

## East Side Story of Ecological Globalization

**Veranstalter:** French-German research project „Contemporary environmental history of the Soviet Union and the successor states, 1970-2000. Ecological globalization and regional dynamics“

**Datum, Ort:** 16.05.2017–17.05.2017, Regensburg

**Bericht von:** Patrick Rolph, Centre for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, University of Toronto

The „East Side Story of Ecological Globalization“ conference was the concluding event of the French-German research project „Contemporary environmental history of the Soviet Union and the successor states, 1970-2000. Ecological globalization and regional dynamics“ funded by the French Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR) and the German Research Foundation (DFG). It took place at one of the project partner's institutes, the Leibniz Institute of East and Southeastern European Studies (IOS) in Regensburg, May 16-17, 2017, and aimed at integrating Soviet environmental history in global ecological and environmental processes. The discussion-oriented workshop was organized into four sessions over the course of two days, in which the project members presented the results of their research. In each session, two presenters briefly summarized their pre-circulated papers, which were then discussed by two distinguished experts of environmental history.

ULF BRUNNBAUER (IOS Regensburg) welcomed the conference participants with a short excursion into the environmental history of Southeastern Europe – using the example of the invasive round goby. Two of the three project directors, MELANIE ARNDT (IOS Regensburg) and MARC ELIE (CERCEC/CNRS-EHESS, Paris), gave the introductory remarks for the conference. The speakers spoke of how the project to study the Soviet „ecological revolution“ first got off the ground and elaborated on the objectives of the project. They noted the still apparent lack of attention paid by contemporary historians, to the environmental history of the USSR. The unexpected eruption of envi-

ronmental activism during perestroika would suffer a sudden decline in the 1990s, following the USSR's dissolution. The coopting of activists by the state authorities, as well as the economic crisis and failure of democratization, led to a declining interest in environmental causes amongst the public.

The first session on Tuesday, chaired by GUIDO HAUSMANN (IOS Regensburg), began with LAURENT COUMEL (CERCEC/CNRS-EHESS, Paris), who presented his paper „Upper Volga River Goes Global. Water Quality Controversies in the Late Soviet Times (1970s-1990s)“. The paper analyzed the history of Soviet water treatment policy, mainly in regards to the Upper Volga region. Coumel described how water management and sewage treatment became a pressing issue in the Soviet Union, with agencies created to monitor and protect Soviet water resources. Nevertheless, the work of such state bodies was often hindered by the general lack of interest on the part of the authorities. The area around Lake Seliger, in the Upper Volga region of Kalinin Oblast', was heavily polluted by a leather factory, which lacked the proper water treatment facilities. Coumel ultimately attributes this state of affairs to the undemocratic nature of the Soviet system, in which state officials had little incentive in addressing local environmental concerns. During her commentary, KATJA BRUISCH (Trinity College Dublin) noted the problems faced by Soviet environmental protection, as the responsible institutions were primarily tied to various economic interests. Furthermore, ZSUZSA GILLE (University of Illinois, Urbana) cited the general lack of incentive in pressing for water treatment, as due to the absence of „exchangeable goods“ that could be derived from such a process.

The second speaker for the first session was KATJA DOOSE (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen), who presented her paper „Eco-nationalism or Environmental Legitimacy? The Ecological Transition of the Armenian Communist Party 1956-1991“. The paper argued that the national movement did not simply utilize environmental issues as a proxy, but that the protests were the result of a growing environmental awareness in Arme-

nian society and the state bureaucracy. Doo-se elaborated on how the presence of various chemical production facilities in the republic had resulted in a particularly severe ecological situation. Armenia's Communist Party started to support certain environmental initiatives in the 1980s, which was also a period of growing national awareness. By acting as an advocate for environmental protection, especially in disputes with Moscow, the Armenian Communist Party was able to shore up and enhance its political legitimacy. During the commentary, KATE BROWN (University of Maryland, Baltimore) noted the manner in which Moscow, in spite of the declared 'friendship of peoples', did not hesitate in threatening the whole Armenian nation, when Yerevan sought to close polluting industrial facilities. MICHEL DUPUY (Institut d'histoire moderne et contemporaine, Paris), contrasted the situation with the GDR, where there existed a high level of censorship on ecological matters.

The conference's keynote, was given by DONALD WORSTER (Kansas University/Peking University), one of the founders of environmental history. His presentation „Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of Abundance“ analyzed the consequences of the discovery of the „second world,“ the Americas, at a time when Europe already faced its ecological limits. Finding this unexpected abundance triggered profound changes in almost every society in the world. Only with the depletion of the „new world's“ resources did actors realize the limits of growth and its effects on economic development. Worster discussed the general agreement among many economists that the global economy is entering a period of low growth rates. Although there are many theories offered by economists, he asserted that the cause can be attributed to the declining abundance of natural resources. Worster noted that it was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that there was a general acceptance of the Earth's „material limits“. Furthermore, the depletion of resources and declining economic growth, will create serious challenges for large and rapidly developing countries, such as China.

The second session on Wednesday, chaired by IRINA MOROZOVA (IOS Regensburg),

began with MELANIE ARNDT (IOS Regensburg), who presented her paper „Nostalgic Bonfires and Nuclear Burnups: West Meets East in the Post-Soviet Garden, 1986-1996“. She examined the interactions between Soviet environmental activists and their Western counterparts in the advent of perestroika. Arndt notes how Western activists were excited and inspired to aid their Soviet counterparts in the late 1980s, especially after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. She reflected on the mutual perceptions of the environmentalists, as well as the impressions they made of each other and the overall ecological situation. Although relations were very close during the perestroika period, these ties became increasingly tenuous following the USSR's collapse. Besides non-governmental actors, Arndt also looked at interactions with the Soviet state, including the KGB. In the commentary, KATE BROWN (University of Maryland, Baltimore) noted how Soviet activists became disillusioned by the lack of material aid provided by their Western counterparts and discussed what role gender played in these exchanges. ZSUZSA GILLE (University of Illinois, Urbana) also mentioned how many environmental groups in the former Eastern bloc, were heavily infiltrated by the security services.

The next speaker for the second session, ISABELLE OHAYON (CERCEC/CNRS-EHESS, Paris), presented her paper „Facing Desertification: Herdsmen, Scientists, and the Social and Environmental Impacts of Pasture Degradation in Kazakhstan, 1960s-1990s“. The paper examined the environmental impact of the overgrazing of pastures in Soviet Kazakhstan. In this process, Ohayon analyzed the role of the Kazakh herdsmen, who were responsible for animal husbandry, and the scientists who tried to publicize the negative impact of overgrazing. As in many other instances, the Soviet system prioritized the meeting of production quotas to the detriment of the environment. During her commentary, JULIA OBERTREIS (Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg) noted how the socialist system, with its emphasis on increasing production, was often unable to effectively deal with ecological challenges. KATJA BRUISCH (Trinity College Dublin) stated how the Soviet system's encouragement of more

intensive grazing, had paradoxically led to a „tragedy of the commons“.

The third session, chaired by CHRISTOF MAUCH (Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Munich), began with RAPHAEL SCHULTE-KELLINGHAUS (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen), who presented his paper „Negotiating Nature. The Baltic Sea Invades the Iron Curtain“. The paper looked at the various international attempts to deal with pollution in the Baltic Sea during the Cold War. In spite of the Cold War confrontation, many states in the Eastern bloc, such as Poland, understood that environmental protection of the Baltic Sea was in their national interests. Such efforts were frequently hampered by various political disputes, with the inescapable German question being the most noticeable. JACOB HAMBLIN (Oregon State University, Corvallis) described how environmental issues were often utilized in pursuit of political aims, as is seen with the „political highjacking“ of the 1972 Stockholm Conference by the German question. JULIA LAJUS (Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg) noted the Baltic Sea's great strategic importance due to its location, and the continued complaints from Nordic countries regarding Soviet/post-Soviet pollution.

The second speaker for the third session, MARC ELIE (CERCEC/CNRS-EHESS, Paris) presented his paper „The End of the Virgin Lands or Their Return? The Environmental Impact of the Fall of the Soviet Union on Steppe Agriculture in Russia and Kazakhstan“. Elie analyzed the ecological situation in the heavily agricultural regions of Northern Kazakhstan, as well as the neighbouring Russian borderlands, after the collapse of post-Soviet agricultural production. Elie noted the particular importance of this vast geographical space, located between the Urals and the Altai Mountains, as it was the centre of Khrushchev's Virgin Lands Campaign. The presentation gave an overview of how the great fluctuations in land use impacted the local environment. During the commentary, PAUL JOSEPHSON (Colby College, Waterville) paid attention to the fact that the Virgin Lands' Campaign was pursued without taking into account local climate or soil conditions. JULIA LAJUS (Higher School of Economics, St.

Petersburg) however, asserted that the Virgin Lands Campaign was not quite the catastrophe for Soviet agriculture as it is sometimes portrayed.

For the fourth and final session of the conference, chaired by ULF BRUNNBAUER (IOS Regensburg), ALEXANDER ANANYEV (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen) presented his paper „Russian Polar Politics and Environmental Problems in the 1990s“. The article examined how ecological degradation in Russia's Polar regions became a topic of intense scientific and political debate in the 1990s. A key focus of the presenter was the Russian settlement of Shoina, an Arctic town that has been declared an „ecological disaster zone.“ Ananyev elaborated on how the exploration and exploitation of the vast natural resources north of the Arctic Circle, became a top priority for the Soviet leadership. The Soviet state's push to develop the Arctic would ultimately lead to the creation of heavily polluted and industrialized urban settlements such as Norilsk. JACOB HAMBLIN (Oregon State University, Corvallis) noted the similar concerns raised by Russia's liberal-democratic Yabloko party during the 1990s, especially in regards to nuclear waste management in the Arctic. MICHEL DUPUY wondered if the main obstacle to the implementation of environmental policies in the 1990s for the Russian Arctic was the bureaucracy or the economic decline and depopulation of this region, and how far did the debates (including the issue of climate change) reach the scientific community and public opinion at the time.

The conference closed with a concluding discussion chaired by the third director of the French-German project, KLAUS GESTWA (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen). The conference was described as having been highly successful in covering such a large geographic area; from the Soviet Arctic and the Baltic Sea to the Caucasus and the Central Asian Steppe. Gestwa noted the necessity in combining various case studies into a common narrative of Soviet environmental history. The event provided an opportunity to look at both the international aspects of the topic, but also the domestic situation and the interaction between local actors with the central authorities. The conference also gave im-

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portant insight as to whether state socialism or the „vastness“ of Russia’s geography were ultimately responsible for the country’s environmental challenges.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Welcome and Introduction*

Ulf Brunnbauer (IOS Regensburg)  
Marc Elie (CERCEC / CNRS-EHESS, Paris)  
Melanie Arndt (IOS Regensburg)

#### *1st Session*

Chair: Guido Hausmann (IOS Regensburg)

Laurent Coumel (CERCEC / CNRS-EHESS Paris): Upper Volga River Goes Global. Water Quality Controversies in the Late Soviet Times (1970s-1990s).

#### *Comments*

Katja Bruisch (Trinity College Dublin)  
Zsuzsa Gille (University of Illinois, Urbana)

Katja Doose (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen): Eco-nationalism or Environmental Legitimacy? The Ecological Transition of the Armenian Communist Party 1956-1991.

#### *Comments*

Kate Brown (The American Academy in Berlin / University of Maryland, Baltimore)  
Michel Dupuy (Institut d’histoire moderne et contemporaine, Paris)

#### *Keynote*

Donald Worster (University of Kansas / Renmin University, Beijing): Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of Abundance

Chair: Melanie Arndt (IOS Regensburg)

#### *2nd Session*

Chair: Irina Morozova (IOS Regensburg)

Melanie Arndt (IOS Regensburg): Nostalgic Bonfires and Nuclear Burnups: West Meets East in the Post-Soviet Garden, 1986-1996.

#### *Comments*

Kate Brown (The American Academy in Berlin / University of Maryland, Baltimore)  
Zsuzsa Gille (University of Illinois, Urbana)

Isabelle Ohayon (CERCEC / CNRS-EHESS, Paris): Facing Desertification: Herdsmen, Scientists, and the Social and Environmental Impacts of Pasture Degradation in Kazakhstan,

1960s-1990s.

#### *Comments*

Julia Obertreis (Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Katja Bruisch (Trinity College Dublin)

#### *3rd Session*

Chair: Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, Munich)

Raphael Schulte-Kellinghaus (Eberhard-Karls University, Tübingen): Negotiating Nature. The Baltic Sea Invades the Iron Curtain.

#### *Comments*

Jacob Hamblin (Oregon State University, Corvallis)

Julia Lajus (Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg)

Marc Elie CERCEC / CNRS-EHESS, Paris): The End of the Virgin Lands or Their Return? The Environmental Impact of the Fall of the Soviet Union on Steppe Agriculture in Russia and Kazakhstan.

#### *Comments*

Paul Josephson (Colby College, Waterville)

Julia Lajus (Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg)

#### *4th Session*

Chair: Ulf Brunnbauer (IOS Regensburg)

Alexander Ananyev (Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen): Russian Polar Politics and Environmental Problems in the 1990s.

#### *Comments*

Jacob Hamblin (Oregon State University, Corvallis)

Michel Dupuy (Institut d’histoire moderne et contemporaine, Paris)

#### *Concluding Discussion*

Chair: Klaus Gestwa (Eberhard Karls University Tübingen)

Tagungsbericht *East Side Story of Ecological Globalization*. 16.05.2017–17.05.2017, Regensburg, in: H-Soz-Kult 09.09.2017.