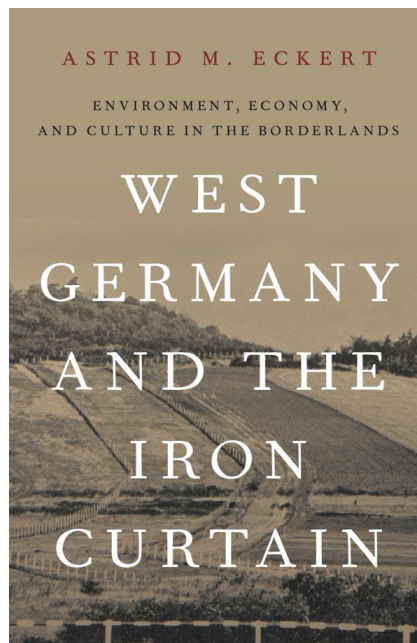


2019 Hans Rosenberg Book Prize Laudatio

Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (Oxford University Press, 2019)

Like a landscape, this book opens the eye and expands the horizon with every chapter, offering new vantage points, unexpected turns, and hidden depths. Geographically it explores the not-so-thin zonal borderlands (*Zonenrandgebiete*) lying on the West German side of the Iron Curtain, from the urban communities of Schleswig-Holstein bordering the Baltic Sea in the north, to rural parts of Bavaria in the south that bordered either East Germany or Czechoslovakia. In these borderlands, Eckert examines the interlocking policy issues faced by economic aid demands caused by underdevelopment, the growth of a tourist industry, public debates about transborder pollution, and the planned construction of a nuclear site close to the border. Although the book's focus falls mainly on West German territories and policies, East Germany is—appropriately—never far from the hinge of Eckert's analysis.

The book's chronology is equally expansive, beginning with the immediate postwar years when two Germanies appeared and continuing across the alleged historical caesura of 1989/91 into the twenty-first century. organize her chapters special impact and borderlands are never fact or irresistible shown to have been along three axes: physically, watchtowers, fences and competing visions of what development might mean and politically, with aid negotiations, and public analytical lenses, the author borderlands were not instead acted as a conduit of countervailing: objectifying obfuscation, wildlife refuge and environmental degradation, effective activism and thwarted advocacy. In these and other ways, Eckert provides the reader with four or five books in one, whereby the whole is indisputably greater than the sum of the parts.



Yet the author's decision to thematically lends this book its readability. The zonal treated as a simple geographical development: rather, they are constituted and constructed through checkpoints, mines; mentally, through the Iron Curtain and regional for Germans' future wellbeing; packages, inter-German protests. Through these shows us that the Iron Curtain's empty or dead spaces, but interactions that were often gazes and defensive

The research that underpins Eckert's argument is impeccable, drawn from over twenty regional, national, and international archives and supported by exhaustive print materials (including many telling illustrations). The author uses maps and statistics to good effect, for example when

she makes dry facts about the chloride concentration in the Werra River into a gripping, revelatory tale of science being used, and misused, in ways all too familiar to us in 2020. She also provides the profound insight that West German officials erred in ignoring or dismissing evidence of environmental disaster in the East: had they grasped the implication of such disaster, they would have understood it as a sign of East Germany's increasing political fragility.

Lastly, the author's erudition and breadth of vision highlight the timeliness of this book. For flora and fauna—not to mention the human populations that rely on them—the disappearance of the Iron Curtain did not presage a new golden age; climate change has ignored the political rupture of 1989/91. Eckert pulls the reader ineluctably into the present day, ending her book with a poignant rumination about borders and walls not falling in the age of globalization but becoming ever more a part of our lives as they are instrumentalized with inhumanity in the name of state security. With such observations Eckert does not need to bend her sources toward a cautionary tale: they point in that direction so demonstrably that the author's prose can be eloquent and clear-eyed at the same time.

The Hans Rosenberg book prize committee congratulates Astrid Eckert for this innovative exemplar of environmental history and its deeper truths, beautifully crafted, as it is, with the toolkits of social, political, economic, and cultural inquiry.

The 2019 Hans Rosenberg Book Prize committee

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