

# The Alps and the Carpathians: Balancing Use and Protection in the Development of Two European Mountain Regions

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**Conveners:** Julia Herzberg (RCC), Martin Zückert (Collegium Carolinum)

**Presenters:** Christiane Brenner (Munich), Paul Erker (RCC), Frank Hadler (Leipzig), Ute Hasenöhrli (Erkner), Julia Herzberg (Munich), Bianca Hoenig (Basel), Roman Holec (Bratislava), Peter Jordan (Vienna), Friederike Kaiser (Alpines Museum des Deutschen Alpenvereins), Gabriela Kiliánová (Bratislava), Patrick Kupper (Zurich), Uwe Lübken (Munich), Jon Mathieu (Lucerne), Christof Mauch (RCC), Arnošt Štanzel (Munich), Martin Zückert (Collegium Carolinum)

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“Here, where Nature alone determines the rules...” the early Enlightenment philosopher Albrecht von Haller wrote in 1729 in his poem “The Alps,” expressing his fascination after a journey through the Swiss mountains. It was the German Enlightenment which first gave rise to widespread interest in and enthusiasm for the natural wonders of this region, although a distinctly Romantic idealization of its supposedly “pristine” character was already beginning to play a role at this time. However, a good 300 years would pass before this mountain region would be developed as a result of mass tourism and industrialization, in particular the use of its streams for producing hydroelectric energy. Although this enthusiasm elicited rapturous responses to the Alps at quite an early stage, it took much longer for the Carpathians to become a particular focus of interest. Even today this mountain range, while covering a much greater expanse of territory than the Alps, is overshadowed by the height of its western neighbor.

Although the relatively young field of environmental history called for a “transnational turn” years ago, studies which actually implement this approach are still few and far between. And this in spite of the fact that studies focusing on environment and infrastructure offer particularly good opportunities for using a transnational approach, since they can examine natural and cultural realms which extend far beyond political boundaries. Mountain ranges such as the Alps and Carpathians are particularly suitable for a transnational comparison. Therefore, it is all the more gratifying to see a conference dedicated to this topic. Jointly organized by three Munich institutes, namely the

Collegium Carolinum, the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, and the Alpine Museum, the conference took place on 10 and 11 October 2012 at the Alpine Museum of the Deutscher Alpenverein. The conveners were Julia Herzberg (Rachel Carson Center) and Martin Zückert (Collegium Carolinum). The conference presented not only the results of current research on the two regions, but also suggested avenues and starting points for further research.

As **MARTIN ZÜCKERT** (Munich) emphasized in his opening remarks, the conveners were concerned above all with starting a discussion about the interpretation of traditions and about how these two mountain regions are seen in relation to their backwardness and/or marginality on the one hand, and modernity on the other. At the same time, there was a particular interest in questions about the specifically communist versus capitalist paths of development, the debate about whether to protect natural areas or to exploit the landscape, resulting in “ecocide.” A particular challenge is the existing disparity in the amount of research dedicated to each of these regions—there is already a substantial quantity of literature on the Alps, but the Carpathians have received little attention by historians thus far. Furthermore, this meeting between the “senior partner” Alps and “junior partner” Carpathians also makes it possible not only to compare these two regions, but also to pose new questions regarding the development of the Alps.

In his keynote speech, **JON MATHIEU** (Luzern) discussed the implications of the Report on Mountain Areas in Europe ordered by the European Commission in 2004 as part of the eastward expansion of the European Union. This report is the most thorough survey that has been produced to date, covering the mountains of the old and new EU states as well as four additional countries. It is of particular interest to scientists not only because of the amount of data that it makes available, but especially because of how this data was gathered and interpreted. There are a number of oddities here: for example, Sweden is described as a country with alpine mountains. Mathieu pointed out the differences between geographical and historical points of view, as well as the influence of demographics and economy in determining how the mountain regions are perceived. Even though the Alps are relatively small when measured on a global scale, the term “alpine” has served as a benchmark since the nineteenth century. In the subsequent discussion, participants questioned the value of using a European frame of reference in research, as well as the concept of “belated modernity” in the mountains. After all, some progressive developments have originated in the mountains. For example, the Swiss Alps were the first place where women’s suffrage was permitted, and electric lamps were also turned on for the first time in the Alps. It is important, the participants agreed, not to consider the mountain regions in isolation, but within the context of the surrounding areas, including the neighboring flatlands.

The first panel used the examples of Slovakia and Italy to call into question the portrayal of mountain regions as peripheral areas caught between progress and resistance to change.

**MARTIN ZÜCKERT** devoted his presentation to the transformation of mountain agriculture in the Slovakian Carpathians, focusing on the promotion of a north-south route through the mountains. This route was designed to provide tourists from the northwest, particularly from Scandinavia, an alternative to travelling through Germany and Austria on their way to the Mediterranean regions. The mountain regions, which were considered impoverished areas, were to be turned into attractive, aesthetically appealing landscapes. Zückert convincingly showed the formative power of tourism and the tensions between the plans envisioned by the (national) government and local resistance. At the same time he pointed out the lack of research on the nature conservation measures implemented by socialist, state-run organizations from the 1970s onwards. The relationship between power and the environment was also part of the second part of the panel, in which **WILKO GRAF VON HARDENBERG** (Munich) discussed nature conservation in the Italian Alps as a way of distributing resources among selected social groups—conservation that was part of an overall modernization process and not only a reaction to it. He concentrated on the ramifications of fascist policies regarding the environment and natural resources, which had both “modern” and “unmodern” characteristics. Using the example of the national park Gran Paradiso, already established in 1922, he showed how hunting and grazing rights are a constantly recurring point of conflict in the Alps. **FRANK HADLER** (Leipzig) suggested in his comments on both papers that more attention should be given to “what lies below,” that is, the neighboring flatlands and valleys, in the analysis of the mountain regions, and he argued for a greater contextualization of the developments, both in respect to their earlier history as well as putting them in a global and transnational perspective. The role of experts in the process of change, which he recommended as a worthwhile and thus far neglected topic of research, was also taken up in the discussion. Alternative points of view from experts, for example the discussion in dissident circles, could also offer further insight into the processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The second panel was dedicated to national parks as sites of conservation and representation. The focus of the first presentation was “rational nature conservation” in the Carpathians, which **BIANCA HOENIG** (Basel) analyzed based on the structures and participants in nature conservation in the High Tatras since 1945. She cogently illuminated continuities and changes in the area along the Polish-Slovakian border, in which those involved were required to make decisions with far-reaching consequences for the various interests of socialist industrialization, agriculture, and tourist-based nature conservation. Particularly instructive were her remarks on the Polish Tatra activists, who have a long tradition of nature conservation and whose contribution to the implementation of the socialist nature conservation policy has been given less attention than it deserves. **PATRICK KUPPER** (Zurich) provided a contrast to the developments in the Carpathians with his presentation about transalpine national parks. He emphasized the difficulty of

applying the contextualization that is so often called for in actual practice. Thus it is often hard to clearly delineate when the conservation efforts really began. Similarly, the cartographical data can often be interpreted in multiple ways, since the boundaries of most of the parks have changed over the course of time. In addition, the supposedly unambiguous geographical details hide the fact that the boundaries of these spaces are ecologically, socially, and mentally much less sharply defined. In her comments, **GABRIELA KILIÁNOVÁ** (Bratislava) called for integrating extant research—above all early ethnological studies created before the collapse of the socialist system—into the analysis of the Carpathians. She recognized, however, that the publication of these materials in Eastern European languages presents a barrier for Western researchers. She also advocated “modern” discourses which allow for opposing narratives in order to reflect the ambivalent, polyphonic and hybrid character of this era. This suggestion stimulated further discussion on questions of whether the proposed “socialist modernity” was really an “ambivalent modernity” or whether it would be more accurate to talk about the ambivalence of a “socialist reality.”

The last panel of the conference discussed the creation of dams and river regulation and the consequences in both mountain regions. **ARNOŠT ŠTANZEL** (Munich) showed how the Slovakian Orava region was “reinvented” multiple times in the course of just a few decades. As a result of the creation of the Orava Dam and reservoir in the 1950s and 1960s, the region developed from an insignificant, impoverished periphery into a booming industrial region, which then was increasingly transformed into a vacation paradise. While there is little record of protests against the Orava Dam, in Bavaria conflicts over “energy landscapes” became increasingly intense in the 1970s, as **UTE HASENÖHRL** (Erkner) explained in the following presentation. She showed the constellations of actors and the various conflicting interests regarding the use of hydroelectric power—from advocates of “white coal” to opponents of “exploitation of natural resources”—in the Bavarian Alps in the post-war era. While there were clear differences among the various groups supporting the hydroelectric projects and their methods changed over time, the arguments of the opposition remained very constant and their chances of successfully hindering the projects increased. **PETER JORDAN** (Vienna) ventured to offer a comparison of socialist and Western approaches to nature conservation in his comments on the papers. Although such attempts at systemization must, of course, remain broad generalizations, the following discussion showed that there were a number of points of comparison. The various forms of modernization remained a key theme here as well. In order to better understand modernization, the participants concluded, the tension between cooperation and demarcation in transnational processes must be examined much more intensively.

The conference closed with remarks by **JULIA HERZBERG** (Munich) and **ROMAN HOLEC** (Bratislava) that summarized many of the topics already discussed. Herzberg pointed out how historians of the Carpathians can benefit from using the Alps as a comparison. The conference brought to light the strong similarities in the history of ideas in eastern and western Europe, even if the statements that were made about the shaping, transformation, and risks of these regions were at times very different. Not all efforts at development in the Carpathians should be understood as a reflection of socialist ideals; rather, here, too, they were subject to the attitudes of “high modernism.” Not only the regional and local deep drilling—a reference to the continuities with the nineteenth century—but also a consideration of global connections make it possible to question the extant narrative of the homogeneity of the Eastern Bloc and the impact of the Iron Curtain. However, it is also necessary to assess whether classical comparative methods are most suitable, or whether focusing on the history of interrelatedness might offer more instructive insights for understanding modernity. In addition, Herzberg challenged the term “development,” which she argued was too oriented towards the human side of the story, and suggested that it is just as meaningful to consider the interaction between environment and society by using nature as a starting point, asking how the material qualities of the mountains have affected society and government. Holec continued this line of thought by once again examining the tension between conservation and use of nature, with a particular emphasis on the role of mass tourism. He also looked again at the national and political instrumentalization of mountain conservation. Although nature doesn’t recognize any boundaries, since 1918 political boundaries have repeatedly led to significant problems for transnational cooperation. Western historiography still has a significant lead on this topic, and historians from Eastern Europe will catch up only through extensive discussion and exchange of ideas. The conference participants endorsed this: A mountain region’s importance for national identity should not be distorted by focusing too much on transnational aspects, however, efforts to better understand the interrelatedness of these regions also offers chances for sharpening awareness of national differences.

The conference was a successful experiment in more than one way—both in regard to the topic selected as well as the composition of the panel. The balanced selection of examples was particularly praiseworthy, for it brought together scholars from East and West not only to discuss the management of use and protection in mountain regions, but also to explore the opportunities and limitations of an East-West comparison.

— Melanie Arndt