Introduction

When Monika Maron published *Flight of Ashes* in 1981, she shocked readers with stark images of Bitterfeld, one of Europe’s most polluted cities in the heart of the East German Chemical Triangle. Considered the first book about environmental degradation in East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR), Maron had to publish the novel abroad in West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany, FRG). Maron exposed the environmental devastation of Soviet-style economies: “And these fumes could serve as road signs. Please go straight ahead to the ammonia, then turn left at the nitric acid. When you feel a stabbing pain in your throat and bronchial tubes, turn around and call a doctor, that was sulfur dioxide.”

Maron’s work not only graphically portrays the pollution but also illustrates the GDR’s unique position between eastern and western Europe during the Cold War. A West German press published the novel for a West German audience, revealing the conditions in Bitterfeld as well as conveying the uncomfortable feeling of constant secret police, or Stasi, surveillance. Moreover, East Germans clamored to have copies of the book smuggled into the GDR, underscoring the connection between the two Germanys. East German environmental issues stemmed from a distinctive domestic situation. Nevertheless, they had impacts on environments, pollution, politics, and social movements beyond the GDR’s borders, just as the GDR was influenced by forces abroad.

The GDR was the product of the Cold War in Europe, but from the beginning, the small central European state held practical and symbolic meaning disproportionate to its size. The communist dictatorship, founded amid heightening US–Soviet tensions in 1949, was hived off from West Germany and incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence.

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With German lands east of the Oder–Neisse Line ceded to Poland after the World War II, the GDR was a strange fragment in the east tied to the “other Germany” through national and historical connections. Within the Soviet bloc, the GDR was also the most industrialized state outside of the Soviet Union and proudly proclaimed the largest per capita income of all communist states in the Cold War. The ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) touted the GDR as a “display window” of socialism to the west and a model for other Soviet bloc states, establishing the country as an important pivot between east and west in central Europe. The GDR’s accomplishments, however, came at the expense of the physical environment, public health, and quality of life as pollution from East German industries, such as chemicals, plastics, and coalmining, wrecked the air, water, and soil.

_Saving Nature_ argues that the GDR’s engagement with nature reconfigures our understanding of environmentalism in postwar Europe, situating it behind and across the Iron Curtain. The GDR was inevitably entangled with environments, pollution, movements, economies, policies, and diplomacy that transcended its seemingly impenetrable borders. Despite obvious environmental failures later in the GDR’s existence, the communist dictatorship embraced environmental protection at home and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. The SED contended that only capitalism exploited both people and nature. Over time, the degradation became a security risk.

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when regulation failed to reduce the pollution. Frustrated with official inaction, various structures and groups in the Protestant Church, which was the only semi-independent institution in the GDR, unmasked the weaknesses of communist responses. East German contact with media, information, and activists outside of the GDR – especially in the FRG and the People’s Republic of Poland – further added to the SED’s sense of fear and situates the pollution crisis in a larger context. Shared physical environments and concerns on the part of both states and individuals ensured the GDR’s responses had implications beyond its borders. Pollution, policy, and activism intimately tied the GDR to its neighbors and them to the GDR, transforming the small state into a crucial focal point in central Europe.

The Environment in Democracy and Dictatorship

With the collapse of communism in 1989–1990, environmental degradation in the GDR shocked audiences around the world, and the FRG shouldered the burden of cleaning it up. Because the West (now unified) German government successfully took up that task, scholarship often assumes that environmentalism was only possible in the “democratic west,” reflective of lingering Cold War triumphalism. The rights to assembly and press, much less the expectation of privacy, so common to democracies, were not guaranteed in communist states. Nevertheless, opportunities for responding to environmental degradation existed both in democracy and under dictatorship. Environmentalism under communism stemmed from multiple sources, including the party and state’s official channels, and ultimately posed a challenge to the SED’s legitimacy. East Germans engaged in environmental activities for numerous reasons, including supporting the official conservation and anti-pollution measures, which stresses that the environment was not explicitly an oppositional issue. It became an effective


9 Raymond Dominick, “Capitalism, Communism, and Environmental Protection: Lessons from the German Experience,” Environmental History 3, no. 3 (July 1998), 326.
weapon against the SED and the state when they fell short of expectations.10

The resonance of the environment across various sectors of East German society helps explain its role in the collapse of communism in 1989. Though environmentalism in Soviet-style communism presented a distinct set of domestic and systemic considerations, it sheds light on how such movements gained a foothold and developed outside of a democracy.11

Green politics in the democratic FRG provide the standard against which others are measured, reinforcing a narrative of (West) Germany as the “greenest nation.”12 While the FRG hesitated to regulate polluters in the 1960s and 1970s, many West Germans embraced environmental protection, reflecting a transition away from conservation and toward a more expansive understanding of ecological interconnectedness.13 Activists organized citizens’ initiatives (Bürgerinitiative), staged demonstrations, and occupied construction sites for airport runways, nuclear power plants, and other projects.14 These efforts were not always successful and even turned violent at times, as in the occupation of a planned nuclear reactor at Brokdorf in 1976, but activists succeeded in shaping public opinion and pressuring the government into better regulation.15 In this democracy, the state, market economy, and citizen represented at least relatively independent entities in conversation with one another. Ultimately, the green movement changed democracy in the FRG, introducing new topics and broadening the scope of legitimate politics to include environmental, peace, and other concerns.16

In contrast, environmentalism in the GDR illuminates how a communist dictatorship both supported and constrained responses to pollution. The one-party state controlled or attempted to control all aspects of the economy, politics, and society to take care of its citizens, the workers in a workers’ state.17

14 Augustine, Taking on Technocracy, 98. 15 Milder, Greening Democracy, 6–7.
In this totalizing constellation, the state was both regulator and polluter. It was not an independent actor apart from economic agents, nor was it accountable to an electorate in any real way. The GDR strictly controlled the dissemination of information, the formation of associations, the ability to publicly protest, and access to environmental data. Questions of degradation and public health were carefully managed and framed to put the SED in the best possible light, often at the expense of experts and activists who held contradictory evidence. These restrictions created a set of dynamics unlike those in a liberal democratic society. Any environmental issue was not only politically charged but a challenge to the SED and its legitimacy. Focusing on repression in the GDR does not diminish the police violence that environmental movements in the FRG or other democracies faced but underscores differences in how the two systems reacted to environmental problems.

The environment—and responses to its treatment—exposes the complex relationship between state, economy, society, and nature in a dictatorship. The rise of environmentalism in the GDR illustrates the constant struggle between economy and ecology in the twentieth century from a different perspective than in western democracies. Tensions between materialism, production, and quality of life posed challenges for states around the world after the World War II. In the postwar period, eastern and western European economies competed for superiority, changing dramatically over the course of the Cold War. Increased rates of production, consumption, and globalization reflected that rivalry, though these developments occurred unevenly. Communist economies, in particular, remained committed to heavy industry and reluctant to transition from

18 I argue that the SED never reached its ambitions of totally controlling all aspects of life in the dictatorship, and use the term “totalizing” in recognition of the ambition but do not agree with the scholarship that labeled the GDR “totalitarian.” See, for example, Sigrid Meuschel, Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945–1989 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).


20 Both environmental histories of Germany, such as Uekötter’s The Greenest Nation? and David Blackbourn’s The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), and environmental histories of communism, such as Paul Josephson’s “War on Nature as Part of the Cold War: The Strategic and Ideological Roots of Environmental Degradation in the Soviet Union,” in Environmental Histories of the Cold War, eds. J. R. McNeill and Corinna R. Unger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), tend to write off environmental efforts under communism. For more on modernity, materialism, and the GDR, see Pence and Betts, “Introduction,” 11–21. Thomas Fleischman’s Communist Pigs: An Animal History of the East Germany’s Rise and Fall (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2020) further reminds us that capitalist and communist economies were intimately connected, especially from the 1970s onward, and not discrete entities.
coal to oil, even as planners devoted more attention to consumer goods. Nevertheless, population growth and skyrocketing consumption forced capitalist and communist states and citizens alike to reconsider their relationship with natural resources and the impact that their habits had on the environment. These conversations flourished in international venues such as the 1972 Environmental Conference in Stockholm as well as in local parish meetings and in living rooms. In confronting the toll that natural resource extraction and consumption took on the environment, East Germans were at the center of global discourses from the late 1960s through the 1980s.

Officials and activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain embraced local and global trends during the Cold War. They recognized the challenges that inaction had caused, and therefore the importance of taking concrete steps to change the future. The Cold War added urgency to environmental questions as technology and consumption became battlegrounds between competing superpowers. These challenges extended beyond the United States and the Soviet Union to their blocs, and even to nonaligned countries. East German environmental consciousness responded to a specific set of domestic and international impulses, but the issues raised there resonated across political and economic structures. Still, interactions were not always smooth. Activists and officials unintentionally and at times willfully interpreted information differently for cultural or political purposes. Borders and limitations on interactions mattered, particularly for dictatorships and citizens of them, but neither environmental policy nor protest evolved in a vacuum.

The Environment in the GDR

Since the GDR’s inception, the Soviet model of intensive industrial production resulted in extensive pollution that plagued the regime, deteriorating the environment and its citizens’ health. The Soviet Union compelled its satellite states to specialize in certain economic sectors in order to compete with western European countries. Coal, steel, and the chemical industry featured prominently in the GDR’s economy, which quickly became the strongest in the bloc (aside from the Soviet Union itself). The state’s scarce natural resources were imbued with national significance for a better future, though Soviet directives and geographic limitations forced the GDR to rely on antiquated technologies and noxious energy sources. The GDR’s primary energy source, lignite, released high levels of particulate matter that polluted the air and led to staggering rates of respiratory illness. Additionally, the presence of sulfur in the coal precipitated acid rain when burned, killing forests in the GDR as well as in neighboring countries. This emphasis on heavy industry resulted in the extreme pollution and public health crisis of towns like Bitterfeld. In a system in which the state was both the polluter and the regulator, the responsibility of balancing political realities, economic needs, and nature conservation weighed heavily on the SED.

Party and state officials quickly recognized that pollution had social and cultural consequences that complicated their pursuit of unchecked economic growth. In a dictatorship, social and cultural matters were inherently political, and as a workers’ state, the GDR felt obligated to shape and control them in the workers’ interest. Starting in the 1950s, the SED established environmental associations in its tightly controlled mass social organization, the Cultural League, as a sign of the party and state’s commitment to nature. In particular, the Cultural League’s Friends of Nature and Heimat – later reinvented as the Society for Nature and the Environment – carried out these objectives. The SED drew on German

17 Ibid., 12.
18 Maier, Dissolution, 82.
19 RHG Th 02/08, ”PSEUDOKRUPP – Krankheitsverlauf und Therapie,” undated.
20 Waldsterben or “dying of the forests” did not come into common usage until roughly 1980, and then primarily in the West German context as a plank in the Green Party’s platform. Into the late 1980s, East German officials denied that Waldsterben existed in the GDR. Uekötter, The Greenest Nation?, 113ff. BArch 5/5829, ”Informacja o stanie środowiska naturalnego na terenach Dolnego Śląska, a w tym głównie w rejonach graniczących bezpośrednio z NRD i ČSRS,” March 1–3, 1988.
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traditions of popular engagement with nature that dated back to the
nineteenth century. It encouraged conservation, landscape preservation,
and hiking among other activities as a means of embracing Heimat,
a German concept linking a sense of national identity to nature. Officials
specifically sought to cultivate an East German Heimat that would bolster
the fledgling socialist nation. They relied on these traditions to publicize
that they were confronting environmental degradation. Together, these
measures raised East Germans’ awareness of the natural world and signaled
that the state prioritized its wellbeing.

The environment became a front in the Cold War for the East German
leadership, which competed with the capitalist west to “outperform” in
terms of conservation and consciousness. For both domestic and
diplomatic purposes, the GDR claimed to be at the forefront of the global
debate over the dangers of economic growth, consumption, and their
impact on the planet. The GDR consequently vied for prestige abroad
and popular support at home through its awareness of environmental
concerns. In the 1968 version of the constitution, the SED declared

citizens’ right and responsibility to a clean environment, claiming
a commitment to providing for workers’ cultural and spiritual wellbeing
in a workers’ state. The SED further declared “socialist environmental-
ism” an essential component of East German society at the VIII Party
Congress in 1972 and subsequently established the Ministry for
Environmental Protection and Water Management (MUW).

Over the course of the 1970s, the state built up a cohort of scientists and
experts to specialize in environmental research and to implement

34 Palmowski, Inventing a Socialist Nation.
37 Laakkonen, Pal, and Tucker, “The Cold War and Environmental History”.
regulation in the newly formed ministry. In the Academy of Sciences, experts theorized about the importance of the environment to socialism, generating an entire body of literature on the subject. \(^{40}\) Universities introduced new fields of study relating to ecology, biology, and environmental protection, and the graduates of those programs entered into state-run research institutes or the MUW. Scientists recorded pollution levels, invented new technologies, and proposed and applied solutions, such as installing filters in smokestacks, ameliorating chemical spills into waterways, and recycling water more efficiently. At the ministry, they also addressed petitions (Eingaben) from frustrated citizens who sought relief from a range of environmental problems. \(^{41}\) Scientists and experts, moreover, often took part in party-sponsored clubs to disseminate appropriate information to the public. \(^{42}\) A generation of experts, then, became caught between furthering environmental protection within the party and state apparatuses, on the one hand, and being required, from 1982, to maintain secrecy regarding all environmental data, on the other.

The SED’s stance on environmentalism created a conundrum; the party raised environmental expectations without committing the resources necessary to execute them. The GDR and socialist states more generally considered themselves immune to environmental issues because they worked in the name of the people without profit motive. The SED believed this position provided them a moral high ground in contrast to capitalist countries. Still, socialist solutions put forward through policy and mass social engagement did not dramatically improve environmental conditions. In the second half of the GDR’s existence, pollution levels plateaued, and in some instances, worsened without investment in new technologies or structural change. \(^{43}\) More and more, the GDR turned inward, restricting access to data for domestic and international audiences, which tacitly admitted the SED’s failure. East Germans operated on the principle – underdelivered by


\(^{43}\) Umwelthericht der DDR: Informationen zur Analyse der Umweltbedingungen in der DDR und zu weiteren Maßnahmen (West Berlin: Institut für Umweltschutz, 1990), 7.
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their own government – that an active citizen and good socialist should both know the importance of the environment and demand its protection.

In response to degradation, and taking seriously the state’s environmental imperative, a second strain of environmentalism unfolded in the Protestant Church. The Church presented an alternative to the socialist interpretation, shaping ordinary East Germans’ understanding of nature.44 Through institutions, such as the Ecclesiastical Research Center in Wittenberg and parish-based groups, engaged individuals took part in protecting and saving God’s creation. Clergy attended the World Council of Churches’ conventions on science and technology, while supporting activists in the parishes and taking up the state’s offer to join party or state environmental organizations. East Germans engaged in both Church and official organizations and became “dual participants,” breaking down traditional divisions between the two sets of actors.45 Moreover, parish-based groups sprang up all over the country from the Baltic Sea to the Erzgebirge to the Thuringian Forest, decentering a Berlin-based narrative of opposition and dissent.46 Activists organized workshops, seminars, tree planting campaigns, and bicycle demonstrations.47 They further recorded their impressions in Church-sponsored publications and self-published underground, or “samizdat,” newsletters and pamphlets.48 Religious organizations supported East Germans’ awareness of pollution

44 Mary Fulbrook, The People’s State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 251.