
Reviewed by Sandra Chaney (Department of History, Erskine College)
Published on H-German (July, 2006)

Forests, Landscapes, and East German History

This book offers an engaging examination of the communist regime’s exploitative policies, which contributed to the declining health and productivity of forests and farms in the German Democratic Republic. According to Nelson, leaders of the one-party state shoulder considerable blame for mismanaging the East German landscape, but they are not solely responsible for its steady ecological demise. Rather, Nelson argues, the GDR inherited land poor in natural resources and with forests already weak in health after a century of industrial forest management that prioritized short-term productivity over long-term sustainability. Yet the cumulative effect of familiar developments under communist rule after 1945–Soviet reparations, land reform and forced collectivization; Walter Ulbricht’s deviation from party orthodoxy with his “New Economic System”; and the exploitative “Industrial Methods of Production” implemented under Erich Honecker (to name the most important topics covered in the book)—resulted in a bleak landscape on the verge of economic and ecological collapse by 1989.

The study is at its best in its richly textured analysis of forest management—the subject that receives the most attention throughout the book. An instructive background chapter examines nineteenth-century developments that rapidly transformed medieval woodlands into rationally managed industrial forests in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Contemporary foresters such as Heinrich Cotta advocated clear-cutting the preindustrial forest of diverse hardwoods and thickets and planting pure stands of pine and spruce instead. These experts intended timber plantations to be temporary—only the first stage in a long process of creating a “close-to-nature-forest,” one characterized by “mixed, native hardwoods managed through natural regeneration” (p. 17). But conifer plantations remained, their wood products vital to the coal, chemical and railroad industries. In addition, the expense of planting native hardwoods to diversify the forests became increasingly prohibitive. By the end of the century, many came to view the tidy, uniform industrial forest as “natural,” modern and uniquely German.

When the productivity of timber plantations decreased in the early twentieth century, experts divided over the best means to revitalize forests. While some remained committed to industrial forest management, others such as Alfred Moeller proposed the restoration of a “permanent forest” or Dauerwald, a radical, utopian vision (in Nelson’s estimation) that viewed the forest as a living organism with near spiritual qualities and ruled out clear-cutting. The debate between these two management approaches—the industrial forest and the permanent forest—continued in Germany under the Nazi and communist regimes. Somewhere between these two models is close-to-nature forestry, the one Nelson finds most desirable and uses to evaluate German forest management.

According to the author, Nazi forest management was “thoroughly ‘green’” (p. 36) and in keeping with close-to-nature forestry, though fighting a total war necessitated some neglect and exploitation of timber re-
serves. Although detailed forestry statistics were not kept between 1938 and 1945, Nelson carefully assesses appraisals of international experts at the time, concluding that German forests emerged from the war in good condition. He explains that when, during the occupation, German communist leaders doctored inventories to make it appear that the Nazis had depleted eastern Germany’s forests of their highest-quality stock, they concealed the extent of Soviet pillaging.

With postwar territorial losses east of the Oder-Neiße line, the Soviet Zone ended up with forests that were predominantly timber plantations of pine and spruce and with territory that tended to have dry, sandy, nutrient-poor soils. Compounding the problems created by these conditions, which were unfavorable to industrial forest management, Soviet relocations continued for nearly a decade (1945-54). Between 1945 and 1949, Nelson explains, the Soviets extracted over thirteen years of forest growth as relocations. They purged the forest service of qualified personnel and sentenced some of these professionals to hard labor, felling trees. Moreover, Soviet authorities changed the forestry year to conform to economic plans, not biological limits or seasonal cycles (that is, they no longer harvested only in autumn when trees were dormant). In one of many telling illustrations, Nelson notes that the Soviets made all of the states in their zone supply the same quota of spruce, even where spruce grew poorly, as in the dry soils of the northern lowlands. To meet its 1946 quota, Mecklenburg purchased spruce from Saxony—one million cubic meters of it. By demanding maximum harvests and obstructing the costly, labor-intensive task of reforestation, the Soviets prevented forests from recovering.

Readers will be interested in Nelson’s carefully documented discussion of land reform and its impact on forests. In September 1945, the Socialist United Party (SED) seized former imperial forests, which made up 55 percent (1.6 million hectares) of the forested area of the eastern zone and the best stocked. The state possessed over two-thirds of forested land by 1946, and 80 percent by 1958. When the SED took over control of forest management from the Soviets in 1949, its two-year plan called for replanting 40,000 hectares of forest per year (at the time 400,000 hectares remained unplanted). Yet it also demanded that 50,000 hectares be clear-cut annually. Undermining healthy recovery further, foresters replanted Soviet clear-cuts with pine and spruce trees, restoring unstable timber plantations.

In two chapters Nelson describes forced collectivization; flight from the GDR; and militarization and closing of the country’s borders. He argues that through these developments, the party created a “simplified” rural landscape of collective farms, even-aged pine and spruce plantations and one class of people in the countryside. According to Nelson, economic planners guided by Marxist-Leninism mandated ever-increasing production from forests and farms irrespective of ecological limits. They regarded natural resources as free goods to be used for maximum benefit to the national economy, a view that encouraged waste and exploitation. Blinded by their faith in centralized economic planning, officials never bothered to assess what the country’s forests and farms could realistically produce without lasting harm. Nor did socialist accounting methods allow foresters to consider investing in capital assets (healthy forests of diverse species and ages) or to estimate the cost of improving stands (for example, by preserving trees to promote old growth). Foresters’ detailed maps of the country’s forests, Nelson explains, were used to determine timber harvests, not to calculate assets or to investigate causes of forests’ declining productivity (which officials explained away as the long-term consequence of capitalist exploitation in the past).

Not even Ulbricht’s short-lived New Economic System (NES) of 1964-65 offered improvements in forest and farm management. NES aimed to demonstrate socialism’s superiority to the West by prioritizing technological innovation. A key component of NES was cybernetics, or systems theory, which promised to increase economic production and efficiency by delegating more authority to technicians and experts, including foresters. The author disagrees with interpretations of NES as a final attempt to introduce market mechanisms into the communist command economy. According to Nelson, party officials used NES to achieve the efficiency and political benefits of a liberal economic policy, but failed because they wanted total control and predictability. Viewed from the perspective of forestry, NES was just a more complicated version of the command economy that ignored ecological limits; setting higher production quotas was viewed as sufficient to get forests to yield more.

When the oil crises hit in the 1970s, the Honecker regime turned to its abundant supplies of lignite coal, dusting forests and landscapes with increased loads of toxic materials. Nelson provides a fascinating explanation of air pollution’s complex effects on East Germany’s forests, but effectively refutes the assumption that air pollution was the primary reason for their declining pro-
ductivity. More critical was “the artificial nature of the industrial forest” (p. 131) and exploitative use, which worsened with the “Industrial Production Methods” developed by longtime party official Gerhard Grueneberg. Industrial Production Methods marked a return to party orthodoxy, Nelson argues, and for the forests, a return to exploitation on the scale of Soviet reparations. In the 1980s, party officials responded to declining yields by increasing the application of chemical fertilizers and planting pollution-resistant hardwoods such as poplar and birch, hoping in vain to make ecological limits irrelevant. By the mid-1980s, East Germany’s forests were exhausted. Adding to the strain on forests to meet unrealistic quotas were disruptions in the shipments of pulp from Siberia as the Soviet Union disintegrated. To meet harvest volumes in the last Five-Year Plan, forest districts cut immature trees no bigger around than “a man’s upper arm” (p. 160).

Nelson documents how the regime effectively suppressed opposition to forest exploitation with purges (in 1956 and again in the 1960s); with training that grew increasingly ideological; with harsh punishment for independent thought (by the latter 1960s, sharing forest inventories was considered a capital crime); and by steering research in non-threatening directions (such as developing pollution-resistant trees). Beginning in the 1970s and increasingly in the 1980s, however, East Germans in general began to connect the condition of ailing forests with air pollution, attributing both to the incompetence of their leaders. In protesting forest death, they challenged the regime that denied them basic rights.

The collapse of the GDR gave forests a reprieve. Right away, eastern Germany’s forests fell under western management practices and the expensive, labor-intensive effort began to diversify pine and spruce plantations by increasing hardwoods from twenty to forty percent. And what of East Germany’s oversupply of ideologically correct foresters, which the regime had intended to use to control rural areas? With reunification, many found career doors closed, as the five new states hired only enough to satisfy demand.

In general, Nelson’s study is careful to avoid ascribing an inevitability to the failing health of East Germany’s forests and farmland, emphasizing instead the role of conscious decision-making by party officials. Occasionally, however, the author’s analysis borders on a kind of ecological determinism that assumes a one-to-one relationship between the fate of the country’s forest and farms and the fate of the regime. In the preface, the author writes that “[t]he qualities of the forest, its diversity, structures, resilience, and flows, revealed the essential political and economic structures of the East German polity and were the most accessible and accurate leading indicators of its future.... Indeed, one could have read the instability and brittleness of the East German regime from satellite photographs, which illuminated a landscape of extreme artificiality, suffocating under low levels of diversity and a linear structure. What one saw in the forested ecosystem one also saw in the East German society and economy” (p. xiii; see also pp. 161-163, 184).

Nelson clarifies that not Marxism-Leninism per se, but rather the party leadership’s fear of complexity, diversity and individualism led the East German state to its collapse. According to this argument, because the regime preferred “simplified” structures (one class of people, one party, one age class of trees, and so on) and eschewed complexity and diversity (both key to ecological sustainability) in politics, society and the economy, it failed. Had outside observers looked closely at “landscape change and structure” they would have seen “the state’s entropic path” (p. 184). Instead, many expressed surprise at its sudden end. Without denying that ecological mismanagement was a major source of weakness of the regime—one that contributed to its collapse—such a sweeping conclusion gives short shrift to existing scholarship on the GDR that paints a more nuanced picture of its history and demise. Nelson’s interpretation leads him to recommend the following: “The lesson of East German forestry is that we should make policy with an eye toward reducing control to increase individual freedom and autonomy and let communities emerge from the bottom up. Rather than striving to direct these complex systems toward a specific goal or endpoint, even the most enlightened, policymakers should work to create richness and abundance in the systems qualities of economic and political structures” (p. 185). Yet it seems unwise to wish that ecosystem management—a science that only presumes to be neutral—would be the primary basis for ordering human society.

Whether or not readers agree with all of Nelson’s conclusions they will be encouraged to debate the relationship between the treatment of natural resources and the long-term stability of economic and political systems. Provocative and thoughtful, impressively detailed and reliant on rich primary materials, Nelson’s study will be of interest to economic and environmental historians, historians of Germany, Central Europe and the Cold War and those concerned with ethical policymaking.