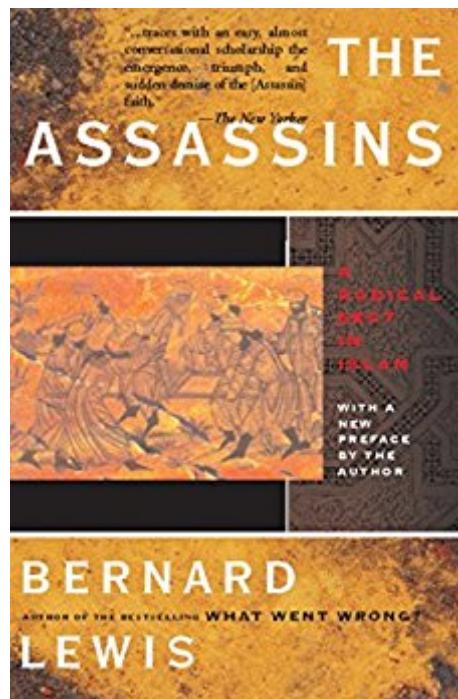


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The Assassins



Synopsis

The Assassins is a comprehensive, readable, and authoritative account of history's first terrorists. An offshoot of the Ismaili Shi'ite sect of Islam, the Assassins were the first group to make systematic use of murder as a political weapon. Established in Iran and Syria in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, they aimed to overthrow the existing Sunni order in Islam and replace it with their own. They terrorized their foes with a series of dramatic murders of Islamic leaders, as well as of some of the Crusaders, who brought their name and fame back to Europe. Professor Lewis traces the history of this radical group, studying its teachings and its influence on Muslim thought. Particularly insightful in light of the rise of the terrorist attacks in the U.S. and in Israel, this account of the Assassins--whose name is now synonymous with politically motivated murderers--places recent events in historical perspective and sheds new light on the fanatic mind.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It's probably a fair guess that sales of Bernard Lewis's "The Assassins" were a lot slower before 9/11 than they are today. Many who purchased this book over the past year probably did so hoping that it would help provide some insight into Osama bin Laden and the terrorist network he heads. This book doesn't really do that, although that's no reflection on what Lewis has actually

accomplished here. He wrote "The Assassins" more than a third of a century ago, and there are very significant differences between the Nizari Ismaili Order and the hate-filled fanatics of Al-Qaeda. But although this book won't help you understand what makes Osama bin Laden and his acolytes tick, it will introduce you to an important and little-known chunk of medieval Islamic history in which a lot of intriguing historical personalities play starring or supporting roles. This should be more than reward enough. The group we call the Assassins are more accurately known as the Nizari Ismailis, an offshoot sect of Shi'i Islam. Their sect still survives today in the followers of the Aga Khan, whose communities from India to southern California reflect a progressive and humane face of Islam. From the late eleventh to thirteenth centuries, however, the Nizaris' struggle for survival in the midst of their more numerous and militarily powerful Sunni enemies led them to develop a form of defensive terrorism that proved remarkably effective in ensuring their security for almost two hundred years. In the end, however, the sect's lurid reputation proved its undoing -- for the Mongol khans ultimately concluded that their own safety could only be secured by the Assassins' extermination. There are some similarities between the Assassins' modus operandi and that of today's Al-Qaeda terrorists.

Lewis writes in the introduction that his publishers and reviewers in recent years have sensationalized the book by linking the study to modern Islamic terrorism. What emerges instead is a straightforward and highly competent historical summary of a particular Ismaili offshoot of Shiism also known as Nizaris after the belief that descendants of the elder son Nizar of the 8th Fatimid Caliph al-Mustansir of Egypt were the rightful line of succession. That there were no surviving family members of the line led to the belief in the "hidden imam" who would reveal himself at the end of time. In 1089 Hassan-i Sabbah, a Persian Ismaili, who established Alamut, a castle just south of the Caspian Sea as the Assassin base, and employed a pattern of terrorism by sending out his fida'i (pl. fidayeen) to commit attacks against Seljuk and Abbasid alike, and is credited with masterminding some 50 assassinations. His dynasty continues in a similar mold, though with less frequent assassinations, expanding to further castle freeholds, eventually becoming a normalized kingdom under Jalal an-Din Hassan (1211-1221) who gives up assassination as a political tool and moved towards reconciliation with Sunni practices. The final link in the chain is his grandson, Rukn al Din. Rather than a glorious finale in battle, the Assassin leader reacts to the Mongol Hulegu's demands for dismantling his settlements by appeasement, and in the end Hulegu has him and his followers killed in 1256. Meanwhile in Syria the cult gains a following around Homs and Aleppo, drawn from other Ismaili offshoots such as Alawites and Druze.

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