

FISH INSTEAD OF FISSION: INDUSTRIAL EXPANSION AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTEST IN HAMBURG AND THE LOWER ELBE REGION SINCE THE 1960S

RIBARENJE UMJESTO RAZARANJA: INDUSTRIJSKA EKSPANZIJA I EKOLOŠKI PROTESTI U HAMBURGU I REGIJI DONJE ELBE OD 1960-IH GODINA DO DANAS

Frank Zelko

University of Vermont
Department of History
201 Wheeler House
133 S. Prospect Street
Burlington, Vermont 05405
USA
Frank.zelko@uvm.edu

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Summary

The massive post-war expansion of the Hamburg Harbor, and the industry surrounding it, placed a tremendous amount of environmental stress on the Elbe River and its environs, including the city of Hamburg. Despite the adoption of various pollution abatement technologies, the massive amount of shipping traffic, combined with various industries along the banks of the Elbe, had a deleterious impact on the river. By the 1970s, fisherman began to catch severely deformed fish and health authorities warned against the consumption of seafood taken from the Elbe's lower reaches. Swimming became unthinkable.

In response to this environmental deterioration, local authorities attempted to ameliorate the problem through various technological developments, but their efforts were frequently stymied by various industries and their supporters in the government and the labor unions. The inability of the local government to combat the pollution in the Elbe, and the areas around it, led to the formation of a grass-roots environmental coalition that focused its energies on putting political pressure on industry and local authorities in Hamburg. A group made up of fishermen, scientists, and local environmental activists, began to engage in a variety of protest activities in the 1970s, from lobbying politicians to various forms of non-violent direct action, such as blocking the harbor, hanging banners on chimney stacks, and dumping barrels full of polluted water and deformed fish in front of the headquarters of the sanitary authorities and various industries they deemed responsible for the pollution. The author would like to thank the Gerda Henkel Stiftung for funding much of the research that went into this article.

Key words: Environmental History, Environmental Protest, Hamburg, the Lower Elbe Region

Ključne riječi: povijest okoliša, ekološki protesti, Hamburg, regija Donje Elbe

In Mid-May of 1981, thousands of citizens turned out along the banks of the Elbe River in Hamburg to celebrate the 729th birthday of the Hamburg harbor, one of the largest and busiest ports in Europe. The celebration, organized by the city-state government and the harbor authorities, was a well-attended and pleasant, if somewhat innocuous affair. Within a week, however, it was upstaged by a massive protest in which over 500 fish cutters, yachts, and motor boats blockaded the

harbor to protest against the industrial transformation of the Elbe from a healthy, multi-use river into a »stinking sewer canal.« In addition, over 50,000 landlubbers gathered along the river's banks offering support to the protest flotilla. Their banners and chants accused the authorities of allowing the Elbe to become the »Cesspool of Industry« and they demanded that the government »Rescue the Elbe, Now!«¹ This demonstration was one of the more spectacular examples of the direct action environmental protests that were taking place on the Elbe—and to a lesser extent on other German rivers—throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to signaling public displeasure with the environmental despoliation wrought by modern industry, such protests also indicated the growing ecological awareness of the German population. Furthermore, they set the stage for the emergence of an influential direct action environmental movement, a development most graphically illustrated by the rapid and massive growth of the German branch of Greenpeace, whose headquarters, to this day, lie directly on the north bank of the Elbe, a mere stone's throw from the sprawling Hamburg harbor.

Hamburg's emergence as the German center of this new, spectacular, and more radical form of environmentalism is largely the result of a combination of historical circumstances that were present throughout much of Germany, but which were particularly acute in the Hamburg region in the 1970s. Firstly, beginning in 1969, regional authorities in Hamburg and the neighboring states of Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein released a plan that would, over the coming decades, transform the lower Elbe region between Hamburg and Cuxhaven from a sparsely settled, relatively impoverished agricultural region—the »Calabria of the North,« as some politicians referred to it—into a massive industrial zone where multiple nuclear power plants, new and bigger harbors and cheap land would entice chemical plants, steel manufacturers, and oil refineries. The *Untere Elbe*, in short, would become »ein zweites Ruhrgebiet.«²

Viewed from a broader economic context, the plans to develop the Untere Elbe region were part of the Wirtschaftswunder, the so-called economic miracle, of the post-war era. In the immediate postwar period, the West German state played a major role in facilitating economic recovery. The country's stunning success lent further momentum to the German corporatist model in which the state, in partnership with industrialists and the major labor organizations, engaged in massive development schemes, many of which required the total re-engineering and reorganization of landscapes throughout the country. And since many of the nation's major industries required massive quantities of water, riverbanks became increasingly crowded with aluminum smelters, petrochemical facilities, and nuclear power plants. In short, it was a classic example of what James Scott described as a high modernist scheme: the process whereby the modern bureaucratic state employs science, technology, and rational social planning by trained experts to re-order society in order to make it both more productive and easier to control.³ However, unlike most of the examples that Scott uses, West Germany was a liberal democracy rather than an authoritarian state.⁴ In democracies, high modernism waxed and waned according to the strength and conviction of particular governments and politicians, the degree to which large industrial enterprises exerted control over the state at various times, and the relative strength of civil society. The complex interplay between these forces meant that the state's ability, indeed, its desire, to plan and carry out high modernist schemes varied according to changes in political opportunity structures. Times of crisis, whether real or perceived (or for that matter, manufactured), frequently provided opportunities for states to attempt massive

¹ *Der Spiegel*, 25/5/1981, p.52

² The »Calabria of the North« quote is from *Der Spiegel*, 25/5/1981, p.53. For a critical account of the industrialization plans for the lower Elbe, see Christian Jungblut, *Es war einmal ein Fluss* (Kabel Verlag, 1983), pp.64-79.

³ Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁴ For a critique of Scott's work as it applies to liberal democracies such as the United States and West Germany, see Morton Keller, »Looking at the State: An American Perspective,« *Journal of American History*, Vol. 106 (1), Feb. 2001.

development schemes with little opposition. At other times, however, a vibrant and empowered civil society has tenaciously opposed such schemes, sometimes quite successfully. More often, various groups reach some sort of compromise. Protestors, though unable to stop a development scheme, have perhaps been able to reduce its scale and its social and environmental impact. This is the scenario that best describes West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s and provides the backdrop for the emergence of more radical forms of environmentalism. A conjuncture of several circumstances, or to put it another way, a change in the political opportunity structure, created conditions that were conducive to a form of environmentalism that groups like Greenpeace espoused.

By the 1970s, the ecological consequences of the *Wirtschaftswunder* could no longer be ignored. One of the results was a reorientation of German environmentalism. As historian Sandra Chaney has written, the late 1960s and 1970s was an era in which *Naturschutz*, a traditional form of nature conservation, began to give way to *Umweltschutz*, a more ecologically-informed brand of environmentalism with a more holistic view of human beings' relationship with the natural world.⁵ As a result, Hamburg and the lower Elbe became a contested region: a battleground between state-sponsored industrialization of the kind that had produced the *Wirtschaftswunder*, and the new form of *Umweltschutz*. This conflict, which was particularly intense in this region, led to the emergence of the direct action environmentalism—represented most strikingly by Greenpeace—which became such an important force in the modern German environmental movement.

ES WAR EINMAL EIN FLUSS...

For centuries, the Elbe has been a »working river.« It has been continuously re-shaped to suit the needs of human settlement and transportation, and has long borne the by-products from the production and consumption habits of those who live in its watershed.⁶ Pollution of one form or another, therefore, has long been part of the river's history. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, for example, the river was basically an open sewer, continuously polluted by raw sewage and waste from various industries such as abattoirs.⁷ Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined below, the 1970s and 1980s saw an intensification of inorganic pollution in particular, to the point where the river was, from an ecological standpoint, at death's door.

Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic

In the post-WWII era, the Elbe became an unfortunate victim of the geo-political circumstances that had divided Europe into two camps. For most of its length, it now flowed through Czechoslovakia (35%) and the German Democratic Republic (49%), where it was forced to bear the untreated effluent of countless poorly regulated industrial plants. West German industrialists, and the politicians who unquestioningly supported them, had no doubts about where the majority of the Elbe's pollution stemmed from. The Christian Democratic Union Bundestag representative, Wolfgang von Geldern, for example, insisted that the Czechoslovaks and East Germans were »*Umweltverschmutzer Nummer eins*.« In comparison to the care taken by West German industry, he continued, the two communist nations were »criminal« in their neglect. The *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für die Reinhaltung der Elbe* (ARGE), the inter-state government agency set up to monitor pollution in the Elbe, also laid the blame for heavy metal pollution of the river squarely at the feet of the easterners. Such efforts to

⁵ Chaney, *Nature of the Miracle Years: Conservation in West Germany, 1945-1975* (New York: Berghahn, 2009)

⁶ Of course, the same can be said about virtually all German rivers. For example, see Mark Cioc's study, *The Rhine: An Eco-Biography, 1815-2000* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006). For a broader history of river development in Germany, see David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006).

⁷ For a vivid description, see Richard J. Evans, *Death in Hamburg: Society and Politics in the Cholera Years 1830-1910* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 126-161.

exculpate West German industry, however, were not entirely convincing. The fact that the communist countries were unconscionable polluters is beyond dispute. Nevertheless, it was difficult for scientists to apportion blame for the pollution that eventually flowed through Hamburg and into the North Sea. A significant percentage undoubtedly came from outside the Bundesrepublik, but it is clear that many West German industries were little better than their eastern brethren when it came to waste disposal.⁸

A NEW RUHRGEBIET

The major proponent of the industrialization of the lower Elbe region was a Hamburg businessman and politician named Helmuth Kern. With the support of industry, labor unions, and regional planning and development bureaus, Kern drew up a breathtakingly ambitious plan designed to create a massive industrial corridor along the river from Hamburg to the North Sea, in the process transforming an »underdeveloped« region into a new version of the Ruhr Valley. The plan called for the construction of several nuclear power plants and a massive injection of state funding in order to create the infrastructure that heavy industry would require. New dikes would be built to regulate the river's flow; harbors would be expanded to accommodate the increased volume and size of shipping traffic, while new roads and railway lines would connect the region to the rest of West Germany and Europe. Kern was aware of the aesthetic and ecological impact his plan would have on a river that was already struggling to cleanse itself of the effluent discharged from the DDR and from industries in Hamburg. The lower Elbe, he admitted, was an idyllic region, but one which a modern society could not afford to preserve. Although Kern's plan was never realized in its totality, in large part due to the protests of environmental activists and citizens' initiatives, the area nonetheless experienced considerable industrial development. By the late 1970s, the nuclear power plants at Stade, Brunsbüttel, Brockdorf and Krümmel were either operational or in the process of being built, and major industrial and chemical firms such as Bayer, Dow Chemicals, Veba and Reynolds Aluminium had set up plants in the new industrial zones around Blützfeth, Stade, and Cuxhaven. Although all of these facilities were bound by regulations that strictly defined the extent to which they could pollute the river, it soon became clear that the regulatory bodies were prepared to give them considerable leeway in the interest of reducing costs and currying favor. The inevitable result was that there was minimal regulation of pollution emission, and as a consequence a marked deterioration in the water quality of the lower Elbe.⁹

EXPANDING THE HAMBURG HARBOR

In 1967, the Hamburg senate decided to embark on a massive expansion and modernization of the city's harbor, by far the largest employer in the Hansestadt. In order to accommodate the new generation of giant container ships that were destined to dominate maritime trade, the 700 year-old harbor would need to be deepened and expanded once more. Enormous docks and dry docks would have to be constructed to facilitate the loading and unloading of cargo and to allow for ship repairs. The dredging operation alone was projected to cost 13 billion DM.¹⁰ In the process, millions of tons of river-bed sediment, most of it severely contaminated by decades of accumulated heavy metals, was dumped on the old harbor fishing village of Altenwerder, whose resident population of fishermen

⁸ *Spiegel*, 25/5/1981, p.53; Handelskammer Hamburg, *Umweltschmutz in Hamburg: Beispiele aus der Wirtschaft* (Abteilung Industrieller Dienst der Handelskammer Hamburg, 1980), p.14; ARGE, *Schwermetalldaten der Elbe: Bericht über die Ergebnisse der Schwermetalluntersuchungen im Elbabschnitt von Schnackenburg bus zur Nordsee, 1979/1980* (Hamburg, 1980), p.65.

⁹ Umweltschutzgruppe Physik/Geowissenschaften, *Wasser in Hamburg: Giftig, Salzig, Dreckig, Stinkig* (Hamburg, 1981), p.1; Jungblut, *Es war einmal ein Fluss*, pp.67-73. Jungblut calculated that the billions of DM in public funding that was used to subsidize industrial development and create jobs amounted to approximately 1 million DM per job created. See *ibid.*, p.54.

¹⁰ Gerd-Dieter Nagel, »Hafenentwicklung: Die Weltwirtschaft als Randbedingungen der Hafenentwicklung,« in Architekten und Ingenieurverein Hamburg e.V., *Hamburg und seine Bauten, 1969-1984* (Hamburg: Christians, 1984), p.252.

was forcibly relocated to nearby Finkenwerder, although not without considerable protest. By the late 1970s, Helmut Kern had become the chairman of the Hamburg Harbor Board, and he brought with him to the position his unremitting drive for growth and expansion at any price. The dredging operations, along with the increased shipping traffic and the location of new chemical industries and oil refineries around the harbor all had a significant ecological impact on the Elbe in Hamburg and downstream.¹¹

TITANIUM DIOXIDE DUMPING

In the post-war era, the river mouths and bays of the North Sea became major dumping grounds for a variety of chemical wastes. One product developed a particularly bad reputation, not just for its negative ecological effects, but also because industry and government refused to acknowledge its impact despite mounting evidence from fishermen and environmentalists. Titanium Dioxide (TD) is a chemical whose bleaching properties made it a vital component of many common products, from toothpaste to laundry detergent. Unfortunately, for every ton of TD that a chemical plant produced, there were eight tons of dilute acid waste to dispose of, much of which was laden with heavy metals such as cadmium, chrome, zinc, and copper.¹² In 1969, Germany's major TD producer, Kronos Titan, a subsidiary of the U.S. firm, National Lead, decided to complement its facility in Leverkusen with the construction of a second plant on the Weser River in Nordenham. The facility received a glowing report from the federal ministry of transport, which praised its »especially environmentally friendly waste disposal system,« which, they argued, caused no significant harm to marine life and posed no threat to the German fishing industry. The technique, which in retrospect appears decidedly unimpressive, was to dilute the waste with sea water in a ratio of 1:750, pour it into a ship and dump it into the North Sea off the west coast of Helgoland.¹³ By the mid-1970s, however, fishermen began to complain of an increasing number of diseased and malformed fish that constituted a growing portion of their ever-diminishing catch. It was not long before they made a connection between the diseased fish and the mile-long trails of yellow chemical waste that were released into the North Sea on a daily basis by Kronos Titan.¹⁴ Hamburg-based fishermen were particularly affected, since the dilute acid waste was often released in the middle of their fishing areas and impacted fish caught near the mouth of the Elbe. Kronos Titan's Titanium Dioxide would prove to be a major catalyst for the protests of both fishermen and direct action environmental groups in the early 1980s.

All of these developments took a heavy toll on the Elbe and contributed to the steady demise of the river's ecological health. Even the relatively conservative ARGE, which had been set up by the state governments of Hamburg, Lower Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein and which was widely perceived as friendly to industry, admitted the Elbe was seriously polluted. ARGE used a seven-point ranking system to rate the overall quality of the water in the lower Elbe and its tributaries, with 1 indicating a high degree of purity, 4 denoting that the river was critically contaminated, and 7 warning that it was extremely polluted. In 1979, ARGE gave the Elbe an overall rating of 4. In 1981, they increased this to 6—«very heavily polluted»—warning that large parts of the river were

¹¹ Helmut Nuhn, Jürgen Ossenbrügge and Elfried Söker, *Expansion des Hamburger Hafens und Konsequenzen für den Betroffenen* (Hamburg: Wirtschaftsgeographische Abteilung des Instituts für Geographie und Wirtschaftsgeographie der Universität Hamburg, 1983); Eckert Klessmann, *Geschichte der Stadt Hamburg* (Hamburg: Die Hanse, 2002), pp.612-613; Behörde für Bezirksangelegenheiten, Naturschutz und Umweltgestaltung, *Umweltfibel Hamburg* (Hamburg, 1982), pp.27-29.

¹² Horst Güntheroth, *Die Nord See: Portrait eines bedrohten Meeres* (Hamburg: Stern-Buchim Verlag, 1986), p.136; Volkert Dethelfsen, *Überblick über Auswirkungen der Verklappung von Abfällen aus der Titandioxid Produktion in der Deutschen Bucht* (Hamburg: Bundesforschungsanstalt für Fischerei, 1986), pp.1-2.

¹³ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12/8/1980

¹⁴ *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 14/10/1980

severely contaminated with toxic chemicals, dangerously low on oxygen, and almost uninhabitable for most species of fish.¹⁵

Any reasonably observant citizen, let alone those who made their living on the Elbe, did not need ARGE to tell them that things were seriously awry with the river. By the mid-1970s, fishermen began to notice an increasing number of fish with tumors and malformations, while independent scientists and investigative journalists also began to report on the sorry state of the Elbe's ecology. The combination of factors that contributed to this deterioration also spawned a series of opposition movements in Hamburg and the lower Elbe region. These mirrored or were part of various movements also occurring in other parts of West Germany, including anti-nuclear protests, citizens' initiatives, and local grass-roots environmental groups. What all of these groups had in common was a highly critical and hostile attitude toward the bureaucracies that facilitated massive industrial projects without, these groups argued, obtaining the broad consent of local citizens. On top of that, these same bureaucracies did little to prevent private industry from by-passing or altogether ignoring regulations that were supposed to protect people and the environment. Certainly, environmental protestors were critical of individual industries. However, many adopted the attitude that private industry was incorrigible and would always try to skirt pollution controls if it helped them cut the cost of production. The state, on the other hand, was expected to mitigate these excesses. Once environmentally conscious citizens felt that the state's planning and regulatory agencies were not only facilitating inappropriate industrialization, but also turning a blind eye to the continual breach of emissions regulations, they began to direct their anger toward them. In classic new social movement fashion, the arena of class struggle shifted from traditional conflicts over resource distribution and exploitation of the working class, to the alienating effects of being subordinated to the decisions of anonymous and undemocratic technocrats.¹⁶

Among the first groups to challenge the lower Elbe industrialization project and its impact on environmental deterioration were local grassroots citizens' initiatives, or *Bürgerinitiativen* (BI). These associations were loosely and often temporarily organized groups of citizens mobilized in response to one particular local issue. Their members tended to be overwhelmingly young and highly educated, espousing a New Left ideology and employing tactics ranging from lobbying and circulating petitions to organizing mass demonstrations and protest marches.¹⁷ Throughout the 1970s, numerous BIs emerged from Hamburg and the lower Elbe region. Among some of the more prominent were the *Bürgerinitiative Umweltschutz Untere Elbe*, the *Förderkreis »Rettet die Elbe,«* the *Arbeitskreis Umweltschutz Brunsbüttel*, and the *Arbeitsgruppe gegen Untere Elbeindustrialisierung*. In the late 1970s, most of these groups, along with countless similar ones throughout West Germany, were loosely incorporated into the Association of Citizens' Initiatives on Environmental Protection (*Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz—BBU*), an umbrella organization set up to coordinate the hundreds of environmental BIs throughout the country.¹⁸ The BIs were vital in building a bridge between *Naturschutz* and *Umweltschutz*. By the late 1970s, ecology became the BBU's guiding philosophy, a fact that was reflected in its influential publication, *»Für eine ökologische Kreislaufwirtschaft,«* which argued that an »ecological economy« could not be bought into existence through single issue individual measures in the area of technical environmental protection, but only when the requirements of ecology became the foundation of economic and social policy in their entirety.¹⁹

¹⁵ ARGE, *Wassergütedaten der Elbe*, 1979, 1981 (Hamburg Behörde für Wirtschaft, Verkehr und Landwirtschaft).

¹⁶ See Alain Touraine, *Anti-nuclear Protest: The Opposition to Nuclear Energy in France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Andrei Markovits & Philip Gorski, *The German Left: Red, Green and Beyond* (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.100-101.

¹⁷ Markovits & Gorski, *German Left*, pp.99-102.

¹⁸ Martin Leonhard, *Umweltverbände: Zur Organisierung von Umweltinteressen in der BRD* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1986).

¹⁹ Chaney, *Nature of the Miracle Years*, pp. 195-212; Markovits & Gorski, *German Left*, p.105.

The local BIs played a vital role in publicizing the ecological problems in the Elbe and coordinating lobbying and protest campaigns against them. The *Arbeitsgruppe gegen Untereibeindustrialisierung*, for example, published a booklet entitled *Elbwasser macht Schlank*, which summarized, in a standard declensionist narrative, the transformation of the Elbe from »one of the richest fishing grounds of Europe« to »a mere sewage canal and shipping lane.« The industrialization process, they argued, not only posed a catastrophic environmental threat, it also failed to achieve its stated goal of reducing unemployment, since whatever jobs were created by the development of heavy industry were offset by the job losses in professions, such as fishing, which relied on the ecological good health of the river and its surrounds.²⁰ Another BI, the *Umweltschutzgruppe Physik/ Geowissenschaften*, composed primarily of students at the University of Hamburg, went so far as to conduct their own scientific assessment of the Elbe in order to compare their results with those issued by official sources, particularly ARGE. The result was a blistering critique of the authorities charged with the task of regulating Hamburg's waterways. The group discovered that various portions of the Hamburg harbor were contaminated with levels of chemical and heavy metal pollution that were several thousand times above the legal limit. Some canals near the industrial zones were, for all intents and purposes, biologically dead, while others had so much heavy metal in their sediment that they were almost worth mining.²¹ The study also pointed out some of the absurdities of the pollution laws, such as the regulation which prevented ARGE from detailing the contents of effluent released by a particular industry since such information might provide competitors with the details of the firm's chemical formulas, thereby threatening its competitiveness. According to some of the bureaucrats the group spoke with, this was one of the few regulations that were firmly adhered to by the water authorities. »It is absurd,« the students concluded, »that a work group from the university should have to inform the government agencies about how grotesquely poisonous some industrial effluent is, given that it is their job to protect the public from such hazards. Our tests clearly show that they have been neglecting their duties for several decades.«²²

Suspicious that regulatory authorities frequently cooperated with industry in order to by-pass pollution laws were confirmed by similar stories in both the Hamburg region and from other parts of the country. The *Stern* journalist, Christian Jungblut, for example, learned that Reynolds Aluminum had managed to by-pass zoning regulations that would have forced them to construct their plant in a more ecologically friendly manner. In collusion with regulatory authorities, Reynolds invoked a law that allowed planning regulations to be by-passed where the project was deemed to be »essential to the public interest,« such as the building of military installations for defense purposes.²³ In Hessen, civil servants sympathetic to the giant chemical manufacturer, Hoechst, allowed the firm to contravene various pollution regulations and then boasted to corporations about »keeping their promise« not to unduly interfere with standard industry practices.²⁴ Such stories infuriated the BI groups throughout the country and spurred them toward escalating levels of environmental protest.

Another important factor in the radicalization of West German environmentalism was the anti-nuclear power protests of the 1970s. The first of these occurred in the small village of Wyhl in the country's far southwest, an area in which a series of industrial parks had been constructed in an otherwise picturesque wine-growing region of the upper Rhine. The government of Baden-Württemberg developed blueprints for the Wyhl plant in 1972, but the local community only found

²⁰ *Arbeitsgruppe gegen Untereibeindustrialisierung, Elbwasser Macht Schlank* (Hamburg, Feb. 1981), pp.2-3, 1.

²¹ *Wasser in Hamburg*, p.1

²² *Ibid.*, pp.1-2, 35.

²³ Jungblut, *Es war einmal ein Fluss*, pp.74-76. Jungblut relates numerous examples of how officials minimized or simply ignored scientific evidence that may have impeded the construction or operation of various industrial plants and nuclear power stations.

²⁴ *The Economist*, 5/4/1980.

out about them in mid-1973, at which point the project was in an advanced stage of planning. In order to win the approval of local residents, industry and government used a carrot-and-stick approach, with the power company offering generous prices for land and buildings that belonged to farmers, while the state government made barely veiled threats to expropriate the land of those who held out. Initially, the tactic paid off, with a narrow majority of locals approving the plan in a referendum. Those who opposed the power plant, however, did not give up so easily. In 1975, the construction site was occupied by protestors, many of whom came from outside the region to support the locals. The issue received a considerable amount of media attention in both the regional and national press, much of which highlighted the haughty tactics and corrupt practices of the politicians and businessmen who deemed the plant vital for the region's development and prosperity. In the end, however, the government backed down, providing the protestors with a victory that became a catalyst for environmentalists throughout the country, transforming a moderate, regional protest into a national opposition front against the Federal Republic's nuclear program.²⁵

The success of the Wyhl protest spurred a similar movement against the construction of a nuclear power plant at Brokdorf, on the Schleswig-Holstein side of the Lower Elbe. The project was announced during the autumn of 1973 and within two weeks, several BIs had sprung up to combat the development. The power company and the state government initially tried to buy off locals with promises of lavish public works projects and well-paid jobs. A local referendum, however, revealed overwhelming opposition to the plant. As in Wyhl, the people in charge of evaluating the Brokdorf plant also sat on the board of the power company that was building it, and construction soon proceeded despite the strong public opposition. Once again, protestors attempted to occupy the construction site, but this time the authorities were determined not to cave in. They were aided in their endeavors by the appearance of several communist and anarchist groups from Hamburg who were prepared to resort to violence in an effort to occupy the site. The protest turned into a riot, providing police with an excuse to crack down hard on any and all protestors in the region, regardless of their intentions. Although club-wielding anti-riot police drew little public sympathy, the image of black-clad, balaclava-wearing protestors throwing stones and damaging equipment did little to elicit public support for the protest. Unlike Wyhl, therefore, Brokdorf was a failure for the environmental movement. However, the authoritarian tactics of the state, combined with the violent tendencies of a minority of the protestors, forced the movement's majority into a state of reflection. Many vowed to henceforth adopt non-violence as a first principle.²⁶ Among those present at Brokdorf were Heinz Oestmann, a fisherman from Altenwerder who would become a key figure in later environmental protests, and Harald Zindler, one of the future co-founders of Greenpeace Deutschland. Both of them came away from Brokdorf with feelings of anger and frustration, not just against the state authorities, but also against those protestors who had resorted to violence.²⁷ Beyond the notoriety achieved by a few *Chaoten*, however, Brokdorf served to make a large segment of the public aware of the plans for the rapid and massive industrialization of the lower Elbe, as well as the ruthless measures that authorities were prepared to adopt in order to carry them out.

Another group who were radicalized by the rapid industrialization of the lower Elbe, and the technocracy's role in facilitating it, were the fishermen who made their living from the river and

²⁵ Christoph Büchele, Irmgard Schneider und Bernd Nössler, *Der Widerstand geht weiter : der Bürgerprotest gegen das Kernkraftwerk von 1976 bis zum Mannheimer Prozess* (Freiburg: Dreisam, 1982); Dieter Rucht, *Von Wyhl nach Gorleben : Bürger gegen Atomprogramm und nukleare Entsorgung* (Munich: Beck, 1980).

²⁶ Markowits & Gorski, *German Left*, pp. 103-104.

²⁷ Author's interviews with Heinz Oestmann, Hamburg, 12/10/1999 and Harald Zindler, Hamburg, 8/9/1999.

the nearby areas of the North Sea.²⁸ In Hamburg, many of these fishermen came from old fishing villages, such as Finkenwerder and Altenwerder, on the south side of the Elbe. The latter group, whose chief spokesman was the aforementioned Heinz Oestmann, was particularly aggrieved. Not only were they catching increasing numbers of diseased fish, but their home had been sacrificed on the altar of harbor expansion, with the result that much of Altenwerder was buried under thousands of tons of contaminated sludge from the river bed. By 1980, Oestmann and his fellow fishermen estimated that 30 percent of their catch was made up of sick fish which had to be discarded: eels with cauliflower or raspberry-like growths protruding from their mouths or eyes and flounder with dark spots that looked like multiple cigarette burns. Despite this, government scientists continued to dispute the charge that these diseases were the result of Titanium Dioxide poisoning or of industrial pollution more generally. The German Hydrographic Institute in Hamburg and the Institute for Maritime Fishing in Bremen did not deny that the number of sick fish was increasing, but they questioned whether this was due to pollution or »natural causes.« One industry-commissioned study even went so far as to suggest that there were more fish in the Elbe than had been the case a century before.²⁹

Like the BIs and anti-nuclear power protestors, the fishermen displayed an acute anger and contempt for the government authorities, such as the Hydrographic Institute, who were responsible for protecting the environment. »The people who are supposed to be expert scientists are, in our eyes, nothing but expert idiots. When they tell us that industrial emissions are within legal limits, we ask ourselves: who has the legal right to destroy nature?« The fishermen further accused the authorities of condoning »environmental terrorism« and of effectively allowing industry to regulate its own emissions. »We're not professional demonstrators or anarchists,« insisted Oestmann, distancing himself and his fellow fishermen from some of the more violent protestors. »Rather, we are fishermen, and if you drive us into a corner,« he wrote somewhat threateningly, »you had better be prepared for the consequences.«³⁰ The protesting fishermen, and Oestmann in particular, became well-known figures in the North German media. By playing on the general perception that fishermen were conservative members of the working class or petit-bourgeoisie, their participation in the protests of the late 1970s and early 1980s lent an extra degree of legitimacy to the local *Umweltschutz* movement.

By 1980, the fishermen and BBU-affiliated environmental groups had reached a level of frustration which threatened to boil over. Some groups, particularly in Hamburg, were being strongly influenced, or outright taken over, by anarchists and communists who advocated more extreme forms of action, such as violent protest or sabotage. Although most activists rejected such methods and were keen to avoid another Brokdorf, they were nonetheless dissatisfied with the impact that their current methods—lobbying, letter-writing, publishing pamphlets and booklets, demonstrating outside government agencies—were having on both the authorities and the general public. What was needed was a form of protest that was non-violent, yet which would attract a great deal of media attention

²⁸ Elbe fishermen have a history of protesting from time to time throughout the twentieth century, though none of the earlier protests were as radical or well-organized as those of the period under discussion. For examples of earlier protests, see Charles E. Closmann, »Modernizing the Waters: Water Pollution and the Harbor Economy in Hamburg, Germany, 1900-1961,« Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Houston, 2002, ch. 3.

²⁹ Güntheroth, *Die Nord See*, p.141; Heino Möller, *Daten zur Biologie der Elbfische* (Kiel: Verlag Heino Möller, 1985), p.197. The claim that there were more fish in the Elbe in 1980 than 1880 may have been true to the extent that eels were concerned. However, this was probably due to the fact that they were able to survive in conditions that other fish could not tolerate. Whatever the reason, the increase in eel numbers was of little consolation to the fishermen if the fish were too toxic to eat.

³⁰ Arbeitskreis Chemische Industrie, Köln, *Blockade Illustrierte* (Cologne: Volksblatt, 1981), p.19. Thanks to Helga Helmke of Greenpeace Hamburg for providing me with a copy of this difficult-to-track-down publication. A copy can also be found at the Bayer archive in Leverkusen.

and make sympathetic figures out of the activists, while also highlighting the environmental crimes of industry and the government's complicity in them.

This was exactly the kind of campaign that Greenpeace specialized in organizing and carrying out. Founded by a group of Canadian and American peace and environmental protestors in Vancouver in 1971, Greenpeace began life as an anti-nuclear organization which specialized in high-profile actions designed to garner a maximum degree of media exposure.³¹ In the mid-1970s, it broadened its campaigns and began to stage spectacular protests against whaling, with activists risking their lives by positioning themselves between harpoon boats and fleeing pods of sperm whales. By the late 1970s, the new branches in the U.K., France and the Netherlands had begun to organize campaigns against the dumping of nuclear waste in the Atlantic Ocean. Activists would pull up to a fast-moving vessel and position themselves underneath the chute from which barrels of highly contaminated nuclear waste were being released, thereby forcing the workers to either halt their dumping or risk injuring or killing the activists. In May 1980, a group of Dutch Greenpeacers spent three days blockading a Kronos Titan waste disposal ship in the Rotterdam Harbor. Up to this time, there was still no Greenpeace group in Germany. However, the Rotterdam action was reported in the German press and several BBU groups were immediately inspired to replicate it. Harald Zindler, an environmental activist from Hamburg who was working closely with Heinz Oestmann and the Altenwerder fishermen, not only intended to replicate this action, but was also determined to set up a Greenpeace branch in West Germany. Along with his girlfriend, the environmental and social activist, Monika Griefahn, Zindler contacted the Greenpeace group in the Netherlands and discussed the prospect of organizing a Greenpeace action in North Germany, specifically against the chemical industries they felt were most responsible for polluting Germany's major rivers. The Dutch group had also been contacted by various BIs, such as the *Arbeitskreis Chemische Industrie* in Cologne and the *Wuppertaler Bürgerinitiative gegen Bayer-Umweltgefährdung*, so that very soon a number of groups along the Elbe and the Rhine had decided to simultaneously stage a series of Greenpeace-style protests throughout West Germany.³²

In addition to the groups mentioned in the preceding paragraph, several other BIs also joined in planning the anti-chemical industry protest, which was set for October 13, 1980. Included among them were the *Leverkusener Bürgerinitiative gegen Umweltgefährdung*, the *Aktionsgemeinschaft »Rettet den Rhein,«* the *Bürgerinitiative Umweltschutz Unterelbe*, the *Arbeitskreis Umweltschutz Brunsbüttel*, and Heinz Oestmann's *Fischverein Altenwerder*. On a cold, damp mid-October morning, Zindler and Griefahn's new Hamburg-based Greenpeace group launched a number of inflatable rescue boats into the Weser River in Nordenham, and, as daylight broke, tied themselves to the bow and rudder of a Kronos Titan dumping ship. In Leverkusen, the Cologne-based *Arbeitskreis Chemische Industrie*, along with several other local BIs, conducted a similar operation against both Kronos Titan and Bayer, while in Brunsbüttel on the lower Elbe, Heinz Oestmann and a group of fishermen dumped one ton of tumor-riddled fish at the front door of the Bayer chemical works. Similarly, in Hamburg, another group of protestors dumped several wheelbarrow loads of sick fish on the front steps of the German Hydrographic Institute. The press coverage of the event was widespread and generally sympathetic to the Greenpeace and BI activists. As *Der Spiegel* reported, »the Greenpeace action made clear to everyone what until that time had mostly been debated among biologists, fishermen, and environmental activists: that harmful pollutants from industry and the

³¹ Zelko, »Making Greenpeace: The Development of Direct Action Environmentalism in British Columbia,« *BC Studies*, Summer/Autumn, 2004.

³² Author's interview with Zindler and Monika Griefahn (Berlin, 23/10/1999); *Arbeitskreis Chemische Industrie, Blockade Illustrierte*, p.3.

general community are increasingly threatening the environment of the North German coast, thereby creating an ecological crisis in the North Sea.«³³

There is a common perception that the modern environmental movement, as represented by the BIs and Greenpeace, arrived rather late in Germany, but when it did, Germans embraced it like few others. The recent history of the *Umweltbewegung* in Hamburg and the lower Elbe region appears to bear this out. The Greenpeace action of October, 1980, opened the floodgates, and soon dozens of similar actions began to take place throughout the Bundesrepublik. The liberal and left-leaning media gave such protests a great deal of sympathetic coverage, and while the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine* tended to adopt a tone of haughty cynicism, the right-wing populist *Bild Zeitung*, Germany's largest circulation daily, celebrated Greenpeace activists as *Umwelthelden*. Since many of the actions involved dramatic stunts, they provided excellent fodder for television news programs, which covered them extensively. Within a few months of the simultaneous action on the Elbe, Weser, and Rhine, thousands of people from all walks of life joined in the massive Elbe blockade described in the opening paragraph. *Der Spiegel* reported that in addition to the environmental groups, the participants in this action came from a diverse array of backgrounds, »from young Christian Democrats to the Communist Party, from fishermen to the posh members of the Hamburg Sailing Club.«³⁴ The pent up anger and frustration that had built up in the area throughout the 1970s as a result of the massive industrial expansion, the resulting pollution, and the failure of regulatory agencies to protect the environment, had finally found an outlet.

It is possible that German environmentalists may have developed a vibrant environmental protest culture even without Greenpeace's arrival on the scene in 1980. Nevertheless, the fact that Greenpeace possessed a ready-made tool kit for direct action meant that they were a perfect »fit« for an emerging *Umweltschutz* movement that was struggling to make itself heard and whose frustrations tempted some to resort to the kind of tactics, such as those used in Brokdorf, that would alienate large sections of the general public. Greenpeace, for its part, found a perfect niche in the Hamburg area, where its expertise in organizing protests on rivers and seas proved to be a major advantage. The timing could hardly have been better: just as Greenpeace International's leader, David McTaggart, was looking to take advantage of the potentially huge and relatively untapped West Germany environmental »market,« a group of activists were searching for exactly the kinds of tactics and skills that Greenpeace was able to offer. Within a few short years, Greenpeace became the wealthiest and most high profile environmental group in the Federal Republic, and by the beginning of the 1990s, the German branch was the largest within the Greenpeace International family.

Although there are many details of this history that are specific to West Germany, the broader story appears in various guises throughout liberal democracies in the postwar era. A powerful and opportunistic state attempts to implement a massive development scheme. As the environmental and social implications become clear, a protest movement emerges. In the end, development proceeds, but not to the extent that the original plans had called for. In West Germany, opposition emerged in the form of various citizens' initiatives and protesting fishermen. The entry of Greenpeace and the rise of the Green Party solidified this opposition, providing it with greater visibility and political clout. To be sure, the Lower Elbe region was greatly transformed and the area's waters, for a time, were heavily polluted. But the development never reached the level that state planners had envisioned. For example, only three of the seven nuclear power plants were ever built, and far fewer industries occupy the banks of the Lower Elbe than planners had originally hoped. Water quality, too, has gradually improved. The story is a good example of the limitations that high modernist development schemes

³³ *Der Spiegel*, 20/10/1980. Virtually all of Germany's major newspapers reported the event. For a view from the participants' perspective, see *Blockade Illustrierte*.

³⁴ *Der Spiegel*, 25/5/1981, p.52.

can encounter in vibrant democracies, as well as illustrating how such schemes were instrumental in giving rise to new forms of direct action environmentalism in the latter part of the 20th century. In that sense, it also illustrates the development of what Michael Bess refers to as a »light-green society.« In Bess's words, such a society is one in which the »gradual commingling, over several decades, of . . . two antagonistic ideological currents—the greens and the technological enthusiasts—[produced] something new: the partial greening of the mainstream, in which neither side emerged wholly satisfied, nor utterly dismayed, but in which a whole new complex of discourses and institutions nonetheless came into being.«³⁵

As for the Elbe itself: initially there was little improvement in the river's ecology. The best one could say was that the situation had stabilized. Bureaucratic inertia and the effluent emerging from the death throes of East German industry prevented meaningful environmental progress from occurring until the early 1990s. By 1997, however, the Hamburg Department of Environment was happy to report a significant improvement in the Elbe's condition, awarding it a water quality rating of 4 (critically contaminated), which was down two notches from the »very heavily polluted« grade which the river had received throughout the 1980s. The federal environmental ministry even went so far as to proclaim, with considerable exaggeration, that the Elbe was »once more, one of Germany's sparkling beautiful assets.«³⁶ Hyperbole aside, however, there is little doubt that the river has improved considerably since the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, it remains very much a »working river,« and efforts to strike a balance between the needs of industry and the river's ecological health will continue to be a source of tension between various interest groups for the foreseeable future.

SAŽETAK

Snažno širenje hamburške riječne luke nakon 2.svjetskog rata, te pripadajuće industrije, dovelo je do ogromnih posljedica na rijeku Elbu i njezin okoliš, uključujući i sam grad Hamburg. Unatoč usvajanju i primjeni brojnih tehnologija za snižavanje i smanjenje razine onečišćenja, golemi riječni promet i brojne industrije uz riječnu obalu Elbe, dovele su do razarajućih i štetnih učinaka na samu rijeku. Do sedamdesetih godina 20.stoljeća, ribari su sve češće izlovljavali deformiranu, mutiranu ribu, a zdravstvene vlasti upozoravale protiv konzumacije riječnih i morskih plodova riječne delte. Plivanje je postalo nezamislivo.

Kao odgovor na uništavanje i propadanje okoliša, lokalne su vlasti pokušale s melioracijom, kroz brojne tehnološke postupke, ali su njihovi naponi unazađeni različitim industrijama, njihovim lobistima u državnoj upravi i radničkim sindikatima. Nesposobnost lokalne uprave da se bori protiv zagađenja rijeke Elbe i njezinog okoliša, dovelo je do formiranja lokalnih ekoloških saveza koji su svoje djelovanje usmjerili kroz politički pritisak na industrije i lokalne vlasti u Hamburgu. Grupa lokalnih riječnih ribara, znanstvenika i ekoloških aktivista započela je s brojnim protestnim aktivnostima sedamdesetih godina 20. stoljeća, od lobiranja kod političara do različitih oblika nenasilnog izravnog djelovanja, kao npr. blokade luke, vješanja upozoravajućih plakata na tvorničke dimnjake, prosipanja buradi s prljavom vodom i od zagađenja deformiranom ribom pred sjedištima zdravstvenih i sanitarnih inspekcija, te centralama industrija, koje su aktivisti krivili za zagađenje. Autor zahvaljuje Fondaciji »Gerda Henkel Stiftung« za financiranje istraživanja koje je korišteno u ovom članku.

³⁵ Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.4.

³⁶ Hamburg Umweltbehörde, *Wassergütemessnetz Hamburg: Biologisches Fühwarnsystem, Elbe und Nebengewässer* (Hamburg, 1997), p.3; Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety, *Common Ground*, 1/1997, p.5.



Fig. 1

The Elbe near its headwaters in the Krkonoše Mountains on the Czech-Polish border



Fig. 2

The Elbe in Hamburg

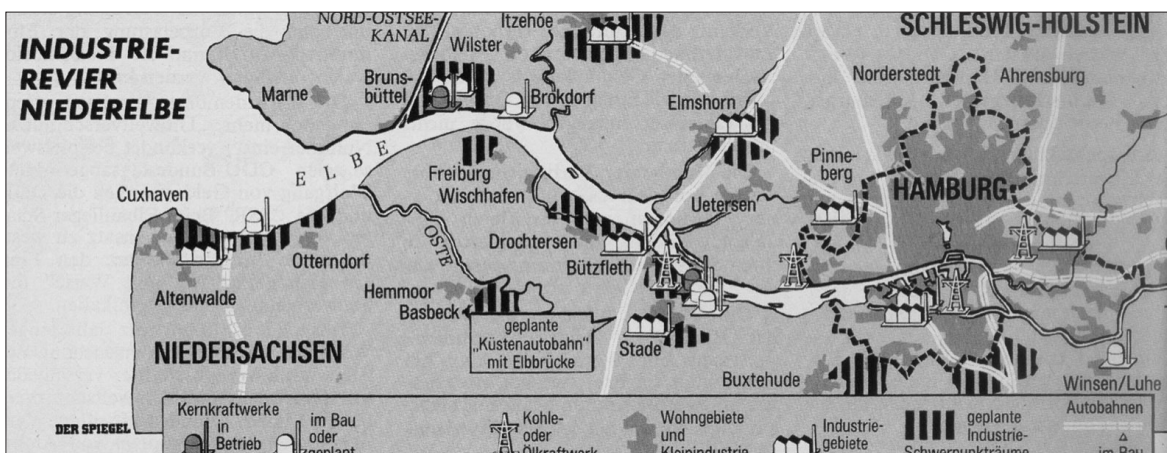


Fig. 3

Hamburg and the Lower Elbe with proposed industrial sites marked



Fig. 4
The village of Altenwerder
in the early 1960s



Fig. 5
Altenwerder in the 1980s



Fig. 6
Violent anti-nuclear protests
in Brokdorf



Fig. 7
Greenpeace activists protest nuclear waste dumping in the North Sea in 1978.



Fig. 8
Harald Zindler, a protest leader in Hamburg and one of the founders of Greenpeace Germany



Fig. 9
Heinz Oestmann, a fisherman who was among the protest leaders



Fig. 10
Protestors dumped fish on the steps of the German Hydrographic Institute



Fig. 11
Large protest on the Elbe in
Hamburg, 1981



Fig. 12
The first protest by
Greenpeace Germany in
Nordenham, 1980.

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Ivana Lučića 3, HR - 10000 Zagreb
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Adresa uredništva / Mailing adress:

Hrvoje Petrić (urednik)
Odsjek za povijest, Filozofski fakultet
Ivana Lučića 3, HR-10000 Zagreb
e-mail: h.petric@ffzg.hr
ili Vinka Vošickog 5, HR-48000 Koprivnica

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