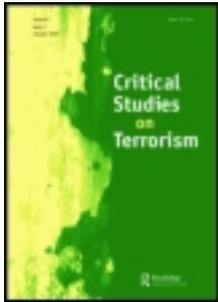


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SPECIAL SECTION

Survival on a shoestring: the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) revisited

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This article provides a reappraisal of the history of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) based on source-based research. Even if the case may appear marginal, it provides useful insights into the dynamics of terrorist campaigns and especially into the survival of small terrorist groups. It highlights the importance of examining the attitudes among the potential supporting communities beyond one of support or rejection of terrorism and suggests that even passive support can help a group significantly. Furthermore, the case provides further evidence for the observation that the role of ideology as a motivation for participation in terrorist campaigns should not be overstated.

Keywords: terrorism; Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA); radicalisation; disengagement; public support

Introduction

The Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a small leftist terrorist group that operated in California in 1973–1975, earned its notoriety by kidnapping the heiress Patricia Hearst. While the group and the case of Patricia Hearst in particular have captured the fascination and imagination of the general public, it has attracted little academic interest. The incidental references to the SLA in the literature deal either with Hearst or the group as an example of a rather bizarre, minuscule, insignificant organisation that was hopelessly alienated from its potential constituencies (e.g. Clutterbuck 1975, p. 42, Bell 1978, pp. 45–47). Until now, no major academic study has been conducted on the SLA.

This lack of academic interest in the SLA may well be symptomatic of the general trend in terrorism research to concentrate on those cases and questions that seem policy-relevant at that particular moment (e.g. Silke 2004, Gunning 2007). Another important point is that historical research on terrorism has been an especially underdeveloped area, even though it is exactly that kind of research that can provide us with very valuable possibilities for advancing our understanding of the dynamics of terrorist campaigns (e.g. Duyvesteyn 2004, Horgan 2005, pp. 140–141, Cronin 2009, pp. 1–3, Ranstorp 2007, p. 12).

Moreover, if we are to gain a comprehensive understanding of terrorist campaigns, it is worthwhile not only to look at the most prolific terrorist groups, but also to analyse the more marginal ones. In fact, it is an open question as to whether the less prolific cases should be considered to be marginal. For example, David C. Rapoport has estimated that

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an overwhelming majority of terrorist groups do not last for more than a year (Rapoport 1992, p. 1067). Furthermore, according to the analysis of Audrey Kurth Cronin, from the total number of 873 groups listed in the MIPT database, only 457 fulfilled the criteria of having targeted civilians (and not only military targets or property without civilian casualties) and of having displayed sustained organisational capabilities (Cronin 2008, p. 77).

Despite its small size and marginality, I argue that the case of the SLA provides useful insights into the dynamics of terrorist campaigns and especially into the dynamics of survival. This is largely for reasons that have fallen outside the scope of most previous analyses of the group's history. First, most attention has been directed at the first months of the SLA and the Los Angeles shootout has been considered the end of the story (e.g. Ross and Gurr 1989, Finlayson 1997). This is not, however, an accurate interpretation. The remaining SLA members subsequently found new allies and initiated a new terrorist campaign. It is exactly from this period that many interesting observations emerge.

These new associates, even though routinely referred to as SLA members,¹ nevertheless never considered themselves as being SLA members and neither were they perceived as such by the 'real' members of the SLA. None of the new associates agreed with the SLA strategy, but many of them ended up taking part in armed actions, including bomb attacks aimed at killing as many police officers as possible. How this happened provides a good illustration of the mobilising power of the need to survive, friendship ties and group pressure. Furthermore, the history of the SLA suggests that sometimes participation in terrorist attacks may never lead to ideological radicalisation, or that ideological radicalisation may remain superficial and rather easily 'undone' when the involvement in terrorist activities ends.

The SLA is an illustrative example of the conditions for survival of a terrorist group in other ways. It shows that surviving and maintaining a low level of political activity does not take substantial resources. In addition, even if the SLA was largely isolated and despised by the radical Left and radical black organisations such as the Black Panther Party and few people were ready to support it, the SLA still benefited from the passive support of the surrounding radical subculture (Waldmann *et al.* 2010).

The present article provides a reappraisal of the history of the SLA based on the historical source-based research I conducted for my PhD thesis. The source material used in this study includes, for example, interviews with three former SLA associates, an unpublished memoir of one of them, all public material produced by the SLA and its associates, and a wide selection of (mainstream and movement press) news reports on the group.²

Rise and (the assumed) fall of the Symbionese Liberation Army

The SLA was formed and its programme was developed in the summer of 1973 by a black escaped convict Donald DeFreeze (or Cinque Mtume by his reborn name), who had become politicised in prison, and by a handful of white activists from the Berkeley, California, area. The goal of the SLA was to make the dream of the revolutionary Left come true: to unite people of all races, gender, age and sexual orientation in the revolutionary struggle. The premise of the SLA was that there was no way the revolution would come about without armed struggle and the group established itself explicitly for the purpose of conducting armed struggle. With their bold actions that reflected the potential of armed action committed by dedicated revolutionaries, the SLA hoped to bring new life to the revolutionary struggle. The SLA members claimed that the previous initiatives for armed struggle had fallen apart due to bad leadership which led to a constant regrouping of the same revolutionaries without starting the fight. As a consequence, the SLA developed a

'Symbionese Federation' as an alternative model to the traditional format of party organising. The SLA hoped that, structured this way, it would not fall apart so easily, as it would not place too much pressure on everyone agreeing on every issue.

The founding members of the SLA went around the Berkeley area to recruit people to join their project, but found only a handful of additional members among a circle of friends. During the summer and autumn of 1973 they began to prepare for armed struggle. The first attack by the group took place in November 1973 when they assassinated Marcus Foster, the black Oakland school superintendent, and wounded his colleague, Robert Blackburn. The SLA claimed the attack in a communiqué and accused both Foster and Blackburn of taking part in the sinister Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-related programmes that, according to the SLA, aimed at subordinating blacks and other minorities to the servitude of the fascist ruling class and to crushing any opposition against its rule.

That attack created a severe backlash. After all, what kind of a revolutionary movement would start its campaign by assassinating a *black* person? It is not known for certain how and why the SLA ended up choosing Foster as its target. He was not among the 'usual' enemies of the Left. Even though Foster was considered to be an 'Oreo cookie' (black on the outside, white on the inside) when he started his job in Oakland, he had largely won trust and respect by late 1973.

The SLA members were not deterred by this negative reaction and went on preparing for new attacks. These preparations were interrupted in early January by the arrest of two of its members, Joe Remiro and Russell Little, who opened fire during a routine traffic inspection. At this point, the group went underground and for security reasons they allegedly cut off contact with their helpers. This left the SLA with no more than a dozen members.

As a response to this setback, the SLA went on the offensive and kidnapped Patricia Hearst, a 19-year-old heiress of a media dynasty, in February 1974. This kidnapping was instantly a major news story that attracted worldwide attention. In fact, it was the first political kidnapping in the United States. It was widely assumed that the SLA would demand the release of Remiro and Little in exchange for Hearst. The release of Remiro and Little was indeed what the SLA strived for. However, instead of voicing this demand immediately, the SLA chose to first wait a few days and then requested the Hearst family deliver first a token of good faith by organising an extensive food-delivery programme. Furthermore, they asked their communiqués outlining the programme of the SLA to be published in full. This demand was met widely, as was the food-delivery demand, although the programme that Patricia's father, Randolph Hearst, created together with the Hearst Corporation was more limited than the SLA had demanded.

In late March, the food-delivery programme was completed and the public waited for the next step from the SLA. To everyone's bewilderment, Patricia Hearst announced that she had joined the SLA. She stated that she had been given the name Tania, in the spirit of a comrade of Che in Bolivia. With that tape, a now famous photograph was released of Patricia Hearst dressed in a jump-suit and beret and holding a carbine.

The next public act of the SLA was a robbery at a Hibernia Bank located in San Francisco in mid-April 1974. This was conducted in order to improve the group's financial situation, but also to generate publicity: Patricia Hearst made her first public appearance since the kidnapping and gave a short speech to the surveillance camera.

While there are few first-hand accounts of the SLA at this time, the picture that emerges from the available sources is one of a very isolated group that had an undisputed leader and one that was fully dedicated to preparations for a revolutionary struggle. As a result, most of their time was devoted to physical exercise, weapons training (without ammunition in their apartment), information gathering and ideological discussion. Moreover,

they conducted intensive sessions of criticism–self-criticism in an effort to rid themselves of their bourgeois backgrounds and to become better revolutionaries. In addition, they all lived in the same apartment and they rarely left the house. With no support networks left, they were forced to rely on their own resources and occasionally rang the doorbells of random (black) people to recruit help.

The bank robbery became a point of no return, not only for Patricia Hearst, but also for the other SLA members who had not previously been declared wanted by the authorities. Around April, Hearst recalls that ‘a new intensity crept into our lives, a combination of revolutionary zeal and sheer paranoia: we were running out of time’ (Hearst with Moscow 1982, p. 177). DeFreeze kept insisting that the struggle was intensifying and that it would only be a matter of months before the revolution would begin. With the forthcoming struggle in mind, a decision was made to split into three teams and that they would start operating independently and would recruit new members. Around this time, they also reached the conclusion that San Francisco was becoming too dangerous and, as a result, they decided to move to Los Angeles. The next combat operation in their plans was to take to the streets, search-and-destroy style, and to kill police officers during the night. During the day, they would hide in the people’s houses. With this campaign, they envisioned that they would force the authorities to intensify countermeasures, which in turn would enrage the people and to incite them join the SLA in its struggle.

According to Hearst’s description, the group was becoming ever more frantic in their combat drills and weapons practices and they were enclosed in their own realm. Her retrospective analysis is that they were all ‘suffering from a combination of group hypnosis and battle fatigue, our anxieties and fears stretched to the breaking point’ (Hearst with Moscow 1982, p. 199). Death also had become a regular discussion topic and surrender was considered not an option because it would be too demoralising for the people.

On 16 May, one of the teams, including Bill and Emily Harris, and Patricia Hearst, made a fatal mistake that led the police to find the SLA. Bill Harris was stopped by the security guards in a shop called Mel’s Sporting Goods because he was (rightly) suspected of shoplifting. At that point, Patricia Hearst, who waited in the car, grabbed a submachine gun and fired. They managed to escape but the weapon they left at the scene and the car they abandoned later during their flight all gave the police sufficient evidence to locate the SLA’s safe house. Before that shooting incident, the police had no idea that the SLA was in Los Angeles.

The other SLA members managed to leave their safe house before the police arrived, but it did not take long before the police discovered that the SLA members had entered one house in the Compton area. Trusting that black people were on their side, they made no secret about who they were and the rumour about the SLA presence started to spread. By the afternoon, the police had encircled the house and had called on those inside to surrender. When this did not come about, intense shooting erupted. In the end, the house caught fire and burned down, together with the six SLA members who refused to surrender. During the shootout, thousands of bullets were fired, half of them by the SLA, the rest by the police, but amazingly enough only the SLA members got hurt. This shootout was allegedly the biggest gunfight ever in Los Angeles. The media attention around the SLA was again at its height. The entire shootout was broadcast live on television.

The story of the SLA was generally considered to be over. The only remaining identified members, Emily and Bill Harris and Patricia Hearst, were called to surrender by several parties, including their friends, relatives, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Randolph Hearst and Governor Ronald Reagan. Even though there were no signs of progress in the investigation, the police seemed to believe that the matter would soon resolve itself. In

other words, it would not take long before the fugitives had exhausted their limited resources and could no longer hide.

From helpers to bombers: the Symbionese Liberation Army after the Los Angeles shootout

The Harrises had heard the calls for surrender, but had no intention to give up. The core commitments of the SLA made that an extremely hard choice to make: it had pledged not to compromise and shy away as all other leaders had done before it. Besides that, there was a good deal of survivor guilt involved. The fact that six comrades had lost their lives in battle, and that this had happened because of their mistake, created a strong feeling of obligation to continue the struggle.

The Harrises and Patricia Hearst were almost penniless and badly needed someone to help them out. They returned to the Bay area and contacted several old friends and associates who all turned them down. Finally, they approached Kathleen (Kathy) Soliah (who currently uses the name Sara Olson), a close friend of Angela Atwood, one of the SLA members who had died in the Los Angeles shootout, and she agreed to help. She mobilised her friends to help them and brought them in contact with Jack Scott, a radical sports writer, who together with his wife had a history of providing help for activists in trouble. The Scotts transported the Harrises and Hearst to a farmhouse in Pennsylvania so that they could lay low for a while.

What seemed to attract the Harrises to Jack Scott in particular were his reputed contacts with the Weather Underground Organization (WUO). The Harrises were considering the possibility of merging with that group. Hearst later told that the Harrises were impressed by the WUO's reputation and that they dreamt of convincing them that the tactics of the SLA were more efficient. In fact, they had grounds for believing that the WUO would be interested in helping them because it had praised the SLA's successes and had lashed out at the Left for its failure to back up the SLA in the communiqué that was made public after the Los Angeles shootout. While the WUO was reportedly contacted and asked for help, the organisation declined the request.

After a few months, the Harrises and Hearst returned to California after they had run into a dispute with the Scotts. Technically speaking, if their only concern would have been to survive, they could have adopted new identities and continued a low-profile existence outside the political hotspots of the country, as the WUO members had. Having Patricia Hearst with them did complicate them adopting this strategy, but what posed a greater obstacle was the Harrises' eagerness for action.

The Harrises and Patricia Hearst landed back on the doorstep of Soliah. For the coming months, they were supported by Soliah and her friends. A couple of these friends, such as James Kilgore and Michael Bortin, were politically oriented to some degree, but most of them became involved mainly out of their loyalty to each other. The circle of friends included also Soliah's brother, Steve, and sister, Jo.

This network of people was actually not at all well-equipped to help the fugitives. Kathy Soliah had spoken in the SLA memorial rally and together with James Kilgore they had established the Bay Area Research Collective (BARC) to organise support for the group and for the underground in general.³ Therefore, they might have been monitored by the FBI. Apart from Jack Scott, they had no connections that would help them in gathering the financial resources and in tapping them into any underground network. They merely went on with their lives as before, kept painting houses and using the money they earned from that to support the fugitives.

What had got Kathy Soliah involved in helping the fugitives was first and foremost her friendship with Angela Atwood. Those close to Soliah have stated that after the Los Angeles shootout, she underwent a great transformation in her character and conduct. The initial and primary reason for Soliah and her friends, henceforth called 'the new team', to get involved was to help Emily and Bill Harris and Patricia Hearst hide from the authorities. While Soliah and her friends were terrified to undertake this task, the death of Kathy Soliah's friend made them feel that they could not decline. After all, if they only managed to keep the Harrises and Patricia Hearst safe and sound, they felt they had already accomplished a valuable political deed. The Harrises, however, were not ready to settle for mere survival. They were more ambitious and wanted to help Russ Little and Joe Remiro escape from prison so that the SLA would again have an experienced cadre. They also looked at training the new team to become part of their army.

These plans became a major source of tension between the remaining SLA members and the new team. Most of the new team wanted nothing to do with political violence. Kathy Soliah and James Kilgore had played with the idea of getting involved in the armed struggle and Michael Bortin had earlier made the first steps towards that direction, but got arrested. However, with armed struggle, they were not thinking in terms of a SLA-style campaign that included attacks against people's lives. The new team argued that instead of new attacks, the Harrises should take a critical look at what the SLA had accomplished and then reconsider its programme. It was clear for the new team that the SLA's ideas had not found acceptance and legitimacy among the Left. In order to garner more support, those of the new team who had interest in politics argued the Harrises should study classical Marxist literature and integrate that kind of analysis into their propaganda. The Harrises, however, remained steadfast in their belief in the power of the SLA-type action to revitalise the revolutionary struggle.

These differences led to disputes concerning how they should work together. The Harrises looked at the new team as people being in a process to become part of the SLA. As a consequence, the Harrises demanded that the others obey Bill Harris as the leader of the group. The new team resisted his authority, demanding instead that they should function in a more democratic way and make decisions together. They also opposed the Harrises' plan to recruit a new black leader and thought that the Harrises' third-world leadership was a ridiculous idea stemming from excessive white guilt and a romanticisation of blacks. Besides these political differences, there were also personal tensions along various lines that were exacerbated further by disagreements about how to deal with these differences.

All in all, while these differences prevailed until the very end, it seems that the Harrises succeeded well in getting their way. This might be because they seemed to have three aces in their hands. The first was that they were more experienced in the business of revolution, which made it difficult for the less experienced, new participants to dispute their arguments. The second was that the Harrises did not hesitate to remind everyone that six of their comrades had given their lives in the struggle. Finally, the third was that they often managed to wear out the opposition by their sheer persistence.

Over time, the involvement of the new team started to extend from merely helping the SLA members to survive into taking part in the Harrises' plans for armed struggle. The process that led the new team towards that direction derived from what 'helping' the fugitives entailed. By late 1974, it was clear that the new team needed other, less time-consuming, sources of income. As a result, they started to conduct petty thefts: shoplifting, stealing money from a mail truck, and stealing wallets in health spas and tennis courts. Those of the new team reasoned that money was needed to take care of the fugitives, so it was part of their commitment to help them.

The new team also helped the Harrises in their planning of new acts, including acts against people. Although the new team was by far more horrified than excited by these plans, they still gathered information about the possible targets and conducted surveillance, at least partly because it was easier to comply than to keep resisting. Taking part in the planning activities also drew them closer to committing violent attacks. One of them described the process later as follows:

Unfortunately, simply by the very act of discussing these major, major felonies, we tacitly accepted our assemblage as a guerrilla unit, and to that I must attach much blame to myself, because I co-operated with researching a hit list (or pretended I did) rather than challenged the legitimacy of such acts in my protracted visit since at our first meeting we had clearly stated our refusal to engage in those activities. And though we did not, thankfully, follow-up on these outlandish and clearly not executable acts by ourselves, we simultaneously bargained, or dumbed down, to committing ourselves to various and sundry petty felonies acts, which we did commit. . . . Ironically, we justified these petty crimes, although we were all painting together, in that we were developing cohesiveness and teamwork as a functioning guerrilla unit. And so we journeyed around in a syllogistic kind of tautologically closed system, where somewhere along the way the true premise at political involvement only in hiding out the trio and perhaps some guerrilla theatre . . . somewhere along the line that true and, I believe, heartfelt premise, was substituted by a false premise – face-saving, foot-dragging and procrastination now our tools of denial rather than straightforward discussion and political dialectic – the false premise being our defining ourselves as a guerrilla (if not combat) unit or at least one in a provisional stage of formation. (unpublished memoir of Michael Bortin)

Meanwhile, the group's financial problems continued. The thefts provided them with a few hundred dollars now and then, but not enough. They tried to find ways to knock on the WUO's door to get help and looked for possibilities to sign a book deal for the Harrises and Patricia Hearst. That did not bring any results. Generally, they were too frightened of getting caught to approach other people for help. In the end, they decided to rob a bank. Bill Harris wanted the new team to do the job so that they would get their hands on the revolution properly. Planning for the robbery started in late January 1975, and a month later Mike Bortin and James Kilgore entered a small Guild Savings and Loan Association bank on the outskirts of Sacramento. They walked away with several thousand dollars. The group issued no claim to the robbery and no one got hurt.

By March 1975 the core group of the new team had committed themselves to the plans for armed struggle to the extent that they agreed to move to Sacramento to live together with the Harrises and Hearst. Those of the new team who did not move stated that they did not want to have any part in such plans, but remained in contact.

The next act under intensive planning was another bank robbery. The target was to be the Crocker National Bank branch in Carmichael, just outside Sacramento. Bill Harris allegedly wanted to make it a full SLA operation, but the others talked him out of this idea because they thought it would put too much pressure on them. In the end, a group of eight people, including some of those who explicitly opposed the idea of armed struggle, entered the bank and walked away with over US\$15,000. In other respects, however, the operation was a disaster: Emily Harris shot dead one of the customers, Myrna Lee Opsahl, when she did not obey the order to get down quickly enough. The shooting incident provoked serious turmoil among the group. Whereas the Harrises played the whole incident down, the others were deeply shaken. It was the first time they were involved in an action that cost someone's life.

With the police looking for bank robbers in Sacramento, they decided to leave the city and move back to the familiar Bay Area in early May. The Harrises and Patricia Hearst would

stay underground, but all others would return to their normal lives as much as possible and get jobs. Once they had settled in San Francisco, the tensions from the previous months subsided and the planning for attacks continued. During the next few months, the Harrises and the new team seemed to find a common ground on which to operate. Besides the slippery slope from helping the fugitives towards deeper involvement, there were also other processes at play that led the people from the new team to commit themselves to increasingly radical actions despite their initial, and to some degree still prevailing, reluctance:

You accept certain assumptions and once you accept them your capacity for lateral/creative thinking is gone. Once you accept the ‘violence is the only true way’ paradigm you got caught up in a cycle of bad decisions. It is like ‘group think’ I think we fell prey to a kind of blinkered thinking. If violence is the only way, then you think more violence is an even better way. People’s value becomes measured not according to how well they can analyze, strategize or build organization but how far they are prepared to go. Once you accept that you are going to die soon (which we did, or at least be captured, tortured, etc.) then why worry about risk? The person who wants to go out with the biggest bang becomes the model. Now normally if you’re in a group and things get a little extreme, you can walk away or create some distance. . . . But when you’re in a small group, underground, surviving on a shoestring, and every cop in the country is looking for you, you’re always immersed up to your eyeballs in this crazy logic you’ve created. Fortunately for us, the most extreme of our plans never came to fruition – either because we were incompetent militantly, scared but too afraid to admit it, or just too confused to pull off something big and crazy. . . . I think the intensity of Bill and Emily, plus their moral weight as the heirs of the martyrs, gradually pushed us all with the model of the urban guerrilla group think. I’m not trying to blame them. We could have pushed back harder. We could have walked away or just provided material support. We chose to jump into the whirlpool. (James Kilgore, personal communication)

The compromise they reached was that they would conduct a bombing campaign and claim it under the name of the Jonathan Jackson/Sam Melville Unit of the New World Liberation Front (NWLFL). An important point to highlight here is that the SLA was *not* the NWLFL, as has been sometimes claimed in the literature.⁴ The history of the NWLFL has yet to be written,⁵ but from the perspective of the remaining SLA members and the new team, the NWLFL was a Left-wing armed revolutionary group that was operating in California at that time and had called on anyone sharing its goals and ideology to operate in its name. They had no idea who were those responsible for the bombings conducted in its name, but they found it a good idea to connect their efforts to a bigger campaign. Furthermore, for the new team, this had the benefit of them not having to operate under the name and heritage of the SLA.

To honour the direction that the SLA had been moving in before the Los Angeles shootout interrupted the campaign, they were still looking at targeting the police. The hit list that the group compiled reportedly included such targets as the San Francisco police chief, whose department harassed blacks during the search for the so-called Zebra killers,⁶ the FBI Office in San Mateo.

After long discussions, a decision was reached to launch bomb attacks against the police cars parked outside two stations, one in the Mission District (a classic target for attacks in the previous years) and one at the Taraval station. The operation was conducted on 7 August, but none of the bombs exploded. Six days later, they made another attack with an improved bomb design on the Emeryville police station. That explosion destroyed the police car completely. Following that attack, they sent out a communiqué in the name of the NWLFL, Jonathan Jackson/Sam Melville Unit. The SLA slogan ‘death to the fascist insect that preys upon the lives of the people’ was added to the communiqué, reportedly because the Harrises had insisted on that.

The next operation they started to prepare targeted the Marin County Civic Center. They decided to plant two bombs in the building in such a way that the explosions would hit as many policemen as possible. Later, it was decided that with the Marin County bombing, they would conduct another bomb attack in Los Angeles simultaneously and thereby demonstrate that they had enough strength to carry out action in two parts of the state at the same time. They carried out these attacks on 20 August. Both bombs in the Marin County Civic Center went off, but in the wrong order. There were no casualties. The bomb attack in Los Angeles, however, did not work out. The group charged with the bomb attack placed two bombs under parked police cars in East Los Angeles and set them to go off when the cars left. However, the first bomb did not ignite and both bombs were later found.

Even though the group managed to find enough common ground to pull off these operations together and some of those who had declared they did not have anything to do with such operations had taken part in them, the old feuds were not really over. The disputes erupted in full force after the 20 August attacks. The new team and Patricia Hearst began to make new plans and to distance themselves from the Harrises. The Harrises were nonetheless still determined to revitalise the SLA. A few days later, with help from Kathy Soliah (who still stayed in touch with the Harrises and seemed to be somewhat ambivalent about the split), the Harrises made contact with Doc Holiday as they wanted him to become the desperately needed black leader of the SLA, an offer which he declined.

At the same time, the FBI investigations finally started to produce results. On 18 September, the Harrises, Patricia Hearst, Steve Soliah and another reluctant SLA associate, Wendy Yoshimura, were all arrested. These arrests effectively ended the campaign of the SLA. With the Harrises arrested, and no need to protect Patricia Hearst, the driving forces of the struggle were gone.

It is obvious that the Harrises did not expect Kathy Soliah (who was not arrested) and others still outside the prison to pick up the torch of the SLA and to continue the struggle. In fact, they angrily protested when a political statement by Kathy Soliah and James Kilgore was published as a SLA statement by the Bay Area Research Collective.⁷ Half a year after the arrests, Bill and Emily Harris, together with Russ Little and Joe Remiro, granted an interview where they called themselves the last four surviving members of the SLA and said that with their arrest the SLA had ceased to exist (Lyne and Scheer 1976, Harris *et al.* 1976).

The Symbionese Liberation Army and the radical Left⁸

One reason it was widely expected that the Los Angeles shootout represented the end of the SLA was that the group seemed to have very little support. Certainly, the SLA had succeeded spectacularly in attracting media attention during its first months of existence. For instance, Patricia Hearst was on the cover of *Newsweek* on 29 April and on 27 May 1974. Before that, she had made the cover once already and would still make it four more times, for the last time on 29 March 1976. As for *Time*, she was on three covers in total. That was unique by any measure (e.g. Nacos 2002, pp. 40, 48–51).

However, the SLA's success in terms of winning over its most important constituencies, the radical Left and black communities, was very poor. The SLA had alienated almost everybody with the Foster murder and the kidnapping of Patricia Hearst hardly improved its score. It got a positive response almost solely from such groups and individuals that had already committed themselves to armed struggle, such as the Black Liberation Army. The SLA was also warmly, although more reservedly, greeted by the WUO. In a communiqué

signed by Bernardine Dohrn, it stated that the kidnapping dramatised what was wrong with the society and that a change was needed. Even though the WUO did not comprehend the Foster murder, it underlined that it should not legitimise an all-out attack on the SLA. In fact, in another communiqué, the WUO called for everyone to show solidarity with the SLA and to help it.

In many respects, the SLA was a product of the radical Left. If one forgets the SLA's actions and ignores its rhetorical style for a moment, there is actually very little that is alien in the context of the radical Left at that time. The programme of the SLA reads almost like a catalogue of issues that were raised by the protest movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, its roots were particularly in the ideas and utopias that developed from the interaction between the New Left and the political prisoner movement. The SLA members later identified their key sources of inspiration to be Marxism, revolutionary black nationalism and revolutionary feminism.

This kinship was recognised by many on the Left, but instead of the badly needed leader, they rather viewed the SLA as their unwanted child. For instance, the editors of *Ramparts*, a high-profile New Left magazine, famously claimed that the SLA was a product of the failures of the organised Left to regroup and revive after its collapse in the late 1960s. They claimed that exactly this lack of organising enabled the emergence of extreme groups such as the SLA. There was extreme frustration at the lack of action, but as there was no mass movement, there was also no moral community that would restrain excesses (*Ramparts* 1974).

This negative reception did not go unnoticed by the SLA. They tried to see and read every single news story on the SLA and seemed almost obsessed with the SLA's public image. The tapes and communiqués are filled with the members' reactions to other people's comments about the SLA. In the communiqués during the Hearst kidnapping, the SLA operated from the assumption that the opposition against its project was based on a lack of understanding. To them, more explanation would mean that the people would 'get' what they were saying and would start to support their fight.

The general distaste of the Left appeared not to be derived from the content of the SLA programme or misunderstandings, but more from the morals of its methods and choice of targets. The idea of starting up an armed struggle in the United States at the time was highly controversial and every group that did that was subject to fierce criticism. What polarised the attitudes in the case of the SLA was the specific style of armed struggle it adopted. Adopting assassination and kidnapping as methods of revolutionary struggle so radical choices that even the most revolutionary edge of the Left had difficulties to digest them, especially when it involved both murdering a person who was not generally considered to be an enemy of the 'people' and the kidnapping of an innocent girl.

Moreover, the SLA also had a credibility issue among the Left because of its members' background. It seemed to bother many that the evolution of the SLA had not followed the expected course of moving from protest gradually to more radical action. In other words, it did not seem credible that someone would change from a flower girl to a fully fledged urban guerrilla so quickly. Besides the seemingly quick radicalisation on the individual level, the decision to start from the top with the methods of action also seemed hard to understand. The members of the SLA realised this problem afterwards and stated that they should have rather started with something small in scale and then slowly have escalated their actions. Then the Left would have probably understood better what the SLA was up to.

Illustrative to the unease that the Left felt in face of the SLA is that the editors of *Ramparts*, one of them being David Horowitz, did not publish their SLA criticism under

their own names for the fear of revenge from the SLA (Horowitz 1999). Generally, it was not the SLA, however, that people were afraid of, but the response from the authorities. It was widely feared that the establishment would use the SLA as a means to discredit the whole Left. For instance, the writers of the *Ramparts* editorial blamed the SLA for making the work of the Left even more difficult than it had already been and expected that the authorities would start a new 'witch hunt'. Those who felt most threatened by the SLA refused to recognise the SLA as a genuine Left-wing group. Such views were expressed by those who felt most alarmed by its existence, for example, the Black Panther party. The Panthers suspected that the Foster assassination was a cover operation which was intended to give a bad name to the Black Panthers and to the black community in general.

One might have expected that the Los Angeles shootout in May 1974 could have changed the attitudes among the radical Left and opened its safety nets. It was after all an exceptionally brutal police operation, especially considering that it targeted white activists. While black activists had been killed in similar kinds of situations before and sometimes downright assassinated, the white activists had until then had immunity. The Los Angeles shootout was indeed met with outrage among the Left and the conduct of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was widely criticised. The outrage, however, did not really translate into support for the SLA. The fundamental differences with the SLA remained. Those who had supported it before mourned the deaths of the revolutionaries. Memorial rallies were organised in the Bay area that were attended by a few hundred people. Those who had been particularly fierce in their criticism of the SLA from the beginning had little sympathy for the dead. The SLA lost the battle; they knew what they were up to and they were foolish enough to choose to fight.

It seems that the massive hunt for Patricia Hearst and the fate of those who were killed in the Los Angeles shootout in particular caused many in the Left to view the SLA as too high a security risk. Those in the Left did not want to get involved in that case in any way. What also played a role was the timing of the SLA. By 1974, consensus was building up in the radical fringes of the Left about the futility of armed struggle. One indication of that were the efforts of the WUO to build itself an aboveground existence. The WUO's political programme, *Prairie Fire*, calling for this kind of change of direction was published in May 1974. This might also explain why the WUO did not help the SLA fugitives.

Considering that practically everyone in the radical Left had turned their backs on the SLA and that the fugitives were supported by only a handful of young people with no ties (the short cooperation with Jack Scott notwithstanding) that would have helped them in their task, it is surprising that it took such a long time for the FBI to locate the Harrises and Hearst. This lack of success was not due to a lack of effort. For example, in an interview with a New York weekly, two special agents recounted that the resources that the FBI had invested in the case during the first ten months amounted to US\$3 million, 270,000 work-hours, and (attempted) interviews with 25,000 people (cited in McLellan and Avery 1977, pp. 413–414).

One impediment for the investigations appears to have been the lack of cooperation from the public. Of all the people whom the FBI had tried to interview, more people had declined than agreed to talk. Even though the SLA did not have the sympathies of the Leftist activists, it benefited from their reluctance to get involved in the matter in any way whatsoever. Many still held to their principle of 'don't talk to the FBI', as they thought the police represented an illegitimate authority.

What improved the SLA's security position in the early months was its decision to reduce communication with people outside the group. This minimised their risk of getting caught, but it also cut its ties with the surrounding community. Security was prioritised

over access to the ‘people’ later as well. Soliah and their friends were intensely afraid of getting caught so they told very few people about their role in hiding the fugitives. There were, however, people who could have provided the FBI with useful information. The new associates went outside especially with Patricia Hearst and were more than once spotted by their acquaintances. Many of them lived with their friends and tried to maintain a normal social life to stay beyond the suspicion of the authorities.

In retrospect, what seems particularly astounding is that it took so long for the FBI to start investigating seriously the possibility that Kathy Soliah, Kilgore and their friends could be involved. Since Soliah had appeared in the SLA memorial rally, the FBI would not have needed any further tips to know that she was sympathetic to the SLA. A more careful look at Soliah’s and her friends’ networks could have brought the investigators quickly on the right track.

The only plausible explanation for this seems to be that the FBI considered Soliah and Kilgore to be too obvious and visible SLA sympathisers to play a role in the underground. Here, the FBI may have fallen prey to false assumptions: it may have seemed improbable that a handful of working people could support three wanted fugitives for months. This interpretation is supported by the fact that when the FBI got on Soliah’s track, it did not expect that she would lead them to the HARRISES and Patricia Hearst directly, but rather that she would provide further clues about their helpers and their whereabouts. The same may have applied to Michael Bortin, who was on parole for the entire time for his involvement in a previous bomb attack. According to the SLA associates’ recollections, he may have been monitored by the police at least occasionally, but if that was the case, it did not lead to the discovery of Bortin’s links to the fugitives.

Conclusions

The decline of the Symbionese Liberation Army’s (SLA) terrorist campaign resulted mainly from the severe backlash it created by its actions in the wider ‘movement’ community and black activists. It is a textbook example of how terrorist campaigns can be self-defeating and that the terrorist groups themselves are sometimes the best counterterrorist agents (cf. Cronin 2009, pp. 94–114). It is hard to imagine any counterterrorist measure that could have turned the radical subculture more effectively against the SLA than the murder of Marcus Foster. The repressive measures, especially in the form of arrests, were important turning points in the SLA’s campaign, but it is very unlikely that the SLA would have been able to become more successful even were it not for these setbacks because its strategy was simply too radical for its potential constituency to digest. Moreover, practically all public support for revolutionary terrorism in the United States had faded by the mid-1970s.

Having said that, the rejection of the SLA by the radical Left and the decline of public support to all movements like it did not imply that the SLA would have become an easy prey for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). It had few active supporters, but it certainly benefited from the passive support of the radical subculture. This support was not based on sympathy, but the SLA rather benefited from the prevailing distaste for the authorities and the feeling that the authorities were using the SLA to lash out against the radical Left in general.

In all these respects, the case of the SLA highlights the importance of examining the attitudes among the potential supporting communities beyond one of mere support or rejection of terrorism. If the surrounding subculture feels threatened by the authorities, for example because of the way that either the current or previous incidents of protest or terrorism have been handled, this can become an important handicap for the investigations.

What may appear as passive support for terrorist movements to outsiders can just as well be motivated by an unwillingness to cooperate with the authorities.

A closer look at the ‘new team’ that got involved in helping the remaining SLA members survive provides further evidence for the argument that one should not overstate the role of ideology as source of commitment and motivation in participating in terrorist groups. As Marc Sageman has famously pointed out, friendship ties are crucial in the process of getting involved in terrorism (Sageman 2004).

Similar to what Donatella della Porta observed of the Left-wing terrorism in Italy and West Germany (Della Porta 1995), the SLA’s need for survival began increasingly to dictate the development of its campaign. This can become a powerful motivation that leads new people to take part in the campaign, as the case of the new team demonstrates. Further, the necessities dictated by this need for survival can become the slippery slope (cf. McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008, pp. 419–421) that take those involved gradually from support towards more participation in armed struggle.

Interestingly, the deepening involvement in the SLA’s activities appeared not to lead to ideological radicalisation in every case. In the literature, ideological radicalisation is typically considered to be a necessary element in the process towards violent radicalisation (e.g. Korteweg *et al.* 2010, p. 30). While this may hold in the majority of the cases, it is not necessarily always the case. Moreover, those who had been politically active before and had been more willing participants in the attacks appear to have adopted the basic tenets of the campaign only superficially. One indication of this superficiality is the fact that none of the SLA associates involved ever again became participants in armed actions after the fugitives had been arrested. Some of the SLA associates remained politically active, but their activities represent rather a continuation of their activities before they became involved in helping the SLA than during that time. This all supports John Horgan’s observations that not all participants in terrorist organisations may be as committed as one may tend to think (Horgan 2009, p. 150), even when they are deeply engaged.

Notes

1. See, for example, the news on their arrest and trial in the early 2000s (Findley 2002, Mackey 2009).
2. For convenience, I provide here only limited references to my sources. For a more detailed documentation and elaborate discussion of the case, see Malkki (2010). In addition, the book that journalists Vin McLellan and Paul Avery wrote about the SLA in the late 1970s has been helpful (McLellan and Avery 1977), even though my research has indicated that there are deficits in their account. Another well-known book, *The life and death of the SLA* by Les Payne and Tim Findley (1976), is less detailed and less balanced, even though Findley was among the stars of the investigative journalists who were reporting on the SLA at that time. There are also several memoirs and biographies on the SLA members and associates. The biography of the SLA member Joe Remiro (Bryan 1976) is written by a sympathetic journalist whose own position towards Remiro clearly influences his account, but is useful in terms of providing insights into the milieu that surrounded the SLA. The biography of another SLA member, William Wolfe (Kinney 1979), concentrates predominantly on Wolfe’s life story and draws heavily from interviews with Wolfe’s family and friends. The biography of Kathleen Soliah, also known as Sara Olson (Hendry 2002), was written without any cooperation from Olson and contains little original material. Last but by no means least, there is Patricia Hearst’s memoir (Hearst with Moscow 1982) which has been an important source for this study. Questions can be posed about the validity of her account of the events, i.e. based on her status as a kidnap victim and her mental state after first being held in a closet for several weeks. Several people who feature prominently in Hearst’s account have, however, confirmed to me that the facts and interpretations that she presents are largely accurate. To my knowledge, no one elementally involved in the SLA has publicly disputed her story, apart from the way she describes her own involvement and attitude

- towards the SLA. Having said that, I have always tried to find other sources to support and contrast the view she has presented. The other publications on the SLA are in fact more about the writers themselves or about Hearst (Baker 1974, Weed 1976, Graebner 2008).
3. Kathy Soliah and James Kilgore withdrew from the BARC when they became involved in helping the Harrises and Patricia Hearst. From then on, the BARC was mainly run by Kathy Soliah's roommates.
 4. For example, in the otherwise excellent book by McLellan and Avery (1977).
 5. The only account I am aware of is Buck (1978).
 6. A series of killings, known as the Zebra murders, had been committed in the area of San Francisco in 1973–1974. During the first months of the Hearst kidnapping, some suspected that the SLA and the Zebra murders would have been linked to each other. The SLA, for its part, claimed that it was a covert police operation directed against it (e.g. the tape released after the Hibernia bank robbery in mid-April 1974, transcript printed in Pearsall (1974, pp. 121–124). Later, it turned out that the murders were committed by the Death Angels, a group within the Nation of Islam. On the Zebra murders, see Howard (1979) and Sanders and Cohen (2006).
 7. This statement is 'History will absolve us' that was distributed with the November 1975 issue of *Dragon* (the BARC's publication). For the comments of the remaining 'true members' of the SLA, see Harris *et al.* (1975).
 8. The following analysis of the radical Left's response to the SLA is mainly based on articles on the SLA in various 'movement press' publications, including *The Berkeley Barb*, *The Black Panther*, *Guardian*, *Ramparts*, *New Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Dragon*. I have also used some KPFA radio broadcasts preserved by the Freedom Archives.

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