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Talk title: Siberian Rivers Working for—and Against—Communism



Abstract: In 1963, the world’s first space traveller, Yuri Gagarin, visited the future site of the Krasnoyarsk Dam—soon to be the most powerful in the world. Reporters likened the construction site to a cosmodrome, while a dam-builder and poet dreamed of taking Soviet engineering to Mars. Mega-dams were central to the Soviet project of modernization, symbolizing the promise of socialism harnessing nature’s forces. While Soviet expertise never reached outer space, it was exported across the “Third World.” No wonder the Krasnoyarsk Dam appeared on the ten-ruble banknote.

In the post-Stalinist USSR, economists often compared Siberia to outer space—vast, cold, and mysterious. Seen both as a backward periphery and a realm of boundless potential, it became a

prime site for experimentation in engineering, labour, and governance. Stalinist industrialization was coerced; post-Stalinist expansion, voluntary—yet it unfolded on an even grander scale, transforming landscapes and waterscapes across Siberia.

This talk explores the history of the Krasnoyarsk Dam as a lens onto the relationship between nature, technology, and ideology in late socialism. Were the Soviet state and society fundamentally antagonistic toward nature? In many ways, the “reds” were also “green”: their drive to “subjugate” nature coexisted with efforts to “protect” it. The dam, encircled by restrictive “green zones,” fostered a model “forest” city alongside the Stolby nature reserve. By tracing the experiences of Siberian workers—how they built the dam and how the dam, along with the Yenisei, “built” them—this talk reveals the reciprocal entanglement of environment, infrastructure, and subjectivity in late socialism.