terrorist transgressions

gender and the visual culture of the terrorist

edited by Sue Malvern and Gabriel Koureas

I.B. Tauris London - New York
There seems to be no way in avoiding the category of generation when it comes to conceptualizing 1970s West German leftist terrorism. The concept of generation has been prominently used in three different ways: first, the Red Army Faction (RAF) is narrated as the crimes of three distinct generations. Second, the RAF’s political violence has been recurrently considered an after-effect of the 1968 generation and/or an excess of Second wave or generation of feminism. Third, the 1968 generation and the RAF tend to be framed as the children trying to kill their literal and/or political fathers – the National-Socialist legacy. It is this third mode, a decidedly Oedipal generational and familial framing of the RAF that this chapter focuses on.

In her book *Hitler’s Children* (1977), South African publicist Jillian Becker demonstrated how severing the ties from both literal fathers and the great impersonal societal father had fatal consequences. Becker’s controversial bestseller may not be the first but it is the most prominent voice in a sea of journalists, publicists, criminologists, psychologists, RAF-members and sympathizers to draw on the Oedipal family narrative about Nazi fathers and their offspring. The RAF founding member Gudrun Ensslin famously said in 1967 ‘this is the Auschwitz generation, there is no arguing with them’.¹ Bommi Baumann, founder of RAF’s less intellectual counterpart ‘Movement of June 2nd’, indicts the Nazi father in *How it All Began*, whereas Fritz Teufel, prominent member of ‘Commune 1’ and the ‘Movement of June 2nd’ accused his own father in court.² Since then, countless memoirs by 1968ers and RAF-members insert their experiences into the frame of the Oedipal drama. In

What is strangely missing in this debate, and particularly in the popular RAF historiographies by journalists and publicists that this chapter focuses on, is an acknowledgement of psychoanalysis and how it implicitly and explicitly informs the authors’ generational thinking. This omission has the paradoxical effect of ‘suppressing’ gender questions, to make use of psychoanalytic language myself, while preserving them nonetheless. In this chapter I argue that the generational framing of the RAF used by journalists and publicists such as Becker and Schmieding implicitly or explicitly invoke the Oedipal rivalry myth, which in Freud’s understanding was decidedly gen(d)erational. Freud didn’t imagine genderless children struggling against genderless parents. Quite the contrary, his entire point was to show how children develop into boys who develop into men. It is thus surprising that in the late 1970s, a time one might call the second wave of psychoanalysis, when both psychoanalytic readings of the 1968 phenomenon and feminist psychoanalysis were flourishing, there were not more gen(d)erational analyses of left wing terrorism. One might argue that the dominance of socialist feminism in West Germany precluded any analysis of the RAF in feminist-psychoanalytic terms. Plus, many feminists were busy defending themselves against the accusation of being (like) left wing terrorists. Of course there are always exceptions to the rule: one short essay by Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen published in 1978 where she adopts a feminist-psychoanalytic approach at explaining female participation in left wing terrorism in generational and familial terms.

While one might come up with many explanations as to why no substantial gen(d)erational analyses of left wing terrorism came out of the 1970s and early 1980s popular RAF historiography, it seems almost wilful when current debates about the RAF as a generational conflict ignore the overt sexing, gendering and ageing of their Oedipal frame. After 30 years of feminist theory, masculinity studies and queer theory, it is difficult to turn a blind eye to the gendered script of male children killing their literal and symbolic fathers. I contend that acknowledging the influence of psychoanalysis on popular RAF historiographies such as Becker, Schmieding or more recently Aly, entails including gender as a meaningful if not to say necessary category of historical analysis.

I thus see my contribution to this debate in raising questions about the explanatory power of a generational approach as a psychoanalytically infused
category of historical and gender analysis. My larger project focuses on why the generational framing of the RAF keeps resurging in popular texts, and how it shapes popular RAF historiography in profound ways. In this chapter, however, I will concentrate solely on publicists Jillian Becker’s and Walter Schmieding’s contribution to the debate.

generation

There are many explanations as to why the generational framing of the RAF has been so dominant. For one, the concept of generation has become increasingly prominent in twentieth-century West German historiography more generally. Based on generation’s etymological root as ‘genus’ referring to ancestry, genealogy and generativity of families, an understanding of generation as static, coherent generational classes based on age, or philosophical schools that are tied to generations, has become dominant. Generation has also been linked to another etymological root: generation as *generatio.* In this vein genera, following *generatio,* are in constant movement or flux. This understanding of generation seems to have been far less dominant in West German historiography.

The salience that the static category of generation has garnered in the twentieth century has at various times been seen as an effect of the naturalization of bourgeois gender hierarchies, the rise of scientific theories of procreation or the ascendency of genetics. It has been argued that the rise of ‘scientific’ sex and race theories has led to an intertwining of biological and sociological notions of generation, and that in the course of these developments generation became seminal for historiography; for those historians attending to continuities in history as well as those focusing on rupture and conflict. According to historian Ulrike Jureit, it is only around World War I that an understanding of generation as conflict and disruption comes to prevail over continuity. Incidentally this coincides with when Freud’s psychoanalysis entered popular discourse. Since then, the term generation refers to a rift between two succeeding generations. A case in point is sociologist Karl Mannheim’s essay ‘On the problem of generations’. Mannheim analysed the impact of generational experience on groups of people across class and geographical lines. Given the prevalence of psychoanalytically infused social diagnosis in the post World War II era by the likes of Adorno and Horkheimer, Mitscherlich and Marcuse, it may not surprise that even
some of the RAF members stylized their actions as motivated by their conflict with literal and symbolic father(s). Some self-critically admitted to having become like their fathers, the deviant offspring of a society traumatized by Nazism.

My own understanding of generation is informed by Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of the Oedipal complex and feminist criticism of the paradigm by Julia Kristeva, Marianne Hirsch and Judith Roof. In her essay 'Women's Time' Kristeva points out that 'when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of the space generating and forming the human species than of time, becoming, or history'. She then goes on to unfold the binary logic of women either fighting for inclusion into linear, progress orientated time and history, or women refusing to form part of the male order while celebrating a maternal, cyclical, repetitive time. Roof argues that organizing history as a set of seemingly natural cycles the way generational historiography seems to, does not guarantee women a place in history. For generation is neither an innocent empirical model nor an objective assessment of a historical reality. Against this background, I will now revisit what film theorist Thomas Elsaesser called the 'master-narrative of fathers and sons', that is the RAF's entanglement with the Nazi past in order to discuss the explanatory power of this framework as well as its shortcomings.

**hitler's children: oedipal rivalry and repetition compulsion**

*Hitler's Children*, commissioned by the New York publisher J.B. Lippincott, was published in June 1977. It proved an immediate bestseller; in the same year the publication received the *Newsweek* (Europe) book of the year award. The author, English-South African journalist Jillian Becker, started to work on a second edition right away. A new chapter was added to the second edition, which came out as a Panther paperback by Granada, London in January 1978. This new chapter focused on the recent attacks by the second generation of the RAF carried out in 1977, namely the kidnapping and murder of Hanns-Martin Schleyer and the deaths of Jan Carl Raspe, Gudrun Ensslin and Andreas Baader in Stammheim prison on 18 October. This expanded edition was translated into French, Spanish, Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, Japanese and German. The German edition was published in 1978.
The book already instigated a debate well before its publication. Indeed, two weeks after the 13 October hijacking of a Lufthansa plane to Mogadishu, and the already mentioned deaths on 18 October, a much discussed review of the book appeared in the noted German weekly *Der Spiegel* written by political scientist Martin Greiffenhagen. The author took issue with some of the main points of Becker’s argument but nonetheless engaged seriously and not dismissively with the book. Greiffenhagen stressed, however, that the book’s title was unfortunate if not incorrect. To him Becker’s claim that Meinhof and Ensslin were Hitler’s children was not doing her own analysis of Ensslin’s and Meinhof’s socio-political background and socialization justice. He thus added that these so called children were also ‘heirs of a reduced understanding of politics that in its moral resistance, prophetic setting of an example, elitist community spirit, and fatal fascination for the exceptional had to be open to the accusation of rather being on the right than on the left politically’. Greiffenhagen points out that if one takes into account what Becker unearths about Meinhof’s and Ensslin’s socio-political background and socialization, one would invariably come to the conclusion that there was more to the RAF than the slogan ‘Hitler’s Children’ suggested. Indeed, in the German edition of the book a question mark was added to the title: *Hitler’s Children*? For the German context, the adapted title was still provocative enough and Fisher Publishing house still feared repercussions.

The title *Hitler’s Children* is reminiscent of Giselher Schmidt’s 1969 monograph ‘Hitler’s and Mao’s Sons’, drawing attention to the continuities between National Socialism and 1968. Schmidt too made use of the father-child trope. Not only did the title of his book suggest a natural reproduction of extremism – from ideological fathers to sons – the book’s title also made a case for structural similarities between Hitler or rather the far right National Democratic Party and Mao or the new Left. The generational frame facilitated Schmidt’s analogy between left and right. A similar argument could be made about the title of Becker’s book and the analogies it facilitated.

In her bestseller, Becker is mostly interested in the two most prominent women in the RAF: Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin. She also writes about Andreas Baader but not in the same depth. This might have led her to choose the seemingly gender-neutral *Hitler’s Children* as title. By highlighting specific events in the two women’s biographies, Becker demonstrates how intimately bound up the RAF was in recent West German history. Becker suggests that even though the RAF had disqualified any kind of authority as fascist, which to them was identical to Nazism, and even though the RAF’s
terrorist actions were directed against their Nazi fathers, they inadvertently imitated them. The terrorists, for Becker, had not only disqualified themselves as recalcitrant adolescents rebelling against any adult authority but they were also petulant, spoiled children trying hard to rupture their bond with the Nazi past, so hard in fact that in the end they reproduced the same kind of anti-Semitic violence as their father(s). To substantiate her claim, Becker recounted the revolutionary cell's 1976 airplane hijacking to Entebbe, Uganda, when the terrorists separated the Jewish passengers from the rest.25 ‘Once again they were ordered about by guards with guns, shouted at to move quickly – “Schnell!” – this time by a German woman hijacker, who also felt it was necessary to slap them (18).’26 According to Becker’s account, the female terrorist in question consciously or unconsciously repeated the anti-Semitism of Nazi concentration camps. The children or rather daughters had become their fathers.

Just to make it clear, Becker was not the only one to make these kinds of observations: revolutionary cell member Hans-Joachim Klein, learning of the separation of Jews at Entebbe, said ‘this is Auschwitz all over again, pure and simple’. In fact, the anti-Semitism evident in the Entebbe hijacking had become the focus of long-running internal debates during which Klein eventually left the movement. Klein had sent a letter and his gun to Der Spiegel in 1977, announcing his resignation. And RAF-member Silke Maier-Witt, in her memoir says, ‘in trying not to be like my father, I ended up being even more like him. Terrorism is close to Nazism’.27

As linguist and RAF-scholar Andreas Musolff points out, ‘the implied ethical assessment [of assuming the symbolic position of the child] was ambiguous because it varied with the perception of children as either being in revolt against the perpetrator-parents (i.e., the preferred self-image) or inheriting=carrying forward their legacy (i.e., the critics’ view).’28 Becker’s popular RAF historiography showed how revolt and emulation were constitutively intertwined. Setting the scene as a generational conflict between children and literal and/or symbolic father(s) allowed Becker and others to question the political nature of the RAF:

But whether the idealistic moral-political motives claimed by these rebellious children of the free Western democracies, styling themselves an avant-garde of world communist revolution, are plausible, or whether quite different and personal motives were more likely to have impelled the young gangsters to their acts of violence, is one of the questions which a close inquiry into their histories should help to decide.29
Becker's implicitly psychoanalytic frame for studying the RAF connected the 'private' children–father conflict with 'public' political ruptures between generations. Incidentally, when Becker emphasized the personal dramas that influenced these 'young gangsters', she predominantly focused on the women in the RAF. One could argue that she tapped into the long tradition of conflating women with the private and personal in order to underscore her central argument that the RAF was not about politics, their disgust with what to them was an oppressive, fascist state was just a smoke screen. To her it was clear that instead theirs was a misguided rebellion against the father(s) that ended in the unconscious repetition of their crimes.30

'Unser kampf'? a feminist response to the resurgence of oedipal RAF historiography

In 2007, commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Benno Ohnesorg's murder, journalist Jens Jessen wrote a piece in the weekly newspaper Die Zeit suggesting that there might be more to the Nazi-1968 analogy. A year later, Götz Aly's provocative publication Unser Kampf took the comparison to a new level. The generally indignant responses from noted 1968 scholars and journalists were not long in coming. The debate is still raging on but has become more subdued with responses by Kraushaar31 and Musolff32 adding nuance. Is this resurgence of Oedipal RAF historiography itself a case of repetition compulsion? How do we make sense of this almost forty year old debate from a gender perspective?

First, the decidedly masculine understanding of generation in this debate suggests continuity – both over time and space. The continuity over time is summed up by the popular saying 'like father like son'. The same 'like father like son' trope somehow also manages to imply spatial continuity. The extreme right is likened to the extreme left. As if it didn't matter whether the pendulum swung to the right or to the left, the trope suggests that the outcome would be the same. Second, generation infers a cyclical yet progressive temporality by drawing on generativity and generative tropes such as the 'birth of a new generation'. These images naturalize a specific sequence of events, namely an older generation giving birth and then being killed off by a younger one. Generational classifications are construed on the basis of what Roof calls 'sequential negation':33 Roof shows how history is organized as a series of intergenerational bonds inevitably ruptured by a new and/or younger
generation. Third, history that is structured by generational conflicts, tends also to naturalize violence as a necessary *movens*, each generation needing to kill its fathers. Finally, the generational frame thus lends itself to focus on the continuity or repetition of Oedipal rupture. The Oedipal lens, however, seems to occlude all that lies outside this familial and familiar matrix.\(^{34}\)

It is not the goal of this chapter to discount generational historiography. The generational lens can contribute to making sense of the complex psycho-sexual-cultural-political entanglements of those who lived through World War II and those who were born after. However, the complexities invoked by the generational frame are hardly ever explored, especially when they touch on gender and sexuality. More often than not, the Oedipal narrative paints too coherent a picture of two and only two main players, fathers and children. More specifically, the entire narrative is organized around the Nazi fathers. The power relegated to the father’s position overshadows all the other players in the Oedipal constellation, their position and agency within the constellation. For one, it is hardly ever explored how women and men’s relationship to the symbolic and literal fathers might have differed. Freud stresses that women and men resolve the Oedipal complex differently; she needs to work through penis envy, he needs to come to terms with castration anxiety. The result is the child’s identification with the same-sex parent and the successful development of his or her mature sexual identity. In this logic, female RAF members who entered into competition with their fathers, on equal footing no less, assumed the masculine role. Whereas it was deemed almost normal and ‘natural’ for young men to ‘compete with and overthrow a father figure’, women who attempted the same upended or at least upset the symbolic order,\(^ {35}\) which presumably made them all the more threatening yet fascinating a topic to cover in journalistic accounts.

Furthermore, when Greiffenhagen lists the different ways that left wing terrorism has been explained thus far, ‘missing fathers’ and ‘excessive hatred of fathers’ figure prominently. Mothers don’t figure on his list. Indeed, mothers are virtually absent in psychoanalytically infused Oedipal narratives of the RAF. One exception is the already mentioned article by Margarete Mitscherlich-Nielsen where she describes how damaging the mixed messages were that mothers sent their daughters by being subservient to husbands that they clearly despised.\(^ {36}\) In contrast to those journalists who characterized the mothers of prominent members of the RAF as dominant, overprotective and domineering,\(^ {37}\) Mitscherlich-Nielsen draws a more ambivalent picture. However, her reading doesn’t call the centrality of the father figure into question when she explains the mother’s confusion is the result of her ambivalent
relationship to the *pater familias*. Against this background, one might be inclined to agree with Marianne Hirsch that the Oedipal narrative excludes one particular ‘aspect of women’s experience and identity – the maternal’.\(^{38}\) Hirsch is thus particularly interested in the figure of Jocasta: ‘In asking where the story of Jocasta is in the story of Oedipus, I am asking not only where the stories of women are in men’s plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters.’\(^{39}\)

Indeed, if the mother surfaces in analyses on the RAF, she never seems to be implicated in the Nazi atrocities. The ‘Nazi Mutter’ is missing from popular RAF historiography. This omission is reminiscent of Jocasta’s absence in Sophocles’ and Freud’s Oedipus as well as in feminist re-readings of the Oedipus narrative:

> The story of her desire, the account of her guilt, the rationale for her complicity with the brutal husband, the materiality of the body which gave birth to a child she could not keep and which then conceived with that child – this story cannot be filled in because we have no framework within which to do it *from her perspective.*\(^{40}\)

References to the active role of women and mothers in World War II were written out of the conflict between the RAF or the 1968 and Nazi generations. There might have been the odd analogy between the behaviour of female members of the RAF and female concentration camp wardens in popular RAF historiography.\(^{41}\) However, these analogies never served to substantiate an Electra narrative that is a plot that centres on the child’s rivalry with his or her mother for possession of his or her father.\(^{42}\) If the mother was given a role in the unfolding of the RAF drama, she was firmly situated within the hearth of the home. In other words, popular RAF historiography predictably places the mother outside or on the margin.\(^{43}\) The mother is equated with the Other, which may be seen as a way of disarticulating ‘the political’ from the feminine and/or maternal position.\(^{44}\)

What’s more, the focus on the perpetrators and their relation to their father(s), obscures other important aspects that are constitutive of terrorism. Feminist terrorism studies have shown how terrorism is constituted in a constellation of differently situated spectators, consumers and producers of terrorism,\(^{45}\) and they have pointed to the gendered and racialized power dynamic at play in these constellations. As Jasbir Puar, the author of *Terrorist Assemblages*, underlines, multidimensional perspectives allow us to see more than two opposing fronts. Puar’s insistence on ‘multiple figures of ambivalence’ instead of clear binaries is echoed by those RAF scholars who have
been working towards a definition of terrorism that questions temporal schemes such as the notion of the past as the inherited legacy or burden for the present. They challenge the binary constellation of perpetrator–victim. In their view, reconstructing possible psycho-social dynamics between the Nazi and the RAF-perpetrators is just one aspect of the story.

Norbert Elias concluded his analysis of West German terrorism with the following words: 'How far from linear, how full of spurts backwards and forwards, is German development.'\textsuperscript{46} If indeed generational historiography reproduces progress orientated 'linear, chronological time where the elements that come first appear to cause the elements that come later',\textsuperscript{47} this frame may not be so helpful in making sense of West German terrorism. Especially since it fails to take into consideration what Michael Schneider pointed out in an essay entitled 'Fathers and son's, retrospectively: the damaged relationship between two generations':\textsuperscript{48}

[The 1968er generation's] return to the past was not at all primarily an interest in the fathers and in the dark areas of their pasts, but rather, and to a much greater extent, an interest in their own beginnings. The look back at the fathers is at the same time a retrospective look to the roots of their own emotional lives, to the influences at work on them, and to the psychological legacy of spiritual injuries and deficits.\textsuperscript{49}

Schneider compared the RAF to the tragic figure of Hamlet, a melancholy if not to say whiny dreamer shaped by an authoritarian father and a disciplinarian family. According to him the father and the family are 'agents for drilling in the same rules and codes of behaviour which had conditioned the generation of the fathers into becoming the submissive followers of the Nazi government and men',\textsuperscript{50} and produce sons consumed by the silenced Nazi legacy. What seems insightful about Schneider's reading of the RAF as Hamlet is how this manages to jumble the predictable temporality of the Oedipal narrative by introducing the unpredictable, volatile figure of the ghost:

And like Hamlet, they often did not know whether this apparition was only a ghost of their imaginations, of their suddenly unfettered suspicions, or whether it was a genuine indication of the true natures of their fathers which had previously been kept from them.\textsuperscript{51}

As Berendse and Cornils imply, it could be fruitful to not only focus on the Nazi fathers' ghostlike (re)appearances to the 1968ers and the RAF, but to conceptualize RAF historiography more broadly as both haunted and haunting.\textsuperscript{52} This begs the question: what if the past does not produce the future as
parents produce children? Isn't our understanding of the RAF just as much shaped by the act of looking from the present to the past, and by our specific socio-cultural location in time?

'upheaval of daughters'; in search of the RAF women's mothers

Whereas the legacy and burden of being the offspring of Nazi fathers was hardly ever questioned, the Oedipal script didn't implicate the Nazi mother in the same way. The complicit figure of the 'Nazi Mutter' didn't surface in popular RAF historiography. However, women's involvement in the RAF kept terrorism experts searching for precedents or antecedents. In 1978, Walther Schmieding, nationally known as a TV-journalist and anchor, wrote an extensive article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung where he pointed to the striking similarities between nineteenth century Russian revolutionary women and the women in the RAF. A year later he published the widely read book Upheaval of Daughters (1979). In the introduction he observed a resurgence of anarchism reminiscent of the conspiracies of the Russian revolutionaries of the outgoing nineteenth century. As evidence he noted that a pirate copy of the 1883 History of the Revolutionary Movement in Russia by the historian Alphons Thun was back in circulation. In the second half of the nineteenth century Russian anarchists bombed and assassinated leading heads of the Russian Empire. These assassinations gave the impression of a vast international network, which in turn led to the counter-anarchist collaboration of the international community of states. According to Walter Laqueur, one of the most widely published terrorism experts in the 1970s, these assassinations indicated the first signs of systematic terrorism.

In the 1970s one might speak of a veritable renaissance of studies on Russian nihilists. Similar to Schmieding's more popular work, they were quick to draw parallels between the Russian revolutionary women and the female members of the RAF. Newspaper articles on the women in the RAF regularly turned to nineteenth century Russian revolutionaries when it came to explain women's (political) violence. A Swiss newspaper article on the women in the Red Army Faction called attention to the female revolutionaries in Tsarist Russia: 'The participation of femininity in terror is older than commonly assumed', noted the Swiss lawyer and psychologist Susi Thürer-Reber. She quickly qualified her statement, however, by noting that the
political situation then and today was hardly comparable. In the same vein, the Swiss newspaper *St. Galler Tagblatt* compared female members of the RAF to nineteenth century female anarchists:

Wherever there is – alleged or real – social or national injustice, women stood at the forefront. A century ago in Tsarist Russia Vera Sassulitsch, Vera Figner and the aristocrat Sophia Perowskaya spread revolutionary terror, that in terms of finesse, cold-bloodedness, intelligence outshined their male accomplices.\(^{59}\)

The idea that women, once they had fallen out of their ‘passed-down role’, were more brutal and forceful than the male members of terrorist cells, was espoused by these popular historiographies.\(^{60}\) In fact, even certain feminists accepted this convention as fact.\(^{61}\) In the search for an explanation for women’s participation in terrorist cells, many terrorism experts bought into the myth of women’s innate greater radicalism, a myth that was still invoked in an early 1990s account of female violence.\(^{62}\) In this logic, woman’s motherly instincts made her more ferocious than men. The terrorist cell symbolized ‘her brood’ or her ‘ersatz-family’.\(^{63}\) She supposedly felt an intuitive need to defend them from enemies and whistle-blowers.

One of the main reasons why those in search of the mothers of the RAF might have looked back to the events that led to the Russian Revolution was the prolific participation of Russian women. Because of this, the comparison seemed obvious, its explanatory power hardly ever questioned. Possibly, the analogies between female members of the RAF and the women who had taken part in the events that led up to the Russian revolution might well have been influenced by the widespread anti-communist sentiments in 1970s Cold War Europe. The reason why the women in the Red Army Faction could be compared to Russian anarchist women in the first place, was that Vera Figner and others had written memoirs.\(^{64}\)

In her memoirs *Nacht über Russland [Memoirs of a Revolutionist]* Figner makes no secret that she is giving an account of the revolution, and that changes in her personal/gender relations symbolize larger social changes.\(^{65}\) Indeed, she never strictly separates the private and the social spheres. Figner's coming of age – from coddled child and decorative object to political subject – marks the transition from old world order to the anticipated revolutionary changes. In the ‘old’ Russian Empire aristocratic women, Figner explains, were destined to lead existences of mere dolls. The only ambition aristocratic young women had, was to become the Tsar’s bride or a court lady.\(^{66}\) Figner
was brought up that way too, and as a child, she admits, she didn’t yet see any
difference between the past and the present.

Another social transformation that Figner narrates as coinciding with
changes in her personal gender identity is her decision to join a revolution-
ary group: Figner writes that she had almost freed herself from her husband’s
clutches, and that when she returned to Russia in the spring of 1875 her husband
didn’t disturb her any more.67 Soon thereafter she severs all ties to him, she
stresses, and a year later she divorces him. To underline her newly won ‘freedom’,
Figner also goes back to being called by her maiden name.68 Figner demarcates
the next stage of social progress by changes in personal/gender relations: she and
her comrades set out to raise the conscience of the peasant population through
propaganda, educational programmes and by carrying out assassinations. This
meant saying goodbye to her earlier life, ‘all family ties, sympathies, loves and
friendships had to be ended’, and going underground.69 In her memoirs, joining
an illegal organization is presented as a radical break from the old, traditional
life of marriage, family and other intergenerational ties.

The fact that Figner emphasizes the radical rupture with family without
mentioning the support she got from many of her relatives during her radical
days, suggests that narratorially the rupture serves to build up the readers’
suspense. In addition, the stark dichotomization between the old regime and
the new social order make the terrorist acts committed by Figner and her
comrades seem more drastic. Indeed, the Oedipal rivalry myth served Figner
as a narratorial tool to depict the revolutionaries as starkly different from
their predecessor. It is noteworthy that changes in gender relations take centre
stage in her memoirs – both for narrative structure and content-related pur-
poses. Her descriptions of traditional gender roles and gender relations depict
the old regime in negative light, while the ‘freedom’ from husband and father
became metaphors for the social freedom from the coercive Tsarist regime.
Indeed, the generational frame of the father–son relationship is metonym-
ically linked to the repressive state and its subjects.

the renaissance of russian nihilist women
in the 1970s

In the 1970s, these memoirs were revived anew, in the hope one would
discern important information about why women would turn to violence.
Vera Figner, Sophia Perowskaja and other revolutionary women were made
into the harbingers and forerunners of the ‘modern female terrorists for whom the terrorist fight also signified personal emancipation’.

Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, an Austrian journalist well known for his polemic against the 1968ers, usually published in journals of the new Right, noted that Russian terrorism is where it all began. According to him it was the first time that young women started to play a decisive role in terrorist organizations. Much like the female members of the RAF these Russian women were a specific ‘type of terrorist amazons’. To him they presented a ‘cruel caricature of a decadent-destructive masculinity’. At least the ‘girls’ of the Russian Revolution ‘embodied’ hope of a better future, whereas the women in the RAF didn’t exhibit anything but hatred and an ‘irrational will of destruction’ opined the Austrian journalist.

While Kaltenbrunner placed RAF terrorists at the end of the hierarchy of deviants – a discursive strategy to denaturalize them even more – other journalists and criminologists drew parallels between the Russian women and the RAF. Schmieding was convinced we could learn much from Russian anarchists about the psychological make-up of West German terrorists and about the path from ‘human to terrorist’ more generally. With this statement Schmieding made clear that terrorists weren’t human. He also intimated that psychologically the ‘Tsar murderesses of 1881 and the RAF terrorists of the 1970s were indeed comparable.

One similarity that Schmieding pointed to was the emancipatory ambitions of both Russian and West German terrorists. According to him these manifested themselves in the female terrorists’ masculine self-presentation, in their lack of (sexual) interest for the opposite sex, their belief in ‘free love’ and last but not least in their problematic relationship with their fathers. They also both severed their ties with their families which they replaced with the terrorist organization as a type of ‘ersatz’ family. In addition, Schmieding noted that their biographies and conspiratorial activities bore resemblance: they would only commit to relationships with men, whether they were engagements or marriages, if they served the larger cause of the revolution. When the feminine charms promised to be of use to the terrorist organization, these women were willing to abandon their masculine self-presentations – short hair, dark glasses and ‘enormous cigarette consumption’ – for the time being. To illustrate this point, Schmieding referred to parts of Figner’s memoirs where she describes how she lived under a pseudonym in a secret apartment and disguised herself as a ‘high society doll-lady’. During her secret mission these ‘peacock’s feathers’ were her disguise. As soon as the mission was over, she went back to
her masculine self. The fact that these nineteenth century revolutionary women were so good at ‘passing’ as aristocrats, farmers or even as men was a frequent topic in the 1970s. Their ‘double lives’ were likened to the RAF women’s undercover existence. Similar to the Russian revolutionaries, these ‘female supermen’ and ‘phallic women’ were able to adopt the inconspicuous appearance of bourgeois women. Female members in the RAF and their undercover performance of bourgeois femininity confounded deep-seated ideas about the congruence of sex, gender and desire. In other words, their gender presentation unhinged the firm belief that a person’s self-presentation expresses her gender identity and sexual orientation. Most terrorism experts initially assumed that a woman’s feminine self-presentation indicated that she not only identified as a woman and desired men but that she couldn’t commit violent crimes. This easy equation was called into question by some feminists, butch lesbians and other women who dared to dress and act like men but weren’t inclined to commit violent crimes, and it was further complicated by feminine women who committed violent terrorist acts despite their feminine appearance.

The familial genre that a revolutionary like Vera Figner used to frame her path to revolution provided much sought after answers as to what motivated the female/feminine members of the RAF to deviate from dominant notions of femininity. It also gave at least a partial answer to the recurring question of whether women’s involvement in West Germany’s Red Army Faction was a consequence of feminism and women’s sexual liberation. The question itself reveals much about the notion of gender espoused by those who posed it, namely a deep-seated belief in femininity as peaceful, domestic and dependent, while associating feminism and sexual assertiveness with masculinity and violence. To underscore the commingling of feminism and terrorism, terrorism experts inserted 1970s female terrorists in a genealogy: Meinhof and Ennslin became Figner’s daughters, and their acts were believed to be an upheaval against the shackles of patriarchy. However, framing the women in the RAF and violent women more generally as ‘Daughters of Upheaval’ linked political violence directly to these undutiful daughters’ relation to their literal fathers. Furthermore, political violence – in accordance with Figner’s autobiography – could be proven to go hand in hand with changes in gender and sexual identity, in essence with a virilization and a quest for independence from both fathers and husbands. The generational framework thus seems to naturalize prescribed genealogies and origins of gender and sexuality.

The similar descriptions of nineteenth century Russian anarchists and 1970s female terrorists suggest that a transhistorical type of the ‘deviant
woman’ was created. Short, unkempt hair, nervous smoking and sexual assertiveness were some of the gender markers used to characterize these different women of different epochs. At times other gender codes were introduced that confused or even contradicted the ones mentioned above. Such inconsistencies notwithstanding, an image of the ‘deviant woman’ congealed over time and reaffirmed an understanding of femininity as peaceful, domestic and dependent. And it legitimized the criminalization of women who visibly deviated from traditional bourgeois gender roles.

**the absent presence of women in oedipal RAF historiography**

An understanding of history as generational ruptures has shaped twentieth century West German historiography in profound ways. In these histories of conflict between generations, women rarely figure as agents. They are however deemed eminently important for the reproduction and socialization of future generations of responsible citizens, and in this respect for the progression of history. One example is the generative language such as ‘giving birth’ to a movement commonly used to recount and naturalize a course of events. As Kathleen Jones points out in relation to similar tropes used to conceptualize the nation state: “The history of the Western cooptation of feminine powers of generativity in representations of the “birth of the state” as an essentially masculine act of political natality both suppresses and ironically preserves the connection between charismatic rule and female symbology.”

One could argue that the generational, familial RAF historiography does the same. It suppresses overt gender analyses while at the same time preserving gender by emphasizing the rule of the father and Oedipal rivalry as the pre-political, natural *movens* of history as unilateral progression.

But why this present absence of the mother figure and of gender analyses more generally? The reasons lie first and foremost in the Oedipal framework of popular RAF historiography. As Hirsch rightly points out, stories of Electra or Antigone, for example, would most certainly shape different plot patterns, foregrounding the mother’s relation to daughter instead of erasing it. Within the Oedipal plot, an explanation may be found in the socio-symbolic risk factors that liberated mothers like Ulrike Meinhof or Gudrun Ensslin must have seemed to personify. When these women penetrated movements and histories previously reserved for men, it was considered to be just that, penetration and
cockiness. Moreover, their violence was seen in stark contradiction to their biopolitical role as the bearers of life.\textsuperscript{93} Indeed, these terrorists decided to take lives. Thus, rooting the 1970s political violence in Tsarist Russia may be understood as the effort of certain journalists to discursively and narratively tame the unruly events of the 1970s. It is debatable, however, whether this containment contributed to historicizing women’s involvement in the RAF or rather to their decontextualization. In fact, one could speculate that the generational conceptualization of the RAF served to depict Meinolf, Ensslin and Mohnhaupt as neither unique nor novel. The RAF women were written into a long history of violent women. From a feminist point of view one might not only critique that genealogies – the search of the origins of a current question – produce a definite, unambiguous narrative but that this quest for an origin also seeks to unveil and naturalize a pre-discursive truth about gender. At the same time, the insistence on the long tradition of violent women deflects from the specificities of the socio-political context of the 1970s. Whereas the trans-historical comparison of the women in the RAF to the Russian ‘Daughters of Upheaval’ could be seen as giving women’s political violence a proper place in history, one might also surmise that depicting terrorism as the result of the unnatural virilization of woman was a way to deflect from the specific circumstances of 1970s West Germany. Female terrorists were simultaneously given a history and written out of history.

Notes

5. Ohad Parnes et al., \textit{Das Konzept der Generation: Eine Wissenschafts- und Kulturgeschichte} (Frankfurt am Main, 2008).


26. For an analysis of the RAF’s anti-Semitism, see: Kraushaar: ‘Hitlers Kinder’. Most analyses of the RAF turn a blind eye to the group’s anti-Semitism and racism, however.


34. Roof: ‘Generational difficulties’, p. 69. By arguing against the use of generationality, however, feminist theorists invoke inter/generationality. Ironically, feminism has narrated its own history as a story of succeeding generations, commonly referred to as three waves of feminism. This reading of feminism has been strongly criticized by women’s historian Karen Offen for its reductionism and by feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti for its Anglo-American bias; see Van der Tuin: ‘Jumping,’ pp. 17–31.


42. Infamous terrorist Carlos is supposed to have compared one of the female members of the RAF with a ‘KZ-Aufseherin’ (Schreiber: ‘Wir’, p. 103).
54. Alphons Thun, *Geschichte der Revolutionären Bewegungen in Russland* (Leipzig, 1883); several chapters of Thun’s book are devoted to terrorism in the Tsarist Russian empire.
56. Lacqueur’s statement refers to terrorist organizing and the execution of assassinations. It does not allude to the systematic expansion of supranational counter-terrorist efforts and their effect on anarchism/terrorism (Walter Laqueur, *Terrorismus* (Kronberg, 1977), p. 12).

58. ‘Über Terror und radikalisierte Frauen. Lic. Iur. Susi Thürer-Reber sprach bei den liberalen Luzernerinnen’, Luzerner Tagblatt, 2 March 1978; articles that appeared in academic journals also compared women terrorists of the 1970s with Russian anarchists of earlier eras. Amy Knight (Knight: ‘Female Terrorists’, pp. 144, 147) noted that both the German and the Russian women were highly educated and formed an exceptionally united front.


63. See also Schreiber: ‘Wir fühlten’.


65. Vera Nikolaevna Figner, Nacht über Russland. Lebenserinnerungen (Berlin, 1985 [1928]).


68. Figner: Nacht, p. 50.

69. Figner: Nacht, p. 91.


75. Schmieding: ‘Sophia Perowskaja’.
76. Schmieding: *Aufstand*, p. 249.

77. Figner: *Nacht*, p. 41; In the German version of her memoirs, Figner writes that the accusation was that under the guise of pursuing university studies in foreign countries Russian women devoted themselves to the lusts promised by ‘free love’ (Figner: *Nacht*, p. 41). It is possible that the Russian Tsar reacted to the rumours about Russian women that were circulating in Switzerland at the time. Dominique Grisard, ‘Nationale und geschlechtliche Grenzziehungen “verqueeren”. Transgressionen russischer Sozialrevolutionärinnen und Studentinnen in der Schweiz des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts’, *Ariadne. Forum für Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte*, 57 (2010), p. 23.

80. Figner: *Nacht*, p. 94.


88. Van der Tuin: ‘Jumping’.

