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Creating a Safer Environment? Death, Mutilation, and Automobility in the United States and Germany, 1930–2000

Creating a Safer Environment? will contribute to the growing field of the environmental history of mobility. Many, if not most, studies in the subfield have focused on emissions. Relatively little attention has been paid to the most obvious consequence of traffic, deaths and injuries, from an environmental point of view. It might be that classifying such events as “accidents” made environmental historians less prone to regard them as proper objects of study. Yet, as today’s public health research correctly point out, traffic fatalities and injuries are not acts of God—as the notion of “accidents” would imply—but rather preventable health risks. Thus, traffic fatalities are categorically equivalent to tuberculosis and malaria, to name but two examples of health risks which have been studied by environmental historians. A 2004 study by the World Health Organization estimated that 1.2 million people are killed in traffic globally each year and urged drastic intervention in order to prevent these numbers from growing.

Creating a Safer Environment? aims to analyze the public debates and environmental changes associated with traffic fatalities and injuries in the United States and Germany from 1920 to 2000. During these years, hundreds of thousands of US and German residents were killed or injured while on the road. The two countries were leading producers and consumers of automobiles throughout the twentieth century. The United States was the world’s largest market for automobiles until 2009, when China took over this role, and displayed higher rates of per-capita automobility than any other nation. Germany, like most European countries, adopted mass motorization only in the 1950s and 1960s, but did so with special vigor.

With varying degrees of intensity, the problem was highlighted, ignored, or normalized in both countries. Various sets of actors informed these debates: car drivers, automotive associations, mechanical engineers, landscape architects, insurance companies, public health officials, and regulatory agencies were the most prominent ones. Despite manifold efforts to curtail the number of automotive deaths, their numbers increased drastically until the early 1970s. The peak for the United States was 56,278 road fatalities in 1972; West Germany reached its highest number of deaths, 19,193, in 1970. More Americans have died in traffic than in acts of war; the reverse is still true in Germany for obvious reasons. Still, for the two decades from 1950 to 1970, the composite number of German traffic deaths amounts to 287,277. Contemporaneous observers disagreed, often vehemently, over the causes of these deaths and ways to avoid them. I would like to suggest that such debates were about the proper role of individual movements in environments. With this project, I aim to show that the intensifying debate over traffic safety led to a conceptual and physical reordering of public spaces and of the individuals using these spaces.