

Title: The Limits of Genius: Human Ingenuity and the Global Environment in the Strugatskys' *Za milliard let do kontsa sveta*

Author: Yvonne Howell, University of Richmond

Soviet ideology emphasized human dominion over Nature in ways that have usually been interpreted as yet further evidence of the system's totalizing impulse. Ambitious projects to conquer the arctic, irrigate the deserts of Central Asia, harness nuclear energy, and reverse the flow of Siberian rivers (never implemented) exacted enormous ecological and human costs. The Promethean overreach of these attempts to conquer Nature has been justly criticized as yet another failure of the Soviet system, in which dissenting scientific opinions were silenced and expertise was presumably co-opted by state power structures. Since the 1990s, a new wave of revisionist history of Soviet science has suggested that the tension between ideology, science policy, and theoretical research faced by the USSR was not so different than that faced by most modern technological societies. In the Strugatskys' 1976 novella *Za milliard let do kontsa sveta*, scientists and humanists at the peak of their intellectual powers are prevented by mysterious forces from implementing their paradigm-breaking discoveries. Cold War interpretations of *Za milliard let* saw an allegory for state interference in the theoretical work of its scientists. My paper will provide a purposely contrary reading that highlights the productive interaction between genuine scholars and the Promethean impulse of Soviet scientific policy. This interpretation sets the stage for a more convincing explanation of the novella's renewed relevance in the 21st century, as a parable about the ecological (not ideological) limitations to human ingenuity and production.