

INTRODUCTION

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Germans, like the people of most nations, have a shared view of their past which owes as much to mythology as history. At its most basic level—that of, say, everyday conversation or tabloid journalism—this view of a nation's past is distilled into a series of clichés which explain the national character in a way that resonates with both natives and foreigners. One such cliché holds that Germans are frequently slow to embrace various ideas and developments that occur in other “modern” nations, but once they finally do, they approach them with ferocious energy and unparalleled discipline and organization, qualities which are among the most resonant of German traits. The industrial revolution is frequently viewed through this lens, as is the eventual embrace of parliamentary democracy. The fact that such clichés rarely withstand historical scrutiny is largely beside the point; like religion, they are immune to scholarly falsification.

Environmentalism occupies a similar place in the popular mythology of the Bundesrepublik: Germany was slow to get on board, but once it did, it took environmental reform further—and practiced it better—than other nations. The history of the German branch of Greenpeace, the nation's most successful and visible environmental organization, confirms this view. The German group emerged only after Greenpeace had already established itself in North America and Western Europe, but within a decade it became the largest and most powerful Greenpeace group in the world. This *Sonderweg* view of German environmentalism, however, ignores a long tradition of *Naturschutz* and *Landschaftspflege*, not to mention the environmental proclivities of National Socialism, however problematic they may have been.

Environmental history, which has been well established in the United States for the past three decades, also seems to fit the latecomer cliché. Initially, the discipline appeared to make little headway in Germany, but it is now beginning to thrive, as the essays in this volume demonstrate.¹ In the case of environmental history, however, the field's relatively slow scholarly development is indeed the result of some very particular aspects of German history. Ironically, German scholars were among the first to write historical narratives that incorporated human interaction with various landscapes. To the historically informed, this should come as no great surprise. After all, in the nineteenth century German scientists such as Ernst Haeckel were pioneers in ecology, while scholars such as Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter helped give birth to the modern discipline of geography. Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl blended ecology and

geography with history and anthropology in his multi-volume and monumental *Naturgeschichte des deutschen Volkes als Grundlage einer deutschen Socialpolitik* (1851–1869). After the First World War, a group of historians influenced by Riehl's work established a school of *Volksgeschichte* in which regional cultures were inextricably intertwined with their landscapes and ecologies.²

Volksgeschichte's focus on human interaction with the landscape, which bore some resemblance (though also some significant differences) to the work of the Annales School in France, was part of an important development in twentieth-century historiography. Nevertheless, the *Volksgeschichte* of the prewar era has been irreparably tainted by its association with Nazi ideology. Rather than simply describing and analyzing the history of various environments and the people that dwelt in them, some of these scholars advocated the creation of certain types of landscapes—ones that were orderly, fruitful, in short, “civilized”—and insisted that only Teutonic people were capable of converting wild forests and malarial marshes into productive and aesthetically pleasing landscapes. Slavs, Jews and other “inferior” races were incapable of carrying out this vital work, and their removal was seen as a necessary part of the project of landscape civilization.³ Such views obviously served Nazi ideology very well, and as a result historical scholarship that discusses the interaction between German culture and the German environment has understandably been viewed with suspicion in the postwar era. As David Blackbourn has recently noted, while a title such as *Rooted in the Land* is completely unproblematic in an American context, in Germany it would risk conjuring taboo concepts such as *Lebensraum* and *Blut und Boden*.⁴

Despite the recent trend toward a “normalization” of German nationalism, particularly during the World Cup this past summer, the Nazi era continues to loom over postwar German historiography like a massive, barely dormant volcano, and environmental history also lies in its shadow. Furthermore, the conflation of environmentalism with Nazism has spilled over Germany's borders and is occasionally used as a cudgel against late twentieth- and early twenty-first century green politics and social movements. Both radical scholars, such as Peter Staudenmaier and Janet Biehl, as well as conservatives such as Anna Bramwell, construct a sinister narrative in which the agrarian romanticism of Riehl and his contemporaries, with its xenophobic nationalism and antipathy toward industrialization, led directly to the *völkisch* movements of the early twentieth century and the Nazis' putative commitment to the preservation of “authentic” German landscapes. Modern-day environmentalism, such writers warn, retains significant vestiges of this tradition and exhibits latent “ecofascist” tendencies.⁵ The implications for environmental historians are clear: any study of the way Germans have interacted with their

environment in the past risks being accused of the *völkisch* heresy, while histories of environmental ideas and movements must conform to a declensionist narrative in which *Naturschutz* becomes hitched to National Socialism, thereby promulgating the culturally deracinated landscapes of Nazi utopia.⁶

Despite such potential accusations, an ever-growing number of German historians have begun once again to focus on people's interaction with their environment throughout history. Most of them are hyper-aware of the potential problems the new discipline may encounter as it bumps up against the ever-present process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. But many would also agree with Blackbourn's sentiments (though they are probably grateful that the words come from a British academic based at Harvard): "It is really time that we stopped letting National Socialism dictate who we read and how we read them." Why should German historians, Blackbourn asks, shun Riehl's work "because what he wrote resonated with some National Socialists some seventy years after he wrote it?"⁷

The shadow of the past is not the only factor that has held German environmental history back. The fact that some of the field's earlier texts were closely associated with *Naturwissenschaften* and scientific positivism was also a concern for historians who were oriented toward cultural theory and studies of mentalité.⁸ The conservatism of the German academic system, with its rigid demarcations between sub-disciplines, also discouraged historians from departing from the more established historical traditions and identifying themselves as environmental historians. The contributors to this volume have grappled with these dilemmas to various degrees and their work reflects the more nuanced approach to German environmental history that has characterized the discipline in recent years. They recognize, for example, that while some aspects of *Naturschutz* and *Landschaftspflege* dovetailed with Nazi ideology, they also bear other historical characteristics which do not fit the declensionist narrative. Jeffrey Wilson's careful examination of the efforts to preserve Berlin's Grunewald at the turn of the last century, for instance, demonstrates that preservationists were not merely knee-jerk reactionaries steeped in German romanticism. Rather, they were reformers who thought seriously about how to deal with the less salutary consequences of modernization. Richard Hölzl comes to a similar conclusion in his study of early twentieth-century *Naturschutz* in Bavaria, discerning a significant number of progressive tendencies in organizations which had previously been dismissed as agrarian romantics. Like their counterparts in Berlin, or for that matter, in the United States, Bavarian nature protection organizations sought "an alternative, more sustainable and careful path to modernization."

At first glance, a study of seventeenth-century North Frisian communities along the windswept west coast of Schleswig-Holstein would appear to lie beyond the contentious historiographical terrain described above. However, as Marie Luisa Allemeyer points out, the long-held popular image of North Frisians as heroic marsh dwellers fighting a constant battle against the encroaching sea was used by the National Socialists as a metaphor for the German people's battle against racial "contamination." Allemeyer is interested in exploring how ordinary North Frisians thought about and interacted with their environment. Drawing on a rich source of archival materials that are rarely available to social historians of the early modern era, she delves deeply into the minds of her dike-building subjects, in the process teasing out the meaning they invested in the natural world around them and how this in turn affected their interaction with their coastal environment. Through this approach, Allemeyer breaks down the simplistic dichotomy that pits the marsh dwellers against the sea and offers a more complex version of their environmental worldview.

Martin Knoll's study of Regensburg and its hinterland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries takes us into the heart of one of Germany's archetypal landscapes: the verdant forests of subalpine Bavaria. In Knoll's hands, the landscape that in earlier times inspired so much romantic longing and Teutonic mythology becomes merely another place where humans have attempted to balance resource extraction and conservation. Following in the steps of scholars such as William Cronon, Knoll dispassionately examines the interaction between the city and its hinterland, focusing on Regensburg's efforts to secure supplies of wood from the surrounding forest just as the burgeoning industrial revolution began to foster intensive competition for natural resources.⁹ The pressure on the regional environment, and the political, economic and social changes that accompanied it, are set against the backdrop of broader cultural and intellectual changes in which Europeans began to adopt an increasingly utilitarian attitude toward nature. Scott Moranda's article also deals with the commodification of nature, though with a twist. Moranda focuses on the way citizens of the German Democratic Republic experienced nature through recreation. His case study of the Erzgebirge region of southern Saxony demonstrates that East Germans came to view recreational facilities such as reservoirs and forestland as consumer goods, and the inability of the state to provide the population with satisfactory "nature experiences" was assimilated into the broader critique targeting communism's failure to provide people with sufficient amenities.

Bernhard Gißibl's contribution takes us well beyond the borders of Germany and into the East African colonies, vestiges of Germany's rela-

tively limited role in the scramble for Africa. His study points to the links between German conservation policies in Africa and those of other imperial powers, particularly Great Britain. Such imperial conservation efforts, Gißibl argues, were among the first to promote wildlife conservation at an international level, foreshadowing later cooperative efforts such as the International Whaling Commission and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). Nevertheless, German conservation efforts constituted a form of imperialism that imposed certain values, such as the German hunting ethos, upon local indigenous people, thereby disrupting or destroying their traditional hunting and farming lifestyle. As Gißibl puts it, Africans “experienced imperial environmentalism as a form of environmental imperialism.”

In his study of twentieth-century German agriculture, Frank Uekötter analyses the impact that industrial technology has had on farmers. The use of increasingly sophisticated heavy machinery, soil analysis, agricultural software and chemical fertilizers and pesticides has encouraged a transfer of knowledge from farmers to agricultural advisors. These new “experts” act as professional interlocutors between farmers and the scientists and engineers they increasingly depend upon. Despite the fact that Uekötter answers the question in his essay title with an emphatic “no!”, he does not feel any “nostalgia for besieged indigenous knowledge.” His goal is instead to understand: “Who is the expert, since when, and for what reason?” Thus Uekötter seeks to write an environmental history that questions a common discourse pitting science and progress against traditional knowledge and environmentalism.

The essays in this volume were originally presented at the 2004 Young Scholars Forum held at the German Historical Institute in Washington DC. With the generous support of the Friends of the German Historical Institute, the forum provided emerging scholars with the opportunity to discuss their work with some of the most distinguished environmental historians in Europe and the United States. The forum emphasized the following themes: the environmental consequences of industrialization and agriculture; changing ideas about nature from the standpoint of cultural and intellectual history; and the history of environmentalism, including movements originating in government agencies, activist groups and other organizations. The presentations ranged across geographical and disciplinary boundaries. In addition to papers that dealt solely with Germany, the forum also heard from scholars working on the United States, Israel, Russia, Africa, France and the United Kingdom.¹⁰ For the sake of thematic consistency, the seven essays eventually chosen for publication dealt primarily with Germany.

In addition to the forum's participants, I would like to thank those who contributed considerable time and energy to its realization. The forum was conceived by GHI director Christof Mauch, who was also an enthusiastic moderator and participant. Charles Closmann, now at the University of North Florida, put a tremendous amount of effort into co-organizing the event, while the administrative and organizational skills of Christa Brown and Bärbel Thomas of the GHI were, as always, indispensable. Andrea Humphreys, a doctoral candidate at the University of Queensland, put her PhD dissertation aside for several weeks while editing the articles, and her stellar efforts were appreciated by all concerned, as were those of Stephen Scala at the GHI, who took care of the nitty-gritty copy editing tasks. I would particularly like to thank the distinguished scholars who devoted four days of their busy lives to the forum, providing guidance, constructive criticism and the experience that stems from many decades of practicing environmental history. Verena Winiwarter from the University of Vienna, Joachim Radkau from the University of Bielefeld, John McNeill from Georgetown University and Donald Worster from the University of Kansas generously made themselves available from dawn to dusk. Their many insights and comments, as well as the broader influence of their scholarship, made the event an invaluable experience for all the participants, and the essays in this volume are clearly indebted to their work.

Notes

¹ For an overview of the state of environmental history throughout the world, see J. R. McNeill, "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," *History and Theory* 42 (December 2003): 5–43. Recent studies in German environmental history include Christof Mauch, ed., *Nature in German History* (New York, 2004) and Thomas Zeller and Thomas Lekan, eds., *Germany's Nature: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2005).

² Willi Oberkrome, "Entwicklung und Varianten der deutschen Volksgeschichte (1900–1960)" in *Volksgeschichten im Europa der Zwischenkriegszeit*, ed. Manfred Hettling (Göttingen, 2003), 56–99.

³ The work of the historical geographer Martin Bürgener is a good example of this kind of landscape history. See David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany* (London, 2006), 240–249. For an overview of *Volksgeschichte's* innovations in the 1920s, see Oberkrome, *Volksgeschichte: Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945* (Göttingen, 1993), 56–99.

⁴ Blackbourn, *Conquest of Nature*, 17. The book referred to is William Vitek and Wes Jackson, *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place* (New Haven, 1996).

⁵ Peter Staudenmaier and Janet Biehl, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (Oakland, CA, 1996). Anna Bramwell, *Blood and Soil: Richard Walther Darré and Hitler's Green Party* (Abbotsbrook, UK, 1985). For refutations of Bramwell's argument, see Piers H. G. Stephens, "Blood, not Soil: Anna Bramwell and the Myth of 'Hitler's Green Party,'" *Organization and Environment* 9(3) (Autumn 2000): 267–94 and Frank Uekötter, "Natur- und Landschaftsschutz im Dritten Reich: Ein Literaturbericht," in Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekötter, eds., *Natur-*

schutz und Nationalsozialismus (Frankfurt, 2003), 459–461. In a bizarre speech to the Australian parliament, the conservative Australian senator George Brandis attacked the Australian Greens for their “Nazi tactics” and described them as having a National Socialist lineage dating back to the work of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl. Interestingly, the speech relied heavily on Staudenmaier and Biehl’s work. For a transcript, see <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/10/29/1067233222840.html>.

⁶ Undoubtedly, various strands of *Naturschutz* had a *völkisch* outlook and were easily assimilated into National Socialist ideology. However, as Raymond Dominick has pointed out, these strands have largely disappeared or been absorbed into various cryptofascist organizations. See Raymond H. Dominick III, *The Environmental Movement in Germany: Prophets and Pioneers, 1871–1971* (Bloomington; Indianapolis, 1992), 114.

⁷ Blackbourn, *Conquest of Nature*, 17. For a more balanced study of the connection between environmentalism and National Socialism see Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc and Thomas Zeller, eds., *How Green were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich* (Athens, OH, 2006).

⁸ For example, see Christian Pfister, *Das Klima der Schweiz von 1525 -1860 und seine Bedeutung in der Geschichte von Bevölkerung und Landwirtschaft* (Bern, 1984) and Peter Brimblecombe and Christian Pfister, eds., *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History* (New York, 1990), whose contributors stem largely from the natural sciences.

⁹ The model for this type of regional environmental history is Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1992).

¹⁰ For a summary of the Forum, see Charles Closmann, “Young Scholars Forum 2004: Environment, Culture, Politics: Transatlantic Perspectives,” *GHI Bulletin* 35 (Fall 2004), which can be viewed at: <http://www.ghi-dc.org/bulletinF04/35.184.pdf>.