Blood and Rage: a cultural history of terrorism – A book review by Thomas Spencer – UK Defence Forum Researcher

In his book "Blood and Rage", the award-winning historian Michael Burleigh explores periodic convulsions of terrorism through the 20th and 21 century.

Terrorism has become an overprescribed subject matter; contemporary literature has a tendency to be historically selective and narrow in its account of political violence. Understandably this phenomenon is often explained merely as a consequence of the violently predisposed and those who maintain that the ends justify the means.

"Blood and Rage" surmounts these pitfalls, delivering a holistic account of terrorism that interprets chapters in history obscured by our fixation with Al-Qaeda. During a historical narrative spanning two centuries Burleigh paints a picture of political violence that is interpreted through the optic of cultural affirmation.

The ascendency of violent movements and ideologues are cast in the furnace of social and political turmoil, though every chapter characterises the unique individuals, some politically ambitious some psychologically jolted or predisposed, who help draw pariahs and embittered men to a political violence.

The book begins with the Fenians. Sporadic yet tenacious terrorist campaigns of both the Fenian Brotherhood and the Irish Republican Brotherhood succumbed to British counter-terrorism and a politically expedient Irish Republic. Readers are quickly reminded of Republican terrorism's transatlantic roots and the support that endured on America's East Coast until 9/11.

As in successive chapters this episode guides the reader through the ascendency and consolidation of a determined political ideology, the future ramifications of which are explored, in depth, in the later half of the book. In the case of Armed Republicanism this is played out in the infamous 'Troubles', for which Burleigh delivers a chilling account of Republic-Unionist hostilities with his graphic characterisation of violent sectarianism. Most notably the acts of barbarism committed by the Ulster loyalist gang - the Shankill Butchers - typify the extremities of the human condition and the select individuals motivated not by political violence but merely by violence itself.

An account of Russian Nihilists anarchists follows the Fenian discourse. While rich in socio, psycho and historical observations these intricacies do on occasions detract from a fluid narrative, though only momentarily. Again Burleigh is adept at collating wider developments into an engaging plot in which he details the ascendency and transmutation of Russian terrorism. As a consequence the reader can comprehend how cataclysmic events, most

notably the Bolsheviks revolution, came to pass. Notably the historical plot assimilates the story of a young gangster – Joseph Stalin - whose success in supporting the Bloshevik cause with the proceeds of violent crime goes some way to explain his sadistic seizure and application of power.

Burleigh takes forward his aptitude for profiling and cultural contextualisation, exploring the development of anarchist terrorism in European and American history. An ideology preaching "the redemptive powers of chaos" as Burleigh characterises it, is shown to be rooted in the French revolution, though the narrative closely shadows it bloody passage through Europe as it reaches maturity in Jacobite and Black International movements. As ever Burleigh is able to join up the dots in history and bridge the gap across the Atlantic. A perceptive and nuanced understanding of social upheaval in America truly helps explain the manner of Black International transatlantic proliferation.

Breaking from Marxism and anarchy Burleigh excels in explaining terrorism against the backdrop of British and French decolonisation. Britain's protracted withdrawal from Palestine is situated within the melee of conflicting Palestinian and Zionist political agendas. For both sides terrorism becomes a means to statehood, though only one truly succeeds in its application. In its entirety this chapter encompasses how the Palestinian movement fragmented into opposing political factions during its failure to secure a state and conversely how paramilitary groups, such as the Irgun, ascended as Israel's security services. This is a history book that, in many ways says more about the present than it does the past.

France's withdrawal from Algeria and the FLN's – "Front de Libération Nationale" – campaign to dislodge a colonial presence through terrorism offers many an insight into this sordid affair. A vivid narrative encapsulates France's experience of its own far right extremists the OAS - Organisation de "l'armée secrète" - and the organisation's violent aversion to decolonisation. Burleigh does not sanitise the realities of political violence, cynical manipulation of sectarian rifts are explained as a modus of operandi for both the OAS and the FLN. This makes for a provocative, albeit at times unsettling read.

This direct engagement with the reader continues through the latter half of the book in which Burleigh is able to leap frog with literary eloquence from Black September to Badder Meinhoff and from ETA to the IRA. Burleigh delivers a scathing attack when characterising the vanity of infamous terrorists: Profiling Ali Hassan of Black September as a gold-medallion wearing macho man; Andreas Badder as a dope smoking womaniser and Gerry Adams as a man with "the tone of a sociology lecturer at a provincial university." In all, despite the brutalities that periodically embellish these chapters Burleigh manages to interpret individuals and operational blunders occasionally with comedic effect.

Criticism can however be levelled at this personalised approach to terrorist profiling, namely that the author relies on this a little too frequently when affirming his argument that all terrorists are "morally insane." Nonetheless this close proximity in the narrative to individual terrorists underpins what is consistently a vivid and engaging account of terrorism.
In the closing chapters the development of Jihadism is again delivered through Burleigh's direct literary tone during a dual account of religious affirmation in Iran and a Salafist ideology fuelled

by heavy handed Arab dictatorships. Later the plot is tinged with some irony; an American and Saudi policy to support the Afghanistan Mujahedeen and 'bleed the Soviets dry' helped conceive regional Jihadism.

On reflection this book stands as a historiography of terrorism, but as ever it is pertinent in its contemporary remit. Burleigh delivers an epilogue that is forward thinking, suggesting that to assign Saladist Jihadism to the history books requires a different approach from the West : Political alignment with repressive Middle Eastern regimes must be retracted in a bid to promote democracy in earnest. Establishing meaningful dialogue with Islamic cultures could entice the more pragmatic away from terrorism.

In Burleigh's view only these efforts can strike at the foundations of Jihadism.

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