

Bruno, Andy: *The Nature of Soviet Power. An Arctic Environmental History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-1-107-14471-2; 305 S.

Rezensioniert von: Alan Roe, College of William and Mary, Virginia

As the „most populated, industrialized, and militarized section of the global arctic, as well as the most polluted,“ (p. 4) the Kola Peninsula is more than a worthy subject among the growing literature of histories on the arctic region. Throughout his well-written, extensively researched book, Bruno analyzes the Soviet motives for the extensive settling and developing the Kola Peninsula, the means by which they achieved this, and the environmental consequences that resulted. At almost every step, „*The Nature of Soviet Power*“ adeptly engages with many of the important questions in the growing field of Russian environmental history while bringing in examples of the development of arctic regions in other countries to put this story into global perspective. Some of the framing questions that Bruno returns to throughout the text include: what were the particular Soviet ideological views of the natural world that informed the development of the Kola Peninsula? What larger insights can be gained in Soviet history by viewing it through and environmental lens? Was the Soviet experience in developing the Kola Peninsula exceptional in comparison to the development of arctic regions in other countries?

Bruno's introductory chapter introduces these and other questions and lays out a roadmap for the five thematically organized chapters to follow. These chapters focus on the construction of the Murmansk Railroad, the mining and processing of phosphorous rich minerals, the collectivization of Sami reindeer herders, nickel mining and smelting, and the utilization of different sources of energy to meet the demands of an expanding population through the course of the twentieth century. While the chapter on the Murmansk Railroad spans from the late-nineteenth century to the 1930s, the remaining four body chapters focus exclusively on the Soviet era, with one going through the 1970s

and others into the 2000s. Each chapter successfully illustrates how larger developments in domestic Soviet politics, international relations, and the evolution of the global economy influenced Soviet policies in and approaches to developing the region.

The first chapter asserts a stronger continuity in the views of the natural world before and after the October Revolution than is usually acknowledged by Soviet environmental historians. In the years leading up to the October Revolution and through the Soviet period, there was, according to Bruno, an ideological tension between „conquering“ and „assimilating“ (living in harmony with) the harsh environment of the Kola Peninsula. While the former position likened the Kola environment to a battlefield and the development of it as a primordial struggle with the elements, the latter emphasized the potential for both improving the lives of humans and the surrounding environment. Bruno correctly notes that the former view has been more widely acknowledged by Soviet environmental historians who have assessed the Soviet Union's particular approach to economic and industrial development. But Bruno argues that an imperative of economic growth above all other goals, which the USSR shared with other twentieth century industrializing states, is more important in understanding extent of environmental damage that took place on the Kola Peninsula than either these views or particular aspects of Marxist-Leninist ideology. He argues that the extensive development of this region was made possible by the fact that the USSR exerted „greater state power than existed almost anywhere before the twentieth century.“ (p. 10) While scope of the Soviet project on the peninsula required a highly-centralized, command economy, the particularly Russian obsession with „overcoming backwardness“ was largely responsible for the relatively weak attention that the USSR gave to mitigating environmental damage. While increased attention to environmental protection globally influenced Soviet law and the pronouncements of government officials, the Soviet economy's inability proved particularly maladroit at moving away from the model of extensive growth during the period of postwar economic growth. As Western Eu-

rope and the United States were successfully cleaning air and water, Bruno argues that the environmental situation continued to deteriorate on the Kola Peninsula and that much of it peninsula, especially areas around nickel smelters, had become a „polluted hell“ (p. 175) in the 1970s.

Almost unbreathable air, widespread deforestation, municipal water pollution and the subsequent loss of aquatic life, altered soil chemistry, and acid rain were some of the many environmental consequences of the Soviet Union's extensive economic development strategy. Bruno places equal importance on the active role of nature in shaping the course of the Soviet project. The many unique aspects of the environment – cold, mosquitoes, the short arctic days during the winter, the landscape, and others – were all important factors in considering the region's development. While Bruno's characterization of nature's role as an active participant in shaping the history of the Kola Peninsula might still be relatively unfamiliar territory to many Russian historians, he is careful not to conflate the issue of historical actors with historical agency, which he appropriately only ascribes to the human actors in his story.

Bruno maintains a tight focus throughout the book by frequently returning to the orienting questions that he asks in the introduction. Some readers might desire more information about some of the influential local political actors important to this story. This reviewer wished that Bruno had included more about the efforts of civic organizations, such as the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Nature, to protect the nature of the Kola Peninsula at different times during Soviet history. But these are very small criticisms of an impressive book that will stand out in the sub-field of Russian environmental history in the years to come.

HistLit 2017-3-005 / Alan Roe über Bruno, Andy: *The Nature of Soviet Power. An Arctic Environmental History*. Cambridge 2016, in: H-Soz-Kult 04.07.2017.