

Ștefan Dorondel & Stelu Șerban (Eds.), *A New Ecological Order: Development and the Transformation of Nature in Eastern Europe*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022, x + 281 pp., ISBN: 9780822947172.

The city of Kherson, the Kakhovka Dam, the nuclear power plants at Zaporizhzhya, and the Dnipro River. While writing this review, I have been following the dramatic war in Ukraine from the safety of my office in New York. At times on an hourly basis. The names, the environment, and its people have been largely foreign to me, and this fine anthology came as an excellent remedy. Though the entire content was written before the war began, the volume feels oddly relevant to understanding the current conflict.

The Russians who turned into Soviets only to become Russians again, loom large in this volume, either directly or indirectly. They serve as the implicit or explicit antagonists, but also, at times, as protagonists in most of the essays. Equally important is the real, or imagined, cultural, political, and scientific self-confidence of Western Europe. The anthology seeks to explore the shadowy presence of Eastern Europe caught in between Russia and the West. Exploring the meaning of this in-betweenness is what most of the articles have in common, and it serves as a key tool in the investigations of developments and transformations of the environments in question.

The geographical spread of the volume reaches from Czechia in the West to Kyrgyzstan in the East, and from Belarus in the North to Turkey in the South. Though this is most certainly a huge area, the editorial focus is not on any shared environment identity for these places. Instead, the articles seek to understand environmental strategies to escape a shared sense of being on the margin, in the periphery, or also in between the West and the Russians. In terms of historical time span, the collection covers, roughly, events from the 1870s to the mid-21st century, which was a period full of rapid modernization schemes that came to radically alter the natural world.


The scientists were at the forefront of bringing about this change, with the support of related experts such as engineers, architects, bureaucrats, planners, and so forth. Most essays in the volume focus on the impact of these agents. Both Dragana Ćorović's article about the transformation of Belgrade's urban landscape and George L. Vlachos' piece about hydraulic work in the Macedonian swampland bear testimony to the power of science and planning, and to excellent scholarship.

Other interesting contributions that stood out to me include Jiří Janáč's essay about the hydraulic bureaucracy in the modernization of waters in Czechia, along with Jeanne Féaux de la Croix and Flora Roberts's biographies of big dams in Central Asia. Being an ignoramus on these topics, I closed the anthology with the feeling of having learned more about the destructive powers of modernization on natural environments to the benefit of humans or also the political and social elites.

One essay that stands out is Stefan Dorondel and Anna Olenenko's "In Quest of Development: Territorialization and the Transformation of the Southern Ukrainian Wetlands, 1880–1960." It is not only well researched and well argued, but also relevant to understanding the current warfare in the region. The authors tell the story of how wetlands—(back then considered "wasteland")—were transformed under first the tsarist and then the Soviet regimes to create agricultural landscapes. It's a story about the transformation of muddy land to the benefit of large landowners and authorities at the expense of local communities, but also negotiations between colonial occupiers. At the heart of the article is the construction of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station in the 1950s, while Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. This caused the end of much of the wetlands in the region, including preventing the annual floods of the Dnipro River that left behind rich residue. The current Russian invasion of this land clearly builds on imagined and real historical claims of "ownership" of previously occupied environments. The article is a piece of solid environmental history about the destructive powers of modernization familiar to similar hydropower projects around the world. As these places and environments are constantly in the news, this article felt particularly enlightening. I shared the article with my students, and they too found it relevant and interesting in light of current affairs.

As with all anthologies, I found myself wondering about places and themes not included, such as the environments and political cultures of Finland, Poland, or Lithuania. Also, I was not fully convinced about classifying Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as East European countries, even though their legacies of large dam-building projects and political visions of social and environmental engineering were similar to those of the Eastern European nations.

It was surely refreshing to read this detailed and well-researched anthology about environmental transformations and developments in largely understudied regions of the world. The contributors to this anthology have offered what to me looked like novel stories written in an engaging language free of technical jargon. *A New Ecological Order* is an important contribution to the history of technology, science, and environment of Eastern Europe, and it is well worth the read.

Peder Anker  0000-0002-0017-5199
New York University, NY
peder.anker@nyu.edu