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ENVIRONMENTALISM AND ETHNIC AWAKENING

Marshall I. Goldman*

In most countries of the world, environmentalists tend to be internationalist in orientation. Recognizing that environmental degradation is not a problem specific to their own country or region, most environmentalists eagerly reach out in cooperative efforts to help not only each other but also themselves. Failure to reach out may well mean that pollution generated in one country will travel, by design or not, across the border into a less vigilant neighboring country.

It is therefore striking that in the Soviet Union, environmentalists are often more parochial. For the most part they focus almost exclusively on the environmental problems in their own neighborhoods or republics and ignore the environmental problems of the Soviet Union as a whole. Of course, there are exceptions. Some environmentalists in the Baltic republics coordinate their efforts, but that may be more a reflection of the separatist attitude of the Baltic area. The Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians regard themselves as one when it comes to dealing with the Soviet Union—with the exception of Stalin, Slavs traditionally have dominated the central government.

The reaction of environmentalists to the Slavs' domination of their territory helps to explain another peculiarity of the environmental movement in the Soviet Union: the fact that almost all the nationalist and ethnic stirrings that have occurred since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power have originated within the environmental movement. Environmentalists often have been in the forefront of what have become nationalist and even separatist factions in the republics. This again contrasts with the usual stance of environmentalists in the noncommunist countries of the world. As a result of both environmental and political considerations, environmentalists usually tend

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to be one-worlders. In the Soviet Union, however, these considerations have spawned just the opposite reaction.

This atypical stance is a direct consequence of the Soviet Union's political system and its approach to economic development. Until recently, the official communist line has been that pollution cannot exist or occur in a communist society. It occurs in capitalism because greedy capitalists seek to push off their waste onto their neighbors, thus sparing the polluters the cost of their own cleanups. Such results, which economists call "negative externalities," are absent in communist societies—the theory goes—because a polluter's neighbor is not a competitor but a fellow socialist and member of the state. In other words, in capitalism individuals try to shirk costs, while in communism there is no one but the state to absorb these costs. Therefore, the state and its factory managers will try to avoid pollution and its attendant cleanup costs in the first place.

Unfortunately, life is not as idyllic as theory. Soviet managers seek to push off their costs just like capitalists. Moreover, in many cases, the problem turns out to be even more serious. There has been less money available for cleanup in the Soviet Union. Historically, diverting funds to pollution control necessarily meant directing them from the task of increasing production, and given the overpowering pressure to increase production, that was always a hard thing to do. In addition, because the state denied that pollution existed, there was less sensitivity to the problem. It was difficult to remedy a problem or allocate money for solving it when the problem officially did not exist.

Not surprisingly, by the 1970s and early 1980s, pollution had become a very serious matter throughout the Soviet Union—after all, on the whole, the state had done little to cope with it. Whatever the state's attitude may have been, the awareness that something was wrong became inescapable. Because of the ban on all nonstate-sponsored organizations, there were no independent environmental groups to protest for change. Individuals nonetheless could and did begin to protest in an unorganized fashion. In response to one environmental problem or another, those who felt most concerned began to write letters to newspapers and speak out about particular disruptive events that were affecting them. Having identified themselves through their letters, articles, and lectures, these individuals then could coordinate their efforts, although they could not form organizations.

When Gorbachev came to power, he called for grassroots glasnost and began to allow individuals to form informal groups that were
unaffiliated with the state. It was only natural that those with nationalist yearnings sought out anyone who had demonstrated a willingness to speak out against the status quo. Since virtually the only ones who had dared to speak out and were not in jail were those concerned with the environment, it also was only natural that large numbers of environmentalists were swept up into nationalist causes. Except for the environmentalists, there were relatively few others who were easily identifiable critics of the status quo.

Equally important, environmentalists increasingly had begun to attribute the pollution affecting their regions to decisions that Moscow had made. It was not that Moscow had set out purposely to pollute the various republics. It was just that, as the state sought to spread the rewards (and shortcomings) of industrialization throughout the Soviet Union, it also inevitably reached out into heretofore undeveloped areas in an effort to industrialize them. Moreover, it often sent out Russians from Moscow to supervise these activities. At first, local officials viewed these efforts at industrialization as positive and often vied with one another for the accompanying patronage. Only later did the realization grow that industrialization was harmful to the environment.

At that point, attempts to determine who bore the responsibility for such decisions began. In almost all cases, the orders appeared to stem from Moscow, and the implementers appeared to be Russians. This made it all the easier for environmentalists to link up with local nationalists and echo their calls for more local autonomy and decisionmaking. It also led, however, to a growing distrust of Slavs and Muscovites in general. For that reason, there has been growing antagonism between environmentalists in the regions and in the center.