

REVIEW ESSAY

Taylor, Maxwell. *The Terrorist*. London: Brassey's, 1988.

Lodge, Juliet, ed. *The Threat of Terrorism*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988.

It used to be an easy assumption of most members of the public, and of too many officials, that terrorists were simply mad and that it was, consequently, unnecessary to attempt to understand them, their cause or the implications of their choice of this particular form of violent political manipulation.

Fortunately, those attitudes have largely passed and there is now general recognition that most terrorists are not behaving the way they do because of some recognizable psychological disturbance. Officials increasingly accept that understanding (and, in some cases, dealing with) the political, social or economic causes of terrorism is vital to the successful handling of terrorist incidents and, more particularly, of terrorist campaigns. And analysts now accept that there is a strategic logic which informs the choice of terrorism over other options as a political tool.

Our increasing understanding of terrorism and experience of dealing with it should have spawned an accompanying increase in attention to the psychological dimensions of the strategy and the perpetrators. Instead, the early disillusionment with rather simplistic studies of the individual psychology of terrorists, together with a shrugging off of the importance of psychological factors which came with the acceptance that terrorists are not usually mentally ill has meant that psychology has had little influence in either the academic study of terrorism or in counter-terrorism policy and operations. The generally poor standard of much of the literature on the psychology of terrorism has done little to encourage an interest in the area.

A handful of studies (eg., Crenshaw, 1985¹; Post, 1987²) have made useful attempts at applying the principles of organizational psychology and group processes to an analysis of the dynamics of terrorist organizations. Such work has pointed the way towards both a fascinating area of academic study and the possibility of practical outcomes for counter-terrorist policy makers and operational commanders. However, very few other studies have followed and the implications appear to have had little impact on policy or operations.

Maxwell Taylor's *The Terrorists* is an attempt to survey the major psychological approaches to the study of the terrorist, with an emphasis on behavioral approaches which might have practical application. In less than 200 pages Taylor succeeds well in confronting the complexities, ambiguities and moral confusion which surround terrorism and in explaining the reason for their existence. He writes not for the specialist psychologist, but for the well-informed general reader. Accordingly, his approach is straightforward and lacking in the oversupply of technical jargon which mars so much of the psychological literature.

Taylor begins, as so many before him, by trying to get to grips with the scope and nature of his subject through the issue of definition. He argues that the actions which constitute what we call terrorism are not necessarily unique in themselves. Accordingly, there are considerable problems in deciding about (and considerable room for disagreement over) exactly which behaviors to include within the notion of terrorism. Indeed, it is probably true that "assumptions which have been made about the uniqueness of terrorism have in fact contributed to our problems of analysis" (p. 15). The strength of the book lies in Taylor's attempts to explore the nature of these assumptions from the viewpoint of immediate victims, officials, the general public and the terrorists themselves. It is refreshing to see the subject approached from all of these perspectives free of the usual moral or ideological outrage which is often passed for analysis of terrorism.

Probably the weakest chapter in the book is one entitled "The Nature of Terrorism." This has the virtue of examining terrorism in many of its guises, from State terrorism, to revolutionary terrorism to warfare and includes discussion of crime by terrorists, terror in policing and illegality in the community. Taylor succeeds in driving home the point that the concept of terrorism has very fluid boundaries, but the discussion may well leave the reader wondering whether the concept has any boundaries at all. Maybe that is the point he is making. Certainly it is a concept which expands and contracts to suit the needs of both those who use and combat it.

The chapter also discusses the psychology of state terrorism. This is a vital subject which does not get sufficient treatment here. It is a topic which has the potential for considerable implications for international efforts to curtail state sponsorship of terrorism as well as for those aimed at curbing the excesses of repressive regimes. Taylor does little more than raise the issue. It really deserves a book in its own right.

The Terrorist also traverses the psychology of terrorism from other angles. It examines the nature of fanaticism, the individual psychology of terrorists and the dynamics of terrorist groups — the latter topic one which is receiving increasing recognition as a source of information of considerable potential interest to counter-terrorist operatives.

Overall, Taylor succeeds in convincing the reader that psychology does have something to offer the field of terrorism studies. He provides a balanced and comprehensive overview of what some of those contributions might be. It is in the nature of overviews, though, that they are tantalizing, but never satisfying. Too many topics are covered in too little detail to provide a solid basis for debating any particular one. Nevertheless, the book will be of interest to anyone who studies terrorism and, hopefully, will stimulate an interest in further pursuing the subject matter of the individual chapters.

The second volume under review, *The Threat of Terrorism*, attacks the problem from a much more familiar analytical perspective. It is an edited collection of essays on the counter-terrorist strategies of seven Western European states — Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, (the then West) Germany,

France, the United Kingdom and Italy — and the European Community as a whole.

As a source of information about the policies and experiences of these states, the book makes a useful addition to the terrorism scholar's library. However, a number of factors limit its usefulness. Although well-written and showing no major differences in quality (unevenness being a well-recognized drawback of edited works), the chapters are too descriptive and insufficiently critical. Partly this is because of space limitations and the obvious intention to write survey chapters. The result, however, is a collection which fails to address, except tangentially, the controversies and conflicts over counter-terrorism within and between the countries surveyed.

A further problem is the absence of a common analytical framework for each contribution. This means that each chapter approaches the problem according to the preference of each author, thus making a comparative assessment of the information contained in the book a rather difficult exercise. The final chapter, by the editor, Juliet Lodge, is a useful contribution which briefly, but effectively summarizes the potentials and problems of an integrated European approach to counter-terrorism policy. As with Taylor's book, this collection raises more questions than it answers, although in this case it is because of a limited coverage of the field rather than because the analysis itself stimulates further inquiry.

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Endnotes

1. Martha Crenshaw, "An organizational approach to the analysis of political terrorism," *Orbis*, 29, no. 3 (1985), pp. 465-89.
2. Jerrold M. Post, "Rewarding fire with fire: Effects of retaliation on terrorist group dynamics," *Terrorism: An International Journal*, 10, no. 1 (1987), pp. 23-36.