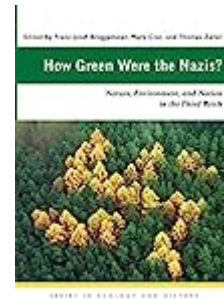


**Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc, Thomas Zeller.** *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich.* Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006. 283 S. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1646-4; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1647-1.



Reviewed by Kees Gispem

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## F.J. Brüggemeier u.a. (Hrsg.): *How Green Were the Nazis?*

In the introduction to this volume about environmentalism in the Third Reich the editors assert that the contributors "steer clear of polemic" and "shy away from a monolithic interpretation" (p. 2). The second half of this claim is truer than the first. With its juxtaposition of the words Nazis and Green, the work's very title, if not exactly polemical, is certainly provocative. It hints at affinities between the post-1960s Green movement, whose concern with the natural environment and grassroots democracy grew out of a left-wing critique of contemporary society, and the racist, genocidal Nazi regime, which was anchored in the politics of the radical right.

The choice of words is of course intentional: the anachronistic label Green for Nazi Germany is a clever way to pique one's curiosity about environmentalism in the Third Reich. But the volume does not follow through on the title's implied promise. On the contrary, it consistently avoids exploring the potentially sinister connections between the environmental tendencies in National Socialism and those in the contemporary world, rejecting attempts to do so as unproductive and misguided. Posing a more modest question instead, it asks only "whether

there was an overlap between the goals of National Socialists and environmentalists in the first half of the twentieth century [â] and if so, whether that overlap [â] had a lasting impact on the German landscape" (pp. 2-3). Books by scholars such as Anna Bramwell and Simon Schama, who have ventured beyond this limited agenda and linked Nazi environmentalism with the contemporary Green movement, come in for some harsh criticism.

If the editors' claim to eschew polemics is therefore somewhat disingenuous, there can be no doubt that the volume's nine chapters are highly diverse, even as they share a common theme. The contributions progress from the truffle-hunter variety exemplified by Charles Closmann's discussion of the Reich Nature Protection Law of 1935 and Michael Imort's first-rate analysis of National Socialist forest policy in the first two chapters to the broad vistas of parachutists Thomas Rohkrüger, Mark Bassin, and Joachim Wolschek-Bulmahn in the last three chapters. Contributions by Thomas Lekan, Frank Uekötter, Gesine Gerhard, and Thomas Zeller range in between.

Closmann, an assistant professor at the University

of North Florida, asks how it was possible for the Nazi regime to enact a pioneering and relatively enlightened piece of legislation such as the environmental law of 1935, most of which had been drafted in the Weimar Republic. His simple but not entirely satisfactory answer is that the law contained a number of provisions, such as strict limits on the rights of dispossessed property owners, which reflected Nazi ideology (p. 35). Imort, a cultural geographer at Wilfried Laurier University, examines National Socialist forest policy, specifically its adoption of the progressive Dauerwald (perpetual forest) doctrine. The Dauerwald system, which centered on the environmental benefits of mixed-stand forests and selective cutting as opposed to the monoculture and periodic clear cutting of scientific forestry anticipated current, Green forestry management principles. Its success in the Third Reich resulted less from the expectation of ecological advantages and economic benefits, however, than from the realization that it offered the Nazis an abundance of propagandistic analogies between German forest and German Volk (p. 44).

How did laws such as the Reich Nature Protection Law of 1935 affect environmental practices at the local and regional level? Lekan points out that there was a huge gap between rhetoric and reality. An historian at the University of South Carolina, Lekan argues that although the 1935 law initially generated much enthusiasm among preservationists, in practice there was little coordination, a great deal of bureaucratic infighting, and much confusion on the ground. As a consequence, continuity with routines established in the empire and the Weimar Republic often counted for more than the new legislation. Compounded by inadequate funding and shifting national priorities (industrial mobilization for war), the lack of progress gave rise to widespread disillusionment with the regime's environmental record. In the end, writes Lekan, "Nazism failed to fully displace the older aesthetic, environmentalist, and regionalist vision of Heimat that had formed the basis of grassroots Naturschutz since 1900" (p. 94).

Uekötter detects a similar pattern in his investigation of air pollution control. A research fellow at the German Museum in Munich, Uekötter argues that the failure of a comprehensive approach to the problem of air pollution in the Third Reich was above all a consequence of Nazi polycentrism. A by-product of various conflicting reform initiatives, air pollution abatement never crystallized as a problem in its own right. Consequently no coherent policy developed either, which meant that the inertia of inadequate, pre-existing routines carried the day.

The Blood and Soil ideology of Nazi agriculture minister Richard Walther Darré is the focus of Gesine Gerhard's contribution. An assistant professor at the University of the Pacific, Gerhard has structured her contribution as an extended critique of Anna Bramwell's 1985 study of Darré, which portrayed him sympathetically as a misunderstood martyr and father of the Greens of today (p. 138). Not only was there nothing Green whatsoever about Darré, writes Gerhard, but he was a through and through racist, concerned only with the "purity" of the Nordic race living off the land (p. 139). In other words, Gerhard's Darré is all blood and no soil, as opposed to Bramwell's interpretation of all soil and no blood. One suspects Gerhard is closer to the truth, especially considering Mark Bassin's chapter on geopolitics, which further unpacks the ideology of blood and soil to reveal its inner contradictions. Making a strong argument for "blood or soil," Bassin, a cultural geographer at University College in London, explores the tensions between the environmental determinism of political geographers such as Friedrich Ratzel and Karl Haushofer and the biological determinism of ideologues such as Darré.

If the case of Darré seems a good reason for keeping contemporary Greens and Nazi environmentalists in their separate corners, that of the Munich landscape architect and self-promoter Alwin Seifert (1890-1972) makes for a more ambiguous assessment. As Zeller points out in one of the volume's most interesting chapters, Seifert was an environmentalist first and foremost. But he was a political opportunist and reactionary modernist as well — a kind of environmentalist version of an Ernst Jünger or a Carl Schmitt — which helps explain his successful career in the Third Reich, his quick rebound in the Federal Republic, and quite possibly the abiding relevance of some of his ideas as well. Zeller, a historian at the University of Maryland and one of the volume's editors, concentrates on Seifert's career before 1945.

Seifert approached nature neither as unspoiled wilderness, something to be preserved in its original state untouched by human hands, nor as an enemy to be conquered, but rather as "landscape" — a culturally charged space, where humans and nature interacted (p. 149). Landscape, the "outcome of centuries of cultural work" by humans on the environment, emerged as Seifert's central concept for thinking about, and acting upon, nature (p. 150). Influenced by romantic, historicist ideas as well as by notions of human mastery over nature through architectural or engineering design — and blending the two — Seifert's landscape concept radiated in many different directions. It opened the door to organic

and harmonious technological design of Autobahnen, for instance, which put Seifert at odds both with traditional conservationists and with the orthodox engineering staffs of his patron Fritz Todt, Hitler's highway czar and armaments minister. It made possible attacks on the Enlightenment's outdated geometric engineering spirit, even as it embraced the latest discoveries of scientific and technological modernity. It dovetailed with projects such as the redesign and refashioning of conquered Polish territories, transforming them into beautiful, German landscapes without Jews and Poles, of course.

Seifert reemerged after the war as a prominent voice in matters of landscape. Zeller unfortunately skirts the question what legacy, if any, the environmentalist's ideas might have left to the Green movement that emerged within a few short years of his death. A similar reluctance to contemplate the possibility of intellectual continuities from the Third Reich to the Federal Republic characterizes the chapter by Thomas Rohkr mer on Martin Heidegger's environmentalism. An intellectual historian at the University of Lancaster, Rohkr mer argues that Heidegger's involvement with Nazism and his post-1945 thoughts on environmentalism belong to different phases of his work (p. 194). Thus contemporary environmental thought, which increasingly draws on [Heidegger's] work, remains untainted (p. 172) by the philosopher's infatuation with National Socialism in the first half of the 1930s.

Wolschek-Bulmahn, a professor of space planning and landscape architecture at the University of Hannover, examines the history of his own profession's involvement with wartime planning and policymaking in the annexed parts of Poland. Placing the fanatic anti-Semite Seifert at the scene of the crime, so to speak, he cites the Reich Landscape Advocate's self-incriminating words, "If the East is to become home for Germans from all over Germany, and if it is to flourish and become as beautiful as the rest of the Reich, then it is not enough just to cleanse the towns of past Polish mismanagement and construct clean and pleasant vil-

lages. The entire landscape must be Germanized" (p. 245). Other members of the profession were equally if not more enthusiastic about the many opportunities including the Generalplan Ost that beckoned in the East. Wolschek-Bulmahn concludes that urban architecture and landscape design in the Third Reich were inextricably linked to the terror regime of the Nazis (p. 253).

In the final analysis, how Green were the Nazis? The volume's unavoidable conclusion is that they weren't really Green at all if by Green we mean the environmental movement associated with the left that emerged from the turbulent 1960s. True, the Nazi dictatorship embraced a number of environmentally sound and forward-looking practices, but to a greater or lesser extent all these were contaminated by their fatal entanglement in Nazi barbarism. When the regime died, so did this particular brand of environmentalism.

The editors and authors have good reason of course to make this case. If the Nazis and contemporary Greens share anything more than superficial resemblance, then either the former gain a certain measure of progressiveness or the latter are tainted by kinship with National Socialism. Both are unpalatable and troubling conclusions. Still, one wonders whether both the right and the left, from their diametrically opposed starting positions and with slightly different timing in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century, eventually arrived at similar conclusions about the shortcomings of Liberalism's approach to nature about the inadequacies of the Enlightenment's geometric engineering spirit and instrumental rationality. Could it be that Nazi environmentalists were somehow Green before the term existed? Could it be that the proximate appearance of foundational texts such as Heidegger's essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," in 1953 and Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's "Dialectic of Enlightenment" in 1944 was not just a coincidence? One wishes that the editors and authors of this interesting volume had shown greater willingness to confront those questions.

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