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Bruce Garver

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Review

Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany

Quinn Slobodian. Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2012. 320pp.

Bruce Garver^{*}

In *Foreign Front*, Quinn Slobodian presents a thorough, critical, and well documented account of how West German and foreign students cooperatively organized and led large public demonstrations from February 1961 onward against repressive policies of Third World dictatorships and imperialistic great powers. Simultaneously this joint activity accelerated the political radicalization of German students while enlarging their understanding of international affairs. Foreign students initiated many of these demonstrations in order to protest injustice and suppression of dissent by their home governments. In doing so, they were helped by their German fellow students to utilize the free press and civil liberties in West Germany to publicize grievances and to try to protect themselves against reprisals. For example, they usually thwarted efforts by foreign governments to enlist German authorities in the silencing or deportation of the most effectively outspoken foreign students, including the Iranians Bahman Nirumand and Ahmad Taheri. Some other interventions ultimately failed, such as those on behalf of the Nigerian medical student, Obi Ifeobu. Nevertheless, the law courts and representative political institutions of West Germany usually upheld the right of citizens and of foreign

* Since 1976, **Bruce Garver** (Ph.D., Yale, 1971) has been professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Omaha where he teaches courses on the two World Wars, the Enlightenment, modern Italy, and transport history. He is a fellow of the Center for Great Plains Studies whose April 2010 Symposium he co-organized with Dr. Miluše Šasková-Pierce on "Czech and Slovak Americans: International Perspectives from the Great Plains." His publications include *The Young Czech Party, 1874–1901: The Emergence of a Multi-Party System* (Yale University Press, 1978) and articles such as "Human Rights in Czech and Slovak History."

visitors to protest what they perceived to be undesirable policies and activities anywhere in the world.

Slobodian has organized his monograph topically within a chronological framework in which he clearly distinguishes between causes and effects in a rapidly unfolding series of interrelated domestic conflicts and international crises. For example, individual chapters address such topics as “Third Worldism”; Vietnam; the massive protests against the Shah Reza Pahlevi’s state visit to West Berlin on 2 June 1967; and “the cultural revolution in West Germany.” In this context, Slobodian objectively investigates and interprets media coverage of the larger student demonstrations in West Germany, including those in which violence was involved or else strongly emphasized by journalists and television reporters. Among such events are those that resulted in retrospective “corpse polemics” including one about the fatal police shooting of demonstrator Benno Ohnesorg and the wounding of Helga Haas on 2 June 1967, and another “polemic” concerning the protests against the release in 1966 of the racially biased film, *Addio Africa*.

Throughout *Foreign Front*, Slobodian shows how the ever closer collaboration between German and foreign students developed much more out of personal friendships and mutual academic and political concerns than in response to *a priori* ideological convictions or to any individual psychological problems. He also demonstrates that this radical political engagement of West German students both predated and expanded independently of comparable activity by American students up to 1965 when students in the U.S. and Europe began publicly to protest President Johnson’s escalation of President Kennedy’s heretofore largely clandestine military intervention in Vietnam. In fact German student activists, and even such mainstream periodicals as *Der Spiegel*, had already more promptly than most Americans begun to criticize the increasingly militant foreign policy initiated by JFK and intensified by LBJ.

Slobodian reveals how West German and foreign students often critically and comprehensively investigated the causes to which they committed themselves and also how they tried to design every demonstration to achieve the widest possible publicity. Nonetheless, out of this activity arose differences of opinion concerning both the desirability of specific policies and the best means of implementing them. Internal conflicts erupted not only among students at the Free University of Berlin and the

University of Hamburg but also within the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) and its associates in the non-Communist German left. As the size and intensity of public protests increased throughout Europe and North America during the later 1960s, some student radicals even advocated reversing the traditional relationship between theory and *praxis* or espoused post-1968 Soviet ideology or Maoist ideals. On the other hand, many European, Asian, and African students denounced the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and called attention to the violation of fundamental human liberties in Communist countries as well as in imperial Western powers and their former colonies. One venue at which students debated such issues was the enormous World Youth Festival in Sofia from 27 July to 8 August 1968.

Slobodian's original and path-breaking monograph is solidly based upon comprehensive and painstaking research in primary and secondary sources. The former include collections in four important German archives as well as several collections from the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Slobodian has thoughtfully evaluated this and other evidence in order to understand critically the thoughts and actions of German and foreign student activists from their own perspective as well as from that of informed observers. Therefore, Slobodian is seldom influenced in his opinions by authors who have superficially judged radical students of the sixties from an ideological or psychological point of view and largely independently of historical evidence. Anyone who wishes to understand 1960s student radicalism in West Germany from the inside out as well as within a worldwide historical context would be well advised to read *Foreign Front*.