

Interview with George Rosie on Terrorism

George Rosie, the Scottish affairs correspondent of *The Times* for the last ten years has written *The Directory of International Terrorism* (Mainstream Publishing) which gives a concise and interesting description of terrorism and its practitioners in today's world.

Free Life interviewed George Rosie recently.

Free Life: Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. has defined terrorism as "the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends." If military targets are chosen, could this be defined as the legitimate conduct of war?

George Rosie: Netanyahu tries to distinguish between attacking military targets and attacking civilian targets, but the problem is that the IRA, for instance, attack both. It seems that FATAH, the mainstream of the PW, are concentrating their actions on what they see as legitimate military targets in the occupied territories. That does not stop the Israelis regarding FATAH as essentially a terrorist organisation.

FL: If FATAH and the IRA were to concentrate only on military targets, would you regard them as terrorists? I am thinking of the distinction which nation states at war have of combatants and non-combatants.

GR: I think that would be an ideal solution but the chances of getting terrorist groups to adhere to that are remote. There is also the problem of the definition of 'military targets'. Do you regard the British Government as a legitimate target for the IRA? I don't think so. It seems to me that the attempt to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants in this way becomes very difficult.

A Century of terrorism

FL: The 20th century has seen the growth of terrorist tactics in war. Many innocent people have been killed by mass bombing. Do you think that any of the small political terror groups are imitating the actions of 20th century states?

GR: The totalitarianism of the mid-to-late 20th century has had a poisonous effect on the body politic. The Second World War saw a totalitarian response to a totalitarian system. What the British Government had to do to confront the Nazis would have been regarded in the previous century as very totalitarian. Rounding up all aliens and flattening German cities would have been inconceivable 50 or 70 years before. Perhaps terror groups do take a cue from this. If people can justify the bombing of Dresden, Coventry and Hiroshima, the terrorists may well feel that they can justify planting a few bombs too.

FL: This brings up the question whether terrorists can be beaten by counter-terrorism. The Germans executed the inhabitants of whole villages during World War Two in order to deter support for the partisans. If counter-terrorism can be successful, can it be justified? Churchill supported unrestricted guerrilla warfare in World War Two. Were any methods permitted to defeat the Nazis?

GR: It is interesting that the Nazis defined the partisan groups as terrorists. There is though, a danger of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. We are faced with small groups of terrorists, not the Wehrmacht or SS or a whole state dedicated to evil. Some of these groups are well-financed, some not so well-financed. We must not be panicked into throwing away all kinds of civil liberties against a threat which though dangerous is not overwhelming. I like to make the distinction between the effects of terrorism on a stable polity and what can happen in a political tinderbox. I like to make the comparison between America at the time of the Kennedy assassination - power was transferred quite smoothly - and the attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in 1982 in London which was

used by the Israelis as a pretext to invade the Lebanon. That had horrendous consequences. It destabilised the Lebanon, led to thousands of deaths and Israel itself tottered.

FL: It is true however, that beating terrorists is one step towards making a particular situation more stable. It is difficult to reconcile Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland as long as the IRA are operating. The actions of the IRA poison the whole atmosphere.

GR: But the IRA are operating as a result of the repressive political situation in Northern Ireland which had been forgotten about. This is what fed the IRA.

State v Revolutionary Terror

FL: In the introduction to your book you make a distinction between 'repressive' and 'revolutionary' terrorism. 'Repressive' is that carried out by the state to further government policy and 'revolutionary' is that carried out by groups within a country who wish to become the new government or change the policy of the existing government. Media in the West tend to concentrate on 'revolutionary' terrorism. Do you think this is more significant than 'repressive' terrorism. I am thinking of the crimes committed by Pol Pot, Stalin and the Argentinian Junta.

GR: It is true to say that the one breeds the other. The Montoneros in Argentina became such a destructive force that they helped to precipitate a military coup. The same thing happened in Uruguay. The guerillas there brought about the loss of civil liberties for the Uruguayan people.

FL: Which terrorist groups do you think have been the most successful? How should terrorists go about their business if they are to be successful?

GR: They should throw down their arms and start voting! As a dedicated constitutionalist and democrat I don't believe that terrorism can be justified. Some of it is more understandable. It seems to me that the Red Army Faction in Germany and the Action Direct in France are going nowhere. They are faced by strong, resourceful democratic

societies and their idea of a left-wing Marxist regime is not going to get very far. However, the ANC in South Africa will in 20 years time be the dominant force amongst Blacks because they are feeding upon an obvious injustice.

Terrorism and Justice

FL: You think then that there is a relationship between the success of terrorists and the justice of their cause?

GR: Yes, I do. The more obvious the injustice which is producing the terrorism, the more likely is terrorism to shade into a guerrilla war and the guerrilla war into a full-scale conventional war. I suppose the Sandinistas are an example of that. They started off as a very small group, and gradually as Somoza grew more and more repressive in response, the campaign of the Sandinistas grew and grew. Now the Sandinistas are in control and are probably making the same mistakes as Somoza.

FL: There are a number of terrorist groups in the Soviet Union. Both Georgian and Ukrainian nationalist groups are rumoured to have let off bombs. Do you think these groups stand a chance of success? Is their cause just?

GR: I think their cause is just, but nationalist and separatist groups are another genre altogether. They are less susceptible to rational argument. Why do people feel more Georgian than they do Soviet, more Irish than British or indeed more Scottish than British? I would have thought though that the Georgians are on a hiding to nothing. The reason I say this is that terrorism is, in a way, a phenomenon of democracies. The state is so powerful in Eastern Europe that it is difficult to imagine that the KGB will allow these Georgians to succeed.

Televised Terror

FL: How far do you think that terrorism is encouraged by media coverage? Is this why many terrorist acts seem to occur in the West?

GR: Media and terrorists have what I can

only describe as a symbiotic relationship. Terrorists can't exist without the media. They play to the gallery and the explosion of media, particularly in the last 20 years has made that gallery much bigger. When the images of terrorists come into the home, the pressure for the government to do something becomes difficult to resist.

FL: Viewed merely as a military operation, the IRA does not seem to have a hope in hell. Can such actions as the hunger strikes only be understood in connection with a media campaign?

GR: The idea that terrorism is the warfare of the poor is true to a large extent. The PLO cannot fight against the Israelis using tanks. It is the political effect which the terrorists are relying upon. The American media however, say that you cannot completely ignore hijacking or hostage-taking. If we do that, are we not creating an even bigger threat to democracy by overriding the Constitution? I think there is a compromise to be struck here. Some of the American coverage of the TWA hijacking last year - when there were live interviews with the hostages - was disgraceful.

FL: When people produce newspapers they want to sell to as many people as possible. Television stations want to broadcast to as many people as possible. Terrorist incidents such as the TWA hijacking are very interesting to people. People do want to know about them. But it is possible to publicise successful operations against terrorists such as the Iranian embassy siege.

GR: Not to mention the German raid at Mogadishu or the Israeli raid at Entebbe. It works both ways because when you get successful operations like those, the governments gain kudos. The British Government did very well in opinion polls after the storming of the Iranian embassy. The massive media coverage did them no harm there. I am reminded of Marshall McLuhan here. In the 1960s we assumed that the global village would be like Hampstead or Highgate, but we are, in fact, in a much more dangerous and disturbed global village and the events in South Africa and the Middle East will reverberate in Washington and New York.

FL: How significant do you think that terrorism is in the East-West conflict? Claire Sterling wrote a book saying that all terrorism was financed by the Soviet Union. How far is this correct?

The Strategic Significance of Terror

GR: The flashpoints seem to me to be Central America and the Middle East. The fact is that the Syrians are as much behind recent terrorism as Ghaddafi. (George Rosie was interviewed before the verdict of the Hindawi trial-Ed.) Syria is the Soviet Union's most important client state in the Middle East. This must raise the possibility of the Israelis and therefore the Americans becoming involved. Similarly, the Americans support the Contras whom most detached observers regard as murdering thugs. This must raise the possibility of the Russians providing support for the Sandinistas.

FL: The Middle East has been a hot spot for a generation at least. Why do you think this is so?

GR: It has been like that for the last 3,000 years! I suppose that Israel represents to Arabs the sort of standing affront which South Africa represents to Blacks. It's hard to find an Arab from North Africa around to Iran who has a good word to say for Israel. Add to this the nihilism of the refugee camps. Apparently, before the bombings at the airports in Rome and Vienna, Abu Nidal's people went around the camps in Beirut and recruited youngsters who were willing to go on a suicide mission. If these places are breeding that kind of nihilism, a removal of poverty alone is unlikely to solve the problem. The Arabs moreover, see Israel as an outpost of the West, dominated as it is by Ashkenazy Jews.

FL: In your book you briefly mention the Scottish National Liberation Army. Could you say a little more about it?

GR: There have been a number of groups over the years. They have blown up pipelines, pylons and gas-pumping stations, though so far, no one has been hurt. At the edge feelings do run high. There are a number of people in Scotland who feel bitter

The Libertarian Alliance is an independent, non-party group, with a shared desire to work for a free society.

about the devolution issue of the late 1970s. It is felt that the ground rules were changed at the last moment when the stipulation was made that the pro-assembly vote had to total 40% of the total electorate. It was felt that Westminster had changed the rules. Churchill had said that one vote was enough for a majority - but evidently not in this case.

Justice Once More

FL: You say at the end of your introduction to your book that there can be no peace without justice. This seems a little strange. Slavery existed for hundreds of years relatively peacefully because negroes did not have the strength to overcome it. The UN Israeli ambassador said that Palestinians and other groups need hope and that means the support of other Arab states. Similarly, the IRA needs help from the Irish Republic and its friends in America. I am really questioning here your idea that because something is just, it is likely to be more successful.

GR: The example of Eastern Europe is interesting here. What you have there is uniform misery. Everyone is in the same boat. You do not get the stark contrasts and the same feeling of resentment that you get in Soweto.

FL: Perhaps if you are strong and ruthless you are OK. If not, no matter how just your cause, you will get nowhere. The Nazis in the 1930s took power with the ballot box in one hand and the clenched fist in the other. They had no particular respect for the electoral process.

GR: I think that what is interesting about the 1930s is that people like Franco and Hitler used terror tactics to successfully seize power. In the 19th century, groups such as *Narodnaya Volya* never got beyond the edges. This Russian group also criticised the assassination of James Garfield in the U.S. stating that Americans living in a democratic society had no just reason to perform such acts.

FL: Thank you, George Rosie