NATURE PROTECTION, ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN COMMUNIST AND CAPITALIST COUNTRIES DURING THE COLD WAR

Conference at the German Historical Institute, Washington, May 29-30, 2015. Co-organized and financed by the Volkswagen Stiftung, the GHI Washington, and the Mortara Center for International Studies at Georgetown University. Conveners: Astrid Mignon Kirchhof (Georgetown University) and John McNeill (Georgetown University). Participants: Melanie Arndt (Institut für Ost- und Südosteuropaforschung, Regensburg), Julia Ault (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington), Stephen Brain (Mississippi State University), Kate Brown (University of Maryland, Baltimore County), Laurent Coumel (Centre d’Études des Mondes Russe, Caucasiens et Centre Européen, Paris), Michel Dupuy (Institut d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine, Paris), Hendrik Ehrhardt (Technische Universität Berlin), Eagle Glassheim (University of British Columbia), Jacob Darwin Hamblin (Oregon State University), Simo Laakkonen (University of Turku), Brian Leech (Augustana College), Jan-Henrik Meyer (New York University, Berlin), Stephen Milder (Rutgers University), Scott Moranda (State University of New York, Cortland), David Painter (Georgetown University), Viktor Pál (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien), Hrvoje Petrić (University of Zagreb), Rachel Rothschild (New York University), Wilko Graf von Hardenberg (University of Wisconsin, Madison).

Environmentalism emerged in postwar Europe as an arena for both competition and cooperation between communist/socialist and capitalist countries, interlacing state policies and social movements in complex ways that affected the Cold War itself. Conference participants questioned how and to what degree conditions in different social, political, and economic systems impacted nature conservation and environmental politics. Furthermore, papers discussed whether environmental issues led to the de-legitimization of states in addition to exploring factors that help explain the seeming synchronicity of environmentalisms in the East and West: was the similarity across the Iron Curtain a product of imitation, of mutually experienced Cold War pressures, or did it represent the logical state of modernization?

The conference’s first panel, chaired by Kate Brown, noted how differences in the political and economic structures in the East and West complicated environmental policies by analyzing the role of experts
and scientists. In his paper “The Internationalization of Czechoslovak Environmental Discourse in the 1970s and 1980s,” Eagle Glassheim argued against the normative claim that communist governments were generally immune to popular concerns about the environment. Rather, he suggested, environmental dialogue and worsening environmental conditions on the global level prompted a shift in the state’s priorities from balancing economic growth and environmental protection to containing the political fallout associated with the deteriorating standard of living. Michel Dupuy’s paper, “Acid Rain: An Issue between East and West,” contended that interactions both within the Eastern Bloc and across the Iron Curtain regarding the damaging effects of acid rain shaped domestic policy in the German Democratic Republic on both national and local levels. Furthermore, he linked the state censorship and falsification of scientific findings on acid rain with international and popular de-legitimization of the regime. The panel concluded with Scott Moranda’s paper, “A Brief Moment of Balance,” on agricultural reform in the American sector of postwar Germany. American experts intended to restructure German agriculture on small-scale crop farms, but West German farmers and local officials adopted only those American policies that complemented local environmental conditions.

The second panel, moderated by Astrid Kirchhof, discussed the intersections of the economy and environmental politics. Hendrik Ehrhardt’s paper, “Keeping the Air Clean?” addressed the shifting role of utility companies in West German environmental politics since the early 1970s. He argued that utility companies passed through a series of strategic stages until the early 1980s when they realized they could no longer defeat environmental legislation and finally sought to place themselves at the head of the green movement. This transformation of political strategy contributed greatly to the dramatic reductions in air pollution that were possible by the early 1990s. In his paper, “A Boom without Guidance,” Wilko Graf von Hardenberg turned to Cold War Italy. Instead of producing long-term plans to ameliorate the effects of environmental degradation, the ruling Christian Democrats relied on a patronage system that awarded funds to groups that engaged in localized, short-term projects. The lack of any form of centralized planning meant that there was little concern for the immediate or long-term environmental consequences of industrialization or urban development. Viktor Pál’s paper, “Craving for Growth,” offered a comparison of Eastern and Western European attitudes towards environmental protection by
focusing on a case study of a water treatment plant in northeastern Hungary. Pál argued that capitalist and socialist economies shared certain assumptions about environmental protection: namely, that environmental protection could not be justified without economic growth, while industrial economic growth itself made environmental pollution harder to control.

The third panel, chaired by David Painter, was devoted to national environmental politics. Brian Leech’s paper, “Energy and Environmentalism during the 1970s and 80s,” illuminated the significance of regional differences, arguing that subnational attitudes towards national environmental policies were informed by local conditions. In the American West during the 1970s, tensions between the corporatization of natural resources and growing environmental concern gave rise to grassroots activism with widespread support. The regional combination of resource abundance and low population density shaped perceptions of and reactions to conservation policies. Examining the American-sponsored ‘Water for Peace’ desalinization project in the Middle East, Jacob Darwin Hamblin’s paper, “An American Miracle in the Desert,” described how the so-called “technical solution” to water shortages — the construction of nuclear power plants — was meant to ensure lasting peace in the region. Once nuclear reactors became an option instead of a requirement, however, political and monetary support for the project dissipated, indicating that policymakers and industrialists preferred either a nuclear solution to water scarcity and regional instability or no solution at all. In his presentation on “Successful Soviet Water Protection,” Simo Laakkonen countered the notion of Eastern technical backwardness. His case study of water protection in Lithuania demonstrated that the communist states could have had an alternative model of technical competence had it not been for limited access to and safekeeping of records. Laurent Coumel’s paper, “East-West Competition and the Attempts to Create a Soviet Eco-Power on Water Resources,” offered a rethinking of the Cold War’s impact on environmental policy in the Soviet Union. The Brezhnev era Ministry of Water Management and Land Reclamation dominated the internal environmental discourse, ignored elite-driven popular calls for increased protection, and discounted Western water protection practices. The heightened transparency of the Gorbachev era, however, created the space for a more independent ministry that prioritized environmentalism and used water protection as an arena for competition with the West.
In the fourth panel, moderated by John McNeill, presenters discussed the influence of environmental politics on the national and international stage. In his paper, “Relevant Others?” Jan-Henrik Meyer focused on the environmental policy of the European Communities in the early 1970s. He argued that West European policy officials looked to the Eastern Bloc, drawing examples from which they could craft their own policy recommendations, despite political and economic differences. Meyer challenged the notion that environmental policy represented an example of “technocratic internationalism,” in which transnational issues are framed as technical problems to be managed by experts instead of as political questions. He concluded that West European treatment of Eastern policy was not entirely depoliticized.

In her paper on “Transnational Air Pollution and Environmental Diplomacy,” Rachel Rothschild maintained that the climate of détente between the Soviet Union and the United States allowed Nordic countries to exert pressure on acid rain polluters and ultimately bring about the 1979 Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution. She concluded that the broader effort to ease Cold War hostilities created an environment in which major international agreements concerning acid rain were possible despite the united opposition of major polluters within the European Communities.

Astrid Kirchhof’s paper, “Fighting for Recognition of Sovereignty,” argued that a policy of cooperation between the United States and Soviet Union regarding environmental issues was “primarily a vehicle in and for the détente process.” The 1972 United Nations conference in Stockholm gave the two powers an opportunity to test their commitments towards cooperation, though these efforts were complicated by questions about East Germany’s participation after it was denied equal “quasi-member” status with West Germany and ultimately boycotted the event.

Participants reconvened on the second day for the fifth panel, the first of two discussing the environmental and peace movements, chaired by Hartmut Berghoff. Melanie Arndt’s paper, “Chernobyl Transnational,” described how the 1986 nuclear disaster catalyzed the mobilization of environmental groups that were, because of the fallout’s global impact, heterogeneous and transnational. The lasting ecological effects of the crisis demonstrated the entangled nature of radioactive fallout, provoking a critical rethinking of both the regulation and future of nuclear energy in the United States. Stephen Milder’s “From Anti-Nuke to Ökopax” contended that the unparalleled mobilization and intensity of anti-nuclear proliferation...
demonstrations in the early 1980s across West Germany were shaped by anti-nuclear reactor protests of the 1970s. West Germans’ personal and localized concerns over nuclear energy in the 1970s transformed popular attitudes a decade later that equated the anti-nuclear movement in Germany with safety, appealing to a wide social base between the traditional political bipolarity.

During the final panel, moderated by Stephen Brain, participants continued their conversation about the environmental and peace movements. Julie Ault opened the discussion with her paper “Protesting Pollution,” which contrasted the environmental movements in East Germany and Poland. Ault emphasized the culture of protest and relative political freedom of the Polish movement in order to highlight variation within the Eastern Bloc. She concluded that concerns over local environmental problems fed into the anti-nuclear movement after the disaster at Chernobyl and eventually into larger protest movements directed at Eastern regimes, which were perceived as being unable to provide for the health and safety of their citizens. The final panelist, Hrvoje Petrić, presented the case of “Nature Protection, Environmental Thought, and Environmental Social Movements in Socialist Yugoslavia,” a unique example because of Yugoslavia’s intermediate position between the Eastern and Western Blocs. Petrić argued that the trajectory of the Yugoslav environmental movement mirrored that of the ruling communist party itself, both of which became increasingly decentralized following the constitution of 1974. The number of successful local environmental protests “from below” indicated the extent to which the Communist Party was losing its grip on the political monopoly it had once enjoyed.

John McNeill’s closing remarks highlighted three of the most prominent themes from the conference discussions. First, he re-emphasized the paradigm of a porous iron curtain in which pollution, radiation, attitudes, technology, and information were all able to travel from one side of the Cold War divide to the other, though inconsistently over time and place. The global nature of environmental concerns led to McNeill’s second theme, which was related to regional versus national perspectives. How do environmentalisms look different when framed at the subnational or supranational level? Is the model of the East-West divide still a useful tool? Finally, McNeill asked to what extent these environmentalisms represented Cold War phenomena. Were they spurred by nuclear build-up or military production, by Cold War competition to be or to appear more
‘green’ than one’s political or economic rivals, or indeed by the quest for safe political space in which East and West could cooperate? Several participants felt that increased production of consumer goods and financial limitations due to debt in the Eastern Bloc characterized those environmental movements as a uniquely Cold War phenomenon. Others felt that environmental issues were equally important as a venue for competition as they were for international cooperation. This question sparked a debate among participants as to whether the Cold War simply represented the context during which environmental change occurred, as Laurent Cousel contended, or was itself a motor of change. Were environmental issues used as tools by politicians, as Astrid Kirchhoff argued in the case of East Germany’s quest for sovereignty and legitimacy, or was politics used as a tool by environmentalists, as Rachel Rothschild contended in the case of acid rain legislation? Were these strategies different in an Eastern and Western context? McNeill concluded that future historical studies need to explore the interaction of environmentalism and the Cold War in an East Asian context in order to complete the picture presented by the European-American cases discussed thus far.

Timothy J. Schmalz (Georgetown University) and Natalie Smith (Georgetown University)