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BLOOD OVER SOIL: THE MISCONCEPTION OF
NAZI ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Most people do not immediately think of environmentalism when they hear the term “Nazi.” Nazis were racist imperialists who killed millions of people. Is it possible for the genocidal policies of the Third Reich to be compatible with green politics and nature preservation? Several historians and sociologists during a period of anti-green backlash and Nazi revisionism in the late 20th century argued that environmentalism was, indeed, a central part of National Socialism. Citing environmentally progressive Nazi legislation combined with elements of the “Blood and Soil” element of Nazi ideology, these individuals made a case that Hitler and the Nazis were some of the first modern environmentalists. This intriguing and unusual claim was used both to depict Nazis more favorably as well as to paint contemporary green politicians in a more negative light.

Although it is important to consider the views of such historians like Schama and Bramwell, who argued the above point, the Nazis cannot be called environmentalists. Despite their passing of a few noteworthy pieces of green legislation and their admiration for the German landscape, the Nazis prioritized rearmament, war, and ethnic purity far above national environmental protection policies, which were largely abandoned with the escalation of the Second World War. Nature preservation remained an effective propaganda theme for the National Socialists, as they were quite fond of linking the *volk* and their pure blood to the German land, but sweeping environmental reform simply did not take place. With that said, it is imperative to review the scholarship of those who argue that the Nazis were true environmentalists and the elements of the Third Reich that led them to come to those faulty conclusions.

Anna Bramwell and Simon Schama are two of the most prominent writers defending Nazi environmentalism. Both dwell on Reichminister of Agriculture Walther Darré, one of the

few authentic Nazis who also had genuine beliefs about protecting the environment. A pioneer of biodynamic farming practices, Bramwell believes that Darré ought to be considered the “Father of the Greens.”¹ Darré also coined the term “Blood and Soil,” which referred to the intimate connection between pure Aryan blood and the German landscape. He was inspired by the prolific Roman historian, Tacitus, whose detailed accounts of the ancient Germans and their environment had the unintended effect of inspiring naturalists like Darré to turn to militant nationalism. Tacitus described the Germans as “a race unmixed by intermarriage with other races, a peculiar people and pure, like no-one but themselves.”² The Nazis would pounce on this ancient justification of the purity and exclusivity of the Aryan race. Tacitus goes on to explain that the rugged and formidable topography of the German landscape was reflective of its citizens, which directly connects the blood to the soil. This, combined with the idea that Jews had disproportionate power in commercial, urban, and cosmopolitan life in Germany, made many ethnic Germans want to revisit their ancient woodland roots.³ Schama outlines no specific policies that demonstrate the environmentalist tendencies of the Nazis, but he makes it clear that there was a certain idealization of nature in the Third Reich. The Führer, too, held the landscape in a high regard.

With only a few scattered references to the sublime power of nature in *Mein Kampf*, it is best to evaluate Adolf Hitler’s opinions on the environment through his taste in art. In the wake of various unorthodox cultural and artistic movements of the Weimar era, Hitler made major changes to what he considered the degenerate art scene upon his seizure of power. He did this through the construction of the House of German Art in Munich, which hosted eight annual Great German Art Exhibitions from 1937 to 1945. The exhibitions included pieces that were compatible to Nazi ideology, including Nordic mythological scenes, portraits of pure Aryans,

and, for the purpose of this paper, idealized landscapes. In a speech at the opening of the first Great German Art Exhibition in July 1937, Hitler lambasted the abstract artistic movements popular in Weimar Germany. He claimed that the degenerate Weimar artists created works that could have been done in the Stone Age, and this violated the purpose of art, which was, according to Hitler, “to symbolize the vitality” of modern civilization.⁴ He went on to boast about the pieces on display at the 1937 exhibition and how they represented the “purification of art.”⁵ Because landscape paintings were featured prominently at the exhibition, they must have depicted modern vitality to the Nazis. The *volk* would have understood illustrations of the German countryside as a display of a major societal strength. Hitler could consider landscapes as so-called purifications of art, because they provided accurate representations of the ideal Germany that the Nazis worked towards as opposed to the abstract, demented settings that the pseudo-artists of the Weimar era favored. Finally, landscapes were culturally constructive in the Third Reich. They melded well with Darré’s “Blood and Soil” ideology, and German citizens would respond well to portrayals of the beautiful German land that supposedly gave them their pure blood. Hitler ends his speech by predicting the rise of a new generation of fantastic artists given the resurgence of art under the Nazi regime.⁶ One such artist, according to the Führer, was Hermann Gradl.

Gradl had forty works in the Great German Art Exhibitions, and they were all landscape paintings. His style was enormously popular with the Nazis, as it intertwined natural and cultural themes. Hitler publicly called Gradl his favorite landscape painter and classified him as one of the most important artists in the Third Reich by including him on the *Gotbegnadeten* List. He was commissioned to paint six landscapes for the dining room of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, and, in addition, Hitler, Eva Braun, Goebbels, and Speer owned several of his paintings.⁷

One of Gradl's most famous pieces, *Mainlandschaft*, translated as *Main Landscape*, beautifully demonstrates the highly idealized German landscape so popular in the Nazi era.⁸ In the bottom left corner, two men, who are deliberately quite small in the vastness of the painting, pull wooden canoes out of a river, which is dammed by what appears to be simple earthen works (as opposed to concrete or other human materials that would spoil the natural tranquility of the scene). There is a small town in the background on the right side of the painting. The tallest building is a church, and its steeple rises above the simple homes. Notably absent is any smoke billowing up from rearmament factories or any traces of frantic industrialization in preparation for war. Instead, the town is perfectly settled in the pocket of an expansive landscape that dwarves the human elements of the painting. A huge sky covers half of the painting, and its blues contrast well with the greens in the rolling hills of the German countryside. The landscape is undisturbed, calm, and healthy. It is a perfect setting to provide the fruits for the master race.

Now, none of this is really environmentalism. Rather, the "Blood and Soil" ideology popularized by Darré and the art of the Third Reich promoted by Hitler merely fosters a deep admiration for nature. There was an idealization of the environment by the German people encouraged by the propagandistic linking of their racial purity to the land. Based off of the popularity of artists like Gradl and "Blood and Soil" propaganda, it is safe to assume that the vast majority of Nazis appreciated nature. From here, however, the conclusion that the Nazis were environmentalists cannot be made. That would be comparable to claiming that football fans across America are in fact football players, because they enjoy watching their favorite NFL teams play every Sunday. Enjoying a sport does not make someone an athlete just as enjoying the environment does not make someone an environmentalist. An appreciation for nature is probably a prerequisite for becoming an environmentalist, but in order to call the Nazis true

environmentalists there needs to have been significant government effort at instituting green policies to protect German nature. Although there was some of this, particularly in the form of the 1933 Law on Animal Protection and the 1935 Reich Nature Protection Act, Nazi environmental policy was limited by a wartime economy and overshadowed by more important tenants of National Socialist ideology, including racial purity.

The 1933 Law on Animal Protection was the first significant piece of legislation passed under the Nazi regime that had to do with nature. It forbade German citizens from tormenting or roughly mishandling animals, and it provided detailed definitions for both offenses. The law also included a list of violations including animal neglect, overwork, mutilation, and other forms of abuse.⁹ A sentence opening Section III clearly stated, “It is forbidden to operate on or handle living animals in ways that may cause appreciable pain or damage for the purpose of experiments.”¹⁰ It is difficult to fathom that the same government that exterminated millions of people in the Holocaust cared for animals so much. Indeed, the Nazis treated animals significantly better than many humans. After an extensive section on specific provisions for animal experimentation, the piece of legislation ended with outlining the punishments for animal abusers, who faced up to two years of imprisonment and heavy fines.¹¹ It is unquestionable that the 1933 Law on Animal Protection was environmentally progressive, but more evidence is needed in order to possibly reach the conclusion that the Nazis on the whole were environmentalists.

The most important law in the environmental history of Nazi Germany was the 1935 Reich Nature Protection Act (RNG), written by the conservationist Hans Klose. The preamble bemoaned the destruction of the German landscape because of deforestation, over intensive farming, and one-sided land consolidation. It went on to mention the ideological as well as

economic damages that these practices caused, which shows the influence of “Blood and Soil” on law making.¹² As far as nature conservation, the legislation covered a variety of topics. Building on the 1933 Law on Animal Protection, the RNG outlawed animal exploitation and abuse as well as set provisions for the conservation of endangered species.¹³ The crux of the law dealt with the protection of natural monuments and nature reserves. Similar in purpose but not in scale, natural monuments were specific creations of nature like rare trees and waterfalls, whereas nature reserves were large areas deemed important enough to be protected. Both were to be preserved “because of their scientific, historic, ethnographic, or folkloric significance.”¹⁴ Although some natural monuments and reserves were protected for scientific and thus environmental reasons, others were protected for non-environmental purposes. For instance, a famous battlefield could be deemed historically significant and converted into a nature reserve. Examples like this, in which the RNG was interpreted for more nationalistic purposes, hurts the law’s reputation as a purely green piece of legislation.

A small but very important clause at the end of Section I of the RNG must not be overlooked. It includes the limitations of nature conservation in the Third Reich: “Nature conservation may not affect the use of areas which serve exclusively or predominantly...the Wehrmacht, the main public roads, sea and inland waterway transport, or vital commercial enterprises.”¹⁵ The importance of this sentence is difficult to understate. It prevented widespread national environmental reform because it prioritized military, transportation, industry, and business concerns over environmental ones. The massive Nazi industrialization, mobilization, and participation in World War II must have rendered the RNG null and void throughout massive portions of Germany. Nature preservation was among the least of concerns

for the Nazis, especially during the war, which is a major reason why they cannot be fairly categorized as environmentalists.

Nature protection was also not unique to National Socialism. In fact, German concern for the environment can be traced back to the Romantic era of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ Before the Nazi seizure of power, however, nature protection laws and regulations were only made at the regional level.¹⁷ Some states, like Prussia, were more environmentally aware than others, and the Prussians passed land protection laws in 1903, 1907, and 1926.¹⁸ The Nazi regime made it possible to pass comprehensive nature protection laws on a national scale under the Reich Nature Protection Office and Reich Forest Office, headed by Hermann Göring. Unlike the Weimar government, the Nazis cared for the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) over individual property rights. They were more concerned with the common good than the individual good, and it was the individual thirst for profit that often prompted construction that defaced the natural landscape.¹⁹ The Nazi idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* complemented "Blood and Soil," as it sought to protect the land, which was linked to the superior Aryan race, from individual, harmful ambitions.

The Nazis provided a platform from which German environmentalists could pass national legislation that they were unable to before. The RNG, passed in 1935, was widely considered among environmentalists to be overdue. However, many of the German environmentalists were not fervent Nazis. Hans Klose, the primary contributor to the RNG, was more of an opportunistic conservationist than a committed Nazi, and he was not a member of the party. He liked the RNG because of his genuine concern for the environment, and, despite its noteworthy limitations, the RNG was still mostly a green law. On the other hand, some environmentalists like Walter Schoenichen devoted themselves to the National Socialist cause. He accused the

Weimar Republic's urbanization and cultural backwardness as threatening the German landscape. Schoenichen was a firm believer in the "Blood and Soil" ideology, and he interpreted the RNG as a way of preserving the national character of Germany.²⁰ The Nazis on the whole were not environmentalists as much as they were nationalists. They were obsessed with preserving the purity of their race, which, thanks to "Blood and Soil," they found they could do by preserving the environment. Conservationists, whether or not they agreed with the Nazis, seized the opportunity to cooperate with a government that was open to their concerns, albeit for other motives, and the RNG was passed.

The passing of the RNG in 1935 began a period of euphoria and hope among German conservationists, who scrambled to push through more legislation to create protected natural monuments and nature reserves. Their success was notable. Between 1937 and 1943, for instance, the Nazis established 58 nature reserves covering 17,653 acres of land in the southern region of Baden alone.²¹ The frenzy for nature preservation, however, came to a halt when more serious needs arose. With Hitler's goals of autarky combined with World War II, the acreage transformed by the labor service, Autobahn construction, rearmament policies, and war far exceeded the achievements of the conservationists.²² To the Nazis, environmentalism was excellent propaganda to advance the "Blood and Soil" myth, but it was not nearly as important as mobilizing for and fighting World War II. Environmentalist policies were enacted when it was convenient, but, especially after Stalingrad, the German government had other priorities.

A fine example of this Nazi prioritization occurred in March 1943, just over a month after the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad. Goebbels had recently called on the German people to wage total war, and the Reich Forest Office approved of the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the scenic Wutach nature reserve.²³ Conservationists led by Hermann Schurhammer and Hans Klose

(the same who had written the RNG) were understandably upset at the spoiling of a beautiful nature reserve, but they realized they could not take legal action against the Reich Forest Office given the war conditions of the time. In a desperate attempt, the two conservationists appealed to Heinrich Himmler of the SS, who had helped them prevent the construction of a quarry in the same area a few years prior. The war, however, was much more serious than it had been then, and Himmler could not help Schurhammer and Klose.²⁴ With their unwillingness to promote nature preservation in times of war, the Nazis had shown that they were not true environmentalists. The construction of the dam in Wutach strained relations between conservationists and National Socialists.

The relationship between German conservationists and the Nazi government was one of cooperation but never full union. As the Nazis pursued industrialization, mobilization, and war at the expense of environmental concerns, the conservationists were often at odds with Nazi ideology. In the early 20th century, German conservationists were divided into regional, heterogeneous groups. Despite their various beliefs, it was very rare for conservationists to be aligned with the Nazi movement before 1933, when they were essentially forced to during the *Gleichschaltung* period.²⁵ As a group, German conservationists were absolutely not anti-Semitic. The Nazi expulsion of major Jewish environmentalists like Professor Lais in Freiburg was met with “forlorn acceptance” rather than jubilant celebration.²⁶ The conservationists blamed Germany’s environmental problems on industrialization and urbanization, not the poisoning influence of Jews. They also did not conform to the National Socialist idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* national community. Conservationists were mostly university-trained intellectuals who arrogantly looked down on the masses instead of identifying with them.²⁷ Furthermore, many of the German conservationists were apolitical. One such conservationist

was Hans Stadler, who declared, “there has not been any talk of party membership [among his associates]...for a tree or a quarry cannot stand right or left politically, but will always remain neutral.”²⁸ For many living in Nazi Germany, environmentalism was divorced from national politics. Conservationists often held views that were opposed to National Socialism, like Jewish sympathy and a reluctance to join the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The two could coexist and even cooperate, but it would be wrong to associate the two as one. The passing of the RNG was an example of some Nazi commitment to the conservation movement. However, as mentioned before, environmentalism would fall behind several other priorities in the Third Reich.

Separate from the RNG, Nazi forest policy is important to look at in order to evaluate their concerns for the environment. Before the Nazi ascension into power, scientific forestry was the norm in Germany since the late 18th century. The methods of scientific forestry involved creating artificial forests with limited varieties of trees to provide sustained yields of wood. These planned forests were economically successful in the short term, but ecological constraints over time hurt the German wood industry.²⁹ A depressed German wood market in the 1920s and 1930s caused the increased popularity of a new policy called *Dauerwald*, or “eternal forest.” Without delving too deeply into the complexities of forest science, the general idea behind *Dauerwald* was to manage the entire forest ecosystem rather than just the trees. This would create healthy, natural forests with long-lasting economic rewards for foresters. *Dauerwald* was far more environmentally friendly than scientific forestry.³⁰ Hermann Göring, head of the Reich Forest Office, had a strong personal preference for *Dauerwald*, which was still a fringe forest policy in the early 1930s. In a daring move, Göring made *Dauerwald* the official forest policy of Nazi Germany in 1934.³¹ Before long, German forests were healthy and thriving. The forest ecosystems were robust with a wide variety of trees, plants, and animals, and foresters were

selling high-quality wood. Even so, there is still reason to hesitate before calling the Nazis environmentalists.

Although Göring recognized and appreciated the ecological benefits of *Dauerwald*, the primary reason for its implementation on a national scale was ideological. The stalwart Nazi was most impressed with the “organic” and “primeval” nature of *Dauerwald* forests, and the forest policy was heavily propagandized in the Third Reich.³² Any green reform introduced by Nazi forest policy featured many layers of brown, which hurts the claim that the Nazis were environmentalists. Instead of celebrating the ecological advantages of natural, mixed forests, the Nazis portrayed *Dauerwald* “as the cornerstone of National Socialist ideas of race, community, and eternity.”³³ The government propagandized *Dauerwald* to make it a metaphor for the Nazi state. For an example, only native trees were permitted in *Dauerwald* forests, just as Aryans were the only people accepted in Germany. There was also an emphasis on the interconnectedness of the different elements in the forest. This melded well with the *Volksgemeinschaft* idea of downplaying the individual and promoting the collective for the benefit of society. Finally, the Nazis drew a grim parallel between the selective cutting of trees in *Dauerwald* forests and the removal of unwanted peoples in Germany.³⁴ With the increased attention on *Dauerwald* in Nazi propaganda, the reputations of foresters in the Third Reich soared. Particularly in rural areas, foresters were seen as important role models, and schoolchildren learned about forests to discover their roles in German society.³⁵ Foresters did not owe their popularity to their ecologically sound tendencies. Instead, they were heroes because their forests were natural microcosms of Nazi society that fit in beautifully with “Blood and Soil” ideas. In schools German students learned about the forests in a Social Darwinist lens as a tool to help them learn about fundamental aspects of their morally disordered society. If the

Nazis were actual environmentalists, they would teach their children about the natural benefits of having healthier, mixed forests instead of artificial ones. The *Dauerwald* forest policy principally served the Nazi's ideological agenda, not a marginalized environmental one.

Revisiting Walther Darré's "Blood and Soil" idea at this point makes it apparent that there was an overemphasis on the "Blood" component and less focus on the "Soil." When speaking about "Blood and Soil" Nazi leaders never talked about ecological dangers like deforestation. They focused on race and ethnic purity as a source of national and cultural strength rather than the landscape.³⁶ Whereas environmentalists would view nature as something to protect for global health and aesthetic purposes, the Nazis were obsessed with purity, strength, struggle, and supremacy in nature. Another "racist core belief over ecologic window dressing" was at work in the process of choosing Germans to settle the Eastern European land that the Nazis conquered in World War II. German families who had been living in cities for more than a couple of generations were not allowed to become settler farmers, because the Nazis believed that the urban German blood had been inevitably polluted by contact with city-dwelling foreigners.³⁷ This was Nazi mythology and pseudoscience about race, not true environmentalism. Environmentalism was more of a propaganda tool than a core belief for the Nazis, and "Blood Over Soil" seems to be a more accurate title for Darré's ideology.

It is undeniable that the Nazis had a certain appreciation for nature. One only needs to review Nazi art to recognize this. Indeed, the most notorious regime of the 20th century also passed some environmentally progressive legislation, including the 1933 Law on Animal Protection and the 1935 Reich Nature Protection Act. This appreciation for nature, nevertheless, did not translate into environmentalism. Even though the Nazis established numerous nature reserves and an ecologically friendly forest policy, they did so for reasons outside of saving the

environment, and the relationship between German conservationists and the National Socialists was not harmonious. Nazi propaganda accentuated the ideological benefits of nature policies like the *Dauerwald* instead of the environmental ones. On top of that, environmental policies set up in the RNG were severely limited by Germany's rampant industrialization, rearmament, and war under Hitler. The Nazis were much more concerned with World War II than they were about nature preservation, which was significantly impeded during the war especially after the Nazi defeat at Stalingrad. All things considered, conservation was at best a minor concern for most Nazis, and the claim that the Nazis were environmentalists is a hyperbolic misconception.

Endnotes

¹ Thomas Lekan, "Regionalism and the Politics of Landscape Preservation in the Third Reich," *Environmental History* 4, no. 3 (1999): 385, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3985133> (accessed November 18, 2017).

² Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 82.

³ Schama, 118.

⁴ Adolf Hitler, "Hitler's Speech at the Opening of the House of German Art in Munich." (speech, Munich, Germany, July 18, 1937), German History in Documents and Images, http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1577.

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⁷ "Hermann Gradl, Titisee," German Art Gallery, accessed November 18, 2017. http://www.germanartgallery.eu/m/Webshop/0/product/info/Hermann_Gradl_Titisee&id=129

⁸ Hermann Gradl, "Mainlandschaft," *German Art Gallery*, November 18, 2017. http://www.germanartgallery.eu/m/Webshop/0/product/info/Hermann_Gradl_Titisee&id=129

⁹ Clemens Giese and Waldemar Kahler, *1933 Law on Animal Protection*, November 24, 1933, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Germany/Nazianimalrights.htm> (accessed October 25, 2017).

¹⁰ Clemens Giese and Waldemar Kahler, *1933 Law on Animal Protection*, November 24, 1933, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Germany/Nazianimalrights.htm> (accessed October 25, 2017).

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¹² Hans Klose, *1935 Reich Nature Protection Act*, June 26, 1935. <http://www.stadtgrenze.de/s/p3r/natsch/natsch.htm#03> (accessed November 18, 2017).

¹³ Hans Klose, *1935 Reich Nature Protection Act*, June 26, 1935. <http://www.stadtgrenze.de/s/p3r/natsch/natsch.htm#03> (accessed November 18, 2017).

¹⁴Hans Klose, *1935 Reich Nature Protection Act*, June 26, 1935.
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¹⁵ Hans Klose, *1935 Reich Nature Protection Act*, June 26, 1935.
<http://www.stadtgrenze.de/s/p3r/natsch/natsch.htm#03> (accessed November 18, 2017).

¹⁶ Charles E. Closmann, “Legalizing a *Volksgemeinschaft*: Nazi Germany’s Reich Nature Protection Law of 1935,” in *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*, ed. Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc, and Thomas Zeller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 31-32.
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¹⁷ Closmann, 28.

¹⁸ Closmann, 33.

¹⁹ Closmann, 36.

²⁰ Closmann, 42.

²¹ Frank Uekötter, “Green Nazis? Reassessing the Environmental History of Nazi Germany,” *German Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (2007): 277, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27668287> (accessed October 23, 2017).

²² Uekötter, 277-278.

²³ Uekötter, 280.

²⁴ Uekötter, 281.

²⁵ Uekötter, 269, 272.

²⁶ Uekötter, 274.

²⁷ Uekötter, 271.

²⁸ Uekötter, 273.

²⁹ Michael Imort, “Eternal Forest – Eternal *Volk*: The Rhetoric and Reality of National Socialist Forest Policy,” in *How Green Were the Nazis?: Nature, Environment, and Nation in the Third Reich*, ed. Franz-Josef Brüggemeier, Mark Cioc, and Thomas Zeller (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 53-54.

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³⁰ Imort, 55.

³¹ Imort, 57.

³² Imort, 56.

³³ Imort, 75.

³⁴ Imort, 61.

³⁵ Imort, 62-63.

³⁶ Piers H.G. Stephens, "Blood, Not Soil: Anna Bramwell and the Myth of 'Hitler's Green Party'," *Organization & Environment* 14, no. 2 (2001): 178, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/219902786?accountid=13320> (accessed October 23, 2017).

³⁷ Stephens, 179.

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