

War and Pest Control in Imperial and Soviet Russia as Symmetrical Histories, 1900–1940

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This project seeks to open up the prolific field of “war and the environment” in the area of Russian and Soviet studies in a transnational key. It analyzes pest and predator control policies and practices in Russia in the first half of the twentieth century as strongly interconnected with war, forced labor, terror, and mass repression. This was a time when cataclysmic social conflicts and “natural” disasters telescoped with enormous intensity.

The prolonged predominance of the agricultural economy, as well as the “intimate relationship between war and the Soviet system” (David-Fox), makes the heuristic of these entangled histories of war and nature particularly rewarding for this area and period. Let’s recall that the Bolsheviks seized power during the Great War and built their dictatorship through a “continuum of crisis” (Holquist), channeling the violence of total war inward. The forced collectivization of agriculture, an unprecedented and cataclysmic experiment attempting to “modernize” the countryside in the context of a looming “inevitable war,” would trigger another wave of ruthless state violence against the peasantry.

I analyze the overlap of armed conflicts and “natural” disasters in the long sequences of war, revolution, and civil war and through the forced collectivization and its aftermaths. Discursive and action categories, regimes of mobilization, and imaginaries and technologies expanded from the waging of war to the management of nature.

The unprecedented mobilization of scientists for total war crystallized in multiple inter-professional collaborations and was perpetuated in peacetime across the military and civil spheres (entomologists, chemists, engineers, etc.). These associations were articulated through “social organizations” controlled by the Red Army, thus harnessing pest control to the military-industrial complex.

The porosity between war and natural disasters remained starkest in the margins of the Imperial/Soviet territory. Environmental and rebel threats came to be interrelated in the peripheries, where “militarized” practices of pest control and successive “disinhibiting” (Fressoz) toxic experimentations were adopted to emulate European colonial practices. The Stalinist “revolution from above” worked as an incubator of the military-scientific experiments and practices of the 1920s.

My project at the RCC aims to deepen and enlarge this research with diverse tools of the environmental humanities and a wide array of new archival and printed materials.

- I will advance a more thorough understanding of key ecosystems, environmental phenomena, and ecological transformations that impact pest dynamics and correlated sociopolitical evolutions. The fierce scientific controversies surrounding shifts in expertise and correlated policies in agricultural, conservation, and pest control policies will be more precisely examined. I will also more accurately situate Russian-Soviet developments within a global context and further trace the transnational circulation of ideas, objects, and experts.
- I also aim to broaden my analysis to include new imbroglios between war, nature, and social injustices by scrutinizing the powerful environmental, economic, cultural, and social factors shaping predator control activities and game management in the same time lapse. The story exists at the crossroads of marksmanship and hunting democratization on the one hand, and the “socialization of agriculture,” access restrictions to the commons, and an increasing repression of “poachers” on the other.