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Fascicolo 24. Novembre 2025
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Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Estandart Reyat u d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

CAROLA DIETZE,

The Invention of Terrorism in Europe, Russia, and the United States

London: Verso, 2021.



In this timely and seminal book, Carola Dietze explores the historical genesis of terrorist action – or, in her own words, the “invention of terrorism” – as strictly linked to the birth of modernity in Europe, Russia and the United States. A historian by training and profession, but well-versed with the main sociopolitical theories, concepts and literatures underpinning terrorism studies, Dietze recognises that a shared definition of terrorism is yet to be achieved. Moreover, she notes that “terrorism” is a contextual and political term, as it changes meaning and interpretation across space and time. In this sense, Gerald Seymour’s aph-

orism that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” perfectly encapsulates the dichotomy between “good and evil” that so often accompanies highly charged and frenzied political statements in contemporary times of crisis (i.e. after a terrorist attack on the West).

Dietze draws upon solid academic literature to prove that terrorism, as a tactic, operates at the nexus of interaction and learning processes, as well as the specific circumstances and models of socialisation and legitimisation: in other words, terrorism is usually the result of a learning process (rather than psychopathological conditions) and is utilised when other means are proven ineffective. The processes of democratisation and economic modernisation, as a result of the advanced and multifaceted complexities of modern society, have allowed certain forms of violence to emerge and find legitimisation within certain social movements (e.g. post-revolutionary ones). Terrorist action emerges primarily as a ‘communication strategy’ based upon public display of violence and requiring an ‘audience’, so that it can escalate confrontation to force a reaction. In all of the cases studied by this book – and, indeed, in all contemporary terrorist attacks – the media, as an integral element of terrorist calculation have passed on the news on spectacular violent events to the target groups, namely the public and the State.

The author argues that two revolutionary ideas have driven the invention of terrorism: the goal of personal freedom (emancipation and equality) and the goal of political freedom (political participation, self-determination and nation-building), both representing key aims of the American and French revolutions.

In the case of personal freedom, the author reminds us that slavery existed across most of the world since biblical times and was an institution considered both legitimate and necessary, with the exception of China, Japan and most of Europe. European countries abolished slavery in their colonies in two manners: on the one hand, there was the Continental model of emancipating slaves by decree; on the other hand, there was the Anglo-American process of broad public engagement in social movements.

In the case of political freedom, Dietze identifies three types of nation-building processes: (1) achieved through collective violence in the political-legal step, as in the case of the English Revolution, the American Revolutionary War and the establishment of Greece and Belgium as nations; (2) achieved without collective violence, due to external power relations that acted as political blockages, as in

the case of the abortive national revolutions in Poland, Hungary and Ireland in the nineteenth century; (3) achieved through individual violence, after the failure of political means and/or collective violence, as in the case of nation building in the German and Italian States

The core of Dietze's book is devoted to the exploration of how the terrorism that we know today developed historically. Her main argument is that terrorism was 'invented' by a small group of actors in Europe, Russia and the United States, who 'learnt' a collective transnational process, bringing about a new type of political violence (terrorism) within less than ten years in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Felice Orsini (1819-1858) was the 'inventor' of this new form of violence: a follower of the Italian revolutionary leader Giuseppe Mazzini, Orsini served as his agent in the Papal States, Switzerland, Hungary and England. After breaking ties with Mazzini, Orsini started plotting the assassination of the French Emperor Napoleon III in 1858, believing that his death would trigger in France a revolution that could spread to Italy. While the bombings of Napoleon's carriages failed and Orsini was first arrested and then executed, the Emperor was prompted to declare war on Austria in 1859, from which ensued the independence of Italy.

This unwitting 'cooperation' with the Emperor transformed Orsini's abortive attack into a successful terrorist act, which was widely covered by the American media. Importantly, it inspired John Brown (1800-1859), a militant American abolitionist and a longstanding foe of slavery, who became obsessed with the idea of taking action to liberate enslaved Black people. Brown changed his tactic from guerrilla warfare to terrorism and, one year after Orsini's attack, in 1859, led a group of abolitionists to raid the arsenal and the weapons factories of the military in Harpers Ferry, taking 60 leading men of the area as hostages: after a confrontation with the local militia, a contingency of troops and a small force of Marines forced Brown and his accomplices to surrender. Although Brown was arrested and executed, eventually failing to spark a general slave revolt, his actions speeded up the war that would bring emancipation.

Among the pioneers of terrorism, Dietze include the first copycats of Felice Orsini and John Brown, namely: Oskar Wilhelm Becker (1839-1868), who attempted to assassinate the Prussian King Wilhelm I in 1861; John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865), who killed the American president Abraham Lincoln in 1865; and

Dmitry Vladimirovich Karakozov (1840-1866), who launched a failed attack on Tsar Alexander II in 1866.

All of these acts can be classified as terrorism, insofar as they share some common elements: they were premeditated and calculated; they aimed to shock the public, spread fear among political opponents and garner support among potential sympathisers; they targeted the political order based on the countries in which the attackers operated; they utilised violence as a provocation to obtain a reaction.

The national democrats and abolitionists were proactive movements that organised themselves at the national, transnational and transatlantic levels: around these movements there are processes of political socialisation and radicalisation, particularly for Felice Orsini, who belonged to the national democratic movement in the Italian states, seeking the establishment of an Italian republic through collective violence and institutional political channels, before resorting to individual violence, and for John Brown, who belonged to the abolitionist movement and fought to end slavery in the United States. Their copycats, namely Becker, Booth and Karakozov, were also associated with social movements, though they were much less involved than Orsini and Brown. Moreover, these perpetrators from the nineteenth century confirm the sociopolitical theories explaining the terrorism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In all of these cases, the ideas of liberty (personal freedom) and nationhood (political freedom) accounted for much of the sociopolitical and economic processes of modernisation and inspired the invention and development of terrorism. Therefore, terrorism originated in the nineteenth century as a product of European and American modernity: here, the interlinked development of the media and technology, as well as political and religious thought around modernity played a key role in the emergence of a new form of political violence (terrorism), triggered by the processes of emancipation and nation building. In other words, terrorism emerged as a post-revolutionary form of violence invented in non-revolutionary contexts in Europe, Russia and the United States.

To conclude this review, it is important to reflect on the role played by terrorism in the contemporary world. While it is true that parts of Africa and the Greater Middle East are plagued by this kind of political violence, nowadays Europe stands in a rather privileged position. Indeed, in the twenty-first century Western

Europe has been much safer than in the last 30 years of the twentieth century: the Global Terrorism Database shows that, between 2000 and today, terrorist activities resulted in more than 100 casualties per annum only in 2004 (Madrid attack), in 2015 (Paris attack) and in 2016 (Nice, Brussels and Berlin attacks). This figure is in stark comparison with the previous 30 years (1970–1999), 23 of which saw more than 100 casualties every year as a result of violence perpetrated by the Irish Republican Army in the United Kingdom, the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna in Spain and other terrorist groups across Europe. This situation reminds us of the words of Richard English on “how comparatively limited terrorism-generated levels of death and injury actually are when set against more major threats”, in a context in which governments, on the contrary, all-too-often display knee-jerk reactions to the latest terrorist atrocity.

COMESTOR



Unexploded Orsini Bomb, in the Museu d'Història de Barcelona (MUHBA).

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William Balfour Ker (1877-1918), *Knights of Columbus*, 1917 / Poster showing a priest looking heavenward and raising a crucifix, blessing kneeling soldiers. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-10131
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