among the Bolshevik leadership. His high rank as a railwayman before the revolution and his decision to remain a nonparty Marxist became the main factors hindering his career after the revolution. His professional talent helped him remain part of the system until the mid-1920s, but he was forced to emigrate when the direction of the Soviet society changed.

Lomonosov's career and personal ambitions were integrally connected to the development of Russian society. Heywood's book therefore highlights individual agency—how social change and technological modernization were experienced by one individual. This approach of individual agency connects *Engineer of the Revolutionary Russia* to Cusack's *Riverscapes*. What is the role of an individual in the creation of nations and the production of modernity? Railways and Yuri Lomonosov indeed make for an interesting case. He had a long career as a railway engineer, professor, and researcher in the Russian and later Soviet railways. In addition—and partly connected to his status as a railwayman—he took part in the revolutionary actions of 1905, playing a leading role in efforts to build cooperation between liberals and socialists in Kiev and later participating in the revolutionary activity of the Russian Social Democratic Worker's Party. Later in his career, he interacted with the outside world as Russia's representative and supported international scientific and technical cooperation. Lomonosov is also important from the standpoint of transnational history: he was pivotal as an agent of transnational exchange and information flows in the field of technology. He strongly influenced the technological development of the Russian railways, but he also transferred Russian expertise to other countries, especially to Germany and France. Abroad, Lomonosov was known especially for his work on developing and testing diesel locomotives. In Russia, Lomonosov's work in building railways that integrated remote areas into the Russian Empire helped change the understanding of Russianness. More regions became accessible and connected to information flows.

Heywood's book provides a profound examination of the technical development of locomotives and the interaction among specialists in the field of trade and technology during an era of remarkable change. A reader who may not be that keen on railways and locomotives but wants to learn more about wider societal developments must plough through the book to glean the important information, which lies embedded in a large quantity of detail.

This task, however, is compensated by lively insights into Russian history through the prism of one individual's life and fate.

After reading these three books, the reader acquires a unique view of new and changing societies. All the societies considered in these books shared the aim of modernization, which required engagement with issues of culture, space, environment, and sustainability. The modernization project of the 19th and 20th centuries was a global enterprise, and national processes were influenced by transnational exchange and information flows. These three books also focus on change and continuity on various historical levels and can thus be recommended to those who want to understand the cultural, technical, and environmental dimensions of modernization. Each book offers scholarly writing of high quality, and each author scrutinizes his or her respective subject in interesting and innovative ways. Thus, all three books handsomely reward the reader.

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