

## **"Now We Must Find Ways To Be Released..."**

### ***Interview With Political Prisoner Helmut Pohl On The Politics Of The Red Army Faction (RAF)***

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*This interview was translated by Arm the Spirit; it also appears on the Arm the Spirit website at: <http://www.etext.org/Politics/Arm.The.Spirit/Guerrilla/Europe/Red.Army.Faction/pohl.interview.1996>*

*There was a split between the RAF and many of the prisoners, and now the political prisoners no longer present themselves as a united group. So, for whom are you speaking in this interview?*

First of all I'm speaking for myself, but I also know what some of the other prisoners are thinking. We have all been isolated from one another since the 1989 hungerstrike. There was possibility to have an exchange about the new situation. Letters are not an appropriate medium for such a discussion.

*Why not?*

Our mail has been utilized by the authorities for well over ten years. The BKA [Federal Crime Office] pours over every sentence, trying to analyze the style - that makes discussions impossible. It's just not possible to communicate exclusively by means of such a tedious medium like letters. It's just not an option after years of isolation and the eventual decline of contacts to the outside. But the collective does still exist: We are struggling together for our freedom.

*How do you explain the fact that since the 1992 cessation by the RAF, which ended armed attacks against persons, the prisoners group has dissolved and the RAF itself has disappeared from the political scene?*

The cessation, at least as we envisioned it, never came about. Our vision of the cessation was meant to stand for a transformation of that which RAF once was into a political force which could influence new political situations. And that didn't happen. All that happened in 1992 was that actions were halted, and everything else just evaporated. The reasons for this lie in the fact that a political discussion about how things should continue on in the future never even got off the ground.

*But there have been a series of texts, full of criticisms and self-criticisms of the RAF and the prisoners...*

But these papers from the RAF, and the "self-criticism", weren't real critiques. It was just a rehash of the 1980s, putting it through the wash one more time. The so-called "new politics" of the RAF was just an attempt to make a variant of "revolutionary politics" on

top of the old foundation, a reproduction of the same, but this time done the right way, so to speak. But there was never a complete break from the old concept. In line with this, I think it's important for those who are still underground to announce the dissolution of the RAF. Other prisoners expressly told me to say that in this interview. The RAF must be dissolved, then we can see what develops.

*How should the discussion have gone, in your opinion?*

In order to explain that, we need to look at the history of the cessation discussion. In 1987, the prisoners made mention of a cessation for the first time...

*In other words, after the attacks on MTU manager Ernst Zimmermann, Siemens manager Kurt Beckurts, and the diplomat Gerold von Braunmuehl. Was there a connection between these attacks and talk of a cessation?*

Thoughts of a cessation had more to do with international developments. By 1987, it was clear to us that things were going to change. That meant, in our opinion, that the entire concept of the RAF up to that point needed to be put in question. But no discussion followed from this analysis, things just got stuck. That criticism is also applies to us, the prisoners: At that time, when it was clear to us that we weren't going to get any further, we should have stated clearly that things can't go on in the same way. But at that time we thought we couldn't push that through. We just didn't have enough fundamental thoughts on this. We, far away in prisons, isolated from one another, weren't in a position to say what it all means and how things should continue. But we should have said something nonetheless. But still, we were some of the few people who had our fingers on the pulse, so to speak.

In the 1989 hungerstrike, we tried once again to introduce a fundamental reorientation. We were pushing for the RAF to stop its actions, then for a political discussion to start, then freedom for the political prisoners.

*That was a demand issued internally?*

Yes, those were our internal discussions concerning the armed actions.

*How, in your opinion, did international developments lead to armed struggle no longer being relevant?*

The politics of the RAF are always immediately associated with armed struggle. But it was never supposed to be that way, and the fact that it became that way was a mistake. So the thoughts of a cessation had nothing to do with armed struggle per se. All across the world, a tendency towards marginalization could be seen. One example from our discussions at that time. In Central America, a war of destruction was being waged, but over here it was hardly taken notice of, on the contrary, quite a different image was being portrayed. Here it was assumed that supposedly democratic steps were taking hold there, when in reality entire areas were being destroyed. At the same time, the ruling powers

were able to push through nearly all over their projects in Central Europe. Whether it was gene technology, atomic energy, Fortress Europe, or remilitarization, there were qualitative changes taking place. I should mention that all of this became clear to us then, but some non-Europeans said to us that they had been discussing that back in 1980; that says something.

That's why it was of great importance to us that people come together from across the leftist spectrum and discuss things, so as to understand the catastrophic direction things were heading in. It wasn't just our way of making politics which had become outdated, other leftist groups, even bourgeois ones, had failed to find methods of dealing with the new situations.

*That means, the decision to halt the attacks which had become characteristic of the RAF was of a fundamental nature. But how does that fit with your statement from 1993, in which you said: "The things I have been saying for the past few years I no longer say now. And the possibilities which the cessation gave rise to are gone. So I'll be damned if I'd ever 'renounce' the armed struggle." That seems more like the hardliner image which the authorities have tried to pin on you.*

It was certainly a mistake to formulate my anger in such a way in the concluding paragraph of that statement. But if you read the entire text, which was published in 'die taz', you can easily see the message I was trying to convey: I will not be blackmailed by state propaganda. At that time, the state was demanding that we renounce violence and the politics of the RAF from the very beginning - I am not willing to do that. The cessation was not meant in that way either, rather it was necessary so as to continue political work. When we first starting discussing the cessation, people who visited us and the RAF had no idea what it was all about. For example, people kept saying that we had to keep open the option of an attack. Personally, I don't find that to be convincing: If something is done right in the meantime, then it doesn't matter if "the option to attack is no longer there". But even if people saw things differently, anyway a new form of attack needed to be found. And so some thinking was done at this time - for example, instead of shooting people, high-level acts of sabotage could be carried out. But that never happened either. As for the hardliner stigma: That's got nothing to do with what we prisoners say or do. Until 1991/92, all the prisoners were seen as "hardliners" - despite our attempts to bring about some sort of social discussion. That brings to mind the Vollmer/Kasemann/Waiser Initiative of 1988 [an attempt by the Greens to win amnesty for the prisoners]: We responded to that, not as a tactical manoeuvre, because it was in line with our thoughts of a cessation. But the state prevented this initiative. We were seen as "hardliners" despite our efforts in the hungerstrike of 1989, when we had talks with state authorities and other persons - and despite the fact that everyone knew we wanted something new. At the time, supposed attacks plans attributed to us were discovered and spread in the media. And this continued against the prisoners who were still inside after the cessation, despite our public statement via Irmgard Moeller that we welcomed the halting of attacks. Facts play no role when it comes to the state's smear campaigns.

If you look at things today, you come to the following conclusion: Despite the transformation of the RAF and the necessary political decision with regards to the prisoners, a split developed, attributed to a few of the prisoners and backed by "hardliner" propaganda, and this has made it possible for the state to attempt to achieve with those of us who remain what it has sought to do for the past 20 years, namely bring an end to the prisoner problem.

*What would be the state's interest in this?*

It's important for the state to continue to develop its picture of a political enemy, and the state under no circumstances wants to allow a political process to develop, as we propose. The history of the RAF is to end with an accounting, with the burden falling on some individuals, and not with a political process. And that's not just the case with the RAF, rather it's what the authorities have in mind for society in general.

*But the fact that the state can do this is also partly the fault of the RAF, a group which was never very open to controversial discussions, and which was a group which many people couldn't imagine except in the context of killing people.*

Of course, it also comes back to the RAF itself. In the 1980s, controversial discussions weren't exactly a speciality of the RAF. It was the same way in other leftist groups. The causes for that, in my opinion, go way back to fundamental mistakes by us, but also in other leftist groups as well, namely the fact that political structures were hardly developed at all. Instead, ideology and actionism prevailed. But the RAF concept always stressed the primacy of politics, the armed actions were supposed to advance politics, not replace it.

*Leftist groups often criticized the fact that the RAF acted primarily on a military, rather than a political, basis.*

Yes, but only when it fit with their political concept. That's why these discussions always failed. I think the fundamental mistakes made by everyone, from groups on the radical-left in general to the RAF itself, was that we weren't based enough in reality and were too obsessed with ideology. There were meetings, papers, concept discussions, events, campaigns - but these weren't reality. And the collapse of the radical-left at the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s was the hour of truth for this structure of politics which had come out of the '60s - if something had been won from the struggle, which was what it was all about all along, then something should have been taken out of that. But that didn't happen. Instead, self-dissolution or running in place. And that brings us to the point that it's not any different for the RAF, the German radical-left, or the left in general, namely that we were never able to escape from the contradiction of living in the most developed social system and not being able to avoid the contradictions which arise from that fact. On the one hand, you want to escape from that system to something different, on the other hand it's the best of all places that are visible. This contradiction in our spectrum led to a theory and praxis of ideological thinking, characterized in cyclical activity and actionism. I call that "replacement politics". Politics means real processes. Not ideology.

The white European left, and the German left in particular, was more clever than anyone. No one read more or talked more than the left here did. But that's not politics. That's a sign of a stationary process which remains adapted to social norms. An example of what I mean by "stationary": Women have often noted that the never-ending so-called "sexism debate", the men's discussion of it, has only ever resulted in the problem being endlessly debated, seen as politically tackled, and everything stays the way it was. And the women are right about this. It's a sort of problem-defeating mechanism. The same is true for the anti-racism discussion. During the anti-IMF actions in 1992 [in Munich], the events served as a replacement for politics.

*And the RAF, in your opinion, is part of this stationary process?*

The RAF became a part of it. The actions which we carried out in the second half of the 1980s were fundamentally wrong according to most of the prisoners still inside today. For us, armed actions always had a strategic function. They were to make something clear, to advance something. The actions of the late '80s were just a series of shootings. And when you get right down to it, to their political core, they were nothing but revenge attacks. And the RAF knew we would criticize these actions. They knew, from me especially, that I was against things continuing to develop as they had, with more people going into illegality. When a concept no longer has any perspective, you can't attract new people, even on the basis of maintaining the ability to attack. People going underground envision continuing the struggle which they had previously carried out in concrete base projects, only now on a different level, but in reality they are entering a vacuum. I don't want to create a false impression here, or to separate us from that. We were all part of this process and developed it. I'm speaking now about the changes in the relationships in the unwinding the prisoners issue over the past few years. We kept it going because we wanted a continuity, from the initial outcry to the silence. We all agreed about the unavoidable effects a total collapse would have, so we wanted to maintain some source of strength. That kept us from the drawing the decisive conclusion.

*But aren't you stating a contradiction: on the one hand a continuity, on the other hand being opposed to new people joining the illegal structures?*

It wasn't about a continuity of the RAF as it had existed before, rather a continuity of political content. The armed struggle was not the political content of the RAF. The political content of the RAF, to be brief, was liberation.

*You criticize the attacks and assassinations by the RAF in the latter half of the 1980s. What was better about the earlier actions? What's the difference, for example, between the failed attempt to kill General Kroesen and the shooting of the diplomat von Braunmuehl?*

You are speaking there about an action where the different understandings meet one another. We were critical of actions in the '80s such as the one against von Braunmuehl because the means and the political goal were far removed from one another. And that is true even for those of us who experienced '77, the so-called "hardliners". The action

against Kroesen or the U.S. army installation at Ramstein were part of the conflicts surrounding NATO militarization. Both were strategic actions, attacks which, we thought, would help force the global collapse of militarization in the metropolises.

*Preventing militarization was also a goal of the peace movement, which by and large denounced the RAF's attacks. Didn't that make you wonder?*

Well, there were a lot of things about the peace movement that made us wonder. For example, the peace movement also had some very nationalistic elements. They were primarily opposed to a war being fought here, and this wing of the peace movement did not concern itself with imperialism's interests or war aims.

*But if you criticize the peace movement for having nationalistic tendencies, then you must also recognize that in older RAF texts as well. There, Germany is described as being a U.S. puppet and an occupied country.*

Those are tones from the '70s, based in an incorrect, shortened analysis: The fact that U.S. capital was dominant in the world, and the fact that U.S. corporations dominated German corporations, led to the conclusion that Germany was a U.S. colony. That was false. But in our politics, this thinking only played a minor role.

*But the attacks of that time were mainly directed at U.S. military installations and U.S. military personnel.*

Yes, but always in conjunction with NATO and militarization. Those weren't actions against America as some occupying power. But I will admit that in the left, and in our structures, there were some weak areas, some anti-American tendencies which went so far as to reject American culture. But we, I was underground at the time, always criticized this anti-Americanism disguised as anti-imperialism in our discussions and during our contacts. But we weren't always successful. But I think there exists a false impression of our situation and our sympathizers from that time. At the beginning of the '80s, we didn't want to strengthen the RAF, rather we sent people who came to us back into the local struggles. We wanted structures and political processes, but all we heard was the demand that we carry out actions. We couldn't change that pressure at that time. It's wrong to imagine that things always go the way one plans in a concept. The same thing failed later on during the cessation debate.

*For a long time, the demand was made to regroup the prisoners in one or two groups so that a discussion could take place among them. How do you think things should proceed today?*

At the present time, we need to get the demand put back on the table that we need to be released. Now, as before, that is a political question, not a legal one. We're not talking about some abstract principle here. We aren't even that affected by the Justice Department in general, rather the BAW [Federal Prosecutor's Office] and the state security courts, and our cases are all well known. Besides, most of us are in very poor

health, so the question of us spending 20 years plus a few more, depending on the individual, is not an option. We need to find ways now of being released. And to do this, there need to be a decision which is more than words. It must be something visible, in our prisoners statute: What does someone do, who will be released in the foreseeable future? That person can build up social relations on the outside. The same must also be allowed to us. We must be able to start building the foundations for how we want to live. There must be communication and projects to work on. Right now, we have almost no contact to the outside. I'd like to stress that this interview today has been one of the few chances I've had to speak with someone from the outside for a long period of time. The biggest success of my time inside has been a 90 minute conversation, without the police watching over me, a few weeks ago...

*Is this orientation towards communication with people on the outside a consensus among the prisoners?*

It depends, some think regroupment is more important so that we can make a public statement together. I always thought it was more important to get out.

We alone are too few to succeed, we need further reaching exchanges. We can't just keep repeating the catch phrase "discussion" for years on end. Of course we seek discussions for our common interests, but communication with the outside needs to mainly aim at finding ways to win our freedom.

The worst thing that has happened to us, and from it came the bitter internal splits, was the fact that long years of isolation left us in a situation where we could not deal with this isolation. The things which have happened over these long years needed to be discussed and looked at together with others. But we weren't allowed to do this. Instead we came from isolation into the vacuum of our stations, a group of people in prison, a small group who couldn't meet together inside and who were prevented from contacting the outside. Once the first of us starting having health problems was when the isolation treatment really began to kick in. This isolation, which we have experienced with our own bodies, needs to be struggled against at every turn. If someone has been inside for a long time, afterwards something needs to happen, you can't just take off the lid and then that person has to see where they're at. And when I say that, as someone who has experienced it, I'm not just trying to describe darkest moments of our history, rather because this systematic isolation is now become characteristic of prisons in general. That which we were subjected to from day one is now being applied to other prisoners who are selected to endure it.

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