

Lake Ladoga. *The coastal history of the greatest lake in Europe*. Maria Lähteenmäki and Isaac Land, editors. Helsinki: Finnish Literary Society, SKS. 2023. 233 p, paperback, epub and pdf. ISBN 978-951-858-628-2 (print). €45. Also available as a free open-access download (<https://doi.org/10.21435/sfh.27>).

This is an enlarged and substantially revised version in English of *Laatokka: Suurjärven kiehtova rantahistoria*, edited by Maria Lähteenmäki and published in 2021. It deals with Lake Ladoga, which as the title reminds us is the largest freshwater lake entirely in Europe, and undoubtedly one of the world's "great lakes." It is over 150 km long and 100 km wide, large enough to experience its own weather and often known as the "Karelian Sea." Until 1944 half of it lay within Finland; redrawing of borders after the Second World War placed it entirely within the Soviet Union, in Russia. As scholarship relating to Russia becomes increasingly disconnected from much of the rest of the world, and the risk of forgetting increases, publication of this book in English is timely. Why should readers Polar Record take notice of it? Geographically speaking, the lake lies within the subarctic region, in the southern taiga. As such, it falls within one of the most important biomes for the global climate system, and it would be easy to justify a deep study of the area on purely physical grounds. However, this is (mostly) a history book, and it reminds physical scientists like me that we cannot properly begin to understand a physical environment without also taking note of human interactions, with one another and with the environment itself. As Maria Lähteenmäki writes in her introductory chapter, the history of the Ladoga region is "interwoven not only with the Finnish-Russian borderland of Karelia, but also with the Soviet Cold War narrative, the history of postwar Russia, and the story of Europe's Green Belt."

The book is divided into 12 chapters, organised into 4 sections ("Focus on Coastal History," "Towards the Eastern Waterways," "Industrialisation and its consequences," "Experiences on Littoral nature,") and a postscript. In fact, the area under study extends beyond the lake itself to include its much larger drainage basin (which is about as big as Ecuador: the lake itself is almost the size of Wales), which has around 150,000 human inhabitants and lies within both Russia and Finland. Inhabitants earn their livings through forestry, mining and tourism – not so many from the lake itself. Hardly uniquely in the world, the lake suffered from urbanisation, industrialisation and agricultural runoff, undergoing eutrophication – but that story has a happier ending than some, and the lake is now comparatively healthy.

The first part of the book puts the study of river basins into a historical context and sets up a framework for much of the later part of the volume. As the first chapter, "Taking Lakes Seriously," points out, lakes have received surprisingly little attention in academic humanities and social sciences research. Here, I think we can say that the physical sciences have been historically ahead since they have been taking lakes fairly seriously for a long time and have some quite sophisticated technologies at their disposal now, some of which is touched on in a later chapter. The second part is more specifically focused on the Ladoga area and opens up a truly fascinating account of early routes and settlers, from Finno-Ugrians and Slavs to Vikings (maybe even the English Vikings of whose existence I was previously unaware) and the "Normanist controversy" – about which I have to admit having been a little hazy. How strong was the Viking contribution to the development of the early Russian state? Ladoga lay on the Viking route that stretched from Uppsala to Constantinople. Such questions echo today: as we are reminded in the book, and daily by the news, some politicians "take a more active interest in the shaping of history and legend than many of their colleagues in other countries." Since 2015, the small town of Staraya Ladoga, near the lake (and according to Icelandic sagas presented as a wedding gift by Yaroslav the Wise to his wife Ingigerðr in 1019), has boasted a 5-m high bronze monument to the legendary, possibly Slavic but possibly not, leaders Rurik and Oleg

Next, the book focuses on industrialisation, with one chapter examining the "hydrosocial system" (one of many revealing and useful terms, new to me at least, introduced by the contributors) of the Jänisjoki river system, which rises in Finland but flows into Russia, and another the industrial geography of the town of Pitkyaranta, which thrived until the Second World War. Although this is a book principally written by scholars in the humanities, here in the section on industrialisation is a chapter contributed by a physical geographer (and a climate impact scientist, who also contributed the very effective maps to the whole volume). This chapter is the one that speaks most directly to me since I share some of the technical skills deployed to

assess the ecological status of the lake. Satellite imagery is analysed to show how phytoplankton levels have changed over time, and to substantiate the statement that the health of the lake has improved. The last section of the book focuses on the intangible heritage of the region. What do Finns who lived on the shores before 1944 remember? How do they conceptualise the lake now? What have interactions between the archipelago and the surrounding region looked like, and how has each imagined itself and the other? (There are over 600 islands within the lake, including the Valaam archipelago with its famous monastery). How has thinking about and implementation of nature conservation evolved in the area? These important questions are elegantly and authoritatively addressed.

The last chapter of the book, “Multidimensional history of Lake Ladoga,” offers a postscript. As the editors write, the volume has “opened up four research paths into the history of the Ladoga region,” and this is evidently true. The focus of the book is mainly within the field of environmental history, and I imagine it is there that new research will at first be developed. There is also food for thought here for physical geographers like me, especially as we try to grapple with the question of how properly to incorporate a human dimension into our understanding of the physical environment. One can find things to complain about, of course. There is an index, but only of people’s names, not places, things or ideas, so relocating particularly intriguing passages can be a bit frustrating. The book feels under-illustrated – but then again, there are excellent maps and some charming, evocative photographs from the 1920s and 30s. I was rather expecting to find the language of the professional historian and social scientist difficult going, but

it is not. And I would have liked to see more of a balance between the social science and physical science descriptions of the lake (and for the latter to include more about the lake’s surrounding catchment), but it is after all a history book, from a publisher specialising in ethnology and folklorics, linguistics, literary research and history. In fact, I read this book mostly as a generalist, to increase my background knowledge of a part of the world almost unknown to me and to try to understand how its history fits into the broader picture of the European and subarctic regions. From this point of view too, the book is richly rewarding and I will be rereading it for pleasure as well as mining it for ideas for my own research in future. Above all, this is a rich and authoritative description of somewhere in danger of being forgotten. I am not surprised to learn that the Finnish volume from which this English-language work has been developed received an award, and I believe the present work will find an appreciative readership in the English-reading world, among specialised coastal historians but also anyone with an interest in the history of Finland, north-western Russia, and northern Europe, especially from an industrial and environmental perspective.

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DOI: [10.1017/S0032247423000207](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247423000207)