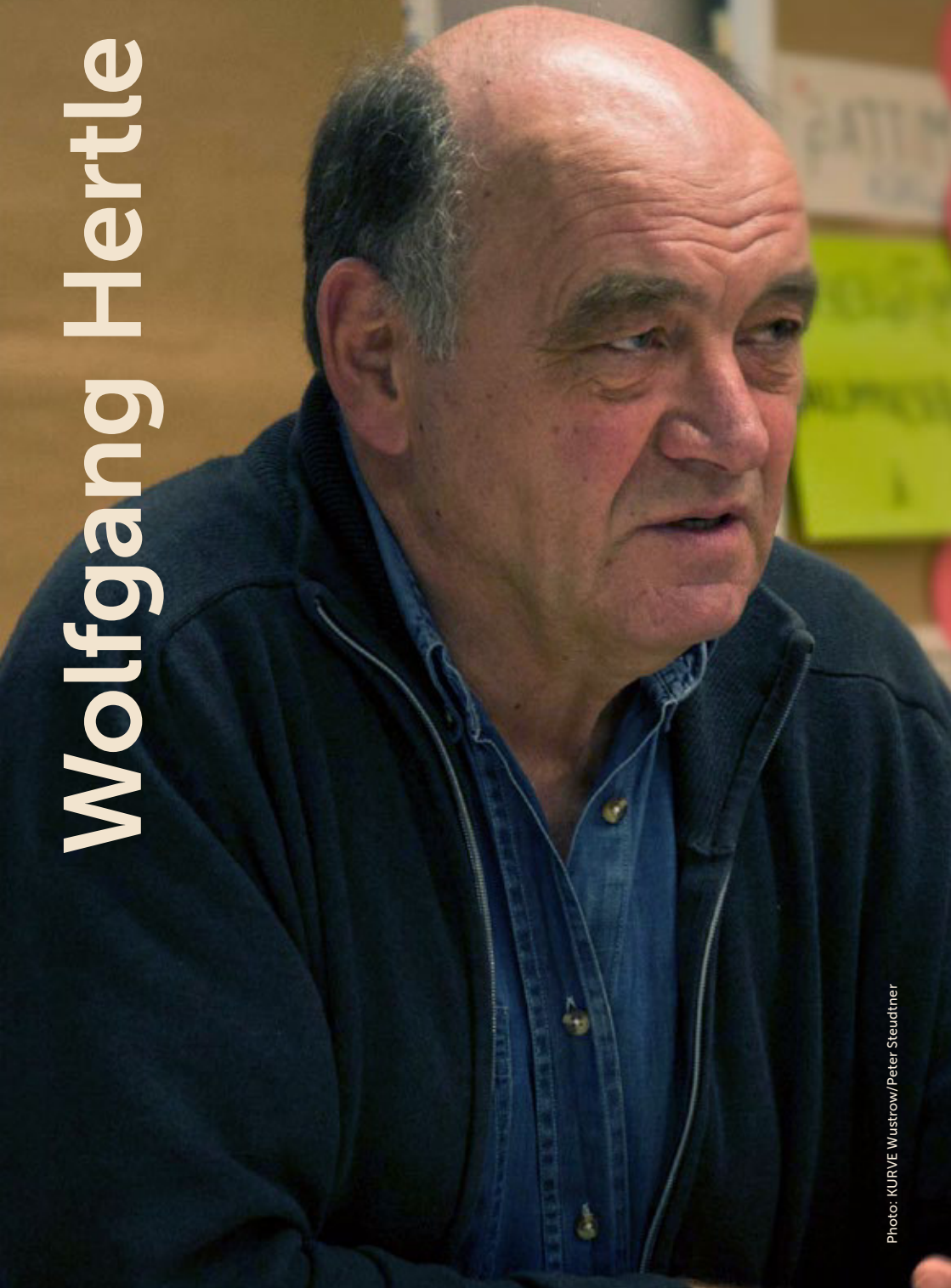


Wolfgang Hertle



Nonviolent Resistance with an International Dimension

**From Larzac in France to the North-German
Wendland—Exchange of experience as a catalyst
for successful action**

Wolfgang Hertle, born in 1946, is a founding member of KURVE Wustrow and became the first full-time employee of the new “Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action” in 1981, together with Margrit Albers. At that time, the political scientist had already been involved in nonviolent resistance against military facilities and nuclear power plants for about 15 years and had gained profound international experience in political action and training. Nowadays, Wolfgang is, amongst other things, campaigning for the rehabilitation of forced labourers at the arms corporation Rheinmetall during World War II and against the continuing production and export of weapons.

“We wanted to combine political education with nonviolent action in a region immediately affected by conflict.” That’s how Wolfgang Hertle explains the idea to found a “Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action” in the North-German Wendland four decades ago. It was triggered by the decision of the German Government in 1977 to make Gorleben the site for a nuclear waste repository. The opposing citizens’ group in the local town of Lüchow-Dannenberg asked for support from the wider anti-nuclear resistance movement, and Wolfgang was happy to take his long-term national and international experience in nonviolent action to the Wendland.

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The conscientious objector to military service because of Christian principles had gained this experience particularly in the 1970s on the Larzac in Southern France. On this plateau, local farmers and armament opponents protested against the planned extension of a military training ground for the French Armed Forces. At one stage, they occupied a farm and founded a so-called centre for nonviolent action and social defence. This peace centre “Le Cun” served Wolfgang as a model for the future KURVE Wustrow. He was associated with the Larzac resistance movement, which successfully prevented the extension of the local military area, for

several decades. He also wrote his PhD thesis about this struggle and has stayed in contact with activists in the region until today.

The experience gained in France proved very useful during the anti-nuclear protests in Wyhl at the Kaiserstuhl in the South-German State of Baden-Württemberg, as Wolfgang recalls. Plans for an atomic power plant at that site were eventually shelved in 1977 after massive resistance from local wine-growers and other activists as well as a court order to stop construction. “I suppose the success of our action can be measured by what could be prevented”, says Wolfgang. The later abandonment of plans for a nuclear reprocessing plant at Wackersdorf as well as a fast breeder reactor at Kalkar could also be ascribed to successful resistance, even when taking into account economic considerations by the nuclear industry. For Wolfgang, it seemed vital in this context to create effective networks amongst as many anti-nuclear groups as possible, as long as they were committed to the principle of nonviolence: “The exchange of experience is a key catalyst for successful action.”

Such an extensive exchange preceded the formation of KURVE Wustrow as well. Wolfgang contacted many groups of the ecology and peace movement active at that time in order to recruit members for the

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Supporting Association. One of the most important protest campaigns took place in May 1980 when the “Centre for Training and Networking in Nonviolent Action” was still in its infancies. Anti-nuclear activists occupied the building site section number 1004 in the forest of Gorleben and proclaimed the “Republic Free Wendland” on these premises. “This was one of the most intensive phases of our resistance”, Wolfgang remembers. “In our makeshift camp, tailor-made training courses in nonviolent action were conducted in order to convince even those activists who didn’t want to exclude violence categorically. At the same time, it was possible to raise larger national and international awareness for the Gorleben issue.”

When building works for the intermediate nuclear waste repository commenced in January 1982, Wolfgang and his fellow campaigners managed again to draw attention to themselves. They didn’t assemble at the building site where the police was waiting for them, but occupied a small strip of land at the border of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). This strip actually belonged to the GDR, but there were no fortifications like everywhere else. Neither the police nor a border patrol of the British Armed Forces dared to remove the demonstrators, since they were not allowed to step on GDR territory. Radio programmes and other media outlets reported extensively about this creative campaign.



Photo: KURVE Wustrow/Peter Steudtner

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About ten years later, Wolfgang was one of the protest organisers in the community of Wendisch Evern near Lüneburg, just outside the Wendland area. Activists set up a tented camp and occupied railway tracks to stop the trains with the Castor containers full of burnt-out nuclear fuel rods. The transport schedule was thus disrupted by four to five hours. "What was really crucial was the positive response of the villagers who initially were very skeptical", Wolfgang stresses. "They realised that we weren't brutal thugs like referred to in government propaganda. Eventually, they even offered us their houses to have a shower or stay overnight. And, most important, they set up a new anti-Castor initiative group."

There is no doubt for Wolfgang that only the principle of nonviolence had convinced most of the local population in Wendisch Evern as well as in the Wendland to join the anti-nuclear resistance movement. And KURVE Wustrow has played an important part with its related programmes for training and networking: "Broad support was certainly necessary, as nonviolent resistance requires a very long-term commitment in order to have a genuine impact."

Wolfgang, who in 1972 founded the magazine "Grasswurzelrevolution" (grass roots revolution), has upheld the principle of nonviolence for all

his life. At a young age already, he felt a leaning towards the teachings of Gandhi as well the American Civil Rights Movement of Martin Luther King and was also in touch with the War Resisters' International. In the various protest groups he got involved in, he has always demanded an unequivocal commitment to nonviolence. Not all activists were ready to embrace such a principle and rather wanted to keep up the option to use violence, if that seemed useful in a given situation.

Wolfgang, however, is convinced that such usefulness can only prevail for a very short time, if at all: "I go along with Gandhi who claimed that one always has to develop new methods of nonviolent resistance and exploit their full potential. That's the only way how resistance can be successful in the long run."