Tag: The Baader Meinhof Complex (film)

Baader-Meinhof in film: celebration or indictment?

The 2008 movie *The Baader Meinhof Complex* runs two and a half hours, and it is as ambitious as it is long. It seeks to tell the history of the Baader-Meinhof Group, or Red Army Faction (RAF), as fully as possible – to include every act of terrorism and every important RAF personage. The production is fastidious: the filmmakers reportedly went out of their way to re-create events, whenever possible, in the very spots where they had taken place. The attention to period detail, and to other particulars, is remarkable, as is the effort to create rich, rounded portraits of the major figures of (at least) the RAF's first generation.

The film – directed by Uli Edel from a script by himself and Bernd Eichinger, which is based on a book by Stefan Aust – was a huge hit in Germany. It was a nominee for the Oscar for Best Foreign Film. There was, however, much debate as to whether or not it romanticized the terrorists. Some felt it portrayed RAF members as "Bonnie and Clyde-style heroes." One film critic objected that Edel had given **Andreas Baader** "what he always wanted. Posthumously he has become the hero of a real action film." Bettina Röhl called the film "the worst-case scenario – it would not be possible to top its hero worship." The widow of banker Jurgen Ponto, who'd been assassinated by the RAF, protested the government's financial support of the film by returning a Federal Cross of Merit. Michael Buback, son of a murdered federal prosecutor, complained that Edel had shown "little consideration…towards the family members" of the RAF's victims.

Christopher Hitchens, however, praised the movie for *not* romanticizing the RAF. As he saw it, the film "interrogates and ultimately indicts (and convicts) the West German terrorists rather than the state and society which they sought to overthrow." And Jorg Schleyer, son of another RAF victim, affirmed with admiration that Edel showed the RAF to be a "wantonly brutal band of murderers."

Uli Edel

Well, which is it? On the one hand, the movie doesn't stint on spelling out the main characters' many flaws (including the fact that they're cold-blooded killers). On the other hand, its use of cutaways to stock footage of the Vietnam War – bombings, terrified natives, etc. – seems to impute legitimacy to the RAF's view of America as a cruel imperialist power. This impression is enhanced by the film's almost total failure to remind the viewer that America was, in fact, at war with Communism, thanks to which East Germans were living under a totalitarian government under the thumb of the Kremlin. In the end, whether a particular viewer considers the characters in *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* sympathetic may depend mostly on that viewer's own politics.

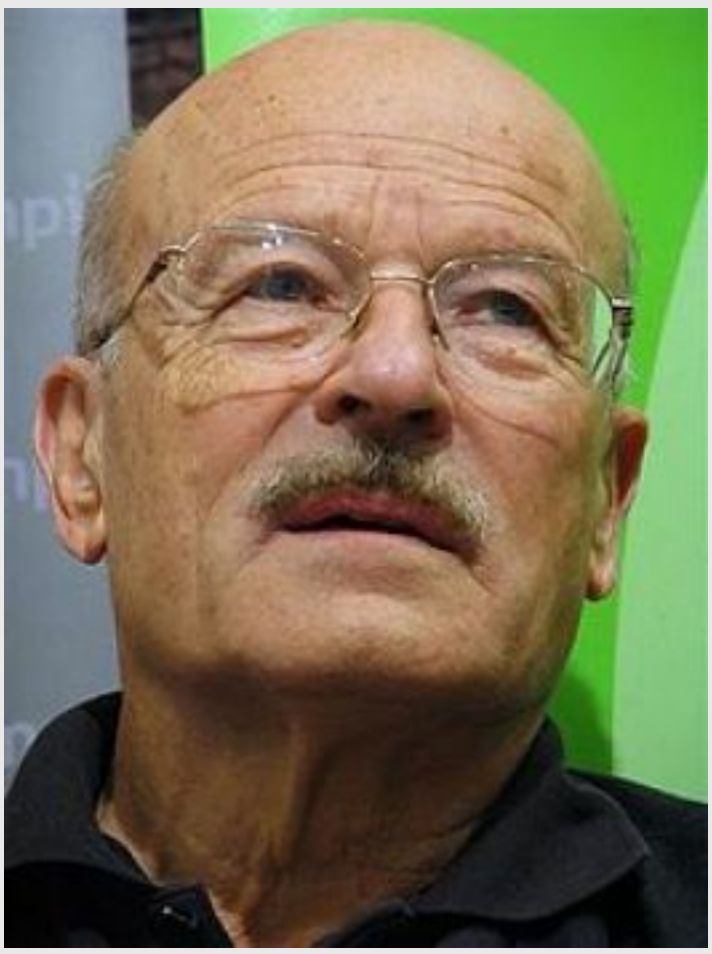
But the movie fails in at least one important, indisputable way: for whatever reason, it essentially omits the role of the Stasi in the history of the RAF. And without the Stasi, the film's story, however crowded with accurate specifics, becomes a lie.

By contrast, consider Volker Schlöndorff's 2000 movie *The Legend of Rita.* It's the story of a well-off young West German woman, Rita Vogt (based in part on RAF member **Inga Viett**), who becomes involved in a RAF-like group because, as she puts it, "Riding horses, playing tennis or guzzling down salmon doesn't interest me."

After she makes the front pages by killing a cop in France, she flees to East Germany. The Stasi's RAF links are made clear from the start, and it's the Stasi that gives her a new identity (and then yet another identity after the first one is blown).

There's no doubt what Schlöndorff's film wants us to make of Rita: she's an oddball, as perversely happy with her new life in grim, oppressive East Germany than she was unhappy as an affluent citizen of the West. In the East, she's grinning like a fool while everyone else is miserable. Ideology, clearly, is realer to her than reality. She doesn't understand their attraction to the West: "Why do so many people want to leave here?" For their part, they mock the naïvete with which she contributes to a Sandinista solidarity fund: doesn't she realize it's a government scam?

When the Wall comes down, her colleagues' newfound joy enrages her, and she lectures them about the value of what they're losing: "This here was a great attempt at a revolution!" At the end, there's no doubt about her utter foolishness. As a portrait of the RAF mentality, *The Legend of Rita* is shorter on documentary fact than *The Baader Meinhof Complex,* but scores far higher on moral clarity. Alas, one hesitates to say the same thing about its portrait of the Stasi mentality; to anyone familiar with the real Stasi, the consistent kindness of Rita's Stasi contact is beyond improbable.



Volker Schlöndorff

A third film merits mention here. *Germany in Autumn* (1978), the work of ten high-profile German directors, including Schlöndorff and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, is a bizarre mishmash of images, staged scenes, documentary footage, and impromptu monologues and arguments, all directly or indirectly about the RAF; it concludes with the October 1977 funeral of Baader, Enslin, and gang member **Jan-Carl Raspe**, at which dozens of mourners raised their

fists and screamed “Murderers!” at cops. The filmmakers obviously felt they were paying some sort of tribute to the RAF, or at least doing them the honor of tackling the issues they’d raised, but today the film serves mainly as a document in 1970s-era useful stoogery in West Germany, where for many members of the cultural elite democracy was fascism and Communism was liberation.

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Baader-Meinhof: The Stasi connection

The Baader-Meinhof Group, otherwise known as the Red Army Faction (RAF), represented itself as a small, independent group of heroes taking on not only West Germany but the entire American Empire. In fact – as has been increasingly well documented in the years since the fall of the Iron Curtain – they were far from independent.

After German reunification in 1990, massive East German archives were opened and discoveries began to be made. One of those dis-coveries, made in 1991, was that a 1981 RAF attack on a U.S. Army base, which included a failed attempt to kill U.S.

1981: bombing of Ramstein AF Base

General Frederick Kroesen, commander of American forces in Europe, was in fact a joint operation with Stasi, East Germany's brutal secret police. Stasi officers, it turned out, had trained RAF members to use anti-tank grenades and had also supplied them with the grenades. Later information showed that the Stasi also trained RAF members responsible for the 1981 bombing of the U.S. air base at Ramstein, which wounded 17 people.

These revelations severely damaged the RAF's reputation among its many West German fans. But they were just the beginning.

Bettina Röhl

As we noted yesterday, one of **Ulrike Meinhof**'s daughters, Bettina Röhl, went on to become a journalist herself – and a fierce critic of the RAF. Röhl, who was ten years old when Meinhof was captured and incarcerated, and fourteen when she committed suicide in prison, published a book in 2006 about the RAF that was sardonically entitled *Making Communism Fun.*

Among Röhl's revelations, based on archival research, was that *konkret,* the far-left magazine that was published by her father and edited by her mother, was for many years wholly financed and directly controlled by the East German government. Far from being a free voice of dissent, in other words, it was, at least in the early 1960s, an out-and-out East German propaganda organ, and Röhl's father was, in Bettina's own words, a bought-and-paid-for "useful idiot" who accepted 40,000 deutsche marks per issue for following the Honecker regime's orders. Later,

Röhl was able to document the regular transfer of funds from the East German government to the RAF.

1967: death of Benno Ohnesorg

In 2009, further archival studies forced a total rewrite of the event originally cited by the RAF as having triggered its founding. In 1967, the shooting by a police officer of university student Benno Ohnesorg at a demonstration against the visiting Shah of Iran outside the opera house in West Berlin had solidified young West German leftists' hostility toward their government – and had intensified their belief that things were better on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The 2009 revelations, however, showed that Karl-Heinz Kurras, the cop who killed Ohnesorg, was in fact a Stasi spy and a member of the East German Communist Party. There's no definitive evidence as to motive, but as at least one observer has pointed out, the likely reason for Ohnesorg's murder is that "Kurras on his own or under orders from the Stasi decided to give the left wing a matryr to mobilize them."

In 2011, the *Guardian* reported that **Horst Mahler**, one of the RAF's founders, had reportedly been a paid Stasi informant until 1970. (By the way, in what may be regarded as a reflection of the ideological confusions that marked most of the RAF's high-profile members, Mahler later became a neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier.)

Over the years, the picture has come ever more sharply into focus – and the role of the Stasi in the story of RAF has loomed larger and larger. It was, for example, the Stasi that smuggled RAF leaders **Gudrun Ensslin** and **Andreas Baader** back into West Berlin after they'd spent

Horst Mahler

some time laying low in France and Italy, waiting for things to cool down back home.

The Stasi's involvement grew with the rise of the so-called second and third generation of the RAF, who came to the fore after the first generation were sent to prison (and the top names committed suicide). Thanks to Stasi training, this new wave of RAF members were able to carry out more professional-quality acts of terrorism. Many of these later RAF members eventually retired in East Germany, where they were given new identities and rewarded with lifestyles that ordinary East Germans could only dream about – only to be arrested, tried, and imprisoned after German reunification.

A wanted poster showing RAF members

In short, it's clear by now that the RAF was, when you come right down to it, a Stasi operation. But this aspect of the RAF story is still often overlooked – for example, in the 2008 German movie *The Baader Meinhof Complex.* We'll get around to the movie tomorrow.