

Dietze, Carola: *The Invention of Terrorism in Europe, Russia, and the United States*. London: Verso 2021. ISBN: 9781786637192; 656 S.

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Carola Dietze's *Invention of Terrorism* opens with a clear and original argument: modern terrorism was invented between 1858 and 1866, sparked initially by Felice Orsini's attempt against Napoleon III and John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, which gave direct inspiration to the three assassination attempts from 1861–1866 of Oskar Wilhelm Becker, John Wilkes Booth, and Dmitry Vladimirovich Karakozov. She argues that these terrorists were inspired by „two revolutionary ideas. [...] those of nationhood and of liberty“ (p. 9), and that the phenomenon itself „originated in precisely those places—Italy, France, and the United States—where the promises of the American and French Revolutions, couple with a revolutionary tradition, resonated particularly strongly but were only partially fulfilled“ (p. 10). Dietze distinguishes herself from those who either conceive of terrorism as an „anthropological“ phenomenon as old as human society or locate its origins in leftist social revolutionists (anarchists, the People's Will in Russia) and/or nationalists (the Irish Fenian Brotherhood) active beginning a decade or two later. While novel in its particulars, her focus on the Italian nationalist movement as the origin point of modern terrorism does not challenge familiar arguments associating terrorism with nineteenth-century nationalism; by contrast, bringing the United States centrally into the narrative of terrorism's origins is a significant shift in perspective, following from Dietze's insight that many actors struggling for „liberty“ were consciously contending with the two institutions of human bondage still prominent in Europe and America at this time, slavery and serfdom.

Dietze's definition of terrorism draws directly from sociologist Peter Waldmann's. In her words, terrorism is „a politically motivated strategy of resorting to spectacular violence with the goal of producing a powerful psychological effect in a society – fear on the

one hand, sympathy on the other – in order to compel political change“ (p. 47). In addition, she emphasizes that terrorism contains „the element of provocation aimed at delegitimizing and exposing powerful opponents“ (p. 53). Terrorism arose, she argues, in societies undergoing rapid processes of modernization that also had a politicized population and in which political goals desired by elites seemed possible but the routes of both legal change and collective violence had proved unavailing (p. 62). Following the established literature, she notes that terrorism is at its core a communication strategy and thus could only develop in a society with a developed communications infrastructure, where mass media could relay terrorists' messages to their intended audience, provide a venue for the interpretation of their actions, and „produce feedback results“ (p. 67).

Chapters 2 and 4 cover the lives of Felice Orsini and John Brown, their acts of terrorism, and public reactions to these, while chapters 3 and 5 trace the transatlantic communications that spread knowledge about the „inventors“ of terrorism to others. In her account of Orsini, Dietze emphasizes that in the Italian states, aspirations to nationhood inspired by the French Revolution were repeatedly thwarted over the first half of the nineteenth century—by Napoleon, by the European Great Powers after the Congress of Vienna, and even by the soon-to-be Napoleon III (an erstwhile supporter of the Italian nationalist cause) in 1849. By 1857, she observes, „all attempts to achieve the national unification of Italy with collective violence had failed for nearly forty years“ (p. 118). Orsini, following in his father's footsteps as an ardent Italian nationalist and an adherent of Mazzini's Young Italy, became disenchanted by this string of failures, concluding, „when all further collective action became impossible, individual violence became an option to be taken seriously“ (p. 122). Orsini judged that the key obstacle to the revolution that would bring Italian unification was Napoleon III, making his assassination a necessary step to achieve this goal (p. 128). However, the spectacular bomb attack launched by Orsini and his collaborators not only failed to kill the emperor, but initially offered the would-be assassin no

opportunity to communicate his ideas to the public, despite extensive media attention to the act, threatening to doom his project. Yet, according to Dietze, „Orsini’s act ultimately did succeed, because Napoleon III resolved to use the assassination attempt and the assassins to affect a shift in French policy towards Italy“ (p. 149), namely direct intervention to support the liberation and unification of Italy, the very goal of the attackers. Orsini’s trial, especially his letters to Napoleon III advocating for the cause of Italian unification, which the emperor allowed to be published and utilized, made Orsini into a heroic martyr while also giving Napoleon III himself support in backing the unification of Italy, which occurred just three years after Orsini’s attack and execution.

Chapter 3 charts how Orsini’s attack and trial were reported in the United States, noting the ways that transatlantic shipping, the flourishing American penny press, and the telegraph all contributed to the rapid dissemination of news. The cause of Italian unity had a sympathetic audience among American radicals, especially abolitionists, who saw Orsini as an avatar of the struggle for liberty and universal rights in which they too were engaged.

Chapter 4 draws a direct parallel between John Brown’s career and Orsini’s. Dietze begins with the political blockage in the United States on the subject of the abolition of slavery, debated since the 1770s but still unresolved and intractable by the 1850s. Brown, like Orsini, followed in his father’s political footsteps, committed to the cause of anti-slavery from his youth. Yet he was initially a „typical member of the abolitionist movement“ (p. 192), subscribing to abolitionist periodicals, speaking at gatherings, and signing petitions. Like Orsini, he joined in direct action efforts, initially participating in the Underground Railroad, and becoming increasingly radicalized by events in the 1830s and 40s. By the 1850s, he and his sons were immersed in the bloody skirmishes in Kansas between slavery proponents and radical abolitionists, and he began to prepare for a guerilla war to liberate slaves, which he envisioned as cascading into a full-out war of emancipation. With only inferential evidence, Dietze suggests that Orsini’s ultimate success

in helping to achieve his political aim likely inspired Brown, whose vision of the attack on Harpers Ferry took on a more conscious coloring as a publicity-seeking act than originally conceived. After the attack failed as a military operation, the public debate in this case too helped establish Brown as a heroic martyr among Northern intellectuals and a dangerous menace among Southerners. While scholars have debated the role Brown’s raid played in bringing about the US Civil War, most at the time shared the opinion that it had certainly hastened it, cementing, as in the case of Orsini, the notion that terrorism could indeed effectively bring about political change that had been blocked.

Chapter 5 explores the European media’s reaction to the raid on Harpers Ferry, which included mostly positive assessments of Brown and his actions. Dietze devotes a significant section of this chapter to the situation in Russia, where „the political blockage lay in the question of emancipation“ (p. 396) as well. Since the Decembrist revolt in 1825, successive generations of Russian intelligentsia had fought fruitlessly for change, much like the Italian revolutionaries. By the time of John Brown’s raid, Russia was in the midst of reforms that would lead to the abolition of serfdom in 1861, yet without the intelligentsia’s hoped-for transformation of Russian social relations, leading to widespread disillusionment with existing institutions and toward support of terrorist tactics (p. 403). In this context, Brown was lionized, with Dietze arguing persuasively that he served as an inspiration for the revolutionary Rakhmetov in Chernyshevsky’s influential novel *What Is to Be Done?* (published in 1863).

Chapter 6 covers three would-be assassins (the „imitators,“ in her words) who modeled their attacks on those of Orsini and Brown (the „inventors“). Like the inventors, „all three belonged to the intellectual elite in their respective societies, were intensely engaged with political questions and were affected early on by the central political struggles of their time regarding the establishment of the nation and freedom“; they were also involved in social movements connected to these aspirations, and they „understood the political situation as blocked and saw the legal

possibilities of political action as too limited and ineffective as a result of this blockage“ (pp. 496–497). In addition, all three explicitly or implicitly drew on the example of either Orsini or Brown: Becker saw himself as pursuing the same nationalist goals as Orsini, while Booth engaged directly with the moral commitment to action of his political antagonist Brown, and Karakozov also followed Brown, albeit indirectly, via Chernyshevsky’s portrayal of Rakhmetov. According to Dietze, the imitators utilized rhetorical elements from the letters, interviews, and courtroom pronouncements of the inventors—including the emphasis on words over deeds, the understanding of the propaganda value of their acts, and the commitment to personal self-sacrifice—to forge the new genre of the terrorist claim of responsibility that would be taken up by later terrorists. Nevertheless, despite the media spectacle they generated, they failed to achieve their communication goals, partly due to their own problems of articulation, partly due to state tactics, such as isolating them in prison and holding closed trials (and Booth was killed before making it to trial), and partly due to the fact that „there were no powerful social figures and groups who would, for their own purposes, productively instrumentalize the aims of the three imitators, their violence or their person and thereby lend them political significance“ (p. 568).

In her book’s conclusion, Dietze considers how her study might guide future scholarship on terrorism, such as making right-wing counter-revolutionary terrorism like Booth’s more central to the discussion of terrorism, integrating the United States fully into the history of terrorism’s origins, and considering other acts of political violence both before and after the era of her study utilizing her definition of terrorism (especially helpful is her distinction between the instrumentalism that guides political murder versus the symbolic, communicative import of terrorism). Ultimately, she calls for the development of a more integrated understanding of terrorism, which is theoretically grounded, historically rooted, and transnational in scope.

Dietze’s central thesis is persuasive, as are many individual points, both broadly theo-

retical and regarding aspects of these specific historical cases, made across this sprawling work of over 600 pages. In addition to its many scholarly insights, the book tells the story of each of these assassins, their acts, and the media reaction in a lively and rich narrative style. Also deserving of note is that while Dietze offers a social scientific framework to explain the logic of terrorism’s development under certain social conditions, as a historian she is always at pains to ground the theory in specific historical contexts, emphasizing, especially in looking at the reception of terrorist acts, the importance of historical contingency. Despite the terrorists trying to shape the reception of their acts as much as possible, it was only through the words and deeds of state actors, representatives of social and political movements, media coverage, and the social conditions of the time that the inventors of terrorism achieved their eventual successes and the imitators did not. In such an ambitious work, there are inevitably claims that one might find questionable or stretched (for example, the argument for Orsini’s influence on Brown and Brown’s on Karakozov seems plausible but tenuous to me), but even if one takes issue with individual points, Dietze’s well-researched and well-reasoned work is compelling, important, and should be one that every scholar wishing to understand terrorism’s origins and think critically about terrorism as a phenomenon should engage with.

HistLit 2022-2-120 / Elun Gabriel über Dietze, Carola: *The Invention of Terrorism in Europe, Russia, and the United States*. London 2021, in: H-Soz-Kult 31.05.2022.