
Published in spring 2010, Laura Henry’s new book concludes with an optimistic assessment about the future of environmental activism in Russia. “In general,” she writes, “the diversity of orientations, activities, and organizational types bodes well for the sustainability of the environmental movement in some form even as Russia’s political and economic fortunes continue to shift in unpredictable ways” (242-243). Just a few months later, activists from an array of environmental groups used a combination of protests, direct actions, and connections to public figures to persuade President Dmitry Medvedev to halt construction of a planned road through the Khimki forest outside of Moscow. This mobilization even appears to have helped precipitate the ouster of long-time Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov. Since then, construction plans have proceeded and very recently, protests renewed. It remains to be seen if the greens will succeed in the long run or if this surge in environmental activism will come to the same conclusion as the gathering of 2.5 million petition signatures to hold a referendum about government plans to import nuclear waste in 2000. Either way, recent events make Henry’s evaluation of Russian environmental activism seem prescient.

The book does a wonderful job of illuminating the activities, struggles, and organizational forms of the Russian environmental movement since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Henry came to the project interested in questions about the role of civil society in post-communist transitions. She claims that focusing on post-Soviet political change as a failed “transition to democracy” simplifies the matter and instead insists, “the relationship between political liberalization and civil society is complex and unpredictable” (232). While not losing sight of the relative weakness of environmental groups, she tells their story by highlighting their vibrancy within the context of constrained opportunities for influencing the political process and establishing a broad support base. Henry’s study examines Saint Petersburg, Bryansk, Vladimir, Novosibirsk, and Vladivostok. Through cross-regional comparisons, she reveals a remarkable consistency in the quantity of environmental groups in diverse locations, even if the type of activism they engage in occurs in different proportions. Her analysis makes us appreciate that citizens throughout Russia are involved in a variety of autonomous projects to find more environmentally sound ways to live their lives.

In order to make sense of environmental activism, Henry develops an “organizational approach” that combines features of social movement theory, organization theory, and work on transnational networks and norms. This method allows her to investigate “organizational niches” occupied by different groups in a constrained “mobilization field.” As applied to this context, Henry outlines three overarching goals that influence three ideal types of environmental organization. These goals are the need to find financial, social, and political resources to survive as an activist group, the ability to influence actual environmental policy and make progress on specific issues, and the hope to change the relationship between state and society in the Russian political system more broadly. Grassroots, professional, and government affiliated environmental organizations pursue these survivalist, substantive, and transformative objectives quite differently. I will leave it to the social scientists to assess the salience of Henry’s approach as a theoretical model. As a heuristic for structuring her discussion of environmental activism, I found it quite compelling. The bulk of the book consists of three chapters that address each of these types of goals. Instead of following her chapter structure, I will give an overview here of each of the organizational types.
Grassroots environmental groups in Russia often rely on community networks, tend to concentrate on local issues, and frequently view education as a means of changing society. These groups manage with limited resources by restricting the costs of their operations and soliciting volunteer donations and small grants. These strategies make them comparatively resilient to economic hardships but confine the scope of their interventions. Such grassroots organizations focus on issues related to environmental education of children and other groups, community health and well-being, and eco-spirituality. Sometimes they galvanize around a specific local issue such as cleaning up a nearby water body. They often take neutral and disengaged positions toward the government, emphasizing the allegedly apolitical, yet independent, character of their activities.

Professional groups most closely resemble Western NGOs (non-governmental organizations). They have highly educated staffs and, unlike many grassroots organizations, are often officially registered with the state. A prominent source of the funding for these groups has been grants from foreign donors. Though this strategy of sustaining their operations has often been more lucrative than relying on domestic funding, it has engendered certain risks and opportunities. Specifically, it has ceded non-Russian donors a degree of agenda-setting power, risked losing their support when donors move on to new causes, and created suspicions in the government and among the public that they are supporting foreign agents against Russian interests. Professional organizations have tended to work on national and international environmental issues. They take a decidedly cosmopolitan outlook to the problems they address and turn to the natural sciences to bolster their arguments for action. Activists in these groups are most likely to have a cynical and distrustful attitude toward the government. They also most readily see themselves as participating in a civil society and an effort to democratize Russia.

Government affiliated organizations seek to use official channels to help Russia best tackle environmental issues. They receive state funds and enjoy connections to politicians and bureaucrats. These strategies of institutional survival offer government affiliates more stability than the other types of organizations, but leave them vulnerable to shifts in state policies. Many of the participants in these groups are firmly entrenched in networks of the Russian state bureaucracy. They view their objectives as assisting in the implementation of the government’s environmental policy, which they view as largely sufficient for addressing problems. They also make the case that they are able to be most effective in environmental stewardship by embracing a cooperative stance with the state. As could be expected, government affiliated organizations seem to have little interest in transforming Russia’s political system or culture.

Henry appropriately treats the Soviet legacy as having a complex and multivalent influence on Russian environmental activism over the past two decades. By emphasizing that norms, networks, and institutions from the Soviet period also create opportunities for activism, she rightly challenges views that take the influence of the Soviet past as uniformly inimical to autonomous activity in society. However, her brief assessment of Soviet environmental history at times falls into the same monolithic view that she criticizes. I find the old claim that “severe environmental degradation… is the result of Soviet economic planning” especially untenable (34). This simplification obscures too much to be helpful. Do market-based industrial and post-industrial economies lack “severe environmental degradation”? Of course they do not. Structural tendencies in the central command economy and its performance during particular historical eras certainly affected how specific environmental problems emerged. So too did the limited possibilities for independent political activity in the Soviet Union until perestroika. But the influence of these factors was, as Henry might say, more one of quality than quantity.