Making Tracks: Melanie Arndt

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In the "Making Tracks" series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

Chernobyl
By **Melanie Arndt**

I grew up in a country that does not exist anymore—East Germany or the GDR. Perhaps this partially explains my interest in Eastern Europe and its environmental history. Even though I was too young to completely comprehend the events of 1989, I have vivid memories of that tumultuous time. It certainly accounts for my eagerness to explore the world, half of which was essentially inaccessible to me behind the so-called Iron Curtain. It flickered by on the forbidden West German television programs that animated our living room; during other times, I was able to imagine those places with the help of the colorful postcards that arrived from our West German relatives, or the relatives of friends and neighbors who were willing to share a glimpse of the world "over there" ("drüben", as we used to say). There were also some books that provided me with components to build up my image of "the West," the most powerful of which were those about nature and wildlife. I received "Australia's wildlife," translated from Czech, from my parents on one of my birthdays. It was a wonderful gift. I was completely blown away by the drawings in the book, the descriptions of many unknown animals whose habitat and diet I quickly learned by heart. Because of that book, Australia ranked first on my list of "most favorite countries" for a very long time, despite my being fully aware that I might never have the chance to go there; it happened to be on the wrong side of the political division of the world.

But it was not only "Western" nature and wildlife that fascinated me: my parents made ample use of our limited travel options and showed us many of the landscapes available to us in Eastern Europe. In the late 1980s and up until the early 1990s, East Germany, like many other Eastern European countries, went through a phase of

ecologization—people started to speak out against the devastating environmental degradation they had been experiencing for decades. One of the rather paradoxical outcomes of the Cold War is the green belt that winds through the former border and no-man's-land between East and West. Once the place of a homicidal border regime, it is now a wildlife sanctuary for some rare birds and animals. In my hometown, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, I became one of the sandal-wearing cyclists who protested against the straightening of the Elbe, denouncing the demolition of its marshy meadows, and demanding more bicycle paths.

After secondary school, and some five years after Germany's reunification, I spent 18 months as a volunteer in Minsk, Belarus. Even if the choice of an Eastern European country seemed strange to many of my relatives and friends (we finally could go West!), it did not come as a big surprise for others. I belonged to the minority who had always loved the Russian language. In fact, I have had a pen pal in Minsk since the fifth grade, and I had spent several summers entertaining "Chernobyl children" during their recuperation.

Working for one of the first civil rights and Chernobyl non-governmental organizations and in an orphanage for disabled children, the time I spent in Minsk was incredibly important for both my personal and professional life. I not only learned a lot about another country in flux and a disaster so impossible to comprehend, I was also forced to deal with challenges of my own identity. Rather suddenly I was transformed from an East German, or "Ossi", to a West German, or "Wessi." Although I had grown up in the Soviet bloc, fellow Eastern Europeans perceived me now (and sometimes I even perceived myself in this way) as coming from the affluent, democratic West. These experiences taught me how easily perspectives can change, how fragile seemingly self-evident matters can be, and how much there is to understand about ourselves and others if we switch our frame of reference from time to time. I have never forgotten.

Since Belarus was the country most affected by the radioactive fallout of the 1986 disaster, I read all the material available to me about Chernobyl before moving to Minsk.

Arriving there (with a backpack full of “clean” milk powder) I quickly learned about the ambiguous role the disaster had played for the people in the capital and even more in the provinces. While my new Belarusian friends laughed at this over-anxious “Wessi” with her milk powder, and did not care about the origins of the products they consumed, “Chernobyl”—ten years after the explosion of the reactor—became a crucial political issue, driving hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets of Minsk. I was confronted with this “political Chernobyl” not only in the streets but also daily at the office of the NGO, which was one of the main organizers of the protest marches. But I was also confronted with yet another side of the disaster: the office was a busy transit point for a huge number of foreign organizations offering what they understood would be of most help for the disaster victims. Even though I had taken care of “Chernobyl children” back in my hometown, it was only at this moment, that I understood the scope of the solidarity movement “Chernobyl” had created and that broke open all Cold War barriers.

My firsthand experiences and the many questions they raised made me want to return to the topic since the day I left Minsk. I remain most intrigued by the often-paradoxical consequences of the disaster, especially by the very different approaches to coping with the problem. After studying in Potsdam, Berlin, and London, and finishing a PhD on a quite different topic, I finally returned to Chernobyl. As the director of an international research project with five Belarusian and Ukrainian PhD students, I finally had the chance to reexamine my earlier experience through the lens of science. At first I was most interested in the disaster’s impact on the development of civil society in Eastern Europe. Increasingly, however, I realized that the underlying problem was much bigger and that Chernobyl was not just a “typical Soviet” disaster—as many continued to believe until the disaster at Fukushima proved them wrong. The problem has much more to do with the “nature” of radioactivity itself.

I discovered environmental history rather late in the game; it was essentially by accident through the works of Joachim Radkau. This field fascinated me because it offered ways to break down my observations to the very intimate relationship everyone has with nature, defining our well-being. In my current book project, which I developed during rigorous intellectual exchanges with the fellows and staff at the Rachel Carson Center, I have set out to use the approaches of environmental history to analyze the social and political processes that flow from irradiated landscapes, or, rather, from attempts to understand, mitigate and compensate for them—not only in the Soviet Union but also in the US. The exchange with scholars from all over the world, working on so many different topics, but all related to the relationship between human beings and the

rest of nature—be it in colloquia, in the kitchen or on the top of the Bavarian mountains—was incredibly fruitful and I am very grateful for this experience. Even if I had to learn from the Australian fellows that the dingo, my favorite animal from my childhood book, is an allegedly dangerous animal.