

Announcements

TRI Thesis Award 2016: Top Finalists Identified

Since 2014, the Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) has annually awarded a prize for the best doctoral dissertation in the field of terrorism and counter-terrorism studies. The jury currently consists of Prof. James Forest, Prof. Clark McCauley, and the chairman, Prof. em. Alex P. Schmid, with Prof. Edwin Bakker as an alternate member. The criteria set by the jury includes that deserving theses must demonstrate originality in terms of introducing new data, theory or methodology and that award-worthy theses manifest novelty/uniqueness in their findings. Of the theses submitted to TRI in 2016, two clearly achieved these criteria and were selected as co-finalists:

Dr. Emily Corner (Research Associate, University College London), author of *The Psychogenesis of Terrorism*

Dr. Steven T. Zech (Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Monash University), author of *Between Two Fires: Civilian Resistance during Internal Armed Conflict in Peru*

Dr. Emily Corner examined mental disorder and psychological distress among lone-actor terrorists and regular members of terrorist groups. Her methodologically sophisticated, solid empirical research was based on six unique datasets (including 97 terrorist autobiographies) and guided by an excellent conceptualisation. Her findings bring nuance to the debate about the issue of normality vs. mental health problems among terrorists.

The jury was impressed by the immense amount of field work that Dr. Steven Zech performed in Peru, where the Maoist Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) was active. The originality of Dr. Zech's approach lays the groundwork for a theory of civilian resistance by focusing on the neglected issue of when and how communities organise for self-defence when caught between the brutality of insurgent violence and the almost equally indiscriminate government repression.

The jury wishes to congratulate the two finalists for their achievement. They will each receive a check of US \$500 and a formal award certificate from the Terrorism Research Initiative.

Abstracts of the doctoral theses of Dr. Corner and Dr. Zech can be found below.

The Psychogenesis of Terrorism

(University College London, 2016 by Emily Corner)

Studies concerning both mental disorder and involvement in terrorism have a long and convoluted history. The literature that has focused on attempting to understand psychological drivers of terrorist behaviour has shifted through multiple stages. Moving from untested assumptions of psychopathology, personality, and deviance, towards more empirically sound interpretations of sociology. While the early studies were correctly debunked on methodological grounds, the existing consensus, spawned from the growing interest in sociology, that mental disorder never plays a role in terrorism, is likely to be a fallacy when we consider the complexity of the problem and the diverse pool of individuals who engage in it. This body of research falls into line with highly influential seminal reviews, and more recent re-examination of the role of group processes in terrorism. This thesis takes the starting position that the logic of an act of targeted violence being either borne out of mental health problems or terrorism is likely to be a false dichotomy. Instead, we are likely to see a range of mental disorders across the arc of terrorist involvement. This thesis utilises multiple existing and novel inferential statistical techniques on both qualitative and quantitative datasets, to address the current discord both in the understanding of the potential role of psychopathology, and to re-examine currently well accepted, but as yet untested theories of terrorist

behaviour. The intent of this multi-pronged methodology is to provide practitioners with a holistic understanding of the problem as well as suggestions toward preventing and disrupting future offences.

Between Two Fires: Civilian Resistance during Internal Armed Conflict in Peru

(University of Washington, Seattle, 2016) by Steven T. Zech.

Research on internal armed conflict focuses on violence perpetrated by insurgent groups and state security forces, often ignoring other armed civilian actors. However, militias, paramilitary groups, and civilian self-defense forces represent important third parties in most armed conflicts including Mexico, Nigeria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Peruvian civilian self-defense forces played a crucial role in defeating the insurgent threat challenging the state during the 1980s and 1990s. Why did some communities organize self-defense while others facing similar situations did not? I argue that how communities address the tension between their ideas about violence and their own use of violence is key to understanding violent action. Community narratives interpret events and define inter-group relations: narratives that legitimize violence makes violence more likely. The form this resistance takes—whether large-scale mobilization or disorganized individual acts—depends on a community’s institutional capacity to generate and sustain collective action. I test my argument against realist and rationalist arguments that emphasize power, threat, and opportunism. I use a mixed-methods approach that combines a quantitative analysis of regional violence with historical and contemporary community case studies in the Ayacucho region of Peru. I draw from hundreds of testimonies in the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission archives, as well as nearly two hundred personal interviews with self-defense force members, community leaders, military officials, and civilians. I also accompanied contemporary self-defense forces on patrol in remote mountain and jungle communities to evaluate hypothesized social processes from my argument. This research has important theoretical and policy implications. I demonstrate the power of community narratives and the causal role of ideas and identities. Understanding the processes driving violent action will provide policymakers with additional tools to manage or prevent it. Armed civilians play a crucial role during most armed conflicts. Peruvian civilian self-defense forces varied in their origins, behavior, levels of support they received from the military, and their post-conflict trajectory. The Peruvian case provides a unique opportunity for policymakers to learn from successes and failures when civilians organize to combat security threats.

P.S. The deadline for submissions for the TRI Thesis Award 2017 is 31 March 2018. Conditions remain the same as in previous years (see: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/494/pdf>).