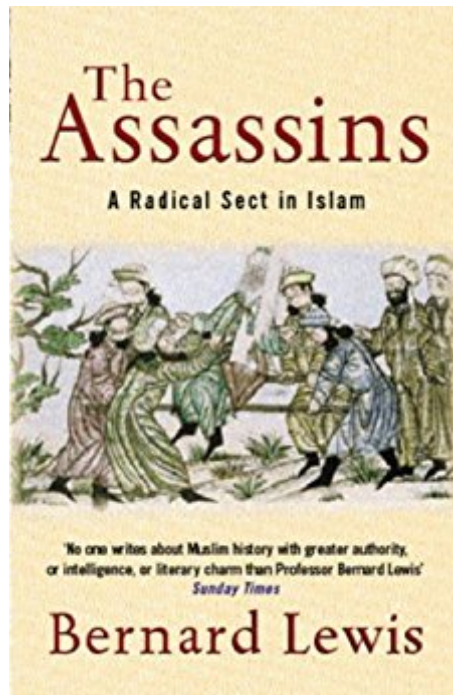




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The Assassins: A Radical Sect In Islam



Synopsis

The history of an extremist Islamic sect in the 11th-12th centuries whose terrorist methods gave the English language a new word: assassin. The word 'Assassin' was brought back from Syria by the Crusaders, and in time acquired the meaning of murderer. Originally it was applied to the members of a Muslim religious sect - a branch of the Ismailis, and the followers of a leader known as the Old Man of the Mountain. Their beliefs and their methods made them a by-word for both fanaticism and terrorism in Syria and Persia in the 11th and 12th centuries, and the subject of a luxuriant growth of myth and legend. In this book, Bernard Lewis begins by tracing the development of these legends in medieval and modern Europe and the gradual percolation of accurate knowledge concerning the Ismailis. He then examines the origins and activities of the sect, on the basis of contemporary Persian and Arabic sources, and against the background of Middle Eastern and Islamic history. In a final chapter he discusses some of the political, social and economic implications of the Ismailis, and examines the significance of the Assassins in the history of revolutionary and terrorist movements.

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Customer Reviews

Great book by Bernard Lewis.

Informative but not as interesting as other books by the same author

Bernard Lewis has a long history of providing excellent reviews of major themes of Islam to Western readers. This is another such example. Lewis produced this volume in 1967. His trademarks in scholarship, including a focus on primary sources and a deep knowledge of the language and history of the region, allows him to create a vivid picture of the religious sect in Muslim history, weeding out the myths that have surrounded the Assassins since the 11th century. The Assassins were a radical offshoot of Shiite Islam called Ismailis. While never a conquering or crusading force, they were at various times able to influence and direct events, mainly out of fear and trepidation they caused in the various rulers around them. Their main objective was overturning the existing Sunni regimes, and they did so through radical fanaticism of their followers and a deep belief in the traditions of sacrifice and martyrdom in Shiite beliefs. Lewis has produced a tidy little volume that is well worth the afternoon it takes to read this book. I highly recommend it.

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. In

each case, terrorists assigned to carry out missions for the group did not concern themselves with escape and expected to die whether their mission succeeded or not - a fact that added greatly to the apprehension of their enemies and their own mystique. Each group treated acts of terrorist violence as having a sacramental component - the Assassins always killed their victims up close and personal, choosing to use knives rather than poison or arrows, much as Mohammed Atta and his confederates observed certain rituals of personal hygiene and dress before carrying out their terrorist acts. The young men selected to carry out the actual terrorist operations in each case believed that their sacrifice for the sake of the cause would open the gates of paradise. And each group answered to the commands of a single leader, who styled himself as both a religious teacher and a political and military strategist. But there the similarities end. Indeed, after reading Lewis's account, the most striking thing about the medieval Assassins is how much more civilized they seem to have been than the terrorists of Al-Qaeda. Their use of political assassination as a weapon was both highly focused and thoroughly pragmatic. Because they lacked the military strength to defeat their powerful enemies (primarily the Great Seljuks) in open combat, it made sense instead to strike at their opponents' command structure. Mass slaughter of faraway civilians for its own sake would have been incomprehensible to them. The Nizaris could plausibly have viewed their use of political assassination as both just and humane. They had legitimate grievances, for their community frequently suffered pogroms at the hands of their Sunni enemies that echoed the atrocities inflicted on the Jews of western Europe during this same period. By striking directly at the political, religious or military figures who had attacked their own communities, the Assassins could punish a current enemy, deter Sunni political and religious leaders from future attacks, and win the security they sought without the necessity of killing masses of their enemy's rank-and-file soldiery or risking the lives of more than a handful of their own members. As Lewis points out, the Assassins were also masters of psychological warfare. They sometimes planted "sleeper" agents in the households of prospective enemies just in the event they might ultimately be needed. These agents did not always have to actually strike in order to achieve deterrence - a knife or a note left by an enemy's bedside while he was sleeping served to emphasize his vulnerability and was often sufficient to achieve the Assassins' political ends. (Sometimes, in fact, the Assassins did not even need to plant sleeper agents to accomplish their objectives - they might simply bribe an otherwise loyal member of their enemy's household to leave the note or the knife, thereby accomplishing the same effect without the need of even committing one of their own personnel.) Lewis tackles and persuasively debunks most of the popular legends about the Assassins, such as the claim that their Grand Master secured the fanatical loyalty of his young followers by drugging them with narcotics

and then conveying them for short periods to an artificial "paradise" of his own creation that was staffed by sensuous and accommodating young women. Lewis instead finds that a more straightforward (and plausible) explanation for the willingness of the Assassins' fida'is to offer themselves up for suicidal missions: religious passion and commitment to the Nizari community. Lewis's short (140 pages) and elegant account will thus introduce you to an intriguing period of medieval Islamic history, one populated by a collection of memorable figures - the brilliant and ascetic Assassin leader Hassan i-Sabah, the real founder of the Order; the "Old Man of the Mountain," Sinan, who commanded the Order's Syrian branch during the most critical years of the Crusades; Saladin, who was at different times both a target and an ally of the Assassins; Hulegu, the grandson of Genghis Khan, who finally succeeded where the Seljuks had failed, rooting out the Order from its mountaintop fortresses and then ordering mass exterminations of its communicants; and last but not least, Marco Polo, to whose vivid tales can be ascribed much of the lingering fascination that continues to surround the Assassins.

Puts the September 11 terrorist attacks in perspective. Somewhat dry account; does not repeat the lurid tales which have been spun about the Assassins. Needs to be combined with Amin Maalouf's "The Crusades through Arab Eyes" for a fuller understanding.

Eye Opening Book about the dangers of Islam. It is easy to see why the Shia and Sunni hate and kill each other.

This is not a bad book, but it is too short, fragmented, with few footnotes, and seems like a collection of thoughts more than a 'scholarly' book. Keeping that in mind, it gets 2 stars. You can also surf the web and get the same information.

This is a teacher's book - sometimes pretty uneasy to read. Reminds me a couple of guys at university who "understood themselves" Don't get me wrong I am commenting the way it's written here. Otherwise it's a pretty good catalogue of facts. Buy it if you want to be documented. Don't buy it if you want to be documented AND have (little) fun reading

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