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Struggle for Oil: An Environmental History of West Siberia, 1970s -2008

Russia's substantial oil reserves have played a central role in its geopolitical and economic rebirth. West Siberia is Russia's most highly developed and oldest oil province, producing 78 percent of the all Russian oil. Though the province enjoys the highest rate of gross regional product in the country, West Siberia has been notorious for its pollution ever since the discovery of oil there in the 1960s. West Siberian oil resources have been exploited on a massive scale, and have been a major source of both revenue and a spectrum of petroleum-related ecological problems for forty years. Russian historiography, however, clearly lacks works concentrating on the regional environmental history of the late and post-Soviet period. Although there is no shortage of literature on Soviet environmental damage, research on modern Russian environmental history and the history of oil in particular is still just beginning to accumulate.

In my dissertation project, I interpret West Siberia's environmental problems as the product of ever-growing conflicts between federal and regional politics on the one hand, and between the state, businesses, and society on the other. These problems have deep historical roots in the resource policy of the Soviet totalitarian regime, the pressure of the planned economy, and in the challenges of the Cold War. At the same time, the full-scale socio-economic and political transition following the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought new trends into Russia's energy policy and created new challenges for the environment.

My study focuses on the public discourse surrounding West Siberian oil production and its historical and political roots. When, and in what context, were the environmental aspects of oil production first brought up? What effect has oil production had on indigenous communities of the region, and what has been the societal response thereto? How has the regional environmental movement developed, and what relationship does it have to the state and businesses? How have conflicts between federal and regional oil policies affected the environment of West Siberia? To what extent have the environmental challenges of the modern Russian oil industry been inherited from Soviet energy and natural resource policy?