Andrew S. Tompkins, review of *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* by Astrid M. Eckert (Oxford University Press, 2019) in *German History*, Volume 39, Issue 2, June 2021, Pages 330–332, https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghab008

In different forms, the 'Iron Curtain' was a constant presence throughout the first forty years of the Federal Republic of Germany's existence; its traces, physical and symbolic, remain visible even thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Precisely because 'the Iron Curtain magnified all activities and occurrences within its orbit' (p. 5), it constitutes a powerful lens for investigating German history, as Astrid Eckert demonstrates in her insightful and highly readable environmental history of West Germany's eastern borderlands.

Eckert focuses her study on the broad strip of land within the Federal Republic that bordered the GDR. These 'zonal borderlands' were constituted as a unit through efforts by very different communities to procure subsidies from the federal government by claiming to be economic victims of Cold War division. In Lower Saxony alone, regional aid to the eastern borderlands (*Zonenrandförderung*) flowed to both rural, sparsely populated Lüchow-Dannenberg (directly adjacent to the demarcation line) and urban, industrialized Braunschweig (nearly 40 km from the border). The textile industry in Hof (Franconia) lost key suppliers in Thuringia after 1945, though it also profited when manufacturers relocated from across the border. The Baltic port of Lübeck likewise lost access to canals in Mecklenburg – but only after a half-century of losing business to Hamburg. What all these places shared was neither the particular degree nor the precise cause of their economic grievances, but the ability to articulate them in a way that made a 'moral claim on the state' (p. 31).

The justifications for this regional aid programme were contradictory, flimsy, and shifted with time. As Eckert points out in her second chapter, it was hard for these borderlands to constitute both a 'depressed area' within the Federal Republic and a 'window to the West' for (absent) visitors from East Germany (p. 65). It was an even greater challenge to demonstrate how all this free money fulfilled the Basic Law's reunification mandate. The borderland aid scheme was 'pork-barrel politics' (p. 81), yet it quickly became 'politically unassailable' (p. 246) and was rendered permanent in 1971. When the Wall did finally fall, subsidies (and the businesses chasing after them) wandered from West Germany's eastern borderlands into the neighbouring space of the former GDR. As *Zonenrandförderung* was abruptly phased out in the West after 1989, it transformed into the *Aufbau Ost* reconstruction programme for the East.

The Iron Curtain's magnetism attracted not only federal funds but also throngs of tourists, as Eckert discusses in Chapter 3. Cold War border tourism began as a grassroots phenomenon – reviving interwar nationalist practices of visits to the 'bleeding border' – but it quickly grew as local residents, tourist businesses, government agencies, and border guards (on both sides) all intervened to structure, define, or (re-) direct tourist visits. Anti-communist propaganda – often supplied by local promoters or national interest groups rather than government itself – played up the dangers of visiting the front line of Cold War conflict, sometimes to the extent that tourists were ultimately disappointed to discover that that there was no literal 'Iron Curtain' (p. 95). As border visits became increasingly staged for consumption on the Western side, the GDR responded by moving the military out of sight and otherwise rendering the border as visually uninteresting as possible.

Such GDR responses contributed unintentionally to the creation of what Eckert calls 'transboundary natures' (Chapter 5): environments reshaped by the presence of the border and, in this case, the relative absence of human beings. The quality of life for flora and fauna within this 'no man's landscape' (p.

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159) varied dramatically: birds built nests in anti-vehicular ditches, but large mammals like deer perished in minefields; the GDR's border 'control strip' was poisoned with herbicides and insecticides for years, but flourished when infrastructure was moved further inland. The partial abandonment of the immediate border area facilitated the creation, after 1989, of the 'Green Belt' of tourist-friendly nature parks along the former demarcation line. It helped too that West German politicians had already drawn up plans for cross-border nature preserves as part of efforts to engage the GDR diplomatically in the 1980s. In the end though, neither the Federal Republic nor its much-vaunted environmentalism were decisive. Rather, it was last-ditch efforts by East Germany's final, freely elected government that established national parks on that state's territory in 1990, just before the state itself disappeared. It would take another 15 years before regional governments on the western side followed suit.

East Germany's overall environmental legacy was, of course, far from idyllic. Eckert ably discusses the East-West diplomacy surrounding transboundary air, water, and soil pollution in Chapter 4. She confirms the GDR's incontestably bad environmental record while simultaneously questioning triumphalist narratives about socialist 'ecocide' (p. 125) – not because severe environmental damage did not occur in the GDR, but because it neither started nor ended there. For example, salinification of the Werra River began before the First World War but exploded during the Second, when the Nazis increased the legal limit for chlorine concentration tenfold, from 250 to 2500 mg/L (!). While pollution climbed to 4000 mg/L in the late GDR, after unification it remained at the unacceptably high 'new normal' (p. 134) of 2500 mg/L. Eckert thus convincingly argues that, in environmental terms, 'the difference between socialism and capitalism was one of degree, not of substance' (p. 158).

If pollution does not stop at the border, neither does radioactivity: Eckert devotes her sixth and final chapter to the nuclear waste site that West German policymakers planned for Gorleben, only a stone's throw from the demarcation line. The decision to locate this sensitive facility so close to the GDR resulted from the convergence of top-down and bottom-up pressures: the federal government wanted to build a world-leading nuclear fuel reprocessing centre wherever it might be both geologically and politically feasible, while local administrators in Gorleben lobbied hard for any project (a Transrapid test track, a power station, whatever) that might bring jobs to one of the country's least-populated areas. Yet in the 1970s, this apparent backwater had become valued precisely as a site of supposedly untouched, natural beauty sheltered in the shadow of the 'Iron Curtain'. Nuclear energy opponents skillfully deployed such bucolic tropes – as well as the protest opportunities the border location itself presented – to mobilise the anti-nuclear movement then and for decades thereafter.

West Germany and the Iron Curtain is an ambitious re-examination of German history from its literal margins. Eckert's methodologically innovative analysis not only straddles the East-West divide but interrogates 1945 and 1989/90 as chronological caesuras. Refracted through the environmental history of these borderlands, Germany's political, social, and cultural history looks familiar but also different in illuminating ways: Cold War border pilgrimages resemble their interwar predecessors, East Germany's devastating pollution looks less like an exception than like the rule, and the apparent successes of unification are shown to be both ambiguous and highly contingent. Written with nuance, perspicacity, and subtle humour, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain* masterfully re-evaluates the history of twentieth-century Germany.

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