Networking local environmental groups in Germany: The rise and fall of the federal alliance of citizens' initiatives for environmental protection (BBU)

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Abstract:

From the mid-1970s well into the 1980s, the Federal Alliance of Citizens' Initiatives for Environmental Protection (BBU) was one of Germany's most visible and influential environmental organisations, an unusual achievement for a network of local organisations. Lacking strong competitors, it was able to become a central movement organisation for Germany's rapidly growing anti-nuclear power and environmental movements. However, after institutionalisation of environmental concerns robbed the movement of some of its impetus, competing social movement organisations appeared, and government subsidies ended, familiar problems of grass-roots networks, which had plagued the BBU from the beginning, intensified. The resulting downward spiral cost the BBU most of its members and its prominence.

Keywords: Environmentalism | Environmental organizations | Germany | Federal Alliance of Citizens' Initiatives for Environmental Protection | BBU

Article:

Local grass-roots groups play a significant role in environmental movements world-wide (Freudenberg & Steinsapir, 1992; Rootes,2003, Fischer & Boehnke, 2004), and they frequently form networks for information exchange, mutual support, co-ordination of effort, and participation in national politics (Kempf, 1984; Bullard, 2000; McNeish, 2000). Despite their advantages, such networks have limitations. By definition, grass-roots groups focus on local affairs, and they may resist diverting resources to a network. Moreover, they are usually underfunded, forcing networks to operate on a shoestring or solicit outside funds, which may come with strings attached. Finally, grass-roots activists are often committed to non-bureaucratic

local action and suspicious of networks that could limit local autonomy and become bureaucratised and oligarchical (Dalton, 1994; Dowie, 1995; Diani, 2003).

Attempts to build such networks, such as the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice in the USA or Alarm UK, report notable successes in supporting local crusades. Nevertheless, their existence has remained precarious, and no network has become a major player on the national environmental scene in the USA or UK (Dowie, 1995; McNeish, 2000; Shabecoff, 2000), suggesting the obstacles are simply too great. A network that did become influential at the national level would thus warrant close examination to see whether its success was due to innovations in structure or strategy or to unique factors in its external environment.

In this context, the case of Germany's Bundesverband Bürgerinitiaven Umweltschutz (BBU) (Federal Alliance of Citizens' Initiatives for Environmental Protection) deserves careful attention. Founded in 1972, the BBU quickly attained a membership of several hundred groups and became Germany's most visible environmental organisation. It played a key role in co-ordinating huge demonstrations, its leaders were widely cited, and it exerted significant political influence. Success, however, proved short-lived. By the end of the 1980s it had lost most of its members and influence.

The BBU attracted considerable attention from German social scientists (Guggenberger & Kempf, 1984; Brand *et al*., 1986; Leonhard, 1986), yet a systematic search located only two articles devoted exclusively to it (Kempf, 1984; Kazcor, 1990), neither of them a comprehensive case study. Except for a very brief history in Koopmans (1995), almost nothing about the BBU is available in English, so this important case has been known only to the minority of English-speaking scholars who read German or know about it via discussions with German colleagues. This paper attempts to fill these gaps by providing a systematic account of the BBU in English. The BBU's rise and fall can be adequately explained only by considering both internal factors and the changing social context in which the BBU operated. Therefore, this account offers both a summary of the BBU's development and enough information about the BBU's social context to make the case understandable to readers not intimately acquainted with the history of German environmental politics. [1]

Few primary source documents have been archived or are readily accessible, and so this account relies on published and unpublished secondary works. [2] This procedure has drawbacks, but a substantial number of accounts exist, written from diverse perspectives – including several by BBU leaders or employees – and with extensive citations of original documents.

Environmentalism in postwar Germany

In postwar Germany, rebuilding the nation eclipsed almost all other concerns, including the environment, and even as rebuilding evolved into West Germany's 'economic miracle', Germans continued to focus on expanding the economy and enjoying their prosperity. Offices for pollution control, nature protection, and urban planning were underfunded and their responsibilities

fragmented, courts and administrative agencies often favoured economic growth over citizen complaints, and industry opposed efforts to clean up. Historical conceptions of nature protection, which emphasised protecting scenic or ecologically sensitive areas and specific species, were poorly adapted to Germany's new environmental problems: air and water pollution; high energy use; and consumption of open space. Warnings in apocalyptic essays, protests from the citizens most affected, press reports, and calls for better land use planning failed to produce much action.

Postwar Germany had numerous nature protection organisations dating from the prewar era, including the Bund für Vogelschutz (BfV) (League for Bird Protection), the Bund für Naturschutz in Bayern (BN) (League for Nature Protection in Bavaria), and the Bund Heimatschutz (League for Homeland Protection). Their membership centred on government officials, teachers, scientists, and other elites, and their activities included public education, behind-the-scenes lobbying, and small-scale purchases of ecologically sensitive areas. However, their already modest influence had been reduced by the war and its aftermath, and years passed before they regained their prewar memberships. They took no part in the anti-nuclear weapons movement of the 1950s and remained on the margins of local battles against water and air pollution.

The origins of the environmental movement

By the end of the 1960s, changing circumstances called renewed attention to environmental problems. The Rhine suffered fish kills and was episodically covered with polluted foam, and visible air pollution hung over industrial areas like the Ruhr valley. The 1972 Club of Rome report predicted imminent resource shortages, and its prophecies were echoed in essays and novels in Germany. In the early 1970s, the European Nature Protection Year, the first US Earth Day, and the United Nations environment conference in Stockholm focussed additional attention on the environment. In addition, Willy Brandt's new social democratic/liberal coalition government, which took office in 1969, emphasised quality of life issues, including the environment. It passed new laws in areas like solid waste disposal and emissions into air and water and set up advisory panels and bureaux to formulate policy, enforce environmental laws, and conduct research. The government's steps fell short of solving the problems, but they did call attention to them. For all these reasons, media reporting about environmental issues increased markedly (Voss,1995).

The late 1960s also saw the rise of a protest-oriented counter-culture centred in universities and some urban neighbourhoods. Its chief concerns were Vietnam, university reform, and Germany's consumerist, bourgeois culture, but the counter-cultural critique contained elements compatible with environmentalism. Demonstrations and protests from the counter-culture and the left also provided models for later environmental protests. Indeed, by the early 1970s, a true ecological critique was emerging. In 1972, a group of environmentalists from across the political spectrum drew up an 'Ecological Manifesto'. It criticised Germany's pro-growth ideology and advocated redirection of effort from protection of specific species and areas to new environmental issues,

such as population, overconsumption, and the impacts of human activity on health and ecosystems (Hoplitschek, 1984). These themes resonated with a new generation of educated, secure Germans, and, by the mid-1970s, polls were showing increases in the percentage of citizens concerned about the environment (Dalton, 1994).

The growth of citizens' initiatives

Growing environmental concern also manifested itself in the increasing number of local *Bürgerinitiativen* (BIs) (citizens' initiatives) focussed on the environment. 3 These grass-roots groups included not only environmental groups, but also BIs emphasising housing, tenants' rights, schools, playgrounds, minorities, and social services. The environmental BIs focussed on air and water pollution, highway and airport construction, traffic, airport noise, energy, and nuclear power. Impetus for their founding came not only from specific problems, but also from the unresponsiveness of political parties and government bureaucracies closely tied to business and labour. Consequently, BIs typically advocated increased citizen participation. Most early BIs were non-partisan, not particularly ideological, and worked within the law.

Estimates of the growth rate and number of BIs, their total membership, and the percentage of BIs concerned with environmental issues vary, but there is wide agreement that they multiplied rapidly and achieved growing acceptance. The number of BIs listed with the Bavarian government increased fivefold between 1972 and 1979 (Hoplitschek, 1984), and in a 1973 national survey, 3% of adults said they belonged to a BI, and others expressed willingness to join or sympathy (Rat von Sachverständigen für Umweltfragen, 1978; Thaysen, 1984). The limited data about member characteristics suggest an overrepresentation of males, young persons, and the well-educated and politically active. Core members were often those with a personal stake, but environmental BIs also attracted supporters with general environmental concerns. Many BIs were small, loosely organised, and short-lived; however, some achieved some permanence and organised formally. The Brandt government worked to give them more input, albeit with limited success. Local government usually welcomed BIs aimed at improving services through self-help or volunteerism, but their attempts to influence inert bureaucracies often encountered foot-dragging and exclusionary tactics.

The founding and early years of the BBU

BIs opposing aircraft noise organised a network as early as 1965 (Rat von Sachverständigen für Umweltfragen, 1978), and other regional and national networks appeared during the early 1970s. The most important was the BBU, founded in 1972 by 15 BIs centred in the Rhine valley to co-ordinate their efforts, share information, educate the public, and represent them in the media and national politics. The BBU received early support from a foundation associated with the Liberal Party (FDP) (Mayer-Tasch,1985) and, evidently, from the FDP-led Interior Ministry, which had major responsibility for environmental issues; however, BBU leaders later downplayed or denied the connection (Kazcor, 1986).

With its activist, counter-cultural orientation and grass-roots emphasis, the BBU suited the times better than traditional nature protection organisations. Its early position statements emphasised social justice, simplified lifestyles, restructuring and democratising economic and political institutions, and the catastrophic consequences of untrammelled growth. It condemned nuclear power and atomic and chemical weapons and called for renewable energy, alternatives to automobiles, stronger nature protection, and controls on industrial chemicals (Wey, 1982).

The BBU's voting members were local BIs, regional coalitions of BIs – some of which described themselves as regional BBU affiliates – and other environmental organisations. Individuals could join but not vote. A board of directors elected at an annual meeting of delegates from member groups oversaw day-to-day operations. By 1975, the BBU was publishing a magazine. It also published a newsletter for its member groups. In 1976, it began to set up working groups in areas like nuclear energy, traffic, and water pollution; some of these, however, proved to be 'one-person shows' or were inactive or short-lived. The BBU was best known for staging demonstrations, but it also organised conferences about environmental problems, issued press releases, held news conferences, lobbied, testified at hearings, and participated with government and business in policy discussion groups. Mirroring its founders' ideals and the style of its constituent groups, it had a loose, informal mode of operation.

All available evidence indicates that the BBU grew rapidly during the 1970s. Unambiguous, consistently reported data about the number of member BIs are scarce, [4] but the most careful investigations suggest that the number of direct member BIs reached 200–300 by the end of the 1970s (Rieder, 1980; Kazcor, 1986). There were member groups throughout Germany, but members were concentrated in the south-west (Thaysen, 1984; Kazcor, 1986).

From the beginning, the BBU's effectiveness was limited by internal problems, including many member groups' insistence on their autonomy, rapid membership turnover, minimal participation by some BIs in the annual meeting, and difficulty maintaining communication with member groups. Other problems included an overworked and rapidly rotating volunteer board, understaffing, and underfunding. Although low, dues often went unpaid, so the BBU was financed largely through subsidies from the Interior Ministry. These funds, designated for conferences and educational materials, could not be used for basic administration. Business was conducted from the board chair's home.

Despite the emphasis on grass-roots democracy, member BIs could influence policy only at the annual meeting, so the board largely determined the BBU's agenda. Competing obligations and commitments to local activities made it hard for most board members to participate actively, and some lived far away. This was not true of the BBU's second president, H.-H. Wüstenhagen, a dynamic, hard-working leader, who gave up his job to work full-time for the BBU. His commitment, knowledge, and range of contacts were so great that great influence devolved into his hands. Although Wüstenhagen's work was a major factor in keeping the BBU afloat, his dominance also led to board resignations and complaints about centralisation.

The criticism arose, in part, because Wüstenhagen and his allies defined the BBU's task as broader than merely providing information and services to member BIs. They emphasised influencing the media and national politics through public information campaigns, lobbying, mass demonstrations, and offering policy alternatives.

Polarisation and confrontation

As the 1970s progressed, several factors led to confrontation between the German establishment and the environmental movement. Oil shortages, oil price shocks, and the resultant economic dislocations and unemployment threatened to undermine growth. This prompted the government, now headed by Helmut Schmidt, to rethink Germany's environmental programme. With the support of business, unions, and all major parties, it slowed the pace of new legislation, and enforcement remained underfunded and fragmented. To escape dependence on oil, the government began to push the construction of nuclear power plants.

Environmental and anti-nuclear activists viewed these steps as an unacceptable reversal of Brandt's environmental policies and openness. The nuclear power issue, in particular, had broad and deep resonance. It attracted local farmers and shopkeepers alarmed about the implications of nuclear facilities for health and prosperity, environmentalists concerned about the dangers of nuclear power and government high-handedness, counter-cultural groups for whom it symbolised wrongheaded priorities, and far left groups, which saw an opportunity to challenge industry and government. Dozens of anti-nuclear BIs sprang up, and the issue came to dominate the environmental movement and BBU.

The determined activists used administrative appeals, court cases, public information campaigns, and protests effectively enough to slow Germany's march to nuclear power. Their successes threatened established power arrangements, and the movement's counter-cultural themes threatened the dominant ideology of growth. Struggling to keep its nuclear programme on track, the government – working in co-operation with energy firms and, at times, *Länder* governments – adopted a policy of uncompromising resistance. It offered local communities subsidies in exchange for co-operation, bent administrative rules to obtain required approvals, mounted public relations campaigns touting the safety and benefits of nuclear facilities and discrediting its opponents, denied BIs information and excluded them from participation in hearings, and assigned police to monitor opponents. The nuclear industry even helped to set up pro-nuclear BIs. Nuclear power was supported by conservative elements of the press and most labour unions, which viewed environmental protection as a job-killer (Krüger, 2000). Local leaders concerned about economic growth also often supported nuclear facilities.

Faced with these tactics, the environmental/anti-nuclear movement turned to mobilising public opinion through massive protests and construction site occupations, which continued from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s. There were also protests and marches in local, regional, and national capitals. In these protests, moderate groups of local citizens concerned about their

health, the marketability of their farm products, unwelcome industrial growth and urbanisation, and threats to tourism were joined by environmental activists and supporters from the counter-culture and far left. The left, in particular, often sought to instrumentalise local BIs for its own purposes. The resulting uneasy alliance was characterised by recurrent debates over goals and strategy and swings between peaceful protest and violent confrontation.

The demonstrations sometimes led to repressive police action as the government, which had a tradition of repressing extreme dissent and was simultaneously struggling with leftist terrorist attacks, responded forcefully to protests it saw as backed by the far left. Confrontations sometimes turned violent, as police cleared occupations of construction sites and turned back protesters. Far left groups sought to heighten the conflict and create a cycle of repression, and the confrontations did radicalise many participants. Footage from extensive media coverage of violent confrontations won support from citizens who saw the demonstrations as justified and were repelled by the government response. Others viewed the confrontations as evidence of a breakdown of order and the protesters as dangerous radicals.

The polarisation was accentuated by the involvement of many environmentalists in networks of environmental, anti-nuclear, peace, and feminist groups. Their counter-cultural worldview was characterised by apocalyptic interpretations of environmental problems, anti-consumerism, strong critiques of capitalism and runaway technology, anti-militarism, and an interest in self-realisation and alternative lifestyles. Also prominent were commitment to grass-roots democracy and protest, a jaundiced view of the political system as serving mainly the needs of established interest groups, and unwillingness to compromise.

Anti-nuclear protests dominated the headlines, but some BIs pursued other environmental issues, including air and water pollution, road construction, transit, solid waste disposal, eco-agriculture, noise, and alternative energy. They too sometimes became involved in confrontations, especially around airport expansions. These BIs often supported the anti-nuclear movement as a secondary objective.

The most comprehensive information about environmental BIs in this period comes from a mail survey of members of the BBU and a smaller umbrella organisation. The survey suffered from a low response rate, but the results suggested that environmental BIs most often focussed on energy (including nuclear power), traffic, nature protection, city planning, and industrial emissions. Most claimed to have goals that extended beyond a specific controversy, and about a third had, at some point, altered their focus. Their activities included demonstrations, leafleting, press conferences, press releases, meetings with local administrators, reports, and participation in hearings (Andritzky, 1978). Not all environmental BIs belonged to networks; some worked alone (Rat von Sachverständigen für Umweltfragen, 1978).

The BBU as an environmental movement organisation

Germany's nature protection organisations, with their narrow agendas and conservative members, were ill-adapted to counter-cultural ideologies, action on new environmental issues, or confrontational protest. The BBU therefore emerged as the central social movement organisation for the movement. Its 1976 statement of goals, echoed by later ones, strongly criticised Germany's commitment to growth and demanded an end to nuclear power. It also advocated reorientation of transportation toward mass transit, organic farming, reductions in the scale and concentration of industry, and grass-roots democracy (Kazcor, 1986). BBU leaders, especially the knowledgeable, articulate Wüstenhagen, became very visible, for the media frequently treated the BBU as the movement's lead organisation.

Functioning as a movement organisation produced strains for the BBU. Wüstenhagen and his allies steered a cautious course. They opposed violence, sometimes negotiated with the authorities, and worked to ostracise BIs that they identified as communist-front organisations. By 1977, a split – which foreshadowed later struggles between the Green Party's 'realos' and 'fundis' – had developed between Wüstenhagen's supporters and the sizeable minority that favoured work outside the system and was more willing to co-operate with communist-dominated BIs. Wüstenhagen precipitately resigned in 1977, citing the board's refusal to increase office staffing, but many believed that this split was the actual cause.

After Wüstenhagen's resignation, measures were implemented to forestall renewed dominance by a single leader. New by-laws re-emphasised grass-roots democracy and the autonomy of local BIs, replaced the board chair position with a three-member leadership committee, reserved more decisions for the board, and established a non-hierarchical administration. The business office, which was not established until the end of the 1970s, had only a handful of employees overseen by the treasurer, who received a minimal stipend. There was also a move to require that nominees for the board be endorsed by their home BIs.

Arguments over whether to emphasise influencing national politics or supporting local BIs, whether to work within the system and accept public funds or join the extraparliamentary opposition, and whether to co-operate with leftist groups, remained prominent in the late 1970s; however, new conflicts also emerged, including a power struggle between the board and the BBU's transportation working group. This well-established, active group demanded increased autonomy and the right to approve press releases about transportation. A parallel struggle broke out between the board and the editorial staff of the BBU magazine. The majority of the staff wanted the magazine to be an independent voice addressing the public, not just a house organ, and the magazine often criticised the BBU from the left. The conflict was resolved after long negotiation by a grant of quasi-autonomy. With so many issues in play and the BBU's emphasis on grass-roots democracy, annual meetings sometimes became chaotic, with endless proposals under discussion and heated debates.

In the end, the effort to prevent centralisation of power in the BBU was unsuccessful. The pressures to make decisions, issue press releases, and give interviews expeditiously made it

impracticable for a geographically dispersed board to exercise day-to-day control, and many board members were heavily committed to their own BIs. Consequently, the three-member executive committee gained influence. Jo Leinen, who served from 1978 to 1984, emerged as its informal leader and the principal BBU spokesperson – a development encouraged by the media's preference for a single voice.

Under Leinen's leadership, the BBU continued to emphasise lobbying, public education, and public mobilisation, and remained influential and visible. In the early 1980s, as the salience of nuclear power began to decline, Leinen pushed for an alliance with the peace movement and an emphasis on hazardous chemicals.

The rise of competitors

The BBU's problems were exacerbated by the rise of competitors for supporters, press attention, and political access. The most obvious, the Green Party, evolved out of slates of candidates for local office whose platforms generally combined environmental issues and opposition to nuclear power with other issues, including feminism, grass-roots democracy, human rights, and peace.[5] At the beginning of the 1980s, these coalesced into the Green Party. In the early days, Greens ranged across Germany's political spectrum, but when the party embraced environmentalism and other new social movement issues but rejected the hard left agenda, most conservatives and communists departed. Some Greens were recruited from the BIs and BBU; however, the BBU's tradition of non-partisanship, its desire to retain movement leadership, and scepticism about the Greens' prospects prompted it to hold the Greens at arm's length. Nevertheless, parallels between the ideologies and goals of the BBU and the Greens made the latter a strong competitor for those BBU supporters willing to work within the system.

Additional competition came from the established nature protection organisations, which gradually adapted to changing times. The BfV, for example, entered the 1970s with a membership dominated by bird watchers with little affinity for counter-cultural environmentalism, a history of leadership overlaps with government and business, and a non-confrontational strategy.[6] During the mid-1970s and early 1980s, however, it incrementally broadened its goals to include protection of ecosystems and non-bird species and general environmental protection. By the early 1980s, its youth group was pressing for an even broader agenda and politically activist stance, including opposition to nuclear power. These changes were hotly disputed, the youth group was threatened with dissolution, and the BfV suffered 10,000 resignations when it finally decided in 1986 to oppose nuclear power (Cornelsen, 1991), but it survived, grew rapidly, and became a competitor for the BBU.

The BBU's principal competitor was a new organisation spawned by Bavaria's BN.[7] The BN had traditionally pursued a narrow nature protection agenda, worked closely with the authorities, and avoided confrontation. But in 1969, an oppositional faction won control and began moving the organisation toward engagement with new environmental problems, including pollution, loss of

green space, and waste disposal. The BN also began to question unbounded consumption and population growth, and, during the 1970s, it moved gradually from mild support of nuclear power to strong opposition.

In 1975, these changes led to the founding of a national organisation, the Bund Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland (BUND) (German League for Environment and Nature Protection). Its founders, which included BN leaders, nature protection organisations in Baden-Württemberg and elsewhere, and leading environmentalists, wanted it to address a broader range of issues than existing nature protection organisations or their umbrella organisation, the German Nature Protection Ring. They viewed the BBU as too radical and chaotic to be effective, and wanted BUND to be a more structured organisation. BUND's early leadership included a broad spectrum of political opinion. Its second president, a well-known author and former Christian Democratic member of the federal parliament, hoped to transform it into a political party; however, this effort failed, and he resigned, taking many conservatives with him. In the late 1970s, BUND became deeply involved in anti-nuclear protests and moved leftward, but it also continued to pursue traditional nature protection goals, and many moderate members remained.

Despite this bumpy beginning and initial slow growth, BUND met the need for a movement organisation that was also stable and well organised. It consolidated its position and grew rapidly in the late 1970s and 1980s, attracting mainly well-educated, middle class members. It joined the BBU and sometimes co-operated with it, but there was also much competition, including efforts to persuade some BBU member groups to become BUND groups.

Additional competition came from Greenpeace Germany, [8] which was established in 1980 through the efforts of Greenpeace International and former BI activists. Greenpeace's confrontational stance and spectacular actions attracted media attention and raised environmental consciousness. Feeding on the environmental movement and public concern about environmental isues, it achieved almost exponential growth, reaching 750,000 supporters by 1990 (Rucht, 1995).

In one respect, however, Greenpeace was incompatible with the BIs. While they sought to remain loosely organised, decentralised, and democratic, Greenpeace was highly centralised. It recruited volunteers in small numbers to assist with fundraising and protests, but its local groups received their marching orders from headquarters. Consequently, although Greenpeace competed successfully for press and public attention, there was little danger of its wooing away grass-roots activists. Indeed, a Greenpeace splinter organisation, Robin Wood, was formed by former Greenpeace activists who wanted an organisation that emulated Greenpeace's strategy but was decentralised. Robin Wood never attained mass support (Kunz, 1989), but it too competed with the BIs to some extent.

The institutionalisation of environmentalism

The BBU was also challenged by the gradual institutionalisation of environmentalism during the 1980s. Environmental concerns were increasingly addressed by political parties and embodied in public policy, and the Greens' 1983 entry into the federal parliament provided environmentalists with easier access to politics. Indeed, the funds the party then received automatically from the Treasury greatly exceeded those available to the BBU. Public opinion and competition from the Greens also precipitated a 'greening' of the Social Democrats, and the Christian Democrat-dominated government passed a stream of environmental regulations and established an Environmental Ministry. By the late 1980s, Germany was leading the way toward saving the ozone layer, fighting global warming, and sustainable energy. The government continued to supported nuclear power, but cost overruns, faltering demand, and safety concerns had brought the programme to a standstill.

Industry also began to accept the inevitability of environmental regulation, co-operate with environmental groups, endorse ecological modernisation, and advertise its environmental commitment (Clausen, 2002), and labour unions rethought their opposition to environmental measures. In 1981, the German Labour Federation made environmental protection an official goal (Rogall, 2003), and the 1980s and 1990s saw calls for safer, less polluting production processes and efforts to co-operate with environmentalists (Teichert, 1992; Krüger, 2000).

The daily press continued to give environmental problems, including acid rain, dying forests, and Chernobyl, sustained attention (Leonhard, 1986; Voss, 1995). General interest magazines featured environmental stories, news magazines reported on nature and environmental issues, and numerous television programmes were dedicated to the environment. These developments both reflected and sustained public concern (Billig, 1994).

Critics could justifiably criticise this 'institutionalisation' as chiefly cosmetic, but the changes were sufficiently real to create a new situation for the BBU. By reducing incentives for confrontation and increasing the attractiveness of working within the system, such developments favoured more moderate, established environmental organisations over the BBU. Consequently, the counter-cultural, environmentalist critique of German society and the anti-nuclear movement waned. The latter also came under the domination of radical activists with a penchant for violence, and this hindered alliances with environmentalists.

The decline of the BBU

Although it remained important well into the 1980s, the BBU proved poorly adapted to these changes. As the anti-nuclear movement declined, it attempted to build alliances with the peace movement, where during the early 1980s it held a leading role; however, the peace movement's high level of mobilisation proved short-lived. The BBU also tried to expand to other environmental problems, including the chemical industry and dying forests, but these initiatives failed to offset its problems. Long-running internal disputes over toleration of violence, co-operation with government, and the relative importance of national-level lobbying and service to

local initiatives rekindled. Conflict with the organisation's magazine, which had become ever more critical of the BBU, escalated. New BIs continued to join, but a greater number dissolved, abandoned the BBU for networks focussed on specific problems, or withdrew to become autonomous. Consequently, the number of dues-paying BIs fell from 247 in 1981 to 138 in 1983 (Kazcor, 1986). BUND joined the BBU, as did Greenpeace and Robin Wood, but they were not BIs, and their membership produced new stresses.

The early 1980s also saw financial crisis. In 1981, the government responded to criticism that the BBU promoted illegal demonstrations by reducing its support, and the shift to a CDU-dominated coalition in 1982 heralded the end of federal subsidies. The result was elimination of numerous BBU programmes, termination of the magazine, and reduction of the staff to one employee. Several BBU leaders also faced expensive lawsuits accusing them of instigating illegal demonstrations, and some BIs lost their tax-exempt status.

Another factor in the BBU's decline was new competition. BUND, in particular, attracted those who wanted an activist organisation that was also well organised. Some BBU BIs became BUND groups, and some individual BBU members transferred to BUND. Additional competition for activists and media attention came from Greenpeace and Robin Wood, while the Greens provided an alternative for those with a bent toward political activity. The BBU's political influence diminished further in 1984, when Leinen departed.

The factors that led to the BBU's decline have remained in place, so it is not surprising that decline and financial crisis have continued unabated. By the mid-1990s the BBU was no longer being listed by knowledgeable observers (e.g. Blühdorn, 1995; Ehlers, 1995) as among Germany's important environmental groups, and there have been no signs of a recovery. According to the organisation's internet site and most recent (2001–03) activities report, it continues to issue position statements, hold press conferences, and participate in government-sponsored policy-making forums. However, the business office is open only 25 hours weekly, the executive secretary is the only contact person listed in any context, and its publications list contains only four brochures, the most recent dating from 1999. The activities report provides no specific information about staffing or budget but refers repeatedly to the BBU's precarious financial situation, which has made it almost impossible to undertake new initiatives or programmes, caused the termination of its newsletter, and required that most activities be conducted by volunteers. In June 2005, the internet site listed links to 25 member BIs and one affiliated regional network. Several environmental organisations, including BUND, Greenpeace, and Robin Wood, retain their membership, and the activities report lists five working groups focussed on specific topics (Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz, 2005).

Conclusions

The unusual size, prominence, and influence attained by the BBU, albeit for a relatively brief period, invite inquiry into the grounds for its success. Did the BBU discover an innovative

structure or strategy that allowed it to overcome the internal problems typically encountered by networks of grass-roots environmental groups? Or does the explanation for its success lie in factors external to the organisation?

The available information makes a strong case for the latter explanation. Indeed, rather than overcoming the well-known internal problems of networks, the BBU was tormented by almost all of them. Its national effectiveness was hobbled by core principles of grass-roots organising to which it swore allegiance. Member BIs focussed on local concerns and guarded their autonomy. Underfunded and almost entirely reliant on volunteers, they resisted diversion of resources away from their needs, leaving the BBU underfunded and understaffed. They eagerly accepted information and services, but many lacked enthusiasm for national lobbying, for they feared that involvement with the national politics and media would lead to professionalisation and centralisation of power.

There were good grounds for concern about centralisation. Despite the BBU's verbal affirmations of grass-roots democracy, democracy within the BBU was at best a partially realised ideal. The reality involved instead significant elements of Michels's iron law and Pearce's description of 'leadership by default' (Markham *et al.*, 2001). Individuals became leaders because they had the time, interest, and skills to serve when most others did not. They remained because they acquired almost irreplaceable knowledge and contacts and, at least for a time, desired to continue. The resultant oligarchical tendencies stirred resentment and internal conflict as advocates of grass-roots democracy struggled against organisational realities.

Finally, the BBU fell victim to factional infighting. Struggles between advocates of emphasis on local issues and grass-roots democracy and those who argued for national action overlapped with struggles between ideological purists and compromisers, and there were garden-variety struggles for autonomy and influence within the organisation.

More promising explanations of the BBU's success lie in its external environment. The first is its emergence at the time when the burgeoning environmental and anti-nuclear movements desperately needed a movement organisation to circulate information, co-ordinate their efforts, and represent the movement to the media and government agencies that wanted the movement to speak with one voice. The BBU deserves credit for seizing the opportunity to play this role and unite the environmental and anti-nuclear movements under a single umbrella, but, in fact, the role of movement organisation fell to it almost by default. The Greens had not yet appeared, and established nature protection organisations, weakened by the war and its aftermath, had retreated to familiar, non-controversial activities. Neither the inclinations of their members nor their experience suited them to be movement organisations, and they required time to adapt to new realities.

The BBU also benefited from Germany's unique anti-nuclear movement. A full explanation of the depth of anti-nuclear sentiment in Germany and the rise of Europe's most powerful anti-

nuclear movement in the 1970s is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear is that the BBU profited greatly from the temporary melding of the environmental and anti-nuclear movements and that it was the passion and strength of this movement that carried the BBU to prominence.

A final factor in the BBU's success was government financial support. Although the subsidies were modest and generally earmarked for specific programmes, they allowed the BBU to channel its dues and other income to organisational maintenance. This arrangement did not solve the BBU's financial problems, but it did keep the organisation afloat.

Changes in the organisational environment appear to have been just as decisive in the BBU's decline as in its rise. Internal difficulties persisted throughout the BBU's history, but so long as the constellation of factors that brought it to the fore remained intact, they could be contained. But these conditions did not last. As the anti-nuclear movement lost momentum, the BBU began to flounder, and efforts to find a replacement goal failed. Stubborn opposition from government, business, and unions had been a constant in the BBU's glory years. However, as the movement gained support, these institutions changed course, passing new laws, modernising production methods, and adopting environmentalist rhetoric. Claims that the changes were little more than greenwashing and co-optation are far from groundless, but the changes were real enough to take some of the wind out of the BBU's sails.

Competitors also undermined the BBU. The Greens quickly grew into a major competitor, nature protection organisations broadened their goals and adopted a more confrontational stance, and new environmental organisations appeared. None of the competitors precisely duplicated the BBU, but, in combination, they offered a range of options for activists and competed for press and public attention. In this context, the withdrawal of government funds proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back, precipitating a disastrous downward spiral of budget cuts, reduced services, declining membership, and reduced member commitment.

The BBU case demonstrates that building a network of grass-roots initiatives into a powerful national voice is not impossible; however, the case also suggests that this is a precarious venture, apt to succeed only under specific conditions, and it invites further inquiry about them.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. I used numerous treatments of the history of German environmentalism to prepare the sections on social context. To avoid a plethora of repetitive citations, I list those used throughout the paper here and include citations in the text only when a source documents a specific fact or where citing page numbers is desirable. The only book-length history of German environmentalism in English is Dominick (1992) (see also his 1988 paper). Joppke (1993) contains a comprehensive history of the anti-nuclear movement. Koopmans's (1995) book on new social movements and protest, Bramwell's (1994) treatment of green politics, and recent books on comparative environmental politics by Schreuers (2002) and Dryzek *et al*. (2003) also include relevant material. Articles on the history of German environmentalism in English include Schmid (1987), Riordan (1997), Brand (1999a), Rucht and Roose (1999), and Rohkrämer (2002). In German, Hermand (1991) offers a comprehensive history emphasising Green thought, while Wey (1982) highlights struggles against air and water pollution. Briefer treatments appear in Brand *et al*. (1997) and several related papers by Brand (e.g. Brand, 1999b, in press). Also useful is Brand *et al*. (1986). Other brief overviews include Schenklung (1990) and Fritzler (1997). Rucht (1980) provides detailed coverage of anti-nuclear protests. Books and chapters that focus especially on the history of environmental organisations include Leonhard (1986), Cornelsen (1991), Kazcor (1989), Hey and Brendle (1994), Oswald von Nell-Breuning-Insitut für Wissenschafts- und Gesellschaftsethik der Philosophisch-Theologischen Hochschule Sankt Georgen (1996), Rat von Sachverständigen für Umweltfragen (1996), and Bergstedt (1998). Sources emphasising political, legal, and policy developments include Mayer-Tasch (1985), Meroth and von Moltke (1987), Hucke (1990), Wilhelm (1994), and Jänicke and Weidner (1996).

2. The only discussion of the history of the BBU in English known to me appears in Koopmans's (1995, pp. 217 – 223) book about new social movement protests, although there are capsule descriptions elsewhere (e.g. Schmid, 1987; Rucht, 1989). In German, the most comprehensive histories of the BBU are two long master's dissertations (Rieder, 1980; Kazcor, 1986; see also Kazcor,1989 1990). A short article by Kempf (1984) also focuses on the BBU. Several more general treatments of German environmentalism and environmental organisations (Wey, 1982, pp. 171 – 172; Leonhard, 1986, pp. 131 – 132, pp. 142 – 143, pp. 152 – 158, pp. 166 – 168, pp. 190 – 192; Hucke, 1990; Schenklung, 1990; Rucht, 1994, pp. 235 – 290 passim; Oswald von Nell-Breuning-Insitut für Wissenschafts- und Gesellschaftsethik der Philosophisch-Theologischen Hochschule Sankt Georgen, 1996, pp. 84 – 85; Bergstedt, 1998, pp. 104 – 109) include information about the BBU. Also useful are two histories of the anti-nuclear power movement (Rucht, 1980; Joppke, 1993 passim, pp. 67 – 70), Wilhelm's (1994) book on environmental politics, and Wolf 's (1996, pp. 67 – 71) dissertation on Bund Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland. Useful articles by BBU leaders include Wüstenhagen (1975) and Sternstein (1981).

3. In addition to sources cited in notes 1 and 2, see Lange (1973), Andritzky (1978), Thaysen (1984), Klingelmann (1991), and Rucht (1994).

4. The BBU leadership declined to release membership lists to the press – and sometimes even to its member BIs, board members, or employees – and some BIs requested not to be included on such lists. Some member groups were themselves networks of BIs. Some of their members also belonged directly to the BBU, but even those that did not could be counted as 'indirect' members. Finally, BIs that did not pay dues often maintained regular contact with the BBU and received its services. These complexities made it easy for BBU leaders to exaggerate the number of BIs that the BBU represented, and there is clear evidence that they frequently did so. Their inflated claims were sometimes uncritically reported in the press or academic articles.

5. Numerous books and articles document the rise of the Green Party. This section draws primarily on Guggenberger (1984), Frankland (1995), and Müller-Rommel (1993).

6. In addition to sources referenced above, see Hanemann and Simon (1987) and May (1999).

7. In addition to sources referenced above, this section draws on Hoplitschek (1984) and Wolf (1996).

8. Books and articles about Greenpeace Germany include Kunz (1989), Reichert and Schmied (1995), Rucht (1995), Krüger (1996), Flechner (1999), and Greenpeace Deutschland (1996).

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