

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

BWB-4
West Germany's SDS--
Utopian Democrats (I)

Im Rosental 96
53 Bonn
West Germany
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The chaos at the annual delegates' congress of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (Socialist German Students), West Germany's most influential student organization, exasperated even their sympathizers. After four days of bickering over personal and political issues--during which the only concrete results were approving an analysis of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, tossing out five SDS "Stalinists," and littering the auditorium at Frankfurt's Wolfgang Goethe University Student House ankle-deep with cigarette and cigar butts, banana peels and orange rinds, empty beer and orange drink bottles--French-German revolutionary Daniel Cohn-Bendit took the microphone to remind his fellow radicals in scolding tones: "The Socialist German Students is a political society, not a group of wandervögel (idealistic wanderers). How is it possible," he asked, "to come to a delegates' conference without knowing what's to be done politically? This is surely not a convention of virgins!"

After the debacle in Frankfurt, West Germany's "bourgeois press" is not so sure. Even the liberal newsweekly Die Zeit, which has championed the students' pleas for university reform and against police brutality, is ready to write them off. "The permanent cultural revolution in their own ranks has paralyzed the SDS," wrote Kai Hermann of Die Zeit. "The German revolt is deserting its favorite child, the SDS. The avantgarde of yesterday threatens to become the footsore of tomorrow's protests."

Admittedly, the mid-September conference this year was remarkable for its non-achievement. Whereas the delegates' conference in 1967 had passed resolutions and statements covering sixty single-spaced typewritten pages, the 119 SDS delegates to this year's conference spent five days in pre-noon to midnight discussion on anti-authoritarian organization... and adjourned without choosing a new slate of national officers or even approving an action program for 1968/69. The final item of business was setting another date, two months hence, for a second stab at a fruitful delegates' conference.

German journalists, however, similarly brushed off the nation's most radical student group after the SDS delegates' conference in 1967.

"The collective frivolity as a unifying band, otherwise confusion and no new ideas, that is the position" of the SDS, wrote Siegmund Schelling of the Rheinische Merkur in September 1967. Then quoting Chairman Mao's exhortation to "know the enemy and know yourself, then you can fight a hundred battles without danger of a defeat," Schelling concluded that "the SDS knows neither the enemy nor itself."

Observers Schelling and Hermann surely overstate the case; the SDS-ers with whom I have talked are not tiring of the revolution so easily. Despite the plethora of opinions on political strategy and Marxist ideology among their ranks, SDS members are of one voice in insisting that their enemy is the post-capitalistic society, their goal the transformation of a "class and consumer society" into a "producer's democracy." In order to bring about the socialist revolution they believe will free the individual, they want to make modern man aware of his manipulation by, and lack of freedom within, our present-day authoritarian society. "Men should develop the ability," said Rudi Dutschke, the fiery 28-year-old sociology student who was the leading SDS theoretician until his attempted assassination last spring, "to comprehend society, and not let themselves be manipulated by it."

The SDS ideology is based on the Marxist interpretations of C. Wright Mills, Herbert Marcuse, German philosopher-sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and "Third World" revolutionary prophets Mao Tse Tung, Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. Having given up hope of changing the society of industrialized nations through a parliamentary system that is "immobile," which self-perpetuates the ruling class and anesthetizes the individual through mass media and the accumulation process, the West German New Left looks toward the guerilla fighters in the underdeveloped nations for impetus toward a direct democracy. Revolt in the Third World, say the SDS-ers, may shock the European working class out of their drowsy non-thinking contentment within the system and prepare the socialist revolution here. "One, two, many Vietnams" is an oft-heard cry.

If an industrialized, manipulated society is the enemy, then 1967/68 was not a year of paralysis but a year of success for the SDS. In the past year and a half, the German public has been continually confronted with student demonstrations, university occupations, sit-ins, go-ins, teach-ins. West Germany's Time-like news magazine, Der Spiegel, has devoted five cover stories to the nation's leftist students since June 1967. After Dutschke was seriously wounded on 11 April 1968, 45,000 students and young workers in twenty German cities stormed the streets in a "lost weekend" (Der Spiegel) of violent protest. Billy clubs, water cannons, tear gas and 21,000 police were turned on the demonstrators, and the casualty count reached 400 wounded, two dead. West European students mounted sympathy protests for the West German Genossen (comrades) in front of almost every German mission; in Rome the Italian students threw Molotov cocktails into the diplomatic Mercedes, in London a chorus yelled "Sieg Heil."

At the Socialist May Day celebration in Berlin, the SDS brought 25,000 sympathizers onto the streets; it was one of the few occasions when SDS and SED (the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands of East Germany) joined in common cause. In the week before the West German parliament

approved the emergency laws (which give a splinter parliament the right to govern in time of crisis), 150,000 SDS-spurred youth took over universities, interrupted theater performances to hold impromptu teach-ins against the proposed laws, and 70,000 staged a march on Bonn.

The street battles and university confrontations, wrote SDS ideologue Bernd Rabehl in a recent speech for Radio Free Berlin, serve a pedagogical purpose. "Only the provocation of the authoritarian state through the students and the enraged reactions of the police apparatus created a pre-revolutionary situation, destroying the identification of the worker with the society's authority and the security idiom." Such provocations, theorized Rabehl, a bearded, chubby, 30-year-old sociologist and successor to Dutschke as leading theoretician in the 490-member West Berlin SDS, should demonstrate both the political and existential components of the revolt.

"In the battle with the power organizations of the system, with the legal and social bureaucracy, with the police, with the justice machinery, and the industrial bureaucracies in the oligopolies," predicted Dutschke at the 1967 delegates' conference, "the sentimental-emotional rejection will evolve into an organized rejection, into practical critical knowledge, into revolutionary will, which will destroy the production strength that is taken for granted, the inhuman machinery of war and of manipulation, which day after day spreads death and terror in the world."

But university sit-ins and thousands on the streets do not make a revolution. A deepening chasm exists, in fact, between the radical students and public opinion. The SDS, itself a small organization with membership fluctuating between 2,800 and 3,000, can count on almost total support from other political student groups--the Humanistic Student Union (1,000), the Liberal Students (1,300), and the Social Democratic Students (3,000), plus 2,000 high school students in the SDS-sponsored Action Center for Independent and Socialist Students. But politically active students account for only a third of the 340,000 student population in West Germany and West Berlin. Four fifths of the nation's population, according to an independent poll taken after the Easter riots, oppose the student demonstrations.

Up to now, the SDS-ers have, in fact, antagonized the very group their Marxist ideology instructs them to proselytize--the working class. The more stridently the New Left cries about the evil manipulations of modern society, the more the middle-class German sinks back into his cocoon of prosperity and calls for Ruhe und Ordnung. The more the New Left bewails fascistic tendencies in the Establishment, the more the new proletariat reacts to produce the fascism they fear. And Professor Habermas, the philosopher-sociologist whose ideas helped to nurture the New Left of West Germany, now sees a danger of left fascism in the radical students.

"This reactionary theorem (student provocation of the Establishment)," said Rabehl, in the obscure language which clearly illustrates one reason why there is such lack of communication between students and workers, "did not affect the duality of the anti-authoritarian existential revolt of the



Rudi Dutschke, in leather jacket and carrying briefcase, leading the students' march at Vietnam Congress last February in West Berlin.

(Eric Meskauskas photo)

students and the theoretical interpretation of society's development."

Nor have the confrontations produced the hoped-for results within the SDS itself. The centralized organization needed to steer such SDS campaigns as opposition to the emergency laws resulted in the establishment of authoritarian figures within the student organization itself. "In the mass actions," said Rabehl, "the cultural revolutionary components of the anti-authoritarian revolt did not break through, which of necessity resulted in the SDS rebuilding itself into a middle-class type of organization with executive committee, leaders and followers."

The SDS first appeared in post-war Germany in mundane middle-class fashion. Founded in 1946 as the student wing of the Social Democratic party, the SDS was organized along SPD lines and financially supported by the party. When the "big brother" Social Democrats began to pursue a more moderate political line, following their acceptance of the Godesberg Program in 1959 which advocated re-arming West Germany and softened the SPD stand against atomic weapons, the SDS turned against the new SPD goals.

In 1960 the SPD announced it would financially support only those student groups which accepted the Godesberg Program, and in September of that year the Sozialdemokratischer Hochschulbund (Social Democratic Students) was formed as the party's new student wing. Right wing SDS-ers joined the new SHB, and the remaining members began their slow, steady movement to the left.

In the first independent years, SDS theoreticians concerned themselves primarily with university politics, offering in 1961 a program which is still accepted as the cornerstone for university reform, "Hochschule in der Demokratie." Lack of government response to the desperately needed educational reforms prompted SDS members to turn their attention to revolutionizing a society which no longer seemed able to reform itself from within by parliamentary processes. In 1965, the West Berlin SDS first took to the streets with non-violent demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and the proposed emergency laws. By 1966 the movement slowly was spreading to the Federal Republic, and when a policeman's bullet killed a West Berlin student on 2 June 1967, the anti-establishment protests among various student elements fused under the SDS banner.

"The earlier political work was done by perhaps ten percent of the SDS," said Peter Gäng, a gentle Free University philosophy student who is considered one of the SDS "authoritarian" figures. "Our politics until now was primarily to articulate the emotional opposition of students and young people to our society. For that we needed some persons who could speak well, who could vividly express these emotions." Dutschke was the most prominent. Now Gäng, Rabehl and Wolfgang Lefevre are among these so-called "authorities" in Berlin; in Frankfurt the articulators are Hans-Jürgen Krahel, 26, a philosophy student of Theodor W. Adorno; Karl-Dietrich Wolff, 26, a sociology student and the 1967/68 national president; and his brother Frank Wolff, 24, also a sociology student.

Participation in the street and university confrontations, however,

increased the confidence of the SDS fussvolk (footsoldiers). Gradually the political work was turned over to basis gruppen (cells) and ad hoc groups. "In the change-over," said Gäng, "the groups have become organized so that they no longer need speakers, but comrades who can do continual political work."

A discordant feedback from the fussvolk marked the "cultural revolution" which exploded at the September delegates' conference. The SDS "elite," led by the executive committee, managed to bulldoze through a resolution barring five traditionalist, Moscow-line members who had thwarted earlier internal SDS actions and who were ring-leaders in the communist-wing SDS delegation's actions at the World Youth Congress in Sofia against the SDS Vietnam demonstration and teach-in projects.

The expulsion of the five traditionalists is a barometer of how far left the SDS has veered within the past year. At the 1967 delegates' conference, Wanja von Heiseler ran as the conservative candidate for national president; Wolff, the final winner, was a middle-of-the-road president, an organization man chosen to avoid antagonizing the conservative wing. But the anti-authoritarian trend, the solidarity with revolutionary China, North Vietnam and Cuba instead of imperialistic Moscow, further isolated the "Stalinists." This year von Heiseler was one of those dumped by the conference "to put the conservatives on the defensive," as one SDS member told me.

"The executive committee," read the suspension resolution, "is clear in its decision that in the anti-authoritarian phase of the organizational measures require a special reason; particularly because the impression must not first be made that unpopular opinions are 'paid off' within the SDS in a Social Democratic manner. We are, however, of the opinion that the executive committee cannot react passively in a case that is not merely political but also obviously jeopardizes the action unity in SDS."

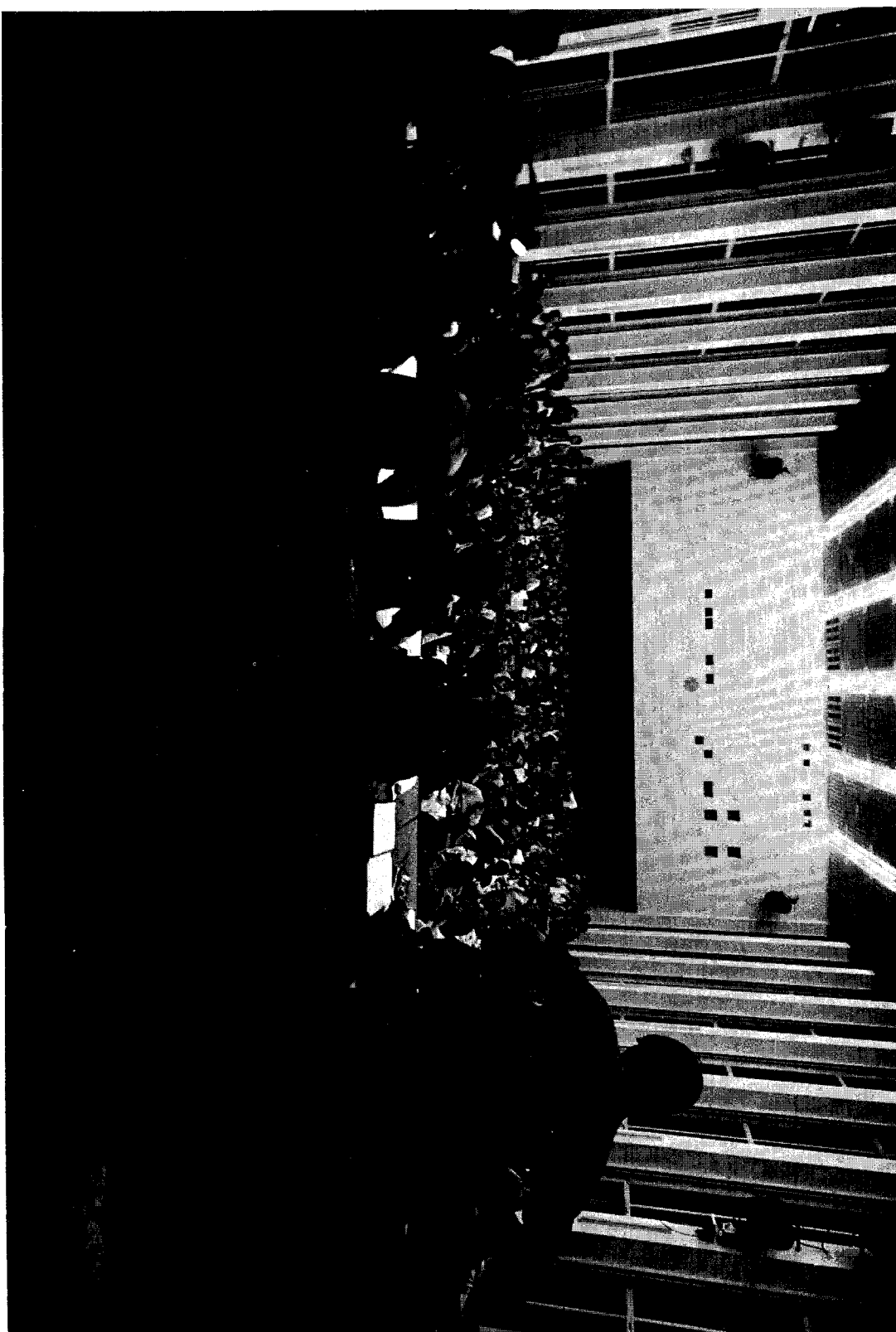
The delegates heatedly discussed the proposed expulsion for a day and a half, then, raising the pink cards which identified the voting delegates, they voted by two-thirds majority, on the second ballot, to okay the exclusion.

With the conservatives still recoiling from the slap, the anti-authoritarian foot soldiers took the stage. The most dramatic aspect of the rebellion occurred on the second day, after a slight, dark-haired SDS-ler from West Berlin named Helke Sander took the microphone to declare battle against the SDS men in a new fight for emancipation of women through a movement called "Action Soviet for the Freeing of Women."

"We cannot solve the social repression of women individually, we cannot wait until the times after the revolution, since a revolution in the political-economic sense only does not remove the suppression in private life...this has been proved in all socialist nations. We are striving for living conditions which remove the competition between women and men. This is possible only through the transformation of the

View from stage of the September delegates' conference of the

Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund
(Calle Hesslefors photo)



production conditions, and therefore the power conditions, through the creation of a democratic society."

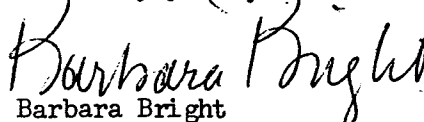
Then, with a final flourish, the fragile speaker burst out: "Comrades, your conferences are intolerable. You are full of inhibitions which you must loose against the comrades who say something dumb or who say something which you already know. The aggressions come only partly from the political insights in the stupidity of the other side. Why don't you finally admit that you're kaputt from last year, that you don't know how you can longer bear the stress of exhausting yourself physically and spiritually in political actions without seeing any progress made? Before you plan new campaigns, why don't you discuss how one should carry them out? Why do you all buy Reich (a German Freudian philosopher who wrote The Function of Orgasm)? Why do you talk of class wars here and of difficulties with orgasm at home? We'll participate no longer in such repressions..."

Her speech greeted with applause and embarrassed laughter from some self-satisfied delegates, the comrade sat down and Frankfurt ideologue Krah1 stepped up to the podium to offer his views on a totally different subject, a proposed campaign against the West German Army. Suddenly, a red-haired Genossin, obviously in her ninth month of pregnancy, stood up from one of the front tables and shouted angrily at Krah1: "Why don't you talk about the repression in our own ranks, not just on the outside? Have you even asked yourself what role we women play in SDS?" Krah1, sheepishly admitting he had not considered the problem, turned his attention again to his notes.

But Sigrid Rueger, 29, a romance languages student from Berlin, had reached into her purse and pulled out three ripe tomatoes. With an overhand throw that would have made Denny McLain proud, she pelted Krah1 on the forehead with one, on the shoulder with another, and the third missed its mark to splatter over the speaker's podium. "Genosse Krah1," she shouted, "you're a counter-revolutionary and an agent of the class enemy. This is to show you we can use the same methods to fight you as we use on others."

The gauntlet of the anti-authoritarians was down. How it can be picked up without shattering the SDS may be decided in Hanover this week, at the second delegates' conference, and will be the subject of a future newsletter.

Sincerely yours,


Barbara Bright

Received in New York November 19, 1968.