BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE "RED ARMY FACTION"

The "Red Army Faction" or "Baader-Meinhof gang* as it was generally called, caused a series of sensations in West Germany in the middle-seventies. Their actions included kidnappings, bombings, robberies and various raids for political ends. A number of their main leaders died in prison in circumstances which led to controversy as to whether they committed suicide or were murdered.

Horst Mahler, a former member of the group, was interviewed earlier this year in the Italian Communist weekly Rinascita. He discussed why such a group arose in a country like the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), what their motives were and why they became isolated.

A small group of intellectuals, members of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) formed the Red Army Fraction (RAF) in 1967-68. They were concerned with issues such as the war in Viet Nam and the way in which their country was playing a subordinate role to US imperialism, and set out to create a more critical public opinion.

At the same time it was becoming increasingly clear that, while playing a very important role, the students were only of limited significance in the situation. We debated who would make the revolution, and this led to the first split in the student movement.

Mahler explained that some, close to libertarian and anti-authoritarian positions, denied the leading role of the working class. In spite of the struggles going on around them, they argued that there wouldn't be a revolution in the industrialised countries. The other side of the debate maintained that the workers would be the main force in any revolution while the students could at most carry out the function of a "detonator".

The next step was organisation: the aim was a party of cadres and revolutionaries with an emphasis on excluding any deviations from the "correct line". In this way, the atmosphere of open debate and comradeship which had existed in the student movement was destroyed.

Finally there was the decisive step — to decide on what concrete forms of struggle to adopt. Our analysis of victorious revolutions — from the Chinese to the Algerian or Cuban or Vietnamese — indicated to us that the central subject was not the classical proletariat and that it was possible to make the revolution outside the classical scheme.

Consequently, the only thing that counted was to decide on revolution and make it. But in Europe, at least, a mass, popular revolution could not be organised, so we had to form small, resolute groups able to show that it was possible to resist
and a revolutionary example. These were the ideas which led to the choice of the urban guerrilla warfare tactic.

Asked about early terrorist actions, Mahler told of an early split which developed in the “armed struggle movement”. It arose from some unsuccessful actions and the decision to plant a bomb in the Berlin synagogue to protest against the repression of the Palestinian guerrillas. You can imagine what that meant for some of us who had grown up politically with the guilt complex of our fathers regarding the Jews.

I was strongly opposed to such tactics. I did not oppose armed struggle in principle, only certain applications.

During this period we tried to elaborate our strategy. There were two main conflicting perspectives for our future. The majority maintained that although the people showed no interest in revolutionary struggle, it was nevertheless necessary to build links with the masses, to weave relationships and anchor ourselves to reality. The minority, however, saw our role only as a component of the revolutionary movement of the Third World and wanted RAF to be a kind of “fifth column” of the national liberation wars. They had an extremely negative view on the possibility of the masses in Western countries playing an active role. Neither was there any desire to take account of the psychology of the population of our country. Thus the group that gave rise to RAF began with “basic work” in Berlin.

Mahler believes that the entry of Andreas Baader into the organisation increased the tempo.

There is no doubt that he played a key part in the evolution of RAF. This was not only because of the influence of his activism and decisiveness, but also because the first terrorist action of RAF was intended to free Baader from prison in Berlin. During this operation a worker was seriously injured and from that moment on we became fugitives, isolated from everyone and particularly from the Left. This forced us to change our line. It became impossible to conduct mass work and in this way any relationship with reality was lost. The minority line then appeared to us by a process of psychological rationalisation, to be the correct line. The only way that remained was that of violent action....

Mahler was questioned about the fact that the explosives used in the first actions were provided by a counter-espionage agent who had infiltrated their ranks. Did they ever have any idea that they were being used by others, to act as a convenient tool of reaction. He replied that he understood the point of the question very well but thought it would be “too convenient” to hide behind it.

It explains almost nothing. Certainly not the internal dynamics of a terrorist group. In fact the secret service agent played no decisive role, at least as far as the ideological choice of armed struggle or the kind of actions undertaken. He was “used”. He certainly provided information about us and contributed to the arrest of Baader, but he alone could not have convinced us to take the road of terrorism.

Regarding the use made of terrorism by the Right — we knew very well that there was a long tradition, in France for example, of infiltration of revolutionary movements by the police to push them into blind alleys. Yet this was not enough to make us refrain from what seemed to be a necessary choice. At the beginning however, we did seek to follow a strategy which would make it impossible for us to be used.

Mahler then spoke of his disillusionment with RAF’s strategy:

My break with the RAF, when I was already in prison, came after the attack on the Hamburg skyscraper, the headquarters of the Springer press. It was an attack which I knew had been organised by the left. But the negative effects were such that it could well have been initiated by the right.

From then on, everything became clearer; the things the RAF organised were indistinguishable from the things for which the right sought to blame us, so wrong and suicidal was our strategy.

Asked to explain the growing number of disillusioned terrorists, Mahler said:

The failure of terrorism, not only in West Germany, is now clear. It is not just a technical-military defeat, leaving the hope that better results could be achieved with a different organisation, but a failure in principle. I believe it was a disastrous
policy of a certain component of the left and of the theoretical-political premises on which their actions were based.

It is a failure of what I would call "the politics of the Advent" (the coming of Christ — D.D.) with its mystical idea of revolution and transformation of the world. If we look at the reality around us, is it really possible to think of achieving our ends with ideas like that of urban guerrilla war?

Mahler concluded by saying that the left, or at least part of it, is confronted with the need to re-examine itself and the principles on which it has based its existence.

To produce the great event of revolution we must have the courage to apply our strength and our consciences in a different way.

The alternative to this is the degeneration of political action into blind activism, into purely criminal action without prospects, like the rock song which says, "macht kaputt was euch kaputt macht!" (Destroy that which is destroying you!).

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