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Political Elements in Post-Columbine School Shootings in Europe and North America

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School shootings have traditionally been interpreted as non-political acts. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that not all shootings are necessarily so different from political violence, at least in the shooter's own opinion. The article analyses 28 school rampage shootings in Europe, the U.S., and Canada from 1999–2011 to determine common and prevalent political elements in the shootings. The shootings are divided into three categories: shootings with overtly political communication (four cases), shootings with references to previous school rampage shootings (13 cases), and isolated incidents (11 cases). While it is possible to question whether the shootings were genuinely politically motivated, it is clear that the majority of school shooters link their deed to the agenda and beliefs presented by the Columbine shooters, which has created a sense of tradition, continuity, and imagined community among the shooters and their admirers, not unlike in cases of terrorism and political violence that are referred to as leaderless resistance.

Keywords Columbine shooting, cultural script, leaderless resistance, political motivation, school shootings

Introduction

On November 7, 2007, 18-year-old Pekka-Eric Auvinen entered the Jokela high school in Tuusula, Finland and started shooting his fellow students and teachers, killing eight and shooting himself in the end. Before leaving to go to the school, he had uploaded an extensive media kit to the Internet, including photos and videos of himself as well as documents in which he explained his deed and philosophy. In a document called “Attack information,” he wrote:

Attack Type: Mass murder, political terrorism (although I choosed [*sic*] the school as target, my motives for the attack are political and much much deeper and therefore I don't want this to be called only as “school shooting”).¹

This description sounds peculiar considering that school rampage shootings like this have traditionally been interpreted as non-political acts. Explanations for why they

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happen have focused heavily on the personal history of the shooter, the social dynamics in the school and surrounding community, and the wider cultural context that provides narratives glorifying rage and portraying violence as a solution to one's problems.² The majority of contributions come from the fields of sociology, education, youth studies, and (social) psychology. In the public debate, the discussion has typically revolved around questions of youth, delinquency, mental health, and gun control.³ As for terrorism studies, the school rampage shootings have received very little attention. In those rare cases in which they are mentioned, it is to highlight that they are not a form of terrorism.⁴

While Auvinen is, to my knowledge, the only school shooter who has explicitly called his act terrorism, he is not the only one who has used political vocabulary to explain his deed. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who committed the notorious shooting in the Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999 said in their video recordings that they wanted to kick-start a revolution with their act. Harris and Klebold have been referred to by other school shooters as martyrs or heroes. The word *terrorism* appears in the context of several school shootings, for example as a text in a T-shirt, a rhetorical device used in the manifestos, or as a shooter's strong interest in terrorism and violent crime.

These examples suggest that the school rampage shootings may not always be as far apart from political violence as the previous literature suggests—or that at least the shooters themselves do not think they have nothing at all to do with terrorism. Can it be that the political elements in the shootings have been downplayed and ignored in the aftermath of the shootings? Maybe the strong focus on the mental health and peer relation issues has overshadowed other aspects of this phenomenon?

These questions are important, especially for the ongoing debate on lone wolf terrorism. One of the key issues in this debate is how to draw the line between politically motivated lone wolf terrorism and mass murderers acting primarily motivated by personal grievances or mental health problems and how lone wolf terrorism differs from other forms of lone operator violence. This question has been debated, e.g., with relation to the cases of Anders Behring Breivik, who committed a bomb attack and killing spree in Norway in July 2012, and Nidal Malik Hasan, who opened fire at the Fort Hood military base in the U.S. in November 2009.

The purpose of the article is to take another look at the school rampage shootings and focus specifically on their political elements. This analysis is conducted in order to see how prevalent and common they have been in the context of school shootings. This, in turn, will hopefully contribute to the discussion on the relationship between lone wolf terrorism and other forms of lone operator violence.

School Rampage Shootings

Many kinds of shooting incidents have taken place at educational institutions, ranging from shootings performed by government agents (e.g., the Kent State shootings in 1970) to full-blown terrorist hostage incidents (e.g., the Beslan hostage crisis in 2004). Many shootings related to personal feuds or gang disputes have also taken place on school premises.⁵

It is, however, one specific type of incident in particular that the researchers usually have in mind when they talk about school shootings. This type is usually called “school rampage shooting” in the literature. These acts are defined as (at least partly) indiscriminate shootings perpetrated by former or current students⁶ of that

school. They are “attacks on whole institutions—schools, teenage pecking orders, or communities.”⁷

School rampage shootings are essentially symbolic violence, committed with the intention of sending a message to a wider audience than the immediate victims. In some cases, this message is embedded in the act itself, but it has also been typical that the perpetrator leaves behind writings or videos that provide explanation for his act. This indiscriminate and communicative nature of the school rampage shootings separates them from targeted killings.

This article focuses on these school rampage shootings. This does *not* mean that there might not be any other kinds of school shootings that would merit further investigation with regard to their relationship to lone wolf terrorism. There are several incidents that do not fall into the category of school rampage shootings in which the shooter has given political meaning or reason for his act. One well-known example of such an attack is the École Polytechnique shooting in Montreal in 1989. The shooter, Marc Lépine (25 years old, not a student of the school) killed fourteen women and four men, injured ten more women, and finally shot himself. He had a note in his pocket in which he wrote that he had committed the act for political reasons and that he hated feminists.⁸

Besides the obvious need to limit the scope of this study for practical purposes, there are specific reasons why I have chosen to focus on the school rampage shootings. The first reason is that they have some things in common with terrorist attacks: both involve symbolic violence with a clear intent to communicate a message to a wider audience than its immediate victims and witnesses.

Secondly, the nature of school rampage shootings appears to have changed during the last decade in ways that makes the phenomenon of particular interest to the lone wolf terrorism and leaderless resistance debates. At the beginning of the article, I gave some examples about the use of political language by school shooters. All the examples that I gave are from school shootings after 1999. The Columbine shooting in 1999 has been a watershed event that has arguably changed both the anatomy of school rampage shootings and public perceptions of them in important ways. A prominent school shooting researcher Ralph W. Larkin has claimed that during the 2000s, “[r]ampage shootings were no longer the provenance of isolated, loner students who were psychologically deranged. Columbine raised rampage shootings in the public consciousness from mere revenge to a political act.”⁹

Research Design and Methods

While Larkin’s aforementioned statement has been an inspiration for this article, he actually does not really elaborate on what exactly makes these attacks political beyond the Columbine shooters’ statement that they wanted to kick-start a revolution. The main point of his article is to demonstrate how the Columbine shooting has influenced these subsequent school rampage shootings. When it comes to the political meanings, his attention is more directed at the public debate than at the characteristics of the shootings as such.

The focus of this article is in the acts themselves, and the intent and communication of the shooters in particular. How have the perpetrators explained their actions? Do they make any reference to political thinkers, activists, ideologies or use political terminology in their communication? Have they a history of interest

or involvement in politics? Do they mention previous school shootings or terrorist attacks? Do they place their act in a wider political and social context?

To analyse these questions, I have compiled a list of post-Columbine school rampage shootings from April 1999 to December 2011. I have limited the scope of the article to Europe, the U.S., and Canada. The other continents are excluded because it would have been very difficult to put together a representative list of cases fitting the definition of school rampage shooting based on the source material that was within the reach of this study.

To identify potential cases for this study, I have used several chronologies of school shootings.¹⁰ One of them was the chronology of post-Columbine shootings presented by Ralph W. Larkin in his aforementioned article. I have adopted the same definition that he used, which defines school rampage shootings as indiscriminate, non-targeted attacks perpetrated by current or former students against a school institution. Larkin also set additional criteria for cases that were included. The same criteria were used in the case selection for this article. These criteria are: The student has brought the gun to the school with the intention of shooting somebody (not just to show off), at least one person (other than the shooter) has to be injured by a bullet, and that “the shooter attempts to shoot more than one person, at least one of whom was not specifically targeted.”¹¹ There are, however, differences between my list and his chronology. Larkin’s study includes 12 cases in the U.S. and 11 cases outside the U.S., starting from April 1999 (but excluding the Columbine shooting) and ending in November 2007. The time span of my list starts from the Columbine shooting and ends in 2011. Two of the cases in Larkin’s list are from countries not included in this study (one from Australia and one from Argentina) so they are excluded from this study. I have also excluded two cases that are on Larkin’s list because a closer examination revealed that they do not meet the definition of a school rampage shooting.¹²

Besides the writings, videos, and photos by the shooter, I have also collected information on the perpetrator’s background, including their family background, mental health record, peer relations and school situation, criminal record and history of violent behaviour. In particular, I focused on evidence suggesting interest in politics or political participation. The source material that has been used in this analysis includes publicly available communication by the perpetrators (manifestos, letters, videos, photos, diaries, etc.), official reports and police investigation documents on the incidents, media reports as well as previous research on the incidents. The availability of information varies considerably among the cases.

I should also point out that at this stage of the study, the goal was not to decide what the “real” motive of the shooting was. In other words, the question asked here was how the school shooters explained their deed, not what made them commit the shooting. As it has been brought up in the recent discussion on lone wolf terrorism, “perpetrators’ true motivations are rarely fully accessible or accurate.”¹³ I will return to this question at the end of the article.

Overview of Post-Columbine Rampage Shootings

The dataset of rampage school shootings that was put together for this study consists of 28 cases (the cases are listed later in the article). Rampage shootings represent only a small minority of all school shootings, let alone school violence in that period.¹⁴ When compared to the documented cases of lone wolf terrorism, the number of

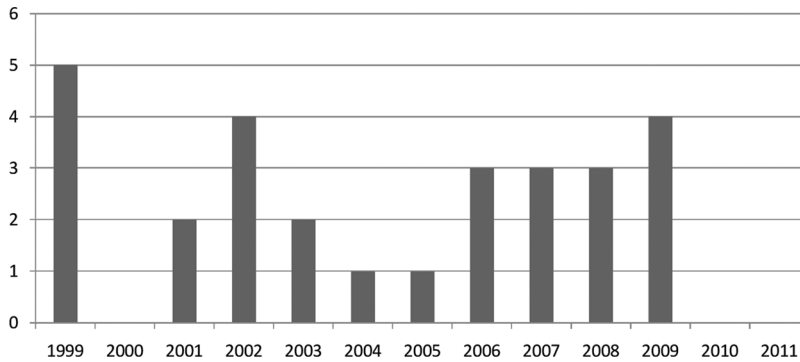


Figure 1. Post-Columbine school rampage shootings per year ($N = 28$).

school rampage shootings is quite similar, as far as the available statistics allow such comparison. For example, Spaaij's chronology of lone wolf attacks includes 33 cases for the years 1999–2010. However, his study does not include all European countries, so the numbers are not entirely comparable.¹⁵

The majority (17) of the shootings took place in the U.S. Five of them happened in Germany, two in Finland, and one in Canada, Bosnia, Greece, and Hungary. It is perhaps good to mention in this context that plans for similar school rampage shootings have been revealed in several other countries too. Therefore, even though I was able to identify actual school rampage shootings in only seven countries, the phenomenon is not completely restricted to these countries only.

The number of incidents per year varies from zero to five. The small number of cases makes it difficult to make any conclusions about trends. What is worth mentioning is that I was not able to find any single incident conforming to the definition between November 2009 and December 2011. This is the longest time period without documented school rampage shootings since 1999. There are, however, such cases again in 2012.¹⁶

In terms of gender, age, and race of the perpetrator, the cases in this study conform largely with the image that emerges from the previous literature. All but one of the perpetrators were males, most of them white. Their age varies from 13 to 62, but

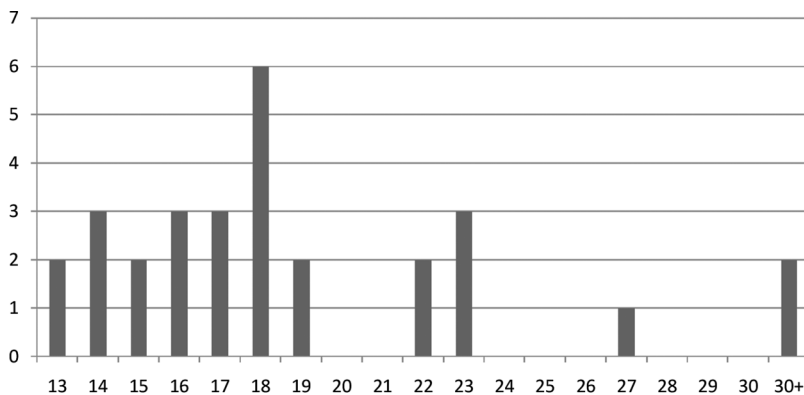


Figure 2. Age of the post-Columbine school rampage shooters ($N = 29$).

an overwhelming majority of the perpetrators (21) were between 13 and 19 years of age. Only two shooters were over 27 years old. The Columbine shooting was the only one that involved two active perpetrators.

There is a notable difference in terms of the age of the perpetrator among countries. All incidents in which the shooter was 13–15 years old took place in the U.S. (5 cases) or Canada (one case). Likewise, all shootings in which the shooter was over 23 years old happened in the U.S. (three cases). In other words, in all European school rampage shootings, the perpetrator was 16–23 years old.

Political Involvement and Interest

In order to assess the political elements in these shootings, this study analysed the communication of the perpetrators as well as looked for information on their background to see whether there is any evidence on political interest or involvement. In none of the examined cases was I able to find evidence that the perpetrator had been involved in any form of political action or tried to join a political organisation. In two cases, the perpetrator is known to have been in correspondence with politically minded organisations or people. Pekka-Eric Auvinen (perpetrator of the Jokela school shooting [Finland] in 2007) was in contact with the Finland-Korea Association (he was interested in North Korea at that time) and Jeffrey Weise (perpetrator of the Red Lake school shooting [MN, U.S.] in 2005) wrote a few messages to a neo-Nazi Internet forum.

Information indicating that the perpetrator had some degree of interest in politics was more common. Such evidence was found in 8 cases. It is good to keep in mind here that interest in political issues is not among the questions that have usually been asked in the aftermath of school shootings. Therefore, it is possible that there are more cases in which the perpetrator had an interest in politics, but that was not considered relevant enough to mention in the newspaper articles or investigation reports.

The nature and depth of the interest varies from case to case. On one end, there are cases in which the perpetrator has voiced his admiration for Hitler, but there is no conclusive evidence indicating deeper familiarity and interest in political thinking. On the other end, there are cases such as that of Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who had studied and supported several forms of radical political ideologies for years, ranging from far left to far right.

In 11 cases, the perpetrator had left behind communication that deals explicitly with the shooting. In four cases, this explanation included political elements. In the rest of the cases, the message was merely personal or ambiguous in nature. Dimitris Patmanidis, the perpetrator of the Athens school shooting (Greece) in 2009, for example, wrote in the note which was written in Greek: “I have no reason to continue living. But, unluckily for you, I’m too selfish to leave and let you keep living . . .” He also said that he had been rejected by someone whom he was in love with and complained that he had experienced “nothing but rejection and contempt from those around me.”¹⁷

To give an example of an ambiguous message, T. J. Solomon (the perpetrator of the 1999 Heritage School shooting in Conyers, GA in the U.S.), left behind a message “for the sake of my brothers and sisters related to the Trench Coat Mafia, those answers will have to remain out of the public eye.” While the reference to the Trench Coat Mafia connects the act to the Columbine High School shooting and evokes the

impression that he sees himself as a representative of a larger entity, he does not provide a political meaning or explanation for his deed.

The strong influence of the Columbine shooting on subsequent school shootings is very evident in the case studies. In a majority of the cases (16 of 27), there is evidence that the perpetrator was influenced by Columbine. In the remaining 11 incidents, there was no evidence of Columbine influence. It is not impossible that the perpetrator was familiar with the Columbine shooting also in these cases, but there was no evidence available that s/he had made indirect or direct reference to that shooting.

It is also noteworthy that there was only one case in which there was evidence that the perpetrator had been interested in politics but there was *no* evidence of Columbine influence. I will briefly discuss this case later in the article.

Typology

Based on these observations, the school rampage shootings in the list can be loosely divided into three categories in terms of their political and communicative elements:

1. *Shootings with overtly political communication* (four cases). In these cases, the perpetrator has left behind a message in which he explains his deed. This explanation includes clear political content—references to political thinkers, movements or actors, use of political terminology and/or a political goal for the act.
2. *Shootings with references to the Columbine shooting* (13 cases). In these cases, the perpetrator may have left behind some written or visual communication, but it does not include an elaborated politically coloured explanation (beyond short and simple statements like “I blame the society”). However, either the communication and/or the way the shooting was conducted include clear references to the Columbine shootings. I have singled out these attacks as a separate category, because such references may mean that the perpetrator wanted his deed to be seen as part of a larger phenomenon.
3. *Isolated incidents* (11 cases). This category includes incidents in which the perpetrator has not left behind any politically coloured explanation for his/her deed and there is no evidence of explicit references to the Columbine shooting.

Shootings With Overtly Political Communication

The shootings in this category were accompanied by visual or textual communication in which the perpetrator explained his deed (all perpetrators in this category were male). The explanation provided in the communication had references to wider political or social processes beyond his personal situation. Furthermore, the shooter claims to be part of a larger category of people whom he hopes to inspire with his act.

There are four such cases within the time range of this study. Two of them have taken place in the U.S., two in European countries (Germany and Finland). Again, the small number of cases makes it difficult to draw any definite conclusions, but it may still be noteworthy that European cases are overrepresented in this category (25 percent of all cases in Europe fall into this category, compared to only 12 percent of the U.S. cases). In terms of timing, there is an interesting pattern: even though the Columbine shooting has been the major model for all three subsequent shootings in this category, these all happened over six years after the incident and within a time

Table 1. Shootings with overtly political communication*

Date	Name(s)	Gender	Age	Location	Country	School	Killed/ wounded	Suicide
April 20, 1999	Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold	Male	18 and 17	Littleton, CO	U.S.	Columbine High School	13/21	Yes
October 13, 2006	Sebastian Bosse	Male	18	Emsdetten, Germany	Germany	Geschwister Scholl	1/21	Yes
April 16, 2007	Cho Seung-Hui	Male	23	Blacksburg, VA	U.S.	Virginia Tech University	32/23	Yes
November 7, 2007	Pekka-Eric Auvinen	Male	18	Tuusula	Finland	Jokela High School	9/12	Yes

*There is conflicting information on the number of injured in several cases. The numbers included in the table are the most reliable estimate that I was able to find from the data used for this study. The same applies for Tables 2 and 3.

period of 13 months. The category is also more homogeneous in terms of the age of the perpetrator than school rampage shootings in general: one perpetrator was 17, three 18 years old, and one 23 years old.

These four cases are the most interesting ones for the present discussion, so I will go through these cases in detail and then conclude this section with some general observations.

Columbine High School Shooting in Littleton (U.S., 1999)

In the history of school shootings, the most influential incident has without any doubt been the Columbine shooting. Two students, Eric Harris (18) and Dylan Klebold (17), entered their school and opened fire on the students and teachers. Thirteen people were killed, over 20 were injured, and the shooters ended their shooting spree with suicide.

In the weeks preceding the shooting, Harris and Klebold made several videos, popularly known as the basement tapes, in which they talked about their plans. Most of the basement tapes have never been made public, but reports by journalists who have seen the tapes give a rather good overview of their content.¹⁸ Harris and Klebold also wrote diaries that they quite clearly intended to be found.¹⁹ These diaries and some other writings have been made publicly available over the years after the incident.

The tapes and diaries indicate that Harris and Klebold conducted the attack clearly out of contempt, rage, and desire for revenge against their peers and teachers at school. “Isn’t it fun to get the respect we’re going to deserve?” They complained about the way they had been treated:

Harris recalls how he moved around so much with his military family and always had to start over, “at the bottom of the ladder.” People continually made fun of him—“my face, my hair, my shirts.” As for Klebold, “If you could see all the anger I’ve stored over the past four f___ing years...” he says. His brother Byron was popular and athletic and constantly “ripped” on him, as did the brother’s friends. Except for his parents, Klebold says, his extended family treated him like the runt of the litter. “You made me what I am,” he said. “You added to the rage.” As far back as the Foothills Day Care center, he hated the “stuck-up” kids he felt hated him. “Being shy didn’t help,” he admits. “I’m going to kill you all. You’ve been giving us s___ for years.”²⁰

However, the school and their peers were not their only target. As Larkin writes, “their primary target was the peer structure, the secondary target was the community at large, and the tertiary target was American society.”²¹ In fact, the Columbine incident was not supposed to be a “school shooting” at all.²² Instead, Harris and Klebold laughed at previous school shootings in their tapes. What they had in mind was rather a mass-casualty bomb attack that would outdo all violent incidents in U.S. history, specifically mentioning the Oklahoma City bombing among others. They had placed a series of bombs inside the school and in their vehicles parked in front of it. The bombs in the school cafeteria were meant to go off first, then they would shoot people escaping from the building, and the bombs in their cars would explode when the rescue workers arrived. The way their “judgment day” played out

was mostly improvisation. When the bombs in the cafeteria (as all other bombs) failed to detonate, Harris and Klebold decided to enter the school and start the shooting spree that ended with their suicide.

In his diary, Harris writes that he does not think the human race is worth fighting for anymore. He views most people as brainless followers who act like robots and do not think for themselves anymore—and it is partly the school that makes them that way:

WWII was the last war worth fighting and was the last time human life and human brains did any good any [sic] made us proud [sic]. Now, with the government having scandals and conspiracies all over the fucking place and lying to everyone all the time and with worthless pointless mindless disgraceful [sic] TV shows on [scratched out] and with everyone ub-fucking-sessed [sic] with hollywood [sic] and beauty and fame and glamour and politics and anything famous, people are just not worth saving. Society may not realize what is happening but I have; you go to school, to get used to studying and learning how youre [sic] “supposed to” so that drains or filters out a little bit of human nature.²³

What separates Harris and Klebold, in Harris’ mind, from others is their self-awareness. He and Klebold can see through the situation and realize the real state of the world. “I feel like GOD and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me. I already know that I am higher than almost anyone in the fucking welt [sic] in terms of universal intelligence and where we stand in the universe compared to the rest of the UNIV.”

Harris and Klebold completely expected the attack to make them notorious—in the basement tapes, they famously discuss how they want someone to make a movie about them and who would direct it (Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino). Besides fame, they also expected to have followers. With their act, they said they wanted to start a revolution of the dispossessed.

The diary and school assignments, in particular those of Eric Harris, indicate that he was interested in politics, history, and philosophy to some degree. In particular, Harris expressed his admiration of Adolf Hitler. In his diary, he also mentions philosopher Nietzsche in passing. Researchers have argued that his texts indicate that he may have been influenced also by Thomas Hobbes.²⁴

During the last couple of years before the attack, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had become inseparable friends. The personal background of Harris and Klebold has been a subject of intense debate. The researchers still disagree on various matters. One of these issues is bullying. There are studies that claim that Harris and Klebold were outcasts who were systematically bullied at school and their act was at least partly a revenge on the school community for how they had been treated. As a close friend of Eric Harris, Brooks Brown, stated in a radio interview five years after the incident, “Eric and Dylan were crazy, but it was Columbine that made them that way.”²⁵ Others deny that bullying would be important for understanding the attack. David Cullen, for example, points out that the writings of Harris “are not the rantings of an angry young man, picked on by jocks until he’s not going to take it anymore. These are the rantings of someone with a messianic-grade superiority complex, out to punish the entire human race for its appalling inferiority.”²⁶

There is also disagreement about the mental health of the perpetrators. It is less so for Dylan Klebold, who has been commonly seen as a confused, depressed follower. When it comes to Eric Harris, while there is dispute about the correct diagnosis, it is beyond dispute that by the time of the attack, he was mentally unstable and out of control.²⁷ This was not evident to everyone—most adults and many of his fellow students thought he was nice and well-mannered. He was a bright student who did well at school and rarely caused any trouble. His writings, online activities, and nightly endeavours, however, reveal another “dramatic, passive-aggressive, vindictive”²⁸ side of him. He spent a lot of time on his computer and is well known for having been a heavy user of the violent computer game Doom. When Harris had posted a death threat against his schoolmate on his website about one year before the attack, his mother arranged a meeting for him with a psychologist. He told the psychologist that he was feeling angry, depressed, and had suicidal thoughts. A doctor prescribed him SSRI type medication.²⁹

Geschwister School Shooting in Emsdetten (Germany, 2006)

On the morning of November 20, 2006, 18-year-old Sebastian Bosse entered his former school in Emsdetten, Germany. He was armed with guns, explosives, and smoke bombs, and wore a suicide-bomber style explosive belt, a long black coat, and a gas mask. Over 30 people were hurt by gunshots or suffered from asphyxiation. After the shooting, Bosse committed suicide on the school premises.

Before the attack, Bosse (who used the nickname ResistantX online) had uploaded videos and writings to the Internet. Part of this material is in English (“Sometimes I write s**t in English because I want everybody to understand what the hell I am talking about!”).³⁰ All the material has clear visual and textual references to the Columbine shootings.

In his messages, he expresses his deep dissatisfaction with his life and the way the society works. He explicitly states that there are two main reasons for why he committed the massacre: school and politics.³¹ These two are clearly interlinked in his communication as he sees the school as part of the larger social system that he opposes.

He tells that his life was good until he went to school at the age of six:

The only thing that I was taught intensively in school was that I am a loser. For my first years at the GSS,³² this is even true, I was captivated by consumer lust, I tried hard to make friends, people who do not regard you as a person, but as a status symbol. But then I woke up! I realized that the world as it seemed to me does not exist, that it was an illusion which is essentially produced by the media. More and more I noticed in what kind of world I was. A world in which money rules everything, even in school everything revolved around it. You must have the newest cellphone, the newest clothes and the right “friends.” If you do not have one of those, you are not worthy of being noticed. And those people are called jocks. Jocks are all those who think that because of expensive clothes or beautiful girls by their side they outrank others. I hate those people, no, I hate people.

I have experienced in those 18 years of my life that you can become happy only if you bow to the majority, adjust to society. But I could not

and did not want to do so. I am free! Nobody is allowed to intervene in my life, and if he does anyway, he has to bear the consequences!³³

This protest against limits and regulations links directly to his personal situation. What seemed to function as the triggering event was that he was scheduled to appear in court because of illegal possession of weapons one day after the incident. Bosse makes direct reference to this in his farewell letter (“No politician has the right to enact legislation that prohibits me to do something. No cop has the right to take my gun away from me, certainly not while carrying his own on his belt.”)

Bosse explains himself that he committed the shooting foremost as revenge against all those who had made his life miserable and meaningless. He calls the “normal” life course S.A.A.R.T. (German acronym for school, education, work, retirement, death) and constructs his act as a protest against this whole system. For him, the current political system is not a democracy or government by the people but a fascist system, and the school is an integral part of this system (elsewhere he draws a parallel between the Hitler youth and school³⁴):

The child sets off on its personal route of socialization, and in the subsequent years, it will be forced to adjust to the general public, the majority. If it refuses, teachers, parents and not least the police will intervene. Compulsory school attendance is whitewashing for coercive education, because you are forced to attend school. If you are forced to do something, you lose part of your freedom. You are forced to pay taxes, you are forced to obey speed limits, you are forced to do this, you are forced to do that. Ergo: No freedom! And this is called popular government. If the people would rule, it would be anarchy!³⁵

What he wants instead is anarchy, a complete freedom. Immediately after the previous passage, he calls others to action (“WAKE UP AT LAST – TAKE TO THE STREETS – IT HAS WORKED IN GERMANY ONCE BEFORE!”). He also states that he wants to contribute to the revolution of the outcast. In his diary, he wrote that “I hope that other outcasts will be treated better after GSS! And I hope that some of ‘em will be like Reb, Vod and Me! A FUCKING HERO!”³⁶ Committing the rampage shooting was his way to find meaning in his life (he states this explicitly in his farewell letter).

When it comes to the personal background of Sebastian Bosse, we know that his family background is unremarkable. He had some trouble at school and had to retake two classes, but managed to graduate with good grades some months prior to the attack. He had a strong interest in weapons and all things military. He liked to play violent computer games. His peers considered him a somewhat strange loner. There is also some evidence that his parents and relatives were concerned about him to some extent, worrying that there was something wrong with him. He displayed behavioral problems since grade 3 and teachers had recommended that his parents consult with a school psychologist. In June 2004, he sought help in a professional psychological counseling forum, where he wrote about his fear of being bullied and his anger, mentioning also the possibility of a rampage shooting.³⁷

Virginia Tech University Shooting in Blacksburg (U.S., 2007)

The shooting at Virginia Tech University on April 16, 2007 has been the bloodiest school rampage shooting so far as it left 32 people dead. The perpetrator was Seung Hui Cho, a son of a South Korean immigrant family and a current student of the university. From the perpetrators of the shootings in this category, he has the longest and most severe history of documented mental health problems. He was extremely introverted, quiet, suffered from extreme social anxiety and had been treated for depression and suicidal thoughts. He was involuntarily committed to mental health treatment a few months prior to the shooting because he was considered to present an imminent danger to himself and others.³⁸

While his mental health problems undoubtedly play a significant role in why he committed his attack, it is equally clear that he wanted to make a statement with his act. On the morning of his attacks, he sent a package to NBC News including pictures of himself, video clips, and a 1,800-word text, described as a “multimedia manifesto.”³⁹ His message is commonly viewed as mostly incomprehensible “rambling diatribe.”⁴⁰ It is more idiosyncratic than the other manifestos, but it does include an explanation for his act that goes beyond his own situation and has a distinctively political (and religious) flavour to it.⁴¹

The text is full of resentment and anger. He blames others for “raping his soul” and ruining his life and forcing him to act:

You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today, but you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off, you Apostles of Sin.⁴²

He does not consider his suffering as an isolated case, but part of a larger problem. He portrays himself as one of the many weak and defenceless people in society who are abused by a dominating class of sadist hedonists whose desire for more money, profit, and commodities is insatiable and who have never experienced pain. He calls these people lovers of terrorism, Christian Nazis, and many other degrading terms.

He presents himself as one of the weak and defenceless people, an anti-terrorist, who dies “like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people—my Brothers, Sisters, and Children—that you fuck”:

By destroying we create. We create the feelings in you of what it is like to be the victim, what it is like to be fucked and destroyed. Because of your annihilations, we create and raise new breeds of Children who will show you fuckers what you have done to us. Like Easter, it will be a day of rebirth, it will be a start of a revolution of the Children that you fucked. You have never felt a single ounce of pain your whole life, thus, by destroying you, by giving you pain, we attempt to show you responsibilities and meanings of other people’s lives.⁴³

He explicitly links his act to the Columbine shootings, stating that “[g]eneration after generation, we martyrs, like Eric and Dylan, will sacrifice our lives to fuck you thousand folds for what you Apostles of Sin have done to us.”

Jokela High School Shooting in Tuusula (Finland, 2007)

The most elaborate political explanation for a school rampage shooting has been provided by Pekka-Eric Auvinen, the perpetrator of the Jokela High School shooting in 2007. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, he explicitly called his attack a mass murder and political terrorism. He further specified that the target of his attack was “Jokelan Lukio (High School Of Jokela), students and faculty, society, humanity, human race.”⁴⁴

To explain his deed, he uploaded a “media kit” to the Internet before his attack. It included several documents, as well as videos and photos bearing close resemblance to the Columbine shooting visual communications. All writings were included both in Finnish and in English.

One of the documents is a three-page Natural Selector’s Manifesto in which he explained his view on what was wrong in the world. He picks up many of the themes that are present in the communication of the previous shooters discussed in this section, but he discusses them much more elaborately. He also makes a lot fewer references to his personal situation than the other shooters, making the content of his manifesto in that sense more akin to the manifestos and communiqués of terrorist groups or lone wolf terrorists.

In his view, the process of natural selection had reversed and the human race was devolving. The large majority of people had fallen under the spell of collective de-individualization and are not thinking for themselves. He is one of the few who have woken up and can see through that:

Majority of people in society are weak-minded and ignorant retards, masses that act like programmed robots and accept voluntarily slavery. But not me! I am self-aware and realize what is going on in society! I have a free mind! And I choose to be free rather than live like a robot or slave. You can say I have a “god complex,” sure . . . then you have a “group complex”! Compared to you retarded masses, I am actually godlike.⁴⁵

Auvinen hoped that his act would inspire others to fight for the revolution and describes his own act as dying for a cause:

Long live the revolution . . . revolution against the system, which enslaves not only the majority of weak-minded masses but also the small minority of strong-minded and intelligent individuals! If we want to live in a different world, we must act. We must rise against the enslaving, corrupted and totalitarian regimes and overthrow the tyrants, gangsters and the rule of idiocracy. I can’t alone change much but hopefully my actions will inspire all the intelligent people of the world and start some sort of revolution against the current systems. [. . .]

I am ready to die for a cause I know is right, just and true . . . even if I would lose or the battle would be only remembered as evil. . . . I will rather fight and die than live a long and unhappy life.⁴⁶

The content of the manifesto demonstrates that Auvinen was familiar with philosophy and political ideology. It is clear that he had read at least Plato and

Nietzsche. It is also known that he was interested in Ted “the Unabomber” Kaczynski. Coincidence or not, the day he had chosen to carry out his plan was the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution.

In terms of his personal background, Pekka-Eric Auvinen was in many ways a typical school shooter as depicted in the research literature: he lived in a small town, he had been bullied for years at school, did not have many friends, and suffered from panic attacks and fear of social situations. But unlike other school shooters, Pekka-Eric Auvinen’s personal history shows a strong interest in radical politics.

It was well known to people around Auvinen that he had been interested in politics for years. His interest in politics dates back at least to the age of 12 and it went through several phases. According to his mother, he was initially mainly interested in mainstream politics, but around 14–15 years of age, he started to become fascinated with more radical politics and fringe parties (e.g., the Finnish communist party). He considered joining its youth organisation, but did not find the courage to do that. After that, he became interested in North Korea and was in contact with the Finland-Korea association. The North Korea phase was followed by fascination with Nazism. During the year 2007, Auvinen reportedly started to be critical of Hitler and his choice to go after the Jews because he thought they were not the right target. Around this time, he started to talk about violence as a legitimate means of political action. These developments were well known to his fellow students and friends, who became increasingly worried about him.

The evidence suggests that Auvinen started to plan his act in early 2007. Eight months prior to the act, he wrote in his diary that he was “going to initiate an operation against humanity with the purpose of killing as many people as possible and causing havoc and mayhem around him.”⁴⁷ He also wrote in his diary that he wanted to make a lasting impact on the world and believed that others would follow his example. He began writing his manifesto six months before the attack. His computer also included photos and information on several terrorist attacks. In a video called “Mass of murders” that he made, several terrorists are mentioned, including Theodore Kaczynski, Eric Rudolph, Franz Fuchs, and Timothy McVeigh, as well as earlier school shooters (Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, Jeff Weise, Robert Steinhäuser, Seung-Hui Cho, all included in this study).⁴⁸

Around early 2007, Auvinen started to contribute actively on Internet discussions dedicated to the Columbine shootings. He had produced several videos on American school shootings, Hitler, and Finnish radical ecologist Pertti Linkola and made them available on YouTube. His admiration for the American school shootings comes out very clearly also from his diary.

His interest and familiarity with “Columbine” is evident from his act. During the shooting and in many of the photos, he wore a t-shirt with a text “humanity is overrated,” quoting the Columbine shooter Eric Harris and imitating Harris and his fellow shooter Dylan Klebold, who had worn shirts with a short written statement during their attack. His videos are stylistically similar to the shooting videos of Harris and Klebold. Included in his media kit is a document listing things that he liked and hated, much like Eric Harris had done in his writings, and he mentioned many of the same bands as Harris and Klebold are known to have admired. Many ideas included in his manifesto are present in some form also in the writings of Harris.

Interim Summary: Emerging Narrative of the Political School Rampage Shootings

Despite their differences, the manifestos and writings of these school shooters share many commonalities. All the latter three overtly political rampage school shootings in 2006–2007 very clearly follow the tradition of the first of them, the Columbine shootings. This goes both for the content of the perpetrators' writings, their visual material as well as the way their attack was conducted. Reading the writings side by side, one can see that they are in essence variations of the same narrative. Their analyses of the prevailing political and social situation and their role in it are in many ways very similar to each other, all mixing personal and political grievances, which in the perpetrators' mind are closely related to each other.⁴⁹

The perpetrators express angrily their resentment of the way they have been treated, arguing that they were pushed to their act of vengeance ("I did not start this war"). From the description of the personal situation emerges an image of a failed joiner,⁵⁰ who tried to fit in but was bullied, teased, and rejected.

At some point, they understood that they did not even want to fit into the majority and live in a world like that. They blame the majority of people for being brainless sheep, following the others without thinking for themselves. They see the media, school, and democratic politics as systems that create and maintain this state of affairs. What they think differentiates themselves from the others is their self-awareness. They understand what is going on and they have developed one step ahead. As a solution for this situation, they demand anarchy and/or that the law of natural selection would be left to take its natural course, allowing the survival of the fittest. They strongly protest against any limitations to their freedom, claiming that they only have the right to decide on their own life.

The shooters stress emphatically that they alone are responsible for their act ("this is my war"), portraying themselves as lone heroes fighting a war against their enemy. Even if they act alone, there is an "us" for them, the outcast, which they hope to inspire with their actions to do something similar and in that way to start a revolution against the majority.

These observations, together with numerous textual, visual, and behavioural references to previous school rampage shootings suggest that indeed while they acted alone, perpetrators of these rampage shootings saw their attack as part of a wider struggle. For them, it was not only about their personal situation, but also about dying for a cause that they felt had wider significance.

Finally, what is noteworthy here is that the ideas and images expressed by these school shooters bear a lot of similarities with the cultural narratives of the U.S. paramilitary culture of the 1980s and 1990s: a lone hyper-masculine hero, starting up the fight against the system.⁵¹

Columbine-Influenced Shootings

The second category includes shootings that have been clearly influenced by the Columbine shooting. Some of these perpetrators have also left behind visual or textual communication directly related to the shooting, but none of these communications are such politically and socially coloured elaborate explanations as is the case with the shootings in the first category.

This category includes 13 school rampage shootings, spreading over the entire period. Eight of these shootings happened in the U.S., two in Germany, and one in Canada, Finland, and Greece. The perpetrators were 14–27 years old. Five of the perpetrators were 14 or 15 years old. The category thus includes all but two cases in which the perpetrator was 15 years old or younger.

The Columbine influence is evident in these cases in various ways. Several of the perpetrators have participated in the school shooting discussion groups online or collected photos, videos, and writings dealing with the Columbine shooting. They have quoted previous school shootings in their discussions prior to the attack or during the attack (such as “Humanity is overrated,” “Do you believe in God?”). They have imitated the clothing of Harris and Klebold during the shooting by wearing black trench coats or t-shirts with a message. Some of them have left behind photos and videos that bear strong resemblances to those produced by Harris and Klebold. Another common way to connect their act to the Columbine shootings has been to list things that they hate and love in the same style as Harris did in his writings. In these lists, the same cultural products appear over and over again.⁵²

A good example of cases included in this category is the Kauhajoki school shooting perpetrated by Matti Saari in 2008. Saari did not leave behind any writings beyond Internet profiles, but he uploaded several videos and photos that are very similar to those of the Columbine shooters and Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who had committed Finland’s first school rampage shooting ten months earlier. He also reportedly expressed his admiration of previous school shooters to his friends. During the last months before the incident, there were also concerns about his mental state among his friends and family.⁵³

In some other cases in this category, the perpetrator has had an extensive history of mental health problems. One case in point is Steven Kazmierczak, the perpetrator of the Northern Illinois University shooting in 2008. He had had considerable mental health problems since the age of 16, including several suicide attempts and hospitalizations. He was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. In 2002, he started his sociology studies at the university and was a remarkably successful high performance student for a long time. In autumn 2007, his condition started to deteriorate again after a series of losses and changes. Throughout these years, Kazmierczak showed strong interest in mass murders and violent crime, including previous school shootings (such as the Columbine and Virginia Tech shootings) and National Socialism. He did not, however, leave any explanation for his deed, but on the contrary evidently destroyed his computer hard drive completely. On the other hand, during the shooting he did wear a black T-shirt with the word “Terrorist” written on the chest over a picture of an assault rifle.⁵⁴

Besides Columbine, these perpetrators occasionally referred to other school shootings as well. In Kazmierczak’s case, he referred at least to the Virginia Tech shooting. The German school shooters have often referred to the Erfurt school shooting in 2002, which was the first post-Columbine school rampage shooting in the country. It is noteworthy that the subsequent school shootings after Columbine do not feature even nearly as prevalently in their case histories or communication as Columbine does. This highlights the role of this particular school shooting as an exemplary action among the school shooters.

In four cases of this category, we have evidence that the perpetrator had at least some level of interest in politics. Robert Steinhäuser, who committed the Erfurt school shooting, showed interest in terrorism.⁵⁵ The same goes for another German

Table 2. Columbine-influenced shootings

Date	Name	Gender	Age	Location	Country	School	Killed/ wounded	Suicide
April 28, 1999	Todd Cameron Smith	Male	14	Taber, Alberta	Canada	W. R. Myers High School	1/1	No
May 20, 1999	T. J. Solomon	Male	15	Conyers, GA	U.S.	Heritage School	0/6	No
December 6, 1999	Seth Trickey	Male	13	Ft. Gibson, OK	U.S.	Fort Gibson Middle School	0/4	No
March 5, 2001	Charles Andrew Williams	Male	15	Santee, CA	U.S.	Santana High School	2/13	No
April 26, 2002	Robert Steinhäuser	Male	19	Erfurt	Germany	Johann Gutenberg High School	16/7	Yes
February 9, 2004	Jon William Romano	Male	16	East Greenbush, NY	U.S.	Columbia High School	0/1	No
March 21, 2005	Jeffrey Weise	Male	16	Red Lake, MN	U.S.	Red Lake Senior High School	9/7	Yes
March 14, 2006	James Scott Newman	Male	14	Reno, NV	U.S.	Pine Middle School	0/2	No
August 30, 2006	Alvaro Rafael Castillo	Male	18	Hillsborough, NC	U.S.	Orange High School	0/2	No
February 14, 2008	Stephen P. Kazmierczak	Male	27	DeKalb, IL	U.S.	Northern Illinois University	5/18	Yes
September 23, 2008	Matti Saari	Male	22	Kauhajoki	Finland	Kauhajoki Polytechnic School	10/1	Yes
April 10, 2009	Dimitris Patmanidis	Male	19	Athens	Greece	OAED Vocational College	0/3	Yes
March 11, 2009	Tim Kretschmer	Male	17	Winnenden	Germany	Albertville-Realschule	15/11	Yes

Table 3. Isolated shootings

Date	Name	Gender	Age	Location	Country	School	Killed/ wounded	Suicide
November 19, 1999	Victor Cordova Jr.	Male	13	Deming, NM	U.S.	Deming Middle School	0/1	No
March 22, 2001	Jason Hoffman	Male	18	El Cajon, CA	U.S.	Granite Hills High School	0/5	No
January 16, 2002	Peter Odighizuwa	Male	46	Grundy, VA	U.S.	Appalachian School of Law	3/3	No
February 19, 2002	Adam Labus	Male	22	Freising	Germany	Economics School	3/1	Yes
April 29, 2002	Dragoslav Petkovic	Male	17	Vlasenica	Bosnia	Vlasenica High School	1/1	Yes
May 9, 2003	Biswanath Halder	Male	62	Cleveland, OH	U.S.	Case Western Reserve University	1/2	No
July 2, 2003	Florian K.	Male	16	Coburg	Germany	Realschule II	0/1	Yes
October 10, 2007	Asa H. Coon	Male	14	Cleveland, OH	U.S.	Success Academy	0/4	Yes
February 8, 2008	Latina Williams	Female	23	Baton Rouge, LA	U.S.	Louisiana Technical College	2/0	Yes
April 26, 2009	Odane Greg Maye	Male	18	Hampton, VA	U.S.	Hampton University	0/2	No
November 26, 2009	Ákos Gere	Male	23	Pécs	Hungary	University of Pécs	1/3	No

school shooter, Tim Kretschmer (The Winnenden school shooting in 2009), who had regularly researched the 9/11 attacks.⁵⁶ Jeffrey Weise, the perpetrator of the Red Lake school shooting in 2005, was known for his interest in Nazi ideology and Hitler. He wrote some messages to an Internet forum dedicated to these issues one year before the incident. Weise's shooting is also one of the few cases in which the political orientation of the shooters made headlines.⁵⁷

Isolated Shootings

This last category includes cases that meet the definition of a school rampage shooting but do not include any references to the Columbine shooting and are not accompanied by an extensive political explanation. I have named the category as "isolated shootings" because there are no similar links to previous school rampage shootings as in all cases included in the previous two categories. Since there was very little information available on some of these cases, it is not impossible that there might have been Columbine references in some of these cases that were not reported in any of the sources that I was able to find. The category includes the only case in which the perpetrator was a female, as well as both cases in which the shooter was over 27 years old.

Most of the shootings are closely linked to the perpetrator's personal situation. Some of them bear a trademark of targeted vendetta that has gone awry and led to other casualties. In one case, that of Odane Greg Maye (the perpetrator of the Hampton University shooting in 2009), we know that the perpetrator went to his former school with the intention of creating a no-way-out situation that would give him enough courage to commit suicide.⁵⁸

Even if none of these perpetrators left behind political manifestos, not all shootings in this category, however, are completely devoid of political flavour. The case in point is the school shooting in Freising, Germany in 2002, perpetrated by Adam Labus. We know that Labus had been influenced by militarism and National Socialism. Despite his interest in politics, political motivation was ruled out by the police.⁵⁹ Labus is in fact not the only school shooter in this study who had dreamed (and tried) to become a soldier or mercenary, but had failed to make that happen.

Conclusion

This article set out to analyse the political elements in school rampage shootings. The first thing that the analysis makes evident is that the majority of school rampage shootings included in this study do not have explicit political elements. Even within the relatively homogeneous category of school rampage shootings, there are a lot of differences between the cases. Some of them have signs of political motivation, or at least politically coloured communication, while in other cases, there is little to support any claims about political motivation. None of the school rampage shooters had been politically active prior to the shooting and only a minority had showed any interest in politics.

On the other hand, in four of these school rampage shootings, the perpetrators provided an explanation for their act that had undeniably political content. What should we think about this? Should we consider them as political acts?

One possible argument against interpreting these school shootings as political acts is that even if the school shooters explain their act in political or ideological terms, we should not really let ourselves be fooled by that. Their real motivation is not political anyway, but derives from the personal problems of the shooter.

The political rantings are a mere topping and an attempt to legitimate their violent acts.⁶⁰

A second way to view the political elements is to place them in the context of the perpetrators' other interests. It is not always clear whether the shooters' fascination with politics is more based on the content of ideologies and agenda, or rather their violent and spectacular manifestations. Several school shooters have been fascinated with mass murders, violent crime, and previous school rampage shootings. Their fascination with terrorist attacks and totalitarian regimes can also be seen in this light. For example, one can legitimately ask whether the fascination with Adolf Hitler should be read as support for Nazism. Ralph Larkin, for example, has suggested that Harris's fascination with Hitler "seems to derive from Hitler's ability to exterminate anyone who did not conform to his image of the world."⁶¹

These same questions are also discussed by Ramón Spaaij in his study on lone wolf terrorism. His case studies suggest that, also in the case of lone wolf terrorism, it is very typical that the perpetrators mix political ideologies and personal grievances. In one third of the cases included in his chronology, the ideological source remained unclear. This suggests that the political and ideological component in lone wolf terrorism is not always very distinct. In the words of Spaaij, "boundaries of lone wolf terrorism are inevitably fuzzy."⁶² When there is no conclusive evidence, there seems to be a tendency in terrorism studies to classify acts still as terrorism if targeting, timing, or interpretations of the act in the public debate hint in that direction. The question of the mental health of the perpetrators and its significance in terms of understanding the violent acts is also a topic of discussion. There is some tentative evidence suggesting that mental health problems may be more common among lone wolf terrorists than members of terrorist groups.⁶³

How to view the school rampage shootings in the first category is thus closely linked with the question of how to deal with the criteria of political motivation in the case of lone wolf terrorism. The literature on terrorism does not have a lot to say about how to apply the definitional criteria that the attack has to be politically (or religiously) motivated. The criterion is evidently there in many definitions in order to distinguish terrorism from criminal and psychotic violence. Alex Schmid's discussion on the matter in the *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* is tellingly vague and ends up with the statement that "'political' is an element that ought to be included in a definition of terrorism, but non-political terrorism should not be totally ruled out."⁶⁴ Determining whether this criterion is met has been somewhat easier in the case of group-based terrorism: if the attack is perpetrated by an organization that is known to have political objectives, the criterion is met. It needs to be discussed more carefully how to evaluate the nature of the attack in the case of lone operators. As the group context is often much more vague or even non-existent, the question is at least partially transferred to the realm of analyzing motivations of an individual which makes the evaluation much harder.

Besides the first category of shootings, also the second category, the Columbine-inspired shootings without explicit political communication, are interesting in this context. One possible reading of these cases is that they are copycat crimes⁶⁵ or suicides with a "cool factor," but there is another way to look at them that seems worth consideration. Even though the perpetrators have not explained their deeds politically, the references to Columbine may indicate that the perpetrator wanted his act to be placed in the larger context described in the Columbine shooters' communication. Besides providing an example of how to conduct a spectacular school shooting, "Columbine"

as a reference point seems to have created a sense of tradition, continuity, and imagined community among these school shooters and their admirers.⁶⁶ While the question remains whether these shootings can be considered as political, the *de facto* dynamics and shape of this Columbine phenomenon are not necessary worlds apart from what is usually referred to as leaderless resistance.

Whatever we may think about the boundaries and linkages between school rampage shootings and lone wolf terrorism, the way the school shooters have used the term illustrates the cultural significance and connotations of the term “terrorism.” That Auvinen labeled his act as political terrorism shows what kind of a status the word terrorism has acquired in today’s world, even in Finland where there has been hardly any terrorism to speak of since the Second World War. For people like Pekka-Eric Auvinen, terrorism does not appear to be a pejorative label, but rather a badge of credibility and worthiness, denoting a higher purpose, not unlike for the anarchists in the late 19th century, who used the term terrorism to separate themselves from ordinary criminals.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Pekka-Eric Auvinen, “Attack information.” This document and other writings included in his media kit are available at http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Original_Documents_files/Pekka-Eric%20Auvinen%20Online.pdf.

2. See, e.g., Katherine Newman, David J. Harding, Jal Mehta, and Wendy Roth, *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Jonathan Fast, *Ceremonial Violence: Understanding Columbine and Other School Rampage Shootings* (New York: Overlook Press, 2008); Peter Langman, *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Glenn W. Muschert, “Research in School Shootings,” *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 1 (2007): 60–80; and two early influential studies: Mary Ellen O’Toole, *The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective* (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999); and Bryan Vossekuil, Robert A. Fein, Marisa Reddy, Randy Borum, and William Modzeleski, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attack in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Whether the theories and approaches for explaining school rampage shootings may be applicable to some cases of lone-wolf terrorism as well is discussed in Leena Malkki, “School Shootings and Lone-Wolf Terrorism,” in Michael Fredholm, ed., *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Past Experience, Future Outlook, and Response Strategies* (forthcoming).

3. See e.g., Benjamin Frymer, “The Media Spectacle of Columbine: Alienated Youth as an Object of Fear,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 10 (2009): 1387–1404; Glenn W. Muschert, “The Columbine Victims and the Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator,” *Youth, Violence and Juvenile Justice* 5, no. 4 (2007): 351–366; Leena Malkki, “Suomessa Ei Ole Terrorismia, Koska ‘Suomessa Ei Ole Terrorismia’? 2000-Luvun Väikivallanteot ja Tulkintojen Merkitys” [There Is No Terrorism In Finland Because “There Is No Terrorism in Finland”? The Interpretation of Violent Incidents in the 2000s], in Anssi Kullberg, ed., *Suomi–Terrorismi–Supo* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2011), 204–224.

4. E.g., Ramón Spaaij explicitly states that the Virginia Tech Shooting was not a terrorist attack even if it is sometimes erroneously labelled as such (Ramón Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism: Global Patterns, Motivations and Prevention* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 11–12. One of the few contributions in which school shootings and terrorism are discussed together is Adam Lankford and Nayab Hakim, “From Columbine to Palestine: A

Comparative Analysis of Rampage Shooters in the United States and Volunteer Suicide Bombers in the Middle East,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 16, no. 2 (2011): 98–107. They suggest that the differences between the American rampage school shooters and volunteer suicide bombers in the Middle East are more cultural and contextual in nature and that when it comes to underlying psychology and motivation, they are quite similar. See also Adam Lankford, “A Comparative Analysis of Suicide Terrorists and Rampage, Workplace, and School Shooters in the United States from 1990 to 2010,” *Homicide Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012): 255–274.

5. For a typology of school shootings, see e.g., Muschert, “Research in School Shootings” (see note 2 above).

6. Some definitions also include shootings perpetrated by current or former employees of the school (e.g., Muschert, “Research in School Shootings” (see note 2 above)). This article is limited to the shootings perpetrated by former/current students only.

7. Newman et al., *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (see note 2 above), 14.

8. Lépine’s suicide note is available online at www.schoolshooters.info. See also, e.g., Katherine Ramsland, *Marc Lépine’s Gendercide: The Montreal Massacre*, http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/notorious_murders/mass/marc_lepine/8.html.

9. Ralph W. Larkin, “The Columbine Legacy: Rampage Shootings as Political Acts,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 9 (2009): 1309–1326.

10. These chronologies include, e.g., Jessie Klein, *The Bully Society: School Shootings and the Crisis of Bullying in America’s Schools* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2012); the school shooting data for Klein’s book on <http://jessieklein.com/images/resources/resources-dataonschoolshootings.pdf>;

Brian Van Brunt, *Ending Campus Violence: New Approaches to Prevention* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Herbert Scheithauer and Rebecca Bondü, *Amoklauf und School Shooting: Bedeutung, Hintergründe und Prävention* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); Newman et al., *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings* (see note 2 above); the Wikipedia lists on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_shooting and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_school_shootings_in_the_United_States.

11. Larkin, “The Columbine Legacy” (see note 9 above), 1310. This means that all targeted shootings and shootings related to personal feuds and gang violence were excluded. Drawing the line is admittedly at times hard, because there is not always much evidence available on the motives and intentions of the shooter. All failed attempts or foiled plans were also excluded.

12. The excluded cases are the Vaestermalms High School incident in Sundsvall, Sweden in November 2001, which was a stabbing and not a shooting (his list was limited to shootings only, as is mine) and the Dawson College shooting in Montreal, Canada where the shooter was not a current or a former student of that institution.

13. Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism* (see note 4 above), 20.

14. For a wider picture on school shootings and violence, see, e.g., Jessie Klein’s school shooting data for 1979–2011, <http://jessieklein.com/images/resources/resources-dataonschoolshootings.pdf>.

15. Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism* (see note 4 above), 110–116.

16. E.g., shooting at Oikos University in Oakland, U.S. on April 2, 2012 (Matthias Gafni, Thomas Peele, Joshua Melvin, and Matt Krupnick, “Oakland University Shooting: Accused Oikos University Shooter One Goh Was ‘Troubled,’ ‘Angry,’ Said those Who Knew Him,” *Oakland Tribune*, April 3, 2012) and the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in Newtown, U.S. on December 14, 2012 (N. R. Kleinfeld, Ray Rivera and Serge F. Kovalski, “Newtown’s Killer’s Obsession, in Chilling Detail,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2013).

17. “Student Shoots 3 in Greek College, Kills Himself,” *Guardian*, April 10, 2009.

18. Here, especially the following article is helpful: Nancy Gibbs and Timothy Roche, “The Columbine Tapes,” *Time*, December 20, 1999.

19. Harris ponders in his diary, “I wonder if anyone will write a book on me. Sure is a ton of symbolism, double meaning, themes, appearance vs reality shit going on here. Oh well, it better be fuckin good if it is written.”

20. Gibbs and Roche, “The Columbine Tapes” (see note 18 above).

21. Ralph W. Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 153–154.

22. This point has been made forcibly by, e.g., Dave Cullen. See Dave Cullen, "The Depressive and the Psychopath: At Last We Know Why the Columbine Killers Did It," *Slate*, April 20, 2004, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/assessment/2004/04/the_depressive_and_the_psychopath.html.

23. Harris' diary is available transcribed at acolumbinesite.com/eric/writing/journal/journal.html.

24. Peter Langman, *Influences on the Ideology of Eric Harris*, http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Articles_files/Influences%20on%20the%20Ideology%20of%20Eric%20Harris%201.1.pdf.

25. Quote from Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (see note 21 above), 154.

26. Cullen (see note 22 above).

27. See, e.g., Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (see note 21 above), 126. Some months before the shooting, he was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. This diagnosis has been disputed after the incident, e.g., by a FBI profiler who claims he was a psychopath. This is the conclusion also in Dave Cullen, *Columbine* (Tiverton: Old Street Publishing, 2009). See also Langman, *Why Kids Kill* (see note 2 above) and Fast, *Ceremonial Violence* (see note 2 above).

28. Fast, *Ceremonial Violence* (see note 2 above), 183.

29. *Ibid.*, 192.

30. Sebastian Bosse's diary, November 17, 2006, <http://staydifferent.st.ohost.de/diary>.

31. Quote from his farewell video message: "There are two main reasons for that massacre: First reason, school, teachers, students, everything in the fucking building. Second, the politics. I want anarchy." The video is available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZrAiQMzkDY&feature=related>.

32. The abbreviation refers to his school, Geschwister-Scholl-Schule.

33. Sebastian Bosse's farewell letter (written in German), <http://www.n-tv.de/politik/dossier/abschiedsbrief-article199956.html>.

34. Sebastian Bosse's diary, September 18, 2006.

35. Sebastian Bosse's farewell letter.

36. Sebastian Bosse's diary, November 19, 2006. Reb(el) and VoD(Ka) are nicknames that Harris and Klebold used of themselves. Elsewhere in his diary (September 26, 2006), he writes that "it is alarming how similar Eric was to me. Sometimes it seems to me as if I lived his life again, as if everything repeated itself. I am not a copy of REB, VoDKA, Steini, Gill, Kinkel, Weise or anyone else! I am the further development of REB! I learned from his mistakes, the bombs. I learned from his entire life." The other persons he lists are all previous school shooters.

37. Speech by the Minister of the Interior of North-Rhine Westphalia in the Committee on Internal Affairs of the federal state parliament, December 14, 2006, <http://www.mik.nrw.de/presse-mediathek/aktuelle-meldungen/archiv/archiv-meldungen-im-detail/news/rede-von-innenminister-dr-ingo-wolf-in-der-sitzung-des-innenausschusses-des-landtags-nrw-am-1412.html>; Armin Lehmann, "Die Gesichter des Jungen B.," *Tagesspiegel*, November 25, 2006, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/zeitung/die-gesichter-des-jungen-b-/778516.html>.

38. Seung Hui Cho's personal history and mental health are described in detail in *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech April 16, 2007. Report of the Review Panel. Presented to Governor Kaine, Commonwealth of Virginia* (2007), 21–53. Available online at <http://www.governor.virginia.gov/tempcontent/techpanelreport-docs/fullreport.pdf>.

39. The text is available, e.g., on Peter Langman's internet site: http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Original_Documents_files/Cho%20manifesto.pdf.

40. This term was used to describe his text in the report of the review panel.

41. Edward J. Carvalho sees evidence in his manifesto suggesting "that Seung-Hui had a sophisticated understanding of 'culture jamming'" (p. 411) and reads his text as "designed to strike at the nerve center of Western sensibilities" (p. 421). Erik J. Carvalho, "The Poetics of a School Shooter: Decoding Political Signification in Cho Seung-Hui's Multimedia Manifesto," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 32 (2010): 403–430. While one can question how much of this was intentional, I share Carvalho's argument that it would be mistaken to label the text as "devoid of political significance" (p. 404). See also Douglas Kellner, *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombing to the Virginia Tech Massacre* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Pub-

lishers, 2008). He makes a similar point about how the political references of his manifesto have been largely ignored.

42. Seung Hui Cho's multimedia manifesto, available online at http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Original_Documents_files/Cho%20manifesto.pdf.

43. Ibid.

44. Pekka-Eric Auvinen, "Attack information." This document and other writings included in his media kit are available at http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Original_Documents_files/Pekka-Eric%20Auvinen%20Online.pdf.

45. Pekka-Eric Auvinen, "Natural Selector's Manifesto," available online e.g. at http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Original_Documents_files/Pekka-Eric%20Auvinen%20Online.pdf.

46. Ibid.

47. The quote is from the official report on the Jokela school shooting which is available also in English: Ministry of Justice, *Jokela School Shooting on 7 November 2007: Report of the Investigation Commission* (Helsinki: Ministry of Justice, 2009), 1, 17. The description of Auvinen's background and planning of his attack draws from this report, as well as the police investigation records on the Jokela school shooting (National Bureau of Investigation, 2008). The investigation material includes summaries of interviews with Auvinen's mother, his friends, fellow students, teachers, and other participants in the Internet forums frequented by him. Auvinen's background is also discussed elaborately in Atte Oksanen, Johanna Nurmi, Miika Vuori, and Pekka Räsänen, "Jokela: The Social Roots of a School Shooting Tragedy in Finland," in Nils Bökkler, Thorsten Seeger, Peter Sitzler and Wilhelm Heitmeyer, eds., *School Shootings: International Research, Case Studies and Concepts of Prevention* (New York: Springer, 2012).

48. Oksanen et al., "Jokela: The Social Roots of a School Shooting Tragedy in Finland" (see note 47 above).

49. The similarities in the communication of school shooters is also pointed out, e.g., in Nils Bökkler and Thorsten Seeger, *Schulamokkläufer: Eine Analyse Medialer Täter-Eigendarstellungen und Deren Aneignung Durch Jugendliche Rezipienten* (Weinheim and München: Juventa, 2009).

50. See Katherine Newman and Cybelle Fox, "Repeat Tragedy: Rampage Shootings in American High School and College Settings, 2002–2008," *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 9 (2009): 1286–1308. Newman and Fox claim that the high school shooters are typically failed joiners, while the college shooters are closer to the ideal type of a loner. Seung Hui Cho, the only college shooter in this category, was in reality very much a loner, but the narrative in his manifesto is in any case one of a failed joiner.

51. See, e.g., Kellner, *Guys and Guns Amok* (see note 41 above); Jessie Klein, *The Bully Society* (see note 10 above), Ralph W. Larkin, "Columbine: The School Shooting as a Postmodern Phenomenon," in Michael Flynn and David C. Brotherton, eds., *Globalising the Streets: Crosscultural Perspectives on Youth, Social Control and Empowerment* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 203–215.

52. The favourite bands that are often mentioned include, e.g., KMFDM, Rammstein, and Nine Inch Nails, video games Doom and Counterstrike, and movies *Natural Born Killers* and *Bowling for Columbine*. For an analysis of music and school shooting subculture, see Tomi Kiilakoski and Atte Oksanen, "Soundtrack for the School Shootings: Cultural Script, Music and Male Rage," *Young* 19, no. 3 (2011): 247–269.

53. On the Kauhajoki school shooting and Matti Saari's background, see Ministry of Justice, *Kauhajoki School Shooting on 23 September 2008: Report of the Investigation Commission, Reports and Guidelines 10* (Helsinki: Ministry of Justice, 2010).

54. Steven Kazmierczak's background and shooting are described in detail in a report commissioned by the Northern Illinois University (*Report of the February 14, 2008 Shootings at Northern Illinois University*, <http://www.niu.edu/feb14report/feb14report.pdf>).

55. Karl-Heinz Gasser, Malte Creutzfeldt, Markus Näher, Rudolf Rainer, and Peter Wickler, *Bericht der Kommission Gutenberg-Gymnasium* (Erfurt, 2004), 26, http://www.thueringen.de/imperia/md/content/text/justiz/bericht_der_kommission_gutenberg_gymnasium.pdf.

56. Simone von Kaiser, "So Eine Wutt, so Eine Hass," *Der Spiegel*, September 14, 2009.

57. E.g., J. Bone, "'Nazi' Student Calling Himself Angel of Death Shoots Nine Dead in Rampage at Red Lake," *The Times*, March 23, 2005. Weise's online communication is available at http://www.schoolshooters.info/PL/Original_Documents.html.

58. Peter Dujarin, "Former Student Gets 14 Years in Shooting," *Daily Press*, November 11, 2009, http://articles.dailypress.com/2009-11-11/news/0911100086_1_maye-mental-illnesses-shooting.

59. Klaus von Brinkbäumer, Conny Neumann, Sven Röbel, and Andreas Ulrich, "Die Rache des Kleinen Rambo," *Der Spiegel*, February 25, 2002.

60. Most of the school shooting literature appears to lean towards this explanation. See, e.g., Rebecca Bondü, *School Shootings in Deutschland: Internationaler Vergleich, Warnsignale, Risikofaktoren, Entwicklungsverläufe*. Inauguraldissertation zur Erlangung des Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie, Freien Universität Berlin (Berlin, 2012).

61. Larkin, *Comprehending Columbine* (see note 21 above), 136.

62. Spaaij, *Understanding Lone Wolf Terrorism* (see note 4 above), 19–20.

63. Ibid., 49–50. See also Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to al Qaeda* (New York: Routledge 2003); Rafael Pantucci, *A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorist* (London: ISCR, 2011), http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf. It is also good to bear in mind that it is very difficult to form credible post hoc evaluations of mental health. It is an open question whether the lack of diagnosis reflects the lack of mental illness or rather that the mentally troubled youth has not gotten proper help (Christopher Ferguson, Mark Coulson, and Jane Barnett, "Psychological Profiles of School Shooters: Positive Directions and One Big Wrong Turn," *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations* 11 (2011): 1–17).

64. Alex P. Schmid, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2011), 78.

65. For an interpretation of the school shootings as a copycat phenomenon that is powered by the media, see Loren Coleman, *The Copycat Effect: How the Media and Popular Culture Trigger the Mayhem in Tomorrow's Headlines* (New York: Paraview Pocket Books, 2004).

66. On the online school shooting communication and fan clubs, see Nathalie E. Paton, "Media Participation of School Shooters and Their Fans: Navigating Between Self-Distinction and Imitation to Achieve Individuation," in Glenn W. Muschert and Johanna Sumiala, eds., *School Shootings: Mediatized Violence in a Global Age*. Studies in Media and Communications, vol. 7 (Bingley: Emerald Books, 2012), 203–229.