

Environmental Policy and the Environmental Movement in East Germany

By Dieter Rink

1. Introduction

The environmental situation in East Germany, which by the late 1980s had in some regions reached catastrophic proportions, was one of the main reasons for the mass protests in the autumn of 1989. Interestingly, East Germany had been one of the first countries in the world to take political action in response to environmental pollution and destruction; Western countries only reacted much later and more reluctantly. East Germany claimed it wanted to place mankind's relationship with nature on a completely new footing and to put an end to the destructive exploitation of natural resources. This initially seemed to prove the long-term superiority of socialism: capitalism would be unable to solve environmental problems, and the deteriorating environmental situation would become another reason for the historical need to defeat it. The emergence of a grassroots campaign and environmental movement in the early 1970s and the escalation of the nuclear conflict in the mid-1970s appeared to bear out this argument. Yet not long afterwards, at the end of the 1970s, East Germany's socialist environmental policy, too, came under severe criticism by members of oppositional groups. The aim of this article is to ascertain whether the failure of East Germany's socialist environmental policy to meet its own aims was due to the system itself, or whether it resulted from the confrontation between capitalism and socialism. Is socialism in principle better able to solve environmental questions? Or did the East German regime have to be toppled by the democratic revolution in autumn 1989 before the environmental problems the state had obviously caused could be solved? Public opinion tends to favor the latter position, given the improvement in a number of environmental parameters since 1990 such as the dramatic reduction in air and water pollution. By contrast, protagonists of the independent East German

environmental movement, who at that time were among the strongest critics of socialist environmental policy, are today critical of continuing environmental destruction, citing the accelerating extinction of species, rising land use and the increasing amounts of ozone caused by cars and trucks. In their view, the improvement in the environmental situation in eastern Germany since German unification in 1990 is mainly an unplanned ecological bonus of the unprecedented deindustrialization, rather than an achievement of united Germany's government's active environmental policy.¹

A number of considerations below contribute to this differentiated view of environmental policy in East Germany. First of all, the main environmental problems are mentioned and their causes ascertained. There then follows an outline of the environmental efforts by East Germany and discussion of the question of the specific possibilities offered by a socialist environmental policy. Finally, the link between state environmental policy and the independent environmental movement, as well as the contribution made by the latter to the Peaceful Revolution in autumn 1989, are examined.

2. The Environmental Situation and Socialist Environmental Policy in East Germany

Environmental problems grew enormously in the 1970s and 1980s. East Germany was one of the countries with the highest levels of harmful emissions in Europe. The list of serious problems is daunting: air and water pollution in industrial areas, forest decline, large-scale destruction of the countryside by coal mining, soil erosion and soil exhaustion by agriculture, and the radiation and other risks from atomic power stations and uranium mining.² East Germany had very high levels of all kinds of air pollution. For example, the levels of sulfur dioxide pollution were extremely high throughout almost the whole country, exceeding the permissible limits a number of times over (e.g., 30 times higher than in Japan; levels of particulate were over 100 times higher). Smog was officially referred to as "industrial fog." The government claimed that it blew into the country from the west by the wind. Despite the health risks, there were no smog alerts; since the occurrence of smog was officially denied, smog alerts would have been an official admission of the contrary.

¹Information is available at <http://www.otopia.de>.

²Cord Schwartau, "Die Entwicklung der Umwelt in der DDR," in Redaktion Deutschland Archiv, ed., *Umweltprobleme und Umweltbewußtsein in der DDR* (Cologne: 1985).

The use of the country's lignite stocks was the main factor behind the enormous emissions. Lignite (East Germany's staple fuel, called "brown coal" in Germany) is a fossil fuel which was overwhelmingly used in East Germany to generate electricity and heating (in district heating and as domestic fuel). It was also used as a raw material for the chemical industry, since East Germany had insufficient hard currency to purchase oil on the world market. The volume of lignite mined in East Germany increased sharply in the 1970s and 1980s owing to the growing energy demand and the global market for lignite. Energy demand continuously rose owing to obsolete industrial plants. "The pressure to achieve maximum production growth on the basis of technically obsolete production structures and growing energy demand was one of the main reasons for the disastrous state of the environment."³ This basic resource problem was exacerbated by bad decisions, above all in regional economic and structural policy; a planned economy which was loath to accept change; and low capital investment for environmental protection systems owing to financial shortages. The result was near environmental crisis.

The extremely high groundwater pollution was mainly caused by the chemical industry, agriculture and the food industry. Only 17 percent of rivers were usable for drinking water — even if treated — ever since the 1970s. Mechanical cleaning mainly served as a cosmetic measure, since most rivers were clinically dead.

As of the late 1970's, the environmental situation increasingly deteriorated due to the unfavorable international situation. The ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) was driven into a corner by the competition between socialism and capitalism in the 1970s. It tried to counter public dissatisfaction and legitimize its power by means of ambitious production targets and socio-political measures. Owing to problems in foreign trade precipitated by the oil crisis, as of the late 1970s lignite underwent a renaissance in East Germany. Since the country had few other raw materials, it depended on lignite as a source of energy and "with annual extraction volumes exceeding 300 million tons...was by far the world's biggest lignite producer."⁴ The government also pinned its hopes on nuclear power, hoping for a long-

³Sylke Nissen, "Die Sozialistische Arbeitsgesellschaft in der Ökologischen Transformation: Arbeit und Umwelt in der Ehemaligen DDR," in S. Nissen, ed., *Modernisierung nach dem Sozialismus. Ökologische und Ökonomische Probleme der Transformation* (Marburg: 1992), p. 15.

⁴Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, *Die Energiepolitik der DDR: Mängelverwaltung zwischen Kernkraft und Braunkohle* (Bonn: 1988), p. 10.

term alternative to lignite, and nuclear plants based on Soviet technology were built at great expense in the 1980s in Greifswald and Stendal. However, difficulties in Soviet reactor construction and disposal problems led to discrepancies between the ambitious targets and the actual progress made. Against this background, hardly any work was done to develop alternative energy sources (for example solar energy), and even energy-saving measures were all but left off the agenda.

On paper the SED's policy was geared towards the "unity of the economy and ecology." But in actual fact the economy took precedence. Until the 1960s, East Germany's economic policy, despite collective ownership of the means of production, was not very different from that of the West. Its chief goal was to overcome the legacy of World War II (including the wholesale removal of industrial plants by the USSR after the war), by relying on quantitative economic growth. Political authorities only reacted to the worldwide phenomenon of increasing environmental destruction once the consequences had become unavoidably visible and news reports concerning environmental harm had accumulated in other countries.

"On paper" policies appear impressive. There were numerous instances of legislation to regulate sub-sectors of the economy. In 1968, environmental protection was institutionally embodied in East Germany's revised Constitution. In 1969 general environmental legislation was passed, while in 1970 the entire array of environmental protection was collected in the Culture Law for the States, the *Landeskulturgesetz*. Section 1 stated that the natural bases of life and production were to be preserved, improved and effectively used for society, and that the socialist homeland was to be made more beautiful.⁵ This extensive general environmental legislation was made more concrete by individual laws and implementation directives. Environmental legislation ranged from integrating environmental aspects into the various levels of centralized and factory planning, through regulations designed to influence behavior, to economic instruments. In 1971, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Water was set up as a central authority designed to oversee the implementation of the *Landeskulturgesetz* as well as to handle the state planning and direction of environmental protection measures. East

⁵Horst Paucke, "Chancen für Umweltpolitik und Umweltforschung: Zur Situation in der Ehemaligen DDR," in Hermann Behrens and Horst Paucke, eds., *Umweltgeschichte. Wissenschaft und Praxis. Umweltgeschichte und Umweltzukunft II* (Marburg: 1994), p. 13.

Germany was one of the first European countries to establish an environmental ministry and to introduce advanced ecological legislation. This was partly due to East Germany's foreign policy efforts to achieve international recognition, which became an obsession in the early 1970s during the course of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation) process in Europe.

Initially, the East German state made every effort to translate its socialist environmental policy into practice, the aim being to solve the country's main environmental problems in a planned fashion. The 1971-75 five-year plan was the first to include significant funds for environmental protection, with 7 billion marks budgeted for this purpose. However, 4 billion marks of this sum was earmarked for drainage measures in agriculture, while the remainder was intended for repairing environmental damage. The idea of *preventing* pollution was not yet on the agenda.⁶

Nevertheless, in the mid-1970s, public debate and to some extent discussion among specialists on environmental topics came to a standstill. Environmental protection measures no longer featured in the following five-year plans. Unlike the West, East Germany's lack of financial muscle and its close integration within the Comecon meant it was unable to use the oil crisis in the early 1970s to develop new technologies. Instead of switching to *intensive* use of raw materials, energy production relied on the increasingly *extensive* exploitation of lignite — the only natural resource East Germany had in abundance.

Another reason for the deviation from a genuine socialist environmental policy was the general decline in production investment. Under Erich Honecker (who replaced Walter Ulbricht as head of state in 1971), spending on consumer goods was increased and the quality of socialism was increasingly measured in terms of domestic consumption and rising public welfare. As a result, attention was diverted from the protection and increase of nationalized property, which had been the focal point of socialist policy and the identity campaign of the 1950s and 1960s. The quality of public resources such as air and water was neglected. Hence East Germany's policy, which had previously been geared towards collectives, was increasingly replaced as of the mid-1970s by a focus on individual welfare. But as nature was no longer regarded as a collective resource, it was de facto left out of socialist environmental policy. However, the progressive, relatively extensive legislation at that time compared to other countries was hampered by

⁶Rainer Loske, *Umweltprobleme in der DDR und ihre Ursachen* (printed manuscript, Paderborn, 1985), p. 85.

the obvious shortage of natural and material resources. Furthermore, the limits laid down were too weak and funding too low. As of the mid-1970s, East Germany environmental policy became subordinated to key economic and socio-political considerations and was not part of overall policy.

Another crucial weak spot of the country's environmental policy was the secretive information policy combined with the repressive way in which the SED-controlled centralized decision structures were screened off from public scrutiny. Moreover, official environmental debate was highly reactive and ideologically tinged. According to the SED, environmental destruction was caused by capitalist production methods which had not yet been fully overcome in East Germany, and by lack of resources for environmental protection owing to the competition between the two global systems. This argument of course ignored the possibility of alternative economic and socio-political developments, to say nothing of the introduction of more democracy into environmental policy.

On the other hand, limited economic and technical modernization as well as the shortages which plagued the economy also had a positive environmental impact, such as the large extent to which raw materials were recycled and the high reliance on rail transport for cargo. For example, scrap accounted for 75 percent of steel production, 49 percent of paper demand was met by recycled paper, 39 percent of tires were recycled, and by 1983 the proportion of bottles and jars returned exceeded 75 percent. In this respect, too, East Germany wins an international gold star — irrespective of the fact that the high level of recycling was not due to ecological aims, for the secondary raw material (“Sero”) system was of course primarily geared towards conserving scarce natural resources and scarce foreign exchange. In 1980, in order to reduce its huge foreign debt burden, East Germany actually began importing waste from West Germany.

After 1979, East Germany was the only industrialized country to drastically reduce road cargo — partly by switching to rail, and partly by transport-reducing interventions. Moreover, public transport was used for the majority of both local and long-distance travel, and only 44 percent of households owned a car. The emphasis on public transport meant that hardly any new roads or highways were built. This prevented large areas of countryside from being fragmented, and meant that cars were only responsible for a fraction of the pollution and noise they cause nowadays.

The main environmental protection and nature conservation assets were organized in the excellent system of 402 landscape conservation areas and nature reserves, accounting for about 18 percent of the country's entire area.⁷ This achievement was possible because the socialist state was able to dispose of land as a nationally (rather than privately) owned commodity. It is thanks to this nature conservation and zoning policy that nowadays landscapes in East Germany feature high biodiversity. (Apart from in industrial conurbations, the flora and fauna in eastern Germany remained much healthier and more diversified than anywhere in western Germany.)

Suburbanization was countered by restrictive measures. For example, new homes were permitted only in already settled areas, and construction permits were granted almost exclusively to families with several children. Shops and small companies remained at their original sites, and did not move into the surrounding countryside — albeit due to the poor financial situation rather than environmental considerations.

Ecological debate was conducted “officially” by individual scientists and leading politicians as well as “unofficially” within Church-based and autonomous environmental groups, e.g., the state education system, nature study emphasized the value and beauty of the socialist fatherland. The development of an environmentally responsible life style was mainly molded by the many campaigns outside school. Numerous competitions (especially “Help make our towns and villages more beautiful!”) and other events related to environmental protection were designed to raise awareness on the basis of moral incentives. Yet despite political and ideological education and the propagation of environmentally responsible, economically sustainable activity to create a specifically socialist/communist human attitude to the natural environment, the sense of ecological responsibility among the general public was not well-developed.

3. The Independent Environmental Movement in East Germany and its Contribution to Democratization

Ecological problems began to be addressed by the peace movement in East Germany in the 1970s. The first active autonomous environmental groups were formed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, chiefly in response to specific problems in ecological crisis areas in the

⁷Ministerium für Naturschutz, Umweltschutz und Wasserwirtschaft / Institut für Umweltschutz, ed., *Umweltbericht der DDR: Information zur Analyse der Umweltbedingungen in der DDR und zu weiteren Maßnahmen* (Berlin: 1990), p. 48.

south of the country. They mainly began under the auspices of the regional Protestant churches, and the Church continued to be the “roof” under which ecological and other critical groups met, due to its semi-autonomous protected status in East Germany. It was only after prolonged theological and socio-ethical discussion that a strong ecological basis was formed in the early 1980s. During the process of consolidation and changing political conditions, differences emerged in the aims addressed by the various environmental groups.⁸

The Chernobyl disaster mobilized the environmental groups since it suddenly shook the faith in technical progress held by large sections of the population. In response to Chernobyl, in 1986/87 anti-nuclear-power groups arose in Berlin, Dresden, Greifswald and Leipzig. In January 1988, members of different groups founded the *Umweltbibliothek* or environmental library in Berlin.

One aim of the environmental library was to make the numerous books on ecological themes in private libraries publicly available to a broader readership. Another goal was to create a small alternative forum for public debate — essentially, a “public space.” The library was established in 1986 in a church in Berlin, the *Zionskirche*, and rapidly developed into an oppositional center. Events focusing on peace and environmental topics were regularly held, and its activists also published the *Umweltblätter* or Environment Pages — a monthly samizdat bulletin, which soon became the best-known organ of the independent groups. The library helped to link up the various environmental groups in East Germany and provide them with a channel for information. In addition, contacts were established with groups elsewhere in Eastern Europe such as the Greenway network. In 1987, the library was searched and the leading members were arrested, precipitating a broad wave of solidarity in the opposition which forced the release of the “librarians.” The ideological background of its work comprised left-wing, partly also anarchistic, positions. The environmental library was one of the few groups which continued to remain active after German unification, and stayed independent. However, its focus on environmental policy declined somewhat, the group later regarding itself as a left-wing/autonomous entity. Until the year 2001 it published the *telegraph* — a journal which was an important organ of left and left-autonomous groups in eastern Germany.

The program of the environmental groups stemmed from both criticism of industrialized society generally and from the specific

⁸Michael Jones, “Origins of the East German Environmental Movement,” *German Studies Review*, 2, 1993.

political and ecological conditions in East Germany. The focus of this criticism was directed against the misguided industrial policy, with the main target being the energy policy — especially lignite-mining and the planned long-term expansion of nuclear power. In the Church-based opposition, criticism of the environmental situation was linked to criticism of the system itself.

The groups were mainly geared towards Western theories, acquiring books by authors such as Herbert Gruhl, André Gorz, Ivan Illich and Robert Jungk. One decisive aspect of their conceptual development in the 1970s was the reception by East German dissidents of Western ecological research findings, especially the “Meadows Report.” These researches were then used to develop home-grown theories. Important East German theoretical work came from Robert Havemann, Rudolf Bahro and Wolfgang Harich.

In his utopian novel, *Morgen, Die Industriegesellschaft am Scheideweg* (Tomorrow: Industrial Society at the Crossroads), Havemann blended Western findings on the looming ecological crisis with his own ideas of another form of socialism which also represented an alternative to industrial society. His recommendations included converting energy generation to natural sources (solar and tidal energy, geothermal heating, wind power, hydropower), increasing the lifetimes of consumer products, and abolishing individual motorized transport. At the heart of his argument was a new manner of production based on automation, leading to the enormous release of human labor. The resulting free time could then be used for cultural and educational purposes in order to develop a new, ecological way of life. Havemann however was skeptical of the prospects for such a radical change in industry and technology, not to mention in the whole way of life under socialism. He feared that with respect to the impending economic and ecological crisis socialism might be “even blinder than the economic model it worshipped,” i.e., capitalism.⁹

Bahro’s 1977 book *Die Alternative* incorporated insights on the ecological crisis, centering on reduced consumption and the critique of civilization.¹⁰ The idea was that an alternative development would be initiated by a new elite, a new “League of Communists,” who would steer the development of socialism onto a new path.

⁹Robert Havemann, *Morgen. Die Industriegesellschaft am Scheideweg* (Munich: 1980), p. 58.

¹⁰Rudolf Bahro, *Die Alternative. Zur Kritik des real existierenden Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: 1977).

Wolfgang Harich's thoughts on overcoming the ecological crisis led to *Kommunismus ohne Wachstum* (Communism Without Growth), the title of his book published in the West in 1975. In this work he developed his original concept of "dictatorship" into an ecological and distribution "dictatorship" — a society based on the economy of scarcity, which would require asceticism and reduced consumption on the part of its citizens.¹¹

The ideas of above all Havemann and Bahro were studied in the 1970s by activists of the "conspiratorial opposition groups." In the 1980s they were adopted as theories and programs by the environmental groups.¹² The anti-democratic ideas contained in Harich's book, however, led to its rejection by the East German environmental movement, nor was there much enthusiasm for Bahro's communist elite or Harich's affirmation of technology. Criticism of the environmental situation by the Church-based opposition was combined with criticism of the system, albeit to improve it, not eliminate it. There was a general approval of sustainable technologies and an alternative way of life which included ascetic elements. This way of life was however to be achieved by democratization and the establishment of openness, not by decree or dictatorship. Other key starting points in the groups' work included the internal implementation of democratic aims, the establishment of a public sphere for environmental topics, and changing their own life style.

The majority of the members of environmental groups were also involved in other movements, typically the peace and human rights movement as well as Third World movements. Hampered by conditions of partial illegality, the environmental groups were unable to reach a large public. Compared to the population as a whole, they had a very small number of members. Also, they had a low degree of professionalism and lacked resources. Nevertheless, a political and social "counterculture" was created, with a minimal organizational, self-determined structure.¹³

¹¹Wolfgang Harich, *Kommunismus ohne Wachstum. Babeuf und der Club of Rome* (Reinbek: 1975).

¹²Uwe Bastian, *Greenpeace in der DDR* (Berlin: 1996), pp. 83f.

¹³Dieter Rink and Saskia Gerber, "Institutionalization in Lieu of Mobilization: The Environmental Movement in Eastern Germany," in Helena Flam, ed., *Pink, Purple, Green: Women's, Religious, Environmental, and Gay/Lesbian Movements in Central Europe Today* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, Distributed by Wiley, 2001), pp. 83-102.

In addition to criticism of society, the ecological groups tried to personally live out their aims to a high degree. New ecological approaches were above all directly implemented in members' own everyday lives to create a "signal" effect. The members focused much attention on strongly modifying their personal behavior. However, the demands for a new way of life had to be largely implemented within traditional working and living conditions. This honing of environmental awareness can be regarded as a forerunner of the Peaceful Revolution in autumn 1989. However, the partial adoption of Western theories and the resulting orientation towards criticism of consumption were not in tune with the majority sentiment at the end of the 1980s. Material limitations owing to the poor economy and the relatively low prosperity in East Germany at the end of the decade, and especially after German unification, led to even greater problems of acceptance for the environmental movement among the general public than in the West.¹⁴

Ecological mobilizations initially emerged from campaigns aimed at small practical changes, such as the tree-planting campaigns started in 1979 and the "Mobil ohne Auto" (Mobile without Cars) weekends organized by the Church. Following the Chernobyl reactor disaster, an annual "Week of responsibility for creation" was held in Dresden starting in 1986, along with a number of smaller campaigns with a clear environmental focus. Such activities frequently resulted in the formation of new groups and alliances which remained independently active.

In the second half of the 1980s there were more massive protest demonstrations on environmental themes; notably the Pleisse pilgrimage marches in Leipzig with hundreds of participants in 1988 and 1989, and the campaign "a mark for Espenhain." The Pleisse marches protesting the death of a river were called pilgrimages for the religious connotation, since they would otherwise have been forbidden. Since no signs were allowed, people wore black armbands to mourn the death of the river.

One of the biggest campaigns, the symbolic collection and petition entitled "A Mark for Espenhain" resulted in 80,000 marks (80,000 signatures), indicating that the potential for mobilization had gone far beyond the limited circle of environmental activists in 1988. Espenhain, south of Leipzig, was a huge combine left over from the Nazi era that turned lignite into chemical raw materials and released vast quantities of dust, carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide and lethal poisons. There was also a successful protest against the construction of a silicon factory in nearby Dresden in 1989.

¹⁴Bastian, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

East German activists were additionally encouraged and supported by “movement professionals” from West Germany, such as the West German Greens, various independent groups, and especially Greenpeace. As of 1983, Greenpeace tried to become active in East Germany, for example, calling for the cessation of nuclear weapons testing in the Soviet Union (1983), campaigning against the development of nuclear energy in East Germany (1984 and 1985), and a poster campaign against the pollution of the River Elbe (1987 in Dresden). Furthermore, in the mid-1980s Greenpeace began nurturing cooperation with East German environmental groups both under the auspices of the Church (at the environmental library in Berlin) and with the urban ecology groups of Society for Nature and the Environment. Videos (about the chemical industry region in Saxony) and documentaries (on uranium mining in Saxony and Thuringia) enabled the concerns of the East German environmental groups to reach a large audience via a detour through the Western media.

Despite the increase in the public arena for these topics, the growing potential and isolated successful mobilizations, it proved impossible to penetrate the blockade imposed by the repressive East German system.¹⁵ This was above all due to the effectiveness of the East German state security service, the Stasi. The Stasi classified the environmental groups under Church auspices as the “environmental movement independent of the state,”¹⁶ and began to infiltrate and subvert them. A “central operational campaign” code named “Rainbow” was drawn up for 1990 under which activities against the East German environmental groups and their ‘infiltration’ by Western environmental groups and associations were to have been integrated, allowing a coordinated, powerful attack. But history intervened first.

The official ecology debate in East Germany was above all conducted by the GNU (Society for Nature and Environmental Protection) founded in 1980, which was the largest voluntary nature conservation organization in East Germany. A state organization, the GNU was the only official attempt to encourage grass-roots work among dissident Party members and independent intellectuals. It was part of the *Kulturbund* (League of Culture) and combined traditional

¹⁵Hubertus Knabe, *Umweltkonflikte im Sozialismus. Möglichkeiten und Grenzen Gesellschaftlicher Problemartikulation in Sozialistischen Systemen. Eine Vergleichende Analyse der Umweltdiskussion in der DDR und Ungarn* (Cologne: 1993).

¹⁶Christoph Kuhn, “Inoffiziell Wurde Bekannt...” *Maßnahmen des MfS gegen die Ökologische Arbeitsgruppe beim Kirchenkreis Halle* (Magdeburg: 1997), p. 12.

conservation with approaches of modern environmental protection in the form of the Urban Ecology interest groups. From the originally 40,000 environmentally active members when it was founded, by 1989 its membership had grown to 60,000. Nevertheless, the GNU had little political clout and the political ecology approach was hardly represented in it.

Autumn 1989 was dubbed by protagonists of the environmental movement as the chance for an “ecological republic.” Environmental issues played an outstanding role in the mobilizations in autumn 1989, especially in the initial phase until the breaching of the Berlin Wall. By the end of the 1980s, environmental destruction had become glaringly obvious, especially in the south of East Germany, becoming a reason for the mass demonstrations.¹⁷ This was mainly due to the glaring environmental problems, but the state’s zero-information policy of secrecy since the early 1990s also contributed to the growth of opposition. Since the problems were mainly caused by industry, responsibility clearly lay with the state and the solution had to be a fresh economic and environmental policy. Especially in the industrial areas in the south where pollution was high, various aspects of the environmental situation became themes of mass demonstrations such as those held every Monday in Leipzig. Moreover, environmental reform was an issue which was shared by otherwise differing oppositional tendencies, thus contributing to unity.

The problems debated at that time were both general and regional. General topics aimed at shifting the model of society towards ecological modernization (of industrial production and energy usage); examples of regional environmental problems were lignite mining and air and water pollution. The demands were for environmental data to be published, the abandonment of nuclear power, the reduction of air and water pollution, and the cessation of the destruction of the countryside by lignite mining. Ecological aims gained increasing attention thanks to alarming stories in the media. Reports on “the dirtiest place in Europe” (the village of Mölbis south of Leipzig), “Lake Silver” in Bitterfeld (a huge deposit of diverse, mostly highly toxic chemicals) and the radioactive slagheaps created by uranium mining in Thuringia caused public anger and forced those responsible to react.

During the interregnum between the fall of the wall and the annexation by West Germany, citizen groups held a kind of dual power through the “round tables.” The term first occurred in 1989 in Poland. The oppositional trade union Solidarity forced the state government to

¹⁷Wolfgang Schneider, ed., *DeMONTAGEbuch* (Leipzig/Weimar: 1990).

allow a Round Table to be set up, where Solidarity managed to have the first civil liberties granted. This idea was adopted by the citizens' movements in East Germany in the same year and implemented together with the introduction of democratic parties in December 1989 until the first free elections to the East German parliament in March 1990. This was a way of involving the newly founded citizens' movements and parties in government, allowing important demands to be put through and facilitating the transition to democracy.

The Church-based opposition groups and the various associations in the League of Culture were closely involved in the formulation and implementation of political and environmental measures via their participation in the Green Round Tables, and they had a strong influence on the democratization of environmental policy. In December 1989 the Green Round Table was convened, whereupon similar bodies were set up in many other towns. Mainly for that reason, the Peaceful Revolution was able to achieve significant environmental successes. For example, the nuclear power stations were closed by Minister without Portfolio and former environmental activist Sebastian Pflugbeil. The nuclear power stations in Rheinsberg (north of Berlin) and Greifswald were shut down, and construction of a new plant in Stendal on the Elbe was stopped. Incidentally, West German anti-nuclear power activists strutted in borrowed plumes by using this to claim the success of their own movement since the result was obviously a reduction in nuclear power throughout Germany as a whole.¹⁸

Following a resolution by the Central Round Table, in early 1990 five new large national parks were designated, confirmed by the de Maizière government shortly before unification with West Germany, and enshrined in the Treaty of German Unity. In addition, four biosphere reserves and 12 conservation parks were also set up. These national parks are some of the most valuable landscapes in Central Europe and represent characteristic sections of the main large landscapes of East Germany.¹⁹ As a result, over 10 percent of eastern Germany is

¹⁸Redaktion AtomExpress, ed., *...und auch nicht anderswo! Die Geschichte der Anti-AKW-Bewegung* (Göttingen: 1997), p. 44.

¹⁹Helmut Herles and Rose Ewald, eds., *Vom Runden Tisch zum Parlament* (Bonn: 1990), p. 154. According to the German Environmental Expert Council, "The national park program and in particular the establishment of biosphere reserves in 1990...provided crucial impetus for the environmental movement throughout Germany as a whole," Rat von Sachverständigen für Umweltfragen (SRU), "Die Bedeutung der Umweltverbände für die Operationalisierung des Leitbilds einer dauerhaft-

now under nature conservation (not to mention the large areas subject to landscape protection). Since conservation regulations are now treated much more strictly than before, this is far more even than in the old East Germany.

The Round Table went on to shut down particularly dangerous industrial plants (e.g., in coal chemistry), to abolish state support for electricity and gas, and to introduce the phased cessation of lignite-mining. The lignite combines were instructed to stop destroying villages and agricultural land.²⁰

Even if the Peaceful Revolution was no “ecological revolution,” given its environmental success it can be regarded as a breakthrough for the environmental movement in both parts of Germany. Although the successes cannot be directly attributed to genuine environmental policy mobilization, the representatives of the environmental movement were among the protagonists of the Peaceful Revolution and managed to put through the main aims of the movement at the Central and Green Round Tables as well as in the role of ministers without portfolio in the short-lived Modrow government. The Peaceful Revolution was also a high point within environmental policy mobilization.

4. Summary/Prospects

This brief excursion through the history of East Germany’s socialist environmental policy shows that initially it reacted faster and more extensively to environmental problems than Western countries. The far-reaching nature and landscape conservation aims enshrined in the *Landeskultugesetz* were better enforced owing to national ownership of the land and the possibilities of long-term planning than is feasible nowadays in capitalist countries.

Yet even though this advantage also existed in principle in socialist industry and agriculture, it could not be used given the orientation towards the “steel model of socialism,” that is an obsolete industrial basis. Moreover, gearing economic and social policy to the Western model of prosperity impeded discussion of alternative economic and social models proposed by “heretics” such as Bahro, Harich and Havemann. Furthermore, the strategy of technological modernization (such as the planned expansion of nuclear energy) ignored its technical risks. This was demonstrated most clearly by the reaction of the East German government to Chernobyl in 1986; the GDR tried to play down

umweltgerechten Entwicklung,” in *Umweltgutachten 1996* (Stuttgart: 1996), p. 230.

²⁰Herles and Rose. *op. cit.*, pp. 92ff, 181.

the extent of the catastrophe, attributing it solely to human failure. As a result, Chernobyl did not pave the way for any changes in East Germany's energy policy.

The model of socialism practiced in East Germany was unable to involve the public democratically in shaping environmental policy. As the environmental problems grew, environmental policy was forced to become more restricted, leaving an open field for oppositional forces. Although the worsening of environmental problems was largely due to the helpless reaction to the increasing competition between capitalism and socialism as well as the ruthless exploitation of nature inherent in the system, it was seen as due to socialist policy. The defensive reaction to any criticism of the environmental situation and the repression of independent environmental groups made the environment one of the central issues of the protests and hence one of the reasons for the collapse of the system.

Consequently, East Germany's socialist environmental policy is difficult to judge. The excellent legislation and institutionalization remained largely ineffective, and the positive impacts (apart from the nature conservation and the zoning policy) were in fact unplanned side-effects of economizing and self-sufficiency measures. Moreover, the disastrous deterioration of the environmental situation in the 1980s cannot be solely attributed to the system itself.

The majestic aims of the dialectical shaping of the relationship between nature and society and socialism — which were theoretically based on the “naturalization of human beings and the humanization of nature,”²¹ formulated in Marx's early work — could not be even remotely implemented. One important reason was that no genuine alternative to the western model of prosperity was developed. Current debate concerning sustainable development can therefore not be orientated towards the environmental policy of actual socialism, but must instead develop its own perspectives. However, if sustainability is not to remain solely an ecological modernization strategy, some aspects of socialist environmental policy could well be included — as long as we learn from the mistakes made.

Unlike in West Germany, the environmental movement in East Germany was hardly able to develop owing to the repressive regime, in particular the lack of democratic media. Under the East German

²¹Karl Marx, “Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte,” in *Marx-Engels-Werke, Ergänzungsband, Part I. Schriften bis 1844* (Berlin [DDR]: 1968), p. 548.

dictatorship its opportunities for exposing scandals and for mobilization were almost zero, and its actual mobilization phase after East Germany collapsed in 1989/90 was very brief. Consequently, the work of the environmental groups under the auspices of the Church prior to 1989 tended to be directed internally rather than externally. Their activities largely comprised theoretical discussions and changes to the members' own lifestyle, while the ecology groups within the *Kulturbund* limited themselves to conservation work in the traditional sense. This explains why in comparison to West German groups there were hardly any moves towards a political ecology. Unlike in West Germany, the East German environmental movement was (and is) not located in the left-wing political camp. Whereas the *Kulturbund* groups thought of themselves as apolitical, the Church groups also contained a large number of bourgeois/conservative positions coming from the context of the Protestant Church.

Following German unification, the East German environmental movement felt forced to copy the evolution of the West German movement in a very short time. New problems had to be dealt with under a different structure, such as the pressure to work more professionally on certain issues, and to finance and institutionalize their own political activity. Yet the Western strategic approaches could not simply be transferred to eastern German sections of the environmental movement owing to the different campaign experience and different conditions. In the new united Germany, eastern German environmental activists faced the choice between founding their own movement anew or joining West German environmental and conservation associations. Despite attempts to recruit newly "freed" East German conservation and environmental activists, there was no great wave of people joining the Western environmental movement. A policy of rapid merger failed, and so the anticipated "smooth transition to the West German association structures" was only carried out by a minority of activists in eastern Germany.²² The expansion of the large environmental and conservation associations to eastern Germany had ambiguous consequences: on the one hand, it enabled workable structures to be built up in eastern Germany; on the other hand, many East German environmentalists experienced a feeling of alienation or even colonization. This explains much of the decline in environmental involvement in eastern Germany. Furthermore, during the 1990s the environment was overshadowed by crucial social and (un)employment concerns.

²²Hermann Behrens, et al., *Wurzeln der Umweltbewegung. Die "Gesellschaft für Natur und Umwelt" (GNU) im Kulturbund der DDR* (Marburg: 1993), p. 87.

In the 1990s, the activities of groups in eastern Germany focusing on lifestyle and habitat were continued by the establishment of ecological villages and communes. One of the most famous was *LebensGut Pommritz* in Saxony, which was based on the ideas of Rudolf Bahro. Its ethic is the “search for a different inner state of mind and way of life” geared very much to “self-limitation and the corresponding sustainable economic circulation.”²³ Bahro sees the goal of social progress as a “cultivated subsistence economy” based on an environmentally sustainable economy and on small and medium-sized technologies. Local and regional self-supply is regarded as being constitutive for life in manageably small communities. These “base communities” would form basic units of human life and be characterized by personal communication. *LebensGut Pommritz* and other communes, ecological villages and “new communities” are a further development of commune projects and ideas from West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s, and currently make up an expanding network.²⁴ Alongside Bahro’s ideas, interest is growing in the ideological foundations of Deep Ecology,²⁵ as well as spiritual and esoteric ideas. In addition, analogies and parallels are unavoidable with the early local conservation and nature protection movement in Germany.²⁶

The future development of the east German environmental movement already appears to be mapped out. It will act in a pragmatic rather than a fundamentalist manner, its cooperative approach partly compensating for its mobilization weakness. Its continuation — even at a lower level — is initially safeguarded owing to the infrastructure developed and its institutionalization-based associations. Its partial institutionalization and professionalization will mean aspects of it can be integrated into the political system. Certain sections will leave and become politically radical and fundamentalist, such as the anti-nuclear power protest, which in eastern Germany is also dominated by left-autonomous activists.²⁷ This will strengthen the diversification and particularization of the east German environmental movement, which shows some signs of gradual dissolution. One of the main problems is

²³Rudolf Bahro, *Über Kommunitäre Subsistenzwirtschaft und ihre Startbedingungen in den neuen Bundesländern* (Berlin: 1991), p. 9.

²⁴Information is available at www.ecovillages.org/germany.

²⁵Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁶Rudolf Bahro, *Apokalypse oder Geist einer neuen Zeit. Bleib mir der Erde treu!* (Berlin: 1995); Andreas Knaut, *Zurück zur Natur! Die Wurzeln der Ökologiebewegung* (Greven: 1993).

²⁷Rink and Gerber, *op. cit.*

the continuing lack of attention paid to environmental issues in the public and political arena. However, “Local Agenda 21” and the sustainability discussion may have a positive impact by encouraging exchange and networking among environmental activists and boosting the public influence of environmental groups.