Missing Green in the Black Gold

Environment in the Public Debate on West Siberian Oil Production from the 1970s to the Present

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West Siberia's substantial oil reserves have played a central role in Russia's geopolitical and economic rebirth. West Siberia is Russia's most highly developed oil province, producing 78 percent of all Russian oil. The process of development, which started in the late 1960s, has been characterized by a minimal regard for environmental protection, preservation of cultural properties, or effective consultation with indigenous peoples. Over the last 50 years from a poor, sparsely populated area (around 120,000 in 1960) there emerged a highly industrialized region with a population of 15 million and the highest gross regional product.

The choice of West Siberia as the regional focus of my study has to do with the uniqueness of this area, which despite its remoteness, mirrors the entirety of Russia in several respects: Geographically, its territory stretches from the northern to the southern state borders, including almost all of Russia's climate zones. From a historical perspective, the region has experienced all major stages of development, typical for most Russian territory: conquest by the expanding Russian state, establishment of military and later total political control, agricultural cultivation, development of the processing industry along with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, and forced industrialization. Ethnically, the region's population includes all three groups represented in the Russian population – Slavic, Turkic, and Finno-Ugric. In terms of politics and administration, the region has a federal structure with the problems of separation of powers and clashes between the centre and the regions – problems typical of

Russian federalism. But most importantly, it is the development of the oil industry in West Siberia that has had a deep impact on the late Soviet and post-Soviet history of the region and of the entire country.

Russian historiography, however, clearly lacks works on the late and post-Soviet environmental history.[1] Material histories concerned with the late Soviet Union and the newly created Russian Federation are just beginning to accumulate. This project attempts to fill this gap as it constructs an environmental history of the region by studying the meanings which the society attributed to the natural resource oil.[2] By focusing on West Siberia, this study offers a perspective on the provinces, a much neglected area in terms of research. Existing historical works on Russian oil production either analyze political decisions regulating oil exploration[3], or praise the heroism of the first geologists and oilmen.[4] With the exception of anthropological[5] and ethnological[6] studies related to West Siberian indigenous population, humanities research on Soviet and post-Soviet oil production omits the issue of environmental impact. Given both

1 | More on Russian environmental historiography in Andy Bruno: "Russian Environmental History: Directions and Potentials", in: *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8:3 (2007), 635-50.

2 | More on the subject of environmental history in Donald Worster, ed.: *The Ends of the Earth. Perspectives on Modern Environmental History.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 289-308.

3 | Maria Slavkina: "Istoria Prinyatiya Reshenia o Promyshlennom Osvoenii Zapadnoi Sibiri" (History of Decision Making on Industrial Development of West Siberia), in: *Economicheskaya Istoria* 10 (2005), 146-62. Hereinafter, all Russian quotations and titles were translated by the author.

4 | See e.g. Matvey Krol, ed.: *Neftianaya Epopeya Zapadnoy Sibiri* (The Oil Epic of Western Siberia). Moskva: Parnas, 1995 or Sergey Kazantsev, ed.: *Energia Ugry: Istoki* (Energy of Yugra: the Roots). Vol. 4: Vsem Mirom (All Together). Yekaterinburg: Parkus, 2002.

5 | Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer: "The Tension between Might and Rights: Siberians and Energy Developers in Post-Socialist Binds", in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 58:4 (2006), 567-88.

6 | Anna Sirina: "Oil and Gas Development in Russia and Northern Indigenous Peoples", in: Elana Wilson Rowe, ed. *Russia and the North.* Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2009, 187-203.

its insufficiency and policy importance, historians could contribute to the development of an environmentally conscious public discourse on oil.

This paper aims to trace the change of oil meanings over the last four decades in order to evaluate the public awareness about the environmental damage caused by West Siberian oil production, and the state's disposition to conduct a responsible energy policy. This analysis will help understand the historical background of contemporary Russian energy mentality. To fulfill this task, this work examines a bulk of oil discourse sources consisting of a variety of newspaper accounts, and articles in historical and sociopolitical journals related to West Siberian oil industry over the investigated period. This paper employs the notion of 'discourse' as an aggregate of utterances, speech acts and practices related to a certain issue and positioning this issue within the public sphere.

The meanings attributed to oil are analyzed against the backdrop of their respective political and economic contexts. What images of oil did the state impose on the society and what meanings of oil did the society in turn construct? How did people perceive the change which oil development had caused to the environment? The study pays special attention to the emergence of such themes as environmental awareness and resource finiteness in the oil discourse. When and why did the analyzed discursive themes appear? Did they signify a transition to a more environmentally sensitive society?

The investigated Soviet media dating from before 1986, as well as historical and sociopolitical journals, were heavily propagandistic and praised the progressive role of oil. Only in the late 1980s did scholarly journals begin to publish articles that described the catastrophic environmental condition of the largest oil province. But such writings have remained rare until now and are dominated by articles on the danger that oil dependence poses to the national economy. The first comprehensive works on the damage that West Siberian oil production caused to the environment, the indigenous population and the national economy appeared in the early 1990s and were published abroad. Other valuable sources for this study are transcripts of meetings of Soviet Council of Ministers behind closed doors, found in the state archive. Further primary sources, analyzed in order to put the investigated patterns of the oil debate into appropriate historical context, are governmental acts and statistics.

My research rests on the hypothesis that the collapse of the totalitarian regime in the 1990s caused a discursive shift, but that the change of oil

perceptions to more critical ones did not mean that either the state or the society became more sensitive to environmental damage inflicted by oil production.

Russian environmentalists argue that in the past three decades Russia has seen several changes in attitudes towards environmental protection on behalf of both society and state: The state ecology experienced a rapid upsurge in the late 1980s and a brisk rollback during Putin's presidency.[7] However, this study argues that the indicated rise of environmentalism did not have any effect either on Soviet oil production in general or on the perception of the oil-related ecological problems.

The time frame of my study begins in the 1970s as it is the starting point of 'big West Siberian oil' and simultaneously the years that brought the world oil shock and first Soviet environmental legislation. The period under investigation stretches over the peak oil of the mid-1980s, the rise of environmental movements in the USSR in the late 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union to the transformation years until the present day. The analyzed period allows the examination of not only the beginnings of a high industry region, but also the economic and political concerns which led to a change in the implications of oil.

1970s: Big Oil and Cold War Geopolitics

In 1970, West Siberia was already considered a large oil region by international standards. During the following twelve years, oil production there increased twelvefold. The Soviet government discussed intensively how to exploit the West Siberian deposits most effectively. The oil industry experts warned CPSU[8] leadership and *Gosplan*[9] that it would be impossible to increase the production at such a rapid pace in the future without facing serious technical problems. The 1965-1977 oil minister Shashin often engaged in heavy discussions with the *Gosplan* decision-makers, arguing that the planned extraction rates went against geological norms and that such

7 | See e.g. Vladislav Larin/Mnatsakanyan Ruben/Igor Chestin/Evgeniy Shwarts: *Okhrana Prirody Rossii: ot Gorbacheva do Putin* (Russia's Nature Protection: from Gorbachev to Putin). Moskva: KMK, 2003.

8 | The Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

9 | The State Planning Committee.

policy was short-sighted. Thus, he would criticize a *Gosplan* representative: "You are a risk taker! Where are you taking the country with your policy, do you think about the consequences of such a production increase?"[10] Yet, the party told the oil ministry there was no other choice. The Soviet premier, Aleksey Kosygin, used to call the chief of the *Tyumenneftegaz* (the oil and gas mining division at the time), Viktor Muravlenko, and explain the desperation of the situation: "Please give three million tons on top of the plan. The situation with bread is awful."[11] Oil exports were the only reliable source of Soviet hard currency earnings between 1973 and 1985. This is what Gorbachev's colleague, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikolai Ryzhkov, explains in his book: "We export raw materials because nobody wants to buy anything else from us for free convertible currency."[12] By the 1970s, when not enough such raw materials were available for exports, the state was on the verge of bankruptcy. Starting in 1964, the Soviet government had to increase its grain imports annually.[13] Without the discovery of Siberian oil, the Soviet Union might have collapsed decades earlier simply because it would not have had enough hard currency to pay for its wheat imports. The only reason why the Soviet Union did not cease to exist after it had become the world's largest grain importer, was the discovery of West Siberian oil fields. Luckily, the new deposits were truly unique due to the shallow bedding and high flow rate. Besides, the oil was relatively light, with low content of sulfur and paraffin. In particular, oil originating from the Latitudinal Ob region has been even qualitatively better than the Brent Crude – the oil blend used as a benchmark to price two thirds of the world's internationally traded oil supplies.[14] Thus, the ninth and tenth five-year

10 | Qtd. in Egor Gaydar: *Gibel' Imperii. Uroki dlia Sovremennoi Rossii* (The Collapse of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia). Moskva: Rosspen, 2006, 48.

11 | Qtd. in Maria Slavkina: *Triumf i tragedia: razvitie neftegazovofo kompleksa SSSR v 1960-1980-e godi* (Triumph and Tragedy: Development of the Oil and Gas Complex in the USSR 1960s-1980s). Moskva: Nauka, 2002, 143.

12 | Nikolai I. Ryzhkov: *Desyat let velikikh potryaseniy* (Ten Years of Great Distress). Moskva: Assotsiatsiya "Kniga, Prosvyashenie, Miloserdie", 1995, 229.

13 | Vneshniya Torgovlya SSSR (Foreign Trade of the USSR), 1966-1978. Ministry of Foreign Trade, Moskva: Statistica.

14 | Oil characteristics are taken from Vagit Alekperov: "Zapadno-Sibirskoye 'Chernoye Zoloto'" (West Siberian 'Black Gold'), in: *Neftyanik Zapadnoy Sibiri*, 31.10.2009, 2.

plans for 1971-1975 and 1976-1980, respectively, scheduled the doubling of oil extraction. The realization of this strategy relied largely on the newly discovered oil fields in the Tyumen oblast.[15]

The 1973 oil shock made the Soviet government rely even more on the profits from selling Tyumen oil to pay for imported grain, equipment, and most importantly to keep military spending at its traditionally high level. The resulting excessive oil pumping did not correspond with the geological and environmental norms, leading to premature field depreciation and to long-term ecological problems. But in the 1970s environmental issues were still far from entering the discourse on oil development. At that point, the government was mainly concerned about the sufficiency of oil export revenues to keep the stagnating economy afloat. The task of the Soviet press, however, was to persuade the people of the richness of their motherland that was supposed to be rapidly pacing toward the bright communist future.[16] Newspapers were glorifying the abundance of the country's petroleum reserves: "The Soviet Union has plenty of oil and we generously share it with other countries of the socialist camp."[17] Thus, the discovery of West Siberian oil created the notions of 'oil excesses' and 'oil beyond plan'.[18] These notions, in turn, became convenient propaganda tools to create the myth of a prospering economy, serving as the locomotive of the entire Socialist bloc.

The geopolitical implication of the new deposits was praised in nearly every oil-related writing of the time: "Each year West Siberian oil and gas complex plays a greater international role, which strengthens the positions of the USSR on the world arena, as well as of the other socialist countries, and gives them new opportunities to compete economically with the West [...] and Siberian oil thus serves the development of international cooperation

15 | Tyumen Oblast (district) is the largest administrative unit in West Siberia.

16 | According to The Third Program of the CPSU, adopted by the 22nd Congress of the CPSU in 1962, the Soviet society would have built communism by 1980, which, among others, meant that "[...] all the springs of cooperative wealth will flow more abundantly and the great principle 'From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' will be implemented.", Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. New York: International Publishers, 1963, 71.

17 | "Kuda potechyot neft?" (Where Will the Oil Flow?), in: *Pionerskaya Pravda*, 13.12.1960, 1.

18 | Sergey Bogatko/Sergey Chursin: "Sopernichaya s solntsem" (Competing with the Sun), in: *Pravda*, 30.06.1971, 2.

and forges peace in the whole world."[19] But the structure of oil exports that was established by the beginning of the 1980s was far from economically viable. In 1981, the USSR sold 90 million tons of crude oil to the Socialist 'brother-countries' (12% of the oil extracted in 1981) at the average of 117-130 rubles per ton.[20] In comparison, the price on the capitalist market, to which USSR exported around 65-70 million tons a year, was 250-270 USD per ton.[21] Obviously the goal of this trade was to 'buy' the political obedience of the Socialist bloc. By the early 1980s, the Soviet government almost ran out of the resources that nourished this political cooperation.

1980s: Peak Oil and the Soviet Edition of 'Promethean' Discourse[22]

In the 1970s, Soviet people sincerely believed in the imminent approach of communism, which the party had promised to achieve by 1980. The

19 | Viktor Alekseyev: "Istoricheskiye ocherki. Otkritiye Sibirskoy nefti" (Historical Outlines. Discovering Siberian Oil), in: *Voprosy Istorii* 5 (1986), 79.

20 | Vneshniya Torgovlya SSSR v 1981 (Foreign Trade of the USSR in 1981), Ministry of Foreign Trade, Moskva: Statistica, 1982, 254.

21 | Vneshniya Torgovlya SSSR v 1981, 256.

22 | 'Promethean' or 'cornucopian' view of nature-human relationship emerged in the early 1980s as a response to survivalism and was manifested first by Julian Simon in his work *The Ultimate Resource* (1981). Ecosystems impose no real constraints on human activity – in particular, on economic growth. In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and thereby empowered people to manipulate the world for their benefit. Prometheans perceive nature as brute matter that can be transformed into goods in order to keep the economy on a positive growth track. Any problems that might occur in the transformation, i.e. environmental problems, can and will be solved through technological innovation. These Promethean ideas match well with the Marxist-Leninist concept of natural resources and the relationship between humans and their environment, both discussed in this section. Drawing an analogy between the Soviet (and later Russian) discourse on natural resources and the Promethean discourse is helpful for the analysis of the oil-related abundance rhetoric. For further reading on the Promethean discourse see John S. Dryzek: *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

environment, they believed, could not be endangered in the country so close to the most advanced form of society, which was comprised of flawless Soviet people. According to the leading ideologist of the official 'new biology'[23], the dean of the Faculty of Biology at Moscow State University, Isaac Present, the Soviet Union did not need environmental protection: "Who do you want to protect our nature from? From the Soviet people?"[24] Such ideology destroyed all elements of Soviet ecological science which had developed before 1948.

Until the mid-1980s, environmental data was secret in the USSR. Only as the result of glasnost reforms, catalyzed by the Chernobyl disaster, the government released its measurements of contamination levels, estimations of doses of absorbed radiation, and health statistics.[25] For the first time in Soviet history, it became possible not simply to conduct a full-scale ecological inspection but also to publish its results. This was the jump-start of the ecological movement in the country. The All-Russia Society for Nature Protection (the first Russian ENGO) gained political power and participated in law making. In 1988 the State Committee on Nature Protection was founded. First Western ecology textbooks were translated into Russian.[26] Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund opened their offices in the USSR. The Sixth *Congress of the Union of Writers*

23 | The 'new biology' (currently referred to as 'Lysenkoism') was a pseudo-biological science, conform to Marxism-Leninism, developed in 1948 by a Ukrainian agronomist Trofim Lysenko, a political favorite of Stalin. Lysenkoism rejected the advancements of genetics and mandated that all biological research conducted in the USSR conform to a modified Lamarckian evolutionary theory. Its underlying appeal was that all organisms were not genetically constrained, which was consistent with the desire in the USSR to assert that heredity had a limited role in human development; that people living under socialism would lose any bourgeois or fascist instincts.

24 | Nikolai Vorontsov: "Dlia Nas i Potomkov. Okhrana Prirody do Lysenko, Berii, pri Nikh i Segodnia" (For Us and Our Descendants. Nature Protection before Lysenko, Beria, at Their Time and Today), in: *Izvestia* 228, 12.06.1989, 3.

25 | For further reading see e.g. Arthur T. Hopkins: *Unchained Reactions: Chernobyl, Glasnost, and Nuclear Deterrence*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1993.

26 | Eugene Odum: *Ecology*. 2 Vols., 1963, translated from English. Moskva: Mir, 1986.

of the RSFSR (December 1985) turned into a tribune for protest against the project of Siberian river reversal.[27] In 1987, a short novel *Povorot* ('The Turn') by Sergey Zalygin was published in the literary journal *Novyi mir*. The author criticized the government's project of river rerouting as an act of tremendous violence towards nature. There was also an earlier example of literary criticism of official modernization projects, causing destructive transformation of landscape – Valentin Rasputin's 1979 novel *Farewell to Matyora*. However, no such literature was dedicated to gluttonous oil pumping.

The adaptation of the Decree on the Fundamental Reorganization of Nature Protection (1988) and the foundation of the State Committee for Nature Protection of the USSR (1988) were heralded by a debate, which referred to the catastrophic ecological situation around the West Siberian oil fields. Nevertheless, this issue, in contrast to the project of the river reversal, did not gain publicity. The only mention of oil in the new legislation on nature protection addressed the Ministry for Chemical and Petroleum Engineering, which was then obliged to work out guidelines for assuring that machine manufacturing was environmentally compliant.[28]

Despite the rise of glasnost, the critical situation in the oil sector seemed to be completely left out of the public debate. However, the developments in the oil production in the mid-1980s deserved public reaction. In 1983, for the first time, West Siberia did not fulfill its production target, being 3 million tons short of the plan and 5 million tons below the plan in 1984.[29] The deteriorating national economy was losing its main source of revenue:

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27 | In the 1980s, twelve of the Arctic Ocean-bound rivers were proposed to be redirected to the south, in order to supply water to the southern part of West Siberia and to Kazakhstan. The project was closed due to environmental risks it was posing, which were actively discussed by Soviet writers in the mass media and in the published literature.

28 | Postanovlenie CK KPSS, Sovmina SSSR ot 07.01.1988, N32 "O Korennoy Perestroike Dela Okhrany Prirody v Strane" (Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Soviet of Ministers of the USSR from 17.01.1988, No. 32 "On the Fundamental Reorganization of Nature Protection in the Country"), paragraph 24. http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=ESU;n=770, Accessed: 06.09.2011.

29 | Matthew J. Sagers/Milford B. Green: "Transport Constraints in Soviet Petroleum", in: *Energy Policy* 13:4 (1985), 376.

But the government badly needed additional petrodollars in order to cover the budget deficit, worsened by the continuing war in Afghanistan. All existing economic plans, however, were based on the assumption that the oil production would steadily grow. From 1981 to 1986, the world oil prices decreased six-fold. This meant the collapse of the Soviet economy. The government was perfectly aware of the approaching decline, as is obvious from the minutes of a meeting at the prime-minister's office in 1989:

"Over the last 10-15 years we have increased capital investments fivefold, but there is still no growth in oil production. Since 1989 there has been a sharp decline. We import 15-18 percent of the equipment for the oil industry. In several years we will be at 30 percent. The structure of oil deposits is changing dramatically: the active deposits are becoming smaller, mining costs are rising. Export is declining. Next year we will be able to export only 60 million tons [...] and then we are going to bury everything [...] I see, if there's no oil there's no national economy."[30]

However, the public was not aware of such government discussions behind closed doors and was told the country needed more oil for its rapidly developing automotive and air transport.[31] At his meeting with the Tyumen's oilmen, Gorbachev said they needed to extend mining in order to support the economic growth of the Soviet Union on its way to communism: "The party has put forward serious goals of increasing economic growth. And I'll be direct: for reaching them, the country has to have enough oil and gas resources at its disposal. And this primarily depends on the work of

30 | Transcript of the meeting at the office of the USSR Chairman of the Council of Ministers comrade Ryzhkov N.I. "O postavke dlia gosudarstva nefti, gazovogo kondensata I nefteproduktov v 1990 godu" (On the state supplies of oil, gas condensate and oil products in 1990), 17.09.1989, State Archive of the Russian Federation, F. 5446, Op. 162, D. 379, L.143.

31 | Postanovlenie XXVI S'ezda Kommunisticheskoy Partii Sovetskogo Soyuza po Proyektu CK KPSS "Osnovniye Napravleniya Economicheskogo I Sotsialnogo Razvitiya SSSR na 1981-1985 gody i na Period do 1990 goda" (Decree of the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the Project of the Central Committee of the CPSU "The Main Directives for Economic and Social Development of the USSR for 1981-1985 as well as until 1990"), in: *Pravda*, 03.03.1981, 1.

the oil- and gasmen in Tyumen. Tyumen district is the main source of hydrocarbon resources, like no other."[32]

Due to additional capital investments and extensive extraction, West Siberia again managed to drag the country away from unavoidable collapse, and brought another five million tons beyond the plan.[33] Such headlines kept the public faith in the power of the state for a short time, during which it was de facto disintegrating and inefficient in its economic reforms. Despite the growing environmental consciousness of the 1980s, the oil discourse still lacked an ecological dimension. Not least because of the Chernobyl catastrophe of 1986, as a result of which petroleum was seen as a more secure source of energy than nuclear power.

The firm belief of the state in its capacity to constantly manipulate complex natural systems in combination with the rejection of environmental implications of such manipulations allow the classification of the official Soviet oil discourse until the late 1980s as a socialist edition of a 'Promethean' discourse. Notions of finiteness of natural resources as well as environmental limits were simply denied. For 'Prometheans', there are no natural resources, ecosystems and even no nature itself at the ontological level.[34] Likewise the Soviet oil industry treated nature as a brute matter and a store of energy. 'Prometheans' believe that nothing should constrain human activity. The concept of ecosystem does not play any role in their discourse. Accordingly, neither the term 'carrying capacity'[35] has any useful meaning to them. Interestingly enough, only rare (and relatively recent) Russian works on oil production use this term and use it in English, as there is no established Russian equivalent for it.[36] 'Prometheans' have

32 | Michail S. Gorbachev: *Izbrannie Rechi i Stat'i* (Selected speeches and articles). Moskva: Politizdat, 1985, 237.

33 | "Sverkhplanovaya neft" (Oil beyond Plan), in: *Trud*, 05.11.1987.

34 | Dryzek: *The Politics of the Earth*, 49.

35 | 'Carrying capacity' of environment or an ecosystem is the threshold limit of use of that system without damaging the system. Every ecosystem has its resources that are used for economic development, for survival and for habitat creation. Environment and ecosystems have got the abilities to recover the loss of these resources by regenerating them over a period of time. Environments, whose carrying capacity is exceeded, generate risks.

36 | Eduard Kulpin/Oleg Yanitsky: "Resursy i Perspectivy Socialno-Ecologicheskoy Modernizatsii: Problemi Sibiri i Dalnego Vostoka" (Resources and Perspec-

unlimited confidence in the ability of humans and their technologies to overcome any problems they would encounter. Similarly, Soviet and Russian leaders attributed the occasional resource shortages to technological imperfections, which could be easily corrected by scientists and engineers. Despite having reached the peak oil in the mid-1980s, the Soviet leadership still regarded oil depletion with skepticism: "'Limitation' of oil resources is a relative factor and can be overcome not only by prospecting activities, but also by technological improvements in oil extraction. Until recently, there was no particular urgency for elaborating such technology."[37] In fact, it was not the lack of urgency, but simply the inability to increase oil production by means of technological improvements: The technological base of the Soviet oil industry was poor and obsolete, lagging far behind international standards. Thus, production growth could only be extensive. Devastating environmental effects of the extensive oil extraction had not at all been a matter of concern.

While the Soviet leaders recognized that natural resources were finite, they did not share the pessimism of many of their Western counterparts. To many Westerners, the energy crisis in 1973 was only the first symptom of a general natural resource shortage which would eventually engulf the world.[38] While the USSR recognized the existence of short-term energy and raw material shortages, Moscow did not agree that they were caused by the depletion of natural resources. Instead, the shortages were attributed to the socioeconomic organization of Western capitalism. Many Soviet sources stressed that the Western fear of resource depletion was not based on fact. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, referring to hypothetical energy-resource depletion emphasized: "[M]ankind – and all the specialists seem to agree on this point – is not threatened by energy strangulation. Science

tives of the Socio-ecological Modernization: Problems of Siberia and the Far East), in: *Rossia Reformiruyushayasya* 7 (2008), 464.

37 | A. S. Astakhov/A. D. Khaitun/G. E. Subbotin: "Socio-economic Aspects of Oil and Gas Development in West Siberia", in: *Annual Review of Energy* 14 (1989), 124.

38 | Daniel S. Papp: "Marxism-Leninism and Natural Resources: The Soviet Outlook", in: *Resource Policy* 3:2 (1977), 138.

has by no means had its final say in the development of new sources of energy."[39]

Other Soviet sources cited statistics to show that there was no short-term danger of either energy or resource depletion. *Sotsialisticheskaia Industriia* informed its readers that, at the current rate of consumption, chemical fuels would last another 150 years and nuclear fuels substantially longer, and that much more productive energy sources would be mastered long before existing fuel resources are exhausted.[40]

But unlike the capitalist Prometheanism, the socialist paradigm of industrial cornucopia arising from the pages of *Pravda* and *Sotsialisticheskaia Industriia* promised that once the Soviet Union and its allies (generously fueled with West Siberian hydrocarbons) had won the socialist competition and defeated capitalism, communism would create a world of unlimited plenty for everyone. Surely, such promises were a necessary propaganda tool to justify the miserable working conditions and poor social infrastructure in the areas of petroleum production.

Oil-Related Modernization: Transforming Remote Villages into Industrial Centers and 'Savages' into Communists

West Siberia's industrial development had begun in the second half of the 20th century and its first stages had been connected mainly with geological prospecting of oil. The oil industry transformed the city of Tyumen from 'the capital of villages' into a West Siberian metropolis. Until the early 1990s, the petroleum industry was portrayed as a driving force behind economic development and social modernization in the region. Passages like the one below were in almost every newspaper article referring to West Siberia, emphasizing the beauty of the new industrial landscape and diverting the public eye from miserable living conditions in the emerging oil cities:

39 | Vystuplenie Gromyko na VI Spetsialnoy Sessii Generalnoy Assamblei OON (Gromyko's Speech at the VI Special Session of the UN General Assembly), in: *Pravda*, 12.04.1974, 4.

40 | *Sotsialisticheskaia Industriia*, 28.11.1974, 1.

"The music of oil fountains woke the Tyumen North up [...] The music of motors is accompanied by the never ceasing rumble of helicopters [...] Flying in the Siberian skies has now become merrier: instead of the dull green spots of swamps – clear lines of railways and roads, electric power lines, pipelines and concrete stripes [...] Towns, production fields and roads are born faster than maps are printed. Constantly developing new fields, the conquerors of the taiga are competing with the sun, reaching new deposits faster than the sun rays."[41]

Soviet propaganda praised the heroes taming the wild nature for the sake of producing more and more petroleum beyond plan to fuel the socialist construction. Monuments like the 1978 "Conquerors of Samotlor"[42] were erected. The giant male figure near the town of Nizhnevartovsk is still cordially referred to as "our Alesha" (gently called after the legendary folklore giant) and despite its explicit propagandist nature has turned into one of the main landmarks of today's Tyumen region.

Soviet media also eagerly glorified as progress that indigenous people of West Siberia had been integrated into the socialist system. "Under the influence of the Great October Socialist Revolution and with the help of the glorious Russian proletariat [...] the small peoples of the North, backward in their past, whose life was dominated by semi-savagery and even genuine savagery, now contribute significantly to the [...] construction of communism."[43] In the meantime, Khants, Mansi and Nenets – the West Siberian indigenous groups whose culture dates back to the *ust-poluyskaya* culture[44] – were becoming a minority on their lands and began losing

41 | Bogatko: "Sopernichaya s solntsem", 2.

42 | Samotlor is Russia's largest oil field, rating as the sixth in the world, discovered in 1965.

43 | Aleksey Novgorodov: "Istoricheskaia nauka v SSSR. Retsenzii. M. E. Budarin. Put' malykh narodov Krai'nego Severa k kommunizmu" (Historical Science in the USSR. Reviews. M.E. Budarin: The Road of the Small Peoples of the Far North to Communism), in: *Voprosy Istorii* 6 (June 1970), 134.

44 | *Ust-poluyskaya* is an archaeological culture of the Iron Age (6th century BC-2nd century AD) found on the territory of the today's Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (an entity in the Tyumen Oblast). For further details see Elena G. Fedorova: *Rybolovy i ochotniki bassejna Obi: problemy formirovaniya kul'tury khantov i mansi* (Fishermen and Hunters of the Ob Bassin: Problems of Formation of Khant and Mansi Culture). Sankt-Peterburg: Evropejskiy Dom, 2000, 6.

resources to pursue their traditional semi-nomadic family-life based on hunting. Although a number of valuable ethnographic and archeological studies about these peoples had been published in the post-war years[45], most of the mass media accounts on indigenous groups (including those published in the glasnost years) were highly conformist and praised the modernization evoked by the Soviet oil industry:

"Soviet people woke the tundra up, found oil and gas in its depths and [...] as V.I. Lenin mentioned, helped the small peoples of the North to pay the cultural debt of many centuries. From the Stone Age people here stepped into Socialism! Oh, healing pains of the world, Creator of the Earth – the Working Class!"[46]

Such lines, although written by a Mansi author, do not show any regrets about the loss of traditional livelihoods due to construction infrastructure for oil-extraction. The native tribes had no choice but to conform to the Soviet ideology and get involved in the propaganda of the system, which was actually destroying their traditional way of life.

Glorification of the heroic oilmen on the one hand and of the progress to socialism of the indigenous people on the other clearly showed that in the minds of the Soviet elites, oil production was not just a process of acquiring an energy source. Its intention was also to ideologically conquer such remote and underdeveloped territories and set them on a socialist path.

Klaus Gestwa, who recently published a study about large-scale Stalinist projects, put forward the idea that erecting gigantic industrial complexes particularly in the energy sector was a form of technological colonization.[47] This paradigm perfectly fits the development of the West Siberian oil industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Transformation of virgin landscapes into highly industrial regions was linked to the hope that the society and its individual members could be similarly transformed. What Gestwa says about the transformation of the river landscapes in the post-war years

45 | Valentina I. Moshinskaya: *Archeologicheskiye pamiatniki severa Zapadnoi Sibiri* (The Artifacts of the North of West Siberia). Moskva: SAI, 1965.

46 | Yuvan Shestalov: "S vysoty rodnogo ochaga" (From the Height of My Native Hearth), in: *Pravda*, 20.11.1985, 3.

47 | Klaus Gestwa: *Die Stalinschen Großbauten des Kommunismus. Sowjetische Technik- und Umweltgeschichte, 1948-1964.* München: Oldenbourg, 2010.

is a perfect illustration of the landscapes surrounding West Siberian oil fields: By producing energy, the gigantic constructions sites also produced illusions for the Soviet people. The large industrial construction projects also functioned as "stages of the Soviet modernity"[48] with the task of delighting the public. At the same time the 'construction giants' became sites of tragic confrontation and ecological disaster zones. But in the case of West Siberian oil industry the confrontation of interest groups and the recognition of the disastrous environmental impact arrived only after the demise of the system that had created this industry.

Ideologically, this technological colonization was largely based on the Marxist-Leninist tenet of continually expanding production which remained a major concern of the Soviet government. Accelerating economic growth was kept in high esteem in the socialist system, whereas Western scholars at that time began to advocate economic constancy and zero growth, in an effort to conserve scarce natural resources. The creation of the 'material and technical basis of communism' remained as important to Gorbachev in the late 1980s as it had been to Brezhnev, Khrushchev and even Vladimir Lenin in 1918. The concept of zero growth to conserve natural resources was decried by Soviet authorities. Without the growth of productive capabilities, they argued, attainment of communism would be impossible. Thus, keeping up growing oil production – at least on the pages of printed media – was an essential tool of legitimization. The denial of oil's finiteness was certainly connected to these ideas and allowed Soviet politicians to present the future in a more optimistic light and thus justify the aspired conquest.

Dispelling the Soviet Oil Myths

The Soviet oil-related progress rhetoric was nothing but a propaganda tool. Only as late as after glasnost reforms, the true recognition of the destructive effect of the oil industry on the local population entered public debate. This time, the first critique came not from academic circles, but from oil workers themselves. An electrician from Nizhnevartovsk sent a letter to the historical journal *Voprosy Istorii* where alongside with unpaid salary, food and electricity shortages, he lamented gasoline deficit: "Here, where we

48 | Gestwa: *Die Stalinschen Großbauten*, 46.

send hundreds of millions of tons of oil and gas to the entire country and abroad, there is not enough gas to fill up our cars!" Despite a commonly held assumption in many Western historical journals that oilmen had been the adversaries of indigenous people because of conflicts over land use and cultural rights, it was this electrician from a Nizhnevartovsk oil field who as one of the first posed a very daring question: "And who should be held responsible for the tragedy of Khanty, Mansi, Nenets and Selkupy? [...] Doctors are begging for help: Tuberculosis is taking over! [...] Contamination of the River Ob is 90 times higher than the permissible norms! [...] The Nizhnevartovsk district alone throws annually more than 300 thousand tons of petrochemicals in the river! Who is to be held responsible for that?!"[49]

A response from the academic world came in another analytical journal from Vladimir Sangi, a scholar of Nivkh origin. Sangi was among the first to pinpoint the value of the ethical principles, which regulated the relation of the indigenous peoples of the North to nature: "These principles appear to us as an [...] unreachable ideal from the future, [...] not the conquest and merciless exploitation, but the principle of consent and unity with nature."[50]

According to the customary law of the indigenous peoples of West Siberia, one is not allowed to take any unnecessary excesses from the earth, but rather only resources needed for oneself and one's children. Khanty, Mansi and Nenets barely store up. Two very contradicting models of resource use: The sustaining approach of the indigenous population and the Soviet exploitive approach have been the essence of the conflicting situation in the oil province. The Khanty and Mansi families are de jure entitled to compensation from the oil-extracting companies operating on their tribal lands. De facto, such compensations have only rarely been paid and often not to the full extent.[51] However, based on the oversimplified but widely spread confrontation line 'oilmen – indigenous peoples of the

49 | Nikolai Nosonovich: Nizhnevartovsk Tyumenskoi oblasti. Pisma v redaktsiyu (Readers' Letters), in: *Voprosy Istorii* 10 (1989), 178.

50 | Vladimir Sangi/Anna Dmitrieva: "Spasti narodnosti severa, sokhranit' ikh kul'turu" (Save the Ethnic Groups of the North and Preserve Their Culture), in: *Voprosy Literatury* 3 (1989), 5.

51 | N. I. Novikova: "'Rodovyie ugodia': Perspektivy Pravovogo Plzuralisma (Predstavlenia Predstavitelei Korennikh Narodov i Zakonodateley) ('Tribal

North' in the media, the non-indigenous inhabitants of West Siberia envy Khanty and Mansi for their alleged privileges: "There are people in our country, who manage to get rent from the deposits, which belong to the whole nation, but are situated on their land. [...] To be able to work on these territories, oil companies have to pay the masters of the taiga in cash and in kind: with flour, butter, vodka and kitchenettes."[52]

It was the researchers from the Institute of Geography of the USSR Academy of Sciences who among the first in the early 1990s spoke about a broader spectrum of problems, namely "the conflict between the natural environment, the oil industry and the population."[53] Such works were soon followed by articles further dispelling oil's progressive role.

An important element of the new oil discourse was the oil city with its poor social infrastructure. The city was never on top of the socialist agenda. Oil revenues were largely reinvested in increased production and the search for new fields as well as other heavy industries. Thus, West Siberian cities constructed for the oilmen, whose work was sustaining the whole country, looked like "skinny teenagers, whose heart is just not capable of pumping enough blood for all the organs of the weak body, bizarre cities – wherever one touches them, it hurts."[54] Poor living conditions caused by factors such as lack of running water, no central heating and unreachable health care were cloaked in the supposed romanticism and heroism of the socialist regime. It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that oil production began to be portrayed as evil for the social and communal sector.

Lands': Potential for Legal Pluralism [Perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples and Law-makers]), in: *Gosudarstvo i pravo* 6 (2000), 105.

52 | "Za neft' platiat mukoi'" (Paid with Flour for Oil), in: *Argumenty i fakty*, 02.10.2002.

53 | Among several works in Russian some were published in English and even abroad, as for example: Gregory Vilchek/Olga Bykova: "The Origin of Regional Ecological Problems within the Northern Tyumen Oblast, Russia", in: *Arctic and Alpine Research* 24:2 (1992), 99-107.

54 | A. I. Prishepa: "Gradostroenie v Surgute vo vtoroy polovine XX veka" (City-Planning in Surgut in the Second Half of the 20th Century), in: *Otechestvennaya Istoria* 2 (2007), 96.

In the mid-1990s, printed media and scientific literature opened a large-scale debate on the issue of associated gas flaring.[55] Until now, this has been a major oil-related environmental problem in Russia as the Khanty Mansi Autonomous District (KMAO) is the world's leader in the amount of the associated gas explosions. This makes this West Siberian district the brightest spot on the world's map. Officially 20 billion cubic meter of associated gas is burned here every year, but Russian environmentalists estimate it being closer to 50 billion. Following this discursive theme and the 1994 oil spill in the city of Usinsk[56], both media and scholarship pinpointed the lack of environmental awareness, typical for the oil sector ever since its foundation. This time, the discourse gained some apocalyptic rhetoric, which is well illustrated by a quote from a book published in 1995. Commemorating fathers of the West Siberian oil industry, it states: "We now again realize our connection to and dependence on nature and understand that a human being cannot survive without the biosphere."[57] As the prominent Russian mathematician and ecologist Nikolai Moiseyev once said: "The Cro-Magnon man managed to survive the ice age. But I am afraid, our civilization will not even be able to survive the real oil crisis that we are approaching."[58] Similar utterances were also to be found in the printed media, for instance, in the weekly *Argumenty i Facty*, which published an account of an enormous increase

55 | Associated gas is natural gas found dissolved in oil at the high pressures existing in a reservoir, and it can be present as a gas cap above the oil. Traditionally, this type of gas is released as a waste product of the oil extraction industry and burnt off in flares. Associated gas flaring produces ca. 1% of total global emissions of greenhouse carbon dioxide. The annual global volume of natural gas currently flaring is equivalent to 30% of natural gas consumption by the EU, 25% of U.S. consumption or 75% of Russian natural gas exports and results in the emission of 400 million tons of carbon dioxide. See À. Knizhnikov/N. Poussenkova: "Russian Associated Gas Utilization: Problems and Prospect", WWF-Russia, Institute of World Economy and International Relations of RAN, Moscow, 2009, http://www.wwf.ru/data/pub/oil/poputnygaz_eng.pdf, Accessed: 23.09.2011.

56 | Usinsk's on the ground spill of around 100,000 tons of oil is the largest in history, and although the town is not situated in the West Siberian oil province, its notorious oil spill shook the entire discourse on fossil fuels and environment.

57 | Krol: *Neftianaya epopeya*, 327.

58 | Nikolai Moiseev qtd. in Krol: *Neftianaya epopeya*, 329.

in oncological diseases (over 90 percent), especially in lung cancer, in the Tyumen Oblast in the post-Soviet years. The article blames the authorities for allowing associated gas flaring and paying for the "black gold" with human lives.[59]

2000s: Primacy of Economics and Neglected Ecological Disasters

Considering the increased environmental awareness of the early post-Soviet discourse, it is strange that one notorious case of environmental damage caused by oil extraction still has not gained domestic publicity. In June 2000, the World Bank declared the West Siberian Samotlor oil field "an ecological disaster zone."[60] This caused a lively debate on the environmental deterioration of Russia's 'Wild East' in the Western media and to some extent in Russian scholarship.[61] However, the discursive shift towards the oil-related environmental damage barely took place in the Russian media. Right up to the present day, the oil discourse has been dominated by economic matters rather than environmental ones. Thus, within Russia the tragedy of Samotlor is regarded either as an outcome of the absent economic rationale[62] or as a failure of the system to resist the interests of the Soviet elites. Most analysts simply regret that the oil deposit was ruined as several million tons of oil was not extracted due to

59 | Yuriy Zviagintsev: "Chernoye zoloto tsenoy zdorovia" (Paying with Health for the Black Gold), in: *Argumenty i Facty*, 15.08.1996, 3.

60 | Qtd. in West Siberia Oil Industry: "Environmental and Social Profile", Final Report by IWACO BV Consultants for Water and Environment, June 2001, 63. http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/nederland-old/reports/west-siberia-oil-industry-envi.pdf, Accessed: 11.04.2010.

61 | See e.g. Oliver Morgan: "Black Cloud over BP Oil Deal," in: *The Observer,* 19.10.2003, http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2003/oct/19/oilandpetrol.russia, Accessed: 22.06.2011 and Stanislav Meshcheryakov: "Environmental Problems in the Fuel-Energetics Complex of Russia," in: *Chemistry and Technology of Fuels and Oils* 36:2 (2000), 78.

62 | Viktor S. Smirnov: "Diskussii i Obsuzhdenia. Economicheskie Prichiny Krakha Sotsialisma v SSSR" (Discussions and Debates. Economic Reasons for the Collapse of Socialism in the USSR), in: *Rossiiskaia Istoriia* 6 (2002), 106.

technological mistakes of the 1970s and 1980s. Until today, none of the investigated media sources have reported about the natural catastrophe caused by irrational exploitation. Not a single Russian source mentions the 6,500 hectares of heavily polluted soil or the people exposed to major health risks through contaminated drinking water and air. Only Western statistics document that in the last 5 years, 97 percent of the drinking water from the Vakh River has been contaminated with oil.[63]

Obviously the current discourse is focused on the destructive effect of the oil dependence on the national economy. Although by the late 1990s, Russian oil mining companies completed structural reforms and increased efficiency, the state underwent another type of restructuring. It became more dependent on oil prices than ever before. Since 1997 there has been a clear correlation between oil prices and Russia's economic growth.[64] This is especially dangerous because petroleum is a commodity whose position on the market is subject to steep fluctuation cycles. Such strong dependence of the national economy on oil revenues and the resulting underdevelopment of its other branches are symptoms of the so-called Dutch disease.[65] The Russian oil curse, namely the ease and speed with which oil revenues are received, makes the country unable to use such wealth to boost its economy. Together with the high rate of oil-related crime

63 | West Siberia Oil Industry: "Environmental and Social Profile".

64 | Fiona Hill: *Energy Empire. Oil, Gas and Russia's Revival.* London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004, 33.

65 | 'Dutch disease', also called the 'resource curse' or the 'curse of oil', is the damaging effect on an economy as a result of the exploitation and export of natural resources. Rapidly acquired resource wealth tends to give rise to a fight over existing resources, which in turn leads to poor institutional quality and lower growth. The argument here is that the large rents that can be obtained from natural resources create incentives for governments and private agents to engage in rent-seeking behavior, voracity and corruption, thus hindering entrepreneurial activity and other pro-growth activities. Recommended further reading: Nienke Oomes/Katerina Kalcheva: "Diagnosing Dutch Disease: Does Russia Have the Symptoms?", International Monetary Fund, WP/07/102 (2007), http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2007/wp07102.pdf, Accessed: 08.09. 2011.

and the approaching "end of oil history"[66], this pathological dependence poses a threat to Russia's national economic security. Moreover, one of the complications of the Russian mutation of the Dutch disease has been a slowdown of institutional reforms.[67] This has to do with the low demand for reforms on behalf of big business (mostly oil businesses) and insufficient reform offers from the state, since both parties are interested in maintaining the status quo, e.g. easy revenues from fossil fuels. In this respect, Russia resembles many emerging economies cursed by their wealth in natural resources. Governments that are not dependent on the wealth of the citizens just do not need to care about their own people and hope for the never-ending plenty of precious hydrocarbons.

The discovery of Siberian oil riches at the moment of dramatic economic decline of Brezhnev's stagnation era has set the trend of keeping the national economy afloat with the help of oil-export revenues. This habit had its ideological grounds in the Marxist-Leninist concept of natural resources, which challenges the very existence and gravity of environmental issues. Despite the fact that the 'green wave' of the 1980s put environmental protection institutions in place, there has not been an environmental breakthrough in the oil debate.

West Siberian oil has been used to create an illusion of saving the country from an unavoidable collapse in the last decades of the Soviet rule. The illusion of oil plenty, deeply ingrained into people's minds through Soviet propaganda, lives on. Today, the exploitation of oil fields has become even more predatory than in the Soviet period and sustaining national economy by pumping more and more natural resources turned into an addiction. The traditional strategy of plundering West Siberia put the whole country on the 'oil needle'.

Although the discourse on oil-related environmental problems in Russia has grown over the past two decades, it has had little effect on the political action undertaken to make the industry cleaner and to effectively look for alternative energy sources. Despite the fact that science recognizes the environmental limits of oil extraction, politics, businesses and society

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66 | Yuriy Latov: "Vliyanie neftegazovogo komplexa na national'nuyu economicheskuyu bezopasnost' Rossii" (Influence of Oil and Gas of Russia's National Economic Security), in: *Terra Economicus* 7:1 (2009), 101.

67 | Sergey Guriyev/Konstantin Sonin: "Economica 'resursnogo proklyatia'" (Economics of 'The Resource Curse'), in: *Voprosy economiki* 4 (2008), 65.

do not wish to respect these limits. However, a functioning system of environmental protection potentially can pose hurdles to the traditionally extensive mining. The recognition by the government of the vital importance of the oil wealth for the national economy has had two dramatic results: de-ecologization of the state energy policy and of the energy mentality of the Russian people. And if the society remains indifferent to environmentally conscious energy policy, what are the chances that the state will become greener? As long as there are no structural improvements in the economy and no progress in the development of civil society in Russia, there will be no transition from a resource exploitive to a sustainable society.

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