

The Anti-Nuclear “Free Republic of Wendland” (May 30, 1980)

Abstract

In order to prevent the federal government from establishing a permanent nuclear waste facility outside the town of Gorleben in Lower Saxony, five thousand environmental activists “occupied” a piece of burnt forest and constructed a countercultural “Free Republic of Wendland” to dramatize their opposition.

Source

Watchful in Wooden Palaces: Anti-Nuclear Activists Offer Resistance in Gorleben’s Peace Village

The resistance opened up their kitchens and living rooms, stables and fields. Opponents of nuclear power from all over the world—writers, scientists, even Native American chiefs from Canada and the United States—are coming to Gorleben^[1] to learn from the people who are resisting here. A delegation of farmers from Larzac who are fighting the expansion of a military base in their country just participated in the International Farmers’ Meeting, which was organized by the Farmers’ Emergency Association and held in nearby Trebel.

The “Gorleben women” are known as far away as the United States: Rose Fenselau was asked by an anti-nuclear power initiative to travel to Chicago. She cannot accept the invitation because she has to take care of her husband and mother, both of whom are disabled, but she keeps receiving visitors from all over the world. Like many farms and weekend cottages in the Lüchow-Dannenberg area, Rose’s quaint little apartment in Vietze is constantly filled with guests.

[...]

The procession of demonstrators that stretched for kilometers over the field and forest paths from Trebel to Site 1004 was a hodgepodge of bundles, wheelbarrows, and horse-drawn carts, and looked wholly incompatible with any form of organization. But on the day after their “takeover” of the area (which escaped disruption by the police), thousands of people—citizens of the “Free Republic of Wendland,” as they call themselves—formed an anthill of activity, moving around in a way that defied outsiders’ comprehension.

Within only a few days an entire wooden city appeared on the “liberated” piece of land: a model of alternative half-timbering and “village politics.” Many of the original 5,000 squatters are starting to go home, but others are just arriving, gathering together in “affinity groups” from their hometowns. After the people who brought the nails had left, newcomers hammered them in. Fifty houses have been built so far—each of them unique. One has a gable that extends way up high; another is dug down into the ground. There’s a round house with a roof terrace and a wigwam with wall tapestries. And there’s a house for women and children that is heated by bottles filled with air and water: at nighttime, they radiate the warmth they absorbed from the sun during the day.

All of this is in the forest, where there is neither electricity nor water, only sandy paths. But nothing basic is lacking, not even for those accustomed to affluence. In the morning you wash yourself at the pump connected to the well. And people either go to the toilet alone or in groups of five: squat next to me in the wooden cabin (which is open to the front and back); read the *Tageszeitung* as I do, and otherwise just let

your legs hang down—with your pants around your ankles. Breakfast is as plentiful and healthy as it is in most communal households. If you need anything, ask the people next door. And anyone can eat anywhere, or at the counter of the kitchen house, where any stomach can be filled for two marks: soup, muesli, big open-faced sandwiches.

What meticulous housewife wouldn't enjoy seeing her "long-haired kid" separate the trash neatly into glass, compost, and non-organic waste? And the tourist who drives his caravan to the Adriatic and leaves his trail of plastic bags in the sand would have much to learn here about developing a concrete environmental consciousness.

Self-responsibility, self-discipline, self-organization—these are not new words in the leftist and ecology movements. And here on this squatted land they stand up particularly well. If there had been the slightest hint of authoritarian instruction, then this village would have never come into being—or it would have collapsed on account of contradictions that had not been discussed. But here you discuss your problems and concerns with your "affinity group," which sends a delegate to the speakers' council, whose decisions are then brought back to the groups for discussion before they take effect. That way, the people participate in and know about most of what's going on.

Differences have arisen on the issue of resistance in the event of their expected eviction by the police. Most people at the site were absolutely in favor of passive resistance—that is, letting themselves be carried off and watching as police bulldozers razed the circular village. A few people from the outskirts of the big city had picked up on some of the police's logic through frequent contact with these forces. They have trouble understanding why they should let the state authorities destroy the houses they built, the trees and flowers they planted, the precious models of alternative technology they created; why they should allow these constructive contributions to the resolution of energy and environmental problems be destroyed without even defending them. This standpoint, as dangerous and senseless as it might seem to the other squatters, is taken seriously. Because non-violence means dealing both with issues and each other.

Violence and passive resistance were also discussed during the religious service that Pastor Richter from Prezelle held on "1004." There were gentlemen in ironed knickerbocker pants squatting next to "freaks" in baggy t-shirts, ladies in traditional hunting attire next to women in "water-cannon-proof" leather, and after the pious prayer—"May God give us hope not to become resigned in the resistance we have started"—they talked about violence.

If a similar mix of people—landowners and welfare recipients, businesspeople and left-wing students—assembled elsewhere around such a subject, then the familiar terms of endearment ("establishment swine" and "rowdies," "reactionary pigs" and "chaotic anarchists") would be heard. But here, on the contrary, people—and there were well over a hundred of them—turned it into a kaffeeklatsch without ingesting the tension. People like Andreas Count of Bernsdorff, who also participated in the service, became acquainted with the anger of the big city eco-proletariat. And those who have been confronted with violence their whole lives, in the family, school, work, and on the street, were able to learn from the Lüchow-Dannenbergers that there are more imaginative ways to resist injustice and police dominance than just striking back.

Although they pushed through to the generally binding declaration of passive resistance, the risk of eviction—how could it be otherwise—continues to hang over the "Free Republic" like the sword of Damocles: Wrapped up in my sleeping bag, I am lying in one of numerous tents. Someone trips in the dark over one of my tent stakes, puts it back in, and quietly wishes me a "good night."

From the "friendship house" and other little wooden palaces, the sounds of singing and guitar-strumming make their way through the entire village to me. Half-awake, I can see them in front of me,

crowded around the fire, a little romance of a campfire mixed with the sparkling humor of people who have never given up—in their lives, the office, school, the company, college. I've turned around in the hubbub of circle-dancing and kicked up some dust so that it hangs in the starry night sky. From the strings and horns of a music group from the teacher's college in Berlin come roguish melodies, a mixture of folk and polka. Now I feel as warm as the vegetable bed that Peter Wollny, a farmer from Vietze, covered up today in order to protect it from the cold.

Suddenly fear startles and awakens me: "The cops are coming." Police troops surround our little village and start coming closer—heavily armed; convoys of police squad cars and bulldozers follow, and the song stops. In its place is the mechanical sound of a loudspeaker demanding that we disperse.

So what next? Nightmare or reality?

Whatever happens, experience says that the evictors and the armed men will get their way. They've already seen to it in advance.

"What the squatters are doing is itself violence—we are only reacting to it ... unfortunately," said the press spokesman of the police precinct of Lüchow, which is responsible for the "nuclear police." And all the media—*Tagesspiegel*, *Die Welt*, television, etc.—needs to do is mention a "fighting village" or insert a clause that somehow associates the squatters with "the so-called chaotic professional demonstrators and K-Groups ... that staged the bloody riot against the army in Bremen"—not even Meyer^[2] claims to know about a connection between Bremen and "1004"—and that's enough for the whole Left to be right back where they want it, and for the police presence that has swelled up over the last few years to find justification.

If the quails start squawking in Gorleben, it's not because they're breeding, but because they're frightened by the special border-police squad cars that thunder past the floodplains and the dykes of the Elbe on their way to the relief point at deep-drilling sites 1002 and 1003. And when the birch groves between the lonely farmsteads and the surrounding villages seem particularly green, it's not because spring is coming, but because behind them the border police convoys are driving by in camouflaged vehicles adapted to the surroundings.

[...]

At the start of the police action four years ago, the border police were still content to write down the license plate numbers of cars parked in front of the church with bumper stickers reading "Nuclear Power—No Thank You" while the drivers were inside at the service. Soon the police could get away with, for example, using a welding torch to cut down the lighting pole of a methane gas installation of the farmer Horst Wiese—after all, it might be used for a crime. Charges filed against the policeman who did it were dismissed on the grounds that he could not have known it was against the law.

Deaf Ears of Technocrats

The threat posed by the planned waste disposal plant, on the one hand, and the massive border guard, on the other, even brought people who had nothing against peace and order up to then to their feet. Women who had never worried about anything aside from their husbands and children left their kitchens and stepped up to the speaker's platform. They could no longer hold themselves back: "The arrogance of politicians who don't mind leaving the dangers of nuclear power to future generations is so shocking that it's simply beyond me," said Marianne von Alemann, a fifty-year-old housewife, as we sat for tea and cake in her elegant country home in Prezier. Two years ago, she and her invalid husband, a civil engineer by profession, moved from Düsseldorf to this county, in order finally to live a quiet life. And then they heard: a nuclear reprocessing plant is coming to their backyard.

[...]

The citizens' initiative has recently lost its nonprofit, public-service status. The only thing that serves the public is nuclear energy. And the occupation of the site, which many felt was the only possible form of political articulation in a world of deaf-eared technocrats, has been treated in the meantime by the federal interior ministry as more of a "matter of police discretion."

Fear, resignation, and attrition are the changing expressions of people in Gorleben: "Nothing but fighting, fighting, fighting and still, the nuclear plans are moving forward step by step. You give everything you have and then ..." (Rebecca Harms).

The only thing that offers hope is the occupation of the site itself. In the 1981 local elections (in which nuclear energy opponents want to run their own candidates), the occupation should contribute to a revision of the current local and county assembly resolutions, so that a rejection of the interim storage site can be pushed through.

The initial skepticism toward the—illegal—site occupation has been largely resolved. "1004" has become a kind of pilgrimage site. Even invalid veterans on crutches come and bring their "gifts": food, straw, wood, bread – often so much that it cannot be accepted. Even suitcases filled with medicine are brought to the first-aid house, "so you can treat your injuries if anything should happen when you are evicted."

Once, a pastor from Gartow was looking for one of his confirmation candidates, so that she could decorate the church. When he called her at home to ask where she was, her mother answered indignantly, "She's at 1004, right where she should be!"

NOTES

[1] Town in Lower Saxony where at first an interim and later a permanent storage for nuclear waste was supposed to be constructed in an abandoned salt mine—eds.

[2] Rolf Meyer, press speaker for the Deutsche Gesellschaft zum Bau und Betrieb von Endlagern (DBE), the company contracted by the German government in 1979 to construct and operate the German final repositories for radioactive waste—trans.

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