



## Some notes on the ‘Baader-Meinhof Complex’\*

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### abstract

This film review essay offers some reflections on the contemporary receptions of left-wing armed struggle politics as represented in the film *Baader Meinhof Complex*, directed by Uli Edel and based on a book by Stefan Aust. It argues for a political understanding of the actions of the RAF or similar ‘terrorist’ cells. From such a perspective, the anti-imperialist ideology of armed struggles can be subjected to criticism.

If we were to name a trigger event that radicalised the 1968 movement in West Germany, it would be the tumultuous scenes of 2 June 1967, near the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin. The SDS (Socialist German Student Union) had mobilised for protests against an official visit by the Shah of Iran to the city. Hundreds turned out to demonstrate against repression and dictatorship in Iran, some trying to disrupt the Shah’s visit to the opera with paint and flower bombs. They were met with pro-Iranian demonstrators, flown and bussed in by the Shah’s secret services. While Berlin’s opera performed Mozart’s magic flute, outside the pro-Shah activists turned on the student protesters. The Uli Edel film *Baader-Meinhof Complex* depicts this scene in a highly dramatised and almost theatrical way. Young Iranian men in suits suddenly turn their placards into weapons and begin attacking the German students. The police forces, drawn in to protect the Shah, stand by and watch. Eventually, they intervene – not to separate the two groups but to assist in the brutal beating of the pro-democracy protesters. The film scene stands out as an attempt to explain the political anger and frustration that must have been the background to the formation of armed struggle guerrilla groups in West Germany. Groups like the Red Army Faction (RAF) could only make sense in a context where police brutality was the accepted response to young people’s political concerns. Unfortunately, this is one of only few scenes in which the *Baader-Meinhof Complex* tackles the issue of the conditions that gave rise to a popular anti-imperialist movement, complete with its violent and armed underground groups. All too often, the film remains stuck on questions of method (armed struggle) rather than political motivation (anti-imperialism).

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The police action to clear the area of anti-Shah protesters escalated later on that day in 1967. The pacifist student Benno Ohnesorg was shot dead by policeman Karl-Heinz Kurras. In the aftermath, Kurras was charged twice with manslaughter, but was acquitted both times. Thousands of students held anti-repression demonstrations, memorial events and conferences to come to terms with and learn the lessons from Ohnesorg's death. The '2 June' date here became the common reference of identification. It is no surprise that 4 years later, by which time the militant extra-parliamentary opposition in West Germany had dramatically increased, a left-wing urban guerrilla group would adopt the name 'Movement 2 June'. The Baader-Meinhof Complex tells the story of militant left-wing politics in West Germany from 2 June 1967 to the 'German Autumn' in 1977, focusing on the RAF group around Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. Initially, a politicised generation of students protests and demonstrates against the failed denazification of West Germany, against their parents' authoritarianism, and against what they perceive as the new face of fascism: US imperialism. Less than a year after the killing of Benno Ohnesorg, a right-wing fanatic nearly kills popular student leader Rudi Dutschke. Those who would later found the RAF, the Movement 2 June or similar armed struggle groups begin to contemplate more militant tactics. In many ways here, the ten year time span of the Baader-Meinhof Complex is overly ambitious. At once action movie, personal drama and political documentary, it races through an eventful decade and is forced to neglect nuances and details – at times to such an extent that the political context and motivations behind the RAF's militancy cannot be understood. Indeed, it may well be that we still do not know enough to grasp fully the reasons behind the decisions to take up arms. Only recently, newly accessible documents revealed that the policeman Kurras, who shot Benno Ohnesorg, was in fact a spy working for the German Democratic Republic. In the light of the significance of 2 June 1967, the revelation could have given a very different twist to the Baader-Meinhof story.

## Terror and politics

The 'real' story of the RAF and its motivations, it seems, is still being contested. On the day of the German cinema premiere of the Baader-Meinhof Complex, a group of left-wing Autonome threw rocks and paint-filled bottles at the house of journalist and author Stefan Aust and started a fire at the front door. Aust's popular book on the history of the RAF, also called the Baader-Meinhof Complex, had provided the background study to the film. Aust, too, was a close collaborator to Bernd Eichinger's script and Uli Edel's direction. The trio hail their work as a historical intervention into the contemporary debates on terrorism. Stefan Aust is one of the most successful German journalists. Last year, he retired from his position as editor-in-chief of the major politics magazine *Der Spiegel*. He has led, in the past decades, the academic, journalistic and cinematographic vision of the Red Army Faction – as author, in a number of TV productions and as *Spiegel* editor. His journalistic career, however, began in the same intellectual milieu as Ulrike Meinhof's. In the 1960s, they both worked for the radical left-wing magazine *Konkret*, whose founder and editor was Meinhof's husband Klaus Rainer Röhl. From then onwards, Meinhof's and Aust's paths could not have taken more different turns. Meinhof went on to join the RAF, leaving behind her personal and journalistic life. Convicted for an arson attack on a Springer Press building and on trial for murder, she

was found dead in her prison cell in 1976 (the official cause of death is suicide, though this is contested by many). In contrast, Stefan Aust – after Meinhof had gone underground abandoning her children – freed her twin daughters from an RAF hideout in Sicily to return them to their father. From his villa in Hamburg's noble district of Blankenese, he still maintains his passionate interest in recent German history. Now, the film version of his book was to be another great achievement – possibly the culmination of his journalistic career. It is obvious that the paint and fire attack on his house was also directed against this career that Aust has made from his knowledge of the RAF. In a letter claiming responsibility for the action, an anonymous group justifies it as an act against the 'continuation of the distortions and lies' of Stefan Aust (anonymous 2008, my translation).

The story of the RAF is not yet history. The anonymous attackers still seem to have a stake in its representation. They denounce the list of former RAF allies, student militants of 1968 and former members of guerrilla groups ('notorious liars') who have helped Aust in his historical project. Some of those collaborations, of which the Baader-Meinhof Complex is the final product, 'have led to new investigations and blackmail attempts by the public prosecution service against comrades who were once part of the RAF' (ibid.). The group continues to write about Aust: 'He denounces armed, militant resistance against imperialism and state terrorism as insane. This accusation, that one has to be crazy to take up arms, is the recurrent theme in Stefan Aust's work' (ibid.). One does certainly get a sense in the Baader-Meinhof Complex that there is little attempt to understand the political, rather than personal, motivations behind anti-imperialist armed struggle in Germany. There are some reflections on the use of violence and strategy for revolutionary change, partly through the films use of Meinhof's writings. However, wider ideological issues are neglected. More than that, the extreme violence portrayed in the film is explained as pathology – not based on ideological thinking but on the psychological inability of some individuals to adequately respond to the upheavals of the time. While the book's and film's title refers to the name given to internal dossiers of government and police authorities investigating the RAF group, the term 'complex' could also be understood as a reference to the anti-political direction that the film takes. A psychological complex refers to unconscious mental factors that determine ideas and actions. The militant and armed struggles of the 1970s – of the RAF and the Movement 2 June for example – sometimes come across as the result of a psychological complex of a young, naïve, but frustrated element of the hippie generation. As such we might want to understand the militant reaction of contemporary RAF sympathisers to the film's release. It is a response to the perception that the Baader-Meinhof Complex condemns armed struggle tactics in the past and present through de-politicisation.

Take the depiction of Ulrike Meinhof. With her articles in the magazine *Konkret* she captured the zeitgeist of a whole generation of students and leftists through a series of political tracts and arguments. In the film she at best provides the 'theoretical' voice-over for Andreas Baader's adventurist and macho escapades. Already Meinhof's first – and, in the view of Aust and Eichinger, fatal – decision to leave behind the bourgeois idyll of nude beaches and garden parties for the revolutionary milieu is not one she only takes out of political conviction: foremost, she is driven away by her cheating husband. The fact that her divorce from Klaus Rainer Röhl, her husband and *Konkret* editor, was

also a political break is omitted. In 1969, Meinhof ended her work for her husband's journal 'because it is becoming an instrument of the counter-revolution' (Meinhof 1969). But in the guerrilla movement, her credentials as a radical journalist do her little favour. She is repeatedly challenged by über-activist Gudrun Ensslin for her intellectualism. For the film makers, the Baader-Meinhof group still had to abandon its political and theoretical baggage before it could begin its campaign of terror. At worst Meinhof's appearance strikes the viewer as naïve, timid and intimidated by the 'deeds-not-words' actionism of the Baader clique. Her decision to join the gang into illegality is shown as impulsive, rather than as the result of the ideological escalation of her own beliefs. Even when she leaves behind her children, against all her previous principles, it is other members of the group that speak for her and make the decision on her behalf. It is here that the film's ideological condemnation is most striking, though again the argument is made on the basis of emotion not politics. It is Meinhof's emotional state that has been altered to such an extent that she is no longer guided by the love for her children. She abandons them not out of political conviction of the primacy of her underground existence, but out of feeble subservience to the 'madness' of the armed struggle. Meinhof's suicide in prison is finally no longer a protest against the prison complex and the conditions of her imprisonment. In the end it comes across as no more than apologetic self-justice or as the only possible frustrated attempt to leave the RAF and its violent campaign.

In stark contrast to Meinhof is the character of Andreas Baader. Baader's first appearance is with a bottle of beer in his hand, making petrol bombs with the other, and telling his friends that they should burn down a department store. Macho, womaniser, drinker – Baader comes across more like a Wild West villain than as the political leader of a revolutionary group. With his liking for fast cars, drugs and guns, he is action hero – not terrorist, bandit – not revolutionary. Armed struggle was certainly a major tenet for the RAF, with the Heckler & Koch machine gun as its logo. But Baader's continuous racist and misogynist outbursts reinforce the image that he is in it for the thrill, not political change. The juxtaposition of the two protagonists also entails a class condemnation. Confronted with the proletarian Baader, Meinhof is challenged in her politically principled and rational attitude.

However not Meinhof, but a third key character plays the role of the measured and rational antagonist to the raging Baader. Bruno Ganz, who previously played the figure of Adolf Hitler in Eichinger's *Downfall*, is persuasive in his role of Horst Herold, the president of West Germany's national police force (BKA) and the RAF's enemy number one. Only that Herold, who in the 1970s vowed 'we'll get them all', is portrayed more as an understanding and intelligent chief-of-police who sees the root of the problem not in terrorism, but in the 'objective' wars and social conditions that have radicalised a generation. What is needed according to the film character is not a police operation but political change. It is here that the film comes closest to engaging politically with the left-wing terror campaign, and to treating said violence as embedded in its social context. With Herold, however, the Baader-Meinhof Complex situates this insight at the heart of the bourgeois state (Herold even dishes out soup as he makes his remarks). Meanwhile the real Herold was ousted from his job in 1981. His controversial methods of treating as suspect everyone with radical left-wing views had led to accusations of a police and surveillance state. There is certainly an attempt by the film-

makers to portray the fear-mongering dragnet controls, though this remains unconvincing. It is after all much easier to visualise the terror of an armed robbery or the attack on family homes, than the creation of a climate of fear through systematic state and police repression of political opponents.

## Anti-imperialism

While the defenders of the RAF's methods and politics see the Baader-Meinhof Complex as Stefan Aust's final betrayal of the movement, the group's ideological motivations have also been subjected to critical scrutiny. Not so much by Edel and Eichinger – they only make occasional allusions to this – but there have been strong reactions to some of the elements of the RAF's anti-imperialism in the German Left. The uncritical collaboration with Palestinian nationalist groups (in the film, the differences are based on lifestyle, not politics), the activist-elitism that removed it from working class organisation, the deeds-not-words ideology that put it at odds with more reflected revolutionary agitators – what would it mean to depict, critically, the ideological background that underlay much student rebelliousness and armed struggle tactics? The film makes some vague attempts though they could easily be overlooked.

For example, the roots of the RAF's anti-imperialism are portrayed vividly in an early scene when Gudrun Ensslin storms out of her conservative-religious home dominated by her priest-father. The first step towards rebellion against the state is rebellion against one's parents, it seems. Next, Rudi Dutschke and his student audience at the Berlin Vietnam congress, consumed by a quasi-religious revolutionary fever, react to the only pro-war protester with passionate chants of 'Ho- Ho- Ho-Chi-Minh'. Ensslin adds a few derogatory comments about consumerism in America. It certainly was the Vietnam War and American military and cultural imperialism that guided many into action. The continuous point of reference, however, remained the Nazi past of the previous generation. A fascinating commentary is made in an early scene. The apparently significant, almost apocalyptic camera shot stands out, and yet goes almost unnoticed. In front of the flames of a burning Springer Press building (the symbol of mass media collusion with war and capital) stands the lonesome figure of a bare-chested hippie. Directed at the night sky, he repeatedly shouts his 'political' message: 'Dresden! Hiroshima! Vietnaaam!'. All three refer to large-scale bombing campaigns by US American forces against their enemies. Lumped together and taken out of their contexts, however, their political meaning is either equated, or forgotten altogether. While 'Vietnam' was the disastrous US war that mobilised the RAF's generation, 'Hiroshima (and Nagasaki)' were nuclear attacks on the Empire of Japan towards the end of World War II. Millions died in the Vietnam war and hundreds of thousands as a result of the nuclear bombing. The air raids on the East German city of Dresden, on the other hand, were much smaller in scale and were carried out by British and American air forces in February 1945 as part of the allied war against Hitler's Third Reich. Is the irrational scream of the hippie to the backdrop of burning newspapers a depiction of the 'madness' that would engulf the armed struggle?

To appreciate the significance of the Dresden analogy, it is necessary to understand it with a view to the re-formulation of German nationalism. It would be false to see the

Dresden bombings from a humanitarian perspective alone; its meaning has become deeply politicised. Most dramatically, the comparison of the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima is a central demand of neo-Nazis today, who refer to the allied air raids as a 'bombing holocaust', thereby also equating it with the Nazi Holocaust against Europe's Jews. Here the number of deaths in the air raids becomes a contested figure. The exact number of casualties is unknown, though historical and officially documented estimates range from 18,000 to 35,000. Neo-Nazi publications, on the other hand, put the number much higher, sometimes at up to 350,000. The destruction of most of the city alongside the high number of casualties is considered proof of the fact that the Germans were victims too. The city itself became occupied by the Red Army on 8 May 1945, the day of the Nazi capitulation. For the Nazis, Dresden had central military and strategic significance. Already in 1944, the allies flew their first air raids on the area, but the Dresden air raids refer to the large-scale bombing of the city from 13-15 February 1945. The raids were not the heaviest during the Second World War. Cities like Hamburg and Köln suffered from much larger and longer air attacks. However, more than any others, the Dresden raids provoked condemnation of the Royal Air Force's practice of bombing vast urban areas irrespective of civilian casualties. The higher numbers of deaths in the bombings were initially made up by Nazi strategists themselves and taken up by some international media, which could explain why the figures persist until today. Also, a number of revisionist and far right historians continue to insist that the Nazi figures were correct. Amongst them is convicted Holocaust denier David Irving, who with his 1963 book *The Destruction of Dresden* also influenced Ulrike Meinhof. Already in 1965, Meinhof reiterated Irving's message that Dresden had turned the anti-Hitler war into fascistic barbarism (Meinhof 1965).

The film scene of the Springer Press protest is an indication of the political turn that would come for some of the Baader-Meinhof group. Most striking of course is the direction taken by Horst Mahler, prominent lawyer and RAF founding-member, who in the Baader-Meinhof Complex organised the group's trip to the Jordanian training camp and appears complete with Castro-style cap. He is the one who finds Baader, Meinhof and Ensslin in Italy and convinces them to return to Germany to form an urban guerrilla group. Mahler spent 10 years in prison for his role in Andreas Baader's prison escape and the group's subsequent series of bank robberies. Behind bars, and after his release, Mahler made his slow but complete conversion to neo-Nazism. Still using anti-imperialist rhetoric, he began describing Germany as an 'occupied territory', which was in dire need to liberate its 'true' national identity. Later, he became a member of Germany's far right party, the NPD, successfully defending it in lawsuits brought by the German government, which was attempting to ban the organisation. Mahler has been back in court and prison several times since, for Holocaust denial and showing the Hitler salute, providing him with a welcome platform for anti-Semitic and xenophobic remarks. Mahler is still a self-professed anti-imperialist and claims that he never gave up on the principles of the 1968 generation. The concepts that, for him, enabled him to bridge the gap from left to right are US imperialism and Zionism. Of the former, Mahler says: 'The enemy is the same. The means to fight it have changed' (Mahler 2007, my translation). The transition from anti-Zionism to anti-Semitism was not that easy. There had been no conscious anti-Jewish sentiments in the RAF politics: 'We felt guilty towards the Jews and were embarrassed when we were in the Palestinian camp of the

Fedayeen, the Fedayeen came with their pictures of Hitler and said: Good man. This was difficult for us' (ibid.).

The student generation of 1968 was outraged by the institutional continuation of Nazism in the Federal Republic – many who had held Nazi positions were not dismissed or punished. But they offered only a limited critique of authoritarian fascism and militarism – epitomised in their parents' generation, the Springer Press, and in the United States' war in Vietnam – despite the warnings from such intellectual figureheads as Adorno and Habermas. On the one hand Adorno disliked the at times anti-theoretical actionism of the student movement (Adorno 1978). In his view, the paradigm of the unity of theory and practice more often than not had as an outcome the opposition to critical thought in favour of pseudo-activism. On the other hand, the actionist, anti-imperialist mindset allowed some to slip into nationalistic and anti-Semitic tones.

The films reluctance to look more explicitly at that side of the RAF's politics is also picked up on by Hans Kundnani in the review for Prospect magazine. Kundnani spots Abu Hassan, the leader of the early Arab terrorist group Black September, appearing in the film as the commandant of the Palestinian training camp in Jordan. Black September was later responsible for the killing of 11 Israeli athletes and a police man at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972 and the hijacking of a Lufthansa plane. They demanded the release of Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof alongside 230 Palestinian prisoners. Kundnani (2008) writes:

What the movie omits, however, is the bizarre communiqué Meinhof – the designated 'voice' of the RAF – wrote from jail celebrating the killing of the Israeli athletes as a model for the West German left. Meinhof's weird logic illustrates the arc of anti-Semitism on the German New Left that began well before the RAF, with the bombing of a Jewish Community Centre in West Berlin on November 9th 1969, the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. This left-wing anti-Semitism culminated in the Entebbe hijacking in 1976, in which two German members of the Revolutionary Cells – another terrorist group to emerge out of the West German student movement – and two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked an Air France jet, flew it to Entebbe and separated the Jewish passengers and the non-Jewish passengers before Israeli commandos stormed the aircraft. And all of this from a student movement that began as a rebellion against the 'Auschwitz generation'.

Kundnani is right to highlight the importance of anti-Zionist ideology that became part of German anti-imperialism at least after the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and Syria, at the end of which Israel had gained control of Gaza and the West Bank. Also Ulrike Meinhof's editorials in *Konkret* were characteristically pro-Israel before 1967 and anti-Israel thereafter. However, the RAF's anti-imperialism was not necessarily anti-Jewish. The conversion of former RAF members and sympathisers (Mahler was not the only one) from anti-imperialist Leftists to anti-imperialist neo-Nazis can only be understood with reference to the radicalised branch of anti-Zionism and anti-Americanism that the RAF had adopted.

While one might be hard-pressed to spot a critique of left-wing anti-Semitism in the Baader-Meinhof Complex, the film's treatment of RAF-style anti-imperialism is nonetheless not sympathetic. Until now, the story of RAF terrorism was also the story of political policing, illegal surveillance and state cover-ups, which could open up some uncomfortable questions. Documents that could give an indication whether Baader's

and Ensslin's deaths were suicide or murder are still withheld from public view. The Baader-Meinhof Complex turns these questions into non-topics: the RAF; they were slightly mad, slightly cool – but the ideological conversion from lefty students to armed struggle organisation remains an enigma.

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