# Defining “1968” in German Political Culture

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## Abstract

*This article uses the West German experiences of the late 1960s to analyze the discursive process through which historical narratives are formed and develop over time. While a multitude of perceptions and interpretations of events may exist, only a handful of competing narratives shape public memory of those events. Engagement, Access and Audience determine which of the many varied interpretations of an event or events will emerge as dominant narratives or "history." The author examines the evolution of "1968" in German political culture from experience to history, and from narrative to myth and suggests new directions for the negotiation of the meaning of "1968" in a now unified Germany.*

**Search Terms:** Germany, Student Movement, Memory, Extra-parliamentary Opposition, Sixty-eighters

## 1. Introduction

Although historians often speak of “facts,” the progression from experience to memory to history is not always a straightforward or simple one. In a 2001 article in the newspaper, *taz,* Dirk Knipphals noted the curious interplay between memory and history (Knipphals, 2001). In his memories, Knipphals recalled the West German student movement's "hero worship" of theorist Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s and the intensity of the moment when he spoke at the Free University. Archival photos presented a different historical “truth.” Rather than appearing hypnotized by the speaker, the crowd seemed bored and distracted. Knipphals’ recollections of this specific event had been influenced by historical narratives that sought to give meaning and coherence to the period (White, 1987). Student movements around the world recognized the importance of controlling the terms of the discussion. In West Germany, the Extra-parliamentary Opposition (APO) argued that Axel Springer Press controlled a veritable monopoly on the press and deliberately manipulated public opinion to forward its causes. Thirty years later, critics like Hubertus Knabe (2001) and Kurt Sontheimer (2001) accused the 68ers themselves of having established a monopoly on meaning (*Deutungsmonopol*) with regards to 1968. When 1960s icon Rudi Dutschke stood at the grave of RAF terrorist Holger Meins and declared, “The struggle goes on!,” it is doubtful that he had in mind the discursive battle over the meaning of 1968. Nevertheless, the significance of 1968 lies as much in the cultural realm of discourse surrounding “1968” as in the events of the late 1960s themselves. Indeed, the struggle to shape and define the meaning of 1968 for future generations continues and has made “1968” a much more important signifier in German politics than the scale of events would suggest.

The image of Rudi Dutschke offers a good example of shifts in the narratives of 1968. Already a media favorite, the assassination attempt of April 1968 catapulted Dutschke to martyr status and erased many memories of political infighting within the APO. To the right he embodied the protest movement, and to the left he was a fallen hero. The ambiguity of his philosophy on revolution and violence enabled many varied manifestations of 1968 to claim his message as their own. His recuperation period [after taking a bullet to the brain] removed him from the movement during its darkest days and thus preserved his image by distancing him from the narcissistic battles within the left. By the time of his death in 1979, Dutschke was seen as an integrating figure for the splintered German Left. In light of terrorist hysteria, Dutschke's image was sanitized of all leanings towards violence. Then in the 1980s, the martyr image gave way to a more realistic and balanced view of Dutschke's role in the APO (Chaussy, 1983). Still, most leftist writers describe Dutschke's death as a "consequence of the 1968 assassination attempt" while the conservative press simply writes that Dutschke "drowned in the bathtub." While both are true, the difference in emphasis is worth noting. In the 1990s, debates surrounding the youthful activities of Green Party politician and future Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, as well other debates of the period, the sanitized portrait of Dutschke prevailed. Little mention was made of Dutschke's own flirtations with terrorism which included in one instance transporting explosives in the lining of his son's baby carriage. And while more recent articles speak of the hypocrisy of 68ers, few mention Dutschke's own early employment, albeit brief, with arch nemesis Springer Press.

## 2. Setting the Parameters of the Narrative

At least three factors influence the negotiation of meaning and the development of public narratives from among the potentially infinite number of interpretations: engagement, access and audience. Nineteen sixty-eight is a battlefield over which and through which many battles have been, and continue to be, fought. First and foremost, a band of fighters must be assembled who have an interest in pursuing the struggle. Some voices remain silent, not because they are suppressed but because they choose to fight on other battlefields or not at all. Thus for example, leading feminist periodicals such as *Emma* and *Courage* typically have not commemorated 1968 anniversaries and have rarely addressed issues arising from "1968." Bernd Rabehl lamented in 1985 that he could not interest more women in participating in a conference on the influence of the Socialist German Students' League (SDS) in German politics. In his closing report, he noted, "The main problem here seems to be that most women did not develop their political identity in the SDS, but this 'old boys club' (Männerverein) remained just a passing phase for them" (Rabehl, 1985).

Those who strive to preserve the memory of events, who participate in the negotiation of the narrative, have a purpose which drives their actions. In order to endure in public memory, the story must remain relevant to current contexts and discourses. Thus the individuals and groups which negotiate the narrative will emphasize those aspects of the story which serve their purposes while still limiting themselves to a set of commonly accepted "facts." And the contours of the narrative and the trends in interpretation will change as the political and social context changes.

Then there is the question of access to an audience which combines both the question of the means of communication as well as authenticity. In the late 1960s and through the 1970s, the radical left was at a clear disadvantage with regards to media access. Through provocative acts they gained the attention of the instruments of mass media, but they did not control them. Conservative Springer Press and the left-liberal media (*Spiegel, Zeit, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Rundschau*, etc.) thus played a significant role in the early shaping of the narrative, its "key" events, symbols, and leaders. By the 1970s, a generation of intellectuals politicized in the Socialist German Student League (SDS) had embarked on the "long march through the institutions," and used their academic credentials to speak through the mouthpiece of the scholarly and publishing world.

Even the attainment of a platform from which to speak does not ensure a receptive audience however. While interested in the successes and failures of 1968 and more than willing to defend their views, the Marxist-Leninist cadre groups (K-Gruppen) failed to convey their message to the broader public. Using heavy-handed Marxist jargon, these bourgeois leftists ignored the real experience of German workers and were rarely able to make their arguments intelligible to those outside their own ranks (Schmeier, 1969). In the end the K-Groups were unable to contribute greatly to the formation of narrative or to the ongoing dominant discourse because they were incapable of engaging other participants (Negt & Kluge, 1972, 1973). They remained isolated in a parallel discourse which would fade into virtual obscurity by the late seventies. In an attempt to rescue the anti-authoritarian movement in the troubled political context of the 1970s, the K-group movement and terrorist offshoots were transformed the moderate Left into deviant patterns of regretful impatience, which contributed to the demise of the real "'68" project. The liberal/SDS narrative resonated better within the broader leftist milieu.

## 3. From Experience to Narrative Past

Initially, the youthful rebels of 1968 renounced literature as meaningless for politics. Writers were encouraged to forego their poems, novels, and carefully considered theoretical tracts for pamphlets, flyers, and broadsheets, and the "literature of action" (Hahn, 1978). The form and style of "literature in action" conveyed the nonconformist, confrontational attitudes of the period. Critics, on the other hand, attacked the diffuse style of the protest movement as self-contradictory and theoretically inconsistent. While conservative critics responded in kind to the flurry of document collections, they never developed a corollary to the Agitprop, street theater styles of the counter-culture.

As the calendar year 1968 came to a close, the revolution as "fun and dance" largely gave way to Marxist political categories. Even in music and theater, the tone changed. The days of the impromptu spectacles and documentary hodgepodge waned and totalizing theoretical conceptions emerged. People still marched in the streets, chanted slogans, sang protest songs, acted out plays, and compiled documentaries, but more cohesive narratives began to emerge, held together primarily by the glue of political theory (Kukuck, 1977).

As the movement itself fragmented, a number of competing strands of narrative interpretation of "1968" could be distinguished, but by the end of the 1970s, the two dominant strands had merged to present a more or less shared narrative framework. A SDS narrative highlighted the activities of the organization, placing it at the center of the movement (Fichter & Lönnendonker, 1977). The image of 1968 that emerged from the narrative portrayed a non-dogmatic, socialist, anti-authoritarian movement led by thoughtful leaders versed in both theory and praxis (Bauβ, 1977). Largely through a SDS-dominated academic configuring of the narrative, counter-cultural events developed an interconnectedness in political theories of anarchy and provocation. Sexual experimentation and new explorations in defining gender roles destroyed "bourgeois" class norms and rebelled against repressive authority. Counter-cultural events took on a new rational quality, and the counter-culture emerged less as a parallel movement in opposition to the overtly political goals of the SDS, and more as an integral (if not always preferred) part of the SDS campaign.

Debates over 1968 also drew upon liberal discourse over civil rights in Germany: the right to free speech, the right to demonstrate freely, and the assumption of innocence along with other legal protections, but also the limits of freedom (Habermas, 1969). In the narratives of liberalism, the pivotal demonstration of June 2, 1967 was not about the vices of the Shah or Third World politics but about the death of student demonstrator Benno Ohnesorg, and the freedom of his killer, police officer Karl-Heinz Kurras, became inextricably linked to the detention (*Untersuchungshaft*) of counter-culture icon Fritz Teufel. The demonstrations of Easter weekend 1968 following the attack on Rudi Dutschke were not so much about assailant Josef Bachmann or his victim, but about press baron Axel Springer and the issue of press monopoly. These narrative interpretations emphasized freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom from arbitrary arrest and other civil rights championed by liberalism.

## 4. The Conservative View

Conservatives used the political theoretical model of narrative much more than the "literature of action," literary novels, or even traditional historical narrative. With the exception of conservative institutional histories, conservative treatments of 1968 devoted little time to examining the events of 1968 in chronological progression. Two main theories of conservative analysis emerged. The first focused on the question of governability and typically looked at security issues, escalating violence and the growth of terrorist organizations. (Horchem, 1974, 1975; Langguth, 1976; Becker, 1977) The second conservative theory of the social implications of the student movement described in pessimistic tones various concerns over the perceived downfall of western values and ultimately western culture. Older conservatives were joined by former liberal intellectuals, who having personally felt the wrath of vehement student criticisms, took a decidedly conservative turn in their political positions. These neo-conservatives criticized "1968's" lack of respect for western values and traditions (Löwenthal, 1970), its dangerous utopian delusions (Scheuch, 1968), and its unacknowledged authoritarian and undemocratic tendencies (Lübbe, 1978; Schelsky, 1975).

## 5. The Cultural Turn

By its tenth anniversary, 1968 had become history. A canonized list of "key" events emerged, and the number of competing narratives decreased as Marxist and anarchist versions faded into obscurity, and a merger of SDS and liberal narrative interpretations stood to counter a conservative cultural critique. The historicization of 1968 was also in part a sign of the victory of the SDS/liberal narrative because it generally ended with the dissolution of the SDS and thus separated the student movement and the "true" 1968 from the terrorist activities of the 1970s. It was at this point in 1977-78 that the term "1968" as symbol or catchword and "68ers" entered popular vocabulary providing that same sense of closure and limited focus which was not found in other terms for the period (student movement, APO, youth rebellion, cultural revolution). It reflected both the disillusionment of the Left at the end of the 1970s as well as the desire of key figures in narrative formation to preserve a positive evaluation of leftist activities in the late 1960s.

But just as the SDS/Liberal narrative coalesced, a new counter-narrative was emerging. As the 1970s progressed, the Left itself began to reflect upon its radical past. An atmosphere of despair and political weariness shifted the thrust of narratives away from analysis of society as a whole to personal accounts of political transformation (Baumann, 1973; Vesper, 1977). The individual re-emerged from the collective consciousness of theory and ideology. Abstract theories and goals were replaced with everyday experience and popular culture (Buselmeier, 1977; Mosler, 1977; Stefan, 1973). In the late 1970s and 1980s, the dominant narrative form with regards to the story of 1968 continued to follow an individualized biographical model, creating an alternate narrative of heterogeneity, in stark contrast with the sometimes forced solidarity of earlier days (Fraser, 1988). Recounting the desire to belong, the inspirational attributes of music, a youthful rebelliousness, and the excitement of the moment, the biographical narratives combined many of the elements of the two earlier trends of the counter-cultural and political narratives. The personal experience, however, generally ended in frustration, disillusionment, and a new search for meaning (Cohn-Bendit, 1987; Horx, 1989; Mundemann, 1988). To them, 1968 was seen as a failed project. That sense of loss and despair in some ways also inadvertently contributed to the growing conservative trend against 1968.

## 6. From Narrative to Myth

By the twentieth anniversary, 1968 was understood primarily as a cultural revolution. Both conservative and leftist myths of 1968 drew upon the concept of a basic transformation in the structure of personal values or a *Wertewandel* (Inglehart, 1977). When political themes emerged they were reduced to slogans and sound bites, bits of ritualized youth culture important not for their particular content but as relics of a culture of dissent, identifying marks of generational self-discovery (Siepmann, et al., 1984). The issues had been de-politicized. Newspaper retrospectives wrote of Vietnam, of the Prague Spring, and of the sexual revolution, but in terms removed from theoretical explanations or social criticism. Rather they were indicators of a *Zeitgeist* of rebellion (Mommert, 1984). This development could possibly be attributed to the continuing prevalence of the leftist biographical literature in discourse with conservative cultural critiques.

## 7. The Struggle for Relevance

The 1990s brought a profoundly different political context requiring a renegotiation of the meaning of 1968. A generational gap was already emerging at the end of the 1980s as the APO-Opas faced a younger generation which refused to accept uncritically their leadership of the left (Mommert, 1984; Zukka, 1984). With regards to the scholarly treatment of 1968, the torch has also been passed to a new generation of post-68er scholars. They bring to the debate a more detached theoretical approach which seeks to avoid much of the polemics which have surrounded the field (Schildt, et al, 2000). Thus the biographical model of the late 1970s and 1980s has returned to analytical, though less doctrinaire account.

In addition to the new voices brought to the debate by a younger generation, unification also added seventeen million East Germans. Since unification in 1990, efforts to craft a unified national narrative have also touched on 1968 (Schildt, et al, 2000). Konrad Jarausch and others have argued that in some ways the 1980s human rights movement in the GDR was a legacy of 1968, bringing together the alienation of GDR intellectuals in the aftermath of the Prague invasion and western post-materialist values of environmentalism, pacifism and gender equality (Jarausch, 1998). The West German left initially saw in 1989 the East German parallel to 1968 in the west, a rebirth and continuation of the democratic agenda of 1968. West German leftist grew disenchanted however, as East Germans quickly embraced capitalism and the political leadership of the Christian Democratic Union. In their disappointment, they continued to herald 1968 as a model of democracy which the former East Germans had yet to experience and in doing so substantiated their own distrust and sense of moral superiority over the former east. In a 1994 lecture in Berlin, Daniel Cohn-Bendit posed the question, “What separates Ossis [Easterners] from Wessis [Westerners]?” His response was, “1968.”

For their part, citizens of the former GDR have not embraced 1968. Few locals visit the Dutschke exhibition in his eastern hometown Luckenwalde's Kreisheimatmuseum. It attracts only West German 68ers (Karutz, 1996). Likewise in politics, Easterners like Joachim Gauck, Angela Merkl and Vera Lengsfeld have attacked the *Mythos* of 1968, noting that despite the rhetoric of the time, the Federal Republic was not a dictatorship and thus calling into question the 68ers justification of violence against the state. These Easterners resent the demand that they come to terms with their GDR past while Westerners, like politician Joschka Fischer, are allowed to dismiss their past, even their illegal activities (Knabe, 2001). Cora Stephan has described Fischer's response to criticisms of his youthful involvement of radical actions as yet another indication of the self-righteous authoritarian tendencies of the 68ers--claiming for themselves the right to determine what is right and wrong, who is friend and who is foe. "That frees one from the tedious process of democratic negotiation, which seeks to solve problems through established institutions and according to set rules" (Stephan, 2001). Indeed the call for critical self-reflection and a coming to terms with the anti-democratic and militant aspects of the 68er movement appeared to be drowning out positive appraisals of 1968 in the new millennium.

Perhaps even more problematic for the prevailing conception of 1968 was that unification seemed to prove Adenauer and Springer right. The magnet of western capitalism and liberalism eventually brought down the illegitimate eastern regime. When the Wall fell, the 68ers who had accepted the division of Germany and sought relations with the SED government of the East found themselves on the wrong side of the barricades. Scholars such as Axel Schildt (1995), Hanna Schissler (2001), and Robert Moeller (1997) began re-evaluating the previously discredited 1950s and placed the contributions of the 1960s in question. In this new political climate, the successors of Axel Springer attempted not only to restore Springer's reputation but continue his battles against both the 68ers and the GDR (Schwarz, 2008). Springer and other conservatives warned of communist subversion in the 1960s, noting the East German origins of many of the APO leaders. In the early 2000s, articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and Springer papers claimed that the SED and Stasi placed operatives within the Republikanischen Clubs and the SDS. While some acknowledgement from the left of limited interaction and funding had suggested that the SED sought to exploit and support the student movement whenever possible, Hubertus Knabe in his book *Der diskrete Charme der DDR* maintained that the SED inspired and directed some of the key campaigns of the APO, most notably the anti-Springer campaign (Knabe, 2001).

An odd manifestation of the new eastern dynamic is an attempt to push the blame for all the difficulties of the 1960s onto the GDR. On the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination attempt on Rudi Dutschke's life, Mathias Zschaler described the attack as "Ossi gegen Ossi," noting the Sachsen origins of Josef Bachmann in contrast to most earlier accounts which cited his Munich roots. The article noted further that another East German singer-songwriter, Wolf Biermann, wrote the now-famous song "*Drei Kugeln auf Rudi Dutschke*" (Three Bullets for Rudi Dutschke), which laid blame for the attack on Springer Press and the West German establishment (Zschaler, 1998; Kraushaar, 2000). When combined with attempts to further discredit the APO's critique of West German society and politics by tracing its roots to the communist regime of East Germany, it would seem that West Germany had no problems in the 1960s, except those that came from the East.

While the "long march through the institutions" had already placed 68ers in positions of power within the media, education, and numerous other areas of German culture, the late 1990s and the Red-Green coalition brought 68ers to the highest political offices. Again, 1968 became the battering ram of political jockeying. While conservatives had always connected the 68er movement with the developments of the 1970s, the left had spoken of effects but stopped short of calling them "68ers." Interestingly, these controversies seem to indicate that the chronology of "1968" has shifted into the seventies, erasing the *Schlussstrich* (strict line) drawn by SDS/Liberal narratives. In part, this may be the result of the coming to power of politicians whose biographies of leftist activity draw more upon the 1970s than the 1960s. The question then remains though, why are they defined as 68ers? Here one must draw upon the cultural definitions of the term during the 1980s. In the biographical narratives of the 1980s, 68ers spoke of the politicizing effects of popular culture and, as Detlef Siegfried has pointed out, the merger of popular music and politics really occurred in the 1970s. The same can be said of counter-cultural (hippie) fashions. Thus the year 1968 had shifted from being the end point of a history of SDS dissent and organization beginning with Bad Godesberg, to the beginning of the politicization of a wide array of young leftists who would later lead Germany. And as the controversies of the late 1990s proved, the 68er legacy served as a favored weapon of conservatives trying to regain control of the Bundestag.

## 8. Conclusion

As the 1950s find redemption and 1960s idealism slides into the troubled 1970s, a few defenders of 1968 remain (Semler, 2001). What’s left? The contours of "1968" as a caesura in German history seem to be eroding. Conservatives speak of a monopoly on meaning (*Deutungsmonopol*) which has established a positive interpretation of 1968 and the protest movement as a crucial stage in the democratization of Germany. But a pervasive cynicism on the left observes that nothing has changed significantly. A 2001 *taz* chronology examined West Germany's history since the 1960s and found little left other than sex, kitsch, commercialization, scandal and status quo (Eine Subjektive Chronik, 2001). If "1968" did help liberalize Germany, was that merely a coincidental by-product of movement? And what is one to make of the legacy of 1968 when one examines the 68ers themselves? Have they sold out? What of Joschka Fischer in his Armani suit lamenting the "errors of his youth" and sending German troops into the Balkans? What of Daniel Cohn-Bendit whose support of the Euro and market economy earned him the title "neo-liberal?" What of Horst Mahler, whose biography spans from APO lawyer to RAF founder to ultra-nationalist right-wing extremist (Block & Schulz, 2010)? Even more unsettling to existing categories of understanding might be the revelation that Karl Heinz Kurras (the police officer whose fatal bullet started the mass movement) was in the employ of the East German Stasi (*Spiegel*, 2009). Historical narratives are edited versions of a complex reality. As the fiftieth anniversary approaches, a new edition of the '68 story seems to be in the works, but it is unclear which voices will prevail in the re-negotiation of meaning. Michel Foucault wrote, "Discourse is power" (Foucault, 2004). Indeed it would seem, "the struggle goes on."

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