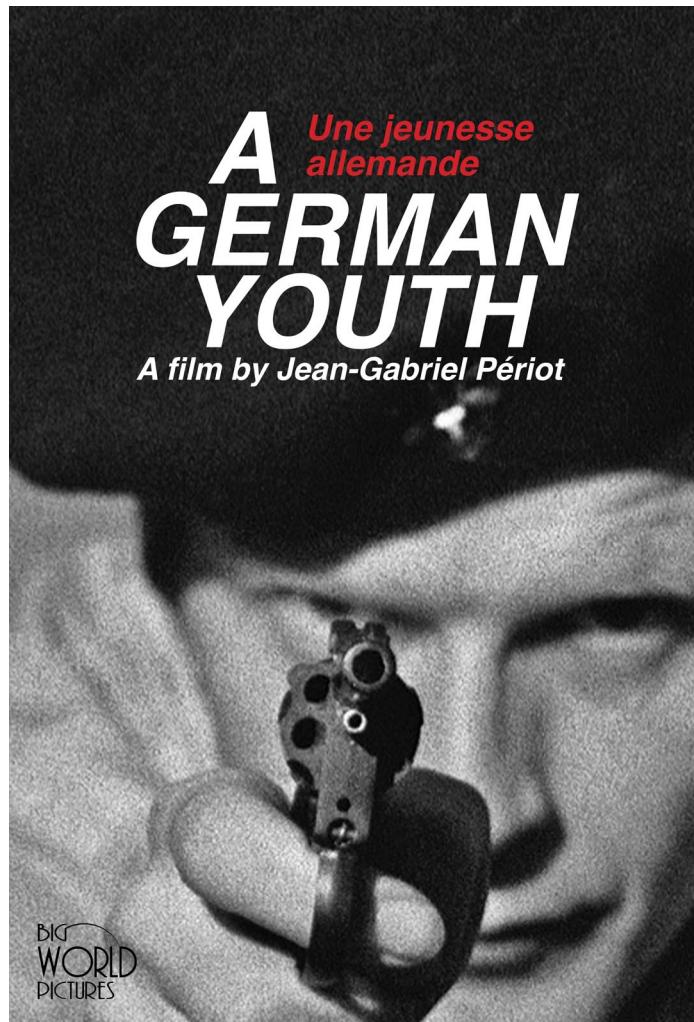


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# A GERMAN YOUTH

(UNE JEUNESSE ALLEMANDE)

A film by Jean-Gabriel Périot

France/Switzerland/Germany 2015 - 1:1.85 - 5.1 - 92 min

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

*A GERMAN YOUTH (Une Jeunesse Allemande)* chronicles the political radicalization of some German youth in the late 1960s that gave birth to the Red Army Faction (RAF), a German revolutionary terrorist group founded notably by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof, as well as the images generated by this story. The film is entirely produced by editing preexisting visual and sound archives and aims to question viewers on the significance of this revolutionary movement during its time, as well as its resonance for today's society.

## LONG SYNOPSIS

In the 1960s, the young democracy of West Germany was embarrassed by its Nazi past, and ingrown in its role as imperialist and capitalist outpost faced by its communist double. The postwar generation, in direct conflict with their fathers, was trying to find its place. The student movement exploded in 1968. The *pas de deux* between students and the government deteriorated, and radicalized those involved in a gradual escalation of violence and reprisals. From this seething youth emerged the journalist Ulrike Meinhof, filmmaker Holger Meins, students Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, as well as the lawyer Horst Mahler. When the student movement collapsed at the end of '68, they remained isolated in their radicalism, and desperately sought ways to continue the revolutionary struggle.

The RAF (Red Army Faction) was founded in 1970, its militants disappearing into hiding. Both the government and sympathizers appeared cautious. Initial RAF acts, along with police responses, involved a certain amount of improvisation. Then came 1972, and the irreparable break: in less than a week, the RAF committed five major attacks, resulting in many victims. The government reacted by taking a hardline stance in its conflict with the terrorist movement. Casualties grew on all sides, including the RAF (both outside and in prison), government (police officers but also politicians and officials), and especially anonymous civilians. Voices questioning both the political and moral

implications of the RAF's combat, as well as the federal government's choice for total repression, were progressively drowned out.

The autumn of '77 marked the bloody finale to this story, which was also a war of images. The government refused to capitulate to the demands of both the RAF—which sought the release of its imprisoned members in exchange for Schleyer, the kidnapped president of the Employer Union—as well as the Palestinian commandos who, won over to the RAF cause, had hijacked a plane of German tourists. That same night, the plane was taken by storm at the Mogadishu airport, and the hostages were freed, while in Germany the final founding members of the RAF who were still alive “committed suicide” in prison, and Schleyer was killed by his abductors.

The visual material available to recount this tragedy is exceptionally rich. *A German Youth* gathers its sources from three irreconcilable sides: the West German government, the RAF and the movie-makers of the time (including Godard, Fassbinder and Antonioni), as well as the images respectively produced by each.

The story of the film is told in the present tense and chronologically, without retrospective excerpts, indeed exclusively through images that are contemporary with the events in the story. The connections between the characters as well as the story's dramatic arc and flair are brought to life through the editing.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"My films paint a bleak portrait of humanity: concentration camps, Hiroshima, prison, reprisals, revenge, oppression, violation, death. However, my work as a filmmaker is not to burden, depress, or lecture my audience with these images. On the contrary, I have found that watching humanity at its weakest builds a feeling of resistance. And moreover, that within this resistance lives resilience, a love of humanity in its fragility, and most importantly, hope.

I realized a few years ago that I only questioned violence produced by the systems to which I was personally and deeply opposed. It is much easier, of course, to judge the acts of adversaries. Why was I so ready to find excuses for actions committed in the name of convictions I deemed to be "good"? Just because the impetus was an ideology closer to my own, did that somehow make one act of violence more justified than another? Upon reflection, I realized that associating with the victim was still ultimately a one-sided point of view. To be truly objective, one must truly examine and question the motivations and thought processes of the so-called wrongdoers as well. This raises unresolvable and even unbearable questions. While considering these ideas as human beings neither rewrites history, nor excuses the crimes committed, it does open a door to a more complete discussion about the nature of the acts, and our own humanity, albeit the gloomiest part.

With this in mind, I dove headfirst into my research of revolutionary violence. As years passed, I narrowed down my research to emancipation movements in the sixties and seventies, until finally I chose to focus on the history of the Red Army Faction, a left-wing German terrorist group. Terrorism is no more than failure and destruction, blindly spreading death, and discrediting its own revolutionary ambitions. My question all along was this: how could anyone deliberately choose this kind of violence? This question is even more pointed when the terrorists are not of some marginalized, disenfranchised group, living on the fringes of society. In the case of the Red Army, we see a group of "normal" German youths with rights, resources, and a bright future ahead of them. They held the proverbial keys to a country that, in the 1950s, in the crippling aftermath of the world wars, was still immersed in total reconstruction.

*A German Youth* is a real story of failures and fears. A story told through powerful, historical images. During my research about the RAF, I watched over a thousand hours of archives, fascinated by the deep link between the story and the images. "

Jean-Gabriel Périot

## HISTORICAL MILESTONES

1965

The children born in the wake of the war were reaching their twenties. In West Germany and abroad, young people as well as intellectuals pondered over the fragility of this new democracy built on the ruins of Nazi Germany.

The journalist Ulrike Meinhof was one of the leading figures of this German youth. On TV panels, where she was regularly invited, she embodied the voice of the extreme left wing.

1966

Berlin's film school, the DFFB, opened its doors. Holger Meins was among the students of the first graduating class. With his fellow students, Meins questioned his status as filmmaker. Together, they decided to work collectively to place themselves, with their cameras, in the service of the revolution brewing under the influence of the events in Vietnam and Cuba as well as China. On a daily basis, this group of enthusiastic film directors thus documented the students' demonstrations as well as their own debates concerning cinema as a tool for political activism.

In December, following the federal elections, the social-democrat party (SPD) agreed to govern with the conservative party. Kissinger, a former Nazi, thus took the lead of the new government, with Brandt, a former resister, as his second in command. The establishment of this coalition triggered a protest movement uniting all those who, on the left-wing, rejected this unnatural alliance.

In Berlin, the heart of the protest, the members of the students' union (SDS) organized demonstrations. Still in Berlin, the Kommune 1 was created and became, with the SDS, one of the main gathering places for the protesters. That was where Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin met. The lawyer Horst Malher took over the defense of the Kommune 1 members brought before the courts for their anarchist-Dadaist happenings. The Kommune 1's and SDS's actions were recorded both by Meins (and the DFFB filmmakers) and the TV channels.

1967

Demonstrations followed one another in Berlin: against the Vietnam War, against the visit of American officials or third-world dictators... the students showing up in ever growing numbers, as were the police.

The rift created between the protesting youth and German society thus grew deeper. In the streets, the confrontations between the forces of law and order and the demonstrators became increasingly violent.

At the end of the year, Ulrike Meinhof left Hamburg for Berlin. When invited on TV, she had clearly chosen a side, even justifying the demonstrators' violence, which, she felt, had become necessary.

1968

As a stance against Springer Editions (the largest press publishers were right-wing supporters and participated in the escalation of the movement's hardening), Holger Meins made a film-pamphlet, How to make a Molotov cocktail? The silent film described visually, and very precisely, the

preparation of what he presented as a revolutionary weapon on the hands of the men and woman who were going to burn down Springer Editions.

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the TV newscasts presented in the headlines a double arson which destroyed two department stores in Frankfurt. Four young people, including Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin, had placed incendiary bombs in the stores; they were arrested a few hours later.

In all of West Germany, the breaking point had been reached. Demonstrators attacked Springer Editions' buildings. In Berlin, Horst Mahler paraded at the front of the protest march, Meinhof was nearly arrested, while Meins and his colleagues filmed, an entire night through, a demonstration turning into a riot that the police could hardly contain.

In May, the DFFB's students, including Holger Meins, decided to occupy the school and entirely place it in the service of the ongoing protests. They renamed it "Dziga-Vertov Academy". As they'd been doing all along, and all the while carrying out their activist initiatives, they kept documenting: their occupation of the DFFB, the police's victorious counter-attack and their permanent expulsion from the school. In their final collective film – a broad recapitulative film covering nearly two years of cinema activism – they appeared as a group, behind a large banner stating: "we're going to take up arms inside the dominant systems and enthusiastically prepare their destruction."

As the movement was reaching its peak and with other protest movements exploding throughout the world, the parliament voted emergency laws "against any breach of the democratic and liberal constitutional order."

In October, Mahler defended Baader and Ensslin, who were being tried for arson. All the leading figures involved in the protest (from Ulrike Meinhof to Daniel Cohn-Bendit) attended the trial, which received wide TV news coverage.

Baader and Ensslin, because of their choice of direct action, as well as the unmistakable, aggressive political views they expressed during their trial, became the face of the movement in the media. They were the subject of a first film made for television, *Brandstifter*, a Godard-like film by Klaus Lemke, which established them into the public's imagination as the contemporary - and revolutionary - Bonnie & Clyde.

1969

A pivotal year for Ulrike Meinhof; a documentary depicted her at home, depressed, overwrought. In the spring, Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin were released from prison while awaiting their appeal trial. They invested their energy in a low-income housing neighborhood of Berlin, with an informal group of volunteers including Mahler and Meinhof. Holger Meins handed cameras to the neighborhood's idle youth, who were soon joined by critical architects. Afterwards, Baader and Ensslin also worked in community homes for young adults in precarious situations and participated in a solidarity movement supporting former students still jailed. On November 11<sup>th</sup>, the appeal court confirmed the sentence pronounced against them. They refused to go back to prison and entered into clandestinity.

1970

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, the TV newscasts widely covered the liberation of Andreas Baader (who'd been arrested in April in a routine traffic police check) by an armed commando that included Ulrike

Meinhof. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, the magazine Der Spiegel published an interview with Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof. In the interview's audio recording, Ulrike Meinhof could be heard declaring, in a sharp and assertive tone: "Organizing an armed opposition, developing class war, founding the RAF... To ask whether it is right to organize clandestine opposition groups in West Germany and West Berlin equals asking whether all of this is possible. The answer can only be given through practical implementation. The rest is mere speculation. Political power comes out of cannons."

In September, the RAF robbed three banks in Berlin. In October, five RAF members, including Horst Mahler, were arrested. In November, the BKA, a police department in charge of anti-terrorism, was founded, while the RAF started stealing passports from various town halls. In December, four RAF members were captured... The TV news broadcasted strings of reports and segments covering the subject. Ulrike Meinhof was officially declared "number one public enemy". The streets were covered with posters bearing her picture and entire police investigation TV shows were dedicated to her.

1971

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, the TV newscasts announced the death of Ulrike Meinhof – killed by a policeman. The very next day, the news item was rectified: it was in fact Petra Schlem, a young RAF activist, who had been killed. In October, a policeman was killed by the RAF. In December, an activist and a policeman were both killed. In March 1972, the police mistakenly killed an Englishman without connections with the RAF. A few days later, a RAF member and a police superintendent were killed during armed clashes...

1972

In May, in Frankfurt, three bombs went off at US Army headquarters; in Augsburg, two bombs went off at police headquarters; in Munich, a bomb went off at the BKA; in Karlsruhe, a judge's car exploded; in Hamburg, two bombs went off at Springer Editions; in Heidelberg, two bombs went off at US Army headquarters. These attacks totaled five dead and sixty-five wounded. On TV, bloody images, segments on the rescue squads, interviews with the survivors and on-the-spot analyses followed one another non-stop.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, cameramen filmed a car repair shop at the foot of a building as it was besieged by a hundred policemen. TV channels broadcasted, live and continuously, this uncertain and chaotic event. When a police tank came to position itself in front of the building, a man came out of the repair shop, taking his clothes off. He was tall and extremely thin. The policemen grabbed him violently and dragged him to an armed van. Holger Meins resisted, not so much by struggling as by shrieking. A second man came crawling miserably out of his cache. It was Andreas Baader, his leg wounded. Between June 7<sup>th</sup> and July 13<sup>th</sup>, eleven RAF members, among whom Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, were arrested throughout the country. All were filmed as they were being handled by the police.

1973

While the RAF discredited its cause with its initial supporters by its bloody actions, a new wave of support started when the extreme detention conditions the prisoners were subjected to were revealed.

1974

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt held a press conference and faced a horde of cameras and microphones: "I would like to say that any social-democrat can only be filled with consternation by each death resulting from blind ideology. However, everyone should bear in mind that Mr. Meins was the member of a violent group, the Baader-Meinhof group, which caused the death of other citizens. After all, this group has been fighting against the citizens of our country. They cannot expect to live in a resort while they are awaiting trial! They must accept the discomfort of prison." Meins had just died from a hunger strike that the prisoners had started as a protest against their detention conditions.

1975

As a response to the RAF's threat, the federal government voted numerous legal changes limiting defense rights while exponentially increasing the means and prerogatives of various law and order bodies. West Germany became a spearhead country in terms of fighting against terrorism through the development of the first IT system establishing files on the population. However, it remained ineffective: terrorist attacks kept increasing.

May saw the opening of the RAF trial in the brand new, high security Stammheim jail in Stuttgart. The court, installed inside the prison compound, was subjected to a never-before-seen security and surveillance system.

1976

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, Ulrike Meinhof was found hung in her cell. A suicide for some, considered a staged suicide and a murder by others, her death was a traumatic moment both in Germany and abroad. While some journalists and politicians commented coldly on what they saw as the well-deserved death of a terrorist, others nevertheless paid homage by publicly declaring their sadness in view of the irremediable downfall of the woman they once knew and for a time appreciated.

1977

The police became increasingly militarized and tanks were now protecting official buildings. All those – whether simple citizens, politicians or intellectuals – who dared speak up to criticize this law and order backlash were denigrated by the media. Heinrich Böll, who refused to silence his criticism, found himself accused of supporting the terrorists.

On September 5<sup>th</sup>, Hans-Martin Schleyer, the president of the Confederation of German Employers' Associations, influential with the government, also CEO of Mercedes Benz and a former Nazi, was kidnapped by a RAF commando demanding the liberation of their prisoners. Chancellor Schmidt addressed them live on television: "Those guilty of this act are probably among the viewers tonight. You may be rejoicing; perhaps you feel triumphant and powerful. But do not hide the truth from yourselves. There is no future for terrorism, for terrorism's opponents are determined and aren't only found in the organs of the State. The entire German nation is against you."

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, a passenger aircraft was hijacked by a Palestinian commando also demanding the liberation of RAF prisoners. On TV, commentators, whether journalists or politicians, were at a loss as to how to react to the images broadcasted live. The plane went from one airport to another until

October 17<sup>th</sup>, when it landed in Mogadishu. Meanwhile, protestors massed in front of the Stammheim jail, requesting that the RAF prisoners be hanged.

## JEAN-GABRIEL PÉRIOT - BIO/FILMOGRAPHY

Born in France in 1974, Jean-Gabriel has directed several short movies, both in video and cinema. He has developed his own editing style with archives. Between documentary, animation and experimental, most of his works deal with violence and history. His latest works, including "Our Days, Absolutely, Have to Be Enlightened", "The Devil", "The Day Has Conquered The Night" and "Optimism", have been shown worldwide in numerous festivals, and honored with many prizes. "A German Youth" (Une Jeunesse Allemande) is his first feature.

Une Jeunesse Allemande 2015

Si jamais nous devons disparaître ce sera sans inquiétude mais en combattant jusqu'à la fin 2014  
(short)

We are become Death 2014 (short)

L'optimisme 2013 (short)

Le jour a vaincu la nuit 2013 (short)

The Devil 2012 (short)

Looking at the dead 2011 (short)

Les barbares 2010 (short)

L'art délicat de la matraque 2009 (short)

Entre chiens et loups 2008 (short)

Nijuman no borei 2007 (short)

Eût-elle été criminelle... 2006 (short)

Under Twilight 2006 (short)

Undo 2005 (short)

Dies Irae 2005 (short)

We are winning don't forget 2004 (short)

Avant j'étais triste 2002 (short)

21.04.02 2002 (short)

Journal intime 2001 (short)

Gay ? 2001 (short)

## CREDITS

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