

C. L. Sulzberger

BONN — The Germans are perhaps the best soldiers in the world although, thank heavens, they have had no chance of proving this for more than 30 years.

They recently seemed to be in the process of becoming the best terrorists if one can qualify that unchartered form of brutality. Nevertheless, they have not yet developed a philosopher or theorist of terror as they did for war which was done with deadly logic by Gen. Karl von Clausewitz.

German terrorism — and at the forefront, of course, comes the terrible Baader-Meinhof gang or Red Army faction — has shown itself ruthless, brutal and, as far as one can ascertain, mindless. All in all the gang appeared more effective than its Palestinian, Irish, Brazilian, Argentinian, Uruguayan and Japanese colleagues, to name a few.

Technologically and in terms of method, all these groups are to some degree linked. Yet their objectives frequently differ. On Nov. 9, 1969 I wrote: "Vietnam has been the codeword for the formidable array of troubles that has weakened the United States during the past five years. Palestine may be the codeword

Victims of democracy

symbolizing other agonies during the next five."

Like the Red Army faction, most terrorist organizations plaguing the West have some connection with Palestinian Arab militants. They frequently train together or exchange technical information. I have talked with Irish Republican Army killers who told me they had worked with Palestinians in the Middle East.

There is an undoubted link between existing terrorism and the nihilism of 19th century Russia that was described in the writings of Ivan Turgenev. Nihilism however did possess a vague idealism and gentler philosophy of negation, and the technical equipment at its disposal was relatively negligible. Once — and it is inevitable — a modern terrorist group gains possession of even a crude nuclear device, nobody can foresee how it will be used.

Although there are technical books by terrorists like the late Brazilian Carlos Marighella, Che Guevara or Regis Debray, contemporary terrorism has neither its Clausewitz nor its Marx. Broadly speaking, it comprises two groups: those who hope to destroy existing society and replace it with some kind of better millennium; and those who wish to conquer control over a particular territory.

The Red Army faction together with its Japanese allies or the Argentinian Montaneros, for example, are what is sometimes called "millennarians," meaning nihilists who wish to bring down all society and replace it with an unchartered millennium. How the savagery spawned would improve on things is dubious. The Palestinians and IRA, who might be called "territorials," simply wish to seize specific geographical areas and destroy those who now govern them, like Israel or the United Kingdom.

It is possible that someday the current crop of "millennarian" terrorists may develop their own general theory but so far they seem far more obsessed with technique, are perhaps as anti-Communist (at least in the

Soviet sense) as anti-democratic, and glibly praise the virtues of anarchy without having studied Bakunin.

This lack of definable goal or theory makes it escruciatingly difficult to negotiate with terrorists except on the same kind of ad hoc basis one would use in negotiating with wholly non-political kidnappers. Meanwhile a sheer joy in violence for the sake of violence has been gaining — especially in this tormented land — until this week's melodrama.

The German Federal Republic has made remarkable strides since the Hitlerian ghastliness and consequent holocaust which left the nation destroyed and amputated. It is a true democracy that has proven itself vibrantly successful. But not even a true democracy is always insensible to the steady hammering of combined physical and psychological blows.

Mirabeau, the 18th century French revolutionist described Germany as "an army in search of a country." That isn't in any sense true today; not even for armed terrorism which anyway seeks its "country" in Ulster or Palestine. But can some subconscious strain be tortured out of the Teutonic mind along the lines of that dreadful quote repeated in John Wheeler-Bennett's "The Nemesis of Power?"

"The German nation is sick of principles and doctrines, literary existence and theoretical greatness. What it wants is power, power, power! And whoever gives it power, to him will it give honor, more honor than he can ever imagine."

There is no shred of truth in this statement, as far as the federal republic's reaction to the Red Army faction is concerned. But maybe a version of that sick analysis is what made the Baader-Meinhof gang. Now it is badly wounded — a victim of democracy.

C. L. Sulzberger is a columnist for the New York Times