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An Environmental History of Germany, 1800 to the present

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth century Germany probably was—and still is—the most industrialized country in Europe, with far reaching consequences for the environment. The project will look at these consequences starting at around 1800, the onset of industrialization. The first chapter will give a rough description of the pre-industrial situation concentrating on the scientific debates, inventions, and innovations; the impact of the enlightenment; perceptions of nature and—most importantly—its impact on everyday life.

The following chapters will describe the changes to the environment brought about by an increase in population, urbanization, and industrialization. They will look at how these changes were perceived by contemporaries, the concepts they developed to understand them, and the solutions proposed to deal with them. To understand these debates and solutions, and to place them in their contexts, the project will analyze the developments in technology and law, court rulings, the media, and the areas of policy and politics. To do so, it can draw on a wide-ranging and rich literature on the environmental history of Germany, and will pay special attention to some of its major and controversial concepts: Can we see the decades around 1800 as a fundamental turning point and by what criteria? What about the 1950s syndrome? Is this basically a descriptive term or does it have explanatory potential? What about the idea of “Heimat,” respectively “Heimatschutz,” and its conjunction with racial and national socialistic ideologies?

In addition to these traditional areas of research the project will also look at less established ones, among them the new perceptions not only of time and space, but also of nature and the environment brought about first by the railway, then by the telegraph and its new forms of communication and finally by the internet; the consequences of globalization; the different prophecies concerning nature and the environment; and the various attempts to create new, artificial natures.

As a conclusion the project will not so much make a statement about whether the state of the environment in Germany has improved or deteriorated over the last two centuries. Rather, it will try to understand which problems contemporaries perceived and why and how they reacted to them. In order to understand their behavior and debates, it is important to analyze their capacities and capabilities to act, be these scientific, political, technological, or in respect to public awareness and the role of the media. These capacities and capabilities have not only changed considerably over the last two centuries, they have also greatly increased and have become much more effective. This is of great significance, since our ability to deal with the environmental problems facing us will depend not on specific proposals or solutions, but on the general efficiency of these capacities.