

### State Terrorism

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### Abstract and Keywords

Seeing official violence as unduly neglected, “critical terrorism studies” scholars have pushed hard for state terrorism to become a central concern of the emergent field of “terrorism studies.” Although laudable in intention, such critiques have been blunted in their impact by path dependency in how state violence has conventionally been studied. Some examples such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union have indeed been relatively well explored by scholars. Yet these truly spectacular examples are only a small part of the historical picture of state violence—and against that wider backdrop they appear highly aberrational. Any systematic attempt to understand the complexity of inter-relationship between state and non-state violence must develop both far greater historical awareness and sociological discernment.

Keywords: critical terrorism studies, state terrorism, torture, human rights, death squads

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## Introduction

“TERRORISM by states remains unstudied and mostly invisible,” asserts Richard Jackson (2009, 70). Taken at the face value, it seems a claim designed to lift eyebrows. As long ago as 1975, indeed, it was observed that “the three most perennially popular subjects currently to be found on the bedside tables of the reading public [are] golf, cats and the Third Reich” (Coren 1975, 1). Forty years later, something like that triptych of interests probably still holds good: at any rate, the keen postgraduate assigned a literature review on the Nazis is unlikely to find that their chief difficulty is finding books. Another piece by Jackson helpfully clarified (albeit in a footnote) that he did not actually mean “that state violence and repression has not been studied, but rather that it has not been systematically studied under the rubric of ‘terrorism’ or by recognised terrorism studies scholars” (Jackson 2008, 389).

Such views are clearly designed as a critique of the foundational orientation of terrorism studies towards insurgent actors. Any broad and dispassionate investigation of terrorism—broadly understood as violent intimidation for political effect—must inexorably lead into

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the corridors of power since “state terrorism is incontrovertibly far more prevalent and destructive than non-state or insurgent terrorism” (Jackson et al. 2010, 2). It is strongly implied in this critique that scholars of terrorism should be concentrating far more upon the state (Jackson 2008, 377). I follow that prompt, focusing here only upon states’ use of domestic repression and “hard power” projection. I deliberately put the important subject of clandestine “state-sponsored terrorism” to one side, since it arguably constitutes a relatively discrete subject area in its own right (Alexander 1985; Byman 2005; Messinger 1935).

The spirited critique that I have sketched has been advanced by scholars who have recently arrayed themselves behind the banner of the “Critical Terrorism Studies” movement (George 1991; Jackson et al. 2009, 2010; Blakeley 2010, 14). Pioneering work dating back to the 1980s is duly acknowledged, but this is a critique that has gathered (p. 332) momentum sharply since the so-called War on Terror (Stohl and Lopez 1984). On the theoretical front, Richard Jackson and Ruth Blakeley have recently done the most sustained heavy lifting here for building the case for state terrorism as a worthy, indeed vital, subject for study (Jackson 2008; Jackson et al. 2010). Since they see the core of the phenomenon of terrorism as the instrumental use of violence (against some) to communicate (to many) they are at pains to reject an actor-centered approach to their subject in favor of an action-centered one (Jackson et al. 2010; Blakeley 2010). While non-state actors may indeed practice such tactics on a “retail” scale, states with their typically far greater resources have the luxury of doing so on a “wholesale” basis (Chomsky 1990, 26; Jackson et al. 2010, 230). Mere scales of atrocity are ultimately beside the point in this view, however. In Blakeley’s words, “even if the motives, functions, and effects of terrorism by states and non-state actors are different, the act of terrorism itself is not, because the core characteristics of terrorism are the same whether the perpetrator is a state or a non-state actor” (Blakeley 2010, 13).

The proponents of this “state terrorism turn” in terrorism studies occasionally seem a little downcast that they have not made more converts (Jackson et al. 2010, 237). By their own terms of reference, this seems a little pessimistic. First, earlier and more traditionalist generations of terrorism studies scholars often acknowledged the phenomenon of state atrocity more than has been recognized (Gearty 1997; Wilkinson 2006, 1): second, this trend in emphasis continues to grow well beyond the confines of the Critical Terrorism Studies field (Schmid 2013, 48–9, 68–70, 203–6; Duncan et al. 2013). “Can the state be terrorist?” asked Peter Sproat back in 1991. If the layperson’s answer was obviously “yes” back then in 1991, then it surely is all the more so now.

Yet the key question remains one of analytical utility: namely, what is gained by describing state repression as “state terrorism” rather than by some other label? Attempts to “insist upon the importance of the distinction between state terrorism and repression” on the basis of instrumentality here seem over-ambitious (Blakeley 2010, 14: also Stohl and Lopez 1984, 7–8): can we really identify a government repression that is not freighted with a wider communicative intent to terrify? It seems unlikely, even if the study of state repression has remained curiously indifferent to the question of any wider terroristic in-

tent (Davenport and Inman 2012, 627). At any rate, we are faced with a vast expansion of the traditional subject area of terrorism.

Some would wish to widen it further. In particular, I am keen to pick up the gauntlet left by Richard Jackson in his sketch for a research agenda on state terrorism:

we see real value in exploring the ways in which studies on state terrorism can add a value to the study of non-state terrorism. It seems clear that state and non-state terrorism are linked, and in some real-world cases, they feed off each other in violent cycles. However, a stronger case needs to be made that studying state and non-state forms of the phenomenon together is a useful way forward.

(Jackson et al. 2010, 238)

Certainly, this is an important challenge: to identify the basic processes of mutual reinforcement under which state repression and anti-state political violence feed off each other voraciously. Yet an important new body of integrated comparative work has only just begun to grapple with this key dialectic: of how, in Richard English's phrasing "the mutually shaping relationship *between* non-state terrorism and state counter-terrorism continues to determine local and international experience in complex and powerful ways" (English 2015, 1: original emphasis). And here it is worth stressing that governments are as prone to miscalculation as any other actor (English 2015, 14). As a recent excellent study of the birth of the Weimar Republic concludes, "in the end, it was the fear that they would become victims of violence that led the state's political leadership and large parts of society to support unprecedented levels of warlike violence against their internal enemies, real and *imagined*" (Jones 2016, 4: added emphasis).

### I

As a historian, and in line with my earlier work on the subject, I argue for the value of taking a long-term view of the general phenomenon of terrorism. If we want to understand terrorism *now*, then it might make some sense to reflect upon terrorism *past*. In other words, looking at how terrorism has developed might help us towards a deeper appreciation of our current situation. That approach might sound like common sense—to a historian, at least. But in general it is also been exactly what has *not* happened: as a rule, the academic terrorism "industry" has been conspicuously more interested in making terrorism history than making histories of terrorism.

But some consideration of the historical roots of the phenomenon is surely unavoidable. As any discussion of the origins of the term in the cauldron of the French Revolution invariably notes, "terrorism" belonged to the state long before it belonged to the counter-state (Townshend 2002; Guelke 2008, 19). State terrorism thus has roots in modernity that run both wide and deep: indeed, it constitutes one of the "elemental forces" that go to make up the contemporary world (Wilson 2013, 14).

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It could hardly be otherwise, since violence is the state's core business. "The modern state is a compulsory association which organises domination," argued Max Weber in his famous 1919 lecture, "Politics as a Vocation". In this classic exposition, indeed, the *primary* business of the state is to organize violence better than anyone else: to become the Arch Terrorist on the Block and to run a successful monopoly of intimidation within its sovereign territory. Its next most important task is to disguise this foundational reality. When it is successful, the result is a type of alchemy—Bourdieu's "state magic"—by which the government's reserves of overwhelming force are converted into the liquid capital of social legitimacy: a fusion of shock and law (quoted in Thorup 2010, 51).

What, then, is to stop successful state monopolies of violence appearing blatantly terroristic? Historically, the classic European answer to that is the emergence of the *Rechtsstaat*—the commitment of state elites to perform public displays of legalistic self-restraint (Wilson 2013). A formal separation of powers between judicial, legislative, and executive functions prevents too naked a tyranny; and in doing so a merciful veil is drawn over the foundational reality that "the phenomena of government are from start (p. 334) to finish phenomena of force," as the American political scientist Arthur Bentley put it as long ago as 1908 (quoted in Dyson 1980, 2009, 133).

Broader populations over time may thus come to acquiesce in the "fairness" of the "Rule of Law" regardless of the uneven realities of how social and economic power actually works in practice: "it is not that anyone imagines the law to be just. Everyone knows that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. But no one accepts the implications of this, everyone takes it for granted that the law, such as it is, will be respected, and feel a sense of outrage when it is not" (Orwell 1957, 71). More inconsistently and uncertainly, the late Ottoman Empire likewise tried to temper repression by limiting excess in line with popularly resonant Islamic values (Masters 2013). It is a model that its successor regimes have often resurrected, however flirtatiously and insincerely (Seale 1988, 328).

State terrorism is thus potentially dangerous to regime legitimacy because it unmasks the ugly potential for organized violence that always lies at the heart of modern state building. Those states and societies that have benefitted the most over the long run from such terror are often the most inclined to forget it (Tilly 1990). Thus "terror is externalized from the state (the concept of 'state terror' does not name the state but only the excessive state as terroristic, just like 'police violence' does not name the police violent but only that which exceeds the mandated violence)" (Thorup 2010, 101). Even if civilized life depends upon the very fact of its remaining hidden, state violence thus always contains the possibility of becoming mere barbarism. Social contracts can become protection rackets. Democratic regimes may hide this tension rather better than most: at least when rich and well-resourced, they allow most of their citizens most of the time to forget their intrinsic vulnerability in the face of state power. Therein lies their claim to moral superiority. But they, too, can nurture their own "deep states" (Cobain 2012, 2013; Woodworth 2001). And since domestic electorates are notoriously uninterested in foreign policy, this, too, often stinks (Hainsworth 2000; Murray 2006, 2007).

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Certainly, then, one can make a logically powerful and consistent case for taking all this oppressive behavior by states and folding it together with insurgent activity into one giant omelette called “terrorism.” But how do we actually sink our teeth into a dish this big? We are at some risk here of courting severe intellectual indigestion.

More fruitful, perhaps, would be to explore lower levels of analysis. We need to dig both down and sideways more in understanding violence we might loosely call “terroristic”. Historians and anthropologists have much to offer here since they are avid contextualizers (see, for instance, Green 1994; Nagengast 1994). With such approaches we might usefully ask simple but still rigorously comparative questions of our case studies: why does *this* type of violence occur, but not *that*?

A striking feature of the “critical” approach to the study of terrorism here is that it proclaims a commitment to an act- rather than actor-based approach. Yet it shows little interest in the fine detail of those acts themselves. In fairness, this may simply reflect a wider tendency within international relations to study the world with stratospheric detachment. Still, it remains a key weakness to advancing understanding. From 30,000 feet all cruelty may indeed look similar. But that in itself teaches us rather little.

(p. 335) Any more focused attempt to dissect state terrorism might therefore usefully begin by acknowledging that different states terrorize differently. A crucial distinction drawn by the historical sociologist Michael Mann is helpful here. As ideal types, Mann distinguishes between “infrastructural” and “despotic” power (for a useful brief summary, see Thorup 2010). Despotic power refers to the exercise of overwhelming, but often temporary and localized, violence: “it is a projection of power without institutions or regularity on a territory and population not fully within the control of the state” (Thorup 2010, 47). It is worth noting in passing that lapses into despotic power may be at least semi-spontaneous: indeed, from Peterloo (1819) to Sharpeville (1960) and Marikana (2012) some of the most notorious peacetime massacres committed by modern state forces have had a highly chaotic and panicked quality to them (Marlow 1969, 1970, 137–41; Frankel 2001). By contrast, infrastructural power is relentless: “it refers to the state’s ability to penetrate its territory and population, to implement and exert its dominance through institutions, legitimate practices, regularized and controlled use of force equally on all its territory” (Thorup 2010, 47–8). “Death by government” pursued by infrastructural means creates true hecatombs whose true extent fades into a “numerical haze” (Rummel 1994, p. xix). We need to try to grasp both the dynamics of despotic and infrastructural power and the areas of overlap between them.

State elites aim to create infrastructural power: for which tin-pot dictator in the “Global South” would not want to control the same density of CCTV coverage enjoyed by, say, the British state? Yet they often have to settle for far less: “despotic power may rule a territory but it does not and cannot govern it” (Thorup 2010, 48). Michael Mann’s general summary of the patterns that state repression assumed after 1945 is useful here: “during the Cold War the United States mostly allied with tribal monarchies, while the Soviets allied with urban nationalists who had more progressive goals. But since they lacked mass sup-

port, these regimes turned towards despotism” (Mann, 2013, 120). Mimetic rivalry between the superpowers bred numerous Cold War Caligulas: figures such as the buffoonish Idi Amin or the priapic Colonel Gaddafi who seem to have escaped straight out of Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars* (Cojean 2013; Kamau and Cameron 1979; Grant 1957, 1989). Such tyrants were arch-technicians of capricious violence: their courts and their harems zones of extreme turbulence.

How does despotic state terrorism function as a wider system of social control? Demonstrative atrocity is its hallmark. Travelling through northern Latvia just after the Great War one American journalist was surprised to encounter a village that reminded him of the Somme battlefield: “I mean, it was smashed to pieces, utterly flattened.” This ruin lay far to the north of the battlefields of the 1914–17 fighting: it turned out to date back to the Cossacks’ “punitive expeditions” of 1906 (Duranty 1935, 64–5). Across the Global South in the later twentieth century, helicopter-borne forces acted similarly. Such “aerial Cossacks” constitute a roving state reserve of highly mobile destroyers: they “came out of the helicopter firing bursts from their sub-machine guns. They fired at anything, even if it was just a leaf falling from the tree, they were already firing,” recalled one Peruvian witness of the troubled 1990s (quoted in Degregori 1999). Both Iraq and El Salvador saw similar state tactics (Steele 2008, 199; McClintock 1987, 304–6).

(p. 336) Such despotic terrorism represents guerrilla hit-and-run tactics “from above.” David Lesch has memorably described the Syrian regime’s initial response to protest in 2011 as thus resembling the arcade game “whack-a-mole”: “generally, wherever serious protests propped up in a particular city or region, the elite and most loyal units of the military and security forces were sent to whack them down” (Lesch 2012, 103–4). At most, despotic terrorism can seek to compensate for lack of infrastructural power through bursts of frenzied hyper-activity. But these are hard to sustain indefinitely.

## II

How far, and under what circumstances, do state and anti-state terrorisms feed off each other in tightly escalating spirals? Here we have to confront the severe limits to what we know about state terrorism in general. The academic literatures are vast, but lopsided. Most specifically, the task of gaining any kind of historical overview of the development of state terrorism is not helped by a profound skewing of our knowledge base towards the most spectacular case studies.

Putting it simply, the best studied exemplars of state terrorism are also amongst the least typical: “Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia—for all that historians and political scientists have sought to demonstrate the apparently anarchic character of their bureaucracies—differed from most other countries in the past because of the relative orderliness, ambit, and coherence of their state machinery” (Mazower 2002, 17). The key point here was these were technologically advanced states whose huge infrastructural power became geared to social engineering through mass human destruction. In effect, these were utopian regimes that could afford to treat their masses as human playdough, to be mold-

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ed or discarded as their leaders saw fit (Burleigh 2000; Kuromiya 1998; Mann 2013; Schölögel 2008, 2012). In targeting their victims, they combined spectacular state terrorism (killing within categories) with genocide or politicide (killing off a category). Strictly speaking, the latter eliminations were often more exterminatory than terroristic in intent. But the key point is the sheer size of the body counts that resulted (Bullock 1991, 1993; Geyer and Fitzpatrick 2009; Overy 2004, 2005; Snyder 2010). In their heartlands (though not always in their empires and borderlands) these states essentially achieved overwhelmingly effective monopolies of violence. Certainly, they were very little troubled by any domestic campaigns of anti-state terrorism.

Yet from a global perspective, the general point here is that most state terrorism has not been conducted by regimes enjoying the overwhelming infrastructural power of Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia (or, indeed, Mao's China, Suharto's Indonesia, and so on). Even in the mid-twentieth century, European colonial empires for instance still typically rested upon despotic, rather than infrastructural, power. In 1931, for instance, the vast territory of French Algeria was policed by a gendarmerie that possessed a grand total of twenty-seven automobiles and fourteen motorcycles (Thomas 2012, 96). Even before independence movements gathered momentum, memoirs of colonial officials testify repeatedly to a vertiginous sense of their own precariousness (Orwell 1957, 91–9). After (p. 337) 1945 European control could only be maintained by spectacular atrocity: at Sétif in 1945, Algerian insurgents killed 103 European settlers. The French backlash took perhaps 6,000 lives (Fisk 2005, 2006, 639). The profound democratization of the means of violence amongst colonial populations; exhaustion and devastation in Europe; a general revulsion at the excesses of Nazism—all these factors combined to create a highly unusual set of circumstances where time and again insurgent terrorism could not only take on colonial terrorism, but also successfully “outbid” it. After 1945, the trajectory of conflicts in Palestine, Cyprus, Kenya, and Algeria was ultimately structured by this broad dialectic, albeit severely modified by the presence or absence of “loyal” populations. State terrorism failed not because it lacked inventiveness or, in the short term, resources, but because it lacked stamina. Its “centre of gravity” (to use the Clausewitzian term) remained firmly located back in the metropolis; and to metropolitan opinion the colonial “periphery” was ultimately expendable and, indeed, largely forgettable. “Back in Britain there would be no soul-searching or public accounting for the crimes perpetrated against the hundreds of thousands of men and women in Kenya”: such (lack of) reaction or remorse was typical of metropolitan populations that had the luxury of forgetting the savage wars of peace (Elkins 2005, 363).

Such mid-century liberation struggles (where colonial states caved in) contrast rather sharply with the typical outcomes of later twentieth-century “dirty wars.” In these sustained auctions of intimidation waged between the rival terrorisms of authoritarian governments and their insurgent challengers, outcomes were typically clear cut. Dictatorships won hands down. Such, for instance, was the case in Syria after 1976 (Hinnebusch 2001, 2005, 93–103; Lefèvre 2013, 109–29). The final showdown at Hama in 1982 possibly cost somewhere between five and ten thousand lives (Seale 1988, 334). Although lacking such a grand climactic, the experience of Argentina in the 1970s was broadly compa-

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nable—there was an attempt to build a sustained left-wing guerrilla/terrorist campaign. But the scale of state repression simply obliterated it. The Dirty War in Argentina was very decisively won by the generals (Moyano 1995; Index on Censorship 1986).

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, superpower largesse for client governments is certainly part of the explanation for these regime triumphs. Yet it is far from being the full story. Most governments most of the time can marshal more resources than their challengers: “complete, full-blown state collapse does not happen very often” (Sorensen 2004, 134–5). Successful revolutions, too, are rather rare events. Any wavering populations forced to choose between rival terrors will seek to avoid the greater threat: and here it is a “common-sense observation that people are more likely to be terrorized by the open display of violence from heavily armed forces backed by the authority of the state than by anyone who has to hide their identity behind a mask” (Guelke 2008, 19).

Yet popular tolerance for state terrorism may have more positive drivers (Seale 1988, 328). State terrorism can indeed be *popular*—especially if disorder has persisted long enough (Moyano 1995). In the rueful judgment of one of the Argentinian guerrilla leaders, leftist armed struggle had turned out to be a “lost patrol”—overwhelmed by superior state forces and far too far out in front of public opinion (Moyano 1995). Civil society (p. 338) does not always choose the side of the angels: a key possibility whose significance has tended to be missed by those keen to hold the state to account. One recent study of the Chinese regime’s “consultative authoritarianism,” indeed, concludes that “civil society might not play a role in challenging authoritarian governments, as liberal theories predict, but rather in making them more durable” (Teets 2014, 4–5).

This point can be pushed much further. Albeit with dangerously anorexic reductionism, I have sketched three broad typologies of confrontation between state and anti-state terrorism. In the first, the contest never really got going: state terror was simply unmatchable. In the second, state terror was trumped by colonial insurgency. In the third, a cycle of violence did begin, but state terror swiftly came out on top. This sketch tends to assume that state agencies are fairly clearly defined entities. But there are many other possible configurations and hybridities, since the state is itself inter-penetrated with society (Migdal 2001). Even in good times modern state apparatuses themselves are often labyrinthine in their complexity: and though we should be careful not to see states as entirely centrifugal and incoherent, we should hardly be surprised if different parts of them sometimes pull in different directions (for a possible overstatement of this case: Jarvis and Lister 2014). Indeed, deep opacity about exactly who is committing the atrocities is very often *the* defining feature of state terrorism in dirty war scenarios. This tendency demands far more explanation and historical contextualization than it typically receives. I turn to it now.

### III

In a general overview of twentieth-century barbarism, Eric Hobsbawm writes that he could “find no real precedent before 1914 ... [for] quasi-official or tolerated strong-arm

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and killer squads which did the dirty work governments were not yet ready to do officially: *Freikorps*, Black-and-Tans, *squadristi*" (Hobsbawm 1999, 340). A major study of death squads similarly takes its first in-depth case study the activities of the *Freikorps* and their spin-offs in the early Weimar Republic of 1919–23 (Campbell and Brenner 2000: see also Gumbel 1922; Jones 2016). It was in exactly this period, too, that Belfast police death squads began to pioneer a distinctively new repertoire of terrorist tactics:

They always came at night, after curfew. They left plenty of witnesses alive. Above all, they took great care to ensure no ambiguity as to whether or not they *were* the police, so that there should be no doubt as to who was giving this message of terror; thus, they introduced themselves as "police on duty"; they wore their uniforms; they mocked their victims by denying that they were the "murder gang", by reassuring them that all would be well, and by returning afterwards to offer their families fake condolences. After one killing, they chatted in the street before driving off.

(Wilson 2010, 93)

In terms of the long history of the development of the modern state, then, paramilitary proliferation is a relatively *young* historical phenomenon (although one certainly more (p. 339) venerable than the spectacularly mistaken "New Wars" thesis allows: see Kaldor 1998, 2007, 98–9). All in all, the emergence of the death squad as the archetypal vehicle for (pro-)state terrorism seems to have something important to do with the development of the state in the period of late modernity. Most puzzlingly of all, such freelance brutality seems to have emerged in technologically advanced Europe at precisely the moment when the demands of "total war" had created the "total state": at the wartime juncture when "the state grew in size, in its multiple functions and in its authority" (Winter 2014, 2).

In a highly original—although regrettably all too brief—discussion, Brenner and Campbell begin by acknowledging the obvious attractions to modern states that are "bound by a whole range of internal and external norms that place strict limits on a state's range of options—if respected." Death squads offer the prospect of "plausible deniability." Yet as they go on to point out, this observation at best offers a partial explanation only for the rise of the phenomenon. Domestically, deniability is never fully convincing. If it were, it would cease to be authentically terroristic. Internationally, this strategy may buy time but "the charade doesn't usually last very long" (Campbell and Brenner 2000, 12–13).

They then approach the phenomenon historically. Death squads, they note, are not always mere tools of the state. They tend to draw resources from outside official circles and, to some extent, develop their own agendas: "in short, death squads cannot exist before the concept of citizenship does." Such citizen activists are the "antibodies" that spontaneously coalesce to fight infection within the body politic, at least according to their apologists (Chippendale and Harriman 1978, 14).

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State elites often still deny association with them, of course. But such denials, in turn, are driven partially by “the existence of the concept of the governed, and this consent is based, among other things, on holding to the rule of law.” In other words, death squads belong to the world of modern states (Brenner and Campbell 2000, 14–16). Finally, and most provocatively, they locate the appearance of death squads against a more general “crisis of the twentieth-century state” caught between centralizing and devolutionist impulses. In their view, the role of states has grown so extensive that they face being overwhelmed by the scale and variety of tasks expected of them:

This has led to the widespread use of semistate or semi-public entities by modern states to “subcontract” important political, social, and economic tasks. Because of this, the modern state bleeds sovereignty, which is one of its defining characteristics.

(Campbell and Brenner 2000, 16)

Rather than see the death squad as merely another extension of the long arm of repressive states (as others have done: see Sluka 2000, 1–36), this account presents death squads as specialized public–private partnerships that “generally involve the paradox of being secretive and covert organizations that nevertheless often act in particularly public and gruesome fashion” (Campbell and Brenner 2000, 5). A more recent study has come to a convergent conclusion: “paramilitaries challenge the typologies comparativists have traditionally relied upon in that they [are] neither entirely ‘state’ nor entirely ‘civil society’ actors. Rather they are the product of interests shared across factions of (p. 340) groups within both arenas” (Mazzei 2009, 217). Death squads seem to appear where the modern state is pulled between the twin imperatives of security domination and service devolution.

From a global perspective, Campbell and Brenner may underestimate the importance of state *weakness* in fostering state terrorism through death squads. Anatol Lieven comments in the context of Pakistan that this is “something that human rights groups in particular find hard to grasp, since they stem from a modern Western experience in which oppression came chiefly from over-mighty states” (Lieven 2011, 25). Death squads seem, too, to have flourished more in the under-mighty Iraqi state since 2003 than before (al-Khafaji 1991). “Seldom have death squads operated so openly” remarks Patrick Cockburn (2008, 224).

Still, Brenner and Campbell have offered a highly valuable broad account of why death squads have emerged when and where they have. One of its strengths is attention it pays to the possibility of moral hazard: that progressive change may, however unintentionally and indirectly, help structure new horrors. They write that it “is one of the many cruel ironies that crop up in connection with state violence, for it is quite likely that the increased concern for human rights has itself inadvertently been a contributing factor in the use of covert violence by governments, and in particular, in the use of death

squads” (Campbell and Brenner 2000, 13). This latter point is worthy of exploration in its own right.

### IV

“Today there exists,” writes Pagden “even if it is only of very recent creation, an unmistakable and universal ‘human rights culture.’ This is, as those from the Ayatollah Khomeini to Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew, who have opposed it in the name of theocracy or of some variant of communitarian ‘Asian’ values, have repeatedly insisted, the intellectual progeny of European universalism, and European universalism is the handmaiden of European imperialism” (Pagden 2015, 37). Cmiel concurs, writing in 2004 that “few political agendas have seen such a rapid and dramatic growth as that of ‘human rights’” (quoted in Ron et al. 2005). Reading the academic literature on how states come to behave better, it is thus hard not to be struck by the dominance of teleological assumptions. However unevenly or slowly, the highly influential “spiral model” of human rights essentially assumes that good developments will lead to better: “while human rights progress was often uneven and our various phases occurred asynchronously in different countries over time, there was a clearly identifiable pattern of human rights progress ... Over three decades from the 1960s until the 1990s, the various phases during which human rights change occurred grew progressively shorter, leading to a ‘speeding up’ of improvement in the overall global human rights situation” (Risse et al. 2013, 7–8). The Human Rights motorway, in this view, is a one-way street. Once joined, there may indeed be bumps and hold-ups. But there are no exit ramps. State terrorism seems here destined to wither away, like the state itself in Marxist theory.

**(p. 341)** Conversely, much of the academic community that is interested in pioneering the study of state terrorism seems little interested in evaluating the influence of human rights lobbies at all: a rather striking omission given their proclaimed, and commendable, intention to work towards “constraining state excesses and promoting genuine human and societal security” (Blakeley 2009, 19; Jackson et al. 2010, 6). There has been a notable failure to engage with important work that stresses how state repression adapts to awareness of humanitarian monitoring. Studies from James Ron and Darius Rejali are worth special mention here.

In his important comparative study of patterns of state violence in the “semi-democracies” of Israel and Serbia, James Ron draws a basic distinction between what he calls “frontiers and ghettos” that is worth quoting at length:

The crucial difference between frontiers and ghettos is the extent to which states control these arenas and feel a bureaucratic, moral, and political sense of responsibility for their fate. States enjoy an unrivalled level of control over the ghetto’s borders and territory, suppressing challenges to their monopoly over force. Although this grants states some distinct advantages, it also implies important responsibilities. Ghetto residents are despised members of society, but both local and international rules stipulate that the state bears substantial responsibility for

their welfare. Frontiers, by contrast, are perched on the edge of core states and not fully incorporated into their zone of control. States do not dominate frontiers as they do ghettos, and they are not bound by the same legal and moral obligations.

(Ron 2003, 9)

Life in the ghetto is certainly not great since “the ghetto is a storage facility for the unwanted. It is incorporated, but not integrated with the polity” (Thorup 2010, 62). But life on the frontier may be even worse: states feel free to bludgeon frontiers harder than ghettos. The fate of Gaza since its “liberation” in 2005 illustrates the point with economy.

By contrast, Darius Rejali’s focus on torture is much more fine-grained (although, strikingly, he, too, finds a contrast in Israeli abuse of prisoners in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories: Rejali 2007, 15). As others have usefully pointed out, torture serves as a valuable proxy marker for assessing wider practices of state terrorism. Getting prisoners to talk is only a part of the purpose of torture: getting a wider domestic constituency to “listen” to their fate is often rather more important politically (Blakeley 2007, 375; Branche 2007; Jackson et al, 2010, 4). Yet this is embarrassing internationally. How states manage the dissonance between the expectations of domestic and international audiences is the focus of Rejali’s work on torture.

In this truly monumental study of torture techniques, Rejali stresses the sheer creativity of torturers in a world in which “most states perceive the advantages of at least appearing to respect human rights” (Rejali 2007, 26). His survey of torture styles and repertoires—with the central focus upon those designed to leave no lasting mark—is devastating in its wealth of accumulative detail. Democracies may indeed have tortured less. But they have also tortured “better”: that is, more creatively, more cleverly, less obviously.

**(p. 342)** The techniques they have pioneered to avoid detection have led the way in teaching authoritarian types to hide their torture better: “by the late twentieth century, the clean techniques that first appeared in the main democracies can be found in countries around the world” (Rejali 2007, 4). An early pioneer was Britain. Waterboarding was standard practice in Palestine in 1936–9; Her Majesty’s Torturers were at it again in Cyprus two decades later (Wilson 2013, 15–16). “When we watch interrogators, interrogators get sneaky” comments Rejali simply (2007, 9).

Rejali is careful to avoid a grand theory of cultural essentialism in his explanations of why torturers do the different things that they do: “religion and custom have little to do with the way they go about inflicting pain” (Rejali 2007, 35). But his work certainly throws much needed light on the longevity and adaptability of *sub*-cultures within “deep states”: that is, those parts of the state apparatus that most shun scrutiny and accountability. If we can then talk—however broadly—of distinctive traditions of state torture, can we do the same more generally for state terrorism?

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A landmark predecessor to the recent body of work produced by the Critical Terrorism Studies community was a collection of essays titled *Western State Terrorism* (George 1991). The title is a striking one in that it implies there might be a *distinctively* western way of state terrorism, perhaps parallel to a supposedly western way of war. Terminological fashion has shifted with the end of the Cold War: instead of “The West,” the standard term now is the “Global North.” Yet the basic comparative question remains both intriguing and strikingly under-explored. All in all, it seems that the critical terrorism tradition has largely opted to study Western state terrorism without any deep reflection upon the complex historical evolution of the Western state itself: classic studies such as Dyson’s *The State Tradition in Western Europe* go conspicuously unreferenced in their bibliographies (Jackson et al. 2010). And, most strikingly of all, key conceptual distinctions between the canopy term of the *state* and specific branches of *government* simply glide by unheeded.

Crucially, too, the hegemonic power of the United States of America in the post-Cold War moment and its inglorious adventures of occupation during its “War on Terror” seem to have largely precluded explicit comparison with *other* traditions of state terrorism (Blakeley 2009). With shifts in global power towards Asia, this is surely a potential research question that will grow rather than diminish in importance: as reflected in the exponential growth of Chinese companies manufacturing “policing and security equipment” for export (Moore 2014). It is therefore encouraging here to see the focus broadening into a wider range of case studies that incorporate India and Papua New Guinea, in a recent collection (Jackson et al. 2010). But this is only a beginning.

As far as the Global North goes, there is an urgent need to contextualize its export of state violence both sociologically and historically. If the most powerful states of the Global North now go to considerable lengths to either hide or sub-contract their torture; if they would rather bomb, than occupy, “enemy” populations; and if they now choose to train more drone pilots than “pilots for fighters and bombers combined” (Crandall 2014, 464)—then, to a large extent, it is because they are authentically democratic. In other words, their executive governments are at least minimally sensitive to the broad (p. 343) wishes of a citizenry that has become markedly *less* militaristic than it was a hundred, or even fifty, years ago. American society would certainly not tolerate today the hundreds of military fatalities it was sustaining every week in Vietnam in the early 1970s.

Russell Crandall comments astutely that “part of the motivation behind the proliferation of drone strikes was that they could allow the U.S. military to maintain its military preponderance around the world without the long, costly, and unpopular wars and occupations that had dominated the last decade” (2014, 464). Yet the ability to kill more easily constitutes a standing temptation to kill more regularly. “Because it helps normalize the low-intensity conflicts the overall duration of the conflict could be extended and, finally, more ‘lesser evils’ could be committed” (Weizman 2007, 251). Drone proliferation thus forces us to recognize the resonant truth of Weber’s observation that “it is *not* true that

good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.”

## Conclusion

Where, then, does this leave Richard Jackson’s project of studying state and non-state terrorism together? In particular, how can we write a more integrated account of both?

Despite some recent advances, I argue that the major barrier to such a project is the naive ahistoricism that characterizes the field of terrorism studies, diverse as that field has become. We could usefully start by reflecting upon our own historical situation with regard to political violence: especially if we are scholars who happen to come from the UK or USA. Domestically, both these societies mostly had an unusually dull twentieth century. Any serious violence tended to come from outside.

It bears emphasizing how aberrational this societal experience of political violence is in global terms. If we wish to understand turmoil elsewhere better, it is worth recognizing that in many societies state violence is expected. A good place to start exploring it is therefore at its limits—to ask in other words, what is *not* expected? What does not tend to happen? What levels or types of violence are generally held to be taboo? Who sets those taboos? Are they maintained by tradition, or imposed by the international human rights community? How is violence structured accordingly? Why do limits hold or break down? Why death squads, and not full-blown genocide? Or vice versa?

Much of the study of anti-state terrorism is weakened by the tension between expansive definitions of what constitutes terrorism, and the very limited repertoire of actions and actors actually analyzed: essentially small groups conducting bombings and hostage-takings. Much of our understanding of state terrorism is distorted by a comparable over-emphasis on centralized and infrastructural mega-violence. But in between these rival foci lies another much less illuminated scene where despotic power looms larger. This seethes with overlapping anti- and pro-state activity: a dark landscape alive with lynchings, pogroms, massacres, and death squad killings.

(p. 344) All of this looks like political violence (at least partially) intended to spread fear. All of it therefore looks like some sort of “terrorism”: and we shall not understand it better if we continue to insist on our decontextualized and ahistorical conceptualizations of what we think state/anti-state terrorism should “really” look like. If we are serious about understanding terrorism comprehensively, then, we are obliged to try to map it all in all its messy interconnectedness. We shall certainly have our work cut out.

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