

ARTICLE

A River Runs through It: The Elbe, Socialist Security, and East Germany's Borders

Julia E. Ault

University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Email: julie.ault@utah.edu

Abstract

This article traces the course of the Elbe River from Czechoslovakia through the German Democratic Republic (GDR) into the Federal Republic, where it flows into the North Sea. As the GDR's main water artery, the Elbe's border crossings became a site of security concern for the GDR. Traversing the GDR's border with fellow communist state Czechoslovakia as well as its rival West German state, the river linked the GDR to a larger ecological system as well as transnational sociopolitical dynamics. These connections illuminated the GDR's crucial position in central Europe and beyond. Yet the Elbe also presented challenges for the GDR in terms of controlling information, people, and pollution that streamed into—and out of—the country. The river thus was a precious and contested resource that revealed the communist dictatorship's limited ability to control nature, humans, or interactions between the two. Ultimately, the Elbe's border crossings were a site of transnational and global connection that called into question the GDR's domestic legitimacy and international standing.

Keywords: GDR; borders; Elbe River; environment; security

On November 14, 1987, five Greenpeace members from Hamburg, West Germany, protested on the famous Georgi-Dimitrioff (now Augustus) Bridge in Dresden, East Germany. The demonstrators crossed the Iron Curtain to demand improved water conditions in the Elbe River that flowed from northern Bohemia in Czechoslovakia through East Germany and into West Germany, passing through Dresden and Hamburg, before emptying into the North Sea. The Greenpeace protestors carried flyers that proclaimed, "Pollutants are borderless—Dresden—Hamburg—North Sea—Water is Life."¹ In both Czechoslovakia (CSSR) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany, GDR), runoff from factories dumped high levels of heavy metals and other contaminants into the water, damaging and killing plant and animal life in the North Sea. Moreover, residents living near the river consumed dangerously degraded drinking water that contained nitrates, mercury, chromium, nickel, and a host of other pollutants.²

After the Second World War, international settlements reshaped the geographies of central Europe and disrupted existing economic and political networks.³ The GDR exemplifies

¹ Robert Havemann Gesellschaft (RHG) Th 02 07, Greenpeace, "Die Schadstoffbelastung der Elbe," November 14, 1987.

² Bundesarchiv (BArch) MfS HA XVIII 21998, "Stellungnahme zu den Flugblättern der Internationalen Umweltschutzorganisation 'Greenpeace,' die von 5 Mitgliedern der Organisation am 14.11.1987 in Dresden verteilt wurden," 1–2.

³ Astrid M. Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain: Environment, Economy, and Culture in the Borderlands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Edith Sheffer, *Burned Bridge: How East and West Germans Made the Iron Curtain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

how new states and hardening Cold War divisions transformed central Europe and drew reconfigured borders and people. The GDR's history is, in many ways, a history of borders.⁴ As the two new Germanys were established, regions were divided, and cities separated from their hinterlands, creating newly marginalized areas along the German-German border. Places that had once been in the center of the German territories now became peripheries. To the east, too, the GDR's borders were a source of tension.⁵ With the end of World War II, Germany lost territory to Poland and Germans in the Sudeten were expelled. Over the next forty years, the socialist governments closely regulated those borders, and as Andrew Tompkins argues, the GDR and Poland contested them for decades. Though relations improved after a trilateral treaty established "borders of friendship" in 1972, distrust between the GDR and its socialist neighbors, Czechoslovakia and Poland, never fully dissipated.⁶ East German borders produced new centers and peripheries, and much of the GDR's diplomatic will was spent on legitimizing contested borders and reinforcing them.

The Elbe River exemplified the GDR's need to secure its borders, demarcate its territory, and define its sovereign status. Rivers become manifestations of a state's politics, ideology, and culture as regimes attempt to control the banks, flows, biological life, and cargo for their own purposes.⁷ In the years immediately following the GDR's founding, the river was essential to communication across the Iron Curtain and the SED's construction of socialism through industrial output and trade. Given the Elbe's course, the GDR was a recipient, intermediary, and donor of everything human and nonhuman that the river carried. The shipping of goods and people, flooding, and the protection of aquatic and human life all provided challenges to the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Although the border crossings along the Elbe were not highly visible to the public or the media, the river formed a chain of responsibility that linked countries, populations, and waters that did not necessarily directly touch one another. Decisions made upstream reverberated far beyond border regions, tying together these three countries.⁸

Political borders hold enormous symbolic and real power by both connecting as well as dividing. They also often have uneven effects for peoples and states on different sides of those borders. In the context of the Cold War, East Germany's ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) faced existential questions about its borders and sovereignty. The GDR needed to assert itself as an entity separate—with a "capacity for independence in action"—both from the FRG and, in a different way, the Soviet Union, while also having "supremacy of authority" within its borders.⁹ The Elbe's international course underscored East German desire to project legitimacy at home as well as protect and enhance the GDR's reputation abroad by controlling what was in the river, carried by it, or absent from it.¹⁰ While borders often function as a

⁴ Dominik Trutkowski, *Der geteilte Ostblock: die Grenzen der SBZ/DDR zu Polen und der Tschechoslowakei* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2011), 7.

⁵ Trutkowski, *Der geteilte Ostblock*, 8. Eagle Glassheim, *Cleansing the Czechoslovak Borderlands: Migration, Environment and Health in the Former Sudetenland* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press), 2016; Peter Polak-Springer, *Recovered Territory: A German-Polish Conflict over Land and Culture, 1919–1989* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

⁶ Mark Keck-Szajbel, "A Cultural Shift in the 1970s: 'Texas' Blue Jeans, Taboos, and Transnational Tourism," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 1 (2015): 217.

⁷ Maya K. Peterson, *Pipe Dreams: Water and Empire in Central Asia's Aral Sea Basin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4–5.

⁸ Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, ed., *Rivers in History: Perspectives on Waterways in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

⁹ William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949–1969* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 16, 25. Quotations from Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 52.

¹⁰ Christoph Kleßmann, ed., *The Divided Past: Rewriting Post-War German History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001); Simon Mikkonen and Pia Koivunen, ed., *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015); Tobias Hochscherf, Christoph Laucht, and Andrew Plowman, ed., *Divided but Not Disconnected: German Experiences in the Cold War* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005). Literature on East German connections to other Soviet bloc countries—beyond comparative edited volumes—tends to be less developed. Prominent examples,

filter, controlling what can cross a boundary, a river that physically transcends borders challenges that ability and requires more than policing a checkpoint but rather controlling the area around the border.¹¹

In the case of the Elbe, people, water, and biological life floated and flowed across the GDR's borders. The United States' Radio Free Europe, known for its intelligence operations, tracked barges and their crews up and down the river to gain insights into the mood behind the Iron Curtain.¹² The East German secret police, the Stasi, also viewed the river as a matter of national security. It connected the GDR to neighboring states and threatened to reveal unflattering information about the GDR (and the CSSR); it was essential for the functioning of the economy; and its ecological well-being was preserved under the right to a clean environment, as anchored in the 1968 constitution.¹³ Starting in the late 1960s, the Elbe drew attention from East German officials as pollution affected citizens and the functioning of the economy. Through the Ministry for Environmental Protection and Water Management, the Stasi, and other agencies, the East German state sought control of the river and the information it carried.

The Elbe River defied those very efforts along with the enduring notion that political borders are static and impenetrable. A reorientation of Cold War central European geographies illuminates how the river served as a point of economic, environmental, and diplomatic contact. Despite the GDR's efforts to limit interactions across borders, the river functioned as an agent independent of state goals, prompting a different set of issues than border crossings explicitly intended for human travelers.¹⁴ The GDR nevertheless attempted to implement policies of regulation and surveillance of the Elbe. The river revealed information about the GDR to other states, potentially weakening the GDR's standing vis-à-vis its neighbors. Changeable levels of both water and pollution—not to mention trade and humans on board ships—exposed jealously guarded information about the GDR's functioning. The river's course across multiple borders proved to be a liability for the state's security, connecting the GDR to its neighbors in ways that revealed the SED's limitations in controlling nature, humans, or interactions between the two. With socialism upstream and capitalism downstream of the GDR, the Elbe was a shared but contested resource between both socialist friends and ideological competitors.

The Elbe and Its Connections

The Elbe River figured prominently in complex ecological, commercial, and political negotiations that linked central European states long before the Cold War. World War II even symbolically ended on the Elbe when the US and Soviet armies met at Torgau on April 25, 1945. Shortly after that euphoric meeting, though, new and hardening political borders disrupted long established patterns of trade, migration, and regulation. Questions of shipping as well as water rights and quality garnered attention from locals and occupiers. The Soviet zone, and later the GDR, generally lacked large rivers, and officials often fretted over a shortage of

however, include Trutkowski, *Der geteilte Ostblock*; Tytus Jaskułowski, *Przyjaźń, której nie było: Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Państwowego NRD wobec MSW, 1974–1990* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2014); and Andrew Tompkins's article, "Caught in the Net: Fish, Ships, and Oil in the GDR-Poland Territorial Waters Dispute, 1949–1989," in this issue of *Central European History*.

¹¹ Patrick Major, *Behind the Berlin Wall: East Germany and Frontiers of Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2–3.

¹² Richard H. Cummings, *Radio Free Europe's "Crusade for Freedom": Rallying Americans behind Cold War Broadcasting, 1950–1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2010), 6–8.

¹³ Julia E. Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 8; Barch MfS HA XVIII 19276, "Erste Bestandaufnahme zu den bedeutendsten Umweltproblemen in der DDR," erarbeitet April 1981.

¹⁴ For a contrast in conceptions and uses of borders, see Lauren Stokes, Ned Richardson-Little, and Johanna Folland's contributions to this special issue.

water for industrial and residential purposes. The Elbe was the only major river to traverse both a socialist-socialist and a socialist-capitalist border in that order, which poses unique questions about the GDR's independence and interconnection with neighboring states.¹⁵ Regulating borders was crucial to the SED's goal of establishing GDR as a legitimate and internationally recognized state. Protecting and policing East German borders were aimed at normalizing the postwar division and depicting the GDR as more than a mere Cold War invention.

The Elbe (Labe, in Czech) River begins in the Giant Mountains (Riesengebirge, Krkonoše) in Bohemia (today, Czechia) and runs about 1,100 kilometers, primarily through Germany, before emptying into the North Sea.¹⁶ It is one of the largest rivers in Europe flowing through such well-known cities as Dresden, Magdeburg, and Hamburg. Navigable for commercial boats and ships since 1842, the river was an established means for transporting goods and individuals and essential to German territories as they industrialized in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Hamburg's status as an important Hanseatic city relied on the Elbe to bring goods downriver, even as it also brought sewage, pollution, and disease.¹⁸ Like the Danube and the Rhine, the Elbe also was integral to transnational networks of trade and information.¹⁹ After World War I, the Elbe, along with the Rhine, Danube, and Oder Rivers, were internationalized in order to provide newly established and landlocked Czechoslovakia with a means to export its goods. The Treaty of Versailles even entitled Czechoslovakia to lease its own national sections of the ports in Hamburg and Stettin (Szczecin) on the Oder River.²⁰ The Elbe was critical for Czechoslovak trade with the rest of the world via Hamburg's port.²¹ The river had been crucial in linking central Europe for at least a century before the hardening of Cold War lines. During the division of Germany, then, Hamburg's position at the mouth of the Elbe and as a recipient of upstream pollution inspired frustration on the part of local officials and residents, and by extension, the 1987 protest upstream in Dresden.

The physical devastation of World War II and the uncertain border situation that followed disrupted these longstanding trading, communication, and migration networks. The reconstruction of bridges, locks, dams, and other infrastructure prevented trade from quickly rebounding in the immediate postwar years. Moreover, the wreckage of barges and boats from the war posed dangers to vessels carrying new products.²² Even without formal legal status, the Elbe and Vltava Rivers held de facto international status with free navigation based on practice, a situation that the GDR and Czechoslovakia affirmed in a 1957 protocol. And yet, there were still limitations on trade and communication between eastern and western Europe. West German bargemen were not allowed to enter Czechoslovakia, and

¹⁵ The Danube River flows eastward from southern Germany into Austria, before crossing the Iron Curtain into Hungary and on to the Black Sea.

¹⁶ Dirk Schubert, "Path Dependencies Managing the River Elbe and the Requirements of Hamburg's Open Tidal Seaport," in *Rivers Lost, Rivers Regained: Rethinking City-River Relations*, ed. Martin Knoll, Uwe Lübken, and Dieter Schott (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017), 157.

¹⁷ Schubert, "Path Dependencies Managing the River Elbe and the Requirements of Hamburg's Open Tidal Seaport," 157; Gerald Crompton, "'The Tortoise and the Economy': Inland Waterway Navigation in International Economic History," *Journal of Transport History* 25, no. 2 (2004): 8.

¹⁸ Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years, 1830-1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 141-61.

¹⁹ Luminița Gătejel, "Verkehr, Warenfluss und Wissenstransfer. Überlegungen zu einer internationalen Geschichte der Unteren Donau (1829-1918)," *Südost Forschungen* 73 (2014): 415-16; Mark Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002); David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

²⁰ Jiří Janáč, *European Coasts of Bohemia: Negotiating the Danube-Oder-Elbe Canal in a Troubled Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 45-47.

²¹ Ivan Jakubec, *Schlupflöcher im "Eisernen Vorhang." Tschechoslowakisch-deutsche Verkehrspolitik im Kalten Krieg, Die Eisenbahn und Elbeschiffahrt, 1945-1989* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006), 11.

²² Jakubec, *Schlupflöcher im "Eisernen Vorhang,"* 160-61.

Czechoslovak barges were only permitted to travel the Elbe route to Hamburg and did not have access to other waterways in the FRG.²³ The Elbe held both practical and symbolic value for connections between socialist and democratic states.

The Elbe River, and water more generally, was also essential to industrial production, to the health of the population, and to the environment.²⁴ As the GDR's largest river, the Elbe "held great economic meaning," especially given that the country lacked natural resources of value. East German water management officials often declared it was "the largest, and in an economic sense, most important river in the GDR" that flowed through some of the "most densely settled industrial regions of the country." The river provided water necessary for industrial processes in factories, as a reactant, a coolant, and a means of waste disposal. The Elbe also carried important freight, such as "coal, coke, building materials, wood, grain and other agricultural goods, sugar, and cement" within the GDR and across its borders. Authorities recognized that "The Elbe is the largest, and from an economic perspective, most important river in the GDR, whose course primarily runs through the country's most densely populated industrial centers."²⁵ Still, the Elbe is smaller than other central European rivers, which resulted in water shortages for the East German economy. By volume, the Elbe is roughly 2.7 times smaller than the Rhine and 7.5 times smaller than the Danube River.²⁶ Despite being significantly smaller in volume than other central European rivers, the GDR depended on its water not only for transport but also for industrial production. The Elbe was critical to East German industries and to central European trade more generally.

As one of the most industrialized countries in Europe—and the most industrialized of the Soviet satellite states—the GDR faced a shortage of water. From the early on, the GDR worked to use water more efficiently, well aware that pollution and waste created a series of serious problems for the economy and for East Germans. The Elbe's catchment area covered 76.8 percent of the state's territory, and its prominent tributaries included the Saale, Havel (and by extension Spree), and Mulde Rivers. The GDR's most densely inhabited and heavily industrialized regions relied on these rivers, not least among them Dresden, Berlin, and Halle. The Elbe was therefore central to any discussion of water and industry. The GDR and CSSR had agreements about the border waterways dating back to the 1950s, including one from 1955 on sharing information about ice, flooding, and industrial spills. They were crucial to the industrial production needed to fulfill the SED's Five-Year Plans.²⁷ In the late 1980s, the Stasi reported that twenty-three major plants and factories drew on the Elbe and its tributaries' water. They were also the rivers' greatest polluters.²⁸ Nevertheless, maintaining the industrial status quo to satisfy consumer demands was essential and overrode all other concerns. The Elbe and its tributaries were necessary to the GDR's self-definition as a modern, industrial, socialist state.

The Elbe's transnational character forced the GDR to navigate relations both within and beyond the Soviet bloc, and scholars have dubbed it a "loophole" in the Iron Curtain.²⁹ The river connected Czechoslovakia to the FRG in the west and Hamburg's international port. In the 1950s, workers on Czechoslovak ships became key informants for American information

²³ Jakubec, *Schlupflöcher im "Eisernen Vorhang,"* 155–56.

²⁴ BArch DK 5 625, "Stellungnahme zur Konvention zur Zusammenarbeit zum Schutz der Wasserressourcen," March 22, 1974.

²⁵ BArch DK 4 1908, "Analyse des gegenwärtigen Standes der Wasserwirtschaft in den Mitgliedsländern des RGW, ihre Entwicklungsprognose für den Zeitraum 1971–1975 und die wichtigsten Tendenzen für den Zeitraum bis 1980," 1970, 74.

²⁶ "River Systems of the World," (<https://web.archive.org/web/20090919123146/http://www.rev.net/~aloe/river/>).

²⁷ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PA AA) M 1 C 71 76, "Entwicklung der vertraglichen Beziehungen zwischen der DDR und der CSSR im Jahre 1973," January 16, 1974.

²⁸ BArch MfS HA XVIII 21998, "Information über die Entwicklung der Beschaffenheit der Elbe und zur Durchführung von Maßnahmen der Abwasserlastsenkung," August 19, 1987, 1.

²⁹ Jakubec, *Schlupflöcher "Eisernen Vorhang,"* 11–12.

networks, especially Radio Free Europe (RFE), as they reported on water levels, trade agreements, and accidents upon reaching Hamburg. Confirmed and unconfirmed accounts of political purges, flooding upstream, new construction projects, and more made their way to West German and American ears. In 1952, for example, a forty-one-year-old Czechoslovak captain for the state-owned shipping company escaped to the west, where he communicated challenges for the industry under new norms. The RFE notes determined his information important, being “about a subject which has not yet been reported here. The entire report makes a realistic impression.”³⁰ In part for these very reasons, East German officials gradually severed Hamburg from its traditional trade networks, especially after the German-German border closed in 1952.³¹

The East German leadership sought to push Czechoslovak (and East German) commerce to the GDR’s smaller ports to boost its own traffic and reduce reliance on the FRG. To do so, the GDR planned to construct new canals to connect the Elbe to the port of Wismar, a plan that West Germans and Czechoslovaks met with “incredulity as the difficulties of building canals through this territory ... are well known.” It would require breaking through heights of well over 100 feet at several points, only to increase traffic beyond Wismar’s capacity.³² The GDR also attempted to redirect shipping through Rostock, which faced similar challenges to Wismar. Such projects fit into larger Soviet-style water management projects that were a hallmark of Cold War modernization.³³ Moreover, between 1952 and 1956, East German officials permitted Czechoslovak ships to travel downstream but forbade West German vessels from going upstream through the GDR. Both the West German and Czechoslovak governments worked to overturn these restrictions to improve trade, especially because the Elbe River was the only port Czechoslovakia used for western trade.³⁴

The Soviet Union and its Community for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) also waded into these debates, expanding trade on the Elbe from a regional to an inter-bloc issue. The Comecon, backing the GDR, preferred for trade to travel down the Oder or other avenues within the Soviet bloc instead of relying on the Elbe and Hamburg.³⁵ In 1956, East German officials announced an unrealistic canal project in the second Five-Year Plan that would have diverted Czechoslovak shipping to Wismar through the construction of a canal. The canal would have required eleven dams with the goal of creating more hydroelectric power for the GDR, which would have increased the young country’s self-sufficiency. The project would also have helped meet demand for electrical power, which was still relatively scarce in the GDR. The number and height of the proposed dams, however, would have also made travel for barges “long and wearisome,” making it unappealing to the CSSR.³⁶ RFE reports deemed the project to be beyond East German and Comecon resources, likening it to the Aswan Dam in Egypt in terms of scale and practicality. At the same time, the proposal fit large-scale communist construction and understanding of water management as a hallmark of Cold War modernization.³⁷

³⁰ Open Society Archive (OSA), Item No. 03418/53, “Norms in Elbe Shipping,” March 31, 1953.

³¹ Schubert, “Path Dependencies Managing the River Elbe and the Requirements of Hamburg’s Open Tidal Seaport,” 158.

³² OSA, Item No. 7794/56, “Lack of Diplomatic Ties Hampers Elbe Negotiations between Bonn and Prague,” August 25, 1956, 2.

³³ Vincent Legendijk, “Divided Development: Post-War Ideas on River Utilisation and Their Influence on the Development of the Danube,” *International History Review* 37, no. 1 (2014): 80–98.

³⁴ OSA, Item No. 7793/56, “Czechoslovakia,” 4; OSA, Item No. 2968/53, “Controls on Elbe Shipping between Praha and Hamburg,” 1.

³⁵ Jakubec, *Schlupflöcher im “Eisernen Vorhang,”* 185.

³⁶ OSA, Item No. 7793/56, “Czechoslovakia,” 3.

³⁷ OSA, Item No. 8215/56, “Bonn and Pankow Feud over Use of the Elbe River,” August 25, 1956, 2; Legendijk, “Divided Development,” 80–98; Klaus Gestwa, “Technik als Kultur der Zukunft: Der Kult um die ‘Stalinistischen Großbauten des Kommunismus,’” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 30, no. 1 (2004): 37–38.

Both the West Germans and the Czechoslovaks continued to advocate for the Elbe and Hamburg over other options despite East German and Comecon wishes.³⁸ Both of those countries recognized the importance of inland water trade to their economic well-being. West German and RFE officials acknowledged, though, that East German actions on the Elbe were a means of forcing “inter-German cooperation at the government level—and hence for diplomatic recognition” of the GDR. Essentially, the GDR intended to use traffic on the Elbe as a means of coercing the FRG into negotiating with the GDR as an equal, something that the West German government refused to do. Water levels and quality directly influenced river ecology, which reflected an economy’s—and thereby a state’s—performance. Managing waterways became a proxy for international legitimacy and standing. The Elbe thus remained important to trade as well as reinforcing the river’s prominent place in Cold War diplomacy.

The relationship between the GDR and the FRG faced a different sort of complication as the Elbe and other waterways crossed the Iron Curtain. The SED’s hardening of the GDR’s political borders and installation of fortifications in the 1950s as well as the West German Hallstein Doctrine discouraged communication between the two German states.³⁹ The Elbe was one of fifty-two waterways that ran between the two Germanys, but it was the largest and most heavily trafficked. Even today it is the third longest river in Germany and one of the largest by volume.⁴⁰ As of the late 1950s, accumulated pollution from East German and Czechoslovak industry in the Elbe made swimming in Hamburg unadvisable. Rivers inadvertently exposed socialist weaknesses, such as outdated technology that polluted and insufficient environmental regulation. Moreover, older dikes and other infrastructure had been built without such a border in mind, connecting the two sides even as politics divided them.⁴¹ Negotiations between the GDR and the FRG over shared water problems did not gain much traction until the 1970s, when a confluence of improved diplomatic relations and growing environmental awareness on both sides made the conversation more possible.

To the east and the west, the late 1960s and early 1970s were a crucial period for the GDR as it both strengthened ties within the socialist world and gained international recognition. After signing a trilateral friendship treaty with Czechoslovakia and Poland, the GDR relaxed border controls between socialist states, in particular after normalization policies diminished the earlier threat from Prague. These developments increased interactions between the GDR and its Soviet bloc neighbors.⁴² West German policies under Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* also helped normalize relations with the other side of the Iron Curtain. The Basic Treaty between the two Germanys in 1972 further improved the GDR’s international standing, and ultimately, recognition at the United Nations.⁴³ This trend toward international recognition and cooperation between the GDR and FRG reached a high point at the Helsinki Accords in 1975. On a smaller scale, new agreements on travel between the two countries increased the movement of people and information.⁴⁴ These measures stabilized the GDR’s existence, which in turn opened its borders—at least in a limited way—to neighbors on both sides of the Iron Curtain. This change in status posed new questions for the SED leadership about the GDR’s position in central Europe. Having the East German borders align with the SED’s international objectives was key to the GDR’s sense of security, though

³⁸ OSA, Item No. 7793/56, “Czechoslovakia,” 2.

³⁹ Tim Grady, “A Shared Environment: German-German Relations along the Border, 1945–1972,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 3 (2015): 667; Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, 97–98, 119.

⁴⁰ Schubert, “Path Dependencies Managing the River Elbe and the Requirements of Hamburg’s Open Tidal Seaport,” 157–58.

⁴¹ Grady, “A Shared Environment,” 660–61.

⁴² Hermann Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen. Die DDR im internationalen System, 1949–1989* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 429–30.

⁴³ Carole Fink, *Cold War: An International History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, 168–69.

geographic and environmental realities did not always match the SED's political and economic objectives.

As the GDR's diplomatic status became better defined and more recognized, a second phenomenon reshaped states' perspective on borders: growing environmental awareness. Across the Soviet bloc, leadership acknowledged that pollution hindered production and jeopardized citizens' well-being.⁴⁵ The GDR and its socialist neighbors deepened cooperation as degraded waters had both economic and ideological implications. Moreover, transboundary pollution, especially between the GDR and the FRG, potentially undermined the SED's promise of a brighter future in the east as well as its newfound international acceptance. East German rivers primarily flowed west into the Federal Republic, making them the recipient of socialist waste. Green movements and growing awareness about degradation forced countries to address industrial production and pollution at home as well as inherited degradation in the water supply and the air.⁴⁶ As such, shared waterways challenged political and ideological narratives on an international stage, turning rivers into either a showcase or a liability for the GDR.

Thus, the GDR faced a precarious situation in the Elbe as both a river that flowed across a political border and, for ninety-five kilometers, constituted the border between the two Germanys. It intricately connected the GDR with neighboring countries through trade as well as environmental and water management. All of the GDR's neighbors influenced its water policies because water levels and quality and maintaining aquatic life could not be resolved by one country alone. The GDR's borders were critical to establishing independence, restricting movement, and building socialism, but environmental factors constantly undermined the attempt to maintain distance from the world around it.

Starting Upstream: Socialist Borders, Shared Waters

The Elbe was both a source of transborder tension and a necessary topic of negotiation. Despite friendship treaties to improve relations between the GDR and Czechoslovakia, distrust remained, and tensions continued to arise. In the postwar period, the Elbe—and other waterways—generated a series of diplomatic and environmental issues. Though the actual border crossing between the GDR and CSSR was a relatively quiet location, away from any major towns or cities, heavy industry in northern Bohemia affected water quality locally as well as hundreds of miles downstream. Czechoslovak pollution had an impact across the GDR as well as both East German and Czechoslovak affairs with the FRG. The Elbe's position as a flowing body of water that crossed socialist borders created unique and interrelated economic, political, and environmental issues for the GDR. It had to continually redefine its border and friendship with the CSSR to improve conditions in the GDR as well as relations with the FRG. As two socialist states, though, the GDR could not uniformly condemn Czechoslovakia's water management practices because it also relied on the CSSR's support in other arenas.

After 1945, the GDR's borders with Czechoslovakia were new and relations often uneasy. The southeastern part of the GDR felt the settlements finalized at Potsdam most keenly. On the Czechoslovak side, this borderland had been predominantly German speaking until 1945, though both wild and organized expulsions quickly transformed northern Bohemia's demographics. On the East German side, regional and local identities had long made loyalty to Berlin uncertain as they contended with national ones.⁴⁷ Moreover, the Oder-Neisse Line

⁴⁵ BArch DC 20-I 3 715, "Prognose: Industrielle Abprodukte und planmäßige Gestaltung einer sozialistischen Landeskultur in der DDR," September 1968, 7.

⁴⁶ Frank Uekötter, *The Greenest Nation? A New History of German Environmentalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 92–93.

⁴⁷ Glassheim, *Cleansing the Czechoslovak Borderlands*; Caitlin E. Murdock, *Changing Places: Society, Culture, and Territory in the Saxon-Bohemian Borderlands, 1870–1946* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 11–13.

reconfigured Poland's relationship with Germany (in this case, the GDR), and to a lesser extent, Czechoslovakia. The Oder and Neisse Rivers now formed the border between the GDR and Poland, rather than running through Germany. The GDR quickly recognized the new border (and "lost territories") with a treaty signed in Görlitz/Zgorzelec on July 6, 1950, in addition to agreements on water rights and responsibilities in the two rivers.⁴⁸ To complicate matters, the Neisse's headwaters lay in northern Bohemia, and thus required trilateral mediation between Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the GDR on matters involving water quantity and quality.

Water levels in the river determined the ability to move goods, which had a direct impact on the East German, Czechoslovak, and West German economies.⁴⁹ Water management and damming in Czechoslovakia directly affected the ability to transport goods within the GDR as well as from Czechoslovakia to the FRG. If the water was not within a certain range for depth, ships could not safely travel on the river. In 1953, within a six-month period, water levels of the Elbe went from being too high for traffic to travel—boats could not pass under bridges around Dresden—in February to too low for passage along the full length of the river in July.⁵⁰ A year later, storms and heavy rains in the southern part of the GDR generated fears of flooding along the Elbe, especially between Dessau and Magdeburg, where a flood dike was severely damaged.⁵¹ Flooding, and water levels more generally, necessitated cross-border cooperation for the regulation of dams, dikes, and other infrastructure, and often halted the flow of goods until it could be repaired. The Elbe's course through the GDR greatly depended on its neighbor upstream, and thus belied projects to make the GDR self-sufficient and claims that the SED maintained total sovereignty over its territory.⁵²

By the late 1960s, the Elbe featured prominently in the GDR's difficulty in addressing pollution and the problems it posed to the state, the economy, and the environment. The GDR hoped to exert influence over all waterways that "the state border cut across as well as all bodies of surface water through which the state border ran."⁵³ East German officials further sought to have a say in all reservoirs or dams built in Czechoslovakia that might decrease waterflow in the GDR. This position actually infringed on the CSSR's right to manage water how it saw fit, but as socialist neighbors, the GDR sought to exert what influence it could to limit Czechoslovak retention of water to the detriment of the GDR. There was already one example of a Czechoslovak reservoir in Fláje that reduced water levels downstream in the GDR. The East Germans complained that the Czechoslovak government could dam up water, reducing levels "such that there would be economic impacts on territory of the GDR."⁵⁴ Dilemmas such as these propelled the GDR to extend its influence into other countries to improve its own situation. For the sake of economic performance and

⁴⁸ Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen*, 102–03; BArch DK 5 3452, Correspondence between Willi Stoph and Johannes Rochlitzer, April 14, 1965. In contrast, the FRG did not recognize the Oder-Neisse Line as Germany's border until 1970 with Willy Brandt's Treaty of Warsaw. At the Helsinki Accords in 1975, the line (and other territorial borders) was reaffirmed in the final act. Brandt's position on this had changed even from a few years earlier. For a review of literature on the history of these borders, see Andrew Tompkins, "Binding the Nation, Bounding the State: Germany and its Borders," *German History* 37, no. 1 (2019): 77–100.

⁴⁹ OSA Item No. 7793/56, "Czechoslovakia," August 25, 1956, 1–2.

⁵⁰ OSA Item No. 01365/53, "Czechoslovakia," February 3, 1953; OSA Item No. 9549/52, "Czechoslovakia," July 23, 1953.

⁵¹ "Die Lage in den Hochwassergebieten: Bericht der Zentralen Hochwasserkommission der DDR," *Neues Deutschland*, July 15, 1954, 1–2.

⁵² Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 52–54.

⁵³ BArch DK 5 3542, "Entwurf: Direktive für die Ausarbeitung eines Abkommens zwischen der Regierung der DDR und der Regierung der CSSR über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der Wasserwirtschaft an den Grenzgewässern," November 22, 1972, 1–2.

⁵⁴ BArch DK 5 3542, "Entwurf: Direktive für die Ausarbeitung eines Abkommens zwischen der Regierung der DDR und der Regierung der CSSR über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der Wasserwirtschaft an den Grenzgewässern," November 22, 1972, 2.

national sovereignty, the East German leadership attempted to exert power beyond the GDR's borders, though it would have protested if the roles were reversed.

Beyond issues surrounding water levels, the Elbe was heavily polluted when it crossed the East German-Czechoslovak border but became more so over its course through the GDR. On the Czechoslovak side, the Elbe flowed through some of the CSSR's most industrial regions in northern Bohemia. As historian Eagle Glassheim has demonstrated, grave pollution in the former Sudetenland constituted a crisis on the Czechoslovak side of the border too.⁵⁵ Stasi reports frequently referred to the Elbe's "high levels of previous contamination" in the CSSR to explain its seriously degraded condition in East Germany.⁵⁶ The GDR pushed the CSSR to consider the "entire course" of any river that crossed the border or surface waters through which the border ran. Cleaner water flowing from Czechoslovakia improved the situation for both countries.⁵⁷ In Pirna, a few kilometers inside the GDR, a paper factory dumped pulp into the river. Then downstream, factories in Dresden discarded arsenic and other heavy metals to the Elbe's water.⁵⁸ As the river flowed through the GDR, it picked up additional pollutants and toxins from East German industries.

Officials in the East German Office of Water Management were increasingly dissatisfied with water quality in the Elbe.⁵⁹ In 1967, the head of the office, Johannes Rochlitzer, complained bitterly to the deputy minister in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Oskar Fischer, that "yet again a serious contamination, stemming from the CSSR, has polluted the Elbe." Rochlitzer emphasized the economic damage that the water pollution had caused and that affected industries and factories turned to his office for compensation. In turn, he believed it was right that these "demands for indemnities be passed on to the CSSR."⁶⁰ Fischer fully agreed with Rochlitzer's assessment and promised that if negotiations with the CSSR's representative for questions on border waterways failed, "The Ministry for Foreign Affairs will pursue diplomatic avenues with the CSSR, because it is a question of principal importance."⁶¹ Both Fischer and Rochlitzer viewed the pollution and lack of communication as serious and ongoing problems that required additional action. Though Czechoslovakia and the GDR both participated in the Comecon's Conference of Water Management Directors, Rochlitzer turned away from the multilateral organization for improvements in the Elbe. Rochlitzer instead pursued bilateral bargaining.⁶² The Elbe's water quality demonstrated that the GDR was not isolated from its neighbors but rather dependent on other countries.

That same year, the GDR and CSSR signed a Friendship Treaty that supported renewed collaboration on border questions.⁶³ The Prague Spring and the subsequent Soviet invasion

⁵⁵ Glassheim, *Cleansing the Czechoslovak Borderlands*.

⁵⁶ BArch MfS HA XVIII 21998, "Information über die Entwicklung der Beschaffenheit der Elbe und zur Durchführung von Maßnahmen der Abwasserlastsenkung," August 1987, 3–5. The term used in the reports is "hohe Vorbelastung."

⁵⁷ BArch DK 5 3542, "Entwurf. Direktive für die Ausarbeitung eines Abkommens zwischen der Regierung der DDR und der Regierung der CSSR über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der Wasserwirtschaft an den Grenzgewässern," November 22, 1972.

⁵⁸ BArch DC 20 I 3 715, "Prognose. Industrielle Abprodukte und planmäßige Gestaltung einer sozialistischen Landeskultur in der DDR," September 1968.

⁵⁹ The Office of Water Management fell under the purview of the Council of Ministers and was later incorporated into the Ministry for Environmental Protection and Water Management, starting in 1972.

⁶⁰ PA AA M 2 B 1655 77, Correspondence between Johannes Rochlitzer and Oskar Fischer, November 2, 1967.

⁶¹ PA AA M 2 B 1655 77, Correspondence between Johannes Rochlitzer and Oskar Fischer, December 28, 1967.

⁶² BArch DK 4 1701, "Berichterstattung über die Durchsetzung und Anwendung der von der Tagung der Leiter der Wasserwirtschaftsorgane der Mitgliedsländer des RGW beschlossenen Grundsätze und Methoden (Thema 1, 2 und 15)," April 12, 1965.

⁶³ Harri Czepuck and Klaus Haupt, "DDR und CSSR haben ihr festes Bündnis besiegelt und verstärkt. Vertrag über Freundschaft, Zusammenarbeit und gegenseitigen Beistand unterzeichnet," in *Neues Deutschland*, March 18, 1967. This treaty is different from the 1972 treaty on the "borders of friendship" among the GDR, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.

of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 briefly cooled relations between the two countries. Still, Rochlitzer and his Office of Water Management viewed the Elbe as an important topic of negotiation.⁶⁴ In the wake of the Prague Spring—as normalization set in in Czechoslovakia—relations between the socialist states improved again. More agreements reaffirmed a commitment to the Comecon, and in 1972, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the GDR approved the “borders of friendship” as a follow-up to the earlier treaty. Moreover, the East German establishment of a Ministry for Environmental Protection and Water Management in 1972 provided more credence to discussions regarding the Elbe’s environmental and economic importance. The early 1970s opened new opportunities for diplomatic and environmental cooperation.

The GDR and Czechoslovakia finally settled on new measures for the Elbe in 1973, signing them a year later. The CSSR agreed to inform the GDR of flooding, ice, and other disasters or spills that could have an effect downstream.⁶⁵ Through these measures, the GDR sought to balance the constant need to fulfill the Five-Year Plan and the safety of workers, though economic production almost always won out.⁶⁶ At the same time, though, both promised to respect one another. Such pronouncements reflected a broader improvement of relations between the socialist states and closer ties within the Comecon in the wake of the Prague Spring. They promised to respect one another’s sovereignty and to not do anything that “negatively influenced” the other state.⁶⁷ To ensure these questions and others were appropriately addressed, the two countries set up a joint commission that would meet annually to share information and any potential plans for waterways along the border. The agreement between the CSSR and GDR also included provisions and guarantees of passes for the experts who had to traverse the border for these meetings. These measures helped the GDR to exert influence over Czechoslovakia, though they did not provide as many environmental and water management guarantees as the East German leadership would have liked.

Even as the two countries hashed out a new accord, tensions over border-crossing rivers continued, especially regarding the rights and responsibilities for pollution and abatement. In Bärenstein, an East German village along the Czechoslovak border, the textile factory Wedru noticed that the stream it used for production was contaminated with oil. A heating oil plant in Vejprty on the CSSR’s side had spilled into the stream, resulting in a production standstill at Wedru. Accordingly, a representative contacted the foreign ministry to ask about the reparations protocol and to seek compensation for the factory’s lost time and production.⁶⁸ Despite pursuing multiple avenues, though, Wedru did not receive clear answers from the foreign ministry or the newly founded ministry for environmental protection and water management. The foreign ministry ultimately said that Wedru could seek civil (not criminal) compensation. In the past, that practice “had generally been avoided,” but now they could.⁶⁹ Environmental and economic considerations complicated relations between the GDR and Czechoslovakia as the two countries attempted to resolve border disputes

⁶⁴ Barch DK 5 3452, “Entschließung zum gemeinsamen Brief der Zentralkomitees der kommunistischen und Arbeiterparteien Bulgariens, Ungarns, der DDR, Polens und der Sowjetunion an das Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei der Tschechoslowakei,” July 25, 1968.

⁶⁵ PA AA M 1 C 10 77, “Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republic und der Regierung der Tschechoslowakischen Sozialistischen Republik über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der Wasserwirtschaft an den Grenzgewässern,” October 8, 1973.

⁶⁶ Thomas Lindenberger, “‘Havarie’: Reaching East-German Society through the Violence of Things,” *Divinatio* 42–43 (2016): 304–05.

⁶⁷ PA AA M 1 C 10 77, “Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Deutschen Demokratischen Republic und der Regierung der Tschechoslowakischen Sozialistischen Republik über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet der Wasserwirtschaft an den Grenzgewässern,” October 8, 1973, Article 3, Paragraph 1(b).

⁶⁸ PA AA M 2 B 1655 77, “Schadenersatzansprüche des VEB Wedru aus Gewässerverunreinigungen. Schreiben vom 22. 3. 1973,” April 18, 1973.

⁶⁹ PA AA M 2 B 1655 77, “Vermerk über ein Gespräch mit Genossen Kästner, stellvertr. Abteilungsleiter im Amt für Rechtsschutz des Vermögens der DDR,” April 17, 1973.

through means that respected sovereignty but also acknowledged the challenges transboundary pollution created. Neither side was fully satisfied.

The question of transboundary pollution and compensation plagued the GDR from multiple angles as international standards moved toward a “polluter pays” model. In this formulation, which became increasingly popular with Western countries in the 1970s and 1980s, the polluter should be “charged with the cost of whatever pollution prevention and control measures” necessary. It could also include compensation for the damage that resulted from residual pollution, though it would not be obligatory according to the principle.⁷⁰ Even within socialist countries, there was not full agreement on what model to use. Polish officials pushed for a “polluter pays” principle starting in the mid-1970s.⁷¹ If the GDR had agreed to “polluter pays,” however, it could have demanded compensation from Czechoslovakia, but maintaining the status quo was more important. Relations between the socialist states were already complicated with each country expressing frustration with the others’ inaction. Polluted rivers and air crossed from northern Bohemia into the GDR, virtually killing off the pine trees of the Erzgebirge and heavily polluting the Elbe River, among others. And yet, the GDR’s air pollution into Czechoslovakia almost equaled the reverse flow by the mid-1980s.⁷² The Elbe was part of a larger conversation regarding the exporting and importing of different forms of pollution between the GDR and Czechoslovakia.

To paint a more comprehensive, regional picture, cross-border pollution was not limited to a bilateral discussion between the GDR and the CSSR. Poland, too, had complaints about water pollution from the CSSR as well as about the lack of open communication regarding the extent of the spill. In 1986, for example, heating oil from Ostrava spilled into the Lucina River, a tributary of the Ostravice that eventually flows into the Oder River. The oil crossed unchecked into Polish waters, but the Czechoslovak government only slowly admitted to any spill, much less provided hard numbers.⁷³ Spills into the Lausitzer Neisse (Nysa) River also frustrated both Polish and East German authorities, who continued to push for improvement in water quality downstream from Czechoslovakia with goals for the 1990s and even the 2000s.⁷⁴ Miscommunication, distrust, and health problems prompted frustration among the three governments’ respective populations.

Until communism’s last moments in eastern Europe, systemic obstacles and entrenched mindsets protected sovereignty over international environmental cooperation. This interconnection highlights that the communist bloc was not monolithic and that nonhuman actors were dynamic in ways that officials underestimated. The GDR’s socialist borders were closely monitored and policed for a variety of reasons, alternating between trusting and distrusting its socialist neighbors. While the 1970s generally represented a period of opening up along the “border of friendship,” the 1980s generally constituted a retreat and defense of each state’s own interests. As the GDR tried to assert influence over waterways—and especially water quality and quantity in the Elbe—in Czechoslovakia, East German officials also pushed back against attempts to regulate or compensate air pollution affecting Poland. The entanglements that the Elbe and environmental problems posed challenged the clear lines drawn on the map and pushed the SED to work with neighbors at the expense of the GDR’s sovereignty.

⁷⁰ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), “The Polluter Pays Principle: Definition, Analysis, Implementation” (Paris: OECD, 1975), 6.

⁷¹ BArch DK 5 1991, “Information über die 2. Beratung zur Ausarbeitung eines dreiseitigen Abkommens über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet des Umweltschutzes zwischen der DDR, der CSSR und der VR Polen,” 1988; BArch B 136 18820, “Basispapier zur Vorbereitung von Verhandlungen mit der DDR über spezifische Gewässerschutzfrage,” December 22, 1977, 21.

⁷² BArch DK 5 1991, “Direktive für das Auftreten auf dem dreiseitigen Treffen der Stellv der Vors des MR der DDR, CSSR und VRP zu Fragen des Umweltschutzes und der Wawi im Februar 1988 in der VRP.”

⁷³ OSA, “Czechoslovakia—Situation Report,” December 22, 1986, 7.

⁷⁴ BArch DK 5 1991, “Direktive für das Auftreten auf dem dreiseitigen Treffen der Stellv der Vors des MR der DDR, CSSR und VRP zu Fragen des Umweltschutzes und der Wawi im Februar 1988 in der VRP.”

Continuing Downstream: German-German Waters

For the GDR, the German-German border held particular significance. It represented a line of demarcation in the Cold War, making the GDR a self-conscious “display window” for the camp of socialism.⁷⁵ The Elbe transcended that dividing line while also forming ninety-five kilometers of that border, a status that continued to be a source of some tension. As water, pollutants, and people flowed out of the GDR, East German officials had to work to maintain the country’s sovereignty and present socialism in the best possible light. As with the borders to the east, waterways presented a challenge to the GDR’s self-representation both as a beacon of socialism and as an environmental leader.⁷⁶ Water degradation in the Elbe highlighted a chain of responsibility, or a domino effect, from east to west. Pollution that killed fish populations and other aquatic life exposed the GDR’s economic and environmental weaknesses to a Cold War rival. As ecological degradation continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s, West German pressure for abatement increased. East German authorities oscillated between cooperation and denial as they sought to contain political and environmental damage.

As with Czechoslovakia and the GDR, water levels in the Elbe led to tense negotiations between the two Germanys. The greater concern downstream, though, was flooding and ice dislocation in winter as the river grew in volume. The FRG insisted that East German water management plans be approved by West German experts, so they could ensure that the FRG would not encounter “any negative effects,” such as flooding, presumably.⁷⁷ At the same time, any new flood management in the FRG, such as holding back water, could have effects upstream in the GDR. The Stasi suggested that “extreme flooding” could cause damage to 47,190 hectares of agricultural land, five cities and four communities with 21,500 residents, 102 kilometers of border installations, sixty-one structures for animal production, and industrial sites around Boizenburg, Dömitz, and Lenzen. Cooperation on these concerns included updating dikes along the ninety-five-kilometer section of the Elbe that constituted the border and constant measuring and monitoring of water levels.⁷⁸

The stretch of the Elbe that served as the border posed a variety of complications for sovereignty, security, and water rights. The Elbe’s status as a large river that was navigable differentiated it from other border-crossing waterways and made it of higher importance to both sides. A border commission negotiated where exactly the border was and how to access installations that crossed the river, such as dikes within the other state’s territory. Unlike in other situations, where a bank on one side is considered the border, the German-German border ran directly down the middle of the river valley.⁷⁹ This situation meant that barge crews often requested better markers with lights because they were hard to see and posed challenges for steering.⁸⁰ At the border crossing, the customs agents were not armed, but the border police were, creating tense situations for crews.⁸¹ On the East German side of the river, such as around the village of Rüterberg, a fence was erected,

⁷⁵ Sheffer, *Burned Bridge*, 64.

⁷⁶ Julia E. Ault, “Aquatic Conundrums: The GDR’s Water Woes and Soviet Bloc Cooperation, 1963–1989,” in *Ecologies of German Socialism*, ed. Sabine Moedersheim, Scott Moranda, and Eli Rubin (New York: Peter Lang Press, 2019), 204.

⁷⁷ BArch MfS Rechtsstelle 643, “Bericht über di 43. Sitzung der Grenzkommission DDR/BRD am 13./14. September 1978 in Dresden,” 3–4.

⁷⁸ BArch MfS Rechtsstelle 643, “Information zum Stand der Verhandlungen mit der BRD zum Hochwasserschutz im Bereich des Grenzabschnittes der Elbe und Vorschläge für das weitere Vorgehen,” undated, 1–3.

⁷⁹ BArch MfS JHS 21847, “Die völker- und staatsrechtlichen Grundfragen der Staatsgrenzen. Die Grenze zwischen der DDR und der BRD, zur Ostsee und um Westberlin und die politisch-operativen Aufgaben ihrer Sicherung,” May 25, 1975, 15.

⁸⁰ BArch MfS JHS 21847, “Die völker- und staatsrechtlichen Grundfragen der Staatsgrenzen. Die Grenze zwischen der DDR und der BRD, zur Ostsee und um Westberlin und die politisch-operativen Aufgaben ihrer Sicherung,” May 25, 1975, 81.

⁸¹ Dieter Bub, “30 Jahre nach der Grenzöffnung. An den Ufern der Elbe,” *Deutschlandfunk*, July 21, 2019 <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/30-jahre-nach-der-grenzoeffnung-an-den-ufern-der-elbe-100.html>.

and over the years, the border installations grew more complex and families either left or were told to leave the area.⁸²

Farther into West Germany, GDR-imposed limitations on Hamburg's traditional upstream trade networks presented only one set of challenges for the FRG. Already in the 1950s, officials banned swimming in the Elbe as a result of both domestic and foreign degradation.⁸³ Heavy metals such as cadmium and mercury as well as chlorides and inorganic nitrates found their way into the Elbe and other rivers before they entered the FRG. The GDR's lack of access to water also led to intensive use and reuse of the water for industrial production, which added more and more pollutants as the Elbe flowed toward the German-German border.⁸⁴ Even though the GDR was well aware of its lack of water and the challenges that water pollution presented to its citizens and industrial production, it proved unable to muster the resources to dramatically improve conditions.⁸⁵ Short-term economic gain, which the SED saw as essential to maintaining its power, overrode investment in pollution abatement that might have promoted a longer term stability.

While East German officials grew frustrated that Czechoslovakia did not provide timely information about spills, the GDR repeated that approach with the FRG. This situation raised the question of whether being upstream trumped other kinds of relations countries could have along a river. Even with improving diplomatic relations in the 1970s, the GDR closely guarded information about spills, attempting to hide the extent of the degradation from officials in the west. In 1976, for example, a chemical plant near Magdeburg spilled hydrochloric acid in the Jeetze River (a tributary of the Elbe's) that killed a significant portion of the nearby fish life. Border troops collected the dead fish in the hope that West Germans would not realize the extent of the spill.⁸⁶ Two days later, when East German officials determined that the water's acidity could not be sufficiently neutralized, they finally reached out to West German counterparts about what had happened.⁸⁷ A year later, the Stasi similarly debated informing the West German government about a pesticide spill in another Elbe tributary, the Mulde. In that case, the concentration of the spill was so high that "even after the Mulde joined the Elbe, a die-off of fish in the Elbe cannot be ruled out."⁸⁸ Still, informing the FRG was not deemed necessary, and experts were later able to neutralize the spill. Despite East German obfuscation and secrecy, West German officials were well aware of and greatly frustrated by the frequent fish die-offs.⁸⁹ The Elbe challenged the allegedly impermeable Iron Curtain, demonstrating the porousness of the political boundary as it forced the SED to decide how and when to disclose information.

The Stasi's recording and reporting of spills had both domestic and international implications, namely, protecting the functioning of the economy and the state. By categorizing environmental disasters as crucial to state security, the Stasi's involvement underscored their importance. The GDR's efforts to showcase socialism could not tolerate being undermined by pollution that crossed the border, often despite the state's best efforts. The German-German border became a site where hiding pollution and minimizing the effects

⁸² Christina Lüdke, "Dorfrepublik Rüterberg," *WDR* (https://www.planet-wissen.de/natur/fluesse_und_seen/die_elbe/pwiedorfrepublikrueterberg100.html).

⁸³ Grady, "A Shared Environment," 660–61.

⁸⁴ BArch MfS HA XVIII 21998, "Information über die Entwicklung der Beschaffenheit der Elbe und zur Durchführung von Maßnahmen der Abwasserlastsenkung," August 19, 1987, 6–7.

⁸⁵ BArch DC 20 I 3 715, "Prognose: Industrielle Abprodukte und planmäßige Gestaltung einer sozialistischen Landeskultur in der DDR," September 1968, 6.

⁸⁶ BArch MfS HA XVIII 19386, "Information über Fischsterben in der Jeetze, Kreis Salzwedel," September 11, 1976.

⁸⁷ BArch MfS HA XVIII 19386, "Information. 1. Ergänzung über Fischsterben in der Jeetze, Kreis Salzwedel," September 13, 1976. Also written "Jeetzel," East German files use "Jeetze" and West German files use "Jeetzel," as the name changes on river's course downstream.

⁸⁸ BArch MfS HA XVIII 18216, "Information über Vergiftung der Mulde durch Pflanzenschutzmittel," November 30, 1977.

⁸⁹ BArch B 136 18820, "Umweltschutzprobleme im Verhältnis zur DDR," December 6, 1976.

of spills were crucial. It highlighted attempts to keep West German influence out of the GDR and to maintain sovereignty. Thus, the Stasi policed and blocked environmental as well as human flows across the GDR's borders, attempting to ensure autonomy by cutting itself off from ecological and historical connections.

At the same time, the GDR did not hesitate to lambast the FRG when West German pollution degraded the quality of East German rivers. In 1971, experts in the Office of Water Management concluded that pollution from organic substances in the Saale River stemmed from the Bavarian (West German) side of the Iron Curtain. In a memo to Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Willi Stoph, Rochlitzer argued that this incident should be made public because "the press in the FRG has polemically exploited" water pollution crossing from the GDR into the FRG in the Werra River.⁹⁰ Here was an opportunity to turn the tables on West German authorities. Four days later, the major East German newspaper *Neues Deutschland* reported on the spill, emphasizing that East German officials had "taken measures to combat any negative effects."⁹¹ Despite this pronouncement, East German industry was not particularly affected and Rochlitzer did not deem a meeting with West German officials to be necessary.⁹² The newspaper notice was more about attempting to discredit the FRG than economic or environmental considerations.

Nevertheless, the FRG was disproportionately the recipient of degraded water and continued to pressure the East German leadership to address transboundary pollution. With growing environmental consciousness in the FRG in the 1970s, numerous state-level legislatures and the newly formed Green Party advocated for better water quality on the Werra, Weser, and Elbe Rivers. West German efforts increasingly put the GDR on the defensive, even though FRG officials intentionally treaded lightly on those topics as well as the matter of pollution in West Berlin's waterways.⁹³ In 1982, East German authorities classified all environmental data to limit the domestic and international damage that information about the pollution was already inflicting on the GDR's reputation. The justification for the decision specifically cited the "contamination of border waters (Werra, Saale, Elbe, etc.)" as a reason to formally restrict the data.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, in closed meetings, East German leaders continued to turn the environmental situation and growing popular West German frustration to their advantage, using it for power politics and to extract concessions from the FRG.

Pollution in the Elbe prompted the FRG to bypass the GDR and pursue environmental agreements with Czechoslovakia. This move both emphasized the interconnectedness of these water networks as well as the GDR's intransigence, and by extension, weakness as an intermediary. The GDR at times refused to negotiate with the FRG, and it also failed to improve water quality, so the FRG turned to a potentially more reliable partner in the CSSR. In 1984, the two states held their "first environmental talk" on a range of topics from the Elbe to degradation along the Czechoslovak-Bavarian border. Yet East German officials heard about this arrangement and attempted to subvert this circumvention. The GDR's foreign ministry inquired about the conversation via its embassy in Prague. The foreign ministry emphasized that it would maintain the agreed upon position with the CSSR regarding water quality in the Elbe. The East German foreign ministry then pressed for more information about the FRG and whether it raised the topic of the Elbe and polluter pays. The GDR did not wish the Elbe to become a topic of conversation between Czechoslovakia and the FRG, telling the embassy "to inform the Czechoslovak side about our position regarding the

⁹⁰ BArch DK 5 3452, "Besonderes Vorkommnis Staatsgrenze West," correspondence between Johannes Rochlitzer and Willi Stoph, September 21, 1971.

⁹¹ "Verschmutzung der Saale durch Abwässer aus BRD," *Neues Deutschland*, September 25, 1971.

⁹² BArch DK 5 3452, "Besonderes Vorkommnis Staatsgrenze West," correspondence between Johannes Rochlitzer and Willi Stoph, September 21, 1971.

⁹³ BArch B 136 18820, "Protokoll der Besprechung über Umweltprobleme im Verhältnis zur DDR am 23.11.1976 im Bundesministerium des Innern," November 23, 1976.

⁹⁴ BArch DK 5 1982, "Bericht über des Geheimnisschutzes beim Informationen zum Umweltschutz," October 25, 1982.

Elbe.”⁹⁵ Through its fellow socialist neighbor, the GDR shaped the conversation around water quality in the Elbe, protecting its industries and borders from international implications.

The GDR faced pressure from multiple West German sources to improve water quality in the Elbe. Beyond the federal delegations, West German members of parliament and city officials also reached out to the GDR about the pollution.⁹⁶ More than once, a center-right Bundestag member from Schleswig-Holstein, Dietrich Austermann, directly contacted East German environmental minister Hans Reichelt to meet about the Elbe. East German officials internally decided not to engage with Austermann, and East Berlin declined to respond to Austermann’s overtures.⁹⁷ Hamburg’s environmental senator, Wolfgang Curilla, encountered a similar experience when he approached Reichelt on behalf of the Working Group for Protection of the Elbe in the Elbe Minister Conference, a consortium of water management offices in the three affected provinces.⁹⁸ Protecting information about the state of the East German economy outweighed environmental considerations, even though pollution had become a source of discontent in the GDR.⁹⁹

Czechoslovak leaders recognized the growing importance of green politics in the West at a moment when eastern European countries were increasingly dependent on western money. As a Czechoslovak report noted, following a meeting with West German experts, “In the FRG, solving the problem of the environment is politically very important. Practically any politician wishing to win a campaign must—immediately after solving unemployment—do something for the health of the population, and that is tied together with the environment.”¹⁰⁰ East German and Czechoslovak officials sought to use western engagement with the air and water quality to their advantage and to acquire hard cash and foreign technology. Moreover, the GDR argued that the beneficiary of environmental cleanup efforts should pay—not the polluter.¹⁰¹ This stance served to corner the FRG into providing aid to the GDR. It also kept the GDR from setting a precedent of a polluter pays model, which Czechoslovakia and Poland might have used to insist that the GDR compensate them for air pollution that crossed into those countries. Poland in particular was primarily a recipient of East German pollution, whereas the CSSR and GDR exchanged pollution levels more evenly (based on water courses and weather patterns).¹⁰²

Despite German-German cooperation on other environmental topics, such as acid rain, the SED refused to officially discuss persistent problems with the Elbe’s water quality until December 1987. The Greenpeace action in Dresden in November described at the beginning of this article forced the SED’s hand.¹⁰³ The activists pushed for the GDR and the CSSR to participate in a London-based conference on ecological conditions in the North Sea because although the two countries did not lie directly on the body of water, their pollution negatively impacted the sea.¹⁰⁴ Shortly thereafter, in December, the SED agreed to trilateral

⁹⁵ PA AA M 41 633 89, correspondence between Comrade Seidel and Helmut Ziebert of the Embassy in Prague, December 12, 1984.

⁹⁶ For a similar recounting, see Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*, 132–33.

⁹⁷ PA AA M 41 633 89, “Standpunkt zum Anliegen eines Bundestagsabgeordneten der BRD bezüglich eines Gespräches über die Reinhaltung der Elbe,” May 20, 1985; PA AA M 41 586 87, Correspondence between Seidel and Moldt, May 23, 1985.

⁹⁸ PA AA M 41 812 88, Correspondence between the East German Permanent Diplomatic Mission in Bonn (Glienke) and the FRG Department of the East German Foreign Ministry (Seidel), April 15, 1986.

⁹⁹ For more on this situation, see Ault, *Saving Nature under Socialism*, 146–47.

¹⁰⁰ PA AA M 41 633 89, “Inoffizielle Übersetzung, Bo-Prag,” February 4, 1985.

¹⁰¹ Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain*, 148–53.

¹⁰² BArch DK 5 5829, “Information für den Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates, Willi Stoph, zum Abschluss des Abkommens DDR-VRP-CSSR über die Zusammenarbeit auf dem Gebiet des Umweltschutzes,” 1987.

¹⁰³ BArch MfS HA XVIII 21998, “Stellungnahme zu den Flugblättern der Internationalen Umweltschutzorganisation, ‘Greenpeace,’ die von 5 Mitgliedern der Organisation am 14.11.1987 in Dresden verteilt wurden.”

¹⁰⁴ BArch MfS HA XVIII 21998, “Stellungnahme zu den Flugblättern der Internationalen Umweltschutzorganisation, ‘Greenpeace,’ die von 5 Mitgliedern der Organisation am 14.11.1987 in Dresden verteilt wurden,” 3.

talks with the FRG and Czechoslovakia to address the Elbe's condition.¹⁰⁵ In the last year or two of the GDR's existence, East German leader Erich Honecker and the SED tentatively agreed to work with, or to essentially receive aid from, the FRG to improve the water quality of the Elbe.¹⁰⁶ The province of Schleswig-Holstein offered to help with the abatement of mercury and cadmium.¹⁰⁷ These collaborations acknowledged that the GDR could not stop environmental problems at the political border. Accepting assistance opened the door to improving water for Germans on both sides of the border.

As with other negotiations between the Germans, the GDR did not survive long enough to see improvement plans fully implemented.¹⁰⁸ The GDR and FRG finally came to an agreement on the Elbe—and one of its tributaries, the Saale—in July 1989, just months before the Berlin Wall opened. In the agreement, the FRG promised to invest in chemical and pharmaceutical protections for East German industries along those rivers, which would ultimately benefit the FRG's section of the Elbe.¹⁰⁹ Typical stall tactics from East German leaders including Erich Honecker and Economic Secretary Günter Mittag as well as the Stasi hindered pollution abatement across the German-German border for virtually all of the GDR's existence. In the 1980s, the GDR's leadership often fell back on short-sighted solutions in an effort to keep the SED in power. The leadership's actions embodied the SED's emphasis on sovereignty over solutions, both environmentally and more broadly. Even as the GDR was nearing its demise, the East German leadership sought only that outside investment that would prop up the SED regime. At the same time, the need for aid demonstrated that the GDR was not capable of abating pollution and keeping its constitutional promise to a clean environment.

The Elbe River brought heavy metals from northern Bohemia, nitrates from fertilizers, and pollutants from other industries across the Iron Curtain.¹¹⁰ The 1970s stabilized relations between the Germans and opened up opportunities for cooperation as the countries through which the Elbe flowed recognized the far-reaching effects of pollution. The river, the populations of the three affected countries as well as the North Sea, into which the Elbe empties, all bore a share of the damage. By the 1980s, the GDR's emphasis on propping up its economy by bringing in foreign cash led to a breakdown in goodwill. The Greens and Greenpeace activists in Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, and Hamburg all expressed concern about the high levels of pollution to both the GDR and Czechoslovakia with limited resonance before 1989. The Elbe demonstrates the interconnectedness of central European environments and the challenges that adversarial political regimes posed to ecological improvement. The Elbe formed and transcended the heavily militarized German-German border, connecting Germans across political divides through shared and inherited problems. Nature—be it water, air, soil, flora, or fauna—undermined the clear delineation that the GDR sought to create and forced East German leaders to navigate diplomatic relations with its greatest rival.

Conclusion

Four days after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel* revealed “a secret report out of East Berlin” that proved the GDR had turned the Elbe “into a sewer.”¹¹¹ For West German residents who lived along the river, this exposé did not contain surprising information. For decades, they had complained about the

¹⁰⁵ Archiv Grünes Gedächtnis (AGG) B II 1 567, “Kurziprotokoll der 13. Sitzung des Ausschusses für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit,” December 9, 1987.

¹⁰⁶ Wentker, *Außenpolitik in engen Grenzen*, 519–20.

¹⁰⁷ BArch MfS HA XVIII 24797, Correspondence between Hans Reichelt and Gunter Mittag, June 5, 1989.

¹⁰⁸ Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain*, 153.

¹⁰⁹ Eckert, *West Germany and the Iron Curtain*, 154.

¹¹⁰ BArch MfS HA XVIII 21998, “Information über die Entwicklung der Beschaffenheit der Elbe und zur Durchführung von Maßnahmen der Abwasserlastsenkung,” 1987.

¹¹¹ “Giftsuppe aus dem Osten: Eine geheime Studie Ost-Berlins beweist, daß die DDR die Elbe zur Kloake verkommen läßt,” *Der Spiegel*, November 13, 1989, 49–50.

transboundary water pollution from heavy metals, poisons, and chlorinated hydrocarbons in rivers that flowed from the GDR into the Federal Republic.¹¹² Yet the GDR's polluting of the river is only part of the story. In the case of the Elbe, water entered the GDR already heavily polluted from industries in Czechoslovakia's northern Bohemia, unmasking a chain effect as pollutants accumulated on the river's course downstream. East German waterways knit together a central European environment that transcended the Iron Curtain, highlighting how pollution affected ecosystems and people across seemingly impermeable divides.

The East German leadership did not fully appreciate the impact of the Elbe's flows—human, biological, and informational—on the GDR's domestic legitimacy and international standing. The East German leadership's concern over sovereignty and harder borders attempted to conceal environmental and other weaknesses but never fully could. Environmental connections continued to undermine efforts to hide the devastation. Through the Elbe, the GDR defined and secured its borders with both socialist and nonsocialist states, asserting authority and preserving sovereignty whenever possible. At times, the GDR attempted to influence decisions beyond its borders, such as pressuring Czechoslovakia to change policies that had an impact downstream. Complex ecological problems that affected each country differently, however, required solutions that spanned political and ideological divides. These solutions were difficult, and sometimes impossible to reach.

Questions about the Elbe and water did not exist in isolation or a purely environmental realm. They were intimately tied to economic issues, such as trade and industry, as well as information. Access to water as well as its levels had a huge impact on economic production as well as the movement of goods across multiple borders. Those other demands also deteriorated the quality of the water. The comparatively close quarters in central Europe, along with a history of shifting borders and networks across the region, prevented the GDR's attempts to divorce itself from surrounding environs. The Elbe, and by extension the environment more generally, confounded the East German leadership's efforts to achieve economic self-sufficiency as well as to maintain physical and political separation from neighboring states. The Elbe integrates the GDR into a larger central European and transnational history of connection and delimitation during the Cold War. After 1989–1990, unification changed the Elbe's border crossings again as the German-German border was eliminated and discussions of conservation and environmental protection along the Elbe gained national attention. Debates over the chains of responsibility among Czechia, Germany, and the North Sea continue to this day.¹¹³

Julia E. Ault is an associate professor of History at the University of Utah. Her research interests include the environment, transnational networks, socialisms, and the Cold War. Her first book, *Saving Nature under Socialism: Transnational Environmentalism in East Germany, 1968–1990*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2021. She has also published in *German History* and written numerous chapters for edited volumes.

¹¹² BArch DK 5 5111, "Ergebnisse und Probleme im Umweltschutz der DDR," 1984.

¹¹³ Miriam Rasched, *Die Elbe im Völker- und Gemeinschaftsrecht: Schifffahrt und Gewässerschutz* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003), 2–5.

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