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The deadly stoogery of Baader-Meinhof

It was a blast from the past. And boy, did these people know about blasts.

“Three veteran members of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, Germany’s most notorious homegrown terrorist organisation,” [reported](#) Justin Huggler in the *Telegraph* last May, “may have emerged from years in hiding to execute a series of armed robberies.” These crooks, who walked off with several hundred thousands of dollars, were part of the gang’s “third generation,” which had been notorious for act of terrorism back in the 1980s and 90s.



The RAF's official logo

How to sum up the long, eventful story of the Baader-Meinhof Gang (a.k.a. Baader-Meinhof Group), whose large cast of characters dominated headlines in 1970s West Germany with their seemingly random and meaningless acts of violence? Known by the names of two of its founders, **Andreas Baader** and **Ulrike Meinhof**, it actually called itself the Red Army Faction (RAF). Its members, most of them university students or former university students who had grown up in the years immediately

following World War II, were young and angry. And extremely confused. For them, the Bonn government was little more than a continuation of the Nazi regime, and a tool of America – which, in their view, had inherited the Nazis' role as the major worldwide force of fascist imperialism.

One might ask how they managed not to recognize the rather significant difference between Hitler's Germany and the West Germany in which they lived. One might further ask how a group of people who lived right next door to the Soviet bloc were so fiercely exercised over America's supposedly imperial actions in far-flung places like Vietnam and Chile while showing nothing but fondness for the Moscow regime that subjugated Eastern Europe, ran the Gulag, and had built the wall around West Berlin, where many of them lived and operated.

But then, any American who encountered political-minded West German university students in those days can attest to the fierce anti-establishment and anti-American attitudes that ran rampant among them. Not all of them sympathized with the USSR, but even those who did not seemed to view it almost as an implacable fact of nature and appeared to see no point in criticizing its philosophy and policies.

As writer Michael Burleigh has [put it](#), they were a generation of “spoiled middle-class kids [who] revolted against parents who had arduously rebuilt the country from wartime rubble” – and the RAF was “the lethal face of [that] radical generation.” (Indeed, Stefan Aust noted in his 1985 history *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* that while violent New Left radicals such as the Weather Underground were never popular in the U.S., fully a quarter of West Germans under forty actually felt sympathy for the Baader-Meinhof Group, with one out of ten saying they'd hide a member of the group from the police.)



Andreas Baader



Ulrike Meinhof

But if RAF were their generation's "lethal face," they were hardly disciplined. Far from being worthy of the name "army" – theoretically coherent, strategically focused, tactically organized – the first generation of RAF members differed from the majority of their West German atermates largely by being bigger slob, bigger screw-ups, and bigger screwballs: they lived, in Burleigh's account, "a life of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll amid overflowing ashtrays, posters and fetid sheets."

RAF co-founder **Gudrun Ensslin**, notes Burleigh, was "a dope-smoking anti-nuclear protester with serial boyfriends who had given away an illegitimate child for adoption" and who "had

already starred in a soft porn movie when she fell under the spell of Andreas Baader." As for Baader, he'd "been thrown out of school and failed at a succession of jobs; he had eked out a living as a male model, supplemented by robbing customers in the lavatories of gay bars and stealing cars. Like Ensslin, he too had an illegitimate daughter – and was also a drug-fuelled fantasist."



Gudrun Ensslin

More than one observer has **dismissed** them as "psychopaths." Christopher Hitchens **wrote** in 2009 that he'd been convinced since the late 1970s "that the Baader Meinhof phenomenon actually was a form of psychosis." A principal recruiting



Christopher Hitchens

ground for the RAF, he noted, “was an institution at the University of Heidelberg called the Sozialistisches Patienten Kollektiv, or Socialist Patients Collective, an outfit that sought to persuade the pitifully insane that they needed no treatment save social revolution.” When the RAF ran low on members and needed to replenish its

numbers, it proselytized at the SPK.

In any event, the RAF unequivocally admired the Communist world. If West Germany was the Third Reich’s successor state, East Germany preserved the ideals of the anti-fascist forces, led by Moscow, that had defeated it. They loved Mao. They identified with Che Guevara. Like many members of the New Left throughout Western Europe and North America, they were steeped in the writings of the Frankfurt school and other Marxists, devouring, and frequently consulting and quoting, writers like Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and German-American theoretician Herbert Marcuse (1929–1979).



Che: a role model

But theory wasn’t enough for the RAF. Above all, they were devoted to translating theory into action. More about that action tomorrow.