

On Created Worlds and Plotted Routes

00

As a child, I was sent to my grandmother's place for the entire summer. The distance between my settlement and the city on the Volga River where she lived was just over three hundred kilometers. At that time, the only way to get there was by taking buses with four transfers. The journey took eight or nine hours. Year after year, I followed the same route. I remembered the names of the towns and rivers, knew the layout of each bus station where we changed buses, and could predict how the landscape would shift after the next turn.

Two things mesmerized me along the way. The first was the power lines. The massive metal towers looked like robots, capable of destroying forests and dividing vast territories with their wires. I was afraid of them, and I would stare at each one in awe, checking to see if it would move. The second was the dates. Signs either showed the founding year or marked the town anniversaries. The numbers varied greatly, spanning time in a way that was hard to grasp—950, 850, 400, 200 years. The settlements, however, were marked with dates like 1918, 1919, 1920, 1921, 1925. I knew that my settlement also had a date like that, and I felt a connection to these places, but I couldn't articulate it.

I would ask my relatives questions: Why isn't my birthplace as old? Why is the settlement situated right between the forest and the swamp? Why did my relatives decide to live here when there was nothing around but mosquitoes? Why, and from where, did so many people come to this settlement? Did they miss the places where they were born? What did they dream about? I never got answers that satisfied me. So, as a child, it seemed to me that the place where I was born wasn't quite real, only pretending to be. That feeling hasn't changed, even after many years.

01

In this text, I use archival materials, official speeches and letters, laws, statistical data, academic articles and analyses, fiction, posters, newspapers, and more. But the most important sources are the interviews with peat extraction workers who relocated to the settlement where I was born during Soviet times, along with the few existing memoirs and personal recollections, gathered from online posts and comments, in addition to my own reflections.

As above, my personal memories and the simulated parts of this text are distinguished from the rest of the text with a different color.

Peat extraction is seasonal work that lasts from around April to September. In Soviet times, more than half of the workforce in peat production were women. Young women came to work from rural areas of various regions, from Ryazan and Vladimir Oblasts, Mordovia, Mari El, Tatarstan, and Chuvashia. The official job title was *torfyanitsa* but in colloquial language, women working in the bogs were pejoratively called *torfushkas*. The term *torfushka* became a collective label and is still used in the settlement today to describe a poorly dressed or unkempt woman, or even a sex worker.

There is an extremely small amount of information about the seasonal peat workers. It's not that they were erased from history and archives—they were never included in the first place. Their existence is described by onlookers in literature and medical journals. Their lives and work, captured in numbers; their voices, spoken for by their supervisors. To understand how industrialization and parallel migrations shaped identity and collective memory, it is *crucial* to foreground their experience and present the social landscape in which these peat workers lived and worked.



Pic. 1. Female peat workers at work in a peat field. Place, year and author unknown.

In working on the simulated recreation of the stories of peat workers, I partially draw on the method of African American researcher Saidiya Hartman. She creates a narrative of Black women who lived in the early 20th century in the United States, a narrative that radically differs from how they were portrayed in newspapers, documents and literature of that time. Hartman merges her voice with the voices of these women in inseparable

unison, forming a sensory perception of her characters' lives.¹ However, my method of artistic simulation differs significantly from those developed by Hartman. She writes about specific Black women with experiences of racialization, discrimination, and often slavery, knowing details of their lives, such as their name, age, place of residence, profession, or family members.

Conversely, I don't have direct contact with the women who worked in peat extraction. I rely on interviews conducted by another person, whose identity will remain anonymous to ensure their safety and privacy. I do not know the exact names, ages, birthplaces, or ethnicities of the interviewees and use only a tiny fraction of their experiences and stories. Their names are substituted with fictitious initials, and the name of the peat settlement where they worked is not mentioned. The stories of female peat workers presented in this text are *proxies*—they are based on real facts and events, but the stories do not describe any one specific person.

Before the interview, the women were informed that their words would form the basis of this text. However, they were not told who would write it, or for what purpose. Before publication, the text was read by the person who conducted the interviews with the peat workers. She decided not to send them the text, stating that while the factual interpretation of their speech was accurate, the emphasis was placed solely on the difficult aspects of their lives, without mentioning the positive moments of working on the peatlands.

Any text, especially an artistic simulation, involves subjective perception. As an ethnically Russian person who grew up in a rural area of the *N* region and received higher education, I cannot speak on behalf of workers from villages who lived in the Vladimir region or came from the Republic of Tatarstan and Mari El.

02

In 1976, the novel *The Riddle of Prometheus* by Hungarian writer Lajos Mesterházi was published chapter by chapter in the journal *Foreign Literature*, becoming the year's most-read foreign literary publication.² In the novel, Prometheus is portrayed as a socialist hero-god who worked hard, much like the people building communism, and ultimately *disappeared into the depths of the true history of the great multitude of humanity, which has been struggling for a million years, always for the sake of tomorrow*.³ Scholar Ihab Hassan describes Prometheus as the central figure of modern

¹ Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*. London: Serpent's Tail, UK. 2021.

² Киш, И. «Finis initium»: миф о Прометее в Венгрии и Советском Союзе / И. Киш // Вопросы литературы. 2016. №5, С. 151-175. [Kish, I. "Finis initium": the Myth of Prometheus in Hungary and the Soviet Union, *Questions of Literature*. 2016. №5, pp.151-175.]

³ <http://www.lib.ru/INPROZ/MESHTERHAZI/prometej.txt>. Accessed October 9, 2024.

mythology, one that seeks to transcend the limits of human and natural possibilities, uniting imagination and science, myth and technology, language and numbers.

Prometheus as a symbol of progress and technological development in the Soviet Union began to emerge around the 1960s, primarily associated with nuclear energy and the electronics industry. In 1967, artist Ernst Neizvestny proposed a sketch for a Prometheus sculpture to be placed in front of the Science Center building in Zelenograd. The sketch was approved, and the foundation for the sculpture was laid. However, with the upcoming Lenin anniversary, the Prometheus monument was never erected; instead, a monument to Lenin was placed in the square.⁴

Is it possible to assert that Prometheus and Lenin represented the same thing, making their comparison unnecessary? Did Lenin need no comparison, because he was a myth himself? If Prometheus was replaced by Lenin, could Lenin also be replaced by someone or something else?

Based on these questions, I propose the following:

$$\Pi \leq \Lambda,$$

where Π = Prometheus and Λ = Lenin (or the cosmological constant, characterizing the vacuum of the USSR).

Let's assume this statement is true. The question then arises: who or what is significantly greater and significantly lesser than Π and Λ ?

$$? < \Pi \leq \Lambda < ??$$

The existence of the Soviet Union and the establishment of communism were, in addition to the political and military order, also linked to technological progress in Bolshevik ideology. In his letters to Krzhizhanovsky, Lenin stated that communism could only be built through industry, and the condition for industry was electricity. Electric energy was perceived as something flexible, an invisible substance that humans could create, simultaneously transforming everything around them. In the rhetoric of the Soviet state, electrification was presented as a *revolutionary breakthrough* that transformed natural resources into an *endlessly useful* and *controllable force*, while also reshaping citizens in the likeness of the *renewed* socialist man.⁵

If we consider the words and actions of the early Soviet state, where electric power was a key element in building a *new world*, we can assert:

⁴ Зеленоград — город архитектора Игоря Покровского / авт.-сост. Ф. А. Новиков. — М.: Кучково поле Музеон, 2019. [Novikov, F. A. *Zelenograd—The City of Architect Igor Pokrovsky*, Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, Museon, 2019.]

⁵ Ленин об электрификации: [сборник]; с предисл. и под ред. Г. М. Кржижановского. - М.: Молодая гвардия: ОГИЗ. 1931, С. 46. [Krzhizhanovsky, G. M., ed. *Lenin on Electrification: [Collection]; With a Foreword and Under the Editorship of G. M. Krzhizhanovsky*, Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, OGIZ, 1931, p. 46.]

$\Pi \leq \Lambda < A$,
where **A**=Electrification.

This means that electrification is indeed the component that can replace Lenin. While there may be other indicators besides **A**, we will focus solely on **A** or electrification.

03

Expanding on Aimé Césaire's idea that the *colonial world is not only where colonizers go*, Povinelli argues that the colonial system is also an infrastructure for the movement of resources—both natural and human—into European cities, alongside the parallel devastation of rural spaces and landscapes. *All roads lead to Rome*, and regardless of how far they extend, anything valuable moves in only one direction.⁶ The railway network that stretched across the Russian Empire invariably converged in Moscow and St.Petersburg, which were the receiving points of extracted goods from Siberia, the Urals, the Caucasus, and the Donbas. The distribution of people and resources from the *periphery* was carried out exclusively in the capitals.

The concentration of the White Army during the years 1917-1921 in the main energy regions of the Russian Empire led to a railway collapse and a fuel crisis. During this period, industries reliant on Donetsk coal or Baku oil practically ceased to function. The first electrification plan, developed by the GOELRO commission in 1920, took into account the difficulties of transporting energy resources from the *periphery* of the Soviet Union to Moscow and St.Petersburg. According to the plan, new power plants were to use local types of *second-rate* fuels—peat, lower-quality coal, oil shale, and hydroelectric power—as energy sources. The plan was designed for a 10-15 year period, with an increase in electricity production from half a billion kilowatts to 8.8 billion, coal extraction from 8.7 million tons to 62.3 million, and peat extraction from 1.4 million tons to 16.4 million.⁷ The construction of power plants formed a vast energy system. Now, it was not resources that were being transported, but energy. An infrastructure of power transmission lines (PTL) was established for transporting energy over long distances. The goal of GOELRO was not merely the development of the electrical industry but the entire economy—rapid industrialisation, agricultural development, and the transportation of resources and people.

⁶ Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Routes/Worlds*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022, pp. 122-142.

⁷ План электрификации РСФСР. Доклад VIII Съезду Советов государственной комиссии по электрификации России. Второе издание. Государственное издательство политической литературы. Москва. 1955, С. 23. [*Plan of Electrification of the RSFSR: Report to the VIII Congress of Soviets of the State Commission for Electrification of Russia*. 2nd edition. Moscow: State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1955, p. 23.]



Fig. 2. Poster. Translation: *How Electricity is Made and its Benefits*. Author: Aleksandrova, Illustrator: Sakharova, I.M. Moscow: Gosizdat. 1921.

The GOELRO commission based its plan on the results of colonial expeditions aimed at draining swampy territories in the Russian Empire, which began in 1873 under the leadership of General Zhylynskiy. The objective of these expeditions was to *evenly distribute moisture and eliminate excess water*⁸ in the regions of Polesie (Палессе/Полісся on contemporary territories of Belarus and Ukraine), the Meshchera region, and the Baraba lowland of Western Siberia, in *order to create large areas of land for agrarian colonization*.⁹ Members of the expeditions classified and mapped the terrain, the characteristics of rivers and swamps, as well as the biological and geological life. Based on these studies and drainage works, in 1897, Tanflev developed a classification of swamps and peat bogs in Russia, which served as the foundation for the peat industry of the Soviet Union.

⁸ Балотны генерал Іосіф Іпалітавіч Жылінскі, [Заволочыцкі край](#) [Balotny General Josif Ipalitavich Zhylynskiy, *Zavolochytsky Krai*. Accessed October 9, 2024.

⁹ К. Паустовский. Мещерская сторона. [K. Paustovsky. The Meshcherskaya Region.] <https://deti-online.com/skazki/konstantin-paustovskiy/mescherskaya-storona/>. Accessed October 9, 2024.



Fig. 3. Poster. Translation: *Peat- Energy base for industrialisation and collectivisation of agriculture*. Date, author, and illustrator unknown.

Alongside the development of the energy industry, institutions were established and laws were enacted to emphasize its importance. In 1918, Lenin established the Main Peat Committee, which regulated the industry, surveyed peat deposits throughout the Union, and built the infrastructure necessary for extraction. That same year, a decree was signed mandating local councils of workers and peasants to assist development efforts.¹⁰ In 1919, four management bodies were formed to oversee the construction of peat power plants around Moscow, one of which was Shatura Management. Lenin signed a resolution recognising the construction of the Shatura and Kashira power

¹⁰ Декреты Советской власти. Т. II. 17 марта – 10 июля 1918 г. – М.: Политиздат, 1959. С. 144-149. [*Decrees of Soviet State. Vol. II. 17 March—10 July 1918. Moscow, Politizdat. 1959, pp.144-149.*]

plants as defense-related projects of exceptional significance for securing the rear.¹¹ By the end of 1925, the construction of the Shatura power plant was complete.

The GOELRO plan followed the logic of the Russian Empire's railway construction: power stations built in various locations and connected by power transmission lines (PTL) directed energy towards the center of the infrastructure—Moscow. Several dozen kilometers from Shatura, along the Kazan-Moscow railway, peat extraction began in the *X* village. In 1919, the settlement of *X* was founded. By 1925, the *X* peat extraction operation produced goods valued at 197,238 thousand rubles.¹² To ensure the transport of peat from the extraction site to the thermal power plant, a narrow-gauge railway was laid through the swamps between *X* and Shatura.

The creation of the electricity industry was made possible through the development of infrastructure and the transportation of labor. The settlement began with the construction of barracks for workers and an office for representatives of Soviet authority. *X* was continuously expanding and growing. In 1932, the *Y* factory started operating in the settlement, producing peat-based thermal insulation materials for the military industry. Within 10-15 years, the settlement had a canteen and health facility for factory workers, as well as a school, hospital, and club.

Starting from the early 1920s, in various regions of the Soviet Union—just as around Shatura—working peat settlements and small towns began to emerge, one after another. As these new settlements were built, a hierarchical logic of dependencies was formed, in which the settlements served as resource satellites for regional power plants and/or large factories. These, in turn, operated to supply either Moscow or St.Petersburg.

04

Simulation #1

Character #1

She works seasonally on the Nazia peat extraction site in the Leningrad region, starting in the early 1930s. She is young, but her body is broken by labor.

In a black-and-white photograph, a bent woman crawls through a mass of peat mixed with roots and branches. Her body, wrapped in a waterproof suit, is submerged up to her chest in the thick mass. Her hands are hidden under the water. She pushes away snags from the pipe that sucks in the hydro-peat,¹³ preventing them from damaging the

¹¹ Декреты Советской власти. Т. V. 1 апреля – 31 июля 1919 г. – М.: Политиздат, 1971. С. 607 [*Decrees of Soviet State*. Vol. V. 1 April—31 July 1919. Moscow, Politizdat. 1971. p. 607.]

¹² Экономическое обследование гужевых дорог Владимирской губернии. Владимир, издание Владимирского губернского коммунального отдела. 1929. [*Economic Survey of Gauge Roads in Vladimir Province*. Vladimir: Edition of the Vladimir Provincial Communal Department, 1929.]

¹³ The technique for extracting peat involved using a powerful jet of water to wash it out. A mixture of peat and water, known as hydromass, was pumped out of the quarries by large pumps and transported through pipes, roughly a meter in diameter, to drying fields. There, the water drained into ditches, and as the peat dried, it was compressed and cut into brick-like shapes.

pump. She throws the debris into piles on either side of her. In a second photograph, presumably taken from the same spot, the landscape of the excavation site and the pump structure are visible.

Through Google Image Search, I try to find the author of these photos. Most of the search results show me battlefields of the Western Front from the First World War. The absence of any living vegetation, ditches, uprooted stumps and mud create identical landscapes. Despite the differences in conditions of these environments, the physical experiences of the people look largely similar.

How many hours did she crawl through the peat sludge? What is the water temperature at the end of April or the beginning of September? When does the suit soak through? When does she stop feeling her hands and feet?



Pic. 4. Female peat worker in the peat liquid, pushing snags away to keep them out of the pipe. Leningrad Oblast, circa 1930-35.
Author unknown.



Pic. 5. The hydro-peat mining field. Leningrad Oblast, circa 1930-35. Author unknown.

These photos don't show whether she had a lunch break, if there was a chance for her to warm up somewhere, or if she had dry clothes with her. We don't see her swollen, blue hands and feet, nor do we see her taking off her boot and pouring out liters of water. We don't hear her coughing, which turns into wheezing and ends with a splutter of blood.

She stands, with her comrades, waist-deep in the water of a quarry. One of the pumps has broken down—someone missed a log. Up above, at the edge of the pit, the boss stands in warm, clean clothes. He yells at them for several minutes, non-stop. They stand with their heads down. She lifts her head and turns to her colleagues:

Girls, how about we dunk him in the swamp? Why is he so clean?!

The illness she contracted while working in the peat bogs never left her, even when she stopped working in the water. Her cough worsened every time she found herself back in the bog. Neither the beautiful dresses she brought from home nor the songs in her native language, sung with the girls from her village, could ease her suffering. The bleeding and pain during menstruation were so severe that she spent several days in a daze. Her body was wasting away, but she kept working.

How did she end up in the peat bogs so far from her village? Did she believe the man who spoke her language, when he came to the village and said there was good money

to be made working in the peatlands? Perhaps she didn't want to work on the collective farm? Did she hope that working in the peatlands would earn her a passport so she could leave and study in the city? What did she dream of as she returned, season after season, to the peat fields?

05

In her research, Francine Hirsch writes that the Soviet regime of the 1920s viewed colonization as a necessary stage of ongoing modernization, aimed at integrating people into the Soviet economy and infrastructure. To unite various peoples and their territories, the Soviet administration manipulated categories of nation and nationality, using a process of *double assimilation*. Soviet subjects were assimilated into official national categories, and at the same time, these newly formed national categories were assimilated into the Soviet state and society. *Double assimilation* was an important mechanism for synthesizing diverse populations to create a constantly modernizing state, which was preparing for a transition to socialism.¹⁴

Industrialization, along with its integrated resource extraction, the creation of supporting infrastructure, and the relocation of people, shaped new archetypes and communities with an ever-tireless workforce, laboring for the development of the Soviet state. Everyone was important in the victory of communism—there were no remote places, no unattainable goals for *the new Soviet person*.

Electricity and the process of electrification were creating the new Soviet person. Power stations became high-voltage *pillars engaged in the electrical enlightenment of the masses*.¹⁵ The human body and mind were transformed through modernization.¹⁶

Electrification, and peat extraction in particular, act as a catalyst that helps transform the rural population into the working class. Drawing an analogy to the previous equation, I argue:

$$\mathbf{A} = \mathbf{\Omega}$$

where \mathbf{A} = electrification and $\mathbf{\Omega}$ = the new person.

The transformation into *the new person* was popularized through art, literature, science, and propaganda materials. In the 1932 novel *The Sun's Treasure*, the rural *last of the Mohicans from the backwoods* are dying out. The release of the *stored energy of the sun*, preserved in the bog, and its transformation into electricity, transforms the female workers who have come to the peat extraction sites. From being *ignorant* only

¹⁴ Hirsch, Francine. "Toward an Empire of Nations: Border-Making and the Formation of Soviet National Identities." *The Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000): 201-26.

¹⁵ Ленин, В.И. Ленин об электрификации: [сборник]/[В. И. Ленин]; с предисл. и под ред. Г. М. Кржижановского. - М.: Молодая гвардия: ОГИЗ.1931. С. 15 [Lenin, V. *Lenin on Electrification*. [Collection]/[V. I. Lenin]. Ed. and preface by G. M. Krzhizhanovsky. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, OGIZ, 1931, p. 15.]

¹⁶ Гастев. А. Восстание культуры. Молодой рабочий. Харьков. 1923, стр. 21 [Gastev, A. *Revolt of Culture*. Kharkiv: Young Worker, 1923, p. 21.]

wanting to sing *chastushki* girls, they evolve into Soviet women, striving for education and work. They are ready to labor for the benefit of the Soviet state, sacrificing their bodies without hesitation. The *will to victory*¹⁷ drives the united millions of the working class.



Pic. 6. Pravda newspaper. Translation: *One norm for myself, another norm for a comrade who went to the front.* Field editorial office in Shatura. August, 1944.

They (torfushkas) were brought in—Mordvins, Chuvash, people from all over— were here. They lived in barracks back then. Some of them stayed to live here. They were hired, and three of our people would go, both to Chuvashia and Mordovia, recruit workers there, and bring them by train. Separate barracks were built for them. Some played the balalaika, others the guitar, and they sang in their own languages. It was interesting for us—we would go watch how they danced, what they looked like, what songs they sang. Then they would leave at the end of the season. Some came back the next year, while others stayed. When we started working with the milling machine,

¹⁷ Перегудов Александр. Солнечный клад. Московский рабочий. 1973 [Peregudov, Alexander. *Solar Treasure*. Moscow: Moskovskiy Rabochiy, 1973.]

they stopped coming. As long as everything was done by hand, they would come. N.B. recalls that seasonal female workers were recruited for peat extraction until the 1960s.

Many female workers who came for seasonal peat extraction later stayed to work in the settlements or moved to the city. According to the census, the rural population was 82% in 1926, 67% in 1939, 48% in 1959, and 38% in 1970.¹⁸ In 1926, 87.9% of women aged 16 to 59 worked in the agricultural sector and were redistributed for seasonal work when necessary.¹⁹

Agitation leaflets and newspapers were filled with utopian ideas and techno-optimism, citing statistics about over fulfilled quotas, competitions in peat extraction between work cooperatives, sacrifices of lives to save equipment, and power stations opened in record time. However, the individual experience of female workers did not match how it was portrayed in propaganda materials. The working conditions were incredibly harsh. A 1931 brochure, published by the Institute of Occupational Health, discusses the need to rationalize the labor of peat workers. During an eight-hour shift, a single worker would carry up to five tons of peat. The basket of peat was thrown onto the shoulder with a jerk. Due to the weight and the accelerated pace of work, the worker would run across the field and climb two-meter scaffolding. Lunch breaks were often non-existent, and women worked without rest. *If a woman lifts excessively heavy loads in an awkward manner, requiring a lot of effort to tense the muscles of her abdominal wall, this tension causes the muscles to press strongly on the abdominal cavity and all the internal organs within it; as a result, intra-abdominal pressure increases, and under this pressure, the uterus, which is normally suspended in a flexible manner, begins to tilt back. In more severe cases, especially with prolonged hard labor, it may descend into the vagina, or, as is said, 'prolapse' (i.e. protrude outward through the genital opening).*²⁰

¹⁸ Federal State Statistics Service. "Demographic Indicators." Accessed October 9, 2024.

https://rosstat.gov.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/demo11.htm

¹⁹ Eason, Warren W. "Labor Force Materials for the Study of Unemployment in the Soviet Union." In *The Measurement and Behaviour of Unemployment*, 1957. pp. 389-438.

²⁰ Рационализация и оздоровление труда торфяниц. Выпуск 11. Государственное социально-экономическое издательство. 1931. С. 6 [Rationalization and Improvement of the Work of Female Peat Boggers. Vol. 11. State Socio-Economic Publishing House. 1931. p. 6.]

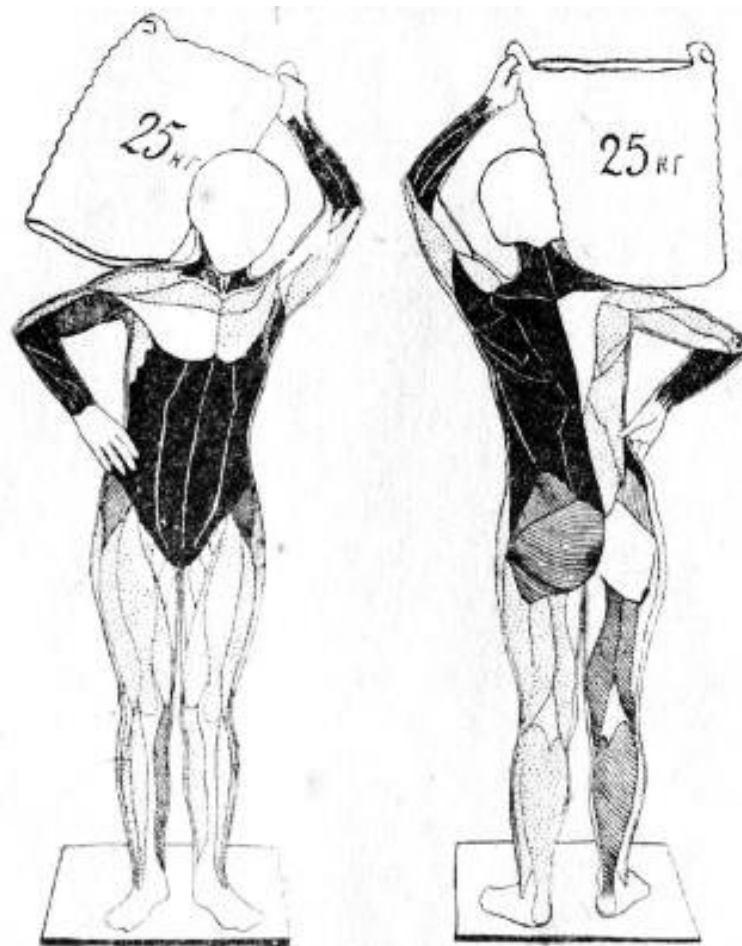


Рис. 11. При переноске тяжестей на плече — очень сильное напряжение брюшных мышц.

Pic. 7. Illustration from the brochure *Rationalisation and Improvement of the Work of Female Peat Boggers*, 1931.

According to studies, 61 out of 100 female workers who had worked in peat extraction suffered from chronic menstrual cycle disorders. Many workers experienced infertility. It is unknown whether this brochure was available in settlement X, but according to N.V and N.M, labor remained manual until around the 1960s. The living conditions for seasonal female workers were no better. In a local newspaper in 1927, there was a complaint from the peat workers of X swamp stating that they received *poor-quality black bread*, that *the latrines were not properly maintained*, and that in the female workers barracks, the *ventilation was insufficient*.²¹

N.M recalls that they worked manually *like primitive people* six days a week. After their shifts, they always stayed for overtime for an additional 10 kopecks. N.M spent her only day off doing housework and washing by hand for all the family members; *I didn't see anything good in my childhood. I've never been anywhere in my life, not even on vacation, nowhere*. In the 1950s and '60s, the production of thermal insulation boards at factory Y reached its peak. Trains were always waiting at the station for loading. The

²¹ Газета Призыв 5.06.1927 [Newspaper *Prizyv*. June 5, 1927.]

settlement was divided by a main railway line into two parts. People had to crawl under the trains to get to work or return home. *Once, I almost had my legs cut off when the train started moving.*

Torfushkas were always brought in for the season, but some of them stayed to live in the settlement. *There's that woman [_____] from Mordovia, that woman [_____] from Chuvashia, [_____] from Tatarstan. There were a few from Mari El. But what's the difference? Now they're all Russian,* says N.M.

The management of the peat extraction operations did not take into account the physical and mental state of the female workers, their personal tragedies, or the disappearance of cultural memory regarding the abandoned villages. Work in the industry stripped their bodies of the right to rest, exhausting and crippling them.

Returning to the artistic speculation and the question of which component is lesser, like Prometheus and Lenin, I propose:

$$T \leq \Pi \leq \Lambda < A = \Omega$$

where **T** = female peat worker, **Π** = Prometheus, **Λ** = Lenin (or the Cosmological Constant, characterizing the vacuum of the USSR), **A** = electrification, and **Ω** = the new person.

The following statement more accurately describes the possibility of there being an unlimited number of indicators between **T** and **Π**:

$$T < \dots \leq \Pi \leq \Lambda < A = \Omega$$

with **T=0**.

06

Simulation #2

Character #2

She works in the peat extraction fields in the Moscow region. 1944.

The shift should have long been over, but the other work crew are yet to arrive. All efforts are focused on extinguishing the fire in the second section. The fire is quite far from their area, but they hurry to load at least the stacked peat in case the fire gets too close. She can't remember the last time she sat down to rest. The bed in the barracks seems like the most wonderful place right now.

How did she end up here? How much longer did she need to hold on? Perhaps if she had been given an exact time, she could calculate her strength?

After filling the basket, she jerkily throws it over her shoulder. Her vision darkens, but she holds on. Fifty meters across the field, sinking in the mud, over the bridges across the ditches, another two meters up, then empty the basket and run back to the stacks of dry peat in the field.

How can she stop? Will no one come to relieve them? How many hours had they been out here already?

Tractors light up the field through the pitch-black darkness. The glow of the fire is not visible, but the smoke from the burning peat is everywhere. The silhouettes of the women move across the field, sometimes caught in the beams of the searchlights. Their movements are mechanical and slow. Fill the basket with peat, throw it over your shoulder, fifty meters across the field, over the bridges across the ditches, two meters up, empty the basket, run back. She throws the basket over her shoulder. Her head swimming, her vision darkens. She falls.

Миннән калган киёмнәрне
Туганнарым кисеннәр.
Кызлар кайткач, әнкәемә
Үлеп калды дисеннәр.²²

*Let my remaining clothes
be worn by my relatives
When the girls return to our homeland,
Let them tell my mother I died on this land.*

(Translated to Russian by Ayaz Ismagilov, to English by author)

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The Soviet administration viewed nature as an *infinite* and *controllable* resource. The swamp, also known as the *Sleeping Beauty*, held within it an energy that at first glance was hidden and *waiting to be released* (Gorky, Kirsanov, Peregudov, Prishvin, et al). It was *organically unpleasant* for the *almighty man* (could it be Prometheus?) to see unused potential, and he sought to *turn green idlers, peacefully ending their lives without benefit to man, into obedient slaves*.²³

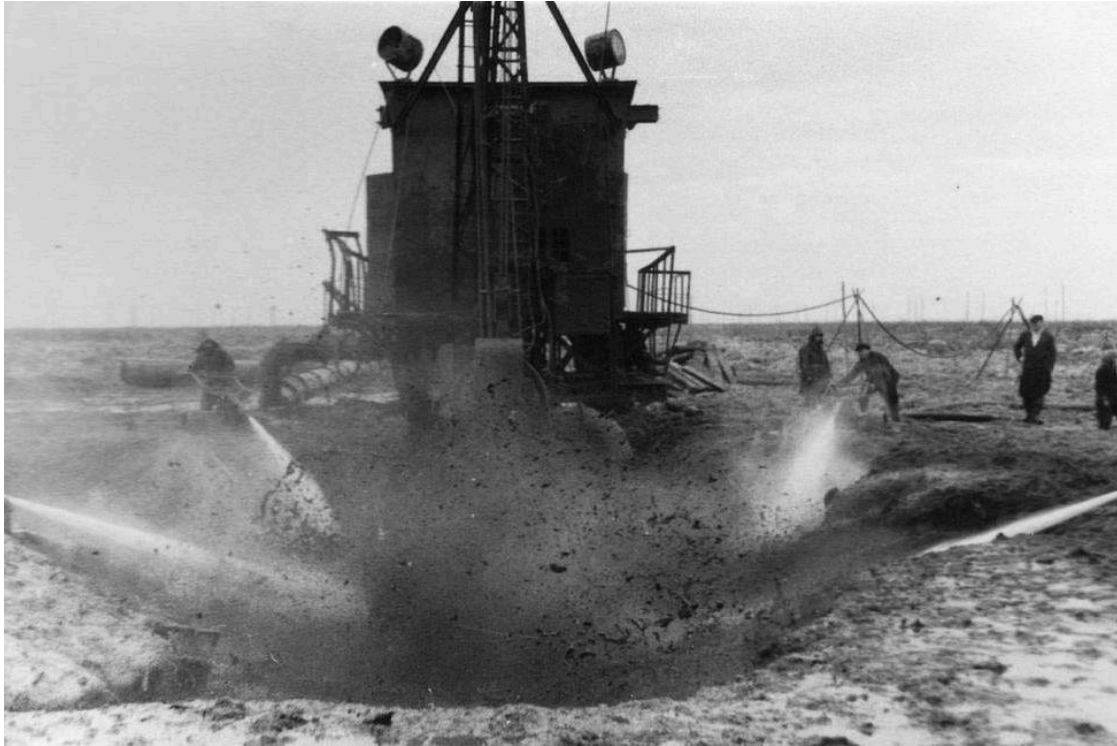
Katja Bruisch writes that in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, wetland ecosystems were perceived solely as a resource composed of land, wood, and fuel. At the

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<https://intertat.tatar/news/sugysh-ellarynda-torf-chygargan-tatar-kyzlaryny-tyryshlygy-ni-chen-k-l-g-d-kaldy-5820846> "Let my remaining clothes be worn by my relatives. When the girls return to our homeland, let them tell my mother that she died on this land." (Translated by Ayaz Ismagilov) *Intertat*. [Тәэминә Биктимерова "Сугыш елларында торф чыгарган татар кызларының тырышлыгы ни өчен күлэгәдә калды?"]. Accessed October 9, 2024.

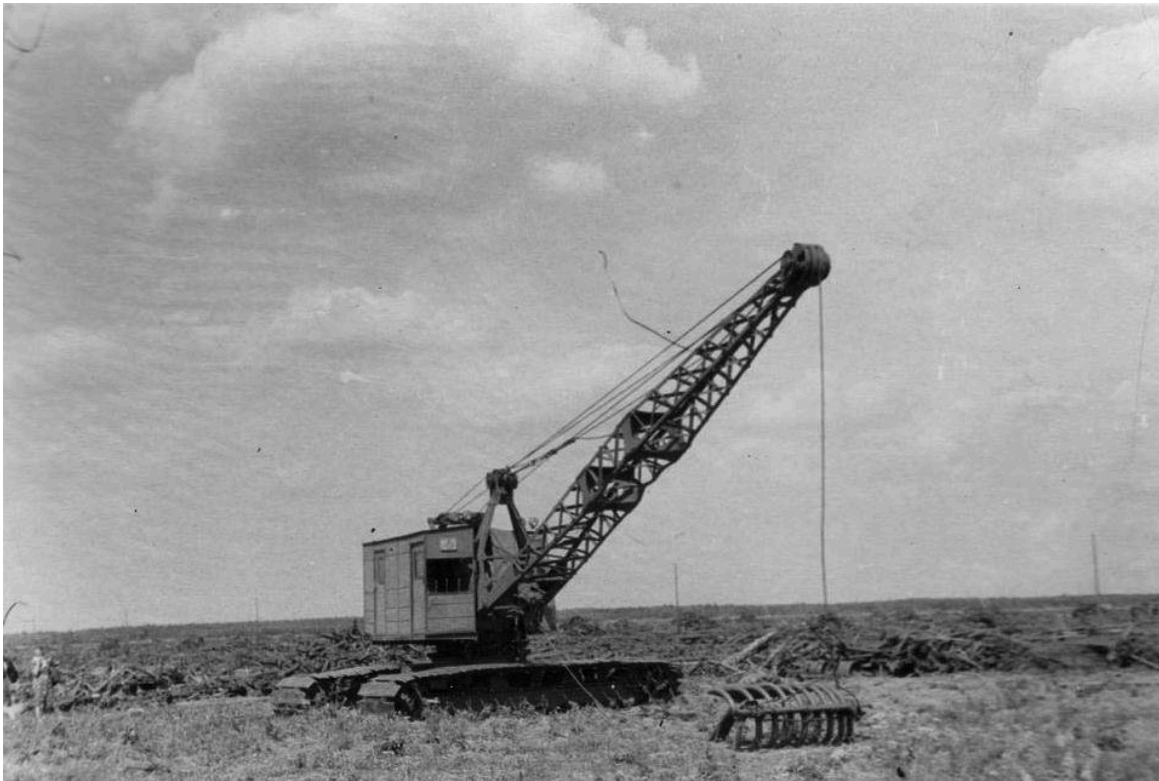
²³ Вселенная и человечество. Книга 12я. Завоевание мощности (история изучения и применения в технике сил природы). Составил Б.П. Вейнберг 639-706. Ленинград, издательство П.П. Сойкин. 1928. С. 706 [*The Universe and Humanity*. Book 12, *Conquest of Power* (History of the Study and Application of the Forces of Nature in Technology, compiled by B.P. Weinberg 639-706. Leningrad: P.P. Soykin Publishing House, 1928. p. 706.)]

same time, the swamp was described as a mistake, a natural disorder that needed to be corrected by man, an aggressive system that had to be stopped. Lands unsuitable for natural use were proposed to be transformed into productive landscapes.²⁴ Trees and shrubs were uprooted, swamps drained, and peat extracted, leaving behind devastated territories and poisoned soils.



Pic. 8. Erosion of a sinkhole for the extraction of hydrot-peat. Leningrad Oblast, circa 1930-35. Author unknown.

²⁴ Bruisch, Katja. "Nature Mistaken: Resource-Making, Emotions and the Transformation of Peatlands in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union." *Environment and History* 26, no. 3. August 2020: pp. 359-82.



Pic.9. TE-2 excavator for cleaning passageways. Date, location and author unknown.

In the 1960s, manual labor was replaced by mechanized processes. By the 1980s, peat extraction had reached its peak, with 80% of the world's peat production taking place in the Soviet Union.²⁵ Describing the mechanized extraction process, H.B. talks about the machines and their functions. Peatland development begins with the clearing of forests and shrubs. Machines dig primary channels to drain water from the selected area into lakes or rivers. After clearing, the remaining stumps, logs, and roots are ground into dust by the deep milling machine MTP42 to make the work easier for the next machines. Excavators dig drainage ditches, 500 meters long and spaced 20 meters apart, allowing water to flow into the main channels and then into rivers. The excavated soil, once dry, is leveled by bulldozers. This process is repeated in the same section for three years. *After the milling machine, nothing alive remains on the site*, says H.B. In 1981, peat extraction at the X enterprise averaged 500,000 tons. *The plan—you die, but you complete it. Extraction didn't stop, even during fires, and people worked through the nights. In 2010, when the regions around Moscow were burning, we lost 60,000 tons of extracted peat to the fires.*

Given all the mentioned parameters, I can derive the final statement:

$$\mathbf{T = N < \dots \leq \Pi \leq \Lambda < A = \Omega}$$

where:

²⁵ Bord na Móna, *Fuel Peat in Developing Countries*. World Bank Technical Paper Number 41, 1985, p. 8.

Π = Prometheus, Λ = Lenin (or the Cosmological Constant characterizing the vacuum of the USSR), \mathbf{A} = Electrification, $\mathbf{\Omega}$ = The New Man, \mathbf{T} = Peat Worker, \mathbf{N} = Nature

with the conditions that:

$$\mathbf{T} = \mathbf{N} = \mathbf{0} \text{ and } \mathbf{A} = \mathbf{\Omega} = \infty$$

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In 1971, the UN adopted the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, which recognized that wetlands are not useless territories, but ecosystems of immense importance that require protection. Peat bogs store vast amounts of carbon, which is released into the atmosphere when these areas are drained, even for agricultural use. The only way to halt the massive carbon emissions is to begin rewetting these areas artificially. Despite this, discussions about the environmental state of wetlands in the Soviet Union only began in the late 1980s. H.B. recalls that by the early 2000s, five out of six peat extraction sites had been shut down. The industrial equipment and drained lands were abandoned without any oversight. Peat can smolder underground for long periods, burning large areas. *Zombie fires* are often invisible on the surface, and when they do break out on the abandoned peatlands, they are almost impossible to extinguish. By the 2000s, this led the government and scientists to begin conserving and restoring wetland ecosystems.

I'm holding several black-and-white photographs that I took with my Zenit camera around 2009. In one of them, there's part of a field with patches of unmelted snow. An elderly woman is crossing the field along a path. In the background, there's a tall water tower—metal at the base and cylindrical wood on top. Behind it, you can recognize part of the semi-ruined factory Y. In another picture, the interior of the factory is shown. The floors and roof have collapsed, but the frame still stands. Bricks are scattered everywhere, and rebar juts out from the remaining walls. In other photos, there are fragments of Soviet trucks stuck in the mud, rusted tractor and truck cabins, an excavator with its bucket resting on the ground, and the frame of narrow-gauge railway cars with ties inside them. As kids, we used to sneak into the repair shop and spend hours wandering between the wagons and broken-down machines, looking for metal parts of specific shapes, listening to the footsteps of guards and workers, and running away when they spotted us. The abandoned factory buildings were hangout spots for teenagers. It was dangerous to be there because of the risk of collapse, and the holes in the floors and walls. People drank alcohol, smoked, and had sex there.

One of the factories was leveled to the ground. Only large pits suggest that a massive building once stood there. The water tower remains untouched. The briquette plant still

stands as a skeleton, but the first floor is sealed off to prevent anyone from entering. The building was purchased by some company, but it's unclear how it will be used. The mechanical shop started working again about eight years ago. New equipment for molding peat briquettes was installed. In winter, the snow around the shop turns gray and black. The same as the snow in Soviet times.

In 2016, the State Duma approved, and Putin signed, a bill to support thermal power plants that use peat as fuel.²⁶ Peat was granted the status of an environmentally sustainable *renewable energy source* because its annual growth in the Russian Federation exceeds 200 million tons. Plans were made to increase the use of peat in the fuel and energy industry from 1.2% to at least 8-10% by 2030. Additionally, the revival of the peat industry promised job growth in *depressed areas*, aiming to *breathe life into rural territories*.²⁷ Bruisch emphasizes that *officials are actively promoting peat extraction, while peat fires at abandoned excavation sites are often poorly controlled or even concealed by local authorities*.²⁸

The spheres of workers' lives in the X settlement, both during Soviet times and over the past thirty years, have revolved around peat extraction and/or the railways. These sectors have undergone changes depending on the period, emerging and dissolving, expanding and contracting, and shifting from one space to another. Workers came and returned to the peat fields year after year; peat was transported by rail in various forms, and equipment was brought in; people left the settlement due to the decline in peat extraction and the cessation of production.

Povinelli writes that routes shape spaces (*create worlds*) and determine which (non)biological agents carry meaning within those spaces. The social institutions that emerge within these spaces-worlds create and transport the things and resources significant to them. Routes build an interconnected network, forming new artificial worlds. If I project this idea onto the processes that have taken place since the 1990s in settlement X, it explains my perception of this space as something artificial. The meanings of social existence, formed before I was born, defined socio-political interactions both between people and between people and nature. "It has always been this way. Therefore, everything must remain the same". The settlement was sinking into a longing for the "familiar", for an idealized memory of lost greatness, for artificial togetherness, for jobs at the peat enterprise. A single moment of resistance: a power, heating, and water outage for several weeks in the 1990s forced the residents to gather and block the main railway. As soon as light, heat, and water were restored, the residents dispersed to their homes (and did not come out again). The protocols of

²⁶ *Garant Base*. Accessed October 9, 2024.. <https://base.garant.ru/71435040/>

²⁷ *State Duma Transcript*. Accessed October 9, 2024. <http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/node/4481/>; *Izvestia*. Accessed October 9, 2024. <https://iz.ru/news/554448>

²⁸ "State officials have been actively promoting peat extraction in the last couple of years, while peat fires on abandoned excavation sites are often monitored poorly or even covered up by local authorities." Bruisch, "Nature Mistaken", p. 382.

existence were impossible to change — the logic of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union flowed into modern Russia. Everything that was done to people and territories will remain unpunished— it always has. What can break this cycle?

Postscript

Energy is material and consists of metal, concrete, stone, peat, and wires. If one component, such as peat, is removed from energy (**A**), its (infra)structure will be destabilized and begin to disintegrate. Energy ceases to be infinite. The new person ceases to be the ideal. The myth of Prometheus is forgotten. Monuments to Lenin disappear. Simultaneously, peat bogs (**T**) and nature (**N**) cease to equal zero.

$$\text{---T=N<...≤Π≤Λ<A=Ω---}$$

If pressure is applied, the system will disappear.

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