The New Watch on the Rhine: Anti-Nuclear Protest in Baden and Alsace

Stephen Milder

Summary

During the 1970s, a broad cross-section of the population—from farmers and vintners to scientists and middle class urbanites—worked together to oppose a series of reactor projects planned for the Upper Rhine Valley. The movement that developed in this rural borderland between West Germany, France, and Switzerland was remarkable because of its diversity and also because of its protagonists' unorthodox approach to activism. When reactor opponents launched a nine-month occupation of the Wyhl reactor construction site in February 1975, their bold action attracted numerous outsiders to the region. Inspired to recreate the Wyhl occupation elsewhere, these activists soon discovered the difficulty of simply exporting "Model Wyhl." Other attempted reactor site occupations were not as successful as the Wyhl occupation, but they did succeed in raising concerns about nuclear energy and drawing an ever wider cross-section of the West German population into that country's growing anti-nuclear movement.

On the morning of 18 February 1975, some 300 local people—most of them middle-aged farmers and vintners—made their way to a clearing in the woods outside the Badensian village of Wyhl. Construction had just gotten underway on a massive nuclear reactor at this secluded site; the uninvited visitors quickly stopped the work. Within an hour, "every machine [on the site] was shut down." By evening, tents and trailers dotted the site, and protesters traded stories around a roaring campfire. A full-fledged occupation was underway.

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Demonstration against the planned construction of the nuclear power plant at Wyhl. (August 1974)

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Though many observers expressed their surprise at this turn of events, the occupation cannot really have been unexpected. Reactor opponents had been threatening to occupy the Wyhl site for six months; they had been protesting against nuclear reactors along the Upper Rhine for four years. The region's first mass anti-reactor protest came in 1971 at Fessenheim in Alsace. Further demonstrations followed in 1972 in Breisach (Baden), where yet another reactor was to be built. In December 1973, activists carried out a week-long "trial-squat" at a proposed reactor site in Swiss Kaiseraugst. Beginning in September 1974, they occupied the site where a lead-processing plant was under construction in Alsatian Marckolsheim. The Wyhl occupation, therefore, was only the latest installment in a long series of similar protests.

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Protest march against nuclear power plant Wyhl (August 1974)

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Perhaps the fact that the people who carried out the illegal occupation were not "typical" protesters confused observers. In fact, many of the Wyhl occupiers were conservative farmers and vintners. Cooperation between these rural people and scientists from nearby Freiburg connected local knowledge of the region with technical expertise. Perhaps most importantly, collaboration between French and Germans allowed for the creation of an imagined community of the "affected population" that spanned the Rhine and positioned itself as an alternative to the central governments in Bonn, Paris, and Stuttgart.

The movement was also unorthodox because its protagonists linked nuclear fears with material concerns about the future of local viticulture. The democratic process was essential to many reactor opponents, too. They considered government officials' behavior high-handed and fiercely protested limitations on public debate.

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Activists occupy construction site at Wyhl (February 1975)

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During the summer of 1975, the occupied site at Wyhl became a symbol of this unorthodox and diverse "popular politics." People from across western Europe were drawn to the occupation; they came away awed by the "example of Wyhl" and determined to recreate it elsewhere. It was not long, however, before these visitors discovered the difficulty of simply exporting "Model Wyhl." Years of alliance building and countless smaller actions had preceded the Wyhl occupation. The police, too, had learned from Wyhl and were better prepared to defend other construction sites. Thus, attempted occupations near the northern German towns of Brokdorf and Grondhe descended into pitched battles between protesters and police. Even so, concerns about nuclear energy became increasingly commonplace after Wyhl, drawing in an ever wider cross-section of the population. In this sense, the grassroots movement against reactors that took place along the Upper Rhine played a major part in making nuclear energy a hotly contested issue throughout Western Europe.

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Further readings:

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Related links:

- BUND Freiburg: Regional Environmental History (in German)
  http://vorort.bund.net/suedlicher-oberrhein/umweltgeschichte-regionalgeschichte-oberrhein.html
- Badensian-Alsatian Citizens' Initiatives (in German and French)
  http://www.badisch-elsaessische.net/
- Wickström, Mats, Hanna Lindberg, and Matias Kaihovirta. "The Neste War 1970–1972." *Arcadia* 2018, no. 8.
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