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The Red Army Faction, A Documentary History, Volume 1: Projectiles for the People. PM Press/Kersplebedeb, 2009. J. Smith and André Moncourt (editors).

The Red Army Faction (RAF) is one of the last half-century's most talked about and least understood radical left groups. An anarchist colleague, upon hearing that I was reviewing this book, felt compelled to ask why, as an anarchist, I would bother to spend any time reading about – much less reviewing the work of – an irrelevant group of authoritarian leftists like the RAF. I replied that much of the terms of debate surrounding the RAF are based on mythology, rumour, misrepresentation, and propaganda. For the most part, the voices of the RAF themselves have been largely absent from the debates and discussions of their legacy in English-speaking contexts. The reason, as the editors of *Projectiles for the People* point out, is simple: their political position papers, commentaries, and debates have been largely unavailable within English-speaking Left circles.

Thus, those with an interest in the RAF and the phenomenon of anti-capitalist armed struggle movements in the West can be

thankful for the labour put into the preparation and distribution of the present volume. The editors-translators went through every available document from the RAF in German, providing new translations of the texts. In making direct translations from the German, many of the documents were reviewed five to six times between the editors. Overall the work presents around 500 pages of new translations. The end result is a book that includes, to the best of the editors' knowledge, every major political document issued by the RAF between 1968 and 1977. Their planned second volume will include every document from 1978 to 1998.

Discussion of the RAF has tended to be polarized between two rather starkly opposed positions. On the one hand, there are those who see the RAF as heroic urban guerrillas trying to initiate a spark of revolution in a Cold War context of supposed apathy, indifference, and inaction – particularly among a working class exemplified by a conservative, bureaucratic union movement bent on compromise with capitalism and benefiting from imperialism. This is a romantic position posing the RAF as the war brought home, the burning of revolutionary desire "in the belly of the beast." On the other hand, there are both communists and anarchists who view the RAF largely as irresponsible adventurists. The group is critiqued as "middle class" and privileged youth acting out "revolutionary" fantasies detached from any real movements or support from the working class. In this view, the cost of such carelessness was the state's enactment of repression, punishment, and violence against the working class, poor, and oppressed – with disastrous consequences for working class and radical politics.

Interestingly, both of these approaches operate within a shared framework. Each suggests a detached and decontextualized RAF, operating on its own with little or no connection to specific communities or social movements. Similarly, they both fail to situate the emergence and development of the RAF within uniquely detailed political histories, traditions, and debates. *Projectiles for the People* goes some distance in providing this kind of context by in-

cluding all of the theoretical manifestoes and communiqués that accompanied actions and letters released by the RAF. Unfortunately, it omits most of the thousands of letters written by imprisoned RAF members and the hundreds of court statements made by RAF defendants. Nevertheless, it remains a comprehensive work, and it is significant in that it allows the group to speak in their own words and presents their own documents directly.

The RAF was formed in 1970 when a core of West German activists went underground to carry out armed actions against targets of West German capital and US imperialism. Over the course of almost thirty years their varied membership engaged in a range of often stunning actions, including assassinations and bombings against a variety of ruling class targets. Within a few years, as the preface to this volume points out, almost all of the original members were either dead or captured, a lesson on the obstacles facing such groupings given the deployment of state resources to stop them. Still, new members came forward to extend RAF activities while the political prisoners continued to serve as an embarrassment to the West German state, and an inspiration to radicals in West Germany and beyond.

This collection is not simply a documentary of the West German revolutionary Left at a particular point in the Cold War 1970s. It is more important for the insights it provides into the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities of waging armed struggle within the context of a wealthy, well-resourced, Western capitalist state. In this, the experiences and activities of the RAF are unique in the lessons they might teach organizers in Western capitalist milieus. In our own context, it is likely that future conditions of radical social change, and certainly revolutionary struggles, will more closely approximate those engaged by the RAF in 1970s West Germany than the much more influential examples of Russia in 1917 or Spain in 1936. In this sense, the RAF experience might be a more appropriate focal point for contemporary revolutionary assessment than the

much more popular and obsessively examined Russian and Spanish examples.

The RAF made a number of decisive mistakes and left many lessons behind; a thoughtful reading of these experiences can offer some insight to revolutionary Left struggles in the contemporary period. Among the perspectives the RAF presents is the critique of the false and defeating dichotomy between pacifism and violence and the belief among some activists that radical social change can occur purely through non-revolutionary community work. As the RAF argued:

If the red army is not simultaneously built, then all conflict, all political work carried out in the factories … and in the courtrooms is reduced to reformism; which is to say, you end up with improved discipline, improved intimidation, and improved exploitation. That destroys the people, rather than destroying what destroys the people (81).

For the RAF, the movement to build a legitimate fighting force must coincide with the movements in the communities. Those movements alone can only go so far: "If we don't build the red army, the pigs can do what they want, the pigs can continue to incarcerate, lay off, impound, seize children, intimidate, shoot, and dominate" (81). Profound social transformation will not happen "peacefully" and the state, confronted by growing social movements, will not simply wither away or collapse of its own contradiction. The RAF states:

We are not saying that the organization of armed resistance groups can replace the legal proletarian organizations, that isolated actions can replace the class struggle, or that armed struggle can replace political work in the factories or neighbourhoods. We are arguing that armed struggle is a necessary precondition for the latter to succeed and progress… as without it there can be no anti-imperialist struggle in the metropole (86–87).

adventurist irresponsibility that harmed the working class and the broader left as the state took the opportunity gladly to enact violence against opponents of capital with little distinction for their political affiliation. The RAF's guerrilla strategy was vulnerable to manipulation by the state. The state and the far right carried out criminal activities and blamed the guerrillas. This happened not only in Germany, but in France, Turkey, and Italy. It also provided the state with a convenient excuse to enact repressive legislation against social movements. Activities of the guerrilla, detached from broader social movements and organizations of the working class and oppressed, served to breed distrust among the general population towards the left as a whole.

Overall, the collection fails to adequately address the more questionable side of the RAF, including some of its members' connections to neo-fascism in West Germany (see Horst Mahler and Francois Genoud) and to the East German secret police, the Stasi. With regard to the latter question, the editors say only that until the later years "the RAF-Stasi connection seems to have been casual if not ephemeral" (59). The collection does not examine the extent to which the RAF chose targets or formulated ideology to please foreign state patrons.

Still, much recommends this expansive volume. At the outset of this review, I suggested that for some the RAF are little more than yuppie fakers, or worse, terrorists who provided the German state a freebie for initiating repressive policies that it was already looking to introduce. For others they stand as a beacon of hope in a grim age, an expression of revolutionary desire, and the refusal to concede. Overcoming this dualistic approach, based as it is around narrow and limited caricatures of the RAF, is a necessity if we are to develop a productive and helpful engagement with recent histories of struggle, organization, and resistance. This collection provides a starting point to do just that.

Thus, the urban guerrilla struggle "is based on the analysis that by the time the conditions are right for armed struggle, it will be too late to prepare for it" (97).

The RAF were also scathing in their criticisms of the overly academic tendencies of the Left and the insular self-referential perspective of many student-based socialisms. In their view: "The decision of leftists and socialists, the student movements' authority figures, to turn to the study of scientific socialism and transform the critique of political economy into a self-criticism of the student movement, was at the same time a decision to retreat into the classroom" (92).

The shift from organizing to publishing and the preference of some members of the Left for inaccessible writing and theoretical obscurity are also targeted by the RAF as failings of the so-called radical groups. In their words: "The paper output of these organizations shows their practice to be mainly a contest between intellectuals for the best Marx review before an imaginary jury, which couldn't possibly be the working class, as the language used excludes their participation" (93). These are relevant and timely criticisms in the current period, given the retreat of some of the anti-globalization movement into intellectual pursuits, the privileging of obscure theoretical language within recent tendencies such as "post-anarchism" (which seeks a convergence of anarchism and post-structural philosophy) and the growing numbers of academics finding their intellectual niche in anarchism and anarchists who are active primarily as academics.

At the same time, various commentators note the group's failure to address the needs and desires of the working classes in Cold War Germany (or anywhere else for that matter). This failure raises questions about the RAF activities but even more about the capacity of armed struggle to speak to the working class in liberal capitalist democracies. Certainly this is a relevant question given the state-sponsored panic of the Age of Terror and the capacity of states and capital to stoke and mobilize working class fears.

If armed struggle is itself a way to communicate with the working class – an argument presented by various actors, from nineteenth century anarchist proponents of "propaganda of the deed" to the RAF and the Weather Underground – why are these tactics regularly dismissed? Were the RAF and their armed struggle serious responses to the failure of social democracy, trade unionism and pacifist protest, as they viewed themselves to be, or were they yet another sign of failure, ultimately as futile and dispiriting as the other tired options?

This collection provides little evidence that the RAF had much connection or appeal to the mainstream working class. Indeed as the editors suggest, they were "the object of mass hatred" and the West German working class seemed to view the RAF as a sign that people were "losing their moral compass" (xxi). The editors note that the RAF did not merge with the anarchist urban guerrillas who were also active in West Germany during the period partly because the more proletarian anarchists viewed the RAF as pretentious "middle-class" students.

Nevertheless, a reading of these texts suggests that the primary audience of the RAF was young people. The writings are, in pitch and tone, geared towards disaffected youth in alienating and oppressive conditions. But the RAF seemed to have little understanding of the industrial working classes and their aspirations in the here and now of capitalism. Indeed, in various places the RAF are contemptuous and dismissive of their "standard of living" and many of the things for which good numbers of workers strive (79).

It seems apparent that the RAF did not enjoy wider appeal because their writings lack a vision of a better world. There are profound expressions of contempt and disgust with capitalism-imperialism and oppression. Yet this is a largely negative impulse. There is little positive expression here. They express reactive rage, righteous to be sure, but they never quite rise above the level of rejection and anger. More often the tone is one of frustration and futility, even desperation.

There is little in these often stilted communiqués that could be called inspiring. If nothing else, the collection makes it easy to see how the RAF missed the mark in calling working people to action. Tellingly, the most poetic and energetic piece is the courtroom statement by Thorwald Proll who was part of the group's initial core but who left after about a year.

Curiously, the editors chose not to include "Regarding the Armed Struggle in Western Europe" (1971) by Horst Mahler, the only member publicly expelled from the group. The editors' unsatisfactory reason is that the group rejected the text. In my view this choice was a great mistake, serving to flatten the history and narrow the debate and discussion. In fact, more examples of internal debate and disagreement, alternative perspectives and strategies from within the group would have enlivened the presentation here, which presents final statements almost as monuments or souvenirs without much of a sense of the vigorous and heated process through which they emerged.

The lack of debate, responses, and criticisms from other significant left interlocutors leaves the collection, at times, a bit sterile, with the same sense as certain histories of Stalinist sects. It also feels clinically removed from the debates, discussions, and movements with which the RAF engaged. The inclusion of some contextualizing debate would have been useful and contributed to the overall readability of the text.

The presentation leaves a feeling of uncritical support bordering on promotion at times. The editors claim not to want to "muddy the waters" by condemning or praising the RAF along the way, and that is a fair position to take. Yet there is much praise throughout the book, and the collection is produced clearly from a perspective of adulation, with very little condemnation.

Rather questionable positions are presented in the best possible light. The place of armed struggle in "baiting its ruling class into dictatorial reactions" is presented as a positive contribution of the RAF (xxi). Yet for critics, this is exactly, and obviously, the sort of