



Patricia Melzer. *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl: Women's Political Violence in the Red Army Faction.* New York: New York University Press, 2015. 352 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-6407-2.

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“Can political violence be feminist?” is the question behind Patricia Melzer’s exciting study of women within the West German militant Left of the 1970s. At times, more than half of the members of West Germany’s Red Army Faction (RAF) and Movement 2nd June were women—a fact that, as Melzer points out, is rarely reflected in the historiography of West German terrorism. Existing literature on the postwar Left has largely focused on the absence of feminist theorizing among RAF members or their classification of women’s oppression as “secondary contradiction.” Moreover, associations between femininity and nonviolence that prevailed during the peace movement of the late 1970s and 1980s solidified an understanding of terrorist women as anathema to feminism. In five tightly argued chapters building on interviews, memoirs, prison letters, movement publications, and media representations of female terrorists, Melzer argues convincingly that this is a retrospective view—one that takes the outcomes of important debates in the 1970s about terrorism and patriarchal violence for granted and ultimately obscures the effect of women’s violence on contemporary gender norms.

Melzer’s argument is a welcome corrective to the literature on the postwar Left, which has often struggled with the issue of political violence. In a more general observation, Kristin Ross (*May ’68*

and Its Afterlives, 2002) has argued that well-meaning retrospectives about the French 1968 have focused on liberal aspects of the revolt while obscuring more militant working-class and anticolonial activism. This may have contributed to a generally favorable view of the events, but it has also rendered important dimensions of the period invisible. Melzer takes on the most controversial aspect of the 1970s Left: political violence committed by women. For the authors of one—often highly politicized—body of literature on the postwar West German Left, political violence has served to discredit the student movement altogether. They have developed arguments claiming that the seeds of violence were contained in the student movement from its very beginning in the 1960s. In response to these scholars, more sympathetic historians have focused on other successors to the student movement, which at least partially spawned feminism and the so-named “new social movements.” As Melzer shows, both of these approaches eclipse important questions about the meaning of political violence in the context of the Cold War and decolonization but also important conversations within feminism. More importantly, they also reinscribe a dichotomy of violence and feminism that was challenged in practice by West German women engaging in political violence as well as debates within the autonomous women’s movement that

hotly contested the legitimacy of violent resistance to imperial, patriarchal, and state violence.

Melzer argues that two overlapping discourses came to solidify the association of women with nonviolence and men with violence: the *Feminismusverdacht* (suspicion of feminism) and what she calls the violence-against-women paradigm. Regarding the former, she shows that while violence was condemned in media representations of terrorism, the participation of women posed particular problems within these discourses and prompted gendered and sexualized responses. In 1977, Susanne Albrecht, Brigitte Mohnhaupt, and Christian Klar attempted to kidnap Dresdener Bank CEO Jürgen Ponto from his home. During an ensuing struggle, Ponto was shot and killed. Media representations of the killing focused on the participation of the two women and the fact that Ponto had been a family friend of the Albrechts, with the West German daily *Die Welt* wondering if now everyone had to fear being confronted with “death in the shape of a young girl,” thereby providing the study’s title (p. 134). One hotly debated article in the weekly *Der Spiegel* helped popularize a link between terrorism and feminism by quoting West German intelligence chief Günther Nollau, who suspected terrorism to be an excess of female emancipation. In responding to this link, which in varying forms had emerged since 1976, feminists were forced to increasingly seek to distance themselves from terror and violence. At the same time, the mid-seventies saw a focus of West German feminists on violence against women that solidified narratives of men as perpetrators and women as victims. The combination of these two incidents has produced retrospective understandings of feminism that rendered feminism and nonviolence synonymous.

But Melzer’s intervention is not just historical. *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl* at all times contends with feminist scholarship on politics and terrorism, focusing on feminist practices rather than subjects and challenging the universal subject of

feminism. She calls for a recognition of feminist practices even when those are not consciously theorized. She mobilizes Jean-Luc Nancy and Eugenie Brinkema to argue that besides inflicting harm, the existence of violent women also produces a violent truth that blows wide open gendered expectations of female behavior. She locates in the peace movement of the 1980s the context in which cultural feminism linked maternity with peace. This did not need to be an essentialist or biological argument: feminist theories of an ethics of care were at pains to deessentialize motherhood and emphasize the importance of the social practice instead. Yet, as Melzer shows through an examination of Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof’s struggle with their own roles as mothers, motherhood did not imply peace, and Meinhof’s own struggle with motherhood was “grounded in a feminist understanding of how motherhood is a patriarchal ideal” (p. 88). Consequently, Melzer argues that to presume a link between feminism and peace or nonviolence ultimately reconstitutes prevailing gender roles.

The book does not shy away from difficult questions raised by her argument. For example, she asks in the conclusion, “if it is the effect on gender discourse, not the subjectivity of the political actor, that is the defining moment of feminist politics, does this mean that the violence of right-wing women activists constitutes feminist practices?” (p. 243). Ultimately, she decides that the answer to that question depends on whether one determines right-wing women pose a challenge to existing gender regimes or reinforce them. But this poses questions about Melzer’s own case of women in West Germany’s armed struggle: Didn’t the discourses (both conservative and feminist) resolve the challenge posed by women’s political violence either by declaring political violence an excess of women’s emancipation (in the former case) or by relating violence to patriarchy (in the latter case), thereby reinscribing existing gender regimes? Did the activism of the RAF, as she formulates the litmus test, contribute “to an overall more socially

just society” (p. 243)? That Melzer does not conclusively answer those questions is not a weakness of the book but a sign of its intellectual honesty and the difficulty of the questions it contends with.

There will doubtlessly be those who will dismiss Melzer’s argument as apologia for the specific politics of the RAF (and the Movement 2nd June). But it is well worth suspending those suspicions and taking seriously her intervention into the literature of the postwar Left, where the issue of political violence has either been cause for condemnation or else sidelined by well-meaning historians interested in more redeemable aspects of the mobilizations of the 1960s and 1970s--thereby obscuring the complicated arguments over the nature and virtue of political violence spawned by the culture of violence in the Cold War and decolonial revolutions in the Global South.

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