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Role of the Norilsk Nickel Smelter in Formation of Norilsk Urban Environment in 1950–70s

Abstract

Existence of the cities above the Arctic Circle is a topic that is gaining importance. Most

scholars adhere to economic approach, some to urbanistic, and rarely to social. However, it is the sociocultural situation that distinguishes a city from a settlement near a plant, the quality of the urban environment playing a decisive role in preservation (or loss) of population. Urban environment is a multidimensional notion. This paper aims to correlate the elements of the urban environment of Norilsk created with direct involvement of the Norilsk Nickel Smelter with those evolved entirely without its intervention. The paper demonstrates that absolutization of departmentalism in city life can camouflage essential features of the urban environment, while the widely used notion of “single-industry town” (monogorod) contradicts the very essence of the city. The work is based on archival materials and memoirs of the Norilsk citizens, some are being introduced into scientific use. The authors employed “new urban history” approach, in particular, works of Henri Lefebvre. The paper analyses the sources and specific character of urban population growth, investigates the driving forces of Norilsk development and improvement. The paper also shows constructive and destructive influence of the smelter upon the urban environment. The paper explores the ways in which residents contributed to city development. Additionally, it considers natural and climatic factors. The authors conclude that it is wrong to overemphasize the activities of the Norilsk Nickel Smelter in creation of Norilsk and to contrapose city and plant. Though there are clear physical boundaries for both town and plant, their social and cultural spheres are interconnected. The development of plant and town are like two sides of a coin. Those who inhabited the town and those who worked for the smelter or managed it were with few exceptions the same people. The plant organized and financed city construction and development, but realization was in the hands of its citizens. Even if the initiative belonged to the plant administration, side issues of municipal improvement were settled by dint of citizens’ activities. The geographical position of Norilsk influenced its specific lifestyle. It was impossible to cope individually with existential threats of living beyond the Arctic Circle. In this respect, the smelter paternalism was natural. Simultaneously, the difficulties of everyday life united people and formed collective spirit that remained even when people left the town. The same hardships promoted construction of health and wellbeing resources, contributing to urban development, organized and sponsored by the smelter. Altogether, the paper argues that the development of the smelter and the town was interrelated. It became a crucial factor for survival in extreme environments.

Keywords

Historical sources, Norilsk, smelter, urban environment, Arctic, departmentalism, construction activity, municipal improvement

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