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Wyhl: The Mid-1970s Anti-nuclear Mobilization Efforts between a Small West German Village and Germany's Younger Generation

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Wyhl: The Mid-1970s Anti-Nuclear Mobilization Efforts between a West  
German Village and Germany's Younger Generation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

William Laurence Christian

Committee in charge:

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September 2020

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I am also very grateful to Mark Cioc, J. Sears McGee and John Talbott who coached me through my written and oral examinations, even holding my hand when necessary. The support that I received from Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval and Paul Spickard is unparalleled. Their embrace near the finish line made the difference to the success of my dissertation. The sacrifices and confidence that Paul and Ralph displayed, assured me of their genuine and vested interest in my overall success.

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families who affably opened their homes and gardens to me for pastries, tea, and conversations, I am very grateful. Complete strangers who insisted that I stay overnight, instead of traveling two hours with public transportation in the night to return to my Flat. Residents who gave me the history of the adjacent towns as we walked softly through the cemeteries at the local churches. I would have been lost without the knowledge and the rich array of archived photos given to me by Wyhl native, protester, and historian, Bernd Nössler. Of great significance, I thank the numerous brains that helped me translate my documents when dialects were often indecipherable and words were indefinable. Many thanks to translators: Mira Foster, Christian Kraiker, Heinrich Raatschen, Uli Remmele and Holger Wegner.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Jack and Jerri, for their unwavering support. To my wife, Kongit, a soul amongst souls; and to the most precious and loving daughter this side of heaven, my Pumpkin, Lauren Desta Christian.

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## ABSTRACT

### Wyhl: The Mid-1970s Anti-Nuclear Mobilization Efforts between a West German Village and Germany's Younger Generation

by

William Laurence Christian

In 1974 protesters in Wyhl, a taciturn village in Germany's Kaiserstuhl area on the edge of the Black Forest, ushered in a crusade against nuclear energy.

Inevitably, this particular movement challenged the *perceived* authoritarian rule of the West German government. Protesters in Wyhl began to prioritize the principles of regional and national concerns over the needs of individuals. The *Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz*, commonly referred to as the BBU (National Association of Citizen Action Groups for the Protection of the Environment) had been founded in 1972 and within a short period boasted more than 1,000 grassroots organizations throughout Germany. In Wyhl, there was a uniquely diverse coalition that included Catholics and Protestants, educated and uneducated individuals, conservative and liberal voters, as well as working and professional classes. This dissertation, however, highlights the role and involvement of the younger generation of Germans, especially students from nearby University of Freiburg who assisted the

small agricultural community in its resistance against the government's offensive environmental proposal to build a nuclear plant less than one kilometer from the historic Rhine River, and in the center of South Germany's wine-growing region. This dissertation is the culmination of numerous personal interviews with former students, student leaders, community activists, cooks, and other behind the scenes participants. These protesters were essentially the "followers who led" one of Germany's most effective anti-nuclear power movements.

## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
1. Interviewing the Wyhl Protesters.....	16
Dr. Frank Baum .....	17
Georg Löser .....	18
Bernd Nössler .....	20
Pastor Günter Richter .....	21
Anna Marie Sacherer - Interview with Her Son.....	22
Bernd Sacherer-Zorn .....	23
Gabriela Walderspiel .....	24
2. Two Groups, One Mission: An Anti-Nuclear Germany.....	27
3. What Happened to My Milieu?.....	30
4. Germany's Two Largest Political Parties: Christian Democrats vs. Social Democrats .....	35
5. Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself: Community Needs vs. Individual Needs .....	40
6. Why Wyhl? .....	44
Conclusion: The Success of Wyhl's Anti-Nuclear Movement.....	50
Bibliography.....	54
Archival Collections .....	54
Personal Interviews.....	54
Secondary Sources.....	54

## Introduction

In one of his four anti-nuclear movement studies, which included France, Sweden, the United States and West Germany, political scientist Herbert Kitschelt demonstrates that since the 1960s, there have been a number of protest movements that have successfully challenged public policies, and along the way established modes of political participation and socio-economic institutions in countries classified as industrial democracies.<sup>1</sup> West Germany was no exception to Kitschelt's assertion. The social and political climate shifted dramatically in West Germany during the 1970s. This *shift* is often considered the result of German Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* and its attempt to normalize political relations between West Germany and Eastern Europe, particularly as it pertained to East Germany. After more than a decade of the Berlin Wall's perceived permanence, the aftermath of the 1968ers' student movement, and continued frustrations about being the buffer zone between the East and the West in the Cold War, many in German society had become increasingly discontent with the Cold War.

According to Hanno Balz, scholars in the field of social movements largely agree that between the late 1960s and 1980s, West Germany saw a growing influence of protest groups and citizens' initiatives on policymaking.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Balz,

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert P. Kitschelt, *Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Hanno Balz, "We Don't Want Your Peace'..." the West German Antiwar Movement, Youth Protest, and the Peace Movement at the beginning of the 1980s." *German Politics and Society*, Volume 33.3 (Autumn 2015), 28.

environmental historian Roger Karapin adds that many studies linked political participation at the national or aggregate level to post-materialist values and focused almost exclusively on nonviolent participation. They saw the leftist movements as part of a more democratic, more participatory “new politics.”<sup>3</sup> In their zeal to differentiate and classify the movements that emerged after 1968, numerous social movement theorists tend to overlook and undervalue the ways in which the ‘68ers forged new, heterogeneous political coalitions and dramatically changed citizens’ ideas about politics and their approaches to social participation.<sup>4</sup> During the late 1960s, and as late as 1975, domestic and political issues, and more notably, environmental and nuclear concerns, came to the fore in West Germany. German Studies professor Sabine von Dirke states that during the upheaval of the student movements in the late 1960s, West Germany was not allowed to “return to business as usual.”<sup>5</sup> She further notes two very critical changes that occurred in West German society: “the hegemonic culture proved itself to be more adaptable to change than expected,” and importantly, “the collective political identifications had gained the

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Karapin, *Protest Politics in Germany: Movements on the Left and Right since the 1960s* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 23-24.

<sup>4</sup> Die sozialen Bewegungen in Deutschland seit 1945: *Ein Handbuch*, (Frankfurt, 2008). The Social Movements in Germany Handbook defines the antinuclear movement as narrow “individual, groups and organizations” who actively campaigned against the civil use of atomic energy, particularly through the means of collective public protest within the framework of a larger, self-defined network-like relationship.” In the Handbook, Rucht makes clear distinctions between the self-centered interests of the antinuclear movement and those of the environmental movement, which is apparently interested in anti-nuclear movements, as well as other environmental causes. Stephen Milder, “Between Grassroots Protest and Green Politics: the Democratic Potential of the 1970s Antinuclear Activism.” *German Politics and Society*, Issue 117 Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter 2015): 25-39.

<sup>5</sup> Sabine von Dirke, *“All Power to the Imagination!”: The West German Counterculture from the Student Movement to the Greens* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 67.

upper hand to the extent that personal issues or matters of subjectivity were denounced as counterrevolutionary.”<sup>6</sup> According to political historian Joyce Mushaben, West Germany held a pivotal position among European peace movements. Its historical legacy, effectiveness to mobilize large protest coalitions after the Second World War, and its geo-strategic location, provided strength to its ‘extra-parliamentary’ experiences acquired by the student activists of the late 1960s; a movement that undoubtedly led to their ‘long march through the institutions’ during the 1970s.<sup>7</sup> As a result, individual needs became less important and the needs of the community-at-large emerged as a defining characteristic of citizens in West Germany, particularly in the south German state of Baden-Württemberg. The younger generation of protesters who participated in Wyhl’s anti-nuclear movement were less concerned about the individual impact of a nuclear plant, and more concerned about the impact that it would have on south Germany as a whole.

There is no evidence to support whether or not the West German government’s decision to designate various nuclear proposal sites were arbitrary, intended simply to restrict opposition, or the result of vast open space in these rural areas. My dissertation focuses on the contributions of nearby students from the University of Freiburg who participated first-hand in the Wyhl protests. Documentary evidence is supplemented by personal interviews conducted and recorded in various parts of southwestern Germany in 2008.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>7</sup> Joyce Mushaben, “Grassroots and Gewaltfreie Aktionen: A Study of Mass Mobilization Strategies in the West German Peace Movement,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1986.

Das sind die Mörder des Kaiserstuhls

ASB 122 873  
10/12/14 L

**Der Bürgermeister und die Gemeinderäte von Wyhl am Kaiserstuhl entscheiden demnächst sowohl über die Durchführung des Bürgerentscheids, als auch über den Verkauf des gemeindeeigenen Geländes zum Bau des Atomkraftwerkes**

30. Oktober 74



**Zimmer, Wolfgang**  
Bürgermeister in Wyhl  
seit 1968  
32 Jahre  
Stockackerweg 16, Tel. 1695  
Mitglied des Kreistages (CDU)



**Seiter, Ludwig**  
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Gemeinderat

**Damit zeichnen sie allein voll verantwortlich:**



Flyers such as this one were disseminated to inform local residents of the political leaders in the region.



Protesters in Wyhl, Baden-Württemberg are confronted by the West German State Police,  
February 21, 1975.  
Photo credit: Bernd Nössler.

In Wyhl, for example, one of Baden-Württemberg's small villages, its 2,700 residents were assisted in the mobilization efforts of a younger generation that included socially and environmentally conscious Germans. Because of various citizens' initiatives and the non-locals' mobilization efforts and the outsiders' willingness to subordinate their views to those of the local villagers, the anti-nuclear protests in Wyhl proved to be highly successful. The protests were also a shock to those in government who had recommended the site as a nuclear facility location. Critically, in Baden-Württemberg citizens' initiatives were an important and well-linked network, and many of the initiatives, such as the *Bund für Heimat und Umwelt*



(The Association for the Homeland and Environment), tended to focus on the enjoyment of nature and boasted considerable membership.

In 1974 protesters in this taciturn village in the Kaiserstuhl area on the edge of the Black Forest not only sparked a crusade against nuclear energy, but they also challenged the *perceived* authoritarian rule of the state. Protesters in Wyhl began to



prioritize the principles of regional and national concerns over the needs of individuals. The *Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz*, commonly referred to as the BBU (National Association of Citizen Action Groups for the Protection of the Environment) had been founded in 1972 and within a short period boasted more than 1,000 grassroots organizations within Germany.<sup>8</sup> In Wyhl, there was a diverse coalition that included Catholics and Protestants, educated and uneducated individuals, conservative and liberal voters, as well as working and professional classes. This dissertation, however, will highlight the role of the younger generation of Germans<sup>9</sup>, especially students from nearby University of Freiburg<sup>10</sup> who assisted the small agricultural community of Wyhl in its resistance against the government's offensive environmental proposal to build a nuclear plant less than one kilometer from the historic Rhine River. Stephen Milder, renown global historian, states, "the apparent provincialism undergirded environmental activism's important contributions to the broadening and renewal of West German democracy by changing individuals' conceptions of the political and making space for new, heterogeneous coalitions."<sup>11</sup> In his 2008 book about the global history of environmentalism, Joachim Radkau argues

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<sup>8</sup> Citizens' Initiative Associations as a Political Force in Germany” ([https://germanculture.com.ua/library/facts/bl\\_cia.htm](https://germanculture.com.ua/library/facts/bl_cia.htm)) online edition.

<sup>9</sup> Although the term younger generation can be viewed as ambiguous, I will refer to those born after 1940, which would calculate their age to be thirty-five or under during the Wyhl protest movement.

<sup>10</sup> The University of Freiburg was founded in 1457 and it is the fifth oldest university in Germany. Its enrollment was nearly 20,000 students in 1975. Among its most famous alumni and professors are Konrad Adenauer, Desiderius Erasmus, Joseph Goebbels, Martin Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse and Max Weber.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Milder, "Between Grassroots Protest and Green Politics: the Democratic Potential of the 1970s Antinuclear Activism." *German Politics and Society*, Issue 117 Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter 2015): 25-39.

that the modern notion of 'the environment' arises from rapidly expanding networks of human relations:

As environmental problems became more pervasive and widespread, there were growing interactions between the various problematic areas, and this gave rise to a new awareness in the second half of the 20th century. Many older problems – for example, preserving the fertility of agricultural fields – were transformed into a problem of energy, and the energy problem in turn became an environmental problem. To a greater degree than ever before, the multitude of problems were perceived as aspects of one great and global problem, and in this way the term 'environment' acquired the meaning it has today.<sup>12</sup>

However, as it pertains to Wyhl, German scholar Stephan Elkins argues that ecological and environmental justice has two dimensions and both are inherent to *Heimat*, a common German environmental term used during the protests in Wyhl. It is a term for "homeland" that has powerful emotional valence for Germans --it is the home of the heart. In Wyhl, notions of *Heimat* were fervent, given the rural, agricultural and idyllic character of the area. In fact, the application of environmental justice as a whole seems appropriate when it comes to understanding the formation, use, and power of the citizens' initiatives.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Joachim Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment* (Cambridge University Press, German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., 2008), 258.

<sup>13</sup>Martin Kalb, "Rather Active Today than Radioactive Tomorrow: Environmental Justice and the Anti-Nuclear Movement in 1970s Wyhl, West Germany," *Global Environment* Vol. 5, No. 10 (2012), pp. 156-183.

*“The student protest movement was not for individuals or particular groups, instead it was for the entire region.”<sup>14</sup>*

Frank Baum, Universität Freiburg student in the mid-1970s



University of Freiburg students protest against the proposed nuclear plant in Wyhl (23 February 1975). Photo: Google images

The Rhine, which had been the scene of centuries of political unrest, the producer of community and commercial fishing, and perhaps more importantly, the largest water supplier of Europe, continued to attract citizens as its guardians. As environmental historian Mark Cioc states, “For the Rhine governments and corporations, the nuclear protests represented a major public-relations setback. Never in a century and a half

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<sup>14</sup>Frank Baum Personal Interview, May 7, 2008.

had they encountered such a well-organized and effective citizen resistance to their economic development plan on the river.<sup>15</sup> As Milder asserts, the pre-history in Wyhl had longer ramifications. It created a broad and unlikely coalition that united Wyhl on the basis of limited “provincial” concerns and citizens changing democratic expectations. The Wyhl occupation was therefore not unexpected.<sup>16</sup>



Fish demonstration organized by the Wyhl protesters in August 1973 to bring attention to the KKW’s potential harm to the Rhine River’s ecosystem.  
Photo Credit: Meinrad Schwörer

<sup>15</sup>Mark Cioc, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 137.

<sup>16</sup>Stephen Milder, “Between Grassroots Protest and Green Politics: the Democratic Potential of the 1970s Antinuclear Activism” *German Politics and Society*, Issue 117 Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter 2015) 25-39.



“Today the fish [will be dead], tomorrow, we will be.”

Photo: Bernd Nössler

Officials in Bonn believed that Germany’s nuclear technology would diminish Germany’s reliance on foreign oil. Officials did not, however, anticipate such a large-

scale opposition to nuclear proposals.<sup>17</sup> In 1974, the Federal government announced that the country intended to increase the production of nuclear-generated electricity within Germany from 1 percent to 15 percent. In order to reduce Germany's dependence on imported oil, Bonn proposed an ambitious program to increase the production of nuclear-generated electricity from 4,400 megawatts to 50,000 megawatts by 1985.<sup>18</sup>

Raymond Dominick acknowledges that, "in the mid-1970s, arising out of the citizens' initiatives (such as those in Baden-Württemberg) came the crusade against nuclear energy," and the government's proposal "introduced a nationwide target for attack."<sup>19</sup> According to Dominick, at the time of the 1974 proposal to construct a nuclear plant in the small village, there were only 150 protesters, mostly conservative, rural neighbors from the surrounding area against the rural project.<sup>20</sup> However, by the time the second demonstration was organized, the Wyhl protest included "thousands of students" and radicals from nearby towns, which made it an increasingly powerful and heterogeneous movement.<sup>21</sup> Though clearly a heterogeneous social movement, Wyhl was unquestionably a "Movement of One." The protesters often "soft-pedalled"

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<sup>17</sup>Earl H. Fry and Gregory A. Raymond, "The International Implications of West Germany's Energy Policy" *German Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1978), pp. 173-199.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 187.

<sup>19</sup>Raymond Dominick, "The Roots of the Green Movement in the United States and West Germany" *Environmental Review: ER*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1988), pp. 1-30, 4.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 16.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 16.

systems criticism in the manner of Karl Marx and Herbert Marcuse, and instead mobilized people around concrete issues of local importance.<sup>22</sup>

However, it is important to note that the protesters in Wyhl were not the “usual suspects” of political activism. Nor were the occupiers’ motivation particularly radical. In fact, their two primary concerns were the future of their agricultural livelihoods, and the contemptuous manner in which government officials had handled their prior complaints about the nuclear reactor.”<sup>23</sup>



“We are looking for representatives of people, not atomic advocates.”

Photo: Bernd Nössler

<sup>22</sup>Dominick, “Green Movement,” 13.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Milder, “Between Grassroots Protest and Green Politics: the Democratic potential of the 1970s Antinuclear Activism.” *German Politics and Society*, Issue 117 Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter 2015): 25-39.



The outcome in Wyhl was astonishing. After three years of protests, the students' participation, and the occupation of the proposed site, the locals and outsiders celebrated the victory of 'Small Village Wyhl' over the West German government. Kitschelt notes that the anti-nuclear power movement, which was notably different from the anti-nuclear weapons movement that was predominant at the time, swept across the political landscapes in Europe in the 1970s. Although the anti-nuclear movement occurred during the 1970s and the anti-nuclear weapons movement had sparked interests as early as the 1950 and early 1960s, the momentum increased during the 1980s. Anti-nuclear weapons *consciousness*, however, began in Germany as early as the Nazi years in the 1940s..

Between 1942 and 1945, the tendency of scientists to criticize and amend could be much better understood by a democratic government than by a rigidly authoritarian and totalitarian regime. In fact, in 1956, Alfred Scherz, the author of *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, noted, "it was of positive advantage to a democracy...it was invariably true at that time that the conservative element [of the National Socialists] was chiefly represented by the military authorities [and] their opposition to ail new weapons was great, but never so strong as in the atom project."<sup>24</sup> As early as the 1950s, the anti-nuclear weapons movement demanded that

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<sup>24</sup>Robert Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of Atomic Scientists*. Copyright renewed, 1986, 88. Originally published in **German**: *Heller als tausend Sonnen. Das Schicksal der Atomforscher* (Stuttgart, 1956).

“disarmament replace deterrence as the principal nuclear business of the Atlantic alliance.”<sup>25</sup>

Small villages were often proposed as designated nuclear sites, and Wyhl was no exception. The West German government’s attempt to construct nuclear plants near villages or small towns was quite common in the mid-1970s.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>M. Mandelbaum, “The Anti-Nuclear Weapons Movements.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (1984) pp. 24-32.

<sup>26</sup>The following nuclear sites were proposed in small villages between 1975 and 1977: Wyhl, 1975 (2,700 residents); Brokdorf, 1976 (1,000 residents); Kalkar, 1976 (14,000 residents); and Gorsleben, 1977 (700 residents).

## 1. Interviewing the Wyhl Protesters

While studying German language in Freiburg in the early 2000s, I visited a used bookstore to find books to assist me in learning the language. Although I was in search of grammar books, I came across a yellow book, entitled, “Wyhl.” I thumbed through the pages, attempting to recognize key-words, and I eventually realized that it was a nearby village. Prior to this particular *Secondhand Buchhandlung*, I had neither been introduced to Wyhl, nor its relevance in German and European social, nuclear, and environmental history. I was truly fascinated with the magnitude of its protest and the effective mobilization efforts that surrounded this mostly Catholic village. Wyhl was extremely significant in German social movements and well known throughout Germany. It captured the essence of working together for the betterment of a particular society, as protesters were “concerned about a social ideology.”<sup>27</sup>

Later, after sharing my interests with a librarian at the University of Freiburg, I was informed about an archive in Weisweil, a predominantly Protestant village adjacent to Wyhl that embraced Catholic Wyhl’s anti-nuclear occupation. I called the archive to make arrangements to visit and a local gentleman was very eager to share his story, as well as recommend me to others who would be just as enthusiastic. The gentleman was Herr Ernst Jena, age eighty at the time of my interviews. Throughout my research, my interactions with Jena would remain strong over the next six months. Initially I was given the names of “movers and shakers” during the protests.

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<sup>27</sup>Dr. Gabriela Walderspiel Personal Interview, May 7, 2008 in Freiburg. Walderspiel studied Sociology at the University of Freiburg in the mid-1970s.

However, I wanted to speak with those who were mostly students at the time, as well as those who committed to the daily operations of the “occupation.” Although I conducted numerous interviews, only select interviews will be introduced in my dissertation, as their experiences as students were noteworthy and applicable to my project. The interviewees will appear alphabetically and their age at the time of the interview will accompany their names.

Dr. Frank Baum, Born: November 25, 1941, 66 years-old (retired biochemist)

Georg Löser, Born: September 9, 1948, 59 years-old (scientific researcher)

Bernd Nössler, Born: February 18, 1953, 55 years-old (government employee)

Pastor Günter Richter, Born: July 11, 1933, 74 years-old, (retired pastor)

Bernd Sacherer-Zorn, Born: November 15, 1966, (proprietor, wine cellar)

Maria Sacherer, 1947-1993, Interview given by her son, Bernd Sacherer-Zorn

Dr. Gabriela Walderspiel, Date of Birth Unknown, Refused to give

### **Dr. Frank Baum**

Dr. Baum was born in Berlin, but grew up in Bavaria. He studied biochemistry at the University of Freiburg and stated that he “came to Freiburg only because of its landscape.” As a concerned nature lover and student, Baum’s participation in Wyhl had less to do with atomic power and more to do with the possibility of a nuclear plant disturbing the nearby Black Forest region. He was not a member of a political party in the 1970s, as he considered himself to have more flexibility as an Independent rather than when connected to a particular party. As a politically non-affiliated person, he could openly express his concerns with regard to nature, and not consider the other obligations that party members addressed.

Baum stated that many of the local villagers supported the CDU initially, but later changed their political positions due to the CDU supporting a nuclear plant in Wyhl. He stated that many in the wine villages were afraid that there would be a drop in wine sales if a plant were permitted to be built in the region. Baum believed that the supporters in favor of the plant were not very vocal, compared to those against. The state government in Stuttgart simply refused to believe that rural Christian Democratic Union (CDU) voters were intent on challenging its authority. In failing to survey its constituents, however, scholars have stopped themselves short of understanding how a powerful antinuclear movement emerged along the Upper Rhine in what disheartened leftists and veterans of the student movement considered a “leaden” decade for their own, purportedly more transformative, activist projects of the ‘70s,” Baum’s contact was mostly with those against the proposal. He stated that the police were considered the enemy, although they were “sensitive to our movement.” However, they had a job to perform on behalf of the state. Baum considered the president of Baden-Württemberg at the time, Hans Filbinger, to have been a “terrible, horrible and hard” man. Filbinger was a former Nazi judge, and according to Baum, used propaganda against the plant’s opposition by generalizing that the protesters were communists who offended the locals.

### **Georg Löser**

Georg Löser was a student activist in Wyhl. He was inspired by the academic and scientific research that pertained to the potential dangers of constructing a nuclear plant in the area. As a student, he was a member of the *Aktionsgemeinschaft*

*demokratische Verkehrsplanung gegen die Schwarzwald Autobahn* (The Democratic Association against the Traffic Planning of the Black Forest Expressway), as well as numerous other organizations. However, he was a poor student and did not join clubs that required membership dues, which ranged, at the time, from 10DM to 110DM.<sup>28</sup> Some of the organizations, such as the Environmental Chemistry Club, only required that members be active or give presentations. No fee was required. As a result, Löser decided to participate in the group.

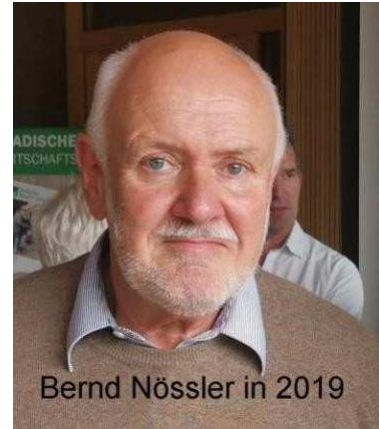
Students wanted to influence and assist the people in Kaiserstuhl (a hilly region in the Rhine plain south of Wyhl), not have them as subordinates. In 1975 students attempted to occupy the construction site. At one point, some other students stole the planned power plant's emergency evacuation plan and gave it to Löser. Following this theft, the students planned a conference to explain to the local people that in the event of an accident, there was a plan to evacuate them. It was called a "Catastrophic Plan." Löser was the president of the Protestant Committee for Protecting the Environment and collected many signatures against the proposed nuclear site at Wyhl. At one point, he approached one of his professors in the Department of Physics at the University of Freiburg, Professor May, who adamantly supported building a nuclear plant in Wyhl. May began yelling at him, and the Department's secretary had to intervene on Löser's behalf.

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<sup>28</sup>In 1973, 10 to 110 German Marks is equivalent to approximately \$5.75 to \$63 in 2016.

## **Bernd Nössler**

Bernd Nössler provided an enormous amount of historical information regarding Wyhl's political, social and economic climate. Nössler grew up in Wyhl, where his parents owned a bakery and sold wine. He photographed many of the protests in Wyhl and graciously provided a



DVD with innumerable photos for my research. Nössler's vast knowledge and generous time were invaluable to this project. He was a very engaged student during the occupation. Nössler was deeply inspired by the non-violent protests of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. He first demonstrated at the nearby French nuclear power plant site across the Rhine in Fessenheim (construction began in 1971 and was completed in 1971),<sup>29</sup> then Breisach, and later when the proposal affected his home village, Wyhl. He was determined to protest against a nuclear plant in Kaiserstuhl.

According to Nössler, Wyhl's residents needed jobs. Following the closure of Böhringer, a major tobacco firm, Wyhl's unemployment rate rose. He estimates that the company employed between 500 and 600 employees in the surrounding area. The mayor of Wyhl at the time, Wolfgang Zimmerman, was a young and dynamic man, but he was an opportunist and very arrogant. He was only concerned about the economy. Although there was no connection between the closure of the tobacco firm

<sup>29</sup> Information posted on the website of the ASN on May 27, 2010, retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100728034138/http://www.asn.fr/index.php/L-ASN-en-region/Division-de-Strasbourg/Centrales-nucleaires/Centrale-nucleaire-de-Fessenheim> (accessed June 28, 2019).

and the proposed Wyhl site, Nössler stated that government leaders in Stuttgart, the capital of Baden-Württemberg, were attempting to provide jobs in the region. The mayor, however, tended to polarize the community and contributed to the various groups becoming more antagonistic towards each other. At the time of our interview, Nössler was the Chair of the Black Forest Association. With a membership of nearly 100,000, it is the largest nature group in Baden-Württemberg.

### **Pastor Günter Richter**

***“[In Wyhl] The Church became a voice for those who had no voice.”<sup>30</sup>***

Pastor Günter Richter

Günter Richter was the pastor of the Protestant congregation in Weisweil from 1967 to 1978. He adamantly opposed construction of a nuclear plant in the region. As a Protestant minister, Richter was critical in



Günter Richter

the opposition against the government’s proposal to situate the plant in the neighboring Catholic village of Wyhl, and he proved to be a reliable partner in mobilizing the area’s protest movement in northern Kaiserstuhl. According to Pastor Richter, “The Church was called upon to call in, albeit critical, solidarity with the concerned “population.”<sup>31</sup> At one point, the government planned to vacate the occupation by dispersing 400 police officers and four water cannons. However,

<sup>30</sup> *Badische Zeitung*, July 26, 2014, <https://www.badische-zeitung.de/>.

<sup>31</sup>Christian Stahmann, Editor, *Evang. Dekanat des Kirchenbezirks Emmendingen, Reformation im Werden: 450 Jahre Reformation im Kirchenbezirk Emmendingen*, 2006, 140.



Pastor Richter quickly mediated and the action was terminated.<sup>32</sup> The Protestant Church “increasingly sided with those who held the weakest position in the dispute of opinion.” Pastor Richter mobilized numerous groups and individuals around the theme, “peace, justice and the preservation of creation.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Anna Marie Sacherer - Interview with Her Son**

Anna Marie Sacherer’s story was given by her son, Bernd Sacherer-Zorn. Sacherer lived in nearby Bischoffingen and passed away at the age of forty-nine in 1993. Throughout my research and interviews, her name was often mentioned. Without knowing it, I had interviewed her son, who was a soft-spoken and very humble man. I contacted him again and asked if I could inquire about his mother. He agreed. Sacherer was a very religious woman, but she did not care very much about the clergy for the church as an institution. She was Catholic, but mostly ecumenical, and she did not attend church every Sunday. She was not very committed to religion, as she thought it led to many wars. She rebelled against her religious upbringing and the patriarchal society in which she lived.

Sacherer was politically and socially liberal. However, prior to the movement, she was not very well known. She was never involved in politics until Breisach was recommended as a nuclear site in 1972, one-year before the Wyhl proposal. Her parents were wine-growers and she was emotionally connected to the region. She spoke the local dialect, *Allemanisch*, which turned out to be a binding agent between

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<sup>32</sup>Personal Interview with Pastor Richter and his wife, Ilse, at their home in Freiburg. He and I met for tea and pastries on three separate occasions.

<sup>33</sup>Stahmann, “Reformation,” 140.

her and the locals who opposed the nuclear plant. She was selected as the spokesperson for the region's *Sasbach Rotwein Initiative* (Sasbach Red Wine Initiative). Sacherer was instrumental in organizing and assigning various villages designated days to occupy the site. A phone tree was put in place in order to disseminate information quickly and efficiently.

Sacherer did not think highly of Wyhl's mayor, Wolfgang Zimmerman, and she considered Hans Filbinger, the president of Baden-Württemberg at the time, to be the worst that the state had to offer. She thought it was unbelievable to see a former Nazi in a political position. However, in both elections, Filbinger was able to reach the 51 percent threshold without having to establish a coalition government. In the 1972 state elections, Filbinger's CDU achieved 52.9% of the vote, gaining an absolute majority for the first time. In 1976, campaigning under the slogan "Freedom instead of socialism,"; Filbinger increased his party's vote to a hitherto unsurpassed 56.7%.<sup>34</sup>

Following the Wyhl protests, Sacherer began to think more about food production and consumption. She therefore began producing organic wine in the region, the first one to do so in the Kaiserstuhl region.

### **Bernd Sacherer-Zorn**

Bernd Sacherer-Zorn is the owner of an organic winery in Vogtsburg-Bischoffingen in Kaiserstuhl. It is approximately 17 km (10 ½ miles) from Wyhl. His family has been in the winery business since 1648. During the Wyhl protests, he was

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<sup>34</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans\\_Filbinger#Minister-president\\_of\\_Baden-W%C3%BCrttemberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Filbinger#Minister-president_of_Baden-W%C3%BCrttemberg)

a member of the region's wine association. When his parents protested against the proposed plant they would often leave him and his sister at his grandparents' home. He was never taken to a protest that involved a police presence. Many people in the small village supported the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), but after the CDU advocated for the plant, many citizens, including his parents, left Germany's largest conservative party.

In the 1970s many of the protesters were labeled as "terrorists" for trying to prevent the nuclear generating station from being built. His great-grandfather was in his eighties and he would protest against the plant, and the young police officers would be sensitive to his grandfather's cause by thinking that he could have been their grandfather. As the women and children became more visible, others were unable to label all of the protesters as terrorists. The protesters were often portrayed with a particular image by the government and the media as long-haired, male college students. Although state president Filbinger, had issued orders to fire weapons on the protesters in 1975, violence never erupted during the protests when Sacherer-Zorn was present. Local police were often given the responsibility of directing traffic, whereas more contentious duties were delegated to police officers from outside of the region. Many of the local officers were sympathetic to the protesters' cause.

### **Gabriela Walderspiel**

Walderspiel became conscious of Wyhl through the church. She was a sociology student at the University of Freiburg during the protests. She had strong reasons to protest at Wyhl. She had come from a well-to-do family in Freiburg and

both of her parents were socially conscious physicians. Her parents had been active in an array of social causes during her childhood. Walderspiel became involved in Wyhl because of the Citizens' Initiatives. She was extremely surprised that so many people became involved in grassroots organizing. Growing up Catholic, she became conscious about her social obligations to society in her teens in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup>

According to Walderspiel, who no longer had contact with the Catholic Church in the 1970s, there was an understanding among those within student political circles that they [the students] were not only concerned about the environment, but also the "social ideology" that prevailed during the mid-1970s.

Walderspiel organized meetings with various student organizations, including non-violent movements. Walderspiel was the press secretary for almost four years for the local initiative group. As the group's press agent, she was in contact with other non-violent student groups in Germany. There were twenty-one non-violent student groups, including the University of Freiburg's groups. Her group consisted of only students and numbered between 10 and 20 members. There were always two sub-groups: anti-nuclear and anti-military. Her group's goal was to restructure society, but the main goal was "direct intervention." They wanted the populace to realize that there was suppression within society, but unfortunately the people in Kaiserstuhl did not initially accept this notion.

Walderspiel's group organized many non-violent training camps for Wyhl's protesters, particularly the students who, based on previous protests, had a strong

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<sup>35</sup>Walderspiel interview, May 2008 (see note 16). Unless otherwise noted, the following information is drawn from this interview.

proclivity to react to the authorities. Although she contributed large amounts of time to the trainings, Walderspiel described the non-violent trainings as being ineffective and stupid. The student groups often visited the wine-growers and always carpoled. Initially there was a strained relationship between the locals and the students, which later resulted in a compromise that included the students behaving as “guests” in the villages. Her group insisted that the protests remain *local* and with *local people*, and importantly, that the students would not be the only protesters against the movement. This was a very effective tool in promoting the anti-nuclear movement in Wyhl. In other areas, such as Brockdorf, the violent clashes were predictable because the local residents were not involved. According to Walderspiel, the mobilization efforts and the success that occurred in Wyhl “surprised the authorities.” The outcome in Wyhl was positive because the students made their activity “subordinate to the locals.”



“Right and Left of the Rhine: KKW Nein” Silent march in downtown Freiburg after the police violence in Brockdorf Photo Bernd Nössler

## 2. Two Groups, One Mission: An Anti-Nuclear Germany

The development of nuclear weaponry in Germany was inadvertently forced upon West Germany's first Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. Following World War II, many German anti-nuclear weapons demonstrations were a response to Germany's militaristic past. The younger *and* older generations of Wyhl environmentalists in the 1970s, however, participated in anti-nuclear site proposals out of concerns for the environment. Georg Löser stated that the West German weekly newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* published an article in 1970 on toxic vegetables in Germany, and for the first time, he "became aware that he should get involved in the environmental movement."<sup>36</sup>

In order to become a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), in 1955 Adenauer renounced his country's development of nuclear weapons, and with that limitation, West Germany was allowed to create its own armed forces.<sup>37</sup> However, in order to reassure the European community and West Germany's neighbors, in particular France and England, stipulations were set.<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>36</sup> Personal interview with Georg Löser in April 2008. Dr. Löser worked as a member of the University of Freiburg Evangelical Student Organization and was the head of the Evangelical Committee for Protecting the Environment. I was not able to find an article on toxic vegetables in 1970, but Löser's memory might be faulty. I found an April 1973 article about toxic home compost, "Giftige Krume" (<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-42602598.html>), and a November 1970 article about pollution in Lake Constance that affected vegetables on Reichenau island, "Getrübe Träne" (<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-43837762.html>).

<sup>37</sup> Susanna Schrafstetter, *The Long Shadow of the Past: History, Memory and the Debate over West Germany's Nuclear Status, 1954-69* (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2004), 118.

<sup>38</sup> The West Germany military could not exceed 370,000 troops, the military would not be able to operate outside of Germany's boundaries except as peacekeeping forces, and individuals could refuse military service based on conscience. Importantly, the military records would

anti-nuclear drive of 1958-60, according to Susanna Schrafstetter, was “inexorably linked to Germany’s historic past.”<sup>39</sup> In one of Germany’s leading newspapers, Munich’s *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, one journalist wrote that “German politicians had not learnt their lessons of the past” and that “Some German politicians, showing that they have learnt nothing from recent German history, declare that the better armed we are, the higher our international prestige.” Schrafstetter argues that during the 1960s, “a non-nuclear Germany was the ultimate touchstone in reaching détente with the Soviet Union and stability in the Cold War system.”<sup>40</sup> Despite the government’s refusal to acknowledge such a claim, most citizens did not support a nuclear Germany.<sup>41</sup> Walderspiel recalls that there were always two groups in Germany during the protests, one being largely against nuclear plants and the other against nuclear armaments.<sup>42</sup> On 20 February 1975, however, an unusual scene of violence occurred at the occupation site. An extremely brutal police raid forced the protesters to disperse. Three days following this violent confrontation, more than 28,000 West Germans, French and Swiss assembled to show support for the rural citizens and students, and re-occupied the site. Marie Haug, a protester at Wyhl who resided across the Rhine in France stated, “The struggle against nuclear reactors must be a chain reaction. One victory will trigger another. A colleague of Haug from

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be transparent to other members within the European Defense Community, which had complete jurisdiction over the West German military.

<sup>39</sup>Schrafstetter, “Long Shadow,” 122.

<sup>40</sup>Schrafstetter, “Long Shadow,” 137.

<sup>41</sup> In this paper, I will not distinguish between nuclear weaponry, nuclear armament, nuclear reactors and nuclear energy.

<sup>42</sup>Personal interview with Walderspiel.

Luxembourg added, “The struggle in Wyhl is our struggle, your victory will be our victory.”<sup>43</sup>



20.02.1975 Platzräumung im Wyhler Wald

Protesters being cleared from the Wyhl Forest in February 1975.

Photo credit: Bernd Nössler

<sup>43</sup>Heigs Weber-Zucht. 1975. Wieder ein Ostermarsch – Wyhl, Infodienst für gewaltfreie Organistoren 19 (March/April 1975) 3-5.



### 3. What Happened to My Milieu?

Since the 1960s numerous changes took place in West German society. One notable change, as political science Professor Christian Graf von Krockow refers to it, was the “dissolution of the milieu.”<sup>44</sup> Whereas individuals had traditionally found their place in German society through their own special milieus -- be they rural, urban, middle-class or working-class--, the removal of these milieus caused a loss of social and political stability in many corners of West German society. Social values were more threatened and challenged by younger Germans who had vehemently confronted their nation’s Nazi past, including the collaborative activities of the church, family members and neighbors. Many of the demonstrators were frustrated, discontent and even angry at the government’s lack of response to what they considered valid ecological concerns as they pertained to south Germany in particular, and West Germany overall.

Kitschelt believes that close examination needs to be granted in order to fully understand the mobilization efforts of the protesters, the number and intensity of the social ‘strains’ and ‘grievances’ that they encountered, as well as the relative deprivation that certain groups experienced.<sup>45</sup> Walderspiel states, “The main goal of the student groups was to restructure society” and “to get citizens to recognize that

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<sup>44</sup>Christian Graf von Krockow, “Grenzen der Politik,” in *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B32-33/82, August 14, 1982.

<sup>45</sup>Kitschelt, p. 59.

there was suppression within society.”<sup>46</sup> During the 1970s, the new social movements were interested in the extent to which the connection to the state was transformed through institutions, as well as an elevated desire for political participation. By comparison, the younger protest generation, such as Freiburg’s, increasingly turned away from the demand for a (revolutionary) change of the system, and instead started to pursue autonomy. Earlier in the twentieth century, it was possible to imagine that state control was the key to a better society, but during the mid-1970s, this was no longer the case.<sup>47</sup>

In the 1960s and ‘70s the political atmosphere in West Germany was changing, but that of Wyhl remained more or less the same. At that time in 1977, Wyhl was a village of approximately 2,700 residents, located in the Emmendingen district, about 20 km west of Freiburg.<sup>48</sup> Although Wyhl had a mayor and city council, it did not have services such as a police department, fire department, social services or even a hospital. There was an elementary school and a high school that enrolled students up until the ninth grade.<sup>49</sup> Similar to Wyhl, many local politicians

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<sup>46</sup>Oral interview conducted with Dr. Gabriela Walderspiel on May 15, 2008 at Universität Freiburg. She currently practices as a therapist.

<sup>47</sup>Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Nonviolent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s* (University of California Press, 1991), 56.

<sup>48</sup>A Landkreis is equivalent to a county in the US. In most cases, it is the seat of the various municipalities that make up a particular region.

<sup>49</sup>It is common in many small villages in Germany to only have a Hauptschule, which is recommended by the elementary teacher to those students who tend to perform below standard in grammar school. The German “high” school system consists of the Hauptschule (grade 9), the Realschule (grade 10) and the Gymnasium (grade 13). Students who are recommended to the Hauptschule generally learn a skill to work in the service or technical industry. Those who are recommended to the Realschule are often taught such trades as cashier, clerk or customer service. Students who are recommended to attend the Gymnasium are generally on track to attend a university, and thus become eligible to join the

were often disconnected from the local population, and local government decisions seemingly disregarded due public process. According to Thomas Scharf, it was characterized by “non-confrontational decision-making processes.”<sup>50</sup>

In his 1994 book about the German Green Party, Thomas Scharf argues that there were several factors that reinforced the ‘unpolitical’ label placed on politics at the local level in West Germany, including: the traditional separation of the ‘political’ from the ‘administrative’ in German local politics; the nature of the tasks performed by local authorities in postwar Germany excluded citizen participation; the presumed lack of public interest in *all* aspects of politics following the war; and critically, the absence in the vast majority of German communities of effective local organizations representing the major political parties.<sup>51</sup> Local issues rarely came to the attention of the wider society prior to the 1970s. Traditional social milieus had been threatened and were in decline. After the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, more citizens sought to participate in government decisions whenever possible. In many small villages, however, especially those with strong traditions, the exclusion of the *Volk* continued unchallenged. Wyhl was no exception. Arrogance was often displayed by local ‘small town’ politicians. Bernd Nössler, who was a teenager at the time of the Wyhl protests, stated, “The mayor [Zimmerman] was very arrogant and proposed the site to the

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professional class. All in all, approximately one-third of the German students attend each of the three high schools.

<sup>50</sup>Thomas Scharf, *The German Greens: Challenging Consensus* (Berg Publishers: Oxford, 1994), 64.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid, 82.

Minister President [Hans Filbinger, President of Baden-Württemberg] prior to speaking to his constituents.”<sup>52</sup>

Although the West German political system demonstrated democratic principles during this time, the mayor’s decision to refrain from sharing public information regarding such a major issue is rather surprising, even for a small village. Nössler also described Zimmerman as very undemocratic and at times unprofessional. "The mayor," he said, “would often disconnect the microphone when he disagreed with the comments of his opponents.”<sup>53</sup> Not only did the mayor of Wyhl fully support the construction of the nuclear plant, but the Minister President of Baden-Württemberg, Filbinger, remained in his rejection of the citizens’ initiative. In a television appearance, Filbinger stated “[that] it would be almost a system of rewards to recognize the citizens’ initiatives. As the head of the state government, the leader knows what has to be decided, and as an elected representative of the people, we finally have a representative democracy.”<sup>54</sup>

It was a matter of adhering to democratic values. Frank Baum, a student during the 1970s protests and in 2008, a biochemist in his 60s, argued, “They [the government] just began building the plant and there was no choice or input from the community.”<sup>55</sup>

There were a number of uneducated and simple residents, according to

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<sup>52</sup> Oral interview of Bernd Nössler on May 7, 2008 in his office in Freiburg. Nössler is a retired baker, but has since become re-employed in local government. He is a fourth generation Wyhler, and currently resides there. Although I requested an interview with Filbinger, it never occurred, as he was 93 years-old and in poor health in 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Nössler interview.

<sup>54</sup> Hans-Helmut Wüstenhagen, *Bürger gegen Kernkraftwerke: Wyhl - der Anfang?* (Rowohl Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1975), 104.

<sup>55</sup> Baum interview.

Baum, who did not realize the dangers of the plant.<sup>56</sup> Wyhl was a “poor village” that did not openly embrace the protests, but many of the locals became supportive once the neighboring communities and students intervened.<sup>57</sup> Wyhl was unusual from other small villages in that there was a conglomeration of groups with similar interest in the environment. Because these groups had national appeal, their interdenominational, intergenerational, trans-regional and trans-political support made Wyhl a more cohesive and effective protest movement.

Walderspiel stated that the public’s response to Brockdorf was predictable. However, the authorities did not anticipate that those in the Kaiserstuhl region would mobilize as well, or be as successful as they were. The most important thing, states Walderspiel, is that people *wanted* to prevent this and the distinctions between the locals and the students was insignificant, as the two groups agreed on the slogan, “Nein Danke,” which translates into, “No, thanks.” Without this agreement to work closely between the various student groups and the local people, it would have been impossible to achieve the results that Wyhl rendered.<sup>58</sup>



Wolfgang Zimmer  
Bürgermeister Wyhl

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<sup>56</sup>Baum interview.

<sup>57</sup>Walderspiel interview.

<sup>58</sup>Walderspiel interview.

## **4. Germany's Two Largest Political Parties: Christian Democrats vs. Social Democrats**

In order to understand the local and regional political climate in West Germany during the 1970s, it is important to note that the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), had governed West Germany with a number of smaller coalition partners from 1949 to 1969. Founded after 1945, the CDU was non-denominational, though largely supported by citizens who identified as Catholics. The CDU maintained that mankind had a responsibility to God in upholding Christian ideals and caring for the environment.<sup>59</sup> The Christian Democrats supported a social-market economy, had a substantial following in rural areas, and promoted the importance of preserving traditional German culture and values. It was moderately nationalist-conservative and attracted a majority, but certainly not all, of middle class households.<sup>60</sup>

Chancellor Konrad Adenauer led the CDU from Germany's first Federal election in 1949 until his resignation in 1963. Even after his resignation the CDU maintained power for another six years. The party was pro-United States and certainly pro-West. This position caused concern to many Germans who either preferred to remain neutral in the East-West conflict, or remain optimistic toward

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<sup>59</sup>There is a significant difference in the use of the term "Christian ideals" as described in US politics. Those who support the CDU are less likely to be concerned about abortion rights, gay issues or the inclusion of so-called family values, as advocated in Evangelical, right-wing conservative branches of the Republican Party of the United States. Christian ideals as understood by US-Americans do not necessarily define the platform of the party.

<sup>60</sup>For further information, see the Christian Democratic Union website at: [cdu.de/partei](http://cdu.de/partei)

someday achieving a unified Germany and a more amicable relationship with the Soviets who were occupying Germany's eastern states.

By the mid-1960s the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was increasing its political clout. The party was initially founded in 1863 as a left-wing workers' party, but had not experienced much success since the tumultuous years of the 1920s.<sup>61</sup> As the SPD's website professes, the party tends to favor socially progressive causes, such as reforming secondary education and increasing economic equality throughout Germany.<sup>62</sup> The SPD is more likely to attract urban, left or center voters, as well as many intellectuals. Because of their progressive stance and occasional challenge to ruling parties, Bismarck, as Reich Chancellor, introduced anti-Socialist laws that banned the Social Democrats' participation in government from 1878 to 1890. During that time, many SPD members participated in Parliament as Independents. After 1933, Hitler's government first threatened and intimidated members of the SPD, imprisoning, forcing them to flee abroad, or even murdering them. These Nazi tactics eventually led to the SPD being banned as a party in June 1933.

In 1949, in the first election after the war, the SPD narrowly lost out on becoming the leading party in the new Bundestag, and was not able to attain a plurality for nearly two decades. However in 1966 the party was able to participate in government as part of a "Grand Coalition" with the CDU, and finally, in 1969, six

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<sup>61</sup> Following the First World War, a democracy was set up in Germany and the Social Democrats legitimately seized power during the Weimar Republic. However, between 1919-1932, there was internal conflict, which led to fourteen chancellors in thirteen years. Though only four of the Chancellors represented the SPD, the Social Democrats were widely held for the political and economic hardships that post-WWI Germans had to endure.

<sup>62</sup> See the website of the Social Democratic Party: [spd.de/partei](http://spd.de/partei)

years prior to the Wyhl proposal, West Germany elected its first Social Democratic Chancellor, Willy Brandt. In order to run the government the SPD, which had received less than the mandatory 50 percent of the popular vote, had to combine their 46.4 percent with the support of the libertarian leaning Free Democratic Party (FDP), which had received 8.3 percent. This coalition would later prove to be problematic. Brandt, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971 for his efforts to reconcile relationships with the East in his *Ostpolitik*, was also concerned with decreasing Germany's role in Western institutions, which he thought provoked the Soviets and limited West Germany's influence with Eastern bloc countries.

Although Brandt opposed an increasingly nuclear-armed Germany in central Europe, the atmosphere in Parliament was different. The established national political parties in Bonn refused to choose a side regarding nuclear energy. The local-level conservatives (CDU) were clearly in favor of nuclear power, as were the powerful labor unions that generally aligned with the SPD. The liberal SPD and its coalition partner, the Free Democrats, controlled the Federal government during that period and, according to Kitschelt, they were “internally divided between pro-union and pro-business nuclear advocates,” which led to “a temporary policy stalemate”.<sup>63</sup>

None of the major parties chose to support the anti-nuclear position. As a result of the traditional parties' unwillingness to support the BBU, a growing number of discontented citizens would begin to consider the emergence of a national environmental party to represent their concerns in Parliament. Although from

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<sup>63</sup>Kitschelt, “Political Opportunity,” 75.



February 1975 to April 1979, a total of nearly 300,000 West German protesters either participated in or occupied seven nuclear power plant processing sites, it was not until 1979 that the Federal government convened a commission to address the nuclear and environmental concerns of the protesters. Kitschelt labels the mid-70s West German government as a “weak state” and argued that it did not “act decisively to quell the unrest.”<sup>64</sup> Brandt’s role however, as a pragmatic Chancellor and anti-missile, anti-nuclear politician would influence younger Germans in their later quest to challenge authority and protest nuclear armament and nuclear plants. Brandt’s insistence on a unified Germany through peaceful and political dialogue was widely respected and accepted by younger Germans.



<sup>64</sup>Kitschelt, “Political Opportunity,” 71.



Facilities such as this Volkshochschule were often set-up to organize and disseminate information, as well as provide social space through songs, literature, arts, crafts and children's activities. Photos: Bernd Nössler and Meinrad Schwörer.

## **5. Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself: Community Needs vs. Individual Needs**

In the early 1980s political science Professor Gerd Langguth noted that the younger generation expressed noticeable interest in changes in values as they pertained to education, gender equality, and the environment.<sup>65</sup> Organizers embracing various ideologies became involved for various reasons. Some were concerned with government imposing itself on its citizens, whereas others thought that a constructed nuclear plant, particularly in Wyhl, could lead to a succession of plants throughout the region or country. The Germans were aware of the large number of nuclear plants built in neighboring France during the 1970s. Following the oil crisis in the early 1970s, France became more reliant on nuclear energy. In fact, over the next fifteen years, Paris authorized fifty-six nuclear plants to be constructed, many in proximity to Germany.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, as author Karl-Werner Brand states, the campaign against *nuclearism*, which was coined in the late 1960s as the use or acceptance of nuclear weapons to maintain national security in West Germany, was crippled in the early 1970s after the heyday of the student movement. The Citizens' Initiatives of the 1970s were conceived as a "practical expression of participatory grassroots

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<sup>65</sup>Gerd Langguth, *Jugend ist Anders: Porträt einer jungen Generation* (Freiburg: Herder Press, 1983), 25.

<sup>66</sup> For more information on this topic, see the transcript of FRONTLINE Show #1511, which aired on April 22, 1997 on PBS. [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/reaction/readings/french.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/reaction/readings/french.html). The documentary was directed and produced by Jon Palfreman.

democracy.<sup>67</sup> Of course the reasons for participating varied throughout the region. Dr. Frank Baum, for instance, stated, “My first concern regarding Wyhl had nothing to do with the dangers of nuclear power, but rather the landscape was being destroyed. It was a beautiful, humid forest and it should not have been destroyed.”<sup>68</sup> Later, Baum stated, he realized that, “Technology was very dangerous and there was no other technology that was as dangerous as nuclear power. No one knew what to do with nuclear waste.”<sup>69</sup> As a biochemist, Baum was adamantly opposed to the management of nuclear waste, and since West Germany was a small country with high population density, many in opposition to nuclear construction echoed such concerns. West Germany was one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, averaging 249 persons per square km in 1970. In 2005 (after German unification), Germany still ranked among Europe’s most densely populated countries at 232 persons per square km, compared to Luxemburg with 193 per square km, France with 110 per square km and Spain with 89 per square km. Only the Netherlands (395 per square km), the United Kingdom (345 per square km) and Belgium (341 per square km) exceeded united Germany in population density.<sup>70</sup> It is important to note the lack of domestic land space with which the Germans had to maneuver. In 1975, for example, densely populated West Germany had approximately 4,000 landfills, whereas after unification there was more land available. Following unification, the number of landfills in all of

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<sup>67</sup>Karl –Werner Brand, *Aufbruch in eine andere Gesellschaft: Neue soziale Bewegungen in der Bundesrepublik*. (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1986), 86.

<sup>68</sup>Baum interview.

<sup>69</sup>Baum interview.

<sup>70</sup>This report was compiled by the United Nations Population Prospects (<http://esa.un.org/unpp/>)

Germany had been reduced to 300.<sup>71</sup> The discarding of waste was increasingly a concern for those within the BBU, and the German government had addressed the vast majority of the concerns spearheaded in the mid-1970s.

In retrospect Walderspiel considers the trainings that she administered in her early twenties to have been ineffective.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, however, she acknowledged that the police did not want to “harm the locals,” and that in all likelihood the police would have “responded more violently to the non-local opposition without such training.”<sup>73</sup> In essence, the non-violent training sessions held at the occupation site may have been more productive and effective in preventing hostile situations from becoming more volatile. Law enforcement was often concerned that the student protesters would release Molotov cocktails, though they were never used.<sup>74</sup> Although Walderspiel was never seriously injured, she admitted being struck by the police, but was not harmed when the police were authorized to use water hoses and tanks against the protesters.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>Bette K. Fishbein, “Der Grüne Punkt. Germany, Garbage and the Green Dot”. The United States Environmental Protection Agency Report, September 1994, EPA 600R-94/179.

<sup>72</sup> Walderspiel interview. Although I sought elaboration regarding this comment, Walderspiel did not provide a specific reason as to her position regarding such a stance.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.



20.02.1975 - 700 Bereitschaftspolizisten  
räumen das KKW-Gelände



State police using water hoses and barbed wires to prevent the protesters from penetrating the Wuhl Forest (February 1975). Photo credits: Bernd Nössler.

## 6. Why Wyhl?

*“What was different about small-scale communities was not that their practices were always sustainable, but rather that environmental concerns were immediate, ‘an integral component of life’.”<sup>76</sup>*

Joachim Radkau

In response to the question, “Why was Wyhl chosen as the site of the proposed nuclear power plant?” longtime resident Bernd Nössler thought that the government of Baden-Württemberg only wanted to support the region’s economy.<sup>77</sup> Community activist and local wine-grower Anne-Marie Sacherer agreed that the regional government’s intentions were indeed designed to benefit the economy. She stated, “Politicians in Stuttgart wished to impose on us, by law, an atomic cuckoo’s egg, knowing full well that they would not have to bear the consequences of their actions. They are defending big business.”<sup>78</sup>

The area had high unemployment and was unable to produce grapes for the surrounding wine-growing region. Wyhl’s landscape is mostly flat and does not provide the necessary slopes for grape production. Its inclement weather patterns also prevented it from producing grapes. Wyhl therefore provided a small amount of labor to the other wine-growing areas, but this was insufficient to support the majority of the villagers. According to Nössler, a number of the unskilled manual laborers began working at fifteen or sixteen, which was normal at the time since most had not

<sup>76</sup>Radkau, “Nature and Power,” 37.

<sup>77</sup>Nössler Interview.

<sup>78</sup>Anne-Marie Sacherer (1947-1993), Interview with her son, Bernd Sacherer, April 25, 2008.

attended school past the ninth grade.<sup>79</sup> Those who remained in the village relied heavily on low wage tobacco jobs. Most of the villagers in Wyhl were farmers or craftsmen. It was the desire of many village residents to receive the taxes generated from the nuclear plant in order to support needed local programs.<sup>80</sup> Although the residents were generally split regarding the consequences of having a nuclear plant constructed, a small group supported the government's decision in order to create jobs in the area. Biochemist Baum, however, believed that it was absolutely "crucial for the BBU to protest against unfair government" and to protect the seemingly helpless and disorganized residents of Wyhl.<sup>81</sup> Baum recognized that the vast majority of the villagers were conservative and generally voted with the CDU; however, many wanted to protect their own villages from such massive development and thus stopped supporting the CDU in large numbers.<sup>82</sup> West Germany's 1949 Basic Law (constitution) did not have a provision allowing for plebiscites. As a result, anti-nuclear groups were unable to attempt to achieve their goals through national referendums.<sup>83</sup> For that reason, the protesters had to rely on the legal system, which

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<sup>79</sup> The German secondary education school system consists of three levels. The Hauptschule prepares students until the ninth grade; the Realschule prepares students until the tenth grade, and the Gymnasium prepares students until the 13<sup>th</sup> grade. A student is recommended, based on academic records from the first four grades, to attend one of the three secondary schools. It is not uncommon for villages similar to Wyhl to have a Hauptschule and no Realschule or Gymnasium. In many villages, the small percentages of students who are recommended to attend the Realschule or Gymnasium generally have to be transported several kilometers away to larger towns or cities. According to Nössler, in his class of nearly sixty students, approximately 90 percent were recommended by their primary teachers to attend the Hauptschule. He stated that there "may" have been one or two recommended for the Gymnasium.

<sup>80</sup> Nössler interview.

<sup>81</sup> Baum interview.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity," 70.



after three years of litigation ruled in their favor. As Jefferey Sellers states, “Systematic analysis of litigation as politics ultimately requires comparisons of the part courts, and related legal practices, play in the wider “opportunity structures” of political actors.”<sup>84</sup> Kaiserstuhl was no exception. Sellers further argues that, “in the early 1970s a nationally prominent confrontation had “pitted the Land government against opponents of a proposed nuclear power plant in Wyhl.”<sup>85</sup>



CDU election results and their downward spiral since the Wyhl protests began in 1973. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CDU\\_Baden-Württemberg#Baden-W.C3.BCrtemberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CDU_Baden-Württemberg#Baden-W.C3.BCrtemberg)

<sup>84</sup>Jeffrey M. Sellers, “Litigation as a Local Political Resource: Courts in Controversies over Land Use in France, Germany, and the United States”. *Law & Society Review* 29 (3): 475–516.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid, 484.



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Memorial “No We said” 18 February 1975

1990 Poster: “Wyhl: 15 Years Later”

Photo credit: Bernd Nössler.

Although it was commonly viewed as procedural at the time, many public meetings turned into what many German opponents dubbed an “*Alibiveranstaltung*,” an “alibi event” on behalf of the public officials.<sup>87</sup> Officials would introduce various proposals, have experts co-sign, and later others would be able to make brief statements from the floor. However, the decision was usually decided well in advance of the meeting. Nössler exclaims that Zimmer simply proposed the nuclear site to Filbinger and later *presented* it to the community without any meaningful preliminary discussions.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Erected at the site of the Wyhl protests, the stone reads, “No, we have said!” Crowds gather annually in February or March to commemorate the Citizens’ Initiative’s defeat of the state’s nuclear proposal. The fifteenth anniversary poster is displayed.

<sup>87</sup> Sellers, “Litigation,” 496.

<sup>88</sup> Noessler Interview.



In a rare episode of violence, protesters clash with police during a 1975 demonstration in Wyhl . Photo credits: Bernd Nössler

In addition to promoting non-violence, dissent within the student groups pursuing change and political discourse was also respected. Baum stated, “Compromise was exceptionally important to the groups. If one voted, there were always losers and winners, which could have possibly created friction within the group.”<sup>89</sup> Baum’s concept of society was consistent with von Dirke’s argument that “the mid-70s movement represented the direct response and challenge to the student

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<sup>89</sup>Baum interview.

movement of the 60s and it challenged the hegemonic authoritarianism.”<sup>90</sup>

Additionally, von Dirke argues that “the aesthetic practices for individual emancipation and as a means for expressing dissent had become popular again.”<sup>91</sup>

The events in Wyhl not only mobilized the locals in Baden-Württemberg, but also encouraged others throughout Germany to challenge local and regional government plans to impose industrial facilities upon their communities. Kitschelt believes that the anti-nuclear movement became a member of a larger class of ‘new social movements’ that was spawned by the systems of bureaucratic and technological control that regulated social life.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>von Dirke, “All Power,” 209.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Kitschelt, “Political Opportunity,” 71.

## **Conclusion: The Success of Wyhl's Anti-Nuclear Movement**

Former student press secretary Walderspiel stated, "We were successful because it was an example that citizens [could] prevent something if they mobilized as a group." She adds that the unity and mobilization efforts in Wyhl came as a "surprise to the [governmental] authorities."<sup>93</sup> Importantly, Baum notes, the citizens' initiatives sought to control the situation through democratic concepts and thinking and "always promoted non-violence."<sup>94</sup> Sellers states that there was a remarkable display of civility in Wyhl, where "28,000 protesters peacefully overwhelmed police lines to occupy the site and forestall construction."<sup>95</sup> In the West, non-violent tactics proved to be effective and crucial to the success of local anti-nuclear movements. The movements were more likely to appeal to larger audiences, and as Kitschelt observes, "the access of social movements to the public sphere and political decision-making [is] also governed by institutional rules, such as those reinforcing patterns of interaction between government and interest groups."<sup>96</sup> Wyhl protesters paved the way for other anti-nuclear demonstrations throughout Germany. Sellers reminds us that success in Wyhl became "legendary in the German anti-nuclear movement."<sup>97</sup> Importantly, as previously noted, this interactive process with local citizens was often omitted in late capitalism.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Walderspiel interview.

<sup>94</sup>Baum interview.

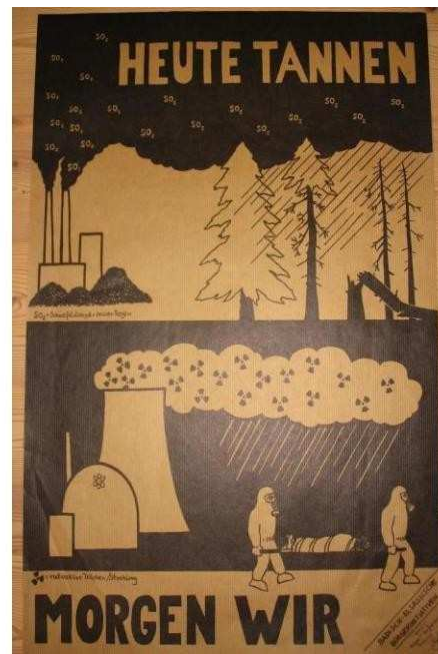
<sup>95</sup>Sellers, "Litigation," 501.

<sup>96</sup>Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity," 61.

<sup>97</sup>Sellers, "Litigation," 501.

<sup>98</sup>Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity," 58.

However, it was not only the revolution of social movements and the bureaucracy that made the students' participation in the protests in Wyhl and other sites successful, but also, as Samuel Beer argues, it was "the spirit of democracy."<sup>99</sup> Wyhl and other proposed sites' successes stemmed, in large part, from the implied "concept of equality," and more importantly, the freedom of political choice, freedom from arbitrary authority and the demonstrators' right to dissent.<sup>100</sup> Two popular slogans distributed through flyers were:



"Hands off of Wyhl's Forest" / "Today fir trees, tomorrow us"

All of these aims were crucial to understanding Wyhl's success. Events in Wyhl, and its relationship with the younger German anti-nuclear protesters who came into the region, underscore the importance of democratic values and resistance against

<sup>99</sup>Gene E. Frankland and Donald Schoonmaker, *Between Protest and Power: The Green Party in Germany* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

arbitrary decisions, which were imposed upon certain communities. With the mobilization efforts of common citizens from various generational, religious, economic, social and educational backgrounds, the local community of Wyhl's resistance to the planned power plant would likely not have been as successful as it ultimately was without the Citizens' Initiatives that initiated massive grassroots efforts, particularly as it pertained to student groups from nearby Freiburg. It would be unfair, even naive to state that the anti-nuclear movement was largely shaped by a number of pre-established efforts that sought to challenge the existing political regimes. Instead, as Kitschelt bluntly puts it, the anti-nuclear movement "led to different dispositions of governments to defend or revise policies."<sup>101</sup> In other words, governments began to act in a somewhat superficial way that was *taught* to them.

Ultimately, the proposal to turn south Germany into an industrial area similar to the Ruhrgebiet in north Germany was defeated. A conglomerate of what many referred to as disconnected individuals witnessed an occupation by protesters from across West Germany and Western Europe. According to Stephen Milder, many of the occupiers were conservative farmers and vineyard owners; however, cooperation between the rural people and scientists, as well as students, connected the local community with technical expertise. According to the Environmental Justice Atlas, the movement in Wyhl was an important collaboration with the Germans and allowed for the creation of *an imagined community* of the "affected population" that spanned throughout the Rhine River.<sup>102</sup> Since 1995 the community and nation that embraced

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<sup>101</sup>Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity," 84.

<sup>102</sup><https://ejatlas.org/conflict/whyl-in-germany>

Wyhl's anti-nuclear stance has applauded its relevant history as it has been declared a nature reserve along the historic Rhine River. Due to the united efforts of Catholics, Protestants, various socio-economic classes, rural and urban citizens, professional and non-professional classes, and importantly, conservative farmers and liberal students, the small village of Wyhl's anti-nuclear stance became the environmental face of a nation.



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