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Radical Warfare's First "Superweapon": The Fears, Perceptions and Realities of the Orsini Bomb, 1858-1896

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ABSTRACT

This article retraces the forgotten legacy of a percussion triggered shrapnel scattering improvised explosive device (IED), known as the Orsini Bomb. Initially used in an attempt to assassinate Emperor Napoleon III in 1858, in the decades after, the Orsini Bomb was replicated, modified and deployed by regicides, insurgents and terrorists, and mythologised by the press as an omnipresent aspect of such forms of radical warfare. This article presents a "biography" of this unique IED, concluding, firstly, that Orsini's design was an important point of reference in weapons manufacture for violent radicals even after the advent of dynamite in the 1860s and, secondly, that its reputation as a semiotic reference point for terrorist activity was enhanced by press reportage of its proliferation and use throughout the *fin de siècle*. In the final analysis, the Orsini Bomb became a transnationally recognised "brand" of weapon, synonymous with both assassination and insurgency. As such, the bomb's reputation—often dwarfed in the historiography of political violence by dynamite—needs to be reconsidered.

KEYWORDS

Felice Orsini; Orsini Bomb; improvised explosive devices; newspapers; radical warfare; nineteenth century; contagion effect

Introduction

On the 12 January 1858, Emperor Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie were travelling down Rue le Peletier, enroute to an evening performance at the Paris Opera House. As their carriage drew up to the building amidst a crowd of cheering Parisians, the scene of pomp was eradicated by a flash of blinding light and "a tremendous explosion" which was "so loud as to throw the whole quarter into a state of alarm." The source of this violent disruption were three homemade bombs, tossed from the crowd "upon the pavement within a few inches of the vehicle." Although Napoleon and Eugénie emerged relatively unscathed—the latter caught glass shards in her eye and the former's hat was damaged—those gathered around the target were not so fortunate.¹ The blast that emanated outwards from under the carriage's wheels killed the horses and their driver, sent shards of white hot metal into the bodies of the emperor's guards, and left scores of bystanders bleeding and screaming. In all, 8 people died and 156 people were wounded by this act of political violence, the purpose of which, as the mastermind of the attack opined, was to kill Napoleon, the head of a "government based upon despotism and treason," with the hope of engendering "a revolution in Paris, a war of principles and republicanism in continental Europe" and a war in Italy that could ensure the peninsula's independence.²

The designer of the weapon that was supposed to unleash this revolution was Felice Orsini, an Italian nationalist cut from the same cloth as his contemporary, Giuseppe Garibaldi. Like the latter, Orsini was an insurgent involved in plots to liberate his homeland and unite it as one nation. The attainment of this goal, he believed, required the death of Napoleon III who, as the ruler of a nation of Catholics and commander of Europe's largest army, was the military power behind the hated Pope Pius IX. As such, Orsini believed the emperor's death would lead to the collapse of papal power and the

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sending of a signal to the courts of Europe that nationalists, republicans and liberals had the ability to strike down tyrants at will.³ Orsini's *attentat* failed and, in the aftermath of the bombing, he and his accomplices—Antonio Gomez and Carlo de Rudio—were apprehended, the latter two receiving life sentences (later commuted), whilst Orsini was led to the guillotine. The fourth plotter, Giovanni Pierrri, did not get a chance to join the attack. As Napoleon's carriage neared to Opera House, Pierrri's nervous demeanour drew the attention of an off-duty *gendarme* who, having collared the would-be assassin, discovered in his pockets two small iron orbs with protruding nodules.⁴

The objects that Pierrri carried were a form of improvised explosive device (IED) that would come to be known across much of the world in the decades that followed as the Orsini Bomb. Although its notoriety as a weapon of insurgents, assassins and terrorists was eclipsed from the 1870s onwards by the advent of dynamite, the praise heaped by violent radicals of the late nineteenth century on the latter did not mean that the Orsini bomb became outmoded.⁵ Indeed, despite being less destructive than dynamite, variants of the Orsini Bomb appeared in the plots of nihilists, anarchists, Fenians, nationalists, socialists and other groups involved in acts of political violence throughout the formative years of international terrorism.⁶

In 1867, a year after dynamite was invented, “a large quantity of concealed missiles and combustibles, principally of the description called ‘Orsini Bombs’” were found in one of Garibaldi's bases in northern Italy. In 1870, in Paris, the press reported a new conspiracy to assassinate Napoleon using Orsini bombs, which involved the plotters making a “toast to Orsini” ahead of their attack. A year later, it was alleged that Georges Clémenceau, future leader of France, had “delivered 600 Orsini bombs” to storehouses in Montmartre during the Paris Commune, the ordnance having become a frontline weapon in the Communards' battle to defend the city. In 1893, Orsini bombs were used by the anarchist Santiago Salvador to kill at least thirty people in Barcelona and, as late as 1904, a gang of Italian nationalists was caught hoarding Orsini bombs in a warehouse in Trieste.⁷ The influence of the IED as the ideal weapon for radical warfare spread beyond Europe. In 1866, Isma'il Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, had two Orsini bombs thrown at him as he travelled through central Cairo. In 1898, police in Havana reported the uncovering of a cache of Orsini bombs that were earmarked for use in a political assassination and, ten years later, in Kolkata, “bombs of the Orsini pattern” were used by anti-colonial insurgents in an attempt to derail a train.⁸

Some of these plots were real and others were imagined or, at the very least, exaggerated—a practice far from uncommon in reportage of terrorism during this burgeoning age of mass media.⁹ As scholars of contemporary terrorism have noted, however, media narratives of terrorist activity, whether based on truths or not, are highly influential on perceptions of the threat and can often play a role in engendering “copycat” attacks. Whether influencing the actions of would-be terrorists, or the anxiety levels of the public and the police, the recurrence of motifs in these narratives is central to either process, imbuing elements of terrorism reportage with semiotic values.¹⁰ As this article demonstrates, this process was at play in the coverage of the Orsini Bomb. A full decade before dynamite assumed a similar role in public imaginations, the Orsini Bomb emerged as motif in media reportage of terrorist activity in the years after the attempt on Napoleon III, becoming imbued with a semiotic value that was acknowledged by both violent radicals who championed the weapon and by police and journalists who assumed that its presence—often in large quantities—was discernible in all manner of radical plots.¹¹

To understand why the Orsini Bomb became lauded by radicals and synonymous in press perceptions with terrorist activities, this article presents a “biography” of this revolutionary IED, charting its development both physically and conceptually. Through this biography, new insights into the reportage of political violence during the late nineteenth century are presented, a deeper understanding of how the term “Orsini Bomb” was used is explored and a contribution to the burgeoning revision of Orsini as an influential figure in the history of international terrorism is made.

The progenitor?

Given that as late as 1911, variants of Orsini Bombs were reportedly being used in terrorist attacks, it is curious that the IED and its inventor have received limited regard from historians, particularly those

who have produced histories of terrorist tactics, weaponry and ideology.¹² Neither Schmid and Jongman's history of political terrorism nor Chaliand and Blin's centuries-spanning work discuss Orsini and his often-replicated weapon. Michael Burleigh's one-sentence mention of the Opera House attack was an afterthought in his popular history of terrorism—Orsini's full name was not mentioned, the bombs were referred to in the context of a discussion about Fenian terrorism, and Burleigh was off on his date for the 1858 *attentat* by a full year. Randal D. Law devoted more consideration to Orsini, correctly assessing his attack as one "intended to further a revolutionary cause," rather than a simple regicide. To this, Law added a speculative sentence by way of analysis of the Orsini Bomb which, he pondered, might have been chosen by the attackers because it was "more effective at destroying a well-guarded target; or maybe they understood the impact such a dramatic attack would have on the public and other revolutionaries." Richard Bach Jensen referred to the "ingenious design" of the Orsini Bomb when assessing the Barcelona attack of 1893, but, owing to the chronological focus of his book, did not delve further into the history of the weapon or its creator. Martin A. Miller also said little about the bomb, however, unconstrained by Jensen's chronology, he gave the designer his dues, acknowledging the importance of Orsini's *attentat* as one that "created a sensation" in the minds of other violent radicals, engendering emulation.¹³

For historians of political violence who have focused on the pre-Paris Commune period, Orsini's influence on the development of modern terrorism has been better explored. Marco Pinfari has argued that the bombing of Napoleon's carriage deliberately targeted civilians, with the intent to engender fear across Europe and highlight the political grievances of Italian nationalists. Likewise, David George used a range of criteria to assess the motivation, end-goals and organization of the Orsini *attentat*, from which he concluded that it was "a terrorist's attempt to remove an 'imperial obstacle' to his chosen, ideologically defined policy goal, by way of assassination." Together, these examinations of Orsini's attack have evidenced his key role in the history of terrorism, establishing his *attentat*, indifference to civilian casualties and grand revolutionary objective as a collective point of confluence between the centuries-old world of tyrannicide, and the burgeoning era of the ideologically driven terrorist.¹⁴

This idea of Orsini representing a "hinge" point in the history of terrorism has been further explored by Tom Parker and Nick Sitter, who identified him as patient zero in the global spread of nationalist terrorism. This re-casting of Orsini aligns with Mischa Honeck's argument for him becoming a transnational martyr in the eyes of abolitionists and radicals in the pre-bellum United States.¹⁵ Within these welcome re-evaluations of Orsini's significance, however, there is still a missing dimension to our understanding—namely, the importance, recognised across the transatlantic world for much of the late nineteenth century but since forgotten, of the weapon with which he sought to change the world.

The weapon of the people

Walter Lacquer has declared that "the Orsini Bomb was a mere children's toy compared with the later developments of infernal machines."¹⁶ This was true. The design was simplistic, and the bomb's destructive capacity was less than that of dynamite. Yet, it was the makeshift nature of the IED—formed of easily acquired components, simple to assemble and uncomplicated to detonate—that made it enduringly popular amongst violent radicals, many of whom, having eschewed mass insurrections following the failure of the 1848 revolutions, sought asymmetrical forms of weaponry to pursue their political goals.¹⁷ This impetus was made clear in 1853 by the terrorist philosopher Karl Heinzen in his infamous treatise, *Murder*, in which he stated that the "barbarian party" of the ruling classes had "gun foundries in which to produce guns, powder mills in which to manufacture powder and it has complete freedom to mount its guns and pour in the powder. We have none of these things." As such, Heinzen argued, radicals needed to "study the mysteries of powder and fulminating silver" in order to "devise some sort of missile which one man can throw into a group of a few hundred, killing them all." Then and only then could the imbalance in the capacity for violence between radicals and

reactionaries be redressed, gifting “a few lone individuals the terrifying power to threaten the safety of whole masses of barbarians.”¹⁸

In keeping with Heinzen’s advice, Orsini’s IED was, as a newspaper article of 1887 had it, an “imperfectly manufactured tool of murder.”¹⁹ In appearance, the Italian’s original model was a rough-hewn oval of cast iron, created by two half shells, one of which was weighted by numerous nodule-like protrusions. Feeding into a central chamber containing between 500–800 grams of explosive, the nodules acted as percussion caps, channelling the concussive force created by the bomb being tossed against a hard surface into the main chamber, igniting the material therein.²⁰ The resulting blast not only did damage in its own right but, by design, ripped apart the pre-fragmented casing, creating the shrapnel effect that led to the carpeting of Rue le Pelletier with injured civilians and a head injury to Orsini himself, such that when he was apprehended later in the night it was with “the top of his head wrapped in a bandage.”²¹ The size of the bombs used in both that attack and in those carried out in the years that followed varied considerably, with some devices reported to have been “rather smaller than a cricket ball,” whilst others were thought to have been the size of a grapefruit. Regardless of dimensions, most versions of the IED, when packed with explosive, weighed between 0.5 and 1.5kgs, with some reported as being as heavy as four kgs.²² In general, therefore, the Orsini Bomb was both compact and lightweight, designed so that it could be easily carried in an assailant’s pockets, unnoticed, to within range of their target.

Orsini’s idea for a small, percussion triggered IED that could scatter shrapnel over a wide area was not original. In the 1690s, the British glassmaker Philip Dallowe patented a glass shatter grenade that would unleash a fiery payload in a manner not unlike the modern-day Molotov Cocktail. The percussion triggered detonation in Dallowe’s design provided an alternative to the timed fuzes that were usually fitted to iron grenade shells, which required a degree of training and timing to use effectively. Regardless of the glass grenade’s ease of use, the iron shell was still favoured by armies throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the material was more robust than glass for use in the field. It was only for want of iron casings during the Crimean War that Anglo-French and Russian forces reverted to modified versions of Dallowe’s design. For some, including Colonel Robert Hibbert of the 7th Royal Fusiliers, the glass grenade opened the way to further innovation. With grim understatement, he suggested that “filling empty soda water bottles full of powder, old twisted nails and any other sharp of cutting thing” would greatly “annoy our friends in their pits.” In this suggestion, the notion of shrapnel being added to a percussion triggered grenade was put forward, moreover, at a time when military planners across Europe were discussing the need for a trigger mechanism that could replace timed fuzes.²³

As a keen student of firearms and explosives who had connections to military figures across Europe, Orsini likely either took direct inspiration from these post-Crimean War discussions over grenade design or, was given specific instruction from another like-minded insurgent. Regardless of the IED’s genesis, the strength of Orsini’s design lay in the fact that it married several aspects of contemporary grenades together—percussion triggered detonation, shrapnel, and a casing harder than glass.²⁴ If the design of the Orsini Bomb contained a thread of innovation, it was in the role played by fulminated mercury. This explosive material, which was discovered in 1800, was used throughout the nineteenth century as a primer in various forms of rifle and small arms ammunition. Although unstable by the standards of today’s primers, in Orsini’s time fulminated mercury offered both flexibility and a percussion triggered lethality that other explosives lacked. As a contemporary scientific journal noted, fulminated mercury was both “twenty times stronger as an explosive agent than gunpowder” and safer to dry out and activate for use. This made transporting it easier, as it could be “kept in a wet state, when it is perfectly harmless” until such time as its destructive capabilities were needed.²⁵ Furthermore, it was simple to make. In November 1857, one of Orsini’s conspirators, Simon Bernard, simply walked into a pharmacy in London and purchased sizeable quantities of nitric acid and brandy. Those ingredients, when mixed with mercury—an easily obtainable treatment for syphilis—created fulminated mercury.²⁶

The casing that housed the explosive was also easy to construct, transport and assemble. The man who forged the iron shells for Orsini—a Birmingham-based engineer named Joseph Taylor—has often been described as a gunsmith. Yet, records indicate that he had no specialist experience in producing ordnance.²⁷ This lack of military expertise likely contributed to making the products of Taylor's labours appear unthreatening to the casual eye. In the weeks leading up to the Opera House attack, Bernard convinced a curious London café owner that the unassembled bomb shells he was carrying were harmless components of “an invention connected with the manufacture of gas.” Cementing the IED's status as a weapon that anyone could acquire the components for, transport and use was the simplicity of the assembly method, which required little more than inserting a screw between the two shell cases and tightening it.²⁸ The Orsini Bomb, in short, was the physical manifestation of Heinzen's call for an innovative, easy to make IED that could act as a leveller in the battle between radicals and the powers that be, idealised, as one radical newspaper of the age had it, as “one of the badges of the free citizen.”²⁹

The weapon of assassination

The “contagion effect” of terrorist tactics has been well noted in the literature, particularly as it pertains to terrorist groups of various sizes, ethno-political backgrounds and resource bases learning new weapons design and adapting means of deployment from each other.³⁰ This process was at play in the global diffusion of the Orsini Bomb in the decade after 1858, during which the weapon was lauded by those who either desired a weapon that could despatch a target without the need to get closer than throwing range or, simply wished to emulate their hero Orsini as accurately as possible.³¹

Few violent radicals of the age were more possessed of these criteria than the members of the Russian nihilist group, Hell. Inspired by the ease with which Orsini and his accomplices had been able to get close to Napoleon and release their payloads, Hell's leader, Nicolai Ishutin, believed that the Orsini Bomb was the key to fulfilling his groups' mission to kill Tsar Alexander II. Ishutin was not alone amongst Russia's oppressed in realising the utility of the IED as a tool of assassination. During the Polish Uprising of 1863, an “Orsini Bomb was thrown from a window at General Berg as he was driving through a suburb of Warsaw.” Much like the attack on Napoleon's *gendarme*-surrounded carriage, the bomb was deployed in this instance for the purposes of cutting through “the usual number of Cossacks” who guarded the general's carriage.³²

Informed by this demonstration, in 1865 Ishutin used what little money Hell possessed to send a loyal follower to Geneva, with the aim to contact a group known as the European Revolutionary Committee, which was rumoured to have the blueprints for the Orsini Bomb that the Poles had used. Hell only had enough money to pay for a one-way train ticket for Ishutin's emissary, who ended up having to beg for change in order to fund his trip back to St. Petersburg once he discovered that the European Revolutionary Committee was a myth and the plans not forthcoming. The mission's failure aside, the fact that Ishutin was willing to empty Hell's meagre treasury to acquire the Orsini Bomb, in addition to the deployment of the weapon on the streets of Warsaw, speaks to its growing international reputation as the ideal device for would-be assassins who aimed to kill a well-guarded target.³³

This recognition of the IED's potential as a weapon of assassination persisted even after the invention of dynamite in the late 1860s. Guglielmo Oberdan, an unwilling conscript into the Austro-Hungarian Army, deserted his regiment and fled to Rome in 1878, for the purpose of acquiring Orsini bombs from the same nationalist circles that Orsini had emerged from. Oberdan's purpose was to assassinate Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria during an upcoming visit to Trieste, replicating the Opera House attack on a tactical level, using the crowd around Franz Josef to get close to his target before deploying the IED, whereupon its shrapnel would cut through civilians and guards to get at the emperor.³⁴

For Nicolai Kibalchich, the chief bomb maker for the Russian nihilist group, *Narodnaya Volya*, the appeal of the Orsini Bomb as a weapon of assassination lay as much in its capacity to land an indiscriminate death blow as in its portability and quick-fire detonation. Throughout the 1870s,

Kibalchich designed a variety of bombs for the purposes of assassinating Tsar Alexander II, including timed explosives and delayed fuze-ignited models. When it came time to launch a brazen attack on the Tsar's carriage in March 1881, however, Kibalchich designed a weapon that adhered to Orsini's basic principles of a percussion triggered IED. As one of his colleagues recalled, Kibalchich's bombs were comprised of "kerosene cans . . . which served as cases for the explosive." The explosive used was dynamite rather than fulminated mercury, however, within the cans were "two crossed tubes containing nitro-glycerine," placed so that "they would explode whatever the position of the bomb when it struck its objective." More complex than Orsini's design, only four of the bombs were created after "three men had worked on them for fifteen hours." In the end, however, only one of these IEDs was needed to kill the Tsar as he exited his carriage.³⁵

It is interesting that, despite Kibalchich's original design and the presence of dynamite, the shadow of both Orsini and his infernal machine was cast over *Narodnaya Volya's* deadly success. The "Orsini Bomb that has done for Russia," the French radical Henri Rochefort declared, "what William Tell did for Switzerland." Wedding the two terror weapons of the age together, the satirical journal *Beaumarchais* declared that the autocrat had lived too long on his "fantastic throne, placed atop Orsini Bombs and undermined by dynamite."³⁶ Unsurprisingly, such evocation of Orsini in the Tsar's death was typical in France, where the press attributed his end to "the explosion of Orsini Bombs" which were, as a correspondent in St. Petersburg phrased it, either "thrown against his carriage" or "cast at his feet" in a manner not unlike the 1858 attack. *L'Événement*, for its part, simply reported that the Tsar was "killed by the shards of an Orsini Bomb." As the reportage spread wider across Europe and into the United States, the Orsini-influence narrative was further developed via the circulation of an erroneous story that the "the day of the Czar's death was the anniversary of Orsini's execution"—a "strange coincidence" which implied that the Italian was an inspiration for both the attack and its means. The omnipresence of the bomb in *Narodnaya Volya's* plots was further emphasised when, in the weeks after the assassination, newspapers across Europe and the United States reported that a shipment of Orsini Bombs—variously reported as numbering between a dozen and 300 devices—was uncovered enroute to St. Petersburg from Spain, supposedly sent by supporters of *Narodnaya Volya* in the event that their initial *attentat* failed.³⁷

This inflated association of Orsini and his bombs with the Tsar's death exemplified a wider trend that had emerged in the reporting of terrorist attacks in the years after 1858, in which allusions to Orsini Bombs were commonplace—even when attacks were planned to be carried out by other means. In 1870, a fresh conspiracy to assassinate Napoleon was uncovered, the initial reports of which claimed that the perpetrators would "dress themselves as soldiers, present a petition to the emperor, and shoot him when he was receiving it." As the story grew, however, new details were inserted, which suggested that "twenty bombs were found, very well made, and of an explosive force calculated as five times that of the Orsini Bombs," despite the fact that the supposed architect of the plot—Louis Auguste Blanqui—had derided the Orsini Bomb as "very dangerous to handle."³⁸ In 1878, another newspaper tried to persuade its readers that a "state of siege" existed in Berlin, which was being terrorised by "Orsini Bombs and dynamitards." This was despite the fact that the main acts of political violence that had taken place that year in the German capital were two separate assassination attempts on Kaiser Wilhelm, both perpetrated by assailants armed with guns, not bombs.³⁹

The same process of association was at play an ocean away from Europe. In February 1861, it was reported that "ten thousand hand grenades, similar to the Orsini Bomb" were being manufactured by anti-abolitionists who, in response to Abraham Lincoln's victory in the presidential election the prior November, intended to use this unrealistically massive cache to kill the incumbent before he could begin a campaign to abolish slavery. Notably, the actual details of this plot concerned an ambush of the president elect's train as it passed through Baltimore, during which Lincoln was to be shot. Indeed, the only reference to Orsini that was actually connected to this plot came from its alleged mastermind, Cipriano Ferrandini, who declared to his co-conspirators that "my life is of no consequence in a cause like this, and I am ready to give it for his. As Orsini gave his life for Italy, I am ready to die for the rights of the South, and to crush out the abolitionist!" Testament to the linkage that was already being made

in the press between acts of Orsini emulation and the IED that bore his name, however, the reportage simply assumed that the bomb would feature in the assassination attempt.⁴⁰

This assumption that Orsini Bombs meant assassination went beyond the realm of sensationalist journalism. In 1868, a Prussian citizen resident in Britain informed the embassy in London of a plot hatched by a disgruntled Hanoverian soldier to kill King Wilhelm. The fact that the Hanoverian was, “a desperate man” who asserted to his accuser that “he was in possession of an Orsini shell” was all the information needed for the loyal Prussian to take the talk of killing Wilhelm seriously and report the matter to the police.⁴¹ Four years prior to this, a reporter for *Le Courier du Gard* summed-up this growing connection between Orsini Bombs and assassination plots by opining that, “before Orsini, the regicides used only pistols, rifles or daggers.” Now, however, that they had access to his “horrible device of destruction,” a new era of targeted killing had dawned. Given that this linkage was being made over fifteen years before the Tsar met his end, it seems clear that much of the attribution given to Orsini’s influence in *Narodnaya Volya’s* *attentat* was born not simply of the fact that Kibalchich used a variant of the IED, but also of a narrative that had been steadily constructed since 1858, in which assassinations would feature Orsini Bombs—even if, in practice, such plots relied on other weapons. This narrative placed a semiotic value on the Orsini Bomb as a weapon synonymous with political murder.

The weapon of insurgency

The semiotic value of the Orsini Bomb was not confined to assassination and, in the years after Orsini’s *attentat*, the IED also became synonymous with more general acts of violent insurgency. As in the case of the assassination semiotic, a kernel of truth lay at the heart of this “branding” of the Orsini Bomb as an insurgent’s best friend. Less than a year after the Opera House bombing, followers of Garibaldi were being ordered by their commanders to “complete the fabrication of Orsini shells” as part of their defence of Palermo during the Italian War of Independence. Such a practice was widespread during this conflict. One of Garibaldi’s followers alleged in his memoirs that stashes of Orsini Bombs numbering in the hundreds were collected by nationalist liberation groups everywhere from Sicily to Naples. These “murderous missiles,” as one war correspondent put it, were deployed in urban ambushes, such as one in 1867 in Rome, during which “a shower of Orsinis” was rained down on government troops from the upper windows of a street in Trastevere. Such instances of “bomb-throwing, blowing up of barracks etc infuriated the soldiery almost to madness.” This, of course, was the point. Beyond its tactical uses, the connection of Orsini the nationalist hero to the weapon by which the peninsula could be liberated lay, as the Irish nationalist newspaper the *Freeman’s Journal* put it, in “the Orsini mode of warfare.”⁴²

As this journal’s applauding indicates and as Mischa Honeck has argued, this image of Orsini as a symbol of radical liberation was transnational, making him a figure fit for emulation in the eyes of Fenians, Republicans, Anti-Abolitionists and militant liberals the world over.⁴³ The same was true of his IED. In addition to the use of the bomb in Poland by separatists in 1863, an early chronicler of the Fenians recorded that in London in 1866, “Orsini shells were manufactured by the score” in secret factories controlled by the Irish Republican Brotherhood.⁴⁴ In the United States, one of the supporters of the abolitionist John Brown stated in the lead-up to the groups’ fateful raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859, that “Orsini bombs, which can be made in N.Y., would be effective in so frightening a soldier’s chivalry that our object could be accomplished during the panic.”⁴⁵ This same perception of the weapon as an asymmetrical leveller persisted into the years of the American Civil War, during which variants of the IED were deployed by both Confederate and Union militia groups. Notably, one such variant, which was displayed at the Philadelphia Exhibition in 1876, was labelled in the accompanying catalogue as an “Orsini Bomb.” This was despite the variant being patented in 1862 by a Kentuckian called W.W. Hanes and being known as a “Hanes Excelsior Grenade” during the war. Such was the power, by this time, of the Orsini “brand.”⁴⁶

Why was the “brand” so strong by the late 1870s? Beyond the inflated reportage of the Orsini Bomb in assassination plots, it seems that the IED’s reputation was greatly enhanced by accounts of its

omnipresence in both the Paris Commune of 1871 and the siege of Paris that preceded it. During these months of violence for the French capital, Orsini Bombs were manufactured by radicals within the city, first as part of the struggle against the invading Prussians and then, as a means of defending the Commune from the French government's troops. The IEDs produced to these ends were highly variable in design, with many of the devices being bereft of screwable shells, nodules or percussion caps.⁴⁷ Despite often looking and functioning nothing like the bombs used in 1858, the 7,000 such makeshift IEDs, glass bottle incendiaries, firework rockets and "cylindrical copper cartridges full of fulminating material" produced by Paris' radicals were typically branded as Orsini Bombs by the press and other contemporary observers, as their percussion triggered mechanisms featured "the generic principle of the famous Orsini design." Even in cases where percussion-triggered detonation was not evident, this branding occurred. When, for example, the Communards were alleged to have wired a house full of hostages for detonation, it was suggested in the press that "sixty Orsini Bombs" had been used, even though percussion-triggered shrapnel IEDs were not appropriate for the task. This Orsini-branding of the manifold explosives found in Paris was even embraced by the Communards themselves, in particular Henri Rochefort, who boasted that he and his companions took "delivery of thirty thousand Orsini Bombs to defend our institutions."⁴⁸

Such claims contributed to a fearful narrative that emerged in the wake of the Commune's bloody suppression in May 1871, which depicted a city awash with Orsini Bombs, stored in mass caches for the purposes of arming a second insurrection.⁴⁹ Surveying the blasted streets of Paris after the Commune's end, a correspondent from *The Times* claimed to have seen as many as "three thousand Orsini bombs" amidst the revolutionaries' abandoned stores. In keeping with the Communard's idiosyncratic means of weapons production, the correspondent identified two types of IEDs amongst this cache. The first appeared like a cricket ball, "filled with powder and covered with nipples, upon which are percussion caps." The second design was described as being "circular, flat and hollow, about six inches in diameter and an inch and half thick, and fitted all around its edge with little hammers, which play upon a glass case inside filled with nitro-glycerine." As was the case of Kibalchich's design, the only similarity between this device and Orsini's original was the percussion triggered detonation. And yet, no less than the correspondents who covered the Tsar's assassination and the compilers of the guide to the Philadelphia Exhibition, the surveyor of Paris' ruin used the term Orsini Bomb as a catch-all, tying the "brand" to Europe's latest radical outrage. Another, more cynical reporter, highlighted to readers the danger of this trend, declaring that the police were using "supernatural instinct" to uncover caches of supposed Orsini Bombs, "some shaped like a pear," others "shaped like an apple" all of which clearly needed to be found and disposed of "so as to awaken the people to a sense of the danger from which the police alone had saved them."⁵⁰

This suggestion that all explosive devices—or, perhaps even, random objects—were being classed by the police as Orsini Bombs as a means of making Parisians afear of the Commune's return was given some credence in 1872 by Ernest Cresson of the Paris Police Prefecture. Testifying to a government inquiry into the rise and fall of the Commune, Cresson claimed to have "snatched from the hands of the conspirators some 24,000 Orsini Bombs, of which 6,000 were primed." His predecessor, Albert Choppin had a similar story to tell, noting that "since the Orsini attack the bomb seems to have become an obsession of the conspirators. They have attached themselves to it with ardour." As such, Choppin claimed that numerous Orsini devices that were "wheel-like in shape, containing white powder and a glass cylinder filled with sulphuric acid, and packed nails" had been found in Montmartre, the spiritual home of the Communards.⁵¹

Whether real, imagined or exaggerated in size and lethality, the reportage of these unbelievably large caches of assorted IEDs and their connection to the Commune ensured that the Orsini "brand" became as synonymous with insurrectionary plots after 1871 as it had been with assassinations. As a Spanish newspaper sympathetic to the Commune's politics put it, "primitives" fought with "the baton, the club, or the straight punch," states had "canons and bayonets and other forms of military hardware," but "revolutionary peoples" had a means of rising up "on a large scale against their governments, by means of the rifle, the barricade and the Orsini Bomb."⁵²

This semiotic value of the Orsini Bomb as a weapon of insurrection led to it being affiliated with a more nebulous fear that took hold of reactionaries in post-Commune Europe—the fear that the alleged puppet master of the Commune, “the socialist party of the International” was poised to rise up violently.⁵³ This conflation of Orsini with the International Workingmen’s Association over a decade after the latter’s execution was best articulated by an agent of the French secret police, the Sûreté, who wrote in 1881 that “Orsini, the right-hand of the patriarch of the International” who, “offended by the dominance of his homeland by a monarchical regime, imitated Karl Marx and Bakunin, putting himself at the head of Carbonari and Internationalists.” His tools of liberation, “were to be called Orsini bombs.”⁵⁴ Unnerved by the rise of both the godless Commune and the International, in 1875, the French clergy’s official journal stated that the enemies of god could be identified simply as those who “make Orsini Bombs and print obscene works.”⁵⁵

It was in this fearful context that the Orsini “brand” reached its epoch, fed by hyperbolic reportage of the IED’s usage and omnipresence in the shadow plots of both the International and other, more demonstrably violent, radicals. As early as June 1871, a military parade involving the leader of France, Adolphe Thiers, was called off at the last minute, on account of “the threatening attitude of the International (and) the fact that for every insurgent who has disappeared at least ten have been enrolled in the temporarily lost cause” which, in this instance, was rumoured to involve the assassination of Thiers, using either “picrate of potassium or Orsini Bombs.” This *attentat* did not occur. A year later, a correspondent from the *Telegraph* alleged that Thiers had received two cases of Orsini Bombs in the mail, complete with a note threatening that “2,000 of the same sinister commodities had already been sent into Paris and were in the hands of the Communists who had been released from prison.” This report dovetailed with an assertion in *Le Figaro* that “there are currently in Paris five factories concerned with fabricating Orsini Bombs.” And yet, not one of the alleged 2,000 IEDs produced by these factories was detonated in the city. Indeed, if the ordnance ever existed, it appears to have gathered dust in the backroom of a radical club, for a year later arrests “were made of several members of the International society both in Paris and in some of the Departments it is said that Orsini Bombs were found in the possession of several of the prisoners.”⁵⁶ Outside of France, “nine Orsini bombs and some socialist proclamations” were found at “the house of a member of the International” in Florence in 1874 and, in Berlin, a story about the expelling of German socialists to Switzerland and Britain reported “rumours that a number of Orsini Bombs have been seized and further precautionary measures are imminent.” Meanwhile, in Florence, reports of non-lethal Orsini Bomb explosions on various highways were attributed to “socialist demonstrations” and in Spain—wracked with conflict by the outbreak of the Third Carlist War in 1872—a Madrid newspaper claimed that amidst the fighting, “Internationalists here made many Orsini Bombs, with the aim to kill everyone.”⁵⁷

Outside of these alleged machinations of the Orsini Bomb-armed International, the association of Orsini’s IED with assassination plots continued to linger. In 1878, some Orsini Bombs were seized in Hamburg, the possessors of which were alleged to have also sent a letter threatening assassination to King Christian of Denmark. A similar interception of two Orsini Bombs suspected of being prepared for use in the murder of a Tsarist official occurred in Kiev a year later. Such reportage of “interceptions” and “uncoverings” of Orsini Bombs belies the fact that the actual use of the IED was minimal during the 1870s and, when bombings did occur, they were of a scale and lethality that was far removed from the post-Commune claims of great caches of ordnance being unleashed by armies of radicals.⁵⁸ In addition to sporadic bombings during the war in Spain, there were occasional explosions of Orsini IEDs in Italy, such as a seemingly random attack in central Rome in July 1872, during which, “an Orsini Bomb exploded causing great terror” but no fatalities. Such non-lethal attacks were increasingly seen as a nuisance more than anything else by the authorities, who identified the IEDs in some attacks as being little more than “fireworks,” which were “commonly sold in shops under the suggestive name of Orsini Bombs.”⁵⁹

Despite the lack of an Orsini Bomb-armed Internationalist revolution, and the fact that the number of “foiled” Orsini Bomb plots exceeded actual instances of explosions, the semiotic value of the IED continued undiminished. In 1878, the banker’s journal *Le Capitaliste* complained of the “repeated

attacks against the lives of sovereigns, the plots attributed to affiliates of the International and the singular frequency of the explosion of Orsini Bombs reported in Italy and as far away as Hungary.⁶⁰ Not only did such reportage misrepresent the scale of the threat of Orsini Bomb attacks but, ironically, it glossed over the fact that one of the most significant Orsini Bomb events of the 1870s didn't involve the attempted assassination of a general or the destruction of a police station, but rather, an attack on members of "working men's societies." This bombing, which occurred in 1878 in Florence, was reported by several newspapers as the act of a man "who is probably insane," tossing an Orsini Bomb into a crowd that was marching in support of King Umberto the day after an attempt was made on his life—notably, by a knife-wielding rather than bomb-throwing assailant. The bombing, moreover, was reported to have killed either no one or, at most, two people, leaving between five and twelve people injured. It is significant that the reportage of this same attack from a reactionary German newspaper was skewed toward the Orsini semiotic, obscuring the part of workingmen's association members as victims and describing the procession as a "patriotic rally" which was "disrupted by the throwing and bursting of an Orsini Bomb, and by the death and wounding of several people."⁶¹ This attempt by a reactionary press to both enhance the lethality of the IED and continue the narrative of it being the weapon of those who hate "patriots" (ie: Internationalists) could not obscure the fact that, by the end of the 1870s, the Orsini Bomb was entering its years of eclipse as the go-to weapon of radical warfare.

The weapon surpassed

As the accounts of Garibaldi's nationalists, Polish insurgents and terrorist assassins deploying the Orsini bomb in the two decades after the Paris attack suggest, violent radicals across Europe understood the power of the semiotic value the press had bestowed upon the IED. It was, from the moment its author detonated it on Rue le Peletier, a weapon of terror, which had caught the imagination of journalists, who had obligingly made clear to the reading public that the Orsini Bomb was a weapon to be feared.

As the 1880s unfolded, however, the Orsini Bomb's status was undermined by "apostles of dynamite," such as the notorious socialist-anarchist Johann Most, the Fenian chief Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa and the nihilist instructor "in the destruction of life and property," Professor Mezzerooff, all of whom both excited the imaginations of violent radicals and bedazzled journalists and writers with their blatant lauding of dynamite as the new symbol of terrorist violence.⁶² True, as the accounts of the various plots regaled at the start of this article indicate, the Orsini "brand" survived into the new century, carried along by both the modifiable genius of the original design and the trend, particularly after the Commune, for IEDs of various types to be referred to as Orsini Bombs. However, compared to dynamite—what Most called the "proletariat's artillery"—the once menacing shrapnel grenade looked more like a disruptive firecracker than the weapon by which the world could be changed.⁶³

As much is evident in the various threatening letters sent to the Paris Police Prefecture in the aftermath of clashes between police and anarchists at Clichy in 1891, and during the subsequent trial and execution in 1892 of the notorious terrorist Ravachol, who had sought to avenge the Clichy Affair via bombings. In a sample of forty-six such letters, amidst threats of "200,000 bullets," predictions of retaliatory attacks from a so-called "Committee of Dynamite" and warnings of letter writers being "instructed by the Execution Committee to dynamite you," the phrases Orsini Bomb, Orsini Grenade or Orsini Shell are never mentioned. References to dynamite, however, either in the name of self-appointed revenge committees or as a weapon of retaliation occur no less than twelve times.⁶⁴

Amidst the rise of the dynamite "brand," the Orsini Bomb did have two last spectacular and deadly appearances in the annals of terrorist history. The first occurred in Spain a year after Ravachol's beheading, when an anarchist named Santiago Salvador threw Orsini Bombs into the orchestra chamber at Liceu Opera House in Barcelona during a performance of *William Tell*—the same play that was showing at the Paris Opera House the night that Napoleon III was attacked

decades earlier. The bombs used by Salvador, moreover, were, unlike the catch-all termed variants of recent years, close replicas of Orsini's originals and, given the density of people in his target area, they caused far more death and destruction, with over thirty deaths reported.⁶⁵ And yet, although local reportage confirmed the presence of Orsini Bombs, the Liceu Opera House attack was also referred to in the non-Spanish press as a "dynamite outrage," the product of "the militant anarchist party who deal in bombs and dynamite," with descriptions given of the "dynamite bombs" that Salvador carried into the theatre. One periodical even tied the attack to the recent explosion of a ship at Santander that was carrying dynamite, declaring that both the accident and the terrorist attack would "draw the attention of the public authorities to dynamite," whilst a French anarchist periodical claimed that the explosion of the "the dynamite at Barcelona" was owed to the "fatal excesses of the Spanish bourgeoisie."⁶⁶ This suggests that, in much the same way that references to Orsini Bombs had become frequent in the reportage of various plots and attacks in the pre-dynamite era, newspapers bereft of details assumed that the Liceu bombing was carried out with dynamite, it having become the new go-to weapon for violent radicals by the 1890s. The same form of reportage also emerged three years later when Barcelona was subjected to yet another Orsini Bomb attack, which claimed the lives of twelve and wounded fifteen. The bomb used on this occasion was indeed charged with dynamite and as much was reported by the press, with one newspaper forensically claiming that "a summary examination of the fragments of the bomb leads to the supposition that it contained 25 dynamite cartridges." The presence of dynamite acknowledged, what is striking is how many reports simply referred to the "throwing of a bomb," a "bomb of dynamite," or a "terrible dynamite attack." Even in cases where newspapers reported accurately that "the bomb was of the Orsini pattern—charged with dynamite" or featured an "Orsini system," the once potent brand was mostly absent from the reportage, and an emphasis was instead placed on the "terror of dynamite" and the ongoing scourge of "crimes committed by dynamite" in Spain.⁶⁷

Conclusion

It seems clear that from 1858 onwards, the Orsini Bomb was imbued with semiotic value, as both a tool assassination and, more broadly, a weapon of insurrection. This semiotic value was conferred on the IED by the press which, in an example of "contagion effect," promoted the Orsini Bomb such that it was seized upon by would-be assassins and violence radicals across the transatlantic world, as a must-have component of their arsenals. The newspaper reportage that grew the Orsini Bomb's "brand" in this way was plagued, like so much reportage on terrorist activity during the *fin de siècle*, by exaggerations, assumptions and inaccuracies, the most glaring of which was the assertion of a connection between the Communards, Orsini Bombs and the International Workingmen's Association. At the nexus of these three elements of the newspaper reportage was a fear of terrorist violence in the post-Commune world which, owing to the growth of the Orsini "brand" in the preceding decades, featured the IED prominently. This narrative belied the reality that, as the 1870s progressed, radicals cognisant of the semiotic value of the Orsini Bomb and mindful of the press' compulsion to promote its usage as something for reactionaries to be fearful of, were turning their attention to dynamite—a more powerful form of explosive which, predictably, received the same sensationalised, fear-mongering coverage in the media.

This advent of dynamite eclipsed both the fear of the Orsini Bomb and the strength of its "brand." In the midst of the IED's nadir, however, the Spanish artist Antoni Gaudí, made a lasting contribution the history of the Orsini Bomb via his "Temptation of Man," a carving on the Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona which depicts an anarchist being gifted the percussion grenade by a demonic figure. In this image, the IED is presented as the means by which a worker can be corrupted and turned to violence, suggesting that, to Gaudí's mind, the Orsini Bomb was nothing less than a tool of the devil himself. An obvious response to the Barcelona bombing, unbeknownst to Gaudí he was also commemorating in stone the epoch in which the easy to make, light to carry and

deadly to unleash Orsini Bomb was regarded as nothing less than a “superweapon” of radical warfare.⁶⁸

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Notes

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42. “The insurrection in Sicily,” *The Times*, June 13, 1860; “De Rome,” *Le Temps*, July 31, 1861; “The condition of Rome,” *Daily Telegraph*, November 2, 1867; “Dublin,” *The Freeman’s Journal*, December 23, 1870; Giuseppe Guerzoni, *Garibaldi*, vol. 2 (Firenze: G. Barbéra, 1892), 515.
43. Honeck, “Freeman of all nations.”
44. John D. Rutherford, *The Secret History of the Fenian Conspiracy: Its Origin, Objects and Ramifications*, vol. 2 (London: Keegan and Paul, 1877), 158.
45. John le Barnes letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, November 22, 1859, cited in Janet Kemper Beck, *Creating the John Brown Legend: Emerson, Thoreau, Child and Higginson in Defence of the Raid on Harper’s Ferry* (Jefferson: MacFarland, 2009), 128.
46. Revil, *Improvised Explosive Devices*, 7; US36295A—“Improvement in explosive projectiles for ordnance,” August 26, 1862, <https://patents.google.com/patent/US36295> (accessed July 20, 2020); *Report of the Board on Behalf of the United States Executives Departments at the International Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876*, vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 688.
47. Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, *My Adventures in the Commune* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914), 243-44; Alistair Horne, *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune, 1870-1871* (London: Penguin, 2007), 132; “Les bombes incendiaires de la Commune,” *Le Petit Presse*, June 17, 1871.
48. It is very difficult to determine the actual number of Orsini-branded bombs that were produced by the Communards. Ostensibly, Rochefort’s claim of 30,000 seems to have been inflated for propaganda purposes. However, correspondents in Paris reported that 7,000 devices were available to the Communards just prior to their seizure of power. In the aftermath of the Commune’s suppression, a stash of 3,000 was reported to have been found near the bank of the Seine. The police later claimed to have found an additional 24,000 bombs in various caches across Paris. Given these reports, it is possible that 30,000 IEDs were produced by the Communards as Rochefort claimed, meaning that approximately 3,000 were used during the defence of Paris. It is, however, just as likely that Rochefort’s claim was made as a reaction to the police claims and that the latter were fabricated to heighten the post-Commune fear of further radical attacks—“Letter from Paris,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 24, 1871; “Un nouveau complot,” *Le Cri de Peuple*, February 24, 1871; “Bruits,” *L’Ami De La France*, January 10, 1871; “Paris au jour du jour,” *Le Figaro*, February 24, 1871; “Documentos históricos,” *En Pensamiento Español*, May 30, 1873; “L’exposition du Armees,” *La Liberté*, January 4, 1872; “Les événements du jour,” *Le Constitutionnel*, May 30, 1871; Henri Rochfort, *Les Dernières Causeries du Henri Rochefort*, ed. W.D. Fonvielle (Brussels: Bureau du Petit Journal, 1871), 24; Joanni d’Arsac, *La Guerre Civile et la Commune de Paris en 1871* (Paris: F. Curot, 1871), 147.
49. For an overview of how the narrative of a Commune reprise was created see Patrick C. Jamieson, “Foreign Criticisms of the 1871 Paris Commune: The Role of British and American Newspapers and Periodicals,” *Intersections* 11, no. 1 (2010): 100-15.
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