German students campaign for democracy, 1966-68

June 1966 to: May 1968

Country: Germany
Location City/State/Province: Berlin; nationwide

Goals:
To prevent the Kiesinger administration’s undemocratic reforms regarding universities and the right to use military force.
An end to police brutality, censorship of the press, and excessive executive power.
University reform and democratization.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 5th segment:
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 050. Teach-ins
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 179. Alternative social institutions → Critical Universities

Methods in 6th segment:

• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors → American SDS burns Nazi flag in show of solidarity
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 050. Teach-ins
• 173. Nonviolent occupation
• 179. Alternative social institutions → Critical Universities

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Defense
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

• Activists
• students
• workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Socialist German Student Union (SDS; Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund), Rudi Dutschke
Partners:
Union workers
External allies:
Students around the globe, American Students for a Democratic Society
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
American Students for a Democratic Society
- Unions
- Unions (Exit)

**Segment Length:** Approximately 4 months

**Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

**Opponents:**
Kiesinger administration

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Not known

**Repressive Violence:**
Police brutality led to the deaths of many protesters, including Benno Ohnesorg and Rudi Dutschke

**Success Outcome**

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
2 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
0 points out of 1 point

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
Part of the failure of the German student movement has been attributed to its attempt to take on too much—lacking a fixed agenda, they succeeded in the battle of gaining attention and recognition, but not the war of reforming the coalition government and actually achieving their many goals. The SDS, which had 2,500 active members at its peak in 1968 (it had 40 in 1966), was in decline thereafter, and disbanded in 1970. Others speak to the critical loss of the SDS leader, Dutschke, as responsible for killing the movement.

In 1966, faced with an economic recession, the two major West German political parties—Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Christian Democrats (CDU)—came together to form what came to be known as the Grand Coalition. Their decision to allow Kurt Georg Kiesinger of the CDU serve as chancellor proved controversial, as Kiesinger played an active role in the foreign ministry under the Third Reich. Many criticized the coalition as a step back for the German Federal Republic, and public opinion turned sour after the defense ministry jailed the publisher and the editor of German magazine Der Spiegel for printing detailed information of a NATO maneuver.

The Great Coalition’s reform proposals were criticized as well for their undemocratic nature. New statutes in the emergency laws, which regulated the use of force in times of crisis such as war, appeared to give excessive power to the executive branch. Their proposal to reform German universities and make the nation more competitive ignored students, who demanded a voice in the procedure. Students resisted changes that allowed the government to limit graduation requirements in order to produce more graduates faster as a part of its economic plan.

On 22 June 1966, 3,000 students from the Free University of Berlin staged a sit-in below the window of the hall where the
school senate, consisting of the rector, professors, and other college administrators, was holding a meeting on proposed resolutions such as limiting class requirements and giving administrators enhanced powers to expel. The students demanded inclusion of the student senate in the proceedings and transparency. The students then passed a resolution themselves in which they demonstrated the need to democratize the university system and society in general. The students were not simply fighting for the right to study longer in school or express themselves. “...We are more concerned that decisions affecting students be made democratically and with student participation...What is going on right now in Berlin is a conflict...the main point of which is neither longer periods of study nor increased vacation time. Instead, it is about dismantling oligarchic rule and implementing democratic freedom in all areas of society.” This action was successful, as the limitation-rule on class hours was not adopted at the Free University of Berlin.

The Socialist German Student Union (SDS; Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund) emerged as a leader of the German student movement. The SDS had been the ones to organize the first German sit-in on 22 June, and, inspired by their compatriots in the US, where University of California - Berkeley students successfully organized sit-ins to protest school censorship, they organized demonstrations and sit-ins on a variety of issues throughout 1966 and 1967.

The German student movement did not cohesively pick up until June 1967, however, when the Shah of Iran visited the Federal Republic of Germany. On 2 June, the SDS organized a march in Berlin in front of the opera, where the Shah was attending a performance, to protest the hypocrisy of the democratic German Federal Republic supporting a brutal dictator. Police, confronting the banned march, violently engaged the protesters, beating them. In the struggle, a police officer killed twenty-six year old student Benno Ohnesorg, who died from a shot to the head. A general outrage erupted at universities across the country. Nationwide, students protested police brutality, including 10,000 in Frankfurt, who organized a silent funeral march on 8 June, and another funeral procession in Berlin, where students created a convention on “Conditions and Organizations of Resistance.” On 13 June, 5,000 protesters gathered in Berlin. They walked in formation so that one protester was followed by fifty students, parodying a suggestion by the police department that there should be one officer for every fifty protesters to maintain order. By August, after months of protest, and under the duress of domestic and foreign pressure, the mayor of Berlin and the police chief resigned.

In the fall of 1967, students established Critical Universities within the existing university institution as a space to critique and reform higher education. The first Critical University was organized by the SDS at the Free University, from which it then spread throughout Germany. Students occupied classrooms conducting seminars on New Left Thought and education reform. These seminars declined beginning in June 1968 when students establishing a Critical University at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University were confronted by police called on by the administration. The success of dissuading the Goethe University students encouraged other university administrators to mimic this strategy.

The attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke, a leader of the SDS, on 11 April 1968, brought international recognition to the German student movement and their cause. SDS blamed Axel Springer, publisher of the tabloid Bild-Zeitung, for the murder, in inciting Josef Bachman, a radical neo-Nazi to kill Dutschke. In early 1968, Springer referred to Dutschke as “Red Rudi,” suggesting he had Communist affiliations, and labeled him a “public enemy” to the people. The paper was also reportedly biased against student activists long before, siding with the police after Ohnesorg’s death, and students had protested the paper ever since. On 14 April, 12,000 people marched in Berlin to protest Springer. Dutschke’s attempted murder (he recovered with extensive brain damage) sparked an international response, as students around the world protested in front of Springer publishing buildings or German embassies on 15 April in solidarity with the German students. The American Students for a Democratic Society, along with other student groups, called for rallies at Columbia University and New York University in New York City, and picketed at Springer’s office in Rockefeller Center, burning a Nazi flag at the demonstration.

In May, the German SDS joined activists and union workers to fight against proposed changes by the Kiesinger administration to the emergency laws. On the 11 May, 80,000 protesters gathered in the capital Bonn against the proposed legislature. When the government adopted limited concessions, however, union leaders were satisfied and withdrew, allowing parliament to pass the law on 30 May. This ultimately prevented further coordinated action between workers and students, and marked the beginning of a steady decline for the SDS and the German student movement.
Research Notes

Influences:

University of California Berkeley's protest against censorship as part of the Free Speech Movement showed German students the effectiveness of sit-ins as a form of protest (see University of California at Berkeley students campaign for freedom of speech, United States, 1964). (1)

Sources:


Bergmann, Uwe in “The ‘Sit-In’ as a Means for Reforming the University (June 22, 1966).” German History in Documents and Images.


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