Ulrike Meinhof was arguably the most interesting figure on the political Left in postwar West Germany.¹ She first gained notoriety in the late 1950s and early 1960s for her incisive reporting in the influential left-wing journal *konkrete*, which she also edited for a time. The characteristic flair of her writings on the domestic and foreign affairs of the Bundesrepublik made her well-known beyond the – then – still relatively small number of radical anti-authoritarian and labour activists, groups which included many members of the liberal intelligentsia.² Her analyses of events in West Germany through the 1960s acted as a barometer of the increasing radicalisation, and then the bitter disillusionment of the vibrant student movement and extra-parliamentary opposition (APO), from the time when its wide-ranging challenge to the status quo gained momentum through to the moment when it helplessly crashed against the walls of a vindictive state repression.

In May 1970, Ulrike Meinhof took a step most of her deeply frustrated comrades did not: she opted for armed resistance as an ‘urban guerrilla’. With Meinhof’s help, Andreas Baader, who was serving prison time for an arson attack on a department store, arranged to be brought to a library under armed guard, ostensibly to consult with her on a research project.³ Once there, he was freed by a masked group which overpowered his guard. Baader, along with Meinhof, Baader’s lover, Gudrun Ensslin, and a handful of other militants, went underground to form the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF).⁴ For the next two years, the RAF staged a series of armed attacks against the police, the judiciary and a number of US military installations, and published statements justifying their actions as part of a global anti-imperialist liberation struggle, which, they claimed, had finally come home to roost in the heart of industrial Europe. By provoking the West-German state and pushing it towards ever more severe repressive measures, they aimed at unmasking its role as a proto-fascist enemy of the German working class.⁵ All the while, the RAF remained on the run from an increasingly intense and comprehensive national dragnet. Ulrike Meinhof fitted perfectly in her role as RAF publicist, particularly given her extensive knowledge of Marxist theory.

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¹ The author would like to thank Jay Moore for insightful comments and suggestions.

² A wide sampling of Ulrike Meinhof’s political essays has been republished in two volumes compiled by Klaus Wagenbach (Meinhof 1995a and 1995b). The titles of these collections, taken from two of her essays, give a flavour of her talent in producing sharp formulations. The first, *Die Würde des Menschen ist antastbar*, translates roughly as ‘the human being’s worth can be touched’ (in the sense of meddled with), and is a playful reversal of the famous first article of the West German Basic Law of 1949: *die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar* [the human being’s worth may not be touched]. The title of the second volume, *Deutschland, Deutschland unter anderm* [Germany, Germany among others] offers a counterpoint to the infamous line from the national anthem, often associated with Nazi ambitions.

³ Interestingly, Klaus Wagenbach, publisher of the book under review here, was to publish the Baader-Meinhof collaboration that served as the pretext for the meeting. It was to be based on community work which both founders of the RAF had done with marginalised youth.

⁴ The brief account of the RAF presented here is taken from Aust 1997. The illegal core of the RAF would include, at one time or another, individuals whose names and faces would become familiar in every West-German household by means of wanted posters: Jan Carl Raspe, Holger Meins, Irmgard Möller, Astrid Proll.

and familiarity with the writings of Fanon, Guevara and other figureheads involved in national-liberation struggles throughout the global South, and not least, her unmatched writing abilities. While no major RAF text was written without extensive discussion and critique from other members, she was often given the task of drafting their public statements and later giving them a final form.

In the span of two weeks in June of 1972, Andreas Baader, Holger Meins, Gudrun Ensslin and finally Ulrike Meinhof were captured and placed in high-security cells at various prisons around West Germany. The next five years were marked by bombings and kidnappings carried out by younger RAF ‘generations’ against prominent names in government and business. Through sympathetic attorneys, acting as messengers, the leadership in prison managed to retain ideological, if not always operational, control over events outside.6 A crescendo of violence was reached in the autumn of 1977, the so-called ‘German Autumn’, which culminated in the kidnapping and eventual killing of Hanns Martin Schleyer, head of the West German Council of Industries, and in the foiled attempt, in co-operation with the PLO, to hijack a Lufthansa jet in order to force the West-German government to free Baader, Ensslin and the other surviving RAF leaders. Throughout this period, the federal authorities relentlessly tightened the conditions of incarceration faced by Meinhof and the other prisoners, constructing a new maximum security compound (Stammheim) near Stuttgart specially to hold members of the RAF and other left-extremist groups, and passing legislation stripping the prisoners of many of the basic rights previously guaranteed by the Basic Law. The day after the attempt to free them failed, Baader, Ensslin, and Raspe were found dead in their cells. By that time, Ulrike Meinhof had been dead for over a year, found hanged in her cell at Stammheim in May of 1976. Opinions differ to this day about whether the deaths of Meinhof, Baader, Ensslin and Raspe were indeed suicides, and even the authoritative liberal account can do no more than offer circumstantial evidence.7 While the brutal conditions in prison could certainly have led to suicide without any additional element of conspiracy, the vindictiveness with which the West-German state pursued the RAF, and the gratuitous harshness of the conditions faced by the prisoners, have led many who otherwise condemn the RAF outright to the unshakeable belief that they were killed.

Peter Brückner’s book is an attempt to explain something Klaus Wagenbach (publisher of the volume) said in his graveside speech at Ulrike Meinhof’s burial in 1976, namely, that ‘what had killed Ulrike Meinhof were the German circumstances [die deutsche Verhältnisse].’8 In the first part of the book, Brückner intersperses essays and excerpts from Meinhof’s writing with documentation supplementing her radical analyses, and with his own short commentaries. His main purpose here is to show that even many of her most shocking and seemingly hyperbolic condemnations of West-German politicians and policies were in fact richly and unmistakably supported by direct quotes, explicit federal government policies and other publicly available documents. Among the issues to which Meinhof returned

6. The subsequent biographies of some of these attorneys would provide rich material for political analysis: Otto Schilly served as the federal Minister of the Interior under Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and was regularly taken to task by democratic activists for his overzealous security measures. Horst Mahler is now a prominent ideologue of the nationalist far Right.