



The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam

Bernard Lewis

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The Assassins is the most comprehensive, readable, and authoritative account of history's first terrorists. A fanatical sect of Islam, first mentioned in accounts of the Crusades, the Assassins were the first group to make planned, systematic use of murder as a political weapon. According to Medieval historians, and to such famous travelers as Marco Polo, the Assassins lived in the Levant Mountains and were ruled by a mysterious "Old Man of the Mountain" who housed his followers in a paradisaical castle and sent them on murderous expeditions to visit rival princes and later imams.

One of "the hazards of the East," this group struck fear in the hearts of Crusaders and mainstream Muslims in and around Phoenicia, where tales abounded of princes felled in the night by Assassin daggers and of the Old Man's secret powers over his followers. (The name "assassin" comes from the Arabic "hashish," the narcotic effects of which were already known to Medieval Muslims.) According to Brocardus, a 14th-century German priest, "The Assassins...sell themselves, are thirsty for human blood, kill the innocent for a price, and care nothing for either life or salvation. Like the devil, they transfigure themselves into angels of light, by imitating the gestures, garments, languages, customs and acts of various nations and peoples; thus, hidden in sheep's clothing, they suffer death as soon as they are recognized."

In *The Assassins*, Bernard Lewis traces the history of this radical Islamic sect from the 13th century to the modern day. He studies the teachings of both the Assassins and their parent sect, the Ismailis, the spread of their ideas, and their continued influence on Muslim thought. He also traces the etymology of the word "assassin," which today is a common noun meaning one who kills by stealth or treachery, whose victim is a public figure, and whose motive is fanaticism or greed. Particularly insightful in light of the recent rise of Muslim fundamentalism, this readable, factual account of the group that lent its name to politically motivated murder places recent events in historical perspective and sheds new light on the fanatic mind.

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