

Five thoughts on the armed struggle of the 1970-90s in Germany

Ron Augustin

Fifty years ago, getting Andreas Baader out of prison was the starting gun for the Red Army Faction. Around the same time, similar organizations emerged across Europe from the period of revolt that characterized the 1960s. In May 2020, militants from France, Italy, Germany, Portugal, Euskadi and Greece intended to gather in Paris to reflect on these experiences at a conference on the *Ethics of Revolutionary Violence*, which had to be canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The following are some notes for the discussion that has been limited to online exchanges for the time being. In a way, the following points can be considered anti-theses to the pitfalls of mainstream historiography in France and elsewhere.

1.

Neither the Nazi past nor the so-called “radicalization” of the 1960s played a decisive role in the emergence of armed struggle in Germany.

Our practice fit into much more complex international conditions, which triggered the appearance of armed movements in all capitalist centres, as one of the repercussions of the decolonization process and liberation struggles in the Third World. In Europe, the protest movement, for whom rock & roll and counterculture were a unifying factor, was, above all, confronted with the problem of cultural and political alienation in consumer societies. Experiences during our growing political awareness in the 1960s gave us an understanding of the dialectics of violence that Fanon had identified as the lever to smash the violent relation of social apathy and indifference. But that was only the subjective side of our perspective's secret. Objectively, the global character of the capitalist system of rule made it impossible to separate the struggles in its centres from those in its peripheries.¹

As to the more specific conditions in Germany, it was class analysis, i.e., the analysis of the revolutionary subject and the balance of power, that was decisive, and not some linear derivation from the Nazi past or judicial and police repression. With regard to the Nazi past, the Left of the 1950s campaigned against the presence of Nazis in the various institutions. Even while, in the discussions of the 1960s, this topic remained important, it was generally subordinate to the larger issue of authoritarian mentalities. Similar to other Western societies, by the way. A continuity based on the genocidal history inherent to the imperialist stage of capitalism, in which the Nazi phase impacted virtually all of Europe. It did, however, open our eyes to institutional fascism and the continuity of imperialist projects. What was crucial for us was the fact that West Germany had been armed economically and militarily to function as an anticommunist frontline state and NATO's leading European power. Debates on the “silence of the parents” didn't become prevalent until later, when the movement, despite claims of “autonomy”, was once again in the grip of social-democracy and its green version. And more as part of the general trend to individualize and neutralize political experiences.

However, the long period of the 1919 massacres, the Weimar Republic and its culmination in Nazi fascism confronted us with its impact on *class composition*. In that regard the situation after 1945 was different from that in other countries, where the class had been disarmed in other ways. In Germany, the more or less organized Left, among whom the Jewish Left played a non-negligible part, had been literally liquidated. Working-class demographics had been completely upset by the war. The last communists who had survived the concentration camps continued to be prosecuted, right up to the ban of the Communist Party and all organizations suspected of supporting it. Any kind of opposition had to confront the West's aggressively anticommunist Cold War doctrines. A wall of propaganda, chauvinism, conformism, authoritarian structures, social amnesia, and isolation. The 1950s were “leaden years”, and it was this inheritance that we first had to get rid of. With the rappers of Manau one may effectively wonder whether “the future is a long past”.

In the new capitalist world order created by the Second World War, revolutionary dynamics had shifted from the workers' movements in its centres to the anticolonial and anti-imperialist liberation struggles in its peripheries. Vietnam succeeded in making a political breakthrough of global dimensions. For the peoples of

the Third World, Dien Bien Phu signaled a possibility: to turn weakness into strength. The repercussions, both on the liberation movements, Cuba, Algeria, etc, and the capitalist centres, showed what Marx called the material force of facts that objectively create new conditions. Conditions from which we started to fight.

When the United States insisted on establishing, in Vietnam, an example against revolutionary upheaval anywhere in the world, it was the Vietnamese resistance that continued to provide an example, by reversing the stakes. The vicious and repressive reactions against the solidarity movement here taught us the nature of the system we were up against, both here and there, and that their struggle was ours. In Jean-Paul Sartre's words, "The essential effect that this war had on the European and American militants is that it enlarged the sphere of what's possible. Previously, it seemed unthinkable that the Vietnamese would be able to resist the enormous American war machine and win. And yet, that's what they did, and so they completely changed the students' way of looking at it (...). These came to understand that there were possibilities that remained unknown. Not that everything was possible, but that one cannot know whether something is impossible until one has tried it and has been defeated."² So we did.

2.

The need for illegal forms of action was being expressed in Germany no later than early 1966, and not because of particular subsequent events.

As much as the year 1968 is considered the high-point of the 1960s protest movement, its militancy, as opposed to the Left's previous pacifism, developed from the early 60s, in Germany as well as in the US around 1964.

In a wider sense, the Cuban revolution, the war in Algeria and the Afro-American struggles had a significant impact on the formation of what came to be known as the New Left. Other strong moments that influenced the movement were the controversies within the communist movement after 1956, the assassinations of Lumumba and of numerous activists in the US, the teach-ins and free-speech movements spreading from Berkeley, the class struggles in Latin America, and the extraordinarily creative period in music that determined our cultural identity.

Early on in the movement's discussions, there was a growing awareness that protests, demonstrations, information campaigns, and symbolic actions had reached their limits. The ruling order's institutional violence strengthened our will to do more, to try and find the means to attack the system concretely and effectively. In Germany, discussions started no later than early 1966 on the necessity of illegal forms of action.

Initially, what materialized was a fairly solid clandestine network that developed in Europe beginning in late 1966. The American armed forces had intensified their efforts in Vietnam by increasing troops and using B52 bomber planes. The Black Power movement responded by initiating its "Hell No! We Won't Go" campaign, which rapidly developed into a large anti-draft movement, supported by war veterans and conscripts, "GIs", and which gained an increasing foothold on military bases, including the ones in Germany, then a major hub for American forces traveling between the US and Asia. Calls and actions with pamphlets encouraging American soldiers to desert were accompanied by the development of a large support network to help them concretely, by organizing and providing forged papers, escape routes, money, transport, contacts, apartments.

Across Europe there were groups and clandestine structures which were more or less connected in this rather discreet network that came to be known as the "Second Front". In France and elsewhere there had been such groups since the war in Algeria. In the other Mediterranean countries, clandestine resistance groups, which had never stopped existing in any case, also benefitted from exchanges with the network. Many years later, the experiences accumulated in these structures still continued to be useful for a number of revolutionary organizations.

In the RAF and among those fighting alongside us, there were at least four people who had come from this network. Besides, our contacts with GIs were also useful for laying our hands on a small quantity of arms and ammunition.

3.

The theory of “radicalization” and dividing the RAF’s existence into “generations” are part and parcel of the attempts to depoliticize our practice.

Public perception of revolutionary struggles largely depends on the media. Despite bits of counterinformation and authentic testimonies, scientists and journalists, but too often also leftist militants accept the distortions of the official discourse, concocted by state agencies and renegades.

Reflecting on society’s current political disorientation, Alain Badiou speaks of an operation “that is typical of all reactive periods, such as the one we are living in today”, consisting of “making the previous sequence indecipherable, a sequence that actually was perfectly oriented”. It’s a method that has been known ever since the Paris Commune. Badiou traces it back as far as the French bourgeois revolution: “It was characteristic of the Thermidor reaction to make the previous Robespierre sequence indecipherable: reducing it to the pathology of some blood-thirsty criminals made any political understanding impossible. If a period is declared pathological, there is nothing to be drawn from it that can provide an orientation. A historical balance sheet completely dictated by the adversary.”³

Pathology attributed to individual persons has been the main recipe in attempts to depoliticize collective experiences. I will not go into this further at this point. But there are two preconceptions that continue in the same vein. One is the idea that armed struggle emerged from a so-called radicalization following the “spiral of violence” between demonstrators and police, against those “who shot first”. As if drawing a straight line from some chronological events would suffice for the understanding of rather contradictory historical processes. The other is the way that the 30 years of the RAF’s existence is divided into three “generations”, which goes hand in hand with the fiction that most of us came from well-to-do families.

Virtually all attempts to connect the RAF to the movements of the 1960-80s start from the same simplistic presumption that a part of the Left became increasingly “radicalized” as a reaction against the carceral and police violence of the time. An interpretation that might apply to some militants’ individual trajectories, but that ignores that there were more profound reasons for the formation of armed movements in the capitalist centres. Sure, the confrontation with state violence has been a school for many of us. But the suggestion that this explains virtually all the Left’s subsequent processes of political awareness and organization, is part of the attempt to drown the movement’s manifold collective learning processes in the quagmire of today’s disorientation. And in so doing to precisely blunt their subversive sting.

One of the German Left’s myths consists of claiming that the movement’s mobilizations didn’t really take off until after the death of a student, Benno Ohnesorg, during an extremely violent police operation against the demonstration of June 2, 1967, when the Shah of Iran visited Berlin. Even recently I had to read that the moment when the movement started to change its policy of “peace in Vietnam” towards more concrete support for the Vietnamese liberation war, only came after Ohnesorg’s death. It’s not true, but it’s typical for how history is rewritten for the sake of justification. At best due to laziness, confusions of memory and lack of research, or because people generalize from experiences in one place at a point when they were already outdated elsewhere. However, what is also left aside here, is the role of social-democracy in suffocating the movement, part of a long history of pacifying social upheavals.

The fact is that Benno Ohnesorg was killed after the movement had already reached a certain political maturity. If it hadn’t, the mobilization against the Shah of Iran wouldn’t have happened as it did. The campaign against the Shah was not the start but rather a result of years of actions, political education, organization, and international contacts, using methods that showed a level of creativity and coordination hardly achieved afterwards. After the attack on movement spokesperson Rudi Dutschke ten months later, there was an extremely short period of anger and indignation, with a series of actions against the newspapers of the Springer publishing group, which had been responsible for the smear campaign against Dutschke. Then the “Basisgruppen” (grassroots initiatives) appeared, as well as a broad mobilisation against the state-of-emergency laws, and then – the movement had already started to crumble. At the same time, the Left actually continued to grow in numbers.

One can say that the bullets that hit Ohnesorg and Dutschke had a shock effect on people, accelerating consciousness-raising processes, while also provoking disengagements, but even without them the political situation would certainly have intensified. In the long run, other processes have been more important, also for the formation and structure of the urban guerilla here. Such as, particularly, the connection between the personal and the political, i.e., the politicization of private life called for mainly by the women in the movement.

What remained was the mobilization for Vietnam of course, like elsewhere in the world, the connecting thread to our understanding of what was happening around us and what we were willing to do about it. Nevertheless, after the International Congress on Vietnam in Berlin in February 1968, its organizers concluded that the congress “had shown the consolidation of a local counterculture rather than a turning point in the organization of resistance against the imperialist war.”⁴ The anti-NATO campaign announced at the congress didn’t materialize until more than a decade later. Yet the congress was important for the discussions and meetings that subsequently contributed to the development of armed and other struggles in several European countries.

It is typical for pseudo-historians to copy each other’s stereotypes. An example is the division of the RAF’s history into three generations, which correspond neither to real strategic phases nor to the composition and age of the group’s respective members. One day, someone invented it, and then everyone else copied it, without researching or thinking any further. At least five generations could just as well be distinguished by applying the same pseudo-arguments. Indeed, a smart ass discovered that one had been forgotten, so he invented a “bridge generation”, adopted by others as the “in-between-generation” or “first-and-a-half generation”, allotted to alternating periods. All in order to suggest three or four phases amalgamated to different sets of persons, also “radicalized” by isolated events of course, with the single aim of negating the real continuity of the group, its politics, as well as that of its struggles in prison.

In my view there were only two phases in the RAF’s history. The first one lasted until 1977, and a second phase, the one of the front⁵, which became public in 1982, but had been discussed from late 1979 onwards, following a period of reorientation and reorganization. Obviously, arrests always interfered, but basically there had been a period of consolidation, during which we tried to enlarge the movement’s scope of action by our practice, and the period of the front as a kind of second attempt to reinforce the movement while responding to conditions that had changed in and by the confrontations of the first period.

The first years of the RAF were characterized by the organization’s formation, the first offensive in 1972, and the start of the prisoners’ struggle culminating in the 1977 escalation. Among the people supporting those of us who were underground or in prison, more and more wanted to develop their own political practice in relation to the guerilla or to the prisoners. Initially, they remained aboveground in nonpolitical contexts or practices disconnected from our politics, while taking risks, or in a limited and often frustrating support position, or they joined the RAF. In this regard, more than a few evaluation errors were made on both sides, creating a dilemma that other guerilla groups have tried to solve in their own ways. The front concept was an attempt to establish another relationship between the different struggles of the guerilla, the aboveground militants, and the prisoners, also on an international level, as well as connecting the anti-imperialist struggle with other social movements.

One might consider a third period, starting around the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse and the fall of the Berlin Wall, when not much was left of the RAF, and mainly the prisoners were pushing for a dissolution, hoping that this could be transformed into a new political movement. A transformation that couldn’t be realized in the end, for reasons concerning the state of the remaining militants underground as well as that of the Left in general.

4.

The ethics of revolutionary violence is a tautology. Without ethics violence cannot be revolutionary, i.e., emancipatory.

Insofar as the question of violence tends to be presented as a *problem*, it is a purely theoretical problem, an academic one, lacking a dialectical relationship with a concrete practice. In my view the only problem is its

absence. In the words of one rap band, “many brawlers, few combatants”. At the outset it’s a petit-bourgeois problem. But the real problem is that nothing will move as long as violence remains internalized and taboo for the majority of those who could be considered the revolutionary subject today. As long as violence doesn’t express itself in a collective, thought-through, and organized way, it’s the system’s violence that the class keeps turning against itself.

Ever since Fanon made the simple observation that human beings liberate themselves in and by violence, pseudo-historians, -biographers and -journalists have denounced him in every way or else have tried to prove that he “meant something else”. In almost all editions of *A Dying Colonialism*, his publishers left out the chapter on the use of violence, where he explains that for oppressed people who take up arms in unbearable conditions, “the question was not to make sense of their lives but to make sense of their deaths”.⁶ A thought Jean Genet concurred with by saying that “violence and life are more or less synonymous”.⁷

That has also been our experience, violence’s existential side – in terms of attack, resistance, revolutionary practice, extending all the way deep into the prisons – in a dialectic that refers less to a particular attack than to the project of armed struggle as a whole. In isolation in prison, it was the struggle for our identity and the development of our political consciousness. A struggle that materialized in intensive learning and discussion processes, the daily confrontations to make these possible, and collective hungerstrikes. Arguably, the prisoners’ struggle had more impact on other struggles, both in Germany and abroad, than any other aspect of our politics.

5.

For those who started or continued the armed struggle, the main issue wasn’t violence but the organization of the underground, the only space allowing free movement for revolutionary initiatives.

We say armed struggle rather than revolutionary violence, because, even as a metaphor, that term is an oversimplification. It leads to misunderstandings such as the supposed spontaneity of certain developments and the linear interpretation of facts we keep encountering. The question of violence, which is a matter of ethics as opposed to the violence inherent in the capitalist system, should not be confused with the question of when to use it, which is a matter of tactics.

For those who chose to take up this struggle, violence was not the question. Confronted with the problems of impoverishment and alienation in consumer societies, the questions we had to solve first were strategic considerations, possible interventions and alliances, and, above all, matters of organization. Questions that had to be thought through, time and time again, all through the history of the RAF.

Our analysis started from the fact that the world’s balance of power at the time offered an opportunity for the revolutionary Left in the capitalist centres that had to be seized. On a global level, the imperialist economic system was about to push through qualitative transformations in the forces of production and, as a consequence, in the composition of labor, of the class, leading to the kind of precarization as we know it today. Union struggles are an integral part of this move, as they are limited to defending localized interests. On the other hand, on the political and military level, capital’s neocolonial efforts were confronted with popular struggles all around the world. The experiences of the Tupamaros had shown us that the anti-imperialist struggle and social struggles don’t exclude each other, and only come together in concrete struggles.

Clandestinity became a precondition, not in terms of a defensive, outlaws, or spaces of freedom, nor as a reaction to particular events, but as an *antagonistic relationship* and space to be created in order to be able to organize the anticapitalist resistance in practical terms, while avoiding the attention, at each movement and each preparation, of intelligence agencies and other surveillance and prevention machineries with their snitches, infiltrators, etc, which were already very present at the time. A discussion that in Europe took some time to materialize, but that had started and spread across borders by the second half of the 1960s. When we began to realize the limits of protests and the necessity *to organize the resistance*, our most important task was to find appropriate forms of organization, that would provide us with the capacity to be more effective in the fight against the system, to attack, to intervene, to take concrete steps.

It was clear that this would eventually mean the accumulation of fire power and engaging in violent battles, because the system is not an abstract entity but a militarized complex, out for blood when it is seriously attacked. Inspired by Che Guevara's experiences, the still theoretical credo of the most "radical" part of the German Left in 1968 was "the permanent struggle that attacks imperialism everywhere and makes it bleed to death".⁸

In short, that was what we were trying to do for the thirty years that followed. We lost that battle, but the attempt had to be made, and at any rate we accomplished some valuable experiences along the way. Otherwise no one would still be talking about it today.

¹ Conclusion by II Manifesto adopted in the RAF's *The Urban Guerilla Concept*, April 1971; in English at <http://germanguerilla.com/1971/04/01/the-urban-guerilla-concept/>

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *New Left Review* Nov-Dec 1969, in: *Situations IX*, Gallimard 1972

³ Alain Badiou, *Le Monde* 13/2/2010, in: *Circonstances 8 – Un parcours grec*, Editions Ligne 2016

⁴ Dutschke, Käsemann et al, *Vietnam-Kongress*, Oberbaumblatt February 21, 1968

⁵ RAF, *The Guerilla, the Resistance, and the Anti-Imperialist Front*, May 1982; in English at <http://germanguerilla.com/1982/05/01/the-guerilla-the-resistance-and-the-anti-imperialist-front/>

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Pourquoi nous employons la violence*, in: *L'an V de la révolution algérienne*, La Découverte 2011 (reproducing the 1960 edition); in the English-language editions, *A Dying Colonialism*, this chapter is missing as well.

⁷ Jean Genet, Preface, *textes des prisonniers de la "fraction armée rouge" et dernières lettres d'Ulrike Meinhof*, Maspero 1977, <https://socialhistoryportal.org/raf/6248>

⁸ Dutschke, Käsemann et al, *Der lange Marsch*, Trikont 1968