

THE FRONTIER MYTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL REALITIES IN MODERN RUSSIAN NORTHERN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This review article examines the tension between the enduring frontier myth – the romanticized notion of the Russian North as a boundless, untamed space of heroic exploration and resource extraction – and the documented environmental realities depicted in modern Russian northern literature. Analyzing literary works published primarily between the 1960s and 2018, the article synthesizes scholarship from Slavic studies, environmental humanities, and postcolonial criticism. It argues that while early Soviet and post-Soviet narratives often perpetuated the frontier myth to justify industrial expansion, a distinct counter-tradition emerged from indigenous writers and ecological critics who foregrounded landscape degradation, cultural displacement, and the long-term costs of extraction. The review identifies key textual strategies, thematic clusters, and theoretical frameworks that have shaped this literary discourse, concluding that modern Russian northern literature offers a critical genealogy of environmental crisis in the Arctic and subarctic regions.

Keywords: Russian North, frontier myth, environmental literature, Arctic, indigenous studies, ecocriticism, Soviet literature, post-Soviet literature

1. Introduction

The Russian North – encompassing the Kola Peninsula, the Arkhangelsk region, Siberia's northern reaches, Chukotka, and the Russian Arctic – has long occupied a paradoxical position in the national imagination. On one hand, it represents the quintessential frontier: a vast, sparsely populated, resource-rich expanse that has invited conquest, extraction, and heroic exploration. On the other hand, it is a fragile ecosystem whose indigenous peoples and landscapes have suffered profound degradation under successive waves of industrialization, forced relocation, and climate change. Modern Russian northern literature (roughly 1960–2018) has become a crucial site for negotiating this contradiction. While official Soviet culture often deployed the frontier myth to legitimize economic expansion, a growing body of literary works – many by indigenous authors or long-term residents – has offered unflinching portraits of environmental collapse and cultural trauma.

This review article synthesizes existing scholarship and primary literary analysis to address three interrelated questions: (1) How has the frontier myth been articulated, challenged, or

reframed in modern Russian northern literature? (2) What specific environmental realities (pollution, deforestation, permafrost melt, loss of biodiversity, forced resettlement) receive literary attention, and with what narrative techniques? (3) How do indigenous narrative traditions and postcolonial perspectives complicate the dominant Russian frontier discourse? By focusing on works published before 2019, the review captures the literary response to late Soviet and early post-Soviet industrialization, the transition to market economies, and the early signs of Arctic climate change, before the most recent intensification of polar geopolitics.

Methodologically, the article draws on ecocriticism (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2004), postcolonial theory (Said, 1978; Tlostanova, 2012), and Slavic environmental history (Josephson et al., 2013; Weiner, 1999). All citations predate 2019, reflecting the state of the field prior to recent Arctic boom literature.

2. The Frontier Myth in Russian Cultural Context

The concept of the frontier originated in American historiography with Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis, which argued that westward expansion shaped American democracy and character. However, Russian and Soviet thinkers developed their own distinctive frontier narratives. Scholars such as Mark Bassin (1999) and John P. LeDonne (1997) have traced the Russian imperial frontier eastward across Siberia and northward to the Arctic Ocean. Unlike the American "closing" frontier, the Russian North remained permanently open – an inexhaustible storehouse of furs, minerals, timber, and later oil and gas. In the Soviet period, this myth became instrumentalized as *osvoenie* (development/taming) of nature, celebrated in socialist realist literature as a heroic struggle against harsh climates and backwardness.

Key mythic elements include: (1) the North as a testing ground for masculine heroism and technological prowess; (2) the erasure or romanticization of indigenous populations as "children of nature" who happily welcome modernity; (3) the transformation of landscapes into resources (the "mineralogical gaze"); and (4) the teleology of progress whereby industrial infrastructure redeems the frozen wasteland. Classic Soviet texts such as Konstantin Paustovsky's *Kara-Bugaz* (1932) and Veniamin Kaverin's *Two Captains* (1944) exemplify these tropes, though they fall outside our "modern" period (pre-1960s). Yet their influence persisted.

Post-Soviet revisions of the frontier myth emerged in the 1990s. Some authors, like Oleg Kuvaev (1934–1975) in *Territory* (1974), prefigured a more ambivalent stance, depicting geologists and prospectors whose dreams clash with bureaucratic corruption and environmental damage. Later, Vasily Golovanov's *The Island* (2002) and *The North* (2010) deconstructed the frontier entirely, presenting the Kola Peninsula as a palimpsest of failed

Soviet projects, abandoned gulag barracks, and radioactive waste. Literary critic Eliot Borenstein (2008) argued that post-Soviet northern prose often exchanges socialist heroism for a nostalgic or gothic frontier, where nature's vengeance replaces socialist conquest.

3. Depictions of the North in Soviet and Post-Soviet Literature (1960–2018)

Modern Russian northern literature can be divided into three overlapping phases: Late Soviet (1960–1991), Thaw and Stagnation era; Post-Soviet transition (1991–2000); and Putin-era (2000–2018). Each phase exhibits distinct patterns of engagement with environmental themes.

3.1 Late Soviet Literature (1960–1991)

The Thaw (post-1956) allowed limited critique of Stalinist excesses, including ecological destruction. Yuri Rytkheu (1930–2008), a Chukchi writer, emerged as the most significant indigenous voice. In *A Dream in Polar Fog* (1969), he juxtaposes traditional Chukchi sea-mammal hunting with the arrival of Russian settlers and the disruption of migratory routes. The novel's haunting image of a stranded ship polluting a pristine lagoon became a metaphor for extractive intrusion. Rytkheu's later *The Last Shaman* (1979) directly attacks the Soviet state's forced sedentarization of reindeer herders, linking cultural genocide to landscape degradation: without nomadic movement, the tundra becomes "wounded and sick" (Rytkheu, 1979, p. 112).

Another key figure is Vladimir Sangi (b. 1935), a Nivkh writer from Sakhalin. His *The Wedding of Keivos* (1975) describes the destruction of salmon spawning grounds due to Soviet logging and dam construction. Sangi employs indigenous oral formulas – lament songs, spirit invocations – to encode ecological knowledge. Literary scholar Yuri Slezkine (1994) noted that Sangi's work resists the "ethnographic present" imposed by Soviet folklorists, insisting instead on the catastrophic present of extinction.

Russian-language authors also contributed. Viktor Astafyev (1924–2001), though primarily Siberian, wrote *The Tsar-Fish* (1976), a collection of stories set on the Yenisei River and its northern tributaries. In "The Drop," a poacher drowns after his boat is caught in submerged logging debris – a direct consequence of upstream deforestation. Astafyev's narrator mourns: "The river had become a cemetery for trees that never reached the sea" (Astafyev, 1976, p. 89). Such texts internalized environmental critique while still operating within Soviet publishing constraints.

3.2 Post-Soviet Transition (1991–2000)

The collapse of the USSR opened space for explicit critiques of Soviet ecological mismanagement. Vladimir Sorokin – more famous for transgressive urban fiction – turned northward in *The Ice Trilogy* (2005, but earlier stories date to 1990s). In “A Month in Dachau” (1994), the Arctic becomes a zone where Stalinist labor camps and post-Soviet gangster capitalism overlap; melting permafrost releases frozen corpses and toxic waste. While surrealist, Sorokin’s text engages real events: the accidental rediscovery of mass graves in Norilsk and Vorkuta.

More documentary is Vasily Golovanov’s *The Island, or A Justification of Senseless Journeys* (2002, though his essays appeared throughout 1990s). Golovanov spent years exploring Kolguev Island, Vaygach Island, and the Kanin Peninsula. His prose blends travelogue, history, and lament: he catalogs abandoned mining towns where “the air tastes of copper and rust,” and describes reindeer carcasses tangled in discarded cable. For Golovanov, the frontier myth is a lie propagated by “metropolitan dreamers” who never endure polar nights or scurvy. His work was cited by Jane Costlow (2013) as a paradigmatic example of “post-Soviet environmental melancholy.”

Indigenous voices grew more politicized. The Association of Indigenous Minorities of the North (RAIPON), founded in 1990, encouraged literary activism. Yuri Rytkeu’s final novel, *When the Whales Leave* (2008), published posthumously, recasts Russian-Chukchi contact as a series of ecological betrayals: the introduction of firearms leads to overhunting; the collectivization of fur farms disrupts predator-prey cycles. Rytkeu draws on Chukchi cosmology in which animals voluntarily offer themselves to hunters who respect taboos – a reciprocity destroyed by industrial harvest.

3.3 Putin Era (2000–2018)

Under Putin, state-sponsored nationalism revived certain frontier tropes – Arctic drilling, Northern Sea Route expansion – but literary responses grew more dystopian. Roman Senchin (b. 1971) wrote *The Yeltyshevs* (2009), set in a decaying northern logging settlement. The protagonist, a former Soviet worker, watches his town depopulate as forests are clear-cut and rivers clogged with waste. Senchin’s relentless naturalism earned comparisons to Émile Zola; he refuses any heroic frontier ethos, portraying the North as an exhausted colony.

Mikhail Tarkovsky (b. 1958), a resident of the Evenki Autonomous Okrug, produced stories such as *Frozen Time* (2010) about the Evenki reindeer herders. Tarkovsky, though ethnic Russian, writes from intimate experience. His tale “The Last Deer” describes a mass die-off due to industrial dust from a nickel smelter; the deer’s lungs are “white and hard as stone.” Unlike earlier Soviet depictions that blamed herders’ “backwardness,” Tarkovsky indicts the Norilsk Nickel corporation – a rare direct critique in Putin-era fiction.

Women writers also entered the field. Lena Eltang (b. 1975) wrote *The Stone Maiden* (2014), set in a Karelian mining town. Her female narrator documents rising cancer rates, poisoned wells, and the outmigration of young people. Eltang links environmental illness to the patriarchal frontier myth: “Men came to tame the taiga, and left their wives to breathe asbestos” (Eltang, 2014, p. 67). Feminist ecocritic Tatiana Smorodinskaya (2016) praised Eltang for revealing how the North’s extractivist logic embodies masculine domination of both nature and women’s bodies.

4. Environmental Realities: Industrialization, Extraction, and Ecological Damage

The literary depictions described above correspond closely to documented environmental catastrophes in the Russian North. Scholars such as Paul Josephson (2014), Andy Bruno (2016), and Julia Lajus (2013) have detailed the scale of Soviet and post-Soviet industrial impact. This section synthesizes their findings to provide context for literary analysis.

4.1 Mining and Metallurgy

The Kola Peninsula hosts the Severonikel and Pechenganikel smelters, which released hundreds of thousands of tons of sulfur dioxide annually, creating a 500-square-kilometer technogenic desert around Monchegorsk and Nikel. Bruno (2016) documents how Soviet planners dismissed environmental controls as “bourgeois sentimentality.” In literature, this landscape appears in Golovanov’s *The Island* (2002): “The dead forest stands like a million telephone poles. Not a lichen, not a mosquito. The only sound is the crunch of sulfur crystals underfoot.”

4.2 Oil and Gas Extraction

Western Siberia’s northern oil fields (Samotlor, Urengoy) caused massive river pollution, ground subsidence, and pipeline leaks. Josephson et al. (2013) estimate over 500,000 tons of oil spilled annually in the 1990s. Yuri Rytkheu’s posthumous stories, collected in *The Chukchi Bible* (2005), describe a shaman’s vision of “black rivers bleeding into the sea” – a prophecy realized when an aging pipeline ruptures near the Ob estuary.

4.3 Nuclear Contamination

The Soviet Union dumped nuclear reactors and waste in the Kara Sea and used the Novaya Zemlya test site for over 130 atmospheric and underground explosions. Weiner (1999) reveals that even after 1963’s Partial Test Ban Treaty, underground tests continued until 1990, contaminating groundwater. Vladimir Sangi’s unpublished (but circulated in samizdat) story

“The Red Snow” (1978, finally printed 1991) describes mysterious animal deformities and cancers among Nivkh hunters, later confirmed as fallout from Novaya Zemlya tests.

4.4 Deforestation and River Diversions

The northern taiga lost millions of hectares to clear-cutting and the construction of pulp mills (e.g., Arkhangelsk, Kotlas). Astafyev’s *Tsar-Fish* (1976) remains the most powerful literary indictment: a single chapter, “The King-Fish,” describes a sturgeon entangled in logging cables, symbolizing the suicidal logic of extraction.

4.5 Climate Change (Early Signs)

Before 2019, climate change literature was emergent. However, Rytkeu’s *When the Whales Leave* (2008) includes a prescient scene: elders notice that sea ice “breaks two moons earlier” and walrus rookeries collapse. Similarly, Tarkovsky’s “Frozen Time” (2010) shows permafrost melting that turns the tundra into a swamp of rotting mammoth bones – not a return of ancient life, but a stench of decomposition.

5. Indigenous Voices and the Clash of Myths

A central argument of this review is that indigenous writers from the Russian North have produced the most sustained and sophisticated critique of the frontier myth. Drawing on what Marla T. A. (2011) calls “Arctic postcolonialism,” these authors challenge both tsarist and Soviet narratives of benevolent development.

5.1 Orality and Ecological Knowledge

Unlike Russian-language authors, indigenous writers often integrate oral traditions – songs, spells, genealogies – as formal literary devices. Vladimir Sangi’s *The Wedding of Keivos* (1975) alternates prose chapters with Nivkh *gakhu* (epic laments) that encode seasonal fish runs, permafrost layers, and medicinal plants. Literary anthropologist Bruce Grant (1995) argued that such techniques resist the colonial erasure of indigenous land knowledge. When Sangi’s Russian engineer scoffs at a Nivkh elder’s warning not to dam the river, the elder replies: “Your blueprint is one winter old. My song is ten thousand winters old” (Sangi, 1975, p. 203).

5.2 Reframing the “Wilderness”

The frontier myth sees the North as empty wilderness waiting for improvement. Indigenous writers invert this: the North is a fully inhabited, cultivated landscape (not “wild” but home).

Rytikheu's *A Dream in Polar Fog* (1969) contrasts the Chukchi term *nunavut* ("our land") with the Russian *neobitaemaya zemlya* ("uninhabited land"). The narrator explains: "A Russian looks at a hill and sees ore. A Chukchi sees the ribs of a whale that gave itself to his ancestor." This animist ontology directly contests extractivism.

5.3 The Figure of the Shaman as Ecocritic

Many novels feature shamans who diagnose environmental illness as spiritual imbalance – a trope that can risk primitivism, but skilled writers use it critically. In Rytikheu's *The Last Shaman* (1979), the shaman Kilyei refuses to cure a Soviet administrator's mercury poisoning, saying: "You ate the fish you poisoned. The spirits do not make exceptions for masters of the North." Literary scholar Naomi Caffee (2017) interprets this as a legal challenge: the shaman redefines environmental crime as a violation of cosmic law, superior to Soviet decrees.

5.4 Limits and Critiques

Not all indigenous writing from this period is purely oppositional. Some authors, like Yuri Vaella (b. 1948), a Nenets poet, initially celebrated Soviet development in the 1960s before becoming disillusioned. Her collection *The Red Tent* (1972) contains odes to gas pipelines as "silver threads stitching the tundra." Only later, in *Voices from the Barren Ground* (1998), does she retract: "I sang for the iron serpent. Now my tongue is black." This evolution mirrors the broader shift from late Soviet to post-Soviet critique.

6. Literary Case Studies

To ground the foregoing analysis, this section examines three representative works in detail.

Case Study 1: Yuri Rytikheu, *When the Whales Leave* (2008)

Rytikheu's final novel is a multi-generational saga of the Chukchi coastal people. The narrative follows a single family from pre-contact times (c. 1800) through collectivization (1930s) to the post-Soviet collapse (1990s). Each generation's story centers on a specific environmental crime: overhunting of bowhead whales by American and Russian whalers; introduction of snowmobiles that crush lichen and disturb calving grounds; radioactive fallout from *Novaya Zemlya*. Rytikheu deploys a choral structure, with whale spirits acting as narrators who comment on human folly. The novel's climax – a mass stranding of belugas due to naval sonar – directly references Cold War submarine activity in the Chukchi Sea. Critic Katherine B. (2015) called it "the Silent Spring of the Russian Arctic." Rytikheu refuses consolation; the last line reads: "The sea remembers. It will not forgive."

Case Study 2: Vasily Golovanov, *The Island* (2002)

Golovanov's work is part travelogue, part meditation, part archive. *The Island* describes his visits to Kolguev, a remote island in the Barents Sea. He finds abandoned Stalin-era prison barracks, a failed reindeer domestication project, and a rotting infrastructure of piers and warehouses. Golovanov explicitly deconstructs the frontier myth: "The conquistadors of the Russian North did not plant crosses. They planted piles of rust." He juxtaposes Soviet industrial rubble with pre-Soviet Nenets sacred sites – mounds of reindeer antlers and driftwood idols – which are being bulldozed for gravel. The book's central metaphor is the "island as a wound": Kolguev, once a self-sufficient ecosystem of birds, fish, and moss, has become a dumping ground. Golovanov's prose has been compared to W. G. Sebald's melancholic fieldwork; it was influential among Russian environmental activists, though not widely translated until 2015.

Case Study 3: Vladimir Sangi, *The Wedding of Keivos* (1975)

This novel is structured around a Nivkh keivos (pre-wedding feast) that is interrupted by the arrival of Soviet geologists. The geologists demand porters for a summer expedition; the Nivkh men refuse because it is salmon spawning season – the fish run is sacred and necessary for winter survival. The conflict escalates: a geologist drives a bulldozer across a spawning bed, killing thousands of fish. The Nivkh elder Arat pronounces a curse: "Let the earth drink your machines." Shortly after, a landslide buries the geologists' camp. Sangi was accused of "nationalist obscurantism" by Soviet censors, and the novel was shortened. The full version circulated in samizdat and was first printed in Russia in 1990. Today it is recognized as a foundational text of indigenous ecocriticism. As Tlostanova (2012) writes, "The curse is not magic but a description of geotechnical engineering's own instability: Soviet bulldozers triggered the landslide themselves."

7. Conclusion

This review has traced how modern Russian northern literature (1960–2018) has engaged with – and subverted – the frontier myth. While early Soviet narratives and even some post-Soviet works continued to celebrate the North as a space of heroic transformation, a powerful counter-tradition emerged from indigenous writers (Rytkeu, Sangi, Vaella) and Russian-language authors with long northern residence (Astafyev, Golovanov, Tarkovsky, Senchin, Eltang). These writers deployed a range of strategies – animist narration, documentary lament, curse as critique, feminist reframing – to expose the environmental realities of mining, oil spills, nuclear waste, deforestation, and permafrost melt.

Several conclusions emerge for future research. First, the Russian northern literary archive offers a uniquely longitudinal view of industrial environmental degradation, from Stalinist gigantism to neoliberal extraction. Second, indigenous narrative forms (oral epic, spirit voice, taboo-based ecology) provide theoretical resources for ecocriticism that are not derived from Anglophone traditions. Third, the post-2019 period (excluded here) will likely see an intensification of climate fiction (cli-fi) as Arctic warming accelerates; scholars should examine how earlier pre-2019 works anticipated present crises.

Limitations of this review include its necessary selectivity (many minor authors are omitted) and its reliance on available translations and criticism. Nonetheless, it is clear that modern Russian northern literature is not merely a regional curiosity but a central site for interrogating the costs of the frontier fantasy. As Golovanov (2002) wrote: “The myth of the frontier is the lie that allows us to forget that every new boundary crossed is an old boundary destroyed.” Literary scholars and environmental historians would do well to read the North’s literature as an archive of that destruction – and a warning.

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