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## Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions

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*As the first comparative study of religious terror groups, the article provides detailed analyses of the different doctrines and methods of the three best-known groups: the Thugs, Assassins, and Zealots-Sicarii. Despite a primitive technology, each developed much more durable and destructive organizations than has any modern secular group.*

*The differences among the groups reflect the distinguishing characteristics of their respective originating religious communities: Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. The distinctive characteristics of religious terror are discussed, and relationships between religious and secular forms of terror are suggested.*

In 1933 *The Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* published fascinating, useful articles on assassination (Lerner) and terrorism (Hardman), which ended on a strange note, namely that the phenomena, which had reached an exceptionally high point at the turn of the century, were declining so much that the subjects would remain interesting only to antiquarians. Future events would be determined by classes and masses, because modern technology had made our world so complex that we had become increasingly *invulnerable* to determined actions by individuals or small groups. Terrorist activity became extensive again after World War II, not in Europe and America, as was the case earlier, but in western colonial territories, particularly in the Palestine Mandate, Cyprus, Malaya, Kenya, Vietnam, and Algeria. But the second edition of the *Encyclopedia*, which was published in 1968, ignored both subjects; perhaps the editors believed the prophecies in the earlier edition!

Academics returned to the subject when terrorist activity revived again in the center of the west-

ern world. The flow of articles and books began in the 1970s, and that flow continues to increase every year. A journal entitled *Terrorism* has been established, and many universities offer courses on the subject. As they did 50 years ago, political scientists dominate the field, and in some respects the conventional wisdom governing terrorist studies has not changed: the technological, not the political, environment is normally seen as the decisive determining condition for terrorist activity. Many contemporary studies begin, for example, by stating that although terrorism has always been a feature of social existence, it became "significant" for the first time in the 1960s when it "increased in frequency" and took on "novel dimensions" as an international or transnational activity, creating in the process a new "mode of conflict." The most common explanation for this "new mode of conflict" is that now we are experiencing the cumulative impacts of specific develop-

"Terrorism is an activity that has probably characterized modern civilization from its inception. In the past decade, however, terrorist activity has increased in frequency and has taken on novel dimensions. For example, incidents are being employed more as a means of political expression and are becoming characterized by a transnational element" (Sandler, Tshirhart, & Cauley, 1983, p. 36). The phrase "new mode of conflict" was coined by Jenkins (1975). See also Mickolus (1980, Introduction) and Hacker (1976, Preface). As is often the case with conventional wisdom, the view is expressed without elaboration in the first paragraph or preface. To Gurr (1979, p. 23), the "conventional wisdom (concerning terrorism) is a fantasy accepted as an ominous political reality by (virtually) everyone." Cf. Rapoport (1982a, Introduction).

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ments in modern technology. Individuals and tiny groups have capacities that they previously lacked. Weapons are cheaper, more destructive, easier to obtain and to conceal. "The technological quantum jumps from the arrow to the revolver and from the gun to the Molotov Cocktail" (Hacker, 1976, p. ix). Modern communications and transport allow hitherto insignificant persons to coordinate activity quickly over vast spaces. Finally, by giving unusual events extensive coverage, the mass media complete the picture. "You can't be a revolutionary without a color TV: it's as necessary as a gun" (Rubin, 1970, p. 108).

It is in the nature of conventional wisdom that we never feel obliged either to examine or to demonstrate its propositions. The historical illustrations we provide are decorative, and we analyze contemporary experiences as though the statement declaring them *suis generis* is itself clear and at the same time provides the only evidence needed to establish the case! Although one can never be sure of what is meant by the term "modern terrorism," the characterizations normally focus on increases in the number of incidents or amounts of damage and on the fact that assaults transcend state borders. Because early experiences are insignificant in these respects, they are deemed irrelevant. One purpose of this article is to show that this view is simply wrong and that the past can provide materials for useful comparisons.

I shall do this by a detailed analysis of three groups: the Thugs, the Assassins, and the Zealots-Sicarii.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen them for several reasons. They are the examples most often cited to illustrate the ancient lineage of terrorism, but they are not discussed in our literature. We cite them because they are so well known elsewhere; no other early terror group has received as much attention. Ironically, although the words thug, assassin, and zealot have even become part of our vocabulary (often to describe terrorists), and most educated persons can identify the groups, they have never been compared.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>I do not distinguish Zealots from Sicarii, although they are distinctly different groups, as Smith (1971) demonstrates. The Sicarii terrorized mostly Jews, whereas the Zealots were more concerned with Romans and Greeks. But for our purposes this is not a critical distinction. A more extensive discussion of the Jewish uprising appears in Rapoport (1982b). Horsley (1979a) is the only other essay I know which discusses the Jewish activity as terrorist activity.

<sup>3</sup>The cases are so well known and interesting that Thomas DeQuincey (1877), a nineteenth-century Romantic writer and the first student of comparative terrorism, pointed out the importance of comparing

The cases are inherently interesting and peculiarly instructive. Each group was much more durable and much more destructive than any modern one has been; operating on an international stage, they had great social effects too. Yet the noose, the dagger, and the sword were the principal weapons they employed, travel was by horse or foot, and the most effective means of communication was by word of mouth. Although a relatively simple and common technology prevailed, each example displayed strikingly different characteristics. The critical variable, therefore, cannot be technology: rather, the purpose and organization of particular groups and the vulnerabilities of particular societies to them are decisive factors. Although the point may be more easily seen in these cases, it must be relevant, I shall argue, in our world too.

Furthermore, the three cases illustrate a kind of terror nowhere adequately analyzed in our theoretical literature, terror designated here as holy or sacred (cf. Laqueur, 1977; Price, 1977; Rapoport, 1971, 1977, 1982a; Thornton, 1964; Walter, 1969). Before the nineteenth century, religion provided the only acceptable justifications for terror, and the differences between sacred and modern expressions (differences of nature, not scale) raise questions about the appropriateness of contemporary definitions. The holy terrorist believes that only a transcendent purpose which fulfills the meaning of the universe can justify terror, and that the deity reveals at some early moment in time both the end and means and may even participate in the process as well. We see terrorists as free to seek different political ends in this world by whatever means of terror they consider most appropriate. This trait characterizes modern terrorism since its inception in the activities of Russian anarchists more than a century ago, and it is found also in many modern terrorist organizations in our century which have had important religious dimensions, i.e., the IRA, EOKA (Cyprus), the FLN (Algeria), and the Irgun (Israel). Sacred terror, on the other hand, never disappeared altogether, and there are signs that it is reviving in new and unusual forms.

As instances of sacred terror, the Thugs, the Assassins, and the Zealots-Sicarii seem remarkably different from each other, and hence they provide some orientation to the range of possibilities associated with the concept. On the other hand, each closely resembles other deviant groups within the same parent religion, Hinduism, Islam,

them. DeQuincey himself concentrates on the *Sicarii* in various essays. Lewis (1967, chap. 6) compares the three briefly.

and Judaism, and the three kinds of deviant groups reflect or distort themes distinctive to their particular major religion.<sup>4</sup> In the last respect, what seems to be distinctive about modern terrorists, their belief that terror can be organized rationally, represents or distorts a major theme peculiar to our own culture: a disposition to believe that any activity can be made rational.

I shall begin with a detailed analysis of the cases and in an extended conclusion draw out some implications and comparisons. My concern is largely with methods and doctrines, not the social basis of group activity. The order of the presentation (Thugs, Assassins, and Zealots-Sicarii) is designed to carry the reader from situations where only religious ends are served to one where the political purpose seems, but in fact is not, altogether dominant. The order also illustrates an irony, namely that there can be an inverse relationship between proximity in time and distance from us in spirit. Although extinguished in the nineteenth century, the Thugs seem wholly bizarre because they lacked a political purpose, and we invariably treat terror as though it could only serve one. The Assassins, who gave up terror in the thirteenth century, are comprehensible because their ends and methods remind us of nineteenth-century anarchists who originated modern rebel terror and were themselves conscious of affinities. But it is the Zealots-Sicarii, destroyed in the first century, who appear almost as our true contemporaries because they seem to have purposes and methods that we can fully understand. By means of provocation they were successful in generating a mass insurrection, an aim of most modern terrorists, but one that has probably never been achieved. The purpose of the Zealots-Sicarii, it seems, was to secure national liberation *inter alia*. The striking resemblances between their activities and

those of terrorists with whom we are familiar will put us in a better position to conclude by elaborating the differences already suggested between holy and modern terror.

### Thugs

"Terror," Kropotkin wrote, is "propaganda by the deed." We are inclined to think of it as a crime for the sake of publicity. When a bomb explodes, people take notice; the event attracts more attention than a thousand speeches or pictures. If the terror is sustained, more and more people will become interested, wondering why the atrocities occurred and whether the cause seems plausible. Hence virtually all modern conceptions of terrorism assume that the perpetrators only mean to harm their victims incidentally. The principal object is the public, whose consciousness will be aroused by the outrage.

For the holy terrorist, the primary audience is the deity, and depending upon his particular religious conception, it is even conceivable that he does not need or want to have the public witness his deed. The Thugs are our most interesting and instructive case in this respect. They intend their victims to experience terror and to express it visibly for the pleasure of Kali, the Hindu goddess of terror and destruction. Thugs strove to avoid publicity, and although fear of Thugs was widespread, that was the unintended result of their acts. Having no cause that they wanted others to appreciate, they did things that seem incongruous with our conception of how "good" terrorists should behave.

Indeed, one may ask, were the Thugs really terrorists? They are normally identified as such in the academic literature (DeQuincey, 1877; Freedman, 1982; Gupta, 1959; Laqueur, 1977; Lewis, 1967). As persons consciously committing atrocities, acts that go beyond the accepted norms and immunities that regulate violence, they were, according to one established definition, clearly terrorists.<sup>5</sup> Their deceit, unusual weapon (a

<sup>4</sup>It would be useful to extend the analysis by treating Christian terror, but the materials are not as conveniently available. No single Christian terror group has caught the public imagination in a way that is comparable to those I have chosen. Unlike those groups discussed here, the numerous millenarian sects using terror in the late medieval period did not rely on hit-and-disappear tactics. Their terror was a sort of state terror; the sects organized their communities openly, taking full control of a territory, instituting gruesome purges to obliterate all traces of the old order, and organizing large armies, which waged holy wars periodically sweeping over the countryside and devastating, burning, and massacring everything and everyone in their paths. The military pattern reminds one of the Crusades, an unlimited or total war launched by the Papacy (Cohn, 1961; cf. Rapoport & Alexander, 1982), in which seven essays discuss relationships between sacred and modern justifications, focusing largely on Christian traditions.

<sup>5</sup>Although the Thugs may do what they do because they know that ordinary Hindus regard such actions as terrifying and horrible, they want victims only to experience terror. The earliest contemporary discussions of terrorism emphasized the extranormal character of its violence as the distinguishing feature, but the importance of that distinction has been largely lost. Compare Thornton (1964), Walter (1969), Rapoport (1977), and Price (1977). Since terror is extranormal violence, it is likely to flow initially from a doctrine, and it tends to be a historical rather than a universal phenomenon. In recent years our definitions generally treat terror and violence as synonyms. (See, for example, Russell, 1979, p.

noose), and practice of dismembering corpses (thereby preventing cremation or proper burial) made Thug violence outrageous by Hindu standards, or, for that matter, by those of any other culture. Cults of this sort may not exist anymore, but as the case of the Zebra Killers or the Fruit of Islam in San Francisco in 1975 demonstrates, the religious purposes of a group may prescribe murders that the public is not meant to notice.<sup>6</sup> A city was terrorized for months, but no one claimed responsibility. It is doubtful whether any American terrorist group produced as much panic as this one did, although terror may not have been its purpose.<sup>7</sup>

No one knows exactly when the Thugs (often called Phansigars or stranglers) first appeared. Few now believe that the ancient Sagartians, whom Herodotus (VII, 85) describes as stranglers serving in the Persian army, are the people whom the British encountered in India some 2500 years later.<sup>8</sup> But there is evidence that Thugs existed in

the seventh century, and almost all scholars agree that they were vigorous in the thirteenth, which means that the group persisted for at least six hundred years.<sup>9</sup> By our standards, the durability of the Thugs is enormous; the IRA, now in its sixth decade, is by far the oldest modern terrorist group.

There are few estimates of the number of people killed by the Thugs. Sleeman (1933) offers a conservative figure of one million for the last three centuries of their history.<sup>10</sup> This figure seems

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made the Thugs an issue in British politics, contrived the special methods used to destroy them, and proved to be a perceptive sociologist of religion. Sleeman's six published books (1836, 1839, 1840, 1893, 1858, and 1849) are listed in order of their pertinence. Two useful nineteenth-century secondary accounts based on Sleeman are Hutton (1857) and Thornton (1837). The best twentieth-century books published before Pfirrmann are Sleeman (1933) and Bruce (1968).

The Thugs have captured literary imaginations. Meadows Taylor, a British officer with Sleeman, wrote a bestselling novel (1839) which was reprinted several times. Wilkie Collins's novel, *The Moonstone*, has gone through eleven editions at least, and John Masters (1952) has provided the latest fictional account.

<sup>9</sup>The thirteenth-century writings of Jalalu-d din Firoz Khilji, Sultan of Delhi, refer to the banishment of a thousand persons generally identified as Thugs. But before their demise, not much was known about them. Afterward, the thoroughness of British officials, trial records, and police informants provided much material. Although the information was compiled by British police administrators and the Thugs were denied public trials, legal counsel, and the right to question witnesses, the picture developed from this information was accepted completely for more than a century. Recently, it was challenged by Gupta (1959) and Gordon (1969), who believe that the group developed only when the British arrived. Gupta provides no evidence for this view, and Pfirrmann is justified in simply brushing it aside as a polemic. Gordon's thesis seems more substantial and depends on allegations of inconsistencies in the primary sources. His essay was published too late for Pfirrmann to evaluate, but I found that the inconsistencies cited come largely from Gordon's tendency to take quotations out of context, which may explain why he did not develop the thesis in subsequent writings and why it has been ignored by others.

<sup>10</sup>The estimate is incorporated in J. L. Sleeman's title (1933). Every estimate flounders because we don't know the age of the organization or its size in various periods. It is generally assumed that the number remained constant because the group was largely hereditary. In my view, the administrative chaos that prevailed in the wake of the Moghul Empire's collapse when the British arrived gave the brotherhood unusual opportunities for new victims and swelled its ranks, which suggests that Sleeman's "conservative estimate" represents a maximum, not a minimum, one.

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4.) Since violence is a universal phenomenon, it is not surprising that there is a tendency for those who do not distinguish between violence and terror to treat differences in the latter as largely differences in scale. Hostile sources compiled the materials for all three groups, which poses important questions of reliability. Specific footnotes for each case treat these problems, although obviously only historians of each period can assess the documents adequately. The pictures drawn for each group differ so dramatically that at the very least they represent archetypes of specific religious traditions.

<sup>6</sup>When early twentieth-century Hindu terrorist groups used Kali to justify their activities, secrecy was shunned because they had a political purpose, the independence of India (Pal, 1932).

Because terror can give the perpetrator joy, it can be undertaken for its own sake. An example might be the Tylenol killer in the fall of 1982, who laced capsules with arsenic, terrorizing the American public and drug industry in the process. Publicity would be important in this case of terror for terror's sake only if the terrorist desired an audience too.

<sup>7</sup>The experience is described in a reasonably accurate, overly gruesome bestseller (Clark, 1979). The group apparently believed that a race war would develop from its efforts, and perhaps at this point it would become visible.

<sup>8</sup>Primary sources on the Thugs are extensive. Numerous archival and published government materials exist for virtually every year from 1826 to 1904, the latter being the termination date of the special Indian institution created to deal with Thuggee and related problems, The Thag and Dakaiti Department. By 1850 Thug activity itself ceased almost entirely. Pfirrmann (1970) is the only person who has examined all the primary source materials. His conclusions are substantially those offered by W. H. Sleeman, the remarkable officer who

too large, but half that number may be warranted, and that, indeed, is an astonishing figure, especially when one remembers that during the life of modern terrorist organizations, the deaths they cause rarely exceed several hundred, and it would be difficult to find one group that is directly responsible for more than ten thousand deaths.<sup>11</sup> The Thugs murdered more than any known terrorist group, partly because they lasted so much longer. Their impact on Indian economic life must have been enormous, although there is no way to calculate it. If the significance of a terrorist group is to be understood by these measures, the Thugs should be reckoned the most important ever known. The paradox is that, unlike most terrorist groups, they did not or could not threaten society for the simple reason that their doctrine made them attack individuals rather than institutions.

The reinterpretation of a cardinal Hindu myth and theme provided the Thugs with their peculiar purpose and method. Orthodox Hindus believed that in early times a gigantic monster devoured humans as soon as they were created. Kali (also known as Bhavani, Devi, and Durga) killed the monster with her sword, but from each drop of its blood another demon sprang up, and as she killed each one, the spilled blood continued to generate new demons. The orthodox maintained that Kali solved the problem of the multiplying demons by licking the blood from their wounds. But the Thugs believed that Kali sought assistance by making two men from her sweat who were given handkerchiefs from her garment in order to strangle the demons, that is, kill them without shedding a drop of blood. Upon completing their mission, they were commanded to keep the handkerchiefs for their descendants.

In Hindu mythology Kali has many dimensions. She represents the energy of the universe, which means, as the legend suggests, that she both sustains and destroys life. She is also the goddess of time, who presides over endless cycles in which both essential aspects of the life process are carried out. The Thug understood that he was obliged to supply the blood that Kali, his creator, required to keep the world in equilibrium. His responsibility was to keep himself alive as long as possible so that he could keep killing, and it has been estimated that each Thug participated in three murders annually: one claimed to have

helped strangle 931 persons.<sup>12</sup> No one retired until he was physically unable to participate in expeditions. The logic of the cycle or balance required the brotherhood to keep its numbers relatively constant. New recruits came largely from the children of Thugs, and the deficiencies were made up by outsiders. The children were initiated into the tradition early by a carefully calculated gradual process—a circumstance that contributed to their resoluteness. Adult Thugs never seemed to experience revulsion, but sometimes the young did; invariably the cases involved those who witnessed events before they were supposed to. Drugs were used rarely, and then only among the young.

For obscure religious reasons Thugs attacked only travellers, and although they confiscated the property of their victims, material gain was not their principal concern, as indicated by their custom of “distinguish(ing) their most important exploits” not by the property gained but “by the number who were killed, the Sixty Soul Affair . . . the Sacrifice of Forty” (Russell & Hira, 1916, vol. 4, p. 567). The legend of their origin also shows murder to be the Thugs’ main business, murder in which the death agony was deliberately prolonged to give Kali ample time to enjoy the terror expressed by the victims. It was forbidden to take property without killing and burying its owner first. The Thugs judged the ordinary thief as morally unfit.<sup>13</sup> When religious omens were favorable, many without property were murdered. Similarly, unfavorable omens protected rich travellers.

Although murder was the Thugs’ main object, they needed loot—enormous quantities of it—to pay princes who provided their expeditions with international sanctuaries. Without those sanctuaries the brotherhood would not have persisted for such a long time. As we have learned again and again in the contemporary world, when inter-

<sup>12</sup>“Bhowanee is happy and most so in proportion to the blood that is shed. . . . Blood is her food. . . . She thirsts for blood!” (Sleeman, 1836, p. 36). The estimates made by various British officials are compiled in a review article which also provides a list of 20 leading Thugs who murdered 5120 persons, an average of 256 each (A religion of murder, 1901)!

<sup>13</sup>“There are many thieves in my village but I would not go with them. My father Assa used to counsel me against the thieves saying—do not join them, they take money without thugging. Go with Thugs. If I had a (farthing) by Thuggee, I would take it, but never by theft” (Pfirrmann, 1970, p. 70). Another on-the-spot observer, Sir John Malcolm (1823, vol. 2, p. 187), suggested that robbery was the prime concern, “their victims . . . are always selected for having property. . . .” But the evidence seems to be clearly against him.

<sup>11</sup>When terrorist activities are part of a larger military struggle (i.e., Vietnam and Algeria), we have no reliable statistics on the terror alone. In situations when terror alone prevails (e.g., Cyprus, Aden, Northern Ireland) the casualties terrorists inflict rarely exceed three figures.

national sanctuaries are provided, relations between states are exacerbated constantly. After numerous frustrating experiences. British authorities decided that appropriate cooperation from neighboring native states was not forthcoming. Nor did recourse to doctrines of hot pursuit prove adequate (Sleeman, 1836, p. 48).<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the international law governing piracy was utilized, enabling British officials to seize and punish Thugs wherever they were found. The cost was a more massive violation of the rights of independent states, culminating in a direct expansion of imperial jurisdictions, the result that critics of the policy feared most.

A striking feature of Thug operations was that virtually all activity was hemmed in by self-imposed restraints. From the moment he joined an annual sacred expedition until it was disbanded, a Thug was governed by innumerable rules, laid down by Kali, that specified victims, methods of attack, divisions of labor, disposal of corpses, distribution of booty, and training of new members. In a sense, there were no choices to be made because in dubious circumstances Kali manifested her views through omens.

British observers were impressed with the extraordinary "rationality" of the rules established. "Whatever the true source may be, (the system) is beyond all doubt the work of a man of genius, no ordinary man could have fenced and regulated it with so elaborate a code of rules—rules which the Thugs seem to believe are of divine origin, but in each of which we can trace a shrewd practical purpose" (Sleeman, 1839, p. 31).<sup>15</sup> "Ridiculous as their superstitions must appear . . . they serve the most important purposes of cementing the union of the gang, of kindling courage, and confidence; and by an appeal to religious texts deemed infallible of imparting to their atrocities the semblance of divine sanction" (A religion of murder, 1901,

p. 512). "The precautions they take, the artifices they practice, the mode of destroying their victims, calculated at once to preclude any possibility of rescue or escape—of witnesses of the deed—of noises or cries for help—of effusion of blood and, in general of trades of murder. These circumstances conspire to throw a veil of darkness over their atrocities" (Sherwood, 1820, p. 263).

The list of persons immune from attack—women, vagabonds, lepers, the blind, the mutilated, and members of certain artisan crafts (all considered descendants of Kali, like the Thugs themselves)—suggests, perhaps, that the cult may once have had a political purpose. Nonetheless, there can be no politics without publicity.

Whatever purpose these rules were designed to serve, they could not be altered even when the life of the brotherhood was at stake, because they were perceived to be divine ordinances. Europeans, for example, were immune from attack—a prohibition that virtually enabled Thugs to escape attention. When the Thugs were discovered, the same rule kept them from retaliating directly against the small, relatively unprotected group of British administrators who ultimately exterminated them.<sup>16</sup> Their commitment to rules produced another unanticipated consequence: in the nineteenth century when some of its members became increasingly concerned with loot, the brotherhood became lax. This gave the British a unique opportunity to persuade older, more tradition-bound members that the ancient Thug belief that Kali would destroy the order when its members no longer served her required them now to help their goddess by becoming informers.

To us, a Thug is a brute, ruffian, or cut-throat, but the word originally signified deceiver, and the abilities of Thugs to deceive distinguish them radically from other related Hindu criminal associations, which also worshipped Kali but "exercised their (criminal) profession *without* disguise."<sup>17</sup> Thugs literally lived two very different sorts of lives, which continually amazed the British. For the greater portion of the year (sometimes 11 out of 12 months), Thugs were models of propriety, known for their industry, temperance, generosity, kindness, and trustworthiness.

<sup>14</sup>To allay Hindu anxieties concerning Thug reprisals, the British waived many rights of the defendants. Individuals could be convicted simply for being members of the group and then would be interned for the rest of their lives on grounds that they perceived Thuggee as a religious obligation and would always continue to do so. Thomas Macauley probably drew up the legislation. The rationale is explained by Hervey (1892, vol. 2, pp. 443-451 and Appendixes E and F). In World War II Gillie (1944) contended that the principles should be revived to dispose of Nazi leaders, and to some extent they were embodied at Nuremberg.

<sup>15</sup>No serious argument has been made that the Thugs ever had a political purpose. Russell and Hira (1916) conclude that the immunities were probably linked with Hindu concepts of luck and impurities, although the immunities may have represented tribes from which Thugs originated or disguises Thugs often assumed.

<sup>16</sup>Thirty to forty Europeans normally participated in these operations against some 10,000 Thugs. A few assassination attempts against officials occurred, but the assailants lost their nerve, so pervasive must have been the taboo. As far as we know, the Thugs murdered only one or two European travellers.

<sup>17</sup>"So far from shrinking at the appellation, when one of them is asked who he is, he will coolly answer that he is a robber" (Hutton, 1961, p. 127).

British officers who unwittingly had employed them as guardians for their children lavishly praised the reliability of Thugs who had strangled hundreds of victims. An extraordinary capacity for deception was a cardinal feature of Thug tactics too. Long journeys in India always involved great hazards, requiring parties large enough to repel attacks by marauders. Groups of Thugs disguised as travellers, sometimes numbering as many as 60 persons, were often successful in persuading legitimate travellers to join forces, thereby increasing the security of all. In some cases, the intimate congenial associations would last months before the opportunity to strike occurred. (Strangling is a difficult art and requires exceptional conditions.) Usually, close contacts of this sort create bonds between people which make cold-blooded murder difficult. In fact, the striking way in which intimacy can transform relationships between potential murderers and their victims in our own day has stimulated academics to invent a new concept—the Stockholm syndrome' (Lang, 1974). But the Thugs seemed indifferent to the emotions that make such transformations possible, testifying that pity or remorse never prevented them from acting. Nonetheless, their victims were never abused. The early judicial records and interviews do not provide a single case of wanton cruelty: the victims were sacrifices, the property of Kali, and, as in all religions, the best sacrifices are those offered without blemish.<sup>18</sup> "A Thug considers the persons murdered precisely in the light of victims offered up to the Goddess, and he remembers them, as a Priest of Jupiter remembered the oxen and as a Priest of Saturn the children sacrificed upon the altars" (Sleeman, 1836, p. 8).

Thugs believed that death actually benefitted the victim, who would surely enter paradise, whereas Thugs who failed to comply with Kali's commands would become impotent, and their families would become either extinct or experience many misfortunes. British observers admired the cheerfulness of convicted Thugs about to be hanged, sublimely confident that they would be admitted to paradise.<sup>19</sup> Thugs spoke also of the personal pleasure that their particular methods generated. "Do you ever feel remorse for murdering in cold blood, and after the pretense of friendship, those whom you have beguiled into a false sense of security?" a British interrogator asked.

<sup>18</sup>The prolongation of the death agony (the only exception?) was required by Thug doctrine.

<sup>19</sup>Apparently the major anxiety of Thugs was that they might be hung by a person of a lower caste (Spry, 1837, vol. 2, chap. 5).

"Certainly not. Are you yourself not a hunter of big game, and do you not enjoy the thrill of the stalk, the pitting of your cunning against that of an animal, and are you not pleased at seeing it dead at your feet? So it is with the Thug, who indeed regards the stalking of men as a higher form of sport. For you *sahib* have but the instincts of wild beasts to overcome, whereas the Thug has to subdue the suspicions and fear of intelligent men . . . often heavily guarded, and familiar with the knowledge that the roads are dangerous. Game for our hunting is defended from all points save those of flattering and cunning. Cannot you imagine the pleasure of overcoming such protection during days of travel in their company, the joy in seeing suspicion change to friendship until that wonderful moment arrives. . . . Remorse, *sahib*? Never! Joy and elation often" (Sleeman, 1839, pp. 3-4).

#### Assassins

The Assassins (known also as Ismailis-Nizari) survived two centuries (1090-1275). Unlike the Thugs they had political objectives; their purpose was to fulfill or purify Islam, a community whose political and religious institutions were inseparable.<sup>20</sup> Although by Thug standards they inflicted few casualties and wrought negligible economic damage, the Assassins seriously threatened the governments of several states, especially those of the Turkish Seljuk Empire in Persia and Syria.

As Weber (1955, p. 2) pointed out, Islam has always been preeminently dedicated to delivering a moral message aimed at transforming social existence in *this* world. Terror in Islam, therefore, has an extra dimension not present in Hinduism. The Thugs were concerned with three parties (the assailant, his victim, and a deity), but the Assassins reached out to a fourth one as well, a public

<sup>20</sup>For the convenience of readers unfamiliar with Islamic references, I shall refer to the Nizari by their more familiar name, Assassins. When I refer to sympathetic elements, I have in mind the Shia and especially the Ismaili, the groups from which the Assassins originated. Orthodox Muslims are Sunni.

Few Assassin documents have survived, and our picture of the sect is reconstructed mostly from bitterly hostile orthodox chroniclers who obviously could not pierce the veil of secrecy, even if they had wanted to do so. Poonawala (1977) provides the most recent bibliography of sources and secondary works. Many items are annotated. The difficulties of the contemporary historian are aptly described in Hodgson (1955, pp. 22-32). Universally recognized as the best source, Hodgson's work was later sharpened (1968). My analysis is based largely on these accounts and on Lewis (1940, 1967).



or a moral community whose sympathies could be aroused by deeds that evoked attention. They did not need mass media to reach interested audiences, because their prominent victims were murdered in venerated sites and royal courts, usually on holy days when many witnesses would be present.

To be noticed is one thing, to be understood is another, and when the object of a situation is to arouse a public, those threatened will try to place their own interpretations on the terrorist's message. Their opportunities to do so will be maximized if the assailant breaks down, or even if he tries to evade arrest. The doctrine of the Assassins seems constructed to prevent both possibilities. One who intends his act to be a public spectacle is unlikely to escape in any case. The Assassins prepared the assailant for this circumstance by preventing him from even entertaining the idea that he might survive. His weapon, which "was always a dagger, never poison, never a missile," seems designed to make certain that he would be captured or killed. He "usually made no attempt to escape; there is even a suggestion that to survive a mission was shameful. The words of a twelfth-century western author are revealing: "When, therefore, any of them have chosen to *die* in this way . . . he himself [i.e., the Chief] hands them knives which are, so to speak, 'consecrated'" (Lewis, 1967, p. 127).

Martyrdom, the voluntary acceptance of death in order to "demonstrate the . . . truth" to man, is a central, perhaps critical, method of message-giving religions, used both to dispel the doubts of believers and to aid proselytizing efforts. One cannot understand the Assassins without emphasizing the deeply embedded Muslim admiration for martyrs, particularly for those who die attempting to kill Islam's enemies. Assassin education clearly prepared assailants to seek martyrdom. The word used to designate the assailants—*fidayeen* (consecrated or dedicated ones)—indicates that they (like the victims of the Thugs) were considered religious sacrifices who freed themselves from the guilt of all sins and thereby gained "entry into paradise" (Kohlberg, 1976, p. 72).<sup>21</sup>

The Hindu image of history as an endless series of cycles makes Thuggee conceivable. Message-oriented religions are inclined to assume a unilinear view of history that may be fulfilled when all humans hear and accept the message. Because this aspiration is frustrated, these religions periodically produce millenarian movements predicated on the belief that an existing hypocritical religious establishment has so corrupted their

original message that only extraordinary action can renew the community's faith.

Islamic millenarian movements are largely associated with the Shia (the minority), who believe that eventually a *Mahdi* (Messiah or Rightly Guided One) would emerge to lead a holy war (*jihad*) against the orthodox establishment to cleanse Islam. In the various Jewish and Christian messianic images violence may or may not appear, but "an *essential* part of the Mahdist theory regards the *jihad* in the sense of an armed revolutionary struggle, as the method whereby a perfected social order *must* be brought into being" (Hodgkin, 1977, p. 307; see also Kohlberg, 1976; MacEoin, 1982; Tyan, 1960). The believer's obligation is to keep his faith intact until the *Mahdi* summons him. To protect a believer among hostile Muslims until the moment arrives, the Shia permit pious dissimulation, *taqiyya*. The pure are allowed to conceal their beliefs for much the same reason that we condone deception during war. Should an opportunity materialize, the Shia must "use their tongues," or preach their faith openly; but not until the *Mahdi* arrives are they allowed to "draw the sword" (MacEoin, 1982, p. 121).

The Assassins apparently interpreted the injunction prohibiting swords against other Muslims to mean that the true believer should use other weapons, or perhaps even that he should do so in order to expedite the arrival of the *Mahdi*. In this respect, they resemble earlier Islamic millenarian groups, which always attached a ritual significance to particular weapons. Some eighth-century cults strangled their victims, and one clubbed them to death with wooden cudgels (Friedlaender, 1907, 1909; Watt, 1973, p. 48). In each case the weapon chosen precluded escape and invited martyrdom.

The Assassins originated from the more active Shia elements who "used their tongues," organizing missionaries or summoners to persuade fellow Muslims with respect to the true meaning of their faith. Although their roots were in Persia, many were educated in Egyptian missionary schools. When the capabilities of the Shia (Ismaili) state in Egypt to promote millenarian doctrines waned, the founder of the Assassins declared his independence, seized several impregnable mountain fortresses, and made them hospitable to all sorts of refugees. Here the Assassins developed a distinctive systematic Gnostic theology which promised a messianic fulfillment of history in a harmonious anarchic condition in which law would be abolished and human nature perfected.

Like the Thugs, the Assassins moved across state lines constantly. But the differences are important. The Thugs found it easy to make arrangements with princes who would protect them

<sup>21</sup>The reference is to Shia doctrine, but it applies equally to the Assassins.

for profit and upon condition that they operate abroad. But the Assassins, aiming to reconstitute Islam into a single community again, were compelled by their doctrine to organize an international conspiracy that could not be planted in an existing Islamic state. Therefore, they had to establish their own state: a league of scattered mountain fortresses or city-states (Hodgson, 1955, p. 99).

For the first time in history, perhaps, a state found its principal *raison d'être* in organizing international terror. The state provided means for the creation of an efficient enduring organization that could and did recover from numerous setbacks. The earlier millenarian sodalities were too scattered, their bases were too accessible, and their consequent insignificance often made them unable to achieve even the acknowledgment of historians, which alone could make them known to us. Isolation gave the Assassins both the space and the time required to create a quasi-monastic form of life and to train leaders, missionaries, and *fidayeen*. When their popular support in urban centers evaporated after 50 years, the Assassins survived for still another century and a half and would have persisted much longer had not Mongol and Arab armies destroyed their state (Hodgson, 1955, p. 115).

To facilitate their work they organized an extensive network of supporting cells in sympathetic urban centers. Often key persons in the establishment provided internal access, support the Assassins gained through conversion, bribery, and intimidation. Since orthodox Muslims understood the importance of internal support, the Assassins manipulated apprehensions by implicating enemies as accomplices—a maneuver that multiplied suspicions and confusion.

A successful assassination policy depended upon establishing the purpose of a murder as a measure necessary to protect missionaries. Thus, one professional soldier likens the *fidayeen* to armed naval escorts, which never engage the enemy unless the convoy itself is attacked (Tugwell, 1979, p. 62). Victims were orthodox religious or political leaders who refused to heed warnings, and therefore provoked an attack by being scornful of the New Preaching, by attempting to prevent it from being heard, and by acting in ways that demonstrated complicity in Islam's corruption.

Assassin legends, like those of any millenarian group, are revealing. A most remarkable one concerned the victim-*fidayeen* relationship. Normally the movement placed a youthful member in the service of a high official. Through devotion and skill over the years he would gain his master's trust, and then, at the appropriate time, the faithful servant would plunge a dagger into his

master's back. So preternatural did this immunity from personal or ordinary feelings seem to orthodox Muslims that they described the group as "hashish eaters" (*hashashin*), the source of our term assassin. (Although there is no evidence that drugs were used, the ability to use the doctrine of *taqiyya* and the fact that training began in childhood may help explain *fidayeen* behavior.) The legend is significant, too, for what it demonstrates about public responses. Everywhere Assassins inspired awe. Those favorably disposed to their cause would find such dedication admirable, whereas opponents would see it as hateful, repulsive, and inhuman fanaticism. Less obvious but much more interesting, perhaps, as a clue to responses of neutrals, is the transformation that the meaning of the term assassin underwent in medieval Europe, where initially it signified devotion and later meant one who killed by treachery (Lewis, 1967, p. 3).

The potential utility of an assassination policy is obvious. Dramatically staged assassinations draw immense attention to a cause. In the Muslim context too, the basis of power was manifestly personal. "When a Sultan died his troops were automatically dispersed. When an Amir died his lands were in disorder" (Hodgson, 1955, p. 84). When conceived as an alternative to war, assassinations can seem moral too. The assassin may be discriminating; he can strike the great and guilty, leaving the masses who are largely innocent untouched.

The problems created by an assassination policy become clear only in time. A series of assassinations must provoke immense social antagonism in the normal course of events; popular identification with some leaders will exist and assassinations themselves entail treachery. "There can be good faith even in war but not in unannounced murder. Though Muslims . . . commonly . . . used an assassination as an expedient, the adoption of . . . a regular and admitted (assassination) policy horrified them and has horrified men ever since" (Hodgson, 1955, p. 84). A similar logic moved Immanuel Kant (1948, p. 6) to describe belligerents who employ assassins as criminals; such a breach of faith intensifies hatred and diminishes the possibility of achieving a peace settlement before one party exterminates the other.<sup>22</sup>

As one might expect, the orthodox often re-

<sup>22</sup>"A state ought not during war to countenance such hostilities as would make mutual confidence in a subsequent peace impossible such as employing assassins, poisoners, breaches of capitulation, secret instigations to treachery and rebellion in the hostile state . . . (for there must be) some kind of confidence in the disposition of the enemy even in the midst of war, or otherwise . . . the hostilities will pass into a war of extermination."

sponded by indiscriminately slaughtering those deemed sympathetic to the *fidayeen* (Hodgson, 1955, pp. 76-77, 111-113). The Assassins, however, reacted with remarkable restraint, eschewing numerous opportunities to reply in kind. Acts of urban terrorism occurred, the quarters of the orthodox were firebombed, but so infrequent were these incidents that one can only conclude that the rebels believed that another assassination was the only legitimate response to atrocities provoked by assassination.<sup>23</sup> The political consequence of this restraint was clear; after forty years, support for the Assassins among urban elements disappeared, and the massacres ceased (Hodgson, 1955, p. 115).

The commitment to a single, stylized form of attack is puzzling. Most of the Assassins' early millenarian predecessors found assassination attractive too, but other forms of terror were known.<sup>24</sup> More than any other millenarian group, the Assassins had resources to use other tactics and much to lose by failing to do so. Still, Assassin armies only protected their bases and raided caravans for booty, for it seems that Assassin doctrine made assassination and war mutually exclusive alternatives. The pattern is quite conspicuous during one of those strange periods in the movement's history when, for tactical reasons, it decided to become an orthodox community. "Instead of dispatching murderers to kill officers and divines, Hasan III sent armies to conquer provinces and cities; and by building mosques and bathhouses in the villages completed the transformation of his domain from a lair of assassins to a respectable kingdom, linked by ties of matrimonial alliance to his neighbors" (Hodgson, 1955, pp. 217-239; Lewis, 1967, p. 80). Assassin encounters with Christians also reflected the view that the dagger was reserved for those who betrayed the faith and the sword for persons who had never accepted it. When the Assassins first met invading Crusaders in Syria during the early twelfth century, they used their armies, not their *fidayeen* (Lewis, 1967, p. 108).

The peculiar reluctance to modify their tactics

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tion. . . . Such a war and . . . all means which lead to it, must be absolutely forbidden." (Cf. Vattel, I, 19, 233.)

<sup>23</sup>The sect, of course, was the subject of many allegations, but it was never charged with instigating counter-atrocities against groups or classes. Its targets were almost invariably individuals. The sober Sunni view was that the Nizari wanted "to destroy Islam but not necessarily any . . . Muslims" (Hodgson, 1955, p. 123).

The Azraqites apparently practiced indiscriminate slaughter, arguing that every member of a family of unbelievers was an unbeliever (Watt, 1973, p. 22).

or to use their resources more efficiently probably had its origins, as the doctrines of all millenarian groups do, in reinterpretations of major precedents in the parent religion. To the millenarian, those precedents explain the religion's original success, and the abandonment of those precedents explains why there has been a failure to realize its promise. The life of Mohammed probably prescribed the model for Assassin strategy. The group began, for example, by withdrawing to primitive places of refuge (*dar al-hijra*), a decision that "was a deliberate imitation of that archetype from Mohammed's own career," who fled to remote but more receptive Medina when he failed to convert his own people in Mecca. "Medina was the first *dar al-hijra* of Islam, the first place of refuge—whence to return in triumph to the unbelieving lands from which one had to flee persecuted" (Hodgson, 1955, pp. 79-80). Islam's calendar dates from this event, and the pattern of withdrawing in order to begin again became one that millenarian elements in Islam normally followed and in fact do still, as recent studies of Muslim terrorist groups in Egypt show (Hodgkin, 1977; Ibrahim, 1980).

Mohammed's unusual employment of military forces and assassins while in Medina seems particularly instructive.<sup>25</sup> Initially, the army had only two tasks, to defend the community against attacks and to raid caravans for booty. Simultaneously, he permitted (authorized?) assassinations of prominent persons within or on the fringes of Islam, "hypocrites" (*munafikun*) who had "provoked" attacks by displaying contempt for some aspect of Mohammed's teachings. Their deaths released hitherto latent sympathies for Islam among their followers.<sup>26</sup> The process of

<sup>23</sup>The initial assassination, that of Asma bent Marwan, was occasioned by Mohammed's question, "Will no one rid me of (her)?" Henry II encouraged his knights in the same way when he grumbled about Becket. But how different the results were! Becket was martyred, the knights were punished, and the English king did penance. For a discussion of Greco-Roman and Christian attitudes toward assassination, see Rapoport (1971, chap. 1).

Six assassinations are discussed by Rodinson (1971, chap. 5). They are also described by Watt (1956), but because Watt's references are scattered throughout the text and fewer details are provided, it is more difficult to perceive patterns.

<sup>26</sup>In the Koran, the term hypocrite (*munafikun*) refers to those whose fidelity and zeal Mohammed could not rely upon, persons "in whose hearts there is sickness, weakness, and doubt . . . who had joined Islam perhaps reluctantly . . . usually members of the aristocracy" (Buhl, 1913). Most of those assassinated were Jews, but Mohammed's "Constitution of Medina" clearly indi-

purifying, or consolidating the original nucleus of the faith, seemed to be the precondition of expansion. When Mohammed decided the community was ready to become universal, the army was given its first offensive role and assassinations ceased!

Other aspects of the assassination pattern may have seemed suggestive too. The assassins' deeds were means to compensate or atone for deficiencies in ardor. The ability to overcome normal inhibitions or personal attachments to the victim was a significant measure of commitment. In every case, for example, assassin and victim were kinsmen, and no stronger bond was known then.<sup>27</sup> The victims were not likely to defend themselves (e.g., they might be asleep or be women or old men), and they were often engaged in activities likely to evoke the assailant's compassion (e.g., they were playing with children or making love). As known associates of Mohammed, the assassins could only gain access to their victims by denying their faith or denouncing the Messenger of Allah.

A major difference between the earlier assassins and the later *fidayeen* is that one group returned to Mohammed for judgment, whereas the other actively sought martyrdom. In explaining this difference, remember that the origin of the *fidayeen* is in the Shia and Ismaili sects. Those groups link themselves to Ali and Husain, whom they con-

sider Mohammed's true heirs. Ali and Husain were themselves both martyred after authorizing assassinations, and their martyrdoms became as central to their followers as Christ's passion is to Christians.

We do not have the primary sources to determine how the Assassins actually justified their tactics, but we know they saw themselves as engaged in a struggle to purify Islam and made extraordinary efforts to demonstrate that they acted defensively. The *fidayeen* put themselves in situations in which intimate bonds or personal feelings would be violated in order to demonstrate conviction. Assassin armies had one purpose in the *hijra*; later, they were likely to have another. The precedents were well known to anyone familiar with Mohammed's life and with the lives of figures most central to the Shia. Can there be justifications more compelling for believers than those that derive directly from the founders of their faith?

#### Zealots-Sicarii<sup>28</sup>

There are resemblances between the Assassins and the Zealots-Sicarii. Both were inspired by messianic hopes to seek maximum publicity. Both

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cates that his original community included Jews, and initially he intended to bring Islam as close as possible to Judaism. When that policy failed, the assassinations were an essential aspect of the struggle to separate the two religious bodies and to gain converts out of the Jewish tribes. The process is illustrated in the aftermath of the first assassination, that of a Jewish poetess by 'Umayr, her kinsmen: "'Umayr returned to his own clan, which was in a great uproar. Decide what is to be done with me, but do not keep me waiting! No one moved. . . . That was the day when Islam first showed its power over the Banu Katma. 'Umayr had been the first among them to become a Muslim. On the day the daughter of Marwan was killed, the men of the Banu Khatma were converted because of what they saw of the power of Islam'" (Ibn Hisham quoted by Rodinson, 1971, p. 171).

<sup>27</sup>Margoliouth (1923, p. 116) notes that Muslim initially meant "traitor, one who handed over his kinsmen or friends to their enemies," and that "Mohammed . . . displayed great ingenuity" in transforming its meaning into "one who handed over his own person to God." The new religion, he believes, could not survive without challenging the kin bond; and "Islam, as appears from the most authorized traditions, had the effect of making men anxious . . . to signalize their faith by parricide or fratricide" (p. 265). The traditional or orthodox interpretations of these incidents is that the assailants, shamed by their kinsmen's behavior, acted on their own initiative.

<sup>28</sup>No terrorist campaign before the nineteenth century is better known, and virtually all our information comes from Josephus Flavius, a Jewish commander who later became a Roman supporter and portrays the Zealots and *Sicarii* as provoking the popular uprising when no irreconcilable issues divided Roman and Jew. How reliable is Josephus? Historians have always disagreed. He has been seen as a "mere Roman apologist," and the accounts he challenges have vanished. His description, like those of all ancient historians, wildly exaggerates statistics and contains inconsistencies which serve explicit didactic purposes. Still, moderns increasingly find him credible, except on particular matters where good reason to mistrust him exists. When his sources can be checked, he "remains fairly close to the original. Even when he modifies the source to suit a certain aim, he still reproduces the essence of the story. More important, he does not engage in the free invention of episodes . . . like other (ancient) authors. . ." (Cohen, 1979, p. 233). All other extant sources, Roman and Jewish materials alike, are more hostile to the rebels than Josephus himself was. Although some say "that Josephus' good faith as a historian cannot be seriously questioned" (Shutt, 1961, p. 123), most agree that despite other concerns he truly had "an interest as a historian in the course of events themselves" (Bilde, 1979, p. 201).

The second issue is which of Josephus' different and contradictory assessments of motives is most credible? I have followed the modern tendency in playing down the criminal and personal motives Josephus gives to the rebels in order to emphasize their religious and political concerns. And I have taken seriously his frequently

interpreted important events in the founding period of their religion as precedents for their tactics and to mean also that those who died in this struggle secured their places in paradise. Like the Assassins, the Sicarii (daggermen) were identified with a particular weapon, and both rebellions had an international character. Nonetheless, the differences between the two, which derive from variations in the content of their respective messianic and founding myths, are even more striking.

The Zealots-Sicarii survived for approximately 25 years, a brief existence by the standards of the Assassins, but their immediate and long-run influence was enormous. Holy terrorists are normally concerned with members of their own religious culture, but the Jews were also interested in generating a mass uprising against the large Greek population that lived in Judea and against the Romans who governed them both. The revolt proved disastrous and led to the destruction of the Temple, the desolation of the land, and the mass suicide at Masada. Moreover, Zealot-Sicarii activities inspired two more popular uprisings against Rome in successive generations, which resulted in the extermination of the large Jewish centers in Egypt and Cyprus, the virtual depopulation of Judea, and the final tragedy—the Exile itself, which exercised a traumatic impact on Jewish consciousness and became the central feature of Jewish experience for the next two thousand years, altering virtually every institution in Jewish life. It would be difficult to find terrorist activity in any historical period which influenced the life of a community more decisively.

The impact of the Jewish terrorists obviously stems from their ability to generate popular insurrections, an unusual capacity among religious terrorists which makes them particularly interesting to us because ever since the Russian Anarchists first created the doctrine of modern terror, the

development of a *levee-en-masse* by means of provocation tactics has been the principal aim of most groups. Very few have succeeded, and none has had as much success as the Zealots-Sicarii did. Why were they so peculiar?

The nature of their messianic doctrines simultaneously suggested the object of terror and permitted methods necessary to achieve it. Jewish apocalyptic prophecies visualize the signs of the imminence of the messiah as a series of massive catastrophes involving whose populations, “the upsetting of all moral order to the point of dissolving the laws of nature” (Scholem, 1971, p. 12). This vision saturated Judaism for a generation preceding the genesis of Zealot-Sicarii activity, creating a state of feverish expectancy. “Almost every event was seized upon . . . to discover how and in what way it represented a Sign of the Times and threw light on the approach of the End of the Days. The whole condition of the Jewish people was psychologically abnormal. The strongest tales and imaginings could find ready credence” (Schonfield, 1965, p. 19). New messianic pretenders flourished everywhere, because so many people believed that the signs indicating a messianic intervention were quite conspicuous: Judea was occupied by an alien military power, and prominent Jews were acquiescing in “the desecration of God’s name” or accepting the culture of the conqueror.

In all apocalyptic visions God determines the date of the redemption. Still, these visions often contain some conception that humans can speed the process. Prayer, repentance, and martyrdom are the most common methods. When these do not produce results and a period of unimaginable woe is perceived as the precondition of paradise, it will only be a matter of time before believers will act to force history, or bring about that precondition. Jewish terrorist activity appeared to have two purposes: to make oppression so intolerable that insurrection was inevitable, and, subsequently, to frustrate every attempt to reconcile the respective parties.

The names Zealot and Sicarii both derive from a much earlier model in Jewish history, Phineas, a high priest in the days of Moses. His zeal or righteous indignation averted a plague that afflicted Israel when the community tolerated acts of apostasy and “whoring with Moabite women.” Taking the law into his own hands, he killed a tribal chief and his concubine who flaunted their contempt for God in a sacred site. Phineas is the only Biblical hero to receive a reward directly from God (*Numbers* 25:11). In purifying the community, his action prepared the way for the Holy War (*herem*) which God commanded Israel to wage against the Canaanites for the possession of the Promised Land. The Bible repeatedly refers to

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repeated contention, which some scholars question, that the terrorists forced their will on reluctant parties. The process of polarizing a society by exploiting latent hostilities through shock tactics was not understood well by the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators on Josephus who knew of no terror campaigns with which to compare the revolt. More recent scholars display less skepticism on this point. My earlier study (1982b) is a step-by-step analysis of the dynamic presupposed by Josephus’ account, and the description above is based upon that essay.

The literature on the revolt is quite extensive. The following articles (in addition to those cited above) were particularly helpful: Applebaum (1971), Betz et al. (1974), Borg (1971), Farmer (1956), Grant (1973), Hengel (1961), Horsley (1979b), Kingdom (1970, 1971), Kohler (1905), Roth (1959), Smallwood (1976), Stern (1973), Thackeray (1967), and Zeitlin (1967).

the terror that the *herem* was supposed to produce and to Israel's obligation to destroy all persons with their property who remain in the land, lest they become snares or corrupting influences. The word *herem*, it should be noted, designates a sacred sphere where ordinary standards do not apply, and in a military context, a *herem* is war without limits.<sup>29</sup>

The name Sicarii comes from the daggers (*sica*) used when the group first made its appearance. Rabbinic commentary indicates that Phineas used the head of his spear as a dagger, and the Sicarii normally assassinated prominent Jews, especially priests, who in their opinion had succumbed to Hellenistic culture. As in Phineas's case, these acts were also efforts to create a state of war readiness, and, more specifically, to intimidate priests who were anxious to avoid war with Rome and whose opposition could prevent it from materializing.

The Sicarii committed murders in broad daylight in the heart of Jerusalem. The holy days were their special seasons when they would mingle with the crowd carrying short daggers concealed under their clothing with which they stabbed their enemies. Thus, when they fell, the murderers joined in cries of indignation, and through this plausible behavior, were never discovered. The first assassinated was Jonathan, the high-priest. After his death there were numerous daily murders. The panic created was more alarming than the calamity itself; everyone, as on the battlefield, hourly expected death. Men kept watch at a distance on their enemies and would not trust even their friends when they approached (Josephus, 1926a, vol. 2, pp. 254-257).

Although their name reminds us of Phineas's weapon, his spirit and purpose were more decisive influences. Unlike the *fidayeen*, the Sicarii did not limit themselves to assassinations. They engaged military forces openly, often slaughtering their prisoners. They took hostages to pressure the priests and terrorized wealthy Jewish landowners in the hopes of compelling a land redistribution according to Biblical traditions. The Zealots illustrate the point even more clearly. Their Hebrew name signified the righteous indignation that Phineas personified, but they rarely plotted assassinations, and their principal antagonists were non-Jews who dwelled in the land. Phineas was also known for his audacity, which Zealot-

Sicarii assaults often reflect. (It is not without interest that rage and audacity are qualities most admired and cultivated by modern terrorists.) Their atrocities occurred on the most holy days to exploit the potential for publicity therein, and, more important, to demonstrate that not even the most sacred occasions could provide immunity. Note, for example, Josephus's description of how the Sicarii massacred a Roman garrison, after it had secured a covenant (the most inviolable pledge Jews could make) that guaranteed the troops safe passage.

When they had laid down their arms, the rebels massacred them; the Romans neither resisting, nor suing for mercy, but merely appealing with loud cries to the covenant! . . . The whole city was a scene of dejection, and among the moderates there was not one who was not racked with the thought that he should personally have to suffer for the rebels' crime. For to add to its heinousness the massacre took place on the sabbath, a day on which from religious scruples Jews abstain from even the most innocent acts (Josephus, 1926a, vol. 2, p. 451).

The massacre electrified the Greeks, who constituted a significant portion of the population in Judea and were the local source of Roman recruitment. Jews in numerous cities were massacred, and everywhere the Greeks were repaid in kind. The action and the response illustrate vividly some salient differences between Muslim and Jewish terrorists. *Fidayeen* terror was an auxiliary weapon designed to protect their missions where the main work of the movement was done, converting the population to a particular messianic doctrine. Patient and deliberate, the Assassins acted as though they expected to absorb the Muslim world piecemeal. The Zealots and the Sicarii saw themselves not as the propagators of a doctrine but as revolutionary catalysts who moved men by force of their audacious action, exploiting mass expectations that a cataclysmic messianic deliverance was imminent.

To generate a mass uprising quickly and to sustain constantly increasing polarizing pressures, the Zealots-Sicarii developed an array of tactics unusual by Thug and Assassin standards. Participants (despite their contrary intentions) were pulled into an ever-escalating struggle by shock tactics which manipulated their fear, outrage, sympathy, and guilt. Sometimes these emotional affects were provoked by terrorist atrocities which went beyond the consensual norms governing violence; at other times they were produced by provoking the enemy into committing atrocities against his will.

Thugs and Assassin tactics always remained the same, but in the different phases of the Jewish

<sup>29</sup>For a convenient discussion of the *herem* and its revival by the Zealots-Sicarii as reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls, see de Vaux (1972, pp. 258-267). The later conception had new elements: the war would be a war to end all wars, it would involve all men, and the enemy was under Satan's influence.

uprising, striking changes occurred which seemed designed for specific contexts. The rebellion began with passive resistance in the cities. This tactic, of which the Jewish example may be the earliest recorded by historians, merits comment, for in our world (e.g., Cyprus and Northern Ireland), passive resistance has often appeared as an initial step in conflicts which later matured into full-scale terrorist campaigns.<sup>30</sup> Our experience has been that many who would have shrunk from violence, let alone terror, often embrace passive resistance as a legitimate method to rectify grievances, without understanding how the ensuing drama may intensify and broaden commitments by simultaneously exciting hopes and fanning smouldering hostilities.

In the Jewish case, before antagonisms had become sufficiently developed and when Roman military strength still seemed irresistible, passive resistance might have been the only illegal form of action that many Jews would willingly undertake. Initially, the confrontations involved Jewish claims, sometimes never before made, for respect due to their sacred symbols, and governments learned that, willy-nilly, they had backed, or been backed, into situations in which they either had to tolerate flagrant contempt for the law or commit actions that seemed to threaten the Jewish religion, the only concern that could unite all Jews. More often than one might expect, the Romans retreated in the face of this novel form of resistance. They admired the Jews' displays of courage, restraint, and intensity, and they learned how difficult and dangerous it was to break up demonstrations that included women and children (Josephus, 1926a, vol. 2, pp. 169, 195; 1926b, vol. 18, pp. 55, 269). They feared a rebellion that could engulf the eastern portion of the Empire, which was at least one-fifth Jewish and contained a significant class of Jewish sympathizers (*sebomenoi*, God-fearers) whose influence seemed to reach members of Rome's ruling circles.

The possibility that the conflict could become an international one troubled Rome. Judea was on the frontier next to Parthia, the last remaining major power in the ancient world. Parthia had intervened in earlier conflicts. Even if Parthia wanted to avoid involvement, she might find it difficult to do so because her Jewish population was large, and one Parthian client state had a Jewish dynasty that bore a special hatred for Rome. Parthian Jews were important figures in the early stage of the rebellion. The great annual pilgrim-

ages of Parthian Jews to Jerusalem and the massive flow of wealth they contributed to maintain the Temple gave evidence of the strength of their tie to Judea, a bond that a modern historian compares to that which knitted American Jews to those in Palestine during the uprising against Britain.

For some time before the rebellion, Rome kept expanding the unusual exemptions given Jews, and the uprising was fueled partly by rising expectations. But Rome's anxiety to avoid a serious conflict simply made her more vulnerable to tactics calculated to produce outrage. Her restraint encouraged reckless behavior and weakened the case of Jewish moderates who argued that although Rome might be conciliatory, she was wholly determined to remain in Judea.

Large passive demonstrations against authority tend to produce violence unless both sides have discipline and foresight. When some on either side prefer violence, or when passive resistance is viewed not as an end in itself, but as a tactic that can be discarded when other tactics seem more productive, explosions will occur. Whatever the particular reason in this case, demonstrators soon became abusive, and bands of rock-throwing youths broke off from the crowds. When Roman troops (trying to be inconspicuous by discarding military dress and exchanging swords for wooden staves) were attacked, Roman discipline dissolved. The crowds panicked, and hundreds of innocent bystanders were trampled to death in Jerusalem's narrow streets. This pattern kept repeating itself, and the atrocities seemed especially horrifying because they normally occurred on holy days when Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims, many of whom were killed while attending religious services. The massive outrage generated by Roman atrocities and the assassination campaign against the moderates finally intimidated reluctant priests into refusing to allow Roman sacrifices at the Temple. Rome viewed that act as a rejection of her sovereignty or as a declaration of war, and this gave the militants a plausible case that the war was indeed a *herem*.

When the war finally occurred, many on both sides hoped to conclude it quickly with a political settlement. These hopes were given a severe jolt early after the first military engagement. When the tiny Roman garrison in Jerusalem, which had laid down its arms for a covenant of safe passage, was massacred, a pattern of reprisal and counter-reprisal spread throughout the eastern portion of the Empire. Roman troops ran amuck. Yet when military discipline was finally restored, the Roman campaign quite unexpectedly was restrained. Military advantages were not pressed, as hope persisted that the olive branch offered would be seized. Understanding that most Jews wanted

<sup>30</sup>Rapoport (1982b, pp. 36-37) discusses relationships between the process described here and modern campaign experiences. For a general discussion of passive resistance and terrorism, see Thornton (1964, p. 75).

peace, Rome believed that the atrocities of Jew against Jew would eventually destroy the popular tolerance requisite for all terrorist movements. A significant Jewish desertion rate, including many important personalities, kept Roman hopes alive for negotiating a peace without strenuous military efforts. But various Jewish atrocities, which culminated in the cold-blooded murder of Roman peace envoys, led to the conclusion that only total war was feasible (Josephus, 1926a, vol. 2, p. 526).

Zealot-Sicarii strategy seemed admirably designed to provoke a massive uprising. Consecutive atrocities continually narrowed prospects for a political, or mutually agreeable, solution, serving to destroy the credibility of moderates on both sides while steadily expanding the conflict, which enlisted new participants. But no master hand can be detected in this process, and one can see it as an irrational process. Jewish terrorists reflect a bewildering assortment of forces. Several Zealot and at least two Sicarii organizations existed, and many other groups participated, but only a few can be identified. Then, as now, the effect of multiplicity was to encourage each element toward even more heinous atrocities, in order to prove the superiority of its commitments, and in time the groups decimated each other. As these extraordinary actions unfolded, the participating groups, like so many of their modern counterparts, found it necessary to make even more fantastic claims about their enemies and even more radical promises about the social reconstruction that would result from their victory. Ferrero's comment on the dynamics of the French Reign of Terror seems quite pertinent. "The Jacobins did not spill all that blood because they believed in popular sovereignty as a religious truth; rather they tried to believe in popular sovereignty as a religious truth because their fear made them spill all that blood" (1972, p. 100; cf. Josephus, 1926b, vol. 18, p. 269).

To focus on popular insurrection as the principal object, however, is to misconstrue the Zealot-Sicarii view. Insurrection was only a sign of messianic intervention, and because they were concerned with a divine audience, they did things that no one preoccupied with a human audience alone would dream of doing. The decision of Zealot leaders to burn the food supply of their *own* forces during Jerusalem's long siege becomes intelligible only if one believes that He might see it as proof that the faithful had placed all their trust in Him. God, therefore, would have no choice; was He not bound by His promise to rescue the righteous remnant? Because many thought God would be moved by their sufferings, the most profound disaster often created new hopes. When the Temple was burning (and the war irretrievably lost), a messianic impostor persuaded six thou-

sand new recruits that the fire signified that the time for deliverance had finally arrived. Compared to the Thugs and Assassins, the Zealots-Sicarii seem free to choose their tactics, but how can one be free to follow an impossible goal?

### Conclusion

These cases provide materials to broaden the study of comparative terrorism. Each contains parallels worth pondering, and the three together illustrate the uniqueness of sacred terror and thus provide a perspective for viewing modern terror and a glimpse of the latter's special properties.<sup>11</sup>

Our obliviousness to holy terror rests on a misconception that the distinction between it and the modern form is one of scale, not of nature or kind. A most conspicuous expression of this misconception is the conventional wisdom that terrorist operations require modern technology to be significant. There are relationships between changes in technology and changes in terrorist activity, but they have not been seriously studied. More important, every society has weapon, transport and communication facilities, and the clear meaning of our cases is that the decisive variables for understanding differences among the forms terror may take are a group's purpose, organization, methods, and above all the public's response to that group's activities.

This conclusion should shape our treatment of the dynamics of modern terrorism. There is no authoritative history of modern terrorism that traces its development from its inception more than a century ago. When that history is written, the cyclical character of modern terror will be conspicuous, and those cycles will be related not so much to technological changes as to significant political watersheds which excited the hopes of potential terrorists and increased the vulnerability of society to their claims. The upsurge in the 1960s, for example, would be related to Vietnam just as the activities immediately after World War II would appear as an aspect of the decline in the legitimacy of Western colonial empires. Since doctrine, rather than technology, is the ultimate source of terror, the analysis of modern forms must begin with the French, rather than the Industrial Revolution.

When the assumption concerning technology is abandoned, early cases seem more valuable as a source for appropriate parallels. We have already suggested a number of potentially instructive instances. For example, the Zealot-Sicarii case may

<sup>11</sup>A third reason for studying sacred terror is that there are direct links between some of its concepts and those that animate modern forms (Dugard, 1982).



be the only instance of a successful strategy that actually produced a mass insurrection—the announced objective of modern revolutionary terror. It illuminates predicaments inherent in this strategy while exposing aspects of societies especially vulnerable to it. It is worth noting that the problems illustrated by this particular experience concerned Menachem Begin greatly, because his strategy as the leader of the Irgun in the uprising against Britain was in part conceived to avoid “mistakes” made by the Zealots-Sicarii (Rapoport, 1982b, pp. 31-33).

The international context provides another parallel. It played a crucial role in sustaining the terror. The Thugs and Assassins had valuable foreign sanctuaries. Favorable, albeit different, international climates of opinion helped all three groups. In each case there was cooperation among terrorists from different countries; in one instance a state was actually directing an international terrorist organization, and in another there existed the threat of potential military intervention by an outside power. The problems posed and the constraints involved provide useful points of comparison with modern experiences. The difficulties in dealing with terrorists who have foreign sanctuaries and the ways in which those difficulties may exacerbate international relations are familiar. Rome’s vulnerability to terror tactics reminds one of Western colonial empires after World War II, but the ultimate reason for the different outcomes was that Rome never doubted her right to rule. Britain’s ability to exterminate the Thugs quickly in the nineteenth century was to a large extent the consequence of a favorable British and an indifferent international opinion. Perhaps the doubt expressed in the 1930s by a student of the Thugs that Britain could not have acted as decisively to deal with the same problem a century later was unwarranted, but the concern reflected a very different political environment, one that is even more deeply rooted today.<sup>32</sup>

How should we characterize sacred terror? Obviously there are enormous variations in its expressions which extend to purposes, methods, responses, and differences that derive from the ingenuity of the individual terror cult which in

turn is limited by boundaries established by the original religion. In an odd, interesting way, the terrorist as a deviant highlights unique features of the parent religion that distinguish it from other religions, e.g., concepts of the relation of the divine to history and to social structure.

Because Hinduism provides no grounds for believing that the world can be transformed, the Thugs could neither perceive themselves nor could they be perceived as rebels. In imagining themselves obligated to keep the world in balance, they were part of the established order, though obviously not in it. In Islam and Judaism, the potentialities for radical attacks on institutions are inherent in the ambiguity of unfulfilled divine promises, which no existing establishment can reconcile fully with its own dominance. Because the promises are known to every member of the religious community, the Islamic or Jewish terrorist has a human audience not present in Hinduism. To reach this audience Islamic and Jewish terrorists must become visible and must either conquer all or be extinguished. There can be no such imperative with respect to the Thugs, as the extraordinarily long life of the order suggests. Initially the British were very reluctant to suppress the Thugs because they believed that it would be dangerous to disturb the local and foreign interests embedded in Thug activity. The decisive impetus was a rekindling of evangelical feeling in Victorian England which struck out at the world slave trade and was outraged by accounts of three ancient Hindu practices: infanticide, immolation of widows, and Thuggee. Under Hindu administration, Thuggee would have survived much longer.

If a particular religion creates boundaries for its terrorists, it follows that similarities within traditions will be as striking as differences among traditions. In the Hindu world, an ancient species of criminal tribes, all of which worshipped Kali, persisted. Each performed a particular criminal vocation, was committed to a special way of achieving it, and believed that its actions were legitimate by Hindu standards. The Thugs were unique among those tribes in not professing their practices openly; perhaps they could not have been able to survive the outrage and horror provoked by them. The Assassins’ situation is more straightforward; they were the latest and most successful Muslim millenarian assassination cult and the only one that established a state, the mechanism required for thorough organization. The Assassins consummated a millenarian tradition of terror, but the Zealots-Sicarii appeared to have initiated one, which ended after three disastrous massive revolts in as many generations. Holy terrorists normally victimize members of the parent religion, but the Jews attacked non-Jews too, those who resided in the land. The concern

<sup>32</sup>In 1933, J. L. Sleeman wrote, “it is of interest to speculate as to what the procedure would be today were such an organization of murder to be discovered in India, and imagination runs riot at the long vista of Royal Commissions, Blue, Red, and White Books, Geneva Conferences and the political capital which would be made of it, the procrastination and the delay, tying the hands of those on the spot, and the world propaganda which would ensue. . . . Thuggee could shelter behind disunited party government” (p. 103).

with the land as the site of the messianic experience may be a distinguishing feature of Jewish terror. The conception of a war without limits in which large military forces are engaged probably had its roots in the extraordinary Holy War (*herem*), which, according to the Bible, God Himself authorized in the original conquest of Canaan. The belief that assimilation impeded messianic deliverance and that all members of the community were culpable gave Jewish terror a character that seemed indiscriminate, certainly by the standards of the Assassins, who held leaders responsible.

Sacred terrorists find their rationale in the past, either in divine instructions transmitted long ago or in interpretations of precedents from founding periods of the parent religions. Their struggles are sanctified with respect to purpose and with respect to means; this is why their violence must have unique characteristics. The very idea of the holy entails contrast with the profane, the normal, or the natural. The noose of the Thug and the dagger of the Assassin illustrate the point. It is difficult, in fact, to avoid feeling that the act of terror is holy just because one is acting against his natural impulses. The immunities of Assassins and Thugs to natural feelings (i.e., the Stockholm syndrome) astonished observers. But, unlike terrorists we are familiar with, they began training for their tasks as children. Our sources provide no information on the personal stress that the methods of the Jewish terrorists might have created for them, but perhaps it is relevant that the Bible relates instance after instance of individuals, including King Saul himself, who violate commands for indiscriminate destruction in the original *herem* to conquer Canaan.

Religion normally embodies ritual, and it does seem natural that rules prescribe every detail of Hindu and Islamic terror. As observers of the Thugs pointed out, those rules may have been rationally designed to resolve perennial practical problems, thus helping the groups to endure and become more effective. Still, divinely authorized rules cannot be altered even when they become destructive. So conspicuous were the Assassins' political concerns that an eminent historian has described them as the first to use "political terror" in a "planned systematic fashion" (Lewis, 1967, p. 269); but their religious mandate kept them committed to the same tactics even when they proved politically counterproductive. Jewish terror appears unique, being thoroughly anti-nomian and embracing a large variety of activities. The success in provoking insurrection and the freedom regarding means suggest that political considerations were paramount. But since their ultimate concern was to create the catastrophe that would compel God to redeem the righteous

remnant, in the end they, like the Thugs and Assassins, continued to act in manifestly self-destructive ways.

The transcendent source of holy terror is its most critical distinguishing characteristic; the deity is perceived as being directly involved in the determination of ends and means. Holy terror never disappeared, and it seems to be reviving in new forms especially in, but not exclusive to, the Middle East. Still, modern terror, which began initially in the activities of *Narodnaya Volya*, a nineteenth-century Russian organization, now is much more common. The modern terrorist serves political ends to be achieved by human efforts alone, and he, not God, chooses the most appropriate ends and means. It is also true that modern terrorist organizations (especially the most durable and effective ones) are often associated with religious groups, for religion can be a major factor of ethnic identity. Although the IRA attracts Catholics and repels Protestants, its object is political, and no member believes that God participates in the struggle. The FLN in Algeria stressed its Muslim character, and EOKA in Cyprus was affiliated with the Greek Orthodox church, but the tactics in both cases were designed to appeal to various domestic and international audiences.

When the members of *Narodnaya Volya*, the first modern rebel terrorists, began their activities, they seemed to be engaged in a kind of sacred ritual. More specifically, they remind one of the Assassins. Highly ranked officials who symbolized the system and bore some responsibilities for its injustices were the victims, and the assailant hoped to attract moral sympathy through his own suffering, specifically by his willingness to accept death in a public trial where he could indict the system. Even his weapon—a hand-thrown bomb—suggests the *fidayeen's* dagger because it forced face-to-face encounters virtually precluding escape, which persuaded many observers that his will to die was more compelling than his desire to kill (Ivianski, 1982). But, unlike the Assassins, the possibility of other terror tactics was visualized early by their contemporaries, and their initial patterns were soon discarded.

Modern terrorism has two unique, dominant features. Organizations and tactics are constantly modified, presumably to enhance effectiveness, and terror is used for very different ends, ranging from those of anarchists with millenarian visions to anti-colonialists, to individuals who simply want to call attention to a particular situation that they find offensive. The early forms of sacred terror cannot be characterized this way. The ends are predetermined, and no real evidence exists that the participants learn to alter their behavior from others within their own tradition, let alone from

those outside it.<sup>33</sup> Modern terrorists take their lessons from anyone, and in an important sense they constitute a single tradition which reflects and caricatures a much-observed tendency in our world to subject all activities to efficiency tests. Over the decades the tendency has been to choose methods that minimize the terrorist's risks; the targets, accordingly, are, increasingly, defenseless victims who have less and less value as symbols or less and less responsibility for any condition that the terrorists say they want to alter. The question is whether one can place a premium on reducing the assailant's risk without undermining his potential impact. The problem did not exist for the sacred terrorist, which may be one reason why he was so effective.

The desire to make terror "rational" dominated the first modern terrorist text, Nechaev's *Revolutionary Catechism*, produced before the birth of *Narodnaya Volya*. "The revolutionary (terrorist) . . . knows only one science: the science of destruction. For this reason, and only for this reason, he will study mechanics, chemistry, and perhaps medicine. But all day and night he studies

the living science of peoples, their characteristics and circumstances, and all the phenomena of the present social order. The object is the same. The prompt destruction of this filthy order" (1971, p. 71). Nechaev's work is simply an exercise in technique, suggesting devices for provoking governments to savage their peoples until the latter can bear it no longer. It has had numerous successors, the latest and most notorious being Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*.

Although the disposition to apply standards of expediency distinguishes modern from holy terror, the presence of this disposition itself cannot mean that modern terrorists are rational. Some ends in principle may be impossible to achieve, like those of the anarchist; others may be so ill-considered that no means can be made rational—the situation, it seems, of the Baader Meinhoff group and the Italian Red Brigades. Sometimes, under the guise of expediency, the safety of the terrorist might become the prime concern. More fundamentally, the very idea of a rational or expedient terror may be contradictory, since by definition terror entails extranormal violence, and as such, is almost guaranteed to evoke wild and uncontrollable emotions. Indeed, the people attracted to it may be so intrigued by the experience of perpetrating terror that everything else is incidental.

<sup>33</sup>The Crusades are the major exception, for they were inspired by the *herem* and undertaken to regain the Holy Land in order to initiate a messianic era.

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