

# SCREEN COMMENT'S REVIEWERS DISCUSS THE BAADER-MEINHOF COMPLEX

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SAÏDEH PAKRAVAN : The difficulty when you see a film like « Baader-Meinhof » when you remember that time as I do is the extreme ambivalence you feel toward these urban guerillas such as the ones in Italy or Germany or even toward someone like Che Guevara, (no saint as we know; indeed someone who didn't hesitate to eliminate opponents). The ambivalence exists because the principles governing their action were generous and idealistic, such as the protection of the poor and the oppressed against imperialism, capitalism, big establishment, etc.

ALI NADERZAD : I don't feel that ambivalence because by the time the actual armed struggle starts, all these theories, these nice concepts, their political credo have already gone out the window. None of that remains with them. Other factors cause them to take up arms and start an action so the original motivation disappears. I can only see them as terrorists, completed misguided individuals who will deny facts on purpose so that they can continue their struggle without having an objective overall view. Their action is extreme and I don't think one can feel any ambivalence toward it.

SP: In the film, one example of this denying facts or even twisting them to fit the purpose comes after the violence in Berlin during the Shah of Iran's 1967 visit when first monarchists and then the German police attack demonstrators with incredible brutality. One demonstrator, Benno Ohnesorg, is shot and his death is a marker of the RAF's beginnings. By the way, at the beginning of the present year, the killer turned out to have belonged to the Stasi, the East German secret police. Anyway, following that death, Ulrike Meinhof, still a journalist then, writes a published letter to Empress Farah, the Shah's wife, in which, among other accusations, she says that the Shah had the eyes of Mossadegh, his former prime minister, gouged, though of course he did no such thing. That's how you distort facts.

AN: Exactly, and this theme of distortion insinuates itself through the narrative of Uli's film.

SP: I remember one sentence of Baader (Moritz Bleibtreu) when he talks about everything that's going on outside the prison when he and the others have been in prison for several years. He says something to the effect of these second and third generations of their movement being much more violent than the original, that they commit actions that he and his cohorts would not have committed and that the government—I think he's talking to someone from the Interior Ministry or some such—will see much more violence. I'm not sure Baader would actually have said that or thought it. These people were not idiots--though Jean-Paul Sartre thought so--but this may have been too elaborate a concept for him. Probably the director or the author of the book on which the screenplay is based wanted to draw a parallel with today's violence, the terrorism confronting our world, establish some sort of continuity from Baader Meinhof to Bin Laden. I don't see that continuity in the present . I know you believe otherwise.

AN : For me, actor the present people are directly inspired by movements such as Baader-Meinhof, the Italian Red Brigades and all that, the armed struggle in an urban environment against populations. I think they copy that. I see the turning point as Munich of course. Munich is a good link between then and now. The only way to talk about Munich is to say that that's when the torch was passed. All these people are graduates of the same school of terrorism. Not only that but you have to see the framework in which these acts are committed. Beside obvious questions of differences of geography or ethnicity, for me it all comes down to the struggle between oppressed and oppressor. That's how it was in the 1970s and that how it is now. It was the origin of the movements in the 1970s and continues to be the rallying cry today. When these nineteen hostage takers hit the towers in 2001, it was in the name of an oppressed people, the Palestinians. They saw themselves as fighting on the side of the victims.

SP : There is a main reason why I say there was a break, a great division with the urban guerilla of the 1960s and 1970s. It is important to see the difference between the motivations of the

armed struggle of the Rot Armee Fraktion, the Brigatisti and even Carlos the Jackal because these people were communists of one trend or another—Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist, Maoist or other—which means they were atheist and religion had nothing to do with what they did while now all protests, whether violent or not—except in places like China but that’s a different story—are religious. One can argue of course that religion is just another ideology but all this is potent and prevents any kind of solution. In the case of Israel and Palestine, I’m certain that the conflict would have been over long ago if the discussion could have taken place between secular elements on both sides because they would reach an agreement much sooner and they want the conflict to end. I’m talking about the younger generations because although the founders were not religious, things were too raw on both sides for any kind of agreement to be reached. Now things keep going wrong because of Hamas leaders funded by Iran and fighting in the name of Islam, same in Gaza with the more radical elements and in the settlements, the settlers who are Jews first and then Israelis, not only Israelis. These are fundamentalists, supported by the Netanyahu government with people like Lieberman. All these people make demands in the name of religion. There is a big difference with the armed movements we were talking about.

AN : That’s interesting. Listening to you, I think about the Crusades when it was a question of spreading a religion but this is not the case here. That’s why I don’t think Mohammad Atta and the other eighteen did anything in the name of religion.

SP : What more did you want ?

AN : For me, these are agents of a government.

SP : What government ? World Islam?

AN : This international association of Muslims who see themselves as sovereign as Islam sees itself as a sovereign nation.

SP : The *umma*.

AN : Yes. For them, I don't think it's a question of spreading Islam, they couldn't care less if the rest of the world becomes Muslim or not. So it's not a question of religion but a demand for obtaining the rights of the oppressed.

SP. I'm not saying it's a religious claim or that there is a universal effort to spread Islam. I'm saying that these acts of terrorism are done in the name of Islam, which by the way is unfair to the general Muslim public everywhere as they are held hostage by a bunch of assassins and fanatics and the world sees every ordinary Muslim through this prism. I'm saying it's in the name of Islam and there's a reason why when these people shout allah-o-akbar before hitting the towers with their planes. They consider themselves to be true believers just as the Israelis settlers claim the occupied territories as theirs in the name of their several thousand years of possession of that land. For them, it's their Biblical right. Never mind that they were gone a long time and came back with the foundation of the state of Israel, throwing the Palestinians out of their homes and repossessing land that hasn't been theirs for a long time. So the grievous wrong done to Palestinians is done in the name of religious and historical antecedents. Bin Laden is another story. Not only does he want to reclaim Palestine but he wants to reclaim Andalusia from where the Muslims were thrown out by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. There too, it's a historic right and a religious duty. So obviously, all this has a religious basis, it's completely different from those older urban guerilla groups or Guevara or even Mao and Trotsky whom these people claimed to follow.

AN : To bring this discussion back to the film, what I found very interesting was to see these young terrorists go to Yemen or Jordan for training, they wear these military fatigues, right away you can recognize people training there very similar to Atta and his gang. So the director makes this parallel and I think he does a great job at establishing historical continuity with real, actual events.