International conference at Tulane University, New Orleans, October 23-26, 2008. Co-sponsored by the GHI’s in Washington, London and Paris as well as the Department of History at Tulane University, Murphy Institute of Political Economy at Tulane University, and Stiftung Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland. Conveners: Carola Dietze (GHI Washington), Claudia Verhoeven (George Mason University), Mareike König (GHI Paris), and Benedikt Stuchtey (GHI London). Participants: Patrick Bahners (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung), Melanie A. Bailey (Centenary College of Louisiana), David Blackbourn (Harvard University), Oleg Budnitskii (Academy of Science, Moscow), Gavin Cameron (University of Calgary), Alexander Demandt (Friedrich Meinecke Institute, Berlin), Barbara B. Diefendorf (Boston University), Johannes Dillinger (Oxford Brookes University), Roni Dorot (European University Institute), Mark Driscoll (University of North Carolina), Dan Edelstein (Stanford University), Christopher Ely (Florida Atlantic University), Beverly Gage (Yale University), James L. Gelvin (University of California, Los Angeles), Joshua D. Goldstein (University of Calgary), Adrian Guelke (Queens University of Belfast), Richard Bach Jensen (Louisiana Scholars' College), Jeffrey Kaplan (University of Wisconsin Oshkosh), Isaac Land (Indiana State University), Ann Larabee (Michigan State University), Friedrich Lenger (University of Giessen), Martin A. Miller (Duke University), Paul Miller (McDaniel College), Daniel Monterescu (Central European University), Gotelind Müller-Saini (Heidelberg University), Neeti Nair (University of Virginia), Timothy H. Parsons (Washington University), Lynn Patyk (University of Florida), Samuel C. Ramer (Tulane University), David Rapoport (University of California, Los Angeles), Klaus Ries (University of Jena), Frithjof Benjamin Schenk (University of Munich), Ulrich Sieg (University of Marburg), Michal Targowski (Nicolas Copernicus University), Peter Waldman (University of Augsburg), Niall Whelehan (European University Institute), George Williamson (University of Alabama), Andrew Zimmerman (George Washington University). Additional participants: Elizaveta Budnitskaya, Jeffry M. Diefendorf (University of New Hampshire), Marline Otte (Tulane University), Peter G. Stillman (Vassar College).

This conference brought together leading scholars from Canada, Europe, the United States, the Middle East, and Asia to explore the links between terrorism and modernity as they articulate different forms of political violence on the global and local scales. Posing a critical alternative to Eurocentric historiography as well as to the contemporary reification of the phenomenon of terrorism, the participants employed sophisticated theoretical perspectives that drew on a wealth of empirical evidence. Revitalizing key conceptual and methodological debates, the conference illuminated the problem of terrorism’s historicity and provided a historically grounded definition of the subject.
Framing the foundational question of terrorism’s “modernity,” the introductory comments launched a lively debate. Carola Dietze and Claudia Verhoeven started with a series of open questions and guiding problems that set the terms for the following discussion. Both terrorism and modernity, they argued, present us with profound problems of definition and periodization regarding their respective historical itineraries in different locations and their linkage to state apparatuses, collective consciousness, and constructions of past, present, and future. In his keynote address entitled “Terrorism—A Timeless Topic,” Alexander Demandt surveyed more than two millennia of political violence to support the argument that terrorism has always been a part of contentious politics. From Spartan random killings through the zealot rebels in Judea, the Assassins, the Saint Bartolomeo massacres, the French Revolution, and the Red Brigades, terror has been deployed as both a “bottom up” and a “top down” strategy of mobilization, intimidation, and political bargaining. Terrorism thus enact a “diabolical” dialectic cycle: When violent means are effective, they become legitimized as a rational means to an end, and when they bear no immediate fruits, they call for perpetual escalation until the goal is achieved. This bleak conclusion construes terrorist violence as an integral, “timeless” part of political history. The second keynote speech put forth the opposing view, namely, that rebel terrorism is a specifically “modern” phenomenon. To support this thesis, David Rapoport’s exposé “The Distinctive Features of Modern Terrorism” followed the unfolding of acts of terror since the 1880s and dissected different modalities of political violence. The subsequent emergence of four historical waves (Anarchist, Anti-Colonial, New Left, Religious) attest to the unique characteristics of terrorism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which are markedly distinct from previous forms of violence and therefore call for a critical interrogation of modern technology and culture.

Panel I, “Premodern Comparisons,” was dedicated to terrorism’s prehistory and its nineteenth-century interpretations. Johannes Dillinger, in his talk “Forerunners of Terrorism and Nineteenth-Century Historians” analyzed how nineteenth-century historians conceived the history of political crimes. Addressing the role of the emerging state in shaping European patterns of violence, Dillinger described how the fight of law enforcement agencies against political criminals contributed to state building and the creation of new security apparatuses. In the historiography of the nineteenth century, he concluded, the political criminals of the premodern era were considered to be lacking any political agenda. Therefore, they were not regarded as terrorists, although treason came close to the phenomenon of terrorism. In his talk “The World Church of Terror: The Papacy after Lord Acton,” Patrick Bahners drew on Acton’s work (1867) about the Lucca law, which permitted
the liquidation of former citizens who converted to Protestantism. Treating the papal supremacy theory as interchangeable with the theory justifying the assassination of heretics, Acton conceived the Church’s tradition as a web of lies which exercised a modern concept of sovereignty. Bahners argued that by isolating events from their context, Acton’s account of the Catholic Church led him to develop a moral absolutism that did not differentiate between past actions and present judgments. Thus engaged in an intellectual war on terror, liberal universalism may breed its own fanaticism. Concluding the first panel, Dan Edelstein’s paper on “Law and Terror: Toward a Theory of Totalitarian Justice” argued that the Terror of the French Revolution was rooted in the Enlightenment tradition of natural rights. He further exposed the dual system of justice as an essential feature linking Jacobin Terror laws to the subsequent totalitarian justice of the Nazi and Soviet regimes. This duality was predicated on the existence of traditional criminal courts alongside new “extraordinary” courts that expanded their authority so as to eventually consume normative justice.

Panel II, “Intellectual History,” unpacked some of the conceptual questions raised in the opening session. In their paper “What is so Terrible about the Terror? Hegel, the French Revolution, and Contemporary Terrorism as Reenactment of Modernity,” Joshua Goldstein and Gavin Cameron turned to philosophy to reposition the logic of terrorism. Hegel’s analysis of the Jacobin Terror reveals a twofold logic of terrorism that constitutes a uniquely modern process of simultaneous identity construction and destruction. This dynamic of violence exposes contemporary terrorism as a logical articulation of modern identity. Klaus Ries’s paper on “Fichte’s Philosophy of the Act” described how Fichte’s thought, influenced by the French Revolution, constituted a theoretical basis of “Modern Terrorism.” He developed the figure of the “Modern Intellectual” who preached a political radicalism referring to the French Revolution and ultimately constituted an important foundation of the terrorist “act of conviction” and the formation of political parties in Germany. Lynn Patyk concluded the session with a paper on “Modern Terrorism and the Sensitive Heart,” which highlighted the emotional public discourse of “covert sympathy” for the victims of state oppression in the nineteenth century. One of the predominant types was the sensitive terrorist, a “wounded soul” whose violence was motivated by identification with the victims of state cruelty.

Panel III, “Wars and the Technology of the Bomb,” interrogated the transformations in styles of warfare brought about by new methods of terrorism in the nineteenth century. Andrew Zimmerman’s paper “Barricade Warfare and the Origins of Revolutionary and Military Modernity” identified the increase in barricade warfare during the 1848-49 revolutions across Europe
as a new battlefield for regular and revolutionary militants. Using the 
Communist Manifesto as a reference point, he showed how the prevailing 
view of historical optimism made way for a new form of military realism 
after 1848. Marx and Engels closely followed the American Civil War, during 
which the strategies of revolutionary and conventional war merged further, 
continuing a transatlantic dynamic that lasted into the era of decolonization. 
Ann Larabee’s paper “The History and Subversive Rhetoric of Bomb-Making 
Manuals in the United States” examined how radical groups gained expertise 
through the circulation of bomb-making instructions. Analyzing bomb-
making as a form of cultural and technical production, Larabee showed how 
bomb-making had many of the same functions recently ascribed to cultural 
forms like protest songs, murals, poetry, and documentary movies. Bombs, 
she concluded, are meaning-generating machines which often draw on “le-
gitimate” sources. In the same vein, Niall Whelehan’s presentation dealt 
with Fenian violence in the late nineteenth century and the way its changing 
definitions of uprising and new repertoires of violence—new technologies, 
asassinations, and bombs—borrowed elements from several jurisdictions. 
According to Whelehan, processes of modernization enabled exchanges be-
tween Irish nationalists from inside and outside Ireland, thereby challenging 
routines of violence, which led to their self-perception as crossing existing 
political boundaries.

Panel IV, “Big Developments,” explored the transformations in material in-
frastucture and social organization that served as conditions for the rise of 
modern terrorism. In his paper “Urban Space and Populist Terror in Russia, 
1878–1881,” Christopher Ely proposed to read the emergence of radical groups, 
e.g., the “Will of the People,” as a product of the changing environmental reali-
ties in Russia, especially urbanization. While Russian populists idealized the 
countryside, their ideas and organizations remained firmly embedded in the 
cityscape of urban Russia. By the late 1870s, they understood that effective 
manipulation of urban space offered them a remarkable source of power and 
influence. In “Attacking the Empire’s Achilles’ Heels: Railroads and Terrorism 
in Tsarist Russia,” Benjamin Frithjof Schenk identified modern transporta-
tion systems as vehicles of mobility and mobilization. While railroads served 
mainly to increase state control, they also became an effective device in the 
hands of political forces dedicated to destabilizing state control. From the 
1860s, terrorist assaults on railway tracks aimed to end the lives of the tsar 
and high officials, the expropriation of state and private treasuries, and the 
obstruction of military transports within the country. Mareike König’s paper 
“Terrorism, Migration and the Fear of an International Complot” used the 
example of Germans in Paris from 1871 to 1895 to examine the impact of mi-
gration in constructing a transnational landscape of fear. Even though French
President Carnot was assassinated by the Italian anarchist Sante Caserio in Lyon in 1894 and Empress Elisabeth of Austria was killed by the Italian Luigi Luccheni in Geneva in 1898, König concluded that migration cannot be used as an analytical category to explain the emergence of terrorism and called the “international conspiracy” thesis into question. The session concluded with Richard Jensen’s analysis of anarchist terrorism, often cited at the turn of the century as the greatest single threat to civilization. Between 1880 and 1914, Jensen showed, the efforts to combat anarchist terrorism took place globally. The anarchist threat proved a powerful stimulus to police centralization, professionalization, and technical modernization in Italy, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Spain. Eventually it was the combination of economic, social, and political factors, along with an effort to downplay the importance of anarchist terrorism, that best explains the decline of this form of violence in certain countries. Careful police intelligence work and international police cooperation, together with more professional protection for monarchs and heads of state, could aid in reducing anarchist terrorism, but heavy-handed repression only worsened it.

Panel V, “Colonial and Anti-Colonial Assassinations,” began with Michal Targowski’s paper “Against Colonialism or Social Iniquities? Polish Terrorists in the Long Nineteenth Century,” which presented Polish terrorism as a reaction to two main forces: capitalism and the tsarist autocracy. Nationalist accounts were deliberately disguised by socialist programs so as to attract and mobilize youth. The rise of Polish terrorism, he concluded, was tightly connected to Russian terrorism, which was motivated by a radical socialism directed against the tsar’s capitalist and autocratic pressure. Moving the debate to the African colonial context, Timothy Parsons described the October 1905 assassination of Koitalel Arap Samoei, leader of central Kenya’s Nandi, by Captain Meinertzhagen, a military representative of the East African Protectorate (EAP). Parsons investigated the debate surrounding the question “Who is the terrorist?” by examining two colonizer and colonized cultures that resorted to extreme political violence. Since the British framed their African imperial project as a “civilizing mission,” the question of colonial modernity came to the fore, leading Parsons to challenge the Eurocentric conception of “modernity” in the colonial context. In “Gandhian ‘Satyagraha’ as Terrorism: The Limits to Non-Violence in Late Colonial India,” Neeti Nair analyzed Gandhi’s repudiation of Bhagat Singh—a popular “terrorist” who fought against colonialism and was consequently condemned to death. She argued that Gandhi’s refusal to support political actors who threatened his position as the nation’s most prominent advocate actually amplified Singh’s legacy and popularity.
Panel VI, “Comparisons,” set forth two case studies that shed new light on European terrorism. In her paper “China and the ‘Anarchist Wave of Assassinations,’” Gotelind Müller-Saini revisited the emergence of the so-called anarchist terrorism in China (termed “assassination-ism” at the time). Critically engaging Rapoport’s wave concept in the East Asian context, Müller-Saini argued that this wave of violence should not be called “anarchist,” because what circulated around the globe was more of a strategy. In China, for example, the strategy of assassinations was taken up by Chinese nationalists. Further elaborating the comparative framework, Peter Waldmann addressed the “lack” of terrorism in Argentina in the late nineteenth century. Terrorism should be regarded not only as a form of “irregular violence” committed by non-state actors but also as a form of symbolic violence or “violence as communication” (aka propaganda of the deed), committed by small groups who seek to represent and mobilize the masses. Contrasting the upsurge of urban guerrilla movements in the Cono sur in the 1960s and 1970s with the lack of terrorist groups eighty years before, Waldmann argued that the conditions for waging urban guerrilla wars in the twentieth century help us to understand why the situation in the late nineteenth century was not yet “ripe” for the birth of a terrorist movement in Argentina.

Panel VII, “Nineteenth-Century Interpretations and Reactions,” addressed different narratives and responses to terrorism. In “Narrating the Origins of Political Violence,” George Williamson analyzed German reports on “revolutionary machinations” in the 1820s. Following the 1819 assassination of conservative publicist and playwright August von Kotzebue, a secret “report” sought to explain the origins of “revolutionary machinations” in Germany by relying on a “history of ideas” approach to German nationalism, which located these origins in the writings of Fichte, Arndt, Jahn, and Schleiermacher and then traced the influence of these ideas among German nationalist and liberal associations. The report also contained a psychological profile that characterized the assassins as mentally unstable, while the movement as a whole was referred to as a “sickness of mind.” As the term “terrorism” had not yet acquired a clearly negative connotation, state discourse relied on other strategies to condemn the violence it saw as inherent in the liberal and nationalist movements, thus undermining the emerging image of the assassin as a righteous tyrannicide and presenting him as a fanatic who killed for the sake of revolution. The “Increasing Importance of Values” was addressed by Ulrich Sieg, who studied the reactions in German philosophy after the assassination attempts against Wilhelm I. Sieg traced the genealogy of a theory of values to Hermann Lotze. After the assassination attempts in 1878, Bismarck launched an attack against intellectuals and leftist liberals who were blamed for “paving the way for socialism” by “systematically undermining all pillars of the monarchical
state.” In “Terrorism and the American Left, 1877-1920,” Beverly Gage traced the evolution of American left-wing terrorism from the Molly Maguires and Haymarket episodes of the late nineteenth century through the Wall Street explosion of 1920, arguing that ideological and tactical disputes over the use of violence, especially terrorism, formed a key point of factionalization within the American left. At the same time, dramatic acts of terrorism such as the 1910 dynamiting of the Los Angeles Times often united progressives, anarchists, socialists, syndicalists, and non-revolutionary labor unions around common causes such as free speech, due process, immigration policy, and labor reform. The session concluded with Melanie Bailey’s paper “Civilization or Barbarism? Violence and Terror in the French Revolutionary Tradition.” Analyzing the work of Domenico Sarmiento, who was forced into exile in Chile by the political situation in his native Argentina, Bailey reflected on the limits of modernity’s civilizing mission in Latin American political culture. Whereas mid-nineteenth-century Britain or France embodied civilization for Sarmiento, the violent politics of Argentina suggested that it belonged less to civilization than to barbarism. The decentralization of the struggle for independence and the prolonged weakness of the central government in Argentina had inured people to violence as a feature of the political culture. Sarmiento decried the harmful results and urged his people to opt for law over disorder, which he cast as a choice between civilization and barbarism. Other nineteenth-century writers and politicians, both in Latin America and in Europe, also attributed civility to those individuals or peoples who declined to engage in political violence. Representatives of a broader trend, mid-nineteenth-century thinkers such as Sarmiento and Blanc rejected political violence not only as ineffective but also as uncivilized and inhumane.

Panel VIII, “Legacies,” explored novel approaches to historical and contemporary terrorism. Mark Driscoll’s paper “Tokyo, 1923: Terror, Spectacle and the Origins of Modern Japan” analyzed the links between the 1923 Great Eastern Japan Earthquake, the emergence of Japan’s military police (kempeitai), and the institutionalization of a “state of exception” targeting Koreans and other “internal enemies.” The martial law instituted after the 1923 earthquake, the first in modern Japanese history, granted unprecedented legal powers to the military police. Targeting proletarian and syndicalist thought as the main threat to “public security,” the military police planned to assassinate several of Japan’s leftists during the earthquake crisis. The ensuing trial was the first mass spectacle that legitimized terrorism as a violent means to protect the Japanese emperor and national body. Driscoll concluded that the entirety of Japan’s modern history could be read through the kempeitai, and its “state terrorism.” Paul Miller’s paper “Compromising Memory: The Site of the Sarajevo Assassination” examined a potent symbol of Serb nationalism, the footprints
marking the spot where Gavrilo Princip stood when he shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Addressing the shifting memorial landscape at the murder site, Miller argued that the memorialization process rarely broke free from outside influences. For many Westerners, the Sarajevo assassination confirmed stereotypes of Balkan barbarism, allowing them to divert blame for the war from their own leaders. Indeed, numerous Western “terrorism experts” today still use this assassination to illustrate the consequences of a single terrorist act on global events. The session concluded with James Gelvin’s paper “Nationalism, Anarchism, Reform: Understanding Political Islam from the Inside Out.” Gelvin provocatively proposed to view Al-Qaeda actions as a form of Islamo-anarchist violence. Rather than interpreting contemporary Islamist globalized radicalism as a mere “pathology” or an embodiment of Oriental backwardness, Gelvin recast the history of the state in the Middle East as a forced colonial imposition rooted in nineteenth-century reformism, nationalism, and anarchism. Diametrically opposed to “ameliorist” movements and analytically distinct from “Islamo-nationalists,” Al-Qaeda exemplifies a global project of Islamo-anarchist liberation that puts the bond of religion over the bond of nationalism and ethno-territorialism.

The conference came to a close with Friedrich Lenger’s comments, which reframed the problem of modern terrorism and called for coining more precise analytical terms and employing diverse methodologies. Lenger suggested a narrow definition of terrorism as the violence of non-state actors targeting a strong state structure. Terrorism, this implied, emerges when partisan warfare (including its urban manifestations, e.g., barricade fighting) is impossible. He also emphasized that terrorism is symbolic—rather than primarily instrumental—violence that is directed at the public and the media. Finally, he argued for a restricted chronological framework, reaffirming terrorism’s traditional date of birth in the 1870s and 1880s, and stressing the importance of “high modernity” for the historical emergence of this new form of political violence. Therefore, he regarded terrorism as a European phenomenon, which has been made global by the exchange of people, goods, and ideas. The participants unanimously acknowledged the success of the conference in promoting individual and collective research agendas which articulate the long durée of terrorism as well as its localized engagements with nationalism, socialism, and anarchism.

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