



**Jeffrey K. Wilson.** *The German Forest: Nature, Identity, and the Contestation of a National Symbol, 1871-1914.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. xi + 326 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4426-4099-3.

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## Two Roads Diverged in a Wood: Questions about Germans, Their Forests, and the Path of German History

After the devastating Roman defeat at the Battle of Teutoberg Forest, Caesar Augustus, it is said, lamented his lost legions in utter dismay. The Germanic tribes seemed to magically materialize out of the forest, inflict a terrible beating, and then disappear once again into the trees. The reality was somewhat less lyrical, especially since Romans had trained the German commander, but the myth is one of many tying the German people closely to their forests. It also was a precursor to the idea that Germany pursued a “special path” (*Sonderweg*) in its history, one that rejected Western, Enlightenment values, opting instead for darker, more sinister, more pagan principles. This rejection of modernity, the explanation goes, led ultimately to Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust. Afterward, destroyed and helpless, Germany would finally turn to Western values, leaving the dark forest of their violent attitudes behind for good.

The *Sonderweg* and the values associated with it are at the heart of Jeffrey K. Wilson’s work, and he succeeds in arguing for a reconsideration of the applicability of this concept. While taking on the entire *Sonderweg* argument would be beyond his study, Wilson focuses on its expression in terms of attitudes toward nature, specifically forests. Basically this involves giving national meaning to the landscape, seen by *Sonderweg* writers as a “deviant, distinctly un-Western relationship to nature” and a rejection of modernity (p. 10). While some extreme national-

ists did reject modernity and infuse the forests with antimodern meaning, Wilson argues that this did not apply to all of Germany, especially at the local level, as seen in the case studies in chapters 3 and 4. Wilson’s main purpose is to show how Germans used the concept of the “German forest” to promote modernization, capitalism, and land preservation, not antimodernism. The situation was not as simple as the *Sonderweg* writers saw it.

Wilson begins his challenge to this simplified view of the German forest with a chapter on the manifold symbolic meanings that forests had for Germans, in particular the bourgeoisie. Using examples from published sources, such as forest guidebooks, hiking journals, geography texts, and middle-class magazines, he illustrates how the forest created the basis for German unity, both geographically and historically. These works created “sites of memory,” including Wartburg Castle, historic trees, and other monuments to Germany’s past, that tourists and hikers, often part of organized groups, would visit and reflect upon. Those unable to visit could read about them in magazines or “tree books” (*BaumbÄ¼cher*) published by natural science associations, who encouraged preserving these “sites,” thus, in Wilson’s view, introducing the distinctly *modern* concepts of conservation and preservation to the German public. By associating specific places, rather than myths, with the forests, it made the idea of “German forest” more tangible, and

something worth defending.

None too soon, either, as during this same period, large landowners, tired of sharing their forests, stepped up efforts to deny centuries-old public access to these lands. These efforts, analyzed in chapter 2, were not, however, designed to turn back the clock to the primeval forest (*Urwald*) or simply maintain hunting preserves for the arch-reactionary eastern nobles (*Junkers*). They were in fact, Wilson argues, motivated by the very modern idea of capitalism. Forests were a large part of Germany's economy, and became more valuable as Germany industrialized rapidly in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Denying peasants access to forests, where they had long supplemented their living by harvesting wood, hunting, and keeping livestock, meant more resources for the landowner, not to mention a healthy boost to property values. These efforts, as exemplified by the 1880 Field and Forest Law, encountered resistance from social reformers, who championed the benefits of forest visits to exhausted urbanites, and agrarian reformers, concerned about the negative economic and aesthetic impacts of monoculture. For Wilson's argument, these conflicts show how once again the "German forest" idea served modernization, not a return to the past.

Having established the symbolic and material characteristics of Germany's forests, Wilson illustrates his argument using local case studies in the two following chapters. While set in different parts of Prussia/Germany and under different circumstances, each demonstrates how the concept of the "German forest" proved useful for both the German public and its government. These studies also illustrate how Germans applied the ideas of public open space and land conservation in a booming city, and behaved with the arrogance of colonial masters in their own territory.

Anyone visiting Berlin today will be struck by the amount of green space, from the Tiergarten in the city center to the GrÃ¼newald, the subject of this case study, in the outskirts. In chapter 3, Wilson analyzes how the GrÃ¼newald, once a high-value property belonging to the Prussian government, eventually became a public park owned by the Berlin city government. He does an effective job of weaving in the concepts of the symbolic, health, and material value of forests presented in chapters 1 and 2. After years of political wrangling, the local government, supported by Left liberal newspapers and eventually the general public, was able to offer the forest's physical and moral benefits to the citizens. It denied the monetary benefits of valuable real estate, en-

visioned as a wealthy suburb of villas, to the Prussian government. More important to Wilson's argument, the supporters of preservation used the "German forest" idea for a very modern goal, land preservation. This chapter offers good insights into the workings of German local, regional, and national politics, and would be interesting for political and urban historians.

Chapter 4, in contrast, analyzes the role of forest discourse in Germany's provinces of East Prussia, specifically in the Tuchel Heath in the province of Pomerania, which lay roughly between West and East Prussia in the area previously known as the Polish Corridor. Wilson analyzes how German foresters attempted to exercise political control over ethnic Poles and Kasubians by establishing administrative control over the area's forests in the 1890s. He describes how the foresters, such as Chief Forester R. SchÃ¼tte, believed that they were bringing German "civilization" to the barbaric peoples of the East in an effort to improve their lives. Wilson sees this effort as a "colonial" project not unlike the actions of white settlers in the American West or European imperialists in Asia and Africa. These men were trying to maintain order by quashing three age-old forms of resistance: wood theft, poaching, and arson. While they believed themselves to be doing good and making positive changes, through arrogance and condescension, Wilson argues, they actually made the situation worse, increasing the local population's enmity toward its German overlords. As Wilson's story ends in 1914, violent resistance increased with the onset of the First World War. In terms of the book's argument, this case study illustrates how the foresters, while they were not successful in imposing order, saw forests as a force for modernization, not, as the *Sonderweg* writers would have it, of reactionary conservatism.

The final chapter, which describes the application of scientific views of the forest to society, is the weakest part of the book. While it establishes that the discourse on the "German forest" took a turn toward the modern by applying the ideas of Social Darwinism and proto-ecology to the forests, it does not quite fit with the previous chapters. There are no case studies to back up the argument, and while the information is useful and interesting, the chapter feels like an afterthought or a way to fill space. The scientists, while respected at the time, come off more as cranks than representatives of public opinion. The most relevant and effective part of the chapter addresses how nineteenth-century Germans tried to decide if the oak or the native linden tree was the best national symbol of Germany. This conflict over symbols fits in per-

fectly with Wilson's focus on the meanings of forests for Germans.

The book as a whole makes a very effective, well-supported argument that definitely adds to the scholarship on imperial Germany, the German forests, and attitudes toward nature in Germany. Wilson has done extensive research and makes excellent use of primary sources.

One quibble is that the book focuses only on Prussia and Prussian sources. While Prussia dominated the government of the German Empire and held much of its land, Bavaria was also a substantial player and contained extensive forest resources. It would be interesting to see if attitudes in Bavaria matched those in Prussia. Hopefully this book will inspire someone to do just that.

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