

Militant Women

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So I left the *Wochenschau* group because it was too moderate, I announced, and joined a group of anarchist-minded women with whom I worked on the collective of the newspaper *Agit 883*. That meant translating Italian and French articles, typing up the pages, doing layout and selling the paper in the working-class districts on the outskirts of Berlin.

The newspaper *Agit 883*

The newspaper's name referred to the first three digits of the telephone number of an apartment at Uhlandstrasse 52 where *Agit 883* was founded by Dirk Schneider (later a member of the Berlin parliament for the Alternative List or AL), among others. The members of the editorial collective were constantly changing; they included Tilman Fichter (later a member of the SPD) and Klaus Hartung (later an editor at *Die Zeit*), Dagmar von Doetinchem (previously of Kommune 1, later a midwife) and Renate Genth (now of the Research Institute for Patriarchy Critique and Alternative Civilizations FIPAZ e.V.).

Agit 883[1. PDFs of the individual numbers of *Agit 883* can be found at [http://www.agit883.infopartisan.net/.](http://www.agit883.infopartisan.net/)] attained a circulation of 6,000 in 1970 and, together with *Hochschulkampf* (University Struggle, 8,000 circulation in 1972) was the most important newspaper of the non-dogmatic Left. The paper published 86 issues between 1969 and 1973, was frequently banned and went underground in 1971. It was printed by the later prison poet Peter Paul Zahl, among others, and in those days a copy cost 50 pfennig, about as much as a Berlin bus or underground ticket. *Agit 883* was sold in left-wing pubs and Berlin bookshops, for example *Das Politische Buch*, Karin Röhrbein's bookshop, Kiepert, Montanus, a few newsstands and of course by book hawkers.

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Title page, *Agit 883*, no. 60, May 1970.

The title page of the A3 format newspaper was illustrated with high-contrast photos or cartoons. With its unmistakable graphic style, *883* set a cultural revolutionary tone quite different from other leftist papers such as *Roter Morgen* or *Die Wahrheit*.

As a woman who used to read *Agit 883* recalled in a conversation with me,

They didn't write in 883, they shouted.

It is hard to believe the kind of language that was acceptable back then.

– I remember how three of us women translated and edited an article from France:

We carved a revolutionary article out of a report on a strike. I had my doubts about it: If this was journalism... But I was convinced that the more extreme the writing, the more I would accomplish.

– Exactly. We all spoke only in formulas. In a mixture that was passionate and formulaic, we clung to sentences and slogans. We needed something to hold us together.



Moral outrage...

...and the outrageously amoral endangerment of others.

We didn't think strategically, "if we attack this or that it will have a long-term effect on x and so on." We were driven more by moral outrage over an "injustice" we had heard about without knowing anything in detail. Spontaneity was the magic word, which seemed to justify our actions. And then there was our pleasure in risk-taking, in the forbidden and the dangerous, in what gave us a feeling of having actually done something. We could demonstrate "I do what I say."

For all our youthfully naïve reverence for spontaneity, it was often others who had to pay the price, usually because we did all our actions by car. In the communes people shared everything, including cars. Renate Sami was arrested because she was found in a car that had been sighted hours before at an action against Amerika Haus. People there had thrown stones and Molotov cocktails. The occasion for this action was the US invasion of Cambodia in 1970. Who exactly had thrown the Molotovs was never established. Renate was acquitted after spending a year in pre-trial detention.

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Comic on the arrest of Holger Meins and the witnesses for his defense Ulrike Edschmidt and Philip (Werner) Sauber in *Agit 883*, no. 66, Sept. 1970.

Georg von Rauch of the Blues[2]. The Blues emerged out of a group of mostly working-class young men who had become politicized through contact with Kommune 1 and referred to themselves self-ironically as the “Central Council of Vagabond Hash Rebels.” One year later,

this group gave rise to the June 2nd movement.] threw a pipe bomb under a police car. The bomb did not explode, but since a policeman was standing nearby it was considered attempted murder. The police found Holger Meins because he was the owner of the car. Some people learned from this, and from then on did risky actions only on foot. “We” didn’t ride bicycles in those days, and nobody from the scene would have had access to one.



The Women’s Liberation Front Speaks Up

In 1970—the Action Council for the Liberation of Women had just been disbanded—a Women’s Liberation Front spoke up, suggesting that women adopt a new approach and citing other reasons for an emancipation movement. These women put together a two-page spread in *Agit 883* no. 56 (April 16, 1970): four columns of text, typed on three different typewriters because of the division of labor common in those days. The middle of the page featured a patchwork of news items: a photo of Leyla Chaled at the typewriter, Emma Goldman—an early twentieth-century leader of the US anarchist movement,— Valerie Solanas, the image of a woman student covered in blood, an African woman, a few Vietnamese women and various comic strip figures, including Barbarella. This provides an optical outline of the Women’s Liberation Front’s program, which was presented along with two excerpts from Valerie Solanas’ 1969 [SCUM Manifesto](#)

As bold as its style was, the [Women’s Liberation Front’s proclamation](#) contains virtually nothing but justifications—presumably because of the objections of male comrades: Mao is invoked as evidence of women’s oppression on the Left. To bolster their argument that an armed group had a right to exist independent of a party, the authors cite a speech by Fidel Castro. At a time of fractionation, even women who rejected dogmatism felt compelled to cite the leftist classics. We could not refer back to our foremothers, who had been forgotten during the Nazi period. In fact, we did not even know that there had once been a women’s movement in Germany, one larger and more radical than the new women’s movement would ever be.

The two-page spread in *Agit 883* should be understood mainly, though, as a call to those women who did not want to accept that all that remained of the Action Council for the Liberation of Women was the group of the [Socialist Women’s League of West Berlin](#) (SFB). On this topic the proclamation notes combatively:

Other [female] comrades grow hard in the attempt to stand up to men solely by accumulating knowledge, and in their intellectual battles forget that they of all people have a duty—in the interest of the revolution—to prevent the wrecked [male] comrades from beating each other to death with their theories. But there are also women with super self-confidence who want to do something together. Where is this gang of women? What’s up with you? If you’ve got the knack to do these things, then you’ve got to do them.... Many women brag about jumping onto a party express without realizing

that the old jalopy has to be electrified first before it can drive. They've chosen security over the struggle.

What was needed, according to the proclamation, was practical work, for example in the form of self-administered pre-schools and after-school centers. But the description of what exactly these women wanted to tackle remains vague; they mention the resistance of girls in the Eichenhof, the girls' home featured in Ulrike Meinhof's docudrama *Bambule*. What is clear, however, is that what the women from the Women's Liberation Front were planning was less "grassroots work" than "militant" actions:

The Women's Liberation Front will plan and execute actions in close cooperation with comrades in the various grassroots arenas and build up cells throughout the city. It will rise silently out of the darkness, strike and disappear again



Anarchas versus Hierarchs

I only joined the 883 newspaper collective shortly after this article appeared and later tried unsuccessfully to find out who the women who had written the proclamation were and what motivated them. The proclamation looks to me like a wild flailing against men's permanent claims to leadership and their political "assessments" and commentaries, which dogged us women wherever we went in those days. Although we avoided s and the hierarchical goings-on in the party organizational structures, we as women were not spared the often long-winded lectures of men who, even as anarchists, were forever trying to create hierarchies.

I recall one such scene. Three of us women who worked at 883 sold the newspaper every week in the working-class bars and discos in Wedding. That is, we worked hard and were not just all talk. A man from the 883 editorial collective, Philip (Werner) Sauber,[3. Philip (Werner) Sauber was one of the [students expelled from the dffb](#), worked on *Agit 883*, later belonged to the circle around the [June 2nd movement](#) and died after a shootout in Cologne in 1975] was sitting on his bed and we sat at his feet. From that position Philip really lit into us, calling us "bourgeois cunts," putting us down (I have forgotten why). We three women were speechless.

His companion remembers a similar situation in her pre-school, where a man also ran the show. She had even drunk hard liquor to get up her courage before daring to criticize his patriarchal behavior. When she mentioned it to him years later, he said that all he could remember was the dress she had been wearing.



Sticker by women from the *Agit 883* editorial collective. It translates roughly without the rhyme as: The Militant Panther Gals Knew Terror Long Before They'd Heard of Drugs!

It was in this atmosphere that some women from the editorial collective of *Agit 883* produced a provocative sticker, "Die militanten Panthertanten Terror schon vor Rauschgift kannten". What moved them to make these stickers? One of them remembered,

Our husbands were studying at the newly founded film academy in Berlin while we tried our hands at what we later called women's solidarity. We offered each other mutual support and noticed how great it could be to share one's life with a female friend. When we returned to Berlin our husbands were together with other women! Naturally that changes your consciousness, you don't want to retreat from life humiliated and abandoned anymore. The Black Panther women were our role models, which led to such slogans. We always tried to be like somebody, but rarely like the people we actually were.

Annerose Reiche was the sister of Reimut Reiche and studied sociology in those days. She, too, went to prison late in 1970. She had thrown Molotov cocktails into a Sparkasse bank with her boyfriend, a member of the Blues. They had been easy to identify via the license plate of the car which they had borrowed from a housemate. Both were sentenced to prison for arson endangering persons. She later lived and was an activist in the squatted houses on Hafenstrasse in Hamburg.



A Gender Perspective on Militancy?

In a June 1997 interview in *Der Spiegel* magazine, in which Annerose argued with Bommi Baumann and Till Meyer, both members of the June 2nd movement, the different gender perspectives also emerge:

Reiche: At some point I asked myself, Do you want to stand in the second row forever, applauding other people and letting them do the work, or do you want to do something yourself? ... In the meantime I've come to realize that it is far more effective when people join forces in interest groups. I have been living on Hafenstrasse in Hamburg since 1984, and we have succeeded in defending our project. It was hard-won, but now we have the buildings as a cooperative. It is an example of how self-determined living is possible today. But you don't get it handed to you, of course.

Spiegel: You're clearly more modest than you used to be.

Reiche: We're smarter too. It irks me that I simply didn't know enough back then. For example, the laws of physics such as $e=mc^2$ — why wasn't that clear to me earlier? Being fast is not enough. You need the mass, too....

Baumann: It's not enough to say, "We got the Hafenstrasse and we're going to put in a new bike path back there." That's a tad too little for me.

Reiche: That's not what I'm saying. But I find you arrogant. What are you doing, anyway?

Baumann: ... I'm at the point where I would vote SPD.

Reiche: You what? Mark the ballot and give up your responsibility? ... Everything could be better organized—without the state—or at least with a lot less state. And don't act as if nothing is happening anywhere....

Meyer: Anne, as you know, capitalism can afford any number of playgrounds and grubby little corners—as long as you don't actually step on its toes.... If you do, you will be made to feel the concerted power of the state. That doesn't happen as long as you're fighting for green spaces.

Reiche: But I don't want to feel the concerted power of the state. I want a different society, certainly. A society without prisons, for instance.

Meyer: Dreamer... Capitalism is tyranny. It is based on force, and there is a legitimate right to apply counter-force from below. You can't make a revolution with cotton balls.

Reiche: But a shooter isn't convincing either. It takes human discussion to figure out what is right, not weapons.

....

Meyer: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun," said Mao Zedong. That remains correct historically.

Reiche: I don't want power over other people.