

## Transatlantic Activism

U.S.-German relations in the age of Angela Davis

John Feffer | Global activism did not begin with the Internet. Long before Facebook and email, activists in the late 18th century created the first international human rights campaign, which was opposed to the slave trade. The first international antiwar movements began at the end of the 19th century.

But even in living memory, activists cooperated across national borders to achieve common aims. During the waning days of the Cold War, these movements challenged the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and NATO alliance policies in Western Europe. In this era of “slow media”—letters, mimeographed pamphlets, the occasional phone call—activists discovered that efforts coordinated across countries could add up to more than the sum of their parts.

In his book *The Other Alliance*, which studies student protests in West Germany and the United States, Martin Klimke, a fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., looks at one concrete example of international activism before the Internet age, which he calls “the global Sixties.” As he plumbs the depths of the countercultural transatlantic rela-

tionship, Klimke discovers that much of what we understand as the 1960s—the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the free speech movement—were international in perspective and origin. “Activists were inspired by each other’s protest, visited each other’s conferences, and imported new protest techniques and strategies to their local contexts,” he writes. Young Germans and young Americans, linked by their ambivalence toward middle-class culture and outrage at their governments’ actions, were at the center of the maelstrom of the global Sixties.

Much of the excitement and novelty of this era was the sense that “the whole world is watching.” Television was bringing the world into the living rooms of the middle class and increasingly shaping public opinion. Activists awoke to the realization that they were performing in front of cameras. The free speech demonstrations at Berkeley, the march on Selma, the massive antiwar gatherings in Washington, D.C.: These were American events, but they took place on a world stage. Elvis would demonstrate that America was not all about cultural conformity; Mario Savio atop a police



car in Sproul Plaza in Berkeley; Martin Luther King, Jr. in a Birmingham, Alabama jail; and Abbie Hoffman trying to levitate the Pentagon would all reveal that the United States was no political monolith either.

During the Cold War, in competition with the Soviet Union for hearts and minds, the U.S. government was particularly anxious about its reception in world opinion. Washington was concerned about a gap between professed values of justice and scenes of obvious oppression, such as police crackdowns in the south or at Kent State University in Ohio.

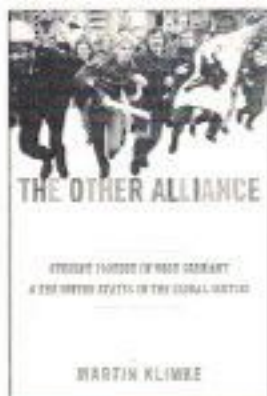
But when it came to foreign policy, Washington was even more vulnerable to outside perceptions. The United States depended on its allies for the war in Vietnam. And Germany, with its many U.S. military bases, was essential to the war effort. It was this military alliance that activists increasingly challenged during the 1960s, at first in parallel, and eventually conjoined efforts in the two countries. Despite geographic distance, a language barrier, and different cultures, as Klimke details in his book, West German and American activists during the 1960s kept in surprisingly close contact with one another. The German counterculture was deeply critical of U.S. government policies but, at the same time, transfixed by the alternative culture of America, its music and politics, its gestures and poses. It was an illicit love affair of which the parents did not approve.

The correspondences went far beyond the coincidence of names—the American Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the German Socialist Student League (SDS in German).

German activist Michael Vester, for instance, an exchange student at Bowdoin College in 1961, participated in the drafting of the famous Port Huron statement. German émigré thinkers—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse—profoundly influenced college students in the United States.

But as Klimke points out, the direction of influence usually flowed the other way. The Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, the increasingly radical Black Power movement, and the antiwar movement all profoundly shaped German activism. With the radicalization of African-American GIs stationed in Germany, these strains of activism began to converge by the end of the decade. In 1970, for instance, nearly 700 African-American active-duty soldiers visited the University of Heidelberg for a “Call for Justice Day.” A key link here was Angela Davis, an important Black Power figure who studied in Germany with Adorno in Frankfurt in 1965-67 and then with Marcuse in San Diego.

Inspired by Davis and others, the “other alliance” that was grounded in the politics of non-violence at the beginning of the 1960s became polarized by the end of the decade, with the Weathermen emerging in the United States and the Red Army Faction becoming even more prominent in Germany. Both groups translated the doctrine and tactics of Black Power into a form of “red power.” The broader transnational alliance began to break down as the movements in both countries fractured. More moderate activists in Germany, such as Joschka Fischer, found a home in mainstream politics, particularly inside the Green



Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton University Press, 2010)



Party founded in 1980. American activists, for the most part, remained politically homeless.

Even before the kidnappings and bombings that typified the violent turn of the 1960s, the U.S. and German governments were taking note of the transatlantic alliance of disaffected youth. As Klimke notes, more Germans were going to university as part of an international explosion of academic enrollment in key countries around the world that contributed greatly to the growth of social movements in the 1960s.

Some American officials believed that Germans still viewed America positively. In February 1968, for instance, 150,000 Germans turned out to support the official U.S.-German alliance, compared to a mere 7,000 Germans who participated in an anti-war demonstration in Berlin the previous October. But the German government helped to orchestrate the February rally. Underneath the surface, the alliance was indeed in trouble. As Klimke writes, the U.S. Information Agency witnessed one of the largest drops of public opinion in the history of its surveys when the number of Germans expressing a net favorable opinion of the United States dropped from 77 percent in January 1965 to 11 percent by December 1967. The United States shifted into high gear with a campaign to reach German youth through cultural programs and exchanges. These exchanges, and organizations such as the German Marshall Fund, continue to operate today.

The transatlantic alliance built from below by students and activists helped to define the global Sixties. It

helped to bring an end to the war in Vietnam (though Klimke does not detail this achievement). It also forced the governments of the United States and Germany to take the opinions of the younger generation seriously. Unfortunately, Klimke does not discuss the longer term implications of these ties. Did a memory of the alliance of the 1960s play a role in the 1980s when a new transatlantic alliance emerged to challenge NATO policy and help the nascent democracy movements in Eastern Europe? How did they contribute to an emerging global civil society that would embrace environmentalism and later challenge globalization?

In his conclusion, Klimke urges a broader look at the global Sixties that goes beyond Europe to include Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Such a broader comparative perspective is indeed necessary. But Klimke might have taken a slightly longer view of his primary subject, the relationship that emerged among young people in Germany and the United States during a tempestuous era. These young people grew up, and they were replaced in turn by a later generation of activists. The "other alliance" did not end in the 1960s. Even a brief glimpse of its future development would have given Klimke's book more resonance.



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