

Alchemists of Revolution

Terrorism *in the Modern World*

A clear-eyed look
at the terrorist mentality,
its origins, and consequences



Richard E. Rubenstein

ALCHEMISTS
OF
REVOLUTION
(TERRORISM IN THE
MODERN WORLD)

Richard E. Rubenstein

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For Brenda Libman Rubenstein

L'espoir déçu s'habille en bombes.

(Hope betrayed arrays herself in bombs.)

Graffito, 1977

Université de Provence

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RICHARD E. RUBENSTEIN
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INTRODUCTION

DURING the mid-1960s, when American cities were struck by a wave of violent racial uprisings, an explanation commonly offered was that a handful of fanatical outsiders—in President Lyndon Johnson's words, "a few mean and willful men"—were responsible for instigating the violence. Congress responded by passing legislation that made it a crime to cross state lines with the intention of provoking a riot; the Federal Bureau of Investigation initiated its now infamous COINTELPRO campaign to "penetrate and disrupt" allegedly seditious groups; and the police took on the Black Panther party.

Unlike most cases of terrorism, however, the ghetto uprisings took place in our own backyard. Its participants (seen nightly on television) were people we knew, or might have known but for the familiar realities of racial segregation and economic exclusion. We did not really need a National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to tell us that the "outside agitator" theory of racial disorder was a sham and a diversion, or that the underlying causes of the rioting were to be found in our own social history . . . and in our own hearts. Thus the rage for retaliation was soon dampened. The nation searched its soul, and while it did not solve the problems of racism and poverty, at least, for a time, it tried.

Terrorist violence evokes a very different sort of reaction; we approach it essentially as outsiders. The terrorists live in far-off lands, reflect alien cultural values, embrace incomprehensible religious and political ideologies. They are the products of a history with which we are unfamiliar and which we think does not implicate us. Furthermore, the type of violence they perpe-

trate has few parallels in our own domestic experience. Racial rioting we understand, just as we understand violent strikes, confrontational demonstrations, prison riots, and political assassinations committed by deranged loners. But systematic terrorism—the calculated use of small-group violence to generate mass mobilization for political change—has been a determining factor in American history only once: when the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups used it to restore white supremacy to the South after the Civil War.

As we will see, the triumph of the original KKK has much to tell us about the conditions for success of terrorist movements. But the memory of that group's violent reign has faded or been repressed, and nothing in our more recent history has prepared us to understand the dynamics of a serious indigenous terrorist campaign. Therefore, as Americans around the world become targets of terrorist violence, we find ourselves responding with a combination of anger, fear, and naiveté, a state that makes us particularly vulnerable to manipulation by demagogic politicians and pseudoscientists, the purveyors of "outside agitator" theories of terrorism and quick-fix retaliatory cures.

Item: In May 1981, a Turkish fascist named Mehmet Ali Ağca attempts to kill the Pope. Immediately, a clutch of right-wing terrorism experts, cheered on by U.S. government officials and the mass media, announces that this is the result of a Soviet-Bulgarian plot to eliminate papal support for the Polish Solidarity movement. Unfortunately for the "Red Network" theorists, Ağca proclaims at his trial that he is Jesus Christ, and suggests that he was told to finger the Russians and the Bulgarians by agents of SISMI, the Italian version of our Central Intelligence Agency. The "Pope plot" collapses, the Bulgarians arrested on Ağca's say-so are released, and we are left knowing virtually nothing about the organization of which he was actually a member: Turkey's fascist Grey Wolves.

Item: In October 1983, a truck bomb driven by a Lebanese Shiite guerrilla blows up the American garrison at Beirut Airport, killing hundreds of GI's. This time, we are informed by the experts, the real villain is the government of Iran—or perhaps

the government of Syria—since the ignorant, fanatical Shiites could not possibly have the technical expertise and material needed to construct such a weapon. But again the evidence of outside manipulation vanishes in the morning mist. Again the urge to retaliate is provoked, then frustrated. And again we are left in ignorance of terrorism's *internal* causes. Indeed, the notion that Shiite fighters are suicidal robots programmed by foreign manipulators to kill Americans—what might be called the "Manchurian Candidate" theory of terrorism—ensures that we will *not* understand their history, their motives, or their reasons for making us their targets.

Item: In October 1985, the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* is hijacked and an American passenger killed by members of the Palestine Liberation Front, an ultranationalist group operating on the fringes of the Palestine Liberation Organization. And in December, the Fatah Revolutionary Council, a group headed by Yasir Arafat's sworn enemy, Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal, is credited with two ferocious bombings at the Rome and Vienna airports. The United States announces that because the Libyan government has given moral and material support to the terrorists, Libya is responsible for these attacks. It is clear that many governments, including that of Muammar Khaddafi's Libya, have supported Palestinian fighters and may be said to bear a share of moral responsibility for their actions. (The United States's responsibility for Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and Israel's for the massacres at Sabra and Shatila, are equally clear.) But support is not control, and if the history of terrorism teaches us anything, it is that terrorist movements with an indigenous political base generally call their own shots and develop their own sources of supply.

Who outside the American South "sponsored" the original KKK? What sinister "network" supplied the most effective terrorists of the 1970s, the urban guerrillas of Uruguay and Argentina? Who now "manipulates" the Irish Republican Army Provisionals, France's Direct Action, or, for that matter, the neofascist movements proliferating so rapidly throughout Western Europe? All of these organizations obtained support

where they could. None were the creatures of outside sponsors, so dependent on external sources of supply that they could be eliminated by turning off some spigot. It is well known, for example, that the IRA Provisionals raise a good deal of money by soliciting contributions from Irish Americans. Yet who would be so foolish as to think that IRA violence in Northern Ireland could be ended by severing the "American connection," or so callous as to believe that the British would be justified in bombing South Boston in retaliation for the killing of British troops in Londonderry? Ironically, the closer to home terrorism strikes and the more we recognize that terrorists, no matter how culpable, are people like us, the less likely we are to accept quack theories of foreign "sponsorship" and the necessity for massive retaliation against alleged sponsors.

What the terrorism experts should understand—but apparently do not wish to acknowledge—is that retaliation based on the principle of collective responsibility for terrorist actions follows precisely the adversary's script. When President Ronald Reagan sent a U.S. task force across the "line of death" in March 1986 to confront the Libyans in the Gulf of Sidra, Abu Nidal smiled. And when American bombers based in England attacked Tripoli in April, killing some forty Libyans, including Khaddafi's adoptive infant daughter, in retaliation for the bombing of a Berlin discotheque frequented by American GI's, he rejoiced. Indeed, if Reagan did not exist, it would be necessary for Abu Nidal to create him. Let us see why this is so.

Mention terrorism, and most people immediately think of specific forms of violence like assassination, hijacking, kidnapping, and the bombing of public facilities. Nevertheless, it seems to me, a more useful definition of terrorism is this: it is politically motivated violence engaged in by small groups claiming to represent the masses. Although illegal, terrorism is not simply crime; mere criminals rarely purport to act on behalf of an entire nation, class, religion, or ethnic group, nor do they ordinarily accept martyrdom. And although political, it is not really warfare either, since the number of active combatants is small and their relationship to mass groups questionable. Ter-

rorism, if you like, is a kind of crime that aspires to become warfare. Its goal is to link a small vanguard of militants to the resigned, timid, or corrupted masses—to awaken these oppressed sleepers and lead them to power.

How is this to be accomplished? The key lies in the truism that there is no force more terroristic than a national state at war. What terrorist assassination campaign compares with the CIA's "Phoenix Program," which resulted in the liquidation of at least ten thousand suspected Communists during the Vietnam War? What kidnapping operation can match the "disappearances" engineered since the mid-1970s by government-sponsored death squads in Guatemala, El Salvador, or Argentina? And what modern terrorist bombing can compete with the annihilation of entire cities in World War II? Obviously, state terrorism is immeasurably more destructive and indiscriminate than small-group violence. In terrorist theory, this simple fact has the impact of Newton's falling apple; for if small-group attacks can provoke powerful governments to retaliate against the terrorist's suppliers, sympathizers, and ethnic brethren, the state itself will accomplish the terrorists' main task. The sleepers will awaken, the cycle of retaliation will continue, the struggle will go forward.

That is why Abu Nidal laughs as U.S. jets stream in over Tripoli, blowing up women, children, and the French Embassy in addition to designated military targets. He knows that the invasion of Lebanon, triggered by his own group's 1982 attempt to kill Shlomo Argov, the Israeli ambassador in London, was a disaster for Israel that created a new front-line enemy on that nation's northern border. Why should the "Israelification" of American policy prove any less disastrous for the United States?

We will see in the pages that follow that terrorism is generated not only by grievances, but by the political weakness of militant intellectuals unable either to organize mass violence or to attract reliable allies to their cause. This disconnection of the intelligentsia, I will argue, is a primary internal cause of terrorism, dictating to a large degree its philosophy, tactics, and

consequences. Only under certain circumstances is small-group violence an effective method of overcoming the militants' social and political isolation; but retaliatory responses that inflame a population already aroused by nationalist passion, and that drag third and fourth parties into the arena of conflict, surely constitute one of these circumstances. The most effective terrorist act in world history (to take an extreme example) was the assassination of Austria's archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo in June 1914 by "Young Bosnia" terrorists who were struggling to liberate the Balkans from Hapsburg control—an act supported, if not instigated, by the Serbian Black Hand organization. The Austrian decision to treat this as an act of war requiring retaliation against Serbia triggered the mobilizations that led directly to World War I; and that war *did* destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire, freeing the Slavs from foreign domination. To the rest of the world, perhaps, Sarajevo represents the beginning of a long nightmare. To modern Yugoslavs, it is the cradle of liberty.

This example may be extreme, but it is not irrelevant. Three lessons seem particularly notable. First, a policy of massive retaliation against terrorists, their suppliers, and their sympathizers is a war policy. Indeed, in the case of the United States it is part and parcel of a defense strategy increasingly based on offense: a nuclear first-strike capability, war-fighting readiness, the supply of sophisticated weapons to anti-Communist guerrillas, and a plan (made public by President Jimmy Carter) to "decapitate" the Kremlin leadership in the first moments of World War III by striking at what the Pentagon calls "C³I"—command, control, communications, and intelligence. The attempt to debilitate Libya by bombing Colonel Khaddafi's headquarters was a particularly chilling indication of this correspondence. Those who consider the Middle East to be the Balkans of the modern era would do well to ponder the lesson learned too late by the Austrians.

Second, terrorism alone virtually never accomplishes the task of igniting a general conflagration. "Revolutionary" terrorism more often obstructs social revolution than produces it. Social revolutionaries aim to set class against class, overthrow the class

in power, and reconstruct society—tasks for which small-group violence is unsuited even when it provokes excessive retaliation. Nationalist terrorism has a more explosive potential, in part because of the relative modesty of its goals. Nationalists hope to unite all classes of natives against the foreigner, to make occupied territory ungovernable, and to achieve recognition by other states. Small-group violence alone does not fulfill these hopes, but if the foreigner cooperates by retaliating against all natives and by attacking other states, anything is possible.

Third, to conceive of terrorism as the mere product of outside manipulation, created by the machinations of this government or that, makes it impossible to understand either its causes or its consequences. A front-page article in the *New York Times** asked, "Is this terrorism motivated by political grievances, or has it simply become another tool of international relations for some states?" Most often, the answer is *both*. Terrorism is not mass violence, and foreign powers have long tried to use it for their own ends. But a terrorist movement with staying power, a movement capable of serving a destabilizing function, is not just a stage play produced by foreign intelligence agencies. It has historical antecedents, roots in a certain social milieu, relationships with other local organizations; it has its own sense of grievance and philosophy of remediation, its own *modus operandi* and contradictions. The surest way to misunderstand a terrorist organization, even if one considers it illegitimate, is to deny its local authenticity. The Soviets do this when they brand the Afghan rebels "bandits." And the *New York Times* does it by suggesting that terrorists like Abu Nidal are "hired guns" because they accept support from foreign governments.

Indeed, when foreign powers aid local terrorists, it is impossible to decide who is using whom, and for what purposes, without a strong sense of the rebel organization's political weight. What are its local social and political connections? In what ways (if any) does it reflect the wishes or satisfy the needs of larger groups? How rational is its program, and how capable is it of

*Thomas L. Friedman, "Loose-Linked Network of Terror: Separate Acts, Ideological Bonds," *New York Times*, 28 April 1986, A1.

using the leverage provided by more powerful allies or opponents? What social changes strengthen or undermine its position? Terrorism is a notoriously unreliable tool, as the Russian Czarists discovered in 1909, when their chief "mole" in the terrorist underground turned out to be the underground's chief assassin! This is because it is the product of internal forces, not just external manipulation. It has a life of its own.

That life is the subject of this book. Moreover, in my view it is no more reducible to grievances than to manipulation. Grievances have been with us always, but the history of modern terrorism spans little more than one century. What we want to know is why this form of violent politics was revived with such force in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and why it persists. Furthermore, small-group violence seems an exceedingly dangerous and ineffective way of redressing grievances. What impels young people to embrace it as a way of life? Under what circumstances, if any, does it work? And what are its unintended consequences?

In attempting to answer these questions, I have used a comparative method. Because terrorist movements are locally based and conditioned, they exhibit great diversity from group to group, country to country, and generation to generation. Nevertheless, their common features are particularly striking. Terrorist violence, we will find, is a response to a certain kind of social crisis. Widely divergent groups, politically speaking, share important structural similarities in their thinking, organization, and practice. This suggests that there is a logic of terrorist action that has a good deal to do with determining the outcome of diverse struggles and that may produce results unimagined by any party. To describe and illustrate this logic is one of our principal goals.

This, then, is the plan of the study. I begin by exploring the psychology of terrorism and by attempting to free the subject as a whole from misleading stereotypes and metaphors (part I). Then, in part II, I offer an explanation of terrorism's social causes, describing the typical situation that seems to produce terrorist movements at various times and places. Part III com-

pares the theories and practices of the major schools of modern terrorism: anarcho-communist, nationalist, and fascist. Finally, part IV investigates the relationship between terrorism and social revolution, and part V defines the roles played by terrorists in modern struggles for national liberation. The overall purpose of this analysis is to provide the reader with an insider's feel for the subject—an understanding of terrorism as a historical and a human activity rather than as some mysterious, satanic force. My theme, let it be noted, is neither "Exterminate all the brutes!" nor "Sympathy for the Devil." One need have very little sympathy for terrorists to insist that they are neither brutes nor devils, but people in many ways like us.

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