



Book Review

Jeffrey D. Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat* (Prometheus Books, New York, 2013)

Reviewed by Tim Wilson

Jeffrey Simon has written an illuminating book. Unfortunately, it illuminates mainly by calling into question its own subject matter as an intellectually-coherent category for analysis. Given the subtitle, this was presumably not the author's intention.

If Simon does not fully succeed in demonstrating the worth of a discrete sub-section of political violence labelled 'lone wolf terrorism', this has much to do with his approach which is eclectically biographical. Constructing a group portrait out of an assemblage of loners naturally brings challenges as Simon implicitly concedes – a 'selective look at a few of the more notable ones in history reveals diversity in their backgrounds and motivations' (page 149). It would have helped the reader here if the reasons for including some 'lone wolves', and not others, had been spelled out more explicitly. At other times discussion broadens out abruptly to include case studies that clearly fall outside any 'lone wolf' framing (for instance, pages 114-127) or, indeed, outside the conventional understanding of terrorism as intrinsically politicised violence (pages 68-74).

Such handfuls of examples nevertheless yield rich harvests of conjecture ('lone wolves are not afraid of failing' – page 103), generalisation ('human interaction [is] a characteristic that appears to be valued more by women than by men' – page 127) and, perhaps most strikingly, some arresting banality ('the most difficult, and therefore least probable, of the weapons of mass destruction that could be used by a lone wolf is a nuclear weapon' -page 111). Many of Simon's insights *are* valuable – that on occasion mavericks can indeed punch above their weight (page 18) but will generally face severe challenges of resources and capacity, and these sometimes around surprisingly 'routine' activities (such as the surveillance of potential targets – page 192). But these remain the insights of intuition rather than systematic dissection.

A more ambitious historical survey might have sought to examine 'lone wolf terrorism' against the broader rise of individualism in western societies as a whole. A more sociologically-informed study might have drawn upon classical debates concerning the relationship between individual behaviour and society to shed light upon the extreme case of political violence conducted by lone operatives. But these are roads resolutely not taken: indeed, Jeffrey Simon's *Lone Wolf Terrorism* remains sublimely innocent of any such possibilities.

About the reviewer: Jeffrey Simon has written an illuminating book. Unfortunately, it illuminates mainly by calling into question its own subject matter as an intellectually-coherent category for analysis. Given the subtitle, this was presumably not the author's intention.



If Simon does not fully succeed in demonstrating the worth of a discrete sub-section of political violence labelled ‘lone wolf terrorism’, this has much to do with his approach which is eclectically biographical. Constructing a group portrait out of an assemblage of loners naturally brings challenges as Simon implicitly concedes – a ‘selective look at a few of the more notable ones in history reveals diversity in their backgrounds and motivations’ (page 149). It would have helped the reader here if the reasons for including some ‘lone wolves’, and not others, had been spelled out more explicitly. At other times discussion broadens out abruptly to include case studies that clearly fall outside any ‘lone wolf’ framing (for instance, pages 114-127) or, indeed, outside the conventional understanding of terrorism as intrinsically politicised violence (pages 68-74).

Such handfuls of examples nevertheless yield rich harvests of conjecture (‘lone wolves are not afraid of failing’ – page 103), generalisation (‘human interaction [is] a characteristic that appears to be valued more by women than by men’ – page 127) and, perhaps most strikingly, some arresting banality (‘the most difficult, and therefore least probable, of the weapons of mass destruction that could be used by a lone wolf is a nuclear weapon’ -page 111). Many of Simon’s insights *are* valuable – that on occasion mavericks can indeed punch above their weight (page 18) but will generally face severe challenges of resources and capacity, and these sometimes around surprisingly ‘routine’ activities (such as the surveillance of potential targets – page 192). But these remain the insights of intuition rather than systematic dissection.

A more ambitious historical survey might have sought to examine ‘lone wolf terrorism’ against the broader rise of individualism in western societies as a whole. A more sociologically-informed study might have drawn upon classical debates concerning the relationship between individual behaviour and society to shed light upon the extreme case of political violence conducted by lone operatives. But these are roads resolutely not taken: indeed, Jeffrey Simon’s *Lone Wolf Terrorism* remains sublimely innocent of any such possibilities.

About the reviewer: *Tim Wilson’s research and teaching focuses upon comparative approaches to the study of inter-communal violence across Europe and the Middle East. He is especially interested in the relationships between group identity and violence in ‘identity-based conflicts’ and, in particular, in the ways in which communal identities may help structure conflict dynamics at the grassroots. He studied history at Oxford in the early 1990s before working in the community sector in Belfast during the peace process years in Northern Ireland. A return to academia via a master’s degree in Comparative Ethnic Conflict at Queen’s, Belfast, led to a doctoral thesis at Oxford University under the supervision of Dr Marc Mulholland. This project, an integrated comparative study of the north of Ireland and Upper Silesia the years after 1918, formed the basis of his first book which was nominated for the Royal Historical Society’s Whitfield Prize. From 2000 he has taught a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Queen’s, Belfast and Oxford Brookes. He joins St Andrews from Oxford University where he was a Departmental Lecturer in Modern History from 2009 to 2011. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 2012.*