



Jutta Ditfurth: Ulrike Meinhof, The Biography



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A new biography on the German journalist and terrorist Ulrike Meinhof has just been published. Jutta Ditfurth gives a partly new portrait of her and of how the German state governed by law was set aside during RAF's wave of violence, writes Björn Sandmark.

BOOK

Jutta Ditfurth
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Thirty years have passed since *Deutscher Herbst* (German autumn), a bloody and violent period in European history.

Besides noting the anniversary, particularly in Germany, there is a renewed interest in the anatomy of terrorism once again. The parallels to the challenge of fanatical Islamism to the U.S.A. and the Western world reminds one of the RAF-terror in the 70's in several respects. And the U.S. response to terrorism: terror-bombings, invasion and the abolition of the state governed by law to crush terrorism are of a wider scale, yet the mechanisms are similar.

One of the prominent figures in RAF was the journalist Ulrike Meinhof. *Ulrike Meinhof, Die Biografie* provides an opportunity for re-examining the historical writing. The author, Jutta Ditfurth, is a journalist and politician with a history in the environmental movement. It is important to establish from the start that Ditfurth is no apologist. However, she puts an end to several myths which have come to characterise the picture.

The RAF-terror was a misdirected attempt to change the world and must be condemned. But the state acted in a way unworthy of a democracy, and the conflict escalated in an uncontrollable way. Ulrike Meinhof was born in a Nazi home in 1934. Her father was a party member and worked as a director of a museum. Her mother got her education after bearing children and became a teacher and a researcher. The father died during the war. Mother Ingeborg fell in love with the young historian Renate Riemeck, and lived with her until she succumbed to breast cancer in 1947.



Ulrike and her sister, Wienke, became orphaned, but Renate Riemeck, at the time 27 years old, took care of the two girls. Ulrike was soon to become Germany's youngest professor. She co-operated with the occupying power and, in that way, was assigned to write history textbooks for the school. Riemeck denied having been a Nazi, but Ditfurth has investigated the archives and found that Riemeck applied for membership in the Nazi party in 1941. Her membership number was 8915151.

It was when she was at the university in Münster that Meinhof's political convictions started to take shape. She held her first political speech in the anti-nuclear movement, in 1958, when she was a member of the Student Socialists and the forbidden KDP (Communist Party). She was a political being before meeting her future husband Klaus-Heinz Röhl, and later became a contributor to his magazine *Konkret*, which was financed by East Germany (DDR), in order to create a left-wing opposition within West Germany. Ulrike Meinhof's image has come to be strongly characterised by Röhl, Riemeck and Stefan Aust, current editor of *Der Spiegel*. Aust started his journalist career at *Konkret* and has been loyal to Röhl and Riemeck since. It is this picture Ditfurth now has changed once and for all.

Ulrike Meinhof had a bright start both as a columnist and as editor at *Konkret*. After a couple of years of marriage and the birth of their twins Regine and Bettina, Ulrike got bored with the husband's notorious infidelity, and the marriage started to creak at the joints. She filed for divorce and got sole custody of the two daughters.

She avoided the somewhat chic left-environment in Hamburg and associated with the extra-parliamentary opposition in West Berlin, foremost in the spring of 1968. There are different presentations of this process of disintegration. Klaus-Heinz Röhl presented his view in a book in the 70s and the contents are expressed in the main by the daughter Bettina Röhl in the book *So macht Kommunismus spass*, published a year or so ago.

The differences are understandable, given the dispute over custody of the children that later broke out. This is really the only area in which Ditfurth isn't as detailed as Bettina Röhl. One of the myths canvassed by both Röhl and Stefan Aust was that Meinhof intended on sending her daughters to a children's home in Jordar

where they were be trained as terrorists. Ditfurth rejects this myth, with support from letters and other sources. Meinhof got mixed up more and more in West Berlin radical circles, and on 14th of May 1970 she leapt into crime. She had received permission to interview the imprisoned Andreas Baader at an institutional library in Berlin-Dahlem. The purpose was to rescue him, however Meinhof was not to be involved in the actual action but was to remain at the scene after the escape. But that's not how it turned out. She leapt out through the window with Andreas Baader.



But the state was not idle when RAF formed itself. A special commander for combating terrorism, Horst Herold, initiated meticulous work in mapping out terrorist suspects. The hunt for RAF also had the side effect that society was cleansed of all leftist groups. House-collectives and small left-wing publishing houses were closed down. Slowly, the state got on the track of the terrorists. Meinhof was caught in 1972 and confined to a solitary confinement cell at the jail in Köln-Ossendorf. She was held isolated under torture-like circumstances for eight months without trial. She lived in a white-painted cell with few objects. The light was never turned off. Every other hour warders woke her up, and so on. The purpose was to break down her individuality, which was only partly successful.

This treatment was motivated by RAF's threat to society and, in June of 1972, a constitutional amendment was pushed through allowing much rougher detention rules than before.

The protocols from the Stammheim trial are no longer available in Germany. Ditfurth has, however, found them in the Netherlands, and this is an account of how the German authorities forgot that the country is a state governed by law. The state became an avenger instead of the guarantor of rule of law and democracy.

After the prisoners had suffered years of torture in prison, they didn't have the strength to go through with the court proceedings, and had a doctor's certificate assuring this as well. Nevertheless, the judge decided to proceed with negotiations without the defendants. Defence lawyer Otto Schily, later on Minister for the Interior in Gerhard Schröder's government, exclaimed: "Congratulations, you have ruined the state governed by law!"



Stammheim, 9/05/1976. Archiv Jutta Ditfurth

In her last meeting with her sister Wienke, in the spring of 1976, Ulrike said: "If they say that I have committed suicide, be sure it was murder." On the morning of May 9, 1976, Ulrike Meinhof was found hanged in her cell. There were indications that it couldn't have been suicide. On the other hand, there were circumstances that don't exclude it either. Jutta Ditfurth doesn't take sides on this issue, she only presents what is available.

Jutta Ditfurth has written an important historical work about a person and a time in recent history, and has shown how Ulrike Meinhof has been exposed to a form of historical revisionism by people once close to her, who later used her for their own purposes. It's a tragic history in many ways, yet at the same time a defence of democracy and the state governed by law in a time of new terrorist threats. What is remarkable after all is that Germany, despite flaws under this critical period, has managed to turn itself into a more democratic state which has reunited in peace and freedom and is now one of the guarantors for the democratic development of the E.U., inter alia.

The perspectives have shifted gradually and yesterday's truth tends to be forgotten by today. Jutta Ditfurth's book holds on to the key issue of how it really was. There is no safer way to find that out than to go to the sources. Everything else is literature.

Also known as the Bader-Meinhof Gang

A German left extremist group active 1970-1998.

Ulrike Meinhof belonged to the first generation of RAF along with Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, among others.

In 1972 many members of the group's inner circle were arrested.

The arrested RAF-members were collected in the high-security prison of Stammheim.

In 1975, the RAF-associated *Movement 2nd June* occupied the West German Embassy in Stockholm, Sweden, murdering two employees and blowing up the embassy.

In the autumn of 1977, the president of the German employers' association and former Nazi Hanns-Martin Schleyer was kidnapped, and a dramatic aircraft hijacking took place. Baader, Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe committed suicide in Stammheim.

A third generation of RAF committed a number of terrorist acts against the armaments industry and U.S. interests in Germany in the 1980s and 90s.

The group took a final farewell in an official letter in 1998.



Jutta Ditfurth. © Kurt Steinhausen

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