

1968—FORTY YEARS LATER

Workshop held at Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, New York, April 12, 2008. Co-organized by the GHI and Vassar College (American Cultures, History Department, International Studies, and Dean of the Faculty). Conveners: Maria Höhn (Vassar College) and Martin Klimke (GHI). Participants: Michael Hanagan (Vassar College), Eric Lindbloom (Poughkeepsie, NY), Joe Nevis (Vassar College), Michele Mason (Vancouver, Canada), Jeff Schutts (Douglas College, British Columbia), David Schalk (Vassar College).

This workshop initiated the GHI's cooperation with Vassar College in an international research project on "African American GIs and the Civil Rights Movement Abroad." It sought to trace postwar social and anti-war movements on both sides of the Atlantic, their historiography and political legacies. The workshop was open to the public and drew a large audience both from the local community, Vassar students and faculty, as well as alumni and parents.

The first panel entitled "The Sixties in America and Europe" opened up the panorama of protest movements and dissent from a transatlantic perspective. In his talk on "The Other Alliance: Transnational Protest and Activist Networks during the 1960s," Martin Klimke described the geopolitical infrastructure of the Cold War and the various factors that led to the emergence of a New Left in Europe and the United States. Klimke particularly examined the ideological and cultural convergences of the 1960/70s protest movements and countercultures, which allowed activists to reach across national boundaries and join forces in what they perceived as a common struggle against imperialism.

Maria Höhn subsequently discussed the relationship between "German Students, the Vietnam Campaign and Black Panther GIs" in greater detail, situating them in a larger framework of American occupation of West Germany after the Second World War and internal revolt in the U.S. army at the end of the 1960s. Höhn not only stressed the fact that the dissatisfaction of black GIs posed a significant problem for the internal moral and strength of the U.S. military and its mission in Vietnam. She also highlighted the efforts of German New Left activists to organize American soldiers and establish a Europe-wide "underground railroad" to help them desert from their bases in the Federal Republic to countries such as France and Scandinavia.

The third panelist, David Schalk, extended this perspective to the situation in France in the late 1960s in his talk on "Paris, Algeria and Vietnam: The French May of 1968." Schalk analyzed the attitude of

French students to the war in Vietnam during the turbulent events of the French May based on the country's experience with the Algerian War in the late 1950s. He suggested that France's long colonial involvement both in Algeria and Vietnam was one of the reasons for the strong intellectual opposition against the U.S. engagement in South East Asia. In comparing the situation in France with the anti-war movement in the United States, Schalk also drew on his experience as a former anti-war activist who counseled more than 300 GIs who contemplated becoming conscientious objectors during the war in Vietnam.

To provide a comparison to current events, the first panel was followed by a screening of the documentary "Breaking Ranks" (2006), which examined the current phenomenon of U.S. soldiers seeking refuge in Canada as part of their resistance to the war effort in Iraq. The movie followed the experience of four American military deserters, their lawyers and families, as they tried to exercise their consciences while facing profound emotional, ethical, and legal consequences. After the screening, Michelle Mason, the movie's director and film-maker of the award-winning documentary "The Friendship Village" (2001), explained the individual circumstances of these testimonies and the political complications generated by the decisions of these deserters for U.S.-Canadian relations today.

The second panel, "War and Peace—Then and Now," brought together academics and anti-war activists from the 1960s to the present to discuss similarities and differences between the Vietnam War and the current war in Iraq. Jeff Schutts, himself a former veteran who became a conscientious objector in the late 1980s, gave an overview of current GI organizing efforts. Mike Hanagan recalled his experience as an anti-war activist in the 1960s, particularly his collaboration with GIs in producing underground newspapers. Eric Lindbloom elaborated on his candidacy as the 1966 Independent Peace Party candidate in the 28th Congressional District of New York. What united their presentations was their insistence that despite the different nature of the two wars, there remained a continuity in terms of the disastrous impact on both America's image abroad and the lives of returning veterans.

The workshop was not only remarkable for the large audience it drew but also for the intensity of the discussions. Different generations of academics, activists, and students engaged in a vivid and stimulating debate on issues of war and peace that seemed to move a great many people. The event was thus a successful start for the cooperation between the GHI and Vassar College, as well as the greater community of New York.

Martin Klimke (GHI)