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Revolution and Madness - The "Socialist Patients' Collective of Heidelberg (SPK)": an episode in the history of antipsychiatry and the 1960s student rebellion in West Germany

In early 1970 a group of patients emerged at the psychiatric clinic of Heidelberg University calling themselves "Socialist Patients' Collective" (SPK). They believed the only consequent way to fight mental illness was the "overthrow of the pathogenic capitalist patriarchal society". The patient was to "turn illness into a weapon" and convert his "unconscious unhappiness" into an "unhappy consciousness" realizing the causes of his misery. The doctor-patient relationship as an expression of the "object role" of the patient was to be repealed and instead "every patient become a therapist of himself and other patients." Following an escalating and violent conflict with hospital and state authorities the SPK dissolved in July 1971 and its leaders ended up in jail.

The story of the SPK has given rise to many myths and legends such as the SPK having been the first self-assistance group of psychiatric patients in history victimized and destroyed by the state. This legend was passed on over the years by various authors, some portraying the SPK as the main recruiting basis for the left-wing terrorist group Red Army Faction (RAF). Based on ample archive material and eye witness interviews the inner life and structure of the group, its therapeutic practice and the deeper reasons for the irreconcilable and destructive nature of the conflict will be analyzed in the historical context of the student rebellion, the antipsychiatry Zeitgeist and the mental health reform movement.

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