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The People's Own Landscape: Nature, Tourism, & Dictatorship in East Germany by Scott Moranda

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In the decade following German unification, studies of the German Democratic Republic were strongly influenced by theories of totalitarianism, typically positing a stark contrast between an overbearing state and a beleaguered society. In more recent years, scholars of everyday life such as Paul Betts and Mary Fulbrook have criticized this binary opposition of people and power, instead emphasizing the entanglement of citizens with the communist dictatorship, even while acknowledging the regime's repressive aspects. Historian Scott Moranda adds to this discussion with *The People's Own Landscape*, effectively demonstrating that instead of bitter disagreement between ordinary citizens and the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) over land usage, there was for most of East German history a remarkable consensus between rulers and ruled that scientific and authoritarian management of nature could yield limitless economic abundance and higher standards of living. As a result, the GDR countryside "evolved into a world created (or, from some points of view, destroyed) by both authorities and consumers" (p. 6).

Moranda explores the history of GDR environmentalism through tourism and landscape planning in six chronological chapters. His study mines national and local archives for government reports, correspondence, and memoirs to reconstruct policy debates among bureaucrats, scientists, ecological activists, and ordinary citizens about how to manage East German landscapes. The book begins by situating East German attitudes towards the environment in a longer historical trajectory. Since the nineteenth century, growing numbers of Germans harbored dark fears about hunger and lack of resources, anxieties that led them to embrace statist solutions to resolve these problems of scarcity under both the Weimar democracy and Nazi dictatorship. In many ways, the East German regime fit comfortably into this longer pattern of bureaucratic management of nature, even if disagreement on specific policies for land usage were frequent.

Among the main participants in these debates were landscape architects, doctors, and scientists. Coming from this longer tradition of statist environmental management, they argued that if planned carefully, nature could be both a resource of industrial development and, through "*Erholung*" (nature tourism), a space for workers' recuperation and thus a boost to productivity. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, however, members of this "conservation bloc" fought an uphill battle; while SED officials were willing to listen to calls for a better balance between economic interests and preservation, time and again the government refused to handcuff efforts to improve material living standards. In this light, the passage of a comprehensive conservation law in 1970 to strengthen centralized planning of nature marked a surprising victory for conservationists.

Ordinary East Germans also often agreed with the SED and conservation bloc about the need for the state's scientific management of nature to create a society of abundance. Challenging historians who suggest campgrounds and weekend cabins were part of a "niche society," spaces of refuge from an overbearing regime, Moranda instead describes such sites as "hybrid spaces" reflecting both official policies as well as popular demands (p. 80). By visiting publicly maintained lakes or staying at bungalows administered by state-owned firms, citizens participated in a leisure culture shaped by government priorities. Yet in the interest of building legitimacy, by the 1960s and 1970s SED officials often acquiesced to the idea that campgrounds

and nature trails were areas for private consumer pleasures, not “productive” leisure. In brief, these sites became spaces of “common expectations (if not values), rather than as one of refuge and resistance” (p. 97).

The common ground between the SED, conservationists, and ordinary citizens began to erode in the 1970s. Conservationists, initially elated by the conservation law, grew frustrated with the SED’s continued willingness to exploit nature (and generate monstrous levels of pollution) in order to satisfy consumer demands and build legitimacy. In the 1980s, as unplanned development of the countryside for tourist use progressed, some members of the conservation bloc sought allies in oppositional environmental groups criticizing consumerism as well as authoritarianism. Simultaneously, tourists, confronted with increasing social inequalities in accessing campgrounds and vacation homes due to corruption, grew disillusioned with the SED’s failure to fulfill its promise to provide equal opportunities for leisure in the countryside. Yet instead of calls for reduced consumption, many citizens merely sought equitable access to consumer pleasures, asserting that nature was a commodity to which they were entitled.

The book makes several key contributions to scholarship on dictatorship and environmentalism. Moranda’s analysis of East Germans’ diverging paths regarding landscape management goes far in explaining how environmental activists, so important in anti-SED protests in the 1980s, could quickly lose influence during the 1989-90 revolution due to their critiques of the expanded consumerism sought by most citizens. His emphasis on the SED’s desire to respond to some popular demands also adds to a growing literature on the limits of dictatorship, while at the same time his exploration of “horizontal conflicts” between East Germans about access to nature reinforces Andrew Port’s suggestion that a key factor behind the GDR’s stability over forty years was the ability of the SED to redirect discontent away from itself and toward fellow citizens. Finally, Moranda’s efforts to link East German models of nature management to wider currents in West Germany, the United States, and the Soviet bloc shows how much conservationists in both democracies and dictatorships shared after the Second World War.

For all of the book’s strengths, its chapters can be repetitive, and the frequent use of acronyms, perhaps a necessary evil when studying the vast bureaucracies of state socialism, sometimes yields more confusion than clarity. More substantively, the core of some chapters centers on singular examples involving a few dozen people (e.g., the transformation of a hiking club, the failed efforts to create a national park, the decision of a few conservationists to join opposition groups, etc.) and while these cases are instructive, one sometimes wonders how representative they are. Finally, the book’s omission of any reference to Hans Reichelt, East German environmental minister from 1972 to 1989, is somewhat puzzling. On balance, though, *The People’s Own Landscape* is a well-written book that addresses several misconceptions about East German environmentalism. Moranda’s book succeeds in transcending its East German focus to address wider conversations in German, European, and global history.

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