

Paul Oestreicher examines the links between Hitler and the Baader-Meinhof terrorists

Germany must stand up to these sick gangsters

As a six-year-old, soon to flee with his parents from Hitler's Reich, I first met urban terror in the streets of Berlin. Jack-booted SS men, smashing up Jewish shops, then burning down the synagogues. With demonic (rather than Germanic) logic the killing followed.

The historians are merely left with statistical discrepancies: were four or five or six million added? If the Jews really were the source of all evil, was it not virtuous to kill them? The Nazis had their ideals, and they are far from dead in the *Landesheim* in which I now live.

Who today would claim that Germans have a monopoly on the sick kind of idealism that is both fanatical and murderous? It is only in the realm of efficiency—even the efficiency of terror—that the Germans may still have the edge.

There may appear to be no direct line from Adolf Hitler to Andreas Baader. Were it possible to merge today with yesterday, the two would undoubtedly gun each other down. Their left and right wing labels, however, are less relevant to understanding them than their messianic dreams. The real link is a deeply romantic idealism that will stop at nothing to prove itself. The ideal is more important even

than success. Such irrational idealism nearly always envisages some kind of "new and better humanity". Before that ideal is buried with its proponents—40 or 40,000 or 40,000,000 may have to die.

With Hitler it was 40,000,000. With the Baader-Meinhof gang it is not yet and, I hope, will not reach 40. Two years ago I talked to its leaders in their prison cells, urging them to end their first prolonged hunger strike which had then cost one of them his life. Are they mad or totally evil; are they potential political leaders? In their own eyes they are an avant-garde army, fired with a kind of religious fervour. Crusaders, who will one day be recognized as true visionaries.

The enemy of mankind in this battle is bourgeois society. The heroes are the dispossessed of the world, not now in Germany but in Latin America and other far-off places. Their theory, avidly studied but little understood, comes from Marx and Lenin. But not their desperado terror which is a product of their own idealistic mythology, their deep-seated hatred of our kind of society and their desperate need to live dangerously and spectacularly.

Their perverted idealistic passion is like Hitler's. So is

their deep hatred. Their dreams, admittedly, are not like Hitler's, but a lot more humane. Yet when the only road to their "new Jerusalem" is through mangled limbs and pools of blood, the dream is turned into a delicious nightmare. "Let me say, at the risk of seeming ridiculous", said Che Guevara, "that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love". The Baader-Meinhof terrorists are not in that league. Politically more important is the fact that they are not revolutionaries at all.

They have no relation to power. They have never seriously sought to capture it. They have no relationship either to any significant sociological grouping. They are deeply disaffected middle class drop-outs who loathe their own background. They have nothing in common with workers, least of all workers on the political left.

Their only allies are a relatively small group of rootless, disaffected and unhappy intellectuals who wish they themselves had the nerve to quit their villas and limousines and join this wildly romantic pseudo-revolutionary band. Some of their lawyers answer to that description. One or two have actually "joined the army" and provided some of

its considerable brain-power.

At some point in his struggle to assert his personality, Hitler recognized that his dream could become the dream of millions. All his energy went into persuading them that he was their saviour. He succeeded. As a brilliant young journalist Ulrike Meinhof, fired with ideals of social justice (as Karl Marx had been a century before), did try to convert people and society. But all the injustices remained. She failed. She came to hate her own pseudo-success and prosperity. In a "franciscan" gesture she left all; fame, popularity, family, wealth... and soon was submerged in a community of violence and hate. That too led to a socially dead end.

Her suicide was a logical consequence of a search for meaning that ended in total despair. Gudrun Ensslin, too, almost certainly set out on the path to terror because her puritanical Christian ideals had been frustrated by a selfish and greed-oriented society. She is a parson's daughter. It was her despairing mother who said to me: "If only we had not brought Gudrun up with such strict standards."

The road from unbending morality to demonic immorality is shorter than many people

recognize. That is why, with all the best intentions in the world, the indignant enemies of permissiveness (who are often right in what they condemn) are also often perilously close to the fascist mentality.

If the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon is a form of social paranoia rather than a serious political movement, it should be treated as such. Pathological criminals, though politically motivated and self-styled soldiers, should be vigorously pursued by all legitimate police methods and when captured, dealt with by the courts firmly, rapidly and (in contrast to their own standards) humanely.

For complex reasons often not creditable, the German political and judicial authorities have largely failed to do this. The "Red Army Group" never within the remotest reach of political power, has actually been allowed to acquire a special kind of power over the whole West German scene. The authorities, by giving them such special treatment, aided by the sensation loving media, have largely created that situation. Whatever is said to the contrary, they have been treated as if they were dangerous political enemies rather than sick, misguided idealists who have be-

come murderous, self-centred gangsters.

By allowing their tactics to push the government into enacting special laws to deal with them, by making it possible for them to fight collective battles, even from within the prison system, by considerably reducing the civil liberties of all citizens, the state has allowed them to push it a little nearer to being the repressive system they believe it to be. That is a sad victory.

For the German political left it is a tragedy. And for German liberalism. The effect of the terror is to strengthen substantially every reactionary tendency in German society. The Baader-Meinhof hard-core are, I believe, so totally isolated by now from social reality, so *Weltfremd*, that I doubt if they even recognize the paradoxical degree of their own success.

They probably hate the whole social system so much that they could not care less whether Helmut Schmidt or Franz Josef Strauss rule Germany. Every dead policeman, soldier, industrialist, politician, banker is a symbol to them, a "sacrament" in blood, pointing to the millennium they themselves do not expect to see. This is the stuff of criminals: melodrama, not of history.

The deep question to West German end to western society as a whole is whether such threats to law and order can be faced calmly and self-critically, rather than with fear and bitterness.

Must the whole government machine in Bonn and in the Länder rise to the bait of these isolated, though efficient, terrorists? Must Chancellor Schmidt negotiate with murderers and kidnapers? Nothing is unjustified if even one life is saved. But something, somewhere has gone badly wrong when a nation allows itself to be held to ransom by a group of desperados.

My sympathies are firmly with the politicians in Bonn who have convincingly broken with Germany's authoritarian past. May they stand up both to the terrorists and to a frightened and increasingly reactionary public.

Ultimately the roots of alienation in modern society, be it capitalist or socialist, will not be eradicated by police with automatic weapons and computers. They lie deeper in us all.

© Times Newspapers Ltd, 1977. The author is vicar of the Ascension, Blackheath, and chairman of the British section of Amnesty International.