

Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | October 2022

The Legacy of Munich 1972. The Munich Massacre and its place in the history of terrorism


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

Bernhard Blumenau*

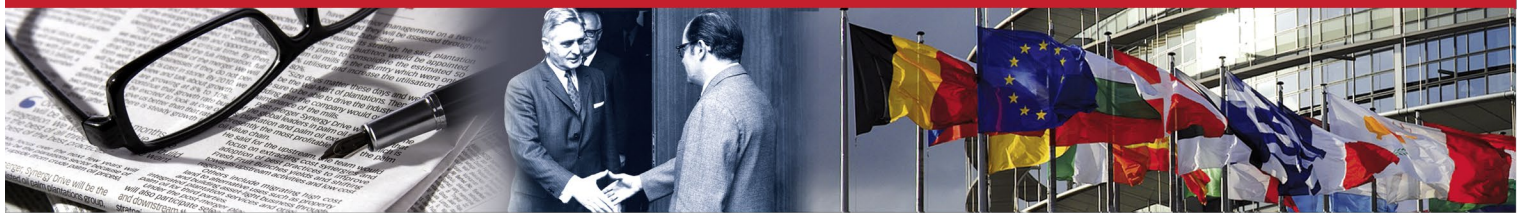
The Legacy of Munich 1972. The Munich Massacre and its place in the history of terrorism

When athletes from around the world gathered in Munich on 26 August 1972, the commencing Olympics were meant to be a celebration of sports and achievements, showing to the world the new, progressive, and democratic (West) Germanyⁱ. The Munich Olympics was supposed to erase from common memory the last Olympiad which had taken place in Berlin in 1936. Back then, Adolf Hitler abused the Games as a propaganda event demonstrating Germany's alleged rebirth and newfound power. This job was accomplished not least by Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film, 'Olympia', which was highly acclaimed for its innovative character around the world despite the glorifying image it painted of Nazi Germany. Thirty-six years on, the Munich Olympics was meant to do the same: improve Germany's prestige around the world, but this time by showing a peaceful, civil, happy, and celebratory Germany. This image was shattered when on 5 September 1972, members of the Palestinian terrorist group 'Black September' took athletes of the Israeli team hostage. Subsequent negotiations and a failed release operation by German police led to a bloodbath which saw all remaining hostages and most of the kidnappers killed. The issue of compensating the relatives of the victims has occupied German politics for half a century, and only in 2022 was a compromise with the families of the victims reached. But the legacy of Munich went beyond this issue. The attack on the Israeli team in front of cameras live broadcasting into the world the events as they happened heralded a new chapter in the history of terrorism. Now, terrorists could achieve their goal of seeking global attention and the international spotlight more easily as news could be transmitted around the globe in mere seconds. Terrorismⁱⁱ thrives off attention, and Munich 1972, just like the 9/11 attacks, reconfirmed this truism.

This paper will have a twofold mission. First, it will take a look back at the Munich Olympics attacks – 50 years after they occurred. Second, the paper will look at how terrorism itself – as well as the responses to it – have changed since then and how the Munich Massacre fits into the broader history of terrorism.

The Munich Massacre 1972

The Munich Olympics was meant to be a festival of peace and athletic competition, inviting the world to visit the new and democratic Germany. Consequently, security was lax, and this enabled eight terrorists of the Palestinian Black September organisation to enter the

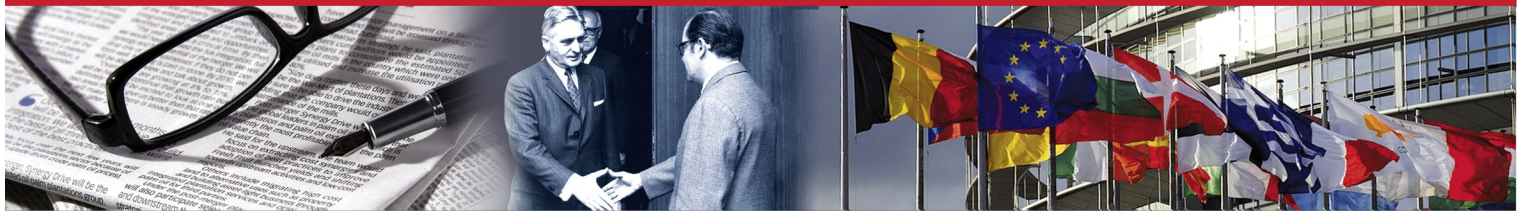


Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | October 2022

Olympic village and make their way to the quarters of the Israeli team. Once there, they forced their way into their rooms and took nine athletes hostage while killing two further Israelis in the process. This was the beginning of a period of a protracted hostage situation, negotiations, failed rescue attempts, and death. The Germans were completely unprepared for this event. And the situation became even more complex when the terrorists made their demands of Israel. The crisis thus not only involved German state and federal authorities but the Israeli government, too. Meanwhile, TV crews, already abundantly present in Munich to live broadcast the Games to the world, tuned their cameras on the Israeli quarters, which added further pressure on the German negotiators. It soon transpired that Black September wanted the release of more than 200 Palestinians from Israeli prisons, a demand that the Israeli government under Golda Meir dismissed immediately. The German team of negotiators, spearheaded by the Federal Minister of the Interior, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, thus had nothing to offer the Palestinians in exchange for the hostages. The Black September members eventually agreed to being flown out of Germany into a country in the Middle East from the nearby German air force base of Fürstenfeldbruck. However, this plan was a trick as German authorities wanted to overwhelm the kidnappers on the runway so as to secure the release of the hostages. It was planned that the people on board the aircraft would be policemen pretending to be cabin crew while police snipers were placed all around the airport. Promising as the plan might have sounded in theory, it ended in complete havoc and disaster. For one, while the terrorists and their victims were on their way to the airport, the policemen on board the plane voted to abort their mission as they did not consider themselves sufficiently trained for such an operation. There was no time to spare, and no other police officers could be sent in as the helicopters carrying terrorists and hostages were about to land. Consequently, there was no 'crew' on the plane; which rose suspicion in the terrorists who inspected the aircraft and detected a ruse. Then, all hell broke loose when police snipers started firing at will. They were so badly positioned across the airport that they were in each other's line of fire and while some terrorists were taken out, others managed to throw hand grenades into the helicopters with the waiting hostages, exploding them, and killing all on board. The situation then developed into a lengthy standoff which finally resulted in the killing of all hostages, five out of the eight terrorists, and one policeman. The remaining three perpetrators were taken into police custody. Meanwhile, the spokesman for the German government spread the false news that the release operation was a success, and that all hostages were saved. This statement had to be backtracked quickly and the subsequent announcement that all hostages were killed, made this even more difficult for the relatives to stomach. The disastrous management of the crisis, and especially of the release operation, earned Germany a great deal of criticism domestically, abroad, and particularly in Israel. Germany's federal and state authorities were completely unprepared to deal with a crisis of such a magnitude as no counterterrorism unit nor blueprints for handling such a situation existed. This, subsequently, led to the establishment of the Grenzschutzgruppe 9 (GSG9), which would launch its first successful operation five years later, in Mogadishu in October 1977, establishing its reputation as one of the best such units in the world. This was too late, however, to save the nine Israeli hostages and it took 50 years until a [settlement for damages](#)ⁱⁱⁱ could finally be reached between the German government and the relatives of the victims.

But the massacre at Fürstenfeldbruck was not the end of the Munich crisis. With Palestinian terrorists now in German prisons, Black September launched a hijacking operation just a few weeks later, on 29 October 1972. With the abducted Lufthansa jet 'Kiel' circling over Zagreb, the Germans quickly gave in to the hijackers' demands and released the three surviving Munich perpetrators. This was the end point of the Munich crisis, and another decision that faced heavy criticism abroad. Israel and other countries decried how quickly and willingly Germany gave in to the terrorists' demands. It is reasonable to assume that the German authorities did so in the hopes that this would remove Germany again from the target list of terrorism. This was not to be, however, as in subsequent years, Germans would be targeted again by Palestinian groups.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

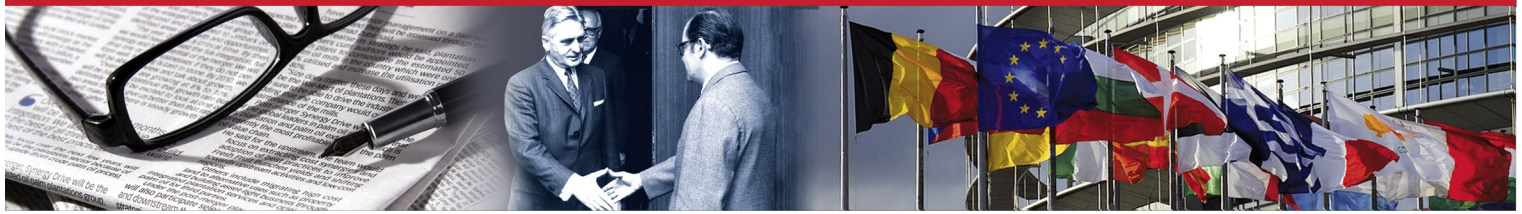
N°8 | October 2022

The changing character of terrorism

To contemporaries, the Munich Massacre was certainly a spectacular event that stood out in the history of terrorism due to the attention it garnered, much aided by the fact that it was the first time an unfolding terrorist crisis was live broadcast. Just two years before, Palestinian terrorists had already caught global attention by successfully hijacking four planes – rerouting three of them to a desert air strip in Jordan, Dawson's Field, while another one was sent to Cairo. Once the planes had been evacuated all of them were blown up, while all the hostages could be saved eventually. Both breath-taking events exhibited the terrorist technique of choice at the time: large scale hostage operations meant to garner a maximum of global attention. When perpetrated by Palestinians, these crises were meant to turn the global spotlights on the plight of the Palestinian people trying to establish their own state in the disputed Israel/Palestine region. This points to an important characteristic of terrorism: getting attention. As Margaret Thatcher once put it: it is the 'oxygen of publicity on which [terrorists] depend'.

In that sense, the Munich attacks were just one event in a long chronology of terrorists trying to devise new means of assault so as to shock people and to spread fear, forcing the public and governments to give in to the terrorists' demands. Therefore, terrorists have always been good at exploiting new technologies and developments. The Russian anarchists of the 19th century for instance used the newly developed dynamite as a weapon of choice, a tactic which quickly spread to other corners of the world. Meanwhile, the development of more accurate handguns made assassination attempts committed in this fashion easier, too. Explosives and bombs quickly became a favourite of terrorists of all kinds. Whether it was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in Russia in 1881, the Chicago Haymarket massacre resulting from a bomb thrown by anarchists in 1886, the bomb attack on the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946, the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, the *La Belle* bombing in West Berlin in 1986, the Lockerbie bombing of 1988, the explosive attacks on US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1988, or the Madrid and London bombings of 2004/5; attacks committed with explosives run like a red line through the history of terrorism over the course of the past 150 years. The fact that since the mid-19th century, news could spread much more easily due to faster means of transportation, but also because of a quick relay of information through telegraphs, and later the telephone, aided terrorists as well. They could now reach a larger audience and more easily put bigger spotlights on their perceived struggles. It is thus little wonder that towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 1900s, some in the public even thought that terrorists of various countries might unite as an Anarchist International. While this hysteria was ultimately unfounded, the example still shows how terrorists exploiting new technologies and attention-seeking techniques impacted public perception.

As means of transport improved further over the course of the 20th century, terrorists eagerly exploited them, too. Yet, the purpose of attacks was not always to kill people – although terrorists often did this as well^{iv}. Hostage crises, however, were often deemed more appropriate means to force a government into concessions. The reason for this is once again based on the attention that an attack garners. An assassination is an abhorrent climactic event where a crisis is, however, quickly over (once the person is dead). Hostage crises drag on much longer and thus keep public attention for a prolonged time. Consequently, hijackings became a very popular sub-category of hostage crises and a favourite means of spreading fear. Terrorist hijackings (as opposed to those committed purely to get money), experienced a heyday around the 1970s – with various abductions of Israeli El Al planes in the late 1960s ringing in this decade of skyjackings. But other airlines were soon targeted as well as shown by the Dawson's Field crisis of 1970s or the abduction of the Lufthansa plane 'Landshut' in 1977. Yet, vehicle seizures were not limited to planes, as the terrorist takeover of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* in 1985 demonstrated. While the technique of hijackings ran somewhat out of fashion in the subsequent two decades, it experienced a sad revival in 2001. However, as opposed to earlier cases, the 9/11 hijackings were never committed as a means of exchanging hostages on board the planes for political concessions. Instead, on that infamous September day, the planes as such were



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | October 2022

weaponised and (intended to be) flown into various symbolic buildings. Again, terrorists devised a new means of violence – this time while readily sacrificing their own lives in the process – in order to stun the world with a yet unseen attack.

As of late, the trend of technologizing attacks has been reverted. Over the past decade, we saw a proliferation of assaults committed often with very simple means, knives and machetes, or cars driven into crowds. The purpose behind these 'new' techniques is again to spread fear by doing something that has not been done recently. The terror induced in the population is now deriving from the perception that really anybody could be hit. Previously, the risks were higher if one was to fly on a plane or visit a symbolic building. But with the attacks committed on busy roads, Christmas markets, concerts, or even cafés, the message that terrorists want to spread is that no one is safe. This fear, again, is the oxygen that terrorists need.

Consequently, while the nature of attacks has changed over the past 150 years, the reasons behind them have not: terrorists want to create outrageous crises so that the public and governments will give in to their demands and so as to stop further attacks from happening. In this sense, the attack on the Munich Olympics, shocking and outrageous as it was (partly due to the incompetent German response to it) was just one amongst many in the bloody history of terrorism.

The changing character of the response to terrorism

Much like terrorism, the response to it has changed as well over the decades. The problem that authorities face when dealing with terrorism is that terrorists are normally one step ahead. It is extremely difficult to anticipate what new technique they might devise and how, where, and when they will strike. When terrorism mushroomed in the 19th century, states responded by setting up special police units to infiltrate and investigate groups. At the same time, they attempted to cooperate internationally so as to mirror the international exchange of ideas and 'best practices' that was occurring amongst terrorists at the time. However, while cooperation was often hampered by states not trusting one other and their unwillingness to have their hands tied through international treaties, certain means of harmonising responses were nevertheless designed. In the early 1900s, for instance, standardised descriptions of criminals as well as portraits were becoming more common so that it was easier for authorities to identify suspicious or wanted people. Later, fingerprints would follow as means of identification and police forces would be engaging in (often limited) exchanges of information across borders. When hijackings became more prolific, metal detectors would be installed at airports so as to spot weapons before they got smuggled onto the planes. Likewise, towards the end of the 20th century, mechanisms for marking and spotting explosives became more widespread, as did body scanners at airports in the first two decades of the 21st century.

And when terrorist attacks started proliferating in the 1960s, states tried to coordinate better their cooperation against terrorism on a global or regional level. A multitude of international treaties were thus concluded that attended to a variety of aspects related to terrorism such as hijackings, hostage crises, or the financing of terrorism. However, a treaty adopted is not the same as a treaty applied and the international framework against terrorism still offers many loopholes to states not willing to comply.

At the same time though, many states set up counterterrorism units to have specially trained personnel ready to deal with a crisis when it occurs. For instance, in the aftermath of Munich 1972, the West German government set up its GSG 9 counterterrorism unit that subsequently managed to prevent a repetition of the botched response to the Black September terrorists. It resolved subsequent terrorist crises successfully, for instance when GSG 9 officers released the hostages on board the 'Landshut' in 1977.

With the internet gaining ever more importance in daily lives, so did it become a battle ground for terrorism. Subsequently, governments too improved their capacities to detect and stop terrorist activities on the world wide web. Counterterrorism thus advances too, but due to the very nature of the dynamics it often lags a bit behind terrorists.



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | October 2022

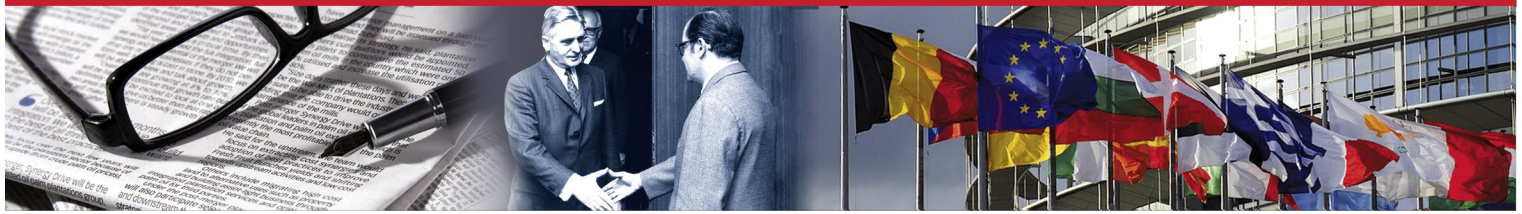
Conclusion

The attack on the Munich Olympics was no doubt a horrendous event in the long history of terrorism. For people at the time, it was also a wake-up call. The crisis proved that terrorism was not retreating, but on the contrary, it was continuing to seek new opportunities to exploit the spread of fear so as to wind down people's morale. For state authorities, too, it was a wake-up call. In Germany, the government realised that more had to be done to counter the continuing threat of not only domestic terrorism (as practised by groups such as the Red Army Faction); but also international perpetrators who continued to target German citizens. Among other policies, after 1972, the federal and state governments would set up counterterrorism units to be able to respond to future such challenges. Yet, the Munich crisis also affected politics more generally. At the United Nations, the Munich Massacre was the straw that broke the camel's back and provided the final evidence that terrorism was here to stay. Subsequently, the world organisation would see numerous initiatives developed in order to deal with the scourge of terrorism. This trend continues still today, 50 years after Munich.

In the larger scheme of things, however, Munich was just one among many events tailored to spread a great deal of fear through novelty: either in terms of techniques or weapons used, or the scale of events and number of victims. In order to continue grabbing the headlines and getting maximum attention, terrorists will always seek to do something new and do one up on previous events. This basic premise of terrorism was as true in 1972, as it is today.

Dr Bernhard Blumenau

* Lecturer in International Relations, Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews



Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°8 | October 2022

-
- ⁱ In this paper, 'Germany' and 'West Germany' will be used interchangeably and both refer to the Federal Republic of Germany.
- ⁱⁱ It is difficult to define the term 'terrorism' in a way that everybody can agree. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, terrorism will be understood to be the use or threat of violence by non-state actors against civilian targets. Its purpose is to blackmail a population or government into making political concessions.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See for instance the above-mentioned killing of Tsar Alexander II, the stabbing of Empress Elisabeth of Austria in Geneva in 1899, the assassination of US President McKinley in 1901, the double attack on the lives of French prime Minister Louis Barthou and Yugoslavian King Alexander I in 1934, the killing of West Germany's Siegfried Buback, Jürgen Ponto, and Hanns Martin Schleyer (1977) as well as Italy's Aldo Moro (1978), Lord Mountbatten (1979) and many others.
- ^{iv} See for instance the above-mentioned killing of Tsar Alexander II, the stabbing of Empress Elisabeth of Austria in Geneva in 1899, the assassination of US President McKinley in 1901, the double attack on the lives of French prime Minister Louis Barthou and Yugoslavian King Alexander I in 1934, the killing of West Germany's Siegfried Buback, Jürgen Ponto, and Hanns Martin Schleyer (1977) as well as Italy's Aldo Moro (1978), Lord Mountbatten (1979) and many others.