

H-Net Reviews

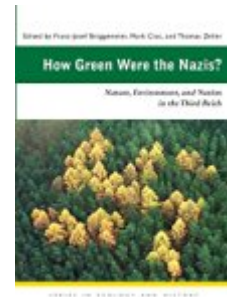
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc, Thomas Zeller. *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006. 283 S. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1646-4; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1647-1.

Marc Cioc Franz-Josef Brueggemeier, and Thomas Zeller, eds. *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. viii + 283 pp.

Reviewed by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy)

Published on H-Environment (October, 2006)



Hitler's Nature: Environmental Policies in Nazi Germany

The topic of the alleged “greenness” of the German Nazi regime has been widely debated over the last twenty years.[1] This book, edited jointly by Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Marc Cioc, and Thomas Zeller, attempts to give an overview of the most recent research in the area, from environmental policymaking, to the life and deeds of some outstanding personalities in so-called Nazi environmentalism, to philosophical and ideological issues. *How Green Were the Nazis?* is a must for those who want to be introduced to the controversial relationship of Hitler's regime with the natural world.

The editors claim in the introduction that actually no linear relationship may be traced between “today's Greens” and “yesterday's environmentalists” (p. 2) within or outside the Nazi party. They stress how, in opposition to the current Green slogan, “think globally,” before World War II the dimension of the nation-state represented the psychological limit of environmentalism. With the most powerful conservationist movement of the early twentieth century, the German case offers particularly fertile ground for exploring the links between modernity, its aberrations, and its links to the natural world. The editors rightfully call for a value-free analysis of Nazi environmental policies that considers both positive and negative aspects: “to miss the positive features of National Socialism is to miss why it appealed so

many people” (p. 4). A most important aspect in understanding the links between the Nazi regime and the conservation movement is the history of German conservationism, briefly but effectively sketched by the editors in the introduction, as it may show us whether Nazism represented continuity or discontinuity with the history of German environmental policies. As the editors suggest, it is possible that even without Hitler's rise to power similar policies would have been drafted and the landscape subjected to similar changes. In my view this is a central point in the actual understanding of Nazism's tangential relationship with the environment.

Moreover, what is stressed well in this book is the tangled web of warring bureaucracies and rival personalities that characterized the Nazi regime, that is, its inherently polycratic nature. Diverse essays deal with this issue and approach the analysis of some important personalities, and of the most important political bodies within the Nazi system. Furthermore the authors stress the sometimes uneasy relationship between Nazi ideology and policy, and “green” ideas. In fact, while in many cases there were opportunities for cooperation, in others, such as the Nazi rearmament policy, there were unbearable frictions. “For some green-leaning Nazis, however, that was acceptable. For them the war and destruction were necessary evils since they would bring about a new order that would fi-

nally allow the establishment of a better and greener Germany” (p. 14). This book promises to be one of the most important reference books for understanding the links between violence and green thought and the need to look at environmentalism as a value-laden enterprise.[2]

The book may, for the purpose of analysis, be tentatively split into three parts, addressing different aspects of the links between “nature, environment, and nation in the Third Reich.” The first four chapters focus on issues related to Nazi environmental law-making and the actual impact of the implemented policies, while the two central chapters are dedicated to the analysis of the life and deeds of two very important, if debated, personalities in Nazi environmentalism. Finally, the last three chapters concentrate on the effects of philosophical, academic, and ideological debates on the construction of the Nazi concept of nature.

Charles Closmann in chapter 1 and Thomas Lekan in chapter 3 analyze the real impact of the much-praised *Reichsnaturschutzgesetz* (RNG, Reich Nature Protection Law) on the German environment. Closmann contests both the view that the RNG was the symptom of an actual interest of the Nazi regime in the preservation of the natural world [3] and the widespread idea that the RNG was not a Nazi law at all, but rather the nonideological expression of previous ideas.[4] What Closmann attempts to demonstrate in his essay, indeed rather successfully, is that the RNG reflected instead key elements of both progressive preservationism of the 1930s, such as the concepts of natural monuments and nature protection areas, and of Nazism, such as racialism and nationalism. Moreover, he rightfully notes how the RNG was the logical offspring of the polycratic nature of the Nazi regime, and as such it was subject to the effects of confrontation between diverse competing power centers. In chapter 3, Lekan looks instead at the RNG from a case study perspective and gives a detailed account of the law’s impact, limits, and acceptance at the regional level in Westphalia, concluding that, after their initial enthusiasm for Nazism, most conservationists were disappointed and disillusioned by the regime’s actual policies in the field of nature preservation.

In chapter 2, Michael Imort gives an intriguing account of the ideological contradictions of Nazi forestry policies, in particular with respect to the implementation of the *Dauerwald* concept and the ambiguous role of Goering as both *Reichsforstmeister* (Reich Master of Forestry) and plenipotentiary for the Four-Year Plan. However, what I deem to be probably the most interest-

ing part of the whole book is the discussion by Frank Uekoetter in chapter 4 of the evolution of air pollution control in Nazi Germany and of the effects of polycracy on environmental policy-making. In this chapter, through an analysis of the debate between diverse bodies of the regime on how to approach air pollution, Uekoetter gives us insight into the ways Nazi polycracy actually worked and shows us how, at the end of the line and notwithstanding the claims of propaganda, pragmatism and continuity with the Weimar period characterized Nazi environmental policy-making.

Chapters 5 and 6 by Gesine Gerhard and Thomas Zeller are dedicated to two outstanding personages in the fields of agrarian policies, and of landscape planning and *Autobahn* construction, respectively: Richard Walther Darre and Alwin Seifert. Gerhard, in particular, is very effective in producing a valuable critique of Bramwell’s hagiographic account of Darre as a “green Nazi” [5] and in explaining how his agrarian policies and ideas were tightly bound to a racist vision of the world. Zeller’s account of Seifert’s political biography tackles another scholarly myth regarding the relationship of the Nazis with the natural world: that the *Autobahn* had been planned on the ground of some sort of “ecological consciousness.” Actually, Zeller highlights how the impact of Seifert’s ideas on the planning process was less pronounced and his position within the regime less important than previously supposed. Seifert’s role as the Reich’s gardener and the up and downs of his career depended principally on his ability to use the polycratic structures of the regime to his benefit, rather than from an actual Nazi interest in nature conservation.

In chapter 7 Thomas Rohkraemer tackles Martin Heidegger’s conflicted relationship with both National Socialism and environmentalism, giving an insightful view into the intellectual biography of the philosopher. In particular, Rohkraemer stresses that “Heidegger’s serious environmental thought was not positively connected with his political involvement in the Third Reich” (p. 194). In fact, it is not possible to state, as has often been done, that Heidegger’s peculiar environmentalism, fully developed only after the end of World War II, represented an integral part of Nazi ideology. As Rohkraemer affirms, in fact, it was precisely Heidegger’s disillusionment with National Socialism, to which he had initially been attracted in the hope that it would set in place a pseudo-romantic national and *voelkisch* awakening, that pushed him towards an interest in environmental issues. In chapter 8 Mark Bassin discusses the influence of so-called *Geopolitik* on *voelkisch* and Nazi inter-

pretations of the natural world and of foreign politics, explaining, however, that *Geopolitik* was a scientific theory only partially incorporated within the political ideology of *Blut und Boden*. In the conclusive chapter 9 Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn faces the role of violence in the ideological construction of landscape planning under National Socialist rule, with particular respect to the physical “Germanization” of annexed western Poland. German landscape architects enthusiastically participated in the transformation of the Eastern Areas, ideologically considered a void and empty area, into a new homeland for Germans. They were thrilled by the opportunity to use their professional abilities and impose their ideals of landscape with total freedom of action: “By obliterating the visual structures of Polish culture, they participated in their own unique way in the implementation of the ‘final solution’” (p. 245).

Despite the different styles and attitudes of the contributors, this edited book has the capacity to summarize effectively the patent contradictions of the relationship of the Nazi regime with the natural world and with early environmentalism.

Notes

[1]. Some of the most significant contributions to the debate are Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler’s “Green Party”* (Bourne End: Kensal, 1985); Anna Bramwell, *Ecology in the 20th century: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Karl Ditt, “Nature Conservation in England and Germany: Forerunner of Environmental Protection,” *Contemporary European History* 5, no. 1 (1996): 1-28; Karl Ditt, “The Perception and Conservation of Nature in the

Third Reich,” *Planning Perspectives* 15 (2000): 161-187; Raymond Dominick, “The Nazis and the Nature Conservationists,” *Historian* 49 (1987): 508-538; Jost Hermand, *Gruene Utopien in Deutschland. Zur Geschichte des Oekologischen Bewusstseins* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991); Paul Josephson and Thomas Zeller, “The Transformation of Nature under Hitler and Stalin,” *Science and Ideology: A Comparative History*, ed. Mark Walker (London: Routledge, 2003); Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekoetter, eds., *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2003); Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995). More titles are given in the book’s exhaustive selected bibliography, which is a very useful introduction to secondary literature on the topic.

[2]. Douglas Weiner, “Demythologizing Environmentalism,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 25, no. 3 (1992): 385-411.

[3]. Bramwell, *Blood and Soil*; and Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

[4]. See, for example, Raymond Dominick, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871-1971* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and Edeltraud Klüeting, “Die gesetzlichen Regelungen der nationalsozialistischen Reichsregierung fuer den Tierschutz, den Naturschutz und den Umweltschutz;” and Karl Ditt, “Die Anfaenge der Naturschutzbewegung in Deutschland und England,” both in *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekoetter (Frankfurt: Campus 2003).

[5]. Bramwell, *Blood and Soil*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

Citation: Wilko Graf von Hardenberg. Review of Brüggemeier, Franz-Josef; Cioc, Mark; Zeller, Thomas, *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich* and Franz-Josef Brueggemeier, Marc Cioc, and Thomas Zeller, eds, *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12420>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.