

Politisierung der Alpen. Umweltbewegungen in der Ära der Europäischen Integration (1970-2000)

By Romed Aschwanden. Vienna and Cologne: Böhlau, 2021. Pp. 347. Hardcover €60.00. ISBN: 978-3412521349.

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In the early modern period, many Europeans believed the Alps were home to dragons and other threatening creatures. After the Second World War, an increasing number began to see the Alps and the Alpine way of life as under threat from humans and their activities. Romed Aschwanden traces the history of such groups and the networks they formed from the wake of 1968 until the turn of the millennium. He is interested in the discourses advanced by these actors, and particularly how increasing European integration in this period influenced the view that the Alps were under siege and simultaneously provided new structures that could be utilized to protect the Alps. Aschwanden argues that in these years a fundamental shift brought these activists to see “Europeanization”—here the expansion of a single European market—as the chief threat to the Alps.

Europe arrived primarily in the form of trucks carrying goods across the Alps on the burgeoning European highway system. The uplands force all vehicles seeking to cross the mountains onto a handful of favorable passes, resulting in an often-intense concentration of transit traffic. Limiting transit transport, shifting it to railways, and stopping new transit infrastructure became priorities of the Alpine protection movement. By the early 1990s, this achieved significant results in the form of an international treaty (*Alpenkonvention*) and a constitutional amendment stymying the flow of transit traffic in Switzerland.

Aschwanden looks at what in the German-speaking world is referred to as *Alpenschutz*, a concept which is only imperfectly explained by its direct translation of “Alpine protection.” This is an analytical category, as many of the actors involved did not always view their endeavors strictly as defending the Alps. *Alpenschutz* was in part environmentally motivated, in that its practitioners saw the mountain ecology as threatened by human activity. But *Alpenschutz* was not only about nature. It also saw the Alps as a unique regional culture in need of protection. This extended to sheltering the regional economy and quality of life. The use of the German term reflects the book’s emphasis, which is squarely located in German-speaking Switzerland. While both the French and the Italian Swiss were also active in *Alpenschutz*, these “organizations and activities” concentrated on German Switzerland (14). The publications of Swiss Alpine protection groups and their associated archival holdings represent the bulk of the sources consulted.

The book is based on a dissertation completed under the auspices of an international research project “Issues with Europe—A Network Analysis of the German-Speaking Alpine Conservation Movement (1975-2005),” funded by Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. This explains the focus of chapter 2, which is a social network analysis of the Swiss Alpine protection movement. Using a series of meeting minutes, Aschwanden is able to compile the data necessary to produce (computer-generated) images that allow for visualization of the *Alpenschutz* network. The images underscore the importance of networks in communicating ideas between science, media, and the public. Although the illustrations allow comparisons between different eras within the Swiss movement, the lack of comparison with other national settings makes it difficult to draw broader conclusions. Aschwanden himself concludes that network structure alone is unable to explain the success of *Alpenschutz* in

these years. The remainder of the study proceeds to analyze the interplay of local, national, and international dynamics to fill out the picture.

The third chapter takes a partially global perspective to explain how protecting the Alps became an object of political interest in the years 1970–1990. While an international organization dedicated to nature protection in the Alps, the Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Régions Alpines (CIPRA) was formed already in 1952, it was not until the 1970s that the perspective of the Alps as an endangered ecosystem gained widespread acceptance. Scientists in Switzerland deftly established the mountains as a particularly sensitive environment, both at the European and the global level. By the early 1990s, they helped anchor sustainable development of the Alps in international law and won the protection of mountain areas a place in the Agenda 21—the United Nation’s sustainability program for the twenty-first century.

Chapter 4 zooms in on Switzerland to explore the local roots of *Alpenschutz*. Here Aschwanden argues that it was the “left-alternative milieu” (*linksalternative Milieus*) that were particularly responsible for the politicization of the Alps. The most well-known of these groups was the Alpen-Initiative that shocked the country in pushing through a referendum “on the protection of the Alpine region from transit traffic” (*zum Schutze des Alpengebietes vor dem Transitverkehr*) in February 1994. The initiative succeeded against the wishes of the federal government as it complicated Swiss negotiations on economic relations with the EU. Together, the handful of left-alternative factions analyzed here managed to create a new image of the Alps as ecologically unique, which challenged the traditional, national-conservative one.

The final two chapters spotlight *Alpenschutz* in the context of expanding European integration. In the early 1990s, Aschwanden finds an initial “Europeanization” of Alpine protection, as various national organizations joined together in an economic critique that opposed the expansion of transit roads. They saw Europe as both the primary threat to the Alps and a resource to counter the hazards. By the early 2000s, however, these same organizations retreated back to the national domain.

In a couple of ways, the title of the book is misleading. It is not really “environmental movements” in general that receive attention. Rather the focus is on groups who sought to protect the Alps from the avalanche of motorized vehicles crossing the chain. Easing truck traffic may have become the most important environmental movement in the Alps by the 1980s, but it was not the only one. Others existed, and they did not always see Europe as the primary menace. Moreover, for a work that otherwise devotes ample space to theoretical considerations, the book adopts a somewhat uncritical stance on the ecological intentions of *Alpenschutz*. Did the protection of plants and animals always rank as high as quality-of-life issues? Finally, readers should not expect a book that examines *Alpenschutz* throughout the entire mountain range. Despite some consideration of the Alps in the broader framework of European politics, and some sideways glances at neighboring Austria, this book focuses squarely on the Swiss Alps. In another sense, though, this Swiss focus is welcome. The country is often left out of broader narratives of European history.

With *Politisierung der Alpen*, Romed Aschwanden has contributed an important chapter on the contemporary history of the Alps. It provides a comprehensive analysis of how the conservation of the Alps became a political issue in the postwar period. This examination of how groups concerned about local habitats operated in an arena that was increasingly influenced by global and European processes should also interest scholars of the environment and European integration alike.

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