



## The “Baader-Meinhof” Group A Distorted Model of Repugnant Violence

Ignacio Gutiérrez de Terán Gómez-Benita

Professor of Contemporary Arabic and Islamic Studies, Autonomous University of Madrid

The Red Army Faction, or the "Baader-Meinhof Group," emerged from the womb of the popular protest groups that erupted in the Federal Republic of Germany in the late sixties of the last century. It was influenced by the slogans shouted during various student and labor uprisings in several European countries, including the May 1968 events in France. However, the organization's first step occurred in May 1970 when Andreas Baader was smuggled out of prison with the help of journalist Ulrike Meinhof, resulting in their names becoming the label for the group in media, overshadowing its official name.

Although the actual history of the group began with Andreas Baader's encounter with the young Ulrike Meinhof, their familial, social, and cultural origins were vastly different and contradictory. Baader, born in Munich in 1943, belonged to a poor family. He lost his father on the Russian front in the last years of World War II. His childhood and adolescence were marked by recklessness, truancy from school, and loitering in the streets. He had a penchant for stealing cars and motorcycles with friends, engaging in races for amusement, and perhaps he was influenced by leftist ideas and had a class consciousness without turning into a professional criminal.

On the other hand, Ulrike Meinhof was the daughter of a wealthy family, rooted in a religious background connected to the Lutheran Protestant denomination. Her father was an art historian, and her mother was a teacher. She joined peaceful left-wing movements early on to write leftist publications due to her media studies. In one of these movements, she met Klaus Rainer, whom she married and had twin boys with. However, she separated from him, seemingly due to her almost complete commitment to her political activities.

## The Prevailing Situation

The political and social environment prevailing in Germany during the late sixties and early seventies of the last century paved the way for the emergence of numerous ideological movements and groups. The state witnessed remarkable economic growth after the material and population exhaustion caused by World War II. Moreover, the division of the country into the western and eastern parts contributed to the transformation of some German youths in the west into left-leaning currents opposed to Europe's subjugation to US policies.

Undoubtedly, the relationships of some German politicians in the western part with the Nazi regime that held power in the thirties, leading the country to destruction in World War II, and the adoption of extreme right-wing patterns and visions by some others, aroused the indignation of those currents dissatisfied with widening this division. This was especially pronounced after the Communist authorities began erecting the dividing wall between the eastern and western parts of Berlin.

The political elitist background in the Federal Republic of Germany proved to be a real obstacle, particularly as the rulers of the fifties and sixties enacted exceptional laws to prevent protests and punish public sector employees expressing political ideas that could be described as anti-Federal. The police and the army exhibited inappropriate behavior in dealing with protesters on the main streets and squares, especially when they felt that these protesters showed sympathy to communist ideas and indirectly supported the Moscow-friendly government in the eastern part.

Among the events that fueled the anti-central government movements was the killing of several students in late sixties in protests, at the hands of police officers or members of right-wing extremist groups openly sympathetic to the defunct Nazi regime. This exacerbated the danger of the tense political situation.

Although this social boiling point led to the downfall of the central government in the 1969 elections and the rise of the Social Democratic Party under the famous politician Willy Brandt's leadership, the political scene continued to suffer from constant setbacks. This was due to the new government's imposition of laws that placed strict restrictions on individual and public freedoms, ostensibly to prevent the country from descending into chaos and social discord.

## The "Baader-Meinhof" Organization

Understanding the trajectory of the journalist Ulrike Meinhof and her leanings towards adopting extremist contexts is fraught with a series of paradoxes and complex events. She started by accusing the capitalist system of not upholding the values of democracy and social justice. This led to her designation as a journalist at "Konkret" magazine to cover a large store burning incident and follow the case where two young men were accused of its destruction, calling it "eliminating a symbol of savage capitalism". One of them was Andreas Baader, whom she got to know during the trial (he was eventually sentenced to prison with parole).

The first paradox was Meinhof's eventual departure from "Konkret," claiming it was "too commercial," meaning it was complacent with consumerist capitalism. This departure marked another turn in her political journey, leading her to join more left-wing extremist groups. During this period, she met Gudrun Ensslin, a friend of Andreas Baader. The latter had been incarcerated once again for driving too fast.

The second paradox in Meinhof's journey was her plot to liberate prisoner Andreas Baader from a string of minor offenses and crimes unrelated to political work but rather to general criminal activities. Leveraging her journalistic position, she secured a private meeting with him and orchestrated his escape, assisted by Baader's friend. They benefited from his status as a seemingly inconspicuous prisoner.

Following the operation, the three fled Germany to receive military training, returning to execute bombings that targeted police stations, courts, and American military bases in West Germany. Their criminal activities expanded, making the new organization the primary concern for German security forces and intelligence agencies until their arrest.

Ulrike Meinhof, considered the mastermind of the organization, was placed in a high-security solitary confinement cell. The harsh conditions of her imprisonment sparked widespread protests from various humanitarian organizations, demanding her transfer to a less strict cell.

However, the organization members continued to complain about their conditions in German prisons, starting a hunger strike that led to the death of one group member, Holger Meins, in 1974. This coincided with a series of armed operations carried out by the organization's members who had escaped from imprisonment. The prisoners persisted in their hunger strike, and the trial of Meinhof, Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and others began in 1975.

Further exacerbating the situation in 1976 was the discovery of Ulrike Meinhof's body in her cell. The coroner's report concluded she had hanged herself. However, several media outlets and political organizations doubted the official narrative, accusing the prison authorities of orchestrating her assassination. Her death marked a decisive historical moment in the organization's history.

## Terrorist Crimes

Trials continued for the remaining prisoners of the Baader-Meinhof group, resulting in life sentence, the maximum penalty in West Germany. These sentences paved the way for the hijacking of a Lufthansa German Airlines plane from Mallorca, Spain, to Frankfurt, Germany, on October 13, 1977, forcing it to head to "Mogadishu" airport. with around ninety people on board.

Although the operation was attributed to a Palestinian group, the hijackers demanded the release of more than ten Baader-Meinhof members still held by German authorities. Five days later, a special unit of the German army stormed the plane, killing all the hijackers except one.

The third paradox in the organization's history was that all the prisoners the group had hijacked the plane for, seeking their release from German authorities, died under extremely strange circumstances in the hours following the incident.

While the government claimed they committed suicide, except for Ingeborg Müller, who reportedly stabbed herself multiple times without succeeding in committing suicide, many suspected security forces of conspiring to assassinate them. The majority of organizations, political parties, and civil society institutions refrained from holding the state accountable, given the tension resulting from the organization's terrorist activities and security crackdowns against them. This highly fragile phase in contemporary German history became known as the "German Autumn."

The dilemma was that before the plane incidents in Mogadishu and the alleged collective suicide in German prisons, the organization had kidnapped a prominent German businessman named Heinz Martin Schleyer in an operation resulting in the death of two policemen, the businessman's driver and personal bodyguard. After the news of the prisoners' suicide spread, Schleyer was assassinated and left in the trunk of an abandoned car in a French city on the German border.

This assassination led to a wave of arrests within the organization, weakening it for a period, but it experienced a kind of resurgence at various times in the 1980s through a

series of less severe operations compared to their violent crimes in the '70s, until the organization was declared dissolved on April 20, 1998, via a statement sent to a news agency in Cologne, Germany.

### **Between Terrorism and Legend**

The Red Army Faction (RAF) did not enjoy widespread popular support compared to other armed organizations like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland or ETA in various rural and mountainous areas within the Basque region of Spain. The RAF lacked a nationalistic basis and focused more on extreme ideological elements. Despite this, it holds a significant place in modern German history, with a death toll of 34, mostly judges, businessmen, bankers, and US military personnel based in Germany.

The organization preoccupied German authorities for over a decade, and many older Germans still recall images of businessman Heinz Martin Schleyer in their grasp, shown daily with a placard indicating the number of days in his imprisonment.

It is difficult for them to forget the famous Baader-Meinhof logo composed of a red star, a machine gun, and the Latin letters RAF. The mysterious circumstances surrounding the deaths of Meinhof, Baader, and ten of their comrades, the heroic tales spun about them by certain magazines and newspapers, and the romanticized portrayal of the group's founders contributed to a legendary image, despite their involvement in unjustifiable assassination and sabotage operations.

Germany worked on dispelling this image, which was enshrined in terrorist intentions, through the publication of a series of books and the production of the film "Baader Meinhof Complex," released in cinemas in 2008. It is one of the most expensive films, aiming, as expressed by its director, Bernd Eichinger, to erase the "romanticized" image some citizens still associate with the organization, especially after some suggested its primary goal was to expel US forces from Europe.

Even after 1998, the group's activities did not entirely cease. A small faction of its members refused to abide by the decision to permanently halt armed struggle. They engaged in a series of attacks on stores, banks, and police departments known as the "Third Generation" incidents. German police suspected these individuals were involved in armed robberies of commercial and banking institutions in 2016, yet they ruled out these acts being part of an organized terrorist scheme.