

COMMENTARY

A Review of Dispensation of Dynamite

Molly Amman

Federal Bureau of Investigation, Quantico, Virginia

This intriguing narrative of Europe in 1883 echoes the headlines of 2018 with its dramatic recounting of an explosive device attack and speculation about when and where the next attack will occur. In reading it, one can hardly help but to feel a sense of déjà vu on a global scale. Anarchist waves rolling over the European continent with explosions and terror cells could easily be transposed with the pervasive international terrorism with which the world grapples today. The similarities between 19th century anarchists and modern-day militant Salafists are worth noting: Both anarchists, then, and militants, now, embrace the idea that state violence against the innocent has justified their own violent acts. Middle- and upper-class, educated men have comprised much of the leadership in both movements; they chose to relinquish lives of comfort and take up arms to defend the downtrodden victims of state oppression. Provocateurs violently confronted what they viewed as intolerable interference by states; these attacks, in turn, often resulted in harsh backlash against the actors themselves and against larger ethnic populations who shared demographics with attackers.

Equally interesting are the dramatic contrasts between the violent anarchist and militant Salafi movements—contrasts that, although profound, somehow ultimately did not change the similar outcomes of mass violence. The so-called Islamic State openly seeks to destroy the world governing order and replace it with a unified caliphate, whereas anarchists of the 19th century had no tolerance for a ruling system at all. Whereas the Islamic State declares the caliph-

ate's unity will end strife, the anarchists believed that governments and law were the very creators of conflict. Today's militant Salafism centers on a pure and literalist religious view that all on Earth should follow; anarchists rejected all religion as just another kind of oppression. The 19th century anarchists believed in the absolutism of free speech as a right; militant Islamists viciously condemn, as deserving of death, any question or challenge to their interpretations.

So what made this pattern so ripe for repeat, even when at least as many factors were in opposition as were similar? Why do ordinary people wind up carrying out terrible acts of violence, under disparate circumstances and operating under different world views? The General Aggression Model (GAM), developed to predict circumstances under which aggression and violence, including persistent and escalating violence, may arise, comes to mind as a lens through which to view critical commonalities (DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011). A critical component of the GAM is the development of knowledge structures, or beliefs built up over time that influence judgments and behaviors.

According to the GAM, intergroup, violent conflict might result from an event or events that impact two or more groups, causing harm. Such events could, for example, originate in resource disputes such as unfair wages which harm the working class or exploitation of one group's natural resources by the other. Within the group perceiving itself to be victimized, beliefs take hold, currently and generationally, that injustice and victimization is occurring. Some members respond violently, believing that response justified under the circumstances. The other group, a government, then perceives that response to be an unjustifiable overreaction. An escalating, retaliatory cycle between them

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Molly Amman, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Quantico, VA. E-mail: molly.amman@ic.fbi.gov

ensues. Over time, each group develops aggression-relevant knowledge structures regarding the other, now identified as an enemy. Individual judgments facilitate increasing mistrust and aggression toward the others while simultaneously fostering feelings of justification about their own behavior.

After the 9/11 attacks, many in the United States felt justified in military action in Afghanistan and, later, Iraq. Obviously that is one perspective. Another is to search farther back in time to Western development of Middle Eastern oil reserves and the perceived exploitation of other states' natural resources. In any event, many Americans did not understand perceptions in the Persian Gulf that the United States is evil and unjustified for reacting with force to their justified vengeance against the United States for its exploitation and aggression. After 9/11, aggression-related knowledge structures increased in the United States, such as positive attitudes toward war. Military enlistments spiked and the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. In limited instances, extremely aggressive actions were taken by Americans against Arabs, such as the crimes committed at Abu Ghraib. In turn, Arabs and others who experienced or heard about harms caused by United States and coalition military actions were inspired to join terrorist factions and retaliate. And so it goes.

As for the 19th century anarchists, they were living in a time and place of ubiquitous inequalities and on the heels of the violent French Revolution. Factory workers died because of poor working conditions at an alarming rate while factory owners acquired vast wealth at their expense. Sickness and starvation claimed

the lives of others while the rich maintained comfortable lives and controlled the governing order. Anarchy as a philosophy took root as an alternative to the injustices of government regimes—remove the state, and order would naturally restore itself. The desperation of the plight of the poor drove some to engage in bombing violence to dislodge the state, and the state, in turn, reacted brutally to suppress it. Being identified as having anarchist sympathies resulted in any number of reactions from the state, ranging from property confiscation to prison or worse. As a result, violent anarchism spread and spread to push back against the state.

Both contexts work well within the GAM, despite their significant contrasts. It explains, even potentially predicts, the occurrence of large-scale violence in both eras and appears to be a timeless model for examining violence from a grievance–ideation–action–retaliation standpoint. Reviewing this historical article was a fascinating exercise in the contemplation of theory and, on a less scholarly level, prompts recall of Alphonse Karr's adage, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." [LG1] (Karr, 1898)

References

- DeWall, C. N., Anderson, C. A., & Bushman, B. J. (2011). The general aggression model: Theoretical extensions to violence. *Psychology of Violence, 1*, 245–258. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0023842>
- Karr, A. (1898). *Les Guepes*, Michel Levy Brothers, Eds., Paris.

Received September 26, 2018

Accepted October 1, 2018 ■