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# The wife who became Public Enemy No.

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June 18, 1972: Neal Ascherson reports on Ulrike Meinhof's 1972 capture by police and traces how a one-time pacifist became one of Germany's most wanted terrorists

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Neal Ascherson  
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When police burst into a house near Hanover airport on Thursday night, they confronted a woman who screamed when she saw them but was too exhausted to get to her guns or even to struggle very hard.

With the capture of Ulrike Marie Meinhof, West Germany has caught the woman officially named 'Public Enemy No. 1'.

The so-called 'Baader-Meinhof Band' of urban guerrillas seems to have been destroyed at last.

Earlier this month, police firing submachine guns and supported by a military armoured car surrounded a house in Frankfurt. After a gun battle they captured four men. One of them, writhing in pain from a wound, was Andreas Baader.

The group, which calls itself the 'Red Army Faction' has been waging war on West German established society for three years. At one time 150,000 policemen were looking for them.

Ulrike Meinhof, a handsome, shy woman of 38 who is the mother of twins, had become a myth in West Germany. Some even believed that she was dead and that a coffin recently burned in Hamburg crematorium contained her remains (it certainly did not contain the person whose name was on the lid).

Every day citizens telephoned the police to say that they had seen her: leaving a deserted summerhouse in the grey light of dawn, driving through Berlin in a stolen sports car, crossing a frontier guarded by a squad of young girls armed with Beretta pistols.

She was an unlikely person to lead such a band, to inspire the bank raids, gun battles and bombings of police headquarters and American installations. But the group, like the 'Tragic Band' of anarchists who fought society all the way to the guillotine in pre-1914 Paris, was composed of exceptionally resourceful and intelligent men and women, many from the universities. Many were young girls: the 'Red Army' attracted those who believed that their disadvantages as women could not be overcome without the overthrow of capitalism, and that the system could be challenged only by force.

Ulrike began as an idealistic nuclear disarmament. In the early sixties, tougher left-wingers

despised her pacifism. 'They say I am a peace-peddling egg pancake,' she told me helplessly.

In those days she was editing the left-wing magazine Konkret in Hamburg, with her husband, Klaus Rohl. Her foster-mother was Renato Riemeck, a remarkable woman who in the fifties had supported nuclear disarmament at a time when such ideas were denounced as crypto-Communist. But in Ulrike's ideas then there were already seeds of her future despair.

Under the glossy surface of the 'Economic Miracle', she saw accumulating a layer of desperately poor and backward social drop-outs whose children stood no chance of escaping their poverty. She described to me hutments inhabited by three generations already, most of whose children went to remedial schools or none.

No party and no paper, she said, would fight for those children. 'People like me aren't dangerous,' she said bitterly, 'as long as we can't make contact with the workers. And we have no means of communication.'

This worry stayed with her. When her husband turned Konkret into a big-circulation magazine by interleaving nudes with the political articles, she left him and moved to West Berlin. She absorbed the Marxist ideas of the student movement there, led by men like Rudi Dutschke and Christian Semmler. But, working with a community of her 'problem' working-class girls, she came to believe that even they were not radical enough. Only the example of revolutionary armed struggle would break down the indifference of the working class.

In early 1968, Andreas Baader and several companions tried to burn down two stores in Frankfurt to give the burghers 'that Vietnam feeling'. He and Ulrike came together. The first exploits of the 'Red Army' was to free Baader from prison in a gun battle, in which Ulrike took part. Both of them, with a group of friends, escaped to the Middle East, took some guerrilla training with the Palestinian National Liberation Front and returned secretly to Germany.

'Since then, the 'Red Army' has been at war. In many leaflets and messages, Ulrike Meinhof has tried to explain what she seeks. 'Urban guerrilla tactics' she said recently, 'are the revolutionary method for generally weak revolutionary forces...an armed group, however small, has better chances of transforming itself into a great people's army than a group which merely preaches revolutionary principles.'

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