

**CLAUDIA VERHOEVEN, *THE ODD MAN KARAKAZOV: IMPERIAL RUSSIA, MODERNITY AND THE BIRTH OF TERRORISM***

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*By Simon Pawley*

In this provocative monograph, Claudia Verhoeven examines the relationship between terrorism and modern forms of political thought and action; avoiding a programmatic definition, she treats terrorism “not simply [as] a strategy...but rather a paradigmatic way of becoming a modern political subject.” (4) Verhoeven explores this connection through an investigation of what she argues was the foundational act of modern terrorism – the failed attempt by Dmitry Karakozov to assassinate Russian Tsar Alexander II in 1866. This act has received so little attention from historians, she suggests, because it was unsuccessful and because Karakozov – said to have been mentally disturbed – is thought not to have understood the significance of his actions.

Verhoeven argues that what distinguished this act from other political assassinations is that the target was not the monarch himself, but rather the very institution of the monarchy. It was thus representative, she suggests, of a quintessentially modern conception of politics, which legitimized the intervention of non-state actors to bring about political change, by resort to violence where necessary. Such a notion drew on the idea of popular sovereignty, which challenged the legitimacy of traditional political institutions, such as monarchy. She links the emergence of this new form of political subjectivity to other aspects of modern life, such as the development of mass communication, large-scale urbanization and new forms of social identity.

Despite identifying such links, Verhoeven’s argument suffers from the absence of broader contextualisation. The French revolution, inspired by modern, secular ideas of popular sovereignty, gave expression to a new concept of political subjectivity by forging a new model of the ‘citizen’. Across 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, this prompted a reconsideration of the legal status of political crime and shaped a new concept of legitimate political violence; historian Jonathan Daly has demonstrated the impact of these debates on Russian legal thought in works that Verhoeven does not discuss. Because her narrative is not contextualised by a treatment of these issues, Verhoeven overextends her argument, treating Karakozov’s act as a point of fundamental rupture that inspired a new vision of violent political action that inspired the Russian revolutionary terrorist movements that emerged in the following decades. Because it lacks broader contextualization, Verhoeven’s attempt to demonstrate the importance of Karakozov’s act in creating a new vision of political action is not convincing.

aAlthough she does not cite him, Verhoeven’s argument is inspired by the suggestion of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben that the essence of the political is defined by exceptional cases, because these define its limits, and hence its scope. Paradoxically, as a ‘micro-history’ of the Karakozov case, Verhoeven’s study isolates it from its historical context, and thus serves only to reproduce its exceptional status rather than demonstrating its centrality. Ultimately, while Verhoeven’s claims for the significance of this case in shaping modern forms of political subjectivity and political violence are intriguing, her study does not do enough to support them.

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