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West German Protests against the United States' Action in Vietnam

The protests in West Germany against the United States' involvement in Vietnam began in 1965. West Germany had expressed a sense of unrest towards the actions that the U.S. was taking in Vietnam in the years prior to 1965, but due to uncertainty among the West German population there was not much support for the cause. Operation Rolling Thunder, the United States' bombing of North Vietnam in 1965, became the catalyst that started the active protest movement. Students in West German universities began to form groups and coalitions with the purpose to strive for peace and protest the aggressive and authoritarian stance the U.S. had taken against Vietnam and thus the entire Communist world. Once the students organized themselves, notable protests started to take place around West Germany.

The atmosphere in which these protests developed was one of frustration and resolve. While the students protested vehemently against the war in Vietnam, there were many factors that contributed to the escalating magnitude of protest that were unrelated to that particular conflict. One factor was that the number of eligible students who wanted to attend university was severely larger than the number of spots that universities had available. This caused many eligible students to be turned down for admission (Thomas 54). Many students who were denied admission to university were against the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and, along with admitted students, joined the West European Students' Committee for Peace, a group which helped to increase interaction between student organizations all across Western Europe.

One of the more prominent student groups in West Germany was the West German League of Socialist Students (SDS). When this group was founded in 1946 it was closely affiliated with the Socialist Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), but that connection grew strained and eventually broke because the SPD saw the SDS as too radical, even to the point where the SPD feared that the SDS could overthrow the government if the students set their minds to it (Thomas 59-60). The SDS was seen as an embarrassment to their supervising party because their criticism of Marxist ideals did not match up with the beliefs of the party. A large part of society also believed that the students wanted to replace the current capitalist society and parliamentary democracy with groups of citizens taken directly from the population in order to achieve an anti-authoritarian government, which the students did not believe existed in West Germany at that point (Thomas 58-60).

The severance from the SPD led the SDS to pursue involvement from the West German student population instead of from developed political parties; the SDS believed most governmental parties possessed too conservative of an ideology (Thomas 58). The SDS organized a conference in May 1966 that involved over 2,000 students from different organizations. The speakers talked about their anti-authoritarian ideals and attacked the American military campaign and the impact the aggressive action had on the civilians of Vietnam. This congress showed that the SDS was a powerful force with which to be reckoned in regards to the West German protest against the actions of the U.S. in Vietnam (Thomas 76).

Part of the purpose of the student movement was to rebel against what the parents of this generation of students had put faith in: an authoritarian government. In the case of

the Vietnam War, the SDS charged the U.S. with imperialism and drew parallels between the U.S. actions in Vietnam and the murder of the Jews in Auschwitz (Thomas 246). The harder they fought for peace and the more protests they were involved in eased the guilt that students felt on behalf of their parents' actions during the Second World War.

Another reason why the protests began is because some of the West German people feared that the U.S. occupation of Vietnam would also spread to Germany because of their experiences of growing up while Germany rebuilt itself from the destruction of World War II. As Andreas W. Daum stated, "Behind these fears lay the experience of World War II, of Allied air raids, and of pulverized German cities, an experience, then, of victimization" (Daum 284). This generation desired peace and a life that was not controlled by a severe government.

One of the people whose ideology significantly affected the leaders of the SDS was the philosopher Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse believed in a free civilization, one that was liberal and had no restrictions on happiness or freedom (Marcuse vii). His essays explored the foundations of liberalism and the socialist theories that brought the theory of Marxism to the student movement in Eastern Europe. His belief in an equal and free society for all appealed to the Western European university students, who were of all races and nationalities. Many radical scholars and activists were influenced by Marcuse's work; one such was Rudi Dutschke.

Rudi Dutschke was a radical West German student who spoke out against the corruption in West German government and educational institutions. He was one of the leaders to whom members of the German SDS turned for guidance. Dutschke not only led the West German opposition to the United States' involvement in Vietnam, but also

went on to help found Germany's current Green Party. His ideology permeates both actions and could be seen as a representation of what many of his followers were feeling in regards to the situation in Vietnam.

Dutschke's opposition to the United States' involvement in Vietnam was based largely on how aggressively the United States pursued its agenda. Dutschke and his generation had grown up perpetually aware of Germany's Nazi past and saw the United States as a dangerous force whose intrusion in Vietnam could be compared to the expansionist tendencies of the authoritarian Hitler (Markham). The United States already dominated the capitalist world and many saw its action in Vietnam as a move suggesting a desire to expand that domination to the communist world (Appleyard).

The threat of war also loomed in the back of Dutschke's mind. The United States already had strained relations with the Soviet Union, and tensions were elevated with the excitement over the space and arms races (Markham). Dutschke, among others, worried that West Germany would become the stage for a war between the United States and the Soviet Union, not only because West Germany shared a border with the Soviet Union, but especially because the United States still occupied parts of West Germany and its bases there could become the target of a possible nuclear attack from the Soviets (Markham).

Dutschke also saw shadows of the Nazi past in his own West German government and openly opposed these threats. Kurt Georg Kiesinger, West Germany's Chancellor from 1966-1969, had worked in the Nazi propaganda department, while West Germany's President from 1959-1969, Heinrich Lübke, had designed barracks built and inhabited by prisoners in concentration camps during the second World War (Kinzer). Additionally,

the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, the two main political parties in West Germany during the 1960s, had formed a powerful coalition eerily reminiscent of Hitler's control over German government starting in 1933 when he abolished all other political parties besides National Socialism. The Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats exhibited the conservative trend in West Germany's Parliament which many young people found unresponsive and repressive (Kinzer).

The protest movement against this government eventually branched into two groups, one being the violent Baader-Meinhof Gang (later the Red Army Faction). The other branch, led by Dutschke, pursued peaceful avenues which, ten years later, led to the formation of Germany's Green Party.

Dutschke's pacifist ideology did not gain headlines as often as the Baader-Meinhof Gang's terrorism, but that was not his goal. He said change could not and should not come from outside the government, but from within by the process of what he called "the long march through the institutions," gaining support through elected posts ("Germans Take a Fresh Look at 'Red Rudi'"). This approach to government "infect[ed] Germany [. . .] with a liberal spirit of grass-roots democracy" (Ascherson).

Unfortunately, Dutschke did not get far into implementing his plan. In April of 1968 Josef Bachmann, who claimed to have been inspired by the killing of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. a week before, shot Dutschke in the chest and head, leaving him severely wounded and requiring brain surgery (Hamill).

When Dutschke finally picked up West German politics again in 1979, he carried on much in the same vein as he had before. He helped found West Germany's pacifist Green Party in 1979, which took a "startling" 3.2 percent of the West German vote in its

first year, soaring above numerous other parties to become the third-largest party in Parliament, second only to the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats (Markham). Many saw this as a “yearning for a sylvan, ecologically clean land,” in reaction to the “cramped, urban realities of everyday West German life” (Markham). If the Green Party’s focus on a cleaner environment came from Dutschke, one might be able to make the claim that one of Dutschke’s oppositions to American involvement in Vietnam stemmed from a dislike of the detrimental effects which the United States’ extensive bombing and use of napalm and Agent Orange had on the Vietnamese ecosystem. Dutschke did not get to fully see his Green Party take action, as he drowned on December 24, 1979 while taking a bath as a result of a seizure brought on by complications from the injuries he received during the attempt on his life (“Germans Take a Fresh Look at ‘Red Rudi’”).

Although Dutschke’s legacy is a lasting commitment to pacifism in the face of growing unrest, the protests that ignited across West Germany in response to the attempt on Dutschke’s life were incredibly violent. The violence was not limited to primitive tactics such as rocks and fists, rather firearms, Molotov cocktails, and high-pressure water cannons were also used. In fact, it was the assassination attempt on Dutschke in April of 1968 that inspired students in “all large West German Cities” to carry out the “Springer blockade,” an organized blockade of all conservative newspapers owned by Axel Springer, an avid opponent of the student protestors (Buddeberg). The mere intention to “obstruct delivery procedure” (“Rudi Dutschke Demands the Expropriation...”) was enough to enrage his conservative opponents, one of which was the man who attempted to assassinate Dutschke, Joseph Bachmann. Dutschke’s dream of

non-violence disappeared as “Molotov cocktails rained on the Springerhaus” following the assassination attempt, according to editor in-chief Bascha Mika of the *Tageszeitung* (Hockenos).

The attempt on Dutschke’s life was not the first event to spark major riots in West Germany. The first major wave of violence in the German student protest movement of the 1960s was in response to the death of student Benno Ohnesorg. During the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin on June 2, 1967, Iranian and Berlin Police forces provoked student demonstrators protesting the Shah’s visit. According to a Social Democratic Student Association pamphlet, the Berlin Police provoked the students by having some of the students “dragged [. . .] over the barriers and [beating] them within sight of the others [. . .] water cannons were then deployed [. . .] scattered students [. . .] were then brutally clubbed down. Benno Ohnesorg was fatally injured during one of these actions” (“Rudi Dutschke Demands the Expropriation...”). The pamphlet further said that Ohnesorg was a first-time protester and was beaten by a plain-clothes police officer.

Contemporary socialist writer Manfred Buddeberg claimed that the death of Ohnesorg “politicized spontaneously” many Berlin and West German Students. Many became more conscious of police brutality because of this event and began sympathizing with the League of Socialist Students, making the death of Ohnesorg become a rallying point for the student movement. It also became a symbol of solidarity for student relations with the working-class as the students felt themselves to be “defenselessly exposed to the power of the state” (Buddeberg). As a result, Buddeberg writes that the student movement began “a feverish activity to arouse support in the community and

particularly among workers.” This action would allow the students to gain a broader base of support and solidarity.

Following the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg, riots erupted all over Germany; police forces were mobilized and coordinated across the nation to diffuse the demonstrators. Government forces used clubs, mounted police, and high-pressure water cannons to disperse the crowds as violence escalated across Germany to its highest peak yet. At this point, an ideological split began to grow between mainstream protestors and those who used terrorism and urban guerilla warfare. While members of the Red Army Faction (RAF) had been active during the late 1960s, the RAF was not formally founded until 1970. Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, the founding members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, which later became the RAF, continued to wage violent warfare against the government due to their impression that simple protests and rioting were not effective enough to bring about the change they desired. The Baader-Meinhof Gang, unlike Rudi Dutschke, believed that violence was the only way to make the government listen to what they had to say. However, in later years many people seemed to think that the Baader-Meinhof Gang started to lose its focus and began to commit violent acts merely because that was what they were used to doing, not necessarily because they could remember and believe the purpose behind these acts (Appleyard).

While student protestors across West Germany charged the United States with imperialism, many Germans raised their voices in support of the United States. During the early years of the conflict in Vietnam, many Germans perceived a parallel between Berlin and Saigon and took comfort in watching the United States bring war to communist Vietnam. Some regarded the Vietnam War as a good testing ground, a

testament showing that the U.S. honored its commitments. Since the United States so willingly came to the defense of Saigon, those who supported the actions of the United States in Vietnam believed it was “safe to assert that the U.S. would defend West Germany against communist aggression” (Junker).

This show of support by West German citizens did not endure to the end of the Vietnam War. This was due to Germans fearing that more American troops in Vietnam meant less of a military presence in Germany, a fear that was perpetuated by American troops in Vietnam increasing from 59,000 to 297,500 in the short span of a year. America tried to reassure Germans with claims that failure on their part to support allies in Southeast Asia would embolden Germany’s communist neighbors. In addition, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara came up with “Exercise Big Lift” which he stated would enable troops to be rapidly deployed to American bases in Germany if reinforcements were needed. Little could be said or done to diminish the fears of West German citizens. As the United States continued to send more military troops to Vietnam, Germans became less sympathetic to America’s motives (Kaplan).

As the Germans grew increasingly unhappy with the actions in Vietnam, their feelings of fear and resentment mixed with their own ideologies became so strong in some people that they felt the need to act upon these feelings. These activists had a specific set of political views, which stemmed mainly from their disapproval with the United States’ aggressive behavior. They renounced the official American objective in Vietnam, which was to try to contain communism from spreading out from the already dangerous Soviet Union into the rest of the world. The activists accused the United States of many atrocities, the foremost being that they were reverting back to the old ways of

imperialism. In the same vein, they drew many parallels from the current situation in Vietnam to the Third Reich's murder of millions of innocent people during the Holocaust, accusing the United States of committing similar atrocities in Vietnam. They accused the United States' government of following fascist ideals; exactly what their own government had done not twenty years before.

The ideological stance the students took in this situation was one thing they felt could help them cope with the collective feelings of guilt that they believed they and their entire country shared after World War II. The German people, even those who had not been affiliated with the Nazi regime, had had the blame for the Holocaust placed squarely on their own heads, and the student activists needed a way to cope with the guilt for the deaths so many innocent people. By protesting what they felt were similar atrocities in Vietnam, many felt they could atone somewhat for what their countrymen had done only a few decades before and show to the world that the Germans, as a people, had changed.

In the course of the protests, a contradiction in some of the protesters' viewpoints became apparent. While the protesters were adamantly against the United States' presence in Vietnam because they felt the United States had no right to intervene in the workings of other countries, whether they were communist or not, the protestors seemed to forget that they themselves relied on the United States' presence in their own country to protect them from Soviet aggression. With the Berlin Wall in place, the Soviets were always looking for other ways to expand their territories and spheres of influence in the non-communist world. Due to the restrictions placed upon the German military after World War II, West Germans had to rely on the American government to keep troop levels up in West Germany to discourage the Soviets from expanding past the Wall.

Despite the contradictions that arose within the protestors' ideology, their cause was genuine. They had seen first-hand where aggressive authoritarianism had led Germany before and felt it their duty to warn others when they saw someone heading in that same direction. Part of this was the selfish desire to appease their own guilt, but mostly the protestors did not want history to repeat itself, especially with the advances in weaponry that the advent of the nuclear age had brought about. These visionaries may have differed in their methods of making themselves heard, from Dutschke's quiet guidance through government systems to the Baader-Meinhof Gang's violent riots, but all had a common purpose in mind: keep the world from making the same mistakes it had in the past and keep driving it forward to reach a place that would be beneficial for all, a place of happiness, freedom, and equality.

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