Book Analysis: *The Man Who Was Thursday* by G. K. Chesterton

Ethan Woodward
*College of DuPage*

Follow this and additional works at: http://dc.cod.edu/essai

Recommended Citation

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@C.O.D. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.
Book Analysis: *The Man Who Was Thursday* by G.K. Chesterton

by Ethan Woodward

(History 2237)

G.K. Chesterton’s novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, gives a unique interpretation of the issue of anarchistic terrorism in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The story is of a detective who works undercover to infiltrate a secret anarchist terrorist cell, only to find out that all of the members of the organization are also detectives in disguise. This book speaks of two important characteristics of terrorism in this era. The first being the very real threat of terrorist violence on the ruling classes. The second, which seemed to beget the terrorist acts themselves, was the reaction from media outlets and government institutions such as the police, and the idea that there was a vast international anarchist conspiracy.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, there were many acts of political assassination as well as incidents of seemingly indiscriminate violence against the ruling classes in Europe and the United States. Many of these attacks were acts of retribution for the imprisonment or execution of previous terrorists. In 1878, there were two attempts on the life of the German Kaiser, as well as on King Umberto of Italy. Five years later, German officials uncovered another plan to assassinate the Kaiser along with several military officials (Burleigh 79).

In France, labor unrest, and the brutality employed by police against demonstrators, served as fodder for a violent cycle: a terrorist attack would be followed by the imprisonment and/or execution of a perpetrator, which would invite another attack as retribution. This scenario played itself out in 1891 when, after the police used a machine gun to disperse a crowd of demonstrators killing women and children, anarchist Francois-Claudius Ravachol carried out bomb attacks on the advocate general and a judge. When he was caught and eventually executed, Auguste Vaillant bombed the office of the Chamber of Deputies in response. With his execution came another anarchist response, carried out by Emile Henry, who bombed the Cafe Terminus, victimizing individuals who were not political targets. Henry infamously declared, “There are no innocent bourgeois.” (Burleigh 80-81) This sentiment was echoed in with the 1892 bombing of Barcelona’s Liceo Opera House, an attack that killed thirty people who were among that city’s social elite (Burleigh 83).

Then, between 1894 and 1901, came a series of high profile-political assassinations, creating even more panic amongst the public of the clandestine anarchist threat. The first came on May 21, 1894 as a continuation of the Ravachol cycle of violence, when French President Carnot was stabbed to death because he refused pardons for Emile Henry and Auguste Vaillant. After Carnot’s death, the Spanish prime minister was murdered by Italian anarchists in 1897. This was followed by the murders of Empress Elizabeth of Austria, King Umberto of Italy, and U.S. President McKinley (Burleigh 82-83).

All of these acts of terrorism contributed to harsh reactions from police and governments, and also fostered the belief by many that they were all part of some global anarchist conspiracy. Although there was never a supreme anarchist council directing these events like the one Detective Syme believes he has infiltrated in the Chesterton novel, there had been a handful of small anarchist groups, which were more akin to social clubs than terrorist cells. Such organizations were the Rose Street Club, the Autonomie Club, and the International Club in the 1880s (Marshall 489). Perhaps most similar to Chesterton’s fictitious council was a group called the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). In 1883, the SDF took an official anti-government stance when it issued its *Manifesto to the Working Men of the World*, and one of the group’s founders, Joseph Lane, wrote his own...
proclamation in 1887 entitled *Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto*, which demanded “the abolition of the State in every form and variety.” (Marshall 489)

Improved communication technology further contributed to the fear of conspiracy. There were dozens of anarchist publications with international circulation, as well as mainstream newspapers reporting on the various atrocities being committed by anarchists. This phenomenon served to antagonize the situation in two different ways. For one thing, it exacerbated the fears of the average citizen, and led to intense xenophobia. Many anarchist terrorists were foreigners who spoke alien languages. After the Haymarket disaster in Chicago, one local newspaper heralded, “Let us whip these Slavic wolves back to the European dens from which they issue, or in some way exterminate them.” (Burleigh 76,79). Another effect of the sensationalist media was that it served to recruit more anarchists or even encourage existing anarchists to become more hard-line. Newspapers would record the courtroom dialogues and people would read the defensive statements of accused anarchist terrorists. This essentially gave a terrorist an outlet for which to speak to the people. As put by one of the founding members of Scotland Yard’s Criminal Investigation Department, “The ‘advertisement’ of anarchism, as of many other crimes, infallibly leads to imitation.” (Burleigh 79)

In the wake of terrorist violence, governments and police agencies responded in different ways. Some law enforcement resorted to raids and torture (Burleigh 82), and other times governments would sacrifice certain civil liberties for the sake of security. In response to Vaillant’s bombing, the French government made it illegal to wear coats inside government buildings, and passed a series of “scoundrelly laws”, aimed at stifling sedition. Jean Grave was put in jail for two years for writing passages in a book that were seen as inciting violence (Burleigh 81). President Theodore Roosevelt, outraged by the anarchist menace, put before Congress laws prohibiting anarchists from immigrating to the U.S, and deporting existing immigrants who were found to have anarchist leanings. This practice was used by the French and Italians as well (Burleigh 84). The British police forces began profiling its citizens, arresting those who merely possessed the appearance of being an anarchist, for the purpose of photographing them, evident in Chesterton’s depiction of a disguise laden anarchist underground. Rather than employ special governmental agencies to combat the terrorist threat, the British mobilized its police force and made use of secret undercover police agents, who themselves often turned to shady dealings (Burleigh 85).

This era of anarchistic terrorism is one of complexity and emotions. Chesterton correctly indicates the feelings of panic and fears of conspiracy that had been experienced by law enforcement and citizens alike during this period. Though a global network of organized terror did not exist the way Detective Syme had thought, the threat of attacks by terrorists was a legitimate concern during these years. However, it is evident in looking at the near in-kind responses from the ruling elites, and their arm of force, the police, that anarchism was just one side of a vicious back and forth, between a desperate and increasingly exploited working class and a reactionary and fearful ruling class.

Bibliography
