



Statewatch Analysis

Policing popular mass protests: The transport of nuclear waste at Gorleben, Germany

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In 1977 the village of Gorleben became a storage site for radioactive nuclear waste which is the target of regular protests - involving a large proportion of the village's population and a large police operation

Once a year the tiny rural village of Gorleben, located in the Wendland region of northern Germany, becomes the focus of the largest police operation in Europe. Demonstrators and activists attempt to stop the transportation of the plant's highly radioactive nuclear waste on route to a storage facility in the woods. The local population is vehemently opposed to the storage of nuclear waste for several reasons, but chief among their concerns is the potential for environmental pollution.

A large part of the village's population participates in the protests and blockades, which means that the authorities cannot argue that it is led by "outside agitators". However, "surrendering" to the protesters would mean that the state's nuclear energy program would come to a standstill. The waste-transport, nicknamed "castor" after the containers used to package the waste, has to be pushed through at all costs. Heavy-handed policing and infringement of civic rights therefore form an almost customary part of the programme. Demonstrators have become experienced in monitoring and exposing the behaviour of the police and informing activists of their rights.

The waste-transport operation in November 2010 was especially controversial because the federal government had recently permitted nuclear plants to operate for much longer than had initially been envisaged. The decision marked a shift in the position of the conservative ruling party, Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany, CDU), which had compromised on a phase out following the 2008 elections. In reaction to this decision more than 100,000 people demonstrated against nuclear energy in Berlin, and many protestors made clear their intention to join the protests in Gorleben soon after. Meanwhile another hotspot of protest developed in Stuttgart, where local inhabitants were opposing the demolition of their central train station and surrounding park. Despite using extreme force, police failed to disperse tens of thousands of demonstrators. [1]

The history of castor nuclear transport

In 1977 it was decided that Gorleben would become the site for what was called an "interim storage unit with possible permanent storage" for radioactive waste. Protests started immediately: the first demonstration on 12 March 1977 was attended by 20,000 people. The reason for selecting Gorleben was the existence of an underground 'stable salt dome' that could be used as a long-term storage space for all kinds of radioactive waste. This was what local inhabitants feared the most.

The overground interim storage unit has a limited capacity (the permit allows for 420 dry casks on site, which means that it is almost full, and the next shipment of waste might be the last). But once

the underground salt layer comes into use, the capacity to dump highly radioactive waste will be almost endless. The waste will be active for more than 200,000 years. There is widespread concern that this is not a secure way to manage nuclear waste. Experiments with comparable storage facilities elsewhere demonstrated that groundwater is easily contaminated, and that 'stable' salt layers are seldom completely stable, certainly not for 200,000 years.

Local inhabitants, farmers and anti-nuclear organisations tried to stop the scheme through legal means, but were unsuccessful. In 1980 the planned storage facilities were occupied by thousands of people who erected a village of huts and declared it to be a 'free republic'. After a month the occupation was evicted by a large number of police officers. It took until the mid 1990s to finish building the storage facility. Since then every waste transport has been met with massive protests and blockades. The waste comes by train from the French reprocessing plant in La Hague and is then moved onto trucks in the town of Dannenberg. From there it is driven the last 20 kilometers to the storage facility via a tiny road through the woods.

Demonstrators have used every imaginable strategy to try to stop these transports. Only by applying an army of police units, which use force and often illegal methods, has the German state been able to push the transports through. Scenes of high powered water canon aimed at peaceful elderly protesters sitting on the streets, or heavily armed riot police chasing children from the railway tracks, have become a common image of the Gorleben protests. Many people have been injured and one demonstrator in France died. Sebastian Briat lost his life while participating in a railway blockade near Avircourt in 2004. The train ignored warnings to stop in time, running him over.

"Schottern"

In 2010 demonstrators joined the call for a new form of protest, nicknamed 'Schottern' after the stones (*Schottersteine*) used to embed the rails. For its last 50 kilometers the nuclear waste train uses a single track rail line that is not being used by other trains. The call was to organize in affinity groups and execute an act of civil disobedience by removing the stones. The campaign was organised by 'post autonomous' organisations that had successfully arranged a mass blockade of the G8-summit in Heiligendamm in 2007 and a blockade of Germany's largest Nazi march in Dresden in 2009. Their strategy succeeded in involving large groups of people to participate in acts of civil disobedience. They explain the success of their mobilisations by the fact that they publically state that their actions:

"are not about fighting with the police, but about achieving our stated objective (stopping a Nazi march, or blockading a G8-summit). This commitment to transparency and measurability in turn has made it easier for more 'moderate' groups to get involved in forms of action that they might otherwise have shied away from: collective rule-breaking, civil disobedience, direct action. With these tactics, the movements in Germany mounted not only the effective blockades of the G8 in Heiligendamm in 2007, but also shut down Europe's biggest Nazi march in Dresden in February of this year. Not by fighting with the cops, but by simply making it possible for thousands of people to sit down in the street in a way that they felt comfortable with, and the police obviously felt uncomfortable just blasting them off the street (the keyword here is 'legitimacy')."

Some groups organised street blockades and local groups staged protests along the length of the train route. The train was delayed by more than 24 hours and on arriving at Luneburg - where it usually pauses before starting the last part of the journey to Dannenberg - it was met by tens of thousands of demonstrators preparing actions and demonstrations. They had also built seven different action camps along the route.

Business as usual, but with differences

The police strategy was comparable to previous operations, but with some remarkable differences. As usual the area was flooded with a huge number of police - some 16,000 - who occupied almost every village in the area. One of the disadvantages for the police is that this requires the use of a large number of vehicles and high mobility. But the roads are narrow and easily blocked by local

farmers with their tractors, who have become a symbol of the resistance. This caused the police constant problems. They could not mobilise their forces as required and often police officers could not be relieved on time. On some occasions police officers claimed to have been on active duty for 24 hours without relief. At one action camp individual policemen requested food from the activists' kitchen (which started a debate among activists over whether to comply or not).

The authorities' approach can be summed up by the expression "business as usual." They overturned regional regulations on the right to gather and demonstrate and handed power to another regional police authority: the Lüneburg *Polizeipräsidium*. Along the entire route (rail and road) a 50 meter area on both sides was declared a sterile zone where gathering and demonstrations were forbidden. Previously, the authorities had tried to expand this zone to 500 meters, but were defeated in court. Another annual legal battle is to obtain permits to organise protests or camps which, more often than not, are denied by local authorities.

The *Komitee für Grundrechte und Demokratie*, which regularly monitors civil rights infringements at demonstrations in Germany, had a team of observers in the area who reported a long list of 'unacceptable police actions.' [2] One of the complaints concerned the continual hindering of people trying to gain access to locations where they were permitted to gather. Transport was hampered throughout the area by police checking traffic, holding up cars or turning them back without legal reason. Local public transport, such as buses, was forced to take alternative routes and public transport between Lüneburg and Danneberg was paralysed. Another tool commonly used by police was the issuing of so called *Platzverweise* (Red Cards) to demonstrators who are then forced to identify themselves and are issued with an official warning and ordered to leave the area. If they are caught again they can be arrested, held and given a fine, regardless of whether they have committed an offence.

The *Komitee für Grundrechte und Demokratie*, among others, observe that the authorities make a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' demonstrators and use this as justification to apply violent and often illegal tactics against the latter. The Schotterers were identified as 'bad' demonstrators, despite explicitly calling for the police not to be targeted. Weeks before the transport took place, the minister of interior for Lower Saxony, Uwe Schünemann, stated that the authorities would deploy heavy enforcement against the Schottern-campaign [3]. Individuals who had signed-up to participate in the Schotter-actions received a message from the public prosecutor that an investigation was being initiated against them. This group originally consisted of 200 people, but after the news that they were being targeted for possible prosecution was made public, their number rapidly grew to more than 1,700.

During the transports thousands of "Schotterers," the majority of whom maintained a strictly non-violent approach towards the police, were generally met with aggressive tactics by police forces [4]. Pepper spray was frequently against demonstrators who tried to approach the railway track. They were also attacked by the police with batons, horses, dogs, tear gas, and water canon. The Schotter-campaigners claimed that more than 1,000 people were injured, mainly through the use of pepper spray and batons. The *Komitee für Grundrechte und Demokratie* recorded that the federal police used 2,190 containers of pepper spray. Police from other countries were also present during these operations, in uniform and armed. A French police officer was observed participating in attacks on demonstrators, as was a German police medic.

Other blockades

Elsewhere, a peaceful blockade of a railway track, involving at least 1,500 people, was held near the village of Hitzacker. During negotiations with the activists, police promised not to attack it and to carry out evictions using 'reasonable measures.' They said they would evict people by dragging them away, but that they would not have to identify themselves. In reality, the longer it took to remove the activists the more police mishandled them. They were then held in a gigantic 'kettle' of police vans on a meadow. People were held for hours in freezing weather. They were offered the opportunity to be moved to the "warm prisoners complex at Lüchow" if they identified themselves. One demonstrator was also severely injured when a police horse fell on her.

A similar story applies to the last blockade of the road near Gorleben organised by the explicitly nonviolent *X-Tausendmal Quer*. This group of a few thousand people, who had been occupying the road for more than two days, was initially approached by the police with relative courtesy. But after a short time (and especially when no media was present) coercion was used to make them leave; people's arms were twisted, others were beaten and thrown around. Elsewhere, at Laase, a protestor who had climbed a tree along the route was sprayed with pepper spray, causing him to fall and break one of his vertebrae. Police also launched raids on three farmhouses without search warrants and used drones to film demonstrators.

Footnotes

[1] *Germany Shocked by 'Disproportionate' Police Action in Stuttgart*

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,720735,00.html>

[2] *Komitee für Grundrechte und Demokratie, Informationen 5-6/2010 December 2010*

[3] *Castor-Transport: SPD kritisiert Innenminister*

<http://www.ndr.de/regional/niedersachsen/heide/gorleben535.html>

[4] See a registration of repression on the Schotter-website: <http://www.castor-schottern.org/aktuelle-infos/43-webseite/123-repression-gegen-castor-schottern-ein-ueberblick>

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