H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Durba Ghosh. *Gentlemanly Terrorists Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 290 pp. $29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-63738-8.

Reviewed by Heather Streets-Salter

Published on H-Diplo (February, 2018)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of educated, high-caste Indian men formed secret societies with the goal of violently overthrowing British rule. To fund this mission, they resorted to acts the Government of India called "terrorist," which included robbing banks and post offices. They also carried out political assassinations and bombings of British administrators and Indians who supported British rule. These groups continued their campaigns of violence through independence in 1947, all the while seeking to inspire more revolutionaries and deeply alarming the colonial government out of all proportion to their numbers.

Durba Ghosh, in *Gentlemanly Terrorists: Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919-1947*, takes up these revolutionary movements in the years after World War I to demonstrate the ways "terrorist" movements "reshaped the politics and laws of late anticolonial nationalism in India" (p. 10). While attention to these movements highlights the fact that the Indian nationalist movement was more complicated than Gandhian nonviolence, Ghosh goes further by arguing that the Indian nationalist movement cannot properly be understood without attention to revolutionary terrorism. This was because the devolution of power to Indians by the colonial government during the 1920s and 1930s occurred alongside, and in relation to, the enactment of a series of repressive laws designed to contain the threat posed by the ideals and acts of revolutionary terrorists. Revolutionary terrorism, Ghosh argues, prompted the colonial government to make it abundantly clear which Indian elites would be considered worthy and legitimate heirs to the state and which would not.

Indeed, one of the core arguments of *Gentlemanly Terrorists* is to demonstrate how major constitutional reforms in late colonial India were accompanied by repressive legislation. This simultaneity, Ghosh argues, was no accident. In the case of the 1919 Government of India Act, which expanded the Indian franchise and introduced devolution at the provincial level, Ghosh links these constitutional reforms (and a liberal-minded reform of Indian jails) with the introduction of the repressive Rowlatt Act which allowed indefinite detention and incarceration without trial of political dissidents, among other things. Thus, while the Government of India Act and the jails reform sought to bring Indians who might oppose colonial rule into a working relationship with the state, the Rowlatt Act simultaneously continued the repressive legislation of the World War I-era Defense of India Act. In essence, Ghosh argues that "a plan of introducing self-government to educated elites in India and improving jail condi-

tions was paralleled by a series of repressive legislation that attempted to discipline the revolutionary and radical activities of those very same educated elites" (p. 34). This same pattern also marked the discussions around the Simon Commission later in the interwar period, which advocated provincial autonomy and federalism in India in the midst of a series of repressive legislative acts designed to contain and silence revolutionaries.

A second core argument is that the repressive legislation so intimately connected to constitutional reform in India tended to galvanize not only revolutionary terrorists against the government but also more moderate nationalists as well. This, in turn, prompted colonial administrators to believe that further emergency repressive legislation was necessary to prevent revolutionary violence from spiraling out of control. Ghosh argues that this belief was reinforced after the brief hiatus in repressive legislation that followed the enactment of the Government of India Act in 1919 and lasted through Mohandas Gandhi's Non-Cooperation campaign until its end in 1922. During that time, revolutionaries agreed to Gandhi's request that they refrain from staging violent attacks on colonial administrators or their supporters. Once the Non-Cooperation campaign was officially over, however, terrorist acts proliferated around Bengal between 1923 and 1925. Colonial administrators argued that the absence of repressive emergency laws during the Non-Cooperation campaign were to blame for this situation, and in response quickly enacted a series of emergency ordinances in Bengal that more or less accomplished the same goals as the never-enforced Rowlatt Act. The Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act (BCLA), as it was called, resulted in an explosion in the number of political prisoners—approximately 10,000 by 1933—who had to be detained in special detention camps. The dramatic rise in detainees and the conditions under which they lived were widely decried by even moderate Indian politicians, and continually put the colonial government at odds with Indians who insisted that the rule of law must prevail. Notwithstanding these consistent objections, when the BCLA lapsed in 1930, it was quickly renewed and supplemented with further emergency legislation in response to a series of assassinations between 1930 and 1934. By this time, Ghosh argues, "anticipating a continued state of emergency became a new norm" (p. 145). The irony, as Ghosh demonstrates, was that repressive legislation did not stop revolutionary terrorism and also contributed to moderate nationalist discontent. In spite of this, the colonial government continued to insist that such legislation was essential right through independence.

A third core argument of *Gentlemanly Terrorists* revolves around the ways that individuals—both revolutionary terrorists themselves and colonial administrators—used history and historical accounts to make claims about the movement. Indeed, Ghosh shows that in seeking to make sense out of revolutionary terrorism, the colonial government spent a lot of energy and time writing histories of the movement. In so doing, government accounts imposed an artificial unity on terrorist acts that made them seem part of a conscious and connected conspiracy—a legacy that persists to this day. Even more important, Ghosh argues that revolutionary terrorists themselves used history to take control of their own stories, both during the interwar years and after independence. Ghosh explores a handful of autobiographies written by revolutionaries after their release, in 1919, from detention during the war. For these men, writing their own histories was a political statement that became "a part of their political insurrection" (p. 63). Notwithstanding the differences in each story, each of these men sought to portray themselves as both disciplined and modern revolutionaries who were willing to give their lives for their nation. In so doing, they hoped to gain recruits for their cause and also to remind Indians and Britons alike of a long-standing Bengali tradition of militancy. In the postindepen-

dence period, revolutionaries released from detention camps in 1947 likewise sought to record their autobiographies for posterity. But unlike the revolutionary autobiographies of the earlier period that hoped to build the movement, these later texts sought to demonstrate the importance of revolutionaries and the revolutionary movement to the larger history of India's independence movement. And in this new political environment of independence, revolutionaries (including some women) became celebrated public figures: indeed, in postindependence India they had truly gone from being seen as terrorists to being seen as freedom fighters, and were officially recognized by the state.

While Ghosh points out that most Indian schoolchildren know about the men and women featured in the book as gentlemanly terrorists, she is equally aware that it was the story of Ghandhi's nonviolent movement that became the accepted narrative of independence. And though it might be tempting to brush off the story of these revolutionaries as marginal to the larger story of Indian independence because of their smaller numbers, because of their regional concentration in Bengal, or because they ultimately failed, Ghosh shows us in multiple ways that the problem of revolutionary terrorism was fundamental to the unfolding of the better-known Gandhian narrative. For her, the enactment of emergency legislation and the promotion of a liberal democratic agenda were not contradictory impulses but two sides of the same coin.

Given that the revolutionary terrorist movement generated an enormous official archive in both India and Britain, Ghosh could certainly have had ample material to work with from such sources alone. Her choice to include so many of the writings of these revolutionaries, however, makes the book not only far more interesting but also far more nuanced. Just as revolutionaries sought to recover control over their own histories by writing their autobiographies, the chapters that focus on revolutionary writings refuse to let colonial administrators have the last word on what kind of people these revolutionaries were or how they should be remembered.

One of the ironies of this history, however, is that despite such a major shift in how Indian revolutionaries were viewed by the colonial and the independent Indian states, the legacies of the past —especially with regard to emergency legislation existing in tandem within liberal democracies— continued to haunt independent India. While the "terrorists" of the newly independent state were not the same as those of the past, new "terrorists" such as tribal leaders, Maoists, and communists were targeted by emergency legislation after 1947. In the end, Ghosh argues that "both the colonial and postcolonial states have used the logic of protecting democracy and democratic norms and rights as a way of rationalizing a growing security apparatus" (p. 245).

Gentlemanly Terrorists is important in its own right for what it says about Indian revolutionaries, the Indian nationalist movement, and the priorities of the late colonial and early independent Indian states, but it also speaks to a more general problem for the construction of democracies. Although Ghosh does not make this connection explicitly, it is not difficult to see numerous other case studies in which the passage of emergency laws in order to preserve and protect emerging or existing democratic forms—in Malaya, Kenya, South Africa, and Germany, among others—has resulted in the abrogation of democratic rights for those whose political programs contradict or threaten those of the state. For this reason *Gentlemanly Terrorists* can provide a useful case study for exploring the logic of how and why these seemingly oppositional impulses have become linked. One wonders if there are more global implications to this cycle of seeing revolutionaries everywhere, legislating to remove them from society, detaining them, and continuing to feel the need for more legislation. In

any case, *Gentlemanly Terrorists* is an important book that will leave readers with a greater understanding of the complexities of Indian nationalism and of an understudied set of violent revolutionaries who helped to shape the colonial state's response to it. It may also leave them with larger questions about the history of the interplay between repression and democracy and how it has played out around the world.