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Aesthetics of the Volga and national narratives in Russia

In Simon Schama's provocative work, *Landscape and Memory*, he reveals the role that nature has historically played in shaping culture. Although much of Schama's focus predates the twentieth-century, my work on the historical development of the Volga River extends up to the present. Schama's thesis, however, of demonstrating the continuity of earlier nature myths with the present, is an ongoing theme in my research as I recount the effects of modernization on the Volga while a nationalist rhetoric touts its aesthetic qualities. These aesthetics--symbolized through literary and artistic representations of Mother Volga--contributed to an emerging national narrative in Russia in the nineteenth-century. This national identity is articulated through a rich visual culture that includes the work of Russian artists such as Isaac Levitan and Ilya Repin with their landscape portrayals of the Volga.

As a result, the river assumed an iconic status which enhanced the story of its transformation. By the 1930s, the Volga underwent a major engineering project that rerouted part of the river into the Moscow Volga Canal. Construction of the project took four years in which an array of journals, photographic essays and newspaper articles chronicled its progress, celebrating this symbolic foray into the modern nation-state. Overlooking the beginning of the project were two towering statues of Lenin and Stalin reinforcing the nationalist attributes of the project.

In the 1930s' Soviet Union, the literature is rife with references regarding the conquest of nature to serve socialism. Harnessing rivers was especially attractive to Stalin in his push to modernize. But the Moscow Volga Canal was not just a showpiece--although in some instances the architecture rivaled the newly built metro stations-- as it connected Moscow to the Caspian Sea, provided hydropower, and supplied drinking water to Moscow.

In conclusion, my paper will expand on Schama's thesis with twentieth-century examples of how the Volga River continued to serve a nationalist discourse for a country in the throes of modernization. The story of the Moscow Volga Canal is also a reminder that nature is often the repository to which nations look when crafting their identity.