

PUTTING GERMAN TERRORISM IN PERSPECTIVE: AN AMERICAN RESPONSE

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The Red Army Faction (RAF) is often considered a relic of the Cold War. Yet there are a number of intriguing parallels between the RAF and Al-Qaeda that place the RAF in a key position in the history of terrorism. My comment will elaborate on this comparative perspective. There are, of course, profound differences between the RAF and Al-Qaeda. The RAF was primarily a domestic phenomenon, whereas Al-Qaeda, at least in its pretensions, operates on an international scale. The RAF was a secular terrorist organization: the God that it worshipped was a particularly idiosyncratic interpretation of Marxism, or perhaps Stalinism. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, is a *mélange* of many different things: in addition to being strongly ideological, it also has a strong base both in theology and Islamic jurisprudence. The RAF was also remarkably small. After all, there were no more than roughly three dozen actual trigger pullers and bomb throwers, who were able to terrorize the West German state and society for almost thirty years. It is sobering to think what a challenge this handful of people presented to the West German state, whose security services were rather more adept than many of the security, intelligence and police forces that terrorists are arrayed against throughout the world today. And finally, the RAF killed about thirty people, whereas Al-Qaeda has the blood of thousands on its hands, the vast majority of which are Muslims. Despite these differences, it is not entirely far-fetched to compare RAF and Al-Qaeda—and perhaps even draw some lessons—because the RAF was such an archetypal modern terrorist group.

First and foremost, as Aust's metaphor for the RAF's behavior—Captain Ahab's search for the white whale—and the RAF's own use of *Moby Dick's* characters as their code names make clear, terrorists ineluctably live in the future. They are constantly grasping for that distant but imperceptibly close point in time when they will triumph over their enemies and attain the ultimate realization of their destiny. This certainly was a theme in the RAF, and Al-Qaeda, too—not least in the seven years after 9/11—similarly lives in this future: hoping to revitalize and reorganize itself, not just to carry on the struggle, but to succeed and triumph in a cause that they believe is divinely ordained.

Second, while these groups live in the future that they are chasing after, they have only a very vague conception of what exactly that future might entail. In the case of the Red Army Faction, when they attempted to conceptualize a concrete vision of their future, their efforts rarely produced anything more lucid than verbose disquisitions espousing an idiosyncratic interpretation of Marxist doctrine. Let me give you an example. In the collection of RAF statements that was published by the group in 1977 (and subsequently banned), Gudrun Ensslin wrote: "We have applied the Marxist analysis and method to the contemporary scene. Not transferred it, but actually applied it." Yet no further elucidation of the desired result was offered, except for the expression of the belief that Marxism would be rendered obsolete when the movement triumphed and the "capitalist system had been abolished."¹ Many would argue that Al-Qaeda's conception of the future it plans for is just as vague and no less ill-formed.

Thirdly, like all terrorists, both the RAF and Al-Qaeda see themselves as reluctant warriors cast on the defensive, forced to take up arms against an aggressive predatory enemy. In the RAF's conceptualization, this enemy was the state, which they saw as bent on killing or destroying all protest. This explains the galvanizing effect that the death of Benno Ohnesorg during the Shah's 1967 visit to Berlin had on the radicals who eventually formed the "Second of June Movement" and the Red Army Faction. If the government was going to use violence against them, they had no choice but to use violence in return. Indeed, Gudrun Ensslin had written of this transformation, remarking: "This fascist state intends to kill all of us. We must organize resistance. Violence can only be answered with violence. This is the generation of Auschwitz [referring to the West German government and society], you cannot argue with them."² Similarly, Al-Qaeda's justification and legitimization of its violence is that the West—championed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations—is waging a predatory aggressive war on Muslims worldwide so that Muslims have no choice but to resist with violence.

Indeed, this is the fourth parallel: like the Red Army Faction, Al-Qaeda came to the conclusion that there is no option but violence. This is why bin Laden, Zawahiri, and others constantly issue threats, warnings, and entreaties to their enemies, giving them the opportunity—at least propagandistically—to repent and to mend their ways. This is done cynically, since no one expects any government to adjust its foreign policy to suit Al-Qaeda's dictates; but it allows the Al-Qaeda leadership to say to their supporters: "See, we've warned them, we gave them a chance to change, but you see, they won't change. The only logic they understand is the logic of violence. Therefore *jihad* and the sword is the only option."³ The same logic was expressed by Ulrike Meinhof when she wrote how

the most radical elements of the student protests became “deeply disappointed by the actions of the student movement and of the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition and their inability to achieve change. There was no other choice, and it therefore became a necessity for the Red Army Faction to declare the idea of armed struggle.”

Fifth, both Al-Qaeda and the RAF share a firm belief in the didactic power of violence to rally the masses, the main constituency in their self-appointed quest. For the RAF, this hinged on the unprecedented economic prosperity of the 1960s, which allowed a luxury of introspection and self-criticism that in most radical circles generated revulsion against the socio-economic inequities endemic in the modern industrialized capitalist state. “All they can think about,” Ulrike Meinhof once dismissively remarked of her fellow Germans, “is some hairspray, a vacation in Spain, and a tiled bedroom.”⁴ With violence, Meinhof and her comrades would galvanize the masses to action. Bin Laden has made a similar point in his effort to rally Muslims against the United States, the capitalist-imperialist international order, and the process of globalization that he decries: “The capitalist system,” he has written, “seeks to turn the entire world into a fiefdom of the major corporations under the label of ‘globalization’”⁵ championed by the Americans. The similarities are striking.

Sixth, in the case of Al-Qaeda and the RAF, the key lieutenants all came from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. In a column titled “Red Terror, Green Terror” that Bret Stephens wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in September 2007, he remarked that neither the RAF nor Al-Qaeda were the “wretched of the earth”—to use Frantz Fanon’s famous term—but the educated and disgruntled children of the bourgeoisie. From that background, they were attracted to a lifestyle of action, taking control of their destinies, and enjoying, in the case of the RAF, the status of the “urban terrorist” and, in Al-Qaeda’s case, the status accorded to the “martyr.” “You must understand,” Astrid Proll, a member of the RAF’s first generation, once said, “that then, the most fantastic thing in the world was not to be a rock star, but to be a revolutionary.”⁶ In the same way in which Che Guevara was depicted on countless posters, with his beret and the revolutionary red star, today we see “martyrs” who have carried out suicide attacks lionized, celebrated, and emblazoned on posters, flags, key chains, and the like. It would be a mistake to dismiss Proll as an apolitical narcissist or a weird drop-out from society. Like her colleagues, she was animated by a profound sense of social injustice coupled with intense enmity towards what she and the rest of the RAF perceived as worldwide American militarism and domination. “To my mind, it was not simply an international question,” Hans Joachim

Klein recalled in a 1978 interview, “but also an internal problem. The B-52s stopped over Wiesbaden on their way from Vietnam.”⁷

This leads to the seventh point in my comparison: the strident anti-Americanism that has been a sign of both the RAF’s and Al-Qaeda’s ideology. “Anti-imperialism,” Christof Wackernagel once said, “meant first of all the protest against the Vietnam War, but also against the American predominance over most countries of the Third World.” Or as Ulrike Meinhof told a German court in 1976: “The strategic concept as developed by the RAF was directed against the U.S. American military presence in the Federal Republic. The concept was developed by us all through a collective discussion process.”⁸ Al-Qaeda’s views on American militarism and anti-Americanism are well-known.

Eighth, the RAF was among the first terrorist organizations to forge alliances between terrorist groups in different countries and to put together mixed commandos of operatives from different countries. After the end of the Vietnam War, the RAF and other German terrorist groups, such as the “Second of June Movement,” needed a new cause. Their choice reflected the international orientation of West German radical politics. Common cause was now to be made with the Palestinians. In his book *How it all Began*—or as it was titled in the United States, *Terror or Love*—Michael “Bommi” Baumann of the “Second of June Movement” described the logic behind this decision. “Since Vietnam is finished,” he said, “people should get involved in Palestine. It is actually much closer to us, which is apparent today with the oil business and has more to do with us here in the European cities than does Vietnam. Thus Palestine is to become the new framework to carry on the struggle here.”⁹ As a result, members of the RAF and of the “Second of June Movement” went to Palestinian camps in Jordan and elsewhere where they received training. As Stefan Aust pointed out, relations were not all that good. Nevertheless, the paramilitary training that Andreas Baader and his group received in Jordan was crucial for the establishment and future operations of the RAF. It also marked a milestone in the history of terrorism since it was probably the first time that one terrorist group had trained another. Thereafter, the relationship between the German and Palestinian terrorist groups flourished. Combined teams of German and Palestinian terrorists were involved in the 1975 seizure of the OPEC ministers’ conference in Vienna, the 1976 hijacking of an Air France flight to Entebbe, Uganda, and the hijacking of a Lufthansa flight to Somalia in 1977. German terrorists also reportedly provided critical logistical assistance to the Palestinian Black September terrorists responsible for the 1972 Munich Olympics attack. Although the closest ties were formed between the Germans and the PLFP, Arafat’s comparatively more moderate Al-Fatah organization also played a particularly important role in supplying the RAF with

weapons. According to the leading German-Israeli counterterrorism analyst, David Schiller, the RAF could not have survived without the assistance provided by the Palestinian terrorists. The profound influence exercised by the Palestinians over the Germans was never clearer than in 1985, when the RAF joined forces with the French left-wing organization, Direct Action, in the hopes of creating a PLO-like umbrella, an anti-imperialist front of Western European guerillas that would include Italy's Red Brigades and the Belgian Communist Combatant Cells group. Likewise, Al-Qaeda's name means "the base"—the foundation from which the worldwide Islamist revolution can be waged in alliance with a number of like-minded organizations.

Ninth, the RAF provided us with the world's first modern suicide terrorists. The RAF certainly differed from the variant of suicide terrorism that we see today: they used suicide terrorism not as a physical weapon, but as a potent psychological one—after all, terrorism is a form of psychological warfare. Witness the spectral image of Holger Meins starving himself to death in prison and the dramatic impact of the deaths of Baader, Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe in Stammheim prison.

Tenth, the RAF remains prominent because of the pioneering role of women. To this day, it is hard to escape the image of Petra Schelm, a former hair dresser, when she was stopped by a police roadblock with her boyfriend. Told to "get out of the car, put down your weapons, put up your hands, the boyfriend obediently followed the instructions of the police, while Petra jumped out of the car guns blazing and was shot.¹⁰ This is what supposedly led to Germany's GSG-9, one of the first elite counterterrorist forces, being told to "shoot the women first" whenever they encountered RAF terrorists. This is the title of a book Eileen McDonald wrote nearly twenty years ago about women in terrorism.¹¹ Likewise, female suicide terrorists—perhaps not in Al-Qaeda's case, but certainly with Al-Qaeda in Iraq—have generated enormous interest in the field of terrorism studies today.

Eleventh, the RAF and Al-Qaeda are both known for the detailed reconnaissance and planning of terrorist operations. In the annals of terrorism, perhaps with the exception of 9/11, no terrorist operation was as meticulously planned—and effective in its use of deception—as the 1989 assassination of the German banker Alfred Herrhausen. This is a lesson we see countless times in Al-Qaeda: The five years that Al-Qaeda spent planning the attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in 1998, the three years spent planning the 9/11 attacks, the two years that went into the attack on the USS Cole, and so on.

Twelfth, the Red Army Faction is a classic example of the generational effects of terrorist organizations. Despite the successes of the West German counterterrorist machinery, despite dwindling public support

and increasing isolation, especially in the 1990s, the RAF was consistently able to marshal its resources and carry on with its struggle. How could they have done this? The key mechanism of the most effective terrorist groups is that they are learning organizations. Through a constant learning effort to better understand the methods deployed against them by the government, these organizations develop improved countermeasures. The RAF went through three generations in slightly less than thirty years. In August 2008, Al-Qaeda celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Like the RAF, Al-Qaeda is a learning organization that, despite diminishing public support in the Muslim world, has been able to learn lessons from the mistakes of previous generations. The RAF was especially effective in this regard. A senior German counterterrorism official who was interviewed in 1991 marveled at how members of the RAF's third generation "routinely study every court case against them to discover weak spots." Having learned about the techniques used against them by authorities through testimony presented against them by law enforcement personnel in open court, the Red Army Faction was consistently able to undertake the requisite countermeasures to avoid detection. For example, learning that the German police could usually obtain fingerprints from the underside of toilet seats or the inside of refrigerators, surviving RAF members of the third generation began to apply a special ointment to their fingers that prevented fingerprints after drying, thus thwarting identification and incrimination.¹²

Finally, when the Red Army Faction eventually collapsed it was not only because the citadel at which they worshipped, the Soviet Union, had crumbled, but also because they lost the sanctuary that they had enjoyed in East Germany. Similarly, Al-Qaeda's fortunes have revived at present precisely because it has been able to regain its sanctuary—no longer controlling an entire country, like Afghanistan, but a sanctuary nonetheless in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan and adjacent states.

In conclusion, let me make a final observation about the importance of the RAF experience. Looking at the countermeasures that were used by the West German state, one can see precursors of many of the standard approaches to countering terrorism today, at least in the United States. Stefan Aust has written about the so-called "B/M," which in American parlance we would call a "fusion center," that was created by the German authorities to bring together federal and state police forces to coordinate and cooperate in gathering information about the RAF. Creating "fusion centers" is still one of the key weapons used in the war on terrorism, along with data mining to collect and process information to identify patterns of terrorist activity, another technique used by the German state in the fight against the RAF.

Notes

- ¹ Gudrun Ensslin, "Statement of 19 January 1976," in *Red Army Faction: Texte der RAF* (Malmö, Sweden, 1977), 345.
- ² Quoted in Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, (Berkeley, 2004), 31. See also "The Crisis Years of the RAF/The Baader-Meinhof Terrorist," accessed at <http://www.germanvideo.net/germanrafterroristfilm.html>.
- ³ See Paul Eedle, "Terrorism.com," *The Guardian* (London), 17 July 2002.
- ⁴ Quoted in I. Fetscher and G. Rohrmoser, *Analysen zum Terrorismus*, vol. 1: *Ideologien und Strategien* (Bonn, 1981), 301.
- ⁵ Quoted in Bret Stephens, "Red Terror, Green Terror," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 September 2007.
- ⁶ Eileen MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First* (New York, 1991), 210.
- ⁷ Quoted in Jean Marcel Bougereau, "Memoirs of an International Terrorist: Conversations with Hans Joachim Klein," in *The German Guerrilla: Terror, Reaction, and Resistance* (Sanday, Orkney, no date), 12. See also the similar statements on pp. 9,14,15.
- ⁸ Quoted in Stefan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Group: The Inside Story of a Phenomenon* (London, 1987) p. 366.
- ⁹ Michael "Bommi" Baumann, *Terror or Love? Bommi Baumann's Own Story of His Life as a West German Urban Guerrilla*, trans. Helene Ellenbogen and Wayne Parker (New York, 1979), 60. See also p. 59 and the 'SHALOM & NAPALM' communiqué on pp. 67–8.
- ¹⁰ Jillian Becker, *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Gang* (London, 1978), 262–263.
- ¹¹ MacDonald, *Shoot the Women First*, xiv.
- ¹² Frederick Kempe, "Deadly Survivors: The Cold War is Over but Leftist Terrorists in Germany Fight On," *Wall Street Journal*, 27 December 1991.