**Huff on Ault, 'Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968-1990'**

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In the last ten years, scientific research on the environmental history of the socialist states has intensified. This is especially true for the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which played a special role in due to its location on the edge of the Eastern Bloc and its historical, linguistic, and cultural interconnectivity with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). The first academic studies were focused on the conditions within the GDR in order to explore the possibility for environmental engagement in state-socialist societies. The monographs and edited volumes that built on this foundation expanded the understanding of how the GDR interacted with neighboring states in terms of environmental history. Here, the attention turned westward in order to describe the relationship between the FRG and the GDR in more detail. Later, the GDR was also analyzed in more detailed manner as part of the socialist world.

Julie Ault's new book now emphasizes the unique bridge-building function that the GDR had, acting as a kind of hub between East and West. This position is already emphasized by the chosen subtitle, which underlines that the main focus of the work is on the transnational component of the GDR environmental movement. Specifically, Ault looks at the West German influence that was important for strengthening East German environmental groups. Second, she investigates developments in Poland, which from the 1980s onward combined with the developments in the GDR and allowed a new dynamic to emerge. As a result, Ault delivers an interesting study based on classical archival sources which overlaps with older studies, especially in the first half of the book. Moreover, the explanations of events in Poland sometimes seem to be attached to the individual chapters without really being connected to the chapters' contents. The second part of the work is much stronger, as the transnational analytical claim is actually realized here. Even if the conclusion seems exaggerated in some cases—for example, when Ault makes the sweeping judgement that the East Germans were "transnational in their thinking" (p. 13)—the chosen approach provides notable insights in individual cases that broaden the understanding of how independent environmental groups could and had to act in unfree societies.

Contrary to the transnational subtitle, Ault deals almost exclusively with the conditions within the GDR in the first chapter and highlights the significance of nature conservation and environmental protection for the SED state. In doing so, she emphasizes the importance of this policy field for domestic and foreign policy legitimacy. The GDR, as an artificial state, was supposed to be successful
at all costs. So the GDR had to positively distinguish itself from the Federal Republic and partially succeeded in doing so until the 1970s in the field of environmental legislation. Nevertheless, the GDR leadership succeeded less and less in keeping its own promises. The lack of raw materials, together with the development of heavy industry demanded by the Soviet Union, led to serious environmental damage. At the same time, environmental awareness grew among the population. Ault sees the SED as caught between the needs of ecology and economy. The GDR's lack of economic productivity did not allow it to allocate more resources to environmental protection without widening the gap to Western consumption levels. The last attempt to structurally solve this dilemma happened under Walter Ulbricht in the 1960s. But the large-scale reform attempts ultimately failed.

Chapter 2 deals with the institutional expansion from the 1970s onward and the brief flowering of GDR environmental protection policy. During these years, the GDR used its environmental policy massively for foreign policy purposes in order to achieve international recognition. However, Ault only touches on the question discussed in previous research as to whether environmental policy was "invented" solely for this purpose or whether the environmental policy agenda had a deeper significance. But short-term economic goals were more important than "fulfilling its own environmental promises" (p. 70). Thus the GDR failed to meet its own legal requirements. Although improvements were made on a small scale, the increasing debt caused by the "unity of economic and social policy" under Honecker since the 1970s and the oil crisis increasingly robbed the GDR of its ability to act. Increasing environmental pollution, which was visible to the naked eye, made people more and more dissatisfied and undermined the promises made within the SED's environmental policy.

Chapter 3 discusses the emergence of an alternative environmental narrative. The SED's master narrative was based on the idea that property relations under communism, combined with advances in science and technology, would lead to the end of environmental devastation. Opposition to this narrative, which was obviously absurd, first manifested itself in the ecclesiastical sphere. Here, Ault also talks about processes and developments in the sphere of the Protestant church, which has already been described several times. Important for the development of alternative narratives was the slogan "Integrity of Creation," which more strongly emphasized the responsibility of the individual and renunciation of overconsumption. At first, the Ministry of State Security perceived the church environmental movement as apolitical. However, this changed rapidly in the 1980s, when the Green Party gained influence in the Federal Republic and became visibly interested in the state of the environment in the GDR. The SED had an ambivalent relationship to the Green Party. On the one hand, it saw the party's rise as a sign of the decline of Western capitalism. On the other hand, the Green Party's close contacts with the independent environmental movement in the GDR were a thorn in the SED's side. In addition, the events surrounding the trade union Solidarity in Poland became annoying for the SED because environmental information was relatively freely available there and flowed to the West, putting the East German policy of secrecy under pressure.

In chapter 4, Ault focuses on about the mediating role the GDR played between the blocs. Here she first addresses cross-border pollution of the rivers that flowed from the GDR to the Federal Republic. Since people in the West also suffered directly from this form of pollution, it formed a gateway for joint protests, for example in 1987 in Dresden, where Greenpeace joined forces with East German groups to draw attention to the pollution of the Elbe. At the same time, however, the state's capacity for effective environmental monitoring grew. The Centre for Environmental Development, founded in
1982, henceforth served as a central collection point for environmental information. The growing frustration of the staff there with the slow pace of environmental policy reform led to some information being leaked to independent environmental groups. Western influence on East German environmental history was strengthened by Solidarity. The trade union sought greater public recognition in the FRG and since the topic of the environment was modern in the West, Solidarity used environmental data to gain attention. The trade union included data on the state of the environment, such as water analysis of the Oder River, in its German-language publications.

Chapter 5 deals with the expansion of environmental groups after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. For the Christian-based environmental movement, thinking characterized by renunciation always meant self-limitation. This kind of thinking was not acceptable to the majority in GDR society. The events surrounding Chernobyl attracted activists who had little or no church affiliation. As a result, the character of these groups changed visibly. Their number increased and they became more radical in their appearance. Not only did information about the state of the environment spread more widely and quickly, but the new members sought to go public and thus actively challenged the state. The SED tried to take action against this development until the late 1980s and finally even restricted travel into the neighboring socialist country of Poland. With the onset of glasnost and perestroika from 1986 onward, Poland had become a hub for information. West German environmentalists met there with East German activists and planned joint actions.

The sixth and final chapter asks about the significance of the environmental movement for the collapse of communism. For Ault, environmental engagement was a decisive factor in the collapse of the state-socialist systems in 1989/90. The broken environmental promise of the SED “set the stage for their own downfall” (p. 229), as evidenced by the great importance of environmental issues within the framework of the Central Round Table, among other things. Many demonstrations also featured banners with an environmental message. Ault explains the lack of electoral success for the green parties in the free elections of 1990 primarily as a result of the fragmentation of the green movement in the GDR and the positive effects of the new environmental legislation.

This is not the only point on which Ault’s argumentation is not completely convincing. In essence, Ault assumes that environmental movements are a reaction to environmental pollution. This is not entirely wrong, but as an explanation it falls short for both liberal-democratic and for socialist-authoritarian societies. On the contrary, environmental history has shown many times that a fundamental environmental awareness must be accompanied by social, technical, and economic processing capacities before an environmental condition is even described as a problem and work is done to remedy it. It was the industrial character of GDR society and the orientation toward the Western level of consumption that kept the movement small, not just oppression by the state. The environmental movement did not explode after the fall of the Berlin Wall but imploded because it did not have a broad social base. For every banner at the demonstrations in 1989/90 with an ecological slogan, there were many with the demand, If the D-Mark comes, we stay; if it does not come, we go to it.

There are also some minor malpractices to be regretted. It is to be welcomed that Ault’s work fundamentally seeks to distinguish itself from older studies and relies on opposition sources. However, it is incomprehensible why legal regulations are not quoted from the law gazette or the Council of Ministers’ decisions, but from secondary sources. In addition, source criticism remains
underdeveloped in places where statements in petitions are generalized. Ault presents the GDR in a very monolithic way. It is unclear who the actors behind "the SED" or "the GDR" are. Admittedly, it is not Ault's main concern to examine the internal structures of state environmental policy. But previous research has shown that it is helpful for understanding the GDR’s environmental policy to pay attention to the internal decision-making processes. There are also minor shortcomings to be noted regarding the literature base, exemplified by the absence of the relevant monograph on the Society for Nature and the Environment, which was also transnational in character.[1] Ultimately, Ault has presented a study that largely reproduces what is already known about the history of the GDR environmental movement. However, the strong underpinning of the account with archival sources is a gain that makes some well-known events even more vivid. In addition, the passages on Poland broaden the understanding of how contacts across borders were possible in the former Eastern Bloc and how this influenced East German environmental engagement. However, Ault only partially fulfills her own goal of reconfiguring our understanding of environmentalism in postwar Europe, as there is no theoretical discussion of the basic social conditions of environmental engagement in socialistic societies.

Note


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