

# Katja Tempel



# “At least there was One Hour less Training for War”

**Blockades to disrupt operations—  
Nonviolent resistance against atomic  
weapons, nuclear waste transports  
and genetic engineering**

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**Katja Tempel**, born in 1963, has been associated with KURVE Wustrow since her youth. The midwife and social worker from the North-German Wendland has been active in the anti-Gorleben resistance movement for decades. In 2011, she initiated the campaign “gorleben365” which set up blockades in front of the nuclear waste repository for a whole year. Until today, Katja is organising similar events at the military airfield of Büchel in the Eifel hills, which stores nuclear weapons, or in the Altmark area of Brandenburg. Civil disobedience against injustice has been a principle of her whole life, and she has even gone to prison for this.



've grown up with the principle that we can only live well if all human beings have equal chances and minority rights are observed, too. Whenever this is not the case, there has to be resistance." For Katja Tempel, resistance is more than just protest to get one's opinions noticed in public. Rather, resistance implies interfering action and civil disobedience in order to disrupt the operations of opposed institutions, even if it might be for a short time only. "At least there was one hour less training for war", the activist from the North-German Wendland comments on her "go-in" at the military airfield Büchel in the West-German Eifel hills.

In line with the campaign "büchel65" in 2016, some 35 resistance organisations gathered for 65 days at this airbase which until today stores 20 atomic bombs of the United States Armed Forces. Repeatedly, routine operations were disrupted so severely that the nuclear weapons would not have been ready-to-use during those hours. Most spectacular was the following action: Notice had been given of a blockade in front of the well-guarded main gate only, but in an area further afield, activists managed to dismantle the connections between two fence sections. Carrying balloons and protest banners, they reached the runway without being observed and were only removed after they themselves informed the police and

military about their presence on army grounds. One of the leading organisers of this "go-in" was Katja's then 20-year-old daughter Clara who thus continued the family tradition of nonviolent resistance in the third generation.

All participating activists were charged with trespassing. They refused to pay the imposed fines and, instead, went to prison for several days. One of them was Clara Tempel. To demonstrate their readiness to be imprisoned, the activists presented their tooth brushes at the final rally of the "büchel65" campaign. Katja had already been in gaol for civil disobedience in the 1980s, once for 40 days and another time for ten days. She announced that she would now go to prison again rather than paying her fine of 30 daily rates. Three activists appealed to the German Supreme Court on constitutional grounds with the aim to end the storage of atomic weapons on German soil once and for all—which would be in line with international treaties.

Peaceful resistance has been an intrinsic part of Katja's whole life. Her parents Helga and Konrad Tempel, committed pacifists and Quakers, were co-founders of the German Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1960 and are closely connected to the international peace movement until this very day. At the age of 17, Katja first participated in



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the solemn vigil “Fasting for Peace”: For ten days, she and other activists camped without eating on the market square of her hometown Ahrensburg near Hamburg in order to protest against the NATO Double-Track Decision of December 1979, which increased the number of nuclear weapons on German soil. Together with her parents, she later took part in blockades of US military sites, particularly at Mutlangen in Southern Germany, to oppose the deployment of Pershing-II missiles.

More than 2,000 court cases in this context led to legal revisions with the result that nonviolent sit-ins are no longer classed as coercion under German law.

In the mid-1980s, Katja graduated in social pedagogy from the University of Bremen, years later she also trained as a midwife. After her studies, she went to India for a while where she met Narayan Desai, the son of Mahatma Gandhi’s personal secretary. His Institute for Total Revolution in Vecchi north of Mumbai has been a long-standing partner of KURVE Wustrow whose board member Katja became in 1985. Later, she was Educational Coordinator at this Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action and organised many training courses, especially to promote resistance against the transport of nuclear waste to Gorleben.

That’s where Katja played a leading role for decades. She was a founding member of the anti-nuclear initiative “x-tausendmal quer” (x thousand times obstructive) whose activists staged regular sit-ins across the roads towards the Gorleben site. In March 1997, as many as 9,000 people took part in a blockade of the loading crane—an outstanding success in Katja’s eyes. On behalf of “x-tausendmal quer” and in cooperation with KURVE Wustrow, she initiated “gorleben365” in 2011. During this campaign, di-



verse resistance groups staged daily blockades in front of the nuclear waste repository site throughout a whole year. KURVE Wustrow thus became visible again as a prominent actor in the anti-nuclear movement of the Wendland.

According to Katja, the continuing resistance contributed to the final decision of the German Parliament in June 2011 to phase out atomic energy for good. And Gorleben, where building works were repeatedly disrupted, is no longer an option for a potential long-term nuclear waste repository within Germany. All this might have been influenced by a multitude of factors, including the accident at the Japanese nuclear plant Fukushima. Still Katja is convinced that nonviolent resistance can bring about desirable changes. "We should never say people at the top will do what they like anyway. They can only do this, if we let them", she stresses. "We as activists are not powerless at all, as long as we join up with many other people to fight for a common cause together."

Another success for her was the occupation of an agricultural field in the Wendland on which genetically engineered maize of the meanwhile outlawed brand MON 810 of Monsanto was supposed to be grown. Katja and other activists blocked tractors, planted an alternative maize variety and pulled the few

remaining genetically altered plants out of the soil by hand. After two months, the involved farmer gave up, and the Wendland has remained free from genetically engineered produce ever since. "This is another example that nonviolent action can work", says Katja.

The principle of nonviolence does not stop her from being a fighter and breaking a superficial peace, as many of her blockades have shown. "For me, this isn't a contradiction at all, but a necessity in order to draw public attention to conflict situations", she stresses. "If keeping the peace is equalled to being quiet and doing nothing, I'll say no. However, nonviolence means that you never vilify your opponents and don't cause them any personal harm deliberately."