Historian Mary Barton presents a thoroughly researched and concise history of European and US counterterrorism and arms control efforts between the world wars. Drawing on archives from four countries, Barton unpacks a story of diplomacy, international law, and counterterrorism frequently omitted from the history of terrorism.

Barton starts with the problems of terrorism and arms control in the aftermath of World War I. The major combatants had produced absurd numbers of small arms during this war, and afterwards a largely unregulated arms trade worsened instability in places like the Balkans and colonial India. State-sponsored terrorism reared its head in this era, especially in the struggle for power in the Balkans, where Italy and Hungary backed the Croatian assassins who killed King Alexander I of Yugoslavia and the French foreign minister in 1934. The United States, Great Britain, and France, the book's primary actors, also feared revolutionary subversion and arms exports from the Soviet Union, which Barton shows were significant threats in the 1920s. For the great powers, terrorism and the arms trade were two sides of the same coin of destabilization.

The great powers made several efforts at coordinated arms control in the 1920s under the auspices of the League of Nations. The first major effort came with the 1919 Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye, which prohibited the export of artillery, ammunition, and other small arms with a focus on barring this trade in the British and French empires. This treaty had little effect on the arms trade, and its failure led to the Arms Traffic Conference of 1925, which further restricted arms sales in the imperial zones and created an enduring ban on chemical weapons use in warfare.

The book culminates in the League of Nations' adoption of the 1937 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism in response to the assassination of King Alexander I. The signatories viewed terrorist acts like assassinations as potential causes of wider wars, as had happened with the killing of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. This convention reflected broad agreement on the definition of terrorism as “criminal acts directed against a State or intended or calculated to create a state of terror” (p. 172). The United Nations, by contrast, has never been able to agree on a definition of terrorism; instead, it has criminalized specific aspects of terrorism like hostage-tak-
ing and hijacking. This convention also required states to prevent and punish international terrorism and rendered state support of terrorism as an illegal act in itself.

Barton shows how these efforts were undermined by competing interests between states and different perceptions of the terrorist threat. Great Britain and France wanted to sever the flow of weapons to anti-colonial revolutionaries but did not want to cut off all international arms markets. France, moreover, wanted to sell arms to central European powers that would help it contain Germany. Few countries wanted to restrict their trade rights before a critical mass of other states, especially the great powers, had also signed on, creating a thorny catch-22 that inhibited effective arms control.

In addition, the United States failed to ratify the 1919, 1925, and 1937 treaties as part of its post-war withdrawal from European affairs, and it continued to flood the global market with weapons. US remoteness was enhanced by the well-founded suspicion that Anglo-French emphasis on arms control was really a way to preserve their empires. The United States and Great Britain cooperated on anarchist and leftist terrorism, but US officials resisted British exhortations to crack down on Indian and Irish revolutionaries. Meanwhile, Germany and especially the USSR sought to undermine the British and French empires by shipping arms to anti-colonial groups. The global flow of arms was not reduced, nor was much coordinated action taken on terrorism, and by the end of the 1930s growing tensions with Germany and Italy overshadowed these problems.

Despite these failures, Barton shows that some progress on international law, arms control, and counterterrorism was made for future generations. National intelligence agencies expanded during the 1920s and 1930s, as did intelligence sharing between states. The 1925 Geneva protocol on chemical weapons has become a pillar of international law. Moreover, the League compiled and published data on the arms trade, creating precedents for future efforts at transparency. In their attempts at creating international counterterrorist laws, the great powers expanded the idea of state responsibility to include active suppression of international terrorism launched from one's territory, a key principle of later twentieth- and twenty-first-century counterterrorism. Barton's book suggests that international cooperation on issues like terrorism might fail in the short term while making valuable contributions to later efforts at building rules and norms.

Barton contends that much of this interwar history was forgotten by the 1970s and 1980s, when a resurgence of international terrorism again vaulted this issue onto the political and policy agenda. This is unfortunate because this story reinforces important lessons for counterterrorism. One is that the fluid, transnational nature of terrorism and the arms trade requires that any solution start with international cooperation.

A second lesson is that counterterrorism efforts must deal with the political problems contributing to terrorism rather than just repressing it. Post-World War I counterterrorism in India, for example, focused on expanding the law to enable more surveillance, detention, and repression. Although these methods worked in the short term, they did not address the Indian desire for greater autonomy and dignity, the ultimate source of revolutionary activity. Finally, Barton's book shows that international counterterrorism efforts, like all attempts at international cooperation, must always grapple with the problems of state sovereignty and disparate state interests, even among seemingly like-minded states.

One minor caveat about this book is in order. Readers expecting a counterterrorism-centered book might be slightly disappointed, as the focus is more on the great powers' use of international law and arms control to address several types of instability, one of which was terrorism. A more
suitable, if wordier title might have been “Arms Control and Counterterrorism between the Wars.”

Barton's book makes valuable contributions to the study of terrorism. She illuminates an era of the history of terrorism that scholars have long overlooked and integrates counterterrorism into the established narrative of postwar efforts at international law and cooperation. Scholars of arms control, terrorism, the League of Nations, and interwar geopolitics will find this study particularly worthwhile.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57070

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.