LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS
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The RAF as Trauma and Pop Icon in Literature since the 1980s

Based on Dominick LaCapra’s theory of history and memory, this article examines literature’s contribution to the collective memory of RAF terrorism over two decades from 1981 to 2001. It argues that the representation of the RAF changed the focus from trauma and collective identity in works by Friedrich Christian Delius and Christian Geissler to the treatment of the RAF as pop icon in John von Düffel’s and Leander Scholz’s texts. The essay reads the critique of the latter’s representation of the RAF as part of the larger discursive changes and the generational reconfigurations in Germany.

The German public’s infatuation with the RAF seems to be never-ending. Even after its last remnants officially disbanded in 1998,¹ this militant left-wing group remains a topic for literature, film, and other artistic forms. A new cohort of artists Born in the R.A.F.,² to cite the title of one of these recent works, or, in other words, the children born to the generation of 1968, discover the RAF promptly two decades after its defining moment, the ‘Deutsche Herbst 1977’ (German Autumn). The recurring preoccupation with this particular historical moment and primarily with the first generation of the RAF (Baader, Meinhof and Ensslin), demonstrates that this by now historical phenomenon of left-wing violence has seeped deep into collective memory.

As Gerrit-Jan Berendse points out, the increasing distance to this troubling past makes it easier to speak about it.³ However, this argument cannot fully account for the explosion of debates on and artistic works about the RAF in the 1990s. Research on memory emphasises that only events that are experienced as unique and with long-term as well as far-reaching consequences on individual and collective life are regularly rehearsed and thus inscribed into collective memory.⁴ This clearly holds true in the case of RAF terrorism not only because of its duration – three decades of German history – and the tragic death toll but also because of the impact on individual and collective life. The exhibition, Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung, which focused on pictorial representations of the RAF in the media and in the fine arts, is a good case in point. Even before it opened in 2005, a heated public controversy ensued which illuminates how the RAF has become part of the politics of memory.⁵