The Sins of the Father

*Generational Conflict, Vergangeheitsbewältigung, and the Creation of a Militant Generation*

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Ghost: I am thy father’s spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres…

Hamlet: … The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T’asssume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me…

Shakespeare, Hamlet, Acts I and II
Learning and understanding one’s national history is essential in developing one’s identity as a citizen of a nation; to learn, as an inheritor, the significance of what it means to be a part of a people or system that has persisted through time and developed into the society one lives in; it helps to ensure the continuation of a prideful tradition, usually by stressing the importance of heritage, unity, courage and principles. Two groups that are arguably the most influential in the development of one’s historical notions are our parents and teachers who initiate this process. Through these incredibly influential figures we are introduced to legends, historical and mythical, that support and explain our development and identity. Usually, these tales are meant to invoke pride, to create a desire within the child to willfully support their nation and national endeavors when they reach adulthood. However, a problem is presented, that not all national histories are a timeline of glorious achievements and contributions.

Political governance, international relations, and domestic social policy of a nation are often underscored with tainted histories of prejudice and violence. In many developed countries, the worst instances of such are far enough in the past, or so everyone would like to think, where there could be a distinguished divisive line between ‘then’ and ‘now’. Or they occur on foreign soil, allowing the mind and media to distinguish the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’. But what about when the situation transcends prejudice and manifests itself as hatred? When violence becomes an orchestrated atrocity? How then, does one teach their youth that they are the inheritors of a state gone awry, only to be corrected by war? Such was the dilemma faced by Germans after the Second World War, with the shame of the Holocaust subject to publicized international debate. Unlike the Reign of Terror, or the religious persecutions of the Middle Ages, the Holocaust could not be looked at with any significant historical delay. It is much easier to cope with injustices committed by their ancestry centuries earlier, but how does one tell their children that they supported, participated in, or were apathetic to the organized, mechanized,
macro-scale murder of the Holocaust? How does someone look in the mirror and say, “I am a
murderer,” even if by default? Such has been the challenge for Germany since the arrival of the
Allies in 1945; upon their realization that the Nazi dream had turned into a European nightmare.

Coined by the German historian Hermann Heimpel, the idea of the
Vergangenheitsbewältigung addresses the issue of coping with a disgraced history; according to
Dr. Tobias Freimüller, the phrase means “to overcome, or to come to terms with the past.”¹

Denazification, the efforts to remove all traces of Nazism from German society and politics was
aided by the Allied involvement in post-War Germany – but, as implied by the term
Vergangenheitbewältigung, Germans had a much larger task to undertake than ensuring Nazism
did not experience resurgence in politics. They must explain to themselves, and to their children,
how the Holocaust happened during their generation, and importantly, why.

This task, for many, was too tough of a pill to swallow. The Holocaust was not discussed
in great detail in West Germany during the years immediately following World War II and the
subsequent Nuremberg Trials. The 1950’s were a period of solemn reflection for West Germans;
those who came of age during the decade after the War had experienced serious poverty and
hunger during their youth, they also certainly had reason for disdaining politics and politicians.
Their apparent lack of faith in politics, historian Stuart Drummond suggests, gave the impression
to the international community that it was the “apathetic generation without ideals, concentrating
upon purely material questions and refusing to look back at the past or forward into the future.”²

Rather, Drummond argues that the behaviors of the 1950’s youth revealed their wary skepticism
of the Federal Republic, cautious that the welfare society would give out or prove disastrous as
they warily began the process of Wiederaufbau, or post-war reconstruction. Juxtaposed with the

¹Tobias Freimüller, “Is Vergangenheitsbewältigung Germany’s Most Successful Export?,”
Goethe Institute, translated by Chris Cave, http://www.goethe.de/ges/pok/dos/eros/erw/vgp/en2267663.htm (accessed April 14,
2012).
experiences of Germany during the 1940’s, West Germans experienced a cultural calm, a period that allowed for West Germans to forge a new, post-Holocaust identity, without actually confronting the Holocaust. Drummond says the youth were “a cool generation, free from romantic illusions, pragmatic and individualist, perhaps cynical and selfish but one not likely to fall victim to empty slogans and scholastic formulae.”³ They were, as much of the rest of the world, enjoying the seemingly calm post-War atmosphere, but ever cautious that it may end, especially as Cold War brewed. This rocky calmness would last until into the 1960’s and would be challenged by what Drummond saw as a new generation that may possibly have “anarchical outbursts in reaction against the suffocating atmosphere of the comfortable welfare society”.⁴ A new generation would come of age in the 1960s, and if the previous generation had been labeled apathetic, the youth in the 1960s would represent a stark contrast. Whereas the first post-War generation remained focused on reconstruction and stabilizing West Germany, the 1960s generation would come to confront the Reich-era population, their parents, professors, and politicians in whose conduct during the Nazi regime they saw serious moral blemishes.

Adolf Eichmann was a German National Socialist bureaucrat responsible for helping to facilitate the Holocaust; Israeli Mossad agents captured him in 1960 while living in hiding in Argentina. Eichmann was brought to Israel to be tried in a highly publicized trial that began in 1961. Eichmann was convicted and sentenced to death before an international audience. His trial and conviction were unique in that Eichmann had no direct interaction with the crimes of which he was convicted; rather, it was argued that he made it possible for the atrocities to occur, an accessory to the Holocaust. His trial, according to German academic Anat Feinberg, was the first to have the *Endlösung* or Final Solution at the center of the judicial proceedings, she writes of the difference between the Nuremburg trials and Eichmann’s, “the emphasis was put on war

³ Drummond, “West German Youth in the 1970s,” 360.
⁴ Drummond, “West German Youth in the 1970s,” 360.
crimes, crimes against peace and against humanity. The *Endlösung* was thus only a side issue. With Eichmann’s trial in the court peopled by survivors, the spotlight for the first time was on the crime against the Jews.”

Adolf Eichmann came to represent the greater German populace whose voluntary compliance with, or lack of resistance to, Nazi policies that made it possible for grave human rights violations to occur, Feinberg writes that “Eichmann has moreover become an archetype of the Nazi persecutor, or, as he is often referred to, an “administrative murderer.”

The social implications of this trial was profound, it created a distinct generational divide between the youth and the older generations. The elders were viewed by the youths as participants in the Holocaust, like Eichmann. According to historian A. Dirk Moses, “There is no doubt that many German children felt polluted, and even saw themselves as victims of their parents and grandparents.” To the perpetrator generation, the youths ascribed *Kollektivschuld*, an irredeemable collective guilt.

There developed a suspicion of authority and distrust of the ‘old’ institutions. The Eichmann trial effectively publicized and legitimized the widespread cultural guilt Germans were trying to escape. They had, in years previous, preferred to focus on restructuring and reestablishing a new Germany, but with the onset of the Eichmann trial, West Germans in the 1960’s were obligated to address their past. The youth would come to actively engage the older generations in debate and question their morality and rightful use of authority. They would come to see themselves as the ‘liberators’ of a Germany plagued by a hushed guilt. For their society to progress, they reasoned, collective sins must be amended for, and future instances of authoritarian control must be resisted. To counter the stigma that the people of Germany had ‘lost their way’, and the nation was therefore ‘abnormal’, Chancellor Helmut Kohl said of the

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generation, “The young German generation does not regard Germany’s history as a burden but as a challenge for the future. They are prepared to shoulder their responsibility. But they refuse to acknowledge a collective guilt for the deeds of their fathers.”

Their tools would be public displays of discontent, and eventually, violent resistance to what they perceived to be a continuation of Nazi-era politics and racially based economic and cultural imperialism.

If the 1950s generation had been contemplative, and a generation of political wariness, the 1960s generation would prove to be a conscious stark contrast to such behavior. Michael Schmidtke believes the new generation became political as a result of a modernized consumer culture, “New mass consumer products like magazines, radio, and especially television created a profound change in living conditions – and fostered a mass media which reinforced the message of an awakening youth faced with an older generation of conservative politicians.” New media allowed for individuals and groups, who were less established than political parties, to dispense their views and message. Not only was the greater population confronted with images and broadcasts regarding domestic politics and international affairs, like the war in Vietnam, they also offered social critics of an alternative perspective to express their views. They felt a need for their own voice, one not controlled by the older generations who did not align with their beliefs.

The gap between generational politics can be seen with the group Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund (SDS), the youth group of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). The SDS heartily denounced their political elders hostile attitudes toward communism. Both their party and the opposition were guilty, SDS members believed, of continuing political traditions that had previously doomed Germany. Michael Schmidtke believes that the student movement identified the vehement anti-communism of the older generation to be intimately tied to anti-Semitism,

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“they held anti-communism responsible for a lack of critical opposition within the SPD and in the entire German political system,”

the lack of opposition that Schmidtke writes of is what the youth saw as their parent’s generations seemingly compliant behaviors with the rise of the authoritarian Nazi party politics, whose first victims were communists. Thus, when the SDS saw their parent party, the SPD abandon their Marxist position at the Party Convention in 1959, students were outraged and felt as if their concerns were not being supported by the SPD.

The view was different from atop the leadership of the SPD, they saw their transformation from a strictly workers party to a more inclusive socialist party as a necessary move to stay competitive in politics. The SPD had been defeated in multiple elections of the 1950’s, and to maintain a presence in government, they dropped their more radical positions in order to reduce the differences between their party and the Christian Democrats (CDU). The political union of the SPD and CDU became known as the Great Coalition. The Coalition was necessary, Schmidtke believes, because of political changes made to the Constitution of 1949. The new Constitution of the Federal Republic required that for a political party to participate in Parliament they needed to attain a minimum of 5% of the popular vote, which limited the number of parties that were represented in Parliament. The intention of this clause was to prevent faction groups from entering Parliament, thereby hoping to eliminate the introduction of extremist policies. The 5% rule came to pass legislation as a result of the increase in the political power of the Parliament and decrease in the power of the president, according to Schmidtke, “the reason was the failure of the Weimar Republic and the experience of Nazism.”

Despite the reduction in the President’s powers, the youth saw the drawbacks in the constitution, the concentration of power afforded to the major political parties, a fear that was, for them, embodied in the Great Coalition.

10 Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 80.
11 Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 78.
In addition to what they perceived as a dangerous concentration of power, the youth believed that the Coalition was taking a step backwards to the Nazi past by accepting Kurt Georg Kiesinger as Chancellor. Kiesinger was a government official in the Third Reich government, and his appointment as Chancellor was seen as a step backward and a failure of West Germany to wholly de-Nazify. Coupled with displeasure for former-Nazi officials openly participating in politics were the student’s concerns over the new statutes for the revised Emergency Powers. In Schmidtke’s article, he writes “Critics complained that the legislative process for these laws was similar to the 1930s, giving excessive powers to the executive, and this prompted a growing backlash against the laws.” The Emergency Powers afford the president, in emergency times such as war, a much broader range of powers and limited checks and restrictions on his office. Author Hans Magnus Enzensberger gave a speech at an anti-Emergency Power conference, proclaiming that the Powers were likely to be abused by capitalists to maintain their political and cultural sway, “the rule of a tiny minority, the rule of capital, can no longer be upheld by any other means.” Enzensberger predicted that intellectuals, students and workers would unite to protest the Emergency Laws, “They will play deaf and dumb…until we, together with the students and the workers, go out on the street and express ourselves a little more clearly. On the street there are no celebrities anymore, and we don’t need an admission ticket for a strike.” The SDS came to see itself as the only platform left for open dialogue on communist interests and anti-authoritarian politics. In 1961 they severed their official ties with SPD and continued to operate independently. Students saw themselves, along with intellectuals, as revolutionary groups that would one day march alongside workers to bring about the Revolution promised by Karl Marx.

12 Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 79.
An American, C. Wright Mills, a sociologist at Columbia University popularized the position that students and intelligentsia would be members of the revolutionary class. In 1960, he composed his “Letter to the New Left” where he wrote that students and enlightened academics were beginning to escape their political and social apathy. Michael Schmidtke assessed the “Letter to the New Left” and it’s impact on student organizations, and he asserts that it was fundamental in creating a disjuncture within the Left, between the Old and New schools. Petra Rethmann too saw this disjuncture as a defining moment for members of the academia culture, a moment that “allowed students and intellectuals to break with the identity of a particular social group with particular self-interests and accede to something larger: a flight from social determinations, from the routine life of the student or even the worker.”

The New Left movement in West Germany was headed by social critics such as Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich and together, with the students, turned their collective power against the university system, which was seen by many as a relic of the authoritarian days of Nazism; according Konrad Jarausch, together, “they attacked the ‘brown past’ of many professors and began to rail against poor educational conditions.”

The Old Left, believed to be comprised of complacent and appeasable professors, was challenged by the New Left and the organized students for greater academic freedom in curricula and more democratic administration procedures that would allow for greater student input, as student Uwe Bergmann wrote as a student in 1966, “We are more concerned that decisions affecting students be made democratically and with student participation…it is about dismantling oligarchic rule and implementing democratic freedom.”

At a particular university senate meeting at the Free University of Berlin on June 22, 1966 the

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student representatives organized several thousand students to congregate outside the meeting hall. It was their intention to show their interests and desire for involvement in making university policy on with the involvement of the students. When the professor representatives refused to participate in open discussion with the congregated group, three thousand students and academic allies marched into the meeting hall and occupied the building. Within a few hours, the academic senate had agreed to more open discussion and student participation in academic affairs. The success of the first ‘sit-in’ style protest in West Germany set off a sentiment amongst youths that ‘action achieves ends’. Bermann would say of this success, “This is about viewing freedom in the university as a problem that points beyond the realm of the university itself.”

It was time, Uwe and other students felt, to take their politics to the streets.

In attempts to take their successful ‘triumphs’ over the injustices in the university system further, student protest leaders like ‘Red’ Rudi Dutschke advocated the use of direct action, public displays of protest which “aimed to create situations where power structures would be unveiled, and where participants would define themselves independently from authority.”

Authority became synonymous with repression, and “repression in advanced capitalist societies was not just a matter of police and the courts. It was inherent in all institutions. In schools, corporations, culture … Society limited its members and prevented them from realizing

18 Bergmann, “The First ‘Sit-In’: Revolt against Rule by Professors,” 1 – 2.
19 Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 83.
that there might be alternative ways of living.”\textsuperscript{20} A significant source of this authoritarianism was the culture industry whose consumers, they argued, were “given the semblance of free choice while they reinforced the ideology through which they were enslaved.”\textsuperscript{21} The position of the individual man in a capitalist society was marred by the materialism that is inherent to the capitalist system; critics believed that the consumer materialism manipulated man into becoming complacent with being a member of the populace herd. By reducing man to a purchaser and a number in a crowd, the culture industry was effective in creating a “subconsciously ‘uniformed’ mass-man, lacking autonomy and thus capable of authoritarian surrender to powers.”\textsuperscript{22} The culture industry was keeping people preoccupied with the promise of new goods, while behind the scenes, they continued to exploit both consumer and workers.

An interesting consideration that has been noted by some academics is that the leaders of this anti-materialist culture were oftentimes the consumers of the American corporate products they publicly denounced. Horst Krüger observed of the participants in the 1968 protest generation, “Although they protest the forms of consumption of a society of abundance, they remain its creatures and creations.”\textsuperscript{23} A culture of the counter-culture had developed, and it was an example of hypocrisy and faddism in the movement, Konrad Jarausch notes, “entrepreneurs discovered the youth market, commercializing rock music, t-shirts, and other accoutrements, and, as a result, exploited the alternative lifestyle for their own gains.”\textsuperscript{24} Despite the contradictions over their anti-materialist, anti-consumption stance, Krüger writes of the generation with faith, that they may represent a new ‘international Germany’, “Never before was youth in Germany so resolutely and, at the same time, so convincingly young. This is an astonishingly beautiful

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\textsuperscript{20} Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 81.
\textsuperscript{21} Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 81.
\textsuperscript{22} Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 82.
\textsuperscript{24} Konrad Jarausch, \textit{After Hitler}, 174.
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generation of those very Germans still labeled as ugly throughout the world. In subscribing to the international fashion trends, the youth were taking steps away from anything that would have been distinctly German, preferring to embody the image of the internationale, they were “a bit of Paris, a bit of Greenwich Village, a bit of Swinging London; lively, hip.” They wished to distance themselves from things uniquely German, so as to shed-off the stigma and guilt inflicted on Germans by the international community.

These new fashions were not inexpensive but could be afforded by the new West German population. The 1960s-70s became prosperous times for the Federal Republic, on both the national GDP level and for individual households. M. Rainer Lepsius, a sociologist in the FDR claims that, “opinion polls from 1969 and 1972 indicate that roughly 60 to 70 percent of those questioned assessed their own economic situation as good, and only about 10 percent rated it as poor.” With the new economic and social policy plans made after the close of the Second World War, “poverty is no longer the collective fate of an entire social class,” as both a product and a contributing factor of this affluence, there were more students enrolled in the universities. Michael Schmidtke notes that the number of students who entered college increased, from 195,000 in 1960 to 281,000 by 1966. This was not only a period of unprecedented college enrollment in the Federal Republic, but also a time where intelligentsia were introducing new and ‘daring’ concepts to their teachings.

Building off of the New Left movement officiated by C. Wright Mills, German academics explored more the various brands of communism, studying Stalinism, Maoism and the Cuban Revolution for example. In an interview with Der Spiegel, student leader Rudi Dutschke

29 Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 78.
encouraged universities to add a regiment of new courses that would raise global consciousness to aid in the development of international communist student solidarity, “We have to see very clearly that our chance to revolutionize the present order exists only in our consciousness-raising.”

Dutschke began encouraging students to examine their own society to identify social ills that indirectly perpetuated global authoritarianism, such as the German factories that aided the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. U.S. involvement in Vietnam was seen by some as a racially motivated imperial struggle that was playing itself out in a genocide. It was the duty of the students to raise the working class out of their state of apathy, to recognize that the capitalist war machine had exploited them, as Dutschke preached, “we have to pit our bodies against the extermination machinery,”

the German factories that supplied the U.S. military with electrical components and chemical products that were used in Vietnam.

The West German youth were brought into the global anti-Vietnam War campaign by the calls of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, whom they identified as a hero of the Cuban Revolution, to “Create two, three, many Vietnams,” where they could fight racist, capitalist imperialism. They identified the anti-War movement as a collective responsibility of Germans in the Federal Republic to express resistance on behalf of their Vietnamese ‘comrades’. To student leaders like Rudi Dutschke the struggle of Vietnamese communists against the invading foreign power of the United States capitalist war machine was loosely similar to the fight of ethnic and political minorities in Germany in the 1930s. They felt that they needed to stand with those who resisted authoritarian, imperialist control. They sought to combat the prevailing defense that was criticized by social philosopher Herbert Marcuse, “I cannot judge that, the government knows

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31 Dutschke, “We Demand the Expropriation of Axel Springer,” 5.

32 Schmidtke, “Cultural Revolution or Cultural Shock,” 82.
better than I do, and you can’t do anything about it anyway.” Just as was said during the times of increasingly austere Nazi politics, those who dissented from government opinion felt that things were beyond their control, and that they were not in a position to criticize things that they were told they could not understand. For men like Marcuse and Dutschke, fighting racist imperialism in Vietnam was much more than a political expression, it was the moral duty of man, and especially for Germans who had, in their complacency, committed serious injustices.

Marcuse wrote,

In history there is something like guilt, and there is no necessity – neither strategic nor technological nor national – that could justify what is going on in Vietnam: the slaughter of the civilian population, of women and children, the systematic destruction of foodstuffs, carpet bombing of one of the poorest and most defenseless countries in the world – that is guilt and we must protest against it even if we believe that it is hopeless, simply in order to survive as human beings and perhaps to make a dignified existence possible for others, perhaps only because it could possibly shorten the terror and the horror, and today that is already a great deal.

When Dutschke was asked by Der Spiegel if he preached violence, he replied, “To call for violence, for murder, and killing in the cities of highly developed industrial countries – I think that would be wrong and virtually counterrevolutionary.” At a later point in the interview, he sought to clarify his position on violence, he suggested that when the State uses violence to confront the righteous, the protestors, they should retaliate with violence, for if done in defense of the moral, the acts would ultimately be excusable, he said, “Violence is an element of rule and has therefore to be answered from our side with demonstrative and provocative counterviolence. The form of the response is determined by the form the conflict assumes.” Protests should turn to violence only as a defensive strategy, Rudi believed, and should not be utilized as a tool, for it would prove to be counterproductive and hypocritical. However, there were those within the

35 Dutschke, “We Demand the Expropriation of Axel Springer,” 5.
36 Dutschke, “We Demand the Expropriation of Axel Springer,” 5.
protest movement who would heartily disagree with Dutschke on this contention, and over this
difference, the protest movement would become the resistance struggle.

Leftist journalist Ulrike Meinhof would be one such dissenter from Dutschke’s ‘violence
when necessary’ position; she would utilize her writings and social power to convince protestors
to commit themselves to open resistance. In her column in the alternative magazine *konkret*,
Meinhof loosely quoted slain American Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, “Protest is when I
say I don’t like this and that. Resistance is when I see to it that things that I don’t like no longer
occur. Protest is when I say I will no longer go a long with it. Resistance is when I see to it that
no one else goes along with it anymore either.”

Meinhof would use her column to laud the
increasingly militant and violent student protests, seeing the youth rebellion as a revolution, “for
real, not just symbolically.” With a detectable degree of excitement and passion, Meinhof
stated, “the fun is over…now that the shackles of common decency have been broken, the
discussion on violence and counterviolence can and must be started anew.”

Ulrike Meinhof would be joined in the promotion of anti-State violence by a student protestor, Gudrun Ensslin,
who proclaimed, “Make it clear that the revolution will not be an Easter stroll.”

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37 Ulrike Marie Meinhoff, “From Protest to Resistance,” In *Konkret*, no. 5 (May 1968), p.5,
40 Gudrun Ensslin, “‘Build up the Red Army!,” June 5, 1970, translated by Allison Brown,
join Meinhof and Andreas Baader in the formation of *Rote Armee Fraktion*, or the Red Army Faction, a domestic terrorist group that in the 1970s would wage an international campaign of fear and violence in the name of global solidarity.

In Ensslin’s call to build up the Red Army, she rallied that, “You have to make clear that it’s social democratic bullshit to claim that imperialism along with the whole filth can be undermined, duped, overpowered, intimidated and eliminated without a fight.”\(^\text{41}\) Violence was more than just an appropriate response to violence from the state – it was essential for the resistance movement to continue their struggle, for Ensslin believed, “any dialogue between us and the generation of Auschwitz is impossible.”\(^\text{42}\) The Red Army Faction found their supporters; many of whom had been members of the protest movement and had felt the stinging blow of violence at the hands of the police. One such RAF member testified of his experience at a student protest, “I saw a policeman with a white helmet who was running with his bludgeon…I got one over the shoulder…and I have to say, this hit was my awakening.”\(^\text{43}\) The police use of the *Schlagstock*, a riot baton, gave the impression to protestors that the police were present at the protest for more than maintaining peace and order, and that instead, they had shown up prepared to battle.

After Andreas Baader was captured by the police and put into jail, Ulrike Meinhof along with other members of the Red Army Faction devised a plot to spring him from detention. Using weapons, and killing a guard in the process, the RAF was forced to go underground to avoid capture, especially for Meinhof, who was a well-known public figure. The Red Army Faction would continue their anti-State campaign underground, with a string of terrorist attacks financed by bank robberies. They would bomb the institutions of the Federal Republic government, the

\(^{41}\) Ensslin, “Build up the Red Army!,” 2.
\(^{42}\) Rethmann, “On Militancy, Sort Of,” 76.
\(^{43}\) Rethmann, “On Militancy, Sort Of,” 76.
conservative press, and symbols of material culture. They would receive militant training from a cell of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and would conduct numerous acts of terrorism, including political assassinations, over the course of several years, culminating in the organized hijacking of a Lufthansa passenger plane as a dramatic, but unsuccessful, effort to get Meinhof, Ensslin, Baader and other members of the RAF out of jail. According to Konrad Jarausch, “This Red Army Faction proved capable of shaking the Bonn Republic but never came close to bringing it to its knees.”

The terrorist attacks, which were originally defended by the intellectual class as “a kind of armed defense against neo-Fascist tendencies” would come to hurt their movement, and the RAF were criticized and delegitimized by popular beliefs that their cause and actions had turned them into the very oppressive, militant forces they sought to eliminate from society. Enamored by their power and potential to cause fear throughout society, the RAF pushed the bounds beyond the tipping point, and,

What had begun so full of hope, what had suddenly made the world seem so ‘young’ again: the rediscovery of humanity, the feeling of being connected

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44 Jarausch, After Hitler, 175.
45 Jarausch, After Hitler, 175.
globally, the return to individuality, spontaneity, and the power of the human will to move mountains – all of this went off like fireworks. The public believed they had gone too far, and there when the group planned the hijacking of the airliner, support for anti-State quickly diminished, both in the public eye and within the group itself. The resistance movement had run its course by 1975, things in the Federal Republic began to assume an air of calm, of normalcy; political scientist Bernd Guggenberger believed that in 1975, “the unusual sobriety actually points more to exhaustion than to a deceptive calm before a new storm. The revolutionaries are tired, sad, disillusioned. In the end, it is more draining to be against everything than to totally subordinate yourself to one idea, one mission.”

If the Red Army Faction was unsuccessful in achieving global solidarity and communist revolution, they were successful, along with the more general student protest movement, in promoting free and open speech, public demonstration, governmental criticism, denouncing superficiality and supporting equality and global justice. Their violence was so much more than a generational rebellion, it was a revolution against the oppression and authority that had been misused in the previous generations to commit horrible atrocities that the youth in the 1960s and 1970s vowed to resist. It was not just a rejection of established systems, but a resistance to an established system that perpetuated a cycle of fear, hate and injustice that Germany had had more than its fill of. Their methods were illegal, controversial, and murderous – but in their eyes, so were those of the State and established systems. In the opinion of Michael Schmidtke, the protest and resistance movements “could be considered the birth of a previously missing democratic culture in Germany.”

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Images:

