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Abstract

This paper will examine the rise and fall of Students for a Democratic Society during the 1960s and into the 1970s. One of the most prominent organizations, Students for a Democratic Society, emphasized ideas about participation, individuality and supported the rejection of Cold War ideologies. SDS dramatically grew their numbers over a short period of time, creating spaces throughout the country for students to protest, argue and speak freely about the issues they faced. Through an analysis of its founding documents such as the Port Huron Statement and the ideologies of leaders like Tom Hayden, this paper aims to lay out the various issues that ultimately lead to the organizations collapse. Differences in beliefs and the practices of protests began to create a split within the organization with some looking towards a more radical approach. These violent factions tarnished the reputation of SDS as a peaceful organization and became both a danger to themselves and their communities. Although many remained committed to its founding principles for as long as they could, in the end the organization split into two groups, the Progressive Labor Party and the Revolutionary Youth Movement. SDS laid the groundwork for modern political activism, and its legacy remains essential to the narrative of liberation movements. However, in looking at the timeline of events and people who contributed to the organization, it is clear why SDS ultimately failed. This paper will allow for a better understanding of how differences in opinion and a lack of organizational authority contributed to a movement such as SDS growing too large to be controlled by any one group.