

‘The Socialist Environment Should Be Beautiful’

Nature and *Heimat* in the German Democratic Republic

Daniël Hendrikse

INTRODUCTION

On January 8, 1990, almost two months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the West German magazine *Der Spiegel* featured on its cover a smoky industrial town in a laboratory flask bearing the hammer and compass of East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The headline read ‘*Giftküche DDR*,’ ‘devil’s kitchen GDR.’ The cover story, titled ‘The Land of 1000 Volcanoes’, discussed at length the environmental problems of the GDR. Those problems included dying forests, poisonous rivers, and cities covered under smog. *Der Spiegel* raised the alarm. The magazine emphasized that cleaner air and rivers in the GDR were ultimately in the best interest of West Germany as well (Der Spiegel 1990). Most readers reacted not out of shock, but with resignation. The public seemed to have accepted that the GDR was ‘an ecological mega Chernobyl,’ as one reader described East Germany, referring to the Soviet nuclear catastrophe of 1986 (Kramer 1990). Others were more skeptical of the West German environmental conditions, pointing to the air pollution around Cologne and the low biodiversity in the Rhine (Küster and Weber 1990).

It is well known that both German states had ecological problems in the 1970s and 1980s (Blackbourn 2006; Mauch 2004; Uekötter 2014). Yet, the image of the GDR as a ‘devil’s kitchen’ remains prevalent, both in the popular imagination and, to a large extent, in scholarly literature (Hermand 1991; Dominick 1998; Nelson 2005). This conception overshadows the fact that nature and the landscape played important roles in East German ideology, identity, and everyday life. A crucial part of German identity is the notion of *Heimat*; the idea of home, birthplace or motherland that is connected to feelings of belonging, locality, and familiarity (Boa and Palfreyman 2000, 1-2). Nature is a key aspect of the notion of *Heimat* (Blickle 2002, 112).

This essay will use government-controlled sources such as atlases, magazines, newspapers and educational materials from the 1950s to the late 1970s in order to analyze the function of nature in

Heimat-discourses in the German Democratic Republic. Although I am aware of the demand for a more integrated German history between 1945 and 1989 (Bösch 2015), it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed comparison of *Heimat* discourses in East and West. Therefore, my main focus remains on the socialist state. The early 1970s, which were a turning point in political regards in both German states and for the Cold War, will be the main period under scrutiny. This essay argues that the nature-based notion of *Heimat* played a significant role in East German ideology, identity, and everyday life.

Historiography

Jan Palmowski has contributed the most important work on the construction of an idea of *Heimat* in the GDR. In his influential study *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, he argues that the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED), the ruling party, constructed an idea of *Heimat* that ‘lay claim to a distinctive nationhood for the GDR’ (2009, 7). Palmowski detects a tension between *Heimat* as the SED presented it in the ‘public transcript’ on the one hand and *Heimat* experienced by the population in ‘hidden transcripts’ on the other. He argues that the inhabitants of the GDR conformed to the SED’s ideology, but at the same time developed their own ideas about nationhood. Those ideas simmered under the surface until they emerged after the 1989 revolution (Palmowski 2009, 12, 19). Even though Palmowski dedicated one chapter to nature and the environment, he discussed the environmental destruction and the tensions between the party and ecological activists, rather than the role of nature in *Heimat* itself.

This essay seeks to expand on Palmowski’s work. It also draws on the rich scholarly literature about the connection between nature, *Heimat* and nationalism in German history. Most of these works, however, deal with the period at the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, when conservationist movements sprung up for the first time (Rollins 1997; Lekan 2004; Williams 2007). The Nazis radicalized ‘the assertion that there is an organic link between a people and its landscape,’ as Thomas Lekan phrased it (2004, 1). This idea not only led to the infamous notion of ‘*Blut und Boden*’ (blood and soil), but also to the politicization of the landscape. German landscapes were connected to ideas of *Volksgemeinschaft*, order and power in the Third Reich (Zeller 2007, 22; Bavaj 2016, 94-96, 145-146). *Heimat* had become the expression of *Bodenständigkeit*, a virtue of being ‘grounded in the soil of the homeland’ – in contrast to the anti-Semitic stereotype of the ‘wandering, rootless Jew’ (Lekan 2004, 159, 163).

After 1945, *Heimat* remained an important notion for Germans on both sides of the Wall to identify themselves, despite its newly nationalist and racist connotations. Maintaining connections to their local traditions and nature helped many Germans to come to terms with the past and to carry on with

their lives after the war, although historians have pointed out that *Heimat* was not just ‘a simple cure’ (Applegate 1990, 229).

The historiography of the *Heimat* concept in the post-war period is mostly concerned with its cultural dimension, such as *Heimatfilms*, rather than with nature. Scholars who have discussed nature and the environment in the two German states have primarily considered the history of environmental organizations, often neglecting to make the connection with *Heimat* (Dominick 1998; Nelson 2005; Markham 2008). Until recently, the environmental history of the GDR was long dominated by the image of an ecologically failed state as *Der Spiegel* and other West German media presented it (Kauntz 1986; Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 1988; Der Spiegel 1990; Die Zeit 1990). Scott Moranda and Tobias Huff have challenged the earlier viewpoints with a more nuanced view of the ecological politics in East Germany. As they point out, up to the early 1970s, the GDR was progressive in its ecological standards until General Secretary Erich Honecker opted for economic progress rather than environmental protection from 1971 onwards (Huff 2014, 540-542; Moranda 2014, 81).

By contrast, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), also known as West Germany, turned towards more environmental consciousness in the 1970s. After winning the 1969 elections, the social-liberal coalition with chancellor Willy Brandt took measures to control the environmental pollution in West Germany. The environment was ‘invented’ as a political issue, with the new term *Umweltschutz* (environmental protection) replacing the older *Naturschutz* (nature conservation) (Chaney 2012, 186-190; Uekötter 2014, 86-87). Pollution, waste, and smog had become pressing problems in the West German state – it was, one could argue, the price that had to be paid for the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the miraculous post-war economic growth (Dominick 1998). Whereas the FRG turned towards stricter environmental policies after years of neglect, the GDR focused more on economic growth and less on the environment in the 1970s.

TOWARDS A NEW IDEA OF HEIMAT

Although the SED first rejected the concept of *Heimat* for being bourgeois and romantic, it accepted the term for its usefulness and to differentiate the socialist nation from the capitalist West from 1955 onwards (Jäger 2017). In fact, Palmowski pointed out that *Heimat* became a political tool in dealing with the mass flight to the West in the 1950s; a strong sense of affiliation to one’s homeland should have prevented people from leaving (Palmowski 2004, 377). A clear sign of how the SED adopted *Heimat* into its official program was the formation of the *Natur- und Heimatfreunde* (Friends of Nature and *Heimat*) as part of the state-led *Kulturbund* (Cultural Association) in 1949. With 50,000 members, it became the largest sub-unit of the *Kulturbund* (Palmowski 2009, 30, 46). The appropriation of *Heimat* into the socialist discourse led to a new understanding of the concept.

The SED sharply contrasted the socialist idea of *Heimat* to both earlier and Western meanings. Whereas in West Germany, *Heimat* was still a ‘subject of class struggle,’ in the GDR the workers and peasants had ‘full power’ over the *Heimat*, according to the SED (Kertzscher 1968; Lange 1973, 55). The capitalist bourgeoisie could no longer exploit it to their own needs, but instead, the people now owned the *Heimat* themselves. As a result, *Heimat* had become a sphere of peace and equality in East Germany (Hühns 1959, 211-212). The GDR version of *Heimat* was thus connected to the ideological dictums of dialectic and historical materialism, as well as socialist virtues such as progress, unity, and solidarity (Schobeß 1959). It was one of the many political tools to promote anti-Americanism, anti-fascism, and to strengthen its ties to other countries in the socialist bloc (Palmowski 2009, 53).

Neither the ideological connection nor the propagandistic uses of *Heimat* were truly innovative; indeed, it was not the first time *Heimat* was used ideologically to legitimize a dictatorship (Bavaj 2016). The real innovation in the GDR’s idea of *Heimat*, which also became its most distinctive feature, was an improbable combination of nature and technology. As a country of workers and peasants, the GDR stressed its industrial character from its origin as an autonomous state. However, nature was never absent in this conception. In the notion of *Heimat*, the two came together in a complementary way. One reader of *Natur und Heimat*, the highly popular magazine of the *Natur- und Heimatfreunde*, summarized this almost as a propaganda slogan: ‘Where potatoes used to be harvested, now steel moves and fertilizers are produced.’ (Nierath 1959).¹

However, I should point out that Hans Nierath, who wrote this letter, criticized the magazine for paying too little attention to the industrial side of the *Heimat* concept. Indeed, in the early 1950s, *Natur und Heimat* focused primarily on traditional pastoral themes, such as animals, plants, regional history, and old crafts. This traditional view is even clearer in the choice of images, most of which show seemingly unspoiled nature and villages in the tradition of the despised bourgeois imagination. *Heimat* was still connected to a mythicized sense of time (Blickle 2002, 42).

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the ‘traditional’ image of *Heimat* changed towards the socialist conception of *Heimat*, where industry and nature were integrated into one entity. This development coincided with the construction of the GDR as an industrial state. A good example of this new idea of *Heimat* is the illustration on the cover of the 1959 annual index of *Natur und Heimat*. In a stylized, almost abstract manner, it shows an antlered deer in a forest, while a large dam with flood gates and a nuclear power plant loom in the distance (*Natur und Heimat* 1959, 597). This image, which promotes the modern socialist idea of *Heimat*, contrasts strikingly with the ‘traditional’ images of *Heimat* in which nature was depicted as unspoiled by modernity. In the new socialist idea of *Heimat*, nature, and industry went hand in hand.

On the whole, readers of *Natur und Heimat* embraced this new concept. In many letters to the editors, they expressed their gratitude for introducing it. For example, Hans Kästner from Thuringia wrote that

he was glad that the magazine did not provide space for ‘backward-looking nature sentimentality (*Naturrührseligkeit*) and fake *Heimat* romanticism’, but that it instead made an effort to explain the new, real feeling of *Heimat* as ‘every materialistic thinking man should experience it’ (Kästner 1959). For this reason, another reader argued that *Natur und Heimat* should become compulsory literature for all district secretaries (Albrecht 1959). Even though letters to the editors in the GDR remain a problematic source because they were sometimes fabricated by journalists (Fiedler and Meyen 2015), they nonetheless demonstrate how the Party wanted its citizens to embrace the new concept of *Heimat*.

***Heimat* in GDR Ideology and Culture**

Industry and modern technology in the new idea of *Heimat* replaced the role of pastoral arts and crafts of the older conceptions of *Heimat*. The combination of nature and industry dominated not only the *Heimat* discourse in the GDR but also the self-perception of the East German nation at large. I will now demonstrate how it became one of the main ideas of the state’s ideology that found its way into society via science, education, and entertainment.

In the preface to the main atlas of the GDR, Werner Scheler, president of the Academy of Sciences, stated that the starting point of the atlas was the ‘unity of natural and societal relations and of the close interaction between human and nature’ (Akademie 1976).² This goal might not be that surprising for an atlas since most atlases deal with both human and physical geography. However, the connection between the two more important in the GDR than in the capitalist world. The geographer Edgar Lehmann asserted in his introduction that ‘the atlas comprehends the entire territory of the GDR as the diverse operational area of natural and societal factors, especially the economy. (...) [The atlas] can serve as a basis to the much-discussed critical theme “nature – society,” which it so urgently needs’ (Akademie 1976).³ It is clear that the combination of nature and society was not just of interest for geographical specialists, but that it also formed a central question in Marxist-Leninist ideology, the official *Weltanschauung* of the GDR.

The conception of the man-nature relationship according to Marxism-Leninism is complex, to say the least (Harvey 2001, 52). Following Marx, history could be understood as ‘the story of man’s expropriation from nature and from the primitive, natural community’ (Quaini 1982, 57). In other words, the worker is not only alienated from the means of production, but also from nature itself. The relation between man and nature in modern times is thus essentially a dialectic one (Lange 1973, 31-32). Yet, man remained a natural being, according to Marx and Engels (Parsons 1977, 9). Reconstructing unity between man and nature did not close the door on industry, because ‘industry is the actual, historical relationship of nature,’ said Marx (quoted in Parsons 1977, 217). Nature in the Marxist sense should not be confused with the ‘bourgeois’ understanding of nature. Whereas the latter promoted a sense of purity in ‘unspoiled’ nature, the former sought to embrace the human impact on

the natural world. Socialism would put nature, ‘the most conservative element of our country’ (Valentin Kataev quoted in Lange 1973, 87), in service of the future. As a result, in order to achieve communism, one of the major tasks of socialism was to reconstruct the disrupted relation between man and nature.

It is important to keep in mind that nature is not a thing-in-itself that is simply ‘out there,’ but as Bruno Latour has pointed out, it is rather a discursive construct. To differentiate between nature and society as two opposing entities has been one of the main elements of Western modernity, which was used to distinguish from pre-moderns who lacked this distinction (Latour 1993, 99). However, if we understand Marxism-Leninism as a particular version of modernity, the combination of nature and society can be seen as a response to the framework of nature-society as defined by the Enlightenment (Arnason 2000). Whereas in the Enlightenment model the asymmetry between the two is understood as an asymmetry between past (nature) and future (society), in Marxism-Leninism the two are combined – for the sake of the future. Thus, the combination of nature and society originates not just in the result of trying to solve man’s alienation from nature, but also to move the realms of society and nature together towards the future. A first practical step towards this end happened when the SED declared most forests and fields in the GDR as the people’s own (Arndt 1971). An additional step was spreading the sense of unity between humans and nature, for example through education.

From an early age, children in the GDR were taught to love the *Heimat*. For example, kindergarten teachers could show a slideshow called *Beobachtungen im Wald* (Observations in the forest) and let them hear a vinyl record with sounds of nature. The instructions for the teacher on the record sleeve state that ‘the children should become aware of the beauty of nature, [and] the significance of workers for the preservation of plants and animals’ (Schola 1976).⁴ Other ways in which *Heimat* was introduced to children happened at the youth organization *Junge Pioniere*, which was directed at children from six to fourteen years. There they would learn the song ‘*Unsere Heimat*,’ which praised the plants and animals as a part of *Heimat*, next to the cities and villages. The song ended with the phrases ‘We love the *Heimat*, the beautiful *Heimat*,/ And we protect it,/ Because it belongs to the people,/ Because it belongs to our people’ (quoted in Palmowski 2009, 186).⁵

Entertainment, as a part of popular culture, was also connected to the notion of *Heimat* to a large extent. It was a common theme in GDR music, and the music was a popular medium to transmit love for the socialist fatherland, even though many historians have overlooked this connection. Children at the age of ten or eleven might have listened to ‘selected battle and partisan songs of the working class’ in school, including ‘The *Heimat* has beautified itself,’ ‘On the earth flowers blossom,’ and ‘I go through a grass-green forest’ (Schola 1977).⁶ Other albums, also directed at children, included the record ‘We love our *Heimat*’ part of the series ‘Our new music (Songs for the Youth and Masses).’⁷ In popular music such as *Schlagers*, *Heimat* appeared time and again. Singer Jo Kurzweg closed his

album 'In the green forest' (1977) with the song 'Well goodbye to you, my dear motherland' (Amiga 1977a).⁸ In the same year, the compilation album 'Wind belongs to hiking' appeared (Amiga 1977b).⁹ These songs were connected to *Heimat* in the national sense, encompassing the whole of the GDR – or even the whole of Germany, that remains deliberately vague. *Heimat* in the regional sense could also be found among GDR music, like the album *Harzer Lieder* with songs from the Harz region (Amiga 1976).

It should be noted that in music the traditional view of nature prevailed. The album covers show rural areas or forests, without any signs of urbanization or modern industry. Also, in most other forms of entertainment such as television programs the traditional, timeless image of *Heimat* predominated (Palmowski 2009, 186-187).

Hence, in the concept of socialist *Heimat* different ideas of nature existed next to each other. The SED promoted the Marxist-Leninist view, where nature was the workers' possession and thus consisted of both natural and industrial elements. In entertainment and popular culture, however, *Heimat* was related to the more traditional view of unspoiled nature and old villages. These two different conceptions of nature (industrial modern or timeless nostalgic) coexisted without being similar and were both present in the notion of *Heimat*. Depending on the context and circumstances, GDR citizens could relate to either of them.

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN THE GDR

Environmental pollution was not unheard of in East Germany, even though some historians present it as such. Sonja Boehmer-Christiansen, for example, has argued that nature was a blind spot for the SED, since 'Marxism-Leninism gave no guidelines on how to deal with the environment.' Environmental problems were connected to the capitalist West, which implied that 'socialism could afford to be a little dirtier,' she wrote (1998, 71-72). Considering the Marxist-Leninist man-nature relationship as discussed above, one has to conclude that Boehmer-Christiansen's view is erroneous. In fact, Marxism-Leninism prescribed the protection of nature – not for its own sake, but to take it along in the proletarian revolution. In theory, socialism would be much better for the environment because it protects nature from capitalist exploitation. Yet, the question remains: how could the environmental problems in the GDR get so badly out of hand despite the ideological focus on nature as an essential part of *Heimat*?

Environmental pollution was actually a topic of conversation among scholars and the general public in the GDR. On a conference in 1973, East German scientists discussed themes such as river contamination, noise pollution, and atomic radiation. Even global warming was mentioned as 'an important problem that should be solved for future development' (Glaser, Unger and Koch 1976,

14).¹⁰ The scientists agreed that industries should be monitored for their environmental impact because, in a ‘densely populated and highly industrialized nation’ such as the GDR, this was of major importance (Glaser, Unger and Koch 1976, 87).¹¹

Discussions like these did not only take place within academia. In the popular pro-government newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, environmental issues were regularly discussed, even with a critical tone. In her front page column, journalist Brigitte Hering wrote that ‘industry has harmed nature in multiple ways. It ruined the air with sulfur dioxide, flue ashes, and other exhaust gasses, poisoned rivers and lakes with all kinds of chemicals. It destroyed the biological self-purifying power of water, and weakened the reproductive capacity of nature at large’ (Hering 1971).¹² However, it was not yet too late. Hering thanked the SED for the week of socialist *Landeskultur* (land improvement), which was directed at environmental protection. Despite this, the tone of the column is clearly critical and alarming.

Between the 1950s and the early 1970s, the SED organized weeks such as the *Naturschutzwoche* (nature protection week) and the week of socialist *Landeskultur* to promote nature protection and environmental awareness (Huff 2014, 541). *Heimat* served as the main reason for environmental protection in three ways; ideologically, to maintain a balance between nature and industry; economically, to have enough natural resources; and aesthetically, to have a beautiful country, since ‘the socialist environment, in which we live, should be beautiful’, as a SED-ideologue put it (Kertzsch 1968).¹³ Therefore, the state presented environmental measures as progress (Anonymous 1972).

However, in the later 1970s and especially in the 1980s, several internal and external affairs led to a more contested attitude towards the environment. As Tobias Huff has pointed out, Honecker preferred to focus on economic growth rather than on environmental protection, because the SED tried to solve their legitimacy deficit through introducing more consumer goods to society (2014, 543). This main internal factor coincided with the oil crises of the 1970s and reduced oil exports from the USSR. These problems in energy supplies led to an even stronger reliance on brown coal in the GDR. The outdated, inefficient practices of the East German industry had, as a result, the extensive pollution and damaging of the environment. By the end of the 1980s, the once so important balance between industry and nature was severely disrupted. The environment had become a taboo subject (Hermand 1991, 146).

These changes, important as they were, did not mean that the role of nature and *Heimat* in GDR ideology changed fundamentally. There was only a small shift in interpretation, with more emphasis on nature in service of technological progress and less on the protection of nature. The vagueness of Marxism-Leninism and various readings of the canonical writings made this interpretational shift possible. Even though the change, in theory, seemed negligible, the consequences were disastrous for the East German environment. Because of this widening gap between nature as it was presented and as

it actually was, *Der Spiegel* claimed that the East German party apparatus was not even aware how grave the environmental conditions were (Der Spiegel 1990).

CONCLUSION

After an initial rejection, the SED, East Germany's ruling party, embraced *Heimat* as part of the socialist ideology. In the official view, *Heimat* consisted of a harmonious combination of nature and industry. However, within popular culture and entertainment more nostalgic and anachronistic images of 'unspoiled' nature also appeared as a part of *Heimat*. Thus, the discursive construction of nature took various forms, leading to slightly different ideas of *Heimat*. The general ambiguity of the term *Heimat* made it possible for different groups to find their own meaning in it. After Erich Honecker took over power in 1971, he prioritized economic development over sustainable policies. Whereas the consequences for the environment were detrimental, this did not lead to a major shift in ideology. Nature had to serve progress and the sake of communism, according to ideologues. How this was done, was open to various interpretations. This helps us to understand how severe environmental problems could go hand in hand with ideas about nature as a part of *Heimat*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Riccardo Bavaj and Claudia Kreklau for their comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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¹ *‘Wo früher Kartoffeln geerntet wurden, fließt jetzt der Stahl, werden Düngemittel hergestellt..’*

² *‘Einheit natürlicher und gesellschaftlicher Beziehungen und der engen Wechselwirkung zwischen Mensch und Natur.’*

³ *‘Der Atlas umfaßt das gesamte Staatsgebiet der DDR als das vielfältige Operationsfeld von Faktoren der Natur und Gesellschaft, insbesondere auch der Wirtschaft. (...) Dem viel angesprochenen Problemkreis „Natur – Gesellschaft“ kann er [der Atlas] als eine der festen Grundlagen dienen, deren dieser so dringend bedarf.’*

⁴ *‘Den Kindern soll durch das farbige Bildmaterial die Schönheit der Natur, die Bedeutung des arbeitenden Menschen für die Erhaltung von Pflanzen und Tieren vor Augen geführt werden.’*

⁵ *‘Und wir lieben die Heimat, die schöne./ und wir schützen sie./ weil sie dem Volke gehört./ weil sie unserem Volke gehört.’*

⁶ *‘Die Heimat hat sich schöngemacht’, ‘Auf der Erde blühen Blumen’ and ‘Ich geh durch einen grasgrünen Wald.’*

⁷ *‘Wir lieben unsere Heimat; Unsere neue Musik (Jugend- und Massenlieder).’*

⁸ *‘Im grünen Wald’ ; ‘Nun ade, du mein lieb’ Heimatland.’*

⁹ *‘Der Wind gehört zum Wandern .’*

¹⁰ *‘...ein wichtiges Problem, das für die zukünftige Entwicklung gelöst werden müßte.’*

¹¹ *‘...ein hochindustrialisiertes und dicht besiedeltes Land.’*

¹² *‘Die Industrie hat der Natur auf vielfältige Weise Gewalt angetan. Sie verpestete die Luft mit Schwefeldioxid, Flugasche und anderen Abgasen, vergiftete Flüsse und Seen mit verschiedenen Chemikalien. Sie zerstörte damit das biologische Selbstreinigungsvermögen vieler Gewässer und schwächte überhaupt die Reproduktionskraft der Natur.’*

¹³ *‘die sozialistische Umwelt, in den wir leben, soll schön sein.’*