Ancestral Voices Prophesying War

Study, Rachel Howard, 2005

The Institute for the Study of Terrorism, which I founded and directed in London in the 1980s, gathered and disseminated information about terrorists wherever in the world they acted. At that time—as far as we knew—we were the only private institution in Europe doing it. Because we had the Thatcher government's patronage (though not its financial support), we

were often taken to be an agency of the state. We were called upon for facts, figures, and opinion by members of the European parliament (MEPs), foreign ambassadors and police chiefs, military strategists, journalists from everywhere. We were easy to contact by phone; our number was listed in the directory but not our address. We met our visitors somewhere nearby and brought them to our (literally) underground offices.

Some of the voices on the phone announced themselves with famous names. One was Otto von Habsburg, who between the ages of four and six—from the end of December 1916 to the end of October 1918—had been next in line to be Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary. His father was crowned with glorious pomp in the middle of the First World War, and little Otto, dressed royally in ermine, rode with him and the splendidly attired Empress in a golden coach through the streets of Vienna. It was the splendor and glory of a sunset. In 1918 Austria was defeated in the war it had started, and empire and kingdom vanished away. The little prince grew up to become Herr Otto von Habsburg MEP, after another World War in which Austria, annexed by Germany, was again defeated. He was a strong supporter of the European Union. He believed, or ardently hoped, that its existence would prevent any more wars between its member states.

But what of a war between the free West and the Communist East? He asked me if the New Left terrorist gangs in Germany, Italy and France were Cold War proxies for Russia. I told him that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was officially against what it called “individual terrorism,” by which was meant Communist terrorist organizations which the Party did not control; but that some fugitives were given shelter in East Germany or Russia itself, and some rebels were trained in the use of arms and techniques of violence by Soviet-backed Arab organizations in the Middle East. The founders of the EU had not foreseen that indigenous terrorist

groups would arise to disrupt the coveted peace of the new Europe. What I told him confirmed what he feared.

His Vienna, the city that war had degraded, had nonetheless been wonderfully fertile in its imperial twilight. Most of the new ideas that have both invigorated and weakened the West in the last hundred years, came out of it. A cluster of thinkers calling themselves the Vienna Circle launched new philosophical arguments which stirred academics throughout Europe and America. Their theories about science provoked critical examination, chiefly by the great philosopher of politics and science, Karl Popper, whom they called "the official opposition." His was another voice I heard.

Sir Karl called me only to apologize for not being able to deliver the opening address at a conference we were holding on the subject of terrorism. He expressed his regret; but my regret was much greater for missing the opportunity to meet and talk with him. It is from a published address of his, delivered in 1947, that I know he was "among the hopeful enemies of violence." He said, just two years after the end of the Second World War, "I am today no less hopeful than I have ever been that violence can be defeated. It is our only hope; and long stretches in the history of Western as well as of Eastern civilizations prove that it need not be a vain hope—that violence *can* be reduced, and brought under the control of reason." [1] "Reduced" not "extinguished" was what he said. He went on to discuss "disagreement" as a cause of violence and how "argument" could be brought to bear instead. But he was not unaware that there are people who *want* to be violent. "You cannot have a rational discussion with a man who prefers shooting you to being convinced by you."

By establishing an institute to study terrorism, my intentions were to accumulate information and expose the savage ideologies that inspired the terrorists; to be of use to democratic governments by providing a service to their police

forces and armies which could help them actively quell the menace.

I had read that Simon Wiesenthal, the famous Nazi hunter, had said “Information is a defense.” By gathering it, he helped trace Nazis in hiding and bring them to judgment. I wanted to know how he did it.

He lived in Vienna and there I went in search of him. After days of waiting, after sending many messages through channels that would vouch for my trustworthiness, he agreed to meet me. I was instructed where to go and found him and a secretary (or bodyguard) in offices that were so bare they could only have been borrowed for the occasion. In the course of our conversation he recommended a book to me.

“It’s about the Baader-Meinhof gang. It’s called *Hitler’s Children* and it will give you a real insight into what motivates affluent educated young Europeans to become terrorists. It reveals how they think violent revolt is romantic, and Communism is romantic. I can’t remember who wrote it.”

“I did,” I said. I had sent it to him as a self-recommendation when I was trying to get his consent to a meeting.

He apologized for forgetting my name, became more talkative and answered my questions, but did not, as I had hoped, encourage me to pursue my project of gathering information to help combat terrorism. He implied that it was not likely to be of much help. He seemed to me a disappointed man, sorrowfully pessimistic about the future. He foresaw an increase in Muslim terrorist action. When I praised the Mossad as the most efficient intelligence gathering agency in the world, adding respectfully that it had had the sense to seek his assistance, he said it wasn’t what it had been. “Now they work nine to five,” he said.

I went to Israel, asked for an interview with the Mossad and

met two very reserved agents who noted what I had to say and told me nothing. But I also got to speak with Benjamin Netanyahu, introduced to him by letter from the British publisher who'd commissioned me to write a history of the Palestine Liberation Organization. I knew more about his heroic brother, Jonathan Netanyahu, who had been shot dead in Entebbe while rescuing hostages from their German and Arab terrorist captors, than I did about him when we first talked over a desk in Jerusalem. He told me what I wanted to know—his own opinions—and asked me questions about the life of Yasser Arafat, details I'd mentioned in my history of the PLO.

I met him again a year later at a conference on international terrorism which he co-sponsored in Washington, D.C., in June 1984. I was invited to deliver an address on the PLO, and to bring my spouse. As I didn't have a spouse just then, I brought my daughter Claire. Of those she and I most interestingly encountered (in addition to the Japanese professor who—he told me—recommended my book on the German terrorists to the Tokyo publishing company which brought out the Japanese translation of it) were, most memorably, the warrior and statesman Yitzhak Rabin, and the celebrated historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis.

On the last night, in a corner of a large lounge where the speakers and eminent guests assembled before dinner, Yitzhak Rabin, with Claire and me as his only audience, talked about terrorism, looking over our heads and speaking as if to the apathetic world. He had no need or wish to hear our opinions and neither of us had any that deserved to engage with his. No hesitancy, no suggestion of doubt, crept into anything he said, yet he did not sound dogmatic, only authoritative and dependable. As individuals we were unimportant to him, but how to deal with terrorism was all-important, so he spoke at length, and we felt privileged to hear him. He had been a soldier for twenty-seven years, fighting war after war against Arab armies and terrorist organizations. It was under his

command that Israel had won its great victory in the Six Day War of 1967. As Prime Minister he had ordered the Entebbe Raid in 1976. He was no pacifist, but he ardently desired peace. It was with the hope of peace that some ten years later, as Prime Minister for the second time, he would sign the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians' "sole representative," the PLO. For that venture—disastrous as it turned out for Israel and himself—he would pay with his life. He was assassinated in 1995, shot dead by a fellow Israeli furious about the unrepaid concessions made by the Israeli side under Rabin's leadership.

I wondered then and wonder now, how a man who's been fighting an enemy for decades and knows all too well that it doesn't keep its word, can bring himself to trust it. His hope must have been very strong for him even to imagine that trust was worth trying. A saying of his became well known: "We must fight terrorism as if there's no peace process and work to achieve peace as if there's no terrorism."

Very different was our chat with Bernard Lewis. In the hope of meeting him I had prepared myself by reading some of his many books and others also on the history of Islam by my friend Bat Ye'or. I had well-informed questions to ask him, but the chance did not arise. He wanted to talk about us. Charmingly flirtatious, he waved away the topic of terrorism and paid us compliments which neither of us objected to in the least. He asked Claire about Yale law school, where she was learning not just law, she told him, but all about the progress of the ominous "long march" of Communism "through the institutions." We all spoke lightly and joked. Bernard Lewis seemed gifted with natural cheerfulness. It is from his writing, not his conversation, that I know he foresaw an intensification of the age-long conflict of the West with Islam. He has foretold that most victims of Muslim terrorism will be Muslims—against the teaching of the Koran and the *hadiths* (the traditions). "If the fundamentalists [such as Al-Qaida] succeed in their war, then a dark future awaits the world, especially the part of it

that embraces Islam." And, "If freedom fails and terror triumphs, the people of Islam will be the first and greatest victims. They will not be alone, and many others will suffer with them." [2]

What I took away from the conference was that Western Europe, the Middle East, South America and possibly North America must expect more terrorist attacks. Also that it was widely understood and resented that the press, for the most part, was biased in favor of Islam, and especially the Palestinian terrorist organizations.

The Middle East correspondent for the London Times, Robert Fisk, was zealously devoted to the Arab cause. He claimed, for instance, that Beirut had been "bombed by the Israelis worse than Dresden [flattened by the British Royal Air Force in the Second World War]," though Israel had not in fact bombed Beirut at all. A section of the city was in ruins, bullet holes riddled the walls that still stood, and most of the buildings round the Hippodrome in the center were reduced to rubble. It was a scene of post-war devastation—caused not by Israeli intervention but by recent civil war.

Fisk's reports were widely acknowledged to be biased, but that did not trouble him. He is one of those rare people whose name has entered the English language, having a verb named after him: "to fisk." What it means, according to my internet dictionary, is to have one's statements refuted point-by-point. Yet it didn't happen to Robert Fisk nearly as often as it should have done.

When (in 1986 or thereabouts) I had an invitation from the Foreign Office to lunch with him, I was curious to meet him, though certain nothing good would come of a meeting. He and I, and a woman diplomat whose name I forget, sat down to cutlets and wine in the dining-room of a club on Pall Mall. Did someone in the Foreign Office hope that he would win me over to his pro-Palestinian opinion? That was far more likely than

that anyone there would want me to change Fisk's mind. But what, realistically, could such a meeting bring but restatements by each of us of the views we each knew the other held? I did not tell him that I'd heard him say into a phone (one in a long bank of phones against a wall of the lobby where I, an extraneous middle-aged woman, was sitting among a host of foreign correspondents in their favorite Beirut hotel), "I'm standing under an orange tree in the Bekaa Valley …" Or that I had been on the roof of the same hotel when he was up there recording a report, so I heard him say, as a lone Israeli reconnaissance plane advanced from the horizon, "Here they come, one, two three … six, no seven Israeli bombers …" I did not "fisk" him. And we actually agreed on something: that the Arab-Israeli conflict had no foreseeable end, would long continue, and the so-called "peace process" would not achieve peace.

On my flight back to London from the Washington conference, I was reminded that Africa too was under threat of terrorist onslaught, by terrorist armies rapidly gaining political power. At the airport I saw the former Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia and introduced myself to him as the Director of the Institute for the Study of Terrorism. I told him I had just come from a conference on terrorism. He asked me whether it had the backing of the US government. I told him it had been opened by President Reagan's Secretary of State, George Schultz. Was terrorism condemned unanimously? I could truthfully say yes. Had there been talk of a plan of action against the growing evil of terrorism? I had to say no.

When we boarded the plane, he went to the first-class section, I to the business-class seat bought for me by the organizers of the conference, but when the plane reached the height at which it was safe to walk about, Mr. Smith came looking for me. He took the empty seat beside me. I reckoned that he wanted company, preferably sympathetic or at least understanding; and my being a fellow white African (born in

South Africa, as I had told him) and a desk-warrior against terrorism, I represented a fair chance of it. He lamented that the British government understood so little about Africa and about the terrorist leader Robert Mugabe who had come to power by violence—though finally winning an election in 1980. Mugabe was now Prime Minister of Ian Smith's country, newly named Zimbabwe. It was, Mr. Smith assured me, well on its way to ruin. He had famously said that the black Africans of his country were not ready to govern nor would be for a very long time. "Not for a thousand years", he had said—words much quoted as proof that he was a white supremacist, a thing popularly regarded throughout the Western world as worse than a terrorist.

How true have the prophecies of the small cast of this memoir proven to be? Under Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe soon became poor and hungry. In many other parts of Africa, terrorist armies are killing millions—shooting their victims, burning them alive, slicing them into pieces. Terrorist attacks on all the inhabited continents, including the mainland of the United States, have done more harm than any pessimist predicted in the 1980s. Islamic terrorist groups are proliferating. They have made more than 40,000 lethal attacks since nineteen Muslims killed 2,996 people in America on 9 September 2001. President Donald Trump defeated two of the largest and cruelest of them—al-Qaeda and ISIS. But they are regrouping in Afghanistan, where America fought the terrorist Taliban for twenty years and then, under the Biden administration, yielded to them. Contrary to the administration's claim, the Taliban are not amenable to reason. Nor is the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas, which rules Gaza and continues to fire rockets into Israel. The European Union, tormented no longer by New Left terrorists but by Muslim jihadists, is an authoritarian oligarchy, beginning to disintegrate. No one is reported to be hunting down mass killers, or risking his life to rescue captured hostages. And the archive of my institute, a collection of information painstakingly built, has been lost

or deliberately destroyed by the British university that bought it.

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[1] Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1972, pages 355, 357.
[2] Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Orion Books, London 2004, pages 140, 146.