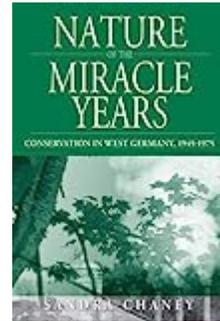




Sandra Chaney. *Nature of the Miracle Years: Conservation in West Germany, 1945-1975.* Studies in German History. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008. xii + 284 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-430-2.



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Greening Slowly in the Postwar Years

Recently, scholars have challenged the argument that Germany's environmental movement emerged abruptly in the early 1970s. Focusing their attention on the period from 1945 to 1970, they also have refuted the thesis that these years were characterized by public indifference to polluted air, contaminated waterways, and the destruction of rural landscapes. Instead, they argue, conservationists and other educated citizens were well aware of the ecological harm caused by Germany's transition from a coal-fired, industrial economy to a system based on petrochemicals and consumerism.[1]

In this book, Sandra Chaney reinforces the view that Germany's conservationists deserve much of this recent attention. Without renouncing its critique of modern society, the conservation movement gradually adopted new ideas and tactics, assuring it would make the transition rather than disappear during the shift to more radical environmentalism in the early 1970s. Using meticulous research and well-chosen case studies, Chaney shows how this flexibility allowed conservationists to achieve a "partial greening" of German society during the so called

"miracle years." [2]

Chaney starts with a careful examination of the antecedents to post-World War II conservation. She notes that romanticism, the idea of homeland protection (*Heimatschutz*), and the concept of landscape care (*Landschaftspflege*) formed important touchstones for conservationists in the 1940s and 1950s. National Socialism left a more troubling legacy. In an act of selective remembering, some leading conservationists suppressed the memory of the Nazis' genocidal landscape planning schemes in the conquered territories of Poland during World War II.

Yet German conservationists continued their work with renewed vigor after the war. In a section on the occupation years (1945-55), Chaney notes that conservationists frequently advocated the protection of "nature-as-*Heimat*," a concept that would aid in the construction of a positive national identity (p. 47). Chaney's analysis rests upon thorough research. She cites contemporary magazine articles, editorials, and radio transcripts

by Gert Kragh, Wilhelm Linienkämpfer, and other leading conservationists to argue that love of *Heimat* motivated nature lovers. Her discussion of the Association for the Protection of German Forests (SDW) is especially revealing. Chaney quotes SDW president Robert Lehr, who proclaimed in 1952 that “Germans have always been connected to the forest in a ... heartfelt way ... yes, our soul is deeply anchored in the forest” (p. 69). At the same time, Chaney argues, German conservationists avoided racist language and attempted to adapt their rhetoric to a new democratic society.

Conservationists also reconstituted government agencies and private groups after the war. Dr. Hans Klose persuaded the government to establish a Federal Institute for Nature Protection and Landscape Care in 1953, and private organizations like the German League for Bird Protection and the Bavarian League for Nature Protection also remained active in the first decade after the war. Although most of these groups struggled to attract membership, they also prevented a reduction in the number of nature preserves, according to Chaney.

She reinforces her argument with a well-chosen case study. Inspired to action in the 1950s, an alliance of foresters, biologists, and other experts used both traditional and non-traditional methods to stall a hydroelectric project in the scenic Wutach Gorge. Chaney shows how conservationists engaged in behind-the-scenes lobbying (a traditional approach) and a massive petition drive (a non-traditional approach) to halt this scheme. Yet their victory was only partial. The electric company eventually developed other river valleys for hydropower, an outcome that is an example of Chaney’s definition of the “partial greening” of society.

Remaining sections of the book also demonstrate that conservationists gradually—if not always successfully—adapted to changing times. Chapters 4 and 5 examine their attempts to embrace the concept of *Landschaftspflege* from 1956 to 1965. During a time of booming economic growth, government officials argued that planning was necessary to “restore order to society and the economy” (p. 115). Citing a variety of sources, Chaney shows how conservationists supported university degree programs for landscape planning and organized the 1959 German Conservation Day around the concept of “order in the landscape, order of space” (p. 126). Yet this effort resulted in frustrating compromises rather than major victories. Some traditionalists resisted landscape planning as too technocratic, a reflection of the conservative outlook of many conservationists. Inadequate funding

also meant that *Landschaftspflege* played only a minor role in the creation of nature parks.

According to Chaney, the period from 1967 to 1975 was also one of transition. Her analysis is persuasive, with some qualifications. Drawing upon numerous articles in *Der Spiegel* and *Natur und Landschaft*, in addition to letters between officials in the Ministry of Agriculture, she demonstrates that controversial figures like Bernhard Grzimek and Hubert Weinzierl brought passion, media savvy, and a more radical message to nature protection in the late 1960s. They also bridged the gap between traditional conservation groups and modern environmentalism (*Umweltschutz*). Yet Chaney’s own analysis leaves one impressed by the abrupt effect that left-wing students and citizens’ initiative groups had on environmentalism in the early 1970s. She shows that widespread concerns about a global ecological crisis inspired tens of thousands of citizens to embrace a confrontational approach to issues of pollution, development, and nuclear energy. Conservationists with the German Conservation Ring (DNR) were, at best, ambivalent about the rhetoric of these popular groups. Moreover, issues of nature protection remained “peripheral” to the wave of environmental law adopted by the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s, according to Chaney. One is left with the impression of a slowly changing, somewhat elitist conservation movement washed over by a wave of radical environmental alarms.

A few, albeit minor, critiques of this book also bear mention. Readers will sometimes be confused by the interchangeability of terms like conservation, *Landschaftspflege*, and *Naturschutz*. Moreover, the placement of maps at the end of the text is inconvenient when one is reading about campaigns to protect the Wutach Gorge or to create a Bavarian National Park. Yet none of these issues undermines Chaney’s basic thesis that West Germany’s conservation movement adapted, if haltingly, during the “miracle years,” or that it made a lasting contribution to the protection of natural areas.

Chaney’s book is a welcome addition to the scholarship on German environmental history. The first English-language study of German conservation after World War II, her work is also a model of painstaking research and careful argument. It will appeal to students of German history and global environmental history for years to come.

Notes

- [1]. For recent works in this field, see Monika

Bergmeier, *Umweltgeschichte der Boomjahre 1949-1973: Das Beispiel Bayern* (Münster: Waxmann Verlag, 2002); Jens Ivo Engels, *Naturpolitik in der Bundesrepublik: Ideenwelt und politische Verhältnisse in Naturschutz und Umweltbewegung, 1950-1980* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006); Frank Uekötter, *Naturschutz im Aufbruch: Eine Geschichte des Naturschutzes in Nordrhein-Westfalen, 1945-1980* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004).

[2]. Chaney borrows the phrase “partial greening” from Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

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