

# THE RED ARMY FACTION: UNDERSTANDING A MEASURED GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO AN ADAPTIVE TERRORIST THREAT

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## INTRODUCTION

For three decades prior to 9/11, West Germany fought its own war on terror. For 28 years, it faced off against the Red Army Faction (RAF), a small yet highly adaptable terrorist organization that constantly evolved to meet the countermeasures deployed against it. The RAF repeatedly reformed its ideology, operational objectives, and modus operandi when confronted with setbacks. In turn, the West German government approached the RAF with three primary measures: police and intelligence work, special counterterrorist paramilitary forces, and legislative reforms.

The present article will analyze all three components of the West German counterterrorism strategy. The first section surveys the historical background of the RAF, with a particular focus on its organizational and ideological underpinnings to understand its critical strengths and weaknesses. Second is a brief overview of the various police, paramilitary, and legal measures put in place. The article then moves on to an examination of the effectiveness of each measure, the public perception of the policies put in place, and the role they each played in the downfall of the RAF. Finally, this article will extract lessons on counterterrorism from the West German experience that can be used to inform the current U.S. campaigns against al Qaeda and ISIS.

While West Germany was predisposed against a strong central government because of the Nazi past, the government overcame those concerns in order

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to strengthen and create centrally-controlled intelligence and paramilitary organizations, the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) and GSG-9, respectively. Both measures had initial successes but faltered in the long run: intelligence collection due to rising public concern over civil liberties and paramilitary forces because later generations of the RAF avoided situations susceptible to GSG-9's skill-set, namely hostage taking.

Legal initiatives, while also fraught with public concern and debate, were the measure that sealed the RAF's fate. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the failure of the RAF's efforts to create a united pan-European terrorist front, the group had little to fight for except the release of the RAF prisoners, becoming what Jeremy Varon described as "free-the-guerilla-guerrillas."<sup>2</sup> The Kinkel Initiative, a prisoner release program for those who denounced terrorism and were near the end of their sentence, helped to break down the narrative of the prisoner's plight propagated by the RAF. Due to the combination of those factors, the commando level of the RAF was left with no choice but to abandon the armed struggle.

Thus, while effective shifts in operating procedures made the RAF an enduring threat in Germany for the better part of three decades, the group was hampered by its own ideological misgivings. West German innovations in police and paramilitary work crushed the first two generations of the RAF, and a prisoner release program was the final step in convincing the elusive third generation to give up the fight.

## **ASSESSING THE ENEMY'S STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES—HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### *The First Generation: Sparking the Global Marxist Revolution, 1970-1977<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 234.

<sup>3</sup> While all of the first generation's leaders were arrested in 1972, they would remain active in a command and control role until their suicides in 1977. The leaders were prevented by their imprisonment from participating directly in attacks, but they were not completely neutralized. RAF prisoners used their lawyers to communicate with commandos on the outside and order attacks to be staged. Their continuing involvement in active command and control until their suicides makes it important to denote 1977 as the true ending period of the first generation, even as a second generation was staging attacks in the meantime.

The Red Army Faction was born out of the student protest movement of the 1960s. The children of the Nazi generation worried that their parents were once again letting Germany become an authoritarian state.<sup>4</sup> This came to a head on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1967, when unarmed student protestor Benno Ohnesorg was shot at a rally during the Shah's visit to Berlin by a plainclothes police officer, leading to a series of further protests. The student movement also took up the cause of the North Vietnamese. Led by the charismatic Rudi Dutschke, they held rallies and congresses to show solidarity with the Viet Cong in their fight against American imperialism.

Pushed to action by this political environment, young couple Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, who would form the core of the first generation, lit two Frankfurt department stores on fire on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1968.<sup>5</sup> They were promptly caught and arrested, and both narratives were on display during their trial. Early on, Ensslin spoke for both herself and Baader, stating that the act of arson was committed “in protest of against people's indifference to the murder of the Vietnamese.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, later in the trial, their lawyer Horst Mahler gave a much different explanation—the arson was an act of “rebellion against a generation that had tolerated millions of crimes in the Nazi era.”<sup>7</sup> Baader and Ensslin felt they had no choice but to act violently against what they perceived as an increasingly dangerous state.

Just eight days after the arson incident, young anti-communist Josef Bachmann staged a failed assassination attempt on Rudi Dutschke, galvanizing further anger in the left-wing student movement. Prominent left-wing columnist Ulrike Meinhof watched all of this unfold and, after covering the trial and interviewing Ensslin, decided it was time that she too “crossed the boundary between verbal protest and physical resistance.”<sup>8</sup> Together with Ensslin, Meinhof helped to break Baader out of prison on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1970, marking the official start date of the RAF or, as it was labeled in the press and by the government at the time,

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<sup>4</sup> Konrad Kellen, “Ideology and rebellion: Terrorism in West Germany,” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrike Meinhof, “From Protest to Resistance,” in *Everyone Talks About the Weather -- We Don't: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*, ed. Karen Bauer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Stefan, Aust, *Baader-Meinhof: The Inside Story of the R.A.F.* trans. by Anthea Bell, (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

the “Baader-Meinhof Gang.”

After briefly training with the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Jordan, the group was unable to decide between the two motivating factors, and so the first generation attacked targets symbolic both of the U.S. and the FRG. In 1972, they launched the “May Offensive,” a series of five bombings targeting U.S. Army installations, the West German police, and the right-wing press. In line with their anti-imperialist ideology, the RAF sought to use tactics that would galvanize public support for their cause. The RAF sought to portray themselves as loyal defenders of everyday people against an oppressive state. The title of the RAF’s first communiqué, “The Urban Guerilla Concept,” is a reference to the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla* by Carlos Marighella, which advocated that terrorists provoke the government into repressive countermeasures that would mobilize the population against the state.<sup>9</sup>

However, the May Offensive scared more ordinary Germans than it did mobilize support for the RAF, and the public was forthcoming with tips to the police. In June and July of 1972, West German authorities arrested ten RAF members, including all of the group’s leaders.<sup>10</sup> A loyal group of supporters then filled in the ranks and became the second generation. While imprisoned, Baader, Ensslin, and Meinhof developed an “info-system” of note-passing through their lawyers, through which they communicated with each other and commanded operations on the outside.<sup>11</sup> However, all efforts to free the prisoners failed, and on October 18<sup>th</sup>, dubbed “Death Night” in Stammheim Prison, Baader, Jan-Carl Raspe, and Ensslin all committed suicide.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Second Generation: Fighting for the Prisoners, then Against American Imperialism, 1972-1982*

The second generation had two distinct phases. From 1972 to 1977, the second generation existed solely to secure the release of the original leaders. During those years, the RAF was led by lawyer Siegfried Haag, who planned

<sup>9</sup> Carlos Marighella, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla*, in *Voices of Terror*, ed. Walter Laqueur (New York: Reed Press, 2004), 370-6.

<sup>10</sup> Assaf, Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement in the Red Army Faction,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, no. 2 (2012), 161.

<sup>11</sup> Aust, *Baader-Meinhof*, 196-8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 411.

the unsuccessful 1975 attack on the West German embassy in Stockholm, where the RAF took hostages and demanded the release of the Stammheim prisoners.<sup>13</sup> Haag was arrested in November of 1976, but upon her release in February 1977, Brigitte Mohnhaupt took command of the RAF along with Christian Klar.<sup>14</sup> The second generation planned one last-ditch effort to free the Stammheim prisoners by kidnapping Hans Martin Schleyer, who they killed after failing to secure the release of the prisoners.

Thus, a second phase ensued, the “Mohnhaupt-Klar years” from 1978 to 1982, when the dominant operational focus shifted away from freeing the prisoners and to an increase in anti-U.S. and anti-NATO attacks.<sup>15</sup> Their operations were “aimed at killing representatives of the ‘Military-Industrial Complex’,” in what they dubbed the “‘M-I-C’” strategy.<sup>16</sup> Attacks included failed assassination attempts of American generals Alexander Haig (then Supreme Allied Commander of NATO) and Frederick Kroesen and the successful bombing of the U.S. airbase at Ramstein. Klar and Mohnhaupt were arrested in November of 1982, marking the end of the second generation.

*The Third Generation: Rebelling Against the European System, 1984-1998*  
*Organization of the RAF*

In 1984, West German authorities identified a new pair of leaders, Wolfgang Grams and Birgit Hogefeld, who would bring about another change in the RAF.<sup>17</sup> The third generation carried on the tradition of “anti-imperialist” rhetoric but picked a new target for their aggression—the continent of Europe itself. Claiming that Germany was at the forefront of a push for European global economic supremacy, the third generation picked targets involved in banking, diplomacy, and industry. The RAF also attempted to raise its international profile by calling on other European leftist terrorist groups Direct Action (DA) of France, Red Brigades (RB) of Italy, and the Communist Combatant Cells (CCC) of

<sup>13</sup> Dennis A. Pluchinsky, “An Organizational and Operational Analysis of Germany’s Red Army Faction Terrorist Group (1972-91),” in *European Terrorism: Today and Tomorrow*, ed. by Yonah Alexander and Dennis A. Pluchinsky (New York: Brassey’s, 1992), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Pluchinsky, “An Organizational and Operational Analysis,” 47.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Horchem, “The Decline of the Red Army Faction,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 2 (1991), 65.

<sup>17</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 168.

Belgium to create together a “West European Guerilla.”<sup>18</sup> Arrests of key members in those organizations prevented any serious collaboration from materializing.<sup>19</sup> However, the RAF continued to internationalize its struggle by claiming attacks in the names of foreign terrorists; named commandos of the third generation included Patsy O’Hara of the IRA, Mara Cagol of the Red Brigades, and Khaled Aker of the PFLP-GC.<sup>20</sup> The third generation struggled to redefine itself when Communism receded from the international stage with the fall of the USSR and the ensuing democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> Hogefeld was arrested and Grams was killed in a police operation in 1993, and the RAF remained dormant until finally announcing its dissolution in a statement sent to Reuters on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1998.<sup>22</sup>

*RAF Tactics and Ideology: The Primacy of the Primacy of the Prisoners*

As a left-wing Marxist group, the RAF holds a clear position in the terrorist typology. David Rapport theorized the “four waves” theory of terrorism, which describes how terrorism has changed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The theory stipulates that modern terrorism began with the first wave of anarchists, primarily in Eastern Europe, and was followed by the anticolonial second wave from 1920 to the 1960s.<sup>23</sup> The RAF belongs to the third wave or “New Left,” which was initially motivated by the Vietnam War and lasted from then until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> The third wave learned from the second—in the case of the RAF, their founding document begins with Mao’s famous call to draw “a clear dividing line between the enemy and ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> The RAF hoped to reinvigorate Mao’s revolutionary ideas for a new age and a new cause. Among the third wave were

<sup>18</sup> Tom Parker, “Fighting an Antaeus Enemy: How Democratic States Unintentionally Sustain the Terrorist Movements They Oppose,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 2 (2007), 171.

<sup>19</sup> Horchem, “Decline,” 68-9.

<sup>20</sup> Pluchinsky, “An Organizational and Operational Analysis,” 66-72.

<sup>21</sup> Pluchinsky, Dennis A, “Germany’s Red Army Faction: An Obituary,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 16, no. 2 (1993), 136.

<sup>22</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 170-1.

<sup>23</sup> David C. Rappaport, “The Four Waves of Terrorism” in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James Ludes (eds.), *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 47.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Andre Moncourt, and J. Smith, *trans.*, *The Urban Guerilla Concept*, (Montreal: Kersplebeed, 2009), 7.

the groups Dennis Pluchinsky classified as the Fighting Communist Organizations (FCOs) of Western Europe, namely the RAF in West Germany, RB in Italy, DA in France, and CCC in Belgium, among others.<sup>26</sup> Internationally, left-wing groups such as Sendero Luminoso and the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) materialized. The RAF differed from other third wave groups such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) or the Basque ETA, both of which mixed left-wing radicalism with nationalist sentiments. The RAF also differed from its left-wing West German contemporaries—the 2 June Movement and the Revolutionary Cells—who were more anarchist in ideology and used cell structures that were far less hierarchical than the RAF.<sup>27</sup>

This ideology of leftist radicalism terrorism lent itself to highly symbolic acts that killed few but struck specific targets that spoke to the organization's cause, such as airplane hijackings, hostage taking, and assassinations.<sup>28</sup> In line with this pattern, the RAF favored kidnappings, assassinations, and bombings. The RAF was noted for its excellent tradecraft, following potential targets and learning their habits before staging an attack.<sup>29</sup> Even if a target was heavily protected, the RAF would spend weeks looking into potential flaws that it could exploit instead of moving on to a more vulnerable target.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the organization's tactics and modus operandi did not stay stagnant over its 28-year lifespan. The third generation turned the RAF into a professional learning organization by studying the court cases of the first and second generation to "discover their weak spots."<sup>31</sup> Third generation members even began to apply an ointment to their fingertips when they realized that police were lifting fingerprints from toilet seats and refrigerators.<sup>32</sup> Measures like that allowed the third generation to consistently evade authorities. While the core of the first generation was arrested within a span of two months in 1972, after 1984, "not a single safe house used by RAF members was found."<sup>33</sup> This high level of tactical and organizational adaptability allowed the RAF to outlast almost all of the other

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<sup>26</sup> Pluchinsky "Obituary" 136.

<sup>27</sup> Della Porta 117-8

<sup>28</sup> Rappaport, "Four Waves," 57-8

<sup>29</sup> Horchem, *Terrorism and the Government Response*, 51

<sup>30</sup> Pluchinsky, "An Organizational and Operational Analysis," 55.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Kempe, "Deadly Survivors: The Cold War is Over, But Leftists Terrorists in Germany Fight On," *Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 1991, accessed November 29, 2016.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

Western European FCOs.<sup>34</sup>

Yet while the RAF was adaptive in terms of technique and tradecraft, the group's attempts to shift its ideology to gain widespread support were unsuccessful. The RAF began with the initial goal of a global Marxist revolution, then moved on to anti-American and anti-military sentiment, and finally established their stance as anti-European global power. Yet each attempt failed to create mass support or sympathy. In fact, beginning with the first generation, the RAF was frequently criticized from the left for both the group's motives and actions. A 1978 editorial board statement in a left-wing paper criticized the RAF, stating that the group lacked "the moral justification of the right to resistance" because "*the Federal Republic is not a fascist regime.*"<sup>35</sup> Then, the second generation failed to galvanize anti-American sentiment with attacks on military and NATO targets. Finally, the third generation was widely criticized for its methods and targeting; at the 1986 Frankfurt Congress, the participants labeled the 1985 murder of an American GI to obtain his ID card "an act of revolutionary self-justice."<sup>36</sup> The RAF became, in short, "outsiders, desperadoes in the eyes of extremists of the Left."<sup>37</sup>

While the RAF made several ideological shifts during its 28 year lifetime, there was always one constant from 1972 on—they always talked about the prisoners. The RAF's founding act was freeing Baader from prison, and prison and liberation often stood as metaphors for the RAF's battle against the FRG. As Dennis Pluchinsky notes, "the RAF essentially was born in the prisons," with the entire leadership of the first generation being arrested shortly after the May offensive of 1972.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, the issue of the prisoners was a major recruiting tool for the RAF. Mohnhaupt and Peter-Jürgen Book were two of the few members of the second generation who had personally known Baader and Ensslin. The others joined "out of sympathy—especially following the hunger strikes of some of the

<sup>34</sup> Pluchinsky, "Obituary," 136.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Sarah Colvin, *Ulrike Meinhof and West German Terrorism: Language, Violence, and Identity* (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), 233.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Horchem, "Decline," 67.

<sup>37</sup> Hans Horchem, "The Lost Revolution of West Germany's Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 1, no. 3 (1989), 356.

<sup>38</sup> Pluchinsky "Obituary" 138.



inmates in the Stuttgart-Stammheim high security prison.”<sup>39</sup> These supporters were often members of the “committees against torture” created to protest the conditions of the RAF prisoners, and many of the active members of the RAF as of 1980 were recruited from these groups.<sup>40</sup> An April 7<sup>th</sup>, 1977 communiqué stated that the RAF “will prevent the federal prosecutors and state security organs from taking revenge on the imprisoned fighters,” clearly placing the active commandos as the defenders and protectors of the prisoners.<sup>41</sup> From 1977 on, the RAF maintained a steadfast assertion that the Stammheim deaths were not suicides, but were in fact murders by the state, a narrative the group “consciously employed” to gain sympathy.<sup>42</sup>

In this manner, the RAF was able to use the issue of the prisoners to overcome their lack of ideological sway. As Jeremy Varon noted, “the drama of the prisoners provided a way for the RAF to rhetorically compensate for its chief political failure: to win a critical mass of West Germans to its armed struggle.”<sup>43</sup> In order to rally support, the prisoners were portrayed as living in horrible conditions, even though in reality they “were given four newspapers a day and were allowed to have 20 books at a time, their own radios, unlimited mail privileges, and contact with other prisoners.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, the “myth of the prisoners” was a key component to sustaining the RAF’s armed struggle and an aspect of the organization that the FRG would have to address in order to defeat the group.<sup>45</sup>

## GOVERNMENT COUNTERMEASURES

### *Police and Intelligence Measures: Overview*

There was one major hurdle for almost all FRG counterterrorist action—the design of the republic itself. In post-war Germany, the states (*Länder*) were

<sup>39</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 163

<sup>40</sup> Hans Horchem, “Terrorism and Government Response: The German Experience,” *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 3 (1980), 45.

<sup>41</sup> Pluchinsky, “An Operational and Organizational Analysis,” 60.

<sup>42</sup> Beatrice de Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism Performance: A comparative study* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 53.

<sup>43</sup> Jeremy Varon, “Stammheim Forever and the Ghosts of Guantánamo: Cultural Memory and the Politics of Incarceration” In *Baader-Meinhof Returns: History and Cultural Memory of German Left-Wing Terrorism*, ed. by Gerrit-Jan Berendse and Ingo Cornils (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 310-1.

<sup>44</sup> Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer Morrison Taw, “Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Insurgency,” RAND Corporation, 1992, 62.

<sup>45</sup> Pluchinsky, “Obituary,” 142.

purposefully strong to prevent another ideologue from taking power.<sup>46</sup> West Germany was thus a federation where the central government (*Bund*) shared equal power with the states.<sup>47</sup> However, failures to effectively combat terrorism at the state level led the ministers of each *Lander* in 1972 to give the Federal Criminal Police Office (*Bundeskriminalamt*, or BKA) “final authority over all police activity” within West Germany.<sup>48</sup> The BKA was centrally-controlled, and thus an ideal organization to combat the RAF throughout the Federal Republic.

Horst Herold, named head of the BKA in 1971, would oversee an immense growth in the organization. When he took over, the budget was DM 54.8 million, and by 1981, it had increased to DM 290 million.<sup>49</sup> BKA staffing rose from 930 to 3,536 personnel in that period.<sup>50</sup> Herold was a proponent of computerized systems who believed that the “most important thing in the fight against terrorism is to be systematic.”<sup>51</sup> However, in the early 1970s the BKA had a highly rudimentary card-index system that filed over 3 million documents.<sup>52</sup> Herold set out to modernize the BKA’s intelligence system by creating a computer at the BKA’s Wiesbaden office. Every address and name found on a captured terrorist or at the scene of an attack was put into the database.<sup>53</sup> The computer’s database was split into two sections—PIOS (persons, institutions, objects, and things) and BEFA (observations and search).<sup>54</sup> By the mid-1980s, PIOS had upwards of 135,000 people, 5,500 institutions, and 115,000 objects and things on file.<sup>55</sup>

This system was dubbed Herold’s “Nuremberg Model,” where “computers churned out up-to-the minute data and predictions that would be handed over

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<sup>46</sup> Christopher Dobson and Ronald Payne, *Counterattack: The West’s Battle Against the Terrorists* (New York: Facts on File, 1982), 95.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen M. Sobieck, “Democratic Responses to International Terrorism in Germany,” in *The Deadly Sin of Terrorism: Its Effect on Democracy and Civil Liberty in Six Countries*, ed. by David Charters (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 52.

<sup>48</sup> Alan, Rosenfeld, “Militant Democracy: The Legacy of West Germany’s War on Terror in the 1970s,” *The European Legacy* 19, no. 5 (2014), 577.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 59.

<sup>53</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 103.

<sup>54</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 59.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

to police.”<sup>56</sup> A key example was the July 1980 car crash that killed RAF members Wolfgang Beer and Juliane Plambeck. 2,500 pieces of information were gathered from the crash, some of which warned of an impending attack. Within days Herold announced the BKA had impounded four stolen cars with French plates that were going to be used in the operation.<sup>57</sup>

Police investigative powers were also expanded in addition to the intelligence apparatus. After a series of second generation attacks in late 1977, the criminal code was amended to give police more leeway in conducting investigations, including setting up road checkpoints and searching whole apartment buildings if even only one unit was under investigation.<sup>58</sup> Police were also given the right to tap phones and read mail.<sup>59</sup>

### *Paramilitary Measures: Overview*

Similar to the case of police and intelligence reform, the structure of the FRG was an initial obstacle to the creation of an effective counterterrorist paramilitary unit. Until 1972, the central government had no special unit for combating terrorism. Instead, that responsibility was left to the individual states. The Black September attack during the Munich Olympics laid bare that flaw in the system. When Palestinian terrorists stormed the Israeli team’s quarters in the Olympic Village, took hostages and demanded a prisoner release, it fell to the woefully unprepared Bavarian police to manage the incident. In an attempt to ambush the terrorists at the airport, policemen without training in sharpshooting were assigned as snipers. After they took their first shots, they hesitated and the surviving terrorists had time to detonate grenades and kill the remaining eleven hostages.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, “most of the deaths occurred during the poorly planned and conducted German attempt to rescue the hostages.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus, after the RAF’s May Offensive and the Munich Massacre, there was a strong desire in West Germany to develop a capable, well-trained counterterrorist special unit “in response to the proliferation of large, well-organized terrorist

<sup>56</sup> Rosenfeld, “Militant Democracy,” 576.

<sup>57</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 104.

<sup>58</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 54.

<sup>59</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 60-1.

<sup>60</sup> Martin C. Arostegui, *Twilight Warriors: Inside the World’s Special Forces* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 58.

<sup>61</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 48.

groups.”<sup>62</sup> The Federal Border Guard (BGS) was chosen as the parent agency of the new unit. For several years, the BGS had already acted as a frontline defense against terrorism in West Germany, protecting German embassies since 1970 and guarding airports since 1971.<sup>63</sup> The BGS was also chosen because it was centrally-controlled and thus could prevent the debacle of the Munich Olympics through dedicated training not available to local police forces.<sup>64</sup>

In an emergency meeting less than ten days after the Munich Massacre, the Lander interior ministers unanimously voted to create a special federal antiterrorist police unit called GSG-9 (*Grenzschutzgruppe 9*).<sup>65</sup> Unlike its contemporaries such as the American Delta Force or British SAS, GSG-9 was a civilian police unit; GSG-9 members were drawn from the BGS.<sup>66</sup> GSG-9 members received an extra nine months of commando training after BGS training.<sup>67</sup> The first five months were spent learning psychology training in martial arts and target practice.<sup>68</sup> Much of the non-kinetic early training was “devoted to knowledge of the law, especially as it applies to anti-terrorist operations.”<sup>69</sup> Additionally, members studied the origins, ideology, and tactics of terrorist groups.<sup>70</sup> The last four months of training focused on special operations preparations, including hijacking, kidnapping, and criminal pursuit scenarios.<sup>71</sup> Spurred on by the pressure of local police failures, the FRG was able to stand up a highly professional counterterrorist police unit in a short amount of time.

GSG-9 first saw use during the height of the German Autumn—the RAF second generation’s series of attacks in the fall of 1977 meant to pressure the FRG into releasing the first generation leaders held in Stammheim Prison. In September, an RAF commando kidnapped German industrialist Hans Martin Schleyer. In October, while Schleyer was still being held by the RAF, the PFLP hijacked a Lufthansa flight in solidarity and flew it to Mogadishu, Somalia. The

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<sup>62</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 131.

<sup>63</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 60.

<sup>64</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 96.

<sup>65</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 60.

<sup>66</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 97.

<sup>67</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 132.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 97.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>71</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 132.

FRG responded by deploying GSG-9 on “Operation Fire Magic,” a hostage rescue operation on the tarmac.<sup>72</sup> The Somali government gave the FRG permission to deploy GSG-9, and the West Germans told the hijackers they would be delivering the \$15 million requested in cash.<sup>73</sup> Instead, German commandos stormed the plane. Airport workers lit a fire on the tarmac as a distraction while twenty GSG-9 members and two SAS advisors snuck underneath the plane, used rubber-coated ladders to get onto the wings, and breached the over-wing emergency doors with plastic explosives.<sup>74</sup> In all of two minutes, the unit killed three of the four hijackers and rescued all ninety passengers aboard the plane.<sup>75</sup> The Mogadishu raid was GSG-9’s first operational use, and its “flawless performance” endeared the group to the West German public while demonstrating the unit’s professionalism and elite status.<sup>76</sup>

The unit would next see action during Operation Squirrel, the 1982 mission to capture the leading figures of the second generation.<sup>77</sup> In October 1982, German authorities discovered an RAF weapons cache with clues that led them to ten additional facilities.<sup>78</sup> On November 11<sup>th</sup>, police and GSG-9 arrested Brigitte Mohnhaupt and Adelheid Schulz and then captured Christian Klar five days later.<sup>79</sup> With the arrest of Mohnhaupt and Klar, leaders of the RAF since 1978, the second generation was essentially neutralized.

GSG-9’s final counter-RAF action took place in 1993. On June 27<sup>th</sup>, a West German informant met with the two leaders of the third generation, Birgit Hogefeld and Wolfgang Grams, at a train station in Bad Kleinen where 54 police agents, primarily GSG-9, were waiting.<sup>80</sup> Hogefeld was arrested, but Grams fled, killing a GSG-9 officer in the process before killing himself.<sup>81</sup>

### *Legal Measures: Overview*

<sup>72</sup> Rosenfeld, “Militant Democracy,” 568.

<sup>73</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 98. Arostegui, *Twilight Warriors*, 71.

<sup>74</sup> Arostegui, *Twilight Warriors*, 72.

<sup>75</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 61.

<sup>76</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 61. Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 133.

<sup>77</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 133.

<sup>78</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 164.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Kinzer, “Police Scandal Is Giving Germans an Inside Look at War Against Terrorists,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1993, accessed November 29, 2016.

<sup>81</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 170.

The FRG also made several changes to federal legislation in order to combat the RAF. In 1971, laws were passed to specify what activities constituted terrorist acts under German criminal law.<sup>82</sup> These included carrying out aircraft hijacking and hostage taking, as well as planning or preparing for such acts.<sup>83</sup> In April 1976, criminal law was expanded further. Amendment 129a to the Basic Law (the German constitution) criminalized membership in a terrorist organization, even if one had not participated in a terrorist act, with a five year maximum sentence.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, recruitment for or participation in a terrorist organization was made punishable under the law.<sup>85</sup>

The most contentious legal measures came in 1977. When it became evident that the RAF's lawyers were acting as couriers for the terrorists, provisions were made so that lawyers with terrorist sympathies could be banned from representing terrorists.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the controversial "contact ban" law was passed in 1977. The *Kontaktsperre* enabled authorities to seal inmates off from the outside world and from contact with one another in the case of an imminent threat.<sup>87</sup> It was first enforced during the kidnapping of Schleyer. While authorities later learned that the Stammheim prisoners were not actively controlling that operation (although they had ordered the 1975 attack on the West German embassy in Stockholm), the inmates were prevented from speaking to their lawyers for the duration of the incident.<sup>88</sup>

By 1989 there was still no law on the books regarding informants or the release of prisoners who had already served most of their sentence. After nineteen years combatting the RAF and no end in sight, the FRG decided to try another method. In an April 1989 interview, Christian Lochte, head of the Hamburg Office of the Protection of the Constitution, remarked that terrorism in the FRG "can be combatted most successfully by such measures as offers and amnesty or

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<sup>82</sup> Hoffman and Taw, "Strategic Framework," 59.

<sup>83</sup> Kevin G. Horbatiuk, "Anti-Terrorism: The West German Approach," *Fordham International Law Journal* 3, no. 2

(1979), 172-3.

<sup>84</sup> Rosenfeld, "Militant Democracy," 578-9.

<sup>85</sup> Sobieck, "Democratic Responses," 54.

<sup>86</sup> Rosenfeld, "Militant Democracy," 579.

<sup>87</sup> Horbatiuk, "Anti-Terrorism," 182-3.

<sup>88</sup> Hoffman and Taw, "Strategic Framework," 61-2.

dialogue, that may lead to the RAF's internal erosion and disintegration."<sup>89</sup> That year, a law was passed to allow repentant terrorists (*Aussteiger*) to receive reduced sentences in exchange for cooperation with law enforcement.<sup>90</sup> The law stayed untouched until January 1992, when German media first reported that Justice Minister Klaus Kinkel was planning a gradual release of RAF prisoners.<sup>91</sup> The idea originated in a coordination group on counterterrorism (*KG* at the BKA), which was made up of representatives from the Federal Prosecutor General, the BKA, and the BfV.<sup>92</sup> The group assessed that "the RAF's ideology had gradually turned into an associated dedication to the release of the prisoners."<sup>93</sup> After deciding that the prisoners were an ideal component to test, Kinkel was placed in charge of implementing the plan. In the first year of the program, four RAF resistance members and one commando member were released.<sup>94</sup> By 1996, Kinkel had released at least eight prisoners total, all of whom had already served anywhere from 17 to 22 years in prison.<sup>95</sup>

#### EVALUATING THE WEST GERMAN COUNTERMEASURES—SUCCESSSES AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE EFFECTS

With the RAF's ideology and structure in mind, this article will move on to an assessment of each government countermeasure. In particular, the three measures will be evaluated on how they contributed to the arrests of RAF members and the decline of each generation of the group, and also on their inefficiencies and shortfalls.

The existing literature on counterterrorism effectiveness is comprised of tactical-level best practices manuals, cross-national analyses, and single-country analyses such as this article. Intelligence gathering is widely seen as "the most important dimension of any counterterrorism effort," but involves several challenges: intelligence work must be accurate and timely, information often needs to be shared amongst domestic and international agencies, and the surveillance

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Hoffman and Taw, "Strategic Framework," 63.

<sup>90</sup> Sobieck, "Democratic Responses," 55.

<sup>91</sup> Moghadam, "Failure and Disengagement," 171.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Pluchinsky, "Obituary," 143.

<sup>95</sup> Moghadam, "Failure and Disengagement," 171.

methods will be subject to much public scrutiny.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, “good intelligence can’t guarantee success, but bad intelligence can guarantee failure.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, while strong actionable intelligence is an important component of a counterterrorism response, it is sometimes even more important to not have poor information. With that intelligence in hand, law enforcement agencies are responsible for finding and arresting terrorists, but their effectiveness depends on cooperation between agencies and maintenance of a level of police professionalism that does not bleed into militarism.<sup>98</sup> Finally, calls for legal measures often occur when the existing system is perceived as “not sufficient to deal with a persistent or serious threat.”<sup>99</sup> These legal reforms can be necessary to support police and paramilitary effectiveness but run the risk of in fact undermining the rule of law if the measures infringe on civil liberties.<sup>100</sup>

Counterterrorism theories focus largely on “the interplay between action and counter-reaction.”<sup>101</sup> Therefore, one of the most challenging aspects of counterterrorism policymaking is that of a measured response. Tom Parker’s research shows that punitive measures can “enhance the credibility of the terrorist cause,” and thus undermine a liberal democracy’s fight against terrorism.<sup>102</sup> Crafting a measured response was a factor that played into all three components of West German counterterrorism.

### *Police and Intelligence Effectiveness*

The computerized intelligence apparatus built by Herold proved to be a helpful tool for the FRG. Within six weeks of using one database in 1978, fifteen terrorists were found.<sup>103</sup> The implementation of computer terminals connected to the database led to a threefold increase in arrests between 1975 and 1976, many

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<sup>96</sup> James J. F. Forest, ed. *Essentials of Counterterrorism*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), <https://psi.praeger.com/Topics/Display/2058280?cid=137&sid=2058280>, 12-13.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Forest, *Essentials*, 44-5.

<sup>98</sup> Forest, *Essentials*, 21-2, 44.

<sup>99</sup> Alex P. Schmid and Ronald D. Crelinsten, “Western Responses to Terrorism: A Twenty-Five Year Balance Sheet,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 4, no. 4 (1992), 330.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Alex P. Schmid, *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central, 255.

<sup>102</sup> Parker, “Fighting an Antaeon Enemy,” 158.

<sup>103</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 101.



at border checkpoints and airports with the new terminals installed.<sup>104</sup> However, these methods ultimately fell short against an increasingly adaptable enemy. Later generations worked to avoid detection, using regular cars instead of the flashy sports cars that Baader liked<sup>105</sup> and borrowing apartments from supporters rather than renting them.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, the third generation's modus operandi was far "less conducive to computer searches" because they executed operations that required "little in the way of prior arrangements."<sup>107</sup>

The BKA computing system was also limited by an overabundance of information.<sup>108</sup> In 1978, when Gerhard Baum became Minister of the Interior, he ordered an inquiry into the Wiesbaden computer that found an overwhelming amount of data; 37 databanks contained 4.7 million names, 3,100 organizations, 2.1 million fingerprints, and 1.9 million photographs of individuals.<sup>109</sup> Additionally, the computer system could only work if all levels of government were cooperating. In 1977, a hint on the kidnapped Schleyer's location was lost for several days because of a dispute between state and city level officials.<sup>110</sup>

Finally, there was serious public concern about government surveillance and data collection. If an individual applied for a public service job, their name was fed into the database.<sup>111</sup> Baum expressed the concerns of many ordinary Germans when he commented that "we can always call for new laws when what we really need is more composure."<sup>112</sup> Thus, beginning in 1981, laws were passed restricting police surveillance.<sup>113</sup> Stories of a new surveillance state appeared in German publications *Stern* and *Der Spiegel*, and Herold was pushed into retirement by Baum in 1981 amidst increased scrutiny of BKA surveillance.<sup>114</sup> The debate was largely put to rest in 1983 with the "census verdict" of the Federal Constitutional Court, which reaffirmed the individual's right to protection against the individual

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<sup>104</sup> Hoffman and Taw, "Strategic Framework," 109.

<sup>105</sup> He was known for a proclivity for red BMW's, which were dubbed "Baader-Meinhof Wagens" at the time.

<sup>106</sup> Hoffman and Taw, "Strategic Framework," 110.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Aust, *Baader-Meinhof*, 141.

<sup>109</sup> Sobieck, "Democratic Responses," 60.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 108.

<sup>113</sup> Hoffman and Taw, "Strategic Framework," 110.

<sup>114</sup> Rosenfeld, "Militant Democracy," 581

collection of their personal data, effectively putting an end to Herold's model.<sup>115</sup> By 1992, less than 200 suspected sympathizers and associates were listed in the database.<sup>116</sup>

### *GSG-9: Effectiveness*

GSG-9 had several early operational successes, but was hampered in later years by bureaucratic squabbles and an increasingly adaptive enemy. The unit's first operation, the Mogadishu raid, was so successful that it served as a strong deterrent—no West German plane was ever hijacked afterwards.<sup>117</sup> However, this led the second and third generations of the RAF to turn to other tactics. After the Mogadishu raid, the RAF “modified their own activities, deliberately pursuing objectives by means that circumvent the force's particular abilities.”<sup>118</sup> GSG-9 effectively put itself out of business, and its unique toolset of hostage rescue was unable to counter the third generation's hit-and-run attacks.<sup>119</sup> Thus, since 1977, with the exception of the 1982 and 1993 arrests of RAF leaders, GSG-9's primary activity has been training other counterterrorist forces around the world.<sup>120</sup>

GSG-9 also faced another major limitation—the bureaucratic and competitive nature of the individual German states. GSG-9 could only be deployed in Germany with the permission of the state authorities. Yet state-level law enforcement units were “extremely territorial” and often refused because GSG-9 members are paid more and the unit receives federal funding that could be going to the states.<sup>121</sup> Even though GSG-9 is highly trained and capable, state ministers would even refuse their services. For example, in 1972 GSG-9 was asked to take part in a nationwide sweep for terrorists, but one state Minister of the Interior rejected them, remarking that “all they do is shoot.”<sup>122</sup>

One final challenge to the effectiveness of GSG-9 was allegations of misconduct and unlawful use of force. In the 1993 operation to capture the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 582.

<sup>116</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 110.

<sup>117</sup> Sobieck, “Democratic Responses,” 61.

<sup>118</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 133.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Quoted in Dobson and Payne, *Counterattack*, 99.

leaders of the third generation, police were alleged to have subdued and summarily executed Wolfgang Grams.<sup>123</sup> However, this debate was ultimately resolved by the rulings of several courts, culminating in judgement by the European Court of Human Rights that found insufficient evidence for the claim.<sup>124</sup>

It is important to note that GSG-9's three operations against the RAF were actions that directly or indirectly neutralized each generation's leadership (the Mogadishu raid led to the Stammheim suicides, and the 1982 and 1993 operations involved the arrests of the leading figures of the second and third generation). However, against an enemy such as the RAF, which was specifically designed with a small (never larger than 15-25 members) active, underground commando group and a larger pool of "militant supporters" living openly and legally, taking out the leadership cannot succeed on its own.<sup>125</sup> The RAF proved several times that even when its entire leadership was arrested, "new leaders stepped forward and were able to continue the RAF's activities," coming up from the ranks of the resistance or sympathizer levels to join the commando group and replace the arrested members.<sup>126</sup> Thus, GSG-9's successful capture operations were an important part of the counterterrorism campaign, but were not sufficient on their own because of the RAF's adaptive structure.

### *Legal Measures: Effectiveness*

In a similar manner to the BKA's intelligence collection, legal counterterrorism measures were somewhat effective but also fraught with public outcry and debate. The implementation of the contact ban during the German Autumn proved ineffectual because RAF prisoner Jan Carl-Raspe had a smuggled transistor radio in his cell and heard of the failure at Mogadishu.<sup>127</sup> He shared the news with his fellow prisoners and they promptly committed suicide that night. Thus, the law's implementation failed to completely seal the prisoners off from the outside world. Had it been implemented earlier, the contact ban could have prevented the first generation prisoners from coordinating attacks. However, their involvement in outside actions was not widely known until 1976, when the

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<sup>123</sup> Kinzer, "Police Scandal".

<sup>124</sup> Nils Melzer, *Targeted Killing in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10-11.

<sup>125</sup> Pluchinsky, "An Organizational and Operational Analysis," 53.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

<sup>127</sup> Aust, *Baader-Meinhof*, 410-11.

contact ban was promptly created and enforced. The suite of laws passed in 1976 and 1977 was effective at neutralizing the RAF lawyers—in one case radical lawyer Arndt Mueller was charged with smuggling the pistols that Raspe and Baader used to commit suicide.<sup>128</sup>

The contact ban faced public criticism, particularly after the Stammheim prisoners appealed to several different courts. Both the German Federal Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights found the measures constitutional and justified in mitigating the threat that the prisoners still posed.<sup>129</sup> However, that didn't stop the RAF from continuing to propagandize the myth of prisoner abuse. Instead, it would take further action to neutralize that narrative.

### *Effects of the Kinkel Initiative*

The Kinkel Initiative can be directly tied to the decline of the third generation. The coercive measures of the BKA and GSG-9 had put pressure on the terrorists, but the RAF was always able to recruit more operatives who were sympathetic to the plight of the RAF prisoners. Thus, the logic behind the prisoner release program was that “defusing the RAF prisoner issue could damage the RAF’s recruitment efforts.”<sup>130</sup> In this regard, the program was highly successful, so much so that the RAF began debate over how to respond. Initially, the group publicly embraced the initiative, stating in an April 1992 communiqué that the government had finally “begun to understand that a solution has to be found in the matter of these prisoners,” and that the RAF would be beginning a ceasefire.<sup>131</sup> The communiqué was released by those conducting attacks at the commando level, demonstrating that the ceasefire had the full weight of the operational RAF behind it.<sup>132</sup> Yet not all of the prisoners agreed with this position. Several hardcore prisoners publicly refused to give up the armed struggle.<sup>133</sup> In October 1993, Brigitte Mohnhaupt, speaking for herself and many other RAF prisoners, decried the initiative and referred to a split in the RAF.<sup>134</sup> Yet the active

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<sup>128</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 62.

<sup>129</sup> Horbatiuk, “Anti-Terrorism,” 186-8.

<sup>130</sup> Pluchinsky, “Obituary,” 139.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 170.

<sup>134</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 170. Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism*

RAF members continued to support the initiative, drawing a wedge between those in the group wanting to continue the struggle and those willing to take the way out being offered a way out by the government. Kinkel was correct in assessing that “without the prisoners, there would no longer be a RAF,” and the group would take no further action until disbanding in 1998.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to dividing the group, the initiative also cut through the narrative of the prisoner’s plight. If the RAF sympathizers refused to believe that the prison conditions were in fact adequate, then this initiative would at least prove that the government was capable of treating prisoners well. Finally, the Kinkel Initiative broke through the RAF’s suicidal logic. First generation member Holger Meins wrote in his final letter that “people who refuse to end the struggle, they win or they die: instead of losing and dying.”<sup>136</sup> In contrast, the gradual release of prisoners provided an alternative exit strategy from terrorism.

### *External Factors*

However, it is important to acknowledge factors other than government countermeasures that contributed to the RAF’s demise. The most evident of these was the reunification of Germany and the fall of the Soviet Union. For years, the East German Ministry of State Security, or Stasi, had aided the RAF. It remains unclear just how much support the RAF received from the Stasi, but there are three concrete examples of collaborations between the two. In 1980, the Stasi held strategy discussions with the RAF on the topic of recruitment, meetings that finished with a Stasi promise to provide intelligence to the terrorist organization.<sup>137</sup> Then, in early 1981, Stasi agents trained three RAF members to use rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), the same weapon the RAF would use in September of that year in their botched attempt to kill General Frederick Kroeson, the head of all U.S. forces in West Germany.<sup>138</sup> Finally, in a policy codenamed “Stern 2,” the Stasi gave safe haven to ten RAF members who moved to East Germany between 1980 and 1982.<sup>139</sup> This was not an operational safe haven, but rather an opportunity for disengaged members to escape law enforcement and a life underground in the

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*Performance*, 54.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Pluchinsky, “Obituary,” 143.

<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Horchem, “Decline,” 74.

<sup>137</sup> Kempe, “Deadly Survivors.”

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> Moghadam, “Failure and Disengagement,” 168.

FRG. As one Stasi official explained, “the former terrorists were granted GDR citizenship and their new cover stories only after they expressly sworn to desist from any further terrorist attacks and promised to break off any relationship with the RAF.”<sup>140</sup> Upon German reunification in 1990, nine of those former RAF members were arrested in the former German Democratic Republic.<sup>141</sup> Thus, with the fall of the Berlin Wall came an end to the decades-long relationship between the Stasi and the RAF, and the loss of materiel and intelligence support that entailed.

More important than losing the Stasi’s support, the RAF had lost its ideological backdrop with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe. There was no longer an East versus West conflict on the global stage to give the RAF a foundation for its armed struggle. The West had won, Marxism was discredited, and the RAF appeared to be a relic of a bygone age. The RAF’s April 1992 communiqué announcing an effective ceasefire coincided with these international changes. The communiqué refers to the changes in the “international balance of power” and how the “collapse of the socialist states” had caused the RAF to rethink their strategy.<sup>142</sup>

### **LESSONS FOR THE U.S. CAMPAIGNS AGAINST AL QAEDA AND ISIS**

What lessons can be extracted for the current U.S. campaigns against al Qaeda and ISIS? At a base level, the West German campaign against the RAF was primarily a domestic affair and countermeasures were always oriented towards an internal threat.<sup>143</sup> For example, the RAF completely failed to develop a united European terrorist front, but al Qaeda and ISIS have been notably successful at ‘franchising’ global Jihad and gaining affiliates worldwide. The RAF did build strong connections with the Palestinian movement, but never created anything even close the scale of the international network of ISIS and al Qaeda. Thus, there is much to learn from the German experience in how to properly address homegrown threats.

Another key difference between the RAF and al Qaeda, and especially ISIS, is targeting. The RAF was highly selective about its targets. Their ideology

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Horchem, “Decline,” 63.

<sup>141</sup> Horchem, “Decline,” 61.

<sup>142</sup> Pluchinsky, “Obituary,” 148.

<sup>143</sup> Hoffman and Taw, “Strategic Framework,” 123.

might have been muddled, but the targets were always clearly explained in political terms for their symbolic value to the ideology of that generation of the group. Al Qaeda is less selective, and ISIS is practically not selective at all, killing ruthlessly and indiscriminately.

For all of these differences, there are still many similarities among the RAF, al Qaeda, and ISIS. All three groups viewed themselves as the vanguard. They were to bring about great change in the world, but did not have a clear idea of what to do afterwards. All three groups effused a very defensive logic. The RAF was first defending itself against a repressive state, then defending the Vietnamese against the U.S. military, and finally defending its own prisoners from mistreatment at the hands of the authorities. Similarly, Salafi Jihad ideology is inherently defensive, with influence from such works as *In Defense of Muslim Lands* by Abdullah Azzam. The Salafi Jihadi is viewed as the righteous defender of Muslims against foreigners who seek to dominate holy lands.

Yet another similarity is the demographic makeup of the leadership and ordinary members of the group. All three had educated or well-off leadership. As Bret Stephens noted, the leaders of the group were “not the wretched of the earth, but the educated and disgruntled children of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>144</sup> Of the core of the first generation of the RAF, Meinhof was a famous columnist, Mahler a lawyer, and Ensslin had been enrolled in a PhD program.<sup>145</sup> Similarly, Ayman al-Zawahiri, currently the head of al Qaeda, was a surgeon and Mohamed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers, was an urban planner.<sup>146</sup> Osama bin Laden was incredibly well off, coming from one of the richest families in Saudi Arabia. In the case of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is a theologian who reportedly received a PhD in Islamic studies. However, the general makeup of the lower ranks of the group differed widely. The RAF initially recruited through the court-mandated social work of Baader and Ensslin. This attracted such members as Peter-Jürgen Book, a lost and impressionable young man who had dropped out of his apprenticeship, was arrested for drug possession, and ended up helping to start a riot in juvenile detention.<sup>147</sup> Al Qaeda and ISIS have similarly recruited less-educated foot soldiers to bolster the movement.

With these common and differing traits in mind, what lessons can be

<sup>144</sup> Bret Stephens, “Red Terror, Green Terror,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sep 11, 2007.

<sup>145</sup> Sarah Colvin, *Ulrike Meinhof*, 82

<sup>146</sup> Stephens, “Red Terror, Green Terror”.

<sup>147</sup> Aust, *Baader-Meinhof*, 46-49.

drawn from the West German counterterrorism experience? First, there is a clear lesson about breaking down terrorist narratives in order to stop radicalization and recruitment. The Kinkel Initiative helped to break down the narrative of the prisoner's plight. Similarly, ISIS built its early recruitment on the narrative of its success and the glory of traveling to the Levant to join the fight. James K. Glassman, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, suggested a policy of creating videos of interviews with former or captured ISIS militants detailing the accurate picture of the daily strife of fighting in Iraq and Syria, and posting those videos on message boards frequented by potential recruits.<sup>148</sup> Such a program could help to counter radicalization by breaking down the narrative pushed by ISIS on Twitter of the fun and adventurous life of the jihadi. If a potential recruit sees a video of a despondent captured fighter and has to compare that with the rosy picture ISIS presents on social media, they might think twice about committing to the fight.

Secondly, the government must be careful not to fuel the narrative themselves by overreacting. Terrorism is a strategy of provocation, and the RAF was explicitly channeling Marighella by trying to goad the FRG into repressive countermeasures. The West German government walked a fine line between crushing the RAF and overstepping civil liberties, and in doing so avoided playing into the hands of the terrorists. The historian Jeremy Varon went so far as to draw a parallel between Stammheim Prison and Guantanamo.<sup>149</sup> The comparison might be a stretch, but the lesson is clear. The U.S. needed to rethink its policies of rendition and torture, because they are actions that further propel the terrorists' narratives and the perceived legitimacy of their armed struggle.

Thirdly, and this is a lesson applicable to both domestic and international terrorism, it is clear from the West German experience that decapitation, or the process of targeting and neutralizing terrorist leaders, does not work on its own. As Pluchinsky notes, on "two occasions, in 1972 and 1982, the whole RAF leadership was arrested by German authorities; however, new leaders stepped forward and were able to continue the RAF's activities."<sup>150</sup> Decapitation initially failed because the first generation leaders were able to control operations from inside their cells. It later failed because the RAF had created such a strong

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<sup>148</sup> Notes on Glassman presentation, June 3, 2016, AEI.

<sup>149</sup> Jeremy Varon, "Stammheim Forever," 303-325.

<sup>150</sup> Pluchinsky, "An Organizational and Operational Analysis," 44.



narrative around itself that more recruits came out when Mohnhaupt and Klar were captured in 1982, and the RAF's flexible structure of commando and sympathizer levels allowed supporters to fill the void. The U.S. campaigns against al Qaeda and ISIS have been similarly plagued with a sometimes singular focus on terrorist leaders and key figures such as bomb makers or propaganda producers.

This is not to say that decapitation is not effective or that it should not be used at all. Neutralizing terrorist leaders is a vital component of any counterterrorist strategy, but it's just that—a component. It was not until the FRG implemented measures to allow terrorists to disavow violence in exchange for freedom that the RAF's ideology and cohesion were damaged enough to prevent more sympathizers from taking the place of imprisoned members. Thus, the West German experience shows that decapitation is but a singular tactic, and that it will backfire if not effectively combined with and supported by a host of other policies.

## CONCLUSION

At the outset of this 28-year battle, West Germany was woefully unprepared to face a determined and adaptable terrorist threat. The West German government scrambled to put together a response after the shock in 1972 of both the Munich Massacre and the RAF's 'May Offensive.' As Beatrice de Graaf aptly notes, "until 1975, a national strategy was virtually absent."<sup>151</sup> However, once the threat was identified, the state greatly expanded the size and funding of the federal police and intelligence forces and stood up a new, highly professional paramilitary antiterrorist force. In turn, each element played its part. The demise of the first generation can be attributed to effective police work that captured all of the leaders of the RAF within two months of the May 1977 offensive. Paramilitary work by GSG-9 stopped the first generation's last hope of getting out of prison and ensured the capture of the second generation's two leaders in 1972. Finally, just as the RAF was struggling to redefine itself amidst the fall of Communism, the Kinkel Initiative sowed dissent in the group and led to its eventual dissolution in 1998.

West Germany's efforts to eradicate the RAF highlighted the tension for democratic states between defeating terrorists and maintaining liberal values. The RAF may not have posed an existential threat to the state, but it did "expose contradictions inherent in the modern democratic state's dual commitment to guaranteeing civil liberties while safeguarding the lives and property of its

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<sup>151</sup> Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism Performance*, 65.

citizens.”<sup>152</sup> At the heart of this was the controversy over surveillance, as well as the discussion of prisoner treatment and torture.

However, once a response was put together the West German government showed a great deal of restraint. The first generation of the RAF had mobilized because of heavy-handed police tactics, most notably the shooting of unarmed protestor Benno Ohnesorg. Yet, as Parker notes, “German authorities adopted a much more measured response to the terrorist threat after a while.”<sup>153</sup> The state was able to combat terrorism decisively, while still maintaining a sense of “moral legitimacy.”<sup>154</sup> In turn, it was the RAF that was isolated from the left because it was seen as too violent or too out of touch with their political goals. In short, the RAF’s attempt at provocation failed because West German counterterrorism was firm yet not over-reactive. Hans Horchem accurately described this balance:

The RAF must meanwhile realize that its attempt to bomb the Federal Republic into a revolutionary situation has failed. The state reacted with firmness and flexibility. Overreaction was avoided. The terrorists were unable to mobilize fresh recruits to fight on their side as a result of exploitation of any behavioural errors on the part of the police authorities and other organs of the state.<sup>155</sup>

To be sure, the FRG’s actions did not account entirely for the decline of the RAF. The organization was successful in tactical and operational shifts, but its ideological changes failed to galvanize support, instead confusing and turning away potential supporters because of the frequent shifts in objectives. A perfect storm had truly occurred. The RAF had been losing supporters, having trouble recruiting, and hardcore members in prison were losing their “revolutionary zeal.”<sup>156</sup> Additionally, the organization was suffering from “ideological fatigue” because the fall of the Soviet Union left the RAF without a strong ideological background.<sup>157</sup> With only the cause of the prisoners left, the Kinkel Initiative

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<sup>152</sup> Rosenfeld, “Militant Democracy,” 569.

<sup>153</sup> Parker, “Fighting an Antaeus Enemy,” 172.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> Horchem, “Lost Revolution,” 356.

<sup>156</sup> Pluchinsky, “Obituary,” 144.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

was able to cut the last legs out from under Western Europe's most evasive and adaptable terrorist organization.

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