

Humans and Environment:
"Environmental History as Eastern European Regional History from Industrialization to Post-Socialism"

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: Collegium Carolinum, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC)

Conveners: Horst Förster (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen), Martin Zückert (Collegium Carolinum), Julia Herzberg (RCC)

Participants: Martin Schulze-Wessel (LMU Munich), Julia Herzberg (RCC), Martin Zückert (LMU Munich), Anost Stanzel (LMU Munich), Jira Janáč (Charles University in Prague), Ivan Bičík (Charles University in Prague), Horst Förster (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen), Eva-Maria Stolberg (University of Duisburg-Essen), Andrea Kiss (Jozsef Attila University Szeged), Nicholas Orsillo (Masaryk University, Brno), Stefan Dorondel (RCC / Francisc I. Rainer Institute of Anthropology Bucharest), Michael Heinz (University of Rostock), Erzsébet Magyar (Eötvös Loránd University), Eva Chodějovská (The Institute of History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, v.v.i.), Frank Uekoetter (RCC /Deutsches Museum), Jana Piňosová (University of Bonn), Herman Behrens (Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences), Martin Pelc (Silesian University, Opava), Bianca Hoenig (LMU Munich)

In light of climate change, none other than Dipesh Chakrabarty announced that one of the most important tasks of a historian is to "break through the wall separating human history and natural history." If one accepts this statement, then the conference "Humans and Environment: Environmental History as Eastern European Regional History from Industrialization to Post-Socialism," organized by the Collegium Carolinum in cooperation with the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society and the European Society for Environmental History, touched upon a hot topic in international history. Where else but at the interface of human and natural history could one place the increasingly prominent sub-discipline "environmental history?"

After an introduction by **Martin Schulze-Wessel** (LMU Munich), the first chair of the Collegium Carolinum, the conference's first panel, "Environmental and Infrastructural History of Eastern Europe," commenced. **Julia Herzberg** (RCC), one of the conference's conveners, addressed possible objectives of environmental history in her presentation entitled "Eastern Europe in View: Envi-

ronmental History between Global and Regional History.” Environmental history could deal with “human actions and adaptation,” cultural history, or the history of ideas. The discipline could address political history, and, by extension, the history of infrastructures. In the last decade, environmental history research on Eastern European and general history has been particularly impressive. Since neither pollution nor natural disasters could be held back at national borders, it is important to critically assess national and regional histories and to simultaneously consider global or transnational approaches. While environmental history is “inherently transnational,” it is also beneficial to consider national approaches, such as in the examination of winter and frost as “places of memory” in Russia. Natural spaces are also socio-spatial units: East-Central Europe is not a natural space, and therefore is a prime example for transnational environmental history. Here, it is important to ask if East-Central Europe as such can constitute a historical region. Previous conceptions of space, such as those of Klaus Zernack or Jenő Szűcs, perceived East-Central Europe as a structural space. But was East-Central Europe also an ecological community, similar and yet somehow different from West, which according to Frank Uekoetter, ended at the borders of the Iron Curtain? According to Julia Herzberg, this difficult question can be answered with “yes” in the context of the short twentieth century.

Martin Zückert (LMU Munich), also one of the conference’s conveners, explored the “system requirements for a modern society” (Dirk van Laak) in his presentation entitled “Infrastructures and Environment: The Consequences of State Development Politics in East-Central Europe.” According to Zückert, infrastructures freed everyday life of elementary problems related to securing one’s livelihood, but, on the other hand, led to new dependencies, and not in the least to new social hierarchies. Infrastructures, therefore, were often means of securing power, which is not to say that infrastructure construction and use always coincided with the political situation in a country. Next to their intended uses, both political and infrastructural innovations had unintended consequences for humans and the environment that can be seen in the example of resource scarcity. All this makes studying the history of infrastructure and environment in a region like East-Central Europe rewarding, though the study of political upheaval deserves special attention: in the era of state socialism, it is important to ask if East-Central Europe acted significantly differently from Western Europe in terms of infrastructure and treatment of its intended and unintended consequences.

The second panel addressed “Infrastructural Development and its Consequences.” In his presentation entitled “Dam-Building Projects in the Slovak Carpathians: On the ‘New Man’ through ‘White Coal,’” **Anost Stanzel** (LMU Munich) discussed early research findings of his dissertation project on dam-building and river-straightening projects in the Slovak and Romanian Carpathians between 1948 and 1989. Dam-building projects are “indicators” for the relationship between humans and

nature, since they symbolize “human applications of nature.” The subjugation of nature by man can also be studied in terms of state socialism, which attempted to use such projects as means of legitimization. Using articles from the communist daily *Rudé Právo*, Stanzel demonstrated how relevant texts from the 1950s to the 1970s assumed an increasingly sober tone. In later stages of state socialism, “hope for salvation” was no longer pinned on dam projects.

Occasionally, the history of large infrastructure projects reflects the history of an entire country. One such case are the repeated attempts in the course of the twentieth century to not only interconnect the river systems of the Elbe, Oder, and Danube within Czech territory, but also to connect them to three different oceans. This topic was examined by **Jira Janáč** (Charles University in Prague). While parts of this canal system were actually well built, on the whole, the project remained a “white elephant.” Among other reasons, the failure can be explained by water scarcity at the vertex of the Oder and the Danube at the Moravian Gate, and by the constantly recurring shortage of funding for the project. Another decisive factor in the failure of this project was the conflict of interest in its use: the specific nature of the waterway was optimal for ships, irrigation, drinking water, sewage treatment, water power as an energy source, and later for ecological uses. For these reasons, the history of the Danube-Elbe-Oder canal project can be understood as the history of the relationship between humans and the environment in East-Central Europe.

The third panel, entitled “Transformation and Perception of Landscapes,” was the first to feature representative from disciplines other than history. In his presentation entitled “Long-term Land-use Changes: A Case Study of the Czech Lands, 1845-2000,” geographer **Ivan Bičík** (Charles University in Prague) introduced a database (www.lucc.ic.cz) that is divided into eight categories of land use, with 8,903 spatial units (each an average of 800 hectares), and four time periods (1845, 1948, 1990, and 2000). An interesting observation that can be drawn from this project is that the Bohemian lands lost close to twenty percent of their original farmland between 1848 and 2000. The size of cultivated surface area increased two-hundred and three-hundred percent in 1948 alone, although roughly 1,200 settlements were abandoned as a result of the expulsion of the Moravian and Bohemian Germans in the same time period.

Horst Förster (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen), also a geographer and the third co-coordinator of the conference, gave a presentation entitled “Space Evaluation and Cultural Landscape Transformation: The Example of North Bohemia.” The space presented by Förster was among the most ecologically destroyed regions in Europe. The character of the originally highly productive farmland at the foot of the Erzgebirge was entirely transformed when some 7.5 billion tons of lignite (also known as brown coal) was discovered underneath its surface. In the nineteenth cen-

tury, open-cast mining stations were erected. Four remain today. These stations are huge: they range from twelve to sixteen square kilometers and reach up to four hundred meters below the original surface level. Using the example of North Bohemia, one can demonstrate, according to Förster, how the political, economical, and social evaluation of space changed in the course of time: While for some time the region was perceived as the height of prosperity and progress, today's society is attempting to "eliminate" the ecological destruction by filling or flooding the area with water; the latter is also a problem due to the rise in the water level.

Eva-Maria Stolberg's (University of Duisburg-Essen) presentation entitled "O biegu rzek: Between the Oder and Weichsel; Environment and Being Foreign as a Construct of German-Polish National Narratives" drew upon Lucien Febvres idea of "national river gods" or ghosts. The unique valley landscape formed by the Oder and Weichsel had been the destination of both German and Polish settlers until the nineteenth century. Since the late nineteenth century, the Oder and Weichsel have become symbols of national unity and demarcation. The pre-national transfer became a national border landscape.

In her presentation entitled "A Complex Long-term Analysis of Land Use and Environmental Changes in Former Vine-growing Areas: The Example of North Hungary," **Andrea Kiss** (Jozsef Attila University Szeged) discussed a geographical micro-study that also made use of historical research methods. The elaborate methodology that Kiss used in the evaluation of maps made her doubt the way historians had treated military maps without reservations. According to Kiss, the biggest landscape changes have occurred in the regions surrounding the Danube-bend and Nagymaros, all formerly dominated by viticulture. In the twentieth century, these areas were subject to reforestation schemes and the construction of weekend homes.

The fourth panel dealt with "Collectivization, Agricultural Modernization, and Its Effects." In his presentation, **Nicholas Orsillo** (Masaryk University, Brno) introduced his oral history project entitled "The Socioeconomic Factors behind Agricultural Land Drainages: Environmental Impacts in the Communist-Era Czech Lands." While collectivization schemes in the fifties aimed above all to control the agricultural sector, policies enforced in the sixties concentrated on increasing production. An important means towards intensification and amelioration was land drainage. The problematic economic instruments used to control the land, however, led to reduced economic efficiency and increasingly worsening environmental pollution.

Stefan Dorondel (RCC / Francisc I. Rainer Institute of Anthropology Bucharest) also addressed the unintended consequences of state interference in landscape management. In his presentation

entitled “Privatizing the Post-Socialist State: Changes in the Landscape in Rural Romania,” which was based on nine months of ethnological field research, Dorondel offered a fascinating, yet also unsettling picture of rural life in postsocialist Walachia. The implementation of postsocialist land reforms ran parallel to the decentralization of the state and the transfer of administrative authority to the local level. This transfer bestowed immense power on the local elites, and encouraged patron-client relations. For this reason, mayors, municipal councils, and other members of the local elites profited both economically and politically from postsocialist forest and property restitution. The consequences for land management were, on one hand, the fragmentation of land parcels and the associated extensification, and on the other hand the intensification of other land uses with the simultaneous expansion of areas dense with houses and traffic routes and increased and often illegal logging in forests—the latter largely carried out by members of the poorest villagers in the village with the permission of the local elite. According to Dorondel, land fragmentation and extensification as a consequence of decollectivization was not a problem for those villagers who found jobs in the flourishing industry and practiced part-time farming on the side.

Dorondel’s presentation on Walachia was followed by **Michael Heinz’s** (University of Rostock) paper on rural Mecklenburg and agriculture in the GDR. Heinz discussed the concentration and specialization processes of the 1960s, which aimed at creating industrial-intensive agriculture, and those of the 1970s, which concentrated on the administrative and operational division of animal and plant products. This scheme not only found little economic success and was carried out against the will of most collective farmers, it also demonstrated little consideration for the environment. Contaminated fertilizer, for example, caused the nitrate concentration of drinking water to increase five-fold between 1960 and 1980. Measures aimed at correcting environmental damages in the 1980s remained half-hearted. Only plans for the urbanization of rural life, through which the collective farmers would become part of the “proletarian” class, were abandoned as the SED was unable to stop the rural exodus to the cities.

The fifth panel, entitled “Urban Landscape in Flux,” was composed of two very different presentations. **Erzsébet Magyar’s** (Eötvös Loránd University) presentation entitled “The Urban Environment of Vienna, Budapest, and Prague in the Nineteenth Century,” was positioned at the interface of art, culture, and environmental history. Therein, Magyar introduced her research on the history of city parks as part of a comparative culture and environmental history of the Habsburg Monarchy. **Eva Chodějovská’s** (The Institute of History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, v.v.i.) presentation on “Changes in the Landscape of Prague’s Suburbs during the Socialist and Post-Socialist Period” provided a rather impressionistic depiction of Prague’s urban sprawl, or “ciganska kaše” (Gypsy mush) as the phenomenon is often referred to in politically-incorrect Czech. She ob-

served that Prague's suburbs, outskirts, and the surrounding townships are growing unchecked. Traffic routes and often Soviet-style block housing buildings and industrial plants from the post-socialist era stand in stark contrast to the aesthetics of the inner city.

The sixth panel was dedicated to "Nature Conservation and the Environmental Movement." **Frank Uekoetter** (RCC /Deutsches Museum) gave a presentation entitled "Environmentalism—Eastern European Style: Some Introductory Remarks." Since the early 1900s, all countries that considered themselves to be a part of the "West" arrived at the consensus that a certain degree of nature conservation measures were necessary: Therefore, we cannot speak of a specific "style" of nature conservation in East-Central Europe. This changed in the socialist period. "Socialist" specificities in the context of nature conservation include an early institutionalization of environmental concerns (environmental protection laws were passed as early as 1954 in the GDR, where the FRG only passed relevant laws in 1976; in the GDR, a ministry for environmental conservation and water management was created in 1976, where the FRG established its own ministry for the environment as late as 1986). If one included not only pollution, but also the protection of the wilderness in the East-West comparison, the "East" performed markedly better. Finally, the history of the ecology movement throughout Eastern Europe followed an entirely different path than its counterpart west of the Iron Curtain, with the region's "Green Dissidents" movement and related, sometimes trans-national institutions within and outside the socialist political systems.

In her presentation, **Jana Piňosová** (University of Bonn) examined the "Environmental Movement in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1938." During this time, environmentalist groups assumed the role previously played by the Association of Groups for the Beautification and Home Protection, established in 1904. However, no environmental protection law was passed in the period of the First Republic.

The sixth panel was concluded with a lecture given by **Herman Behrens** (Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences), in which he explored the environmental movement in the GDR. After the establishment of the GDR, nature protection and local history groups were categorized as "Nature and Home Friends" and later, in 1980, as the "Society for Nature and Environment" under the umbrella of the GDR's Culture Association. Clerical and autonomous environmental groups were established at the end of the seventies: they were the expression of the Culture Association's failure to unite its individual associations as well the intensification of environmental problems after 1967 and 1973. The Secrecy Decree of 1982, which mandated that information regarding environmental issues be kept under wraps, led to exasperation and further protests. By 1985/1989, the GDR's fifty to forty environmental groups had roughly 550 to 850 members. In 1987, a Culture Association-led Industrial Union for City Ecology counted approximately 7,000 members. Helped by

the Ministry for State Security's unofficial collaborators, state control within the Culture Association was very intense. The success of environmental groups in the Culture Association was limited to the creation of nature reserves, as they were powerless against the agriculture, fish, and forestry industries as well mining and industry projects. Despite their relative impotence, environmental groups were successful in calling attention to environmental problems and arousing constant conflicts on the subject. Church groups were also unable to improve the environmental situation in the GDR, though they played an important large role in the peaceful revolution

The seventh and last panel examined "Nature and Tourism." In the absence of author **Martin Pelc** (Silesian University, Opava), the study "'The Prevailing Landscape, to Preserve the Existing Landscape, to only Beautify It...': The Schizophrenia of the Tourist Project, its Effects and Outlets" was examined. The study uses the example of the Bohemian lands between 1880 and 1930 to explore the contradiction between two typical, incompatible demands of early tourist associations, namely the preservation and beautification of nature and landscapes. In the last presentation of the conference, "Protection against Humans, Protection for Humans?: The Foundation of the Tatra National Park, 1949," **Bianca Hoenig** (LMU Munich) showed how, ironically, an American concept was realized in less than a year after the Soviet seizure of power—the Soviets emphasized both the importance of protecting nature from humans and our need for relaxation. By 1960, over one million tourists had visited the small mountain range in Slovakia.

Environmental history is inherently interdisciplinary, as demonstrated by this conference that in its best moments became an expression of "absolute East-Central European environmental history." As this new historical sub-discipline becomes increasingly institutionalized, a certain professionalization of this research field will simultaneously increase. This is not a bad thing, so long as contributions from "outside" are still accepted. Some topics, such as infrastructural development in East-Central Europe, undoubtedly belong in a conference with the main topic "Humans and the Environment," but cannot be exhausted there. All the better!

-Andreas Helmedach