

# Debate on a Petition to Save the Siebengebirge Mountains (1887)

## Abstract

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As railways and increased leisure time brought millions of Germans into the countryside to enjoy its natural, aesthetic, and historical treasures, protests inevitably arose that mass tourism was spoiling some of Germany's natural landmarks. The local Association for Saving the Siebengebirge [Verein zur Rettung des Siebengebirges] was formed in May 1886 to call attention to the fact that leaders of the nearby stone-quarry industry were ignoring their pleas to protect "this charming little piece of German soil." The issue was complex because the mining operation produced important revenues for Rhenish authorities, but in this document—a report from the Petition Committee of the Prussian Landtag on its deliberations—we can read how passionately the petitioners stated their case.

## Source

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### Fifth Report by the Petitions Committee.

Reporter:

MP Olzem.

The Petitions Committee discussed this petition on April 22, 1887 in the presence of Privy Chief Counselor [Geheimer Oberregierungsrat] Braunbehren representing the Minister of the Interior, District Forestry Superintendent [Landforstmeister] Janisch representing the Minister for Agriculture, Demesnes, and Forests, and Privy Mining Counselor [Geheimer Bergrath] Eskens representing the Minister of Public Works.

[...]

The petition reads as follows:

Year after year the well justified complaints about the progressing devastation of the much-praised, beautiful mountains and ridges in the Rhine valley increase. From Mount Rochus above Bingen down to the Finkenbergrücken across the river from Bonn countless stone quarries already spoil the beautiful picture of the landscape. With the disfigurement of the mountain ranges the wonderful magic and the incomparable loveliness of our beautiful Rhenish homeland continues to fade.

Especially the uniquely beautiful Siebengebirge mountains are currently at risk.

More than fifty years ago the treasury acquired the Drachenfels mountain, thus saving it and its legendary castle ruin from the threat of demolition. The adjacent Wolkenburg is already so wrecked by the trachyte quarries on its southern side that this once gorgeous mountain, when seen from Rolandseck, presents a ghastly picture.

Of the remaining major hilltops in the Siebengebirge mountains, the magnificent Oelberg mountain surpassing all other heights and the splendid Petersberg mountain located in the foreground right on the Rhine now also are in the most immediate danger of being demolished and ravaged for their basalt rock. For both mountains the threat is imminent.

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The Siebengebirge with its wonderful and uniquely beautiful mountain ridges draws many thousands of visitors to this part of the Rhine every year, and it is mostly to this tourism that the numerous surrounding towns owe their flourishing prosperity. For this reason alone it seems highly necessary to protect the endangered hilltops of the Siebengebirge before it is too late.

The corporative administration of the Rhine Province and its provincial Diet did not honor the general wish and our specific request to take the initiative in protecting and saving the Siebengebirge, this pearl of the Rhineland. Therefore we now turn to the House of Delegates with our appeal for help. For further information we humbly refer to the two brochures enclosed.

We refrain from formulating our wishes and hopes in special applications since we believe that the House of Delegates is better able than us to judge which means and ways are the most suitable to reach the desired goal. We limit ourselves to this request:

May it please the House of Delegates to present the appropriate applications for both the protection of particularly beautiful spots in the landscape in general as well as for saving the endangered hilltops in the Siebengebirge specifically to the Royal Prussian state government or at least to deliver our petition to it for fair consideration.

Enclosed with the petition are two publications, the first is entitled *Zur Rettung des Siebengebirges*. Herausgegeben vom Verein zur Rettung des Siebengebirges. Mit fünf lithographirten Tafeln in Tondruck. Bonn 1886. Verlag von A. Henry [*Saving the Siebengebirge*. Published by the Association for Saving the Siebengebirge. With five lithograph illustrations printed on a colored surface. Bonn 1886. A. Henry, publisher], the second is entitled *Zur Rettung des Siebengebirges II. Eine Rechtfertigungsschrift*. Herausgegeben von dem Vorstande des Vereins zur Rettung des Siebengebirges. Bonn 1887. Verlag von A. Henry [*Saving the Siebengebirge II. A Justification*. Published by the board of the Association for Saving the Siebengebirge. Bonn 1887. A. Henry, publisher]. According to the rapporteur's communications, the contents of these are as follows:

First they attempt to describe the character of the landscape and the beauty of the Siebengebirge. Among the many and much-praised beauties of the banks of the river Rhine, the Siebengebirge was unsurpassed and unique in its character; its hilltops were concentrated in a small area of less than one square mile, a miniature high mountain range. In line with its geological origins, they all took manifold shapes, the basalt knolls of the Oelberg, Petersberg, and Nonnenstromberg as well as the proud dolerite knoll of the Löwbenburg in soft curving lines, while the trachyte mountains Lohrberg, Wolkenberg, Drachenfels were jagged and craggy. This produced a wonderful alternation of lines, which joined or intersected in always new and captivating ways depending on the direction from which one approaches the mountains. Yet however variable and different the mountains presented themselves from all sides, the views one could enjoy from its heights, both the minor and major ones, were even more manifold by far. One was astonished to behold so many constantly changing views, one more captivating than the other, on such a short route, now a great panorama, now lovely framed vistas of the wooded valleys. Such an abundance of natural beauty concentrated in such a small area was not to be found anywhere else in the entire Rhine region and perhaps in all of Germany. The petitioners claim that the Siebengebirge was one of the most sacred and valuable assets of the nation and that it was a national matter to preserve it in its woodland magic and in the undiminished beauty of its mountain shapes. Everyone had a right to the beauty of the Siebengebirge, albeit an ideal one, but who wanted to deny that the ideal assets of our people are as valuable and as deserving of general protection as the material ones. Due to its beauty the Siebengebirge also was of material value to the entire surrounding area. It was the area's scenic beauties which lured countless visitors, and the flourishing prosperity of the adjoining towns was based primarily on tourism. Therefore serious economic interests certainly also demanded the preservation of the Siebengebirge's scenic beauties. Yet these scenic beauties were threatened by great and serious danger.

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Next they attempt to illustrate the facts of the Siebengebirge's progressing devastation with the help of the lithographed illustrations printed on colored paper that have been enclosed with the petition.

The Siebengebirge was in danger of being permanently destroyed by the stone quarrying industry. The number of quarrying operations and the workers employed by them was relatively small; in addition, quarrying was a truly destructive exploitation that quickly reached its natural end once a quarry was exhausted, which happens quickly these days. It was a temporary profit while barren, worthless detritus and bare rock faces remained; once a mountain had been exploited by the quarrying industry, it was and always remained a sad heap of rubble, a wasteland. If the majority of the Siebengebirge fell victim to quarrying, its beauties would be irretrievably lost, and with it the visits to these mountains and the area's prosperity. This sad prospect was not in the distant future; the number of quarries increased in a concerning manner every year.

[...]

In order to save the Siebengebirge the petitioners primarily refer to state support. Both in ideal and material terms, the preservation of a large and the most beautiful part of the most beautiful province in the entire state seemed in the general interest. Just as the Drachenfels was once acquired with state funds, so the other main hills, too, would have to be purchased with state funds. The Drachenfels, the Löwenberg, and the north side of the Oelberg belonged to the treasury, thus what remained was to provide for the Petersberg and the Oelberg. The use of eminent domain was sufficient to enable the necessary acquisitions. Should this not be the case, however, it could not be too difficult to obtain the consent of the legislative entities for a legal reform regarding the preservation of particular scenic beauties. Historically and art historically significant monuments were already protected by the state, and a mountain range such as the Siebengebirge certainly also bore a historical character by giving the area a particular imprint, a unique landscape that had always been in the closest relationship to the customs and nature of its inhabitants. To preserve those instead of wiping them out seemed just as important as the preservation of ancient monuments which the state was so eager to protect and preserve.

Secondly, the petitioners also hope for help from the Rhenish provincial administration, which needed to suspend its quarrying operations on the Petersberg completely and take all necessary steps to save the Siebengebirge.

In the summer of 1886 the petitioners had encouraged the establishment of an association to save the Siebengebirge, and it resulted in much agreement and many people joining, so that the association soon counted thousands of members. The association met with support from many sides and sympathetic declarations for its cause were made. Those who agreed with the association's goals and decided to support them were:

The board of the Verschönerungsverein für das Siebengebirge [Beautification Society for the Siebengebirge],

The Historical Society for the Lower Rhine,

The Society of Rhenish Friends of Antiquity,

The assembly of Bonn city councilors,

The Königswinter municipal council,

The Honnef mayor's office,

The Godesberg municipal authority.

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The position taken by the Historical Society for the Lower Rhine in Bonn is significant here. The society's chairman believed the question whether the cause of the Association for Saving the Siebengebirge fell within the jurisdiction of the Historical Society must be answered in the affirmative because history, myth, and legend were more intimately connected to the Siebengebirge than with any other point in the Rhineland and not a small number of historic monuments were to be found in its area. He expressed the concern that a visitor who read Lord Byron's famous stanzas praising the Siebengebirge in a travel guide might feel moved to harsher and perhaps more justified complaints than those raised by so many sides now against the destruction of Medieval Rome. The Association for Saving the Siebengebirge initially focused its activities on saving the Petersberg and the Oelberg and to this end it appealed to the Rhenish Provincial Diet requesting that it:

1. decide that the Petersberg quarry facing the Rhine which belonged to the province was closed immediately and completely;
2. authorize and instruct the administrative council to immediately begin negotiations with the proprietors of the privately operated quarries on Petersberg and Oelberg in order to acquire them, to purchase the quarries or initiate an expropriation procedure.

The Provincial Diet voted with a majority of all but three votes to reject the petition and return to its usual business, considering:

that the closure of the stone quarry in question would severely hurt the interests of the provincial roadways administration while no practical goal could be achieved by it as long as the other quarries that diminished the beauty of the landscape far more, notably at Wolkenburg, on Stenzelberg, Lohrberg, and Oelberg, were closed at the same time and the opening of new quarries there was prevented; furthermore that the acquisition of all privately owned quarries in the Siebengebirge requested by the petitioners, be it by way of a voluntary sale, be it by way of expropriation cannot be considered for that reason alone that the province does not have the necessary funds at its disposal since the additional surplus cannot be used for the abovementioned purpose and did not even suffice for fulfilling the obligations that come with it, and that the raising of a tax for the purchase of quarries in the Siebengebirge in order to close them was neither legal nor called for under present circumstances;

finally, that it could not be the task of the Provincial Diet to provide the Association for Saving the Siebengebirge with means and ways to achieve its goals.

After receiving this rejection as a reply, the petitioners submitted their petition to the House of Delegates.

After presenting the petition's content, its basic justification, and the petitioner's abovementioned course of action thus far, the rapporteur first remarked that the petitioners' description of the characteristic landscape, the beauty, the ideal and material value of the Siebengebirge must be recognized as true, and that anyone who knew the Siebengebirge could only agree with this description; the Siebengebirge was the Rhineland's pride and most beautiful adornment. Therefore the question could only be whether the petitioner's claim that quarrying operations threatened to demolish the hilltops of the Siebengebirge and damage its scenic beauty was warranted and if that was the case, whether the petitioners' course of action was justified and its suggestions for saving the Siebengebirge were suitable?

Regarding the question whether quarrying operations demolish the hilltops of the Siebengebirge and damage its scenic beauty, the rapporteur believes there can be no doubt that the increasing exploitation of the Siebengebirge must diminish the overall character of its landscape because there was a great threat to the existence of the Siebengebirge. A crag that rises above a green forest was not a defacement

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of the landscape, but when crag sat next to crag and quarry next to quarry, the desolate waste heaps of those quarries must create the impression of a wasteland and of devastation and change the character of the landscape. The ash grey, extensive waste heaps must throw an ugly shadow over a cheerful region and spoil the landscape. It was true that only those quarries that assaulted the mountains from the exterior were a threat since the quarries operating underground did not alter the appearance and shape of the mountains. The Siebengebirge could not be razed entirely either, and its romantic character might never be completely destroyed by quarrying, but if the destruction of the Siebengebirge progressed as it had in recent years, the defacement of this mountain range was merely a question of time. The threat was all the greater since the Siebengebirge was not made up of continuous ridges, but of single hilltops whose alteration and defacement occurred much quicker than that of the bulk of a mountain. Therefore quarries located just below the hilltop were the most dangerous while those in the valley could not do much harm. The petitioners' drastic depiction of the ravages in the Siebengebirge must be considered well-founded based on the facts they cite. Due to technological progress and our fast means of transportation today, the exploitation by quarrying had increased enormously in recent years; dynamite and powder continuously expanded their destructive work and the exploitation of mountains was carried out on an ever larger scale. The progressive exploitation had increasingly taken hold of those mountains which had thus far been relatively spared. The fact that most recently quarries had become prevalent on the Petersberg and Oelberg as well could not be denied and it gave reason to fear that the incessant work of destruction, whose effects are clearly discernable even from a distance, would deliver these mountains to the same fate as the Wolkenburg, which has completely lost its former shape. Anyone who returned to the Siebengebirge after a longer period of time was astonished at the progressing ravages caused by quarrying. The ridge stretching from the Siebengebirge to Basel had also suffered considerably, as one could see from Bonn. Nor could anyone deny the threat to the Siebengebirge in face of the effects of quarrying, even the Rhenish provincial administration had admitted that the quarries had a defacing effect, only it claimed that other quarries had an even more defacing effect than the provincial quarry at Petersberg. The fate of the Wolkenburg, which was completely wrecked, the fate of the Stephanshügel near Limburg of which nothing is left but a barren block of stone, and especially the fate of Saxon Switzerland must eliminate any doubts about the dangerous effects of quarrying for the Siebengebirge.

With regard to the petitioners' previous course of action the rapporteur emphasizes that one had to acknowledge that their objective to protect the Siebengebirge from destruction was indeed a noble one and that those who had actively worked on this matter to promote the common good deserved nothing but gratitude and recognition. Whether the effort as it is expressed in the petition to the Rhenish Provincial Diet was suited to reach its goal of protecting the Siebengebirge from destruction seemed doubtful though. Since the effort had mainly been directed against the provincial quarry on the Petersberg's Rhine-facing side, it gave the impression of one-sidedness; in accordance with its goal, the effort must be grounded on a much broader general basis. The significance of the reasons given in the negative ruling by the Provincial Diet, according to which the closing down of the province-owned quarry on Petersberg seriously hurt the interests of the provincial roadways administration and no practical goal was reached by ceasing quarrying operations on Petersberg if the other quarries in the Siebengebirge that diminished the area beauty far more, notably at Wolkenburg, on Stenzelberg, Lohrberg, and on Oelberg, were not also closed down at the same time, cannot be denied. The provincial administration claims that a quarry located about a mile away from the Rhine would cost the province about 150,000 marks more annually and that sourcing basalt from the most conveniently located quarry in the Eifel region would amount to an additional expenditure of 250,000 marks annually, furthermore that the provincial quarry was an indispensable price regulator, which is why the province had acquired the quarry on Petersberg for 75,000 marks and that the provincial administration would have acted against the public interest if it had not seized the opportunity to acquire its own basalt quarry. In the provincial administration's view, the province could not be burdened with making the financial sacrifices necessary to save the Siebengebirge at the expense of the province's tax payers alone, and neither did it

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make sense for the province to suspend its quarrying operations while a neighboring owner began or continued quarrying operations in the same location in a much more ruthless manner. The provincial administration further stated that the provincial quarry covered only a negligible section of the Petersberg and was so distant from its peak that a defacement of the mountain by quarrying was impossible; furthermore the waste heaps below the quarry would be reforested, thus covering up the quarry's bare slopes, as photographs of the Petersberg commissioned by the provincial administration were meant to prove. While the petitioners refuted the provincial administration's explanations and assertions with the claim that if the administration were to procure its basalt from quarries near Linz, for example, and transported it from there to the Lower Rhine using the Rhine's cargo ships, the province could undoubtedly save a large sum of money every year and further that with the suspension of quarrying operations on the Petersberg's Rhine-facing side at least this side would be spared further ravages, that the attempt at reforesting waste heaps could not have any appreciable success, that the jealous competition between the many quarrying operations in the Rhineland had always been the best, most certain, and only true price regulator and would forever remain so. In light of these contradicting claims by the petitioners and the provincial administration it seemed impossible based on the materials presented to come to a final decision on the Provincial Diet's negative ruling on the petition submitted by the Association for Saving the Siebengebirge. On the one hand, the economic side of the question was of great importance for the Rhine Province, on the other hand, it must not be ignored that the provincial administration apparently viewed the matter differently than a private owner and that the inhabitants of the Rhine Province had a right to expect that the provincial administration, which was charged with protecting the overall real and ideal interests of the Rhine Province, would not remain inactive and indifferent in the long term. A private owner only needed to know his own interest, yet the provincial administration as owner of the mountain slopes had to keep the interest of the province in mind. It was self-evident that one could not request from a private owner to somehow show consideration for the beauty of the mountain landscape while the provincial administration itself defaced the very same landscape in a conspicuous spot for economic reasons.

[...]

As mentioned earlier, the petitioners had not named any means and ways for saving the Siebengebirge but only requested that the House of Delegates submit the relevant applications for the protection of especially scenic spots in general as well as for saving the endangered hilltops in the Siebengebirge in particular to the Royal State Government, yet the commission had no reason to discuss the application inasmuch as it addresses the protection of beautiful scenic spots in general since it lacked all justification, nor would it be able to submit specific applications for saving the Siebengebirge to the Royal State Government; instead it could merely decide to request the House of Delegates to send the petition to the Royal State Government for consideration.

[...]

The commissioner of the ministry of the interior stated: "The efforts made by the Association for Saving the Siebengebirge deserved much praise.

It had already been pointed out that the state, where quarrying operations had previously existed on its terrain – albeit it not in areas especially valuable for their scenic beauty – it would cease these. As far as the province was concerned, it had refused to close down its quarry on Petersberg out of serious economic considerations, yet the wishes represented by the petitioners had not remained entirely without effect among the province administration since it had decided to carry out its quarrying in a careful manner, notably by eliminating its barren waste heaps by reforesting them, which had already been begun successfully; government supervision could not very well expect the province to completely cease its quarrying operations and thus jeopardize its supply of road building materials, especially since private industry would carry out indiscriminate exploitation more than ever in that case. The state would

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only have effective means to fight the encroachment upon the Siebengebirge's natural beauty by private industry if it were able to purchase the entire area; yet that could hardly be seriously considered, and it would be perceived as an unjustified favoring of the Rhine Province in other parts of the country and give rise to wishes whose satisfaction would require incalculable sums. At any rate, the province was more closely concerned with such a procedure than the state as a whole, and the petitioners therefore would have to focus on bringing the provincial administration's interests closer to this idea; however, the most immediate area of the petitioners' agitation should be sought in the private realm. For all the sympathy for the praiseworthy efforts of the association, the state will not be able to take further action in the future. When it is suggested to pass police regulations for the abovementioned purpose, it must be said that the preservation or restoration of scenic beauty and other aesthetic goals can hardly be included among those matters subject to police regulations in any way.

[...]

During the subsequent discussion, everyone concurred that the petitioners' efforts were indeed commendable and deserved sympathy and goodwill. Several sides emphasized, however, that it was first and foremost the responsibility of the Rhine Province to protect the Siebengebirge from damage and that it had to make sacrifices to this end. One member suggested that the forestry administration take on the task of reforesting all disused quarries in the Siebengebirge. After several commission members pointed out that submitting the petition for consideration could only result in prompting the Royal state government to give the matter of the Siebengebirge its permanent attention while it was not meant to prevent the petitioners and the Rhine Province from helping themselves by raising funds for acquiring endangered spots, the deliberations were concluded.

In his closing remarks, the rapporteur emphasized that the petitioners' ideal effort to preserve the Siebengebirge in its beauty met with unanimous approval by the commission, that its request to refer the petition to the state government for consideration was not meant to prevent the Rhine Province from making its own efforts to keep the Siebengebirge intact; it was self-evident that the state could not be expected to make considerable financial sacrifices on behalf of the Rhine Province while neither the Rhenish provincial administration nor the immediately concerned municipalities or the private entities had actually explained their interests in this matter. Its application was intended to draw the Royal state government's attention, which had long been sympathetically directed to the matter, to this issue permanently and to prompt the state government to seriously consider the question whether police or legal measures were necessary for the protection of the Siebengebirge and which measures were suitable for preventing further ravages to the Siebengebirge. Only the care of state and provincial authorities in unison with the efforts of the affected Rhenish municipalities and the friends of the Siebengebirge could prevent the looming devastation in time and preserve the Siebengebirge in its great beauty and its wonderful shapes. The application's approval did not favor any private interest but recognized and encouraged the effort to promote the common welfare. If the state government actively picked up the issue and helped to steer the efforts to save the Siebengebirge on the right course, then there was hope that the Siebengebirge might be preserved for current and future generations in the shape in which it is dear and precious to Rhinelanders and all Germans. He requested that his application to this effect be approved.

The commission voted with a majority of 12 against 9 votes to ask in accordance with the rapporteur's request that:

*The House of Delegates express its agreement with the petitioners' efforts by deciding to "refer petition II no. 384 to the Royal state government for consideration."*

Berlin, April 22, 1887.

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The Commissioner for Petitions. V. Gliszczynski (Tost-Gleiwith), Chairman. Olzem, Rapporteur.

Source: *Anlagen zu den Stenographischen Berichten über die Verhandlungen des Hauses der Abgeordneten während der 2. Session der 16. Legislaturperiode*. 1887. Dritter Band. Berlin, 1887, pp. 2122–28.

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