

# Germanwings Flight 9525: Depression, Motivation and the Language of Terrorism

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Region: [Europe](#)

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The language of supposedly rational classification and categorisation has done terrible things. In the desperate need to find links, corollaries, causation, or simply correlations, we package, box and categorise like addicts in search of fixes. And when it comes to suspicious catastrophe, the next pundit will venture into the dangerous world of kiss and tell – what was the motivation for that particular act?

The loss of all those on board Germanwings Flight 9525 is another blight on the air industry, the next disaster story in the aviation chronicles. Again, it is dwarfed by frequency and lethal accidents in other forms of transport. But the spectacular nature of such an event – no survivors, suspect conduct by a pilot – have propelled various individuals into the expert seats to fill media slots. Why the seemingly senseless mayhem?

One thing that careful regard is being paid to is the use of a word that has become an impulsive point of reference where infliction of mass death is concerned. Evading the issue of “terrorism” meant that other forms were sought. The character profile of co-pilot Andreas Lubitz was rapidly psychologised – it was a case of mental illness and concealed depression, which supposedly the thorough Lufthansa program would have rooted out. Alison Griswold, writing in Slate, wondered if “better psychological testing” could “prevent a tragedy like the Germanwings crash”. The short answer: “Probably not.”[1]

The Daily Mail decided to add to the account with its own thesis: that the pilot was suffering from a vision deficiency. “A haunting new image has emerged of killer co-pilot Andreas Lubitz as it was claimed he may have sought treatment for problems with his vision in the weeks leading up to the moment he deliberately flew a Germanwings passenger plane into the French Alps.”[2]

Impaired, with psychosomatic illness, depression – this is the picture of Lubitz being conveyed through the tabloid currency, and even the higher brow accounts. It has led to warnings that such matters should not be stigmatised. Depression should not, on its own accords, prevent a pilot from taking to the skies. “That is wrong,” claimed Professor Simon Wessely, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, “as much as saying that people with a history of broken arms shouldn’t be allowed to do something.”[3]

If the individual had sported a capacious beard, a dark countenance, and a few other culturally cosmetic additions, that would have made for a different set of observations. The uncomfortable reality about designations matter for what, effectively, is the same outcome. Prosecutors in this case were quick to dispel suggestions of a terrorist cause, excluding any political or religious motive.

Yet it is hard to forget that, in those last few minutes, passengers were subjected to an act

of pan filled terror that would qualify, in any substantive sense, as terrorism. Refined terminology on such infliction of fear hardly helps before being obliterated in the Alps. The aim of the entire act did resemble that of any misguided martyr – to make a sorrowfully impressive mark, or at the very least an etching, on the history records. The black dog that is depression can be truly vicious.

The acts of Norwegian Anders Breivik, which involved the shooting of 69 people at a youth summer camp on Utoya Island in 2011, matched every terrorist tick box imaginable. There was political motive: a dislike of progressive multiethnic policies. There were religious undertones: a fear of the Islamisation of Europe. There was an intention to inflict terror. But the response to Breivik by a good number of critics was to refuse using the term in the hope of delegitimising it. Emphasis was placed, instead, on “white supremacist” and fantasist, marginalised stellar nut-job.

The terror tag is ennobling, adding impetus to a message that would otherwise be seen as obnoxious and dangerous. Hence Deborah Orr’s effort in *The Guardian* to insist on Breivik’s insanity, urging “those trying to give meaning to his actions” to stop.[4] The flipside, then, is to mark out the insane and classify it accordingly. A mass murderous Caucasian is deemed mad; the murderous Islamic follower is, well, an inspired terrorist.

Jonathan Freedland refused to fall for that caper, noting the vast inconsistency between the treatment of terrorists, so-called or otherwise. Individuals like Abu Qatada of al-Qaeda, argued Freedland during Breivik’s trial, are given no platform to vent, no opportunity to engage in vast disclosures of any world view. Breivik, in contrast, was given a chance to “testify for five solid days, given an extended opportunity to expound” his world view and have his “psychology and video game habits, probed and debated” (*Guardian*, Apr 21, 2012).[5] Again, one is either patient or religious follower, depending on how the ethnic cookie crumbles.

That issues of ethnicity and mental should meet is something that rocks the observer’s boat. Those examining the lethal antics of the Sydney hostage taker, Man Haron Monis, could not wait to throw him into the global whirlpool of terrorist indulgence – a “lone wolf” feeding on the teet of Islamic fundamentalism. “The lone wolf,” insisted Charles Krauthammer, “is the new nightmare, dramatised and amplified this week by the hostage-taking attack in Sydney” (*Washington Post*, Dec 18, 2014). There was an abundance of evidence suggesting mental unhinging and plain old depression, but that did not stop the terrorist punditry from finding what they wanted to see: coherent ideology in absurdist tragedy.

In this line, selectivity is everything. As Zak Cheney-Rice would suggest on *Mic*, the issue here was not even whether terrorist tags should automatically float in the direction of Lubitz’s action. “On the contrary, it is an argument for holding people who commit mass murder to similar standards, regardless of their race or religion.”[6]

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Notes

[1]

[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/medical\\_examiner/2015/03/germanwings\\_crash\\_ai](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/medical_examiner/2015/03/germanwings_crash_ai)

[rlines\\_screen\\_pilots\\_for\\_physical\\_and\\_mental\\_health.html?wpsrc=fol\\_tw](http://www.dailynews.com/news/2015/mar/28/germanwings-plane-crash-alps-depression-doctor)

[2]

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3015504/I-m-planning-heinous-act-remembered-forever-Killer-pilot-s-ex-girlfriend-says-shared-chilling-prophecy-Alps-crash-woke-nightmares-shouting-going-down.html>

[3]

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/28/germanwings-plane-crash-alps-depression-doctor>

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/27/breivik-not-terrorist-insane-murderer>

[5] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/apr/20/breivik-terrorist-like-al-qaida>

[6]

<http://mic.com/articles/113896/everyone-s-trying-really-hard-not-to-call-the-germanwings-co-pilot-a-terrorist>

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