

The Volga and Russian geopolitics

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The longest river in Europe bears the imprint of Soviet history. From dams to fishing by way of industrialization, it lies at the heart of the continental upheaval that is unfolding before us.

Reviewed: Pascal Marchand, *Volga, l'héritage de la modernité* (Volga: The Legacy of Modernity) Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 2023, 256 p., 23 €.

Pascal Marchand, a geographer specializing in Russia and the author of many authoritative publications, has published a new book, *Volga, l'héritage de la modernité* (Volga: The Legacy of Modernity). He wrote his doctoral thesis on the management of the Volga and the environment in the late Soviet period.

A global context

The book's guiding thread is the story of the successive stages in the management of Europe's longest river as it evolved from a natural waterway to a "man-made" river, while experiencing failures and successes that had positive and negative effects on the economy and environment. Marchand has chosen to assign particular importance (in pages as well as chapters) to fish (in terms of physical geography) and fishing (in terms of human geography), though he has neglected no topic. Overall, the book is very thorough.

Because it seeks to retrace the major steps in managing the Volga, the book is primarily written in the past tense. It is logically included in the series "Geohistory of

a River." The exceptions are the end of chapter eight, which examines river traffic, as well as the conclusion, entitled "The Volga: An Asian River?" These passages explore the present as well as future perspectives.

For geographers, the final pages are probably more fascinating than the rest. They prove that the author is a great specialist of Russian geopolitics, which he situates in a Eurasian and even global context. Historic upheavals of planetary significance in which Russia is the protagonist are unfolding before us. The economic and geopolitical perspective of the North-South corridor, from the Volga to India by way of the Caspian Sea and Iran, are the most striking example.

A "pantheon of Marxism-Leninism"

The book begins with a prologue in which the author develops a metaphor that has been important to him for some time: that of the Volga as the "valley of the Bolshevik kings," a "pantheon of Marxism-Leninism," or a "mausoleum valley," like an Orthodox iconostasis of Soviet Communism.

The first chapter is devoted to physical geography, focusing on the river's limits and potential for management, particularly hydroelectric energy production. Its originality lies in the importance it gives to the biogeography of fish.

Chapter two studies the political and administrative as well as the natural context in which river management work has occurred. It explains how the Soviet regime dealt with years of drought in the Volga basin, a major consequence of which was the decline in the Caspian Sea's water level. Marchand shows how this exceptional climactic era shaped a number of contemporary management decisions. Inter-basin transfer projects are discussed in great detail, not least because Marchand interprets their failure as a major reason for the Soviet Union's collapse.

The third chapter presents the consequences of the river's transformation into a staircase of lakes due to the construction of a dozen or so dams from the 1930s to the 1980s. Marchand first calculates the surface area of flooded lands, which are particularly extensive since the dams are located on planes. Next, he examines their role in the regularization of flows, reduced water levels being the most successful--and most desired--effect.

Since 1962, the Volgograd dam has produced artificially high water levels to help the fish populations of the lower Volga, but the flow thus released has not brought about water levels as high as were once achieved naturally. The chapter ends by considering environmental problems: the excess water in land near lakes resulting from the rise of the water table; riverbanks retreating due to erosion; and the siltation of dam reservoirs.

The next chapters are devoted to fish stocks and fishing, much of which is concerned with the exemplary question of sturgeon and the geographic region of the lower Volga, though irrigation is a close second.

Urbanization and river traffic

In a chapter devoted to towns on the Volga, Marchand emphasizes the legacy of old fortresses (or kremlins), often made of wood. Yet at the time that the tsarist empire was overthrown, the great river's banks lacked a proper major city, with the possible exception of Saratov.

Late in European history, the Volga was urbanized thanks to Soviet industrialization. It received considerable impetus from the Second World War (or Great Patriotic War, in Soviet phraseology), since, in the face of the Nazi advance, factories located further west had to be evacuated and relocated to the Volga, the Urals, and Siberia.

In the 1950s and 60s, the Soviet economic boom was based on planning that turned to the Volga and, at least for hydrocarbons and heavy industry, the Kama, its major tributary. In addition to core industries, the region also became the home to the automobile industry, notably in Togliatti (on the Volga) for cars and Naberezhnye Chelny (on the Kama) for trucks; aeronautics, in Kazan, Ulyanovsk, Samara, and Saratov; and the aerospace industry, primarily in Samara.

The eighth and final chapter consider river traffic. A Volga navigable by large vessels has long been a dream of Russian rulers, yet it was only achieved recently, thanks to Soviet infrastructure policies, which are not yet complete. With the end of the Soviet Union, river traffic collapsed. Yet a renewal is now underway, as the old Five Sea System--though now turned towards the Indian Ocean--has once again become a priority.

One problem lies in the fill level of the Cheboksary reservoir which, when too low, makes the circulation of large vessels on this section impossible. Marchand describes the power struggle between the federal government, which wants to raise the water level, and local authorities (often supported by ecologists) who have successfully refused.

Rigorous yet personal

This little synthetic book includes five illustrations (four maps and one cross-section) and 28 black-and-white photographs. An annex includes a table that summarizes the numerical characteristics of the dam reservoirs connected to the river and its main tributary. The volume lacks a bibliography, but in its place are some twenty pages of notes.

Overall, the book is lively and studded with personal anecdotes. For instance, the author mentions the stifling heat of the streets of Volgograd, and regrets the loss of a much of the Russian book collection at the Geography Institute in Paris.

Marchand, who has several decades experience with the Volga, has produced a concisely written synthetic work that also examines its various topics exhaustively. The fact that it is a rigorous academic study does not prevent him from offering personal impressions, with which one may not always agree, but which make for enjoyable and often fascinating reading.

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