

**slackbastard**

Anarchy and apathy battle it out on  
@ndy's blog.

---

**Nineteenth Century Anarchist Terrorism: How Comparable to the Terrorism of al-Qaeda?**

Posted on January 15, 2009 by @ndy

Nineteenth Century Anarchist Terrorism: How Comparable to the Terrorism of al-Qaeda?

Richard Bach Jensen

*Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.20, No.4, 2008 (589–596)

In a speech given last November and in an article, Professor James L. Gelvin argues most forcefully for the existence of close similarities between nineteenth century anarchist terrorism and contemporary terrorism.<sup>1</sup> In his talk Gelvin specifies six main areas of resemblance. These include the fact that both anarchists and al-Qaeda: number one, prefer action over ideology, number two, focus single-mindedly on resistance to an intrusive alien order, three: lack programmatic goals, four: pursue violence for its own sake, five: attack the state and the entire world system of nation states and, finally, operate through decentralized, semi-autonomous cells. Gelvin goes further than noting similarities, since he actually contends that al-Qaeda–style jihadism is a kind of anarchism, an Islamic anarchism, and indicative of the reemergence of anarchism as a force in world history after an approximately sixty year absence. Understandably, Gelvin concentrates on al-Qaeda, a subject that forms part of his general area of expertise, and spends little time explaining how the anarchist terrorists fit into his paradigm.

This points to a problem for commentators trying to compare these two terrorist phenomena, since usually those authors who know something about the Middle East and Islamic terrorism know little about nineteenth century anarchists, and those who know something about anarchist terrorism know much less about al-Qaeda. I have to place myself in the latter category, since my field of expertise is not contemporary, but rather nineteenth century terrorism, and more specifically, the diplomatic and police efforts to repress nineteenth and early twentieth century anarchist terrorism. Nonetheless, in this essay I will go out on a limb and analyze the ways in which the phenomenon of nineteenth century anarchist terrorism prefigures the phenomenon of contemporary terrorism, adding my amendments and additions to Gelvin's intriguing hypothesis.

First of all, it is important to note that Gelvin makes no distinction between anarchists and anarchist terrorists. Few anarchists became bomb-throwers or carried out violent acts. One of the founding theorists of modern anarchism, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, was either equivocal about or rejected violence. He proclaimed in 1848 that: "Killing people is the worst method for combating principles. It's only through ideas that we triumph over ideas."<sup>2</sup> Although most anarchists assumed the necessity of a violent revolution to overthrow the established order, pacifist anarchists such as William Godwin, Leo Tolstoy at the end of his life, and the Dutch anarchist, Domela Nieuwenhuis, were also influential. Therefore when Gelvin speaks of Islamic anarchism, he really means Islamic anarchist terrorism.

Some of Gelvin's other points can be accepted with little comment. In a rough sort of way anarchism does put action over ideology since it emphasizes spontaneous deeds reflecting popular feeling rather than careful planning. General strikes and popular uprisings, not parliamentary debates and vanguards of the proletariat

certainly plotting revolution according to the precepts of an allegedly scientific socialism. Al-Qaeda also seems less interested in ideology than in instigating spectacular deeds of violence.

Gelvin's third point is similar to the first and perhaps just as plausible: both anarchism and al-Qaedaism lack programmatic goals (although they certainly have SOME programmatic goals, depending on what one means by that).

Perhaps, too, Gelvin is correct that al-Qaeda, "like anarchism, targets the very system that is, for it, the wellspring of subjugation."<sup>3</sup> This is a fancy formulation noting that al-Qaeda denounces the great structures of the modern era in a way comparable to the anarchist denunciation of government, capitalism, and the institutional church as the sources of human oppression. This is one of Gelvin's more interesting claims. Gelvin has found various statements by bin Laden and other Jihadists denouncing Arab nationalism and the "enervation of the Islamic world" due to its dispersion into "dozens of states and mini-states."<sup>4</sup> Bin Laden sees the nation state as a Western imperialist structure lacking a religious foundation and imposed on the Islamic East by the Western powers after World War I. Bin Laden has also denounced the entire international states system and the United Nations as tools of a Zionist-Crusader alliance.

In the place of the evil nation state—and here is where it seems to me al-Qaeda diverges from anarchism—Bin Laden and his followers want the establishment of an enormous Islamic Caliphate, a millenarian kingdom of justice on earth where sharia law will be applied absolutely and that would include all areas which have, or have had in the past, an Islamic population.

By contrast, most anarchists were not interested in religion, which they saw as oppressive. Even if anarchism itself possesses aspects of a secular religion, which it does, the anarchists have never suggested the creation of such a superstate. The Islamic superstate, moreover, implies the existence of a single ruler or caliph, which would be doubly anathema to the individual freedom-loving anarchists. The anarchists, at least according to the great anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin, propose the devolution of states into their component parts so that the earth would become covered by a vast "interwoven network," or federation, of communities and local groups of producers and consumers linked together voluntarily. This fragmentation of authority seems at the polar opposite from the grand Islamic caliphate. The anarchists would also hate the imposition of sharia law, or any law, period, since anarchism rejects law and court systems as detrimental.<sup>5</sup>

Even more open to question is Gelvin's contention that both anarchism and al-Qaeda are essentially reactive, with a single-minded focus on resistance to alien intrusion. This seems more applicable to the Jihadists, since in statement after statement they have called for the self-defense of the Islamic umma, or community of believers, against the "Zionist-Crusader alliance" which has occupied parts of formerly Arab Palestine, invaded Iraq, and for a time stationed troops in Saudi Arabia, the site of Islam's holiest shrines. Jihadists wish to roll back Western incursions going all the way back to the Christian reconquista of Moorish Spain.

Jihadism is much more nostalgic for an idealized past than anarchism. Although Kropotkin and other anarchists saw in the premodern clan, the village community, the guild, and the free city of the Middle Ages praiseworthy examples of resistance to the state, he emphasized that history developed organically and was on the side of the anarchists. Kropotkin thought that in his own era the vast development of "voluntary associations" what we now

[Home](#)
[Latest posts](#)
[Popular posts](#)
[Comments](#)
[Random post](#)
[Share](#)

can non-governmental organizations, showed that structures were emerging from the ground up that would replace governments and lead to an anarchist society. Anarchists were also great believers in modern science, technology, and education, which they were confident would liberate humans from the political, economic, and religious prejudices and structures of the past. In other words the anarchists proposed, and in some places carried out, a constructive program. This was true, even if another one of their most powerful messages, a message that resonated especially with anarchist terrorists, was a “reactive” protest against the abuses of nineteenth century society, particularly its economic exploitation and political repression.

What about Gelvin’s fourth point, that Jihadists and anarchists, or better, anarchist terrorists, pursue violence for its own sake? One thinks immediately of the anarchist leader Mikhail Bakunin’s infamous statement (made even before he became an anarchist) that the “urge to destroy is also a creative urge.” One also thinks of al-Qaeda’s attack on the twin towers, which had only a roundabout connection with Bin Laden’s stated goal of getting the Zionists and Crusaders out of Islamic lands. 9=11 seemed to be more a piece of violent, symbolic theater, than concrete policy.

On closer examination, though, I find it difficult to write off either al-Qaeda or the anarchists as engaging in violence for the sake of violence. Dive bombing the World Trade center towers was designed to rally Islamic support behind al-Qaeda, which it accomplished to some extent since this stunning attack made al-Qaeda seem to be a very powerful organization. Overnight, it was transformed into a potent magnet attracting discontented Muslims from throughout the world. There were also other justifications for the 9=11 attacks, even if they were not good ones. All of this does not appear like violence for the sake of violence, since 9=11 had specific goals outside the violent acts themselves.

As for anarchism and violence, it is instructive to examine, by way of example, the motives of the Italian anarchist-terrorists, who became famous as Europe’s preeminent regicides. Crackpots aside, I can think of only one case of violence committed by them for the sake of violence, or actually violence for the sake of earning a lot of publicity. In 1898, on September 10 (September has proved to be an ominous month for terrorist deeds), an Italian anarchist named Luigi Lucheni stabbed the Empress Elizabeth of Austria in the heart because he wanted to become famous (and also because he was frustrated with his poverty stricken and miserable life). Of the two dozen or so Italian anarchist assassins or bomb throwers between 1880 and 1914, nine carried out their deeds primarily for revenge: six to revenge political repression, two to revenge socio-economic repression, and one for personal revenge against a newspaper editor who had slanderously suggested that he, the anarchist Achille Pini, was a police spy. Anti-clerical feelings fueled the actions of three anarchists, leading them to kill two priests. Two wished to protest Italy’s imperialist invasion of Libya in 1911, as well as the repressiveness of society. At least two were severely mentally unbalanced. The culprits involved in four alleged anarchist incidents, most spectacularly the 1894 bombings of the Italian parliament, and of the War and Justice ministries in Rome, were never identified. Two Italian anarchist terrorists may have been police spies and a third, Gennaro Rubino, who tried to assassinate the king of Belgium in 1902, definitely was. These latter terrorists carried out violent deeds in order to restore their reputations with anarchist comrades, reputations that had been soiled by rumors of police connections. One might add that the number of police agents and agent provocateurs involved in terrorist incidents throughout Europe before 1914 is sufficiently large to constitute a relatively important cause of violent mayhem. This may differentiate the earlier period from contemporary terrorism since as yet little has been heard of Jihadist agent provocateurs performing violent deeds.

While most of the Italian anarchist revenge attacks carried some symbolic baggage, they were also executed in response to specific political or police actions rather than in a mindless lashing out against targets of purely symbolic oppression. (It should be emphasized that such quixotic assaults as that on the Greenwich Observatory in 1894 were exceptions, not the rule.) In May 1893, Paolo Schicchi bombed the Spanish consulate in Genoa (but removed the dynamite from the explosives so that there would be no innocent victims). Schicchi wanted revenge against Spain because the Barcelona police had tortured him. Paolo Lega shot at Prime Minister Crispi in June 1894 because he blamed him, correctly, for ruthlessly repressing the fasci siciliani, unions of Sicilian peasants and workers. Sante Caserio assassinated President Carnot of France for refusing to reprieve anarchists such as Vaillant, who was guillotined despite the fact that he made sure the bomb he threw into the French parliament was too weak to kill or seriously injury anyone.<sup>6</sup> In turn the assassin of the editor of a Livorno newspaper wished to avenge the latter's published attack on Caserio. Perhaps with greater justification, in 1897 Michele Angiolillo shot down Spanish Prime Minister Canovas as ultimately responsible for the police's savage torture of completely innocent anarchists and others imprisoned in the Montjuich fortress, all falsely accused of complicity in terrorist bombings. At his trial in 1900, Gaetano Bresci declared that it was "after the states of siege [i.e., martial law] in Sicily [in 1894] and Milan [in 1898], established illegally by royal decree, that I decided to kill the king in order to vindicate those pale and bleeding victims." Moreover, Bresci explained, the king was at fault for awarding a medal to the general who had shot down unarmed men, women, and children in Milan who were protesting rising bread prices and unpopular government policies.<sup>7</sup> All of Bresci's complaints against the king were arguably true, even if retribution might more justifiably have been meted out to the general in charge of the troops in Milan and the prime minister directly responsible for these policies. Bresci believed that his act of regicide would be followed by a revolution within two months.<sup>8</sup> This lengthy analysis of motivation shows, I think, that the Italian anarchists did not carry out their deeds in pursuit of violence for its own sake, except perhaps in the cases of the assassin of the Empress Elizabeth and the two crackpots.

In terms of the general cause or motivation for anger, leading in some cases to terrorist deeds, one might ask whether a fundamental difference does not exist between historic anarchism and radical Islamic Jihadism. Anarchist militancy was intimately tied up with the "social question," the social problems, injustices and grievances of the nineteenth century working class population, both rural and urban. When a significant amelioration of the social question occurred through a combination of political and economic action and reforms, improvements in the economy, and anarchist absorption into the labor movement, as in France and Italy after about 1900, the problem of anarchist terrorism diminished dramatically.<sup>9</sup> Given its connection to the social question, one wonders if nineteenth century anarchist terrorism does not parallel more closely the new Left terror of the 1960s and 1970s than contemporary Jihadism (even if the membership of the Italian Red Brigades, for example, was much more middle class than the anarchist terrorists, who were mostly artisans and labourers).

Unlike anarchism, Jihadism's fundamental complaint is not the product, or primarily the product, of any social question. Rather it is a protest against what al-Qaeda perceives to be western, "crusader" imperialism. Its genesis was intimately tied up with the successful expulsion of the Russian imperialists from Afghanistan. Therefore, al-Qaeda's major discontent seems to resemble much more that of the Irish, Algerian, and other anti-imperialist terrorists of the period from the 1920s to the 1960s, what David C. Rapoport has called the second wave of terrorism, than that of the propagandists by the deed.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, similarities exist in terms of the worldwide scope and the styles of violence employed by al-Qaeda

Home	Latest posts	Popular posts	Comments	Random post		Share
------	--------------	---------------	----------	-------------	--	-------

and the anarchists. In the early twentieth century, anarchist terrorism appeared to be a universal threat, like al-Qaeda today. Stunning assassinations and bombings took place in previously untouched or recently untouched areas, such as North and South America, and groups unaffiliated to anarchism, such as the terrorists of India, were co-opted into the Black International by the reports of alarmed and sensation-seeking journalists.<sup>11</sup> The only continent that avoided some act of real or alleged anarchist “propaganda by the deed” was Antarctica. Both al-Qaeda and the anarchists have been prone to select highly symbolic targets, be they the center of America’s war making power, the Pentagon, or, in 1893, that great den of the bourgeoisie, the Barcelona opera house. The symbolism of bombing the latter was enhanced by the fact that at the time it was performing “William Tell,” an opera about assassination in the name of achieving liberty. The anarchists also targeted such symbolic sites as stock exchanges, cafe, and religious processions. Most famously, they murdered more (eight) monarchs, prime ministers, and presidents than any other terrorist group in history. While most of these rulers possessed real authority (and therefore were not purely symbolic targets), two were figureheads with minimal (the President of France) or no (the Empress Elizabeth) political power.

Another point of possible similarity regards acts of suicidal terrorism. Although they did not push it to the extremes of al-Qaeda, the anarchists carried out a number of suicide bombings and were often fatalistically resigned to dying after committing their violent deeds. This may be significant because suicide bombing only occurred or occurs in the anarchist and the most recent waves of terrorism. Probably the first suicide bombing of the modern era was carried out in March of 1881 by a Russian nihilist (although the nihilists were not anarchists) when he consciously gave up his life in order to ensure that his bomb got close enough to assassinate the Russian Tsar. The assassin stood one meter from his target and the ensuing explosion killed both assassin and victim. Emile Florion, the first French propagandist by the deed, tried to commit suicide after he had fired at a random bourgeoisie (but perhaps Florion is not such a good example since he was mentally unstable). Alexander Berkman, a Russian-Jewish immigrant to America, was planning to die by his own hand after he killed the ruthless, strike-breaking manager of the Carnegie steel works. Emile Henry, the brilliant young French anarchist who was responsible for the death of five policemen as well as killing and wounding 21 people in a Paris cafe’ in 1894, frequently expressed the desire for martyrdom. After an enormous wave of terrorism swept across Russia following the outbreak of the 1905 Revolution, we find reports of anarchist suicide bombers.<sup>12</sup> In November 1912, Manuel Pardinás killed himself immediately after shooting to death Spanish Prime Minister Canalejas. On the other hand, about half of the Italian anarchist terrorists attempted to escape after their deeds, or carried them out anonymously. While none of the 20 or so Italian attentatori tried to commit or contemplated suicide, more than a handful made little effort to secure their escape after performing violent deeds. Lombroso, the famous criminologist and controversial analyst of the anarchists, labeled this behavior “indirect suicide.”<sup>13</sup>

Gelvin’s final point of comparison between anarchism and al-Qaedaism points to their highly decentralized structures built upon semi-autonomous cells. Rohan Gunaratna supports this view in his best selling 2002 book Inside al-Qaeda. There he claims that the constituent groups of al Qaeda operate as a loose coalition, each with its own command, control and communications structures. . . . Al Qaeda can also be conceptualized as a holding company and its associated Islamist groups as its subsidiaries, with al Qaeda providing venture capital.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, this is terrorism by franchise, with al Qaeda happy to lend its brand name to terrorists operating in Spain, Indonesia, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Home	Latest posts	Popular posts	Comments	Random post		Share
------	--------------	---------------	----------	-------------	--	-------

Even if Bin Laden and Gervin's depictions of al-Qaeda are correct, the comparisons with anarchism work only partially. This is because as decentralized as terrorism by franchise may seem, the anarchists, not surprisingly, made even less effort to organize and coordinate their attacks. They never created terrorist training camps or central command posts. The newspapers spread stories that London and Paterson, New Jersey, were the centers of vast anarchist conspiracies, but these were all myths. Most anarchist deeds of violence were due to spontaneous individual actions, sometimes with the help of a few friends. In an essay on political violence, Emma Goldman, the famous American anarchist and intimate friend of the assassin Alexander Berkman, compared anarchist violence to the outbreak of a summer storm. Sensitive souls, she claimed, suffering from the wrongs and injustices of society, lash out against the system. "The burning, surging passion" caused by "just indignation . . . makes the storm inevitable."<sup>15</sup> Most of the notorious anarchist assassinations of political leaders fit this description (although certainly in some cases their justice would be called into question.) Only the 31 May 1905 assault on King Alfonso XIII of Spain, who was riding through Paris in the same carriage as the President of France, may have been an exception, since this seems to have been the product of an elaborate international plot originating in Spain. Who exactly was behind the assault is unclear; the French court acquitted the Spaniards arrested for the crime.<sup>16</sup>

But the anarchists were occasionally able to pull off organized feats of terrorism that foreshadowed what al-Qaeda accomplished in 1998 in East Africa and on 9=11. The best examples of this took place in the United States. At the end of April 1919, thirty bombs were mailed to various high-ranking officials, from the Attorney General and a Supreme Court justice to mayors, congressmen, and a Bureau of Investigation agent. They were all supposed to arrive on May 1, international Labor Day, but due to the vagaries of the post office and the anarchists' failure to put sufficient postage on one package, it did not happen. Nonetheless, this attempt at nationwide terrorism stunned the public. On June 2, 1919, nearly simultaneous explosions took place in seven American cities at the homes of various officials, including the Attorney General, who was severely shaken. The culminating event of this wave of anarchist violence was the terrible Wall Street explosion of 16 September 1920. This was the deadliest act of terrorism in American history before the Oklahoma City bombing of April 1995. The identity of the man who placed the bomb that killed 33 people and injured over 200 others has never been conclusively established, although several historians believe it was Mario Buda, a follower of Luigi Galleani. Galleani was an Italian immigrant, anarchist, and advocate of terrorism who wrote a guide to building bombs. The historian Paul Avrich speculates that Buda set the bomb near the symbolic heart of American capitalism as revenge for the persecution of his anarchist friends over the previous years. Among these friends, recently indicted for murder, were Sacco and Vanzetti.<sup>17</sup>

In conclusion, some similarities do exist between al-Qaeda and anarchism: both emphasize direct action, lack the detailed programmatic goals of some other political groups, and demonize the modern nation state. The threat posed by both appears—or once appeared—to be global. Suicide bombing also finds a pale premonition in pre-World War I terrorism. But anarchism is less backward looking, less purely defensive, and less centrally organized than Al-Qaeda. The anti-imperialist thrust of al-Qaeda seems distinctly different from the anti-social rage of the anarchist terrorists. If history rhymes, as Mark Twain famously said, then these two terrorist twins are a little out of rhythm with each other, the explosive "music" of their respective terrorisms considerably off key.

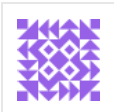
Notes

Home	Latest posts	Popular posts	Comments	Random post		Share
------	--------------	---------------	----------	-------------	--	-------

1. [www.international.anarchobase.com/cms/mcs/6anarchism.pa](http://www.international.anarchobase.com/cms/mcs/6anarchism.pa)

2. John Ehrenberg, *Proudhon and His Age* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1996), 92.
3. Gelvin (see note 1 above), 7.
4. Ibid., 11.
5. A convenient summary of Kropotkin's views can be found in his entry on "Anarchism" published in the eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1910).
6. Jean Maitron, *Histoire du mouvement anarchiste en France* (Paris, 1955), 220.
7. Arrigo Petacco, *L'anarchico che venne dall'America* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 2001), 99–100.
8. Ibid. 113, 132; "Il comploho", *La Tribuna* (Roma), 4 August 1900.
9. For various explanations of the reasons for the decline of anarchist terrorism in Italy, but not Spain, see Richard Bach Jensen, "Criminal Anthropology and Anarchist terrorism in Spain and Italy," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 16, no. 2 (December 2001), 31–44. For France, Maitron (see note 6 above), 241–242, 311–322, 353–356, 386–388.
10. "The Four Waves of Modern Terrorism," in Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, eds., *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46–73.
11. For anarchism, terrorism, and India, see Jensen, "The Evolution of Anarchist Terrorism in Europe and the United States from the Nineteenth Century to World War I," in *Terror: From Tyrannicide to Terrorism in Europe, 1605–2005*, Brett Bowden and Michael T. David, eds. (Routledge and University of Queensland Press, 2008) Chapter 8.
12. Anna Geifman, *Thou Shalt Kill: Revolutionary Terrorism in Russia, 1894–1917* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 132.
13. *Gli anarchici* (Turin: Bocca, 1894) Chapter VIII.
14. *Inside Al Qaeda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), 91.
15. "The Psychology of Political Violence," *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), 80.
16. Joaquin Romero Maura, "Terrorism in Barcelona and its Impact on Spanish Politics 1904–1909," *Past and Present* 41 (December 1968), 139–144. Rafael Nunez Florencio, *El terrorismo anarquista (1888–1909)* (Madrid: siglo veintiuno, 1983), 72–75, disputes much of Romero Maura's conspiratorial thesis.
17. Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 205–205; Nunzio Pernicone, "Luigi Galleani and Italian Anarchist Terrorism in the United States," *Studi Emigrazione* 30 (September 1993), 469.

See also : Walter Laqueur, [Anarchism and Al Qaeda](#) | Gelvin's original craptastic article and response posted later...



#### About @ndy

I live in Melbourne, Australia. I like anarchy. I don't like nazis. I enjoy eating pizza and drinking beer. I barrack for the greatest football team on Earth: Collingwood Magpies. The 2017 premiership's a cakewalk for the good old Collingwood.

[View all posts by @ndy →](#)

This entry was posted in [Anarchism](#), [History](#), [War on Terror](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

[Home](#)
[Latest posts](#)
[Popular posts](#)
[Comments](#)
[Random post](#)
[Share](#)

One Response to *Nineteenth Century Anarchist Terrorism: How Comparable to the Terrorism of al-Qaeda?*



**Анархист** *says:*  
November 11, 2010 at 11:57 pm

You people are so being confused. I will give you an advice. Read about ideology, philosophy and activism before you write statements, before you open blogs and pages and mainly before giving speeches in front of the public. Anarchy, mostly the social anarchist types are against violence, that's why anarchist terroristic attacks are a oxymoron, while there is only one type of anarchism, which is called anarchist syndicalism which advocates the use of power to maintain balance between the State and the ordinary people. No other, or highest percent of other Anarchist branches accept violence as a way of explaining your opinion. You cant make similarities between Al-Qaeda and Anarchy. Anarchy is peace. Read up a bit, please...

Home	Latest posts	Popular posts	Comments	Random post		Share	
------	--------------	---------------	----------	-------------	--	-------	--