

APOCALYPSE, REVOLUTION AND TERRORISM

From the Sicari to the American
Revolt against the Modern World



JEFFREY KAPLAN

ROUTLEDGE

APOCALYPSE, REVOLUTION AND TERRORISM

This book focuses on religiously driven oppositional violence through the ages. Beginning with the 1st-century Sicari, it examines the commonalities that link apocalypticism, revolution, and terrorism occurring in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam past and present.

It is divided into two parts, 'This Was Then' and 'This Is Now,' which together examine the cultural and religious history of oppositional violence from the time of Jesus to the aftermath of the 2016 American election. The historical focus centers on how the movements, leaders and revolutionaries from earlier times are interpreted today through the lenses of historical memory and popular culture. The radical right is the primary but not exclusive focus of the second part of the book. At the same time, the work is intensely personal, in that it incorporates the author's experiences in the worlds of communist Eastern Europe, in the Iranian Revolution, and in the uprisings and wars in the Middle East and East Africa.

This book will be of much interest to students of religious and political violence, religious studies, history, and security studies.

Jeffrey Kaplan is Professor of Security Studies at the King Fahd Security College, Saudi Arabia. He is author or editor of many books on terrorism and religious violence, including *Radical Religion and Violence: Theory and Case Studies* (Routledge 2015).

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Revolt against the Modern World

Jeffrey Kaplan

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'Jeffrey Kaplan's discussion of how ancient groups in the Jewish, Islamic and Christian religions have utilized the apocalyptic vision and how apocalyptic thought has affected contemporary American politics including the election of Donald Trump is fascinating and provocative.'

*David C. Rapoport, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), USA*

'If you are a true believer in conspiracy theories, you should not read this book – your favourite theory why the world is in such a mess and who is to blame for it might be undermined by Jeff Kaplan's detached dissection, separating facts from fantasies. His analysis of human folly and fanaticism, past and present, should be an eye opener for those who "feel too much and understand too little", to cite a line from the author's previous book.'

Alex P. Schmid, Editor-in-Chief, Perspectives on Terrorism

'Jeffrey Kaplan's *Apocalypse, Revolution and Terrorism* is the culmination of a lifetime's worth of extraordinary scholarly achievements. At once deeply personal and meticulously annotated, this work ranges across continents and centuries to make sense of the nexus of terrorism, apocalypticism, and the revolutionary mindset. It is equally as relevant and useful for historians of the ancient and medieval world and for the contemporary policymaker.'

*Randall D. Law, Birmingham-Southern College in
Birmingham, Alabama, USA*



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The book would not have been completed in so timely a fashion, and certainly not so well, without the help and advice of Prof. Randall Law of Birmingham-Southern College. His expertise on the history of terrorism and his careful and very timely reading of various drafts of the work were of invaluable assistance, although the errors that remain are, sadly, my own.

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x Acknowledgments

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Finally and most of all, my love and gratitude go to my wife, Sheron, who in the darkest days convinced me that I could still write and continued to have something to say that was worth reading. Her patience while I was locked away in a darkened office, music blaring and shaking the foundations of wherever we lived in three countries and four cities, is what really made this book possible.

INTRODUCTION

This book is not about terrorism, although there are terrorists by the score within its pages. Nor is it about apocalypse, although apocalyptic dreams are woven into its very fabric. And revolution? There are revolutions a plenty in this book – Umayyad and Abbasid, Hussite and Taborite, French and Russian and Iranian and more besides. But it is not about revolution either.

At its deepest level, it is about the religious consecration of the simple act of negation. Or in less rarified terms, it is about apprehending that the world is a fallen place, distant from the Word and Will of God, and in so seeing, refusing to either accept or condone its truths – its accepted modes of governance or its ways of life.

But this intellectual *satori* is only the first step. In the two millennia that is the span of this book; uncountable millions have reached precisely this conclusion, and yet they rose for work the next day, their lives unchanged. Their rejection of their world is kept in the inner recesses of heart and mind, to be shared perhaps with family or while in one's cups with those most trusted, but not ever to be acted upon. For to this day, the wages of rebellion are ridicule, rejection, incarceration, torture, or death. Who would embark on such a path knowing that the chances of success, of victory, are nil given the contemporary balance of forces? And what would give a man hope in such a dire quest?

In each of the cases in these pages the answer is basically the same. While man's truths are by their nature transitory and therefore false, God's Truth is immutable, but it is also accessible to men if they search deeply enough and believe strongly enough. With the certainty that in the end, when times are darkest and hope all but gone, He will act and his faithful will find succor, victory, and, ultimately, terrestrial salvation: No obstacle is too great.

This book has adopted a simple metaphor to illustrate such truths. Attributed to the Old Man of the Mountain, Hassan i-Sabah via the novel *Alamout*, it is this: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.' In every case and every context, this

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means simply that no human truth is ultimately true, for Truth resides in God and in His Word. In pursuing this truth in text and personal revelation, everything is permitted. That is, every form of textual interpretation, licit or, as in the case of the Sunni conception of *Ijtihad*, illicit, is permitted. In this pursuit of truth, selective retrieval of text is the norm and the personal inspiration of individuals or religious virtuosi is ever present. Very much in keeping with the examples offered in sacred text, once Divine Truth is understood by the True Believers every violent action is permitted.

In the end, genocide is the logical outcome of each of these struggles. Some will be saved, or in Jewish terms have a portion of the Hereafter, and others simply will not. Following this logic, what matters in this world how many lives are taken in the implementation of God's Design when the immortal souls of the victims are already forfeit?

This belief gave the Sicari in the time of Jesus the faith to meet their deaths, either at the hands of fellow Jews in the streets or at their own hands as they and 900 others leapt to their deaths from the walls of Masada. The Sicari were the first, and the credit for the invention of terrorism as we understand it today belongs to them, for if they had predecessors they are lost to history. So many followed this path, Jews, Christians, and Muslims that this book can give only the barest of outlines of their numbers.

Yet each, however bloody their paths and however monstrous their violence, shared the central faith that they, and they alone, knew God's Truth and that whatever actions they took were therefore not only in His name, but at His behest. Knowing this, what excesses might they undertake that were not in imitation of and obedience to the Word of God?

Each of the Peoples of the Book has clear instructions in sacred text as to the method of dealing with unbelievers and apostates. For the Jews:

10 When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace.
11 If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. 12 If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. 13 When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. 14 As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. 15 This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby.

16 However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. 17 Completely destroy them – the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – as the Lord your God has commanded you. 18 Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.

(Deuteronomy 20:10–18 NIV)

Christians for their part adopt the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, which has enough blood and Divine vengeance to sate any appetite. More overt violence is therefore largely left to parables and the Revelation of John which stands as perhaps the most beautiful, and frightening, apocalyptic text still extant.

The Qu'ran too is not lacking in *surahs* that recount Divine retribution on sinners:

2 [This is] a Book sent down unto thee – so let there be no constriction in thy breast because of it – that thou mayest warn thereby, and a Reminder for the believers. 3 Follow that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord, and follow not any protectors apart from Him. Little do you reflect! 4 How many a town have We destroyed! Our Might came upon them by night, or while they took their ease at midday. 5 Their plea, when Our Might came upon them, was but to say, “Truly we were wrongdoers.”

(*Al-A'raf* 2–5)

Nothing done by the believers in these pages surpasses the Wrath of God as recounted in inerrant text.

What is perhaps most remarkable in this book is the continuity between the ancient and the modern in their approach to text and to God's Word. In the ancient and medieval worlds the distinction between sacred and secular had yet to be made. The world of the 20th and 21st centuries is more complex and far more rule driven. Modern states, each of which possesses overwhelming power over their citizens, take a dim view of radical religious movements who seek to overthrow the established order and institute a government based on God's Will, often manifested in ethnic or racial terms. On occasion, these do take root and grow to cancerous proportions. The Serbian attempt to use rape as a tool of genocide against the Bosnians in the Yugoslavian conflict in the 1990s or the Lords Resistance Army's use of similar tactics in 21st-century Uganda are two examples of how dangerous this can be.¹

As the late Robert Mathews and his followers of the Bruders Schweigan, or the Order, found to their cost in the 1980s, the United States is a fallow field for growing a 'divinely mandated' race war.² Failing real revolution, what is left but to retreat into fictional fantasy, conspiratorial suspicion, or apocalyptic dreams? The second half of this book has plenty of both; the apocalyptic fiction of the radical right and the fantastic bricolage of fever dreams that is the Alt Right, the Christian Right, and the “Fox and Friends”-driven GOP populists.

Yet, as the 2016 election demonstrated, every now and then even the dreamers might have their day. That day was helped along mightily by Russia and as these words are being written in 2018, it is clear that, for all but Donald Trump and those who believe in him most fervently, either a new Cold War, or more to the point, a new phase of the Soviet-American Cold War, is unfolding and deepening before our eyes. These events concern the latter part of this book. They fit the pattern well. For the Alt Right, the Christian Right, and the populists who control much

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of the Republican Party, as well as the Soviet intelligence officers turned *siloviki*,³ there is a shared perception of defeat, humiliation, and the need for redemption in a hostile world.

Each began with a simple act of negation – a refusal to accept the status quo of a popular African-American President for the Americans and the spectacle of a drunken and clownish Boris Yeltsin presiding over the dissolution of the Soviet system on the other. And each refused to accept that status quo and acted to change the world. The Americans, as is their wont, used a religious discourse having more to do with the Divine Will than manifest destiny. The Russians remain wedded to Cold War rhetoric and a political and security discourse; although they too have substantial backing from the Russian Orthodox Church that lends assurance to the faithful that Putin too is doing God's Will in all that he does.⁴

That the two seemingly incongruous actors would come together to swing a close election in favor of Donald Trump is a remarkable enough story in and of itself. The later chapters will consider these ironies in depth, but for the academic readers of this book, there is another irony that has gone too long unremarked. Donald Trump, the Alt Right, the Christian Right, and many of the GOP populists are inveterate conspiracy theorists. Until the success of the *X-Files* television series, the intellectual elite that are the denizens of the academic institutions laughed at these conspiratorial beliefs and roundly ignored all but those with a strong racist or anti-Semitic content. Even in "X-Files" America, conspiratorial fantasies could perhaps be studied and taught in the classrooms, but only as examples of the fictive worlds of the less enlightened.

In 1971 I picked up a book, God knows why or where it came from, with the wonderfully emotive title *None Dare Call it Conspiracy* by Gary Allen. Later, I recalled little but the title and then even that was gone until I came across Richard Hofstadter's "The Paranoid Style."⁵ Hofstadter does not mention Allen, who was a favorite of the Birch Society right of the late 1960s/early 1970s. *None Dare Call it Conspiracy* offers the usual set of conspirators; closet commies, pinko liberals, and the master conspirators of international institutions and American finance. But in its pages it offers occasional acute observations, one of which well illustrates the current irony in which academics, security professionals, mainstream media, and Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller see a clear conspiracy between the Trump campaign and Russian intelligence while Donald Trump and his supporters denounce the investigation as a witch hunt and a fake news crazy conspiracy theory. To quote Allen:

Why is it that virtually all "reputable" scholars and mass media columnists and commentators reject the cause and effect or conspiratorial theory of history? Primarily, most scholars follow the crowd in the academic world just as most women follow fashion. To buck the tide means social and professional ostracism. The same is true of the mass media. While professors and pontificators profess to be tolerant and broadminded, in practice it's strictly

a one way street – with all traffic flowing left. A Maoist can be tolerated by Liberals of Ivory Towerland or by the Establishment’s media pundits, but to be a conservative, and a conservative who propounds a conspiratorial view, is absolutely verboten. Better you should be a drunk at a national WCTU convention!⁶

Indeed . . .

This then is the book that I hope you will continue to read. There is however one more issue that need be considered. Despite its breadth and the two thousand years that these pages seek to explore, this is an intensely personal book. That surprises no one more than it does the author.

In the 1980s and early 1990s my work centered to a considerable degree on violence in the world of new religious movements and the radical right. I did considerable fieldwork in these arcane Euro-American byways. In those days, there was a fashion among scholars to be self-referential. I suspect that the malady could be traced to literary criticism and the hyper-sensitive conclaves of the Modern Language Association of the time. The joke in those days was that, where other disciplines at the close of a hard day’s conferencing would repair to the bars for a night of discreet dissolution, the MLA faithful would by contrast repair to their rooms to cry.

But in dealing with issues of racism, anti-Semitism, and religious violence, especially when studied with a participant/observer methodology, there was a constant question of ‘how do you personally relate to what you see and write’? My methodology – a detached and as value-free-as-possible history replete with what the anthropologists would call ‘thick description’ – made the question of particular import to the curious. Then there was Waco in 1993 and the FBI began to recruit NRM scholars to give them background into violent religious milieus.⁷ I politely declined to either place myself in my work or to assist the FBI. Colleagues at the time found this puzzling, but I talked about myself almost not at all, and while I had my reasons, I chose not to share them.

Where most career academics have been in school virtually their entire lives, it was for me a career fallen into more by accident than by design relatively late in life. Before returning fresh from Hebron/al-Khalil and Intifada I to the US to attend the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, I had spent almost the whole of my adult life abroad. Eastern Europe in the 1970s, the Middle East and South Asia in the late 1970s–1980s, with long detours in such locales as Indonesia and the Sudan (multiple times in peace and war), and many points between. I witnessed a good deal that I write about in this book, either directly or in the aftermath where I lived deeply connected to the people of each of these places.

Much of what I write about is therefore more than mere ‘book learning.’ Violence, warfare, revolution – these are emotional and passionate events and the emotion and passion is too often leached out of academic accounts. My work has always tried to convey dry facts with the intense feeling of those who acted or

were acted upon in violent conflict. Yet this was always from the perspective of the close but invisible observer rather than the presence of the ghost in the machine. Why the change? Why go as far as I have in this book to place myself into events that I witnessed, from Karta 77 in Prague to the Iranian Revolution and much more besides?

This introduction is being written in an attempt to answer that question for myself. And while I have as yet no good answer, I suspect it has more than a little to do with age and mortality. This book was conceived in Changchun, PRC, and born in Riyadh, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where I currently reside and teach at an age when many of my colleagues have retired from academe or from life altogether. As I write these words, the Saudi Arabia I knew and loved in the late 1970s and early 1980s is being transformed, at least outwardly, beyond recognition. In the classroom I talk much about the Arabia of my students' grandfathers' time – a place they hardly recognize. I am therefore constantly asked which time I prefer, the Arabia of restrictions, of *Mutawa* (religious police) and *maharams* (male relatives without whom a woman could not walk the streets of much of the country) or now when the *Mutawa* have been removed from the scene and *maharams* are fast going the way of the dinosaurs. The answer is always the same: "Old men look back and young men look forward."

The first part of this book looks back and the second part looks forward. *Enshallah* (if God Wills) there will be something here for all.

Notes

- 1 On the Yugoslavian conflict, see Lisa Sharlach, "Rape as Genocide: Bangladesh, the Former Yugoslavia, and Rwanda," *New Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2000): 89–102. Doris E. Buss, "Rethinking 'Rape as a Weapon of War'", *Feminist Legal Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009): 145–163. On the LRA, Jeffrey Kaplan, "The Lord's Resistance Army: Millennialism, Violence and the Timeless Dream," *Religious Studies and Theology, Special Edition on Security and Religion. Maeyam Razavy, and T. Butko, T. (eds.)* 28, no. 1 (2009): 95–127.
- 2 Kevin Flynn and Gary Gerhardt, *The Silent Brotherhood: Inside America's Racist Underground* (New York: Free Press, 1989).
- 3 Of the *siloviki* – former KGB and other intelligence officers who now control much of the Russian government – we will have much to say later in the book. For a good introduction, see the review article Ola Cichowlas, "In Russia, It Is Deja-Vu All over Again: How Russians Fell Back in Love with the Kgb and Stalin," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2013): 111–124.
- 4 John Anderson, "Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?" *Journal of International Affairs* (2007): 185–201.
- 5 Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2008). The title essay is available at <https://blog.lix.cc/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Hofstadter-Paranoid-Style-American-Politics.pdf>.
- 6 Gary Allen and Larry Abraham, *None Dare Call It Conspiracy* (1971), www.whale.to/b/allen_b1.html.
- 7 Michael Barkun, "Project Megiddo, the Fbi and the Academic Community" in *Millennial Violence: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Jeffrey Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 97–108. Catherine Wessinger, "Religious Studies Scholars, Fbi Agents, and the Montana Freeman Standoff," *Nova Religio* 3, no. 1 (1999): 36–44.

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