

Europe, matrix of contemporary terrorism?

From the French Revolution to totalitarianism

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of terrorism, which has received great media attention, is of importance in the history of modern Europe, but remains difficult to grasp for it does not adhere to any satisfactory definition. Scattered among different groups dependent on the most varied ideologies, it cannot be reduced to a succession of attacks, demands, and trials. It is therefore necessary to situate it within a larger dynamic and context, by noting the links connecting the different movements, and by sketching out a genealogy of the phenomenon. Terrorism emerged in nineteenth century Europe. France under the Consulate initiated this new kind of violence, which was imported in Russia where it was theorized by nihilists before spreading across Europe. Anti-terrorism, which is based on exceptional laws, appeared almost concurrently. Whether it was colonial, dictatorial, revolutionary, or totalitarian, the state was also prompted to establish terror as an instrument of government. Terrorism was thus established as a political tool in the service of both the state and those opposing it.



Assassination attempt in the rue Saint-Nicaise targeting Napoleon Bonaparte on December 24, 1800 (engraving, unknown artist). © BnF. Source : gallica.bnf.fr



Assassination attempt targeting Tsar Alexander II on March 1, 1881 (unknown artist). Source : marjinalis.livejournal.com



The Bologna train station bombing, August 2, 1980. Front page of the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino*, special issue from August 2, 1980.

Definition and genealogy

Did Europe give birth to terrorism? This hypothesis calls for defining the phenomenon—a form of urban guerilla warfare that combines publicity and conspiracy, armed rhetoric and political violence—and sketching out its genealogy. The term was coined in the context of the French Revolution to describe the policy conducted by the Convention in the name of public safety, characterized by the state of exception and bloody practices (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1798). It is thus related to the “monopoly of the legitimate use of violence,” which according to Max Weber defines the state (*Politics as a Vocation*, 1919). However, the word was soon used to refer to the political violence wielded by opponents, in keeping with the tyrannicide of the Ancien Régime.

Terrorism, a European phenomenon during the nineteenth century

This political violence thrived on the individualism that emerged in the late eighteenth century, as well as on the desacralization of political power. But it was during the nineteenth century that Europe reverberated with the sound of attacks, initially in France under the Consulate with the Jacobin-inspired *conspiration des poignards* (Daggers Conspiracy) (October 1800), and the assassination attempt in the rue Saint-Nicaise planned by monarchists (December 1800), both targeting Napoleon Bonaparte. This same form of violence struck repeatedly under the Bourbon Restoration, with the assassination of the duc de Berry in 1820, and later under the July Monarchy, with a series of assassination attempts against Louis Philippe, especially the one organized in 1835 by Giuseppe Fieschi, who missed his target but caused eighteen casualties with his “infernal machine.”

The phenomenon spread throughout Europe. It was imported in Russia, where it was theorized by the nihilists. It was there that the word terrorism took on its contemporary meaning of violence emanating from minority groups targeting an individual considered to be representative, in an attempt to disrupt a political and social order. Sergei Netchayev, who co-authored with Mikhail Bakunin an actual terrorist breviary (*Catechism of a Revolutionary*, 1869), and whose actions inspired Dostoevsky to write *Demons* (1872), was also the first to lay claim to the designation “terrorist” during his trial in 1873. The assassination attempts of 1878, which injured the German Emperor William I and killed the King of Italy Umberto I, attest to the resonance of this theorization in Europe. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II by anarchist revolutionaries in 1881 shook Europe, where the number of activists in exile increased (particularly in Berlin, but also in Geneva, London, Paris, and Brussels) and anarchist violence exploded (assassination of the French President Sadi Carnot in 1894, of the Spanish Prime Minister Canovas del Castillo in 1896, and the Empress Elisabeth of Austria in 1898, etc.). A new phase in the evolution of terrorism occurred in Spain and France in 1894 with the development of a blind terrorism henceforth using a strategy of destabilization and targeting the crowd, which became an “enemy objective” without distinction. Terrorism was inscribed in this kind of war between a community and a state, as well as a nation.

Once they had moved past the stupefaction caused by this new type of violence, governments quickly got the measure of this singular crime threatening the security of the state and calling for a judicial reaction. Anti-terrorism, which was based on laws of exception, therefore appeared almost concurrently, and was asserted as part of recurring waves of repression. It became international as European governments, which were confronted with what they saw as a genuine terrorist international, organized two international conferences on the subject—in Rome in 1898 and Saint Petersburg in 1904—in order to jointly combat and stem the phenomenon.

The globalization of terrorism during the twentieth century

Terrorism became globalized during the twentieth century. There was a diversification of ideological discourses of legitimization (nationalism, revolution, religion, etc.) as well as the methods used (the invention of dynamite by Alfred Nobel in 1866 continues to be a historical milestone). The attack in Sarajevo in 1914 offers a demonstration of the stakes involved with terrorism, a weapon of the weak with huge consequences, in this instance a world war.

Terrorism revealed its transnational nature and its capacity to successfully connect the global and the national. The scope of the phenomenon was such that it was central to the preoccupations not just of states, but also of international institutions. The LN was a pioneer in this domain with a first convention in 1937, which heralded those that would be developed later within the European Union (1977, 2000, 2002).

Evolutions in the political violence of minority groups should not obscure the way in which states could also seize upon the tool of terror for political ends. In fact, while the Convention paved the way, the twentieth-century state—whether it was colonial, dictatorial, revolutionary, or totalitarian—also used terror as a tool of government. One of the first statesmen to defend the principle of this “legal terror” was Trotsky, in his response to the German socialist Karl Kautsky (*Terrorism and Communism: A Contribution to the Natural History of Revolutions*, Paris,

1919): “Whoever on principle renounces terrorism, which is to say the measures of intimidation and repression with regard to the tenacious and armed counterrevolution, must also renounce political domination over the working class.” This practice of terror was still laid claim to by Lenin, who in 1922 invited Koursky—one of the drafters of the Soviet penal code—to “justify and legitimize” terror from a legal perspective. For totalitarian regimes, state terror represented a modern tool of government in the service of a political project—the end of the social question—and as part of a permanent revolutionary dynamic. In these states forged by a millenarian discourse and the will of the leader (the Hitlerian *Führerprinzip* prevailed over law), political violence was given the force of law. Hannah Arendt highlighted this in *The Origins of totalitarianism*: “If legality is the essence of the non-tyrannical regime, and the absence of laws the essence of tyranny, then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination.” And this pattern, which spread in the 1930s beyond Europe to the rest of the world, resulted in genocidal practices.

Terrorism represents the dark side of European political history: it prospers in liberal regimes, distorts the freedom of the press for propaganda purposes, and plays on the opening of borders. In a pacified Europe advocating consensus, it bears witness to the irreducible character of political conflict, as well as its interpretation in terms of violence.

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