

# Urban Guerrillas: The Decade of Left-Wing Terrorism

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Mar 23, 2024

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Song used is “Urban Guerrilla” by Hawkwind.

**Books drawn from:**

Michael ‘Bommi’ Baumann, “How It All Began”

Walter Laqueur, “Terrorism: A Reader”

Walter Laqueur, “A History of Terrorism”

Carlos Marighella, “Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla”

Dennis A. Pluchinsky & Yonah Alexander, “Europe’s Red Terrorists”

Mark Rudd, “Underground”

J. Smith & André Moncourt, “The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History, Vol.1”

Jeremy Varon, “Bringing the War Home”

**Timestamps:**

0:00 — Introduction

3:45 — The History of Left-Wing Terrorism

7:05 — Guerrilla Warfare

12:41 — The Radical Students’ Movements

23:16 — Alienation

31:09 — Violence Against the Left

35:47 — The Characteristics of Urban Guerrilla Groups

44:41 — Rural Guerrillas VS Urban Guerrillas

48:09 — A Timeline of Events

1:03:41 — Decline

1:18:02 — Conclusion

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, acts of domestic terrorism in Western countries, more often than not, come from the far-right, especially white supremacists. In the United States in 2019, for example, the head of the FBI reported that out of the 100 recent domestic terrorism arrests they had made, the majority of them involved white supremacists.

It can be strange, therefore, to recall a period in the second half of the 20th century, peaking in the 70s, in which a significant portion of domestic terrorism in western countries was carried out by left-wing groups, which, in contrast to white supremacy, were more often linked with anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and national liberation movements. Indeed, the term “terrorism” entered mainstream circulation and became widely used in the 70s in part because of acts carried out by national liberation groups such as those in Ireland and Palestine, as well as Marxist groups like the Red Army Faction in Germany or the Weather Underground in the United States.

And, while today’s white supremacists often target the weak and vulnerable, killing and wounding unarmed people in stores, churchgoers, and children, the left-wing groups of the ‘70s had managed to carry out kidnappings and assassinations of military leaders, high-ranking politicians and statesmen, bombings against government buildings and military bases, as well as bank robberies and acts of sabotage.

There were left-wing terrorist organizations, often describing themselves as urban guerrillas, active around the globe, from West Germany to the United States, from Italy to France, from Ireland to Japan, signifying that this was a global tendency. And whenever there is a global tendency in politics, understanding it helps us understand the wider historical moment that it is a symptom of.

What this expressed was by no means the power of the Western radical left, as some might assume. It was rather an expression of despair. Despair caused by the historical decline of the organized left. In the face of a messed up, exploitative, violent, and alienating world, and the lack of effective mass organizations, it was an attempt to force the world to change as if through sheer act of will, making up for lack of numbers by the extremity of one’s actions. An attempt to create political power out of the barrel of a gun.

## **The History of Left-Wing Terrorism**

The association of terrorism with the political left actually goes back to the very origin of the term, as it first originated during the French Revolution, in reference to the Reign of Terror which was carried out by the Jacobins, the left wing of the French Revolution. The Jacobins used the term positively in reference to themselves, with Robespierre writing that popular government in a time of revolution must be virtue and terror combined. In the 19th century, terrorism became widely understood as a form of political struggle consisting of armed actions carried out by small groups of conspirators, mainly bombings and assassinations. Such tactics were used by revolutionaries in pursuit of national independence, notably in Italy and Ireland, before coming to be associated in many places with anarchists, some of whom carried out bombings and assassinations under the idea of “propaganda of the deed” – the attempt to win people over to rebellion through direct action. In America, in which the early class struggle was particularly violent, terrorist methods were used by workers in industrial

disputes to win themselves better working conditions. Most famously, the Haymarket Affair in Chicago in May of 1886, where workers were striking for an 8-hour workday, and a bomb was thrown at the police force that had arrived to suppress the strike. In response, the state sentenced 7 anarchists to death, even though there was no proof that they were the ones who threw the bomb, and it was these events that led to international Labor Day being celebrated in May.

Around the same period, terrorism was widely used among the anti-Tsarist militants in Russia, most notably *Narodnaya Volya*, The People's Will, a group of populists who adhered to an agrarian form of socialism. Such tactics had become so common there that at one point, Karl Marx, who was otherwise opposed to terrorist tactics, suggested that Russia might be the one country where a revolution could be kickstarted by terrorist means. Besides this particular instance, however, Marx & Engels were highly critical of terrorist tactics, criticizing them as being mainly ineffective and far too individualist. While they believed in the necessity of armed revolution, they believed that such a revolution would arise as a result of mass organizing; that revolution is waged by classes, not by small groups carrying out individual acts of violence.

And this view became dominant among organized Marxists 1 or 2 decades into the 20th century. Around this period, radical mass organizing made huge advances, and the organization of workers into unions, mass parties and workers' councils attained great political gains that individual acts of terror had not been able to. Many Russian Marxists believed that terrorism belonged to a less advanced stage of revolutionary struggle, and that mass organizing had made it superfluous at best, and counterproductive at worst. Lenin & Trotsky, as well as Rosa Luxemburg of the German communist party, all explicitly spoke out against individual terrorism as a worldwide revolutionary wave was breaking out.

## Guerrilla Warfare

In the 2nd half of the 20th century, the first wave of proletarian world revolution was long gone, and the global revolutionary left was undergoing a lot of fundamental changes. Contrary to the Orthodox Marxist belief that the terrain of revolution would primarily be in the industrially advanced countries, revolutions were breaking out in mostly unindustrialized countries with large rural populations. And whereas the revolutionary left in the early 20th century was led primarily by the urban industrial working class, the 2nd half of the century saw a shift towards the peasantry, side by side with anti-colonial liberation struggles. This shift was influentially signaled by the Chinese Revolution in 1949, both a peasant revolution and an anti-colonial war. In the 50s, a revolution in Cuba, also supported by the peasantry, overthrew a brutal US-backed dictator, Algerians fought a war of independence against French colonialism, and most famously in the 60s, the largely agrarian Vietnam fiercely defended itself against an American invasion.

All of these revolutions were the success stories of guerrilla warfare, an essential element of the period's anti-colonial struggle. Everyone from Mao to Che Guevara wrote about it, and it entered the lexicon of much of the radical left. Guerrilla war as practiced by anti-colonial revolutionaries was a form of unconventional warfare in which small armed groups in rural areas would carry out ambushes, raids, and sabotage, gradually chipping away at the enemy forces, despite the fact that they were often greater in numbers and more well-funded. The guerrillas, despite typically having less advanced military technology, would use the rural terrain to their advantage, and were also mobile and flexible in ways that took the enemy by surprise, often acting without orders from centralized leadership. One of the greatest advantages the guerrillas could have was popular support, which the colonial militaries often lacked. Wherever successful, the guerrilla forces, weakening the enemy bit by bit, were eventually able to liberate entire areas where they would establish autonomous zones, begin acting out social reforms, and recruit volunteers from the masses, expanding from small groups into regiments, battalions and even divisions. Beginning in the countryside, the guerrilla forces would spread and encircle the urban centers, at which point their force could no longer be withstood, and the victory of the revolution would be assured.

Because of the immense success of guerrilla warfare in Cuba, Che Guevara then sought to replicate it in the rest of Latin America. However, its limitations soon became apparent. Its success depended on a large variety of factors that were rarely met: first of all, the country had to be mostly unurbanized, because it was only in the countryside that the guerrillas could find the space and freedom of movement they required; secondly, the existing government had to lack legitimacy and public support, such that the population would mainly side with the guerrillas and help them or join their ranks; and finally, the government had to be relatively politically isolated, and its military forces inadequately established. In Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia, the guerrilla movement was defeated, and Che Guevara, while trying to foment the revolution in Bolivia, was captured and killed. This series of defeats signaled a shift. Many revolutionaries in Latin America made the conclusion that the rural guerrilla struggle is no longer enough, and the concept of the *urban guerrilla* was introduced, its practice emerging in the late 60s in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. Che Guevara had always emphasized that guerrilla warfare belongs to the countryside, arguing that the urban terrain is the graveyard of the guerrilla fighter. Both him and Fidel Castro found the idea of waging guerrilla struggle from the urban centers nonsensical. The new generation of urban guerrillas disagreed, and believed they could do significant damage by striking at the very urban centers in which the enemy headquarters were located. They began forming small armed groups, with which they would carry out isolated armed actions and quickly retreat – bombings, kidnappings, assassinations, bank robberies, and sabotage.

Carlos Marighella, the founder of the Brazilian urban guerrilla group National Liberation Action, which was responsible for a series of bank robberies and high-profile kidnappings, wrote an introductory manual, *The Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*.

This text, detailing the set of activities urban guerrillas must engage in, was distributed far and wide, reaching not only the rest of Latin America but the radical left in western countries.

Many radicals in the West looked upon these anti-colonial movements with hope and admiration, hoping that they signaled the coming of a new world revolution; however, given their urban surroundings, there was not much they could do to replicate rural guerrilla struggle themselves. But now that the new concept of the *urban guerrilla* had reached them, many radicals thirsting for action saw it as their cue to join the global struggle, not just with words, but with weapons.

But to understand how the concept and practice of the *urban guerrilla* could take hold so quickly in the industrialized West, we must understand the conditions that gave it fertile ground – the radical students' movements.

## The Radical Students' Movements

At this time, Germany was split in two – there was the Federal Republic of Germany, aligned with the Western bloc and NATO, and the Democratic German Republic, aligned with the communist bloc; also known as West Germany and East Germany respectively. In West Berlin, where the two countries met, there was a growing radical youth movement, and it provides us with a useful starting point in understanding the radical students' movements in the rest of the industrialized capitalist countries.

One of the pivotal moments for the German radical youth were the Auschwitz trials held in West Germany between 1963-65, where 22 leading Nazis were tried for murder or complicity in murder. It was a trial that involved almost 300 witnesses, and was widely reported on. The youth watched on in horror as they not only listened to the atrocities that were committed in the name of the German nation, but realized that thousands of their parents, teachers, and community leaders had been active supporters of the Nazis, or at least complicit with their rule. Nazism was not just a thing of the past – former Nazi party members were still everywhere, all the way up to industry leaders and government officials.

As one student recalled, "My whole moral world view shattered, got entwined with a rigorous rejection of my parents and school. If religion had not prevented this mass destruction of human beings, then it is no good for anything, then the whole talk of love of your neighbor and of meekness ... was just a lie."

The radical youth thus formed a fierce sense of opposition to the generation that stood by and did nothing during Nazi rule, or even supported it. Everyone says that, had they lived during the Nazi party's rise to power, they would have opposed them, but not many actually do something against the atrocities being committed in the present. And what was happening at the time in Vietnam was seen by many radicals as, precisely, a genocide – the war led to the death of 2 million civilians, and stories were coming out of American soldiers carrying out massacres against unarmed farmers

and their families, mass killings of women and children, brutal atrocities including widespread sexual assault. And back home in West Germany, where they were still surrounded by the remnants of the country's fascist past, the young radicals wanted to show that they would not have been one of the people standing by. This desire to rebel against the past was also held by students in other formerly fascist countries – Italian radicals looked back at Mussolini's rule, Japanese students looked back at Imperial Japan, and Greek students looked back at the totalitarian regime of Metaxas. Radicals in all of these countries were painfully aware of the brutality the state is perfectly willing to employ in the fight against the left, and they did not want to become, like many of their parents had, complicit.

In West Germany, much of the radical youth had initially been organized within the Socialist German Students' Union, which was actually a branch of the center-left Social Democratic Party of Germany. At the time, The Communist Party in West Germany was illegal, and being a member of it could lead to jailtime. In the 50s, the social-democratic youth had begun moving further left than the party leadership, which led the party to expel the entire students' union from the party in 1961. In 1966, the Social Democratic Party of Germany entered into a grand coalition with the other major West German party, the Christian Democratic Union, the leader of which was a former Nazi who had had close connections to Joseph Goebbels, and soon became West Germany's chancellor – one example of just how little West Germany was actually de-nazified. The left-wing students were thus not only kicked out by the social-democrats, they also witnessed the willingness of Social-Democrats to collaborate with the political right. It was therefore clear to the radical youth that they had to work outside of the existing parliament, and so the Socialist German Student Union, now an independent organization, went on to become the leading section of a growing protest movement, known as the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition.

The students who took part in this movement were not only disillusioned with moderate parliamentary politics, but even with the existing European communist parties, which they believed had grown stale and ineffective; and they did not have much sympathy for East Germany either. The most popular leader of the student radicals, Rudi Dutschke, was in fact a refugee from East Germany. Instead, the students were looking to the newer revolutionary developments happening around the globe, from China and Cuba, to Vietnam and Palestine. It was around this time that the Sino-Soviet Split happened, with Mao accusing the Soviet Union of being revisionist, arguing that it is no longer revolutionary because of its attempt to coexist peacefully with imperialism; and much of the radical Marxist youth in the West sided with China over the Soviet Union, many of them having a lot of hope for Maoist China as the torch-bearer of a genuine popular revolution. In several Western countries, these events led to what's referred to as the New Communist Movement. The New Communist Movement consisted of a number of new organizations and parties, made up in large part of students, often identifying as Maoists, who were disillusioned with both the old Communist parties and the Soviet Union. Although it might sound strange to people today, many of the



new Maoist groups actually saw themselves as an anti-authoritarian strain of Marxism. And side by side with these developments arose also a new wave of the so-called spontaneous left, critical of the old type of party discipline – various strains of anarchists, communizers in France, autonomists in Italy, and others. There were a lot of cases of strange allyships and collaborations between these various strains, anarchists operating side by side with Maoists and so on.

The radical students seeking a theory of revolution in this period would read works from Lenin, Mao, Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, in some cases Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg. From more theory-heavy works, they would read the writings of Wilhelm Reich, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukacs, Frantz Fanon, in some cases the French Situationists, or Erich Fromm in the United States, and, of course, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. While the Frankfurt School's Theodor Adorno was highly critical of the student movement, Herbert Marcuse positioned himself as an ally to it, and dedicated some of his writings to the student radicals. He argued that in late capitalist societies, workers are for the most part no longer rebellious because of how successfully they have been integrated into the system of production; and that, because of this, the revolutionary vanguard must be sought elsewhere: the "substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not." It's unsurprising that this analysis was quite appealing to many sections of the new left, even if by no means all of the left-wing youth agreed with it. Sections of the new left had little hope for the revolutionary potential of workers in the

1st world, as in both the US and West Germany, the mainstream unions under which most workers were organized, had become quite moderate or even conservative, and much of the union leadership was not only critical of the student radicals, but even supported the war in Vietnam.

And the West German Socialist Student Union put forth the analysis that "liberation movements in the Third World, marginal groups in society, and socialist intellectuals now constituted the revolutionary subject in society and the appropriate strategy was direct action."

All of these political and theoretical influences were used to concoct a 60s strain of radicalism which opposed everything that the old generation had been associated with. It criticized everything – not only capitalism and imperialism but Soviet revisionism, the factory system, the school system, the bourgeois family, and the culture industry.

The patterns through which the radical students' movement developed in West Germany was mirrored in many other countries. In the United States, student radicals organized as Students for a Democratic Society, SDS, an organization which became the center of the New Left in the United States. And just as left-wing students in West Germany began as merely socialdemocratic students, so the SDS began on a relatively moderate basis – organizing according to ideals of participatory democracy, they first

sought to expand free speech on campuses, such that political issues could be freely discussed, they sought to support the black struggle for civil rights, and later organized against the war in Vietnam, gradually moving further and further to the left. They were also heavily disillusioned with the existing political establishment, and were fed up with both the Democratic and the Republican Parties.

The Japanese left-wing students' movement, like the West German one, also initially consisted in a formal party organization – the Zengakuren, a popular students' union which was linked to the Japanese Communist Party. Just as in West Germany and the United States, the Japanese students were also concerned with ideals of participatory democracy and anti-war struggle, and as they gradually moved to the left, they were also disillusioned with parliamentary politics, and broke away from the Japanese Communist Party which they believed had become too moderate, forming an independent students' organization called the Communist League. And similarly, the Italian terrorist group *Red Brigades* was originally part of the Italian Communist Party's Youth Federation, before being expelled for their extremist views. Almost invariably, the radical groups that would turn to violent direct action, arose as a result of splintering in the wider movement of left-wing youth.

## Alienation

Many of these radical students, from the US to Germany to Japan, were driven by the kind of general feelings still felt by much of the youth today: a sense of alienation, and hopelessness about one's future prospects in the existing society. Bommi Baumann, who would become one of Germany's anarchist terrorists, described his pre-political life like this: "...you sit there on the bus, and you hear the same conversations, see the same drawn faces, one drunk always more fucked up than the next. Or you hear about the same shitty TV movie which you unfortunately saw the night before, and then on the bus the next day you get it all over again, horrifying, a thousand interpretations of that shit. Unrested, hungry, you get to work, and as an apprentice you're just Mr. Asshole there too. You can't see any sense in it, you aren't interested in learning any kind of craft anymore. It just breeds contempt in you, you want to tear it down."

The concern with alienation was also seen in the program of Students for a Democratic Society: "Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today. These dominant tendencies cannot be overcome by better personnel management, nor by improved gadgets, but only when a love of man overcomes the idolatrous worship of things by man."

Such a concern with estrangement from one's society was widespread, and, indeed, some had described the New Left as having moved from a focus on exploitation to a focus on alienation. Some used this shift towards alienation to explain why radical politics in the US grew more concerned with questions of identity, as this period saw the growth of black power movements, radical feminist groups and gay liberation

movements. From this perspective, some argued that the future revolution would be led by those most alienated by the existing society, whether alienated students who don't yet have an established social role, racial minorities in a racist society, women in a patriarchal society, or gay people in a homophobic society.

A sense of alienation was clearly felt by Ulrike Meinhof, a successful left-wing journalist and writer who would become one of the leading members of the Red Army Faction in West Germany. Despite a successful career and a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, she was still unhappy, feeling like her life was meaningless, and that her writings didn't amount to anything significant. When she heard of the young militants who were committing arson and bombings, she felt envious of their moral certainty and willpower, and was enticed by the prospect of bypassing all those fruitless theoretical discussions with uncompromising violent action, which is what led her to join the urban guerrillas with whom she founded the Red Army Faction.

Radical student politics also often intersected with counter-culture – rock music, long hair, sex, and drug use. A conservative parents' nightmare. There were some groups that explicitly identified with drug use, like the West German Roaming Hash Rebels, one of whose goals was to politicize and radicalize local drug addicts.

Counter-cultural aesthetics seemed compatible with the radicals' rejection of conservatism and conformity, as well as the injunction to question everything. In their early years, some of the West Germans who'd go on to become urban guerrillas were sometimes indistinguishable from mere delinquents. For instance, one of the first acts of property damage carried out by the anarchist Bommi Baumann, was simply the act of slashing a bunch of car tires while passing through a street drunk. He himself admitted that the act was completely irrational and spontaneous, but argued that it still somehow contributed to his political development. The judge who tried him for this act, very helpfully and very reasonably told him, that if he had slashed tires in a wealthy district, it would've been much better.

The first armed action carried out by those who would become part of the Red Army Faction was the bombing of 2 department stores while they were closed, the political rationale behind which I also find quite difficult to understand. The perpetrators explained that this was done in protest against the war in Vietnam, and without this explanation, it would be difficult to distinguish the act from mere delinquency. While much of the left-wing student movement distanced themselves from this act, the journalist Ulrike Meinhof defended them in an article, arguing that the act's very illegality is what gave it political significance, writing that one car set on fire is a criminal offence, but hundreds of cars on fire is political action.

In several countries, young radicals formed small communes, often located in empty or abandoned buildings, which they saw as an alternative to bourgeois family life. Some of these communes, hotbeds of counter-culture, would go on to become bases for left-wing terrorists to organize and plan actions in.

In most countries, however, despite major successes organizing on university campuses, the students failed to expand their influence outside of universities, and were

sometimes viewed negatively in wider society. Despite campus occupations, despite protests numbering in the hundreds of thousands, despite clashes with the police, the students still felt ineffective, unable to bring about the kind of large-scale long-term changes that they sought after. Fierce infighting began, with various factions of the student movement accusing each other of not being radical enough, blaming one another for the movement's failures, and 1968, the peak of the student movement, was followed by the movement's decline into factionalism in 1969.

The Japanese case provides an example of just how bad the splintering of the movement was. It had begun with the Zengakuren, which at its peak contained as much as 60% of Japan's students. Then, the young radicals split away due to the organization's perceived moderateness, and formed the Communist League, also known as the Bund. After a million splits and reunifications the Bund was re-united as the 2nd Bund, but its most adventurist radical wing felt no less frustrated than before, and split away once again as the Japanese Red Army Faction. This was already an extremely tiny group, but even they could not get along, and split into 2 new groups – The United Red Army and the Japanese Red Army, numbering 29 and 40 members respectively. Thus, the splintering of the movement led from groups of more than 100,000 to groups of less than 50.

It's quite telling that in France, where mass organizing was more successful, and where there was greater unity between students and workers, far fewer people resorted to terrorist tactics. Around the globe, the rise of urban guerrilla tactics was a response to past political failures; to an extent, it was something resorted to out of despair, out of the sense that nothing else will work, that nothing else has worked.

As youthful optimism and a spirit of radicalism often met frustrating deadlocks, some young radicals came to believe that political violence, by sheer force of willpower, courage, and dedication, would be the tool that overcomes their organizational failures, and makes clear who the serious revolutionaries are.

## **Violence Against the Left**

But everything mentioned so far was not yet enough to push radical youth into terrorism. What ultimately gave them the push were lived experiences of state violence, and the violent targeting of the left by the right. In 1967, German students came out to protest the Shah of Iran's visit to West Germany, as he was the head of a brutal regime supported by the US. The events escalated as cops and students clashed, and the 27-year old Benno Ohnesorg, who had come out unarmed to his very first demonstration, was shot in the head by a cop, an event which radicalized thousands of students. What would become West Germany's anarchist terrorist group, the 2nd June Movement, named themselves after the date on which this happened.

In 1968 in the US, MLK Jr. was assassinated, and a week later, directly inspired by his assassination, a young West German right-winger attempted to assassinate the

unofficial spokesman of the student radicals, Rudi Dutschke, who was explicitly in favor of peaceful political methods. Although the 3 shots did not kill him immediately, he would die from his injuries a decade later. The left took the rise of right-wing violence in Germany with a great sense of urgency, given that a few decades earlier an entire generation of leftists had been wiped out by the state. In 1969, cops, aided by the FBI, drugged Fred Hampton, the leader of the Black Panthers, and murdered him while he was sleeping in bed.

For many American radicals, the members of the Black Panther Party were political heroes. The way they grew organically out of the communities they hailed from, and the way they organized to materially improve the lives of the people of those communities, organizing self-defense groups and free breakfast programs, was extremely admirable. And it's precisely because of this community organizing that the American state did whatever they could to ruin the organization. The police and the FBI carried out infiltrations, sabotage, arrests, and finally assassinations against the Black Panther Party, and its membership had begun declining.

Then there was the Kent State Massacre in Ohio in 1970, where the National Guard opened fire on unarmed students engaged in peaceful protest against the expansion of the war in Vietnam, killing four of them. Similar events happened in other countries as well. In Greece in 1973, students in Athens protesting military dictatorship occupied their university, which led the state to respond with brutal measures of repression, including the use of a tank, leading to the death of at least 24 civilians. All of these were life-changing events for an entire generation, leading an even greater number of students to join the radicals. What this shows is that the radical youth did not resort to violent methods right away, and yet, in so many cases, peaceful protest and non-violent organizing was met with open violence. Those who would become urban guerrillas took these events as a lesson: if the state will murder even unarmed people engaged in peaceful protest, then only violent rebellion can challenge it.

It is after such events that most of the west's left-wing terrorist groups came to be. The most extreme section of Students for a Democratic Society broke away into a new organization numbering around 500 members, the Weather Underground, named after the Bob Dylan lyric – "you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows". After the assassination of Fred Hampton, they declared war on the US government. Many members of the Black Panthers themselves, after facing ruthless state violence, believed that illegal underground armed struggle was now necessary, and moved to the urban guerrilla group Black Liberation Army. The West German students who had participated in the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition, joined terrorist groups like the Red Army Faction, the Revolutionary Cells, and the 2nd June Movement. And the most extremist section of the Japanese Communist League formed the Japanese Red Army Faction.

The historical conditions for the western urban guerrilla wave had all come together. The *urban guerrilla* concept from Latin America, experiences of state and vigilante violence against the left, admiration for the liberation struggles of the third world, frus-

trations with the failures of mass organizing and the decline of the student movement – all of these conditions combined, set off an explosion.

And so came the decade of left-wing terrorism:

In West Germany, the Red Army Faction, the 2nd June Movement, the Revolutionary Cells

In the US, the Weather Underground and the Black Liberation Army

In Italy, the Red Brigades

In Japan, the Red Army Faction

In Greece, the Revolutionary Organization 17th November

In France, Action Directe

In Belgium, the Communist Combatant Cells

In the UK, The Angry Brigade And many many more.

## Characteristics of the Urban Guerrilla Groups

Among these were groups that identified as Marxist-Leninist, such as the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades. There were those that identified as anarchist, like the 2nd June Movement and The Angry Brigade. Some, like the Japanese Red Army Faction even had Trotskyist influences. Then there were groups centered around anti-racism and national liberation, like the Black Liberation Army. And also specifically feminist groups, like the Rote Zora in West Germany, whose actions included bombing the Federal Constitution Court for supporting anti-abortion laws, or the May 19th Communist Organization in the US, which was led entirely by women, several of whom were proud lesbians.

The Urban Guerrilla groups carried out bank robberies, which they referred to by the Marxist term “expropriation”, to fund further actions and support their underground lifestyle; in a few cases the robberies acquired a kind of “Robin Hood” character, where the money stolen from banks would be distributed among impoverished communities, as was done by the Tupamaros in Uruguay or Revolutionary Struggle in Greece, leading some to view the urban guerrillas as folk heroes. The urban guerrillas carried out bombings, and lots of them; sometimes kidnappings and more rarely assassinations. In some cases they would do prison breaks, rescuing arrested comrades, and in some desperate situations have shoot-outs with the police. They would leave communiques at the scene of the crime or anonymously contact the media to explain their goals and the purpose of their actions. They would build homemade bombs, sometimes using knowledge from their studies to do so; sometimes they would get explosives by robbing military posts and construction sites, or even buy dynamite over the counter where this was possible. Sometimes military warehouses or gun shops would be raided for weapons, sometimes they were acquired on the black market, and sometimes provided by guerrilla groups from abroad.

Some believed that a new period of world revolution was emerging. Many of the urban guerrilla groups that propped up saw themselves as part of a worldwide anti-imperialist struggle that included revolutionaries from Cuba, Vietnam, China, Palestine, and others. And while this may seem like mere self-aggrandizement on the part of 1st world radicals, they did actually make ties with revolutionary and anti-imperialist representatives from around the world, and sometimes collaborated, or received training and funding from them. Places like Jordan, Lebanon, and Yemen would often become safe havens for various urban guerrillas to plan and regroup in when the state forces in their home countries became too difficult to evade.

It's worthwhile to remember that the Palestinian liberation struggle at this time was led not by Hamas but by secular and socialist groups, like the Palestinian Liberation Organization, PLO, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the PFLP. In fact, what would eventually become Hamas was at one point funded by Israel, so as to split up the Palestinian liberation movement. The PLO and the PFLP would welcome all stripes of socialists to receive military training in their camps in Jordan, which is precisely how Germany's Red Army Faction, RAF, first received training. At the same time, this training period offered an example of the childishness and stubbornness that the RAF would sometimes exhibit – despite the hospitality and help provided by the Palestinian guerrillas, the RAF refused to follow all of their rules, which included the rule that women and men who were training in common in the camps were to sleep in separate rooms, a disagreement over which they ended their training course.

Despite this, The Red Army Faction would later collaborate with the PFLP in hijacking a plane. The Japanese Red Army would receive support and funding from Gaddafi's Libya, Syria, and North Korea. Libya also interestingly supported the French libertarian urban guerrilla group Action Directe. And even though the German Red Army Faction was highly critical of East Germany, the East German state found them politically useful enough to provide them with support, training, shelter, and new identities. Many of these acts of support were, of course, done covertly, so who knows just how common they were, but it's understandable why so many of these urban guerrillas had such a fiercely internationalist mindset. There were also collaborations and allyships between many of the urban guerrilla groups within the west, allyships between guerrilla groups in Germany and Italy, France and Belgium, Britain and Ireland, and countless others.

In the US, the Weather Underground had made contact with Cuba, with several of its members having gone there on expeditions. Weather Underground member Mark Rudd recalled being profoundly inspired by representatives of the Vietnamese Revolution that they met in Cuba. He received a souvenir ring from them, and was told that the ring had been made out of a downed American war plane, the 2017th such plane that they downed, as was indicated by a number on the ring. The Vietnamese representatives welcomed the Weathermen very warmly, explaining that their enemy is the US government, and that they want nothing but friendship with the American people, and, to the Weathermen's annoyance, were asking what their parents thought

about the war. Mark Rudd recalled the Vietnamese saying that if the Weathermen want to help the people of Vietnam, the best thing they could do was build the broadest possible American anti-war movement, but the Weathermen were deaf to this point. When Mark Rudd left the meeting, with a ring made out of a downed US aircraft on his finger, he and his friends didn't feel like patiently building a broad anti-war movement, they felt like waging a people's war. Later, there was allegedly a Cuban diplomat who was keeping track of the American left, and believed that the kind of actions the Weather Underground were carrying out were ineffective and self-isolating. Ironically, those who were the biggest heroes to the Weather Underground, the Cubans and the Vietnamese, seemed to be quite critical with their tactics.

## Foco theory

As mentioned earlier, Che Guevara had been highly critical of launching guerrilla struggle on urban terrain, but despite this, some urban guerrillas, including the Weathermen, saw themselves as following Che Guevara's theory of guerrilla warfare, particularly the *foco* concept. The idea behind *foco* theory was that the revolution could be advanced by small cadres of armed guerrillas, named *focos*. This was based on the incredible success of Guevara's guerrilla army in Cuba. At times, they numbered fewer than 200 men, and yet, using guerrilla tactics, won victories against military and police forces that numbered between 30 to 40,000, eventually leading the Cuban revolution to success. This was incredibly inspiring to young radicals in the west, as it led them to believe that they could fight for an immediate revolution even with a tiny membership. This, however, was a mistake. First of all, Guevara's *foco* strategy had worked in Cuba partly because the existing government was already widely hated among the lower classes, who thus gave widespread support to the *foco* groups even while not being members of them. So, *focotype* activity made a lot more sense for the Northern Irish Guerrillas or the Palestinian ones, and hence why their guerrilla operations on urban terrain were a lot more long-lasting and effective. By contrast, the American government still had legitimacy in the eyes of many Americans, and the American young radicals were not viewed favorably in large sections of the population. And secondly, the *foco* strategy in Cuba was pursued in rural conditions, where the forces of the state had less presence in the countryside and the mountains, giving the guerrillas large spaces in which they could regroup and gather their forces. Such conditions did not exist for the Western radicals operating in urban centers, where police presence was a lot more widespread and efficient. The success of *foco* activity depended on a rare combination of conditions that definitely did not apply in North America.



## Rural Guerrillas VS Urban Guerrillas

And this might be a good time to talk about the essential difference between rural guerrillas and urban guerrillas in general. The urban guerrillas and their sympathizers have tended to shun the label of terrorism due to its pejorative use, and to emphasize that they are not terrorists but urban guerrillas. However, while rural guerrilla struggle very clearly differed from terrorism, urban guerrilla struggle involved precisely the kinds of actions that were termed terrorism by the left at the end of the 19th century – bombings, assassinations, bank robberies, and so on.

Guerrilla warfare as originally theorized by people like Che Guevara, would use open rural spaces to their advantage, and gradually transform the smaller units into companies, battalions, regiments, and divisions, growing their forces, and engaging in extended battles which would liberate entire areas. It differed from mere terrorism in clearly being a form of warfare. The urban guerrillas, strictly speaking, didn't really engage in warfare, because the urban terrain and tightly organized state forces prevented them from growing their groups into active military units. In the absolute majority of cases, the urban guerrillas were limited to very small groups, which could not possibly wage extended battles or create liberated zones, and instead simply carried out isolated acts of terror after which they would retreat. There was a clear contrast between the military language they used, calling themselves armies and declaring wars, and the actual nature of their activity. Because of this crucial difference, I believe that urban guerrilla struggle can for the most part be accurately described as a form of terrorism, using that term in a purely descriptive sense, in contrast to rural guerrilla struggle which, while it was sometimes combined with terrorist tactics, was essentially a method of warfare.

On urban terrain, guerrilla warfare in the strict sense of the term has only been carried out in rare conditions of relative urban collapse, or where the forces of law and order had broken down. One of the few cases of an urban guerrilla group actually resembling traditional guerrilla warfare and expanding its numbers into the thousands was the Tupamaros in Uruguay, who, starting out with 50 members, managed to grow to 3,000. However, this rare success story also had a huge disadvantage – its high membership made the organization easier to detect and eventually destroy. And this has been an unsolvable contradiction faced by most urban guerrilla groups – on the one hand, they wanted a mass movement, and wanted to expand their influence among the population, and yet, on the other hand, the more members they had the easier they were to detect and persecute. And so, while the Tupamaros provide a rare exception, most urban guerrilla groups were not only numerically limited but, even at the peak of urban guerrilla struggle, had the tendency to decrease in numbers. Not having the benefit of a vast rural terrain, the 1st world urban guerrillas would end up either living extremely paranoid underground lifestyles, or would station their groups in other countries, and return home only for specific actions, neither of which constituted warfare, and neither of which were ultimately sustainable.

## A Timeline of Events

With thousands of urban guerrilla actions happening around the globe each year during this period, I couldn't possibly cover all of them, but to give you a general idea, I will go through a timeline of some notable, exemplary or otherwise interesting such actions. Although they range widely in terms of their nature and scale, it will hopefully paint a general picture of what this wave of urban guerrilla struggle was like.

**1969:** In September, the Brazilian Marxist-Leninist group National Liberation Action kidnap the US Ambassador to Brazil, Charles Burke Elbrick, in exchange for whom they win the release of 15 political prisoners. Their 2nd kidnapping is of the German ambassador Ehrefried Von Holleben, for whom they win the release of 44 political prisoners. The group's founder, Carlos Marighella, one of the original theoreticians of urban guerrilla struggle, is killed in a police ambush later that year.

That same year, in response to brutal state repression against the labor movement, the Uruguayan Tupamaros engage in kidnappings, assassinations, and even manage to briefly occupy an entire city, the city of Pandos. One of the only urban guerrilla groups to manage to do something at this scale, and so it is no surprise that many found them to be an inspiration.

**1970:** In March, the Weather Underground accidentally sets off an explosion in their New York home while building bombs, killing 3 of their own members. The traumatic experience leads the Weathermen to decide to avoid targeting people, and to focus only on property damage, making them one of the tamer famous urban guerrilla groups.

At the end of the month, the Japanese Red Army Faction manage to hijack a passenger flight, armed with katana swords, daggers, and a homemade bomb. Their initial plan is to fly to Cuba so as to receive training. However, they are told that the plane does not have enough fuel for a flight to Cuba. So instead, after releasing all the passengers in South Korea, they land in North Korea, where they are granted political asylum, and where some of them still reside to this day. It still amazes me that something like this could be done by a couple of students, but, of course, airport security looked very very different back then.

In July, the Uruguayan Tupamaros kidnap Dan Mitrione, an American FBI agent who was also working for the CIA, and, among other things, was instructing the Uruguayan police on the use of torture. Although the Tupamaros treat him remarkably well while in captivity, the government refuses to cede to their demands, and Mitrione is killed. This event is depicted in the movie *State of Siege*, perhaps the best movie depicting urban guerrilla activity.

In August, the British anarchist group The Angry Brigade begins a bombing campaign against property, with targets including banks, embassies, and homes of conservative members of parliament.

**1971:** In March, the Weather Underground bomb the US Capitol building, in protest against the US invasion of Laos.

**1972:** In February, the anarchist 2nd June Movement bombs a British Yacht Club in West Berlin, apparently as a favor to the Irish Republican Army.

In May, the Japanese Red Army carry out the Lod airport massacre in Israel. This is one of the major actions that I cannot wrap my head around. The urban guerrillas indiscriminately opened fire at an airport, while also throwing grenades, killing 17 Christian pilgrims from Puerto Rico, 8 Israelis, and a Canadian citizen. This act boggles my mind, especially given that most of the left-wing urban guerrillas tended to select their targets quite carefully, and were against the targeting of civilians in principle. They had been recruited by the so-called PFLP External Operations, and it's very important to note that this was not an official section of the PFLP, and its activity was not sanctioned by the actual organization, while the man behind it was later expelled from the PFLP.

In July, 5 members of the Black Liberation Army hijack a plane going from Detroit to Miami, eventually collecting a ransom of 1 million dollars and, after releasing the passengers, diverting the plane to Algeria. Though the authorities seize the ransom, they allow the group to flee, but 4 of them are eventually arrested in Paris.

**1973:** The Symbionese Liberation Army, SLA, is formed in San Francisco, California. This is one of the more bizarre and incoherent urban guerrilla groups, and I guess it makes sense that it comes from the United States. They did not identify with any specific political movement or tendency, and were not allied with any particular groups or governments. Their manifesto is not very enlightening either – it says simply that they seek the unification of all socialists, and people of all races, genders, and religions, and that their opponent is exploitation, oppression, and murder. Not much political specificity. Their very first action is to assassinate Marcus Foster, the first black superintendent of a large city school district. A truly incomprehensible choice. The SLA accused Marcus Foster of being a fascist because they believed that he sought to introduce a system of student ID's. Somehow, the SLA was surprised to see that this act made them disliked both in the local black community, and the local radical left, and they would later move to LA because they were so disliked.

The next year, they carry out their most famous act – the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, a publishing heiress whose family had a lot of political influence that the SLA hope to leverage. The demand they put forth in exchange for the hostage is, honestly, hard to hate – the setting up of a free food distribution program. Patty Hearst's father agrees, takes out a loan, arranges an operation, and actually donates 2 million dollars' worth of food to the poor people of the Bay Area. The operation descends into chaos as it is badly organized and the distributors are overwhelmed by the amount of people that show up, however, after that the SLA demands that the program be placed in the hands of the community coalition Western Addition Project Area Committee, who, using the funds, successfully organize the distribution of 100,000 bags of groceries in San Francisco. The free food program is, as one would expect, quite short-lived, and it is not the kind of long-term systemic change that a revolutionary seeks, but it did feed thousands of people, and that's more than most left-wing sects can brag about.

After holding Patty Hearst captive for a week they then let her choose between being released or joining them and herself becoming an urban guerrilla. She actually chooses the latter option, after which she participates in several actions, most famously the robbing of a bank.

In May, 6 SLA members die in a shootout with the LA police, and the rest are eventually arrested. Patty Hearst herself is arrested after being on the run for about a year, and a debate ensues regarding whether she carried out the armed actions of her own volition, or as the result of severe abuse leading to Stockholm syndrome. Though she is found guilty, her sentence is commuted after 2 years in prison, and she is later pardoned by Bill Clinton.

**1975:** The Weather Underground bombs the US Department of State in retaliation for Vietnam.

And the German anarchist 2nd June Movement, kidnap candidate Peter Lorenz of the Christian Democratic Union – a right-wing politician who was once a member of the Nazi Party. He is released after their demands are met – the freeing of several arrested German urban guerrillas, along with 9,000 German Marks and a flight to South Yemen.

Starting this year, the Greek urban guerrilla group, Revolutionary Organization 17th

November start a campaign in the course of which they assassinate 23 people, including US and NATO officials, Greek politicians, magistrates and businessmen, and, being one of the most wellorganized and efficient such groups, successfully evade capture by the Greek police and even the CIA until 2002. They acquire weapons by robbing military warehouses, capturing, among other things, bazooka rockets, and even seize a rocket launcher from the Athens War Museum. The Greek radical left doesn't play games, as would be later evidenced in 2007, when a different Greek group, the anarchist Revolutionary Struggle, shot an RPG-7 at the US Embassy. The group's member Nikolaos Maziotis is eventually arrested, but then escapes prison with a hijacked helicopter, in which he flies away with his romantic partner as the prisoners cheer him on.

**1976:** Ulrike Meinhof, the journalist who was the RAF's leading theoretician dies in prison. The official government claim is that she killed herself by hanging. However, many believe it to be an execution by the state. Meinhoff's sister claimed that, during her last visit to the prison, Meinhof said "You can stand up and fight only while you are alive. If they say I committed suicide, be sure that it was a murder." And while the official account is today generally accepted by default, an independent investigation into her death claimed signs of violence and assault, and provided many reasons to doubt the suicide claim.

And in the US, the Weather Underground voluntarily disbands, with several members, tired of living in secrecy, giving themselves in.

**1977:** In this year begins what is known as the German Autumn, an escalation in which the intensity of German urban guerrilla struggle reaches its peak.

The Red Army Faction kidnap Hanns-Martin Schleyer, a powerful business executive and industry representative, who had not only been a Nazi party member but an SS officer. At this point, the West German state is no longer willing to negotiate, and with their demands unmet, the terrorists execute Schleyer.

Then, the Red Army Faction collaborates with the PFLP in hijacking a Lufthansa flight, and demand the release of 10 RAF members from the Stammheim Prison, as well as 2 Palestinian comrades jailed in Turkey. Once again, the government is no longer willing to negotiate, and instead sends a counter-terrorist task force which successfully invades the plane and kills most of the hijackers.

The same night, 3 of the original RAF leaders are found dead in their cells. The official government explanation is that they had used an illicit communication system to organize a collective suicide. And the government account, is, as one would expect, the standardly accepted account of events, especially today. But J. Smith, who wrote a history of the RAF, while not claiming to know exactly what happened that night, has found a whole bunch of reasons to doubt the official explanation. Andreas Baader's suicide gunshot wound was, for instance, at the base of his neck, a really unintuitive and uncomfortable angle from which to commit suicide, and would've required the use of his left hand, which was not his dominant hand, while other bullets in the floor and in the wall suggest the possibility of a struggle.

In the case of Raspe, who also supposedly killed himself by gunshot, no powder burns are found, which always occur when firing a weapon.

In the case of Gudrun Ensslin who allegedly hung herself, the torn sheets supporting her body would not have likely tolerated the weight of a falling body, and the chair on which she supposedly stood was too far away from the hanging. She was also quoted as telling her lawyers "I am afraid of being suicided in the same way as Ulrike. If there is no letter from me and I'm found dead; in this case it is an assassination."

Irmgard Möller survives the alleged group suicide with several stab wounds made with a prison-issue butter knife. The government explains this as a failed suicide attempt, a claim which Möller always denied, as well as denying the existence of a suicide pact in general.

Ultimately, no independent body was ever formed to investigate the Stammheim deaths, so I don't think we will ever have a certain answer as to what happened, and your view will ultimately depend on which sources you trust more. Safe to say, while a suicide pact was of course a possibility, the West German state certainly was not above the use of extrajudicial murder. In any case, the Stammheim death night marks the end of the first generation of the RAF leadership, and the group's influence declines from here on.

**1978:** The Italian communist urban guerrilla group Red Brigades kidnap Aldo Moro, a prominent centrist politician of the Christian Democratic Party, who had been Italy's prime minister. Aldo Moro led the so-called Historic Compromise, the attempt to unite the Christian Democratic Party with the Italian Communist Party, so as to strengthen the political centre by bringing the left closer to it. The Red Brigades hated this idea

of an alliance with the center, and wanted to prevent the Historic Compromise, and create political instability, which they believed was more conducive to revolutionary politics. The government refuses to negotiate with the Red Brigades, and after 55 days, the urban guerrillas reluctantly assassinate him. Aldo Moro was quite popular for his message of unity, and the assassination greatly reduces the Red Brigades' popularity, while also, contrary to their intentions, leading to an anti-communist blowback.

**1979:** In the US, members of the May 19th Communist Organization walk into the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women, take 2 guards hostage, and successfully free Assata Shakur, a Black Liberation Army member who had received a life sentence for killing a state trooper. She flees to Cuba, where she is granted asylum and lives to this day.

**1982:** The May 19th Communist Organization begins a 3-year bombing campaign, whose targets include the National War College, the Washington Navy Yard Computing Center, and the Israeli Aircraft Industries building.

In October, the Canadian anarchist group The Squamish Five, after stealing over 1000 pounds of dynamite from the Department of Highways, bomb a Litton Industries Plant, which had been making components for American cruise missiles.

**1985:** In France, Army General René Audran, who had been engaged in arms sales, is assassinated by the far-left group *Action Directe*.

In Belgium, the Communist Combatant Cells, in opposition to imperialism, had been carrying out attacks mainly against US companies and organizations, and I just wanted to mention them because I found it funny that their leader ends up being arrested inside an American-style burger restaurant.

The list of attacks could go on for several hours, but I end the timeline here. The number of notable attacks drops heavily in the 80s, and the concept of the urban guerrilla largely loses relevance in the 90s. Many urban guerrillas were arrested, many died, many decided that such methods of struggle were no longer worth it, and after ceasing their activities either fled or gave themselves in. Urban guerrilla groups, on average, have very short life-spans, as the nature of their activity simply does not lend itself to long-term operation. In these decades, the political left in general suffered an intense decline, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were fewer countries willing to fund urban guerrillas in the west. Perhaps a more significant factor was the greatly increased funding for counter-terrorist forces, which had made huge advancements in their methods. Police presence was increased and made more efficient, and, at least in first world countries, the maintenance of an urban guerrilla group was made almost impossibly difficult. Not to mention, the world's governments became increasingly less likely to negotiate or meet the terrorists' demands, instead switching to an uncompromisingly offensive strategy. The risks were greatly increased, and the rewards decreased. And so, the age of the urban guerrilla fizzled out, not only at the hands of state forces, but at the hands of its own contradictions.

## Decline

The urban guerrilla groups had anticipated that their acts would intensify government repression, but some of them believed this to be useful for the struggle. They believed that the struggle would force the government to reveal its true colors, so to speak, and as government repression increases, the population's hatred for the government would also increase, lending itself to greater revolutionary sentiment. In retrospect, this view was quite naïve, because, while the excessive measures of repression taken by governments were often unpopular among the population, these measures also made it more difficult for the revolutionary left to organize, whether they professed violent methods or not. The urban guerrillas gave governments the pretext for increased repression, while not creating the kinds of mass organizations that could effectively resist such repression.

Out of the 1st world countries, the most intense government repression as a result of urban guerrilla struggle came from the West German state, not surprisingly given that it contained a significant number of former Nazis.

In response to urban guerrilla activities, the West German state began equipping police officers with hand grenades, semi-automatic revolvers, and submachine guns. In 1971, in an attempt to find the urban guerrillas, the state used 3000 heavily armed officers to patrol the cities and set up checkpoints throughout Northern Germany. In 1972, a 17-year old sped through one of these checkpoints simply because he didn't have a drivers' license, and was gunned down by the police with submachine guns as a result.

Over the 70s, the West German Federal Criminal Bureau, with the task of capturing the Red Army Faction, would have its budget increased six-fold, its staff tripled, and converted into the West German equivalent of the FBI, it would lead the world in computerized repression. It set up databases which contained almost 5 million names, over 3000 organizations, around 2 million photographs of people, and about 2 million sets of fingerprints. While this has become quite standard today, in the 70s it was unheard of.

And finally, in 1972 the government passed the Anti-Radical Act, the greatest clampdown on the legal left since the ban on the German Communist Party. Supported by the 3 major political parties, including the social-democrats, and supported even by the mainstream trade unions, it barred people who professed far-left views from taking up positions in the public sector, which included everything from the post office to public hospitals to, most significantly, universities and schools. The influential Belgian Trotskyist theorist Ernst Mandel, who was a holocaust survivor, was barred from teaching in West Germany. A special political police, the Guardians of the Constitution, would gauge people's loyalty to the state through the collection of data and covert surveillance. This led many radicals to hide their political views out of fear of repression, with over 80% of students reporting that they had avoided checking out left-wing literature out of the library for fear of being blacklisted. And the icing on the

cake was the fact that the Guardians of the Constitution was led by Hubert Schröbers, who had been a Nazi prosecutor responsible for sending people to concentration camps in the 1940s.

The fear that West Germany was once again becoming fascist was very well-founded in this period, and it is perfectly understandable why some left-wing radicals believed the use of terrorist tactics to be necessary. At the same time, such tactics ended up being ineffective in challenging state repression. Historically, where state repression was successfully resisted, it has been only by means of mass organizing, and mass organizing itself had only become more difficult.

The goal of the radical left had always been the creation of a mass movement, but time and time again, the urban guerrilla groups inevitably went in the opposite direction, leading to small groups of dedicated but isolated revolutionaries. Whereas the point of rural guerrilla warfare was to continuously expand its ranks, the urban guerrilla groups in the vast majority of cases failed to grow in numbers, and their general tendency was towards numerical decline. It was an ineffective way of propagating radical views, because most people only support political violence if they already agree with the political views that motivated it. More often, it led people to disassociate themselves from the movement, as most people found the risks involved far too high in relation to the effectiveness of the tactics.

The next major problem was that these groups were unable to achieve any kind of prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics is when you try to prefigure the kind of society you desire in the very methods and principles used in your daily organizing and political actions. The Students for a Democratic Society were actually doing this, even if in a very small way – they wanted a genuinely democratic society, so they utilized participatory democracy throughout their organization. The Black Panther Party also did this quite commendably – they didn't just attack their political enemies, but created community self-defense groups to protect people from police brutality and racist violence, they held seminars, and instituted a free breakfast program for children, thus creating at the small local level the kind of social changes they wanted to see nationwide. And this was a much more effective way of propagating their views, because it actually showed communities how their politics could benefit them.

The urban guerrilla groups were unable to do this because they were in essence underground organizations that had to work in secret. Rather than increasing their numbers and expanding their sphere of influence, they contracted, as the number of people they could trust kept decreasing, and a group that keeps contracting cannot work towards wide-reaching social transformation. Their impact was more in the headlines they made than in the concrete social changes they created. There was an unsolvable contradiction at the heart of these groups – while they wanted a mass movement, their very existence depended on limited membership, because the more members the group had, the easier it was for the state to detect them. To be fair, some such groups did attempt to create aboveground organizations to supplement the underground struggle, but these mostly ended up being neglected because so much



time, effort and resources had to be spent maintaining underground existence, and maintaining the links between the underground and the aboveground orgs was always risky.

The urban guerrillas found themselves increasingly more isolated, unable to link up with the wider movement. Fearing being arrested or betrayed, they often became increasingly paranoid, unsure who to trust, and had to spend all their efforts continuing to simply survive, which left little time for concrete political work. In conditions like this, groups of dedicated radicals become like a snake eating its own tail – burning with a desire to change the world, and yet being unable to expand their social power, reduced to a defensive position at all times. The struggle that was meant to lead to a world of solidarity and freedom instead led to an atmosphere of paranoia, infighting, and self-destruction.

Bommi Baumann summarized the situation quite well: “What began with joyful rebellion against oppression ended with isolation from society, internally imposed pressure to produce and achieve, and led inexorably to imprisonment, nervous collapse, betrayals and death. Most significantly, it also led to the destruction of the vision of a new life which had inspired the revolution in the beginning.”

And because they were increasingly less tied to any kind of mass base of support, they were increasingly unaccountable and liable to make all kinds of mistakes. If the Symbionese Liberation Army, for instance, would’ve had strong ties with the local black community and the local radical left, they probably wouldn’t have made an incomprehensibly bad choice like killing a black school superintendent.

Baumann wrote that “Because you’re illegal, you can’t keep your contact with the people at the base. You no longer take part directly in any further development of the whole scene. You’re not integrated with the living process that goes on. Suddenly you’re a marginal figure because you can’t show up anywhere ... the group becomes increasingly closed. The greater the pressure from the outside, the more you stick together, the more mistakes you make, the more pressure is turned inward.”

And in some cases, the urban guerrilla groups grew increasingly narrow in their goals because they had been spending all their resources and efforts trying to free previously jailed members, in the course of which sometimes even more people would get arrested, and even more actions would be carried out trying to free them. This would form a closed circle in which all of a group’s actions would be dedicated to freeing its own members, and no time would be left for the wider social issues that they were meant to address.

In other words, the conditions of their very existence made it impossible to realize the kind of ideals they had fought for in the first place. The isolation and paranoia also often led to unhealthy relationships between group members, as they criticized one another, accusing each other of not being dedicated and serious enough, sometimes creating a cultish atmosphere. The combination of revolutionary zeal, paranoia, strict discipline and isolation from wider society ended up providing fertile ground for abuse, as leading members would sometimes begin abusing and taking advantage of lower-

ranking members. Some urban guerrilla groups would hold sessions of so-called “self-criticism”, a term derived from Maoism, where individual group members were meant to internalize revolutionary views and have their dedication to the revolution tested, but, far too often, these self-criticism procedures were merely sessions of bullying and abuse. In the self-criticism sessions of the Weather Underground, some members would be berated for hours for all of their flaws and shortcomings. While these sessions were sometimes actually effective in rooting out informants, they also led to fear and mental deterioration that wasn’t very conducive to healthy solidarity. As a further example of cultish behavior, some Weather Underground chapters would break up romantic couples in the name of combatting monogamy, and would actually force their members to rotate sexual partners.

Being unable to change the world, the combative energies of the militants came to be directed against fellow radicals. Just as a religious ascetic who finds the world irredeemably sinful and feels powerless to change it begins self-flagellating, so political radicals who were in despair about the political state of the world and yet were powerless to change it, turned their anger inwards, against members of their own political groups.

The infighting and abuse that took place within the Weather Underground, however, is very far from the worst example. The most extreme and horrific example of this happened within the United Red Army in Japan, which first killed 2 people for leaving the group, and, later, as the group’s leader Tsuneo Mori accused fellow members of not being revolutionary enough, subjected them to sessions of “self-criticism”, which were really, without any exaggeration, sessions of torture. Members were brutally beaten and forced to stand out in the winter cold, eventually leading to the death of 14 of its members. When the injuries inflicted led to death, Mori said this was only proof that they had not been genuinely determined revolutionaries. The United Red Army, starting out with 29 members, killed almost half of its own membership. Tsuneo Mori, himself, would later commit suicide in prison while awaiting his trial. So, if you ever feel bad about infighting in whatever organization you’re part of, at least you’re not the United Red Army. While a fringe case among the urban guerrilla groups of the period, it did show in the most extreme form the kind of dangers latent in a form of small-scale political organizing that combined violent methods with illegal underground conditions and the demand for unflinching dedication and sacrifice.

## Conclusion

Today, the age of the urban guerrilla is long since over, and it seems unlikely that it will return to its former peak. Although I find it difficult not to admire the ambition, dedication and bravery of some of these urban guerrillas, their actions were not ultimately effective in achieving their stated goals. We must sadly admit that the most widespread effect of these actions was an increase in police funding, an improvement

in the efficiency of police methods, and, at least in the short-term, a strengthening of repression against the political left. Perhaps the most admirable achievements of the urban guerrillas in the 1st world were the freeing of political prisoners, but the state's willingness to negotiate and meet demands was highly limited, and this limit was quickly reached.

Left-wing terrorists have only achieved success in 3 broad categories: 1) Those whose demands were narrow, limited, and clearly defined, for instance, industrial disputes with terrorists demanded increased wages, which often happened in America's early labor movement. 2) Those which enjoy widespread popular support, especially where the enemy regime is a foreign occupier, like in Ireland or Palestine 3) Those which were embedded in a wider organized popular movement, of which terrorism was only a small part. And even the 2nd category was rarely successful when not combined with the 3rd category.

One could point to the Algerian anti-colonial movement as an example of urban guerrilla tactics leading to success, as Algeria did eventually gain independence. However, even here, it was the rural guerrilla struggle that was ultimately decisive in Algerian victory. And the more the globe is urbanized, the less relevant rural guerrilla warfare becomes.

And while terrorist tactics may have been successful in attaining certain narrow or limited demands, if what you seek is large-scale social transformation there's just no way of getting around it: what you need is mass organizing. Because one thing is for certain – it doesn't matter just how dedicated your small revolutionary unit is, there has never been a social revolution in history which succeeded without widespread mass action.

I'm always struck by the clear patterns that arise in modern global political movements. First you had the French revolution, the Haitian revolution and the American revolution all happening around the same period, all seeking to establish the rights of man. Then there were the revolutions of the mid-19th century in Germany, Italy, and France, all demanding the establishment of national republics, mainly led by artisans and the middle-class. Then, you had the first proletarian world revolution in the early 20th century, with revolutions around the world led by industrial workers at its forefront, carrying out general strikes and organizing workers' councils, trying to expand workers' power and bring about a social revolution. Then, in the mid-20th century you had the wave of anti-colonial movements, led primarily by the peasantry, using the methods of guerrilla warfare, and seeking national self-determination. And finally, in the 60s, widespread radical student movements, organizing student unions and holding mass protests, demanding an end to imperialism and seeking an all-round more liberating society. International movements of protest and revolution seem to arise like unstoppable waves, unexpectedly engulfing the entire globe.

Just as in the 1960s, opposition to the Vietnam War politicized and mobilized millions of people around the world, so today, the closest thing we have to a global mass political movement is the one opposing Israel's onslaught on Gaza, with even the

International Court of Justice ruling that it can be plausibly described as a genocide. It is up to each generation of radicals to find its means of struggle, and to discover what it is capable of, and what works in trying to affect change. The process of discovering the correct methods of struggle is always a global one, always internationalist. And whatever methods of struggle are discovered, the only thing I know for a fact is that our strength will be in numbers.

# The Ted K Archive

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Urban Guerrillas: The Decade of Left-Wing Terrorism

Mar 23, 2024

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