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The Nazis and the Environment: A Relevant Topic?

In February 1938, five years after Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party came to power, the German conservationist Wilhelm Lienenkämper published an essay on "the protection of nature from a Nazi perspective."[1] Three years earlier, the Nazi government had passed a national conservation law with great fanfare, and now, Lienenkämper thought, the time was ripe for a preliminary summary of the results. He was full of praise for the law itself and celebrated it as an achievement for the ages. For him, the conservation law was not an accidental by-product of Nazi rule but a direct expression of the "new *Weltanschauung*." Whereas the protection of nature had formerly been something "that one can choose to do or not," National Socialism now bestowed on it a new sense of urgency. As Lienenkämper enthusiastically proclaimed:

> The new ideology, and with it the national conservation law, imposes a new postulate for totality. They refuse all kinds of compromise and demand strict, literal fulfillment. . . . Time and again, we are nowadays talking about sacrifice as a key idea of our society. Those refusing the call for sacrifice are under attack, and rightly so. But when conservationists are likewise asking for sacrifice in the interest of their movement and on the basis of the law, people come up with a thousand 'ifs' and 'buts', with economic interests and special concerns; we are not always proceeding with the firmness and rigidity that we are used to in other fields. The idea of National Socialism demands totality and sacrifice. And we have to bring

[1] The term *conservation* is used here as a synonym for nature protection. Any allusion to American concepts of resource use or a juxtaposition of conservation against preservation would be misleading. The "Note on Vocabulary" at the beginning of this book provides a more comprehensive discussion of the author's choice of words.

that message time and again to those people who for some reason see the nature protection movement as a marginal and subordinate one.[2]

The protection of nature as an expression of National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, totality and sacrifice in the interest of the common good, Nazi rule as a showcase of firmness and rigidity – one does not need to know about the horrible toll of Nazi rule to think that such a quotation is shocking indeed. Thus, it should come as no surprise that quotations of this kind have created quite a stir in recent years. Some historians have published long compilations of similarly appalling quotations, suggesting that National Socialism permeated conservation thinking to the core.[3] On first glance, Lienenkämper's article seems to nourish this kind of reading. But does it?

It is interesting to note that the longer one reflects on Lienenkämper's article, the more ambiguous it appears. The trouble starts with the question of whether he was serious about his core argument: did he really think that the protection of nature was a key goal of Nazi rule? After all, there were laws and programs installed after the conservation law of 1935 that the Nazi leadership obviously took much more seriously: the Nuremberg Racial Laws of the same year that placed German Jews in a lower citizenship category, for example, or the Four Year Plan of 1936 to make the German economy ready for war. Did Lienenkämper really think that conservation could stand on a par with racial purity and rearmament on the Nazis' agenda? And what were the motives behind this article: did Lienenkämper correlate conservation and National Socialism for ideological or for tactical reasons? Given the deplorable state of conservation work that he mentioned, one could imagine that he simply tried to strengthen the conservationists' case by plundering the Nazis' ideological arsenal for anything that might be useful. Was that his true intention? And if so, how would this change our interpretation of the text?

The ambiguities become stronger when one looks at the article in a broader context. The conservationists' cause enjoyed some support among some Nazi leaders, as this book will show, but the Nazis never made the protection of nature a truly urgent part of their policy. So could one not read Lienenkämper's article as a document of desperation – the

[2] Wilhelm Lienenkämper, "Der Naturschutz vom Nationalsozialismus her gesehen," *Sauerländischer Gebirgsbote* 46 (1938): 26. All translations from German by the author.

[3] The best-known examples are the publications of Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn and Gert Gröning. The Appendix provides a more comprehensive discussion of the development and state of research.

outcry of a dedicated conservationist who saw his concern sidelined by the government? In this case, the article would not demonstrate the proximity of conservation and the Nazi state but rather the opposite: the deep *gap* separating them. Also, basing an indictment on ugly quotations inevitably brings up the question of how to deal with those people who, as far as we know, never adopted Nazi rhetoric to the extent that Lienenkämper did. This problem is by no means a marginal one: the lion's share of conservationist publications between 1933 and 1945 could be printed again today without raising eyebrows. So how do we deal with the large number of publications devoid of Nazi rhetoric? Was Lienenkämper simply one of those "Nazi hotheads" that a popular postwar myth blamed for the Nazis' atrocities?

The situation becomes even more complex if one adds a moral perspective to the general picture. The shock that many readers experience over quotations from the conservation literature of the Nazi era is certainly genuine. But what is the reason for it? The novelist Ephraim Kishon, an Israeli author with a wide readership in Germany, once expressed his displeasure over certain trends of modern art, and when others pointed him to similar trends in Nazi Germany, epitomized in the infamous exposition on "degenerate art" of 1937, he replied laconically, "I will not start smoking because Adolf Hitler hated cigarettes."[4] Would it be possible to deal with the conservationists' Nazi past in a similar vein? Nobody would consider a ban on German shepherds because a member of this species, Blondi, was Hitler's most cherished partner during the last years of his life (until he had Blondi killed by poison as a trial run for his own suicide).[5] So if the Nazis embraced conservation – and vice versa – does that constitute more than a curious but ultimately meaningless footnote of history? If one thinks of conservation as "good" and the Nazis as "bad," and any connection between both as "strange," does one not fall into a crude and naïve essentialization of "eternal good" and "universal evil"?

Publications on conservation in Nazi Germany usually ignore questions of this kind and simply take the relevance of the topic as given. But it is easy to see that such a stance is unsatisfactory in both analytical and moral terms: it implies, after all, a moral condemnation before one has clarified the terms by which to make a decision. Rushing to a verdict and

[4] See Joachim Radkau, "Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus – wo ist das Problem?," in Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekötter (eds.), *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt and New York, 2003), 41.

[5] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London, 2000), 825.

condemning every link between the conservationists and the Nazi regime may look like good political judgment on first glance, but it quickly leads to a dead end. The ambiguities of Lienenkämper's stance provide a fitting case in point: was he a true believer in the gospel of Nazi conservation or rather an opportunist trying to drape his own concerns in Nazi language? Did he represent a staunch alliance between the conservation movement and the Nazi regime or rather argue for an alliance that never materialized? Obviously, even a blunt statement like Lienenkämper's is open to a wide range of interpretations and with that a wide range of moral judgments. It would be unwise, to say the least, to blame Lienenkämper before knowing what to blame him for.

Therefore, inquiring deeper into the story's relevance does by no means undermine the general importance of the topic. Quite the contrary, it demonstrates that dealing with the topic is indeed rewarding, if not crucial, for environmentalists even more than 60 years after the Nazis' demise. In fact, it seems that the ensuing story has relevance also beyond the realms of environmental history. After all, the history of the conservation movement in Nazi Germany is part of the general history of the relationship between intellectuals and the Nazi regime. Since its birth in the late nineteenth century, intellectuals had played a pivotal role in the German conservation movement, and the dominance of university-educated people among the conservationists of the 1930s is unmistakable. On this background, this book opens a new avenue toward the history of intellectuals in Nazi Germany: it demonstrates the stunning ability of the Nazi regime to befriend intellectuals even when they were not in league with the Nazis' overarching ideology. The history of the conservation movement in Nazi Germany provides a sobering reminder of the extent to which intellectuals can be seduced.

To place the story in such a broad context, a book of this kind is well advised to start with a discussion of the general context of conservation in Nazi Germany. After all, conservation was neither an invention of the Nazis nor a German peculiarity. Like most of its European counterparts, the German conservation movement emerged in the late nineteenth century, when industrialization and urbanization led to a massive transformation of the natural environment, and conservation had become a fixture in most European countries long before the Nazis' rise to power. Conservationists were anything but immune to the nationalist sentiments permeating all European societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that left a marked imprint on the political philosophy of conservation, as this book will show for the German case. But this did

not preclude contacts and a candid exchange of ideas: it is noteworthy that these contacts, though by no means as intensive as in the current environmental movement, never actually ceased to exist and, in some cases, even ran directly counter to public sentiment. It is irritating, to mention just one example, to see a German conservationist pointing to the much-despised Polish government as a model during the Nazi era.[6] Therefore, it is important to see the German conservation movement in the international context of the interwar years: did the German movement differ from that in other countries and, if so, in what ways?

A comparison between Germany and England shows some similarity in the original motives but marked differences regarding institutional structures. In Germany, the state quickly assumed a central role in conservation policy; in England, it played a rather marginal, supportive role for decades. Founded in 1894, England's National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty became the dominant institution in the field, acquiring or purchasing nature reserves along with gardens and historical monuments. The British parliament gave support to its work with the passage of the National Trust Act of 1907, which made the Trust's acquisitions "inalienable," thus giving public legitimacy to its role as a trustee "for the benefit of the nation." A more active role of the British state was under discussion in the 1930s but did not materialize until the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949. The success of conservation in Nazi Germany thus contrasts strongly with the stalemate in the British Isles.[7] The French case likewise reveals more differences than similarities: although German conservationists were highly critical of touristic exploitation of nature from the outset, the Touring Club of France and the Alpine Club of France were among the most important early conservation organizations on the other side of the Rhine.[8] The

[6] WAA LWL Best. 702 No. 191, Provinzmittel für den Naturschutz. Memorandum of the Sauerländischer Gebirgsverein, ca. 1934. Similarly, Walther Schoenichen, *Urdeutschland. Deutschlands Naturschutzgebiete in Wort und Bild*, vol. 2 (Neudamm, 1937), 11. On the development of international conservation efforts, see Hanno Henke, "Grundzüge der geschichtlichen Entwicklung des internationalen Naturschutzes," *Natur und Landschaft* 65 (1990): 106–12; and Anna-Katharina Wöbse, "Der Schutz der Natur im Völkerbund – Anfänge einer Weltumweltpolitik," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 43 (2003): 177–90.

[7] This account of English conservation is based on Karl Ditt, "Die Anfänge der Naturschutzgesetzgebung in Deutschland und England 1935/49," in Radkau and Uekötter, *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus*, 107–43; and David Evans, *A History of Nature Conservation in Britain*, 2nd edition (London and New York, 1997).

[8] Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960–2000* (Chicago and London, 2003), 68. See also E. Cardot, *Manuel de l'Arbre* (Paris, 1907), 74; Danny Trom, "Natur und nationale Identität. Der Streit um den Schutz der

contrast with the United States is even more striking: almost a century elapsed between the designation of Yellowstone as a national park in 1872 and the creation of the first national park in Germany in 1969.[9] Moreover, there was no equivalent in Germany to the monumentalism that was the driving force behind the protection of Yellowstone and Yosemite Valley or the cult of wilderness that became so central to both American environmentalism and American nationalism.[10] To be sure, German conservationists maintained a certain fascination for American conservation, and the Nazi era in fact saw a frustrated attempt to create a number of national parks. But when Walther Schoenichen noted in his book *Urdeutschland* ("Primeval Germany") that Yellowstone National Park was thirty-four times larger than the Lüneburg Heath, one of the largest German nature reserves, and that the total acreage of all 600 German nature reserves combined did not even add up to one-third of Yellowstone, the differences between German and American conservation become plainly apparent.[11] Even a patriotic German conservationist could not help but concede that "compared with the wonders of Africa and America, we are miserably poor (*bettelarm*) in natural treasures."[12]

With Germany and Italy emerging as allies during the 1930s, the comparison between these two countries deserves special attention. The similarities and differences between Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy have attracted much interest among historians, not least because of their relevance on the background of more general theories of Nazi rule.[13] Was there a distinct fascist style of conservation? Some Italian conservation

'Natur' um die Jahrhundertwende in Deutschland und Frankreich," in Etienne François, Hannes Siegrist, and Jakob Vogel (eds.), *Nation und Emotion. Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich* (Göttingen, 1995), 147–67.

[9] See Hans-Dietmar Koeppel and Walter Mrass, "Natur- und Nationalparke," in Gerhard Olschowy (ed.), *Natur- und Umweltschutz in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Hamburg and Berlin, 1978), 810.

[10] See Alfred Runte, *National Parks. The American Experience*, 3rd edition (Lincoln, Nebr., 1997); and Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th edition (New Haven, Conn., and London, 2001).

[11] Walther Schoenichen, *Urdeutschland. Deutschlands Naturschutzgebiete in Wort und Bild*, vol. 1 (Neudamm, 1935), 5n. For a more extensive comparison among Germany, England, and the United States, see Karl Ditt, "Naturschutz zwischen Zivilisationskritik, Tourismusförderung und Umweltschutz. USA, England und Deutschland 1860–1970," Matthias Frese and Michael Prinz (eds.), *Politische Zäsuren und gesellschaftlicher Wandel im 20. Jahrhundert. Regionale und vergleichende Perspektiven* (Paderborn, 1996), 499–533.

[12] Hans Stadler, "Landschaftsschutz in Franken," *Blätter für Naturschutz und Naturpflege* 18 (1935): 45.

[13] The classic study in this regard is Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism: Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism* (London, 1965). For a stimulating recent comparison

efforts look strikingly similar to German approaches on first glance. Mussolini supported the planting of forests to make the climate cooler and embolden the Italian warrior spirit, thus adhering to the same parallelism between landscapes and national characters that characterized much of the German conservation literature.[14] During the famed draining of the Pontine Marshes in the 1930s, Mussolini set aside some 8,000 acres for a nature reserve over the objections of his minister of agriculture, thus creating Circeo National Park, Italy's third, in 1934. However, on second glance, the differences between Germany and Italy appear more significant than the similarities. Hitler never engaged in conservation efforts as prominently as Mussolini, leaving the topic mostly to subordinates such as Hermann Göring, Fritz Todt, and Heinrich Himmler. More significantly, the general impression of conservation in fascist Italy is one of gradual decline, whereas the German conservation movement clearly thrived during the Nazi era.[15] In fact, even Circeo National Park does not provide a good example of fascist Italy's commitment to the environment if one takes a closer look: in his environmental history of Italy, Antonio Cederna speaks of a nature reserve "born dead."[16] And with doubts persisting generally about the similarities between Italian fascism and Nazism, it seems that the potential of this line of inquiry is rather limited.[17]

While the fascist school of Nazi interpretation has declined in recent years, the theory of totalitarianism experienced a boom, in large measure because of the collapse of the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. However, a comparison between Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia quickly demonstrates the limits of such an approach in this context. German conservation worked in public, and with few exceptions, conservationists did not experience prosecution, or even fear it to a significant extent, whereas in the Soviet Union, conservationists laid low in the 1930s so as not to

between Germany and Italy, see Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen SA* (Cologne, 2002).

[14] John R. McNeill, *Something New under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century* (London, 2001), 329.

[15] See James Sievert, *The Origins of Nature Conservation in Italy* (Bern, 2000), esp. pp. 199–214.

[16] Antonio Cederna, *La Distruzione della Natura in Italia* (Torino, 1975), 196. Conditions in the park were so bad that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature considered deleting it from its list of national parks (*ibid*., 200).

[17] See Renzo de Felice, *Die Deutungen des Faschismus* (Göttingen and Zürich, 1980), esp. p. 255; and Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Zeitgeschichtliche Kontroversen. Um Faschismus, Totalitarismus, Demokratie* (Munich and Zürich, 1984), 13–33. Even the recent synthesis by Michael Mann cannot help but acknowledge a number of important differences between Italian fascism and German Nazism: Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge, 2004), 360–2.

appear as an autonomous, and hence potentially dangerous, group. Aesthetic and cultural motives played a strong role in German conservation from the outset, whereas Russian conservation had been closely aligned with science since tsarist times. In Germany, conservation enjoyed, at least temporarily, the favor of some of the most powerful Nazis, whereas in the Soviet Union, the conservationists generally sought to escape Stalin's attention and actually succeeded in doing so until 1951, when a decree dissolved two-thirds of the country's nature reserves and reduced the total acreage under protection by almost 90 percent.[18] As David Blackbourn quipped in his contribution to the 2002 Berlin conference, "A conference on conservation and Stalinism would certainly be much shorter than this one."[19] It is too early to make a final assessment of the contrast between Germany and the Soviet Union; after all, the environmental history of socialism is only starting to be written.[20] But with the current state of research, it seems that a typical pattern of conservation work in totalitarian states is nowhere in sight.

For several decades, the school of totalitarianism has had a powerful rival in German historiography in the polycentric school of Nazi interpretation. Whereas the totalitarian model assumes the dictator's dominance in decision-making, the polycentric model stresses the multitude of institutions and interest groups competing with each other. In its earliest formulation, this line of reasoning goes back to Franz Neumann's study of the Nazi state written during World War II. "The ruling class of National Socialist Germany is far from homogeneous. There are as many interests as there are groups," Neumann wrote.[21] Rather than seeing the Nazi regime as a monolithic bloc with strict top-down processes, where the Führer's will was diligently carried out by myriads of underlings, the polycentric approach stresses the administrative chaos in Nazi Germany and the rivalry among different institutions. An extensive

[18] This description of Soviet conservation is based on Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachëv* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999); and Douglas R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000).

[19] David Blackbourn, "'Die Natur als historisch zu etablieren.' Natur, Heimat und Landschaft in der modernen deutschen Geschichte," in Radkau and Uekötter, *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus*, 71.

[20] For some of the most recent contributions, see Klaus Gestwa, "Ökologischer Notstand und sozialer Protest. Der umwelthistorische Blick auf die Reformunfähigkeit und den Zerfall der Sowjetunion," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 43 (2003): 349–83; and Alla Bolotova, "Colonization of Nature in the Soviet Union. State Ideology, Public Discourse, and the Experience of Geologists," *Historical Social Research* 29, 3 (2004): 104–23.

[21] Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933–1944* (New York, 1963 [first edition 1942]), 396.

literature has shown that there was an enormous amount of infighting among Nazi leaders, with Hitler routinely suspending these disputes instead of resolving them, and that coordination between bureaucracies was notoriously weak, ultimately culminating in what Hans Mommsen has called "an unparalleled institutional anarchy."[22] From this background, Hitler emerges not as an omnipotent dictator but rather as a supreme authority that often evaded clear decisions and even refrained from issuing general guidelines. Hitler could decide what he wanted to decide, but he left much room for initiatives from the second tier of Nazi leaders, provided that these could somehow claim to adhere to the spirit of the Third Reich.

The history of conservation in Nazi Germany provides a showcase of this institutional anarchy, for the inconsistency of the Nazis' environmental policy is plainly apparent. Countless books and articles explained how Germany's strength hinged on its rootedness in the land, all while the intensification of agricultural production and the hasty buildup of industry in preparation for war were changing the face of the beloved *Heimat*. The Nazis passed the national conservation law of 1935, one of the best laws of its time, and then watched while many agencies and institutions ignored its provisions. Fritz Todt, the head of Autobahn construction and supreme engineer of Nazi Germany, hired a number of "Landscape Advocates" (*Landschaftsanwälte*) to assure that the construction of the Autobahn went on in accordance with the demands of the German landscape, but his planners routinely ignored the Advocates' advice. In fact, the conservation movement itself became more and more fragmented, and rivalries among conservationists flourished to such an extent that fights between fellow conservationists sometimes seemed to be more important than the fight for the protection of nature. At the same time, Nazi leaders showed little inclination to advance a more consistent policy. Hermann Göring, the semiofficial "second man" in the Nazi state, was instrumental in the passage of the 1935 national conservation law, but his work

[22] Hans Mommsen, "Nationalsozialismus," *Sowjetsystem und demokratische Gesellschaft. Eine vergleichende Enzyklopädie*, vol. 4 (Freiburg, 1971), col. 702. For some of the studies that have shaped this picture, see Martin Broszat, *Der Staat Hitlers. Grundlegung und Entwicklung seiner inneren Verfassung* (Munich, 1969); Peter Hüttenberger, "Nationalsozialistische Polykratie," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 2 (1976): 417–42; and Dieter Rebentisch, *Führerstaat und Verwaltung im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Verfassungsentwicklung und Verwaltungspolitik 1939–1945* (Stuttgart, 1989). See also Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (eds.), *The "Führer State": Myth and Reality. Studies on the Structure and Politics of the Third Reich* (Stuttgart, 1981), for a pointed discussion on the character of Nazi rule.

as Germany's supreme forester and as chief of the Four Year Plan ran strongly against conservation interests. Hitler showed even less interest in conservation issues, and his sporadic initiatives bordered on the comical. A brochure of 1941, entitled "The Führer Wants Our Hedgerows Protected," demonstrated the conservationists' gratitude for what was, in all likelihood, an offhand remark that some paladins had transformed into an official decree, but it also showed something else: it inadvertently revealed Hitler's lack of support for other, more important, conservation goals.[23]

It would be wrong to conceive of the totalitarian and the polycentric approaches as fundamentally at odds with each other. It is impossible to understand some aspects of the following story without referral to the totalitarian character of Nazi rule. The Nazi regime reacted allergically to anything that resembled public protest or even a systematic campaign for a certain natural treasure, and it cared little about the general spirit of the protest. Even Ludwig Finckh, one of the most aggressive right-wing ideologists within the entire conservation community, was monitored by the Gestapo during his campaign to save the scenic Hohenstoffeln Mountain from mining interests. The conservation movement also lost several of its members, especially those who were Jewish or deemed Jewish according to the Nazis' race-based definition, and the social democratic *Naturfreunde* tourist association. But other than that, the totalitarian character of Nazi rule was of little importance for the conservation community, and debates among the conservationists were characterized by a surprisingly large degree of freedom of expression. The reason is simple: it was difficult, if not impossible, to deduce an authoritative conservation ethic from the key pillars of Nazi ideology. If we see anti-Semitism and the quest for *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe as the two fundamentals of Hitler's political ethos, as Eberhard Jäckel has argued in a seminal monograph, it is easy to see that deducing clear "dos" and "don'ts" for the conservation community was next to impossible.[24] Since its inception in the late nineteenth century, the German conservation movement had blamed industrialization and urbanization for the destruction of nature, and there was no way to shift the blame to a small band of Jewish conspirators. To be sure, this

[23] GLAK Abt. 235 no. 47680, Der Führer hält seine schützende Hand über unsere Hecken. Hans Schwenkel, Reichsbund für Vogelschutz. For the original decree of the German Peasant Leader (*Reichsbauernführer*) of January 23, 1940, see WAA LWL Best. 702 no. 191, Dienstnachrichten des Reichsnährstandes no. 7 of February 10, 1940, edition B.

[24] See Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitlers Weltanschauung: A Blueprint for Power* (Middletown, Conn., 1972).