Terrorism and Affordance

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Affording terrorism: Idealists and materialities in the emergence of modern terrorism

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Enter terrorism: The opening shot

Modern terrorism emerged out of the meeting of a revolutionist and a revolver, of idealist motivations and materialist capabilities. This paper will make the case for a wider perspective on the emergence of terrorism, and add to the importance of ideological machinations the impact of technological machines. It argues that just as we cannot understand the breakthrough of ‘international’ terrorism in the 1960s without taking into account the capabilities and characteristics of airplanes and television sets, we cannot understand the breakthrough of revolutionary terrorism in the 1880s without revolvers and dynamite bombs.

Before the 1870s sub state terrorism did not exist as a recognized and distinctive political practice. The violent act that crystallized the new tactic of ‘revolutionary terrorism’ took place in January 1878 in the capital of Imperial Russia, St Petersburg. This was the shooting of the city’s governor General Fedor Trepov by the social revolutionist Vera Zasulich. She herself has left us an account of the act:
It was already growing light on the street, but the half-dark station was completely deserted. I changed clothes, exchanged kisses with [her friend] Masha, and left. The streets looked cold and gloomy.

About ten petitioners had already gathered at the governor’s office.

"Is the governor receiving?"

"He’s receiving; he’ll be right out." . . .

I was satisfied. The nightmarish feeling that had weighed on me since the previous evening was gone without a trace. I had nothing on my mind but the concern that everything should go as planned.

The adjutant led us into the next room, me first, and put us in a corner. At this very moment [governor] Trepov entered from another door, with a whole retinue of military men, and all of them headed toward me.

For a moment this confused and upset me. In thinking through the details, I had found it inconvenient to shoot at the moment I presented the petition. Now Trepov and his entourage were looking at me, their hands occupied by papers and things, and I decided to do it earlier than I had planned – to do it when Trepov stopped opposite my neighbour, before reaching me.

And suddenly there was no neighbour ahead of me – I was first... It’s all the same; I will shoot when he stops the next petitioner after me.

I cried inwardly. The momentary alarm passed at once, as if it had never been.

“What do you want?"

“A certificate of conduct.”

He jotted down something with a pencil and turned to my neighbour. The revolver was in my hand. I pressed the trigger... a misfire. My heart missed a beat. Again I pressed... a shot, cries... Now they’ll start beating me. This was next in the sequence of events I had thought through so many times.

But instead there was a pause. It probably lasted only a few seconds in all, but I felt it.

I threw down the revolver - this also had been decided beforehand; otherwise, in the scuffle, it might go off by itself. I stood and waited.

“The criminal was stunned;” they wrote later in the papers. Suddenly everybody around me began moving, the petitioners scattered, police officers threw themselves at me, and I was seized from both sides.

“Where is the gun?”

“She threw it – it’s on the floor.”

“The revolver! Give up the revolver!” They continued to scream, pulling me in different directions. . . . Everything went as I had expected (Engel and Rosenthal, 1975, 81-2. Emphasis in original).

That it went as Zasulich ‘had expected’ indicates that this was not a spontaneous act of revenge but a planned act of symbolic political violence. This planning and the deliberate choice of a representative victim were central in making this into the first terrorist deed. Although not publicly known at the time, this was part of a larger plot including at least one other co-conspirator, the friend Maria ‘Masha’ Kolenkina of whom Zasulich had taken leave immediately before her attack on the governor. After parting, Masha had gone away to execute a similar and simultaneous assassination attempt against another Russian government representative, a former prosecutor in a trial against Russian radicals. However, Masha failed in creating the possibility to also fire her hidden revolver and it was Vera Zasulich’s shot that came to spark a number of similar violent political deeds, outside and inside Russia. One of the first theoreticians of terrorism in 1880 praised Zasulich’s attempt as the origin of the new revolutionary violence.

This shot was the starting point for the whole struggle that followed. From this point on the movement took on definitive form, and it went on almost without deviation towards the new, already clearly established ideal. People unknown to society or government appeared out of nowhere and started to dispose of one or another statesman... From this time on, the events become more and more grandiose (Morozov quoted in Gross, 1972, 103-4. Emphasis added).

This ‘new, already clearly established ideal’ was terrorism, which from then on was recognized as a viable political practice.

Zasulich’s act together with the other founding deed of nineteenth-century Russian terrorism, the bombing assassination of Alexander II in 1881, is used to demonstrate the role that an analytic focus on technology can play in understanding the development of terrorism as an emergent political practice. This inaugurated what political scientist David Rapoport has described as the first wave of international terrorism which became the ‘first global or truly international terrorist experience in history’ and where ‘similar activities occur in several countries, driven by a common predominant energy’. In Rapoport’s model this energy was ideological in the form of ‘Anarchism’ (Rapoport, 2004, 47). Contrary to Rapoport’s and other studies of the origins of modern terrorism this chapter attempts to supplement such reliance on idealist motivations by focusing on terrorism’s materialist and sociotechnical foundations (see also Fridlund, 2007).

This will enhance the understanding of the central role of technology in affording new threatening possibilities for political action. The overall argument outlined here is that terrorism is the sociotechnical result emerging out of
the meeting of an idealist revolutionist and a materialist technology 'script' (Akrich, 1992). This perspective belongs to what Domanska has described as 'new material studies' which are interested in studying things beyond texts, and 'points to the agency of things, accentuating the fact that things not only exist but also act and have performative potential' (Domanska, 2006, 339). Such a perspective is also a post-humanist account, which by Andrew Pickering's description is one 'in which the human actors are still there but now inextricably entangled with the non-human, no longer at center of action and calling the shots' (Pickering, 1995, 26). In support of this approach I need to introduce a concept that captures the enabling and constraining role of technology in applied political practice, what I call sociotechnical affordances.

**Sociotechnical affordances: Bridging and enabling aspirations and technologies**

That technology can play critical parts in shaping political actions is not a controversial statement, especially in the minds of those who have lived through the Cold War with its nuclear weapons politics of balance of terror and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). What is more controversial is to argue that technologies constrain, enable or even determine political outcomes. The standard critique against such statements can be said to follow two interconnected lines of argument: the first is to demonstrate the fallacy of technological determinism, and the second to show the prevalence of social voluntarism in technological processes. Technological determinism can be described as the notion that technologies develop along autonomous trajectories that are determined and propelled by internal technical criteria. The extension of this argument is that technological developments are a force outside of society that cannot determine its inevitable direction or content and instead have no choice but to adapt to and be changed by the demands of technologies. One of the general critiques of technological determinism is that technological development cannot be autonomous or inevitable as the preferred design, use and characteristics of technologies are outcomes of social processes of choice, adaptation and redesign which inevitably include social negotiations and therefore the results of social groups' voluntary choice. However, social voluntarism has also been criticized to overly emphasize the possibilities of 'reading' and reinterpreting the possible meanings of technologies and the flexibility of their various uses. What such voluntarism does not take fully into account is to what degree these choices are already circumscribed or predetermined by technologies. How, as

Claude Fischer has described it, the 'existence and use of a technology alters material and social givens, creating new options for and new constraints on individual actions' and how technology 'becomes more than a tool for action, it becomes a condition of action' (Fischer, 1985, 295).

As a way between the Scylla of technological determinism and the Charybdis of social voluntarism I propose the concept of 'sociotechnical affordances' as a fruitful tool for historians of political change to re-address the question of how technology has shaped politics. This is an appropriation and modification of the concept of affordances formulated by the evolutionary psychologist James J. Gibson (1907–79). Affordances can be described as the 'possibilities, enablements and constraints' made available by technology, and can be described in terms of an ability (portability, concealability, etc.) that the characteristics of a technology makes possible for its use when it is matched with appropriate user capability (Hutchby, 2006, 168). This idea that technologies afford certain kinds of interactions and behaviours and not others has begun to be taken up in design studies as well as in the sociology of technology by scholars such as Mike Michael and Ian Hutchby (Michael, 2000a, b; Hutchby 2001a, b). However, historians studying political change have previously not adopted affordances.

The main popularization of affordances in connection to technology came when Donald Norman introduced it to the design community in his book *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (1988), later republished as the paperback *The Design of Everyday Things* (1990). This was a simplified version of Gibson's theory of affordances, primarily formulated in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979) as a way of addressing 'one of the most fundamental theoretical issues of modern psychology, the reality of meaning'. (Costall, 1995, 468). According to Costall, Gibson claimed what 'we attend to in our surroundings, are not the shapes, colours and orientations of surfaces in our surroundings, but rather the meaning of things for action. We can see, for example, that something can be eaten or thrown' (Costall, 1995, 470). Or to quote Gibson directly:

The same layout will have different affordances for different animals, of course, insofar as each animal has a different repertory of acts. Different animals will perceive different sets of affordances therefore,... The meaning or value of a thing consists of what it affords. Note the implications of this proposed definition. What a thing affords a particular observer (or species of observer) points to the organism, the subject. The shape and size and composition and rigidity of a thing, however, point to its physical existence, the object. Both these determine what it affords the observer. The affordance points both ways. What a thing is and what it means are
not separate, the former being physical and the latter mental as we are accustomed to believe (Gibson, 1971/1982, 407–8).

It is this relational quality of an affordance which makes it a central way of bridging and surpassing the created dichotomy between technological determinism and social voluntarism and which merits my designation sociotechnical affordances. Gibsonian affordances are inherently sociotechnical or hybrid, they are 'aspects of a given technology's materiality which only really become relevant at the interface between that technology and some person's attempt to put it to use for certain purposes. The concept is therefore a relational one and its main use is in showing how action is either enabled or constrained by material factors' (Hutchby, 2005, 68). An affordance 'represents a means by which both the materiality of technologies and the observable orientations of technology users can simultaneously be taken into account' (Hutchby and Barnett, 2005, 152). In this way, a sociotechnical affordance is an ability for action that is the relational outcome of when a user's specific skill capability is matched by a technology's material functionality. A pocket calculator affords the ability of calculation if the user knows arithmetic and the calculator has the proper software and hardware for calculation, a car affords driving only if the user knows how to operate the wheel and gears and if the car has gas and is fully operational.

However, to be able to use affordances for historical purposes it is necessary to make a couple of distinctions about different kinds of affordances. First it is important to emphasize that although a technology often has one intended way of using it, its 'canonical difference', (Costall, 1997, 79) this does not mean that a technology has only one affordance, on the contrary a material thing may have a great many different possible ways in which it can be used. Each is an affordance. . . . Thus a floor affords walking, dancing, placing furniture; a window affords a view of the lake, an escape from a threat, a view for a peeping Tom; a knife affords cutting, threatening, opening a window catch, and lots more (Harré, 2002, 27).

In addition, it is important to emphasize with sociologist Will Gibson that affordance 'is also intended to describe the ways in which new usages can emerge from the interaction of cultural knowledge and physical properties' (Gibson, 2006, 175). This is what I would describe as unintended emergent affordances in contrast to the intended affordances designed by inventors, designers and engineers. Furthermore, to the historian it is important to emphasize that a technology's canonical and auxiliary affordances are not necessarily constant but might change over time; might emerge, evolve and disappear. All this taken together makes it possible to talk of three different kinds of historical affordances: designed, discovered and disappeared affordances. Designed affordances are the intended affordances of a technology, purposefully constructed to be the canonical or auxiliary ability of a technology by its designer. Discovered affordances are unexpected or unintended abilities of a technology that is discovered by its users – such as the use of a book as a door stop or a passenger airliner as a cruise missile – or that emerge as possible following the development of new user capabilities or additional technologies that did not exist at the time of its invention, such as television sets being used as computer screens. The history of technology has many examples of technologies, like the telephone, the canonical or dominant uses of which, such as for sociability and gossiping, came at a later stage in their development, or the mobile phone for which we still are discovering and constructing new affordances decades after its invention. Similarly, the affordances of a technology might disappear if the user capabilities or technical functionalities vanish globally or locally, like Sumerian tablets or floppy disks which no longer afford reading as we no longer have the capability of understanding the language or lack the equipment to operate them. In considering terrorists' use of technology we are primarily focusing on the unintended, emergent, rather than designed affordances, such as when automobiles and passenger airplanes afford their use as car bombs and 'human cruise missiles' (Hoffman, 2006, 133) or when Russian idealists discovered the potential for a new form of revolutionary propaganda afforded by small and powerful revolvers.

**Idealists: Radicalizing populists**

In 1862, Ivan Turgeniev's novel Fathers and Sons led to the naming of the young anti-authoritarian Russian populists as ' nihilists ', a movement which gradually developed into a more explicit social revolutionary movement. The practical breakthrough of terrorism was preceded by a process of what we now refer to as radicalization – an acceptance and willingness to use violence to achieve political change – of parts of this populist movement in the form of the development of an increasingly more militant and violent culture among Russian populists. Among the populists there was somewhat of a difference between 'propagandists' and 'agitators' about the proper way towards revolution. The former were followers of Peter Lavrov and focused on achieving the revolution through peaceful propaganda inciting a socialist consciousness among the peasants, while the latter adhered to Mikhail Bakunin's glorification of rebellion through agitation using specific grievances and protests to foment
local uprisings that would ignite a widespread revolution. Both these tactics were to be tried in the 1870s before we reached the origin of ‘terrorism’ at the end of the decade.

First out were the propagandists. During the spring of 1874 thousands of Russian university students had left their dormitories for ‘going to the people’, to go and live and work with the peasant communes in the countryside and workers of factories in villages and cities to propagate the gospel of social revolution. However, this was a failure overall; peasant and factory work was too long and hard and the audience too alien, uninterested or suspicious (Offord, 1988, 1). Next out were the agitators. In Kiev in the Russian South there was a group of revolutionists known as the Southern Rebels (Ïúâëèé Êóâòàò) who, inspired by Bakunin’s idea that the peasants were ‘inherently’ revolutionary, believed they needed ‘practical insurrectionists that would inspire them to act’ rather than ‘solemn teachers intoning revolutionary theories’ (Bergman, 1983, 24; Siljak, 2008, 154). In 1876, the Southern Rebels left the city, dressed as country-dwellers, to offer the peasants ‘weapons, men and the backing of a large revolutionary organization’ which they expected would start the coming nationwide uprising. The rebels travelled between villages ‘preaching to the peasants that they should act in their own self-interest and rise in revolution against the state’. However, the Buntari had naively expected that their presence and offer would be enough to spark an uprising but, as in the case of the propagandists, the peasants did not want or believe the Buntari’s revolutionary ability and promises of violent social revolution and many agitators soon returned to city life (Siljak, 2008, 157–9).

Back in the city there was a growing tension following several arrests of populists and stories of secret police spies and infiltrators. The growing fear of betrayals among the rebels made it a widespread habit and ‘common practice to carry a revolver at all times’ and the police allegedly ‘kept their distance from the Buntari because they feared that they would respond with gunfire’ (Siljak, 2008, 162; Bergman, 1983, 26; Venturi, 1960, 598). A critical step towards terrorism was taken in 1876 when some Buntari attempted to assassinate the alleged informer Gorinovich, bashing his head in with a ball and chain, pouring acid on his face and leaving him for dead with a sign around his neck saying ‘Such will be the fate of all spies’. This was an important and radicalizing event as it was the first known predetermined and planned act in Russia by revolutionists of representative violence; previous activities had been peaceful with two exceptional and spontaneous acts of armed resistance to arrests (Meincke, 1984, 160; Siljak, 2008, 162; Bergman, 1983, 28). However, Gorinovich survived the assassination attempt and informed on his former fellow Rebels, which led the Buntari to leave Kiev and abandon their countryside efforts. As one of them put it: ‘Activity among the peasants becomes impossible. . . . We shall try in the cities. We are all armed. We decide on individual struggle against the government, armed resistance to arrest; we shall liquidate spies, traitors [and] . . . officials’ (Michael Frolenko quoted in Ulam, 1977, 247).

Several Buntari in December 1876 arrived in St Petersburg and joined the new radical organization, Zemlya i Volya (Land and Freedom). Although the new organization worked mainly through underground propaganda activities, it had also partly embraced previous violent talk about the acceptability of self-defence and ‘disorganization’. It stated that one of its missions was ‘to weaken, to shatter, that is to disorganize the power of the state, without which, in our opinion, the success of even the broadest and best devised plan for revolution will not be guaranteed’ (Hardy, 1987, 48). Originally, this violence was supposed to be reactive rather than proactive and limited to self-defence and protection although that also included elimination of traitors and spies (Hardy, 1987, 53; Ulam, 1977, 250). But so far there had been only one disorganization victim: the previously mentioned Gorinovich. But in 1877 Land and Freedom’s disorganization group was inaugurated with the killing of a worker who had informed on a populist leader to the police (Haber, 1995, 149; Ulam, 1977, 277). So, although the Buntari had failed in revolutionizing the peasants, they had succeeded in contributing to radicalizing the populists and by 1878 an increasing number of radicals ‘were making a point of carrying arms’ (Hardy, 1987, 58).

But to fully understand this radicalization we have to analyse not just populist and nihilist ideologies and motivations but also their technologies and materialities. That the devil is in the details is never more fitting than for the post-humanist history of terrorism. Let us consider therefore the violent materiality that together with radicalized idealists was to coproduce terrorism – the revolver.

**Materialities: Civilizing revolvers**

The mature revolving pistol design can be said to have emerged during the 1860s when the military was the dominant handgun customer and the different military cultures of Europe and the US shaped the revolvers on the market. US warfare after the end of its civil war was to a large degree ‘more of a guerrilla warfare with her native inhabitants’. It was characterized not by large battles but by sudden and relatively short surprise skirmish attacks with relatively few casualties. In this kind of warfare the ‘keys to survival’ in military arms were not so much speed but ‘rugged reliability and some degree of
accuracy'. This was something that characterized single action (SA) revolvers (Wilkerson, 1998, 19–20). 'Single action' meant that when the trigger was pressed the revolver only executed one single action, that of releasing the cocked hammer which then hit and ignited the bullet which sped out of the barrel towards its target. This meant that the hammer before and between each shot had to be cocked manually to ready another bullet in the revolving cylindrical magazine to be fired. This was different from the double action (DA) revolvers which, when the trigger was pressed by itself, cocked the hammer, revolved the magazine and in the same movement dropped the hammer firing the bullet.

The double action was more popular in Britain, in part due to its different military situation in which struggles against colonial insurrection and wars of colonial expansion and consolidation predominated. These colonial shoot-outs took place overseas in Africa and Asia as well as on the home front in Ireland. This was the period of the 'new imperialism' which was shaped by as well as shaped the development of European guns (Headrick, 1981). British military forces were often greatly outnumbered in close quarters battles by large groups of native enemies armed with primitive but efficient hand weapons. That produced a demand for handguns with rapid fire and large 'man-stopping' firepower, which could incapacitate more native soldiers at a greater distance, that is, before they could deploy their dangerous hand weapons. Double-action revolvers afforded this ability, through being able to fire several shots in succession until the magazine was empty without needing to manually cock the hammer between shots. It was also possible to use two revolvers simultaneously which was very valuable in close quarters combat against many enemies. Compared to Americans 'Europeans were more interested in the rate of fire than in accuracy' and the preferred European handgun in the 1870s were double action revolvers of large calibres such as .45 or .50 (Wilkerson, 1998, 19).

Also significant was the development of the revolver during the 1870s from being primarily a military technology to becoming a product directed towards civilian markets. This 'civilizing' of the revolver meant that manufacturers started to design particular models with specific civilian affordances. Part of that consisted in an increased use of small powerful pocket revolvers. The growth of a new civilian revolver culture is shown by the Colt company's development of their first double action revolver for the European market. Since 1874, Colt's European agency in London had been encouraging the company to start manufacturing a double action revolver to be able to compete in Europe, as that was 'what now sells best in this market'. The sales of Colt's small revolvers in Europe as well as in the US 'had been badly eroded' due to 'numerous low quality pocket pistols by various manufacturers' forcing the company to drastically lower their prices. Many of those manufacturers came from Belgium that was one of the largest revolver manufacturers in the world, although mainly of lower and cheaper quality than the British and American firms. In 1875, the London office reported to the US that 'they make in Liege scarcely any new pistols but of that system: self extracting double action revolvers. Any new revolver to have a fair chance of success, must be of that construction . . . the public prefers it, and that argument is unanswerable'. Colt had resisted developing a double action model mainly because of the 'very large expenditure for tools' such a new product line would mean. However, by 1876 Colt 'finally accepted the fact that double action were the way to go' and to be able to compete the London agency had started to offer British made DA revolvers to its customers (Wilkerson, 1998, 22–5). On New Year's day 1877 Colt shipped their first 21 double action revolvers to Europe, a small six-shot pocket revolver of the smaller .38 calibre.

But the affordances of this revolver, its lethal abilities, were not deemed sufficient for the European market. Colt's London office soon asked for the manufacture of a more powerful revolver, a .45 cal. self cocker like the British Bulldog or Irish Constabulary revolver, we would sell a great many of them, and I have no doubt they would take with time in America. Please consider the matter' (Wilkerson, 1998, 25). This Bulldog revolver was an embodiment of the new 'civilized' military revolver. It was introduced by the British company R. Webley & Son and can in hindsight, when considering its centrality in the development of modern terrorism, be described as a case of 'blowback' or something of an 'own goal'. It had been developed as a weapon for use by one of Britain's colonial forces against insurgents and rebels (Worman, 2005, 197; Layman, 2006), the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), the police force in Ireland and a paramilitary police force the purpose of which was 'to police a foreign land to ensure security of the imperial elements and the colonial interests' (Das and Verma, 1998, 354). Its military character was reflected in its weapons. It was armed with rifles, carbines and revolvers in contrast to the unarmed bobbies of the empire's heartland (Myatt, 1990, 12). The RIC was a large user and buyer of revolvers and in 1868 Webley introduced its Constabulary model, which was a double-action six-shot model of the large .442 calibre (Layman, 2006, 17). After a couple of years, Webley decided to try to market this revolver towards the civilian market, but it needed modification 'in order to make it a more attractive product for the general population' (Layman, 2006, 17). In 1872–73, it was redesigned as a smaller but mechanically similar five-shot revolver with a shorter barrel but of large calibre 'entirely suitable as a concealable weapon of considerable knockdown power at close ranges' and described by a contemporary English sportsman to be 'as good a weapon as can be recommended for purposes of self-defence at close
range, the disabling powers of this pistol being on account of its large bore, of fair amount’ (Layman, 2006, 17; Wormer, 2005, 116).

But, despite the revolver becoming increasingly a civilian consumer product, the major buyers were still the military, and one of the biggest military orders came in 1870 when Russia decided to equip their cavalry and artillery troops ‘with a modern revolver’. The one they chose was Smith & Wesson Russian .44 calibre Military Model, a modification of Smith & Wesson’s Single Action Army Revolver, the first large-calibre revolver designed for metallic cartridges. This modified revolver came to be known as the ‘Russian Model’. In 1872–78 almost 150,000 Smith & Wesson cavalry revolvers were introduced to Russia. Among them, one ‘Russian Model’ played an indirect part in the origin of the ‘Russian Method’, the tactic of political terrorism pioneered by Russian social revolutionists.

**Affording political violence: Zasulich’s armed propaganda by the deed**

Vera Zasulich was a veteran revolutionist and had taken part in the ‘go to the people’ movement before she together with her fellow student Kolenkina had joined the Buntari in 1875. The two women had gone out in the countryside together with male rebels posing as village wives and after a while the two women ‘began to carry revolvers and practiced shooting daily’ (Siljak, 2008, 159). Zasulich supposedly also ‘strapped a pistol to her belt and went along’ when her fellow rebels travelled to the country side to incite the peasants (Bergman, 1893, 26). However, Zasulich after about a month was ordered to return to city life and by the end of 1876 she left the South for St Petersburg to work as a typesetter in Land and Freedom’s underground printing press (Meincke, 1984, 152, 158).

In St Petersburg Zasulich supposedly was so enraged about the government persecutions of populists and impatient with the delay of other planned nihilist protests that she formed a plan together with Kolenkina – and most likely aided by other fellow Buntari – to assassinate two government officials who had been involved in persecuting the ‘going to the people’ movement: they were Zhalekhovsky, the prosecutor in the so called Trial of the 193 and Senator Zhikharev who had ordered the arrests of thousands of propagandists. The plan however changed when they heard how the arrested populist Bogoliubov had been given a severe beating in prison after not showing enough deference to the visiting general-governor of St Petersburg, Fedor Trepov. Following this Trepov replaced Zhikharev as the second target in their plot (Maxwell, 1990, 28).

The background to Bogoliubov’s arrest is another illustration of the prevalence of revolver culture among the radicals. Bogoliubov was actually a cover name for the seasoned radical Alex Stepanovich Emelianov who had just taken part in setting up a secret populist office for making fake passports. He had been warned to stay away from a planned populist demonstration and had gone to a local rifle range to practice shooting his revolver. But on his way home he could not resist going to watch how the demonstration had turned out and when he then was apprehended ‘his practice weapon was found on him, and this was all the proof the authorities needed of his criminal complicity’ (Meincke, 1984, 235).

The conspiracy of Zasulich and Kolenkina illustrates something general about the history of terrorism and counter-terrorism. This is that, although the historical and contemporary record of terrorism is filled with similar aspirational or fantastical assassination plans, many of them have stayed on the drawing board or in the heads of radicals. What makes Zasulich’s different and critical to the history of terrorism is that it came to fruition. And it is in understanding why that is the case, why it succeeded rather than failed or foiled, that an analysis of the various sociotechnical affordances of the terrorist technologies that could have been used can help us. It is theoretically possible that Zasulich and Kolenkina could have achieved their deed more effectively or equally spectacularly with other technologies like knives, rifles or bombs. But we don’t know that and cannot better their local and specific knowledge. What we do know – and this is a central part of the argument – is that Zasulich did not feel that she could afford to accomplish her planned act with just any kind of technology. It was the very specific affordances of her chosen weapon that were critical for her to accomplish her deed. We know this as she actually rejected a weapon she already had in favour of another that was more suitable.

The weapon technology she already had was a Smith & Wesson revolver, probably the same one she had worn on her horseback trips among the Buntari and it was most likely one of the 150,000 imported Smith & Wesson single action ‘Russian Models’ cavalry revolvers mentioned previously. One major design modification of the Russian Model was to shorten the long (8 inches) barrel somewhat (Hogg and Weeks, 223–4; Kinard, 2003, 131–3; Boothroyd, 1970, 245–6). Nevertheless, it was still quite long which had the advantage of giving it high accuracy although with some difficulty in handling ‘in situations requiring speed rather than precision’ (Hogg and Weeks, 223). The importance of this was that the Russian Model was a large powerful military weapon focused on accuracy and firepower, very suitable to be used at a distance or from a horseback when you had the time and opportunity to take good aim before every shot. Zasulich’s planned assassination attempt did not afford
such conditions. Zasulich is supposed to have considered using her Smith and Wesson, but had 'rejected it as too long to be concealed in her clothing' (Ulam, 1977, 269). It lacked the affordance of concealability. Instead she had one of her Buntari friends go and buy her (and probably also Kolenkina) a smaller and less bulky revolver designed with affordances more suitable for personal protection, affordances which as easily could be turned to personal attack.

The particular revolver she chose was the previously mentioned British Bulldog. This was a new type of civilian pocket revolver, small, compact and concealable but also powerful as it was based on Webley's Constabulary paramilitary revolver, and having many of its lethal affordances: double-action rather than single-action, and powerful at close distance but with lack of high accuracy which was less necessary at a close distance. This was the revolver Zasulich used in the assassination attempt as its affordances much better made possible her planned clandestine killing than her large Smith and Wesson Military revolver. She could easily hide the Bulldog under her shawl and shoot at Trepov. In particular, the fast multiple-shooting ability of this double-action revolver enabled Zasulich after her first misfire to fire a second shot that hit Trepov without anyone of Trepov's protective 'retinue of military men' being able to stop her (Engel and Rosenthal, 1975, 81). A single-action revolver with its necessity to manually cock between each shot would have been much more conspicuous and time consuming. So although the two revolvers shared many lethal affordances the ones they did not share turned out to be critically significant to Zasulich in making the choices she did and in carrying through with her violent deed.

Although the original plan partly failed in that Kolenkina on the assassination day did not get access to Zhelekovsky, Zasulich's deed made it into a success. It also appeared as if Zasulich's shot had succeeded in more than just wounding a representative of the Russian government, it had also demonstrated that a new political practice was possible. Overnight she had transformed previous blustering bold and violent words about striking back against and hurting the state into irrefutable reality and midwifed a new violent political practice. She was not the inventor of 'propaganda by the deed' but she was its innovator as she had realized a demonstration of the theoretical invention and showed its power in practical use.

For many revolutionists and radicals, Zasulich's shot was a decisive and igniting moment and a number of violent deeds involving firearms, defensive and offensive, outside and inside Russia followed. This included several assassination attempts against heads of state: against the Spanish king Alfonso XII, the Italian king Umberto I and twice against the German Kaiser Wilhelm. Inside Russia populists started to shoot back against the police when they came to arrest them which was new as armed resistance had previously 'felt to violate the etiquette governing such proceedings'. Less than a week after the shooting of Trepov the police met with gunfire when they came to break up a secret populist printing press. The leader of the group Ivan Kovalsky was 'a declared proponent of armed struggle' and when he 'was ordered to empty his pockets' he pulled out a revolver and shot at the police officer (Ulam, 1977, 275-6; Hardy, 1987, 58). This act of militant 'protest' deeply impressed many radicals as Kovalsky's group were the first 'to put into practice one of the rebels' principles, “not to allow themselves to be taken like sheep” and 'to practice what they had preached: namely to launch an armed struggle with the authorities in the name of political freedom and social revolution' (Venturi, 1960, 593; Haberer, 1995, 151). Another act of armed resistance involved Kolenkina. She had managed to stay in freedom for several months until her apartment was raided by the police when she 'pulled a gun from under her pillow – she always carried a revolver – and shot twice at one of the policemen' (Hardy, 1987, 72). So, she got to fire her hidden revolver in the end. After this first phase of 'radicalization' the further development of terrorism was characterized by its consolidation and institutionalization in which sociotechnical affordances played a central part.

Institutionalization: Designing a systematic strategy and scientific technology of terrorism

After emerging as a more or less spontaneous, however planned, act of 'armed propaganda' to use a twentieth-century term, the new violent revolutionist practice gradually became more self-consciously recognized, systematic and organized. Part of this was the formation the year after Zasulich's shot of Russia's first organized revolutionary party and the world's first self-declared 'terrorist' organization, Narodnaya Volya (The People's Will), which became the prototype for subsequent terrorist organizations and central in naming and systematizing the new violent method. Originally this new kind of political violence had been discussed in more reactive terms such as 'disorganization', 'armed resistance' and 'self-defence' but now the term 'terrorism' gradually came to predominate.

In addition to its assassination activities, The People's Will was also occupied with devising a more systematic ideological and theoretical structure around the new political violence. One of its leading ideologues was Nikolai Morozov who from exile in Geneva published the pamphlet The Terrorist Struggle
(1880) in which he recognized the importance of Zasulich in demonstrating a new way towards revolution and asked what was

the likely fate of this new form of revolutionary struggle which could be called ‘terroristic revolution’? . . . This presents really a new form of struggle. It replaces by a series of individual political assassinations, which always hit their target, the massive revolutionary movements, where people often rise against each other because of misunderstanding and where a nation kills off its own children, while the enemy of the people watches from a secure shelter and sees to it that the people of the organization are destroyed. The movement punishes only those who are really responsible for the evil deed. Because of this the terroristic revolution is the only just form of a revolution . . . The lifeless forms of governmental hierarchy will exist up to the time when the nation will become aware of its rights and will rise en masse. The nation will wipe out the hierarchy, and a new better system based on the needs of freedom and justice will be built on the ruins of the old order. . . . Terroristic struggle which strikes at the weakest spot of the existing system will obviously be universally accepted in life (Morozov quoted in Gross, 1972, 104, 106, 108, 111).

This was an ideological and theoretical justification of the ‘new form of revolutionary struggle’ that was to replace and make unnecessary the traditional revolutionary battles of the barricades with a new systematic method. This was also one of the first times that the new method was described as ‘terrorist’ and soon the term was disseminated in public when Russian newspapers in 1890 described the accused in a trial of revolutionaries as ‘members of a self-proclaimed “terrorist party” (terroristicheskaya partia) and identified themselves as “terrorists” (terroristy).’ In 1881, at a trial of People’s Will members, the group can be said to have been given its ultimate recognition when the state prosecutor described the group’s struggle as ‘terror raised to the level of political theory’ and Morozov’s pamphlet as ‘terrorist theory’ (Verhoeven, 2008, 100–1).

In addition to advancing a systematic ideology of terrorism, the People’s Will contributed to the development of an equally systematic technology of terrorism. In 1879, the group started a systematic campaign to assassinate Czar Alexander II, which was grounded in promising international technological and scientific advances. Morozov described the new terrorism as a struggle ‘of science and education against bayonets and gallowes’ and the ‘terroristic revolution’ as being the ‘most convenient form of a revolution’ as at no time ‘before in history were there such convenient conditions . . . for such successful methods of struggle’ (Quoted in Gross, 1972, 103). These conditions primarily came from the nineteenth century’s Second Industrial Revolution. Compared to the earlier revolutionary violence of mass insurgencies and battle on the barricades the new terrorism was seen as a product of industrial and technological development, it was a rational and scientific violence. Claudia Verhoeven has expressed terrorism as ‘regicide reproduced in the age of science’ and the application of ‘scientific expertise and clinical [medical] experience to politics’ (Verhoeven, 2009, 149).

This came with the innovation of the dynamite bomb. Here we can see the development of a new practice that was to shape the terrorism of the following century and beyond. The group of populists that was to become the People’s Will had already in 1878 under the direction of the former engineering and medical student Nikolai Kibalchich started a systematic programme to develop a new kind of bomb using dynamite. They saw themselves as representing a new stage in history in which traditional wepons like knives and guns were no longer sufficient. What was seen as necessary was a new progressive weapon. This was dynamite, an industrial technology developed by Alfred Nobel based on the scientific discovery of nitro-glycerine. In the 1870s, Nobel had invented gelignite, a more powerful kind of dynamite, and the one that the group started to try to develop for assassination. One terrorist said that ‘dynamite gave a terrible power to the powerless’, and when another member had proposed to use a pistol to kill Alexander II it had been rejected as that ‘would not have created the same impression’. It could be interpreted as an ‘ordinary murder’ rather than ‘a new stage in the revolutionary movement’ (Ivansky, 1977, 47). Ann Larabee has described how the new terrorists ‘were devoted to creative destruction, the annihilation of old lives, old institutions, old civilizations, to make way for the new. The dynamite bomb was the ideal weapon to display this radical energy. An explosion was a spectacularly visible way to announce great change, the apocalyptic advent of revolutionary transformation’ (Larabee, 2005, 195). The desirable affordances of dynamite were not just its high explosive qualities which would make it more possible to kill the well-protected Czar, but also the ability to signal a systematic, scientific, serious and innovative organization behind the bombs.

The first public presentation of the new terrorist technology was an unsuccessful assassination attempt in 1879 using a dynamite mine that exploded under a train with the Czar and it was followed some months later with another dynamite explosion inside the Czar’s Winter Palace in St Petersburg. Finally in 1881, the People’s Will was successful when they assassinated Alexander II with two gelignite-filled hand grenades. Also in this case the concealability and portability affordances of the dynamite bombs were critical in achieving the nihilist’s goal.

The new tactic and the new technology were soon appropriated by other radical militant organizations. First out were various US-based Irish-American Fenians who used “denny-o-mite” in a number of terrorist bombings in Great Britain. That was followed by several Anarchist bombings in Italy, Germany,
United States and Spain. 'The Russian Method' continued to spread into a global wave of political violence culminating in August, 1914 with another momentous shooting when Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife was assassinated by the Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip who previously tried twice to join a Serbian army volunteer group but had been rejected as ‘too small and too weak’ (Smith, 2008, 18). However, on that August day a Browning 1910 semi-automatic handgun and an unused hand grenade afforded Princip new abilities and opportunities to engage in political violence. By this time terrorism had found its shape in a systematic ideological tactic, an organizational form and two canonical materialities – the gun and the bomb. And civil society to this day lives with and suffers from the violence these weapons afford militant ideologists.

Exit terrorism: The opened door

In May 1878, just a few months after Zasulich’s assassination attempt, Ivan Turgenev, baptizer of the nihilists, was apparently inspired to also depict their turn to terrorism. This was in The Threshold, a poem about a Russian girl standing in front of a huge building wishing to enter its door and the ‘gleam of darkness’ behind. From the building’s depths a ‘slow hollow voice’ questions her preparedness for the ‘hatred, mockery, contempt, insult, prison, sickness and death’ awaiting her if she enters (poem quoted in full in Oliver, 2010, 93). It ends with an emphasis on the strength of idealist convictions on the threshold of radicalization:

“You will perish – and no one, no one will even know, whose memory to honor!"
“I need neither gratitude nor pity, I don’t need a name.”
“Are you ready for crime?”
The girl lowered her head... “I am ready for crime.”
The voice did not immediately renew its questions.
“Do you know,” it began finally, “that you may lose faith in what you now believe, you may come to understand, that you have been deceived and have ruined your young life in vain?”
“I know this as well. And I still want to enter.”
“Enter!”
The girl stepped across the threshold – and a heavy curtain fell behind her.
“Fool!” someone snarled from behind.
“Saint!” came from somewhere in response.

Turgenev’s depiction of radicalization focuses on the importance of idealism and voluntarism of revolutionists and of the differing interpretations of those motives and their political value and effectiveness – how foolish or praiseworthy they are. But as has here been argued, such an idealistic focused description of radicalization is not enough to understand the emergence of terrorism. It needs to be complemented by another perspective on this door, on what unlocked and opened it in the first place so that the revolutionist could exercise the choice to enter it or not. Such a perspective is provided by historian of technology Lynn White Jr in Medieval Technology and Social Change (1962) and his account of the importance of another military technology – the stirrup – in the rise of a different politicalism – feudalism. Here White tempers the importance and potencies of social choice with that of technological agency:

The historical record is replete with inventions which have remained dormant in a society until at last – usually for reasons which remain mysterious – they ‘awaken’ and become active elements in the shaping of a culture to which they are not entirely novel... As our understanding of the history of technology increases it becomes clear that a new device merely opens a door; it does not compel one to enter. The acceptance or rejection of an invention, or the extent to which its implications are realized if it is accepted, depends quite as much upon the condition of a society, and upon the imagination of its leaders, as upon the nature of the technological item itself (White, 1962, 28. Emphasis added).

The emergence of terrorisms old and new in such a perspective concerns how matches are realized between idealist motivations of aspiring militants and lethal abilities of enabling materialities, the discoveries by radical militants of sociotechnical affordances of revolutionary violence and propaganda enabled by new civilian and industrial technologies. The path towards modern terrorism described here began with individual Russian revolutionists embracing the new civilian use of revolvers and was followed by their radicalization through their discovery of the revolver’s affordances not just for reactive self-defence but also for proactive assassinations. From such occasional violent deeds by various individual radicals terrorism was further developed into a recognized, systematic and collective political practice through the sustained bombing campaign against Alexander II, enabled through dynamite’s spectacular and explosive affordances. From then on the ‘Russian method’ of terrorism continued to spread widely through space and through time.

To uncover what forges such matches between radical motivations and lethal materialities, and how revolutionary abilities for terrorism are afforded,
we must look both at what opens new doors and what makes people enter them. And this is equally important whether we are interested in studying those who have entered or in wanting to find ways to keep them forever outside, locked out and afforded no choice.

**Note**

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## Affordances and the new political ecologies

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### Introduction

The increasing use of ‘affordances’ in educational research, human computer interface design and psychology (Laurillard et al., 2000; Costall, 2008; Norman, 1999; Noé, 2008) marks a shift into a more explicitly ecological framework for describing and analysing perception, action, learning and innovation. Ecologies in this sense are self-organizing, interactive, adaptive and thrive on variance and redundancy. In ecologies, ‘survival of the fittest’ means the fittest to adapt to changes in the environment, and even to adapt the environment itself, rather than ‘survival of the strongest’.

Affordances are more than just passive or objective opportunities that the environment or the technology offers: affordances are not ‘in’ the environment, but ‘in’ your interaction with it. It might be useful to start with an example: the Two Times Table.

### The Two Times Table

Take two scenarios: In scenario A, an adult comes into a room and sees a table, chairs and a table cloth. The adult says: ‘That’s great, there’s a nice table and table cloth, so with a bit of rearranging, and some better lighting, I can invite some friends over and we can have a dinner party’. In scenario B,
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Daily Mail Protestor breaks into ‘fortress’ power station and shuts down 500 MW turbine for four hours. 11th December 2009.


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