

CONFERENCE REPORT

Environmental History and the Cold War

Conference at the German Historical Institute, Washington, DC

22-25 March 2007.

Conveners: John R. McNeill (Georgetown University) and Corinna R. Unger (GHI).

Conference Website (with papers): <http://www.ghi-dc.org/conferences/ehcw/>

Participants: Greg Bankoff (University of Auckland), R. Samuel Deese (Boston University), Celia Donert (European University Institute Florence), Matthew Farish (University of Toronto), Eagle Glassheim (University of British Columbia), Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu (Michigan State University), Jacob Hamblin (Clemson University), Kristine Harper (New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology), Ingo Heidbrink (Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum Bremerhaven), Holly High (Deakin University), Toshihiro Higuchi (Georgetown University), Sabine Höhler (Universität Hamburg), Kai Hünemörder (Hamburg), Paul Josephson (Colby College), Han-Rog Kang (Oxford University), Michael Lewis (Salisbury University), Uwe Lübken (GHI), Erez Manela (Harvard University), Bao Maohong (Beijing University), Mark Merlin (University of Hawaii at Manoa), Scott Moranda (SUNY Cortland), Arvid Nelson (Yale University), Joy Parr (University of Western Ontario), Joachim Radkau (Universität Bielefeld), Thomas Robertson (Worcester Polytechnic Institute), Jenny Smith (Yale University), Richard Tucker (University of Michigan), Frank Uekötter (Deutsches Museum München), Thomas Zeller (University of Maryland), David Zierler (Temple University).*

Conference Report by **Thomas Robertson**, Ph.D.,

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The environmental history of the Cold War is an understudied aspect of both Cold War studies and environmental history. Assessing the Cold War’s environmental history poses a tricky interpretive challenge: how to distinguish between environmental damage caused by the Cold War and that which occurred during the Cold War years due to other factors such as industrialization and urbanization. A similar question could be asked about the environment’s impact on the Cold War: how much did environmental change – and ideas about environmental change – influence the conduct of the Cold War? A truly international group of historians, anthropologists, biologists, and geographers came together at the German Historical Institute Washington in March to sort through these issues.

The conference’s opening session was devoted to warfare and environmental degradation. One of the themes that emerged from this session was that much of the environmental transformation

* All institutional affiliations were current as of the date of publication of this H-Diplo conference report.

caused by the Cold War came not from direct fighting, but from preparations for war. In his paper on nuclear testing in Oceania conducted by the U.S., France, and Great Britain from 1946 to 1996, **Mark Merlin** identified three types of environmental change on the atolls brought by the tests: their direct impact, their indirect impact through radiation, and the effect of the roads, airfields and other infrastructure built to prepare, conduct, and assess the tests. Like many of the other papers presented at the conference, Merlin’s paper revealed that the environmental impact of the Cold War on this ecosystem and the people who live there will be playing out for years. **Paul Josephson**, in his paper on rivers in the USSR, pointed out that war, and especially preparations for war, devastated the landscapes of the Soviet Union on a scale comparable to problems in the West. He identified three interrelated political, economic and ideological factors that distinguished the war on nature during the Soviet period and accelerated during the Cold War: the idea that scientific planning would enable socialist economies to avoid the costs of industrialization, the emphasis on “hero projects” – large scale, centralized development projects, each of which acquired nearly unstoppable technological momentum –, and a war against capricious nature itself. Several interesting points came up in the discussion of this paper: that the extent, quality, and amount of technology distinguished the post-WWII Cold War period from the prewar period, that there were ebbs and flows of environmental change during the Cold War period, and that the most distinguishing element of the Soviet system of development compared to the American system was the lack of citizen input. However, **Holly High** stressed that *direct* Cold War fighting did leave lasting environmental impacts in many places. In her paper, High examined the role that ideas about nature and technology played in the U.S. “secret war” in Laos from 1964 until 1973, the environmental devastation wrought by that war – some of which is still evident today – and some of the ways that Laotians and tourists understand those landscapes today. One might wonder whether those who describe the Cold War as a “long peace” only do so because they overlook Third World places like Laos, where fighting was covered up at the time and has been generally overlooked since.

The second panel of the conference highlighted the complicated mix of Cold War ideology, environmental change, and local politics in the communist states of Eastern Europe in the decades after World War II. **Arvid Nelson** argued that the history of the Cold War can be told through an analysis of environmental change in East Germany (the GDR). According to Nelson, Stalin’s imposition of land reform on the previously diverse economy of East Germany in 1945 and 1946 – which cut off West Germany from its chief food source – signaled the growing tensions between the Soviets and the Americans. These programs also ended the century-long process of equilibrium of central Germany’s population, ecosystems, and economy to their geographic and global economic environments and locked the landscape and population into a downward spiral which only ended with the dissolution of the GDR. Nelson pointed out that the evidence of these decisions is still visible in the forests and fields of this part of Germany. Also relating to the GDR, **Scott Moranda** examined an effort to establish a national park on the eastern side of the Elbe River during the 1950s. Here a typical clash between economic developers and hikers, landscape architects, and conservationist reformers took new form because of the Cold War. Park supporters, Moranda explains, mobilized socialist rhetoric to justify their agenda: workers, they argued, needed the park for recreation space. The park idea was eventually shot down, but economic planners ran into continued opposition.

In other parts of Eastern Europe, critics used environmental problems in campaigns against communist rule. Focusing on regional identities and varied ideas of “place” in a part of Czechoslovakia bordering Germany, **Eagle Glassheim** described how the anti-modern visions of both Czech intellectuals and Germans expelled from this region after World War II came together to critique communist development policies in the region. “Many on both sides of the Iron Curtain,” Glassheim writes, “envisioned a haven from ideology in the everyday and the local, in carefully tended urban and rural landscapes, harmoniously balanced between man and nature” (22). **Celia Donert** examined similar issues in the Carpathian mountain region in Slovakia, where a deep-rooted cultural preservation movement drawing energy from a vision of social and environmental decline became the basis of a strong critique of Soviet control of the area during the 1980s. These papers showed how environmental analysis can shed unusual light on the lived experiences, identities, and politics of these areas. Similarly, **Joy Parr**, in her examination of Gagetown, a Canadian settlement that was sacrificed for a military base, stressed the entangled relations between environment, space, and memory.

One of the best places to see the influence of the Cold War on global environments is the Third World. In the first of several papers on this topic, **Richard Tucker** spoke about two of many Cold War dams, the Dez Dam in Iran and the Helmand Dam in Afghanistan. He argued that during the first two decades of the Cold War a series of dams that were built around the periphery of the Soviet Union had critically important American participation, and that American Cold War priorities help to explain the locations, timing, beneficiaries, and social and environmental costs of these massive infrastructure projects. **Kristine Harper** examined another environmental modification that combined Cold War maneuverings and Third World development: a secret weather modification program run by Americans in northern India during the mid 1960s. Her presentation gave an idea of the multifaceted entanglement between “high politics,” environmental engineering mentalities and practices, and the overarching impact of the Cold War on perceptions of nature. **Erez Manela** offered a slightly different angle on the environmental history of the Third World during the Cold War by examining why the Smallpox Eradication Project, a massively successful program run by U.N. agencies during the 1960s and 1970s, has received so little attention by historians. He suggested that diplomatic historians often overlook health stories, that environmental historians who write about disease often overlook eradication stories, and that modernization historians often overlook success stories. Together, these papers showed that, as historians begin to pay more attention to the Cold War in the global periphery, they would do well to think about the complicated environmental changes that almost always accompanied great power maneuverings.

The first day of the conference ended with two papers on animals that offered challenges to the declension narratives that environmental historians often rely on. They suggested that our duty to document the complexity of the past requires us to seek out and explore other environmental stories as well. After hearing about the devastation wrought to the fragile landscapes of the atolls of the South Pacific by nuclear testing, the question arose whether, alongside all of the negatives that came out of the reckless testing, there were any outcomes that could be considered positive. In the discussion that followed, **Greg Bankoff** suggested that we label past environmental change, even cases involving evidence of decline, not as decline or devastation but as “transformations.” Doing so might allow us to tell stories of destruction as well as open space for some of the ironic and contradictory aspects of the environmental history of the Cold War.

Both **Jenny Smith** and Bankoff presented papers that pushed in this new direction. In “The Sable Boom: The Effects of a Cold war Mentality in Transbaikal Siberia,” Smith examined the curious case of the sable. Because the sable did not directly compete with American and Canadian furs and was exempt from American sanctions on trade with the Soviets, it became the center of a booming fur market during the 1950s and 1960s. More importantly, the story of the sable belies the standard declensionist story of Soviet resource exploitation as a monolithic pursuit that uniformly destroyed landscapes, people, and livelihoods. Sables, their hunters, and the markets in which they circulated, Smith noted, “have proved adaptable and sustainable over long periods of time” (3). In “A Curtain of Silence: The Fate of Asia’s Fauna in the Cold War,” Bankoff emphasized that not enough attention has been paid to how war has affected animals. Even environmental histories of war, he noted, are often anthropocentric. They have, for instance, overlooked how wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan have devastated animal populations. Even more damaging, though, was the preparation for warfare, which destroyed habitat far from battlefields and in some cases around the planet. But, Bankoff emphasized, the story of the Cold War and animals is not one of complete decline. During these wars, although some animal species lost out, others gained. In Vietnam, he notes, tigers, rats, and mosquitoes all increased in number and range. Moreover, because of the disruption of human activity in some areas, wars overall may not have been as destructive for animals as periods of peace, which allowed human interference with ecosystems on a much larger scale.

Several papers on the second day of the conference offered new perspectives on science and environmental planning during the Cold War. Examining early Cold War policies on radiological and biological warfare, **Jacob Hamblin** argued that when in the late 1940s American scientists steered clear of these forms of “environmental warfare” they did so more for practical than moral reasons. Indeed, Hamblin shows, U.S. government officials showed a great deal of enthusiasm for these weapons and seriously considered them for use in the Korean War. **Matthew Farish’s** presentation focused less on ethics of warfare than on the knowledge that came from war planning. Exploring the kinds of geographic knowledge that military preparedness required, Farish highlighted the elaborate simulations of extreme environments – Arctic, desert, and tropical – that the U.S. military conducted in its research labs. In the third paper of this group, **Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu** probed how an international system organized around nation-states came to grips with an environmental issue that transcended nation-states – the problem of regulating fishing in the North Pacific – during the early Cold War. Guthrie-Shimizu concluded that the North Pacific Fisheries Convention, which was the first international treaty negotiated and signed by postwar Japan, accelerated the “enclosure movement” within the world’s oceans. Guthrie-Shimizu’s paper formed a pair of sorts with **Ingo Heidbrink’s** paper on conflicts over cod fishing in the north Atlantic during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which showed how, because of Iceland’s strategic importance to NATO and the U.S., a low-level international dispute over fishing got wrapped up in Cold War geopolitics.

Finally, the conference also offered many new insights about the relationship between the Cold War and environmental politics. In “Peace with Nature and the World: Environmental and Anti-War Activism in the Two German States,” **Frank Uekötter** suggested that anyone interested in this relationship must ask how the environmental movement would have looked if the Cold War had never happened. He made four additional points: 1) that environmentalism is more diverse

and international than those who focus on Rachel Carson and pollution suggest, 2) that we need to recognize that the Cold War was not just political and military but social and economic as well, 3) that Cold War fear was one of the defining features of the environmental movement, and 4) that the current situation in Iraq offers many parallels to the early years of the environmental movement and perhaps a chance to observe many of the same ingredients reassemble. In his paper, **Toshihiro Higuchi** traced one of the most direct and surprisingly understudied ways that the Cold War and the environmental movement overlapped: nuclear testing. Higuchi pointed out that while historians have given industrial use of nuclear weapons a great deal of attention, they have often ignored nuclear testing. Similarly, much has been written about the nuclear disarmament movement but not much about its environmental elements. In his paper, Higuchi addressed the campaign against above-ground nuclear testing, which came to an end with the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1963, and the coming together of anti-nuclear war activists and environmental activists in the very early 1970s, especially in opposition to the planned underground tests on Amchitka Island, Alaska. By presenting the case of the Huxley brothers, Julian and Aldous, who both acted as outspoken critics of environmental degradation and nuclear weapons, **R. Samuel Deese** offered an insight into different approaches to environmental protest as well as into the literary forms (in this case, science fiction) such protest could take.

Supplementing the attention historians have given to grassroots environmental actors, two presentations stressed how the high politics of détente focused new attention on environmental issues. In "Environmental Crisis and Soft Politics: The International Policy of Détente and the Global Environment, 1968-1975," **Kai Hünemörder** argued that during the late 1960s, environmental issues gave Western and Soviet Bloc diplomats a discussion topic that was seemingly less fraught than other issues. "By stressing common problems in public," he argues, "the foreign and security politicians of the West and the East tried to use environmental threats as a vehicle for the normalization of international relations." For Western diplomats, these were issues that their constituencies back home were growing increasingly concerned with; for their communist counterparts, environmental issues offered a way to win political recognition. In "Against Protocol: Ecocide, Détente, and the Question of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam, 1969-1975," **David Zierler** examined another aspect of détente, the effort to fix loopholes in international treaties against chemical weapons. Looking for a way to ease tensions between East and West through disarmament measures, Richard Nixon resubmitted the Geneva Protocols against Chemical Warfare in November, 1969. What happened next surprised him: consideration of the treaty launched an extended investigation into the problems caused by Agent Orange in Vietnam. Zierler's work promises to flesh out the details of the Agent Orange story and its role in the environmental movement. These two papers, together with Erez Manela's work on smallpox eradication and **Bao Maohong's** work on environmentalism in China (see below), reveal the potential for a lot more work on the overlap of détente and environmental movements around the world.

Finally, two papers addressed environmental movements outside of the U.S. and Western Europe. In "The Korean Green Movement during the Cold War and post-Cold War Eras," **Han-Rog Kang** traced the development of environmental politics in a country where national security and economic development trumped all social and environmental issues. Only in the late 1980s, Kang points out, could South Korean environmentalists question national security projects. Interestingly, as in parts of Eastern Europe, South Korea's environmental movement often

combined with pro-democracy movements. Examining the emergence of environmental concerns in mainland China, Bao Maohong argued that until recently international and top-down influences have driven Chinese environmentalism. Of particular importance was the U.N. Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972, to which China sent a large delegation. According to Maohong, the Chinese delegation to the Stockholm conference did three things: 1) it recognized that China had serious environmental problems, 2) it established environmental protection as a guideline for policy, and 3) it established the first environmental agency and first environmental standards for pollution in China’s history.

In the final panel, three scholars offered overarching reflections. Echoing Frank Uekötter’s paper, **Joachim Radkau** emphasized the fear of nuclear annihilation that pervaded the 1950s and 1960s. Radkau also encouraged us to approach the environmental history of the Cold War with two Weberian themes in mind. The first is Weber’s ideas about rationalization. The 1950s and 1960s were very rationalized years, and environmentalism itself has its own kind of rationality. Second is Weber’s emphasis on how humans in modern societies often search for redemption and seek out refuges. The Cold War years, and especially environmentalism, seem ripe for analysis that takes Weber’s insights seriously. **Sabine Höhler** called on the participants to unsettle the concepts of “environment” and “cold war” that we take for granted when discussing the environmental history of the Cold War. Both concepts, she stressed, came into being during the postwar decades and yet are often reified as transcendent, self-evident objects. One task for environmental historians of this period is to explain how the environment was “invented” during the Cold War years and what role the Cold War played in this cultural construction. Höhler also reminded us that the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were a time when global views, often focusing on the world as a closed and interconnected system with clear limits, came into their own. **John McNeill** offered two key questions to ask about environmentalisms. First, to what extent does the Cold War create space for environmentalisms to flourish, to what extent did it constrain discussion, and conversely, to what extent did environmental movements affect the Cold War? Second, he pointed out the conflict of temporal perspectives at work in Cold War thinking and environmentalist thinking. While both were consumed with urgency and fear, Cold War culture emphasized the possibility of nuclear annihilation in the very near future, while environmentalists, adopting a longer view, worried about the collapse that would come some years down the road. The difference in these timeframes, McNeill suggested, might help explain why national security priorities almost always trumped environmental concerns.

A publication of selected papers is being planned.

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