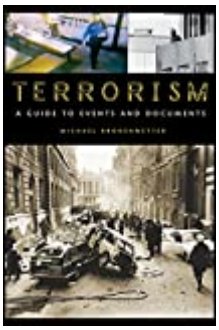
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences




**Michael Kronenwetter.** *Terrorism: A Guide to Events and Documents.* Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004. ix + 298 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-32578-6.

**Reviewed by** Darren Mulloy (History Department, Wilfrid Laurier University)

**Published on** H-Amstdy (March, 2006)

## Facing Terror

*Terrorism: A Guide to Events and Documents* is Michael Kronenwetter's response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Kronenwetter argues that before these attacks many Americans were content, despite a surfeit of evidence to the contrary, to dismiss terrorism as something that happened elsewhere, predominately in the Middle East, Latin America, and the outer reaches of Old Europe. Terrorist violence within the United States, he says, was never really seen as "terrorism." It was something else: "vigilantism," "racism," or "labor trouble." Since the events of September 11, though, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. Now, Kronenwetter says, terrorist violence is everywhere. The United States has embarked on a global "war on terror" and Americans "have come to think of terrorism as a monolithic threat to our liberties, and even, perhaps, to our very survival" (p. viii).

Negotiating the terrain between these positions is the task Kronenwetter has set for himself. He wants to provide a "much-needed realistic perspective on this critical subject" (p. ix), and his target audience is clearly, if somewhat belatedly, identified as the *American* "general public" (pp. 89-90). (That most of his readers are likely to be American and that editorial decisions have been made on this basis is a point that is made more than once.) The book's first five chapters tackle such issues as the problem of defining terrorism; the relationship between terrorism and conventional warfare; the historical roots of terrorism; terrorism as an instrument of state power; the appeal and advantages of terrorism as a political strategy; the different types of terrorist activity that exist; and that current idÃ©e fixe, the danger of terrorists gaining access to weapons of mass destruction, biological, chemical, and nuclear. As befits an introductory work of this kind, these chapters are short, broadly informative, and the writing clear and accessible. In the course of them Kronenwetter also raises interesting questions about how the boundaries of legitimate and illegitimate violence are to be policed, about how much responsibility ordinary "innocent" citizens of representative democracies should take for the violent actions of their governments, and about the romantic attraction of the terrorist figure as rebel and outlaw, questions that might provide a useful starting point for classroom discussions on the

subject.

Kronenwetter's intentionally broad-strokes approach, though, does not really explain why he thinks King Leopold II's rule over the Congo Free State at the turn of the twentieth century merits four substantial paragraphs as part of a discussion of state terror, while the regimes of Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin require only a sentence between them. The same discussion also provides an example of the sometimes unfortunate consequences of Kronenwetter's relatively informal style, as when he writes that in comparison to the state terrorism of Hitler and Stalin, "the violence of even the most vicious and relentless subnational groups [is] relatively 'small potatoes' " (p. 29). Another example occurs with the author's reductive and simplistic observation that the "history of nuclear weapons can be summed up in two words: Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (p. 80). More problematic, however, is that despite Kronenwetter's repeated emphasis on the importance of understanding the specific context and circumstances that produce terrorism, one finds very little of the necessary social, political, and economic background one needs to understand its history in, say, Northern Ireland or the Middle East, areas which are referred to repeatedly throughout the book.

Closer to home, even Timothy McVeigh's 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City, the most destructive act of domestic terrorism in the history of the United States, is insufficiently examined and explained. Kronenwetter complains that most Americans view the bombing as an aberrant, isolated event, the work of a lone "maverick" (p. 33), but without any discussion of McVeigh's extreme right-wing politics, the motivation provided him by federal government's handling of events at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and Waco, Texas, in 1993, or his time spent in the U.S. Army, it is difficult to see how Kronenwetter's readers would be able to come to anything but the same conclusion. And although Kronenwetter may well be correct in his explanations of why people turn to terrorism–bitterness, anger, frustration, a feeling of helplessness, emotional trauma, and mental deficiency are all offered (pp. 43-51)–his arguments would be better served if they were supported with more specific evidence and examples.

The book also includes an A-Z description of thirty-seven terrorist groups such as Hamas, Al-Qaeda, the Tamil Tigers, the Irish Republican Army, and the Mau Ma; brief case studies of four different terrorist events (a 1906 lynching in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Black September's murder of eleven Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympic Games–the subject of Steven Spielberg's recent film *Munich*–, a huge parade organized by the Ku Klux Klan in Washington, D.C. in 1925, and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States); a chronology of terrorist incidents from 1831 to 2003; and a selection of "interesting and historically significant documents" including speeches and statements by George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden and former CIA Director George Tenet (p. ix). Unfortunately, there are a number of problems in Kronenwetter's presentation of this material. The only domestic organization included in Kronenwetter's A-Z listing, for example, is the Ku Klux Klan; the other thirty-six entries are all "foreign groups" which have been chosen, we are informed, rather opaquely, because of their "special interest to Americans for one reason or another" (p. 90). Somewhat more mysteriously, Kronenwetter's discussion of the Klan is illustrated with photographs of John Brown and his son, Owen. No mention is made of Brown in the accompanying text, the book's chronology, or even its index, although one would have thought that his 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry would warrant some consideration, however brief, in any work intended to introduce readers to the history of terrorism in the United States. And while the four case studies are intended to "illustrate important aspects of the terrorist phenomenon" (p. 139), Kronenwetter's preference for narrative detail over analysis and explanation leaves one largely left to one's own devices in assessing what is important and what is not in the events being discussed. The documents presented suffer both from being weighted too heavily towards September 11 and its aftermath, and from being insufficiently contextualized. Most glaringly, with no date attached to the U.S. Army Intelligence Center List of Terrorist Groups, one could be forgiven for assuming that organizations like the Weather Underground and the Symbionese Liberation Army were still fully functioning. More fundamentally, when taken together these sections of the book seem only to confirm the assumption that Kronenwetter initially set out to rebut: that terrorism is mainly a "foreign" problem. After consulting *Terrorism: A Guide to Events and Documents*, many of Kronenwetter's readers may feel that this is indeed the case.

**Citation:** Darren Mulloy. Review of Kronenwetter, Michael, *Terrorism: A Guide to Events and Documents*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11483