

The Routledge History of Terrorism. Edited by Randall D. Law. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015

Mark J. Roberts
subject matter expert

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss>
pp. 119-121

Recommended Citation

Roberts, Mark J.. "The Routledge History of Terrorism. Edited by Randall D. Law. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015." *Journal of Strategic Security* 8, no. 4 (2015): : 119-121.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.8.4.1496>
Available at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol8/iss4/10>

***The Routledge History of Terrorism.* Edited by Randall D. Law. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015. ISBN 978-0-415-53577-9. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. xiii, 527. \$215.00.**

One should always approach a book claiming to provide something exceptional in the spirit of *caveat emptor*. This manuscript boldly claims it “is essential reading for all those interested in the past, present, and future of terrorism” (back cover). The cover also boasts that the book is “Comprehensive enough to serve as a survey for students or newcomers to the field, yet with enough depth to engage the specialist, *The Routledge History of Terrorism* is the first single-volume authoritative reference text to place terrorism firmly into its historical context.” Sadly, the book’s substance falls short of the promised contents. Throughout the book, “terrorism” is so widely (re)defined it loses meaning or significance as it encompasses any type of violence, intimidation (psychological or physical), prejudice, or bigotry that humankind has perpetrated upon itself. Viewed in that context, it is a selective history of humankind with a patina of terrorism.

The book is composed of thirty-two chapters in six sections covering terrorism in the pre-modern world, modern terrorism, terrorism in the Twentieth Century, recent decades, critical themes, and historiography. The editor and contributors are mostly academics with backgrounds in History, Religion, International Relations, Terrorism, Security Studies, Political Science, Public Policy, Defense Studies, and Peace Studies, among others. Most of the contributors are History professors with a research background. The research is thorough and well-documented, yet the emphasis at times is so laden with political correctness (PC) as to render meaningful discussion of terrorism in the first ten chapters unattainable. There is a lack of hands-on practical expertise in policy, military, law enforcement, or military understanding. This detracts from some otherwise brilliant gems folded into the book’s contents.

In the introductory chapter, the editor thoughtfully and eloquently makes his case for how to approach the book and some of the philosophical issues the reader must tackle. He outlines the past and present trends of how terrorism is viewed and offers a framework to study and better understand the topic.

Part One contains three chapters discussing tyrannicide from Ancient Greece and Rome through the Seventeenth Century, pre-modern terrorism, and the Middle Ages. These chapters walk the reader through the topics listed above and classify violence carried out by the Romans, Vikings, Crusaders, and the perpetrators of the Spanish Inquisition. While Part One is acceptable history, its overall value to study of the topic of terrorism is negligible.

Part Two contains six chapters that encompass the French Revolution and early European revolutionary terrorism, terrorism in America from the colonial period through John Brown, late Imperial Russia, terrorism in

Europe, anarchist terror in the United States, and American racial terrorism. The first chapter is a solid overview of the (French) Reign of Terror. The second chapter paints America as a terrorist state, vilifying European colonizers for their treatment of indigenous peoples and slaves imported from Africa. There is plenty of “white guilt” to satisfy the PC mavens and reflects the *zeitgeist* in modern academia. The third chapter has excellent insights into the waning days of the czars that would better fit in a Russian history tome. The fourth chapter examines European anarchist activities for a half century with aplomb. In the fifth chapter, one of the authors provides a quote from an “eminent historian,” who writes “Americans certainly have reason to inquire whether, when compared with other advanced industrial nations, they are not a people of exceptional violence” (132). For a professor of history, the author seems to ignore that the history of humankind is one of “exceptional violence.” The last chapter examines racial tensions in the U.S., focusing on white racism and savaging the Deep South. The second and sixth chapters are intellectually lazy screeds better placed in a tome of revisionist history. Overall, Section Two is uneven.

Part Three contains ten chapters covering 20th Century terrorism. Countries covered include Britain (including colonial and Irish activities), Algeria, Israel and the Palestinians, Islamism, Latin America, and Western Europe. On the whole, these chapters are well-written and well-researched, giving the reader a comprehensive understanding of the topics covered. A notable omission is treatment of the terrorist group Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA). Chapter 16’s treatment of Israeli-Palestinian strife should be required reading for any serious analyst of the topic due to its masterful blend of history, psychology, and anthropology. Chapter 17’s treatment of Islamism framed as a Muslim response to Western imperialism is useful to understand the Muslim point of view. However, it bypasses Muslim acts against the West. It does have a very well done exposition of the myriad meanings of jihad.

Part Four contains three chapters treating terrorism in the U.S., al-Qa’ida, and terrorism concerning India and Pakistan. The author of Chapter 21 asks “Can we categorize violence fueled by bigotry as terrorism?” (323). The question is valid and her treatment is worth the read for questions it raises, even if slanted towards a liberal viewpoint. According to her fellow essayists, the answer seems to be a resounding “yes.” Chapter 22 outlines the rise of al-Qa’ida. There is a factual error as the author quotes a source who incorrectly claims U.S. aid “did not reach such anti-Soviet Arab groups as that led by a young bin Laden” (334). In fact, Pakistani intelligence funneled aid to their preferred factions, which included bin Laden. The author also incorrectly stated al-Qa’ida resembles an insurgency rather than a terrorist group and the U.S. focus on such was wrong (339). Such sloppy scholarship detracts from an otherwise solid chapter. Chapter 23 is a virtuoso handling of the overall context of how terrorism evolved in India and Pakistan and should be required reading for any serious analyst of the topic.

Part Five contains eight chapters discussing themes in the history of terrorism. Chapter 24 treats the topic of modernity and terrorism. The author

posits that terrorism is as old as humankind, citing Roman crucifixion, the Spanish Inquisition, the colonization of America, the Nazis, Imperial Japan, and the U.S. conduct of warfare against Japan and Vietnam, among myriad other examples. Ignoring the nature of warfare, he tosses out didactic musings without focus, lapsing into a pedantic rant. Chapter 25 is as excellent as its predecessor was awful. The author expertly dissects the differences between terrorism and insurgency. He outlines “the ability and the will of non-state groups to employ lethal violence in support of their objectives, and the reality that any state’s response in the ensuing conflict depends on its own analysis of its enemy’s goals, capabilities, the extent of its support, and own weaknesses” (392). Chapter 26’s discussion of suicide terrorism correctly frames both historic and current issues on the topic. Chapter 27 discusses counterterrorism and conspiracy. Chapter 28 examines the crucial binds between the media and terrorism and shines as one of the better essays in the tome. Terrorism and Technology (Chapter 29) is a relevant and well-done piece that provokes the right kinds of questions that terrorism analysts should be asking (how terrorists exploit and learn from technology). Chapter 30’s treatment of international terrorism is an outstanding overview of the topic and is key reading for anyone seeking to better understand underlying issues from recent years. Chapter 31 (terrorism and literature) is more a treatise on terrorism in Russian literature, adding little to the book’s value.

Part Six has the concluding chapter on terrorism studies’ literary turn. It raises a series of topics that terrorism analysts need to examine and understand such as media reporting, risk management, terrorism in academia, instant “experts,” and the terrorism “industry.”

The Routledge History of Terrorism is a frustrating book. Some sections have well-thought out insights; other sections seem to be written to satisfy the requirement for university faculty to “publish or perish.” For the think tank policy analyst, military member, professional terrorism specialist (government, non-profit, private industry, or novice/student), the tome has pockets of absolute brilliance, as well as some chapters that offer so little their presence diminishes the book’s credibility. If the book’s chapters were available for *à la carte* online purchase, the reader could obtain the relevant chapters without the baggage of the other chapters. At \$215.00, the book *en toto* is not a good investment.

Mark J. Roberts is a subject matter expert