

Living with Terror: Urban Fatalism and Care for Fellow Riders in the Moscow subway

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Recent terror events gave us a feeling that “new” terror is everywhere. At the same time, cities’ experiences of terror differ significantly. In some cities terror is routinized and perceived as an inevitable part of everyday life, since terror attacks have been occurring there over a long time. In other cities terror is still a rare or even imaginary experience.

In my presentation I focus on Moscow, where the terror events or threads of them have become “an urban routine” since middle 1990s. There were numerous explosions in trading centers, streets, but the main target of terror attacks was the subway.

I assume that while studying terror it is necessary to concentrate not just on some general trends and structures, but also on micro level. The micro perspective increases our sensitivity to the specificity of events, configurations of actors, power hierarchies and city culture. It allows to consider terror events and further reactions to them as emplaced situations and lived experiences.

The terror is not just an event, but a social construction, which is produced by many agents and institutions. **In my presentation I will follow the perspective of urban citizens, whose perception is affected by media, institutions, agents of influence, but at the same time they elaborate their own perspective on the terror events.**

My interest in the conjunction of terror and the city was occidental and came up as a side effect of my project on the Moscow subway, that I have been carrying on since 2014. In the beginning of the project I was more concentrated on the current state of the subway and did not ask about the terror events, but my interview partners were keen on telling me about their general attitudes, their fears, their experiences of terror events. The stories were different, but most of them refer to the absence or presence of fear – for themselves or for others.

So, the terror appeared to be one of the important events structuring the riders’ perception and experiences. The perception of the terror combines the memories of the subway riders about the particular events and their actual experiences, since they were affected by the past. That’s how, the issue of terror became one of the important foci of my study.

Public transportation, that I am going to talk about, has been one of the main targets of terror attacks in the cities since 19th century and first explosions in the London tube. The recent explosions in the Brussel subway just confirmed the trend.

In my research I follow a “bottom up” approach that comes from the case study to some theoretical statements.

So, I will start with some general information about the Moscow subway. In Moscow the subway has a special significance to the city, since it has both practical and symbolic meanings. Nowadays Moscow subway consists of 200 stations. It is the Europe's busiest metro system, which carries from 7 to 9 million passengers daily. The intervals between trains vary from 90 seconds up to 3 minutes during working days. The total number of the riders is 2384,5 mln riders per year.

For Moscow the subway is definitely a “laboratory” (in Robert Park’s terms), where the city culture and experiences are produced. For the majority of moscovites and visitors the subway is the main mode of transportation with no real alternatives at the present moment. With huge traffic jams, long-term road works and car accidents making travelling on the surface almost unpredictable, the importance of the underground has been constantly growing. So, riding the subway is an unavoidable experience in Moscow for the majority of the people.

Moscow subway has a very strong symbolic meaning. Being built in 1935, it epitomized all the best and most progressive things that could be dreamed of in a Soviet city. The Moscow subway was placed on a large map of the world. It was stressed in 1930-s “[The metro] and its décor go beyond Moscow and the entire Soviet Union. They are an architectural event of global significance” (Cherkasskiy, 1935: 12). Moscow subway still struggles to retain its status as the ‘World's best subway’ acquired 80 years ago. With remarkable persistence it proclaims itself ‘world’s best’ in some respects, such as the most beautiful subway of the world or, more recently, the most IT-advanced, with the city mayor emphasizing that “the free Wi-Fi access in the Moscow metro is unique in the world.”

The subway is not just an ideological heritage, but an important part of the city identity. It provokes really intensive “love-hate” relationship among urban citizens. In the perception of residents and visitors, the city is divided not in administrative districts but in areas associated with metro stations. Sometimes the subway map serves as a life map on which significant personal and family life facts such as births, moves, workplaces etc. are mapped. The subway is also a part of urban imaginary – it inspires books and movies - mostly the thrillers.

Urban Fatalism

Terror events have been taking place in the Moscow subway since middle nineties. So, in some sense they became an urban routine, something that affected the behavior and the attitudes of the subway riders or at least made their experience of the everyday ride more reflexive and easy to communicate. Alan Kirschenbaum in his paper, which focuses on Israeli cities with their long term experience of terror, stresses “Terror ... triggers adaptation behaviors” (2006).

It is assumed that one of the main changes produced by the terror is a fear. Fear changes travel behavior as well as many other urban activities. “Fear and risk perception are central factors in understanding travel behavior in the face of terror” (Wafa et al, 2013). Nowadays the consequences of fear are described mainly in terms of behavioral changes - avoidness of public transportation, preparedness and readiness to react in a particular way, or at least in risk calculation. I think it is also important to take into consideration changes in the attitudes and the perception of everyday life or

what can be called – an affect management – the efforts of the urban citizens to control their emotional states and, consequently, their behavior.

In his book “Terror, War and the City” Stephen Graham states that terror and the city are constituting each other. I think that this process of creation of new urban atmosphere and new urban life can be compared to the formation of the city life in a modern metropolis, when the urban citizens were constantly facing new experiences, insecurities and ambiguities.

In my further conceptualization I would like to refer to the Simmel’s idea of “blasé attitude” (Simmel [1902], 2002) - the attitude created by and affecting the life of a modern city. Blasé attitude is a reaction to overstimulation and oversaturation of an urban life. It is “an inability to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy”. “The essence of blasé attitude is an indifference toward the distinctions between things”.

For me a blasé attitude is rather an umbrella term than a precise definition. I assume that the conception of “blasé” could be clarified and diversified especially in a reference to the terror events. First of all, blasé is not an individual reaction. The experience of the Moscow subway shows that while considering the terror events, we just can not ignore other agents or structures that affect the perception of the urban life and its intensity.

I think that one of the main consequences of the terror events in the Moscow subway was the emergence or strengthening of what I call “Urban Fatalism”. Urban fatalism is an attitude shared by urban citizens. It is a feeling that nothing can be done to prevent the terror events or some other urban dangers/undesirable experiences, therefore, they have to be accepted as a part of an urban life. Urban fatalism admits that urban citizens could be accidental victims. I think that the title of Zigmund Bauman’s paper «Living (Occasionally Dying) Together in an Urban World» (2004) perfectly reflects this idea of inevitability and everydayness of terror. As one of my interview partners brilliantly put it:

I do not keep in mind how dangerous riding underground is. I remember that it [explosions] happened, that it might happen again, but I prefer not to think about it. I am a fatalist, you know. I prefer not to think about negative things, though they can happen to me. We can’t avoid negative experiences, we have no guarantees in our daily life. Why should I think about them after all?

Though lot of subway riders stressed they did not think about the dangers of a subway ride or they were not scared with them, the situation is more complicated. Urban fatalism does not lead to ignoring the multiplicity of urban life. It rather sharpens the sensitivity to the differences, nuances, and details of the urban and social environment. But being sensitive to them, urban citizens feel themselves unable to cope with these numerous dangers and, therefore, have to accept them, not to ignore (!). They keep the dangers in mind.

Urban fatalism is shaped by numerous circumstances. Two of them have a special meaning for urban residents. Firstly, the limited freedom of choice that results in inability of urban citizens to avoid some urban experiences. Thus, riding a subway in Moscow is unavoidable experience for the majority of its 12 million residents and numerous visitors, since it is the most extended, predictable and affordable system of public transportation. Secondly, urban fatalism is a consequence of institutional distrust and the lack of solidarity among fellow riders and urban citizens in general. The alienation of the institutions playing an important role in the city life such as a police and local

authorities is still a common situation for Russian cities. This attitude of distrust affects the everyday life of urban citizens, who “do not believe that these institutions can promote interests other than their own” (Gudkov, 2012), and consequently have to rely mostly on themselves.

Distrust is not just a general attitude. It is also constituted by the personal experiences of the subway riders and their communication with the subway services. As I was told in the interview: “Once I told someone. I do not remember if it was a train driver or a policeman. There was a purse there. Well, they just ignored me. They did not do anything, you know”

This distrust changes only in critical situations and not for a long time. So far the individual strategies such as affect management including urban fatalism become the most successful ones allowing to cope with urban risks.

Urban fatalism – an unruffled **acceptance** of the situation of risks and dangers - is a widespread attitude among the Moscow subway riders. At the same time, it is often mixed with anxiety or substituted by it in particular situations. Imposed by the agents of power, the policy of anxiety and suspicion toward the fellow riders is one of the most efficient and routinized one. But surprisingly it has an unexpected potential for solidarity and mutual help. The policy of anxiety increases and sharpens the attention of the subway riders to other passengers, so it makes some critical situations such as robbery, illness, etc. more noticeable and therefore more manageable by the common activities of the riders. So, paradoxically the anxiety results in establishing solidarities (even though situational ones), which Moscow as many Russian cities is lacking so far.

Just to conclude: why I think it is important to conceptualize Urban fatalism?

First of all, because we are facing the crisis of security, predictability of the urban life and, therefore, the ability to calculate;

Secondly, the crisis of security and predictability caused the crises of a rational actor and highlighted the necessity of a new vocabulary to describe new urban experiences, including affects and affect management;

And third and the last one. I think it is important to speak about a particular type of fatalism, which was brought to life by the city environment. It is a *secular, not religious* fatalism and I hope it deserved to be studied in details.