



The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam

Bernard Lewis

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The history of an extremist Islamic sect in the 11th-12th centuries whose terrorist methods gave the English language a new word: assassin.

The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam Details

Date : Published February 6th 2003 by Weidenfeld & Nicholson (first published 1967)

ISBN : 9781842124512

Author : Bernard Lewis

Format : Hardcover

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Religion, Islam

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Sura * says

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Fathy Sroor says

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Salma says

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Sagheer Afzal says

Bernard Lewis in his career did not grasp the tactic used by the great William Dalrymple; that history is best realised when the narrative focuses on people rather than events. Consequently, this book does become a dry read bogged down with names and dates. However, Bernard Lewis does succeed in shedding light on the Assassins.

Anyone interested in the state of the modern day Islamic world will no doubt see a parallel between the Assassins and suicide killers who have so tarnished the name of Islam. For this reason, I feel that the entire book is worth reading just for the last chapter. Bernard Lewis makes the observation which so few political pundits do nowadays:

'HUMAN SACRIFICE AND RITUAL MURDER HAVE NO PLACE IN ISLAMIC LAW, TRADITION OR PRACTICE'

There is no real point of similarity between the Assassins and suicide martyrs. The Assassins were a fanatical zealots who lived like monks and hungered for death. They obeyed their Elder without question and murdered without reason. Even the redoubtable Saladin was forced to make concessions with them for the sake of his mission. Suicide martyrs are fanatical imbeciles who hunger for glory.

Even though the Assassins hailed from a Shia sect, I doubt very many of them would be at ease with their beliefs. Nonetheless, during their time towering intellects like Ibn Sina were in favour of them.

I would have like to have seen more accounts of the exploits of the Assassins amidst the array of dates and events. Other than that, this is an interesting read that does give you an insight into a rare moment in Islamic history when murder and faith became inseparable.

Tim says

A few quick facts: When the Prophet died he left no direction for the succession of his leadership. It fell to Abu Bakr -- the first Caliph, "one of the earliest and most respected converts" p. 23. Some followers felt that Ali, cousin of the Prophet would be a better leader. They formed the Shi'atu Ali or Party of Ali. This party was referred to simply as Shi'a and is the origin of the Shi'ite branch of Islam. A strong sect within the Shi'a were the Ismailis who at one time or another ruled in either Egypt, Syria, and Persia. The first half of the book has been a rapid read of the history of Islamic world after the death of the Prophet. One of my first thoughts was that this book or ones like it should have been read and studied before the USA stepped into a 1000 year old feud in Iraq. One of the other reviewers mentioned that the book is tedious. I find it to be a fast moving history.

Ayman yassin says

Sesana says

Another book that caught my attention only because I love the Assassin's Creed games. Yes, this is the same order that inspired the one in the games, though naturally very different. Telling the real story of the historical Assassins is complicated by relatively sparse documentation, with little coming from the actual Assassins themselves. As far as I can tell, Lewis did a good job of summarizing what is known, or at least what was known when this was written in the mid 60s. It feels like it's relatively non-sensational, which is good. It does get a little dry in the middle, but it's a very short book. I see that there's some debate about the author's interpretation, but I don't know enough to judge.

Haitham fahmy says

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Saif Ali says

Dated. Old. Flawed.

This book uses an understanding of history that now scholars do not accept as true of the Assassin order. The Assassins were a highly mythicized group of what were essentially special-ops soldiers of the highest order of the Nizari Ismaili community in Iran and Syria. They were not the norm of the community. Rather, they were trusted members of the community appointed by the leader - Hassan Sabbah in Persia, Rashid ad-Din Sinan in Syria - and trained to infiltrate the courts of Seljuk and Crusader rulers in order to coerce them to not attack Ismaili strongholds in the mountains.

Scholars and experts on the Ismaili community have developed new, more accepted theories on the Assassins and what they did. The commonly held scholarly belief is that the Ismaili fid'ai, the special operatives, were a largely defensive tool used to strike fear into the hearts of political leaders who opposed the Nizari Ismaili community, rather than a sect of incensed, political terrorists that functioned as a prototype for al-Qaeda. That comparison fails on several accounts, the largest being that al-Qaeda has a history of oppressing and killing Shi'a Muslims, especially more heterodox Shi'a such as Ismailis, another being that the Assassins likely killed with a knife and only killed the target, not bystanders.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassin...>

The above wikipedia page's section does a good job of dispelling most outdated theories on the Assassins.

Ali AlShewail says

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Mohammed-Makram says

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Brent Weeks says

I remember thinking at one point in this book: How is it possible to write a book about assassins that's boring? I soon realized the fault of my boredom was my own--that is, my own limited knowledge. When an author is using terms to describe how much territory a group controlled and he's referring to cities and regions that no longer exist, he's not being boring, he's just talking over your head. Too much of this, and it might as well be abstruse algorithms rather than the history of what Lewis calls in passing "the first terrorists".

That terrorist point isn't his main thesis (he wasn't writing this to examine al Qaeda or something, the book was first published in 1968), but it does stand up pretty well. This small group juggled much larger neighbors who could crush it by scaring the hell out of their leaders--personally. There are some interesting points that he throws in about how the Ismailis didn't bother to assassinate Hospitalers or Knights Templar:

assassinations didn't work against highly structured societies in which the number 2 in command would simply step into command with no break in order; it only worked against fragmented, personality-driven kingdoms that were the norm in the Middle East. The Ismailis knew this, and didn't waste assassins on them. I don't know enough Islamic religious history to comment on that, though it is important to this book, and Lewis's treatment thereof probably contentious among scholars of Ismailism (a branch/heresy(?) of Shia Islam).

What is of note is that the assassins definitely had a religious strain in their motivations. Contrary to what happens in all of our tv, an assassin was more akin to a suicide bomber than to a Navy Seal. They would spend years working their way into a position where they could murder a leader or a preacher if they were so ordered--but when and if they did, it was a shame to escape alive. That's right. You were supposed to become a martyr. Escape was not the plan.

How do you motivate that? Heavenly paradise, of course. It also makes the assassins about a hundred times more dangerous, because guys who want to die killing you are much, much harder to stop than guys who need an exit plan after the deed is done.

A good antidote to the sometimes-more-interesting fictions out there about assassins. (Fictions the real guys would have encouraged, by the way. It made them more scary.)