International terrorism, in Claire Sterling's *The Terror Network* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston), is fundamentally a Communist-choreographed dance macabre. Content with havoc, the Communists are pretty much willing to leave terrorists to their own devices, helping this "terror by proxy" along with arms and opportunities. But if the Communists remain offstage, Sterling argues, they still call the tune. Hence anticomunism is presumably the keystone of any effort to combat terrorism.

Some flaws in this notion are obvious. First, Sterling concentrates on leftist terrorists in Europe, passing over the various White Terrors around the world. Second, the evidence for her thesis is anecdotally thin. The CIA has repeatedly rejected it, reducing Sterling to the claim that cowardice prevents the Agency from confirming her findings. But such comments only hint at the problem. Sterling knows the arcana of terrorism, and she loves to relate goings and comings, interrelations and enormities. Despite all those trees, she does not really understand terrorism as a phenomenon in the political forest.

In the first place Sterling treats terror as an extension of the ordinary hierarchy of power, hence she presumes that the strong control the weak. Terrorism, however, aims to modify that normal order of things, or even—gradually and delicately—to upset it altogether. Terrorism is the tactic of the weak and the desperate, especially of stateless people like the Palestinians, who lack even the legal status to pursue diplomatic solutions, to say nothing of the means to wage war or apply economic pressure. The central aim of terrorist strategy is to compel those who have money, guns, and statehood to make those resources available. Terrorists aim to coerce their *friends* more than their enemies. The Arab governments, for example, have their own projects. Even militant regimes like Libya distrust the PLO, with reason, and often regard it as importunate and impertinent. Yet the Arab regimes cannot oppose the PLO without seeming to desert the Palestinian cause. The PLO wages its war for the headlines to establish itself as the front-line champion that cannot be opposed without aiding the enemy. Given its success in this aim, the PLO can threaten any hostile Arab government with domestic disaffection. Of course terrorists can take this tactic too far, as the PLO did in its military confrontation with King Hussein. But a judicious combination of terror and propaganda offers the weak their best chance to command the strong.

One example is evident. The Reagan administration is ideologically drawn to Mrs. Thatcher's government. Mr. Reagan and his associates are not likely to adore the IRA, especially given the links—which Sterling documents—between the IRA and various international revolutionaries. But the administration has not hastened to support Thatcher in her confrontation with the hunger strikers, even though the IRA obtains a good part of its money and arms from American sources. The Justice Department has ordered the Northern Aid Committee to register as an arm of the IRA, but that seems rather mild. In Northern Ireland, to some considerable extent, it is Americans who "lay the loaded gun on the table." Our hesitancy about strong measures to support the British, however, does not mean that the conflict in Northern Ireland is part of an American masterplot. It simply means that too many Americans sympathize with the IRA or feel that Mrs. Thatcher should have yielded to Bobby Sands's specific demands. Even hard-line antiterrorists like Reagan and Haig know how to yield to political pressure—up to a point.

Just so, Communist regimes often feel constrained to show some sympathy for terrorist "revolutionaries." The Soviet Union is ready enough to use terror, but that great bureaucratic polity loathes the romantic individualism of the highly publicized terrorists. It knows that a blank wall is more terrifying than a capering beserker, and it prefers terror that is monotonously impersonal. But even the Soviet Union is willing to give an inch rather than seem hostile to the revolution. The Soviets are far less vulnerable to this sort of pressure than we are, but that does not mean they are *immune*.

It is an even more basic flaw in Sterling's case that she treats terror as an *effect* of terrorism, a more or less calculated tactic, neglecting the extent to which terror is a *cause* of terrorism. And since terror is ubiquitous in modern polities, the pressure toward terrorism exists in all regimes.

Terror is essentially arbitrary, threatening me with dangers I cannot comprehend. If I am terrorized, I feel that nothing—neither defiance nor surrender—will make me safe. Who I am does not matter, and neither does what I do. My name and conduct are irrelevant. I am essentially "demoralized," without moral significance, a nonperson, almost literally a non-entity. In that sense terrorism speaks to our horror of oblivion, our dread of meaninglessness. The "king of terrors," Bildad tells Job, is the loss of roots and branches and remembrance, so that one has "no name in the street."

Namelessness and terror go hand in hand. And we have so many nameless people in modern society. Part of the grim attraction of terrorism is that it palliates terror. Acts of terrorism are so appalling that they fascinate us. The media cover them lovingly, if not salaciously. Terrorists get attention and "take credit" for atrocities. New Yorkers who could not name either of the dominant political parties in Puerto Rico can identify the FALN. Nameless people like Sirhan Sirhan or James Earl Ray acquire names through acts of terror. To the terrorized soul, infamy is preferable to anonymity. In these terms terrorism works, and that makes terrorism tempting for Communists and capitalists alike.