

day. Of course there are more of us now living on the island and the murder rate is even lower, but the most rapid decline happened back then. Back then, even in what they called the noughties in the UK, only two people were shot each month, almost always by someone they knew, and yet the population in 2016 were told on their news to live in fear that they might be shot – especially by terrorists.

The UK elite had feared terrorists for a long time. One hundred years earlier, in April 1916, terrorists in Ireland had seized control of a number of buildings in Dublin. Most were quickly caught and executed by the British government, but within two years their political party, Sinn Féin, won a majority of the Irish seats in the UK general election of 1918, some 73 MPs. There was more violence, but within three years the Irish Free State had been created and one of the oldest British colonies was free. That pattern was repeated around the world and the British Empire crumbled. People initially called terrorists were re-labelled freedom fighters almost everywhere.

One hundred years later and nobody suggested using violence in those parts of the UK still seeking independence. Even though it was disintegrating, the elite insisted calling it a United Kingdom for many more decades. The Scottish Nationalist Party won 56 of the 59 Scottish constituencies in the general election a century ago, back in 2015. That was the greatest number won by a third party since 1918. The world had changed so much, so quickly, that the idea of armed insurrection was only contemplated in the most impoverished of places by the start of the twenty-first century. But even then the insurrections were almost always because proxy wars were being fought at arms length between larger powers. Occasionally the great powers would intervene directly, usually by long range and increasingly unmanned bombing.



Guernica/Picasso

The coordinated bombing of civilians had begun when the fascist German air force targeted the quiet village of Guernica in Spain in April 1937. A tapestry of Pablo Picasso's painting of the bombing was later hung in the United Nations Building in New York. A curtain covered it up in 2003 when the United States Secretary of State gave a press conference in front of it trying to justify more US bombing. That was because of his embarrassment.² It was only then, only just over one hundred years ago, that the 'great powers' began to become embarrassed when they inflicted civilian casualties.

It became less rare a century ago to hear former and current military personnel speak out against violence and the use of force. US Air Force un-manned drone operators explained to the public and the President that the military drones program they had been a key part of was morally outrageous and "one of the most devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world."³ People were learning more quickly than ever that violence begets violence; that bombing creates terror; that killing leads to more killing.

And the killing was becoming more rare by 2016. Across the United States only 28 people were executed in 2015, the lowest number for twenty-five years, and that number was part of a near continuous fall⁴. Across all of Europe – where there had

been no death penalty for decades – murders killed fewer and fewer people each year. However the actions of a few mass murderers drew more and more attention. There was concern that a very small number of people were more prone to resort to violence. In 2011 Anders Breivik, a far-right fantasist, had killed 77 children and young adults in Norway. A decade earlier a middle class doctor called Harold Shipman had been found guilty of killing some of his patients, later estimated as at least 215. But in early 2016 it had been the memory of the 130 people killed the December before in Paris by terrorists from France and Belgium that haunted the imaginations of Europe's public the most.⁵ The security services warned there would be more such attacks.

Warnings were rarely proportional to risks back then. More people died on the roads in the United States as a result of avoiding air travel following the 9/11 twin tower attacks than died directly from the 2001 September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center complex in New York.

Including the 9/11 attacks and all others that occurred since the year 2000 the chance of a US resident being killed by a terrorist a century ago in 2016 was 1 in 3.5 million.⁶ Terrorism wins when people became afraid. Violence was seen to work only when the consequences were not thought through, and even then only in the short-term.

One hundred years ago the legal arms trade was one of the largest parts of industry in some of the world's richest countries. But even then a growing number of countries were abandoning having any armed forces; some 23 countries had no army by 2014.⁷ For the first time in human history it was becoming possible to imagine people living life in peace – and yet hardly anyone realized that was beginning back then.

In December in the year 2015 some 225 members of the then UK parliament voted against bombing people in a country that was called Syria – 153 Labour MPs, 56 SNP, 7 Conservatives 3 Plaid Cymru, 3 SDLP, 2 Lib Dems and the one Green MP.⁸

She was the very first Green MP, of course today every MP is in some way Green and the label has lost its original meaning. But back then those 225 were not enough to prevent the bombing, however it later became clear that their actions were part of that long slow and steady widespread rise in the opposition to war, bombing and the infliction of terror. A century earlier and only 36 MPs had opposed the Military Service (conscription) Bill of 1916; no one would even contemplate military conscription in 2016.⁹ So much had changed in just that one century from 1916 to 2016. It was remarkable, in hindsight, that people were surprised when all this continued onwards. Perhaps the situation was changing so slowly that it is only in hindsight that we now see it as progress. A century ago just a few hundred MPs could take a country to war. A century before that and the votes of a few hundred University students could cause a national scandal.

In 1933, students at the University of Oxford voted by a majority (of 275 to 153) that under no circumstances would they fight for their King and Country.¹⁰ A century later and thousands of students from that same University were calling for a statue of Cecil Rhodes, the one that used to overlook the public High Street, to be taken down. It was one of the ugliest statues that had ever been carved of what appeared to be a broken-hearted man who looked as if he was about to step off a ledge and kill himself.¹¹ However the reason the students had wanted that statue removed was not because it was so depressing, but because Rhodes had caused so much killing and terror in Africa. Like almost all despots he is not remembered now, but he had been a tyrant in the distant past.

The need to remove the statue from public gaze quickly became more and more obvious. The hardest question then became who to replace him with. Should it be another man, like former terrorist/freedom-fighter Nelson Mandela, or someone who was a little more peaceful in his approach, such as Martin Luther King? Maybe a woman would be better, such as the statue of the woman holding her dead son that so many visitors to the *Neue Wache* memorial for the victims of war and tyranny in Berlin still view every year?¹² It was not an easy decision to make. Unlike Germany, Britain contained so many statues to past military tyrants back then. Germany and

almost all other countries in 2016 did not do this. Someone once remarked that visiting the UK was a little like visiting Narnia during winter – except at least in fictitious Narnia most of the statues were of the innocent, not the brutal.

A little over twenty years before the Statue of Rhodes became such an issue for the British, just up the hill in that small city of Oxford there was a state school. That school tried to copy public (which were private) schools by having four ‘houses’ that the children ran for on the annual sports day (it is too hard to explain what a “sports day” was in today’s terms so I won’t try). One of the four ‘houses’ was called Rhodes house, after Cecil Rhodes. Some children refused to run in his name. The school renamed the ‘house’ after Martin Luther King. Oxford University students took longer to achieve the same change. The state school children of Oxford had been ahead of the Oxford university students by a generation, the world had been rapidly changing leaving old elitist views in the dust, but the privileged are the last to learn when times are changing.¹³

So many of the sons and daughters of the old guard join the elite, or at least its outer edges, that older views tend to prevail for longer at the top¹⁴. The British had caused turmoil around the world when they invaded country after country to create their empire. The aftermath of former British colonies was still the underlying reason for so much terror a century ago. Even though almost all of the former empire was free of overt obvious colonialism by then, covert colonialism continued. It was from where Britain’s soldiers had first shot civilians two centuries ago, in Afghanistan, in the Middle East, in Africa, that their actions continued to come back to haunt them. Today, in 2116, all these labels and words are so strange that it can be hard to understand the world of a century ago. So much has changed again, but don’t be fooled into thinking that those who lived back then in 2016 understood what terrorism was in their day – or appreciated who lived in most actual terror and fear, and who was at the greatest risk from what and from whom.

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Endnotes

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 - 2 <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/jan/26/picasso-tapestry-guernica> also see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_\(Picasso\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_(Picasso))
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