

German Terror From the Left

By STEPHEN SPENDER

THIS book is an account of the transformation of the movement that began with the German students' demonstrations of the 1960's—first against their own universities and later against such things as the American role in the war in Vietnam and the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin—into the terrorist movement of the 1970's. The Baader-Meinhof gang was formed by left-wing activists in 1970; its leaders were arrested two years later. The trial of the four chief members of the group—Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe—began on May 21, 1975 in a specially constructed maximum-security courthouse at Stammheim that had cost \$4 million to build and equip. A year later, on May 9, 1976, while the trial was still proceeding, Ulrike Meinhof committed suicide in her prison cell. The three others were sentenced to life imprisonment in April 1977. Members of the gang are still at large. One took part in the 1976 hijacking of an Air France plane to Entebbe, Uganda, and was killed there by the Israeli rescue force.

"Hitler's Children" is strong on facts and useful source material and is a good crime story, though turgidly written; but it fails to do what the author, an English novelist, set out to do: to provide a clear analysis of the motives, actions and personal psychology of the leftists who became terrorists. One conspicuous reason for this failure is that in her anxiety to distinguish her own undeluded attitude from that of writers like Heinrich Böll and Jean-Paul Sartre and many pastors, academics, artists and liberal-minded men and women who tried to "understand" and in some cases gave aid to the terrorists, the author adopts a tone of heavy sarcasm. She is forever contrasting the terrorists' claims of being humanitarians, defending the cause of oppressed Palestinian Arabs or German workers, with the inhumanity of their actions: leaving bombs in shopping centers, setting fire to the establishments of the Springer publications, raiding banks, shooting completely innocent onlookers, kidnapping, hijacking airplanes. Of course this contrast is implicit in terrorism and always has been. But simply to draw attention to it in a sneering way does not help us to understand the *Rote Armee Fraktion* or R.A.F. (Red Army Faction), as the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang called itself, any more than it would today's Palestinian or Irish terrorists.

What is really required in a book of this kind is something like a scientific analysis of terrorism. Terrorism might be defined as the extension of protest against supposed injustices, more or less within the framework of the law, into guerrilla war without regard to law, individual life or personal property, if these are seen as standing in the way of ends to be achieved. Up to the moment when this extension of protest into naked violence took place, Jillian

Becker is rather sympathetic to the German students: she thinks that they had real grievances against the German universities, and she describes the death of Benno Ohnesorg, a student shot during a demonstration against the visit of the Shah of Iran to Berlin in June 1967, as an act of irresponsible police violence. (Ohnesorg became, of course, the symbolic martyr and victim of the rebellious student movement.) But the moment the young leftists turn to terror, they are treated by her as inhuman monsters, and the police become angels; liberals who tried to explain, understand and be patient with the terrorists are given the same sarcastic treatment as the terrorists themselves. This seems particularly unfortunate because lofty sarcasm—a kind of infantile pose of superiority to one's cultural and ideological opponents—was a characteristic and symptomatic attitude of the rebellious students. This was apparent in the sneering remarks they addressed to their professors in class and to their judges in the criminal courts. Thus the book reflects too much the conditions from which it springs.

The failure may be partly one of language. At times one has the impression that the author simply cannot write English, and that the publishers should have corrected or provided some improved version of sentences that read like badly translated fragments of German police reports written by some resentful police officer. For instance, in the account of Andreas Baader, we are told: "Between 1964 and 1967 he was convicted for incorrect behavior in traffic, four times driving without a license, offenses against the car insurance law, misuse of car registrations, driving license forgery." This sentence is not English. Phrases like "consumption terror," which seem to be transferred literally from the German, though they mean nothing in English, are used throughout. And we have to wade through pages of this kind of writing, as in the following excerpt from Becker's sarcastic account of the life of Ulrike Meinhof: "In Kampen she lay in the sun with an empress of soap powder, perhaps, or a queen consort of typewriters. Perhaps with Inge Feltrinelli, wife of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, first publisher of Solzhenitsyn in the West, yet despite that belonging devotedly to the Schili, admiring Castro (whom he visited), marching with the APO and students in Berlin demonstrations, and finally dying in a mysterious incident involving the blowing up of a pylon in northern Italy in 1972."

Ulrike Meinhof is the most interesting of the terrorists, and we are told a good deal that is valuable about her. There were many theologians in her family on her mother's side. Her mother died when she was still a child, and a teacher named Renate Ridmeck, who was extremely kind to her, became her foster mother. "Ulrike's childhood was not an unhappy one. Yet she was fatally attracted to unhappiness," we are told. Later she married Klaus Rainer Röhl, a leftist pacifist like Ulrike at the time. Röhl edited a magazine called *Konkret*, which by going pornographic as well as political became extremely successful, and made Ulrike and her husband rich and fashionable in the mid-1960's. The marriage broke up in 1967, and Ulrike soon became convinced of the necessity of terrorism in politics (something which as a Christian she had previously opposed). Finally she became perhaps the most fanatical and convinced terrorist of the Baader-Meinhof gang.

Continued on Page 32

Terror

Continued from Page 7

All this is interesting, but it does not really throw much light on why Ulrike Meinhof became a terrorist. In postwar Germany there must have been at least 500 young girls in situations not very different from hers who did not become terrorists. Jillian Becker is no psychologist; she is simply a reporter who makes available to us facts of which we have to make the best use we can, once we've stripped them of that overlay of sarcasm toward the terrorists and those who tried to understand them. A comparison of Ulrike Meinhof with other women who have become political extremists, such as Rosa Luxemburg or W.B. Yeats's friend, the actress Maud Gonne, might have been revealing.

These so-called "Children of Hitler" had before them the example of parents who, even if they were not Nazis, had failed to resist Hitler. If one supposes that Ulrike Meinhof's actions had been directed not against the Germany of the Economic Miracle but against the Germany of Hitler, one would have a very different attitude toward her. It may be

that she and some other Germans transferred to the newly prosperous, consumer-goods materialistic Germany of the late 1960's and 70's the violent opposition that they felt their parents should have shown toward Hitler.

This is not to excuse them. The fact is that when people take to terrorism even for idealistic motives, they not only become corrupted by their own methods, they also find themselves in the company of people who were corrupt from the start. Even movements that most people would condone, such as the French Resistance, provide evidence of this. But when Sartre interviewed Andreas Baader in prison in 1975, he was not altogether playing the role of the sentimental, duped intellectual sympathizing with terrorists that he is made out to be here (though he should probably have interviewed Ulrike Meinhof and not the brutalized thug Baader). This book is valuable as reportage, if one can struggle through tangled passages of writing. In the early part, the historical background of the students' movement is interesting. On the whole, however, as an analysis of the motivations of the terrorists, it lacks objectivity and analytic detachment. ■

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HITLER'S CHILDREN

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Stephen Spender's books include "Love-Hate Relations: English and American Sensibilities" and "The Destructive Element."