

## Terrorism in Historical Perspective

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On November 24, 1917 a bomb thought to have been planted by anarchists killed nine police officers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On June 2, 1919, anarchists were suspected of setting off a series of bombs in eight cities, including Washington, D.C., where a bomb partially destroyed the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. On September 16, 1920, an explosive-laden wagon exploded on Wall Street, across from the headquarters of J.P. Morgan & Company, killing 40 and wounding 300.

September 11, 2001 was not America's first experience with terrorist violence. Bombings in 1886 at Haymarket Square in Chicago during a labor rally, in 1910 at the Los Angeles Times Building during a labor dispute, and in 1963 at Birmingham, Alabama's 16th Street Baptist Church are only a few earlier examples of indiscriminate violence.

Few subjects are more surrounded with myths and misconceptions than terrorism. Historical knowledge is essential if we are to place the contemporary problem of terrorism in proper perspective.

One common misconception is that terrorism is a new and unprecedented phenomenon. In actuality, terrorism is not an invention of modern times. Indeed, the very words we use to describe terrorists show what a timeless phenomenon it is.

Our word zealot comes from a group of first-century Jews who tried to overthrow Roman rule over Biblical Palestine through the use of murder and assassination. The Zealots later committed mass suicide at Masada. Our word assassin comes from a Shiite Muslim sect that sought to assassinate Sunni Muslim leaders from the 11th through the 13th centuries. Supposedly, this sect used hashish before committing acts of violence, giving rise to the word assassin. The word thug originally referred to a group of revolutionaries in India before the 18th century.

The word "terrorism" comes from the French Revolution and the "Reign of Terror," when terror was used as an instrument of state policy. Terror was used to eliminate counterrevolutionary elements in the population, save France from anarchy and military defeat, and suppress hoarding and profiteering. Unapologetic about the use of terror to eliminate political enemies, Robespierre, the radical leader, said that "Terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible." An estimated 40,000 people were sentenced to death during the Terror in France. Altogether, about 12,000 people were executed during the reign of terror.

Modern terrorism arose in Tsarist Russia in the 1870s. Opponents of the Tsar's government had three primary aims:

- To publicize grievances and build support through the "propaganda of the deed";
- To destabilize governments and divide the population; and
- To provoke authorities to overreact and generate international sympathy for the perpetrators' cause.

Terrorist tactics were subsequently adopted by some dissident groups in the Ottoman and British empire and by some anarchists in the United States and Western Europe. Late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century terrorism typically took the form of assassination attempts on heads of state and bomb attacks on public buildings. Between 1880, the president of France, a Spanish prime minister, an Austrian empress, an Italian king, and two U.S. presidents were assassinated. Attempts were also made on the life of a German chancellor and emperor.

Another misconception is that terrorism is essentially a Middle Eastern or left-wing phenomenon. In fact, terrorism has been used by many groups in different parts of the world for diverse purposes. Recent events underscore the terrorism's complexity. During the days surrounding the September 11th, 2001,

attack, there were at least three other attacks that might be described as acts of terror:

In Colombia, right-wing paramilitaries killed fifteen villagers they accused of collaborating with Marxist guerrillas.

In Londonderry, Northern Ireland, the "Real IRA" planted a roadside bomb, targeting three police officers.

A suicide bomber in Istanbul detonated a bomb to protest conditions in Turkish prisons.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, terrorism was generally ideologically inspired and found its greatest support among anarchists eager to overthrow governments viewed as oppressive or corrupt. Terrorism was generally opposed by Marxists, who regarded it as counterproductive and as contrary to the notion that change was best accomplished through revolutionary action by the masses.

The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1914 signaled a new phase in the history of terrorism: a first phase of separatist, anti-colonial terror. For the first time, terrorist violence was employed to overthrow colonial empires, including the Ottoman and British empires.

The 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of yet another form of terrorism, right-wing fascist terror, as Hitler's brownshirts and Mussolini's blackshirts used murder and violent intimidation to achieve political power and attack specific elements in the population. The fascist dictatorships and Stalin's Soviet Union offer modern examples of state-sponsored terrorism, in which governments dispatch assassins and saboteurs to kill their enemies.

A fresh wave of nationalist anti-colonial terror emerged after World War II, when societies as diverse as Algeria, Kenya, and Israel achieved independence in part as a result of terrorist tactics employed by nationalist groups. During the early postwar period, terror was not confined to any particular group of people or part of the world. Acts of terror took place in such disparate societies as Algeria, Argentina, Egypt, France, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Northern Ireland, Peru, and Sri Lanka. Struggles against colonial domination led to a romanticizing of revolutionary violence, an attitude that found its most influential expression in Frantz Fanon's influential book *The Wretched of the Earth*. The Martinique-born Fanon, who had participated in the Algerian struggle against France, wrote "violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect." The Algerian struggle seemed to underscore the effectiveness of attacks against civilians.

Following the successful use of terrorism by the FLN in Algeria, terrorism was adopted by other nationalist and separatist groups, including some Basques, Irish, Quebecois, and African and Latin American revolutionaries. In the case of Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Latin America, terror tactics were also utilized by the nationalists' and the revolutionaries' militant opponents. This period also saw the growth of government-sanctioned or government-tolerated death squads in Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Spain.

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of new forms of revolutionary terror in the affluent West, when groups such as the Red Army Faction in Germany, Action Directe in France, the Red Brigades in Italy, and the Weather Underground and the Symbionese Liberation Army in the United States kidnapped and assassinated people whom they blamed for economic exploitation and political repression. Many members of these groups were radicalized by the Vietnam war and incidents of police brutality, though the actual size of these groups tended to be quite small. It is estimated that the Red Army Faction only had 20 to 30 hard core members and some 200 sympathizers. The worst violence in the West occurred in Italy, where there were 40 deaths in 1973, 27 in 1974, and 120 in 1980. To suppress terrorism, Italy imprisoned some 1,300 leftist and 238 right wing terrorists by 1983.

Terrorism emerged on the world stage with the 1972 murder of eleven Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, in an effort to end Israeli occupation of their territories and establish a Palestinian homeland. The most feared group, the Abu Nidal organization, which split from the Palestinian Liberation

Organization in 1974, had approximately 500 hard-core members.

More recently, the Aum sect in Japan, which was responsible for the Tokyo subway nerve gas attack, and the radical wing of the militia movement in the United States, raised public awareness of the threat of domestic terrorism in world's most prosperous countries. In recent years there have been outbursts of public alarm about cyber-terrorists, narco-terrorists and eco-terrorists.

Yet another misconception is that terrorism is a direct response to oppression. In fact, few acts of terrorism have been directed against especially brutal regimes, such as Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Soviet Union. Terrorism is directed primarily against governments that allow a free press and that are responsive to public opinion.

Nor is there is not much evidence to suggest that those who perpetrate acts of terror are impoverished, poorly educated, impressionable youths. Indeed, many of the accused World Trade Center attackers were mature, often highly educated and well-trained adults, many with families, who had spent years in Western Europe or the United States.

Is terrorism successful?

The historical record is mixed. In some cases, terrorism has indeed been successful in achieving political ends. Terrorism accompanied the struggles to achieve independence from colonial rule in for Algeria, Kenya, and Israel. Terrorist violence also occurred in the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa. But it seems likely in each of these cases that independence would have been secured even in the absence of terrorist violence.

In other instances—in the Palestinian territories, Chechnya in the Russian Republic, and in Kurdish parts of Turkey—terrorism has been less successful. In these parts of the world, it appears that suicide bombings and other attacks stiffened the will of governments and may even have unified divided populations.

Terrorism has allowed small groups to exert an influence disproportionate to their size. The Symbionese Liberation Army, which attracted enormous attention in the United States in the 1970s, had just eight members. The Baader Meinhof Gang a few dozen members. In Colombia, the Tupamaros numbered about 3,000. Yet each of these groups attracted widespread notoriety.

In a number of cases, notably in Quebec and in Northern Ireland, terrorism turned out to be the prelude to peaceful political transformations. In Canada, Quebec separatists set off bombs and robbed armories during the 1960s in a bid to establish a separate French-speaking country. In 1970, they murdered a Quebec cabinet minister. But separatists eventually attained provincial power.

In general, it appears that terrorism has been most successful when its goal has been to end colonial domination, in part been wearing down a colonial power's will and partly by winning international recognition for the validity of the perpetrators' aims. It has been less successful in toppling existing regimes. The most successful terrorists have been nationalist or separatist groups, because their ethnic and religious appeal has guaranteed them popular support, or because they have received support from foreign powers.

In recent years, terrorism has shifted in its roots, methods, and goals. First of all, there has been a trend away from state-sponsored terror toward terror perpetrated by individuals or independent groups

According to the U.S. Department of State, there were 189 state-sponsored acts of terrorism in 1987, compared to no more than 15 in 1998. Four of the countries that regularly appear on the State Department list of terrorist sponsors—Cuba, Libya, North Korea, and Syria—have not been accused of involvement in international terrorist attacks in more than ten years.

Secondly, tightly organized terrorist groups have given way to more amorphous terrorist networks. In

contrast to groups such as the Japanese Red Army, Germany's Red Army Faction, the Irish Republican Army, and Italy's Red Brigade, which had a clearly defined leadership structure, the newer groups appear to be more decentralized and loosely knit. The newer groups also appear to be less willing to issue communiqués explaining and taking credit for their attacks. But these groups may be larger than their predecessors. Whereas the Abu Nidal organization reportedly had about 500 members, the Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaida network is reputed to have 4,000 to 5,000 supporters.

Loners also appear to be more involved in terrorist acts than in the past. These include violent anti-abortionists and individuals such as the Unabomber and Timothy McVeigh, who are not members of established organizations, as well as xenophobes and racists engaged in white supremacist and neo-Nazi violence.

Third, a growing number of acts of terror have been perpetrated in the name of religion rather than of ideology or nationalism. Revolutionary and separatist movements engaging in terroristic acts have declined in recent year, while religious groups make up a growing number of the organizations that have been identified as perpetrators of international terror. In 1980, just two of 64 international terror groups were considered to be religiously motivated. In 1995, the figure was 26 out of 56 organizations. There is concern among many students of terrorism that as religious motivation has increased, the goals of terrorists have become more grandiose and they have grown less selective and discriminate in their targets.

Fourth, the number of acts of terror has decreased, but those that take place have grown more deadly. According to the U.S. State Department, the largest number of terrorist acts occurred in 1987, when 666 attacks occurred. In 1998, in contrast, there were 273 terrorist attacks, the smallest number since 1971. Before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the deadliest act of international terrorism was the 1985 bombing of an Air Indian jet by Sikh militants, killing 329 people. In second place was the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, in which 213 people were killed. Timothy McVeigh killed 168 people at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

Terrorism generates particular public alarm because it suggests that every person is vulnerable to attack. Today, the availability of weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons, makes terrorism a particular source of dread.