

SALEM STATE COLLEGE

**TOWARDS A HISTORIOGRAPHY
OF THE KENT STATE SHOOTINGS**

**RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED FOR
HIS 700-S1 HISTORIOGRAPHY**

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THE HAPPENINGS OF MAY 4

I. Background [THE EVENT]

On May 4, 1970, four white, middle-class college students were shot and killed by 28 members of the Ohio National Guard, deployed to manage what had become a common site on college campuses throughout the 1960s: a peaceful anti-war protest. They were not the only ones to be killed in the social and political turbulence of the 1960s; they shared that role with Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, black Civil Rights activists working in urban ghettos and white Civil Rights activists working in the rural South. They were not even the first college students to be killed by government officials – that title went to a Berkeley student in the People's Park incident two years prior.

Yet the public reaction to the Kent State shootings was immediate and powerful. Hundreds of colleges across the country closed as part of a national strike against the shootings there and at Jackson State University, which occurred less than two weeks later. A *Newsweek* poll taken later that month discovered that half of those polled believed that the student demonstrators were responsible for the shootings; only 11 percent blamed the National Guard.¹ Obviously, the country was sharply divided over the Kent State shootings. As Scott L. Bills writes in the introduction to *Kent State/May 4: Echoes Through a Decade*, "People immediately offered explanations of how such an event could occur and who was culpable, and they did so consistent with their perspectives on the major issues of the day" – patriotism, rebellious youth, the Vietnam War, free speech.² And the shootings have remained in the collective American memory as a symbolic of the division in society that took place during the 1960s.

Based on these figures?

II. Preface

[OBJECTIVES]
TOWARDS A HISTORIOGRAPHY

¹ William A. Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?* (Laguna Hills, CA: North Ridge Books, 1995), 19.

² Scott L. Bills, "The Past in the Present" in *Kent State/May 4: Echoes through a Decade*, ed. Scott L. Bills (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988), 58.

My initial goal for this paper was to examine the ways that historians have written about the causes of the shootings at Kent State University on May 4, 1970.³

WHY? WHERE'S THE HEATHER?

NUMBERS

Yet, despite the continuing public interest, I discovered that historians have not written about Kent State as much as one might expect. The shootings have been written about by journalists, sociologists, political scientists, lawyers, memoirists, novelists and even an insurance salesman. But in my literature review, I found only two brief articles written by professional historians focusing on the military aspects of the tragedy.

The historian who seeks to (appreciate/ contextualize)

Consequently, I have had to broaden my lens to include writers who are not historically trained, but who use the research and presentation methods of historians in their work. I have included these writers in this paper for three reasons: 1) they use many of the same research and writing techniques as professional historians; 2) several use an interdisciplinary approach to history that makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the event; 3) without the inclusion of non-historians the historiography of Kent State is quite barren.

well-organized; nice writing

My organizational structure for this paper will be to begin by describing the theoretical constructs into which I will attempt to place the writings on Kent State. I will then reconstruct some of the central events of April 30-May 4, 1970 on the Kent State campus and in the town of Kent.⁴

Next, the reader will find...

I will then discuss the historiography of the Kent State shootings, beginning with two of the first books written specifically about the shootings and their focus on the "trigger" causes of the shootings. From there, I will look at the Kent State shootings through the eyes of writers who have contextualized the incident within social histories of the 1960s, labor history and military history. I will look at who is writing the history,

³ For the purposes of this paper, I constricted my focus onto just the causes of the shootings. An entire other paper could be written about the effects or the memorialization/commemoration of the shootings.

⁴ Although the shootings themselves took place over a time period of less than a minute, the activities on campus and in town over the previous four days provide a necessary context to the shootings I chose to begin my chronology with April 30 because both writers and experiencers generally see this as the beginning of the "event" of the Kent State shootings.

You may want to reconsider the paragraphing above.

what their sources are and how they present the evidence to explain the causes of the shootings at Kent State.

The final section of my paper will look at the role of historical memory and theories on why Kent State has not received the attention from historians that one might think it deserves.

I will not posit any new theories about how or why the shootings at Kent State took place nor draw any conclusions as to who is to blame. Although the question of blame is the core of my interest in the shootings – it is not a question that can be answered by the review and analysis of secondary sources.

III. Approach of the Paper

As I began to formulate my research into a paper, I sought a model of historiography into which I could place what I was finding written about the Kent State shootings. But none of the historical theories or schools of interpretation I encountered seemed to fit the case study of Kent State. The closest I was able to come is historian Paul A. Cohen's ideas about the difference between history as event and history as experience, as described in his historiographical study, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*. I will use Cohen's theory as a way to understand why Kent State has been written about the way it has, and why it has not been written about the way one might expect.⁵

In his prologue to part one of *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*, "The Historically Reconstructed Past," Cohen argues that there is a essential difference between events as experienced by those who lived through them and

⁵ Let me say at the beginning that this is very much a work-in-progress. One of the things I discovered while writing this paper is that what works for the Boxers doesn't fit as neatly onto the case study of Kent State.

events as described, analyzed and contextualized by the historian: “the history the historian creates is fundamentally different from the history people make.”⁶

According to Cohen’s theory, as people live their lives, they place the events they experience in a context and narrative framework that makes sense for them biographically and insures psychological coherence. This framework is constantly under construction and is influenced by the individual’s social, cultural and geographical context and their personal motivations. As a result, experiencers of the past “are concerned at least as much with the fashioning of a past that is psychologically tolerable as with uncovering the ‘truth’ in a rigorously objective manner.”⁷

Cohen argues that historians, on the other hand, are concerned with constructing an objective past. They have the perspective to be able to see events through a much broader lens: they can place events in the context of larger social and political movements occurring over a greater space and time, and they know in advance what the outcome of events will be. But they also are unable to capture the intimate sensory details and personal motivation of individual experience. So the context and narrative framework created by a historian is inevitably different from those who experienced the events. As Cohen writes, “At the bare minimum, all historical writing, even the best of it, entails radical simplification and compression of the past.”⁸

If we accept Cohen’s argument, there arises the question of what happens when someone who lives through an event then approaches the same event as a historian? Cohen believes that historians can recontextualize their own experiences, but “we retain a special emotional attachment to the original experience, our own past, that no amount of historical reading can touch.”⁹

⁶ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: the Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 3.

⁷ Cohen, *History in Three Keys: the Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*, 4-6, 65. Cohen also argues that this process occurs on a community level as cultural and social groups contextualize events in which they participate together.

⁸ Cohen, *History in Three Keys: the Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*, 7-11, 4.

⁹ Cohen, *History in Three Keys: the Boxers as Event, Experience and Myth*, 65, 294.

In other words, when those who lived through events go on to write a history of those same events, there arises a tension between history and biography. The psychological inclination to make sense of one's own life may conflict with the objectivity we expect of our historians. This is what I discovered happened when historians and other writers who came of age in the 1960s attempted to write about the time period through which they lived, including the Kent State shootings. I will discuss this further in section six of this paper.

But first, following the model of Cohen in *History in Three Keys*, I will attempt to reconstruct a particular four-day piece of history in the following narrative.

IV. Kent State: A Narrative History

On April 30, 1970, after weeks of public assurances that he was going to be reducing the number of American troops in Vietnam, President Richard Nixon announced that he had sent American troops into neutral Cambodia. Nixon made the decision as part of his plan for Vietnamization – training the South Vietnamese to fight the Viet Cong, rather than having Americans on the front line. He explained that Cambodia continued to be the weak link, serving as a location for the transportation of weapons into North Vietnam.¹⁰

The reaction on college campuses throughout the country was immediate. Nixon made his announcement on national television on a Thursday evening. By Friday morning, hundreds of college campuses erupted in anti-war protests. One of those campuses was that of Kent State University in Kent, Ohio.

Kent is located in northeastern Ohio, about ten miles east of Akron and 30 miles southeast of Cleveland. Then, as now, the largely white, working class town on the banks of the Cuyahoga River was dominated by the university. In 1970, Kent State University had a student population of more than 20,000.

¹⁰ Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: the Tragedy and Promise of America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 9-11.

Nice use of
dox narrative style

In 1970, the campus itself stretched over the northeast quadrant of Kent. At the center of the campus Commons was a brick structure holding a large bell traditionally rung at sporting events. It was around this Victory Bell that the first events of the weekend of May 1-4, 1970 unfolded.

On Friday morning, May 1, a group of graduate history students called an anti-war rally on the Commons and symbolically buried a copy of the U.S. Constitution. About 500 students attended the rally and it dispersed without incident within an hour. A second rally was announced for noon on Monday.¹¹

Friday evening found many of the Kent students in the bars lining Water Street, the main commercial drag in Kent. This was a popular weekend night activity, both for Kent students and young people from neighboring towns. Kent was one of the only nearby towns where 18-year-olds could purchase 3.2 beer (so named for the reduced alcohol content). Friday night also happened to be a NBA play-off game, so the sports bars were particularly busy. It was a warm spring night and the drinking and socializing in the bars spilled out onto the streets.¹²

At some point in the evening a small group of individuals began throwing rocks through storefront windows and setting fires in the street. Soon they were disrupting traffic through town and the Kent police department, having heard rumors of radical plots, became concerned about their ability to manage the crowd.¹³

Around 1:00 a.m., Kent police made the decision to close the bars, forcing the crowds into the streets. Kent police in riot gear chased students back to campus with tear gas. The total damages to property from that evening would be assessed at about \$10,000 and 14 people were arrested.¹⁴

¹¹ Lesley Wischemann, "Four Dead in Ohio," *American History Illustrated* 25 (May/June 1990): 27.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Protest on the Kent State University campus was not unknown. Kent State University had a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) on campus for two semesters - from the fall of 1968 until their charter was revoked in the spring of 1969 after a series of nonviolent confrontations with college administration over police recruiting on campus and other issues.¹⁵

And Kent State was not alone. Students on campuses across the country had begun protesting the Vietnam War almost immediately after the first American troops were deployed. One of the targets of student protest at Kent and at other universities was the perceived partnership between the college and the war efforts. The most prominent symbol of this was the presence of the Army Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC) on campus.

At Kent State University, ROTC offices were housed in an old Army barracks building located on the corner of the Commons. It was this symbol of the war that would be targeted on Saturday evening.

A curfew had been instituted in town for Saturday night. Several hundred students began gathering on the Commons that evening. Around 9:00 p.m., someone set fire to the ROTC building. The Kent Fire Department attempted to put out the flames, but was prevented from doing so by unidentified people who cut holes in the fire hoses. Reports would later differ as to whether the fire was set by students or outside agitators. The Kent police department would later be criticized for failing to protect the fire personnel. As the building burned to the ground, Ohio Governor James A. Rhodes declared a state of emergency and called the Ohio National Guard to Kent.¹⁶

¹⁵ Joe Eszterhas and Michael D. Roberts, *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1970), 62-68.

¹⁶ Wischemann, "Four Dead in Ohio," 28-29.

The Ohio National Guard had spent the weekend at a teamster strike in Akron. Many had not slept or eaten properly in several days. Their training for situations such as that which they faced at Kent State would later be questioned.¹⁷

Students awoke on Sunday morning to see their campus occupied by the green tents of military personnel. Despite that, the day passed relatively uneventfully. Students relaxed around campus, interacting with individual Guardsmen. Some of the Guardsmen were from Kent; some were even former KSU students.¹⁸

Ohio Governor James A. Rhodes and National Guard General Sylvester Del Corso held a press conference that morning where they announced that they would use whatever force necessary to quell the disturbances at Kent State. They would later be criticized for using inflammatory rhetoric in the press conference. Others would see their announcement as proof that there was a plot to shoot the students.¹⁹

That evening, students again gathered around the Victory Bell to protest a campus curfew and what many saw as an occupation of their campus by the military. The National Guard dispersed the crowd with tear gas, but they reassembled in town, blocking an intersection. Protesters were read the riot act and forced back onto campus by the National Guard. Several protesters and guardsmen were injured in the process.²⁰

Despite the weekend's events, classes were to be held as usual on Monday. There had been several calls to close the campus, as had several other colleges, but Governor Rhodes refused to do so, saying that doing so would be giving into the radicals.²¹

The rally announced on Friday was scheduled to be held on Monday at the Victory Bell on the Commons. Students began gathering on the Commons around noon.

¹⁷ Eszterhas and Roberts, *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State*, 142-149.

¹⁸ William Barry Furlong, "The Guardsmen's View of the Tragedy at Kent State," *New York Times Magazine*, 21 June 1970, 12.

¹⁹ Eszterhas and Roberts, *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State*, 111.

²⁰ Wischemann, "Four Dead in Ohio," 30.

²¹ Eszterhas and Roberts, *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State*, 112.

Students crossing the Commons between classes also stopped, adding observers to the 2000 people gathered. National Guardsmen came by with a bullhorn and read the riot act, declaring that the gathering was illegal and ordering the students to disperse. The announcement was followed by tear gas, which was largely ineffective because of the strong winds that afternoon.²²

The National Guard leaders made the decision to disperse the students physically. They formed a line and began marching up Blanket Hill towards Taylor Hall, herding the protesters and observers before them. The reactions from those gathered varied. Some actively taunted the Guardsmen, throwing rocks, empty tear gas canisters, waving black flags and verbally harassing the men. Other students lingered on the sidelines, books and bags in hand, and watched.²³

The National Guard marched to the top of the hill and then made what critics would later call a strategic blunder. Rather than remaining in place, generally blocking the protesters return to the Commons, they continued marching down the backside of the hill and onto a practice football field. At the far end of the football field was a chain link fence. When the Guardsmen reached the fence they turned around to find that they were now the ones surrounded. Students who had followed behind them now stood at the crest of the hill and other observers stood between and in front of the buildings on either side. Some protesters, empowered by what appeared to be their upper hand, ventured closer to the guardsmen and more taunting was exchanged.²⁴

At one point several guardsmen kneeled and pointed their weapons at the students before them. They did not fire; and the protesters seemed unfazed. At one point, several guardsmen may also have briefly conferred on the practice field.²⁵

²² Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 31.

²³ Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 33.

²⁴ Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 33-35

²⁵ Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 33.

After a bit, the guard leadership made the decision to return up the backside of the hill. One contingent marched around the side of Taylor Hall, clearing students out ahead of them. The majority retraced their steps up the hill – in what looked to the protesters like a retreat. As they reached the crest of the hill, 28 guardsmen turned, raised their weapons, took aim, and opened fire into the grassy area and parking lot below.²⁶

In the 13-seconds that followed, 67 shots were fired. One Kent State student was killed instantly; three more would die of their wounds that afternoon. Nine other students were wounded; one of those would be permanently paralyzed. The students shot were between 20 and 250 yards from the firing line.²⁷

The National Guardsmen would later claim that they had fired because they feared for their lives. Some said they heard a sniper shot or an order to fire. After intense pressure from the victims and their families, a Justice Department investigation was held, but charges against the guardsmen were dismissed. A civil trial held in 1977 would eventually settle out of court.²⁸

V. Kent State: Amateur Historians Seek Trigger Causes

Within four years, 11 books had been published about the shootings at Kent State. Although none were written by trained historians, the authors used many of the research and analysis techniques of historians in recreating the events leading up to the shootings. They collect and compare sources, seek to put what they learn in a broader social and historical context, and make assessments about the cause of the shootings. Where they sometimes fall short is in the analysis of their sources – they don't seem to be sure what to do with contradictory information, particularly when presented by eyewitnesses to an event.

The central question asked by the writers of these early books was, “Who was to blame for the shootings?” This question focuses their research onto the “trigger” causes

²⁶ Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 35

²⁷ Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 53.

²⁸ Eszterhas and Roberts, *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State*, 162-163.

and they seek to connect the shootings with the current social and political upheaval in which they found themselves. In their research, they turned to interviews with witnesses, photographs taken before and during the shootings and the written results of official investigations to reconstruct the events of May 1-4.

These writers faced the same challenges that historians do when working with eyewitness testimony: contradictory testimony, unreliable memories, personal motivations. Perhaps as a result of this, or their lack of formal training in historical research, the writers reach a variety of conclusions about why the shootings took place: government conspiracy, communication breakdown, *agents provocateurs*.

Or perhaps their own politics influenced their writing more than it would have for a professional historian.

James A. Michener was already a Pulitzer prizewinning author of several books of historical fiction when he came to Kent in the aftermath of the shootings to investigate the shootings as symptomatic of “the great problems that will confront this nation for the next decade.” In his introduction to *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, Michener describes how he looked to Kent State to answer questions such as: “How pervasive is the malaise that has attacked university students?” and “How strong are the semi-underground forces that are determined to destroy our university and the society that supports them?”²⁹

He was also 63 years old, a World War II veteran and a former Congressional candidate – all of which distanced Michener socially, politically and philosophically from many of the young people he intended to write about. Michener overcame this barrier by employing a small army of young research assistants to interview students, faculty, townspeople and anyone else with a connection to Kent State University, the town of Kent or the shootings. He sent them out to research not just the central narrative of the

²⁹ James A. Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1971), vii.

shootings and profile the key players in the events of the weekend, but also to explore a variety of side stories related to the shootings.

Perhaps because of the contradictory nature of the eyewitness testimonies, Michener relied most heavily on official logs kept by the Kent police and fire departments in his reconstruction of the weekend's events. He also used local newspaper articles, federal government investigation reports and a book about the shootings published a few months earlier and written by two newspaper reporters (which itself relied primarily on interviews with eyewitnesses to the shootings and photographs taken before and during the shootings).³⁰

Michener's intended audience for this book was his peers – the “ninety percent of the American population [that] subscribes to [a] traditional life style”³¹ and which, he implies, has been shocked and horrified by the events of the 1960s. He addresses his audience in the preface of the book and identifies why they should read this book:

“This could be your university. The students and National Guardsmen could be you, or young people of your neighborhood, or, if you are old enough, your sons and daughters. The city of Kent could be your community. That is why you need to know what happened to you, so that you can prevent it from happening again.”³²

Michener's perspective as an outsider to the youth movements of the 1960s is evident throughout the book. He spends a good part of his first chapter describing the “non-traditional” lifestyles of some of the Kent State students: communal living, recreational marijuana usage, premarital sexual relations; implicitly connecting the students' behavior to the tragedy to follow.

³⁰ Michener, 51. The book Michener references is *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State*, written by Joe Eszterhas and Michael D. Roberts (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1970).

³¹ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 66.

³² Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, viii. This statement is also reproduced on the front cover of the hardcover edition of the book, in place of the usual cover artwork.

Michener then ties the stories loosely together with a narrative structure that he perfected in his earlier historical novels: tracing the lives of a variety of people as they intersect with each other and the events of the weekend. At more than 500 pages, it is the longest book about Kent State – but perhaps draws the fewest conclusions.

At various points in the book, Michener says the events of May 1-4 were alternately “partially the result of the current clash between two different life styles, which are contending for the spirit of America;”³³ the fault of “a hard core of radical activists – abetted by a few real revolutionaries, not necessarily from the university – who grasped at the disturbances [that occurred during the weekend] as a means of advancing their own well-defined aims;”³⁴ and contributed to by a group of adjunct instructors “who seemed to be following personal prejudices rather than scholarly conclusions... [and who] intended to close down the place.”³⁵

Michener dismisses the theories that there was a conspiracy among the National Guardsmen to shoot students or that an order to fire was given by General Canterbury. Instead, Michener gives what he calls an “educated guess” that, while they were on the practice football field, some of the guardsmen decided among themselves that if the students continued to harass them then they would “let them have it.”³⁶

Michener’s bias is most evident when he defends the guardsmen’s actions:

“They [the guardsmen] have been on duty for nearly a week, sleeping at odd times and in odd places. They have eaten irregularly and been subjected to taunts and ridicule. They are bewildered by the behavior of college students and outraged by the vocabulary of the coeds. It is hot.”³⁷

“Twenty-eight different Guardsmen did the firing, but this fact should be remembered: If each of the men had fired his weapon directly at the massed students, the killing would have been terrible... Fortunately, many of the men

³³ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 66.

³⁴ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 135.

³⁵ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 165-166.

³⁶ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 361.

³⁷ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 364.

found it impossible to fire into a crowd and pointed their rifles upward – avoiding what could have been a general slaughter.”³⁸

His final conclusion: “We have dissected all adverse evidence, explored each ugly rumor, but we cannot convince ourselves that murder was committed by the Guard. It was an accident, deplorable and tragic.”³⁹

Although Michener paints a detailed portrait of the atmosphere around Kent State and the movements of a wide variety of individuals throughout the weekend, he provides no footnotes, endnotes or source citations. Without information on the sources of his information – particularly when he recreates conversations – a critical reader may be forced to dismiss Michener’s book as yet another work of historical fiction.

Peter Davies was a 40-year-old insurance salesman living in New York when he read about the shootings at Kent State. Horrified by the government’s refusal to call for an investigation, he began his own analysis of the shootings, relying heavily on Michener’s book, *13 Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State* written by two local journalists, and photographs. The initial result of his research was a 227-page letter to the Justice Department entitled “An Appeal to the U.S. Department of Justice for an Immediate and Thorough Investigation of the Circumstances Surrounding the Shootings at Kent State University, May 1970,” arguing that the National Guardsmen conspired to shoot protesting students on May 4, 1970. His letter and the efforts of the family and friends of the victims would eventually help motivate the Justice Department to launch an official investigation. Davies would later expand his book into *The Truth About Kent State: a Challenge to the American Conscience*, published in 1973. and ?

Unlike Michener, Davies is thoroughly distrustful of the official documentation on Kent State and is predisposed to see a conspiracy behind the shootings. Davies uses more than 50 photographs taken on May 4 to support his argument that the National Guardsmen were not under attack and the shootings were unjustified. The photographs,

³⁸ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 341.

³⁹ Michener, *Kent State: What Happened and Why*, 410.

taken by Kent State University staff, professional photojournalists and students, appear to show that there were no students near enough to the guardsmen to pose any threat.

The photos were obviously un-posed and spontaneous, but they still must be looked at with a critical eye. Even with so many photos, there are still moments and angles uncaptured by the camera. Davies seems predisposed to find a government conspiracy behind the shootings and may be over-reliant on the research of others when reconstructing the events of the weekend.

Davies has also been criticized for his research methods. According to William A. Gordon, author of a 1995 book about Kent State, at the time that *The Truth about Kent State* was published, Davies had spent only 15 minutes on the Kent State campus. Gordon believed that any theories about the shootings necessitated an intimate understanding of the geography of the campus, which he argued Davies did not have. Gordon said of Davies: "We had fundamentally different approaches to the case. I believe one should examine the evidence and then see what theory best fits the facts. Peter thought it should work the other way around."⁴⁰

In terms of the historiography of the Kent State shootings, these early books are useful in recreating the events of the weekend and presenting an introduction to the players in the tragedy and their backgrounds. These books are also important because many subsequent writers look to them for source material on Kent State.

But it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that writers began to look beyond the trigger causes of Kent State and place the shootings in a larger historical context. However, with this expansion of the historical lens, the Kent State shootings begin to lose their prominence.

VI: Kent State as Social and Oral History

⁴⁰ Gordon, *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?*, 256.

With the exception of one book published in 1995, no new books have been written about Kent State since 1982.⁴¹ Instead, the shootings begin turning up in more general 20th century American histories, where the shootings are usually described as being the inevitable conclusion to the student activism of the 1960s.⁴²

These writers – journalists, political scientists, sociologists – are not particularly concerned with the question of blame in regards to the Kent State shootings and do not go into any detail of the events of that weekend. They usually give a brief recounting of the events, citing one of the early books, if any at all. These writers are, instead, looking at social and political trends. They ask questions about where the movements of the 1960s came from and how they came to dominate the social scene for the better part of a decade.

In these books, “The Sixties” refers to the turbulent social and political movements than a particular ten-year period. “The Sixties,” in the context of these books, generally begins with the 1960 lunch counter sit-ins in the South; continues through the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s, the emergence of the New Left and the anti-war movements of the late 1960s; and ends sometime between the fall of 1968 with the dissolution of SDS and the emergence of the radical Weathermen and the women’s, gay and environmental movements, and the spring of 1970 with the shootings at Kent and Jackson State University.

Their source material includes newspaper articles, popular culture, government documents and records kept by the various organizations active in the 1960s. They also rely heavily on oral history and memoir.

⁴¹ The exception is Gordon, William A. *Four Dead in Ohio: Was there a Conspiracy at Kent State?* Laguna Hills, CA: North Ridge Books, 1995.

⁴² It is interesting to note that the Kent State shootings, although they took place almost half-way through 1970, are almost always placed in the context of the 1960s.

Several “histories” of the 1960s are, in fact, nothing more than collections of interviews with witnesses to the events of the decade. Although these do provide a personal voice to the history, they are lacking the contextualization and analysis of true history.⁴³

The remaining histories of “the Sixties” were written by both historians and non-historians, all of whom lived through the 1960s themselves. Many writers were college students at the time; several were involved in the social and political activism of the decade.

Although it may, at first glance, appear that those who live through, and even actively participated in, the events of the 1960s would be the best to write about same events. But this is not necessarily the case. Instead, the writers of these histories often fall victim to the conflict between history as event and history as experience that I described earlier in the paper.

Former SDS president Todd Gitlin’s 1987 *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* is exemplary of the memoir/history written by many historians who came of age in the 1960s.⁴⁴ Gitlin, now a sociology professor, traces the social and political movements of the 1960s, turning to a variety of sources including media coverage, previously-published histories and interviews. But, as he acknowledges in his introduction, his motivation is not purely academic:

“It is to reclaim the actual Sixties from ‘The Sixties’ ... as well as to find out what I think, that I have written this book... This is part historical reconstruction, part analysis, part memoir, part criticism, part celebration, part meditation... I have

⁴³ Examples include: Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz, *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), which profiles wounded student and activist Alan Canfora and his sister Roseann; and, Joan Morrison and Robert K. Morrison, *From Camelot to Kent State: the Sixties Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It* (NY: Times Books, 1987) which profiles wounded student and activist Tom Grace and another Kent State University student.

⁴⁴ Other examples include: James Miller, *Democracy is in the Streets: from Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) and Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

stressed the strips of history I know firsthand, taking my experience as primary evidence.”⁴⁵

So, again, although these books are important to the historiography of Kent State as social histories and as oral history, they cannot be seen to present an objective view of history as event.

Develop

VII: Kent State as Military and Labor History

Although not as widely read as the books specifically on Kent State or the social histories of the 1960s, military historians and those writing about the history of violence in the United States have also analyzed the shootings.

John Logue was an associate professor of political science at Kent State University when he contributed a chapter to Scott L. Bills’ book *Kent State/May 4: Echoes through a Decade*. In “Official Violence: An American Tradition,” Logue asks how unique the shootings at Kent State were in American history and turns to his area of specialization: American labor movements, for the answer. He argues that the shootings at Kent State were part of a long history of government violence against citizens in times of popular discontent.

“Governmental use of force against demonstrating citizens is no novelty in American history,” he writes. “Official violence... has been a standard response to the waves of popular discontent that called into question the sanctity of governmental decisions.”⁴⁶

Logue says that by 1970, the general public was no longer supportive of Nixon and his administration. This popular discontent swelled upon Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia. He says that in the context of government repression of protest, the shootings at Kent State were relatively unusual in two ways: first, because the violence was

⁴⁵ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 3.

⁴⁶ John Logue, “Official Violence: An American Tradition” in *Kent State/May 4: Echoes through a Decade*, ed. Scott L. Bills (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988), 143.

initiated against college students, a socio-economically privileged class (although less so at a public university in 1970 than at a private college a generation before); and second, because the violence was targeted not at a minority group out of sync with the masses, but at a group that was seen to be representative of the majority of public opinion. In Logue's words: "... the government's actions had ceased to be legitimate in the eyes of the people. It was time for the government to choose another..."⁴⁷

The connection Logue makes between government strike-breakers in the early 1900s and the National Guard shootings at Kent State is an interesting one, particularly in light of the efforts anti-war demonstrators made in the 1960s to connect with the labor movement, ultimately unsuccessfully. And he is accurate in his assessment that after the Kent State shootings, "the wave [of anti-war demonstrations] was broken; the tide of opposition ebbed."⁴⁸ But it is unclear what his source material is for his assessment, so it is difficult to evaluate its validity. ✓
explain ✓

Ted Robert Garr, a political science professor at Northwestern University in 1979, also looked at the Kent State shootings in the context of the history of violence in America. Garr argues in *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* that violence on college campuses in the 1960s was relatively rare and primarily occurred during the latter part of the decade.⁴⁹

But the violence that occurred at Kent State was typical of a particular type of political control used by the government for 100 years – what he describes as "reactive control": "The clash began with the actions of a disruptive, sporadically violent group of protesters. Outside forces were called in to restore order. The inevitable confrontations occurred and finally fatal shots were fired."⁵⁰ Like Logue, Garr said the shootings were

⁴⁷ Logue, "Official Violence: An American Tradition," 146.

⁴⁸ Logue, "Official Violence: An American Tradition," 149.

⁴⁹ Ted Robert Garr, "Political Protest and Rebellion in the 1960s" in *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Garr (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979), 57.

⁵⁰ Ted Robert Garr, "Alternatives to Violence in a Democratic Society" in *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Garr (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979), 500.

unique only in that they occurred on a college campus, rather than in an urban slum or outside a factory gate.

Garr studied media reports throughout the 1960s and 1970 to compile statistical tables about protest and political violence in America. These tables are displayed and referenced in his article. Although Garr acknowledges that some numbers had to be estimated, his tables are still the strongest empirical evidence on the characteristics of protests on college campuses during that time period.⁵¹

Historians Stephen E. Ambrose and John K. Mahon both looked at the Kent State shootings in the context of military and organizational history in their books *The Military and American Society: Essays and Readings* and *History of the Militia and the National Guard*, respectively. Both blame the shootings, in part, on the organizational structure of the National Guard and reached the conclusion that the guardsmen used more violence than the situation warranted.

Ambrose's 1972 *The Military and American Society: Essays and Readings*, co-edited with James Alden Barber, Jr., is a compilation of essays tracing the evolution of the American military-industrial complex from the 1930s to the 1970s and its growing influence on American life. The editors are concerned with questions of how the military came to be as large and influential as it was in the 1970s, and what impact it had on American society. In "The Armed Forces and Civil Disorder," Ambrose, then a history professor at Louisiana State University, blames the shootings at Kent State on the poor organization and training of the National Guardsmen.

"From the professional soldier's point of view," he writes, "nearly everything about the [National] Guard's operation at Kent State was wrong... Professionals do not introduce violence – they react to it, using an absolute minimum of force... Professionals do not carry live ammunition in their rifles and when they do load and fire, they aim only at those who are shooting at them. Most of all, professionals distinguish between a crowd of aimlessly milling people and an

⁵¹ Garr, "Political Protest and Rebellion in the 1960s," 55.

angry mob bent on destruction.”⁵²

The National Guard, Ambrose argues, have neither the proper training nor organization for their primary use: quelling domestic disturbances such as what occurred at Kent State. Instead they are trained for active combat, which they are almost never called to engage in.

In his essay, Ambrose traces the history of the National Guard and describes how it has evolved into an organization with such dissidence between its stated and actual functions. Although the National Guard (and its predecessor, the state militia) was founded to insure the federal government had no monopoly on military power, its actual role from 1877 to 1941 was primarily breaking labor strikes. And, writes Ambrose, since the turn of the 20th century the president has had the power to “federalize” the Guard, a power that was used during the integration of schools in the South in 1957. In the 1960s, the National Guard was primarily used for domestic work: providing assistance after natural disasters, quelling ghetto riots and dispersing anti-war protesters on college campuses.

Mahon’s *History of the Militia and the National Guard*, published in 1983, traces the same history and in chapter 16, “The Turbulent 1960s” reaches a similar conclusion about the Kent State shootings: “There lingered a general belief that the Ohio National Guard had lacked adequate training in riot duty and that it could have restored order less brutally.”⁵³

Mahon also finds evidence that many of the guardsmen had only 14 of the required 32 hours of riot instruction when they were called up to Kent State and argues

⁵² Stephen E. Ambrose, “The Armed Forces and Civil Disorder” in *The Military and American Society: Essays and Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Ambrose and James Alden Barber, Jr. (New York: The Free Press, 1972), 241.

⁵³ John K. Mahon, *History of the Militia and the National Guard* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1983), 245.

that the National Guardsmen at Kent State did not follow their own written protocols for dealing with rioters on May 4, 1970.⁵⁴

Ambrose concludes his essay with little hope that the violence at Kent State will not be repeated: "It is perfectly clear that the Guard lacks the discipline, training or leadership to meet its responsibilities... The outlook for the future is not sanguine."⁵⁵

VII: Kent State Forgotten?

As I noted in my preface, very few histories mentioning the Kent State shootings were actually written by professional historians. It is not that historians have ignored the 1960s and early 1970s as a topic of historical research and writing. Instead, they appear to have devalued the importance of Kent State in the history of the two decades. Take, for example:

- Boston University history professor Bruce Schulman's 2001 socio-cultural study *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics*, makes only passing mention of Kent State in his introduction: "The war dragged on, Nixon became president, GIs invaded Cambodia and students died at Kent State."⁵⁶
- History professors Maurice Isserman (Hamilton College) and Michael Kazin (Georgetown University) reference the protests over the invasion of Cambodia organized by GIs at military bases abroad and by former Peace Corp volunteers in Washington, D.C.; but make no mention of the protests and shootings at Kent State in their 2000 political history *America Divided: the Civil War of the 1960s*.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Mahon, *History of the Militia and the National Guard*, 244.

⁵⁵ Ambrose, "The Armed Forces and Civil Disorder," 248.

⁵⁶ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 16.

⁵⁷ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: the Civil War of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 270.

- Barnard College history professor David Farber also dismisses the Kent State shootings in his 1994 history of the 1960s, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s*. “The violent protests that people equate with the ‘60s came at the very end of the decade and early 1970s.”⁵⁸
- John Morton Blum, a Yale University professor specializing in 20th century American history, wrote in detail about Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia in his 1991 political history *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society*; but sums up the May 4 shootings in less than a sentence: “... confused by the movements of participants in a peaceful demonstration, guardsmen fired a volley into a crowd of students, hit 15 [sic] and killed 4, of whom two were just observers.”⁵⁹
- William H. Chafe, a Duke University history professor in 1986 when he wrote *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, grants Kent State mention and two photographs in a section about “The Demise of the Left.” In his social history, Chafe sees the Kent State shootings as the “final denouement” of the violence and tragedy of the 1960s.⁶⁰

So why have the Kent State shootings not found a more prominent position in the history books? Certainly the question of causation in regards to the shootings has not been resolved; each writer who has examined Kent State has come up with a different combination of long-range, mid-range and trigger causes. Instead, historians seem to have largely dismissed the shootings – as abhorrent or irrelevant to 20th century American history.

Why?

⁵⁸ David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 159.

⁵⁹ John Morton Blum, *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society, 1961-1974* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 368.

⁶⁰ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 405.

One possibility is that Kent State happened at the end, rather than the beginning, of a new political and social movement. Historians are primarily concerned with the question of causation – with beginnings, rather than endings. When they study the 1960s and the 1970s, they can point to the lunch counter sit-ins as the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the Port Huron Statement as the beginning of the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the Stonewall Riots as the beginning of the gay movement.

The Kent State shootings, though, were not the beginning of any particular movement. Most historians see them as the end of the anti-war movement. Some argue that the movement died the autumn before with the dissolution of SDS. They see the Kent State shootings, instead, as a final, sad coda.

Another possibility is that which was posited in the introduction: that not enough time has passed for a historiography of Kent State to have developed. Most of the people who came of age in the 1960s are still alive and active in the social and political movements that were conceived then. The subsequent generation of historians – those for whom the 1960 and 1970s are “history” rather than “memory” – are only now winding their way through graduate school.

IX. Kent State and Historical Memory

Scott L. Bills makes the argument that the shootings are too fresh in our collective memory in his article “The Sixties, Kent State and Historical Memory” in a 1990 special edition of *Vietnam Generation* focusing on the Kent State shootings: “The political struggles launched [in the 1960s] remain unresolved, unfinished, unburnished by historical smoothing.”⁶¹

Jon Corelis, writing in *The Journal of Psychohistory* in 1980, looks to the Vietnam War and unresolved issues surrounding our national sentiment towards the conflict as a reason for why the Kent State shootings have not been fully analyzed: “we

⁶¹ Scott L. Bills, “The Sixties, Kent State and Historical Memory,” *Vietnam Generation: A Special Issue “Kent and Jackson State”* (1990), 166.

Americans have refused honestly to consider the meaning of that shocking incident, just as we have been reluctant to confront our feelings about the whole Vietnam War of which it was a part.”⁶²

Corelis describes how the reaction of the public to the shootings was largely supportive of the National Guardsmen’s actions and hostile towards the students who had been wounded, a fact which he says is largely downplayed in most writings about the Kent State shootings.⁶³ He says that the hostility towards the victims is “the crucial element” and “the key” to understanding Kent State.⁶⁴

Corelis uses sociologist Gaston Bouthoul’s theory about war as “deferred infanticide” to argue that “the killings and woundings [at Kent State] were actually sacrifices demanded by the older generation.”⁶⁵

According to Bouthoul’s theory, as explained by Corelis, war is a way to rid a country of an “oversupply of young men” and to “suppress dissent and reinforce the traditional morality of a nation.”⁶⁶ During the anti-war movement, Corelis argues, young people refused to submit to the will of the nation and go to war, which elicited the hostility of the elder generation. When the shootings at Kent State took place, the public saw that as the proper punishment for the disobedient youth.⁶⁷

“The sacrifice which they [the older generation] demanded was justified not as a necessity of war, but as a punishment for the betrayal which the younger generation had committed by refusing war. And they demanded youth’s submission to their agents... in the form of the National Guard.”⁶⁸

⁶² Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” *The Journal of Psychohistory* 1980 8(2): 137.

⁶³ The research conducted for this paper also supports Corelis’s observation about how the public reaction to the shootings is portrayed in most histories.

⁶⁴ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 139.

⁶⁵ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 146.

⁶⁶ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 140. This is a terribly abbreviated summary of Bouthoul’s theory. Corelis goes into more detail of it and other psychoanalytic theories that support it in his article.

⁶⁷ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 140-144.

⁶⁸ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 144.

Corelis concludes that the American public has been unwilling to analyze the Kent State shootings because to do so would bring them too close to what he sees as the truth behind Kent State and the Vietnam War: “that we do not tolerate the slaughter of our children in order to wage wars, rather, we find excuses to wage wars in order to bring about the slaughter of our children.”⁶⁹

“Great pains have been taken to reconstruct the sequence of events [at Kent State] in the most meticulous detail,” Corelis writes, “as if by reconstructing the nightmare we could somehow exorcize it.”⁷⁰

X. Conclusion

No one has yet fully explained why the shootings at Kent State took place. Riots of greater length and violence had been taking place at Columbia, Berkeley, Harvard and other colleges across the United States throughout the 1960s – but these shootings took place on a relatively apolitical campus in Middle America. Perhaps the Ohio National Guardsmen were not trained properly for riot control, but the very same troops had been called out to quell student protests at Ohio State University the month prior and the situation had been resolved peacefully.

Unfortunately, academic historians are not alone in leaving the Kent State shootings off their list of important events in 20th century American history. In 1977, Kent State University was nominated for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, a federal listing of more than 70,000 sites determined to have historic or cultural importance. The National Park Service evaluated the university to determine if the area where the shootings took place could be included in the register. The application was denied; the federal government determined that the Kent State shootings were only “symbolically important.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 144.

⁷⁰ Jon Corelis, “Kent State Reconsidered as Nightmare,” 138.

⁷¹ Scott L. Bills, “The Past in the Present,” 58.

Those who have written about the Kent State shootings, both historians and others, have either cast their net wide - linking Kent State with labor movements, political repression and the general chaos of the 1960s - or narrowed their view down to a microlevel of analysis. The problem with the wide net is that it provides context, but fails to answer the question of cause. The microanalysis inevitably leads to the question of what was going on in the minds of 28 young men during a 13-second time period. And they aren't talking.

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coverage.

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Written by history professors at Hamilton College (Isserman) and Georgetown University (Kazin). They argue that the 1960s should not be defined as merely the rise and fall of the New Left. Includes a very brief mention of Kent State.

Kelner, Joseph and James Munves. *The Kent State Coverup: the Definitive Account of the Kent State Shootings and the Trial that Followed*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980.

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Includes a brief mention of Kent State: "It had been a bad spring for Richard Nixon."

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A fairly standard recounting of the events of May 1-4, 1970.

APPENDIX: Reflective Essay

I enrolled in this, my first graduate-level history course, in hopes of learning the secrets of doing historical research and writing. Instead, probably the biggest lesson I've learned in this class is to trust myself and follow my instincts. The methods of historical research don't appear to be any great secret: be methodical, be thorough, know what questions you are asking and why, and learn as much as possible about your subject. Easy enough, right?

The actual research process for this paper was amazingly organic. I started out looking for the answer to the Dynasty question: "Who shot Jeff Miller?" (and Sandra Scheuer and Allison Krause and William Schroeder) But after re-reading the books that posited an answer to the question of blame – (It was a government conspiracy; there were *agents provocateurs*; they fired in self-defense; Terry Norman did it.) – and finding that there was little history (again, the focus of this particular assignment) in them – I had to cast a wider net in my research. And what I dragged in were resources culled from A to Z in the Library of Congress catalogue:

Questions about the role of student radicalism in the shootings led me to profiles of activist organizations, memoirs of SDS members and histories of the rise and fall of the New Left.

Questions about the motivation of the National Guardsmen on that sunny Monday afternoon led me to histories of the American military and interviews with the shooters.

Questions about why this happened in middle America, rather than on the more politically charged campuses of Columbia and Berkeley, led me to histories of violence in America and demographic analyses of activity on college campuses throughout the 1960s.

As a result, I feel like I have a much greater understanding not just of a particular event but of the entire decade preceding it and trends in political, educational and military

life stretching back even further. If anything, I think I may have done too much research for this particular paper. In fact, when it came time to actually sit down and write this paper, I had to remind myself that my topic was the shootings at Kent State – not the entire middle third of the 20th century!

The biggest struggle I encountered was after I finished my research and after I did my initial 20 page “brain dump.” I then had to try to put what I had discovered about Kent State into the framework of historical theory. And that was easier said than done.

But the process (including my two-hour meeting with Prof. Morrison about my paper – which I greatly appreciated) was really valuable. It forced me to think about my material in a new way. It forced me to do more than just take bits of information and place them into chronological order – but instead think about how we think about events and history. And that was a fun mental exercise. I just wish I had come to some sort of conclusion with my material!

As for the future, I have several ideas of where I would like to go with my research.

Certainly I think there is room for more research on Kent State itself – a MA thesis, perhaps even a book. Half the story – the aftermath and legacy of Kent State – was not even touched upon in this paper. And a true history of Kent State – utilizing primary source materials analyzed through the eyes of a trained historian – has yet to be written.

I think I also bring to the material a new perspective – that of someone who did not live through the 1960s. Someone who was not involved in anti-war protests, did not worry about being sent (or seeing loved ones sent) to Vietnam, did not see a president assassinated, civil rights leaders murdered and race riots on television. Perhaps my background might bring a new perspective. Certainly my initial interests would be to look more closely at avenues that have not been as well explored: the background and training

of the National Guard, the role of college administrators throughout the weekend, a comparison to what was going on at other colleges throughout the 1960s.

This project has also inspired a broader interest in the 1960s and their roots. I am taking 20th Century US History next semester and, if appropriate, might do some more research into some trends of the 1960s. Perhaps I could look at the development of the New Left -- how they rose from the ashes of the "old" Left, the theory that '60s activists were following the natural evolution of their parents liberalism, even look at specific "red diaper" babies (I love that expression!) and how they came to lead SDS and other organizations.

This also has inspired an interest in some of the activities of the early 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement. The work of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) particularly piqued my interest. I could envision a paper tracing their beginnings, their work with blacks in the South, the backlash, beatings and murders, through the point where SNCC kicked out their white members, and wherever they ended up. I also would be interested in looking at the evolution of student activism and American higher education as a whole -- from the 1920s through the present.

Finally, there was one interesting idea that I didn't encounter until late in the semester, while reading Paul A. Cohen's book. I briefly touched upon it in this paper, but I think it is actually a much larger issue: that of the historian writing about events through which he lived. I think the potential conflict between autobiography and history -- the difference between event as experienced and event as history -- is a fascinating topic and one I would love to explore further at some point.

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