

Driving Germany: The Landscape of the German Autobahn, 1930–1970. By *Thomas Zeller*. New York: Berghahn, 2007. viii + 289 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN: 1-845-45309-3.

Reviewed by Christopher Kopper

Thomas Zeller's book, *Driving Germany*, is devoted to a topic that has fascinated numbers of German scholars of technology and transportation: the building of a two-thousand-mile highway network in just six prewar years of the Nazi regime. Unlike cultural historians who looked at the *Autobahn* as a multiple aesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk* (collective art), Zeller examines the propagandistically acclaimed "roads of the Führer" from the perspective and with the methodological tools of an environmental historian.

Zeller's book—the American version of his 2002 German dissertation—looks at the landscape design of a road project that exceeded the demand of Germany's motorization in the 1930s by far. Hitler's highway planner Fritz Todt pursued the idea of designing a whole national highway system like a comprehensive artwork. The author looks at how the National Socialist road builders tried to turn driving on a highway into a stimulating sensual, romantic experience of the German landscape. He tells how the idea of re-creating a seemingly typical German landscape experience evolved through the cooperation of rational, thinking civil engineers and the romantically minded landscape architects.

However, the relations between civil engineers and landscape architects turned out to be complicated. Although the Nazi regime endowed the Autobahn planners with very generous funds for Hitler's pet project, conflicts between the engineers and the landscape planners proved to be unavoidable. The chief landscape architect's push for perfect natural habitats on both sides of the Autobahn and for a seamless integration of the highway into the surrounding landscape were too often irreconcilable with the engineers' professional ambitions to complete the highway network as fast as possible. Zeller examines the ideological background of the landscaping architects very closely. His elaborate and highly knowledgeable analysis of National Socialist landscaping gives

the reader a clear idea of how concepts of racial purity were literally rooted in the landscaping profession of the Nazi era. The trees and bushes planted along the Autobahn should display a pure German landscape without any disturbing “foreign newcomers.” But since the highway engineers dominated the National Socialist roadbuilding agency, the landscapers had to accept that their concept of a “green” Autobahn could not be implemented on a one-to-one scale and was often sacrificed to the imperative of speedy construction.

For good reasons, Zeller’s report does not stop at the end of the Nazi regime. Under the new institutional structures of the Federal Republic of Germany, landscaping architects found themselves marginalized by the civil engineers who implemented their vision of pure technical rationality without any significant interference by landscape romanticists. Their former concepts of botanical purity and aesthetic landscaping were sidelined by the overarching demands of economic rationality and the technical imperatives of a high-speed track. Substantial knowledge about how to reduce the negative impacts of highway building in ecologically sensitive landscapes got lost—and was not revived before the renaissance of ecological thinking in the 1980s.

Zeller’s well-organized book will definitely be viewed as a valuable contribution by everybody interested in the environmental history of Nazism and the ideological background of National Socialist landscaping. Economic and business historians might be disappointed by the omission of hard facts about the financial agency of the Nazi road builders and the short-term and long-term economic effects of the German highway system. But Zeller should not be blamed for this deficit. Scholars of economic and transportation history have so far never tried to assess how the premature completion of a national highway system in undermotorized Nazi Germany contributed to the fast economic growth of the West German economy in the 1950s and 1960s and the success of the German car manufacturers. Since many files of the highway planning boards were lost at the end of World War II, the financial background of permanent conflicts between the Nazi landscape architects and their counterparts in civil engineering remains rather in the dark.

BUSINESS HISTORY REVIEW

Winter 2007

BOOK REVIEW

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