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Ulrike Marie Meinhof as Woman and Terrorist: Cultural Discourses of Violence and Virtue

When someone has been at the centre of an ideological confrontation that involved violence and deaths on both sides, as Ulrike Meinhof was, the chances of a fair, rounded, and non-sensational public presentation of that person are slight. Portrayals of women terrorists in the German media and other documentation of the 1970s were frequently crass. It is the intention of this essay not to focus on the lack of subtlety itself, but rather to look into the history and background of the ideas that still shape Meinhof in the public imagination, even now, and to start to put them in the context of a history of ideas about violent and criminal women. Whatever she may have been like as an individual, Meinhof is now a thoroughly constructed historical figure, and a discourse emerges in accounts of her life and person that has recognisable tropes and patterns.

High-profile media cases now and in recent years suggest that the cultural reception of women who commit violent crimes is coloured by gendered expectations. Commentators tend to be far more shocked by violent women than by violent men, and women criminals are generally perceived as more reprehensible and more repugnant than their male counterparts: they are ‘doubly deviant, doubly damned’.1 In the British context, Myra Hindley and Rosemary West are high-profile examples. The BBC described West as a ‘murderess most foul’,2 and cruder, less literary insults accumulated in the popular press.3 Hindley was, and still is, cast as a ‘female icon of evil’.4 In both cases the notion of absent motherliness is a particular concern, where absent paternal instincts are never a focus in accounts of their male accomplices. ‘Bad mother’ is just one of a number of blame categories used for the vilification of women offenders5 – no surprise, then, that the culturally hypersensitive Elfriede Jelinek recently cast Meinhof not only as Mary Stuart but as Medea.6

Ulrike Marie Meinhof (1934-76) was a mother, a high-profile journalist and a media intellectual before she co-founded a terrorist organisation. In 1968 Meinhof had reported for the journal she also edited, konkret, on acts of arson committed in Frankfurt department stores by Andreas Baader and his partner Gudrun Ensslin, in protest against the war in Vietnam.7 After the trial Baader and Ensslin appealed and were released pending the outcome to lead a youth project in Frankfurt. It was Meinhof, again, who went to investigate.
When their appeal was dismissed, the pair jumped bail, but Baader was subsequently re-arrested for speeding. He was recognised and imprisoned. In May 1970, therefore, Ensslin and Meinhof co-organised an armed operation to enable Baader’s escape: a raid on a Berlin library, where the journalist Meinhof had acquired permission to meet with Baader, after alleging that they were jointly researching a book on youth criminality. In the course of the raid a library employee, Georg Linke, was shot and badly injured. Meinhof, Baader, and his armed liberators escaped through a window and went into hiding to form a guerrilla group that called itself ‘Rote Armee Fraktion’ or RAF, but was popularly known as ‘Baader-Meinhof’.

‘Baader-Meinhof’ was not long-lived. Baader, Meinhof, Ensslin, and most other core members of the Red Army Faction’s so-called ‘first generation’ were arrested in the early summer of 1972. Meinhof was found hanged in her cell in Stuttgart-Stammheim’s high security prison on the morning of 9 May 1976. The date has been accorded different cultural significance – personal and political – by different commentators: some point out that it was Mother’s Day; others that 9 May is the anniversary of the end of World War 2. However we read the date of her death, the brevity of Meinhof’s career as a terrorist makes her impact on the German imagination until the present day all the more remarkable.

It emerged only in 2002 that Meinhof’s body had been interred without a brain. Without the knowledge of her family or lawyers, her brain was removed from her body after death and taken by a neuropathologist (Jürgen Peiffer) to Tübingen, for testing. It further transpired that in 1997, again without any formal or family consent, Meinhof’s brain was moved from Tübingen, to be given to a psychiatrist at Magdeburg, Bernhard Bogerts, for further investigation.

The justification for the scientists’ interest in Ulrike Meinhof’s brain was an operation performed in 1962: immediately after her twin daughters were born Meinhof had undergone brain surgery for a suspected tumour. The problem was in fact found to be an engorged blood vessel, which was clipped by the surgeon. When Meinhof was arrested ten years later, her identity was ascertained not in the usual way by fingerprints, but by an X-ray of her brain, which revealed the metal clip.