

Apocalypse then, apocalypse now

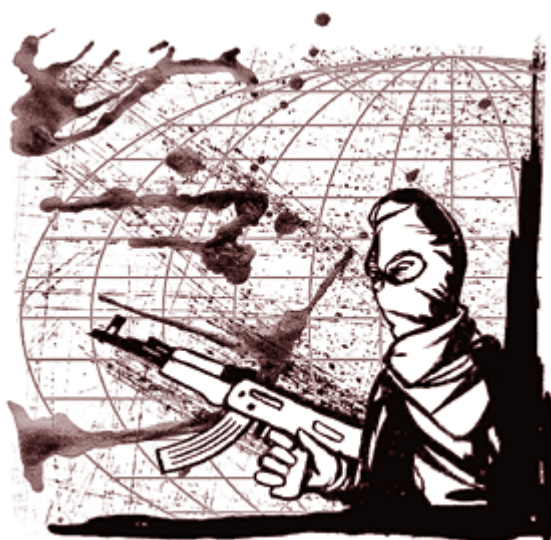
Matthew Carr charts a clear course through the history of terrorism in 'The Infernal Machine' and then crashes on a reef of his own making

Reviewed by Branislav L. Slantchev
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Rarely is reading a book as disappointing as when you begin in vague agreement with the author only to finish by pulling your hair out in frustration.

No history of terrorism is ever going to be without controversy; even the decision what to include in that book can be questioned. No self-respecting reader would expect an account that would offer comfortable moral certitude and unambiguous delineation of the world in the Manichean "us" and "them." Reality is a lot murkier and more sordid than the triumphalist accounts of the victors or the tragically heroic epics of the losers suggest.

Matthew Carr's "The Infernal Machine" offers a history of politically motivated violence against civilians perpetrated by non-state actors. The story begins with Russian revolutionaries who, frustrated by their inability to rouse the peasantry against the czarist regime, assassinated the emperor. It detours briefly into the pre-Cold War years when assorted anarchists with indiscernible existential motivations wreaked more havoc in the public's imagination than in reality, and the IRA's campaign of terror.



The bulk of the book comprises the Cold War era of revolutionary and nationalist struggles (often against colonial rule and often inspired by communist ideology) and the post-Cold War international terrorism that often yokes religion in place of discredited Marxism-Leninism. While the first part of the book is informative and balanced, in the last 150 pages the author transforms himself from being more or less an objective observer into an acerbic critic of the West who picks events and interpretations to suit his needs.

The underlying thesis is eminently plausible. Carr describes government propaganda and compares it to the motives of the perpetrators as revealed by their own writings and statements, or by their comrades. The contrast is stark, and validates the notion that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter, a claim no less true for being a cliché. As Carr documents, governments routinely describe terrorists as dark forces of evil, enemies of humanity, brutish beasts who revel in violence for its own sake, monsters who glorify mayhem and pursue nihilist apocalyptic agendas inimical to any civilized society, fanatical remorseless killers who can only be stopped by being hunted down and destroyed.

Carr terms this a "ritualized response" that transcends time, geography, culture and regime type. Instead of trying to make sense of terrorism, governments obscure it and often justify costly countermeasures that are sometimes more horrifying than the deeds they seek to prevent.

Rather than trying to find an overarching definition of terrorism, Carr wants to explore why people engage in such violence: Is it truly a pathological condition, or can we understand it as coherent purposeful behavior by rational people?

Terrorists perceive themselves as noble and heroic participants in a struggle against overwhelming odds, a struggle in which the sacrifice of innocents is a necessity arising out of the severe asymmetry in power. Without the strength to confront the regular military, without recourse to the governing institutions that could redress their grievances and without access to channels that would enable their voice to be heard, the perpetrators use terror to combat what they perceive as an unjust regime and to force an indifferent society to pay attention.

Carr claims, with excellent reason, that the slaughter of civilians, no matter how repugnant, is almost always a tactic used in pursuit of a political agenda. In other words, it is far from being irrational. Making sense of it only requires one to examine the context of the conflict and the options available to the perpetrators.

The goals that such tactics can serve are diverse. Terror can undermine the prestige and the legitimacy of the government by revealing its incompetence and inability to provide security for its citizens, as Menachem Begin observed in relation to his campaigns against the British in Palestine. It can provoke a disproportionate response that would alienate the public further, as it did when the murder of 130 Europeans by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in Algeria resulted in the French forces killing more than 5,000 Algerian Muslims in retaliation. Terror can also convince the government that its policies are too costly, thereby coercing it into a more accommodating stance, as it did in Ireland. It may even be necessary if a group has to demonstrate the capability and willingness to inflict harm before its demands are taken seriously.

Terror is the weapon of the weak who have no chance of surviving a showdown with formidable regular forces arrayed against them. Whereas this has led many to label these tactics as cowardly, they are nothing of the sort. Leaving aside why confronting a gun-toting insurgent with tanks should be considered brave, these tactics are rational responses to a severe imbalance of power. Few people would deem Washington's avoidance of a decisive battle with the British a sign of cowardice. Especially in the South, the "irregular" tactics of the American forces could easily be disparaged by the British in much the same way the Americans themselves could disparage American Indian guerrilla tactics. Cowardice simply does not play into it.

If terrorism is then an understandable tactic, then perhaps the goals in whose service it is used are irredeemably evil? In fact, in many cases one finds it hard not to sympathize with terrorists' goals. Whether it is the Irish or Algerian struggles for independence, the Palestinians' effort to secure their own state in the mess that is the Middle East or the countless attempts to improve the lot of peasants or disenfranchised workers in Latin America, the goal of a just social order is hard not to admire even if one vigorously disagrees with how it must be constituted in practice. After all, some of us have no wish to

live in an authoritarian Islamic Puritania.

And therein lies the greatest challenge to Carr's thesis.

You see, in Carr's world there are only two types of anti-government violent resistance. One is perpetrated by misguided youths whose goals are so idealistically naive or at odds with the rest of society, and whose means so pathetically inept, that they constitute no real threat, even if they do manage to pull off the occasional spectacular media circus event. This category includes the early 20th-century anarchists, the Red Army Faction (RAF) in Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy, the Weather Underground in the United States and the Japanese Red Army, among others. The ritualized response to these terrorists is severe overreaction, and the costs society pays in curtailed civil liberties, political rights and police action far outweigh the threat these groups represent.

The other type shares goals and is supported by a significant segment of society even if the latter may be squeamish about the tactics. This category includes the Irish Republican Army, the Algerian FLN, the Basque Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) and, of course, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The ritualized response often involves protracted and massively disproportionate violence by the authorities, the extent of which can surpass the carnage of the terrorists. Because it refuses to engage the grievances to which the violence is a reaction, and because these grievances are legitimized by being shared by so many, this response, too, is counterproductive.

But Carr never addresses the perennially vexing question of how to deal with this terrorism. The lurking assumption is that rational people should be able to resolve their conflicts without resorting to violence. Once we understand the other side, we can open the channels of communication and work to resolve our differences in a peaceful way. Violence is thus a result of racism, oppression, bigotry and a distorted image of the other, an image produced by the ritualized response itself.

But is this so? Understanding that a group wants to redistribute wealth and create a communist utopia or eradicate decadence and establish an Islamic Caliphate does not bridge the vast chasm between our view of what a society should look like and theirs. If we fail to convince them that ours is the right way and they similarly fail to convince us that theirs is the right way, then what? Do we just agree to disagree?

Not when one can resort to violence and decide, once and for all, who is right. Some conflicts are too fundamental to be solvable by holding hands; the trick is to figure out which ones can be. Carr is correct to insist that refusing even to try to understand the people engaging in terrorist violence is bad policy. But he is wrong in veering into the other extreme, in which any forceful militarized response constitutes prima facie evidence of political and moral failure of the government.

And veer Carr does, for he goes to great lengths to buttress the heroic image of the terrorists. More often than not he portrays them as humane individuals engaged in a valiant struggle that forces them into appalling acts, acts they abhor but nevertheless recognize as necessary. So we read about the RAF's Ulrike Meinhof's "aversion to bloodshed and her preference for nonviolent operations," and the FLN's Yacef Saadi, who sheds "clearly authentic" tears while ruminating about a bombing of a dance hall he had ordered.

For Carr, no such humanity exists on the other side. Testimony is proffered about the CIA providing recruits for the Nicaraguan Contras with "large commando knives which were much sought after, since 'everybody wanted to have a knife like that, to kill people, to slit their throats.'" Carr essentially transposes the brutish image from the terrorists to the government.

Then, there is the ubiquitous use of scare quotes. When not eschewed in favor of "militant," "insurgent" or "guerrilla," the word "terrorist" invariably appears enclosed in quotes, presumably to alert the reader to its subjective nature. The practice becomes more intrusive as relativism spreads to "the 'innocent' and the 'guilty.'" Carr is busy persuading us that terrorists are forced to use abhorrent tactics, then, apparently without noticing the irony, he deploys the scare quotes: "The counterterrorist is 'forced' to use the methods of the terrorist in order to defeat him."

The heavy-handedness does not stop with rhetorical flourishes and grammatical tricks; Carr's selective interpretation of facts often leads straight into conspiracy theories that would baffle students of history. The mask of objectivity comes off on Page 211: "From the mid-1970s onwards, the spectre of international terrorism became part of a sophisticated and wide-ranging right-wing propaganda offensive, which aimed to convince the Western public that the Soviet Union was still pursuing its dream of world conquest even as it edged toward peaceful coexistence." What follows is the usual laundry-list of bogeymen (individuals and organizations), along with a selected list of events, all designed to create the impression of a well-orchestrated global manipulation of world events by Western capitalists.

Replacing the vast communist conspiracy with a vast capitalist-militarist conspiracy does little to enhance the appeal of the author's arguments. The increasingly strident and venomous diatribes against the West that fill the last third of the book ruin whatever contribution it could have made to a rational debate.

In the end, Carr perpetuates the very stereotype he accuses others of peddling. Summarizing what he perceives as the atrociously incompetent, mendacious and manipulative response by the West to 9/11, he writes, "The decision to respond to the September 11 attacks through a global 'war' was a political and strategic choice. There were, and are, other means through which the world might have responded." (Emphasis mine.)

Turning to the other side, he describes a rage caused by humiliation and indignation, a rage so overwhelming that "even the bloodiest acts of unofficial terrorism are invariably seen by their perpetrators as a legitimate response to the actions of their enemies." In other words, we, the civilized, have choices; the others, the oppressed, have none. We can decide how to deal with a problem; they can only lash out in rage. This will continue until the civilized societies "address the wider causes and grievances that inspire [this violence] and accept their share of responsibility for even the most ostensibly 'evil' terrorist acts."

Aside from the vague exhortation to address the so-called "root causes" that are supposedly the result of misguided or even sinister Western policies, Carr ignores the fact that a fervent belief in something, no matter how sincere, does not make it true. The willingness to sacrifice oneself and/or kill others does not convey legitimacy to one's goals. Its popularity in academic circles notwithstanding, "authenticity," the idea that a subjective

truth, if sincerely felt, is just as valid as an objective fact, is patently absurd.

If Carr wanted to counter the myth that people who engage in political violence against civilians are uniformly evil, irrational and incomprehensible to a civilized society, he has succeeded. If he wanted to show that government response is often a cure worse than the disease, he has succeeded in that as well.

But if he wanted to argue that understanding must lead to peace, then he has failed. Suppose we accepted that "the present eruption of Islamist violence is perhaps a symptom of an imbalance of power and the consequence of decades of manipulation, deceit and hypocrisy in Western foreign policy toward the Arab world"? Leaving aside his biased assessment of the problem, would acceptance lead us closer to a peaceful solution? How do we redress this imbalance of power – by unrestricted nuclear proliferation? By giving these states enough means to kill us so they can sleep tightly at night? Beyond the vacuous platitude of developing "a more mature and honest attitude towards violent conflicts," Carr is silent.

And if he wanted to suggest that violence is never an appropriate response to violence, then he has failed in this as well. While it may be true that a democracy should be held to higher normative and moral standards than an autocracy, it does not follow that it should commit suicide by tying itself into knots of self-doubt and self-recrimination. We could paralyze ourselves by trying to decide whose cause is "more just," as Albert Camus did when he could not reconcile his revulsion to terrorism with his desire for a more equitable social order in Algeria.

The difficult question that must be addressed – one that Carr serenely brushes aside – is precisely what a democratic polity should do when faced with a violent conflict. In the film "The Battle of Algiers," journalists question a French colonel about the extreme methods he is using to suppress the FLN. His response is to the point: "I would now like to ask you a question: Should France remain in Algeria? If you answer 'yes' then you must accept all the necessary consequences."

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