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# **Lagoonscapes**

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Serenella Iovino

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## The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities

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## Table of Contents

### FRAMING ENVIRONMENTS IN RUSSIA: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON ECOLOGY, CULTURE AND POWER

#### **Introduction**

Nadia Caprioglio, Roberta Sala 7

#### **Environments of the Post-Reform Village**

**An Ecocritical Reading of Nekrasov's *Red-Nose Frost***  
J. Alexander Ogden 17

#### **Crossing the Border**

**A Comparative Study of the Forest in the Poems  
of Gennadij Ajgi and in the Actions of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija***  
Roberta Sala 27

#### **Gennadij Ajgi's Poetic Mysticism of Trees: On the Motif of Willows**

Henrieke Stahl 45

#### **The Motherland of the Giant Hogweed**

**How Giant Hogweed Became a Botanical Symbol  
of Contemporary Russia**  
Anastasia Sinitsyna 61

#### **Phenomenology of Oil in Soviet and Post-Soviet Literature**

Nadia Caprioglio 77

#### **Economic Rationality and Socio-Technological Fantasy**

**Soviet Oil and its Geochronological Formation  
(A. Konchalovsky's *The Siberiade*, 1978)**  
Ilya Kalinin 91

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<b>The Gulf of Finland as an Unknown Waterscape that Needs to Be Tamed</b> Perceptions, Imaginaries and Knowledge in Imperial St. Petersburg Alexei Kraikovski, Julia Lajus	117
<b>The Volga, Mother of All Russian Rivers, Silent Protagonist of Vasilij Grossman's Novel <i>Stalingrad</i></b> Giulia Baselica	129
<b>Environmental Agenda in Russia Since the Beginning of the War</b> Angelina Davydova	143
<b>The Green Practices of Tyumen Residents Traditions, Values and Meanings</b> Olga V. Zakharova, EGINE Karagulian	151

**Framing Environments in Russia:  
Critical Reflections on Ecology, Culture and Power**

edited by Nadia Caprioglio and Roberta Sala



# Introduction

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We hear something in the woods, and then try to articulate it in human speech. That shift from audition to narrative involves a complicated process of translation, *pere-vod* in Russian, carrying back across the forest boundary into the world of human culture and converse.

(Costlow 2013, 11)

Often represented as primordial and formless, inert and abject, soil simultaneously attracts and frustrates attempts to give it form in our physical and cultural landscape.

(Erley 2021, 3)

No area of life, knowledge or human ability exists without some connection to water; it flows in and across human and non-human bodies.

(Costlow, Rosenholm 2016, 4)

The cultural conception and representation of the other-than-human has played an extremely meaningful role in the construction of Russian identity, as well as in the socio-political processes concerning the Russian territory. As noted by Jane Costlow, “cultural historians have long observed the importance of landscape in the dynamics of Russian history” (2013, 6). This becomes particularly evident when considering nature’s essential role in the “мегатекст” *megatekst* ‘megatext’ of Russian poetry (Epštejn 1990, 6), where the landscape, besides acting as a backdrop for socio-cultural changes, is often related to the folk values having forged the country’s national

spirit. The idea of natural environments as sites of aesthetic and moral models, largely influenced by German *Naturphilosophie* from the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century (Erley 2021, 8; 11-19), has often led to conceive nature as a symbolic *object* of human thought within Russian literary and cultural contexts.

At the same time, a flourishing ecological debate concerning environmental conservation was opened up in the second half of the 19th century, when concerns related mainly to deforestation were brought to light by several Russian scientists, writers, journalists. At the beginning of the Soviet period some important laws on conservation were issued, while scientific research on the environment intensified. In this context the scholar Vladimir Vernadskij developed his pioneering idea of humankind acting as a major geological agent, which he conceptualized by adopting the term 'noosphere' in his work of the late 1930s *Научная мысль как планетное явление* (*Naučnaja mysl' kak planetnoe javlenie* (Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon). During Stalin's regime, however, the intellectual independence of scientists was barely ensured: research in the field of natural science was supported by the government, though chiefly insofar as it contributed to the exploitation of natural resources, the domestication of the lands and technological progress. A deeply anthropocentric conception of the environment was fostered by the state's utilitarian attitude toward the other-than-human:

Stalin strove for total transformation not only of the social and political landscapes, but also of the natural landscape in his drive to control the entire society, economy and polity. [...] Conservation organizations were closely surveilled, policed, reorganized or liquidated. (Josephson et al. 2013, 110)

In the post-Stalinist period the idea of the other-than-human as a socio-political *object* was carried out by the Soviet leadership. For instance, the government's commitment in national and international projects of nature protection during the Brežnev period, following the new global awareness of the environmental crisis, was essentially aimed at achieving a leading role in the competition with the United States (cf. Josephson et al. 2013, 186, 191). Furthermore, even some of the environmental activist groups which arose in the former USSR republics provided nature with deep political connotations, since they served as surrogates for political issues excluded from public discourse (cf. Gille 2009a, 2-3).

Only after the full realization, in the years following the Soviet Union's collapse, of the considerable ecological damages caused by the regime, some broader perspectives on nature have opened up in the Russianist academic context. Relying on the methods developed in the United States within the interdisciplinary areas of the Environ-

mental Humanities, the role of human narratives in transforming nature has been increasingly investigated, due also to the meaningful heritage of Soviet science. Indeed, as underlined by Jonathan Oldfield,

the evident lack of any consequential response to the country's developing environmental dilemma by the Soviet state did not stop its scientists from reflecting deeply on the character of the changing relationship between society and the natural environment. (2021, 2)

Meanwhile, the other-than-human has gradually started to be understood as a complex biological *subject* existing independently of the anthropocentric gaze and actively shaping cultural processes. An important impulse to this trend was given by some pioneering studies in the field of Russian and Soviet environmental history, environmental sociology and environmentalism, carried out, from the end of the 1980s, by authors such as Douglas R. Weiner (1988; 1999), John Massey Stewart (1991), Murray Feshbach and Alfred Friendly (1992) and Jane I. Dawson (1996).<sup>1</sup> However, the analysis of cultural and literary images of nature from the point of view of ecocritical theory has not attracted significant scholarly interest until the beginning of our century. The ground-breaking works of Christopher David Ely (2002), Jane Costlow (2003a, 2003b) and Alexander Ogden (2005) have paved the way for the development of some more systematic studies considering the peculiarities of Russian landscape through the lenses of the ecological thought. In this regard, both the collection of essays *Understanding Russian Nature: Representations, Values, Concepts* (2005), edited by Arja Rosenholm and Sari Autio-Sarasmö, and the thematic cluster "Nature, Culture and Power" (2009b), edited by Zsuzsa Gille in the journal *Slavic Review*, shed light on the active participation of nature in the socio-political processes and historical transformations involving Russia and other East-European countries. The work *Other Animals. Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History*, edited by Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson in 2010, investigates the relationship between the other-than-human and humankind as well, focusing specifically on the role of animals. Furthermore, some meaningful interdisciplinary studies examining the cultural conceptualization of Russian forests, water and soil have been published by Jane Costlow (2013), Jane Costlow and Arja Rosenholm (2016) and Miekka Erley (2021) respectively. Another fundamental field of investigation

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarship in the field of environmental history was increased, in the 2000s, by the meaningful contributions of Andy Bruno (e.g. 2007; 2016; 2018; 2022), Paul R. Josephson et al. (2013), Jonathan Oldfield and Denis Shaw (2015), Jonathan Oldfield, Julia Lajus, Denis Shaw (2015), Jonathan Oldfield (2021).

in the area of Russian ecocriticism, considering the economic and political value of fossil fuels in the Soviet and post-Soviet period, is represented by recent research on oil and its multiple interconnections with the development of Russian cultural identity (e.g. Kalinin 2015; Rogers 2015; Etkind 2020; Porter, Vinokour 2023). Finally, on the basis of the cited studies, in 2020 Alec Brookes and Elena Frattono edited the monographic issue “Anthropocene and Russian Literature” of the journal *Russian Literature*, aimed at rethinking the other-than-human in Russian literature considering the geological impact of humankind in the Anthropocene.

Given these premises, the special issue “Framing Environments in Russia: Critical Reflections on Ecology, Culture and Power” originates from our intent to stress the raising importance of ecocritical theory and environmental ethics in contemporary research involving Russia and the Soviet Union. The idea of *framing* does not imply here an attempt to further delimit the other-than-human, this time through the cultural lens of the ecological thought. On the contrary, *framing* is understood in its meaning of *expressing, constructing, developing* new flourishing perspectives on Russian natural environment, in order to show its complexity, as well as its deep interconnections with human experience. To this end, great emphasis has been put on the agency of the other-than-human, conceived not only as an object of cultural conceptualizations, but mainly as active *matter* penetrating, transforming and reshaping physical and mental landscapes. Besides, the multidisciplinary approaches taken by the authors of this issue highlight the urgency to re-think social structures and hierarchical logics of power in order to preserve both cultural and natural environments. As observed by Wendy Wheeler,

Environmental damage [...] means both damage in nature and damage in culture; these are not, essentially, different things. Environmental literacy must be understood to encompass natural, social, cultural and, by implication, emotional literacy also. (2006, 155)

All ten essays included in this special issue address the conceptualization of the natural environment in Russia by engaging with a diverse range of cultural expressions which encompasses activist prose, fiction, poetry, art, and cinema.

Since the nineteenth century, human identities in Russian literature have been depicted as inextricably intertwined and creatively interdependent with natural forces, which, in turn, play a crucial role as agents of transformation. The opening contribution, written by J. Alexander Ogden, analyses Nikolay Nekrasov’s poem *Red-Nose Frost* (Мороз, Красный нос *Moroz, Krasnyj nos*, 1863), highlighting how nature is portrayed as an active force. In the context of the surge of environmental activity that took place in Russia at the end

of the nineteenth century (Fedotov, *Uspenskij* 2021, 487), Nekrasov was among the first authors who strove to find the proper balance between advocating that humans should refrain from any interference in the natural world and recognizing human dependence on natural resources. Ogden highlights that, in Nekrasov's poem, creatures, natural forces, and the natural world are all portrayed as sentient agents commanding consideration: countrymen, for instance, are fully enmeshed in the natural world, and the author displaces onto a rural Other a connection to the environment that has been lost by his implied audience, the urban elite.

The following seven essays are organized thematically according to the three geographical elements that have most significantly influenced Russia's historical trajectory: forests, steppes (soil), and rivers (water) (Ključevskij 1904, 69). The importance of these three *loci/resources* was first acknowledged by the renowned historian Vasilij Ključevskij, when – during his public lectures in Moscow in the 1880s – he delved into the relationship between material cultures and the psychology and customs of a people.

The forest, a perennial setting for Russian life, has traditionally played a major role in Russia's history. Until the second half of the 18th century, most people lived in the forest belt of Russia's plain, and the state could only consolidate itself in the far north, under the cover of forests on the steppe side (Ključevskij 1904, 69, 70). Roberta Sala's contribution provides a comparative analysis of the forest in the production of the Russian poet of Chuvash origins Gennadij Ajgi (1934-2006) and in the early performances of the Moscow conceptualist artistic group Коллективные Действия *Kollektivnye Dejstvija* (Collective Actions) (1976-77). Sala suggests that both contemporary artists displace the natural world onto an Other, in ways that echo Ogden's observations about Nekrasov. The Other of Ajgi and of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija* preserves a harmony with nature that was instead lost in the Soviet ideologized society. In their production, the non-anthropized forest appears as a marginal space of a creative encounter between human identity and an otherness, finding in nature an other-than-human "place of discovery", which extends beyond human experiences, encompassing both the realms of nature itself and culture (cf. Maran 2020, 35).

Continuing with a focus on the poetic representation of trees by Gennadij Ajgi, Henrieke Stahl analyzes the specific mystical value attributed to the 'willow tree' (*Salix alba*) through various phases of his poetry. Stahl observes that Ajgi's shift between the three Russian names for the willow – ветла *vetla*, верба *verba*, ива *iva* – corresponds to a transformation of his own poetic mysticism. Drawing from a traditional cultural context, the poet attributes consciousness and volition to the willow, considering it as natural force, influenced by a belief system that contains elements of animism (cf. Garrard 2011, 129-37).

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The second element, the steppe, the soil, elicits different impressions and influences. The cultivated black soil (чернозём *černozem*), along with the grassy steppe pastures, played a crucial role in the early and significant development of agriculture and cattle breeding (Ključevskij 1904, 71). At the same time, the unpredictable nature of Russian soil has often been a source of danger, particularly when human activities have altered biodiversity and disrupted the ecosystem.

Human intervention in ecosystems has, for instance, contributed to the rapid spread of species considered *invasive*, often associated by humans with inherent malevolence. Anastasia Sinitsyna's contribution examines the multiple representations of the giant hogweed (*Heracleum*), a perilous and noxious herbaceous plant, across various art forms, from installations to photographic exhibitions. Originally introduced as a solution to fodder shortages, the giant hogweed was hailed as an emblem of the Soviet Union's scientific achievements in transcending natural constraints. However, as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent disruption in agricultural management led to an uncontrolled proliferation of the giant hogweed around the country, the plant became a powerful symbol of the Soviet empire's far-reaching influence within the political and cultural domains of contemporary Russia, and of the adverse effects of imperial governance on native ecosystems.

Transitioning from the representation of the soil to the exploration of subsoil depths, the articles by Nadia Caprioglio and Ilya Kalinin examine the cultural and social significance of oil in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian culture. Through the analysis of three literary case studies spanning different periods, and Andron Končalovskij's film *The Sibiadiade* (Сибиряда *Sibiriada*, 1978) respectively, these contributions illuminate the underlying tension between the potential of oil for modernization and the conservative economic and socio-political trends that accompanied the increasing dependence on this resource. The resulting effects often manifest in unexpected ways, showing that, from the anthropocentric optimism of the Soviet era to the awareness of our times about oil as an uncontrollable *object*, oil consistently appears to be a hybrid of nature and culture, one that holds a significant place in Russian literature and cinema, and that carries various forms of utopian, mystical, historico-philosophical, and metaphysical meanings.

Alexei Kraikovski and Julia Lajus's contribution focuses on the third element, water, and provides a comprehensive overview of St. Petersburg as a center of control and management of the surrounding lagoonscape. Their analysis delves into the role of knowledge, viewed as a social construct, in shaping the city's development within the context of the Neva inlet, the easternmost part of the Gulf of Finland. By exploring how knowledge is formed through collective perception, imagination and observation, the authors contend that these three mech-

anisms have influenced the city's development and have contributed to the establishment of St. Petersburg maritime empire, in material and political terms, as much as in narrative. Additionally, the article highlights how the origin of modern Russian literature coincided with the initial attempts to depict the empire's maritime experience. The Neva River, functioning as a powerful non-human actor, provided an imaginative seascape that significantly shaped representations of this amphibious city and its intricate relationship with water.

The archetype of water in Russian Culture is most vividly manifested in the image of the river. Giulia Baselica's essay examines the role of Russia's rivers, with a particular focus on the Volga, as a multifaceted space and an important cultural motif in Russian literature. The essay traces the gradual exploration of rivers as a thematic element, their incorporation into storylines, and their growing importance as subjects of literary discourse over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These accounts encompass a wide range of popular images and symbolic representations, which evolve in conjunction with shifts in knowledge and intertwine with the construction of ideology throughout history. In particular, the Volga features prominently in Vasilij Grossman's remarkable novel *Сталинград Stalingrad* (1952), where it becomes an integral element of the ethnocultural image of Russia as a whole and plays a substantial role in shaping the identity of the Russian people.

The two final essays effectively bring our cluster to a conclusion by incorporating a diverse range of non-literary discourses that contribute to the expansion and comprehensiveness of our discussion. Specifically, the article authored by Angelina Davydova offers a distinctive perspective originating from outside the academic world. Davydova is an experienced environmental journalist and observer with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since 2008. She is also the co-founder of the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences (UWEC) Work Group. Her contribution is a comprehensive examination of the direct and indirect environmental and climate impacts resulting from the full-scale war in Ukraine, initiated by Russia in late February 2022. In addition to the immediate consequences, which typically entail the devastation of ecosystems and wildlife, chemical contamination, and the destruction of infrastructure due to military operations, she also exposes some secondary ramifications that may have more subtle implications. These encompass the restructuring of global markets for energy, metals, food, and fertilizers, as well as the alterations observed in environmental and climate policies and actions at a national and international level. Davydova emphasizes the conflict in Ukraine as a catalyst for significant global transformations within the realms of environmental and climate governance, encompassing not only Russia's policies in these domains but also environmental activism within the country.

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Before the war in Ukraine began, there was a noticeable increase in environmental activism across various regions in Russia, as demonstrated in Olga Zakharova and Egine Karagulian's article. The authors explore the green practices adopted among the residents of Tyumen, the largest city in Western Siberia. Using a questionnaire methodology, the study's findings reveal that a significant percentage of citizens (ranging from 30% to 71%) own knowledge about and actively participate in green practices, such as cleaning and beautifying the environment, separating waste for collection, adopting sustainable consumption habits. These practices, deeply intertwined with specific ethical values and the construction of self-identity, generate a sense of satisfaction and meaningful engagement, and empower individuals to exert influence on the environmental state of the city. However, Zakharova and Karagulian's contribution underscores the significant disparity between the government's management of environmental policies and the green practices actively undertaken by individual citizens. This evidence highlights Russia as a site where significant social and ecological transformations take place, shedding light on novel dimensions of the intricate relationship between nature, society, culture, and power. Moreover, it contributes to the conceptualization of how nature evolves from being solely an object of human thought and action to becoming an active participant in socio-political processes.

The essays featured in this special issue of *Lagoonscapes* collectively contribute to our understanding of Russian ecological relationships, environmental history, and the study of Russian literature amidst the complex social, cultural, and geological contexts, underlining the significance of these intersections.

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