GHOSH, DURBA. Gentlemanly Terrorists. Political Violence and the Colonial State in India, 1919–1947. [Critical Perspectives on Empire.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017. xv, 275 pp. Ill. £69.99. (Paper: £23.99; E-book $24.00).

Durba Ghosh's book *Gentlemanly Terrorists* complements other recent histories that make a concerted attempt to highlight the place of militant political actors in the Indian freedom movement and to de-centre Gandhian/non-violent politics as the be all and end all of the anti-colonial struggle.[1]

As the title implies, with its reference to a gentlemanly (*bhadralok*) class of offenders, Ghosh deals with the history of Bengali militancy especially around 1920 to the late 1930s. But unlike other recent histories, the author does not focus on the revolutionaries themselves (or their international connections and sojourns), but rather on the administrative machine designed to tackle the threat they represented. Specifically, she traces the expansion of a system of repressive laws that suspended civil rights for those suspected of sedition, and the associated growth of a specialized system of detention facilities. Four particular detention camps, and especially the camp at Deoli, are closely examined in the second half of the study. Through this empirical account, the author makes a paradigmatic case about the "state of exception" that lurks at the core of the modern state – and that casts a long shadow over postcolonial India with its myriad repressive and pre-emptive laws that bear a close resemblance to the colonial-era ordinances and regulations she explores here (pp. 252–256).

The book skips over the first wave of "terrorism" in Bengal from c.1905 and begins its story with the end of World War I and the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms in 1919, which widened the franchise for elections to the Legislative Assembly and allowed provincial governments to administer "nation-building" departments, such as health, education, but also, significantly, justice, jails, and police. The centre retained control over critical areas such as the military, defence, foreign relations, and trade. Moreover, the provincial Governor General could implement or veto any bill within the legislature. Ghosh demonstrates just how much British officials would use these powers when it came to issues of "security".

The administration kept extending war-time emergency measures introduced by executive order into the post-war period (in the form of the Rowlatt Act and later the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act), including suspending the right to a trial by jury, banning those it suspected of

1. For other, recent publications in this vein, see for instance, J. Daniel Elam and Chris Moffat, "On the Form, Politics and Effects of Writing Revolution", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39:3 (2016), pp. 513–524; Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (London, 2015); Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Ali Raza, Utopias Lost (forthcoming, 2019); There is a great number of detailed studies especially of the Bengali revolutionaries, such as Peter Heehs, The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910 (New Delhi [etc.], 2004); Leonard Gordon, Brothers against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat & Subhas Chandra Bose (New York, 1990). Ghosh herself points out that the contestation over the importance of revolutionaries for the Indian freedom movement is actually much older. Revolutionaries themselves have tried to set the record straight since the 1920s (see below) and historians like R.C. Majumdar pressed for a recognition of their contribution when official histories of the Independence started to be written around 1950; see the book reviewed in this volume, pp. 247–248.

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terrorist or seditious activities from attending public meetings or publishing their writings, and detaining suspects to "non-penal custody", even if there was no proof or crime connected to this activity (p. 43). Ghosh analyses various instances, starting with the 1919 reforms, when constitutional and legal reforms were complemented by such repressive legislation.

The signature simultaneity of governmental reforms and the selective suspension of habeas corpus was by no means accidental, but interdependent: In order to "make India safe" for constitutional reform, the government argued, repressive and pre-emptive security measures were necessary to stamp out the threat posed by terrorist activity – and even when there was little sign of such activity, this was only due to the existence of repressive laws (pp. 31–33). Such legislation was therefore repeatedly extended and reshaped despite the resistance of Indian members of the Legislative Assembly, who relied on the language of law and order, or universal rights in their attempts to curb such measures, and in this capacity most unequivocally sided with the "terrorists".

Among historians of India, there is now a greater awareness that "you can't tell the story of Gandhi without telling the story of the revolutionary terrorists" (p. 97), because of the temporary alliances between "terrorist" groups and members of the Indian National Congress, the generally porous borders between mainstream politics and militants, and the space that violent practices opened up for political negotiations between Indian politicians and the Government of India (GoI) or to mobilize popular support against the latter. Another interesting aspect in this context is her discussion on the nexus of a nationalist discourse on self-sacrifice as a prime virtue, and the social status, credibility, and political clout former prisoners gained – not a few of them went into politics later (see especially p. 181 and from 207ff.).

But where *Gentlemanly Terrorists* truly shines is in its close reading of prison reform and regulations, the contestation and discursive strategies by detainees and the government, and the evolution of pre-emptive legislation (especially the above-cited Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act). While historians are very aware of the importance of late colonial legislative measures and the stark continuities between colonial and post-colonial law (especially criminal law), there is a relative dearth of work specifically focusing on these issues and their socio-economic impact.[2]

Prison reform, too, was taken up just after the end of World War I, in the form of a Jail Commission to study the regime of "transportation" (to the panopticon-inspired prison in the Andaman Islands) as punishment for the most notorious militants but also to explore how the GoI might ultimately reform and rehabilitate this particular segment of the Indian population.

Bengali detainees presented a peculiar problem for the administration insofar as it relied precisely on this educated, landed class, which the Bengali *bhadralok* epitomized, to participate in and lend legitimacy to political reforms and, through this, to the Empire itself.

2. Some excellent work in this field exists, of course. See for instance Radhika Singha on the first half of the nineteenth century and colonial legal reform as ad hoc law, cf. Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Oxford, 2000, [1998]), or her work on twentieth-century measures to control "habitual offenders" and the flexibility of that term: *idem*, "Punished by Surveillance: Policing 'Dangerousness' in Colonial India, 1872–1918", *Modern Asian Studies*, 49:2 (2015), pp. 241–269. See also Rohit De, "Rebellion, Dacoity, and Equality: The Emergence of the Constitutional Field in Postcolonial India", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 34:2 (2014), pp. 260–278; *idem*, "'Commodities Must be Controlled': Economic Crimes and Market Discipline in India (1939–1955)", *International Journal of Law in Context*, 10:3 (2014), pp. 277–294.

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The janiform nature of the GoI, which craved legitimacy out of insecurity and was authoritarian out of a sense of necessity, must also be seen in the context of the post-World War I landscape, in which British colonialism had to contend with newly emerging, more radical nationalist movements. In India specifically, the government was faced with the challenge of a significant portion of its subjects who became criminal by courting arrest or taking up arms for political ends yet were not "common" or "habitual" criminals (in the parlance of colonial sociology), but were of the class and background that should have destined them to sit in councils and offices – not plan bloody murder in ashram-like, clandestine dormitories.

The report of the Jail Commission marked the beginning of a long and complicated series of negotiations between British politicians in the metropole, the colonial administration, intelligence officials, Indian politicians, and the detainees themselves regarding what right and treatment they should be entitled to. The colonial state resisted attempts by Indian politicians and revolutionaries to categorize them as political prisoners, but nevertheless developed specialized regimes and concessions for those who were in jail for political reasons (p. 188, see also p. 180). While the state thought these measures quite generous, detained revolutionaries undertook some very efficient campaigns to highlight their plight, including hunger strikes – even while officials tried to argue that the "neurotic" Bengalis had too much time on their hands and were merely keeping busy protesting (pp. 190, 195).

Ghosh also provides us with a nuanced reading of the very conscious sense of religion, class, and caste, as well as privilege of the detainees, how their rights were violated, for instance, by having to give up their sacred threads, do hard, manual labour, or having no access to the diet they were accustomed to in the Andamans, and how regulations were laid down to cater to such requirements later on. These discussions, based also on accounts by the inmates, allow for a glimpse of prison life on an everyday basis and also touch on the difficulties resulting from the "special class" prisoner status that set the typically elite prisoners apart from their fellow inmates.

Between the mass arrests of non-violent protesters that came with any major Gandhian campaign, the overcrowding of jails, the sheer number of people detained under suspicion of terrorism – in Bengal in late 1933, these numbered some 10,000 men and "a scattered number of women" – and concerns about the health of the detainees (pp. 123f., 178), the government built detention camps, such as Deoli, to keep "terrorists" as a separate prison population.

While the administrative response and the political discourse around the "terrorists" are the main focus, there are two chapters that deal with revolutionary autobiographies. The appearance of such accounts was clustered around specific moments, a first wave after 1920 and a second one around 1947. Here, Ghosh explores the diverse styles and accounts of famous prisoners like Barin (dra Kumar) Ghosh, Upendra Nath Banerji, Bhupendra Kumar Dutta, and Ullaskar Dutta, who went mad in the Andamans, probably compounded by the torture he endured there. Among the writers of the "second wave", we find figures like Trailokya Nath Chakrabarty, Kalpana Dutta, Bina Das, and Kamala Dasgupta. Ghosh explores the modes of writing and presentation the former detainees employed and their stark sense of historical contingency – from the millennial euphoria at the beginning of the 20th century, when revolutionary cells mushroomed in Bengal, to the sense of urgency some of these authors had in providing their own version of history in order to claim their place in the popular narrative of events, to create a sense of continuity and direction of the movement, and, especially around the time of Independence, to emphasize the continued

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importance of a more militant struggle and create the discursive space for future political and social alternatives by connecting them to a lineage of revolutionary resistance against the Empire (pp. 61, 243).

In summary, the *Gentlemanly Terrorists* offers a fascinating study of policing political suspects and militants in this period. Despite having worked on some of these groups myself, I learnt much about the laws and internal mechanisms regulating incarceration and rehabilitation. The book, at times, seems somewhat uneven in the amount of detail, background information, and analysis it provides. Sometimes it almost reads like a textbook but foregoes deeper analysis or follow-up on pertinent questions and issues for an empiric, narrative-driven account; at other times, the reader benefits from having substantial background knowledge, for instance on the Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar, the major conspiracy cases, relevant political figures, but also a familiarity with the specificities of certain tropes that structured the nationalist discourse, from masculinity and religiosity, to self-sacrifice and discipline.

The conclusion seems to imply that the author had planned to write more on the continuities of post-colonial repressive legislation but that the West Bengal State Archive's regulations apparently made this unfeasible – a more elaborate sketch of developments in the 1940s as well as postcolonial (dis)continuities would have added much to the book, and one might hope that the author will publish more on this in the future.[3]

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3. The archive, I have to say from my own experience, sadly does not permit the use of laptops, and will take long periods to review – and liberally censor – any notes taken from files dated 1946 or later.

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