

# **Naming Terrorism: A critical analysis of the Buffalo ‘Shooting’**

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## **The Terrorism Bias**

European and North American media has a tendency to conflate acts of terrorism with Islamic extremism and non-whiteness (Lajevardi, 2021). Meanwhile, violent crimes committed by white perpetrators motivated by other ideologies, such as, but not limited to, white supremacy, conveniently escape the “terrorism” label (Corbin, 2017). I argue that this is wildly unjustified, and that even crimes committed by white perpetrators born and raised in the West can indeed be classified as terrorist. To this end, I focus on the case of the Buffalo shooting that occurred on May 14th, 2022, wherein an armed American white supremacist entered a store frequented by Black customers and proceeded to kill ten and injure three (Prokupezc et al., 2022). This is an *express* act of terrorism, and I prove it by first constructing a definition of terrorism based on prevailing academic literature, and then arguing through court-submitted evidence that the Buffalo shooting falls squarely under this definition. To my frustration, Western media insistently names the crime a “mass shooting” or “massacre” in their headlines, but never “terrorist” (Franklin, 2022; Mckinley et al. 2022; O’sullivan, 2022), demonstrating how white terrorist acts evade the term, and I intend to show this bias with this article.

## **Defining Terrorism**

Terrorism is a tricky term to define because it is frequently tossed around, sometimes “careless[ly]”, in popular discourse, and this is a real issue (Richards, 2013, p.X). A clearly-demarkated definition of terrorism is useful for the development of law surrounding terror-related crimes and so we can challenge instances of racist bias in its use, as I seek to do (Richards, 2013). In this section, I will draw upon existing literature and arguments to conceptualize terrorism.

First, there is a distinctly ideological character to terrorism, in that it is violence committed for some political end and not a *random* act of violence (Richards, 2013). An accidental explosion, for instance, cannot be considered terrorist. However, importantly, it is also not an act committed in the name of any *particular* ideology (i.e., Islamic extremism) because

that would render the concept unreasonably narrow, potentially racist, and would exclude a range of mass violent crimes that intuition might deem terrorist (Richards, 2013).

Secondly, terrorism is not any particular form or method of violence (Richards, 2013). For example, some associate terrorism with bombings, but then strategic state-organized bombings of, say, nuclear sites could be considered terrorist. This would also mean that cyberattacks and other unconventional forms of violence could not be considered terrorist. Both of these conclusions are counter-intuitive.

So how can we define terrorism, then? According to prevailing literature, terrorism “*lies in the intent or purpose behind the act of violence rather than in the act itself, namely to generate a wider psychological [terror] impact beyond the immediate victims*” to some “*political end*” (Richards, 2013). In other words: for an act to be considered terrorist, it must be violence committed with an ideological/political motive, intended to spread fear in some population beyond the physical victims. In the following section, I argue that the nature of the Buffalo shooting exactly matches this definition.

### **The Buffalo Terrorist Act**

The case of the Buffalo shooting can be classified as terrorist because it was an act of violence committed symbolically in the name of an ideology, namely, *white supremacy*, intended to cause fear in a group beyond the immediate victims, namely, *Black America*. I demonstrate these claims by reviewing the content of the shooter’s manifesto, inscriptions written on his weapon, and his Discord messages.

First, the ideological and political nature of the shooting is clearly explicated in the shooter’s white supremacist manifesto and through the engravings on his gun. In his manifesto he claims that Black people are an “obvious, visible, and large group of replacers” of the “White man” (U.S. v. Gendron, 2022). On the gun he makes several political statements, including: “Here’s your reparations”, a reference to the reparations that many Black Americans have requested to offset existing inequalities created by slavery, and “The Great Replacement” (a reference to the, and allow me to be liberal with my word choice here, positively *ludicrous* idea that the White race is being replaced by other races in the United States) (U.S. v. Gendron, 2022). This clearly ideological and political motivation behind the crime is the first step to classify it as “terrorist”.

The second and even more crucial step to classify this attack as “terrorist” is by proving that he had the intention to spread this political message beyond the immediate victims to create a wider psychological impact, and I argue that this is demonstrated in his manifesto and in his Discord. According to these sources, “the goals of the attack were to ‘Kill as many blacks as possible,’ ‘Avoid dying,’ and ‘Spread ideals’” (U.S. v. Gendron, 2022). The last point in particular, “*spread ideals*”, points to the conclusion that the act of violence was intended to have psychological effects beyond those immediately harmed. It was to spread a message of white supremacy, or as the shooter called it, “The Great Replacement”. The aforementioned references to highly politicized racial issues in the United States such as the “reparations” indicates how the shooter was also addressing more broadly Black persons of America, and not only the Black people he killed. Also key is the fact that he stated “kill as many blacks as *possible*”, indicating that the shooter targeted the victims not for a personal vendetta against them in *particular*, but because they were Black, and their death *symbolized* to him a fulfillment of a (markedly twisted) political end.

### **Name the Crime**

As an American national and European resident, it is frustrating to watch most if not all Western media outlets dancing around naming the crime committed in Buffalo as an act of terrorism. Not only does the refusal to call the act “terrorist” undermine the experience of the victims and their families, it also reinforces existing Western biases that incorrectly associates “Islam” with “terrorist”, and unjustifiably excuses white and non-Arab perpetrators from this label. From here on, I call name the Buffalo shooting for what it really is: The Buffalo terrorist act.

### References

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