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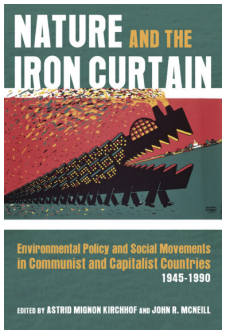
Astrid Mignon Kirchhof, John R. McNeill (eds.)

Nature and the Iron Curtain

Review by: Anna Åberg



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In the edited volume *Nature and the Iron Curtain: Environmental Policy and Social Movements in Communist and Capitalist Countries, 1945-1990,* the authors aim «to contribute to current debate about the implications for nature of the two foremost political and economic orders of the twentieth century». Over the past twenty years, much historic work, for example in the history of science and technology, has shown that the Iron Curtain is, indeed porous, in terms of environmentalism as well as in regard to consumption and techno-scientific exchange. This volume adds to this research, going into details of the kind of environmental policy and action that are possible under diverse political and cultural regimes. This complex look at environmental movements and legislation enabling serious comparison between countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain is an important contribution to the field.

One component of this contribution is to nuance what is often a monolith narrative regarding environmental policies, or rather, the lack of them, in the Eastern Bloc. One example of such narratives that is cited in the book is from historian Ramachandra Guha, who has stated that «[T]he ideology of State socialism is antithetical to environmentalism on a number of grounds: in its worship of technology, in its arrogant desire to conquer nature through its system of central planning in which pollution control comes in the way of fulfilling of production targets. Most of all, though, state socialism has inhibited environmentalism by throttling democracy»[1].

While there is a certain truth to these claims, such generalizing statements are cautioned against already on the first

page of the introduction, and, indeed, the book does provide diverse narratives of the state of environmentalism on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

As editors Astrid Mignon Kirchhof and John R. McNeill point out, an exploitative perspective of nature, Taylorist work organization and economic accumulation have indeed been trademarks of both the capitalist and the communist systems, and despite a persisting Cold War narrative, more variation is often found within the two systems rather than in between them. The volume also points to great similarities in how environmental issues have been perceived, and how actors have worked for and against environmental action. In other words, while the economic systems looked different in many countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, the discourse and actions that were prioritized by actors often looked similar. As pointed out by Eagle Glassheim in a text on Czechoslovak environmental policy, the escalating environmental problems in Northern Czechoslovakia was not caused «primarily by neglect, censorship or isolation, but rather by an internal balance of interests willing to sacrifice environmental and human health of certain regions for economic growth». As a comparison, Hendrik Ehrhardt shows that the West German utilities that shaped policies on air pollution during the Cold War, made similar choices during the 1970s, not considering that battling air pollution was worth the cost. Later the utilities changed strategy when realizing that it was important for their public image to be «green».

In terms of topic content, this edited collection is more coherent than most (although I am, admittedly, a bit confused about the division of the chapters into the three parts of the volume). Many common threads run through the texts, allowing for interesting connections and comparisons like the one above.

Environmental governance is another such thread. In the first chapter, Laurent Coumel uses the case of water management in the Soviet Union to describe how the environment became a policy issue in the Soviet Union. The author points out that Soviet environmentalism was a by-product of rapprochement rather than competition, however, despite the development of an environmental awareness in the Soviet Union, the practical impact of this awareness on, for example, the Baïkal situation was limited. Meanwhile, the water treatment plans that were implemented by the centralized Soviet administration did influence the water waste management in Lithuania, as shown in the chapter by Anolda Cetkauskaite and Simo Laakkonen. Their foray into this topic reveals an interesting interplay between local scientists and decision-makers who were able to take advantage of the existing policies of the centralized Soviet administration to implement water treatment measures in Lithuania.

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the Italian case clearly shows that the lack of functioning environmental policies is not something particular to communist states. Wilko Graf von Hardenberg shows that Cold War policies, as well as *laissez-faire* planning and the particular patronage politics in Italy, led to a race for welfare that did not consider collective needs, including environmental concerns. In West Germany, as seen in the chapter by Scott Moranda, discussions about the future of agriculture pitted traditional ideas of German agriculture against American models of high-input agriculture, including a high degree of mechanization and use of chemical fertilizers, the latter eventually winning out. During this process, high-input farming, which would come to have severe environmental consequences, was reimagined by agronomists as a «natural» way of farming aligning with traditional German ways.

Another important thread throughout the contributions is activism, and its many faces. Over time, the fight for public health and cleaner air and water, as well as against nuclear reactors, has gathered a diverse set of actors, and sometimes rather unlikely bedfellows. Brian James Leech maps out the anti-nuclear actor protest in Montana (USA) showing that they were driven by diverse attitudes including anti-materialist concerns as well as populism and anti-corporate appeals among college students, urban dwellers, farmers, and ranchers of different political camps. These concerns had a common denominator in a critique against outside economic influences on local resource exploitation. Similar relations can be found in the anti-nuclear reactor movement in West Germany, gathering local actors of diverse backgrounds. Stephen Milder shows the correlation between this largely local activism and the peace movement. Despite the fact that the two movements started off with very different shapes, the peace movement was able to use the tools and materials from the largely local anti-nuclear reactor movements, incorporating an individual perspective and thus diversify and grow their own movement, which culminated in the 1980s.

The complex relation between environmental activism and other political movements, such as the peace movement in Milder's text, and the democratic movement in several communist regimes, is highlighted in several texts. One example is Tetiana Perga's text on the impact of Chernobyl on the environmental and the democratic movement in the Ukraine. The two were closely intertwined, since the disaster became an example of the mismanagement of the Soviet power, as well of authorities putting secrecy before human health and safety. The accident thus united the green movement and the democratic movement. In Poland, as in the Ukraine during the 1980s, environmental protest eventually was wrapped up in political protest, and connected to, for example, Solidarność. In both countries, the influence of Gorbachev's reforms was felt through an opening of a public sphere that allowed the growth of such

movements. In the German Democratic Republic, on the other hand, as Julia E. Ault shows, these reforms were openly rejected and the environmental movement could not be openly political. Despite this, the movement was able to operate within the protestant Church, which became a haven for a variety of activist groups.

In Yugoslavia, holding a special position among the countries of the Eastern bloc, environmental and system critique also coincided in the late 1980s, as shown in the chapter by Hrvoje Petrić. However, the environmental structures, both within and outside of the state structure, tended to be local to each republic, and the situation differed greatly between them, with, for example, the green movement in Slovenia seeing great success. The chapter on Yugoslavia is one of several examples from the book of cases and countries whose environmental histories are not much studied (the Lithuanian case can also be mentioned, among others). Filling such gaps of environmental history is one of the great contributions of the volume as a whole.

In the final two contributions, the policy level is lifted to the supranational, as Jacob Darwin Hamblin brings in the issue of the technical fix, a concept that seems to have many adherents on both sides of the curtain. He describes how, in the US, proposing a nuclear solution to the water problems of the Middle East, became a strategy that played into both Cold War competition, a belief in the civil use of nuclear and the need to engage pro-Israeli voters at home. Thus, the project can be seen as an opportunistic justification for political goals, rather than an environmental protection project. Such use of environmental issues to reach foreign policy goals is also the topic of Astrid Mignon Kirchhof's text on the attempts of the German Democratic Republic to gain legitimacy as a sovereign state after World War II. Environmental diplomacy was used by the German Democratic Republic both as a means to influence citizens of West Germany to become more sympathetic to the East German cause, and to normalize relations with the UN, for example by lobbying for participant status at the Stockholm Conference in 1972.

In conclusion, while the countries in the Eastern bloc have in certain instances been 'behind' the West in terms of environmental policy, and part of the reason were the politically repressive structures, under both systems real and effective environmental action has been hard to come by. As pointed out in the introduction to the volume, for national populations and governments as a whole, on both sides of the Curtain, environmental action never ranked among the top priorities during the Cold War, despite the surge of environmentalism in many countries, especially in comparison to questions of economy and security. However, we are also given examples of successful activism and policy, that may inspire our actions forward, especially if we look for a 'third way'-stance of environmental and social action, alluded to by the editors.

[1] R. Guha, *Environmentalism. A Global History*, New York, Longman, 2000.