Terrorism and crime are similar in that they are violent activities carried out sporadically by small groups and individuals. Terrorists and criminals differ primarily in their goals and in their willingness to risk death. Terrorists operate in pursuit of a political goal and are frequently willing to die in the effort, while criminals are in the game for fun and profit and are distinctly unwilling to die in the process.

When criminal bands become significant enough in size and in their predations or when governments enlist significant numbers of criminals into their military forces, criminal warfare ensues. Something similar holds for the relation of terrorism to disciplined warfare. When disciplined methods are applied sporadically and by individuals or small groups, the process can be designated “terrorism.” When such violence is perpetrated by substantial groups and becomes continuous or sustained enough, it will look like, and be called, “war.”

This essay explores and extrapolates from these distinctions.

Differentiating between disciplined and criminal warfare

Broadly speaking, there seem to be two methods for developing combat forces – for successfully cajoling or coercing collections of men into engaging in the violent, profane, sacrificial, uncertain, masochistic, and essentially absurd enterprise known as war. The two methods lead to two kinds of warfare: criminal warfare and disciplined warfare.

Intuitively, it might seem that the easiest (and cheapest) method for recruiting combatants would be to enlist people who revel in violence and routinely seek it out or who regularly employ it to enrich themselves, or both. We have in civilian life a name for such people – criminals – but the category would also encompass people popularly known as bullies, hooligans, toughs, goons, and thugs. Violent conflicts in which people like that dominate can be called criminal warfare, a form in which combatants are induced to wreak violence primarily for the fun and material profit they derive from the experience.
Criminal armies arise from a couple of processes. Sometimes criminals—robbers, brigands, freebooters, highwaymen, hooligans, thugs, bandits, pirates, gangsters, outlaws—organize or join themselves together in gangs, bands, or mafias. When such organizations become big enough, they can look and act a lot like full-blown armies.

Criminal armies can also form when a government or ruler needs combatants to prosecute a war and concludes that the employment or impressment of criminals and thugs is the most sensible or direct method for accomplishing this. In this case, criminals and thugs essentially act as mercenaries.

As it happens, criminals and thugs tend to be undesirable warriors, however much they may be drawn to combat by their inclination to relish violence or to find profit in it. To begin with, they can be trouble-makers: unruly, disobedient, and mutinous, often committing unauthorized crimes while on duty (or even off duty) that can be detrimental or even destructive to the military enterprise. This natural unruliness is often enhanced by the deprivation and boredom that commonly envelop the long periods between military actions.

Most importantly, criminals can be disinclined to stand and fight when things become dangerous, and they often simply desert when whim and opportunity coincide. Ordinary crime, after all, preys on the weak—on little old ladies rather than on husky athletes—and criminals often make willing and able executioners of defenseless people. However, if the cops show up they are given to flight. The motto for the criminal, after all, is not a variation of “semper fi,” “all for one and one for all,” “duty, honor, country,” “Banzai,” or “remember Pearl Harbor,” but “take the money and run.”

Indeed, for a criminal to perish in battle (or in the commission of a bank robbery) is essentially absurd. In general, then, although they seem to be more willing to accept risk than ordinary people and although they can be induced to engage in battle by the appeal of pay or booty and by the prospect of inflicting violence, they will tend to fight only when the probability of being killed is low enough or when they are massively coerced. In addition, the presence of such people in the ranks can affect the fighting morale of non-criminals in the combatant forces. Non-criminals routinely avoid criminals and other social undesirables in civilian life, and they may sensibly distrust their reliability in combat (McPherson, 1997, 8–9, 116).

The discovery of these problems with the employment of criminals as combatants has historically led to efforts to recruit ordinary men as combatants—people who, unlike criminals and thugs, commit violence at no other time in their lives (though they may watch a lot of it on television). Combat studies, in fact, generally find performance positively correlated with social class.

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1 See Valentino (2004), chapter five, on the use of jailed criminals in the Turkish massacres of Armenians in 1915. See Kaldor (1999), 55, on the use of mostly criminal paramilitaries to carry out the massacre at Srebrenica in Bosnia in 1995.