

BOOK REVIEWS

Stohl, Michael and Lopez, George A., eds. *Government Violence and Repression: An Agenda for Research*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1986.

Testimonials to the importance of state terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism are now commonplace in studies of political violence. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of serious scholarly work on state terrorism. For whatever reason (some of the possibilities are considered in Nicholson's chapter on "Conceptual Problems of Studying State Terrorism"), most of the literature is preoccupied with insurgent terror. Stohl and Lopez's edited collection, *Government Violence and Repression*, provides at least partially a welcome corrective. In an earlier volume, *The State as Terrorist* (Greenwood, 1984), Stohl and Lopez convincingly argued the need for greater methodological rigor in studies of state terrorism.

Stohl and Lopez make good on this concern in *Government Violence and Repression*. Although the work is a collection of various pieces by different authors, all of the essays emphasize the analytical and methodological difficulties associated with the study of state terrorism. No less important is the general emphasis by each contributor on the instrumental nature of governmental violence, on the conscious choice of terrorism as a means of governance. As this author has indicated elsewhere (see the review of Oots, *A Political Organization Approach to Transnational Terrorism*, in *Conflict Quarterly* (Spring 1987), p. 63), the rational-choice approach to the study of state terrorism enables its practitioners to draw upon well-developed social science literatures, and in so doing deemphasizes the peculiar or unique character of the subject.

This general theme is most clearly articulated in the first four chapters. The introductory essay, by Stohl and Lopez, provides an overview of the epistemological obstacles one encounters in studying governmental violence. Their conclusion is that "While the epistemological requirements for building a data-based theory of state terrorism are no different in principle from those of any other area of social science research, that task still remains incomplete," (p. 2).

The difficulties are explored at greater length by Nicholson in his chapter on conceptual problems in the study of state terrorism. The central thesis of Nicholson's essay is that there is nothing about state terrorism that should disqualify it from the traditional research methodologies associated with the social sciences. Nevertheless, he does concede that there are problems. Of these, Nicholson focuses upon two. First is the issue of intention and culpability—the state is not, as Nicholson properly points out, a unitary or monolithic actor. Instead, the "state" is an analytical construct that considerably oversimplifies the diversity of the various agencies, offices, and officers that comprise the state. If the use of terrorism is goal-directed and purposive, one must identify where

responsibility for that choice rests. Ascribing responsibility to "the state" is likely to confuse rather than clarify the issue. Nicholson is sensitive to this problem, but fails to consider it in its more subtle versions. Greater sophistication in the treatment of the state should enable one, for example, to investigate conflicts *within* states and between elites about the use of violence as an instrument of governance. Likewise, Nicholson's treatment of the problem ultimately leads to little more than an exhortation to humility: "I am thus suggesting an added caution in the analysis of state terrorism in the use of the word 'state' or 'government'"

It is also somewhat surprising that Nicholson fails to address in detail the question of when the state's use of violence is a legitimate exercise of sovereignty, and when violence exceeds the legitimate use of coercion. As an initial matter, one might, for example, wish to draw a (Weberian) distinction between acts of state coercion and violence that are authorized by law and those that are not, or those that are taken under the "color" of state authorization and those that are not. Such distinctions hardly provide easy solutions, as many students of terrorism have observed (indeed, some of the objections are considered in the opening piece by Stohl and Lopez), but to omit any discussion of them at all is curious. The second research difficulty Nicholson addresses is one familiar to all students of terrorism: the emotive nature of the subject tends to obscure clear thinking. Again, Nicholson's sensitivity is admirable, but not much is forthcoming in the way of practical advice. "My argument, then, . . . [is that] we have to be extremely careful with definition," (p. 31).

Perhaps the most interesting piece in the collection is Gurr's chapter on "The Political Origins of State Violence and Terror: A Theoretical Analysis." Gurr's central assumption, one that is consistent with the general thesis of state terrorism as goal-directed and instrumental, is that state terrorism has its genesis in conflicts between elites and non-elites. Indeed, "in this perspective, a theory of state terrorism is part of the explanation of why elites use coercion as an instrument of rule," (p. 45).

Gurr distinguishes between "situationally specific" and "institutionalized" state terrorism, which he then incorporates into "a more general theory of the conditions of state terrorism," (p. 50). Such a theory must, Gurr argues, account for four variables: (1) the challengers of state authority, (2) the regime and its prevailing political ideology, (3) the social structure, and (4) the international system. In his discussion of each variable, Gurr develops a series of principles, or axioms, about, the first, the conditions in which state violence is likely, and second, when state terrorism in particular is likely. Some of these principles are unremarkable and of doubtful analytical utility. For example, Gurr hypothesizes that "Regimes are more likely to use terrorism against politically marginal groups than opposition groups that have influence on or supporters among the elite," (p. 52). Other principles suffer from imprecision. Gurr fails to distinguish, for instance, between the actual presence of governmental opposition and the perception of opposition,

and his observation that weak regimes are more likely to use violence in response to challenges than strong regimes is premised implicitly and somewhat precariously on definitions of "weak" and "strong" that are limited to material resources. Some students will also find many of Gurr's conclusions highly controversial, such as the hypothesis that "democratic principles and institutions inhibit political elites from using state violence in general and terror specifically," (p. 57). Perhaps, but one might restate the claim so that: "Democratic principles inhibit political elites from acknowledging the use of state violence in general and terror specifically."

Whatever the flaws with Gurr's analytical framework, however, and they are not insubstantial, the work is theoretically rigorous and disciplined. Unlike the journalistic literature on state terrorism, much of Gurr's piece is capable of verification or falsification, and for that reason alone it is a substantial contribution to the field. Perhaps most importantly, it can also provide a useful theoretical construct for other scholars, a point made clear in the subsequent chapter by Lopez on national security ideology as an impetus to state terror. In a provocative essay, Lopez argues that persistent violence by some Latin American governments against their citizens finds its justification in a "shared mindset" of governing elites.

The remaining chapters are more subject specific, and include essays by Wolpin on state terrorism in the third world, Harff on genocide, Stohl on superpower conflict and terrorism, Wardlaw on terrorism and counterterrorism in democratic societies, and Friedlander on state terrorism and international law. All are useful, although most disappointing is Wardlaw's "Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism, and the Democratic Society." Wardlaw's discussion is, as always, comprehensive but he covers no new ground in this essay. Readers are better advised to consult Wardlaw's extended and more fruitful discussion in *Political Terrorism: Theory, Tactics, and Counter-Measures* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

In sum, this is an extremely useful collection of essays in a field that lacks theoretically rigorous work. Read in conjunction with the earlier volume, *Government Violence and Repression* presents a compelling case for the scholarly study of state terrorism and indicates, by example, how it should proceed.

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Kurz, Anat and Merari, Ariel. *ASALA: Irrational Terror or Political Tool*. Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1986.

Gunter, Michael. *"Pursing the Just Cause of Their People": A Study of Contemporary Armenian Terrorism*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986.

These books appeared within less than a year of each other, as the decline of Armenian terrorism, begun in late 1983, continued; the only