

Studying Terror - the Life and Work of David Rapoport

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David C. Rapoport, one of the first scholars of terrorism, the pioneer of the study of religious terrorism passed away in February 2024 at the age of 95, leaving behind a profound legacy. This article reflects on his life and contributions to the field, highlighting his groundbreaking work in understanding religious terrorism and his development of the four waves theory of modern terrorism.

David C. Rapoport, one of the first scholars of terrorism, the pioneer of the study of religious terrorism, and to me, a mentor and close friend passed away in February 2024 at the age of 95. For those unfamiliar with terrorist studies, David Rapoport was one of the pioneers, taking up the study in the late 1960s at a time when terrorism was considered so marginal a field that it attracted few specialists. By the 1970s there were probably no more than half a dozen recognized authorities in the world, and of these, David was singular in that he and he alone believed that religion was an important motivational factor while his colleagues held that religion was a mere excuse for politics—a way to manipulate the ignorant masses into joining a terrorist cause. With the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and all that followed, David was proved right and the field changed accordingly.

Readers familiar with the study of modern terrorism will need little introduction to his work. Eric Hoffer wrote in his timeless *The True Believer*: “For though ours is a godless age, it is the very opposite of irreligious.” Rapoport’s work embodied this adage in its deepest sense. “Moses, Charisma, and Covenant” (1979) presaged his work in terrorism studies by examining the political connotations and the underlying themes of violence in sacred text that would be the center of his seminal articles on religious terrorism. “Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions” (1984), “Terror and the Messiah: An Ancient

Experience and Some Modern Parallels" (1982), and "Messianic Sanctions for Terror" (1988), marked the beginning of the study of religiously motivated terrorism.

I first met David in Chicago in the early 1990s as the graduate student assistant in the Fundamentalism Project, a multi-volume study edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. I edited his contribution, "Comparing Militant Fundamentalist Movements and Groups," and there first discovered the joys and trepidations of editing David's work. The article was excellent and offered a perceptive analysis, but David was a scholar of the old school, indeed of a previous age. Every word in the article was carefully crafted, and this meticulous attention to every detail made the editing process a matter of ongoing protracted negotiations. Every article David wrote was seminal to the field, and to achieve this he invariably opted for quality over quantity. He wrote few books, beginning with *Assassination and Terrorism* in 1971 which was the distillation of a series of lectures given in Canada, several anthologies co-edited with Yonah Alexander, and finally *Waves of Global Terrorism: from 1880 to the Present*, which was released a year before his death and written, incredibly, while he was in his 90s.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to the field of terrorism studies as a whole came with the founding of *Terrorism & Political Violence*, published by the London-based Frank Cass & Co. in 1989. He served as the first editor and opened

its pages to a wide range of views and approaches, interpreting terrorism studies with a broad brush that allowed for articles from a wide variety of interdisciplinary perspectives. This was a bygone era in publishing, one in which word limits were a suggestion rather than a mandate as I discovered to my relief in 1995 with my first special issue on “Millenarianism and Violence” which weighed in at well more than twice the required length. Frank Cass responded by saying that we would call it a double issue, published it, and went on to the publish the final issue of the year anyway.

Feeling that I really should leave the Arctic and rejoin the academic mainstream, David placed me on the T&PV Board, and later asked me to become Book Review Editor all the better to find a position in the Lower 48 in university that at least had a family resemblance to the academic mainstream. I remained Book Review Editor for the next 16 years. In that time, David’s policy with the reviews section mirrored the openness with which he edited the journal. Book reviews were my minor fiefdom, and I was allowed to experiment with review articles, extended reviews and ultimately review essays that would perhaps have fit better as regular articles. Even after the switch to Routledge, to whom word count is something of a divine writ more than a guideline, a way was always found to accommodate the reviews.

When we first met, I was laboring over my dissertation on millenarian violence in the modern world, and in this David was generous with his time and

advice, as he was to a number of young scholars. It was David's kindness and generosity that marked the progress of my career as it did theirs, and as it did for so many of his own students at the University of California Los Angeles. He published my first academic article in the pages of *Terrorism and Political Violence*, a massive piece that would never have appeared in print in the academic publishing world of the 21st century whose title was almost as long as the text: "The Context of American Millenarian Revolutionary Theology: The Case of the 'Identity Christian' Church of Israel." The article was based on personal interviews and as a participant/observer among the racist and revolutionary Christian Identity faithful. The article offered copious analysis and numerous direct quotes. What it did not contain however was either praise or condemnation of my subjects, adopting the tone of value free scholarship that would mark my publishing career and, in the academic atmosphere of the time, probably make me unpublishable in any other mainstream journal. David put the article through the usual review process and armed with positive reader reviews, published it without question.

On the basis of the meagre qualification of a single publication, he invited me to my first international conference in Berlin, where, with the chutzpah encouraged by the established scholars of that day, I immediately fell into a dispute with Ehud Sprinzak over aspects of his theory of split delegitimization. The flavor of the debate is analyzed in Ashmini G. Kerodal, et. al., "A test of Sprinzak's split

delegitimization's theory of the life course of far-right organizational behavior." It is a testament to the patience and collegiality of the terrorism scholars of that generation, and to their willingness not only to tolerate an upstart scholar from as an unlikely institution as could be imagined, Ilisagvik College in Barrow, Alaska, with a single publication to his name, but to engage seriously in the debate and to make some modification to the original draft of the paper that would become Ehud Sprinzak's "Right-wing terrorism in a comparative perspective: The case of split delegitimization." Ehud too became a close friend until his untimely death in 2002.

However, with all of his achievements in the field, David's four waves theory will be that for which he is best remembered. The first iteration of "Modern Terror: The Four Waves," appeared in a 2004 anthology, *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, edited by Audrey Cronin and J. Ludes. I well recall our discussions at that time and during subsequent iterations of the piece. David was first and foremost a political scientist and was somewhat insecure about the historicist bent of the piece, dividing the waves of modern terrorism into specific epochs, beginning with the anarchist wave in the late 19th century and proceeding through the waves of national liberation, the new left and ultimately religious terrorism. He needn't have been concerned. My own field, the history of culture, is built on the kind of cultural and ideological patterns embodied by wave theory. Eras, like ideas, are born, burn brightly for a

time and decay, giving way to a new era of human thought. Johan Huizinga in his lyrical *The Waning of the Middle Ages* illustrated this perfectly, and the idea was adapted to American politics with Arthur Schlesinger's generational theory in "Cycles of American History." David, every bit the political scientist, was not really aware of this historical work, but wave theory is very much in this mode of analysis.

If David was the high priest of wave theory I became something of an acolyte, analyzing wave theory in a number of publications, not the least *Terrorism & Political Violence*, culminating in "Waves of political terrorism, revised and updated," in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics in 2021. Beginning in 2010 I published a book and a series of articles on what I believed to be the fifth wave of terrorism based on novel forms of tribalism. David really didn't agree with the formulation, and in retrospect what I had identified as a global wave may well have been a regional undertow of the religious wave which was most visible in Africa and the Middle East but was not really global as were the waves posited by David. But his doubts aside, he published my articles in *T&PV* and encouraged me to go deeper in my research. It was an approach he took with all of those younger scholars he took under his wing, even if they were by the 21st century not so young anymore.

In the end though, it was the personal more than the professional relationship that made both David and Barbara such treasured friends.

Barbara was always at David's side whenever and wherever we met. Indeed, they never seemed far apart. As David taught at UCLA, Barbara until her retirement worked at the UCLA library. On the rare occasions I got to Los Angeles, the last time more than a decade ago to take part in a festschrift in his honor, or when I could invite him to my own conferences in Stockholm and elsewhere, Barbara was always there and her kindness and empathy was a perfect match for David's own.

David C. Rapoport was giant in the field, a unique visionary, and a scholar to whom many of us owe so much in our own careers. Our field will not be the same without him, but more than that, we will miss him as a friend.