DEAD EVIL?

CONSTRUCTING THE ‘TERRORIST’ IN MEDIA OBITUARIES[i]

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Terrorists – or, better, those portrayed as ‘terrorist’ – are remembered in a multiplicity of ways after their death. In murals and music, in slogans and speeches, on t-shirts and online, in fiction and in film. This article focuses on one specific site of social memory – the newspaper obituary – to explore how these: story deceased ‘terrorists’ via reflection on their character, actions and significance; situate the deceased within relevant structural backgrounds; and, explain ‘terrorist’ behaviour via life-defining, formative experiences. It argues that these obituaries produce the (dead) ‘terrorist’ as a nuanced, complex and situated figure, one: whose designation as ‘terrorist’ is capable of contestation; who often possesses redeeming features; and, whose violences are situated within, and made possible by, wider structural contexts. In so doing, the article offers three contributions to knowledge: empirical, via the first sustained analysis of ‘terrorist’ obituaries as a distinctive mnemonic project; analytical, by elaboration on the processes through which past – rather than current/future – threats are made meaningful; and, conceptual, through reflection on the explanatory work that obituaries do in depicting ‘terrorism’s’ causes.

Key words: terrorist; terrorism; memory; remembrance; obituaries; forgetting

Introduction

Terrorists - or, better, those widely portrayed as ‘terrorist’ - are remembered in a multiplicity of ways after their death. News items announce the killing of former foes;

political speeches are delivered to parliaments and news conferences; eulogies and rebel songs honour the dead; videos of suicide bombers circulate on mainstream and other media; murals variously glorify or demonise the deceased; official and unofficial monuments, both physical and virtual, help organise public grief; films, video games, posters, mugs and other memorabilia inform, commodify and entertain their consumers; while scholarly and other biographies take stock of their protagonists' historic importance. Such mnemonic practices frequently intersect: news items, for example, may report on parliamentary statements. They also, amongst other things, help frame the meaning of violent act(ors); contribute to collective identity formation – in part by distinguishing 'them' from 'us'; and serve to reproduce or contest broader socio-political discourses around, for instance, grief, heroism, and masculinity (e.g. Sjoberg and Gentry 2007: 88-89; Jarvis and Holland 2014; Rollins 2018: 123-124).

This article investigates such dynamics by asking how deceased 'terrorists' are remembered across one very specific mnemonic site: obituaries published in the mainstream news media. Focusing on obituaries of seven 'terrorists'[ii] – Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Nidal, George Habash, Manuel Marulanda, Osama bin Laden, Shamil Basayev, and, Velupillai Prabhakaran within the British print media – it argues that these obituaries serve to produce the figure of the 'terrorist' as a more complex and situated figure than is typical of contemporary constructions thereof. It does so by demonstrating that these obituaries are able to: (i) problematise the category 'terrorist' by highlighting competing understandings of violent acts and actors; (ii) humanise their subjects through recollection of redeeming qualities and acts; (iii) situate violences within broader social and political contexts; and, (iv) emphasise the importance of such contexts within pivotal, life-defining moments. In making this argument, the article demonstrates that these obituaries therefore constitute an interesting – and surprisingly neglected – discursive site through which ‘terrorism’ is made meaningful.

In making these arguments, the article offers three contributions to knowledge. First, empirically, it offers the first sustained analysis of ‘terrorist’ obituaries as a specific type of mnemonic project. This, I argue, broadens existing understanding of the workings of ‘terrorist’ discourse, complements research around the commemoration of ‘terrorism’s’ victims, and, opens considerable future research avenues detailed in the article’s conclusion. Second, analytically, it elaborates on the process through which threats that have now passed are made meaningful. In so doing, it moves discussion beyond representations of current and future threat that have tended to dominate constructivist explorations of (counter-)‘terrorism’. Third, conceptually, it reflects on the explanatory work of these obituaries in depicting ‘terrorism’s’ causes.

I begin by situating my argument within two bodies of relevant contemporary literature on: (i) constructions of ‘terrorism’ as a present/future threat; and, (ii) the remembrance of ‘terrorism’s’ victims. My emphasis in this article on representations of now-expired threats extends the former, I argue, by spotlighting the work of ‘backward’-facing discourse. It also extends the latter by focusing on memories of ‘terrorism’s’ protagonists. A second section introduces the newspaper obituary as a specific and longstanding site of social memory, before detailing the article’s methodological framework. A third section presents my findings in three parts focusing on how these obituaries story, situate, and explain the deceased via representation of character, context, and formative experiences. I conclude by reflecting on the significance of these findings for contemporary understandings of ‘terrorism’ and for critical security studies more broadly, before sketching a range of potentially promising avenues for future research.

Terrorism, discourse and memory

As the first systematic analysis of the ways in which those portrayed as 'terrorist' are remembered within newspaper obituaries, this article builds on, and contributes to, two existing literatures.

The first – and largest – of these focuses on 'terrorism's' construction or performance as a specific type of identity and threat within diverse social and political sites. Much of this work is contemporary; a product, in part, of the pervasiveness of the post-'9/11' 'war on terror'. Here, book length overviews of the George W. Bush administration's discourse (e.g. Silberstein 2002; Jackson 2005; Kellner 2007) sit alongside comparative analyses (e.g. Graham *et al* 2004; Holland 2012b), historically-oriented explorations (e.g. Jackson 2006; Winkler 2006; Ditrych 2013), non-US case studies (e.g. Holland 2012a; Fisher 2016), analyses of non-elite representations (O'Loughlin and Gillespie 2012; Jackson and Hall 2016; Jarvis and Lister 2015, 2016; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016) and investigations of this discourse's percolation through, and contestation within, other sites of social life (e.g. Croft 2006; Jackson 2008; Hodges 2011; Powell 2011; Robinson 2012; Spencer 2012).

Taken collectively, this literature's primary importance is its demonstration of 'terrorism's' contingent character. 'Terrorism', as approached in the above scholarship, is not an objective, given, or stable entity. It is discursive, and therefore both 'made' and subject to transformation (see also Stampnitzky 2013). Much of this research demonstrates the simplicity of prominent constructions of this threat, in which 'terrorism' is typically reduced to a form of 'evil' (Jackson 2005: 66-76; Croft 2006: 104-107) or radical other signifying the antithesis of everything for which we stand (Winkler 2006: 11-16). Such constructions tend to flatten the differences between campaigns of violence, depoliticising and dehumanising their protaganists, including via metaphors around disease and crime (e.g. Spencer 2012). Much of this research also – understandably –focuses on articulations of present/future threat in 'terrorism' discourse, seeking to unpack the work (and the harm) done by constructions of exceptionalism, risk and danger for citizenship, democracy, and so forth. This is the case even for historically-oriented explorations which tend to emphasise how (*then*) politicians and others depicted the threat of 'terrorism' (*now*, or *to come*). While an unquestionably significant research seam, one consequence has been the affording of far less attention to the construction of memories of now-past dangers, and the implications of these memories for social and political life. By focusing on obituaries of recently deceased 'terrorists' as a site of social memory, this article seeks to contribute precisely such a focus.

My effort to extend constructivist research around 'terrorism' discourse builds on a second, related, literature that does employ a backwards-looking gaze. Here I refer to work on the remembrance of acts, and especially *victims*, of 'terrorism' across diverse commemorative practices. David Simpson (2006), for instance, situates the commemoration of 9/11 within longstanding cultural practices, exploring the politics of selectivity evident in the remembrance of the 'war on terror's diverse victims. Christina Simko (2012) – more recently – traces two competing commemorative grammars ('dualistic' and 'tragic') from the aftermath of those attacks, highlighting the role of events, speakers, audiences, and available genres in the resonance thereof (see also Holland and Jarvis 2014; Simko 2015). Judith Butler (2004, 2009) pursues urgent ethical questions around grief's instrumentalization for future violences, while Jenny Edkins (2003) locates 9/11 in a longer history of periodic tension between the state's linear time and the trauma time of unexpected events. Charlotte Heath-Kelly (2016) – builds on her earlier (2014) work into the testimonies of former militants – to think through the political dimensions of memory in this context (also McGowan 2016), while empirically-focused contributions, finally, document case studies of commemoration including television news (Hoskins 2006), internet memorials (Hess 2007; Jarvis 2011), trees and vegetal landscaping (Heath-Kelly 2018).

This – largely interdisciplinary – literature opens important political and ethical questions around the remembrance of ostensibly exceptional violences. In so doing, it subjects performances of innocence, grief, victimhood and trauma to critical scrutiny, encouraging reflection on the framing, implications and exclusions thereof. This article takes a similar approach, but develops the above by exploring the workings of memory around the instigators – not victims – of violence. In so doing, it asks how figures of abjection are, or can be, remembered under conditions in which the very memory of such individuals may be heavily policed, circumscribed or even denied.[iii]

Obituaries and social memory

Memory, as approached in this article, is a fundamentally social phenomenon. 'It is in society', as Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 38) argued, 'that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories'. Approached thus, the past is forged in the present – often with an eye on the future – through a plethora of social institutions, technologies and objects (see, for example, Sturken 1997; Olick and Robbins 1998; Bell 2006; Rossington and Whitehead 2007; Olick *et al* 2011; Resende and Budryte 2016). Monuments and memorials, museums and libraries, traditions, cultural objects, rites of passage: all these, and more, contribute to the construction of ostensibly shared pasts which live beyond, and exceed, aggregations of private recollection (Winter and Sivan 2000: 6). Such 'memory projects' (Wagner-Pacifici 1996) are also inherently, and inevitably, partial. Creativity is exercised in selections of what is remembered and how (and, indeed, what is forgotten), if not always, or necessarily, consciously or deliberately. Memory projects are, therefore, both intrinsically political – imposing meaning on contingent terrain (Laclau 2004: 2-4) – and often contested through counter-memorialising efforts and activities (Foucault 1980).

The newspaper obituary offers an important, and longstanding, carrier of social memory, emerging – in the English language – in the seventeenth century (Starck 2005: 268). The practice has changed considerably since this emergence, witnessing some diversification of its subjects (Fowler and Biesela 2007), and – importantly – a growing concern to evaluate or appraise the life thereof (Starck 2005). The contemporary obituary, therefore, now approaches what might be termed 'the first verdict of history' (Starck 2005: 268) ;

> a semi-ritualized nexus of ethical, political and professional worlds. Like the memorial service, it is a secularized *rite de passage*, to help the bereaved; yet it is also a verdict, derived from professional peers, about the worth of the dead person's contribution. Finally, despite conflicting interpretations vying for authority, it aims to provide the last judgement about their personalities (Fowler 2005: 61).

In doing all of this, obituaries reflect, reproduce and – potentially – contest social mores through which the significance of individual lives is evaluated (Starck 2005: 280; Fowler and Biesla 2007), in part via the "selection of life-defining experiences, selection and emphasis of specific events and experiences, use of historical detail, and provision of cultured scripts" (Taussig 2017). This, of course, raises significant editorial questions around inclusion and exclusion (Hamann 2016: 3) – the resolution of which varies across publication, spatial context and the passage of time (Árnason *et al* 2003;

Fowler 2005; Starck 2005, 2007).

This article's emphasis is upon one sub-genre of newspaper obituary identified by Fowler (2005): the 'negative obituary'. Relatively rare, such obituaries typically serve as 'critical acts of commemorative retribution' (Fowler 2005: 65) although criticism of individuals within them, as demonstrated below, may be significantly mitigated by reflection on contextual circumstances. My focus here, specifically, is on the obituaries of seven individuals – Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006); Abu Nidal (1937-2002); George Habash (1926-2008); Manuel Marulanda (1930-2008); Osama bin Laden (1957-2011); Shamil Basayev (1965-2006); and, Velupillai Prabhakaran (1954-2009) – published across six sources: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph,* the *BBC Online*, and *The Economist*. These sources comprise the UK's 'four leading obituary pages' (Starck 2005: 278), its public service broadcaster, and – in *The Economist* – a UK-based publication of lengthy obituaries with over twenty-five years standing (Colquhoun and Wroe 2008: 1-2). Because of editorial differences, this generated a total of forty obituaries providing a corpus of 55,376 words[iv] identified via Lexis Nexis and subsequent Internet searches.

The initial criteria employed for inclusion in my sample were that the subject be: (i) responsible for an organisation or acts of violence widely deemed 'terrorist' – satisfied, for instance, by inclusion on national lists of proscribed organisations;[v] (ii) lacking a transition away from violent struggle before their death; (iii) deceased; and, (iv) sufficiently obituarised across the six identified media outlets. These criteria are purposive rather than representative (see Etikan *et al* 2016), and designed to serve the project's focus on how figures of condemnation are remembered posthumously. Upon identification of these initial criteria, a strategy of heterogeneous sampling was then employed to select individuals with diverse geographical, political, and organisational backgrounds (Howarth 2005: 331; Etikan *et al* 2016: 3). This satisfied the article's purposes as the first sustained investigation into media obituaries as a site of 'terrorism' discourse.

The non-probabilistic research design underpinning this article led to the exclusion of a number of potential candidates for the study. Several notorious individuals satisfying the first three criteria – including Shoko Asahara, Ulrike Meinhof and Timothy McVeigh, for instance – were simply not sufficiently obituarised for inclusion in this study, in part because negative obituaries constitute a relatively recent – and still rare – phenomenon within the obituary's evolution (Fowler 2005: 65). Others – including Nelson Mandela, Martin McGuiness, or Yasser Arafat – were excluded because their remembrance is concentrated on their political careers as much as, indeed often far more than, earlier violences. Whilst this design generated a sufficient and appropriate corpus for the purposes of this project, it clearly involves sacrificing any claim to generalisability for my findings. Alternative conceptions of those deemed 'terrorist' would potentially encounter different populations of obituaries, perhaps with alternative ways of storying their subjects and their violences.

Dead evil?

As noted above, my analysis of these obituaries is organised around three themes: (i) characterisations of individual 'terrorists' and their actions; (ii) efforts at contextualisation; (iii) and, explanations of 'terrorism', especially via life-defining experiences.

Storying the deceased

All seven of the individuals considered in this article died within ten years of the 9/11 attacks. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that we see in their obituaries considerable reference to themes and tropes now familiar from the ‘war on terror’ discourse (see, amongst others, Jackson 2005). Most obviously, we see a widespread framing of the deceased in the language of ‘terrorism’ (an idiom whose prominence grew considerably throughout the twentieth century: Jackson *et al* 2011: 10). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, for instance, was a ‘Jordanian born terrorist’ (Telegraph 2006a), or – more elaborately - a ‘terrorist leader at war with Christians, Jews and the West’ (Guardian 2006a). Abu Nidal had been ‘for years the world’s most-feared terrorist’ (Independent 2002), enjoying a ‘murderous terrorist career’ (Guardian 2002); while Osama bin Laden was ‘the world’s most wanted international terrorist’ (Telegraph 2011); ‘the mastermind behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks’ (Guardian 2011).

This widespread identification of the deceased as ‘terrorist’ within these obituaries is, importantly, frequently nuanced via recognition of this designation’s contestability. Shamil Basayev, for example, is remembered in the Telegraph (2006b) as, ‘a hero to his people in the Republic of Chechnya [yet viewed] elsewhere [as] … one of the world’s most infamous terrorists’ (Telegraph 2006b).Velupillai Prabhakaran, of the LTTE, emerges similarly as a personification of that most famous framing of ‘terrorism’s’ positionality: ‘If there was ever a competition to find the person who summed up the adage which says that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”, then Velupillai Prabhakaran ….would have been a strong candidate’ (Independent 2009). Some obituaries go further still to the point of directly contesting ostensibly accepted identifications of their subjects. Thus, where George Habash of the PFLP is described by the Telegraph (2008) as ‘responsible for introducing the world to international terrorism’, the Independent (2008) takes a rather different line, arguing instead that Habash was ‘not responsible for the reign of terror with which he was credited in the West'.

The equivocation around their subjects' positioning is matched, in these obituaries, by a greater measure of normative complexity than typical in popular constructions of 'terrorism'. On the one hand – as one might expect – we see regular reference to the 'ruthless' (Independent 2009) 'brutality' (Guardian 2006b) of their subjects and their 'atrocities' (Guardian 2006a), the unpleasantness of which are, on occasion, elaborated at length:

> He would order executions in the middle of the night when, after a heavy bout of whisky-drinking, his paranoia and vindictiveness were at their worst. Sometimes, while the committee waited for its leader to confirm a death sentence, a prisoner would be placed in a freshly-dug grave with the earth shovelled over. A steel pipe in his mouth allowed him to breathe. Water was poured in from time to time to keep him alive. When the word came, a bullet was shot down the tube, which was removed and the hole filled up (Guardian 2002).

Such depictions of brutality contrast, starkly, too, with the innocence of the 'terrorist's' victims, signified either through their positioning - '344 civilians, 186 of them children' (Telegraph 2006b) and 'His … targets were almost invariably young Shia men desperate for work' (Independent 2006b), or explicitly described in this language: 'His threat was more than simple bravado and his killers were responsible for a series of spectacular hijackings and massacres, usually aimed at innocent civilians in public places' (Times 2002).

At the same time, however, this condemnatory framing is often also softened and modified including via reference to their subjects' redeeming features. We learn from the Times (2006a), for instance, that Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi was a doting son who 'took his ailing mother to Peshawar in Pakistan where, he said, the mountain air might cure her', and from the Guardian (2008a) of George Habash's long-standing commitment to the public good: 'There was already an idealistic strain in his choice of careers: like many others, he was a doctor before he was a politician'. Manuel Marulanda is encountered in his Guardian (2008b) obituary as a polymath who had 'learned to play the violin with some skill as a boy and also showed considerable aptitude for business', while the LTTE's Prabhakaren, in particular, emerges as a leader who was genuinely admired by his followers: 'it was not unusual for Sri Lankan Tamils to say that he possessed divine powers' (Times 2009). Indeed, even Osama bin Laden – the archetypal 'terrorist' monster of the contemporary period – is capable of humanisation:

> Six feet three inches in height, Osama bin Laden was a handsome man. Visitors remarked on his beautiful manners and quiet speech, his accurate Arabic free of seminary affectation, his Hatim-like generosity with his inherited fortune, his hypochondria and good humour. Kalashnikov semiautomatic weapon at the ready, a master of international commerce and satellite communication, Bin Laden seemed to embody a new and romantic model of Arab masculinity. Unlike many Muslim revolutionaries, he did not waste his breath on Western social customs or in hectoring respectable women (Independent 2011).

Situating the deceased

As the above section demonstrates, obituary efforts to story their 'terrorist' subjects are, approached collectively, doubly nuanced. In the first instance there is equivocation around the appropriateness of the 'terrorist' moniker. In the second, accusations of brutality and violence are juxtaposed against – and softened by – discussion of redemptive or humanising characteristics. Interestingly, where causal explanations for their subjects' violence are offered, in this medium, similar equivocation may be identified.

In the first instance, and as one might anticipate, ‘terrorist’ obituaries seek to explain violent campaigns through specific individual or personal characteristics of the deceased. Less sympathetic constructions in the sample analysed here include reflection on al-Zarqawi’s religious fanaticism – ‘Being a Salafi, or purist Sunni Muslim, al-Zarqawi particularly hated Shias as heretics and appeared intent on creating a civil war’ (Times 2006) – or, indeed, Abu Nidal’s avarice – ‘He was the ultimate mercenary’ (Guardian 2002), ‘little more than a gun for hire, utterly without principles’ (Times 2002). Nidal, in particular, is given an especially critical reading, characterised as a seemingly ‘insane’ (Guardian 2002) man, who ‘appeared to suffer from severe psychopathic tendencies’ (Times 2002), ‘paranoia’ (Times 2002) and ‘suicidal despair’ (Times 2002). Vellupillai Prabhakaran is depoliticised too, albeit in less condemnatory tone: ‘He had no coherent political philosophy beyond a vague commitment to socialism’ (Telegraph 2009), and, ‘No philosophy or ideology guided him, as far as anyone could tell’ (Economist 2009). As, in the Economist (2011), at least, is Osama bin Laden; his motivation explained in simple affective terms:

> No political ideology guided him, though he might lie for hours at night thinking, or read for most of the day. The polite, pious rich boy, who had left university without a degree, became neither an intellectual nor a visionary. Pure rage was all he needed, roused especially by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the arrival of American troops in Saudi Arabia, on the holy ground of the two mosques in Mecca and Medina, in 1990. Hatred of America had tormented him for as long as he could remember.

These explanations of ‘terrorism’ through appeal to wanton criminality, emotion, or mental illness contrast with similarly individualised, yet more explicitly political framings, within other obituaries. George Habash's popularity amongst militants, for instance, is explained by his 'loyalty to Palestinian national unity, along with his personal modesty and simplicity' (Guardian 2008a). Manuel Marulanda, meanwhile, is depicted as both strategist and tactician in the BBC's (2008b) framing of him as, 'Farc's political and military mastermind. An avid student of military history [and] a master of guerrilla warfare'. These more agentially-oriented explanations find their counterparts in these obituaries with efforts to situate the deceased within pertinent social, historical, and political contexts. Reflection on their subjects' upbringing and early life is a staple of this genre, whether through stories of hardship – 'his [al-Zarqawi's] father … often found it difficult to feed and clothe his brood' (Times 2006a) – or comfort – 'His [Abu Nidal's] family were prosperous, middle-class plantation owners' (Telegraph 2002).. Familial relationships also acquire explanatory relevance on occasion, for instance: 'his [al Zarqawi's] mother would die in Jordan in February 2014, her last wish being that her son should die in battle rather than in prison' (Times 2006a); and, 'His [Basayev's] family were proud of their history of resistance to Russian rule' (Times 2006b).

More prominent, however, is reflection on the broader (geo)political worlds in which those being obituarised matured. For Basayev, for instance, it is the post-Cold War backdrop of disenchantment and opportunism that grounds his emergence: 'As Chechen society degenerated, in the unreconstructed ruins of postwar Grozny, the collapse of the economy after the USSR had fallen apart, and the militarisation of a generation of jobless young men, he became a warlord' (Guardian 2006b). Manuel Maralunda's turn to political violence, meanwhile, is situated within Colombia's civil conflict that followed the 1948 killing of Liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitá: 'With the onset of "La Violencia" ("The Violence") in 1948, Marulanda fled to the hills and joined one of the many peasant self defence groups' (Guardian 2008b). And, al-Zarqawi's story is written, in part, through the 1979 Soviet invasion of Aghanistan:

> When he was 20, he went to Afghanistan to join the Mujahideen fighting the Soviet Army. There he was trained in guerrilla warfare, learned about chemical weapons, and came into occasional contact with Osama bin Laden (Telegraph 2006a).

Such contexts are attributed explanatory power for the waxing and waning of violent campaigns, as much as their emergence: 'By the 1990s Abu Nidal's group was losing its support base in the Middle East, where most Arab states were engaged in peace talks with Israel and where no regime wanted to be associated with terrorism' (Times 2002); and, 'By the time George Habash resigned his leadership of the PFLP in April 2000 the group had been marginalised. The secular Marxist militant group was losing ground to radicals of an altogether different type – Islamist groups like Hamas' (BBC 2008). As are more localised contexts such as inter-group: 'George Habash and Yasser Arafat had a long-standing rivalry. The tensions between them are cited as one of the reasons why Dr Habash founded the PFLP' (BBC 2008). Indeed, at their most structural, the 'terrorist' obituary reduces their subject to little more than a pawn serving wider political interests. Al Zarqawi, for example, is widely remembered as a (constructed) bogeyman serving US propaganda purposes:

> His name was unknown until he was denounced on 5 February 2003 by Colin Powell … There turned out to be no evidence for this connection and Zarqawi did not at this time belong to al-Qa'ida. But Mr Powell's denunciation made him a symbol of resistance to the US across the Muslim world. It also fitted with Washington's political agenda that attacking Iraq was part of the war on terror. (Independent 2006b).

Abu Nidal, in related vein, emerges as an unwitting instrument of Israeli foreign policy:

‘it was Israel's policy to destroy the PLO, to fix it indelibly in the international mind as the terrorist organisation it had never wholly been (and was so less and less). No one helped this strategy like Abu Nidal’ (Guardian 2002).

Explaining the deceased

The structural contexts discussed above serve to situate and make sense of those widely remembered as ‘terrorist’. In so doing, they balance and often limit their protagonists’ agency; positioning their actions at the intersection of individual conduct and background environments. This interplay of context and conduct – of structure and agency – becomes even more pronounced, I want now to argue, where these biographies turn to their subjects’ formative life experiences – those ‘self-defining’ events and experiences (Taussig 2017: 466) – from which their life’s path was fundamentally determined. Such moments – those depicted as absolutely vital in producing the now-deceased ‘terrorist’ – are, again, frequently complex and multiple: juxtaposing individual experience of, and reaction to, some external event.

Al-Zarqawi’s life story, for instance, is narrated through two formative experiences. The first – and most prominent – is of his ‘radicalisation’. This took place, in the Independent’s (2006c) framing, in stages. It began with his mother’s decision to enrol al-Zarqawi:

> … for religious instruction in al-Hussein bin Ali mosque in central Amman in 1998. … He immediately gave up alcohol (and later damaged his skin with acid to remove his tattoos). He liked the inflammatory sermons directing hatred at non-Muslims.

This process approached its completion, for the Independent (2006c), ‘in the early 1990s, in the mosques of Afghanistan and Peshawar [where] … Abu Musab al-Zarqawi completed his spiritual transformation and developed a pathological hatred for “unbelievers”’. The Telegraph and Guardian provide a similar structuring narrative albeit with greater emphasis on al-Zarqawi’s time in prison, in which ‘he fell under the spell of an extremist cleric’ (Telegraph 2006a), and ‘embraced militant Islam’ (Guardian 2006a). A second –more evocative –account, however, is given by the Times (2006a) in which: ‘By his own account, it was in Afghanistan that he had a life-changing vision. He would describe how, while trying to fall asleep one night in a cave, he saw a great sword falling from the sky. On its blade was written the word jihad’. Although complementary in explaining al-Zarqawi’s violence through a prism of religiosity (see Gunning and Jackson 2011), celestial, otherworldly dynamics here supersede those very human and social influences of the above accounts.

Osama bin Laden’s life path is narrated, in part, through similarly religious defining life experiences. In several obituaries it is his time at university that proved particularly significant:

> At university, Bin Laden, who had been raised in the strict tradition of Saudi "Salafist" Islamic practice known outside the kingdom as Wahhabism, was exposed to newer, more politicised and often anti-clerical religious doctrines. It was the fusion of the two, particularly by charismatic preachers such as the Jordanian-Palestinian Abdullah Azzam, that laid the foundation of the young man's own thinking (Guardian 2011)

Explicitly political dynamics, however, are prominent, too, especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which ‘changed Bin Laden’s life forever’ (BBC 2011), and the 1991 Gulf War, which ‘turned bin Laden into an implacable opponent of the Saudi royal family’ (Telegraph 2011) and – according to Prince Turki al-Faisal, cited in the Independent (2011) – ‘changed [bin Laden] from a calm, peaceful and gentle man interested in helping Muslims into a person who believed that he would be able to amass and command an army to liberate Kuwait'.

Although they receive very different treatment, the lives of Abu Nidal and George Habash are similarly explained through one common formative experience: Palestinian suffering. For each, this begins with the 1948 'calamity' accompanying the Israel's creation. The impact of this experience is mediated, for the former, by psychological traits:

> The experience had been searing for Abu Nidal, but, if it left unusually deep and disturbing effects on him, that is because his was already a deeply disturbed personality. The child is father of the man, and Abu Nidal was not the only ogre of our times who, as grown man, took terrible, disproportionate revenge on his fellow men for the sufferings of his infancy (Guardian 2002)

For the latter– a less monstrous figure across these obituaries – however, it is direct experience of assisting victims of the violence that takes centre-stage:

> It was his personal experience of the 1948 disaster which, more than anything else, fired in him a determination to devote himself to the politics of struggle. In 1948, as a 22-year-old undergraduate in medicine at the American University of Beirut he rushed back to Lydda to serve as a medical orderly as the Zionists advanced on the town and drove out its inhabitants (Guardian 2008a).

A similar emphasis upon the experience of state violence is typically evident in Manuel Marulanda's obituaries. The Guardian (2008b), for instance, refers to his conversion to Marxism after the, 'self-defence group he joined was rapidly radicalised by the [1948] conflict'. The BBC (2008b), too, describes Marulanda as having been, 'radicalised as a teenager, after several relatives died in the vicious Colombian civil wars in the middle of the last century'. Such stories contrast with Shamil Basayev's obituarisation which stands out for the lack of any sustained discussion of defining experiences. Most obituaries refer to his travel to Chechya following Dzhokhar Dudayev's 1991 declaration of independence from Russia, but absent is any explicit sense that this moment – or others – played the same future-defining role as, say, the violences of 1948 or celestial visions did for others. This contrasts too, finally, with the most personalised, and memorable, experience we find in this sample: the death of a hunger striker that opens the Economist's (2009) obituary of Prabhakaran.[vi] This experience – recounted with rich narrative detail – brings to Prabhakaran a commitment to revolutionary violence with awful future consequences for the island of Sri Lanka:

> THE body of the young man lay on a scarlet bier. He was in his colonel's uniform and beret, with white gloves that made his hands seem enormous beside his emaciated body. His face was set in a rictus of death that was somewhat like a smile. But the portly, moustachioed man who stood looking at him, in a short-sleeved white shirt and blue trousers, hands clasped awkwardly in front of him, was not smiling. Velupillai Prabhakaran always said this was the moment, four years into the war in September 1987, when he gave up any faith in non-violence. The young man before him, Thileepan, had fasted to death to highlight the plight of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and their demands for independence. The Sinhalese majority had paid no attention. So Prabhakaran pledged himself and his Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to a path of unremitting carnage (Economist 2009).

Conclusion

Memory projects are always contingent, and emerge from an interplay of authorial intention, audience expectations, available genres, pragmatic constraints, socio-political contexts, and other factors besides. Selectivity is a necessary feature in all efforts to reflect or commemorate the past, and newspaper obituaries – as argued above – are characterised by their own (evolving) norms of form and content. The specific obituaries considered in this article are significant, I argue, for two initial reasons. In the first instance, they provide further evidence of the growing prominence of the figure of the 'terrorist' within the twenty-first century socio-political landscape – at least in the United Kingdom. If the negative obituary as a sub-genre remains relatively unusual (Fowler 2005), the 'terrorist' obituary is less rare today than it was in the past. Individuals such as bin Laden or al-Zaraqawi are now deemed to merit remembrance thus in a manner that their forebears simply were not. In this sense, where existing research has highlighted 'terrorism's' increased presence across diverse social, political and cultural environments (e.g. Rothe and Muzzatti 2004; Croft 2006; Jackson *et al* 2011; Fisher 2016), this article evidences something similar within this specific – and previously unexplored – commemorative practice.

Second, although these obituaries therefore share with much contemporary political and popular culture a focus on the figure of the 'terrorist', that figure is – here – a far more nuanced, complex, and situated one than is typical of the caricatured threat we have tended to see elsewhere. As demonstrated above, the obituarised 'terrorist' is: (i) one whose designation *as* 'terrorist' is problematised and contested, including via reflection on competing understandings of violent campaigns and events; (ii) normatively complicated through discussion of redeeming features and actions; (iii) responsible for violence, *but* within wider structural contexts that shape and delimit interests and decisions; and, (iv) moulded by those external contexts even in the case of vitally important formative, life-defining moments. 'Terrorism', written and remembered thus, emerges as a fundamentally situated phenomenon, not the outcome of autonomous, atomised agents.

By tracing the way obituaries story, situate and explain dead ‘terrorists’, my immediate aim in this article was to extend contemporary research into ‘terrorism’ and memory by looking beyond the commemoration of ‘terrorist’ victims, and to develop critical work on constructions of ‘terrorist’ violence by focusing on representations of threats that no longer exist. In so doing, the article also responds to recent appeals for further empirical research into media depictions of ‘terrorism’ (O’Loughlin 2016: 284), and for greater dialogue between memory studies and critical terrorism research (Heath-Kelly 2016: 296).

The emphasis here on memories of threats that have passed has, though, wider - and potentially significant – implications for critical security studies, too. Although security discourses tend to be future-oriented – characterised, at their most dramatic, by an ‘urgency of emergency’ (Salter 2011: 116) due to an impending ‘point of no return’ (Buzan *et al* 1998: 33) – recent work has explored how the past might be mnemonically securitised, albeit – typically – in the context of current threats (e.g. Mälksoo 2015). The obituaries considered here, however – with their complex and situated construction of previous threats – indicate something rather different: how past dangers may, retrospectively, be rendered less dramatic or exceptional. They indicate, put otherwise, how past threats may be normalised, even (re-)politicised, through reflecting on – and presenting for debate – competing interpretations of violence, and the significance of broader (geo-)political interests and contexts. Indeed, one might go further still and argue that such obituaries – and their reading in specific presents – themselves present opportunities ‘for reflexive consideration of the past as a means of highlighting the historically constituted nature’ (Campbell 1998: 16) of current threats. Just as encounters with former, fabulous, encyclopaedias may stimulate circumspection on contemporary taxonomies (Foucault 2002: xvi-xvii), so too encounters with former foes now rendered less monstrous might shed new light on present enemies, and the contingent nature of understandings thereof.

Such reflections point to potentially productive future research agendas to build on this article's first attempt to explore and demonstrate the significance of these obituaries. Such research could include analysis of obituaries published in other sites and states, as well as comparative work with figures of condemnation remembered for other forms of violence. Reception studies could explore various readings of these, and the interaction thereof with other political or security imaginaries, while numerical research would document trends relating to their content, and changes therein over time. More conceptual work, finally, could investigate the intrusion of contemporary interpretative frames – such as 'radicalisation' or 'new terrorism' – in the writing of past threats, and, indeed, the extent to which such obituaries reproduce assumptions about religion, race, nationality, class, and – perhaps especially given the sample explored in this paper – gender.

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[i] I am grateful to the editorial board, anonymous reviewers, Charlotte Heath-Kelly and Andrew Whiting for their thoughts and comments on earlier versions of this article. Any errors remain, of course, my own.

[ii] I return to the selection of these individuals and my use of this terminology below.

[iii] This also offers the first sustained analysis of the workings of terrorist obituaries more generally (although see Fowler 2009, 165-167).

[iv] These breakdown as follows: Al-Zarqawi – 6 obituaries, 8160 words; Nidal – 6 obituaries, 8416 words; Habash – 5 obituaries, 5766 words; Marulanda – 5 obituaries, 5111 words; bin Laden – 6 obituaries – 14,992 words; Basayev – 6 obituaries, 5689 words; Prabhakan – 6 obituaries, 7242 words.

[v] Six of the seven selected individuals occupied prominent leadership positions in organisations featuring on formal lists of designated terrorist groups such as the US State Department's List of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and the UK Home Office's List of proscribed organisations: al-Zarqawi (al Qaeda); Nidal (Abu Nidal Organisation); Habash (People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine); Marulanda (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia); Osama bin Laden (al Qaeda); and, Prabhakan (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). The seventh - Basayev - was included for his responsibility for the Beslan School

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massacre, and the 2002 Moscow Theatre attack, and – with the aim of heterogeneity – as a figure within the Cechen conflict.

[vi] This story, interestingly, is absent from the other obituaries of Prabhakaran which emphasise instead his witnessing of the Tamil population's oppression by the Sinhalese-dominated government (BBC 2009; Telegraph 2009), or the failings of earlier, peaceful efforts to correct these injustices (Times 2009).