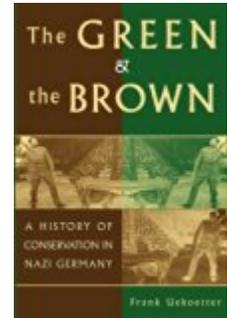




Frank Uekoetter. *The Green and the Brown: A History of Conservation in Nazi Germany.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xv + 230 pp. \$23.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-61277-7.



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In 1938, Wilhelm Liezenkamper wrote that "[t]he idea of National Socialism demands totality and sacrifice. And we have to bring that message time and again to those people who for some reason see the nature protection movement as a marginal and subordinate one" (pp. 1-2). This citation, which connects National Socialist ideology to the German conservation movement, is the starting point of Frank Uekoetter's impressive new book. While such statements are far from representative of the environmentalist literature of the period, one may be tempted to perceive strong ideological parallels between official Nazi ideology and the conservation-oriented facet of German society. However, to Uekoetter's credit, he seeks to avoid the commonly held stereotypes of rabidly antisemitic Germans driven solely by ideological concerns, aiming instead to provide a nuanced analysis of the complex forces, motives, and intentions at work in the conservation movement's relationship to the Nazi government.

While a growing literature dealing with similar topics has appeared in recent years, this book offers the most specifically focused analysis of the

cooperation between the various segments of the conservation community and the National Socialist hierarchy, along with the serious implications of this union, implications that extend far beyond ecology.[1] In this volume, Uekoetter draws effectively on a wealth of primary and secondary sources to provide a gestalt of the conservation movement's relationship to Nazism prior to and during the war, as well as its perception of its own behavior in the conflict's aftermath. In chapters that approach the subject both chronologically and thematically, Uekoetter reveals the intricacies of what he terms the "almost Faustian bargain" of the conservationists with Nazi leadership leading up to the war (p. 166), wartime developments that led some members of the conservation community to become "accomplices" in developing the "blueprints for genocide" (pp. 13, 155), and the exculpatory, postwar attitude that the movement had remained independent of political developments, "shrouding the Nazi experience in graceful silence" (p. 188). On this last point, Uekoetter's study provides a useful elaboration on Thomas Lekan's recent criticism of German conservationists' "postwar claims that *Heimat* activities and lo-

cal social life provided an 'oasis' from Nazi tyranny during the dark days of the Third Reich." [2] Evidently, this attitude still persists among many conservationists to this day.

Early in his volume, Uekoetter evokes the "polycentric" school of thought, which emphasizes the "institutional anarchy" at the heart of the many Nazi institutions and the competing interests of their individual members (p. 8). Under this model, which has also fed the functionalist side of the historiographical debate over the evolution of the Holocaust, Adolf Hitler's direct influence is minimized while crucial importance in the development of events is attributed to lower-level and local initiatives. [3] While this wider theoretical arena could perhaps have been plumbed more extensively, Uekoetter's representation of conservationists' arguments and activities demonstrates that their attachments to Nazi ideology, and their indifference to its disastrous consequences, were far from insignificant. Seeking to fill a gap in the existing literature, Uekoetter also devotes much attention to the widespread effects of the Nazi regime on the environment itself. Indeed, despite the "strong affection, if not enthusiasm" (p. 61) inspired in conservationists by the establishment of a Reich Nature Protection Law in 1935 (only shortly before the infamous Nuremberg Laws abolished citizenship and other rights for German Jews) and sporadic support by elements of the Nazi leadership, the expansion of agriculture and industry in preparation for war had a devastating impact on the countryside. [4]

Uekoetter's study can be situated within the broader problem regarding the complicity of prominent German intellectuals through their impact on or conformity to National Socialist views and values. The controversial roles of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, Richard Wagner's music and Leni Reifenstahl's films, to take only a few examples, remain as unpalatable and unresolved as they are relevant. [5] Uekoetter's volume demonstrates that the overall acceptance of Nazism by

the conservation movement is yet another symptom of "the stunning ability of the Nazi regime to befriend intellectuals even when they were not in league with the Nazis' overarching ideology," an acceptance that resounds in contemporary times as "a sobering reminder of the extent to which intellectuals can be seduced" (p. 4). It also, of course, has the potential to shed some light on the reasons behind the overwhelming acceptance of Nazism by German society as a whole.

As in more general studies of the level of support for the Nazi regime within the German population, or even of the motives of perpetrators of wartime atrocities, the question of whether certain individuals and groups were ideologically or strategically motivated, true believers or pragmatic opportunists, antisemitic or "merely" indifferent, is invariably far from a clear-cut issue. [6] The volume's resonance within these broad problems ensures that its relevance encompasses more than a purely environmentalist audience. Uekoetter stresses the ambiguities of conservationists' motives and intentions, and the resulting difficulties in reaching a moral judgment: "If one thinks of conservation as 'good' and the Nazis as 'bad,' and any connection between them both as 'strange,' does one not fall into a crude and naive essentialization of 'eternal good' and 'universal evil'?... Rushing to a verdict and condemning every link between the conservationists and the Nazi regime may look like good political judgment on first glance, but it quickly leads to a dead end" (pp. 3-4). In this sense, one may relate Uekoetter's project to Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi's highly influential concept of the "grey zone," which warns against attempting to understand human behavior through hasty moral judgments and a simplifying "Manichaeian tendency which shuns half-tints and complexities." [7] At the same time, Uekoetter does not seek to absolve conservationists of any wrongdoing: "As far as we know, there was no contribution, however minimal, from the conservation movement to the German resistance. Obviously, the credentials that the Nazi

regime had earned through the passage of the national conservation law did not wear off completely until the Nazis' total defeat" (p. 166).

While quite rightly not hesitating to accord responsibility to conservationists for their often dubious behavior and ideological stances, Uekoetter displays careful moral deliberation throughout his analysis, acknowledging ambiguity where it remains rather than condemning his subjects outright. The problems inherent in generalization are underlined by the fact the conservation movement lost several members identified as Jews by the Nazi government, occurrences that are unfortunately given only brief attention. Nonetheless, Uekoetter's discussion serves to reinforce Levi's fundamental observation that "the greater part of historical and natural phenomena is not simple, or not simple with the simplicity that we would like," and demonstrates that the behavior of conservationists in Nazi Germany is a case in point. [8] In a similar way to Levi's dismissal of a black-and-white binary opposition between "good" and "evil," Uekoetter's volume argues for and provides a nuanced exploration of the important part played by the conservation movement in the history of Nazi Germany. To conclude with Uekoetter's words: "The green *were* brown to some extent—all too many of them. The story that emerges is a complicated one, with many facets that defy a simple narrative or a clear-cut explanation. It is a story of ideological convergence, of tactical alliances, of simple careerism, of implication in crimes against humanity, and of deceit and denial after 1945. It is a story that many environmentalists will find disturbing. That is what makes it important" (p. 16).

Notes

[1]. Related works include David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (London: J. Cape, 2006); Franz-Josef Bruggemeier, Mark Cioc, and Thomas Zeller, *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*

(Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005); Thomas M. Lekan and Thomas Zeller, eds., *Germany's Nature: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Jonathan Olsen, *Nature and Nationalism: Right-Wing Ecology and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Germany* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Colin Riordan, ed., *Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997); and Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995).

[2]. Thomas M. Lekan, *Imagining the Nation in Nature: Landscape Preservation and German Identity, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 154.

[3]. For a useful summary of these different intentionalist and functionalist historiographical perspectives, see Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (London: Penguin, 1987), 31-54. One of Lekan's chapters also concentrates on the conservationists' role in the ideological consolidation of "Nazism's institutional 'polycracy.'" See Lekan, *Imagining the Nation*, 153-203.

[4]. For a detailed discussion of the Nazi conservation law, see Charles Cloosmann, "Legalizing a *Volksgemeinschaft*: Nazi Germany's Reich Protection Law of 1935," in *How Green Were the Nazis?*, 18-42. The law saw the establishment of over eight hundred nature protection regions spanning several thousand kilometers, and fifty thousand natural monuments by 1940.

[5]. See, for example, Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, *Martin Heidegger and the Holocaust* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1996); Christopher Nicholson, *Richard and Adolf: Did Richard Wagner Incite Adolf Hitler to Incite the Holocaust?* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 2007); and Rainer Rother, *Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius*, translated by Martin H. Bott (London: Continuum, 2002).

[6]. For studies of German attitudes to the Nazi regime, see Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany* (London: John Murray, 2005); and Adam LeBor and Roger Boyes, *Surviving Hitler: Corruption and Compromise in the Third Reich* (London: Pocket, 2000). See also the early chapters of Robert S. Wistrich, *Hitler and the Holocaust: How and Why the Holocaust Happened* (London: Phoenix, 2001). For opposing studies of German perpetrators, see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

[7]. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 2003), 22.

[8]. *Ibid.*, 23. For a recent collection of essays that appropriate Levi's "grey zone" for a variety of Holocaust-related subjects, see Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth, eds., *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New York: Berghahn, 2005).

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