



## Lone Wolf Terrorism – A Socio-Psychological Approach

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to characterize, mainly from the socio-psychological perspective, the phenomenon that is usually described as the activity of lone wolves. This characteristic supports the thesis expressed in the article that the strength of a lone wolf's motivation, who is defined as a violence-using and ideology stimulated individual, is based not on external (exogenous) impulses, i.e., objective depreciating situations that become a conscious foundation of the declared ideology, but on internal (endogenous) drives – personal complexes and deficiencies, not linked to the declared ideological goals.

The paper consists of four sections. In the first one, the notion of “lone wolves” is explained, which is followed by a brief history of “lone wolves” activities. Sections two and three present the sociological and psychological aspects of the phenomenon respectively. The paper is concluded with a summary where the actual and potential danger of lone wolves is analyzed.

**Keywords:** leaderless resistance, lone wolves terrorism, resentment, safety

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### 1. Definition of the term “Lone Wolf” and history of their activities

Although terrorism committed by lone individuals constitutes a small number of terrorist actions, society, but also the forces

to counteract terrorism, see in it a significant danger for safety. Such a perception is based on two beliefs: first, that an individual acting alone, i.e., without the material and psychological support of a group, must be strongly determined (that determination, under certain circumstances, makes them suspend rational calculations regarding

profits and losses on their path to reaching a political goal and turn to means presenting a higher degree of risk, both to the individual and society); second, that all attempts of traditional invigilation, due to the individual nature of the potential acts are not effective (the police is unable to infiltrate the mind). Such highly disadvantageous state of affairs, from the point of view of security, should invoke a closer analysis of the phenomenon of lone wolves. It may also bring us closer to reaching effective countermeasures and preventive actions.

The sources of the “lone wolves” concept are to be found in works of two political activists – the founder of International Service of Information, colonel Ulius Louis Amoss, and a radical right-wing activist, Louis Beam. Both of them created a strategy defined as leaderless resistance (Pośluszna, 2015). The strategy postulates total resignation from hierarchical organizational structures, which are replaced with a loose configuration of small, autonomous cells, individuals, or small groups that are not managed by any decision center. The cells act independently and rely on their own tactics and strategy, which are not coordinated with other individuals or groups. In comparison to the traditional pyramidal organizations, the ones based on the leaderless resistance model have significant tactical leverage. They are much less vulnerable to various forms of invigilation by the police. In organizations of that type, ideology becomes the central unifying element. Ideology also becomes the origin of knowledge about the proper (i.e., effective and morally right) methods of combat for the members. It must have, of course, its vital source. Since the 1990s, the internet has become such a source. Moreover, it has significantly activated lone wolves. It is not just about the access to a particular ideology, but also about satisfying needs that earlier could be satisfied only in an organization – the need for an emotional connection with others (thanks to being active in online forums)

and a thymotic<sup>1</sup> need for exalting themselves above other people (thanks to the possibility to gain, on account of the internet, a global voice).

The real development of the strategy of terrorist actions based on “individual activity,” the so-called lone wolves took place in the second part of the 20th century, mainly because of the ultra-right-wing theoreticians (primarily white supremacists, anti-abortionists, and proponents of racial division), such as Joseph Tommasi, Luis Beam, William Luther Pierce, Tom Metzger, or Alex Curtis (Kaplan, 1997). William Pierce's book “Hunter” was also of great importance for the popularization of the lone wolf activities. The novel depicts lone activities of Oscar Yeager, a Vietnam war veteran who murdered “colored” people and Jews in the name of the restoration of racial division in America. Such activity, in Pierce's opinion, is entirely safe, because the police are not able to “infiltrate the mind” (and therefore control individuals who act on their own).

The terrorist activity of Eric Rudolf is considered today as a model example of the lone wolves strategy. Rudolf became famous, among other things, on account of two bomb attacks on abortion clinics (during one of them, in January 1988, a police officer, Robert Sanderson, was killed), planting a bomb during 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta (two people killed and 111 injured), and an attack on a gay club (five people injured). He, just like Unabomber, successfully dodged various enforcement agencies for years,. Finally, in 2003, during a routine control, he was captured by the police (Pośluszna, and Mares, 2016).

The police analysts did not treat lone wolf terrorism seriously up to the mid-1990s. They wrongly believed that only or-

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<sup>1</sup> The term “thymotic” has gained popularity thanks to Francis Fukuyama, who claimed that the causes of social conflicts should not only be looked for in the desire to obtain material resources but also in satisfying the need for acclaim (*thymos*). The latter need, which is realized individually and socially, is a desire that someone (the object of these desires; other individual or collective) asserts one's (individual or collective) value and power.

ganized groups of fighters were able to pose a significant threat to public security. There were also doubts about whether attacks of an individual nature could be classified as terrorism. For example, in 1983, President Reagan declared that attacks on abortion clinics could not be treated in such a way, because organized groups do not conduct them. The two-person attack in Oklahoma City and a growing number of attacks on public institutions carried out by lone individuals significantly changed that way of thinking. In 2003, the FBI admitted that lone extremists could become a serious threat to the state in the following years (Jonston, Risen, 2003).

In the specialized literature, there are progressively more analyses about lone wolves terrorism. More and more researchers try to examine it in more detail or even to define it. The latter task is not a simple one due to the problems with the very definition of terrorism and the difficulties with the precise determination of “independent action,” which is attributed to lone wolves.

It is a fact, no doubt, that the notion of group affiliation may be interpreted differently. According to Paul Gill, that affiliation may be defined in four ways – as membership in a social movement (that does not entail any organizational or propaganda contacts), an ideological support network (a loose propaganda-based structure with no plans for shared actions), an operational support network (providing technical competences for terrorist actions, but without a direct order to carry them out), and an operational cell (a group of terrorists acting together) (Gill, 2015). There is, among many researchers, a natural definitional tendency to include lone actors into social movements or support networks. Most of them adopt the definition, according to which, lone actors act by themselves, which means that they neither belong to any terrorist group nor have any connections with these groups or networks (i.e., they do not get instructions from outside). Of course, they can sympathize with them (and their ideology), but still, which is often stressed, they always pursue their own goals when

performing acts of violence. This fact is difficult to verify. Sometimes, it takes years to discover whether a lone actor or an organized group was responsible for a particular act.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that there are significant controversies regarding the term that is usually used for describing the terrorist activity of lone wolves. Since some researchers believe that the term “lone wolf” has too many positive connotations – it creates an image of a resourceful, intelligent, predatory individual, who is accompanied by an aura of romanticism. This idea, as they claim, is fundamentally untrue. The average lone wolf has a rather average personality; he or she is not very intelligent (Gill, 2015; Borum, et al., 2012). Maybe because of the incompatibility of personal features and suggestions resulting from the terminological connotation, many authors use other, alternative terms like freelancers (Hewitt, 2003), lone operator terrorists (Heide, 2011), solo terrorists (PET, 2011), loners (Gruenewald, et al., 2013), stray dogs (Jenkins, 2011), lone offenders (Borum, et al., 2012), menacing loners (Buuren, and Graaf, 2014).

Taking into account the above-mentioned proposals and reservations, I have decided to use, for the purpose of this paper, the term “lone wolves terrorism” and define it as ideologically motivated direct violence (that is targeting humans, not things, i.e., it is not violence-free sabotage) towards people not participating in the fight, which is inflicted by lonely operating individuals, i.e., without orders or direct input from other people. According to this definition, lone wolves cannot belong to any organized terrorist group; they neither can collaborate with other individuals nor obey any orders. They can, however, draw inspiration from other people or inpersonified forums – the sources emitting fighting ideas.

## **2. Who Are They? A Sociological Perspective**

It is not easy to construct a behavioral-psychological portrait of a typical lone wolf. The main obstacle is the mentioned above methodological problem related to the inability to acquire the necessary knowledge about the individual nature of their activity and motivations. Another one is a small number of studies carried out (especially such that cover all types of lone wolf activities) on interesting issues ranging from the socio-psychological point of view as gender, age in the moment of attack, education, professional activity, mental health issues, family relationships, worldview identification, and psychological conditioning.

Despite the limited amount of data, it is possible to create an outline of characteristics that may, in turn, serve as an authentication of some more in-depth psychological analyses and ascertainments. The latter should not be treated, naturally, as incontestable claims, but rather as imagination developing clues – an inducement for further research. Who are, then, lone wolves from the sociological point of view?

The fundamental distinction – gender should not be a surprise. Indeed, just a small number of women fall within the category of the ideologically motivated lone perpetrator. Only two such women have been identified and arrested. The first of them was Rachelle ‘Shelley’ Shannon – a housewife born in Wisconsin in 1956. She became famous thanks to a number of anti-abortion activities (including attempted murder). The second woman – Roshonara Choudhry – a student and extremist 23 years younger than Shannon British, who, in 2010, in revenge for the British government's support for the war in Iraq, stabbed a member of parliament, Stephen Timms.

Informal observation, supported by empirical data, shows that a high level of education significantly reduces the readiness to break the law (Lochner, and Moretti, 2004). It is so because of at least two reasons – education induces imagination concerning potential consequences of a criminal act, which, in turn, may have an impact on the readiness to commit it; and it enhances the

chances on the job market, and in consequence, decreases the amount of free time.

Lone wolves do not entirely fit that scheme. Gill reports that 60 percent of the 111 lone wolves<sup>2</sup> he examined participated in some forms of academic education – 26 percent graduated college, 11 percent finished master's program, and seven percent were granted a Ph.D. Only 12 percent finished their education with high school (Gill, 2015). Gill further notices that this educational success, in the case of lone wolves, does not translate into success on the labor market. Among the researched individuals, only 44 percent had a regular job (only half of the people with higher education were employed). Of course, the reasons for such a state of affairs may be various. One should not exclude, however, the hypothesis of social maladjustment that severely hampers professional success.

Maladjustment is not tantamount with abnormality. According to Hewitt, although the majority of terrorists are essentially “normal,” there is an overrepresentation of psychologically disturbed people among lone wolves (Hewitt, 2003). Pantucci's opinion is quite similar – he believes that the story of many lone wolves is, in essence, a story of mental and social disturbances (Pantucci, 2011). Gruenewald, Chermak, and Freilich, who examined personality and behavioral differences between a chosen sample of extreme-right ideology motivated group terrorists and lone wolves, concluded that the latter much more often demonstrated signs of mental illness. As many as 40 percent of lone wolves and only eight percent of group perpetrators showed various psychological disorders. Loners are usually older, much more often live far from their families, are divorced, have a military background, and more often use weapons to kill (Gruenewald, et al., 2013). According to Spaaij, many lone wolves suffer from diverse forms of personality disorders and experience social alienation, which they, in

<sup>2</sup> The 111 lone wolves studied by Gill came from the United States or Europe, or carried terrorist attacks in their territories.

a particular time of their lives, chose for themselves or were fated to it by circumstances (although many of them wanted to belong to a group, the attempts to establish close group links usually ended with failure) (Spaaij, 2012).

### 3. Lone Wolves – a Psychological Perspective

Of course, the notion of “personality disorders” does not explain a lot. It is a fact, though, that many of the most famous lone wolves (Volkert van der Graaf, Franz Fuchs, Theodore Kaczynski, David Copeland) had documented mental problems. Another issue is the question what led to it – whether at the source of those problems, there were physiological-impulsive conditioning or traumatic life experiences that generated the sense of being undervalued, or maybe the both of them. The current state of knowledge does not allow us to investigate the first thesis closer. A large amount of data provides support for the second factor, and its proponents usually advocate for the narcissism-aggression hypothesis.

The narcissism-aggression conception connects the existence of aggression with the occurrence of a narcissistic disappointment defined as deep and long-lasting damage caused to the image of “I;” the damage results from the inability to meet the expectations imposed by the ideal ego or desired standards of behavior (benchmarks adopted as objectively valuable). From that disappointment stems, according to the supporters of that conception (Lasch, 1979; Crayton, 1983), narcissistic aggression driven by the need to defend “I” from destructive self-condemnation. The aggression is directed towards the objects that represent the features imposed by the ideal ego or the desired standards.<sup>3</sup> Directing ag-

gression to “foreign objects” is extremely useful for the agent. Thanks to that procedure, they can regain faith in their own strength and lose a sense of their own value. According to Pearlstein, narcissistic aggression in service of political terrorism is exceedingly attractive for the agent also because it allows building a new and better, strong and omnipotent identity on the rubble of the old impaired “I” (Pearlstein, 1991). In Crenshaw's opinion, people who demonstrate narcissistic tendencies usually suffer from emotional deficiencies that make them blind to the negative consequences of their actions (Crenshaw, 1986). One cannot negotiate with such people, modify their goals, and find common ground concerning values. They are characterized by axiological and pragmatic stiffness that is immune to any form of persuasion. This is due to the fact that the issue here is not declared in ideologically-postulated goals. Of course, they exist, but they are rather substitutes.

An interesting modification of the narcissism-aggression conception, which, in my opinion, best describes the behavior of lone wolves, is the theory of resentment created by Friedrich Nietzsche. Resentment is a conglomerate of hateful emotions – envy, jealousy, and lust for revenge. They are founded on the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness, which arises when the agent cannot attain important values for them (when they, due to whatever important to them reason, feel inferior). Not everyone shares such a feeling of powerlessness, but those who, because of their various mental or physical shortcomings, or long-term suffered depreciation, have limited possibilities to deal with the challenges posed by reality. The reality, which is tailor-made for those who are free from such defects and incapacities. Therefore, weak and inept people must suffer, and this suffering is ex-

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<sup>3</sup> According to Robert Robinson and Jerold Post, the development process of narcissism is of a triad na-

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ture. It consists of (1) narcissistic claim for rights, which inevitably leads to (2) disappointment caused by not satisfying the narcissistic needs, which results in (3) narcissistic anger triggered by the rejection of the right (Robins, and Post, 1999).

cruciating because it is based on a negative image of oneself (Nietzsche, 1995). The suffering is accompanied by strong hatred, both towards the world where such unattainable values exist and towards those who represent those values. Hatred, in a natural way, brings forth the desire for revenge, which, however, cannot be satisfied directly. There can be many sources of that lack of satisfaction. The most common factor, however, is the fear of acknowledging one's inferiority to oneself, or of failure in confrontation with the "better one," who lives in glory and praise and does not deserve it. That fear has one vital feature (especially if it lasts long), namely, it forcefully strikes positive self-appraisal; it poisons, raises doubts, causes pain. Therefore, the human being that experiences it has to act – has to create (of course, unconsciously) strategies that will enable them to reconstruct the lost sense of one's own dignity. One such strategy is suppression of hatred, anger, envy, or lust for revenge. Thanks to such an operation on emotions, their source – direct painful cause (a concrete situation or the originator of suffering) – becomes forgotten. Of course, suppression does not eliminate envy, anger, or lust for revenge. The emotions still exist. They are, however, less intelligible, less clear, and because of that, it is easier to tear them away from the real resentimental cause; it is also easier to interpret them or give them a new direction. Still, suppression does not resolve the issue. Muted emotions continue to impact the mind in an unnoticed way. They do not stop hurting and generate bitterness, festering, and bring unhappiness. They will eventually lead the struggling agent to develop a new, more perfect strategy, i.e., revaluing the values, which consist in depreciation of the desired, but unattainable values (the object of their original desires) and glorification of those, which are believed to be stuck with (secondary desires created as substitutes). This strategy is, obviously, a falsification of their real desires and drives. However, on its account, a person with resentment ceases to feel, at least on the conscious level, envy and anger because of the lack of

particular values – the value of these values becomes depreciated. In consequence, people who possess those values cease (at least on the conscious level) to invoke conscious envy or jealousy. They belong now to a different world and become worthy only of mercy. From that time on, the only and unquestionable source of pride will be only those values that they represent themselves (and which were produced as secondary by them). With their use, the person with resentment will create their new mental and axiological "backbone" – the long-lasting foundation of their faith and source of undisturbed power. Now, they do not experience resentimental feelings – they are beautiful and clear at the surface, but below, there is a desire to kill deep and eating from the inside. Now (in their own eyes), they are not swayed by their personal desires; they do not look for revenge, but administer justice, restore balance to world, and enable the existence of forces of good. They are not, anymore, worthless, swayed by their own drives lonely individual but a part of a larger whole. The whole that grants power and allows participation in a bigger whole that transcends them. Being a part of a higher power, the resentment person is on a mission – not to realize some interim goals, but a permanent fixing of the world.

Both the conception of narcissism-aggression and resentment turn attention to the sense of subjective non-appreciation as a factor that pushes the agent towards hatred and violence. The studies carried out on the biographies of terrorists provide evidence for its driving role. Most of them conclude that terrorists are people who have experienced (or are still experiencing) great humiliation that violates their sense of order and value (what results in frustration and then in aggression), or questions the value of their own self (what causes narcissistic disappointment that later on transforms into aggression).<sup>4</sup> Quite often, this

<sup>4</sup> In this context, it is worthwhile to mention Kaplan's monograph "Deviant Behavior in Defense of Self," where he presents a theory that links to-

humiliation occurred early in life. On the basis of interviews with the IRA leaders, psychologist Jeanne Knutson states that “all [of them] had been victims of terror themselves, all had experienced violations of their personal boundaries that damaged or destroyed their faith in personal safety” (Volkan, 1997, p. 160). That violation sometimes took a form of beating, abandonment, a divorce of parents, sexual abuse, or rejection by their peer group.

In the case of lone wolves, depreciation violating the sense of safety and personal worth seems to be of particularly strong nature (one should remember that lone wolves act alone, without psychological support that is usually provided by a group). Volkert van der Graaf, a murderer of Pim Fortuyn, experienced severe depression that lasted for years. It led him to a suicide attempt after his girlfriend broke up with him. Franz Fuchs, as well, suffered from depression and planned his own suicide, because he was unable to find a partner and a regular job. Another lone wolf – Theodore Kaczynski developed deep depression that allegedly lasted from the late 1980s till 1994. Its possible cause was the experience of humiliation and violence in childhood. According to psychiatrists, Andreas Breivik also suffered from serious mental disorders, which caused considerable discomfort. He was diagnosed with narcissism, borderline personality disorder, dissocial narcissism, and psychopathy (Gardell, 2015).

Of course, is the issue of recognizing the psychological mechanism that constitutes the personality of a lone wolf methodologically vital. Is there really a mechanism of revaluing the values that is at play here? Furthermore, is the conception of resentment the most adequate in describing the phenomenon of lone wolves? It should be admitted that we do not have substantial psychological evidence supporting these claims. It is difficult to imagine that such

would exist. There are several reasons for that. For example, all attempts of finding depreciating “I” events or such periods in life are doomed to fail. Not only because we often have no access to solid biographical testimonies. The fact is that the importance of these events or periods is subjectively evaluated. The depression that would result from them may not be even registered by the surroundings or the individual themselves. Briefly speaking, it is impossible to introduce an objective gradation of events that potentially generate this acute sense of inferiority, depression, aggression, and eventually revaluation within individuals. We cannot be sure either whether inferiority, if had occurred, was not later on countered (in consequence of subsequent circumstances) by other experiences with a more affirmative nature. These doubts should not lead to the conclusion that all speculations regarding the links between lone wolves with the phenomenon of resentment are accidental.

Even very superfluous analysis of lone wolves’ biographies reveals many essential features of resentment, such as strong devaluation of their value system (usually the one that was dominant for the individual), equally strong valuation of the new system (which is a clear sign that revaluation happened), great sensitivity to it, a sense of superiority, mission, and an uncompromising effort in striving for axiologically defined goals. Discovering in an individual that kind of constitutive for resentment features does not have to mean that this phenomenon really occurred. These features merely make it more possible to appear.

Next step on the path of substantiating the thesis that resentment is the source of motivation for a lone wolf is jealousy, envy, and lust for vengeance. Here again, one has to admit that it is difficult to find reliable testimonies about that in the biography of a lone wolf. We can only carry out an analysis that provides plausible evidence for its occurrence (i.e., the selection of data and their gradation). Does it refer to all lone wolves? Although such a claim is well supported, we will never achieve, unfortunately, full cer-

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gether negative self-esteem with the phenomenon of defensive rejection of group norms that one was not able to live up to (Kaplan, 1980).



tainty. However, the explanatory power of the resentment conception is significant. Until we find a more apt theory, we should adopt it.

#### 4. Summary

Does lone wolf terrorism pose a real threat to safety? Data on the number of attacks are not particularly alarming. Research conducted in 1968-2010 in 15 examined states registered only 88 lone wolves who carried out 198 attacks (in contrast to 11,235 attacks recorded by the Global Terrorism Database). As Ramon Spaaij reported, this number of attacks constitutes only 1.8 percent of all the attacks carried out in this period. This shows that attacks carried out by lone wolves are rather marginal (Spaaij, 2012). The lethal nature of attacks carried out by lone wolves is not impressive. A lone wolf reaches an average of 0.62 deaths per incident. The number gets even less impressive if we compare it with all terrorist attacks in the discussed 15 countries because their death rate amounts to 1.6 (Spaaij, 2012).

However, the impact of terrorism is not measured only by the number of attacks and the number of deaths they cause, but they are also founded on fear mediated by the media, fear that translates into particular social behavior (usually expected by terrorists). A terrorist act organized by a group has a different emotional charge than a one conducted by a lone wolf. This is probably so because of a subconsciously adopted assumption that a group, as an entity composed of individuals having different, to a certain degree, personalities and interests (despite a strong ideological unification) is something more or less rational; it is a place where certain, although sometimes unstable, balance of interests is worked out, which, in consequence, must lead to toning down actions and goals. An individual, in contrast, (in the mind of who will analyze such terrorist acts) is a closed world. If they

act alone, without any guidelines or suggestions from above, they are fated to the impulses coming from their "I." Because these impulses are not subject to external orders and limitations, which are a result of intersections of interests of other members of the ideological community, and may not be countered by other internal impulses (e.g., fear of consequences), they could take extremely radical form. Such concerns are, as it seems, justified by the lone wolf's psychological reality.

A lone wolf, objectively speaking, is a very dangerous individual. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the strength of their motivation is based not on the external (exogenous) impulses – objective depreciating situations that fuel the declared ideology, but rather on the internal (endogenous) ones – personal complexes and shortcomings that are not linked with declared ideological goals. If the strength of those internal motivations will be linked to resentment (to which I incline), the situation becomes even more severe, and an uncompromising attitude is formed, which is accompanied by the inability to reach a compromise. The possibility of weakening motivation due to, for example, the activation of self-preservation instinct, or simple compassion for the potential victims, significantly decreases. In the case that such an individual is able to multiply their damaging force (e.g., by access to weapons of mass destruction), it should be expected that that possibility will be realized.

Even a superficial insight into the essence of resentment leads to the statement that this phenomenon is difficult to eliminate. The structure of consciousness that is steeped in the sense of being worse and suffering is very complex. It is especially so when resentimental reevaluation of values appears. In this case, axiological preferences effectively conceal hatred and make it surreptitious not only to others but also for that consciousness. It is not easy then to single out individuals afflicted with resentment. It is also difficult to eradicate the causes that generate it. Can we, then, successfully deal with problems related to



ressentiment, and therefore, with lone wolf terrorism? Theoretically – yes, but only when we solve the inferiority problem. In practice, however, it seems impossible.

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