TERRORISM AND RESILIENCE: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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> *The only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror*
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> Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933.

A firecracker is set off in Turin during the Champions League Final (June 3rd 2017); the crowd thinks there has been a bomb and panics: one person dies and 1,527 are injured in the stampede. A week later an overheard conversation on an Easyjet flight from Ljubljana to London Stansted is (wrongly) interpreted by the crew as evidence of an imminent terrorist attack; diverted to Cologne for an emergency landing, nine passengers need medical treatment for injuries sustained during evacuation. A car striking pedestrians at an Eid festival celebration in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (June 25th 2017) prompts swift official clarification that this was an accident, not an attack. Local police clearly feel such apprehensions need calming, and quickly.

Governments, meanwhile, flirt conspicuously with a doctrine of inverted Rooseveltianism: the only thing to fear is not fearing enough. Above all, they must show their citizens that they are not complacent about terrorism. Since October 2015 the presidencies of France, Europol and Britain's twin intelligence services (MI5 and MI6) have *all* independently described the terrorist threat as "unprecedented". Angela Merkel's New Year message for 2017 spoke of terrorism as constituting "the biggest challenge facing Germany". Across Europe the air is thick with the sound of threat mills being heavily cranked.

Civil society, for its part, rallies the symbolic resources of civilisation. To semaphore pan-European solidarity back and forth, tourist attractions are pressed into service as anti-terrorist beacons. Thus, after the Paris massacres of November 2015, London's Wembley Stadium and National Gallery are lit with giant projections of the French Tricolour; in early June 2017 the gesture is reciprocated as the Eiffel Tower dims its lights in solidarity after attacks in London: for its part, the Brandenburg Gate likewise carries a projection of the Union Jack, and so on. We are all Europeans now, Brexit notwithstanding.

In short, morbid symptoms abound at all levels of public life. A spectre is haunting Europe: the spectre of Islamist terrorism.

I

In this chapter, I stand back to gain historical distance on this contemporary moment. Put simply, I look at the ongoing crisis of European terrorism against a long-term backdrop. My starting point is the traditional reaction of the historian when faced with the present: *how did we get here*? And my biases are fully traditional, too. Like most historians, I am little interested in debating definitions for their own sake. Like most historians, I prefer to analyse fuzzy phenomena (such as terrorism) as operating in complex interplay with other forces. Here I simply concentrate on "terrorism" in the (anti-state) sense in which it is most commonly understood: that is, *public atrocity staged against random strangers for political effect*. Above all, I am interested in what we can learn from the past about how well European societies can be expected to ride out the current wave of violence.

From this vantage point, several points are worth stating upfront about the general context to our current predicament with Islamist terrorism. Seen in any rigorous historical comparative perspective, most citizens of western European societies live lives of material comfort and security that their 19th century forebears could never have imagined. They live better. They live longer. They live in Good Times.

Disease and epidemics now frighten more by their anticipation than by their actual incidence. Outside times of warfare, there has been no mass starvation: for the last peacetime famine, indeed, one has to go all the way back to Ireland in 1845–9. Whatever other problems they have created, post-1945 welfare regimes have managed largely to meet the basic biological needs of their populations. Heart disease and cancer now do the population-reduction work that tuberculosis and typhoid used to do: and they are generally much slower off the mark.

Rates of both industrial and domestic accidents have never been lower. This last point bears some emphasis. As one French government report of 1889 noted succinctly, "like a war, modern industry has its dead and its wounded". That was no exaggeration. Indeed, in every year of the last three years of peace before the First World War an average of 1430 British coal-miners died in accidents. The disaster at Courrières in northern France on 10 March 1901 killed 1,100 miners alone: a death toll, incidentally, that dwarfs any recent terrorist atrocity, 9/11 excepted. Road accident rates in western Europe are the lowest of any region of the world.

Socially, then, life here in the early 21st century is indisputably longer and more comfortable than ever before. It is certainly far, far safer. Karl Marx once wrote of the "idiocy" of rural life; but he never foresaw the infantilism of an urban society where one cannot buy a coffee without being warned that it might scald. And when genuine disaster does still strike – as at Grenfell Tower in West London (June 14th 2017) – then the universal shock is palpable. Even the fire crews are recorded on their mobile phones asking each other in appalled wonder: "How is that even possible?"

So much, then, for the general context of hazard in western Europe: over 100 years life has improved beyond recognition. Sudden death as a mass phenomenon has become culturally alien. What, though, of *deliberate* threats to life? What, in short, of the long-term trajectory of political violence?

If anything, the picture of improvement here is even more striking. Contrasts with the preceding century, indeed, could hardly be starker. As a menace to the world order, the anaemic Islamic State Revolution of 2017 cannot compare to its Bolshevik counterpart in 1917. Moreover, macro-contexts in early 21st century western Europe are infinitely more benign: 13 million Europeans perished in the first Great War (of 1914–18); and perhaps another 40 million in its sequel (between 1939 and 1945). In between, another half a million were killed in the conflict in Spain between 1936 and 1939, a killing rate twice as fast as the contemporary Syrian Civil War (2011–). And from the later 1940s until the later 1980s the prospect of even greater carnage hung over all Europe. My students look stupefied when I tell them that at the age of ten I asked my father in all seriousness why we had not yet built a bunker in our back garden. In the Cambridge of 1981, surrounded by American air force bases, nuclear annihilation did not seem an entirely abstract prospect.

If the Cold War was distinctly edgy, it at least remained "cold" (for Europeans). And it did have the immeasurable benefit of driving the virtuous circle of Franco-German reconciliation; which, in turn, spread bounties of prosperity and stability across the region. Strikingly, there has been no armed confrontation between western European powers since 1977 (that is, the last of the farcical and half-hearted "Cod Wars" between Iceland and the United Kingdom). Nor have there been any coup attempts since 1981 (in Spain). Revolutions that did not follow a major defeat in war have also been unknown for a very long time indeed (since 1848–9, in fact). Even "revolutionary situations" have dried up. No barricades have appeared in any western European capital since May 1968.

Surveyed against this historical backdrop, the comparative stability of states and societies across western Europe in the early 21st century is truly remarkable, even allowing for recent excitements generated by austerity and Brexit. Equally remarkable over the long-term has been the deliberate intermeshing of national fates in the common project of building the European Union. By the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, then, western Europe had apparently come close to a final conquest of public violence: or, at least, its banishment to the very margins of visibility.

II

Yet this extraordinary achievement has had the unintended effect of magnifying the residuum of serious violence that remains in European public life: the terrorism. As far back as 1997 Conor Gearty observed that "without any great war or massive insurgency to distract us, we have been able to indulge our anxieties about the terrorists' sporadic violence" (Gearty, 1997: 14). Twenty years on, those anxieties wax even larger; and the need to keep a wider sense of proportion is even more urgent.

We thus need to make some very basic analytical distinctions here. Such terrorist attacks – which typically come in spasms, and then fade away – are an existential threat *only* to those individuals highly unfortunate enough to be caught directly in their path. For those individuals maimed or bereaved or traumatised, the effect of such horrors may well be devastating and permanent. They deserve every support going. But societies are complex and resilient entities and their continued existence is in no way fundamentally threatened by such atrocities. It cannot be emphasised enough that

> the actual danger of the new international terrorist networks to the regimes of stable states remains negligible. A few score or a few hundred victims of bombs in metropolitan transport systems in London or Madrid hardly disrupt the operational capacity of a big city for more than a matter of hours. Horrifying though the carnage of 9/11 was in New York, it left the international power of the US and its internal structures completely unaffected (Hobsbawm, 2007, 2010: 135).

There are, perhaps, vital lessons we can relearn here from the 1970s, when terrorism accounted for rather more victims across western Europe than it does today. Back then, hijackings, aircraft bombings and hostage-dramas were mesmerisingly new phenomena: the toxic fruits of a dawning age of mass air travel and satellite TV. Even so, the horrors of the day tended not to be discussed as an *existential* threat to civilisation. Any reflective person could see that they did not represent the same type of generalised threat as a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union.

Any serious discussion of how to build European resilience against terrorism in the early 21st century similarly cannot start from the common assumption that it truly represents an existential threat to all civilised life. Against the prospect of truly existential threats, there can be no resilience: only attempts at the prevention or avoidance of final catastrophe. Resilience, understood here broadly as the ability to get public life largely back to normal, only makes sense against second-order threats. At one level, indeed, public debate needs to catch up here with spontaneous public behaviour. Despite occasional panics, the European masses still commute, fly, and go on holiday. Every such journey is a vote of confidence that existing security measures will probably work well enough. And they are (very nearly always) right.

This last point bears some emphasis. A much-quoted US Department of Justice study from 1976 remarks that "terror is a natural phenomenon; terrorism is the conscious exploitation of it" (Schmid, 2011: 39). This sounds straightforward enough; but in reality the creation of a sustained atmosphere of intimidation "from below" with very limited resources is anything but a simple matter. Carnage must be both repeated and sufficiently varied to create and maintain mass anxiety over the long haul. After all, terrorist atrocity is designed as media spectacle; and all media spectacle, by its very nature, is evanescent. This is not an easy balance to strike or sustain.

Contemporary Islamist terrorism is also notably wasteful of its own talent. For all their variation, all three of the English attacks in the early summer of 2017 fully shared one common feature: that all five of the attackers went out, apparently, with a firm death wish and absolutely no intention of coming back. Even though only the Manchester attacker, Salman Abedi, actually blew his own gangly frame into fragments, it is hard to believe the other four attackers at Westminster and Borough Market did not expect to be gunned down – as they all promptly were. Kamikaze tactics, in short, use up the most committed the quickest. They also have limited appeal – outside of truly desperate contexts such as prolonged military occupations.

Attention has focused most on the recent trend towards what has been called "the weaponisation of ordinary life" – an ugly term for an ugly phenomenon. Put simply, it refers to the use of everyday objects such as knives, trucks and cars as means of destruction. This apparent turn towards primitivism – increasingly evident since the Bastille Day truck massacre in Nice (2016) – is often interpreted as indirect evidence of counter-terrorist success: those who would build bombs if they could are instead forced to improvise. Such tactics are seen as evidence of desperation and reduced capability. The rather hopeful conclusion drawn is that this development might yet prove to be transitory.

So it may: there are fashions in terrorist tactics (as in everything else in public life). And the interpretation is not itself far-fetched: at least in accounting for the genesis of this development. But we should not be too optimistic. We are in some danger of missing the intrinsically *hybrid* nature of these attacks. Weapons may indeed seem primitive, but the way they are used directly leverages the social media revolution to maximum resonance. A rather simple van attack in central London can be relied upon to generate dramatic images of carnage simply because it can be reliably assumed that any crowded street will be full of literally hundreds of camera phones today in a way that it would not have been even 15 years ago. This tactical turn is no anachronistic throwback, in short. It belongs firmly to the present networked moment; it is unlikely to disappear soon.

And there is a much deeper danger here as well. This "weaponisation of ordinary life" dramatically lowers the bar to more-or-less spontaneous retaliation using similar means. Such tactics are, of course, inherently transferrable – they can be imitated without any training or preparation. Here the far-right vehicle attacks on identifiably Muslim crowds in both Malmö (11 June 2017) and London (19 June 2017) are genuinely disturbing because they point to the potential for tit-for-tat cycles of inter-communal violence that bypass the state entirely. Where the targeting logic is widely obvious, and where potential victim categories are easily identified, then the stage is at least potentially set for violence to generate its own momentum. Within these parameters it takes very few people to kill just enough people to scare very many people indeed: a classic small input/large output dynamic. Arguably, the potential to spark a sustained far-right backlash is amongst the most ominous features of the current crisis of Islamist terrorism.

Hence the urgent need for so-called "deradicalisation" strategies, then, to be applied across the board: to the far-right as well as Islamist sub-cultures. But we should expect no automatic miracles from the over-stretched and heterogeneous agencies of European governments tasked with the unmaking of (potential) killers. Such strategies are never easy since, at heart, they attempt to persuade the most discontented to dream one type of dream, and not another.

And rival siren voices will always be hard to drown out entirely. Social media is the ultimate theatre of dreams. Against this most flattering of backdrops, society's also-rans and misfits walk tall as righteous avengers – of a beleaguered Christendom, or an oppressed Islamic umma, according to their own consumer choice. Suicide merely adds romantic glamour. Ever since 1774 (when Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* first sparked a fashion for self-destruction across Europe), it has been clear that suicide can be wildly appealing to the young.

III

From an historical perspective, then, how deep is our current terrorist predicament?

We must be careful not to exaggerate. All violent rebels in early 21st century European societies can operate only in the interstices of state power. Given the complexities of coordinating complex bureaucracies both within, and between, European states, these interstices may on occasion yawn far wider than is comfortable: the Brussels connections to the November 2015 massacres in Paris are a disturbing case in point. But we should not confuse lamentable security coordination with fundamental weakness. There is no terminal crisis in Europe. Neither state nor society is about to implode; although the most serious danger remains the emergence of reciprocal cycles of nativist and Islamist violence. Simple tactics are the simplest to copy, after all.

Yet, like the late 19th century anarchist threat (whose praxis it often resembles), Islamist terrorism will surely eventually fade of its own accord. Who now remembers, reveres, or reviles Santiago Salvador? Yet his bomb at the Barcelona Opera House on 7th November 1893 efficiently slaughtered more than Salman Abedi managed at Manchester Arena on the night of 22nd May 2017. Or, to choose another example, who now has heard of the dynamite bombing of the British parliament on 25th January 1885? Yet at the time *The New York Times* could declare: "All England Frightened". More recent headlines about more recent attacks from the same newspaper ("nation still reeling" – June 4th 2017) may one day seem equally quaint.

That said, we should be equally clear-eyed that this particular type of Islamist terrorism is very unlikely to fade anytime *soon*: it would be wiser to think in terms of decades, rather than months or years. Even after its disappearance, the ISIS caliphate is likely to long continue as a sort of Islamist Iliad: a legend and an inspiration for future generations about how to build the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth. Thus did the Bolsheviks long revere the memory of the Paris Commune of 1871. And terrorism will most likely continue to emerge, in part, from ongoing turmoil adjacent to Europe. Whatever the future holds for Iraq/Syria, it is a safe bet that there will be no tidy endings here. A hundred years on from the fall of the Ottoman Empire the aftershocks continue to be felt far afield.

Most uncomfortably of all, though, if contemporary Islamist terrorism does not represent any existential threat *to* the survival of European civilisation, it certainly constitutes an obstinately recurrent phenomenon *within* it. Murderous ideologies encourage murder: that much is clear. But in itself this observation explains little as to why such ideas should command *any* degree of social support, however marginal. To understand the deep roots of such an appeal we need social history more than religious or intellectual history. As Olivier Roy (2017:1) observes right at the beginning of his elegant analysis of the global appeal of Islamic state: "there is something terribly modern about the jihadi terrorist violence that has unfolded in the past twenty years or so". Indeed, there is: in both the solipsism of its volunteers and the sophistication of its media manipulation, this is violence that authentically belongs to early 21st century Europe. Such a spectre cannot be easily or quickly exorcised: it is already a part of our civilisation, and of us.

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