How Terrorism Succeeds

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How Terrorism Succeeds  
by Gerald Holton

Most current discussions on terrorism miss the point that, in the absence of an act of international will, we have passed through an historic transition, while ignorant about how modern terrorism can succeed.

Throughout history, terrorism—whether initiated in opposition to prevailing social, political, or theological worldview—is a method of coercion of a population or its leadership or both, through fear or traumatization. Until recently, the majority of cases had two characteristics. They have been carried out with readily available, paleotechnic means, and while they might have attracted attention for a time, they have been mostly failures—failures with respect to the long-range objectives of coercing fundamental policies that would favor the purposes of the attackers. One recalls here the callous, dismissive remark in a letter of September 1870 from Engels to Marx: "Terror is for the most part useless cruelties committed by frightened people to reassure themselves." Yet, as examples such as Sarajevo in 1914 and New York in 9/11 confirm, the government’s reactions can be catastrophic in turn.

However, there is an urgent need to understand better how terrorism also, in our time, can succeed. It does so when in addition to the horrid destruction of life and matter, it upsets current models of normal or "regular" life, taken for granted by the targeted group—in short, if it subverts historic memory of the affected population.
To see this essential point more clearly than is common, one must realize that throughout history, terror has aimed to produce a drastic modification in the target group of its traditional conception of society and nature within which human life had previously been thinkable. It is through this modification that the victims are intended to be disoriented, robbed of integrity, and made manipulable. That is even the chief lesson of a primal example of traumatization, namely chapter 11 of Exodus: Not until the tenth plague, one that disrupted the whole familial and social fabric of Ancient Egypt, was the level of terror high enough to coerce the pharaoh's concession.

The modern terrorists may well try to determine consciously where the most effective place is in the personal and historic memory of their intended victims, in order to insert the crowbar there, e.g. in “the City of Light.” Conversely, a group and its leadership that fears victimization by terrorists might well examine the weak spots in its society that could at least partially be protected, and also what may be the hate-producing elements in the potential attackers' worldview and grievances that might be ameliorated.

The potential of using the psychological ground of historic memory as part of a stage for violent action has long been known and used. It is therefore essential at least to glimpse what is in the mind of the terrorist. In Réflexions sur la violence (1908), a manual long influential in terrorist movements, Georges Sorel counseled the revolutionaries of his time to take advantage of these "social myths," as he termed them. He noted that

"...the framing of a future...may be very effective....This happens when the anticipations of the future take the form of those myths, which enclose with them all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party, or
of a class, inclinations which recur to the mind with the insistence of instincts in all the circumstances of life; and which give an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action by which, more easily than by any other method, man can reform the desires, passions, and mental activity."

He argued that it made no sense to discuss how far such a myth can be taken literally in detail as future history: "It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important: its parts are only of interest insofar as they bring out the main idea." He proceeded to show that this conception can be used both in its positive and its negative sense. That is, not only can a social myth stabilize a social order, but its destruction and replacement by another myth can be, and indeed has to be, the condition for the radical transformation of a society. This, in his view, was the function of "Proletarian violence" and "plainest brutality." The aim of this violence is the institution of a counter-myth, for example one of "End Time."

Thus Sorel's whole essay, far from being a call to violence for its own sake, had the grandiose aim to "confront man with a catastrophe" that would signify "absolute revolution." While one might well doubt details of Sorel's conceptions, the method of transformation through a large-scale catastrophe organized for the purpose is, an even more powerful conception in our technologically advanced era.

Another famous manual for using widespread terror in the service of an ideology is Leon Trotsky's book *Terrorism and Communism*, written within two years of the Bolsheviks' victory in the Russian Revolution. In his chapter titled simply "Terrorism," he writes with confidence: "The problem of revolution, as of war, consists in breaking the will of the foe, forcing him to capitulate and to
accept the conditions of the conqueror"...."Are we expected to consider them [the measures] 'intolerable'?"...."As for us, we were never concerned with the Kantian-priestly and vegetarian-Quaker prattle about the 'sacredness of human life."’ Similar sentiments came from fascist dictators and from more recent adversaries such as jihadists.

May aim has been to indicate how terrorism can succeed. I regard this as the first, necessary step before one considers the spectrum of ameliorations and counter – actions, instead of impulsively resorting to responses that failed in the recent past.