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1970s Terrorism Goes Cinema: A Comparative View of "The Baader Meinhof Complex" (Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex) and "United Red Army" (実録・連合赤軍:あさま山荘への道)

Christian W. Spang

Lately, history has become one of the preferred topics of German filmmakers. "Downfall" (Der Untergang, 2004), depicting Hitler's final weeks, and Oscar-winning "The Lives of Others" (Das Leben der Anderen, 2006), dealing with former East Germany's secret police (Staatssicherheit or "Stasi"), are two eminent examples of this trend. "Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex" (BMK), portraying West German left-wing terrorism in the 1970s, follows along these lines (the movie poster is on page 28). Like "Downfall" it is a big-budget production by Bernd Eichinger. Both movies were nominated for an Oscar.

"Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex" is, in fact, based on a 1985 monograph by Stefan Aust. The movie even uses the same title as the book, which refers to Andreas Baader (1943-1977) and Ulrike Meinhof (1934-1976), two of the most notorious German revolutionaries of the 1970s. Aust was editor-in-chief of Germany's well-known news magazine *Der Spiegel* until 2008. He knew some of the terrorists before they went into hiding and conducted in-depth research prior to publishing the first edition of his book 25 years ago. The movie starts by showing the confrontation between left-wing students and the West German state in the late 1960s. After that, it depicts the establishment and the early years of the "Baader-Meinhof-Gruppe", which only later adopted the name "Rote Armee Fraktion" (RAF). Since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., the global interest in terrorism reached unprecedented hights. This might be the reason why films like BMK or the Japanese movie "United Red Army" (URA) have been produced in recent years.

Radical members of the German student movement interpreted the policy of West Germany (and the USA) as imperialist or even fascist and hoped to instigate some kind of proletarian revolution. Two incidents in the late 1960s in West Berlin finally pushed some of them towards terrorism. On 2 June 1967, Benno Ohnesorg, a recently married and politically inexperienced arts student, was killed during a protest march by a police officer, who was, in fact, a Stasi informer at the time. The second of the above-mentioned events was the shooting of the most outspoken student-leader, Rudi Dutschke, on 11 April 1968. He was severely wounded by a right-wing assassin, after the conservative Springer-press (Bild-Zeitung, etc.) had been running an anti-Dutschke campaign for months. The following violent demonstrations finally paved the way for the foundation of three German terrorist groups: "Bewegung 2. Juni", "Revolutionäre Zellen", and the RAF.

After some bank robberies to finance their activities, the RAF staged a series of bombings in May 1972, but by the end of that year all RAF founders and their closest collaborators had been arrested. Their successors, the so-called "second generation", focussed on strategies to free their imprisoned idols, which were initially kept in total isolation for some time. Against this treatment by the state, the radicals protested by various joint hunger strikes. When Holger Meins, one of the widely known first generation members, died in 1974 as a result of one of these strikes, he became a martyr for the leftist scene in West Germany. His death revived the left-wing solidarity for the terrorists which had been weakened by the bombing spree of 1972. In April 1975, a RAF commando took hostages at the West German embassy in Stockholm. The untimely explosion of one of

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their own bombs ended the unsuccessful attempt to free the RAF prisoners that left four people dead. Later, Ulrike Meinhof killed herself in prison in 1976 after severe infighting with fellow founding-member Gudrun Ensslin.

In 1977 the conflict between the RAF and the Federal Republic of Germany finally escalated. The second generation tried to force the government to release Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe from their high-security prison in Stuttgart-Stammheim. In April 1977, the RAF murdered federal prosecutor-general Siegfried Buback, in July they killed the director of Dresdner Bank, Jürgen Ponto, and in September the RAF kidnapped the chairman of the German Employers' Organisation, Hanns-Martin Schleyer. This lead to dragged out indirect negotiations between the terrorists and the West German government. To increase the pressure, the RAF organized external support for their cause: On 13 October four members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (P.F.L.P.) hijacked a Lufthansa Boeing 737 called "Landshut" with about 90 people onboard and demanded the liberation of Baader, Ensslin and Raspe, amongst others. When a German special force group (GSG 9) freed the hostages in Mogadishu (Somalia) after five days in the hands of the terrorists, the RAF inmates in Stuttgart realized that there was no way out and committed suicide – some of them with weapons their attorneys had smuggled into the prison. The subsequent murder of Hanns-Martin Schleyer ended six weeks of terror in West Germany, the so-called "German Autumn". Until today, many details of the 1977 executions and several other RAF crimes are unsolved. In various cases it remains unclear who was involved in which way. All these murders and attacks are shown very realistically in the movie – a fact that not everyone liked particularly. It should be remembered, though, that the RAF was a terrorist group. Despite the fact that numerous members were highly intelligent, their aim was to trigger revolution by action not by words. They risked the lives of innocent people to spread their "message". This is clearly shown in the movie – without making monsters out of the terrorists.

Half a year before BMK was released, Wakamatsu Kōji's low-budget movie "United Red Army" opened in Japan. It deals with another terrorist group, the so-called Rengō Sekigun, a splinter group of Japanese 1970s terrorism. Like the German movie, URA begins with a (rather long) section on the student movement. Then it shows the internal conflicts between the student-terrorists and the lynching of many Rengō Sekigun members by their own peers in a training camp in the Japanese Alps. The group had some contacts with other Japanese terrorists. Nevertheless, it should not be confused with the more active and long-lived Nihon Sekigun. It was the Nihon Sekigun leader Shigenobu Fusako who was arrested only a few years ago in Ōsaka after living for decades in the Near East, organizing terrorist attacks abroad. More than anywhere else in the two movies under review, the lynching scenes in URA show the narrow-mindedness as well as the ideological bias and blindness of the terrorists. The last part of URA depicts the final showdown of the group with the police in 1972. From 19 to 28 February, five terrorists held one hostage in a mountain lodge near Karuizawa (Asama sansō). The rescue operation by the police was a media event, being broadcast live on Japanese TV for many hours. Nearly 40 years later, the English as well as the Japanese Wikipedia have rather long entries on this incident, indicating the historical importance of this outbreak of violence in Japan.

Both movies use original (TV-) footage from the 1960s and 70s, which they blend in to gain some authenticity. As URA includes more original material and regularly inserts the names of important locations and those of the involved terrorists, it feels more like a documentary, while BMK comes across like an action movie, based on historical facts. Without the insertion of names, it is difficult to distinguish between the many (lesser known) RAF terrorists. Due to the exceptionally high number of people and locations as well as the fast sequence of the scenes, even native speakers find themselves

in trouble grasping some of the details of BMK.

The film was released in Japan in the summer of 2009 with Japanese subtitles and is available on DVD now, as is URA. Yet, it is not an easy task to comprehend the events depicted in "Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex" if one cannot understand the original German. Furthermore, it has to be stressed here that viewers without a basic knowledge of the

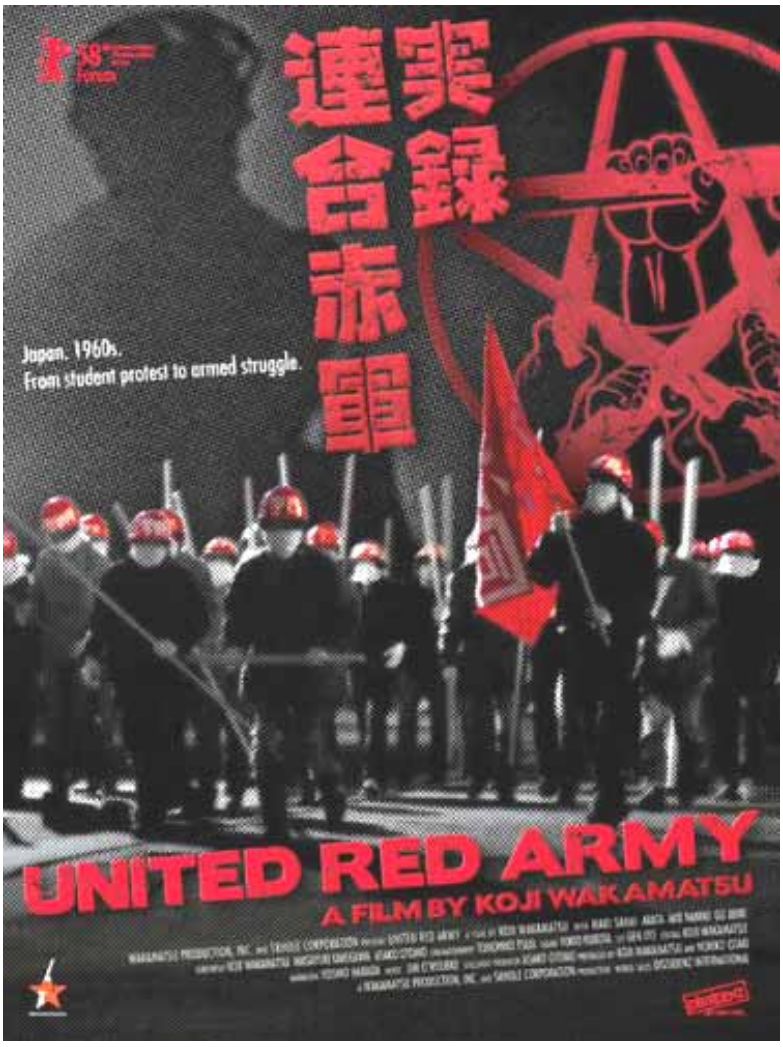

Figure 1. Movie poster of "United Red Army". Retrieved December 15, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:UnitedRedArmy.MoviePoster.jpg

historical background will have a hard time keeping up with the action. However, as the German and the Japanese movie retell the past of known terrorist groups, potential viewers can prepare themselves before watching either of the movies. By searching the Internet, reading some reviews, etc., it is possible to gather relevant knowledge about the student movement and the political situation of the 1970s, as well as to find information about the RAF or Rengō Sekigun. After that, everyone should be in a position to follow the unfolding story in both cases and learn a lot about an important chapter of German and Japanese post-war societies.

One of the reasons why BMK attracted a large audience is the fact that the terrorist activities of the RAF are still widely known and discussed in Germany. Every year, many articles are published in newspapers and journals about the group, which did not officially dissolve itself before 1998 after having killed more than 30 people during their futile fight against the West German state. Furthermore, a number of biographies have been published, mostly focussing on Ulrike Meinhof, who was (and for some still is) an icon of the radical left. Shortly before BMK came into cinemas, there was an intensive public debate about the (upcoming) release of two of the leading figures of the second generation: In March 2007 Brigitte Mohnhaupt left prison after 24 years, and in December 2008 Christian Klar followed after a term of 26 years. Despite the fact they had been sentenced to life imprisonment, German law stipulates that even capital offenders have to be released after 20-25 years in prison if they no longer pose any severe danger to society. The continued German interest in the RAF contrasts sharply with the much lower level of common knowledge about the home-grown 1970s terrorism in Japan. In this respect, anything before the 1995 sarin-gas attacks by the Aum Shinrikyō sect seems to be beyond the horizon of many Japanese, particularly those who do not have first-hand experience of the 1970s.

It has to be stressed here that the actors do a very good job portraying the terrorist in both movies. But while the Japanese artists are not particularly famous ones, some of their German counterparts are among the most popular faces in that country's showbiz. This creates some interference problems for

German viewers because the terrorists unconsciously acquire some positive image through former roles of the actors (e.g., Andreas Baader is portrayed by Moritz Bleibtreu, who stars in "Run, Lola Run!"). This contrasts with the actors that took the roles of the police chief in charge of counter-terrorist activities (Bruno Ganz, who played Hitler in "Downfall") and the judge of the trial against Baader, Ensslin, Meinhof and Raspe (Thomas Thieme, who is the corrupt East German state minister in "The Lives of Others"). Their former roles bring along rather negative images for these representatives of state. For people who are not familiar with German cinema and TV-productions, this difficulty does, of course, not exist.

Some critics have argued that BMK focuses too much on action; others disapproved of the fact that the victims barely play any role at all (Buback, 2008; Siemens, 2007). Public opinion as well as the reactions of the responsible politicians are kept largely out of the story. All this criticism is beside the point, though, because the filmmakers never intended to present a complete or novel interpretation of German left-wing terrorism. They confined themselves to make a movie out of Stefan Aust's book, where the above-mentioned aspects are barely mentioned. On the one hand, there is, in fact, rather little room for any in-depth explanations of the underlying (disturbing) logic of the RAF founders and their successors in the movie, but on the other hand, that means that it is open for various interpretations. While several reviewers called this attitude "apolitical", others accused BMK of offering a clean and easy to swallow version of the story, leaving out most of the controversial conspiracy theories surrounding the death of some RAF members. By doing so, these critics argue, the movie tries to put an end to any debate about the RAF. In fact, the controversial discussion about the movie and the intention of the filmmakers shows again that RAF terrorism is still fresh in people's minds. The arrest of second-generation member Verena Becker in August 2009 for her alleged involvement with the execution of Siegfried Buback in 1977 will keep the public argument going. The fact that new DNA-testing methods brought this new development about, seems to indicate that there will be further investigations into some of the unsolved cases – many of them committed by the so-called third generation RAF members, active between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s.

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Figure 2. Movie poster of "Der Baader-Meinhof-Komplex". Retrieved December 15, 2009, from http://www.bmk.film.de