



Andreas Elter. *Propaganda der Tat: Die RAF und die Medien.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 2008. 287 pp. EUR 10.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-518-12514-4.



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Focusing primarily on the Red Army Faction's (RAF) activity inside the Federal Republic of Germany, and drawing periodic links to al-Qaeda, Andreas Elter probes the efficacy of terroristic violence as a strategy of communication. As such, the author emphasizes that, in addition to its destructive force, terrorism is "always also" a communicative strategy whose actual target is the general public rather than the direct victims of an attack (p. 11). Elter's desire to locate a "comparable orchestration of horror through terrorists" (p. 10) in the wake of 9/11 leads him to the West German RAF, which he describes as the "first group ... to make extensive use" of advances in electronic mass media (p. 11). The extent to which the RAF was unique in this regard may be called into question, since the Weathermen, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Black September, the Japanese Red Army, and the Italian Red Brigades all employed similar strategies in the 1970s. This observation does not, however, undermine the central thrust of Elter's argument. Concentrating on acts intended to function as

"propaganda of the deed," Elter demonstrates convincingly not only that terrorists have depended upon the media as a transmitter and amplifier of "fear and horror" (p. 11), but that the entire strategy of propaganda of the deed has only emerged and evolved in conjunction with advances in media technologies.

The author's main objective is to integrate a historical analysis of terrorism with a media-centered perspective, and he asserts that "hardly a work to date ... has taken this approach" (p. 12).[1] In the first of two larger chapter groupings (followed by two mini-sections), Elter maps an assortment of communicative modes onto the strategy of terrorism. He distinguishes, for example, internal from external communication, direct from indirect communication, and encoded from unencoded communication, in addition to illustrating the differences between one-dimensional, bipolar, multipolar forms of communication. This particular method of analysis provides a useful framework for students of political violence to conceptualize and articulate the dynamic relationship

between terrorists and established media outlets. Elter stresses that terror acts simultaneously function on internal and external communicative levels, targeting fellow group members on the one hand and a assortment of publics—including sympathizers, the media, and state authorities—on the other. Viewed from this analytical perspective, a suicide bombing is far more than an act of "concrete, physical violence, but rather always simultaneously a symbolic act" directed against outsiders (p. 51). In fact, suicide bombings form but one strand of a more significant facet of propaganda of the deed, namely the assailants' construction of "idols, myths, and martyrs," designed to "convince the supporters' scene and the general public of the high morality of their goals" (p. 77).

In his historical overview of terrorism, Elter calls attention to the convergence of advances in technologies of communication and destruction. Specifically, he traces the genesis of the strategy of propaganda of the deed back to nineteenth-century European anarchists who capitalized on the development of rotary printing and dynamite. This point is particularly significant in that the author claims that propaganda of the deed still provides the "most important basis for the communicative strategy" of al-Qaeda and the terrorist organizations of the twenty-first century (p. 266). Needless to say, this terrorist strategy has continuously evolved throughout modern history, and perhaps the greatest benefit of Elter's study is his ability to link these changes to the emergence of new media technologies. A prime example in this regard would be the development of Polaroid photography and home video cameras in the 1970s and the dynamic impact these devices had on terrorist groups like the RAF, which increasingly turned to kidnappings as a mode of propaganda of the deed. In the more recent past, Elter identifies the emergence of the Internet as a "quantum leap for the development of terroristic strategies of communication," by enabling groups like al-Qaeda to reach

a broad target audience without the assistance of the mass media (p. 171).

One of the underlying strengths of Elter's media-centered approach is its ability to account for the propaganda success of terroristic acts of violence that failed miserably from an operational perspective. Indeed, Elter's study suggests that a group's communicative strategy plays a larger role in its long-term propaganda effects than do its operational achievements. As a case in point, the author argues that propaganda of the deed successfully established itself on a global scale with the Munich Massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics, as Black September exploited live international television coverage to reach instantly close to one billion television viewers. It mattered little, Elter maintains, that the eight commando members failed to secure the release of any of the prisoners on their list, or that all eight were either killed or arrested during the course of their liberation attempt. On the contrary, Elter argues, the deaths of five Palestinian guerrillas transformed the Munich assailants into martyrs, and thus provided Black September with a potent instrument of external communication targeted at sympathizers as well as the general Arab public.

Regardless of whether or not the RAF was path-breaking in its application of the strategy of propaganda of the deed, Elter's extensive analysis of the group's communicative strategy supports his claim that media coverage has been as crucial a component of terrorism as destructive force. Notably, the RAF was one of many left-wing guerrilla organizations of the 1970s inspired by Brazilian Carlos Marighella's notion that modern mass media, when properly manipulated, could provide the most effective weapon of terrorist propaganda. Elter deftly unravels the RAF's contradictory relationship with the media establishment, pointing out that group members "heavily criticized" West German media outlets as a central element of the hated "pig system," even though they "required them as a transmitter of their mes-

sages" (pp. 123, 194). The author reminds us that former *Konkret* journalist Ulrike Meinhof was not the only member of the RAF's "first generation" who possessed journalistic credentials, and he correctly presents group members as suffering at times from a "press fixation" (p. 121).

Tellingly, the arrest and imprisonment of the RAF's inner core in 1972 did nothing to curtail the group's focus on the mainstream media as a tool of external communication. Elter argues that, if anything, the RAF's communicative strategy became more professional during this period, despite adverse circumstances. Continuing their political activity behind bars, RAF guerrillas increasingly deployed coordinated hunger strikes, another media-dependent strategy that came to displace propaganda of the deed as the primary mode of struggle. With attorney Klaus Croissant functioning as a veritable "PR manager" for incarcerated group leaders, the RAF successfully developed and propagated concepts such as the "death wing" and "isolation confinement" that shifted the focus of attention away from previous acts of terror and onto current prison conditions. The RAF's sustained efforts to incorporate the mainstream media into its communicative strategy thus helps explain why the 1974 death of RAF core member Holger Meins during a hunger strike generated an unprecedented level of sympathy among broad swathes of the West German public.

Propaganda der Tat provides a useful case study of terrorism as a strategy of communication. Elter's findings suggest that the tendency of the RAF's first generation to outpace rival guerrilla groups and its own subsequent incarnations in terms of posthumous literature and media coverage stemmed from its innovative communication strategies rather than a preponderance of destructive violence. Whether this trend applies universally remains unsettled, but Elter's work certainly opens paths for similar studies of guerrilla groups in different national contexts. For terrorism specialists or scholars considering adding a new

course on terrorism to their repertoire, Elter's media-centered approach supplies an analytical framework that transcends temporal and regional constraints. At a time when politicians speak of terrorism as an infectious ideology, Elter also reminds us that terrorism is, in fact, a propagandistic strategy that is thoroughly intertwined with advances in media technology.

Note

[1]. For examples of scholarly investigations that, at least in part, provide a media-centered approach to terrorism, see Walter Laqueur, *No End to War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003); Leith Passmore, "The Art of Hunger: Self-Starvation in the Red Army Faction," *German History Review* 27 (January 2009): 32-59; Klaus Weinhauer, Jörg Requate, and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds., *Terrorismus in der Bundesrepublik: Medien, Staat und Subkulturen in den 1970er Jahren* (Frankfurt an Main: Campus Verlag, 2006); and Michael Wieviorka, *The Making of Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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