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Chris Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France*. New York: Manchester Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xiv, 336. ISBN 978-0-7190-8439-3.

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One does not typically think of the military as an eco-friendly institution. Yet that image may be changing. In November 2014, the Pentagon issued a report that listed global warming as one of the gravest national security threats facing the United States and outlined several important steps that the Department of Defense (DoD) was taking to mitigate its effects.¹ Over the last decade, the branches of the US armed forces have increased their use of alternative energy sources to lessen or eliminate their reliance on fossil fuels. The French military, too, has implemented eco-friendly policies through, for example, a recycling program, pollution mitigation, and making bases safe havens for wildlife. This is not to say that twenty-first century military forces are wings of Greenpeace or even advocates of environmentalism, but a growing interaction of environmental and military historians in academia mirrors the convergence of these two fields in the policy arena.²

With his first book, *Mobilizing Nature*, Chris Pearson (Univ. of Liverpool) has made a most valuable contribution to a burgeoning field of study: “I aim to shed light on the evolving and profoundly historical relationship between war, militarization, and the environment” (1). More specifically, he stakes out militarized environments as distinct spaces, with their own ecology, policy implications, patterns of resource use, social conflicts, and effects on other landscape.

The book opens with the construction of Camp de Châlons in 1857 and progresses through a century and a half of peace and war into the twenty-first century. The author chronicles the conflict between national military and local civilian priorities, the continuous expansion of the militarized environment, the place of animals and hunting regulations, use of resources, and the perceived influences of nature on the physical and mental health of soldiers in training.

Napoleon III’s Camp de Châlons was France’s first large, permanent military base. Its establishment opened a debate between military authorities and suspicious civilians that echoes still today. Large-scale maneuvers that laid waste to everything in their path angered Second Empire farmers. So, too, in the twenty-first century, the effects of erosion, pollution, and waste have upset local civilian communities. The French people consider militarized landscapes to be ugly sterilizations of the land and attacks on their local, largely rural, way of life. To allay such concerns, the French Army claimed it required only marginal, unproductive lands ill-suited to farming.³ In the 1950s and 60s, the army moved into the more rugged hinterlands to train for operations in the harsher terrains of colonial wars. While this territory was indeed agriculturally unproductive, its great natural beauty made it attractive for recreational purposes.

After the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), French army camps were charged with rejuvenating a defeated people by dispensing an invigorating dose of nature to young male conscripts. Expansion of military bases in 1897, state propaganda efforts, and showy maneuvers meant to impress the French people with the army’s vitality only raised tensions between the government and a skeptical populace. In an interesting examination of postcards, Pearson demonstrates that depictions of army service as a sort of grand manly camping trip were thoroughly discredited by the actual experiences of the soldiers living in dreary, squalid,

1. DoD, 2014 *Climate Change Roadmap* – www.miwsr.com/rd/1508.htm.

2. See, esp., Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell, eds., *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of Warfare* (Corvallis: Oregon State U Pr, 2004).

3. This argument played a role in the creation of the US national parks. See Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1979).

and unhealthy camps. Military facilities played a similar part in efforts to restore French masculinity and national pride following the Second World War. But, by that time, such a mission was complicated by imperial wars, the presence of NATO, and De Gaullist policies.

Never static, the French militarized environment shifted and grew. Camp de Châlons was overshadowed by late nineteenth-century constructions, which were in turn superseded in World War I by the massive network of trenches stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border. Instead of seeing the trenches as a “disfigured, transformed, artificial” (91) landscape, as did most contemporaries, Pearson advises historians to evaluate the experiences of the soldiers in light of the unique ecological space they inhabited. After the forest was obliterated, soldiers entrenched to alter the environment to meet an immediate, pressing need—protection from enemy fire.

The French military expanded into new areas both domestically and globally after the Great War. At home this was visible in the construction of the Maginot Line, memorials to the fallen, and battlefield cemeteries. Globally it meant tighter management of resources in the colonies. This expansion beyond the borders of France continued during the Second World War, through German extraction of natural resources, and during the Cold War, through colonial conflicts and nuclear testing in overseas possessions.

Forestry dominates Pearson’s discussion of resource usage. French military planners cut back or added forests to suit their strategic needs. They were almost always at loggerheads with civilian foresters about the health of the land. After all, forests grew irrespective of convenient fields of fire from fortified pillboxes. Both the Germans and NATO considered the French forests a valuable resource. Pearson lumps the German occupation with NATO dominance into a single chapter, “Occupied Territories,” on the period 1940–67. Although the Germans had militarized France in several ways, including building coastal fortifications and large-scale defensive flooding, they did the worst damage by aggressively harvesting timber with a total disregard for sustainability.

Some considerable postwar tension between France and its NATO allies stemmed from disagreements over the emotionally significant Fontainebleau forest. Even the French exit from NATO did not solve the conflict over the woods. From the 1960s on, an emerging French environmental movement coalesced around resistance to the militarizing of forests. As Pearson points out, this was not an expression of Deep Ecology, intended to preserve the trees for nature’s sake; it was an effort to save and protect a pleasant recreation space. Pressure from civilians in the last thirty years has led the French Army to implement a recycling program, permit multiple uses of its bases, and provide wildlife, especially endangered species, with sanctuaries.

Finally, Pearson tracks the role of animals, both wild and domestic, in the history of French militarization of the environment. Thousands of animals—their care, shelter, transport, waste, and remains—had an important impact in both peace and war. The First World War trenches provided a favorable environment for invasive pests like fleas, lice, and rats, species ubiquitous in the literature of soldiers on both sides. However, the men were not insensitive to the rare examples of natural beauty around them: a lone tree, a colorful flower, a stray songbird might be noticed and cherished more than they would be in peacetime.

Fond recollections of birdsong pepper veterans’ accounts of trench life as symbols of hope and solace. Against the odds, birds had adapted to the militarized environment of the Western Front, feeding on the insects that thrived in the trenches and nesting in remains of trees. Waterfowl also gathered on water-logged shell holes and starlings mimicked the whistle blasts used to warn of enemy planes. Birdsong provided reassurance for soldiers of different nationalities ... a reminder that life survived within the brutal environment of the trenches. (100)

In the 1970s, sheep became a point of controversy when the army sought to extend Camp Larzac into traditional grazing lands. A national anti-extension campaign forced the French Army to abandon plans to annex the land. Two decades later, military authorities argued that their bases served as quasi-nature preserves that protected endangered birds and butterflies. Hunting⁴ regulations were now another bone of

4. Of mushrooms as well as animals.

contention. As Pearson observes, before the Revolution the French people had no right to hunt, which was restricted to aristocrats and royals. Whether German armies of occupation or the French military itself sought to restrain local hunting, civilians resented any curtailing of this very symbolic right to nature.

Mobilizing Nature is well written and firmly grounded in both primary sources and the secondary literature on militarized environments. Pearson does not compare in any detail the French experience to that of its neighbors. Strictly speaking, this is beyond the scope of the book, but French military planners certainly kept an eye on developments across the English Channel. The building of a central military installation on marginal land followed the British model of Aldershot. Likewise, packaging military installations as nature preserves had British precedents.⁵

Chris Pearson's book will appeal to and instruct a range of readers. It will give environmental scholars a better understanding of the effect of the French military on the environment in the context of three wars on the European continent, the Cold War, colonial struggles, and nuclear armament. Students of military history will learn that nature is more than an aspect of geography, that the environment dictates military options in peace and war, and that cultural perceptions of the land shape the views of those who plan and fight wars.

5. These matters are touched on without elaboration on pages 19, 275–76.