TITLE: A HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN CHELYABINSK

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 808-24
DATE: November 18, 1993

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* The work leading to this report was supported by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research. The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author.
A History of Environmental Activism in Chelyabinsk

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary ......................................................... i
Pre-Gorbachev Environmental Action .................................... 1
The Greens of Perestroika .................................................... 3
Chelyabinsk Greens Are Born .............................................. 5
The Chelyabinsk Environmental Organizations ...................... 7
Current Directions ............................................................ 14
Analyzing the Movement .................................................... 15
Alliance Patterns ............................................................ 18
Political Strategies and Tactics ............................................ 21
Conclusion ........................................................................ 22
References ......................................................................... 25
Endnotes ........................................................................... 27
Executive Summary

This examination of the evolution of environmental activism in Chelyabinsk traces the growth of citizen protest in the heart of the Russian military-industrial complex. It looks at the movement’s origins, first steps, organizations, issues, tactics, friends and foes. The story is told in the context of Soviet, and later Russian environmental protest in an attempt to identify how local environmental politics coincide with or differ from national trends. This study provides fertile ground to analyze the emerging structure of democratic processes in contemporary Russia. Information was obtained by working with, observing, and interviewing environmental activists in Moscow-based and Chelyabinsk environmental organizations.

The leadership of the Chelyabinsk environmental movement has no links with pre-Gorbachev politics or environmentalism. This may be its strength, in that it is not hampered by the old habits of constrained activism, but also its weakness in that its experience with environmental issues is only very recent. This is one reason why environmental action did not make or break political candidates in the 1990 election campaign, whereas the national movement based in major industrial centers actually shaped the campaign.

The political disunity that is characteristic of the movement throughout Russia is also evident in Chelyabinsk. There is no 'us versus them' attitude that dominated politics in the non-Russian republics and united diverse nongovernmental organizations around the issue of reasserting ethnic identity against Moscow. Another related problem is that there is no strong inter-regional network, which is also a common phenomenon throughout the country due to inadequate local infrastructure, poor communication technology, and provincial passiveness. Throughout the country, including Chelyabinsk, nongovernmental organizations have not developed internal funding sources.

The authoritarian political culture of the communist regime, which has survived the reshuffling of official personnel at all levels of government structure, is also alive and well in the nongovernmental sector. While it is less evident in the national environmental movement, particularly the Socio-Ecological Union (SEU), with its consensus-oriented democratic process, the amorphous democratic structure and decision-making process of the most influential Chelyabinsk environmental groups, the Chelyabinsk Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party, borders on the autocratic.
The question remains open whether this movement can remain on the playing field or even forge ahead with new triumphs, despite the strong official opposition led by the wounded but recuperating military industry, and despite the public apathy caused by preoccupation with economic issues and political disillusionment. Among the deciding factors will be the extent to which the much stronger SEU umbrella organization can compensate for the weaknesses of its local affiliates and the Chelyabinsk environmentalists can efficiently use foreign funding for long-term institution-building.

This research was supported by grants from the Institute for Global Cooperation and Conflict at the University of California at San Diego, the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, and the Focused Research Program on Democratization at the University of California at Irvine. The author is, however, solely responsible for the analyses and interpretation presented here.
A History of Environmental Activism in Chelyabinsk

Paula Garb

This examination of the evolution of environmental activism in Chelyabinsk traces the growth of citizen protest in this formerly secret corner of Russia, the heart of the Russian military-industrial complex. It looks at the movement's origins, first steps, organizations, issues, tactics, friends and foes. The story is told in the context of Soviet, and later Russian environmental protest in an attempt to identify how local environmental politics coincide with or differ from national trends.

This study of the Chelyabinsk environmental protest movement against the background of the national movement provides fertile ground to analyze the emerging structure of democratic processes in contemporary Russia. It provides rare information about local and national action in a post-Communist state, and the many new nongovernmental groups in Russia that are still ill-formed or underdeveloped. Democratic reform in Russia depends in part upon the growth of an independent non-governmental sector that can monitor and publicize the conformance of government agencies to the laws, and lobby for additional laws to protect citizens from government abuse. The findings can have fundamental implications for our understanding of democratic theory, the processes of resource mobilization used by citizen groups, and the nature of citizen action.

Results of the research are based on five months of field work over nine visits to Russia from June 1991 to March 1993, including five trips to Chelyabinsk from December 1992 to March 1993. Information was obtained by working with, observing, and interviewing environmental activists in various Moscow-based and Chelyabinsk environmental organizations.

Pre-Gorbachev Environmental Action

In the two and a half decades that preceded the Gorbachev era Soviet environmentalists were primarily in the All-Union Society for Nature Protection (Vsesoiuznoie obshchestvo okhrany prirody) and student nature protection patrols (known as druzhiny, the term used for the armed forces of ancient Russian princes). The activities of these organizations did not constitute a movement, but were essentially the efforts of a
relatively small group of people who were able to exert some influence through back
channels to those in power (French, 1991). Neither the Society for Nature Protection, nor the
druzhiny were funded by the government; they were member supported.

The Society for Nature Protection was founded long before the pre-Gorbachev period,
on November 24, 1924, by conservationists, mainly researchers in the natural sciences.
Douglas R. Weiner, in his Models of Nature, concluded that "through the early 1930s the
Soviet Union was on the cutting edge of conservation theory and practice" (Weiner, 1988,
p.x). By 1933, with the advance of Trofim Lysenko,1 the Society was no longer a
progressive force for conservation. From that time on, the organization carefully avoided
locking horns with the establishment. The organization limited its functions to holding
educational forums about conservation, keeping track of endangered species, and assisting
government agencies responsible for maintaining nature preserves.

The student nature protection patrols, established in the mid-1960s largely by biology
students (after the demise of Lysenko), originally guarded against poachers by staking out
forests to bring to justice illegal hunters. Inevitably they confronted corrupt authorities who
had been bribed to close their eyes to the poaching. Yet the students held their ground.
Later they expanded their activities to seeking out natural wildlife habitats, studying them in
detail, and lobbying for them to be turned into preserves. Throughout their history these
student patrols were comprised of militant activists, pressuring the establishment to its limits,
yet they managed to remain a legitimate and viable force (Schwartz, 1991; Yanitsky, 1993).

As conservationist groups, the primary emphasis of the Society for Nature Protection
and the student patrols was to defend nature. In this respect they shared common goals, so
they sometimes worked together. However, there were significant differences. Members of
the Society tended to be middle aged and older, professionals, and politically pro-
establishment, who rarely, if ever, crossed their Communist Party patrons. Members of
student patrols were usually in their twenties and early thirties; they were primarily students
of biology, geography and engineering. They tended to be critics of the Soviet political
system, although they learned to work with the establishment.

During that period, conservationists had some notable triumphs in influencing the
Soviet state to abandon environmentally destructive projects. One of the most important
examples was the effort to stop the diversion of water from several Siberian rivers for
irrigation in southern Russia and Central Asia. Another celebrated case was the public focus
on the pollution of Lake Baikal. Furthermore, by the end of the Brezhnev era there was environmentally-oriented legislation that provided a certain degree of legitimacy to environmental advocacy. Much of these activities and legislation was spearheaded by writers using the print media to draw public attention to these problems (Green, 1991; Gontmacher, 1993).

There was no equivalent pre-Gorbachev environmental action in Chelyabinsk. There was a local chapter of the Society for the Protection of Nature which held its regular membership meetings and collected dues in customary tranquility. Students in the Chelyabinsk region were not organized into nature protection patrols.

The Greens of Perestroika

In the late 1980s, when the grassroots environmental movement in the former Soviet Union had emerged as the first mass movement of the early reform period, Chelyabinsk was just giving birth to a local, fledgling environmental movement. The Chelyabinsk movement was started from scratch, its members having had no previous special interest in environmental issues or any relationship with established conservation organizations. This was in contrast to the situation at the national level where the movement was led by those environmentalists who had been the most critical of the old system. Many of these people had been the leaders and activists of the student nature protection patrols, and were among the most vocal and energetic organizers of the burgeoning political movement that became the vanguard of democratization in the early Gorbachev period. It was largely an urban movement of all segments of the population focused on the defense of people, whereas the earlier conservationist movement of intellectuals had been entirely focused on the defense of nature. Instead of calls for saving flora and fauna for their own sake, the emphasis was now on restoring the damaged ecology for the sake of human health. The movement was essentially challenging the political and economic system that was jeopardizing the health of the nation.

During that period several significant national environmental organizations came to the forefront (Yanitsky, 1993; Green, 1991; the The Economist, 1989). The largest and most influential was the Socio-Ecological Union (SEU), an umbrella organization founded on December 25, 1988. The SEU claims that in 1990 its mass actions involved around one
million citizens. In 1991 it united as many as 160 local nongovernmental environmental
groups and individuals in 260 towns in nearly every republic (Zabelin, 1991).

Another influential environmental organization was the Ecological Union. Its
members parted ways with the Socio-Ecological Union at their founding convention in 1988.
They formed a separate organization a day before the SEU did, on December 24, 1988.
Their differences apparently were over activism versus education. The Socio-Ecological
Union advocated political action that would lead to tangible changes in environmental policy
and practice. The Ecological Union had a different vision of how best to effect change. It
was oriented to studying environmental problems and educating the public in
environmentally-sound principles. The leadership was interested in developing
environmentalism as a science, and promoting small businesses for environmental protection
and restoration.

Another important environmental actor was the Green Party, which formed on March
24, 1991. It stressed political reform as the only way to bring about changes in
environmental policies. Its leaders hoped to unite all environmentalists to constitute a major
new political force in Soviet politics. Its mass actions focused on influencing the general
political course of the nation, rather than specific environmental issues. The party believed
that such political changes were prerequisites to improvements in environmental policies. Leaders of the Socio-Ecological Union opposed establishing a party, believing the idea was
premature, that the organization would not hold together because the movement was too
weak and politically divided.

To counter-balance the emergence of the autonomous environmental groups, the
government-sanctioned Soviet Peace Fund and Soviet Peace Committee initiated a new
group, Ecology and Peace. Its founding members were scientists who had worked against
the river diversion project, and it also involved prominent environmental scientists. Unlike
the other environmental organizations, it had the advantage of a well supported infrastructure
(building space, office equipment, and funding). Its activities have consisted mainly of
publishing studies, sponsoring conferences, and supporting local activists (Green, 1991).

The final component of the environmental movement was local groups in diverse
regions of the Russian republic that particularly attracted Russian nationalists who viewed the
restoration of the environment as part of their agenda for Russia's cultural revival.
Nationalism in the non-Russian republics tended to reinforce environmentalism because
people identified their ethnic identity with the degradation of cultural territories. This has also been the case in Russia to varying degrees. The main difference is that Russian nationalist environmentalists still have not attracted large followings, perhaps because of their anti-democratic and chauvinistic thrust. Some anti-democratic Russian nationalist groups have used environmentalism to cloak their anti-Semitism or attacks on other non-Russians, which has been contrary to grassroots trends among Russian activists (Green, 1991).

**Chelyabinsk Greens are Born**

The Chelyabinsk environmental movement traces its origins to the government's official acknowledgement of the radiation contamination caused by plutonium production at Chelyabinsk-65.

The newspaper article in the Chelyabinsk rabochy (Chelyabinsk Worker) on July 6, 1989, that gave impetus to the Chelyabinsk greens was the transcript of statements made in the Soviet parliament by Deputy Chair of the USSR Council of Ministries, L.D. Ryabov. This article outlined the environmental and health consequences of the Chelyabinsk-65 accidents. After the article was published the local democratic reform movement, the Chelyabinsk Popular Front, which had been active for nearly a year and a half, decided to create the Ecological Group, a subgroup intended to focus on environmental issues.

This environmental group's first action was to call a public hearing to debate whether to continue construction of the Southern Urals Nuclear Power Plant in light of the new environmental information released about the earlier accidents at Chelyabinsk-65. The hearing, held in September, was essentially the first public meeting on an environmental issue that electrified the public—the Southern Urals Nuclear Power Plant. It attracted about 600 people. The Popular Front was the official sponsor, but the Ecological Group initiated and organized the event.

Local government officials at the hearing were confronted with hard questions from the public, about the region's history of radiation contamination, the advisability of building another nuclear power plant, and the impact of Chernobyl contamination. One of the most dramatic moments was when the region's official in charge of sanitation inspection, Dr. Eleonora Kravtsova, was asked why she had permitted meat from Chernobyl to be brought to Chelyabinsk for processing, knowing the degree of radiation exposure that already existed in...
the region, Kravtsova’s only defense was that she was a government official first and a citizen second.

Chelyabinsk-65 was not a focus of this public protest but it was the first local institution to respond to the hearing. The Chelyabinsk-65 authorities initiated a conference to continue discussing the issue of the Southern Urals Nuclear Power Plant. They invited 250 participants, 50 of whom were from the public. The rest were nuclear power scientists, many from Chelyabinsk-65 and from a weapons facility in Obninsk (near Moscow). Having been invited to select the fifty representatives from the public, the Popular Front’s Ecological Group ensured that a number of anti-nuclear scientists attend from the ecological group at Academgorodok (Academy City) in Novosibirsk. This was the first time scientists in a public forum opposed each other openly on such sensitive issues as nuclear power and other weapons related issues.

The next important stage in the formation of the Chelyabinsk environmental movement was the 1990 election campaign in Russia. By that time the national environmental movement was at its peak. It was playing a key role in reform politics, supporting or opposing candidates in the contested elections across the nation (Feshbach, 1992). The Chelyabinsk greens, however, were only getting started. The Popular Front ran its own candidates for the regional legislature and the Chelyabinsk City Council. They won five to ten percent of the seats in the regional legislature, about 30% in the city council, and in city districts their victory was around 20%.

Only a small percentage of these successful candidates ran on strong environmental platforms (Gontmacher, 1993).

The Popular Front and its environmental candidates were not strong enough to have a dramatic impact on the 1990 election outcomes, but the Chelyabinsk greens gained valuable organizational experience from these political campaigns. During the first year of their activism they learned how to organize rallies, make posters, write newspaper articles and letters for their campaign. It was relatively easy to mobilize hundreds and thousands of people to rallies in the prevalent atmosphere of general political activism. The environmentalists still had no contact with foreigners or with environmentalists from other parts of the Soviet Union. Everything they did they created by themselves. It was a case of self-taught, grassroots democracy.

It was also during the election campaign that candidates chose either political or environmental priorities in their platforms. After the elections, those who opted for
environmental platforms formed the core of a movement independent of the Popular Front. This was when most of today’s players took their different places on the political scene of environmental activism.

The Chelyabinsk Environmental Organizations

After the 1990 elections four distinct environmental organizations evolved in Chelyabinsk—the Nuclear Safety Movement (Dvizhenie za yadernoye bezopasnosti), The Democratic Green Party (Demokraticheskaya partiya zelyonykh), the Association of Greens (Assotsiatsiya zelyonykh), and the Kyshtym-57 Foundation (Fond Kyshtym-57).

All the organizations focused on nuclear issues related to the weapons complex. This focus on nuclear issues primarily related to the local weapons industry distinguishes Chelyabinsk environmentalists from most other local environmental groups whose emphasis is on conventional pollution, and makes it similar to other areas, like Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk, where the main environmental issues are also targeted against local weapons complexes. While the focus on nuclear issues was the same, the four organizations represented different trends on the political scene—from the far left to the far right. However, their political differences were not yet clearly enough defined to prevent them from working together in a loose united front for the next year and a half.

Soon after the 1990 election the Nuclear Safety Movement (NSM) was founded by Natalia Mironova. She was an engineer who had never taken an interest in politics until the advent of the Popular Front and the expose of her region’s ecological damage. From a family-oriented mother of two children, passionately concerned about her youngsters’ education in a school system starving for funds that she felt were being consumed by the weapons complex, she catapulted to a candidate to elected office and the leader of a militant social movement. Mironova took the leadership role in the Popular Front’s environmental group, and was one of the candidates for oblast deputy who chose to focus on environmental issues in her successful campaign.

In the NSM Mironova worked regularly with ten to fifteen activists, and could count on another forty to fifty individuals to help her organize large mobilizations. By early 1991 the Nuclear Safety Movement affiliated with the Socio-Ecological Union (SEU), which was the Soviet Union’s largest national environmental organization. This association connected the NSM with the SEU’s valuable intellectual resources. This relationship also brought
Mironova out of Chelyabinsk, where no foreigners had ever been permitted, to attend an international environmental conference sponsored by the SEU in Moscow, in February of 1991. There she made a presentation about her movement, and was subsequently invited to attend another international conference in April. This time it was at the University of California, Irvine, and focused on the environmental consequences of nuclear weapons development. When Mironova returned to Chelyabinsk journalists from the United States, Western Europe and Japan began contacting her for interviews and permission to come to Chelyabinsk.

Around this same time, the Nuclear Safety Movement launched the Democratic Green Party (DGP), primarily as a vehicle to run candidates in elections. Most of the party’s core organizers were the male members of the NSM who were motivated to tackle general political issues as a means of resolving the environmental problems. During the August 1991 coup, the young men in the party formed defense teams to protect the newly-elected democratic representatives in local government. Mironova became co-chair of the party together with Nikolai Kalachev.

The organization eventually signed up approximately 2,000 dues paying members throughout the region, and could count on a steady ten to twenty to mobilize other members for one or another action. Mironova feels the ideas of the Democratic Green Party and the NSM are endorsed by at least the 300,000 people in the region who signed a petition demanding an end to nuclear and other industrial development in the area, and protesting continuation of the construction of the Southern Urals Nuclear Power Plant.8

Among the original members of the Popular Front’s Ecological Group were individuals who affiliated themselves with a Russian nationalist organization known as Rodina. When political differences became more defined within the Ecological Group, these individuals were attracted to an organization called the Association of Greens, led by Vitaly Kniaginichev, who later also became the Chair of the Russian nationalististic Great Russia (Velikaya Rossiya) Ethnic-State Bloc.

Nikolai Kalachev, Co-Chair of the Democratic Green Party, claims that Kniaginichev was instructed by the Oblast Communist Party Committee to found the Association of Greens, as a means of controlling the movement.9 Others in the democratic reform movement maintain that Kniaginichev’s link is primarily with the KGB that wants to control the environmental movement through him. They say the connection with the KGB is not...
direct, but through the Communist Party before it was banned, and now through members of the old party elite who still hold influential positions in local government. When I interviewed Kalachev in December 1992, right after the appointment of Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, Kniaginichev expressed his unequivocal support for Chernomyrdin solely on the basis that, unlike Chernomyrdin’s predecessor, "he is a pure Russian, and therefore will do what’s best for Russia."^10

During the early period of environmental activism in Chelyabinsk (mid-1989–mid-1991) that was marked by mass rallies and petition drives against the Southern Urals Power Station, the Nuclear Safety Movement, the Democratic Green Party, and the Association of Greens found enough common ground to work together on various issues. Gradually, by the fall of 1991, the organizations went completely separate ways, following a nationwide trend. As Eric Green (1991) pointed out, politics in the Russian republic was generally far more complex than the ‘us versus them’ attitude that dominated politics in the non-Russian republics. This complexity resulted in greater ideological heterogeneity which eventually undermined the environmental movement’s unity.

The fourth organization in Chelyabinsk that emerged to play a significant role in addressing local environmental issues related to the weapons complex was the Kyshtym-57 Foundation. It was set up by Louisa Korzhova, a retired nuclear physicist who spent her career working on nuclear power plants, and Alexander Penyagin, who once worked on a nuclear submarine. Neither Korzhova nor Penyagin had been involved in politics before perestroika. Both present themselves as professionals who understand the complex nuclear issues better than other Chelyabinsk environmentalists.

The goal of Kyshtym-57 is to provide diverse assistance to the region’s estimated one million victims of radiation exposure from the weapons facilities. For instance, Korzhova, who is the only full-time paid staff member, with the assistance of an elaborate network of volunteers throughout the region, distributes humanitarian aid packages (food and medicine) to those who were exposed to radiation during the accidents and to members of their families. The Kyshtym-57 Foundation also has been active in promoting legislation that gave Chelyabinsk the same status as Chernobyl as a nuclear disaster zone, thus enabling the region to receive additional allocations from the national budget intended to provide better medical and other social services to the stricken population. Korzhova does not categorize her
organization as a movement, but many of the activists view themselves as environmentalists contributing to the movement through the Kyshtym-57 Foundation.

Mironova, Kalachev and Korzhova originally worked together, but by late 1991 they too began operating entirely independently of each other, although some rank and file members are volunteers for both organizations. The national referendum in March of 1991 seems to have been the final turning point, after which the Chelyabinsk organizations went their separate ways (except for the Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party which remained aligned).

The debate over preserving the Soviet Union brought to the forefront general political differences between the leaders of the groups that previously had not seemed significant enough to prevent joint action. The major problem in describing the political views of different groups in Russia is that the leaders themselves are deliberately unclear about their positions. So, Korzhova, Penyagin, and even Kniaginichev (who is more clearly aligned with right-wing forces) have not expressed any general political views that are radically different from Mironova. Democracy and economic reform are goals expressed across the political spectrum. The tensions arise in the movement among the leaders who respond to each other’s subtle statements, subtle action or lack of action that indicate the real positions behind the words.

The general political differences related to reforms are over how fundamental the reforms should be and how fast they should proceed. In addition, the environmentalists had differences over the Southern Urals Nuclear Power Plant and government plans to import spent fuel from other parts of the Soviet Union and from Western countries for reprocessing and storage at Chelyabinsk-65. The Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party are unequivocally against finishing the plant and importing spent fuel. If necessary, they advocate civil disobedience to stop these plans. Neither the Association of Greens nor the Kyshtym-57 Foundation have taken such firm positions. Their leaders are open to negotiating with the local authorities on how high a price might be charged to foreign agencies wishing to leave their spent fuel in Chelyabinsk and what percentage of that money might be spent directly on social benefits to the population. Depending on the terms of the agreements, the Association of Greens and the Kyshtym-57 Foundation would take a final position. They also have not taken a clear stand against the Southern Urals Power Plant.
All these four organizations are based in the city of Chelyabinsk and have no branches in the outlying towns and villages. This is primarily because reform politics are still concentrated in large urban centers. The Chelyabinsk region is no exception. None of the areas outside the city of Chelyabinsk had candidates in the 1990 election campaigns who were aligned with the democratic bloc of the Popular Front, or who ran on environmental platforms. Individuals in some outlying areas (most notably, Muslyumovo and Kyshtym) have been influenced by citizen environmental action in Chelyabinsk, but still have not been involved in any systematic way. The main obstacles to involvement are related to the typical infrastructure inadequacies throughout Russia--the absence of phone service and poor roads--making communication within a region more difficult than between large cities.

To varying degrees the efforts of Chelyabinsk environmentalists have had notable success. In mid-1990, for instance, in response to the movement's newspaper and letter writing campaign, and a petition drive that gathered 300,000 signatures against the Southern Urals Power Plant, Gorbachev set up a commission that within months published a detailed assessment of the region's environmental conditions. As a result, the Chelyabinsk Region was declared a national environmental disaster area, enabling it to receive national allocations similar to the territories affected by the Chernobyl accident. Environmentalists in Chelyabinsk also feel as though their public protest forced the government to suspend construction of the Southern Urals Power Plant, although the opposition claims that the project was halted only due to lack of funds. Mironova, representing the Chelyabinsk Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party contributed to the draft of the Radioactive Waste Law still waiting to be passed in the Russian Parliament. No progress, however, has been made toward banning the import of spent fuel for reprocessing and storage in Chelyabinsk.

Perhaps the organization's most large-scale and effective mobilization was around the March 1991 nationwide referendum on the fate of the Soviet Union. The Chelyabinsk greens (primarily the NSM and the DGP) wanted to add two more questions to the referendum:

1) Do you agree with building the Southern Urals Nuclear Power Plant, yes or no?
2) Do you agree with importing radioactive material from other republics and countries, yes or no?
It was not possible to put the questions on the ballot throughout the whole region, but the local environmentalists managed to put the questions to a vote in the city of Chelyabinsk. Just before the referendum the first Russian Congress of People’s Deputies had passed a resolution forbidding the import of radioactive materials. This lent solid support to the referendum. It was the main argument the movement used throughout the campaign to urge a no vote on both questions. These points were put forth for two months prior to the referendum in weekly newspaper columns in the Vecherny Chelyabinsk (Evening Chelyabinsk) that allowed for a discussion of both the pros and cons of the two referendum questions. Support for the referendum and (opposition to the power plant and import of spent fuel) came from the Democratic Front (formerly the Popular Front), the Social Democratic Party, and the Popular Labor Alliance.

The most vociferous opposition, including Chelyabinsk-65 officials and the local Communist Party elite, opposed adding the questions to the referendum. When the questions were added anyway, these groups represented the loudest voices in favor of the power plant and reprocessing imported spent fuel.

The outcome of the referendum was dramatic. Seventy-six percent of the city’s population voted against the Southern Urals Power Plant, and eighty-four percent voted against importing radioactive materials to Chelyabinsk-65.

In December of 1991, the Regional Administration (formerly the Regional Executive Committee) offered Mironova a job to organize and head its new Committee on Radiation Safety. As in many other regions of the country where pro-Yeltsin politicians were put in charge of Regional Administrations, there was a partial merging of government bodies and nongovernmental organizations.

During this period of 1991 and 1992 Mironova’s committee employed many leading activists in the Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party. They launched a major campaign to register everyone in the region who had been exposed to excessive radiation through the 1957 Kyshtym disaster and was eligible for government compensation. In the process they expanded their movement’s base of potential activists. They collected and publicized valuable information about the weapons complex that previously had been classified, and hired SEU specialists to conduct an independent monitoring project to identify plutonium contamination in the village of Muslyumovo.11
The high point of the movement's activities under the sponsorship of the Radiation Safety Committee was the organization of an international conference in Chelyabinsk on the environmental consequences of nuclear weapons production in the Urals. In the process Chelyabinsk environmental activists forged contacts and exchanges with counterpart environmental organizations, independent scientists, medical professionals and journalists in Russia and other countries. The conference, open to anyone who wished to attend, was intended to be a major educational forum for the public. In May of 1992, after overcoming countless logistical and political hurdles, the hosts of the landmark Chelyabinsk conference greeted 550 delegates from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Germany, France, England, Sweden, Italy, Japan, Canada, and the United States. Among them were scientists, physicians, government officials, and environmentalists.

The week-long conference itself constituted a busy schedule of workshops on a wide range of issues: reprocessing, medical and epidemiological concerns, environmental law, groundwater contamination, radioactivity in agricultural crops and grassroots organizing. People with divergent views on these controversial matters had daily opportunities to hear each other out. Participants noted that in the same month of October 1957, not only did Chelyabinsk-65 suffer a major accident, but so did similar plants at Rocky Flats, Colorado and Windscale (now Sellafield) in the United Kingdom. In her final remarks at the conference's closing, Mironova called those nearly simultaneous disasters a tragic warning of the dangers of nuclear power that, had it not been kept from the world, might have prevented Chernobyl.

All these activities brought the Nuclear Safety Committee and the Democratic Green party generous television and newspaper coverage. Almost immediately after the May conference Mironova began to feel strong pressure from within the administration to discontinue her grassroots work. Efforts were made to limit her contact with foreigners and her ability to spend time away from Chelyabinsk to travel inside and outside the country. Pressure was also placed on the other environmental leaders whom she had involved on the committee, particularly Mironova's co-chair of the Democratic Green Party, Nikolai Kalachev, who, unlike herself, was not an elected official and therefore did not enjoy immunity. The NSM and DGP agreed that it was important for Mironova to continue heading the committee because the position gave her unique access to sensitive information so important to the movement.
Throughout the country other NGOs that had accepted the funding and hospitality in the offices of local governments were also beginning to lose their sense of independent action. They faced the dilemma of either staying on the inside without an independent voice or perishing on their own.

Meanwhile the national environmental movement had already slid into serious decline. The collapse of the Soviet Union, followed by the severe economic crisis, dealt the movement a heavy blow. It was clear that the new government did not have the resources to put environmental considerations ahead of economic development. By the winter of 1992-93, when the Soviet Union was officially declared dead and economic hardships completely consumed the population's time and energy, activism, whether for environmental or political reform, became a luxury that many people apparently could not afford. Nikolai Reimers, head of the Russian Ecological Union, offered this explanation: "In the first phase of the movement the focus was on tearing down this, preventing the building of that, not on restoration. That phase was passionate. Passivity set in when energy was sapped and gains were few, and when life's everyday hardships multiplied." 12

With the demise of the Soviet Union environmentalists in the various republics no longer looked for ways to unite with activists outside their republics. The exceptions were those organizations most closely affiliated with the SEU. The task for the Moscow-based organizations (except for the SEU) that had been building all-Soviet movements was to shift gears and focus on shaping solid networks within Russia. Only now they had numerically smaller and less optimistic memberships, and less resources to run their operations.

Current Directions

The Chelyabinsk environmental movement can no longer boast the mass following it enjoyed in 1989-1991. It can rely on the core militants who began the movement, although, unlike at the national level, most of these people did not take an interest in environmental issues before the democratic reform movement. The environmental activists today are still motivated more by a sense of victimization and a concern for environmentally-related health risks than by purely environmental values that have a long history (Dalton, 1993; Gluck, 1993). All the local environmental organizations described above still exist with the same leaders, but with dwindled citizen support. All are striving to remain on the political scene.
So far it appears that the Nuclear Safety Movement and its affiliated Democratic Green Party have the greatest chance of survival. This is due to their close relationship with the still viable Socio-Ecological Union and their potential for receiving funding from foreign foundations interested in promoting Russia's floundering nongovernmental, democratic sector. Mironova's present plan is to establish an Ecological Bureau, to be initially funded by private U.S. foundations and the U.S. government's Agency for International Development (AID).

The goal of the proposed Ecological Bureau is to sponsor independent monitoring and assessment of local environmental conditions, promote public education programs intended to alert local residents to possible health and safety risks. There will be a special focus on the growing contamination of water supplies and the health hazards to the local population. Support and protection will be given to employees of Chelyabinsk-65 and Chelyabinsk-70 who choose to become "whistle blowers" revealing to the public hazardous practices at the site. At the same time Mironova hopes to overturn the enemy image of environmentalists that officials at the weapons facilities have promoted by charging that environmentalists are incompetent to evaluate the complex nuclear issues, and that they are out to destroy the closed cities by urging that they be opened. "The scientists in the closed cities," says Mironova, "are acting like a rejected lover no longer adored for their patriotic contribution to defense."13 Her solution is to help the scientists win back the people's "love" by getting them to appreciate the significant role of environmental cleanup.

The Ecological Bureau will also continue supporting the Democratic Green Party which plans to run candidates in the next election. Meanwhile, local green parties are attempting to unite nationwide, although probably into two politically different parties—the Velikaya Zelyonaya Party (Great Green Party, dominated by right-wing Russian nationalists) and the Green Party of Russia dominated by pluralistic, democratic forces.

In these final two sections we will discuss some factors that help predict the behavior and social implications of a movement: the organizational structure, alliance patterns, political strategies and tactics.

Analyzing the Movement

Research on Western environmental groups indicates that these movements often do not follow the model of centralization and bureaucratization that is common among other
citizen interest groups (Gundelach, 1984; Donati, 1984; Kriesi and van Praag, 1987; Kitschelt, 1989). One explanation is that the participatory and democratic norms embodied in the New Environmental Paradigm, lead environmental groups to avoid centralized and bureaucratic organizational structures. They prefer a fluid organizational framework based on a horizontal coordination of grassroots groups in loose networks. Another is that the small size of locally-based groups makes an extensive organizational structure less necessary and less desirable.

Russia’s movement is still young, but it is already evident that as successful organizations, like the SEU, grow and mature they must make decisions that will either facilitate their evolution into bureaucratic, hierarchic structures or their preservation as decentralist, participatory structures.

In October of 1992, the SEU held its fourth conference to discuss its transformation into an international environmental organization. Leading activists attended from the SEU’s affiliate organizations in most of the former Soviet Union, except for Georgia, Azerbaijan, Estonia, and Latvia. Their desire was to unite their resources and efforts, rather than consolidate as separate organizations in their own newly formed nations. Motivated by the realization that their environmental problems, the causes and means of solution, were similar, they opted for working together. In their final resolution they expressed these sentiments as follows: “The participants are convinced that nature on the planet is a unified whole, is indivisible, regardless of state or ethnic boundaries established by people; and in all its activities the SEU will be guided by this principle.”

Sviatoslav Zabelin, who was entrusted by the conference with the task of building this newly expanded organization, does not take comfort in the knowledge that the SEU is the only one in the former Soviet republics attempting to internationalize. The SEU’s leaders, with their long personal histories of environmental action, environmental and democratic values wish there were other strong environmental organizations taking the SEU’s path. They feel uncomfortable with this “monopoly” on national and international environmental action, this absence of “competitors,” and are concerned that this situation may be even counterproductive to their cause.

This new international organization also runs the risk of becoming highly centralized and bureaucratic in its effort to manage activities and organizational matters that extend over so much territory and so many national boundaries. It may be unable to move its nerve
center out of Moscow and Russia to equalize the intellectual and material resources among its affiliates.

The SEU’s October 1992 conference and resolutions give reason to believe that the organization has chosen to preserve its participatory orientation. For instance, it opened the conference to any individual and groups who wished to attend and vote on all issues. In forming an international organization comprised of member groups from the former Soviet republics represented at the conference, the SEU had to grapple with a major dilemma. Should the leadership body be based on representation from each country (former republic), as would have been the case in the old Soviet Union, or should individuals be chosen by the general membership regardless of their country or ethnic origin? The conference resolved against ethnic or national considerations prevailing, which the leadership hopes will promote the organization’s unity.

In Chelyabinsk, the environmental organizations have also evolved from amorphous structures with loose decision-making processes into distinct organizations with charters outlining specific structures, rules and regulations about membership, leadership and decision-making. Unlike the SEU, which has increasingly attracted member organizations around the country like the Chelyabinsk Nuclear Safety Movement, the Chelyabinsk local organizations have not been plagued by rapid growth. This is typical of local-based organizations throughout Russia. Therefore a process of bureaucratization is not at all evident.

This does not mean, however, that the organizations are entirely participatory. The charters of the Chelyabinsk organizations provide for membership-elected coordinating councils and a chair or co-chairs that meet regularly, weekly, bi-weekly or monthly to make decisions between general membership meetings. They also specify the high value placed on democratic decision-making. In practice it appears that most day-to-day decisions are made by phone among the leading activists who are usually amenable to whatever the chair or co-chair advises. This style of leadership is more in keeping with old political practices than with the consensus-oriented process characteristic of the SEU at the national level. This traditional Russian style of leadership has been further reinforced in the current political chaos which has prompted a prevalent public opinion throughout the political spectrum that the ideal leader is a strong personality prepared to and capable of giving others direction.
Alliance Patterns

Identifying potential friends and allies is a crucial step in planning strategies of action and building coalitions that can produce environmental reforms. Resource mobilization theorists stress the importance of ties linking environmental organizations to other social groups and political organizations (Klandermans, 1990; Diani, 1990). For instance, local citizen groups formed after the Three Mile Island incident had numerous (and diverse) ties to other political groups (Walsh, 1988). Anti-nuclear protest groups in the West also have developed complex patterns of alliances (Rudig, 1991).

Alliance networks are important because they can provide funding sources and influence strategies of political mobilization and political action. For instance, groups that have allies within the political establishment may be less willing to pursue tactics of confrontation and direct action. Conversely, a group that emphasizes its conflicts with the political establishment may be less willing to work with government agencies on possible reforms.

Western environmental groups, such as Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace, are often estranged from established social and political groups. Some scholars explain the autonomy of Western environmental groups in terms of their commitment to the NEP, which place them at odds with established interests. Thus, to work with established political actors implies a betrayal of the movement’s call for a fundamental change in economic structures, political processes, and humankind’s relationship to nature. Other scholars link the supposedly autonomous tendencies of environmental groups to their lack of resources and hence their inability to engage in the bargaining exchange of normal politics.

In our examination of alliance patterns in Chelyabinsk we see that the process of coalition building within a quasi-pluralist setting is new for Russian environmentalists. In addition, in the midst of revolutionary changes in society and the political system it is not always clear who are one’s potential friends and foes.

The main opposition to the Nuclear Safety Movement originally came from the Regional Communist Party’s department in charge of defense. Party officials voiced a common charge from the communist establishment, claiming that environmentalists are guided by Chernobyl-phobia and are not focusing on the real environmental culprits—civilian industry in the city of Chelyabinsk. The KGB never took visible action against
environmentalists. However, it is possible that the defense department in the Regional
Communist Party was acting on behalf of the KGB (Gontmacher, 1993).

The management of Chelyabinsk-65 has also voiced repeated opposition to the
environmental movement. In public statements plant officials have accused environmentalists
of not having the interests of the population at heart by not wanting Chelyabinsk to have the
much needed electrical power that the Southern Urals Power Plant could offer. They also
criticized environmentalists' indifference to the valuable hard currency that could be earned
from reprocessing imported spent fuel. Chelyabinsk-65 officials presented environmental
leaders as individuals who are exploiting the popularity of environmental issues to gain
political capital in the pursuit of personal political careers. This enemy image of
environmentalists is projected particularly vividly in the Chelyabinsk-65 local newspaper. In
this campaign they blamed the environmentalists for wanting to deprive Chelyabinsk-65 of its
privileged status and related benefits.

The NSM's main institutional support originally came from the Regional Executive
Committee, and especially from the head of environmental affairs. He responded positively
to any request for his department's approval of the movement's various action initiatives, and
provided them in a timely manner with important information about operational plans of the
weapons facilities. 16

Both sides shared an interest in such an alliance. The Nuclear Safety Movement and
its affiliated Democratic Green Party are the region's most prominent, mass-based
environmental organizations, the ones most closely associated with the democratic reform
movement, and with the strongest national environmental organization, the SEU. Perhaps by
showing their support for popular movements, local officials wanted to increase their popular
legitimacy. They may have also wanted to control Mironova and her followers who had no
other funding sources or office space, and therefore agreed to the patronage. The Nuclear
Safety Movement felt that a primary advantage to this alliance, other than the funding, was
the quick access to information about the weapons complex that they could not obtain from
the outside.

The major base of popular support, however, has been the individual activists in the
NSM. These individuals are primarily professionals in the fields of engineering, medicine
and education. Another base of support are individuals who are concerned about the
alarmingly high incidence of illnesses, especially allergies, among children, and the high
mortality rate, particularly among men. The year the movement emerged in 1989 was marked by intensive industrial output and correspondingly severe pollution, so environmental issues were particularly salient. It was also in this year that the residents of Chelyabinsk learned of the extent of the radiation contamination and began realizing that their ailments and early deaths were likely related to the weapons complex. Until then, people thought they personally, or fate, were to blame for their illnesses.

The organization does not have dues or any funding source other than contributions by its own activists and supporters. Some donations have been in the form of free xeroxing (probably at the expense of a state enterprise or private business where some sympathetic employee may work), materials for making posters and announcements for rallies, and of course, free labor. During the whole year of 1990, when the average monthly salary was 220, the organization spent between three and four thousand rubles donated from its activists.

The media are normally an important group for social movements. This has been especially true in Russia where the media has been in the forefront of the democratic reform movement, generously providing space to the most militant voices for radical transformation and against the entrenched interests of the party elite (Gontmacher, 1993).

In Chelyabinsk, it has been somewhat more difficult for local environmentalists to have access to the local media due to the strong control the military complex still wields throughout the region's power structure. Nevertheless, newspapers, such as the Vecherny Chelyabinsk (Evening Chelyabinsk), the Ekologichesky vestnik (Ecological Bulletin), and especially the local television station, have been the key forum through which local environmental organizations have spoken to the public at large. There are several local journalists who readily assist environmentalists in getting their articles and letters published, and getting air time on television and radio. Editors, however, are pressed by the weapons complex to allow them equal access to their critics.

Without doing a special study of the media it is not possible to say precisely how "equal" is the access. However, conversations with environmentalists throughout the region and with officials at Chelyabinsk-65 and Chelyabinsk-70, point to some tentative conclusions. In the city of Chelyabinsk environmentalists are satisfied with their access to the media, whereas plant officials claim that they have difficulties being heard in Chelyabinsk. In the outlying towns and villages local activists maintained that they have almost no access to local papers that prefer to publish the point of view of the facilities.
Political Strategies and Tactics

Although environmental interest groups are active participants in the political process of most advanced industrial democracies, scholars remain divided on the overall quantity and quality of their participation. The early literature on environmental organizations focused on the unconventional political tactics and anti-establishment aspects of these groups. This one-dimensional image of unconventional action has been challenged by more recent research that documents the diverse range of tactics actually used by these groups (e.g., Dalton, 1993). Social movement theorists predict that the diverse goals and opportunity structures that environmental groups face lead them to pursue political reform through many routes, ranging from the conventional to the unconventional (Klandermans, 1989; Kitschelt, 1986).

In the case of environmentalism in Russia, and particularly in Chelyabinsk, we want to understand how groups make decisions on which tactics to use. Throughout its existence the Chelyabinsk environmental movement has organized rallies, newspaper and letter writing campaigns, petition drives and referendums to promote its causes. The primary goal of these tactics has been to compel national agencies to investigate the environmental consequences of the complex's nuclear disasters, to pry information from the complex directly, to promote legislation on atomic power and the handling of radioactive waste, to ban construction of the Southern Urals Power Plant and the import of spent fuel.

Their decisions are pragmatic based on the opportunities, rather than a reflection of their identity as opposition groups. They have been willing to work with government and official agencies. For instance, the NSM and DGP leaderships were involved with and employed by the Regional Administration's Nuclear Safety Committee in 1992-93. These groups, however, pulled back from this relationship when it began to threaten the goals and autonomy of the movement. They were eventually dropped from the Administration for continuing to want to further their movement's anti-nuclear and anti-weapons complex thrust while the Administration was moving in the opposite political direction.

With the loss of status within the Administration the NSM and DGP have found themselves without local funding or office space. They have, however, found funding from the United States through their association with the Socio-Ecological Union. This will shape their future strategies accordingly. Since the funding is coming from private organizations interested in promoting the education and implementation of democratic citizen action to
improve environmental conditions, and coalition-building, the NSM and DGP will have to engage in actions that will move them in these directions.

Within that framework Mironova and her co-leaders are forging a stronger inter-regional network to be associated with the new Ecological Bureau. Part of creating this network is to build on the increased political activism of the Turkic-speaking, Muslim Tatar and Bashkir minorities in the region who have been most affected by environmental damage by the weapons complex because they comprise a sizable portion of the population living in villages closest to the sites. They represent a key social base for local activism because of the recent upsurge in ethnic identity and cultural cohesion among these people in the region over general political issues as well as the nuclear environmental issues. Experience has shown that in these cultural groups where family networks are strong and are prime shapers of public opinion, large numbers of people can mobilized in a relatively short period of time if key elders and family members are motivated to join a cause.

Also part of the strategy in building an inter-regional network is to involve individuals in the multi-ethnic outlying towns and villages who have expressed to Mironova and other members of the Chelyabinsk organization their deep concern about local environmental issues and their frustrations over inadequate contact impeded by poor phone service and transportation. Even within the same city, such as Kyshtym (a few miles from the weapons complex), potential activists do not know of each other’s existence. Other potential participation in this network live in the town of Voroshilovsk, inhabited mainly by employees of Chelyabinsk-65 who are bussed in and out of the closed city daily, and by employees of the complex’s environmental monitoring station. They have circulated a petition underlining the long-neglected environmental and health problems they face.

Conclusion

Nongovernmental organizations have an especially significant role in a society attempting to change from an authoritarian to a democratic political system. This is particularly true of nongovernmental environmental organizations that throughout the reform period have enjoyed mass support. All such groups represent a powerful force for political reform from the bottom up, and therefore can be pivotal in securing a positive outcome from social and political transformation.
In Chelyabinsk, where the heart of the military industrial complex is backing the resurgent right wing in impeding reform and the grassroots agents of reform, such as the Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party, the challenge to these organizations is all the more critical, having global implications. This study has attempted to assess the strengths and weaknesses of this young, democratic movement, and suggests the following conclusions.

The Chelyabinsk environmental movement is characterized by a leadership that has no links with pre-Gorbachev politics or environmentalism. This may be its strength, in that it is not hampered by the old habits of constrained activism, but also its weakness in that its experience with environmental issues is only very recent. This is, perhaps, one reason why environmental action did not make or break political candidates in the 1990 election campaign, whereas the national movement based in major industrial centers actually shaped the campaign.

The political disunity that is characteristic of the movement throughout Russia is also evident in Chelyabinsk. There is no 'us versus them' attitude that dominated politics in the non-Russian republics and united diverse nongovernmental organizations around the issue of reasserting ethnic identity against Moscow. Another related problem is that there is no strong inter-regional network, which is also a common phenomenon throughout the country due to inadequate local infrastructure, poor communication technology, and provincial passiveness.

Throughout the country, and Chelyabinsk is no exception, nongovernmental organizations have not developed internal funding sources, perhaps because ordinary people are too poor and too unaccustomed to donate their funds to political and social causes, and new entrepreneurs who are potential big donors do not see how their self interests can be met in such philanthropy.

The authoritarian political culture of the communist regime, which has survived the reshuffling of official personnel at all levels of government structure, is also alive and well in the nongovernmental sector. While it is less evident in the national environmental movement, particularly the SEU, with its consensus-oriented democratic process, the amorphous democratic structure and decision-making process of the Chelyabinsk Nuclear Safety Movement and the Democratic Green Party sometimes borders on the autocratic.
Therefore the Chelyabinsk movement enters this period of right wing resurgence and economic devastation with only a brief and modest history of a mass following and political victories, a core leadership with much determination but, perhaps, inadequate environmental expertise, political disunity among fellow environmental activists, no strong inter-regional network, no internal funding base, and a feeble democratic structure. The question remains open whether this movement can dig in and stay on the playing field or even forge ahead with new triumphs, despite the strong official opposition led by the wounded but recuperating military industry, and despite the public apathy caused by preoccupation with economic issues and political disillusionment.

Among the deciding factors will be the extent to which the much stronger SEU can compensate for the weaknesses of its local affiliates by providing political guidance and environmental expertise, and furthering its inclusive approach to promote greater unity among divergent forces nationwide and at the local levels. The poignant environmental problems in Chelyabinsk that have resulted from the U.S. and Soviet arms race, the global relevance of these issues, and the admirable dedication to solving the problems on the part of Chelyabinsk environmentalists have compelled U.S. foundations to provide financial support to further these efforts. Therefore the movement’s future will also depend on its efficient use of foreign financing and consultations for long-term institution-building that might help it unite scattered, inter-regional forces to build a solid base of public support for democratic and environmental reform.
References


Endnotes

1. See Douglas R. Weiner. *Models of Nature*. Trofim Lysenko was the Soviet biologist who during the Stalin Period rose to dominate biology, discrediting and ruining the study of genetics, as well as the early Soviet conservation movement and the discipline of ecology.

   Weiner documents the golden age of early Russian conservation activity, locating it in the decade before the 1917 Revolution until the advent of Trofim Lysenko in the early 1930s. Weiner points out that due to these early conservation efforts, the Soviets were first to propose and set aside protected territories for the study of ecological communities, and to suggest that regional land use could be planned and degraded landscapes rehabilitated on the basis of those ecological studies. He attributes Russian and early Soviet ecologists with pioneering phytosociology, the individualistic theory of plant distribution, and the trophic-dynamics, or ecological energetics, paradigm, so critical to the field of community ecology.


5. An academic community established in the 1960s where the major industry was scientific research.


7. An oblast deputy has essentially the same function as a state legislator in the United States.


11. The monitoring laboratory at Chelyabinsk-65 denied any contamination at Muslyumovo, other than in the nearby Techa river.


16. Under the Soviet regime a region had two administrative bodies—the Regional Party Committee and the Regional Executive Committee. As reforms proceeded and the communist party declined in prestige and power, the authority of the Regional Executive Committee rose accordingly.