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Terrorism and international relations

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The terms 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' first emerged in the late eighteenth century during the French Revolution. Fearful that enemies of the Revolution were gaining in strength, the new French government undertook a reign of terror, identifying and executing enemies of the people.

These violent acts against sections of the population were effectively state terrorism. Terror was seen as virtuous and a necessary defence of the democratic principles of the Revolution.

What's known as modern terrorism started with the anarchist movement of the late nineteenth century, emerging mainly in Russia. Anarchists used targeted violence to raise awareness about the poor conditions under which citizens lived.

Their ultimate aim was revolution. So they tried to make clear their actions were not those of criminals, but were politically motivated.

For example, in 1878, Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich attempted to assassinate the governor of Saint Petersburg. She shot him once with a revolver before dropping the gun. When asked why she didn't flee, she said, 'I am a terrorist, not a murderer.'

This was the propaganda of the deed, a term widely used by anarchist revolutionaries.

As Mikhail Bakunin, a key anarchist theorist, put it, 'We must spread our principles, not with words, but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent and the most irresistible form of propaganda.'

Using new international transport and communications technologies, the anarchist movement became global in scale. It claimed many successful political assassinations, including the Russian tsar, a French president, one Russian and two Spanish prime ministers, and the kings of Italy, Portugal and Greece.

In 1902, after the assassination of US President William McKinley, his successor, Theodore Roosevelt, declared a global war on terror. Denouncing anarchy as a crime against the whole human race. He fostered international cooperation between states to facilitate deportations, tight immigration controls and the sharing of information.

The Ku Klux Klan emerged from the ashes of the American Civil War. It aimed to overturn new constitutional rights guaranteed to former slaves and restore white social and economic supremacy. Using terrorist tactics such as violent beatings and hangings, it was instrumental in white democrats regaining electoral control in many southern states.

The group was banned by President Grant's federal government in 1871, but this was too little, too late, as segregation was already being introduced across the former slave states. The Klan would re-emerge in the early twentieth century, again using a range of violent tactics to continue the fight against racial equality.

The end of the First World War brought with it the first stirrings of what would become a wave of national liberation movements. In their challenge to the legitimacy of European colonial power, violence was a key element of their struggles for independence. One of the early conflicts was the Irish War of Independence between 1919 and 1921. The often violent activities of the Irish Republican Army were central to the creation of a new Irish free state.

In the 1930s and '40s, the Zionist paramilitary group Irgun used bombings and other terror tactics in their fight for the creation of a Jewish state in British-controlled Mandate Palestine. And in Algeria, between 1954 and 1962, the Front de libération nationale led the fight for independence.

The colonising countries generally viewed such violence as terrorist activity. Citizens of the colonised countries inevitably perceive this as a delegitimization of their struggle for liberation. This difference in perspective is one reason it's hard to get an international consensus on what terrorism is, particularly for previously colonised countries in the Global South.

In the 1930s, fascist street movements emerged in Germany, Italy, Spain and other countries across Europe. Groups of uniformed men would take to the streets to intimidate and violently suppress those they saw as enemies of the state.

One of the best-known groups are the Brownshirts of Nazi Germany.

Here, what started as street violence morphed into a regime of state terror, leading to Kristallnacht, a pogrom against Jews throughout Nazi Germany and Austria that took place on the 9th and 10th of November 1938, and the horrors of the Holocaust during the Second World War.

State terror wasn't confined to fascist regimes. In the USSR, Stalin used the ever-present threat of state violence as part of his paranoid attempts to enforce political orthodoxy and control of the country. Fabricated trials of enemies of the state led to death sentences or forced labour in remote gulags.

In later decades, the focus of state terrorism shifted further west, to Latin America. A series of fascist regimes took power by force, and with the assistance and training of the US, enacted violent campaigns in which enemies of the state were routinely killed and disappeared.

In the 1970s and '80s, small groups of left-wing revolutionaries emerged who saw themselves as the Vanguard of an oppressed third world. Organisations like the Red Army Faction, also known as the Baader–Meinhof Group, used kidnappings and assassinations against industrialists, politicians and other symbols of the system they despised.

At the other end of the political spectrum, extreme right-wing groups harked back to the years of fascism. They used bombings and other terror tactics to create havoc and destruction to destabilise the democratic order.

Around the same time, a new wave of radical nationalist movements emerged to take up the struggles for liberation in countries in Europe and beyond. Founded in 1964, the Palestine Liberation Organization used hijackings and other terror tactics in its fight for self-determination for the Palestinian nation.

In the UK, the Provisional IRA staged a series of devastating attacks in its campaign to end British rule in Northern Ireland. In 1984, the IRA attempted to kill British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, blowing up the hotel in Brighton where she was staying.

In Spain, the Basque separatist movement ETA targeted police officers and senior politicians, including Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco, with bombings and shootings used as favoured tactics. Members of the wider population often ended up in the firing line. Although they were working towards national aims, liberation movements such as these built networks of solidarity and support that linked the Global North with the Global South.

In recent times, terrorist attacks are often associated with religious fundamentalism. The 1990s saw a series of events in which radical religious zealots used terrorism, often indiscriminately, against civilians, aiming to inflict as many casualties as possible.

Examples of what's been called 'new terrorism' include the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma by white power activist and Christian nationalist Timothy McVeigh, the assassination

of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by Jewish ultranationalist Yigal Amir, and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by members of a doomsday cult, Aum Shinrikyo Supreme Truth.

But perhaps the most significant group to emerge was al-Qaeda, a militant Islamist group under the leadership of Osama bin Laden.

Al-Qaeda's deadly attack on the United States on September 11th 2001 shocked the world.

US President George W Bush responded:

'Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.'