

## Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France

**Review Number:**

1416

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 16 May, 2013

**Author:**

Chris Pearson

**ISBN:**

9780719084393

**Date of Publication:**

2012

**Price:**

£65.00

**Pages:**

320pp.

**Publisher:**

Manchester University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719084393>

**Place of Publication:**

Manchester

**Reviewer:**

Marianna Dudley

Chris Pearson's *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* is a recent offering from the ever-growing subfield of environmental history that is focusing on the relationship between militaries, war and environment. A number of large projects and research networks have emerged in recent years that have brought scholars working within these broad parameters – from environmental histories of the American Civil War to contemporary studies of boundaries in the Gaza strip, to name two examples – into closer contact and sustained dialogue. Despite the broad scope of potential subjects, the area has become more cohesive, and Pearson is a notably productive and active member of the community of environmental historians of war and military environments.

In the UK, an AHRC-funded large grant project ran at Bristol University from 2007 to 2010 that explored 'Militarized Landscapes in the Twentieth Century: Britain, France and the US'. Pearson's role as postdoctoral researcher on the project produced the research that he draws upon in *Mobilizing Nature*. As the doctoral student researching my own environmental history (1) of the UK Defence Estate, I worked alongside Pearson and observed his research evolve. It is gratifying to review this finished work, which builds upon his previous published monograph, *Scarred Landscapes: War and Nature in Vichy France* (2) by widening his timeframe of study beyond the Vichy regime. By tracing the 'creation, maintenance and contestation of militarized landscapes in France' from 1857 – the year of the first large-scale, permanent military camp in France – to the 21st century, Pearson has produced a comprehensive introduction to the

militarization of the French environment in the modern age.

The title, *Mobilizing Nature*, is well-chosen, offering a clue to Pearson's approach to environmental history that is discussed, but moreover, demonstrated, in the work that follows. In a thoughtful introduction that explains key terms and concepts – making this a useful text for students and scholars new to the area of military environmental history – he defines militarized environments as 'simultaneously material and cultural sites that have been partially or fully mobilized to achieve military aims' (p. 1). Mobilization, a central concept to the book, highlights the use of nature and environment by militaries and civilians to prepare for, wage, and survive war. The OED defines it first as the preparation and organization of troops for war, and secondly as the organization of people or resources for a task. Pearson draws upon both senses of the word, but also, importantly, the emphasis on activity that it conveys. It presents the environment not just as a setting for warfare – as military history tends to relegate it – but as an active agent that has been used by humans materially and symbolically, and that forms its own responses to the impacts of militarization (as chapter four, 'The mangled earth of the trenches', portrays particularly powerfully). This understanding of environment replaces the notion of passive landscape and invites a rethinking of 'artificial' notions of a 'nature' and 'culture' divide. Pearson argues convincingly that a study of militarization is necessarily a more-than-human history.

The book progresses chronologically, and grounds itself from the outset in an important category of militarized environment that is often overlooked in favour of battlefields and conflict zones: training camps. At these sites, preparations for war maintain a military presence over a sustained period of time, during which time the military interacts with the environment and inhabitants within and around the camp. Chapter one, 'The Emperor's new camp', introduces the first dedicated training camp in France, Châlons. Established by Napoleon in 1857, it is presented as key to the Second Empire's imperial ambitions. Contemporary medical geographies of Châlons reflect the wider medicalization of French society in the 19th century, and the close connection between understandings of hygiene and environment at the time. The reclamation of 'waste' land is a recurring feature of military training areas internationally. Here Pearson provides a fascinating early French example, made unique by its construction as a public space from the outset, where development of the camp was hoped to radiate beyond its boundaries to bring modernization to the region.

It is followed by 'Militarized environments in the 'Terrible Year' (1870–1)'. This chapter begins bluntly, with a discussion of the connection between environment and warfare in battlefields – which are not, unsurprisingly, always in fields (p. 40). But it develops in subtlety and the discussion that follows on the emergence of French military geography out of cartographic necessity during the war, proves an interesting one. Furthermore, Pearson introduces a subject that he writes brilliantly on at several stages through the book: animals at war. Animal history is a key research interest for him, and he maintains an entertaining blog about dogs in history ('Sniffing the Past').<sup>(3)</sup> This chapter recognizes animals as actors, rather than mascots, in war, and uses historical accounts to illustrate that visible animal suffering could sometimes move those accustomed to the hardships of warfare.

'Remaking militarized environments in the wake of defeat, 1871–1914' follows the Siege of Paris with the description of the modernization of a defeated army. Despite defeat, and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine, the Third Republic saw the army as the means to secure the nation's security against future German aggression. The mobilization of nature on the eastern border included the exertion of military control over forests, which were incorporated into plans for fortifying the strategic border region. This period also saw the establishment of more military camps, including Mailly in the 'training heartland' of Champagne (p. 74). Pearson remarks upon the similarities in pro-military discourse surrounding the establishment of Mailly, in 1902, and that of Châlons in 1957, drawing a line of continuity from the Second Empire to the Third Republic. He also invites the reader to picture life in the camps, as depicted in turn-of-the-century postcards that are reproduced here. This chapter achieves a difficult task, in that its relatively long timespan encompasses a period of major political and social change. By focusing on the militarization of the French countryside for the purpose of training the army and securing remaining French territory, Pearson doesn't over-extend, and brings the environmental history of war and militarization in France up to 1914, and the beginning of its greatest

upheaval.

Chapter four, 'The mangled earth of the trenches', addresses – how could it not? – the environmental annihilation of the Western Front in the First World War. But, importantly, it extends its consideration of this environmental and human catastrophe to explore how the war was fought and sustained beyond the trenches too – through gardens, farms, and natural resources. Again, Pearson brings the animal history of war to the forefront. *War Horse* has recently brought the plight of horses in the trenches to popular attention, in print, on stage, and on the big screen. For those who doubt Spielberg's cinematic depiction of equine suffering, Pearson provides the historical source materials: staggering numbers and moving first-hand accounts that confirm a grim reality. Despite technological advances, horses still pulled 80 per cent of artillery in the French army by the time of the armistice (p. 97). Pigeons and dogs were utilized, too, in strategic ways. Lice and rats were other familiar, if unwelcome, co-habitants of the wartime environment. Attention to the animal histories of the First World War does not negate the human suffering of this period. Rather, it provides detail that augments our imaginings of the day-to-day experiences of soldiers and civilians grappling to survive in the most extreme of environments. The trenches of the First World War were crawling, literally, with life, amongst the detritus of death.

Accounts of soldiers connecting with nature during this conflict describe men clinging on to life. Birdsong, the quiet of a forest, or a swim in a river were made so much more vital with the omnipresence of destruction. Pearson notes that this falls in with a Romantic tradition of nature as a source of spiritual nourishment. The solace found in pockets of surviving nature are nonetheless important, as they serve to remind us that militarization, even on the Western Front, was never complete. Or, 'to use a term commonly associated with war in the twentieth century, it was not "total"' (p. 101).

Though we may begin to comprehend the scale of destruction of the First World War, the 'Demilitarization and remilitarization (1918–40)' of France that followed is subject to far less attention. Pearson addresses this imbalance with a chapter that describes the transformation of war-damaged environments to peacetime uses. For the most mutilated places, identified on maps as Red Zones, there were three options: forestation, memorialization, or militarization.

Here Pearson weaves an interesting narrative strand around trees, which were planted (controversially) to reforest some Red Zones, or in memorial gardens where they were laden with national symbolism (maples commemorated fallen Canadian soldiers, for example) (p. 138). Where trees stood on otherwise obliterated landscapes, they were revered as survivors and witnesses (p. 139). Animals, like trees, were mobilized in wartime *and* used to commemorate the conflict, with imagery appearing on memorials across the commemorative landscape. Battlefield tourism emerged, guided by literature such as the Michelin guides, used here as source materials. And at Suippes, a former battlefield was transformed to a training camp. This re-use of war-damaged land is a fascinating addition to our knowledge of militarized landscapes. In France and elsewhere (Britain, USA) military engagement in conflict historically spurred expropriation of land for military purposes, often in the 'wildest', least-populated – and most 'pristine' – landscapes. Here, we learn of a landscape scarred by warfare that went on to be deployed for continuing military use. But the expropriation that occurred in other places also took place at Suippes, where only two-fifths lay within the Red Zone, adding complexity to this site which, like many militarized places, has multiple layers of military and civilian use, pre- and post-military history, inhabitants and evictees, human and non-human presences.

After 1918, 'the French mobilized nature to commemorate and heal the physical and mental scars of war' (p. 156). Militarization continued in the inter-war period with the expansion of camps and fortification of the Maginot Line to defend the eastern border. But the phoney war, or *drôle de guerre*, saw a scramble for air bases by the Allies in France in preparation for a protracted war against Germany. The speed of the invasion toppled the French government, killing people and displacing many more. It disrupted the environment, too, but it did not repeat the four years of trench warfare that had taken place in the previous conflict.

While Pearson addresses the German presence as a strategic threat in peacetime and combatant in wartime, it is beyond his realm of expertise, as a historian of France, to assess how German troops experienced the

French environment. He notes in the footnotes for chapter six, 'Occupied territories', that there is an extensive international historiography for the Second World War. This monograph makes an important contribution not only to our knowledge of environmental histories of war, but also to our understanding of the French wartime experience. It also identifies areas ripe for future research, the German experience of the French wartime environment being one of them.

'Occupied territories, 1940–67', covers the war and its aftermath. Dense with source materials and examples, Pearson nonetheless retains an eye for detail, and utilizes the narrative power of a well-chosen anecdote. We are told that British planes dropped nearly 600,000 tons of bombs over France during the war, but the description of one that flattened half-a-dozen fruit trees and injured a cow in Calvados, rather than trivializing such a vast and damaging figure, grounds it and demonstrates that each military action has a localized, environmental, social, cultural and personal impact. This example itself encapsulates environmental history's capacity to add to our historical knowledge, complementing social and cultural histories rather than diverting attention from them. Viewing history through an environmental lens can open our eyes to the extent human activity impacts on the natural world, and vice versa. It does not exclude the human stories of the past, but contextualizes them and recognizes that we exist, and always have done, in a more-than human world.

'A (very) large military camp' charts the ongoing militarization of post-war France, but by drawing attention to continuities in the mobilization of nature, bridges the wartime and post-war periods. Rearmament and modernization of the French military after 1945 continued the camp expansions of the pre-war era. New pressures on the land increased tensions between military and civilians, in particular when it came to forestry administration, and developing tourism in areas used for training. Decolonization, too, impacted the militarized environment. The French state used the relatively secluded and secure training camps to accommodate *harkis* (the name given to Algerians who fought on the French side) who were subjected to persecution after the Algerian declaration of independence. Internment of *harkis* on army bases 'was part and parcel of the wider reshaping of postcolonial France' (p. 215). Nuclear testing areas are added to the list of militarized environments, although the ecological risks and political fallout were outsourced to the Pacific. The focus understandably remains on home territories here, although I would have liked more on the impact of weapons testing on overseas territories, as they stand out as internationally significant environmental events.

‘Opposing military environments’ is an important, and welcome, chapter in the book. ‘A (very) large military camp’ hints at growing unrest towards the military use of land, and this chapter addresses it directly, providing a civilian-focused counter-narrative to militarization. The growth of environmentalism meant that protest against the military (on environmental grounds) progressed from lone voices to become a movement that collectively viewed militarization as a threat to nature. This context informed public protests on a larger scale, such as at Canjuers camp. Analysis of the rhetoric and protest literature reveals a site-based protest that was heavily informed by the profound and complex social and economic transformations taking place in French society. Protests against Larzac camp, too, brought together campaigners with a range of agendas, who mobilized the local environment – materially and symbolically (for example, releasing sheep on to the grass of the Champs de Mars in Paris) – against the military presence. These accounts challenge the ‘lazy assumption that rural France is backward-looking and politically reactionary’, but also make the critical point that these protests were informed by local environmental, social and economic concerns. Campaigners were not Deep Ecologists, motivated to fight for nature for its own sake, but rather, were fighting to preserve the environment primarily for human use and enjoyment. Protests against the military are a prominent feature of the militarization of environments internationally, and *Mobilizing Nature* provides historians with French examples to add to our body of knowledge on the subject. In the context of the book itself, this chapter is vital in balancing the narrative to acknowledge those who fought against the processes of militarization described throughout. A short epilogue returns to this theme, and to the sites of Canjuers and Larzac. It feels misplaced, as the content could have been included earlier, but serves as a final reminder that militarized places and spaces are contested sites, home to histories that challenge the narrative presented by the military.

*Mobilizing Nature* concludes with a chapter on the ‘greening’ of the French military. This describes the military’s adoption of environmental values in the last decades of the 20th century, mirroring developments in Britain, Sweden, and elsewhere.<sup>(4)</sup> Military-environmentalism, or the claim that militarism and environmentalism can co-exist, is a global and controversial phenomenon. On the one hand, military environments have become reservoirs of biodiversity amid civilian urbanization and industrialization. The military uses this discursively to present the organization as environmentally responsible. On the other hand, critics argue that military activity is fundamentally incompatible with environmentalism and sustainable development, and that the military-environmentalist discourse is no more than a cynical attempt to justify military control of land (p. 274). This discord exists in France, as elsewhere. This final chapter explores the ‘greening’ of French militarized environments, introducing that concept in a clear manner to those who are unfamiliar with its multiple manifestations. It raises questions over the manipulation of the environmentalist discourse by the military – but reminds us that military environmentalism in France is more complex and profound than claims of ‘greenwash’ give credit, and that ‘however flawed, partial and self-interested it may be, military environmentalism needs to be added to the other ways in which military personnel perceive and mobilize the environment’ (p. 275).

The final chapter, ‘“Greening” militarized environments’, is representative of *Mobilizing Nature* as a whole. It stands alone as a significant contribution to French history, but locates itself within international historical investigation into the history of war and environment. My criticisms of the book are minor, and in the main, editorial. The inclusion of maps at the start is pleasing; the failure to demarcate all of the training camps discussed, merely frustrating. The epilogue is a somewhat superfluous feature which in my opinion would have been better included into the main body of the book. But the work itself is exemplary. *Mobilizing Nature* demonstrates the capacity for environmental history to bring new and vital perspectives to our understandings of historical events, actors and places. I often return to a quote by the historian Ellen Stroud, who explains that

‘environmental history is not simply another subfield of history, taking its place alongside political, social and economic history. Rather it is a tool for telling better histories in all of these fields ... it offers not merely another axis for analyzing relationships of power, but new sites

and sources for uncovering those relationships'.(5)

*Mobilizing Nature* introduces French military areas as sites where the big events of modern French history have made an impact. They are complex places where multiple narratives can be found. Pearson's detailed research and wide range of sources tease out those narratives, and presents a history of the French military and its relationship with the French environment that is engaging and enlightening. *Mobilizing Nature* can be recommended to all historians and students of French history, whether they share Pearson's (and my) preoccupation with the environment, are approaching the subject for the first time, or have a broader interest in modern French history.

## Notes

1. Marianna Dudley, *An Environmental History of the UK Defence Estate, 1945-present* (London, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Chris Pearson, *Scarred Landscapes: War and Nature in Vichy France* (Basingstoke, 2008). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <http://sniffingthepast.wordpress.com> [2]> [accessed 8 March 2013]. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Peter Coates, Tim Cole, Marianna Dudley, Chris Pearson, 'Defending nation, defending nature? Militarized landscapes and military environmentalism in Britain, France, and the United States', *Environmental History*, 16 (July 2011), 456–91. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Ellen Stroud, 'Does nature always matter? Following dirt through history', *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 42 (December 2004), 75–81. [Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1416>

## Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/62904>

[2] <http://sniffingthepast.wordpress.com/>