

Prescient, Inconsistent, and Ignorant: Commentary on *The Dispensation of Dynamite*

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*The Dispensation of Dynamite* is equal parts prescient, inconsistent, ignorant, and devoid of true context. Prescient, because it has a similar tone, note and body of recent terrorist act depictions in the West. 135 years ago, transnational terrorist attacks (and plots to use chemicals), centrally coordinated from afar, caused death and destruction across Europe. Sounds familiar. Inconsistent, because it waivers in whether such violence is an existential threat to Western democracy or not, and whether the perpetrators demonstrate rationality. Ignorant, because amongst other factual inaccuracies, it conflates very dissimilar ideological groupings into one large-scale sinister plot. Devoid of true context, because it demonstrates an inability to correctly assign motive, understand the perpetrator, or look at prior behaviour. In what follows, we try to contextualize aspects of *Dispensation's* reporting, add some correctives to erroneous aspects, and draw upon contemporary debates within terrorism studies, as well as recent terrorist attacks.

*Dispensation* reports the day after coordinated bombings on government buildings and *The Times* newspaper in London. The invention of dynamite by Alfred Nobel in 1864 gave rise to the first wave of aggrieved revolutionaries with access to bomb-making materials. This 'dispensation of dynamite' sparked a new wave of terrorism across Europe that was later adopted by US anarchist terrorists by 1886 (Thai, 2015). *Dispensation* ascribes the bombing to "Irish anarchists", and links them to several European countries and Russia, as if they were a homogenous territory. In fact, Irish Republicanism (heavily directed from the U.S. itself) inspired the attack. A mixture of the Fenian Brotherhood and Irish Republican Brotherhood conducted the attack aiming for an independent sovereign Irish Republican democracy – very far from anarchist ideals. It seems *Dispensation* paints any movement that challenged the established order with the same anarchic brush, regardless of actual ideological intent.

Of course, misreporting the ideological intent of the perpetrator is common in the immediate aftermath of a sudden event like this bombing. It regularly occurs to this day. It is perhaps understandable when an event is either the first of its type within a country (for example, many initially assumed Anders Breivik's right-wing attack in 2011 was jihadi-inspired) or when an ideologically isolated event occurs close in time to several attacks by other ideological groupings (for example, the mass shooting at a Munich shopping mall in July 2016 occurred during a cluster of jihadi attacks).

The March 1883 bombings in London were neither. They were part of a coordinated campaign beginning two years earlier. Preceding bombings targeted military barracks, police

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barracks, political buildings, and key infrastructure like bridges and gasworks. In the two years after this bombing, they targeted popular London train stations including Victoria, Paddington, Westminster and Charing Cross – each were later attacked or had near misses with Irish Republican attacks in the 1990s, or jihadi attacks in the 2000s and 2010s. Repeat victimisation, it seems, is not just a volume crime issue and the features that made these targets attractive are still relevant (see Clarke & Newman, 2006:93-97). Clutterbuck (2004:154) refers to these Irish Republicans as making a “seminal contribution to the development of terrorism in the twentieth century...their strategy, operational methodology, tactics and targeting...provided a blueprint for the conduct of terrorism that has not changed fundamentally for well over a hundred years”. In that light, *Dispensation*’s prescience is unsurprising.

A failure to understand the perpetrator led to several inconsistencies in *Dispensation*. Within the space of a few paragraphs, the threat went from putting “everything that belongs to and represents the British government” in danger, to it being “ineffective” in asserting political gains (e.g., “none of these sacrifices will lift a feather’s weight from the burdens of the people”). Whilst the latter position is more reflective of reality, the former is commonly used to push questionable, and often illiberal, counter-terrorism legislation and practice today. For example, in the wake of several attacks in the U.K. in 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May stated a willingness to change human rights laws to increase punitive powers.

Those tasked with maintaining British security at the time did not fail to understand the perpetrator. Indeed, the London attack had a profound and long-lasting implication for counter-terrorism practice in the U.K. and beyond. Within a week, Scotland Yard established the ‘Special (Irish) Branch’ with the remit of investigating national security matters. The first of its type in the world, Special Branches quickly became the norm throughout Great Britain and the Commonwealth, and would later form the foundation for present-day counter-terrorism commands.

In many ways, the inconsistent description of the individual perpetrators’ true intentions and capabilities are a microcosm of the debates that occurred within terrorism studies decades later. From “there is neither reason nor common sense in the methods”, to an acknowledgement they are “not wholly irrational.” They missed the key component that the strategic logic, location, timing and modus operandi most likely result from careful thinking and planning that weighs the costs and benefits of action at several locations (Gill et al., 2018). The London bombing was certainly part of a strategic Republican doctrine that sought to impose high costs to continued British rule in Ireland (see Clutterbuck, 2004: 161-164).

What is interesting is *Dispensation*’s take that individual motivation is a crystallization of “fanaticism”, “disregard for human life,” “private griefs” and “no other means...to give expression” to their grievance. This certainly chimes with contemporary studies of the lone-actor terrorist:

“Lone actor terrorism is usually the culmination of a complex mix of personal, political and social drivers that crystalize at the same time to drive the individual down the path of violent action. Whether the violence comes to fruition is usually a combination of the availability and vulnerability of suitable targets that suit the heady mix of personal and political grievances and the individual’s capability to engage in an attack from both a psychological and technical capability standpoint” (Gill, 2015:66).

Although *Dispensation*'s tone is foreboding, there is a lot to take comfort from. Tradecraft was poor on occasion then (e.g., the accidental explosion at the bomb factory), as it remains now (see Kenney, 2010). Democracy remained resilient to sustained campaigns of violence – even ones with supposed foreign direction, senselessness, randomness and the aptitude for experimenting with chemical attacks. In fact, it is the jovial part of *Dispensation* that has aged terribly. Within a decade, the “harmless Sultan of Turkey” oversaw the Armenian Massacres of 1892-1896 that killed up to 300,000 individuals. This is just one example of a tendency to reify the state's authority, not acknowledge that genuine socio-political grievances underpin many violent movements, and uncritically present the state's position as fact, when the assertions simply amount to rumour and scaremongering (e.g., the section on Andalusia – see Esenwein, 1989:87).

Finally, from our offices, we can confirm London's “air” remains “murky,” not with “rumors and fears” but with toxic levels of pollution – a true threat to “everything that belongs to and represents the British government” and its people but barely registers the same level of concerted effort, attention and resources generated by low-probability, high-impact events like terrorist attacks. There's a lesson there somewhere.

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