

With a pistol one has one shot, max two, if the pistol is double-barreled. With a revolver, five to ten. Vera Zasulich shot the governor of St. Petersburg one January day in 1878, and this is usually seen as the beginning of the wave of terrorism that washed over Europe until the outbreak of World War I.

THE FACE OF TERRORISM

ACTING LIKE A STATE

Zasulich used a British Bulldog, a small, powerful revolver that had recently come on the market. Would she have taken the shot if she had had just a pistol? Would she have made the same attempt with only a knife? Mats Fridlund is a historian of technology and science, associate professor at the Centre for Advanced Security Theory at the University of Copenhagen. One of the things his research focuses on is the significance of technologies for the emergence of modern terrorism.

“Zasulich is a very good example of how the specific form and function of weapons matter. She already had a gun, a large military revolver, but chose to acquire a new, powerful pocket revolver that fit under her shawl. She was a member of the social-revolutionary group Country and Freedom. They trained with weapons, but at this point in time no one was prepared actually to go out and shoot someone. Zasulich takes that step. I wonder whether it was precisely this new revolver technology that made that possible.

“The counter-factual question that guides my research is: what would have happened if the revolver had been invented 20 years later? Would we have had this wave of political violence? The question can of course not be answered. In the political violence that followed the attempted assassination by Zasulich, most have used the revolver or dynamite, and it is interesting to see what role these new technologies played.”

Vera Zasulich needed two shots to hit the governor, the first was a misfire. After a preliminary examination of terrorism in Europe, Mats Fridlund observes that many terrorists have suffered the same technological mishap. Often two, three, or more shots have been required, something that would have been disastrous with a pistol.

“What is the significance of having an extra chance? Can we go so far as to say that the new technologies provided radically new possibilities for new types of political activity, in this case, terrorism? So far, this notion seems to be true. Many other things were of course important for the establishment of terrorism, but the technology resulted in the new political strategy, known as the ‘Russian method’, receiving attention and spreading internationally. Similar arguments have been proffered in the case of the role of radio and the fax machine during the 20th century, and the Internet today.”

In 1878, when Zasulich shoots the governor, the word *terrorism* is not yet established in Russia, but this changes quickly. Previously, it had been used to describe the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. Then, however, what was meant was a justified terror used by the state against its own people. Now, the word and the practice had been redefined. Terrorism is directed against the state. Ideologues in the Russian social-revolutionary movement describe terrorism as the only just form of revolution. In an ordinary revolution, there is a risk that the people fight against the people – revolutionaries against the soldiers – but with terrorism it is only the real powers that be, the real culprits, who are affected. Previously, the social-revolutionary movement had worked hard on educating and enlightening, on reaching out to the peasantry with the message of social justice and revolution. It ended in mass arrests.

“During the 1880s, terrorism began to be seen as a more effective method for stirring up the people. The attacks are combined with the printing of pamphlets

explaining why the actions are being taken. Terrorism is actually a violent form of communication. It uses violence as a medium for spreading its message.”

It is precisely in propaganda that choice of method and technology plays a major role. It is here that dynamite makes its entrance.

“For the social-revolutionaries, dynamite was not just any tool of violence, it had a symbolic value. For example, in a discussion where people are thinking about how to assassinate the Tsar, someone suggests using a knife or a pistol. But the others want to use dynamite to show that there is something new, a new politics, not just the classic, old regicide.”

In dynamite, the explosive nitroglycerin is mixed with other substances that make it stable and safe to use. When Alfred Nobel invented dynamite in 1866, it was intended for use in construction and rock-blasting.

“Social-revolutionaries saw themselves as progressive and rational, they talked about the new human being, the new woman. They represented the future, science, and development. Dynamite was nothing less than a modern rational product that had been developed by science, a gift from science to the people. A gift that gave people power.”

Different kinds of dynamite-based bombs would soon become the classic tool for anarchists and other terrorists. But it was the faction People’s Will (*Narodnaya Volya*) that began developing the technology. With dynamite, you can build small bombs, basically hand grenades. To get the same effect with gunpowder a whole cask would be required. On its seventh attempt, the People’s Will succeeded in killing Tsar Alexander II



in a bombing in 1881. At this point, the Russian Tsar had been traveling in an explosion-secure cab, and both bullet- and knife-proof vests had been developed.

The bombs that the People's Will constructed were also dangerous for the user. Here we can see how the ideology has an impact on the choice of technology used.

"It was important that as few innocent people as possible be affected. So the People's Will made bombs with a very small burst radius. There was a high probability that the person who threw the bomb would himself die. On the other hand, they knew that they probably would be arrested and executed, which indeed happened. They can be seen as early suicide bombers."

Another major terrorist group at this time, the Irish American Fenians, chose a more terroristic use of technology. They placed time bombs in the London Underground. The attack failed, but many civilians were placed in danger.

"For the Fenians, whose goal was nationalistic, who it was that died wasn't very important, as long as it was Englishmen. All Londoners were seen as complicit. Dynamite itself makes possible a more terroristic form of violence. Those using a time bomb give up their control and accept that innocent people can perish. In this way, technology affects politics. Today, as well, a dominant perception among many terrorists is that no one is innocent."

The Russian social-revolutionaries received great international attention. That they were selective as to who was attacked, and manifested a willingness to die for their cause was part of the success. The use of new technologies and the fact that many of the revolutionaries were women also made the attacks more spectacular. But Mats Fridlund does not see any connection between technology and the high proportion of women in the movement.

"No, we can make a comparison with the Irish American Fenians, who were traditionally Catholic. There, I am not aware of any women. According to the Russian social-revolutionaries, everyone had the same obligation to do something for the people – in the official ideology and practice, at least, they were equal. It's possible that there was a certain predominance of women at the secret printing presses."

In his research, Mats Fridlund has chosen to focus on the earliest historical phases of terrorism.

"This is in order to show that the discussion that came after September 11, that terrorism would be different now, does not hold. Terrorism has always been modern in its form, one might say hypermodern, since it makes use of modern technologies and its practitioners are often engineers. At the same time, it is not new. It has a long history in both the U.S. and Europe. Terrorism is not something abnormal, pathological, or unfamiliar. Despite how cruel and horrible it is, it is a human product, a product of human creativity and emotions."

From a technological perspective, the history of

terrorism is not so revolutionary. Ideologies come and go, while the technologies that make terrorism possible prove to be more or less the same.

"It is often emphasized as a major threat that terrorists might release a weapon of mass destruction. It sends a stronger signal to say that we are going to invest several million in order to prevent biological terrorism than, for example, car bombings, which are by far the most common form of terrorism. It is the spectacular forms of terrorism that we feel we must do something about, that are seen by the state as a greater threat. The fact is, when chemical and biological weapons have been used by terrorists, the effect has not been very lethal."

Few historians conduct research into terrorism and even fewer on the link between technology and terrorism. Mats Fridlund believes that this primarily stems from the fact that the concept of terrorism has long been seen as something that states have constructed in order to justify their violence against movements of liberation.

"Attitudes have changed since the 1990s, and more people are now seeing terrorism as something interesting in itself. As a historian of technology, I want to find out how technology is politically formed, in which ways one can see technology shaping policy. The development of technology has lent certain features of various ideologies more credibility. Just as dynamite reinforced the self-image of social-revolutionaries as rational and progressive, access to powerful military weapons, previously reserved for states, has given terrorist groups the opportunity to see themselves as being on par with states and their armies. In order to see yourself in your and others' eyes as a legitimate alternative to a state, you must also be able to act like a state, and equip yourself like a state."

An additional step in the research is to figure out the significance engineers have had for terrorism. The Russian social-revolutionaries were often university graduates. Many of the women had studied in Switzerland, which had opened its universities to both sexes.

"Work was also done to popularize the bomb technologies and make them available to everyone. In the past, the role played by engineers and engineering in terrorism wasn't highlighted very much. Of course, it is extremely important to study the political ideologies and motives behind terrorism. But a strong ideology isn't enough without the possibility of realizing the ideas materially."

tove stenqvist

Journalist at the Sydsvenska Dagbladet (Malmö)



Vera Zasulich was acquitted even though she was caught red-handed after shooting the St. Petersburg Governor Trepov in his audience chamber. Trepov survived, but was seriously injured. Zasulich claimed that she planned the attack alone. Today we know that she was part of a conspiracy. Her friend, Masha Kolenkina, was to have shot a prosecutor on the same day, but failed. When Zasulich was brought to trial, the Russian judicial system had recently been modernized – juries had been introduced. According to the law, it is not enough to prove that someone had committed a crime. Intent was very important to the ruling. Zasulich had been charged with murder, but her lawyer successfully argued that her intent had never been to murder Trepov. Instead, the picture he painted was of a young, innocent, isolated woman who was gripped by strong emotions and attacked a brutal tyrant. Her goal was said to have been to call attention to Trepov's abuse of a political prisoner six months earlier. Trepov had imposed corporal punishment. Despite the acquittal, Zasulich fled to Switzerland, since a new arrest was ordered. Later in life, she renounced terrorism as a method.

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