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***Chelovek Protiv Okruzhayushchei Sredy: Landshafty Velikoi Voiny v
Vostochnoi Evrope [Mankind against the Environment: Landscapes of
the Great War in Eastern Europe]***

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The destruction of ecosystems, landscapes and biodiversity is often seen as just one among many consequences of war – and not the most significant. Environmental problems tend to fade against the backdrop of human suffering, economic crises and political debates. Yet the boundary between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘natural’ often exists only in the eye of the beholder. The destinies of human societies and their environments are usually so interwoven that it is impossible to separate one from the other, and brutality toward people and nature are merely two sides of the same coin.

In recent years, armed conflicts have once again become a pressing and painful subject for the humanities, and environmental history has been no exception. Following one of the most influential works in this field – the edited volume *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally* (Richard Tucker and Edmund Russell, eds.) – several studies have examined the interaction between society and the environment during wartime. The Second World War has consistently attracted attention, as it laid the foundations of new international politics, including in the sphere of climate and environmental protection, and became, in John McNeill’s view, one of the starting points of the Great Acceleration. For a long time, the First World War remained in the shadow of this later and bloodier conflict. Although recent research has partly corrected this imbalance, many gaps remain in the environmental history of the First World War.

The predominant format in this field has been the edited volume, bringing together researchers from different regions and disciplines around a common theme. A group of Russian scholars has now contributed to this body of work. In 2024, the European University at St Petersburg Press published a collective monograph entitled *Human against the Environment: Landscapes of the Great War in Eastern Europe*. Its co-authors – Yaroslav Golubinov, Yulia Zherdeva, Alexandra Likhacheva and Oxana Nagornaia, under Nagornaia’s direction – share responsibility for all chapters of the book. It is the result of a three-year project, *The Great War and the Anthropocene: Toxic Legacies of Empires and the Transformation of the Environment in Central and Eastern Europe*, supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and the Austrian Science Fund.

Human against the Environment is the most substantial and visible study to date on the environmental history of the Eastern Front during the First World War. The authors examine different aspects of the conflict across five chapters,

drawing on an impressive range of sources collected from central and regional Russian archives and libraries. Many of these sources were studied here for the first time in the framework of an international environmental history project – an opportunity unlikely to recur soon, which adds significantly to the book's value. But how much does this volume advance our understanding of the environmental dimension of the 'Great War'? And how successful is it methodologically?

The brief prologue outlines the theme and its importance in broad strokes, drawing on quotations from eyewitnesses and facts about the war. The key conceptual framework is established in the first chapter, 'Wars of the Modern Period in Scholarly Debates.' Here the reader is introduced to Kurt Lewin's 1917 concept of the 'belligerative landscape': a physical space altered and structured by military action, where the zone before the front line serves to hold or push it forward, and beyond which begins the 'unknown and dangerous 'nothingness'' (p. 13). As the authors show later, the 'fog of war' in the perception of landscapes is indeed difficult to overcome. Connecting the Great War to current debates on the Anthropocene, they make an important claim on p. 16: 'As shown by the results of the project presented in this book, the First World War became an important point of development (or point of no return) in environmental change', and can therefore be considered 'one of the cornerstones of the Anthropocene.'

Chapters 2–5 form the empirical core of the book. Analysing 'nature through the optics of war', Chapter 2 deals with rivers in military operations, terrain in troop movements and territorial control, forests as resources and ecosystems, and concludes with a substantial section on animals at the front and in the rear. Chapter 3 focuses on the management of occupied territories in Galicia, Bukovina and Romania. Its central themes include militarised landscapes, the history of military medicine, and the impact of the First World War on Eastern Europe's oil industry. Here, the focus on the environment and the Anthropocene begins to blur: while the transformation of landscapes fits within environmental history, the link between the oil industry and the environment remains largely superficial. The authors describe in detail the destruction of oil wells and reservoirs before enemy advances, but the environmental impact of spills and burning oil is merely noted, not analysed: 'Inflicting damage on the enemy automatically meant the destruction of the natural environment' (p. 202). To sustain their thesis that the Great War was a cornerstone of the Anthropocene, the authors needed to examine more closely how the destruction of oil reserves affected ecosystems, how different groups assessed these events, and what the long-term effects were. These questions remain unanswered.

Chapter 4 is among the strongest in the book. Here the authors explore how nature and frontline landscapes were perceived by combatants, asking: 'Which factors determine the construction and transmission by soldiers of an image of

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a conquered yet potentially dangerous environment during war?’ (p. 203). The chapter draws on a rich body of ego-documents and visual sources, including a section on ‘nature through the lens of the military camera.’ By combining personal experience with environmental transformation, wartime photographs juxtapose idyllic agrarian scenes with images of devastation, showing the shift ‘from the heroics of war to the negative consequences of armed conflict’ (p. 228).

Chapter 5, ‘The Collapse of Empires and the Toxic Legacy of the Front’, again moves away from the book’s central questions. While briefly acknowledging that demilitarisation also meant confronting the toxic legacy of war, the authors devote some thirty pages almost entirely to political and administrative aspects of the demobilisation process: demobilisation commissions, property transport and storage, interdepartmental rivalry, railway breakdowns, speculation and looting. References to environmental issues often seem incidental. For example, in the section entitled ‘Hunger and Mass Extinction of Animals on Former Frontline Spaces’, the discussion is limited to the problems of horse maintenance, with no mention of the near-extinction of the Białowieża bison during the war (pp. 270–273).

In the epilogue, the authors present the First World War as a palimpsest, understandable only through the combination of multiple natural, cultural and social layers. The war transformed the landscapes of Eastern Europe, changed practices of interaction with the environment, and left traces in ecosystems that are still measurable today. At the same time, it stimulated international initiatives for nature protection. Although political divisions prevented Eastern Europe from being fully integrated into these projects, the Eastern Front nevertheless played a significant role in the environmental history of the First World War.

The research carried out by the authors – and this book as its main result – marks an important step in studying the environmental legacy of the war, whose significance remains insufficiently understood despite a long historiographical tradition. The book benefits greatly from the authors’ meticulous work with archival and visual sources in Russia, which adds new and important details to the existing picture. Yet some of their methodological choices and approaches require further discussion.

First, the framing in the title – *Human against the Environment* – reflects a rather one-sided view of human–nature relations in wartime. This perspective was common in early works of environmental history but has since been largely abandoned. Already in the 2004 volume edited by Tucker and Russell, nature appears not only as a ‘natural enemy’ but also as a ‘natural ally.’ Rivers could act as obstacles but also as defences; mountains slowed troop movements but also helped hold positions. The idea of human–nature antagonism may be a convenient metaphor for a book on war, but it creates a false binary that obscures the complexity of historical reality.

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Second, the authors often adopt the perspective of their sources, viewing the environment through the prism of the belligerent landscape, with the ‘unknown and dangerous “nothingness”’ lying beyond the front line. The scarcity of sources from the western side of the Eastern Front in many chapters restricts the analysis largely to a Russian perspective. The reader follows combatants along Galician rivers, climbs the Carpathian peaks, and sees through the eyes of wartime photographers. This narrative is engaging, but it does not keep the reader’s attention on landscapes and ecosystems that transcended political borders and for which the advance of Russian, German or Austrian troops meant the same devastation. Historians are often constrained by the anthropocentric and state-centred perspectives of their sources, but more reflection on this limitation could have helped balance the narrative.

Third, many sections – such as those on the oil industry or demobilisation – do not fit neatly into the environmental framework the authors propose. The book sometimes gives the impression that ‘the environment’ and ‘the Anthropocene’ served mainly as umbrella concepts to unite researchers with diverse interests, some of which lay outside environmental history. This may have worked well for project organisation, but in book form it leads to important themes going unmentioned or covered too briefly.

These shortcomings do not diminish the fact that the book raises important questions and opens up space for new research in a promising and timely field. It demonstrates once again that the ecology of war is not a peripheral subject of inquiry but a central theme for understanding the key contradictions of the twentieth century. The book offers several compelling case studies and valuable sources, making it an important contribution to debates on the environmental history of the Eastern Front in the First World War, successfully combining military, environmental and social dimensions of warfare into a coherent narrative.

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