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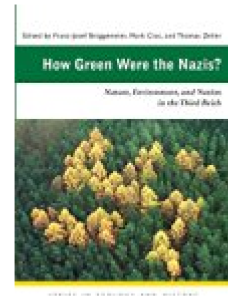

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As Brown as Ever?

Once we get past the editors' exaggerated claim that their book offers "a more nuanced and historically richer answer to the question 'How green were the Nazis? ' than previous efforts" (p. 14), this volume proves to be a valuable contribution to the ongoing study of naturist ideologies and movements in modern Germany.[1] Discussion of early-twentieth-century German environmentalism has been influenced by decades of historiography according to which Germans' allegedly extreme passion for nature was essentially anti-modern, anti-rational and anti-liberal and thus fed into Nazism.[2] Moreover, some anti-ecology polemicists have tried to use the supposed environmentalism of the Nazis to cast suspicion on contemporary ecological movements in Germany and elsewhere.[3] In a more general sense, the book exemplifies a recent trend toward critical scholarship on early environmentalism, of which William Cronon's collection *Uncommon Ground* (1995) is the best-known example.[4] At issue, then, is not only the particular history of the Third Reich, but also the ethical character of environmentalism in general.

As the editors put it, the aim of the nine contributors is to inquire "whether there was an overlap between the goals of National Socialists and environmentalists in the first half of the twentieth century, be it at the level of policy, persons, institutions, or methodologies; and, if so, whether that overlap translated into laws and policies that had a lasting impact on the German landscape" (pp. 2-3). The word "environmentalist" is never specifically defined, but the editors and several of the authors seem to equate it with conservationism. Four of the essays focus on Nazi policymaking toward the environment, and they also illuminate the roles played in the new regime by middle-class conservationists who had been pursuing their goals long before the Nazis came to power.

Charles Closmann writes about the 1935 Reich Conservation Law (*Reichsnaturschutzgesesetz*, RNG), which was, on paper at least, the most advanced nature protection law of its time. Closmann concludes that the RNG was a "green law" in its adoption of pre-1933 "progressive ideas about nature preservation and landscape protection" (p. 19). Closmann sees a close connection between pre-and post-1933 conservation, pointing out that some key leaders of the Weimar movement helped to formulate the RNG. He might have made more of Hermann Göring's tutelage of the lawmaking process; indeed, Göring emerges here and in some of the other articles as an apparent candidate for the leading "green" Nazi. More emphasis on Göring's role, however, would have necessitated a closer look at his motives in pushing through the RNG, which had little to do with a sincere interest in conservation and a lot to do with Göring's personal desire for power, prestige and wild game preserves for hunters like himself.[5]

Closmann takes his analysis of the RNG itself further, maintaining that it was a fusion of pre-1933 conservationist ideas and Nazi ideology. This is an important point, but the author does not make it as convincingly as he might have. More attention to the sense of

dire social and political crisis that drove bourgeois conservationists into the arms of the Nazis would help; so too would a more skeptical analysis of the language that both Nazi leaders and conservationists used about preserving nature. What exactly counted as "nature," and why did they think it needed protection? Moreover, Closmann neglects to discuss the question of enforcement. He correctly argues that the RNG provided for the expropriation of private property without compensation, which reflected the Nazi principle of subjugating individual rights to the rights of the "national community." But to what extent did the state actually take away property for the purpose of conservation? In fact, the RNG was full of caveats, the most telling of which was a clause announcing that the law did not "set restrictions on areas in use by the army, important public roads, shipping, or essential economic endeavors."[6] This qualification permitted countless policy decisions that favored industry, agriculture, massive work projects and the military over nature preservation. Moreover, a whole series of subsequent orders and decrees, signed by Hitler and Göring, whittled away the principle of confiscation without compensation until it became irrelevant.[7] Confiscation only occurred on a large scale once the Nazis embarked on their quest for "living space" beyond Germany, and then it was motivated not by a desire to preserve nature, but by racist imperialism. These facts about the lack of implementation weaken Closmann's warning about the "dangers present for a society which links reverence for nature–as represented in laws like the RNG–with racism and the brutal suppression of other nations" (p. 20).

Attending much more closely to both the ideology and enforcement of conservation during the Third Reich, Thomas Lekan's essay suggests that conservationists at the regional level lost power under the Nazis. Conservationists in the Rhineland and elsewhere welcomed the demise of the Weimar Republic for a variety of reasons, not least of which was the Weimar state's inability to pass a national conservation law. Yet when the long-desired RNG finally came, it gave Rhenish conservationists little, if any, power of enforcement. They proved unable to counter the regime's increasing exploitation of the environment for the purpose of war preparation. Moreover, because the regime failed to "synchronize" the Rhenish movement and bring it into line with national policy, the Nazis' racial-nationalist "blood and soil" (*Blut und Boden*) ideology failed to take complete hold at the regional level. Without glorifying the Rhenish conservationists as a source of significant resistance to the dictatorship, Lekan shows that they managed to retain an ecological vision of the landscape that "remained overwhelmingly aesthetic and provincial rather than racist and nationalist" (p. 90). In this case, green thinking persisted *despite* the Nazis.

Frank Uekötter's chapter on air pollution policy emphasizes the polycentric character of the Nazi regime–that is, the system of rule in which party leaders and bureaucrats carved out competing sites of power, which led to a complex, even chaotic dictatorship. According to Uekötter, this polycentrism explains why a coherent air pollution policy never took shape in the Third Reich. Competing interests among businessmen, farmers, the military and the government precluded effective new laws, and existing laws were poorly enforced. Uekötter seems unaware of Ian Kershaw's important adjustment to the polycentricism thesis–the notion of "working towards the Führer," according to which Adolf Hitler set the general agenda, and his minions competed to find ways of instituting it.[8] Applying Kershaw's insight, we can see that Hitler's lack of interest in air pollution might be why the regime did so little to ameliorate it. Why waste time cleaning the air if the Führer's priorities lay elsewhere?

Michael Imort's essay on forestry provides one of the more convincing arguments for an ecological current in Nazi policymaking. In 1933 and 1934, Göring as "Reich Forest Master" jettisoned the previously dominant "scientific" forestry model in favor of the concept of *Dauerwald* ("perpetual forest"), which had only appeared in forestry discourse in the 1920s. Imort shows convincingly that although the Nazis' motives were primarily economic and propagandistic, their *Dauerwald* policy of sustainability and biodiversity was ecologically progressive. He states that "the organic view of nature that underlay the *Dauerwald* model in the 1930s corresponds to a large degree with what we would label holism, environmentalism, sustainability, biodiversity, habitat protection, and ecological management today" (p. 45). Yet he also shows how the Nazis undermined their own environmentalism after 1936 by increasing timber production drastically. Once again, war preparation trumped everything else. After the war, West German forestry laws took up the model of a sustainable, ecologically healthy forest anew; presumably this development is a main reason why Germany remains such a heavily forested country despite its dense population. Even though Imort ends his essay by claiming that Nazi forestry policies left a "lingering 'brown' taint" in postwar forestry, the statement seems a bit tacked-on and unconvincing, since the Nazis did not come up with the *Dauerwald* concept them-

selves. This instance seems to be one of few in which even the most vicious regime in modern times managed to perpetuate–for a while, at least–a good idea from the past.

The remaining five articles take an intellectual history approach, analyzing attitudes toward nature found among leading Nazis and their collaborators. Gesine Gerhard dismantles the notion that Agricultural Minister Richard Walther Darré led a "green" faction within the Nazi state. In the process, Gerhard shows that one of the Nazis' central ideological concepts, *Blut und Boden*, had no real ecological meaning. Rather it was a metaphor for "rootedness" in an idealized German agrarian landscape. For Darré and other ideologues of "blood and soil," this rootedness was the precondition for "racial quality" among the German population. Although Darré had some interest in organic farming, no truly environmentalist attitudes can be found in his writings.

Mark Bassin continues the investigation of *Blut und Boden* by scrutinizing the discipline of geopolitics and the ideologies of its leading German proponents, Friedrich Ratzel and Karl Haushofer. Since the Wilhelmine era, political geography had been closely associated with "völkisch" far right-wing nationalism and the discipline's geopolitics shared with the Nazis the concept of "blood and soil." Yet there was a crucial difference. For political geographers the "soil" determined "blood"–that is, the environmental conditions determined the character of any given nation. For the Nazis, the quality of the "blood"–that is, racial strength–determined the landscape. Thus the Nazis argued that the "inferior" Slavic race had failed to cultivate its landscapes productively, and only German colonizers could do the job. Despite a few years of collaboration with the regime, political geographers like Haushofer soon were criticized for failing to agree with the Nazis' "insistence on the Volk as the active agent shaping an inert and subject landscape" (p. 229).

In a fascinating essay on Martin Heidegger, by far the most prominent philosopher to collaborate with the dictatorship, Thomas Rohkrämer investigates whether the ecological current in Heidegger's thought arose out of his early enthusiasm for Nazism. According to Rohkrämer, Heidegger supported the destruction of Weimar democracy out of a combination of anti-communism, conservative nationalism and belief that Hitler offered the best way out of the "existential crisis of modernity" (p. 174). His hopes of becoming Hitler's philosophical mentor were soon dashed, however, by the Nazis' anti-intellectualism. In the late 1930s, his disillusionment gave rise to a trenchant critique of the human will to power over nature, something Heidegger perceived not only in fascism, but in all modern political systems. Science, rationalism and the exploitation of nature were all symptoms of the modern desire to "gain a sense of security and control" (p. 184). Thus, according to Rohkrämer, Heidegger's environmentalist tendencies derived from his ultimate rejection of Nazism as a symptom, not a solution, of the crisis of modernity. This essay effectively vindicates Heidegger's environmentalism and its influence on postwar ecological movements. It is important in a broader historical sense as well, for it points to a clear divide between the rapacious essence of Nazism and a truly Romantic, reverent concept of the human/nature relationship.

Thomas Zeller's essay refutes the notion that the Autobahn was designed with conservation in mind. Zeller looks at the career of Alwin Seifert, the Munich landscape architect who found a niche for himself under the protection of the Third Reich's leading engineer and Autobahn designer, Fritz Todt. Seifert and his band of "landscape advocates" exemplified a new type of conservationist who wanted to reconcile the rural landscape with modern technology. They hoped to become an influential planning elite within the new regime. Yet despite Seifert's attempts to convince Nazi leaders of the need to make their massive construction and hydro-engineering projects more ecological, his influence remained very limited, and he ended up alienating nearly every leading Nazi. Zeller is particularly sophisticated in his interpretation of the strategic use of Nazi rhetoric. As they realized that they were not being taken seriously, Seifert and his colleagues "pursued a strategy of growing shrillness in order to maintain their position.... The more Todt's bureaucracy appeared resistant to landscape planning, the more passionate and overtly racist the advocates' rhetoric became, as they tried to align their professional agenda with racial definition and exclusion, one of the core tenets of Nazi ideology" (pp. 153-154). But these attempts to curry favor through racism failed. Once wartime planning for the occupied East got underway, Seifert and his colleagues hoped to help "Germanize" a landscape emptied of Slavs and Jews.Yet that task fell instead to Himmler and the SS.

The final essay in the volume, by Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, focuses on the SS's wartime planning of the landscape in the occupied territories to the east of Germany. The Nazi war of imperial conquest, in carving out a new "living space" for German colonists through

mass expulsion and extermination, opened "new vistas for landscape architects and urban planners" (p. 244). Hitler appointed Himmler in charge of "cleansing" of occupied landscapes for resettlement by ethnic Germans. Yet Wolschke-Bulmahn never clearly explains what was environmentalist about these planners and the blueprints they prepared for Himmler. Was there anything green about "demolishing towns, villages, and rural landscapes" and their replacement by "clean and pleasant villages" of the kind that peppered the German landscape (p. 245)? The author is content instead to amass a number of quotations from SS men involved that demonstrate their acceptance of genocide as a precondition for "Germanization"; but what else would we expect from the SS? The failure of this essay is unfortunate, since Wolschke-Bulmahn and others have written much more effectively elsewhere about the intertwining of pastoral landscape ideals with Nazi imperialism and genocide. In fact, the long-time director of state conservation in Württemberg, Hans Schwenkel, helped to formulate the SS's "General Directive on the Shaping of the Landscape in the Annexed Eastern Territories of December 21, 1942." This series of detailed recommendations suggested how the landscape of the occupied East could be transformed into a mirror version of the German homeland. The landscape would be pastoral yet modern, with new Autobahn and railway lines and new towns and villages nestled carefully into the topography. Ecological measures would be taken to prevent erosion, cultivate hedgerows and keep air and water clean.[9] There was indeed a strain of ecological thinking in this plan, but Wolschke-Bulmahn does not illuminate it.

Intentionally or not, the essays in this volume leave the Nazis looking as brown as ever. The picture that emerges is of a regime that seemed intent early on to protect the environment yet abandoned conservation as soon as serious war preparation commenced in 1936. Only in wartime planning for the postwar imperial utopia do we find a current of arguably green thinking. Yet even here we can ask whether such plans would actually have come to fruition had the Germans won the war. Would the fundamentally radical and activist dictatorship have been able to settle down enough to colonize the East in an environmentalist way? Or would the Nazis have gone on to further conquests, plundering the environment of the occupied territories as they had done in Germany itself? Is there any evidence to make us believe that this regime would have honored the rights of nature any more than it honored the rights of human beings?

And what of the picture of environmentalism that emerges in these essays? Is there a "brown" taint in the history of green ideas? In their introduction the editors allege "many similarities" between Nazi and green thinking: "The green policies of the Nazis were more than a mere episode or aberration in environmental history at large. They point to larger meanings and demonstrate with brutal clarity that conservationism and environmentalism are not and have never been value-free or inherently benign enterprises" (p. 14). But this statement rings hollow, for the articles collected here provide little evidence that the Nazis were, in fact, sincere environmentalists. Nor does this book convincingly demonstrate that that there is something inherently dangerous in green thinking. Nonetheless, in introducing us to conservationists who threw in their lot with the Nazi regime, the volume does remind us that the desire to protect nature must be accompanied by an equally strong commitment to social justice and human rights.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekötter, eds., *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2003), from which three of the essays in *How Green* are reprinted in translation; Thomas Lekan and Thomas Zeller, eds., *Germany's Nature: New Approaches to Environmental History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

[2]. George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964) is an influential early example of this thesis.

[3]. For instance, Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the Twentieth Century: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), includes a section entitled "Ecology: A German Disease? "

[4]. See also Douglas Weiner, "Demythologizing Environmentalism," *Journal of the History of Biology* 25 (1992): pp. 385-411.

[5]. Edeltraud Klueting, "Die gesetzlichen Regelungen der nationalsozialistischen Reichsregierung für den Tierschutz, den Naturschutz, und den Umweltschutz," in *Naturschutz*, eds. Radkau and Uekötter, pp. 77-106.

[6]. Quoted in Werner Weber and Walther Schoenichen, *Das Reichsnaturschutzgesetz vom 26. Juni 1935* (Berlin: Bermühler, 1936), p. 31.

[7]. Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv München, Reichsstatthalter 667: "Zweites Gesetz zur Änderung und

Ergänzung des Reichsnaturschutzgesetzes" (December 1, 1936).

[8]. Ian Kershaw, " 'Working Towards the Führer': Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, ed. Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 88-106.

[9]. Reprinted in Mechthild Rössler and Sabine Schleiermacher, eds., *Der "Generalplan Ost". Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs-und Vernichtungspolitik* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1993), pp. 136-147. Cf. Gert Gröning and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, *Die Liebe zur Landschaft, Teil III. Der Drang nach Osten* (Munich: Minerva, 1987); Uwe Mai, *"Rasse und Raum". Agrarpolitik, Sozial- und Raumplanung im NS-Staat* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002).

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