

Editor's Introduction: No End to History

This issue is *Radical History Review's* response to the events of 9/11—both the horrific destruction on the day itself and the subsequent “War on Terrorism.” This introduction and the rest of the issue went into production in June 2002, and we realize there may be more drastic shocks before it appears. We do not claim to be a magazine of topical commentary. Instead, we attempt to have a longer view, a radical perspective informed by the conviction, as underscored by Malcolm X, that “of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research.” In this supposed new epoch, history is peculiarly necessary—only through its contingent narratives can we refuse the numbing absolutes of a new “civilizing mission” and return to the specificities of politics, place, ideology, and conjuncture.

The *RHR* editorial collective met in late September 2001 and felt the urgency of bringing history back into the dialogue of 9/11 and fighting the centrifugal pull of events, the insistence that “everything had changed,” and that this “new Pearl Harbor” made the last American century old news. We decided to compile an issue inviting scholars, in and outside the United States, to interrogate, document, and reflect on the slippery political and historical category of “terror.” Our intention is to break up the monolithic discourse of *terror*, *terrorism*, *terrorists*, and to break down the “fourth wall” of awful spectacle erected by state, para-statal, and para-military actors, from Al-Qaeda to the Bush administration. We began with simple questions:

How do we distinguish terror from other forms of political violence? Can we or should we?

Is “state terror” a useful category, or an obfuscation?

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How has terror or terrorism been justified, and when, and by whom?

Can terrorism of one or any sort be justified, from a left or radical perspective?

What does it mean to refer to *terrorism* and *terrorists* as something other than polemical terms for a particular group in a particular situation?

Does terrorism as a political strategy have an affinity for, or historic relationship to, certain types of movements?

Conversely, are there categories of political struggle where terrorism is rarely or never used, and if so, why?

Can we distinguish between terrorisms of the right and the left, or do they affect societies, cultures, peoples, and governments in the same way?

Is terrorism a recognizably modern or postmodern phenomenon, linked to the creation of “the nation” or other universalistic categories?

What is the relationship of “The Terror” of 1792–94 to the various international left traditions (Jacobin, anticolonial, anarchist, communist, and so on)?

(At the end of this introduction, I will return to these questions to assess whether any answers have emerged.)

As in other recent issues, we emphasize types of historical writing that foreground explicitly political perspectives. The issue leads off with an Intervention by Lisa Brock of the editorial collective, the text of a talk she gave at a teach-in at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago ten days after the events of 9/11. We feel this is a voice that needs hearing, a challenge to ignore “patriotic” calls for unity predicated on the chauvinism of a unique victimhood.

What follows is the “Reflections” section, comprised of sixteen pieces by a diverse group of scholars. Each author was free to answer the above questions as she or he saw fit, to present any argument or analysis that seemed appropriate. We did not assign topics, though an effort was made to include viewpoints from or about different parts of the world and significant examples of political violence, whether in Chile, Ireland, Palestine, or India.

These “Reflections” can be grouped into two categories. The first includes pieces that discuss a country, place, or historical moment and present a perspective for understanding terror and its workings in a specific instance. Thus, Deborah Levenson offers a painfully intimate explanation of how Guatemalan labor organizers

persisted through life and then death under some of the worst state-terror conditions of the last fifty years, undercutting romantic optimism about “el pueblo unido jamas sera vencido.” Veronica Valdivia discusses the gradual unraveling of enforced silence about the post-September 11, 1973 killings in Chile under General Augusto Pinochet and the continued polarization of Chilean society over assigning ultimate guilt. Gerardo Renique and Deborah Poole explain the chiliastic appeal of the Communist Party of Peru—Sendero Luminoso—with its evocation of the necessarily cleansing nature of absolute violence. Looking homeward, Joy James argues that U.S. intellectuals should refuse any exceptionalist understanding of our own state regime of control and engage with its political prisoners, including those who advocated armed self-defense—whether Mumia Abu-Jamal or those Black Panthers still imprisoned.

Turning from this hemisphere, Donnacha Ó Beacháin explores a taboo topic—the roots of conventional political parties in organized violence, in this case Ireland’s perennially dominant Fianna Fail (Warriors of Destiny), which was founded by ex-IRA commander and Catholic nationalist Eamon de Valera in 1932. Vijay Prashad examines the career of Indian anticolonial revolutionary Bhagat Singh, executed by the British in 1931 after throwing bombs into a provincial assembly, and how his revolutionary “propaganda of the deed” complicates our understanding of Gandhian nonviolent liberation. Joel Beinin concisely anatomizes how terrorism, so-called, has been used by Zionists of various stripes and their Arab opponents in Palestine/Israel, under the British mandate and since. Belinda Davis explores the sequence of events that turned a few anarchist youth into West Germany’s monstrous Red Army Fraction (known as the “Baader-Meinhof Gang” on this side of the Atlantic), suggesting that the ambiance of terror was very much a state creation. The anthropologist Allen Feldman discusses fieldwork in the 1980s among Republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, and how codes of violence and revindication were inscribed across geography, memory, and physical bodies. Lastly, David Prochaska reexamines the significance of *The Battle of Algiers* in his own life and the Fanonist discourse of the necessity of armed struggle that parallels that remarkable film (despite Fanon’s own warnings, as he reminds us), situating the anticolonial war in later French cycles of remembrance and denial and in the war between Islamists and the military government devastating present-day Algeria.

The second group of “Reflections” ranges more widely, looking at antecedents of the current anti-terror war of “Empire,” to cite Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (with Hannah Arendt the most commonly cited author in this issue). Nikhil Singh elucidates the tensions between the Christian nationalism represented by Attorney General John Ashcroft and the contained racial liberalism whose human face is Secretary of State Colin Powell, situating this new war back into the half-century since World War II, with particular attention to Arendt’s totalizing thesis of

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totalitarianism. Amy Kaplan dissects the odd language the current Bush administration has adopted—such as the very un-American use of “homeland” with its evocation of the German *Heimat*. Looking toward the twenty-first century, Horace Campbell stresses the profoundly militarist and racist premises of the War on Terrorism, arguing that a “culture of peace” must be counterposed to the *Herrenvolk* assumptions of U.S. supremacy. Joseba Zulaika provides some much needed practical history—how counterterrorism became its own industry and self-fulfilling prophecy in the past two decades, while the United States was mostly free of what is conventionally labeled “terrorism” (though hardly free of violence intended to terrify people of color, gays and lesbians, and feminists). Finally, Cedric Robinson reflects on the mendacity of the U.S. press, its refusal to acknowledge the 1986 World Court finding of state terrorism committed against Nicaragua by the Reagan administration, and how this reflects a larger pattern of sycophancy to power.

A central problem with the new, presumptively hegemonic discourse of terror is the degree to which it absolutizes the sole claim of the state (or Empire, if that is what the U.S. now leads) to *any* use of violence, and legitimizes its unlimited application of this power as a new kind of “divine right.” This effectively turns the clock back on several centuries in which the right to resistance and even revolution was inscribed in global popular memory so that anyone anywhere could claim the legacies of the Jacobins and Tupac Amaru, of Bolivar and L’Ouverture, of Isandlwana and Dien Bien Phu, the Sierra Maestra and Yenan. This is not a history to be given up or disavowed lightly.

Following the “Reflections” section, two major features turn us toward the question of when systematic violence by a state, a ruling class, or a racial, religious, or colonial oppressor justifies an armed response. They address opposite ends along the spectrum from the defensive and preventive to the retaliatory and sanguinary. Akinyele Umoja discusses how the transition from nonviolent resistance—whether of the infra-political, daily variety or more self-conscious “direct action”—is actually managed. He puts this question in the context of one of the most famous “civil disobedience” campaigns in U.S. history: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s organizing drive in Mississippi, which culminated in the Freedom Summer project in 1964. Through oral histories and rereading archival documents, Umoja demonstrates that nonviolence was barely maintained as an official strategy by early 1964 and was routinely contradicted in practice, with organizers leapfrogging from one safe haven to another, relying on black communities with established neighborhood watches, early-warning systems, and guns. Like Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, also on Mississippi, and Tim Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie*, charting the trajectory of Robert F. Williams, Umoja makes us rethink comfortable dichotomies between civil rights and Black Power, nonviolence and armed self-defense.

The question of plebeian violence, its uses, disabilities, and circumstances, is also the topic of an interview with Mike Davis, conducted by Jon Wiener. Davis discusses a book-in-progress, *Heroes From Hell*, that recovers the once-ubiquitous revolutionary terror (whether anarchist, “social revolutionary,” or just nationalist) that roiled most of Europe from the French Revolution’s aftermath through the early twentieth century, a continental narrative littered with notorious names like Ravachol, Durruti, the Fenians, and IMRO (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization). The bombs thrown into royal carriages and bourgeois cafes, “great houses” burned, bishops and politicians gunned down in the street, heroic escapes and grisly executions are a significant part of the international radical tradition, but they are remembered with discomfort on the left, not just because of the genuine bloodthirstiness and the repression that decimated legal movements tarred with the “bomb-thrower” stigma. The Marxist left of disciplined mass parties originally defined itself in opposition to “adventurism” or “putschism”—and for good reason. Davis raises still pertinent issues: first, that we must understand the persistent appeal of the avenging *attentat*, then and now, without pacifistic appeals to the higher nature of the oppressed; second, that in certain instances, popular justice is just that—*just*.

In this issue, we also debut a new section, “Historians at Work,” with a timely talk by Jesse Lemisch to a recent Columbia University conference titled “History of Activism, History as Activism.” Lemisch arraigns what he describes as the movement away from conscious, long-term political engagement by radical scholars, using many pungent examples. The “Public History” section features an essay by J. Angus Johnston that effectively debunks the shoddy “quiz” used by Lynn Cheney’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni to prove that students know nothing about U.S. history and are therefore unprepared for the patriotic gore of the coming war-without-end.

Finally, the “(Re)Views” section in this issue focuses mainly on nonliterary texts. We begin with an essay by Marilyn Young on the “new” war movies of the late 1990s, a turn away from the previous era’s ambiguously Reaganite movie culture built around variations on *Rambo* and *Terminator*. She demonstrates how “Greatest Generation” sagas like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*, and new-fangled homosocial battle epics like *Blackhawk Down*, try to recuperate a naturalist vision of masculine heroism—yet Vietnam still remains a roadblock to any restoration of Yankee virtue. Stephanie Smith examines a series of important new books in Latin American gender history, examining the cultural and policy histories associated with sexuality in Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Mexico City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collective member Thomas Klubock discusses the transition in Patricio Guzman’s films, from the multipart *Battle of Chile* in the 1970s, to the more recent *Obstinate Memory* (1997), and suggests that the turn to a personal, elegiac

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remembering of the Unidad Popular government signals a larger loss of vision in neoliberalized, post-Pinochet Chile. Two other collective members, Ian Fletcher and Duane Corpis, conclude with a review of the *Without Sanctuary* exhibition of lynching photographs at the King Center in Atlanta, placing it into a larger history of racial terror that seems startlingly close in the Georgia context.

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Even this short summary of the issue's contents suggests some provisional responses to the questions that originally framed it. (It should be noted that the following paragraphs are my own response and do not reflect any discussion by our editorial collective.)

First, our authors emphatically reject the shibboleth that “real” terrorism is only carried out by nonstate actors. While unsparing of movements and regimes that claim the left's legitimacy and use indiscriminate violence against civilians (the conventional definition of terror in current usage), this issue highlights the extent of *state terror*—and how this terror plays upon, exaggerates, theatricalizes, and evokes *counterterror* by subaltern groups. Examples of this dynamic abound, including the Red Army Fraction's killing of German industrialist Hanns-Martin Schleyer (a former SS officer) after the deaths of their comrades in jail and a crackdown against thousands of supposed “sympathizers,” Michael Collins's assassination teams that saved the future Irish Republic from the Black and Tans in 1919–21, the formation of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) in Algeria after the French Army massacred peaceful protesters in 1954, and the Black Panthers who were convicted of murderous conspiracies and attacks after dozens of their comrades were executed by police in 1968–69.

Second, the most scrupulously documented examples of state terror by the left, including France in the 1790s, the Soviet Union from the 1920s through the 1950s, the People's Republic of China from the 1950s through the 1970s, and Kampuchea in 1975–78 are absent from these pages, except in passing or by inference. Does this reflect a refusal to face the worst? Equally absent are the genocidal wars against indigenous peoples by Europeans, the Middle Passage, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, white settler regimes in and out of Africa with their fantastically institutionalized micro-terror, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Indonesian Communists in 1965, My Lai and all the undisclosed My Lais. Instead, the issue emphasizes the more immediate, less clear-cut instances where terrorism was either imputed or consciously practiced as a political strategy. In doing this, we risk naturalizing the horrors of the past, even the very recent past, as the product of impersonal, irrational forces. Massacres, pogroms, and high-level bombing raids on “targets” in heavily populated areas become the equivalent of hurricanes and earthquakes. If, instead, we had examined the subject of terror in history as mainly *a nor-*

mative, transhistorical practice by states of all varieties, would that not “blow up” the category of terror and terrorism entirely? Perhaps that might be a good thing. In this issue, however, we focus on the practice of terrorism in the modern epoch, acknowledging that it is a flawed but deeply potent construct.

Third, one is struck by the constant parallel of “national” struggles—for nationhood, *by* nations trying to preserve extra-national colonial empires, *between* two “nations” both claiming the same territory—and political violence that we can provisionally call terroristic. This explains the rather close, self-conscious similarities between Zionism and Irish Republicanism early in the last century, and both movements’ admiration for the Boers. Even the title of the Sinn Fein anthem “A Nation Once Again” underlines the connection, which in other contexts is condemned as “revanchism” or “irredentism,” antique epithets that need reviving. Treading on delicate ground, there is also the peculiar situation today where, separately and for radically different reasons, many leftists *and* neo-Nazis express admiration for the Palestinian Intifadah. Of course, the classical gesture of fascists and their emulators, from Hitler and Mussolini to Trujillo, Amin, and Pinochet, is to indict their opponents as carriers of the Marxist, Jewish, Asian, or some other virus, who must be cleansed from the nation’s body—yet this appeal to unity and the people is hardly a strategy restricted to the right. In a sense, we all know this: even Colin Powell repeats the cliché about yesterday’s “freedom fighters” being tomorrow’s “terrorists.” It bears restating here because, however legitimate the struggles of revolutionary nationalist and national liberation movements to destroy the apparatus of colonialism and empire, their rationale was necessarily provisional, existing uneasily (and sometimes productively) with the internationalism that remains the left’s greatest claim. At the Cold War’s height, for instance, the Cuban Revolution defined revolutionary nationalism for people around the world and many here in the United States, but its larger legacy is an unstinting internationalism that constitutes a standing rebuke to terrorism, as documented in Piero Gleijeses’ remarkable new book, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*.

I will close this introduction by asking—what of those organizations, movements and peoples that, like the Cuban revolutionaries, have refused the option of terror, or the necessity for vengeance? What of the Guatemalan labor organizers described by Deborah Levenson, who kept going to union meetings and trying to defend their members, even as they were “disappeared” one by one? Or the African National Congress, the Timorese FRETILIN (Frente Revolucionária do Timor-Leste Independente), and the Central American liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s, which insisted on their right to armed struggle but maintained a unilateral respect for the “laws of war,” however absurd that notion may seem to some? In a much larger frame, as both Cedric Robinson (in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*) and George Fredrickson (in *Black Liberation: A Compar-*

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ative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa) have argued, should we not honor the extraordinary humanism over five centuries of both Africans and Africans enslaved in America, given the “savage” (to use Frederick Jackson Turner’s word) origins and evolution of American civilization? Now, perhaps more than ever, they remind us that terror is never a necessity.

By now, the provisional character of an issue on terror and history will be obvious to the reader. If we have required you to rethink the category of “terrorism,” and any simple dichotomies or certainties based on it, then our goal is met. Responses and critiques are invited to what should be a sustained dialogue, both in and well beyond these pages.

—Van Gosse