

Movements of Peoples and the Genesis of “Soviet Spaces”

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Abstract

The Soviet Union was mysterious for so long in part because it was closed to most outsiders. In retrospect, Soviet Power is remarkable because of the way it organized and commanded its sequestered space. This paper tries to explain how the USSR came to be a “heterotopia”--unlike spaces with which we are familiar. Russia’s historical record shows administrative centralization alternating regularly with decentralization over hundreds of years. And although the pattern remained operative in the Soviet period, it remains possible to speak of a distinctly Soviet space-- which included an extended space of incarceration, a characteristic domestic space, a space of planned cities, and a vast space of environmental ruin.

How to integrate numerous diverse ethnic groups had been an ongoing concern for the empire- building Great Russians since the sixteenth century. When a successor regime emerged after the collapse of the Russian Empire, it drew on its radical convictions about the transformability of human nature and learned from the Habsburg Empire’s disintegration as it reassembled and reorganized as much as it could of the original empire’s space. But the extraordinary displacement of people under conditions of mobilization in the First World War and the practices developed to manage legions of displaced persons would shape the Bolsheviks’ sense of the possible. It was less Marxist ideology, than the legacy of late Imperial population movements that gave rise to peculiarly Soviet spaces. Moreover, the experiences of 1914-1918 modified German thinking about the possibility of massively reorganizing space in a way that would prove influential in world politics twenty years later. In various ways the otherness of Soviet space has outlived the Soviet political system.

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The last empire, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, would be noteworthy if only because it occupied a sixth of the earth’s landmass for the better part of a century. But Soviet Power left a legacy that is a constant reminder of the singular order it fashioned. A demographer writing recently of the remarkable reduction of death rates worldwide since the 1950s points out that planetary expectation of life has jumped by almost 19 years, or about two-fifths. “Practically the only countries to register no appreciable improvements in the life expectancy over this period were the handful of ‘European’ territories within what was once the Soviet Union; in the Russian Federation in particular, gains over these four and a half decades were almost negligible.”¹ A particular space bears the mark of historical forces, assumptions and decisions that deserve to be better understood.

¹ Nicholas Eberstadt, “Doom and Demography.” *Wilson Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2006): 19.

Given that international tourism has been shrinking the world for at least a century and a half, it should come as no surprise that travel writing should seek grist for its mill in difficult-to-reach places shaped by Soviet Power. Daniel Calder professes “anti-tourism” in a book on his visits to three ethnic republics in the general area of the lower Volga, “Mother of Russian Rivers.”² The places are not untouched by the twentieth century. He finds fast food restaurants, and, in Izhevsk, Udmurtia, the home of the Kalashnikov A-47 rifle. Yet it is their abnormality that attracts. It finally dawns on him that he had been traveling to write a book, “a book about . . . the ghosts haunting the ruins of collapsed empires, howling and moaning, with nobody to listen except other ghosts.”³ And he diagnoses the dislocation of “the denizens of these lost zones” with respect to what might be called the Post-modern condition:

They don’t have the illusion of connectedness to the hum, the throb, the buzz of the modern world, or a sense that their history is of any significance. They are merely footnotes to another, greater history, that of the Russian people. And so they know that nobody knows who they are. They are already forgotten, already not seen.⁴

One may wonder whether his explanation does justice to his perceptions of being in “another dimension,” “a wasteland full of junk and poor people,” an environment “startling,” “eerie,” “so much like the Twilight Zone.”⁵

Geographer Vladimir Kaganskii also came to appreciate the “inscribed” quality of Soviet space. “Having written much about the powerful structural inertia of Soviet space, I nevertheless underestimated it. Space is changing: before our eyes the most important empire on the planet

² His working title: “Bad Places.” Daniel Calder, *Lost Cosmonaut: Travels to the republics that tourism forgot* (London: Faber, 2006), 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 252, 134.

(and I hope the last) has fallen.”⁶ He offers a sensitive and rare insider’s account of how Soviet space outlived Soviet Power: “We are all still living in Soviet space and are ‘getting ourselves out of the mess’ of its structural inertia, understanding the problematical legacy; the wreckage of Soviet space will rain down on us for a long time—and not only in a figurative sense.”⁷

The Russian Empire had collapsed suddenly, as Silver Age poet Alexander Blok vividly recalled. Blok, who had served on the committee that investigated the fall of the tsar’s regime, personally attending interrogations of key statesmen and administrators, wrote that in January, 1918: “I could hear for several days on end, physically, with my ears, a great noise all around—a composite noise (most probably the noise of the collapse of the old world).”⁸ Policies in the last years of the Empire would play a decisive role Soviet space created by the Bolsheviks.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two postwar French thinkers in particular have generated interest in a spatial approach to history. Michel Foucault in a 1967 lecture applied structuralist techniques to frame some observations on unique features of the Western experience.⁹ Interested in sites that “neutralize,” “invert,” “contradict all the other sites,” he proposed the concept “heterotopia.” His examples of “other” spaces include the garden--sacred space for the Persians which represented the four parts of the world--, and the theater, whose rectangular stage represented a whole series of places foreign to one another. His heterotopia “*par excellence*” is the ship, which has been “for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic

⁶ Vladimir Kaganskii, *Kul'turnyi landschaft: Sovetskoe obitaemoe prostranstvo* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2001), 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ Leonard Schapiro. *Russian Studies* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 365.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (Spring, 1986), 22-27. Tartu semiotician Iu. M. Lotman contrasted medieval and modern conceptions of space in Russia from a somewhat similar vantage point. See, for example, his 1965 “O poniatii geograficheskogo prostranstva v russkikh srednevekovykh tekstakh,” *O russkoi literature. Stat'II issledovaniia (1958-1993)* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1997).

development . . . [and] the greatest reserve of the imagination.”¹⁰ If Kaganskii is correct, should Soviet space (which was largely inaccessible to outsiders) itself not now be counted among the West’s “other spaces?”

Henri Lefebvre, a professor of sociology at Nanterre University profoundly affected by the 1968 student uprising, would go on to write seven books on urbanization, culminating with *La production de l'espace* in 1974. David Harvey asserts that Lefebvre, who had earned his living as a taxi driver in Paris in the 1920s, was drawn to the role of distinctively urban space in shaping political struggle by “the outbreak in Nanterre—a suburban university close to the impoverished shanty towns of the periphery—and the subsequent geography of street action in Paris itself.”¹¹ Lefebvre is attentive to sharp disjunctions in history, uprisings like the early modern peasant revolts and the industrial revolution, “sudden uprising followed by a hiatus, by a slow building of pressure, and finally by a renewed revolutionary outburst at a higher level of consciousness and action—an outburst accompanied too by great inventiveness and creativity.”¹² The “revolution of space,” for him the ongoing “production of space,” subsumes the urban revolution. It would become clear to Lefebvre that the state was more and more the guiding hand in this “production.”

When the state, in any given country, took control of energy production (electricity, oil) . . . few people perceived that [it] was continuing to install a dominant space, extending the space demarcated by motorways, canals, and railroads. This would only be confirmed for certain later on through the state’s creation of networks of highways and air traffic routes, and the production of nuclear energy. With its technostructure controlling energy

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ David Harvey, afterword to *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 430.

¹² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 419.

questions, the state gradually becomes master of them . . . because it partitions space under the double surveillance of its technicians and the police.¹³

Even as flows of capital, technology and workers traverse national borders “with the impetuosity of rivers,” the modern state functions to maintain “a hierarchized system of places, functions and institutions.”¹⁴ But the fact remains that this historical ordering has produced general acquiescence rather than resistance. “Abstract space, the space of the bourgeoisie and capitalism, bound up as it is with exchange (of goods and commodities, as of written and spoken words) depends on consensus more than any space before it.”¹⁵ Lefebvre’s theorizing may be useful in defining the dominant, usual, mainstream course of Western spatial development since World War II.

A Russian architect, Vladimir Paperny, undertook in the 1970s a study that would link sharp changes in spatial conceptions in the USSR between the 1920s and the 1930s, to the notion of a cyclical dynamic in Russian history.¹⁶ Vasili Kliuchevskii, doyen of Russian historians in the nineteenth century, had called attention to a pattern of dynamic population movement penetrating and colonizing vast spaces alternating with periods of stoppage and suspension.¹⁷ Paperny saw an ancient dialectic still operative in Soviet Russia with respect to governed space. The dynamic could be observed in the reign of Peter the Great, which had begun in the late seventeenth century, for example, with “an affirmation of equality and uniformity,” reversed when decentralization had given way to “a complete turnaround into centralization.”¹⁸

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, “Space and the State” in Neil Brenner, Bob Jessop, Martin Jones, Gordon Machoed eds., *State/Space: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92, 94.

¹⁵ Lefebvre, *Production*, 57. Cf. Fredric Jameson: “Late capitalism is a form of standardization, and a lifeless application of grids and prefabricated forms.” “Is Space Political?” in Cynthia C. Davidson, *Anyplace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 205.

¹⁶ Vladimir Paperny, *Kul'tura “Dva”* Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985.

¹⁷ Vladimir Paperny, *Culture Two* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xxiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

Something very similar had happened under Soviet Power. The 1920s was characterized by egalitarianism and asceticism or moderation in consumption. This culture of “spread,” with its emphasis on the horizontal, he dubbed “Culture One.” “Culture Two, on the other hand, was hierarchical, its architecture vertical. Under Culture Two Moscow was established as the center and top, and residence there and in other top-ranked cities was restricted. A passport system introduced in 1933 bound Soviet people to their places. Hierarchy returned to society as well, with the introduction of widely divergent pay levels. Government agencies took over whole residential buildings for their employees, supplanting local committees that had assigned living space in the 1920s, creating “a ministerial ‘pale of settlement’” in the cities.¹⁹ In schooling, grades—abolished after the revolution—would make a comeback in 1935. Finally, an individualized, high-consumption lifestyle was created in the most important places—but only for the “best” people.²⁰ The depth of the cultural shift is registered in sharply different conceptions of good and evil. In the 1920s deviance had been viewed as contingent on social shortcomings, and action was taken to integrate the disadvantaged and the handicapped into society and labor. Under Culture Two, abnormality was seen as “infectious and incurable,” and every newsworthy misfortune came to be attributed to “wreckers” and enemies.

According to Paperny, Culture Two in turn began to wane in the 1950s. In the 1980s everything was leveled again. Sergei Medvedev underlines the spatial implications. “Culture One of the Gorbachev and early Yeltsin epochs was very much about the emancipation of space, of its inherent ethnic and cultural diversity which could not be completely abolished during the

¹⁹ Ibid., 80.

²⁰ Ibid., 120.

Soviet period. It was not only the ‘liberation’ of East European states and Soviet republics, it was the comeback of territory as a principle.”²¹ He eloquently summarizes the flattening:

As restrictions were progressively removed, a horizontal civil society started to emerge (in fact, in 1987-1991, the Soviet/Russian civil society, as well as the free press, had their day, and eventually faded away in post-Soviet Russia). The population enjoyed greater social and territorial mobility, and all barriers to emigration were removed on the Soviet side (tragically, some years later, we have seen the other side of this mobility, with hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees, escaping from Chernobyl, civil wars, or genocide). The ultimate acts of Culture One were the destruction of the Warsaw Pact, the Communist Party, of the USSR proper in 1991, of the socialist economy through shock liberalization and privatization in 1992, and finally, of the institution of the soviets in 1993. Gods were dislodged, and the old world of all things Soviet was engulfed in flames.²²

Medvedev is not unaware of the predictive value of Paperny’s theory. From 1992 a desire for stability became dominant “and the wheels of Culture Two started moving.”²³

The authorities once again attempted to control the space. There is something in the optics of Russian space, and the Russian mentality, that makes the authorities believe that control always means command, and that building a territorial and administrative hierarchy is the only way of dealing with this space. The territory had to see a strong man in the Kremlin.²⁴

²¹ Sergei Medvedev, “A General Theory of Russian Space: A Gay Science and a Rigorous Science” in Jeremy Smith, ed., *Beyond the Limits: The Concept of Space in Russian History and Culture* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1999), 35.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Paperny's theoretical framework is indispensable for understanding the "production of space" in a civilization not driven by the urban revolution.

Spatial Reconfiguration at the End of the Russian Empire

The 1914-18 war displaced astonishing numbers of the tsar's subjects and engendered a bureaucracy dedicated to assisting and accounting for refugees and immigrants. Foreigners had been coming to Russia in large numbers since the 1860s, and had supplied over half the investment in industrialization between 1890 and 1914.²⁵ The Russian state had offered special preferences and incentives to various immigrant groups, giving them reason to avoid becoming naturalized citizens. According to Eric Lohr, "Russia was distinct from most other nations in that it had multiple generations of foreign residents that never became citizens."²⁶

But in another respect Russia clearly resembled the other European states. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century it had established a statistical bureau and begun collecting data on its peoples. In the late 1840s the Russian Geographical Society had gathered ethnographic data from thousands of parish priests, officials, landowners and merchants, and by the 1850s was publishing descriptive accounts of the manners and customs of indigenous non-slavic peoples in the empire.²⁷ Peter Holquist has investigated the military's employment of data and found that "Military statistics established a *grid of ethnicity* for the Russian empire and disaggregated the population into ethnic categories."²⁸ By the 1860s the government was spending hundreds of thousands of rubles to remove all the native mountain tribesmen from the western Caucasus and

²⁵ Eric Lohr, "Immigration, Emigration, and Empire: Population Politics in Imperial and Revolutionary Russia," *Kennan Institute Meeting Report* 23, n.4 (2005), 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nathaniel Knight, "Science, Empire and Nationality: Ethnography and the Russian Geographical society, 1845-1855," in Jane Burbank and David L. Ransel, eds., *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 129-30.

²⁸ Peter Holquist, "To Count, to Extract and to Exterminate," in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 114 (emphasis added).

resettle them in Turkey.²⁹ According to Geoffrey Hosking, this resettlement, along with the voluntary emigration of hundreds of thousands of Circassians, Chechens, Kabardianians and Nogai Tatars, “anticipat[ed] the massive deportations of the twentieth century.”³⁰

With the opening of the Eastern Front in 1914 the army acquired “absolute control over all affairs in the theater of operations.”³¹ Chief of Staff General Ianushkevich favored a scorched earth policy, using troops to clear civilians from behind the front. Jews were the first ethnic group to be displaced in large numbers. By one estimate 600,000 were deported even before mass removals began in the summer of 1915.³² According to Joshua Sanborn, military planners had two sets of maps. One showed roads, hills and bodies of water, towns, villages and fortresses; the other showed ethnic groups and assessed the reliability of local populations. “Civilians were a Clausewitzian friction that introduced chance, disruption and disorder into a conceptual and physical space that military men spent their lives trying to control in one way or another.”³³ A February decree in 1915 expropriated German landowners. Families of German descent who had lived for generations in Volynia, Kiev and Podol’ia and in the Volga region were shipped to Siberia or Central Asia.³⁴ Ianushkevich welcomed the availability of their land as a reward for soldiers rendering exceptionally loyal service, but parliamentary liberals pointed out that expropriation set a terrible example for Russian peasants, who had so recently sought land reform at nobles’ expense in the 1905 revolution and the first Duma. The tsar’s ministers

²⁹ “Officers of one power read and learned from the work of fellow officer statisticians, thereby making military statistics a cross fertilized hybrid of European sociomilitary thinking. Russia’s military journals explicitly compared the British experience in Algeria with their own campaigns in the Caucasus.” *Ibid.*, 116-17.

³⁰ *Russia: People and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 23.

³¹ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 16.

³² *Ibid.*, 18.

³³ “Unsettling the Empire: Violent migrations and social disaster in Russia during World War I,” *Journal of Modern History* 77 (June, 2005), 301.

³⁴ Gatrell, 23. According to the 1897 census, over two million Germans had settled in these areas, making them the most numerous of the Russia’s ethnic minorities. Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against enemy aliens during World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 4.

were appalled by the General Staff's displacement of civilians, but were powerless, given the provincial governors' deference to the High Command. The Minister of Agriculture fulminated at the 4 August meeting of the Council of Ministers:

A nice method of fighting! Curses, sickness, misery, and poverty are spreading all over Russia. The naked and hungry spread panic everywhere, dampening the last remnants of the enthusiasm which existed in the first months of the war. They come in a solid phalanx, trampling down the crops, ruining the meadows, the forests. Behind them is left a virtual desert. The railroads are jammed; the transportation even of military loads or the bringing up of food will soon become impossible.³⁵

In August 1915 as many as a quarter million Armenians crossed into Russia from Turkey.³⁶

When it was announced in late June 1916 that the draft had been extended to the tsar's Central Asian subjects, rioting swept across the region, and in mid-July the entire Turkestan region was placed under martial law. The rapidity with which the world turned upside down demonstrates to Eric Lahr the wisdom of Rogers Brubaker's definition of nationalism "as something that suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjuncturally fluctuating and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action rather than as a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity or culture."³⁷

One would have to be obtuse indeed not to see a new force field coming to bear in Russia's total war experience. As Sanborn puts it:

Treating the Russian battle zones of World War I as a social and temporal space of 'violent migrations' allows us to better understand the social interaction and social

³⁵ Michael Chernavsky, ed., *Prologue to Revolution: Notes of A. N. Iakhontov on the secret meetings of the Council of Ministers, 1915* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), 46.

³⁶ Gatrell, 26.

³⁷ Lohr, *Nationalizing*, 8-9.

change . . . and forces us to analyze soldiers and civilians on the same plane. All were living with a radically new social and political ecosystem that shaped their behavior in important ways. Violent migrations progressively unsettled the Russian Empire, unhinging society and emboldening the state that helped direct and manage them.³⁸

On the latter point, it may be instructive to consider two state initiatives from the war and civil war period that seem of a piece with the “socialist construction” of the Soviet 1930s. A Murmansk Railway Project designed in 1915 to link an ice free port on Kola Peninsula with Petrozavodsk employed 70,000 P.O.W.s as well as Uzbeks and Kazakhs from the punitive battalions created in 1916 following the uprising in Central Asia.³⁹ The line was finally completed early in 1917—a year behind schedule and too late to alleviate Petrograd’s supply problems. Peter Holquist describes a breathtaking 1919 project to undertake an agricultural resettlement policy in the Don basin after slaughtering the Cossacks there: “But after several months the policy was abruptly terminated and the Cossacks normalized as a regular part of the population.”⁴⁰

German occupation of the lands lost by the Russian Empire also engendered a new imagining of space that would prove influential. Between two and three million German soldiers rotated into the Eastern front at some point from 1914 to 1918. With roughly a third of the pre-war population gone, the military government, followed by German journalists, stressed the emptiness of the conquered lands.⁴¹ Administrators set about introducing sanitary measures, reorganizing agriculture, cutting timber from old growth forests for the Reich. Economic

³⁸ Sanborn, 292. See also Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, “Population Displacement, State-Building, and Social Identity in the Lands of the Former Russian Empire, 1917-23,” *Kritika* n.s. 4, 1 (Winter, 2003).

³⁹ Peter Gatrell, “Prisoners of war on the Eastern Front during World War I,” *Kritika* n.s. 6, 3 (Summer, 2005), 561.

⁴⁰ Holquist, 129.

⁴¹ Vejas Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 162.

administrators collected statistics obsessively. Natives were now required to secure written permission to travel locally.

“Spaces” had to be ordered, cleared and cleaned. While *Raum* was presented as a neutral, descriptive term, it in fact presented an entire program in one word.... *Raum* defined a given area, but since the concept homogenized space, the area which was “treated” could keep expanding, endlessly. This was a distinct turn in thought, for what the new occupiers had begun to see as distinct “lands and peoples” (*Land und Leute*) now came to be viewed as “spaces and races” (*Raum und Volk*), objects of control.⁴²

The other critical turn of thought identified by Liulevicius came when the Foreign Ministry endorsed the Front command’s proposal that depopulated areas be filled in “with a human wall of German settlers, securing it for all time.”⁴³

After the Bolshevik revolution a civil war ensued in which displacement and disorientation reached their apogee as industry collapsed and the cities emptied out. As Lenin subsequently addressed economic recovery in his New Economic Policy, he reconstituted the empire with a policy that Terry Martin has called “affirmative action.” Recognizing the fissiparous threat of national consciousness among the ethnic non-Russians, he underplayed the role of Russians as a state-bearing people and dedicated Soviet Power to supporting the national territories, languages, elites and identities of the ethnic groups. “No country has yet approached the vast scale of Soviet Affirmative Action.”⁴⁴ Live to the new unwillingness of citizens to

⁴² Ibid., 106-7. On the rise of German geopolitical thinking and reclamation schemes for the Pripet Marshes in the 1930s: David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 251-61.

⁴³ “A decisive mental threshold had been crossed and moving of ethnic populations became a thinkable option.” Ibid., 95.

⁴⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 18. Francine Hirsch emphasizes the legacy of nineteenth century ethnographic science in the Soviet administration of territories inhabited primarily by non-Russians. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

perceive themselves as subjects, he rejected the empire designation explicitly. “As a result, the Soviet Union became the first multi-ethnic state in the world to define itself as an anti-imperial state.”⁴⁵

Soviet Spaces

Behind its closely guarded borders, population movement would be regulated in Soviet space. An internal passport system introduced in the 1930s for workers remained in force until the 1970s. Soviet citizens were restricted with respect to residence in particular cities. Even business travel fell under a regime of authorizing documents, *komandirovk* (which had originally been introduced by Peter the Great).

It remains only to sketch briefly some of the particular spaces that were characteristically and peculiarly Soviet. Where better to begin than the spaces of incarceration? According to Dmitri Volkogonov, the Bolsheviks began to construct concentration camps in 1918.⁴⁶ S. A. Malsagov, sentenced to the Solovki camp for three years in 1923, learned that camps had been established at Kholmogory and Portaminst at the end of 1919.⁴⁷ He described the Solovki camp proper:

The concentration camp is a rectangular enclosure some 200 yards long and 150 yards wide. It stands on a marsh at the south-eastern corner of the island, with heaps of stones scattered about it. The camp is surrounded by a high wire fence; along this at intervals stand huts for the sentries, each containing eight men.⁴⁸

Because Marxist ideology privileged the secular, the sacred spaces of “Holy Russia” had no place in the new order. The violence of the war years had taken its toll. Konstantin Paustovsky

⁴⁵ Martin, 19.

⁴⁶ *Lenin: A new biography* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 243.

⁴⁷ *Island Hell* (London: A. M. Philpot, 1926), 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

described a small, remote monastery he visited in Ukraine during the civil war whose monks were all despatched by bandits.⁴⁹ The Solovki, built on islands in the White Sea, dated from the fifteenth century. Roy Robson describes the facility's conversion to its new function.⁵⁰ Malsagov believed the Bolsheviks had executed half the monks, sent the rest to forced labor in central Russia and burned the wooden buildings in 1922. D. S. Likachev, a student imprisoned there in the late 1920s later became a celebrated art historian and medievalist. In his memoirs he described the artistic treasures that remained and recalled some of the remarkable *intelligenty* detained there, their camp theater and newspaper.⁵¹ Malsagov noted that besides persons of outlawed social estates thought to be actively opposing the regime, social democrats and Mensheviks, and common criminals, the Solovetsky also contained hostages: "Old Caucasians (Chechentsy) had been transported to Solovky as hostages for their sons, grandsons and great grandsons who had joined the guerilla bands and were waging a ceaseless war with the Bolsheviks—a war which is still going on. They themselves had not committed any offense."⁵² The definitive work on the system of camps developed in the 1930s is by Anne Applbaum.⁵³ She employs archival and memoir material to describe the economic function of the camps, how the influx of P.O.W.s during World War II made the inmates more difficult to control, and how the system was dismantled when it finally became obvious that the costs of maintaining it were incommensurate with the returns on slave labor.

Domestic space was also handled in a distinctive way under Soviet Power. Economic necessity in the first twelve years after the revolution sharply limited new housing construction. Under NEP coops and factories were authorized to build housing, but did so infrequently. In

⁴⁹ *The story of a life* (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 492-94.

⁵⁰ *Solovki: the story of Russia told through its most remarkable islands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵¹ *Reflections on the Russian soul: a memoir* (Budapest and New York: Central European Press, 2000), 120-31.

⁵² Malsagov, 115.

⁵³ *Gulag: A history* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

connection with Lenin's electrification scheme, individual dwellings with garden plots were constructed around new power plants and surrounded by green space; but in the 'thirties cities grew up around the plants, and the cottages were demolished and the green space built over.⁵⁴ More and more people were crowded into the existing housing stock in which toilet and kitchen facilities were shared.⁵⁵ The 'twenties saw a general enthusiasm for remaking everyday life. According to Olga Matich, proponents of a "new" everyday life replaced the double bed of generational continuity and social stability with the mobile single bed."⁵⁶ In any case, private living space was minimized in connection with a determination to deemphasize or even destroy the family. Social life was to move into clubs and public spaces like movie theatres. Newly built living space was often connected to public areas to encourage "shared life," and new buildings contained space for amenities like public dining and laundry service.⁵⁷ In the view of Oleg Kharkhordin, this reflected a "total disrespect for privacy in Bolshevism."⁵⁸

Avant-garde architects had a change of heart in 1930. "Whereas earlier the domestic sphere was to be tightly regulated if not entirely obliterated, it was now quite suddenly presented by some of the most committed architectural . . . reformists as the locus of individual growth, development and cultural progress."⁵⁹ Two years later the government took total responsibility for housing. A 1932 decree required that all new housing had to have separate apartments for individual families. Further, steps were taken to make plots of suburban or rural land available to

⁵⁴ Milka Bliznakov, "Soviet housing during the experimental years, 1918 to 1933," in William Craft Brumfield and Blair A. Ruble, eds., *Russian housing in the modern age; design and social history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90.

⁵⁵ Katerina Gerasimova describes life under these arrangements. "Public privacy in the Soviet communal apartment," in David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist spaces; sites of everyday life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002).

⁵⁶ "Remaking the bed," in J. Bowlt and O. Matich, eds., *Laboratory of dreams; the Russian avant-garde and cultural experiment* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), 77.

⁵⁷ This of course ran counter to "planned assignment of land according to the uses permitted for buildings erected on it—dominant in most countries today." Bliznakov, 95.

⁵⁸ "Reveal and dissimulate: A genealogy of private life in Soviet Russia," in J. Weintraub and Krishan Kumar, *Public and private in thought and practice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 343.

⁵⁹ Victor Buchli, *An archeology of socialism* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 1999), 66.

families for vegetable plots and summer cottages.⁶⁰ In fact, from 1953 the Soviet family went on to become the leading institution in privatization.⁶¹ Between 1970 and 1984 personal property of Soviet citizens increased 250 percent, contributing to the growth of the underground economy.⁶² Moreover, public spaces like libraries and clubs were less frequented, and theater attendance dropped steadily. The state from Khrushchev on constructed high-rise apartment blocks at a prodigious pace, satisfying much of the pent-up demand.

Soviet space seemed to change with enormous speed once the party repudiated NEP and embarked on rapid industrialization and collectivization in 1928. The campaign to drive peasants into collective farms represented nothing less than a social revolution, and once started it could not be reversed. Although many resistant better-off peasants were removed to Siberia, many fled to cities to construct new identities and find factory work. The numbers of people on the move required massive changes in the built environment. Moscow's population increased from 2.3 million in 1929 to 3.6 million by January 1933.⁶³ During the years of the first Five Year Plan little capital could be diverted from industry for urban reconfiguration. But at least peasants headed to the capital did not abandon nature altogether. Green space in Moscow—public gardens and boulevards—had doubled between 1917 and 1928. *Park Kul'tury* (later Gorky Park), a showpiece fitted out with amenities for leisure time activities, became the national standard of excellence when it opened in 1928, and similar parks were planned for Leningrad, Sverdlovsk, Ivanovo and the Donbass. The provision of green space in cities fit nicely with the conceit that

⁶⁰ “From being very much a minority privilege on the eve of the war, summer houses had become commonplace by the mid-1980s.” Stephen Lovell, *Summerfolk: A history of the dacha, 1710-2000* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), 163.

⁶¹ V. Shlapentokh, *Public and private life of the Soviet people: Changing values in post-Stalin Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 164.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 162-5. By the mid-1980s ten percent of Soviet families owned automobiles; there were 500,000 privately own cars in Moscow.

⁶³ Stephen V. Bittner, “Green cities and orderly streets: Space and culture in Moscow, 1928-1933.” *Journal of Urban History* 25, no. 1 (1998), 28.

human nature was being transformed and a “new Soviet man” created. Congested streets and the impossibility of adding enough tram lines to move all the newcomers required drastic measures. In 1929 demolition began in the Kremlin area improve traffic flow. Streets would be widened, new thoroughfares created and a subway system built. The improvements would attract yet more of the ambitious out of the villages. Of the 330,000 peasants taking courses in 1931 under the auspices of the Central Collective Farm Administration in accounting, mechanics, electrical work, construction, agronomy and tractor driving, most left to find jobs as soon as they completed their training, and many landed in Moscow.⁶⁴

But even as hierarchy returned, growth was not limited to the center. In the heady climate of rapid industrialization regional administrations routinely manipulated the central planners and then ignored plan constraints. Urals officials, for example, “faked geological surveys . . . in order to convince the center to expand the regional plan,” but also regularly initiated construction projects without approval.⁶⁵ Yet the public would have been unaware of environmental costs of breakneck growth. They were reminded, rather, that the Soviet Union had been establishing reserves (*zapovedniki*) since 1920. And if they were unavaible for recreational use, it was well known that the majority existed for research and to protect wildlife habitats.⁶⁶

A new conception of Soviet space took hold, one that conflated industry, progress and integration. According to James Van Geldern, the revival of heroic ideas traditionally associated with territorial expansion would result in a welcome upsurge of confidence.

⁶⁴ David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant metropolis: Social identities in Moscow, 1929-1941* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 44.

⁶⁵ James R. Harris, *The great Urals: Regionalism and the evolution of the Soviet system* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 212.

⁶⁶ Philip R. Pryde, *Environmental management in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 138.

Cultural geography mapped the Soviet Union as a set of socialist islands—progressive cities, industrial projects, *kolkhozes*—immersed in a sea of hostile influences—the open spaces. By the mid-1930s the periphery no longer seemed alien or hostile. The map was redrawn to include the great expanses, all in one way or another considered ‘Soviet’ (in the cultural as well as political sense). The demarcation was not by points—the islands—but by the great outer boundary enclosing the country. There was a new and powerful consciousness of the border. Socialist conflict arose not when the centre penetrated the periphery, but when outsiders (foreigners) violated the outer boundary.⁶⁷

The confident mood undoubtedly provided the context in which myriad ill-advised decisions were taken.

While Soviet Russia could hardly claim a monopoly on environmental mismanagement, the fact remains that spaces of environmental degradation existed in profusion by the 1980s, and that public concern over the scale of these spaces would figure in the fall of the regime. Well before the widely publicized nuclear contamination at Chernobyl in 1986, a catastrophic release of radioactive material in 1957 had caused hundreds of square miles of agricultural land south of Cheliabinsk to be permanently evacuated.⁶⁸ After a couple of years of bumper crops, Khrushchev’s “virgin lands” project failed for insufficient rainfall. Daniel Calder assessed the impact of the plough in Kalmykia:

For the last fifty years sand has been encroaching on the land. The sand was always there, beneath the black earth of the steppe. When it lay undisturbed, it did no damage. But then the all-knowing authorities in Moscow ordered that the land should be ploughed to grow cereal. . . . The Kalymik elders protested: it was madness, they said. For centuries they

⁶⁷ “The centre and the periphery: cultural and social geography in the mass culture of the 1930s,” in Stephen White, ed., *New directions in Soviet history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 71.

⁶⁸ Zhores Medvedev, *Nuclear disaster in the Urals* (New York: Vintage, 1980).

had lived in harmony with the steppe, because they understood it. They had grazed their animals on it, yes, but they had always shown restraint. . . . Moscow knew better. Great machines came and ploughed the land. And the sand began to spread. Rare plants and herbs disappeared. Animals that had roamed the steppe for centuries, millennia, died in large numbers.⁶⁹

The diversion of rivers feeding the Aral Sea to irrigate a cotton monoculture in Central Asia is well known, as is the fact that what was once the world's fourth-largest inland body of water has been shrinking since the early 1960s and that the toxic salts from fertilizer run-off in its exposed bed blow hundreds of miles east and poison the cotton pickers. Less well known is that tiny "Rebirth Island" in the Aral Sea was exclusively used for testing biological weapons, aerosols of bacterial cells or viral particles to which monkeys were exposed.⁷⁰ Although "Biopreparat" accidents killed civilians by infecting them with plague and a virulent strain of anthrax, the source of infection was successfully concealed. But when life expectancies began dropping in the mid-'sixties and continued to fall steadily, the health costs of Soviet growth were everywhere to be documented, even by foreign researchers.⁷¹ And after Soviet Power ended, foreigners would continue to compare Soviet deployment of population in geographical space to demographic movement elsewhere.⁷²

Conclusion

The Soviet regime began with a dislocated and disoriented population disposed to accept the interventions of a bureaucracy that had vastly increased its reach under the conditions of

⁶⁹ Calder, 98.

⁷⁰ Ken Alibek, *Biohazard* (New York: Random House, 1999), 15-18.

⁷¹ Murray Feshbach and Alfred Friendly, Jr., *Ecocide in the USSR: Health and nature under siege* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁷² An interesting example is Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *How Communist planners left Russia out in the cold* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

Total War. To hold sway over the bulk of the former imperial territory, it contrived to pacify fifty ethnic groups and secure at least their sufferance through the promise of respect and attraction of the civilizing process. People who had become accustomed to “a radically new social and political ecosystem” before Soviet Power now had to endure a systematic assault on private property and the legal norms supporting it. An assault on the institution of the family as locus of selfishness and unsociability lasted through most of the ‘twenties.

Henri Lefebvre coined the phrase “production of space” to describe the post-World War II urbanization that he observed to be penetrating, negotiating, the countryside in the West. To him it was a revolution which, like the industrial revolution, produced tensions and generated creativity. Lefebvre’s reference to the industrial revolution is revealing. R. A. Dodgshon remarked that Britain had been “the first country in Europe to experience large scale reorganization of its spatial order through the institution of competitive markets” and that geographical colonization of new or peripheral areas had afforded “greater freedom to make pattern-breaking adaptations.”⁷³ These features would appear to be precisely the ones that intrigued Lefebvre. The difference of course is that Lefebvre’s urban revolution required the participation of a modern state that mastered energy production and laid down networks of highways and air traffic routes, in the process building broad consensus.

The Soviet state did not, despite energy riches, “partition space under the double surveillance of its technicians and police.” When it turned to infrastructure development during the industrialization drive it relied on forced labor administered through the Gulag. Bureaucratic authority and a command system that accommodated to faked results produced unusable links, like the infamous White Sea Canal. But the larger problem is clear in what Von Geldern

⁷³ *European past: social evolution and spatial order* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1987), 291, 355.

characterized as “socialist islands in a sea of hostile influences.” The center could be elevated and the periphery comfortably secured, but the countryside was left behind—effectively benighted by the very methods employed to “catch up with and overtake” the industrialized West. The state reversed itself on the family and, to some extent, on private property, with a resulting expansion of the exchange of goods (as Shlapentokh demonstrated). But much of this wealth expansion lacked legal sanction, blocking the development of social consensus. The cost of cold war competition may account for some of the corner cutting that fouled so many spaces. Finally, the “tragedy of the commons” accounts for much of the environmental degradation.

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