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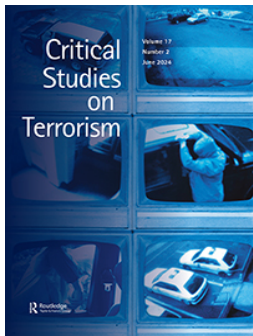
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# Bad history: a historian's critique of Rapoport's "four waves of modern terrorism" model

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## ABSTRACT

The late David C. Rapoport's seminal "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism" model has exerted huge influence over approaches to historical and contemporary terrorism. Structuring the history of terrorism since the 1870s into four successive "waves", the model purports to explain the origin, duration, and end of terrorist episodes, as well as the persistence of terrorism over the *longue durée*. Close examination of successive elaborations of the model reveals flaws and contradictions that undermine the theory itself. Most significantly, its central contention that terrorist waves follow a generational pattern is underdeveloped and under-evidenced. Such inherent weaknesses call into question the model's usefulness. Consequently, the article argues that terrorism studies scholars should discard the model in favour of genuine historical study of terrorism in the past.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Terrorism; history; Rapoport; waves model; generations

Most scholars working on terrorism have encountered the late David C. Rapoport's "Four Waves of Modern Terrorism" model. Beginning in 1999, Rapoport recapitulated the theory in at least eight published articles or chapters, a multi-volume reader, and a book published in 2022. Scholars have acknowledged the model's remarkable influence on terrorism studies since 2001, describing it as a seminal text in the field and "by far the most influential 15 pages ever written on the history of terrorism" (Bar-On and Paradela-López 2023; Blumenau and Timothy 2022, 149; see also Gagnon 2010; Kaplan 2008; Parker and Sitter 2016; Simon 2011). The four waves theory applies a framework to the history of terrorism since the late 1870s that purports to explain changes and continuities in the phenomenon, such as those regarding motives, tactics, and targets. Rapoport divided the last 150 years into four successive "waves" of terrorism. He defined a wave as "a cycle of activity in a given time period ... characterized by expansion and contraction phases" (Rapoport 2004, 46). In each wave, a "common predominant energy" inspired most (but not all) terrorist groups to take up arms across the world. Rapoport surmised that this "energy" can be understood across time as "revolutionary", though "revolution" meant different things at different times. The pull of this revolutionary cause prompted a certain form of terrorism to come to the fore in successive waves and

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each wave takes its name from this dominant form: the first “Anarchist” wave (1879–1920s); the second “Anti-Colonial” wave (1920s–1960s); the third “New Left” wave (1960s–1990s) and the fourth “Religious” wave (1979–present). Waves saw peaks and troughs of terror; the rhythm of these ups and downs differed according to the period.

The first three waves lasted for “about a generation” or roughly forty years, dissipating thanks to counterterrorism efforts, political concessions, and the ageing of the terrorists themselves (Rapoport 2004, 48). This final factor concerns generational change; it is central to the model. All waves originate in generation-defining events, defined as “major unexpected political turning points” (Rapoport 1999, 501; 2022, 66) that inspire young people into action. As this young generation ages – and the dreams that inspire it fail to inspire the successor generation (Rapoport 2003a, 37) – the momentum of the wave falters. Waves eventually lose their energy because “[t]he heirs of the revolution simply do not value it in the same way its creators did (Rapoport 2013, 284). This “generational approach” is of paramount importance for it explains the origin and end of a wave, as well as offering a means to predict a coming fifth wave. The prioritisation of generations represents the model’s most important contribution to our understanding of the history of terrorism (an early title for Rapoport’s 2022 *Waves of Global Terrorism* was in fact *The Four Waves of Modern Terror: A Generational Theory* [Rapoport 2003a: 19]). Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson have observed that the emphasis on “generational waves of terrorism” is what makes the waves theory “particularly distinctive” (Karen and Thompson 2009, 30).

Several scholars have proposed adaptations to the model (such as the inclusion of extra waves, sub-waves, or different waves) without challenging its basic conventions (Auger 2020; Collins 2021; Dietze 2021; Hart 2023; Kaplan 2008; Lynn 2019; Sedgwick 2007). Wholesale rejections of the model are rare: Tom Parker and Nick Sitter are outliers in this respect for they have proposed a different approach to the history of terrorism, one that foregrounds “strains” of terror rather than waves (Parker and Sitter 2016). Meanwhile, in a pointed attack, Denys Proshyn has described Rapoport’s theory as “an unsuccessful attempt to find a single explain-all solution for the extremely complex problem of the origins and transformation of terrorism. It ‘works’ only if one agrees not to notice how superficial and sometimes even flimsy its author’s reasoning is” (Proshyn 2015, 94). Proshyn believes that the recourse to terrorism may be understood only with reference to local contexts; a focus on the assumed impact of watershed events, often distant in both chronological and geographic terms, tells us little. Proshyn favours a fine-grained analysis of local minutiae and he finds Rapoport’s approach too broad to shed any light on terrorism (Rapoport does admit that local contexts could be important, yet he does not enter into detail on the matter [Rapoport 2004, 51; 2011, 118]). Likewise, Tim Wilson has recently questioned Rapoport’s appreciation of historical context, and the impact of global events on local expressions of terrorism. Notably, Wilson points out that Rapoport gave little credit to the role of the Russian Revolution in bringing the anarchist wave to an end (Wilson 2022).

The waves model deserves credit for sensitising scholars to the history of terrorism and for prompting them to question the ebb and flow of terrorism over the long term. Nonetheless, it is time to dispense with the four waves model and this article constructs my case for doing so. For the first time, I trace the origins of the theory and subject its

components to critical examination. Significantly, I call for terrorism studies scholars to put the wave theory aside, for it is an imperfect substitute for historical research.

I do not challenge the model for what it *does not include*, though such an approach might be fruitful. Take historical right-wing terrorism. Rapoport stated that nationalist groups spanned all four waves. He noted, too, that right-wing groups “caused more casualties, and more indiscriminate ones” than their revolutionary counterparts in the first, second, and third waves (Rapoport 1999, 502). Yet right-wing terrorists do not truly figure in Rapoport’s thinking. In 2004, he explained the exclusion of right-wing groups for they were “more often than not ... associated with government reactions” (Rapoport 2004: 70n17) and the waves model is concerned only with “rebel” terror. Yet in 2011, Rapoport gave a different reason for the absence of right-wing terrorist groups: “[t]here was not enough time or space to include them” (Rapoport 2011, 118)! In 2016, he admitted that the “Nazi-Fascist issue should be worked out” (Rapoport 2016, 223). Rapoport decided not to do this working out in his 2022 book because, as he admitted, his focus was on “underground groups” (Rapoport 2022, 116). This omission is plausible if one defines terrorism as the deed of clandestine entities; the Italian Fascist and German Nazi parties, and their violent street-fighting wings, were legal organisations. However, the Italian Fascist government poured significant financial and material resources into funding underground terrorist groups such as the Croatian Ustashe and the French Cagoule. Rapoport ignored these groups, remarking wrongly that only in the third wave did states begin to fund terrorist groups (Rapoport 2001, 423). Fascist “rebel” terrorism did not seem worthy of his consideration.

I am less concerned here with exposing factual problems than with exploring the model’s conceptual weaknesses. I base my critique on the problems and contradictions inherent to the model’s basic features. Most significantly, I argue that the generational approach raises more questions than answers because Rapoport did not adequately explain what a generation “is” and how a theory of generations can explain the long history of modern terrorism. Rapoport’s generational approach grew in significance since he first mooted the waves theory in 1999. The first articulation of the model did not use the term “generation”; Rapoport simply claimed that “[t]he first three [waves] lasted from 35–40 years each” (Rapoport 1999, 501). By 2022, generational change had become essential to the model because it determined the lifecycle of a wave (Rapoport 2022, 7–8). In a 2022 interview with devotee Jeffrey Kaplan, Rapoport went as far as to describe terrorism as a “generational phenomenon”:

What constitutes a wave is a generation. Normally we think of classes and groups, existing groups, which are divided by purposes, but a generation is a category which is related to a particular time, when a people who are born roughly at the same time [take political action] and when they are over forty years in action they simply disappear, because they are too old and a new generation doesn’t follow the same purposes (Utrecht University 2022).

The intellectual foundations of this generational approach are not clear. In his later publications, Rapoport mentioned several scholars who have proposed a generational approach to history, namely José Ortega y Gasset, Karl Mannheim, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Allusions to these theorists are largely absent from earlier versions of the model. The extent to which these ideas influenced Rapoport is obscure because he did not explain how these works informed his thinking. In his 2022 book, his main source

for determining the length of a generation seems to be the Bible (Rapoport 2022, 7–8). Closer examination of this scholarship on generations reveals incompatibilities with Rapoport's model, not least on the *length* of a generation. When one approaches the waves model considering this literature, the result is confusion. On what basis did Rapoport determine that a generation lasts for forty years? Is a generation simply a single age cohort or does it encompass multiple cohorts? Does a generation commence with the events that triggered the respective waves and, if this is the case, by the time a wave dissipates are all terrorist entering their sixties? These are just some of the questions that the model does not answer.

There are three sections in this article. The first section briefly explores the origins of the waves model. Why did Rapoport feel compelled to create the framework? Where and when was it first articulated? The second section investigates the model's ubiquity in terrorism studies, asking why it has assumed such an influential position in the field. I offer three answers: a) the model's elaboration in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when political, public, and scholarly attention on terrorism intensified; b) the model's orientation to "orthodox" terrorism studies, namely its focus on *rebel* rather than *state* terrorism; c) the social scientific dominance of terrorism studies and this discipline's unsound predilection for rules and models. These three factors helped to popularise Rapoport's work and establish it at the heart of approaches to historical terrorism. The final section examines the generational approach. I analyse Rapoport's theory with reference to academic work on generations. I uncover weaknesses in the model's use of the concept that derive from its innate underdevelopment and lack of empirical data.

The article concludes with a call to abandon flawed rules- and models-based approaches to the history of terrorism. I do not offer an alternative model to that of Rapoport. To replace one model with another is unsatisfactory to this historian and goes against the grain of their discipline. Rather, the study of terrorism in the past – of its individual instances, its global manifestations, and its development over time – requires deep engagement with the archival record, the prioritisation of context, and the appreciation of nuance. A model cannot explain the multifaceted and complex history of global terrorism; only a truly historical terrorism studies is fit for this purpose.

### There are no good histories of terrorism: the origins of the four waves model

Rapoport formulated the four waves model after a career of teaching and researching terrorism. Its creation owed something to his long-held frustration with the lack of historical work on the phenomenon.

Rapoport pinpointed the moment that sparked him to devise a historical theory of terrorism: an undergraduate student, with relatives in El Salvador, "wrote that although there were crucial continuities in the terrorist experience, critical themes such as the ultimate purpose, class and sex recruitment, tactics, and international context 'always varied depending on the period involved'" (Rapoport 2011, 119). This remark – that things were different in the past – began Rapoport's intellectual journey to the model.

Rapoport first intimated that terrorism was a cyclical phenomenon in 1979, in a review of Walter Laqueur's 1977 book *Terrorism*. Rather than conclude, like Laqueur, that terrorism was waning, he suggested that a "better ending [to the book] would remind us that an activity which has had such a long tradition, experienced so many revivals, and is so

deeply rooted in our intellectual life, will not disappear” (Rapoport 1979, 294). Rapoport did not at this time mention “waves” or “cycles” of terror (though he had, in late 1970, referred in passing to “waves” of terrorism in a programme for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [published in Rapoport 1971, 44–53]).

In a 1984 article on religious terrorism, one perceives the beginnings of the waves model in several of Rapoport’s propositions: firstly, that ideology or doctrine drives and conditions terrorism, rather than the technological environment in which it operates (a precursor to his later concept of the “common predominant energy”); secondly, that “significant political watersheds” nurture the hopes for change of political activists; thirdly, that the history of terrorism has a “cyclical character” and can be traced back to the French Revolution. He even mentioned the importance of political turning points to the origins of terrorism, such as the Vietnam war and the decline of the European colonial empires, factors that would later feature in the waves theory (Rapoport 1984). Three years later, Rapoport referred to *three* waves of terrorism in a 1987 special issue on terrorist organisations for the *Journal of Strategic Studies* (published as a book the following year: see Rapoport 1987, 1988).

Rapoport’s growing interest in terrorism prompted frustration with the academic literature. In 2011, he recalled that when he began to teach the subject (in 1969), the sources available to him consisted solely of artistic works or memoirs; there was a paucity of academic research. He took a dim view of contemporary histories of terrorist violence, writing in 1984 that there was no “authoritative history of modern terrorism” (Rapoport 1984, 672). He had already lamented the “serious and obvious” flaws in Laqueur’s *Terrorism*, a work usually recognised as a foundational text in the history of the phenomenon (yet not by Rapoport: “No one, I suspect, will find it satisfying,” he stated [Rapoport 1979]). This frustration with the apparent scarcity of historical work on terrorism persisted throughout Rapoport’s career. In 2004, his lament was the same: “[n]o good history of terrorism exists” (Rapoport 2004, 68n3). In 2013, this complaint appeared again in a collection of essays on historical terrorism (Rapoport 2013, 302n4).

Rapoport’s 2022 *Waves of Global Terrorism* does not contain the same indictment of the historiography of terrorism, yet he did not let historians off the hook. Rather, he perceived a “historical amnesia” around the subject. The book in fact commences with a quotation from historian Richard Hofstadter apparently chastising historians for “shirking” research on terrorism, a dereliction of duty that has led to a widespread repression of the subject in the American national consciousness (Rapoport 2022, 1). To further drive home the message, Rapoport noted that the 1960s edition of the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (the second edition of this work) did not contain an entry for “terrorism.” The first edition of the work *had* included such an entry, in which JBS Hardman (a Russian radical political activist) had predicted the demise of terrorism (Hardman 1935). Rapoport could not explain the omission of Hardman’s essay from the second edition. He speculated that, thirty years later, the editors had decided, like Hardman, that terrorism was no longer a cause for concern (Rapoport 2022, 5–6).

It is true that for a long-time historians seemed little interested in terrorism (Millington 2023). Yet Rapoport’s lamentations do not suggest a familiarity with historical work on the topic. For instance, his 2004 comment on the lack of “good” histories rested on the fact that Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman’s survey of terrorism literature “[did] not even list a history of the subject” (Rapoport 2004,

68n3; Jongman and Schmid 1988). Schmid and Jongman's survey had appeared *sixteen years* previous. As noted above, Rapoport repeated the statement, and the reference to Schmid and Jongman, in 2013 (Rapoport 2013, 302n4). Rapoport's search for "good" historical work on terrorism was now *twenty-six years old*. Had he still found no "good" histories or was he not up to date with the literature? Evidence from the 2022 *Waves of Global Terrorism* points to the latter reason. Hofstadter's comment about historians originally appeared in the introduction to his *American Violence: A Documentary History*, a work published *fifty-two years* before *Waves of Global Terrorism* (Hofstadter and Wallace 1970). This lapse in time begs the question as to whether Hofstadter's statement – and Rapoport's use of it – still held water. Had no historical work on terrorism appeared in the intervening five decades? There is another problem with Rapoport's quoting of Hofstadter: the original statement did not relate to terrorism per se. Hofstadter's work in fact covered *eight* violent phenomena in the United States, of which terrorism was just one; his charge against historians pertained to the history of violence *in general*, and not specifically to terrorism as Rapoport had the reader believe.

Rapoport's allusion to Hardman's missing encyclopaedia entry is equally problematic. Rapoport used this example to illustrate his argument on several occasions (Rapoport 1984, 2011; 2017, 2022). He was puzzled by the omission, yet he accepted that "[e]ditors ... do not generally explain why they decide to omit some articles" (Rapoport 2022: 308n9). In a 2011 article, he speculated that the editors of the later edition were "oblivious to political violence beyond the subject of war" (Rapoport 2011, 115). In a 2017 essay, Rapoport attributed the omission to a change in understandings of violence between the social scientists of the 1930s and those of the 1960s. Yet the answer to the puzzle *is easy to find* because the editors of the encyclopaedia *did* explain their decision. Editor David L. Sills clarified in the introduction to the second edition that the new encyclopaedia was "designed to complement, not to supplant, its predecessor" (Sills 1968, xix). In fact, the original work, including the Hardman essay on terrorism, *remained in print*. Sills continued: "[The second edition] consists entirely of articles prepared for it at the invitation of the editors; *no articles have been reprinted from the earlier encyclopedia* or from any other publication" (Sills 1968, xix; my italics). The 1968 edition no more proved that scholars had forgotten terrorism than they had forgotten "Abortion" or "Alcohol", two subjects that appeared in the 1930s publication but not that of the 1960s! All this aside, in 2022, was it really appropriate to illustrate the "historical amnesia" of a field with reference to a *fifty-four-year-old* publication? Indeed, I have argued that if, at one time, there *were* few historical treatments of the subject, today that is no longer the case (Millington 2023).

Exasperated with the lack of "good" histories of terrorism, Rapoport decided to write one himself. He regarded himself as something of a pioneer in this respect. In 2011, Rapoport claimed that he had always sought to combat the indifference of social scientists to history, while he had helped to establish the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence* with the express intention of encouraging the involvement of other disciplines, *especially* history, in the field of terrorism studies (Rapoport 2011). Unfortunately, the sense is that Rapoport's model – especially its 2022 book-length version – draws on an out-of-date grasp of the historical literature (Wilson makes a similar observation: Wilson 2022).

## The post-9/11 moment: accounting for the popularity of the waves model

Most scholars locate the first elaboration of the waves model to Rapoport's 2001 article in *Current History*, published three months after the attacks of September 11 (Rapoport 2001). A longer version of this essay was subsequently published in 2002, and later reprintings followed (Rapoport 2003, 2004, 2005). Few scholars refer to an earlier entry on terrorism in the 1999 *Encyclopaedia of Violence, Peace & Conflict*. The second section of this article is entitled "The Four Waves" (Rapoport 1999). Here, Rapoport described the four waves much as he would later do so. There is a major difference. The 1999 article did not propose a generational model and the piece does not mention generations at all. For this reason, Rapoport does not underline the predictive nature of the theory. Quite the opposite, in fact: "Terrorism will remain part of the landscape indefinitely, and we cannot forecast its ebb and flow, because terrorism is likely to remain linked, as it has in the past, to unexpected major political transformations. There is no way of determining when the current religious element [will run] its course" (Rapoport 1999, 509). In 1999, it seems that the historian in Rapoport got the better of the political scientist. However, Rapoport's essay, buried in the third volume of an encyclopaedia, was less visible than his later articles. Furthermore, published prior to 9/11, there was simply less interest in terrorism. It was a case of wrong place, wrong time.

Political, public, and scholarly interest in terrorism was intense when Rapoport's next version of the waves model appeared in *Current History* in December 2001. The avalanche of terrorism literature that followed 9/11 might have buried Rapoport's model. It is therefore important to understand why the waves model became so influential. I suggest three reasons here: a) an unprecedented interest in terrorism; b) the model's orthodox, "state-centric" approach to terrorism; c) the social scientific dominance of terrorism studies.

Firstly, the impact of 9/11. The attacks in September 2001 generated intense interest in terrorism. Surveys of the terrorism studies field have noted a huge upswing in publications on the subject, accompanied by a surge in government and research council funding, and the growing prominence of the terrorism expert in the media (Phillips 2023). In late 2001, for anyone looking to situate Al-Qaeda's attacks on the US in the long-term context of terrorism, as well as to comprehend the origins of twenty-first-century terrorist violence, Rapoport's model offered an easily digestible summary of the 125-year history of a global phenomenon. It was "a history lesson for non-historians . . . both short and accessible" (Blumenau and Timothy 2022, 149), or as Proshyn puts it less charitably, the model offered "seductively simple answers to complex questions" (Proshyn 2015, 97). This was particularly significant given that most researchers were focused on the Islamic terrorist threat with little appetite for deeper historical enquiry. For university educators now called to teach courses on terrorism, the model likewise provided a succinct overview of a huge topic and (in my own experience) proved an effective tool for provoking discussion in the classroom (Daniel Dory and Tim Wilson agree: Dory 2022; Wilson 2022).

Secondly, the model's orthodox approach. Rapoport adopted a state-centric view that ignored terrorist acts committed by the state. He apparently considered state terrorism a minor phenomenon: in his 1999 encyclopaedia entry, Rapoport wrote that state terrorism "eclipsed" rebel terrorism only briefly during the 1930s (Rapoport 1999, 499). Scholars who accept that states can perpetrate terrorism would contend that, in all periods, state

terrorism has vastly outweighed that of rebel groups. For Rapoport, however, the “overriding aim” of terrorism was “revolution,” conceived as violent opposition to (consecutively) the bourgeois state, the colonial state, the capitalist state, or the non-Islamic/secular state (Rapoport 2003a, 37). The absence of state violence was not necessarily a problem in the earlier versions of the work, where Rapoport specified that the model related only to “rebel” terror (Rapoport 1999, 2002; 2003). However, by 2004, he had named his model “the four waves of *modern* terrorism”. The change of name was important: rebel terror had now become *all* terror, leaving little room for consideration of other types.

Equally important in this respect was the naming of the waves. Neither Rapoport’s 1999 encyclopaedia entry nor his 2001 article in *Current History* named the waves as anything other than the “first,” “second,” “third,” and “fourth.” In 2002, Rapoport for the first time labelled the waves “Anarchist”, “Anti-Colonial”, “New Left,” and “Religious” (Rapoport 2002). The explanatory power of the labels is small, and they do not do justice to the complex reality of the periods to which they are applied (Duyvestyn 2007). Rather, they imply the prevalence of *non-state* violence while obscuring the much greater incidence of state violence. In naming the waves after the groups that opposed the status quo, the model reinforced traditional, state-centric conceptions of terrorism, and continues to do so.

Thirdly, the social scientific dominance of terrorism studies. In the early 2000s, Rapoport’s model encountered a receptive audience because social scientists dominated terrorism studies (as they still do). Andrew Silke’s 2004 survey of the field’s leading journals found that nearly half of authors were political scientists (Silke 2004). Later reviews have likewise noted the persistent preponderance of authors from social scientific backgrounds (Phillips 2023). It is therefore unsurprising that social scientific research methods should exert an inordinate influence over terrorism studies.

In the case of the waves model, the social scientific preference for rules and generalisable theories trumped historical approaches that focused on context and nuance. Social scientist Dipak Gupta has identified this methodological difference: “The primary difference between history and social science lies in the former’s reluctance to develop a generalised theory, while the latter clamours for common rules that bind human behaviour over time and geographic space” (Gupta 2011b, 96). A little more acerbically, Isabelle Duyvestyn has noted that, in contrast to historians, “social scientists are satisfied with rough descriptions of time periods and typologies” in their quest to establish models that are of little historical use (Duyvestyn 2007). Rapoport’s model made sense for the field of terrorism studies because it spoke to its established modes of enquiry and output. He demonstrated scant engagement with either historical primary sources (those produced in the period under investigation) or historical literature. One could of course argue that Rapoport formulated the theory after a career of researching and teaching the subject; his “source” was his vast knowledge accumulated over decades. On the other hand, as a historian, I would like to see more primary evidence to support a theory, especially when that theory has come to exert such influence over academic study for two decades. While Charles Townshend has lauded the model for its “highly learned, lucid, and cogent analysis” (Townshend 2016, 225), its widespread adoption owes much to the social scientific orientation of terrorism studies.

The most surprising aspect of the waves model, at least for this historian, is the apparent belief that it can *predict the future*. In 2004, Rapoport proposed that “if the pattern of its three predecessors is relevant [the fourth wave] could disappear by 2025” (Rapoport 2004). He repeated this prediction in 2013 and 2017 (Rapoport 2013, 2017). In a 2021 article, Rapoport implied that a fifth far-right wave had begun; he even wrote about the fourth “Religious” in the past tense (Rapoport 2021). Rather confusingly, the 2022 *Waves of Global Terrorism* refuted the claim that recent acts of right-wing terrorism heralded the coming of a new wave (Rapoport 2022). The reader may not share my scepticism and no less a historian than Hugh Trevor-Roper once allowed for the proposition of “conditional prophecy” in history (Tosh 2000, 198). And Rapoport’s model has encouraged terrorism studies scholars to look for portents of a new wave (Auger 2020; Byman 2023; Collins 2021; Gallagher 2017; Hess, Dolan, and Falkenstein 2020; Kaplan 2008). Such prognostication aims to direct scholarly attention to the far right and to raise awareness more broadly of this growing threat (Auger 2020; Collins 2021). We should stop to consider the extent to which Rapoport’s prediction of a fifth wave is a self-fulfilling prophecy; because we *expect* to see signs of a new wave in the early 2020s, we look for them and we find them. At the very least, I wonder whether the model’s usefulness really does extend to *prophecy*. I am not alone in my doubts: Gupta has argued that “The wave theory ... is largely devoid of predictive capability [because] [s]ocietal events do not behave with the regular oscillation of a trigonometric function” (Gupta 2011a, 39). And in 1999 Rapoport himself counselled that despite the dogged persistence of terrorism throughout recent history, “[t]he past will never be a conclusive guide to future,” even if it is “worth consulting” (Rapoport 1999, 509).

Further problems arise when we attempt to apply the waves model to history. It requires us to tie the past to a Procrustean bed, slicing off the parts that do not conform to the theory. When messy reality meets this neatly-formulated model, contradictions emerge, even within Rapoport’s own reasoning. I outline a handful here.

- (a) *On the names of the waves*: Rapoport originally named the waves after the “common predominant energy” that drove them. Yet in 2022 he stated that he labelled the first wave the “Anarchist” wave, because in that period, “the public normally described all terrorists as anarchists” (Rapoport 2022, 107). While that may have been the case, this was the first time that Rapoport had mentioned the importance of public perceptions in the naming of the waves. Are the waves named after their “common predominant energy” or public impressions of the violence?
- (b) *On how waves end*: in most versions of the model, Rapoport argues that waves come to an end largely due to “[r]esistance, political concessions, and changes in the perception of generations” (Rapoport 2004, 48), with the final factor seemingly most important. However, in 2022 he wrote that the “demise of each of the first three waves was associated with important international events” (Rapoport 2022, 266). Thus, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 brought an end to the Anarchist wave, the end of European imperialism closed the Anti-Colonial wave, and the collapse of the USSR ended the New Left wave. Rapoport had not previously attributed the end of the waves to a specific happening. Of course, it makes sense that anti-colonial terrorists would halt their campaign once the empires retreated. But why should the Versailles treaty bring an end to anarchist terrorism? Rapoport went on

to write that in the first three waves, “terrorists were either defeated or received enough of their original demands to stop fighting” (Rapoport 2022, 266). What happened to the all-important generational factor?

- (c) *On the nature of the second wave*: Rapoport included anti-colonial violence in his theory of modern terrorism. Interviewed in 2022 about his book, the inclusion of anti-colonial fighters seemed less certain. When asked by the interviewer (Kaplan) whether the second wave was better described as “insurgent” or “terrorist”, Rapoport picked the former. “But there were terrorists there,” he added (Utrecht University 2022). If second-wave anti-colonial violence is better categorised as insurgency, its inclusion in the model needs further consideration, even if one accepts that insurgency and terrorism are not mutually exclusive.
- (d) *On the duration of a wave*: Rapoport modified the model from its first elaboration in 1999. The most significant change related to the third “New Left” wave. Rapoport admitted in 2002 that this wave was “somewhat abbreviated”, meaning it did not readily conform to the generational cycle of other waves (Rapoport 2002). This caveat is missing from other versions of the model. In fact, in his 2004 essay, he wrote that “the first three waves lasted about a generation each” (Rapoport 2004, 48). By 2022, Rapoport had extended the third wave into the 1990s. Yet in the same work he admitted that the wave was effectively over within fifteen years of its beginning (Rapoport 2022, 180). Do waves last for a generation or not?
- (e) *On the beginning and end of successive waves*: according to Rapoport’s 2017 essay, waves “overlap each other in time and space” (Rapoport 2017, 8). This means that terrorist groups from different waves may coexist, at least in a short crossover period while one wave dissipates and its successor swells. However, in the conclusion to his book, Rapoport dismissed the prospect of an emergent right-wing fifth wave because “the new [right-wing] terror in Europe emerged during the Fourth Wave’s last decade, a process that has never produced a new wave before” (Rapoport 2022: 305). In the same conclusion, he wrote that “[w]aves overlap in the sense that during one’s decline, a new one [emerges]” (Rapoport 2022: 270). Do waves overlap or not?

When one considers that Rapoport attempted to contain more than a century of global history in a systematic explanatory model, it is unsurprising that contradictions emerged – contradictions that even the model’s creator seemed unable to resolve.

Rapoport-enthusiast Kaplan has praised the waves theory because it is “is history based and takes history, and historical development, seriously” (Kaplan 2011, 102). I disagree. There is little in the model that a historian would recognise as bearing the hallmarks of their discipline, namely empirical research and an emphasis on nuance and context. Even the development of a model itself, no less one that seems to explain more than a century’s worth of history, would appear unhistorical to most historians. The widespread adoption of Rapoport’s theory in the field of terrorism studies owed more to the context into which it emerged, the receptiveness of a field to such models, and the seemingly simple answers it offered to a complex problem.

## Rapoport's generational approach to terrorism

Rapoport placed the notion of generational change at the heart of the four waves model. He used generational turnover to explain the origin, duration, and end of each wave. Furthermore, as noted above, with this process of change apparently continuous, the generational approach offers the prospect of predicting future waves.

The model contends that each terrorist wave begins with a significant political event that exerts an indelible impact upon a global group of young people during their "impressionable years" (scholarship on generations generally understands that these impressionable years lie between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five [Rintala 1979, 93; Braungart and Braungart 1986, 215; Carpinì 1989, 21; Andolina 2023, 2]). This "trigger event" is of such significance, and resonates so strongly with this youthful community, that it constitutes a historical turning point, creating a cleavage between generations (broadly speaking, the "older" and "younger" generations). For the younger generation, the watershed moment shapes an identity based on hopes for political or social change soon. When these hopes are subsequently dashed, some members of this generation turn to terrorism. As the watershed moment has global resonance, the young generation it creates is a global one; this fact that ensures that terrorism in each wave is a global phenomenon. Waves come to an end when this generation has matured, having fought its battles for good or ill. The energy or momentum of the wave subsequently dissipates. Yet, in the death throes of each wave, a new generation-forming event occurs, once again transforming the outlooks of some young people around the world, shaping a new generation, and sowing the seeds of the next wave of terrorism. Generational waves thus explain the ebb and flow of terrorism over the last 150 years.

Rapoport had a long-held interest in generations. In 1970, he authored a chapter on generational change in America. He did not address terrorism specifically, though he did refer to the susceptibility of adolescents to "the most violent aggressive impulses" that can manifest in violent political action (Rapoport 1970, 183; the chapter reappeared the following year in Rapoport's *Assassination & Terrorism* [Rapoport 1971]). Rapoport wrote this chapter at a time of great popular and academic interest in the idea of the "generation gap" (Bengtson 1970; Carlsson and Karlsson 1970; Thomas 1974; Troll 1970) and, especially, the importance of the adolescent years in forming generational identity (Jaeger 1985, 279). One contemporary scholar even suggested that generations could form like a "wave" (Troll 1970, 204)! This interest in generations was particularly strong in America (there was in fact a longer European tradition of generational scholarship). Rapoport posed himself as a pioneer in the American study of generations (Rapoport 2017, 4). It is reasonable to speculate that the environment in which he began his career in the 1960s influenced his interest in generations. In fact, Rapoport illustrated the difference between generations with a reference to his own experience of trying to explain life during the 1960s to the seemingly uncomprehending later generations (Rapoport 2004, 69n12; 2013, 203n14). For him, generational change and generational difference was tangible.

Scholarship on generations broadly comprises two concepts. Firstly, the "positivist" school conceives of a generation as an age cohort that, thanks to the coincidence of birth, experiences the same political, social, and cultural events as it matures. This common experience is the basis of a generation. Biological origins and the importance of "life-

course development” ensure that generations succeed each other “with clock-work regularity” (Braungart and Braungart 1986, 206; Carpini 1989, 17; Jaeger 1985, 277). Positivists thus perceive a strong connection between the ageing process and generational turnover, with each generation lasting about thirty years (Carpini 1989, 16).

Secondly, the “romantic-metaphysical/historical” school holds that generations do not automatically self-generate through birth. Rather, a shared experience or rapid social change is necessary to nurture a generational consciousness. This consciousness is of paramount importance for, without it, there is no generation. Depending on the regularity with generations are rendered sensitive to their existence, a generation may form every 100 years, every thirty years, or even every year (Bengtson 1970, 12–13; Caballero and Baigorri 2019, 335; Carpini 1989, 17–18). According to Karl Mannheim, when these generations become an active force in politics or society, they form a “political generation” (sometimes called a “social generation”). Political generations can reject the status quo and attempt to overturn or reform it (Braungart and Braungart 1986, 217; Fulbrook 2011, 7).

Rapoport’s theory of generations mixes the two models outlined above: a significant event or period of change gives rise to a political generation (as set out by the romantic-historical school), while generations succeed each other thanks to the biological ageing process (as set out by the positivist school). To combine aspects of both schools is not necessarily problematic. In fact, there seem to be few clear guidelines about how to define a generation in the social scientific sources (Thorpe and Inglis 2019, 46). Nonetheless, problems arise when we interrogate the theoretical and evidentiary foundations of the Rapoport’s generational model. For a theory that has gained such traction in the field, it engages little with generational scholarship and draws on scant empirical evidence. This is not to say that terrorism is *not* a generational phenomenon. However, Rapoport’s model is not sufficiently theorised or evidenced to warrant confidence in such an assertion.

The length of a generation is an important feature of the waves model because, “the life cycle of a wave lasts *at least* a generation” (Rapoport 2004, 46, *my italics*). Generally, Rapoport claimed that waves last between forty and forty-five years (Rapoport 2002, 2; Rapoport 2017, 4). What prompted him to settle on this length of time? In his 2022 book, he mentioned the work of José Ortega y Gasset and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr as influential in considering generations and history. Rapoport agreed with Ortega that the generation is “the pivot responsible for the movements of historical evolution” (Rapoport 2017, 11n4). However, Ortega determined that a human life cycle was made up of a series of generations, each lasting *fifteen* years (Caballero and Baigorri 2019, 336). He argued that in each person’s life, age thirty to forty-five was the period of “creation or conflict”, while the subsequent fifteen years (up to the age of sixty) were those of “dominance and command” (Marías 1979, 90; Caballero and Baigorri 2019, 336). Might we situate a person’s terrorist activity within one of these periods? It is difficult to say because Rapoport did not tackle the theory nor relate his own generational theory to that of Ortega. In any case, if we take Ortega’s two periods, they fall at least a decade short of Rapoport’s forty- to forty-five-year generation. The same is true of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr’s work, another scholar whom Rapoport cited. Schlesinger Jr determined that generations effectively last for thirty years. Members of each generation spend the first fifteen years working *towards* political power, and the latter fifteen *exercising* that power. This process causes the oscillation of political generations every *fifteen* years (Schlesinger 1986). As with Ortega’s work,

Rapoport left unexplained how Schlesinger Jr's concept relates to the waves model's forty-year generations.

Consideration of the geographical and temporal reach of the waves model prompts further questions. Is the process of generation formation uniform across *all* societies and *all* time periods? Likewise, is the rhythm of an individual's life-course uniform across *all* societies and *all* time periods? Are the "impressionable years" of adolescence and early adulthood a fixed point in *all* human lives, regardless of geographic and temporal location? (Martin Rintala in fact suggested that in non-Western societies undergoing rapid social change, political generations could last less than a decade [Rintala 1979, 93]). How does life expectancy affect the duration a generation? Arthur Schlesinger's Sr's 1949 analysis of generations recognised that improvements in diet and medicine had led to longer life expectancy in the US; generations had "lengthened" as history progressed (Schlesinger 1949). In the case of France, life expectancy in 1900 was forty-five years; a century later, it had increased to 79 years (Ined 2020). How does the waves model account for the fact that an age cohort in the late nineteenth century likely did not live as long as an age cohort in the twentieth century? How might this disparity in life expectancy affect the length of a generation? One cannot find the answers to these questions in Rapoport's work. Even in his 2022 book, he hastily passed over generational theory in the introduction, and it barely reappeared in the subsequent chapters. In fact, in determining the length of a generation – and thus a wave – he paid as much attention to generational scholarship as to the Bible.

The generational make-up of a wave, as set out in the waves model, is not clear. Do waves comprise one age cohort – a *single group* of people – aged between seventeen and twenty-five at the time of the trigger event (who age as the wave progresses)? If this is the case, the wave ends when, after forty years, this cohort has grown too old to continue the struggle. Or do waves comprise *several* age cohorts, where younger recruits replace preceding cohorts as they age, in a process of renewal that maintains the momentum of the wave? In his 2022 interview with Kaplan, Rapoport asserted that the first age cohort in a wave – the one that experienced the trigger event – remains active throughout the *whole* wave: "when people who are born roughly at the same time [take political action] and when they are over forty years in action they simply disappear, because they are too old and a new generation doesn't follow the same purposes" (Utrecht University 2022). Terrorists are active throughout their lives and their decision to retire – in their sixties? – brings the wave to an end. Kaplan agreed with Rapoport, saying: "The generation theory is apt in a lot of ways, that when you're young you can be a true believer, as you get older you become disillusioned and by the time you hit say fifty you look back and say well we've made no progress, I have no family, I have no home, I have nothing, I've wasted my life ... you rarely meet an old terrorist" (Utrecht University 2022). There are other indications in Rapoport's work that each wave depends on a *single* cohort, not least the claim that waves fail when the "dreams that inspire fathers lose their attractiveness for the son" (Rapoport 2003a, 37) or that "when a generation gets older its energy dissipates" (Rapoport 2022, 7). This implies that the wave relies on a single group of people who all experienced the trigger event in their impressionable years.

Rapoport contradicted this argument elsewhere. In 1999, he claimed that "[t]he only demonstrable common characteristic of active terrorists is their youth; very few reach the

age of 30" (Rapoport 1999, 504). How can this be the case if, as outlined above, the duration of a wave is tied so closely to the life cycle of a single age cohort? It suggests that each wave involves *multiple* age cohorts; if it did not then a wave should last little more than a decade.

If terrorists are generally young, and waves comprise more than one age cohort, then are multiple trigger events necessary to sensitise younger people to the terrorist cause? This question is particularly pertinent to the second "Anti-Colonial" wave because most terrorist activity in this wave occurred *at least twenty-five years* after its trigger in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Rapoport noted that the Second World War "reinforced and enlarged the implications of Versailles" (Rapoport 2004, 53), adding that this war was "a second major political event" (Rapoport 2022, 114) during the second wave. He allowed for the fact, too, that secondary events such as this can "revitalize terrorist confidence" (Rapoport 2022, 180). Why is this secondary event less significant than one that occurred nearly thirty years before the majority of the wave's terrorists took up arms? The answer is that Rapoport chose to fit the history to the model, rather than vice versa. Secondary events and possible "subgenerational differences" (Carpini 1989, 25) become inconvenient factors to be explained away. By 2022, so closely tied to Rapoport's thinking was the generational framework that he was unable to account for a major historical anomaly in the model: the persistence of groups *across* waves. When Kaplan asked Rapoport to explain why some groups outlasted one or several waves, the founder of the waves model replied: "I'm not sure I have the answer to that question and I think it has to do with generations, as a new one emerges, the old one is disappearing but they overlap" (Utrecht University 2022). This response stemmed from the problems inherent to the model.

In the end, it is difficult to fit the complexity of historical reality into a theory of generations (Andolina 2023). Historians have rarely used the approach; it remains what one historian has called a "hidden factor in historical experience" (Fulbrook 2011, v). Its application is best suited to narrow objects of study that lend themselves to practical investigation. To identify global generations across much of the modern period demands a huge amount of empirical research into multiple international case studies. Yet generational studies have also cast doubt on the extent to which the theory is empirically testable (Rudolph, Rauvola, and Zacher 2018). Julián Marías, a student of Ortega, noted: "The empirical determination of generations within a society is difficult and requires investigations that are rigorous and extremely cautious" (Marías 1979, 90). Moreover, the grander the theory, the greater the difficulty encountered (Jaeger 1985, 286). It is unsurprising that the four waves model collapses so completely under scrutiny. Rapoport's theory is unfalsifiable for its relationship with the scholarly literature is obscure and its grounding in empirical research virtually absent. A generational approach to terrorism may be valid. But it requires at least a consideration of how the course of people's lives develop, how this relates to a cohort-specific or generational experience, and an appreciation of the influence of socio-political trends on actors. To apply the model globally and over a period of 150 years would require that this broader consideration involve many case studies drawn from diverse locations and periods.

## Conclusion

This article was under review when David C. Rapoport passed away in February 2024. Rapoport made a huge contribution to terrorism studies and my engagement with his model demonstrates his continued influence over the field. It is a great shame that I will not have the opportunity to enter into dialogue with him.

First mooted in 1999, and revived in the aftermath of 9/11, the four waves model provided a quick and straightforward guide to the history of terrorism for academic and non-academic audiences. The model's social scientific framework, orthodox approach, and apparent mastery of the history of the subject (in the apparent absence of other historical work) further rendered audiences receptive. Yet sustained critical examination reveals contradictions, flaws, and weaknesses in the model. The more one interrogates the waves theory, the greater the confusion it causes - and the more it caused this historian to throw up their hands in exasperation. Rapoport did not resolve the model's problems in his numerous publications since 1999 and the list of unanswered questions has only grown.

I propose neither modifications to "fix" the model nor extra waves or sub-waves. I do not propose an alternative model; to replace one model with another is unsatisfactory for a historian. I do not offer an alternative theory with which to comprehend 150 years of history. The solution to understanding the history of terrorism is to engage in genuine historical study. This means undertaking fine-grained, case-specific research into terrorism, the contexts in which it emerged, the ways in which it operated, and the reasons for which it faded away. It requires a focus on context and nuance and painstaking research into the archival record. Terrorism studies scholars have come round to this position with regard to recent forms of terrorism: for example, the essays in Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan's 2009 volume demonstrate the complex factors that lead to terrorist disengagement (and Audrey Kurth Cronin even suggests that a difference between generations may be one of these factors [Bjørgo and Horgan 2009; Cronin 2009, 58]). As Parker and Sitter observe, rather than waves of terrorism, "there are simply numerous situations around the world where the means, motive, and opportunity to seek political change through violence have given rise to terrorist actors" (Parker and Sitter 2016, 211). These situations demand our attention because it is only through the close study of them that we may comprehend the recourse to terrorist violence. As inconvenient as it may be to some scholars in the field, there are no quick fixes, no rules, and no models for explaining terrorism in the past.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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