Policing 1968-Protests in Western Germany: between civil war prevention and police modernization

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Summary

Policemen all over Germany shared many norms and values. First, they were united by strong memories of the heroic police of the Weimar Republic. These traditions were embodied in those policemen who had served or at least been trained in the Weimar police forces: the patriarchs. Theirs was a pattern of masculinity which put great stress on saving a highly mythologized state, even at the cost of their own lives, and cultivated the formation of highly cohesive informal collectives inside the police. Second, in the mid-1960s both German policemen and - to a lesser extend - shared the master plan and mastermind concept of political demonstrations. The latter were considered as being well planned actions, with masses easily misled by professional agitators (or even common criminals). Third, until the mid 1960s, German federal police forces’ intervention tactics were modeled on the experiences of the early Weimar years.

The confrontation with the protest movements of the mid 1960s had a profound impact on police conceptions and public order strategies which were questioned and changed. Generally spoken, the policing of youth/beat riots on the one hand and the policing of political protests on the other hand must be kept apart. The beat riots were predominantly seen as local disturbances of public order or excesses of juvenile offenders which the policemen were sure to know, could be easily controlled by the police. Matters were totally different, however, when these policemen had to act against protests that were labeled as political actions. But even on this contested terrain, during the 1960s, the long praised civil war model of protest policing, underwent a double change. First, it was informally demilitarized, as using firearms against protestors became unimaginable. Second, in mid 1960s social democratic or liberal politicians (in Munich and Hamburg) realized that violent police actions were burden for the modernization of West German society. Thus they initiated a change in the tactics of protest policing and established new channels of communication for handling protests (planning groups, psychologists) that made it clear that it was not the police alone who had the skills to handle (political) protests. Since the culture of the police remained relatively stable at least until the mid 1970s the practice of policing political protests, however, did not change overnight. Many police hesitated to put these new tactics into practice.