“Everyone will speak of this year / Everyone will be silent about this year,” Brecht wrote in one of his poems entitled “Finland 1940.” This is similar to how I feel about 1968. I am one of those who still want to speak. Most people prefer to remain silent. In any case, the younger generations know very little not only about what happened in 1968 in Europe, but also about what happened in Greece.

The year 1968 was the second year of the junta—the so-called Regime of the Colonels of 1967–1974—and it was a dark year. What made it even darker was the illusion of normality. In theaters, the curtain would rise every evening, cinemas would show new films, and bookstore windows were full of books. However, theaters staged harmless comedies, and national theaters staged only classical works selected by directors who had been appointed by the junta; cinemas showed films hacked up by censorship; and bookstore windows did not disclose the voluntary silence that Greek poets and writers had imposed on themselves, just as though it were a way of resisting the military dictatorship.

With an ear to the radio

The only cultural activity we could pursue relatively freely was auditory. And I am not just talking about music, or about our passion for singing forbidden songs. I am referring, primarily, to a radio culture focused on two foreign broadcasts: Deutsche Welle’s Greek show and the BBC’s Greek program. Unfortunately, there are no statistics about the number of Greeks who spent part of their day hanging on every word coming from their radios to find out what was really happening in their country, and to learn about the resistance activities of expatriate citizens and the attitude of other countries toward the junta.

These programs first informed us about the events of May 1968 in France and about the student movement in Germany and other European countries. Here, we first heard the names of the student leaders Rudi Dutschke and Daniel Cohn-Bendit. With our ear stuck to the radio, we found out about occupied universities and various states’ inability to deal effectively with these revolts.
Quiet resistance

In the evenings, students, poets, writers, and intellectuals used to gather in someone’s home or in out-of-the-way neighborhood taverns to exchange information and to comment on all they had heard during the day. To the Greek media, the May 1968 protests did not exist. Censorship not only prohibited comments on “anarchy” and the “disruption of the state” but banned news altogether. Nevertheless, the May 1968 events also inaugurated a new channel of communication. Every Greek who was not a junta supporter and could still travel abroad felt obliged to collect information from expatriates or foreign friends and carry it back home.

Initially, this silent resistance did not go beyond the limits of comfort. It provided the feeling of satisfaction and hope that comes from the idea that “something is happening,” even though this “something,” in this case, was happening somewhere else. Illegal underground activities proceeded for about two years and began to bear fruit in the early 1970s. The timing was not coincidental. The Greek colonels, unable to withstand the international outcry that had followed their hostile takeover in 1967 for more than two years, had gradually introduced a process of “liberalization,” as they called it. Students, poets, writers, and artists eagerly seized this opportunity, thanks largely to the ideas they had gathered, piece by piece, from the May 1968 revolt in Europe.

Revolution in the arts

Theaters were the first to pluck up their courage. Cautiously, they began to use a new kind of discourse, often by means of plays that seemed harmless at first. A new generation of directors and actors, however, soon discovered Brecht’s plays. In countries where political discourse is forbidden (this was one of the major differences between Greece and other countries that experienced the 1968 uprising), citizens always seek a substitute for it, and Brecht was the ideal substitute: a committed leftist, he embodied just what we were looking for. From 1970 to 1973, Brecht was ubiquitous: hardly a magazine in Greece failed to publish some text by Brecht, hardly a publisher failed to publish some book by him, and no theatrical company failed to stage at least one of his plays.

If there is a common feature between the 1968 uprising in West Germany and in Greece, it is the subversion that took place in the
theater. In Greece, as in Germany, a new generation of writers, directors, and actors took center stage. These same directors and actors are still acknowledged today as the great (and now established) names of Greek theater.

In contrast, developments in poetry and literature were more predictable and less radical, perhaps because entire generations of poets and writers were practiced in the art of indirect discourse that is full of innuendoes and hidden meanings. They had been writing this way from the time of the Metaxas dictatorship (1936–1941) through the German occupation (1941–1944) to the end of the Greek Civil War (1946–1949).

Student resistance

Along with this resistance in the arts, a student resistance movement arose. Students began to occupy the universities in the early 1970s, culminating in the occupation of the National Technical University of Athens (Polytechnion) in November 1973. This is known in modern Greek history as the “Polytechnion Uprising.” On November 17, 1973, the military dictatorship in Greece put a violent end to this pro-democratic demonstration with tanks and soldiers. More than twenty people were said to have been killed on the campus and hundreds more injured; no official number of victims was ever given. This student uprising is considered the climax of the resistance against the military government, having triggered the fall of the Regime of the Colonels in the summer of 1974.

A Greek terrorist group formed in the wake of this tragic event, giving itself the name “17 November” in remembrance. Every year on
this date, there are violent riots. The climax of the protests is usually a march past the American embassy. The demonstrators accuse the US of having supported the dictatorship in Athens and therefore making it possible for the student movement to be suppressed.

In essence, the generation of 1973 in Greece, the Polytechnion generation, is the counterpart to Europe’s generation of 1968. Its members dominated Greece in the arts and especially in politics, where their influence is still omnipresent. However, just as with the German “68ers,” people have now begun to view the Polytechnion generation in an increasingly critical light.

Petros Markaris is a Greek author who became internationally famous for his sociocritical crime novels about “Inspector Costas Haritos.” His recent novel Che Committed Suicide was published in 2009.