Heroic Impatience

by DIEGO GAMBETTA

Baader-Meinhof
The Inside Story of the RAF.
By Stefan Aust.
Translated by Anthea Bell.
Oxford. 457 pp. $29.95.

Everybody Talks About the Weather . . . We Don't
The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof.
Edited by Karin Bauer.
Translated by Luise von Flotow.
Seven Stories. 268 pp. Paper $16.95.

On April 20, 1998, Reuters in Cologne received a letter mailed from Chemnitz, near the border between Germany and the Czech Republic. It read, in part: "Nearly 28 years ago, on May 14, 1970, the RAF was born in a liberation action. Today we end this project. The urban guerrilla battle of the RAF is now history." A bizarre coincidence: April 20, 1998, was the one-hundred and ninth anniversary of Adolf Hitler's birth.

The typewritten letter was unsigned and eight pages long—conciseness seldom being a virtue of violent extremists, even in the throes of dissolution. It was authenticated by the police on the basis of its style and paper. (Both had been used in previous communiqués by the group.) It also bore the group's emblem, a five-pointed star, with "RAF" (*Rote Armee Fraktion*, or Red Army Faction) inscribed over a drawing of a Heckler & Koch sub-machine gun, a German-made weapon used by the military of the very state against which the RAF had declared war. The group had also been dubbed "The Baader-Meinhof Gang" by the media, after two of its main protagonists, Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. (The press spotlighted Meinhof because she was a well-known journalist before she went underground.) As Stefan Aust explains in *Baader-Meinhof*, the gang had intended to adorn its emblem with the image of a Kalashnikov, the Russian assault rifle and symbol of liberation movements around the world. Instead, it made a mistake that stuck.

By the time the letter arrived at Reuters' Cologne bureau, the RAF's weapons had been silent since its assassination in Dusseldorf, on April 1, 1991, of Detlev Rohwedder, head of the agency overseeing the privatisation process in the former East Germany. A year later, in a letter mailed to Agence France-Presse, the RAF announced that it was suspending its guerrilla campaign and in return was asking for the release of its jailed comrades. This decision, the letter said, was due to a change of strategy following the fall of the Berlin wall and disintegration of the Soviet bloc. It was also a response to the latest moves by Justice Minister Klaus Kinkel, who had indicated that the authorities might consider releasing RAF members.

The state kept its promise. It even released Irmgard Moeller, a member of the original gang, despite American opposition and the lack of any signs of repentance on her part. Forty-nine years old when she left prison in 1994, Moeller had been serving a life sentence for participating in the 1972 bomb attack on the European headquarters of the US armed forces in Heidelberg that left three GI's dead. She was also a survivor of the infamous night of October 17, 1977, when her RAF comrades Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carle Raspe died in Stammheim prison in an apparent coordinated suicide. Moeller was found with several stab wounds in the region of her heart. Contrary to the official account of the night, she still maintains they were not self-inflicted and that there was no suicide pact.

After the Rohwedder murder, there were two more violent episodes involving RAF members, but neither had been planned by the gang. In 1993 Birgit Hogefeld and Wolfgang Grams were ambushed by special squad officers at the train station in Bad Kleinen. Grams started firing as soon as he detected the police and ended up killing an officer. Hogefeld was arrested. According to the authorities, Grams committed suicide by jumping on the train tracks. Suspicions that he was actually shot by the special squad officers sparked a furor among the public that culminated in the resignation of the German Interior Minister and the dismissal of the Chief Federal Prosecutor.

The second episode, also involving a couple, took place in Vienna. Horst-Ludwig Meyer and Andrea Klump had been on the run for thirteen years, ever since they were suspected of the murder of Siemens CEO Karl-Heinz Beckurts in Munich in November 1986. On September 16, 1999, Meyer was killed by Austrian police. From the description of the face-off in the London *Observer*, one can surmise that Meyer wanted a quick way to go, commensurate with his identity as an urban guerrilla. There was no reason for him to pull out his 9mm Beretta pistol when a policewoman, tipped off by passers-by to the couple's strange behaviour, asked to see their papers. They were carrying forged copies of Italian passports that had served them well for some time. The special unit was called. "After an exchange of about 10 shots," the *Observer* reported, Meyer was gunned down and Klump arrested.

Astrid Proll, a member of the original Baader-Meinhof Gang, served time in a German prison for attempted murder and now works as a photo editor. She told the *Observer* that Meyer and Klump may not have been planning anything:

> My guess is that they were living as a couple and were still armed because they were on the run. They were hounded people who did not want to go to prison for fifteen years. Once they got into trouble they just behaved as terrorists, and now he is dead. I very much doubt they were into something. Everything is over. This kind of terrorism is something from the past.

Everything was truly over for the RAF, even though the group had not recanted its past actions or the use of violence for political goals. On the contrary, its 1998 communiqué ended on a bombastic note, citing Rosa Luxemburg's dictum "The revolution says: I was, I am, I will be."

In 1968, in the group's pre-history, Baader and Ensslin firebombed two department stores. From then to 1991, the RAF robbed banks, bombed police stations, army barracks and embassies, took hostages and killed people. Some of its victims were mistakes or "collateral damage," others the results of unplanned shoot-outs with police. Many of its attacks were "endogenously" generated—that is, aimed at freeing jailed comrades. But there were also a number of purely politically motivated attacks and, most shocking of all, targeted assassinations of industrialists, administrators and judges

According to Aust, during a quarter century of activity, the RAF killed thirty-

eight individuals. By any standard, their lethality was miniscule—car crashes cause on average the same number of deaths every three hours on Europe's roads. Yet, judging merely by the magnitude of the political and institutional storm the RAF precipitated, which rattled the establishment and brought tanks to the streets of West Germany, it proved supremely cost-effective. The tiny size of the RAF—seventy-five members are known to the police—makes its potency all the more striking.

At the time of writing three RAF members are still on the run, six died in some violent episode before being arrested, and sixty-six have been caught and sentenced to jail over the years. Among the latter, six died of natural causes and seven committed suicide. Fifty-one have now been released. Only Andrea Klump and Birgit Hogefeld remain behind bars. Nineteen members are now dead, a rate of mortality that, considering their line of work, does not seem particularly high.

Most of those freed now lead quiet lives far from media scrutiny. Not Horst Mahler, whose claim to infamy has taken a surreal turn. A lawyer and member of the original Baader-Meinhof Gang, he later recanted terrorism and was released from jail early, in 1980. He went on to join the NDP, a neo-Nazi party. In February 2009—exactly sixty years after his father, "a fanatical Nazi and anti-Semite, shot himself," Aust notes—Mahler, who is now 73, was sentenced to six years in jail for posting videos on the Internet denying the Holocaust and distributing CDs promoting anti-Semitic hatred.

In 1972, I was a twenty-year-old philosophy student in Turin, a hot bed of student-worker protest. The Red Brigades had started to kidnap people, mostly foremen and factory managers unsympathetic to their revolutionary agenda. During the following three years, their repertoire extended to kneecapping and, eventually, assassinations. My reaction back then was disbelief. The means did not match any viable revolutionary end; also, the Brigades were ideologically at odds with true comrades, who do not wage war against individuals, whether judges, industrialists, trade unionists or journalists, and did not mistake themselves for mafia hit-men or loony anarchists. They may have used violence, but as participants in a revolutionary or resistance war. I and several of my friends thought that the Brigades were innocent, and that violent acts had been attributed to them by a fascist conspiracy.

By 1975 we knew that we were wrong. Four carabinieri surrounded an isolated farmhouse near Acqui Terme in which the Red Brigades were holding Vallarino Gancia, owner of the eponymous wine company, who had been kidnapped for ransom. A brigatista named Margherita "Mara" Cagol and a companion, who has never been identified, refused to surrender. They burst out of the farmhouse throwing hand grenades that wounded two carabinieri, one seriously. In the shootout that ensued, as the brigatisti were trying to escape, a carabiniere was killed. The unidentified man vanished into the woods; Cagol was shot dead. Together with her husband, Renato Curcio, who was then already in jail, she had founded the Red Brigades. Gancia was freed unharmed.

What did they think they could achieve by picking such an asymmetric fight? Where is the rationality of having "six against 60 millions," as Heinrich Böll described the Baader-Meinhof Gang? These unanswered questions were all the more existentially displacing considering that, albeit as a participant observer rather than a front-line rabble-rouser, I had also inhaled the zeitgeist of those tumultuous years. I had marched in the same demonstrations, sat through the same endless assemblies, loitered around the same factory and school gates. The difference was that, despite the bellicosity of some of our slogans, it never occurred to me that the situation was ripe for armed struggle.

The RAF seems even more incomprehensible than the Red Brigades. The Brigades had a membership more than twice the RAF's size. It was a proper organisation, with a cell structure and a reasonably clear hierarchy. Unlike the Baader-Meinhof, its members were not always fugitives. Many remained unknown to the police for years and were able to keep up a front as ordinary citizens. In West Germany there were other groups variously linked with the RAF—the June 2 Movement, Red Aid, the Socialist Patients Collective (SPK, "patients" of the mental variety)—but the constellation of sympathisers and kindred spirits on which the RAF could count, though it oscillated over time, peaking after the deaths of RAF members, was far less populous than that of the Red Brigades.

At the same time, the revulsion of large sections of German public opinion of all social strata was strong. By contrast, significant portions of the Italian working class sympathized with the Red Brigades. Disgruntled old members of the Resistance, who felt the civil war against Nazi-fascism had never been properly concluded, supplied the brigatisti with arms they had stashed away in 1945. The Red Brigades were also of a different ideological temper, less interested in the anti-imperialist, internationalist struggle, and parochially focused on Italian workers' conditions. Mario Moretti, one of the leaders, says that, because of this difference, the two groups never managed to collaborate on any operations.

The RAF's fantasy of unleashing a revolution was even more far-fetched than the Brigades'. Renate Riemeck, Ulrike Meinhof's foster mother and a talented historian and peace activist, wrote an affectionate open letter to Ulrike, which was published in *konkret*, the main left-wing magazine in West Germany, in November 1971 when Ulrike was on the run: "The Federal Republic is not the place for an urban guerrilla movement in the Latin American style. The country offers, at most, suitable conditions for a gangster drama." Paying no heed to Riemeck's entreaties, Ulrike, who had been close to her foster mother, issued a dismissive, haughty reply, imbued with a slightly demented Brechtian tone, which was found three weeks later in a garbage bin in a Berlin park.

During the 1960s, Stefan Aust, now 63, was an editor for *konkret*. Its publisher was Klaus Rainer Röhl, the husband of Ulrike Meinhof, who was also an editor at the magazine. Aust, who later was the editor-in-chief of *Der Spiegel*, has had various professional and personal contacts, not always of a friendly nature, with several of the RAF's protagonists. *Baader-Meinhof*, first published in 1985 in German and now available in an updated edition in German and English, covers the years 1967–1977. Aust does not offer a decisive account of the RAF's origins and actions. He modestly refrains from advancing a particular narrative, wisely accepting that there may not be just one. The book's strength lies in its large number of interviews (often first-hand) and its numerous and varied sources, as well as its immediate, fast-paced style. The book is very readable, at times gripping. But it is organised in many short, discontinuous sections and has a hopscotch time-line, which can make it hard to know exactly

when something happened or was said. Still, it is possible to extract, if not the whole picture of the RAF, at least many meaningful fragments.

One discovers, for instance, that Ulrike Meinhof, by far the most interesting and culturally sophisticated character of the group, was herself struggling, ex-post facto, with how to make rational sense of the RAF. Meinhof was arrested in 1972 for various terrorist-related crimes, and in jail in late 1973 she started to write a history of the group. This was perhaps a sign of exaggerated self-importance, given that the group had been in existence for a mere two years before its core members were arrested. But it also demonstrates the need to reflect on and explain what they had done. Meinhof's foster mother, in her letter, had acutely pointed out that a "spirit of sacrifice and the readiness to face death become ends in themselves if one cannot make them understood." In her notes for the history, Meinhof, speaking in the third person plural, wrote:

> Not because they were so blind as to believe they could keep that initiative going until the revolution triumphed in Germany, not because they imagined they could not be shot or arrested.
>
> Not because they so misjudged the situation as to think the masses would simply rise at such a signal.
>
> It was a matter of salvaging, historically, the whole state of understanding attained by the movement of 1967/1968; it was a case of not letting the struggle fall apart again.

She must have felt the need to deny the suspicion that the RAF's members were blind and wrongheaded, incapable of thinking rationally about what they were doing. Instead she claims they were aiming at something else which cannot be measured in ordinary terms. The exact nature of this something else is, however, unclear. There is a marked contrast between the searching questions implicit in her denials and the vagueness of her answer—"salvaging …the whole state of understanding." She seems desperate to rescue the RAF's project from going down in history as an episode driven by strategic lunacy.

Meinhof never completed the project. In fact, one can surmise that sometime in 1974 she began to go quietly mad. She had been in solitary confinement for over a year. This must have weighed heavily on her mental state, combined with the difficulties of tracing her trajectory. Her writings become intermittently incoherent—for instance, when she describes her fraught relation with Baader or launches into abject self-criticism for having doubts. She inexplicably suspends contact with her twin daughters, who were visiting and writing to her in jail.

She would never see them again. After two more years of increasingly difficult relations with the rest of the group (in particular Ensslin, with whom she sometimes shared a cell), Meinhof could no longer bear her own doubts, her sense of guilt about having entertained them and the way her comrades tormented her for having them. She hanged herself in her cell the night of May 8, 1976. She was too intelligent not to feel troubled by the folly of it all, too honest to deceive herself about what she felt—her husband described her after they first met as "the incarnation of intellectual honesty." Yet she was too blindly loyal to the group, or perhaps too weak, to defect "even when the group no longer stood behind her." The group satisfied a deep human need in her to belong: "TV appearances, contacts, public attention"—she wrote in a letter to an undisclosed recipient sometime in the 1960s—"are part of my career as a journalist and a socialist and give me access to radio and television beyond *konkret*. It's all agreeable on a human level, but doesn't fulfil my need for human warmth, solidarity, and belonging to a group."

Aust's book leaves no doubt that the group's "quasi-religious," "deranged crusade" managed to achieve nothing of whatever had been intended. Still, the one thing the RAF did somehow accomplish, all the more puzzling given its tiny number and gangster-like lethality, was to strike fear into the heart of the Federal Republic. As Wolfgang Kraushaar, a political scientist who has edited a history of the RAF, said in an interview with the *Independent on Sunday* in 2007, "You have to remember that this period represents the greatest challenge Germany ever faced between the end of the War and the fall of Communism. The RAF—or Baader-Meinhof Gang—essentially held the German state to ransom. It was a frightening time for the country." Democratic states are generally more vulnerable to terrorist tactics, and the Federal Republic was more vulnerable still because it was untested, haunted by a dreadful past and conceived under the tutelage of the victors.

Here I see a monumental paradox: the effect of rocking West German political institutions was achieved only because the state was not what the Baader-Meinhof Gang claimed it to be. One of the RAF's ploys was to provoke the state "into showing its cunningly hidden and well camouflaged 'true fascist face.'" Once the gang had been incarcerated, the German state seemed at first to oblige: it unnecessarily subjected them to harsh penal conditions—isolation, sound deprivation, white furniture, perpetually lit rooms. Still, these tactics, for all the physical and mental distress they may have caused, represent not unabashed use of force, but muted alternatives, weaker substitutes. West Germany was, as Aust says, "a reasonably well-functioning constitutional state." If the state had had a "true fascist face" to reveal, matters would have been very different. We might not even know about the RAF, since freedom of the press would have been curtailed and secret executions would have replaced trials. By contrast, thanks to intense media coverage, the Gang's terror effect was multiplied and broadcast far and wide. "At no time of their 'underground struggle,'" Aust writes, "did the RAF have so magnetic a power of attraction as they did when imprisoned. Once in prison the group developed a political stature they had previously lacked. The larger-than-life security precautions endowed the prisoners with a political significance they had never come near to achieving with their writing and actions."

The RAF's attitude was reminiscent of a teen tantrum: The state is bad, it deserves to be hit hard. Instead of a pat on our head it responds by shooting us when shot at, arresting and putting us in jail! Bastards! Fascists! You see, we were right all along. The state is so very fascist! Free the comrades! Avenge the fallen! In a sense the gang's *Sturm und Drang* worked since lots of people on the German left were seduced by it. But it wasn't true. At his trial Baader was an irrepressible whinger: he compared the policy of the Federal Prosecutor's Office towards the RAF to the "terrorist" policies of Israel toward the Palestinians, of the US in Vietnam and the Pinochet junta in Chile. He said: "its basic rule being as many dead fighters as possible, as many dead prisoners as possible, executions in the open street, shooting to kill, and so on." Yet Baader was allowed to make that farcical parallel because he was alive and free to speak and be heard. The police had used velvet gloves when they surrounded him,

Meins and Raspe in a garage and arrested them in June 1972. Baader's speeches had an effect only because the press was allowed to attend and report on the trial. In jail the RAF members "compared themselves with the inmates of Nazi concentration camps," Aust writes, a comparison at once laughable and offensive to the millions who died in the camps without the chance to address the press. Yet people outside saw the picture of Meins's arrest: "TV cameras were rolling. The picture of the skinny, almost naked figure of Holger Meins went around the world. And RAF sympathisers, or those close to them, were reminded of the pictures of concentration camp inmates. The myth of the pitiless persecution of the RAF warriors had been born." One wonders if Horst Mahler learned something from those days: Mahler's six-year jail sentence for denying the Holocaust came from a court case he brought against himself, in order to use the courtroom as a stage.

In science, before one finds a good explanation of a phenomenon there are no such things as trivia. Instead there are anomalies, things either contrary to commonsensical expectations or that stand out as peculiar or unique. They are often uninformative quirks, yet at times anomalies turn out to be apertures to unexpected insights. Here I describe anomalies plucked from Aust's book, even though I am not sure to which of the two categories they belong.

Baader was a drop-out, unlike the other main members, who were university educated: Mahler had a law degree, Meinhof a degree in psychology and pedagogy, Raspe one in sociology. Baader was often involved in "boozing and brawling," had a past as a petty criminal and was confined to a young offender institution and an adult prison for stealing a motorbike and driving without a licence. He was released in 1967, just in time to catch the wave of student protests, and perhaps also a screening of a new film called *Bonnie and Clyde*.

He could be kind or brutal, generous or mean. He was fond of Mickey Mouse comic books, *pace* American cultural imperialism; he cheated during hunger strikes at Stammheim in 1974, eating secretly while heaping scorn on wavering comrades. But, unlike many manipulative individuals, he was also an exceptionally hard man: he never recanted, never displayed any weakness and remained defiant of authority till the very end. "It still amazes me," said Chief Commissioner Horst Herold after the siege in which Baader and his comrades were captured, "that they then ventured to fire. They must have known that they were sitting on a powder keg."

The two lead women, while different from both Baader and each other, also had some peculiarities in common. Ensslin was the daughter of a Protestant pastor. Meinhof was descended on her father's side from "an old Würtenberg family, notable for producing protestant theologians," and who couldn't have been amused when Meinhof's mother, after her husband's death, went to live with Renate Riemeck, her female lover, who later became Ulrike's foster mother. Meinhof says she was a Christian pacifist until she joined the communist party in East Berlin in 1957 (the party was banned in the FDR), a time when communists in western Europe were leaving the party in the wake of the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprisings.

Both women could respond very emotionally to oppression and social injustice. Ensslin wept "uncontrollably" when a student named Benno Ohnesorg was shot by a policeman during a demonstration in West Berlin against the Shah of Iran. Meinhof, while watching "dreadful pictures from Vietnam" on TV, "jumped up and said no one was going to do this *to her*, it debased everyone. We must act, she said, we couldn't just sit around doing nothing" (my emphasis). At Meinhof's funeral, the theologian Helmut Gollwitzer said, "I see this woman whose life was hard, who made her life hard *by allowing the misery of others to affect her so much*…I see her now in the peace of God" (my emphasis).

Still, like Ensslin and Baader before her, Meinhof abandoned her children in pursuit of her ideological ends; she was even prepared to ship them off to a Jordanian orphanage camp rather than allow their father, Klaus Rainer Röhl, to look after them. (Aust, a friend of Röhl's, rescued the children, tricking some "comrades" in Sicily where the girls had been temporarily hidden prior to their final destination. He recounts how he only just managed to escape Baader's murderous vengeance.) If Meinhof was affected by the misery of others, she was not so affected by that which she herself caused. Her attitude is reminiscent of Mrs. Jellyby, the "telescopic philanthropist" memorably described by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*, who allows her children to live in squalor while devoting herself to solving social problems in Africa.

Ensslin was besotted with Baader, even during their dramatic years in detention (1972–1977) when she worshipped him like a cult-figure. "The rival, absolute enemy, enemy of the state: the collective consciousness, the morale of the humiliated and insulted, of the urban proletariat—that is what Andreas is," she wrote in a letter to Margrit Schiller, also a RAF member in prison. "We could measure ourselves by Andreas." She called him "baby" and he reciprocated by calling her "cunt." To avoid injustice, he called the other women by the same epithet. The Baader-Ensslin pairing propelled the group and welded it together.

Composed of forty men and thirty-five women, the RAF had an astonishing gender balance, which is hard to find in any institution, let alone one specialising in extremist violence. This anomaly is interesting. Although they have used them as suicide bombers, Islamic extremists include no women at all among their cadres. Right-wing violent groups have only a few. Women have a presence only in left-wing extremist groups: 30 percent of FARC fighters are women and 25 percent of Red Brigades members were women. Even compared to these groups, the RAF was unique. Mario Moretti, a leader of the Red Brigades, recounts in his memoir that once the Brigades arranged with the RAF for their emissaries to meet at Milan central station. The agreed identification signal was a thriller book carried in full view. The "brigatista" sent to the rendezvous returned from the station saying that he had seen no one holding a thriller in view—except a few women. He never expected to find his Teutonic kindred spirits incarnated in three women's bodies. "We rushed back looking for them," Moretti says, "and did not tell them that the first appointment had fallen through because of a macho prejudice. We were not sure they would found it as funny as we did."

There never was a proper plan to set up the Gang. As Meinhof wrote in the notes for her RAF history, the group's emergence was "spontaneous." The banding together of such diverse characters emanates a strong sense of *evitability*. Like in Mahjong, drop the names of the main protagonists on the table a hundred times and they will never form in the same pattern twice. Remove just one of them and the group trajectory would change. In spite of the group's moniker, the members were the very opposite of an army

in which individuals are interchangeable.

Contrary to what we may be tempted to expect, highly salient outcomes are not necessarily the result of big, chunky causes. They can—as Milan Kundera says of Anna Karenina's decision to kill herself—come out of a "conspiracy of details." Here I can piece some such details together.

One, the spark: on the April 2, 1968, Baader and Ensslin decide to live up to the student movement's violent, anti-capitalist slogans and torch two department stores. "The fascist state" catches them and puts them in jail. Two, the encounters: Meinhof reports on their trial for *konkret* and later interviews Ensslin in jail. Mahler is a defence lawyer for Baader in the trial for arson, for which they are sentenced to three years. Raspe's girl friend Marianne happens to be a friend of Meinhof's. During the months in which Baader and Ensslin are freed pending an appeal (which they lose), Meinhof, Ensslin and Baader meet again through their shared interest in institutionalised youth. Three, the fugitives: Baader and Ensslin flee to avoid being jailed again. They knock on Meinhof's door. She agrees to hide them. Four, the escape: Baader is caught and the plan to free him is hatched. (Until now there had been no talk of engaging in armed struggle.) Meinhof takes part in the "liberation action"; she pretends she is writing a book with Baader so the authorities will agree to have him taken under escort to an institute library where they can work together. Five, the shots: during the escape operation, an innocent institute employee is seriously wounded. Six, the jump: Meinhof was meant to stay behind, maintaining her pretence of innocence—her daughters were at school and she had not entrusted them to anyone—but, in a metaphorical gesture, she decided to follow the example of institute runaways by jumping out of a window. According to Karin Bauer "likely, she panicked when shots were fired."

Meinhof jumped on May 14, 1970. From that moment onward the conspiracy of details turns into one of the will, and the planning to develop the armed struggle begins. On June 5, the fugitives issue their first communiqué, a founding declaration at once defiant and exalted. But now they are fugitives, known to the police, and that is not the most comfortable position to be in if you want to organise a revolutionary army.

They were on the run, and a host of mechanisms kicked in and began to govern their actions "more than any strategic notions of their aims."

Life on the run is expensive, as Aust notes. The path of the fugitive guerrilla is dense not just with constraints, but also with insidious mental traps, which affect their ability to make considered decisions. Volker Speitel, a young graphic artist who joined the RAF in 1974, later said that during his life in illegality "he was afraid the group might plunge into rash ventures in the grip of their persecution mania. 'Somebody [in the group] once said that his fear of taking action was growing every day, so he would like to take action at once, and then he would be rid of his fear.'"

Forces other than the lofty goals proclaimed by the communiqués kept the Gang going and made it attractive to new recruits.

The thrill: Beate Sturm recollected: "We did not ask ourselves what we were actually looking for any more. You just slip into that sort of thing. And as we thought we knew we'd got into all this for the correct political reasons, we liked the thrill of it too." "There's adventure, wild, exciting driving, you are going into action in a minor way against anything that comes along," said one RAF recruit from a young people's home, "getting the better of a waiter in a café, getting the better of this or that liberal shit. There is always something going on with the Baader group. That is why all the young people are drawn to them."

The self-reinforcing beliefs: Ulrich Scholze joined the group when "he was 23, and a tutor in the physics department at the Free University." Aust reports Scholze's analysis of what it took to join the RAF: "You have to be emotionally convinced that all attempts at reform simply stabilise the present system of society and consolidate capitalism. And the harmony of reason and emotions which then exists is the pre-condition of resolute action. Then the prosecuting authorities put pressure on you, *and that confirms all you thought*" (my emphasis). More illogical still: "When the Socialist Patients Collective (SPK) in Heidelberg heard the news of Petra Schelm's death [in a shoot out with the police in July 1971] its members *felt confirmed in their view* that it was necessary to go underground" (my emphasis).

The fame: Scholze also had this to say on what helps an urban guerrilla to stay the course: "the sensational press reports and descriptions such as 'Public Enemy Number 1' from government sources create *a feeling of success that gives you the strength to carry on*" (my emphasis).

Fear of shame or ostracism kept members from defecting: Klaus Jünschke, a psychology student who joined in 1971 via the SPK, later said: "it was only too clear to most members of the group that there could be nothing but prison or death at the end of their road. Many of them had doubts, and thought of getting out, but they were all afraid of telling anyone else, even though that person might be thinking just the same."

The reinforcement of the leadership, which typically accompanies life under great pressure, made deliberative democracy within the group impossible. Astrid Proll reports that once Ulrike told her: "I am fed up with this. All this hanging around, acting as look-out, checking out cars. I don't want to end up in jail for that kind of thing, not anymore, not for such petty details." According to Aust, Proll felt the same, "but the group wouldn't tolerate any discussion. Now that they had gone underground, the authority of the two leaders, Baader and Ensslin, was even more powerful than before."

The solidarity effect: when news of the arrest of Baader, Meins and Raspe spread, Peter Jurgen Boock realised he had to go underground: "We must go into action. (…) They got me out of a hole [he was taken out of a juvenile delinquent home by Baader and Ensslin]. Now it's up to me to get them out of one." Many actions by the RAF, especially after 1975, when its second generation went into action, aimed to redress the failures of previous actions, by freeing the "comrades in jail." For example, the attack on the German Embassy in Stockholm (April 1975), the attack on the OPEC conference in Vienna (December 1975) and the kidnapping of Hanns Martin Schleyer (September 1977) were all aimed at freeing the old guard in prison.

The martyr effect: Every death "on the job" has a consequence among not only the surviving members but also new potential recruits who already sympathise with the cause and are spurred into action. "Ulrike Meinhof, we will avenge you." This is a fairly general mechanism—we find traces of this effect among entities as different as the Palermo judges who fought against the mafia since the 1980s and organisations which practice suicide attacks. The "martyr effect" was very strong for the RAF. The death of Meins by hunger strike, for instance, gave the RAF a boost: the number of people the police were looking for went from 40 to 300. Experts estimated that the sympathizers grew to over 10,000.

Although Germany and Italy were and have remained democratic countries, the possible resurgence of Fascism—which worried not only the RAF but the student movement in its entirety—did not seem far-fetched at the time. And for good reasons. Many people in the post-war establishments of both countries—judges, industrialists, academics and politicians—were compromised by contact with the Third Reich or Mussolini's regime. In Germany, the leader of the grand coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Party was Kurt Georg Kiesinger, who had joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and worked on radio propaganda during the war. Portugal and Spain were still ruled by fascist dictatorships. Further, in 1967, when the student movements across the world erupted, there was a *coup d'état* in Greece that inaugurated a series of ultra right-wing military governments until July 1974.

One can retort: but these things were not going to happen in Germany, where the Allies still ran the show. Well, I'm not so sure. In 1973 there was a *coup d'état* against the socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile, and it was backed by the United States, which had not complained about the coup in Greece. The Americans (and the British) were prepared to do anything to defend their freedom against communism, including supporting Fascism. True, left-wing rhetoric traded in sensationalist parallels, equating too many events around the world to the Holocaust; it mistook incompetence, occasional police brutality or niches of authoritarianism in public institutions as the rumblings of Fascism's imminent resurgence. Still, even if it is hard to get the balance right, it was far from ludicrous to entertain those fears. The Germans and the Italians of my generation may have been over-reactive. Still, I wonder whether it is the Italians of today who aren't numbed and uncomprehending in front of the risk of resurgent neo-Fascism masked by Silvio Berlusconi's clownish face.

In postwar Europe, however, we are grappling with a more precise question. Although many were worried about Fascism and its viral representatives hidden in the neo-democratic states, only a handful leaped into armed struggle. Why did Meinhof jump out of that window? Why did I not even think of jumping? It is in the shadow of Germany's past that we need to look for an answer since it is where the thinking protagonists of the RAF themselves looked. As Meinhof wrote in a column in *konkret* in 1961 entitled "Hitler within you," they were members of a generation which "was not involved in the crimes of the Third Reich or in determining the direction that was taken in the postwar period; it has grown up with and into the arguments of the present, entangled in the blame for something it is not responsible for." Even if technically blameless, being the children of a certain generation of Germans exerted a great and special pressure.

Most people put up with it and got on with their lives. Some people, very few, developed an urgency for action, an "heroic impatience"—as a psychiatrist described a trait of Ensslin's personality—to ensure that the bitterly disappointing world around them could be forced to live up to their ideals. They become possessed of a sacred fury, intolerant of nuances or delays. The past is what truly weighs on them and makes their present unbearable. Rather than the future they imagine, it is the past that they know—the past within shouting historical distance, as it were, the source of emotions raw enough to spawn actions that plain rationality would deem ill-advised.

In *Sentimental Education*, Flaubert describes this syndrome, whose deep sources I do not really understand, when he portrays Sénécal, the only one in the circle of friends who in the 1848 revolution ends up taking violent action:

> Sénécal was a tutor in mathematics, a hard-headed man of republican convictions, a future Saint-Just... He was a man of theories, who cared only about the masses, but showed no mercy for the individuals…waking up every morning hoping for a revolution which would change the world in a few weeks. In the end, disheartened by the laxness of his brethren, furious for the delays that impeded the realization of his dreams, and desperate for his country, he joined as a chemist the plot of the incendiary bombs; and he was caught carrying gunpowder, which he was planning to employ in Montmartre, in a supreme attempt to establish the Republic.

It is unlikely that Baader was of this type, but Ensslin and Meinhof were. Remember what Meinhof said when she was watching scenes of Vietnamese horror on TV: "they cannot do this to me." The casualty that she perceives is her own self. A person with such a hyper-moral and brittle ego may succumb more easily to the pressure of distinguishing herself from the faults of others, and those of the previous generation in particular. How do I prove (to myself and others) that if I had lived under the Third Reich I would not have been supine or complicit? In "Hilter within you" Meinhof wrote: "One day we will be asked about Herr Strauss [Franz Joseph, a very right wing Bavarian politician] in the same way we now ask our parents about Hitler." Strauss is like Hitler, Vietnam like Auschwitz, we like our parents: the past seems all one single catastrophe, as it does to Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*. At some point the pressure to rid oneself of the burden of the past becomes unbearable; the wreckage keeps piling up at one's feet, and acts of violence become the only perceived exit.

The most startling words in Aust's book were uttered by the father of Gudrun Ensslin, a Protestant pastor who was interviewed when his daughter was on trial for arson.

> Well, I—I like the whole Federal Republic—would object to any admonishments made in that way. However, what she wanted to say is this: a generation that has seen the building of concentration camps, the encouragement of anti-Semitism and the committing of genocide among and in the name of its own people must not allow any revival of such things, must not admit that hope of a new beginning, of reformation and rebirth can come to nothing. These are young people who are not willing to go on swallowing frustration and be corrupted by it. It has astonished me to find that Gudrun, who has always thought in a very rational, intelligent way, has experienced what is almost a condition of euphoric self-realisation, a really holy self-realisation such as we find mentioned in connection with saints. To me, that is more a beacon light than the fire of arson itself—seeing a human being make her way to self-realisation through such acts.

Even if perhaps tinted by a father's desire not to disown his daughter, Pastor Ensslin's arguments are nonetheless striking. Here we have it all. The guilt over Germany's past, the fear of its revival and the quasi-religious, utterly irrational belief that only as dramatic a gesture as the fire his daughter kindled could

provide catharsis. Pastor Ensslin defends not the rational, reflective self that Gudrun was known for, but the abandonment of that, her transmogrification into a euphoric state of mind that could lift the burden of the past and truly bear witness of rebirth.

The Gang turned the conspiracy of details into an act of the will. There is an almost Nietzschean *delirium omnipotentiae* in what they attempted: even though the conflict between the student movement and the German state could not seriously be compared to liberation conflicts such as that in Palestine, and even though there was no armed organization to rely on, they set out to create both. This, I think, is what gives these tragic *Übermenschen* and *Überfrauen* their sense of historical *evitability*—the fact that the forces pushing them in the direction they took were well short of inexorable.

Aust accepts the official version of Baader's, Ensslin's and Raspe's deaths: they committed coordinated suicides during the night and morning of October 17 and 18, 1977, in their cells in Stammhein prison. Baader and Raspe shot themselves with handguns apparently smuggled in by their lawyers. Ensslin hanged herself. They faced the prospect of spending their lives in prison—at their trial, which lasted for 192 days, life was the sentence. The hijacking of a Lufthansa jet by Palestinian insurgents demanding the Gang's release had ended on October 17 with the death or capture of the hijackers and the rescue of the hostages. The prisoners must have heard of this, and so knew their hopes were over. They also knew that Helmut Schmidt's government was not going to yield to the demands for their release made by the RAF cell that since September 5 had been holding hostage Hanns-Martin Schleyer, a prominent industrialist and former Nazi. The RAF murdered Schleyer after learning of the coordinated suicides.

Aust has indirect evidence to support the suicide hypothesis, showing that "the legend of the murders in Stammhein was born outside the group, not in its inner circle." He relies on the stern words that Brigitte Mohnhaupt apparently delivered to the stunned RAF members who were in hiding in Baghdad when the news reached them. (Mohnhaupt participated in the Schleyer abduction and was one of the few members of the RAF's second generation to have met the old guard and to know how the guns had been smuggled into the prison.) We do not know Aust's source, but this is how he reports Mohnhaupt's words:

> I suppose you lot can only suppose that they were victims. You didn't know them. They are not victims and they never were. You don't get made a victim, you have to make yourself a victim. They were in charge of their situation themselves right up to the last minute. So what does that mean? I'll tell you: it means they did it themselves, not that it was done to them.

Aust, however, also reports several unanswered questions about what really happened that night in Stammhein, and castigates the authorities for not being forthcoming and eliminating all doubts. It is baffling that none of the ordinary prisoners who were in their cells on the floor below heard any of the four shots that night. If the authorities ever admit to eavesdropping on the cells, as seems likely they did, and if they release the tapes, we may be in for some surprises.

For the time being, the account we have is that on the night of October 17 the *Sturm und Drang* tantrum reached its self-destructive climax. Baader, Ensslin and Raspe agreed to die and decided to make it seem as if they were the victims of an extra-judicial execution: The fascist pigs are pretending not to be fascist pigs, let's show everyone what they are really capable of—let's die and teach them a lesson. They left no notes behind. Baader fired a couple of aimless shots in his cell before shooting himself in the head from behind to make it seem, according to Aust, as if there had been a scuffle before his execution. This may sound far fetched. Yet it is consistent with the group mentality. "When their cells in Stammheim prison were being cleared," Aust writes, "a copy of Bertold Brecht's play *The Measures Taken*, from which they were quoting in their letters, was found in almost all of them. The play contained the creed of the RAF, talking of the absolute will to change the 'murdering world' by murders of their own and, if need be, by suicide. 'We are the missiles,' they had written."

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