Keeping the Eye of Siberia Luminous: Environmentalism on Lake Baikal in a Transitioning Society (1930-2013)

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Keeping the Eye of Siberia Luminous:
Environmentalism on Lake Baikal in a Transitioning Society (1930-2013)

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Russian Department Honors
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Lake Baikal has been a source of life with deep spiritual meaning for the peoples of the region. However with the development of human communities around Baikal, the resources of the lake face danger of over-use. In the twentieth century when industrialization posed particular risks to the lake, citizens of the Baikal region rallied to protect their homeland. In so doing, these environmentalists had to work within the political system of the time. This research examines the ways in which environmentalists on Baikal carved out spaces for activism in the face of political turmoil and economic pressures. Tracing the evolution of environmentalism from the 1930s through the present day, this paper focuses on the transition from communism to capitalism from the 1980s to the 1990s. The author argues that this period of transition has created a space for environmentalist movements around Baikal within an international community; at the same time, these movements face real challenges due to a lack of domestic funding and regulation of environmental policies. The contextualization within the politics, economy, and culture of the times discussed in this work reveals the potential opportunities and challenges for civic activists today in Russia and around the world.
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Preface: Transliteration, Translation, and Citations

In my research, I used both English and Russian language texts. In the case of literature by Valentin Rasputin, I read the texts in Russian, but used existing translations for direct quotations in this paper. The translation used is reflected in the citation. For all other Russian language texts, the translations are my own. Furthermore, I cite scholarship that has not yet been translated into English. In these cases, the research provides Anglophone readers with a sample of the information presented in these resources.

However, there are some words and concepts that cannot be translated. In these cases, I have transliterated the word using the Library of Congress system. For example, заповедник, a Russian nature reserve, is transliterated as zapovednik. Names and places will also be transliterated in accordance with the Library of Congress transliteration table. An exception to my use of this system is when referring to words or names that are commonly spelled in a different way. For example, Бурятия is transliterated here as Buryatia instead of Buriatia.

As a final note, works are cited in the language in which they are written. For example, if a citation is in Russian this means that the text I am referencing is also written in Russian.
Introduction

Every year hundreds of thousands of travelers make the pilgrimage to the breathtaking shores of Baikal. From the legendary birthplace of Genghis Khan’s mother to the fish market of Lestvianka, it is no wonder Lake Baikal has earned the title of the Pearl of Siberia. Unfortunately, the awe-inspiring beauty of Baikal’s vistas may not last forever. Scientists are studying the effects on the environment from climate change and are discussing ways in which environmental degradation in the region will influence the thousands of local plant and animal species. These changes are in fact grave, and even if it were only the non-human species that experienced the impacts of climate change, it would be important to invest in research and protection of local ecosystems. However, we too are part of nature’s complex web and rely on the natural world for survival, and consequently are subject to the results of environmental degradation.

Human beings must balance the utilization and protection of natural resources in order to ensure that future generations continue to have the basics we need to survive, i.e., potable water, air, shelter, and food. The wealth of natural resources of Lake Baikal supplies those necessities to the peoples of the region as well as to the millions of species that depend on the lake for survival. The beauty and resources of Baikal have inspired activists, scientists, and writers to speak out in protection of the lake.
Commonly, we refer to these efforts to protect the natural resources of a region as environmentalism. In the United States movements of environmentalism have increased in the past forty years along with other social movements as the dangers of pollution have become evident. Likewise, on Baikal environmentalism has received attention in light of the worldwide debates on global climate change. However, environmentalism, even without that official title, has existed for much longer than we have known about the biological and chemical effects of carbon dioxide.

On Baikal trends in environmentalism have evolved with the culture, politics, economics, and external pressures of the time. The shifts in environmentalism are particularly evident during periods of political transition. The changes in the political and cultural climate place new limitations on movements working to protect the natural resources of the lake. On the other hand, political changes can also provide more opportunities for environmental activism and may even lead to improved environmental policies (as was the case with Gorbachev’s reforms). During political turmoil new circumstances appear to inspire environmentalist action on Baikal. For example, the rapid industrialization during the 1930s and the repressive leadership of Joseph Stalin were detrimental to the environment because of the construction of hydroelectric dams on Baikal’s rivers. At the same time, the strictness of Stalin’s rule limited critique against the powers that be in order to defend the environment. In contrast, the Khrushchev period in the 1960s saw an increase in free speech, which fostered public
action and outspokenness on the importance of the protection of Baikal. With the changing politics of the twentieth century, writers, natural scientists, politicians, and everyday citizens in the Baikal region have carved out spaces for environmentalism based on the circumstances in the country.

In the past century Russia has seen drastic transformations in governance, finances, and individual freedoms, the most recent change being the transition to capitalism and democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Environmentalism around Baikal during this most recent transitory period has greatly informed today’s policies and movements to protect Lake Baikal. At the same time, the course of environmentalism in the 1980s and 1990s did not stand alone and took on the characteristics and influences of preceding periods. Modern environmentalism has characteristics that demonstrate the influence of environmental politics and movements of the twentieth century. For this reason, in order to assess environmentalism on Baikal during the period of transition from communism to capitalism and in the twenty-first century it is important to understand the previous stages of movements to protect the lake.

Using the history of social movements as a lens for analysis, this paper traces the development of environmental movements on Baikal from the 1930s through 2013. Particularly, this work focuses on the ways in which environmentalists around Siberia’s Sacred Sea (Baikal) have found spaces for activism over the past century and the
influences of one period of environmentalism on the next. We will look at questions related to environmentalism in transition: What economic factors inhibited environmental protection? How did politics influence legislation to protect Baikal? Who participated in environmental protection? What long-standing cultural factors impact the progress of nature protection movements? What incentives existed to protect natural resources?

In answering these questions I draw from the work of scholars in multiple fields: biology, history, sociology, environmental studies, among others. In my research presented here, I use these diverse sources to provide a history of environmentalism on Baikal by bridging the gaps in the existing literature. Overall, there is substantial scholarship on the biological changes of the lake, the history of social and environmentalist movements in the former Soviet Union, and the societal changes that came with the collapse of the USSR. There are also scattered government and non-governmental reports from the Baikal region and a substantive body of literary texts by Baikalian native Valentin Rasputin. This scholarship and literature pertaining specifically to Baikal is invaluable in assessing the environmental movements in the region. However, there is not yet a comprehensive study focusing on environmentalist movements in the Baikal region in the twentieth century. The historical, scientific, sociological, and literary texts converge in this paper to fill that gap in the research on Baikal.
Much of the existing literature pertinent to this topic deals with scientific studies of the effects of climate change on the chemical makeup of the water, air temperature, and other physical attributes of Baikal’s ecosystems. These studies include analyses of the impacts of pollution from industrial activity in the region as well as the implications to public health from the degradation of Baikal’s natural resources. The scientific community in the Baikal region has both published work in the Russian language and also collaborated with scientists from the United States to produce English-language reports. These works provide substantial evidence that there have been negative consequences of pollution in the region both for non-human life on the lake and for human health. In Chapter One of this paper, I use the studies of these scientists to outline the reasons that protection of the lake is important.

There is also a wealth of scholarship on the history of environmentalism in Russia and the former Soviet Union; however, no text exists that outlines the history of environmentalism particular to the Baikal region, aside from a section of a larger work or a reference as a case study. One of the primary environmental historians specializing in Russia and the former Soviet Union is Douglas Weiner. Of particular interest to environmentalism during the twentieth century is Weiner’s *A Little Corner of Freedom*. In this book Weiner outlines the history of environmentalist movements in the Soviet Union from Stalin through Gorbachev. This book includes a chapter on Baikal, which offers useful case studies and analysis upon which I expand using other texts and
resources. Although Weiner and other environmental historians do not extensively discuss issues pertaining to the Lake Baikal region, they do offer the necessary framework to contextualize movements on Baikal.

To further contextualize civic environmental activism on Baikal, I draw from the work of Russian sociologists. This includes the work of Oleg Yanitsky and V. A. Artemov. Again, their research does not address Baikal in great depth (if at all); however, both provide overviews of broader socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors that influenced the movements to protect the lake. For example, Yanitsky analyzes major shifts in environmental debates in Russia. Using this framework, I fit activism on Baikal into national trends. On the other hand, Artemov does not address environmentalism at all but rather the changes in lifestyle that the people of Siberia experienced in the 1990s after the collapse of the USSR. Using his work in conjunction with the scholarship of environmental historians, we can assess the ways in which the changes to people’s everyday lives following the fall of the Soviet Union affected Baikal locals’ participation in efforts to protect the lake.

With the contextualization supported by these aforementioned works, I narrow the focus to the Baikal region with resources that address this region specifically. Distinct from the scientific studies of climate change on the lake that principally focus on the physical repercussions of pollution for the lake, these works deal with the interactions of human communities with their surrounding environment. Because of the
scarcity of resources that speak to issues and circumstances particular to the Baikal region, the texts that I include in this paper represent a variety of fields. For example, the main texts that I utilize include reports on development in the region, literary fiction by a Baikalian native, and a survey that I conducted while abroad in Irkutsk, Russia (a provincial capital on Baikal). First, in the 1990s consultants and local scientists on Baikal collaborated to produce *The Lake Baikal Region in the Twenty-First Century: A Model of Sustainable Development or Continued Degradation?* (1993). This bilingual (English and Russian) report examines the conditions of the Baikal watershed at a key moment in history, the early 1990s immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and makes recommendations for the policies and citizen actions that will facilitate sustainable development on the lake. Second, Chapter Three analyzes the work and life of Valentin Rasputin, a Baikalian native who writes both fiction and nonfiction about the lake and the detrimental effects that industrialization had on local communities. Third, in the final chapter I incorporate questions from a survey that I performed in Irkutsk on local perceptions of the relationship between environmental degradation and public health in the region.

While the results of my survey, the literature of Rasputin, and the report of sustainable development in the region are not exhaustive, they offer a glimpse of the experience of the citizens of the region and their fight to protect Baikal. Although these works represent distinct methodologies, their focus on Baikal allows us to place the
social movements of the region within the context of broader trends for environmentalists, the economy, and politics that the environmental historians, sociologists, and other scholars provided. Without incorporating a plethora of methodologies, i.e., by using only texts documenting case studies of environmental movements on Baikal, we would not be able to do a thorough analysis because of the dearth of resources that focus on the Baikal region. By integrating these diverse methodologies, my research can work to fill a gap in the scholarship regarding Baikal and the history of environmentalist movements to protect the lake.

Based on my analysis of the resources outlined above, I contextualize the situation of environmentalism around Baikal using information on the political, social, and economic changes of the period. Particularly, this paper focuses on the development of environmentalism during Stalin’s time in power, the Khrushchev Thaw, and finally the years of glasnost’ and perestroika under Gorbachev and the influences these periods have had on the development of modern environmentalism from the 1990s until through day. Ultimately, I argue that Stalin’s repressive rule left a legacy of exploitation of Baikal’s resources in the name of industrialization and economic development that pervades the government’s perspective on Baikal to this day. Following Stalin’s death, the years of greater freedom of expression in the country with the Khrushchev Thaw saw public outrage at degradation of the lake, which conflicted with the standards for industrialization set by Stalin. Finally, the transition leading up to and following the
collapse of the USSR created a space for environmentalism around Baikal within an international community, yet with real challenges due to a lack of domestic funding and regulation of environmental policies.
Chapter One: An Overview of Baikal

A) Early Settlement of Baikal

Throughout history the climate of a region has influenced the development of the local peoples and cultures. The Baikal region is no exception. In fact, because of the harsh winter conditions, the ancient peoples of Baikal needed particular skills and knowledge to find food and build homes. Central asian tribes, who were the first settlers of Baikal, lived in underground dug-out shelters to avoid the harsh winter winds and blizzards. As they discovered ways to live in harmony with the environment and its extremities, shamanists of the region developed a spiritual connection to Baikal. The tourist industry today uses artifacts of Baikal’s Shamanist traditions and their spiritual connection to the lake to pique visitors’ interest. For example, at overlooks tour guides encourage tourists to tie strips of fabric to trees. This practice imitates the Siberian shamanist barisaa, peace tree practice, that was part of their traditional belief system. Aside from these tourist attractions, the residents of Baikal maintain cultural identities connected with the original peoples of the lake. A good example is the Buryati people who are descendants of the Mongolian settlers. In the Republic of Buryatia, they continue to pass down tales on
Baikal and its environment in Russian and in the native Buryati nation. In this way, the heritage of the peoples of Baikal, which is closely tied to its environment, can influence their modern relationship to the lake. Briefly overviewing the development of the relationship between man and nature starting from the lake’s earliest inhabitants establishes the roots of modern perceptions of the environment.

From prehistoric times the extreme climate has greatly shaped the lifestyle of the peoples of the region and has arguably fostered a bond with the non-human environment that a more mild climate perhaps could not. The potable water, fish, berries, and other resources around Baikal allowed for inhabitants to survive on Baikal for 30,000 years.\(^1\) During the Ice Ages nomadic peoples hunted reindeer and mammoth despite the severe weather conditions.\(^2\) Since then, peoples of Northern Russia and Central Asia settled the area. Starting in the sixth century “the lower reaches of the Selenga River, Tunkinski valley region and the valleys of the Barguzin, Angara and Lena Rivers were inhabited by representatives of the Turkic tribe called Kurikans.”\(^3\) In the thirteenth century peoples from Mongolia settled in the western and eastern regions of Baikal. The descendants of those peoples are the modern day Buryati nation. The basis of the early people’s economies consisted of fishing, hunting, and gathering around Baikal and later they also bred cattle and did

\(^3\) “First Settlers of Baikal,” 2
blacksmith work. As in many primitive agricultural and hunting and gathering societies the peoples of Baikal had only the local resources to rely on for survival.

Because of their complete dependence on the raw materials from the lake, its tributaries, and the surrounding forests there existed a special balance between the earliest inhabitants of Baikal and nature. For the earliest settlers, maintaining a respectful and conscious relationship with Baikal was not only connected with the populations’ physical survival, but also with their spiritual life. Various taboos, prohibitions, morals and ethical norms, dating back to pagan beliefs, served as regulators between man and nature. For example, Shamanists believed that it is wrong to cut down a tree by a spring, trample plants, or kill more animals than necessary for survival. In the thirteenth century the great leader Genghis Khan banned the use of the resources of Baikal for economic purposes. He proclaimed the territory surrounding the Maloe More (Small Sea), a part of Baikal between the island Olkhon and the northwestern shore, as “The Great Forbiddance Zone.” This declaration prohibited any development in the area, including agricultural. Of course modern environmentalists would not count Genghis Khan’s proclamation as an early sign of their movement; however, it does contrast with today’s laws

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7 Brunello, Anthony, Lake Baikal: Experience and Lessons Learned, 3.
8 Ibid., 4.
governing environmental use. This decree also implies that in the time of Genghis Khan’s rule Baikal was valued independently from the its resources to be exploited for physical sustenance.

Since the time of Genghis Khan’s reign the ideology towards nature has changed along with the demographics, lifestyle, and economics of Baikal. In the seventeenth century, many Northern Russian peasants immigrated to the region. At first they settled alongside, but separately from the local tribes, which were also not yet united. For the most part, scholars associate Russian migration to the region with exploration of the Taiga, the deciduous forest that spreads across Eastern Siberia. The Russian settlers adopted an “integrated economy based on a combination of crop-growing and stock-breeding alongside hunting, fishing, carrier's trade and nut-gathering.” The extreme winter temperatures and weather contributed to the generally “unique condition of life... [which] left its imprint on [the inhabitants’] characters and mentality” and resulted in “certain features: steadfastness, reliability,” that have been associated with “the notion of ‘sibiriak’ (a Siberian),” again emphasizing the locals’ sense of identity related to the surrounding natural environment. The increased development and subsequent industrialization of Eastern Siberia led to a change in some of the local peoples’ perceptions of the relationship between man and nature. I. I. Dumova, a scholar

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10 Ibid., 3.
studying Baikal, has labeled these changes as the shift to “the conquest of nature” ideology.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, since the days of the early settlers, human interaction with Baikal and the surrounding forests and rivers has evolved with industrialization, population growth, immigration, and the overall development of the region. With the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad starting in the nineteenth century and the industrialization that came with Stalin’s Five-Year plans in the early twentieth century, trades such as forestry increased dramatically. Lumber and coal industries used trains to ship raw materials all over the USSR, with little regard for the depletion of habitats.\textsuperscript{12} The uses of the natural resources of Baikal in modern times demonstrate both the “conquest of nature” philosophy as well as an awe for the beauty of Lake Baikal. Deforestation of the Taiga for the lumber industry continues to exemplify the former approach to Baikal’s resources. In contrast, the tourist industry depends on the preservation of the environment of Baikal in order to attract visitors from around the globe who want to experience the pristine beauty of the lake. Both the history of the use of Baikal and the modern utilization of its resources influence modern peoples’ perceptions of climate change and pollution of the environment.

\textsuperscript{11} Думова, И. И., Механизмы Управления Региональным Природопользованием, 24.  
\textsuperscript{12} “First Settlers of Baikal,” 7.
B) Modern Baikal: Today’s Uses of the Resources of the Baikal Region

Today in the Baikal region we see the conquest of nature ideology in the industrial activity around the lake. The most developed industries in the region are timber and wood-processing, pulp and paper, mining, fuel, non-ferrous metallurgy, power engineering, machine-building, chemical and oil, food and ferrous metallurgy.¹³

The Irkutsk Oblast, a province on Baikal, boasts 15% of timber export, 6% of coal mining, nearly 20% of pulp production, and about 9% of oil processing in Russia.¹³

Tourism is also a prominent source of income in cities and towns on Lake Baikal, such as the town of Listvianka and Olkhon Island. That fact that hundreds of thousands of domestic tourists come to the shores of Baikal to relax and enjoy the scenic views reflects the reverence for the beauty of Baikal that the first inhabitants harbored. As is common with tourist sites, towns on Baikal use the cultures and eccentricities of the first residents of the region to draw in domestic and international visitors. For example, one can find tributes to the ancient shamanist belief systems with strips of fabric tied onto trees at popular vistas around the lake.

These industries influence environmentalism. Tourism incentivizes preservation of the natural beauty of the region. In order to ensure the purity of the sites, the tourist industry works to protect the environment. In fact, concentrations in ecotourism are growing in popularity as undergraduate and graduate programs expand at Irkutsk State

On the other hand, the lumber industry causes considerable deforestation in the area. Similarly, the Trans-Siberian railroad that transports raw materials, including lumber, throughout Russia alters the shape of the cliffs as workers have to drill into and explode the sides of rock walls to create tunnels for the trains.

C) Environmental Degradation on Lake Baikal

In the 1990s concern for the health of Baikal and the surrounding territories led to studies of the effects of human exploitation of the lake. Research by ecologists, climatologists, biologists, scholars in the health science fields, and others have emerged that address the environmental degradation that has occurred in the region. While these studies do not constitute environmentalist activity independently, their findings serve as rallying points for organizations looking to protect the environment. Put simply, without evidence of environmental degradation there is no purpose for environmental organizations. With that in mind, understanding the effects of pollution and the changes to the natural world is paramount for analyzing environmentalism in the oblasts (roughly equivalent to a province or state) surrounding Baikal.

A cooperative study done between biologists from the United States and Irkutsk State University, titled "Climate Change and the World's "Sacred Sea”—Lake Baikal, Siberia,” provides a comprehensive report on the biological changes to the lake. Baikal

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lies adjacent to the Central Siberian Plateau, “one of three areas in the world experiencing the most rapid climate change.”¹⁵ As reported in the article, scientists have already found evidence of climate change in the region including a 1.2 degree Celsius increase in average yearly air temperature and a 2 degree Celsius increase during the winter season.¹⁶ Additionally, scientists have reported an increase in chemicals in the lake.¹⁷ Looking at the biological and chemical changes scientists have noticed over the years, environmental scholars have made projections on the continued changes to the regional climate.¹⁸ Of course, no one can know for certain what further changes to the environment, if any, will come in the future. Simply, evidence of the changes that have already occurred supports predictions that current environmental degradation could lead to significant impacts on the everyday lives of peoples who work and live in the Baikal region. For example, studies have shown connections between environmental degradation and public health, which could serve as incentives to become involved with environmental movements.

¹⁶ Ibid.  
¹⁷ Ibid. 3.  
¹⁸ Ibid.
D) Factors Affecting Public Health

Studies of the Baikal region have found that there are serious links between “the worsening condition of the environment and the health of the population of the region.”¹⁹ There are various threats to human health from decreased air quality, water pollution, and other consequences of industrial activity, e.g., chemical spills. Respiratory conditions, such as asthma, caused by poor air quality can influence one’s opportunities for work, especially if available jobs involve physical labor. If enough people are affected, either from their own illness or from the suffering of a loved one, then the health of the entire society will decrease. A threat to health on a societal level could motivate politicians to enact policies to protect the environment and public health. For example, following the catastrophic Chernobyl explosion, Gorbachev prioritized the regulation of nuclear activity. Health interests also have the potential to drive movements to protect the pristine quality of the natural resources of Baikal.

As previously mentioned, Baikal has some of the most rapid climate change globally.²⁰ This is reflected in the ranks of Siberian cities with the highest risk to physical health due to environmental degradation. I. I. Dumova divides Siberian cities into four levels of risk groups based on the amount of pollution and the prevalence of conditions associated with this pollution: (1) extremely high ecological danger, (2) high ecological danger (3) moderate ecological danger, and (4) undetectable ecological danger.

¹⁹ Тюмасева, З.И., Маркова А.С., Машкова И.В. “Здоровье человека и окружающей среды—в аспекте общего эколого–вальеологического образования студентов педагогических вузов,” 38.
danger. Two cities on Baikal, Angarsk and Bratsk, fall into the first group: extremely high ecological danger. The second group of cities, those with high ecological danger to health, includes the most well known and largest Baikalian city, Irkutsk, as well as Chita, a medium sized town. Finally, in the moderate risk group is Baikalsk, the factory town that gained fame due to the closing and reopening of its out-dated paper mill.\textsuperscript{21}

Notably, the cities with the greatest tendency for illness are industrial towns such as Irkutsk. Supporting this, a study in Buryatia found that the worst health conditions tend to occur in towns with the greatest levels of industrialization. In the Kamensk Kabanskii region, for example, there are six large industrial enterprises. In that region studies have found 1.5 to 2 times higher incidence of respiratory and digestive illness, malignancy of neoplasm, and other conditions than in the less industrial regions.\textsuperscript{22}

The report Protection of Lake Baikal and Environmental Management in the Baikal Region claims that the association “between the levels of technological pollution of the atmosphere and illness of the population” is a close one.\textsuperscript{23} The connection between industrial activity and risk of illness supports theories that pollution has a significant connection to public health. The Baikalsk case study illustrates interaction between public health and environmentalism. Baikalsk is an industrial town on the

\textsuperscript{21}Думова, И. И., Механизмы Управления Региональным Природопользованием, 15.
\textsuperscript{22}Федерация России. Государственный Центр Экологических Программ: Правительственной Комиссии по Байкалу. "Влияние Качества Окружающей Среды на Здоровье Населения" Охрана Озера Байкал и Обеспечении Рационального Природопользов в Байкальском Регионе: п.п., 1997. Print., 39
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 38.
shores of Lake Baikal. The citizens of the town are largely employed at the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill (BPPM), which has gained media attention since its establishment in the 1960s for its contribution to environmental degradation. As in many factory towns, the residents of Baikalsk depend on the mill for employment. Consequently, workers must often choose between leaving their home to find work in another town or face the negative effects of human industrial activity on their health. Career opportunities, associated with socioeconomic status and access to education, alter individuals’ ability to manage the health risks of living and working in an industry that is detrimental to the natural environment and to their personal health. Mainly, they may not have the luxury of moving to a new town or changing profession as their jobs are limited by their financial means, education level, and mobility (e.g., access to a car). Likewise, residents of towns like Baikalsk often do not have the political power to demand upgrades to the factory to improve environmental sustainability.

Despite the barriers to environmentalism on Baikal, movements have emerged throughout the twentieth century, frequently in response to potential health risks of environmental degradation. The conditions for environmental movements today have precedence in the standards set during the transitory period between communism and capitalism in the late 1980s and early to mid 1990s. It would be remiss, however, to assume that environmentalism during the transitory period appeared without influence from Soviet environmental policies and movements. Indeed, environmentalism during
the transition to democracy and capitalism after the fall of the USSR expanded upon trends from the Soviet period, while also changing with the constraints and opportunities of the times. In order to understand the significance of the trends in environmentalism during the years of transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation, we must also look at the moments of greatest significance to Russia’s environmentalist movement on Baikal.
Chapter Two: Environmentalism in Russia during the Soviet Period

At almost 6.6 million square miles, the Russian Federation boasts the title of the largest country in the world. Its impressive area houses diverse and unique ecosystems: tundra, coniferous forests of the Taiga, the grasslands of the steppe, and semi-desert along the Caspian Sea. Today in Russia alone, not to mention in the former Soviet states, there are 25 UNESCO heritage sites with 26 additional sites on a tentative list. With this vast wealth of natural resources, questions of environmental conservation and exploitation have arisen throughout Russia’s long history. As previously mentioned, during the time of the Golden Horde (the Mongol occupation of Russia) Genghis Khan proclaimed Baikal a “Great Forbiddance Zone” and forbade activities that could harm the purity and beauty of the lake. In the eighteenth century Catherine the Great established hunting laws, which scholars have since marked as an early form of environmentalism. Early signs of natural resource management underscore the historical precedence for environmental regulation in Russia.

In the twentieth century, Russia had numerous forms of leadership: Tsarism, a communist state, a federal presidential republic. Each new governance system brought new economic policies and approaches to the nation’s natural resources. Within the

Soviet period, the country underwent rapid industrialization along with political turmoil, both of which influenced the ability of environmentalists to enact natural protection regulations and to speak out in support of natural wonders, such as Baikal. The differences between the Soviet leaders determined the focus of the environmental movement and the institutions, e.g., regional committees that participated in environmental debates. In the following section we will review the key moments in Russian environmentalism as they related to the politics of the time with a focus on the eras of Stalin and Khrushchev. In doing so, we find that on the one hand the periods of greatest environmentalist activity and legal protection came with periods of political freedom, e.g., the Khrushchev Thaw. At the same time, the years of greatest political repression, such as during Stalin’s time in power, set the tone for the use and misuse of natural resources. Consequently, the areas that experienced the greatest environmental degradation during Stalin’s era also became focal points for the environmentalist movement. The combination of these forces continues to dictate environmental policies today. Starting with Stalin’s reconstruction of Russian waterways during the 1930s, which positions Baikal at the center of environmental debates, I will then discuss the ways that environmentalists protected the environment within the Gulag state. For this section I adopt the term ‘Gulag state’ from the work of environmental historian Douglas Weiner. Gulag state refers to the Soviet political system in which the government favored sending criminals (including political dissenters) to forced labor camps. Gulag is
an acronym for the Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies.

From the discussion of the Gulag state, we will move to the Khrushchev period when the legacy of Stalin’s hydroelectric projects continued to inform the major threats to Baikal; yet, new links between nationalism and preservation of natural resources allowed for greater public participation in environmental debates surrounding the lake.

A) Water, Violence, and the Gulag

The 1930s in the Soviet Union are often referred to as the period of “The Great Terror” because of the extreme State repression, mass disappearances of citizens, and the relocation of millions to the infamous Gulag forced labor camps. The specific projects the Gulag workers undertook positioned water at the center of environmentalist concerns. While activists could not speak out in opposition of the Gulags without risking their own lives and the lives of their families, they could take action to protect the waterways that were frequently the sites of violence of the forced labor camps. Consequently, issues that threatened the “integrity of Soviet, especially Russian, waters elicited the passionate opposition of all varieties of environmentalists.”26 Under the direction of S.I. Zhuk, head of the Main Hydrological Construction Agency of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, the prisoners of the Gulags labored on the reconstruction of Russia’s waterways. His projects included the Moscow-Volga Canal,

the Volga-Don Canal, and the Rybinsk hydrostation.\textsuperscript{27} Nature protection activists at the time started to make the connection “between Stalin’s violent transformation of the land and his violent, instrumental treatment of humans.”\textsuperscript{28}

Here we should note why we consider the reconstruction of Russia’s waterways within the Gulag state an act of violence and not merely a misuse of resources. We count the transformation of nature as violence because of the severity of the changes to Russia’s landscapes and because of the abuse of the Gulag prisoners who performed the majority of the manual labor. A prime example of the destructive force behind the Gulag hydroelectric projects is the White Sea Canal. Originally named the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal, this massive project was completed in April of 1933 after only twenty months of construction. Under Stalin’s Five Year Plans, the first of which spanned from 1928 to 1933, the most important objective was to finish the project as quickly as possible. The White Sea Canal was meant to serve as a symbol of the State’s power and so, all resources were devoted to its completion. However, in this case, resources meant forced laborers. There was an overall dearth of technology utilized and the work of the White Sea Canal was done by hand.\textsuperscript{29} The government meant for the brutal conditions of the camp to serve as corrective labor and reform class enemies (political prisoners) as

\textsuperscript{27} Weiner, \textit{A Little Corner of Freedom}, 355.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 356
well as common criminals. The 100,000 prisoners worked in brigades of 25 who carved out 2.5 cubic meters of stone per day per brigade by hand or with only primitive tools. Estimates of the mortality rate for the project are around 8.7% with additional prisoners sick or disabled. The high mortality rate of the workers testifies to the physical suffering that went into the canal’s construction. Prisoners of the Gulags were criminals and disposable. If a worker died, the managers of the Gulag easily found a replacement.

Likewise, the strict timeframe meant that the work was done with little regard for the destruction of nature. In fact, Zeev Wolfson, a senior Soviet official who authored “The Destruction of Nature in the Soviet Union,” argues that Stalin saw the transformation of natural landscapes as a sign of Soviet power. The more projects, such as the White Sea Canal, contradicted the laws of nature “the more highly they were regarded,” because “the more brilliantly the illusion of their success demonstrated the power and wisdom of the new leaders.” The same ideas contributed to the shrinking of the Aral Sea, formerly the world’s fourth largest saline lake in the world, by seventy-five percent. The Soviet government diverted the Amu Daria and Syr Daria rivers in order to irrigate the desert region surrounding the sea for agriculture. Consequently, the area

31 Земсков, В.Н. Заключенные в 1930-е годы: Социально-Демографические Проблемы. Н.р.: История и Исторические Личности, н.д.
around the sea experiences significant desertification and dust storms to this day. Furthermore, the decrease in fresh water in the region exacerbated economic struggles caused by demographic growth and hyperinflation after the fall of the USSR.\(^{33}\) Stalin’s push for the transformation of rivers, lakes, and streams to glorify the State’s political and economic power led to drastic changes to the environment and to the economy of the region. Because of the severity of these transformations of the environment, we consider the river diversion project to be evidence of violence.

The link between the state’s violence against humanity and reconstruction of waterways went both ways. The reflections of Andrei Dostoevskii, the nephew of the author of Crime and Punishment, support this assertion. Returning from a Gulag sentence working on a hydrological project, he realized that “‘violence to nature and violence to people literally went hand in hand.’”\(^{34}\) In times of greater political repression the exploitation of Russia’s natural resources increased accordingly. Logically, during Stalin’s years this fact came about partially because the political prisoners of the Gulags supplied the manual labor to rework the land. In this way, one form of violence facilitated the other and vice versa. After Stalin’s death in 1953 the violence of the Gulags decreased and so too did the fervor of the hydroelectric projects, though neither came to a halt completely.


\(^{34}\) Ibid., 1.
During the time of Stalin’s administration, environmental scientists evaded punishment by modeling environmental protection agencies after government organizations already in place. Various groups formed for the protection of nature: The All-Russian Society for the Protection of Nature (VOOP), Moscow Society of Naturalists (MOIP), Geographical Society of USSR (MGO), etc. The union of scientists under these formal societies fits into broader trends in Soviet era nature protection, which was characterized by “the search for institutional space” safe from “governmental scrutiny,” in order to speak on behalf of the environment. Stalin himself spearheaded a major campaign to protect the environment: The Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature. While propaganda promoted the Great Plan as a grandiose project “to construct 5.7 million hectares of forest in the Russian south,” it collapsed after Stalin’s death in 1953. In Conservation in the Soviet Union, Philip Pryde argues that the “‘Great Plan’ clearly reflected the view of man as the master and perfecter of his natural environment, rather than as an integral and interdependent component of it.” This ideology is also “indicative of Stalin’s basically domineering attitude towards natural resource exploitation and conservation.”

38 Ibid.
While the societies for the protection of nature and Stalin’s Great Plan represent the potential for important conservation initiatives, both had limited effectiveness because of the repression of scientific research at the time. Stalin’s favoritism and promotion of his political agenda often undermined the autonomy of scientists and the pursuit of truth through the scientific process. One prime example of this occurrence is the rise to power of Trofim Lysenko. Soviet leaders appointed Lysenko as the Director of the Institute of Genetics of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR in 1940. He most likely won the position because of his promise for a more rapid, more plentiful, and lower cost crop yield based on his unsubstantiated experiments. Lysenko rejected traditional genetic thought and took on Michurinism, a form of genetics developed by an untrained plant breeder. By 1948 education in standard genetics was practically outlawed. Many orthodox geneticists faced arrest, which frequently led to death of undisclosed causes. The persecution of geneticists who did not support Lysenko’s vision for agricultural development exemplifies the fate of scientists in other fields whose views did not align with the State’s ideas. Additionally, Weiner attributes the oversimplification of scientific facts in the Great Plan to the unconventional and unsubstantiated scientific methodology that Lysenko promoted. Lysenko’s story also illustrates that while environmental scientists had institutions for conservation work, they had to conform to Soviet scientific ideals that favored certain ideas, such as those of

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Lysenko, based on political favoritism. As a result, these scientists could not be as productive as possible.

Despite the persecution of those scientists who did conform to the state’s norms, environmentalists did find ways to work within Soviet institutions to protect natural resources, including those in the Baikal region. Faced with terror of the Gulags and disappearances of scientists, environmentalists developed the idea of the zapovednik, which countered the violence against nature inflicted by the Gulag system.

B) The Establishment and Development of Zapovedniki

During the 1930s the concept of the zapovednik, the Russian equivalent of a nature reserve, emerged. Douglas R. Weiner calls the institutions that formed around the zapovedniki an “archipelago of freedom” that survived within the Gulag state.\(^{40}\) The zapovedniki were one of the most important institutions of natural protection in the Russian Federation. While they came in response to Stalin’s hydroelectric projects, receiving the zapovednik status became crucial to Baikal later in the 1950s and 1960s when Khrushchev was in office. The development of the zapovedniki was characterized “by uneven rates, with fluctuations with the separate periods” in which the concept evolved under the supervision of various visionaries and scientists.\(^{41}\)

V. P. Semenovy Tian Shanskii first came up with the idea for a zapovednik in 1917 as “‘reserves in line with American national parks.’”\textsuperscript{42} Six years later (in 1923) the idea became a detailed scheme for classifying the reservation areas with respect to both zoning and also regional features in Russia.\textsuperscript{43} While both of these loose definitions failed to provide specific parameters for the location, size, etc. of the zapovedniki they did set the base for environmentalist V. N. Markova. Markova is best known for creating a list of potential sites for zapovedniki and for estimating the size for each reserve.\textsuperscript{44}

After Markova defined the location and size of the zapovednik, various committees and unions formed to promote the nature reserves. By 1950 Russia boasted forty-five zapovedniki. In 1953 the USSR Zapovednik Committee took on the responsibility of assembling a proposal “to reestablish and expand” the geographic network of zapovedniki.\textsuperscript{45} However, the committee was unsuccessful as the number of zapovedniki reduced significantly in 1955 and 1961. These fluctuations continued as new leaders worked on the projects and new politics shaped the political freedom of the environmental movement.

Nonetheless, important ecological reserves did form throughout Russia. Furthermore, the territory of the northern taiga of Eastern Siberia that borders the Baikal

\textsuperscript{42} Соколов, В.Е. et.al, 1997. \textit{Экология Заповедных Территорий России}. Москва: Янус–К
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 42.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
region, and the Transbaikal steppes came under zapovednik protection.\textsuperscript{46} By fitting into the push of activists to institutionalize natural protection efforts, the zapovednik reserve system became a focal point of environmentalism. In effect, the zapovedniki served as one of many responses to the reconstruction of nature under the Gulag system as they protected certain areas from ventures for the sake of economic development. When Baikal became a zapovednik in the late 1960s, the lake and the surrounding forests both received protection. This official classification also put Baikal at the center of environmental debates.

Following the guidelines of the “International Classified Scale of Protected Natural Territories of the Former Soviet Union” (Table 1) illustrated in Экология Заповедных Территорий России/ Ecology of Protected Territories of Russia, Baikal fit into more than one category: Natural Scientific Reserves of a Strict Regime, Natural Monuments, Areas of World Heritage. While the legal restrictions of nature reserves in the Soviet Union could not always promise to uphold environmental codes in the face of political or military opportunities, Baikal’s classification as a protected territory emphasized the value of the lake in the environmental protection movement.

\textsuperscript{46} Соколов, Экология Заповедных Территорий России. Москва: Янус-К, 43.
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<th>Level of Classification</th>
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<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>Natural Scientific Reserves of a Strict Regime (Zapovedniki)</td>
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<td>II.</td>
<td>National Parks (National parks, natural parks)</td>
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<td>III.</td>
<td>Natural Monuments, notable natural projects, reserves (integrated, landscapes, hydrological)</td>
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<td>IV.</td>
<td>Reserves of natural protection destinations</td>
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<td>V.</td>
<td>Protected landscapes</td>
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<td>VI.</td>
<td>Resource protecting reserves</td>
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<td>VII.</td>
<td>Resource protecting areas and territories of multipurpose management and use</td>
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<td>VIII.</td>
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<td>IX.</td>
<td>Areas of World Heritage</td>
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C) *Zapovednik and Public Participation*

Particularly, Baikal’s zapovednik status proved important in the 1950s. The All-Union Hydrological Planning and Scientific Research Institute planned to detonate the mouth of the Angara, Baikal’s only out-flowing river in order to increase the amount of water going to the hydroelectric dams. This would have resulted in Baikal’s water levels decreasing by several meters.\(^{47}\) In response, in August of 1958 the Academy of Sciences Council on Productive Forces sponsored a conference on the development of lucrative resources of Eastern Siberia in Irkutsk. This conference inspired subsequent mini conferences in Ulan Ude, Krasnoiarsk, and Chita. The 5,690 attendees of these conferences came to the consensus that Baikal should become a zapovednik with a 10 kilometer radius of protected forests surrounding the lake. Had the lake not gained a zapovednik title, species residing in Baikal and the area surrounding would have lost significant habitat because of the decreased water levels and deforestation. To many, this would have meant the loss of the awe-inspiring beauty of Baikal that had astounded visitors for centuries.

While pressures from the timber industry, which saw the potential for significant economic gain, motivated the plan to demolish the mouth of the Angara, opponents to the plan argued that Baikal as a zapovednik had greater economic value. The argument for the protection of Baikal as a zapovednik marked a collaboration between scientists, journalists, and economists. For example, the head of the Baikal Limnological Station at Listvianka “equipped the journalists [Taurin and Gaidi] with scientific data and arguments” to write a letter outlining the reasons to protect Lake Baikal.\textsuperscript{48} Signatures from important figures including the hydroelectric station’s chief engineer and the deputy to the RSFSR Supreme Soviet gave the letter greater credibility. The writers of the letter also bolstered its argument with projections of how the project “would affect fisheries...water supplies...and even railroad bridges in the area,” all of which would result in significant economic losses.\textsuperscript{49} The writers submitted their final letter titled “In Defense of Baikal” to the Literaturnaia Gazeta (Literature Gazette) in October of 1958. Taurin and Gaidi’s work ignited an unprecedented response from the public. The journalists felt that the response to their letter spoke to the “‘broad public’” investment in the lake’s well being.\textsuperscript{50}

The ability of the journalists to spark the involvement of the public in these debates also exemplifies the power of writers in environmental movements. As we will

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{48} Weiner, \textit{A Little Corner of Freedom}, 358.
  \item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
discuss in greater depth in Chapter Three when analyzing the work of Valentin Rasputin, writers in Russia serve as a voice of civic conscience. Often leading subcultural movements, writers were traditionally the first to critique the government even when facing arrest, exile, or death. In the environmentalist movement writers maintained this outspoken role. As we look at the ways environmentalists worked within political and cultural contexts to protect Lake Baikal, influential writers will continue to emerge. In addition to Gaidi and Taurin, we will see the importance of Valentin Rasputin and Vladimir Chivilikhin to the environmental movement.

The levels of public participation in the fight for Baikal’s zapovednik status also testify to the altered political climate following Stalin’s death. As previously mentioned, the decline of the Gulag state also led to a decrease in the number of industrialization projects and allowed for greater public participation in environmental debates surrounding Baikal. Specifically, Nikita Khrushchev’s leadership created opportunities for activism to protect the lake. His time in leadership came to be known as the Khrushchev Thaw for his de-Stalinization campaign and reform of domestic policies.

D) The Khrushchev Thaw and the Construction of the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill

After Stalin’s death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev came to power as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Like Stalin, Khrushchev eliminated his political rivals; however, instead of killing them he assigned them to posts
far away, such as in Mongolia. Having joined the Bolsheviks in 1918, Khrushchev had been with Stalin since the beginning. His long history with Stalin made his “secret speech” of 1956 all the more shocking to party members. In this speech, he denounced the excesses of Stalin’s era. At the time, his account of Stalin’s crimes against the Party (though not against the country) was ground breaking because it went against taboos of the time against speaking negatively about Stalin.

When in power, Khrushchev advocated for an all-people’s state that would involve the citizens more fully in governing their own lives. This new stance on citizen participation in governance provided opportunities for public involvement in environmental protection. Participation in the conservation movement was encouraged from above and coincided with the leader’s push for economic efficiency. Public contribution in conservation debates even facilitated the economic reforms in that “it expanded and diversified the sources of feedback for monitoring the economical use of scarce natural resources in a system just beginning the shift to intensive economic growth.”

The results of the simultaneous drive for economic development and the involvement of the people in environmental debates, appear in the Baikal region. With Khrushchev’s inclusion of local Soviets, youth groups, and conservation societies in the decision making process for “less sensitive policy areas,” (i.e., environmental issues)

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52 Ibid.
came new opportunities for the people’s involvement in the environmental movement on Baikal.

The relative spirit of freedom for the environmentalist movement in Russia as a whole coincided with increased industry on Baikal. Indeed, in the 1960s on Baikal the connection between war and the exploitation of nature reached new heights. The debates that had begun over the demolition of the mouth of the Angara river continued as political elites planned the construction of a major military-industrial installation to make viscose cord for airplane tires. While not threatening the water levels of Lake Baikal, the proposed factories would introduce an abundance of chemicals and thermal pollution into the lake’s waters. At first, the public did not know of the true purpose of the factory as the project was fronted as a paper and pulp mill. Ironically, the factory today does serve as a paper mill.

As industrialization projects continued to threaten Baikal, there were also new spaces for environmental activism under Khrushchev’s policies that emphasized public participation. Just as Taurin and Gaidi inspired public outrage at the plan to explode the mouth of the Angara, the work of journalists of the Literaturnaia Gazeta revealed the truth about the factory to the country. Everyday citizens rallied around the cause by writing letters to newspapers and joining environmental organizations. While the factory was completed in 1966, the “concentrated protests of scientific and literary public”

demonstrate the environmentalist niches that writers and scientists alike could fill and their power to rally public support for issues concerning Baikal.\textsuperscript{54}

The controversy first took center stage in the pages of Literaturnia Gazeta. Through the work of Taurin, the media was once again able to expose the true plans of the factories to the public. Under the direction of Editor in Chief Sergei Sergeevich Smirnov, Taurin arranged an interview with the chairman of the Academy’s Council of Productive Forces.\textsuperscript{55} Through this connection Taurin became an acquaintance of Boris Aleksandrovich Smirnov, who worked as chief engineer for the Siberian Planning Institute for the Paper Industry. “Insinuat[ing] himself into Smirnov’s confidence,” Taurin feigned ignorance of the environmental dangers of the factories. Unknowing of Taurin’s true interests in the factor, Smirnov revealed the actual intentions for the factory’s use.\textsuperscript{56} The resulting paper, “Baikal Must Become a Zapovednik” spoke to the significance of the zapovednik status while also taking on “all of the lake’s enemies [e.g., unregulated industry, those who opposed the protection of the lake] at once.”\textsuperscript{57}

Taurin’s paper in 1959 spurred further publications related to the protection of the lake. One of the first of such publications was a collective letter from the USSR Academy of Sciences Commission on the Protection of Nature titled “To the Defense of Baikal.” In 1960 the collective work of these writers and scientists resulted in legislation

\textsuperscript{54} Weiner, A Little Corner of Freedom, 359.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
requiring the installation of pollution abatement technologies—technologies such as ash collection filters that decrease the amount of emissions into the water and air—before the new factories could begin operation. On May 9 the RSFSR passed specific laws to safeguard the protection of Baikal and its basin and in so doing, reinforced the necessity of waste purification technologies before the start-up of the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill. This legislation testifies to the importance of the union between scientists and writers in influencing political decisions related to the environment.

When other newspapers took part in the discussion public awareness of environmental issues in the region and in the country expanded. In April of 1963 the journal Oktiabr’ published Vladimir Chivilikhin's article, “Luminous Eye of Siberia.” Douglas Weiner calls Chivilikhin’s piece “the most famous of all of the essays on Baikal” and indeed, the public response to the article parallels the outrage following the publication of Rachel Carson’s The Silent Spring in the United States. The article follows Chivilikhin on his journey discovering Baikal. The writer wakes up one day with an urge to travel to Siberia and so, he decides to go to the Irkutsk Oblast. His first comments are on the welcoming nature of the people of Irkutsk and he immediately debunks Russian stereotypes that Siberians are quiet and behind the times. His sense of modernity seems to align with the quality of nature in the city. Noting the many open

58 Weiner, A Little Corner of Freedom, 362
59 Ibid.
gains and green spaces, he calls the town of Angarsk the “symbol of modernity.” 60

As he explores the beautiful shores of Baikal and the surrounding Taiga forests, Chivilikhin meets ecologists who study the health of the lake. They inform him of the planned construction of the Selenga factory and the detrimental effects it would have on the ecology of Baikal’s water. Reader and writer learn together about the importance of keeping Baikal clean and saving the surrounding Taiga forest.

Once he establishes the science behind the dangers of the pollution, he comes to the heart of the piece when he calls for public activism to protect the lake. Chivilikhin initially addresses youth because of their “energy,” but he then goes on to call on all Soviet people. 61 For example, referencing leaders of the USSR, he appeals to Soviet enthusiasts. His deference to Soviet leaders may also have helped him avoid punishment by the government for his critique of industry. Specifically, he quotes Lenin as saying that “we must ensure....compliance with scientific and technical standards” when taking raw materials from the land. 62 Chivilikhin also cites Khrushchev, who declared that “we must protect our forests because they are a national treasure. It is best to use this treasure responsibly” for the sake of future generations. 63 Khrushchev’s words

61 Ibid., 155.
62 Ibid., 159.
63 Ibid.,171
become the key point to Chivilikhin’s argument: we must use Baikal’s responsibly so that future Soviet generations may also benefit from the lake.

Adding urgency to his plea, he notes that unless the construction of the factories ceases immediately, Baikal will never be revived to its the former beauty and purity. In his final statement he reinforces the importance of the preservation of Baikal for future generations. Saying that “the luminous eye of Siberia will live well and eternally and the people of communism will be able to reap the benefits from its full and clean cup,” Chivilikhin offers a vision of the ideal future for Baikal. The fulfillment of this vision depends upon the efforts of Soviet citizens. The combination of the urgency of his plea, the appeals to pride for the Soviet Union’s natural resources, and the clear goal of preventing the construction of the factories made it easy for people to rally around his vision for the future of Baikal.

Following the article’s publication, the newspaper saw a massive influx of letters to the editor responding to Chivilikhin's article. The newspaper decided to publish these responses in order to prove that the “‘average person, wherever he or she may live, wants to know everything that is happening in his/her country. As a master of his/her fate, the average Soviet person often demands that his/her opinion, too, be taken into account.’” Though the preface to the letters dramatized the societal reaction, the fact that there were enough responses to warrant inclusion in the newspaper suggests that

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64 Чивилихин, Владимир. "Светлое Око Сибири," 171.
65 Ibid., 172.
66 Weiner, A Little Corner of Freedom, 363.
public involvement in environmental protection efforts had reached a new level. Furthermore, the preface referred to Soviet citizens generally and not specifically to those on Baikal. This reflects the broader interest in environmental issues that the debates over Baikal ignited.

The previously mentioned connections between Stalin’s rule and the violence against nature left a scar on Soviet citizens, as Douglas Weiner notes. The memory of Stalin’s years may have informed the great interest in Baikal during the Khrushchev era and inspired the huge public response in the media. Stalin’s violence against nature and the Soviet people directly affected Oleg Volkov. Volkov spent twenty-seven years in a Gulag camp for refusing to spy on the Greek Embassy in Moscow. Released by Khrushchev, Volkov joined the media debates as “the literary voice of the field biologists/nature protection activists.” He argued that no single agency or institution should have the right to determine the exclusive use of the lake. In a way, the question of who should own the rights to Baikal addresses concerns over who should have the power to make decisions at a local level. Moscow having absolute control of ecological management on Baikal robs local citizens of their right to decide the fate of their homeland. In an opposing example, if the peoples of Baikal have control over the regulation of Baikal’s resources, they are more empowered to make change in their communities. The government’s decision not to support local input on ecological issues

68 Ibid., 364.
sends a clear message that the powers in Moscow are less concerned with the vision of the people and more concerned with their own agendas. Just as Volkov was punished for choosing not to become a spy (as government officials wanted) and political prisoners suffered from human rights violations in the Gulags, the federal government’s ultimate control in ecological matters prohibits local communities from the decision making process regarding uses for the lake. The importance of participation in decisions concerning the local environment are especially important in the Baikal region because of the cultural and spiritual connection to the lake that dates back to the twelfth century and earlier.

Overall, the debates over the construction of the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill represented the combination of the Stalinist fixation on industrialization and the new, more open policies under Khrushchev, which supported local outspokenness concerning environmental issues. The controversy over Baikal reached a broader public than environmental debates had previously as it drew in responses from across the country and for many made environmental concerns a point of national pride. In this way these debates not only fit into the culture of the time, but also set new standards moving forward. The Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill still holds significance today as environmental activists and Vladimir Putin go head to head over the factory’s pollution.
Chapter Three: Valentin Rasputin and Environmentalism Through Village Prose

A) Introduction to Village Prose

Aside from newspaper articles and media debates, there are few testimonies from the individuals most affected by the environmental degradation caused by Stalin’s hydroelectric projects. The construction of dams and the rerouting of river-ways associated with Stalin’s Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature continued in the Baikal region. With each new water project, the citizens of Baikal experienced some of the violence that occurred during the Gulag nature transformation projects. Villagers living along the rivers there, notably the Angara River, had to relocate due to the flooding caused by the erection of dams. Understandably this displacement caused stress and disillusionment for the Siberian villagers forced to abandon their homes and communities in search of work and dry land.

While at times it was dangerous to speak out against the state, writers, like scientists, “had both the moral and the social standing to make their opinions felt even in a highly repressive system.”69 This spirit of rebellion and countercultural movements had particularly strong roots for writers of the Baikal region. Many residents descended from political exiles of both the tsars and Bolsheviks. As Taurin notes, this gave birth to

a special culture, which “imbibed the idea of personal honor and a feeling of their own dignity through the black years of Stalin’s arbitrary rule.”

Many of those exiled were writers, who were sent to Siberia as punishment for controversial works. Indeed, the tradition of the writer as an “alternative government” and civic conscience who used prose, fiction, plays, and other works to protest repressive regimes began in Tsarist Russia. The place of the writer as an actor in countercultural movements combined with the alternative culture that grew from the population of political exiles suggests that the Baikal region would have a wealth of literature in defense of the lake. Unfortunately, Stalin’s years high rates of arrests and disappearances discouraged the formation of a prominent environmental literary movement.

Further working against the participation of authors in the efforts to protect Baikal was the fact that few writers aligned with the scientific intelligentsia's nature protection movement. However, during the Khrushchev Thaw writers and scientists found a new framework for environmentalism. Within this framework “Russian culture could not be preserved in its integrity without preserving integral Russian landscapes and the Russian village.”

Writers could demonstrate pride for their Russian roots through the preservation of the country’s natural features (rivers, forests, lakes, etc). The connection between saving Russia’s landscapes and the preservation of culture gave the movement a nationalistic tone based in pride for their local environments and traditions.

70 Weiner, A Little Corner of Freedom, 358.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid, 33.
Village Prose became the perfect literary genre to embrace this new nationalistic take on the environmental movement as it idealized the traditional Russian village. It gained popularity among Siberian writers, such as Valentin Rasputin, who contributed to the discussion of environmentalism and critique of the government’s industrialization projects. A Baikal native, Rasputin’s work encompassed the experiences of Baikaliens across many different waves of environmentalism on Baikal during the twentieth century. In his discussion of displaced population resulting from hydroelectric projects, Rasputin addresses the consequences of Stalin’s industrialization and reconstruction of water ways. That said, his stories often take place in the post-war period, including Khrushchev’s time in office. Rasputin himself did much of his writing during the 1980s as Gorbachev was rising to power. In this way, Rasputin’s writing is not only a form of environmental protest, but also illustrates the overlap and interaction between the environmental policy of Stalin, Khrushchev, and Gorbachev.

In light of the persecution of writers in previous decades, Rasputin’s work, which highlights the failures in the industrialization of the Soviet system, could have brought him severe punishment. However, the more open policies of Khrushchev and Gorbachev gave writers some freedom to critique government projects. Due to loosened policies that started with Khrushchev and continued with Gorbachev, Rasputin’s criticism of the hydroelectric projects were tolerated in 1980s. More than tolerance, Rasputin has received many honors for his work. He was awarded “communism’s Nobel Prize,” the
Order of Lenin. Additionally, in 2002 President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, presented him with the Order of Merit for the Fatherland. If we take his stories as works of environmentalism, then we must also acknowledge Rasputin as one of the most acclaimed environmentalists in the country.

The popularity of his work stems from the fact that the experiences of his characters spoke to people of multiple generations. His stories represent the struggles, which Baikalian citizens faced because of the reconstruction of waterways that began with Stalin. Rasputin’s work also illustrates the role environmental concerns played in the dynamics between the government and the citizens. We will first look at the specific historical context and personal connection Rasputin had to the displaced villagers to establish the relevance and genuineness behind his work. Second, we will turn to his prominent short stories that relate to the changes to the environment of Baikal. Third, we will assess his non-fiction writings on Baikal.

B) Construction of the Bratsk Dam and Rasputin’s Childhood

After six years of labor, often in brutal weather conditions, in 1961 the Bratsk hydroelectric station was completed. The three-mile-long dam stretched across the Angara River. On September 1, 1961 the reservoir slowly began to fill. The dam was an

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impressive feat of engineering and became a source of pride and patriotism for some including writer Evgenii Evtushenko, who wrote: “‘In the Bratsk Station, Russia, your motherly image shimmering unfolded itself to me.’” His word of “shimmering” makes the dam seem like a mirror or window revealing the glory of the homeland. This imagery resembles Chivilikhin’s metaphor of Baikal as a “luminous eye” to Siberia. This time, however, the word choice is used to describe something that hurt the natural environmental of the Baikal. The filled reservoir caused the water levels on the Angara River near the dam site to rise by almost 500 feet. Consequently, the lower reaches of the river flooded, leading to the loss of numerous rural Russian communities. The technological accomplishment that caused pride for planners and some Siberian natives, such as Evtushenko, led countless others to lose their homes.

Valentin Rasputin was among those who lost their childhood hometowns to the dam. Rasputin spent most of his childhood with his mother and grandmother in a small town called Atalanka where his father worked as a logger. In his youth, his mother sent him to Ust-Uda, a larger city nearby, to finish his education. Water played an important part in Rasputin’s childhood. Growing up along the Angara, Rasputin spent countless days fishing, swimming, and playing in the river. Ironically, however, flooding of the same river due to construction of the Bratsk dam caused him to lose his favorite

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76 Ibid.
childhood stomping grounds, a fact that influenced the focus of his writing. In an interview with People magazine in 1987 Rasputin lamented the loss of his childhood stomping grounds. "I don't think I was even 1 year old when I started to fish,” he reflected. “Now, three hydropower stations have been built on the Angara, and a fourth is under construction. These are tragic changes." The contrast between the river as a source of joy in his youth and as the reason for the disappearance of his community perhaps made the flooding of the Angara even more meaningful to the writer.

World War II further shaped his sense of community. Born in 1937, Rasputin grew up during the war. After the war, which in Russia is known as the Great Patriotic War, the country suffered from famine and economic hardship. Communities had to band together to make ends meet during and after the war. The struggle of his fellow citizens had a significant impact on him. Consequently, his literature was “shaped by the ubiquitous postwar famine and by the heroic communal coping efforts of his hardy fellow villagers.”

Since then, Rasputin has not strayed far from his roots. He attended Irkutsk State University and now lives in the provincial capital, although he frequently spends time at his country home on the shores of the Angara. That said, his proximity, literally and figuratively, to the Angara does not mean that his stories represent the fates and feelings of his fellow villagers.

79 Rasputin, Valentin, Gerald Mikkelsen, and Margaret Winchell, Siberia on Fire, x.
of all affected by the flooding of the river. Siberian residents had varying experiences and opinions, as the writer Evtushenko’s nationalistic proclamation about the dam proves. Rasputin’s stories provide one perspective on the alteration to the environment and the subsequent damage to Russian communities. His personal history testifies to the authenticity of the voice of his characters and makes the stories convincing.

**C) A Significant Short Story by Rasputin: “The Fire”**

Rasputin’s short story, “The Fire,” captures the experiences of the Baikalian villager and the consequences of the Bratsk Dam’s construction. While this story was published in 1985, the characters and plot could apply to anytime after 1961, the year of the dam’s construction. The story is told through the eyes of Ivan Petrovich, a middle-aged man who has become disillusioned by the drowning of his hometown. Rasputin provides a vivid description of postwar Russian provinces in Siberia and the rapid industrialization. The protagonist does not have any extraordinary abilities or characteristics and thus represents the average man. Consequently, the story becomes universal and the reader can easily see how Ivan Petrovich’s perspective would apply to others in his situation. At the beginning, the protagonist ponders the unsatisfactory state of his life in his new town with apathy. As Ivan Petrovich reflects on his experience in the war and the loss of this hometown, we discover that the warehouse, the principal source of income for the town, has been set on fire. Ivan’s decisions and observations
throughout the fire allow us to see the priorities and circumstances of the villagers. At the same time, the protagonist’s flashbacks allow the reader to sense the nostalgia and longing for his old life.

In “The Fire” Rasputin not only gives vivid descriptions of village life, but allows us to glean that while technically there may have been more freedom to speak out against the state during the Khrushchev Thaw and Gorbachev’s glasnost’, other cultural and social factors inhibited the citizens most impacted by environmental degradation from participating in environmental activism. These factors include the dearth of socio-economic opportunities for the workers, the psychological impact of displacement, and the corruption that undermined legislation for economic development and environmental protections.

From the beginning we see that Ivan Petrovich has negative views towards the industry’s shaping of the natural environment through his description of the timber industry in his region. He equates the heavy deforestation of the area as “fine tooth combing” of the woods, implying that every tree available had been taken by the forestry industry and left the forest barren.⁸⁰ Remembering the arrival of the timber company in his community seems evoke fear as Ivan states that the “well-heeled logging operation appeared like a threat hanging over Yegerovsk.”⁸¹ Ironically, Ivan Petrovich himself works for the timber company. In light of the fact that he earns his living from

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⁸⁰ Rasputin, *Siberia on Fire*, 111.
⁸¹ Ibid., 116.
the logging industry, we would expect him to take a positive tone towards the company rather than the negative one that he does. This underscores the importance of the environment to the character. For Ivan Petrovich, the resources of the forest are more profound than the timber. The gains for the lumber industry from deforestation signify for him a great loss of resources that outweighs the gain. He notes that when famine came to his family following World War II they turned to the Angara and Taiga for food and water. However, as the forests are depleted and the rivers polluted the wealth of resources (potable water, animals to hunt, edible vegetation) he and his family had depended upon after the war decreases. Furthermore, the same wave of industrialization that provided him work in the logging business also left him homeless after the flooding of the Angara from the hydroelectric station. The fact remains that regardless of his personal opinions of the consequences of industrialization, he is financially dependent on the timber industry as he has few to no other employment opportunities.

Perhaps because of this dependence on the industry that left him homeless, the protagonist considers himself helpless. After surviving World War II, he works for the logging industry with limited other employment possibilities and is therefore dependent on the same companies that contribute to the despicable conditions of his environment. He does not have the economic opportunities to leave the industry that is destroying the land he holds dear. Likewise, he does not have the political sway to force the industry to
change. These experiences have left him apathetic about the desolate conditions around him.

Rasputin sets the tone for the character’s unresponsiveness from the beginning through depictions of Ivan Petrovich’s interaction with his immediate environment. For example, he passes a ruined garden “without feeling.”\(^\text{82}\) The garden here serves as both evidence for the dilapidated conditions of his community and as a symbol for the broader violence against nature. The alignment of disintegrated community and broken nature underscores Rasputin’s view that environmental degradation and loss of communities were strongly associated. His character Ivan Petrovich feels incapable of addressing either problem. Not wanting anything, he was “[l]ike a man in his grave.”\(^\text{83}\) His only way to evade death was to “overcome March, to conquer his last week with his last ounce of strength.”\(^\text{84}\) The metaphor of death and lifelessness underscores the picture of the intense exhaustion in his life.

Indeed, after pondering for some time he concludes that “perhaps the most important thing in life is for each person to stay headed in the right direction within his assigned place.”\(^\text{85}\) His conclusion marks the climax of his feelings of helplessness in face of the destruction of his community. Whether his assigned place comes from God, the government, or another higher authority is irrelevant in the story. What is more

\(^{82}\) Rasputin, *Siberia on Fire*, 103.
\(^{83}\) Ibid.
\(^{84}\) Ibid.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 116.
important is that Ivan Petrovich feels that he does not have control over his own life.

Regardless of his courage fighting in World War II for a better future for his homeland, he returned home to more suffering. Indeed, the home he was fighting to preserve was in a worse condition than when he left. Ivan laments that he and his fellow soldiers came “home from war only to die a natural death.” After the war, he faced famine, disease, and dislocation. The home for which he fought no longer existed and to add to his struggles, he had to scrounge for food. His statement that each person should not deviate from their predestined place in society stems from his life experiences of working for a better future only to encounter failure. He lost the will to strive for a brighter future and instead resigned himself to passively accept whatever life brings as his “assigned place.” This starts to explain his lack of initiative in fighting environmental degradation: the protagonist does not see his actions as having an effect.

A third reason for his minimal involvement in environmental protection movements appears as he is helping to stop the fire from spreading from one warehouse to another. In the process of removing materials and flammable objects from the building, Ivan Petrovich and his fellow community members find a Ural car in the storage houses of the county seat. This Ural car represents the promised economic development in the community, yet the authorities in the town had kept it secret and prevented the workers of the town from benefiting from its use. In this moment Ivan

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87 Ibid.
realizes the deception of the leaders and factory heads in the town. The corruption at the local level ties into the lack of follow-through on the federal level in multiple ways. First, Ivan notes the lack of enforcement of deforestation regulations. Second, the forest service is severely understaffed, which contributes to the lack of deforestation policies. In Ivan Petrovich’s eyes, the laws are useless because of the corruption of the law enforcers.

This ties into his despair over the dirty water in the community, which in order to see as clean, “you must fasten some clever optical device over your eyes.” As he fights the fire, he flails his arms to signal that they need water. Just as clean water is scarce on a daily basis, Ivan Petrovich finds it impossible to acquire water in an emergency. Both the lack of potable water and the protagonist’s struggles to reach water to put out the fire contrast with the excess of water in the flooding of his hometown. There is never equilibrium of water in Ivan Petrovich’s life and he finds himself powerless to utilize water to his benefit. Just as Ivan Petrovich could do nothing to change the fate of his hometown from the overflowing Angara, he finds himself unable to do anything in the face of the fire that threatens the well-being of his new community. Feeling useless, he realizes that it was worthless for him to “have started flailing his arms in the first place for water.”

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88 Rasputin, *Siberia on Fire*, 129
89 Ibid., 122.
Flailing is the typical gesture of a drowning man and the character’s flailing of his arms alludes to the flooding of his hometown. This frantic gesture symbolizes desperation. If a man is unable to swim there is nothing he can do in the water but wave his arms: flailing is his last resort. In Ivan’s case, the desperation is to save his community. Rasputin draws a connection between the flooding of Ivan’s hometown and the fire in his new community with the character’s flailing gesture. Just as Ivan was powerless to stop the flooding of his hometown, he has no control over the fire raging in his new town. Flailing is also a call for help. As previously mentioned, if a man is drowning, he is unable to swim for himself for some reason. By flailing his arms, the drowning man has the hope of catching someone’s attention and being saved. In Ivan’s case, however, his flailing does no good. No one comes to rescue. In the context of the loss of his hometown, the government did little to support the community.

The protagonist's failure to save his hometown and helplessness to stop the fire symbolize the character's’ inability to demand stricter enforcement of water cleanliness and regulation of the forestry industry. Ivan Petrovich states that calling for the government to protect the environment would be “like some senile old man recalling the clean water of his childhood.” Nostalgia for the clean water of the past, which can also be seen as a symbol of the unblemished joy of childhood, does nothing to make the water of the present potable. In other words, there is no point dwelling on the past.

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because it will not change the protagonist's current situation for the better. The inadequate government support of everyday citizens like Ivan Petrovich renders community environmentalist initiatives ineffective and contributes to feelings of powerlessness to create change, which stifles the formation of natural protection groups in the first place.

The combination of government corruption, displacement, and lack of agency in his choice of profession contribute to Ivan Petrovich’s feelings of helplessness regarding natural protection. The ordinary characteristics of the protagonist, which makes him easily relatable, suggest that Petrovich’s situation is also typical. Furthermore, Rasputin’s own familiarity with village life on the Angara and the displacement of logging communities because of the flooding of the river due to the construction of the Bratsk Dam makes the story credible. “The Fire,” thus, adds nuance to the analysis of freedom of environmentalism in the Khrushchev and Gorbachev periods and beyond. The legal rights and freedoms that arose with relaxed policies following Stalin’s death proved ineffective in light of the social and cultural constraints on the people, particularly as a result of the economic struggles following World War II, heavy industrialization, and corruption.

We can see the relevance of Rasputin’s story to environmentalism in modern Russia by drawing parallels between the situation described in “The Fire” and case-studies from the twenty-first century. Just as Ivan Petrovich depended on the logging
industry for survival, so too did workers in Baikalsk depend on the paper and pulp mill. When the mill closed in response to environmentalist protest, the majority of the residents of Baikalsk had no employment. President Vladimir Putin reopened the mill so that it would once again provide employment in the town. However, instead of funding the adjustments that the environmental standards of the time required, Putin changed the law and reopened the factory with the same equipment and pollution as before. This case study illustrates the continuation of two trends described in Rasputin’s story today. First, people’s economic dependence on local industries, i.e., the pulp mill or timber, inhibits environmentalism. Second, it exemplifies a lack of government support, i.e., Putin not giving Baikalsk residents financial support or pathways to work in another profession, and a disregard for environmental regulations.

D) The Essays and Activism of Rasputin

Aside from his acclaimed repertoire of fiction, Rasputin also wrote a series of essays about Baikal. His illustration of the conditions of citizens in the Baikal region in his works of fiction contains environmentalist overtones. Taking a more direct approach, his nonfiction explicitly advocates for the protection of Lake Baikal and the natural wonders surrounding it. These essays solidified his role as a major voice in the environmentalist movement. The Siberian writer’s literary pieces highlight the nationalistic arguments for environmental protection through the perspective of villagers
witnessing the destruction of their traditional life; however, in his essays he frequently takes a moralistic approach. Rasputin argues that human beings do not hold the right to alter nature’s masterpiece. In his essays, of which we will analyze one here, Rasputin directly “calls on the public and on the authorities to stop the pollution before it is too late.” ⁹¹ This perspective represents the intersection of the spaces for activism of environmental scientists and writers as well as a testimony to the “psychic import of this huge freshwater body to the spirit of the Russian people.” ⁹²

Rasputin uses juxtapositions of the quantitative measures of the lake, which scientists frequently use to argue Baikal’s worth, with references to the unquantifiable spiritual value of Baikal’s awe-inspiring “magic charm.” ⁹³ For example, he highlights the awesome qualities of the lake by comparing space exploration with hiking along Baikal’s shore. He likens the two-thousand kilometers of Baikal’s shoreline to the “hundreds of thousands of miles of empty outer space” and the vast distance between “here and the moon.” ⁹⁴ Similar to the United States during the Cold War, the USSR invested significant funds and money into space technologies. By comparing outer space and Lake Baikal, Rasputin reveals disappointment that the Soviet Union did not invest more thought, money, and time into the protection of the lake.

⁹¹ Gerald Mikkelson, and Margaret Winchell, Siberia on Fire, xvi.
⁹³ Ibid.
Rasputin expresses why he believes that Baikal is worthy of greater attention. He asserts that even the mysteries of the moon could not match the “majestic, living beauty” of Baikal. With this comparison, Baikal becomes even bigger: by virtue of its qualitative characteristics, the quantitative length or depth of the lake surpasses anything outer space has to offer. Indeed, he states directly that “ultimately, it is possible to fathom its physical properties, its material qualities, everything in Baikal that can be measured and counted, but not its aesthetic mysteries and spiritual powers.” Rasputin effectively takes the emphasis off the hard data of Lake Baikal and its resources and leads his audience to see that the unfathomable qualities on Baikal demand its protection, perhaps even more so than any other measure of value. This strategy is important because often industries will think of how to use the lake’s resources quantitatively: acres of forest, gallons of water, population of fish, etc. The quantitative measures of value of the lake are therefore connected to the exploitation of Baikal’s resources. By de-emphasizing these quantitative measures and instead highlighting the qualitative ones, Rasputin demonstrates the untouchable values of Baikal. He directs his audience to appreciate the spiritual value of Baikal, which cannot be measured quantitatively.

This raises another question: Who is Rasputin’s audience in this essay? Whom is he trying to convince to protect Baikal? What people or organizations does he see as

96  Ibid.
participants in the environmental movement that could protect Baikal? The full essay was originally published in Russia as “Lake Baikal Before My Eyes” in 2003. The work was intended for the average Soviet citizen as demonstrated by his choice to take a lyrical, poetic tone instead of a sterile, academic one. For example, he liberally utilizes such spiritual phrases as “miracle,” “echo of grace,” and “uplifting spirit.” There are no technical references or jargon in the essay. Overall, his diction makes the piece accessible to most audiences. Thanks to Gerald Mikkelson at the University of Kansas, a friend and colleague of Rasputin, the essay has been able to reach an anglophone audience. Mikkelson translated Rasputin’s work and published excerpts of it in “Lake Baikal: An Evocation.”

While this allowed a broader public to hear Rasputin’s pleas for Baikal, his original work relies on the reader’s knowledge of the Sacred Sea. For example, he uses the pronoun “we” when describing the beautiful sights on Baikal, but also does not go into specific descriptive detail of the views found there. If one had not been to Baikal, the chilling beauty of the lake would still come through with his writing. However, without having visited it would be impossible to capture the feelings Rasputin tries to convey. A master of literature and descriptive prose, Rasputin has the skills to paint an accurate picture of Baikal in the readers mind if he chooses to include details. The absence of specific descriptive details, therefore, seems deliberate. This suggests that he imagines his audience to be local residents, natives to the region, captivated visitors, or

others familiar with the lake. The list of those who could potentially identify with Rasputin’s rhetoric includes anyone who has a personal connection to Baikal—factory workers and elite alike. He calls everyone, of all classes and professions, to action and argues that “Baikal offers us room to grow and develop” to find an escape from “this artificial world,” but only if it is treated “with care.”

Unfortunately, the writer does not provide specific actions that people should or could take in order to protect the environment. Instead his writings reveal the problems of environmental degradation without offering methods for the everyday citizen to make a change, e.g., recycling in their homes, not littering, boycotting products made with polluting machinery, etc. Rather, Rasputin’s writings and articles compel individuals to involve themselves in already existing movements and push for politicians to make changes in regulations that would protect the lake and its connected waterways.

Valentin Rasputin’s writing, life on Baikal, and environmentalism give great insight into the potential for and reasons behind environmentalism in the Baikal region during the second half of the twentieth century. His short stories focus on village life around Baikal, particularly on the Angara River. Portraying the damages to communities, he draws from his family’s personal experience after the flooding caused by the Bratsk dam, which makes his characters and stories believable. His essays evoke the beauty of Baikal and urge the reader to take into consideration the unquantifiable

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value of the Pearl of Siberia. Rasputin directly acknowledges the spiritual gifts the nature of his homeland has given him. He reflects that the “nature of our native region is engraved in our souls forever. For example, whenever I experience something akin to prayer, I see myself on the banks of the old Angara River, which no longer exists, alongside my native village of Atalanka, the islands across the way, and the sun setting beyond the opposite bank.”

Just as he sees the shores of the Angara as a source of spiritual healing, he implies that those responsible for the destruction of the waterways will face condemnation from a higher being. He states that “when reflecting on the actions of today’s ‘river-rerouting’... it would not be a bad idea for [the modernizers] to know that not everything is forgiven at the time of death.” In this statement he equates the destruction of nature to a grave sin when he alludes to judgement by God “at the time of death.” While the planners directing the water projects in Russia are sinners in Rasputin’s eyes, he also charges the people with the responsibility to protect the sacred resources around Baikal. In his interview with People he reiterated that the openness in Gorbachev’s glasnost’ and perestroika provided the opportunity for real change but only if the people took responsibility for the mistakes already made. He states that "this policy of openness is needed to name the people responsible for past mistakes," but also insists that people are accountable to the lake: "Remember, we had openness once before

100 Ibid., 330.
101 Ibid.
with Khrushchev, but things didn't progress too far because we didn't want to take responsibility for all the mistakes."\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{102} Reed, Susan K, "Siberian Writer Valentin Rasputin Fears for Planet's Fate," 1.
Chapter Four: Chernobyl, Gorbachev, and Political Reforms

In the 1980s nature protection became an increasingly public effort. During the Khrushchev Thaw media debates focusing on environmentalism ensued over the construction of the Baikalsk paper mill and brought on heightened public participation. This spirit of public environmental activism was revived twenty years later. In the 1980s the national focus on environmentalism shifted to nuclear energy following the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear plant. Environmentalism and politics were linked like never before. Within the new climate of social openness that came with Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost’, environmentalism gained new prominence in political conversations. In fact, not only did the Chernobyl event inform ecological movements, but it also shaped broader social, political, and economic policies. Environmental issues came to the center of political discussion as Gorbachev used the explosion at Chernobyl as a platform for broader reforms in policies. Consequently, Gorbachev’s time in power saw heightened discussions of natural resource protection within the government and also set the stage for international participation to save Baikal.

103 Weiner, A Litter Corner of Freedom, 35
A) Chernobyl and the Beginning of Gorbachev’s Reforms

Frequently, catastrophic events spur political action and societal demand for change. These events hold importance both because of the circumstances of the incident itself and also because of the societal pressures leading up to it. For example, in the United States, scholars frequently reference the 1969 fire on the Cuyahoga River in Ohio as a formative event for the environmental movement. This was not the first time that flames had appeared on the Cleveland river, nor did it “incur maximum damages or fatally wound any citizen.”\textsuperscript{104} However, the incident did receive the greatest media attention and led to Congress passing the National Environment Protection Act because of the emphasis on sanitation and waste dumping at the time.\textsuperscript{105}

The explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine in 1986 has numerous parallels to the Cuyahoga fire in that it served as the final tipping point and triggered political action. Unlike the Cuyahoga incident, however, the explosion of Chernobyl led to thirty fatalities immediately following the event and a plethora of other health complications and the forced relocation of residents in the years after the explosion.\textsuperscript{106} Perhaps because of the gravity of the incident, the Chernobyl catastrophe fueled


\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.

Gorbachev’s *glasnost’* and *perestroika*, which in turn created new opportunities for the environmental movement.

In a speech at a Politburo meeting, Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, blamed the Chernobyl catastrophe on the “‘spirit of servility, clannishness, and persecution of independent thinkers’” that pervaded the USSR. With this, Gorbachev asked citizens to take part in meetings to make suggestions for institutional change. In the same year (1986), Gorbachev proposed decommissioning all nuclear weapons by the year 2000 and called for the spread of *glasnost’* — freedom of speech, press and opinion. Following this speech, Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, the restructuring of the economic and political policies of the Soviet Union, and *glasnost’* developed. Both *glasnost’* and *perestroika* are considered influential programs in the ultimate fall of communism and transition to democracy.

Both provided a new space for social organization, including environmental organizations. For example, petitions against the development of nuclear energy were distributed and signed, a testament to the influence of the Chernobyl tragedy on the focus of environmental movements. Aside from issues pertaining to nuclear energy, Gorbachev’s *glasnost’* and *perestroika* policies encouraged environmental activists to rally around a variety of causes to demand government response: river diversion,

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pollution, and health concerns in the wake of environmental degradation. Thus, the environmental movement transformed into an outlet to express dissatisfaction with Soviet environmental policy and ultimately, the Soviet regime itself. The political turmoil both fueled and allowed for the heightened environmental activism and for that reason, the waves of political tensions coincided with periods of intense environmentalism. Laura Henry marks the period between 1989 and 1991 as the time of peak environmentalist activity.

B) An Overview of Glasnost’ and Perestroika and the Trends in Environmentalism

The literal meaning of perestroika is “restructuring.” It was exactly that: the transformation of the social, political, and economic systems in the country. The English equivalent of glasnost’ is “openness” and refers to Gorbachev’s policy reform. To be clear, these terms refer to two distinct changes under Gorbachev; however, media frequently uses the two jointly because of the significance both had for the collapse of the Soviet Union. For that reason, we will refer to the two reforms together, although we also acknowledge that they are distinct sociopolitical movements. Perestroika and glasnost’ had similar effects on the environmental movement and therefore, a cursory overview of the trends of Gorbachev’s sociopolitical transformations is necessary in

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109 Henry, Red to Green, 39.
order to understand the changes of environmentalist movements on Baikal during the late 1980s.

During *perestroika* and *glasnost’* Gorbachev emphasized the inclusion of progressive and dynamic personnel through his *demokratizatsiia* (democratization). While he wanted to keep the one-party system in place, he pushed for multi-candidate elections of leaders and officials at the local level. His hope was that these elected officials would carry out his institutional and policy reforms in each county, city, or region. These changes would decrease the centralized control of the Party and allow for greater participation of the public in political decisions, including environmental ones. Gorbachev encouraged this involvement of the citizens in environmental decisions in the form of regional councils, which led to new forums for public participation. The same political transformation that opened up discussion of environmental issues within regional administrations also formally acknowledged the role of leaders of environmental causes, including those on Baikal, particularly writers and natural scientists. Adapted from a table in Oleg Yanitsky’s paper “The Shift in Environmental Debates in Russia,” the following table (table II) illustrates the shifts in environmental debates and the actors involved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Topics and Scale of debates</th>
<th>Initiator, major participants</th>
<th>Role of Social Sciences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Current demographic trends under the motto “Care for Men,” a campaign to support men’s health (national)</td>
<td>Demographers; intelligentsia of all kinds, general public</td>
<td>Active (mediatory and critical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>Campaign to save Lake Baikal (national)</td>
<td>Natural scientists, and writers; participants: intelligentsia of all kinds, general public</td>
<td>Partly active (mediatory and critical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1980s</td>
<td>Mass campaigns against the Northern Rivers Reversal project and to save the Aral Sea (national), regulation of nuclear energy</td>
<td>Natural scientists, and writers, those public sector, e.g., NGOs</td>
<td>Active (mediatory and critical)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We can glean a few key trends from the table that align with the political changes that Gorbachev instigated. The types of participants highlight the spaces for environmentalism at the time. Natural scientists and writers play a crucial role in the 1980s with natural scientists’ central role in environmental debates continuing until 2006. In more recent years, however, we see the increased involvement of organizers, activists, and members of non-governmental groups. While the public sector was a part of the movement in each of these periods, the increased number of previously limited

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Topics and Scale of debates</th>
<th>Initiator, major participants</th>
<th>Role of Social Sciences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mid-1990s</td>
<td>All-Russian Referendum Against Import of Nuclear Wastes into Russia (national, failed)</td>
<td>Natural scientists, turned public figures; organizers: environmental NGO activists</td>
<td>Relatively passive (as observers and commentators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Mass campaigns to keep transnational oil pipeline away from Lake Baikal (international, successful)</td>
<td>Natural scientists, turned public figures together with environmental NGO activists; participants: those engaged in their networks</td>
<td>Partly active (as observers and analysts of mass campaign results)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
modes of participation, e.g., environmental activism within NGOs, speaks to the increased institutionalization of environmentalism. As the preservation of natural resources gained importance in Gorbachev’s politics, former leaders of the environmentalist countercultural movement became public figures. This official recognition of environmentalist leaders speaks to the greater openness within the government to the movement. Furthermore, Baikal directly benefited from this increased openness. Looking at Table II, we see that the environmental movement in the 1980s focused on Lake Baikal with writers and natural scientists leading the way.

In 1989, environmentalists took advantage of the political reforms when candidates Briusova, Lemenshev, and Shipunov all ran as nationalist environmentalists. Unfortunately, none of the three won. Briusova charged their loss “with a pattern of discrimination on the part of the Electoral Commissions, ‘insofar as it is now known that patriots of Russia did not make it into the ‘Moscow group’ of the Congress’” who had the most power and influence. While the shift to a multi-candidate system was still vulnerable to corruption and Party meddling, the openness to the public’s opinions had an influence on the effectiveness of environmental campaigns as it created greater tolerance for public discourse. Although they failed to gain a seat in office, by the end of the 1980s leaders of the ecological movement “were able to develop and implement a number of key action laws, which later formed the basis of a

112 Weiner, A Little Corner of Freedom, 430.
113 Ibid., 430.
relatively modern structure of government agencies responsible for the conservation and sustainable use of its resources.”

With an open window for the discussion of issues pertaining to the environment, Baikal came to the center of media attention. The most publicized environmental issues during the perestroika period had to do with “water: the consequences of dam construction on rivers and valleys,” and plans to divert north flowing tributaries of Baikal to central Asia for to irrigate cotton fields. Under Gorbachev’s reforms, natural scientists could show their opposition to such projects. Additionally, with the openness of glasnost’ magazines were able to publish more information about the powerful Soviet Ministry of Land Reclamation and Water Management. This former KGB department took responsibility for the construction of dams and canals, including those on Baikal. In this way, glasnost’ allowed the public to be educated on the links between the Gulags and dam construction that had started under Stalin. Overall, glasnost’ led to a more informed public who would, theoretically, have greater motivation to act to protect the environment. The emphasis on issues of water and Baikal in the early years dissipated and articles began to appear on a variety of environmental causes: food contamination, sources of pollution, etc. By the end of the 1980s, according to an interview with

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scientific researchers from Moscow State University, coverage of environmental issues
was rather good overall.117

Other important trends during *perestroika* include increasing economic and
political connections with foreign companies, governments, and organizations. In May
of 1988, the Law of Cooperatives came into existence. This policy permitted private
ownership of companies in a multitude of sectors, including in foreign trade.118 As we
will discuss later, international connections became increasingly important for
environmentalism after the fall of the Soviet Union. Support from abroad became the
main source of funding for prominent NGOs on Baikal, i.e., The Great Baikal Trail, The
Baikal Wave, etc. The changes that came with *perestroika* and *glasnost’* significantly
altered the dynamics in society, trade, and politics of Russia at large.

C) *Gorbachev and Environmental Politics*

Gorbachev revitalized ecological decision-making with institutions modeled
after the Environmental Protection Agency in the United States. These government
agencies gave formal forums for regional input on environmental issues. Under
Gorbachev’s direction in January of 1988 the Council of Ministries and the Central
Committee established the State Committee for Environmental Protection

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Financial Crisis in the U.S.S.R.* St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota, Institute of Agriculture, Forestry
and Home Economics, 23.
(Goskompriroda), which replaced “a hogdepodge of state committees and ministries that formerly shared responsibility for environmental policy.”

This system used the structure of the EPA in which regional branches coordinated with a central agency to enforce environmental regulations. However, the Goskompriroda differed from the EPA in the way the institution was split into sections. Instead of dividing itself by issue areas, i.e., water and air, its categories emphasized comprehensive control and regulation. The divisions included the following: 1) Organizational and Economic Questions, 2) Ecological Expertise, 3) International, 4) Scientific and Technological Progress and Norms, 5) Control Inspection.

At the same time that Goskompriroda developed, the Supreme Soviet also underwent reforms. In 1988 at the nineteenth Conference of the Communist Party, Gorbachev announced plans to transfer power from the party’s highest organs and the Council of Ministries. The Congress of People’s Deputies and the Supreme Soviet together became a working legislature elected by the congress. Since the 1920s the Supreme Soviet had been elected to work eight to ten months per a year. In the 1980s environmental platforms for the congress became increasingly common with Valentin Rasputin among the most outspoken.

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120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
The key transformations in the government structure for the environmental movement on Baikal include a formalized forum for public input in ecological issues and a new openness to the international community. The new structure of Goskompriroda, in which regional residents had sub-committees or branches of federal institutions, ideally facilitated the exchange of concerns from a local level to the national leaders who had the power to enact laws across Russia through the Congress of People’s Deputies and the Supreme Soviet. Furthermore, division three of Goskompriroda focuses on international environmental protection initiatives and partnerships. While the title of the division does not specify the types of international collaboration nor the focus of the international committee, its existence represents the increase in international conversations in which the Soviet Union was participating under Gorbachev and set the stage for the role of foreign environmental organizations moving forward.

**D) Political Reforms in the Baikal Region**

Particularly on Baikal, local environmentalists and the international community took part in discussion on the lake and efforts to protect it. Indeed, Baikal took center stage during the 1980s in environmental debates (see table II). The transformation in environmental administration had a significant effect in the Baikal region, and many of the initiatives to protect the lake stemmed from the new framework of environmental protection under Gorbachev. As Table II exhibits, the period of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*
The focus on water starting in the 1980s demonstrates the lasting impact of the transformation of Russia’s waterways under Stalin. Although the Gulag labor camps decreased following Stalin’s death, construction of hydroelectric power stations, dams, and other such industrial developments continued to negatively impact the waterways. The fact that water issues were at the center of the environmental movement in the 1980s testifies to a continued response to the legacy of Stalin’s industrialization along the rivers, lakes, and seas of the nation. Furthermore, the links between industrialization and threats to bodies of water continued into the twenty-first century. In 2006, Lake Baikal again garnered attention for the proposal of the construction of a East Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline that would have come within 800 meters of Baikal and put the lake at risk of degradation from accidental oil spills. The reocurrence of Baikal-related activism reinforces the importance of Baikal in broader environmental debates in Russia, especially during the Gorbachev period when new policies and regulations concerning natural resources were developed.

The new Goskompriroda played an important role in environmentalism in the Baikal region under Gorbachev. In the late 1980s, the Irkutsk Oblast’ became a model for sustainable development at the local level and a demonstration for the potential of Goskompriroda. The example in the Baikal region as a “model of a local initiative”

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122 Yanitsky, “The Shift of Environmental Debates in Russia,” 752-753.
showed the great potential of the new system, the experience of environmentalist activist for Baikal “also reinforced the conclusions that regional governments still need less interference from Moscow and more money to fulfill their environmental protection responsibilities.”¹²⁴ The new system of ecological law-making and deliberation established with Goskompriroda’s regional branches and the reforms to the Supreme Soviet allowed for the enactment of the 1988 ecological certification law. This law required a “passport” for the 150 largest enterprises in the oblast’. The passport included three elements: 1) A profile of the enterprise’s energy use; 2) A comparison to the must up-to-date technology in the world for the industry of the applying company; 3) A review of the technological improvements that would contribute to conservation efforts. With the proper regulation of this new passport system, the industries of the Baikal region would have had to be much more diligent in managing their emissions, which would have led to benefits including cleaner air and water.

Unfortunately, these initiatives faced certain challenges. First, the regional Goskompriroda branch in Irkutsk had too few staff members for the task. In the example of the passport system, there were not enough experts to review enterprises thoroughly and consequently, there was a lack of accountability. Likewise, technological resources were limited in the region both in terms of the experts who would implement the approval process as well as experts to assist in the improvement of factory technologies.

¹²⁴ Ecology and Perestroika: Environmental Protection in the Soviet Union, 30.
Resources were also limited in terms of the physical construction materials and money. The certification process was only successful in ten enterprises on Baikal because of a lack of money and technology that prevented them from meeting the objectives. Furthermore, the advantage of the devolution of power from Moscow in allowing Irkutsk to exercise regional self-financing and have control over natural resources was often countered by a lack of local expertise.

These challenges were not particular to Baikal. In fact, many of the problems of the implementation of Goskompriroda at the local level stemmed from tensions at the national level. Many critics charge that “Goskompriroda organs are led by apparatchiks who got their positions through connections with powerful officials rather than because of their qualifications.” The heads of Goskompriroda often received their positions based on favors or personal connections in Moscow and not on their knowledge of ecological issues. Additionally, the central office of Goskompriroda also faced a dearth of monetary and human resources. Only 500 people worked in the national office with a twenty million dollar budget, which is minimal compared to the United State’s four billion dollar budget for the EPA at the time.

Overall, no legal parameters for the Goskompriroda existed. The legislature underwent transformation at the same time as the development of the Goskompriroda and so “legislation defining the functions and powers of the Goskompriroda” had not yet

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125 Ecology and Perestroika: Environmental Protection in the Soviet Union, 9
appeared by 1990, over two years since its initial founding. The lack of clarity in procedures and legal definition given by the Supreme Soviet for the Goskompriroda can be seen as a result of the process of restructuring. New personnel had to be hired and systems updated, which takes considerable time. It is possible that, had the Soviet Union not collapsed, the institution would have been able to recover from the initial difficulties and fulfill the potential that the Irkutsk Oblast’ demonstrated. The fact remains that the Soviet Union did fall and the tensions between a dearth of monetary of human resources and lack of regional administration authority continue into the 2000s. While the reorganization of the government under Gorbachev had mixed results for the environmental movement on Baikal, the openness to activism of local citizens did foster powerful citizen-driven movements.

E) Citizens’ Movements and Groups

Because of the uncertainty of federal organizations pressure groups and non-governmental organizations were crucial for environmental policy at the local level in the Irkutsk Oblast’. The use of media proved successful in a few instances in protecting the environment. Just as the public had taken up debates over the construction of the Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill, environmental advocates again turned to the press in order to force the diversion of a pipeline planned to go to the Irkut River in 1987. Local

\[126\] Ecology and Perestroika: Environmental Protection in the Soviet Union, 12
scientists wrote letters to newspapers to argue against the proposed pipeline. Soon other prominent figures and local peoples fought for the cause. Gorbachev’s *glasnost’* did not mean that these activists did not face serious consequences for speaking out. While there was more room to criticize certain aspects of Soviet society, activists faced “risk of dismissal, imprisonment and intimidations from the authorities.” In this case, it was a combination of decreased risk for protesting and a renewed urgency for environmental protection, perhaps encouraged by the conversations happening in *Goskompriroda*, that drove 100,000 people to sign a petition to the Central Committee in Moscow demanding that the pipeline be dropped. In the end the movement was successful and the pipeline project was abandoned.

Many of the same participants of the movement in protest of the pipeline project formed the Baikal Fund two years later. The Baikal Fund, which had members from the All-Russian Nature Conservation Society and the Siberian Department of the USSR Academy of Sciences, was “perhaps the most important pressure group in the area.” Valentin Rasputin was also a member of the Baikal Fund and Gorbachev appointed him to the presidential council. Rasputin spoke to the Soviet leader at length about the problems of Baikal. As a result of their conversations, Gorbachev sent a commission to Baikal in 1989 to investigate.

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128 Ibid., 26.
In both of these instances, local pressure groups had relative success in getting national attention for Baikalian issues. At the same time, during Gorbachev’s time in power there was also increased collaboration among the international community to protect the lake. In September of 1990 the First International Ecological Conference was held. This is just one example of the international participation in environmental protection that appeared at the time in the form of conferences, multinational organizations, and foreign financial support for environmental protection.

One of the potential ways to solve the problems of Baikal was to obtain a UNESCO World Heritage Area designation. As we will discuss in greater depth later, the process for this designation was rigorous and set the standards for international collaboration, local buy-in, and parameters for protection. Though not in direct response to the efforts to achieve UNESCO World Heritage Area (WHA) status, the new openness to international organizations and the trends that encouraged the pursuit of WHA designation, resulted in the formation of international environmental organizations focusing on Baikal. Not only does international support continue to be important for environmental protection in the region today, but many of the organizations that were founded in the 1980s continue to fight for Baikal. For example, the Tahoe-Baikal Institute arose from a 1988 cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States with the vision “to bring together young people from many countries
to study and discuss world problems, including environmental issues, and experience the
wilderness areas in the vicinity of these two lakes.”

Overall Gorbachev’s reforms offered hope to the environmental movement, especially on Baikal. At the same time, the challenges that Gorbachev’s new environmental management structure faced in implementation reappeared after the fall of the Soviet Union.

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129 *Ecology and Perestroika: Environmental Protection in the Soviet Union*, 28
Chapter Five: The Fall of Communism and Changes with Yeltsin

A) Overview of the Fall of Communism

The freedom to express their opinions that Gorbachev gave to the people of the Soviet Union did help to relieve the stagnation that had plagued the country prior to Gorbachev’s rise to power; however, it also allowed people to voice their discontent with Gorbachev himself and with the state of the Soviet Union. The sequence of events leading up to the fall of the Soviet Union and the factors that led groups to protest are complex and what the key movements in the disintegration of the USSR are depends on the perspective of individual telling the history. The disintegration of the Soviet Union started in outlying satellite states. In 1987 the government of Estonia demanded autonomy. After the initial protests in Estonia, numerous other movements appeared throughout the Soviet Union. These expressions of discontent presented a challenge for Gorbachev’s glasnost’. While he did not want to stop the movements completely, he knew that if the protests continued there would be significant challenges for the Soviet Union. When populations in the Armenian-populated autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh in the Republic of Azerbaijan pushed to secede from the Soviet Union, the Gorbachev administration denied their request. This led to a “violent territorial dispute, eventually degenerating into an all-out war which continues unabated until the present
The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh was the opening of the “‘pandora’s box’” in terms of demands for autonomy. Following this incident, nationalist movements emerged in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belorussia, and the Central Asian republics. This significantly weakened the power in Moscow as the Soviet government could no longer rely on the support of the regional republics.

In Russia, particularly in Moscow, the failing economy fueled the people’s growing rage at the Soviet government. Most products were imported from abroad, but there were not enough exports providing revenue for Russians to purchase all the goods they needed and/or wanted. The discontent came to a climax in August of 1991. In a final attempt to save the Soviet Union, “hard-line” communists kidnapped Gorbachev and proclaimed on national television that he was too ill to continue governing. This attempted coup d’etat led to mass protests in Moscow and Leningrad. When the coup organizers tried to pacify the crowds, “the soldiers themselves rebelled, saying that they could not fire on their fellow countrymen.” The communist leaders of the coup realized that they could not overcome the power of the protesters, and following this failed coup, the Soviet Union collapsed completely. Soon Boris Yeltsin rose to power in Russia as the first president of the Russian Federation. He, like the leaders of the other

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131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 3.
former Soviet states, was charged with the task of reorganizing the government, economy, and infrastructure of his country.

The move to a capitalist economy after the fall of the USSR and the formation of the Russian Federation had significant influence on the decision-making process for ecological issues and the participation of citizens in efforts to protect the environment. The transition inhibited local participation in environmental issues, yet the opportunities for support from abroad grew as the former Soviet Union reached out to the international community to protect the natural wonders of Russia.

B) Regional Organization Structure: Back-Tracking from the Gorbachev Days

The transformation of the political and economic systems set the stage for the relationship between regional ecological organizations, such as those in the Baikal Region, and the power in Moscow. Moving into the 1990s regional organizational structure somewhat followed the structure the Soviet times; however, the general process of political democratization and changes in forms of property ownership and land stewardship “had a highly significant influence on the structure and function of networks of regional ecological politics (i.e. ecopolitics).”¹³³ As a result, the provincial ecological organizations in the Irkutsk Oblast and the Republic of Buryatia faced uneven and complicated power dynamics that inhibited environmental regulation. The regional

¹³³ Экологическое Движение в России, 33.
authorities charged with enforcing environmental regulations were caught in a power struggle between local citizens and interest groups, i.e., environmental nongovernmental organizations, factory owners, and the federal government. While under the law, these local administrations had the power to demand adherence to environmental protection policies, the federal government did not give them sufficient resources to do so and as a result many of the efforts to enforce the environmental laws failed. These power conflicts that regional administrations faced continue to shape the environmental policies and decisions to this day.

The networking structure of ecological leadership is hierarchical, stemming from Moscow. In theory, having federal backing gives regional governments greater opportunities for funding and reinforcement of laws and regulations. However, the hierarchies of power between regions and the federal government do not align with the internal hierarchies of regional governments. The regional administration takes the responsibility for distributing resources to ecological branches and local groups. Matters became more complicated between 1989 and 1993 as the legislative and executive branches established councils meant to serve at every level of society. Through these councils even the “lowest level” of society could have a voice in ecological decisions.\textsuperscript{134}

In 1993 these organs of direct representation of the population were dissolved. While this was effective in centralizing the control of resources, the federal government still lacked the complete ownership of natural resources that it had enjoyed in the Soviet

\textsuperscript{134} Экологическое Движение в России, 35.
Union. This reflects Soviet times when leaders of the party and state tried to” rationalize” the structure of decision making in all spheres of society. As a consequence of the new centralized control, when environmental issues made it on the agenda, they followed the bureaucratic decision-making structure of “the existing party-state machine.”¹³⁵ This decision-making structure did not facilitate quick action. A lower level official would first review proposals for environmental initiatives. If it passed that step it would continue to be passed up until a higher-level official could determine the proposal’s fate. Although there were multi-candidate elections, favoritism still played a role and so one group tended to dominate the political sphere. If the proposal fit the party’s needs, then a decision would be made more quickly. However, if the proposal did not seem advantageous to the politicians reading it, then it would take a long time for a decision to be made, if the proposal was even read. The inefficient ecological decision-making process exemplifies the detriments of the consolidation of control over regional resources.

During this same period three processes happened concurrently, two of which hold particular relevance to Baikal. First, conflict arose between the federal center and the regional administration. Second, power struggles unfolded between old elites, from the Soviet period, and new elites, those who profited from the shifting of economic

¹³⁵ Экологическое Движение в России, 35.
distribution as the Soviet Union fell to become wealthy and powerful.\textsuperscript{136} Regionally, governors sought to additionally strengthen their place in power, especially when political positions were decided by public elections. The main issue with these conflicts is that they move the focus away from the basic environmental consequences of rapid industrialization and instead dwell on profit. In an effort to appeal to their constituents, political candidates looked for quick ways to generate jobs in the region. Employment was an especially important topic for politicians after the fall of the Soviet Union as the economy struggled to recover from the sudden switch from communism to capitalism. Creating jobs meant the opening of factories and support of other polluting industries.

As in the United States, businesses and politicians in Russia frequently do not consider the “true costs” of certain environmentally degrading actions. As a result, unless leading businesses see financial benefit from taking Baikal’s holistic health into account, the true costs of industry are disregarded.

On a positive note, in the Republic of Buryatia the regional administrations and the federal government found a potential solution to some of these conflicts. By power-sharing, the regional administration and the federal government made an agreement to “establish conditions for economic activities in the water basin of Lake Baikal.”\textsuperscript{137} These economic activities include mining, forestry, and other environmentally detrimental industries. By establishing regulations and guidelines for these economic

\textsuperscript{136} Экологическое Движение в России, 36.
\textsuperscript{137} Думова, И. И., Механизмы Управления Региональным Природопользованием, 25.
activities, the government could both open new jobs and protect the environment to some extent. This collaboration is essential because without federal support it is much more difficult for environmental organizations to gain access to the necessary resources to protect the environment in the long term simply because they do not have the political influence of wealthy industries, such as timber.

At the same time, decision-making within government agencies was “purely directive, it does not leave room for regional self-organization or, at least, coordination of forces between formal organizations and societal movements.”138 Similar to the highly centralized bureaucracy of the Soviet Union, provincial administrations at the turn of the twenty-first century and today depended on the federal government for funds and resources. As previously mentioned, the regional hierarchies of power continuously faced pressure from two sides: first, from the top, from the federal government; and second, from the bottom, from the local councils, demanding help and resources.139

This pressure on regional environmental administrations from the bottom and top could encourage creative solutions. However, we must consider the individuals who have control in the regional administration and the types of solutions for which they will push. Because the executive branch dominates over the legislative branch of government, mayors run the committees on nature from various cities. While governmental leadership helps to reinforce regulations, the formation of nature

138 Думова, И И., Механизмы Управления Региональным Природопользованием, 25.
139 Ibid., 34.
protection policies requires experts in the field to ensure that the policies are effective and fair. Those who serve on the committees, however, have “close to zero” ecological education.\textsuperscript{140} In the Baikal region, we see the lack of emphasis on expertise in ecological matters even today with the Baikalsk example. When deciding to reopen the factory, Vladimir Putin examined the water from a Mir-1 submarine with his naked eye. While the expedition’s main purpose was to show off the politician’s softer side, he made some illustrative statements about the health of Lake Baikal. Putin “expressed some surprise about how murky the water was.”\textsuperscript{141} However, he also stated that “the water, of course, is clean from an ecological point of view.”\textsuperscript{142} Putin’s assertion is clearly false in light of publications by respected scientists illustrating the increase of dangerous chemicals and water temperature.

Leading up to 1993 when, as previously mentioned, regional representation of the public in the form of councils and committees came to an end, the regional legislative branches were also losing their power. This year marked the dawn of what historian Laura Henry has titled a “super presidential system” in which the State Duma and the Federation Council were weak relative to the executive power.\textsuperscript{143} The executive power, thus, had ultimate control of resources with few channels to them available to the public. Likewise, personal ties meant more than political programs.

\textsuperscript{140}Думова, И И., \textit{Механизмы Управления Региональным Природопользованием}, 25.
\textsuperscript{141}“‘Action man’ Vladimir Putin Dives to Bottom of World’s Deepest Lake.” \textit{The Telegraph}. 1.
\textsuperscript{142}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143}Henry, \textit{From Red to Green}, 26.
The industries that have proven to bring in the greatest income, therefore, also receive the most favoritism from Moscow due to the personal ties of industry leaders. This includes the timber industry, mining, and hydroelectric dams in the Baikal region. Unfortunately, most of these industries do not conduct their work in environmentally responsible ways. The costs of implementing pollution-decreasing technologies are too high from the point of view of the government officials and investors who would support them. As in the Baikalsk example, the more economical decision in the eyes of central power is to change or disregard the regulations and continue work as before, regardless of the effects on the environment.

The hierarchy of decision-making for ecological problems overlooks the key ingredient in effective environmental protection: support at the local level. Environmental scholar, I. I. Dumova writing on Baikal sees collaboration between regional administration and the local populations as crucial for environmental protection. Dumova argues that attempts to preserve the quality of the environment will be doomed to failure if they are not supported regionally by partnerships between local governments and non-governmental organizations, businesses, and citizens. She explains that the strength of the regional administration is crucial because it can help to align the distinct groups of the region and their respective interests for the utilization of the natural resources. Particularly, the local government can play a large role in
mediating between demands for economic development and calls to protect the natural resources.\textsuperscript{144}

The lack of agency of local administrations in the Baikal region and the stripping of the power of local committees was extremely detrimental for the protection of the environment. Environmentalism must exist at all levels of society so that stakeholders at each level have a say in the ecological decisions. When the government eliminated the structures for local collaboration on environmental issues, it also lost the support at the regional level, which is, as Dumova asserts, necessary for the success of environmental protection.

\textit{C) Changes to the Lifestyle in Siberia}

Aside from creating changes to the hierarchy of decision making, the decline of the Soviet Union had an influence on the everyday lives of the citizens in Siberia. Changes in the living conditions of individuals in the Baikal region influenced their priorities and ability to participate in environmental activism. The changes to the Siberian lifestyle that came along with democratization and the transition to capitalism had the potential to both positively and negatively affect the involvement of local communities in environmentalist efforts.

One of the major factors impacting lifestyle is income as it influences anything from leisure activities to shopping habits. Income also affects an individuals’

\textsuperscript{144} Думова, И. И. Механизмы Управления Региональным Природопользованием, 26.
participation in environmentalist activities because investing in environmental protection efforts requires time, money, and social capital. The country experienced hyperinflation that piqued between 1992 and 1993. Issues of escalated inflation continued throughout Yeltsin’s time in office and personal savings were wiped out. GDP fell by a dramatic 40%, while at the same time state spending on welfare, health, education, and culture dropped by 37.5%, forcing Russian citizens to spread fewer funds to cover greater costs.\textsuperscript{145}

Between 1972 and 1993 a study performed by sociologist V.A. Artemov found that between 1987 and 1993 there was a stark increase of people not earning “enough for the bare necessities.”\textsuperscript{146} Specifically, in 1987 only 8% of respondents living in the countryside reported that they did not have enough income for their basic necessities, which jumped to 41% of respondents living in the countryside in 1993.\textsuperscript{147} City dwellers also reported not having enough to meet the basic needs, rising to 14% in 1990. Furthermore, the blue collar industries of Siberia were the least developed and consequently, the poorest populations became poorer. These are also the workers most directly involved with environmentally degrading industries in factories, such as the Baikalsk paper and pulp mill. These economic struggles were not isolated to the transitory period. Indeed, Laura Henry asserts that the impoverishment of the Russian

\textsuperscript{145} Henry, \textit{Red to Green}, 25. \\
\textsuperscript{146} V. A. Artemov. “Changes in Living Conditions and Way of Life in Siberia (1972-93),” 58. \\
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
people during this period led to the 1998 financial crisis. For environmentalism this would mean a prolonged period of struggle.  

During the transition to the new political and economic system citizens spent significantly more time doing housework and taking care of personal needs while also devoting less time relaxing outdoors. Between 1976 and 1990 four percent more urbanite respondents reported that their additional free time would be dedicated to housework and three percent reported time spent on taking care of medical or other needs. This shift is logical considering that during the Soviet period the government provided healthcare and other services. As Russia transitioned to capitalism and a free-market economy, the burden of these formerly public services, e.g., medical insurance, landed on the individual citizens. As a result the families’ “ability to provide themselves with food and material and domestic services has taken on considerable significance in connection with the decline in real income obtained from the social sector.” In other words, real income declined even further as individuals had to look to the private sector for formerly state provided services. Artemov’s study found an increase in respondents reporting multiple jobs, which the study hypothesizes supplement their incomes to pay for the additional services.

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148 Henry, Red to Green, 26.
150 Ibid., 66.
151 Ibid.
Siberian citizens lost both time and funds to invest in leisure activities, which includes participating in ecological protection initiatives. The decrease in real income and time most likely inhibited the Baikalian residents’ participation in events to promote protection of Lake Baikal organized by local non-profits and nongovernmental organizations. Baikal, a popular tourist destination, may also have lost business because of decreased time spent vacationing away from home. Not only did respondents not have as many resources to invest, but there was also a decrease in “the percentage of persons who went on vacation” by 1.3 to 1.5 times. Instead of vacationing on Baikal at the Arshan hot springs or in the resort town of Lestvianka people were more likely to stay home, “working around the house or on their farm plot...making repairs; doing construction, and earning money on the side.”

Respondents attributed not going on vacation to two main reasons: lack of money and the need to work around the home and yard. As previously mentioned, for many in the former Soviet states, financial struggles and the need to supplement former government programs came with the fall of the USSR. In this way, tourism on Baikal, which represents a source of revenue that does not pollute as much as factories or timber, likely suffered from the political changes.

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153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
The economic hardships and coinciding shifts in the ways individuals spent their free time that came with the transition inhibited environmentalist activism both in the short and long term on Baikal. However, not all the changes that arose during the switch from Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin (President of the Russian Federation after the fall of the USSR) had negative implications for environmentalism in the Baikal region. With the fall of communism that had been a deterrent for collaboration with countries such as the United States and the opening of borders, foreign governments, organizations, and consultants flooded to Russia in hopes of shaping post-Soviet politics and culture.

D) Open Policies and Open Borders: Evolving Environmentalism with a New International Community on Baikal

As previously mentioned, Gorbachev’s policies on openness welcomed greater international exchange, including for environmental issues concerning Lake Baikal. For example, in 1990 the Soviet government requested “the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to evaluate Lake Baikal and its watershed as a potential World Heritage Site,” a status that was achieved in 1996.\textsuperscript{155} After the fall of the Soviet Union, foreign governments and organizations took advantage of the formative stage the Russian Federation was in and attempted to

influence the direction of the former communist state in their favor. Likewise, with the inauguration of new policies and the rise of new leaders, environmentalists from around the globe saw the opportunity to support sustainable development on Baikal.

One of the longest-standing and most influential development plans was titled “The Baikal Region in the 21st Century: A Model of Sustainable Development or Continued Degradation?” It exemplifies the international collaboration opportunities around Lake Baikal and the new spaces for environmentalism that arose within the new community. The Siberian Branch of the Academy of Sciences partnered with the US Center for Citizen Initiatives on a two-year project guided by the US based consulting group Davis Associates. The resulting report in 1992 gave a land use proposal for the 30 million hectares of the Baikal watershed. The proposal also argued for Baikal “as a model for sustainable development based on agriculture, education, forestry, mining, science, and tourism.”\textsuperscript{156} Additionally, in bringing economic and ecological interests together, the proposal also called for the participation of local populations and asserted that it was democratization that provided people the “general opportunity to become involved in land use decisions.”\textsuperscript{157} Just as the participants in the creation of this report represented new opportunities for international collaboration to protect Baikal, the


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 22.
content of it also illustrates the ideals of sustainable, environmentally conscious
development as well as the focus of environmentalism at the time.

The reports present the ideals of development on Baikal with a clear list of
primary objectives. A few in particular highlight the stakeholders who should be
included in the projects to protect Baikal. Objectives four and five highlight the
importance of local cultures and people in the ecological movement and for the
protection of traditional Russian life, whose destruction Valentin Rasputin lamented.
The fourth demands that the cultural traditions and diversity of the region are preserved.
Objective five is to “insure that present and future generations in the Lake Baikal basin
can live in dignity and improved quality of life.” 158 The sixth objective calls for the
involvement of the “people of the Baikal watershed in policy decisions.” 159 This
objective addresses the problems which arose with centralized decision making
regarding ecological issues that we discussed earlier. The people of Baikal must have a
say and a way to make their opinion heard by the leaders in Moscow who have ultimate
control of resources.

The objectives of the report also call for unprecedented international partnerships
and greater intergovernmental agreements in protecting Baikal. Indeed, the Baikal water
basin does not affect only Russia, but also the neighboring Mongolia. Objective seven
calls for the expansion of cooperation between Russia and Mongolia “among all levels

158 The Lake Baikal Region in the Twenty-first Century: A Model of Sustainable Development or
Continued Degradation?, 22.
159 Ibid., 15.
of government within the basin.”

Objective eight requires the participation of countries not directly connected to the Baikal water basin by calling for Baikal to “achieve UNESCO World Heritage site designation to reflect global significance of the Baikal region and the determination of Russian people to protect it.”

As we know, in 1996 Lake Baikal met the goal of this objective and became a UNESCO world heritage site.

The UNESCO World Heritage Site reinforces the focus of the objectives of the Davis report with its own requirements for receiving the World Heritage Site title. First, instead of the federal government making all of the decisions regarding Baikal, “regional committees and ecology...that can review the harm to the environment” would have primary responsibility for the protection of the lake. Second, it calls for expanded protected areas and international cooperation to create funding for future programs. Third, the Davis report appeals to the UNESCO World Heritage Site criteria by emphasizing a deep connection between the local peoples and the land and a “heightened respect for native peoples.”

The report encourages diverse public participation rather than top-down decision making from the federal government. It also offers steps that the government and people

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161 Ibid., 15.
162 Ibid., 17.
163 Ibid.
of Russia needed to take to reach the goals set in the final proposal. In order to incite public participation, the report demands legislative action to form a Baikal Commission, to give all citizens the right to information regarding land use decisions and the ability to take legal action against the commission in the event that the commission has decided unjustly.

The objectives of the report set the standard for the political prerogatives for protection of the basin. Mainly, the second objective aims to “inextricably link sustainable economic development and environmental protection.” 164 The third objective then offers a basic definition of environmental protection as that which is necessary to “preserve natural ecological processes and biological diversity.” 165

The report suggests a funding strategy that would require local/regional and international buy-in on projects. These stipulations also reinforce the importance of protected land areas, such as the zapovednik. Under Davis’ recommendations, the regional administrations in each oblast’ would pledge support of environmental conservation efforts with monetary funds. The Russian Federation would then give funds for a system of national protected areas. Financial support for the national parks, natural reserves, wildlife refuges, and other protected lands would also come from taxes in the Russian Federation. The International Monetary Fund in coalition with the World Bank were charged with the task of updating the infrastructure in the region to make it

165 Ibid
more environmentally friendly. The specific tasks included facilitating the process of industrial privatization, assisting efforts in making cellulose plants, specifically the one located in Baikalsk, and implemented modern communication systems, transportation, and sewage systems.166

Ecotourism also came to the forefront as a good source of revenue for the Baikal region as tourist sites could charge a tax on tourist rentals. The Davis report advised that the funds from ecotourism could support community redevelopment to improve the citizens’ quality of life. Ecotourism also provides additional career opportunities aside from industrial work with tourist agencies, museums, hot springs, resorts etc. Improving the quality of citizens’ lives through careers in ecotourism seemed ideal as it addressed factors that inhibited participation in environmentalist activities, while also working in a profession that actively supported a healthier environment. Davis also proposed that tourist taxes be used to support the expenses of operating a Baikal Commission and goskomekologia, regional ecological councils which would also work on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s initiatives to develop regional infrastructure.

These ideals for environmentalism around Baikal exemplify the potential spaces available for environmentalism at the time. Meanwhile, another Davis organization provided opportunities for people to become involved in protecting Baikal. In 1992 President George H. Bush and Boris Yeltsin signed an agreement pledging American-

166 The Lake Baikal Region in the Twenty-first Century: A Model of Sustainable Development or Continued Degradation?, 106.
Russian collaboration to protect Lake Baikal. This statement officially made the conservation of Baikal an official U.S policy. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) contracted George Davis’ non-profit Ecologically Sustainable Development, Inc. to develop several land use planning projects. The first of the land use plans was in the Okinsky Region, “which was selected because of its relative simplicity: the population is small, dominated by indigenous peoples, and the potential land use conflicts (primarily concerning gold mining and forest management) are relatively minor.” Russian, North American, and Buryat resource specialists worked together between 1993 and 1995 to create 19 separate resource maps, which then became part of the final plan in a Geographic Information System format. The planning team tried to incorporate local traditions and “help the community identify economic, social, environmental, and cultural goals” of the project.

The capstone of the project was a Declaration for Traditional Integrated Development that basically amounted to an ethics and policy statement of the indigenous people of Baikal that encompassed the environmental and cultural aspects of their community that they wanted to preserve. The decree, commonly referred to as the ‘Oka Declaration,’ reaffirmed the important role of local populations in environmental protection around Baikal. It also reinforced the connections between the preservation of traditions of indigenous people and of Russian culture and the protection of Baikal itself.

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168 Ibid.
During the transitional period, the voice of the Baikal community gained great attention with the international community, which in its own way countered some of the restrictions civilians had due to the ecological decision making structure. Specifically, international governments and NGOs gave monetary support to local protection efforts around Baikal. Even as the domestic funding opportunities became complicated by the bureaucratic decision making processes that frequently impeded the delivery of funds, environmental NGOs could turn to the international community for financial support. For example, USAID supported The Great Baikal Trail, a prominent environmental NGO in Irkutsk.

In the 1990s the trends in internationally supported structures for grass roots efforts to protect Baikal continued. In the mid-1990s USAID was developing an idea for a Bed and Breakfast on Baikal that would be part of a trail circumnavigating around Baikal. Unconnected with USAID, numerous hostels and bed-and-breakfast inns have appeared around Baikal. It was not until 1999, however, that the idea of the Great Baikal Trail was presented, first at international exhibitions and for the UNESCO World Heritage Sites representatives and then to representatives of the World Bank, the U.S. Forest Service, Greenpeace, and the heads of environmental agencies in the Irkutsk region and the Republic of Buryatia.\textsuperscript{169} The idea was met with enthusiasm and by 2000 the environmental non-profit The Great Baikal Trail (GBT) was born.

Trail constructs trails around Lake Baikal during the summers, while also hosting educational events regarding Lake Baikal. For all of their initiatives, they attract international volunteers.

Aside from USAID and the Great Baikal Trail, other internationally welcoming environmental organizations emerged. All of these organizations offered a concrete structure for interested locals to become involved in environmentalist projects. For example, the Baikal Ecological Wave is a nonprofit NGO that frequently partners with the Great Baikal Trail. Likewise, Greenpeace arrived in Russia. Based in Moscow, Greenpeace has no office in Irkutsk; however, the notoriety of the organization makes issues related to Baikal more widely known. Greenpeace has published articles in English and Russian on their website on issues pertaining to Baikal. While it is unlikely for someone unfamiliar with Baikal to visit the websites of the smaller NGOs based on Baikal, environmental activists from around the world look to Greenpeace for news on important environmental concerns. It was Greenpeace’s protest of the Baikalsk pulp and paper mill that originally ignited the debates that led to the factory’s closing (although the organization insists that they did not want the factory to close, but rather for it to improve its environmental standards).
Chapter Six: Vladimir Putin and Modern Environmentalism

A) Transitioning From Yeltsin to Putin

Increased conglomeration of power marks the transition from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin in 2000. During his first years in office (1991-1995), Yeltsin hoped to make environmental concerns a permanent part of the government agenda with the Ministry of Ecology and Environmental Protection law. However, in 1996 the Ministry of Ecology was demoted, perhaps due to a lack of clear constituency and funding. An uncertain legal environment, sporadic environmental policymaking, and growing regional autonomy characterized his tenure in office. Unfortunately, Yeltsin’s time in power also saw economic collapse, which led to the disillusionment of many in the country. In 1999 Vladimir Putin emerged as Prime Minister and by 2000 he claimed the presidency.

In many ways the exact opposite of Yeltsin, Putin founded his power in strong economic policies. His push for economic growth, commended by many, included a distrust of environmentalism. Law’s enacted with Putin’s support exemplify the leader’s feelings towards environmentalism. A new law defining treason contains deliberate vagueness that allows the government “[to] brand any dissenter a traitor,” including

170 Henry, From Red to Green, 50.
environmentalists. With this law, enacted in Fall 2012, “anyone possessing information deemed secret — whether a politician, a journalist, an environmentalist or an union leader” can face twenty years in prison for espionage. At the same time, he reined in independent oligarchs that had previously challenged federal authority, and made federal laws superior to regional ones. All of these factors made it difficult for activists to have their voices heard due to lack of regional power and control of local resources and the inability to use the court to oppose state policies. Under Putin, the economy did improve, but at the cost of plans for environmental sustainability, such as the one presented in the Davis report.

B) Civic Activism and Opportunities for Environmentalism on Baikal

The examples of state repression of environmental activism on Baikal have a counter example. On August 26, 2010 Putin’s successor, Dmitri Medvedev, ordered the halt to construction of a logging project in the Khimki forest between St. Petersburg and Moscow. As the article “The New Activism in Russia” discusses, the Khimki protests succeeded “where other recent protests had failed,” including those against the Baikalsk

172 Ibid., 1
173 Henry, From Red to Green, 45.
The success of the Khimki protests has also spurred debate on the power that non-governmental organizations and organizations have in influencing the government on environmental issues in modern Russia.

On one side, Yevgenia Chirikova, a thirty-three year old mother and environmentalist believes that with “hard work and persistence, ordinary people have the power to effect change even in the absence of a functioning democracy.” Those who agree with her would say that people of any age can easily rally around a forest, which is much more tangible than environmental laws. Additionally, the Khimki protests present the possibility that when enough people join the movement, they create a “critical mass” to which the government is obligated to respond. However, the failures of activists to force the government to enforce environmental regulations on the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper mill indicate that either the critical mass was not sufficient in that situation or that other factors play a part in the government’s ecological decisions. In short, civic activism fits into a larger power structure that cannot be ignored.

As in the United States, politicians in Russia make their decisions based on a variety of factors. After calculating the pros and cons, if a decision does not seem advantageous for their goals, then they will not do it even if it would be what many would consider the ethical decision. A decision may be politically advantageous for a

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175 Ibid.
variety of reasons. For example, closing a factory that provides revenue and employment in a community could cause the politician to lose constituents. Nikolai Petrov argues that “civil society actions can succeed...only when they are able to ally with one elite group against another.” 176 He asserts that environmental activists will only see victories if they can gain an elite sponsor. Environmental groups can therefore monitor internal conflicts within the government and strategically leverage those tensions to their advantage.

Petrov’s strategies offer hope to the environmental movement. When Putin raised the maximum emission rates from factories to reopen the polluting Baikalsk Paper and Pulp Mill it sent a clear message to non-governmental organizations, i.e., Greenpeace, working to find a mutually beneficial solution that the government has ultimate control and is not willing to compromise. With Petrov’s strategies in mind, however, it seems that these organizations do have windows to pressure the government to change. While finding an elite sponsor may not always be possible, environmental NGOs should dedicate more time utilizing political strategies to their advantage.

Non-governmental organizations, such as the Great Baikal Trail and the Baikal Wave, offer opportunities for environmentalist civic engagement. In many ways Putin’s policies restricted the opportunities for growth that such organizations had found in the early nineties. The persecution of scientists and journalists on issues of “national security” made independent research difficult. As we have outlined, previously scientists and writers were the most outspoken concerning Baikal. Likewise, Putin limited the

176 Nikitin, “The New Civic Activism in Russia,” 23.
freedom of NGOs and international funding. In 2006 it became illegal for NGOs to have a bank account, making finances a logistical nightmare. Similarly, Putin scorns foreign government influence in Russia as it finances “‘political activity in the country.’”

Evidence of the influence of Putin’s stance on foreign involvement in the country appears in the recent expulsion of USAID from Russia. Likewise, in 2006 a law was passed that monitors and restricts foreign support for NGOs. Moreover, because international funding had supplemented government funds in the early 1990s in the Baikal region, the restriction on foreign assistance combined with limited federal support inhibits the possibilities for expansion of already small environmental groups.

The previously mentioned article “The New Civic Activism in Russia” also presents the idea that the lack of activism may not just be due to state repression. Indeed, the article hypothesizes that “many citizens have also become alienated from traditional civil society players such as NGOs, which they feel do not reflect their values and everyday experience.” While the resistance to international involvement may come from the people to some extent, the government encourages these sentiments. The relative popularity of environmental non-governmental organizations with international connections in Irkutsk indicates that this assertion may not be completely accurate for the Baikal region. A survey that I conducted last year in Irkutsk provides insight into the

177 Henry, From Red to Green, 48.
179 Ibid., 24.
level of participation and the reasons individuals do and do not get involved in movements to protect Baikal.

**C) The Voice of Local Residents: A Survey on Involvement in Environmental Movements**

**CI) Methodology and Potential Weaknesses of the Survey**

While studying abroad in Irkutsk with the School of Russian and Asian Studies, I completed an independent research project on the perception of environmentalism in the Baikal region. The survey consisted of eleven questions: eight multiple choice, and three free response. The questions were geared to discover the following: 1) How frequently those living in the region participate in environmental activism on average, 2) Their perception of common impacts of environmental degradation and 3) How prepared the individual is to work for the protection of the environment of Baikal. Here we will focus on the responses to three of these questions (see figures 1, 2, and 3) that specifically address citizen participation in environmental NGOs and environmental protection rallies and events.

I distributed paper copies of the survey in addition to distributing the survey online with Survey monkey.com as a platform and Facebook.com, Vkontakte.ru (a Russian equivalent of Facebook), and CouchSurfing.org as distribution methods. The online version received 71 responses between March 20th and April 4th. I handed out
approximately 70 additional paper copies throughout Irkutsk, mostly at the Irkutsk State Linguistic University and the Irkutsk State University. Because the main locales for distribution were universities, the majority of the respondents were students between the ages of 18 and 22. Likewise, because most of my acquaintances in Russia are around my age (21), most respondents on Facebook, Vkontakte, and CouchSurfing were also in their late teens to mid-twenties. I gave the survey to individuals at bars and cafes, to guests of the host family, and to high-school aged students of the English language. Again, the respondents at cafes and bars were mostly students, although some older individuals from my host family responded to the survey as well.

The limited diversity, particularly in age and education level, of respondents is important to keep in mind when analyzing the findings, but it does not make the results invalid. Indeed, in retrospect it may have been better to have explicitly distributed the survey to students. This age-bracket is the most disposed to partake in civic activism because students generally do not have the burden of taking care of a family or working. Many students, including my classmates at Irkutsk State Linguistic University, even seek out opportunities to volunteer with NGOs to gain experience and to bolster their resumes. Students, therefore, represent a key group for environmental NGOs to target when soliciting support.
"CII) Results and Analysis

In this survey, 89.7% of respondents reported that they feel that climate change is a threat (figure 1). However, only 39.7% of respondents reported having participated in an organization working to protect Baikal or in environmental protection events, i.e., rallies, educational activities, awareness days, etc (figure 2).180

Figure 1. Threat Seen from Climate Change

![](image)

That said, 82.3% of respondents to that same survey reported that they feel prepared to participate in the environmental movement; however, 39.7% reported that they felt ready but did not know how to be involved (figure 3). From that perspective, increased visibility for and accessibility to environmental movements might help galvanize support for them. For example, in 2012 the Great Baikal Trail was located in an obscure part of Irkutsk and most first-time visitors to the group got lost. Unable to find the NGO’s office, it is probable that many potential participants were deterred from becoming involved. On a different note, the public transportation of the city is frequently crowded and difficult to navigate, particularly if you are elderly or not as mobile because there are no handicap accessible buses. If a person with limited mobility wanted to get involved in an environmental organization they would need access to a car. The environmental organizations do not have the power to do an overhaul on the

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entire infrastructure of the city; however, by holding events in a variety of places throughout the city they may reach audiences who were unable to participate previously because of the distance. Likewise, by choosing a more central office location they both will increase their visibility and make themselves more accessible to the people of Irkutsk. Since I completed this survey in Spring of 2012, The Great Baikal Trail has relocated to a more central location. It will be interesting to see how this location change will affect their participation levels.

**Figure 3. Level of Preparedness to Participate in Environmentalism**

**Events/Groups**

Despite factors deterring environmental activism, environmental organizations continue to exist and many of them invite international participants. Furthermore, an international environmentalist community continues to support efforts to save Lake Baikal; however, it must also uncover and capitalize on other resources for financial sustainability and to draw in more participants from Russia as well as from abroad.
Similarly, environmental activists for Baikal should weigh the political advantages of the changes for which they are pushing in order to find elite sponsors.
Conclusion

The circumstances for modern environmentalist movements have been shaped by the culture and politics of the past century. In this paper we have traced the evolution of environmentalism on Baikal from the 1930s through present day with an emphasis on the periods of political and economic transition. Particularly, in the twentieth century Russia faced significant political and economic turmoil as the country passed through various forms of governance: Tsarism, a communist state, a federal presidential republic. As we have seen, periods of transition at times offered new opportunities for environmentalist action. At other times, the new political climate limited activism to protect the Sacred Sea.

Based on my analysis of the texts and resources in this paper, I conclude that Stalin’s repressive rule set the stage for the exploitation of Baikal’s resources in the name of industrialization and economic development. The reforms of Stalin’s successor, Khrushchev, led to greater freedom of speech, which resulted in public outspokenness about the degradation of the lake. During the Khrushchev Thaw, however, the environmentalist movement was still confined by the push for industrialization started under Stalin. Finally, the transition leading up to and following the fall of the USSR created a space for environmentalist movements around Baikal within an international community; at the same time, these movements faced real challenges due to a lack of domestic funding and regulation of environmental policies.
While Baikal’s beauty and biodiversity are exceptional, the lessons learned in the fight to protect the lake can serve other movements as well. The contextualization within the politics, economy, and culture of the times discussed in this work reveals the potential opportunities and challenges for civic activists today in Russia and around the world. First, broader cultural, social, political, and economic barriers limit environmentalist movements, although the specifics of these barriers vary depending on the country or region. Factors inhibiting environmental protection may include national political repression that impedes the movement’s freedom to protest as well as local infrastructural issues that impact individuals’ ability to access environmental organizations. Second, potential opportunities for international support and collaboration will increase as the distance between countries closes with improved communication technologies and globalization. There are few places left untouched by the flow of culture and information through the Internet. Online mediums such as social networks or blogs can prove useful in raising international awareness for regional environmental threats. As we saw with the movement to protect Baikal, activists should seek out niches within an international community. With continued globalization an international perspective will become increasingly important as countries work together to solve environmental crises, such as global climate change.

Lastly, while this work deals with environmentalism, the factors outlined above that inform the opportunities and limitations to activism apply to other causes. With a
contextualization within political and social circumstances, civic activists can better strategize ways to create greater access to their movement and garner support.
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