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 Book review

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***Ljiljana Kolarski\****

*Institute for Political Studies,  
 Belgrade*

**A GENEALOGY OF  
 TERRORISM -  
 COLONIAL LAW AND  
 THE ORIGINS  
 OF AN IDEA\*\***

A GENEALOGY OF  
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 JOSEPH MCQUADE



Joseph McQuade. 2021.  
*A Genealogy of Terrorism:  
 Colonial law and the Origins of  
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 University Press, p. 276.

\* [ljiljana.kolarski11@gmail.com](mailto:ljiljana.kolarski11@gmail.com)

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The newly published book, “*A Genealogy of Terrorism: Colonial Law and the Origins of an Idea,*” by author Joseph McQuade, brings a distinctive perspective on the appearance of the term “terrorist,” used in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial law. Categories of ‘extraordinary’ legal standing such as thugs, pirates, criminal tribes, fanatics, and terrorists demarcate the outer limits of this ‘colonial difference’ by providing oppositional figures, against whom colonialism could assert its legitimacy and expand its jurisdiction through the exercise of emergency sovereign power. As a result, the fundamental purpose of this book is to examine how official colonial policy inspired a wave of legislative measures that were employed as a potent means, and frequently as an excuse, to suppress any revolutionary effort in colonial India.

This book is divided into five segments that are ordered chronologically from the Anti-

Thug Campaigns that began in the 1830s to the international Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism in 1937. While the current work is based on deep-sited archival research in and around colonial India, the relevance of its findings to a broader colonial genealogy of terrorism will be touched upon throughout. In some places, the book engages with texts produced or statements made by the various ‘subversive figures’ who found themselves targets of colonial laws of exception, but the primary object of inquiry is the colonial state itself, as well as the legal and discursive strategies it pursued in dealing with extraordinary categories of criminality. What draws these various categories of criminality together is instead the interconnected tropes or idioms deployed by colonial officials in seeking to justify the imposition of draconian new laws and emergency measures designed to assuage the anxieties of a colonial state that saw itself as vulnerable to secretive and ‘unknowable’ conspiracies lurking at the margins of Indian society. Whether in the clandestine Kali-worship of the ‘thugs’, the collective nature of dacoit gangs, the international nature of the pirate threat, or the unreasoning religiosity

of Muslim ‘fanatics’, colonial assumptions regarding indigenous criminality would heavily inflect the genealogy of terrorism in ways that are still evident to these days.

From this perspective, attempts to capture or exterminate the thugs, dacoits, pirates, and fanatics of the nineteenth century highlight both the paranoia of colonial officials seeking to establish control over territories and peoples they poorly understood on the one hand, and the role of brute force in extending British control over the subcontinent through a coercive apparatus of legal and military control on the other.

For that reason, the author offers two perspectives on the emergence of terrorism: the origins of terrorism in primordial histories of religious or cultural difference, and the spread of ‘propaganda by deed’ following the rise of print capitalism and new communications technologies in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. In general, this second approach has provided a more productive framework for understanding the roots of modern “terrorism” as a tactic of political communication directly linked to the shifting global landscape of the modern period.

Many of the descriptions associated with modern terrorism such as its presumed apolitical nature, fanaticism, cowardice, and insanity, and the inherent danger it poses to international peace, were originally articulated and rehearsed most explicitly in colonial settings like British India. Indian revolutionary violence was a topic of grave concern for British metropolitan politicians in the early twentieth century. With the rise of anarchism in Europe and anticolonial radicalism abroad towards the end of the long nineteenth century, an international system previously defined by the relationships between sovereign states became increasingly concerned with the threat posed to state sovereignty itself by the existence of radical insurgents capable of subverting domestic authority. As a world of empires transformed into a world of nations following the global cataclysm of the First World War and the establishment of the new international society that achieved the expression through the League of Nations the spectre of “the terrorist” began to stalk the margins of international law.

The growing need emerged in the late 1930s to clarify the meaning of a term that, by this point in time, became

ubiquitous in its usage by government officials. The word ‘terrorism’, alongside its physical personification in the figure of ‘the terrorist’, appears so frequently in the colonial police records of 1930s India that a reader could easily be misled into assuming that this term was the natural definition through which revolutionary activities were always described. The author indicates that none has yet provided a comprehensive genealogy of the term ‘terrorism’ within the context of colonial India throughout the height of British rule. Ruminating whether a historical or contemporary figure, or set of figures, should or should not be considered a terrorist versus a freedom fighter is often a political question not a historical one. Furthermore, although the term ‘terrorism’ did indeed exist in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it did not come to be used as the primary category for describing revolutionary violence in India until the 1920s. Hence, the first chapter demonstrated, the origins of colonial legislation targeting so-called extraordinary forms of violence in India have a deeper genealogy, stretching at least as far back as campaigns against dacoity, thuggee, and piracy from the late eighteenth century to the 1830s.

The second chapter explores the phenomenon of ‘propaganda by bomb’ in colonial Bengal, viewing the phenomenon distinct from the ‘propaganda by deed’ carried out by European anarchists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By tracing the inner workings of Bengal’s revolutionary participants, this chapter unpacks how colonial perceptions of these organizations shaped official fears and anxieties and contributed to the genealogy of a new target of political concern called ‘terrorism’. The use of the bomb in political assassinations by Bengali revolutionaries marked a new phase in colonial understandings of political violence and sparked a wave of emergency legislation that sought to police the interrelated propaganda tools of bombs and newspapers. Analyzing the relationship between bombs and ideas, this chapter argues that revolutionaries in this period used bombs as vehicles for disseminating an anti-colonial message to a wider audience than could be achieved through the circulation of radical newspapers or pamphlets. This strategy of propaganda by bomb culminated in the highly publicized attack on India’s viceroy in 1912, laying the groundwork

for increasingly ambitious plots to overthrow British rule entirely following the outbreak of the First World War.

The third chapter demonstrates that the wartime expansion of emergency laws was not only a response to security concerns or to the threat of foreign German interference, as scholars have typically regarded them, but also served as the colonial state’s opportunistic answer to the more long-term political challenge presented by anti-colonial nationalism. By erasing the longer anti-colonial pre-history of revolutionary organizations such as Ghadar, and instead portraying them as collaborators with the German enemy, imperial officials sought to legitimize the extension of extraordinary legislation that would otherwise have been much more difficult to justify. Despite their claim to be nothing more than war measures necessitated by a specific state of emergency, these laws retained a degree of flexibility that allowed them to strain the limits of executive authority under the expansive category of public security. Towards the end of the war, officials returned to earlier arguments regarding the supposed dangers posed by ‘political criminals’, but in the

increasingly politically charged context of the interwar period, these arguments were given far less assurance. The First World War marked an important bridge in sparking the expansion of both anti-colonial revolutionary networks and imperial laws of emergency, between the pre-war language of “political dacoity” and the construction of the new legal categories of “terrorism” and “the terrorist” that came to dominate interwar understandings of political violence.

The next chapter assesses the complex relationship between the Indian National Congress and revolutionary politics, demonstrating that although the Gandhi’s strategy (*satyagraha*) ultimately won, it did so only by a narrow margin in the face of the more radical political aspirations of important figures. Following the rise of Gandhi’s non-cooperation campaign in the early 1920s, British officials began to consciously adopt the term ‘terrorism’ in 1925 as part of an attempt to render the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act more palatable to the British Parliament. By the 1930s, the term “terrorism” became the standard label applied to revolutionary nationalists, despite the relatively infrequent usages of this

term during the period before and during the First World War. The label of “terrorism” became a useful way of delegitimizing the tactics of revolutionaries while simultaneously justifying the creeping expansion of executive rule, during precisely the same period in which colonial authorities were ostensibly devolving a share of power to elected Indian legislatures. By carefully deploying the vocabulary of terrorism in criminalizing the politics of Indian revolutionaries, the colonial state demonstrated the core of executive sovereignty that lay beneath the thin surface of its legislative reforms. The close connections between revolutionary organizations and “mainstream” Indian nationalism forced colonial officials to develop new discursive strategies to justify the continued imposition of increasingly draconian “emergency” legislation. In this context, the category of “terrorism” became a useful rhetorical tool that was explicitly deployed with the goal of justifying controversial measures to the British Parliament on the one hand, and the Indian public on the other.

The fifth and also the final chapter of this book, situates the previously made conclusions within a truly global context

by exploring India's role at the League of Nations during the debates surrounding the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism in 1937, the first international law to target terrorism as a distinct category of global crime. A closer look at India's role in this convention provides new and important ways of understanding the larger context in which colonial officials framed their ideas about terrorism as a new and particularly dangerous form of global criminality, a 'world crime' that threatened not only the governing structures of an existing political regime, but rather the very notion of civilization itself.

Finally, the book provides significant ground for considering "terrorism" as the product of a specific set of historical circumstances and concerns, rather than a natural category of international criminality. The conclusion underlines the importance of culturally based explanations of the nature of terrorism today, arguing that comprehending terrorism and developing counterterrorism patterns requires a clear and simple description based on unbiased observations rather than cultural assumptions.