

was only completed in the eighteenth century when science and reason finally displaced the central role of religion and magic in the lives of English men and women.

Crucially, Thomas's thesis applies not to central Europe but to England, which witnessed the destruction of medieval Catholicism during the Reformation and the gradual emergence of a Calvinist ideology by the end of the seventeenth century. As Ivanič herself points out, the arrival of the Calvinist Frederick V of the Palatinate as elected King of Bohemia in Prague in 1619 coincided with the attempt of his court preacher Abraham Scultetus to destroy the *modus vivendi* established by the Utraquists through the destruction of religious objects, starting with those in the St. Vitus Cathedral. Such iconoclasm, typical of Edwardian and Elizabethan England, was roundly condemned and rejected by the burghers of Prague. In other words, confessional politics played a more significant role than Ivanič is prepared to acknowledge in her insistence on a holistic and harmonious "cosmic" link between the material and sacred spheres. Religious politics played a crucial role in the very survival of the objects that she analyzes so carefully. The fact that so few religious artefacts have survived from medieval England confirms that history consists not only in what has survived but also in what has been obliterated by the forces of iconoclasm.

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***Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe: Literature, History and Memory.***

By Anna Barcz. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. x, 239 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Photographs. \$115.00, hard bound.

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The central challenge of environmental history has always been that our sources are inevitably composed by humans: embedded in culture and communicated in our languages. We do not have access to an unmediated nature, and cannot access its perspective directly. The obvious response has been to turn to scientific findings, but these (despite their rigor and robustness) are also of course the products of human interpretation, remaining mutable and fallible. A tremendous amount of creativity has gone into devising strategies to let nature speak, and the excitement of this field lies in negotiating the mismatch and developing new approaches.

In *Environmental Cultures in Soviet East Europe*, literary scholar Anna Barcz of the Polish Academy of Sciences suggests that we lean into the problem of human mediation with the hope of coming out the other side. The book is composed of five parts, each containing three to four relatively short chapters. Part One, "Unknownland," offers an astute critique of the anthropocentrism of much writing in the environmental humanities, especially relating to the region of eastern Europe, particularly during the period of Soviet rule. The scholarship in this subfield that focuses on nature concentrates, for reasons of political salience and heightened drama, on the ecological catastrophes that accompanied Soviet modernization projects. According to Barcz, this overvalues the agency of humans (especially the state) and minimizes that of nature. But how does one get at nature's perspective?

She proposes that we draw on a resource that is especially abundant across the region: the literary imagination. Beginning with collectivization, she strives to put history in dialogue with close readings of literary works: fiction, memoir, and the particular genre of Svetlana Aleksievich (in Part Four, chapter 3). One advantage of this approach is that it does not treat cultural memory as an afterthought. History, she

argues, “must be reconsidered through memory of the Stalin era and the late stage of heavy modernity. When we see how the Soviet period can be critical for today’s environmental concerns, we recognize that this history is unfinished” (2). The close readings are generally insightful and often penetrating; the engagement with history is more uneven, being derived from a handful of secondary sources in each case, thereby missing the opportunity to juxtapose historical primary sources with literature. The broad topics of each of the four overarching case studies are well chosen, as are the literary texts addressed in each.

The least successful happens to be the first: Part Two, “The Tired Village.” Beginning with Andrei Platonov’s *The Foundation Pit*, Barcz reads rural nature as buckling under but also subverting collectivization in a period she calls the “Stalinocene” (40), adapting the Anthropocene framing of the entire book. This effort is a rare misfire in an otherwise interesting volume. The purpose of the “-ocene” suffix is to mark off those environmental changes of such a scale that they are traceable in the geological record. Collectivization, for all its horrors, does not meet this criterion, and in the end “Stalinocene” seems to be little more than a scientized updating of the 1980s coinage *Stalinshchina*, which had the merits of being an actors’ category and distinctly rooted in the linguistics of the region. More successful is Barcz’s observation that the literary reaction to collectivization has been to romanticize the rural: “One of the responses of this period literature was to poeticize the relation with nature and the animal world, and escape from the brutality of what collectivization brought to rural traditional culture” (78).

The final three Parts are increasingly effective, drawing from Polish, Hungarian, East German, Belarusian, and other literatures to highlight both well-known and less obvious ways in which the literary imagination can reinvigorate the historian’s gaze. These three cases are coal and uranium mining in Silesia, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 and the “exceptional language of witnessing” (127) that followed in its wake, and the forests of eastern Europe—especially Białowieża/Belovezhskaja Pushcha in Poland/Belarus. (In this last section, the brief analysis on page 184 of the Soła River, which runs past Auschwitz-Birkenau, and its communist-era damming, is particularly riveting.) The scale of each case requires a different kind of narration, Barcz argues, and each necessarily transcends national borders and individual languages. By the time we get to the forests, the reader is persuaded of the justice of the critique that was laid out in Part One. It is unfortunate that the book provides no conclusion to synthesize the implications of the case studies.

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***Iron Landscapes: National Space and the Railways in Interwar Czechoslovakia.***

By Felix Jeschke. *Explorations in Mobility*, vol. 5. New York: Berghahn Books, 2021. xi, 221 pp. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustration. Photographs. Tables. Maps. \$135.00, hard bound.

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In his book, published by the prestigious publishing house of Berghahn, the promising young historian, Dr. Felix Jeschke (University of Munich), examines the phenomenon of the railway (only in relation to personal transport) in central Europe, namely in the first Czechoslovak Republic. The aim of the work, whose title page catches the reader’s attention at first glance with its image of a red train car—the