

PART I

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INTRODUCTION

I

History and the Study of Terrorism

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Terrorism¹ and responses to terrorism have repeatedly had a profound influence in shaping human experience. A terrorist incident was the detonator setting off the cataclysmic First World War explosion; terroristic violence was one of the important elements within the anticolonial reshaping of global politics during the twentieth century; responses to the September 2001 terrorist attack on the USA defined much subsequent international politics; terrorism has frequently been deployed by states against their own and other peoples; and the mutually shaping intimacy of non-state and state violence, together with the often agonising legacies emerging from that terrorising relationship, continue to determine the contours of many people's experience (in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Spain, the UK, Colombia and across so much of the polarised world).²

Given this importance within the human past, what can we say about history and the study of terrorism?³ In introducing the present volume, this chapter will ask five central questions. First, what has been the relative contribution of historians to the existing study of terrorism? Second, what

- 1 The contributors to this volume have not been asked to subscribe to a single definition of terrorism. My own definition remains the capacious one that I published and defended in 2009: 'Terrorism involves heterogeneous violence used or threatened with a political aim; it can involve a variety of acts, of targets, and of actors; it possesses an important psychological dimension, producing terror or fear among a directly threatened group and also a wider implied audience in the hope of maximising political communication and achievement; it embodies the exerting and implementing of power, and the attempted redressing of power relations; it represents a subspecies of warfare, and as such it can form part of a wider campaign of violent and non-violent attempts at political leverage' (R. English, *Terrorism: How to Respond* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 24).
- 2 R. English (ed.), *Illusions of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 3 I refer to 'the past' as that which has happened before now; by 'history', I mean research and writing about the past; I use the term 'historiography' to refer to research and writing about history.

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are the distinctive insights potentially brought by historians to our understanding of the subject? Third, what are the particular challenges for historians as they engage with the study of terrorism? Fourth, what are the opportunities for historians in studying this phenomenon? Fifth, given these aspects of the relationship between history and terrorism (the contribution to date, the distinctive insights, the challenges, the opportunities), what will this book decisively and originally offer?

Historians' Contribution to Date

First, what has been the relative contribution of historians to the existing study of terrorism?

Individual historians have, of course, made major contributions to our understanding of various aspects of terrorism, from wide-angled surveys of the phenomenon, to studies of particular non-state organisations, to works on state terrorism, to analyses of particular periods of terrorist activity, to consideration of the dynamics of counterterrorism, to specific national-level studies.⁴ Some of that work will be alluded to in the concluding chapter of this book. But history, as a discipline, has been less conspicuous than some others (particularly some of the social sciences) within the study of terrorism to date.⁵ In the prominent and influential academic journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* between 1998 and 2017, for example, there were 54 article authors who were historians and 957 who were not (so historians represented only 5.6 per cent of article authors during that twenty-year period). Perhaps this proportion will seem appropriate to some readers, since there are numerous disciplines with deep insights to offer regarding terrorism (including political science/international relations, psychology, sociology,

4 From many possible examples, see C. Townshend, *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018); M. Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London, HarperPress, 2008); R. Singh, *Hamas and Suicide Terrorism: Multi-Causal and Multi-Level Approaches* (London, Routledge, 2011); I. Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944–45* (London, Allen Lane, 2011); R. B. Jensen, 'The International Campaign Against Anarchist Terrorism, 1880–1930s', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21/1 (2009); R. B. Jensen, 'The Secret Agent, International Policing, and Anarchist Terrorism: 1900–1914', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29/4 (2017); B. Blumenau, *The United Nations and Terrorism: Germany, Multilateralism and Anti-Terrorism Efforts in the 1970s* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014); M. Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country: Reconsidering Terrorism in American History* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010).

5 Cf. Beverly Gage's comment that, 'on the subject of "terrorism", the form of violence that currently dominates American political discourse, historians have had comparatively little to say' (B. Gage, 'Terrorism and the American Experience: A State of the Field', *Journal of American History* 98/1 (2011), p. 73).

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anthropology, law, philosophy, criminology, theology). But if we consider, for example, that during 2016 and 2017 alone *Terrorism and Political Violence* featured 59 article authors from political science/international relations (more than there were historians for 1998–2017 as a whole), then it might seem that historians have been rather under-represented in such scholarly debates.⁶

The situation regarding academic centres studying terrorism is somewhat similar. The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV) at the University of St Andrews is housed in the School of International Relations; the Centre for Conflict, Security and Terrorism (CST) at the University of Nottingham is based in the School of Politics and International Relations; King's College London's International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) is housed in the Department of War Studies; the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is coordinated by Lancaster University, where the director is a psychologist; the Terrorism and Political Violence Association (TAPVA) is an academic network based at the University of Leeds, its director working in the School of Politics and International Studies.

In the United States too the most prominent academic centres focusing on terrorism have tended not to be housed in History departments or led by historians. The Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST, which has generated an influential Suicide Attack Database) was founded and is directed by a political scientist; START, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, is headquartered at the University of Maryland, where its founding director was a criminologist and its current director another non-historian; CREATE (the Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events) is an interdisciplinary centre based at the University of Southern California, drawing on the work of social scientists, engineers, economists and computer scientists; Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies (CSS) is housed in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, its director being a political scientist; Stanford University's Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) is co-directed by a political scientist and a geologist, and is housed in an Institute for International Studies; the University of California's Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation (IGCC) has an economist as its research director for work on conflict; the influential Empirical Studies of Conflict (ESOC) Project is co-directed by two political scientists; the director of the Terrorism

⁶ *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published by Taylor and Francis.

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Research Center at the University of Arkansas is a criminologist; the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) at George Mason University is based in its School of Policy and Government.

A similar pattern is evident elsewhere. In Israel, the founder and director of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is a political scientist; in Australia, Macquarie University's programme on Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism (PICT) is housed in the Department of Security Studies and Criminology; in New Zealand, the University of Auckland's programme on Conflict and Terrorism Studies is explicitly multidisciplinary, but draws on politics/international relations, media and communications and criminology; the director of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society is a sociologist, and its associate director relating to terrorism is a political scientist.⁷

None of this undermines the excellent work pursued through these and other university initiatives. Nor does it mean that historians have not been at all involved in such ventures; CSTPV at St Andrews, for example, has had historians in its team in recent years. But what this short series of examples does suggest is that, institutionally and collectively, it has not tended to be historians who have been most prominent in the organised academic study of terrorism. Such a conclusion is reinforced by other kinds of evidence too. Lisa Stampnitzky's detailed analysis of the emergence of the terrorism expert reflects the greater influence of International Relations, Law, Maths and International Studies than of History;⁸ another sustained study of the field identified forty-seven 'core members of the Terrorism Studies research community', of whom only four could be considered historians.⁹ So, although some people have detected an increase in historical emphasis in very recent years,¹⁰ this has to be considered in the context of the broadly non-historical centre of gravity which has so long prevailed in the field, and which continues still to dominate much debate.

⁷ These observations about university centres represent the situation at the time of writing and are open to later change, as universities potentially amend their organisational structures. Nonetheless, they represent a striking and telling situation at the time of their being observed, and I doubt that the situation will have greatly altered by the time of this book's publication.

⁸ L. Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented 'Terrorism'* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 88–90, 95–6, 124, 135, 139–40, 161.

⁹ S. Raphael, cited in A. P. Schmid (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London, Routledge, 2011), p. 465.

¹⁰ G. M. Ceci, 'A "Historical Turn" in Terrorism Studies?', *Journal of Contemporary History* 51/4 (2016).

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Historians' Distinctive Insights

Second, what are the distinctive insights potentially brought by historians to our understanding of the subject?

If historians have indeed been less prominent than some others within the debate on terrorism, might we be able to establish some of the disciplinary insights that have potentially been lost as a result? The study of terrorism has rightly and beneficially developed as a multidisciplinary endeavour.¹¹ Just as adherents to other disciplines rightly stress that history alone cannot provide full understanding of political violence,¹² so too it is reasonable to suggest that there might be elements of terrorism which cannot fully be apprehended without historians' contributions. This view is reinforced by the now widespread recognition, from scholars in various disciplines, of the decisive importance of history for our understanding of the present.¹³ Even scholars studying how neurobiology and the genes relate to violence have stressed the decisive role that is played by particular, inherited, complex context;¹⁴ that context is the very realm on which historians focus. So, while historians have not been especially salient in the terrorism debate so far, there is substantial agreement that their scholarly contribution might be important. Let me set out here five interwoven elements which, together, might be judged to represent a historian's distinctive approach,¹⁵ as we collectively pursue a multidisciplinary route towards understanding terrorism.

11 See, for example, E. Chenoweth, R. English, A. Gofas and S. N. Kalyvas (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019).

12 F. Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 3.

13 D. Acemoglu and J. A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (London, Profile, 2012); A. Acharya, M. Blackwell and M. Sen, *Deep Roots: How Slavery Still Shapes Southern Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018); A. Roberts, 'Terrorism Research: Past, Present and Future', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38/1 (2015); J. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).

14 R. M. Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (London, Bodley Head, 2017).

15 For earlier reflections on the particular approach brought by historians to the study of terrorism, see R. English, *Does Terrorism Work? A History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 17–30. Clearly, historians have disagreed among themselves about the nature of historical work (e.g. M. Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield: History, Science and God* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011); cf. D. W. Hayton, *Conservative Revolutionary: The Lives of Lewis Namier* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2019); see also J. D. Popkin, *From Herodotus to H-Net: The Story of Historiography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. xi–xii, 8, 230). But I think that a coherent case can still be made for a distinctive historical approach.

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First, historians analyse the relationship between change and continuity with an eye to long pasts. Whether explaining the causes behind terrorism, the fluid dynamics characteristic of particular campaigns, questions of terrorist success or failure, the capacity of states to deal with non-state terrorism and even to end it – in all of this and much else we need to reflect not merely on the contemporary, but also on pasts that are long enough to enable us to produce strongly grounded assessments. And historians are crucial specialists here: good history ‘looks at processes that take a long time to unfold’.¹⁶ Whether or not the primary focus of a historian’s particular piece of work is a long or short period, historians tend to be strongly conscious of the longer-term roots behind human behaviour. If one legitimate criticism of much current debate on terrorism is its short-term or even amnesiac quality, then historians might seem to have something particularly valuable to offer. In terms of terrorism’s causation, its varied duration and its various endings, long-term frameworks are essential.

So, for example, the post-9/11 War on Terror seems to me imperfectly understood unless one recognises how deeply within America’s past there runs the idea of the USA possessing a unique mission to bring freedom to the world.¹⁷ Here, as in so many other ways, 9/11 did not so much represent an epoch-defining break, but rather a provocation into new versions of familiar behaviours and concepts. Continuity as well as change runs through early twenty-first-century counterterrorism, despite many people claiming that the world had changed utterly on that terrible Tuesday in 2001.¹⁸ More broadly, one cannot understand even the recent politics of Hamas or ETA or the IRA without a deep sense of the long inheritances that are involved in each case.¹⁹ Many terrorist groups themselves take a historically long view of their struggle; so too those analysing them need to do so.

If terrorism is a process intended to bring about change, then we can only assess its efficacy if we adopt this kind of long-term view. Such a historical approach does not necessitate a formally narrative-based analysis, but it will allow us to avoid the danger of anachronism²⁰ (terrorism necessarily being

16 Guldi and Armitage, *History Manifesto*, p. 12.

17 E. Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York, Hill and Wang, 2003), pp. 58–65, 70.

18 R. English, ‘Change and Continuity Across the 9/11 Fault Line: Rethinking Twenty-First-Century Responses to Terrorism’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12/1 (2019).

19 Singh, *Hamas and Suicide Terrorism*; C. J. Watson, *Basque Nationalism and Political Violence: The Ideological and Intellectual Origins of ETA* (Reno, Centre for Basque Studies, 2007); R. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London, Pan Macmillan, 2012).

20 E. Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), p. 7.

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different in some respects in 1820 as opposed to 1920 as opposed to 2020, because the technologies and also the imaginable worlds were so divergent between those various dates); it will also allow for more serious-minded evaluations of major phenomena. The outcomes of 1940s Jewish terrorism, or 1920s Irish republican terrorism, can only properly be considered if we are prepared to assess such activity and its outcomes over long periods of time. Again, the lengthy and complex historical roots of ISIS represent a necessary basis for understanding and responding to that organisation's violent politics,²¹ and a historian's long-term framework will be a necessary part of any persuasive assessment of the group's full effect in due course.

In all this, we cannot properly understand the contemporary unless we 'plunge back into the lost world of yesterday',²² and do so with respect for long time periods. Attention to long pasts allows us to avoid the dangerous solipsism of the present. Why dangerous? Partly because of the problems into which amnesia can lead us. So the frequent exaggeration of the threat that we supposedly now face from terrorism has led to some markedly unhelpful overreactions, and has been based on a forgetting of the extent of previous terrorisms and the threats that they posed. During 1971 and 1972, for example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) noted more than 2,500 domestic terrorist bombings in the USA,²³ this far exceeds the number of jihadist attacks in the USA during the post-9/11 period, and yet alarmist fears about twenty-first-century threats have persisted.²⁴

Indeed, when we consider in detail some of those previous experiences of terrorism, we see that much that has recently been presented as new should more accurately be read as a new version of historically familiar behaviour. On 4 February 1974 19-year-old Patricia Hearst was kidnapped by the

21 D. Byman, *Al-Qaida, The Islamic State and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015); B. G. Williams, *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); B. H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaida and the Jihad Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016); J. Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London, William Collins, 2015); F. A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016); W. McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York, St Martin's Press, 2015); M. Weiss and H. Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York, Regan Arts, 2015); G. Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (London, Penguin, 2017).

22 E. Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London, Little, Brown, 2013), p. x.

23 M. S. Hamm and R. Spaaij, *The Age of Lone Wolf Terrorism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 42.

24 M. Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

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Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) from her apartment in Berkeley, California. The kidnapers included Donald DeFreeze, a low-level, rather pathetic criminal and high-school dropout who had suffered child abuse at the hands of his father, and who sought grandiose redemption and recognition through his political-liberation struggle. The SLA exhibited much that has recently been visible in jihadist violence in the West: a naïve grasp of an international belief system (in the SLA's case, a very crude, simplistic and vague Marxism); the importance of small group endeavour and of very small networks of association; the pursuit of redemption from former low-grade criminality; considerable ineptitude in tactics, but yet a lethal set of outcomes for the victims of the violence; the generation of revulsion on the part of many in the public, accompanied by some militant excitement and support; a blurring between self-serving criminal endeavour and a supposedly grand, revolutionary political ambition; dismal failure in terms of strategic outcomes; the publicity-grabbing potential of theatrically violent and transgressive acts; the campaign-sustaining impulse of a desire for revenge; and the violent death of numerous of the terrorists.²⁵ Even memory of this one historical case would therefore lead us to read twenty-first-century anti-Western jihadism as a more familiar, less automatically surprising or shocking or dangerous challenge than has sometimes been assumed. More broadly, a historically minded appreciation of the artificiality of periodisation, as well as of the long-term continuities that exist across putative fault lines in the past, suggests that what is often considered new in violent conflict is less novel than some have supposed. This can be true of supposedly epoch-inaugurating episodes of violence, as also of the experiences of particular groups of actors, as also of individually significant figures.²⁶ Relatedly, the popular idea of 'new' terrorisms sometimes depends on a lack of familiarity with terrorism's past; shrewd observers have repeatedly pointed out the continuities that have existed across different periods of terrorism year by year, decade by decade.²⁷

25 J. Toobin, *American Heiress: The Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty Hearst* (London, Profile, 2017).

26 English, 'Change and Continuity'; S. Scheipers, *Unlawful Combatants: A Genealogy of the Irregular Fighter* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015); P. R. Neumann, *Bluster: Donald Trump's War on Terror* (London, Hurst and Company, 2019).

27 M. Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences* (London, Routledge, 2011), pp. 53–4; A. Gofas, "'Old" vs "New" Terrorism: What's in a Name?', *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 8/32 (2012); P. R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West* (London, I. B. Tauris, 2016), pp. xv–xvi.

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Second, historians tend to stress the complex particularity, and ultimately the uniqueness, of context.²⁸ So there remains something of an emphasis upon the unrepeatable specificity of what is being studied, and also a recognition of the decisive importance of local, small-scale and even individual action. In line with this, historians will tend to stress that it is terrorisms rather than terrorism that we have to explain. This approach points towards a careful distinction between cases, requiring sensitivity to geographical and temporal variation and to the specificities of setting;²⁹ it emphasises the jagged messiness of human experience as lived in complex relationships; and it leans towards many-layered multicausality. Such an approach, not least in relation to terrorism, represents the basis for valuable cross-case comparison rather than its enemy. So, with regard to context, how did those whom we analyse through the lens of terrorism see the world and interpret it themselves? Does the framework of terrorism make contextual sense of and for them? And what, in properly considered context,³⁰ was it feasible for those in that time and place to do, to think, to pursue? The avoidance of anachronism is one valuable advantage facilitated by this attitude of scholarly mind, and it has great significance as we reflect on terrorism's past.

Third, this complex particularity is analysed by historians through engagement with a vast range of mutually interrogatory sources, including first-hand sources drawn directly from those people under scrutiny. It remains unfortunate that so much research on terrorism is comparatively innocent of what terrorists themselves have actually said or left behind them.³¹ It is not that such sources allow us to reach final or uncontested answers regarding major questions of terrorist definition, causation, consequences or best response. Nor is it the case that evidence from the past produces a straightforward reading of what has been remembered, since silences, reticence and the subtle retention of occluded pasts can also form a part of complex historical reality.³² But the attempt to hear as many competing voices as possible and to evaluate their implications (an attempt so important

28 J. W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', in J. W. Scott (ed.), *Feminism and History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 155, 157.

29 Bentley, *The Life and Thought of Herbert Butterfield*, pp. 9, 12.

30 Establishing the appropriate context to be considered is not, of course, straightforward (T. Shogimen, 'On the Elusiveness of Context', *History and Theory* 55/2 (2016)). But I believe that the point still stands, that historians attend to analysing people, their ideas and their behaviour with a particular eye to the complex and ultimately unique particularity of their setting in time and place.

31 E. Chenoweth and A. Gofas, 'The Study of Terrorism: Achievements and Challenges Ahead', in Chenoweth et al. (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, p. 6.

32 D. MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London, Penguin, 2013); G. Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018).