

A haunting figure: The hostage through the ages

Irène Herrmann and Daniel Palmieri*

Dr Irène Herrmann is Lecturer at the University of Geneva; she is a specialist in Swiss and in Russian history. Daniel Palmieri is Historical Research Officer at the International Committee of the Red Cross; his work deals with ICRC history and history of conflicts.

Abstract:

Despite the recurrence of hostage-taking through the ages, the subject of hostages themselves has thus far received little analysis. Classically, there are two distinct types of hostages: voluntary hostages, as was common practice during the Ancien Régime of pre-Revolution France, when high-ranking individuals handed themselves over to benevolent jailers as guarantors for the proper execution of treaties; and involuntary hostages, whose seizure is a typical procedure in all-out war where individuals are held indiscriminately and without consideration, like living pawns, to gain a decisive military upper hand. Today the status of “hostage” is a combination of both categories taken to extremes. Though chosen for pecuniary, symbolic or political reasons, hostages are generally mistreated. They are in fact both the reflection and the favoured instrument of a major moral dichotomy: that of the increasing globalization of European and American principles and the resultant opposition to it — an opposition that plays precisely on the western adherence to human and democratic values. In the eyes of his countrymen, the hostage thus becomes the very personification of the innocent victim, a troubling and haunting image.

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In the annals of the victims of war, hostages occupy a special place. First, they account for only a very small number of the persons affected by armed violence.¹ Although as many as several hundred people may be taken hostage — as occurred, for instance, during the 1991 Gulf War, or in the Japanese Embassy in

* The original version of this article is available in French at: <<http://www.icrc.org/fre/revue>>.

Lima in 1996/1997, or more recently at a school in North Ossetia in September 2004 — this is an exception; in most cases they can be counted in single figures. Secondly, the interest aroused by them is in inverse proportion to their number, for even a single hostage becomes the focus of attention and mobilizes public opinion. Is this because hostage-taking, by its very brutality, holds some sort of strange fascination? Is it because of the high degree of innocence of the victim, often accentuated by factors such as age, nationality or profession that underscore their non-involvement in the events that motivated their capture? Or is it because the injustice done to the individual weighs upon the collective subconscious like a latent threat to one and all? Or could it even be because of the tragic end that unfortunately awaits some hostages and gives them the status of martyrs?

Whatever the answer, despite the attention he attracts the hostage himself remains a little-known figure. This can be seen in the legal field, where it is a paradoxical result of the wealth of descriptions of hostage-taking that are found in national legislation and international instruments but fail to give any definition of a hostage *stricto sensu*.² As a cause or as an effect of the above, the history of the hostage as such has largely remained untraced. Indeed, this category of victims, which has been recorded from time immemorial, has given rise to only very rare monographs. Those which do exist are basically centred on ancient history and the Middle Ages; there appears to be no historical study of the problem over the long term.³

Perhaps this lack of precise definition should be attributed to a semantic ambiguity leading to differing interpretations, for whereas some linguists see the term “hostage” as directly derived from the Latin word *hospes*,⁴ meaning “host”, others hold that it stems from the term *obses*, related to the verb *obsidere* — “to besiege” — and thus literally to mean “the one who is kept in sight”. These two origins confer different if not divergent connotations on the

1 This article discusses hostage-taking only in situations of armed conflict. It distinguishes hostage-taking from kidnapping, the latter being motivated solely by private and financial considerations.

2 Thus no definition of “hostage” (nor in fact of “hostage-taking”) is given by the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, nor by their two Additional Protocols of 1977. The International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages, signed in New York on 18 December 1979, defines the hostage-taker as “§1. Any person who seizes or detains and threatens to kill, to injure or to continue to detain another person (hereinafter referred to as the “hostage”) in order to compel a third party, namely, a State, an international intergovernmental organization, a natural or juridical person, or a group of persons, to do or abstain from doing any act as an explicit or implicit condition for the release of the hostage.” However, it should be noted that by virtue of its Article 12, the Convention does not apply to acts of hostage-taking committed in time of armed conflict, for which the Geneva Conventions make it an obligation for the States Parties to extradite or prosecute the alleged perpetrator.

3 A gap in historical literature which even historians themselves point out (see Philippe Contamine, *Autobiographie d'un prisonnier-otage : Philippe de Vigneulles au château de Chauvency*, Sylvie Caucanas, Rémy Cazals, Pascal Payen (dir.), *Contacts entre peuples et cultures. Les prisonniers de guerre dans l'Histoire*, Éditions Privat, Toulouse, 2003, p. 39).

4 In old French, the word “hostage” meant lodging or dwelling place; and the expression “prendre en ostage” originally meant to take into the house the person who is to serve as surety for the execution of a contract. It later came to mean the person himself, the “guest” that one keeps, Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, Vol. VI, Le Robert, Paris, 1990, p. 1012.

concept of “hostage”, which mirrors the classic dichotomy between *voluntary* and *involuntary* hostages.⁵

This distinction is not necessarily rigid: the two categories of hostages are often superimposed, both in actual fact and in time. Nonetheless, it offers a valuable analytical framework for anyone seeking to retrace the history of hostage status, its function, usage and evolution over the centuries. Above all, the distinction helps to shed light on the changes in the status of hostages since the end of the twentieth century, when hostage-taking seems to be characterized by preposterous motivations and demands, in contrast to the more reasonable approach followed since ancient times.

Voluntary hostages

The concept of “hostage”, as understood in the French language since the eleventh century,⁶ originally had a specific narrow interpretation. The hostage was essentially conceived of as a guarantee *offered* to a victorious enemy — or even an ally — as surety for the execution of a promise or treaty, or as a symbol of submission on the part of the vanquished. This practice was already customary in ancient Egypt, where high-ranking hostages served as pledges of the loyalty of vassal kingdoms.⁷ Throughout history, membership of the highest social classes was *conditio sine qua non* for acceptance as the guarantee for a pact. The procedure was adopted and developed by the Greeks, for whom recourse to hostage-taking also served to impose political views on others. This is demonstrated by the case of Philip II of Macedonia, whose presence as a hostage in Thebes was intended to prevent the Macedonians from taking up hostile positions against that city.⁸ The Romans too later used this method, both to their benefit and to their detriment. Moreover, the case of the Roman general Aetius, who was given as a hostage in his youth first to the Visigoths and then to the Huns, shows how this practice transcended the division between “civilized” and “barbarian” cultures.

The Middle Ages is not lacking in famous examples of this continuing custom, beginning with the burghers of Calais who, in 1347, offered themselves as hostages to Edward III in exchange for sparing their city from destruction. Count Jean d'Angoulême, delivered into the hands of the English in 1412 by the Treaty of Buzançais, was to spend thirty-three years held hostage by them. In

5 See, for example, H. Wayne Elliott, “Hostages or prisoners of war: War crimes at dinner”, *Military Law Review*, No. 149, 1995 (the author speaks of “True Hostages” for voluntary hostages and of “Indirect Hostages” for involuntary ones); Claude Pilloud, “La question des otages et les Conventions de Genève”, *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 378, June 1950; Adam J. Kosto, “L’otage comme vecteur d’échange culturel du IV^e au XV^e siècle”, Sylvie Caucanas, Rémy Cazals, Pascal Payen (dir.), *op. cit.* (note 3).

6 The word appears in 1081 in the epic poem *La Chanson de Roland*.

7 Jonathan F. Vance (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, Denver, Oxford, 2000, p. 81.

8 Pierre Ducrey, *Guerre et guerriers dans la Grèce antique*, Office du Livre, Fribourg, 1985, p. 242.

eastern Europe as well, the giving of hostages was a traditional phenomenon, as evidenced by the life of Jean Kastrioti (known as “Skanderbeg”). Of royal blood, Skanderbeg was handed over at a very young age to the Turks to demonstrate the loyalty of his people vis-à-vis the Sublime Porte, the government of Ottoman Turkey. Raised in the Islamic tradition, Skanderbeg placed his military valour at the service of Sultan Murad II, whose favourite he was until he turned against his former master and became the hero of the fight for Albanian independence.⁹

The practice of voluntary hostages persisted until the eighteenth century. At the end of the War of the Austrian Succession and under the terms of the 1748 Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, hostages from the English nobility accordingly stayed in Paris, on their word of honour, pending the restitution to France of certain of her North American possessions.

The position of the voluntary hostage was often quite similar to that of a guest, true to the meaning of the word “hospes”. Like a guest, voluntary hostages generally enjoyed a pleasant enough life-style similar to that which they had left behind (and sometimes even with considerable freedom of movement), in keeping with their social rank. The fact that most of them came from the nobility explains their often princely treatment. Furthermore, such hostages never really feared for their lives since the very fact that they were handed over voluntarily, according to the code of chivalry, served as sufficient guarantee that the terms would be respected. It is therefore not surprising that bonds were formed between hostages and their captors that could even take the form of friendly relationships over and above cultural differences.¹⁰

From the end of the *Ancien Régime*, the custom of giving voluntary hostages declined, and the few cases that have occurred since are found in colonial history, such as that of the leaders of Haute-Casamance who handed over four of their sons as surety for a peace treaty concluded with France in 1861.¹¹ Since then, the guarantees offered by a vanquished State for the execution of a treaty have generally taken the form of territory rather than voluntary hostages from the high ranks of power. Thus the Treaty of Frankfurt of 10 May 1871 provided for the temporary occupation by Prussian troops of several departments in the north of France pending indemnification for the costs of the war. Similar action had previously been taken both by the Swiss federal army after the Sonderbund War of 1847 and by the Northern troops after the American Civil War of 1861-1865, who occupied territory to ensure compliance with the peace terms imposed upon the vanquished. In all such cases, the resident populations were perceived by themselves and by others as hostages at the mercy of the occupying forces.

9 Writing in the form of a romantic novel, Ismail Kadare portrayed this episode in his work, *Les tambours de la pluie*, Gallimard, Paris, 1979 (in French translation).

10 Franco Cardini, “I captivi cristiani frutto di guerra santa ‘crociata’; nei luoghi santi”, in Giulio Cipollone (ed.), *La Liberazione dei ‘captivi’ tra cristianità e islam. Oltre la crociata e il Jihad. Tolleranza e servizio umanitario*, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Vatican City, 2000, p. 326. This type of relationship differs moreover from the famous Stockholm syndrome experienced after a relatively long period of captivity.

11 Christian Roche, *Histoire de la Casamance. Conquête et résistance: 1850-1920*, Éditions Karthala, Paris, 1985, p. 112.

From *hospes* to *obses*

The emergence of increasingly defined territories, and consequently of (potential) hostage populations, after the end of the *Ancien Régime* signalled a fundamental change in the practice of holding hostages, itself influenced by major transformations. From the turn of the eighteenth century, a fragmented notion of sovereignty as being vested in individual people was superseded by a more collective and unified concept. With the advent of the nation-State, sovereignty was no longer symbolized by a few isolated individuals but by the citizens as a whole. In those conditions, the *giving* of hostages based on mutual recognition — by both the giver and the taker — of the chosen hostage's intrinsic and particular value had outlived its *raison d'être*, for in a nation-State all individuals are theoretically equal and as such have identical and interchangeable value. Conversely, the *taking* of hostages was henceforth held to be fully justified on the grounds that anyone at all could “play” this role.

Conflict itself also evolved. After a brief lull,¹² battles again became more extreme, first during the French Revolution and then under the Napoleon Empire, gradually reaching the intensity of all-out war.¹³ In the course of ever fiercer confrontations, where hostility is the only possible relationship between the adversaries, the voluntary offering of hostages as a guarantee of mutual respect was no longer appropriate. The belligerents themselves recognized the futility of such a practice. Thus the American lawyer Francis Lieber stated in his famous Code prepared during one of the first all-out wars of the modern era, the American Civil War, that: “A hostage is a person accepted as a pledge for the fulfillment of an agreement concluded between belligerents during the war, or in consequence of a war. *Hostages are rare in the present age.*”¹⁴

In this context, it is not difficult to understand why the hostage is generally no longer offered but instead is taken: this evolution corresponds with the development of the law of war¹⁵ and with the affirmation of the ideals deriving from human rights. This means, for one thing, that the status of hostage no longer depends on the consequences of the hostilities, but on the conflict itself. Also and above all, it is no longer a matter of *hospes*, but of *obses*, in other words, of a person under surveillance whose position is often the result of unilateral or peremptory decisions and whose retention fundamentally differs little, in purely material terms, from captivity. Psychologically, the change is just as brutal: whereas the status of *hospes* is characterized, as we have seen, by an absence of danger, that of *obses* is, in contrast, marked by the very real

12 Irène Herrmann, Daniel Palmieri, “Les nouveaux conflits: une modernité archaïque?”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 849, March 2003, pp. 37 ff.

13 Jean-Yves Guiomar, *L'invention de la guerre totale XVIII^e — XX^e siècle*, Le Félin, Paris, 2004.

14 US War Department, *General Orders No. 100. Instructions for the Government of the Armies of the United States in the Field*, Washington, D.C., 1863, Art. 54 (emphasis added).

15 Until the entry into force of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 formally prohibiting the practice, international law did not preclude this method, especially if it served a military advantage (e.g. the *Hostages Case, United States v. Wilhelm List*, 1950 (see H. Wayne Elliot, *op. cit.* (note 5)). Today the taking of hostages counts as one of the grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention (Art. 147).

threat that hangs over the existence of the person held captive. Moreover, that very danger is what gives purpose to the perilous position of the hostage, who is consequently liable to be cruelly treated or even put to death, as was long the case for any other person taken prisoner during hostilities.¹⁶

Involuntary hostages

Involuntary hostages are subject essentially to the same living conditions as prisoners of war; yet two fundamental characteristics distinguish them from other captive compatriots and are discernable in a multitude of practices.

The first difference is the particular value that these individuals represent in the eyes of their captors. Like the voluntary hostage, the involuntary hostage can serve as a strategic asset in forcing an adversary to make concessions. The Spartans taken prisoner after the Battle of Sphacteria (425 B. C.), at the time of the second Peloponnesian War (431 to 404 B.C.) were used by Athens to neutralize the military superiority of the Lacedemonian city during the four years of their detention.¹⁷ The value to the abductor may, on the other hand, be purely monetary.¹⁸ In this case the involuntary hostage is valuable merchandise for which the abductor hopes to obtain a good price, and is therefore usually well cared for while awaiting the payment of ransom.¹⁹ What's more, such treatment is adapted to the lineage of the hostage: the higher his station, the more he will be honoured and well-treated. This qualitative distinction, which tends to give the *obses* a closer resemblance to the *hospes*, was recognized very early on. Thus it was that Guy de Lusignan, King of Jerusalem captured by the Arabs during the Battle of Hattin (1187), was treated by Saladin as the sovereign that he was.²⁰

The second difference lies in the gradual elimination of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, because involuntary hostages are always more likely to be taken from among the civilian population. The practice

16 Certainly the status of voluntary hostage does need to be qualified because, as Adam J. Kosto points out, the act of giving is generally made under duress. But, “so that this giving of hostages might serve to guarantee an agreement, the two parties had to recognize the hostage as such. Therefore, [voluntary] hostages differ from captives and prisoners of war.” Adam J. Kosto, “L’otage comme vecteur d’échange culturel...”, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 172; for a similar viewpoint, see also Franco Cardini, “I captivi cristiani frutto di guerra santa ‘crociata...”, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 328.

17 This method was also widely used during the American Civil War (see Webb B. Garrison, *Civil War Hostages: Hostage Taking in the Civil War*, White Mane Publishing Company, Shippensburg, PA, 2000). More recently, the detention of the crew of the American ship the *USS Pueblo*, a vessel boarded and seized by the North Korean navy in January 1968, served as leverage and a means of propaganda against the US government at the height of the Vietnam War, until the vessel and crew were released eleven months later.

18 In this case nothing distinguishes a situation of war from a situation of peace in which the same sort of transaction is practised (see e.g. the article of Philippe Contamine, “Autobiographie d’un prisonnier-otage: Philippe de Vigneulles au château de Chauvency”, *loc. cit.* (note 3)).

19 This observation moreover prompted the famous international lawyer, Hugo Grotius, to advocate — in a modern State respectful of the law of nations — that all prisoners be systematically treated as hostages and thus held to ransom.

20 Giuseppe Ligato, “Saladino e i prigionieri di guerra”, Giulio Cipollone (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 650.

generally goes hand in hand with the occupation or annexation of territory and is used to guarantee law and order and thus the security of the occupying troops. A variety of methods, which take into account the hostages' value in personal terms, as a financial asset or as a means of exerting pressure, may be applied and often end up by neutralizing each other and leading to spiralling demands and counter-demands.

Normally, the hostage is held in his home town or village and symbolizes the threat that hangs over the whole community. Alternatively, he may be deported as Napoleon I did when he entered Vienna in 1809, seizing several of the city's dignitaries as hostages and dispatching them forcibly to France.²¹ Hostages may be seized in order to guarantee the lives of other hostages held by the adversary. One of the best known examples took place during the Commune of Paris, an insurrection of Paris against the French government. On 5 April 1871, the Commune decreed that persons accused of complicity with the Versailles government would be considered hostages of the people of Paris and could be shot by firing squad if a prisoner of war or a supporter of the Commune government were executed. Seventy-four hostages, in particular members of the clergy — including the Archbishop of Paris — were held in this way. After proposals for an exchange of prisoners failed, and in face of massacres of wounded and prisoners by supporters of the Versailles government, the Commune executed six of the hostages during *la semaine sanglante* or “bloody week.”²²

Involuntary hostages may also serve as a “human shield” to protect enemy military convoys on the move. The Germans were the innovators of this method when for the first time, in the war of 1870-1871, they used so-called “escort” hostages. This means of pressure was afterward copied by British troops during the Boer War (1899-1902) for rail transports, and was frequently resorted to during the two world wars. For example, during the First World War (1914-1918), the English made hostages (military this time) taken from among naval officers of the Reich go aboard their vessels in order to discourage torpedoing and bombing by the Germans.

Lastly, hostages have also become a means of repression, used to punish those who have sought to disrupt the established regime and, in the most serious cases, have made attacks on the lives of the occupying forces. The hostage's fate then depends on the “guilty” being handed over in a mutual exchange determining the life or death of the main protagonists. During the Second World War

21 Charles-Otto Ziesenis, “A Vienne en 1809: extraits du Journal du comte Eugen von Czernin und Chudenic à propos de l'occupation française”, *Revue du souvenir napoléonien*, No. 376, April 1991, pp. 2-18. During World War I, Germany once again resorted to this method, deporting hundreds of civilians from the occupied zones in northern France to German territory and even into Russia (see Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre*, Éditions Noësis, Paris, 1998, especially pp. 27-88). The tsarist armies did the same at the outset of the conflict in East Prussia: the German hostages were sent off to Siberia. Needless to say, the deportation of hostages was just as widely used during World War II.

22 This procedure was revived during World War II by the German authorities, who arrested Dutch nationals in Holland in retaliation against the internment of German nationals in the Dutch East Indies. See Claude Pilloud, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 433.

(1939-1945) there are all too many tragic examples underlining the inequality of this procedure, for instance the massacre of the *Fosse ardeatine* in March 1944, where 325 Italian hostages were shot by German troops in retaliation against the assassination of a Nazi officer.²³

Between *hospes* and *obses*

The end of the Second World War and the renunciation of total war did not mark the end of hostage-taking but only its imperceptible transformation.²⁴ Since the bipolarity of the Cold War world collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of different forms of warfare throughout the planet. Grouped under the generic term “new conflicts”, the various manifestations of this new belligerence are characterized by a clear asymmetry of the forces involved and by the extraordinary violence unleashed against civilian populations.²⁵ That disparity and aggressiveness are also evidenced in hostage-taking.

In certain wars today, be they active conflicts (Chechnya) or suspended hostilities (Nagorno-Karabakh), the capture of hostages, far from being the exception, appears instead to be highly customary. Some people do not even hesitate to consider it a legal activity similar to trading in raw materials. In connection with the Iraq war, for example, is not reference often made to the “abduction industry”?²⁶ If the terminology used is somewhat provocative, it at least tends to highlight the scale and frequency of the phenomenon while also suggesting the dual evolution it has recently undergone.

The term would in fact seem to imply that, consistent with *hospes*, today’s hostage has regained his or her value as an individual. The truth is that the position of contemporary hostages differs from that prevailing at a time when all-out war was common, because they are no longer seized indiscriminately during a raid. As in the Middle Ages, they sometimes serve as currency to be exchanged for a ransom. This is a common practice in countries such as Iraq and Colombia and generally concerns their own nationals. In less frequent but more publicized cases, their value may be more symbolic than monetary. They are then generally considered as a means of exerting pressure on an external “enemy”.

In that particular context, however, a radical change can be seen precisely in the perception of the hostages’ value, which in turn changes their status, for the very asymmetry of today’s battles means that contemporary hostages are no

23 Alessandro Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito. Roma, le fosse ardeatine, la memoria, la storia*, Donzelli, Rome, 2001 (English edition: *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and the Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004).

24 The civil war in Colombia unquestionably stands out in this latter category, with several hundred hostages in the hands of the armed opposition, the most famous being the politician Ingrid Betancourt kidnapped by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in February 2002.

25 Irène Herrmann, Daniel Palmieri, “Les nouveaux conflits...”, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 25ff.

26 Cécile Hennion, “L’industrie du rapt, ‘nouveau fléau de l’Irak’, est en pleine expansion”, *Le Monde*, 28 September 2004.

longer the “guests” of their captors. At the psychological level, there is therefore a loss of reciprocity, the “new” hostage no longer being viewed as equal in value to what is wanted or must be given in exchange. At the material level there is a standardization, irrespective of social standing, of the conditions of captivity, which are often more severe the higher the rank of the hostage.

Nevertheless, despite the similarities, the “new” hostages likewise do not come within the category of *obsess*, for they do not strictly speaking belong to the “enemy”. On the contrary, such people as Arjan Erkel, head of mission of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders — MSF) in Daghestan, or Margaret Hassan, head of the charitable organization CARE’s office in Iraq, could be considered more as “allies” of their kidnappers. The very nationality of others — for instance the French journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, whose native country had been one of the fiercest opponents of an armed intervention in Iraq — could have served to gain them safe conduct. Above all, their captors showed them no moral recognition whatsoever.

So hostage-taking today seems to be an extreme and unbalanced combination of the *hospes* and *obses* approach. Once again, hostages are being taken selectively, yet they are mistreated. The fact is that hostages no longer represent any value to their abductors except perhaps the value their own world places on them. In other words, the hostage’s value is determined through the perverse interaction whereby his fundamental insignificance for his captors is offset by the price that his own people are willing to pay and that is consequently attributed to him by his abductors. This triangular relationship explains targeted kidnapping as well as the ill-treatment inflicted on those who fall victim to it.

From *obses* to object

Insofar as the abductors play on the values and principles of the adversary, they plan their operations solely in terms of the interest they expect to arouse among the hostage’s own people. So when the antagonist is the West, they concentrate on exploiting two basic factors: the worth of the individual in western society, and the influence of the mass media which, as an added source of pressure on the democratically elected government — itself dependant on the voters thus informed — accentuates even further the value of the individual.

It is thus easy to understand why the choice of “new” hostages is no longer based on criteria of political or military power, as in the days of the *Ancien Régime*, but depends instead on the impact it will have on adverse public opinion. This means that the selected targets are individuals most likely to evoke considerable public sympathy, owing to the positive images associated with their profession (humanitarian workers, war reporters, scientists) or their complete innocence with regard to the events of which they are victims. Worse still, it is because they are so essentially innocent that such persons become hostages, for it is that very innocence — in various and often cumulative

forms, each adding a further degree of innocence²⁷ — which through the media²⁸ mobilizes such a ground swell of support.²⁹

Public reaction, informed in this way, is not limited to anger or consternation. It may go so far as identification with the event, giving rise to real fear. This chain reaction was quickly recognized, and terrorist groups have known since the 1970s how to play on those fears so as to increase the pressure gained through the taking of hostages itself. This practice became even more extensive in the 1990s, along with the spread of the democratic model of government and above all its transformation into a western political campaign programme. The latter undoubtedly helped to “refine” the said method, already broadly applied,³⁰ by favouring the addition of a further component.

The much vaunted dissemination of human rights ideals and political mechanisms to uphold them has in fact propagated the idea of the value of the individual and — as an indirect result — the fear of seeing that same value flouted. At the same time it has stirred up the hatred of all those who see this trend as a new form of colonialism. It is hardly surprising that some of them consequently decide to fight by exploiting “the weapons of the enemy”.

To do this, the abductors take pains to destroy the individuality of the victim and henceforth regard him or her only as the personification of a reality or principles they are combating. Whether it is a matter of symbols (western culture, capitalism, Christianity, etc.) or of ideals (democracy, liberty, charity, knowledge, etc.), and whether these symbols or ideals find expression in the hostage’s origin, citizenship or work, they are viewed as threats that must be eradicated for the sake of a radically opposed world view. Thus disembodied, stripped of any personal or human attributes, hostages ultimately no longer count as enemies or even as human beings.

This dehumanization of hostages leads logically to their reification: they become a thing (*res*) that is used, bought, sold,³¹ or “disposed of” at any moment like an object that has become useless — and all the more readily because today’s pool of potential hostages seems inexhaustible. This attitude is not necessarily a manifestation of a merchandizing or commercialization of conflict, as portrayed by the German political scientist Herfried Münkler.³²

27 An example of this was the British hostage, Margaret Hassan, both a woman and a humanitarian worker whose activities included helping children who, moreover, were Iraqi.

28 As per this revealing title, Robert Fisk, “What price innocence in the anarchy of Iraq?”, *The Independent*, 17 November 2004.

29 However, this tactic can backfire on the abductors, as happened in the case of the Beslan school. Although all the ingredients seemed to be there (the innocence of the victims, most of whom were children, the presence and interest of the media, mainly western), the most important ingredient was missing: the value that is placed on an individual life — a philosophy which, historically speaking, is not customary in Russian society.

30 This method of hostage-taking started on a very wide scale during the war in Lebanon in the 1980s, especially with the abduction of several French journalists and two ICRC staff members.

31 The buying and selling of hostages between groups of abductors is a current practice in certain crisis contexts (for example, in Irak).

32 Herfried Münkler, *Die neuen Kriege*, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2002; the author published a summarized version under the title “The wars of the 21st century”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 85, No. 849, March 2003, pp. 7-22.

The brutal treatment meted out to hostages, in Iraq for example, clearly shows that they no longer have any intrinsic value for their captors — not even to exert pressure. Hostage-taking no longer even serves as “the most barbarous of all weapons against the American ‘occupiers’”, as commented by a recent weekly news magazine,³³ for the purpose of any weapon is to gain the upper hand and thereby force an adversary to surrender, or at least to make some concessions. This does not appear to have been the objective sought by the kidnappers of Margaret Hassan and other western hostages. The intention here is none other than to terrorize the target populations, as evidenced by the gruesome staging and filming of the victims’ executions. In this context terror is the ammunition, the hostages being no more than the unfortunate instruments of that terror.

Conclusion

Perceived as merely a *res*, after having been a *hospes* or an *obses*, the hostage has now reached the final stage in the deterioration of an already unenviable condition. This deterioration is not only due to the aggressors themselves but also reflects the current asymmetry in conflicts and is, even more, the result of a cruel irony of history. In the West, the passage of time has been conducive to a general and continuous blossoming of the belief in the value of the individual. This particular evolution lays claim to being a universal model and thus gives rise to resentment in societies which, out of faithfulness to their identity or because of their structural weakness, are stubbornly hostile to the example thus imposed. As a backlash, that same societal development triggers antagonism and the invention of new weapons, the most effective being those for which it has itself supplied the ammunition. No wonder that westerners, with their personal conscience, their democratic ideals, their information sources and their political rights can themselves become the instruments of attacks of which they are the object. The deterioration in the role of hostages is thus not only in inverse proportion to, but closely associated with, the betterment of their status as individuals. It is by reason of the dignity they believe is their due that their captors debase them. It is also the hostage’s connotation of innocence and suffering that turns him or her into such a haunting, troubling figure.

33 Alain Louyot, “La stratégie de l’innommable”, *L’Express*, 27 September 2004.