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## Getting in Motion: German Environmentalism, 1945 to 1980

### Dirt and Demonstrations in the Miracle Years

In the collective memory of the Federal Republic, the 1950s have long since taken on mythical status. Total defeat and the miseries of the immediate postwar years gave way to a long boom that entered into common parlance as the “economic miracle” [*Wirtschaftswunder*]. Between 1950 and 1973, GDP grew at an average annual rate of around 6.5 percent, an unusual growth rate even for a time when all Western economies were humming along. While the economy had been a notorious source of trouble in the interwar period, it now became a first-rate guarantor of political stability. Mass consumption became the signature of a new kind of affluent society.

At first glance, environmental problems do not quite fit into this panorama. They seem to belong more to the period *after* the frenzy of consumption, when the costs of the boom moved to the fore of awareness. However, environmental issues gained new prominence already in the 1950s, which is not all that surprising upon closer inspection. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, we tend to associate ecological issues with a critique of consumption and growth. But for the 1950s, the opposite correlation was much more plausible. The environmental problems of that time could still be perceived by the

senses: deforestation, dirty water, and dust-laden air. Conditions that people accepted during times of hunger now became subject to criticism, and with that the growing environmental debate was initially not a movement in opposition to the West German economic miracle, but a complementary phenomenon. The environmentalism of the 1950s grew out of traditional German values such as *Behaglichkeit* and *Gemütlichkeit*, a quest for simple pleasures and homely comforts. And, in any case, why should people tolerate the pollution of the environment given that life in general was getting ever more pleasant?

The issues that attracted attention under these circumstances were entirely local in nature. The core concern was protecting one's personal environment against negative impacts, and that gave the protests a special urgency. Furthermore the general climate of the Adenauer years did not exactly invite political mobilization. The Westernization of the Federal Republic had just begun, and manifestations of pluralistic democracies such as demonstrations were still looked upon with skeptical eyes. The old guard of conservation mostly stuck to the traditional procedures of the authoritarian German state and focused on petitions and negotiations behind the scenes. Letters of protest remained the most important instrument, and yet one could sense that the discontent was pushing toward new, more aggressive modes of expression. It was not least environmental issues that transformed the German *Untertan* into a self-conscious, active citizen.

A prime example was the conflict to preserve the Wutach Gorge in the southern Black Forest, which for a time kept an entire region in suspense. It was triggered by a dam project of the Schluchseewerk power company, by which much of the water was to be diverted from the valley of the Wutach and used to generate peak electricity. The Wutach Gorge was a wild, canyon-like river valley that had acquired a reputation as a Romantic natural treasure in the nineteenth century; some

dubbed it the German answer to the Grand Canyon. The valley was a protected area since 1939. With that, the conflict was about a valuable piece of nature, and lurking in the background was the question of how much security the designation as a nature reserve really offered. When petitions failed to make an impression, Fritz Hockenjos, the nature conservationist of the Black Forest Association [*Schwarzwaldverein*], founded the Working Committee for Homeland Protection in the Black Forest [*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Heimatschutz Schwarzwald*] in 1953. While this setup had the major advantage that it offered associations from the region the chance to join as corporate members, it was revealing that Hockenjos created a new organization outside of the existing structures to fight for the Wutach Gorge. He obviously harbored doubts whether an established organization would be able to manage a large public campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The dispute dragged on for several years, and both sides fought with the gloves off. The Working Committee attracted attention from beyond the region with posters, brochures, meetings, and active media work, and it gave no hint of any willingness to compromise: “Hands off the Wutach Gorge,” was the motto of the movement. As early as January 1954, the State Cultural Agency [*Landeskulturamt*] of South Baden spoke of a “popular movement in favor of preserving the Wutach Gorge.”<sup>2</sup> The Schluchseewerk reacted with a flyer that lamented the “propaganda presentations” of the Working Committee.<sup>3</sup> For a protest rally at Freiburg University, the Schluchseewerk even brought in two busloads of workers and employees who made their presence known by heckling, which the Working Committee in turn denounced sharply as “propaganda methods”: “These manners are reminiscent of the disastrous brawling methods of a not-too-distant past,” thus demonstrating how the Nazi experience resonated in virtually all postwar conflicts.<sup>4</sup> The Working Committee collected no

fewer than 185,000 signatures against the dam, a demonstration of where public opinion was standing.<sup>5</sup> In the end, the government and the Schluchsewerk reversed course around 1960 and decided to shelve the project.

To be sure, this conflict still had a good dose of the 1950s' mustiness. The demonstrations of the Working Committee were still fairly diffident: it preferred to organize "excursions" into the Wutach Gorge, and as the culmination of the last great rally in May 1959, the participants joined in singing a popular folksong.<sup>6</sup> We can see a more vigorous approach in northern Germany, where just at this time activists fought to preserve the Knechtsand, a nondescript sandbank in the estuary of the Weser. This was all the more remarkable as the conflict in the tidelands of Lower Saxony led directly into the minefield of cold war defense policy. The threat to the Knechtsand came from airplanes of the British Royal Air Force, which had used Helgoland, a remote North Sea island, as a bombing range after World War II. When West Germany pushed for the return of Helgoland, the Royal Air Force demanded an alternate site, and Knechtsand was chosen. However, this site was much closer to the coast, and so considerable discontent grew in the region. In the beginning the crab fishermen were particularly active, as they suffered economic losses from the restricted military zone. They eventually won financial compensation from the federal government.<sup>7</sup>

The debate took on a new quality when the elementary school teacher and amateur ornithologist Bernhard Freemann made a momentous discovery: the Knechtsand, hard to reach from the mainland and therefore little studied, served as a resting place for Common Shelducks in the summer. The birds spent their molting period there, which left them unable to fly for almost a month and thus rendered them helpless victims of the bombs. In the summer of 1954, Freemann and his comrades-in-arms, who later organized themselves into a Protection and

Research League Knechtsand [*Schutz- und Forschungsgemeinschaft Knechtsand*], found thousands of cadavers. Their discovery quickly turned into a political issue. Was this merely a fraction of the victims, with many more cadavers carried out to sea by the tide? If so, how great were the real losses? Freemann initially spoke of 45,000 dead ducks, soon of at least 70,000, and both figures remained controversial. Could one trust the numbers of an amateur ornithologist, who also had an obvious interest in the most spectacular numbers? This skepticism led to further investigations, the Royal Air Force set up its own Common Shelduck Committee, and only gradually did it become incontrovertibly clear: the Knechtsand was in fact a major European molting site.

As a result the protest acquired a significance that transcended borders. Since the bombs were now a nature protection problem, agencies all the way up to the Federal Office for Nature Protection and Landscape Conservation [*Bundesanstalt für Naturschutz und Landschaftspflege*] took an interest in the sandbank. British bird conservationists became involved, the *Times* of London covered the affair, and the House of Lords discussed it in 1956. Soon memories of the bombing raids during World War II were mixed into the debate, for example, by the *Bild Zeitung*, the leading German tabloid, which put the issue on its front page in October 1954: “A hail of bombs on a German bird paradise.” All the while, West Germans were embroiled in a bitter debate over rearmament, and so pacifist groups were suddenly interested in Common Shelducks as well. Representatives of the German Communist Party liked to show up at the meetings. Police officers blended into the audience and took notes.

The protest movement reached its climax on a dreary Sunday in September 1957. The Protection and Research League invited supporters to a spectacular demonstration on the Knechtsand, revealing astonishing skill in dealing with modern

mass media. Twenty colorfully decorated cutters ferried three hundred demonstrators and reporters to the island, speakers stood barefoot on a washed-up wooden crate, and above them a large European flag fluttered in the wind; upon their return, torchbearers were greeting the fleet. After widespread media coverage on the demonstration, Freemann and his followers were no longer willing to compromise, and suspending the bombing runs during the molting period only was now out of the question. They demanded that the Knechtsand be declared a nature reserve, and a month later the state issued such a decree. In February 1958 Great Britain declared that it would henceforth refrain from military use of the Knechtsand.<sup>8</sup>

The Wutach Gorge and the Knechtsand were two of numerous conflicts that flared up during the 1950s, albeit some of the most spectacular. To be sure, not all these conflicts ended in victory. The struggle of Bavarian conservationists against hydropower projects on major rivers and cable cars in the Alps, for example, was largely unsuccessful.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it is remarkable that issues that previously would have tended to remain internal administrative procedures were now discussed in public. New was also the dramatic language: the community of Kleinblittersdorf in the Saarland, for example, which was downwind from a large French power plant, called for action by the authorities “before our once flourishing place will become a Pompeii from this devastating ash fall and all human and plant life suffocates in the dust.”<sup>10</sup> At the Feldberg in the Black Forest, the community of Menzenschwand fought against a uranium mine over three decades and eventually achieved its permanent closure in 1991.<sup>11</sup> The struggle over the Hoher Meißner in Hesse, a mountain that was a site of memory for the youth movement and which came under threat from a coal mine, ended in 1960 with its designation as a nature reserve.<sup>12</sup> In Lampertheim in South Hesse, a “Save the Palatinate” Committee fought to preserve the Lorsch Forest, where

the US military wanted to clear 800 hectares for an airfield. When the Lübeck Police killed ten dogs in a refugee camp because of a rabies scare in 1954, 1,500 dog owners and animal lovers demonstrated against the “St. Bartholomew's Massacre of the Dogs” with a protest march through the city center.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, none of this compares with the citizens' initiatives that sprang up everywhere since in the 1970s. Postwar Germany was still a society with material hardship, refugees, and people in improvised shelters. Even full employment was only attained in 1961, when the unemployment rate dropped below 1 percent. A serious problem was also the sluggish reaction of established organizations, which did not quite know what to do with the burgeoning discontent. When it came to grassroots work, they mostly thought in terms of slide shows and annual meetings; they were neither materially nor intellectually prepared for supporting a protest movement. As a result the protest found expression mostly in “Emergency” and “Working Committees” that were set up for a particular cause and had trouble putting their work on a permanent footing once a conflict was over. When the guns fell silent at the Knechtsand, tensions within the Protection League grew, and in the end Freemann was expelled from the board and even banned from setting foot on the island. The Working Committee for Homeland Protection in the Black Forest continued to speak out about regional issues like the planning of the Autobahn, but after the battles of the 1950s that seemed like an afterthought. Hockenjos remained active, though, and became president of the Black Forest Association from 1970 to 1979.

The situation was similarly bleak among state agencies. Conservation officials were at best indifferent toward the growing discontent in the general public. When conflicts over strip mining escalated in the Rhineland around 1960, nothing but silence came from the conservation commissioners, of all people.<sup>14</sup> In the Knechtsand conflict, the Federal Office

for Nature Protection actually schemed against Freeman—conduct whose motives the environmental historian Jens Ivo Engels has described as “difficult to fathom.”<sup>15</sup> Closeness to the state and authoritarian manners, an elitist self-conception and skepticism toward the “masses”—there was no lack of obstacles to the communication between the conservation community and its society. It suddenly became obvious that the extensive network of officials was in fact a giant with clay feet. In principle, it was possible to use the leeway that the office of the Conservation Commissioner offered for aggressive work in close collaboration with civil society, as Otto Kraus, the head of the Bavarian State Office for Conservation [*Bayerische Landesstelle für Naturschutz*], demonstrated. But the activism of Kraus remained exceptional.<sup>16</sup>

Yet conservationists did not lack legal powers. The Reich Conservation Law remained in force after 1945 (though the West German constitution prohibited expropriation without compensation), and thus it depended largely on how vigorously it was employed. In retrospect it is astonishing what could be achieved already in the 1950s when the existing regulations were used to their fullest extent. Even the skyline of the national capital was a product of conservation. When federal ministries in Bonn were flirting with the construction of imposing high rises in the Rhine meadows, the District Commissioner threw up a roadblock by invoking a landscape protection ordinance.<sup>17</sup> Conservation officials liked to complain about a lack of personnel, but that was half the truth at best. The system gave commissioners a lot of leeway in defining priorities, and thus any uniformity in conservation work was illusory. In more than one region, conservation work came to reflect personal hobbies and predilections.

What was lacking in the 1950s was not only an effective integration of the scattered activities but also a plausible philosophy. To be sure, after 1945 there had initially been a renaissance



This map shows some of the places that played an important role in Germany’s environmental history.

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of the critique of civilization. Once again, intellectuals pondered the “curse of technology” and humanity’s Faustian urges. But from the middle of the 1950s on, the gloominess increasingly lifted: a highbrow critique of progress sounded ever more quixotic in the midst of the material blessings of consumer society.<sup>18</sup> This was recognized also by the representatives of conservation, which is why they renounced any antimodernism: as the Sauerland Conservation Commissioner Wilhelm Lienenkämper noted, the intent was “not to bring back the romantic stage coach, but to live fully and completely in our time.”<sup>19</sup> In 1947, though, that same Lienenkämper had still spoken very differently before county commissioners of his region: “But is not the deification of technology, the megalomania of humans, and the growing disappearance of awe modern paganism? Have we become happier ever since we have been lifting the veil of creation; ever since we want to be as wise as God and know what is good and evil? Don’t we feel as we did at the expulsion from paradise?”<sup>20</sup> The affirmation of modernity by Lienenkämper thus sprang more from tactics than from inner conviction, and other conservationists drew on the classic themes of cultural despair as well. Even Hockenjos bemoaned that he was waging his battle for the Wutach “in a time of unholy materialistic contamination.”<sup>21</sup>

Given this mindset, it is not surprising that reform initiatives came mostly from outside the conservation community. Philanthropist Alfred Töpfer challenged the German conservation community with a speech at Bonn University in June 1956 that eventually led to the creation of recreational “nature parks” [*Naturparke*] that exist to this day.<sup>22</sup> Count Lennart Bernadotte, who had a knack for nature and turned the Mainau Island in Lake Constance into a flower park, assembled a group of experts for roundtable talks that proclaimed a “Mainau Green Charta” [*Grüne Charta von der Mainau*] in April 1961, one of the first environmental call-to-arms in the

Federal Republic.<sup>23</sup> In 1958, Günther Schwab published his novel *Der Tanz mit dem Teufel* [Dancing with the Devil], the first eco-bestseller after the war.<sup>24</sup>

Some initiatives yielded enduring results. In May 1955, Heinrich Grünewald, representing Germany's engineers as director of the VDI, and the representative of the VDI Expert Committee for Dust Technology attended a meeting of the Interparliamentary Study Group [*Interparlamentarische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für naturgemäße Wirtschaft*], which was discussing ways to combat air pollution. Shortly thereafter the press reported that a social democratic member of parliament was working on a bill that included provisions for "an independent commission of experts." Grünewald immediately contacted the Secretary General of the Interparliamentary Study Group, Wolfgang Burhenne. The initial motivation was surely negative: the VDI regarded such a commission as an unwelcome competition for its own Expert Committee for Dust Technology; moreover German engineers continued to be averse to politicization. But in their conversation Grünewald and Burhenne developed a positive and quite consequential idea. They decided to forgo laws for the time being and instead focus all energies on the development of technical rules and guidelines. What were the merits of tough-sounding laws if no one knew in the end how efficient the filters had to be? The result was the VDI Commission on Air Pollution Prevention [*VDI-Kommission Reinhaltung der Luft*], which to this day plays an important role in the development of technical standards.

The outcome was as remarkable as the process. It was the elitist politics of the 1950s at its best: two powerful men met for a frank conversation and forged a compromise. The agreement between Grünewald and Burhenne served the environmental interest of the Interparliamentary Study Group as well as the professional interests of the engineers. The latter's desire for independence soon came to a test when the powerful

Federation of German Industry [*Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie*] sought to put the reins on the VDI Commission: after all, the industrialists argued, the issue had “not only technological but, to a significant degree, also economic aspects.” The remark touched off the engineers’ sense of pride, as they under no circumstances wanted to be seen as the “extension of industry.” Grünewald ostensibly stressed the need for a “balanced composition” of committees; furthermore the goal was “to achieve conventions and not to impose regulations on anybody.”<sup>25</sup> At the very outset, then, it became clear what a precarious balance the VDI Commission had to maintain—but also, and that is the point, that there were forces that supported nonpartisan “cooperative work.” The attitude of state officials which initially eyed the commission’s work with suspicion and only slowly came to trust it, strengthened these forces even further. To this day, the VDI Commission serves as a model for the power of German corporatism.<sup>26</sup>

The genesis of the VDI Commission was symptomatic of reforms during the 1950s. Insiders were setting the tone, and they embraced a cautious approach to reform. There was constant vacillation between the desire for changes and the effort to preserve the existing structures as much as possible. On the one hand, the reforms aimed with some skill at the important screws within the administrative machinery, such as guidelines and technical standards. On the other hand, bureaucrats sought to preserve the traditional leeway for decisions and shield processes from outsiders. All the while, civil society stood on the sidelines, a backdrop to reform efforts, but not an active participant in ongoing debates. None of the civic leagues of the fifties showed an interest in administrative structures, and the conservation community continued to think that pollution was not its issue. For instance, Hockenjos and his Working Committee never took much interest in the fact that the Wutach Gorge was threatened not only by a dam, but also by the effluents of a nearby paper mill.

The pollution of rivers was another problem that had been the subject of controversial debates already in the nineteenth century and acquired new urgency in the postwar years. The dismal state of Germany's waterways showed in huge mountains of foam that were floating on rivers and canals in the unusually dry and hot summer of 1959. The federal government responded by setting up an expert commission, whose members included independent scientists, waterworks, and the detergent industry. In this instance, too, corporatism was the method of choice. Nobody was put in the dock; instead, an effort was made to arrive at a solution with everyone involved. But this did not mean that the problems had been put off. In 1961, years before similar concerns were voiced in the United States about the Great Lakes, a law on detergents was passed, which addressed soap components that did not easily break down biologically.<sup>27</sup> The times when one could ignore conspicuous problems with a shrug of the shoulders were over.

Of course, the reformist zeal within the bureaucracy was nowhere near ubiquitous. When it came to air pollution, there was really only one state in the 1950s that took a strong interest in changes: North Rhine-Westphalia. The trigger was the Ruhr region and specifically the Settlement Association for the Ruhr Region [*Siedlungsverband Ruhrkohlenbezirk*], whose director drafted a model law as early as 1952. With increasing affluence, the residents of the Ruhr region, like citizens all over the West, felt that environmental problems were an annoyance. In 1959, a regional newspaper described air pollution as "Ruhr problem No. 1." That same year in Essen-Dellwig, Clemens Schmeck, a Homeopathic doctor and chairman of a civic league, filed an injunction against a nearby steel mill when eye problems were multiplying among the children of his neighborhood. Thanks to this kind of mood, officials were able to proceed much more aggressively. As early as 1954, in negotiations about airborne dust from lignite coal power plants in the

Rhineland, officials warned of “administrative ‘self-defense’ measures under pressure from public opinion.”<sup>28</sup>

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy became the driver of change. This also reveals quite a bit about how deeply the competencies were fragmented within the German bureaucracy. Given the nature of the issue, one would have expected the interior or economic ministry to take the lead. But the labor ministry was in charge of the factory inspectorate, which had developed into the defining authority on industrial pollution since the turn of the century. The competition with other agencies gave rise to an important self-interest on the part of the ministry of labor: when it comes to defending and expanding jurisdictions, agencies like to go all out. Characteristically, the Labor Ministry acquired new positions and additional funds, and for two decades North Rhine-Westphalia became the pacesetter of air pollution control in Germany.

Emission control thus became a political football already in the 1950s. Still change for the most part possessed the flair of administrative-technical reforms: only insiders understood the true meaning of the Law Amending the Trade Code and the Federal Civil Code, which the Bundestag passed shortly before Christmas in 1959. Only in the summer of 1960 did those in the Chancellor’s Office grow nervous and press for a review of additional measures “also in view of the approaching federal elections.”<sup>29</sup> Air pollution indeed became an issue in the 1961 election when Willy Brandt declared in his speech at the party convention: “The sky over the Ruhr region must become blue again!”<sup>30</sup> The phrase stuck and became an environmental icon: for most Germans, it is pretty much the only thing they know about air pollution control before 1970. Brandt’s phrase was not tied to any concrete political program, though, let alone in notable difference to the incumbent: for politicians of the 1950s and 1960s, strengthening air pollution control was a matter of common sense. From 1962 to 1970, five state air quality laws were passed without a single dissenting vote.

The bigger problem was that reforms of the 1950s and 1960s generally followed the top-down approach that Germany had adopted in the late nineteenth century. Change focused on new laws and guidelines, with the tacit assumption being that they would somehow trickle down. In other words, reform was mostly an elite effort, disconnected from the everyday work of pollution control. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of fields, we can speak of a political field that was changing after decades of stability, but dynamism was always greatest at the top. Furthermore events within the political field were far removed from the protests that characterized the civic field since the 1950s. The interaction occurred only at a general level: since citizens saw environmental protection as a necessity of an affluent society, bureaucrats and politicians decided to do something.

All the time the third field of environmentalism, culture and life, was bleak. Some intellectuals continued to grumble about the profane materiality of modern life, but most people were happy to enjoy the pleasures of mass consumption. Some traditions from the Life Reform movement survived, and biodynamic farmers continued to do their thing, but they inspired few people beyond their distinct spheres. With a bit of polemic, one might argue that in the 1950s and 1960s, the key thing about appreciating nature was whether one could get there by car.

This picture changed surprisingly little during the 1960s. German historians have come to see that decade as one of dynamism and upheaval, culminating in the student rebellion of 1968.<sup>31</sup> However, environmental issues were strangely disconnected from these events, a situation that has not received much attention from environmental historians so far. Protests seized on other topics: reforms in education, the controversial State of Emergency Laws that the federal government pushed through parliament, the reign of the Shah in Iran, and the US war in Vietnam. At the most, we see some common ground in

protests against gentrification and urban renewal, but these issues appear green mostly in retrospect.<sup>32</sup> When it came to the environment, signs of change were visible first and foremost in an international context.

### Globalizing Environmentalism I: 1945 to 1973

Very little survived from the nascent transnational network that existed before 1914. In a time of international conflicts, communication across borders was naturally difficult, and contacts remained coincidental and sporadic. While there were some initiatives after 1918—for example, at the newly established League of Nations—they did not go further than nonbinding debates. To be sure, these debates mirrored transnational agreement that problems like whaling or oil pollution of the seas required global attention. However, it had become no less clear just how long the path to multinational solutions would be.<sup>33</sup> Collaboration developed best in bilateral exchanges, especially where a concrete, shared concern existed. When Germany had to relinquish North Schleswig to Denmark after World War I, Conwentz, with German thoroughness, sent a list of the nature reserves.<sup>34</sup>

This changed only slowly after World War II. Growing affluence stimulated interest in a clean environment across Europe, but activities were mostly national and regional in scope. However, some of the results were remarkable, with the most spectacular event of the 1950s occurring in London. For centuries, smog had plagued the British metropolis, but even a series of dramatic “killer smogs” in the late nineteenth century had not brought real change. However, when the city was beset by yet another smog episode in December 1952, everything was different. By evaluating mortality statistics, physicians determined that the smog had killed several thousand Londoners, and a committee under the chairmanship of Hugh Beaver, the

head of the Guinness brewery, recommended drastic measures. The Clean Air Act of 1956 made London smog a faint memory within a few short years.<sup>35</sup>

This success attracted attention in Germany, which in itself was a new phenomenon: environmental problems were increasingly becoming an international issue.<sup>36</sup> The situation had still been different in the interwar period. When a weather inversion created a toxic concentration of pollutants in the Belgian Meuse Valley in 1930, killing several dozen residents, the doyen of German air pollution control, Wilhelm Liesegang, declared tersely that the event was of “no general significance.”<sup>37</sup> But now the realization was taking hold that Western consumer societies were wrestling with similar challenges, and this imparted a new relevance to the problems of other countries. For example, the mercury poisoning in Minamata in Japan as well as air pollution-induced Yokkaichi asthma attracted worldwide attention: what would once have been seen as local problems were now perceived as warning signs of industrialization. On the periphery of the Western world, however, the attention declined precipitously. While an air pollution disaster that killed twenty in the American town of Donora, Pennsylvania, in 1948 was internationally noted, a similar event in Poza Rica in Mexico two years later, with a similar number of victims, drew scant attention even in the academic literature.

Global communication and national frames of reference were thus closely connected: the gaze into the wider world was firmly rooted in realities at home. Bernhard Grzimek, probably Germany’s most important cultural export in the environmental sphere in the 1950s, provides a good case in point. His work on behalf of wildlife reserves in East Africa was internationally recognized, and his documentary *Serengeti darf nicht sterben* [Serengeti Must Not Die] won an Oscar in 1960. At the same time, his TV show *Ein Platz für Tiere* [A Place for Animals], which aired more than one hundred and seventy episodes

between 1956 and Grzimek's death in 1987, remained focused entirely on a West German audience. His broadcasts were sedate in style but aggressive in substance: Grzimek fought against fur coats, environmental toxins, hormones in cattle farming, and hen battery cages, and his images were so disturbing that he sometimes advised parents who were watching with their children to turn off the television. But the issue was always an individual problem and not a comprehensive challenge for modern society. Once the show was over, viewers did not have to change their lives but merely wire a donation to the Zoological Society Frankfurt—the bank account number was a routine part of the closing credits. Thus the wide world of animals shrank to a German format: cozy, easy to understand, and suitable for the living room.<sup>38</sup>

The fate of the Japanese fishing boat “Lucky Dragon V,” which found itself downwind from a nuclear test on the Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954, became the peak of transnational environmentalism during the 1950s. Only a few years earlier this incident might have escaped international attention: the number of victims was small, and only one of them died after seven months. Now, however, fears about radiation and a nuclear war inspired a transnational protest movement. Linus Pauling, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist, estimated that 10,000 people had already died or fallen ill with leukemia as a result of atmospheric nuclear testing. In 1957, a conference with twenty-two scientists in the small Canadian town of Pugwash launched an international movement that received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995. Ever since the contamination of the “Lucky Dragon”—a name that henceforth sounded like a bitter irony—radiation was an issue that moved countless people and made its way also into popular culture. In 1962, Stan Lee published the first issue of his comic strip featuring scientist Bruce Banner who, because of an overdose of gamma radiation, mutates into the raging Hulk when provoked to anger.<sup>39</sup>

To be sure, the 1950s were also a time of nuclear euphoria, when hopes for the “peaceful atom” ran across the political spectrum, and yet expectations and fears coexisted uneasily. Advocates of nuclear power were eager to stress the differences between military and civil uses, particularly in Germany, which had maintained an abortive nuclear research program during World War II. In 1957, eighteen atomic scientists went public with a “Göttingen Manifesto,” which called on the German government to refrain from the development of nuclear weapons. At the same time, “peaceful” uses should be supported “by all means.” The Göttingen Manifesto made headlines, as it was a spectacular sign of dissent by 1950s standards. It was also a clever research management strategy since funding for nuclear science would be easier to obtain without military involvement, and a remarkably successful act of whitewashing for a group with a Nazi past.<sup>40</sup> In any case, the myth of a clear line between civil and military uses lingered for decades. Germany ultimately refrained from a nuclear weapons program, though surely not for lack of trying.<sup>41</sup>

The Göttingen Manifesto had a whiff of nineteenth-century politics: notable intellectuals writing a pamphlet to stimulate thinking. Amazingly, a public outcry followed on its heels, though the manifesto was probably less important here than support from the social democratic party (SPD) and the trade unions. Their “Fight Nuclear Death” [*Kampf dem Atomtod*] campaign became enormously popular in 1958, but it had a flash-in-the-pan quality: the sponsors dropped the issue like a hot potato after a few months. The campaign eventually gained some kind of permanence in the transnational Easter March tradition that started in 1960. Moreover radioactive fallout ceased to be a major problem once the nuclear powers had agreed to ban atmospheric testing in 1963. Still the debate had long-term consequences, as the issue assembled people from different countries around a common cause. It was also the first

rehearsal for the kind of apocalyptic rhetoric that would later become one of the defining features of environmentalism.<sup>42</sup>

International communication on environmental issues continued in the 1960s, when the United States increasingly moved toward the center of attention. Germans and others watched with interest while an ecological civil society emerged on the other side of the Atlantic and discussed expressions of discontent no less diligently than other aspects of US culture. For example, Vance Packard's books on consumption were translated with striking speed: *The Hidden Persuaders* and *The Waste Makers* appeared in German in 1958 [*Die geheimen Verführer*] and 1961 [*Die große Verschwendung*], only a year after the English originals.<sup>43</sup> Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was discussed in the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit* already in September 1962, only weeks after excerpts were published in *The New Yorker*. Shortly thereafter, the political magazine *Der Spiegel* set aside five pages for Carson's findings and scoffed that America's chemical industry "began to pop tranquilizers" even before the publication of *Silent Spring*.<sup>44</sup> *Die Zeit*, too, made no secret of its sympathies. The article opened with the following matter-of-fact statement: "Pesticides and chemicals for fighting insects are poisoning our environment and can cause cancer!"<sup>45</sup>

The vigorous response had much to do with the fact that the "Fight Nuclear Death" campaign had sensitized the West German public to notions of global contamination. *Der Spiegel*, for example, used the comparison to highlight the dangers of pesticides: "The poisonous rain growing ever thicker resembles in every detail the sprinkling of the earth with the radioactive dust stirred up by nuclear explosions."<sup>46</sup> What emerged here was a new type of threat that would become characteristic of the ecological age. So far, pollution problems had always been local, most of them could be registered by the senses, and damage was visible within a brief period of time. By contrast, the

new dangers had no geographic, temporal, and sensory boundaries. What had previously been primarily a problem of certain regions, like the Ruhr region, now seemed like a fundamental challenge to which every inhabitant of the Western world was invariably exposed.

This implied a tremendous expansion of the horizon, one that had been long overdue in many respects. After all, there were many dangerous substances that had been the source of concerns in earlier decades, but that had not provoked concrete measures. However, the new threat was about more than a broader range of issues: the new dangers were also more insidious than all previously known threats. The consequences of smoke and dust had been easy to perceive with the eyes and were thus at least visually under control. Even cholera, for all its horrors, had the advantage that if one contracted it, one would quickly gain clarity about one's fate. By contrast, one could ruminate endlessly on insidious poisoning, mutations, and cancer risks without arriving at a secure finding, and this injected a new anxiety into debates over pollution.<sup>47</sup> In the process, debates became more general and vague, losing the preciseness that pollution issues had had when they had centered on bad odors or property damage. As early as 1964, *Der Spiegel* noted about the dangers of DDT: "The weapon that humanity has devised for its campaign against pests now threatens to turn against it."<sup>48</sup>

The debate surrounding Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was indicative in another respect as well: it showed the dynamism of public debates and how they transformed the issues at stake. The controversy that broke immediately upon publication came to reduce Carson's book to a tirade against pesticides. President Kennedy commissioned a thorough study of her claims, while the chemical lobby mocked her evidence, and so all attention focused on DDT. Yet the book was really a more fundamental warning to heed the complex interconnectedness

of ecological processes, and to intervene with caution. Pesticides were merely a showcase of human hubris: since 1956, the US Department of Agriculture had conducted large spraying campaigns in a vain attempt to stop the spread of fire ants, testimony, in Carson's view, of a fundamentally flawed mindset. *Silent Spring* was therefore a call to humility, which fit perfectly with the author's modest character, but this call was mostly lost in the power play over DDT.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly enough, the Club of Rome suffered a similar fate with its 1972 publication *The Limits to Growth*, which it had commissioned from the MIT researcher Dennis Meadows. Here, too, the real issue was a certain way of thinking, namely the absurd belief in exponential growth rates. However, the study was received as a warning of resource depletion, and this reading was further reduced to oil after the first oil price shock in the fall of 1973 seemed to confirm the warnings. Yet Meadows and his team had not carried out any studies of their own on the available oil reserves—they had used information from the oil industry. Moreover the study made no secret about the limitations of its computer-generated forecasts, something that was not common in the heydays of cybernetics and futurology. The authors and the Club of Rome were not concerned with concrete forecasts, but rather with a critique of an idea of growth that had become second nature to many affluent citizens during the postwar economic boom.<sup>50</sup>

*The Limits to Growth* thus touched a raw nerve, and this made it a first-rate international event. Millions of copies were sold in more than thirty languages, and the title became a shibboleth for the turning point in the early 1970s: a time of endless possibilities gave way to a time of limits and crises. However, it is revealing that the study was not commissioned by a distinct environmental organization. Instead, the Club of Rome, founded in 1968 by the Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei and the OECD director Alexander King, felt a responsibility to take

on the totality of the world's problems and emphasized their interconnections; the distinguished multinational circle spoke of "the problématique." Members were handpicked and preferentially men, and they regarded themselves quite matter-of-factly as a global avant-garde. In this it resembled the profile of the World Wildlife Fund created in 1961, whose first president was the Dutch prince consort Bernhard; he was followed in 1976 by the long-time head of Royal Dutch Shell, John Loudon. Internationally, organizations were still firmly in the hand of dignitaries.<sup>51</sup>

In the United States, however, one could sense already in the 1960s that the change of environmentalism would lead to a radical transformation in the system of leagues and institutions as it had evolved since the turn of the century. The traditional groups were not made for social mobilization and aggressive lobbying, and they had even more of a problem with the colorful characters that were now increasingly moving into the environmental community. The transformation of the Sierra Club provides a revealing case study. Since John Muir's death in 1914, the club had led a fairly quiet existence for decades, until its executive director, David Brower, placed the struggle against dam projects at the center of the organization's work. A campaign against a reservoir lake in the Grand Canyon raised the national profile of the Sierra Club, led to a dramatic rise in membership, and eventually achieved the cancellation of the project. Internally, however, tensions with the charismatic Brower grew until he finally quit in 1969 to create a new organization under the name Friends of the Earth. A union with like-minded environmentalists in Great Britain, France, and Sweden in 1971 created Friends of the Earth International, the first international environmental organization with real grassroots members.<sup>52</sup>

Mobilization reached its first climax on April 22, 1970. The initiative of Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson to make this

a day of environmental action achieved a response beyond the wildest hopes. Originally planned as a student teach-in, the event has gone down in American history under the name Earth Day. Millions of Americans took part in some 12,000 events all over the country, and activists drew on the experience and the post-event infrastructure for a long time, giving the US environmental movement a head start over other Western countries.<sup>53</sup> Earth Day showed the acclaim that environmental issues enjoyed at this time, though success was probably more than a matter of awareness: it also offered a welcome respite from divisive political issues to a politically active citizenry. It was no coincidence that environmental problems were booming at the very time when protests against the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement had passed their zeniths. While those issues had split American society, a celebration of the planet that all humans invariably shared promised at least a temporary reconciliation. Fittingly, Earth Day was planned and celebrated as a cross-party event involving all Americans.

Earth Day was a purely American event, though it became a global endeavor with the Earth Day celebrations of 1990. However, it overlapped with an initiative of the Council of Europe, which declared 1970 the European Conservation Year. Events during this year gave a heightened visibility to environmental issues, even though much of it, compared to the social dynamism of Earth Day, bore a rather official character. Furthermore the activism that many countries displayed within the framework of the European Conservation Year had much to do with the fact that in 1968 the General Assembly of the United Nations had decided to hold a large environmental conference in Stockholm in June 1972. Until the environmental summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, this conference was the largest of its kind. However, all in all, it was a fairly mixed experience.<sup>54</sup>

On the one hand, the presence of more than 1,200 delegates from 114 countries showed the growing political clout of

ecological issues. On the other hand, Stockholm also revealed that the environmental debate was at that time an activity of the Western world, as the Global South took its own view of the new planetary awareness. “Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?” India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi asked at the environmental summit in Stockholm.<sup>55</sup> From the perspective of the developing countries, Western-style environmental protection was primarily a luxury, if not an outright neocolonial imposition that obstructed the Global South in the exercise of its right to development. But the conflict between the environment and development was only one of multiple dimensions of the North–South conflict that turned the global exchange on environmental issues into a rather complex discussion with multiple fronts. For example, among the horror scenarios that were passionately discussed around 1970 were also strands of neo-Malthusianism, with the American Paul Ehrlich and his book *The Population Bomb* receiving the most attention.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, the world’s population was indeed increasing at a rapid pace from the middle of the century on, but this growth took place chiefly in the countries of the Global South. Those who discussed population growth in environmental circles thus came under suspicion of wanting to divert attention away from the West’s overwhelming responsibility for resource depletion and environmental pollution.

The environmental summit in Stockholm was burdened not only by the North–South divide but also by the boycott of the Socialist countries. Ostensibly this had to do with a dispute over East Germany’s status under international law, yet the move showed just how much Eastern Europe had disconnected itself from the developments of the West. Socialist countries mostly lacked the resources for effective measures against environmental problems, but they had plenty of means to suppress demands for more protection. Their penchant for large-scale projects with horrendous side effects did the rest; Stalin’s

1948 Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature propelled the Soviet fascination with large technological systems into the realm of megalomania.<sup>57</sup> Three years later Stalin signed a decree that reduced the area under conservation protection by 90 percent—a dramatic measure that had no parallel in Western countries.<sup>58</sup> To be sure, it would be inadequate to write the environmental history of the Eastern Bloc as solely a history of catastrophes, especially since Socialist countries were sometimes having remarkably frank discussions about some environmental problems. However, Socialist Eastern Europe never developed an environmental philosophy that seriously challenged Western-style environmentalism.

On the background of these developments in Eastern Europe and the Global South, we can recognize more clearly the broad trend all over the West. In North America and Western Europe, we can find a heightened attention to ecological problems, a merger of previously isolated debates about the protection of animals and nature, resource use and pollution into one great “environmental discourse,” a growing protest beyond established channels and critical reporting by the media—and all this culminated in a consensus that environmental issues were a key challenge for modern societies. Political responses came thick and fast in the run-up to Stockholm: Great Britain created a Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and a Department of the Environment in 1970, that same year the United States created the Environmental Protection Agency, and in France in 1971 Robert Poujade became the first Minister of the Environment in a European country. That Poujade resigned only three years later and published his memoirs entitled *The Ministry of the Impossible* merely underscored the new status that environmental issues had acquired in the Western world. The environment was now serious business.<sup>59</sup>

This seriousness was probably the crucial new element that defined the time around 1970 as a watershed for modern

environmentalism. We find surprisingly few problems or concepts that were truly new at this time. Even ecology, which rose to become the leitmotif of political rhetoric at that time, had a long tradition as a technical term in biology. What *was* new, however, was that it was no longer possible to smile indulgently at individual concerns and marginalize them. The issue was no longer just dangerous chemicals or endangered hamsters, but an all-encompassing environmental crisis that had many dimensions. As a result debates gained a new kind of urgency after 1970—a transformative moment that has stood the test of time. The issue was no longer merely a collection of disparate problems, but also one very large problem, indeed the greatest challenge of all: the survival of humankind and of the biosphere.

This new urgency was palpable throughout the Western world. But at the same time it did not imply a fundamental challenge to national autonomy. Quite the contrary: in the 1970s and early 1980s, environmental policy remained a matter that was still firmly in the hands of the nation-states. To be sure, the United Nations Environment Program, headquartered in Nairobi, came out of the Stockholm conference, and the European Economic Community presented its first environmental action program in the fall of 1973, but these were simply recommendations, which the member states could deal with pretty much as they saw fit. Even when these activities resulted in binding treaties under international law, the prescriptions remained very soft: for example, the Ramsar Convention of 1971, which 160 countries have now joined, obliged the signatories merely to report wetlands of international importance to UNESCO and to send regular updates on their status. Since plans for cross-border regulation remained illusory for the time being, there was much room for distinct developments in individual countries. Whereas a certain coordination of environmental debates was evident in the run-up to Stockholm,

at least in the Western World, the trend after 1972 was merely toward a renationalization of these debates. While countries continued to talk with each other about environmental issues, they actually pursued paths that were shaped above all by the peculiarities of each country. The following chapter describes the West German path.

### **New Administrations, New Protests: German Environmentalism in the 1970s**

The federal election in September 1969 brought a watershed in German political history. The Christian Democrats, which had ruled the Federal Republic since its inception, were voted out of government, and a new coalition of social democrats and liberals took over. The new Chancellor, Willy Brandt, won international acclaim for his *Ostpolitik*, which paved the way for détente during the 1970s. After landmark agreements with the Soviet Union and Poland, Brandt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971. However, Brandt's diplomacy was just one facet of a broad reformist agenda that sought to make Germany more modern and democratic. Fittingly, environmental issues received a boost from the new government as well.

Environmental reform started in the most inconspicuous way, with the transfer of a division for noise abatement and air and water pollution control from the Health Ministry to the Ministry of the Interior. Transfers of this kind often have an air of horse-trading, and political tactics surely played a role, as the two ministries fell to different parties. However, the new Federal Minister of the Interior, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, seized the opportunity. His ambitions were evident already in the search for an alternative to the division's bulky name. On December 7, 1969, he decided on "Division U," and the letter stood for a previously unknown term: *Umweltschutz*. It was the literal translation of the English term "environmental

protection,” and the word *Umweltschutz* was thus, as Jens Ivo Engels has noted, “a bureaucratic creation par excellence.”<sup>60</sup> In 1971, Genscher presented the first environmental program of a federal government, and he used the opportunity for a programmatic speech. It was necessary to move “from environmental protection that responds merely on a case-by-case basis to a comprehensive environmental policy,” Genscher explained to the *Bundestag*. He promised “to tackle the imminent environmental crisis at its root.”<sup>61</sup>

The Division U pursued an ambitious reform program, one that had no precedent in German environmental policy. A Law against Airplane Noise and a Leaded Gasoline Act were passed as early as 1971, followed by the Trash Removal Law and the DDT Law (both 1972), the Federal Air Quality Act (1974), the Federal Forest Act (1975), and the Federal Nature Protection Act (1976). The emphasis lay on pollution control, the purpose of no fewer than 34 of the total of 54 new laws and ordinances by 1976.<sup>62</sup> Genscher also created the Expert Council for Environmental Questions [*Sachverständigenrat für Umweltfragen*] in 1971 and the Federal Department for the Environment [*Umweltbundesamt*] in Berlin, which began its work in 1974. Further innovations included environmental committees at the cabinet and department head levels, a Conference of State Environmental Ministers in session since 1972, and the appointment of Bernhard Grzimek as Conservation Commissioner of the federal government.<sup>63</sup>

The public received the new policy with a good deal of sympathy, and the neologism *Umweltschutz* became a word in everyday use. Criticism arose largely from party-political and administrative rivalries. That was the case, for example, with the SPD-led Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs in North Rhine-Westphalia, which felt that Genscher’s grandiose rhetoric lacked respect for the work that had already been done.<sup>64</sup> Bavaria, traditionally the staunchest defender of state

prerogatives in Germany, saw the federal initiative as an unwelcome intrusion: a memorandum from the Bavarian State Ministry for Labor and Social Welfare spoke of “threats” from the Federal Ministry, which had “to be countered with the loudest resistance.”<sup>65</sup> But it is revealing that Bavaria ultimately decided not to oppose the federal move and instead sought to outdo Genscher’s initiative. At the end of 1970, Bavaria created the first State Ministry for the Environment in Germany.<sup>66</sup>

In the competition over who would strike the best pose in environmental policy, Genscher retained the upper hand. The situation looked somewhat different with respect to substance: rhetoric about a new era of environmental responsibility must not distract from an enormous degree of continuity. The Federal Ministry was cautious in its approach where reforms were already under way. For example, the Federal Air Quality Act passed in 1974 was modeled entirely on a North Rhine-Westphalian law of 1962. Genscher was well advised to proceed cautiously, as the West German constitution required the federal government to cooperate with the states. Since 1972, waste disposal, air pollution control, and noise abatement all fell under the principle of concurring legislation, which mandated negotiations between the states and the federal government. Furthermore implementation of the new regulations usually rested with the states. Of course, this exacerbated the basic problem of a reform policy from the top down: the bureaucrats in the federal and state ministries had at best a vague idea about implementation on the ground. The reformers showed little interest in such problems, possibly due to a feeling that they otherwise could no longer keep bombarding subordinates with ever-new regulations. The new Expert Council on Environmental Questions finally broke the silence: “By common consensus, administrations, but also the public prosecutor’s offices and the criminal courts, have so far not taken the legal provisions of environmental protection law seriously enough,” the Council

wrote in an expert opinion of 1974. In some cases, official behavior bordered “almost on a refusal to enforce the law.”<sup>67</sup>

The “implementation gap in environmental law” became a standard phrase. To be sure, implementation problems were certainly not unusual by international standards, but the lack of any discussion about the problem made the West German situation more difficult than necessary. In any case, the creation of transparency and public oversight of administrative conduct were not part of the environmental policy of the federal government, and this was not the only thing that we can criticize in retrospect.<sup>68</sup> Genscher shied away from conflict with the electric utilities by forgoing the installation of sulfur scrubbers. While the harmful effect of sulfur dioxide on plants was long beyond dispute, and the first pilot plants were ready to go in the early 1970s (the state of North Rhine-Westphalia having financially supported their development), the power of the large energy producers and the coal interests made it politically expedient to let the issue rest. Not until 1977 did the first commercial flue gas desulfurization plant become operational in Wilhelmshaven, and five years later only seven out of a total of ninety large power plants had these scrubbers. Genscher proceeded with similar restraint when it came to automobile emissions. He simply ignored the US trend toward exhaust filters, with the result that cars continued to pollute the German air while cars for export were equipped with catalytic converters. In both cases the conflict was merely postponed: in the ecological 1980s, car makers and power plant operators came under enormous pressure from ecological protests.

Probably the most momentous failure concerned the speed limit. The federal government reacted to the 1973 oil crisis with emergency measures that included a general speed limit of 100 km/h on the autobahns and 80 km/h on country roads. German automobilism would probably have taken a different turn if that prohibition had not been repealed soon after; a

compromise from the Federal Transportation Ministry, which called for a limit of 120 km/h, failed in March 1974. In this context lobbyists coined the slogan “Free Driving for Free Citizens” [*Freie Fahrt für freie Bürger*], which ever since has turned reform efforts into a political gamble. In this way unrestricted driving on German autobahns became a national myth, and the price has been terrible accidents, horrendous emissions, and a trend toward heavy sedans that made high speeds possible in the first place.<sup>69</sup>

The speed limit debacle was illustrative of the general approach to environmental issues: the goal was government policy, rather than a comprehensive effort at social reform. The new federal government liked to talk about enhancing “quality of life,” but this never evolved into something resembling a political compass.<sup>70</sup> For the time being, the American way of life remained the consumerist model; in fact the American way of life was probably less ambiguous in Germany than it was in contemporary American society. German consumer protection trailed US developments, and when the critique of consumption finally became popular in the early 1970s, that was mostly due to interest from the New Left. There is no German consumer advocate that could compare with Ralph Nader to this day, and it is quite revealing that Nader’s *Unsafe at Any Speed* was never translated into German.<sup>71</sup>

Genscher also sought to co-opt civic leagues. In this he was driven not only by the desire to gain an ally for his environmental policy but also by a strategic calculus on the part of the liberal party (FDP), and specifically the FDP’s left wing. “Environmental protection takes precedence over the pursuit of profit and personal gain,” the Liberals had proclaimed in 1971 in their Freiburg Theses, the climax of leftist liberalism in the Federal Republic.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, in Peter Menke–Glückert, Genscher had made an unorthodox liberal the leading thinker of the Division U, though he soon became a thorn in the side

of the FDP's pro-business wing.<sup>73</sup> In any case, both party politics and the reformers' strategic considerations pointed toward a close collaboration with environmental initiatives, and the ministry maintained close contacts to some key organizations. In 1972 the Federal Minister of the Interior even provided assistance in the founding of the Federation of Citizen Initiatives on the Environment [*Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz*, or BBU], the umbrella organization for mushrooming environmental initiatives.<sup>74</sup> However, the radicalization of the environmental scene dashed hopes for a lobby with close ties to the state; the first chairman of the BBU, Hans-Helmuth Wüstenhagen, also a member of the FDP, resigned in 1977 in response to massive pressure from leftist groups. The aggressive tone in books and the media, which culminated in gloomy doomsday scenarios, did the rest. In short, while the FDP continued to hold some political capital in environmental circles, a new sense of urgency thwarted hopes for an alliance already before the rise of the Green Party. Environmentalists wanted to let off steam for now, rather than fall right away into new political dependencies.

However, what shone through in the efforts of the Federal Ministry was a motivation that tends to be overlooked in accounts of German environmental policy: officials pursued their own interests when it came to environmental protection. Civic players were naturally eager to present the state as a dithering leviathan, one that was able to rouse itself to undertake certain measures only after vigorous protest. In reality, though, agile administrators recognized that an aggressive environmental policy would allow an expansion of competencies and budgets. We can see this motivation at work in efforts to curtail the maneuvering room within the bureaucracy. The Conservation Commissioners were particularly affected, as their traditional independence was now regarded as a threat. After all, a citizen holding an honorary office and subject to no directives could

easily make himself into a tribune of the people and cause the administration a lot of trouble. As a result in North Rhine-Westphalia, for example, the Conservation Commissioners were abolished and replaced by State Administrative Boards [*Landschaftsbeiräte*] in 1975; in addition the government created a new State Agency for Ecology, Landscape Development, and Forestry Planning [*Landesanstalt für Ökologie, Landschaftsentwicklung und Forstplanung*].<sup>75</sup> These measures were not merely about strengthening scientific expertise but also about the fact that such agencies fit much better into administrative hierarchies than the traditional network of commissioners. Reform policy thus went hand in hand with the desire of the bureaucracy to retain control amid all the dynamism.

Environmental historians have given scant attention to how the reins were now tightened within the bureaucracy. They usually focus on civil society, where protest reached a new level in the 1970s. Industry and infrastructure projects now had to reckon with massive opposition. In Karlsruhe, a citizen initiative prevented the expansion of an oil refinery. In the Rhineland, local action groups teamed up with the city of Duisburg to derail an industrial complex of VEBA Chemie on the Rhine near Orsoy.<sup>76</sup> At Frankfurt airport, protest against a new runway was alive for more than a decade.<sup>77</sup> However, no issue stirred emotions as much as nuclear power, the ecological problem par excellence since the mid-1970s. In no other country did the nuclear issue become as decisive for environmentalism as in Germany.

The protest against a nuclear power plant in Wyhl in southern Baden became the signal event. To be sure, there already had been local protests, for example with the power plant projects in Gundremmingen and Würgassen.<sup>78</sup> It was in Wyhl, however, where the protest reached a new quality: winegrowers forged an alliance with citizens from the region and students from nearby Freiburg, and local concerns gave rise to fundamental



Campaign poster for a 1971 rally against a chemical industry complex on the Rhine near Duisburg. Note that it promised “beat, beer, and oompah music” for the event, which suggests that the organizers were counting on a rather diverse group of protesters. Picture Bundesarchiv.



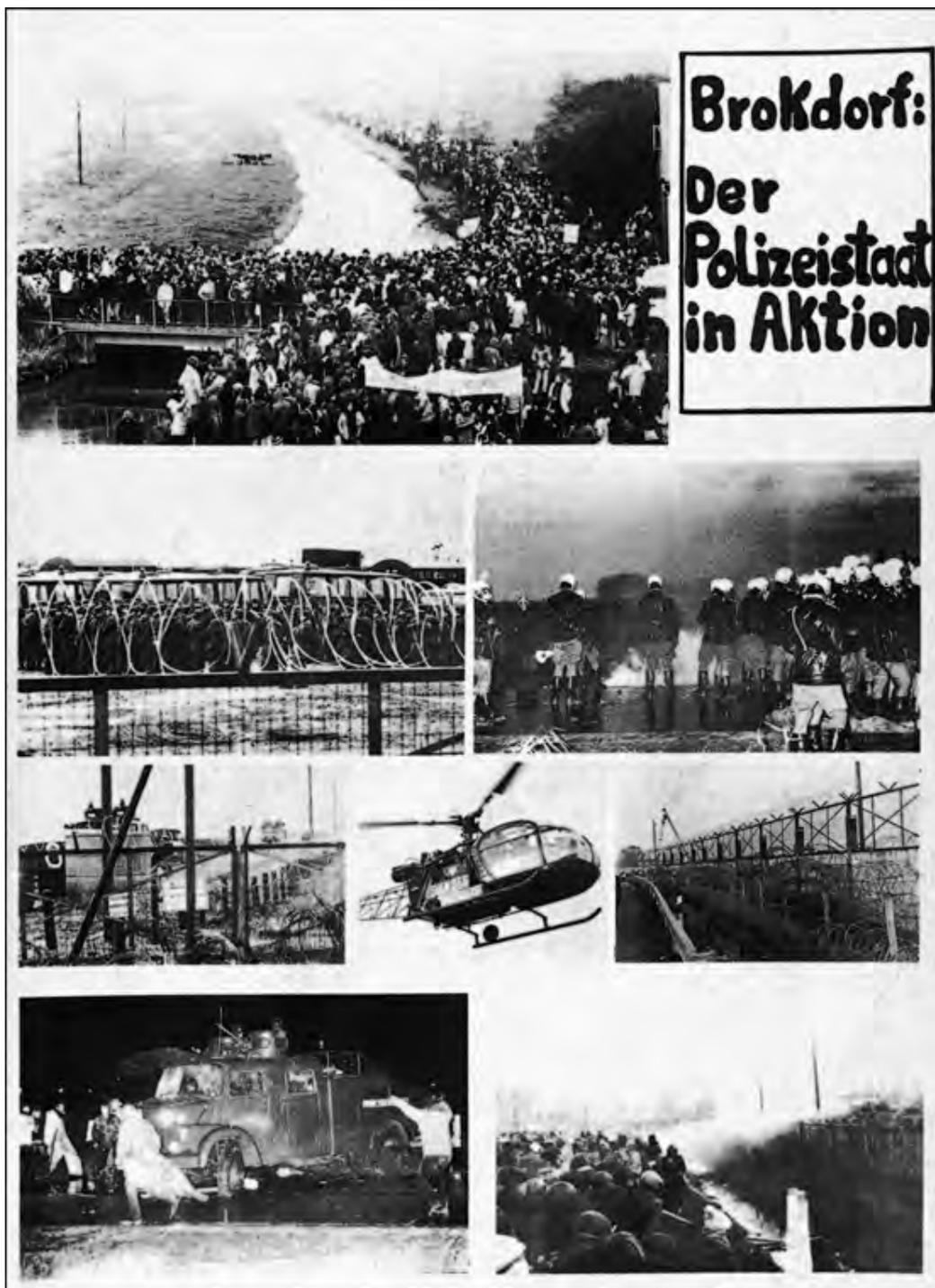
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Pamphlet from a citizen initiative (*Bürgerinitiative*) against a new runway at Frankfurt airport, Germany's largest. The runway was eventually built after a decade of vigorous protest. However, when the airport sought another expansion, protesters won a ban on nighttime flights that was upheld in court in 2012, thus fulfilling the secondary demand of this 1979 leaflet. Picture Bundesarchiv.

doubts about atomic energy: “No nuclear power plant in Wyhl or anywhere else,” was the slogan. Protest was no longer about petitions and demonstrations: when construction began in February 1975, irate citizens climbed over the steel wire, occupied the site, and set up a “Friendship House,” which was soon home to a “People’s College [*Volkshochschule*] Wyhl Forest.” A pirate radio station broadcast antinuclear information. The protest of Wyhl has long since become a national myth, one that embodies what makes a democracy: people come together across deep divides, fight for a common goal, and in the end they win.<sup>79</sup>

The myth of Wyhl drew strongly on the nonviolent nature of the protest. While the state acted quite roughly and without respect for the local mood, protesters remained peaceful. Elsewhere, protest was less benign, with the result that the antinuclear demonstrations not only grew in size but also became increasingly violent. Presumably Wyhl is remembered with such enthusiasm because the events in other places provided little cause for pride: the “battle of Brokdorf” was fought on November 13, 1976, the “battle of Grohnde” on March 19, 1977. Both sides boosted their arms: the police with helicopters and water cannons, the demonstrators with blowtorches for the construction fence, coordinated volleys of stones, command centers and motorcycle messengers, and even their own corps of medical students for the wounded. Baton-wielding policemen, tear gas, and helicopters buzzing over the heads of the demonstrators at low altitudes—these were indeed civil war-like scenes that were deeply disturbing to both sides.<sup>80</sup>

However, public protest was only one aspect of the antinuclear movement. It also included counter-expertise that pushed the nuclear lobby onto the defensive with remarkable speed. There was plenty of fodder for critique: exploding pipes, obstinate fuel rods, blackouts—the early years of nuclear power were full of frightening incidents. In 1973, Holger Stroh



“Brokdorf—The Police State in Action,” ca. 1976: Clashes between protesters and the police became a defining feature of antinuclear demonstrations. They were disturbing to all parties involved. Picture Bundesarchiv.

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published a critical documentation of nuclear power plants under the title *Friedlich in die Katastrophe* [Peacefully into the Catastrophe], which expanded to more than 1,200 pages by 1981 and reached six-digit sales figures.<sup>81</sup> The critique of nuclear power received additional support from the conversion of prominent nuclear experts like Klaus Traube.<sup>82</sup> In short, antinuclear protest met with doubts within the nuclear community, where independent voices became more and more marginalized. As energy interests had invested billions into nuclear power, they were increasingly averse to critical thinking.<sup>83</sup>

In the spring of 1979, a hearing on the Gorleben project showed the power of antinuclear expertise. The Gorleben project was about a “nuclear waste-disposal center,” which was to comprise a reprocessing plant, waste treatment, and a permanent disposal site, to be built in the far east of Lower Saxony close to the East German border. There had been local opposition ever since the government had announced the location in 1977. It merged with the national network of antinuclear groups, as critical experts realized that the nuclear complex was especially vulnerable on the issue of reprocessing, a procedure that was susceptible to accidents and contamination. While the hearing was underway, news broke about a serious accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power station in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where experts feared for days that the reactor might explode. In the end, the state government gave up. In a landmark declaration, the prime minister of Lower Saxony, Ernst Albrecht, recommended that the project of a reprocessing plant “not be pursued further”: it might be technically possible, but it was not “politically feasible.”<sup>84</sup> Albrecht spoke more bluntly in a cabinet meeting: “I don’t want a civil war in my state.”<sup>85</sup>

The Gorleben hearing was the first real success of the antinuclear movement. Nuclear power plants were built in Grohnde, Brokdorf, and many other places, eventually making Germany

the fourth largest provider of nuclear electricity in the world. Political elites stood by nuclear power throughout the 1970s, but revealingly, they never allowed a referendum on the issue. The experience of Austria may have played a role: in 1978, the Austrian people voted to abstain from nuclear energy, thus scuttling a completed nuclear power plant in Zwentendorf and canceling plans for a few more.<sup>86</sup> At the most, German nuclear protests achieved a delaying action that led to the cancellation of several projects, including Wyhl. It turned out that construction plans had run far ahead of demand, which gives German nuclear history an ironic twist: in a way, antinuclear protesters saved the German utilities from a huge waste of money. At any rate, antinuclear sentiments did not achieve a complete victory, and the issue remained on the agenda for decades. Even the Gorleben decision was only a partial success: the authorities built an intermediary storage site and drafted plans for a permanent storage, and Gorleben remained on the map of ecological protest. Still Albrecht's decision was a turning point, a shock for nuclear energy managers, and an important learning experience for their opponents: it was indeed possible to achieve something with words.

However, it was revealing that what was perhaps the most important measure in environmental policy in the late 1970s was an act of renunciation. The federal government's offensive in environmental policy had long been fading out, and with it the aegis of state administrations. Genscher had moved on to the Foreign Ministry in 1974, and left-wing terrorism came to absorb most of the attention in the Federal Ministry of the Interior.<sup>87</sup> As it was, Helmut Schmidt, as Chancellor, made no secret of his low opinion of the green issue: "Focus on the essential" was the leitmotif of his first policy speech. That this in no way included environmental problems became evident in June 1975, when the Chancellor, during a closed conference at Gymnich Castle, blasted an environmental policy that was

getting out of hand. That surely reflected the growing weight of environmental issues: for the first time, conservation, previously a topic irrelevant to the national economy, was perceived as a brake on growth. At last environmental policy had become important enough to be attacked by the Chancellor. Yet this was, understandably enough, poor consolation for an environmental scene that was becoming increasingly disillusioned.

While environmental policy was at bay, there was continuity in the technical-administrative work behind the scenes. The expert circles that had been put in place in the 1950s continued their work, and the federal policies of the early 1970s were an obvious encouragement. This was also reflected in the fact that the first contours of a promising new field of engineering became visible: environmental technology. Beginning in the 1970s there emerged journals and regional associations to furnish experts with information and contacts. The federal government supported this trend when it created, in 1979, an environmental innovation program, which has been in place to this day.<sup>88</sup> However, the goings-on behind the scenes also included a new toughness on the part of industry, which increasingly adopted an obstructionist stance. In his memoirs, Genscher wrote that the negotiations over the leaded gas law had been “an object lesson about the intransigence of some industry lobbyists when it came to environmental policy.”<sup>89</sup>

If we summarize the general situation toward the end of the 1970s, the general picture looks eminently inclusive. There were encouraging signs in all three fields of environmentalism, but it was no forgone conclusion that these trends would continue, let alone mutually support each other. We now know that a tremendous boom of green issues followed in the 1980s, but that surprised observers and activists alike. It is only in retrospect that we can pinpoint specific reasons for this remarkable turn of affairs. The Green Germany as we know it today is to a large extent a product of the 1980s, born out of conditions

that were both transnational and peculiarly German. But then, identifying these conditions requires us to take a step back from the hustle and bustle of political events and reflect more deeply on the underlying causes that drove the rise of environmentalism. That is what the following chapter intends to do.

The issue of underlying causes is surprisingly unpopular in environmental history. Most studies prefer to focus on the drama at play in politics and civil society, as the rapid sequence of events makes for an exciting narrative almost by itself. In the end, the rise of environmentalism comes across as a strangely faceless process, devoid of interests, social stratification, and all the other things that usually provide the backbone of history. But then, environmentalism did not grow by itself, and neither was its rise predestined, nor was it irresistible. It grew out of specific constellations of actors, out of interests, and out of political conditions that deserve careful scrutiny.

The following chapter differs from the previous one not only in terms of focus but also in intellectual ambition. It is a tentative exploration into an underdeveloped field of study: the goal is to stimulate a discussion about underlying causes and to highlight the rich reservoir of approaches that we can take toward an explanation for the rise of environmentalism. Even more fundamentally, the following discussion intends to show how much we are missing when we continue to contend ourselves with descriptions and fail to tackle that bigger question overhanging the history of modern environmentalism: why?