

**Imported Deviance:
Conformity, *Halbstarke*, and American Youth Culture in Postwar Germany**



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Introduction

In the years following Germany's World War II defeat, growing concern centered itself upon the most vulnerable population of the war-torn nation's society: youth. For postwar youths aged roughly between the years of 12 to 23, a "normal" Germany which preceded the nationalist regime of Adolf Hitler was just as vague a memory as the father they knew primarily through pictures and letters. Yet as the Nazi regime came to an end and fathers returned home from war in the late 1940s, these teenagers found themselves in a country filled with people confused by their own norms. The bountiful harvests depicted in Nazi propaganda were replaced with food stamps, the Gothic architecture of Germany's old cities were reduced to rubble, and many of the strong heroes of war returned to their families as defeated, injured, and estranged men¹.

Meanwhile, British, American, and Soviet soldiers occupied Germany and brought their own cultural and ideological norms with them. In West Germany especially, the American occupation brought new genres of music and film which provided an alternative cultural education that significantly shaped a rebellious German youth subculture in the 1950s: the *Halbstarke*. Inspired by actors such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, the young men of this subculture wreaked havoc in the streets while wearing leather jackets, jeans, and a greased back hairstyle which closely resembled those of the men they saw on screen. As the word "Halbstarke" implies, these men were "semi-strong" teenagers who had not yet developed into the adults that would one day lead the German republic that was to follow the Nazi regime. However, this made their deviance

¹ Swaney, Keith. "An Ideological War of 'Blood and Soil' and Its Effect on the Agricultural Propaganda and Policy of the Nazi Party, 1929-1939." *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 3 (2004): 59.

all the more concerning to older citizens who feared that their country was bound to fall into chaos if its future was to be trusted in the hands of these young rebels².

Although the *Halbstarke* represented less than 5% of the German youth population, the press sensationalized the presence of youths who had supposedly been corrupted by the commercialism, hedonism, and individualism they saw in American films³. These characteristics greatly differed from the Protestant ethics of efficiency, thrift, and productivity upheld in Weimar- and Nazi-era Germany, thus classifying the *Halbstarke* as a subculture that was distinctly separate from the German mainstream. Yet, for a society emerging from over a decade of totalitarian rule, what *was* the German mainstream? Nazi ideologies were clearly out of the question, but even long-standing social norms such as the patriarchal nuclear family had difficulty reemerging due to shifts in gender roles that occurred while men were at war. Nevertheless, the 1957 landslide victory of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) under the slogan “No experiments!” seemed to indicate that people were ready for a return to normalcy – even if it wasn’t clear what that normalcy was. In the meantime, the *Halbstarke* became a common topic used by conservative journalists and politicians to describe what Germany was *not* to become.

The current literature on the *Halbstarke* centers around the consensus that the subculture arose due to a lack of present father figures and a rise in consumerism encouraged by American culture. This conclusion is largely influenced by the school of thought developed by the

² Becker, W. “Die Jugend braucht Vorbilder”, *Briefe an die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 November 1956.

³ Walther, Clara. “Deutsche Geschichte: Jugend in den 1950er Jahren.” *Deutsche Geschichte: Jugend in den 1950er Jahren - Deutsche Geschichte - Geschichte - Planet Wissen*. ARD 1, June 13, 2019. https://www.planet-wissen.de/geschichte/deutsche_geschichte/jugend_in_den_fuenfziger_jahren/index.html.

Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, a theoretical framework on subcultures that will be used to examine *Halbstarke* in this thesis. By analyzing secondary sources alongside interviews, newspaper articles, and popular films of the 1950s, this thesis seeks to present a discrepancy between the characterization of the *Halbstarke* in the media and the actual *Halbstarke* of German cities. While the *Halbstarke* differentiated themselves from mainstream cultural codes through their style of dress, few participated in the criminal behavior described in newspapers and fictional media. This led to large-scale raids which profiled teens who met the description of a *Halbstarke*, often resulting in hundreds of arrests which never made it to court due to a lack of evidence⁴. Through these desperate attempts to catch a social type rather than a criminal, the *Halbstarke* shown in German media proves to be more of a figment of the imagination than an accurate depiction of 1950s youth culture. For this reason, it is crucial to examine the motivations of both the *Halbstarke* and those who sensationalized their image in order to understand the *Halbstarke* as a 1950s phenomenon through which the contestation of postwar cultural norms can be viewed as a working-class precursor to the 1968 movement.

⁴ Kalb, Martin. “‘The Youth Is a Threat!’ Controlling the Delinquent Boy in Post-WWII Munich.” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013), 282.

Chapter 1: Cultures and Subcultures – A Theoretical Framework

The *Halbstarke*, though unique within their own national context, were by no means a singular phenomenon in global 1950s youth culture. America's "greasers" existed since the 1940s and established their style years before it was popularized by Hollywood, Switzerland and Austria had their own *Halbstarke* similar to those in Germany, and Britain witnessed the emergence of Mod and Rocker subcultures which closely resembled those of their continental counterparts. No matter their geographic location, the youths of these subcultures all wore leather jackets, rode motorcycles, and were depicted as idle and catastrophic delinquents by the press. However, compared to other deviant subcultures, the British subcultures of the 1950s have received a significant amount of attention in the field of sociology due to the creation of the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Founded in 1964, the "Birmingham School" played a critical role in the development of cultural studies as it became the first institution of its kind to give serious academic value to popular culture and subcultures²¹. Although most research conducted by the Birmingham School focused on specific British subcultures, this chapter will use the theoretical framework developed by the Birmingham School to examine the emergence of the *Halbstarke* as a social type in German society as well as the features which set them apart from their British counterparts.

In order to understand the formation of the *Halbstarke* as a subculture, it is important to examine their relationship to the dominant "mainstream" culture of the postwar period. The "law of culture", as defined by the Birmingham School, "limits, modifies, and constrains how groups

²¹ Andrews, Sean Johnson. "The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication, October 27, 2020. <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-44>.

live and reproduce their social existence...through society, culture and history”²². In postwar Germany, this “field of possibilities” within which groups of people could develop was largely based on values and norms that were transferred from the Weimar Republic: women were responsible for the home, men were providers for the family, and children were to contribute to their family’s productivity through roles largely determined by their gender. However, the belief in these norms in postwar German society is only truly visible when contrasted with reactions to those who deviated from the dominant culture.

The ill-famed “culture of delinquency” of the working-class adolescent male was a feature of the parent culture of Germany and other countries long before the 1950s²³. Reports of delinquents as young as 13 years old harassing passerby and destroying public property appeared in the press as early as 1876, when a young boy was reported for having covered horsecar tracks with rocks in order to capsize the coach²⁴. Nevertheless, the identification of *Halbstarke* based on their peculiar dress, style, and attitude classified them as a separate subculture from former youth gangs. Although they did not have a specific agenda, their delinquency and visibility raised discussions on what German society was *not* to drift towards despite the postwar years making it difficult to conform to Weimar-era norms. As observed by the Birmingham School with regards to British subcultures, members of a subculture often belong to the same families, go to the same schools, and work at the same jobs as their peers and parents from the parent

²² Clarke, John, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts. “Subcultures, Cultures, and Class: A Theoretical Overview.” *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, 1993, 3–60., 4.

²³ *Ibid*, 7

²⁴ Kloeck, Walter F. “Halbstarke überfallen Pferdebahn”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Nr. 152), 20 June 1955.

culture from which they derive, but their dress, activities, leisure pursuits, and life-style project a different cultural response or “solution” to the problems posed for them by their social class position and experience²⁵. Like the Mods and Rockers of England, the *Halbstarke* found the solution to their postwar confusion in particular attitudes, clothing, and forms of leisure that were accessible to their working-class means. What causes a culture to develop a subculture, as well as what ensures its brief existence, is therefore a reliance upon a distinct style or set of symbols that defines the group as deviant from the parent culture.

The reliance of subcultures on style to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture is both an effective visual tool and a fragile basis of group identity. One common trait of subcultures, as explained by John Clarke, is that “the ‘gear’ used to assemble a new subcultural style must not only already exist, but must also carry meanings organized into a system coherent enough for their relocation and transformation to be understood *as a transformation*”²⁶. In the case of the British “Teddy Boys” subculture, youth whose leisure included dancing to Rock n’ Roll music and vandalizing theaters wore Edwardian suits but altered their symbolic meaning by greasing their hair back and wearing chunky suede shoes called “creepers”. However, while the Teddy Boys took an upper-class style and transformed it into an identifier for troublesome youth, the *Halbstarke* did not draw upon their own country’s symbols to transform old styles into their own. Instead, the *Halbstarke* based their style off of a symbolic vocabulary that existed primarily in American films and thus gave their appearance and actions a distinctly American look.

Even though the gear used in *Halbstarke* style did not necessarily exist prior to the American presence in Germany, its use as a symbol of group identity made style an important

²⁵ Ibid, 8

²⁶ Clarke, John. “Style.” *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, 1993, 147-162, 149.

yet fragile element of the subculture. On the one hand, sub-cultural styles are the principal way in which the mass media reports or visualizes “youth”. This makes subcultures recognizable in the public eye but also enables police and social workers to use stereotypes based on appearance to link deviants with certain characteristic kinds of behavior²⁷. On the other hand, if a subculture is primarily based on style and image, it is less likely to create a feasible alternative lifestyle in the long-term because its aesthetic will eventually be incorporated into the dominant culture through the commercial sector²⁸. Fashion trends can easily be replicated for their purely aesthetic qualities, gradually phasing out the symbolic value of a particular style. In addition, for many 1950s youth cultures, the collective male chauvinism which was characteristic of their style could no longer exist as members gradually chose to participate in the dominant patterns of long-term sexuality over the fleeting affairs which ensured the uncompromised masculinity of their youth. As Stanley Cohen describes in his study of the Mods and Rockers, “When work or family demands come to assume greater significance, the style of collective leisure, precisely because it provides no solutions or alternatives to those areas, dissolves as a continuing part of the biography...”²⁹. The aesthetic elements of style, as well as the distinct forms of leisure which characterize a style as deviant, are therefore both the source of a subculture’s emergence just as much as they are the harbingers of its extinction.

Compared to the “productive” sources of leisure commonly found in the dominant culture, the leisure of 1950s youth subcultures was largely centered on idleness. According to a survey conducted in 1954 in Baden-Württemberg, the leisure which most families of the dominant culture experienced was strictly limited by the daily rhythms defined by work. Two-

²⁷ Ibid, 154.

²⁸ Ibid, 159.

²⁹ Ibid, 160.

thirds of skilled workers did not get home until after 6:00pm, leaving little time for family leisure activities and leaving youth with a large amount of unsupervised autonomy³⁰. To combat this isolation, however, over half of German adolescents in the mid-1950s spent their leisure time in associations of some sort, most of which were centered around sports³¹. Leisure time spent within these associations could be considered “productive” because it contributed to social cohesion and encouraged physical activity. Youths who did not adhere to these associations were more prone to joining subcultures such as the *Halbstarke*, who the media commonly depicted as isolated and abandoned³². Lacking the cooperative elements which made mainstream leisure productive, the forms of leisure enjoyed by the *Halbstarke* largely centered around “doing nothing”. The boredom which naturally arose from the lack of structure provided by youth clubs or family outings brought many bored young people to the streets, a trend which contributed to the stereotype of the idle *Halbstarke*. What Paul Corrigan writes of British subcultures greatly resembles the situation in which *Halbstarke* found themselves:

“Doing nothing on the street must be compared with the alternatives: for example, knowing that nothing will happen with Mum and Dad in the front room; being almost certain that the youth club will be full of boredom. This makes the street the place where something might just happen, if not this Saturday, then surely next.”³³.

³⁰ *Die Rundfunkhörer: Tagesablauf, Hörgewohnheiten, Wirkung von Programmumstellungen – beobachtet durch Stichtagsbefragungen im Einzugsgebiet des SDR 1953/54*, 1954.

³¹ *Jugendliche Heute: Ergebnisse einer Repräsentativbefragung der Hörerforschung des Nordwestdeutschen Rundfunks* (Munich, 1955), 157-163.

³² “Appell an Den Ehrgeiz Der ‘Halbstarken.’” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18 June 1956.

³³ Corrigan, Paul. “Doing Nothing.” *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, 1993, 84-88., 85.

However, what “happened” in the streets was rarely deemed as acceptable behavior by the dominant culture. Smashing milk bottles, vandalizing public spaces, or spontaneous fights often became the solution for the boredom felt by groups of youth. “It would be useless to try and explain why these fights occur”, continues Corrigan, “...even if it’s a yawn; or someone stumbling into someone else...something pathetic and forgotten outside of ‘nothing’ becomes vital within that set of behavior”³⁴. A commonly cited provocation for a *Halbstarke* fight was a comment on their style of dress, the slightest disapproval of which was viewed as an attack on that which defined them. In one case, a young man who was arrested for assault at a train station claimed he simply met his friends at their usual spot in the train station but that passerby were “so dumb” as to mutter “Why don’t you all go home, *Halbstarke*” and thereby required him and his friends to assault them. Interestingly, a friend he was with chimed in that “Halbstarke have never existed. You cannot push all youth into the same shoes.”, implying that being classified as a *Halbstarke* by others was not desirable although pursuing the appearance of one was. Unproductive leisure is therefore partially a choice of those who engage in it as much as it is a necessity which results from being estranged from the parent culture.

In this sense, style and leisure are interdependent elements of subcultures. Style, encompassing both aesthetics and attitude, is shaped by the actions which constitute leisure and leisure, often taking the form of provoked violence, is in large part dependent upon criticisms of style by the dominant culture. In the British subcultures studied by the Birmingham School, as in the *Halbstarke* examined in this thesis, understanding this interplay between style and leisure is crucial to understanding the rhythms of life in subcultures through a sociological lens. These patterns, combined with the rise of commercialism in defining the dominant culture, determined

³⁴ Ibid, 86.

the lifespan of 1950s youth subcultures and what eventually constituted mainstream youth culture.

Chapter 2: Creating Deviance – A Hunt for the Idle Worker

The Idle Working Class

“The others called us *Halbstarke*. Even at home: you *Halbstarke*! We actually saw ourselves as quite normal. But when we were in our clique, we were strong. When we sat in the park, the other people sitting there went somewhere else... One always received orders at work or at home and so at least we could be somebody there [at the park].”⁴³

In 1950s West Germany, institutionalized work was no longer the anomaly it had been in the years immediately following the war. Unemployment had significantly dropped every year since 1950 and, as German industry began to rebuild itself, the majority of 14-20 year olds were employed as part of its workforce⁴⁴. However, the work performed by the working class did not evoke the enthusiasm that a middle-class professional, such as a teacher, might feel towards their job. Instead, work in industrial areas was often viewed as nothing more than a source of revenue earned by working in factories or coal plants, both of which had unsafe working conditions⁴⁵. This created a sense of adolescent ennui which, although not uncommon for this age group, was raised to new heights through its juxtaposition against the fictional worlds presented through new sources of entertainment from America.

After having been cut off from the American film industry for years, the presence of Hollywood films in German cinemas introduced a new narrative structure as well as a new interest for individualism, heroism, and a hedonistic approach to life. The American formula for

⁴³ Krüger, Heinz-Hermann. “*Die Elvis-Tolle, die hatte ich mir unauffällig wachsen lassen*”: *Lebensgeschichte und jugendliche Alltagskultur in den fünfziger Jahren*. (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1985).

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 122

⁴⁵ Bebnowski, David. *Generation Und Geltung: Von Den "45ern" Zur "Generation Praktikum"-übersehene und Etablierte Generationen Im Vergleich* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 67.

Hollywood films usually called for a story somewhat divorced from reality, a “dream factory” of sorts, or a cultural hero⁴⁶. Given the disarray of post-war Germany, it is not surprising that these narratives proved to be attractive to young German audiences. Individualism provided a newfound autonomy that a totalitarian regime had suppressed in favor of communitarian ideals, while fictional landscapes that embraced leisure, rebellion, and violence created an escape for youth who were expected to contribute to the family through both official and unofficial labor. In addition to working in a factory or a coal plantation, it was not uncommon for youths to steal coal or hoard cigarettes to trade on the black market in order to generate additional income for themselves or their families⁴⁷. Seeing forms of “unproductive” lawbreaking, such as James Dean’s involvement in racing or knife fights, encouraged a style of leisure that purely served the individual. While these activities may have existed before, American cinema legitimized their existence in youth culture and created a subculture out of what otherwise would have been considered a waste of time.

Without any formal agreements, rituals, or manifestos, the *Halbstarke* based their existence entirely off of a specific sense of style and thirst for rebellion which, according to reports of the 1950s, had no political aim or agenda. Instead, the subculture offered a fluid sense of community that did not rely on individual relationships or a membership system but rather thrived off of a common desire for spontaneous group activities, such as riots or races. The sense of community that this common subculture offered was especially important since youth were typically treated as children within the confines of their home and treated as machine-like adults

⁴⁶ Browder, Dewey Arthur. “The Impact of the American Presence on Germans and German-American Grass Roots Relations in Germany, 1950-1960”, *LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses*, 1987, 174.

⁴⁷ Kalb, Martin. “‘The Youth Is a Threat!’ Controlling the Delinquent Boy in Post-WWII Munich.” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013): 270.

at their workplace⁴⁸, thereby limiting the spaces in which teenagers could develop their personality without the moral policing of their parents or the capitalist supervision of their employer. As one former *Halbstarke* recounts, even the simplest rebellious acts gave the thrill of being a part of a group experience:

“And when we drove off together, we started off in groups of 30 or 40 mopeds and then came 20 more, then suddenly we were 50 mopeds! You have to imagine the amount of smoke there was when all these mopeds came together. And we had our fun. At streetlights, we stopped at ‘green’ and when the light switched to ‘red’, we all sped off with great flare.”⁴⁹

Such acts of deviance were inconvenient and disorderly but, ultimately, harmless. Petty crimes such as pick pocketing, racing, or lurking about the streets at night were not necessarily new forms of teenage deviance, but their perpetrators now had an imported cultural library which soaked their criminal behavior in American glamor. However, as the main identifier of *Halbstarke* was an increasingly popular American style of fashion, youth who *did* engage in serious criminal behavior gradually shared an aesthetic code with youth who simply pursued modern fashion trends. As a result, newspapers began to use the word “Halbstarke” as a synonym for both “teenager” and “criminal”, placing both non-violent pranks and violent crimes underneath the same umbrella term based upon the age of the suspects in question. For example, in the following newspaper article excerpts, the term “Halbstarke” is used in a police report to

⁴⁸ Bondy, C. *Jugendliche stören die Ordnung* (München: Juventa, 1957), 76.

⁴⁹ Krüger, Heinz-Hermann. “Die Elvis-Tolle, die hatte ich mir unauffällig wachsen lassen”: *Lebensgeschichte und jugendliche Alltagskultur in den fünfziger Jahren* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1985).

describe youths who nearly derailed a train as well as in an article on a medical conference which discussed the difficulties of raising teenagers:

“Last night, around 8:00pm, *Halbstarke* between the ages of 16 and 18 years of age stopped a train on the tracks of the Freimann Station. They took a big red sign and placed it on the tracks, thereby forcing the conductor to pull the emergency brake. When the station officer took hold of one of the youth, the other six attacked him so that all seven youth could escape.”⁵⁰ – “Latest Police Report: *Halbstarke* stop train”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

“There were fascinating discussions on children and youth psychology. Professor W. Catel, director of the University Children’s Hospital of Kiel, introduced the key words [of the conference]: *Halbstarke*, misbehavior, and mentally challenged [youth].”⁵¹ – “The *Halbstarke*: examined from a doctor’s point of view”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

Although most youths labeled as *Halbstarke* were not profit-seeking criminals, their sporadic disturbances in public spaces and ominous presence in the media created serious concern amongst adults who feared that Germany would never be able to recover from the war if this was the generation to lead their new republic. As police stations continued to publish reports on *Halbstarke* and their criminal activity in local newspapers, politicians and journalists began to address this growing issue through policy meant to help these troubled youths find their way back towards a productive society – or create a new one entirely.

⁵⁰ “Letzte Polizeimeldung: Halbstarke stoppen Güterzug”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Nr. 154), 28 June 1950.

⁵¹ “Der Halbstarke: einmal ärztlich gesehen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 September 1958.

Are the kids alright?

Perhaps the most uniting factor amongst the opinion articles and policy propositions of the 1950s which debated “the *Halbstarke* problem” was the mere recognition that the *Halbstarke* existed as a broader social dilemma rather than a singular organized crime network. From this understanding, however, two strands of thought emerged on how these denim-clad youths were to be interpreted. On the liberal end of the spectrum, the *Halbstarke* were not interpreted as criminals at all but rather as a “completely different type of people” who created chaos through harmless pranks just for the sake of rebellion⁵². Meanwhile, conservative opinion articles tended to label *Halbstarke* as criminals that were a serious threat to public safety as well as an attack on citizen’s values. “Youth pranks involve stealing an apple from the neighbor or smashing a neighbor’s window”, one conservative columnist wrote, “a broken and looted casino or a stolen car are undoubtedly criminal actions”⁵³. In viewing these opinion articles, it becomes evident that *who* was a *Halbstarke* was not entirely clear because authors had yet to agree on what specific behaviors transformed a mischievous youth to a *Halbstarke*.

A reoccurring narrative surrounding the conservative interpretation of the *Halbstarke* was that these criminals were simply the children of poor, working-class families who did not have the time to teach their children the morals of German society. The *Halbstarke* were thus an attack on citizen’s values, according to one passionate opinion article writer, “First, because the sight of concentrated idleness [in these communities] is a thorn in one’s eye” and “Second, because the youth are boisterous and their tone of speech has diverged from our own”⁵⁴. This diversion from the national parent culture – to the extent that outsiders could not comprehend

⁵² *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7 September 1956.

⁵³ *Sonntagsblatt*, 2 September 1956.

⁵⁴ *Frankfurt Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 September 1956.

Halbstarke speech patterns – was often connected to the intrusion of the Hollywood film industry, as seen in a *ZEIT* article which stated that “the mentality of film fans, with their worship of movie stars, must be acknowledged as a perversion of religious worship”⁵⁵. The concept of a *Halbstarke*, in the conservative sense, thus arose out of an alternative cultural education which replaced the protestant values of thrift, efficiency, and religious devotion with commercialism, leisure, and celebrity culture. In other words, when parents were not around to raise their children, the cinema did. However, the simplification of the *Halbstarke* as low-class criminals who lacked a proper German upbringing enables the authors of these articles to direct their blame at a specific section of society. The question of “Are the kids alright?” was thus transformed into the question of “Are *your* kids alright?”, antagonizing working-class families as the source of social chaos. On the contrary, police reports on *Halbstarke* riots often indicated the opposite to be true:

“They are between 15 and 18 years old and all have stable jobs. Their parents are decent people and none of them have a criminal record. We are certain that they do not belong to a gang. They don’t even know each other’s family name. These youngsters also live in different neighborhoods and coincidentally met one another on this street Sunday afternoon. Then they split into four groups. Some of them drank up to six glasses of beer. The robbery occurred on their way home. Several of the nine young men spent all the money they had with them on alcohol.” — Police Report, 1956⁵⁶

⁵⁵ *ZEIT*, 27 September 1956.

⁵⁶ Ansperger, Klaus. “...denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun sollen – Eine internationale Zeiterscheinung: Die Halbstarcken/SZ-Gespräch mit Erziehern und Psychologen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 156, 1 July 1956.

Contrary to the narrative of conservative opinion articles, police reports often implied that the youth labeled as *Halbstarke* did not come from the broken families that were expected of the working class. Instead, these *Halbstarke* were often employed, described as decent or having “intelligent faces”⁵⁷, and engaged in criminal activity for the simple thrill of it. This tension between a class-based explanation and an ambiguous “face” of the *Halbstarke* reveals a significant dilemma in post-war German society. While it would have been reassuring to read that these youths were led astray by financial instability or homelessness, both of which could be directly tied to the aftermath of the war, the fact that many *Halbstarke* actually lived an objectively decent lifestyle signified that achieving financial stability was no longer sufficient for quelling juvenile delinquency.

Who corrupted the youth?

Struck by the actions of their children and the hedonistic lifestyles they pursued, many parents began to blame their own generation for not paying closer attention to the way they raised their children during the years following the war. On the conservative end of the spectrum, the trope of the rebel born from a broken family placed the blame on distracted parents and a general lack of core values in post-war German society. “We need to approach this issue through families directly”, said Lutheran theologian Dr. Kurt Blaser in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in which he argued that the *Halbstarke* mainly arose out of a lack of parental guidance⁵⁸. While he initially agreed with the liberal argument that deviance in adolescence is simply a

⁵⁷ Westphälische Rundschau, 3 December 1956.

⁵⁸ Ansperger, Klaus. “...denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun sollen – Eine internationale Zeiterscheinung: Die Halbstarcken/SZ-Gespräch mit Erziehern und Psychologen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* Nr. 156, 1 July 1956

normal phase of “trial and error” in human development, Blaser emphasized that the extreme narcissism and lack of empathy which characterized the *Halbstarke* resulted from a lack of authority asserted by parents and schools⁵⁹. This view was not uncommon and points to the broader shift in sources of national socialization processes in German society.

Due to the high demands of labor required by a post-war industrialized society, adult supervision was less present in the domestic sphere and American popular culture began to fill the educational void left by working parents and a failed totalitarian state. “We need to give the youth ideals again”⁶⁰, was thus a rallying cry of Rector Kurt Seelman, the head of the Youth Welfare Office of Munich, whose belief that industrialization ruined family values was shared by many other critics of the *Halbstarke* as well. Not only were young men forced to act as full-grown adults by their teenage years due to their expected participation in the labor force, but their parents returned home from work much later than previous generations and were thus too exhausted to pass on their knowledge and morals through quality family time⁶¹. Concerned about what this could mean for the future of German society, local governments, religious organizations, and youth groups began to hold town halls and offer public programs that would provide the personal guidance which Nazi programming, such as the Hitler Youth, had provided in the years preceding the emergence of the *Halbstarke*. Some adults even cautioned against using the term *Halbstarke* in fear that it would hurt the morale of youths who spent their time productively by supporting refugees or participating in youth groups⁶². However, not all adults

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ Conta, M.v., “Über die Behandlung von Blasen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (No. 226), 20 September 1956.

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² Becker, W. “Die Jugend braucht Vorbilder”, *Briefe an die Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 November 1956.

took upon this level of personal guilt in response to the *Halbstarke* problem. For some, it was not a dilemma at all.

Contrary to the aforementioned remarks of religious leaders and politicians, several opinion articles argued that the *Halbstarke* were essentially a non-issue. The authors of these articles mainly argued that young criminals had always existed in Germany, whether or not they wore leather jackets and jeans. Walter F. Kloeck, a writer who wrote that young people have always tested their boundaries through petty crimes, cited the following police report from the early 20th century amongst others from the late 19th century in defense of his argument:

“Yesterday, a man in the field by the Hans-Mielich plaza was approached by several young *Halbstarke* who begged him for money; as he reached into his pocket to give them some money, they threw him to the ground, robbed him of his wallet and watch, and covered him in trash from a nearby landfill.” – Police Report, 24 April 1904⁶³

This sort of assault is strikingly similar to those mentioned in police reports from the 1950s, sharing both the use of group tactics to overpower an individual and the pursuit of a petty crime which resulted in neither death nor large-scale robbery. The true “issue” that surrounds the *Halbstarke* can therefore not be attributed to the crimes they commit since, according to this perspective, this form of juvenile criminal behavior existed long before Marlon Brando graced the screens of German cinemas. Instead, these articles argue that the *Halbstarke* are nothing more than the product of films, marketing, and gossip. As Gunter Groll writes in his article for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, “One must ask oneself what creates more damage: the *Halbstarke* themselves or the gossip that surrounds them?”⁶⁴. Groll, like Kloeck, goes on to reflect on how

⁶³ Kloeck, Walter F. “Halbstarke überfallen Pferdebahn”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Nr. 152), 20 June 1955.

⁶⁴ “Die Halbstarcken und ihr Film”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung -- Feuilleton*, 2 October 1956.

every era of history has its rebellious youth and the significantly stronger presence of deviant teenagers following the end of a war is to be expected. In essence, this perspective used history as an indicator that a return to normalcy was inevitable. However, what exactly was the “normalcy” that was desired, or even feasible, by German society after the Nazi regime? Konrad Adenauer’s successful 1957 “No experiments!” campaign slogan, which resulted in the largest ever electoral victory of the Christian Democratic Union, seemed to indicate a wide-spread desire to return to a pre-Nazi-era way of life void of ambitious political ideologies and societal restructuring. Yet this desire was complicated by the ambiguity of gender norms in the postwar period, a subject which remains largely absent from both conservative and liberal articles on the *Halbstarke* from the 1950s. Whether or not delinquent youth arose from “broken” working-class families or middle-class families, the tension between the ideal “new man” of the Nazi regime and the harsh reality of the traumatized husbands who returned home after the war created conflicts which could not be limited to class boundaries and are crucial to understanding the role of masculinity in creating the *Halbstarke* subculture.

Chapter 3: Gender – Harsh Realities and Comforting Myths

1945 to early 1950s: *Trümmerfrauen*, “Veronikas”, and the emasculation of men

Although fictional films and factual reports about the *Halbstarke* did not exclude women from the environment that postwar youths existed in, the *Halbstarke* subculture was incredibly male-oriented. Masculinity played a large role in *Halbstarke* culture, yet the machismo which these young men exuded in their fashion, riots, and style of talking arose from a specific context which followed the German defeat in WWII. The loss of the war was a devastating defeat for Germany society as a whole, but it was a particularly emasculating experience for adult German men. Returning home from the battlefield with injuries, amputations, or shell-shock, many men could no longer uphold the image of the sturdy German man who protected his nation and provided for his family. Strength of will, determination, vigor, and, most of all, toughness – against each other and against others – were the formational characteristics of the “new man” which German soldiers had internalized during the war and could no longer rid themselves of after the war⁶⁵. In one instance, a woman named Dora Brandenburg recounts how her husband, who had not seen their son for nine years, forced their child to do 25 pushups as a consequence for having a low reading level “as if this would help him to read better”⁶⁶. Another woman, whose husband’s leg was amputated during the war, describes that he refused to take painkillers

⁶⁵ Theweleit, Klaus, Erica Carter, and Chris Turner. *Male Fantasies: Male Bodies - Psychoanalyzing the White Terror* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 45.

⁶⁶ Meyer, Sibylle, and Eva Schulze. *Von Liebe Sprach Damals Keiner: Familienalltag in Der Nachkriegszeit* (Munich: Beck, 1985), 147.

for his wound despite suffering from pain in the stump where his leg used to be⁶⁷. In both of these cases, former German soldiers confront mental and physical shortcomings with feats of strength and discipline which confirm their masculine self-image. Yet while this mindset may have been admirable on the battlefield, the militant parenting of the “new man” was not always well received in the home.

The lack of a present father figure and the diversity of women’s roles during the war created an unfamiliar family environment for returning men whose own roles remained undefined once their duties as a German soldier came to an end. By 1950, over 2.01 million men in West Germany were registered as disabled veterans of either WWI or WWII⁶⁸. Although prosthetic innovations made it possible for men to eventually contribute to their household income, the ability of these men to succeed in their lives off of the battlefield was largely dependent upon the additional labor of their wives. “Because we were only living off of a few food stamps, I went to work at the rubble clean-up sites” recalls one wife who needed additional income once her husband returned from a Russian labor camp because he was too ill to work⁶⁹. Literally translated as “rubble women”, the altruistic *Trümmerfrau* became a postwar myth which encouraged women in such a situation to participate in the clean-up efforts of German cities. However, although the *Trümmerfrauen* of the late 1940s were pictured as cheerful while

⁶⁷ Schütz, Johannes. “Risse im Körperpanzer: Prothesenaneignungen und Männlichkeitskonstruktionen nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg.” *Göttinger Studien zur Kulturanthropologie / Europäischen Ethnologie - Göttingen Studies in Cultural Anthropology / European Ethnology* 4 (2018): 27–39. <https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2018-1089>, 34.

⁶⁸ Meyer, Sibylle, and Eva Schulze. *Von Liebe Sprach Damals Keiner: Familienalltag in Der Nachkriegszeit* (Munich: Beck, 1985), 130.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

they carted away their share of rubble (see Figure 1), this hard labor was fueled by a need for additional food stamps rather than pure altruism.



Figure 1: *Trümmerfrauen* clearing away rubble⁷⁰

This realization had a rather emasculating effect on German men. Although most women did not openly acknowledge their additional labor, men not only remarked that they were creating an extra burden for their family but also realized that their wives had been perfectly capable breadwinners while they had been gone at war. As one returning soldier painfully remarked, “In essence, [my wife] was a complete stranger to me. I barely even knew [my] boys. I had only seen the little ones twice, so they were raised solely by my wife. She managed to do all of that without me. As I returned, I didn’t know if she even needed me anymore”⁷¹. Many young children were

⁷⁰ Photograph. 2014. *Deutsche Welle: Dismantling the German Myth of "Trümmerfrauen"*. <https://www.dw.com/en/dismantling-the-german-myth-of-tr%C3%BCmmerfrauen/a-18083725>.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 132.

afraid of the man who suddenly claimed to be their father, while teenagers felt coddled by their fathers. Older children, especially boys, had looked after their younger siblings and helped their mother during the war, thereby pushing past their label as a child and into the role of a father figure. “[My son] was the man of the family and I felt guilty because I feared that I was robbing him of his youth. But he did not suffer under the weight of his responsibilities and he was rather proud of himself. Now, however, he is to become a child again and this strange man is to do everything.”, reflected Anna Falk after her husband returned after nine years at war⁷². It is therefore not surprising that young men distanced themselves from their fathers, who expected the utmost respect and authority over the house. In some cases, these familial conflicts were either resolved or endured but, not too infrequently, the “new man” could not replace the one who had left and thus left his position in the family entirely.

As adult German men began to realize that they could no longer fill the roles they were expected to, new myths of deviant women and children began to form which contained a specifically anti-American undertone. Between 1946 and 1948, the divorce rate in Germany was double that which it had been during the years leading up to WWII⁷³. Many couples had simply grown apart but, in cases not too infrequent, women had also taken on a boyfriend while their husband was at war. For other women, their husbands perceived them as dirty after having been raped by enemy forces at the close of the war. Such was the case of Gisela Koch, a woman who decided to divorce her husband after he said he “needed some time to think...before he made a decision [about the future of their marriage]” after she told him she had been raped multiple times by the Soviet military in Pomerania⁷⁴. Divorced and estranged from their children, German

⁷² Ibid, 145.

⁷³ Ibid, 135.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 134.

veterans gradually created new myths which sensationalized the conflicts they faced in the domestic sphere and replaced their old enemy, the Allies, whom they had fought in the public sphere. The deviant and unfaithful woman, for example, was characterized as a sexually promiscuous “Veronika” who fraternized with American soldiers. While the *Trümmerfrau* earned money by cleaning up the city, “Veronikas” slept with American men to earn additional income or material goods. This social caricature was originally taken from American army posters which discouraged soldiers from having affairs with German women to prevent them from contracting venereal disease, hence the nickname “Veronika Dankeschön” given to the woman in the poster as a play on the abbreviation of the disease as “VD”⁷⁵. The German public went even further, however, and gradually used the name “Veronika” to label all women who entered relations with American men, even popularizing new nicknames such as *Amiliebchen* (Ami-lover) and *Amizonen* (a wordplay on the American zone) to describe female German “fraternizers”⁷⁶. Yet, although these terms were meant to shame women, they also expose an unsurprising fear felt by German men. Not only had German soldiers lost the war against the Americans, but now they faced the possibility of losing their wives to Americans too. Most of the newly arrived American soldiers stationed in Germany had never experienced combat before and simply had what many German men could no longer offer: a healthy mind void of the horrors of war, a healthy body untouched by battle, and material goods that were hard to come by in a war-torn nation. This relationship between commercialism and unchecked sexuality became a key component in an anti-American stance which, despite existing alongside admiration for U.S. aid efforts such as the Marshall Plan, provided the basis for critiques against

⁷⁵ Ibid, 35.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

deviant female characters in 1950s Hollywood films that, in turn, shaped the interpretation of masculinity in the *Halbstarke* subculture.

mid-1950s: *Halbstarke* - a new masculinity?

Much like the character of “Veronika” became an outlet of frustration for divorced or betrayed German veterans, the sensationalized character of the *Halbstarke* took the domestic tension between estranged fathers and their sons into the public realm. Disappointed by the strict attitude or physical ineptitude of their father which did not measure up to the photographs they knew him from, male teenagers found new role models in the powerful male leads of Hollywood films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* which exuded a masculinity that overtook, or perhaps compensated for, the weakness of the adult men they encountered in their lifetimes. Aggressive, strong, and seductive, the men in these films exuded unquestioned confidence and oftentimes sought to create order in a world that adults did not understand. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, for example, James Dean seeks to defend his male honor while simultaneously acting as a father-figure for Plato, who is “forgotten” by his wealthy parents. His own father, who wears a flower-print apron when he cooks for his demanding wife, advises him to avoid proving his honor in a deadly car race in order to protect his safety and constantly seems out of touch with what his son defines as manhood. In essence, the film portrays James Dean as a young man who knows what kind of man his father *should* be and therefore takes over that role for Plato. Although the film takes place in a Californian suburb, these family dynamics are incredibly reflective of those which existed in postwar German households as youth tried to find a masculine prowess they had not observed in the men who returned from war. In reviewing the articles written about the *Halbstarke*, however, it can be argued that older generations of men were not particularly

impressed with the development of this unrestrained machismo since nearly all newspaper articles criticizing the *Halbstarke* were written by adult men.

Contrary to the male teenagers who created an entire subculture based off of what they learned from Hollywood films, film reviewers and opinion article writers typically saw this new masculinity as primitive and, as the term “Halbstarke” suggests, weak. The bright colors, ducktail plumes, and casual posture of male rebels seemed feminine to some parents and one newspaper commentator even compared the *Halbstarke* with gay Nazi Storm Troopers, which thereby conjured up a link between homosexuality and overly aggressive youth⁷⁷. However, it is important to remember that the men writing these reviews belonged to a generation which had been defeated by American men who were not unlike the men on screen that German youth now idolized. In fact, men who made the effort to openly criticize the *Halbstarke* likely had sons of their own whom they feared would fall into the *Halbstarke* subculture to compensate for the lack of an adequate father figure. Most articles thus sensationalized the *Halbstarke* by making the term synonymous with 1950s youth, not simply the criminals amongst the general youth population, and emphasized the dangers of consumerism and the primitive nature of jazz as a threat to proper values⁷⁸. Although directed towards young men, these comments echo those which were made of female “Veronikas” of the late 1940s. Like the *Halbstarke*, these women left the German “man of the house” for Americans who could provide that which German men

⁷⁷ Fehrenbach, Heide. *Cinema in Democratizing Germany: Reconstructing National Identity after Hitler*. United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

⁷⁸ Meyer, Michael. “A Musical Facade for the Third Reich.” In “Degenerate Art”: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany, edited by Stephanie Barron with contributions from Peter Guenther et al., 171–83. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992., p. 171

could not. The harsh criticism of *Halbstarke* culture by older men therefore seems to arise out of the more personal fear of emasculation, a fear that had already manifested itself in the *Ami-lieber* of the late 1940s. Perhaps those who criticized the *Halbstarke* as feminine feared that a classification of this new subculture as masculine would inevitably place them in the same position as the forlorn father in *Rebel Without a Cause*: a powerless protector of male authority.

Chapter 4: Film Analysis – *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Die Halbstarken*

Although the *Halbstarke* were inspired by various components of 1950s American popular culture, ranging from music to dance and fashion, the complete picture of modern leisure came together most cohesively through the medium of film. Hollywood showed German youth what to wear, how to walk, how to talk, and, ultimately, what being a young person *should* feel like no matter the circumstances postwar youth found themselves in. In academic literature on the *Halbstarke*, two films consistently reappear as hallmarks of the *Halbstarke* subculture: *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Die Halbstarken* (1956). With the former produced in America and the latter produced in Germany, the two films and their common themes are clearly a call and response to the issue of juvenile delinquency which plagued the two countries. Both narratives follow a short timeline in the life of a well-meaning middle-class teenage boy who, encouraged by a love interest, finds himself in the dangerous company of deviant youth who ultimately lure him to great tragedy. The two films were well received in Germany, especially *Rebel Without a Cause* which became Warner Bros.'s second-biggest international box office draw of 1956. However, the success of these fictional narratives in Germany, specifically, can be linked to the familial tensions which lingered in postwar households. Understanding the appeal of *Rebel Without a Cause* and the narrative's German interpretation through *Die Halbstarken* is crucial to an examination of the subculture which based its very identity off of these fictional landscapes.

***Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) – An American Dream or an American Nightmare?**

Rebel Without a Cause premiered in Germany a year after James Dean died in a fatal car crash in September of 1955, giving the beloved film star a martyr-like quality shortly after he first graced the screens of German cinemas in *East of Eden* in July of the previous year. The film

quickly established Dean's presence as a major influence in the *Halbstarke* subculture, inspiring young men to buy red "James Dean jackets" and style their hair back just like he had in the film⁷⁹. However, while teenagers enjoyed the fashion trends and dramatic plot of the film, the themes of violence, family discord, and gender norms presented throughout the narrative caused significant anxiety for German adults. The West German *Hamburger Anzeiger* newspaper, for example, published an article in 1956 about the psychology of the *Halbstarke* which advised parents to simultaneously treat their children with "tolerance and strictness". To make their point clear, the author juxtaposed violent stills of James Dean from *Rebel Without a Cause* with a presumably German boy and girl innocently enjoying a picnic in a meadow⁸⁰. The author clearly felt there was connection between fictional American rebels and youth which idled in German streets, a sentiment shared by the West German movie rating board which prohibited youth under the age of 16 to watch the film. The board feared that children who watched *Rebel Without a Cause* would view adults as "comical figures", be amused by "the rebellion against authority", and would therefore hinder "proper ethical formation"⁸¹. This fear was not without reason: 1956 saw a massive spike in *Halbstarke* riots which required the deployment of police forces, totaling to over 350 riots by 1958⁸². This public fear of provocative mass culture as the source of juvenile

⁷⁹ Poiger, Uta G. *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 106.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Arbeitsausschuß der FSK. "Jugendprotokoll: Denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun . . .", LBS, 1956.

⁸² Busche, Andreas. "Zeitgeschichte - 1956: Fäuste und Hiebe." *der Freitag*. *der Freitag*, February 9, 2018. <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/1956-faeuste-und-hiebe>.

delinquency, echoed in dozens of articles on “the *Halbstarke* problem”, made films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* all the more important to the subcultural formation of the *Halbstarke* and all the more crucial to their analysis.

Rebel Without a Cause is a fast-paced drama which manages to examine gender, race, intergenerational conflict, and sexuality within the events of one day in the suburbs of Los Angeles. The story focuses on a high school student named Jim, played by James Dean, who tries to get a fresh start at Dawson High School after his family moves to Los Angeles. However, Jim has a hard time figuring out what kind of man he wants to be. His father is portrayed as comically weak and subservient, a pitiful character best exemplified in a scene where he serves his unloving wife her dinner in bed while wearing a flower-patterned apron. Although he tries to stay out of trouble, Jim is coaxed into a knife fight against his classmate Buzz while on a fieldtrip. Impressed by his daring, Buzz dares Jim to race him on a cliff later that night. The rules of the race are simple yet dangerous: the two are to race up until the edge of the cliff and jump out of their cars at the last possible moment, deciding which one of the two is to be labeled a “chicken” based on who jumps first. Determined to defend his honor, Jim agrees to the race but is horrified when Buzz drives off of the cliff because his jacket catches on the door handle and prevents him from escaping his car. Buzz’s girlfriend, Judy, is devastated but comforted by Jim and eventually falls in love with him as they escape to an abandoned mansion owned by Plato, a classmate and admirer of Jim. Plato looks up to Jim as a father figure since his wealthy parents are never at home and the three characters form a makeshift family as they hide in the mansion that night. However, as Jim and Judy fall in love, Plato feels left out and concludes that Jim has abandoned him just like his own father did, leading him to run away to the nearby planetarium where he is eventually surrounded by the police. In a tragic turn of events, the hysteric Plato

pulls out his unloaded gun and is shot by the police despite Jim's pleas to leave him unharmed. The film ends with Jim grieving over his innocent friend's death while his father promises to be a stronger man.

Although *Rebel Without a Cause* plays in suburban California, many of the conflicts within the narrative reflect those which were present in postwar German households. Just like Jim and his father, German sons and their fathers who returned from the war tried to find gender roles which were feasible in an environment where mothers had taken a more dominant role. In fact, the official title used for the German premiere of the film was *Rebel Without a Cause – Denn Sie Wissen Nicht Was Sie Tun* (translated: *Rebel Without a Cause – For They Know Not What They Do*). From a marketing perspective, this biblical allusion to Jesus asking God to forgive his torturers in Luke 23, 32-34 connected *Rebel Without a Cause* to James Dean's previous hit, *East of Eden*⁸³. However, by not specifying to whom the allusion refers to, it is implied that both the adults and the teenagers in the film are equally clueless to the harm they cause one another through their aimless search for a meaningful role in society. This blatant ridicule of adult authority ironically transformed *Rebel Without a Cause* into a sort of quasi-biblical work for the *Halbstarke* subculture, causing great concern amongst German conservatives. Particularly concerning to critics was the portrayal of parental failure and adolescent misbehavior as a middle-class phenomenon despite the widely-held belief that "the *Halbstarke* problem" was a working-class issue caused by young German males from

⁸³ Ganguly, Marting. *Klassiker Sehen - Filme Verstehen: Halbstarke Rebellen?* (Berlin: Deutsche Filmakademie e.V.), n.d.

impoverished households⁸⁴. This anxiety that “decent” youth could fall prone to delinquency was also interpreted through a gendered lens, as can be seen in a review which found the young women in the illegal race scene which led to Buzz’s death unbearable to watch, especially “the female main character (Judy) who with smiling nonchalance gave the starting signal”⁸⁵. Yet, just as with the caricatures of “Veronikas” and the *Halbstarke*, many German critics tied the characters in *Rebel Without a Cause* to a uniquely American form of moral corruption. Criticizing the use of psychology as an unconvincing excuse for middle-class juvenile delinquency, one commentator wrote “And thus mother America again presses her sweet little scoundrels and cute murderers to her atomic breast...and shouts to us, who really should be outraged: ‘Let them go, for they don’t know what they are doing.’”⁸⁶. The words “atomic breast” and “shouts to us” clearly bear undertones of a lingering frustration over Germany’s WWII defeat, but they also appropriate the overbearing mother trope of *Rebel Without a Cause* to antagonize America’s presence in German popular culture. The anxious anti-American tone of these reviews, combined with the decision to ban youth under 16 from watching the film, indicates that the fictional destruction of the patriarchal family in *Rebel Without a Cause* was dangerously similar to the family dynamics of postwar German society. Yet, despite the qualms of conservative reviewers and politicians, a new film reimagined the themes of *Rebel Without a Cause* through a narrative made specifically for a German audience: *Die Halbstarcken*.

⁸⁴ Poiger, Uta G. *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 108.

⁸⁵ “...denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun”, *Beratungsdienst Jugend und Film*, 1956.

⁸⁶ Rupert, Martin. “... denn sie wissen nicht, was sie tun.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 31, 1956.

***Die Halbstarken* (1956) – “Harsh...Realistic...Timely!”**

In 1956, Georg Tressler released a film that looked remarkably similar to *Rebel Without a Cause* with the advertising slogan “Harsh...Realistic...Timely!” to indicate the film’s commentary on contemporary West German social issues which, as the title implies, centered around *Die Halbstarken*⁸⁷. The film follows two estranged brothers, Freddy and Jan, as they reconnect with one another, compete for a shared love interest, and attempt a heist that ends in tragedy. Freddy, the older brother, is a known troublemaker and has been living on his own after being kicked out of the house by his parents. The story begins when Jan runs into Freddy at the community pool. Freddy introduces Jan to his girlfriend, Sissy, before he has his friends beat up the lifeguard and leave the pool. At home, Jan tells his parents that he met Freddy and that he seems to be doing well: he has a job, material wealth (which he doesn’t realize is stolen), friends that look up to him, and a girlfriend. The news brings joy to his mother but sets his father into a rage, leading him to blame his wife for putting the family in debt after she asked him to lend money to her brother. Frustrated with his parents, Jan joins Freddy and Sissy who live in a small room in Sissy’s mother’s apartment. Sissy subtly tells Freddy that it would be nice to buy a car and start a life together, leading Freddy and his friends to attempt several heists in order to gain the money necessary for the purchase. Jan joins them, hoping to pay his parents the loan which has placed them in debt. In the final heist, which takes place in the villa of a wealthy Italian restaurant owner, Sissy shoots Freddy because he hesitates to kill the man they are trying to rob. Although severely wounded, Freddy throws Sissy to the floor and Jan helps him leave the villa.

⁸⁷ Busche, Andreas. “Zeitgeschichte - 1956: Fäuste und Hiebe.” der Freitag. der Freitag, February 9, 2018. <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/1956-faeuste-und-hiebe>.

As they attempt to escape from the scene, they are arrested by the police as a crowd of whooping *Halbstarke* race by on mopeds without paying them any attention.

While *Rebel Without a Cause* was criticized because of its implication that juvenile delinquency could occur outside of the working class, *Die Halbstarke* was an attempt to show an authentic depiction of adolescent life in West Berlin through a lens largely molded by Hollywood. Throughout the production process of the film, West Berlin city officials, actors, and producers participated in public meetings in an effort to assure an authentic depiction of German adolescents⁸⁸. What this eventually translated to was a narrative equally tragic to that of *Rebel Without a Cause* that focused on purely working-class characters, with little involvement of middle-class youth in criminal activity. As production progressed, however, the West Berlin government withdrew funding because the film did not show “any positive solutions to juvenile upheaval” and was therefore also deemed unsuitable for children under the age of 16⁸⁹. The finished product was also hardly an accurate depiction of the young rebels of 1950s Germany since the protagonists ventured into robbery and murder, a decision criticized by liberal critics who believed that the film misrepresented the *Halbstarke* as criminals⁹⁰. On the other hand, the film catered directly to the concerns of conservatives who had criticized Judy’s criminal involvement in *Rebel Without a Cause* and subsequently linked the *femme fatale* character of Sissy to American consumerism and unchecked sexuality.

Karin Ball, the young actress who played Sissy, was commonly referred to as a “devil” or an exploitative “vamp” in order to emphasize her sex appeal while criticizing her perceived

⁸⁸ Poiger, Uta G. *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 101.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Sie sind besser als ihr Ruf,” *Blickpunkt* (No. 52), May 1956.

inherent mischievous nature. Karl Korn, for example, was a conservative critic who described the child actor as “a sixteen-year-old doll who may not have a heart, but has plenty of *Halbstarcken* sex.”⁹¹ This sentiment is echoed in an advertisement for the film in which Sissy is framed by the legs of Freddy in a submissive position that “tricks” the audience from realizing the power she holds over Freddy in the film (see Figure 2)⁹². Like James Dean, Horst Buchholz became the heartthrob of German society through his role as Freddy and thereby gave his character the appeal of a “bad boy” with a good heart. This characterization encouraged the perception of Sissy as a mischievous sexual object and supported the underlying thesis of conservative critics that consumerism corrupted women and thereby ruined the lives of decent men⁹³. This theory is most explicitly shown through Sissy’s character, but can also be seen in the argument between Jan’s mother and father. In this brief scene, Jan’s father shouts at his wife for putting the family in debt before banishing Jan from the house because he spent time with Freddy. Importantly, however, the father is reflected in a mirror which cuts off his head, thereby juxtaposing the militant personality of the WWII veteran father with his symbolic decapitation in the domestic sphere (see Figure 3)⁹⁴. In essence, Tressler’s attempt at an “authentic” depiction of postwar adolescents blames women, young and old, for the animosity between fathers and their sons. A veteran of WWII himself and a filmmaker for the Marshall Plan propaganda film project,

⁹¹ Korn, Karl. “Ein deutscher ‘Halbstarcken’-Film,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 October 1956.

⁹² Poiger, Uta G. *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, Calif, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 102.

⁹³ Layne, Priscilla. “Halbstarke and Rowdys: Consumerism, Youth Rebellion, and Gender in the Postwar Cinema of the Two Germanys.” *Central European History* 53, no. 2 (2020): 450. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0008938920000187>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 440.

it would not be surprising if Tressler found a certain level of personal relief through his own “realistic” framing of the *Halbstarke*. However, even if this could be proven true, the conservative interpretation of the film as a warning against sexualized commercialism contradicts itself in that the reviewers both exhibit a desire to consume Sissy’s sexuality *and* condemn her for putting it on display, thereby playing into the modern consumerism they claim to fight against⁹⁵. *Die Halbstarcken*, like the real-world debates over the *Halbstarke* in newspapers, is thus more telling of the sensationalized fears which tormented adults in the postwar period than an accurate depiction of 1950s youths.



Figure 2: Advertisement for "Die Halbstarcken"



Figure 3: Jan's father symbolically decapitated by mirror

⁹⁵ Ibid, 452.

Chapter 5: Commercialism – Deviance for Sale

Although the *Halbstarke* and the films they idolized were generally depicted as a threat to the already precarious state of German society, their infatuation with a fictionalized American youth also created a new opportunity for commercial gain. After all, the young people projected on the screens of West German cinemas did not look all too different from the youth that newspapers described as *Halbstarke*. Characters from 1950s Hollywood films typically came from working- or middle-class families, exhibited frustration against their parents, and sought for an escape from their monotonous lives through love, violence, or both. However, the glamor that made these similarities attractive could not be replicated for free: it had to be bought. Movie ticket sales, fashion trends, and modern appliance companies realized the capitalist potential that these individualist narratives provided and began to cater to the desires of youth through advertising campaigns and tabloids that explained how a fictional landscape could be made into a reality.

***Bravo* Magazine and Commercialized Deviance**

Perhaps the earliest example of celebrity consumer culture in post-war Germany can be found in Germany's most established tabloid magazine for youth, *Bravo*. First published in 1956, the magazine labeled itself as "the magazine for film and television" but quickly expanded its topics to music, fashion, and sex advice as its readership grew. In reaction to the magazine's racy photographs, parents and teachers often forbade their children or students from reading the weekly publications in fear that that its contents would lead to the corruption of young people⁹⁶.

⁹⁶ Birkner, Susanne. *Die "Bravo" - Ein Blatt Mit Geschichte(n)*. 26 Aug. 2016, www.ndr.de/geschichte/Die-Bravo-Ein-Blatt-mit-Geschichten,bravowirdsechzig100.html#bravowirdsechzig102.

Yet the forbidden nature of these magazines simply made them more desirable to German youth, creating what many adults have recently reflected upon as a generational “community experience” which arose out of their efforts to secure a copy⁹⁷. “There were always one or two people in class who had a copy which would be passed around since not everyone could buy one”, remembers one woman from Hamburg⁹⁸. The magazine, like the cinema, became a vehicle for the alternate social education which inspired 1950s youth culture and, in extreme cases, the formation of a *Halbstarke*. However, compared to the fictional men and women on screen, *Bravo* gave the deviant characters of Hollywood and West Germany’s cinematic landscape a place in the real world through interviews, gossip articles, and advertisements that promoted their fictional lifestyle as a reality.



Figure 4: “A Dream Becomes Reality” reads a 1956 “Bravo” headline describing Horst Buchholtz and his beloved co-star⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *Bravo*, November 1956.

The placement of advertisements alongside glamorous photoshoots of movie stars played a key role in shaping consumer demand for an American lifestyle that promised more individualism, adventure, and ease of life than a post-war Germany could initially offer. This is largely due to the fact that narratives in American films did not promote the same protestant ethics which older generations of German citizens had been raised with. Instead of promoting the thriftiness, efficiency, and cooperation which defined the ideal German citizen of the Nazi regime, American films and *Bravo* articles promoted a deviant lifestyle of individualism which could easily be achieved through the purchase of certain commercial goods. This new form of cultural commercialism was inseparable from its American origins. As Ludwig Mann recalls of his youth in the 1950s, the *Halbstarke* subculture arose “out of the leisure industry, films, and other junk...within which one could find a ‘Bald Eagle’ from America...all of that came from outside”¹⁰⁰. The “leisure industry” and “other junk” marketed to German youths through *Bravo* thus played a strong role in transporting American ideas of teenage joy, fame, and commercial gain across the Atlantic to the “forgotten” youth of the postwar era.

Prior to *Bravo*, youth publications either existed as weekly cartoon magazines for children or satirical student pamphlets which sought to achieve a certain political aim. Once *Bravo* was introduced, however, youth who were too old for Mickey Mouse and too young for political debates suddenly had a magazine that catered directly to the frustrations, fascinations, and sexual desires of the teenager¹⁰¹. With no content that required a certain intellectual interest

¹⁰⁰ Krüger, Heinz-Hermann. “*Die Elvis-Tolle, die hatte ich mir unauffällig wachsen lassen*”: *Lebensgeschichte und jugendliche Alltagskultur in den fünfziger Jahren* (Wiesbaden, VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1985), 123.

¹⁰¹ Birkner, Susanne. *Die "Bravo" - Ein Blatt Mit Geschichte(n)*. 26 Aug. 2016, www.ndr.de/geschichte/Die-Bravo-Ein-Blatt-mit-Geschichten,bravowirdsechzig100.html#bravowirdsechzig102.

or background, celebrity culture acted as the core of the magazine's content and presented young people with images of who they wanted to be and ways that they could become more like them. Meanwhile, letters sent in to the magazine by teenagers who were concerned about achieving an aspect of the ideal teenage experience (most often romance) were read by older youth who could read these letters as advice from real people who, like them, wanted to live the lives they saw on screen. Due to the low entry barrier, blurring of fictional vs. nonfictional worlds, and natural appeal of good-looking youth, there was something for every teen to read in *Bravo*. However, this also meant that there was something for every teen to buy in *Bravo*.

Bravo publications often mixed the factual and fictional components of the teenage world by interviewing young movie stars, responding to letters from anxious teens, and advertising where to buy the latest fashion trends, all within the same issue. For example, an article from the September 1956 issue of *Bravo* titled "Halbstarke and Policemen – Listen!" criticizes policemen for the "pointless beatings" of "this generation which no one seems to care for"¹⁰². As an inspiring real-world solution to this problem, the article goes on to describe how the mayor of Berlin recently created a "happy ending like in a movie" by building a shelter for troubled youth that not only provided them with a home but trained them into first-rate jazz musicians¹⁰³. Only a few pages later, two pages of stills from the 1956 hit movie *Die Halbstarcken* present the reader

¹⁰² "Halbstarcken Und Polizisten Herhören!" *Bravo*, 16 Sept. 1956.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

with a glorified fictional version of the forgotten youth who were beaten by policemen: fashionable, rebellious, and happy to be a consumer¹⁰⁴.

Cleverly interspersed between these sorts of articles, however, are advertisements for the newest fashion trends, one of which reads “The James Dean jacket – now also available in Germany!” (see Figure 5)¹⁰⁵. By mixing opinion articles on real-world *Halbstarke* riots with gossip articles about movie stars who acted like *Halbstarke* and advertisements explaining how to look like a *Halbstarke*, *Bravo* skillfully managed to blur the line between what was reality, what wasn't reality, and what *could* be the reader's reality through an imported consumer culture. With no political agenda or intellectual goal, *Bravo* acted as a mirror to its equally “aimless” readership.

Yet, despite the frequent depiction of *Halbstarke* as deviant in newspapers with adult readership, the widespread interest that teenagers shared for fictional *Halbstarke* and the fleeting celebrity which real *Halbstarke* received through the press seemed to fulfill a rather common goal for youth in general: fame. Not every young person who read *Bravo* decided to start a riot or steal a car, but the commercial power which deviance held in 1950s youth culture seems to suggest that perhaps leather jackets, idleness, and rule-breaking were not necessarily symbols of moral decline amongst youths themselves. In fact, the commercial success of *Bravo* seems to suggest that deviance was even mainstream amongst teens, just the manifestation of it differed from one person to another. In this

Die James-Dean-Jacke
jetzt auch in Deutschland erhältlich!

DIE JAMES-DEAN-JACKE FÜR DEN HERRN
in den Größen 48—54

James Dean trug Lederjacken. James Dean trug auch Strickjacken. Aber am liebsten trug er die kombinierte Lederstrickjacke im Hollywoodschnitt. James Dean hatte vier Lederstrickjacken. Jede im gleichen Schnitt. Aber jede in einer anderen Farbe. Er trug sie in Rot, er trug sie in Beige, er trug sie in Grün, er trug sie in Cognac. (Er tauchte sie auch manchmal in Cognac.)

James Dean sah es nicht gern, wenn andere die gleiche Jacke trugen. Nur seinen Freundinnen schenkte er sie: in Rot, in Beige, in Grün, in Cognac.

Einheitspreis DM 64.80

Nur durch
LOLA AUERHAMMER-VERSAND
München 34, Schließfach 1.

Postkarte genügt. Mit Angabe der Modellgröße und der Farbe. Lieferung portofrei durch Nachnahme.

Das sind die Merkmale der James-Dean-Jacke: Krauel und Rücken aus 100% reiner Wolle, Fasenstrick, Hollywoodschnitt, echt englisch Gazelle-Leder.

DIE JAMES-DEAN-JACKE FÜR DIE DAME
in den Größen 38—48

James-Dean-Jacken sind praktisch, elegant und sportlich. James-Dean-Jacken sind salopp und chic zugleich. Man ist in ihnen immer angezogen. Man kann sie tragen als Hausjacke, auf der Straße, beim Einkauf, im Büro, auf der Reise, im Restaurant. (Nur nicht im Theater.)

Figure 5: Advertisement for "The James Dean Jacket -- Now in Germany"

sense, the commercial success of deviance in *Bravo* supports the liberal view of *Halbstarke* presented in articles which defined “Halbstarke” as a broad term which encompassed a majority of non-criminal “teens being teens” along with criminals who utilized the same symbolic vocabulary. The determination of newspapers to attack the cultural ramifications of the *Halbstarke* therefore stems not from a small group of rowdy youth, but from the commercial elements which glorified their actions and advertised individuality as something valuable to be achieved through material gain.

Modernity and the Guilty Mother

Although the *Halbstarke* bore the brunt of anti-capitalist or anti-American criticism in the newspapers, the postwar family structure also fostered a new manifestation of misogyny that found itself in the trope of the guilty mother who, corrupted by consumerism, would abandon her motherly duties in pursuit of the products advertised magazines such as *Bravo*. From 1933 to 1945, the Nazi regime had ensured that men and women had a clear idea of their gender roles. By 1941, almost half of the 20 million men who served in Germany’s military had left civilian life and thus became consumed by their role as a protector of the German Reich¹⁰⁶. During the Weimar Republic and in the following Third Reich, the role of women lay in the right and duty to “manage the common household”, only being allowed to work outside of the home if it did not

¹⁰⁴ Krüger, Heinz-Hermann. “*Die Elvis-Tolle, die hatte ich mir unauffällig wachsen lassen*”: *Lebensgeschichte und jugendliche Alltagskultur in den fünfziger Jahren* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1985), 127.

¹⁰⁵ *Bravo*, June 1956.

¹⁰⁶ Mouton, Michelle. *From Nurturing the Nation to Purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi Family Policy, 1918-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63.

interfere with her household responsibilities¹⁰⁷. Because so many husbands and fathers had been deployed to support the war effort, women had also gained a significant amount of autonomy and were able to invest their time in the public sphere through state-sponsored political organizations such as the *NS-Frauenschaft*¹⁰⁸. As mentioned in previous chapters, women retained their role as laborers in the postwar period in order to contribute to the household income that could not be brought in by a dead or disabled husband. However, this pursuit of additional labor for survival, while glorified as altruism through the *Trümmerfrau* and demonized through “Veronikas”, was also used to create the trope of the guilty and inattentive mother portrayed in films, criticized in newspapers, and, in retrospective interviews, noted by former *Halbstarke*:

“My mother disregarded me in some ways. When she went to work, she would often go somewhere else after her shift was done without coming back home to care for me. I often had to take care of things myself and that was sad sometimes.”¹¹⁰

According to articles from the 1950s, it certainly seems as though *Halbstarke* and their mothers existed within the same deviant social category although popular culture continued to promote the image of the Weimar-era housewife. Many women and *Halbstarke* had previously engaged with a state-provided leisure culture which, after WWII, was replaced with a work culture that led new workers to retrieve their lost leisure time through capitalist means. As a market analyst from the 1950s remarked, “This generation lives for their private existence and for their hobbies. They work to afford themselves as many comforts as their consumer culture

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, p. 36-37

¹⁰⁸ Crew, David. *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945* (Taylor and Francis, 2013).

¹¹⁰ Krüger, Heinz-Hermann. Interview with Werner Kullmann. “*Die Elvis-Tolle, die hatte ich mir unauffällig wachsen lassen*”: *Lebensgeschichte und jugendliche Alltagskultur in den fünfziger Jahren* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1985), 116.

offers them.”¹¹⁶. Conversely, a teen magazine from 1958 proclaimed that “The modern housewife has sixteen occupations, from cook to cleaning woman”¹¹⁷ and thus reinforced the idea that woman’s labor should not feed into the same capitalist system as men’s work. Yet, contrary to teenage girls, the adult mothers of *Halbstarke* were often a part of this capitalist system of labor as either a *Trümmerfrau* or blue-collar professional and thus can be seen as deviants compared to mothers who stayed at home. The working mother was not guilty because she worked, but rather because her labor outside of the private sphere encouraged a modern set of values outside of the protestant ethics of her domestic counterpart. The feared result of these values can be seen in the overinvolved mother of *Die Halbstarcken* and the loveless mother of *Rebel Without a Cause*, both of whom are portrayed as opportunistic and greedy. If the ideology of capitalism was the enemy of mainstream German cultural norms, then the character of the *Halbstarke* was the vessel through which it was carried while the character of the guilty mother was its misogynistic counterpart.

¹¹⁶ Muenster, Ruth. *Geld in Nietenhosen* (Forkel-Verl, 1961), 14.

¹¹⁷ Hilgendorf, Gertrud V. *Das Teenager Buch: Ein Brevier Für Junge Mädchen* (Humboldt Taschenbücher), 1958.

Chapter 6: Restoring Order – Solutions to “The Halbstarke Problem”

In September of 1956, a newspaper article was published with the headline “Out of the streets – but to where?” and became one of many articles which debated possible solutions for the uptick in *Halbstarke* riots in the latter half of the 1950s. Indeed, the question “but to where?” seemed to be central to this national clean-up project. For if, as Social Democratic Party (SPD) representative Rudolf Schlichtinger argued, “young people are forced to the streets [because] there is an issue in the home” where could young people spend their time in order to receive “proper” moral guidance¹¹⁸? Many town hall meetings were held during the 1950s to discuss this topic, oftentimes bringing local politicians into conversation with policemen and youth from a certain city or village. The main consensus from these meetings was that a) young people needed to be offered constructive forms of leisure and b) the generalization of post-war youth as *Halbstarke* was incredibly damaging to youth who actively tried to become productive members of mainstream society. Yet while these broader goals sought to reform the *Halbstarke* through occasional engagement with productive hobbies, initiatives by NGOs truly sought to answer the “where” part of the *Halbstarke* question. This answer took the form of shelters and multi-purpose rooms where *Halbstarke* could socialize indoors as an alternative to harassing passerby on the street. But could the solution for a problem in the home truly come from outside of the home? More importantly, what type of *Halbstarke* was deemed troubled enough to be a target of these initiatives – those involved in criminal activity or those with a love for American pop culture? These are questions which shaped the movement to reform the *Halbstarke*, an initiative as aimless as the youths it tried to save.

¹¹⁸ “Weg Von Der Straße -- Aber Wohin?” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 Sept. 1956.

Political Battles

Part of the inefficacy of the *Halbstarke* reform program was due to its unclear goal. This is perhaps best represented in the previously mentioned “Out of the streets – but to where?” article, the subtitle of which fittingly reads “Discussion of the Youth Forum: Do *Halbstarke* Exist?”. Indeed, the report on the televised discussion session seemed preoccupied with dismantling the sensationalism which surrounded the *Halbstarke* before discussing ways to combat the issue. Schlichtinger, representing the SPD in Munich, started his speech with a call to reframe the *Halbstarke* problem. In addition to arguing that the problems in the streets started in the home, he urged that “The word *Halbstarke* must vanish from the discussion, for it gives truly criminal youth the chance to hide within the general youth population”¹¹⁹. Schlichtinger especially blamed the press for causing the ambiguous *Halbstarke* problem as opposed to the more realistic issue of criminal youth. These statements stripped away the veil of cultural, ideological, and commercial motivations which created the *Halbstarke* character in the press and, as a result, led to more progressive reform propositions. Taking the liberal reformist stance of the SPD, Schlichtinger argued that “We all still live under too much surveillance from the state and the police” and advocated for initiatives which actually *supported* the positive aspects of the culture which arose out of the *Halbstarke* instead of punitive law enforcement measures. These initiatives included state-funded sports facilities, tracks for moped races, and dance nights that brought older and younger generations together, all of which were attention-grabbing ideas which never came to fruition by the end of the 1950s. However, though it was not mentioned in the newspaper article, this public support of subcultures and rejection of police surveillance was quite symbolic since it was expressed in the historic Hofbräukeller where Adolf Hitler held his

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

first political speech more than three decades prior. Town hall discussions on the *Halbstarke*, which took place several times in 1956, thus gave the impression that older generations sympathized with the plight of the *Halbstarke* and were ready to help them enjoy a healthy lifestyle on their own terms.

While town halls tended to end with a quote from a politician promising a brighter future, shorter reports on public policy decisions showed a different approach to the *Halbstarke* problem. In one case, a short report published only three months before the “Out of the streets – but where?” article was titled “With full force against Halbstarke” and listed the following initiatives proposed by the Christian Social Union (CSU -- the regionalist counterpart of CDU)¹²⁰:

1. Constant surveillance of cinemas, restaurants, and parks and immediate police action if order or public safety is disturbed
2. Surveillance of young drivers, especially moped drivers who, through their reckless behavior endanger both car drivers and pedestrians
3. Disruption of any gang formations
4. Destruction of any resistance against the state authority by *Halbstarke* with all resources available up until the boundaries of the law

These propositions certainly don't seem to allow room for state-funded moped tracks, yet this is unsurprising given that the CSU was the conservative rival of the SPD. Nevertheless, the plea for state-sanctioned violence “up until the boundaries of the law” was a chilling echo of the Nazi-era policies which sought to eradicate homosexuals, Jews, and disabled people from mainstream

¹²⁰ “Mit Voller Kraft Gegen Halbstarke.” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 June 1956.

society at all costs. This total eradication of a minority group was, of course, difficult to advocate for in a post-WWII Germany, especially against a sensationalized *Halbstarke* character whose deviance was more based on fashion than crime.

Culture War

However, even this character could be combatted according to a report on the “Youth Week” film festival of a youth group in Erlangen. The aim of the week-long programming for youth and adults was to discuss issues affecting young people, the most pressing of which was the *Halbstarke* problem. After one week of discussion, the participants concluded that a) the term *Halbstarke* was damaging to all youth and b) schools and parents do not expose young people to “enough films that are actually good”¹²¹. Given the subject matter of the film festival, it can reasonably be inferred that “good films” did not glorify the *Halbstarke* and that a ban on such media would restore the presence of a law-abiding youth culture. This idea was also reflected in public policy initiatives further north, namely, in North Rhine – Westphalia. A 1956 article with the headline “Call for the ambition of the *Halbstarke*” announced a new state-wide competition as part of a new initiative to “develop *Halbstarke* into responsible citizens”¹²². In an effort to bring youth out of their “dangerous isolation and indifference”¹²³, 13 to 25-year-olds were encouraged to compete in sports ranging from soccer to tennis and arts ranging from fashion to photography. Most importantly, however, the abilities of these youth “should not be rewarded

¹²¹ “Woche Der Jugend in Erlangen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 31 Oct. 1956.

¹²² “Appell an Den Ehrgeiz Der ‘Halbstarke.’” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18 June 1956.

¹²³ Ibid.

through things of material worth”¹²⁴, but rather through good books, paintings, theater tickets, and guided tours. Again, this article points to a bad cultural education as the root cause of youthful deviance and even goes one step further by explicitly fighting against the capitalist values which this imported cultural education had instilled in Germany’s youth. Building a better youth culture therefore meant *teaching* a better youth culture, something which a *Halbstarke* could only learn if their education came from a space other than the home or the streets.

“The Open Door”

One attempt at creating this space manifested itself in the state-sponsored youth shelters known as “The Open Door”. True to its name, shelters of “The Open Door” welcomed youth of all backgrounds to socialize in a space that was minimally supervised by one or two adults. However, the manifesto of the organization makes it clear that isolated and at-risk youth are its target group. Young people, “especially those who do not belong to any form of youth organization already” or “live in unfortunate circumstances”, were encouraged to participate in activities of the shelter which were to promote teamwork and foster their own personal development¹²⁵. The first few shelters were built in 1960, each of which were constructed in especially crowded areas of major cities. Since the alleys in these areas were common hang-out spots for *Halbstarke*, the shelters followed the logic that *Halbstarke* simply didn’t have anywhere else to be and would gradually prefer socializing in the shelter over harassing passerby in the street. In many ways, this logic worked.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Bals, Christel. *Halbstarke unter Sich*, Köln, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1962.

Events organized by “The Open Door” were designed to encourage teamwork and collaboration, creating an environment which aimed to combat the disorder of abusive homes. In a sociological study of “The Open Door” conducted by Christel Bals, it was found that *Halbstarke* placed great value in soccer and table tennis tournaments and, because the team of “The Open Door” proved rather successful, felt a certain loyalty and pride in belonging to their shelter’s team¹²⁶. However, according to the study, it seems as though this merely strengthened the cohesion between the *Halbstarke* themselves rather than conform them to a normative culture. One reason for this was the contentious role of the shelter director, who tended to come from a more “highly regarded” social class and thus created a tense relationship between the independent youth at the shelter and their adult supervisor¹²⁷. In order to make these “authoritarian” youth feel welcome, however, the directors tried to keep their presence to a minimum and had little influence on the youths’ daily lives beyond organizing the events they could partake in. Bals remarks that this was a realistic approach, concluding that the norms of the individual could not be changed if they belonged to a group. In the case of the *Halbstarke*, older teenagers often filled the void of a parental role for younger youth and thus provided a powerful cultural education which could not be overturned by a single adult¹²⁸. “The Open Door” thus succeeded in bringing together isolated deviant youth and reducing their presence in the streets, yet whatever social cohesion they created seems to have been limited within the walls of the shelter.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 96.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 107

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 153

The End of the *Halbstarke*?

Despite town halls, public policy proposals, and NGO initiatives, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the various “solutions” which proposed to solve the *Halbstarke* problem. A large amount of this ambiguity arises out of the blurred lines between the cultural and political dimensions of the *Halbstarke*. If *Halbstarke* were criminals who posed a threat to public authority, did the government crackdown proposed by the CSU reassert their dominance? The table below, presenting the amount of juvenile arrests since 1954 in the column farthest to the right, certainly shows an increase of arrests but the lack of a subsequent decrease indicating a restoration of order does not occur.

► Tab 1 Kriminalität

	Verurteilte				polizeilich Registrierte			
	insgesamt	männlich	weiblich	Jugendliche	insgesamt	männlich	weiblich	Jugendliche
	pro 100 000 Einwohner							
	x0413	x0414	x0415	x0416	x0417	x0418	x0419	x0420
Deutsches Reich								
1882	996	1 667	379	568	–	–	–	–
1890	1 049	1 787	373	663	–	–	–	–
1900	1 164	2 039	357	745	–	–	–	–
1910	1 184	2 059	369	668	–	–	–	–
1920	1 284	2 185	475	1 137	–	–	–	–
1930	1 187	2 148	304	566	–	–	–	–
1938	627	1 092	192	401	–	–	–	–
Bundesrepublik								
1954	1 281	2 434	301	842	2 613	4 848	732	2 118
1960	1 311	2 539	273	1 394	2 857	5 790	710	3 781
1970	1 346	2 504	331	1 741	1 997	3 813	690	4 315
1980	1 433	2 585	410	1 917	2 610	4 715	1 003	5 112
1990	1 286	2 251	404	1 348	2 555	4 281	1 200	5 489
Deutschland								
2000	1 260	2 162	414	1 718	3 051	5 179	1 460	8 075
2010	1 143	1 899	425	1 728	2 880	4 607	1 491	7 150

Quelle: Dietrich Oberwittler, Kriminalität, in: Thomas Rahlf (Hg.), Deutschland in Daten. Zeitreihen zur Historischen Statistik, Bonn 2015, S. 133
Lizenz: Creative Commons by-nc-nd/3.0/de | Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2015 | www.bpb.de



Table 1: The Development of Crime by Gender and Age¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Oberwittler, Dietrich. “Kriminalität - die Entwicklung der Kriminalität nach Geschlecht und Alter.” bpb.de. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, January 27, 2016. <https://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/deutschland-in-daten/220319/geschlecht-und-alter>.

On the other hand, the *Halbstarke* problem could also be interpreted as an issue of cultural deviance. The individualism, capitalism, and hedonism of youth culture did not disappear as Germans became avid consumers in order to replace what they had lost in the war. However, the glamor of the *Halbstarke* as a fictional character did gradually disappear during the 1960s. This is less likely the result of initiatives such as the sports and arts competition in North Rhine – Westphalia than it is the result of *Halbstarke* losing one of their main identifiers: youth. As the postwar youth which bore the label of *Halbstarke* aged into students, parents, and professionals, their age group was replaced by a generation which benefitted from a more established infrastructure than the postwar state the *Halbstarke* grew up in. Furthermore, the actors who portrayed fictional *Halbstarke*, such as James Dean or Horst Buchholz, either died or grew into other roles and could therefore no longer provide new narratives that allowed the *Halbstarke* to expand the cultural library of their subculture. This fading out of cultural relevance is also reflected in the changing definition of what the term “Halbstarke” meant. By 1968, the last year in which the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* mentions the *Halbstarke* in a significant number of articles (see Figure 7 below), the word “Halbstarke” is used to reference teenagers rather than criminal reports or cultural debates. In fact, after 1968, the word nearly disappears from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* archive until it resurges in the 90s as a word used in articles describing fictional plays, photo exhibitions, or youth rebellions in other countries. Like many youth subcultures, the *Halbstarke* disappeared as 1950s youth grew into mainstream adult roles which could no longer sustain the aimless rioting, idleness, and unrestrained machismo of the *Halbstarke* subculture.

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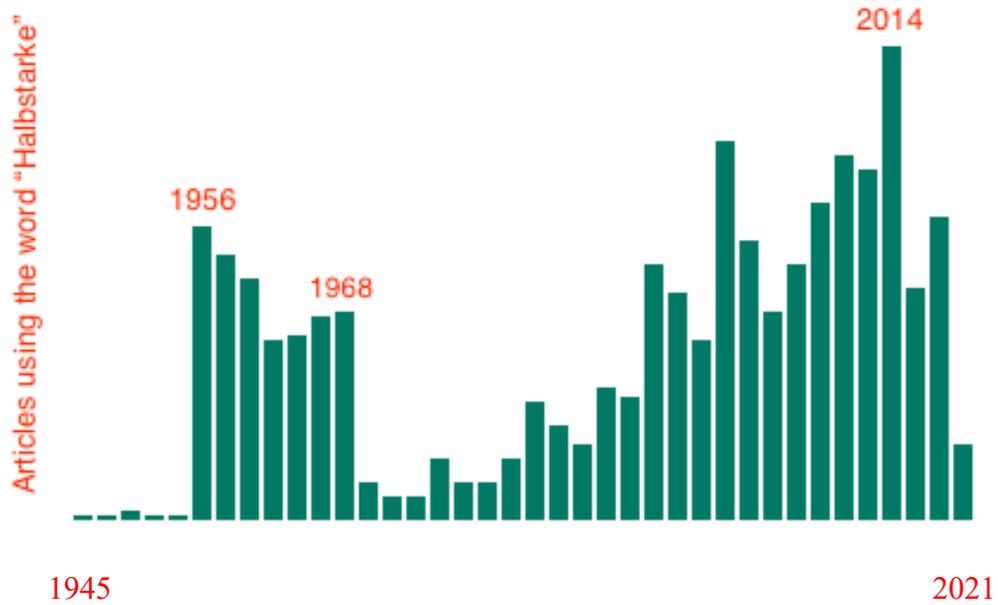


Figure 7: Search results for “Halbstarke” in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* archive filtered by year¹³¹

¹³¹ “Suchergebnisse Für ‘Halbstarke.’” *Süddeutsche Zeitung Archiv - LibraryNet*, 26 Feb. 2021, archiv-1szarchiv-1de-1006d4d6z002d.erf.sbb.spk-berlin.de/Portal/restricted/ExtendedResultList.act.

Conclusion: A Forgotten Legacy

When viewing the history of the *Halbstarke*, their short existence seems like a relatively insignificant blip in the narrative of modern Germany. With early reports on their presence appearing in 1950, reaching their peak in 1956, and faltering out in the 1960s, the *Halbstarke* subculture existed for little over a decade and does not seem to have retained the sense of permanence which other subcultures, such as the activists of 1968, seem to occupy in the cultural memory of Germany¹³². The 1960s saw the pairing of international cultural icons, such as The Beatles and Janis Joplin, with national political martyrs, such as Benno Ohnesorg and Rudi Dutschke, which created both a lasting cultural and ideological legacy from which youths still draw inspiration today¹³³. Yet perhaps it is this overshadowing by the highly political 1968 generation which makes the apolitical *Halbstarke* which came before them a worthy subject for deeper analysis. After all, the university students who fueled the political protests of the 1968 movement were of a generation not much younger than the *Halbstarke* and were thus reacting to a similar set of postwar circumstances. Were the *Halbstarke* thus truly as apolitical as 1950s newspaper reports made them out to be? A reframing of the *Halbstarke* riots and their acts of deviance as political could indicate that the “aimless youth” of the 1950s may actually have been a working-class reaction to the postwar period which could only be taken seriously once it was articulated through the intellectual rhetoric of educated middle-class students in 1968.

¹³² Eigler, Friederike. “Writing in the New Germany: Cultural Memory and Family Narratives.” *German Politics and Society* 23, no. 3 (2005): 31.
<https://doi.org/10.3167/104503005780979967>.

¹³³ Bebnowski, David. *Generation Und Geltung: Von Den "45ern" Zur "Generation Praktikum"-übersehene und Etablierte Generationen Im Vergleich* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 101.

Political Significance: A Precursor to 1968?

The key difference between the *Halbstarke* and the 1968 movement lies in their class and level of education, both of which were factors that determined their representation in the media and the legacy of their deviance. The 1968 youth were largely part of an educated middle-class, meaning that their frustration with social injustice was typically more academic than personal¹³⁴. For example, it was much more likely that middle-class youths were raised by two healthy parents in an economically stable environment and thus avoided the “broken family” environment which was widely believed to have created the *Halbstarke*, since war casualties were far more widespread amongst working-class families¹³⁵. At the same time, however, the association of poverty with working-class families gradually declined as the income of unskilled workers nearly doubled over the course of the 1950s¹³⁶. This led the *Halbstarke* to increase their participation in the consumer economy, encouraging working-class teens to purchase their preferred style of clothes as well as buy entry into cinemas and concert halls without taking on the professions and cultural education of the middle class. Contrary to the anti-consumerist stance of the 1968 protests, the *Halbstarke* clearly reveled in their new role as consumers as they bought in to the lifestyles marketed towards them in Hollywood films, *Bravo*, and 1950s advertisements. Yet, despite their spending habits indicating a desire to conform to the demands of popular culture, the *Halbstarke* riots repeatedly took place in the venues they spent their

¹³⁴ Ibid, 88.

¹³⁵ Zinnecker, Jürgen. “Halbstarke: Die andere Seite der 68er Generation” in Hermann, Ulrich. *Protestierende Jugend – Jugendopposition und politischer Protest in der deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Weinheim/München, 2002), 461-485.

¹³⁶ Bebnowski, David. *Generation Und Geltung: Von Den "45ern" Zur "Generation Praktikum"-übersehene und Etablierte Generationen Im Vergleich* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 68.

money at – oftentimes resulting in the reckless vandalism of cinemas and concert halls at the end of a show¹³⁷. This leads to a difficult question which disputes the entire categorization of *Halbstarke* as deviants: Why would *Halbstarke* destroy the spaces which provided them with the consumerist lifestyle they strove to conform to?

While the lack of written ideologies and charismatic leaders led most journalists to ignore the potential for a political interpretation of these protests, the fact that these riots had no specific aim could perhaps be understood a political act in itself. A recent analysis by David Bebnowski likens the *Halbstarke* riots to the equally “aimless” 2005 riots of immigrants in Paris, arguing that both concerned a group of people who simply desired to become visible to the broader population¹³⁸. This is also not unlike the 1968 youths who sought to make themselves visible to older generations through sit-ins, classroom occupations, and marches, albeit for the clearly stated purpose of political change. Yet, in this sense, the *Halbstarke* riots can be viewed as a display of the frustration felt by working-class youths who, although they possessed the capital to inhabit the same spaces as their middle-class counterparts, did not feel that they belonged to the broader middle class which made up the increasing majority of 1950s German society¹³⁹. The *Halbstarke* subculture could therefore be viewed as a working-class precursor to the more structured and accessible student protests of 1968, largely ignored because of its uneducated participants and their “aimless” use of violence.

¹³⁷ Faulstich, Werner. “Die Neue Jugendkultur: Teenager Und Das Halbstarckenproblem.” *Die Kultur der 50er Jahre*, 2007, 277–92. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783846737484_019.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

¹³⁹ Kaelble, Hartmut. “Social Mobility in Germany, 1900-1960.” *The Journal of Modern History* 50, no. 3 (1978): 443. <https://doi.org/10.1086/241733>.

Cultural Relevance: A Reusable Nostalgia

Despite the political potential of the *Halbstarke*, what remains of their legacy remains largely tied to the decade of their existence. As indicated by the Birmingham School, many subcultures could not create a sustainable alternative lifestyle that could compete with the mainstream culture¹⁴⁰. Whereas hippies had their communal style of living and Mods had gender-specific dress codes that engaged their female counterparts, the *Halbstarke* were a largely underdeveloped subculture that acted more as an emergency placeholder between the Hitler Youth and the 1968 movement than a feasible way of life. This is in large part due to the consistent absence of women from the *Halbstarke* subculture, effectively eliminating the possibility for half the population to participate. While the desire of women was clearly a part of the *Halbstarke* machismo shown in *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Die Halbstarcken*, the lack of articles or interviews describing real-world female *Halbstarke* (who were not simply the tangential lovers of male *Halbstarke*) indicates that the *Halbstarke* subculture was only open to a specific age group of men who only desired one another's shared platonic friendship. Another reason for the short-lived *Halbstarke* subculture can be tied to its lack of leadership. The only role models for the *Halbstarke* were the fictional characters played by James Dean, who died shortly after his German debut, and Horst Buchholz, who went on to play a wide variety of roles after *Die Halbstarcken*. This made it difficult for aging *Halbstarke* to remain in the subculture, but it also left a remarkable cultural void since the icons of the *Halbstarke* were not real *Halbstarke* at all – they were fictional characters played by actors. Contrary to the youth subcultures which followed, no bands, authors, or public figures from the 1950s *Halbstarke*

¹⁴⁰ McRobbie, Angela and Jenny Garber. "Girls and Subcultures", *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain* (1993): 4.

movement stand out in the cultural memory of Germany and have thus largely been forgotten as an inexplicable phase of postwar rebellion.

Although the *Halbstarke* themselves did not produce a lasting cultural legacy, a remarkable cultural revival of the subculture in late 20th century cinema and a more recent 21st century academic interest in the *Halbstarke* implies that the intrigue of their rebellion remains relevant today. Following the success of films set in the 1950s such as *Grease* and *The Outsiders*, a 1996 remake of *Die Halbstarcken* with the same title, plotline, and 1950s setting found its way to the cinemas of a unified Germany. While the plotline remains largely the same, the film concludes with a retrospective narration by Freddy who states that he recently received a silver watch from the postal service (his employer since his arrest) for his 60th birthday¹⁴¹. Not only is this ironic given that the major heist in the film starts with the robbery of a postal truck, but the retrospective narration also gives the first example of what the role of an adult *Halbstarke* could be in a modern-day context: distributing mail for the state-owned postal service. What could have been an homage to a bygone era thus ends in a ridicule of the subculture's inevitable return to conformity. The emergence of this storyline and its modified ending shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall seems to carry an unspoken significance, perhaps as a symbolic return to quotidian normalcy after years of "aimless" fighting. Nevertheless, the cyclical reuse of the *Halbstarke* in cultural history underscores their malleability as a subculture whose deviant aesthetic appeal has almost become a conformist cliché through its repeated use in late 20th century cinema.

¹⁴¹ *Die Halbstarcken*, directed by Urs Eggers (1996: Sat 1.), 1996.

Deviant Conformists

This thesis began with an examination of the *Halbstarke* as a postwar phenomenon through which the ideological battle between traditional German norms and imported “American” deviance could be observed. After analyzing the actions and reactions to these rebellious youths through the lens of gender, inter-generational conflict, cinema, and commercialism, it is clear that the *Halbstarke* were more than the bored teenage criminals the press made them out to be. On the one hand, the *Halbstarke* portrayed by James Dean and Horst Buchholtz, as well as those reported on by conservative journalists, were deviant because they were, in fact, criminals. By breaking the law, they deviated from the written norms of the Republic and thus received the label of *Halbstarke*. On the other hand, youths who wore leather jackets and denim pants, idled around city centers with their friends, and raced each other on mopeds were rather conformist. These “teens being teens” followed the cultural education they received from widely popular films and magazines, participated in the consumer economy, and enjoyed the American music that merged into the mainstream parent culture by the 1960s, all without breaking any written laws. Yet, because they deviated from the unwritten cultural norms expected by older generations and adopted the same aesthetic codes as *Halbstarke* criminals, these youths were profiled under the same label. In essence, the majority of the *Halbstarke* were deviant conformists because they neither broke the laws of their country nor strictly conformed to the German cultural norms of their parents.

The alarmism surrounding the *Halbstarke* thus stems from a fear of the Americanization of Germany, an anxiety largely felt by German veterans who returned to a domestic sphere that looked very different from the state they left it in. For these veterans and their fellow conservative journalists, deviance was in danger of becoming a new conformity and, in some

regards, they were right. In the decades following the war, women became more involved outside of the home, American culture became a part of the mainstream, and the commercialization of individualism significantly influenced the consumer culture of modern Germany¹⁴². Meanwhile, leather jackets, riots, and moped races have long remained absent from the headlines of German newspapers. As history tends to favor the adage “he who writes, remains” when remembering the political movements of the past, the *Halbstarke* have little to be remembered by in comparison to the many ideologies recorded in pamphlets and manifestos of students from the 1968 protests¹⁴³. Yet, given that working-class *Halbstarke* were unlikely to have been exposed to the intellectual rhetoric and structured debate used by their middle-class peers in 1968, their public displays of deviance can be seen as an act of protest that tried to express political opinion within the means that were available to them. The scarce number of oral histories which allowed *Halbstarke*, rather than their critics, to define their actions neither confirm or deny the riots of the 1950s as political despite their outward appearance as an early, though uncontrolled, form of mass protest. For this reason, future research should conduct interviews with elderly German citizens who identify themselves as former *Halbstarke* in order to obtain a deeper understanding of who these youths were beyond the reductionist depictions offered by their critics. The *Halbstarke* subculture was thus a unique phenomenon contained to the postwar environment of the 1950s, yet traces of its impact in public protest culture can be

¹⁴² Fluck, Winfried. “The Americanization of German Culture? The Strange, Paradoxical Ways of Modernity.” *German Pop Culture*, 2004, 19–39.

¹⁴³ Walter, Franz. “Abschied Von Der Halbstarckenrepublik?” Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung, July 21, 2017. <http://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/abschied-von-der-halbstarckenrepublik>.

found in the more structured political youth movements which followed and continue to be used as models for political activism today.

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