Defining Terrorism: Historical Definitions

Ironically, when terrorism first surfaced at the end of the 18th century at the time of the French Revolution, it was a term that was actually associated with the origins of democracy. And it didn't have any of the negative or pejorative connotations that terrorism has today. Rather, it was seen as the birth of democracy, with the end of monarchical rule, with the establishment of rule by the people in essence. And its activities then were associated almost exclusively with government, with government officials, unlike today when terrorism is seen very much as being a non-state phenomena or an act of violence that's perpetrated by subnational entities or subnational groups of people.

Now, terrorism's positive connotations ended in July 1794 when Robespierre, the leader of the French Revolution, held up a list of traitors that he said had undermined the revolution. And then terrorism shifted more towards the negative associations that we have today. Terrorism, therefore, became something that was not positive and not good, but something that was distinctively negative, that was also abusive, and that certainly involved violence often inflicted against ordinary people.

So terrorism resurfaces as both a concept and as a means of revolution or a means to achieve fundamental political change in the mid to late 19th century. And then it's associated with two specific movements, both of them actually inheritances of the French Revolution. On the one hand, with revolutionary organizations that were anti-monarchical that sought to overthrow the ruling dynasties of Europe and establish in their places democracies. But also with what was called the Anarchist movement, a group of revolutionaries, of nihilists, who just wanted to bring the system down in that hope that man's goodness in its place would create something much, much better.

And this exists for roughly 30 or 40 years. We see a spreading throughout Europe, even to the United States where you have especially anarchist bombings in Chicago and New York, and other places in the US. You have the assassination of many foreign rulers across Europe.

And then in the 20th century, we see terrorism shift yet again, especially in the early part of the 20th century where it becomes more associated, not just with revolutionary movements-- movements that want fundamental political change-- but equally as importantly with ethno-national separatist movement, with irredentist organizations. In other words, with individuals or groups of individuals who are attempting to carve out an historic or a linguistic or cultural homeland for themselves.

And I think terrorism's power during that era to really fundamentally affect global events was brought out very clearly on the eve of World War I. In fact, terrorism is credited with having provided the spark that set off the conflagration that became World War I. And this was the assassination in June 1914 of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg throne, by precisely one of these nationalist separatist irredentist revolutionaries by someone named

Gavrilo Princip, who was attempting to wrest Bosnia from the Hapsburg Empire and establish it as an independent separate country.

So terrorism then shifts from being a government phenomena of the French Revolution to being a phenomena very decidedly of the people. But the interesting thing is the 1930s, it swings back again to its government connotations and terrorism becomes very closely associated with the abuses of power and the repression of the populace inflicted by Nazi Germany and also by Stalinist Russia. So then we see terrorism now very much associated with governments.

1950s following World War II, once again, it swings in favor of non-state actors. And terrorism becomes very much associated with anti-colonialists, with nationalists, with peoples throughout the developing world attempting to throw off the shackles of imperialism, to free their countries from European rule.

So it once again, becomes revolutionary. It once again becomes very nationalist. It once again becomes irredentist. The recreation or reestablishment of a homeland.

In the 1960s and '70s, it changes yet again. It remains very much its focus on non-state or substate actors and ceases really to be associated with governments. And now is referred to, or refers to, two separate groups of terrorists or two separate groups of revolutionaries. Radical left wing or Marxist elements or at the same time, the same type of ethno-nationalist separatist groups that existed in the beginning of the century that resurface in places like Palestine, in Ireland, in Spain, and elsewhere.