



CHEAP BUT DEADLY: Most car bombers featured in the programme showed a lack of remorse, whatever their political cause

We live in a nuclear age, fearing rogue states whose leaders have their fingers on 'the button', but a new documentary claims that car bombs, not atomic bombs, have been the most influential weapons of the past 100 years. CLARE HEAL finds out how the bombers made their mark on a budget

THE FIRST car bomb was actually a horse-and-cart bomb. At one minute past noon on September 16, 1920, a wagon parked outside the JP Morgan bank on New York's Wall Street exploded, killing 40 people and injuring hundreds more. The case file remains open but it is thought that the 80lb of TNT, 500lb of scrap metal and their accompanying timer device had been planted by an Italian anarchist named Mario Buda.

He had worked out what all subsequent car bombers have used to their advantage: that the ubiquity of cars (or wagons) makes them the perfect place to put a bomb. He effectively drew up the terrorist blueprint.

American historian Beverley Gage

says: "Having an old wagon around, a pedlar's cart, wasn't that unusual." Before it exploded, passers-by would have thought nothing of Buda's abandoned vehicle, but there are still shrapnel marks on Wall Street that testify to its destructive power.

Likewise Tommy Gorman, a one-time IRA bomber, says: "It was a natural progression that was just so simple and so logical. It [the bomb] was in the car. You're just parking a car like everyone else."

Car Bomb, a Channel 4 documentary (the first part of which is shown tonight), traces the history of these basic but horribly effective weapons. It's presented by Robert Baer, an ex-CIA agent who has personal experience of the subject. In

1963 while he was stationed in Beirut, the American embassy there was destroyed by a car bomb that killed 63. Many of Baer's friends and colleagues died that day and he says he still dreams of falling masonry and shattering glass.

Moreover, he knows how easy these bombs are to make: the CIA taught him as part of his training. They're also cheap. "If you're determined and ruthless, you can change history for only a few hundred pounds," he says.

The first thing anyone in the vicinity will see when a car bomb goes off is what specialists refer to as "the big white light" – the initial explosion. Powerful shockwaves then emanate spherically outwards from this point, shattering all windows in the vicinity and

turning the pieces of the vehicle into deadly shrapnel.

After Mario Buda's first foray into what experts call VBEDS (Vehicle Borne Explosive Devices), car bombs next appeared in Palestine in the Forties, used both by Jewish terrorists determined to drive the Arabs out of what they saw as their rightful Jewish homeland and by Arabs opposed to the Jewish state.

Baer spoke to the sister of Palestinian car bomb maker Fawzi al-Kutab, whose attack on Ben Yehuda Street, Jerusalem's main thoroughfare, killed 54 in 1948. She remains proud of her brother's actions, explaining that they saw every Jew as a soldier of the Zionist state.

Likewise Eliezer Ben-Ami, planter of a Jewish bomb said: "We killed only people who were directly involved in the fighting against the Jewish will to establish an independent country. We never wanted to kill children, innocent people or civilians. It happened. Bad luck: you can't avoid it."

This lack of remorse is evident in most of the bombers Baer spoke to, no matter what their political cause.

Karl Armstrong, a college dropout, was 22 when he car-bombed the physics department of the university of Madison, Wisconsin, in 1970 as a protest against the war in Vietnam. He thought the building was empty but ended up serving 10 years in prison after the blast killed researcher Robert Fassnacht, who was working late. Yet his attitude was that of someone who had done no more than commit a college prank that went awry.

Likewise Marion Price was just 17 when she joined the IRA and speaks

about the bombs she helped plant in London on March 8, 1973 as a bit of a lark. They were the first car bombs to be used in England and one, at New Scotland Yard, was defused but another outside the Old Bailey was not. It killed one man and injured 180.

Two decades later, on April 24, 1993, another IRA bomb at Bishopsgate in the City of London killed one person, injured another 44

and caused £350million worth of damage. It heightened fear and prompted talks and an uneasy ceasefire: more proof that weapons made from readily available fertiliser can change the course of history.

In February of the same year an explosion in the underground parking garage of the North Tower of the World Trade Center created a crater five storeys deep. It failed to topple the towers but was the precursor to the much more damaging attacks of September 11, 2001.

FBI MAN Dave Williams, who was in charge of the investigation into the 1993 Twin Towers car bomb, says they are the ultimate terrorist weapons: "They wreak terror in everyone. Any truck, any car, any vehicle that drives by, could be a bomb-laden vehicle and I can only see it getting more enhanced by adding chemical, biological or nuclear material with it."

Car bombs have also defined the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Military analyst Thom Thom Hames, who served in Iraq, explains how they changed the tactical situation: "Successful counter-insurgency is based on being among the people, close to them. When the US forces are behind bomb barriers, you cut off communication with the people."

They have even changed the appearance of our cities in the West: London and Washington are full of specialised barriers preventing vehicles from getting too close to government buildings, which also have the effect of making people feel more isolated from their own governments.

The ubiquity of the car makes car bombs almost impossible to detect but Baer sees an upside of a sort. "It's amazing people don't do this more," he says. "You could take down a whole financial district with a few well-placed car bombs but, ultimately, people aren't cut out for that kind of killing; it's not in

most people's natures."

Unfortunately it is in the nature of a few desperados but, as Bob Baer says: "There is one surefire way we could defeat the car bombs: we could walk."

● *Car Bomb, C4, tonight, 7pm.*



**WHITE LIGHT: Presenter
Bob Baer has personal
experience of car bombs**