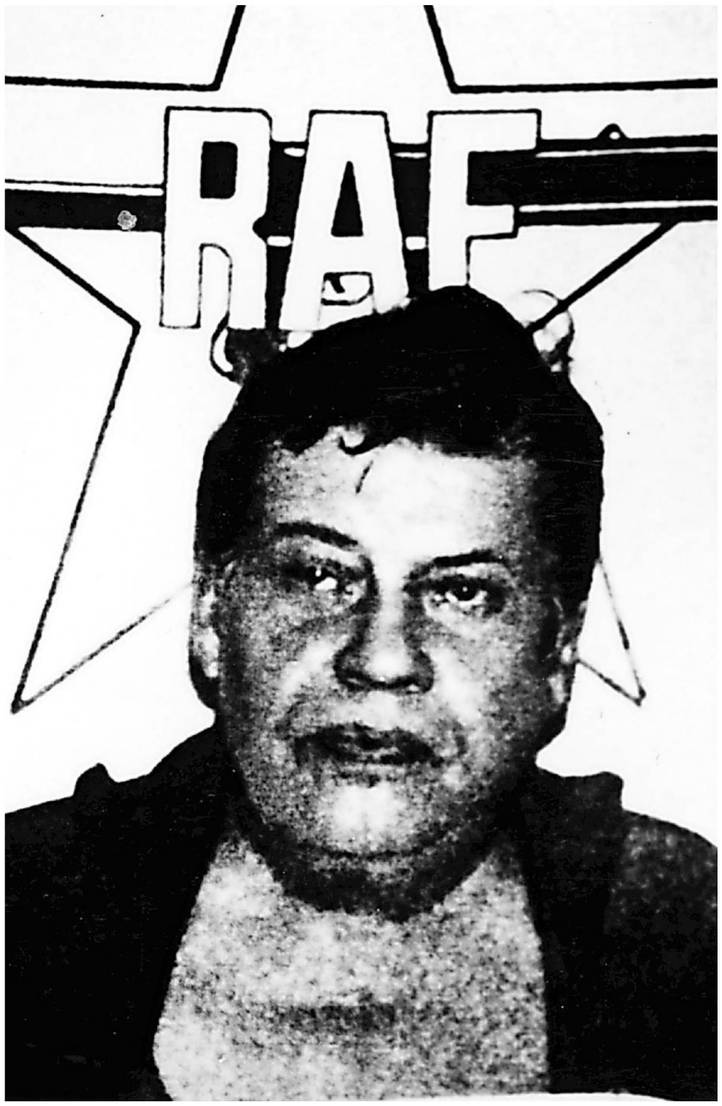

Hostage Hans Martin Schleyer in the hands of the Baader-Meinhof Group

Picture: AP/topfoto

was the only way West Germany could survive after the war. It couldn't look back because what happened was so awful and Germany was so culpable. The country had to look forward just so it could continue to exist. This was the Germany of Adenauer – no questions and "no experiments", as he had in a political slogan. But Germany was still divided between East and West, and it was in the front line of the Cold War. For the generation that came after the war – the baby boomers growing up in a divided, occupied country – silence was never going to be an adequate response.

Meinhof's constituency came from within this group. There were enough young Germans that understood her anger – that understood that generational rage. Schleyer, the man kidnapped by the RAF in September 1977, had been a Nazi and had lived in a house stolen from Jews murdered by Nazis. And there he was in post-war West Germany on television bullishly berating trade unionists and socialists. Of course this doesn't justify the RAF's murders and the bombs – but it does explain it. The Baader-Meinhof Group were an expression of the rage and disgust and anger that Germany, or at least a part of Germany, felt about itself. This was, of course a minority view. The murderous rage of the RAF group, whose destructive nihilism escalated by the time of the 'second generation' – newer members responsible for much of what happened in 1977 – may have had some sort of cathartic quality. But it was terrorism and it was beyond the pale. They were no better than the Nazis and the American imperialists in Vietnam that they despised.

If Meinhof hadn't jumped out of that window and hadn't gone underground then maybe she would have been part of what Germany became. People of her generation, of her political persuasion, even of her radicalism, if not her tactics, ended up in Government. They ended up shaping modern German politics.

A huge part of what German politics has become, especially since reunification, has been the attempt to accept and acknowledge what happened between 1933 and 1945. And that acceptance and acknowledgement has become the basis of what still just about remains a healthy – and hard-won – German liberalism. The actions of the Baader-Meinhof Group were a tragic and terrible part of that process.

■ Ian Walker is a writer and former museum curator, based in Munich

THE MINOAN MYSTERY

PETER TRUDGILL on the strange death of a still undeciphered language

The ancient Minoan culture of Crete grew out of a peaceful, matriarchal society where women enjoyed a privileged position, and a mother-goddess played an important role. The apogee of this first great European civilisation was reached between 2000 and 1500 BC.

We do not know what language the Minoans spoke, but we do have Minoan clay tablets dating from that period with writing on them in a syllabary known as Linear A. (A syllabary has a symbol for each possible syllable, so 'pa' and 'ka', 'te' and 'to', each have a single different symbol.) If we could tell what language these tablets were written in, we might have a better idea of where the Minoans came from originally.

But, unfortunately, Linear A has not yet been deciphered, despite many attempts by many different scholars to do so.

We are rather certain that the Minoans' language wasn't Greek. But did they speak a Semitic language connected to Phoenician; or something like Ancient Egyptian, which was related to the Berber languages of North Africa?

The Oxford philologist L.R. Palmer argued that Minoan was likely to have be an Indo-European language related to Luwian, a member of the now extinct Anatolian language sub-family which also included Hittite.

Luwian was spoken across most of southern Asia Minor – modern Turkey – including the south-western coastal districts, which were a relatively easy sea journey away from Crete.

Our best understanding of what then happened is that there were two large series of earthquakes in the area, followed by a truly colossal volcanic eruption in about 1700 BC on the island of Thera (Santorini), about 70 miles to the north of Crete. Massive tidal waves bore down on the Cretan north coast, and earthquakes caused widespread destruction in Crete itself.

Then, around 1400 BC, the archaeological record shows signs of a major upheaval on Crete, with widespread destruction of cities and palaces, often by fire, accompanied by signs that another group of people had arrived from elsewhere, bearing a different culture. Clay tablets have been found from this period employing a writing system and a language different from the Minoans'. The Minoans, probably weakened by the series of natural disasters, were overrun by these invaders, who appear to have systematically destroyed all the major Minoan cities of central and eastern Crete, although the main centre at Knossos seems to have been spared, perhaps because they wanted to preserve it for their own use.

But who were these invaders? Their identity was not established until the 1950s, when it was discovered by one of the most impressive intellectual feats of all time. The invaders' new writing system, known as Linear B, had defied all earlier efforts at decipherment.

However, in 1951 a brilliant young English amateur linguist, Michael Ventris, succeeded in decoding the script, and in 1953 he published a paper together with the Cambridge Classical philologist John Chadwick – who had worked at Bletchley Park as a cryptographer during the Second World War – showing that the language of Linear B was a very early form of Greek.

From about 2000 BC onwards, people speaking a language ancestral to Greek had begun arriving in the southern Balkans from the north, and had established a civilisation in what is now mainland Greece. Their culture was very different from the Minoans': patriarchal, militaristic, hierarchical, and authoritarian. The invasion of Crete showed that these Greeks had now continued their southward migration from the mainland across the Aegean sea.

Linguistic evidence suggests that Minoan and Greek populations coexisted on the island for many generations, since the Minoan language seems to have had some influence on Greek. The Archaic Greek words *basileus*, 'king', *woinos*, 'wine', and *wrodon*, 'rose', are of pre-Greek origin; and one Minoan word, labyrinth, has even made its way into English.

But it is ironic, given the importance of Crete to modern Greece, that linguistic research suggests that the people who destroyed Minoan Crete were actually Greeks.

■ Peter Trudgill is professor emeritus of English linguistics at the Université de Fribourg/Universität Freiburg, Switzerland

LABYRINTH

Our word *labyrinth* was borrowed from Latin *labyrinthus* 'maze' (originally the mythical maze of Minoan Crete) but it was not originally a Latin word – Latin had no *th*-sound. It came from Ancient Greek, *labyrinthos*. The origin of this word is not known for sure, but it's very likely that it came from the ancient pre-Greek language of the Minoans – whatever that was.