

Binational Toxic Waste Trade and the Two Germanies—From the Environmental Turn to Reunification

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In 1979, a trade company from Lübeck signed a 10-year contract with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) that was unheard of in the history of the two Germanies. The company from Lübeck, *Hanseatischer Baustoffkontor*, was allowed to landfill 850.000 tonnes of toxic waste at the site in Schönberg. Schönberg was located in Mecklenburg (GDR), only five kilometres away from Lübeck (Federal Republic of Germany—FRG) across the border. In February 1981, the magazine *Der Spiegel* estimated that the GDR would gain more than 100 million marks over the next few years, a foreign currency import that was important for the weak East German economy. The GDR's pricing of toxic waste attracted other nations to send their waste there as well, like the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries. The site in Schönberg had a capacity of 35 million tonnes and became "Europe's biggest waste dump" during the 1980s.

However, the inter-German toxic waste trade started earlier, in 1974. After the iron curtain fell, West Berlin lost its traditional dumps since it was surrounded by the GDR. It rapidly turned to its neighbor for a solution. Before reunification, West Berlin produced a yearly amount of around 60.000 tonnes of toxic waste (1988), of which 40.000 tonnes was sent to the dump in Vorketzin, a former household waste dump without any special precautions for toxic waste. During the 1980s, West Berlin developed the highest per capita waste exports of any political entity in the world. Without a base seal, hazardous water seeped into the ground and contaminated the local water around Vorketzin, which led to the shutdown of fountains, a higher amount of dead wildlife in the surrounding lakes, and the closure of vegetable fields.

With the environmental turn and the pressure of social movements in the 1970s, the West was forced to rethink its waste disposal. In particular, the disposal of hazardous waste created by the affluent societies of the FRG was becoming cost intensive. To be able to dispose of toxic waste without attracting political opposition, the FRG accessed five waste dumps and one hazardous waste incinerator in the GDR. My project will provide a long-term historical perspective on the impact and creation of waste regimes in the two Germanies. The history of the Schönberg dump and the approach to toxic waste disposal in West Berlin exemplify the greater interest of the project.

The lucrative business of the binational waste trade allowed the FRG to meet the demands of social movements, as well as to reap economic benefits. At the same time, it reveals the environmental inequalities between the two Germanies during Cold War power constellations. With the new eastern policy and the rapprochement of the 1970s, the economic entanglement of the two Germanies grew. As an object of study, hazardous waste allows us to disentangle the political, socioeconomic, and cultural structures and actors that formed the discourse and practice of waste regimes. Through the incorporation of the material turn, the environmental, economic and sociocultural history, and the inclusion of globalization theory, my study allows insights into the binational relationship between the two Germanies, which faced the problem of industrial hazards, as well as socioeconomic, political, and cultural adversities.

A postcolonial vantage point can analyze hazardous waste within the discourses of knowledge and power, societal constellations, economic dependence, and geographies of inequality, which interlinks with the scheme of the group project "Hazardous Travels: Ghost Acres and the Global Waste Economy."