Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of Green Politics

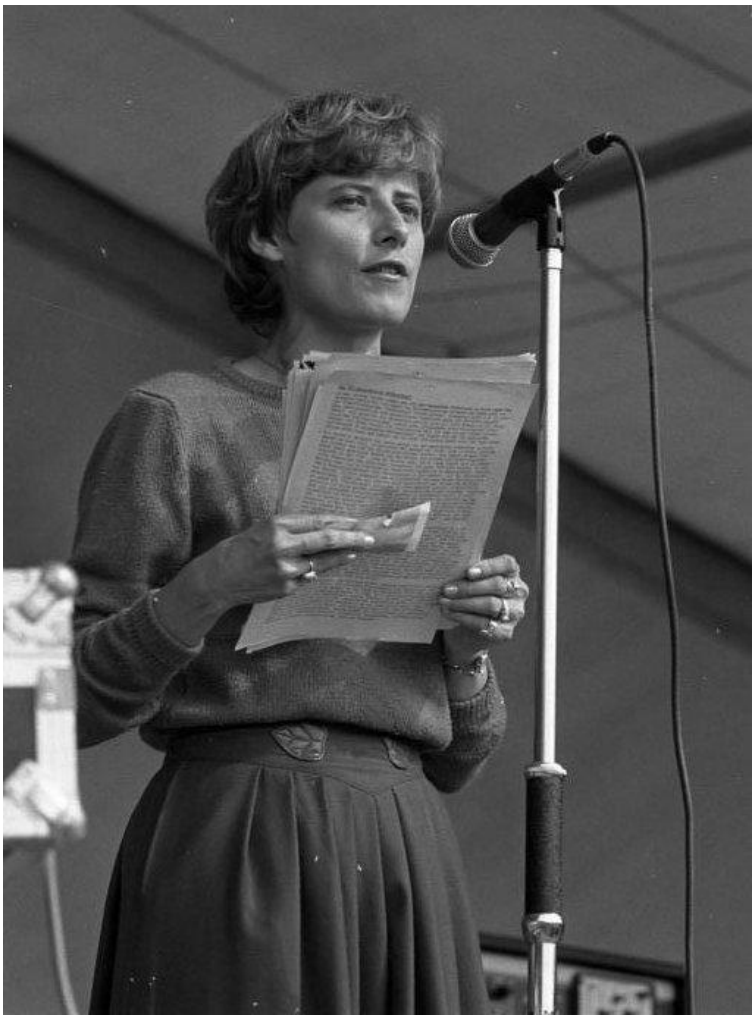
Stephen Milder

Summary

During the 1970s and 1980s, Petra Karin Kelly (1947–1992) traveled the globe, visiting disparate sites of anti-nuclear protest that included rural West German villages, the Australian outback, and Hiroshima. Her travels also took her to world capitals like Washington, Bonn, London, and Brussels. In moving between sites of local activism and capital cities, Kelly played an essential part in the networking of grassroots anti-nuclear activists and helped carry their message to centers of political power. She envisioned the West German Green party, which she co-founded in 1980, as a powerful tool that could redirect "chain reactions" of grassroots protest towards parliaments and thus create a new, more participatory form of liberal democracy.

Milder, Stephen. "Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of Green Politics." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2013), no. 8. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5279.

Print date: 21 November 2026 18:14:01



Petra Kelly talking in front of peace activists and artists supporting the "Krefelder Appell" against the NATO Double-Track Decision (1982)

Photographer: Rainer Mittelstädt
1982 Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1982-0912-015
Click here to view Wikimedia source.

(cc) BY-NC-SA This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License .

During the 1970s and 1980s, Petra Karin Kelly (1947–1992) traveled the globe, visiting sites of anti-nuclear protest that included rural West German villages, the Australian outback, and Hiroshima. Her travels also took her to world capitals like Washington, Bonn, London, and Brussels. In moving between sites of local activism and capital cities, Kelly played an essential part in the networking of grassroots anti-nuclear activists and helped carry their message to centers of political power. She envisioned the West German Green party, which she co-founded in 1980, as a powerful tool that could redirect "chain reactions" of grassroots protest towards parliaments and thus create a new, more participatory form of liberal democracy.

The roots of Kelly's transnational approach to politics are evident in her biography. Born in provincial Günzburg on the Danube in 1947, Kelly left Bavaria for the United States after her mother married an American GI in 1959. She attended high school in Fort Benning, Georgia, and then Newport News, Virginia, before enrolling in

Milder, Stephen. "Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of Green Politics." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2013), no. 8. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5279.
Print date: 21 November 2026 18:14:01

Washington DC's American University in 1966.

It was at AU that she became politically active, serving as a lead student organizer on the 1968 presidential campaigns of Robert F. Kennedy and later Hubert H. Humphrey. Though she was not deeply involved in the student movement while she was at AU, the direct action protests carried out by civil rights activists during the early 1960s and by students later in the decade clearly affected Kelly and informed her approach to politics after she returned to Europe in 1970.

During her employment at the European Economic Community in Brussels during the early 1970s, Kelly began to connect her desire for social change with the need to incorporate "the people at every local level" into political decision-making processes. The death of her half-sister, Gracie, from cancer in 1970 sensitized Kelly to the problems of nuclear radiation. Her discovery of grassroots anti-nuclear protest in the mid-1970s helped her to see anti-nuclear activism as the means towards an alternative, more inclusive politics for Europe.



Petra Kelly at the press conference of the West German Greens (together with Otto Schily) after the party's first election into the Bundestag (1983)

Photographer: Engelbert Reineke
1983 Bundesarchiv, B 145 Bild-F065187-0022
Click here to view Wikimedia source.

(cc) BY-NC-SA This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License .

Intent on bringing the energy of grassroots anti-nuclear protests into parliamentary politics, Kelly helped found

Milder, Stephen. "Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of Green Politics." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2013), no. 8. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5279.
Print date: 21 November 2026 18:14:01

the West German Green Party. She served as the party's lead candidate for the European elections in 1979, and also headed its list for the 1980 and 1983 federal elections. After the Greens finally entered the Bundestag in March 1983, Kelly's continued focus on the sort of transnational grassroots politics that had propelled her to Bonn and her growing personal celebrity alienated many of her Green colleagues. She saw the direct action protests that she mounted within the Bundestag chamber, as well as in front of the White House, on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz, and in the West German embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, as a means of utilizing her parliamentary mandate to further important causes, create transnational networks, and expand liberal democracy. Others, however, saw these actions as contrary to the serious behavior expected of an MP.

By 1992, when she was murdered by her partner, the former *Bundeswehr* general Gert Bastian, Kelly had almost completely fallen out with the Greens. Yet her transnational approach to politics, through which she sought to connect grassroots activism with centers of political power, had been essential to the Greens' initial entrance into the Bundestag and played an important part in the incorporation of environmental matters into West Germany's political mainstream.

Arcadia Collection:
Global Environmental Movements

Further readings:

- Bevan, Ruth. "Petra Kelly: The *Other* Green." *New Political Science* 23 (2001): 181–202.
- Heinrich Böll Foundation. *Petra Kelly: A Rememberance.* Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2008.
- Kelly, Petra. *Fighting for Hope.* London: Hogarth Press, 1984.
- Milder, Stephen. "Thinking Globally, Acting (Trans-)Locally: Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of West German Green Politics." *Central European History*, 43, no. 2 (June 2010): 301–26.
- Parkin, Sara. *The Life and Death of Petra Kelly.* London: Harper Collins, 1994.
- Richter, Saskia. *Die Aktivistin: Das Leben der Petra Kelly.* Munich: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 2010.

Related links:

- Petra Kelly archive (Berlin)
  http://www.boell.de/foundation/archive/about-us-3975.html
- Petra Kelly Stiftung (Munich)
  http://www.petrakellystiftung.de/
- The Right Livelihood Award, 1982 laureate Petra Kelly
  http://www.rightlivelihood.org/kelly.html

How to cite:

Milder, Stephen. "Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of Green Politics." Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2013), no. 8. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5279.

Print date: 21 November 2026 18:14:01

Milder, Stephen. “Petra Kelly and the Transnational Roots of Green Politics.” Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia* (2013), no. 8. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/5279 .

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License .
2013 Stephen Milder
This refers only to the text and does not include any image rights.
Please click on the images to view their individual rights status.

ISSN 2199-3408
Environment & Society Portal, Arcadia

Websites linked in image captions:

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-1982-0912-015,_Petra_Kelly.jpg
- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_B_145_Bild-F065187-0022,_Bonn,_Pressekonferenz_der_Gr%C3%BCnen,_Bundestagswahl.jpg

About the author:

Stephen Milder
Stephen Milder is an assistant professor of European politics and society at the University of Groningen and research fellow at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich. He is the author of *Greening Democracy: The Anti-nuclear Movement and Political Environmentalism in West Germany and Beyond, 1968–1983* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). With support from the DFG (German Research Foundation), he is writing a history of the politicization of climate change and the transformation of post–Cold War Germany.
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5650-4003