



THE END OF THE BAADER MEINHOF GROUP THE LONG GOODBYE OF THE RAF BETWEEN 1977 AND 1998

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AN END AFTER THIRTY YEARS

From 1970 until 1998, the Federal Republic of Germany was confronted by a left-wing terrorist organization that called itself the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF, Red Army Faction) and was referred to by others as the Baader Meinhof Group. Members of this organization performed dozens of attacks, many of them deadly, targeting mainly American soldiers, stationed on German soil, and representatives of Germany's business and political elites, but also police officers, judges and prosecutors. In total 34 people lost their lives at the hands of members of the RAF and many more were wounded, some of them maimed for life. 16 terrorists lost their lives, too, seven of them in prison, mostly by suicides, and most of the others in shoot-outs with the police.

For a terrorist organization, the Baader Meinhof Group lasted a relatively long time: nearly thirty years. It by far outlived similar terrorist groups of the radical left in Germany that were also founded in the early 1970s, like the Bewegung 2. Juni (Movement 2 June) or the Revolutionäre Zellen (Revolutionary Cells). Compared to other social-revolutionary groups in Western countries like the American Weatherman Underground Organization, France's Action Directe (Direct Action) or Italy's Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) the RAF as an organization was a survivor. At different moments in time, it seemed beaten, but then again it managed a successful resurrection. Nevertheless, with hindsight it is clear that somewhere in the late 1980s the final stages of the RAF's history set in. About a decade of complicated maneuvering by state officials, politicians of different colors, and active cells, imprisoned members, lawyers, supporters and sympathizers of the RAF followed. Opposition to an arrangement that would end the confrontation was strong on both sides of the conflict and



mediators were often scorned by their peers. Ultimately, on 20 April 1998, in its last official declaration, the RAF announced its disbandment.

On the following pages I will attempt to answer the question how this end of the RAF came about. I will begin with some introductory remarks about the RAF, explaining its main characteristics as well as the main developments in its history. After this, I will give an overview of the important steps taken on the road to the final declaration of 1998 and also identify the most important protagonists of this story. Who were the most important advocates of reconciliation between the opposing parties and who were the most important opponents of the rapprochement? At the end, I will present a short reflection on the developments that led to the end of the Baader Meinhof Group and point at some elements that might be of interest for current attempts to end terrorism in other countries, such as Spain.

BAADER MEINHOF OR RAF?

The Baader Meinhof Group was a left-wing revolutionary urban guerrilla group that came into existence in 1970 when the protest movement of the late 1960s was in the process of disintegrating into various parties, groups, and tendencies. A very small minority among the activists of the protest movement in decline chose to begin an armed struggle with the state. They modeled themselves after the Afro-American Black Panthers (using a leaping black panther as a symbol in its first publication) and the Tupamaros of Uruguay. Strategic concepts were borrowed from Latin American revolutionaries like Ernesto “Che” Guevara, according to whom small armed groups would be able to spark a revolution with exemplary violence, and Carlos Marighela, a Brazilian revolutionary who had written a treatise on the practical side of being an urban guerrilla.

The Baader Meinhof Group was one of not even a handful of collectives that opted for the strategy of continuing the struggle for a revolution in West Germany by taking up arms. Of these collectives the Baader Meinhof Group



immediately attracted most attention. This had several reasons. First, its membership included some of the most prominent people of the protest movement: the lawyer Horst Mahler, who had defended many protesters, the journalist Ulrike Meinhof, whose critical columns in the left-wing periodical *Konkret* had earned her lots of respect among Germans of radical and liberal persuasion, and the love couple Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, two radicals who had earlier been convicted of arson because in 1968 they had lain fire to two department stores in the city of Frankfurt. Ensslin, who was more of an intellectual and organizer, idolized the action-oriented militant Baader. Secondly, the Baader Meinhof group started with an especially spectacular action: the armed liberation of Andreas Baader from imprisonment on 14 May 1970. Immediately, they attracted widespread attention of the media and of state authorities and from that moment on, for most of the following years, they outshone all other left-wing terrorist groups. This had also to do with a third factor: more than other armed groups the Baader Meinhof Group tried to win the hearts and minds of others on the radical left by publishing declarations and semi intellectual brochures, like the elaborate and lengthy essays it published in 1971: *The Urban Guerrilla Concept* and *About the Armed Struggle in Western Europe*. Finally, more than the other groups the Baader Meinhof group claimed to be the vanguard of the whole milieu of radical left-wing organizations, action committees, projects et cetera in West Germany, and it emphatically demanded their solidarity and support.

Baader Meinhof Group was the name the media invented for the organization in 1970, focusing on the one who was liberated, Baader, and the one who was most famous in the group, Meinhof. Somewhere in the first months of its existence the group itself chose as its name “RAF,” meaning Rote Armee Fraktion (Red Army Faction). It thus declared itself to be a part of a growing revolutionary world army, consisting mainly of the large liberation movements in the Third World, that were fighting oppression by corrupt regimes from within their nations and outside imperialism of the US and other Western countries and to a far smaller extent of some minor groups of Western revolutionaries, such as the RAF, fighting the imperialist beast from within. In Germany, this name RAF had an ominous ring to it, because it brought back horrific memories



of the bombing of German cities by the Royal Air Force during World War II. For at least two reasons this self-given name is to be preferred over the more common term Baader Meinhof Group. First, as I already hinted at above, in reality the actual core of the group consisted not of Baader and Meinhof, but of the inseparable Baader and Ensslin. Secondly, the use of Baader Meinhof tends to blind out the fact that the RAF outlived Meinhof and Baader, who died in 1976 and 1977 respectively, for more than twenty years.

A HISTORY OF THREE GENERATIONS

A concise overview of the RAF's history will make that point very clear. Historians have reached agreement on dividing this in three generations. The first, founding generation had its rise and fall in the relatively short time span of two years, 1970-1972. Initially, it concentrated on the build-up of an internal group infrastructure and all kinds of logistical affairs, including bank robberies, and on the development of a terrorist ideology and the corresponding propaganda. Already at this stage, there were some arrests (e.g. in late 1970 of Mahler) and incidental shoot-outs with the police took place, in which both sides were confronted with the first fatalities. The West German government reacted with a build-up of the security forces. In fact, politics and media created an atmosphere of moral panic that was disproportionate to what was actually taking place. In May 1972, however, the RAF launched its first campaign of political violence: six bombing attacks, spread out over a few weeks, of which two were directed against American military personnel in Germany and the others directed at the perceived enemies of the left within German society: the police, the judiciary, and the right-wing tabloid press. The attacks left four American soldiers dead and about seventy people wounded. Immediately thereafter, in June 1972, the police succeeded in arresting all the main members of the RAF, including Baader, Ensslin and Meinhof. It seemed that the RAF had come to an end. Its members faced lengthy trials and even lengthier prison terms.



In the crucial period that followed, 1972-1977, events took an unexpected turn. Instead of passively undergoing their time in custody, most members of the RAF (excluding Mahler who left the organization) started a prison struggle, involving collective hunger strikes, that was meant to create a solidarity campaign within the left-wing radical milieu and to attract new recruits. This solidarity campaign was rooted in a myth of RAF victimhood, according to which the imprisoned members of the RAF were tortured and even killed by the state. From 1973, in big cities and university towns, solidarity committees were created, often initiated by RAF lawyers. After the third hunger strike had caused the death of a RAF member on 9 November 1974, a wave of moral outrage ran through the radical left. In order to force the German government to release the prisoners, a handful of solidarity committee members started organizing a second generation of terrorist cells. The first armed liberation attempt was directed against the West German embassy in Stockholm, but its occupation on 24 April 1975 ended in an uncontrolled detonation of explosives, instantly killing one terrorist and deadly injuring another. Before, the RAF commando had already killed two German diplomats.

Only weeks after this gruesome event, a tumultuous trial against the top members of the RAF began. It took place in a high security courthouse, which was built especially for this case, next to the prison of Stuttgart-Stammheim, where Baader, Ensslin, Meinhof and another important member, Jan-Carl Raspe, shared a ward. The trial lasted almost two years, from May 1975 until April 1977, and saw many dramatic events, among them the sending-off of the presiding judge early 1977. On 9 May 1976, Ulrike Meinhof committed suicide, creating a new wave of protests throughout West Germany. At 7 April 1977, just weeks before the verdict would be read (life sentences for all three remaining RAF leaders), the second generation started another campaign of violence with the killing of the highest Federal Public Prosecutor and two companions. The "Offensive 77," which was meant to force the Federal government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to release the newly convicted top members of the RAF, continued in the following months with the murder of an important banker and a failed assault with a multiple rocket launcher on the federal prosecutor's office building. The campaign drove West German society to the brink of a major



social and political crisis during the so-called “German autumn” of September-October 1977 when first another German business leader was kidnapped (four security men were gunned down) and then a tourist plane was hijacked by Palestine terrorist comrades of the RAF. It ended 18-19 October 1977 with the liberation of the abducted plane on the airport of Mogadishu, Somalia, by German GSG9-special forces, the collective suicides of Baader, Ensslin and Raspe in their Stammheim prison cells and the murder of the kidnapped businessman. Again, now it had lost its leaders, it seemed the RAF had come to an end.

If so, it proved to be a long goodbye, lasting more than twenty years. Despite new arrests and deadly shoot-outs with the police, the second generation of the RAF succeeded in re-structuring and even took over another left-wing terrorist group, which made it possible to rob a number of banks and perform a few attacks on NATO related targets in 1979 and 1981. Remarkably, in 1980, ten terrorists took hiding in communist East Germany – ten years later, in the summer of 1990, after the German Democratic Republic had become truly democratic, they would be arrested and extradited to West Germany. In the meantime, after the arrests in 1982 of a number of prominent second generation RAF members like Brigitte Mohnhaupt and Christian Klar, a new, third generation emerged, about which the police and historians still do not know much about. The new RAF cells were the first since 1977 to reformulate RAF strategy, publishing a new strategy paper and entering in a short-lived international alliance with the Action Directe. During the 1980s, they performed several attacks on American military personnel and on German executives and officials related to the defense industry and the foreign office, killing several people. In 1989 and 1991 the last targeted killings took place, taking the lives of a financial business leader and a financial administrator. After this, separated by long pauses, steps towards the final dissolution followed. On 10 April 1992 the RAF announced a unilateral armistice, in 1993 it performed its last, highly symbolical bombing, causing no physical harm but destroying a nearly operative new prison facility (damages to the amount of 60 million Euros). Five years later, as stated above, the RAF announced its disbandment: in future, its



members would seek other ways to promote social transformation, its remaining members proclaimed.

THE SUPPORT BASE: SOLIDARITY AND CRITICISM

For an explanation of how this end came about, it is important to discern between the three parties involved: 1) the RAF itself, consisting of the underground cells, called “illegals” in RAF-jargon, and the prisoners; 2) the RAF’s societal support base, situated within Germany’s left-wing radical milieu; and 3) the state, consisting of politicians and officials of the federal government in Bonn and the state governments (especially of the states where RAF members were imprisoned). I think, it is important to take this three-party-approach to terrorism crises in general and to the RAF period in Germany in particular, because the individuals and groups within this “societal surround” of the terrorists play a crucial role. On the one hand they identify with the terrorists up to a certain degree and share part of their aspirations. Therefore they are an essential resource not only of new recruits but also of justifications of the terrorists’ struggle, often legitimizing their program of death and destruction. On the other hand, however, they have their own outlook on society, their own political programs to pursue, and they more often than not are ill at ease with the terrorist strategy of their violent comrades. On pragmatic or moral grounds many of them object to terrorism; in fact, an (incremental) increase of the number of objectors within the terrorists’ support base has contributed to the end of terrorism crises in more than one case.

What is to be said about the RAF, I already mentioned in the short outline of its history. The support base merits some more attention, though. The RAF emerged from the protest movement of the late 1960s and it profited enormously of the fact that the emotional and ideological ties that had held this movement together remained a very powerful force within the left-wing radical milieu of the 1970s and 1980s. In spite of the fact that this radical milieu was a very heterogeneous mix of parties, action committees, projects, initiatives et cetera, which pursued various, often antagonist creeds, reaching from orthodox



and less orthodox communism, via “new left” neo-Marxism to anarchism and libertarianism, the individuals and groups within it still considered themselves to be part of an imagined political community, simply referred to as “die Linke” (the left). They were still bound together by a profound animosity towards the state, and by the desire to revolutionize society in order to get rid of capitalist and imperialist exploitation. It was considered a matter of course that the RAF and the other militant or terrorist groups also belonged to this community and culture of the left.

Within this milieu, at its beginning, there was considerable sympathy for the RAF. Although many had doubts about the wisdom of its strategy, they felt a strong need to support these comrades who were by now on the run for the police. The bombings of 1972 caused some to turn away, but the identity most radicals felt with the RAF remained strong enough for the prisoners to be able to set up a relatively successful campaign of support and solidarity, which also created a breeding ground for the second generation. Already from 1975-1976, criticism of the RAF by radical intellectuals and groups that had formerly been close to it grew stronger, for several reasons, among them the RAF’s arrogance and one-sided militaristic view of the revolution. Then, during the “German Autumn” of 1977 disgust of terroristic violence lead most of the prominent radicals to distance themselves from the RAF. In contrast, many ordinary radical activists remained emotionally attached to the cause of the RAF, mainly because of the powerful myth that the suicides by Baader, Ensslin, Meinhof and others had in fact been murders by the state. Nevertheless, as a recruiting base the radical left milieu became very thin after 1977.

In the background, from the mid 1970s onwards, many on the radical left had switched their course: away from all-out revolution to more reformist politics, away from militant protest to democratic participatory single issue activism based on broad, grass roots coalition movements. Gradually, they even turned around to parliamentary politics: in 1980 the party of the Grüne (Greens) was founded, more or less representing the post-1960s protest milieu. Important was also the founding of a daily newspaper for the radical left, *die tageszeitung* or *taz*, which also served as a forum for debate. This integration into “normal”



politics did not involve everybody on the radical left. During the 1980s and the campaigns around some environmental issues there was an upsurge in militant protest from so-called “Autonome,” and it might well be that some third generation RAF cells have been recruited from these groups.

In between, in 1984-1985, during the first campaign of violence of the third generation of the RAF, parallel to RAF court cases in Düsseldorf and Stuttgart and to a ninth collective hunger strike of RAF prisoners, for a while there seemed to be an upsurge in enthusiasm on Germany’s radical left for their terrorist comrades. Left-wing militants performed 36 arson and small bomb attacks all-over Germany to express support for the RAF hunger strikers. At more than 120 meetings radicals discussed the politics of the RAF. Shortly thereafter, however, the third generation was confronted with large-scale criticism from the radical left after it had murdered an American GI, Edward Pimental, on 7 August 1985, with the sole purpose to obtain his ID. Later on that same day, this ID gave them entrance to an American military compound, at which they exploded a bomb that killed two other American soldiers. Many on the left found it far too cynical that the RAF had killed this simple GI for such instrumental reasons – for them this was no longer in accordance with left-wing morality. In the light of these comments, after several months, the RAF considered it necessary to commit self-criticism. Half a year later, from 31 January to 4 February 1986, friends of the RAF organized a large conference at which they hope to find a new base for the RAF within the radical left-wing milieu, especially among the so-called “Autonome” scene, which the police at the time estimated at about 2000 militants. Because of the Pimental murder, the RAF did not really succeed with the conference. Its support base remained confined to about 200 direct supporters and may be 2000 additional sympathizers.

The murder of the German diplomat Gerold von Braunmühl on 10 October 1986 led to renewed criticism. The *taz* printed an open letter of the five (!) brothers of this middle-rank diplomat on its front page, in which they demanded the RAF to explain why it had killed their brother. This letter triggered a fierce debate on the pages of the paper in the following weeks. Not all people who reacted to the von



Braunmühls condemned the murder, but many did, on several grounds. Some brought forth moral reasons to condemn violence against people, others thought it inopportune to kill somebody like von Braunmühl, a relatively minor figure, and others feared that such an act would trigger repressive measures of the state against the wider radical left-wing milieu, making political struggle harder for them. After this, it remained quiet for a while, until, in 1989, the RAF prisoners started a tenth, and last, collective hunger strike. This was meant as a peaceful protest to force the state to rethink and moderate its harsh stance towards the prisoners. Their main demand was that they wanted to be brought together as one group in a single prison. This time, there was quite a lot of solidarity among left-wing radicals, expressing their support in various protest activities, but there were hardly any militant actions accompanying these protests.

THE STATE: MUCH LEGALISM, SOME PRAGMATISM

Already in the late 1970s, in recognition of the fact that the prison struggle had become the main reason for the continuation of the RAF, some radicals and left-wing intellectuals introduced the idea of an “amnesty” for RAF members, as a way to facilitate their re-integration in society and thereby ending the terrorism crisis. Former RZ-terrorist Hans Joachim Klein and Frankfurt activist and former Paris student leader Daniel Cohn- Bendit published an according plea in a book about Klein’s farewell to terrorism that appeared at the end of 1979. On 4 January 1984 the left-wing sociologist Wolfgang Pohrt published a plea for an “Amnesty campaign” in the *taz*: he hoped that all left-leaning Germans would support the idea to grant freedom of persecution in exchange to which the RAF would end its armed struggle. At the end of the month two RAF members contributed to this debate from their prison cells with articles in which they distanced themselves from the armed struggle and supported the amnesty campaign. The reactions were generally negative: most RAF supporters felt that asking for amnesty would equal an admission of defeat and only a handful of politicians were willing to take the electoral risk of defending an amnesty for convicted terrorists. One of these was speaker for the Grüne political party,



Antje Vollmer, a parliamentarian with a theologian background. Between 1987 and 1990, she started several initiatives to promote the idea of an amnesty. “Society has to take the first step,” was the title of the first amnesty initiative she undertook together with some intellectuals. Although these initiatives led to lengthy debates in the media and in parliament, opposition to an amnesty or to any kind of softening of the official stance towards the RAF remained too strong.

The West German state had always taken on a relatively harsh, uncompromising attitude towards left-wing terrorist groups. With the exception of one early case in 1975 it had never entered in serious negotiations with them, but had tried to regard dealing with them strictly as business for the police and the judiciary. The government kept imprisoned members of the RAF and other groups on a very short lease; especially those who refused to denounce terrorism were treated rather harshly, with some of them held in solitary confinement for long periods of time. In the meantime counter-terrorist legislation was stepped-up, including the scrutinizing of the broad radical left-wing milieu, which was considered to be a breeding ground of terrorism. Some measures were rather indiscriminate and in fact illiberal, incriminating even critical debate about the armed struggle in left-wing periodicals, and as such they were counter-productive.

After 1977, however, the ruling coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals changed their course towards a deliberate attempt to deescalate the confrontation with left-wing terrorism. A new Federal Minister of Justice, Gerhart Baum, of the Free Liberal Party (FDP), moderated some anti-terrorist policies, and domesticated some of the elements of the security apparatus that had become too independent. Baum also started a large social-science research project into the root causes of terrorism that would result in five impressive books, published between 1981 and 1984 as the series *Analysen zum Terrorismus*, fostering more thoughtful approaches to political radicalism. Apart from that, he started with some public gestures of reconciliation, staging a widely publicized discussion with the single surviving founding member of RAF, Horst Mahler, who was nearing the end of his prison term. This moderation was,



however, held in check by a large measure of legalism that ruled most of the actual, practical dealings with RAF members in courtrooms and prisons. Although the trials were not that politically charged-up as they had been during the 1970s, in the 1980s, too, trials against RAF members remained contested affairs and sentences remained harsh, which meant that even sole membership of the RAF would lead to convictions of at least 15 years imprisonment. And circumstances in prison also remained grim; because the RAF was considered highly active and its members were generally considered as very dangerous, the authorities applied maximum security facilities to keep them in check.

During the tenth hunger strike, early 1989, for the first time, state security officials and politicians, among them State Secretary of the Federal Justice Department, Klaus Kinkel (also a member of the FDP), suggested a compromise with the hunger strikers. Why not put the RAF prisoners together in small groups, so as to minimize their complaints about being in solitary confinement? In 1989, it proved to be too early for these ideas: conservative politicians at the federal level and more importantly, the conservative-led governments of several states in Germany that were responsible for the prisons where most of the RAF members were held vehemently opposed the idea of a compromise. Still, there was one achievement: a few days after Kinkel visited some RAF prisoners, the collective hunger strike ended, and in the next weeks the state made some minor concessions to the prisoners. All in all, in the eyes of the RAF these changes did not suffice, and in reaction to the over-all lack of willingness among the political elite to break the deadlock, the RAF “illegals” started another campaign of violence at the end of 1989, killing an important banker on 30 November 1989 and an important civil servant on 1 April 1991 (its last premeditated murder).

In the meantime, breathtaking changes occurred in international politics. The slow end of the Cold War from the late 1980s, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989-1991, and especially the German reunification in 1990 added enormously to the doubts and uncertainty among the left about the substance of their views and the future of their politics. This also meant a further blow to the



possibilities of the active RAF cells to continue the armed struggle and undermined even more the idea that their strategy made any sense. The armed struggle of the RAF had always profited and gained legitimacy from the worldwide confrontation between the US led capitalist bloc of liberal democracies and their sometimes not so liberal allies and the Soviet led communist bloc. The RAF had even enjoyed practical support, mainly by the GDR. Now it was all falling away and the “illegals” as well as their support base began to question the logics of continuing the fight.

One of the first to understand this might well have been the FDP-leader Klaus Kinkel. Now acting as Federal Minister of Justice, on 6 January 1992, Kinkel held a speech at a party conference, in which he mentioned the need for “reconciliation” between the RAF and the state. The idea was to release those RAF prisoners who had at least spent two thirds of their sentences in prison, and in some way or the other had signaled that they would not take up arms again against the state. Like before, there was much criticism from conservative politicians, but for the first time this new initiative was supported, behind the scenes, by various officials of several of Germany’s security services as well as by Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the parliamentary leader of the Christian Democrats in the Bundestag. The other side signaled its support, too. Three months after Kinkel’s initiative, on 10 April 1992, the “illegals” declared a unilateral armistice, meant to grant the minister the maneuvering space he needed to realize his plans. A few weeks later, on behalf of the prisoners, the longest serving RAF member Irmgard Möller confirmed in an interview that they were in agreement with this declaration by the “illegals.” It was a watershed in the history of the RAF. In August 1992 in a position paper the “illegals” developed a self-critical evaluation of its history, and another outlook on its future. As a demonstration of its unflinching capability to wreak havoc, on 27 March 1993, the RAF performed a final act of terrorism: the demolition of the prison building already mentioned above, with which it also meant to encourage Germany’s political establishment to stick to its slow softening of policy towards the RAF prisoners.



During the summer of 1993, all political attention went to a scandal following a fatal shoot-out between a RAF member and several policemen at a railway station in the northern part of Germany. More important for the question of how the RAF came to its end was, however, that late 1993, Brigitte Mohnhaupt, a leading RAF terrorist who had a member of both the first and the second generations, made public a conflict among the imprisoned RAF members that had been smoldering for some time by declaring that three prisoners were no longer part of the RAF. These three, Karlheinz Dellwo, Lutz Taufer and Knut Folkerts, had all been convicted to life sentences for terrorist murders in the 1970s, had been living together for several years on a single ward of Celle penitentiary and had enjoyed lengthy discussions among one another. After Kinkel's initiative of early 1992, they had started talks with government officials, mediated by a RAF lawyer who had become a Grüne politician. Already at the end of October 1992, on behalf of six other RAF members, Dellwo had declared that they would in future abstain from the armed struggle. In stark contrast to the official RAF line, which called for "Freedom for all RAF prisoners," they only demanded their gradual release. Mohnhaupt and other prisoners considered this an act of betrayal and tried to mobilize militant opinion outside of the prisons against Dellwo and his comrades. Interestingly, this plot was not very successful: many on the radical left supported Dellwo and the other dissidents and, remarkably, even the "illegals" refused to take sides. Instead, in open letters, dated 2 November 1993 and 6 March 1994, they wrote of a break with history, signaling measured support for Dellwo and his companions.

In the years to come, starting in 1994, the government did as it had promised. According to German law and a ruling of the Federal Constitutional Court from the early 1980s, even prisoners serving life-time sentences have a right to a second chance on certain conditions (after at least 15 years). On the basis of this, many imprisoned RAF members applied for early release to special parole boards and government officials supported many of these applications. As a result, one after the other, RAF members were released who had served large portions of their sentences and were considered to have sworn off violent politics. Apart from this, the Federal President also pardoned several RAF prisoners, on grounds of illness or because they had been cooperating with the



authorities. These releases certainly contributed to the final moment in RAF history: on 20 April 1998 the RAF made public its “dissolution” as an organization with a short statement, that begin with this reflection on its past. “Almost 28 years ago, the RAF emerged out of a liberation action: today we end this project. The urban guerrilla in the form of the RAF now is history.”

Reactions to the statement of disbandment were relatively reserved, because the RAF had already slowly faded from the public mind. More and more, during the 1990s, historians and the like had taken on the task to write its history, while at the same time RAF members released from prison started to talk about their past or write autobiographies of varying degrees of truthfulness and earnestness. Reversing the trend, the 9/11 attacks contributed to a boom in public and academic interest in RAF history during the first decade of the new century, with peaks in years when the 1977 “German Autumn” had its “jubilees” (2002 and 2007). An exhibition of paintings and other works of art at the Berlin KunstWerke arts center in 2005 caused a public outrage, as did the release of some of the last RAF prisoners around 2007 (in 2010 only one RAF member remains imprisoned). In these rows, more than before, victims of the RAF entered public debate and for the first time they succeeded in influencing political and media opinion to some degree. The decision of the German judiciary to prosecute a former RAF member, Verena Becker, for the murder in 1977 of the highest Federal Public Prosecutor even seems to have been wrested from it by his son and his ongoing campaigning to find out the truth about his father’s death. Becker’s new trial began in November 2010 and seemed a leap back in time, because it was held in the same courthouse in Stuttgart-Stammheim that has been the scene of the big trial against the RAF leadership during the 1970s. Still, compared to some other countries, the victims of terrorism in Germany seem to have only little influence and they still lack any kind of formal organization which could muster public funding.



LESSONS FROM BAADER MEINHOF HISTORY?

Of course, one always has to very careful to draw lessons from history: what happened at a certain time and place may be compared but never equated with events elsewhere and at different moments. Moreover, history is not a simple set of facts, because these are always open to interpretation, and the same applies to historical lessons. Therefore, I will be very modest in this short paragraph that concludes my reflections on the end of the RAF and mention only four elements to the story that might be of some value for policymakers who are currently confronted with terrorism. The first observation is that RAF history learns that imprisonment might not be the end of the fight with terrorists, but that it might be a new start. After they landed in prison, the first generation leaders of the RAF were successful in mobilizing support and solidarity and winning new recruits among the radical left. The state proved unable to counter the myth of victimhood of the RAF that was spread throughout the left on which this solidarity campaign rested, partly because the government's harsh policies towards Germany's left-wing radical milieu in reaction to terrorism lend new credibility to the RAF's propaganda.

This connects to the second "lesson" that deals with counter-terrorist policies in a more direct way. It strikes me as one of the hardest but at the same time most important tasks of policymakers who are facing a terrorist threat that they have to find the right balance between legalism and pragmatism. In Germany, which has an extremely legalist culture anyway, the strict interpretation of the law and the fierce application of rules dominated counter-terrorist policies for quite a long time. Not only was the sentencing against RAF members very severe, but conditions in prison were also rather harsh. By creating unfavorable prison circumstances and using high security facilities such as the Stammheim courthouse that was especially built for the RAF, the state created the impression that it entered in a political fight with the RAF. Not only did this elevate the RAF's prestige, especially on the radical left, but it also damaged the authority of the state, because it did not display the even-handedness and sovereignty modern citizens have the right to expect of it.



The fact that state officials became too deeply involved in the struggle with the RAF in an emotional sense also blinded them for the many differences between the left-wing radical milieu and the terrorist cells of the RAF, and between the multitude of groups and individuals within this milieu. This is a third instructive element of RAF history: during terrorism crises, policymakers tend to develop a very single-minded, security driven view on the terrorists' support base, regarding it only as a recruiting ground and resource of justifications and disregarding the many instances in which groups around terrorists will (openly or behind closed doors) criticize violent politics and pursue their own political agendas. Instead of leaving this internal exchange of ideas within the societal surround of terrorists alone (or may be trying to foster disagreement), policymakers tend to scrutinize the groups and individuals belonging to it and criminalize discussions about violence, even up to the point that anti-terrorist arguments are suppressed by the state.

A final "lesson" concerns the fact that the confrontation between the RAF and the German state for such a long time was little else than a senseless but very deadly repetition of terrorist and counter-terrorist strikes. For years, it seemed impossible to break this deadlock and end the confrontation until sensible politicians, especially Baum and Kinkel, and – in the background – officials of Germany's secret services began to break ground for a new, more subtle and soft approach. Only after Kinkel had spoken about reconciliation, the "illegals" declared a cease-fire and some of the prisoners were willing to admit defeat and enter into negotiations. The ensuing arguments among the prisoners, which must have surprised some politicians, also weakened the RAF's prestige and willingness to continue the armed struggle. Of course, it is understandable that politicians and policymakers are hesitant to make conciliatory gestures towards terrorist organizations. There are moral objections against such steps and there are political risks involved. Still, the German situation shows that little steps by the state might be needed to create the fluidity and dynamics that eventually will break the stalemate situation and end terrorism.



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