

Charlotte Klonk

Terror

When Images Become Weapons

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Translated by Bradley Schmidt and Charlotte Klonk

Fighting with images is a kind of psychological battle. Unintended consequences are the rule, not the exception.

The propaganda videos from the IS are nothing new. On the contrary, terrorists have always made use of images to spread their cause through the media – as did their enemy, the state. In her study, Charlotte Klonk shows which role images of terror have played since the 19th century up through to our immediate present. Examining concrete case studies with the expert insights of an art historian, she analyses image strategies, orders them in their historical development, and at the end of the book answers the pressing question of the ethical treatment of terrorist images. This is a vital book for understanding the background of terrorism omnipresent today.

Charlotte Klonk

Terror

When Images Become Weapons

The subject matter at hand is one so crucial to me, that I as yet do not know whether I can unfold it at sufficient freedom in my current state of thought – that is, providing I succeed in shedding any light on it at all.

Walter Benjamin in a letter to Gershom Scholem, March 26th, 1921

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I. Introduction

On the evening of June 13th 2016, in the Parisian suburb of Magnanville, a French policeman was stabbed to death in the street. The assassin subsequently gained entrance to the victim's apartment where he murdered his wife in front of their three-year-old son. Still negotiating with the special forces units, he posted live footage of himself and his victims on the internet platform *Facebook*. Acting in the name of the so-called *ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria)* and later to be shot dead, the assassin of Magnanville single-handedly oversaw and carried out what is a characteristic feature of modern terror in general: Not the act of violence as such is what matters, but rather the images of it that subsequently circulate.

How should one, how can one deal with these recordings? This question well precedes the advent of the internet. Even in traditional media, the story was always about more than mere information. When an inferior militant group challenges the supremacy of a state, it is not the actual number of casualties that counts, but the capacity to spread horror and fear among the masses and potential glory among sympathizers. Thus, the intensity of image production in the media is a gauge for the perpetrators' immediate success.

The dilemma that follows for the spectator is all but insoluble: As viewing the images leaves one physically unharmed, it gives way to the sublime lust for shock. According to Hans Magnus Enzensberger: "Whom the terror of images does not render a terrorist is turned into a voyeur."¹ Deflection of fear mutates into curious on-looking and vice-versa, in effect blazing the trail from victim to perpetrator: Curious on-lookers fuel the terror-image machinery, and deflection of fear generates counter-images. In order to reinstall a society's sense of security, the production of enemy images in particular is set in motion. Even before the perpetrators are caught, horror becomes a face and vague fear gets a form, enabling the symbolic denigration and elimination of person that one has not yet arrested. The images intensify the event and implicate further image operations, which in turn create deeds and facts, that in themselves may cost lives in some circumstances.² "In this sense", as political theorist Herfried Münkler writes, "terrorism constitutes a form of warfare in which combat with weapons functions as a drive wheel for the real combat with images."³

¹ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, „Ausblicke auf den Bürgerkrieg“, *Der Spiegel*, 25, 1993, p. 174.

² Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk, „Introduction“, in Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk (ed.), *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 1-22.

³ Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars*, trans. by Patrick Camiller, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005, p. 111.

II. Close images: Assassinations and bomb attacks in the late 19th and early 21st century

Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the collapse of the World Trade Center in New York, U.S. President George W. Bush spoke of an event that “changed our world.”⁴ It was an impression that many shared at the time. Never before was there as much widespread and intensive reporting on terror in the media and never before such thorough subsequent scholarly debate.⁵ With time, however, things were put into perspective.

The scale of destruction was unquestionably without precedent. The number of casualties – around 3,000 – was almost ten times higher than with previous attacks. The use of planes as bombs that flew into the tallest buildings in the clear blue sky of Manhattan at prime viewing time was also without comparison and seemed like a take from a disaster movie. The images that subsequently went around the world provoked the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen to refer to the deeds as a “work of art” executed with devious perfection, and the art historian Karl Otto Werckmeister to speak of a new “aesthetic of the apocalypse.”⁶ However, these opinions tinged by the initial state of shock, neglected the fact that the number of deaths and the scope of destruction are not the measure by which cruelty and horror can be quantified. The suffering inflicted is immeasurable for every family who loses even a single person to such an attack.

Neither the use of modern technologies and the selection of a highly symbolic target, nor the fact that the suicide attack was religiously motivated was new in any way. The only thing unprecedented was that the attacks took place in the US. Never before had the country been attacked on its own soil on this scale. The reaction was correspondingly radical. It led to a misguided war in Iraq and a traumatic military intervention in Afghanistan. For the political scientist Louise Richardson the fears provoked by the attacks stood in no relation to the actual threat:

At home Americans were convinced that flying was dangerous although the facts clearly stated the opposite. (Economists have calculated that the acknowledged victims of September 11th were joined by an additional 1,200 deaths on the roads because more people drove vehicles and fewer flew after September 11th). [...] The enormous scale of the atrocity

⁴ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want. Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: Murray, 2006), 207.

⁵ Cf. the wide-ranging bibliography “Deutsch- und englischsprachige Monographien, Sammelbände und Themenhefte zum 11. September 2001” assembled by Jonas Bredebach, last modified August 15, 2001, *Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History*, 8, 2011, 463–474, online publication: http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/sites/default/files/medien/material/Bibliographie_11_09_2001.pdf (accessed: October 15, 2015).

⁶ For context on Karlheinz Stockhausen’s statement, see Klaus H. Grabowski, “Die Stimmen der Intellektuellen und ihr Echo,” in Felicitas von Aretin and Bernd Wannemacher, eds., *Weltlage. Der 11. September, die Politik und die Kulturen*, (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2002), 195–208; Otto Karl Werckmeister, “Ästhetik der Apokalypse,” in Bazon Brock and Gerlinde Koschik, eds., *Krieg und Kunst* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002), 195–207.

seemed to merit a powerful response and the US replied with the most potent weapon in its armory, a declaration of war.⁷

A common characteristic of terror attacks is that they hardly ever miss their targets. The spread of horror and fear is inevitable, and national governments always feel urged towards drastic reactions. It is immaterial just how well organized the attacks are and irrelevant whether nineteen excellently coordinated young men execute a plot that is technically highly demanding and planned long in advance (as on September 11, 2001), or two individuals commit a more or less improvised attack on the Boston Marathon (as on April 15, 2003), in which makeshift bombs caused a relatively small amount of damage in relation to the sheer size of the crowds and the event as a whole. Every attack occupies the media for several days, and the impression is always that something extraordinary has occurred. However, as will become clear in the following, as differently as each drama unfolds as regular is the pattern with which it is visually reported in the news. It follows a predictable sequence of depiction, that already emerged at the end of the 19th century.⁸ In this respect, September 11, 2001 is no exception, spectacular as the images may be.

Self-proclaimed terrorist of the first hour: The attack on Czar Alexander II.

In 1881 a shocking headline spread like wildfire in daily newspapers across the Western world: on March 13, the Russian Czar Alexander II. had been murdered on the way to the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg. There was no precise information available when the initial reports were filed, but the perpetrators had already been named. There had previously been several unsuccessful assassination attempts on the Czar executed by a group of revolutionaries then referred to as Nihilists. The same group was now also supposed to be responsible for the latest and finally successful attempt.⁹ However, the assassins did not call themselves Nihilists. Instead they preferred the word terrorist that as yet did not carry unequivocally negative connotations. It allowed the group to distance themselves from run of the mill violent criminals.¹⁰ They belonged to *Narodnaya Volya* (translated as “People’s Will”), an anarchist organization that was founded in 1876 with the express goal of overthrowing the repressive and authoritarian Czarist regime.¹¹ By 1870 the leading figures of the European anarchist movement, including the Russians Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin living in

⁷ Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want. Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: Murray, 2006), 219–20. “Three thousand casualties was an appalling figure, but in a country that experienced 30,000 suicides, 16,000 homicides, and 15,000 deaths from falls in the same years a more moderate reaction might have been expected.” (Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want. Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, 219).

⁸ The following discussion is based on initial considerations in Charlotte Klonk, “Macht der Bilder – Attentate als Medienereignisse,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 45–46, 2013, 30–39.

⁹ *Illustrated London News*, March 19, 1881, 266.

¹⁰ Rudolf Walther, “Terror, Terrorismus,” 388–390.

¹¹ Hans-Joachim Torke, “Die Narodniki und Zar Alexander II. (1881). Ein Vorspiel zur Revolution,” in Alexander Demandt, ed., *Das Attentat in der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), 298–316, here 308.

exile in Switzerland, had spoken out in favor of the use of violence as a revolutionary tool. Two decades before, the Italian radical Carlo Pisacane had already argued that “ideas spring from deeds and not the other way around” and declared that people could not attain freedom through education, but rather became educated as a result of being free.¹² *Narodnaya Volya* was the first organization that followed Pisacane’s call for a ‘propaganda of deeds’ and began to carry it out with the help of the latest technological advance, Alfred Nobel’s invention of dynamite.

The murder of the Czar in 1881 was the group’s greatest, but also last success. As the *Illustrated London News* among other newspapers hastened to note, the Russian Empire under Alexander II. was brutal and repressive, but he himself had recently introduced a program of reforms that appeared promising. “The lamentable death of Alexander II. will not probably conduce to the alteration of this bureaucratic régime. It has been the profound mistake of the Nihilists to suppose that it would do so”, the newspaper predicted shortly after the assassination.¹³ They would be proven right. The Czar’s son, Alexander III. ascended to the throne, promptly revoked all the liberal measures introduced by his father, and immediately established a ruthless secret police that was feared across all over Europe.¹⁴ Within a month all of the leading members of *Narodnaya Volya* had been arrested, the assassin sentenced to death, and their sympathizers banished to work camps in Siberia.

The Czar’s murder was part of a centuries-old tradition of tyrannicides, for in contrast to later terror attacks the target was chosen for its actual rather than symbolic value to the group’s violent aims. However, the development of an international network of press and media agencies meant that the assassination had far-reaching repercussions far beyond Russia and the individuals involved. There were reports of the event in all of Europe’s leading dailies, and the still nascent illustrated press published visual material for its readers in abundance. The *Illustrated London News* for example, itself a pioneer of this form of reporting since 1842,¹⁵ ran the story for many weeks. Even their equivalents in Germany and France, the Leipzig-based *Illustrirte Zeitung* and the Parisian *L’Illustration*, dedicated several issues and illustrated reports to the attack. Whenever affordable, a local artist was sent to Saint Petersburg to sketch a depiction of the events according to eyewitness

¹² Quoted from the English translation in George Woodcock, ed., *The Anarchist Reader* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977), 43–44.

¹³ *Illustrated London News*, March 19, 1881, 266.

¹⁴ Deborah Hardy, *Land and Freedom. The Origins of Russian Terrorism* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1887); Hans-Joachim Torke, *Die Narodniki und Zar Alexander II.* (1881), 298–316.

¹⁵ For the history of the *Illustrated London News* and the form of visual reporting it established, see Peter W. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page. Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

reports shortly after the news was received. They were then transferred to print media in the respective countries.

On the basis of such a sketch the *Illustrated London News* initially published a reconstruction of the assassination itself (**Fig. 3**). The illustrator had chosen the short moment between the explosion of the first bomb and the throwing of the second, ultimately leading to the monarch's death.

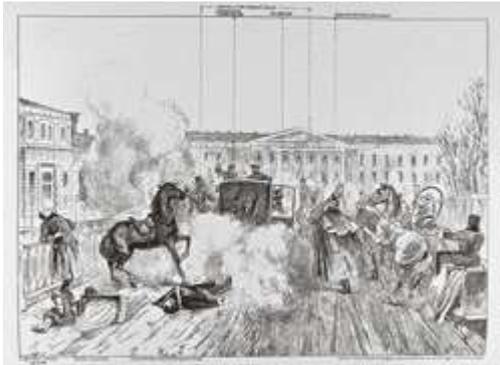


Fig. 3: The assassination of Czar Alexander II. on March 13, 1881.



Fig. 4: A throng runs to the place where the Czar was murdered in St. Petersburg.

The meticulously annotated depiction shows the ruler still alive in the doorway of his carriage shrouded in smoke. A murdered young courier and a Chechen from the Czar's bodyguards are seen lying dead in the left foreground. Next to them a mortally wounded officer is still standing in an upright position while in the center a policeman is already rushing to the scene. Nowhere to be seen are the assassins, who consciously embraced the possibility that they themselves would die in the attack. This reconstruction is followed by pictures showing the throngs of people rushing to the location of the killing in horror (**Fig. 4**).

They conveyed a particularly important message by appearing right after the image of the explosion. The reader was hereby to understand that the attack was merely the act of a handful of fanatics but did not correspond to the will of the people as the name of the terrorist group implied. A further

illustration showing the burnt-out carriage (**Fig. 5**) was followed by a series of pictures depicting the Czar lying in state (**Fig. 6**), then his burial and finally the subsequent coronation of the new Czar, leaving no room to doubt the unbroken power of the state. Within the diverse depictions used by the *Illustrated London News*, only the Czar's death as such remained visualized. In fact, the appearance of his lying in state asserted the opposite. It counterfactually shows a physically unscathed, peacefully deceased ruler whose gruesome death seemingly occurred without leaving a trace.



Fig. 5: The destroyed imperial carriage after the bomb attack on March 13, 1881.



Fig. 6: Czar Alexander II. Lying in state.

With the execution of the conspirators around one month later in front of hundreds of spectators, the state could ultimately demonstrate its undiminished monopoly on power and so the scene found its way into print as well (**Fig. 7**). The depiction shows the condemned still alive, in the moment that three priests are administering the last rights, clearly against their will. They are seen carrying their horrific deed inscribed on signs in front of their chests like cattle brands. Thus the amoral horror of their act is reflected in the rejection of all religious conventions and theological appeals, however mercifully meant and administered.

This sequence, which began with the visualization of the act of terror itself, conceived according to eyewitness reports, and ending with the conviction and execution of the criminals, follows a pattern that was from then on repeated in the illustrated press whenever the perpetrators could be arrested.



Fig. 7: The execution of the terrorists in Saint Petersburg on April 15, 1881.

The Leipzig-based *Illustrirte Zeitung* and the French *L'illustration* also featured corresponding pictures after the attack on the Czar, in part even the same that were found in the *Illustrated London News*. Hence one can assume that many of the illustrations, including those of the execution and the monarch lying in state, were provided by Russian image services.¹⁶ However, the first depiction always drew upon the sketch of an expressly credited illustrator commissioned by the respective papers – in Leipzig the *Illustrirte Zeitung* mentioned the artist (Gustav Broling), the *Illustrated London News* only stated “forwarded by our special artist” and the Parisian *L'illustration* “D’après un croquis de notre correspondant particulier.” In other words, every paper reacted to the shock of the news with its own attempt to visualize the attack as precisely as possible and to get as close as possible. However, already in the next step the inviolability of the power of the state was reasserted by staging its unbroken ability to act. By printing the illustrations provided by the Russian image service a corresponding worldview was perpetuated, conveying a clear sense of friends and foes that kept the horror at bay and transferred the terror back onto the originators.

The fact that one can find the same visual pattern in three leading European illustrated papers allows us to draw conclusions about the expectations of their readership. However, it is hard to say if it was the pictures that influenced the imaginations of the readers or vice versa. Relevant sources and historic studies are missing to confirm one or the other. Yet the differences in the first independently produced depictions after the attack are striking and significant for the subsequent development of media coverage. In contrast to the meticulous reconstruction of the crime scene in the *Illustrated London News*, for example, the French *L'illustration* provided a dramatic visualization of the explosion, and the *Illustrirte Zeitung* of Leipzig even a depiction of the ravished Czar whose legs were severely injured and who is still alive at this point (**Fig. 8** and **Fig. 9**). It is unclear what served as the basis for these sketches. It is unlikely, however, that they relied on direct eyewitnesses for the Czar was carried away immediately after the attack.

¹⁶ *Leipziger Illustrirte Zeitung*, April 2 – 23, 1881, 262–263, 289, 292–293, 337; *L'illustration*, March 26 to April 30, 1881, 200–201, 273, 288.



Fig. 8: The assassination in *L'Illustration*.



Fig. 9: The assassination in the *Leipziger Illustrirte Zeitung*.

Even more spectacular were illustrations in those newspapers that, in contrast to the *Illustrated London News*, the *Illustrirten Zeitung* in Leipzig, and *L'Illustration* in Paris, no longer targeted an exclusively well-to-do, educated bourgeoisie, but rather attempted to reach a wide spectrum of readers.¹⁷ The French *L'Univers Illustré*, for instance, printed a highly dramatic visualization of the explosion (**Fig. 10**). In the fiery glow of the explosion one can still make out how the Czar falls to the ground, the horses hitched to his carriage are spooked, and the first casualties already lie in the foreground. Where the actual terror act is downplayed in the English newspaper, it is downright exaggerated in *L'Univers Illustré*, as if it were a live report.



Fig. 10: The assassination in *L'Univers illustré*.

¹⁷ David Reed, *The Popular Magazine in Britain and the United States 1880 – 1960* (London: British Library, 1997).

It is a difference that has nothing to do with the places of publication, but much with the emergence of divergent target groups of readers. Thus the variations remained in existence in the following decades, even when terror attacks were no longer restricted to people in positions of power, but could potentially strike anyone who spent time in public places in European capitals. Although the killing of the Czar in Russia was a political and organizational catastrophe for the conspirators, it was a sweeping media success. The fact that the attack received wide media coverage is not surprising as such, but that it was visualized so intensively and in such detail tapped the possibilities that the illustrated press offered politically motivated perpetrators of violence. While the Russian *Narodnaya Volya* were principally focused on the assassination of the emperor itself and not the generation of images, it did not take long till a new generation of activists appeared on the scene who recognized that the primary aim of their deeds – the spread of vague fear in the population – was first and foremost fulfilled by the images themselves.