Post-reunification tropes of former East Germany’s abysmal environmental record bring to mind, at best, images of a cheerless washed-out skyline above brutalist housing units, nary a tree in sight. At worst, images of the ecological desecration wrought by the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster recall the ruinous mismanagement by Soviet-style governments in protecting ecosystems and the lives and health of citizens, to say nothing of other biota. But in focusing on the failures of environmental protection behind the Iron Curtain, scholars may too readily flatten the roiling deliberations, dynamisms, transnational influences, and lasting legacies of environmental politics of the Soviet bloc. In doing so, we risk reproducing myths of monolithic socialist party-states, the propagation of which once served the divisive strategic interests of both western Cold Warriors and the ruling Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, SED). This is a key theme animating Julia E. Ault’s *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–1990*, a welcome addition to a growing body of literature pushing back against purely totalitarian renditions of Eastern-bloc policymaking. Ault is an associate professor of history at the University of Utah and has published several essential studies on environmental politics in former East Germany. In her most recent work, drawing on a host of individual, state, church, and other institutional archival sources from both East and West Germany as well as Poland, Ault questions the well-worn argument that communist societies took no interest in environmental questions or the mitigation of ecological destruction. In Ault’s study, not only did grassroots organizing and public pressure prompt major shifts in SED environmental policy from the 1970s through the 1980s—some conciliatory and others obfuscatory—but knowledge of and about environmental concerns also created avenues for transnational activism that led to the collapse of the Iron Curtain itself.

Over six chapters, buttressed by an introduction and conclusion in which Ault neatly summarizes her case that environmentalism is crucial to our understanding of East German politics, *Saving Nature under Socialism* is a focused chronological narrative of the expansion, contraction, and eventual collapse of ecological conservation practices in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from the Soviet satellite’s postwar inception in 1945 through its demise in 1989/90. The first chapter explores nature’s role in the GDR’s planned economy and socialist approaches to environmental protection from 1945 to 1970. The material con-
sequences of postwar reconstruction were undeniable across Europe and much of the world. Massively increased industrial production resulted in a myriad of pollution problems in the GDR, as elsewhere, and necessitated responses at the social and policy levels. Beginning in the 1950s, as part of its tightly controlled mass social organization, the SED established its Cultural League’s Friends of Nature and Heimat—later reinvented as the Society for Nature and the Environment. Within this participatory framework, the SED combined traditional attitudes toward environmental stewardship with a pragmatic need to manage resources, thus embracing environmental conservation and then institutionalizing a specifically socialist environmental protection. Though it will surprise many, given the GDR’s many environmental failings, “the communist dictatorship embraced environmental protection at home and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 2). In its 1968 constitution, the SED went so far as to proclaim citizens’ right and responsibility to a clean environment, thus instrumentalizing environmental concerns as both an avenue of popular mollification and a new axis in Cold War ideological positioning.

Chapters 2 and 3 probe policy shifts and the rise of quasi-grassroots environmental advocacy movements in the 1970s and early 1980s. Throughout this period, the edges of SED commitment to environmentalism began to fray. Nature conservation as both a socialist ideological commitment and a material obligation to its citizens collided with rampant pollution. Through this tension, the SED’s position as the sole governmental authority worked to undermine its power as much as solidify it. “In this totalizing constellation, the state was both regulator and polluter,” Ault writes (p. 4). For example, the GDR depended primarily on lignite (brown coal) for energy, but coal released high levels of particulate matter that polluted the air and led to staggering rates of respiratory illness. Moreover, its use precipitated acid rain, killing forests not only in the GDR but in surrounding countries as well. The resulting movement against Waldsterben (forest death) provided an axis of transnational solidarity for anti-pollution activists who found common cause against both statist and capitalist polluters, all of whom could share blame for failing to account for the externalities in their models of industrial growth. In response, as detailed in chapter 3, a variety of conservationist groups converged within networks of Protestant churches, the only semi-independent ideological organizations permitted by the authoritarian state. Movements stemming from these religious organizations’ broad support for international peace initiatives grew increasingly vocal in challenging what were seen as destructive SED environmental policies, and lack thereof.

Chapters 4 to 6 consider the challenges of the many-layered socialist environmentalism(s) in 1980s East Germany, charting the eventual downfall of the SED as a consequence. As pollution became a more salient shortcoming of SED industrial policy, the cohort of scientists and other environmental experts that had been brought on to staff the government’s Ministerium für Umweltschutz und Wasserwirtschaft (Ministry for Environmental Protection and Water Management, MUW), among other bodies, proved poor evangelists for the SED’s “nothing to see here” approach to industrial pollution. Environmental scientists formed links between East and West Germans who shared critiques of the industrial status quo. Threatened, the SED increasingly tamped down on the production and diffusion of environmental data that could be seen as damaging to the conservationist pretensions of the party. Transnational environmental activism arose behind the Iron Curtain as cross-pollination with Poland’s own environmental movement allowed groups to circumvent some of the scientific censorship they faced while also demonstrating the ecological externalities of modern industry. This strengthened the sense of cross-border solidarity that would later form a cornerstone of green movements and environmentalist thought in the post-Soviet world. The SED re-
sponse to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as well as numerous localized environmental scandals punctured the credibility of the dictatorship's claims to environmental stewardship and spurred widespread demonstrations that helped catalyze antipathy to the regime. Ault's study powerfully supports her contention that, while not the sole cause of the eventual collapse of the SED's authority in East Germany, environmental politics were a major flashpoint in the movement that eventually brought down the regime.

A valid critique may be leveled that Ault's focus on conservationist politics is not robustly theorized. She asserts that the book's core argument is that “the GDR's engagement with nature reconfigures our understanding of environmentalism in postwar Europe, situating it behind and across the Iron Curtain” (p. 2). But the author never fully articulates how this “reconfiguring” advances our understanding of these societies beyond what other forms of knowledge transfer might allow. Likewise, environmental historians may complain that the book is not really “environmental history” so much as a political and policy history centered on environmental themes. Nowhere is the environment an actor in Ault's story.

Still, Ault's study is well worth its jacket price for reminding us that even within states as seemingly monolithic as the SED's East Germany, multiplicity of opinions and objectives reign, such that East Germany's environmental record, to be examined holistically, must be examined within a layered transnational political context. In this light, the SED's environmental failures are a lens through which we can understand the paradoxes, ironies, and unexpected triumphs of green movements writ large. The monograph will be highly interesting to environmental historians, as well as historians and graduate students working on late socialism, modern Germany, central Europe, and transnational political movements.
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