

Questions for Stefan Aust, Author of *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.*

Q: Given your background as an editor of *Konkret* and your previous friendship with Ulrike Meinhof, I've always wondered how the original version of your book was received by the left when it first came out. Though you did not explicitly state it at the time, your book very conclusively seemed to demonstrate that the strange deaths in Stammheim prison were in fact suicides; yet it seems to be an article of faith amongst leftists that Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe were murdered. How was your book received by the left at the time? And has that changed with the new edition, especially now that you clearly state that their deaths were suicides?

A: When the book first came out in 1985, a lot of copies were being bought by RAF members who were sitting in jail. Some of them learned about the first generation of the group mainly by reading the book. But that didn't stop them – or their sympathizers – from being very critical of it. On a talk show, Hans Christian Ströbele, who was a former RAF lawyer and later a member of parliament (The Green Party), said that Baader and Meinhof would roll over in their graves if they read the book.

There were two major points against the book: First, I made it quite clear that all my research had led me to conclude that the strange deaths in Stammheim were suicides. Despite the skepticism surrounding the official investigation, there were no signs of involvement by anyone from the outside. The second critical point was that I humanized the revolutionaries. Critics called that an un-political approach. In fact, from a different angle, it was the same argument that came from the political right: I made human beings out of murderers.

After more than 20 years I now have the feeling that even people from the left see the book as a rather fair and correct work of journalism. Now their main argument is that the book has the “Deutungshoheit” about the subject – which means something like opinion leadership about the subject of RAF-Terrorism.

Q: I'm often struck by the number of people who romanticize the leaders of the RAF, without understanding the devastation that they wrought. The Baader-Meinhof Complex, the Oscar-Nominee movie that you wrote last year, was accused of glorifying terrorism. What are your thoughts about those criticisms? Is there even a way to portray the Baader-Meinhof saga without being accused of glorifying or romanticizing terrorism?

A: The moment you write or make films about groups like the RAF you support their “immorality.” I wanted to portray this group as accurately as possible. It would be impossible for a book reader or film viewer to understand why so many people followed them if they were portrayed only as villains and criminals. It was their charisma that made them so dangerous. One of the reasons why we showed the group's bombings and killings in such detail was that we wanted to explain what terrorism really is: the terror and killing of people—of human beings—not of lifeless “character masks.” The aim was

to make viewers understand why people of such high moral standards turned into ruthless killers, how “hyper moral” turned into immorality.

Q: Do you see any homegrown, leftwing terrorist movements taking root in Europe or America again? I’ve often felt that one of the reasons that the Baader-Meinhof Group was able to rise to prominence early in the 70s was partially because of ineffective police work. It seems to me that in the modern climate, particularly since 9/11, it would be extremely hard for any band of urban revolutionaries to wage a similar war without being quickly caught. Do you agree? What kind of left-wing radical movement COULD succeed?

A: Any kind of terrorist activity is always a part of a bigger radical movement. A terrorist group can evolve only when a bigger radical movement of any kind exists – left, right, nationalist or religious. Organizations like al Qaeda can only function from inside a global Islamist movement. Similarly the RAF was a part of the radical left in Germany, at least in the beginning. And only if this terrorist group is imbedded in a major movement can it have enough supporters to operate for a longer period of time. The members of the RAF were mainly arrested because normal people – even leftists – called the police. The enormous buildup of the police and the security agencies in Germany could not have been as effective without the cooperation of the people. The only way for a left-wing radical movement to succeed is by using the power of convincing the people rather than employing violence of any kind.

Q: I think the single hardest concept for me--an American living in the early 21st century--to understand is the notion that the members of the RAF felt that by attacking the state, and having the state respond with massive retaliation, that there would be an enormous number of German people who would then take up their cause and overthrow the state. It just seems utterly delusional, especially coming from clearly intelligent people. How could they get to the point where this seemed rational?

A: I can only quote Ulrike Meinhof who often said, “wie kommt die Dummheit in die Intelligenz?” which means “how can stupidity invade intelligence?” The first mistake the RAF made was not seeing reality. For me the whole struggle from the very beginning of my research was to realizing that the RAF had a quasi-religious character more than a rational political character. To think that in Germany the masses would overthrow the capitalist system was completely irrational. I cannot believe that they really believed that. Rather, they acted like political or religious martyrs to show that the state was as brutal as they thought it was. It was an experiment with their own – and others’ – lives.

Q: What was Ulrike Meinhof like as a person before going underground? Reading her Konkret essays in chronological order, I am struck by how much more hardened, desperate, and humorless she became in her later columns. Was she like that in her personal life? Did she have fun and socialize? Did she seem like she had an internal conflict?

A: Ulrike was a very impressive person. She was well-educated and could get her point across very convincingly. At the same time she was quite an intolerant individual who thought she knew things better than others. If someone did not agree with her views then this person was considered “unpolitisch”, un-political. She also had a depressive personality. She suffered under the injustice of the world. And sometimes I had the feeling that she was kind of masochistic. Take a look at the letter she wrote in prison “A hypocritical bitch from the ruling class” (on page 203).

However, people of the liberal movement adored her, and she socialized a lot during her time in Hamburg and with konkret, where at this time she wrote about the poor, about people in sweat shops and in prison. In the end she could not live in these two worlds. When she went to Berlin she grew more and more depressed. Ultimately, I think her involvement in the RAF was due to many personal and psychological reasons.

Q: Tell me about having your work realized on the big screen. Were you a major part of the production of “the Baader-Meinhof Complex” during its filming? I was particularly struck by the production design; it seemed simply perfect, especially the Free University rally, and the Stammheim scenes (though I couldn’t help but notice that the BMW 2002 used for the 1971 Petra Schelm shooting scene was a 1974 BMW!). Did the film come out the way you had hoped? What was it like to see someone playing yourself on screen?

A: I wrote a first draft of the script that Bernd Eichinger subsequently finalized. We discussed every scene of the film and used a lot of photos and film footage in order to be as accurate as possible. For example, in the scene where Rudi Dutschke was at the Vietnam Congress, the actor wore the same exact shirt that the real Rudi had worn. We shot the scenes at the Technische Universität Berlin in the original Audimax. We shot the scenes for the visit of the Shah in front of the real Berlin Opera, the Stammheim scenes were shot in the original Stammheim court room, the dialogues in prison are from the original transcript, etc. So we tried to be as accurate as possible. But there are certainly mistakes. For example, I do not know whether the BMW is authentic or not – but I have the impression the helicopter over Stammheim prison is a later model.

It was funny to see an actor playing my part. Let me put it this way: I did not know that I was so attractive then. I’m also afraid that the actors are actually more attractive than the originals were.

Q: A lingering question about the deaths in Stammheim: You make a definitive case for the likelihood that the prisoners committed suicide. I’ve never understood how the officers on duty failed to hear the three gunshots. Having seen the layout of the prison block in both of your Baader-Meinhof films (“Stammheim” and “The Baader-Meinhof Complex”), I can’t understand how these shots could not have been heard. Am I missing something?

A: That is one of the mysteries. Not even the prisoners on the sixth floor directly under the high security tract heard anything. It would be interesting to test out whether shots can be heard from below.

Q: By my accounting, you've written (and revised twice) the definitive book about the Red Army Faction, you've written two major films about the group, produced a major TV documentary about the group, and have overseen dozens and dozens of retrospective articles in *Der Spiegel* about the group. Is this current revision of your book and the companion film the end of it for you? Do you see interest in the public or even your own interest in this subject continuing?

A: If you open one door it leads to another. It is definitely not the end, and one of the mysteries that has not yet been solved is the question about whether the prisoners were wire-tapped in their cells. There is a lot of evidence that supports this but no definitive proof has been found so far. This would raise another question regarding whether there are any tapes of the suicide night, which is something that I am currently working on finding out.

Q: I was struck by the reaction of Juergen Ponto's widow to the film. She was upset because she felt that the facts of her husband's murder were incorrectly presented in the film. It seemed to me that her real quarrel was that her husband's murderers were being brought up yet again in the popular culture without any acknowledgement of the devastation they created. It seems like the specific victims of the RAF are often completely forgotten about. Do you think the coverage of the RAF has focused too much on the romantic aspects of their story at the expense of the brutal violence that the utilized?

A: The scenes about Ponto's murder were written and filmed according to the verdict against Christian Klar and Brigitte Mohnhaupt. It was very close to reality, although the house and the interior looked different, and we did not shoot in the original Ponto villa. The more detailed the film would have been to the real scene, the more shocking it would have been to the family. Of course, it is always very hard for relatives to see the murder of loved ones represented and re-enacted onscreen. They always have a different memory of such a terrible experience, which is completely understandable and a natural problem of filmmaking. But this would mean that journalists and filmmakers would not be able to accurately portray the events as they really happened, so there really is no easy way out. If we would not have shown murder as murder and terror as terror the critics would have said that the film portrayed terrorism as harmless.