

A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev

Douglas R. Weiner

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A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev Douglas R. Weiner While researching Russia's historical efforts to protect nature, Douglas Weiner unearthed unexpected findings: a trail of documents that raised fundamental questions about the Soviet political system. These surprising documents attested to the unlikely survival of a critical-minded, scientist-led movement through the Stalin years and beyond. It appeared that, within scientific societies, alternative visions of land use, resrouce exploitation, habitat protection, and development were sustained and even publicly advocated. In sharp contrast to known Soviet practices, these scientific societies prided themselves on their traditions of free elections, foreign contacts, and a pre-revolutionary heritage.

Weiner portrays nature protection activists not as do-or-die resisters to the system, nor as inoffensive do-gooders. Rather, they took advantage of an unpoliced realm of speech and activity and of the patronage by middle-level Soviet officials to struggle for a softer path to development. In the process, they defended independent social and professional identities in the face of a system that sought to impose official models of behavior, ethics, and identity for all. Written in a lively style, this absorbing story tells for the first time how organized participation in nature protection provided an arena for affirming and perpetuating self-generated social identities in the USSR and preserving a counterculture whose legacy survives today.



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