

## Violence and hypocrisy: the Baader-Meinhof Group examined

Film: *Der Baader Meinhof Komplex / The Baader-Meinhof Complex*  
Director: Uli Edel  
Writer: Bernd Eichinger  
Based on the book by Stefan Aust

There's a scene in *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* where Andreas Baader, the charismatic and hypocritical, not to mention borderline psychotic, leader of the Red Army Faction chucks a tanty in the middle of a Middle-Eastern training camp. Standing up amid the barbed wire he and his comrades have been crawling under, he literally stamps his feet and screams about the hard work. They weren't fighting a desert war, they didn't need this, they were urban guerrillas. They needed to know how to rob banks.

The moment epitomises, not without humour, the capriciousness and superficial rhetoric constantly employed by the RAF in this explosive film from Uli Edel and Bernd Eichinger (*Downfall*). *The Baader-Meinhof Complex* is a detail packed, two and a half hour movie charting the rise of the RAF, otherwise known as the Baader-Meinhof Group, who were responsible for violent robberies, kidnappings, bombings and assassinations throughout 1970s cold-war Germany.

Beginning in 1967, we're introduced to a generation of German youth struggling to understand how their parents allowed Nazism to rise. A peaceful student protest is set upon by pro-Iranian Shah thugs, with the support, then active participation, of police. It's a scene of heart-thudding brutality, visceral and frightening in its confusion and quick edits, with the audience placed right in the middle of the chaos. Yet such sympathetic motivation almost immediately gives way to political posturing and empty dogma as the RAF are formed. They speak constantly in awkward utopian statements – indeed, the dialogue is so staged at times, one can only wonder how they ever managed any coordinated action at all – as they co-opt such real causes to fit their own doctrinaire prejudices.

Based on Stefan Aust's non-fiction book, the film shows its journalistic roots. Ultra-realist in style and with an emphasis entirely on narrative fact, this becomes both its greatest strength and its biggest weakness. Somewhere in the long, detailed portrayal of violence and hypocrisy, something of the human emotion becomes lost. We are never given any insight into Ulrike Meinhof's emotional trajectory from successful journalist, wife and mother, through to violent revolutionary and terrorist. Such things are hinted at, but never explored to the same depth as the violent action, and other characters are given even less emotional presence than she is.

Ultimately, this is a powerful film, brutal and confronting. However, without the human emotional journey to accompany the sharp, realist fact, we are still left wondering what exactly it was which drove these people. It is a fatal flaw in a film professing to answer just that. Political causes can be documented, but it is the human drivers underlying it all which are far more telling, and it is this which is unfortunately missing from what is an otherwise excellent film.