Reconnecting the dots: state-terrorist relations during the Cold War

Daniela Richterova
Department of War Studies, King’s College London, London, UK

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The literature on terrorism is ubiquitous. Since 9/11, academics, journalists, policymakers, practitioners (and even terrorists) have contributed to what is now one of the most intensively researched subjects in security studies. Yet, our understanding of how and why states interact with violent non-state actors has been limited and ideologically tainted. The reason for this is the inherent secrecy that comes with the territory. To survive in illegality and achieve operational success, violent non-state actors are instinctively secretive. States are likewise shy about their dealings with controversial non-state actors – fearing reputational damage, condemnation, or embarrassment. Furthermore, state secrecy about contacts with terrorists is often reinforced by the fact that they tend to be in stark contrast with official government policies. This dichotomy was perhaps most famously demonstrated during the Thatcher era, when the British Prime Minister vowed never to negotiate with terrorists while authorising a secret back channel with the troublesome Provisional IRA. Thanks to this thick veil of secrecy tightly wrapped around state-terrorist relations we have seen little direct evidence of these links. Nevertheless, the 1980s saw a number of prominent American journalists, practitioners, and politicians advance ideologically driven interpretations of state-terrorism. Most famously and controversially, some argued that Moscow and its satellites were supporting a worldwide terror network aimed at destabilising Western democratic societies. The so-called ‘terror network theory’ found ardent supporters within the Reagan Administration, not least Secretary of State Alexander Haig and CIA Director Bill Casey who spent considerable energy and taxpayer money trying to substantiate this narrative.

We now know that this early attempt to connect the dots on state–terrorist relations was flawed. The story of how and why states to the East and West (or to the Left and the Right) of the Iron Curtain interacted with and, in some cases, actively supported terrorism was much more complicated. Terrorism in the Cold War, a two-volume collection of essays, represents a valuable effort to reconnect the dots with respect to the state-non-state nexus based on new historical evidence. The editors, Adrian Hänni, Thomas Riegler, and Przemyslaw Gasztold, have shown great instinct in their case selection and were able to call on almost two dozen authors to help piece together the story of how the ‘East’ and ‘West’ interacted with violent non-state actors during the 1970s and 1980s. Although the project’s breadth is ambitious, the editors managed to keep their feet on the ground. They have exhibited the kind of
humility that only comes with experience and, instead of seeking to publish ‘the definitive account’, they put together a collection of essays designed to ‘present the current state of research, provide a preliminary assessment and blaze a path for further studies’ (Vol. 1, Hänni, p.1).

The two volumes, made up of 21 contributions, represent the most comprehensive set of case studies on state-terrorist relations to date. This breadth is not self-serving but crucial to the editors’ main argument – that state-non-state interactions are far more complex and multifaceted than we previously appreciated. To showcase this complexity, the first volume zooms in on how Soviet sphere countries – the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and North Korea interacted with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), including its factions al-Fatah and the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); or breakaway groups, such as the Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO), the gang associated with Carlos the Jackal; and even Cold War Muslim extremists and the mujahidin. It also includes a piece on North Korea’s ‘counterterrorism’ liaison with the GDR. The second volume shifts focus to the West – examining how Austria, Switzerland, West Germany, Italy, and the United States interacted with the various Palestinian factions and other violent non-state actors. Furthermore, it covers the United Kingdom’s relationship with Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, the US’s relationship with the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, and Iran’s sponsorship of Hezbollah.

Each case study takes a slightly different approach to state-terrorist relations. Some authors tightly focus on one case of liaison, such as Ginor and Remez who discuss Moscow’s ultimately futile attempt to use the PFLP as its kidnapping contractor (see Vol. 1, Ginor and Remez, pp.21–39) or Matthias Dahlke who discusses the so-called ‘Wischnewski Protocol’ and its relevance to Austro-German contacts with terrorists (see Vol. 2, Dahlke, pp.175–191). Other essays adopt a wider scope, focusing on individual country liaison with multiple non-state actors, such as Tobias Wunschik’s piece on the GDR’s relationship with the PLO and the Abu Nidal Organisation (Vol. 1, Wunschik, pp.61–83) or Balazs Orban-Schwarzkopf’s work on Hungary’s relationship with international terrorism (Vol. 1, Orban-Schwarzkopf, pp.123–142). Whereas some contributions are primarily designed to track the liaison process step-by-step, others are less concerned with the details and rather focus on the wider political context underpinning state-terror dealings (see Vol. 2, Travis, pp.223–235; Rickenbacher, pp.207–222; Machnikowski, pp.193–206). Furthermore, several essays are primarily aimed at dispelling old beliefs, including the mythology surrounding the West’s post-World War Two ‘stay behind’ networks (see Vol. 2, Riegl, pp.15–41; Hof, pp.153–173). As with all multi-author volumes, there is an inevitable stylistic and analytical diversity across the contributions. Ultimately, however, this diversity serves the editors’ overall goal – to present the current state of research and highlight different dimensions of state-terrorist liaisons.

Each volume makes a distinct contribution and changes the way we thought about state-terrorist relations. The first collection of essays dispels ideas about the Soviet Bloc’s relationship with international terrorism conceived in the ideological heat of the Cold War. In his swift Introduction (Vol. 1, Hänni, pp.1–19), editor Adrian Hänni summarises the volume’s findings on Soviet Bloc relations with violent non-state actors. Echoing evidence presented in this volume as well as some of the earlier literature on the subject, he argues that despite several attempts at forging operational relations with non-state actors, the Soviet Union was no master coordinator of an international terror network; there was no blueprint for terrorist relations adopted by Soviet Bloc states; and that each of Moscow’s allies had its own unique approach to international terrorism, which varied from group to group and changed over time. The case of Carlos the Jackal is perhaps most illustrative of this variety: on the one hand, Romania created an operational relationship with his organisation, the GDR’s Stasi stayed away from direct involvement but maintained contacts with Carlos’s deputy Johannes Weinrich, and Hungary tolerated the group’s base on its territory; on the other hand, countries, such as Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria or Yugoslavia strictly refused to collaborate with the Carlos gang (Vol.1, Akrap, p.176; Baev, p.149; Žáček, pp.107–122). As Hänni has commented elsewhere: ‘The archives show us that [these states] were on the defensive, often feared instability and worried that violence would spill over behind the Iron Curtain … There is no evidence for any plan for a destabilisation campaign targeting the west’.


Furthermore, Hänni asserts that there was no one motivation for Eastern Bloc states to engage with controversial non-state actors. Some states decided to set up a relationship with terrorists for domestic security reasons – to either protect their territory from terrorist violence or to strike against potential domestic threats (Vol. 1, Fredholm, pp.41–60). Most states were intrigued by the terrorists’ knowledge of their adversaries in the West and were thus motivated to interact with them for intelligence gathering purposes (see Vol. 1, Ginor and Remez, pp.21–39). In some cases, money was key to establishing a relationship with terrorists, much like in the case of Poland’s liaison with the Abu Nidal Group (see Vol. 1, Gastold, pp.85–106). Finally, some governments were drawn to these clandestine liaisons to gain diplomatic leverage. As shown in the case of the GDR’s initial support for the Palestinian cause driven by East Belin’s struggle for international recognition by Arab countries (see Vol. 1, Wunschik, pp.61–83). Overall, Soviet Bloc’s relations with terrorists were fragmented, fuelled by various motives, and largely employed for defensive purposes.

The second volume redirects the spotlight at the West’s liaisons with some of the very same actors typically associated with Eastern European or Middle Eastern states. Although academics have previously attacked the issue of Western states’ relationship to terrorism, these efforts were mostly focused on so called ‘state terror’, not on clandestine liaisons with violent non-state actors. This was arguably due to the dearth of sources on Western state–terror relations. As Hänni highlights in his introduction to the second volume, paradoxically our access to written records of totalitarian Soviet Bloc states is now much better than that in the West (see Vol. 2, Hänni, pp.1–13). Despite this lack of archival evidence on the West’s terror dealings, the essays presented in the second volume show that the West also interacted with some of the most feared terrorists of the Cold War. Most importantly, they show the often-overlooked parallels between the approach of Eastern and Western states towards these controversial actors. The West’s motivation to liaise seemed to have also been largely defensive. To prevent future attacks, countries, such as France, Switzerland, or West Germany arguably either enabled early release of arrested terrorist suspects, helped them avoid trial, or had direct talks with representatives of groups known for employing terrorist tactics (see Vol. 2, Skelton-Robinson, pp.89–152). In some cases, Western governments are said to have allowed terrorists to reside or operate on their territory in exchange for peace (Vol. 2, Gyr, pp. 63–87). In other instances – such as in the United Kingdom – Western countries were found to have colluded with paramilitary units to attack the enemy combatants and civilians (see Vol. 2, Sanders, pp.43–62).

This all suggests that boundaries between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ guys are murkier than we thought. Traditionally, thanks to the ‘terror network theory’, popular accounts have presented Soviet Bloc states as en masse supporters and proponents of international terrorism, whereas Western states were largely seen as victims. Thanks to a recent wave of scholarship, which Terrorism in the Cold War is a part of, we now know that the story is much more complicated. Although undeniably Cold War international terrorists primarily targeted the West, Soviet Bloc states were not immune to attacks and threats from a variety of terrorist groups in the later Cold War period. In fact, as the 1980s approached, Prague, Sofia or Belgrade became increasingly worried about becoming terrorist targets at home or abroad and thus gradually developed their own counterterrorism bureaucracies, procedures, and special units. Having said that, Cold War counterterrorism was imperfect across the board. In fact, most countries on both sides of the Iron curtain seemed to have been aware of this and hence opted for a highly pragmatic appeasement-style approach – characterised by clandestine liaisons and unwritten non-aggression agreements with international terrorists. These were designed to prevent further terrorist attacks and appease mostly Arab allies many of whom had close ties to the PLO, Abu Nidal or Carlos.

Clandestine state–terrorist pacts are every researcher’s methodological nightmare. Although journalists have recently suggested that France, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, and other states have indeed made such agreements, direct evidence or written record of Western governments’ dealings with violent non-state actors remains scant. We have been somewhat luckier in the East. Thanks to the unprecedented access to archives of overthrown communist regimes, we have now found documents that allude to the existence of such informal and unwritten agreements between the East and select groups. Assuming that access to Cold War archives is unlikely to ever be equally liberal in the West, the way forward is to think
outside the box and work in teams armed with mixed research methods. Non-mainstream document reservoirs, such as the National Security Archive, political party archives, private papers, diaries, or unpublished memoires can provide further insight into how and why such alliances were forged and how far governments were willing to go to achieve fragile peace. In many ways, Terrorism in the Cold War is a good example of this approach to Cold War research. By assembling a diverse team of authors – academics, journalists, practitioners – the editors have shown that we are able to find out more if we use mixed methods and explore a wider portfolio of archives and document collections (see more on future of research in Vol. 2, Fris, Frimark and Göllnitz, pp.237–246).

Inevitably, even broad stroke edited volumes such as this one will leave some stones untuned. First, an intriguing angle of the state-terror story largely unaddressed throughout the volumes is that of state-to-state collaboration with respect Cold War terrorism. Did Soviet Bloc states share intelligence on violent non-state actors crossing or residing on their territories? Or were they cagier than we would expect ideological allies to be? And how genuine were the West’s first attempts to create counterterrorism alliances in the 1970s if some have allegedly made off-the-book pacts with the very groups they were claiming to fight? Some recent evidence suggests that in the 1980s, there existed operational counterterrorism liaison between the East and the West.20 Were these largely isolated incidents? Or was this an increasingly popular practice in the last decade of the Cold War when Western pressure on the Soviet Bloc was increasing? Second, we need to do more to set the story of Cold War international terrorism and intelligence within the wider context of decolonisation and the emergence of national liberation movements.21 Understanding the history of the Soviet Bloc’s relations with the Global South and non-state actors, such as the PLO,22 the African National Congress (ANC)23 or the Algerian Front de libération nationale (FLN)24 will enable us to see why Soviet sphere states had sympathy with some violent non-state actors, how these thoughts gradually developed, and where they drew the line between so-called ‘terrorists’ and ‘revolutionaries’. Third, future editions could consider adding a volume on non-allied nations. This would open a new fascinating inquiry into the state-non-state nexus and reveal how states without strict ideological allegiances chose to handle Cold War terrorism.

Overall, the two volumes of Terrorism in the Cold War represent an important ontological contribution to our understanding of why and how state interact and, in some cases, create alliances with violent non-state actors. The volumes of essay will be of interest to all those looking to appreciate the complexity of state-terrorist relations and grasp the paradoxes born out of these liaisons – be they area specialists, terrorism experts, intelligence scholars, journalists, or students across continents. By using new evidence to reconnect the dots on state-terrorist relations, these essays help us rethink what we know about the international history of terrorism as well as the Cold War.

Notes

1. That said, the definition of ‘terrorism’ has been a matter of contention and the sheer amount of institutional and academic efforts devoted to defining this term stands as a testament to this. See overview of definitions in Whittaker (ed.), The Terrorism Reader, 3–4; and further debate in Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 1–41. During the Cold War, this profusion of ‘terrorism’ definitions has largely been caused by the fact that each belief system, regime or ideology chose to define the term in the context of their own security needs and threats – perceived or real. During the highly polarised Cold War era, labels ‘terrorist’ and ‘revolutionary’ were largely ascribed to groups based on ideological and strategic proximity. This created parallel universes of definitions of ‘terrorism’ – each suiting a particular ‘them and us’ narrative.

2. For the purposes of this review article, the term ‘terrorism’ and ‘violent non-state actors’ will be used interchangeably to denote individuals and groups which have perpetrated acts of violence against civilian targets for political purposes.

3. Thatchers, in common with many other leaders, repeatedly declared that she would ‘never’ talk to terrorists. Wilkinson, Terrorism Versus Democracy, 80. On Thatcher and her resolve ‘never’ to negotiate with the PIRA, see Thatchers, The Downing Street Years, 83–7. On the history of these clandestine liaisons, see O Dochartaigh, ‘The longest negotiation: British policy, IRA strategy and the making of the Northern Ireland peace settlement’; Mumford, “Covert Peacemaking,” 633–48.

4. Whereas we have lacked sound analysis and source material on Cold War era state–terror relations, Daniel Byman’s Deadly Connections represents an excellent example of contemporary analysis of state-terror alliances.
5. The 'terror network theory' was primarily based on the work of Sterling, *The Terror Network*. Nevertheless, other works advance similar iterations of this argument. See, for example, Cline and Alexander, *Terrorism*; Francis, *The Soviet Strategy of Terror*; and Goren, *The Soviet Union and Terrorism*. For a rebuttal of Sterling's work, see Herman, *The Real Terror Network*. In reality, after Khruschev was deposed in 1964, the Soviet Union had a far more realistic view of revolutionary movements in the Third World, until Mikhail Gorbachev effectively disavowed it in the 1980s. Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 206–7; and Abedul and Hughes, "The Comandante in his Labyrinth," 536.

6. Less than a week after his inauguration, Reagan held a meeting on 'terrorism' with the FBI, the Secret Service, the CIA, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense. In his diary he noted that he had 'ordered them be given back their ability to function' in a Counterterrorist role. Diary entry for 26 January 1981. Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 1.

7. For more on this, see Woodward, *VEIL*; Persico, *Casey*; Stampnitzy, *Disciplining terror*. The Reagan Administration's hardline policies against Communism in the Third World led J. William Fulbright to observe – in 1985 – that 'We made a great mistake in Vietnam and are making another one in Central America.' Abedul and Hughes, "The Comandante in his Labyrinth," 542–4. Quote at 543.

8. Volume one consists of: 1. Introduction – State Support for Terrorist Actors in the Cold War: Myths and Reality – Adrian Hänni; 2. The KGB's Abduction Program and the PFLP: On the Cusp between Intelligence and Terrorism – Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remes; 3. Soviet Approaches to Muslim Extremism and Terrorism – Michael Fredholm; 4. Palestinian Terrorism and the State Security of the GDR: Abu Nidal between East Berlin, Moscow and Washington 1973-1989 – Tobias Wunschik; 5. Polish Military Intelligence and Its Secret Relationship with the Abu Nidal Organization – Przemyslaw Gasztold; 6. Carlos the Jackal in Prague: Communist Czechoslovakia and International Terrorism – a Case Study – Pavel Záček; 7. Hungarian State Security and International Terrorism in the 1980s – Baláz Orbán-Schwarzkopf; 8. Bulgarian State Security and International Terrorism – Jordan Baev; 9. Yugoslavia, Carlos 'the Jackal' and International Terrorism During the Cold War – Gordan Akrap; 10. North Korea's 'Terrorism' and 'Counterterrorism' in the Late 1980s – Bernd Schaefer. Volume two consists of: 1. Introduction – State Support for Terrorist Actors in the Cold War: Myths and Reality (Part 2) – Adrian Hänni; 2. Gladio – Myth and Reality: The Origins and Function of Stay Behind in the Case of Post-war Austria – Thomas Riegler; 3. The British State and Loyalist Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland – Andrew Sanders; 4. The Secret 1970 Moratorium Agreement between Switzerland and the PLO – Marcel Gyr; 5. The Road Not Taken: Crisis Management, Dialogues and Deal-Making with Palestinian Fedayeen Groups in the Context of the Jordanian Triple-Hijacking Incident of September 1970 – Thomas Skelton-Robinson; 6. The Lodo Moro: Italy and the Palestine Liberation Organization – Tobias Hof; 7. Pact with the (Un) wanted? The Wischniewski Protocol as a Spotlight for Austro-German 'Agreements' with Transnational Terrorists in the Late 1970s – Matthias Dahlke; 8. Hezbollah as an Iranian Proxy in the Age of the Cold War – Ryszard M. Machnikowski; 9. The Propaganda Campaign for the PFLP in Switzerland 1969-1970 – Daniel Rickenbacher; 10. The United States and Nicaragua: State Terrorism during the Late Cold War – Philip W. Travis; 11. Outlook – Writing the History of Modern International Terrorism: Where Are the Puzzles? – Thomas Wegener Fris, Adi Frimark and Martin Göllnitz.

9. Although imperfect, terms 'East' and 'West' are used here to denote countries/regions largely linked to different ideologies during the Cold War 'West' and 'East' of the Iron Curtain.

10. On the Soviet Bloc and Ethiopia in the 1960s (and with especial regard to Bulgaria), see Yordanov, "Fishing in the desert.

11. The GDR also used its intelligence services in its relations with Vietnam in the name of Socialist Internationalism (and to boost its standing internationally). Grossheim, "The East German 'Stasi' and Vietnam."

12. As this reviewer has opined: Officials knew that they were unable to prevent Carlos entering Czechoslovakia by using false identities and passports, and did not want to expel him for fear he would target the country in reprisal. Instead they settled for a "surveillance" strategy, sometimes observing the terrorist and his associates secretly, sometimes letting them know they were being watched.' Richterova quoted in Burke, 'How cold war spymasters found arrogance of Carlos the Jackal too hot to handle.' For more on Prague's relationship with terrorists and revolutionaries, see Richterova, "Terrorists and Revolutionaries"; and Richterova, "The Anxious Host," 108–32.

13. Hänni quoted in Burke, 'How cold war spymasters found arrogance of How cold war spymasters found arrogance of Carlos the Jackal too hot to handle.' For a separate study on Romania see Tofan, *Sacalul Securitati*.

14. From 1969, and for at least the next 30 years, the Polish state-run enterprise Cenzip delivered significant amounts of arms to the PLO, the Abu Nidal Group and a number of other Middle Eastern terrorist and revolutionary entities. Gazztold, "Wars, Weapons and Terrorists," 130.

15. See, for instance, George, ed., *Western State Terrorism*; Blakeley, *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism*; and Herman and O'Sullivan, *The Terrorism Industry.

16. Richterova, "Terrorists and Revolutionaries."

17. See for example: Campbell, "French spy chief's 'pact' with Palestinian terrorists"; 'Secret diaries of Arafat come to light, confirming PLO pact with Italians'; also see Marcel Gyr's essay *Terrorism in the Cold War*, Vol. 2, 63–87) on details of alleged deal between Switzerland and the PLO and the controversy surrounding this case.

18. A rare exception is the so called 'Wischniewski Protocol' discussed by Matthias Dahlke (Vol. 2, 175–91) or further evidence of a PFLP pact with Italy in Hof (Terrorism in the Cold War, Vol. 2, 153–73).
19. Documents on Soviet Bloc intelligence first appeared in academic discourse thanks to Cambridge Professor Christopher Andrew and former KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin, who used the latter’s handwritten notes to piece together an account of the KGB’s domestic and foreign operations (Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive*; and Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*). This coincided with a wave of declassifications across Eastern Europe, which saw communist-era diplomatic, Communist Party, state security and foreign intelligence records opened to scholars and the public. In 2000, Poland released its communist-era archives; in 2007, Bulgaria and Romania also revealed the secrets of their Cold War intelligence archives; and a year later, the Czech government established the long-overdue *Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes* and in 2008 its branch, the *Security Service Archive* (ABS), which enabled access to most communist-era Czechoslovak state security documents.

20. See for instance *Terrorism in the Cold War*, Vol. 1, Baev, 143–66. And, also in this author’s private archive, documents acquired from the Security Service Archive (ABS) in Prague, Czech Republic. On CT liaison see Vol. 1, Schaefer, 185–94.

21. Akrap’s essay on Yugoslavia briefly discusses this wider Cold War context to Belgrade’s liaisons with violent non-state actors (*Terrorism in the Cold War*, Vol. 1, Akrap, 167–84). Also see the special issue on Cold War and intelligence in the *International History Review*, especially: Richterova and Telepneva, eds., “An Introduction,” 1–11.

22. In 1972 the Soviet Union declared the PLO to be in the forefront of Arab liberation movements. Golan, *The Soviet Union and the Palestine Liberation Organization*, 35–36. In the summer of 1974, a PLO ‘embassy’ was opened in Moscow. Cline and Alexander, *Terrorism*, 34. The establishment of Soviet ‘diplomatic’ relations with the PLO followed the case of the GDR (1973) and preceded that of Poland (1976). Gasztold, “Wars, Weapons and Terrorists,” 130.

23. On this see, for example, Shubin, “The Soviet Union/Russian Federation’s Relations with South Africa,” 5–30.

24. On the global Cold War, see Westad, *The Global Cold War*. On the international history of violent non-state actors, see Bülow, *West Germany, Cold War Europe and the Algerian War*; Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution*; Simpson, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*; and Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive*. For more on the Soviet Bloc’s engagement with the Global South see the collection of essays edited by Muehlenbeck and Telepneva, *Warsaw Pact Intervention in the Third World*.

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**Notes on contributor**

Daniela Richterova is Senior Lecturer in Intelligence Studies at the Department of War Studies, King’s College London. Her research and teaching focuses on Cold War intelligence history as well as contemporary issues related to intelligence liaison, counterterrorism intelligence, and intelligence analysis. Richterova has published in *West European Politics*, the *International History Review* and *International Affairs*. She is currently completing a monograph exploring communist Czechoslovakia’s relationship with violent Middle Eastern non-state actors (for publication with Georgetown University Press). She is also series editor for ‘Intelligence, Surveillance, and Secret Warfare’ for Edinburgh University Press.

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