

Philip Jenkins.**Images of Terror: What We Can and Can't Know about Terrorism**

Aldine de Gruyter, 2003, 227 pp.

\$US 24.95 paper (0-202-30679-8), \$US 47.95 hardcover (0-202-30678-X)

Since 9/11, many publishers have released new books on terrorism. Most of the efforts seem to repeat the obvious. Research is culled from newspaper stories or from the most recent books available in the bricks and mortar bookstores. Indeed, few treatments are unique or scholarly. Jenkins, well known for his previous work utilizing social constructionist and historical approaches, looks at the issue of terrorism — particularly the problem of affixing blame for particular incidents. Basically, he says that it is difficult to understand terrorism unless you know the perpetrators' true motivations, which are rarely accessible or accurate. Jenkins is also dubious about pronouncements by the government and media about who is to blame for terrorist incidents and why.

The book is divided into 10 chapters. Chapter 1, "Knowing about Terrorism," tries to place the subject matter in context. Among the many unexpected revelations is that Jenkins, typically associated with a critical criminology perspective, says that he supported the American attack on Afghanistan as a response to 9/11. Chapter 2, "Another Man's Freedom Fighter," struggles with the subjective nature of most definitions of terrorism. Chapter 3, "The American Politics of Terrorism," looks historically at the previous scares of terrorism in the United States and how they were embellished by people and organizations that could use these events to their benefit. Chapter 4, "Motives," outlines the goals of terrorism and reviews the standard objectives of guerrilla warfare. It focuses on Hamas and the historical precedents of Irish terrorism. Then the chapter turns to the importance of radical right-wing books like the *Turner Diaries* and movies such as *The Battle of Algiers* as inspiration for terrorists and their groups.

Chapter 5, "False Flags," is a review of the literature on the clandestine organizational makeup of terrorist groups and how governments often try to discredit the groups and/or their sponsors. Chapter 6, "Investigation and Intelligence," once again explains the reasons why determining motivation for a particular terrorist group is difficult. It discusses methods of stopping terrorism, and particularly highlights the practices of intelligence, infiltration and deception. Jenkins also outlines the implications of not sharing intelligence among national security agencies in the United States. "Explaining Failure," Chapter 7, details how, when a terrorist attack occurs, authorities frequently want to avoid blame and accusations that they may have anticipated the incident. This is why they have a tendency to suggest that someone who is mentally unstable or a "lone wolf" committed the action.

Chapter 8, "Terrorism and the Mass Media," (perhaps the best chapter), is a very good discussion of the role of the media, and focuses on journalists' access to official sources, the leaks by national security agencies after 9/11, and the role of conspiracy theories. It sensitizes the reader to the questions he or she should ask when interpreting a media report about a terrorist incident. Finally, Jenkins reviews domestic and foreign films that depict terrorists or that have a terrorist theme. He focuses on the groups that have often been depicted and those that have been ignored in Hollywood films. The author also points out how powerful interest groups can affect the content of these

movies.

Chapter 9, "Iraq and State Terrorism," looks at the countries that America considers to be supporting terrorism. This chapter outlines the activities of terrorists Abu Nidal, who took up residence in Iraq — and to a lesser extent — the threat posed by Abu Ibrahim. The chapter reviews the "on-again, off-again" notion of Iraq as a sponsor of international terrorism through successive American administrations. It also provides an overview of the anthrax attacks and their possible Middle Eastern and American connections. He also tries to interpret the alleged Prague meeting between Iraqi intelligence officers and Mohammed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers.

Chapter 10, "A Critical Consumer's Guide to Understanding Terrorism," is the shortest chapter, and briefly reviews a social constructionist approach to terrorism. It also compares the field of terrorism to other social problems in which a social constructionist approach has been used, and encourages readers to be critical consumers of media reports on terrorism.

To its credit, *Images of Terror* has a number of advantages: Jenkins, like some other commentators and analysts is willing to criticize terrorism research and policy. He also takes on a sacred cow; Chomsky's "moral equivalence" claim as it pertains to the events of 9/11 (p. 21). But, for all its merits, Jenkins' book is still somewhat problematic. In some cases the book provides unnecessary background. For example, in discussing the Palestinian situation (pp. 69-72), Jenkins believes it is necessary to review the history of this nation. Likewise, he occasionally overemphasizes the points he is making (p. 71). Some of his writing is just plain confusing and jumps around from one idea to another without making the proper connections. For example, after talking about terrorism in the Middle East, he then says "To take an analogy from that same region" Northern Ireland."

The book has a handful of historical inaccuracies and confusing passages. For example, "And as in the 1990s, this right-wing movement found unity through talk radio, namely the anti-Jewish polemics of broadcaster Father Charles Coughlin" (p. 34); but the right wing groups of the 1990s did not listen to Coughlin. Other historical inaccuracies include Jenkins' implication that Palestinian terrorism only started after 1967 (p. 69).

He argues that "understanding the construction of the terrorism problem should help us to assess future claims in this area... the main lesson seems to be that we need to be much more demanding when presented with official claims about terrorism..." (p. 193). But aren't the majority of Americans cynical already? I often wonder how many people unquestionably believe the media and government.

Jenkins includes acts of political violence that most experts would dismiss as terrorism (e.g., the 1961 hijackings of airliners to Cuba; the assassination of Orlando Letelier, etc. (pp. 61-65). The hijackers in these cases were typically criminals who were escaping the United States and who did not have any political motivation. And the Letellier case was an act of state terrorism and cannot be lumped in with the oppositional political terrorism Jenkins documents throughout his book.

For a book that claims to analyze the ways in which terrorism is understood in public discourse, *Images of Terror* ignores a considerable amount of research by some of the world's most important experts on terrorism that has appeared in peer-reviewed journals. Not only does Jenkins seem to reinvent the wheel with his search for an acceptable definition of terrorism (p. 27), but he neglects the work done by Schmid (1983) on developing a consensus definition of terrorism. He also fails to

mention any work by others like Crenshaw (1984) and myself (Ross, 1993; 1994; 1996; 1999) on the causes and decline of terrorism (Ross and Gurr, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). He criticized many definitions and claims, at various points in time, "that we can formulate a definition that would achieve a widespread consensus" (p. 17). But then he seems to adopt the state department's definition of terrorism (pp. 27-30).

Perhaps the most serious drawback is Jenkins' frequent overgeneralizations, lack of citation, and statements that "beg the question." For example, he states, "Yet many millions of people around the world reject such a negative term. Preferring to describe the bombers in heroic terms as guerrillas, partisans, or freedom fighters" (p. 2). At another point he says that social constructionism is apolitical (p. 15). Maybe this is the political scientist in me but I thought almost all human interaction is political? In another case, he looks at the Palestinian/Israeli situation and says that it is difficult to assign blame, so it should be no wonder that we should have difficulty assigning blame in the 9/11 attacks. And then again, "In the Middle Eastern context, the process of labeling a group or nation as terrorist has everything to do with economics and politics, and specifically the politics of oil." (p. 167). Or, he states, "statistics in this whole area are next to worthless, since they are so subject to vagaries in the definition of terrorism, and in the interpretation of individual motive" (p. 192). Finally, "The most active and effective guerrilla groups were those preaching Islamic fundamentalism" (pp. 69-70) begs the question, what does effectiveness mean? Are, for example, "effective groups" also engaging in terrorism. Otherwise, the book is confusing in places: "Another key difference involves the clandestine nature of the activity we need to understand, which in some ways makes it all but impossible to evaluate the behavior of agencies" (p. 191).

Somebody needs to question the overly ideological analyses of terrorism and the numerous implications as they relate to the motivations of perpetrators, labelers, and responders, and Jenkins may very well be that person. But his argument could have been strengthened if he had more rigorously addressed the above mentioned issues.

Jeffrey Ian Ross
University of Baltimore
jross@UBmail.ubalt.edu

Bibliography

- Crenshaw, Martha. 1984. "The causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 13, pp. 379-399.
- Crenshaw, Martha. 1991. "How Terrorism Declines," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp.
- Ross, Jeffrey Ian. 1993. "The Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards A Causal Model," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 317-329.
- Ross, Jeffrey Ian. 1994. "The Psychological Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Toward An Integration of Findings," *International Journal of Group Tensions*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 157-185.
- Ross, Jeffrey Ian. 1996. "A Model of the Psychological Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 129-141.

- Ross, Jeffrey Ian. 1999. "Beyond the Conceptualization of Terrorism: A Psychological-Structural Model of the Causes of This Activity," in Craig Summers and Eric Markusen (eds.) 1999. *Collective Violence: Harmful Behavior in Groups and Governments*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, pp. 169-192.
- Ross, Jeffrey Ian and Ted Robert Gurr. 1989. "Why Terrorism Subsides: A Comparative Study of Canada and The United States," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 4, July, pp. 405-426.
- Schmid, Alex. P. 1983. *Political Terrorism: A Research Guide to concepts, theories, data bases, and literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/cjsocopy/reviews/terrorism.html>

March 2004

© Canadian Journal of Sociology Online