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PROBLEMS IN DETERMINING THE MOTIVATION OF TERRORISTS
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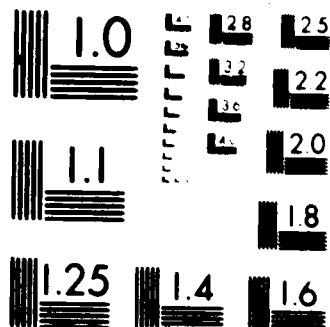
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RESEARCH REPORT

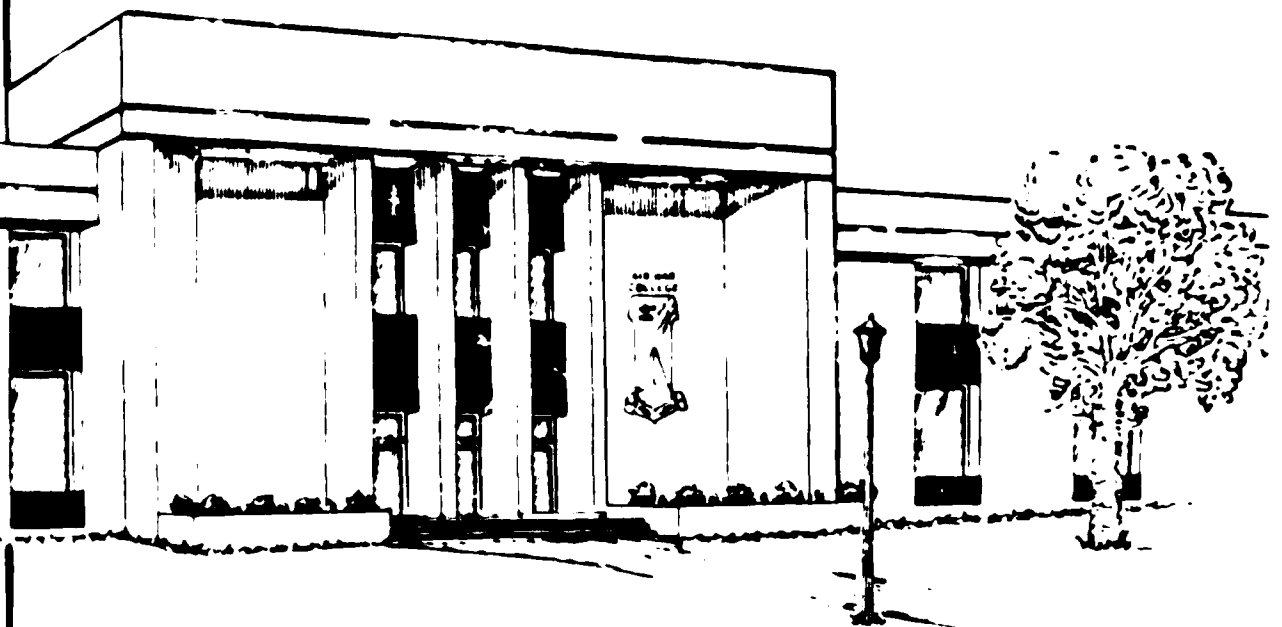
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By LT COL ALLEN F. ROSSOW, USA

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AIR UNIVERSITY
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MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

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PROBLEMS IN DETERMINING
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MOTIVATION OF TERRORISTS

by

Allen F. Rossow
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A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN
FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH
REQUIREMENT

Research Advisor: Mr Clarence O. Huntley

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

March 1986

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AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH REPORT ABSTRACT

TITLE: Problems in Determining the Motivation of
Terrorists

AUTHOR: Allen F. Rossow, Lieutenant Colonel, USA

Paper outlines the difficulties in researching for empirical data on individual and group motivation of terrorists in modern times. Definitional confusion is included as the start point. A wide range of writings are examined in an effort to understand the psychological and sociological motivations of the individual terrorist. The preponderance of the literature found does not provide usable empirical information and much of the published and government contract work repeats other authors.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Allen F. Rossow is a career military intelligence officer with most of his experience in tactical assignments. He has served in Okinawa, Vietnam, and Germany, and activated and commanded the divisional intelligence battalion in Korea. He is a graduate of various military schools, including the Army Command and General Staff College where he received a Master's of Military Arts and Science. He will graduate from the Air War College and Auburn University at Montgomery (Masters' of Political Science) in May 1986.

PROBLEMS IN DETERMINING
THE
MOTIVATION OF TERRORISTS

Why would a group hold an airplane and its passengers hostage? What would cause someone to set off a time bomb next to a shopping center? Who would machine gun a crowded airline terminal? What motivation exists to sustain the dedication of a terrorist who must live underground for several years? Why do they continue in what seems a hopeless cause? What is a terrorist? Are there common traits, personalities, idealities, or motivations? Are terrorists revolutionaries, freedom fighters, martyrs, idealists, extremists, radicals, environmentalists, criminals, religious zealots, patriots, or crazies? These questions are a valid recognition of a need to understand the phenomenon of terrorism which, since the early 1970's, has dominated much of the news media, attention of security officers, and caused fear in people living or traveling overseas.

The revolutionary is a dedicated man. He has no personal inclination, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property and no name. Everything in him is subordinated towards a single exclusive attachment, a single thought, and a single question-the revolution. . . To knit the people into a single force which is wholly destructive and wholly invincible-such is our organization, our conspiracy, and our task. . .(1)

INTRODUCTION:

This project originally sought to understand the motivation of those personnel who could remain dedicated to their cause, while enduring life on the run or living underground. No single answer was found. This paper will outline the literature that is available, the multitude of definitions, some of the theories of individual and group characteristics, and some of the problems encountered in the research.

The extensive bibliography on terrorism can be subdivided into geographical regions, urban and transnational terrorism, Biblical terrorism, psychology of terrorism, and the types of terrorism. Studies have been done under contract to governments, congressional hearings have been held, and international conferences have been conducted to better understand and explain terrorism. The understanding is necessary to predict and prevent. The literature covers the examination of psychological traits, sociological rationales, historical trends, tabulation of reported events, interviews of terrorists, autobiographies, theses by scholars, and thinly disguised novels. A caution on some of the literature will be covered later.

DEFINITIONS:

A significant challenge to the study of terrorism is the matter of definitions. There is no consensus on what accurately describes a terrorist, a terrorist act, or terrorist group. The mental picture of a terrorist is influenced by our own experiences or the latest news release. It is not an empirical description, free of moral judgements, that will allow study and categorization of incidents. The image of the left wing, radical idealist, bombing US facilities in Germany, or the Basque, or the masked Muslim kidnapper, may be totally different. Or can they be described and placed into a usable definition? A comprehensive definition was provided by S. Qureshi, in his article "Political Violence in the South Asian Subcontinent."

Terrorism is the use of violence in order to induce a state of fear and submission in the victim. The object of terrorism is to secure a change or modification in the behavior of the intended victim himself or to use him as an example for others. The violence or terrorism is the ultimate of coercion, whether actually applied or merely used as a threat. The use of terrorist violence is based on the assumption that the intended victim is unreasonable and incapable of seeing the viewpoint of the terrorist, that the victim cannot be persuaded but only compelled, in a manner by which he has absolutely no choice except to surrender.(2)

Most of the literature would agree with the majority of the above, with the exception that many would add the thought of political or idealistic character to the definition. There are key words which are fairly unanimously accepted: violence, fear, change, threat, and victims. However, the terrorist act produces an effect beyond the specific act itself.(3) Terrorist acts violate the rules of war, are beyond the normally accepted means of behavior, are illegal, are targeted to a single goal, maximize publicity, and are conducted by an organized group. Another definition limits terrorism only to contemporary acts and specifies that terrorism is only extortion not just threats, unless the group has carried out acts previously. It also does not include rule by terror in the context of state functions.(4) As can be seen, the lack of consensus in definitions distorts the dialogue and hence the understanding.

Many categorizations have been used to further define terrorism. One that seems to be broad enough to encompass the majority of writings was presented by Bowyer J. Bell in his book Transnational Terror. He outlined six varieties of terror: psychotic terror, criminal terror, endemic terror, authorized terror, vigilante terror, and revolutionary terror. The latter category, he further broke down into: organizational terror, allegiance terror, functional terror, provocative terror, manipulative terror, and symbolic terror.(5) These provide useful tools, and encompass that terror conducted by a state to control its own population, acts committed by groups across the

entire political spectrum, by environmentalists, religious groups, refugees, the disenfranchised, and also mass terror, genocide.

INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS:

The individuals in a terrorist group have been described as leaders, activist-operators (frequently opportunists), and idealists.(6) Most writings group terrorists into three broad categories: the idealist, the political radical, and those with mental problems. The first includes religious fanatics and the environmentalists. The political terrorists may seek to change policy, regain land or statehood, or to correct a perceived wrong. The last category includes both individuals within a group and those who act on their own, often reenacting a previously publicized act.

A survey of students in Germany was conducted in 1979, in an attempt to understand potential causal factors, such as alienation, that would explain the support for the Baader-Meinhof gang and the June 2nd Movement.(7) Charles Russell, in his article, "Profile of a Terrorist," described the "typical" terrorist as male, in his early 20's, single, from a middle to upper class background, educated, and recruited as a student.(8)

A range of personalities was presented in a document by Rand Corporation which included interviews with five former terrorists.(9) The conclusions were that the individual had been disillusioned with society, felt a sense of belonging to a group, might have had skills needed by the group, such as demolitions or weapons, and a desire for freedom from the normal restrictions imposed by society. The five described the excitement of living on the run and the desire for action. Other authors have focused on childhoods of physical beatings, sexual maladjustments, physical deformities, and alienation from student groups.(10) The motivations that terrorist groups provide to the individuals have been described as follows:

- desire to reaffirm masculinity (unhappy
childhoods)
- submerge individuality to the group
- seeking ambivalent closeness to action/power
- displaying a terrorist sacrament(self
loathing, lack of self esteem)(11)

Individual characteristics have been analyzed by psychiatrists who have concluded that terrorists that had been examined were normal, intelligent, even humorous, and "showed no symptoms of psychosis or neurosis and no particular personality type."(12) Others however, have concluded that terrorists obtain psychic gratification from violence, tolerate high risk, desperately need the shared beliefs and commitment from the group, and they have a sense of shared guilt or belief in a

higher morality-the greater good.(13) This higher sense of morality can be accepted in the religious terrorist, but is also found in the ideological member who is convinced that he is acting for a group in a higher, more sensitive form of universal justice.(14)

Martha Crenshaw in her article, "The Causes of Terrorism," as well as other writers, generalizes about the individual's morality in a terrorist group. The individual creates or accepts the group justification of terror. This is necessary since, especially for the idealist, all other methods of achieving change have failed; there are no other alternatives. That individual also perceives that the norm or status or law is, in and of itself, unjust. The terrorist act has therefore been justified, on moral grounds, in the mind of the individual terrorist.(15)

Crenshaw also generalizes on how the terrorist views the victim of the terrorist act. The victim is "de-personalized," not viewed as important, but rather the victim becomes merely a symbol or pawn to the ultimate solution that is sought. The victim becomes the other half of the "we vs they."(16) The victim does not have an identity even though acts of anger may be inflicted over and beyond the actual planned act.

Other terrorists, upon being interviewed, stated that violence was not imparted since the bystander was not involved. In those cases, judgement would seem to have been present, in the midst of seemingly irrational behavior. One popular form of terrorism is that of taking hostages in an attempt to achieve

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The terrorist has been described as having no inherent morality in human customs and law; a revolutionary with no interests of his own; no feelings; no belongings; revolution is the only thought, passion, and interest.(18)

Terrorism is political, goal-oriented action, involving the use of threat of extraordinary action, performed for psychological rather than material effect, and the victims of which are symbolic rather than instrumental.(19)

Most of the written material concludes that motivation of the individual varies greatly. Many individuals may have strongly supported or been actively involved with non-violent groups or movements prior to joining the terrorist group. As mentioned above, many of the terrorists were students. Some of these experienced a rejection by both parents and teachers and then joined a terrorist group.(20) Others were susceptible to writings or even teachers. And others, as mentioned above, were rejected by their peer group and sought the sense of belonging that a terrorist group provided. Many individuals may have the same psychological attributes and grievances, but never join a terrorist group. It seems then that group psychology must have a strong effect on the individual. Why does the terrorist actually join?

GROUP CHARACTERISTICS:

The examination of groups will be restricted to contemporary times, excluding Biblical and historical references. Modern day terrorist groups would include the Tupamaros of Uruguay (Movimiento d[Liberacion Nacional (MLN)) in the 1960's.(21) The Tupamaros began in 1963 as modern day "Robin Hoods" but turned to terror in 1969. They numbered about 3000 members until they were eliminated by the military in 1972. They were basically a nationalist group but have been martyred by left wing German groups.

The members of a group have been described above as leaders, activist-operators and idealists which indicates a variety of personalities within a single group. The psychological and background differences combined with the leadership of the group dictate the sociological composition of the group. Some groups have been formed and their ideals directed by the founder. Such was Wadi Haddad who created the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).(22) The PFLP remains under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization today as a militant arm.

Other groups have been trained and organized under Soviet influence. Giangiacomo Feltrinelli was a dedicated and active supporter of terrorist groups, providing funds and direction primarily in Italy, until he died emplacing demolitions.(23) He allegedly was acting as an agent of the Soviets or at minimum was strongly identified within the Communist movement.(24)

Barron, in his book two books on the KGB, describes the organization of the Committee for State Security, and responsibilities entailed in the overseas directorates, to include liaison, training, and funding for terrorist groups.(25) The total involvement and control by the KGB in international terrorism is still open to speculation by authors. The US Senate held subcommittee hearings in 1981 on the degree of control exercised by the Soviet Union, but the primary people called to testify were authors (to include journalists) who had written on the subject. (26)

The United Nations has not provided much leadership discouraging terrorism. In January 1976, West Germany requested support for a UN initiative against terrorist taking hostages. This followed in the wake of the incident during the Olympic games in Munich. The UN finally approved the initiative in February 1979.(27) Europe has been the scene of much of the terrorist activity, to include the Irish Republican Army, which has waged the most protracted campaign experienced in recent history.(28) On the other hand much of the support system for terrorist groups has also existed in Europe. For example, Sweden was a significant safe haven for revolutionaries and terrorists. Although, arguably, political refugees may not be terrorists per se, both may be rejects from the mainstream of society and may seek havens in the same locale. Sterling states in her book, that in 1978, the following numbers of political refugees from North and South America were located in Sweden: 400 American deserters, 4,410 Argentinians, 397 Bolivians, 492 Brazilians,

2,411 Chileans, 344 Colombians, 214 Peruvians, and 732 Uruguayans.(29)

Group behavior, a function of individual personalities and leadership, is not well documented. The literature does not explain or describe the relationships between the leaders and members, or how the leaders motivate and lead.(30) The leaders tend to be older than the rest of the members and may be more experienced. The terrorism-prone or crazies are normally followers rather than leaders. Some generalizations have been made about the interrelationships within the group. They have a limited trust in each other and they must confide in other members of the group which is forced on them because of the ostracism from the rest of society. The terrorist is under a constant stress and extreme pressure caused by the same ostracism, living underground, and maintaining credibility within the group itself. The commitment to the objectives and the group must be strong enough to outweigh the fear of personal harm or danger. It also must be strong enough to override society's rejection. The group interaction is probably stronger than that of the individual personalities.(31)

Terrorist groups must conduct some initiation rite for new members after proselytizing. The rite might entail an illegal act to insure the dedication and commitment of the new member, but it also serves to entrap the recruit and prevent resignation. The new member is then committed and must trust the group. This initiation rite builds the group interaction that must exist in the initial period of isolation. Initially the

indoctrination period for the new member will include goals, objectives as well as other more tactical training.

The psychology of the group will drive the selected courses of action. It will also focus the selection of the victims. Most groups do not have a diverse repertoire of activities, but rather tend to conduct only one type of act. This limitation is driven by the leadership, skills possessed by the group and most importantly, by the acts considered morally justified.

Most groups do not have strong, clearly defined objectives. Most goals are vague statements and may change over time. An example would be when the target audience rejects the terrorist activities and the group must then seek a higher sense of obligation or moral justification because the lethargic population does not understand.(32) The group may have change its target audience to the world population, since the local society probably considers the activities as criminal. In broad terms, the objectives of a terrorist group might be: gain publicity to encourage support, provocation (enticing officials to overreact), disruption, or punishment.(33) The terrorist group needs instant action to maintain its internal and external credibility. The act that is ignored severely hinders the momentum of the group; the recognition is needed to maintain credibility and motivation. It is the end of the act.

Publicity is a basic requirement for the terrorist group to continue to exist. They must have the medium to gain and maintain support for their purpose or objective-demand action,

ransom, or change. The press however, does not present a balanced picture of the terrorist group. The media tends to focus on the incident and not on the idealism or grievances. The picture presented to the audience is not in context but rather only brief glimpses. The public believes that the media and publicity encourages terrorists and there have been incidents of reenactment or copying. The media however actually covers less than half of the terrorist activities and has become aware of the fact that they have been used by the terrorists. The television media especially have become sensitive to the dangers of providing exposure to the terrorist or by becoming a mediator in the middle of an act.(34)

Terrorism as a process gathers a momentum larger than the individual terrorist or the individual terrorist act itself, independent of external events.(35) Where the group may have embarked on a campaign to remedy grievances, the acts create a situation where there is no satisfactory solution. Physical destruction is the ultimate answer. There are no approved or acceptable alternatives.(36) The group finally ceases because of depletion of resources, factional divisions within the group, erosion of sympathy or support, or by vigorous countermeasures by the establishment.(37)

Terrorist groups do have some general vulnerabilities. Both the groups and the individual members have not fully considered the next or final step-"what happens then". The total range of reactions have not been planned or contemplated. The individuals, as mentioned above, can not fully trust each other,

partly because of psychological weaknesses. The constant tension and stress is a liability and can be exploited. The lack of unity based on the diverse individuals may finally drive the unit apart. The loss of sympathizers and external support is a constant threat to the continued existence of the group. Finally, most groups do not adequately plan or even execute their operations with precision.(38) The reconnaissance may be lax and accomplished by less than competent personnel. The actual act itself, if successful, is probably a result of luck and happenstance. The five former terrorists that Kellen discusses, and the Sterling book, provide examples in execution that had to be modified, or snap decisions required of the individuals.

CONCLUSIONS:

The search to determine the motivations of the terrorist resulted in many diverse opinions and possible generalizations, but not much concrete factual information. Much of the literature has been written by journalists without credible sources. One notable example is the Sterling book, The Terror Network, which references news media sources, unidentified foreign security personnel, and tertiary sources when original sources were available.(39) Most of the literature references other works, so the net effect is cyclic without original scholarly thought or empirical research. Some of the works for government contracts and conferences and composite books is the same material, repeated over and over. Much of the government contract work has been accomplished from the hypothetical level

by authors who lack substantial credentials. An example is the Jenkins article which only asks questions. Five months later, a fellow Rand Corporation employee, Kellen, proposes to answer those same two questions, but with minimal research--basically two German terrorists who wrote books. In sum, the motivation of the terrorist, the decision-making within the terrorist group, and how they sustain the dedication of the individuals remains elusive and unknown. The withering of the European terrorist and preeminence of the Muslim terrorist further complicates the discussion. The religious fanaticism has not been covered, and tentative observations and possible conclusions of group behavior built upon the European brother, do not transfer to the masked hijacker supported by Libya.

NOTES

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19. "Perspective on Terrorism," The Terrorist Reader, edited by Walter Laguer, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1978, pp. 27.
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23. Sterling, *ibid*, pp. 25-48.
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29. Sterling, *ibid*, pp. 97.
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