AN ARCHIVAL AND ORAL HISTORY OF THE TUNGUSKA EXPLOSION

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The Project

On June 30, 1908, an explosion occurred over Siberia that felled a significant section of taiga forest in what is considered one of the largest known impact events in centuries. Numerous witnesses saw a bolide in the sky before the blast and several later recalled suffering injuries. Research into the explosion only began in earnest in the 1920s when Soviet scientists inspected the site and surveyed eyewitnesses. The lack of a crater or enough meteoritic material long puzzled investigators and prompted research into the event to expand in a variety of directions, including by examining the possibility that an active comet instead of a meteorite had triggered the explosion. The mysterious status of Tunguska also caused it to become the subject of science-fiction speculation, which in turn helped inspire voluntary research efforts.

While much has been written about the Tunguska event, including its history, there has not yet been a book-length treatment by a professional historian that approaches the topic from the stance of the history of science, environmental history, and Russian and Soviet history. This project has entailed deep archival work in repositories in Russia and the United States, exhaustive consultation with online databases and published materials, and oral interviews with many Russian and foreign Tunguska researchers, including some of the initial voluntary investigators who began visiting the site in the late 1950s. It also involved a visit to the Tunguska nature reserve in 2018.

The resultant book uses the theme of mystery in the history of science to tie together the trajectory of Tunguska investigations from the moment of the blast to the present. It proposes that the treatment of the Siberian landscape where the Tunguska explosion occurred has been largely shaped by the agenda of better understanding the event. This dominance of “mystery-solving” as a form of landscape interaction is a distinctive phenomenon in global environmental history. Moreover, the study links Tunguska to theoretical literatures on the history of natural disasters, scholarship that examines the role of alternative epistemologies in the scientific enterprise, and relevant historical and historiographical contexts.

Andy Bruno, *Tunguska: A Siberian Mystery and Its Environmental Legacy* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2022)

The Chapters

1. Landscape of Mystery
2. Destruction from the Sky
3. Reaching the Inaccessible Terrain
4. Poking and Prodding for Answers
5. Cosmic Fantasies
6. Volunteers Take Charge
7. Life in Tunguska
8. Protecting the Taiga
9. Views from Afar
10. Siberian and Planetary Futures

Archives, Databases, and Interviews

Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (ARAN), Arizona State University, University Archives, Center for Documentation of the New History of the Tomsk Region (TsDNITO), Center for Documentation of the New History of the Volgograd Region (TsDNIVO),Historical Reference Collection of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), Personal Papers of John Anfinogenov, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGASPI), Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), Saint Petersburg Branch of Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences (SPb ARAN), Smithsonian Institute Archives, State Archive of the Krasnoyarsk Region (GAKO), State Archive of the Tomsk Region (GATO), State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF)

More than 30 interviews and consultation of the website *Tunguska Phenomenon* (tunguska.tsc.ru)

Acknowledgements

This study has been supported by a grant from the Russian Science Foundation (Project No. 20-68-46044), "Imaginary Anthropocene: Environmental Knowledge Production and Transfers in Siberia in the 20th and 21st Centuries," at the Research Center "Human, Environment & Technology" at Tyumen State University, a Research and Artistry Grant at Northern Illinois University, and a Fellowship in Aerospace History from the History of Science Society and the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA).