

Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, *The Aftermath: Meaning-making After Terrorist Attacks in Western Europe*. (Leiden, The Netherlands: University Dissertation, 2021) (337 pp.)

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

It is widely accepted that terrorists use violence for communication - but how effective is their communication strategy? To find out, the author of this dissertation looked at the aftermath of four terrorist attacks which were directly or indirectly linked to the Islamic State (IS): *Brussels* (22 March 2015: 33 persons killed, 340 injured), *Nice* (14 July 2016: 87 persons killed, 458 injured), *Berlin* (19 December 2016: 12 persons killed, 56 injured) and *Manchester* (22 May 2017: 22 persons killed, 512 injured). Terrorists want to send a message to one or more audiences, but the message sent and intended is not necessarily the message received and accepted. While in the case of an assassination the victim and target are the same, making the meaning more obvious, this is not the case when it comes to terrorist attacks against civilians – the direct victims of violence are not the ultimate targets. There are a number of terrorist target audiences: the enemy government, the enemy society, the constituency the terrorists claim to represent, members of their own and other terrorist organisations, the media – to name but the most important ones.

Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, the dissertation's author, focuses on the first two, exploring how government authorities and the general public (citizens) responded to acts of terrorism against them. In her own words, she "...aimed to establish an in-depth picture of who is doing what, how and when" (p.269) at three moments in time: on the day after the attack, in the first week thereafter and on the first anniversary of these attacks against unarmed civilians. Her main research question was: "how do different actors engage in various forms of meaning-making in the first year after a terrorist attack?" (p. 227). The author finds that both governments and members of society engage in meaning-making with the help of frames, rituals and symbols to respond and to make sense of what in the eyes of most people is senseless violence. She operationalises "meaning-making in terms of interpretation frames, rituals and symbols (p. 43). She distinguishes between diagnostic frames (what is the issue and why has the attack happened?), prognostic frames (what needs to be done in response to the attack?) and motivational frames (what should people do now?). She looks at rituals that take the form of "symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive," and at symbols characterised by the "elements of condensation, multivocality and ambiguity...signs that stand for something other than itself" (p. 44). The author found that the rituals and symbols served, in the four cases studied, one or more of these purposes: "commemoration, compassion, reassurance, solidarity and resilience" (p. 256).

With their attacks, successful terrorists manage to drive a wedge between government and (parts of) society while also seeking to increase polarization and foster radicalisation of sympathisers in their religious, ethnic, racial, or ideological constituencies. The Islamic State sought to portray these four attacks as responses to offensive military operations of Western states in the Middle East in the hope that citizens of the "crusader" countries (France, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom) would put pressure on their governments to withdraw their military forces from the Muslim world (p. 72, p. 249). In the case of the Brussels attacks, IS offered on the message service Telegram no fewer than "10 Main Reasons for Brussels Attacks" (p. 89). However, in none of these four attacks did the perpetrators achieve their ultimate goal. Their message was drowned in counter-messages from citizens and representatives of the state which denied them any legitimacy of their struggle (p. 252). There was, at various points of measurement, more often than not a large degree of unity between government and society in the wake of these attacks, although some opposition politicians and fringe groups tried to exploit the situation, playing blame games (p. 116). Manifestations of solidarity marginalised efforts at polarisation and division. The meaning-making attempts of the terrorists were no match to what the authorities and citizens of these countries could muster in terms of creating alternative and opposing meanings about what these wanton attacks on civilians stood for.

The author concludes on the basis of her four empirical case studies that “Terrorism does not seem to be an effective violent communication strategy...” (p. 258). Yet, can this finding be generalised beyond these four cases to situations where terrorism is chronic rather than sporadic? The author does not make such a claim in her explorative study and suggests that this should be “an area for future research” (p. 274). Another issue is: what is the meaning of “meaning-making”? The author admits that “It is difficult to demarcate what counts as meaning-making” (p. 268). Her operationalisation of meaning-making in terms of frames, rituals and symbols, while fruitful, does, in the view of this reviewer, not catch the whole scope of what an act of terrorism, or a series of attacks, can “mean”. This is linked to a third problem: the author only looks at the responses of two actor groups – government and general public. Other actors, including the media at home and in the Muslim world, are not discussed as independent entities. The author readily recognises some of these limitations but nevertheless over-generalizes in her conclusion when writing: “... terrorism is not only an unsuccessful political strategy – as is widely noted – but also a rather unsuccessful communication strategy. Attention does not equal understanding, acceptance or even dissemination of the message of the terrorists. While terrorists receive attention for their ‘opening acts’, the violent performances, their main audiences – authorities and citizens – are not focusing on their core message and goals” (p. 262). However, perhaps the “main audiences” terrorists seek to impress are in the end members of their own and other terrorist groups and their constituencies and – in the case of religious terrorists – those who “guard the gates of paradise.”

To conclude, these few critical remarks should not detract from the merits of what is an eminently readable, well documented and richly illustrated original scholarly study.

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About the Reviewer: Alex P. Schmid is Editor-in-Chief of ‘Perspectives on Terrorism’ and principal author of Violence as Communication (Sage, 1982).