Andy Bruno


Andy Bruno of Northern Illinois University has produced an important and solid book. Through the lens of one of Stalinism’s defining features, the all-consuming drive for industrial and agricultural modernization, Bruno succeeds in presenting the reader with thought-provoking new perspectives on Soviet history. *The Nature of Soviet Power* is not primarily a political history, nor even an industrial history. Rather, Bruno’s ambition is to understand Soviet modernization as a process very much influenced and defined by the natural environment in which it took place. The natural world is portrayed as more than merely a passive backdrop against which human transformative activity could be unleashed. Rather, nature itself is “a participant in the communist project” (p. 7), and was therefore “shaping the Soviet system” (p. 9). In this way, Bruno is contributing to the burgeoning literature on environmental history.

Commencing in 1929, the first five-year plan was a monumental scheme aimed at propelling the Soviet economy closer to parity with its Western competitor. Stalin’s assessment was that Russia’s inherent backwardness had to be overcome if the Soviet Union were to survive. In the coming decade, this existential fervor underpinned the mapping and exploitation of the abundant natural resources sprawled across the Soviet hinterland. The union’s northwestern reaches would become transformed by the influx of Soviet industrialists and the ever-expanding socialist production base. Bruno’s study follows the development in this northwestern corner, and more specifically the process through which the number of inhabitants on the Kola Peninsula increased from a mere 10,000 at the beginning of the 20th century to a soaring million at the time of the Soviet collapse.

Through five substantive chapters, each dealing with different branches of Soviet production, Bruno analyzes the Soviet view of nature and its apparent see-sawing between a symbiotic approach and a more hostile ambition to subdue natural forces through militaristic conquest. The former, though deeply utilitarian, put conservation of the natural world at a premium, albeit not to be realized at the expense of industrial expansion. At the core of this ambitious program, lay the concept of “complex utilization of natural resources”, which prescribed processing all properties in a given natural resource to the extent that industrial waste would be eliminated. The latter vision, of conquest, which is reflected in most of the existing historiography on Soviet industrialization, treated nature as a foe – an impediment to development that was to be bent to the will of progressive socialism.
This antagonistic approach to nature was evident in the construction of a railroad connecting the Kola Peninsula to central areas of the realm. Construction had commenced in the late imperial period and, following two decades of war and unrest, was appropriated by Soviet authorities after the revolution. In this case, natural obstacles were indeed primarily that – obstacles. Their negotiation was, however, deemed necessary because nature was not merely an impediment, but simultaneously provided riches that could be efficiently exploited only if they were brought out of their isolation. After all, excavation and processing of mineral resources relies heavily on human resources and a wide array of supplies. The Murmansk railroad would become the essential artery for provision of these factors, and consequently for the industrialization of the Kola Peninsula. So, while the railroad construction itself involved dramatic battles between the natural world and humanity that left neither side unscarred, Bruno argues that it opened up to a more nuanced human-nature relationship in the following decades.

Bruno goes on to portray one of the main protagonists of his story, geochemist Aleksandr Fersman, and his promotion of a more assimilationist approach to the natural world. More specifically, Fersman and his comprehensive legacy of mapping and exploiting vast apatite deposits contained in the alpine Khibiny Mountains lay, as Bruno argues, the foundations of what he calls a Stalinist “ecosystem” (p. 74). Involving more railroad work, urban developments and building of comprehensive mining and processing facilities, the integration of the Khibiny Mountain range into the Soviet production line was indeed a daring feat of modernistic will. But, as opposed to the militaristic methods applied when laying the main railroad line, the apatite venture was more sensitive to the limitations set by the natural world. While still very much aimed at subjugating nature, Soviet modernization efforts also roomed a more holistic ambition to achieve harmony between man and nature. Nature was always going to exert its sometimes brutal influence on city planning, housing projects and processing operations, and would return with a vengeance (in the shape of avalanches, freezing cold, mosquito plagues, water and pollution) if unheeded. Though largely unsuccessful in mitigating Industry’s derogatory effect on the environment, Bruno asserts that the Soviet industrialism during the first five-year plans was a potent agent for change: “Stalinism succeeded neither in surmounting the limits of the tundra nor in creating an ideal space for residents to find accord with nature, but it did manage to reorder the Khibiny environment into something unprecedented” (p. 114).

Such change required not only influx of machinery but also the expenditure of vast amounts of human energy, which needed reliable refueling. We are presented with one of the few protein sources naturally offered by the Kola