

KATHARINA KARCHER

CAN FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE LEAD TO SOCIAL PROGRESS?

What role can women play in terrorist groups, how might that be reported and can it help pave the way for women in other spheres of society? Dr Katharina Karcher, from the University of Cambridge, addresses these questions based on her research on the Red Army Faction.

On 30 July 1977, Susanne Albrecht paid a visit to the villa of the German banker Jürgen Ponto, a good friend of her father's. According to witnesses, the young woman, accompanied by a 'decently dressed' couple, brought Ponto a bunch of wild roses. When he opened the door to welcome the visitors, they threatened him with guns and tried to abduct him. Ponto resisted, and was shot by the intruders. Two weeks after the attack, the left-wing terrorist group Red Army Faction (RAF), also known as the Baader-Meinhof gang, claimed responsibility for the killing.

The violent conflict between the RAF and the West German State, which had started with an armed raid in 1970, reached a dramatic peak in 1977. Jürgen Ponto was the fourth of ten RAF victims that year, and newspaper and other public responses to the Ponto murder show that it was not the brutality of this and other attacks alone that made the RAF Germany's most notorious terrorist group. In 1977, women clearly outnumbered men on the RAF wanted posters (see image), and their active participation in attacks was perceived as a violent transgression of and threat to the prevailing gender norms. An article published shortly after the Ponto killing illustrates this point. Here, the (male) author asked polemically: 'must every citizen worry they might encounter violent death in the shape of a young girl?'

The RAF has been associated with a tactic that I have described as the use of

femininity as camouflage: individuals or groups made effective use of feminine accessories (e.g., dresses, make up, hand bags, etc.) and stereotypes (e.g., passivity, submissiveness, peacefulness) to prepare or carry out violent attacks. While the murder of Jürgen Ponto brought this tactic to the media's attention in Germany, the attack was of course neither the first nor the last use of femininity as camouflage in the history of terrorism. It is possible to trace this tactic back to the Russian Anarchists' 'propaganda of the deed' in the late 19th century, and it has been used in a range of political and cultural contexts including the Algerian Civil War and suicide attacks by the Islamist extremist group Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Although the suggestion that every citizen should fear death in the shape of a young girl was clearly exaggerated, research has shown that almost half of the RAF members and almost all of the group's leading ideologists were women. The best known examples are Ulrike Meinhof (1934-1976), Gudrun Ensslin (1940-1977), and Brigitte Mohnhaupt (1949-present). This is striking, because there were hardly any women in leading positions in West Germany at that point.

Like their male counterparts, women have historically participated in armed political struggles for a range of reasons, and they have identified with different theoretical and ideological positions. Whilst wanting to be equal to their male comrades in

every regard, women in the RAF distanced themselves from feminism. Other women in the militant left in West Germany, by contrast, identified with the aims and ethics of the women's movement. The Red Zora, for example, was a self-declared women's guerrilla group with an explicitly feminist agenda that formed in the mid-1970s and carried out dozens of arson attacks and bombings, most of which took place in the 1980s.

The RAF and the Red Zora carried out their last attacks in the early 1990s. By then, the political landscape and the gender dynamics in Germany had changed significantly: although still greatly outnumbered by men, women were represented in leading positions in education, politics and industry. Recent years have seen further steps towards gender equality. In 2001, the first 244 female soldiers joined the Federal Armed Forces, and today there are more than 20,000 women in the army. In 2005, Angela Merkel became the first female Chancellor, and has remained in power since. These developments raise an important question: have women in the RAF and other terrorist organisations helped to pave the way for women in other spheres of society?

Recent studies have come to different conclusions regarding this question. Some have argued that female political violence has exposed and challenged the repressive gender regime in post-

DRINGEND GESUCHTE TERRORISTEN

Im Zusammenhang mit dem

- dreifachen Mord an Generalbundesanwalt Buback und zwei seiner Begleiter am 7.4.1977 in Karlsruhe
- Mord an Jürgen Ponto am 30.7.1977 in Oberursel
- vierfachen Mord und der Entführung von Hanns-Martin Schleyer am 5.9.1977 in Köln



Albrecht, Susanne
1. 3. 51 Hamburg
Besonderes Merkmal: wulstige Lippen



von Dyck, Elisabeth
11. 10. 50 Borstel



Krabbe, Friederike
31. 5. 50 Bentheim



Maier-Witt, Silke
21. 1. 50 Nagold



Plambeck, Juliane
16. 7. 52 Freiburg im Breisgau



Schütz, Adelheid
31. 3. 55 Lorrach



Speitel, Angelika
12. 2. 52 Stuttgart



Sternebeck, Sigrid
19. 6. 49 Bad Pyrmont



Viett, Inge
12. 1. 44 Stenwarder



war Germany. Others have disagreed, acknowledging that the RAF put into practise a kind of subconscious feminism but that this violent activism jeopardised feminist aims. While more studies on this subject are needed – especially on a

comparative level – my research shows that female political violence can, but does not necessarily, have a feminist background or agenda, and it is certainly no guarantee for a gender revolution.

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