



A Fact Sheet from the Worldwide Incidents Team

National Counterterrorism Center

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Did you know there was a terror attack on New York City in 1920?

On 16 September 1920, at about noon time, in New York City, New York, United States, a timed improvised explosive device (IED) exploded in the back of a horse drawn wagon at the corner of Wall Street and Broad Street in front of the J.P. Morgan building and Assay Office, killing between 38 and 40 civilians, injuring between 300 and 400 others, and causing extensive damage to several nearby automobiles and buildings. The American Anarchist Fighters claimed responsibility, but no arrests were ever made.



Aftermath of Wall Street bombing on 16 September 1920.
Photo by World-Telegram.

Often called the “1920 Wall Street bombing,” the attack is often cited as the first terror attack in the United States. There are, however, other politically motivated bombings prior to this attack in the US, which makes the claim questionable depending on how one defines terrorism. Many reporters also bill this attack as America's most deadly terrorist attack until the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attacks. This attack is probably the first use of a “car bomb” to carry out any type of political attack (insurgency, sectarian, or terrorist) in recorded history; and this attack also has the hallmarks of modern terrorism, including the use of shrapnel (window sash weights) to maximize casualties and the use of commonly available explosives making it difficult to trace and detect the making of the device.

The American Anarchist Fighters claimed the attack via four circulars left several blocks away, one in a mailbox at the corner of Cedar and Broadway between 11:30 and 11:58 AM¹, which were printed by rubber stamp with, "Remember we will not tolerate any longer. Free the political prisoners or it will be sure death for all of you." It is believed the circulars referred to Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti who were indicted on September 11, 1920, for bank robbery and murder. It is believed these two individuals were referred to in the four circulars. The wagon, believed to have been driven by Mario Buda, contained 45kg of dynamite and 230kg of cast-iron slugs used for window sash weights. It was estimated the damage was around \$2M² with windows shattered as far as 1/2 mile from the blast center.

Police interviewed thousands of blacksmiths and traced every shipment of dynamite over a two year period, and only came up with one blacksmith saying he had recently changed horse shoes for a Sicilian (Italian) man with horses matching the description. One theory was a dynamite shipment simply went off in front of the stock exchange, but all such shipments were accounted for. Over the preceding 10 years to this attack there had been attacks connected with Italian and Russian radicals at the LA Times building, in a Chicago market, and also in Washington, Boston and New York. Detectives even interviewed an insane psychic, Edwin Fischer, who had vaguely predicted the attack and concluded Edwin was not connected with the crime. Another theory that it was a botched robbery attempt on gold bars at the US Treasury, which later surfaced in John Brooks's book, "Once in Golconda". The best clue was the circulars, which the predecessors of the FBI were able to trace back to other flyers used in 1919 during two separate bombings perpetrated by Italian anarchists. The detectives attempted to trace the printing, but were unsuccessful.³

"This bomb was not directed at Mr. Morgan or any individual," said the chief of the [U.S.] Secret Service, William J. Flynn. "In my opinion it was planted in the financial heart of America as a defiance of the American people. I'm convinced a nationwide dynamiting conspiracy exists to wreck the American government and society."⁴

Here are some eyewitness accounts: "I saw the explosion, a column of smoke shoot up into the air and then saw people dropping all around me, some of them with their clothing afire," the head of the Stock Exchange's messengers, Charles P. Dougherty, told the Sun. "I first felt, rather than heard the explosion," an eyewitness reporter for the Associated Press recalled. "I dodged into a convenient doorway to escape falling glass and reach a telephone and call the office. Looking down Wall Street later, I could see a mushroom-shaped cloud of yellowish green smoke which mounted to the height of more than 100 feet, the smoke being licked by darting tongues of flame," added the reporter. A visiting coal magnate said, outside glass covered the street like a snowstorm; wounded people and severed body parts lay scattered everywhere. "The blast, which witnesses said tossed a nearby automobile 20 feet in the air, also stove in the offices of J. P. Morgan, just across from the bomb cart, decapitating the firm's young chief clerk, William Joyce, who had been seated near the front."⁵

¹ Lardner and Reppetto. "NYPD: A City and its Police", Chapter 9, pp. 188-189.

² Not sure if the dollar estimate was in 1920 dollars or 2007 dollars.

³ "A Byte out of History: Terror on Wall Street," 13 Sep 2007, FBI archives, 11 Oct 2007, <www.fbi.gov>

⁴ Ward, Nathan. "The Fire Last Time: When terrorists first struck New York's financial district," American Heritage Magazine, Nov/Dec 2001, Vol. 52, Issue 8

⁵ *Op. cit.* Ward.