INTRODUCTION

The Song of the Forests, Dmitrii Shostakovich's seventh choral piece and his first oratorio, debuted in Leningrad on 15 November 1949. The Moscow debut, eleven days later, so delighted the Party's cultural arbiters that they awarded Shostakovich the Stalin Prize the next year. The oratorio's success was scarcely accidental, as the project had been designed specifically for propaganda purposes. The score, soaringly harmonious and studiously accessible, used folk themes to evoke patriotic fervor, while the libretto unself-consciously celebrated Stalin's brilliance:

> In the Kremlin, the first rays of dawn shone.
> The Great Leader, in wise contemplation, went up to a great map.
> About the glorious deeds, about the invincible homeland, about the people's happiness, our beloved Leader thought.
> And with his strong hand, which had led regiments to victory, he took the pennants from the map.[1]

In accordance with Stalin's conviction that the country must be reforested in order to save it, the oratorio called upon listeners to "dress the homeland in forests," thereby creating a new national guard of maples, beeches, and oaks.[2]

The obviously calculated nature of *The Song of the Forests* brought Shostakovich personal anguish—he is said to have returned home and collapsed in sobs after the first performance, having compromised himself with such blatant and unseemly propaganda—but it raises a curious question: why would eulogizing the forest represent an effective means of currying the favor of

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

Joseph Stalin? The most direct answer points to the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, a vast effort to establish millions of acres of forests in southern Russia, which had been announced the year before. Yet this explanation leads to another question: why did Stalin's government, so often described as hostile to environmentalism and wild nature, see afforestation as a worthy aim and trees as possessing the power to cure Soviet ills? A complete answer to this question reaches back to the first decade of the twentieth century, long before the Soviet era, when there emerged alternative environmental ethics linking Russian identity, forest health, and sustainable economic development. These ethics gained great popularity before Bolshevik policies, and especially the policy of rapid industrialization, made such ideas irrelevant. However, forest conservation soon reemerged as an item of active concern in Stalin's Soviet Union, precisely because proponents of conservation were able to convince the Party leadership that a healthy Russian landscape, one that would sustain intensive economic development, required the preservation of forest cover. Forest conservation returned to prominence, and the Soviet Union in the 1940s went about protecting from exploitation more forested land than any other country in history.

Accordingly, it is accurate to say that the Soviet Union developed a real and effective environmentalist program, although an unusual one. In the United States and in Europe, environmental protection evolved in the nineteenth century to promote either conservationism (the belief that natural resources are scarce and special steps need to be taken to make them last in perpetuity) or preservationism (the belief that untouched nature possesses an inherent value and thus should be set aside for human enjoyment). But environmentalism reaches beyond preservationism and conservationism; if environmentalism is defined as the political and philosophical program that seeks to impose limits on human activity so as to preserve the integrity of the environment—a definition that encompasses public health initiatives as well as conservationism and preservationism—then the Soviet Union did indeed pursue environmentalism. In the story told here, Stalin emerges as a peculiar kind of environmentalist: although not apparently driven by conservationist or preservationist concerns, his policies withdrew millions of hectares from economic exploitation on the grounds that this would improve the hydrology of the Soviet Union. These millions of hectares were left more or less untouched, in keeping with the supposition that complex, wild forests best regulated water flows, and thus one may conclude that Stalin's policies were steadfastly environmentalist—and because of the way they were carried out, preservationist as well.

Such an assertion, clearly, represents a significant revision to the existing consensus about Soviet environmental politics, which holds that Stalin's government was implacably hostile to environmentalist initiatives. This consensus emerged for good reason: by the late 1980s, scholars of Soviet environmental history had documented a number of grave environmental problems in Russia,

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

many of which had roots, or appeared to have roots, in the Stalin era. Soviet promethean proclamations from the 1930s, typified by Gorky's famous dictum "Man, in changing nature, changes himself" and Ivan Michurin's motto "We cannot wait for kindnesses from nature; our task is to wrest them from her," strongly influenced this view, along with accounts of the mammoth engineering projects of the first Five-Year Plan.[3] The failure to adopt meaningful emissions controls like those enacted in the West in the 1960s further reinforced the impression of Stalinist enmity toward nature. Marshall Goldman, in 1972, first drew attention to the severely polluted Soviet landscape and assigned considerable blame to Stalin's rule: "For more than three decades after Lenin's death in 1924, slight attention was paid to preserving the country's natural resources. There was little enforcement of existing laws and almost no enactment of new laws. . . . Ecological interests were not important to the Soviet leaders of the day."[4] Charles Ziegler sounded a similar note, underscoring "Stalin's attempt to forcibly and rapidly industrialize the Soviet Union without regard for the environmental consequences" and concluding that during Stalin's tenure, "the value of the natural environment was totally ignored in the campaign to transform the USSR into a modern industrial society."[5]

The consensus received its last major refinement with the publication of Douglas Weiner's two tremendously influential books about Soviet environmental history, 1988's *Models of Nature* and 1999's *A Little Corner of Freedom*. In these two works, Weiner traced the origins and development of a unique network of nature preserves dedicated to scientific research, the *zapovedniki*. Weiner's discussion of the *zapovedniki* shows how remarkable the preserves were for their strict inviolability, and how they enjoyed firm governmental support in the period before Stalin's ascent to power. However, after Stalin's consolidation of power, the preserves were eviscerated.[6] Weiner's analysis of the *zapovedniki* revised the consensus about Soviet attitudes toward nature by demonstrating the potential for environmental protection inherent in the Soviet system, as well as the concern for nature expressed by a number of isolated members of the Soviet apparatus and by activist groups in society. At the same time, Weiner reinforced the consensus by suggesting that Stalinist development and environmentalism, as represented by the *zapovedniki*, were fundamentally incompatible. Murray Feshbach summarized the refined consensus well: "Initially, the ambitions of the Soviet government seemed truly human. In public health and nature conservation, for instance, the revolutionaries' programs included pioneering efforts—and for a time, notable progress—in controlling disease, ensuring public hygiene and protecting forests and parks. Within a dozen years of their seizing of power, however, Soviet Communists had changed their priorities."[7] According to this interpretation, environmentalism in the Soviet Union fell victim to Stalin's Great Turn, yet another promising avenue of NEP (New Economic Policy) culture barricaded off by a regime too illiberal to value conservationism.

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

Although the shortcomings of Soviet environmental policy were real and important, each with lasting consequences for the Soviet Union's successor states, they have been extrapolated into a sweeping conclusion that conservationist or preservationist awareness in the Stalin era was entirely lacking. Ronald Suny's discussion of the first Five-Year Plan provides a representative expression of this interpretation: "The rush to modernity . . . meant that attention was paid almost exclusively to output and productivity and almost no notice was taken of the impact of rapid industrialization on the natural environment. This insensitivity to the limits of nature was characteristic of capitalist industrialization as well, but in the Soviet Union general ecological ignorance was compounded by the bravado of the Communists, who looked upon nature simply as an obstacle to be overcome on the road to progress."[8] So dominant is this interpretation that countervailing evidence has been unable to shake it: William Husband's recent survey of Soviet children's literature from the Stalin era, for instance, revealed a multiplicity of encoded attitudes toward nature, with a "small but significant number" of books depicting nature in a nonadversarial way.[9] Yet for Husband, such sympathetic portrayals of nature did not suggest that official Soviet policy makers intended to recognize alternative meanings of nature, but instead indicated only the limitations of the Soviet apparatus: "Stalinist-era literature," he writes, "eluded the hegemony the dictatorship sought, and in so doing it demonstrated an important limit to political control in the USSR."[10] Although the English scholar Jonathan Oldfield recently pointed out the need for scholars to "move purposefully beyond broad understandings of the Soviet environmental legacy," the consensus remains basically unchallenged.[11]

The story told here suggests that one key to this broader understanding is the recognition that environmentalism—and forest conservationism especially—can produce benefits that redound to the collective just as much as to the individual. Preserving the integrity of the environment has often been linked with quality of life and liberal individualism, but it can also be linked, as Douglas Weiner demonstrates, with other values; in Stalin's Soviet Union, environmentalism received sanction because its advocates promised that industrial output would suffer without adequate environmental protection.[12] The perceived industrial importance of forested land, therefore, played a key role in reviving forest conservation as an active element of Soviet policy—though had it not been for the deep cultural connection between Russia and its forests, the arguments for protection might never have been articulated, let alone transformed into Soviet law.

Russia is unimaginable without its forests. The birthplace of the Russian state was not on the steppe, which Russians colonized only in the seventeenth century, but in the dark and dense forests around Moscow, Vladimir, and Novgorod. "The virgin forest was the nursery of Great Russian culture," James Billington claimed in *The Icon and the Axe*, "and in the early formative pe-

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

riod, the forest represented a kind of evergreen curtain for the imagination, shielding it from the increasingly remote worlds of Byzantine and Western urbanity."[13] Leonid Leonov's 1955 novel *The Russian Forest* pointed to a more personal aspect of the connection: "The forest greeted the Russian at his birth and attended him through all the stages of his life—with the cradle of the infant and the first booting . . . the steam-bath switch and the balalaika, the splinter that did service for a lamp in the peasant's hut . . . the wild honey and the beaver, the mushroom and the incense . . . the coffin hollowed out of a log and lastly, the wooden cross on the grave, decorated with fir branches."[14] The most famous Russian historian of the late nineteenth century, V. O. Kliuchevskii, contended that the forest (not unlike the frontier for the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner) shaped the very way that Russians think: "Nature asked of the forest settler a difficult riddle: he had to study his place, all of its conditions, in order to find suitable land. This explains the great powers of observation in the Russian. Life in isolated villages did not teach him to work in large groups; he fought with nature by himself, in the depths of the forest, with an ax in his hand. This is why the Great Russian works better alone, and why it is dangerous to hem him in, why he is eternally unsociable, introspective and lost in his own mind."[15] The forest entered the lexicon, as well; the Russian language contains a number of folk-inspired words for specific types of forests, such as *bor,* a pine forest on poor or sandy soil; *ramen',* a mixture of spruce and fir, sometimes with pine and deciduous species; and *dubrava,* an oak forest with an admixture of other wide-leafed deciduous species on rich soil.[16] Equally emblematic were Russian proverbs featuring forest imagery, such as "When you cut down the forest, the chips will fly," "Everything that grows in the forest has a use," "The world sighs when the forest withers away," and "Where our grandfathers stacked logs, now you can't cut a stake."[17] And the observation of pre-Christian religious rites centered on the forest survived well into the nineteenth and even the twentieth century; in the springtime in southern Russia, rural people celebrated "Rusal'naia Weeks," fertility rituals focused on the veneration of one special birch in the forest, which was decorated with "bits of cloth, thread, and garlands."[18]

The proverbs, Kliuchevskii's musings about the Russian soul, Leonov's coffin draped with fir boughs—all of these demonstrate the fundamental importance of the forest in Russian culture. But more specifically, they link the forest to old Russia, either a beautiful and noble Russia to be preserved or an embarrassingly backward and weak Russia best abandoned, depending on one's point of view. Over the course of the nineteenth century, many of the most famous voices in Russian cultural life adopted the former view and fretted about the disappearing forest as though mourning the loss of Russia's premodern authenticity. Anton Chekhov's Dr. Astrov voiced the premonition that something valuable was being lost, slowly but inexorably:

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

> Now, look here. This is a map of our district, as it was fifty years ago. The dark and light green areas indicate forests—over half the area is covered with them. . . . On this lake, here, you see great flocks of swans, geese, ducks, and, according to the old timers, birds of every kind. Enormous numbers of them, hovering like great clouds. . . . Now moving on. This is the region as it was twenty-five years ago. You can see the forests only cover one-third of the total area. The wild goats have disappeared, although the elk remain. The green and blue areas are much lighter. And so on, and so forth. Let's move on to the third map, our district as it appears today. You see the green areas here and there, but not dense sections, mere blotches. The elk are gone, as are the swans as well as the wood grouse. . . . In general, the map shows that gradually, yet undoubtedly, the whole region moves into decline which will be irreversible within ten to fifteen years. . . . [They've] destroyed almost everything and created nothing to take its place.[19]

Dr. Astrov's apprehensions had a firm basis in fact: in the years between 1696 and 1888, the forest cover of central Russia fell from 56 percent to 36 percent, and would decline further still to 30 percent by 1914.[20] At risk was more than just greenery and wildlife. When the forests died, Astrov (and, one suspects, Chekhov) worried, something in the Russian people died, too—their empathy, perhaps even their humanity:

> Didn't that doctor just say, just now, that people recklessly cut down forests, and soon there won't be anything left on earth? Well, men like you recklessly destroy people the same way, and pretty soon, thanks to you, there won't be any faithfulness left on earth, or purity, or self-sacrifice. Why do men refuse to see a woman's indifference, especially when she belongs to another man? Because—and that doctor was right about this—the devil of destruction lives in every one of you. You don't have any sympathy for the forests, or for birds, or for women, or for one another.[21]

Astrov had urged some of the other characters in the play to recognize that forests "enhance the beauty of the land, that man learns what's beautiful from them, that they . . . instill in him higher thoughts and feelings"—what would become of the Russian people if the forests were to vanish?[22]

By the time that Chekhov wrote *Uncle Vanya,* the idea that Russia's forests were under threat was scarcely a new one. Literary expressions of angst about the fading forest had circulated for nearly a half century.[23] In 1858, Nikolai Nekrasov had eulogized the dying forest in his poem "Sasha," best known for the couplet "Sasha had come to know sorrow well / Sasha had wept as the forest was felled." According to Jane Costlow, "Sasha" is notable for "the violence of imagery used by Nekrasov to describe the felling [of trees]," its deployment of rhymes such as *pechali/vyrubali* (sorrow/felled) and *zhalko do slez/kudriavykh berez* (pity-filled tears/curly-haired birches), which together with the plot of the poem creates a "powerful orchestration of sympathy for the forest and its creatures . . . [as a place] of 'intrinsic worth' as habitat and place of serene beauty."[24] Costlow contends that when Nekrasov lamented the destruction of

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

trees, he was simultaneously condemning the devastating practices of the Russian ruling class toward its subjects and that in doing so he was drawing upon a history of analogizing men and trees in Russian letters.[25] Leo Tolstoy, too, who took interest in the forests on his ancestral estate and understood something of forest management, used forests to symbolize concepts much greater than mere standing timber. "Tolstoy's defense of the forest" in *Anna Karenina,* Costlow asserts, "is grounded not in economics or legislation, but in religious ethics and spiritual transformation"; the hero of the novel, Levin, originally intends to cut down his forests to pay off loans, but later has a change of heart.[26] Although irrational from a strictly calculating point of view, Levin's choice "not to cut down the linden is an act of faith . . . faith in the possibility of continuity," and later in the novel Levin "seeks refuge in woods and groves," running "to the forest, ly[ing] down under the aspens and [beginning] to think almost in a rapture."[27] For Tolstoy, the forest is a place of communion with larger forces—historical, social, spiritual—and to cut it down thoughtlessly is to destroy a link to the transcendent and to the past.

There was a similar recognition of the forest's deeply metaphorical value among nineteenth-century Russian landscape painters. The emphasis among painters, Christopher Ely argues, was on issues of national identity more than spirituality, but nonetheless represented a growing appreciation of the symbolic importance of the Russian forest; new approaches developed by painters such as Ilya Repin, Aleksei Savrasov, Fedor Vasil'ev, and Ivan Shishkin "constituted a founding myth of Russian national identity."[28] Over the course of the nineteenth century, Russian landscape painters moved away from mimicking aesthetic forms established by Western European artists and learned to appreciate their native landscape—a landscape offering vistas perhaps less dramatic or varied than the European ideal, but beautiful in its own humble way. The dark, homely, disordered forests, so unlike the rocky promontories, rushing seascapes, and picturesque Roman ruins that apotheosized Romantic standards of beauty, became valued specifically for their unassuming charm. Perhaps the most beloved depictions of this aesthetic were painted by Shishkin, whose paintings seemed defiantly commonplace, "as if he might have simply turned ninety degrees to the right and paint[ed] whatever he saw before him."[29] Shishkin's paintings depict an unorthodox beauty nearly omnipresent in the Russian forest; his forests "sprawl in every direction. Trees spill outside the frames of the paintings and overlap each other into the interior until it becomes impossible to differentiate one from another. . . . Dead branches, fallen trees, and decaying vegetation occupy a prominent position in almost all of these landscapes."[30] His canvases, as a contemporary critic had it, were "deeply national [*narodnyi*], healthy, serious, and severe, like northern nature itself. . . . No, he's like a true son of the wilds of the northern forest, in love with its impenetrable, severe wilderness, with its pines and firs, stretching to the sky, with the mute, untamed hinterlands of the gigantic trees. . . . He's in love with

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

the distinctive character of each tree, each bush, and each blade of grass, and like a loving song he values each wrinkle on his mother's face."[31] Shishkin's paintings, Ely claims, are notable for conveying their nationalistic content without employing the more typical symbols of the Imperial court or the Orthodox church. His paintings "offered his audiences of city-dwellers a chance to take in appreciation of the rural values and spirit of the nation. . . . By creating numerous realistic scenes of simple Russian forests and fields that stood as symbols of Russian nationality, Shishkin invited urban Russians to imagine a profound connection between themselves and their natural surroundings."[32] Shishkin himself felt the nationalistic content of his paintings lay in the shared childhood experience of all Russians, of rambling in the dark and tangled woods—perhaps intimidating to the uninitiated, but as comforting as home for those properly acculturated.[33]

Russian scientists also sensed what Russian writers and painters were feeling. In the first decades of the twentieth century, forest specialists devised theories inspired by the idea that the forest embodied Old Russia, and in the Soviet period, these concepts did not vanish, but instead survived, evolved, and in some ways thrived. The most important figure in this drama was Georgii Fedorovich Morozov, a professional forester and professor at the St. Petersburg Forest Institute who at the turn of the century grew alarmed that the Russian forest was in danger and set out to understand why. Morozov explicitly tied the forest's plight to management practices adopted uncritically from abroad and ill-suited to the Russian setting: "Our slowly advancing science of forestry arose in Western Europe, having begun with the Germans. But our forestry, without discarding the importance of the general, the idea of the West, will make an attempt to allow for the unique properties of *our* forests and *our* country."[34] Morozov critiqued German forest practices for their tendency to abstract the forest and minimize the influence of local variation. He claimed his task was to "show that forest biology has ignored the role of the particular and has not identified different 'taxonomic' or systematic communities, whose biology we must understand first of all."[35] Morozov's goal, however, was not just to understand the forest, but to prevent it from changing. Morozov, from his position as the editor of the country's most influential forest publication (*Lesnoi zhurnal* [The Forest Journal]), urged the state to adopt forest practices that would maintain the various kinds of forest—"stand types," in his terminology—as they were. He wanted to identify the various stand types of Russia and devise specific management plans so that each forest could be harvested without hindering its regeneration. As Anna Bramwell notes, there appeared in many countries ecological movements motivated by "a sense of loss of the past, associated with, but not limited to, the passing of the old, rural world"—but Morozov's forest management differed from other movements by attempting to blend preservationism with economic exploitation and striv-

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

ing to maintain landscapes as they were, even if that meant that a given plot of land looked more like a Shishkin painting than a regularized, German forest.[36]

Morozov's influence was amazingly persistent. His ideas remained a feature of the political landscape, from their formulation at the beginning of the twentieth century until the conclusion of the debates about the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, which was shuttered after Stalin's death in March 1953, and far beyond. From the earliest days of its articulation, Morozov's theory of stand types drew stubborn opposition from advocates of maximized output, who objected to the constraints that management guided by stand types would have placed on unchecked exploitation. The enormous appeal of Morozov's system for professional practitioners, however, and its emotional and nationalist resonance, ensured its continued popularity both before and after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Morozov's stand types reappeared in the 1926 forest organization instructions (the document indicating how foresters should delineate and harvest timberlands) and, after a period of retrenchment during the Great Turn of 1929–31, reemerged as a central plank in the programs of Stalin's forest-protection agencies. Morozov's ideas did not fit seamlessly into Stalin's environmental initiatives; "Stalin's environmentalism," I will argue, although a real phenomenon, focused more on hydrological function than on the moral value of the forest. But when Stalin chose to set aside huge tracts of Russia's best forestland in order to safeguard its hydrological properties, largely in response to the entreaties of Morozov's surviving students, and required that the protected forests remain essentially unchanged over time, Morozov's teachings essentially became official state policy. Morozov's influence reached its zenith during the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature, when a basically conservative project designed to restore the Russian landscape to its prehistoric ideal was twisted into a promethean endeavor dominated by Trofim Denisovich Lysenko. By the time that Morozov's supporters succeeded in wresting control away from Lysenko, Stalin's death ended state support for the venture.

A contemporaneous environmental ethic, which increased the role of the Russian peasant in state forest management, intersected with the Morozov narrative during the Great Stalin Plan. At the end of the tsarist period, the strict divide between peasant forests and state forest management and the rural population borrowed from Germany, although still strong, began to weaken. Foresters at the local level throughout the country questioned whether the policy of excluding the peasant, often deemed too irrational to participate in a scientific endeavor such as forest management, was not harmful for both the forest and the rural population and moved toward integrating them into the day-to-day work of overseeing the state's forests. After a doomed attempt during the revolutionary period to professionalize the forest completely, the democratizing approach was restored for a short time during the 1920s, and peasants were

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.

exhorted to view the forest as a dear friend to be loved and defended. Such romanticism was dispensed with after the introduction of rapid industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture in the late 1920s and 1930s, and when, in the late 1940s, collective farmers were once again urged to become an integral part of state forest policy so as to help fulfill the Great Stalin Plan, their alienation from the state apparatus and forest matters helped doom the plan.

Soviet forest policy reflected the fact that Russian forest management was not only an economic enterprise but also a product of the nation's cultural imagination. This imagination continued along its prerevolutionary trajectory during the Stalin period, despite the concerted effort of the Soviet state to dictate its development. Russian and Soviet economic policies, their considerable inefficiencies and drawbacks notwithstanding, created room for foresters to conceive of and implement forest theories that emphasized environmental or cultural considerations rather than economic expedience. As a result, a line of continuity can be drawn through the works of Morozov, written in the first decade of the twentieth century, to a December 1917 editorial in the journal *Lesnaia zhizn' i khoziaistvo* (Forest Life and Management) claiming that "the forest has always had . . . an enormous beneficial influence on the psyche and spiritual store of humans," to the speech of a delegate at a January 1949 forest conference asserting that "the forest is an enormous moral force for our country."[37] Stalin's rule did not destroy the trend of Russian forest management to reflect deeper culture streams; rather, Morozov's ideas, and forest protection in general, received more institutional support during the years from 1947 to 1953 than at any other time in Russian history. In fact, many of Stalin's environmental policies, and the Great Stalin Plan for the Transformation of Nature in particular, inadvertently brought to life the words of Chekhov's Dr. Astrov:

> Man is blessed with intellect and creative powers, so that he might enhance that which he is given. But he doesn't create, he only destroys. . . . But when I pass one of my peasant's forests that I've saved from the axe, or when I listen to the wind in the leaves of my young trees, trees that I planted with my own hands, I know that the climate is in my control, at least that tiny fraction. And if man is happy in a thousand years, then maybe I will be responsible for a little bit of that happiness. When I plant a birch, then see it grow green and move in the wind, my soul fills with pride and I . . . [38]

To be sure, the survival of environmentalist concerns is not the only noteworthy trend in Soviet forest management in the years between the October Revolution and Stalin's death: most of the Soviet Union's forests, and half of those in European Russia, were classified as "Group III" forests and exploited remorselessly. But the Stalinist political and economic system made meaningful economic and political sacrifices in the interests of environmentalism—even if explicit ideological support for the program was extremely weak—that gave the nineteenth-century linkage between Russia and the forest and Morozov's teachings a permanent place in Soviet environmental policy.

© 2011 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.