

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



The Baader-Meinhof Complex - 2009

Director: Uli Edel

Producer: Bernd Eichinger

Screenplay: Uli Edel (based on the book by Stephan Aust)

Spieldauer: 150 minutes

Cast: Martina Gedeck (Ulrike Meinhof); Moritz Bleibtreu (Andreas Baader); Johanna Wokalek (Gudrin Ensslin); Niels-Bruno Schmidt (Jan Carl Raspe); Sebastian Blomberg (Rudi Dutschke); Simon Licht (Horst Mahler); Stipe Erceg (Holger Meins); Alexandra Maria Lara (Petra Schelm); Bruno Ganz (Horst Herold)

The Primacy of Practice – Allen Krumm

Mao was fond of pointing out the 'primacy of practice.' Righteous indignation and unwavering belief in a cause are well and good, but what is really needed is implementation. Like many of his ilk, Mao had discovered the joy of 'doing unto others.' But what can turn an aimless ideologue into a bold implementer like Mao? One ingredient has proven itself over time to be the catalyst that sets things in motion.

Fearlessness is fascinating in all of its manifestations. Fearlessness is seductive. Those who can talk the talk and walk the walk seem very different from the rest of us. They have broken free of the mundane tethers that restrain other mortals. Hence fearless radicals from either end of the political spectrum captivate the imagination. Fearlessness was at the heart of the image of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* (RAF), a.k.a the Baader- Meinhoff gang.

For the few fleeting years of their existence they were monoscopic missionaries preaching armed doctrine and diligently practicing what they preached. Animated by righteous indignation and a fanatical belief in their cause, equipped with radical theories and grimly faithful to that 'primacy of practice', this tiny band ("six against 60 million") cut a bloody swath across the political and social landscape of Germany.

Nowadays, it might seem as if the RAF had retained a talented image consultant: the logo (the bold type acronym superimposed on the Kalashnikov superimposed on the red star) was pure inspiration; the concept of the Urban Guerilla supplied sufficient intellectual grist, and there was the enduring aura of romance bound up with living in the underground. Their ability to defy the crushing power of the state for as long as they did elicited a broad but mostly hidden sympathy. And ultimately, in terms of image, martyrdom (whether self inflicted or state inflicted) never hurts. It all adds up to a great script.

Andreas Baader, a high school dropout, was their leading man. In a brief period, he transformed himself from a bohemian bum haunting Berlin's bar scene into the RAF's version of Che Guevara. If he was an actor, and more than a few felt he was, it was the role of a lifetime. He seemed to sense from the beginning that a fearless, undiluted radicality would set him apart. Oddly enough, it was during the last five years of his life, when he was in prison, much of the time in isolation, that he exerted the most influence on his group as well as on Germany.

A photo of Baader and his Bonnie, Gudrun Ensslin, at their trial in 1968 for the firebombing of a Frankfurt department store, serves as an iconic image of the charismatic Anziehungskraft of the pair. Baader, sporting his shades, tenderly touches Gudrun's chin as they exchange a knowing look. She was said to be the only one who could handle him. Prior to the trial, Baader had said "ich werde in diesem Prozess meinen Tanz machen." He intensely enjoyed being the center of attention, yet the fearlessness was real. His mother had noted it from a young age: "Andreas hatte nie Angst. Er führte alles bis zur letzten Konsequenz durch." The latter trait, translated to his followers, would lead to much more deadly dancing in the years to come.

Seen from a vantage point of 40 years later, it is amazing how quickly it all transpired. From the riots protesting the visit of the Shah in June 1967 until the German Autumn of 1977, scarcely a decade transpired. The intensity of those times seems almost a dream now, the political idealism somehow quaint and naive. Yet that intensity and that idealism were the magnets which drew many young idealists to the greater seductive force emanating from the fearless practitioners of the Baader-Meinhof gang.

From the time Baader and his chief cohorts were imprisoned for the final time in 1972, a primary goal of the RAF and other splinter groups became securing the release of their leaders. They set to work with deadly intensity, in 1975 seizing the German embassy in Sweden, and later helping a Palestinian group take sixty

OPEC members captive in Vienna. In 1976 they again participated with a Palestinian group in hijacking an Air France flight, diverting it to a place in Uganda called Entebbe.

The overture of violence reached a crescendo in Germany in 1977. In April Attorney General Buback was assassinated. On July 30, businessman Jürgen Ponto was killed at his home near Frankfurt. In September Hans Martin Schleyer (at the time considered the most powerful businessman in German) was kidnapped. In October a Lufthansa plane was hijacked by a Palestinian group. Depending on the sources, the RAF had either agreed to or solicited this action. The plane was stormed by German special police on October 17 1977.

All the efforts failed. No deal was cut. The leaders were still in prison. The day after the police stormed the airplane, the suicides of Baader, Ensslin, and Jan Karl Raspe were announced. Ulrike Meinhof had died the previous year. Later in the month, the body of Schleyer was found. Although violence would continue sporadically into the nineties, the chapter of the first generation of the RAF was effectively over.

Uli Edel's film, based on the book by Stephan Aust, strives for realism, although one senses an undercurrent of sympathy that infers there was something good here that went terribly wrong. That is understandable. The fascination with armed doctrine is real and enduring. The tragedy is that while there was indeed much injustice in the society they saw around them, the fanaticism of the RAF simply morphed into another and uglier form of injustice. Edel is no disciple of Peckinpah. Violence is integral to the story, but he does not render it beautiful.

In retrospect, despite their passionate rhetoric opposing the Vietnam war and US / West German imperialism, one notes that the concrete accomplishments of the Baader-Meinhof gang boiled down to blowing up buildings, robbing banks, and killing people. It was an odd resume for a group claiming an ultimate goal of social justice and economic equality.

Some of the figures from that time and place still survive, and some even thrive. Joschka Fischer (a former stalwart of a *Putzgruppe*) segued seamlessly into the establishment and became part of the ruling elite he once despised. He even does guest lecture gigs around the Ivy League. Some have come full circle. Horst Mahler is still a radical, he just sees things from a right angle now. As for Baader, one wonders what a little vocational counseling and paternal guidance might have done. Perhaps if his father had returned from a previous war, Baader might not have waged his own.