

Into a Frozen Inferno: Personal and Historical Trajectories in Monchegorsk

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Through a foggy bus window I began to make out the town amid the meager taiga landscape. It'd be fitting if the translucent layer of film distorting my view came from the plant's pollution, but I doubt that was the case. As we rolled past a familiar scene of dilapidated Soviet-era buildings and antiquated monuments, something caught my eye. Graffitied on the side of a building near the bus station were the unexpected words: "Welcome to Detroit."



A view of Monchegorsk in the distance through a clouded bus window in 2008. Credit: Andy Bruno

My fiancée, who was travelling with me, and I looked at each other startled and laughed. I was in the middle of researching the environmental history of industry in the Soviet north, while she was writing her own

dissertation on the history of public transportation in Detroit. Monchegorsk, the company town on the Kola Peninsula we had just entered, shared a dystopian reputation with the motor city. But otherwise these two places were worlds apart, connected only idiosyncratically by our personal backgrounds and some Monchegorsk resident's apparent enthusiasm for rapper Eminem.

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The extreme character of environmental degradation from the Severonikel' smelter's toxic emissions had initially attracted me there. Blackened earth and dying shrubs

went on for kilometers south of the plant. These visible results of the heavy loads of sulfur dioxide and metals released by the plant prompted the tourist guide *Lonely Planet* to snarkily remark, “If you’ve ever had the notion to visit Hell, Monchegorsk is pretty close.” I had to go, of course. Why, I wanted to know, had the Soviet Union built such a dirty plant at the far end of the earth? What was it like there? Might it recover?

My first venture to the site occurred in 2004, while I was still a master’s student. After attending a conference in the larger city of Murmansk on the Arctic Ocean, I traveled down to Monchegorsk by myself. It turned out to be an adventurous trip. I was taken by the quaintness of the place and the attractive trees in the central park as I wandered around during the day, stopping by museums and approaching the gates of the factory. When I returned to my hotel, the receptionist ominously informed me: “There was a problem with your passport registration. Go to your room and some men will come and see you.”

They, the policemen, took me into the station. As they processed me one of the officers joked that he could be my president one day since he had been born in the U.S. Then, as I entered the questioning room, I clumsily bumped into a young guard holding an AK-47, muttering an *izvinite* (excuse me). A Ukrainian Orthodox priest without his papers and Sasha, a local juvenile delinquent, joined me for the interrogation, waiting their own turns. Both the tired questioning officer and my exasperated *advokat* (defense attorney) tried to explain my infraction, while I insisted that my student visa allowed me to visit Monchegorsk. Through a combination of sheer obstinacy and tone-deafness to what probably could have been resolved by a simple bribe, I managed to convince the police to relent.

As I was leaving another officer approached me and asked if I could help with his English assignment. Reluctantly, I agreed and while we were discussing electrician vocabulary that was beyond me in my native tongue, the boss stopped by and demanded that they charge me a fine. Though my impromptu pupil rose to my defense, I left the station with a court date for the next day and the advice to skip town and “just don’t come back.”

Four years later I came back. After being reminded of my travel companion’s hometown, I again glimpsed the belching smokestacks. Reading in archives and libraries had informed me about much of the plant’s history by this point: how it was an outgrowth of phosphate mines in the Khibiny Mountains; how Gulag prisoners built much of the initial infrastructure; how tensions with the nearby Lapland nature reserve extended back to the founding of the nickel works; how production and pollution varied throughout the decades; and how enterprise leaders had sought to deal with industrial wastes at different phases of its history. Yet as an observer of a

panorama of Severonikel', I was more reminded of my family's trips past the smokestacks of Gary, Indiana as we returned from Grandma's house than all of the history I had learned.



The Severonikel plant in 2008. Credit: Andy Bruno



Construction of the Severonikel plant in 1940. Credit: Wikimedia Commons

I didn't stay in Monchegorsk long this time. Instead, we took a tour of the picturesque Lapland nature reserve. With refreshing streams, healthy forest, and a snow-covered lake, it felt far removed from its threatening neighbor. Except, of course, the logo of Norilsk Nickel—the owner of the Severonikel' plant and contributor to the nature reserve's tourism infrastructure—was plastered around here and there. Industry and conservation, thriving taiga and mangled moonscape were deeply interwoven in this region. Indeed, as I had discovered, the same expedition that charted out the original borders of the nature reserve had revealed the first traces of nickel deposits in the area.



The Lapland Nature Reserve in 2008. Credit: Andy Bruno

The pollution that denuded large swaths of surrounding vegetation grew in part from a refusal to acknowledge that industrial output and nature protection usually remain at odds. Nickel smelting is an inherently dirty business, but the Soviet experience with it was environmentally unremarkable until the Brezhnev era. Sulfur emissions at Severonikel' even began to stabilize in the end of the 1960s. At the time an observer would certainly have had to conclude that the Sudbury nickel mines in Canada were much more

destructive to the landscape than those in northwest Russia.

What happened next, though, made the USSR earn its reputation for ecocide. With local deposits exhausted, Severonikel' switched to processing ore shipped from elsewhere in the country (in particular Norilsk and the nearby Pechenga region). This ore tended to have significantly higher sulfur content than local materials, quickly outflanking the reprocessing efforts at the plant. Engineers at the firm recognized by this point that “the products of metallurgical manufacturing—the dusts of sulfides

and the oxides of nickel and copper, carbon monoxide, sulfur gas, and nickel solutions —are to varying degrees toxic.” Yet metallurgical manufacturing skyrocketed during the 1970s and 1980s, leading to a more than doubling of sulfur dioxide emissions. Crossing critical thresholds, the environmental damage from this pollution rapidly accelerated until the de-industrialization of the 1990s brought reprieve to the landscape and poverty to the population.

It was not simply the Prometheanism of the Soviet regime or inefficiencies of the communist command economy that generated extreme environmental damage. In the late twentieth century awareness of pollution problems clashed with the continuation of an economic model based primarily on increasing output. As political leaders signed international agreements to cut emissions, the plants continued to produce more metals. The USSR should rightly be held accountable for the resultant environmental failures. But this calamity belonged primarily to late socialism, not to Stalinism.

Appreciating the temporal dimension of Arctic pollution makes this toxic place feel closer to home. Though Severonikel dwarfed it in scale, the aluminum caster down the street from me has its own sordid history of pollution. If the nickel industry in the Soviet north offers a story of hell, then perhaps it is only one circle of it. Much of what the country did to degrade the taiga mirrors the actions of extractive industries elsewhere.

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