

The Forgotten Terrorists: Lessons from the History of Terrorism

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One of the most intriguing, yet forgotten, terrorist groups in history is the Galleanists, an innovative group of militant Italian anarchists active in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. They introduced tactics and strategies that are widely used today in the world of terrorism. This article examines the rise and fall of the group, and discusses how America's experience with it holds many lessons for understanding today's global terrorist threat.

Keywords anarchists, Galleanists, history of terrorism, innovative attacks, useful contemporary lessons, Wall Street bombing

Introduction

One of the most intriguing, yet forgotten, terrorist groups in history is the Galleanists, an Italian anarchist group active in the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. There is hardly a reference to them in most books on terrorism, and even in the vast literature on anarchism they are basically ignored.¹ Yet this fiery band of anarchists introduced terrorism tactics and strategies that are still being used around the world today. They established a pattern of highly innovative attacks that continually frustrated the authorities and caught them off guard. They were the first to introduce on a wide scale the use of package bombs and the first to detonate a “vehicle” bomb in the U.S. in the form of a horse and cart.

The Galleanists' organizational structure was similar to Al Qaeda, with a charismatic leader at the top and several autonomous cells operating throughout the United States. Just as Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups use mosques to recruit and fan the flames of religious extremism, the Galleanists, like other anarchists of the time, used meeting places near factories and steel mills to promote the anarchist philosophy.² The Galleanists, however, foreshadowed other types of terrorist movements as well. Similar to many terrorist organizations that were formed in the twentieth century, the number of active, militant Galleanists was small, most likely between 50 and 60 hardcore members.³ The Galleanists were also ahead of their time with the skillful use of the media to promote their agenda and

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