

The book is handsomely published with a number of illustrations drawn from a variety of sources; the maps unfortunately are poorly reproduced. The translation itself is carefully done and reads well, with editorial explanation kept short and to the point. The editors have appended a useful but by no means complete bibliography. Any personal or public collection with more than a passing interest in Russian America should have this book.

ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN THE USSR

[Review by Terence Armstrong* of Boris Komarov's *The destruction of nature in the Soviet Union*. London, Pluto Press, [1980], 150 p. £2.95.]

This is a translation of a book first published in Frankfurt by Possev-Verlag in 1978 under the title *Obostreniye ekologicheskogo krizisa v SSSR*. The manuscript was smuggled out of the USSR, and the author, whose real name is not Komarov, gives evidence in his writing of being in close touch with officialdom in ecological matters—perhaps he is a civil servant. His indictment of Soviet policies, or lack of policies, is indeed severe. He makes clear however—and the reader very quickly realizes this—that he will ‘discuss only one side of the matter, the ravaging of nature’ (p 19), since the other, good side is to be found in the official publications; but most western readers do not peruse Soviet official publications, and so will lack balance and may tend to mistrust the virtually unrelieved blackness of the picture. This would be a pity, for although in my opinion, Komarov does exaggerate, there is likely to be more than a grain of truth in his allegations.

The book is short, and mostly concerned with the nation-wide situation—air and water pollution, land erosion, legal controls, threatened species, and so forth—but it is chapter 9, ‘A country in reserve’, that will most interest students of the north. Komarov argues that whereas Ward and Dubos in *Only one earth* said that we cannot conduct experiments to determine maximum permissible pollution levels because we do not have a planet in reserve, the USSR does have a country in reserve in the shape of the relatively untouched northlands. He then describes the ‘ravaging’ that has gone on there, coming to the conclusion that the need now is to prevent this ‘second USSR’ from destruction even before the first one. He writes of ice fog, forest fires, sewage and oil in rivers, and erosion by vehicle tracks, and he touches on the sad state of the native peoples. The difficulty of checking his statements is severe here, for so few non-Soviet citizens visit the region. All I can say is that three short visits to Yakutskaya ASSR between 1965 and 1973 did not leave me with the same impression as Komarov wishes to give his readers. Of course I saw only a fraction of that vast territory, and it was no doubt a carefully selected fraction; but I travelled, mostly by air but partly on the surface, for some 6 000 km within the republic, and what I saw of forest fire action, ice fog, sewage disposal and mining debris, while significant, was neither outrageous nor worse than what is visible in the American northlands. On the native peoples question there is some confirmation that the natives of the Soviet north are not exempt from the problems that beset other northern minorities, and that ‘Russians go home’ is not an unknown slogan. But Komarov argues that the Soviet northern peoples are degenerating, and then weakens this by saying that this has always been true to some extent, and there was no such thing as a golden age in the past; an attitude that smacks a little of the metropolitan bureaucrat who sees only administrative inconvenience in native affairs.

The somewhat negative character of this review must not be taken as indicating that the book is anything but a useful and indeed illuminating source on a subject about which westerners know very little. It is just that balance is lacking for the western reader. Accounts like this are extremely valuable, but their emphasis is the natural result of a long period of censorship: the pendulum swings to the other side. The situation (in the Soviet north) is certainly not the ecological paradise that some apologists may try to maintain; but it is probably not a disaster either.

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