

Lake Baikal and the Hydroelectric Moment in World History

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Abstract

This paper examines the building of the Irkutsk Hydroelectric dam and the human-induced, hydroelectric flooding of Siberia's Lake Baikal that began in the mid-1950s and transformed the water systems, fish and human ecologies, energy flows, and cultural practices (especially religious) of the diverse peoples of the region. The building of the hydroelectric dam resulted in a rise in water depth of more than 4 meters around the lake. Whole communities found their villages drowned, water transport infrastructure disappeared, the shoreline was irrevocably changed, and the spawning grounds for the lake's endemic (and iconic) fish, the omul, were destroyed. The Shamanist Buriat communities found religious sites dropped underwater and struggled to prevent (and then culturally to absorb) the loss of these sacred sites. This paper explores the ways that hydrological and geological factors merged with economic and technological ones to generate interest in dam building in the area; the extensive efforts to prepare the lands that would be flooded by the dam; the rise of new ways of thinking about and using the lake after the dam began to work; and finally the impact the dam had on the omul population (and the fishing industry that was based on it). Throughout, the paper puts human-caused, "permanent" flooding into the larger context of the history of the regular, cyclical floods on the river and lake. It is also attentive to placing the Baikal story in the larger context of global hydroelectric development.

Bio

Dr. Nicholas B. Breyfogle is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Harvey Goldberg Center for Excellence in Teaching at The Ohio State University in Columbus, OH. He is a specialist in the history of Russia/Soviet Union and in global environmental and water history. He is the author/(co-)editor of nine volumes, including *Place and Nature: Essays in Russian Environmental History* (2021), *Eurasian Environments: Nature and Ecology in Imperial Russian and Soviet History* (2018), *Readings in Water History* (2020), and *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (2005). He is currently completing the book, "Baikal: the Great Lake and its People." Since 2007, Breyfogle has worked as co-editor of the online magazine/podcast/video channel *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, <http://origins.osu.edu> and most recently of *Picturing Black History*, <https://www.picturingblackhistory.org/>.