

For Us It Was a Question of Learning Explosives and Shooting Techniques

The following interview with Helmut Pohl was originally published as “RAF bestätigt Ausbildung an Waffen in der DDR; Helmut Pohl dementiert Spionage im Auftrag der Stasi” in the July 7, 1991, Frankfurter Rundschau. On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and soon afterwards the entire GDR was annexed by the FRG. Over the course of the summer of 1991, all ten former RAF members who had been living in the GDR were captured. All except Inge Viett would provide the police and crown prosecutors with information about the guerilla, leading in some cases to new charges being laid against prisoners from the RAF. (Viett, it should be noted, did provide information about her former contacts in the MfS.) (M. & S.)

Frankfurter Rundschau: Herr Pohl, we'd like to proceed directly to the question of the connection between the RAF and the *Stasi*. When were you yourself in the GDR for the first time?

Helmut Pohl: First, I'd like to say a few words. We only agreed to this because we feel compelled to comment on this GDR story, which has been blown out of proportion. Neither for our practice nor for the GDR did the contact have the significance that has been attached to it. Of all our international contacts, those with the GDR were the least significant. The only reason to discuss them is that the story has been exaggerated, and that must be corrected.

Frankfurter Rundschau: We'll take that into consideration. Again, when did you first travel to the GDR?

Pohl: In the autumn of 1980.

Frankfurter Rundschau: As early as the early 1970s, the GDR apparently allowed RAF members to transit through.

Pohl: I've been with the RAF since the end of 1970. The only transit was in connection with training in Jordan. I didn't take part in that in 1970. At that time, the group traveled from Schönefeld to Jordan, using phony IDs. Incidentally, in 1973, I traveled to the Middle East in a way that had nothing to do with the GDR.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Are we going to address the question of...

Pohl: The GDR story is connected to the fact that the eight went there. As I understand it, the contact was established by Inge Viett. A year had been spent looking for somewhere for the eight to go. I got out of prison in the autumn of 1979. I don't know anything about the nature of the meetings before that. I went to the GDR in the autumn of 1980. There was a house there, managed by an older married couple; for the life of me, I can't remember where it was. The question for us was whether we'd continue to go there or not. That was clarified in the autumn. I estimate that I remained there for about fourteen days. That was my longest visit. Apart from that there were short discussions. We didn't know what they had in mind.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Which *Stasi* associates did you personally meet?

Pohl: We addressed each other by our first names. Helmut, Günther, and Gerd were the names I knew them by. I learned their last names when they were printed in the press.

Frankfurter Rundschau: What did you talk about with them?

Pohl: About the military-political conflict surrounding missile stationing. We were interested in getting a picture of how other countries saw it, because, as a result of its internationalism, the GDR knew a lot about Third World countries. Their views interested us.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Was the exchange productive for the RAF?

Pohl: Let me finish with the first question. I want to give you a complete picture. In early 1984, we ended the contact to the GDR from our side. After the second-to-last discussion in the autumn of 1983, we had actually decided to break it off, because the discussions were always unpleasant. In early 1984, our members Ingrid Jakobsmeier and Christa Eckes went there for the last visit. Christa because she had never been, and she needed to get a sense of why we had ultimately come to this conclusion.

Frankfurter Rundschau: The objective of the RAF in the 1970s was to provoke the state's repressive apparatus. To formulate it in the RAF's jargon: "to expose the ugly face of capitalism." Was there even any debate within the RAF about the problem of cooperating with a repressive apparatus like the *Stasi*?

Pohl: We wanted contact with the GDR. The Ministry for State Security¹ was simply the appropriate agency for such contact. The trainers did not, in any case, come from the MfS, but from the National People's Army. Now, all of that was structurally interlocked. In the beginning, the contact occurred in the limited context of finding a place for the eight people, which created a basis for further discussion, out of which came the training. Beyond that, there was no cooperation.

Frankfurter Rundschau: What was the political significance of these discussions for the RAF?

Pohl: Starting in 1980, our politics changed conceptually from what they had previously been. After 1977, we arrived at a point where we were restructuring. Part of the organization broke away, and the remainder wanted to do things differently. We developed the front strategy as a strategy against the offensive of the imperialist state. At the time, all politics were closely tied to and defined by the rearmament debate, the Reagan policies, and the military strategy. These were the main issues we discussed. These discussions helped us to clarify our concept, and we hoped to learn as much as possible about the actual nature of NATO policies.

Frankfurter Rundschau: What did the GDR hope to learn from the RAF?

Pohl: They wanted to know about political developments in the FRG. We absolutely never talked about our structure. They, of course, had numerous contacts in the FRG. They asked us, "What do you think about this or that? What's your assessment?" They showed us numerous leaflets and asked us about them. We thought about how we should talk to them. We had a very clear approach: we would talk to them like anyone here that came from one of the social movements or, in the same sense, like any international contact. We generally talked in the same way: extensively on a political level, while offering very limited concrete information.

¹ *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit* (MfS); this is the official name of the *Stasi*.

Frankfurter Rundschau: What price did the RAF pay for the GDR's help in solving the defector problem?

Pohl: There was no price. There was never, for example, any effort to find out about our plans for actions. For them, it was a question of understanding developments in the militant scene, as, for example, with the leaflets I mentioned. At the most, their interest included using our "appeal," as they called it, to mobilize for the peace movement. They said things like, "Imagine if you said that all militants should get involved. That would have an impact."

The most recent nonsense being spread by *Spiegel TV* is this espionage story.

Frankfurter Rundschau: According to *Spiegel*, Helmut Voigt, a lieutenant and a section leader with the *Stasi*'s Department XXII, claims otherwise. He spoke of shooting and explosives training for the RAF in the GDR...

Pohl: Certainly that was discussed during our conversations. But first a little more about this most recent espionage story. What Voigt now says is the exact opposite of what they said to us at the time. I clearly remember that we once addressed the issue—more or less in this way, conversationally, not as an offer—of whether they had any interest in our knowledge about military facilities, and they expressly said, "No, anything that could be construed as espionage should be avoided." Today, Voigt claims the opposite. This is a result of the crown witness policy. He has to produce evidence of a legally useful offense. The goods must be delivered. Obviously, crown witnesses were always called upon to comment on the RAF's actions and structures. As this failed to produce anything, an effort is being made using this alleged "espionage." In fact, it's a joke. Everything we knew about military facilities, they, with their satellites, knew far better. That the opposite is now being advanced by an ex-MfS agent makes no sense to me, other than as an attempt to fabricate something so as to be able to make use of the crown witness law.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Did the people you talked with have it in the back of their minds to discuss defection with active members?

Pohl: From the start, it was clear to us that they weren't in contact with us because they agreed with the RAF's politics. They said they found them incorrect. For the socialist states, the revolutionary process would unfold through three main currents: the socialist states, the working

class in the capitalist centers, and the liberation movements in the so-called Third World. It was clear to us that they wanted to integrate us to serve their political interests. They said to us, "Any of you can come and live here." They would take care of it. But pushing us to defect? No. They didn't try to influence us in any way. It was clear that we would not let ourselves be dissuaded from anything by the GDR.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Henning Beer, who participated in discussions with the *Stasi* and then defected said during his trial that there were negotiations about munitions and similar things. Were you also involved in such things?

Pohl: No. There were no negotiations. In the beginning, when Wolfgang Beer and Christian Klar were in the GDR, everything imaginable was discussed. Those things may have been discussed. By 1980, it was clear that they wouldn't agree to that.

Frankfurter Rundschau: They did, however, train RAF members. How did that come about?

Pohl: The training took place in the spring of 1982. I don't know who besides the BAW today claims that this took place before the actions against the U.S. airbase in Ramstein and the U.S. General, Kroesen, in Heidelberg in 1981. After the Kroesen and Ramstein actions, we had a few concrete, very specific questions about explosives and shooting techniques. We addressed this during our subsequent visit. Then the GDR proposed comprehensive training. They prepared a schedule. Three people attended: Inge Viett, Adelheid Schulz, and myself. Christian Klar, who is always mentioned in this context, wasn't there. On one occasion, he came with us to the shooting range. He visited us there for three days, because he was on his way to meet another international contact and was bringing a few pages of a paper that others who were not in the GDR were working on.

So there can be no talk of the RAF having been trained there. It was three people. We consciously limited it.

The GDR said that more of us could come, ten people or more. However, for us, the goal was to get clear answers to our questions about weapons and explosives techniques. We could share what we learned there with the others. For us, the significance of the whole thing was to create the conditions for the others to train themselves. The program simply and exclusively included explosives and shooting techniques.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Where did it take place?

Pohl: In different locations. We were brought to a forester's lodge "on the water" near Briesen. I've already said that in published material. Theoretical classes were held there. The practical classes took place in different places at National People's Army military facilities. Gun training included pistols, semi-automatic pistols, and short- and long-range weapons of various types. One day, we practiced with the Soviet RPG-7 grenade launcher. Explosives technique, including industrial and home-made explosives, was obviously important for us—explosives and the construction of detonators.

Frankfurter Rundschau: What the *Stasi* people also report—that a Mercedes like Kroesen's containing mannequins and a German shepherd was fired upon—is that true?

Pohl: Oh yes, the German shepherd. That much is true. When we arrived at the location, the Mercedes was there with the dog in it. The GDR people wanted to recreate the action against Kroesen to test its deadly effect. The trainer shot once, and it was a bull's eye. The dog was hit, and he then shot it with a pistol. After that we engaged in target practice.

This training early in the year was the only one that occurred. Later on, Christian Klar once had the opportunity to practice with a pistol, because at the time training was underway. However, he only emptied a couple of magazines.

Frankfurter Rundschau: So the reason for the whole thing was, in this case, to test why the attack against Kroesen hadn't succeeded?

Pohl: The questions we had came more from Ramstein, because we had made very poor quality explosives in that case. We weren't satisfied. As far as firing the RPG goes: it is foolish to believe that any of us learned that there. We had long since known how to do that. However, you don't often get a chance to practice, and it's a difficult weapon to handle. Therefore, we were interested. The GDR handled the training in a very traditional military way. When the Palestinians train you, they do it entirely differently. The training was interesting and important for us.

Frankfurter Rundschau: How did the contact with the GDR end? When did the relationship between the West German guerilla and East German real existing socialism cool down and why?

Pohl: In the two years that followed, there were four or five visits, two of which I was part of. During these, the discussions continued. As far as the training goes, we had the most intensive contact in that context. We also did other things. We were once driven to Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen to visit the concentration camps. I once said that I wanted to go to the German Historical Museum in Berlin, so we did that too. The longer the contact lasted the more difficult it became. Toward the end, there wasn't much left in it for us except the risk involved in traveling back and forth. We had the impression that it was only defensive, only pronouncements and rationalizations, just "securing socialism" and the peace policy. It was so artificial that instead of talking to them, we could have read *Neue Deutschland*.² We didn't learn anything new from it.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Were you disappointed with this behavior on the part of your partners in the anti-imperialist struggle?

Pohl: We didn't see them as partners: they were simply one of the existent realities. Because of historical developments, the socialist states played a particular role in supporting the liberation movements. We didn't care a wit about real existing socialism. The artificiality and the clichés—that aspect created friction at every point. We were probably sometimes as unbearable for them as they were for us. When things started to get rough, they said that that was simply the proletarian way. However, they also did quite a bit. At the beginning, we were surprised with the qualitatively positive way they incorporated the eight people that wanted to leave the RAF.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Do you want, at this time, to provide details that are previously unknown—and will sooner or later be published?

Pohl: If something more comes out at this point, if more crown witnesses from the former GDR come forward, then they are lying. I can only talk about the period up until 1984, but I can't imagine that similar contact was re-established later. In the meantime, the *Verfassungsschutz* has claimed that the support milieu, as they call it, had contact. That's complete nonsense. The fabrication is: we facilitated further contact via the aboveground and maintained it in the same way. However, we never discussed it with anyone. Even within the RAF, we limited information

² During the time of the GDR, *Neue Deutschland* was the newspaper of the ruling Socialist Unity Party.

about the GDR to a few people. The other thing that I want to say about it is that the GDR was neither a rearguard nor a base of operations. There were visits and discussions, in general for three or four days, then we left. The longer, first trip at the end of 1980 had nothing to do with the crazy Schmidt story that the *Stasi* people are now telling—that they wanted to have us there longer to prevent us from carrying out actions during the election in which Schmidt faced Strauß—instead, it was because we wanted to clarify whether we even wanted to have further conversations. They are now trying to ensure that they get as much out of this as possible. We are alleged to have used the GDR as a rear base area due to the constant pressure created by the manhunts. However, that's not true.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Why not?

Pohl: Because our logistics were good enough. As far as I know, we were never in our history as well positioned logistically as we were at that time.

One more thing about the alleged continued contact through the aboveground: that runs parallel to the fabrication about an aggregate RAF, by which as many people as possible are to be criminalized, because they were allegedly part of this aggregate concept. There may have been contact with the radical left scene, but that had nothing to do with us. You should not forget that at the time this was going on political conditions were intense, with the missiles being stationed and the Reagan policies. You saw the relationship to the socialist states differently if you were afraid that a war was coming. We know that radical left groups in the movement that existed at that time went, for example, to the FDJ³ summer gatherings—*Autonomen*, as well as women's groups and professional associations. This was not a RAF thing, but rather it must be seen as an expression of the overall situation. There was, however, no RAF-MfS conspiracy. I know of no concrete contacts. We noticed that the GDR was looking for contacts across the militant spectrum. However, people kept their heads and closed that door.

Frankfurter Rundschau: From prison, you were only able to follow the fall of the GDR through the media—what was your main feeling about it? Did you feel joy that masses of people went into the streets to demonstrate peacefully, or was your main feeling that everything was slipping away?

3 The *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, or Free German Youth, was the official youth movement of the ruling Socialist Unity Party in the GDR.

Pohl: I felt surprise—I had noticed the economic difficulties the socialist states faced. They had already talked about their economic constraints. However, nobody had thought that the socialist camp would implode.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Did you sympathize with this people's revolution?

Pohl: No. Obviously it was legitimate, correct, and inevitable that in a "socialist state" like the GDR, the population would at some point explode. However, I wouldn't call it a revolution. It was more of an outburst than a revolution. The cake was re-cut, and the East Germans like the Germans and the Central Europeans in general belong in their completely obvious self-perception to those who own everything and sit at the top of the power structure. In this way it is essentially a relationship of Europeans to the rest of the world.

Frankfurter Rundschau: From your point of view, is there a difference between defectors like Peter-Jürgen Boock, who rejected the "traitor role," and Susanne Albrecht, who completely "spilled the beans"?⁴

Pohl: Boock played a very special role. I don't, however, see any difference. I don't know which of them played the worse role. It wasn't that the defectors had left the RAF. That was not the problem from our point of view. At the time, some of them waffled, and they were encouraged by us to leave. The problem is that they later allowed themselves to be used by the state as crown witnesses.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Should the defectors now fear for their physical safety? More to the point, should they anticipate the RAF's revenge?

Pohl: Nonsense.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Why do you want to talk now?

Pohl: That's a misconception on your part. Previously, the state never allowed us to speak out. We've been trying to speak publicly since

4 With the exception of Inge Vielt, all of the former RAF members who had defected to East Germany cooperated with investigators following their arrests in the early '90s. Their testimony would be used in numerous new RAF trials. Susanne Albrecht was unique among these crown witnesses for her high public profile, given her family connection and role in the Ponto killing. She would implicate Sieglinde Hofmann, Brigitte Mohnhaupt, and Christian Klar in this attack, and based on her testimony Hofmann would be sentenced to an additional fifteen years.

1988. During and after the hunger strike, we received tons of requests for interviews from the media.⁵ At the time, Karl-Heinz Krumm from the *Frankfurter Rundschau* was among them. I always agreed, but the Ministry of Justice always forbade it. By 1987, we were putting every effort into finding a way around that problem. From the outset we wanted to do it. In 1988, there was the Vollmer/Walser proposal. We accepted and made a concrete proposal: we, the prisoners, wanted to talk to them, even if it was only once. It would at least be a starting point.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Was the desire for discussion a question of a critical reappraisal?

Pohl: Well that was part of it. Since the mid-1980s, we've said it was time for an historical suspension of activity. No one took that seriously. Instead, everyone, the left included, heard what they wanted to hear. That was when it began, the starting point of our desire for a discussion with people and groups, as long as it did not contribute to state repression. The problem of a critical reappraisal of the past twenty years is not something specific to the RAF: it is the entire left's problem. It is not only a question of the armed struggle, yes or no.

Frankfurter Rundschau: That is, however, a decisive question.

Pohl: It is part of it, but must be seen as the least important issue. Our politics can't be reduced to actions. You have to begin with an understanding of the current situation, and on that basis discuss the necessary methods for revolutionary politics. The question, violence yes or no, cannot be addressed in the same way today.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Was it not a concept that your side introduced?

Pohl: Communiqués achieve nothing. Even if the prisoners announce the end of the struggle, others will continue it regardless. The problem lies somewhere else entirely. I'm thinking about non-political violence that arises from the compounding of contradictions, for example, right-wing radicalism and racism. On the international level, as well: for example, what we are seeing in Yugoslavia and the U.S.S.R. It runs through all levels, both domestically and internationally. The question is, how do you set a process in motion that can provide a new

⁵ A reference to the RAF's 1989 hunger strike, which will be detailed in volume 3.

orientation, new reference points, and developments in the conflict. It's a question of real steps.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Over the past few years, the RAF's attacks seem more and more like those of the mafia. They are mostly conducted as ambush murders, for example Detlev Karsten Rohwedder, former head of the Berlin *Treuhandanstalt*.⁶ Do you approve of this action?

Pohl: I won't respond to such a question. It's not an issue we address. The prisoners don't comment on armed actions on the outside. That, of course, doesn't mean that we'll never comment.

Frankfurter Rundschau: Recently, in various media, the BAW has portrayed you and others of the so-called hard core of the RAF as still active cadre of the armed struggle. Do you give orders to those on the outside?

Pohl: There is no control from within the prison cells. We have nothing to do with the actions on the outside. [At this point the LKA agent present terminated the interview, but permitted it to resume at the *Frankfurter Rundschau*'s request.] So, they are trying to pin something on me, for example, that I had something to do with Herrhausen, and then I'm not allowed to comment on it. It's an absurd idea that the prisoners can call for or actually order actions. We deny that assertion. In our texts we have always said that it is part of our basic politics that those who carry out the practice also determine the concrete policy.

Frankfurter Rundschau: The published quotes from the pages seized from the prison cells—apparently seven thousand—make it sound otherwise.

Pohl: They conducted three or four cell searches, and in this context extracted individual sentences to construct what they needed. Certainly, none of us had any knowledge of the preparations, nor did we guide any of those underground in their actions. All of this propaganda stands things on their head. That the prisoners took control of the initiative during the 1989 hunger strike was an exceptional situation. It was completely clear to those outside that no militant or military actions were to

6 On April 1, 1991, the RAF's Ulrich Wessel Commando assassinated Detlev Karsten Rohwedder, the chairman of the *Treuhandanstalt*, the organization responsible for privatizing the industries in the former GDR.

be undertaken. Everybody understood this. But it was equally clear that when the hunger strike was over, this role of the prisoners in relation to the outside would also come to an end.

Frankfurter Rundschau: It was in this context that letters written by you were published.

Pohl: Having seen what was published, I don't know what the significance could be. There is nothing that could be called an *Info* system—unfortunately. We consider it legitimate to discuss things with each other. That has nothing to do with the people underground. That's not our business. It should have been obvious to everyone that there would be actions if the hunger strike failed to yield anything. However, we had no idea what they would be. We would really like to get past all of this criminological bullshit, such as the “RAF-MfS connection” and control from within the prison cells, and finally get down to business: to political discussions, to association, and to a development that would lead to freedom for the political prisoners.